

Diaspora by Design: Muslim Immigrants in Canada and Beyond

By Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnema, and Mark J. Goodman

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A Book Review by

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Diaspora by Design: Muslim Immigrants in Canada and Beyond follows a series of post-colonial, post-9/11 books and studies that challenge “the common misperceptions of Muslim immigrants as a homogenous, religiously driven group, and identif[y] the tensions they experience within their host countries” (Inside cover). Merging socio-economic data with qualitative analysis, Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman explain that the Muslim Diaspora is diverse in terms of urban-rural location, culture, religion, class and gender, and that it is impossible to outline standard experiences that would be common to all members in the Diaspora. Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman stress that integration is a two-way exchange that requires proactive assimilative actions by the immigrant as well as a readiness to remove social and economic barriers by the host society. As part of its mixed methodology, this book provides emotionally-laden accounts to supplement quantitative data that, together, help in the analysis of the dynamics of Muslim immigration to Western countries. The emotional undertones sway the reader towards the opinion that, for generations, Muslims in the West have experienced silencing, discrimination and social exclusion, causing them either to form diasporic communities disconnected from society or to lash out in protest against policies that hinder their integration into the larger society.

This book begins by reviewing the theories and concepts surrounding the phrase “Muslim Diaspora”. The authors discuss the diversity within the Muslim Diaspora and how Muslims in the West experience multi-dimensional identities consisting of their gender, religion, secularism, ethnicity, nationalism, and class, among other markers. Members of the Muslim Diaspora—who may or may not identify with Islam—are drawn to each other because of a shared sense of isolation from the host culture. By staying attached to their original cultures, diasporic Muslims gain a sense of belonging and feel that they are fighting against hegemony.

The second chapter discusses the methodology and the sample studied. The methodology used is a comparative method within a systematic framework, where “instances were examined as parts of an integrated whole and in isolation” (17). The representative sample comes from snowball methods combined with quota sampling. The four communities studied in this book are Pakistani, Afghan, Iranian and Palestinian in origin. The study shows that despite high levels of

education, these communities earn significantly less and have a higher unemployment rate than the national average, which reflects barriers to access and integration into the workplace.

The third chapter deals with diasporic family dynamics and spousal relations both before and after immigration. Family provides a sense of belonging in the new culture, and the Muslims studied tend to maintain their family ties strongly. Gender differences between family members tend to correlate with their attempts at integrating into the new culture. Tensions in spousal relationships rise after moving to a new country, though men tend either to hide these tensions from others or to deny them altogether. Other comparisons made in this chapter focus on various countries with respect to spousal relations and the role that education and employment play in easing tensions within a family.

The fourth chapter discusses religious identities and how religion seems to unite only members of the Muslim Diaspora, but not those of other Diasporas. Moghissi, Rahnema, and Goodman reinforce that Islam does not singularize or simplify the identities or experiences of individual Muslims; it is just one of the factors that shape their identities. However, Muslims do practice their religion more than other diasporic communities. Religious actions such as praying and secular actions such as voting *en masse* during the 2006 Liberal elections in Canada all point to the fact that Muslims hold religion close to their identities, regardless of how secular they are. The authors also point out that the exclusivity of religious groups isolates the members of these groups and hinders integration into the national culture.

The fifth chapter concentrates on the experiences of Muslim youth, who relate to religion and culture as a way of belonging to and enforcing their democratic rights in the new country. Many youth who identify with Islam feel strongly that Western secularism is colonial and aim to challenge misconceptions about Islam. Daily negotiations over rights and rules between parents and youth in their new countries result in mutual respect and closer relationships between them. Although such youth may not have experienced their parents' cultures, they relate to events, foods, friends and music from those cultures.

Chapter Six discusses the process of social and economic integration of Muslim groups into the larger society of their new country. A disconnect between the aims of Muslim groups and the government in their new adopted countries leads to increased tensions and the emergence of barriers to social, economic and political integration. In Canada, however, Muslims aim to be involved in the socio-economic landscape as well as to be able to practice their religion and cultures openly and the government is helping by implementing measures that "accommodate Muslim demands without promoting the formation of separate, isolated, and private communities immune from the normative expectations of the larger society and its laws" (144). Canadian society and government have made more efforts than other countries to accept and accommodate Muslim groups into the larger society.

The last chapter discusses how minority groups—specifically those originating from Muslim countries—feel that they are not included in the social, economic, cultural and political activities of their new countries, and thus experience a sense of not belonging. They turn to their original culture for acceptance and reassurance, and in the process, further exclude and isolate themselves from the larger society. Racism, and the sample's experiences of racist acts against them are at a minimum in Canada when compared to the other countries studied. Also, Canadian societal attitudes as well as media treatment of Muslims break down racist stereotypes and welcome Muslims into society. The two-way exchange necessary for integration does exist in Canada, though not to an ideal extent.

Although the authors continuously point out that integration is a two-way exchange that demands that the host country change its policies and behaviors to accommodate the religious and cultural expression of minority groups while removing barriers to their social, economic and political involvement, they do not discuss how the host culture may also evolve and grow to accommodate the new citizens through interactions with them. The larger community may adapt to practices of Muslim groups without any pressure from government policy simply through daily exposure to this new culture. As a result, the minority groups—in this case Muslims—may find it easier to assimilate and feel a sense of belonging in their new country. Furthermore, this book puts pressure on the host government and society to help Muslims integrate, but does not discuss how these Muslim groups can themselves integrate into the larger society. Although the results of attempts made by Muslims (through education, employment opportunities, religious expression, etc.) are discussed and comparatively analyzed, they are not affirmed as steps towards integration into the new country.

This book's strength lies in the fact that it successfully condenses a large and thorough study into a manageable read and presents its findings in relation to phenomena observable in daily life in Canada and beyond. The methodology can be used to study other communities and Diasporas, and the findings discussed in this book can form the basis for policy changes to help newcomers integrate into the larger society. Lastly, just as the authors intended, this book provides Muslim communities with an insight into their own Diaspora and its dynamics, which may help encourage them to take further steps to integrate into the larger society.

About the Reviewer

Sarah Khan holds an M.A. in Media Studies from the University of Ottawa and a B.A. in Visual Culture and Communication from the University of Toronto. Her Masters thesis studied the representation of Muslim women on CBC's *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. She has also written about Canadian media's treatment of minorities during the Vancouver 2010 Olympics and Canada's media coverage of the Afghan mission. Sarah's interests include media policy, media representations, visual culture and communication, marketing, and graphic design. She plans to continue her research in representations of minorities and pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Toronto, where she currently works at Ancillary Services as Marketing and Communications Coordinator.

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