Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity

Shahnaz Khan
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Shahnaz Khan's study of Muslim female identity in Canada is a worthy contribution to the literature on Muslim experiences in the West. She explores how women negotiate their identities in-between the polarized discourses of Orientalism and Islam by occupying a hybridized third space. This third space is not only the site of resistance to the dominant Islamic and Orientalist prescriptives of Muslim female identity, but a starting point for Muslim women to engage in individual and collective projects to re-map and reconfigure their identities in a process of cultural, political, and economic empowerment. Khan argues that progressive politics by and for Muslim women are possible only from this hybridized location. Her study elucidates this third space's dynamics by examining the dialectic between the personal narratives of culturally diverse Canadian Muslim women and the political space they inhabit.

In her introduction, Khan locates herself as a Muslim feminist intellectual who does not practice but is influenced by Islam, as well as Orientalist, multiculturalist, and feminist discourses. In order to move away from essentialist notions of "Muslim," Khan clarifies that she uses the term to reveal the fluidity and diversity of expressions associated with being Muslim, including its use in both a religious and non-religious context.

In chapter 1, Khan draws on the work of various social theorists to rupture the notion of a homogenous, static, and authentic culture. She does this by emphasizing cultural fluidity, permeability, and shifting boundaries. Resisting and challenging the former serves as the premise of what is termed *the third space*, whereby hybridized identities are constructed from a wide and even contending range of influences, such as eastern and western cultural forces and religion. For Muslim women, Khan outlines how the third space disavows colonial authority and forbids the reign of dominant narratives of either Islam (which legitimates patriarchal authority through sacred texts) or Orientalism (which represents Muslims as the pejorative "Other"). This third space allows Muslim women to negotiate, resist, and reinvent the forces informing their realities.

In the next few chapters, the personal narratives of 14 Muslim women elucidate how Muslim women negotiate their own identities as they confront racism and Islamophobia in the broader community, and sexism and

conservatism within the Muslim community. Khan indicates that these predetermined signifiers are inherent contradictions in the lives of Muslim women – contradictions that they struggle to resolve within the third space. Chapter 2 overviews her selection of the women interviewed and outlines her rationale. Chapter 3 focuses on the lives of three women who reconcile their contradictions by disavowing Islam. Although they no longer identify themselves as Muslim, or have converted to another religion, Khan maintains that they nevertheless still encounter and enact a Muslim identity.

The women interviewed in chapter 4, on the other hand, clearly identify themselves as Muslim. Their hybridized identities are constructed by their experiences with racism in the mainstream and sexism in the Muslim community. Khan associates their experiences with ambivalence and emotional dissonance, which she identifies as key ingredients for entry into the third space. In chapter 5, the narratives of other women who position their politics within an Islamic framework are highlighted. These women resolve the contradictions and sexism they experience by highlighting the emancipatory and transformative potential of Islamic doctrine and practice.

In her conclusion, which weaves together all of the interviewees' narratives, Khan revisits the notion of hybridity and the third space as the mixing that occurs in contemporary diasporic communities at the intersection of contradiction and ambivalence. She indicates that Muslim women engage in the third space daily through resisting and contesting the regulatory pressures of Orientalist stereotypes and Islamic dictates. The hybrid and dynamic notion of Muslim identity, she writes, is a reality of the postmodern and postcolonial world, as it very deliberately enables Muslim women to engage in progressive politics.

The expressive and forceful reflections of the 14 women interviewed strengthen Khan's exploration of negotiated identities, particularly as their narratives are centered in the study. Her ethnographic research is both an original and necessary contribution to unmask the very real resistance, tension, and ambiguity making up the lived realities of Muslim women. She offers a solid theoretical framework on hybridized identities and the third space, and successfully disrupts the dominant stereotypical epithets imposed on Muslim women.

In her location of the third space, however, Muslim women appear to negotiate their identities *equally* between the two hegemonic discourses of Islam and Orientalism. Although presented as contrasting poles, Islam and Orientalism are in fact positioned as "collaborative partners" in their mutual goal to dominate the identity of Muslim women. Hence Khan makes no

distinction between the racism, epistemic privilege, and imperialist motivations that inform Orientalism versus what appears as her own personal impressions and understandings of Islam's sexism and patriarchy.

In this regard, Islam as a holistic faith system is reduced to a set of rigid and static social regulations and prescriptives on female roles and behaviors. By fragmenting Islam into a "rules book" or a regulatory system, Khan negates the ontological, eschatological, and axiological foundations of this faith system that informs and influences the lives and identities of women in multiple ways: psychologically, mentally, physically, morally, and spiritually. Perhaps this disconnect, very consistent in the feminist analysis of Islam and Muslim women, explains why Khan and other (mainly) liberal feminists, underestimate the potential and possibilities of Muslim women to challenge sexist practices in their societies within an emancipatory Islamic framework.

In her analysis, then, Muslim identity is more socially than religiously constructed. This makes it difficult to isolate the religion of Islam from the complex social and cultural practices of Muslims, who may contradict, if not violate directly, Islamic teachings. For example, she shows how the women in her study disavowed Islam by rejecting various practices, such as the different rules for girls and boys in terms of dating, mobility, and education; being in an abusive relationship; not being allowed to wear jeans and western clothing; secluding Muslim women at home; prohibitions on working outside the home; and the control and restrictions imposed on Muslim women by their fathers and brothers. These practices, identified by Khan as falling in the orbit of Islamic hegemony, cannot be challenged only by Islamic principles, but resistance to them may very well fall within the purview of religious obligation. But Khan conveniently skirts a rigorous analysis of what is and what is not part of the Islamic religious discourse, since Muslim identity is taken up in both religious and nonreligious terms.

This approach is fraught with problems and contradictions. For instance, Islam is implicated in sexist and patriarchal customs that may have no religious legitimacy and may in fact be pre-Islamic practices and/or equally widespread in many non-Muslim societies. In other words, even when you remove the "Muslim" element, sexist customs and practices will most likely remain intact. Certainly one can argue that many Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh women have similar experiences as regards dress restrictions and mobility outside the home. Therefore, pinpointing these experiences as distinctively "Muslim" is erroneous and misleading. If one were interested in identifying the *particular* Islamic influence around such a practice, then qualifying it as

"Muslim" or "Islamic" warrants an analysis of its distinct theological underpinnings. However, because the *religious* identity of being a Muslim, literally means to submit to God, is conflated with a non-religious identity, than the term *Muslim* gets appropriated and implicated easily and widely in a consortium of sloppy and ill-defined ways.

Irrespective of these shortcomings, Khan offers a valuable and engaging contribution to the multiple experiences of Muslim women living in the West. By adopting an anti-colonial and anti-racist lens, Khan's critical approach to analyzing Muslim experiences is long overdue and sets a positive example for future scholarly work in this field. More importantly, her study cements the strength of ethnographic research and thereby sets a good example of the poignancy in centering women's narratives in academic research.

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