Unraveling the Bindings of Muslim Women: Agency, Politics, Piety, and Performance

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These books are recent contributions to the continuing debate about Arab women and their affective engagement with Islam. The two overlapping themes in these publications are, first, the appeal and perspective of a post-Islamist political society in Muslim majority contexts, primarily using Egypt as an example, and, second, probing the older theme of fitna, the distracting potential of women’s sexuality and bodies and the ways it has been reclaimed and co-opted in the new millennium, often in collusion with neoliberal patriarchal capitalism. In the context of this broad framing, one should also note that, with the exception of Soft Force, the books in this review demonstrate an excitement about a supposed post–Arab Spring. However, the post-Islamist wave carried on the back of pietist and/or Islamist women offered in these texts is not entirely convincing.

Performing Piety documents the lives of several famous Egyptian female singers, dancers, and actresses who left the entertainment business in the wake of
Islamic aesthetics. The discussion in the last three chapters raises key questions about the impact and consequences of piety movements. Contestations over art with a mission (fann al-hadif) were not just offered by way of secular criticism. The older and more orthodox Islamists are deeply critical of what they mock as “air-conditioned Islam” or “market Islam.” They apply these pejorative labels to the populist preaching of new Islamists, who hold that piety and prestige can coexist and that wealth is a sign of being chosen by God (202). Nieuwkerk offers a comparative discussion of Oliver Roy and Asef Bayat’s different understandings of this transformation and whether it qualifies as “post-Islamism.” This last section also opens the debate on whether Islamic consumption has led to genuine transformation or the Islamist movement has just been (willingly?) co-opted by global capitalism (231).

While Performing Piety documents artists’ efforts to fashion Islamic piety as a contradictory vehicle for promoting the arts (and vice versa), The Veil in Kuwait surveys Islamic veiling at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) as a fashion phenomenon. This book is an interview-based study examining the hypothesis that veiling fashion and reveiling are bridges between religious veiling and nonreligious cultural fashion. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein and Noreen Abdullah-Khan argue that women’s morality can be adjusted through veiling, since the concept of fitna is linked to the economy of guilt, which implies that women are permanently guilty of causing potential sexual shame in society. The study concludes that the veil is at best an ambiguous signifier and contradicts the notion of a post-Islamist society just because of some performative proof of the veil coexisting with seemingly contradictory fashion. In fact, the authors argue that rather than proving a comfortable Kuwaiti moderate religious consciousness, the apparent fusion of religion and fashion actually reinforces both (71).

The Veil in Kuwait is a slim publication (eighty pages) based on the findings of a survey of women’s observation of the veil at GUST in one of the richest Gulf countries. The authors found that 60 percent of the students at GUST are female and that “radical gender segregation” is practiced across the national education institutes, which permit only a quarter of the classes to be mixed genders. The findings show that 66 percent of the female students observe some form of the veil (hijab or head scarf, abaya or full cloak, niqab or face cover), compared with 34 percent uncovered women (24).

The results are discussed in light of the motivations of women who veil. The survey found that most of the respondents (71 percent) who observed the veil stated that they did so out of a sense of obedience to this Islamic requirement, while only 6 percent did so due to parental direction. The survey tabulates perceptions and includes those of the “uncovered” respondents and the male students. About 68 percent of the latter reported that they were very supportive of the veil practice at the university and cited their preferences for their future wives to be women who observe the veil.
As expected of a survey study, multiple divisions in the text discuss the findings yielded through the questionnaires (included as appendixes). Chapter 4, “The Guilt/Shame Paradigm,” unpacks the emotions associated with the concept of the veil as shielding men from the fitna (social disorder, chaos, sexual temptation) potential of Muslim women. It sets up the concluding chapter, which threads through the overlapping themes in the other books reviewed here having to do with veiling, fashion, beauty, cultural consumption, and consumer habits.

The authors find a paradox in that Kuwait’s religious consciousness does not reside comfortably between religion and modernity. Rather than reconciling and fusing fashion as or through the veil, the analysis shows that respondents continue to view religion and fashion as opposites (71). According to the authors, this “palpable” tension (72) that arises in the combination of hijab and fashion seems to remain irresoluble in the veiling environment of Kuwait. This, they argue, is different from other Middle Eastern countries where the veil is no longer only an expression of religious belief. According to the authors, this need to interpret and reduce everything cultural and aesthetic into religious and spiritual terms is prompted by the respondents’ guilt and unwillingness to take a critical or detached view of religion.

Women in the Mosque is not primarily about Muslim women’s ritual practices. Rather, it traces male Islamic (Sunni) legal scholarly arguments about the legitimacy of women’s attendance and participation in public worship. The study explores two key questions of whether women were historically encouraged to access mosques or not and what they did while in attendance.

Marion Holmes Katz’s chronological and geographic inquiry in Women in the Mosque spans the original resistance to the ban on women from the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1530 CE to the twenty-first-century examples of their prolific activism in places of worship. Hers is not a project that suggests that there has been a linear progression from freedom to oppression for mosque-attending Muslim women. Rather, Katz wishes to explore through Sunni legal and nonlegal sources (predominantly Maliki ibn Anas [796 CE] sources) how women sought religious fellowship and fulfillment in other venues because of their political and societal marginalization (4). The central arguments of the book are that women’s mosque usage differs from that of men (7), that a longitudinal survey of legal opinions on women’s access to mosques found a high degree of negotiability regarding legal norms, and that the basic models of gender underlying these norms have changed significantly over the centuries (99).

Katz connects legal prescription over women’s mosque attendance to the paradigmatic case of women’s mobility and visibility outside the home (3) and outlines jurists’ debates over the authority structure of the family and the limits of governmental power. Who was to set the standards of conduct? At the same time, Katz concurs with earlier studies that found that women’s mosque access does not