Media and pop-culture representations of Muslims are vital to the process of crafting Muslim identities and shaping public opinion. It is this theme, this notion of how we regard Muslims through popular representations of them that poet and scholar Gabeba Baderoon takes up in *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-Apartheid*. Baderoon’s central argument is that the depiction of Muslims, whether extreme or seemingly mundane, has necessary political and social consequences. Particularly in South Africa, Muslims ‘have played both a mediating and a translating role in the country from the colonial to the present’ (160), which has located Muslims in a particular place in South African society. Reflection on the South African case, she intimates, can in turn help other societies consider their ideological gaze of Muslims and how this is central to the process of meaning making and societal construction.

The book covers a wide range of topics, interweaving an Ariadne’s thread of Muslim representations through the painful epochs of South Africa’s past—slavery, colonialism and apartheid—all of which remain relevant. Baderoon’s focus on slavery is paramount since she argues that ‘slavery and Islam are intricately connected’ (7). Thus for a sizable portion of the book she focuses on how ‘Cape Malays’—a common epithet for the country’s Muslim population—were objectified and left in an ambiguous racial state, which was only exacerbated under apartheid as Muslims were codified as ‘Coloured’. She contends that this objectified status, put in place to undergird white racial subjectivity, continues to shape popular perceptions of Muslims. To prove her point, Baderoon interrogates ‘visual representations of Muslims in popular and literary fiction, travel writing, cookbooks, folktales, media and paintings’ (23).

Chapter 1 homes in on the colonial utilization of the word ‘kaffir’, a term with Islamic roots that was turned on both Muslims and indigenous peoples to cast dispersions on both and craft a colonial view that would linger for centuries. Baderoon also creatively cross-examines picturesque portrayals of ‘Malay’ slave figures, illustrating just how marginalizing and malevolent these scenic portrayals proved as they propped up colonial slavery as innocent and even scenic. Chapter 2 extends this argumentation about the potentially anomalous meanings of Muslim images as she examines representations of Muslims in the kitchen and how national cuisine bears a subtext of political disenfranchisement. The third chapter, “The Sea Inside Us”; highlights how through poetry and pilgrimage narratives Muslims have reclaimed the Indian Ocean as ‘a new
and sacred geography’ (73) in juxtaposition to its traumatic role in the traverse of slavery. The book moves back and forth between South Africa’s painful past and its improbable present, but in chapter 4 Baderoon bridges the era of slavery with the contemporary scene by investigating ‘innovative visual and literary texts’ (poetry, live performance) to see how the heritage of slavery persists in ‘contemporary concepts of sexuality and gender’ (25). While not leaving out the role of Muslims during the apartheid era, she leaves this significant story to be told, as it has been, by others (Esack 1996; Vahed 2012) and instead concludes with two chapters on the place and potency of Muslims in postapartheid South Africa. In chapter 5 Baderoon analyzes the portrayal of Muslims as extremists in newspapers and on television during the 1996 Pagad crisis in Cape Town. In discussing this significant chapter in postapartheid South African history, she masterfully deconstructs the portrait of violent, bearded, brown-skinned terrorists with AK-47s in tow and illustrates how this period broadened the stage for an alienation of Muslims via skewed representation across society. The book closes by exploring contemporary South African poetry, literature, and memoirs to paint a nuanced picture of Muslims who are re-imagining their place in society in light of the community’s historical heritage and their own feminist critiques, nationalist sentiments, and political activism.

The work is praiseworthy for its vivid and textured writing and evaluation of sources, beautifully migrating between forms of representation and a style that is both intellectually stimulating and affectively gratifying. Baderoon is grounded in postmodern, materialist, and feminist analyses, and wields her elegiac talent to bring life to her examinations of sources along these lines. Still, the work is not without weaknesses. While attempting to balance her scholarly analysis with creative reflection, Baderoon sometimes ventures too far in the latter direction, potentially losing readers. Even so, Baderoon is a poet and literary critic, and her meanderings critiquing the literary force of material artifacts, beyond being expected, are by no means unrefined or without value. Those looking for comprehensive coverage of Muslims in South Africa will not find it here. Although she details the historical context of ‘Cape Malays’ and the slavery era, Baderoon does not provide similar frames of reference for later periods. She instead offers snapshots of how the complex and multifaceted Muslim communities of South Africa have shaped society throughout that country’s history from the very beginning—something that South African interlocutors commenting on Islam or Muslims will benefit from. In the end, Baderoon, through her profound poetic touch, is able to paint a picture of Muslims as more than dark beings of exoticism, malevolence, marginality, and terror—tropes still evident in popular conceptions and media