

Neither commodity nor potential incentive in wider social relations, their power is curtailed to strangers, enhanced to the bonded partner. Where promiscuity runs rampant, Islam builds a society where children know their fathers & fathers are responsible for wives & children. By severing the loose ties of lust, Islam restores the lasting ties of partnership. Where the sexual society objectifies, Islam humanizes.

**Hijab, Veil of Pride:** “That they should Draw their Veil over their bosoms and do not Display their Beauty except to their Husbands...” (24:31; 33:59). It is the minimum standard of decency. **No mention of face covering**, in fact; sexual politics of individual men have seen to that. A Muslim woman is told: cover your nakedness, do not play with your femininity as a commodity. Be proud and save your intimate best for the one who stands by you in times good and bad. Speak loud and clear; the game-and- promise bedroom voice does not belong on the streets, (33:32); Walk firm & tall: the swaying, jingling advertisement of body carries a “for sale” sign on it (24:31).

The Quran seeks clarity of heart and intention; Its injunctions address the deception inherent in teasing and seduction, their signal or their unintentional message. Hijab is **first** a reminder for the soul, an inner code and standard, and only second a physical statement. Indeed the head-to-toe cloak (chador) is by no means unique to Islam; but a universal, spontaneous woman’s choice throughout time, the dress of high-born Roman and Byzantine ladies for centuries to indicate their elevated social status, set apart, “protected” from the labouring throng. In the Quran, verses referring to the veil come in the context of the early struggles of nascent Islam, when false believers were infiltrating the infant Muslim community: Muslim ladies would be recognized at once, wearing a pragmatic veil of conduct affirming their belief in the Creator’s laws. Modesty of dress **externalizes** moderation of behavior: **the inner hijab, the moral affirmation of the bounds of decency, honesty, self-respect, honour, made visible.** The veil continues to

offer recognition & freedom to woman in many ways: it is a signal sent out which demands respect & receives it in return. Thus did Allah intend (33:59).

**The Harem:** “Swathed in their veil, locked away”: yet this popular image of extremes has no place in Islam. It is born under specific skies, in cultural imposition, solidified in misconception, perpetuated in the rigidity of the narrow-minded or the misguided.

**The segregation of the sexes is not a Quranic injunction.** A Muslim woman is given freedom of thought at all times. And that same intrinsic Freedom of action which does not lead to disharmony, in exactly the same manner as a Muslim man. Islam does favour the inherent, the natural division of life-spheres. A woman’s familial duty is foremost, her natural environment is the home. To those who cry, “Sexism,” a word of reminder, and some facts. A woman will know different spans in one single month; medical science has only now begun to concede the often drastic influence of very real hormonal fluctuations in a woman’s biology. The interplay of hormones and emotions is no Sexist Myth. It is Fact. By the same token, throughout Islamic history, women who, through their talent must rise in the larger society, have risen. In the time of Ignorance (Jahiliyah), the Message of Islam came to rectify rampant polygamy. The criterion, as always, balance and fairness. In case a man took more than one partner, it should be done legitimately, within the norms of fair dealing. No “Second class” categories of relationships. No one-night stand: a real commitment in marriage. Islam never overlooks the greater social stability and justice. It will regulate, in its omniscience, all potential forces at work in the social spectrum. In point of fact, the lifelong and monogamous bond of marriage is the actual Muslim reality. **The partnership endures.**

**Divorce:** Where it does not, despite the best intentions, here too, naturalness reigns. Divorce is the most disliked of all lawful things, the Prophet (p) said. Prevention is the priority. But when the life of the couple has grown destructive and counter-productive, the Quran sets strict guidelines, to forestall haste and whim; terms of transition (Iddat) and reasonable waiting periods – usually of four months – have been enjoined, long enough for tempers to cool, for a pregnancy to reveal itself, for circumstances to change or solidify. Divorce can be instigated by husband or wife (Talaq/Khula) & by mutual consent (Mubaraah).

No Muslim girl can be forced to marry against her will. When estrangement & alienation set in (2:226), the partners are directed to bridge their gap within a reasonable period of time, before that point of no return. For Allah understands & eases the frailty of humans.

**Within The Sheltering Peace:** This, then, is the religion of reason, the religion of balance, the religion of fairness, the religion of peace. This is Islam. Look around you, across the street, around the world: you will see Muslim women choosing the veil of their own free will. For they recognize it for what it was enjoined, an emancipation and a liberation. The merchandising of the human being profits only that ever-voracious corporate bottom line. Hijab is a woman’s statement, of transcending the often-abused power of men over their lives. It is a statement of understanding the real meaning within the Quran. It is intrinsic dignity, unadorned and straightforward, for all: and that is the Islamic way.

Today, women have tired of selling themselves short. Selling their “assets” on a false stage, where plastic bodies and fashion kings may dictate the shape of a life and **appearances** have taken on the functions of one’s very soul. Hail the freedom of the “**ugly liberated woman**,” unhinged from the trusting partnership: free to face man-the-enemy, rape, spouse abuse, abandonment, free to starve herself in the mating game – starve in the rat race. Her hard-won rights; her pyrrhic victory. Now imagine a world where women are the cover of men and men, their garment and covering. Imagine a world where merit and strength of character replace the transient, the doomed race after fading beauty; where the good become beautiful & the beautiful, good. The Prophet remarked, “God does not judge according to your bodies and appearances but scans your hearts and looks into your deeds.” “And one of Allah’s signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves, that you may find rest in them, and between you He put love and compassion.” (Surah 30:21).

**Imagine this beautiful world where companionship rules, this sheltering cloak for man & for woman. Imagine such a world & you can enter it. This is the peaceful world of Islam. The real world of Freedom. Any other system that claims freedom is fictional.**

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# Within <sup>the</sup> Sheltering Peace

**Sexual Politics** : Imagine this scenario, for it is real: two antagonists locked in a grim power struggle. And another: two or more other competitors, rivals in a race for high stakes, a race to determine the course of their entire life. At race’s end, the prizes for winning include compliments, telling glances, and First Prize, a wedding ring. Unwanted “prizes” along the way may include physical assault, countless violations of body and soul. The protagonists of these scenarios are all around us; they are modern man and modern woman, and woman vs. woman. From time immemorial, against this harsh horizon of human relations, the “battle of the sexes” has raged. But never has “Sexual Politics” been so virulent as today. Feminism becomes polarization along gender barriers. To offset increased competition for a mate, **extreme nudity splashes itself unchecked.** Fear and suspicion on both sides lurk; **commitments are tepid, or all too fragile.**

**Sexual Balance:** Now conjure this, from the Quran, the Book of the Revelation sent to guide the affairs of mankind; It comes from Allah (the Deity; One, Only) to us, His creatures: “Your wives are a garment to you, and you to them.” (Surah 2:187). As close as the skin to a garment, as essential as the covering layer which envelops and protects us from heat and cold, man and wife are the two halves of humanity coming together in balanced, mutual protection and care. This is the other veil, the deeper veil, the real covering & garment of ISLAM. In days remarkably similar to ours, a new path was taught: the path of enduring partnership and cooperation in human affairs, to level the exhausting shifting sands of competition & suspicion. This path was AL-ISLAM. Islam means the deep submission to God alone, Allah (The One, The Deity, “Eloh” of the Hebrews). Fittingly, the name of this grace-filled, all-encompassing path of balance and harmony for mankind was derived from “Salaam,” the Arabic word for peace.

**Peace:** “For Islam is the religion before Allah.” (Surah 3:19) Islam was not a new religion, “another” religion; it is the same universal truth that God has enjoined upon humanity throughout the ages, in its final, most comprehensive exposition. 1400 years after its Revelation, it stands as pristine, and as beneficial, as it was on the day Allah first granted it: in a time of upheaval, in a world of unraveling values, in a society confused and chaotic much like ours. There Allah chose His last Prophet, the Seal of the Messengers, the Mercy for all mankind. He was an upright, kind and honourable man living in seventh-century Arabia, at the very fringes of the civilized world. And when first Muhammad (p), in his fortieth year, heard the Word of Allah, he was shaken and he was stunned. And he turned to a woman, his wife Khadijah, for counsel: Am I mad? he asked. This true female companion knew better. Go, she said & serve Allah. The Revelation

of Islam was gathered over 23 often perilous years, in the Book of Recitation, the Quran. Today, 1/5th of humanity is Muslim, (those who surrender to Allah’s Will) and millions more (women in the forefront) are heeding its voice. For this Voice speaks with irresistible appeal, of the equitable design for living for all human beings, beyond race, beyond gender: **within the sheltering peace.**

**Freedom:** Islam is freedom; it upholds free will and encourages rational thought; it recognizes only that virtue or sin which an individual earns through free action and choice. Within its parameters is a code of behavior, a complete social pattern for man & for woman, that looks out to the whole of life through the harmony of a balanced scale. In this system, based on natural law and innate reason, (the Knowing System of the Creator Himself), cooperation is the standard criterion. Muslims are brothers and sisters in the family of mankind, brethren all under Islam, in the **sweet surrender** of obedience & worship to Allah, Unique & One (Tawhid). Each Muslim, man or woman, chooses to be a Muslim. Each Muslim is ultimately accountable for his and her actions to Allah alone. Allah will call us all to account on the Day of Reckoning. How easy it becomes, then, to be truly free. For the vain idols of stone, the enslaving tyrants of greed, of lust, of ambition, of public opinion crumble to naught. Freedom from the tyranny of man & man-made conceits: **Islam liberates.**

**Parity:** Not one verse in the whole of the Quran speaks injustice. Not one word says, men and women are **not** equal. Everywhere, the Book of Nature and Creation tells us: equality under God is the only criterion. Under God in sincere worship, man and woman stand in parity. But this Book is truth; truth does not shy away from our most basic, indisputable biological differences. Male & female, quite simply, have distinct & complementary roles to fill, equally vital for the sustenance of life. Everywhere, the Quran reminds us of the mutual rights humans owe to one another, in the balance of our relations. “O men! Fear your Lord Who created you from a single being and out of it created its mate; and out of the two spread many

men and women. Fear Allah in Whose name you demand your rights of one another and heed the ties of relationships.” (4:1). In a time when most women were common chattel, the teachings of the Quran & the practices (Sunnah) of Muhammad, the Messenger (p), firmly restored to them status, both legal and social; and dignity as individuals; cemented their right to wealth and property, to inheritance, to education. In Muhammad (p), women found the champion to uphold their rights, merciful, sympathetic, unwavering in his support: women flocked to his call. Budding Islam grew strong on the depth of their staunch belief. In a day of social anarchy, Islam reintroduced structure and the natural order. For it is the stable bond of the family unit that elevates man from beast. It is its strong foundation, built on understanding and collaboration, which ripples outward in concentric circles to the vast social network. It is here that peace and freedom begin. **Islam elevates.**

**Natural Humanism:** Your body has rights upon you, said the Prophet (p). By this was meant a healthy, clean, intelligent respect for the body & its needs. Personal hygiene is one of Islam’s most basic requirements. Pleasing & discrete elegances smiled upon in Islam, the world’s great Civilization of Refinement, in body & soul. The Prophet (p): “**God Himself is graceful and elegance pleases Him.**” The Islamic way does not want mankind shut up unnaturally, in towers of ivory, to ruminate endlessly in ascetic withdrawal from fellow beings. Islam is inclusive dynamism; Useful & graceful action; Improvement & betterment. Nor does it deny or demean the natural sex drive. On the contrary, it elevates & liberates it, channeling it for a peaceful, healthy society: the hectic waves of seduction, rivalry, the “theft” of physical or mental integrity are banished. Within the REAL partnership of matrimony, the joining of husband & wife is legitimized: here sex is no sin, but a form of natural worship. The Quran itself speaks of sexual relations between man & wife, simple & direct; it teaches the striving toward harmony, the need for trust & confidence between husband & wife, between life partners, as it does between all human beings (Surah 66). Does the nurturer not need nurturing too?

The biological imperatives, Islam meets squarely, head-on, with no coyness; for indeed Allah created us so. Islam addresses the differing needs of man and woman comprehensively. The need of woman, in child bearing years, feminism notwithstanding, is sustenance & security. A pregnant woman requires care; a nursing mother & infant require protection; a wife, mother, sister require respect: these are their rights. Equal rights, in proportioned measure: the way of Islam is honest & clear-sighted. To safeguard the one from the oversights of the other; to remind the one of the requirements of the other; the balanced checks of Islam work in supreme rationality: “Men are the protectors & maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them stronger than the other, and because they spend out of their possessions to support them.” (4:34). Women have the same rights as the husbands have on them. But man is the burden-carrying partner; with the weight of duty/responsibility, comes a measure of fair recognition: “But men are a degree above them (women).” (2:228). These are the basic injunctions of Islam concerning women. They revolve around the **rights** of women, **not** their restrictions. Injunctions placing restrictions on women in the Quran, emerge chiefly in connection to the greater curbs placed on men. For male lust, that primary, but blindest of drives, is **not** allowed to become the driving force of society. Thus the Quranic injunctions recommend modesty, for **both** men & women. (24:31; 33:35). Where the parade of enticement & seduction prevails, Islam upholds the standard of straight forward human dealings, inner mettle to inner mettle. Sex & beauty stay at “home”; **but in these lawless days of social networking (no bedroom is safe with a webcam/cell-phone); strangers have unbridled access (pics/videos/flirty chat/dirty talk/virtual sex) to your “innocent hijabi sisters.” Modesty is non-existent. Immorality is now technologically discreet.**

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