

Book Review:

**Face-Veiled Women in Contemporary Indonesia,  
(Eva F. Nisa)**

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Eva F. Nisa's book, which is based on her doctoral thesis at the Australian National University (ANU), is a deep investigation focusing on the questions of how women who wear Islamic veils frame their choice to cover their face and how they understand their daily life. While some scholars in Western academia and government policymakers stigmatize these women as being conservative, radical, or even part of terrorist groups, Nisa's research, alongside an increasing number of female scholars in Western academia, offers a more sympathetic perspective by considering the insider's framework on veiling in Indonesia. By employing ethnography and extensive field work, she emphasizes the "construction of subjectivity", focusing on the fluidity and temporality exercised by women who wear face veils. By relying on the concept of subjectivity discussed by anthropologists, Nisa understands "construction of subjectivity" as the way the women who wear face veils construct their distinctive individuality and subjectivity through their face-veiling and their socio-cultural interactions. This book also resonates with Geertz's thick description (1973), where Nisa attempts to describe the face-veiling phenomena in Indonesia via its practitioners with all their subjectivities (p.3)

Following in the footsteps of Saba Mahmood's works, mainly *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), which explored women's involvement in mosque-based movements in Egypt—

and which employed the concept of agency and piety—Nisa contextualizes the practice of face-veiling on the grounds that it is part of women’s agency and obedience (Indonesian: “*taat*”, Ar.: *ṭā‘ah*”). She argues that agency is not only an active effort to resist a certain norm or law, but also deals with the ongoing struggle to adhere to certain norms and regulations. Agency is also part of the way in which people discipline their minds and bodies to shape their lives. Nisa proposes her own conception of *taat* as an alternative concept to describe face-veiled women in Indonesia, highlighting “the capacity of these women to take action and take pleasure in becoming pious docile subjects” (p.10). Nisa also follows the conceptual framework of Marcel Mauss in his article “Body Techniques” (1979), in which Mauss formulated the concept techniques of the body. This refers to certain methods and conduct in embodying values and norms. Nisa argues that this is what face-veiled women undertake when they wear *cadar* (clothing which covers the entire body and face). In other words, wearing *cadar* is part of the way that Muslim women internalize and embody the value of being a true *Muslimah* (Muslim woman).

Nisa focuses on the face-veiled women of the Tablighi Jamaat and Salafi movement, engaging with interlocutors for two years (2008-2010) in three major cities: Jakarta, Makassar, and Yogyakarta. While in Jakarta, Nisa engaged with women studying at the Institute for the Study of Islam and Arabic Language (“Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Bahasa Arab” (LIPIA) and the *cadari* women in the Tablighi Jamaat and the “Niqab Squad” community. In Makassar she undertook fieldwork on Wahdah Islamiyah—a large Makassar-based Salafi organization—where most of the organization’s women members cover their faces. She also chose to study women in Yogyakarta due to the fact that many students from different regions of Indonesia choose to pursue university education there and, at the same time, many Islamist organizations seek new recruits from among the student cohort.

Nisa’s book contains seven chapters. The first three chapters deal with the issues of *cadar* as a type of female dress and discuss *cadar*’s internal and social values. In Chapter 1, Nisa traces the historical roots of the

practice of wearing *cadar* and its global and contemporary context. In Chapter 2 she deals with Islamic teachings—based on the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* (recorded sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad)—used by face-veiling women to justify their choices. This chapter also discusses how this normative approach determines and shapes these women’s religious and social engagement—for instance, outlining that when these women choose a husband, their prospective groom should support their choice to wear the veil.

In Chapter 3, Nisa expands her discussion by exploring the mutual-engagement between the *cadari* women and media—how the *cadari* women instrumentalize the media for their interests and how the media constructs *cadari* women. This chapter aims to disrupt and challenge the common perception that *cadari* women are ‘backward’ women in need of ‘modernization’. In fact, Nisa argues that *cadari* women have continuously engaged with pop culture or are, in fact, part of it.

Chapter 4 elaborates further on the practice of wearing *cadar* in Islamic educational institutions, especially in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia/Malay contexts). This chapter shows how the practice of wearing *cadar* is used by certain *pesantren* as a technique of the body, which aims to produce true *Muslimah*. While in Chapter 4, Nisa provides a kind of nuanced case study where wearing *cadar* is externally imposed—in this case by the *pesantren* upon their female students—in Chapter 5, she delves into what she refers to as “passionate *cadari*”, who wear *cadar* by their own choice. In addition, Chapter 5 explores the practice of “*taat* agency” demonstrated by the passionate *cadari* and seen in their struggle to defend their choice and achieve their main goal of wearing *cadar*; to be a true *Muslimah*.

In Chapter 6, Nisa further analyzes the social role of *cadari* women in preaching activities. It is here that she differentiates her research from Mahmood’s approach. While Mahmood’s research focuses on the piety of women which has an inward dimension—namely, women being pious for her own benefit—Nisa argues that the *cadari* woman is not only making a choice for their own piety, but also seeks to “directly affect the lives of

others” by taking part in *dakwah* (propagation) activities (p.19). In the final chapter (Chapter 7), Nisa emphasizes the importance in providing alternative narratives and explanations pertaining to the lives of Muslim women in Indonesia, particularly *cadari* women.

The book is a helpful guide to the contemporary relationship between Islam and women in Indonesia, particularly those who belong to revivalist groups. It provides a rich conceptual framework and data from fieldwork that help the reader obtain a better and more nuanced understanding on this issue. The book also provides an alternative view to the securitization of Islam, helping us to disentangle our understanding of Muslim societies from certain Western and outside perspectives. This book could serve as part of alternative reading for graduate students and scholars examining Islam and gender.

However, it is difficult for those who have read Mahmood’s works to see a different approach and perspective in this book. Both Mahmood and Nisa present an “insider approach” focusing on the interlocutor’s understanding and framework rather than, for instance, a security perspective. After all, both studies provide a more sympathetic perspective on women in Islam as empowered agents rather than marginalized and oppressed beings. However, despite Nisa’s new concepts and case studies, in a general sense this book could serve as an introduction to and commentary on Mahmood’s work, with an emphasis on Indonesian case studies.

## References

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