

“MUSLIM” WOMEN: REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITINGS

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Abstract

In attempting a survey of the contemporary writings of Muslim women across countries, the question of representation of women and their perceived notions of freedom, remains different in each nation; with invariable distinctions as posited by the difference in culture, politics, economy and social circumstances though undeniably bound by their common religion. Muslim women narratives (framed to encompass works not only by Muslim women but also narratives about Muslim women), from the twenty first century which include a wide variety of autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, fiction etc delving into the life experiences of these women, assist one's comprehension of a 'Muslim woman' and their representation of themselves as opposed to the representations by the 'other'.

KEYWORDS: freedom, identity, Muslim women, representation

INTRODUCTION

The endeavours to define a woman and her state of being have always been conditioned culturally with respect to one's geographical positioning, culture and religion. Mariam Cooke in *Women Claim Islam* views it as such:

The image of Muslim women as passive and oppressed has gained currency because it signifies beyond itself to a general category, such as a faith and a culture. In both cases their look is the same: they are more or less exotic, more or less veiled, more or less available, more or less oppressed. This is the image with which they will always have to contend. (2001)

This contended (or non-contended) image is mostly procured by the oeuvre of contemporary life writings.

LIFE WRITINGS

Quite often defined as a subcategory of autobiography, memoirs have always been associated with the art of reminiscing. Infact, the word memoir derived from *mémoire* defines itself to mean 'a memory' or 'reminiscence'. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, one of the most popular among Iranian women's memoirs published in the year 2003 records the experience of Azar Nafisi as a

professor at the University of Tehran. The narrative travels through a period of two decades of Nafisi's lives which include the reign of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iran-Iraq war, her expulsion from the University for not submitting herself to the compulsory veiling and hence the formation of a book club at her residence and subsequently her resignation and decision to move abroad. Nafisi in her narrative, strikingly presents the lives of seven young women, Nassrin, Manna, Mahshid, Yassi, Azin, Mitra and Sanaz; who share her house every Thursday morning to discuss literature. Nafisi uses reading and writing as resistance against stringent rules imposed on women in Iran. With reference to many classical literatures, Nafisi in particular chooses four canonical Western works namely *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller* and *Pride and Prejudice* intertwining the lives of these women (women in Iran) to the characters in these fictions. The women in the group, assuming they have been socially restricted, can notably be identified to Lolita, the victim of Humbert's physical desires which deprives her of her past individuality and hence forced to shape a different identity. Each woman, having come from different walks of life has different stories to recite. Nafisi's portrayal of these women, interestingly, embarks a society in which women can be jailed for dancing, for running up the stairs, punished for allowing a few strands of hair to be shown, reprimanded for wearing colourful apparels, arrested for biting an apple in public etc. The veil, in this narrative becomes a recurring theme which foreshadows different events and characters in the story. The very beginning of the memoir witnesses the narrator's detailing of how each women looks with and without the veil. As opposed to men, women appeared completely different in private and public space obliged to the Islamic republic they were under. The veil (comprising of black robes and head scarves), in its most obvious generalized statement denotes the repression and curbed freedom of women. Nafisi describes their unveiling in her house as an act of shedding away their mandatory clothes and bursting into colours, indicating their unleashed feminine identity. The dress code imposed on them by the authority takes away their true colour, forming a collective mass of women, concealing one's individuality. She details each woman with a distinction which makes it impossible to identify one with the other except for their common chador. Sanaz, one of the young women in the group, "vacillated between her desire for independence and her need for approval (Nafisi 2003) is jilted by her boyfriend as he did not want a sheltered Muslim girl. Also, her vacation with her friends becomes a disorder when they are arrested for their Western attitudes. The juxtaposition of Nafisi's fantasising of the West through the texts she has chosen with the opposed Western ideals within Iran is discernible here. In observable ways, Nafisi as the narrator represents herself as a source of liberation for these young women.

Surprisingly, Nafisi paints herself as an independent and dauntless woman. She is someone who does not go against her will, rather embraces all her desires and becomes bold enough to confront the Islamic Republic. But as the narrative informs us it is seen that Nafisi sustains a relationship with another man, “my magic man” than her husband and constantly corresponds to him for her decision makings. Does this imply the unavoidable dependency of a woman like Nafisi on men and hence the accepted norms of the society?

The Kabul Beauty School: an American Woman Goes behind the Veil by Deborah Rodriguez is another memoir which narrates the beauty adventures of crazy Debbie from 2002 to 2006. As a venturous hairdresser from Holland, Michigan, having tried her hand in music, religion and work as a prison guard, culminates in her desire to carry on humanitarian projects for the Third World. Belonging to what is termed as the post 9/11 era, it is visible that the book presents before the world an unflinching experience of an American woman who in ways become the Saviour of many Afghan women who come to her beauty school. Having started the beauty school at Kabul, Debbie as described by herself was endowed with the gift of befriending Afghan women. Married to a jealous and abusive preacher and a mother of two, she records her travel experience along with her establishment of a beauty school to assist in professionally training women to earn their livelihoods in post-Taliban Afghanistan. During her years of stay in Kabul, she befriends a large number of Afghani women, provides an abode for abused women, marries Samer Mohammad Abdul Khan and graduates two batches of Afghan woman hairdressers.

Though presenting a Third world nation, it is seen that the memoir is filled with Debbie's endeavours as a beautician in ways which she adorns herself as the sole rescuer of these Afghani women. The accounts of different women are very many within the text, but notwithstanding the fact that the major part of the narrative comprises of her own occupation in a country which proved itself to be hostile to her, initially. Rodriguez presents before her readers a self which is endearing, making her accommodative in a world which ill treats women. The autobiographical elements within the memoir accounts for a closer scrutiny as she claims her hand in helping a bride fake her virginity on her wedding night, saves the beauty school from a governmental takeover, punches a man who fondles with her in the market and ends up marrying a man who she has known only for twenty days though they do not speak the same language and in spite of the fact that he already has a wife and seven children in Saudi Arabia. The narrator's representation of other women in the memoir becomes quite elusive with the understanding that she becomes oblivious to the circumstances she came from. In presenting characters like Nahida,

the rhetoric of liberating women in a Third world country conceals the oppression that women face in the West and hence a reassurance of their own freedom: "When my friends back in Michigan asked what they could do for Afghanistan, I'd have a huge list of things they could do or send. And I'd always ask them to pray for Nahida, that she would survive this marriage" (Rodriguez 2007).

Rodriguez, is in fact abused and mistreated in her homeland by her husband just as Nahida is in Afghanistan. Nahida is scarred by the beatings from her husband and is tormented by his first wife which in ways evokes sympathy in the minds of the readers. Eventually she forces her husband into divorce and begins a beauty school of her own. It is perceptible that these incidents resonate with the events in the narrator's life. The narrative through the words of the narrator suggests the difficulty of being a woman in Afghanistan and she manifests it through characters like Robina and her sisters. Not only does the narrator explicate the hardship of an Afghan girl like Robina in Iran but also the differences that the women had among each other; the other women looking down on Robina and her sisters for having lived alone and dated a Western man. Rodriguez's narrative technique utilizes itself to present before the world another world (Afghanistan) which needs the hands of 'Saviours' like herself. The text exemplifies the good deeds and accomplishments of the narrator more than the voices of the Afghan women.

Qanta Ahmed, a Muslim British physician of Pakistani origins, contributes to the genre of Muslim women's memoirs with a documentation of her visit to Saudi in *In the Land of Invisible Women: A Female Doctor's Journey in the Saudi Kingdom*. Published in the year 2008, the memoir recounts Ahmed's challenges and people she faces during her two year stay at Saudi Arabia while working as a doctor at the National Guard Hospital in Riyadh. Peripherally, the memoir seems to outline the life of Saudis; but only to be contrasted by the lack of clarity of the social scenario which existed in the nation. As a Muslim woman in a Muslim country, Qanta seems to be confused and lost whereby she struggles to realize the true face of a Muslim country. The identity of herself that Qanta creates through the memoir becomes rather concealed with the fact that very little of her life is revealed to the readers. Dealing with issues of patriarchy, veiling and much more there is an inherent contempt with which Qanta views the women of Saudi Arabia. The very beginning of the narration gives an idea of what concerned Qanta during her stay. She witnesses a Bedouin woman on an operation table while her son hovers nearby just to make sure his mother's veil does not slip away. This contrasts to a later comment in which she states that not a single Bedouin objected to her unveiled status. Hence, the position at which the narrator places herself becomes quite uncertain. The narrator's attention to veiling and its

consequences form a great part of the memoir. Her comment on the *abbayah* becomes very polemical at certain instances:

I was discovering what many Saudi women already know: that the only way to enter the public space and participate in public life in the Kingdom was behind the shield of an *abbayah*. In some respects the *abbayah* was a powerful tool of women's liberation from the clerical male misogyny. I would remind of the *abbayah* as a banner for feminism time and again as I encountered extraordinary Saudi women who would work alongside me (Ahmed 2008).

In perspectives similar and dissimilar to Rodriguez, Ahmed also narrates the tales of countless women with whom she has taken the effort to converse and understand. She devotes her chapters to reporting to the readers, her interviews with women of a particular sect, which does not include menial workers or Filipino maids. Rather, she performs a task of representing the issues, especially that of gender discrimination of the Saudi elite. Maha, Ghadah, Zubaidah, Fatima, Reem are few of the women to whom she dedicates her time to. In a fairly comprehensive way, Ahmed illustrates women on the basis of the restrictions imposed on them. All the more, the narrative reveals the preconceived notion of the desperateness of women in Saudi. Reem, according to Ahmed was a paragon of the female Muslim professional but at the same time she never raised her voice, she never displayed her frustrations and thus her refused to attend a conference in Europe because of her father's denial to give consent. Qanta exhibits her anger and retorts:

I couldn't believe a woman so intelligent could be so stupid and weak. Why couldn't she defy her family, like I had been able to? Why were women so spineless? And why were our own mothers so eternally silent? (Ahmed 2008)

Reem's character as presented in the narrative displays a silent resignation to the constrained life. At the same time, a dietitian like Ghadah is supported by her educated husband and it seems cunningly enough on the part of Qanta to enquire of the former's distaste with Riyadh, having arrived from Canada. On the other hand, Ahmed also represents strong, individualistic woman like Fatima, a divorcee who divorces her husband because of his desire of a second marriage but at the same time prefers to be a second wife herself. Zubaidah, another of Ahmed's characters poses self restraint on herself and her ways of life; the text indicates her being an exception to all the Western clothed women at a marriage party.

Interestingly, it was not only women who were curbed; Ahmed points out that “it wasn't only women who were oppressed by the puritanical dictated that determined life in the Kingdom; the autonomy of moderate men was shackled too” (Ahmed 375) in opposition to the myriad examples within the narrative which shows the extravagant exhibition of riches by men. Ahmed presents multiple dichotomies in her narrative. Inspite of the constant moral policing by the Mutaweens, one also witnesses instances of illicit sexual relationships. Ahmed's questionable success in illustrating the social stigmas of Saudi Arabia should be weighed against her obsession with an elite group of women along with Western brands and artefacts and thereby lacking substantial information of the life of an average woman.

Also from the Middle East is the memoir, *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced*. Hailing from a financially backward family in Khardji, Yemen, Nujood reports to the world the happenings centred around her divorce at the age of ten. Though written by Delphine Minoui, the narrative claims its voice to be that of Nujood Ali. As a memoir of the recent past (2011), the text serves to give a detailed account of Yemen, its geography, its culture and the social circumstances; although seemingly unlikely that a young girl of Nujood's upbringing will possess the knowledge to describe herself and her milieu in the style perceived within the narrative. There is a detachment between the known culture of Nujood and the voice she is given in the form of the narration by the co-author.

Born to a family of sixteen children, Nujood was married off at the age of ten to a man thrice her age. Faez Ali Thamer's promise of not touching his bride before her attainment of puberty fails to be kept. As such she becomes a victim of torment and sexual abuse over the early months of her marriage, and flees in search of justice. This little girl's tale becomes unimaginable in the eyes of the Western world. The apparently pretended form of narration through the correspondent lacks in it, a soul which would have otherwise been visible in a narrative of one's own language; despite neglecting the fact that Nujood was neither educated in her own language as well except for her name which she knew how to read and write. In a land where women are not allowed to make choices, Nujood, her sisters, mother and other women are portrayed to be not as victims of the religion but more of as victims of a culture. Nujood's mother-in-law as of a matter of fact complies with the existent patriarchy and permits her son's abuse: “Hit her even harder. She must listen to you- she's your wife” (Ali 2001).

Apparently, Nujood does not resent her religion for the abuse she endures, rather retains her faith in Islam and finds fault with the system. The turn of events in Nujood's life is a result of the Yemeni tribal culture and the notion of male honour. This is most often brought into light by the media as a direct consequence of the religion (Islam) which does not grant equal social status to women. Nujood's act of escape to the courthouse, confrontation with men and her subsequent recital of the sexual abuses become a matter of disbelief, in a culture which does not support women or pay heed to their voice. Proving to be a 'woman' of valour, Nujood as depicted in the narrative becomes an epitome of bravery and triumph; someone who refuses to accept her fate as woman who is beaten and raped by her husband.

The narrative's representation of Nujood is in complete contrast to Shada, one of the best lady lawyers in Yemen'(indirectly implying the presence of other lady lawyers from the same culture and nation to which Nujood belongs to) who fights for women's rights. Throughout the memoir, Shada is bestowed with the honour of 'rescuing' Nujood and winning the latter's divorce. Nujood looks upon Shada with admiration and awe :

I look at her, my eyes wide with admiration. She's beautiful, and so sweet. . .She smells of nice perfume, with the scent of jasmine. As soon as I saw her, I liked her. Unlike the women in my family, she does not cover her face (Ali 2011).

It is contradictory in realising that in a culture which allows for Nujood's ill fate, a woman like Shada exists; educated and well off.

Kamila Shamsie, a Pakistani novelist blends the personal with the political in exploring the disillusionment of the Pakistani elite in *Broken Verses* (2005). Written in the voice of Aasmaani Inqalab (meaning Celestial Revolution), the narrative describes the tragic disappearance of her mother, Samina Akram, an activist fighting for women's rights and her quest for the possibility of reuniting with her. Elements of mystery and romance are mingled, bringing into place the politics of Pakistan over the last three decades of the twentieth century. Narrated with an exuberant style of prose and poetry, Shamsie sets forth a unique tale.

The two main female characters in the novel, Aasmaani and Samina are not portrayed as characteristic of their religion, rather given an individuality as framed by their nation and its political activities intermingled with their personal narratives. Though the culture of Pakistan is entrenched in a predominant patriarchy which believes in the endurance and sacrifice of women, it is seen that Shamsie through her representations in the novel, perpetuates ideals of strong

willed and rebellious women. She breaks the notion of ideal femininity through the central characters and supports the autonomy of women. Aasmaani and her mother, along with Shehnaz Saeed, her mother's friend, are illustrated to break away from patriarchal marginalisation. Not only do they contest the societal norms but also willingly fight against it and seemingly prepared to face the consequences. Portrayed as a very progressive character, Samina is described by her thus:

My mother at twenty seven, carrying me into a prison. My mother at thirty four, rallying women together...My mother at thirty-eight, her body covered in bruises from a policeman's lathi, preparing to go out and lead another demonstration. My mother at forty, still dancing to old Donna Summers records (Shamsie 2005).

During the turbulent times, Samina reigns in her activist spirit, fighting for the rights of women in a country which believed only the liberty of women within the guidelines of Islam. However, Shamsie also portrays Samina as "the Jezebel, the fallen woman who abandoned her husband and child" (201). Samina's love for the Poet within the story reminds one of Nafisi's "magician". Her abandonment of her husband and daughter for a life with her lover, Poet, itself proves her deviation from the earlier mentioned notions of ideal femininity. Aasmaani, in ways similar to her mother is also shown to repudiate:

What guidelines? There are no such guidelines! Maybe that's another reason for coming out of retirement. I don't want to be one of those women the beards approve of, the one who sit at home and cook dinner. (59)

Likewise, the character of Shehnaz Saeed reasserts her feminist self as an actress. Shamsie adds a twist to the story in revealing to the readers the homosexual relationship between Samina and Shehnaz; again proving the expression of a woman's desire and her (a woman's) willingness to give voice to it. Apparently freedom for all the three women was the exercise of free will and expression; with the right to decide the turn of events of their own lives.

The period after 9/11 witnessed a rapid growth of authors writing about Afghanistan, especially in relation to the condition of women. Siba Shakib, an Iranian/ German film-maker narrates the true story of a young Afghan girl in *Samira and Samir* (2005). Giving insight into the lives of women in Afghanistan, Shakib presents the day to day life of a commander's family. Samira, the protagonist of the story is born as the daughter of a brave commander and his wife Daria. In a land where the first born should be a boy, Samira's birth is looked upon with much dismay by her commander father and thus she is brought up as a son; concealing her identity to the world.

With no rightful heir to his inheritance and position in the mountains, the commander finds peace in bringing up his daughter as Samir (instead of Samira). The desire for a son is evident even in the voice of Daria: "I wish instead of being born a girl you had been born dead" (Shakib 2005).

Shakib, in her narrative presents a world similar to that of Sidhwa's in *The Pakistani Bride*; a tribal mountainous area where men rule and women obey. With the commander's death, Samir (Samira) becomes the head of the family and follows her father's steps, riding horses, fighting and shooting. In considering the author's representation, it is striking how Samira is portrayed to be courageous and bold only in the false identity that she procures.

Samira's disguise allows for her to believe in her strength, fight other men and also support her mother. This allows for ones contemplation of whether she would have exercised this freedom if she were brought up in her true identity. Interestingly, it is the identity created which serves as the means for her emancipation; saving herself from danger. The narrative is also suggestive of the fact that other women of the tribe believe in the necessity of man for a woman's survival. It is exemplified by a woman of the community who suggests marriage for Daria after her husband's death: "You must marry. You need a provider, a protector...God does not like to see when a woman is alone and without the protection of a man. It brings disorder (Shakib 2005)".

The education of women is also fraught upon by the society:

People think girls do not need to be able to read and write. They think girls are not as clever as boys. And because girls eventually turn into women, people think there is no point in girls going to school because they cannot use their knowledge later on anyway(Shakib 2005).

Although the narrative records the struggle of women, eventually a need to progress is observed in Daria and Gol-Sar who take initiative in tutoring young girls (implying their reception of education and capability of educating). At the same time, it is noteworthy that Samira's love for Bashir compels her to reveal her identity and take pride in it. The author depicts her as a girl of valour who later even abandons her veil, finding it too restrictive. Nevertheless, it remains that Shakib's rendition of women especially Samira, in the novel becomes quite elusive.

Zoë Ferraris, an American novelist, based on her experiences in Saudi Arabia writes *Finding Nouf* (published in the year 2008), a detective novel which gives an unconventional image of the

nation. As seen earlier, Qanta Ahmed in her memoir, draws to the readers a nation which is enshrined in all its riches, showcasing Muslim women who belong mainly to a particular sect of the society. Jean Sasson on the other hand, traces the life of Muslim royal women. Ferraris, in the concerned narrative, combines the lives of women from all walks of life; indicating the diversity of the 'Muslim women' category. Though Ferraris being the 'other' in the Muslim world, she presents the narrative with much accurate intricacy. Centring around the case of the death of Nouf, a sixteen year old girl who "had run away- to desert, no less- leaving everything behind: a fiancé, a luxurious life, and a large, happy family" (Ferraris 2008), the novel must have been inspired real events occurring in the country. As such, the narrative creates various images of women which render it unbelievable and different from what one expects of a religiously rigid nation as Saudi.

Nouf, the central figure of the novel, whose life comes to be told after her death, is seen to be one that goes against the set standards of Muslim living. Her disappearance three days before her marriage, eventually reveals her dissatisfaction with life and her consequent escape. Nouf's urge to taste life in all its splendour follows an urge for adventure. As a privileged Shrawi woman, she does not confine herself to the riches of her world, but goes in hunt of a life made of amusement. The narrative unveils the bravery and agency of Saudi women who are otherwise stereotyped to be behind their veils, completely ostracised. Nouf chases her dreams and desires and has secretly maintained relationships with men, including her half-brother, Othman.

Ferraris' introduction of each of these male characters and their relationships with Nouf seem to bring about a shock. The so called society which does not allow for the exercise of a woman's free will comes to prove itself quite contradictory in the case of Nouf and the other women in the narrative. Nouf's disappearance was rendered as an act resulting from their exhausted life. Muhammad comments on this: "You may not want to believe me, but let me tell you, she wasn't the only one who wanted to escape. Most of the girls feel that way. They hate it on the island. They are always out shopping or riding their jet-skis (Ferrari 2008)."

One does not witness a cloistered community of women but a group capable of jet skiing, delighting in the lavishness of enormous walk in closets stuffed with clothes and shoes (Ferrari 2008). The purdah, in this narrative does not symbolise curtailment but serves as a means of protection and occasionally allows for their deceptiveness.

The narrative, quite successfully draws on the lives of women with respect to their relationship with men; as is executed cleverly by the mysterious yet unconventional relationship between Nayir al-Sharqi, the Palestinian desert guide and tracker who has been hired by Othman and Katya Hijazi, the medical examiner who is engaged to Othman. In Katya one finds a novelty, a woman who wilfully employs her identity in creating a 'self' that is not burdened by the weight of the men in her life. Nayir finds Katya too forward for his comfort and finds it astonishing that Othman tolerates "that sort of a behaviour" (Ferraris 2008). Katya's job and her forwardness seem to bother Nayir and he poses his doubt of revealing it to Othman.

It is worthwhile noticing Nayir's reference to Katya's boldness being a "problem". Eventually in the course of events, one finds a silent admiration for Katya building up in Nayir. The atmosphere at Katya's home also seems to be different from what one would expect. One sees a father doing menial jobs around the house, which in a way challenges the hitherto mentioned notions of patriarchy. As a well educated woman, Katya exhibits her courage and breaks away from her father's notion that a woman works only in times of desperation. Likewise, Katya wins the respect and acceptance of not only her father but also Nayir, to whom she is subtly drawn to; which later paves a path for her secret confinement in his presence. Something exceptionally noticeable in the narrative is Ferraris' development of Nayir's character through the character of Katya. Katya's boldness to bare her face and work in public, though initially makes Nayir withdraw himself from her, increases his desire to comprehend the hidden world of women. Nayir's words reveal his spirituality; the limitations he wrought to himself in approaching women which was considered to be the cause of impurity. But through Katya, he creates a different 'self', which builds in him a desire for female companionship. Ferraris' narrative depicts a social realm where movement, travel and adventure becomes analogous to freedom.

Many of the Muslim women's fictional works belong to what may be termed as "autobiographical novels" wherein there is a conscious merging of the elements of fiction and the author's personal lives. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove* are three novels which belong to this category. Besides their generic similarity, it is also discovered that these narratives have in common the protagonist's relocation in life; from a Muslim nation to the far West. Diasporic elements within these narratives become an integral part; either directly or indirectly involved in the moulding of a Muslim woman identity.

The third novel of Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, published in the year 2004 tells the story of a Sudanese girl, Najwa who along with her twin brother and mother flee to London after the execution of their father following a coup. Oscillating between the past and the present, the narrative presents the dichotomies of Najwa's life in both the nations. The Sudanese life of Najwa is characterised by all the riches of the world, with more than four servants to her service, a magnificent house in Khartoum and occasional travel across the world. Brought up in a secular family, except for the traditional practises of Ramadan, Najwa becomes oblivion to her religious identity until her struggles in London come to place. London brings in Najwa a sense of belonging which is generated through her religion. It locates her both in space and time and so gains an identity through Islam. The loss of Najwa's mother, accompanied by the long sentence of Omar in jail leaves Najwa finding solace in herself and her created identity. Having started her career as a maid, she finds herself lacking even in a country which bestows on her freedom irrespective of her religion. Najwa reunites with her old lover, Anwar in London and surprisingly comes to the realization that the freedom she enjoys with him only turns out to be an "empty space". Eventually she becomes appalled by Anwar's secularism and leaves him; clinging on to her religion. Aboulela's representation of Muslim women with respect to Najwa tends to be moralistic, constituting of what maybe called a religious exhortation. One does not see a woman who escapes from the chains of religion but one who seeks and eventually finds freedom and liberation within it. Not accustomed to wearing a hijab in her own country, she assimilates such religious practices in London and begins to go to the mosque. Once in a veil, she states: "I was another version of myself, regal like my mother, almost mysterious. Perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain than to offer (Aboulela 2005)".

Is it alienation which forces her to identify herself as a Muslim in a nation which does not demand one to? What one sees here is the juxtaposition of how women tend to break free from their religious rigidities when it is demanded and their adherence to it when in a land which does not demand it. In the character of Lanya, Najwa's employer, as presented by Aboulela, one sees a manifestation of liberty. She goes against her husband's will and pursues her Ph.D., enjoys alcoholic drinks and does not abide by the Muslim faith, as Tamer her brother mentions. Lanya's character becomes a reflection of Najwa's life back in Sudan where freedom for those women was defined by one's agency to savour upon their riches and unlimited independence. At the same time, Aboulela also presents characters like Shahinaz, the friend of Najwa in London who is a strong Muslim woman who relishes in the freedom already granted to her by her husband.

Published in the year 2007, Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove* also depicts the life of a Muslim woman, Salma in Exeter, England. As a Bedouin woman of Levant, she was forced to emigrate after bringing dishonour to her family by having a child out of wedlock. The novel outlines Salma's life in prison, the birth of her child which she is forced to abandon and her escape to England. Away from her Bedouin village, one finds in Salma a deep longing for a sense of belonging in the foreign land. The narrative, in ways similar to that of *Minaret*, alternates between her past and present. Salma, called Sally Asher in England strives to create a new identity seeking to reassess her life. Her efforts of acclimatisation are notable; wherein she learns English from her landlady Liz. Nevertheless she does not leave behind her religious identity which instils in her the need to be "pure and clean" (Faqir 2007). All the same, loneliness and rejection drives Salma to pubs and other public spaces, which were otherwise not acceptable. Salma's desire to forge a new identity is visible in her acts; the first being her change in attire whereby she attempts to emulate the West. Faqir, here, presents a woman who revamps her look by discarding the veil, modernising her wardrobe and adopting a liberated lifestyle which allows for more social and sexual life. Salma, as seen, becomes the complete opposite of Aboulela's Najwa.

Another important work of this genre is Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). Narrating the life of Khadra Shamy, a Syrian migrant settled in Indianapolis, the novel traces her life from childhood right into her thirties with impending issues of religious identity, racial prejudices and the community building in a foreign land. The narrative, in the eyes of Khadra seems to grow along with her, from her childhood, presenting to the reader the timely concerns.

Kahf's portrayal of Khadra might be seen to resonate with her own life. As the daughter of a Dawah worker, Khadra adhered to her religious (Islam) beliefs and believed explicitly in what may be termed as "pure" Islamic. Not witnessing anything other than their own religious practises, there arose a lack of comprehension of other Muslims communities. The new girl in town, Tayiba was looked upon with much amusement:

They had never seen a mod Muslim girl before. She wore platform shoes with holes through the heels, bellbottom jeans, a breezy peasant blouse and large sunglasses that rested atop her hijab-a jaunty little kerchief tied at the side of her head. A hijab with a side tie? (Kahf 2006)

Khadra becomes a symbol of change, someone who witnesses the ambiguity of her religion and consciously changes herself in accordance, coming in terms with her own understanding of her religion. Always kept away from “impurities”, it is notable how Khadra's parents restricted her from sleepovers, listening to music, watching Charlie's Angels etc. There was a strong effort to identify themselves different from the Americans. At the same time, her unpleasant experiences during Hajj make her delve more into her religious identity in a Muslim nation. She does not like her being identified as an American and instead states her pride in being an Arab Muslim. Having been denied access to the mosque in Arabia, she questions her rights as a Muslim woman. The narrator's rendition of Khadra gives the picture of a strong Muslim woman being shaped by her own dilemma. She goes against her husband's demands and fights for her rights as a Muslim woman. Eventually, she is seen to compromise with her beliefs and accept the “flaws” in her religion realising the truth that there is nothing which can be defined as the “true” Islam. Zuhura, Khadra's friend's sister becomes representative of another sect of women who assert their rights along the lines of being a rebel. Khaf poses Zuhura as a dissent. A comment in the narrative which reveals the practises of Zuhura is affirmed as such: “Zuhura was going farther afield than a Muslim girl ought to be, especially when it entailed driving home late at night by herself (Kahf 2006)”.

Khaf through her female characters attempt to expose the vulnerability of Muslim women in their religion and their longing to belong in a nation where they are most often viewed as the “other”. Freedom and independence for these women at length becomes a medium for their survival and sustenance. Khadra's liberation was not constrained to education or free movement but an exercise of her reason and logic to come in terms with a religion which in general notion subdued them.

CONCLUSION

In order to have read all these narratives with their similarities and differences in consideration, it becomes noticeable how there is an existing impossibility of defining the so called category of “Muslim women”. The notion that there exists uniformity in terms of rights of women, their freedom and liberty becomes demolished in the reading of these narratives. The understood category of “Muslim women”, most often is overruled by the political framework one associates with it. Each author, some in their own voice, some in their narrative voice and others through the voices of the characters paint different images of Muslim women. When some come in terms

with their religion, others break away, indicating a juxtaposition of religious identity that one seeks.

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