

## Review – Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women

Written by Shireen Manocha

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# Review – Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women

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SHIREEN MANOCHA, NOV 3 2024

### **Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women: A Global-Indian Interplay of Discourses and Narratives** **By Debangana Chatterjee** **Routledge, 2024**

Dr. Debangana Chatterjee's 2024 book builds upon the established Feminist IR understanding that the 'Personal is the International' (Enloe, 2014, p.343). Dr. Chatterjee provides a rich and complex analysis of the multiple levels – "family, community, state, and international politics" (p.2) – at which the discourses surrounding the two cultural practices of Female Genital Cutting/Female Circumcision (FGC/FC) and Islamic veiling are constructed and overlap. The book offers a detailed history of the practices and the shaping of the global discourses around them, as well as their unique manifestations in India in the form of *Khafz* and *Purdah* respectively. In doing so, the book both explores questions of women's agency and choice, and tries to understand the interaction of global discourses with local ones, as well as how cultural practices are rendered 'unintelligible' (p.4) in this process when viewed from the prism of any universal (in this case, the 'human rights') discourse. The book arrives at a nuanced analysis of these multiple hierarchies at play within IR.

This easy-to-follow book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter sets up the theoretical foundations of the book. The next four chapters are evenly divided into an analysis of the two practices, giving equal attention to the global and local levels. Thus, Chapter 2 traces, in-depth, the historical development of the international (legal/social) conversation around what have been termed 'FC/FGC.' The next chapter first contextualizes the practice of *Khafz* in India, before moving into the narrative analysis built through interviews about the practice, to understand the procedure and the Indian public discourse surrounding it. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on Islamic veiling. Chapter 4 lays down the development of the multidirectional discourse on the practice internationally, and Chapter 5 zooms into the practice of *Purdah* and the discourse surrounding it in India – using interviews and focus group discussions. The concluding chapter begins to reconcile the findings of the previous four chapters, elaborating upon the study's contributions in terms of pushing the boundaries of both knowledge production and IR as a discipline. The author puts forth her own analysis of understandings of 'choice' and 'agency' vis-à-vis cultural practices such as *Purdah* and *Khafz*, emphasizing upon the need for a nuanced conversation between international and local discourses. As such, the book is well structured, and takes the reader along at every step, providing sufficient context before moving into a detailed analysis.

Dr. Chatterjee focuses on the narratives of the women themselves, and "women's experiential accounts remain[ing] at the helm of the discussion" (p.13). The book draws upon extensive interviews and focus groups to gain the perspective of the participants. This provides a rich account of the different sides of the conversations surrounding the two practices – from practitioners, activists, supporters, etc. Here, then, as she herself suggests, Dr. Chatterjee responds to Spivak's (2013) call to make the silenced voices heard. This is where her goal of bringing 'marginalised knowledges' (p. 5) to the fore shines through.

The book's focus on both legal and sociopolitical discourses and their interplay is particularly noteworthy. As the book itself states, it is truly interdisciplinary and covers quite a lot of bases. For example, in the case of Islamic veiling it tries to understand its implications in education, fashion, professional growth, sports and the like. This ensures a well-rounded, layered, and multifaceted view emanating from different sections of the society, state, and the

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international.

Herein, the book also opens important conversations around Othering. In discussing the ideas of the 'male' and 'colonial' gaze, and how they overlap, it elaborates on how "coloniality doubly marginalizes women when women's bodies become the primary site of politics" (p.219). Thus, rising Islamophobia coupled with lingering colonial imaginations of the Other interact with culture/tradition to determine the position and choices of women.

It is in these strengths themselves that the book could have pushed further. It would have been interesting to see more in-depth analysis of *how* international discourses make their way into and manifest distinctly within or parallel to Indian discourses. There was some scope to discuss the implications of (or lack thereof) such international discourses on the politics of India more deeply. Similarly, it would have been interesting to see more of where the two discourses convergence or diverge, and what that means for the construction of global and local conversations. The conclusion begins to take steps towards this end, but the chapters divided into 'international' and 'local' levels seem to sometimes exist in isolation.

Secondly, the idea of the 'gaze,' set up very interestingly in the theoretical foundations, could have been more explicitly integrated throughout the chapters. This could have been discussed at different levels – the colonial gaze, the male gaze, the gaze of the state, the gaze of the majority, the western (oriental) gaze in contemporary periods. The chapters hinted at this analysis throughout, but could have benefited from a more explicit and fronted discussion of the same.

Finally, there are some methodological questions that pop up in the reader's mind. For one, the book often mixes up positivist and post-positivist language, wherein the vocabulary of 'variable' often enters what seems to be an overall interpretivist, non-causal, discourse analytic study. Second, future research may be able to compliment this current research by expanding the scope to, for example, the narratives of rural women in the case of *Purdah* in India. Similarly, in the case of *Khafz*, would incorporating the views of medical professionals enrich the study further? Would a parallel study of Hindu veiling in India perhaps help better understand the cultural variance and specificity that the book is getting at?

Overall, the book is important and timely, opening the door for more crucial conversations around how we understand and view cultural practices, whether we hear the voices of those who are impacted by these practices, how we judge and label the practices as outsiders, and what are some ways to bring global discourses in synergy with local ones. It adds to existing literature on gender and IR, giving space to the voices of the women themselves, as well as identifying how global (orientalist) discourses on cultural practices must take into account contextual factors. In so doing, the book sheds a perspective on the importance of an intersectional lens when trying to address the centrality of gender within IR. Thus, Dr. Chatterjee's simultaneously zoomed-out and zoomed-in lenses provide a significant case study in how women and their agencies become entangled in the interaction of global and local discourses surrounding their lives, making them 'sites of politics' (p.219).

### References

Enloe, C. (2014) *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. 2nd edn. University of California Press.

Spivak, G.C. (2013) 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 66–111.

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### About the author:

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