# BOOK REVIEW

## BEING MUSLIM: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN AMERICAN ISLAM

BY SYLVIA CHAN-MALIK

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Dr. Chan-Malik brilliantly challenges the flat stereotype of Muslim women in the 20th and 21st centuries in *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*. This chronological exposition incorporates cultural anthropology, storytelling, and astute reflections to share the untold stories of U.S. Muslim women. This rich narrative centers female perspectives. It also provides insights about how Islamic identities are molded against social and political happenings. Worthy of applause is the non-judgmental inclusion of different denominations and identities beyond the majority Sunni sect, such as the Ahmadiyya, Nation of Islam (NOI), LGBTQI, and Latina Muslims.

The first three chapters naturally focus on Black Muslim women. They comprised the majority of this religious demographic until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The fourth chapter examines the intersection of the Iranian Revolution, the American feminist movement, and Muslim women. The final chapter introduces the breadth of contemporary women who identify as Muslim. The central figures are presented as individuals, with various motivations and pathways to finding Islam. While no broad brush can paint a collective experience, some overlapping themes emerge. Additionally, individualism and collectivism float in the background and could be a site for further sociological exploration.


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On a cursory read, the book wrestles together grand concepts such as race, gender, and religion. A more critical examination, however, reveals that any authentic conversation about women in American Islam must engage these issues. These questions better explain the multiplicity and diversity of this group. Thus, this book is a foundational resource for contextualizing a woman's experience of American Islam.

Often overlooked or shaped by external voices, the "Muslim woman" is widely accepted as a one-dimensional figure. She is seen as an immigrant, housewife, and mother who believes in an "Eastern" religion, obedient to the head of household. She may even possess an unspoken desire for liberation. This stereotype is hopefully recognized as overly simplistic. However, formal scholarship is still forthcoming to better acknowledge the contributions and complexities of this pluralistic group.

Of note is the terminology deliberately chosen in writing this book. Chan-Malik stakes claim to the phrase "U.S. Muslim." These words describe Muslims in the United States rather than across North and South America. She adopts the accepted phrase "American Islam" to describe Islam as practiced in the United States. Because these terms are not parallel, time will reveal whether the term "U.S. Muslim" gains prolific use. For the purposes of this book review, word choice follows the author's intentions.

This book uncovers new depths to understanding Muslim women by centering female voices. Specifically, the author argues how Islamic engagement varies by external social happenings and life experiences. For example, many converts who desire gender and racial justice have expressed personal freedom and safety through engagement with Islam. The author further argues that the journey of American Islam is inextricably linked to Black history, which continues to shape its evolving identity.

These claims are groundbreaking on many accounts, including the manner in which they are told. Firstly, the study of Muslim women is an underdeveloped area of scholarship. And, the history of U.S. Muslims is often told from the perspective of Muslim men or non-Muslims. Prominent historical figures such as Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X dominate historical discussions about American Islam. In shifting the focus to Muslim women, they become humanized. When necessary, evidence is pieced together to objectively postulate over Islam's appeal. Chapter 1 beautifully illustrates this point by singling out from a group photo a woman named Florence Watts. She was a a Black woman who migrated to Chicago from Washington D.C. and converted to Ahmaddiya Islam in 1922. Her motivations for conversion are

reconstructed through primary evidence, historical context, and *Moslem Sunrise* newsletter archives.

By unpacking gender inclusion, a nuanced dialogue emerges about women within American Islam. The absence and presence of proselytization strategies are provided as helpful indicators against broader social contexts. For example, the 1920s Ahmaddiya Movement in Islam (AMI) focused its messaging about the rights and equality of women. AMI also advertised on the "Woman's Page" of the newspaper and offered women leadership roles. The inclusion of women was front and center. This structured approach to attract female followers contrasts the modern-day story of Laila al-Mariyati. Laila's mother remained Catholic until Laila turned eighteen years old. Her mother attributes her conversion to independent reflections and decisions. Here, the absence of active recruitment mirrors modern, pro-female social norms - supporting a woman's right to choose.

Some of the earlier narratives shared in this book are anchored to influential men. For example, the life of Madame Rahatullah, a Hoosier native, lends a few pages to Mufti Muhammad Sadiq. He arrived in the U.S. as the first Ahmaddiya missionary in 1920 and became recognized as a "pastor, prophet and proselytizer." Born in British India, Sadiq perceptively navigated the landscape of a racialized America, attracting Black people and women. In a book about women in American Islam, the attention he receives in the book can initially be bothersome. However, this tool proves useful because it enriches the reader's understanding about women in the earlier years where written documentation is scarce. For Madame Rahatullah, her conversion is better contextualized after understanding Sadiq's personal and professional approaches to developing AMI.

This book also adds a new dimension to the racial and social-political debates in America. The NOI is typically categorized as a pro-Black, socio-religious movement and the narratives largely focus on Muslim men. The story of the famous NOI member, Betty Shabbaz, is undoubtedly linked to that of her husband. In this narrative, however, Malcolm plays a supporting role to Betty. His contributions are shared only to the extent that they better illuminate Betty's motivations. For example, Betty discovered Islam through Malcolm's bold and attractive rhetoric. However, she also functioned as a separate human being grounded in her own beliefs. She courageously fought for her family's safety through expressive letters to Elijah Muhammad. She showed faith and resolve when independently making the pilgrimage to Mecca. As a widow and mother to six, she demonstrated resilience by successfully completing her doctorate. Betty defined her own morality and existence,

which she accepted as intertwined with being a mother, wife, and widow. Her identity as a Black woman co-exists with that of the famous singer, Dakota Staton. In contrast to Betty, Staton publicly challenged the NOI and eventually left Islam. These two women demonstrate diversity in religious understanding, even amongst those outwardly sharing a race and gender.

The book primarily focuses on Muslim women *in* America. It visits global jurisdictions, however, to further understand American Islam, specifically during the rise of American feminism and womanism. These words are further explained in the book. In brief, the word "feminism" faces scrutiny because it prioritizes the needs of White, middle-class women. "Womanism" more broadly describes women who support gender and racial justice. The Iranian revolution, U.S. foreign policy, and the feminist movement combined to characterize the modern day Muslim woman. The resulting image is tied to being foreign. The reality is that over a third of today's U.S. Muslim population is composed of Black women. Hence, this book's shift to focus upon U.S. Muslim women of color is a more accurate demographic reflection.

In this book, American Islam is presented as an intellectual choice carrying different push and pull factors. For many women, Islam has offered liberation amidst ongoing oppression in post-slavery America. Others grapple with the label of "Muslim woman" due to social marginalization in today's mainstream America. Hazel Gomez, a U.S. Muslim with Puerto Rican and Mexican roots, acknowledges the wide range of American Islam. She also strives to capitalize on diversity as a strength. She states, "'We need to come together [as Muslims] and build these bridges [with each other], or else the rifts will become wider and wider. Allah said in the Qur'an that He made us into nations and tribes so that we may know one another, and if anything, the Trump era has forced us to get to know one another'" (Chan-Malik, 2018, 210). Her engagement with Islam fits within broader conversations during today's Black Lives Matter movement. Specifically, employers and activists are asking how to build a more equitable society and celebrate differences. Throughout this book, U.S. Muslim women like Hazel are part of American history. Their engagement with Islam can partly be viewed as a reflection of broader social happenings.

Through these accounts, Chan-Malik demystifies the experiences of U.S. Muslim women of color. Accordingly, this book would be welcomed for students of gender studies, history, and Islamic studies. It's also a needed resource for diversity, equity inclusion, and access measures in a post 9/11 era. The issues raised in this book are further important within the contexts of philanthropy and public policy.

Put to the ultimate test, this authentic expose would be celebrated amongst its data set - Muslim women. Does this book expand the narrative of U.S. Muslim women, as it sets out do? It resoundingly does, with a self-acknowledgement that further scholarship is needed to meaningfully deepen these conversations.

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**References**

Chan-Malik, S. (2018). *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*. New York University Press.