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Muslim women and shari'ah councils: transcending the boundaries of community and law

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I am particularly interested in the chapter 'From ships' holds to factory floors' featuring stories about seamen and their struggles in transition from sea to land-based work. Bald provocatively crafts these characters as mobile, clever subjects of empire, rather than as victims of exploitative colonial economies of cheap native labour. Bald draws his archives together in a story of a South Asian community's tryst with America across the twentieth century. I wonder if Bald would also view the same archives as telling a story of agile, navigating subjects, who worked within, around, and between edifices of twentieth-century capitalism.

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Muslim women and shari'ah councils: transcending the boundaries of community and law, by Samia Bano, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013, x + 329 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-22148-2

Shari'ah councils have existed in Britain since the 1970s and 1980s. They are unofficial legal bodies which provide advice to British Muslim communities in matters of family law, primarily in cases of marital dispute. They encourage spouses to reconcile, in accordance with ideas about 'Islamic duty', and only authorize a religious divorce where it is impossible to reconcile the parties. Whilst shari'ah councils have often been described as 'parallel legal systems', in this important new book Samia Bano argues that they are more appropriately seen as a 'semi-autonomous social field', following legal anthropologist Sally Falk Moore (257). They have no enforcement capacity, and their procedures authorize an Islamic divorce that is not recognized in English law. However, shari'ah councils still raise questions for those concerned with multiculturalism and gender equality.

Much of the existing literature on shari'ah councils in Britain is based on interviews with religious scholars. Here, Bano presents detailed interviews with 25 British Pakistani Muslim women, as the primary users of shari'ah councils, alongside observations of council meetings and analysis of case files. These methods allow her to make a novel and sustained analysis of how gendered power within families and communities plays out in women's interactions with shari'ah councils. Her observations show that in the council meetings, women who have suffered domestic abuse are being required to undergo attempts at reconciliation, despite their wishes not to come face-to-face with their estranged husbands (128); women are being questioned over their intentions to provide child contact to their husbands (129); and scholars are speaking to male family members rather than directly with women users (140). The interviews with women show that Islamic marriage (*nikah*) holds a great deal of importance for them, but the majority of cases where a religious marriage was not registered in civil law occurred because husbands and in-laws went back on their word (161). The women were convinced that, as Muslims, they were required to obtain an Islamic divorce in order to be free of their husbands and able to remarry. However, not all agreed with the interpretations of Islamic law dealt out by the shari'ah councils, they contested the advice they were given, and offered knowing critiques of the operation of power in mediation and arbitration. Whilst some of the women wanted recognition for the work of shari'ah councils, others did not want to have to 'choose between' Islamic and English law. However, the case files show, worryingly, that the deliberations of shari'ah councils are taken to be authoritative by

some solicitors and social workers. Bano's data are precisely the kind of empirical evidence that have been called for by activists associated with Baroness Cox's Arbitration and Mediation Services Bill, which has faltered as a result of 'failing to draw upon the lived experience of Muslim women using shari'ah councils' (249).

The book offers illuminating comparisons with France and Germany, showing how the demand for Islamic law institutions in Britain relates to its policies of multicultural accommodation (97). A further comparative analysis, drawing on literature on India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, would have been helpful, particularly in relation to transnational feminist campaigns for reforms to Muslim family laws (234). Nonetheless, Bano's argument, richly engaged with debates on British liberalism, feminism and multiculturalism, Islam and secularism and state-law relations, is new and convincing. Scholars such as Tariq Modood and Maleiha Malik have called for the recognition of shari'ah councils as arbitration bodies, provided they are consistent with English law, human rights, gender equality and child protection legislation. However, Bano strikes a note of caution, insisting quite rightly that the voices of British Muslim women must be heard. It is not just that shari'ah councils expose gendered relations of power within as well as between 'communities', but that calls for recognition shore up the boundaries of 'communities' and fail to recognize the complexity of how women position themselves within discourses of identity.

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Bollywood and globalization: Indian popular cinema, nation, and diaspora, edited by Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande, New York, Anthem Press, 2011, xi + 197 pp., ISBN 978-0-85728-782-3

With the opening up of the Indian economy to global finance capital in the early 1990s and an Indian Diaspora that passionately patronizes Bombay cinema, Bollywood has become truly global. Books, such as the one under review, therefore become extremely desirable. Rina Bhattacharya Mehta's essay 'Bollywood, nation, globalization ...' explores Indian Cinema as Indian social history and offers an in-depth exploration of the nation in question.

Sangita Gopal's contention of Indian cinema's binary division of *hat ke* (off centre) and Karan Johar films in her essay 'Sentimental symptom ...' succinctly posits that 'the family's capacity to evoke sentiment and establish historical continuity is preserved' (24) in the post-liberalization era. However an examination of the audiences that these films target and their cultural worldviews, and the way they shape the texts under consideration, would have been even more valuable. Anjali Gera's exploration of the Punjabi folk dance bhangra in her essay 'Is everybody saying "Shava Shava"', rightly points to a shift in the spectator's position from an idealized national subject to an ethno-linguistic subject, indicating the imperative of speaking to the subalterns in their own language. But bhangra's transnationalization could equally be read as 'appropriation' of ethnic identities into the larger project of post-Hindutva Indian nationalism, reflective of the 'mainstreaming' of the Sikh community within Bollywood's recent kitsch and pop patriotism output. The following spring to mind: *Border* (J. P. Dutta, 1997), *Gadar* (A. Sharma, 2001), *Jo bole so*