

Young Muslim America: Faith, Community, and Belonging

Muna Ali

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 360 pages.

Muna Ali's *Young Muslim America* is a multi-layered, multi-disciplinary work that delivers a snapshot of American Muslim life, grounded in history and theory. She begins by saying she is looking at individual narratives embedded in a larger narrative "about being and belonging, about identity politics in a globalizing world where grand narratives of national and civilizational histories, secularism, and global wars are summoned" (4). The idea of "narrative" is repeated because it signals a primary methodological approach of the book, where narratives are seen as full of information used to navigate social realities (5).

Ali's first chapter focuses on her method. She describes her work as not having a stable research site—she is working in two cities and on the internet—but helps the reader to understand how she is able to turn that instability into a strength. She is constantly questioning assumptions and engaging with her informants in new ways. This chapter does not just de-

scribe but models her work for us, as she weaves together narratives from her informants, theory, and historiography to tell a larger story. Her approach in this chapter is mirrored to great effect throughout the remainder of the book.

The second chapter of the book is a brief account of the history of Muslims in America. It is a concise overview of current scholarship. Ali has to sift through a large amount of work in the field and distill this to what is necessary to move her own project forward. As a result, the chapter fits well into the scope of the book, but should not be read as a standalone history of Muslims in America. (These comments are not a critique, but are observations about the way the book is structured.)

The next chapter deals with questions of “identity crisis” in a manner notable for its depth and clarity. Her review of the literature around identity is both broad and deep, as she explores the relationship between individual and social identities. She also encourages the reader to reconsider the analytical utility of “identity” as a category, or if “identification” is more meaningful. Here readers also see how she integrates narratives from her informants, narratives from written/spoken sources, and her own analysis. For example, she looks at how Zuhdi Jasser and Eboo Patel understand American Muslim youth development. Jasser is considered by many scholars to be part of the Islamophobia industry in America, and she examines his 2011 congressional testimony about radicalization among Muslim youth. Patel is founder of the Interfaith Youth Corps, and his memoir of founding the organization is the source for Ali’s intervention (53). Rather than focus on individual aspects in these cases, Ali is focused on the broader tensions reflected in her examples which contribute to forming an American Muslim identity. She balances the need to discuss figures that are currently newsworthy without focusing on the personal or the present.

Ali’s fourth chapter engages discourses around “pure” and “cultural” Islam. Her analysis creates a rich conversation among various thinkers, cutting across multiple disciplines. Where she makes a strong intervention is in arguing that self-described “liberal” Muslims use culture talk, as described by Mahmood Mamdani, to deploy a sense of identity, as much as “conservative” Muslims and non-Muslims do. This complication in how we perceive of culture talk adds nuance to American Muslim narratives. The chapter includes a concise review of the relationship amongst religion, secularism, and the secular. All these elements generate the conclusion that a notion of “pure” Islam is ahistorical and that a “Muslim culture” is always tied to space and place.

Chapter 5 offers a review of Islamophobia and the Islamophobia Industry in America, particularly post-9/11. Ali mobilizes a variety of sources in this chapter (including popular culture) to give readers a detailed sense of the issues at play. This chapter is probably the most descriptive of the chapters in the book. It seems like a pivot in the book's structure, from the debates in the American Muslim community she has discussed so far to the creative output from these debates to be considered in following chapters.

The sixth chapter starts bringing the various threads of earlier chapters together, including an explicit return to centering narrative. Ali takes the debates around labels like "immigrant" and "indigenous" Muslims seriously, and lays out the strengths and weaknesses of using the terminology. She sums up a broad range of issues and community self-perceptions in this debate, which she then leverages into addressing other debates in American Muslim communities, including questions of race and gender. Both of these areas are dealt with well, and point to how American Muslim communities are trying move beyond simple divisions. Her discussion on gender is particularly rich, and could be productively pursued further.

Chapter 7 offers a response to the question "is there a unique American Muslim culture?" Ali considers a variety of cultural interventions, from literature, music, politics, and sports, to demonstrate how Muslims contribute to American culture, and even go toward building a self-referential cultural space. Ali's effort in this chapter is not to assess these cultural productions but to lay out as much as she can, in to demonstrate the creative urge that is located in and shaped by contemporary America.

Ali's work is a welcome contribution to the study of Muslims in America, both for its substance and its method. She covers a large amount of information through a strong framework that keeps the material from becoming overwhelming. While she specifically signals questions of gender and race, she also incorporates diversity of interpretation organically in her informant narratives. She talks about various Shi'i perspectives (Ithna'ashari, Isma'ili, Bohra, and Zaydi) as part of the American Muslim experience, without marking them as internal "Others." While not an introductory textbook, this book is a good introduction to the issues facing American Muslims which incorporates a wide array of disciplines and sources. It should be a valuable option for use in Islam in America classes.

Hussein Rashid
Adjunct Faculty, Department of Religion
Lang College, The New School