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A Space for Diversity: North American Muslim Women's ~~<cite>Hijab</cite>~~

A Space for Diversity: North American Muslim Women's *Hijab*

The Muslim Veil in North America is a much-needed research and commentary book on the conditions, issues, debates, and discourse on the *hijab* in North America and specifically in Canada. The book occupies an important and necessary space on a topic that has generally constituted the cover of too many books about Islam and women without any substantial analysis of the issues. Given the Orientalist discourse that has governed writings about Muslims, both men and women, in various parts of the world as well as in North America, it becomes important then to produce knowledge for the community rather than in service of furthering condescending, paternalistic, and racist images and discourses, the emblem of Orientalist writings. The authors are aware of the plethora of writings on Muslim women that address largely and almost exclusively the dominant non-Muslim culture. Therefore they hope that "above all," this volume "will respond to the needs of young women and others in the Muslim world who are curious about dress code controversies among Diaspora Muslims" (p. xv). It appears that they aim to produce a non-political book, which seems highly problematic as a statement made on a highly politicized topic. We can find evidence of this trajectory throughout the chapters as extreme care is taken to avoid any discussion of controversial topics like racism, discrimination, and Orientalist discourses. Even though the terms "racism" and "discrimination" are sometimes used, they are rarely contextual-

ized within the history and politics of race relations in Canada (perhaps assuming that unlike the United States, multiculturalism actually entails egalitarian relations in Canada). In fact, terms like "misconceptions," "misunderstanding," "mutual incomprehension," and "prejudice" are used instead to soften or, perhaps one can argue, to mask the harsh material conditions that Muslims face today in America. This issue will be discussed in further detail below as I discuss specifics of the various chapters in this volume. I will first discuss the layout and format of the volume and then provide some remarks on the content.

This volume is divided into two main parts and an introduction. The introduction by the authors of the book does a good job of contextualizing the research projects pointing out the heightened interest in Muslim lives in North America, which has led to the collaboration of various institutions (like the Canadian Council of Muslim Women and the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University) and authors (professors, researchers, and graduate students). The authors state that the impetus for this work arose in the aftermath of the first Gulf War and that the final touches to the manuscript were made in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers. They thus situate the study in terms of political events that have affected the lives of Muslims everywhere as well as Muslims' relations to the various communities in which they interact. The introduction also does a good job of explaining their interest in the veil and/or the *hijab* as a medium of symbolic communication about identity, re-

ligiosity, and community. The two parts of the book represent the ideas and practices (part 1) and the discourses and re-interpretations (part 2) around the veil (*hijab*) in North America and beyond. The first part, "Veiling Practices in Everyday Life in Canada," is a collection of different research studies among Muslim women in schools, universities, and community in Canada. We hear women's voices as they speak of their own choices and experiences. Those five chapters (part 1) also present various methodological approaches including quantitative (surveys, statistical tables, questionnaires) and qualitative (open-ended questions and statements). The second part, "Women Revisiting Texts and the Veiling Discourse," includes three chapters of detailed research and commentary on the veil in various religious texts, namely the Qur'an and the *hadith*. One main problem with the volume's layout is the lack of a concluding chapter. It is not clear why the authors chose to avoid the customary layout in an edited volume. Even though the two parts of the book are structurally different, a conclusion (final remarks) chapter would have helped bring the issues together for the reader. The findings on women's choices around veiling and their level of education in religious texts, in chapters 1 and 3, seemed to differ markedly. Questions around those differences could have been addressed in a concluding chapter. Hoodfar, in chapter 1, indicates that the women she interviewed had studied, read, and then argued with their families about religious and social practices, all in the process of deciding to wear the *hijab*. Meshal, in chapter 3, found that whereas most claimed knowledge of the texts, only 37 percent were able to identify relevant verses in the Qur'an or the *hadith* on the *hijab* (p. 89). Hoodfar also found that the women, in her sample, who choose to veil had learned through unconventional ways, i.e. not through a mosque or through their families, whereas Meshal found that even when her informants claim texts as their primary source of knowledge, family and mosque were the main transmitters of that knowledge (Meshal, pp. 87-89). It would have been useful for the reader to hear some remarks regarding the differences and similarities in the various chapters as well as reading about future questions and topics that need further investigation and discussion.

Hoodfar indicates that she views "clothing [as] a means of visually creating community, while simultaneously delineating individual features of the wearer such as gender, geographical origin, religion, ethnicity, profession, class orientation and life style" (p. 4). Therein lies the importance of investigating the origin of veiling, which she situates in the thirteenth century B.C.E. Assyrian

legal text (p. 6). She rightly situates the writings of western (specifically European) writers on the veil and women (as well as other topics of the Arab and Muslim worlds) in "their mission ... to depict Muslim cultures as inferior/backward and in need of progress" (p. 6). This representation coupled with modernization projects of new nation-states and postcolonial discourses has affected the choices and ideas that Muslim women make regarding veiling in the Muslim world of today. Those ideas are also clearly featured in the factors that affect Muslim women's decision to veil currently in Canada. Hoodfar acknowledges the diversity in women's practices and choices, while also indicating that there are a number of dominant factors that affect the decision to veil. Interestingly, restrictive parents who feared the effect of dominant Canadian cultural practices became more permissive once daughters demarcated themselves clearly as Muslim, chaste, and serious by donning the veil. Daughters found that their knowledge of Islam, the texts and scriptures, gave them more negotiation powers with their families that allowed them to access the resources available in Canadian societies, like university and work. Many Muslim women also saw the *hijab* as an important aspect of their identity vis--vis the larger dominant Western culture within which they resided. This position was supported by Meshal's finding in chapter 3 where 76 percent of her informants chose to identify themselves as Muslim-Canadian (p. 95), stressing Muslim-ness as an identity as opposed to perhaps more ethnic or national affiliations (i.e., Arab, Moroccan, Pakistani, etc.). "The act of donning the *hijab* renders its wearer more visible even as it covers her form. Veiled, she is marked and identifiable, not just to the Muslim community, but also to the wider Canadian society" (Meshal, p. 93). Both Hoodfar and Meshal argue that one cannot discuss the *hijab* or veiling outside of a particular context as it has often acted and does act as a "vehicle for political and social expression and action" (Hoodfar, p. 37).

Patricia Kelly Spurles's chapter on a Canadian Muslim school and Sheila McDonough's chapter highlighting Muslim women's voices on what the veil means to them both fall in line of reinforcing the idea that religious practice and discourse reinforce identity and create community. Spurles indicates the struggles that the schools face in gaining access to government resources in comparison to other religiously based schools in both Canada and London. At the same time, with the help of the community (funding), the school manages to create a "Muslim Space" where the Qur'an and the *hadith* are taught, Mus-

lim religious holidays are celebrated, religious practices such as praying and fasting are integrated in the structure and curriculum of the school, acceptable gender relations and attire are reinforced, and some diversity of practice is tolerated. She concludes, “processes of gender construction within the school community were linked to changes within the Muslim community at large, as well as Canadian society as a whole” (p. 69). The context of identity and community is always one of predominantly the conditions of life in Canada. This becomes very clear in the women’s commentaries about when and why they veiled as well as the meaning the veil carries for them. Even though or perhaps because those interviewed throughout the volume were immigrants or first generation, their concern was largely for their lives in their new country. The authors in this volume are keenly aware that the conditions that require study and analysis have to do with the specificity of the Muslim community in the diaspora, or in Canada. Perhaps this can best be illustrated by a story told by Rahat Kurd who had decided to wear the veil at seventeen. While sitting on the train eating lunch she notices a woman by her side watching her. Finally this lady asks Rahat if she can ask her a question.

“‘Sure,’ I replied warmly, mentally gearing up for a lengthy explanation of Islam, my life as a Muslim, and why I cover. ‘Was that black bean soup you were eating? I’m trying to get more lentils into my diet and I can never think of good recipes to try.’ I was dumbfounded for three seconds and then, somehow, delighted. For once, a total stranger was not interested in my scarf! I could have hugged the lady. I gave her the soup recipe instead.” (McDonough, p. 118)

Chapter 5, by Sheila McDonough, titled “Perceptions of the *Hijab* in Canada,” is symptomatic of this tendency to mask dominant Orientalist discourses (both popular and scholarly) and reactionary politics by overlaying the issues with psychological motives and reactions in an attempt to de-politicize. By framing the problem in the language of perception and psychological reaction, one can easily avoid talking about the historical dimension of race relations in Canada (immigration laws, discrimination in education and work, propaganda and popular culture, etc.) and of Orientalist representations that construct the backdrop for those perceptions of women and the *hijab* in the Western world. This leads McDonough to characterize a racist political cartoonist as a “victim” of propaganda as opposed to an active promoter of racism (p. 130). Whereas it is extremely important that “the students [at Concordia University] ... needed to spend time talking to each other, and learn to understand how and

why others think and feel as they do” (p. 121), this understanding cannot be complete without a historical analysis. McDonough does present a brief historical analysis that purports to explain the reasons behind the fears and anxieties that arise in Canadians when they see the *hijab*. Religious leaders of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in Canada had opposed the changes in the status of women in society at the turn of the twentieth century. After a long-fought battle, women won the right to vote, among other rights. The image of the *hijab*, she argues, triggers a memory of women being hidden (as in before achieving her equal rights), since popular discourses in newspapers also uses these words to talk about women who veil. McDonough makes some scary generalizations and sweeping remarks regarding the impact on Canadian minds, all of which are unsubstantiated by references or research. “Perhaps many Quebecers, who were adults in 1960, still think of veiled nuns when they see the *hijab*” (p. 126). “The *hijab* is particularly distrusted when it looks like a uniform, because the sight of uniformed young people awakens bad memories in European society of an association of youth in uniforms with fascist groups” (p. 127). “Wife-beating still goes on in the wider society, but its opponents have managed to do a lot to help women find shelter... Thus, the sight of the *hijab* can trigger all sorts of anxieties in Canadian minds, including fear of returning to more brutality by men against women” (p. 128). McDonough does provide us with some history about the struggles of the Canadian women’s movement focusing on two important feminists. Even though her argument is fundamentally problematic, she still would have needed to muster some evidence to mildly convince the reader about the relation between Canada’s past and the response to the *hijab*. The reason behind the correlation in Canadians’ minds between *hijab* and domestic violence or “hiding” is not discussed nor is it self-evident. Given the numerous issues raised by Said’s theorizing on Orientalism and several postcolonial feminist writings (Mehdid, Abu-Lughod, Mohanty, to name a few), the reasons for these correlations have more to do with a historical unequal relationship between the Muslim world and those that aimed to dominate it.[1]

On the other hand, Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrah and Lynda Clarke wrote two excellent chapters about the veil and the Qur’an and the *hadith* respectively. Hajjaji-Jarrah, in a chapter titled “Women’s Modesty in Qur’anic Commentaries,” focuses her attention specifically on the two verses in the Qur’an (v. 53 in chapter 33 and v. 31 in chapter 24) that refer to women’s modesty. She evaluates the verses in terms of the context, the semantics,

and the interpretations. She gives a detailed interpretation of the verses by al-Tabari of the tenth century and al-Razi of the thirteenth century explaining how their interpretations were a product of the time that these two learned scholars lived in, namely the height of the Islamic Empire and the institutionalization of the practice of female slaves as sexual and educated companions to Muslim elite men. Hajjaji-Jarrah provides compelling arguments and historical evidence to discuss the lives of some of the early Muslim women believers during and after the time of the prophet. She concludes that even though those commentaries were done in “the spirit of *ijtihad*,” they have had some largely enduring trajectories and that very few attempts for alternative readings since had been set (Muhammad Shahrur, Fatima Mernissi, and Muhammad Abduh are notable exceptions). Clarke’s discussion of the *hadith* relating to women’s modesty is a very detailed and informative chapter that is, nonetheless, difficult to follow at times. She argues that the *hadith* is vast and not easily accessible to the general public or to scholars like “liberals and feminists” who have tended to avoid it, relying solely on the Qur’an and historical texts for their arguments. Nonetheless, the *hadith* does have salience with the public as it is often used in sermons and by religious councils, thus the need for liberals and feminists to address the *hadith*. Clarke also claims and through an analysis of selected *hadith* texts on *hijab* demonstrates that the vastness of the *hadith* makes it harder for either the conservative or the liberal interpretations to use it as a *sanad* (or main reference). Every interpretation of the text will find gaps and will attempt then to “leap over” them as such almost always leaving room for alternative interpretations. Clarke argues that this is a dialogic view of hermeneutics used by feminists but rarely used by current Islamic thinkers, even reform-

ers and modernists, as they aim usually to uncover the truth.

I find it essential to comment finally on their choice of a book cover and artwork throughout the volume. As a social scientist that works with women in the Arab world, I was elated to see that the authors did not choose a “veiled woman” on the book cover. Their attempt to avoid the tantalizing and essentializing representation of Muslim women on the cover and in the artwork is also reflected in the content of the chapters. Overall, this volume is an important contribution that takes into consideration the diversity of Muslim women’s lives in Canada. The volume does provide knowledge for the community specifically in relation to the practices and discourse (both popular and authoritative) on veiling. As a reader and a scientist, I found that this volume opens up the discussion around identity, community, and religious practices in North America, specifically the *hijab*. It, on the other hand, leaves many questions unanswered in terms of the context of race relations and representations of Muslims in Canada that define the context of Muslim women’s existence and choices.

Note

[1]. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Malika Mehdid, “A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The ‘Oriental’ Female,” in *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation*, ed. Haleh Afshar (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 18-58; Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Boundary 2* 12 (1984): pp. 333-358; and Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): pp. 783-790.

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