

Challenging Identities

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Challenging Identities

Muslim Women in Australia

Edited by Shahram Akbarzadeh



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Foreword

Challenging Identities examines from many angles the complex situation faced today by many Muslim women living in Australia and other countries of the Muslim diaspora. And who better to write such a book than Australian women from diverse ethnic backgrounds with varying degrees of religious attachment to Islam, confident in their own identities, determined to break silences and subvert stereotypes.

A book such as this is long overdue and deserves to be widely read. What it means to be an Australian Muslim woman in a post-September 11 world is clearly defined. The authors' research and their personal experiences and insights challenge the belief that Australian Muslim women form a sisterhood of oppressed females—no mean feat in today's political climate. As this book illustrates, Muslim women are not all cut from the same cloth—the single definition of 'the Muslim woman' is a myth.

While Muslim women are the subjects of countless books and articles, they are not often listened to. Western feminists see them as victims (and sometimes accomplices to their own fate) while Muslim men provide the media with views on hijab, polygamy and Shari'ah law—they become 'authorities' or gatekeepers, monopolising access to public space. Perhaps this book may change this—it's about time.

The challenge of being a Muslim woman today is handled with a candour that does not ignore the shortcomings of Islamic communities. The reasons why Muslim women often hesitate to speak out in public make compelling reading, as does the discussion of the veil in all its glory or infamy—depending on your point of view. Mentioning the hijab is like waving a red rag at a bull—feminists charge, in a swirl of dust, and the annual hijab debate takes off! Why some women 'cover' themselves—and many, if not most, do not—is explained with clarity and above all empathy by a chorus of hijabis and non-hijabis. In the end readers might ask themselves, as do many Muslim women, 'Does it really matter?' Perhaps not, unless you're in pursuit of the 'authentic Muslim', or have a weakness for 'harem horror' genre books with a *niqab*-covered woman on the front cover.

This publication—the brainchild of Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh—is timely. It dismantles stereotypes and contributes to

an understanding of the 'Female Other'. The human face of Australian Muslim women emerges in all its complexity—strong voices, strong women.

Hanifa Deen

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