

**The Veil: Women Writers on Its
History, Lore, and Politics**

Jennifer Heath, editor

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. 346 pages.

Taking an expansive notion of what is a “veil” and recognizing its immemorial relationship to sacredness, Jennifer Heath has put together a wonderful collection of essays about it. The twenty-one female contributors consider the veil from a variety of viewpoints: academic, personal memoir, and artistic. Her introduction and epilogue presents the book’s overall goal and a summation. The main argument is that “the veil” has been (and will remain) part of human society, in countless cultures and religions, for thousands of years. It can be a piece of cloth, a mask, or even related to the mystery of

nature (as in the ancient Greek goddess Nyx [Night], drawing the veil of darkness across earth, while Selene [Moon] rises wearing a veil [p. 5].) Current debates over veiling focus only on Islamic veiling and its relationship to women's oppression, which politicizes and narrows the understanding of this practice.

There is no singular truth to "the veil," Heath suggests, and that is precisely the feeling one gets, for after reading the entire collection, one is no wiser to "the" meaning of "the" veil. The "truth" of the veil, rather, is that the current debate over it (does it or does it not oppress women?) detracts from the real issues women face:

To veil or not to veil is not the burning question. Not in Afghanistan – where beneath the *burqa* underfed, uneducated women, veterans of nearly three decades of continuous war, are barely clothed and where they shelter ragged, starving children. It is not the issue in Iran and Saudi Arabia – where the veil is mandated, but where the pressing problems are gender apartheid: women's right to work, to divorce, to own land and other assets, to vote, to be represented in government, and to be treated as fully human. The first step is to end religious extremism and political religions of all stripes – whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or any other creed – for it is women who pay the price for men's ticket to heaven ... The veil is merely a distracting and detracting banner under which insufferable conditions are permitted to continue. This, finally, is the truth behind the veil. (p. 320)

When given the choice, some women will embrace the veil and its mystery; others will not. Heath argues that that choice should be permitted, even celebrated, but that the veil ought to be left up to the personal experience of the one wearing it (or not), and not become politicized, as it has been in the colonial/anti-colonial/post-colonial era.

The book is divided into three parts, each one containing seven essays. Part 1 considers the veil in relation to its "sacred aspects" (p. 4): Moja Kahf (Islam), Barbara Goldman Carrel (Hasidim), Roxanne Kamayani Gupta (India [saris]), Laurene M. Lafontaine (Roman Catholicism), Jana M. Hawley (Amish), Jennifer Heath (masks and male veiling), and Pamela K. Taylor (Islam). Part 2 examines the veil in relation to its "sensual aspects" (p. 4): Shireen Malik (Salome and the Dance of the Seven Veils), Désirée G. Koslin (Veiling in Medieval Europe), Sarah C. Bell (artistic exploration of wedding veils), Eve Grubin (Judaism), Rita Stephen (Arab Christian), Michelle Auerbach (Judaism), and Maliha Masood (Islam). Finally, part 3 looks at the veil in its "socio-political aspects" (p. 4): Jasbir Jain (Purdah in

India), Marjane Satrapi (artistic exploration of Iran), Ashraf Zahedi (Iran), Dinah Zeiger (Afghanistan), Kecia Ali (media representations), Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed (Islam), and Sherifa Zuhur (Islam).

As this list highlights, this collection of essays covers an amazing depth and breadth, which will surely achieve the aim of widening the scope of any reader's understanding of veiling as a practice that goes beyond the contemporary politics of the West versus Islam, freedom versus oppression. Heath allowed her authors to speak as they wished, and thus the collection contains essays from those who value their experiences with the veil and from those for whom it has been a negative and painful experience. These are two of its greatest merits – and the book will be easily plumbed more than once, as it will yield more each time it is reread.

In my view, one of the most striking commentaries on the poverty of the contemporary media's view that "the veil is a Muslim woman's oppression" are the chapters that consider the veil from the Jewish point of view. Carrel's chapter on Hasidic women's veiling contains explanations, rationales, and experiences that overlap with those of Muslim women, and yet any sense of defensiveness or embarrassment that often comes across in Muslim women's accounts is missing. Jewish women choose to cover in an environment that is free of an overarching discourse that by so doing they are oppressed – a luxury not available to Muslim women. The Jewish women's narratives inadvertently highlight the psychological scars of Muslim women who choose to veil in a toxic environment.

For scholars who write about the veil, there is a sense in which this collection presents nothing new – something she recognizes herself in her epilogue. Thus I wholeheartedly support her call for the attention to be removed from women's veiling and directed toward alleviating real suffering:

There is always more room for further study about the veil, but it is my belief that most of what has needed to be said about veiling as liberating, 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 women's welfare, well-being and equality ... women are thought to comprise 70 percent of the world's poor. Although the figures vary ... all concerned agree that the situation for women worldwide is growing worse. This, not veiling, is what must be solved. Soon. (p. 320)

Katherine Bullock
 Department of Political Science
 University of Toronto, Mississauga, Canada