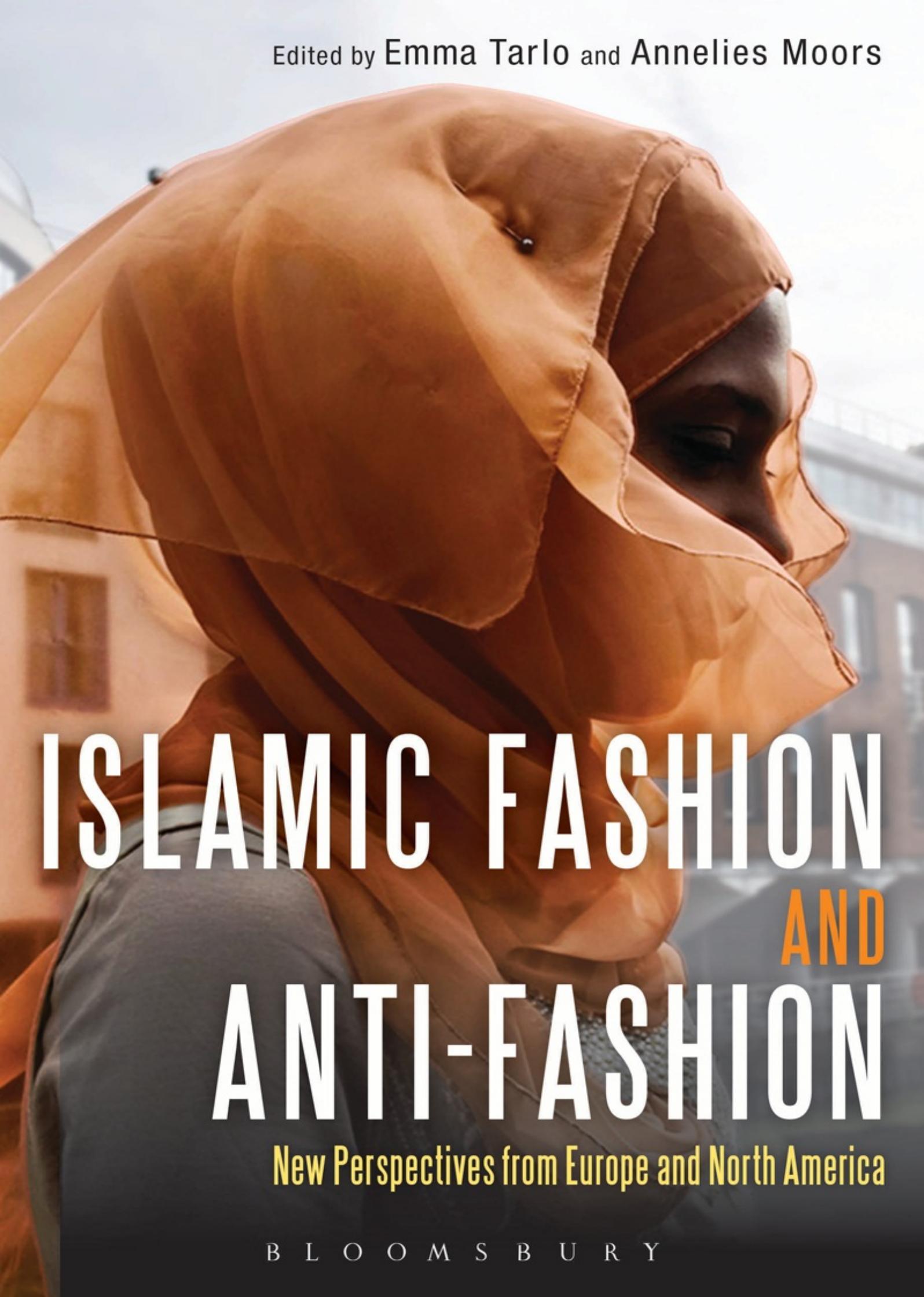


Edited by Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors



**ISLAMIC FASHION  
AND  
ANTI-FASHION**

*New Perspectives from Europe and North America*

B L O O M S B U R Y

# Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion

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Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors

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A volume of this kind has many points of origin and accumulates many debts and friendships on the way. As authors and editors we were first brought together by a shared interest in the everyday dress practices of Muslim women situated in diverse circumstances around the world, whether in Britain, India, Palestine or Yemen. Following a workshop organized by Annelies at the University of Amsterdam in 2005, we went on to jointly edit a special double issue of the journal *Fashion Theory* on the topic of Muslim fashions. Although the volume focussed mainly on non-European contexts, and included contributions about Egypt, Turkey, India, West Africa, Iran and Yemen, working on it alerted us to the absence of research about the growing presence of Islamic fashion in Europe and to the potential offered by fashion as a tool for critiquing the limited and repetitive polemical debates commonly invoked in discussions of Muslim dress and of the place of Islam in Europe more generally. Our first debt, then, is to the many Muslim women in different European cities whose clothing choices and experiments commanded our attention and who willingly shared with us intimate details of their sartorial biographies, dilemmas and aspirations, many of which feature in this book.

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# **Introduction: Islamic Fashion and Anti-fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America**

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The past three decades have seen the growth and spread of debates about the visible presence of Islamic dress in the streets of Europe and North America. These debates, which have accelerated and intensified after 9/11, focus on the apparent rights and wrongs of headscarves and face veils, on whether their wearing is forced or chosen and to what extent they might indicate the spread of Islamic fundamentalism or pose security concerns. Such dress practices are also perceived as a threat to multiculturalism and to Euro-American norms and values which are often spoken of as if they are fixed and shared. Such arguments have been used to support bans and restrictions on Islamic dress practices in the name of modernity, secularism or women's emancipation. What is curious about these debates is not only the way in which they have become so entrenched but also how out of tune they are with actual developments in Muslim dress practices which have, over the past decade, been undergoing rapid transformation. They ignore, for example, the development and proliferation of what has become known, both in Muslim circles and beyond, as Islamic fashion and how the emergence of such a phenomenon does not so much signal Muslim alienation from European and American cultural norms as complex forms of critical and creative engagement with them. This book grows then out of awareness of the discrepancy between public discourses about Muslim dress and actual developments in Islamic fashion in the streets of Europe and America, pointing to the need for greater understanding and more nuanced interpretation. Taking critical distance from the popular assumption that fashion is an exclusively Western or secular phenomenon, it points to the complex convergence of ethical and aesthetic concerns expressed through new forms of Islamic fashion whilst simultaneously highlighting the ambivalence some Muslims feel towards such developments. It also suggests that just as Islamic fashion engages with and contributes towards mainstream fashion in various ways, so Muslim critiques of fashion often share much in common with critiques from secular and feminist sources.

The research on which this book is based was conducted in a variety of cities across Europe and America, enabling us to gain perspective both on the diversity of Islamic dress practices in different locations and on different regional responses to these. The aim was not to gain statistical representativity but to elucidate how Muslim women in different locations relate to Islam, dress and fashion through a series of

qualitative case studies. Although the range of countries and cities covered is far from exhaustive, it does provide a basis for identifying common themes as well as the specificities of particular sites. Whilst such comparative observations mediate against simplistic ideas of a single Muslim culture, they also highlight the extent to which so-called Euro-American values and norms are far from clear cut and that what counts as European is based on a very particular Western and Northern European experience. By bringing the experiences and clothing preferences of Muslims in Eastern Europe into the equation, including Polish Tatars, Arab migrants and Romanian converts, we gain a sense of just how varied the European Muslim experience and forms of cultural expression are.

One lesson quickly learned by all the researchers who have contributed to this book is the impossibility of simply reading from appearances. To highlight this point we include an interview with Zinah, the young fashion blogger represented on the cover of this book whose attitudes towards fashion and matters of appearance only become accessible through dialogue. More generally, it has been through engaging with Muslim women concerning the motivations behind their dress that we have been able to gain insight into the complexity and sensitivity of the issues involved. For example, women wearing similar outfits may have very different motivations for doing so even within a specific location. In some cases, the adoption of a particular type of headscarf may be a first step towards starting to wear covered dress; in other cases, for those who used to wear more sober forms of covering in the past, the very same headscarf may be a step towards experimentation with more fashionable styles. Opinions also vary substantially concerning how much a woman ought to cover and to what extent covering can be considered a religious virtue. In addition, decisions about what to wear are made in relation to the attitudes and opinions of relevant others, whether family, peers in school, colleagues at work or even strangers, all of whom may express approval or disapproval of particular trends. They are also influenced by popular culture and political contexts, which may be more or less conducive to developments in Islamic fashion. In continuity with our earlier research (Tarlo and Moors 2007; Moors 2009a; Tarlo 2010b, 2013b), we have found it particularly important to consider dress biographies and the contexts in which they operate, which include concerns about religion, ethnicity, class, generation and fashion. At the same time, we have been struck by the variety of styles worn, not only between women in different regional settings but also amongst women living in the same locations.

In this introduction, we begin by discussing some of the key debates raised by the study of Islamic fashion in Europe and America, addressing the relation between dress and religion, the turn towards materiality in religious studies, women's religious agency and the importance of considering style. We contextualize the emergence of Islamic fashion in Europe and America by reference to the spread of a global Islamic revival and the increased emphasis placed on reflexive forms of Islam. We review how clothing practices have transformed in Muslim majority countries from the 1970s onwards and how these changes relate to recent developments in Islamic fashion in Europe and America. At the same time, we engage with fashion theory, suggesting how Islamic fashion enables us to question many of the assumptions embedded within the world of fashion and fashion scholarship. In particular, we draw attention to the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in Islamic fashion and anti-fashion

discourses and practices. We also point to the significance of location and how the Muslim presence in different European and American contexts follows different historical trajectories and engages with different forms of secular governance which shape clothing possibilities for Muslims in particular ways. We end by drawing out some of the key themes that have emerged through comparing Muslim experiences and fashions in diverse locations ranging from a small city in the Canadian prairies to large European cities, including London, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Cluj and Amsterdam. Our key contention is that through their visual material and bodily presence young women who wear Islamic fashion disrupt and challenge public stereotypes about Islam, women, social integration and the veil even if their voices are often drowned out in political and legal debates on these issues.

### **DRESS AND RELIGION: A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP?**

What does dress have to do with religion? Conventionally, religion has been studied in terms of doctrine and institutions and more recently, especially in the case of Islam, as a sociopolitical movement and threat to secularism. With a focus on Islamic fashion, and the everyday corporeal practices of young Muslim women, the starting point of this book is different. We argue that to better understand the importance of dress to religion, we need to go beyond the modernist concept of religion, grounded in a European protestant tradition, that considers inner belief and faith as the mainstay of religion, with external forms, such as ritual practices and material culture as marginal phenomena (Asad 1993; Keane 2008; Meyer and Houtman 2012). We also need to move beyond the idea that the primary role of religious dress practices is the maintenance of religious boundaries and the reproduction of tradition (Arthur 1999). Whilst such ideas are relevant, they are inadequate for capturing the dynamic quality of contemporary Islamic fashion with its engagement both with the secular material world and with discursive and reflexive interpretations of Islam. Our focus on particular dress styles and the dynamics of Islamic fashion and anti-fashion tallies, then, with the growing interest in the tangible, material presence of religion in everyday life and with the recognition that for religion to be present in the world, it inevitably requires particular forms of expression. As our previous research has shown, if concerns with modesty encourage the adoption of covered dress, attention needs to be paid not only to the fact of covering but also to the multiple forms it may take, from simple head covering to full body and face covering, from sober to fashionable styles which refer not only to religiosity but also class, ethnicity, generation and fashion as well as membership of particular taste communities which may favour an urban, trendy, sporty, elegant or feminine look (Moors 2009a; Tarlo 2010b).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that some Muslims share a concept of religion that foregrounds faith and spirituality rather than external manifestations of religious belonging. There exists both a historic Islamic tradition that privileges interiority and a more contemporary turn towards such a focus. For some Muslims, modesty is first and foremost perceived as an inner quality that does not require the adoption of covered dress. At the same time, many Muslims consider corporeal practices, including wearing covered dress, to be a religious virtue to which they

aspire, even if they are not always able to do so consistently. Wearing fashionable forms of Islamic covering or dressing modestly through the layering of mainstream fashion garments may serve to make religious practice more appealing for some women, whilst for others such fashionable interpretations of Islamic dress are perceived as a distortion or distraction from more weighty theological concerns. In this book, we introduce a wide diversity of perspectives, demonstrating how Muslim women in different European and American contexts position themselves through different levels of engagement and disengagement with fashion. In this sense, Islamic fashion becomes a tangible medium of public debate both amongst Muslim women and in relation to wider publics.

The question of how far external appearances can be read as indicators of internal states has long been an area of both academic and popular debate. On one hand, in everyday interactions people tend to assume that it is possible to read appearances and to know the interior self and inner character from external signs (Finkelstein 1997). Yet it has been suggested that in Europe at least, from the nineteenth century on, there has also been a growing suspicion that appearances are constructed and hence cannot be trusted as ‘authentic’ (Entwistle 2000: 123). Dress, then, has the potential to both reveal and conceal, and literature and poetry from around the world is replete with examples of its deceptive and seductive potential. In a similar vein, Muslims, including those who wear visibly Muslim dress and consider covering as a religious virtue, often underline that adopting modest dress is not necessarily evidence of a modest, virtuous self. They recognize that some women who cover may not do so out of theological conviction, but, for a whole variety of reasons from pressure from others, a desire to fit in or a preference for a particular look.

## **TAKING RELIGION SERIOUSLY IN THE STUDY OF ISLAMIC DRESS**

If the significance of dress has often been downplayed in studies of religion, the significance of religion has sometimes been underestimated in studies of Muslim dress practices. More than a decade ago, Mahmood (2001) suggested that the literature on veiling only paid scant attention to the religious motivations of many of the women concerned. Instead, covered dress had often been discussed in instrumentalist terms—for instance, as a means for women to acquire greater freedom of movement (MacLeod 1991) or as a form of identity politics or sign of allegiance to Islamist movements (El-Guindi 1981; Ahmed 1992; Göle 1996; Navaro-Yashin 2002). This has also been the case in public debates and policy-making. In a critical reading of the French Stasi report, Asad (2006) argues that this report’s definition of Muslim headcoverings as ‘conspicuous signs of religious affiliation’ did not entertain the possibility that the young women concerned may cover their heads because they considered this a religious duty. Focussing on devoutly practising Muslim women participating in the mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood (2001, 2005) emphasizes the extent to which adopting covered dress was first and foremost a religiously motivated practice for these women.

Mahmood’s work has been important not only for stressing the strong levels of religious intent expressed by some Muslim women who adopt covered dress but also for suggesting how we might rethink debates about gender and agency in relation to

religious practice. Writings about Muslim women have often interpreted covered dress as a symbol or tool for women's subordination in Islam (see Ahmed 1992), while those arguing against such an interpretation have considered covering as a form of resistance to domination. In Mahmood's view, both approaches share a definition of agency which assumes that humans have an innate desire for freedom which is defined in terms of individual autonomy. Contesting this view, Mahmood analyses the ethical practices of the women participating in the mosque movement in Cairo as a form of willed submission. Building on Foucault's notion of subjectivation, she proposes an understanding of agentic power as 'a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable' (2005: 17, 28). In doing so, she moves us beyond the simplistic dichotomy of freedom versus force towards a more complex and less ethnocentric understanding of human motivations and capacities for action.

Finally, Mahmood also takes issue with how the relationship between the interior self and exterior behaviour has conventionally been understood. Whereas wearing covered dress is often considered an expression of a pre-existing inner state of being, she argues that for women of the mosque movement the reverse would appear to be the case. To them, outward behaviour and bodily acts were crucial means by which to realize or bring about a desired inner state of being, for it is through the repeated performance of such practices that a virtuous self is produced (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). Covering then works as a technique of the self, as a bodily act that serves not only as the marker of piety but also as '*the ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious' (Mahmood 2005: 158). Emphasis on the performative power of dress has similarly been a theme of much recent historic and anthropological work on dress (see, for example, Comaroff 1996; Tarlo 1996, 2005; Woodward 2007; Lemire 2010; Riello and McNeil 2010). Concerning the relationship between dress and subjectivity Miller (2010) argues that clothing is not simply 'a form of representation, a semiotic sign or symbol of the person [but] plays a considerable and active part in constituting the particular experience of the self' (2010: 40). Such an approach then goes beyond the debate concerning the ambiguities of how far dress conceals or reveals inner states towards a focus on the production of subjectivity.

## **ISLAMIC FASHION: CONSIDERATIONS OF FORM AND STYLE**

Whilst Mahmood's work has enabled a rethinking of the relationship between dress and religious subjectivity, it is important to remember that the understandings and levels of piety expressed by women in the mosque movement in Cairo are not representative of all Muslim women. In fact, Mahmood herself acknowledges that other women in Cairo do not consider modesty to be an 'attribute of the body' but rather consider it to be 'a characteristic of the individual's interiority which is then expressed in bodily form' (2005: 160). What the findings of this volume suggest is that not only do different Muslim women hold different views regarding this issue but also that it is not uncommon to find individual women who express both arguments, suggesting that covering is both the means to produce a pious self and an expression of that piety (Deeb 2006; Jouili 2009). Such findings highlight the multifaceted interactive relationship people have with hijab and other forms of covering.

Secondly, this book departs significantly from the work of Mahmood through its