

Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith

Reina Lewis, ed.

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Finally it seems the academic study of hijab has come of age. The contributors to this collection neither treat it as an object of curiosity or derision, nor wonder at Muslimahs' "false consciousness"; rather, they treat this "piece of cloth" and the accompanying dress code as a "normal" object of academic enquiry. For example, they expand the investigation to include attire for modest Jewish and Christian women, as well as for secular women who dress in similar ways albeit for different reasons. The title captures this broad focus by using *modest*, rather than limiting the focus to the hijab. While some Jewish and Christian women also dress modestly, discursive politics only label the hijab as oppressive.

It is refreshing to read academic studies that treat the hijab with the same respect that they do modest Jewish or Christian dress codes. This is not to say that the book necessarily endorses or advocates modest dress, which it most certainly does not, but only that its contributors (e.g., a journalist and a panel discussion with bloggers, designers, and entrepreneurs) study in a sociological way the different meanings behind religious dress while maintaining respect for those they study. Even Elizabeth Wilson's "Can We Discuss This?," which finds secular women's recourse to modest dress depressing ("the human body, clothed or unclothed, is a cause for celebration" [p. 171]) and asks secular feminists to "fight their corner" (p. 171), respectfully summarizes the rationale behind modest dress in order to argue against that very rationale.

The contributors also link the study of modest dress with the concept of "fashion," which is a matter of women who want to dress modestly but have to look long and hard for nice, fashionable clothing that meets their standards. But as Lewis ("Introduction") and others, like arts journalist Liz Hoggard ("Modesty Regulators: Punishing and Rewarding Women's Appearances in Mainstream Media") note, the mainstream fashion industry does not treat modest dress as "fashion." Therefore, some Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women entrepreneurs have opened stores as well as designed and sold their own creations to those who want to dress modestly and yet be stylish and fashionable. By investigating the link between fashion and modest dress more closely, the book provides a very refreshing analysis of modest dress. After all, we receive the obfuscations of "oppressed" or "false consciousness" through the mainstream fashion lens.

Lewis argues that the Internet has allowed this niche market to blossom (p. 2). Many online stores have found that their products appeal to women of

other faiths, a phenomenon that has given rise to a growing recognition of commonalities and bonds of empathy across faiths. The advent of blogs and interactive websites has allowed these women to speak their minds about modest dress, what it is or is not, and what it means to them and their lives. Lewis therefore suggests that “online modesty discourse can indeed be regarded as a new form of religious discourse in which women are achieving recognition as religious interpreters and intermediaries” (p. 7). This highlighting women’s agency is yet another element of the book’s refreshing perspectives.

The book contains nine chapters, separated into three parts, and an introductory chapter by editor Reina Lewis. Part 1, “Faith-based Fashion and the Commercially Fluid Boundaries of Confession,” contains four chapters: Annelies Moors’ “Discover the Beauty of Modesty: Islamic Fashion Online,” which examines Islamic webstores, blogs, and youtube videos about modest dress; Reina Lewis’ “Fashion Forward and Faith-tastic! Taste Making as Virtual Virtue: Online Modest Fashion and the Development of Women as Religious Interpreters and Intermediaries,” an analysis of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim on-line stores and style blogs by women on modest dress and what it means to them; and Emma Tarlo’s “Meeting through Modesty: Jewish-Muslim Encounters on the Internet,” which looks at Jewish and Muslim online headgear stores. It also delves into the possibilities and challenges for interfaith dialogue in the online blogs and postings that reveal an appreciation for each other’s faith-inspired modest dress. Tarlo notes how geo-politics becomes mapped onto e-commerce as some Muslim women voice reservations about buying clothes from Israeli or Jewish women. This part’s final chapter, Barbara Goldman Carrel’s “Hasidic Women’s Fashion Aesthetic and Practice: The Long and Short of Tzniuth,” is an ethnographic study of these women in Borough Park, Brooklyn, that includes interviews with store owners and shoppers.

Part 2, “Modesty without Religion? Secularity, Shopping, and Social Status through Appearance,” includes three chapters: Daniel Miller’s “Denim: The Modesty of Clothing and the Immodesty of Religion,” which focuses on those ultra-Orthodox Jews who have banned jeans in the context of five ethnographic studies he conducted of jeans wearers from all religions and many ethnicities as part of the Global Denim Project; Jane Cameron’s “Modest Motivations: Religious and Secular Contestation in the Fashion Field,” which studies American- and United Kingdom-based blogs and forum discussions from religious and non-religious perspectives; and Elizabeth Wilson’s “Can We Discuss This?,” which attempts to craft an argument that “struggle[s] against the pornification of culture” without having recourse to the “puritanical [solution of] covering up.”

Part 3, “Manufacturing and Mediating Modesty: The Industry and the Press,” consists of two chapters: Liz Hoggard’s “Modesty Regulators: Punishing and Rewarding Women’s Appearances in Mainstream Media,” which surveys Britain’s print media in an attempt to understand why fashion pages rarely discuss modest dress as a fashion story in its own right, and a panel entitled “Insider Voices, Changing Practices: Press and Industry Professionals Speak.” This panel discussion, which was held at the London College of Fashion during June 2011, included a journalist, a Muslimah who blogs about modest dress, the founder of a Christian modest-dress clothing line, a Muslimah designer, a professor of the sociology of religion, and Reina Lewis herself.

Written in an accessible style, the book is ideal for undergraduates as well as graduates and scholars – indeed, for anyone seeking a better understanding of this phenomenon in all of its contemporary manifestations and permutations. As a Muslimah friend who sells such clothing at a flea market said excitedly when she saw the book, “I could read this.”

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