

**Iwona Kaliszewska and Maciej Falkowski. *Veiled and Unveiled: In Chechnya and Daghestan*. London: Oxford University Press, 2016. 179 pp., (hardbound).**

Reviewed by Jeanine Pfahlert<sup>1</sup>

Not entirely true to title, *Veiled and Unveiled: In Chechnya and Dahestan* presents a very general introduction to the Caucasian region without an assumption of pre-existing knowledge and in a reader accessible format. While those who typically peruse titles related to Islam, Central Asia, and gender might conclude the book represents an average contribution to the topics covered, this book offers a rare and detailed account of regional Sufi practices found nowhere else. Despite this strength, the book fails to follow through on its promise of a thorough study or handling of gender and dress in the regions highlighted by its title.

Rather than using concrete research methods to investigate and analyze style choices, namely presence or absence of outer layer garments like a chador and use of headscarf, the authors opt to relay on narrative device and journalistic tone. The authors provide little detail on how information was collected, except for in situ descriptions of events and observations and an allusion to “a decade of fieldwork” (vii). The authors’ use of historical detail about the region and its relations to mainstream Russia, however, is a strength.

While the title somewhat deceives, as the book handles the topic of Chechnya and Dagestan quite broadly with history and ethnographic detail the theme about veiling runs throughout the book like a continually interrupted perforated line. The theme surfaces in a unique manner when authors describe a situation where a man succumbs to a tepid jester of modesty with a gender specific accessory worn on the head. The authors write, “Our driver puts his *papakha* on to appear more respectable” (132). More typically, however, descriptions focus on an author as a feminine subject undergoing an impromptu covering or veiling. For example, an author describes, “I duck behind a knoll to change into a skirt and tights and cover my head” (26). The author continues, “Changing clothes did little to help, despite my best intentions. My thin headscarf and calf-length skirt are about as modest as a bathing suit compared to the golden-brown baggy coats and hair-tight scarves preferred by local women” (27).

Toward the conclusion of the book, the authors begin to delve into the symbolic significance of the title by detailing the status quo of dating. After describing how women tend to, “at least carry a scarf their purses” (139) in case they come to need it they continue to describe no-touch chaperoned dates, trial marriages, on-line dating, arranged marriages, and stalking as alternatives to Westernized dating (140-141). The authors describe a nascent couple in the following passage, “She met Jabrail online, and would see him for the first time that day. Having seen each other only on tiny cellphone pictures, the couple has exchanged text messages, instant messages and phone calls” (140). Yet according to the authors, these innovative ways to socialize with the opposite gender has not stopped men in Chechnya from using the thrice said “I divorce you” to finalize, or at least initiate, a legal divorce (143).

To return to the book’s strength, besides the remarkable detail about Sufi customs and social behavior, the book offers a respectable account of Islam in the region, specifically

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illuminating its unique sects and factions. While many assume Shiite and Suni are the only sects of Islam, the authors provide accounts of factions present in this region, such as Wahhabists, traditionalists, and Salafis (70). This area of focus and the purported focus indicated in the title manage to merge together as the authors capture the ambivalence and controversy about feminine dress in the region with the following quote of a Daghestani woman, ‘Whoever heard of a Daghestani woman, a highlander, wearing “Arab” clothing?! A miniskirt, high heels and a half-inch layer of lipstick—why not? But the hijab? She must be a Wahhabi! A terrorist! An enemy of the nation!’ (21).

Despite the vapid quality of *Veiled and Unveiled: In Chechnya and Dahestan*, Kaliszewska and Falkowski, offer an introduction into the region fit for both scholars in the field of Anthropology, Area Studies, and Slavic Studies and a general audience or laity. For Gender and Women’s Studies scholars, however, the book might very well offer too little information for those seeking more than a general introduction into the issues. The main strength, thus, appears to be the ability to introduce the region as topic into Slavic Studies, especially for those involved in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies as the Arabianized region typically suffers from neglect in Area Studies.

Specific to the Post-Soviet vantage point, themes merge as authors convey one individual’s account of how social change in the Caucasian region distances it further from the Soviet past albeit in a way that may ultimately entrench the region in that past. The authors write, “Zarema turned to Islam after the war, donning longer dresses and covering her head with a scarf. Many older family members, who had been brought up in Soviet times, disapproved of this new Islamic behavior” (154). Zarema unfortunately disappeared indefinitely from Chechnya after suffering a kidnapping occurring concurrently with a terrorist attack. The authors leave the reader with this statement about her mother, who they met after speaking with Zarema, “Like many others, she deeply believed in the cause of communism” (155). Although this region at a crossroads remains riddled with dramatic events such as Zarema’s disappearance, its past and present leave the inhabitants at the disposal of an unpredictable future.