

Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home, and Belonging

Haideh Moghissi and Halleh Ghorashi, eds.

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This excellent edited collection unpicks and disputes multifarious and intricate processes that underpin the homogenization, otherization, and vilification of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, Muslim citizens, and individuals with a Muslim cultural background in the group of countries known as “the West.” It does so through presenting a selection of essays that offer an insight into the localized, day-to-day realities of people whose lives are currently defined by their link to Islam. The focus on gender, home, and belonging emphasizes the particular challenge faced by Muslim women: Their bodies are the battleground for the ideological wars fought by western governments on the one hand, and by political Islamists on the other (pp. 30-31).

At the same time, media outlets and governmental policies portray and essentialize all Muslims as a single, uniform community defined exclusively by their Muslimness, thereby ignoring any of their differences based on “national origin, rural-urban roots, class, gender, language, lifestyle and degree of religiosity, as well as political and moral conviction” (p. 2). As all of the essays demonstrate, these concerns about representation remain valid, despite the critiques of historical and contemporary orientalism published by Edward Said over thirty years ago notwithstanding: *Orientalism* (1979) and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981).

The collection is a result of two conferences held in Toronto (2006) and Amsterdam (2008) to discuss these issues. It is organized around four themes: discourse, organizations, and policy; sexuality and family; youth; and space and belonging. The first theme is represented by different perspectives from the Netherlands, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Halleh Ghorashi analyzes the disempowering effects of supposedly “empowering courses” for immigrant women of Muslim backgrounds and indicates how women themselves critique the terms on which such courses are delivered. Fauzia Erfan Ahmed writes about the deteriorating situation for female American Muslim community leaders who are forced into silence despite a long history of female leadership since the time of slavery. Cassandra Balchin’s chapter focuses on Muslim women’s refusal to cede the discourse of their legal rights to both the governments and to patriarchal males within Muslim communities, who are

avored as consultation partners by British policymakers operating within a multicultural framework.

The second theme, sexuality and family, is discussed in the context of Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Anne Sofie Roald considers a potentially problematic situation regarding religious marriage and divorce in Sweden, where the former is conducted by religious associations but the latter is administered by the state. Fataneh Farhani provides a detailed cultural analysis of accounts of Iranian-born women living in Sweden, identifying such themes as the experience of exoticization/eroticization by Swedish lovers, dilemmas regarding intimate relationships with Swedish men, and sociocultural comparisons. Vida Nassehi-Behnam's chapter documents United Kingdom-based Iranian women's successful strategies related to relocating and gaining financial independence. She indicates that women's improved status within the family and the community has resulted in more egalitarian relationships in both. Haideh Moghissi, in her chapter on Canadian Muslims, comes to similar conclusions: a family's economic situation conditions its process of adjustment and, consequently, impacts on intra-family relations.

All three chapters contributing to the third theme, youth, discuss issues faced by contemporary Muslim youth. Thijl Sunier, who looks at Dutch Muslim youth, challenges the tendency of portraying young Muslims in Europe through the lens of an identity crisis. Instead, he argues that they are agents of their own religious experience within the context of a post-9/11 politicization of religious issues. David Thurffjell's discussion of Muslim youth contends that they are forced to choose between embracing a radical interpretation of Islam or of abandoning Islam altogether. Sepideh Farkhondeh delivers an excellent problematization of the lives of young French women with a Muslim background. She points to a complex interplay between the experiences of young displaced men and the treatment of women with a combination of racism, mass unemployment, and violence as a background.

The interlocked concepts of space and belonging are the basis for the fourth and final theme. In their compelling chapter, Marjo Buitelaar and Femke Stock maintain that Dutch Muslims face an identity dilemma: they are not considered fully legitimate citizens in either the Netherlands or in their homelands, which leads to their alienation and ambivalence about belonging. Martin de Koning complements this picture by indicating a great deal of hypocrisy in the Netherlands' public attitude toward Islam, and more widely in Europe, in that only Muslims are constructed as incompatible with "Dutch values" (which presumably include secularism and democracy) on the basis of some imams' controversial views on such issues as homosexuality, despite the fact that orthodox Protestants are equally vociferous about them. In the

final chapter, Jacqueline Ismael and Shereen Ismael examine the experiences of Iraqi immigrants in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Jordan. They focus on those who left prior to the 2003 invasion and document how Iraqis in the diaspora construct their memories of home through folk culture.

The publication conveys the complex experiences of Muslims in “western” countries where they constitute a minority by providing detailed, analytic accounts of their lived realities, the challenges they face, and, often, how they manage and overcome their difficulties. Many chapters, for example Farkhani’s, Balchin’s, Farkhondeh’s, Buitelaar and Stock’s, and Moghissi’s, demonstrate clearly that Muslim women who participated in their research effectively defy the stereotype of silent, passive women who are prevented from exerting their agency by patriarchal religious men; however, these essays are careful and nuanced in that they identify creative and original strategies developed by these women to negotiate their multi-layered identities.

As the co-editor Ghorashi writes, the chapters encourage the reader to “reflect upon the process of inclusion and exclusion in our societies” (p. 215), for they provide an insight into not only experiences of Muslims in the “West,” but draw the reader’s attention to contradictory tendencies in “western” societies, in particular their continuing self-perceptions as cradles of such Enlightenment values as tolerance and the freedom of speech and religion on the one hand, and, on the other hand, their discrimination and hostility toward the Muslim “other.”

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