In 2008, a huge controversy broke out in Britain when some of the most influential authorities in religion and law, the then Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, argued that accommodation of certain aspects of shari'a law into the legal system “seems unavoidable” and that there is “no reason why” shari'a principles could not be the basis for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Indeed, the current “war on terror” and the fear of Muslim extremism in Western European states have not only complicated the role of Islam and what it means to be a Muslim living in the West, it has also transformed the relationship between Muslim institutions and the state. Bano successfully addresses several of these interrelated issues in this highly topical book by posing two main questions. First, how do shari'a councils in Britain operate in practice as informal ADR mechanisms in the area of family law? And second, what are the lived experiences of British Muslim women as primary users of these “privatised” spaces in their struggle to obtain a religious divorce certificate?

Muslim Women and Shari'ah Councils: Transcending the Boundaries of Community and Law consists of nine chapters divided into two parts: part I includes three chapters on the background and context of Bano’s empirical research, while part II includes six chapters on shari'a councils and women’s experiences of marriage and divorce. Chapters 1 and 2 illustrate very well the complex relations between Muslims and the British state, and their position in British society, by drawing upon ongoing debates on multiculturalism, secularism, citizenship, gender equality, community rights and identity. At the heart of these debates lies the claim for greater legal autonomy, which entails the accommodation of cultural and religious pluralism in matters of family law. Interestingly, this claim is also strengthened by the emergence of a “renewed” Muslim identity within South Asian Muslim communities, which must be understood as dynamic, fluid and contested, especially relating to women and the laws of marriage and divorce (p. 5).

The central research methodology adopted in this study is discussed in Chapter 3. Bano explains that interviewing Pakistani Muslim women and gaining access to shari'a councils to conduct research proved not only to be challenging, lengthy and problematic, but was also considered to be “sensitive” (p. 58). The fact that women are seen as carriers of “collective honour”, in addition to issues concerning marriage and divorce exclusively belonging to the
private spheres of family, home and local community, raises a specific set of ethical and methodological challenges for the socio-legal researcher (p. 61).

Chapter 4 delves into the emergence, development and legitimacy of *shari'a* councils on British territory. We learn that the history of *shari'a* councils can be traced back to the 1970s when most councils were part of local mosques and community centres, where imams recruited from abroad provided spiritual and religious guidance, including settling marital disputes (p. 91). Over time, Muslims in Britain have increasingly combined the legal and cultural practices of Islamic and English law to form an unofficial “Angrezi *Shari'a*”. Hence, they often marry, divorce and do many other things twice in order to comply also with the demands of the state and its laws.

Although this practice is in itself no cause for concern, Muslim women however, may face the problem of “limping divorces” whereby a civil divorce has been obtained by the wife, but the husband is refusing to grant her a religious divorce (p. 93). Similar complications emerge if the marriage for whatever reason has not been registered according to the formalities of English law, i.e. the marriage is legally invalid. Under Islamic law men have an absolute right to unilaterally terminate their marriage through *talaq*. Although women can get a divorce without the consent of their husbands, they need the intervention of a *shari'a* court or religious scholar to determine the type of divorce to be issued (*khul*, *tafriq* or *faskh*) and whether they must give up their right to dower (*mahr*). In order not to be viewed as adulterous in the eyes of the community, some Muslim women may feel compelled to remain unmarried. For that reason, a female applicant can contact a *shari'a* council if she desires to relieve herself from this hardship and start a new family.

Chapter 5 draws upon empirical data to provide a more detailed account of the practice of “law-making”, and the ways in which mediation and reconciliation take shape across four *shari'a* councils: three in London and one in Birmingham. As the concept of dispute resolution is grounded in the primary sources of Islamic law, it is considered a duty upon all Muslims to resolve their disputes amicably (p. 103). This religious commitment gives form to the internal strategies, procedures and practices of *shari'a* councils. Bano rightly questions the extent to which Muslim women may be “coerced” to choose community-based mediation and reconciliation over formal adjudication (p. 105). Hence, an important part of this chapter focuses on the analysis of how gender relations are constituted in this process of informal ADR and whether this generates greater levels of disadvantage and inequality for women.

The personal views of British Muslim women regarding the practice of “arranged”, “own-choice” and “forced” marriages are the focus of Chapter 6. It considers that for the majority of women, marriage remains “a process of