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Author

Fungisai GA Gcumeni

Affiliation

North-West University,
South Africa

Email

fmaisva@gmail.com

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Abstract

This contribution reviews the book by Mehdi R *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe: Experiences of Migrant Single Mothers in Denmark* (2024). The book explores the varied and intricate encounters of Pakistani migrant women as they navigate European multicultural societies whose normativity is founded on individualism against their traditional collectivist relational approach to family. The study critically analyses the gender notions that single-migrant mothers and women face in a world of competing social and economic theories, namely neoliberalism and neo-conservatism at different generational epochs of migration. Drawing on multiple theoretical and complementary perspectives, it provides deep insights into to lived realities of single migrant women.

Keywords

Gender; diversity; Danish Pakistani migrant women; individualism; relational collectivism; melange; familism; legalism.

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Review

Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe: Experiences of Migrant Single Mothers in Denmark by Rubya Mehdi is an academic and enriching analysis on socio-legal dynamics and evolving multi-ethnic European societies through a gendered migrant lens tapered down to relationships through the family structure and family law. The book relies on secondary data in reiterating the general experiences of the life of single Danish-Pakistani women within the family unit. Qualitative review through interviews was conducted as part of a comparative study of cultures to provide the source for describing the complexity of family life as divorcees, widows and never-married migrant women. The study begins from the pre-migration backgrounds into their adulthood experiences. In the adaptation of the family structures from their traditional collective history to the new individualist socio-economic structure, Mehdi expounds by describing the interplay between individualism and collectivism family types and their points of converging as a process she terms as melange. Mehdi devised melange as an interactive process that emerged between two distinct family types of individualism and relational collectivism by observing Danish-Pakistani single women illustrated through an analysis of their experiences.¹

To Mehdi, embedded within the melange process are the different modes employed by single women migrants in adjusting to the contradictory values of collectivism and individualism.² Her explicit engagement with the *Melange* process amplifies the psychological, and sociological aspects of migrants from traditionally familiar connections and religion and customs that have strong influences on social norms and behaviours in societies where individual regulate their daily lives. Mehdi argues that melange is a process of negotiated empowerment of women without letting go fully of relational collectivism or its norms. Mehdi articulates the transformation of the new family structures of the migrant single mothers and women by using an analytical tool she terms melange familism to explain new family types that incorporate relational-collectivist and individualist elements. Mehdi creatively devises a term melange familism and employs it as a conceptual tool denoting the way Danish-Pakistan women blend the competing

* Fungisai GA Gcumeni. LLB (Rhodes) LLM (SU) LLD (UFS). Post Doctoral Research Fellow, Faculty of Law, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa. Email: fmaisva@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9996-5106>.

¹ Relational collectivism defined as understanding of self as connected and interdependent and individualism as connoting values of independence personal interest and achievements.

Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 74.

² Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 2, 75.

normative values of individualism and relational collectivism to reconcile their differing theoretical perspectives for adjustment and adaptation for survival.³ The involvement of Mehdi with single migrant women is significant in highlighting the resilience and adaptability of women to challenges, settling in an individualised society and infusing the 'melange effect' in multicultural societies.⁴ The end result has been single women migrants becoming trend settlers for a melange base that future generations can expand on.⁵

Mehdi's articulation of melange familism is a variation of traditional family settings and her engagement with the concept enables one to comprehend how two different values systems affect and how Danish Pakistani mothers and single women cope with their life trajectories.⁶ She argues that migration from traditional and collectivist beginnings into Western individualism family structures shaped the family settings leading to melange familism within Danish Pakistani communities. Migration brings new values, new senses of meaning, and thus new identities.⁷ It initiated the emergence of new family structures that Mehdi regards as melange family.

A part of melange familism entails negotiating new boundaries, the context of the law, cultures identities and religion. Mélange familism is about internalising new norms and pushing and pulling leads to recognising new social relationships and boundaries of control.⁸ This new socio-legal frontier is attainable through dialogue and practical solutions that facilitate combinations. As a result of this pragmatism, an amalgamation known as melange legalism develops in response to new situations.⁹ This melange dynamic results in some practices meaningful under different normative structures like that of Danish-Pakistan women, to lose meaning in the context of new realities whereby their mark is left in rituals.¹⁰

However, the first part of this chapters and the later empirical chapters show how women resist oppression under relational collectivism; this resistance proceeds both on both the personal level and, through women's movements, on the collective level. As articulated by Majumdar, Mehdi's argument is that women are locked in a patriarchal system where they

³ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 1-2, 75.

⁴ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity* 3-4; 74-75.

⁵ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 3.

⁶ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity* 75, 64-66.

⁷ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 67.

⁸ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 117.

⁹ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 155.

¹⁰ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 176.

maximise their short-term priorities at the cost of undermining their long-term material interests.¹¹ Moreover, under the influence of tradition and its conflicts with postmodern concepts of the family, contradictory ideals of personhood evolved. Mehdi drawing from the secondary data and from Watson-Roberts and Pratt study on immigrant families in Europe draws attention to the mobile and contradictory modernities that families have faced in their migration settlement and subsequent transnational activities (defined as social contracts and cultural ties to the land other than where a person is residing).¹² This adaptation mechanism by migrant women according to Mehdi draws us to a modern meritocracy interlinked with strengthening positive traditional familial interdependencies and modern values of individual enterprises.¹³ In Chapter 4 Mehdi compares family-related issues of melange familism to illuminate similarities in family dynamics found in all societies with the intention of bridging the gap between minority and majority differences. It demystifies certain peculiarities and perceptions that are often imputed on certain groupings in society, particularly the marginalised. It provides a human face underscoring that in certain instances and circumstances challenges are similar despite cultural political and socio-economic backgrounds.

Chapter 5 recounts the divorces experiences and the reflections of migrant women on marriage, representing a variety of lifestyles and socio-economic positions. The peculiarity of the chapter is in the way it shows the influence of the political and socio-economic movements of the 1970s in Denmark and globally, coinciding with the migration of Pakistani women to Denmark, shaping these migrating family structures. This period in Danish culture saw a rise in divorce culture and, in turn, melange familism caused divorce culture to develop differently for migrant families in Denmark.¹⁴ It signifies the dynamism of culture and belief systems and the interconnectedness of global structural influences in the shaping of interactions and new formulations of families in migrant women.

The book is apt for the enhancement of the legal pluralism literature in that, where legal systems are not necessarily in conflict with one another, Mehdi argues for the adoption of fractal legal pluralism as an approach to the incommensurable positions that migration imposes on the two normative systems of the legal plurality.¹⁵ Mehdi believes that fractal legal plural theory

¹¹ Majumdar 2002 *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20.

¹² Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 96, 110; Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005 *Gender, Place and Culture* 183.

¹³ Walton-Roberts and Pratt 2005 *Gender Place and Culture* 183.

¹⁴ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 203.

¹⁵ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 182.

is a response to better understand larger forms of diversity as it displays sufficient structural similarities to allow some understanding despite some irregularities.¹⁶ As a theory for consideration in plural legal societies, it allows traction towards incommensurable positions in the formal / informal in addressing similarities and diversities more positively, through dialogue without losing of legal identity. Moreso in the realm of family law Mehdi argues that at micro-level engaging with fractal legal pluralism develops inter-legal jurisprudence which hinges on inclusivism shunning exclusiveness.¹⁷ As a theory, Mehdi regards its ability to describe the self-replication patterns and the complexities that arise at different scales in natural systems. She further regards it as allowing one to gaze into comparative aspects of norms their dynamics, revealing the varied ways of viewing reality and perspectives which Mehdi perceives as valid and meaningful in its own way.¹⁸

The relevance and significance of the book on legal pluralism challenges is through its emphasis on possible solutions to notions of gender in diversity cultural settings. Mehdi proposes a plausible approach through building inter-religious and feminist jurisprudence, incorporating comparative law emphasising empirical work, interpretations, proceduralist, and discursive approaches in diversifying family matters.¹⁹ This approach according to Mehdi harmonises the process of melange in the legal sphere of family matters, enabling space for evaluating requisite legal systems and contributing towards understanding of foreign systems of law. In the case of inter-legal feminist jurisprudence considerations, however, Mehdi cautions states law not to slip out of context, hence engaging with empirical work becomes critical in revealing the lived realities on the ground. Adjustments must be accommodated through hermeneutic interpretations in enhancing inter-legal jurisprudence.

Mehdi's book is an excellent read for assessing the implications of single mothers as heads of households. Her work is relevant in that, while there have been extensive debates related to managing the diversity of experiences of migrants settling in new societies, there have, however, been limited empirical studies on the intersectionality of single-mother family constructions, in collective and individual frameworks.²⁰ In that regard, the book premises Danish Pakistani single mothers as models of

¹⁶ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 181.

¹⁷ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 181.

¹⁸ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 181.

¹⁹ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 181.

²⁰ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 4.

independence, satisfaction, and strength, which are characteristics related to women's independence. With social autonomy transcending traditional gender stereotypes that society attaches to single migrant women, they make new traditions in the light of their past experiences. These new traditions are crafted in interactions with memories of their home countries, in the context of their present life challenges in a new country, and sometimes regarding purely idiosyncratic elements at the household level.²¹ The Mehdi work amplifies the implications of migration on family adaptations exhibiting the transformations on migrant women to new socio-economic and legal realities.

The major significance and relevance of Mehdi's scholarship to gender and family studies is in the way it penetrates the veil of biases and stereotypes of the social, legal, and economic status and abilities of Muslim women to confront the challenges of traditional collectivist cultures as they interact with Western cultures and values. It has implications on the nature of legal pluralism societies amplifying the integratory possibilities on gender interactions, family compositions in both social and legal spheres. By elucidating the development of single-headed households in Europe through a Danish Pakistan women migrants' perspective, her work is precedence on gender and diversity matters in Europe considering the last decades wave of immigration resulting from the Middle East civil conflicts.

The empirical evidence from this book shows the resilience and tenacity within migrant mothers and women to foster new frontiers of possibilities despite cultural religious connotations of situating Muslim women as passive, submissive, inert in power to resolve complexities they encounter socially, economically and legally. Mehdi manages through her analytical framework to position Danish Pakistani women as possessing agency and independence revealed through rebuilding and restructuring of their family structures using their own melange processes to keep the new family structure adaptations viable. The book insightfully challenges the reader to engage and regard melange familism as a useful addition to commonly presented family categories.²²

The book further amplifies the commonalities of relational collective communities found in Asia (Pakistan) as those in Africa especially its ideology toward family interactions, expectations, and structures. As a comparative socio-legal study of two cultural ideologies, she provides a well-contrasting view of the traditional relational collective societies and the

²¹ Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 4.

²² Mehdi *Understanding Gender and Diversity in Europe* 75.

Western Europe individualism in magnifying the melange processes that have occurred over decades on Danish Pakistan migrant single-women family structures.

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