

BOOK REVIEW: “LIVES OF
CIRCUMCISED AND VEILED WOMEN:
A GLOBAL-INDIAN INTERPLAY OF
DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES”
BY DEBANGANA CHATTERJEE

SANTVANA KUMAR*

“Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women: A Global-Indian Interplay of Discourses and Narratives” by Debangana Chatterjee is a thought-provoking work that researches the contentious practices of Female Circumcision/Female Genital Cutting (‘FC’/ ‘FGC’) and veiling. The book stands out for its ambitious scope, aiming to provide a detailed analysis of these practices from both a global and an Indian perspective. Chatterjee’s primary objective appears to be the integration of the voices and experiences of women who are directly affected by these practices into the broader discourse, challenging dominant narratives and policy approaches that often homogenise these perspectives.

The author employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and political science to create a holistic analysis of FC/FGC and veiling. This multifaceted methodology allows Chatterjee to examine these practices not just as isolated cultural or religious phenomena but as complex socio-political issues deeply embedded in historical and contemporary power structures. By doing so, she emphasises the need for a more comprehensive understanding that goes beyond simplistic or one-dimensional interpretations.

Chatterjee’s use of standpoint theory is particularly significant. Standpoint theory, rooted in feminist epistemology, asserts that marginalised groups possess unique and valuable perspectives that can offer profound insights into social realities. In this context, Chatterjee foregrounds the lived experiences of circumcised

* Assistant Professor (Law), IILM University. Kumar with a PhD in Women’s Studies (JNU) specialises in Caste, Gender, and Intersectionality. Her research critically explores caste, gender, and violence, particularly emphasising Critical Legal Studies, Feminist Theory, and Human Rights Laws. I would like to thank Mallika Sharma for the assistance in the research done for this piece. I would also like to thank the Editorial Team of the Journal of Indian Law and Society for their comments on the earlier versions of this piece. All errors are attributable solely to me.

and veiled women, arguing that their narratives are crucial for an authentic and complete understanding of these practices. This approach challenges the often homogenising and paternalistic tendencies in mainstream policy and academic discourses, which frequently ignore or undermine the voices of those most affected. Through detailed personal interviews, Chatterjee brings to light the diverse and often contradictory experiences of women who undergo FC/FGC and practice veiling. She carefully navigates the complexities of these practices, recognising them as multifaceted phenomena that can simultaneously be seen as oppressive and empowering, depending on the context and the individual's perspective. This portrayal is a critical contribution to the discourse, as it avoids the binary of viewing these practices solely through the lens of victimhood or agency.

In Chapter One, "*Introduction: Women's Bodies and the Politics of Representation*", Chatterjee begins by providing a historical overview of circumcision and veiling practices, tracing their origins and cultural significance. She adeptly highlights how these practices have evolved over time and how they are perceived in different societies. The chapter is meticulously researched, drawing on historical texts, religious scriptures, and cultural artefacts. By situating these practices within their socio-political contexts,¹ Chatterjee sets the stage for understanding the deep-rooted traditions and the contemporary debates surrounding them. This foundation is crucial for readers to grasp the multifaceted nature of circumcision and veiling.

Chapter Two, "*Pain, Perception, and FC/FGC: International Discourses on Rights and Representation*", delves into the international discourses surrounding FC and FGC. It investigates how pain and perception related to these practices are represented in global rights narratives and policies. The chapter critically analyses how international human rights frameworks address these issues and the implications for women's rights and representation. The international legal discourse on FC/FGC primarily critiques the practice through the lens of bodily integrity and the violation of women's rights.² For Chatterjee, the prevailing legal framework tends to construct a uniform narrative that often leaves little room for debate, as it elevates a particular understanding of the practice to an almost factual status, thereby marginalising alternative perspectives. This construction of FC/FGC in international discourse tends to depict non-mutilated bodies as normative while portraying mutilated bodies as abject and outside the law, akin to Agamben's concept of the "sacred" as both banished and crucial.³ The performative nature of this language not only reinforces specific imageries but also distorts the genuine experiences of those affected. Although the elimination of FC/FGC is encompassed within broader human rights frameworks and the fifth Sustainable

¹ Debangana Chatterjee, *Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women: A Global-Indian Interplay of Discourses and Narratives* (Routledge India 2023) 5.

² *ibid* 27.

³ *ibid*.

Development Goal for gender equality, the explicit focus on FC/FGC in these frameworks only emerged prominently in the 1990s. Prior to this, while general human rights instruments addressed various forms of discrimination and violence, they did not explicitly address FC/FGC, thus subjecting it to varied interpretations of human rights violations. The international human rights framework, including instruments such as CEDAW, categorically recognises FC/FGC as a harmful practice that impinges upon women's and children's rights. However, the discourse surrounding FC/FGC remains contested, with ongoing debates about its classification under terms such as "violence" or "torture" and questions about whether these terms aptly describe the practice.⁴ The discourse also overlooks the other forms of bodily harm that women endure, such as sexual violence and rape, which are not similarly categorised as mutilation despite their severe physical and psychological impacts. The complexity of FC's/FGC's impact on health and the cultural justifications for its practice, continue to challenge the straightforward application of human rights standards. This creates a tension between universal human rights and cultural rights, with the former often prevailing in the face of practices deemed to violate individual freedoms. The international legal discourse, while aimed at eliminating FC/FGC, often falls short of addressing the nuanced realities and diverse experiences of those affected, thus perpetuating a somewhat simplified and sometimes problematic narrative of pain and violation. Chatterjee adeptly situates FC/FGC alongside other forms of bodily mutilation, highlighting the gaps in the global discourse on sexual violence and bodily harm. While the chapter excels in its comparative analysis and contextual understanding of human rights instruments, it occasionally overgeneralises the practice of FC/FGC, lacks a thorough exploration of alternative rites, and does not fully engage with feminist theoretical frameworks.

In Chapter Three, "*Khafz in India: Culture, Narratives, and Counter-narratives*", the author intricately examines the practice of khafz within the Bohra community in India, juxtaposing it with international understandings of FGC. Chatterjee presents a detailed exploration of how personal narratives of resistance and conformity reflect the broader tension between cultural practices and international human rights norms. The chapter adeptly critiques the alignment of khafz with the World Health Organization's Type I FGC classification while arguing that the dominant international discourse,⁵ predominantly focused on African contexts, marginalises and misrepresents the Indian practice. By scrutinising the procedural and cultural dimensions of khafz, Chatterjee reveals the limitations of both liberal and cultural interpretations of women's choices, suggesting that these narratives often fail to account for the complex interplay of individual agency and structural constraints. The chapter proposes a reimagining of the discourse, advocating for a more inclusive and contextually sensitive understanding that acknowl-

⁴ ibid 29.

⁵ ibid 101.

edges the intricacies of local practices and resists the reductive tendencies of global human rights frameworks.

Chatterjee's approach is notable for its attempt to navigate the complexities of cultural practices through personal narratives, offering an insightful analysis of how these narratives both reflect and challenge broader societal and normative frameworks. However, from the perspective of feminist epistemology, critical considerations emerge regarding the chapter's methodology, particularly the use of interviews. While Chatterjee's empathetic portrayal of individual experiences provides valuable insight, it also raises questions about the extent to which these narratives are interpreted and represented. Feminist critiques often emphasise the need for methodological rigour in ensuring that the voices of marginalised women are not only heard but also accurately represented. The reliance on personal interviews as a primary data source necessitates a critical examination of several factors. First, the representativeness of the narratives presented is crucial. Interviews are inherently selective and may not capture the full spectrum of experiences within a community. Chatterjee's focus on specific personal stories, while rich and evocative, may risk generalising or essentialising the experiences of women involved in khafz. This is particularly pertinent in feminist research, which seeks to avoid the pitfalls of reductionism by acknowledging the diversity and complexity of women's lived experiences.

Additionally, the power dynamics inherent in the interview process must be scrutinised. Feminist methodology highlights the importance of reflexivity and the need to address potential biases and imbalances in the interviewer-interviewee relationship. Chatterjee's approach, while empathetic, must be examined to determine how it navigates these power dynamics and ensures that the participants' voices are not inadvertently shaped by the researcher's own perspectives and interpretations. Chatterjee is careful and aware of her positionality, as highlighted in the introduction; however, within the realm of feminist epistemology, this methodology requires a deeper engagement and critical questioning of positionality. Feminist critiques often call for an examination of how research findings are situated within broader socio-political contexts. Chatterjee's analysis of khafz vis-à-vis international FGC discourses raises significant issues about the cross-cultural application of human rights norms and the homogeneity within international human rights law. The chapter effectively critiques the dominant international narrative, but it also must contend with how these global frameworks influence local practices and discourses. Feminist research should strive to engage with these broader dynamics critically, ensuring that local practices are not misrepresented or oversimplified within the global discourse.

Chatterjee's chapter is a valuable contribution to understanding khafz and its complex interplay with international discourses. A feminist critique highlights the need for methodological engagement. This includes reflexivity of positionality

and social location in interview-based research, addressing power dynamics, and contextualising findings within both local and global frameworks. By incorporating these considerations, the study could offer a more nuanced and equitable analysis of the practice and its implications.

In Chapter Four, “*Veiling in the International Arena: A Fractured Discourse*”, Debangana Chatterjee examines the complex global discourses surrounding Islamic veiling, revealing how it operates as a “situated bodily practice”⁶ that interacts dynamically with cultural and political frameworks. Chatterjee explores how veiling, often perceived through a Western lens, functions not merely as a form of concealment but as a practice that integrates aesthetics, ethics, and social norms, producing distinct “embodied identities”.⁷

The chapter begins by tracing the historical roots of veiling to ancient civilisations, such as the Assyrian Empire, and its subsequent incorporation into Islamic culture. Despite its diverse origins, veiling is often politically and symbolically tied to Islam, frequently overshadowing its practice in other religious and cultural contexts. This association leads to a metonymic representation of veiling as a symbol of Islam, contributing to its portrayal as the “other” in international discourses. This portrayal is particularly contentious, given that a significant portion of the global Muslim population resides in non-Muslim-majority countries.

Chatterjee delves into the etymological roots of the term “veil”, derived from the Latin words *velum* (a piece of cloth) and *velare* (to conceal), highlighting how the term has historically been used to create a dichotomy between the “East” and the “West”. The chapter critiques this binary, arguing that it sensationalises veiling and obscures its multifaceted nature. Chatterjee emphasises that veiling cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives of oppression or resistance; instead, it must be understood within a broader context that includes its various political, social, and cultural dimensions.⁸

Chatterjee concludes that contemporary representations of veiling are fraught with contradictions. The practice is often depicted as either “oppressive” or “resistive”, reflecting a fractured understanding that fails to capture its full complexity. The chapter critiques both anti-veiling and pro-veiling discourses, noting that they tend to perpetuate binary and reductive views. Anti-veiling discourses are rooted in orientalist and colonialist legacies, while pro-veiling arguments often emphasise resistance and identity assertion but can overlook the intricate realities of veiling practices.

⁶ ibid 110.

⁷ ibid.

⁸ ibid 112.

From an epistemological perspective, the chapter effectively challenges reductive representations. While the analysis addresses veiling's symbolic and material aspects, a feminist epistemology interrogates how veiling intersects with experiences of memory, emotions, vulnerabilities, gendered agency, and constraint, offering insights into how power relations shape and are shaped by veiling practices.⁹

Moreover, the chapter's critique of both anti-veiling and pro-veiling discourses aligns with feminist objections to essentialist views of women's experiences. Nevertheless, a feminist lens could enrich this analysis by considering how these discourses affect women across different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. This approach would provide a more granular understanding of how veiling is experienced and negotiated by diverse groups of women.

Chapter Five, "*Local Discourses on Veiling in India: Narratives from the Field*", provides an in-depth exploration of Islamic veiling in India, examining both international and local discourses. It argues that purdah, which encompasses both sartorial and social dimensions, functions as a symbol of gendered control and societal norms. This practice extends beyond Muslim women, also appearing among rural upper-caste Hindu women, and is framed as a form of social control linked to patriarchal dominance, where women are seen as bearers of honour.

The analysis contrasts Islamic veiling with Hindu purdah, highlighting distinct socio-cultural frameworks while acknowledging that purdah practices, such as hijab and burqa, are diverse and context-dependent. Through a study of various Indian cities—Delhi, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, and Kozhikode-Malappuram—the chapter illustrates how veiling practices are shaped by regional identity, socio-economic conditions, and global Islamic fashion trends.

The chapter's discussion on the colonial and male gaze could be expanded to investigate how these perspectives contribute to the exoticisation and politicisation of veiling, affecting women's autonomy and self-representation. In essence, the chapter offers a thorough analysis of Islamic veiling within the Indian context, revealing its complex interactions with both local and global discourses.

The book provides an exploration of the politics of representation concerning embodied cultural practices such as FC and Islamic veiling, contrasting international and Indian discourses. It critiques conventional approaches that rely heavily on statistical evidence, advocating instead for an interpretative narrative that prioritises women's lived experiences. The study challenges established epistemological and ontological frameworks by emphasising the politics of knowledge production and the relational existentialism of women's bodies. It argues that

⁹ Richa Nagar, Sangtin Yatra, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (University of Minnesota Press 2006).

cultural practices are often misrepresented through dominant discourses that prioritise Western perspectives, leading to paternalistic and exoticising portrayals.

The analysis highlights the limitations of current international discourses on FC and veiling, noting that they often overlook local contexts and fail to engage with subaltern perspectives. For FC, the dominant international narrative focuses on eradication, neglecting historical and cultural specificities, particularly in non-African contexts like India. Similarly, the discourse on Islamic veiling is fragmented, influenced by both anti-veiling and pro-veiling sentiments, and reflects broader issues of colonialism and Islamophobia.

The book argues for a decolonised approach to understanding these practices, challenging the dominance of Western knowledge systems and advocating for a more inclusive perspective that considers cultural contexts and women's agency. It calls for a shift from a top-down legal framework to community-based, culturally sensitive approaches to addressing FC. Additionally, it reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these issues, noting increased vulnerabilities for women and the paradoxical normalisation of masking.

Ultimately, the book urges for a dynamic understanding of women's bodies and experiences that transcends simplistic dichotomies, emphasising the importance of integrating cultural relativism and non-essentialist feminism in discussions of international politics and human rights.

The book also critically examines the role of policy in addressing FC/FGC and veiling. Chatterjee provides a thorough analysis of international and national legal frameworks, advocacy efforts, and intervention programs. She highlights both the successes and limitations of these initiatives, pointing out that while policy can be a powerful tool for change, it often fails to address the underlying socio-cultural dynamics that sustain these practices. By focusing on policy, Chatterjee aims to offer practical recommendations for more effective and culturally sensitive approaches to eradicating harmful practices while respecting the agency and voices of the women involved.

However, Chatterjee's emphasis on policy discourse tends to overshadow a deeper engagement with feminist theoretical frameworks. While she acknowledges the importance of standpoint theory and the need to centre marginalised voices, the book could have been more robust in addressing broader feminist concerns related to positionality, representation, and the politics of who has the right to speak for whom. These questions are crucial for a deeper understanding of the power dynamics at play in both the practices themselves and the discourses surrounding them. Feminist theory, particularly in the realm of the politics of representation, offers valuable insights into these issues. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" interrogates the power dynamics involved in speaking for marginalised groups and questions

whether true representation is possible without reinforcing existing power structures.¹⁰ Applying Spivak's framework to the narratives of circumcised and veiled women would involve critically examining who is telling these stories, from what positionality, and with what implications for the subjects themselves.

Through this lens, I argue that incorporating feminist methodologies into policy-making processes is essential for several reasons. First, it ensures that the policies developed are grounded in the lived realities of the affected communities, leading to more relevant and effective interventions.¹¹ Second, it promotes a more inclusive and participatory approach, where marginalised voices are not only heard but also given a central role in shaping the policies that affect them. Third, it fosters critical reflection on the power dynamics and structural inequalities that underpin the issues being addressed, paving the way for more transformative and sustainable solutions.¹²

In conclusion, "*Lives of Circumcised and Veiled Women: A Global-Indian Interplay of Discourses and Narratives*" by Debangana Chatterjee presents rich interdisciplinary narratives, bringing forth the nuanced realities of women affected by violent customary practices. The book effectively critiques both global and local discourses, highlighting the gaps and contradictions in how these issues are framed and addressed. Chatterjee's use of standpoint theory and her emphasis on personal narratives offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of circumcised and veiled women, pushing back against oversimplified and homogenising views. Her analysis pushes for the need for a more culturally sensitive and contextually informed approach to understanding these practices, moving beyond reductionist perspectives.

However, the book's engagement with feminist theoretical frameworks could be deepened. While Chatterjee's focus on policy discourse is crucial, a more thorough integration of feminist epistemological concerns—such as positionality, representation, and the politics of voice—would strengthen the analysis. By addressing these aspects, the book could provide a more comprehensive critique of the power dynamics shaping both the practices of FGC and veiling and the discourses surrounding them.¹³

Ultimately, Chatterjee's work is a significant contribution to the ongoing conversation about gender, culture, and human rights. It calls for a shift towards

¹⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Rosalind C. Morris (ed), *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (Columbia University Press 2010).

¹¹ C. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1988) 30(1) *Feminist Review* 337.

¹² Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge 1994) 23.

¹³ Sandra Harding, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton University Press 1990); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge 1990).

inclusive and participatory approaches in policy-making and advocacy, ensuring that the voices of marginalised women are central to efforts aimed at addressing these complex issues. For policymakers, academics, and activists, this book offers a crucial perspective on the intersection of global and local narratives, advocating for a deeper understanding and more equitable interventions in the realm of cultural practices and women's rights.

