

|| Book Review ||

Muslim Women Speak: Of Dreams and Shackles

Ghazala Jamil. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2018, 189 pages

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Muslim Women Speak, the book by Ghazala Jamil explores the “discursive deafness” by uncovering the varied narratives in the public as well as private spheres of the lives of Indian Muslim Women. Jamil does not limit her study of Muslim women to the Indian context alone, but develops it within the meta-framework of Islam, Orientalism, feminism, and the Indian democracy.

Ghazala Jamil, trained as a social worker in the premier institutes of India like Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, reflects ideational and methodological resources to prepare the enabling environment for Muslim women to speak of their daily demons. The book runs to ten chapters, presenting accounts where women are made to feel “subhuman”, and “inessential others”.

Jamil has used the methodology of social philosophy along with narrative analysis to convey the social reality and politics of the representation of Muslim women. According to Jamil, through narratives, the connection between individual content analysis and the wholeness of the larger society can be drawn. She has also used methods like in-depth interviews, participatory and projective techniques, focus group discussions, and observational narratives by women of both urban and semi-urban settings from the twelve states and union territories of India.

In the book, she mainly focuses on the testimonies of the women survivors of the communal violence of Gujarat of 2002 and Mumbai of 1992–93, although the scope of her fieldwork has been more extensive. It is an especially interesting account as Jamil goes a step further by psychoanalyzing the trauma to the pneuma of the individual. She uses photographs and other supportive visual methods during the workshops to promote women’s self-disclosure, and to encourage them to express their gendered roles in society. This part of the book where girls- in various workshops- recount incidences of violence and misery through these media, is

emotional, and the author has quoted them carefully, adopting a semiotic approach to discourse analysis.

She engages with the debates around liberal, radical, and Islamist feminists and locates the varied narratives of the women received in the workshops in the existing literature. Jamil is highly critical of totalizing the experiences of some women as those of all women. She very strongly hints at the deep chasms within “the feminist movement”, and the dissociation experienced by Muslim women in this entire empowerment project. According to Islamic feminist scholars¹, equality between genders is not an idea antithetical to Islam; rather it is enshrined in the Quran and Hadith. As quoted by Jamil, Asma Barlas resists using the term “Islamic feminist” to describe herself, whereas others like Amina Wadud do not see any issue with the usage of that term.

Jamil laments that the study of contemporary Muslim social life is limited to the study of the crisis of Muslim masculinity, Muslim personal law, and “Muslims as a vote bank”. In writing this book, Jamil criticizes the discernible trend of commenting on the phenomena of Muslim lives but not engaging with it thoroughly.

In the chapter “The Everyday of Inhabiting Margins”, Jamil attacks Habermas’s concept of the “Public Sphere” as exclusionary of women and other marginalized sections. This concept is further critiqued and revised by the more inclusive definition by Nancy Fraser, and used by Jamil in her framework. The creation of a public sphere is necessary for women to manifest their “everyday”. Everyday becomes a site of enforcement and encroachment by the “private”, shrinking further the space for the public. The public sphere is, therefore, an imaginative sphere of appearances and ideational exchanges but for discursive political transformations, an enabling physical space is also required. Jamil, through her fieldwork interactions and participatory workshops, had attempted to create this public space for young girls and women and through this book has successfully compiled the work of ten long years.

In the chapter “Memory and experience of violence”, through in-depth engagements with the survivors of the Ahmadabad Pogroms of 2002, Jamil narrates the varied forms of direct violence,—communal and patriarchal,—as also of structural and cultural violence, even after the riots. She enunciates the view that the memories of minorities are only remembered when it coincides with the memories of the majority or memories of the greater minority. Therefore, she asserts, for the re-

¹ Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

cuperation of the memory project, the very existence of the gendered subaltern collective memory is significant.

She also criticizes the seminal works of Christophe Jafferlot, Paul Brass, P.G. Fachandi, and Asghar Ali Engineer for failing to correctly identify the root causes responsible for the communal violence, showcasing Muslims as only passively impacted victims, and completely omitting Muslim women from this scholarly discourse. The author makes the point that communal questions can-not be separated from Muslim women's questions in India and the fact of global Islamophobia has to be factored in as well.

In further structuring the narrative from Muslim as a monolithic category to Muslim women as a heterogeneous category, Jamil also analyses the works of Madhu Kishwar, Flavia Agnes, Sylvia Vatuk, and Nida Kirmani and illustrates the existence of conceptual lacuna between their interpretations.

Jamil started this work under a research study commissioned by BMMA (Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan) and ActionAid India to “capture and document the aspirations of the girls” and also to “compile the socio-economic and educational status of these girls”. BMMA is a network of organizations formed following the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms that address the concerns of excluded groups like Muslims and Dalits. The work of Ghazala Jamil can be considered a qualitative addition to the works of BMMA and MWS (Muslim Women in India survey). MWS is an extensive survey and the first of its kind, carried out by Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, covering 9,541 Muslim women across forty districts and twelve states. This study² brought forward the particularities of the discrimination faced by Muslim women in India due to the intersectionalities of caste, class, gender, and community.

Jamil, as an advocate of qualitative frameworks, criticizes the positivist methodology of MWS as full of tables, pie charts, and bar graphs but devoid of any space for quoting those women's experiences. She asserts the need to place a subjective approach and the “process of becoming” at the center, aiming at emancipation and not just description. She thereby uses the arguments of Marx, Althusser, Hyman, Olesen, Berger, and Luckmann to substantiate the exposition of the qualitative narration method to highlight the phenomenon of self and reification. In a further dialectic between the structures of identity and collective consciousness,

² Hasan, Z., & Menon, R. (2006). *In a minority: Essays on Muslim women in India*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

she opts for the phenomenology framework of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

While debating “positionality” in the chapter “Portrait of a researcher as a Muslim woman”, Jamil very persuasively criticizes Sharmila Rege’s work³ as an “apologia” for the “brahminical appropriation” of the voices of Dalit women in women’s empowerment project. (p. 50). Jamil, therefore, advocates knowledge formation by the women coming from the standpoint of “place” and relative adjacent positionality. Jamil utilizes the exceptional modus operandi of engaging in the related and comprehensive theoretical and conceptual debates before postulating her ideas. Therefore, in this sense, this book is a veritable guided tour of a variety of philosophical treatises.

In the last two chapters, Ghazala Jamil presents extended narratives of young girls from various states of India obtained through the focus group discussions, which included dream-mapping exercises, aspirations, and suggestions. Presented in an autobiographical manner, these are aimed at government, policy-makers, society, and families- to improve the lives of these women.

Ghazala Jamil has done sterling work by merging the territories of the researcher and the researched and exposing the unacknowledged everyday social realities of Indian Muslim women. This book brings to light the multifaceted politics of bypassing the issues of Muslim women, their invisibility in the public sphere, and the absence of the scholarly gaze from their denied agency. The anthropological and conceptual supplementations along with the compelling accounts of the women, makes the text useful for anthropologists, political scientists, social workers, and adds as a significant resource in understanding the identity debates of Muslim women in India.

³ Rege, S. (1998) Dalit women talk differently: A critique of ‘difference’ and towards a Dalit feminist standpoint position. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(44), 39–46.

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- Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
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- Rege, S. (1998) Dalit women talk differently: A critique of 'difference' and towards a Dalit feminist standpoint position. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(44), 39-46.

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