

REVIEW

P. K. Yasser Arafath and G. Arunima (eds), *The Hijab: Islam, Women and the Politics of Clothing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022), 272 pp., ISBN: 9789392099380

Dedicated to the ‘Muslim girls and women protesting for their rights in India and Iran’, historians P. K. Yasser Arafath and G. Arunima have compiled a deeply engaging collection of essays that explore the wearing of the hijab from a multitude of perspectives. The contributions traverse different national contexts and explore multiple and entangled strands of the debates around the hijab, underscoring its breadth and complexity. And as the essays in *The Hijab: Islam, Women and the Politics of Clothing* demonstrate, not only is this a complex debate, but also one on very rugged terrain. To dispel misconceptions, prejudices and generalities that abound on the subject, the contributors gathered here come with expertise, variously, in religious studies, sociology, English literature, law, theatre, liberal studies, political science, development studies, journalism, education and historical studies. The essays are grouped into sections – ‘Context and Questions’, ‘Reading the Ban’, ‘Ethno/History/Life Writing’ and ‘Many Feminisms’ – and read together illuminate the cross-cutting historical, ethnographical and political trajectories in which the question of the hijab is embedded.

As with any debate, context is crucial. Protests against the hijab in Iran are different from protests against the hijab in France, for example, where questions of the western cultural norms and hegemony predominate in the name of upholding a so-called secular state. An important touch stone for this book is the 2022 ban on the hijab by the educational institutes in southern state of Karnataka in India. One of the principal arguments in this debate is that decisions on the wearing of the hijab are tenable if made by the majority in a particular context. In her essay recounting the 2022 controversy, ‘Can’t a Scarf be Part of a Uniform?’, Ghazala Jamil writes of the tyranny of a ‘muscular majoritarianism.’¹ Protests erupted against students wearing headscarves in schools and colleges in the state of Karnataka and reactionary responses to the hijab, seen as signifying Islam, included the wearing of saffron robes by boys, to assert the sacred colour of Hinduism. The Karnataka High Court, deliberating on whether the hijab or head scarf is an Essential Religious Practice (ERP), eventually upheld the ban.

1 G. Jamil, ‘Can’t a Scarf be Part of a Uniform?’ in P. K. Yasser Arafath and G. Arunima (eds), *The Hijab: Islam, Women and the Politics of Clothing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 105–112.

But whether the hijab is an ERP is not a moot point, as Jamil rightly argues. There are other contingent factors that should be taken into consideration, on both sides, such as custom, tradition and habit. Noor Zaheer, in her chapter, 'Hijab: To Be or Not to Be', shows how questions of choice around the hijab have very personal, private histories. There are contexts where men may insist on the wearing of the hijab to appease other men. Sometimes, women wear the hijab as a means of empowerment, as this allows them into public spaces to study. Their newly gained independence, in turn, gives them the right to choose in a wide range of matters.

As Jamil reminds us, 'garments have often been used to signal or announce politics across history and time',² but perhaps what is often overlooked is how a predominant Western ethos in dress (also reflected in uniforms) is seen as culturally or religiously neutral when it comes to the implementation of dress codes. On the other hand, a sari and kurta are seen as culturally distinctive because they are not identified with a particular religion, in the way the hijab is. Such a view misses how the lines also blur; how in many societies there is a fusion of culture and religion and the spirit world. (Sana Aziz's essay, 'Majoritarian Politics and Veiled Resistance in India', is important here, arguing as it does, that the tradition of covering goes back to the seventh century before the advent of Islam.³) Understandably then, there are those who see evidence of a growing Islamophobia in the increased intolerance to the wearing of the hijab.

When I was at school, in the 1950s, the wearing of pants or *ijar*, by Muslim girls, was part of our school uniform, and made of the same uniform material. The matter was not even debated or seen as controversial. The question of the hijab today is highly contested, and in as much as dress, like the hijab, can be seen as mandatory and oppressive, 'clothes can also express resistance to forms of oppression',⁴ with assertions of identity reflected in the semiotics of dress. And even uniforms, as Jamil rightly argues, may be seen as oppressive. One needs to appreciate, however, that 'restriction on clothing is political',⁵ and that garments do not have inherent meanings but acquire meanings in particular contexts.

One of the key debates on the hijab revolves around the question: Is the hijab mandatory in Islamic religious practice? There is no unanimity in the Islamic world around this question. The Egyptian scholar, Nawal el Saddawi, for example, has argued that the hijab or head scarf is not essential to Islam and there are many present-day Muslim women who assert the same point of view. (Ironically, some institutions, not necessarily well-disposed to Islamic traditions and practices in other spheres, use this argument to support their banning of the hijab.) There is also recent growing opposition by men and women, young and old alike, in countries like Iran, where the hijab had been long seen as non-negotiable in Islamic adherence. But the reality is that there are strong points of view on both sides, and one must factor in issues of

2 Ibid., 105.

3 S. Aziz, 'Majoritarian Politics and Veiled Resistance in India' in P. K. Yasser Arafath and G. Arunima (eds), *The Hijab: Islam, Women and the Politics of Clothing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 114.

4 Jamil, 'Can't a Scarf be Part of a Uniform?', 106.

5 Ibid..

personal and family tradition, symbolism, as well as the need to identify with a particular community.

Jamil also argues that prejudice against the hijab is evidence of a mindset that targets Muslim women and compares it to lynching. Such stripping is tantamount to public humiliation. There is also the selective implementation of the rules. She points out that Scheduled Castes in India have protection against, what she terms, humiliation by the law, but there is no such protection for Muslim women. The conflict is exacerbated by an essentialised view of Muslim women, especially those wearing the hijab.

The debate grows complex, and even contradictory, when one considers the diverse vantage points from which feminist writers and scholars view this question. Some feminists have criticised the practice of the hijab as being oppressive to Muslim women while others have argued that one cannot, for example, judge agency by what women wear. From the various chapters, we begin to appreciate that the politics of representation comes with its complexities. *The Hijab: Islam, Women and the Politics of Clothing* certainly opens up the debate on the hijab rather than closes it and shows the divergent and competing views on the subject.

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