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Intellectual Discourse

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Book Reviews

Islam and the veil: Theoretical and regional contexts. Edited by Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011, pp. 204. ISBN: 978-1-44118735-2 (Hardcover).

Reviewer: Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman, Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. E-mail: ibrahimuthman@yahoo.com.

Throughout the history of Islam, debates on the veil have been based upon the views of traditional Islamic scholars and their interpretations of Islamic scriptural texts. In more recent times, sociological studies that seek to engage real-life experiences of women who wear the veil have come to the fore. This book edited by Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan is necessitated by sociological questions such as does the veil “go against the grain of feminism and undo the work of suffragette movement?” “Does it hamper the quest for equality between man and woman?” (p. 1). It also addresses traditional and contemporary interpretations of Islamic scriptural texts on the veil. This volume is divided into three parts that contain well-written and researched chapters. It begins with an introductory chapter by the editors, which summarises the book.

Part One considers a number of philosophical and methodological issues. The first chapter by Marcus Braybrooke examines the limits to religious accommodation in a secular state. He argues that the British approach of allowing religious groups to maintain their individual identities within the overarching framework of British Law is correct (p. 7). He rejects xenophobia and in this case “Islamophobia” and calls for compromises (p. 10). Gabriel in the second chapter provides critiques of the injunctions of the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* regarding dress and their implications. Gabriel is quite correct to stress that veiling

may go beyond covering the face, insisting “that a woman can never wear the face veil is a denial of individual liberty” (p. 19). Allison Scott-Baumann’s chapter discusses how the veil has become one of the symbols of polarisation between the Muslim world and the West. Scott-Baumann suggests a third option so as not to retreat into the “overbearing conviction that we know more than others about themselves and are therefore able to stand back and judge” (p. 21). This is because each side may in reality be confirming its own reflection in the other (p. 33). In chapter four, Roy Jackson reviews Sayyid Abul A‘la Mawadudi (1903-1979)’s “misguided views” on *purdah* arguing that Mawadudi’s arguments “have no place or relevance for modern society” and should be “put aside and ignored (p. 36). However, though he disagrees with Mawadudi’s “Islamic State” where women have “equipotential rights,” and little or no role, Jackson cannot deny that Mawadudi’s views “are important because he reflects a genuine concern over modernity and post-modernity” (pp. 43-47). Chapter five written by Simonetta Calderini narrates the progress and pace of reforms on the status of Muslim women carried out by Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III (1877-1957) in the Shi‘i Ismai‘li community (p. 48). To Aga Khan III, like many reformers of his age, the progress of the Muslim world was linked to the progress of Muslim women (pp. 51-53). However, despite the success of his reforms, Da‘udi Bohara Shi‘i Ismai‘li women are returning back to the veil, since 1979, as part of a wider process of re-appropriation of Islamic identity (p. 62).

Part Two of the book shifts to an analysis of scriptural primary texts. Usama Hasan, in chapter six, discusses the corpus of differing scriptural interpretations regarding women’s dress. He analyses the views of early and contemporary traditional scholars using the *maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah* or the higher ultimate objectives of the Islamic Law and shows that *hijāb* entails gender segregation in the home of the Prophet and veiling of his wives (pp. 64-70). The *khimār* and *jilbāb* seek to protect the identity, dignity and respect of Muslim women (pp. 68-69). Consequently, Hasan supports the views of contemporary Muslim scholars such as ‘Abdullah ibn Bajjah, Ibn ‘Ashur, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Sheikh Zaki Badawi that a Muslim woman may uncover her hair in public to avoid hardship and ostentation in dressing (pp. 74-79). Chapter seven by Hannan agrees with Amina Wadud that the veil is a perceived “sixth pillar of Islam” (p. 81). She discusses the views of both the proponents and antagonists

of veiling through literature review and interviews with selected UK Imams and women (p. 81). She finds that while some scholars and women believe that complete veiling was meant for only the wives of the prophet, others believe that the wives of the prophet are role models and should therefore be emulated by women (p. 85). Women who cover and or support veiling do so for reasons such as worship, protection, identity, beauty, looking unattractive etc., (pp. 91-98). Similarly, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi in chapter eight explains that the instruction on *jilbāb* was directed at protecting the “society from moral misconduct and safeguard the sanctity of personal relationships” (p. 105). He also notes that the seclusion of the wives of the Prophet (SAW) was to honour their position as “the mothers of the believers” who are eternally prohibited from remarrying after the death of the Prophet (SAW) (p. 114). Chapter nine by Khola Hasan views the Muslim woman public dress as implicit permission for women to enter the public space freely. This is contrary to the view of Mernissi who opines that the *hijāb* veils women from men, the Prophet and then God. The author states that the injunction on *hijāb* begins with a command to lower the gaze, first addressed to men before women (pp. 115-119). She concludes that while scholars like Mawadudi use the theory of *hijāb* to control women and deny them access to public space, others like Al-Albāni have shown how this was not the norm during the Prophet’s time (pp. 123-124).

Part Three of the volume examines the impact of veil on human rights of women. Chapter ten by Sariya Contractor considers extant discourse written by those who enforce veiling on women and those who do not believe it to be a necessary part of Islam as neglecting more important issues of education and health of women (pp. 127-129). Drawing upon narrations of some British women, Contractor sees a growing trend of young educated women, who are proud to be both British and Muslim, reclaiming the *hijāb* discarded by their mothers contrary to the views of feminists like Asma Barla and Nawal ElSaadawi (pp. 130-137). Malika Ghamidi’s chapter eleven shifts the focus on to those viewing the veil as a major obstacle to the emancipation of women and considers its prohibition in France and elsewhere in Europe as a challenge to modern conceptions of democracy, secularity and feminism (pp. 142-147). Ghamidi argues that it may be fashionable in the West to discredit Islam because of the veil but Islamic movements also present Islam as a religion incapable of reforms and concludes that

the real threat to women's human right comes "from those who, in the guise of defending freedom, actually limit it (pp. 147-148). Chapter twelve by Rajnaara C. Akhtar focuses on the French ban on Muslim woman's *hijāb* and its "paradoxical platform for action" which Miriam Cooke believes results from a theory of "Collective Identity" (pp. 149-151). Akhtar, however, rejects this by arguing that this theory fails to take into account the vast differences between women. Her sample of Muslim women across Europe reveals that women involved in Project-*hijāb* identifies with Europe despite their diverse reasons for veiling (pp. 152-156). Chapter thirteen is written by Katherine Bullock who may be described as representing "the best advocacy" of authentic Islamic feminism. She narrates experiences of women who are proud to veil as Canadian Muslims. She explains that Westerners such as the French mobilises the concept of "false consciousness" to argue that though the veil is chosen freely, this is because the wearers do not really know that it is a symbol of inequality between men and women (pp. 161-176). This problematises the exclusion of these women from modern Western secular societies because "once the state is in the business of defining what kind of "equality" its citizen should believe in," it has moved into "a kind of authoritarianism" (p. 177). More so, Orthodox Jewish women and Catholic nuns who also uphold the idea of "equal but different" by covering their heads are not scorned or looked at as "others".

Islam and the veil is a challenging addition to the literature on the *hijāb*. The authors succeed in their objective of reflecting the various shades of opinions in respect of the use of the veil in the Indian subcontinent, Britain, Canada, Turkey, Belgium and France etc. They counter stereotypical understandings of Islam and women. They also highlight a new conception of the *hijāb* different from the binary interpretations of both the West and Muslims. However, some chapters are rather disappointing, especially the one on Mawduđi. Nonetheless, the chapters on methodologies and scriptural analyses of the *hijāb* as well as those on human rights of Muslim women in Western societies are excellent. This book is of immense benefit to scholars, who seek a contemporary understanding of the *hijāb* in Islam.
