

*Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith & Sexuality*

Sarah Husain, ed.

320 pages, 2006, \$16.95 (paper)

Seal Press, Emeryville, CA

Reviewed by Masood Ashraf Raja, Kent State University

The metropolitan representation of Muslim women is invariably couched in the language of victimhood. It seems that female Muslim subjects have never been able to transcend the passive state of existence allotted to them in the metropolitan imaginary. The burqa-clad Afghan women became emblems of suffering requiring the U.S post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan. Thus, it seems that the alleviation of female victimhood still serves as a convincing legitimizing strategy for imperial wars. Lost in this whole process of imperial design and native patriarchy are the very voices of the so-called recipients of imperial benevolence: the Muslim women.

Sarah Husain's timely anthology intervenes in this discourse and inserts hitherto silenced voices of Muslim women as agents who speak for themselves. The book is divided into four parts followed by an Afterword by Miriam Cooke, a renowned scholar in the field of Muslim Women Studies. Combining poems, short stories, essays, letters, and art work, the collection lets Muslim women formulate their diverse, often conflicting, views of the Islamic as well as the Western world. Cooke calls the contributions "brave writings" (261) that challenge the status quo both within the Islamic world and the metropolitan West.

Husain informs us of the multivalent scope of this collection in her candid and eloquent introduction. She declares that for the Muslim women "the struggles we face today are not just limited to those against colonial legacies and its inherited regimes of control, or against today's imperial war, but. . . also. . . the struggles we face within our own 'Muslim' communities, our families, our homes—indeed the struggles within ourselves" (3). It is within this complex view of the Muslim female identity that most of the contributors to the anthology express themselves.

While all the contributions are worthy of note, in the interest of brevity, I will include only a few examples. Not surprisingly, Part One, *(UN) NAMING WARS*, starts with a poem entitled "Woman" by S.N, a South-Asian poet and writer. Written in a patriarchal voice, the poem displays the prejudices that manifest themselves upon women's bodies, for the woman's body, in the poem's male perspective, "is for us to mark our territory/and to conduct our wars" (20). Anida Yoeu's "The Day After: A Cento Based on Hate Crimes Filed Shortly after 9/11" chronicles various individual and communal acts of hate in the U.S against the bodies, minds,

and sacred sites of Muslims. The most moving account combines an act of public hatred with social apathy, a recipe for larger racial tragedies:

Two women at a bagel store.  
Woman attacked for wearing a Quranic charm around her neck.  
Attacker lunges,  
yells, “look what your people have done to my people.”  
No one in the store tried to help.  
The owner apologized to the attackers for any inconvenience. (25-26)

Part Two of the book, *WITNESSING ACTS*, includes work that provides a testimony to the impact of native patriarchy and imperial wars on the bodies of women, while also articulating women’s resistance to all these powerful dictates. Shahrzad Naficy’s “On Loan to the Public,” a story “inspired by a glimpse of two orphans in Afghanistan on CNN” (111) plays with the idea of public display of Third World victimhood, and makes us privy to the thoughts and suffering of her protagonist, a female-child rape victim. The narrator’s references to happy childhood scenes elsewhere render her experience even more heartbreaking and also serve as testimony to her courage in intolerable circumstances.

Part Three, (UN) NAMING FAITHS/UNCLAIMING NATIONS, complicates the two major signifiers of identity: religion and nationalism. The works included in this part provide insightful critique of the nation and religion as imagined by Muslim women themselves and not by their Western benefactors. The critique of religion employs the very language of faith that has often been the medium through which the native Muslim patriarchy has articulated women’s place in Islamic societies. In a moving essay at the end of this section entitled “Infinite and Everywhere! My Kaleidoscopic Identity,” Mansha Parven Mirza captures the traumas, trials and ambivalences of maintaining a hybrid identity in a world obsessed with cultural and religious purities. Challenging the purists, she ends her essay with this courageous statement: “For those who cannot deal with the likes of me, tough luck! I’m here to stay, and this time I won’t drift away” (213).

Part Four, RE-CLAIMING OUR BODIES/RE-CLAIMING OUR SEXUALITIES, deals with, as is obvious, women’s bodies and sexuality, most sensitive subjects in Muslim societies. The challenge to a stereotypical view of the Muslim womanhood becomes obvious in a few lines of Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf’s poem “The Veil, My Body”:

It’s just a piece of cloth  
But after Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Maluku, Kosovo  
This is all I have. (246)

The Muslim female identity is constructed within the larger imperatives of native patriarchy and the international power politics, and in such a complex scenario any reading of the female Muslim subject will have to be much more nuanced and complex. *Voices of Resistance* brilliantly places itself in between the two extremes of politics of representation—the

West and the Islamic East—and lets the female Muslim subject speak for herself. The collection, besides being interesting for a non-academic reader, will be a useful text in fields as diverse as literature, politics, cultural studies, women studies and studies of gender.