

What is veiling? By Sahar Amer. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014, pp. 250, ISBN: 978-1-4696-1775-6.

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The veil is one of the long-standing topics of interest and curiosity about Islam. However, it has particularly become a main point of disagreement and contestation in recent times, which is partly due to the growth of Islamophobia. The latter can be seen in the spike in hate crimes that are committed against Muslims who choose to display symbols of Islamic expression, particularly the veil. Against the backdrop of such incidents, the topic of veiling assumes amplified importance. However, unfortunately, despite intense interests and debates about veiling, materials that comprehensively discuss the subject are scarce. Those that are available only add to ambiguities and confusion among curious audiences.

In addressing the issues above, Sahar Amer, in *What Is Veiling?* provides a thorough exposition. She analyses it from the religious, cultural and historical perspectives, and, at the same time, considers contemporary insights that have laid opinion on the practice of veiling. To those ends, Amer contributes significantly to this pertinent topic. She tackles an issue which, over time, has taken its place as the benchmark that confines Islam to the conservative end in the spectrum of competing social doctrines. In addition, within the Muslim discourse, the veil has become a symbol of righteousness and appropriate gender performance.

Amer debunks commonly held assumptions about veiling, including the contemporary view that takes veiling as an exclusive Islamic practice. She traces the veil's earliest roots, which do not agree with such assumption. She aims to offer an overview and appreciation of the complex history and meanings of veiling, including from the Muslim perspective. Posing some pertinent questions that have always surrounded and that continue to linger around the practice of veiling among Muslims, she draws attention to our scant knowledge about the practice, despite it being one of the most visible and emblematic signs of Islam. She addresses questions such as diversity in veiling practices and the varied meanings that are attached to the practice across Muslim societies globally. Those complex factors behind such diversity include cultural, social, economic and political circumstances.

The book is organized around three sections – ‘Islam, Politics and Veiling’, ‘Veiling in Euro-American Societies’, and ‘Veiling in the World and Words of Women’. Each part comprises three chapters, thus adding up to a total of nine. Each part begins with an introduction, stating its underlying aims and objectives as well as a rich summary.

The first part of the first section, titled ‘Understanding Veiling in Islamic Sacred Texts’, acquaints the reader with an understanding of the intricacies within Islamic discourses on veiling and of the tenuous relationship between the conservative discourses on veiling and the contemporary injunctions that Muslim women should veil. The Sacred texts investigated include the Qur’ān – the highest book of guidance for Muslims; the Hadith – the Prophetic traditions, and, finally, Islamic law. The author provides an overview of multiple exegeses of the Qur’ān, suggesting how the varying degrees of stricture in the interpretations/pronouncements made thereof render the understanding of veiling complex and not uniform. Similarly, the differing explanations of Hadiths and the absence of concrete and clear Islamic laws on veiling, as well as the lack of consensus over laws on ‘*aura* (private, shameful parts) add to its intricacies.

The second part of this first section, titled ‘What Do Progressive Muslims Say about Veiling’, begins with a brief description of those who constitute this group of ‘progressive Muslims’. It brings forth their efforts in attempting to re-define the relationship between Islam and progressive humanist ideals. In addition, Amer discusses how they attempt to explain the practice of veiling by (re)contextualizing the verses and injunctions from the Qur’ān and Hadith that are related to it. The third chapter from this section examines two prominent factors that though remain under-examined, are pivotal in any attempt at generating explanations regarding a woman’s decision to cover, i.e. political and socio-cultural practices. It carefully deconstructs the notion that a woman’s decision to veil can be attributed solely to religion, by citing relevant examples to show how socio cultural norms, state practices, ideology and legal cultures play a vital role in influencing such a decision.

The first chapter of the second part of the book, ‘Veils, Harems and the Mission to Civilize’, presents an account of how the colonial incursions resulted in the creation and popularization of a set of

stereotypes associated with Islamic veiling. The oriental, fantasised depiction of veils, harems and women in European art projected the women as either subordinated or sexually eager, thus establishing a set of pseudo-scientific metaphors that would be continually reproduced and made to survive through time. The cultural production and reproduction of these colonized societies by the colonial powers vilify the veil and reduce it only to being an oppressive and suppressive instrument of Muslim societies. Against this, the European colonial adventures are seen as means of liberation and civilisation. Within such historical context, Amer also locates current debates about the veil in Euro-American societies. Connectedly, the case of ideological manipulation of Muslim women has been exhaustively and painstakingly analysed. The next two chapters, 'Veiling in Western Europe Today' and 'Veiling in United States of America Today', examine the difficulties experienced by women who veil in Muslim-minority states. Among the issues that Amer covers include how the veil has become an excessively politicised issue that is used for menial political gains within such contexts, and how the open scrutiny of the position of the veil has taken a psychological toll on Muslim women, whose identities as citizens of Euro-American societies are put to question.

In the third section, Amer gives due space to the women to speak for themselves. Each chapter addresses one aspect of women's veiling, including their perceptions and attitudes towards veiling and the meaning that the veil holds in their lives, and how, over time, these attitudes and perceptions have undergone changes. In the first chapter, 'Veiling and Feminism', two opposite stances taken by Muslim feminists on veiling in Muslim-majority states and their two broad arguments, 'veiling as a symbol of oppression' and 'veiling as a means of liberation', are discussed. The next chapter, 'Islamic Fashion, Beauty Pageants, and Muslim Dolls' covers recent developments in the realm of beauty and fashion in the Muslim world, such as the emergence of new Middle Eastern, African and Asian Islamic fashion industry, which has played a significant role in redefining the relationship between sartorial practices and religious expression within the Muslim discourse. As such, Amer addresses topics such as the adoption of fashion as a new method of assertion of religious identity, and how contemporary styles and religious grounding mutually inform each other, thus creating a new fusion between realms that were once held as binaries. Lastly, artistic

representations and explanations of heterogeneous standpoints on sartorial practices and their manifestation and expression through arts and fine arts is the theme of third chapter, 'Veiling through Arts'. Hijab poetry and other artistic representations of the veil/veiling practices that are discussed in this chapter makes particularly interesting reading and also further testify the existence of diverse viewpoints about veiling.

Overall, this book is a handy and robust account of the veil, and provides an objective understanding of the practice of veiling among Muslims. It enlightens the reader on a much-mystified subject, corrects misinformation about it, and can be a guide and primer to readers who are uninformed about the significance of the veil in the Muslim societies. Against the background of present global political developments that is characterized by exacerbated obsession with veiling practices (among other things) among Muslim women, this book justifies itself as a necessary read for gaining a deeper understanding of the topic.

Recalling the caliphate: Decolonisation and world order. By S. Sayyid. London: Hurst & Company, 2014, pp. 236, ISBN: 978-1-84904-5346 (Kindle Edition).

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The debate on the caliphate, from Bernard Lewis to Bill O'Reilly, is rarely intelligent or innovative. Many books on the caliphate endorse conspiracies and espouse clichés. It is relieving, thus, to be reviewing a book that is both intelligent and innovative. *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and World Order* is S. Sayyid's reconceptualization of the caliphate and of Muslim identity.

When people talk about the caliphate, they talk about Islam. When they talk about Islam, they are talking about *an entity*. This entity is one in number, limited in its properties. This is what people thought until some realised that Islam in Malaysia is not like Islam in Saudi Arabia, and that Islam in the bedroom is not like Islam in the classroom. These people then said that Islam was many in number, unlimited in properties.