

RACIALIZED BODIES, DISABLING WORLDS: STORIED LIVES OF IMMIGRANT MUSLIM WOMEN

Parin Dossa. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON, 2009, 192 pages.

In *Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women*, Parin Dossa does not hold accountable only institutions within Canadian society; she does not just blame a marketplace that normalizes and suppresses contradictions such as psychiatric patients fending for themselves on the streets or a hungry person receiving sleeping pills rather than food (Scheper-Hughes, 1992). She goes further to hold each and every one of us responsible for upholding neoliberal values that deny full citizenship rights to all subjects. “We, the public, normalize these scenarios on the grounds that they are self-initiated and not brought about by an insensitive and dehumanizing system that violates people’s basic human rights” (p. 23). This self-critique makes this book a valuable read not only for service providers, bureaucrats, and adult educators, but also for us as critical citizens.

Participants of Dossa’s study are Muslim women of South Asia, Iran, and Africa who have immigrated to Canada and have a disability. Living in a white, male, ableist society, these women’s marginalization is multi-layered. It is precisely their stories from their marginalized social location that shed light on “the fault lines of the system and suggest avenues for change” (p. 5). These incredible women have not surrendered and accepted the societal message that they are lesser human beings and burdens; each of the four women are actively resisting the dominant system and struggling for equality and social justice. Mehrun came to Canada in 1981 as a Ugandan refugee; after her own experience of hospitalization with polio, she assists persons with disabilities to move out of institutional settings (Chapter 2). As the mother of two children who have disabilities, Tamiza’s story sheds light on the difficulties related to securing social services for her children (Chapter 3). Firouzeh is a mother, wife, volunteer, and student; her story subverts the script of dependence of a woman with a disability (Chapter 4). Sara’s narrative is the foundation of exposing the intricacies of the relationship between voice and experience-based knowledge (Chapter 5). Their stories reinforce that everyday feminist practices are just as important as large-scale organized movements. By denying popular discourse and rejecting their role as burdens, they are recreating the social tapestry along more humanized lines.

Dossa goes beyond a critique of Canadian social organizations that deal with disability issues. She uses the everyday lives of people with disabilities to unmask a larger affliction that perpetuates and reproduces the dehumanization of “Others.”

Biomedicine, in concert with capitalism, has laid out the contours of the paradigmatic citizen: one who is able-bodied, white, young, and male. People who fall short of these criteria have to work their way through a system that deems them to be ‘abnormal’. Gender, age, race, disability, and social class are markers of difference, hierarchically organized. (p. 96)

This book expertly makes a connection between structural factors that dehumanize and individual experience, and reminds us that because dehumanization and exploitation under capitalism occur at different times and spaces, they are camouflaged. Dossa thus

continuously reminds us that we, in our social relations, are reinforcing much of these issues. "Our collective inability to accept people with different ways of being in the world has led to social marginalization that amounts to nothing less than violation of their human rights" (p. 96). For making this connection, this book is extremely valuable for adult educators.

This book is an important contribution to radical adult education. It is an excellent example of qualitative research informed by feminist scholarship that, among other things, is interested in looking at gender as a category of social experience through documenting and observing women's experiences. This study expertly connects theory with experience. Rather than merely recording what happened, this study explains why or how things happened. By looking at the actual lived experience of immigrant Muslim women who have a disability, Dossa makes the epistemological assumption that knowledge lies with people. By comprehending the complexities of a person's day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life, insight into collective experience is achieved (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 27). In other words, by understanding the particular one can gain insight on the general. People and their stories not only are windows into those people's own personal development, but also shed light on cultural and social phenomena. Dossa theorizes each woman's life in order to shed light on a grander array of social relations, which involves a critique of the state, the market, and capitalism. This is in direct contrast with liberal theories of adult education that posit self-actualization as the purpose of adult education. In the past decades, we have witnessed adult education's curtailment of its social purpose for progressive social change via human capital theory. Such an individualized perspective relieves society and the state of its duties and blames marginalization on individual deficit. Studies such as Parin Dossa's answer radical adult education's call for a return to social purpose.

Dossa's understanding of why none of the women spoke extensively of their Muslim identity is perplexing. She makes the assumption that "Islam was present in their lives and informed their work on social justice" (p. 15). Therefore, since they have chosen not to speak of their Muslim identity during their storytelling, the reason must be "the impacts of discriminatory practices and distorted media images in Canada" (p. 15). The presumption that anyone born into a religion will identify with that religion is the very homogenous reasoning that is the target of Dossa's critique. There is nothing in the excerpts from the women's stories that suggests that Islam has informed their work on social justice. Could their activism not stem from their praxis and their critical consciousness? Could the women not be secular? The fact that Dossa, a brilliant scholar, assumes they are not, shows the researcher herself is not immune from making presumptions.

References

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- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992). *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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