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REVIEW: *LIVES OF CIRCUMCISED AND VEILED WOMEN; A GLOBAL-INDIAN INTERPLAY OF DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES*, DEBANGANA CHATTERJEE, 2024. ROUTLEDGE

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Debangana Chatterjee's 2024 study *Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women*, offers a nuanced analysis of the female body as a contested site where various political ideologies, cultural practices, and discourses of freedom and oppression converge. Focusing on practices such as female circumcision (FC) and female genital cutting (FGC), as well as on the problematic custom of "veiling" as a common practice in Islam, this volume examines their impact on the construction of gendered identities and their representation and self-representation across various media. It also investigates how the female body is disciplined and fully controlled through such institutions as law, education, and medicine. By drawing comparative insights from both Eastern and Western frameworks of representation and cultural practices, Chatterjee argues that the female body remains an inescapable site of political negotiation. She raises critical questions about the intersection of women's rights with broader human rights frameworks, as well as the interplay between postcolonial discourses and feminist narratives.

The volume is structured in five chapters that minutely map out various strategies of representation that trap the female body between tradition and its sometimes controversial practices, and the national and international discourses on human rights. The first chapter dwells upon the cultural roots and the alleged symbolism of such violent practices performed upon the female body as circumcision, infibulation and other forms of sexual mutilation, while establishing the geographical areas (with Egypt as the most likely space of origin) where they are still performed by virtue of long established traditional ways of controlling women's sexuality. The pain and the devastating impact on female physical and mental health have increased awareness about the unimaginable cruelty performed against women in the name of purity. In a thorough analysis of the existing laws and rights stipulated by the Human Rights and Children's Rights, Chatterjee exposes the double standards that make it

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difficult to legally categorize and punish—or even eradicate—cases of FC/FGC as well as instances of rape mutilation, sex selection, female infanticide or domestic violence resulting in injury and mutilation. Despite joint efforts from international organizations and health-based campaigns, attempts to eliminate these harmful practices are still being met with suspicion and resistance by the communal authorities of the countries/regions where they are still performed. The process of implementing laws against them is also long and sinuous. In some countries medicalization has emerged as one step in this process, aimed at ensuring proper hygienic conditions during these practices.

The equivalent *khafz* practice in India is primarily found within the Bohra community originating in the Ismaili movement, whose complicated history the author thoroughly traces in order to clarify the frequent changes of customs and legal arrangements, the various reforms and amendments in the field of sexual control regulations and the vivid debates that have accompanied these changes. Data concerning the prevalence of these practices, the procedures generally involved (age, medicalization, extent of the cut—physical or symbolical cut), various statistics, testimonies and opinion pro or against were provided by a survey conducted between June 2018 and January 2019. This survey mostly focused on women's narratives though male testimonies were also taken into account. An important component of the survey was dedicated to the risks involved and the aftermath effects of the *khafz* upon the physical, sexual, and mental health of the female respondents, in the case when the passage of time, coupled with the psychological and physical trauma, shame, and frustration had not completely erased the memories. In India, discussions and advocacy efforts against *khafz* practices have been initiated on various occasions, leading to a significant proportion of the public being against the performance of FC/FGC (due to its violation of human rights, to the resulting trauma, the lack of consent and health risks). However, a remaining minority continues to defend the practices, considering the attempts to eradicate them as a blow against a longstanding cultural tradition and an attack against family intimacy and community values. Far from yielding a definite conclusion or reaching a satisfying agreement, these debates remain open to dialogue and negotiations.

The fourth chapter discusses the cultural, social, political and religious values of the “veil” in various international discourses as defining and redefining femininity in history and as an element hindering or assisting female agency thus raising questions about its legitimacy in contemporary world and triggering fierce debates pro and against. Chatterjee traces the religious roots of the Islamic veil back to its Mesopotamian origins and follows its meandering history across geographical and cultural spaces and across centuries; starting with the first mentions of the “veil” and the act of “veiling” in the *Quran* and the religious comments and interpretations given in the following centuries, the author dwells on the problematic issues of the veil – in its region specific variations: *hijab*, *niqab*, *purdah*, *burqa*, *abaya* etc., on the changes it underwent over time, on the political implications it acquired during

periods of colonization, decolonization or national modernization, and the cross-cultural dialogues that it has inspired.

The controversies around veiling and the frequent shifts between its imposition and prohibition have often been politically instrumentalized simply stemming from the biased representation of the veil as a “symbol of Muslim ‘otherness’” (123). This perception frequently serves as an indicator of the intensity of political ideology, islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiment in the Western world. Under the guise of national security many countries of the world have enacted laws and regulations restricting or outright banning the use of the veil, viewing it as a “marker of separation” and a perceived threat against Western civilization. Chatterjee objectively adopts a critical perspective toward both the anti-veiling discourses coming from the non-Islamic parts of the world and the pro-veiling rhetoric prevalent in regions where partial or full body covering has become compulsory, as well as in the nations where veiling remains part of tradition. Her analysis seeks to expose how these shifting narratives affect women worldwide and shape their sense of agency. The rise of Islamic movements, the resurgence of pro-veil narratives and the global proliferation of “fashionable veiling” and Islamic aesthetics have drawn renewed attention to the concept of Islamic modesty and symbolic resistance, while also highlighting the complex intertwining of politics, ideology, Islamophobia and nationalism.

The fifth chapter analyses the situation of veiling in India, considering variable factors such as class, region, religion, socio-economical background. It traces the evolution of both pro- and against veiling discourses, highlighting the particular elements that make it specific to the Indian space. In the given context, the Islamic *purdah* has traditionally functioned both as an instrument for silencing Muslim women and rendering them socially invisible, and as a symbolical extension of privacy, protection and chastity. For this chapter the author conducted another extensive survey in four Indian cities (Delhi, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Kozhikode-Malappuram), with questions addressed mostly to Sunni women, both adherents and non-adherents of this practice. The survey assessed the cultural, religious and practical reasons behind their decision to wear or reject it, as well as their views on contemporary narratives of women empowerment and security that regard the veil as a traditional marker of identity or a personal accessory, rather than a barrier to self-fulfillment. The findings revealed a complex interplay between anti-veiling discourses, which emphasize the otherness and exoticism of the veiled body as a potential security threat, and pro-veiling discourses which advocate cultural resistance and the freedom of choice.

Debangana Chatterjee’s study represents a valuable analysis of the practices of female circumcision FC/ FGC and Islamic veiling performed upon the female body and generating a multitude of national and international discourses advocating for or against their perpetuation. The voices opposing these traditional practices are predominantly shaped by international discourses which often disguise their paternalistic and ideological biases beneath the guise of human rights protection. Such

perspectives rely on “sympathy invocation and cultural exoticization” (212), while disregarding local discourses rooted in traditional beliefs, cultural context and personal choice. Although these practices cannot be regarded through an identical lens, international narratives frequently conflate them, subsuming them under homogenized legal and ethical frameworks in which “the politics of representation results in metanarratives without being reflective of localized narratives” (216). While Dr. Chatterjee acknowledges that the book might not encompass every possible dimension of these complex issues, it nonetheless opens up a fertile ground for further discussions. It offers an objective historical panorama tracing the evolution of these practices in various parts of the world and foregrounds women’s voices, enabling their agency to become visible at the intersection of family and community values, state apparatus, and international politics. The book masterfully interrogates global and local discourses, exposing the pitfalls of stereotyping and political instrumentalization that arise when the acceptance or rejection of such practices is confined to the rigid binary of modernity vs. tradition.

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