The Study of Islam @ UJ Book Review


The Muslim veil has remained a contentious garment accessory since Islam’s encounter with colonialism. Variously debated, the veil has been defended as a religious requirement that safeguards female modesty, and a symbol of Islamic identity. It has been criticised as an instrument of female subjugation, gender inequality and a symbol of radical Islam.

However, the typecasting of such a polarised and stereotypical discourse fails to capture the fluidity which holds to account religious revival among Muslims. The veil was a marker of religiosity and an explicit sign of annoyance in Egypt and much of the Arab world to its steady resurgence during the 1970s. The veil took on new meanings, at times different from the traditional outlook on veiling. The veil was a marker of religiousness and an explicit sign of annoyance with secular dominance. Leila Ahmed traces the foundations of the meaning of its resurrection; notably the Muslim Students Association (MSA), to Islamist organisations in the Arab world. While women were involved in the founding of these organisations, the face of these organisations has changed dramatically in respect of gender.

Muslim women head both these organisations today. The veil, in this instance, is both a sign of Muslim identity and a symbol of leadership and activism within Muslim society. Ahmed also, interestingly, gives voice to the criticism from postcolonial theorists such as Hamid Dabashi and Sabah Mahmood on the imperial nature of the common rationale utilised by the West, notably the United States of America, that its moral dubious wars, particularly in Afghanistan, were influenced by liberating women from the veil.

While Ahmed continues to believe that the rights and conditions of women in Muslim-majority societies often are acutely in need of improvement, she wonders ‘if the subject of “the oppression of women in Islam” – coming to us charged and loaded with the legacies...that are capable evidently of taking on renewed life and force in the West in fraught political times in relation to Islam – is any longer a useful or even relevant issue.’

Ahmed’s conclusions are surprising. She posits that it is indeed the legacy of Islam – and the children of this legacy – who are at the forefront of ‘those who were most fully and rapidly assimilating into the distinctively American tradition of activism in pursuit of justice’ and are also at the forefront of women’s rights in Islam.

While this conclusion certainly is an optimistic one for Ahmed, the prevalence of believers in a God-given gender hierarchy is still present. The investigative argument which Ahmed puts forth is certainly interesting and is an alternate view to the dominant discourse on the veil.

The importance of relooking and also rethinking the issue of the veil within the wider context of Islamism, Muslim identity, ethics and gender is integral to understanding the current nature, motivation and purpose of the veil among many Muslim women and the resurgent religiosity within Muslim societies.

Review by Nadeem Mahomed
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