

## **Caravanserai: Journey among Australian Muslims**

*Hanifa Deen*

*Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2003. 400 pages.*

A caravanserai was an inn where travelling Muslim merchants would gather at night to relax after a hard day's journey, share meals, and tell stories to each other. These themes of travelling and storytelling set the scene for Hanifa Deen's wonderful book about these people, who, originally travellers themselves, arrived on the continent around the eighteenth century. Moreover, the book is a story of Deen's journey around Australia to collect the stories of her fellow Muslim compatriots.

*Caravanserai* was originally published in 1995. The impetus behind the book was Deen's sense during the first Gulf War (1991) that Muslims in Australia did not have a human face – they were known by the general public only through negative stereotypes. She sought to tell some of their stories to show that Muslims, just like any other group, were human

beings who “mow their lawns, are preoccupied with losing weight, worry about their jobs and mortgages, play sport, swap jokes or tell their children bedtime stories” (p. 8). She set out across Australia to collect their stories.

At the time, Deen found that Muslims were making their way in Australia, becoming more accepted by the wider community and established as one of many others in Australia’s multiethnic, multireligious society. The 9/11 tragedy changed all that, and Muslims in Australia, as in other western countries, found themselves treated as “enemy aliens.” Believing that the clock had been set back, the author felt an urgent need to retrace her steps to find out how her country’s Muslim communities were faring. The result of the second journey appears as part 4, and its three long chapters make up nearly one-third of the book.

Deen writes that she was asked time and again what kind of book she was writing and, surprisingly, found that answering this question was rather difficult. As she travelled, met people, and collected their stories, the style of *Caravanserai* emerged: part storytelling and part commentary. This combination has served her well, for her renditions of her interviewees’ stories are beautifully written. She describes the people she meets, the scene and ambiance of their meeting, and her thoughts and emotions as she retells their stories. She writes so well that I often felt that I was in the room with her, interacting with the people around her. This was all the more poignant for me, since I am an Australian from Perth, like her, but who became Muslim only after emigrating to Canada. Deen’s stories connected me with the Muslim community in Australia that I have never known.

*Caravanserai* is not an academic book, but her commentary and insights into the state of the Muslim community are penetrating and therefore make the book exceedingly useful for any academic study of Muslims. Time and again I found myself nodding at her analysis of the situation of Muslims in Australia, since they echoed with academic observations of Muslims in North America and Europe: the different strands of Islamic practice and belief; the infighting and turf wars; the struggles with keeping an Islamic identity in a secular, multicultural environment that is largely hostile to Islam even as it promotes tolerance and multiculturalism; and the immigrants’ struggles to settle into their new abode.

On the other hand, her descriptions of Muslims show that Muslim communities in the West are not uniformly the same. I was fascinated by her description of Eid al-Adha in Lakemba, the largest Muslim community in

Australia. Located in suburban Sydney, this predominately Lebanese-Australian community gathered from dawn on the street facing the mosque:

Flocks of young men stood around like peacocks or, from time to time, cruised a little, posed a little, and sent out their messages in non-verbal code. What resembled the old 1940s zoot suit – wide padded shoulders, long jackets and trousers – came in the most amazing hues: deep purples, brilliant emerald greens, mustard yellows and oleander pinks. Lebanese boys, with their modish hair styles and shiny shoes, displayed a style of formal dressing that I had not seen en masse for many a year – “cool” was everywhere. (p. 162)

Carpets are brought outside for the overflow from the mosque to pray on, and a village-like festival occurs. Non-Muslim Australians are gathered on their balconies, watching the spectacle.

The last section of the book, written after 9/11, has an entirely different tone from the rest of the book. Deen explores how a gang rape case in Sydney, in which 14 Lebanese-Australian boys gang raped seven white girls, became a lightning rod for Islamophobia, as part of the backlash by non-Muslim Australians to 9/11 and the Bali bombings. Australia’s mainstream society and media presented this incident as an example of what is wrong with Arab and Muslim culture. And, Muslim voices condemning the rapes were treated as suspect. The book closes with a distressing picture of how Australia treats its refugees: They are put into mandatory detention center surrounded by barbed wire and called by numbers rather than their names (not surprising, given that these centers are operated by a for-profit company that runs prisons in the United States).

Although Deen is still telling stories in this section, the commentary aspect has a stronger hand and, in fact, overshadows the storytelling aspect evoked by a caravanserai. The commentary is a rather harsh analysis of Australian society and its seeming inability to deal humanely with its Muslim citizens. The book’s initial goal of showing the Muslims’ human face is somewhat lost in these last pages – here the aim is to try and sensitize a community that is going down a racist track to the sufferings of Muslims. However, her tone may well alienate well-meaning, but ignorant, white Australians and undo the bridges built through the first part of the book.

I thoroughly recommend *Caravanserais* to anyone interested in Muslims in the West.

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