

Myth and Stigma Around Female Sexuality in Islam

Nina Springle

Malicious generalisations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians.

'Covering Islam' by Edward W. Said

This observation seems more pertinent than ever in light of how many Westerners view their Islamic sisters. From the most extreme fundamentalist practices of honour killings and death by stoning to the acceptance of arranged marriages or even wearing the hijab, now more than ever, most images of Muslim women, both literal and imagined, seem to be met with outrage, indignation and pity by non Muslims. The heated debate in Europe over the last few years regarding the headscarf is a perfect case in point. Studies conducted in parts of northern and western Europe found that it is a commonly held belief that the headscarf is not only worn to portray religious status but as an act of women's oppression, religious propaganda, an expression of fundamentalism and as a sign of unwillingness to integrate.

No apologies can be made for the appalling gender related acts of violence that occur in some Islamic countries or indeed for the oppression of women in any form. Nor can it be denied that theologically, power relations between the sexes in Islam, particularly in the private sphere of life, are heavily weighted in the males' favour. However, how many ideas about female sexuality in Islam are myth and how many are reality? Is the stereotype of the repressed Muslim woman another manifestation of ethnocentricity in Western perceptions of freedom and choice? If Islam is practiced by hundreds of vastly different cultures around the world, how can the status and sexuality of women be standardised to 'one size fits all' or is this so the issue can be comfortably categorised in the Western mind?

My experience of Muslim women comes from three years living in Zanzibar, an archipelago off the coast of Tanzania in East Africa. Zanzibar's population is 99% Islamic with a cultural mix of African, Arab and Indian. One of the most joyous and liberating aspects of living in this Swahili community was their total embrace of sexuality. Women, as well as men, are often overtly sexual and clandestine affairs of a sexual nature are almost a daily excursion for many people. Some young women take to covering their whole body and face in hijab for no other reason than to remain publicly anonymous during their sexual escapades.

Sexual expression of women in Zanzibar is most overt in the use of the kanga, a light sarong like garment that comes in pairs – one to tie over the dress and a partner to be

worn as head covering. Each set of kangas has a traditional Swahili proverb printed into the design and many are related to sex, love and intimacy. The kanga is often carefully chosen by the woman to match her intent of action, for example, to seduce a lover or to snub a neighbour that has flirted with her husband. As separation by distance is common for couples in Zanzibar, usually for reasons of employment, it is tradition for women to buy a new kanga with an appropriate proverb for the return of her husband. It is left on the reunion bed and worn by woman at the beginning of love making. Arranged marriages are the norm but women usually have the right to reject potential husbands. One young woman ended her marriage after two weeks citing sexual incompatibility, sending her crestfallen husband back to England from whence he came. She kept her dowry and remains an active member of that community.

Female sexuality in Islam is a dynamic, evolving phenomenon just as it is in the West and in many cases, far from static or based on some seventh century interpretation of Islam. The portrayal of women's sexual freedom in Islam should not be homogenised as one way or the other, but as complex and ever changing, according to the culture, times and external influences. Certainly the social and cultural, as well as religious, milieu where events take place must be identified and explored in order to make sense of what freedom is for one person as opposed to the next. Without this there is no hope of cross cultural or religious understanding and/or tolerance. The crux is that millions of Islamic women do have sexual freedom according to their own definition, which is not necessarily the same as a Western definition, but that neither makes it right nor wrong, just their own.

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