Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain

Tariq Modood
USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 240 pages.

Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain is an eloquent analysis of empirical and theoretical observations of multiculturalism in Britain. Modood is an expert on this topic, in particular as he writes from a Muslim perspective. The book consists of two parts: "Racism, Disadvantage, and Upward Mobility," which discusses ethnic diversity in employment and educational performance, and "The Muslim Challenge," which comprises chapters five to nine. The book's main purpose is to critique the British perception, which the author labels a "black-white dualism" (p. 5), and the resultant ignorance surrounding the voices of Asians and other minorities. Modood argues that the black-white division is complicated by cultural racism, Islamphobia, and a challenge to secular modernity.

In his introduction, the author sets the stage by providing a brief autobiographical background of how he embarked on the topic of multicultural politics from a philosophical background. These background details are not "nostalgic self-indulgence … in fact, some of the book's themes are rooted in descriptions from childhood" (p. 4).

Throughout the book, Modood emphasizes the "otherness" of Asians, particularly South Asians in Britain, as it existed before the tragedy of September 11 and subsequent terrorist attacks. He argues that in the pluralist nation of Britain, "South Asians were treated as [the] undesirable other" (p. 5). Muslims, not blacks, were increasingly perceived as the most threatening "other" to Western society. He further argues that race and racism are intricately entangled in how British Muslims were perceived, and that their culture was habitually stereotyped and perceived as obstructive to assimilation and integration into British society. The author's arguments shed light on how British Asians are empirically subjected to double racism, as compared to British blacks. Modood acknowledges that this complex situation has to be considered along with such other variables as "class, gender, geography, and [the] social arena" (p. 7).

The author tackles an important argument pertaining to culture and racism, as well as how racism may originate. He argues that cultural racism is based on the idea that culture is static or "quasi-natural … and that cultural racism naturalizes culture … as if culture is automatically reproduced, [as if] it does not change over time" (p. 13). This argument, in particular, is a stepping stone to opposing the categorization of British Muslims as the "other." Second- and third-generation British Muslims are subject to "otherness" based on the perception of inherited Muslim Asian cultural traits. In a similar vein, he argues: "A distinctive feature of racism is 'inherentism': that certain qualities are inherent to a group, and it is a secondary issue whether these qualities are perceived to be hereditary or cultural, racial or ethnic" (Blum, cited in Modood, 2005, p. 13). Assimilation is the enterprise that reproduces the notion of the "inherentism" of race and cultural traits. Although Modood initially provides a historical view that accentuates racism, he contends that a new racism is built on the notion of an "incompatibility between different cultures" (p. 27) in mixed cultures and races in one country (such as Britain). These views are manifested through different means, such as education, and "lead to violent and social conflict and the dissolution of social bonds" (p. 27).

The author describes the immigrants' dilemma that results from living in Western, secularist nations. Many of his own struggles resonate with my

own, as well as with those of many Muslim immigrants residing in the West. What I find particularly interesting is his analysis "that the new way of living, gradually becoming a part of British society, had to be ultimately justified in terms of compatibility with the Muslim faith" (p. 31). Modood's discussion of "self-abnegation" is brief and calls for further exploration. An extended analysis of this topic and its implication on the politics of multiculturalism, the book's main theme, would have been enriching.

The struggle between incompatible viewpoints and cultural values, Islamic and Western, is unavoidable. However, it may create some tension in one's identity formation if one's identity has to be either British or Muslim. More importantly, when Modood asserts that religion is central to the British Asian ethnic identity, he bases his statement on the fact that "South Asian immigrants teach their children to believe in the uniqueness of their culturally distinct beliefs and practice" (p. 31). However, this does not necessarily strengthen their sense of religious identity. Indeed, many immigrants associate with and advocate for their cultural heritage because it provides them with a sense of belonging and self-worth.

The book is useful in understanding the tension among British policy makers and reflects the complexities of racism in the British context. The author's description of the Muslim immigrants' dilemmas and how they arose in Britain is significant for those who advocate multiculturalism. Modood's discussion explores how British Muslims assert themselves by opposing existing equality agendas while challenging some of multiculturalism's secularist, liberal, and feminist assumptions. While the book raises many interesting questions and endeavors to answer them, many of them need further exploration, including the struggles of Muslim immigrants who are caught between Western and Islamic values. The author's arguments are important and new, but lose focus and become scattered because he tries to deal with many intersecting yet disconnected issues. One of these is the discussion of the "Rushdie Affair," the "Muslims, Incitement to Hatred, and the Law," and "Secularism and the State" (pp. 103-13).

In sum, the author of *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain* is one of the most respected thinkers on ethnic minority experiences in Britain. His book offers hope for British and pluralistic educators worldwide who are willing to move beyond the division between Islam and the West and seek to overcome racism in the public school system. Britain, according to Modood, provides a particularly promising beginning for building understanding and tolerance among its citizens. Although

Modood's arguments are focused and shaped by the British context, some are relevant and significant to other contexts, such as the Canadian.

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