Alternative Performativity of Muslimness: The Intersection of Race, Gender, Religion, and Migration

YHRMP ID
362
Author(s)
Alrasheed Nayel, Amina

Aims

The author states that ‘The aims and objectives of this book are to unpack the nature of the performativity of Muslimness among Sudanese women living in West Yorkshire, investigating the interactions of Africanism, Arabism and Islamism within the Muslim identities of Sudanese diaspora women’ (p.57). She argues that these women have been hitherto under-researched and aimed to give them a voice. She attempts to meet this aim by exploring how ‘Sudanese women performatively bring their Sudanese and Muslim identities into being in the West

Yorkshire diasporic space' (p.57). She argues that African Islam is ignored in mainstream studies of Islam, and that efforts should be made to listen to the experiences of African Muslim women.

Methodology

- The author describes her methodological approach as feminist ethnography.
- The fieldwork took place in Leeds. The author distributed questionnaires via social events and email. In order to recruit participants she consulted community leaders to help identify settings where Sudanese women meet, including: The Hyde Park Corner Church, The Lincoln Green Refugee Centre, Little London Primary School, Leeds University, Leeds Metropolitan University, Thomas Danby College, Park Lane College and Brudenell College.
- The researcher used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with 62 Muslim Sudanese women, aged between teenage and retirement age. Most of the women were from the North or West of Sudan. Most had come to the UK for family reunification, and had been in the UK for an average of five years. The majority were well-educated and the author described them as middle class.
- The author considers her position as a woman with the same cultural background as those in her study, and therefore having some 'insider' knowledge, as well as having an academic training which she argues gave her the

ability to create a ‘critical distance’ (p.36). She reflects on the power relations between herself and the women.
- The author used discourse analysis as a tool to analyse the data.

The author provides a historical account of the experiences and culture of Sudanese women, as well as considering Sufi Islam, patriarchy and African women.

Key issues

- ‘This study involves a level of description, interpretation and analysis of a cultural and social group of women from Sudan who live in West Yorkshire, exploring the ways they perform their religion, and addressing the interplay of migration, gender and religion in their lives (p.37).’ The author considers how the identity and gender roles of Sudanese women living in Leeds are transformed as a result of living there.
- The author reports that the discourse from the women’s daily lives shows that they are constantly negotiating multiple and conflicting identities: Muslim, Arab, African, black, female, and migrant. She also highlights the diversity within the group of Sudanese Muslim women, with cultural and religious identities varying depending on which part of Sudan the women originate from.
- The participants reported experiences of racism including from Asian Muslim communities. Some felt that their practice of Islam was more liberal than that of Asian

Muslims, with Sudanese women being allowed to pray in mosques, holding religious and cultural events in churches, and celebrating Christmas. Some women reported being asked to leave Leeds mosques. The author reports that a group of women made repeated attempts to form a social and cultural group but failed to obtain funding and support from the authorities, whereas those establishing a religious study group were supported. She uses this example to support a claim that religious identity can assume a greater importance partly because of the host society's positive attitude towards supporting faith activities. The desire to create a social community was interpreted as a means of resisting the racism and exclusion experienced by the women.

- Participants' experience of the hijab is used as an example of the women's identities and how they occupy a different space from mainstream UK Islam. The author relates the history of hijab-wearing for Muslim women, explaining that its common use dates from 1983 with the imposition of Sharia Law in Sudan, but that the wearing of the hijab can convey class position and power rather than being a symbol of subordination. Women talked about making a choice as to their dress, with several participants reporting not wearing the hijab, and with its use not being common among teenagers, in contrast with some other UK Muslim groups.
- The author explores the concept of 'melancholic nostalgia' in relation to the women's experiences. Common themes were missing home, concerns about cultural loss in the

second and third generations, and isolation in daily life in the UK. The author argues that the lack of opportunity for women to practise Islam in the way they were able to in their home country, has contributed to their sense of alienation. One woman commented: ‘We feel excluded. What we need is just space to perform our culture, to get together, talk, listen to music and enjoy our lives away from home. We can never forget our origin and we need to keep remembering that and make our children aware of their heritage and country of origin’ (p.147).

Conclusion

The author concludes that identity is a ‘fluid and changing construct’ (p.180). She claims that her study has challenged ‘the construction of a homogeneous category of Muslims in the UK’ (p.176), bringing an alternative perspective by investigating African Muslim women.

Recommendations

The author suggests that ‘a new politics of representation is needed to give voice to those who are part of religious and ethnic groups and who were silenced by the way religion, ethnicity and race are articulated within the UK space’ (p.176). She also argues that African Sufi Islam could help Sudanese Muslim women to integrate into British culture if there were greater opportunities to find a place for this in West Yorkshire. The author recommends further research into Sufi Islam.

Web Link
https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783319440507
Migrant Group
Refugees
Topic
Community and society
Community cohesion
Women
Place
Leeds
West Yorkshire
Year
2018
Resource Type
Book

Source URL: *https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/research-entry/alternative-performativity-muslimness-intersection-race-gender-religion-and*