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Book Review: Muslim Women in Britain: De-Mystifying the Muslimah

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Muslim Women in Britain: De-Mystifying the Muslimah. 2012. Sariya Contractor. London: Routledge. 202pp. Hardcover ($135). ISBN 9780415669962

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As the title of this book suggests, its aim is to "demystify" the understanding of Muslim women in Britain. Demystify is to make clear, make less mysterious. Contractor proposes to do this using Muslim women's narratives themselves, "to give voice to Muslim women," a phrase often repeated throughout the book.

Since I had had the same goal and a similar method with a book about Muslim women in Canada more than ten years ago, my first reaction as I began reading was, not that Contractor is treading old ground and not offering something 'original'. Rather a sense of dismay - that in spite of mine and others' work dedicated to the same goal, of dispelling ignorance about Muslim women in Western societies was still necessary. Because it is patently obvious that the situation of Muslim women, especially those in hijab, is worse now than it was ten years ago. That a book which gives voice to Muslim women in order to shine light on continuing negative stereotypes of her as "oppressed" is needed cannot be disputed. Contractor has seen a need and spoken eloquently to such need.

It is here that Contractor makes her most important contribution both to the pragmatics of dispelling negative stereotypes and to the academic literature: the recognition that to tell a story that will demystify one must be heard (p. 45). Her research is "action research" and collaborative, one in which Muslim women create digital self-representations. Contractor weaves parts of her own story as a convert to Islam who wears hijab throughout her analysis. These digital stories are then presented to audiences who discuss their views of Muslim women before and after seeing the films, providing Contractor with valuable data on the salutary effect of sharing Muslim women's narratives with non-Muslim audiences.

Contractor argues that in-groups and out-groups are created by collective memories, by storytelling about society (p. 66–7), so emancipation can be achieved only through deconstructing and re-constructing collective memory to include the previous out-groups. Her book aims to give voice to Muslim women so they can insert their voices into a reconstructed British collective narrative about who Britons are. *Muslim Women in Britain* contains three parts: Giving Voice, Taking Voice and Hearing Voice. The two chapters of Part One discuss the historicity of modern stereotypes and lays out Contractor's theory and methodology. It includes a very nice discussion of her journey from being suspicious of feminism, like many Muslim women, seeing it as an anti-spiritual imperial ideology complicit in the stereotyping of Muslim women, to embracing feminism, as entailing "women's demands and activism for their full human rights as human beings."

The author (Contractor) is cognizant of the range of perspectives both within Islam, some that are emancipatory for women and others that are patriarchal, as well as within feminism, some that are imperialistic and others that are not. So she positions Muslim women not as a single simplistic identity – it's not a flipside of "Muslim women are not oppressed but liberated."

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She recognises a complex layering of identity for Muslim women, in a complex pluralistic Britain. Her clear commitment to a vision of Islam as "emancipatory" underpins this discussion.

A feminist commitment to participatory research that gives a role to the researched while the research seeks to give them voice is combined with Contractor's commitment to pragmatism – that "ideas, philosophies, doctrine or actions become meaningful only through the practical consequences they have for individuals" (p. 39-40). Individual experiences must be understood in social and historical context. To proceed, Contractor combined several methodologies: semi-structured interviews which she analysed for patterns and common themes; group discussions based on these themes; and digital storytelling, in which she assisted participants create three minute autobiographical digital stories. These were then screened to diverse audiences and the discussions of these stories became part of her data.

Part Two contains five chapters each discussing a theme that arose from her (Contractor) work: beginning with the importance of collective memory, and moving to Muslim women's desire to tell their stories and be heard and seen as contributing members of British society; hijab; Muslim women's agreements and disagreements with feminism; and their view of media. Part Three has three chapters that discuss the process of creating and screening the digital autobiographies, the audience responses and how viewing the videos allowed many Britons to alter their view of Muslim women, recognise common humanity and a final chapter on how this work contributes to a new understanding of a more inclusive British identity.

The book is outstanding. It is theoretically and methodologically robust, and also written in a clear voice that will be accessible to undergrads as well as the literate public. Given the strength of the edifice of mystification, it remains to be seen how much can actually be chipped off. However, there are people of good will on both sides and Contractor's participant action research that includes sharing data with ordinary people as part of the demystification process provides an excellent path for others to follow.