



Esra Mirze Santesso

Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature

Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan 2013
ISBN: 9781137281715 (hbk), 223 pp.

reviewed by [Tahoor Ali](#)

Esra Mirze Santesso's *Disorientation: Muslim Identity in Contemporary Anglophone Literature* is an addition to the burgeoning field of critical perspectives on anglophone literature, focusing on the shift from race to religion in the post 9/11 world, creating a gap between secular assimilation, solidarity with both identities (Muslim & Western) and stability of traditional faith. Santesso's site of analysis is immigrant women and how they cope with the challenges of 'British Muslim' identity. She studies the paradox of the 'British Muslim' label when it is applied to immigrant Muslim females and suggests it is both counter identification and provides a 'claim to Britishness despite one's racial/religious difference.'^[1] Expanding upon Spivak's triad idea of subaltern identities; Santesso states, 'If you are poor, black, female and Muslim' you get oppression in four ways (5). One of the reasons behind this oppression is the neglect of modern scholarship to deal with religion as a rational ideology. Santesso highlights the idea that modernist discourse and modern civilization delegitimise religion, which creates issues for Muslims living in modern societies. The marginalisation of religion in modern academia is another reason behind the rhetoric of Islam as a terrorist religion. This work is not limited to the issues of oppression, hybridisation and identity regarding Muslim women. It extends our understanding about secularism, disorientation, Islamophobia, Muslimophobia, heritage preservation and the unchangeable nature of religious identities.

This book studies disorientation as separation, estrangement and confusion due to the disruption of religious identity rather than a product of displacement. Focusing on anglophone literature about Muslim immigrant experiences published after 9/11, this research examines the promise as well as the limits of the 'British Muslim' identity as a viable form of self-representation, and the challenges?particularly for women?of reconciling non-western religious identity with the secular policies of western states. Santesso reads Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Leila Abouleila's *Minaret*, Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove* and Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*, She draws our attention to the work of a new generation of British Muslim authors who analyse female Muslim characters with a focus on ethno-racial tension and religious alienation.

The first chapter (Islam and British Literature) reviews literary scholarship related to the representation of Muslims in British history and literature as deviant, heretic, barbarian, and misbelievers. She points out that despite all the works on Ottoman and Moor figures, it is Muslim

authors from South Asia who have played their role in creating representations of Muslims in English literature. After she reviews literature on the Iranian Revolution in 1979 to the pre-9/11 works of Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, she draws our attention to the 'post 9/11 world and disorientation'. Chapter two (Rethinking Hybridity in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*) focuses on *Brick Lane* from the perspective of hybridity and the challenges of Muslim woman. Santesso studies Nazneen's character in this book as symptomatic of disorientation due to the challenges of hybridity and explores the way that Nazneen is trying to stay loyal to her religious ideology and roots while adapting to the modern environment. Nazneen's disorientation leads her to a character evolution. Disorientation plays an important role in her continuous negotiations in the western world.

Chapter three (Subaltern Desire in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*) deals with feminist postcolonial perspectives. Santesso, with reference to Aboulela's *Minaret*, states that not all female Muslim immigrants are feminist. She reads the character of Najwa as 'unapologetically non-feminist' who approaches religion and gender by reinforcing patriarchal values. Through this chapter she makes it clear that disorientation is part of an immigrant's identity even when they fail/reject to embrace western values. Working from this idea, in Chapter four (Mimicry in Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove*) Santesso analyses Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove* using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Bhabha's concept is not applicable to Muslim immigrants because it does not provide them with choices of resistance when it comes to religion. Mimicking western values would mean the violation of Islamic principles. Salma's mimicry in the novel alienates her from her roots as well as her host culture identity, resulting in false sense of security. Salma, by mimicking, and Najwa's disavowal of western values, lead both characters to disorientation.

Chapter five (Transnationalism in Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*) focuses on transnationalism and its failure to address Muslim migrant's disorientation or those who are British but Muslim, like the female protagonist in Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*. Transnationalism creates issues, such as the tension between state-oriented identity and religion-oriented identity. In Chapter six (Resisting Disorientation) Santesso deals with Kia Abdullah's *Life, Love and Assimilation* and Almas Khan's *Poppadom Preach* and the subject of the unacknowledged disorientation in the lives of immigrant mothers. She adds Nadeem Aslam's *Maps of Lost Lovers*, a male author in female-centred research to investigate the relationship between genre, gender and disorientation. Santesso's case in this chapter is that Literature plays an important role in the construction or rejection of disorientation.

Overall, this study reads disorientation as a global condition of identity crisis experienced by the first generation of female Muslim immigrants. This research suggests that 'full assimilation is not the only end of immigrant integration' (180). It allows characters to recognise home, rhizomatic identities and adjust to kaleidoscopic experiences in order to cope with the state of disorientation. Disorientation defeats the enigma of homelessness. It explains the need to engage with the full available potential in any re-evaluation of beliefs and incompatibility of western lifestyles and religious practices. This research suggests that disorientation is not a solution to the issues faced by female Muslim immigrants, but that the productive use of disorientation will help them to emerge as 'confident, independent Muslim women, determined to make their own way while holding onto their own values' (182). This book is a good fit for the students and researchers working in the field of Islamic Feminism and Global Muslim Narratives.

Note

[1] Stuart Hall, 'Politics of Identity,' in *Culture, Identity and Politics: Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, edited by Terence Ranger,

Yunas Samad and Ossie Stuart, 129–35. Aldershot: Avebury, 1996, p. 131.

MAIN

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue46/tahoor.html>

© [Copyright](#)

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#).

Last modified: 16 Dec. 2021 1619