

### **Book review: Geographies of Muslim women: gender, religion and space. Edited by Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel. New York: Guildford Press 2005. ISBN 1593851839**

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*Ham radio's technical culture* has a wide-ranging audience; finding a place on the bookshelves of telecommunications enthusiasts and academics alike. Haring succinctly captures the hidden world of the radio ham, adding a charming dimension to cultural geography's current fascination with more advanced scientific and technical cultures. 'di-dah-di-dah-dit' (for the uninitiated that was Morse code for 'end of transmission').

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**Geographies of Muslim women: gender, religion and space.** Edited by Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel. New York: Guildford Press. 2005. 337 pp. \$55.00. cloth. ISBN: 1593851839.

Following the September 11 attacks in the US in 2001 there has been a proliferation of work exploring the lives of Muslim populations. Much of this interest has focused on the growing visibility of Muslim women, and on the veiling practices of Muslim women in public spaces. *Geographies of Muslim women: gender, religion, and space*, by G-W. Falah and C. Nagel offer a diverse collection of chapters dealing with how Muslim women negotiate and perform their identities in everyday spaces in diverse geopolitical contexts such as Morocco, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These geopolitical tales tell us considerable amounts about the inter-play between gender, religion, and place in Islamic societies in both Muslim majority and non-Muslim countries. This book is partly motivated by the debates surrounding the headscarf controversy in France. Its editors, anticipating how this debate will play out in other European contexts, found it important to situate the collections within a moral political economy fuelling interest in the spatiality of Muslim women. The results are startling and interesting. The contributions draw on the inter-play between representations of Muslim women across the developing world, and upon specific relations between space, gender and Islam. This collection provides a salutary reminder that critical feminist conversations must not be abandoned at a time when it is most needed. The individual chapters are taken from wide variations of geography and women's daily lives and, illustrating in my mind, G. Pratt's much cited assertion that it is only meaningful to consider identity and [Muslim/Arab] difference, with reference to particular places and at particular times (Pratt, 1992). The contributions reflect an important attempt by feminist researchers on cultural politics to situate women's lives in historical and geopolitical contexts, rather than through the monolithic lens of religion.

Many of the authors make a political plea for distancing the situation of 'Muslim women' from the discourses on women's rights used by the US administration to justify its foreign policy goals. The collections manage to straddle a fine balance between drawing out 'Muslim woman' as a political category and the attendant risk of essentializing the diversity of women in Muslim societies, while at the same time presenting rich and contextualized accounts of the women's lives.

The first part is focused on the intersections on gender, development and religion. The authors highlight the limitations of mainstream development discourses, calling for increased engagement with the negotiated nature of space, girlhood, and notions of Islam within the context of shifting labour production and markets. For example, focusing on Afghanistan,

N.G. Aaftaab presents a historical and contextual account of the girls' education in Afghani society in three pivotal phases, 1930, late 1970s and early 1990s, and firmly grounds women inside the political spectrum and practices in Afghanistan. The picture to emerge is one where women's development and education at local level are formed within an understanding of history and power relations locally and at a larger scale—and this, argues Aaftaab, is missed by human development models imposed by many donors and the NGOs. Similarly, S.H. Steinmann's chapter presents a shifting economic and political landscape against which the pastoral communities in eastern Morocco operate, where similarly gender divisions of labour and spaces are constantly negotiated.

The second section, shorter in length, deals with issues of mobility and migration through the use of women's personal narratives. The chapters throw light on the way in which everyday decision-making takes place at the intersections between gender, culture, and political-economic processes. The case studies range from women's migration from rural Indonesia into Saudi Arabia, to Morocco, through to the migration of Pakistani-origin women in the UK. R. Silvey's account of Indonesian women seeking work as domestic servants shows the way in which Saudi is sold as a destination site for migrants using religion as a major pull to ward off competition from other Gulf countries.

The third and final section deals with discourse and portrayal of Muslim women in written and narrated forms in policy, literary and academic landscapes of representation. The issue of representation for Muslim women has never been more important as growing number of studies, articles, books and novels, surface to depict the *Muslim woman*. The authors use geographical perspectives to contest dominant representations of Muslim women as the Other and illustrate how images and discourse on Islam and the repression of women are increasingly utilised in spatial conflicts. A. Secor's chapter discusses the restrictions the Turkish state has placed on the wearing of the veil in public spaces under the name of secularism. Secor's informants frame their right to wear the veil as a basic human right and call into question Turkey's commitment to democracy. The situation is complicated further when we are presented with a prohibitive view of the state where the need to islamize the public sphere becomes an objective for many who are denied the freedom to wear the veil. A.I. Samatar's chapter moves to Somalia where a different contestation of space is taking place over the formation of a mosque. M. Absisaab similarly presents an analysis on gendered discourse among Lebanese women factory workers as they negotiate equal rights in the workplace. Finally, G.W. Falah's chapter on the visual representation of Muslim/Arab women in US media brings home the full weight of the bias and distortions. Falah's chapter systematically reveals biased representations at work in national imaginaries in support of the War on Terror. A persistent theme in geography has related to the emergence of meaning and practice imbued in texts and visual representations to legitimate ways of seeing for the ideal spectator (cf. Berger, 1972). To some extent this collection, and others like it, point to the emergence and the growing need, for counter-representations.

This volume is an important contribution to debates beyond geography and cultural politics and will no doubt remain a landmark beyond the initial zeal of publications on Muslim women. It will appeal to readers with an interest in Muslims in non-majority Muslim countries where Islam is struggling to emerge as a heterogenous force against both US influenced neo-conservatism and reactionary trends in religion and faith from different parts of the globe.

## **References**

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