

I probably do not fit into the preconceived notion of a "rebel".

I have no visible tattoos and minimal piercing. I do not possess a leather jacket. In fact, when most people look at me, their first thought usually is something along the lines of "oppressed female".

The brave individuals who have mustered the courage to ask me about the way I dress usually have questions like: "Do your parents make you wear that?" or "Don't you find that really unfair?"

A while back, a couple of girls in Montreal were kicked out of school for dressing like I do. It seems strange that a little piece of cloth would make for such controversy. Perhaps the fear is that I am harbouring an Uzi underneath it. You never can tell with those Muslim fundamentalists.

Of course, the issue at hand is more than a mere piece of cloth. I am a Muslim woman who, like millions of other Muslim women across the globe, chooses to wear the hijab. There are many different ways to wear it, but in essence, what we do is cover our entire bodies except for our hands and faces.

If you're the kind of person who has watched a lot of popular movies, you'd probably think of harem girls and belly-dancers, women who are kept in seclusion except for the private pleasure of their male masters. In the true Islamic faith, nothing could be further from the truth. And the concept of the hijab, contrary to popular opinion, is actually one of the most fundamental aspects of female empowerment.

When I cover myself, I make it virtually impossible for people to judge me according to the way I look. I cannot be categorised because of my attractiveness or lack thereof. Compare this to life in today's society: We are constantly sizing one another up on the basis of our clothing, jewellery, hair and makeup. What kind of depth can there be in a world like this?

Yes, I have a body, a physical manifestation upon this Earth. But it is the vessel of an intelligent mind and a strong spirit. It is not for the beholder to leer at or to use in advertisements to sell everything from beer to cars. Because of the superficiality of the world in which we live, external appearances are so stressed that the value of the individual counts for almost nothing.

It is a myth that women in today's society are liberated. What kind of freedom can there be when a woman cannot walk down the street without every aspect of her physical self being "checked out"?

When I wear the hijab I feel safe from all of this. I can rest assured that no one is looking at me and making assumptions about my character from the length of my skirt. There is a barrier between me and those who would exploit me. I am first and foremost a human being, equal to any man, and not vulnerable because of my sexuality.

One of the saddest truths of our time is the question of the beauty myth and female self-image. Reading popular teenage magazines, you can instantly find out what kind of body image is "in" or "out." And if you have the "wrong" body type, well, then, you're just going to have to change it, aren't you? After all, there is no way that you can be overweight and still be beautiful.

Look at any advertisement. Is a woman being used to sell the product? How old is she? How attractive is she? What is she wearing? More often than not, that woman will be no older than her early 20s, taller, slimmer and more attractive than average, dressed in skimpy clothing.

Why do we allow ourselves to be manipulated like this? Whether the '90s woman wishes to believe it or not, she is being forced into a mould. She is being coerced into selling herself, into compromising herself. This is why we have 13-year-old girls sticking their fingers down their throats and overweight adolescents hanging themselves .

When people ask me if I feel oppressed, I can honestly say no. I made this decision out of my own free will. I like the fact that I am taking control of the way other people perceive me. I enjoy the fact that I don't give anyone anything to look at and that I have released myself from the bondage of the swinging pendulum of the fashion industry and other institutions that exploit females.

My body is my own business. Nobody can tell me how I should look or whether or not I am beautiful. I know that there is more to me than that. I am also able to say no comfortably when people ask me if I feel as though my sexuality is being repressed. I have taken control of my sexuality.

I am thankful I will never have to suffer the fate of trying to lose/gain weight or trying to find the exact lipstick shade that will go with my skin colour. I have made choices about what my priorities are and these are not among them.

So next time you see me, don't look at me sympathetically. I am not under duress or a male-worshipping female captive from those barbarous Arabic deserts. I've been liberated.

*Sultana Yusufali, was aged 17
and a Toronto high school student when she wrote this.*