

Islamic perspectives have been discussed in the international context of the 2001-2002 period. The book is a collection of essays, edited by a group of authors, which provides a critical and comprehensive analysis of the historical and modern stereotypes of Muslim women and the veil. The book is a valuable resource for scholars and students alike, and it is highly recommended for those interested in the study of Islam and the role of women in society.

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Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes

Katherine Bullock
 London: IIT, 2002. 320 pages.

Much has been written about Muslim women, dress, hijabs, veils, and more recently, burqas. Bullock's book, based on her doctoral work with 16 Muslim women in Canada, critically examines the western media's representations and perceptions of the veil. What perhaps marks this book as different from many others focusing on the "ubiquitous veil" is not just that

Bullock converted to Islam during the course of her study, but her embeddedness in the material as she describes her conversion and adoption of the hijab. Her personal responses to much western journalistic writing is reflected in her clear frustration at the almost overwhelming refusal of western commentators to acknowledge and respect the concept of choice Muslim women make when regarding dress. As Algerian sociologist Marnia Lazreg noted in 1988, Muslim women are denied the authority to define their own lives by having to satisfy frames of reference dictated and inserted by "Outsiders."

This theme surfaces throughout the book, which seeks to challenge "the popular western stereotype that the veil is oppressive" and to stress the multiple meanings and heterogeneity behind Muslim women's choices in covering. Bullock argues that such misconceptions are social constructions that do not necessarily reflect the lives of those under discussion. She carefully avoids generalizing and presenting an overly positive angle on Muslim women's lived experiences. She acknowledges that for some Muslim women, in certain sociopolitical and historical contexts, enforced veiling is a reality. Thus marked by an absence of choice and the denial of basic rights, the veil can symbolize oppression. The Taliban's restrictions on women are presented as a prime example.

Bullock differentiates between populist views on Muslim women and clothing practices and those of western or westernized feminists. She argues two main schools of thought. The first comprises feminists who believe and stress that religions like Islam are patriarchal, and therefore are inherently oppressive toward women and deny them opportunities for "true" liberation. This school of thought, which Bullock calls "liberal feminism," remains suspicious of arguments advanced by Muslim women who speak positively of their faith and their choices to cover, believing them to be inflicted with a form of "false consciousness."

In contrast, the "contextual approach," based in historical and anthropological methodologies, focuses on seeking to understand social practices from the subject's point of view and considering localized cultures, practices, and socioeconomic factors. This perspective, advocated by Bullock, tries to avoid imposing western explanatory categories onto the lives of non-western women and presenting religion as an overly deterministic feature in Muslim women's lives. Bullock argues that some committed Muslims also reproduce this feature at the expense of recognizing the distinction between the real oppression experienced by some women and the emancipatory spirit within the Islamic texts. This acknowledged distinction between Islam as

the faith and Muslims as the flawed practitioners of that faith marks Bullock's contribution to the literature.

Bullock offers a detailed analysis of colonial and feminist interpretations and writings on Muslim women and veils. She also argues that western assessments and media viewpoints of the veil as inherently oppressive are based on "liberal" understandings of equality that exclude alternative definitions and serve western political interests. She describes how Orientalist perceptions of Muslim societies persist through media imagery and feminist populist writings (such as Govier who, when writing about seeing Muslim women in *niqab* at the Beijing Conference on Women of all places, described them as "masquerading as non-persons" and as "de-humanised"), but also how the veil itself is used as an all-encompassing reductive metaphor for the Muslim world.

Dipping into various methodological and theoretical approaches, from the anthropological and historical approaches on Muslim women and the Middle East to political theories of power relations and mainstream feminist theories of images of women and the body, Bullock makes good use of the extensive literature to enable her to situate her "positive theory of veiling" within. This multidisciplinary framework, coupled with a small sample size of respondents, could be interpreted as a weakness of her approach, for one is left feeling that a certain depth of argument in some places is lacking and could have been developed further. However, the book's accessibility and clarity more than compensates for that. And, it is certainly far from superficial.

The detailed critique of Mernissi's widely acclaimed and accepted discourse on the veil is well worth reading on its own, and offers an invaluable insight into how personal narratives can color and shape a writer's perspective. In short, it reminds us of subjectivity's limits and of how certain perspectives receive validation and acclaim within western discourses, especially if they are perceived to be "authentic" voices from within that confirm neo-Orientalist viewpoints. Similarly, Bullocks' response to western feminists and Muslim women strongly influenced by western theoretical paradigms (e.g., Keddie, Heli-Lucas, Macleod, Afshar, Mernissi and such populist writers as Brookes, Goodwin, and Scroggins) displays an impressive grasp of both the overt criticisms western feminists assert about the veil and women's position in Islam, as well as the more subtle, nuanced discussion that emanates from serious attempts from anthropological and historical perspectives, to understand Muslim women's voices, despite remaining unduly suspicious of Muslim women's choices to cover.

Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil is divided into six chapters, with an introductory chapter outlining the book's main aims, definitions, and themes. Following an account of colonial encounters between Muslim societies and the West in chapter 1, Bullock draws on evidence that westernization did not equal female emancipation. She uses her dissertation to offer an interesting angle to the developing traditional-modern dichotomy debate, which has taken on a new significance since the tragic events of September 11. Chapter 2 focuses on her doctoral fieldwork on experiences of wearing the hijab in Toronto. Chapter 3 returns to broader discussions on the hijab's multiple meanings and the reveiling movement across the Muslim world and in western societies, where the decision to wear it and some state responses to individual choices to cover have been ironically, heavy-handed, oppressive, and discriminatory. She identifies seven non-exclusive core themes or motives behind adopting the hijab: revolutionary protest, political protest, religious reasons, access to public spheres, personal statements, custom, and state law.

Chapter 4 deals extensively with Memissi's largely unchallenged account of the veil and women in Islam. In chapter 5, Bullock offers her alternative and positive theory. Here, she again engages with the main themes that western academic feminist writers have imposed upon Muslim women who choose to cover. She suggests that despite having studied concepts of veiling, Islam, and Muslim women's position in some detail, many writers still define Muslim women's choices through their own western liberal frames of reference. Thus, they fail to fully respect "difference" and all that it entails. She notes that "the liberal/Western concern over cultural pressure to cover makes sense only where covering is not seen as 'good'." She goes on to discuss the hijab as a symbol of religiosity and spiritual piety, as well as an "empowering tool of resistance," that represents a rejection of the rampant materialism so often found in capitalist societies. The book ends with a concluding chapter and some useful appendices giving brief details of her interviewees, references to relevant Qur'anic verses and hadiths, and her interview schedule.

Bullock, perhaps rather ambitiously, states that her book also seeks to "improve the lives of Muslim women" by developing a positive theory of the veil. However, her effective engagement and challenge to different theoretical and populist perspectives – all of which have contributed to the pervading stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women – is certainly a valuable contribution to a movement that seeks to assert authority over the interpretation of Muslim women's lives from a practicing Muslim woman. This

book therefore, represents the growing but emergent voice of confident Muslim women writers and academics situated within “the West” reclaiming an academic and literary territory that was previously dominated and defined by those from the “Outside.”

In my opinion, the author did not go far enough in further exploring western academic or anthropological discourses on the veil and Muslim women. The challenge to Mernissi’s legacy was a fine example of a detailed theoretical critique that could – and should – be extended to a serious critical examination of how academics have contributed toward an essentialized and reductionist discourse when relating to Muslim women. Such a discourse usually focuses on facets of western interest rather than on seeking to expand upon areas that Muslim women define as significant. Furthermore, Shahnaz Khan’s interesting and relevant work on Muslim women in Canada and identities would have complemented Bullock’s study, while some discussion of the contributions made by Muslim women writers from Europe (e.g., Rana Kabani or Anne-Sofie Roald), who have launched staunch arguments against western feminist imperialist interpretations being imposed onto the lives of Muslim women, would have balanced the book’s tendency to seek comparisons with women in the Middle East.

Having said that, this is a valuable, accessible, and timely contribution to the populist and academic literature opening up space for alternative discourses on the veil. It is certainly recommended reading to those in the fields of Islam, gender relations, anthropology and sociology, and the diaspora *and* identity. Journalists in particular will find this an engaging and thought-provoking book.

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