Muslim Women in Contemporary North America: Controversies, Clichés, and Conversations. Meena Sharify-Funk. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023. Pp. 230.

In the last few decades, "Women and Islam" has become a highly charged topic of conversation and inquiry, featuring a variety of voices from both the general public and academia. Despite these many interlocutors, this conversation tends to reinforce a single narrative about women and Islam that is characterized by a prevalence of essentialisms undergirded by monolithic understandings of Muslim women and their identities, values, and struggles. In *Muslim Women in Contemporary North America: Controversies, Clichés, and Conversations*, Meena Sharify-Funk attempts to dismantle this popular "single narrative" by moving beyond clichés and stereotypical essentialisms towards a "greater apprehension of the multiple realities of Muslim women in North America" (7). Engaging public frames of reference in the United States and Canada, Sharify-Funk explores several controversial topics, including "clash" literature, dissident reformists, female religious leadership, and women's liberation efforts, to "enrich public dialogue" and destabilize "simplistic platitudes about the nature of 'Muslim'- 'majority-culture' relations" (3). She employs a dialogical framework approach in her systematic analysis to investigate identity construction and negotiation among Muslim women, ultimately concluding that the "multitude of diverse Muslim women" unequivocally demonstrates that not only is there no "single narrative" but also no archetypal "Muslim woman" (207).

Sharify-Funk begins her analysis by investigating the diverse experiences of contemporary Muslim women in America and Canada. She first observes great variance in the ways Muslim women seek sacred meaning, identifying salient differences based on specific

ethnic, cultural, sectarian, or interpretive contexts (10). Still, as Sharify-Funk argues, women who identify as Muslim share "core, symbolic reference points of Islamic history, community, faith, and spirituality" as they negotiate self-identity and communal identity in North America (13). To this end, Muslim women work through "their own definitions of self and religion in relation to race, religious pluralism, and national identity," often in response to both internal and external identity politics (14, 21). In a post-9/11 context, identity formation has been further complicated by a persistent suspicion of Muslims: Muslims feel a need to "demonstrate benign intentions" and "display loyalty to American or Canadian identities" in order to be considered "moderate Muslims" (22–23). The varied ways in which Muslim women have chosen to construct their identities reaffirms, for Sharify-Funk, the "impossibility of a 'single narrative' about the meaning of their experience" (28).

To make sense of the diversity of constructed identities among contemporary North American Muslim women, Sharify-Funk deploys a dialogical framework distilled from scholarship informed by a dialogical epistemology. Sharify-Funk draws on theoretical insights from scholars like Fred Dallmayr, Xavier Guillaume, and Roxanne Euben for her approach, which "takes note of tensions and asymmetries while also drawing attention to the complexity of cross-cultural interactions" (38). This dialogical framework, according to Sharify-Funk, provides a constructive way to analyze such tensions and interactions, particularly between the West and Islam, and identify divergent beliefs and value claims as well as highlight how "different claims are not always fundamentally incompatible" (64). In this way, Sharify-Funk asserts that we can begin to understand how many American and Canadian Muslim women are "constructing identities defined by complex nuances of meaning" (28–29).

In Sharify-Funk's view, the necessity of a dialogical approach is thrown into sharp relief when the popular success of

totalizing narratives of "clash" literature are considered. The overarching narrative of "clash" literature, which follows in the vein of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, takes the superiority of Western ideals as premise but contends that Western policies of multiculturalism and political correctness have led to the decline of Western civilization. In other words, clash literature sees the West as a "threatened saviour" amidst an inevitable conflict between Western liberalism and Islamic authoritarianism. For these authors, the only way to reverse Western decline is to "assertively condemn Islamic culture and promote women's emancipation within Muslim communities" (73). This stance of the clash literature, Sharify-Funk suggests, is "driven by deep-seated identity insecurity" in the face of the changing contours of an increasingly diverse and plural Western society (90). Overall, Sharify-Funk's critical appraisal of clash literature finds it to be "more alarmist than analytical in nature and intent," especially as it disregards sociological insights, overgeneralizes the other, and discounts the relevance of dialogical thinking (92).

Clash literature's pervasive anxiety about Islam and Muslims has contributed to the rise of "Muslim women's emancipation" as a major literary genre, spearheaded by dissident Muslim women writers in contemporary North America. Sharify-Funk analyzes three prominent dissident authors, Raheel Raza, Irshad Manji, and Ayaan Ali Hirsi, who have become "increasingly influential sources of information about Islam and Muslims" for the lay Western reader (134). Upon identifying several central themes of the genre, including reform agendas, positioning in relation to Western liberalism and secularism, and women's emancipation, Sharify-Funk maps a spectrum of views on the topics among Raza, Manji, and Ali Hirsi. For instance, while the writers agree on the need for reform if Islam is to thrive in the West, their views on the level and intensity of reform required vary. This variance stems from the distinction

between "reforming Islamic *interpretation and practice* and challenging foundational Islamic *beliefs and doctrines*" (114–115). Whereas Raza argues that "the problem is Muslims and not Islam," Manji contends that Islam "is an inherently contradictory set of injunctions and proscriptions" (115).

These differing opinions directly impact the writers' stances on the "prospects for an ultimate reconciliation between Western values and Islamic cultures" (103). Raza, for example, sees essential Islamic and Western values as compatible, while Manji sees a basic contradiction between the two systems and believes that the task of Islamic reformation "requires a transformative Westernization of religious culture" (121). Hirsi Ali, however, sees Islam as "directly responsible for radicalism and terrorism," and so not even worth reform (121). The prospects of Islamic reform, in the view of Manji and Raza, are "inseparably linked" to the issue of women's emancipation; for them, "the strengthening of women's rights is regarded not merely as an outcome of reform, but also as a catalyst" (125). While these dissident writers have gained immense popularity in Western circles, Sharify-Funk notes that their calls for reform have "little appeal" among both "extreme" Muslims and "the many Muslims in America, Canada, and beyond who genuinely wish for changes in their tradition" (133). Even so, Sharify-Funk finds that dissent literature raises important questions, such as whether encounters between Western liberalism and Islam may produce "more consciously pluralistic forms of social identity" (136).

Sharify-Funk investigates the possibility of pluralistic identity through an examination of highly publicized and controversial women-led Islamic prayer events and hypervisible veiling practices among Muslim women in North America. She argues that women-led prayers, which represent a move to liberalize Islam through the deployment of textual strategies, embody an

"attempt to find areas of common ground between Islamic values and the broader North American cultural ethos" (169). The prayer leaders, she finds, underscore participation in both Islamic and Western communities, "albeit in a manner that is more likely to be warmly received in Western contexts than in traditional Islamic communities" (169). While women-led prayers may be well-received in Western society, the Islamic veil is still considered "a visible manifestation of what many considered to be essential cultural differences between Western and Islamic values" (177). This discomfort with Islamic veiling practices is evident in a number of policies and laws that regulate and ban the Islamic head covering and/or face veil in the name of national security and public safety across North America. However, as Sharify-Funk notes, "the veil is not a matter for non-Muslims to decide" and the Western fixation on the veil leads to wedge politics, deepens intergroup divisions, and inhibits belonging (198). Sharify-Funk advocates instead for deeper dialogue as a means to produce "mutually workable forms of accommodation" (199).

In her concluding thoughts, Sharify-Funk reiterates the transformative power of dialogue to move beyond clichés and acknowledge the impressive diversity of Muslim experiences and cultural syntheses in North America. She argues that the dialogical has the capacity to "challenge the reflexive dehumanization of the other in a confrontation over competing claims and realities" as it makes the "interwoven nature of lives as well as the interpretation of ideas and ideologies" visible (217). Naturally, the dialogical process requires conversation partners, and for Sharify-Funk, "Western liberalism has become a principal conversation partner for Islamic traditionalism" (213–214). Thus, Muslims in North America can be said to be at a dialogical crossroads, navigating the blending of Islamic values and Western culture. Sharify-Funk's analysis,

however, focuses on the experiences of North American-born converts to Islam and American immigrants from Muslim families, such as Amina Wadud, Asra Nomani, and Raheel Raza. By focusing only on women who fit the Muslim indigenous-immigrant binary, Sharify-Funk fails to consider the experiences of second-and third-generation Muslim women born and raised in North America whose very lives are evidence of the dialogical at work. Still, *Muslim Women in Contemporary North America* provides an incredibly comprehensive overview of the state of the field for "Women and Islam" and indubitably demonstrates the multiplicity of North American Muslim women's experiences and identities, thereby challenging any sort of singular narrative.

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