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Book Review: Our Stories, Our Lives: Inspiring Muslim Women's Voices

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Our Stories, Our Lives: Inspiring Muslim Women's Voices. 2009.

Wahida Sahffi, ed. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press (for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation)
146 pp (Includes Photographs). \$15 (Paperback)

Reviewed by Azza Basarudin¹

In recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in publications of anthology dedicated to the exploration of Muslim women's experiences and lived realities. Insider accounts that depict struggles to balance the personal, religious and political provide a glimpse into how Muslim women negotiate their private and public spaces. Many of these anthologies are based on issues facing Muslim women within the North American context. Some of them include, but are not limited to: "Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith and Sexuality," (2006), "Shattering The Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out" (2005) and "Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak" (2005).

"Our Stories, Our Lives: Inspiring Muslim Women's Voices" features a collection of multicultural and multiracial narratives by British Muslim women that have largely been missing from this genre. The overarching theme concentrates on identity and faith-based politics at the personal and professional levels. These women include first and/or second generation British Muslims who trace their family heritage to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya, and India. While they differ in age, class, race and ethnicity, they share a common goal of seeking best practices to articulate the meaning of being Muslim and being British in the 21st century.

Edited by Wahida Shaffi, this book is based on the lives and choices of 20 Muslim women between the ages of 14 and 80 in Bradford, a former industrial town with the largest Muslim community in Britain. The city made headlines in 1989 after a group of Muslim protesters paraded through the streets with a copy of Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" before burning the book. Against the background that has come to symbolize the delicate relationship between state policy, Muslim community and immigration law, the voices of these women provide a glimpse into the racial and religious tensions confronting a minority faith group.

"Our Stories, Our Lives" is based on an oral history project called "Our Lives" coordinated by Shaffi and sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, an organization that seeks to "understand the root causes of social problems, to identify ways of overcoming them, and to show how social needs can be met in practice."² The initial aim of "Our Lives" was to "empower women to present themselves in their own words through participatory video, documentary film, audio, oral history/narratives and the internet" (7). The stories documented were left in their original form in order to retain their authenticity and to avoid undue interpretation. As a result, the book reads in the style of a personal journal, which is both intimate and compelling.

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² See "About Us" section of the Foundation at www.jrf.org.uk/about-us

In her introduction, Shaffi lays out the objective of the edited collection: “This book is about them [Muslim women], women of multiple generations who do not see themselves as victims. They depict the courage, dignity and strength of women who have embraced life in all its endless variety” (7). A glossy photograph of the subject along with a famous quote precedes each woman’s narrative and is designed to capture the story. Although the *hijab* (veil) informs many women’s experiences, the collection goes beyond normative topics to address women and sports, domestic violence, entrepreneurship, political candidacy and immigration activism.

The contributors to this book include: a Ju-Jitsu teacher, a former journalist, a woman whose family is made up of Sunni and Shia heritage; a Hindu convert to Islam; an Islamic activist; a daughter of mixed Pakistani and British heritage; a woman who ran her own restaurant and school bus business; a village girl who ended up as the first ever Asian Lady Mayoress and; a young Rastafarian convert. Among the issues that thread through these voices are those related to familial obligations, cultural expectations, notions of equality and justice, gender power relations, religious education, and racial dynamics. The book helps us empathize with the careful negotiations that inform each woman’s social history.

These women shared their experiences of living Islam, being raised in Muslim families, converting to Islam and/or raising a family of Muslims. A particularly vivid account is of Elana Davis, the Rastafarian mother of three young boys. Born in Jamaica, Elana was raised in Bradford and has known the father of her children since she was 15 years old. Although they are married, Elana and her spouse live separately—she with the children and him with his mother and family. Although he visits her and the children everyday, she hopes “he’ll get a backbone and stand up to his mum” before she loses her patience with the arrangement and decides to move on with her life (45).

Elana has a deep appreciation for hip-hop music and formerly taught dance at a school. She also does street dance and because she wears the *hijab*, she has been told that her interest conflicts with her Muslim identity:

Someone told me actually that I shouldn’t wear my scarf because I taught dance. I think if you listen to what everybody’s got to say, you will get confused, and at the end of the day, I became a Muslim for myself. I’ll learn myself, and if I do something wrong, that is something that I’m going to have to deal with, with God – nobody else. And I’ll just try my best to do my best (46).

In holding her ground on how to live as a Muslim, Elana is defining the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable behavior by combining her religious beliefs, cultural values and personal interests.

Syima Merali comes from a Sunni tradition and is married to a Shia man. The couple has a young daughter. They owned a restaurant and after three years of ownership decided to obtain a license to sell alcohol. It was an excruciating decision for them: “It was crash and burn and we made that decision—you know you think, ‘I know it’s wrong but I’m going to do this.’ I can’t afford to suffer the consequences of the business going” (82). While Syima has yet to reconcile her understanding of Islam and the sacrifices required for financial security, she stressed that she is living her life as a Muslim the best

way that she is able. She takes comfort in the knowledge that God is aware of her hardship and is compassionate and merciful.

While many women draw their sense of identity in relation to Islam, Mumtaz Khan's case is distinct because it is her love for Ju-Jitsu as well as her family's history that gives her a sense of identity and purpose in life. An ethnic Pathan, Mumtaz is a Ju-Jitsu enthusiast and instructor. Growing up in Bradford amidst a large community of Pakistanis, she was always "a slight outcast" because of her different cultural and linguistic background (52). Although her family did not place emphasis on religious education, as a child, Mumtaz was sent to Qur'an classes at the local mosque. She described her experience as incomprehensible because the teacher taught Arabic in Urdu, a language that she is unfamiliar with. Given her upbringing, Mumtaz views her relationship with Islam as a cultural rather than a religious commitment: "Do I pray? No, I don't. Do I believe there's a God? No, I don't. There's something but I wouldn't define it as God!" She is comfortable in her skin and in the way that Islam informs her cultural background but not her primary identity.

Racism is a daily and painful encounter for many of these women. Selina Ullah, who was born and raised in Manchester but later moved to Bradford, remembers her own experience of racism: " 'Paki bashing' " was a reality of my primary school years. It was there. There were skinheads and you tried to avoid them so you didn't get beaten up" (137). Selina sees the connection between the racism experienced when she was growing up in the 1970s and the more recent wave of Islamophobia as interconnected to state policy and the stagnant economy as well as general ignorance about Islam and Muslims. While doubtful that decades of racial antagonism between communities will improve in the near future, she is hopeful that the younger generation of British Muslims will be more politicized and take a greater responsibility in addressing issues of racial and religious belonging.

"Our Stories, Our Lives" is salient because it presents British Muslim women with the space from which to speak about the conceptions of self, family and community in their own voices. Their narratives are based on a journey that is rooted in the politics of survival and marginalized solidarity. These women articulate their understanding of how to reconcile their ethnic, religious and communal identities with their status as British citizens with courage, humor and perseverance. In reconfiguring themselves as subjects, these women also call for a remaking of British cultural, economic and political categories that are able to accommodate a multiracial and multi-confessional citizenry.

This book is good reading material for people interested in issues of gender and Islam. It is suitable for introductory subjects on women's studies/gender/feminist studies, European Islam and diasporic studies. It would benefit feminist scholars. While women's self representations make a vital epistemological and methodological contribution, this book would benefit from a more comprehensive contextualization of British cultural politics in general, and Bradford, more specifically. Furthermore, a brief discussion of the history of immigration, racial relations and Islamophobia would contribute to framing the narratives of these women, who have created their own "trajectories of responsibilities, rights and freedoms" (146) in living their lives as Muslim women in Britain.

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