

Belonging and Banishment: Being Muslim in Canada

Edited by Natasha Bakht

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A Book Review by

Alan David Wong

Concordia University, Canada

Belonging and Banishment: Being Muslim in Canada is a collection of essays written by Muslims in Canada from both academic and non-academic spheres, such as journalism and even children's writing. The brainchild of Natasha Bakht, a legal scholar at the University of Ottawa, this anthology features works covering a wide array of topics: from current events that are now familiar to many Canadians, including the Shari'ah law and Omar Khadr controversies, to more quotidian concerns, such as childrearing. The broad scope of this book is not surprising given Bakht's aim, which is, as she states in her introduction, "to explain who a Muslim might be and to consider the issues that are of importance to Muslims".

This book arrives at the end of a decade that has seen Muslims in Canada weather many turbulent storms surrounding their religion, with the catalyst being, of course, the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States. In addition to experiencing overt forms of violence such as the vandalism of mosques, Canadian Muslims have been subjected to many insidious methods of racialized marginalization. These methods have been operationalized through not only legislation and government politicking in cases such as that of Khadr and those incarcerated under the "anti-terrorism" security certificate program, but also the mediatization of what would ordinarily qualify as minor social conflicts, in particular the recent disputes over the accommodation of immigrants and their cultural practices, with hijab- and niqab-wearing Muslim women bearing the brunt of the unwelcome attention. As an attempt to address and tackle some of these issues, then, *Belonging and Banishment* could not be more timely. However, while such a project is necessary, in this instance the result is not entirely successful.

The main problem lies with the unevenness of the book's contents. Because of the diverse professional backgrounds of the contributors, there is quite a variety of writing styles, ranging from first-person reflections to more formal scholarly articles grounded in qualitative research. Some are written in a loose, personal style, some adopt a more philosophical tone, and some present a more journalistic approach. As a consequence, it is difficult to know exactly who the intended audience is for this collection.

For example, the first chapter is an essay on Islamophobia by Haroon Siddiqui, editorial page editor emeritus and columnist for the *Toronto Star*. As one might expect from someone in such a position, the essay reads like a fusion between a newspaper editorial and column, albeit a

long and detailed one. Siddiqui offers strong opinions about many of the recent controversies in Canada that have contained elements of Islamophobia, verging at times on sermonizing. Several chapters later, Karim H. Karim provides a more traditional academic research paper on Canadian Muslims' views towards Islamic authority, using qualitative data culled from focus group sessions and employing a third-person voice to convey his findings. The way in which these two essays are presented could not be more different; the language of one is direct, yet informal, while in the other, the articulation of the point being made is done so in a more detached and less-impassioned manner. Such a disparity in tone and style permeates the entirety of *Belonging and Banishment*, begging the question: Is this a book for scholars or general readers? After scrutinizing each essay, I surmise that, given the forthright tone of most of the papers, it is likely the latter.

Yet even in reaching this conclusion, another question still rears its head: Is this book primarily for Muslims or non-Muslims? Again, because much of the text's contents would be, I imagine, information of which many Muslims would already be aware, the sense I have is that non-Muslims would gain more from reading this than their Muslim counterparts would. Although I am a non-Muslim myself, I am well aware of many of the issues and concerns that the various contributors raise here, so I suspect that Muslim readers might simply feel that they are the proverbial converted to whom these essays are preaching. Indeed, stylistically there is a slight heavy-handed—even, dare I say, didactic—timbre infusing not only Siddiqui's piece, but also those by Anver M. Emon on "Islamic Theology and Moral Agency" and Amin Malak on dialogical discourse.

A number of other chapters, meanwhile, could be stronger. In particular, Rukhsana Khan's "Raising Muslim Children in a Diverse World" stands out, only insofar as her ruminations could be elaborated upon to demonstrate more clearly the distinctiveness of child-rearing among Muslims versus that in other communities. Moreover, the respective chapters by Ausma Zehanat Khan, who describes the development of *Muslim Girl Magazine*, and Sheema Khan, who discusses the Khadr case, could have probed much more deeply with respect to media representations in the former and governmental duplicity and complacency in the latter.

Among the more impressive papers in this collection—including Karim's research—that have given me insight into how contemporary Muslim-Canadians think about authority, Syed Mohamed Mehdi's reflection on his name and how he relates it to his Muslim-Canadian identity is prosaic and quite moving. In a similar vein, Anar Ali's contemplations on his Ismaili background and how it has been affected by tensions brought about by negotiations of pluralism and acceptance among Muslims is thought-provoking. I have also learned much about the role of science in Islam in Arif Babul's work, which, while rather long, provides many details about Islamic history that have given me a better understanding of the intellectual traditions of the religion. Finally, although much has been written on the topic already, Bakht's breakdown of the various controversial incidents in Canada involving Muslim women and veiling is succinct, cogent and well-organized, and offers a perspective from her keen legal eye that is missing from other writings I have encountered.

Although without a doubt one of the main intentions of *Belonging and Banishment* is to showcase the Muslim community's diversity, I feel there is still a need to find a deeper theme to bind these disparate works together beyond merely this diversity. Knowing clearly who the target audience was for this anthology when it was being assembled would have helped tremendously in this regard. As it stands for me, however, reading this collection from beginning to end resulted in some perplexity over what the book is attempting to achieve.

About the Reviewer

Alan David Wong is a doctoral candidate in the Special Individualized Program at Montreal's Concordia University, focusing on diversity, citizenship and identity issues in Canada. His research involves collecting oral histories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual/transgendered and queer/allosexual ethnicized and racialized and Two-Spirited activists in Montreal. He has authored and co-authored articles on oral history in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* and on representations of gay and lesbian refugee claimants in the Canadian press in the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, and is a member of the CURA-funded Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and Other Human Rights Violations project.

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