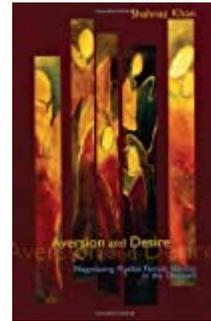


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Shahnaz Khan.** *Aversion and Desire; Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora.* Ontario, Canada: Women's Press, 2002. xiv + 130 pp. \$24.95 Canadian (paper), ISBN 978-0-88961-400-0.



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Most immigrants encounter stereotypes of themselves, their native culture, and their religion, if different than the one in the host society. Living in North America, Muslim women are often incorrectly viewed as Arabs and, more importantly for Shahnaz Khan, as oppressed and in need of rescuing. Like other women of color, they are labeled as the “other” and subjected to discriminatory attitudes and practices. Khan’s book examines the few fortunate Muslim women who escaped postcolonial underdevelopment and oppression of their homeland by moving to Canada, yet who are confronted with a host of new oppressions in diaspora: racism, sexism, stereotypes, and multicultural homogenization. They are treated as homogenized Objects/Others: undifferentiated by sociological factors (of race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality), oppressed by their own religion, conditioned by their Islamic culture, and void of any agency.

This book problematizes the concept of Muslim identity in diasporic context. By probing the implications of race, class, religion, and sexuality, Khan attempts to show the intricate intersections of these forces in the lived experiences of Muslim women in Canada. She is critical of Orientalist depictions of Islamic societies as “totalizing religious and ideological orders” and of Muslim women as passive, oppressed, and homogenous. These women are neither what the Orientalists depict them to be nor

what Islamists want them to be. Disturbed by these disempowering stereotypes, Khan challenges Western assumptions about the female position in Islamic societies in general, and Canadian Muslim female identity in specific. She also criticizes attitudes of Islamic conservatives who deny female believers individuality by presenting them to the world as a homogeneous mass.

Muslim women’s understanding and experiences of their religion are not uniform and coded, as perceived by Westerners and projected by Islamic fundamentalists, but are rather maleable, fluid, manifold, and even contradictory. Most of the women Khan talked to while doing her research are in a double bind. On the one hand, they desire to maintain an Islamic identity in a non-Islamic environment, and on the other they avert the discriminatory and complicating aspects of their cherished religion. They find a sense of security in their religious identity but cannot be comfortable with its totalizing prescriptions. These immigrants are also attracted to the opportunities the new country provides them, but cannot tolerate its mythologies about Islam and Muslim women. The combined effects of this discriminatory treatment and misgivings about their own religion have produced feelings of diasporic estrangement and vulnerability among these female immigrants. The choices presented to these women often come in a binary form: faith and freedom,

religious and secular, native and host cultures, family loyalty and individual autonomy, and past and present. Khan examines the ambivalence reflected in the lives of these women by looking for its causes in Orientalist and Islamist myths about Muslim women. To challenge these myths, Khan aims “to complicate the term Muslim and write in the history that constructs and reinforces the duality of Orientalism and Islam” (p. xxiii).

Using a heavy dose of postcolonial, postmodernist, and feminist jargons, Khan argues for a constructed understanding of Muslim women based on their own sense of who they are and/or wish to be. Caught on the horns of two totalizing views of Orientalists and Islamists, these women struggle to construct a meaningful identity outside of these paradigms. To avoid these pressures and find a space of their own, these women resort to a “third space” within which they resist oppression, confront racism and sexism of their adopted country, and negotiate a unique identity for themselves. Khan believes that this third space, which she views as an in-between gray zone, is where progressive politics emerges and where Muslim women can explore a new identity.

This book is the paperback edition of *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity*, originally published by University Press of Florida in 2000. The latest edition includes a new preface reflecting on the political environment surrounding Muslim immigrants in North America after the tragedy of September 11, 2001. There has been no revision in its content, yet the author does not explain the reasons for changing the title, especially from “North American” to “the Diaspora” in the subtitle. In addition to five chapters, the book contains a preface, an introduction, a conclusion, an appendix, and a bibliography. Several interviews included in the book were previously published in journals.

The book presents a theoretical discussion of the non-structured interviews the author conducted, as a part of her dissertation research, with sixteen non-randomly selected Muslim females in the Toronto area during the early 1990s. The theoretical disposition of the book is exemplary of the dominant discourse in the diasporic public sphere—a focus quite different from assimilation and integration theories of earlier period. The book still maintains its dissertational character by uniformly shifting between offering supporting accounts for her theoretical claims and theorizing interviewees’ accounts. Selections from interviewees’ accounts are presented alongside a heavy dose of theoretical insertions and discussions. Both the selection of subjects and the presentation

of their accounts make the book’s generalizations problematic. Khan’s cues during interviews are not always neutral. She appears to be directing her subjects to opinions and expressions not of their own construction. At times, it appears that she is badgering interviewees into expressing an opinion more closely aligned with her own. During the interview with Nabia, Khan is visibly frustrated with her inability to provide the kind of response Khan wants, by which point the interview had turned into a debate. Khan also ignored many of the statements and explanations of her subjects that would have pointed away from conflicts between Muslims and Canadian society.

Issues raised by this book are extremely significant because, as the movement of people across the globe brings us closer to a post-national world, identity issues will arguably be rendered more ambiguous. Khan is against the static and singular notion of identity, arguing instead for fluid, dynamic, and oppositionally grounded identities. While this approach is relevant and represents an improvement over classical treatments of identity, it is not without risk. Fixed and undialectical notions of identity have to be problematized, but not at the expense of obliterating all demarcations of human experiences. The idea of a “fluid identity” has limited utility and cannot be valid for all people, all places, and all times. It is a post-modernist cliché to see everything in fluidity, so much so that there is nothing to hold onto, nothing to refer to, and nothing to rely on. One may have conflicting attitudes about objects, people, ideas, and locations, but in the moment of action, one chooses to either go with an existing option or invent a new one. In case of an invention, the choice still has a reference, however vague, and is fixated in a time and place, bounded by the person’s capabilities, and privileged by his/her enactment.

Peoples situated in transitional times and locations are more likely to experience feelings of confusion, contradiction, uncertainty, and self-examination, especially if they are dislocated or exiled from their own cultural center. However, these contradictions, fragmentations, and fluidity are not to be essentialized so much so that distinctions and relationality become meaningless. Diluting Muslim women’s identities denies them a sense of “community.” Muslim identity is not the final destination of these immigrants, but a point of entry from which they construct their reality. While these women will continue to experience a certain level of ambivalence, they have no choice, at least not for too long, but to either leave or get rooted in their new homeland. In fact, as Khan’s interviews show, most of her subjects feel rooted enough

to safely engage in a critical examination of both their native and host culture.

Certainly, Muslim identity is fluid and has room for negotiation, interpretation, and transformation. However, high fluidity and abundant contradictions are neither theoretically sound nor empirically sustainable. These immigrants cannot stay too long in this in-between space where they remain detached from both their native culture and the mainstream experiences of their new home. After all, the third space is a space in-between, a make-shift station, a temporary sanctuary, where one buys time for regaining energy and developing a perspective for the challenges on the way to a new settled status.

For Muslim immigrants, fluid identity is more relevant during the earlier stages of their settlement in the diaspora. While many immigrants maintain such identities for a long time, many more grow out of them as they become more integrated into their adopted homeland. With the increased stay and structural integration of these immigrants, their transitional identities will transform into transnational ones. Those who are either unable or unwilling to make this transition will certainly experience more anxiety, distress, and alienation. The latter cannot be the fate of majority of these women. In time, immigrants are able to make such a transition, though not without continued experiences of discrimination and stereotyping. In the case of Muslim immigrants in North America, we need more specific studies of how, where, when, and by whom they are discriminated against, what in the Sharia works for them in a non-Muslim environment and what does not, and who in the diasporic community wishes to remain Muslim or who does not and why.

Khan wishes to show that the Muslim identity of these female immigrants remains paramount, despite their high degree of diversity in religious affiliation, sexual orientation, class background, and ethnic differences. She believes that the discrimination against these women by the larger Canadian society is apparently much harsher than the inequalities they experience from Sharia laws. Despite their unhappiness about the unequal status assigned to them by the Sharia, these women still follow it because of its centrality in their lives and pressures from their families and communities. More concrete evidence of specific instances of discrimination, due to being Muslim, would have been helpful, since a closer look at interviewees' ethnic background and their accounts reveals that much of the discrimination against them, first and foremost, seems to be based on their color.

The specifics of others' complaints can be easily categorized as prejudicial treatment of immigrants in general. Similarly, it is regretful that Khan does not cite any Orientalists' direct stereotypical statements about Muslim women. She only refers her readers to other authors who have discussed these Orientalist assumptions about Islamic women.

Khan's approach to Islam is very subjective and phenomenological. She does not treat it as a given and allows for interpretative appropriation of this religion by her subjects. Islam and Muslims should be viewed in a situated manner. Islam is what Islam means to Muslims and Muslims are who they are, and not what we perceive or wish them to be. To understand religion, culture, and identity, lived experiences of people are as important as the abstract explanations offered by the experts. Yet, Khan herself does not engage different traditions within the Islamic community available to Muslim immigrants in North America. Two of her subjects are Shia, one is Ahmedi [sic], and the rest Sunni. Throughout the book, Khan discusses these women's struggles with categorical stereotypes of Muslim women generated by both Islamic fundamentalists and Orientalists. Which fundamentalism? Which Orientalism? Is Shia fundamentalism imposed on Iranian women the same as the one imposed by Saudi Arabian Wahabis? Is Ahmedi's notion of Islamic gender roles the same as those of Sudanese traditionalists? Do all female immigrants from Islamic countries, who remain loyal to their faith in the diaspora, have the same definition of "Muslim woman"? Khan complains of totalizing language and ideologies of both Orientalists and Islamists, but she also ignores the diversity of views among Islamists by not making any distinction among various Islamic traditions in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. (In a footnote, she does name a few "serious" Western scholars who studied Islam "with integrity").

Khan's theoretical approach to Islam also poses serious and perplexing questions about the theoretical and empirical challenges facing what has come to be termed "Islamic feminism." Khan views Islam in a much more open-ended manner than most Muslim intellectuals could imagine. It would be interesting to see how both modernist and traditionalist Islamic scholars, as the field has been divided, react to her approach. For reasons that are not hard to contemplate, the reaction seems to be muted.

Khan is very critical of Canadian multiculturalism for its static notion of culture and how it denies diversity among Muslims. As much as one has to acknowledge

the ills of Canadian multiculturalism, one cannot ignore the fact that such a policy is the product of a long process of resistance, pressure, and bargaining by various cultural and ethnic groups in that country—a state of affairs much more progressive than previous biculturalism or earlier Anglo domination. There may be many more changes these groups have to work for and demand, but criticism of multiculturalism has to have a constructive and forward direction. Today, Muslims in diaspora in the West are subjected to undeserving suspicion of being a potential fifth column for Islam. In the Manichean moral discourse of post-September 11 in North America, where everything is reduced to good and evil, and reactionary pulses and panic feelings converge, post-modernist attacks on multiculturalism weaken its achievements and offer the opportunity for a conservative rollback of lim-

ited civil rights achievements of the earlier era. Criticisms of unfounded assumptions and essentialized notions of Muslimisms, as well as demand for public respect for Islamic identity, have to be squared with the contradictory manifestations of such an identity. Equally, the quest for demystification of Muslim women and the attempts to privilege their identities in North America should not weaken their struggle for recognition.

Despite these misgivings about her theory and methodology, the book is an important reminder about the interplay of Muslim identity with race, gender, class, and sexual identities in the Canadian society. It should be read widely by those who are concerned with the simultaneous rise in the number of Muslim immigrants and negative attitudes towards them in North America.

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