

Breaking the Stereotypes: Representation of Muslim Women by Muslim Women Writers in Post-9/11 Fiction

Bilal Ahmad Kuthoo

Research Scholar (English), Jiwaji University, Gwalior

ABSTRACT

Muslim women have been stereotyped as subordinate and submissive, suppressed and victims silenced in veil and denied the expression of her feelings and emotions. The literature written about Muslim woman has denied existence of her independent Self. Muslim women have been defined as nothing more than an invisible entity that has a single homogenous color of black veil. These stereotypes about Muslim women intensified after the recent times especially 9/11 terrorist attacks. At the same time, Muslim women writers emerged with an alternative narrative which bestows Muslim women a chance to speak for themselves. Writers like Randa Abdel-Fattah and Mohja Kahf have created this alternative narrative, giving Muslim women central role and a voice to speak for themselves, their novels like *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by former and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by later have achieved this endeavor in post-9/11 scenario. This paper aims at analyzing these two novels, and demonstrates that the authors have done an eminent contribution to the representationally marginal group i.e. Muslim women. The authors attempt to highlight the independent Self of Muslim women; their emotions and social perceptions.

Key Words: subordinate, Muslim women, veil, stereotype, 9/11.

1. INTRODUCTION

Looking at the representation of the Muslim women through the history of their representation which started with the European travelers to Arab, Middle East and Asian countries, Muslim women has been portrayed as exotic, sexual, appealing along with the image of suppressed and subordinate to Muslim men. The stereotypical image of the Muslim women as emerged in the colonial writings was highly sexual harem girl. The fantasy about Muslim women that existed during the colonial era can be much easily and much bitterly understood by looking through the nineteenth century French Orientalist paintings. Many of these paintings have portrayed a scene in Turkish bath in which a male patriarch is surrounded with many naked women of ultimate seductive beauty. As the scene highlights the feminine beauty for sexual exploitation, male lust has been depicted feasting on this group of women with giving them any womanly respect.

The image or the portrayal of Muslim women from eighteenth to twentieth century has been a homogenous single colored on the canvas of the Othing. Being derided of all the womanly qualities Muslim women was dangerously made silent, in literary writings at least. The colonial and later writings which have represented Muslim societies in Arab, Middle Eastern or Central Asian countries depicted Muslim women as confined in

home and hijab, suppressed and subordinated by tyrannical Muslim patriarchy. Colonial writings such as Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* claimed that all the contemporary social backwardness, weak rational and strong superstition, laziness and loathness, camel rearing and child bearing all is sanctioned by Islam. Twain failed to understand the cultural distinctness of Middle East. He did not acknowledge the difference between the European culture and Arab culture and woman's place in both the cultures.

The initial image of Muslim women was belly dancer and chantress magic spells. The popular image that is found in the nineteenth and early twentieth century travel books describing Islamic societies and people, Muslim women is either invisible disappeared in the domain of home and patriarchy or exaggeratedly visible in the lustful males gaze as a belly dancer. The 19th century novels like *Cleopatra* by H. Rider Haggard published in 1889, Middle Eastern women are figured out as treacherous evil character. At the beginning of twentieth century lead role of representing Muslim women was taken by Hollywood, the films like *Fatima* and *Fatima Dances*, former produced in last decade of 19th century and later in the first decade of twentieth century. Both the short movies portrayed a woman belly dancer, the image was most offending reducing whole Arab women to mere sexual objects.

The changing political condition in Arab and other Muslim countries had an impact on the stereotypical image of Muslim women in literature and media contents. Thomas Harris published a novel named *Black Sunday* in 1975. It had its central character a Muslim woman of Arab origin who is a dreaded terrorist. Dahlia Iyad plots to carry out a terrorist attack on the Super Bowl in New Orleans, USA, and kill more than 80,000 American citizens along with the President. This image of Muslim woman was completely new, the transformation had happened from the belly dancer to the terrorist. The real image of Muslim women did not surface throughout the literary representation of them, Muslim women remain far from being an ordinary woman with family responsibility and social duties. Their emotional side has been completely ignored and she has been immortalized in an exotic sexual woman.

Recent Muslim women writers has bestowed a voice to this voiceless creature, Randa Abdel-Fattah and Mohja Kahf in their novels have tried to break the subordinate and submissive stereotype of Muslim women. They have highlighted the emotional side of Muslim women and their decision making capacity under a strong social pressure. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, both the novels judiciously portray the decision of Muslim girls to wear head covering under strong social and political pressure in the post-9/11 era when any Muslim identification in appearance seem to pose a threat. For a girl, looking too evidently a Muslim in a predominantly European society is seen as a Muslim aggression, Islamic culture penetrating Judeo-Christian culture. But both the authors have given a voice to these two Muslim girl protagonists and conveyed in a forceful language their views about their identity.

Does My Head Look Big in This?

Does My Head Look Big in This? is the first novel by Randa Abdel-Fattah, which was published in 2005 and is set in Melbourne, Australia. It is the story of a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl Amal Mohammad Nasrullah Abdel Hakim. Amal decides to wear hijab, a religious veil, full time. Her decision instigates different reactions from her family, friends and peers. The reaction that Amal face after adopting the cultural symbol of religion, her veil is criticized as "head towel" by her classmates. Amal's hijab becomes a catalyst to compel the prejudices which

surface thereafter, those hitherto had remained hidden. The reactions to Amal's hijab place her in a very difficult situation where her hijab is not appreciated by anyone. She completely stands out in her Melbourne society.

All the writers past or present had treated hijab as a Muslim patriarchal domination, something that is always forced on the muslim women and viel is the simplest way to silence Muslim women, as it was supposed. Abdel-Fattah has given an alternative narrative, Amal herself decides to wear the hijab even her family is too critical to her decision. Amal's decision is not liked by her family which is portrayed by Abdel-Fattah as too liberal that even allows Amal to attend a night party at one boy's house where it is likely that alcohol will be available. However, when she decided to don the hijab her family reacts in an indifferent way and she is not supported. In addition to that she is persuaded by her family to give up the hijab and wear a dress that will not define her religious identity.

She forcefully breaks all the stereotypes, She realizes that wearing a headscarf is a life-changing decision when she finds all those around her react differently. Amal makes a list of people who will support her in her decision to cover up: her mom and dad, her good friends Leila, Yasmeen, Simone and Eileen, her favorite teacher Mr. Pearse, nuns, monks and other religious people, and nudists too, because if they believe in the right to take it all off then surely they believe in the right to keep it all on, she thinks. The story mentions some misconceptions and Sterotypes about Islam and Hijab, presents reaction of other classmates and teacher, and portrays her emotions as a teenage girl being ridiculed by some of her peer.

Amal prepares another list of people who will not be okay with her headscarf and will oppose and ridicule her: most of the girls at her posh prep school, the check-out people at the grocery store, Uncle Joe and Aunt Mandy, the principal at her school, her cranky next door neighbor Mrs. Vaselli, people who will interview her when she applies for a job, and Adam Keane, the cutest boy in her class. The novel illustrates the racism, religious discrimination and prejudice that continues in many parts of the world, including developed and multicultural country like Australia, where she lives. Yet, Amal's figure as a strong woman who never changes her belief and identity as a Muslim gives the reader a sense of her courage and bravery. Nevertheless, Amal is scared just thinking about how people will react, even after her best friends help her shop for new outfits.

Abdel-Fattah said in an interview that "in the context of the first Gulf War I felt very strongly that the saturation of negative images of Muslims in the media, especially Muslim women or Muslims in connection with violence and terrorism, had a direct impact on the way that people perceived or treated me, and that was almost always within a negative discourse" and Muslim woman's headscarf seems to her "a mixture of spiritual sort of enlightenment and identity politics" (irving).

"The stereotype seeks to fix an image of the Other, to freeze it on a particular present-centered moment in time, then the eradication of the historical perspective—personal and cultural—becomes crucial" (Morey and Yaqin 27). Muslim girls have been considered sexually passive, a popular image in literature. However, Amal has a crush on a boy, imagine the first kiss of her life and with these emotions develops a friendship with him. Amal breaks all the stereotypes of being conservative Muslim girl, Muslim girls had never been portrayed as open and liberal in sexual and gender issues. Rather, Muslim girls have always been portrayed as subordinate to Muslim to Muslim men even in sexual matters.

Abdel-Fattah said in an interview:

When I wrote *Does My Head Look Big In This?* and was searching for an agent, I spoke to one agent at length, explaining the basic plot of the novel. After my pitch, she had the audacity to joke: “Is there an honour killing in it?” This was the stock standard narrative space for the Muslim novel and that kind of lazy, dehumanizing genre of writing about Muslim women was what fired me up in the first place to want to write something that challenged such tropes. (Rose)

Fattah’s is the first attempt to bestow voice to Muslim girls and let her express her real feeling, and take her representation beyond the honor killing. Breaking stereotypes and coming out of the stock characters has not proven easy for Muslim women, however, Renda Abdul-Fattah in her novel has made a sincere attempt to dismantle the negative stereotypes.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf

Life happens in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Through the eyes of an earnest and strong-willed girl named Khadra, Kahf provides us with a kaleidoscopic view of growing up Muslim and female in America. Racial and religious prejudice, political developments in the US and in the Middle East, integration and activism, all these issues come together in a carefully constructed crucible, strategically situated in America’s heartland. Mohja Kahf vividly describes the tumultuous life of a Muslim woman in America with all imaginable hardships and shows the possibility of equilibrium attaining with society, God and personal identity on the example of a Syrian immigrant Khadra who comes into cultural clashes with the rest of the American world. The writer gives readers an insight into the experiences of religious and cultural minorities who live in America and have to assimilate with the society where religion takes different forms and is interpreted differently, as it occurred throughout the whole life of the main character of the novel under consideration.

In her late-teens, Khadra starts rebelling and trying to discover her true self, as seen in her “black scarf phase,” during which she learns more about Islam, breaking the stereotype of Muslim woman confined under dark room. As Khadra (the “green one”, in the sense of idealistic and inexperienced) grows older, her idyllic world and its values come gradually under scrutiny and she develops a suspicious attitude toward it all. The important encounter occurs half way through the novel, when she accompanies her family to Mecca for Hajj. On this trip, the American Islam of the Dawah Center comes in contact with “real” Islam, the Islam of Hajj, and of Saudi Arabia more specifically. The idealization of the religion, experienced and sustained by the immigrant in the Diaspora, is violently exposed in this context. She is arrested by the Saudi vice police on her way to the Mosque for dawn prayer. “The Muslim country where Islam started, she had never felt so far from home. There was a nip in the air all of a sudden.”

Wearing hijab for the first time and dealing with the abuse of racist KKK neighbourhood members, Khadra had to face the unmanageable reaction. After marriage when their US visa expires Khadra land in Kuwait, joining the Islamic Studies class at her university, where she’s introduced to Sufism; and then, despite her birth control pills, she falls pregnant. Rather than having the child, she decides that her studies and work are more important to her. Therefore, without any hesitation she gets an abortion.

She goes to Syria to her aunt—who also introduces her to a “different” way of thinking, as she recovers from the stress and trauma of the abortion. She eventually returns to America, where she lives far away from her family and any Muslim community – it’s also where “Khadra found that she enjoyed venting... about her experiences with conservative religion.”

After getting married, Khadra does not want to be seen as only “his wife.” She discovers that she “can’t go on in the marriage without killing off the ‘me’ that I am” (p. 242), she gets an abortion and she and Juma divorce. After her divorce, Khadra hits rock bottom and begins a quest to find herself. She realizes that she has never really questioned herself or who she really is, and in order to find herself she must begin to question. “It was all part of some previous life lived by some other Khadra who accepted things she didn’t really want, who didn’t really know what she wanted and took whatever was foisted on her without examining it” (263). Khadra becomes a new person, like a butterfly that breaks free from its cocoon and flies away to find its own, new journey.

When Khadra is in Saudi Arabia, she finds out that her parents have been lying to her all along about how going to the mosque for women is part of Islam. Zuhura is the first example of a strong, Muslim woman who is not afraid to interact with American culture, and she is somewhat of a role model for Khadra, whom she calls one of her “Little Sisters” (59). Zuhura is not afraid to stand out. She does not fit in among the other residents of Indiana, but that does not prevent her from speaking her mind, such as when she lectures a zoning inspector on how zoning law is often used to keep immigrants out of certain areas. Zuhura’s death is looked at as an honor crime, and the killers are never caught. This is a very confusing situation for Khadra, and results in her clinging to her religious standards even tighter.

In terms of Khadra’s growth as a personality her choice of this or that becomes conscious and motivated, as she is gradually filled with knowledge of Islam and realizes the meaning it has for her personally. Here the emphasis is placed more on spirituality than religion as it is, and the epigraph chosen for the chapter testifies to that and runs as follows: “the presence of the heart with God...has primacy over the ritual acts of worship...” (Kahf 30). In the context of slow changes in times and culture it is not an easy task to manage cultures and faith to maintain mutual respect, but the novel is a huge step in this direction, as it demonstrates the differences that exist among community.

II. CONCLUSION

Does My Head Look Big in This? and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* are portraying a new picture of Muslim women, the novels go beyond the Orientalist themes of representation of Muslim women. This Muslim woman in Post-9/11 era has been created more human-like by authors, rather than mechanical cliché. Amal and Khadra, both Muslim Women take independent decision, have a deep unquenchable thirst for self identity, they face society when it criticizes them. Both the Muslim women are non-conformist in family tradition; Amal’s family is too liberal still she chooses to be religious to ascertain her distinct identity, while Khadra belongs to a religious family but chooses a path which is independent of her family affiliations. Both, Amal and Khadra, are new images Muslim women in post-9/11 era.

WORKS CITED

- [1] Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Pac MacMillan Australia, 2005.
- [2] Irving, Sarah. "Breaking down stereotypes: Randa Abdel-Fattah interviewed." *The Electronic Intifada*, 4th May 2014. Retrieved on 03/06/2018 from: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/breaking-down-stereotypes-randa-abdel-fattah-interviewed/9912>
- [3] Kahf, Mohja. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. PublicAffairs, September 12, 2006.
- [4] Morey, Peter, and Amina Yaqin. *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*. United States: Harvard University Press, June 2011.
- [5] Rose, Jaya Bhattacharji. "A story for young adults in the post 9/11 world." *Livemint*, Sat, Nov 18 2017. Retrieved on 04/06/2018 from: <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/cDjgPXtQnMDyuJNZOuZdSO/A-story-for-young-adults-in-the-post-911-world.html>