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Book Review: Hijab, Meaning, Identity, Otherization and Politics: British Muslim Women

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Hijab, Meaning, Identity, Otherization and Politics: British Muslim Women. Saied R. Ameli and Arzu Merali. 2006. Great Britain: Islamic Human Rights Commission, 84 pp. £8.50 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Alyssa Beall¹

As the fourth book in a series titled “British Muslims’ Expectations of the Government,” *Hijab, Meaning, Identity, Otherization and Politics: British Muslim Women* summarizes findings about the value and meaning of Hijab for Muslim women in Great Britain. Saied R. Ameli and Arzu Merali’s primary concern is the lack of diverse perspectives in discussion of the Hijab. They argue that the view of Hijab as a patriarchal, oppressive, anti-feminist tool has been overstated in both mainstream and academic writings. In response to this view, the authors discuss the meaning the Hijab has to those they surveyed in the Muslim community.

The authors define Hijab as “any type of head-covering of Muslim women worn for religious reasons” (7). Everything from symbolic hair covering to full face or body covering is included in their study. In a few sections of the text, different types of dress are addressed as separate categories; for example, the survey question based on the “experience of being laughed at or mocked” is broken down by Hijab, Jilbab, Nikkab, and “loose shawl” (37). These distinctions might have been helpful in more of the survey questions, as the responses do seem to differ when they are broken down in this way.

Some of the responses from women also reflect the broader meaning of Hijab as “modest dress,” and further as “a mode of behaviour that again involves self-assessment and regulation” (53). Men also respond to some survey questions with the broader context in mind: “[We] Also must not neglect that there is a similar basic dress code for men, thus the issue of hijab must be looked at within a wider context than just a piece of cloth” (53)! This range of answers is certainly useful in understanding how Hijab is viewed by individuals in the British Muslim community.

The book begins by discussing how Hijab is treated in the academic literature, giving two basic approaches: “what meaning and significance does it have for the women who wear it and what effects does its practice have on gender role and equity” (11). In both cases, the authors argue, studies are largely one-dimensional and refuse to take into account the actual experiences of Muslim women.

In order to correct this lack of information, a large part of the text is given over to statistics and excerpted interviews about various aspects of veiling. Using this combination of quantitative and qualitative data, the text delivers a large amount of information in very few pages. The survey topics range from “Level of Religiosity and Opinion of Hijab” (19) to “How often do you experience Islamophobic comments made in particular by politicians or high ranking officials during a typical year” (48). These statistics are drawn from 1125 surveys, along with 56 more in-depth qualitative interviews (16).

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Rather than taking a pro- or anti-Hijab stance, the authors seek “to articulate the words of Muslim women who wear Hijab, the responses of those men and women who affiliate to the concept of Hijab within the broader context of our survey work on citizenship as well as the views of Muslim men on Hijab for both women and men” (8). In this respect, the text is a very useful starting point for further study about Hijab. The collection of viewpoints from Muslims around Great Britain is certainly well worth examining, and would be very useful for anyone interested in this topic.

The greatest strength of this book is in its stated willingness to allow people to speak for themselves on these important topics. The authors’ concern for allowing discussion of a multiplicity of views on Hijab comes through most clearly in the range of quotes in each section. What emerge are views that run the gamut from the basic to the critical and complex. For example, while many women speak to the experience of Hijab leveling the playing field between genders (50), one respondent points out that “...women seem to keep more of a distance no matter how friendly you are. With men its [sic] different, they seem to open up more and are a lot more straight forward” (51).

In addition to examining attitudes in the British Muslim community, the report also discusses how markers of Muslim identity – such as clothing – affect peoples’ reactions to Muslim individuals. They find that while Hijab contributes to a greater sense of Muslim identity, it also results in feelings of rejection or isolation from the larger British society. In these, and many of the other survey questions, the authors distinguish between attitudes before Sept. 11th and after, showing how reactions to and representations of Muslims have changed in recent years. These statistics would be more compelling had the surveys themselves been conducted in the different time periods, and the authors acknowledge that some of the statistical change can be attributed to “higher sensitivity to such incidents post 9/11” (34).

The text concludes with recommendations for policy making, directed at the British government. These include statements regarding the right to self-expression, religious rights, and ideas for promoting a better understanding of Hijab. This brief section, with its clear focus on conversation between political action and religious beliefs, would be an interesting addition to classroom conversations about religion, politics, and/or ethics. As a part of the growing resources on Muslim women, *Hijab, Meaning, Identity, Otherization and Politics: British Muslim Women* is a useful study in one very specific area of religion, identity, and politics.