

**Kanaaneh, Rhoda. 2023. *The Right Kind of Suffering: Gender, Sexuality, and Arab Asylum Seekers in America*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 216 pp. Pb.: \$29.95. ISBN: 9781477326381.**

Book review by

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In *The Right Kind of Suffering*, Rhoda Kanaaneh humanizes a diverse group of Arab migrants in the United States by ethnographically recounting their experiences navigating the US asylum system.

Based on a decade of fieldwork from 2012 to 2021, during which the author interpreted for more than 40 asylum applicants, Kanaaneh chronicles the stories of four people who come from Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon and share matters of gender and sexuality as the bases for their asylum claims. The author presents the migrants' experiences and her ethnographic insights as case studies rather than conducting a systematic analysis or engaging deeply with theory. This is not to say that Kanaaneh lacks a critical gaze, however. On the contrary, she uses incisive prose to not only depict her subjects' humanity with great sincerity but also expose how the smallest facets of bureaucracy affect the migrants' pursuits of dignified lives.

The result is a text that is widely accessible to non-specialist audiences who seek to engage in discussions about the human effects of borders, policies, and legal statuses; contemporary Arab American experiences; and intersections of race, gender, and sexuality of people in diaspora. "I see the accounts of such struggles in this book," she states in the introduction, "as an antidote to the dangerous stereotypes that fuel immigration politics" (p. 4).

Most importantly, in each of the following chapters, Kanaaneh clearly guides readers through interrogations of the daily challenges and injustices that individuals face throughout the asylum process, which ultimately contribute to re-traumatization. These range from the most mundane and predictable, such as seemingly endless delays of

court hearings and lack of multilingual officials, to lawyers' intense preparation of asylum seekers for court, where each aspect of the applicants' life stories and the ways they tell them will be aggressively probed.

Kanaaneh's ability to guide the reader in this way makes the book essential reading for anyone who works in law, policy, or social services, or refugees in any context, a claim she implicitly supports in the first chapter when she recounts, "An immigration lawyer who read a draft of this chapter noted that attorneys get caught up in deadlines, documents, and legal arguments and do not focus on how their clients experience the asylum preparation... As a result, [attorneys] often 'feel that trauma is unfortunately an unavoidable part of the process, and that sometimes [attorneys] might even further contribute to it despite all good intentions, as [their] role is so goal-oriented'" (p. 17).

Each of the four chapters is a case study with diverse interactions of national origin, age, education, race, religion, gender, and sexuality. They serve as both portraits of complex people and nuanced landscapes of each individual's social and legal trajectory over the course of their many-year relationships with Kanaaneh.

The author first tells the story of Suad, a young, educated, middle-class woman from Sudan whose lawyers based her asylum case on FGM, or female genital mutilation. Through this example, Kanaaneh displays the state's inspection of Suad's body through repeated medical and discursive examinations while she also challenges widespread racist and sexist depictions of FGM.

In the second chapter, Kanaaneh details the experiences of Fatima, a woman from Egypt who has mental health issues, speaks little English, and is not fully literate even in Arabic, her first language. Here, the author exhibits how Fatima's persistent attempts to receive social services from various institutions that lack multilingual support amount to "bureaucratic torture" (p. 63).

Kanaaneh takes up the story of Fadi, a middle-class gay man from Jordan living in California, in the third chapter. Through Fadi's experiences, the author shows how essentialist policies force asylum seekers and their attorneys to make harmful simplifications of complex experiences in queer life.

The final chapter depicts Kanaaneh's time working with Marwa, a Muslim woman and queer activist from Lebanon who eventually became a mother and lawyer in the US. Through Marwa's multifaceted identity, Kanaaneh again pushes back against monolithic understandings of various identities and cultures. In concluding the text, the author emphasizes not only the challenge for each of her subjects to perform authentic refugee

identities in the eyes of the court but also the impact that the support of friends, companions, and community can have in the realization of people's migration trajectories.

Overall, the depth of Kanaaneh's reflexivity is a highlight throughout the book. For example, she acknowledges the relative privilege of the applicants about whom she writes (they first entered the US on tourist visas, eventually secured lawyers, and all received asylum) in comparison to most asylum seekers who have no legal status and often have no choice but to represent themselves in court to stave off imminent deportation. Moreover, Kanaaneh engages with her own positionality as she reflects on her day-to-day accompaniment of migrants through each step of the asylum process. Examples include her thoughtful reflections on the challenges associated with occupying simultaneous roles of researcher, lay interpreter, and advocate; the difficulty of drawing boundaries between her private life and the applicants' ongoing needs; her complicity in retraumatization as a participant in a process that is harmful by design; and the bureaucratic neglect that her presence as an educated, Arabic-English bilingual US citizen allowed the applicants to avoid.

This last example presents a limitation of the text. As an interpreter and anthropologist, Kanaaneh clearly exhibits great metalinguistic awareness, yet she and future work could give closer attention to language as it functions interactionally to create, sustain, or transform power hierarchies in legal contexts. Despite this, Kanaaneh's capacity to demonstrate connections between small moments and broad ideologies not only makes her perspective on the functioning of the US asylum system vital but also provides strong evidence that critical ethnographic engagement with such high-stakes intercultural exchanges is fundamental to the observation of migrants' human rights.