

January 2011

## Book Review: Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia

Peliwe P. Mnguni

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Mnguni, Peliwe P. (2011). Book Review: Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 12(1), 196-199.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol12/iss1/19>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

***Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia*. 2010**

Shahram Akbarzadeh, ed. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press (Islamic Studies Series 5). 196 pages. \$39,99 (Paperback). ISBN 978-0-522-85715-3

Reviewed by Peliwe P. Mnguni<sup>1</sup>

*Challenging Identities* is a comprehensive text that explores the experiences of Muslim women in Australia. The book is located within the post 'September 11' and 'Bali bombings' context. This is a time during which Muslims came under increasing and often hostile scrutiny from various sections of the global community. The 'condition' of Muslim women became a rallying point for all sorts of causes and at times served to mask what were often strong prejudicial views against Islam. Whereas non-Muslims, and some Muslim women, tend to problematise many aspects of the Muslim culture, particularly gender dynamics, there has been, over the years, an increase in the number of Muslim voices that seek to offer counter-narratives to popular representations of Muslim women as either hapless victims of patriarchy or willing co-participants in the oppression of women.

*Challenging Identities* is one such text. It tells the story of Muslim women in Australia through Muslims women's voices. A recurring theme throughout the book is the question of who has the right to speak on Islam and/or on behalf of Muslim women. The authors problematise the tendency, principally by non-Muslims, to resort to simplifications of, and generalizations about what are often complex and contentious issues. They take exception to those who base their arguments on superficial understanding of the issues to pathologise and demonise Islam and the Muslim culture. For the authors in *Challenging Identities*, failure on the part of these commentators to appreciate the complexity that attends the experiences of Muslim women represents yet another form of negation and racism. Accordingly, the authors emphasise the need for the diversity of Muslim women's voices to be heard and for the diversity of their experiences to be meaningfully represented. The text underscores the need for commentators, even as they problematise aspects of Islam, to also remember and respect the fact that some Muslim women attach value and meaning to their religion. Many Muslim women make a conscious choice to live by their culture. They draw inspiration from and are empowered by their faith.

To ensure a broad and comprehensive enough view of Muslim women's experiences in Australia, the authors locate their analyses on various sites including mosques, airports, schools, places of work, sports and recreation activities. The range of topics covered in the book include the multiple meanings of the *hijab*, the process of converting to Islam for non-Muslim women, everyday racism, Muslim family law and divorce, multiculturalism and the dilemmas of speech for Muslim women. The key issues that the book grapples with include identity, inclusion and exclusion dynamics within both Muslim societies and the wider Australian society, as well as Muslim women's agency.

Upon reading the book, one gets a sense of a community, a culture and a religion under siege and under immense pressure to self-negate so that Muslims can gain conditional acceptance as 'real' Australians. One also gets the impression of an

---

<sup>1</sup> Peliwe Mnguni is a post doctoral fellow at the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa.

Australian society that has a profound sense of discomfort with difference. An underlying assimilationist psyche manifests as pressure for the 'other' not to insist on his or her particularity: but to suppress and deny it instead. The expectation that foreign nationals adapt to local cultures is of course not a uniquely Australian or western phenomenon. Muslim countries have similar expectations, if not outright demands, of foreign nationals on their lands. This begs the question then: at what point do these and similar expectations become racist?

Also evident in the book is the ease with which one can come across as insensitive, patronizing and disrespectful, when one chooses to speak on behalf of the 'other'. This applies to everyone, including Muslim scholars as they are just as capable of committing the same transgressions as non Muslims, when they decide to speak on behalf of the broader Muslim female population. A number of chapters in the book are based on research involving younger Muslim women. The presented narratives quite possibly do not represent the experiences of the older, less educated Muslim women, particularly those born overseas.

One of the strengths of the book is the effectiveness with which most authors use research data to support their claims. By highlighting parallels with other Western countries that have large Muslim populations, they facilitate an appreciation of the global nature of the phenomena being discussed. The authors also demonstrate reflexive capacities and acknowledge problematic gender relations within Islam, even as they defend the culture. This lends some balance to their arguments. There is always a risk, however, that counter-narratives like the ones presented in the book may end up being too oppositional and may inform self-idealisation. They, in the process, could help reinforce the very us-and-them dynamics they ostensibly want to change. That is, in asserting one's voice, one can end up silencing and negating others, the very thing one may be agitating against. Parts of the book tend to veer in this direction.

Akbarzadeh sets the tone for the rest of the text. She problematises the 'unwarranted obsession' with Muslim women's dress code and a tendency to view the *hijab* as the ultimate symbol of gender oppression. This interpretation ignores the fact that wearing a *hijab* can also be an act of both self-assertion and defiance. Akbarzadeh's piece offers a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple meanings of the *hijab*, its many (mis)conceptions, the many motivations behind a decision to wear or not to wear a *hijab* and the various interpretations of this act, by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Hussain locates her analysis within the Mosque as a critical socio-cultural institution for Muslims. She explores some of the inclusion and exclusion dynamics observed within this institution in Australia. While she takes issue with the tendency of Western feminists to want to 'remake the Islamic world in their own image' (p. 13), Hussain acknowledges that there is, 'unfortunately', a lot that amounts to discrimination against women within Islam, as currently practiced. Language, another marker of identity, is introduced as an issue in both the integration of Muslims into Australian culture and in inter-generational dynamics within the Muslim community. What Hussain fails to do, however, is to explore the complexities of the issues that she raises. For example, her analysis would have been enriched by a critical reading of what using English in Mosques might mean for the identity of Muslims in Australia, and the continued survival of their culture. Similarly, considering the prevailing hostility towards

the religion at the time of the research, and a pre-occupation with mosques as sites for planning acts of terrorism, one wonders about the real motivations behind funding the survey of Imams. Could it have been also a form of, or attempt at surveillance?

In Chapter 3, Turner examines the experience of converting to Islam. She evokes the closet metaphor, with its connotations of shame, secrecy and leading a double life, to illuminate the tensions and contradictions that attend the 'process and lived reality of converting' to Islam (p. 33). Describing the process as 'often messy and complicated' (p.33) Turner problematises the potential for psychological narratives in particular, to pathologise the individual convert and to understand the conversion as a symptom of a crisis. And yet, when reading the narratives of the two participants that inform Turner's argument, one gets a sense that when the participants began exploring the possibility of converting, they were at a cross-roads and were grappling with issues of identity and belonging. This suggests a need for both anthropological and psychological understandings rather than the either/or stance implicit in Turner's exposition.

While the terrorist attacks in New York and Bali are often used as reference points in discussions of anti-Muslim dynamics in recent times, Alia Imtoul reminds us that in fact, 'diasporic Muslim communities', particularly those who live within secular western societies, have been subjected to 'religious racism' for a long time. At the same time, however, Imtoul also points out that not all Australians are racist or anti-Muslim. Imtoul's primary focus is the mundane: the taken-for-granted everyday experiences of racism. These are 'a series of low-level but persistent incidents which, when assessed individually, (are) often considered too minor or insignificant to warrant formal complaint. So banal are some of the practices that it can at times be impossible to prove racism. Indeed, upon reading some of the interview data, one wonders whether some of the experiences are necessarily racist as suggested. For example, most work places have particular cultures that they, rightly or wrongly, expect all employees to fit into, irrespective of cultural background. Most job seekers ensure that they present themselves at interviews in a manner that is consistent with the organisational culture of the potential employer. Imatoul's effective use of interview data, as well as her ability to constantly highlight parallels between the experiences of Muslims and those of other victims of other forms of discrimination is likely to resonate for anyone who has ever found themselves in a position of an 'other'.

Anisa Buckley explores some of the sociocultural, legal and religious dilemmas that Muslim women confront when seeking divorce, both within Muslim countries and in western countries. She problematises a tendency by 'many western and secular' scholars to see Muslim family laws as inherently monolithically and exclusively patriarchal. She calls for complex and nuanced readings of gender dynamics within Muslim societies. Buckley highlights the fact that at times, Muslim women living in Western countries choose to observe Islamic family laws despite the them not being recognised by these countries. She also points out that the challenges that attend the divorce process are not unique to Muslim societies but are common amongst Orthodox Jews and other religious groups.

Shakira Hussein uses the binary of speech and silence to make sense of the contradiction between on the one hand, the marginalisation of Muslim women in many aspects of public life and the very central position they occupy in raging debates about Muslims in Australia on the other hand. She characterises the situation the women find

themselves in as a 'double bind' and a 'double responsibility'. As Hussain puts it, 'double responsibility arises because in their interface with non-Muslims, Muslim women not only have to address "women's issues" such as the hijabi, but also play a major, if sub-textual, role in defending Muslim men. In dealing with this double responsibility, (the) women also find themselves caught in a double bind between patriarchy and racism' (p. 159). 'While the double responsibility impels a particular type of speech, the double bind generates silence' (p. 160) as Muslim women are often reluctant to speak up on unsatisfactory gender relations within their communities, lest their discontent and voice get misappropriated in service of others' political agendas.

Negative media coverage of Muslim gender relations both in Australia and abroad tends to portray Muslim women as the hapless victims that need to be rescued and Muslim men as a threat to the western way of life, western values and western women. There is also, a concomitant a preoccupation with the hijabi as a symbol of oppression, a symbol of 'Islamic patriarchic control'. Hussain argues that '...while many Muslim women acknowledge and have reservations about wearing a hijab, especially as it sometimes limits their participation in everyday public life, 'they (also) object to anti - *hiqab* attacks being used as a vehicle for Islamophobic remarks, and feel obligated to express solidarity with *hiqabs*...' (p. 162). She warns however that care ought to be taken not to deny social problems within the Muslim community and to dismiss all criticisms as simply 'Islamophobic propaganda'.

Ghena Krayem explores the proposition that liberal multiculturalism may, in its attempts to accommodate and recognise minority cultures, inadvertently prejudice women within migrant communities. Evident in the chapter are ambivalent feelings about multiculturalism and fears of being subsumed by the other, on the part of both host cultures and immigrant societies. These are the sentiments that are often exploited for political mileage by politicians. An apparent obsession with Orkin as a non Muslim woman writing on Muslim women's issues, while understandably to an extent, does take away from Krayem's analysis.

McCue and Kourouche locate their analysis of issues of identity, gender, agency and Islam within the sports and recreation domain in Australia. They draw on religious texts to argue that faith and fitness are not mutually exclusive. For the authors, it is not religion *per se* that impedes participation in sport and recreation by Muslim women in Australia, but some cultural aspects of sports including the dress codes, a general lack of gendered spaces and alcohol. McCue and Kourouche argue that identity is 'fluid and negotiated' and agency embedded in its nature. Hence the dynamics of both resistance and compliance and both engagement and resistance they suggested are evident in the attempts by Muslim women to negotiate their way through the Australian society. Whereas sport can be the social glue that holds and binds the wider Australian society, it can be very excluding of difference. The young profile of the research participants makes one wonder though about the extent to which their experience is representative of that of older women. The chapter would have been strengthened by presentation of, rather than simply references to 'research data'.

*Challenging Identities* is likely to appeal to a diverse range of readers, including both academic and non-academic audiences in such areas as cross-cultural studies, gender studies, post-colonial theory and auto-ethnography.