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Book Review

**‘Wearing the Niqab: Muslim Women in the UK and the US’**

**Anna Piela (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021)**

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This book is about narratives on various topics voiced out by *niqab* wearers in the private and public spheres, including in the mainstream media, in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US). Featured narratives include ones on religious agency, identity, social interaction, community, and urban spaces. The author, Anna Piela, situates the narratives in the social and political context in the two countries.

The Arabic word ‘نِقَاب’ – transliterated as *nikab*, *niqāb* or *niqaab* – refers to a face covering worn by some Muslim women as part of their religious garments. It is a piece of cloth tied over the headscarf and comes in a variety of styles and colours. It is sometimes mistakenly labelled as the *burqa*, which largely entered the popular imagination during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, when the Western media, often while depicting *burqa*-clad women, wrote about how the war would help advance the rights of Afghan women. The Western obsession with the *burqa*, an all-enveloping piece of fabric with a grille covering the eyes, can be explained by the fact that the Afghan-style *burqa* touches the Western “cultural raw nerve” more than the eye-revealing *niqab* (Inglis 2017:289). It is so because the *burqa* obscures the eyes, rendering the wearer

invisible, inscrutable, and, therefore, uncontrollable. With the 'modest fashion' industry booming and with major brands finally beginning to recognise the ready to wear needs of pious consumers, as well as for education purposes, the differentiation in Muslim head coverings becomes important.

The *niqab* has recently emerged as one of the most ubiquitous symbols of everything that is perceived to be 'problematic' about Islam: barbarity, backwardness, exploitation and oppression of women, and political radicalisation. Yet all these notions are assigned to women who wear the *niqab* without their consultation; '*niqab* debates' or discussions framing the *niqab* as a 'controversy' are held without their voices being heard and valued, and, when they do speak, their views are dismissed.

*Niqab* wearers have long been pictured as difficult group to study, and scholars have described them as a 'rare and elusive sub-culture.'<sup>4</sup> Despite this challenge, Piela was able to conduct research relying on interviews with *niqabi* women. Women who choose to wear the *niqab* talked to her about the long and complex process of self-reflection and questioning prior to their adoption of the *niqab*.

Studies have shown that Muslim women more likely to experience prejudice when dressing religiously in public spaces and workplaces, and are sometimes discriminated against in accessing services. Over 80% of the women interviewed for Piela's book said they had experienced some form of harassment in public, such as hostile stares, having their *niqab* ripped off, or being verbally abused or physically injured.

Legislation that bans religious face coverings in public has been passed in some countries and territories in recent years, including in France and the Canadian French-speaking province of Quebec. Advocates of such laws have argued that face-covering is a sign of religious extremism, social separation, failed assimilation, and patriarchal oppression of Muslim women. There is a common misconception in the West that this is an oppressive, patriarchal practice forced upon Muslim

women. In reality, several studies have shown that many women choose to wear the *niqab* – often against their families' preferences.

The picture painted by the stories in this book demonstrates that, for these women, religious symbols such as the *niqab* are deeply personal, freely chosen, multilayered, and socially situated. Wearing the *niqab* gives voice to these women and their stories, and sets the record straight, enhancing understanding of the complex picture around *niqab* and religious identity and agency.

The *niqab* is not mentioned by the *Quran*, which mandates only modest clothing for both men and women more generally. The *Quran* (24:31) says: "And tell the believing men and women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their hidden adornments..." The 40 *niqab* wearers Piela interviewed for her book considered wearing the *niqab* to be a religious practice. Many said that the wives of Prophet Muhammad reportedly wore it regularly. Some of those women choose to follow what they believe to be the most accurate interpretation of God's word and Prophet's family practice: that women who cover their faces will be rewarded for going the extra mile to fulfil this additional duty.

Piela's book reveals that wearing the *niqab* is a highly individual practice to which the women came after a long reflection. They acknowledged that while the *niqab* may be suitable for them, it might not work for others. A woman from the UK explained why some women choose to wear it while others don't: "The *Quran* says to cover yourself modestly. Now, the interpretation of that is different to every group of Muslims. Some people believe it just to be the loose dress. Others believe it to be an outer garment as well as headscarf. Yet others would go one step further and say it's the face covering as well, because [the *Quran*] says to cover yourself."

Piela, who also authored *Muslim Women Online: Faith and Identity in Virtual Space* (2012), provides a rich and nuanced examination of

spiritual and social experience of British and American *niqabis* amidst prevalent Islamophobic cultural settings. At the backdrop of ill-informed and opinionated media debate and public discourse, Piela sheds much-needed light to *niqab*-wearing women in the Global North. She offers important insights about the role of agency, authority, race, and identity in religious practice. The book is essential reading for scholars and anyone else seeking to understand the diverse, complex, and critical engagements of women with religion and society. Piela concludes that women who choose to wear the *niqab* make up a “new form of Islam”, which involves a degree of individualism that is often based on women’s rejection of historically embedded cultural norms. By providing an analysis of different women’s accounts, she demonstrates the unfixed quality of the *niqab* as a religious artefact to negotiate gender boundaries. At the end, discontinuities between political agenda-oriented and everyday gendered readings of Islam may facilitate women claiming authority over their religious experiences, without pride and prejudice, only sense of piety and sensibility.