

“Nisa”

The literal meaning of the Arabic term “nisa” is woman. An entire chapter of the Quran is dedicated solely to stating and establishing the role and rights of women in Islam. In my baby book, my father wrote a journal about why my parents chose this name for me. Every time I read his words, I feel a surge of pride—the pride that comes from being a woman.

My family’s perception of females is thankfully vastly removed from that of the Bengali or Arabic culture. Growing up in a family of four strong and independent women has enabled me to find the fundamental flaws in my society’s perception of women. Indeed, I grew up in a country characterized by male domination. In general, the man makes all the important family decisions, manages the finances, and dictates over the household. The woman however, is the one who raises the off-spring, tends to household chores, and often manages the agricultural responsibilities. Despite her contributions to society, she is viewed and treated as the inferior gender. In fact, a woman’s place is essentially within the walls of her house; and if she succeeds in adhering to these social standards, she embodies “femininity”.

The concept of femininity in Bangladesh encompasses certain characteristics. A woman has to fit a mold; she is a possession to be proud of, if she is obedient, docile, delicate, and a good homemaker. A woman is the responsibility of her father, her brother, her husband, and ultimately her son. She does not have the liberty to make her own decisions.

It is this myopic definition of femininity that my parents expect me to overcome. To this end, my parents decided to rebel against society’s preconceived notions of the perfect woman, equipping me and my sisters with all the resources necessary for us to reach our potentials. They bravely sent me and my sister to American universities, all the way to the other end of the world, alone, to pursue higher education. This was undoubtedly hard for them to do, virtually impossible for any traditional Bengali

family to imagine. Nonetheless, my parents have consistently made efforts to ingrain in me and my sisters the notion that women are special, strong, and independent. In fact, my father taught us karate as a form of self-defense since I was four, so that we would be physically on par with any man.

Although my parents and I strongly support equality of rights and opportunities for both genders, we choose a stance which may astound many hard-core feminists. We believe that women are meant to be protected and cherished by men and society. Women deserve credit for creating life, for sustaining that life, for tending to their families, and for raising the generations of tomorrow. Women should have the freedom to make their own life decisions: to be educated, to have careers, aspirations, and dreams. Concurrently, women are meant to be respected and appreciated, cherished and pampered. I am certain no woman, given the rights and respect due her, would mind preferential treatment. It seems to that there is a general consensus among the women of the world that chivalry is a desirable quality in any gentleman. I, for one, am undeniably delighted when a man holds the door open for me or gives up his seat for me on a bus, especially when my hands are laden with shopping bags.

Another aspect of femininity which often arises relates to the role of women in Islam and middle-eastern countries. Many people in the western world associate the term "oppression" with women who cover their bodies, hair, and sometimes even faces. Although stories about subservience and repression, narrated by courageous writers like Mallika Oufkir, are true accounts of the heart-wrenching tales of their lives, this is not representative of the teaching of Islam or the overall culture. In reality, some facets of every culture promote independence whereas others seem to enforce suppression, making some women subjugated, and many others liberated. Therefore, it is ignorant and narrow-minded of people to assume that middle-eastern women are always oppressed or dominated.

My view of femininity, then, is multifaceted. Although I strongly promote and stand for the empowerment of womankind, I also believe that women have the “right” to be cherished and loved. Through my life experiences I have tried to break free from the shackles of male domination and narrow-mindedness. I have strived to achieve all that my parents expected of me, and more. In my opinion, the embodiment of femininity is represented by a woman who is educated and aware of her rights. She is emotionally and financially independent and strong, all the while being respected, nurtured, and appreciated.