

MUSLIM WOMEN

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Les femmes musulmanes au Canada sont peut-être les moins comprises et les plus sujettes au stéréotype: la femme voilée, indigente, en général dans un harem. Le nombre des familles musulmanes au Canada a énormément augmenté ces 30 dernières années; mais venant de milieux très variés, elles sont chacune très différentes. Certaines pensent par exemple, que les femmes ne doivent pas travailler; d'autres considèrent que leur survie dépend de deux salaires. Aussi l'auteure ne peut-elle pas parler d'une femme musulmane typique.

L'Islam a marqué une révolte en Arabie contre l'ordre social qui existait, dans lequel les femmes étaient à l'échelon le plus bas de la hiérarchie sociale. L'Islam donne à la femme statut, dignité et droits, légiférés dans son Livre Saint; malgré tout, l'homme est celui qui pourvoit, et la femme est mère et épouse. Mais ces rôles commencent à changer.

Muslim women are perhaps the least understood and most stereotyped group in the eyes of Canadian society and the media. The image of Muslim women one often encounters is that of the veiled, destitute woman, who, in most cases, is a member of the *harem*. She is often depicted as an individual with no rights and privileges, who could be divorced easily — her husband need only repeat the formula "I divorce thee!" three times. In an article on Saudi women, one Toronto newspaper stated that Saudi Arabian women are hardly better than camels!

The image of Muslim women in the West is rooted in the historical, political, and religious conflicts between the Muslim world and the West, as well as in ignorance. At the present time, however, there is more contact between the two worlds; Muslims have moved into areas that were once purely Western Christian territories in Europe and the Americas. Thus they are becoming real, active members in their new communities rather than

mere images. This fact, one hopes, will help improve early stereotypes.

The number of Muslim families in Canada has increased greatly during the last three decades as a result of immigration from Pakistan and India, Malaysia, East and South Africa, the Caribbean, Iran, and the Arab World, with the most recent influx coming from Lebanon. Since these families come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, their world views, outlooks, customs, practices, and attitudes are conditioned, to a large extent, by these varying backgrounds, rather than by Islam itself. Hence there are many differences among these groups. The same applies to the perceived role of women in the family and the society. For example, some members of the above-mentioned groups consider the employment of women as totally unacceptable, especially if it requires women to work alongside men. Others feel that the survival of the family depends on the employment of both male and female, thus giving precedence to the family needs over inherited practices, sometimes mistaken as Islamic. Thus, one cannot talk of a *prototype* Muslim woman but of Muslim women who are the product of both Islam and their cultural environments. There is no room here to discuss the impact of cultures on the role of women; however, I will discuss briefly the role of Islam.

Islam marked a rebellion in Arabia against an existing social order that was characterized by corruption, injustice, and paganism. Women in Arabia, in general, were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They had no rights of protection or inheritance. A few women of the nobility were known to manage their own businesses and choose their partners, as did Khadeejah, who married the prophet Muhammad. Polygamy, bigamy, and slavery existed in pre-Islamic Arabia.

This explains why some of the tribes used to bury their daughters alive at the time of their birth. (All these practices were prohibited by Islam.) Thus Islam gave women status, dignity, and legal rights, some of which were legislated in the Quran (or Koran, the holy book of the Muslims). Others come from jurists (based on the Quran), sayings of the Prophet, and customary legal practices. Thus Islamic law dealt with different aspects of the family and the role of women in it. It dealt with such issues as marriage, divorce, succession, parentage, custody of children, and maintenance rights, among others. It corrected many of the earlier injustices by granting a woman the right to contract her own marriage, receive a dowry, retain possession and control of her property, and conduct her own business. On the other hand, it also emphasized the feminine role of the woman as a mother, a wife, and a daughter, upon whom the strength of the family depends. According to Islam, the man is the main provider for the financial and protective needs of the family.

At the present time, the role and status of Muslim women is changing as a result of education and contact with other communities. Canada is perhaps an ideal place for the study of the changing role of Muslim families and women; however, research in this area has not yet been done.

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