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# Spare Me the Sermon On Muslim Women

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By Mohja Kahf

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Crimson chiffon, silver lamé or green silk: Which scarf to wear today? My veil collection is 64 scarves and growing. The scarves hang four or five to a row on a rack in my closet, and elation fills me when I open the door to this beautiful array. Last week, I chose a particularly nice scarf to slip on for the Eid al-Fitr festivities marking the end of the month of Ramadan.

It irks me that I even have to say this: Being a Muslim woman is a joyful thing.

My first neighbor in Arkansas borrowed my Quran and returned it, saying, "I'm glad I'm not a Muslim woman." Excuse me, but a woman with Saint Paul in her religious heritage has no place feeling superior to a Muslim woman, as far as woman-affirming principles are concerned. Maybe no worse, if I listen to Christian feminists, but certainly no better.

Blessings abound for me as a Muslim woman: The freshness of ablution is mine, and the daily meditation zone of five prayers that involve graceful, yoga-like movements, performed in prayer attire. Prayer scarves are a chapter in themselves, cool and comforting as bedsheets. They lie folded in the velveteen prayer rug when not in use: two lightweight muslin pieces, the long drapey headcover and the roomy gathered skirt. I fling open the top piece, and it billows like summer laundry, a lace-edged meadow. I slip into the bottom piece to cover my legs for prayer time because I am wearing shorts around the house today.

These create a tent of tranquility. The serene spirit sent from God is called by a feminine name, "sakinah," in the Quran, and I understand why some Muslim women like to wear their prayer clothes for more than prayer, to take that sakinah into the world with them. I, too, wear a (smaller) version of the veil when I go out. What a loss it would be for me not to have in my life this alternating structure, of covering outdoors and uncovering indoors. I take pleasure in preparing a clean, folded set for a houseguest, the way home-decor mavens lay elegant plump towels around a bathroom to give it a relaxing feel.

Tassled turquoise cotton and flowered peach crepe flutter as I pull out a black-and-ivory striped headscarf for the day. When I was 22 and balked at buying a \$30 paisley scarf, my best friend told me, "I never scrimp on scarves. If people are going to make a big deal of it, it may as well look good."

I embraced that principle, too, even when I was a scratch-poor graduate student.

Today I sort my scarves, always looking to replace the frayed ones and to find missing colors, my collection shrinking and expanding, dynamic, bright: The blue-and-yellow daisy print is good with jeans, the incandescent purple voile for a night on the town, the gray houndstooth solidly professional, the white chambray anytime.

As beautiful as veils are, they are not the best part of being a Muslim woman -- and many Muslim women in Islamic countries don't veil. The central blessing of Islam to women is that it affirms their spiritual equality with men, a principle stated over and over in the Quran, on a plane believers hold to be untouched by the social or legalistic "women in Islam" concerns raised by other parts of the Scripture, in verses parsed endlessly by patriarchal interpreters as well as Muslim feminists and used by Islamophobes to "prove" Islam's sexism. This is how most believing Muslim women experience God: as the Friend who is beyond gender, not as the Father, not as the Son, not inhabiting a male form, or any form.

And the reasons for being a joyful Muslim woman go beyond the spiritual. Marriage is a contract in Islam, not a sacrament. The prenup is not some new invention; it's the standard Muslim format. I can put whatever I want in it, but Muslims never get credit for that. Or for having mahr, the bridegift that goes from the man to the woman -- not to her family, but to *her*, for her own private use. A mahr has to have significant value -- a year's salary, say. And if patriarchal customs have overridden Islam and whittled away this blessing in many Muslim locales, it's still there, available, in the law. Hey, I got mine (cash, partly deferred because my husband was broke when we married; like a loan to him, owed to me whenever I want to claim it) -- and I was married in Saudi Arabia, a country whose personal-status laws are drawn from the most conservative end of the Muslim spectrum.

I had to sign my name indicating my consent, or the marriage contract would not have been valid under Saudi Islamic law. And, of course, I chose whom to marry. Every Muslim girl in the conservative circle of my youth chose her husband. We just did it our way, a conservative Muslim way, and we did it without this nonsensical Western custom of teenage dating. My friends Salma and Magda chose at 16 and 17: Salma to marry boy-next-door Muhammad, with whom she grew up, and Magda to marry a doctor 10 years her senior who came courting from half a world away. Both sisters have careers, one as a counselor, one as a school principal, and both are still vibrantly married and vibrantly Muslim, their kids now in college.

I held out until I was 18, making my parents beat back suitors at the door until I was good and ready. And here I am, still married to the guy I finally let in the door, 22 years (some of them not even dysfunctional) later. My cousin, on the other hand, broke off a marriage she contracted (but did not consummate) at 16 and chose another man. Another childhood friend, Zeynab, chose four times and is looking for Mr. Fifth. Her serial monogamy is nothing new or radical; she

didn't pick up the idea from reading Cosmo or from the "liberating" influence of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. It's simply what a lot of women in early Muslim history did, in 7th- and 8th-century Arabia.

And would you guess that we've also been freer to divorce and remarry than Christian women have been for most of history? In medieval times, when Christian authorities were against divorce and remarriage, this was seen as another Islamic abomination. Now that divorce and remarriage are popular in the West, Muslims don't get credit for having had that flexibility all along. We just can't win with the Muslim-haters.

Here's another one: Medieval Christianity excoriated Islam for being orgiastic, which seems to mean that Muslims didn't lay a guilt trip on hot sex (at least within what were deemed licit relationships). Now that hot sex is all the rage in the post-sexual revolution West, you'd think Muslims would get some credit for the pro-sex attitude of Islam -- but no. The older stereotype has been turned on its head, and in the new one, we're the pruders. Listen, we're the only monotheistic faith I know with an actual legal rule that the wife has a right to orgasm.

Of course, I'm still putting in my time struggling for a more woman-affirming interpretation of Islam and in criticizing Muslim misogyny (which at times is almost as bad as American misogyny), but let me take a moment to celebrate some of the good stuff. Under Islamic law, custody of minor children always goes first to the mother. The Quran doesn't blame Eve. Literacy for women is highly encouraged by the traditions of the [Prophet Muhammad](#). Breast-feeding is a woman's choice and a means for her to create family ties independent of male lineage, as nursing creates legally recognized family relationships under Islamic law. Rapists are punishable by death in Islamic law (and yes, an atavistic part of me applauds that death penalty), which they certainly are not in any Western legal code. Birth control allowed in Islamic law? Check. Masturbation? Let's just say former surgeon general Joycelyn Elders's permissive stance on that practice is not unknown among classical and modern Muslim jurists. Abortion? Again, allowances exist -- even Muslims seem not to remember that.

It's easy to forget that Muslims are not inherently more sexist than folks in other religions. Muslim societies may lag behind on some issues that women in certain economically advanced, non-Muslim societies have resolved after much effort, but on other issues, Muslim women's options run about the same as those of women all over the world. And in some areas of life, Muslim women are better equipped by their faith tradition for autonomy and dignity.

There are "givens" that I take for granted as a Muslim woman that women of other faiths had to struggle to gain. For example, it took European and American women centuries to catch up to Islamic law on a woman's fully equal right to own property. And it's not an airy abstraction; it's a right Muslim women have practiced, even in Saudi Arabia, where women own businesses,

donate land for schools and endow trusts, just as they did in 14th-century Egypt, 9th-century Iraq and anywhere else Islamic law has been in effect.

Khadija was the boss of her husband, our beloved Prophet Muhammad, hiring him during her fourth widowhood to run caravans for her successful business; he caught her eye, and she proposed marriage to him. Fatima is the revered mother figure of Shiite Islam, our lady of compassion, possessed of a rich emotional trove for us. Her daughter Zainab is the classic figure of high moral protest, the Muslim Antigone, shaking her fist at the corrupt caliph who killed her brother, her tomb a shrine of comfort for millions of the pious. Saints, queens, poets, scribes and scholars adorn the history of Muslim womanhood.

In modern times, Muslim women have been heads of state five times in Muslim-majority countries, elected democratically by popular vote (in Bangladesh twice and also in Turkey, Indonesia and Pakistan). And I'm not saying that a woman president is necessarily a women's president, but how many times has a woman been president of the United States?

Yet even all that gorgeous history pales when I open my closet door for the evening's pick: teal georgette, pink-and-beige plaid, creamy fringed wool or ice-blue organza? God, why would anyone assume I would want to give up such beauty? I love being a Muslim woman. And I'm always looking for my next great polka-dot scarf.

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