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Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora: Secularism, Religion, Representations

Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert, eds.
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Islam has been wrongly interpreted by representing it synonymous with terror and "the Muslim," as Hamid Dabashi maintains in *Norway: Muslims and Metaphors* (2011), "is a metaphor of menace, banality and terror everywhere" (p. 2). Consequently, Muslims in and beyond South Asia are being stigmatized by the newly constituted environment known in the western scheme of things as "Islamophobia." The state of disgrace and misery of Muslims continues to increase and is being facilitated by the biased ideas and thoughts propounded by some journalists and writers to construct often misleading and

one-dimensional images. This had led to Muslims being harassed, dishonored, and rebuked. The present book evinces their increasingly stereotyped and demonized portrayal.

Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora is a critical evaluation and analysis of representations of these Muslims in literature, the media, culture, and cinema. The essays highlight their diverse representations and the range of approaches to questions concerning their religious and cultural identity as well as secular discourse. In addition they contextualize the depictions against the burgeoning post-9/11 artistic interest in Islam and against cultural responses to earlier crises in the Subcontinent, including the 1947 partition, the 1971 war and subsequent secession of Bangladesh, the 1992 Ayodhya riots, the 2002 Gujarat genocide, and the ongoing tension in Indian-occupied Kashmir.

The book contains thirteen chapters divided almost into four equal sections that are aptly titled and followed by references and an index. In the introduction, editors Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert comprehensively present these representations by quoting various scholars to explore the existing stereotypes.

The first section comprises three chapters that examine key concepts and issues in framing and self-fashioning Muslim identities and cultures. In the first chapter, "The Making of a Muslim," Tabish Khair highlights some powerful reflections on six incidents from his life that combine public events with personal history in order to explore Muslim identity fashioning. The next chapter, Anshuman A. Mondal's "Representations of Young Muslims in Contemporary British South Asian Fiction," cross-examines recent literary fiction by setting literary representations of young Muslims, principally those produced by writers of South Asia and Muslim heritage writing in English, but also those from other Muslim backgrounds as well as by non-Muslim writers. The section ends with "Before and Beyond the Nation," in which Lindsey Moore adumbrates the many coordinates shared by female South Asian Muslim and Arab Muslim writers.

The next section contains four chapters that focus on the literary explorations of experiences and histories of cultural intermingling in (and among) India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the western diaspora. Muneeza Shamsie's "Restoring the Narration" highlights the cultural and artistic relationship between Spain and South Asia by analyzing how the English-language poetry and fiction of contemporary South Asian writers of Muslim origin challenges the fractious rhetoric of the present. In "Music Secularism and South Asian Fiction," Caroline Herbert bases her assumptions on Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies* and tries to point out the relationship among music, memory,

and national identity. She also tries to examine what imaginative resources (e.g., music, history, and the interaction between music and fiction) might offer to our understanding of the minoritization of Muslim subjectives and of the shared histories of the Subcontinents' Muslim and Hindu cultures.

In *A Shrine of Words*, Rachel Farebrother seeks to synthesize two schools of criticism on the work of Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali by stressing his use of form and context in the troubled region of Kashmir, respectively, by focusing on repeated images of thresholds and sacred architecture in his *The Country without a Post Office*. The essay details Kashmir's long history of colonization, which began in 1586, and the fact that this reality has received little attention in the West. Thus, Srinagar became a city from where no news can come. In *Hamlet in Paradise*, Peter Morey explores Tariq Ali's description of Kashmir as "the unfinished business of Partition" and argues that Mirza Waheed's 2011 *The Collaborator* is characterized by a politics of procrastination that rejects the common positions of both India and Pakistan.

The third section is concerned with literary engagements with the politics of extremism that exists within and beyond the nation-state. In "Liberalizing Islam through the *Bildungsroman*," E. Rashid explores Ed Husain's *The Islamist,* which was shortlisted for the George Orwell Prize for the Best Political Writing in 2008. Rashid's examination caused him to argue that the *Bildungsroman* form of the memoir reflects the project of reforming British Islamism into structures of secular-liberalism. The author ends by arguing that "*The Islamist* does not offer a straightforward blueprint for the political reform. Instead, it is concerned with the anxious relationship between political reform and narrative re-form.

In "Enchanted [R]ealms, [S]ceptical [P]erspectives," Madeline Clements explores the Islamic affiliations and affinities mapped by Rushdie's post-9/11 fiction. Focusing on the transnational thriller, *Shalimar the Clown* inquires discursive, imaginative, or empathetic South Asian Muslim perspectives on geopolitical events. Claire Chambers uses Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* to explore Bangladeshi Islam, secularism, and the Tablighi Jamaat. Her essay concentrates on the young Bangladeshi state's gravitation toward the Islamic Right since the 1980s and Anam's representations of the Tablighi Jamaat (Society for the Propagation of Religion), a non-violent, apparently apolitical proselytizing Deobandi sect based on six foundational Islamic principles.

The final section centers upon the critique of the circulation of distorted images of Muslim subjects in the public domain in the West. Cara Cilano's *Saving Pakistan from Brown Men* argues that the pervasiveness of both the savior's and the victim's stances throughout representations of Benazir Bhutto's political career and "Pakistan's last best hope democracy." Shamira

A. Meghani discusses contemporary British and North American discourses on diasporic South Asian Muslims and same-sex desire and identity in her "Queer South Asian Muslims." In the final chapter, "After 9/11: Islamophobia in Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses and Burnt Shadows*," Aroosa Kanwal details how Shamsie's novels confront the negative international attitudes toward Muslims and Islam, and accordingly points out the widespread misrepresentation of Islam and South Asians.

The book is about (1) imagining Muslim identities and cultures on the basis of the literary, cinematic, and media representations of the disputed category of the South Asian Muslims and (2) the imaginings of authors with detailed and nuanced understandings of Muslim identities and cultures who, in many cases, seek to write reply to media distortions. The essays have been interwoven specifically to reveal how Muslims have become caught up in the process of redefining what it means to be a Muslim and how Muslim representations have undergone a substantial change since the 1988 controversial publication of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and the 9/11 tragedy. But it does have its limitations, such as imagining Muslim representation in isolation and not interacting with the Islamic text in any really meaningful way.

Apart from some typographical errors, the book is a concise critical analysis of representations of South Asian Muslims. Therefore, it will be helpful for students, researchers, and academics interested in a variety of subjects to imagine the diversity of representations of Muslims and the range of approaches to questions of Muslim religious and cultural identities as well as secular discourse.

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