

Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress

Elizabeth Bucar

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 248 pages.

This book is a very welcome addition to the literature on Muslim women's dress. It is part of a growing trend to treat Muslim women and their sartorial choices through sophisticated theories that recognise the agency, even humanity, of Muslim women. We are far from the days when an American author would simply read a headscarf as a symbol of oppression, and Muslim women in need of rescue—at least in the academic realm, though certainly not in the political and journalistic realms. Easy to read and engaging (but not simplistic) studies like Bucar's will, hopefully, eventually trickle out of academia and lead to a sea-change in political and popular discourses as well.

Bucar, a professor of philosophy and religion, has turned to ethnography to complement her philosophical explorations of the relationship between dress, aesthetics, and morality. One of the special features of this book, and what I believe distinguishes it and makes its insights possible, is Bucar's self-reflective nature, and willingness to share that as she writes. The book begins with a preface, which explains how Bucar came to study this topic while in Tehran to study Persian and Islamic women's groups in 2004. It opens with her very honest discussion of how she was sitting nervously in the airplane, wondering whether or not she would be able to follow the conditions of her visa to observe local laws and wear "proper *hijab*" (vii). A woman sitting in the aisle across from her winks and pulls out her own scarf and overcoat, setting Bucar at ease, who then follows suit. She describes how she spent a few months adjusting to wearing *hijab* and figuring out the various ways women in Tehran adhere to the *hijab* laws. Flying next to Turkey, and experiencing some unexpected internal reactions to going bareheaded, made her see that "modest dress had a moral effect on me" (ix), altering her sense of public space and the aesthetics of women's clothing. "I found surprise, pleasure, and delight in pious fashion, as well as an intellectual challenge to the neat boxes I had once put things in: modest dress as imposed on women, fashion as a symptom of patriarchy, and aesthetics as separate from ethics. This book is an exploration of this delight and challenge" (ix).

Following is the introduction, where she lays out her key terms, methodology, and research questions. Bucar explains that she prefers the term

“pious fashion” to “modest clothing” or “fashion veiling.” This is so because clothing is a cultural practice that is “governed by social forces as well as daily individual choices” (2). “Fashion” allows people to “construct identities, communicate status, and challenge aesthetic preferences.” “Modest” is generally meant to describe clothing that is “decent and demure,” that discourages sexual attention, but she learned that Muslim women’s dress is more than this, as it is connected to “ethical and religious dimensions... such as character formation through bodily action, regulating sexual desires between men and women, and creating public space organized around Islamic moral principles” (3). Hence her preference for the phrase “pious fashion.”

Next appear country case studies of how Muslim women in different locales take up “pious fashion”. She did fieldwork in three cities—Tehran, Iran (2004 and remotely 2011); Istanbul, Turkey (2004, 2012, 2013); and Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2011)—observing women in a variety of locations, going shopping, and participating in activities related to pious fashion (including wearing it herself sometimes). She conducted focus groups and interviews with women between ages eighteen and thirty wearing pious fashion.

After opening with a brief introduction to the country-specific politics of modest dress, each chapter is divided into two main sections: “style snapshots” and “aesthetic authorities.” The style snapshots are often very detailed descriptions (half a page for a single outfit) of different kinds of dress, including material, stitching, colour, patterns, style cuts, and accessories. These sections can be a challenge for those not that interested in such details of fashion. The book contains twenty color photographs to illustrate the styles of dress she discusses, but I still found a laptop an essential component to look up images of the stylists she was referring to, or more basic visual aids to know the difference between “chiffon” and “crepe,” or a “manteau” and a “tunic.” Yet it is such intimate details that give life to her book. These details of fashion are not the object of the book, though, for she embeds these discussions in deeper conversations about aesthetics, morality, piety, beauty, and cultural and political aspects of clothing and fashion.

The sections on “aesthetic authorities” cover religious authorities, governments, visual images, educators, fashion designers, magazines, and bloggers’ pious fashion discourses in each country. She is able to highlight differences and similarities across countries, as well as the prevalence of different interpretations and debates amongst all these different voices on what does and does not count as “pious fashion.” She includes discussions

about what are counted as “bad *hijab*” or fashion failures, as an important way to understand the delimitations of pious fashion in each country.

Chapter Four presents summarizing conclusions. Here she argues that unlike the normal western approach which considers *hijab* as a “problem” to be solved, it is rather a woman’s decision about what to wear which should be analytically considered: “the duty to dress modestly does not resolve this question: even if certain institutional structures and public norms related to taste, virtue, and femininity set limits and provide guidance, Muslim women have a great deal of choice when they get dressed every day” (171). She explores the intersections between national identity, modernity, femininity, modesty, aesthetic rebellion, women’s agency, materialism, the consumer lifestyle, aesthetic concepts of beauty and its relationship to morality and fashion, and tradition and change. She concludes that the study of pious fashion teaches us that

piety...[is] not just about obedience to orthodox interpretations of sacred texts: it also incorporates good taste, personal style, and physical attractiveness. And fashion becomes a key location through which piety can be realized and contested. Piety is not only about being good – it is about appearing to be good as well...[Women who wear pious fashion] are pious because they are using clothing and adornment to cultivate their own characters, to build community, and to make social critiques. (190)

The book ends with an epilogue pointing to a sudden interest, since 2016, in “pious fashion” from the mainstream Western ‘secular’ fashion industry. She notes the two different directions this goes politically—either to celebrate Muslim women’s inclusion in wider society (CoverGirl’s use of first hijabi spokesperson, Nura Afia, 2016, 195) or to criticise Islam’s pollution of secular fashion (designers are encouraging the enslavement of women) (196).

One of the main reasons this book works so well is Bucar’s wonderful ability to be empathetic without being an apologist. She does not wear *hijab* in her life in the United States; the book is not advocating *hijab*. She does not gloss feminist concerns over patriarchy and pressures to wear *hijab*, nor the impact of hijab laws that frustrate many women in Tehran. She recognises the complex nature between dress, identity, fashion, and philosophical questions like ethics and the nature of being. She normalizes *hijab* so that it can be studied, not as some kind of weird, exotic, oppressive, *sui generis* piece of cloth, but like any other piece of women’s clothing, like mini-skirts, jeans, high heels, or the bra:

While modest clothing can indeed be used as a form of social control or as a display of religious orthodoxy, in practice, it is both much less and much more. Much less, because for many Muslim women, it is simply what they wear. Much more, because like all clothing, Muslim women's clothing is diverse, both historically and geographically, and is connected with much broader cultural systems. (1)

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