Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture, Politics, and the Media

Nahid Afrose Kabir
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 220 pages.

Most popular and academic interest in the subject of British Muslim communities in recent years can be located within the context public debates around the visible presence of western Muslims and fears of radicalization and religious extremism. The 7/7 London bombings of 2005, which increased the attention of journalists, researchers, and government policymakers on Muslim young people, has resulted in numerous books, reports, and journal articles purporting to explain why some young British Muslims seem attracted to terrorism. The title under review joins a handful of similar publications that provide more nunanced observations in this field, notably, Philip Lewis' *Young, British, and Muslim* (2007), Anshuman Mondal's *Young British Muslim Voices* (2008), and Sughra Ahmed's *Seen and Not Heard: Voices of Young British Muslims* (2009), all of which explore the lives, experiences, and views of young Muslims in Britain.

This important subject area warrants deep research and rigorous analysis. Nahid Afrose Kabir's extensive ethnographic fieldwork draws upon 216 interviews with young people aged between fifteen and thirty from five of Britain's main cities with substantial Muslim communities. Structured around the themes of identity, religion, and culture, it also includes responses to questions of citizenship and loyalty, media bias, recent controversies around the niqab (face veil), and reactions to the Archbishop of Canterbury's comments on implementing aspects of the Shari'ah in the country. Overall, it makes a contribution to the nascent field of Muslim youth studies by offering windows into the hopes and aspirations of young British Muslims as well as presenting some interesting typologies of self-definition.

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the main contours of the identity debate in Britain. They are informed that hyphenated British Muslim identit(ies) are formed due to the pressures from the "outside" and the "inside" as well as geographical dynamics. International political crisis events over the last thirty years and recent American and British foreign policy decisions, in addition to domestic debates around Muslims, radicalization, integration, and multiculturalism, have all affected and shaped how Muslims choose to define themselves. Chapter 2 provides an overview of this population's main demographic features, while chapter 3 sketches the religious and cultural dilemmas facing their young people. Here, a number of responses capture the representative viewpoints on such issues as marriage, education, drugs, music, religious radicalization, and restrictions on women's access to mosques.

Chapter 4 continues to focus on questions of national identity by pondering the question of whether "to be or not be British." Britishness is defined as the possession of fluent English language skills, "loyalty to Britain, integration with the wider community, belief in democracy, tolerance, acceptance of equal treatment for all and respect for the country and its shared heritage" (p. 79). It turns out that young Muslim Britons hold far more nuanced understandings of national identity, which are negotiated against other equally important influences. Asked how they would define their sense of belonging and whether they consider themselves British brought forth sixteen different types of identity self-description, such as "situational," "dual," "multiple," "single ethnic," "single national," "religious," "mixed race," "confused," "apprehensive," and "transnational." This complexity demonstrates their ability to undermine the dichotomous false choice of whether one should be either Muslim or British. Chapter 5 explores their views on the question of media bias by using broadsheet and tabloid newspaper stories as case studies. Chapter 6 focuses on the public debate triggered by the then Home Office Minister Jack Straw and his comments on Muslim women and niqab. The final chapter, chapter 7, traces the British Shari'ah courts debate and presents a narrative of its origin, media reaction, and perspectives from young people.

Despite its merits, an informed reader could be left disappointed with a number of the book's aspects. The themes chosen appear to have been determined by headlines and stereotypes that Kabir seems keen to dispel, and the topic areas chosen do not add anything significant to the terrain covered in the literature already mentioned. Muslim youth identity issues are an obsession for many media pundits and researchers desperate to confirm an explanatory basis for the prevailing moral panic around young Muslims. Although more mundane issues are touched upon, the everyday aspects of their life and (sub)cultures are left unexplored. This is unfortunate, because the diversity of

their lives cannot be reduced to the well-worn tropes of religion, identity, and media stereotypes.

In addition, this study could have broken new ground if the hybridized youth identities encountered in the research had been probed further. British Muslim youth experiences are equally shaped and challenged by their marginalized economic and social class status, local/national political structures, and lifestyle choices. Neither was there awareness or engagement with the emerging young generation of Internet bloggers, writers, artists, and youth activists who have subverted media representations demonstrating how British Muslim youth are reinventing their religiosity and sense of citizenship were also left unstudied.

The author's arguments are not helped by his overly self-referential style and unnecessary detours into personal biography, which perhaps could have been justified if there had been greater similarities between her life experiences (however rich and interesting) and the respondents interviewed. The text is also marred by an uncritical reproduction of such oxymoronic conjunctions as "Islamic Terrorism" (p. 17) and various factual errors, among them that the Ka'bah is "an important shrine of the Islamic world" (p. 6), Nazir Ahmed becoming a peer of the House of Lords in 1988 (this occurred in 1998; p. 149), and the apparent suggestion that Indian scholar Yoginder Sikand is a Muslim (he is from a Hindu background; p. 152). Also, the glossary fails to explain that the frequently used acronym PBUH means "Peace Be upon Him," the customary salutation made after mentioning Prophet Muhammad's name. Thus, even though the book does contain some commendable insights, in my opinion it remains a missed opportunity.

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