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- 1 Zareena Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*.
- 2 New York and London: New York University Press, 2014. 409pp. ISBN: 9781479800568.
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5

In order to comprehend the importance of Zareena Grewal's project, as it is analyzed in her work *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*, it is detrimental to explore the political, social and religious tensions engendered to the American public by the 9/11 attacks. In the minds of the American people the specific event was the unprecedented manifestation of an evil force with which they had been in an embattled condition for decades. The American exceptionalist ethos and the capitalist and hegemonic aspirations which informed, conditioned and propelled the political decisions of American governments from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards were always in the process of discursively reifying the threat they wished to efface. After the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., and the "end of history"<sup>1</sup> professed by many liberal critics, a new enemy had to be invented in order for the United States to maintain its position as the global sheriff regulating the political, financial and social itineraries worldwide. Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power in Iran, Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait and the gradual empowerment of Al-Qaeda facilitated the progressive

articulation and consolidation of a political and religious discourse by the Western media and discourses that “orientalized”<sup>2</sup> the Arabic people, culture, history and religion and read the complexity and unevenness of their world by employing a simplistic and binary discourse which augmented the distinction between East and West, effaced the heterogeneity of Islam and misrepresented it as a religion that infuses violence to its believers and can be pin-pointed in a clearly locatable region with distinct borders and attributes.

6

Apart from exploring the “orientalizing” strategy that has informed American and Western politics for years, instigating an ontological and discursive process of objectification, reduction and naturalization of its “other” in order to render its destabilizing heterogeneity assailable Grewal’s main concern in the specific work is to observe what it means to be “Muslim and American in our global age? What ties Muslim Americans to Muslims around the world?” and “Who speaks for the stunningly diverse population of American Muslims?” (4). In other words, how can the Muslim Americans balance between their religious loyalty and the dictates of their national citizenship? How can they establish a narrative that blends these obligations together rendering the confrontation in which they had been thrown into inoperative? Grewal’s research aims at exploring Islamic authority, and more specifically, how Islam is defined today by its official representatives and the various pedagogical forms employed in the mosques world-wide in order to disseminate and research its culture and practices. The critic suggests that the majority of the believers and representatives of Islam detect a “crisis” in their religion due to its inability to provide concrete answers and solutions to the challenges Muslims face today. Rising fundamentalism, the militarization of Islam by groups with ambiguous motives, the “dignity revolutions” and the extensive profiling of Muslims as potential threats in the United States and Europe are only some of these “challenges” believers encounter and Islamic knowledge seems “inaccessible or inadequate” to the task of providing convincing answers (39). The author adds to these issues the gradual social unrest in the Arabic world due to “the political illegitimacy of rulers, the difficulty of choosing between radically different political ideologies, the chasm between rich and poor and the diminishing possibilities of social mobility” (58). In order to resolve that “crisis” many young Muslim Americans travel to the Middle East with the intention of retrieving traditional, authentic “tools” that will enable them to balance between the dictates of their religion and the obligations of their citizenship; conditions which seem more and more irreconcilable in the minds of many Muslim youths. Their intention, as Grewal argues, is not to live abroad but return in the U.S. with a narrative that will enable them to “imagine a future for Islam” in their country and restore the lost dignity of being a Muslim (36).

7

Zareena Grewal, who is an American Studies and Religious Studies professor at Yale University, focuses on mapping the “transnational circuits of Islamic intellectuals and ideals” and captures the “shared debates and shared religious imaginaries of a diverse set of Muslims in the Middle east and in the US without collapsing their important differences” (50). Yet, she acknowledges that these journeys of religious revelation, as they are conceived by many Muslim Americans, are “pre-eminently acts of the religious imagination” due to the fact that many student-travellers do not find the Islamic utopia they were hoping for. The critic also detects and explores the misconceptions shared by many Muslim Americans, who understand tradition as an

“object to be found and brought home” indicating the occasionally ostensible understanding of the Islamic culture by the student-travellers as a site where specific methodological tools can be sought, retrieved, “applied” and, hence, resolve the religious crisis governing their debates (36). This disillusionment is partly explained by the ontological restrictions incumbent on Western thinking that engages concepts only as tasks to be accomplished, rules to be applied and conclusions to be deducted. These student-travellers fail to comprehend that Islam is also a culture mediated by everyday-performances, multiple, alternative and, at times, conflicting world-views and approaches as far as its transmission and research is considered. As Grewal suggests, the confusion related to the understanding of Islam as a diverse and complex religion becomes manifest in the confessions of many student-travellers who comprehend their journey as a “return” to a “home,” a “land” or a “space with borders” where the secret of being a Muslim remains hidden and has to be excavated and re-imported in their respective homelands (255). Thus, in their endeavour to study Islamic religion abroad and return to the U.S. with a set of discursive apparatuses and methodologies that will make the “debates in U.S mosques more coherent” (53) student-travellers seem to be “driven by a desire for Islamic authenticity, for a connection to a rich albeit too often romanticised past” (57).

8

The student-travellers’ project, therefore, is to “extract” and “deterritorialize sacred knowledge” in order to import in the U.S. a coherent vocabulary able to dissolve the Islamic crisis (275). In their endeavour to “root Islam” in their homeland, student-travellers, according to Grewal, commit two serious mistakes. First, they fail to take into account the singularity of the American tradition and, by extension, of the Western philosophical tradition. Instead of conceiving tradition as an opportunity to question, engage, critique and if necessary alter specific Islamic dictates, they perceive it as a non-reflexive discourse that must be safe-guarded from western influences at all costs (275). The failure to establish a reflective and adaptable discourse that maintains its core principles only leads to the implementation of an obsolete vocabulary that deepens rather than resolves the crisis. That is why Grewal suggests that student-travellers should conceive their role not as “carriers” but as “mediators” of tradition (296). This leads to her second point in which she avers that

9 If the student travellers are going to be able to have more than just a good story to tell, if they are going to be able to shape the future of Islam in the US, then their travels abroad must be empowering in ways that translate beyond the individual religious experience. (291)

10 Thus, the task of student-travellers is not merely to study Islamic tradition abroad but also to evaluate and reconceptualize the existing pedagogical forms in order to envision and establish an Islamic debating global community that makes and re-makes itself without relinquishing its core values. The emergency of “crisis” should not prevent and suppress debate but instigate the examination of alternative pedagogical forms of studying and disseminating Islamic tradition.

11

The need for Islamic tradition to become more inclusive and question religious restrictions intensifying and proliferating the effects of “crisis” instead of ameliorating

them becomes quite apparent when the consolidation of female subjectivity is examined within the male-dominated spaces of Islamic authority. Grewal avers that “the gendered crisis of Islam discourse is simultaneously a defensive and creative reaction to the construction of Islam as an excessively patriarchal tradition” (246). Revising foundational tenets of the Islamic tradition presupposes the critique of the systematic exclusion of women both from the pedagogical organisations and the higher strata of religious authority. Yet, this revision is postponed in the name of “crisis” as it is considered to be conducive to its intensification and, hence, the moment the issue of female subjectivity is raised it is immediately withdrawn. Grewal diagnoses the precarious “double-bind” female student-travellers face in their endeavours to access Islamic knowledge since they are forced to deny

12 their exclusion in the name of tradition while simultaneously struggling to be included in male-dominated intellectual circles, ultimately muting the reality of their actual pedagogical experiences in defence of the Islamic ideal of learned female authorities. (224)

13 The critic complicates the question concerning female authority in Islamic religion even further by arguing that feminist critics should interrogate events of female resistance more consistently. The Qubaysiyat movement, a female-led religious community which provides access to Islamic knowledge to thousands of women in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, or the Women-Led Prayer Initiative on March 18, 2005 organised by Asra Nomani in the U.S. with the intention of reshaping “American mosques from a feminist perspective” (316) are only some of the documented events that highlight the necessity to reform Islamic tradition in order to be more gendered inclusive but also demonstrate the obligation of feminist critique to “complicate its analysis” so as to “capture the larger constellations of patriarchal power that structure” and undermine feminist discourse (242). Grewal’s invocation of Lila Abu-Loghold’s urgent call towards feminist critique to “complicate” its questioning when it comes to understanding “resistance” aims at exposing the patriarchal structures that remain unscathed in religious debates. Although the ascendancy of women in the higher strata of Islamic authority is indeed “proof that the tradition is being reformed” it also attests to the fact that many women are forced to find recourse to the same discourse that subordinated them in order to gain access to “male-dominate spheres” (246). Hence, the occupation of higher positions of Islamic clergy by women seems to be an ostensible “masking” of the ongoing exclusion of female subjects from tradition (251).

14

After the 9/11 attacks the “intense external scrutiny” Islamic debates have undergone by the media, the government and the public has been conducive to the intensification of the Islamic crisis (296). As Grewal avers, “debates about reform within U.S. mosques are now regular objects of consumption, investigation and analysis for American audiences.” Muslim American spokespeople who participated in these debates had to face a “double bind.” On the one hand they had to “demonstrate their willingness to work with the state to combat terror” and, on the other, they had to “downplay those relationships in their own mosque communities in order to preserve their political legitimacy and religious authority” (298). Hamza Yusuf, one of the most prominent Muslim American spokespeople, correctly diagnosed that “Islam itself had been ‘hijacked’

on September 11<sup>th</sup> in the mainstream media” (306). Unfortunately, Yusuf achieved nothing less than contributing to an ongoing misconstruction of Islamic religion and to its appropriation via a superficial binary discourse that fails to correspond to the complexity and multidimensionality of the Islamic culture by assuming a defensive posture during religious debates and communicating to the American public the message that Islam is a “good religion that confirms dominant Western, Enlightened values, and can, therefore, be rehabilitated” (307). Muslim American spokespeople, in their attempt to mediate the Islamic principles and culture to the wider public, are led to adopt a “digestible” discourse and through the process of “identifying themselves as commensurable, good Muslim citizens against an incommensurable (anti-intellectual, sexist, backward) bad Muslim immigrant they reinscribe the exclusion of (some) Muslims from American social citizenship” (340).

15

In a historical moment haunted by the thousands of refugees forced to abandon their homelands due to civil and international wars, political and religious persecutions, corrupted nation-states and increasing unemployment, Zareena Grewal’s book constitutes a valuable contribution to the academic field since it highlights the necessity of both the Western and the Islamic world to partake in a global debate concerning the ideological tenets composing their respective cultures. This can be achieved only if European nations and the U.S. perform a political and philosophical interrogation of the concepts of the nation, the “human,” and reconceptualize their understanding of “hospitality.” I am referring to an idea of “unconditional hospitality”<sup>3</sup> as Jacques Derrida discusses it in his work and gestures to a welcoming that exceeds and annuls the bureaucratic laws and conventions of the modern nation-state (25). The present historical conditions also demand that the Islamic world revise fundamental laws of its religion not with a view to alter them or erase them but unconceal the democratic and humanistic potentiality inherent in these values in the name of a transnational co-inhabitancy capable of reversing the politics of rage and violence that have engulfed our world.

16

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