

Nov-2009

Book Review: Living Our Religions: Hindu and Muslim South Asian American Women Narrate Their Experiences

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Recommended Citation

Sahota, Simarjeet (2009). Book Review: Living Our Religions: Hindu and Muslim South Asian American Women Narrate Their Experiences. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(1), 333-335.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss1/21>

Living Our Religions: Hindu and Muslim South Asian American Women Narrate Their Experiences. Anjana Narayan and Bandana Purkayastha. 2009. Kumarian Press. Sterling. 341 pages. \$ 29.50.

Reviewed by Simarjeet Sahota¹

In a post 9/11 world where the contemporary fundamentalist groups are engaging in carving a purer form of their religion, tradition and the authentic past through literal readings of religious texts with an aim to create homogenized, simplistic form of faith based, militant, nationalistic, religious identities and the orientalist are readily grabbing those claims to meet their agendas. In such an environment the moderates are struggling to disassociate from any such definitions through their personal religious practices and the liberals who denounce any such claims are in exile both enforced and self induced an attempt to explore the women's experiences of living their religions in everyday life is a much needed effort. The discourses, meanings and social locations that communities employ for identification purposes produce relative dominance and exclusion; women in such group processes are treated as markers of boundaries. The conspicuous absence of women's voices in such identity production processes deem them complicit to such forces or treat them as a non entity. For a long time South Asian feminists have distanced themselves from religions due to gender oppressive patriarchal discourses and practices, and divisive projects of the fundamentalists ignoring the fact that religions also provide women with cathartic release and cultural space to live their lives. Claiming feminist and a religious identity often appear to be an oxymoron. This book explores multiple contexts that shape South Asian American Hindu and Muslim women's religious experiences in the United States. The glimpses of diversity of beliefs and practices of Hinduism and Islam within and between South Asian countries- Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan are provided through ethnographic essays by the contributors who act as co-participants. The aim is to explore how these women represent an alternative reality to contest, shift and change the fundamentalist and orientalist claims of absolute reality. All fourteen authors are highly educated middle class professionals living in the U.S. The book is divided into two sections, the chapters in the part one are arranged to illustrate boundaries between the religions. The nine chapters in this section illustrate how the authors in their daily religious practices blur these boundaries. In the second part the other nine chapters are devoted to dynamics of changing those boundaries through religion, practices and resistance to address social justice issues in the secular settings.

Through the lenses of living religions the authors address the questions of tradition and Gender. The editors denounce the Euro-American lineage of feminism that claims ahistoric linear progression of tradition to modernity to emphasize the coexistence of tradition and modernity in various social locations. Women's religious experiences in everyday lives are cumulative outcome of their communities' socio-cultural and geo-political histories where region, language, class etc. play an important role. Rafia Zakaria beautifully describes in "Muslim Women between Dual Realities," "My mother taught me to say the ritual prayer of purification in Farsi; I learned to say my five prayers in Arabic; and when I spoke to Allah in my own personal prayers, it was always in Urdu" (253). In living their religions women from diverse backgrounds negotiate opportunities

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and boundaries by accepting or rejecting certain religious ideologies or practices to sustain change and carve a space for both tradition and modernity at the same time; this enlivens numerous possibilities. The narratives demonstrate when the religious ideologies and practices are unshackled from text bound narrow explanations they are secular and hold promise for social and gender justice.

The experiences of negotiating an Indian American and a concomitant religious identity for American born or raised women are narrated by Salma Kamal and Monoswita Saha in “I Am Muslim First” and “Red, Bulls and Tea: Cultural Hashing of a 1.5er (A.K.A. Second-Generation Reflections)” respectively. Both authors are younger than other contributors and their contributions are replete with humor. Along with their Indian American Hindu or Muslim identities they had to deal with the existential crisis of teenage and the Indian parents who were raising American children.

The differences in practices and percepts of the same religion within the same country or across countries are often clouded by both fundamentalists and the orientalist in an attempt to forge homogeneous and authentic religious practice and national identity. Elora Halim Chowdhury in “Bengali, Nangladeshi yet Muslim” describes how in the collective memory of Bangladesh the experiences of partition from India and then the liberation from the Pakistan are constructed that her Pakistani cohort remained ignorant of this part of Pakistan’s national history until she came to the U.S. In the absence of caste based narratives of practicing Hinduism the editors included a chapter on Dalit organizing in the U.S. to elucidate the differences in practicing Hinduism. In “Challenging the Master Frame through Dalit Organizing in the United States” Shewta Majumdar expresses her astonishment on the use of word Dalit genocide on a Dalit website “We analyzed the possible reasons for our lack of awareness of such an atrocity. We were uncomfortable because we believed we were or had been reasonably entrenched in progressive politics in India and such news should have gotten to us” (266). But for those of us working in the field this is not a new concept the caste wars in the Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are identified by many as Dalit genocide. The Dalit cooption in the Hindutva agenda and their induction as foot soldiers of the Hindutva in the 2002 Gujarat genocide of Muslims clouded the deaths of dalits at the sametime. The Dalit organizing in the U.S. employ the frames equating casteism to racism and the language of genocide to describe the history of oppression to seek international attention for their cause.

The authors acknowledge the hegemony of the west and Christianity as the default frame of reference in any discussion on religion yet fail to check the creation of Hindu-Muslim as the default frame in this work thereby displacing all other minorities. Narayan in “The Many Facets of Hinduism” describes how a “South Asian Students Association” became the “Indian Student’s Association” and the “Indian” overtly became “Hindu” (159). Post 9/11 numerous hate crimes (based on mistaken identity) against the Sikhs have taken place in the U.S. One wonders how an Indian American Sikh woman negotiates her religious practice and American identity in the face of endangered survival. In such circumstances how a U.S. based Sikh woman attempt to dispel misunderstandings about their faith and religious identity without directing the hate towards the Muslims would be a question to ponder.

All authors lament the invisibility and restrictions on their religious practices and identities in American civil society but ignore to acknowledge even the minorities in their own home countries experience similar dilemmas. How minorities create alternative

spaces to practice their religions and push boundaries of practice to sustain change for social justice is illustrated in these essays. The book rejects the unrealistic extremes propagated by fundamentalists and orientalists and demonstrates how their everyday lives are interwoven with the religions they live and practice that motivates them in their personal and professional lives. If modernity is about making a choice the authors expound they chose traditional values of their religions to claim and sustain modernity.