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All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School

By LOUKIA K. SARROUB (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). 158 pp. Price PB £12.50. ISBN 0-8122-1894-9.

Drawing on 26 months of fieldwork in a Yemeni community in south-eastern Michigan, Loukia K. Sarroub tells the story of six Yemeni-American girls as they try to pick a pathway between the conflicting cultural values of home and school. The six *ḥijābāt*, as she calls them, are the daughters of immigrants who came to the US in the 1970s but who have retained a high level of cultural attachment to their parents' country of origin. They are all teenagers, all students at public schools, all subject to the complex marginalization processes of religion, ethnicity, gender, family, culture, nationality, schooling and socio-economic status, and yet all are presented as negotiating their home and school identities in unique and creative ways. Sarroub is aware of many of the pressures under which the girls live their lives—pressures to be good students so that the option to go to college and become a nurse or teacher remains a possibility; to be obedient daughters who do the housework and will marry husbands of their fathers' choosing; to be faithful Muslims who live out the precepts of the Qur'ān; and to uphold the honour of the family through their modest behaviour. The girls themselves are depicted as fluctuating between optimism and desperation, often questioning whether they can live up to any of the expectations placed upon them.

The picture of these girls' lives is set in a frame of sociological and anthropological theory. For example, Sarroub discusses the notion of success in negotiating the worlds of home and school by reference to key anthropological concepts such as culture, identity and ethnicity. She draws on sociolinguistic theory when she discusses the range of literacy skills the girls have and the way they make sense of the various 'texts' and discourses to which they are exposed. She draws more generally on theories of social and cultural capital and of cultural reproduction. By moving back and forth between narrative and theory, the author seeks to give deeper significance to her work, offering it to readers as a contribution to their understanding of the relations between immigrant students and their teachers and the broader interconnections between education, home life and religion.

Inevitably, there is the problem of authorial voice. Sarroub seeks to maintain a delicate balance between the more objective sections of her narrative (such as historical information about the migration of Yemeni people to the United States) and the more subjective judgments she makes (such as her description of the watchful protection of the girls by the boys as panopticon-like surveillance, p. 35). But as one moves through the text, one is left wondering where she stands in relation to the conflicting values she describes. She leaves some clues along the way. The metaphor in the title of chapter three, 'Classroom as Oasis', suggests a high degree of sympathy for the American values of the school, where the girls can escape for a while from the barren desert of their lives at home and in the local community. This suggestion is confirmed by her implied criticism of the Yemeni parents and her greater sympathy for the Lebanese

voices in the Arab–American debate, and by her assumptions that the Yemeni girls would rather be wearing American clothes, that they would like to be able to converse more freely with boys, that they would like to go out to more parties, and that they find the classroom liberating. But we have to wait until the final chapter for a more open statement of the perspective from which the author writes. She is an Arabic-speaking American of mixed Algerian and Greek background, with an understanding of Islam and some degree of sympathy for the fear and apprehension among immigrant and especially Muslim Arab–Americans in the post 9/11 era, yet she has clearly taken on many American values.

There is a similar ambivalence in Sarroub's descriptions of the teachers in the girls' school. On the one hand she calls them 'inadvertent agents of American culture' (p. 91), but on the other she describes the strenuous efforts made by one teacher (a Lebanese American) to 'help the students become more American' (p. 95). She is quite certain that the teachers do not understand the complexities of Yemeni–American life. She is critical of some of the cultural disrespect she sees in the school management, such as the requirement of ethnic and gender mixing of students in classroom seating plans, which the more sensitive teachers find hard to implement. She welcomes some of the accommodations schools have made in terms of clothing, Friday prayers and the inclusion of Arab elements in the curriculum, but she feels that the concessions do not go far enough, even though they have generated resentment among some of the teachers. This resentment is merely exacerbated when Yemeni students try to bargain with teachers over their grades or refuse to join in with extra-curricular activities.

Sarroub is one of a growing number of young (and usually female) ethnographers providing in-depth investigations of small sub-groups of the Muslim community in the West. (Others include: Anne Alitolppa-Niitamo *The Icebreakers: Somali-Speaking Youth in Metropolitan Helsinki* (Helsinki: The Family Federation of Finland, 2004); and Louise Archer, *Race, Masculinity and Schooling: Muslim Boys and Education* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003).) She makes much of her 'non-threatening presence' (p. 122) as a major contributor to the success of her research. Although she was unable to talk much to the Yemeni boys (and thus the decision to restrict herself to the *hijābāt* was thrust upon her), she was able gradually to overcome the girls' suspicions, befriend them, and become part of their social circle. She was simply 'the White woman doing research' (p. 16). But this non-threatening presence carries over into the book, so that reading the book becomes an act of taking part in a three-way discourse—between author, research respondents and reader. Sometimes the author leaves the reader to interact directly with the respondents. For example, she provides without comment a fascinating string of metaphors used by community leaders to explain their attitude to their womenfolk: they are easily broken, like glass; they must be wrapped up, like expensive chocolate or candy, to keep the flies away; like perfume, they are capable of provoking desire, and this desire must be restrained by covering oneself and avoiding touch. At other times, she stands at the reader's elbow, nudging him in a certain direction. But she always—and this is one of the many

strengths of the book—leaves the reader space to disagree. One of the dominant themes of her book is the way the Yemeni–American girls ‘construct and make sense of their identities’. In contradiction to this, I found a high degree of passivity among the girls as they accepted that others (especially males, parents, brothers, teachers, community leaders) would largely construct their identities for them. This disempowerment was something they had sooner or later to come to terms with. But perhaps it is through such submission, and a renunciation of all-American values, that they come to a deeper understanding of their faith.

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Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic

Edited by LOIS BECK and GUILTY NESHAT (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004). 302 pp. Price PB \$20.00. ISBN 0–252–02937–2 cloth, ISBN 02–252–017189–1 (PB).

This book is a welcome addition to the flourishing literature on women and Islam, placing the discussion in a historical context and asking the often posed question ‘Where are the women in Islamic history?’ in the more specific form: ‘Where were Iranian women?’ The work builds on Beck and Neshat’s earlier edited volume *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003). Unsurprisingly, the authors find that women had simply not been seen, though they had been both present and effective in shaping the history of Iran. In Iran, as elsewhere, education had been instrumental in opening the way to power. Though, as the case studies in this volume demonstrate, it was possible to be extremely influential even without education. Guity Neshat sites the case of Anīs al-Doleh who had come to Naṣīr al-Dīn Shāh’s harem as a maid and had risen to the rank of temporary wife, then his confidant and advisor, though she was no beauty and had little education (p. 55). Always needed were interpersonal skills and the ability to argue well for the chosen courses. Generally, it was also useful to have been born into a powerful family. Elite women were also advantaged by the deep respect felt for and paid to them, which enabled them to express their opinions in the knowledge that they would be heard and attended to. Furthermore, certain Islamic legal provisions entitled women to maintain their own wealth, and exercise considerable degrees of independence that even went so far as choosing not to marry. Neshat sites the case of Fakhr Jahān Khānōum, the daughter of Faṭḥ Alī Shāh and her sister Zīa al-Salteneh who made very much their own decisions about their marital relationships, and served as the harem treasurer and the scribe to the king.

Etehadieh and Afkhami’s chapters build on the existing literature of Iranian women’s political participation (Bamdad, *From Darkness to Light*, Exposition