

# A World Where Womanhood Reigns Supreme (The Seeds of My Own Re-evaluations)

by MARY WALKER

When I joined the team of "Living Islam," my perception of Islam was dominated by prejudice and ignorance, and I found its treatment of women abhorrent. To me the veil symbolized the oppression of women, making them invisible, anonymous and voiceless, and the cause of this oppression lay in the will to perpetuate the family and maintain a patriarchal framework – the very basis of an Islamic Society. I thought women were entirely submerged by divine justification of their role as wife and mother.

"Living Islam" was filmed over two years in 19 different countries and on location I was a lone female in an otherwise male team. I was aware that I especially should behave appropriately. In my mind, women were to be neither seen nor heard. My first trip took me to Mali – to an untypical Muslim community in the bush. Making sure to cover every bit of naked flesh while the men wandered around in short sleeves, I wondered what rooms I was permitted to enter and who I was permitted to talk to. But I also wondered whether my new-found meekness was not in part a reaction to the overpowering atmosphere of the patriarchal society I found myself in. Was this how Muslim women felt - resignation in the face of impossible odds?

The first Muslim woman I met in Mali was far removed from my preconception about the Muslim female. She was the wife of a Shaikh dedicated to converting pagan villagers to Islam. A sophisticated, well-educated woman, previously married to a diplomat, she had renounced a Western lifestyle for a life in purdah. In my eyes she had sentenced herself to life imprisonment. But here was no prisoner, no poor downtrodden slave. A sharp intelligent and influential woman stood before me, clearly the one "who wore trousers" round here. Here seclusion gave her a status of honour and allowed her to exercise control from behind closed doors without confrontation. She was the bargainer, the head of the household, and the manager of her husband's affairs and schedule.

The emancipated woman in the West faces the conflict between confirmation of her femininity and the privileges that she associates with it, and repudiation of the confines of her female role and all the limitations that men

want her to assume. From where I stood, this woman had transformed those limitations into privileges.

On my next trip to northern Nigeria I met two more women who would alter my views even further. These were two women from the household of Shaikh Zakzaky, a fervent preacher of Jihad who urges his supporters to follow the example of Iran and replace the imperialistic western regime with an Islamic state. Zeenah Ibraheem, Zakzaky's wife and Fatima Yunus, her friend, had agreed to be interviewed about the role of women in Islam. They were in purdah and would only speak to another woman. The producer asked me to interview them. I was nervous apart from the fact that I had never interviewed anyone before. I was worried that my feminist sympathies would antagonize the women. But it was precisely these sympathies that Zeenah and Fatima themselves were questioning.

Once again, the women were educated and articulate. And once again they had rejected the Western lifestyle which I considered so superior to Islam in its treatment of women.

As I took my seat on a carpet in the courtyard, the invisible boundary between men and women was a welcome partition, and within this boundary womanhood reigned supreme. This was a sharp contrast with the feelings from the previous days in locations where my presence had been acceptable only as an "honourary man". We had been filming the medieval theatrics of the '*Salla*' celebrations that marked the end of Ramadan. Men, men, men everywhere: 500,000 men gathered for prayer on the morning of the *Salla*, men pouring into the inner courtyard of the Emir of Kane's inner courtyard to pay homage - I was grateful to be allowed to witness these events but at what price? The complete annihilation of my female identity?

But now I was taking the reins because of my sex. No more the feeling of inferiority and exclusion, as a novice in things Islamic surrounded by a team of experts, as a woman in a patriarchal society. Now the men were excluded. Apart from the cameraman and sound recordist, they were encouraged to stand well back. The cameraman

covered his head and the camera with a black cloth - his very own veil. I was now in a world where the men had no voice.

The women talked and in their answers I saw the seeds of my own re-evaluations. They argued that the veil signified their rejection of an unacceptable system of values which debased women while Islam elevated women to a position of honour and respect. "It is not liberation where you say women should go naked. It is just oppression, because men want to see them naked." Just as to us the veil represents Muslim oppression, to them miniskirts and plunging necklines represent oppression. They said that men are cheating women in the West. They let us believe we're liberated but enslave us to the male gaze. However much I insist on the right to choose what I wear, I cannot deny that the choice is often dictated by what will make my body more attractive to men. Women cannot separate their identity from their appearance and so we remain trapped in the traditional feminine world, where the rules are written by men.

By choosing to wear the veil, these women were making a conscious decision to define their role in society and their relationship with men. That relationship appeared to be based more on exchange and mutual respect (a respect that was often lacking in the personal relationships I saw in the West), than the master/servant scenario I had anticipated. The Veil to them signified visual confirmation of their religious commitment, in which men and women were united, and for Zeenah and Fatima an even stronger commitment to a political ideal.

So were my notions of oppression in the form of the veil disqualified? If my definition of equality was free will then I could no longer define that oppression as a symptom of Islam. The women had all exercised their right to choose. To some extent, they were freer than me - I had less control over my destiny. I could no longer point at them and say they were oppressed and I was not. My life was influenced by male approval as theirs - but the element of choice had been taken out of mine. Their situations and their arguments had, after all, served to highlight shortcomings in my view of my own liberty.

## **MARY WALKER**

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