

Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-Apartheid by Gabeba Baderoon (Review)¹

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Regarding Muslims: Slavery to Post-apartheid is a timely book. It sits comfortably not only as a postcolonial analysis, but also as a methodological guide for postcolonial feminist research. The book helps postcolonial African feminist scholars to reconfigure the conceptual and visual habits used to define and represent Muslims and Islam, both historically and contemporarily. Gabeba Baderoon's ambition to use alternative materials to "speak back to the history of infantilising, quietist and picturesque images of Muslims", is exemplary and refreshing.² It charges the book with reflexivity, without running the risk of romanticising or essentialising Islam or Muslims. The book is structured into six chapters, each adding texture and nuance to historically flat representations of Muslim subjects. Thematic foci – representation, food, movement, sexual and labour histories, violence, and post-apartheid identity – respectively characterise the chapters, but these chapters are held together methodologically and theoretically. Each chapter turns the gaze, as it were, to accustomed ideas of what Muslims are – "coloured", or "Malay" – with alternative, but familiar sources – giving the book coherence and consistency.

Arguably, 'Ambiguous Visibility' is the most revelatory chapter in providing protocols and methodologies for postcolonial feminist research. The chapter is important for its introduction of the oblique gaze – a strategy Baderoon employs to view the visual art wherein Muslims are represented. Oblique gaze is an active exercise of looking "at an angle" that cuts through the conformity with which black bodies are designated, and in so doing, (re)surfaces personhood which is often overlooked. This interventionist move is carried throughout the book, yet 'Ambiguous Visibility' foregrounds a suspicion of archival material that will become a consistent practice in the following chapters. Staying with 'Ambiguous Visibility', Baderoon shows that because the archive categorises and catalogues institutions, ideas, place and people in separate holdings, it inherently belies a possibility to be read as an interrelated body of work.

¹ Gabeba Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014).

² Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 4

As such, the very intimacy and interiority required to analyse Muslims and Islam as anything but “submissive and compliant,” is therefore unavailable.³ Baderoon does not stop with just an incisive critique of the limitations of the archive. She engages the archival limitations with alternative and unexpected sources that not only decentre the archive from its echelons, but also regard it as a translation of the multiple epistemologies wherein Muslims are represented.

Baderoon’s approach is firmly grounded in the granular novelties of adding voice, resurfacing presence, and recalling personal memory that thankfully escapes the abstraction postcolonial scholars normally rely on when illustrating how the archive functions as only a “technology of the empire.”⁴ Baderoon achieves this by integrating “alternate archives,” while her creative and contrapuntal method reveal the mutually constitutive power relations at work between subject and coloniser. By defining and representing Muslims and Islam as a discursive strategy to “secure a white subjectivity”, Baderoon reveals how colonial personhood was constitutively defined.⁵ One interesting way she achieves this is by revealing the anxieties and fragile imaginaries of colonists about “the landscape and the communities established by runaway slaves, rebellious labourers and insurrectionary groups”.⁶ In showing the strategies that colonists used to visually and conceptually tame Muslims, Baderoon also unsettles the steadiness of the colonial sensibilities. The chapter, as well as the book overall, is thus always layering the variety of ways in which power functions are entangled between disciplining the visibility of Muslims through sexuality and labour, whilst ensuring a degree of presence that reinforces a dominant representation of colonists.

Another useful contribution is the way Baderoon carefully presents the upsetting and uncomfortable histories alongside the poetic and reconciliatory. In the chapter ‘Sexual Geographies of the Cape’, the book demonstrates how various art forms – poetry, novels, and plays – redress the legacies of sexual violence and enslavement that, she argues, affects “all South Africans, not only the dependents of enslaved people.”⁷ By highlighting the emotive and celebratory features in art and performance art, the book softens the coarseness of the violence sexual histories that at once denies itself to “confine themselves solely to the

³ Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 40

⁴ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. (Duke University Press, 2015).

⁵ Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 45

⁶ Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 43

⁷ Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 86

themes of suffering,” but establishes itself nonetheless as a worthy epistemology.⁸ This method becomes particularly important for African feminist postgraduate research as a *praxis* of oblique gaze – of “looking back” at the histories and the representations without replicating a gaze of shame or disgrace.

Perhaps a shortcoming of the book is its struggle to immediately attract a black reader whose research may focus on “reclaiming alternative modes of visibility for black subjectivity,” yet could ignore the book based on its focus of Muslims and Islam.⁹ When discussing the significance of *Regarding Muslims* for the study of African Traditional Religions (ATRs), Honours’ and Masters’ students confessed that the book presented as a private read of Muslim identity. In a decolonial configuration where the academic cannon is critiqued for excluding black epistemologies and histories, it can be argued that anticipating the content of *Regarding Muslims* ‘by its cover’ signals an urgent call for convenors and lecturers working in the intersections of religion, gender, and feminism in Africa, to include reading materials and pedagogies that disrupt a conventional cannon and teaching praxis. *Regarding Muslims* remains grossly unrepresented in the prescribed reading lists of Religious Studies course, especially when the thematic focus is not a close study of Muslims or Islam. Courses that specialise in ATRs tend to shy away from an engagement with Islam, and bracket it as ontologically and temporally conditioned to Africa. Introducing *Regarding Muslims* to a Religious Studies’ class could encourage students to seek out, and innovatively incorporate, literature that does not immediately represent their research focus. By demonstrating to students, the elegant way in which Baderoon interweaves the personal and the political natures of her research, the classroom could be transformed into a space where students share their lived experience and use this epistemology to critique the theories and methods of Religious Studies. Four years since its publication, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid* remains, not only, a revelatory postcolonial text, but a teaching praxis as well.

Bibliography

Baderoon, G. *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. Wits University Press, 2014.

Lowe, L. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015.

⁸ Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 106

⁹ Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid*. 39