

Book Review: American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah by Jamillah Karim

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Over the last forty years, there has been a dramatic growth in the number of Muslims in the United States. Estimates place the Muslim population at somewhere around 6 million, which makes Islam the second largest religion in the country. Islam today is not just in the international news, but it is an integral part of the landscape of America. Despite this, the Muslim community in America is not one, rather it is somewhat divided and that division is usually based upon race or ethnic origin. The two largest racial groups of Muslims in the United States are Black Americans and South Asians.

Jamillah Karim, a professor in religious studies at Spelman College, explores these two Muslim groups within the context of gender in her book, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class and Gender Within the Ummah*. Dr. Karim conducted interviews with several women from the Black American and South Asian Muslim communities of Atlanta and Chicago, cities which boast two of the largest Muslim populations in the USA. Throughout her work, Dr. Karim injects her ethnographic research with aspects of history, feminist theory and contemporary race relations. She notes that according to the ideal, the *ummah*, the Muslim community, must be united and just. However, her book illustrates that one must make a distinction between the ideal and the social reality in which people live.

Thus, on one level, there is not one *ummah*, rather there are many *ummahs* and these are travelling in parallel worlds to one another. Class and race are the key factors that Dr. Karim focuses on to explain the lack of unity among the two communities. South Asian immigrants have

claimed the label of “model minority,” and by claiming this label, South Asian immigrants participate in a form of “inferential” antiblack racism. Similarly, some Black Americans harbor contempt against immigrants and embrace nativism, a subtle form of anti-immigrant racism that promotes the priorities of natives exclusively on the grounds of their being native. Furthermore, South Asian Muslims are a highly educated, affluent socioeconomic group, whereas the Black American Muslim middle class continue to struggle with economic disparities.

The ethnographic portraits that Dr. Karim portrays reveal a great deal about the role race and class play in the lack of solidarity between the South Asian and Black American Muslim communities. One portrait in particular, that of Safiyyah, a young Tanzanian black woman who was adopted as an infant by an East African Asian couple who left Tanzania and immigrated to Wisconsin in the 1970s, is particularly telling because she was able to move between “two ethnic spaces,” one South Asian and one Black American.

According to Dr. Karim, the ethnic spaces in Atlanta are less pronounced than in Chicago for various reasons. Furthermore, women are asserting themselves in an effort to transform gender space. Thus, it seems that Atlanta, from Dr. Karim’s perspective, could prove to be a model for the bridging of the Muslim communities. In addition, it seems that the book holds out hope that with the coming of age of second generation Muslims, race and class will play a less important role as for as Islam in America is concerned.