

BOOK REVIEWS

Female Muslim Student Experiences in Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry

ZAHRA RAFIE AND HEMCHAND GOSSAI.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 158 pages.

One of the commonly overlooked populations in research on/with marginalized groups in the U.S. educational system is the Muslim youth population. Specifically, young Muslim women's experiences are rarely examined or highlighted in the academic literature on their own. *Female Muslim Student Experiences in Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry* contributes to the emerging body of literature that examines and centers female Muslim students' experiences in U.S. educational institutions. Drawing on critical narrative inquiry, the study reported in this book seeks to understand the unique and diverse experiences of 14 female Muslim students in higher education. In doing so, the authors present individual participants' narratives as a counter tool for challenging the commonly held assumption that views Muslim women as a monolithic group. Thus, the authors weave participants' narratives together in a thematic manner in seven different chapters, highlighting common themes that emerged from those narratives collectively, as well as unique aspects of each individual experience. Along the way, the authors ensure connecting emergent themes with "theoretical themes that have developed in research in this field" (p. 8).

The book starts by laying out the theoretical framework and setting the socio-historical context in which the study is situated. Next, it begins to narrate the participants' experiences through the following themes: othering, Islamophobia manifested in discrimination and microaggressions and disguised as impostorism, sense of belonging, acceptance and resistance, and finally dismantling misinformation and stereotypes. The authors conclude the book with some reflections and recommendations that they elicited from participants. By employing critical narrative inquiry as a methodology, the authors challenge dominant ethnocentric perspectives in academia, particularly in statistical data that fail to attend to the complexity

and diversity of individual Muslim students' experiences, while also often privileging Eurocentric colonial views under the guise of objectivity and universality.

After setting the theoretical, historical, and methodological scene in the introductory chapter, the authors present the concept of otherness through the everyday experiences of their participants. As they share their participants' narratives, they highlight the interconnectedness between invisibility and surveillance as a common phenomenon that most of the participants experience in their everyday encounters with non-Muslims. In other words, they emphasize a common experience among participants who are visibly Muslim (i.e., *hijabis*), that is standing out or drawing attention, and hence being viewed as a threat. This hypervisibility, however, soon turns into complete invisibility, which becomes evident in the way that participants describe the ways they are treated by others. Although not explicitly presented as a theme, being visibly Muslim is constantly conveyed by all participants as a crucial factor in shaping their experiences in educational settings and beyond. This idea speaks to Ali's (2021) MusCrit microframework, which also evolved from a study with young Muslim American women. In her framework, Ali considers identifiability as one of the central tenets that distinguish the experiences of Muslim Americans from those of other marginalized groups in the U.S. The findings presented in this book provide a significant contribution to the academic literature as they confirm findings from other studies and offer more empirical evidence for a theory in the field.

The authors conclude the second chapter by presenting their participants' experiences in light of Fanon's (1952) theorization on internalized oppression. To elaborate, Rafie and Gossai (2024) show how their participants experience othering and inferiorization from their own community and family members who had themselves internalized their colonizer's ideas about their own communities (Fanon, 1952). I find this section especially powerful as it analyzes participants' experiences from a different angle or through the under-researched concept (as the authors state) of internalized oppression. In other words, showing the impact of anti-Muslim racism and othering on the "within group" dynamics (i.e., among Muslim communities) goes more in line with the authors' earlier discussion on decentering ethnocentrism and decolonization of academic knowledge than just presenting participants' experiences in relation to the white world.

The third and fourth chapters focus on Islamophobia as it manifests in microaggressions and impostorism. A common theme that the authors highlight in these two chapters is the subtle and overt Islamophobic attitudes that Muslim women face, and more importantly the toll that subtle Islamophobia takes on their mental health. Once again, the role of visibility comes up in the way participants describe their attitudes and decisions toward wearing or not wearing their hijab at different points in their lives. Besides visibility, the narratives emphasize the role of 9/11 in creating a connotation between Islam and terrorism among the participants' teachers and classmates, and consequently in triggering Islamophobic behaviors towards them, especially those who are visibly Muslim. In examining Islamophobia in terms of impostorism, the authors show how their participants experienced continuous doubts in their academic abilities due to being put down, or indirectly told they did not belong in advanced classes mainly by their school teachers. Despite the impostorism they face, the authors emphasize the persistence and resilience among Muslim women to pursue higher and advanced degrees, which is evident in the participants' experiences and the large numbers of Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, who pursue higher education.

The fifth chapter highlights the contribution of this study to literature on the sense of belonging in the field of education. More specifically, the authors explain the power of narrative inquiry in extending integration theory that is often used in researching the relationship between student success and sense of belonging in schools. They point out that narrative inquiry allows for "approaching and understanding sense of belonging as captured by the individual's understanding of whether they feel included in the educational institution and the intersection of the individual and institutional interaction" (p. 93). In essence, they argue that through narrative inquiry this study extends integration theory by shifting the responsibility of "integrating" students into the system from students to institutions. As they share participants' stories about the relationship between identity and belonging, the authors highlight the problem of "in betweenness" that Muslim students face. That is to say, in an attempt to find a sense of belonging, participants describe that oftentimes they feel alienated from their Muslim communities and American society at large. To put it in one of the participants' words, they feel "too Westernized and not religious enough for the Muslim community, and not Westernized enough for American society" (p. 95).

The seventh chapter focuses on stereotypes and misinformation in academic institutions when it comes to teaching about Islamic history. The authors start this chapter by briefly explaining the concept of stereotypes through a sociological and social-psychological lens. They proceed to portray participants' stories of how they dealt with stereotypes and misinformation perpetuated by their teachers and professors and how much of a burden it is to carry the responsibility of demystifying stereotypes about your own people. The role of visibility came up again in this chapter, specifically in how "not looking Muslim" makes speaking out and correcting misinformation be perceived differently by classmates and teachers.

To ensure they continue to center their participants' voices, the authors conclude the book with reflections and recommendations by simply sharing their concluding thoughts on the study, following these with a brief commentary. One common theme that came up in participants' responses is how therapeutic it was to have a space to share their experiences as Muslim women with someone who was genuinely interested to listen to and valued those experiences. Additionally, they recommended that Muslim communities should continue to do similar work where people would become more comfortable in having "difficult" conversations.

Female Muslim Student Experiences in Higher Education: A Narrative Inquiry is a valuable and promising contribution to literature in the field of Muslim students' experiences in the U.S. As a researcher and a Muslim woman, I believe that this kind of work is much needed not only for the "academic community," but also for Muslim women outside academia. There is power in reading about the experiences and struggles of people who share some of our identities, especially when those experiences are constantly overlooked or invalidated. In order to extend this work and make it even more inspiring to other Muslim students, it is important to not only focus on sharing the struggles, but also highlighting the joys that Muslim female students could experience when they come together, and the power that lies in sisterhood, which one of the participants already mentioned. Inspired by Black Muslim woman literacy scholar, Gholdy Muhammad's (2023) idea of making joy a learning goal in the school curriculum I invite us all to extend this idea from K-12 literacy research to research on young Muslim women's experiences in all education levels. By inviting more young Muslim women to talk about the joys and strengths

they provide each other when coming together, researchers can carve spaces where Muslim women are not only able to name injustices but also to find healing and power in celebrating who they are.

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