

Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance. Fadwa El Guindi. Berg: Oxford, New York. 1999.

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Veil is an important book, much more than its title suggests. Ostensibly focusing on an item of clothing—albeit one with considerable emotional baggage—it offers much more. Were it not so densely written, it might even be that single book to “explain” to Western lay readers how a “symbol of oppression” can have such positive value in segments of Arab/Muslim society. Indeed those seeking to understand Arab culture more generally would do well to read this book—perhaps in small and digestible pieces. I would suggest particularly pages 64-68 and 75 for an understanding of how gender roles and the relations between the sexes are situated in the Arab social and cultural context. Unfortunately the title is likely to discourage readers weary of the subject of veiling from taking advantage of the book’s more comprehensive scope. The book reminds us that an understanding of culture can start from just about any entry point.

El Guindi’s aim in writing the book is to provide a full analysis and understanding of the veil and to embed it in the larger anthropology of dress. To accomplish this task she adopts a number of methodological approaches including original fieldwork, analysis of the meaning of Islamic texts, observation, linguistic analysis, cultural understanding, and a study of historical materials and secondary sources. The book is an artful synthesis of research from primary and secondary texts subjected to the logic of context and her own experience. The conclusions are eminently sensible, fitting well with her analysis of the social roles of women and men, and other Arab/Muslim social constructions. It is not new of course that dress reflects identity and self-image but what is new are the nuances of meaning she identifies through situating veiling firmly in the Arab (mostly Egyptian) context rather than holding it up to some universal set of values. Indeed she notes that when Western psychology (as one example) claims universalist values it “strips the people from their cultural identity. Culture becomes superficially the backdrop against which gender is written.” (p.75) “(I)t is not the veil per se but the code underlying the veil that should be the focus of research attention” (p.118)

Also new is her effort to incorporate men’s veiling into the analysis (see p 117). In my view this practice in the many forms she reports extends the range of meanings for veiling rather than suggests some sort of universality of meanings for the sexes. When men drape their headcloths to prevent “seeing” (as when men enter women’s space) it seems quite different to me from women’s veiling to create their own private spaces. The similarities are more apparent when she talks in a general way about nuances of class, status, and social distance. An additional theme that emerges in this section is the veil as symbol of power for both sexes.

To explain persistently negative Western views of Middle Eastern practices related to gender and sexuality (pp.31-33) she notes “the tendency ethnocentrically to impose Christian constructions on Islamic understandings.” She describes the differences in approach that resulted when “Christianity chose the path of desexualizing the worldly environment; Islam of regulating the social order while accepting its sexualized environment” (p.31). She includes photographs of early missionary lantern slides to illustrate this point compellingly. Also contributing to Western attitudes about veiling were reactions of feminists to Victorian mores of corseting and suppression of overt sexuality. They called for liberating women’s bodies from the confinements of Victorian clothing and greater overt expression of sexuality (p.46), thus leading them inevitably to see other forms of covering as expressions of oppression. She suggests that “the whole tenor in the analysis of Arabo-Islamic culture must shift its emphasis from an overstated “moral purity” to “blood purity” ...as it translates into cultural notions of respect, identity, and space” (p.92). She also makes the important point that Arab feminism must be seen in the context of Islam, rather than as opposition deriving from another culture’s beliefs where it challenges Arab culture as a whole (p. 182). This helps us understand why Arab delegates in international forums are so often pressed to defend their different approach to gender issues.

She concludes that “the veil, veiling patterns and veiling behavior are.... about sacred privacy, sanctity and the rhythmic interweaving of patterns of worldly and sacred life, linking women as the guardians of family sanctuaries and the realm of the sacred in this world” (p.96). She argues for the centrality of privacy as a notion that “embodies the qualities of reserve, respect and restraint as these are played out in ...space. Dress

in general, but particularly veiling, is privacy's visual metaphor" (p. 96). As such it "communicates exclusivity of rank and nuances in kinship status and behavior."(xvii). Through veiling, "a woman carries "her" privacy and sanctity with her, much the same way as when a Muslim worships in any space, converting it to sacred and private"(p.95) El Guindi believes concepts of modesty and seclusion are not adequate to characterize these phenomena in the Middle East (p.xvii)

I will dispose of my criticisms as briefly as possible. First, the organization of "Veil" is somewhat difficult to understand. The headings of its 3 parts seem unrelated in some cases to the chapter content. It is unclear for example why she includes the chapter on "Veiling as a Movement" under Part 2: "Dress, "Libas" and "Hijab" and not in Part 3: "Resistance of the Veil." Earlier critics of her work on Islamicists felt she did not address political issues as much as she might. In *Veil* she remedies that oversight by devoting parts of 3 out of 12 chapters to the politics of veiling, its origins in the late 60s early 70s, reactions to those who veiled, the contexts of resistance, and the veil in internal and external feminist debate.

Second, she often overstates her criticisms of other scholars' work or in some cases I feel she is downright unfair to them. It is not a widely held perception among scholars as she suggests that Islamic texts are far removed from the lives of people and therefore are irrelevant to anthropological studies of Muslims (p.xiii). Rather anthropologists tend to feel quite rightly that beliefs and practices often vary considerably from the "ideals" found in sacred texts. I also disagree with her criticisms that imply she has somehow cornered Truth. Today's truth is only good until another truth comes along. An example is saying Ibrahim's work (1980, 1982) constitutes a tautology (p.162). There is a difference between saying Islamicists have a prevalence of certain characteristics and claiming that these traits create Islamicists—her suggestion that one would need to count those "rurals" who did and did not become Islamicists to prove Ibrahim's case cannot be taken seriously. Too often Westerners who are "wrong" tend to be called "orientalist," while Arab scholars who are wrong are made to appear analytically deficient.

Third, she refers to her own original fieldwork as underpinning her analysis of veiling and indeed she builds on a number of important insights gained from those experiences. Nowhere, however, does one get a

sense that veils or veiling were systematically pursued as the main aims of her fieldwork, and there is surprisingly little direct reference to these issues by her "informants." We have to rely heavily on her interpretations of others' feelings about these matters, selected scholars' works with whom she agrees, and her reading of religious texts that have often been interpreted differently by others. Nevertheless her arguments are well made and these uncertainties are simply to be noted as serious or not so serious depending upon our confidence in her ability to selectively translate these data for us. Scholars have been arguing for centuries over the meanings of Koranic verses, and consequently it may be too soon to declare that she has achieved final truth on these issues.

Finally, while she quotes extensively from various works on the meanings inherent in the uses of the veil, I am surprised she does not give more attention to Kanafani's (1983) work on the United Arab Emirates. Kanafani describes in some detail how women cut their own face masks to accentuate their better features or disguise their poorer ones. In doing so they are preparing a public presentation of themselves that does not seem to be adequately explained by the meanings El Guindi attaches to veiling of privacy, respect, class and status. There are other public messages conveyed in veiling that are not addressed by El Guindi such as the common practice by wearers of signifying their growing religious commitment over time by ever more concealing garments. The veil as sign post to distinguish the fashionably adorned and the religiously committed seems an important feature that should not be omitted. It conceives of the wearer as actively engaged in revealing more subtle meanings than those conveyed simply by privacy, respect, and status.

Nevertheless, we need to give this book its due for its careful review of a large body of research, the insider's understanding of meanings/interpretations in sacred texts, and for a general framework on which to hang our understanding of the veil, hijab, and the social and cultural contexts of both. It is to be hoped that this will lead to more nuanced analyses of cultural artifacts in their social and cultural contexts. We have felt this absence in previous works and hope this research will set a new high watermark for similar studies.