

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BURQA: MUSLIM WOMEN ON FAITH, FEMINISM, SEXUALITY AND RACE

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ABSTRACT

"It's not about the Burqa" is a collection of 17 essays written by Muslim feminist thinkers and authors. In the introduction, Mariam Khan, the editor, explains that the main motive for producing this book is the absence of Muslim women themselves from the narratives created and amplified by mainstream Western media and politics about Muslim women. For Khan, those narratives have been predominantly politicized, homogenizing and naturalizing Muslim women across the globe and representing them as generally submissive and oppressed without any sensitivity to the differences and specificities that exist within the Muslim community at large. This book, according to Khan, is an attempt to fulfill the dire need for adequate space within and through which Muslim women can represent themselves, their diverse narratives, and identities from their own standpoints and without external filtration or subjection to the Western standards of what Muslim women are. Further, Khan, in this book, claims to offer an authentic intellectual space where the contributing Muslim women can express themselves and their voices freely without having to adhere to Western standards of intellectuality. The book ends with brief biographies of the contributing authors.

INTRODUCTION

The contributing authors are self-identified as feminists who write vocally, in their own multiple spaces whether newspapers, magazines, blogs, websites or any other platforms, about issues that concern Muslim women, each within their specific contexts. The authors' writings give prominence and respect to the diverse cultural, political, and socio-economic contexts each author belongs to and writes about devotedly. Among the issues addressed are Western representation of Muslim women, sexuality and faith, and cultural rejection and dismissal. Following is a review I have developed on this book. For the sake of the allowed space, the first part of the review provides a summary of selected narratives present in the book. In the second part of the review, I dwell upon some of the initial thoughts and reactions I developed

while reading the essays in an attempt to critically understand those reactions and reflect on them.

In “Too loud, swears too much, and goes too far,” Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian feminist, activist and writer, shares her reflection on a letter she received from a young Muslim woman in reaction to Eltahawy’s book “Headscarves and hymens: Why the Middle East needs a sexual revolution.” Eltahawy narrates her thoughts when she read in that letter that the rhetoric circulated against her is that she is “too loud, swears too much and goes too far,” which was the reason that kept that young Muslim woman from reading Eltahawy’s book until very lately. Eltahawy comments with her pleasure and content that this was how the people saw her because it would only mean to her that she succeeded and achieved her goal: rejecting the cultural expectations on women to be domesticated and obedient. For her, she is projecting the image she would like the whole world to see of Muslim women: un-submissive, opinionated, “uncontrollable and dangerous” (Khan, 2019, p.4). Eltahawy, born to an Egyptian family who resettled in Saudi Arabia where she received her higher education, narrates how books on the library shelves about feminism made her feel enlightened and liberated in the face of the conservative and controlling culture she used to live in. Eltahawy takes pride in being called “too loud and too much” because, to her, that meant she is considered the potential of a women revolution that challenges the traditional norms that meant to control women and restrict, if not diminish, their own individual and collective potentials as humans.

Coco Khan, in her “Immodesty is the best policy,” grapples with the concept of modesty as a deeply rooted traditional and general expectation of women: A good woman is enculturated to be modest in her clothes, speech and attitude, and who does not deviate from the general norms of a given culture. Within this modesty dogma, being physically fit and healthy was not an emphasized element, if not disallowed at all, in the Southeast Asian cultural upbringing of daughters. In contrast, sexualizing the female body is a predominant theme of this culture: the body’s texture, color-tone and size are topics commonly open for criticism and commentary by the “aunties” as a form of pressure on girls to conform to the beauty ideal standards shared by the community so that they can be matched for marriage, the pre-determined goal and life mission for girls (p.14). Khan calls this “toxic modesty” that is built up to denigrate women’s potentials (p.19).

“The first feminist,” an essay by Sufiya Ahmed, address the negative portraits of the Muslim women developed and perpetrated by the Western media to be fragile, dependent, and oppressed in an ignorance and negligence of the Islamic religion’s value of the woman. First exposed to Khadija bint Khuwaylid, the richest women in the trade business in Saudi Arabia before and when Islam first appeared there, Ahmed was fascinated by her and took her as a role model. Ahmed expressed her anguish and frustration with the persistent image of Muslim women to be oppressed and weak. In reflection of the struggles that accompanied the decision of her Indian single mother to move to the UK to be able to raise her daughter away from the cultural pressures and constraints imposed on single mothers and their daughters, Ahmed expresses her deep appreciation and admiration to her mother’s bravery which, according to Ahmed, was not recognized by the Indian or Southeast Asian community in the UK. Ahmed ends her narrative with a quite impressive encounter in which she received a downgrading, condescending comment from one of her South Asian college mates about her attending college. She, taken aback and offended, slammed him back with how uneducated his family must have been raising him not to realize and respect the potential of women. Upon her deep conviction that men and women are born equal and are regarded equal in Islam, she wishes to implant this idea in all Muslim girls through her writings.

My search for potential books for this assignment was guided by my desire to deepen my knowledge about what Muslim women experience in contexts different from mine. My selection of this book turned out more satisfactory than I initially anticipated. I not only learned

about other Muslim women's lived realities and daily struggles, I saw myself truly represented not portrayed or drawn to fit someone else's imagination of what a Muslim woman is or should be. For example, Afia Ahmed and Afshan D'souza-Lodhi present two separate but complementary narratives of their individual relationships with the hijab – the headscarf. Ahmed in "The clothes of my faith" addresses how the meaning of hijab has been highly politicized, becoming an intensely polarized cultural and political symbol. Instead of situating hijab within its religious meaning as a symbol of asceticism, hijab has become a symbol for selective inclusion of Muslim women in the Western society. The idea and image of modern hijab has been developed by the Western fashion industry as a condition for inclusion. Consequently, Ahmed argues that women with the modern hijab are more accepted by the West than Muslim women who adopt a different form of hijab. Ahmed argues that the same symbol of inclusion – the modern hijab – simultaneously functions as a symbol for exclusion and marginalization.

D'souza-Lodhi, on the other hand, presents us with a more intimate version of her relationship with hijab. In "Hijab (R)evolution," D'souza-Lodhi allows us in her own struggle with her parents, being Muslim immigrants to the UK, to put on the hijab. Holding on to hijab symbolized holding on to her own identity and belonging. Her queer identity did not contradict her Islamic beliefs and religious identity. She has actively and consciously been engaged in a continuous process of reclaiming her faith and owning it herself in the face of global media trends on Islam being a religion based on violence, hatred, and rejection of the 'other'.

The two narratives in relation to hijab enabled me to realize the multi-dimensional dilemma some Muslim women, including myself, are face to struggle with: giving meaning to their hijab in light or opposition of the politicization of it. The two narratives provide me with illuminative insights on what significance the journey of reclaiming and constructing one's faith makes to one's wellbeing – mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I myself struggle with my faith, with the cultural teachings I received that contradicts my gut feelings and humble reading of my own religion and trust in the Divine. Although I have taken the decision to unlearn those contradictory teachings and re-construct my own faith, I slip uncommitted to the duty despite my realization of the difference it would make with me and my worldview had I had been committed enough to it. While reading, I have experienced splashing moments of awakening that revived this sense of duty and commitment to this intimate and personal journey of reclaiming my own faith.

Though the authors did not explicitly acknowledge it in their writing, intersectionality as a framework of analysis was clearly utilized and interwoven within their narratives of their own experiences with hijab: being women of color, born to immigrant parents, with queer identity, and belonging to the Islamic faith were the main forces shaping their individual lived realities. Ahmed and D'souza-Lodhi were cognizant of their positionalities and multitude of identity that shape who they are: the knowledge they produce, then, is eloquently "located" within their own specific contexts (Bromley, 2012, p.47). By mobilizing the intersectional framework to their narratives, the authors acknowledged their differences yet also showed connectedness among all the narratives, which is a core purpose of intersectionality: recognizing differences while addressing how those differences bring up commonalities as well (2012).

The book also showcases the viability of centering subjugated knowledge(s) by adopting the standpoint epistemological theory of feminism. Subjugated knowledge is defined to be those that have been historically "ignored, silenced, or deemed less credible" while standpoint feminism believes in the "retrieval of these knowledges as part of the demand for polyvocality, or the inclusion of many diverse voices" (Mann & Patterson, 2016, p.3). The book is organized in a purposive manner to place the feminist thinkers' narratives at the center of it, devoid of interpretative, normative intellectual lenses and practices historically developed by Western scholars. The narratives are presented authentically, providing readers with "critical insights"

(p.4)– if not radical I would argue – about the lives and experiences of well-accomplished Muslim feminist thinkers. Yet, these thinkers never in their writing claim universality of their own narratives to be inclusive to all Muslim women around the world.

For Michael Foucault, this book might be considered as a form of empowerment to Muslim women. For he argues: “we are subjected to the production of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (Foucault,1980, p.94). This book, henceforward, is an active engagement in knowledge construction, if not deconstruction of the persisting view of Muslim women to be naturally oppressed. In this manner, according to Foucault, Muslim women are being directly and gradually empowered to re-claim ownership over their own narratives and lives (1980).

On the other hand, the concept of social reform was not adequately addressed in the essays. Enn, Diaz & Bryant-Davis (2021) defines transnationalism as a dialogue between highly specific local processes or individual/personal lived experience and cultural/comparative knowledge(s) of differences from which we build informed solidarity needed for coalitional organizing linked to social change,” (p.190). Although the narratives present in the books contribute to a certain form and sense of collectivity, they do not cohesively address how social change can be actualized. Almost none of the authors dedicated some space to articulate their own visions of the kind of social change they aspire to see lest Eltahawy mention she calls for a “revolution of girls being too loud and too much” to break down patriarchal barriers (Khan, 2019, p.9). Accordingly, the transnational aspect of the book is quite incomplete because it lacks clarity of the collective action or definition of the change Muslim women long for.

Khan, in addition, brings an interesting piece into dialogue: having to use the word Burqa in the book title so that the book reaches a wider Western audience (2019). Bravely, Khan admits that she made this conscious decision of adopting how the West generally and stereotypically views Muslim women – oppressed, forced to cover her body, deprived of willpower, symbolized in the word Burqa, the full body coverage. Her motive was twofold: for the title to resonate with the Western audience and to negate that resonance by leaving the remaining space for the Muslim women feminists to share their narratives of what the hijab means to them. In a sense, Khan acknowledges that Muslim women are more than the piece of cloth on them, yet this piece of cloth functions in a multitude of arrays within each author’s context: When seen as an act of cultural pressure and complicity, the burqa should also be seen as an act of resistance and bravery (Shirazi & Mishra, 2010). As sometimes functional as a symbol of a religious identity, the burqa can also be an exercise of agency and “an act of rebellion” against government policies and mainstream culture that stereotypes Muslim women (2010, p.58). Situated within this lens, Khan attempts to challenge the normative narrative about the Burqa as a symbol of submission and deprivation of willpower.

CONCLUSION

It is not about the Burqa stands as a unique and honest attempt to provide genuine intellectual space for Muslim women to express and represent their own stories, daily struggles and lived realities with their own voices. Pride has been growing in me as I was getting exposed to the most intimate struggles and inner tensions experienced by Muslim women in different parts of the world. I felt rather more grounded and connected with the Muslim feminist authors who shared their personal narratives. Accordingly, the book serves as evidence that Muslim women have the intellectual tools and spaces to represent themselves from within to the world. As a result, I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone who is keen on getting genuine exposure to the diversity of lives and realities of Muslim women across the globe on the sole condition of being honest and free of prejudice in pursuing this book.

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