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Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?*, University of North Carolina Press, 2014, 256 pp., \$28.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781469617756.

The last twenty years have seen an uptick in the obsession, judgment, and critique of the outward appearance of religiously observant Muslim women. Since well before 2004 when the French state passed the ban on conspicuous headgear, pundits and academics, non-Muslims and Muslims, have offered commentary on whether “the veil” is oppressive, liberatory, neutral, or anti-feminist—often with the ease with which one sends an email. At some level, it is the controversy on the range of opinions and commentaries about the “ethics” of the veil to which Sahar Amer, a literary scholar, is responding in this book. *What is Veiling?* is at once a primer that offers history and context for the various versions of the *hijab* globally (the “foulard,” the *burqa*, the *niqab*) as well as a commentary on the social debates over the oppressive versus liberatory potential of the *hijab*.¹

What is Veiling? is a breathtaking book in terms of its simultaneous breadth and accessibility: Amer covers the history of veiling before Islam (1200 BCE to 610 CE) all the way to *l'affaire du foulard* in France and beyond, to the meanings and rationales for different fashions for those who wear or manufacture clothes for observant Muslim women. As she states, her book is intended to “give an overview of the multiplicity of meanings and the complex history of veiling practices in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies, and to provide a richer and more balanced understanding of veiling practices among Muslims in the world today” (2). At the level of a survey text, *What is Veiling?* is accessible, candid, and unintimidating. It is a welcome invitation to students and non-students alike to consider the practice of veiling on a macro-level, as well as micro-level, that is to consider the ways in which the veil is misunderstood by skeptical non-Muslims as well as Muslim feminists who oppose the veil.

As Amer herself confesses, although she grew up in Egypt with various older female relatives and neighbors who veiled, she herself underestimated how varied the reasons, styles, motivations, and politics of the veil there could be. She also shares with her readers that she wore the veil for a year, between 1983 and 1984 (17). Her approach to the topic includes religious interpretation, literary readings, history, scholarly literature on veiling,

¹ For some references to this debate, see the writings or remarks of Homa Hoodfar, Fatima Mernissi, Mona Eltahawy, Cécile Laborde, Valentine Moghadam, Susan Moller Okin, and the leader of the Egyptian women’s union, Huda Sha’arawi.

creative expressions by women who wear the veil, and “personal interviews conducted with Muslim women, veiled and unveiled” over the course of two decades (18).

The book is divided into three parts, each of which encompasses three chapters. Part I, “Islam, Politics, and Veiling,” begins with an exploration of Islamic religious texts on veiling, then moves to a description and survey of progressive Muslim positions on veiling, and ends with a chapter entitled, “Politics and Sociocultural Practices of Veiling.” The first chapter offers an interpretation of what the Qur’an says about the *hijab*, even though as Amer points out, the holy text does not use the term “hijab” to refer to women’s clothing, but rather to physical markers denoting privacy or partitions dividing “men and the wives of the Prophet” (24). Amer points to three sources of religious authority: the Qur’an itself; the hadith, which is a record of the speech and doings of Muhammad and his contemporaries; and Islamic jurisprudence, which has provided a tradition of legal commentaries. Referring to these, Amer attempts to extricate an Islamic position on the veil.

It is understandable that Amer, a brilliant literary studies scholar, would take on this daunting task in order to open up a space for conversation. Amer does not refer to a range of scholarly commentaries on the topic of *hijab* in the Qur’an to support her reading. Yet, we know that, as with any literary tradition, especially religious, there will inevitably be multiple readings on any given subject: conservative, moderate, progressive, extremes, with a range of variants in-between. As such, it is slightly surprising that Amer is attempting to extract a singular progressive reading of the *hijab* from the hadith and Qur’an. To be fair, this is a primer, and not a scholarly assessment of the range of readings of the *hijab*.

In Chapter 2 Amer offers an analysis of what progressive Muslims believe about veiling. Her conclusion that the “*hijab* in Islam is much less about clothing, much less about an injunction to wear specific attire, than it is about adopting a modest demeanor, remaining humble, and avoiding pride and conceit” (43) is a nice foil to the view of the *hijab* as either oppressive or pious in and of itself. Here, as well, Amer points to the range of motivations and contexts that surround the decision of Muslim women to wear the veil: from a “sign of self-affirmation and symbolic healing from the trauma” of slavery for African American Muslims, to a personal, kinetic liberation that Muslim women feel when veiled (49), to deciding to take off the veil for various reasons (49). Similarly, in Chapter 3, “The Politics and Sociocultural Practices of Veiling,” Amer invokes a pointed distinction on the part of many Muslims between their attitudes toward the *hijab* versus the “face veil” (either the *niqab* or the *burqa*).

Part 2 of *What is Veiling?* explores the issue of veiling in “Euro-American societies,” a concept which is a bit difficult to understand, given that some (including myself) might object that the historical, political, and social attitudes are distinct between European and American societies. Nevertheless, as Amer points out, there are some commonalities between the Orientalist production of veiled Muslim women’s sexuality as an offering to “European and American male sexualities” (75).

The third part of *What is Veiling?* is a delightful, engaging exploration of different variants of culture in relation to veiling in predominantly Muslim societies, such as Saudi Arabia, from the inconsistencies and contradictions of Islamic fashion, to the notion of beauty pageants that feature veiled contestants and whose standards, predictably, do not explore Muslim women’s physical bodies, but rather their “commitment to Islamic morals” (172).

This section also begins by asking a most compelling question: Can veiling be a feminist practice? Pointing to the deceptive nature of this question and linking it to certain first world liberatory attitudes regarding what authentic feminist freedom must be, she describes the

imperial context by which Western states have invoked the “rescu[e] of Muslim women from their so-called subjugation” (134). Having done that, Amer explores both sides of this question: She refers to Amina Wadud’s point that the *hijab* does not necessarily have a singular meaning, such that it is not clear that there is an obvious monolithic answer to this question. Conversely, she points to the history of the Arab feminist movement and its subsequent politics which urged women in Muslim-majority societies to shed their veils: in places such as Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, and elsewhere, in rural and urban areas. She also points to the differentiated politics by which women of different classes take up or discard the veil.

This will be perhaps the most compelling and persuasive section for undergraduate readers and faculty alike: Amer’s idea of considering the *hijab* from the perspective of the variety and nuance of couture within the Islamic fashion industry, from the combination of wearing the *hijab* along with tightfitting jeans, to the “burkini” which allows observant Muslim women to go swimming (there are no explicit descriptions of this fashion in the book; it would have been helpful to have an image), to the upkeep of hair despite the *hijab*, to Islamic fashion shows and beauty pageants, and corresponding philosophical debates on whether to show the head and the body in Islamic fashion magazines. As well, Amer offers a fascinating look at the range of Muslim women’s expression through various artistic forms that Amer describes as “hijab poetry.” This is where Amer’s talents as a literary scholar become most apparent. Offering an extensive review and analysis of several poets, such as Su’ad Abdul-Khabeer and Mohja Kahf, Amer enables us to glimpse the range of joy, frustration, and political sensibilities of veiled Muslim artists in facing the world, both Muslim and non-Muslim. This section is a fitting end to a broad ranging survey on the context, meaning, history, and implications of one of the most controversial forms of sartorial, religious, cultural expression to rock the political and cultural landscape in the last several decades.

In all, *What is Veiling?* is a remarkable primer that guides newcomers and scholars alike through the range of issues, contexts, debates, and ethics of what is sure to be a continued controversy for some time to come.

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