

## Sexual modesty is **not** shame

which we are judged, as some sort of very primal, almost animalistic response, precedes our ability to relate to one another on terms which value more substantive qualities. This isn't to say – that men, or women – can't control these sexual impulses. There is no justification for people acting on unrequited lust. We don't control our emotions, but we do control whether or not we act on them. In this sense, rape is 100% the rapist's fault – it doesn't matter what the victim was wearing, where she was – the responsibility is with the rapist. Unequivocally.

It is interesting to note that research which suggest men & women's sexuality differs & that the ways in which our sexual arousal differs is reflected in Divine injunctions designed to limit the intrusion of sex into the public sphere, which Muslims believe should be a place in which the only distinction between people is based on "piety & good deeds" – a public sphere in which all other markers of difference are minimised in favour of fostering an atmosphere in which people compete in kindness, generosity, truthfulness, justice.

The sexual cues that tends to trigger arousal in women are mainly psychological, including a man's social status, confidence, desire & ability to protect his family, emotional availability, emotional commitment, strong sexual desire for her & his popularity with other women – all common elements in romantic stories for women. The Islamic prescriptions on male modesty have these desirable traits – men are forbidden from wearing silk, one of the most expensive fabrics, a marker of status & wealth. Similarly, men are forbidden from wearing gold – if we think of gold, particularly in traditional societies, it was given to women as a dowry & the more gold, the wealthier the man – so again, men are limited in their ability to publicly parade their status & affluence, although **in the private setting of a marriage, the man can 'display' his gold, just as woman can display her allure.**

Men & women respond differently to sexual cues & that, while women's sexual drive is tied to psychological factors, men are more visually stimulated than women. What is the consequence on men, whom as a given are more visual creatures of constantly viewing women through a sexualised lens? Research by S. Fiske, a psychologist at Princeton Uni, shows that sexualised images of women in bikinis lead some men to see them as objects, according to her study of male behavior. Brain scans revealed that when men were shown pictures of scantily clad women, the region of the brain associated with tool use lights up. Now this isn't to say men are sex obsessed creatures – **there is a natural tendency within men towards visual stimulation**, which in a certain setting, **Islam would not consider a negative thing**. It has a place in a healthy relationship. But in the public sphere,

## Modesty commands respect

this can become perverse & lead to an objectification of women & a dehumanizing of their person.

A culture of objectification in which women cease to be viewed as people, but rather as things, consumerist commodities, fosters an atmosphere in which violence against women becomes normalised. In a fantastic documentary you can find on Youtube, "Killing us softly", Jean Kilbourne points out that the dehumanised bodies of women found in advertising (but also beyond!), often with heads cut off, or in painful or vulnerable poses, reflects a climate in which women are the objects of violence. She claims the images we see in advertising, foster a climate in which women are dehumanised & are therefore open to violence.

And what of even more overt sexualised images, so readily available. An article in the Times discussed the ways in which **teenage access to porn is killing intimacy & distorting their understanding of relationships & the female body**. This was also impacting their interaction with women, with some unable to relate to women beyond the images they had seen: "I was unable to think of women except as potential porn. I looked at them in a purely sexual way. I was about 15, and I got talking to a girl who must have been 18. I wanted to grope her breasts. I had no idea how to interact with women as people."

Muslim women who choose modest dress **do not** do so because men **cannot** control themselves. The vast majority of men can & do – however, it is the tendency to objectify the female form, far more so than the male form, as the thousands of female mags containing a majority of images of women (men's mags don't contain a majority of images of men) testify – which modest dress, as part of a broader dedication to maintaining modesty in all other aspects of one's being, toward which Muslim women aspire. This is where the choice Muslim women make in shielding themselves from what can be a dehumanising & objectifying gaze, comes into its own. **It is a conscious & empowered decision to reject the tyranny of female objectification**, inline with divine guidelines which speak to fostering the most harmonious environment for human development, in light of divine wisdom concerning the inherent characteristics of humans.

Let's draw a distinction between modesty & shyness or lack of self-confidence. There is some confusion over the notion of modesty, of 'haya', which does **not** mean **NOT** being assertive. Aishah said: "How good are the women of Ansar. **Shyness does not** prevent them from learning the religion." The opposite quality of 'haya' is rendered in the Hadith as vulgarity, including a range of bad manners, such as **vulgar language** that demonstrates lack of propriety & decorum. Haya covers a wide number of concepts – modesty, self-respect, shame,

## Modesty: a mark of true nobility

humility. The original meaning of Haya according to a believer's nature, refers to a bad & uneasy feeling accompanied by embarrassment, caused by one's fear of being exposed or censured for some indecent conduct.

So this value of 'modesty' **does not** mean fading into the background, it **doesn't** mean lacking self-confidence or the ability to express oneself. Rather, modesty is a tool to regulate human interaction, both in men and women, with slight differential manifestations of that in each, based on inherent human characteristics specific to each gender (to varying degrees).

In the knowledge of this inherent aspect of the male psyche, one can make the empowering decision of saying, no, I will not allow myself to be viewed in a sexualised manner – I choose to ensure the focus of my being is on my soul, my person & my actions. Everything else is frankly, none of anyone's business. The public sphere is one where Muslims aim to see neutralised through a focus on meaningful & substantive values.

The Prophet (p): "**God does not judge according to your bodies & appearance but He scans your hearts & looks into your deeds.**" And this is what we seek to reflect in our public sphere. Modesty has such a bad name in the west because it is assumed that only people who hate their bodies, or who are embarrassed about them, could possibly choose to cover them. The assumption is that modesty somehow represents a lack of self-confidence, which clearly is quite distinct from parading one's body, or, the repression of sexuality, and not as a recognition of its power & a respect for its function in specific, desired circumstances.

The sublime medium, the exquisite middle road that is advocated by Islam, enjoins modesty upon both sexes. It rejects both self denial & excess: **sexuality is not seen as evil, but is meant to be expressed in a private domain**, kept out of the public sphere, where the 'real' values, the substantive, meaningful values which men & women can compete on equal footing on, ought to be given precedence, that is piety & good deeds.

**The grim reality is sex before marriage for all women is always a continuous disaster.** Sex "education" erodes natural modesty...not allowing children to develop their personalities before their sexual identities. The truly empowering force of modesty can be seen in the woman who fully accepts her desirability, her femininity, her ability to attract a male, **her feeling that her sex is too powerful to remain unguarded.** This is an innate sense of the female's power; it is a subconsciously realized truth, one that is so deeply connected with the female psyche that it cannot be labeled as conceit. **Showing off your curvature of adipose tissue is pure, unadulterated superficiality. Modesty is the way to showcase your inner self – the road to self-respect & dignity. The best garment is the garment of righteousness.**

# RAISES A WOMAN... Modesty ...TO THE STATUS OF DIVINITY

**"Every faith has an innate character. The character of Islam is Modesty."**

When men & women dress modestly – & behave accordingly – they emphasize both to themselves & to others that **libidinal attraction is not a goal**. They strive to affect the world through the wisdom they have acquired & the deeds they have performed, **not through anatomical endowments that they have received from nature & for which they can claim little or no credit**. Modesty is one of the most **fundamental** of values, but is misunderstood & frequently dismissed as old-fashioned, outmoded, or chauvinistic. It is the art of directing focus **away** from oneself. In our culture's celebration of individuality this art is usually unpopular: What could be more significant than having our individuality acknowledged & acclaimed? Like tattoos on private parts now made public. **But modesty matters.** It is the ornament of women. To go beyond the boundary of modesty, **to behave like a man**, destroys the elegance, grandeur, grace & beauty of the fair sex. Nothing can atone for the want of modesty in a woman, without which beauty is ungraceful. **Modesty is a wonderful mixture of humility, politeness, decency, elegance, gentleness & sweetness.** A modest woman is restrained by a sense of propriety. She has good behaviour & manners. A woman without modesty is like a flower without fragrance; a mere **void** although she possesses many other virtues. Do not waste your lives in fashion & passion, in the zeitgeist of current trendy behaviours, which are the culprits of the modern push towards immodesty & brazen manners. **Islam insists that holiness does not emerge from the suppression of human instincts, but from their affirmation through regulation, so that the natural rhythms of the body are not to be ignored or suppressed, but regulated & commemorated in religious ritual. The use of 'immodest women' to advertise anything (cars, phones) actually dilutes the force of sexuality & in doing so, forces men further & further down the route of strange & increasingly dark perversions. Modest women (the real bombshells), are the ones made for love...as are modest men.** Being a male does **not** make you a man. A man is **made** through uprightness & virtuous character. The Prophet's (p) most outstanding virtue was his modesty. His sagacious advice to men: **"Be chaste & your women will be chaste."**

## THE WORLD & THE WORKPLACE HAS BECOME A GLOBAL THEATER OF CARNALITY.

**M**odesty is the inner self-government, rooted in a proper understanding of one's self before God, which **outwardly displays itself in humility & purity, rather than in self-glorification or self-advertisement. Modesty will not publicly expose itself in sinful fashion.** The clothes we wear are garments for our bodies. Our thoughts, speech & actions are garments for our souls. Garments are borders, to keep the outside out & the inside in. Dressing immodestly is a sign of weak borders. Cultures that worship sensuality dress immodestly. Modesty is a key value in our era of baring all. But another important value is respect, which is a two-way street. Respect in dress is a form of modesty because it doesn't call attention to oneself; women can be beautiful & modest at the same time...**without ending up androgynous.** The female lamb can then properly interact with the manly lion...Maryam & the Jews.

**Vanity leading to excessive luxury in clothing is a vice** which should be studiously avoided by virtuous people. **An obtrusive display in clothing & jewelry bespeaks a vulgar & empty mind.** Modest & cultured people are modest & becoming in their dress. Their spare money is wisely used in further enhancing their culture & virtue. Education & progress are of more importance to them than needless, vain apparel; and literature, art, and science are encouraged thereby. A true refinement is in the mind & behaviour, and a mind adorned with virtue & intelligence **cannot add to its attractiveness (though it may detract from it) by an ostentatious display of the body.** Simplicity in dress, as in other things, is the best.

**Extreme religious modesty:** Ways to Psychosis & Paranoia – Muslim Style. Every possible stringency regarding “modesty” is portrayed as an **absolute** requirement for the woman. Dress length – get out the tape measure. Stockings – they better be bullet proof lest they be considered “sheer”. Nail polish – the bright colours will act like visual Viagra. Earrings that hang – the man's tongue is lolling out like a dog! Makeup – that might reflect light into the eyes of a lascivious man & attract attention to a woman's face, **which will ultimately lead to illicit thoughts, which could lead to same behavior, which could lead to eternal damnation, which could lead to ....paying retail. Lord, have mercy!**

**Beautiful Islamic Modesty: From a properly covered body flows the fragrance of the soul...** manifesting in freedom from conceit or vanity & propriety in dress, speech & conduct. The worth of a flower lies in its colour & fragrance. Where a person is

### Modesty: The Display of God's Splendour

**alien** to modesty they have neither colour nor fragrance. It's a sacred responsibility to clothe the body that houses the divine spirit sensibly, sensitively & joyfully. On the runway of life, use colour, texture & design to robe yourself with modesty & flair, dignity & honour. Let God be the Designer.

Modesty is rooted in ethical communication & is the expression of relationship. The deeper the friendship, the more I reveal & share verbally. So it is with the body. **“Letting it all hang out”** may arouse a physical response, but it violates the ratio between relationship & revelation. In traditional religious language, this behavior is called “uncovering that which is normally covered.” Modesty demands that one should speak & show the body based on the context of the relationship & social setting. In Marriage the body/soul is fully exposed.

Modesty, the flower of manners, the honour of our bodies, the grace of the sexes, the basis of sanctity & the pre-indication of every good disposition. Modesty is not a matter of inches covered or related only to women. In societies that separates genders (**meaning that the woman is made into a sex object**), uncovering may be considered more invasive than in a gender-mixed society. In most traditional settings, modesty has metastasized into prudery, shame of the body & beliefs that women should be less visible & avoid public roles. A mixed culture **that has spiritual roots** has a better chance to achieve normal social interaction & is less likely to turn females into objects of sexual exploitation. In both cultures, the goal should be to set a tone of equality & reciprocal modesty that **honours the other.** A properly applied principle of modesty dynamically adjusts & nurtures human relationships; that is the ideal.

Girls who haven't “gone wild” want to protect the inviolable sanctity of their bodies via their long skirts & sleeves. They want people to value them for their brains & personalities. The body is not shameful or dirty, nor is it a toy – it is sacred. Modest dress is **not** about compensating for thoughts that men might have about them – this would be an **excessive preoccupation** with the idea that they are sex objects. If men have the problem, wear blinders!

Even in our increasingly egalitarian age, women bear **unequal** burdens. Modesty is expected more of women than men. Women's bodies are more often exploited for profit by various media. These images offer distorted views of what bodies are for & what women “should” look like.

Pressure over what to wear drains energy & money better spent on education. It can also lead to eating disorders, even in young girls, making a de-emphasis of appearances a public health imperative. Clothing can be a fun & attractive realm of self-expression, but the real purpose of clothes is more basic (just ask the millions who can't afford them). We'd all be well served by a bit more sartorial utilitarianism.

### Modesty: Maintaining Human Dignity

Islamic women's clothing is a bizarrely emotive topic. To discuss the headscarf represents a deepening of what is an already **grossly exaggerated fixation** with it. Let's discuss the value of modesty & its contribution to female empowerment. ‘Female empowerment’, not Muslim female empowerment & this is crucial. Modesty is both a central value of the Islamic faith & a powerful tool for the emancipation of the modern woman.

There are norms of modesty enjoined by God upon all people, norms which can be found in all faiths, all traditions, including the Islamic tradition. The real question is how do we reconcile this facet of our faith with a world in which, let's face it, nothing is anything unless it's sexy.

The discussion on the hijab cannot be disassociated from the broader context in which Muslim women are discussed. It does so often feel like others, often white men in positions of power, talking about Muslim women (usually, poorer, often disenfranchised, brown women) without necessarily engaging Muslim women themselves in the discussions at hand. To some extent, Muslim women have been taken hostage between two extreme perceptions: a rigid conservative approach within the community & an ethnocentric & islamophobic approach, often found outside of it. The two outlooks share a number of things in common – most notably an unshakable belief in their view, which makes dialogue difficult.

Muslim women undeniably live in various countries where **oppression masquerades as religion**, whereas in some European countries, **fundamentalist secularism masquerades as freedom.** In a society where the self-worth as women is so often premised on their looks, where according to Deborah Rhodes of Stanford Uni (“The Beauty Bias”), **virtually all women consider their looks as key to their self image** – indeed, “over half of young women said they would prefer to be hit by a truck than be fat,” this is an important discussion in which more Muslim women should be engaged.

What does it mean to have a liberated body – female bodies having become battlegrounds for competing ideological & at times, commercial interests. Does the idea that one might wish to limit visual access to one's physicality in the public sphere such an outrageous notion when we're fed a consistent diet of visual imagery which premises a woman's worth on her physical attributes, over & above any other aspect of their person. Rather than competing on equal terms with men, a woman's beauty has become a yardstick from which to measure their worth, a competition in which men decide who the worthy & unworthy women are based on gracious genetics or a fervent commitment to a rigorous exercise & starvation regime.

Natasha Walters lists a number of particularly shocking examples in her book *Living Dolls*. When Ann

### Modesty: Timeless Beauty

Widcombe, the conservative MP appeared on Have I Got News For You in 2007, many of the jokes focused on her looks & how ‘unsexy’ she was said to be. Walters rightly argues that this bullying of women who choose to enter the public sphere, **the public berating of any female figure who doesn't live up to the porn star ideal**, leaves many uneasy about entering the field at all.

In the modern workplace, despite having to worry both about performance & looks (& don't mention the M word – motherhood!) women are paid less than male colleagues & to have to spend more time worrying about how they look. Female lawyers at Freshfields in the UK **were advised to team their stilettos with skirts rather than trousers to ostensibly ‘embrace their femininity’**... or, to translate that – be sure to draw on your physical attributes as part of your professional activities. It is not enough to be a good lawyer like their male peers...if you're a woman, success means being a **‘hot’** top lawyer. Self-worthiness is only established when women obtain male approval, as if being an innately desirable woman is something one must work towards, as if it were not already a God given right & a fact of their existence. The more women allow their bodies to be the primary defining aspect of themselves, the more they are in fact allowing men to define their values, based on a scale & premise that is fundamentally male. The **ability to live up to male penchants**, and if they do look ‘hot’ doing it, expect their physicality to take precedence over their actions & for any & all attention to be focused on their sex appeal rather than any genuine contributions they make.

John Berger wrote: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men & women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”

The Islamic response says this – women (and men!) are sexy, you don't need a cream/a diet/a workout/a hairstyle to ‘become’ attractive, rather, it is a given. The question is, **in the public sphere**, do we wish to make **physical attributes** the defining quality on which we judge one another? And when we do bring our sexiness into the public sphere, does it have a tendency to become the overriding aspect upon

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