

**Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds:
Storied Lives of Immigrant
Muslim Women**

Parin Dossa

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. 192 pages.

Parin Dossa's book on the lives of Canadian Muslims provides insight into the personal stories of women who must grapple with disability in their daily lives. It is, therefore, located at the intersection of race, gender, and disability studies and has broad social implications.

In her introduction, Dossa discusses the 1967 change in Canadian immigration policies that made immigration easier for a pool of skilled laborers needed to fill jobs in the economy. Though this search for skilled labor is posited as objective, these policies are biased as regards the relative value of different bodies. Disabled bodies are valued less in this system. Racial biases make the situation of racialized disabled people even more difficult. Dossa's project seeks to investigate the experience of a racialized body in a world that disables. To counter this external lack of value, the women featured create an alternative space of self-value through storytelling.

Dossa introduces the reader to storytelling and in-depth interviewing as a methodology in the first chapter of the book. The chapter continues with the author's connection to disability studies due to a personal tragedy and her critique of vocational centers that are more focused on providing jobs to able-bodied people than services to disabled people. A section on diasporic communities delves into the diasporic issues of Iranian Muslim women and South Asian Muslim women from East Africa. Dossa then traces the history of medicalizing disability, a process that pathologizes the disabled body and posits it as a helpless victim. The reader is informed, however, that there are competing theories in which disability is not within the individual but rather is a function of the socioeconomic system. From this perspective, disabled people are primarily citizens with rights. A surprising and thought-provoking revelation made toward the end of the chapter is that feminist theorists have not discussed disabled women. The Canadian Muslim women featured in the book are thus othered in multiple ways and excluded from many discourses.

At this point Dossa focuses on the lives of specific women impacted by disability identity. The second chapter concentrates on life experience of Mehrun, a forty-eight year old Ugandan émigré who has lived in Canada for

twenty-eight years and has polio. Upon migrating to Canada she inherited a disability identity that superseded all others. Mehrun explores her multiple identities in Uganda as a member of the mosque community, a chaperone on her sister's dates, and an English tutor. Once in Canada, her family dynamics shifted as she was hospitalized in order to free her father to enter the wage labor force. The chapter discusses her moves through multiple housing situations, as well as the competition with other disabled residents for the caretakers' attention and the lack of social interaction with the wider community. Her disability identity inhibits Mehrun's professional opportunities, for although she is a qualified social worker she cannot find work. Despite the challenges she faces, Mehrun's family and her involvement in various service organizations, both of which have spiritual significance, provide meaning and are sources of self-value.

Tamiza, a mother of two disabled children, is the subject of the third chapter. The reader follows Tamiza's experience from the moment she learned that her first child had a disability. Tamiza purposefully integrates her children into the socio-religious community and emphasizes her son's service to it, based on her view that disabled people are whole people with different abilities. Conversely, according to her, society perpetuates the interpretation of a disabled child as a tragedy and thus makes his/her life seem a priori tragic. Tamiza's story posits religious identity as an alternative identification for disabled people.

A short discussion of storytelling as a methodology serves as an introduction to the fourth chapter's focus on the life story of Firouzeh, a woman who was paralyzed as a child in Iran after being hit by a car. In order to support herself she learned to sew and eventually moved to a bigger city to work in a factory. She met and married a disabled man and raised four sons with him. The focus of the chapter is the stress of immigration on her life. After she moves to Canada to join her husband, Firouzeh is shocked by how much he has changed through the experience of migration. It is as though the experience of being an immigrant has made him aware of and uncomfortable with his disabled status. Firouzeh has a very difficult time and yet finds value in religion and her socially valorized role as a mother.

The final chapter brings into sharp relief the damaging ways in which immigrant bodies are categorized. For example, Sara's status changed from the ideal immigrant the state wishes to reward to the undeserving immigrant who is a drain on the system due to an accident that left her disabled. Her conversational mode of speaking makes her story more powerful. The fact that she escaped an abusive marriage in Iran before she was granted refugee

status provides an example of the complexities of a disabled person's life. Yet the institutional indifference to her pain is galling.

The conclusion of the book highlights the need for interdisciplinary studies of disability, race, and gender. Muslim identity has assumed various forms for the women presented in this book. Yet the possibility of an identity that supersedes the disabling identity is crucial. The relationships that these women are able to forge and the telling of their stories are empowering. Scholars of Islam, gender, and disability studies could all benefit from this book, for it provides an important and necessary voice to a group that continues to be marginalized. The text itself is another level of affirmation for these stories and opens up an alternative space for discourse.

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