

- The Beauty Myth : *How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* by Naomi Wolf
- Ideological battles are often waged with women's bodies as their emblems, and Western Islamophobia is no exception. When France banned headscarves in schools, it used the hijab as a proxy for Western values in general, including the appropriate status of women. When Americans were being prepared for the invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban were demonised for denying cosmetics and hair colour to women; when the Taliban were overthrown, Western writers often noted that women had taken off their scarves.
- But are we in the West radically misinterpreting Muslim sexual mores, particularly the meaning to many Muslim women of being veiled or wearing the chador? And are we blind to our own markers of the oppression and control of women?

VII : Islam & Women



- The West interprets veiling as repression of women and suppression of their sexuality. But when I travelled in Muslim countries and was invited to join a discussion in women-only settings within Muslim homes, I learned that Muslim attitudes toward women's appearance and sexuality are not rooted in repression, but in a strong sense of public versus private, of what is due to God and what is due to one's husband. It is not that Islam suppresses sexuality, but that it embodies a strongly developed sense of its appropriate channelling - toward marriage, the bonds that sustain family life, and the attachment that secures a home.
- Indeed, many Muslim women I spoke with did not feel at all subjugated by the chador or the headscarf. On the contrary, they felt liberated from what they experienced as the intrusive, commodifying, basely sexualising Western gaze. Many women said something like this: "When I wear Western clothes, men stare at me, objectify me, or I am always measuring myself against the standards of models in magazines, which are hard to live up to - and even harder as you get older, not to mention how tiring it can be to be on display all the time. When I wear my headscarf or chador, people relate to me as an individual, not an object; I feel respected." This may not be expressed in a traditional Western feminist set of images, but it is a recognisably Western feminist set of feelings.

-

VII : Islam & Women



- I experienced it myself. I put on a shalwar kameez and a headscarf in Morocco for a trip to the bazaar. Yes, some of the warmth I encountered was probably from the novelty of seeing a Westerner so clothed; but, as I moved about the market - the curve of my breasts covered, the shape of my legs obscured, my long hair not flying about me - I felt a novel sense of calm and serenity. I felt, yes, in certain ways, free.
- Choice is everything. But Westerners should recognise that when a woman in France or Britain chooses a veil, it is not necessarily a sign of her repression. And, more importantly, when you choose your own miniskirt and halter top - in a Western culture in which women are not so free to age, to be respected as mothers, workers or spiritual beings, and to disregard Madison Avenue - it's worth thinking in a more nuanced way about what female freedom really means.

19 September 2008

Link to article: [Sydney Daily Herald](#)

VII : Islam & Women

