

REVIEW

Qureshi, A. (Ed) (2020). *I Refuse to Condemn: Resisting Racism in Times of National Security*. Manchester University Press.

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That a book such as *I Refuse to Condemn* defies compartmentalization into any specific genre is central to its contribution. From the outset, the editor, Asim Qureshi, informs us that ‘objectivity’, generally a highly-prized feature in the academe, does not interest him or his co-writers in this project. Rather, he describes their shared enterprise as one of ‘friends, colleagues and companions, who have stood alongside one another on the ramparts, as we have faced the violence of structures when holding them to account.’ This deliberate approach captures what is distinctive about this collection – it is very consciously an expression and a documentation born out of praxis rather than the mere exercise of detached academic observation and study. The scholarly and the experiential are not artificially separated, nor do they sit awkwardly alongside one another with little to bridge them, as per the convention in many mainstream academic texts. Instead, they are in dynamic conversation with one another, in a way that, to the reader, feels almost revelatory.

The premise of this volume is to interrogate and push back against a ubiquitous ‘pressure to condemn’ – and in doing so, it opens up a window into a myriad of ways in which this pressure presents itself. Remi Joseph-Salisbury succinctly puts it to us that this is a pressure which, for Muslims and other minoritized groups, continuously envelops and consumes:

‘Calls to condemn haunt us; silence us; threaten to overwhelm us; silence us...sometimes the pressure is spoken, more often it is silent, but always it is felt.’

What the volume does so well is to show that the range of ways that this pressure is felt cannot be separated from one another – nor can they be understood in isolation from one another. Qureshi talks frankly about the physiological manifestations of this burden that he contends with when he is faced by demands to condemn during media interviews. Hoda Katebi draws our attention to how the deployment of a language of ‘un-Americanness’ and by extension, the logic of loyalty and disloyalty was not only troubling for the racial prejudices that it betrayed in her TV interlocutors, but for the very real hazardous implications that it had for the life of a visibly Muslim woman who, after being painted as some kind of dangerous threat on live TV, was expected to simply walk out of the studio and exist as normal (whatever that meant) in the world.

There is a real breadth in the range of contributing authors in this collection speaking from geographical contexts spanning across the Global North, and drawing on diverse professional experiences and expertise, whether in community organizing, activism, speaking, creating, or writing. But bringing all these contributions together in a single thread is the hands-on experience that the authors have – all are engaged in the work of resistance in its multifaceted forms. This feature crystallizes in the aspect of the book which makes it cohere so well, despite the remarkable diversity of the individual essays in content and

style. This is that the collective stance of the authors, in sharing their traumatic experiences, their vulnerabilities, and their personal fears as they navigate condemnation culture in all its varied manifestations, is itself a collective calling out of structural gaslighting and deflection. From hostility and harassment at ports, discrimination in professional and public settings, to more subtle attempts at co-optation or even curiosity, which nonetheless place a burden on the respondent to denigrate or disassociate themselves from their pathologized, ‘backward’ community, identity or faith.

On the latter, Yassir Morsi describes a surreal experience of co-optation in his essay entitled ‘The (im)possible Muslim’, where during a radio interview he finds himself being framed by the host to fit a pre-determined mold of a ‘good Muslim.’ Morsi tells of a spectacle of ‘ventriloquism’ that unfolded, whereby platitudes and affirmations which he supposedly endorsed were alluded to and affirmed on his behalf – leaving him speechless at the way in which he was being so presumptuously spoken for by the host, as a way of justifying his very existence in that space. Adam Elliott-Cooper is incredulous at the warped mindset he is met with at a similar engagement – a mindset which assumes the inferiority of young black men, and which had him regularly being asked to explain ‘why drill artists deserved civil liberties’, or being called on to explain what the ‘benefits’ of their cultural expression were – in order to justify that they were not to be prohibited. And Sadia Habib goes to great lengths to patiently talk her ‘left-wing white liberal friend’ through all the ways that their inquisitiveness towards her as a ‘racialized go-to Muslim’ was drenched in unreflexive privilege and centered essentially on eliciting reassurance from her that she and her co-religionists were not a threat.

Though the phenomenon of condemnation culture has exponentially permeated the post-9/11 climate, there is a keen awareness demonstrated in a number of the essays about how this culture is to be contextualized against a longer history: in terms of Empire, migration and communities (Rajina, Elliott-Cooper), as well as more intimate family histories and stories (Ansari, Mir, Younis), the authors draw our attention to how racialization and otherization were contended with by generations before us, of how this shaped the context within which condemnation culture thrives today and is scaffolded into the structures we interact with. There is also an explicit cognizance of the legacy that is being created by their resistance. Perhaps this is most pronounced in Nadya Ali’s heartrending essay which addresses ‘the kids.’ Her words, charged with a deep love, will resonate with people of color everywhere who are burdened with appreciating that an integral part of raising the next generation is to pass on to them the harsh reality that ‘we, with our inheritance, would always have to fight.’

The theme of performance and performativity runs through the entire collection – the dilemmas and hurdles that must be weathered as dehumanization does what it does best – box-in, categorize, caricature, assign us roles and define the parameters within which we can exist. Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan’s contemplative piece sheds light on the frustrations that come with fielding constant advances from those who would tokenize, turning her ‘from a Muslim woman who performs poetry into merely the performance of a Muslim woman to be positioned in the right place at the right time.’

I Refuse to Condemn gives a direct window into multifarious ways that Muslim and minoritized voices are subjected to containment and constraint – but more importantly, how they think through such experiences and respond to them. For Muslim activists, this

collection does a great job in highlighting how there isn't and doesn't need to be *one* correct response. Tarek Younis for example validates the internal struggles and tensions that an earnest Muslim activist will have as they navigate narrow, unforgiving and ultimately impossible terrain. Indeed, he gives space for us to acknowledge, appreciate and understand our own shortcomings or as he puts it, our cowardice. He takes us on something of a journey, sharing his own growth, his disappointments in himself and the lessons he has learned.

A consciousness of how momentous an act it is to put these experiences to writing pervades this volume, which is replete with experiences that when recounted in so many other contexts are most commonly met with denialism and invalidation. Society often conditions Muslims and those from other 'suspect' minorities to hold back, to moderate themselves, to think twice and three times before opening themselves up – since opening yourself up in an environment where you are dehumanized demands continuous risk assessment, not to mention bravery and composure in copious amounts. This is perhaps what I mean when I describe this collection as revelatory: in its complex yet organic discussions, artificial and arbitrary barriers are broken, and unspoken rules are trampled on. So just as 'objectivity' is not deified, faith and spirituality are not relegated as unworthy or 'inappropriate.' Thus, space is claimed within the conversation in a way that validates readers themselves and affirms the reality of their struggles.