Book Review


The ‘nature of Islam and the cultural character of Muslims in Australia’ (p. 1) is an overarching theme in Jan Ali’s latest book. He examines how certain processes and ‘phenomena operate in the broader structure of Australian society’ (p. 1) by revisiting the themes of settlement and integration from a sociological and historical lens. Ali infuses his knowledge of Islamic theology and Muslim community history in his concise compendium that outlines the latest sociological and historical issues related to Muslims living in Australia. The chapters provide a narrative account of the cultural history of Islam in Australia and an analysis of key areas and issues in the public domain; within these discussions, he brings forth evidence from the Muslim experience. These perspectives reinforce the ‘othering’ of Muslims across various sectors of society, demonstrating their unequal access to key rights as citizens of the state. He specifically focuses on the extent of discrimination that Muslim Australians face, particularly with over enactment of terror laws and the ongoing securitisation of all Muslims in Australia. Ali also presents a unique angle to these well-discussed issues by seeking answers to the following: Can a socioculturally diverse nation like Australia accommodate for the ongoing practice of Islam for many integrated Muslim Australians? Is Australia’s multiculturalism failing or successful towards this end? (p. 8)

The book is divided into five sections dealing with these issues. It is a new addition to the emerging studies on Islam and Muslims in Australia intersecting with the discipline of cultural, social and political study of minorities in Australia. It adds to the existing literature that spans two decades of scholarship ruminating on the issues of culture, identity and integration of Muslims in Australia within the context of public debates of inclusion and exclusion. In this volume, Ali draws upon his earlier work critiquing Australia’s multiculturalism and the discriminatory public and social attitudes that stratify Muslims at the lower end of the social
strata. He details the challenges of a ‘sensationalised’ understanding of Islam and the ramifications of this upon a wider acceptance of Muslims. The book also inflames the ongoing polemical discourses around shariah, Islamic schools and places of worship. A lack of true understanding of Islamic tradition as a heterogeneous, not homogeneous, community and faith would assist in combating the greater misconceptions and anti-Muslim sentiments that become barriers to integration as they make the Muslim experience of state and policy discriminatory.

Ali presents both a brief historical overview and statistical analysis of the trends in Muslim contact, migration and settlement in Australia in chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines the relationship between Muslim migration and Australia’s evolving immigration policies with an emphasis on the Immigration Restriction Act (1901) and multiculturalism. Here, Ali demonstrates the sociocultural structure of Australia’s society and its accommodation, or lack thereof, of Muslim migrants. He provides an important historical narrative of community development in chapter 3, scanning across the key parts of their past, including the recap of Muslim cultural groups and their settlement, an important part of which was mosque building and establishing of councils around ethnic lines. Ali essentially illustrates that the ‘institutionalisation of Islam in multicultural Australia has occurred through the establishment of Muslim communities, mosques and CSOs’ (p. 61).

In chapters 4 and 5, Ali classifies and analyses the context, causes and challenges of social exclusions that Muslim Australians face. The marginalisation of Muslims to the ‘peripheries’ of society in Australia is also a reflection of prior assimilationist policies and an unsuccessful multicultural policy. Ali proceeds to diagnose the reasons behind the ‘exclusion of Muslims’ who, prior to terrorist attacks of trade centres, were invisible (p. 82). He then makes a case for the urgent need for policy change and for better socio-economic inclusion of Muslims which would address this issue. Ali argues that ‘Muslim social inclusion has a national benefit that has not been recognised in the conceptualisation of Australian multiculturalism or in the formulation of multicultural policy and integration and the social cohesion model’ (p. 82). Ali ends this section by providing practical policy advice to governments, providing important recommendations for how youth can be positively engaged.

The possibility of accommodation of shariah in Australia and the role of Muslim clergy is explored in chapters 6 and 7. Ali first discusses the argument for inclusion of a plural legal system that recognises shariah for certain matters like mediation in family law matters, but asserts that this is a weak case. He debunks many misconceptions around shariah
and the sensationalisation of it in public discourse. It seems that his objective is to educate and dispel myths around the concept rather than any strong arguments for or against (p. 113). The role of clergy is a succinct yet important account of the complex relationship of authority and leadership in the Muslim community. The issues of lack of proper representation and qualification, whether religious or secular, is also highlighted. Due to the many legal problems ongoing for Muslim Australians around divorce and lack of equal access to women and youth, the contextual skill and professionalism of clergy are often questioned.

The section on Islamic education explores the history of Muslim schools in Australia and provides a sociological rationale for their existence to preserve Muslim identity in a secular nation like Australia. Chapter 9 provides a broad discussion of Islamic studies, from its inception since Islam to its development in academia and the Muslim community. However, missing from these discussions is the scripture and religious education in public schools and the role they play for Muslim youth in their identity formation. In the final section of the book, Ali addresses the rise of radicalisation and the Muslim ‘other’ along with counter violent extremist policies enacted to combat this. Ali does not negate the real threat of violent extremists but is critical of the general ‘othering’ of all Muslims unfairly and questions the effectiveness of countering violent extremists (CVE) programmes. Ali maintains that ‘anti-terrorism policies and security measures fuel a desire to compromise liberties and restrict Islam and Muslims from public spaces’ (p. 192).

*Islam and Muslims in Australia* is a useful monograph for those interested in the Muslim community in Australia. Due to the nature of the book, it is limited in providing more in-depth discussions of each section; however, Ali presents an up-to-date discussion on each of the five listed areas. He also presents the discourse through the lens of sociology to highlight in each section the relationships between state and community and how these entities function and interplay in the establishment of Muslim communities in Australia.

*Mahsheed Ansari*
Charles Sturt University