

Finnish Women, Muslim Spouses

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Kaisa Nissi 2017. *Uskonnot, kulttuurit ja perhe. Etnologinen tutkimus monikulttuuristen liittojen kerronnoista Suomessa*. [Religions, cultures and family. An ethnological study on the discourses on multicultural marriages in Finland.] Siirtolaisuusinstituutin julkaisuja 12. Turku: Finnish Migration Institute. 366 pp. ISBN 978-952-7167-29-8 (print) ISBN 978-952-7167-30-4 (electronic) ISSN 2343-3507 (print) ISSN 2343-3515 (electronic).

Finland has received considerable immigration since the 1990s. It is obvious that this has led to an increasing number of inter-ethnic, inter-cultural and inter-religious marriages – and, in its wake, also to an increasing amount of academic research into these marriages and families. Ethnologist Kaisa Nissi joins the ranks of Finnish scholars tackling the issue of the relations between Finns and their spouses from an immigrant background in her dissertation *Uskonnot, kulttuurit ja perhe. Etnologinen tutkimus monikulttuuristen liittojen kerronnoista Suomessa* (2017). Focusing on the spouses not only as immigrants, the study also aims to shed light on Finnish marriages to Muslim immigrant men in particular.

It is rather baffling, however, that the dissertation focuses on the categories of Finnish women and Muslim/Islamic men, as the former indicates nationality/ethnicity and the latter religion. This is, nonetheless, justified since it reflects the categories that emerged from the narrations analysed in the study. The word “Muslim” does not refer to religion (Islam) as much as it reflects a category of immigrant, exotic, Other, and in many cases of a discourse (see e.g. p. 113), one which is interchangeable with ethnicity.

Another point that must be made about the terminology of the study is that other terms are used interchangeably as well. In the author’s view, the difference between bicultural and multicultural is rather a question of degree (p. 48), but it could be argued that a “multicultural family” could also be defined as a multigenerational family with multiple, not just two, cultural backgrounds (see Viktorija Čeginskas’s (2016) dissertation *Multicultural Belonging. Individuals across cultures, languages and places*. Annales B411. Turku: University of Turku).

The main questions (p. 65) of the project were, how do the people in question build their common world, on what grounds do they build it, and how do they organise their marriage and the roles of wives, husbands and children? Providing a generalised view of the issue is an enormous challenge, as every

single marriage is a combination of individuals and their individual backgrounds. Methodologically, in answering the questions the author resorted to content analysis and discourse analysis of interview transcripts and texts captured from internet forums. As is very often the case in all cultural analysis, the actual process of analysis is not well documented in the final work, and the reader just has to trust the author that what is found between the covers of the final version of the book is a comprehensive and representative sample of all the texts that were analysed.

The dataset of the research consists of interviews with six Finnish-Muslim couples (not all of them with children) and two divorced women as well as 17 threads in popular public internet forums dealing with Finnish-Muslim marriages. In other words, through the interviews, the research examines more closely nine marriages of Finnish women to Muslim men. Some of the men involved are only given voice through the narrations of their now divorced wives; therefore, as few as six men have had their say in this project. The internet discussions reflect the Finnish women's point of view almost exclusively, and they are spiced by outsiders' unsolicited opinions on mixed marriages. The internet discussions, in my view, also reflect the fact that Finnish-Turkish marriages are quite common. For years, they have led the statistics of Finnish-foreign marriages where the wife is Finnish. Therefore, at points the dissertation has a strong Finnish-Turkish emphasis, even though it tries to discuss Muslim men in general. Turkey has a long history of secularisation, which may in some way show in Finnish-Turkish marriages as well.

The author herself is aware that the Muslim men are greatly underrepresented in the narrative voice that she seeks to analyse through the means of discourse analysis. It is to her credit that she does not try to gloss over this fact. It should of course be asked whether this could have been avoided by a better research design. Could it have been possible to use a male research assistant, or, even better, someone who speaks the native languages of the men in question? The setting was skewed from the start, and therefore, it resulted in a lack of male narration. What ensues is a rather unsettling image of Finnish wives, who, on the one hand, love and accept, while, on the other, simultaneously treat and perceive their husbands as the Muslim Other.

To answer the research question, the author discusses several areas of intercultural life in a marriage in four chapters. The first of the chapters is dedicated to the husband-wife relationship and the changes in it and in the individuals over time. The second chapter deals with everyday life, including ideas about home-making, gender roles, food, holidays, daily life and clothing. The third chapter takes into focus the varying ideas of family, extended family, patriarchy and the raising of children. On and off throughout the dissertation,

Kaisa Nissi discusses the stereotype of patriarchal power, which is typically connected to Middle-Eastern families and social structures. How this plays out in a Nordic society and how the Finnish wives see things, and especially narrate their position within the family, is rather interesting and one of the gems of this dissertation. The fourth chapter, which I might call the “man” chapter, discusses integration, working life, money issues, ethnicity and residence permit issues. In particular, it highlights the difficulty of entering Finnish working life and the dead end an individual can find himself in after being labelled a “Turkish pizza man” (p. 271 ff) – despite having a higher education – in connection with a cultural background where the man is supposed to be the sole bread winner. This, in addition to being incredibly discouraging on an individual level, is a huge burning issue in Finnish immigration policy. All the interviewed men expressed a desire to live by their own means and support their families and were suspicious of “free money” from the government. It was obvious that they were afraid of and wanted to avoid the “lazy immigrant” stereotype.

One of the main findings of the dissertation is that the Finnish women both love and doubt their love because these marriages are performed under the influence of public discourse and its prejudices and stereotypical representations of the Other. The Finnish-Muslim couples have to justify their existence to outsiders, unlike mainstream couples. The internet discussion forums and their definitions can seep into the everyday lives and daily experience of Finnish-Muslim homes.

In conclusion, Kaisa Nissi has written an interesting analysis of contemporary bicultural marriages, which, in addition to the obstacles common to all marriages everywhere, face the scrutiny of outsiders with fixed stereotypical prejudices about first-generation immigrant Muslim men. This spins the everyday experience of the individuals involved into a more reflexive position, which in turn makes them both love and yet doubt their love for one another. What I would like to see next is a research project that gives equal voice to the men themselves as subjects. In addition, I think the academic community should to a much larger degree popularise the body of knowledge on intercultural marriages. Doing so would make a difference in the lives of the people in question.

AUTHOR

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