

## **The Muslimah Who Fell to Earth: Personal Stories by Canadian Muslim Women**

*Saima S. Hussain, ed.*

*Toronto: Mawenzi House, 2016. 181 pages.*

Prompted by a chance encounter with a colleague who had commented that Samia Hussain was the only Muslimah she knew – in a city in which about 12% of the population is Muslim – the author reached out across Canada to assemble an edited collection of autobiographical essays by Canadian Muslimahs: *The Muslimah Who Fell to Earth: Personal Stories by Canadian Muslim Women*. She asked them to “share their personal experiences relating to what it meant for them to be Canadians and Muslims, to tell readers details about their lives, their concerns, and their aspirations” (p. 2).

Hussain made “considerable effort to reflect the diversity of Canada’s Muslim population” (p. 2), recounting at a book launch how she approached strangers on the street to ask them to contribute. This effort, which surely led to the inclusion of people who might otherwise have been left out, is also the source of my only minor criticism: Inviting women who are not normally writers to write their own stories gives the book a slightly uneven quality. I wish that Hussain had taken a stronger role as editor and tidied up those pieces that are a bit choppy, hard to follow due to missing elements, or end abruptly without a seeming conclusion. Of course, that is also the beauty of the collection, for writers normally already have some kind of public presence. Bringing out the voices of ordinary Muslimahs so that readers can “meet” women they would not otherwise meet is a gift of bridge building.

The title of the book comes from Munirah Maclean’s chapter of the same name. British-born Maclean relates her arrival in Canada six months after her conversion, pledge to her Naqshbandi sheikh, and marriage to a Canadian Muslim – all of which took place on the same day in Nicosia, Cyprus. Her story narrates honestly her struggles to fit into a small and tight Muslim community in Montreal, one dominated by revivalist Muslims and therefore generally hostile to Sufis and at a time when “terrorists were Irish” (p. 93) (she must have arrived in the 1970s, an unstated aspect I wish Hussain had clarified), and Muslims were an unknown but still foreign quantity not always treated nicely by wider Quebecois society. Sometimes, she laments, albeit with a twinkle, “I felt like an alien from another planet: ‘The Muslimah Who Fell to Earth.’” After surviving a snowstorm in a cabin without electricity, learning how to grow tomatoes, buy halal meat from a store in a shopping mall, have a bank account

and a driver's licence, Maclean "no longer felt like an alien. I was home, safe, among friends and the vibrant Canadian Ummah" (p. 97).

Of the twenty-one stories, some are more autobiographical than others. All of them recount in their unique ways these complex themes of belonging and exclusion highlighted in Macleans' story. Being a multicultural country with a very diverse Muslim population, the resulting internal diversity is a challenge not always easily managed. And such navigations take place in the wider context of suspicion, often hostility, of Muslims as the quintessential "outsider" group, all ensconced in the official Canadian discourse of "multiculturalism," "diversity," and "belonging to Canada no matter your origins." Different authors emphasize some of these themes over others.

The sheer diversity of the accounts defies easy summary in a short book review. There are three converts' stories (Macleans'; Kirstin Sabrina Dane's "Standing My Ground"; and Maria Cruz "Muslim Me"). Thirteen immigrant women wrote. Some of them arrived as children (Ferrukh Faruqi, "Vast Unknownables"; Laila Re, "Dreams of Kabul"; Carmen Taha Jarrah, "Finding God, Finding Me") or as adults (Hanan Abdulmalik, "Not so Black and White"; Ghazia Sirtaj, "For Better or For Worse"; Duaa al-Aghar, "The Story of My Life"; Jenna M Evans, "Like the Stones of a Mosaic"; Azmina Kassam, "A Muslim Woman's Perspective"; Yamine Mallick, "Brackish Water"; Mona Hashim, "Welcome to Toronto"; Sadia Khan, "Love for All, Hatred for None"; Zunera Ishaq, "My Journey with Niqab"; and Tammara Soma, "Embracing Islam in Canada"). The rest were born and raised in Canada (Maryam Khan, "Queering Islam through Ijtihad"; Lina Khatib, "Just Five Bucks"; Mariam Hamaoui, "A Matter of Prayer"; Ashi Munir, "No Suitable Boy"; and Meharoona Ghani, "Letters to Rumi").

Yet to divide the summary in this way does no justice to their stories, as each woman emphasized different aspects of her life. Nor really does the fact that these women were Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, and Ahmadi. Themes of resentment against patriarchal interpretations of Islam resonate across all groups. Some focused on their journeys to understanding their identity (e.g., ethnic, racial, and sexual). Some referred to struggles dealing with racism in Canada, whereas others presented happy stories of contentment, of feeling fulfilled by their religious practices, for challenges or loss of faith. Some offered harrowing stories of sexual or spousal abuse, the challenges related to their physical disabilities, mental or physical illnesses, and how they cope as Muslimahs. Some included stories of their parents or family background and how these impacted them while they were growing up or integrating into Canada.

Given the prevalent themes of how Muslims do not wish to integrate into Canadian society nor can they if they keep their “Muslim” values, it seems important to highlight how many of these diverse women admired the country – even in the face of having had negative experiences. Faruqi captures her love of Winnipeg and the surrounding countryside through a lyrical focus on describing nature and how “the great natural theatre of this infinite space speaks of eternity and the transcendence of God” (p. 16).

Abdulmalik ends her story by commenting on how she feels her Ethiopian heritage and upbringing in several countries fits right in with Canada: “[I]n becoming Canadian I find that I have continued the traditions of my ancestors: membership in a society that is based on shared space, shared values, common language, and a fundamental respect for diversity” (p. 39). Khatib’s narrative includes the frightening tale of her parents’ escape from Syria in the early 1980s and how that experience increased their love for Canadian freedoms, which they imparted to their children growing up in Toronto, despite the anti-Muslim racism that she has faced.

Kassam concludes her story feeling comforted that the multifarious influences on her life and identity seeking occurred in a “nation that by its very nature is expansive, multicultural, and diverse” (p. 106). Hamaoui focuses on her role in student activism organizing against protesters who wanted the Toronto District School Board to keep the Friday prayers off campus: At a rally a woman told her “‘Go back home, you don’t belong here.’ I simply responded by saying, ‘I do belong here, I was born here and raised in Canada.’ She got frustrated and walked away.”

Khan reflects upon the symmetry in “good qualities” between Canadians and Muslims: “I’m a Canadian now and I love this country as I love Pakistan. I thank Allah that I live in the best country in the world, where the health and education system [sic] are good and the people are nicer and friendlier.” Ishaq’s narrative revolves around her decision to wear niqab in Pakistan, to the surprise of her family and disapproval of the surrounding society. When she immigrated to Canada in 2008, she continued to wear it and attracted national attention for successfully taking then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s government to court for her right to take the citizenship oath while wearing it. In her own words: “I felt as if Allah had chosen us to be in Canada and live with the freedom and respect which was not offered in my own homeland. I still enjoy this freedom in Canada and I love to work among the wider community” (p. 168).

All this admiration is to be read along with the stories of others who have experienced being “pushed out” and alienated by mainstream negative

discourses of Islam and racist experiences (i.e., a desire to integrate unaccepted by wider society). Among these people are Re, whose disappointment with negative media coverage about her native Afghanistan has made her question Canada; Evans, who worries that the country's diversity and tolerance that she appreciates is being undermined by anti-Muslim bigotry; and Hashim, who wonders if her admiration of Canadian freedom is being undercut by Islamophobia to the point where she and her children will no longer be safe.

As I say frequently, Muslimahs are a group much talked about, but little heard from. Hussain's collection is an important contribution to breaking that muffling barrier. The courage of the women to share their private lives with a wide ranging public is admirable. Thank you.

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