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Muslim Consumers

The idea of a new generation of Muslims, leading from the front and changing the world, may feel surprising in the midst of current negative representations of the Global Muslim experience. *Generation M*, however, the moniker given to this vanguard, is very much a thing. It is also the title of the new book by Shelina Janmohammed, author of *Love in a Headscarf*. But is it any good?

With over five per cent of the population and numbering nearly three million as a whole, British Muslims have become a category worthy of interest among all sorts of groups – from social science thinkers, policymakers agitating over questions of identity and radicalisation, to concerns over the opportunity frames regarding a mobile, or not, body of people. This focus shifts the attention away from the negative aspects of the British Muslim experience, issues that are greatly in need of resolving. While over half of Britain's Muslims live in ten per cent of the poorest parts of the country, there is a growing body of British Muslims who are highly educated, aspirational, capable, and more importantly, engaging in *halal* economic activity. They are seen as the new frontline of participation and engagement, as well as a new market.

Shelina Janmohammed, *Generation M: Young Muslims Changing the World*, I B Tauris, London, 2017

However, not all is well in the state of Denmark. A book focusing on Muslims on the up, providing a detailed narrative on engagement, progress, enlightenment, has carefully set out templates that boost economic well-being but also enhances *halal* capital for the afterlife. Surely, this is no new perspective, you scream. There have always been Muslims who have integrated successfully, achieving upward mobility and participation, rendering their status as *petit bourgeoisie* or above. In this respect, there have always been Muslim groups moving apart from each other as much as away

from society as a collective. But there is more. While paying attention to an economically forward-looking segment of the British Muslim population, the fact of the matter is that aspirational and successful British Muslims constitute a limited proportion of the entire group category, while the vast majority suffer the deleterious consequences of deindustrialisation, neo-liberalisation and marginalisation.

The relentless pace of modernisation introduces new challenges for individuals who are now also consumers. An identity that is determined by the nature of one's consumption patterns has become more powerful, poignant and prescient as an indicator of social and cultural relations than ever. Mass consumerism has occurred alongside atomisation, individualism and voyeurism. Branding, public relations, marketisation, product differentiation, strategic location and price optimisation are all competitive practices that aim to improve market share. Thus, at a basic level, *Generation M* is a marketing concept. It identifies a category to be targeted by public relations companies advising companies seeking to improve profits. As the Muslim populations across the world grow, they are regarded as market opportunities. It is space for making tremendous profits, not necessarily as a way in which to bring together people variously affected by the vicissitudes of capitalism. Capitalism will reproduce capitalistic tendencies when it seeks to exploit potential in emerging markets, which in this case is in the form of the mobile, educated, aspirational and relatively financially well off young people seeking higher standards of living, combined with cultural, spiritual and economic integration with a global mainstream.

While success equals reward in a capitalist society, these outcomes are skewed in favour of those who start with greater capital at the outset, a perennial problem for policy makers constantly aware of the dangers of monopoly capitalism. Moreover, if left unchecked, this free market liberalism is rampant, indiscriminate and relentless. Today, there is everything wrong with the neoliberal order, with the rise of Brexitism, Trumpism, vilification of Muslims, hatred of immigrants and disdain towards diversity all reflecting a collapse in the western liberal imagination. What we are seeing is the long, slow and somewhat painful decline of the west, especially as China and other eastern powers are returning global power back to the global east. The western, neoliberal, hyper-capitalist, anti-welfare, self-loathing failure that has become our daily grind is more elitist, self-serving and deceitful about itself than ever. Thus, capitalism, without checks and balances, is prone to being not very *halal* at all.

In quite direct ways, the book is an attempt to take attention away from these less than favourable outcomes by focusing on how Muslims are using creative, opportunistic and developmental opportunities to contribute to their existence in society. In of itself, this is a calculated decision to

make a positive contribution about a group in society making positive contributions themselves. The compelling narrative in this book is the notion that there is not simply a case of improved integration among these young Muslims today. There is a particular focus on reclaiming identity, spirituality and human connectivity through consumerism. It is an attempt to redefine what it means to be a member of society as a Muslim consumer. The essence of this book's contribution is to present the view that Muslims are not a problem category *per se*. Rather, in the current climate, with all the negative energies in play, there is a significant number of young Muslims making valuable contributions to, for example, being British, Muslim, and, interestingly, worldly. The story of these Muslims is told without compromise, confrontation or conflation. The net impact of *Generation M* is to bring Muslims into the play – permitting certain economic innovations to improve opportunities for integration, social well-being and the normalisation of differences in society. It is a genuine attempt to try to develop this concept as an organic, emergent and ideational notion, which is grounded, bottom-up and developmental.

But *Generation M* is simply not an economic handbook. It is a serious attempt at looking at the Islamic aspects of integration; adaptations to economic opportunities made in order to fulfil an Islamic criterion fill the pages of this book. For example, in discussing an online sex shop for Muslims, the proprietor argues that these products not only provide an enhancement to the physical connection between man and woman, they also provide a 'deeper meaning to sexuality, sensuality and even spirituality'. Most of the customers are women. This approach removes taboos around sex and encourages individuals to look beyond the everyday when thinking about sexuality, which at present tends to be misogynistic, skewed in favour of men over women, and somewhat disconnected from sensuality. If contemporary pornography is anything to go by, sexual acts are presented as violent, aggressive and often demeaning to women. Muslims are therefore encouraged to seek a greater meaning in their actions through Islam, but through a system where capitalism and consumerism can act as the drivers.

But while all of these are worthy endeavours, and the extent of the possibility of contributing exists in reality, there is the risk of presenting a rather glossy, glowy and somewhat glorified perspective on Muslim economic and cultural integration. Even for highly qualified, extremely educated and highly articulate Muslims, there are external risks to do with discrimination and marginalisation, affecting this particular segment of the population but touching on all minorities in general. Here, the author has done a good job of separating the problems of an unfettered capitalist society and the opportunities arising from capitalism that do not necessarily result in a reduction of the Muslimness

of Muslims. Indeed, in many cases, such approaches introduce opportunities that add to economic integration, while keeping the *halal* in engagement and participation intact. Architects, designers, tech gurus, writers and visionaries of all kinds are in a unique place to play a special role in society.

Generation M focuses on the struggle in relation to being Muslim as a separate space for invention, innovation and incantation among a mobile population group that excels, while at least half of the rest languish in the depths of a marginalised abyss. However, one should not discredit this work simply because it is skewed. In fact, it is the aim of the book to focus on the realm of possibility rather than the limitations of life. Active participation is a way forward for all groups that seek to be heard and understood, and active participation is for those who are at the forefront of evolutionary economic and cultural praxis. The effects of this are not merely to improve the lived reality of these innovators, but to create externalities that present a more positive, forward-looking vision of being an engaged Muslim, leading to wider positive effects in terms of the acceptability or assimilability of the group as a whole. The book acts as a blueprint for those who seek economic and cultural progress – and this is not only a welcome relief but also an undertaking that should be viewed as an option to all those who seek to move forward. For these reasons alone, this book is admirable.

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We arrived late for Friday prayers from a meeting in the city centre. Carried on a warm May breeze, the sermon droned over the little loudspeakers of the dome-less, minaret-less mosque to an audience of motorcycles, chained handcarts, and an avalanche of footwear.

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There is a deep affinity between travelling and telling a story. Put in the simplest of terms, both activities require a starting-point, move through a sequence, and, as conclusion of the activity, aim at an ending, a destination. Travel is a lived experience; telling a story is an expression of lived experience.

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