

## **Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out**

*Fawzia Afzal-Khan, ed.*

*Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2005. 338 pages.*

Ever since the West's initial contact with the East, Muslim women have occupied center stage as highly politicized subjects who the West has claimed to liberate from the oppressive East and who the East has claimed to protect from the hedonistic West. Despite their central role as pawns in this political struggle, women have been strikingly silent subjects. This book belongs to an emerging collection of books that seek to give voice to these silent subjects. Nawal El Saadawi, in her emotionally charged "Foreword," captures the book's tone quite well in her expression that "the personal is political" (p. x). Through personal stories, this anthology seeks to dissociate Islam from both terrorism and the oppression of women. Fawzia Afzal-Khan's anecdotal introduction reveals that her goal is twofold: first, to connect various strands of conversation between Muslim American women from different backgrounds since 9/11, and, second, to enlighten both Muslim and non-Muslim readers of the varied realities of the "Muslim Woman."

This anthology is divided into six sections. Section 1, "Non-Fiction," contains several personal accounts of Muslim American women's encounters with 9/11. In her piece "Unholy Alliances," Afzal-Khan vents her frustration on several targets, including Israel, American foreign policy, Salman Rushdie, women who choose to wear the hijab, as well as the Montclair University Muslim Students' Association and the Global Studies Institute. Nadia Ali Maiwandi, Zohra Saed, and Wajma Ahmady reflect on the responses they encountered and experienced amidst the Afghan-American community in the aftermath of 9/11. Eisa Nefertari Ulen's genuinely tolerant article encourages Muslim and non-Muslim women to work together. Writing from her perspective as an African-American convert, she identifies issues of gender and religion as mere smokescreens used by the "oppressor" to separate women (p. 50). Humera Afridi's witty and refreshing work functions as a social commentary on the climate of New York City after the 9/11 attacks. One of the most edifying pieces is Rabab Abdulhadi's "Where is Home?" This piece, written as a series of journal entries, captures the struggles of identity faced by an exiled Palestinian woman as she tries to make a home in New York City in the aftermath of 9/11.

The second section consists of a collection of poems. Some are moving, powerful, and political, such as those of Suheir Hammad, and deal with the political scene post-9/11. Others are more introspective, like Mohja Kahf's "Little Mosque Poems," which look at inconsistencies within the American Muslim community. The third section, "Journalism," contains a collection of articles written for publication in the media or by journalists for this anthology. Nadirah Z. Sabir's contribution is a collection of articles published in her *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* column. These are the well-written reflections of an American Muslim woman on how 9/11 affected the United States and the global Muslim community. Positive responses from her readers are also included. At the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, these responses help counterbalance some of the collection's other writings that seem to imply that most Americans are intolerant of Muslims.

Section 4, "Religious Discourses," contains articles by Muslim women in academia. Azizah al-Hibri's article attempts to rescue Islam from culture in order to save its integrity. She oversimplifies the categories of "religion" and "culture," associating oppressive practices justified in the name of Islam as originally belonging to culture and then being superimposed on religion. This article also contains several factual errors. For instance, when discussing Job's story, (particularly with regards to his wife losing her faith and blaspheming and Job taking an oath to strike her as punishment), which she asserts is in the Qur'an, al-Hibri conflates the Hadith literature with the Qur'an by presenting the entire story as a Qur'anic paradigm. Kahf's entry is a well-written version of "pamphlet Islam." It is a good introduction of Islam for readers who only have access to mainstream American conceptions of Islam. Finally, the interview with Riffat Hassan is engaging and brings to light her clearly intolerant stand on what she considers "conservative" Islam, or at least of Muslim women "who choose to wear the hijab."

The last two sections are creative in nature. Section 5, "Fiction," contains short stories written by American Muslim women. Farah Qidwai's "Witness" is the rarely told story of an American Muslim woman's survival in New York City's suddenly hostile post-9/11 environment. Section 6 contains plays. Maniza Naqvi's "That Sarah Aziz!" comes across as a thinly veiled attack against women who choose to wear the hijab. Betty Shamieh's "Chocolate in Heat" helps convey this anthology's message for Muslim women – "Arab American" is not a monolithic category.

While the book seeks to reveal the complexity of the "Muslim Woman" category, some voices are genuinely tolerant, whereas others, although calling for tolerance, pluralism, and acceptance of their own positions, are intolerant.

erant of more conservative perspectives. For instance, women who wear the hijab are subjected to a great deal of demonization and essentialization (pp. 16, 25, and 293). But to its credit, this anthology also contains articles by Muslim women who consider their hijab a defining aspect of their identity. In addition, it should be noted that many of the entries are written from a perspective of victimization. While this perspective is important, as it affirms the experience of victimization felt by some Muslims in the United States post-9/11, it is also problematic, since it is sometimes forced – especially when vastly different experiences of oppression are conflated to seem comparable. An example of this is found in Afzal-Khan’s article, where she equates what she perceives to be the oppression of women by conservative Islam with the occupation of Palestine (p. 25).

Despite its shortcomings, this book is an important contribution to the anthropological study of an emerging Muslim American identity, as it captures many cultural and identity-forming moments. It is also a valuable resource for mainstream readers, for whom this book will no doubt shatter preconceived notions regarding the oppression of Muslim women.

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