

Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan.

Svetlana Peshkova. Syracuse University Press. 2014. 368 pp. (ISBN-13: 9780815633730).

Through a rich experimental ethnography, Svetlana Peshkova, the author of *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan*, portrays an agentive dimension of Muslim Uzbek women. Moreover, the author traces the process through which Islam is transformed into “national Islam” in step with social and historical changes witnessed in Uzbekistan. Concepts such as the self and individual, identity and “truly Muslim” are defined, and the interrelationships of and interactions between each concept are addressed at multiple levels. Throughout the book, Peshkova is especially critical of the fact that in many writings on Islam society, it is not the individual voices, but rather clusters of voices presented as the voice that represents the society. By paying attention to each individual voice of Uzbek woman, Peshkova delivers these voices very vividly to the readers.

Through ethnographic narratives, Peshkova weaves together the stories of Uzbek women told in their own voices to examine how they define the “real Muslim” and how personal emotions such as sadness and happiness are employed in the language defining Islam. It is also interesting to note Peshkova’s interpretation of how religious practices of Islam are associated with the formation of personal identities, families and personal lives to touch the hearts of the people. The reader will also find Peshkova’s portrayal of the relationship between the self, emotions, self-identity, personal memories, and physical memories compelling.

On a more personal note, Peshkova shares very candidly the emotional changes and contemplations as a human being that she experienced during the extensive field research, which lasted over a decade, and the interactions she had with the key informants. Her work also helps the reader gain an appreciation of women’s religious leadership that is manifest in Uzbekistan as well as in other Islam countries, yet unfamiliar to the rest of the world. By casting light upon the typical Muslim women educated by female religious leaders, Peshkova addresses the significance of Islam within the daily lives of the people as well as within the practical private spaces of their lives. Peshkova’s work, which encompasses ethnographic sources and theoretical discussions on the tradition of ritual performances by female Muslim leaders known as *otinbalar* in Uzbekistan, is an important contribution to studies of the role of women in Uzbekistan as well as in other Islamic societies.

Unfortunately, despite Peshkova's emphasis on public life in private spaces, as the book's subtitle suggests, she has failed to illustrate how the public life within the private sphere is associated with actual public discourse. It can be surmised that the deeply-rooted controls and the absence of freedom have led to the merging of private space and public space. However, the author's intention to emphasize the changes made in the discourse of "National Islam" and the public and social background, which no longer places emphasis on Arabic languages but on the Uzbek language, is not elucidated. The readers have access to abundant examples of activities within the private space, yet Peshkova fails to elaborate on what these activities actually mean in the public space. Also, how personal emotions are constructed socially and how they reflect historical changes are not clearly defined in Peshkova's accounts.

Despite the afore-mentioned shortcomings, Peshkova's *Women, Islam, and Identity: Public Life in Private Spaces in Uzbekistan* is a well-written ethnographic review that successfully demonstrates "how it is said" and illustrates why "the unsaid is intentional" in Uzbek society. Through insightful descriptions of the everyday lives of people as individuals in Central Asia and the Ferghana Valley, Peshkova inspires the reader to contemplate the meaning of "truly Muslim" and how the members of Uzbek society think and imagine it to be. As one of the informants in the book confessed, the true me and the true Muslim is "dynamic and not abstract," and Islam is pragmatic and not abstract as it is "about real life." Through her work, Peshkova rebuts the claims that Islam is a superficial religion that is difficult to approach and only emphasizes holiness. Instead, she successfully shows that Islam as a religion is closely embodied in the practical lives of Muslims and that it is a dynamic and living religion that does not linger in the past as a traditional and conservative religion.

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