

THE VEIL: WOMEN WRITERS ON ITS HISTORY, LORE, AND POLITICS. Edited by Jennifer Heath. University of California Press 2008. Pp. 360. \$21.95. ISBN: 0-520-25518-6.

What is the meaning of the veil and who determines its meaning? Why has the veil become such a hotly contested political issue? And what does the politicization of the veil mean in terms of women's agency? These are just some of the questions addressed by the diverse group of twenty-one female scholars, artists, and writers who contributed to this insightful volume edited by Jennifer Heath. Heath's goal was to "locate the veil in broader contexts than the stereotypes into which it has been boxed." (319) This is needed, she explains, because the West typically treats the veil as a political issue for Muslims and rarely sees it as a "tradition or sacred custom" that has expression throughout the world. (6) While nearly half of the essays engage the political and personal meanings of the veil for Muslim women, the remaining essays discuss the veil and its forms in a variety of other religious, geographic, and social contexts. It is the diversity of topics that makes this work so compelling.

The authors in this text address these issues from a number of perspectives, from personal narratives to historical analysis. Of particular interest to the readers of this Journal will be the three essays discussing the legal efforts to mandate the veiling and unveiling of Muslim women. Aisha Lee Fox Shadeed's essay, *Dress Codes and Modes: How Islamic Is the Veil?*, argues that "contemporary debates around the veil should begin with politics rather than theology, as both state-level and nonstate groups further their own agendas by exercising control over people's clothing in the name of religion, culture, and authenticity." (293) Shadeed is one of the few authors to discuss the fact that men's clothing has been legally regulated as well, as was the case when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the first president of the Republic of Turkey, required all citizens to wear European style clothing. Both Ashraf Zahedi's piece, *Concealment and Revealing Female Hair: Veil Dynamics in Contemporary Iran*, and Mohja Kahf's piece, *From Her Royal Body the Robe Was Removed*, discuss the impact of legally sanctioned unveiling. Zahedi focuses specifically on Iran, and Kahf explores a number of Middle Eastern and North African nations, including Turkey, Tunisia, Iran, and Syria. Both authors challenge the

reader to see unveiling through the eyes of the women affected. Kahf, for example, asks the reader, “To try to enter into their feelings if you do not wear hijab, imagine having your blouse removed while passerby watch, or your underwear.” (34) These three authors agree that what is required is the legal right for women to choose whether or not to veil.

What becomes clear in all of these texts is that the significance of the clothing one wears lies in its ability to “create boundaries between people and shape collective identities.” (294) But this is not limited to Muslim women in the Middle East. Jasbir Jain’s insightful analysis of the *purdah*, which is worn in India to indicate a woman’s religion, caste, and class, is a case in point. The *purdah*, Jain argues, “has the capacity to signify a relationship between the self and the other.” (231) As a social construct, Jain explains, the *purdah* perpetuates gender norms, both masculine and feminine, and sustains patriarchy. Jain summarizes her argument this way: “Primarily, it is about space—about segregation and division, signifying a conjunction of power and space. In its implied meanings it goes much beyond the covered face and the hidden body to encompass notions of respectability and virtue, class and caste, protection and exposure.” (232) Roxanne Kamayani Gupta’s essay on the Indian sari and “the important role it plays in Hindu society for defining individual and social identity” complements Jain’s analysis. (63) These essays highlight Maliha Masood’s assertion that assumptions made about women who veil or choose not to veil are beyond the control of the women themselves. It becomes clear throughout *The Veil* that the issue of marking boundaries is a key aspect of the meaning of the veil across cultures.

The task of the book is to encourage the reader to see veiling (the construction of symbolic, social, political, and religious boundaries through clothing) in a broader cultural and historical context. One example of this is Barbara Goldman Carrel’s exploration of the religious and cultural meaning infused in the clothing worn by Hasidic women. Carrel concludes that for a woman, “sacred covering, . . . not only publicizes her religious intentions and identity but serves as the primary symbolic protection against the dominant and unwelcome outside influences of the non-Jewish secular society in which she lives.” (56) In a similar manner, Jana M. Hawley discusses her fieldwork living with an Amish community for one year, where both male and female members abide by a dress code. Hawley concludes, “for many Amish, several of their customs derive more from deep-seeded convictions of what it means to be culturally Amish than from religious conviction.” (95)

Some of the authors describe their personal embrace of the veil as an empowering experience. Eve Grubin discusses her own transition into Orthodox Judaism, explaining, “[t]he traditional gender roles of Monsey splashed over me like a fresh shower. I discovered a new kind of feminism embodied in these empowered women.” (178) In a similar way, Pamela K. Taylor discusses her decision, as an American Muslim woman, to wear a headscarf as “the most dramatic, provocative, feminist statement that I could make in my personal life, an in-your-face rebellion against the feminine mystique.” (121) By wearing a head scarf she was “rejecting the objectification of women” and “demanding to be viewed on the basis of character.” (124)

After reading the twenty-one essays detailing the social, political, and personal stakes in veiling, one is left with the clear impression that the veil is an important symbol for both society and the individual around the globe. This makes it all the more startling when Jennifer Heath concludes,

There is always room for further study about the veil, but it is my belief that most of what has needed to be said about veiling as liberation, subordination, resistance, tradition, or icon has pretty much been done. What’s required now is to invest creative energy and scholarship—as well as hard work on the ground—on improving the women’s welfare, well-being, and equality, and on developing more histories of feminism that extract solutions to contemporary tragedies. (321)

“Considering the real problems facing women,” Heath asserts, “ideological battles about the veil are tragic wastes of time.” (320) These statements seem to undermine the wonderful work of the women within these pages, for whom the veil is an important issue that should be discussed and understood. As evidenced in this text, many of the “real problems facing women” Heath is referring to are legally connected to state and public policies that dictate a woman’s right to choose how she covers her head and body. Thus, certain goods and privileges, like jobs, education, and the ability to travel, are attached to this piece of fabric. This leaves the reader questioning whether it is possible or desirable to separate women’s social empowerment from the symbolic meanings of the veil.

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