



SECRETS OF A
MUSLIM
WOMAN

UNVEIL THE MYSTERY

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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?



When people see a Muslim woman on the local High Street, covered from head to toe, exposing nothing but her eyes or her face and hands, all sorts of thoughts and images enter their minds:

Burkah clad victims who hide their bodies away out of shame, forced marriages and honour killings, suppression and oppression of women – things that Islam totally condemns but some crazy Muslims are guilty of.

Feelings range from curiosity and pity, to complete horror at what looks like a religion that deems women inferior. What doesn't really seem to add up is that even though Islam seems to be the least appealing way of life for women, more and more intelligent, educated, independent women in the West feel that Islam showed them what it was to be true to their womanhood and are actually choosing to live as Muslims. Now why would they want to do that?

To be honest, I would completely understand why someone might think Islam was an unattractive choice for women. When Islam is mentioned in the popular media, it is often mentioned alongside horrible stories and without much of an explanation from a Muslim perspective. On top of that, there are some Muslims out there who are doing terrible things that are either twisted interpretations or cultural practises and have nothing to do with the religion of Islam – in fact they are things that Islam is against.

But wouldn't you agree that to judge a religion merely by looking at the actions of some of the people who claim to follow it is not really fair? I mean, surely to get a true understanding of Islam, we've got to look at what its teachings are, what its book says about it – not just at the behaviour of some people who call themselves Muslims. And to get an unbiased understanding, we've got to approach the topic with an open mind – not allowing the things we've read in the papers or seen on TV to colour our view.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH



Everybody seems to have an opinion on Muslim Women: from Presidents of European states to the local cab driver and you've probably heard everyone's views -except the views of the women themselves!

Well, my name is Fatima and I am the busy mother of 4 children. I'm a journalist and a Londoner born and bred and this is a chance for you to hear from me; a Muslim woman, in my own words, how Islam affects my experience of womanhood.

You see the thing is, the way I see my role as a woman is completely linked to the conclusions I've come to about the meaning of life – and they are very rational, common sense conclusions. That the Universe has a cause – a Creator and that Creator sent us guidance and created us with a purpose that is not merely materialistic. That the Creator sent us a manual to guide us through life and an extraordinary individual – Muhammad – to teach us that way of life.

LETS GO BACK TO TO BASICS



I believe that the vast and seemingly limitless universe in which we live didn't just appear by chance. In our human experience we know that nothing just comes out of nothing and everything that has a beginning has a cause. Since the universe around us had a beginning – the universe too must have a cause. You could call that cause the Creator or God or even the Force behind creation. Now forget your old perceptions of God. In Islam, the Creator is not a male or female, we refer to Him as 'He' but that's not because He has a gender. God is Unique, not like His creation, He doesn't need anyone, He made you and me and everything we see and a whole lot of things we can't see too! He is not contained by space and time – He is outside and beyond those finite things.

Now since He is the Creator, He knows everything about His Creation, including about men and women. I mean the designer and maker of something knows what makes it tick right? The designer knows what will damage it and what it needs to function properly.

HEY! WHERE ARE THE INSTRUCTIONS?



It makes sense to me that the One who made us would tell us why we are here – what the purpose of our life is. He wouldn't just create such an intricate and finely tuned creation such as us humans– who question what the meaning of life is- and leave us without any direction. He would tell us how to live a good life. He would give us an instruction manual.

I believe – with good reason – that that instruction manual is the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is the only book that tells us about the Creator in reasonable, rational terms that satisfy our intellects. It is a fully comprehensive guidance, revealed through an extraordinary individual: Muhammad. And it is the only book from God that exists in its original form, word for word. Yes the Torah and the Bible in their original form were from that same source – but it is a historical fact that they have been changed and manipulated by human beings over the years. When I read the Qur'an on the other hand, I found no contradictions and I found that it described things accurately in a way that I would expect the creator to do. In fact even though the Qur'an was revealed over a thousand years ago, a time when microscopes hadn't been invented, it tells us things that Muhammad couldn't have known about – like the development stages of the embryo in the womb of the mother. And other amazing things that convinced me that it had to have a divine source.

But for me as woman, what I found most uplifting was that the Qur'an was incredibly empowering. It empowered me by telling me not to be subservient to created things: to men, to the media, to fashion, to what other people think and dictate to me. It showed me that the way to be free from subservience to created things was to submit to my Creator. That's exactly what Islam means: submission to our Creator.

I also found out through the Qur'an the answer to that question all of us must

have asked ourselves at least once in our lives: What is the purpose of life? What's it all for? The answer is in the Qur'an. That the purpose of our creation is to recognise that we have a Creator and Sustainer – to acknowledge that Creator and submit to Him.

A MAN CHAMPIONING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN?



The Prophet Muhammad was one of the first men in history to stand up in front of a whole nation and speak about the rights of women. Really! He was the first world leader to tell men: Honour your womenfolk, treat them kindly, the best of you is the one who is the best to his wife and respect the wombs that bore you. He elevated the status of women as builders of society.

When a man came and asked him “Who has the most rights over me” who should I serve the most and take care of the most. He said “Your mother.” The man asked, “Then who?” And he said: “your mother” again! And a third time the man asked “and then who?” and he replied again “your mother” and then when the man asked him a fourth time said “And then your father”.

Now if we go back in time for a moment – one thousand four hundred years back to be precise, we realise that there's so much we take for granted as women living in the 21st century...we have rights that women years ago never dreamed of. In Arabia for example, before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, women essentially belonged to men. If a man died, his wife was part of the wealth that his heirs would inherit. Female babies, used to be buried alive because families thought that girls were just a burden.

The message that the Prophet Muhammad came with changed all of that and upset the men who wanted to keep things the way they were. But what he said was a message from the Creator of women it wasn't something that he invented himself. The Prophet Muhammad told women that they were equal to men: just as important as men spiritually, socially, as individuals and as members of society. The Qur'an gave women rights of inheritance and to keep their identity and family names after they got married. In European countries women would change their names when they got married signifying that they now belonged to their husbands.

He told men that women were to be respected and not used as sexual objects or abused and that they must take full financial responsibility to provide and nurture their marriage partners and any children they father, even if the marriage breaks up. He condemned the killing of baby girls and encouraged raising daughters with as much pride as sons. He said that women should never be forced to marry against their will and should be able to choose and refuse.

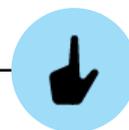
He encouraged women to study and learn and in fact his wife Aisha was one of the greatest and most knowledgeable jurists and teachers in Islamic history. In the words of author Ruth Roded: “In reading the biographies of thousands of Muslim women scholars, one is amazed at the evidence that contradicts the view of Muslim women as marginal, secluded and restricted.” In her study she found that the proportion of female lecturers in many classical Islamic colleges

was higher than in modern Western universities.” Here in Britain – women had to fight for their right to enter universities and only started getting degrees in 1920! If there are men in the world who are stopping women from being educated, they are going against the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

Women would come from far and wide to learn from the Prophet Muhammad and they were always welcome to come and ask him questions. They never felt shy to come to him for justice. For example, one young lady was forced by her father to marry a man. She went to the Prophet Muhammad and told him what her father had done. The Prophet Muhammad told her she could have the marriage annulled. She said that she came to him so that fathers would know that they are not allowed to force their daughters in to marriage. Just look at how confident the women were that if they came to Muhammad, they would get justice and he would stand up for them.

These were all revolutionary ideas that are relatively new even to Europe and the Western World. Yet Muhammad was saying these things 1400 years ago!

SO WHO ARE YOU SUBMITTING TO?



Each and every human being submits to someone or something. Sometimes it's subconscious. We're so used to conforming to subtle external expectations that we don't even realise we are conforming. We submit to peer pressure – pressure from our friends or from the media. We submit to societal pressures or to the fashion or music industries or to our desires...that feeling of 'I want this' and 'I want that'. It's easy for a human being to allow their desires to lead them in life and it inevitably leads to destruction or a lack of fulfilment.

What Islam did for me was to give me a chance to break away from those pressures. I realised that my Creator is the one I must submit to because He knows what is good for me and what is bad for me because He created me! Before that I had many masters – trying to control me, affecting my behaviour – sometimes really subtly. By submitting to God I became free. And I strive to continue to submit to him – it is an ongoing journey – but now I have a clear roadmap to follow.

God tells us in the Qur'an, that we have to submit, to surrender to the will of God – the one who created all of us men and women and who knows us best. That is the only way we will attain peace.

MEN AND WOMEN - EQUAL BUT NOT THE SAME



Any guidance that came from our creator would recognise that men and women are physiologically and psychologically different. To ignore the differences would be unjust. Men are on the whole physically stronger than women. That's why you'll never find Roger Federer playing tennis against Serena Williams!

Nor will you find men racing against women at the Olympics. Our bodies are designed differently. That's why it is still not acceptable on the streets of London for a woman to walk around topless but it would be for a man to – right? So we know that we are different and therefore Islam tells us that our roles in society are different too. We as women give birth to children and nurture them with the milk of humanity. Men cannot do that.

God tells men that one of their roles is to take leadership and nurture their families, to provide for them and to take full financial responsibility for their wives and children. And women are the most powerful force in society, our role as mothers, as the first school of humanity is honoured and supported in Islam. We are not required to contribute one penny to the upkeep of the family. We may work and earn money and that money is ours to do as we wish with. But we don't have to work because God deems us irreplaceable as the homemaker and nurturer of the next generation and had placed that responsibility upon the shoulders of men.

MORE PRECIOUS THAN JEWELS



So to go back to the question I started with: When I as a Muslim woman cover myself, I'm not doing it because a man told me to or my Imam told us to. No! I do it because our Creator knows the nature of men and women and gives us guidance about all sorts of things in the Qur'an to help us live the most upright lives we can. One of the things He tells us in the Qur'an is to cover ourselves when we go outside, with outer garments and head coverings so that we will be recognised and respected and not molested in any way. He commanded us to cover ourselves in a certain way when we are in the presence of men who are not closely related to us. (Men have also been given guidelines for dress in Islam – that's not something you hear about usually – but here I'm focusing on us women as that is what is so often in the media).

When I'm at home or in the company of women and children I dress as I please – yes, I even go to the hairdressers and wear the latest fashions and jewellery, but I just cover it up when I go outside – it's a sort of uniform. There is nothing strange about this. In fact the Bible too instructs women to cover their heads.

We would never walk around with our PIN number on display would we? How about our cash or our most precious jewels? Precious things are kept carefully – and that's what women are in Islam – precious; not to be flaunted cheaply,

but preserved under our robes for people whom we choose to share our beauty with. And we all know that when we are dressed in a more modest way, men show us more respect. Have you ever seen a man whistling at a nun or a Muslim woman who is dressed in Hijab? If Mary came down to earth today – who are the women she would be most like? When we dress as God tells us to, people appreciate what we have to say and what our talents are instead of judging us for the way we look.

ONE BIG FAMILY



Islam teaches us that we – all human beings – came from one father and one mother – Adam and his wife Eve and that it was not due to Eve's temptation that Adam and Eve were taken out of Paradise and put on earth. Both of them were led astray by Satan. So unlike in Christianity, childbirth and menstruation are not punishments from God. They are part of our experience of womanhood and have wisdoms behind them.

God teaches us that we as women are much more than just our bodies or our vital statistics. Our purpose in life is much more than just to be a play thing for men or a commodity for market forces to exploit. We are spiritual beings. Our actions and our intentions will be acknowledged by God when He judges us and we will be rewarded equally to men.

Islam teaches us that to use a woman's body as a commodity is wrong. To exploit her and tell her to cavort in public for the pleasure of men – might please men – but it degrades her and lowers her status in society. Unfortunately today, although we think that we are liberated – women are used more now as sex objects than they ever have been in history. Our sexuality is a beautiful and sacred gift from God that we should share with a man who has committed to us through marriage – who won't use and abuse us or love and leave us.

Islam raises our status as women and frees us from the pressures of society to conform to a particular image or body shape or to be a superwoman who works from 9-5 and then comes home and does the housework too – a double shift! I've found that it allows us to be true to our nature and at peace with it.

When you submit to God, you cease to be forced to go against your true nature. That is true liberation. I invite you to look into Islam further and take a fresh look at womanhood and I hope that you too one day can experience the sweetness that submitting to our Creator brings.