

Culture



**Earle WAUGH, Sharon ABU-LABAN, Regula QURESHI (eds.),
Muslim Families in North America, Edmonton: The University
of Alberta Press, 1991. 369 pages, \$39.95 (cloth)**

Parin A. Dossa

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[See table of contents](#)

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A persistent question intruded as I was reading this volume: where and when would stories such as those related by these three Yukon elders be used — outside the context of writing this book? All three women, Cruikshank tells us, are renowned story tellers. When do they practice their art? On what occasions do they feel compelled to speak in parables? What are the forms of etiquette that surround, and possibly limit, their narrations? These matters are only fleetingly addressed by Cruikshank and might, one imagines, form the stuff of an entire study.

This is an extremely readable book, one which makes the lived experience of women from other cultures easily accessible. By rights it deserves a wider audience than social scientists.

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By Parin A. Dossa

Simon Fraser University

The study of the relationship between Islam, the diverse ethno-cultural family backgrounds of North American Muslims, and the larger secular society is multi-layered and exceedingly complex. Such an enterprise is best explored at two interrelated levels: (a) ethno-cultural manifestations of Islam and (b) its progressive engagement with the larger society. This four part volume, of thirteen contributed papers, captures one dimension of this dynamic: differential impact of Islam on Muslim families in North America. This dynamic is documented in relation to historical circumstances of migration, ethno-cultural backgrounds of migrating families, receptiveness of the host society, generational perceptions and variables of age and gender. While the volume is replete with varied data on the ethno-cultural manifestations of Islam, the issue of how a religiously rooted ethno-cultural identity may be reconstituted in a secular environment, though acknowledged, is not documented in all its complexities. Given the negative stereotyping of Islam, conceptualized as "orientalism", and the insidious distinction between the Other (Muslims) and Us (North Americans), this is a sig-

nificant omission. In spite of this limitation, the volume makes a useful contribution in providing much needed data on diverse forms of Muslim family life in North America.

In part one, three contributions by Abu-Laban, S. Qureshi, and Waugh examine the normative and or ethnic dimension of Islam as a boundary marker for Muslim families. Abu-Laban presents an insightful differentiation between cohorts of immigrants and their descendants. The dynamic interplay between religion and family illustrated in this article is muted in Qureshi's monolithic and descriptive account of the scriptural framework of Muslim family life. Qureshi's conclusion that a Muslim's (referred to as "He"; women are rendered invisible) social environment and socialization are sufficient to enable "him" to establish a family in any part of the Islamic world contradicts the stated theme of dynamism. Waugh's article is refreshing, being one of the few which addresses the issue of complex engagement of the Islamic tradition with the larger setting of Canadian society. The argument advanced here is that while the acknowledgement of racial and ethnic pluralism has enabled Muslims to draw upon their socio-cultural identities, absence of a Canadian national religious identity, has muted the religious dimension of Islam. Waugh's conclusion that a Muslim's practice of Islam is achieved through nationally accepted ethnicity illuminates the dialectical articulation of Islam with the larger secular environment.

The second part of the volume dwells on the theme of generational transmission of Islam. The first two contributors document the differential engagement of two Shi'a communities (Nizari Ismailis and Twelver Shi'a Muslims) to maintain the continuity of their religious traditions. Ross-Sheriff and Nanji's account of the Nizari Ismailis is informative in so far as it portrays the role of the *Jamat Khana* (place of worship), community organizations, women and the elderly in revitalization of family life. Schubel discusses the role of ritual (the *Muharram Majlis*) as a medium through which Islamic values are transmitted to the younger generation of the Twelver Shi'a. Although both accounts elucidate patterns of adaptation which are unique to these communities, they are, nevertheless, unidirectional and descriptive. The dialectical interplay between minority Shi'a communities and the larger encompassing socio-cultural forces is encapsulated in the process of generational transmission of values. This point is

addressed marginally by Ross-Sheriff and Nanji and totally absent in Schubel's simplistic discussion of ritual. Baranzangi's third contribution focuses on Arab Muslims in relation to their varied national origins and differences in perspectives between immigrant parents and their American reared children. Such a situation, according to the author, leads to shifting identities involving three aspects of cultural interaction: Arab, Islamic/Muslim and Western. This article captures the complex interplay of Arab heritage, Islam and the West.

The subject of marriage, divorce, and family is given differential coverage in part three. Within a historical and religious context, Hogben examines the issue of endogamy and exogamy among Canadian Muslims, 75 percent of whom (from a total of roughly one hundred thousand) are foreign born. The author notes that exogamy and divorce have been higher for the Canadian born minority. A reversed situation is observed in R. Qureshi's ethnographic account of Muslims from South Asia. The author documents the active involvement of parents in "socially engineering" in-group mate selection, achieved through creation of family networks and differential socialization of males and females. Taking the case of African American Muslims, Akbar provides an account of the works of two Muslim leaders, Elija Muhammad and his son Warid Din Muhammad, highlighting the development of positive family values. This point is reinforced in Ba-Yunus's contribution on the impact of Islamic values on mate selection and marriage. Although this section brings out the adaptive strategies of normative as well as ethno-cultural Islam, it does not fully capture the dynamics and contradictory relationship entailed in the process of interaction between minority Islamic community and the larger secular and dominant society.

One of the topics that has been subject to heated debate and discussion is that of the role and status of women in Islam. This forms the central concern of part four. The three contributors make a case for examining the differential impact of Islam, as determined by a host of factors. Taking a comparative approach, Aswad shows how differing circumstances of settlement, such as conditions of migration, family cycle and the host environment, have significantly influenced the status of Yemeni and Lebanese Muslim women in Michigan. Caincar's contribution presents a profile of the life experiences of Palestin-

ian Muslim women born or raised in Chicago. Caincar contends that these women (the daughters of the first wave of Palestinian Muslim Immigrants), live in a vacuum, suspended between two worlds: Islamic and North American. The author's conclusion that "the situation of Palestinian women can only be improved by strategies that reduce the level of inequality between genders within the family and the society" (p. 306) is revealing of the simplistic and Eurocentric way in which Muslim women have been perceived in the West. The contribution by Waldman presents an argument for a culture specific observation of the situation of Muslim women, so as to reflect the diversity of 60 national origins of North American Muslims. The observation that the existence of two essentially separate societies in the Islamic world has often enhanced certain types of female traits and powers and continues to do so within the process of modernization (p. 318) is a much needed corrective to the assumption that sex-segregated societies, as a matter of course, lead to inequality. The author's conclusion that "none of these groups (scholars of American religion) has yet appropriated the study of Muslim women in North America, an *interstitial* subject that does not fit comfortably within their conventional intellectual parameters and that is therefore well placed to challenge them all" (p. 323) captures the direction of research required on the North American Muslim female population. This section does not include material on Canadian Muslim women whose immigrant/ethnic experience is different from that of their counterparts in the United States.

Migration of diverse ethno-cultural Muslim families, inclusive of third and fourth generations, is rarely an all-or-none, unidirectional process. This volume's contribution in documenting the diversity and internal dynamics of Muslim family life is commendable. However, its marginal treatment of the dialectical engagement of Islam with elements from the larger society fails to address the issue of Otherness, a crucial dimension in any study of Muslims in North America. Given the strong presence of Muslim families in North America and the viability of the tradition of Islam, it is time that the latter be portrayed as an integral part of North America, and not far removed from it. In spite of this shortcoming, this volume is a welcome addition in the absence of a body of literature on Muslim family life and its diversity on the North American continent.