

**All American Yemeni Girls:
Being Muslim in a Public School**

Loukia K. Sarroub

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In her book, Loukia Sarroub offers an ethnographic account of the lives of six Yemeni-American girls by following them through public schools from 1997-2002 to “obtain a deeper and richer understanding of their day-to-day lives at home and at school” (p. 19). By observing them in the school, home, malls, and mosque, as well as at their community’s social occasions, Sarroub investigates the tensions between their lives and identities in the American public school system and their family lives at home, both in the United States and in Yemen, their land of origin.

In the first chapter, Sarroub details the theories behind her ethnographic research, introduces the research background, reviews the research methodology, and gives an overview of the participants. In chapter 2, she chooses Layla, one of the Yemeni-American girls, as a representative of the group. As Sarroub explains, Layla struggled to find a space for herself, because “it was not always clear to her whether she was

an American or a Yemeni, and her attitude toward her home and school lives reflected her consternation with both identities” (p. 30). Being an Arab Muslim woman myself and living as a minority in a western society, I can relate to the struggle between gender roles. The girls’ roles are prescribed by culture and traditions, and their gender identity is constructed in ways that have been influenced by American society. Therefore, I expected the author to provide a more detailed analysis of how adolescents construct their gender identity in both Arab Muslim Yemeni and secular American cultures.

In addition, I found Sarroub’s description of the participants as living as “sojourners” to be powerful. This expression was used to highlight the fact that many Yemeni-American girls “remain geopolitically, linguistically, religiously, and culturally isolated from American life while maintaining those same ties to their homeland” (p. 22). This, in turn, explains the struggle of constructing, negotiating, and sustaining their identity as both Yemeni and American. However, the tension these girls live as a daily reality, which was analyzed in most of the author’s discussion, cannot be described only as that belonging to a “sojourner,” but more as conflict and brutal struggle. In Sarroub’s own words, “their lives illustrated the irreconcilability of the spaces they inhabited” (p. 29). Indeed, the lives that these young women live are, in a way, contradictory to one another. They live in a small Yemeni village, with all of its traditions and values, within the borders of the United States. Another way to describe this ethnographic research is as a struggle between modernity and the traditions of young Yemeni-American immigrants, which is the greatest challenge facing Muslims families and youths who live in a western culture.

In chapters 3 through 6, Sarroub examines many points that reflect the complexities in the Yemeni-American girls’ lives. One of these is the meaning of success. The author stresses that these girls struggled and thus managed to succeed beyond many of their parents’ expectations. According to Sarroub, a lot of research says that if children are “disadvantaged” by being poor or having little emphasis on education at home, they will not do well. However, as Sarroub notes, the Yemeni-American student’s main informants of this research were an exception to this stereotype. My concern here is the success that Sarroub noted, and if it only applied to the six informants or to all Yemeni-American girls. I found that her explanation of the “success” of Yemeni-American girls was contradictory, for she concluded that “...they are unlikely to benefit from or contribute to American society” (p. 117).

Sarroub also describes how Yemeni-American girls' classroom experiences were liberating; however, the high school experience remains fragmented because of incompatible differences between home and school. Did these Yemeni girls use their marginal status in both worlds – the American and the Yemeni? Did they use the home and school to fashion a place of value and meaning for themselves, a place in which to construct their identities? These questions were left unanswered.

Another important aspect of Sarroub's research involved interviews following the 9/11 tragedy. She writes: "Both before and after September 11, 2001, the girls were torn between American norms and their religious beliefs as well as traditional expectations of their parents and peers" (p. 127). Even though she did not elaborate on the consequences of 9/11 as a tragic event for the already struggling Yemeni-American girls, she provides her personal reflection as being a member of the "other" in the United States' new racial profiling policies.

In the final chapter, the author provides personal accounts not only of the ethnographic research, but specifically of her position as the researcher of Dearborn's Yemeni-American community before and after the 9/11 tragedy. Her analysis would have benefited from an examination of what Homi Bhabha refers to as the hybrid "third space" of identity formation as a way of addressing the complexity of negotiations of identity in a diasporic context.

Despite a lack of detailed discussion on cultural values and religious teachings, and the differences between the two, this ethnographic research is a valuable tool for western and Muslim educators and researchers who want to understand young immigrants. The book highlights the struggles of minority youth in the public education system in North America. More specifically, it gives an insider's examination of the dualistic nature of what it means to be a young Arab Muslim woman in a secular society. Several interesting questions are raised, and answers are attempted.

The book *All American Yemeni Girls: Being Muslim in a Public School* may be mistitled. The research it describes cannot claim to represent the experiences of all Yemeni-American girls in the United States. In the author's own words: "They are not representative of all schools or teachers or students or communities across the United States" (p. 2). Thus, a more fitting title for the book could be "American Yemeni Muslim Girls Negotiating Their Identity between Two Worlds." This would reflect clearly the Yemeni-American girls' struggles. Overall, the book provides an exploration of

many aspects and challenges faced by some young minorities in North American society, particularly in the United States.

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