

Book Review

Muslim Women in Britain, 1850-1950: 100 Years of Hidden History

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Book's Editors: Sariyah Cheruvallil-Contractor and Jamie Gilham

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on British Muslim women has experienced a renaissance in recent years. This comes after decades of primarily orientalist and patriarchal literature which reduced Muslim women to homogenous subjects of scrutiny by well-meaning Western feminists and/or self-appointed white saviours. Muslim feminist scholar of Islam, Leila Ahmed, notably outlines feminism's role as a vehicle of colonialism, in her seminal book *Women and Gender in Islam* (Ahmed, 1992). Her argument focuses on the assertion of universal validity that centres white, heterosexual, middle-class, Western feminist experience. Colonial and postcolonial obsession with, for example, 'the discourse of the veil', lends itself to a paternalistic notion that Muslim women can be regarded as disempowered or empowered merely by the way they dress. Structures of colonial violence are rendered invisible in the oppression of Muslim women, their autonomy conveniently hinging entirely on the practise of religious traditions. Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Loqod and Kecia Ali, also a feminist scholar of Islam, who wrote the preface to Ahmed's republished work (Ahmed, 2021), both reference the justification for the post-9/11 'war on terror' and its mantra of 'saving Muslim women' (Abu-Lughod, 2013). This popular trend for viewing Muslim women through the lens of oppression is ingrained, but finally this meta-narrative is faltering. In fact, academic and trade publications that subvert the rhetoric of victimhood have begun to proliferate. Bestsellers at the forefront of this sea change include Mariam Khan's *It's Not About the Burqa* (Khan, 2019) and Rafia Zakaria's *Against White Feminism* (Zakaria, 2021). Through publications such as these, Muslim women are speaking for themselves. They are tired of incessantly being opined about in ways that negate their agency, and ability to carve out their own paths to female empowerment. Muslim women are challenging the narrow definition of what it means to live a feminist life, a definition created by white feminism, and from which they have felt excluded. As Sara Ahmed (2000) writes: 'black feminist critiques of white feminism are not simply about disputing the terms of analysis of white feminist theory, but about critiquing the very forms of political organization and work which marginalized black women and their experiences.' While a glut of books exploring the lives of the contemporary British Muslim experience is to be welcomed, the voices of women from the earliest British Muslim communities remain unarticulated. Until now. In *Muslim Women in Britain, 1850-1950: 100 Years of Hidden History*, Sariyah Cheruvallil-Contractor and Jamie Gilham combine historical scholarship and sociological frameworks to bring the lives of Muslim women in

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Victorian Britain into focus. The women featured, all lived during the period up until just after the end of the Second World War and the simultaneous crumbling of the British Empire.

CONTRIBUTORS

Sariyah Cheruvallil-Contractor is Professor in the Sociology of Islam at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry, UK. As a ‘feminist sociologist of religion’¹ her previous work aspires to give voice to marginalised communities who rarely have the opportunity to speak for themselves. Her commitment to the collaborative potential of knowledge production is evident in the intersectional approach to depicting the lives of Victorian-era Muslim women. Consideration is given to the class privileges as well as the racialised and gendered experiences of British Muslim converts to Islam as Muslim women from Muslim lands, who find themselves in the UK during that era. Much has been written about Muslim women, British Muslims, and convert communities from a postcolonial and white feminist lens. Jamie Gilham, an independent biographer and historian of Western Islam, has redressed this with his published works on Victorian-era converts in British Muslim communities. The editors combined expertise offers an opportunity to aid understanding of the development of British Muslim communities during a period of global upheaval. Other contributors are drawn from academia, and education and include the great-grandson of Noor Inayat Khan – whose face was displayed on a British stamp in order to commemorate her courage and sacrifice in the fight against Nazi Germany in the Second World War. It is interesting to note that although four of the ten editors and contributors are female, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor remains the only female Muslim contributor to the anthology. This speaks to the under-representation of Muslim women in postgraduate research. The findings of a 2023 report by the Aziz Foundation, ‘underline how rarely Muslim women are able to see themselves represented across academia’ (Samatar and Sardar, 2023). Although there are no exact figures on the number of female Muslim academics working in the UK, a 2020 Higher Education Statistics Agency Report revealed less than 1% of UK professors are black and out of a total of 21,000 professors, around 1,300 are Asian (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024). This underscores why the anthology is particularly important as an example of both historical and contemporary scholarship led by Muslim women, about Muslim women, and the communities to which they belong.

METHODOLOGY

Using feminist historical approaches, the book comprises nine essays by scholars of British Muslim history, which are grouped into four sections. Each essay is written by specialists in their field and elaborates specific themes. The first section sets the premise of the book and asks why Muslim women’s histories should be of interest and so ripe for research. This is followed by an explanation of the role of women in Britain’s first mosques. The third section explores British Muslim women in public life; the book ends with a snapshot of the lives of Muslim women who travelled to Britain and how they settled in this land that was so foreign to them. Research has, until this book, concentrated on contemporary experiences of British Muslim women in the context of post-1960s immigration and the 9/11 generation (Ahmad, 2017).

Each essay is centred around a protagonist, and the writer takes the reader on a biographical journey of the love lives, careers and escapades of formidable British Muslim women. Drawn from all strata of British society, the women brought to life on these pages include members of the British aristocracy, as well as working class British women of decidedly humble origins. The vignettes are serious scholarly studies which are peppered with intriguing biographical, and rather gossipy asides. These tantalising details are obtained from primary sources such as personal diaries, media reports and third-party accounts, as well as academic texts and writings. Determined investigative work to uncover primary sources has built up a holistic picture of the lives of Muslim women in Victorian Britain. This is evidenced by a comprehensive notes section and selected bibliography to signpost further reading. What is more, the editors of the book connect the experiences of the women they document, to the experiences of British Muslim today, as we learn that the same issues and debates that dominate discourse in British Muslim communities at the time of writing, were topics of discussion back then.

MUSLIM WOMEN’S NARRATIVES

The narratives are located at important historical and geopolitical moments which are directly linked to the trajectory that introduced Muslim communities to Britain. Through individual stories, the reader comes to understand how social, religious, and cultural mores came to be formed. Against a backdrop of colonialism, war,

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the carving out of trade routes and the aftermath of a dying Ottoman Empire, the book reveals not just how the first British Muslim communities organised and established themselves, but, crucially, the prominent role played by women.

This comprehensive undertaking builds a picture of the emergence of Muslim communities and the spaces they have carved into the fabric of British society. Diverse stories of triumph over adversity, tragedy and courage, render the hitherto invisible lived realities of the mostly British women converts to Islam, visible. The reader learns about Fatima Elizabeth Cates, Bertha Cave, and Gladys Milton Brooke, among others, in their own words. How they were viewed by fellow members of the Muslim communities informs our understanding of the convert experience to this day. Their challenges were multi-fold, with an alarmed and disapproving British establishment regarding Muslim convert women in particular with deep suspicion, alarm, and disapproval. Convert women's experiences were shaped by assumptions about gender roles, social status and patriarchal values of the times. By making radical and independent decisions about faith and choosing how they wished to live their lives, convert women, and Muslim women from Muslim lands, disrupted patriarchal norms and navigated the consequences of such bold independence. Striding out on their own to embrace Islam, by no means guaranteed emancipation; it is telling that many of the women were mistreated by the men in their lives, and the book clearly illustrates the insidious impact of misogyny on the lives of women whether they are living in the West, in Muslim lands, converts, born Muslims, or non-Muslim.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

As with any anthology, the range of perspectives, style and tone is enlivening. There is the inevitable variation in rigours of scholarship. Some essays intensely detail specific periods in the life histories of our protagonists, with scant insight into the rest. This may, however, be due to the sources available. The wealth of tantalising tittle-tattle makes the anthology a deliciously entertaining read. Some speculation appears to creep in, however, when it is apparent sources cannot confirm a fact. For example, on page 25, we never quite learn why Olive converted to Islam; a juicy context is only alluded to. Such incomplete pictures are enjoyable but suggest an attempt to stretch a life story a little far to fit into a theoretical framework. In some chapters, it seems as if the women are peripheral to the men's stories. The chapter on Nafeesah M T Keep and female Muslims in Victorian Liverpool, begins with an elaborate scene-setting introduction to the historical life and influence of William Henry Abdullah Quilliam (p. 57). It could be argued there is an over-representation of Quilliam in this anthology, although this likely reflects Quilliam's central role in British Muslim history during the period of concern. What is interesting is that the iterations throughout the essays in the descriptions of his character and, in particular, his treatment of women speak to his contested significance. In Turkey he is regarded as the father of Fatma's children, which the writer of the chapter on Fatma insists could not be possible (p. 103). The breadth of detective-work involved in any historical inquiry, and the selective nature of the sources that a historian chooses to amplify or disregard is in full display. This after, all, is how patriarchal understanding of history has come to dominate historical tomes – through the erasure of female voices and the amplification of male perspectives. While reading the fascinating story of Sultan Jahan, I wondered for a moment whether her story was tangential to that of the Woking Muslim Mission. But the attempt to centre Sultan Jahan is perhaps a creative effort to contextualise women's lives and certainly illustrates the influence of a historian as co-editor.

The introduction by Cheruvallil-Contractor, in particular, is a triumph. She lays bare the complexity and nuance in any definition of what it means to be a British Muslim woman since 1850. There is a conscious attempt to acknowledge power dynamics and intersectionality, not just during the era in question. Issues arising from the contested arena of Muslim feminism are just as pertinent in the debates of the time, as they preoccupy Muslim women now. It is eye-opening that the lack of facilities in mosques for female worshippers, misogynistic attitudes and the upholding of patriarchal structures, are all contemporary themes familiar to women now, and troubled Muslim women since the earliest days of the emergence of Muslim communities. To find that little has changed is a little dispiriting.

IMPACT ON THE FIELD

Muslim Women in Britain, 1850-1950 is a valuable resource for historians and social scientists seeking to understand how the earliest British Muslim communities established a postcolonial presence in the heart of the empire. The accessible and narrative-led writing will appeal beyond academia, to non-fiction enthusiasts seeking to understand how convert and diaspora Muslim women negotiated identity and a sense of belonging that is proving pertinent now, as much as it was in the Victorian era. By uncovering the hidden stories of prominent female architects of the formation of early British Muslim society, the anthology fills a gap in our understanding

of the foundations laid before post-war immigration and the emergence of a multicultural British society that Muslims became part of.

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