

**Review of Tamsin Bradley (ed.), *Women, Violence and Tradition: Taking FGM and Other Practices to a Secular State*, London/New York: Zed Books 2011, x + 213, ISBN 978 1 84813 958 9 (pb).**

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This edited volume by Tamsin Bradley, senior lecturer in International Development Studies at the University of Portsmouth, is the result of a 2008 discussion at London Metropolitan University with students about anthropological research and ethics. Bradley describes the book's ambition as exploring how Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women today navigate between their religious and cultural traditions and the secular state (2011: 2). The book's main argument asserts that '...the intersections between religion, culture, race, ethnicity and patriarchy still maintain gender relations that leave many women vulnerable to social, economic and political marginalisation as well as to different forms of violence' (2011: 4). The contributing authors are mainly BA students in anthropology. Each chapter introduces and reflects upon life histories of women from diaspora communities in the UK, focusing specifically on women's experiences of cultural practices and/or violence.

In the introduction, a short section on definitions offers an explanation of terms such as female genital mutilation, Islamic marriage, dowry and domestic violence. In the section on ethics, the editor reckons with post-colonial and orientalist critiques. Bradley holds on to the importance of analyzing aspects of culture and religion, and argues for employing an intersectional framework to get at a more nuanced analysis and avoid essentialising and stereotyping of BME women's experiences. From an intersectional perspective the volume analyses 'how religion and culture, alongside other dimensions, are understood and emerge through the life stories as part of the explanation and also condemnation of practices harmful to women' (2011: 27).

In chapter one, Bradley reviews the methodological approach of life histories used by the individual researchers in the book and the ethical pitfalls of representing the lives of others. The chapter concludes with a section describing the researchers' experiences of collecting life stories within their own BME communities. This process had provoked introspection and self-reflection with the researchers, 'but all agree it has been worth it' (2011: 43). Personal reflections on doing research as well as on the topics of research – gendered cultural-religious practices and instances of violence – continue to emerge throughout the following chapters. They reveal that the individual authors all struggle with the issue of how to talk about inequality and violence within ethnic and religious minority groups without fuelling racist discourses among the ethnic majority population. Some also use their relatives' or own experiences as research material, which leads the reader to interesting insights into how the authors connect theory and everyday life to arrive at a feminist and antiracist critical position and analysis.

The second and third chapter deal with gendered cultural-religious practices within the Somali community in the UK. *Somali Memories of Female Genital Mutilation* is written by Isha Abulkadir. It presents two Somali women's narratives – one from the author herself – recounting experiences of female circumcision. Abulkadir reveals the extent to which women within the Somali community disagree over the necessity for FGM and that migration has done little to resolve the contestations around FGM. She concludes that patriarchal pressures still impact women's bodies, despite living in a secular state that has a legislative framework designed to protect them (2011: 72). In *Tales of Somali Marriage in the UK*, Ebyan Ahmed analyses three women's narratives on marriage practices in Somalia and the UK. She concludes that within marriage, Somali women have to deal with rigid patriarchal gender constructs and relationships (2011: 88).

In chapter four, *Domestic Violence in Zimbabwe and the UK Diaspora*, Eslie Dzumbunu presents the stories of two women (one of them her mother's) that seem representative of those of many women of the Zimbabwean community. She argues that domestic violence continues to impact Zimbabwean women's lives, even after their move to the UK to escape violence (2011: 90). Dzumbunu observes that domestic violence is, however, not a major concern within her own community, and is regarded largely as a private matter. Unfortunately, Zimbabwean women find it hard to access services outside the diaspora, fearing that secular services will not understand their needs (2011: 109).

The fifth chapter, *Narratives of Divorce amongst Bangladeshi Women Living in England*, written by Noorjahan Begum, tells the stories of three Bengali women and their experiences of marriage and divorce. Begum argues that the lack of support of *Shariah* clerics for women who suffer violence lies in the problem of male domination of the translation process of religious teachings into everyday life. She concludes that the secular state failed to nurture and support the growth of more indigenously rooted and culturally responsive services attuned to the needs of Bengali women, which in turn contributes to their marginalisation (2011: 128).

Chapter six, by Charlenie Naik, *Transnational Accounts of Dowry and Caste: Hindu Women Tell Their Stories*, is a compilation of the narratives of four *Brahmin* women in the UK with a focus on caste, marriage and dowry. The women's stories confirm that the practice of dowry is prevalent in the UK where, unlike in India, there is no legislation protecting women from the violence it might cause (2011: 131). Naik concludes that migration to the UK has opened doors for *Brahmin* women, but traditional values continue constructing women as the bearers and upholders of culture (2011: 151).

In chapter seven, *The Big Taboo: Stories of Premarital Relationships*, Sana Khilji presents stories of two young Muslim women, of Somali and Pakistani background, who have faced emotional difficulties navigating between the expectations of their parents and their own desires and the freedoms they feel they have in the UK (2011: 154). Khilji argues that premarital relationships are still a taboo in the Muslim community in the UK, although internal disagreements on the topic exist. As the stories show, she concludes, young women's fear and anxiety about parents' reactions is real and causes stress and tension (2011: 167).

The final chapter, *'I Wish I'd Taken Her With Me'*, is written by Hannana Siddiqui, the head of policy and research for Southall Black Sisters and co-founder of Women Against Fundamentalism. She presents the stories of three BME women who have experienced various forms of gender-based violence. These stories are analysed within the wider UK context of the BME women's movement, financial recession and public sector cuts, the rise of religious fundamentalism, the growth of extreme right, and post 9/11 social cohesion and anti-terror policies (2011: 169). The author critically analyses the government's 'multifaith' approach and policies, which have increased pressure on women to conform to traditional roles, but has also led to a loss of secular spaces, including funding for secular, progressive BME women's organisations (2011: 185-6).

In the conclusion, Bradley pulls out overarching themes and theorises on what the women's stories reveal about the role of the state in supporting BME women. She argues that using religion, culture and tradition as part of the lens to analyse the experiences of BME women enables a number of insights to emerge. First, they highlight how women utilise rather than reject their cultural and religious heritages as resources for understanding their experiences and/or for resisting their situation. Second, religion and culture as analytical categories help to understand why gender-based violence persists. Religion, according to Bradley, is part of the problem, because of its usually conservative male leadership as well as its providing authority for justifying cultural practices such as dowry and FGM (2011: 194-198). Religion therefore needs to be one of the central foci in campaigns to end gender-based violence. Bradley's critique of the UK government is fierce as its policy making doesn't question religious leaders' influence on women's vulnerability. In fact, diaspora women are becoming more marginalised by the state's engagement with 'faith communities' led by men (2011: 199-202).

To conclude, *Women, Violence and Tradition* is not a only a theoretical account about gender, religious-cultural practices and violence. It is steeped in women's everyday life experiences due to its approach and researching from within minority communities. The volume makes audible the voices and experiences of women that are often not heard in public debates. Some points of discussion remain, however. At the theoretical level, the concepts of *intersectionality* and patriarchy do not sit easily together, and this tension is not really resolved. Furthermore, the terms 'secularism' and 'secular' are used throughout the book, and some conceptualization or definition would have been helpful. At the level of empirical analysis, some extra precautions should have been taken to avoid the danger of generalization, which now happens in several chapters through taking the stories of two or three women as representative for the experiences of many.

Notwithstanding these comments in the margin, the volume provides important insights about the specific vulnerabilities of BME women in post 9/11 Western nation-states, and a thorough critique of the state's collusion in violence against women. It is therefore an essential reading for researchers and students in the field of gender, religion, multiculturalism and violence, as well as for policy-makers and social workers, medical practitioners and police officers who need to take into account the specific needs and experiences of women of ethnic, religious and cultural minority backgrounds.