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# Book Review: Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women

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**Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women,  
by Parin Dossa. 2009. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 192 pages, \$55.00  
(cloth) & \$24.95 (paperback)**

Reviewed by Ghazala Afzal Orakzai<sup>1</sup>

"The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life . . . the children; those who are in the twilight of life . . . the elderly; and those who are in the shadow of life... the sick... the needy... and the disabled." - **Hubert H. Humphrey**

If Roosevelt had not been allowed to run for the office of the President because of his polio, if Helen Keller had not received the support and encouragement from her parents and teacher, and if Stephen Hawking had been ignored and cold-shouldered because he did not fit the common definition of a "normal" human being, how poor would our world be today?

Parin Dossa wants to make exactly this point. Her main argument is that the Western world, more specifically Canada, has failed to deliver on its promises to lead the rest of the world in creating a modern, model society that will accommodate people according to their abilities, irrespective of the nature and levels of their physical handicaps. While a lot of progress has been made to address the needs of the native-born citizens through services, and by mainstreaming them, immigrants and naturalized citizens continue to be treated in a less than hospitable manner that almost verges on resentment.

Dossa had a personal motivation in undertaking this study: the sad story of her mentally-challenged brother, denied immigration to England because of his condition, after Idi Amin took over in Uganda. Mohamud, Dossa's brother, died far from his family, in a land that had turned increasingly hostile, making it impossible for them to continue calling Uganda home. The family was forced to leave, but even more tragically, the subsequent efforts to re-settle elsewhere made them abandon their own child, leaving him at the mercy of the strangers. Mohamud's childhood picture precedes the text. Dossa, however, speak in a dispassionate voice, focusing more on the land of her choice--- Canada, drawing attention to the conditions in which disabled immigrants find themselves, in which Mohamud would have found himself, had he succeeded in migrating.

Due to its intrinsically flexible nature, and its possibilities, story-telling is an excellent form for recording human experiences. Dossa has chosen story-telling as her preferred mode to discuss the ground realities of disabled immigrants. There are other principal variables in this discussion: the religion and gender of her subjects. These are colored women who suffer disabilities, either by birth or by accident, or who happen to be the main care-givers to the family-members with disabilities. Additionally, these women are also Muslim. In a post 9/11 world, their religion becomes an even more complicating factor in an already complex social reality. Islamo-phobia, and the general negativity generated by the media in recent years has affected these disabled women

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rather harshly. They have become targets of suspicion, even outright racism. These women now struggle daily to stay afloat.

Reports from South Asian communities of North America and Canada testify to the fact that lack of careful supervision in the service industry for the disabled, has damaged the mental health of these women and their self-esteem in multiple ways. These are women who took the dream of freedom all too literally. In the process, they had never expected to be betrayed by their own circumstances, accidents or by their past. The way Canadian society and specialized services deal with such unforeseen events, especially if they happen to female immigrants, is quite unfortunate and inexplicable. Even a once happy, 27 year old marriage, with a Guinness Book of World Record holder, is unable to withstand the stress created by state policy and public perceptions of disabled aliens (p. 114). Consequently, not only have human rights been impinged upon, but the new social model that had prevailed upon governments and institutions to mainstream their citizens with disabilities, has also been impacted negatively.

The disabled, Muslim, immigrant women have stood firmly against the resistance to their claims for becoming useful, productive citizens. They have refused to accept any obstacle to their entry into a “model” society. They were either lured by a dream of independence, or made conscious decisions to leave their native lands to re-make their lives. They hoped to do it with active engagement in their new environment, but it seems that the powerful agents of this society, from doctors to bus drivers, are out to thwart most of their efforts to rehabilitate themselves. The irony is that they are even willing to put up with exploitation, to compromise with a hostile system. Being under-paid and over-worked does not stop them from wanting to do something meaningful with their lives, yet they have met with little success. Their rights in their adopted land are at best treated condescendingly and at worst, rejected by anyone who wields even a little authority. Some of Dossa’s narrators may sound like they are whining, but the truth of the matter is that even perfectly healthy, native-born citizens have experienced enormous frustrations at the hands of bureaucracy, thus the plight of these women is inevitable. The myth of the “humanitarian” efforts, still propounded by the vested interests, loses its currency when examined from the perspective of a disgruntled “outsider.” It doesn’t matter whether the world is still following the Rehabilitation Model, or the Independent Living Model; life is not easy for these women who cannot return to where they came from. The Western world has always claimed to be the “savior” of the oppressed, but it fails the litmus test on its own shores. Instead of being an enabling model for the rest of the world, the markers of differences, whether gender, race, religion or disability, become causes for marginalization of those who called Canada home.

*Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds* tells a sad story. Dossa has retained the voice of the narrator to authenticate her discussion. But, many a times, one feels that the stories have been “used” merely as an opportunity for commentary. The annoyingly fragmented narratives are subordinated to a discussion of the status quo. While the treatment of disabled immigrant women is the *raison d’être* of the book, Dossa’s strategy undermines the story itself. The narrative is never there in its entirety. The discussant is more interested in making her point in dissecting a system that has categorically failed a certain segment of society. Perhaps, it would have been useful to have the full stories as an appendix to the book.

Dossa's book touches upon a unique social problem from an academic perspective, and may be useful and influential for the work of policy-makers for institutions and governments. In fact, it could well be a recommended reading for politicians, bureaucrats, and service providers who deal with disabled, helpless, immigrant population daily in their offices.