

**Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim
Female Identity in the Diaspora**

Shanaz Khan

United Kingdom: Women's Press, Ltd., 2002. 152 pages.

In this interesting book, *Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora*, Shanaz Khan challenges us to rethink static and fixed conceptions of Muslim women. She also points out that because

minority identities are fixed, women who happen to be Muslim are often forced to enter social and political spaces as Muslim women. Such restraints make it almost impossible to create a place for progressive politics, change, and fluid identities. As an anthropologist and observer, Khan pinpoints and focuses our attention on the situation currently facing Muslim women in the West, particularly in Canada. As a Muslim and a woman, she has located a space in which progressive politics and change may take place.

Borrowing mainly from the work of Homi Bhabha, Khan calls for moving from fixed and static notions of Muslim women into what Bhabha refers to as the “third space,” from which hybrid identities can be constructed. The author argues that both Islam and Orientalism, the two dominant discourses from which ideas about Muslim women have been and are still articulated, have led to essentializing and idealizing our images of the Muslim woman. This is also true of feminism, which sees specific aspects of Islamic practice as oppressive to women and, therefore, the target of change; of colonialism and postcolonialism, which reinforce those stereotypes influenced by unequal power relationships between Euro-American and Muslim societies and that have an imperial history currently embedded in the neocolonial forms of control of other societies; and multiculturalism, which views the cultures and religions of nonwhite people as homogenous, unchanging, and unconnected to any social, political, and historical reality. All of these lenses through which the “others” are viewed contribute to this essentialization.

Moving beyond an extremely useful theoretical discussion structured by the concept of hybridized identities in the third space, Khan then incorporates a series of case studies that are categorized in a manner designed to showcase a variety of Muslim women’s attempts to construct an identity, live life, and challenge the norms of both the wider society and of the Muslim communities in which they live. This is done from a third space, one that they themselves might not even realize that they are occupying.

In the first set of cases we encounter women who, although they self-identify as Muslim, have largely disavowed Islam. However, they are still forced to negotiate their identity as “Muslim.” As a result, they are at odds with their families and communities, as well as with a wider society that forces them into a category with which they may not wish to be identified. In the second set, we meet women who have managed to construct hybrid identities and negotiate their lives in such hybrid spaces. At the same time, however, they accept the authority of monolithic notions of Islamic views regarding what the Muslim woman is supposed to be.

Finally, the third set of women accept their identities as Muslim and strive to conduct their lives within what their communities consider to be

Islamically appropriate behavior. However, they also recognize that, in practice, many aspects of Muslim behavior are sexist and unjust. Thus, these women choose to focus on the more spiritual and internal side of Islamic practice. In rejecting all manifestations of unjust treatment by others while still trying to perfect an ideal kind of Islamic spiritual practice, they have been able to negotiate and establish their own Muslim identities.

This book makes a strong contribution to an ongoing discussion of Islam's encounter with the West. However, it moves away from the Islam vs. the West dichotomy by locating several layers, both in the western perceptions of Muslim women and from within the Muslim community itself, that have been sites from which particular images of Muslim women have been constructed over time. This book makes an interesting theoretical argument and provides an important discussion of how Orientalism and Islam occupy opposite sides of the same coin by serving to create a very similar image of Muslim women.

Moreover, the case studies introduce us to specific examples of women constructing their own third spaces from which they are challenging notions of what it means to be a Muslim woman in Canada. With the growing interest in Muslim minorities in the West, a study located in Canada is an important contribution that allows us to move away from a focus on western Europe and the United States.

One area that Khan could develop further is her data (gathered during 1991-1992). Even though much remains the same in terms of how host countries position their Muslim immigrant communities, so much has changed as we have moved into the early twenty-first century. Her theoretical focus is still relevant, but updated data would greatly improve the discussion.

Khan is an expert at applying theory to case studies. Through this book, she makes an important contribution to studies of transnational religion, Muslim minority communities, gender, and post-colonialism. For anyone interested in these areas, this book is very useful.

Melissa D'Agostino
Ph.D. Candidate in Anthropology
The New School for Social Research, New York City, New York