

Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid.
By Gabeba Baderoon. Johannesburg: Wits University
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Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid is a pioneering study that examines historical and contemporary representations of Islam and Muslims in South Africa. With intellectual sophistication and creativity, Gabeba Baderoon examines varying forms of visual, culinary, artistic and popular representations in ways that speak back to official historical and colonial records. She reads against the grain of dominant narratives and is keenly attentive to “genres that hover between fiction and fact, and generate the kind of knowledge that fills the spaces between the more authoritative sources” (23). Yet hers is neither a simply reactive nor redemptive response to colonial hegemonies. Baderoon succeeds in presenting intricate and complex analyses of her subject matter, and the reading practices that she adroitly employs are both methodologically and analytically instructive to feminist postcolonial scholars interested in re-imagining archives and authoritative canons.

Throughout the book, Baderoon illuminates the seamless interweaving of forms of public and intimate violence defining colonial slave history, and their lingering legacies in South Africa. Her work also retrieves dissident memories, histories and counter-narratives of Islam and Muslims in the South African archive from the 17th century until the contemporary period. She avoids a clichéd approach to culture, religion and politics, approaching these fraught areas obliquely, through the lens of etymology, cuisine, sexuality and gender, gangsterism, and contemporary literature. This refreshing approach manages to avoid the traps that await any scholar of society and politics, namely, cultural essentialism on one hand, and political correctness on the other. It seeks to place on the agenda the diversity of identities within Islam as a global faith even as it celebrates the local, contextual and nuanced nature of its emergence as a minority yet vocal religion in contemporary South Africa. Most

compelling for a scholar of religion is that the book vividly demonstrates that religious identities are never isolated nor independent but deeply responsive to complex contextual influences.

Given the political freight of racial terms and identities in the South African context, Baderoon's careful unpacking of language is a most helpful beginning. Rigorous and relentless in her interrogation of contentious terms such as 'Indian,' 'Coloured,' 'African' and 'Malay,' she correctly calls attention to their constructed nature and to how, historically, religion came to be integrally woven into racial classifications, for example in cases in which a person's racial designation was changed from White or Coloured to Malay when s/he converted to Islam. Baderoon observes that the term 'Cape Malay' has a contested set of connotations. In reality, enslaved people were brought to the Cape from countries as diverse as Mozambique, Madagascar, India and Ceylon, and spoke a variety of languages. Thus 'Malay' is not an accurate reflection of country of origin but could just as well mean Muslim. Baderoon carefully distinguishes this term as a historical appellation for Muslims in the Cape from its contemporary meaning of a sub-category of the apartheid Coloured racial group. This is an important distinction, and it positions Baderoon as a non-racialist thinker who seeks to come to terms with religio-cultural diversity in the context of a society saturated with racism.

Another of the central contributions of the book is to lucidly bring into focus the submerged and neglected history of enslaved Muslims that undergirds the Cape, and indeed the South African, legacy. Playing with the ideas of sight and visibility, Baderoon develops the idea of the oblique gaze, a gaze that looks "at an angle" or at a slant, a "questing" gaze that denotes complexity and refuses to acquiesce to the dominant culture (4-5, 40). As such, Baderoon's book might be described as a sustained oblique gaze – at once agile and nuanced, attentive to complexity and intricacy, refusing simplistic narratives of Islam and Muslims. Baderoon notes that the study of Cape slavery is characterised by little discussion outside the academy. In spite of the important revisionist research done by historians recently, she observes that slavery is rendered exceptional, atypical and unrepresentative of broader South African history. With apposite references to and analyses of the official and popular archives that include paintings, cookbooks, travel writing, folktales, media, and fiction, Baderoon leads her reader to the shocking awareness of the insidious forms of aesthetic representation that

sanitise and minimise a violent South African slave history – a history that is fundamental and formative in relation to the colonial presence and the apartheid state. She examines the ways in which aesthetic traditions represent slaves as picturesque, exotic, decorative and placid, lingering at the margins of public visibility. Such depictions do powerful ideological labour, Baderoon tell us: they banish from our view the violence and savagery implicit to a slave economy, rendering it mild and benign while suppressing all evidence of slave resistance. Moreover, she notes that slaves were presented as “figures of exoticism or pathos, abstracted from history and... [functioning] solely to add depth and distinctiveness to white subjectivity” (21). She neatly captures these modes of representation via the concept of “ambiguous visibility,” wherein Muslims and Islam are “disproportionately visible yet strangely overlooked,” a thematic that she explores throughout the book in a variety of different times and spaces of the South African imaginary.

The chapter on slavery and sexual violence is one of the most powerful and poignant chapters in this extraordinary book. Critically probing the harrowing nexus of race, colonialism and sexual violence, Baderoon notes that: “For almost two hundred years, the system of slavery ensured that systematic sexual violence was built into the colonies that would eventually form South Africa” (83). Baderoon’s mastery of a feminist intersectional approach reveals the mutually constitutive and interlocking relations of power between race, gender, sexuality, religion and colonialism. Intrinsic to enslavement were the unimpeded possibilities for rape and sexual violence against female slaves by male slave owners. Having thus revealed that systematic sexual violence was inherent in the making of race and in the foundations of colonial presence in South Africa, Baderoon then turns to depictions of women and race in contemporary South African art and literature. Here she traces the artistic forms of “reclaiming alternative modes of visibility for black subjectivity” which resist historical erasure by resolutely engaging with sexual violence. Yet these nuanced forms of contemporary representation also portray black women’s “resilience, wholeness and sexual pleasure,” and “stake a powerful new claim on public space by black women” (106).

Baderoon also traces the “brittle intimacy” encountered in colonial kitchens where servitude and invisibility were closely connected to food and spices. She offers a feminist reading *par excellence* that reveals the inextricable and fluid relationships between private domestic realms and public political forces. We learn how food created in slave kitchens became appropriated as national

dishes, claimed by the dominant Afrikaner culture of the day. Foregrounding the fundamental contributions of the Malay slaves to what eventually came to be known as South African cuisine, Baderoon also incisively interrupts dominant tropes of exoticism on the subject of cuisine. Instead she retrieves counter-narratives of survival and preservation reflected in cookbooks authored by Muslim women from the 1960s onwards. Here Baderoon draws on Betty Govinden's crucial insight that "cuisine was considered a way of preserving cultural identity in a strange land" (59).

The book includes a chapter on the sea as a metaphor for "experiences that transcend conventional categories" (67), and examines memoirs and stories of pilgrimage and sacred geography. The notion of the sea as metaphor is evocative given the associations with ships bringing slaves and indentured labours to South Africa as well as sacred journeys to Mecca by enslaved Muslims. Yet this chapter integrates with less ease into the book than the others, possibly requiring deeper analytical development and conceptual integration.

On the one hand, it might be argued that that Baderoon is perhaps attempting to do too much in her ambitious and provocative work: she traverses the large historical sweep of four centuries, discussing many different aspects of Muslim history and identity. On the other hand, while the book certainly engages multiple and diverse types of representation over an extensive historical period, it is characterised by a clear and sustained analytical and theoretical coherence. Precisely because Baderoon employs a rigorous intersectional approach, her work presents a finely-honed and strikingly perceptive lens on complex social-political processes and identities. *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Postapartheid* is an innovative, imaginative, erudite and courageous piece of scholarship. It makes a fresh and vibrant contribution to feminist debates, adding nuanced insights to questions of race, slavery, gender, sexuality, religion and representation drawn from the South African context. Instructive for audiences in a variety of fields, including gender, social history, anthropology, politics, literature, and art, it also makes a powerful contribution to contemporary academic debates and a postcolonial South African and Indian Ocean archive. And, in addition to providing us with a ground-breaking work of enormous intellectual creativity, *Regarding Muslims* is also a beautifully crafted and deliciously pleasurable book to read.