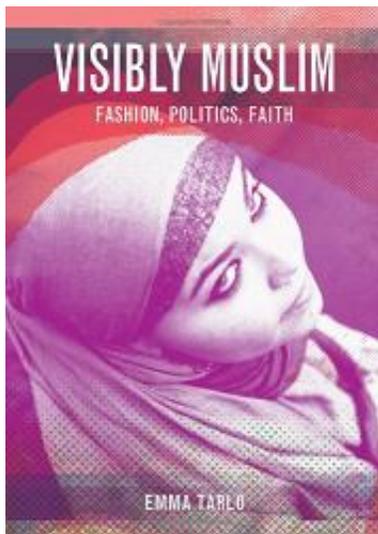


VISIBLY MUSLIM

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I wanted to draw attention of readers of this blog to Emma Tarlo's new book *Visibly Muslim* as much because of the style as the content. But what impresses first about this book is the way it refuses to pander to any of the obvious academic bandwagons it could have ridden. It keeps its integrity as material culture by not trying to reduce itself to any glib politics or stance. It seems to me that Tarlo has tried from the outset to emphasise the two qualities that you would most need to forefront if you want to combat prejudice against hijab and niqab, which are those of creativity and humanism. I think in recognition that for many people there is an underlying assumption that these garments are the antithesis of creativity and intrinsically dehumanising.

How does she manage this? Well the first means is the style of writing. You don't expect a book on this topic to be enjoyable, often quite fun, and celebratory. Most ethnographic fieldwork is based on the fieldworker getting to know relatively few people relatively well. But if you try and write in a way that honestly reflects this method you are inevitably accused of being anecdotal. While if you instead write at a level of generality that says the Nuer do this or Somalis in London do that, the authority of that generalisation is taken for granted. So one veil that is stripped away is that of conventional anthropological writing. Because this book people, in most cases, the key informants as the natural nexus of contradictions and ambivalence. It starts with a chapter *Biographies in Dress* which includes named and known public figures. Recognisable individuals, who change their minds, who are not sure what they think. Some of them are fashion students angsty about what to wear as do most fashion students, only in this case in relation to hijab. So both Islam or hijab, come alive here within a maelstrom of varying interpretation and creativity. Things are tried out, more or less successfully. Much of the creativity is commercial, with chapters looking at material

from the internet, and from various enterprising companies that develop sports hijab or trendy hijab. All of which puts this back into the realm of fashion studies as well as anthropology.

If there is one enduring image that I take from this book as a leitmotif then it is the image that objectifies the challenge of creating spiritual fashion; hijab that does not betray the spiritual by its aspiration to fashion and achieves a potential in fashion precisely because it aims to convey the spiritual. So apart from what it says about hijab, it is making the point that fashion itself can be spiritual, based on faith. This is hijab that tries to convey that what is beautiful is blessing. If the Koran can inspire fabulous elegance and beauty in calligraphy and mosques and mosaics, then why not also in clothing? That hiding mere flesh exposes the beauty of a searching spirit trying to come closer to god. In this book religion is not something to be embarrassed about, some old anachronism, nor is it regarded as conservative. This is very far from the kinds of duality assumed in religious as against secular worlds that seem to pervade the contemporary US for example. Religion here is cutting edge, trendy, even sexy, while remaining modest. Rather as in some fusion music, the sense is that this is quite an exciting moment to be a young London Muslim.

Which leads to a wider theoretical point though one only hinted at in this volume. Should we assume that fashion as creativity is best achieved only through pure freedom, or as expression of pure freedom as in post modernism. Fashion in hijab works with constraint, but that is typical of so much art that emerges at periods of enlightenment in the tension between constraint and modernity, whether from the Greek Polis or the Renaissance.

Of course we cannot think about hijab without its extraordinary politics. If you forgive the pun the people who are the subjects of this work seem to get it in the neck from both sides. You would not expect countries like Britain and France in this day and age to go around banning clothing or telling people what they can and cannot wear, and yet that that is exactly what the French are about to do. Notwithstanding that the veil is central to Catholic tradition and ubiquitous in much 'western' art. But the problem has become that in the press and literature the hijab is reduced to this single dimension of its politicisation. And this itself becomes dehumanising, politics reducing people to tokens, to one side or the other. Which is why it is so valuable to have a book that takes an entirely different perspective.

This is also a book about London, where actually politics is anything but simple. A city whose mayors tend to be elected with a rather quirky, sometimes comic stance, that reflects British irony as much as governance., The characters in this book strike me as quintessential Londoners in that regard. It is politics, but its cosmopolitan, bright, often quite cheerful politics. It is not just Tarlo but the women she studied who clearly delight in taking something as unlikely as hijab and making of it something, young colourful and exciting. Part of the creative cosmopolitanism of urban life. Of course there are many other sides and dimensions to such questions. But by this focus on material culture Tarlo has made an unusual and unexpected contribution which indicates what a veil reveals rather than what it hides.