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BOOK REVIEW

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Elizabeth Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. 248 pp.

Until recently, the concepts of veiling and fashion were seldom discussed together. Much of the research within the social sciences and humanities literatures has understood and studied veiling as an ideological symbol, representing either (Islamic) patriarchal domination or opposition toward Western imperialism and colonialism. This analytical approach was based on a view of the Islamic veil as a representational form—an abstract object full of political and social meanings but devoid of materiality and aesthetics. As such, in its abstract form, the veil has existed outside the domain of fashion, consumption, and the market. In recent years, researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including sociology, anthropology, geography, gender studies, and marketing, challenged this restricted view and directed attention towards understanding the intricacies of the veil as a commodity form. An increasing number of research articles and edited collections provided detailed accounts of the practices of producing, marketing, and consuming fashionable Islamic clothing across different geographies (e.g., Abaza 2007; Almila and Inglis 2018; Balasescu, 2003; Gökarıksel and Secor 2010; Jafari and Sandıkcı 2016; Jones 2010a,b; Lewis 2013, 2015; Sandıkcı and Ger 2005, 2010; Tarlo 2010). A common thread among this work has been to situate the rise of modest fashions within the dynamics of the global political economy and unpack the complex interactions between individual choices and practices of veiling and institutional forces shaping the design, development, and manufacturing of modest fashions. Elizabeth Bucar's book *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress*, which provides a close look into the sartorial practices of young Muslim women living in Tehran, Yogyakarta, and Istanbul, constitutes a welcome addition to this burgeoning literature.

The book is organized along the locations chosen for the study. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 focus on Tehran, Yogyakarta, and Istanbul respectively and Chapter 4 provides a comparative discussion of the findings across cultures. In the Introduction, Bucar explains that she is interested in understanding and describing “the wide range of meanings conveyed by what women wear” (1) and “deciphering how Muslim women negotiate a variety of aesthetic and moral pressures” (2). The major contribution of the study, according to the author, lies in its comparative approach. Comparison enables the reader not only to realize that pious fashion comes in many forms but also identify local differences as well as cross-cultural similarities in veiling practices. Bucar justifies her choice of research sites as a move away from the stereotypical Western perception that equates Islamic dress with the dressing style of Arab women. By focusing the analytical attention on the fashion practices of pious Muslim women located in three non-Arab countries, she underscores the global diversity of pious fashion. Data collected through ethnographic field work provide the author with a detailed understanding of the differences in sartorial practices.

The following three chapters are structured in a similar manner. Each chapter opens with a brief historical overview of the socio-political context and then moves onto the research findings. The findings are presented in two main sections: “style snapshots” and “aesthetic authorities.” The former describes the prominent trends during a particular season and depicts the details of particular outfits. The latter discusses various individual, institutional, and ideological forces that shape and regulate what is considered to be a proper dress in that location. The uniform organizational structure of these chapters eases comparisons across cultures. However, it also results in a rather flat reading experience, in which there is little room left for any unexpected and surprising insights and relationships.

Chapter 1 focuses on Iran and explores *hijab* in Tehran. Iran constitutes the entry point for Bucar to the Islamic contexts and covering practices. As she acknowledges, through her encounter of “bad *hijab*” – covering practices that are deemed as religiously questionable – she realizes that “what is classified as appropriate or inappropriate is defined by local cultures of style” (25). While this is rather well-established knowledge and applies not only to modest fashion but any context, it informs the overall logic of the chapter, in particular the discussions of social distinction and bad *hijab*. By wearing specific styles of clothing, women negotiate various norms and can gain access to political power and distinction. Bucar identifies religious experts, morality police, state propaganda, and fashion designers and bloggers as important aesthetic authorities and describes how they influence stylistic considerations. Overall, through their sartorial practices, Tehrani women both contest the aesthetic authorities and collaborate with the regime of regulation. As such, modest clothing functions not only as a fashion practice but also as a form of political engagement where direct political resistance is dangerous and obstructed.

In Chapter 2, the attention turns to *jilbab* in Yogyakarta. Bucar starts with an episode she encountered at a restaurant where she met with a group of university students. To her surprise, Bucar learns that one of the informants was wearing a “fake bun” – a padding used to elevate the back of the head and create a more elongated shape – underneath her scarf. Puzzled with this discovery, Bucar realizes that “a headscarf can be both pious and attractive.” The tension between piety and beauty and the difficulties of crafting an aesthetically pleasing yet religiously appropriate look is a well-researched domain in the existing literature (e.g., Abbas 2015; Balasescu 2003; Gökarıksel and Secor 2012; Jones 2010a; Moors 2007; Sandikci and Ger 2005, 2010; Tarlo 2010). In line with this stream of research, Bucar interprets the sartorial practices of the fashionable Muslim women in Yogyakarta as a means to “deal with the challenges of being a modern Muslim woman” (118). As the author notes, unlike Tehran, it is not compulsory to veil in

Yogyakarta; hence, “Muslim women ...are free to choose if and how they will wear modest clothing” (92). Differences in motivations for adopting covering translate into differences in the processes of learning and the practices of veiling. For example, the decision to cover often involves substantial fashion research, consultation with friends, and undertaking an inner voyage toward a truly Muslim way of life. Bucar identifies several aesthetic authorities, both ideological and institutional, that shape what are deemed appropriate forms of *jilbab*. Overall, through crafting, wearing, and giving advice about *jilbab*, women learn to balance inner and outer beauty and contribute to debates about how Islam should be lived in public spaces.

Chapter 3 is devoted to *tesettür* in Istanbul. Bucar starts the chapter by noting two important phenomena relevant in the Turkish context: harsh criticism among covered women against each other’s styles of *tesettür* and the highly politicized nature of veiling. In line with existing research (e.g., Gökarıksel and Secor 2010, 2012; Kılıçbay and Binark 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2005, 2007, 2010), Bucar’s analysis traces how the friction between secularism and religion plays out in the sartorial choices of covered women. Similar to Tehran and Yogyakarta, *tesettür* styles do not only change dramatically from season to season but also entail a multiplicity of interpretations of what constitutes proper *tesettür* at a given period. For example, what is deemed as appropriate length of hemline or shape of headscarf can differ over time and across different groups of believers. However, such multiplicity also opens up debates over moral ambivalence about fashionable *tesettür* and intensifies criticisms about particular forms of covering on the grounds of either moral or aesthetic failure. In the Turkish context, a number of actors and ideologies play a role in regulating and influencing modest dress. These include the ideology of secularism, intense public scrutiny and commentary, the apparel industry, and Islamic fashion magazines. Overall, in contrast to other locations, a double layered struggle underlies veiling practices in Turkey. On the one hand, there is a struggle between

secular and Islamic perspectives on gender norms and relations; on the other hand, there is a struggle among supporters of *tesettür* over aesthetic and moral expertise. Thus, veiling requires constant negotiation of the opposing pulls of ethics and aesthetics, being good and looking good. However, given the ever-expanding fault line between the supporters of secularism and Islamism, these negotiations are not easily reconciled in the current political climate of Turkey.

Overall, Bucar provides a rich and detailed account of how Muslim women dress in a wide variety of ways in different locations and shows that what constitutes proper forms of pious fashion is highly debated, negotiated, and dynamic. Her vivid and meticulous description of pious fashion styles, supported by visuals, enables the reader to get a good sense of the prominent trends of the time. The book offers an easy-to-follow guide to Islamic veiling and modest fashion to those who are not particularly familiar with the subject. Thus, it can be used in undergraduate classes within and beyond anthropology. However, for more experienced readers, the take-away from the text is rather limited. Bucar's analysis provides few new insights and, in most cases, reproduces what has been extensively discussed in the existing literature.

The key weaknesses appear to be the lack of theoretical depth and analytically satisfactory engagement with prior work. This results in a text that accounts for the styles, practices, and actors but fails to make theoretical connections between and across them. As each of these ethnographic sites seem to exist independent of each other, the global connections, interactions, and intersections between them and the overall social, political, and economic forces shaping the world seem to be lost in the analysis. For example, the links between neoliberal capitalism and the rise of Muslim modest fashion entrepreneurs or online technologies and modest fashion designers are overlooked. Similarly, Islamic religious movements play an important role in increasing the visibility of Islamic veiling. However, the influence of such communal forces on individual dressing choices remain unaccounted for in *Pious Fashions*. While discussing

women's sartorial choices and the authorities shaping and regulating these choices, Bucar excludes many important practices and factors. Although this is an issue across all three locations, it becomes more prominent in the cases of Yogyakarta and Istanbul, where the author relies more on secondary texts than data collected through extended ethnographic engagement. Overall, Bucar's book offers a useful introductory text to those who would be surprised to learn that Islamic veiling is not only about oppression but also entails fashion concerns. Similar to the author's own experience, their encounter with pious fashions can enable them to realize that Muslim women (too) dress in many different ways.

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