

Op- Ed: Judging Books by their Covers? Islamic Women and the stereotype of the Veil

By Karen Stallings

America is a free country. If I were to ask, most everyone would agree with that statement. They would also agree that as Americans, we are free to express ourselves in whatever way that we choose. We can say, do, wear, and worship whatever we want. Other countries do not have these freedoms. Some people have laws that they must live by in that honor their cultures and traditions.

Members of the Islamic faith (Muslims) have laws and guidelines that they live by. Specifically, women are instructed to be obedient to their husbands, as well as to honor and protect their bodies by covering themselves. The veil, also known as the *hijab*, is a garment that allows women to hide parts of their body, or their entire body, in order for them to remain modest and respectable in the eyes of God.

There are a variety of ways the hijab can be worn, whether it be the type of dress that the woman feels most appropriate in, or the style that chooses to wear it. The veil is said to represent honor and dignity, bringing a woman respect, not only to herself, but to her family. The Holy Quran, that provides scripture to guide Muslims spiritual lives, commands that women wear the hijab so that they may protect themselves from the tempted eyes of men, and so that will not be annoyed by them. However, through the years, the scriptures have been misinterpreted leaving problems for women. The Sharia, derived from the Quran and Hadith (recorded activities of the Prophet Muhammad's daily life), was written and provides laws where women are instructed to wear their headscarves and be obedient to their husbands.

Unequal rights, and women not having the freedom to express themselves because of the male dominated environment, have been reasons why westerners and feminists view the covering of a Muslim woman's body as a sign of male dominance and oppression. From their point of view, the veil is a way to simply hide their femininity, keep them under control, and powerless.

However, researching the veil, led me to different perspectives of women and how they perceived the way they were instructed to dress. Many of the women who chose to veil were upset by the fact that others associated their headscarves and dresses as signs of negativity and oppression. For them, wearing their coverings allowed them to feel empowered in their femininity. One woman interviewed said that it allowed her to remain neutral with the opposite sex. She was able to keep her professional and sexual life separate from one another. Others described it as a way of bringing them closer to God. Wearing the veil, is a modest act, and that is respectable in his eyes.

One of the biggest questions that I asked myself was how can we prevent making assumptions on other people based on their culture, specifically women who choosing to wear the veil? Although some of our negative stereotypes may be a reality in some

aspects, it does not always apply to every case. Ways that we can become more informed are by asking questions, reading and researching, and simply talking to individuals assimilated in the culture. Expanding our knowledge by asking someone educated in the subject, and by doing our research can provide endless possibility. Also when you talk to someone who has experienced the culture first hand, it will allow you to take another look at your own opinion. When we ask, we learn, and in turn, gain a new understanding.

Prior to my research, I was unaware of the positive perspective of the veil and how it allowed women to feel empowered. I viewed it as most of the Western world sees it, strictly in a negative light. However, if we all just stopped for a moment to listen, we would find that we can hear over our own voices. We would place our feet into the shoes of others, see a new perspective for the first time, and learn how to not judge a book by its cover.

Karen Stallings is senior at East Carolina University majoring in Applied Sociology with a concentration in Marriage and Family. She plans to work with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes upon graduation, and to eventually attend graduate school for counseling.

Reference

Sanders, Eli, ed. 2003. "Interpreting Veils: Meanings Have Changed with Politics, History." *Seattle Times*, May 27.