

EL-GUINDI, FADWA. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. xx, 242 pp., Oxford, New York: Berg Publisher, 1999, £14,99.

Unlike most books featuring “veil” in their title, El-Guindi’s work does not present yet another treatise on oppressed victimised passive Muslim women. Indeed, the author strongly reacts against simplistic and ethnocentric explanations about women’s veiling and the cultural codes underlying it, which, as she argues, have been mainly put forward within the discipline of Women’s Studies. Instead she promises the reader an “anthropological framework developed for a cross-cultural analysis of dress”, which would consider the veil as “a mode of communication that builds on cross-cultural, cross-religious and cross-gender knowledge” (p.5). Both the attempt to look at the veil beyond the strictly confined boundaries of Arabo-Islamic culture as well as her proposition to also analyse men’s veiling, constitute refreshing and promising novelties in this field.

The author developed her own interest in “the veil” in the context of her research on the contemporary Islamic movement in Egypt. According to El-Guindi, her research findings revealed that the dress code adopted by male and female activists entails a whole range of cultural codes, which challenge the conventional idiom of “modesty-shame-seclusion”. Rather, as the author suggests, cultural codes underlying veiling relate to notions of privacy, sanctity, respect and restraint. In Part 2 of the book, El-Guindi develops her main argument, i.e. that veiling in contemporary Arab culture is “largely about identity, largely about privacy – of space and body” (xvii). She stresses commonalities between men’s and women’s veiling and refutes interpretations pointing to seclusion and modesty.

While the latter chapters in the book heavily draw on her fieldwork among contemporary Egyptian Islamic activists, the author synthesises from a wide variety of sources: secondary and primary ethnographic material, historical material, and Islamic textual sources. As fascinating as some of these syntheses might be, the further one gets into the book, the less coherent the chapters become. Several themes and issues, especially those related to Islamic textual interpretations, tend to reappear and occasionally become repetitious. Moreover, it becomes obvious that her analysis is mainly restricted to Arabo-Islamic culture and does not provide cross-religious insights. However, within the context of the Middle East, the author provides comparative analyses based on cross-cultural material.

Somewhat puzzling is El-Guindi’s perception of gender analyses, which she criticises for not considering social and cultural codes and values. The author appears to conflate a “gender perspective” with the study of women. Certainly her rebuttal reflects a prevailing trend within gender analyses in the context of Middle East scholarship, i.e. to focus on women. Yet, it is precisely the strength of a gendered perspective to unravel social, political and cultural issues and reflect on the ways men and women are affected by as well as react to them. Ironically, El-Guindi’s book presents the first systematic and in-depth gendered analysis of the veil.

The author offers interesting and insightful comparisons about veiling patterns among Tuareg men and women among the Awlad Ali and in North India (p.92). Her analysis does not only reveal similarities in the ways the veil is used by men and women, but also points to the often fluid and changing meaning of “the veil” depending on context.

The emphasis on similarity in terms of women's and men's veiling, unfortunately works at the expense of a more balanced analysis which would have also taken differences on board. Here, El-Guindi seems to have fallen into the trap, which is luring in front of all of us, who are reacting to and writing against ethnocentric and stereotypical depictions of Muslim women: El-Guindi only stresses the positive and liberating aspects of "the veil" which could also signify oppression and women's secondary status in specific situations and contexts. The author discusses the meaning of the veil during the liberation struggle in Algeria where it came to symbolise the resistance to the French colonists. But, she stops short of discussing the significance of the veil in contemporary Algeria where unveiled women are killed because of not wearing the veil. Her concluding remarks about western hysteria concerning the Taliban in Afghanistan are a sad reminder that anthropological studies of Middle Eastern women (and men) still have a long way to go before breaking out of highly ideological "black-and-white" depictions. But as long as orientalist and racist accounts of oppressed Muslim women persist within western scholarship and media, there will exist reactions, which run the danger of glorifying existing cultural symbols and codes.