

Not Without Her Make-Up*

I do not clearly remember the first time I was here. My earliest memories of Australia start when I was around six or seven, probably my first trip after I was born in the city of Sydney. My parents were not particularly happy with the idea of me growing up there. So, they took me out to Iran at the first opportunity.

As I grew up, my impressions of Sydney were formed from stories I heard from my parents, shows I watched on television and of course, what I saw on my trips. From my first trip at the age of seven, I vaguely remember the people I met and the places I visited. I remember more from my second trip, though, which was at the age of fourteen. I recall my parents warning me over and over again about how women were treated in a society so fundamentally Western.

While I was there, I learnt that individuality was something Australians only dreamt about. I soon discovered I had to conform to the dress code everyone else followed. I had to have my hair highlighted and defrizzed. I had to spend between fifteen and twenty minutes every morning brushing it and putting on clips and hair ties. I had to make it into a ponytail one day, a braid the next and a bun when I went to dinner parties. I was coerced to wear short skirts and tight tops, with a push-up bra to give me cleavage. My

legs had to show, smooth and unscarred, and everyone had to be able to make out my waist.

They told me I had to 'fit in'. Part of the ritual of fitting in meant that I had to paint my face with what they called make-up everyday. I discovered that Australian females liked to attract as much attention as they could to themselves, by hiding behind their make-up. They made their kohl in liquids and pencils, instead of pots like we do, and sold them in stores under a range of different names and prices. They all seemed the same to me, though. Anyhow, I bought what they told me to buy and used what they told me to use, from lipsticks to abdominizers, changing my body from head to toe to please their male gods. Such things ensured that everyone wanted to 'hang out' with me (a term denoting something to the effect of spending time and/or social acceptance).

In the five years between then and now, I had convinced myself that Australia would have joined other countries on the road to progress. But my return to Sydney both shocks and saddens me. While many parts of the world have seen development, Australia has dragged behind, especially with regards to the status of women. It seems as if it has only succeeded in digging itself deeper into a bottomless pit of regression. At this rate, I fear that Australia is a second America in the making.

Upon arrival, I have come across some typical Sydney women. I can see that they are dictated by the strict dress code imposed on them by the social system. They are not allowed to wear loose clothing, headscarves until they are

*By: Tazin Abdullah, Media Student, Macquarie University, Australia. This is a satire written to mimic articles, reports and stories generally written about Muslim women by women from Western non-Muslim backgrounds. It is, to some extent, an attempt to convey to the readers how it feels to be 'othered' and to be judged superficially in accordance with only one's own perceptions. I hope you take it for what it is - a satire.

old or ailing, and it is preferred that they show as much of their bodies as possible. Women who break this rule face harsh penalties. Sarah, a victim of such injustices, told me the specifics. As punishment for wearing non-revealing clothing, she is deemed unattractive and given unequal treatment by her employers. She says she is not considered 'normal'.

A day in the life of a normal woman here requires her appearance to be the focal point. Her sexuality must be available for everyone to consume. She cannot choose to whom she will disclose her intimate parts or exercise her sexuality. She does not have much choice in what she wants to do with her body. Since the fundamentalist regime insists that it must be available for display in a certain manner, she must follow these rules.

The rules are based on the Australian Holy Scriptures, two of which are Dolly and Cosmopolitan. Also known as magazines, these contain the teachings of hard-liner editors and reporters/writers who design the way in which society must view women and the way women must dress and act. Since the advent of these magazines, there have been mass conversions in the country to the faith they preach. Authority and control have been transferred onto them and they play a vital role in the life of women. They have institutionalised radical guidelines such as the 36:24:36 measurement of a woman's body. Furthermore, they propagate intolerance and hate to be internalised in all women - hate for their own bodies, natural intelligence, privacy and inherent dignity. These women are brainwashed into believing that their Creator is to blame for their deficiencies in not automatically meeting these standards.

In accordance with these oppressive impositions, the country's commerce has developed. Industry is devoted to the development of products to assist women in looking as artificial as possible. The market is filled with products for the

face and every different part of it plus the hair, the hands, the legs, the nails...the list goes on. I suppose one must concede to the fact that Australia's delayed development causes it to prioritise looks over the fact that millions of people in the world go hungry.

It is interesting to look at some of the advertisements for the beauty products. I will warn you, though, that coming from an emancipated society, these will be very disturbing. For instance, an advertisement for hair colour uses the motto "L'Oreal - because I'm worth it". A model in an ad for a shampoo claims that using the shampoo gives her more confidence. These poor women must shampoo, condition and colour their hair in order to legitimise themselves. They need the perfect curl, the right bounce and the shiniest colour. Their value to society is directly linked to their hair.

Other significant practices are the prevalent marriage customs. A woman is required to perform the ceremonial 'going out', which can span any period of time from a day to ten years. This starts as early as primary school and as she grows up, she goes out with various men. Until she finds the one she wishes to marry, she does not commit to any one man. All the men she goes out with are allowed to touch her and sleep with her.

All this time, her status and acceptance in society is determined by how many of these men she has accommodated in her life. The greater the quota of men, the more sufficient she is considered. Particularly in high school, young girls have little to contribute to their own identities. Their identities derive from who they go out with and how many boys they go out with. Though this kind of mental torture is less obvious in later years of their life, my conversations with many women in university and work indicate that they still suffer. Some feel they must get married in order to make a place for themselves.

Marriage, though, is subject to a bizarre rule.

A woman cannot legally marry until she is eighteen years old without parental consent. It is socially expected, however, for girls under eighteen to lose their virginity. When I was listening to one of the popular radio stations, 2DayFM, I was informed that the average age that Australians lost their virginity at is between thirteen and fifteen. As a consequence of this, many girls under eighteen become pregnant. Society accepts these girls as mothers before eighteen but does not allow them to have husbands, who could also take responsibility as fathers to the children born. While women must bear the responsibility of parenthood, men can get away with it. This is one of the many contradictions that exist in Australia today.

Inequalities also exist for women who do get married. Marriage requires the woman to play multiple roles. She must be wife, mother and often a breadwinner of the family. She shoulders the responsibility of taking care of her husband and children at home while also earning money not only for herself, but also for the family. Whatever she earns is not solely her property. Unlike Islamic societies, her husband and her family have a claim to her income and she even pays for groceries!

Often, she is not given the choice of whether she wants to stay at home or work. The society she lives in enshrines materiality and money, money and more money. It is vital to their lifestyles. As a result, she must go out and work and make her family richer. On top of that, her position in society is judged on her ability to work outside the home. She must suffer the greatest burden in society. She really does not have the right to choose. Can you imagine a life where your identity is judged by everything you have and not everything you are?

Even more surprising is the widespread cultural practice of women changing their surnames to that of their husbands' once they are married. Amanda, a law student, who opposes this

practice, tells me that, in previous times, this act symbolised the transfer of all of a woman's rights and property to her husband from her father. Though the custom of a woman becoming her husband's property has ceased to exist, women still change their names to that of their husbands'.

Seeing all this, I am aware that Australian women are denied the rights that are basic to many Muslim women. What concerns me, though, is whether or not they are aware of that fact.

I remember from my second trip to Australia that I felt I had a Western noose tied around my neck. I felt I had no space to breathe or to let myself free. The air around me cloaked my beauty, my spirit and my soul. But I was lucky. I could leave.

Most of the Australian women I spoke to do not have that alternative. They do not even know of their plight. They are pushed into a corner where they cannot see outside the boundaries of such a fundamentally Western society. Women immune to Western correctness - mostly the educated Muslims - have begun programmes to educate others around them. They are asserting themselves by breaking out of the confinement, wearing loose clothing and denying just anyone access to their sexuality. I see their efforts as a glimmer of hope. It is crucial that before women can improve their lot, they are taught the rights they have that society has taken away from them.

Nevertheless, there is still hope. I call upon all the Muslim women in the world to come to the rescue of Australian women. I urge that all of us stand up against Western oppression in different parts of the world. It is our responsibility to bring progress into these societies and it is up to us to save them.