

Morality: for women and girls only

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According to a recent report, "Karachi's city government will soon make it compulsory for girl students in schools and colleges, under it, to cover their heads with scarves, and music will be banned in vans carrying them," all in an effort to "improve morality in society," per MMA Nazim Naimatullah Khan (*Daily Times*, January 4, 2003).

It is reassuring to hear that the government is determined to improve morality in a society that has become notorious for its "honor killing" rampages and panchayat-authorized gang rapes of peasant girls. What is unclear, however, is why the government believes that the moral level of the citizenry can be improved simply by forcing girls to wear head scarves and not listen to music. In the absence of measures to ensure morality on the part of boys and men, what purpose can scarves and the banning of music for girls serve? Why have the boys (and men) been left out of these efforts to "improve morality?"

Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, whenever Muslim patriarchies have had to contend with issues of sexual morality, they have been able to do no better than to create two separate and unequal moral spheres, one for women and girls and the other for men and boys. This is because historically patriarchies have assumed that morality and, indeed the fate of civilization itself, hinges on women or, what is truer to say, on how well men can define, limit, and control women's behavior. The fear is that, left to themselves, women will cause the moral collapse of civilization because of their weak and sinful natures.

Such misogynistic views of women date from the time of the ancient Athenians who linked women to what was dark and "unspeakable" in human nature, viewed their bodies as evil, polluting, and open to demonic possession, and believed that they threatened male order, life, and sanity (Ruth Padel, "Women: Models for Possession by Greek Daemons." In *Images of Women in Antiquity*, edited by Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt. London: Routledge, 1993: 3-4). For centuries, women also have been associated with sex, thought of as "an overpowering force which the social/moral/medical has to control" (Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985: 8). Men therefore sought to control women by veiling and secluding them and routinely committing horrendous acts of violence against them.

Such views have percolated down into Jewish, Christian, and Muslim representations of women as "unclean, sinful, and debilitating" as well (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*. New York: Doubleday, 1970: 51). Among early Christians, for example, women were veiled in order to protect men's sexual virtue which was seen to lie in sexual renunciation and abstinence even though many Christians also had a "grossly male view of sexuality" that justified male sexual abuse of women as a way to obtain sexual release (Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sexual Morality in the World's Religions*. Oxford: One World, 1996: 226).

Conservative Muslims too view women as morally lax, corrupt/ing and unclean and this is the basis on which they demand that women cover their heads, and even their faces,

hands, and feet and remain in their homes, even though the Qur'an does not describe women as morally or sexually corrupt/ing, or dangerous, or unclean or explicitly mandate covering their head, face, hands, and feet, or advocate domestic seclusion. Alongside this debased view of women, many Muslims have an equally debased view of male sexuality which they regard as out of control and in need of free outlet even though the Qur'an repeatedly counsels modesty and restraint on the part of both the sexes. For instance:

Say to the believing men
That they should lower
Their gaze and guard
Their modesty: that will make
For greater purity for them:
. . .
And say to the believing women
That they should lower
Their gaze and guard
Their modesty; that they
Should not display their
Beauty and ornaments except
What (must ordinarily) appear
Thereof; that they should
Draw their [*khumur*] over
Their bosoms and not display
Their beauty except to . . .
(24: 30-31; in Yusuf Ali, 904-905).

I do an extensive analysis of these ayat in "*Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (University of Texas Press, 2002). Here I will note only that even on a cursory reading two things are clear. First, while the Qur'an distinguishes between women's and men's dress, it does not suggest that modesty lies only in how women dress or behave. Rather, one half of its injunctions on modesty have to do with men's dress and behavior and the other half with women's; the two are mutually defining and inseparable. Secondly, neither in these ayat nor in any others, does the Qur'an tie modesty of dress on the part of women to the idea that women are weak, unclean, sinful, or evil temptresses from whom men have to be protected. Nor does the Qur'an suggest that men have been endowed with an out of control libido that they can indulge in whatever way they want, a view that also puts the onus on women to veil and seclude themselves in order to protect themselves from barbaric and unIslamic conduct on the part of men. In a truly Islamic society, men would not assume that morality lies in how women dress and not in how they themselves view women or behave towards them.

Unhappily, however, Muslims have fallen into the impious and opportunistic habit of reading the Qur'an selectively, piecemeal, and in a decontextualized and misogynistic way. Otherwise, which ayat do they read as allowing men to circumscribe what women should wear or hear while letting their own dress and behaviors go unregulated?