

Zaheera Jina (ed.), *Saffron: A Collection of Personal Narratives by Muslim Women.*

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Saffron is the second instalment in a series of compendia that capture narratives of Muslim women's lived realities within the South African context. It follows and expands upon the theme of marriage which is introduced in the title of its precursor, *Riding the Samoosa Express: Personal Narratives of Marriage and Beyond* (2015). Suggestively titled, *Saffron, A Collection of Personal Narratives by Muslim Women*, as its evocative spice namesake infers, aims to entice its readers with a multi-sensorial journey into Muslim women's intimate spaces of nourishment, tradition and creativity. The anthology focuses on the theme of marriage by presenting experientially diverse and subjectively fragmented narratives of Muslim women that carefully interweave critical, at times advisory, and also satirical reflections of self, family, faith and food.

There are fifty-six, predominantly South African¹, contributors to the anthology and amongst them are creative writers, published authors, bloggers, educators, community activists and/or academics. Although the editor notes that the collection was curated to include a "wide range" of Muslim women's experiences of marriage (xii), it is noteworthy that a substantial number of the contributors are Muslim women from the South African "Indian" community. Considering South Africa's cultural multiplicities and its history of social disparities, the lack of broader racial representation is, therefore, not an insignificant oversight. The absence of stories reflecting the lived experiences of significant groupings of Muslim women from different racial and cultural clusters is a central weakness of this collective. The narratives are thematically collated into six sections, namely: *Lived Realities; Food and Marriage; Hardship and Conflict; Dealing with In-Laws; Intimacy, Baby-making and Children; The Self-esteem of a Muslim Woman*, and each section has an addendum of advisory epigrams or *Pearls of Wisdom*.

The complexities of Muslim marriages are explored through delightfully witty and skilfully crafted culinary anecdotes. Issues such as familial harmony; dealing with expectations, loss, pain and disappointments; navigating the politics of food and food-making in an evolving South

¹ Only five of the 56 contributors are not South African.

African cultural landscape; negotiating and/or embracing inter-generational relationships and religious traditions, are adeptly entwined to construct intricate layers of personal reflection. Each of the contributors, in varying ways engage with questions of individuality and what that means for them as women who are also multiply invested in their community, family, career and faith imperatives. Their reflections reveal varying nodes of vulnerabilities and resolve, where ordinary and mundane moments in life are all seamlessly and meaningfully integrated with the more cataclysmic and deeply spiritual experiences.

Underpinning these constructions of self is the notion of relatability and mutuality. As iterated on the book's back-cover, "the narratives will remind and reassure you that, as a woman, you never journey alone – many women walk along you," pointing to the idea of women's shared gendered experiences. Their narratives, it would appear, are intended to disrupt and resist homogenising "othering" tropes commonly attributed to Muslim women, where Muslim women are often presented as being uniquely oppressed and/or voiceless.

As a genre, Muslim women's personal narratives, or their "speaking out" literature, has been critiqued for responding to marketing pressures and for adopting a "navigational strategy" to make Islam, generally, and Muslim women's visibilities, in particular, more palatable and less threatening to its intended audiences,² thereby re-inscribing the othering it seeks to resist. In a deeply politicised global context of post 9/11 and its attendant islamophobia discourses, Muslim women's self-representations (or their "truth-telling" missives) are therefore often ambiguously regarded. Although Muslim women's agential writing impulses do not emerge from, and are not bound by, or responsive to, the marketing dictates of the broader discursive terrains of islamophobia, narratives such as those presented in *Saffron* can offer a more nuanced picture of the specificities of Muslim women's gendered experiences, particularly *because* they are enmeshed and located within the inescapable ambit of these global discourses – even when presented through an apolitical veneer.

Considering that the themes of *Saffron* relate very specifically to South African Muslim women's experiences of marriage, it is important to also situate their narratives within the current context of ongoing legal battles

² Aysha A. Hidayatullah and Taymiya R. Zaman, "Speaking for Ourselves: American Muslim Women's Confessional Writings and the Problem of Alterity," *Journal for Islamic Studies; Thematic Issue: Theorising Experience, Subjectivity and Narrative in Studies of Gender and Islam*, 33, 2013, pp48-76.

to have the consequences of Muslim marriages recognised by South African courts. In particular, gendered discourses have emerged from internal resistance to this process by some Muslim religious bodies. In the introductory chapter the editor, drawing on her own personal experience, highlights some of the challenges Muslim women face when entering into and also when dissolving their religious marriages. In the absence of legal protection, proper consultation, support and/or female-sensitive religious advisory processes before and after marriage, Muslim women are often ill prepared on their rights within a marriage. These factors, coupled with cultural expectations and other social pressures, often mean that Muslim women rely mainly on the advice of family members to deal with marital issues such as; financial independence, domestic abuse, divorce settlements, adapting to living with extended family members, matters of self-care and mental health, sexual and reproductive rights amongst so many other issues. Thus, the book offers a compilation of Muslim women's personal experiences around some of these issues, thereby complementing some of the more paradigmatic discussions around Islamic marriages.

Saffron makes an important contribution to these prevailing religious debates. Although the collection is not used as a medium for advocacy on Muslim women's marital rights, it does help bring into the public conversational space, real life concerns and challenges that Muslim women face within their marriages. These personal narratives offer a compelling appreciation for the complex and nuanced ways that Muslim women do negotiate, contest and harmonise their faith imperatives into their everyday lives.

Two notable contributions in this regard are chapters 24 and 26, entitled respectively *Braving conflict and hardship with perseverance*, (pp107-112) by anonymous and *When "the one" is the wrong one!* (pp116-119) by Shauqeen Mizaj. Both narratives deal with issues of intimate partner violence. The assumption that an Islamic marriage legitimises the sexual availability of a wife, with or without her consent, often masks the prevalence of marital rape in Muslim homes and also serves to protect those complicit in its perpetuation. The saliency of including these narratives in the anthology instead of glossing over these difficult issues cannot be overstated, since it is precisely these types of issues that are absent from public discourses around Muslim marriages. In the final analysis, *Saffron* offers a refreshingly honest, warts and all celebration of Muslim women's lived experiences, even if those experiences are somewhat culturally specific.