

Minority Within: 2nd generation Young Adult Muslim Australian in *Ten Things I Hate about Me*

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ABSTRACT

*It is undeniable that in the era of globalisation, the young adults' world is becoming ever fluid and expandable. For the young adult of minority descent, the challenges are made more complex given the contestation with the majority culture of the land. This paper investigates the contestation of marginalization by a Muslim young adult in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Australia as portrayed in Randa Abdel-Fattah's second novel entitled *Ten Things I Hate About Me*. The paper discusses two fundamental identity spaces within the discourse of multiculturalism – private and public, and examines how the social, cultural and religious spaces inhabited by the young adult minority protagonist influence her in the formation of her identity as a member of a minority community in a predominantly white majority society. Pitted as the 'minority within' for the marginalization that the protagonist feels within her immediate family circle, the experience of the young adult minority, as this paper suggests, is ever complex.*

Keywords: young adult fiction; Muslim minority; Randa Abdel-Fattah; Ten Things I Hate about Me; multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION

Young adults are members of society that are “culturally embedded” (Parekh 2000, p. 10) in their own circle while developing a more ‘us-them’ type relation with others including their parents, siblings and society. In the era of globalisation, the young adults’ world is becoming ever fluid and expandable. Risks and dangers that young adults need to face are largely due to the circumstances of great variations in the family structure and the rise of ethnic and cultural diversity in their realm of living (Zhou 1997). For the young adult of minority descent, or the “new second generation” as Min Zhou (1997, p. 64) defines the “children of contemporary immigrants”, the challenges are made more complex given the contestation with the mainstream culture of the land. The journey that the young adult undertakes begins and ends in different ‘spaces’. As Conger (1973, p. 94) explains, the “adolescence begins in biology and ends in culture.” The process of physical growth leads to the formation of characteristics in search of identity. The search becomes ever more provocative when the spaces of identity are contested by different groups of people including parents, peers and society. This paper investigates the contestation of identity by a Muslim young adult in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Australia as portrayed in Randa Abdel-Fattah’s second novel entitled *Ten Things I Hate About Me*.

YOUNG ADULT AND DIVERSITY

The world of the young adult is unique as it signals the transition of a child into maturity and adulthood. It is undeniable that in the era of the borderless world, the question of “Who am I?” that Erik Erikson asked in the 1960s requires more thought as the young adult is now faced with a heightened prospect of threats and perils (Crutcher 1992). The demands from divergent groups including peers, family and society are made more complex due to the circumstances of great variations in the family structure and the rise of ethnic and cultural diversity in the world today. For the young adult minority living in a predominant majority Other, the demands of assimilation and integration into main stream society are as real as those of the adults.

In addition to the physical and physiological changes of puberty, the young adult is also faced with the social and cultural politics of identity that shape their worldview. This facet of their identity affects their cognitive development which leads to the “power of empathy, [...] that allows individuals access to deep patterns of racism, class bias and sexism and the way they structure oppression in everyday life” (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1997, p. 61). It is also in the cognitive developmental stage that the young adult begins to “move from a self-centred, body-centred world to an object-centred world in a process of assimilation” (Rice 1987, p. 182). In a culturally diverse environment like United Kingdom, France and Australia, particularly in a minority-majority binary, the young adult minority is faced with the confounding situation of developing cultural awareness for his/her individual religious and/or ethnic sensibility while assimilating and integrating with the mainstream society. It is between being “an ‘other’ outsider” and “an ‘authentic’ and ‘indigenous’ insider” (Mazawi 2010, p. 187) that the true polemic of the second generation minority lies. Subsequently, religious and culture attachments, especially for young adults of minority descent, may hinder or facilitate their adjustment to the biological transformation that they are experiencing as adolescences, creating either anxiety and confusion or pride and fear of the identity that they inherited. Randa Abdel-Fattah in her young adult fiction creates the space for both anxiety and pride for one’s ethnicity and religion to flourish. The following section discusses her work within the scope of the genre.

RANDA ABDEL-FATTAH AND THE AUSTRALIAN YOUNG ADULT LITERARY SCENE

In fiction, the young adult genre represents narratives that foreground the concerns and conflicts faced by youth between the ages between “twelve and eighteen” (Hinton & Dickinson 2007, p. 2). The central themes in this genre, among others, include contestation of in/dependence and the quest for a personal space in the face of social and public expectations. Alice Trupe’s (2006) *Thematic Guide to Young Adult Literature* presents a thorough discussion of 32 significant themes into the ever growing corpus of young adult fiction. As a literary tradition, the genre thus presents an important avenue for the young adults of the society to find relevant literature that depicts their on-going concerns as growing adults and challenges their mind set about how they fit into the society.

In a country like Australia, the young adult genre carries similar characteristics to other English speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. According to Maureen Nimmon and John Foster (1997, p. 28), “within Australian young adult literature, the adolescent protagonist is searching for the meaning of life and identity that embedded their world and beyond.” The characteristic of Australian young adult

literature, moreover, signifies its “gritty realism” (La Marca 1999, p. 43). This type of realism often invites “edgy situation due to its subject matter such as youth homelessness and street life; dysfunctional parents; and towards juvenile cases like suicidal of youth and domestic violence and homicide.” (ibid.) Hence, as critics suggest, the Australian young adult fiction is characterized by an innovative style where “the themes and issues may not yet be encountered by the North American literature for young adults” (MacMath 1996, p. 232). This is because, as MacMath (1996, p. 232) further argues, young adult literatures in Australia “are keen to involve their personal feelings or their roles in society.” Furthermore, the issues concerned in Australian young adult fiction revolve around

multiculturalism and migrant experiences; searching for identity to be in the contemporary Australia; Australians’ relationship to the natural landscape either physically or psychologically; the historical and present-day experience of Australian Aboriginal people; the class structural and the notion of an egalitarian society that always have been the agenda in Australia and attitudes towards authority (MacMath 1996, p. 232).

The classification of Australian young adult literature compared to other English speaking countries is based on the stories promoted. Within the Australian genre, “the essentiality of the author [is] to express the ideas, values and attitudes of what it means to be Australian in relation to its people, culture and landscape” (Nimon & Foster 1997, p. 187). Moreover, as Maia Pank Mertz and David England (1983, p. 120) elaborate, it is also vital to know “how the author defines the Australian adolescents’ protagonist and audience.” The task then lies in the hands of the authors who need to “write through the teenagers’ own perspectives and interpretations” (Mertz & England 1983, p. 120). Thus, protagonists who are of a certain age may well attract readership of the same category, provided the author has created believable characters showcasing the awareness of how teenagers deal with life and their environment.

Randa Abdel-Fattah is one such writer of the young adult fiction whose writing has attracted wide readership both from within Australia and from other parts of the world. A lawyer by profession, Abdel-Fattah has had six works of fiction to date in the genre of young adult literature published since 2005, two of which deal directly with young adults Muslim minority in Australia. Her second novel, *Ten things I hate about me*, published in 2006, has received numerous international recognition including the Kathleen Mitchell Award for “Excellence in Young Adult Writing in 2008.” The story follows the life of a 14-year old Lebanese Australian who is experiencing a crisis of identity as an adolescent with a religious-cultural heritage that is not part of mainstream society. In the course of the narration, the protagonist lists down ten things that she hates about her life, which includes being “born and raised in Oz but people still assume I was born under a camel in a cave in a desert in the Middle East to parents who belong to a tribe with Osama Bin Laden genealogy” (*Ten Things*, p. 89-90). To cope with the tension of being a Muslim minority and an Australian, she assumes two separate identities – Jamilah, a *hijab*ⁱ clad *madrasa*ⁱⁱ educated, *darabuka*ⁱⁱⁱ player, and Jamie, the blond, blue eyed girl who appears like any Australian girl. The former is who she is known as at home and among family and members of her Lebanese Australian community. The latter is who she assumes when she is at the public school among her Australian friends. The tension is heightened by her father’s structured rules for the young lady and her schoolmates’ stereotypical views about Muslim. The following section presents the methodology which frames the discussion into the young adult’s experience of being a minority caught between the two worlds.

METHODOLOGY: MULTICULTURALISM AND THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DOMAINS

Multiculturalism as stated by critics foregrounds issues of equality and recognition. As Gurpreet Mahajan (2002, p. 15) states: “Multiculturalism speaks of equality of cultures and argues that in a democracy, all cultural communities must be entitled to equal status in the public domain. That is, fair treatment as an equal citizen is a matter of right; it is not – and must not be – dependent upon the largesse or benevolence of the majority community.” Thus the need for equality within a culturally diverse populace, as stated elsewhere (Raihanah M.M. 2012), is rooted in the need for greater recognition by members of the multicultural society, as Stuart Hall (1987, p. 45) reiterates: “Now I perfectly recognize that this recognition of difference, of the impossibility of ‘identity’ in its fully unified meaning, does, of course, transform our sense of what politics is about.”

Within literary works, the issues of multiculturalism are played out by the characters and context of the narrative. The inner conflicts that any protagonist experiences may also involve the contestation between her private space and the public one. The term public-private space, or domain, holds specific parameters within the discourse of multiculturalism. As John Rex (2001, p. 210) elaborates: “Thus multiculturalism in the modern world involves on the one hand the acceptance of a single culture and a single set of individual rights governing the public domain and a variety of folk cultures in the private domestic and communal domains.” The public domain includes the “law, politics and economy” and the boundaries of public domain are “family, morality and religion.” Similarly, Dean A. Harris (1995, p. 112) defines public domain as “the domain of power, of words that count, of encounters among ‘full’ persons whose influence reaches into people’s lives.” On the other hand, private domain is defined as “the insular, the place of emotion and intimacy, bereft of any political or public importance.” Harris (1995, p. 112) also states that, “All dominant cultural ways are appropriate for public spaces. When expressed in public the “other” ones are experienced as out of place. Their place is in the private sphere-only.”

Subsequently, minority communities are mindful of the pressures they face towards gaining greater public recognition for their cultural practice. By looking at the two fundamental identity domains within the discourse of multiculturalism – private and public, we examine how the social, cultural and religious spaces inhabited by the young adult continue to influence her identity formation as a member of a minority Muslim Australian community in a predominantly Caucasian/White Australian majority. In addition, our reading also problematises the experience of the “minority within” to explicate the complexity of identity construction and formation for a young adult Muslim minority struggling to integrate while staying true to her religion and culture. How does a young person find a compromise between two worlds – the Muslim Lebanese and Australia – that at times appear conflicting? How do the pressures she faces in her own family and community, and those she faces in a predominantly all-White school, colour her sensibilities as a young adult? Does she appear to favour her Muslim side or her ‘Australian’ side? These issues will foreground the discussion in the coming sections.

ANALYSIS

2ND GENERATION YOUNG ADULT MINORITY: CREATING A PUBLIC PERSONA

At the start of the novel, the reader is presented with the possible theme of identity politics in the narration when one of Jamilah’s classmates, Ahmed Latif, recalls the beach riot that they were inadvertently involved in:

I was with my cousins and some of my mates. We were walking down the esplanade. We heard a crowd of people chanting. They're chanting out stuff like, *No more Lebs! Wogs Go Home, Ethnic Cleansing*. And there were older people in the crowd too! It wasn't just kids. [...]

I lost my cool. I was shouting at them, calling them racists. This old guy was yelling out that his dad fought in the war and he was a fair-dinkum Aussie and that we should go back to our desert caves. (*Ten Things*, p. 2)

Ahmed's recollection of the riot has mixed reactions among his multi-ethnic classmates. While the other minorities were empathetic, the Caucasian students appeared equally biased. Peter Clarkson, Chris Ross and Sam Richards were among the students in the class who overtly criticise Ahmed for the way he responded to the racists slurs. As Sam crudely remarks: "Oh come on! Even our politicians have singled your kind out as troublemakers. [...] You refuse to integrate. Your women wear that funny headgear and most of you don't speak English" (*Ten Things*, p. 4). Sam's view of his multi-ethnic friends is orientalist. In Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978), he points out the denigrating stereotypes that have coloured the way in which the West views the East and Islam. Thus, Jamilah's community is perceived to be agitators, alienating and non-conforming. At this point in the narrative, the protagonist who is a minority herself, remains indifferent. Within the social hierarchy in the school, she is 'mis/placed' by her school mates as a Caucasian given her blonde hair and blue eyes. As she admits, "I'm known as Jamie when I'm at school because I'm on a mission to de-wog myself" (*Ten Things*, p. 5). This is the introduction that the reader gets of Jamilah @Jamie.

The protagonist, Jamilah, is the youngest daughter of a Lebanese family living in Australia. She feels pressurised to take on the inherited identity of being a minority in the society. Having a father who is a stereotypical patriarch, Jamilah feels compelled to conform to the expectations of her culture as she tries to make up her own mind of who she really is. Thus while she puts on the head scarf when she attends the madrasa, at the Guildford High, a public school, she is as 'Australian' as any mainstream young adult in her school; which is why Peter Clarkson, who considers Ahmed's rantings as "the delusions of immigrants" (*Ten Things*, p. 4), considers Jamie a kindred spirit. As he says to her following Ahmed's recollection about the beach riots:

"What a joke, hey Jamie? Ahmed probably spends his weekends in a garage making bombs or training for a terrorist cell. I'm glad the riots broke out. My dad told me that it's been a long time coming. He used to surf those beaches when he was younger. Sure, there were Italians and Greeks but there weren't too many, so you didn't notice and it was OK. But now the Lebs have invaded the beaches and it's not the same." (*Ten Things*, p. 5)

Peter's ability to 'mis/recognise' (Taylor 1994) Jamie as a fellow Caucasian is evident in this excerpt. More significantly, his ability to openly criticise and profile minorities like Ahmed likewise speaks volume of his mis/association he has of Jamie as a fellow Caucasian who is disturbed by the presence of the minorities in their country. Jamie at this juncture has created a public persona for herself, albeit an illusion, that allows her to be dubbed as a member of the majority.

2ND GENERATION YOUNG ADULT MINORITY: CONTESTING AND CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

Despite her youthful fancies of being accepted for who she is, the protagonist is equally aware of her self-prejudicial and self-incriminatory attitudes. It is this "self awareness," to

borrow Locke's (1992) term that creates the internal conflict in her journey to better understand and accept her sense of identity as a member of a Muslim minority and as a member of the nation-state of Australia. As she says, "The Jamilah in me longs to be respected for who she is, not tolerated and put up with like some bad odour or annoying house guest. But it takes guts to command that respect and deal with people's judgements. Being Jamie at school shelters me from confronting all that" (*Ten things*, p. 9).

Living in a white majority society has led Jamilah to feel uncertain about herself especially socialising among her peer group in school. Her sense of self, as a young adult Muslim minority, is relational to the perception of the majority Caucasian/White. Scholars of the discourse of multiculturalism have argued how such contexts create a "distraction" for minorities, "from the quest for their authentic self by framing their destiny constantly in terms of its relationship to the majority race" (Sullivan 1997, p. 46). The polemic in the life of the young adult is thus between these two tensions – gaining respect for being a member of a minority, on the one hand, and gaining acceptance for being a member of mainstream society, on the other.

However, what does being a member of mainstream society, in this case, an Australian, mean? Why is it difficult for her to accept that she is an Australian, despite being born in the country? The discussion Jamilah has with her father frames the issue as the sense of acceptance by the Other.

"But Dad, you can't deny it. We are wogs," I say.

"No we are not! When I came to this country people would call you a wog and spit at you! It is offensive. You are an Australian, not a wog."

"Well, Dad, most people don't think that way. At my school if you speak two languages or have dark skin or don't celebrate Christmas you're never really accepted as an equal. That's why keeping a low profile is the best option." (*Ten Things*, p. 77)

The plea by the young adult for her father's understanding of her current dilemma as a young Muslim Australian is akin to the arguments put forward by Charles Taylor (1994, p. 25) vis-à-vis the issue of recognition:

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.

Yet, the father's arguments warrant attention. As he advises his young daughter:

You should be proud of who you are, Jamilah! You can be an Australian and still have your heritage and religion. They are not at war with each other. Why is this life always like a battlefield for you? You are Australian and Lebanese and Muslim. They go together, Jamilah. [...]

You were born here. You were raised here. I am the migrant. And yet I feel more comfortable with my identity than you do! [...] My struggles should not be endured by my children. That means we have not progressed. We have gone nowhere and learnt nothing. There's something very wrong with that. (*Ten things*, p. 77-78)

For Jamilah's father, the acceptance of the immediate Other, i.e. the cultural community is a more pressing concern, as his sense of Self is based on his relationship with the cultural community. However, for the teenager who is still developing a sense of cultural

awareness, the Other is projected not to the family or community but the larger White/Caucasian society, specifically due to the nature of her interpersonal relationship. Her Caucasian school friends become the yardstick for her to gauge sense of self-worth. Yet, Jamilah is in a unique position as she experiences dual education - both from mainstream public school and the *madrassa* which exposes her to her religious and cultural contexts. It is in the latter, the public-private domain of the minority cultural/religious school, that she engages with the other aspect of her identity, as a Lebanese Muslim.

As a young adult Lebanese Muslim Australian, Jamilah's admiration towards her cultural heritage is somewhat convoluted. As stated earlier, she "dewogs" herself from ethnic ties in the public school by becoming the blonde, blue-eyed "Jamie". She yearns to be accepted and "respected" without having to put up with false physical traits of herself. Yet by changing her name and physical features she has inadvertently accepted the acculturation process which many minorities resist (Barry 2001). Her misconception has led her to a state of "self-confusion and self-diffusion" (Muuss 1982, p. 500), leading to a sense of disillusionment. Nonetheless, Jamilah's cultural awareness is not altogether non-existent:

After a long day at school, *madrassa* can get pretty tedious but I generally have a good time. Being in the band is awesome. Also, all the other kids in my class are wholly unconnected to my school, so *madrassa* is like a sanctuary for me. There I'm Jamilah. I play the *darabuka*, eat my Lebanese food and listen to Arabic pop music. I'm not a walking headline or stereotype. I'm just me. (*Ten Things*, p. 31)

The extract above clearly signals the pressure of being a minority. For Jamilah, the *madrassa* offers her the needed "sanctuary" to overcome the tension of being a minority. She is able to immerse herself wholly in the cultural landscape of her community without being judged. The *madrassa* also gives her the third space – away from the public school and her conservative father, to focus on her personal interest which is being part of a band and locating herself through the playing of the *darabuka*, a cultural instrument, as she says:

I practice playing the *darabuka* at home after school. I close my bedroom door, dim the lights and sit on my desk chair. I start to play, my beats getting stronger and deeper as I picture myself on the stage at the formal, my true identity exposed. I imagine Peter, Sam, Chris and the rest of their cronies in the audience, jeering at me.....As I play, and the music takes over me, I realise that I can't deny that I love my Lebanese culture" (*Ten Things*, p. 188)

Her moment of self-realisation occurs introspectively as she plays the *darabuka* in the privacy of her home. The instrument thus becomes a medium through which she discovers her talents and her sense of self. It is in this form of cultural attachment that allows Jamilah to transcend the demands of a conservative father who sets out boundaries for her socialisation. It is also through this cultural attachment – to the playing of the *darabuka* in the cultural band that Jamie is later able to show herself to her classmates.

Towards the end of the narrative, Jamilah decides to perform in front of her peers despite her initial apprehension of being misjudged and marginalised, however not without some misgivings. Her attack of "schizophrenia" (*Ten things*, p. 301) happens ten minutes before her performance at the Year Ten Formal when she hears the different voices in her head urging her to either disband the idea or proceed:

Voice 1 (A mix of Timothy and Amy): Don't panic. You have nothing to be ashamed of. It's your heritage. It's cool. You know the *darabuka* is awesome. They'll love it.

Voice 2 (Jamie loud and clear): Don't be such an idiot. How daggy can you get? The *darabuka*? At your Year Ten formal? Run while you still have a chance to save your dignity. It's WOGGY beyond belief. You will never live it down. They'll know you're Arabic! And then what? Do you seriously want to open up the way for all the tea-towel and terrorist and came-jockey jokes? Sprint!

Voice 3 (Aunt Sowsan): You should have eaten some of the pasta. Solids in the stomach would have helped you cope. [...]

Voice 4 (Miss Sajda): Darling, *habibi*, [...] Just have your fun! Be proud of who you are! Remove the disguise. And step out of the world of anonymity.

And so that's what I decide to do.

(*Ten things*, p. 301)

The narrative ends with the “OzWogs” (*Ten things*, p. 302) performing “techno and dance, Eastern with Western” music (303), while the students “respond with frenzied cheers” (303). Despite her initial apprehension of her inability to stand up to the peer pressures of conformation, Jamilah relents. By being more fluid and mobile, Jamilah patterns herself a style of self-consciousness which showcases the capability to negotiate and tolerate Others while understanding her values and needs in shaping her own identity. Having a cultural band that combines the western and eastern world, Jamilah is able to engage with the needed medium to intertwine within cultures towards enjoying a successful and fruitful adolescent experience of being a minority. As she says in the end: “I can't believe I'm here, at my formal, in front of all my classmates, exposing myself like this. There's no shame; there's no embarrassment. With every drumming down on the *darabuka* I'm announcing who I am. For the first time in my life, knowing the answer has never felt so sweet” (*Ten Things*, p. 303).

CONCLUSION

The paper examines the inner conflicts of the protagonist by using the discourse of multiculturalism. Albeit attached to her culture, Jamilah, the protagonist, is made to bear the brunt of being an “ethnic” (*Ten Things*, p. 4) or member of a minority group, by the prejudicial attitudes of her white classmates who stigmatise anyone of minority decent for their culture and religion. In the course of the narration, the young adult Jamilah presents the reader with the challenges she experiences in finding spaces to exert her sense of identity despite the misrecognition she is subjected to. Jamilah is shown at the beginning of the narrative as someone who struggles as a minority living in a majority of the dominant culture. She faces conflicts from all sides: her father, the patriarch; her siblings, who have fixed identities as Australian Muslims of Lebanese descent; her friends in school who have pre-formed ideas about Muslims and minorities; and her own self as she negotiates her public and private roles. In addition, the contestation and construction she has to struggle with involves negotiating culture and religion in both her public and private domains. In the words of Homi Bhabha (1990), the merging of both her domains is akin to the “third space” where she finds balance and peace with both her ancestral distinctiveness and Australian attributes.

Despite the challenges that the protagonist faces, Jamilah is seen to resolve the conflicts in both her private and public domains. Although the novel ends on an ambiguous note in that it portrays Jamilah playing her instrument, the novel shows that the protagonist no longer lives as two separate beings. She is Jamilah, the Muslim Australian-Lebanese who is

able to face the majority other and proudly exhibits her tradition. This aspect of reconciliation is important in a young adult's life, as she negotiates the other terrains of adulthood. The satisfactory outcome of being able to tell her peers who she is and what she stands for, Jamilah exhibits the fusion of both her private and public worlds. By accepting herself, a Lebanese descent who has made Australia her homeland, Jamilah is now able to carry on the journey of adulthood, firm in her own beliefs and proud of her ancestral traditions.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ The head scarf used by Muslim women to cover their hair

ⁱⁱ Religious school in which the children are taught the fundamentals of Islam including the reading of the Quran.

ⁱⁱⁱ A traditional hand drum that is shaped like a goblet.

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