

*Cut from the Same Cloth? Muslim Women on Life in Britain.* Sabeena Akhtar (editor).

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With the rise of Islamophobia across not just the UK but the wider western world, laws seeking to govern the appearance of Muslim women have been discussed, voted on, and passed in countries like France, Belgium, and Switzerland. What Muslim women wear has long been a lightning rod for public and political discourse, providing a useful distraction from issues that actually matter while offering politicians a way to appease conservative constituencies and/or launch wars on the pretext of “saving” Muslim women. The distraction causes pushback from other Muslims as well, who often dismiss attacks on visibly Muslim women or engage in victim blaming, saying that if they would just be less conspicuous (that is, remove the veil/burqa/niqab) then they wouldn’t be subject to such hostility. That may well be the case; however, it is very far from the point.

*Cut from the Same Cloth? Muslim Women on Life in Britain* is a timely collection of twenty essays that unflinchingly airs these and other grievances. Propelled by searingly personal anecdotes, these essays run the gamut from discussions of modesty as personal expressions of faith to institutional biases in the human rights sector to the struggles of motherhood in an atmosphere of rampant hate and fear. The contributions tackle aggressions, both micro and (very) macro, from a variety of perspectives — Black, White, mixed ethnicity, disabled, from the younger generation and the older. As Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan notes in her standout essay ‘I Am Not the Answer, I Am a

Question;, the ethos behind the collection can be summed up as an attempt ‘to *be* Muslim as a praxis beyond an identity (18).’

Of particular concern in a number of contributions is how Black Muslim women navigate society while embodying a trifecta of targets for bigotry and hatred: race, religion, and gender. This triple Othering can make everyday existence precarious, leading to what Hodan Yusuf determines in her essay to be a scarcity of safe spaces, where the most innocuous of sites can be minefields of gendered Islamophobia and misogynoir. Added to that is anti-Blackness within Muslim communities, which is often swept under the rug of insistence that Islam condemns racism with the result that Black Muslims experience a kind of gaslighting when they address anti-Black sentiment within their communities.

What the collection foregrounds is the degree to which Muslim women are hypervisible and invisible all at once. They are the embodiment of tropes and simple stories written by others — submission, oppression, passivity. The essays express frustration with this constant orientation to the West as though it were the primary rubric governing how Muslims ought to write about their experiences. At the same time, the collection highlights the silencing of women by their own societies, which shackle them with notions of shame and warnings not to confirm Western stereotypes by airing internal issues. This hyperawareness can lead to a kind of ‘second sight’, which, as Sofia Rehman states in her essay, places the Muslim woman in a unique position where she is able to ‘see the ills in society at large and [...] those of her own community (122).’

As an Arab/Muslim woman (albeit one who doesn't wear the hijab), I know how exhausting it can be to combat these multifarious discourses and paradigms. Having such representational burdens thrust upon a person can be harmful in a number of ways, leading to everything from anxiety to feelings of guilt to a crisis of identity. As the collection's editor, Sabeena Akhtar, writes in her poignant contribution, we should not have to 'compartmentalise and repackage [our] pain into something to be intellectualised or theorised (213).' More than anything, perhaps, it becomes a mental and emotional drain, where the Muslim woman is constantly in a position of having to defend her faith or explain how her personal experiences are not representative of an entire class of people. In her defiant essay 'Riot, Write, Rest: On Writing as a Muslimah' Sumaya Kassim notes the ways in which these parameters can inhibit the imagination and dictate what Muslim women can (or should) write about, saying, 'it keeps us reactive, not creative (286).'

Manzoor-Khan's response to this array of unwanted external pressures and internal barriers is to refuse to be an answer and to instead insist on being a question. It is to dismantle the entire framework of the discourse, to – as she says – not ask for a seat at the table, but to ask how the table was made. This sentiment is echoed in Asha Mohamed's essay on being conscientious global citizens when she insists that 'we shouldn't want seats at broken tables (42).' In other words, we have a responsibility to resist learned assumptions of the world around us and our place in it so as not to unwittingly perpetuate structures of oppression.

In *Minima Moralia* Theodor Adorno writes, ‘In an intellectual hierarchy which constantly makes everyone answerable, unanswerability alone can call the hierarchy directly by its name (68).’ This is ultimately what *Cut from the Same Cloth?* accomplishes. It serves as a reminder to interrogate the question itself rather than attempt to map out all possible answers to it. These essays allow Muslim women, in Kassim’s words, to not ‘be read in parts (293)’ but rather in their totality. The collection is an important addition to the chorus of Muslim women insisting on a free and unfettered right to elucidate their experiences in contemporary Britain.