

Review of Renata Pepicelli, *Il velo nell'islam. Storia, politica, estetica* [The veil in Islam. History, Politics, Aesthetics], Rome: Carocci Editore 2012, 159 pp., ISBN 978-88-430-6262-1

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Debates on banning 'the Muslim veil' are regularly sweeping over Europe. The argument of it being alien to European values is increasingly stressed and in recent years laws banning full face veils have actually been implemented in countries such as France and Belgium. In Italy 2011 a parliamentary commission approved a draft law which prohibits the wearing of niqab and burqa in public. In this context Renata Pepicelli, researcher at the Department of Politics, Institutions and History at the University of Bologna, has quite timely published a book which offers a deeper understanding of the issue to an academic as well as a broader Italian-reading audience. As she suggests in her foreword, the recent addition of the word *anti-velo* (anti-veil) in a major Italian dictionary is just another sign of how this debate is becoming part of peoples' everyday lives and pushes us into antithetical positioning for or against the garment. On the contrary, this book contributes qualified perspectives on the multiple aspects conditioning the veil. After a previous book on Islamic feminism (*Femminismo islamico*, Carocci 2010) and with solid research on religion, gender and migration within the EU seventh framework project GeMIC (<http://www.gemic.eu>), Pepicelli here demonstrates theoretical depth and ethnographically grounded insights about women's religious revival and the return of the veil in Italy and beyond.

As indicated by the title of the book, the veil is analysed from historical, political and aesthetic perspectives. The book is divided into five chapters, preceded by an introduction in which the author suggests an elementary framing of the debates on 'the veil' in various parts of the world and a terminological mapping of its plural designations. By introducing the diverse forms and meanings of the veil in time, space and social strata, Pepicelli explicitly aims at counteracting the

notion of an Islamic uniform (in fact, such a commonly spread image tends to result in the emphasizing and reinforcement of otherness in today's Europe). The introduction also includes a section on another crucial aspect of the multifaceted context of the veil, that is, the fact that many Muslim women actually do not veil. The author recognizes their complex situation: on the one side they are disregarded in the mass media and public debates, while on the other they are pressed by individuals and groups of Muslims who judge them for not following the principle of covering. This considered, the book still aims at bringing deeper understanding for the women who do practice veiling.

The first chapter delves into the positions on veiling presented in exegetic readings of the Islamic sacred texts. The reader is reminded of the common background of the practice of veiling in the Mediterranean region and in monotheist religions. Chapters 2 and 3 explain historical processes that precede the contemporary debates. Hence, the discursive practices of the colonial past are analysed in relation to the veil and the reader is offered insights as to how 'the veiled woman' came to play a central role for the construction of the Orient and the legitimization of its colonization.

While the second part of Chapter 2 focuses on the 19th century trend of abandoning the veil in countries like Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Tunisia, Chapter 3 is dedicated to its revival from the 1970s to date. This 'return' of the veil has been elaborated on by researchers such as Leila Ahmed in her book entitled *A Quiet Revolution* (2011) and Elizabeth Warnock Fernea in her film *A Veiled Revolution* (1982). The development is discussed in relation to theories on globalization, political Islamism and the general return of religion. The author states that the wide diffusion of the hijab in public spaces from Morocco and Egypt to Indonesia and France, reflects certain common ideals and interpretations of Islam. Yet, the veil is a site of contestation and a major part of the chapter is devoted to reasons voiced in both affirmation and disapproval. Pepicelli skillfully guides the reader through the tense relation between theories that explain the veiled revolution as an answer to men's pressures and theories that seek to demonstrate the active agency of veiled women.

Chapter 4 deals with the contemporary discussion on the veil in Europe. The author explains how continuity and interruptions in the debate on the veil can be analysed from a postcolonial perspective. So far, the intertwined relation between the ex-colonies and the countries involved in the colonization has hardly been dealt with in a productive and reciprocal way. One example of colonial discourses still being reproduced in politics, media and everyday conversations is the one describing 'veiled girls as inevitably oppressed, the Muslim family as a sanctuary of tradition, and young Muslim men as inevitable oppressors trapped in an extreme and violent virility' (after Bonfiglioli 2007, p. 89).

Another widespread argument discussed in this chapter is the one claiming that European secularism is threatened by the new Muslim inhabitants. With visible religious symbols (such as minarets, beards and veils) they infringe the notion of a causal chain between the division of sacred and profane spheres and the development of modernity and democracy. On the contrary, this book highlights the young generation of Muslims growing up in Europe and their will to be recognized as European Muslims. The portrait of young women veiling in the French tricolor is just one of many illustrative examples of performative gestures that announce their 'right to a plural identity' (p. 102).

The veil – whether in the shape of hijab or niqab – is a fact in public spaces of today's Europe. Pepicelli spends two sections on the French and Italian debates that have led to legislations prohibiting women to cover their faces. She presents interesting readings on the support for the right to veil, whether on the basis of freedom of religion and human rights, or postcolonial and antiracist feminist initiatives. Justly we are offered the possibility to read the motivations of Italian women who wear the burqa, and a review of field studies among burqa-wearers in France and the Netherlands. The connection between the Orientalist discourse and contemporary discourses on terrorism or the 'rescue of Muslim women' is effectively explained.

The final chapter explores the material and aesthetic implications of the veil. While the veil is regularly overlooked as an expression of modernity this book presents the reader with the notion of Islamic fashion and its connection to the global market and women's self-presentations in balance with ideas on beauty and identity. The book concludes with a discussion on a street-artist active in Paris under the pseudonym Princess Hijab. By painting black niqabs over the faces of fashion models (male and female) in ads, the unknown artist has initiated multifaceted debates on body politics. We do not know whether the artist is Muslim or not. 'Her' work does not express any position for or against the veil, but 'she' invites us to change perspective: rather than regarding the veil as solely a matter of 'the Other', she invites us to self-reflexive questioning, whether motivated by criticism against racism, sexism and commercialization, or considerations of morals and religious piety.

With this open ending Pepicelli again demonstrates that her intention is not to position herself against or in favour of the veil, nor to discuss the degree of women's morals or religiosity. Rather, she aims at deepening the reader's understanding for women who veil and why these women and their veils have become a problem in today's Europe. Thus, her writing is in line with cutting edge research, such as the examination of the cultural frames organizing the debates on multiculturalism and Muslim veils presented by Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil in a previous article in *Gender and Religion* (2012).

Perhaps Pepicelli's book could have benefited from more accounts of women who are less outspoken and famous than those cited. Such voices might have enhanced the problematization of expressions of ambivalence, pressure and submission to an even higher extent. However, knowing the inadequacy of the general debate in Italy her prioritization is understandable. Rather than focusing on the veil as a problem (stemming from the culture and religion of 'the Other'), she questions why it has at all come to be perceived as such. The positions of Muslim women and their veils are indeed functional to the construction of European national identities – constructions that are all too often founded on negative dichotomization and the exclusion of the Other.

The shortcomings of the debate on the veil in Italy are many and there is also a general lack of critical postcolonial perspectives. The book introduces eye-opening discussions, and yet it might have benefitted from even more examples of the Italian experience. References to Fanon's theoretical writings from the French/Algerian context are indispensable, but the book also poses a golden opportunity for debating Italy's colonial past. Anyway, one should understand that Pepicelli seizes the opportunity to inform Italian readers – a readership not particularly knowledgeable in foreign languages – about events and pro-

cesses beyond the Italian horizon, thus creating a fruitful framework for a better understanding of the local debate.

The dissemination of scholarly knowledge to both experts and a wider readership is not always rewarded within the Academia. Renata Pepicelli deserves recognition for accepting this task. The result is truly well written and composed, and I would be pleased to see an English translation for yet a broader European public.