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Uplifting Islamic Women's Voices and Views

By Cathy Lynn Grossman | Nov 04, 2022

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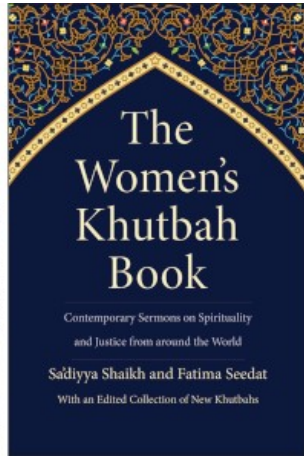
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The Dollie Gouse

from (l.) to (r.): Sadiyya Shaikh, Fatima Seedat

When a woman stands at the minbar—the place in a mosque where a speaker delivers the sermon (*khutbah*) at Friday prayers, expounding on the Quran from her study and spiritual experience—she can open minds, hearts, and souls. She can also get death threats.

Yet two South African Islamic feminist scholars, Sa'diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat, see growing numbers of women approach the minbar, braving the potential backlash. They have gathered dozens of pieces by women who delivered sermons in mosques and prayer services to create *The Women's Khutbah Book: Contemporary Sermons on Spirituality and Justice from Around the World*, out now from Yale University Press. Jennifer Banks, senior executive editor for the press, calls the book "exciting and daring" and "an illuminating account of the active role women are playing in Muslim communities across the globe today."

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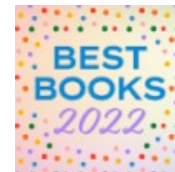
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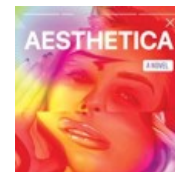
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Shaikh is an associate professor in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Cape Town. Her books and research articles examine theoretical debates on Islam and feminism, Sufism and Islamic law, and religion and gender-based violence. Seedat is head of the university's Department of African Feminist Studies and an expert on the views and experiences of women in classical and contemporary Islamic law. She has published research on feminist, LGBTQ, and egalitarian perspectives on Islam.

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The khutbahs they selected for the book highlight social justice, personal spiritual experience, marital love, and divine love; the views of Muslims of different races, ethnicities, and gender identities; and more. Shaikh says the contributors invite believers to “embark on an internal journey, receptive

to the divine in varied and unanticipated forms, cherishing the unique spiritual gifts that others also embody.” As Seedat writes in her khutbah in the collection, “Here we are in our billions, each with unique ways of knowing the Divine and knowing each other.”

The goal of the book, the authors write, is to be “an intentionally disruptive engagement with the traditional khutbah genre”—one in which women move from being “secondary, marginalized subjects in public conversation among men” to speaking for themselves. They call *The Women’s Khutbah Book* a “virtual minbar” and include templates and resources to guide readers in developing their own egalitarian khutbah practices. After all, they note, the Quran says nothing about the gender of someone who leads congregational prayers.

The book also very deliberately refers to Allah with a feminine pronoun. Shaikh says that this should not be a problem on principle but “in reality, when Muslims feel discomfort at this language, it reveals to us ways in which we have internalized male-centered images of the Divine. Hence it is an opportunity to release limited and idolatrous images of God.”

Still, as Seedat points out in her khutbah in the book, Muslim feminists who dispute the destructive forms of traditions are derogated as “unbelievers” even though, she writes, Islamic law is a human creation that has “historically changed and adapted with time and circumstance.”

For women to go to the minbar, the authors write, is authentic to the original days of the Prophet and his wives, when early Muslim men and women prayed and learned together with no partitions dividing them. Their book asserts, “For many contemporary Muslims, women’s acquisition of the minbar symbolizes an important spiritual, ethical, and political transformation and a potentially new moment in the alignment of religious authority and gender.”

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A version of this article appeared in the 11/07/2022 issue of *Publishers Weekly* under the headline: Uplifting Islamic Women’s Voices

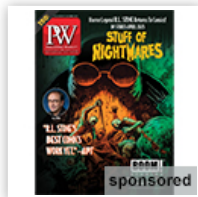
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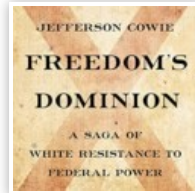
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