

Review of Fida Sanjakdar, *Living West, Facing East: The (De)Construction of Muslim Youth Sexual Identities* (Counterpoints. Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education), New York: Peter Lang 2011, 228 pp., ISBN 978-1-4331-0573-9

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In *Living West, Facing East*, Fida Sanjakdar unpacks the subject of lived sexuality among young Australian Muslims as a site of struggle. Not only does she add to the interdisciplinary field of sexuality studies from the perspective of critical pedagogy, she also aptly intervenes in debates emerging at the crossroads of religion and gender studies. The book presents the multilayered views on sexuality of Muslim youth, teachers and members of the Islamic community living in Australia. In particular, the author takes the contested domain of sexuality education as an entry point and shows how sexual ideologies are shaped by sociological, cultural, political and religious multi-directional power relations.

Sanjakdar takes cues from Michel Foucault's genealogical approach and builds on concepts such as the discursive construction of subjectivity and Homi Bhabha's understanding of hybrid identities. Her critical ethnography aims to explore how identities arise from a complex interaction between discourses, practices and struggles. Illustratively, she problematises the dominant binary opposition between religion and sexuality by emphasising their discursive common ground: 'in many ways Islam and sexuality share a very similar project; both are complex and contested political subjects, both seek to map value and moral positions of various truths and both conjure a range of emotions' (2011: 179). The main argument revolves around a critical ethnography focussed on two issues: an exploration of the ways in which Australian Muslim youth negotiate between Muslim and Western popular cultural constructions of sexuality and a discussion of the possibilities for developing sexuality education programmes in Australia that honour Islamic principles and culture.

The book is structured as follows. In Chapter 1, the implications of being a young Muslim in the context of Australia are sketched. Taking Australia to reflect the situation in the 'West', the West is where religious identities are dominantly bounded to the private domain, while the public sphere is constructed as liberal and secular. Chapter 2 unveils the wealth of interpretations of sexuality to be found in Islamic texts (focusing on Quran and the Hadiths). In general, sexuality is positively viewed as a normal urge, and it is given a prominent role for a fulfilled life and in paradise. These doctrines are variously mobilised in the sexual landscape to offer guidance in matters including marriage, romance, gender relations, and birth control. Chapter 3 presents the voices of Australian Muslim youth, placing them in the context of Islamophobia, being positioned top-down as deviant youths, while they themselves navigate between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations of sexuality. Chapter 4 engages with the various ways in which hegemonic Islamic historical scripts of sexuality and gender, and especially taboos, are culturally constructed and maintained through traditional folklore, myth and labels. Western Muslim teachers advocating social change face the difficulties of balancing normative motivations to sustain these ideologies with contemporary non-hegemonic sexual ideals that aim to nuance misconceptions.

At the heart of her analysis, Chapter 5 zooms in on the institutionalisation of sexuality education, unravelling the disciplinary power of how it defines, learns, regulates and monitors particular configurations of sexuality. Sanjakdar critiques how in many Australian (including Islamic) schools, sexuality education is rendered mute by placing it in the 'null curriculum'. The null curriculum refers to the dominant procedure of teaching sexuality as biologised, natural and instinctual behaviour outside of cultural, religious and social influences. Sexuality is a significant realm of experience and identification, it is privatised. This absence is a significant presence; the lack of education becomes the silent, but dominant form. Although sexuality education is a human right as put forward by agencies including UNESCO; in institutional settings sexuality remains an unspoken construct. Similarly, even though aiming for holistic Islamic education, Islamic teachers fail to include sexuality education by setting up boundaries between religious knowledge on the one hand and secular teaching on issues pertaining to sexuality on the other. Championing a truly holistic sexuality education, the author convincingly argues that social change demands making explicit the specific imprints of cultures, societies but also religiosity on sexual ideologies.

Chapter 6 tackles the difficult topic of educating for sexual difference and homosexuality in the light of growing attention given to Islamic intolerance of homosexuality and sexuality outside of the heterosexual marriage in selected texts from the Qur'an, the Hadiths and Sharia. This tension is further exacerbated in the school environment that is oftentimes implicitly advocates heteronormativity. The author pleads to move away from exclusive emphasis on (and othering of certain) physical acts towards recognising different sexual orientations. One strategy can be considering differential psycho-emotional dimensions. An additional strategy is creating awareness of the fact that the widespread condemnation of homosexuality is only a recent development, as historical, law and literature sources suggest. However, many Islamic teachers with backgrounds in physical education, economics and science disciplines display strong fears of being ostracised themselves; these educators were observed to have great difficulties covering diverse sexual orientations in such non-monolithic ways.

Sanjakdar successfully unravels the intricacies of religious minority Muslim youth sexual identity construction. So far, these processes have largely remained in the shadows. The study is innovative in the way its solid empirical grounding based on Australian Muslim youth's daily lived sexualities is brought into dialogue with critical sexuality education and socio-cultural theory. Documenting Islam as an important source to open up discussions on sexuality, 'the argument that religious beliefs can hinder young people's access to sexuality information, commonly found in the literature, was not supported by the interview responses' (2011: 184). Thus, Sanjakdar successfully resurfaces the multiple and multi-layered voices of the Muslim community, parents, teachers and students as well as the heterogeneity of Islamic ideologies. By offering reflection on new epistemological frameworks of sexuality, her cultural critique aims to initiate conversations aimed at institutional reforms.

The stimulating study also prompts a number of (new) questions: the analysis could have benefited from more in-depth consideration of the ways in which other vectors of identification impact on the daily lives, education and sexual development of young Australian Muslims. Although the focus is on sexuality education in the context of a religious minority group, the ways in which sexuality and gender intersect with ethnicity, class, age and generation remain largely uncovered. Secondly, for a large part of the book, the methodology and especially the details of empirical data gathering remains black-boxed. In the introduction, mention is made of the focus on Muslim youth between 15 and 17, and a mixed method approach that includes interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. However, the reader is not informed how many, which, where and when Australian Muslim youth were studied. This choice of classification risks essentialising and homogenising a group of young people, subsuming all their internal differences. Also, there is no mention of how and why these different approaches were chosen. Although this choice is probably motivated by page-length constraints, I would have appreciated more in-depth reflection including power relations involved and information on the positioning of the researcher as an insider/outsider to the studied population given that this is a very sensitive issue that is studied. Thirdly, the author unfortunately has not covered the role of the contemporary digital media landscape for sexuality education. As hinted at in a previous publication in this journal (Leurs, Midden & Ponzanesi, 2012: 150–175), the digital realm potentially provides alternative sources of knowledge as well as safe spaces to discuss personal topics with like-minded peers.

In sum, this well-written account of sexuality education of Western Muslim communities provides an accessible reading of how Muslim youth in Australia showcase agency and creativity while navigating between Muslim and popular cultural constructions of sexuality. Charting the dynamic epistemological, ontological and ethical positionings of sexualities, the intervention opens up a dialogic space to recognise the rapidly changing identities of Muslim youth in the West and the urgency for alternative forms of comprehensive teacher practices. Besides a theoretical advancement of plural Muslim lived sexualities from the perspective of critical pedagogy, gender studies and religious studies, the practical recommendations Fida Sanjakdar provides will be of interest to policy makers and teachers who are in desperate need to accommodate diversity in their educational outlooks.