

Restraint? Sure. Oppression? Hardly.

By Leila Aboulela
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[ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates](#)

The West believes that Islam oppresses women. But as a Muslim, descended from generations of Muslims, I have a different story to tell. It starts like this: You say, "The sea is salty." I say, "But it is blue and full of fish." I am not objective about Islam, and although I am considerably Westernized, I can never truly see it through Western eyes. I am in this religion. It is in me. And articulating the intimacy of faith and the experience of worship to a Western audience is a challenge and a discovery.

My mother instilled a spiritual awareness in me from an early age. My grandmother told me stories from the Koran, and I grew up listening to adults discussing Islamic law. I don't remember when I learned that Allah existed just as I don't remember when I learned my name.

My earliest contact with the West came when I was 7 and my parents enrolled my younger brother and me in the Khartoum American School in [Sudan](#). For the first time in my life I entered a library, selected a book and took it home with me. It was the books I discovered then that made me fall in love with reading: "Little House on the Prairie," "A Wrinkle in Time," "Harriet the Spy" and "Little Women."

I read them again and again, and even though I knew that the characters were not Muslim, I found Muslim values in those novels. I found spiritual journeys, and familiar depictions of the rigor and patience needed to discipline the ego. Yes, Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness.

I appreciate the West. I love its literature, its transparency and its energy. I admire its work ethic and its fairness. I need its technology and its medicine, and I want my children to have a Western education. At the same time, I am fulfilled in my religion. Nothing can compete with the elegance, authority and details of the Koran.

My personal life may be similar to that of a Western woman in the 1950s. I lived with my parents until I married. As was true for my cousins and friends, my wedding was the defining moment of my life and one of the happiest. It felt like the beginning of a story, the start of an adventure. The social life of young Muslim girls (and this is true for Arab Christian girls as well) is not unlike that of the March sisters in "Little Women." The courtship rituals of modern-day Muslims can be found in a [Jane Austen](#) novel. I can't help seeing this as romantic and refreshing, innocence surviving today's tumultuous, often difficult reality.

I am not oppressed simply because I have, thank God, been spared the causes of oppression: poverty, war, destitution, abuse, illness and ignorance. I grew up in the Sudan of the 1970s, a time before civil war and economic collapse. My mother was a university professor, and my businessman father took us to [Europe](#) and spoke to me about [Shakespeare](#). These things make a difference. I think it is ridiculous that women are not allowed to drive in [Saudi Arabia](#), deeply shameful that young girls are still circumcised in Sudan and criminal that women in any part of the Muslim world can be denied health care or education. Change and progress, though, are happening, slowly but steadily, as Muslim societies acknowledge that their unjust traditions are rooted in a culture that can evolve, rather than in timeless religious values.

Neither Muslims nor Muslim societies are static; they move forward -- but they have their own trajectory. They cannot

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be replicas of the West. In 1985, when I graduated from the University of Khartoum, I was the only female student in my statistics honors class. When I visited the university a few months ago, the first thing that caught my eye was the sheer number of young women on campus -- nearly 40 percent, compared with 20 percent in my day.

In other areas, too, urban professional Muslim women are advancing. The minister of economy and planning of the United Arab Emirates is a woman. The Pakistani ambassador to the [United Kingdom](#) is a woman. From 2001 to 2004, the president of [Indonesia](#) was a woman. Muslim women have always had rights of property ownership, but now they are active in business, the real estate industry and the stock exchange.

Things have been improving in our personal lives, too. Polygamy is mostly out of fashion. Divorce, which has always been allowed by the sharia, has become easier and more socially acceptable. It is still the norm for single women to live with their families, but seeking work or education in another city is now a legitimate reason for leaving home. In recent years, divorced and widowed women have started to defy society by living alone. Although patriarchal pressure on the young is still strong, women older than 50 have considerably more clout and leeway to live as they please.

Islam restrains women, but it also restrains men. Both are expected to accommodate their lives around the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, giving to charity and making the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives. The 10 commandments that Islam honors apply to both sexes.

In the past, men could get away with flouting many conventions simply because they were men. But one of the results of greater education for Muslim women is that they now refuse to turn a blind eye and instead insist that prohibitions that apply to them must apply to their brothers and husbands as well. Among young educated Muslims, it is now rare to find the kind of marriage described by Naguib Mahfouz in the classic novel "Palace Walk," in which the husband is a pleasure-seeking philanderer roaming through [Cairo's](#) night life while his submissive wife is locked up at home.

But despite all this, the West will still consider an affluent, empowered, happy professional Muslim woman oppressed if she dons a veil. The West's distaste for the hijab is no surprise; Muslim liberals and progressives have also opposed the veil for centuries. [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#), the founder of modern [Turkey](#), banned it. In 1923, Hoda Shaarawi, the mother of the Egyptian feminist movement, removed her veil in Cairo's Central Station in a defining moment in Muslim women's history.

Yet over the years, Muslim women have gone back to wearing the veil or have remained loyal to their national dress, which usually includes some kind of head cover. Twenty years ago, when I was recently married and a graduate student at the London School of Economics, I, too, started to wear the hijab. I took this step with no pressure from my parents or my husband. It came after years of hesitation, years during which I held back out of fear that I would look ugly in a head scarf and that my progressive friends would make fun of me.

But I had so often gazed with longing at the girls at university who covered their hair, and I wanted to be like them. To me they seemed romantic, feminine, wrapped in some kind of mystique. I liked the look, but it was more than that. I was persuaded by the religious argument for the veil, which stresses modesty. I wanted to take a step in the right direction.

Recently, Muslim progressives have softened their stance against the veil. In some countries, the hijab's widespread popularity has made it almost the norm, rather than a gesture of defiance by a minority. Also, the veil has turned out to be a red herring; it has not stalled Muslim women's advancement, as was feared.

I hope that in time the West will come to look at the veil in a different light. It encourages me when a Western woman comments on my head scarf. When one says "That is a lovely color" or asks "Is that batik?" I feel that she has reached out to me. She has seen that beyond the symbol is an item of clothing not unlike the veils that Western women once wore to church, or the bonnets Laura sported on the prairie. That mark of perceived female submissiveness is also an accessory that can be purchased in any department store in the West; it comes in gorgeous silks and beautiful hues.

So I say, the sea is salty, but it is also blue and full of fish.

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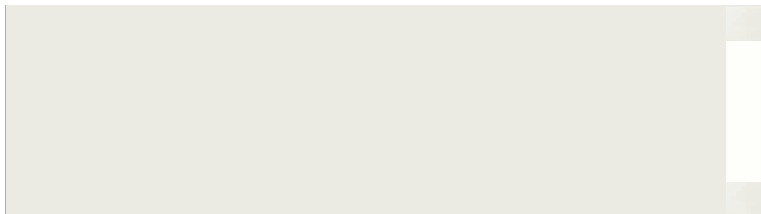
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