

The New Cool: A Review of Generation M Young Muslims Changing the World by Shelina Janmohamad

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There is a certain group of Muslims that writer and advertising industry professional Shelina Janmohamed believes we need to better understand. Her first book, *Love in a Headscarf*, was a breezy, lighthearted memoir about finding a husband, published in 2009. *Generation M* is somewhat more serious, addressing the fact that young Muslims, including in the West, are becoming religious in ways that their parents never were. She believes that, rather than fearing this trend, we should welcome it. This generation, she explains, are making Islam thoroughly modern and progressive.

There are caveats, of course. Not all Muslims belong to this eponymous *Generation M*. If you're old, you don't belong. If you condone religiously-motivated violence, you don't belong. If you aren't fashionable, sociable or educated, you don't belong. If you think women should stay at home while their husbands work, you don't belong. Like hipsters, Generation M is a relatively elite group, but disproportionately influential. They are generally young, middle-class and – crucial to her argument – they wield enormous spending power, contributing many billions of dollars to the global economy. They are all over social media, and now mainstream media, too. What makes them different from other hipsters is that they are also 'a segment who believe in faith and modernity as mutually beneficial,' Janmohamed writes.

This is a book clearly written by someone who works in advertising. It celebrates consumerism, colourfully recounting the stories of young entrepreneurs flogging halal wine and halal convenience foods, halal



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makeup, halal toothpaste, breathable nail polish that makes ablutions easier, stylish hijabs and abayas, sharia banking services, beef bacon, Muslim Barbie dolls, Islamic pop music, Islamic alternatives to Christmas presents – indeed anything that can be transformed into something religiously acceptable (begging one to wonder just how Muslims have managed until now). ‘Generation M love brands,’ she exclaims. By creating an enormous parallel economy of halal products, she argues that *Generation M* is making it possible for people to replicate a modern lifestyle without breaking the rules.

And the rules are key. Janmohamed makes Generation M sound like an exclusive club. But let’s not forget that this isn’t a club that anyone can join. It’s for Muslims only. And for a certain type of Muslim at that. *Generation M*, although it professes to be an honest account of the members of this club, reads overall more like a rule book for a ‘good’ young Muslim. And these rules are where the problems lie.

Millions of young, educated Muslim women in liberal societies, belonging to *Generation M*, have chosen to dive deeper into their faith than their parents did. They have adopted veils – some even niqabs – when their mothers never wore them. They pray five times a day, adhere to shariah law, some refuse to vote, and they have chosen to bring their faith firmly into their public lives. This trend has been spurred by the creeping spread of puritanism within Islam, often Saudi-led, and by the politicisation of the faith by a wide range of movements. The particular generation that Janmohamed describes marks itself apart in trying to reconcile the cosmopolitan and often western lifestyles they want with a new (or at least new to them) strict religious doctrine that demands they be modest, devout and unwaveringly committed to God and the Ummah.

This struggle to have the best of both worlds is the reason we today see hijabi women in big-budget fashion campaigns and recently even in an issue of *Playboy* magazine. Generation M women want to be fashionable, but must ‘always remember the guiding faith principles in the way that

they express themselves,' says Janmohamed, like a tutting aunt. On the one hand, some may want to be pop stars, but on the other hand they may find themselves held back by the Islamic concept of 'awrah', which states that a woman's singing voice should not be heard in public. Apparent paradoxes like these crop up so many times in the book that being a member of this exclusive club starts sounding like a lot of hard work. One chapter even ends with her cheerfully quoting one her interviewees: 'Muslims put the fun back into fundamentalism.'

Just how religious fundamentalism can meet the rights, needs and desires of modern women is territory Janmohamed navigates like a ship's captain steering around icebergs. Although she states (only once) that Generation M is just fine with women not wearing hijabs, both the book cover and its content make abundantly clear that veiling is a major part of being a 'proper' Muslim woman. She describes in positive terms a Muslim beauty pageant in Indonesia in which contestants are judged on their piety and must all wear veils. Never does she mention protests against female veiling in countries that demand it. Nor does she explore the regressive impacts that shariah courts have had on so many women's lives, and their resistance to them.

It's difficult to get a handle on just what role feminism plays for this particular generation. She is insistent that Generation M are feminists like herself, but she also rejects mainstream feminism. 'Generation M women believe in the right to equal participation, equal respect and a full role in society, but increasingly demands this on their own terms as Muslims rather than accepting the goals of feminism rooted in the Western tradition,' she writes. What these 'own terms' are isn't made entirely clear, but it does seem to mean that when feminism conflicts with religious rules, then she doesn't want it.

The problem with Janmohamed's characterisation of Generation M is that it risks pushing her own narrow image of young, middle-class Muslim women as the default. This mainstreaming of Muslim women as

headscarf-wearing and opposing 'Western' feminism betrays the countless women who don't fit inside this box. At the same time, though, in trying to forge a new Muslim identity, it's clear that the women who belong to Generation M are spotting avenues for changing the more conservative and patriarchal institutions of old. They insist on being heard, on having spaces in mosques, and on equality in the home and workplace. It's conceivable that, in asserting themselves and their identity, they may well change their religion from within. The question the book also raises for secular feminists is whether women like the author, who put their religion before their feminism but still identify as feminists, can be included in the wider movement without feeling alienated by it.

But if a middle ground exists, which both secular feminists and conservatively religious feminists can occupy, it's clear that Janmohamed has not yet found it. By ignoring the women within Muslim societies that so powerfully and actively resist the expectation to cover up and conform to religious diktats, she lets them down. Does her Generation M include women in Saudi Arabia who want to be allowed to drive, work and not be chaperoned at all times by a male guardian? What is it doing to support the young girls being forced to wear headscarves by their fathers? What is it doing to support the women whose lives have been damaged by patriarchal shariah courts in Britain? These are the complexities that she conveniently skips over in her glossy descriptions of what she believes young modern Muslims want. This book is a remarkable read, not only for what it says but also for what it leaves out. It is a sanitised version of reality. One in which cool people are happily sipping on their halal wine, cosy in the belief that they are good Muslims, and wouldn't the world be a better place if all Muslims were like them.

The reason *Generation M* is important is because it will serve as a manual to many young Muslim women, nudging them to believe that this is how they should behave, dress and live. If Janmohamed doesn't have a deeper agenda, perhaps she is simply naïve. If she does have an agenda,

then this is religious propaganda at its stealthiest. By leaving out the experiences of those who don't fit inside the narrow constraints of her club – including those who support what she disdainfully dismisses as “Western” feminism – she deliberately turns her back on the millions who define being young, Muslim and modern in other ways.

References

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