

Unveiling the Muslim Woman

By
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Saudi Arabia has long been considered the centre of the modern Muslim world. It is the sovereign Islamic state that administers Mecca, where thousands of Muslims converge from around the world to perform the annual haj ritual. Yet despite this lofty status, women's liberation, a perennial theme in Prophet Muhammad's founding messages of Islam in then uncivilised Arabia, has sadly taken a back seat. Women were not allowed to participate in the nation's recent elections. Only in the despised Western nations and other peripheral Muslim communities has considerable change improved the position of Muslim women, and it continues to gain headway, lending credence to the notion that change is most bona fide when irony is manifest.

For example, Shabina Begum, 16, made headlines in Britain when she recently overturned a court ruling to exercise her personal freedom to wear the 'jilbab' (a full dress Muslim clothing) to school. And in perhaps the most daring and radical initiative by liberal Muslims for gender equality, members of *Muslim Wake Up!* are sponsoring the first mixed-gender public Friday prayer and sermon in New York, led by Amina Wadud-Muhsin, a longtime advocate of women's rights in Islam.

In relating themes of liberation inherent in academic post-colonial studies to the position of women within the Muslim world, the issue of the hijab, or veil, figures prominently. This flimsy piece of clothing worn by Muslim women from different cultures has become the insignia of both liberation and oppression. Rigid Islamists and other pro-hijab Muslims, trying to justify what they perceive as the unequivocal Koranic dictum for women to cover up, even consider the veil as an attempt to liberate women from the capitalist Western world, where a woman's beauty inevitably becomes her prison. Beauty in the West, they say, is determined by advertising in the media, and is benchmarked at the level of celebrities.

Those who do not fit into the beauty pigeonhole, or at least attempt to, automatically become alienated as "the other". In showcasing this adverse impact of colonising the mind, one need only tune in to contemporary reality shows produced in the United States. In *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*, for example, a contestant undergoes a gruelling process of re-inventing himself or herself to be beautiful.

By choosing the Muslim veil, pro-hijab factions (these include men and women) try to drive home the point that a woman's beauty is more than skin deep, that a lady does not need the surgeon's knife to be acceptable or accepted.

And, of course, not every woman wears the hijab as a sign of protest. Some genuinely believe they are heeding God's command, passed through the religious authorities. Related to this, the attempt to beautify oneself by going through excessive measures is also seen by traditionalists as going against what is perceived to be the Islamic values of *redha*, or the notion of accepting what God has given, as well as *fitrah*, or the state of the natural self.

At the other end of the spectrum, critical modernists and other anti-hijab factions view the veil as an attempt to oppress Muslim women. Scour through the Middle East or Women sections of a bookstore, and you will find a slew of books containing images of “unhappy” and/or “grave-looking” veiled Muslim women on the covers. Such strong images further concretise the books’ content – generally how Muslim women are oppressed in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Some are even autobiographical, making the concern even more authentic.

Most of these accounts are truly horrifying. At the same time, the books invite unnecessary mass hysteria by the wide, non-Muslim public that the religion of Islam oppresses women. Muslim women are indeed subjected to a stricter lifestyle than most, but it is not Islam that is oppressing them. The oppressors are patriarchal religious authorities -- simply put, humans. Otherwise why would feminist Indian poet Kamala Das embrace the faith?

The social make-up in the Southeast Asian Muslim communities, where women have traditionally toiled as much or even more than men in paddy fields and matriarchy takes centre stage, has downplayed or pushed aside the patriarchy of Middle Eastern Islam. Yet to say that elements of patriarchy do not exist here is to sweep the problems under the carpet. They certainly do, just in lesser dosages.

With increasing religiosity as a reaction against globalization and increasing American hegemony -- and that could soon include China and India -- in the wake of the Sept 11, 2001 attacks, Muslims in Southeast Asia must be careful not to fall into the trap and trappings of rigid fundamentalism.

A major concern in post-colonial literary study is how the woman’s body is viewed as the “site of a struggle” between contesting ideologies. South African literary works such as Nadine Gordimer’s *Burger’s Daughter* (where the protagonist’s sexuality relates to her changing political affiliations) and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (where a white woman is raped by blacks) have both explored this metaphorically.

Similarly, and moving beyond literary works, this contest between ideologies is happening in the Muslim world, where the woman’s body is used as a site in a struggle between avant-garde modernists and conservative Islamists. As put forth by Haroon Siddique of the *Toronto Star*, the debate over the hijab has been politicised by two opposing camps.

It may seem to facilitate understanding to view the struggles within the Muslim world in fixed polemical terms, but it is dangerous. One will find himself dishing out the ultimatum of US President George W. Bush – “You are either with us, or against us” -- and the exercise will lend credence to Samuel Huntington’s theory of an impending clash of civilisations.

As with most complex issues, there are grey areas that do not fit into fixed categories. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a theorist in post-colonial studies, says women can be “doubly colonised” -- by ethnicity, and then gender -- and in some cases even triple-colonised by, say, the caste system in her native India. Homi Bhabha, also from India, demands we consider the voice of the migrant and diasporic communities.

Globalisation means the Mideast brand of Islam is no longer considered the centre of the Muslim world. Increasingly, the world turns to other “peripheral” and non-Arab Muslim communities. In Southeast Asia, some Muslim leaders and activists in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore are redefining their very version of a progressive Islam, one that can help practitioners relate religion to contemporary challenges, and eventually make Islam relevant. With Amina Wadud-Muhsin leading the first mixed-gender prayer, even delivering a *khutbah* (sermon), women have now marched into the sacred public space that used to be reserved exclusively for pious males. The humanist Muslim can joyously celebrate this one small step towards establishing gender equality.

As we hurtle further into the future, many developments are occurring in the Muslim world, but one thing remains clear: Change is inevitable. It is naive to think that the world will one day, in unison, subscribe to a solitary belief system. Thus, Muslims are left with two blatant choices: fight it, or embrace it. Those who choose the latter are no less Muslims than the fighters.

[This article first appeared on *The Bangkok Post* on Thursday, 17 March 2005.]