

How I Came to Love the Veil

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POLITICIANS AND JOURNALISTS just love to write about the oppression of women in Islam ... without even talking to the females beneath the veil.

They simply have no idea how Muslim women are protected and respected within the Islamic framework which was built more than 1400 years ago.

Yet, by writing about cultural issues like child brides, female circumcision, honor killings and forced marriages they wrongly believe they are coming from a point of knowledge.

And I am sick of Saudi Arabia being cited as an example of how women are subjugated in a country where they are banned from driving.

The issues above have simply nothing to do with Islam yet they still write and talk about them with an arrogant air of authority while wrongly blaming Islam. Please do not confuse cultural behavior with Islam.

I was asked to write about how Islam allows men to beat their wives. Sorry, not true. Yes, I'm sure critics of Islam will quote random Qur'anic verses or ahadith but all are usually taken out of context. If a man does raise a finger to his wife, he is not allowed to leave a mark on her body ... this is another way of the Qur'an saying; "Don't beat your wife, stupid".

Now let's take a glance at some really interesting statistics, hmm. I can almost hear the words pot, kettle, black. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, four million American women experience a serious assault by a partner during an average 12-month period.

On the average, more than three women are murdered by their husbands and boyfriends every day . . . that is nearly 5,500 women battered to death since 9/11.

Some might say that is a shocking indictment on such a civilized society, but before I sound too smug, I would say that violence against women is a global issue. Violent men do not come in any particular religious or cultural category. The reality is that one out of three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime. Violence against women transcends religion, wealth, class, skin color and culture.

However, until Islam came on the scene women were treated as inferior beings. In fact we women still have a problem in the West where men think they are superior. This is reflected in our promotion and wages structure right across the spectrum from cleaners to career women who make it into the boardroom.

Western women are still treated as commodities, where sexual slavery is on the rise, disguised under marketing euphemisms, where women's bodies are traded throughout the advertising world. As mentioned before, this is a

society where rape, sexual assault, and violence on women is commonplace, a society where the equality between men and women is an illusion, a society where a woman's power or influence is usually only related to the size of her breasts.

I used to look at veiled women as quiet, oppressed creatures and now I look at them as multi-skilled, multi-talented, resilient women whose brand of sisterhood makes Western feminism pale into insignificance. My views changed after the truly terrifying experience of being arrested by the Taleban for sneaking into Afghanistan in September 2001 wearing the burka.

During my 10-day captivity I struck a deal that if they let me go I would read the Quran and study Islam. Against all the odds, it worked and I was released. In return I kept my word but as a journalist covering the Middle East I realized I needed to expand my knowledge of a religion which was clearly a way of life.

And no. I'm not a victim of Stockholm Syndrome. To be a victim you have to bond with your captors. During my imprisonment I spat, swore, cursed and abused my jailers as well as refusing their food and going on hunger strike. I don't know who was happier when I was released - them or me!

Reading the Quran was, I thought, going to be a very simple academic exercise. I was stunned to discover that it clearly stated women are equal in spirituality, education and worth. A woman's gift for child birth and child-rearing is very much recognised as a quality and attribute. Muslim women say with pride they are homemakers and housewives.

Furthermore The Prophet (pbuh) said that the most important person in the home was The Mother, The Mother, The Mother. In fact he also said that heaven lies at the feet of the mother. How many women make it into the top 100 power lists for simply being a "great mother"?

With Islam choosing to remain at home and raise children takes on a new dignity and respect in my eyes, similar to those sisters among us who choose to go out to work and have careers and professions.

I then began looking at inheritance, tax, property and divorce laws. This is where Hollywood divorce lawyers probably get their inspiration from. For instance the woman gets to keep what she earns and owns while the man has to stump up half his worth.

Isn't it funny the way the tabloid media gets very excited over the prospect of some pop or film stars pre-nuptial wedding agreement? Muslim women have had wedding contracts from day one. They can choose if they want to work or not and anything they earn is theirs to spend while the husband has to pay for all the household bills and the upkeep of his family.

Just about everything that feminists strived for in the 70s was already available to Muslim women 1400 years ago.

As I said, Islam dignifies and brings respect to motherhood and being a wife. If you want to stay at home, stay at home. It is a great honor to be a home maker and the first educator of your children.

But equally, the Quran states if you want to work, then work. Be a career woman, learn a profession become a politician. Be what you want to be and excel in what you do as a Muslim because everything you do is in praise of Allah (swt).

There is an excessive, almost irritating concentration or focus on the issue of Muslim women's dress particularly by men (both Muslim and non-Muslim).

Yes, it is an obligation for Muslim women to dress modestly but, in addition, there are many other important issues which concern Muslim women today.

And yet everyone obsesses over the hijab. Look, it is part of my business suit. This tells you I am a Muslim and therefore I expect to be treated with respect.

Can you imagine if someone told a Wall Street executive or Washington banker to put on a t-shirt and jeans? He would tell you his business suit defines him during work hours, marks him out to be treated seriously.

And yet in Britain we have had the former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw describing the nikab - the face veil revealing only the eyes - as an unwelcome barrier. When, oh when, will men learn to keep their mouths shut over a woman's

wardrobe?

We also had Government Ministers Gordon Brown and John Reid express disparaging remarks about the nikab - both these men come from over the Scottish Borders where men wear skirts!!

Then we had a series of other parliamentarians enter the fray describing the nikab as a barrier for communication. What a load of nonsense. If this was the case can anyone explain to me why cell phones, landlines, emails, text messaging and fax machines are in daily use? Who listens to the radio? No one switches off the wireless because they can not see the face of the presenter.

The majority of sisters I know who choose to wear the nikab are actually white, Western converts who no longer want the unwelcome attention of those few leering men who will try and confront females and launch into inappropriate behavior. Mind you, there are a couple of London sisters I know who say they wear the nikab at anti-war marches because they can't stand the smell of spliffs.

I am afraid Islamophobia has become the last refuge of the racist scoundrel. But the cowardly, chauvinistic attacks launched - largely by men - is unacceptable to Muslimahs as well as their secular, female sisters from the left.

I was a feminist for many years and now, as an Islamic feminist, I still promote women's rights. The only difference is Muslim feminists are more radical than their secular counterparts. We all hate those ghastly beauty pageants, and tried to stop laughing when the emergence of Miss Afghanistan in bikini was hailed as a giant leap for women's liberation in Afghanistan.

I've been back to Afghanistan many times and I can tell you there are no career women emerging from the rubble in Kabul. My Afghan sisters say they wish the West would drop its obsession with the burka. "Don't try turning me into a career woman, get my husband a job first. Show me how I can send my children to school without fear of them being kidnapped. Give me security and bread on the table," one sister told me.

Young feminist Muslimahs see the hijab and the nikab as political symbols as well as a religious requirement. Some say it is their way of showing the world they reject the excesses of Western lifestyles such as binge drinking, casual sex, drug-taking etc.

Superiority in Islam is accomplished through piety, not beauty, wealth, power, position or sex.

Now you tell me what is more liberating. Being judged on the length of your skirt and the size of your cosmetically enhanced breasts, or being judged on your character, mind and intelligence?

Glossy magazines tell us as women that unless we are tall, slim and beautiful we will be unloved and unwanted. The pressure on teenage magazine readers to have a boyfriend is almost obscene.

Islam tells me that I have a right to an education and it is my duty to go out and seek knowledge whether I am single or married.

No where in the framework of Islam are we told as women that we must do washing, cleaning or cooking for men - but it is not just Muslim men who need to re-evaluate women in their home. Check out this 1992 exert from a Pat Robertson speech revealing his views on empowered women. And then you tell me who is civilized and who is not.

He said: "FEMINISM ENCOURAGES WOMEN TO LEAVE THEIR HUSBANDS, KILL THEIR CHILDREN, PRACTICE WITCHCRAFT, DESTROY CAPITALISM AND BECOME LESBIANS".

Here is an American man living in a pre-Islamic age who needs to modernize and civilize. People like him are wearing a veil and we need to tear that veil of bigotry away so people can see Islam for what it is.