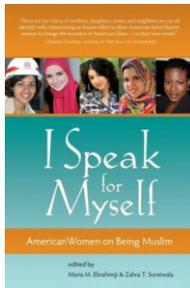


Professional Book Review

Ebrahimji, M. M. & Suratwala, Z. T. (Eds.) (2011). *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim*. Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press. 236 pp., 9781935952008. \$16.95

Reviewed by Zeynep Isik-Ercan, Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne, IN.



I Speak for Myself includes personal essays written by 40 educated and accomplished Muslim American women all under age 40. Editors, who also contributed to the book with their own essays, describe the focus of the book in their introduction: “first-person narratives written by women who were born and raised in America and have been negotiating the dichotomy between Islamic and Western values since birth.” In its aim to portray the past experiences and future aspirations of these Muslim American women, the book follows the footsteps of *The Face behind the Veil* by Donna Gehrke-White (2006). While Gehrke-White told the diverse stories of women through an analytical and categorical lens, the editors of *I Speak for Myself* open up a space for the voices of the contributors and do not attempt to interpret these experiences.

The stories women tell pertain to their early life experiences and how they came to understand who they are. Two strong themes emerge from all of the stories: the women’s ownership of both their faith and their Americanness, and the challenges of growing up bicultural. However, these women also have diverse ideas on their unique educational, spiritual, political, social, and career experiences and aspirations, partially influenced by feminism, modernity, and contemporary educational and social thought in the United States. While a search for identity and spiritual growth is one key idea reappearing throughout the book, each author approaches it very differently.

Since their faith or culture is often perceived to be “different” and “controversial” by the mainstream society, it seems that these women became conscious of their identity, body, and gender at young ages, which enabled them to be active agents during their identity negotiation process and to resist the notion of clashing American and Muslim identities. In many of the essays, contributors report their conflicts with their families and upbringing, but link them to “the culture,” “the global male hegemony,” “family traditions,” “extremity,” “politics,” or “rituals and routines,” rather than “rationales and ideals of Islam” or the “spirituality of Islam” which they align more readily with their identities.

All of the authors perceive their love of and loyalty for their land, the United States, as empowering. While patriotic rhetoric is often used to exclude and shun differences in a post 9/11 context, the women seem to offer a more inclusive notion of patriotism. Yusra Tekbali, a journalist and blogger, writes:

“Throughout my life, I have never felt like my ethnicity or religion clashed with the love I have for America.” Hadia Mubarak, a doctoral student, adds of America: “I sleep in her nest of security, my fears soothed by her magical lullabies. She is the needle that holds my thread, interweaving my story into her all-encompassing quilt. I have fallen in love with her way of life, her personal freedom, her respect for individuality, and her cultivation of diversity and tolerance. I embody her defiant characteristics.” At the same time, she also acknowledges that 9/11 pushed her into a never-ending struggle to legitimize her identity. Many of the authors also display resilient and positive responses to offensive remarks, jokes, hatred, misinformation—the islamophobia—that these women faced.

Hijab, the practice of dressing modestly and, in its conservative form, covering the body except the face and hands based on Islamic tradition, becomes an unavoidable topic in most self-accounts. Unlike the common stereotypes, for hijabi women in the book hijab is the symbol of freedom. For instance, Nousheen Yousuf-Sadiq, a freelance editor who gained her master’s degree in religious studies and formerly taught in college, describes it as “a catalyst for me to develop my character, gain confidence in whom I had become, and attain autonomy over my body and my life. Since achieving control over oneself is the essence of feminism, I unknowingly adopted a mechanism that facilitated reaching both of my goals simultaneously.” For her, hijab became the manifestation of the dual identity as a Muslim and American. “It was a private decision with public ramifications. I often wondered whether I, a young American woman, could take ownership of my Muslim identity to the degree that I would quite literally wear it on my sleeve,” she says. At other times, hijab becomes a sign of hard-earned success, as in the case of Deworthy Bakri-Bazzi, a law student and an avid basketball player, whose coach said, “Deworthy, you made history! First hijabi female athlete of the year, first hijabi to earn your varsity letter in all four sports. You are truly an inspiration.” For others, it sustains their motivation to continue, such as Mariam Sobh, a journalist, whose lifelong dream has been news reporting on TV: “The news executive who told me I would never have a chance as long as I wear a scarf doesn’t know how stubborn and determined I am.”

Diversity among the women included in this volume is best understood through the complexity of their individual identities, as Amira Choueiki, a researcher of international affairs, poignantly puts it: “I am Muslim, but half of my family is Catholic. My three best friends are Methodist, Jewish, and Hindu, and I’ve found myself trying to fit into the American Midwest, the Middle East, and the American South as I have grown up. Yes, it is complicated and crazy, but just like my name, my life is a mixture of worlds and cultures, and I love it that way.”

The variety of experiences these women discuss in the book disturbs our stereotypes about them and demystifies the notion of “Muslim Women,” just as the book claims it does. The book demonstrates how they are “us,” everywhere, from doing volunteer work for Katrina victims, to delivering babies as a doctor, running through the corridors of Congress, doing academic work, engineering,

managing blogs, running businesses, dancing, playing basketball, practicing law, counseling, teaching, and learning.

This interdisciplinary book has broad appeal and could effectively inform such academic areas as women's studies, education, history, political science, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. The high number of contributors provides the opportunity to analyze 40 profiles across different issues. The book could also be used in informal learning environments such as a library book club, since it is an easy read. Inclusion of a *glossary* and *questions for discussions* makes the book more functional for interactive reading.

My suggestion for the future editions of this book includes further diversifying the profiles, such as adding more participants with European, Australian, and Canadian roots to deconstruct our stereotypical thinking of Asian, African or Middle Eastern ethnicities when we hear "Muslim woman." For instance, a few African American women included in the book contribute greatly to our understanding of "Muslim women" whose family are not first-generation immigrants. While there were a few women with parents with dual ethnicities, such as one European American and one immigrant parent, I still kept wondering how women who ethnically assume a more mainstream position might experience similar issues related to their identity.

In summary, while many pieces of literature claim to reflect the fictional or realistic accounts of Muslim women, they often draw from an orientalist approach by marginalizing and pathologizing their lives and feelings in a way that perpetuates the stereotype of oppressed, poor, rural, victimized women signified by key words like "veiled," "unseen," or "invisible." *I Speak for Myself* is a positive and realistic addition that provides a voice to contemporary Muslim women to tell their stories and mention important milestones in their lives in a transparent and non-sensational way.

Reference

Gehrke-White, D. (2006). *The face behind the veil: The extraordinary lives of Muslim women in America*. New York, NY: Citadel Press Books.