

The Veil Unveiled: The True Status of Women in Islam

الوضع الحقيقي للمرأة في الإسلام

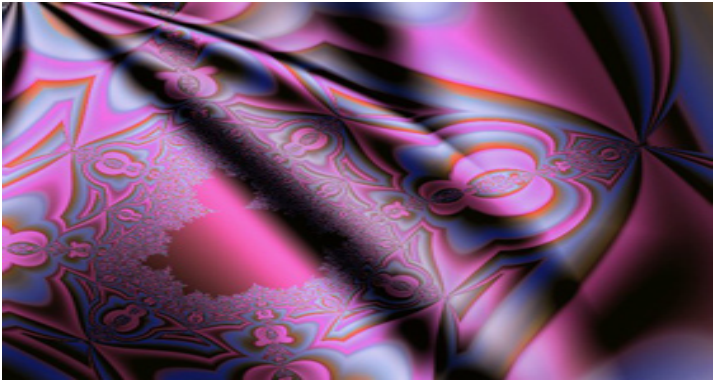
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The Islamic veil or *hijab* refers to the loose-fitting, plain and opaque outer garments which cover a Muslim woman's body. While basically identical to the clothing depicted in traditional Christian representations of Mary (may God praise her and her son), and every nun who has sought to emulate her since, the *hijab* is readily singled out as sign of extremism, the supposedly inferior status of Muslim women, Those who see Muslim women as little more than sex objects are dismayed at the phenomena of educated, professional or, in any case, 'free' Western women turning to Islam. The claim that female converts are either brainwashed fanatics blinded by their veils or suppressed victims frantic to be liberated is no longer accepted. Although, sensationalist and often politically-motivated reports of oppressed Muslim women in some contemporary backward societies still enforce the negative stereotype. What follows is a brief look at the status of women in Islam though comparing the role of the veil in both Islam and Christianity.

“Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily , to them We will give a new life, good and pure. And We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.” (Quran 16:97)

In what would form part of a ‘New Testament’, St. Paul obligated the then common practice of the veil for all women:

‘And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head - it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹ For this reason, and because of the angels, woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.’ (I Corinthians 11:4-10)

St. Tertullian (the first man to formulate the Trinity), in his treatise, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, even obliged its use at home: ‘Young women, you wear your veils out on the streets, so you should wear them in the church; you wear them when you are among strangers, then wear them among your brothers.’

So Islam didn’t invent the veil, it merely endorsed it. However, while Paul presented the veil as a sign of man’s authority, Islam clarifies that it is simply a sign of faith, modesty and chastity which serves to protect the devout from molestation.

“O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their cloaks over their bodies (when outdoors) so that they be recognized as such (decent, chaste believers) and not molested...” (Quran 33:59)

The 19th century Orientalist, Sir Richard Burton, observed how:

¹ Islam teaches that God is not a man, but the Creator of man (and woman); and He created both sexes for one noble purpose: **“I have not created jinn (spirits) and humans except that they may worship and serve Me (alone).”** (Quran 51:56)

‘The women who delight in restrictions which tend to their honor, accepted it (the veil) willingly and still affect it, they do not desire a liberty or rather a license which they have learned to regard as inconsistent with their time-honored notions of feminine decorum and delicacy. They would think very meanly of a husband who permitted them to be exposed, like hetaerae, to the public gaze.’

In truth, the Muslim’s veil is but one facet of her noble status a status due in part to the tremendous responsibility that is placed upon her. Simply put, woman is the initial teacher in the building of a righteous society. This is why from the most important individual obligations upon a person is to show gratitude, kindness and good companionship to their mother. Once, the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was asked:

“O Messenger of God! Who from amongst mankind warrants the best companionship from me? ‘The Prophet replied: ‘Your mother.’ The man asked: ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said: ‘Your mother.’ The man asked: ‘Then who?’ The Prophet repeated: ‘Your mother.’ Again, the man asked: ‘Then who?’ The Prophet finally said: ‘(Then) your father.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

While the mother is given precedence over and above the father in kindness and good treatment, Islam, like Christianity, teaches that God designated man to be the natural head of the household.

“...And they (women) have rights (over their husbands) similar (to the rights of their husbands) over them according to what is equitable. But men have a degree (of responsibility) over them...” (Quran 2:228)

In Islam, man's authority is in proportion to his socio-economic responsibilities,² responsibilities which reflect the psychological and physiological differences with which God created the sexes.

“...And the male is not like the female...” (Quran 3:36)³

Marriage is the means by which both sexes can fulfill their different but complementary and mutually beneficial roles.

“And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves; that you may dwell with them in serenity and tranquility. And He has put love and compassion between your hearts. Truly in that are signs for those who reflect.” (Quran 30:21)

‘Islam’s appeal, wherever it has triumphed, has been in its simplicity. It requires submission to some basic, straightforward rules which are easily kept, and in return it offers that most wonderful and rare commodity, peace of mind ... its discipline, safety and certainties have an appeal for girls lost in the churning seas of permissiveness, whose own families have been weakened by the crumbling of the two-parent family, the absence of fathers

2 Hence, the Muslim man is granted a greater share of inheritance than the woman. He is legally bound to provide for and maintain all the females of the household from his personal wealth while the woman’s wealth is hers alone to spend, invest or save as she pleases.

3 Dr. Alexis Carrel, the French Noble Laureate, reinforces this point when he writes: ‘The difference existing between man and woman do not come from the particular form of the sexual organs, the presence of the uterus, from gestation or from the mode of education. They are of a more fundamental impregnation of the entire organism ... Ignorance of these fundamental facts has led promoters of feminism to believe that both sexes should have the same powers and the same responsibilities. In reality, woman differs profoundly from man. Every one of the cells of her body bears the mark of her sex. The same is true of her organs and, above all, of her nervous system. Physiological laws ... cannot be replaced by human wishes. We are obliged to accept them just as they are. Women should develop their aptitudes in accordance with their own nature, without trying to imitate males.’ (Carrel, *Man and the Unknown*, 1949:91)

and the impermanence of husbands, if there are husbands in the first place rather than boyfriends and “baby-fathers”. And in most societies it is the women who sustain religions in the home and among children.’ (Peter Hitchens, Will Britain Convert to Islam? Mail on Sunday, 2/11/03)

“...They (your wives, O men) are a garment for you and you (men) are a garment for them...” (Quran 2:187)

Sex itself is not taboo in Islam. On the contrary, lawful sexual relations are regarded as deeds of charity! Renowned scholar and former nun, Karen Armstrong, writes:

‘Mohammed certainly did not think that women were sexually disgusting. When his wife had her period he used to make a point of reclining in her lap, of taking his prayer mat from her hand, saying for the benefit of his disciples, “Your menstruation is not in your hand.” He would drink from the same cup, saying, “Your menstruation is not on your lips” ... The harsh sexual punishments meted out to sexual offenders in some Islamic countries is because sexuality is valued and the ideal has been debased, not, as in the past in the West, because sexuality is abhorrent.’ (The Gospel According to Woman, 1986:2)

The Church’s traditional justification for man’s authority is one it inherited from Judaism: the inherent evil of woman! According to the bible, Satan seduced Eve to disobey God by eating from a forbidden tree and Eve, in turn, seduced Adam to eat with her. When God rebuked Adam for his disobedience, Adam blamed Eve, and so God condemned her:

“I (God) will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will bear children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.” (Genesis 3:16)

It was this image of Eve as a deceiving temptress that left a negative legacy for women throughout both Judaism and Christendom. Paul, himself a once vehemently anti-Christian Jew,

wrote in the bible: ‘A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I don’t permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam wasn’t the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner, but women shall be saved through childbearing.’ (I Tim. 2:11-5)⁴

Again, the Islamic conception of woman is radically different. The Quran clarifies that Satan was the only deceiver in the story of the Garden, while Adam and Eve receive equal blame for their disobedience. There is not the slightest hint that Eve was the first to eat the forbidden fruit or that she tempted Adam to do so. Both Adam and Eve committed a sin, asked God for His Forgiveness, and He duly bestowed it:

“They said: ‘Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls and if You forgive us not and do not bestow upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost.’” (Quran 7:22-23)

4 The Church’s founding fathers, men who formulated Christian belief and canonized the Bible, supported this view: ‘Don’t you know that you are each an Eve?’ God’s sentence on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the Devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of the forbidden tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil wasn’t valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. (St. Tertullian)

“Woman is a daughter of falsehood, a sentinel of Hell, the enemy of peace; through her Adam lost paradise.” (St. John Damascene)

‘God created Adam Lord of all living creatures, but Eve spoiled it all. Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house and bear children. And if they (women) grow tired or, even, die (from giving birth), it does not matter. Let her die from in childbirth; that’s why they are there.’ (Martin Luther).

Linguistically, the Quranic terms for ‘womb’ and ‘mercy’ are synonymous. This is because, rather than God’s punishment, childbirth in Islam is seen as one of His countless blessings. Besides, the notion that God condemns the innocent is quite blasphemous! And, while Christianity holds every newborn baby to be a sinner - the fruits of its mother’s punishment, Islam teaches that all children are born innocent and sinless upon the *fitra*: a natural monotheistic and righteous disposition. Hence, one who embraces Islam is said to revert back to their natural religion. It is only the child’s immoral upbringing that converts it into a rebellious sinner.

“Whosoever works evil will not be requited except with its like; and whosoever works righteousness, whether male or female, and is a true Believer, such will enter Paradise, wherein they will have provision without limit.” (Quran 40:40)

Paul’s words, earlier, also show how Eve’s sin was used to justify limiting women’s educational aspirations. In Islam, however, women are equal to men in the pursuit of knowledge. The Prophet said:

“The seeking of knowledge is compulsory upon every (male or female) Muslim.” (*Ibn Maja*)

Furthermore, the most honored position one can reach in Muslim society is that of a scholar [Islam has no Priesthood]. The Prophet’s wife, Aa’isha, from whom leading Companions acquired knowledge, is but one example of learned women who continue to greatly influence Islamic society. As were several female teachers of the celebrated sage, warrior and master of the Islamic sciences, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).

“...Are those who know equal to those who know not? It is only those with understanding who will remember.” (Quran 39:9)

Many of the resurgent pre-Islamic cultural practices that have tragically come to be associated with Islam, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, bridal (as opposed to groom-paid) dowries, honor killings and the criminalization of rape victims, only resurfaced following the disruption caused by colonialism and the resulting disconnect between the common Muslims and their sources of knowledge. It is always the learned scholars of Islam, men and women, who are the first victims of any imperialist purge. Nevertheless, in light of the Quran and Sunnah, the veil of misinformation cloaking the true status of women in Islam is easily removed. Moreover, Islam continues to grow faster than any other way of life with women, accounting for some 75% of all European and American reverts - ironic, given the widespread Western prejudice that 'Islam oppresses women!

'Westerners despairing of their own society - rising in crime, family breakdown, drugs and alcoholism - have come to admire the discipline and security of Islam. Many converts are former Christians, disillusioned by the uncertainty of the church and unhappy with the concept of the Trinity and the deification of Jesus.' (Lucy Berrington, "Why British women are turning to Islam", Times, 9/11/93)

These women have acknowledged the same truth that led the Christian Negus of Abyssinia to embrace Islam following a speech in which the Companions informed him: '**God's Messenger forbade us to speak evil of women.**' (*Ibn Hisham*)

"Verily, those who slander chaste women; innocent unsuspecting believing women: they are cursed in this world and the next. And for them will be a great torment." (Quran 24:23)

Today, many nuns and devout women of the Orthodox, Catholic, Near Eastern and African churches still wear the Christian veil. The Muslim woman too wears her *hijab*, declaring

her faith in humility and servitude before God. Only those given divine sanction - her immediate family and other believing women - may view her bodily beauty. In effect, she is saying: 'Judge me for my faith, not my body - I give you no other choice.' When faithfully implemented, as it was by its earliest adherents, Islam offers women the freedom, dignity, justice and protection that have long remained out of their reach. Mankind inherited from the Prophet a great Islamic tradition when he said:

'The best of you (men) are those who best treat their women.'

While Christian women inherited a tradition of misogyny from both Jewish rabbinism and Greek thought. It was Western woman's reaction to this poor status afforded to her and to her 'sexploitation' that led to the rise of the feminist movement.

"The believing men and women are protectors of one another. They enjoin the good and forbid the evil; they establish prayer and give alms (to the needy); and they obey God and His Messenger. These, God will have mercy on them. Lo! God is Mighty, Wise." (Quran 9:71)

Islam granted women contractual rights, conjugal rights, the right to inherit, to initiate divorce, to independently own and control wealth and property, to set up and run businesses, to earn and receive equal pay, to retain their maiden names, etc., over 1400 years ago while the democratic West granted similar rights only in the last 50 years of the 20th century! In fact, besides casual abortion, much of what feminists still fight for had already been sanctioned by Islam. Not to mention that Western-style emancipation – essentially women copying men – has not only imposed impossible demands on the weaker sex, but has also left womanhood without any intrinsic value. As for the veiled Muslim celebrating her womanhood, she is but a reflection of chastity, humility and dignity, a mirror of her devotion to and belief in God - factors which liberate, not subjugate - and for this she can expect a great reward.

“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for truthful men and women, for patient men and women, for humble men and women, for charitable men and women, for fasting men and women, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God’s praise: for them has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward.” (Quran 33:35)