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Exploring Representations of Self by Diasporic Muslim Writers

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Abstract

This paper highlights four completed graduate research projects conducted at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics in the area of Muslim identity in fiction. The four writers chosen are Palestinian-Egyptian-Australian Randa Abdel-Fattah, Ethiopian-Yemeni Mohamad Abdul Wali, Greek-American Jamilah Kolocotronis and Afghani-American Khalid Hosseini. These writers are part of the ever growing diasporic Muslim canon that continues to explore issues of self and the politics of diaspora. The discussion investigates each writer's representation of the Muslim Self with themes which include confronting identity crisis of a minority adolescent, challenging the fractured identity of a minority migrant, defying religious identity representation of a revert, and exoticizing identity of the Muslim landscape. In conclusion, we contend that the Muslim fiction writers problematize the issue of identity of Muslims in the world today given their heterogeneous landscapes and social/cultural contestations.

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1. Introduction

Research into the area of Muslim identity in diasporic literature has been gaining interest at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, National University of Malaysia. At the graduate level, the novelists that have been studied include Randa Abdel-Fattah, the Palestinian-Egyptian-Australian writer of young adult fiction, Mohamad Abdul Wali, the Ethiopian-Yemeni of Arabic diasporic fiction, Jamilah Kolocotronis, the Greek-American novelist of revert fiction and Khalid Hosseini, the Afghani-American novelist of diasporic Afghani

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fiction. These authors are part of the evolving group of diasporic Muslim fiction writers who continue to explore the issues of identity from within and outside the Muslim majority contexts. The paper investigates issues of the Muslim self as depicted in selected works by these novelists and problematizes the representation that each takes given their respective social/cultural landscapes.

2. Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Ten Things I Hate About Me: Identity In A Culturally Diverse Setting*

Ten Things I Hate About Me, written by Randa Abdel-Fattah (2006), belongs to the genre of young adult literature. The story is about a 14 year-old girl named Jamilah, an Australian of Lebanese Muslim parentage, who lists down ten things that she hates about her life in the course of the narration. Albeit aware of her cultural heritage, she is not confident to voice it out to her friends in school. In order to keep her personal life private, she tries her best to prevent her friends from coming to her house and remains silent when her Caucasian friends degrade her culture. She changes her physical traits, from black hair and brown eyes to blond and blue eyes in order to assimilate with the Australian mainstream culture. Moreover, she changes her name from Jamilah at home, to Jamie among her friends at school. The story thus narrates the re-alignment of minority Muslim self with the majority non-Muslim Caucasian society and the repercussion faced by the young adult minority.

Within the Muslim minority context, the young adult experience is an equally emerging discourse. As Bayat and Herrera (2010: 3) suggest, "Youth have assumed a central, if complex, place in the politics and cultures of these societies [Muslim majority countries], as well as in societies where Muslims make up a sizeable minority." In this novel, the young adult faces conflicts beyond the immediate concern of her peers. Jamilah undergoes the tension of adjusting to the demands of the public via her school mates in addition to the crisis of identity she experiences as an adolescent. It is important to note that the representation of Muslim youth pits them in "a dialectical interplay between different forces and actors" (Bayat & Herrera, 2010: 4). Consequently, the encounters of the youth highlight the polemics of 'marginality'. Muslim youth are juxtaposed against "their global counterparts" as "exceptional" significantly for their "Muslimness" which is defined as "an attribute often equated with religious fundamentalism, outdated notions about gender relations, insularity, and proclivities toward violence" (Bayat & Herrera, 2010: 4-5).

In the case of Jamilah, her inner conflict initially pushes her away from openly recognizing her religio-cultural identity. By dying her hair and donning blue contact lenses when she goes to public school, she has inadvertently made a choice to attach herself to the mainstream society. This action causes her to experience a state of 'minority within.' Her 'minority within,' as this study argues, is the facet of self which engages the complexity of identity construction in the narrative. The word 'minority' as used in this context, foregrounds the protagonist as a member of a minority ethnic and religious group whose inner conflicts causes her to experience a sense of self alienation and displacement that at times make her appear like the Other in her own community. However, as Bayat and Herrera (2010: 5) rightly point out, "there is more to the lives of Muslim youth [...] than mere religiosity, conservative cultural politics and extremism. Despite common elements of identification and cultural specificities, Muslim youth have as much in common with their non-Muslim global counterparts as they share among themselves." For Jamilah, her point of convergence lies in her love for music. As a member of a cultural band, Jamilah learns to channel her individuality through her cultural association. The opportunity to perform at her school presents itself at the end of the narrative allows Jamilah to finally come out of the cultural closet to assert her cultural and religious identity. The point of convergence with her fellow young adult, thus, lies in both the experience of being "neither dependent nor totally independent [...] while at the same time generating some degree of self-reliance where the individual makes choices and expresses autonomous ideas" (Bayat & Herrer, 2010: 5). In other words, the collective identity of being a youth is rooted in the commonality of experience irrespective of cultural, religious and ethnic differences.

3. Mohammed Abdul-Wali's *They Die Strangers* : Migration And Fractured Identity

The second research is on *They Die Strangers* (1972, 2001) which is written by the controversial Yemeni-Ethiopian novelist, Mohammed Abdul-Wali. The novella focuses on the vital experiences of a Yemeni emigrant in Ethiopia vis-à-vis the discourse of diaspora. Abdul-Wali uses characters in the novella to represent the struggles of ordinary people with regards to migration and accommodation in a new social and cultural landscape. For the Muslim Yemeni protagonist, his migration to Christian majority Ethiopia has repercussions on his sense of self identity both collectively and individually. This research discusses the causes and effects that contribute to the fracture in Abdou Sa'id's sense of self, his emotions as well as his experiences as a 'stranger' in the new land Ethiopia.

The notion of a fracture on the migrant's sense of self is considered to be a primarily dominated image in this narrative. The protagonist Abdou Said undergoes a sense of fractured identity causing him to experience a state of "instability and dynamic forms" (Tyson, 2006: 426) of his cultural identity. He is caught between two spaces. The former is the protagonist's homeland, which is one of the countries in the Arab world. The latter, Ethiopia, the host land, is another destination in the "centre-periphery dichotomy" of the world. In order to assimilate into the host culture of Ethiopia, the protagonist begins to 'appropriate' his Muslim self into the non-Muslim environment, immersing himself in the new landscape and subsequently conducting illicit relationships with various local women, an act forbidden in his faith. His sense of faith is more or less destroyed when his sexual relationship is used as a way to escape tax charges. The issue comes to a climax when he is asked to care for his illegitimate child from his illicit relationship.

In discussing the protagonist's multilayered sense of self – from psychological to emotional to spiritual, this study examines the dimensions of the migrant's experience who is perpetually "disenfranchised, marginalized and unhomed" (Bhabha, 1994: 12). The social-cultural and religious separation to his home land inadvertently creates an emotional, psychological and spiritual rupture in his person that culminates in his overt sexual promiscuity with local women. Thus, the freedom from cultural and religious constraints in the host land concludes in a state of crisis for the protagonist with the birth of his illegitimate son which can be seen as the product of his fractured psyche. As this study asserts, the host land, given its predominant non-Muslim cultural and social landscape, plays a vital role in facilitating a fracture in the Muslim protagonist's sense of self. The varied culture in the host land appears to create a permanent rupture in the protagonist's psyche causing him to die a stranger in a foreign land despite being successful at creating a comfortable life for his family in Yemen. Mohammed Abdul-Wali's depiction of the migrant in this novella captures the polemics of Muslim migrants who adopts a foreign social and cultural landscape for economic reasons only to permanently lose his own cultural and religious sensibilities.

4. Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Violence and Exoticism of Afghanistan's landscapes

This study discusses the diasporic writer, Khaled Hosseini's literary style in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, an Asian American fiction that reflects the style of a colonialist writer adapting the 'othering project' by exoticising the pathetic landscapes of Afghanistan. In this project, Hosseini (2007) has reimagined "Afghanistan" in his mind as being a destitute, ruined country. He places his fictional heroines Mariam and Laila as having to live a life of unhappiness and torture under the Taliban rule, which is portrayed as controlled by religious fanatics that treat women with such bestial cruelty. Given that his intention is to garner the attention of American readers as he is physically residing in America, working and educated in the American culture, his narrative fits the exoticist writing style emphasizing and articulating the lives of Mariam and Laila to suit his agenda in exposing gender apartheid practices in Afghanistan.

Hosseini (2007) has carefully selected few imaginary places to describe with vivid concentration. The choice of words and phrases is very aptly applied so that his readers are transported into Hosseini's "Afghanistan" which is governed by religious fanatics blinded by their narrow interpretations Islamic teachings. By describing the private dwellings of Mariam's and Laila's as well as the hospital and the prison, readers are captivated and horrified by the descriptions of the facilities provided and the inhumane treatment on the Afghan women. By showing relentless torture of the Afghan women, his western readers could not help but view Islam as barbaric especially in terms of respecting the rights of its women.

In much the same way as Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Ruzy Suliza Hashim & Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, 2009), placing *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in the lens of exoticism lends an alternative interpretation of how the novel could be read and understood. Rather than accepting the novel as purely a humanist pledge to understand the plight of Afghan women as imagined by Hosseini(2007), literary critics could also view the novel as a successful marketing trend in selling an Asian American novel. Western readers would especially be interested and intrigued by the happenings that occur in countries like Afghanistan especially after the 9-11 attacks and in the midst of the fear of Islamic terrorism being on the rise. Having an insider perspective through native writers like Hosseini, readers would definitely feel that they are properly 'informed' and 'educated' about the Afghan societal and religious practices as authentic as it could be. Therefore, it can be concluded the exoticist elements that are weaved into this novel are the anchoring elements that would continue to confirm Western worst prejudices of Islam and Afghanistan.

5. Jamilah Kolocotronis' *Echoes*. Religious identity and reversion to Islam post 9/11

There has been a steady rise of the Muslim population following the 9/11 tragedy, which is largely due to media exposure – be it negative or positive. However, many Americans today fail to move from amoral social-cultural past towards a Muslim cultural-religious present and future because of the revolutionary impact of reversion on their whole life as stated by Zebiri (2008:1-2): "For those who come to Islam, conversion affects not just their beliefs and values but often their whole lifestyle; from being confined to their inner, spiritual world, their faith is nothing less than revolutionary in terms of the impact it has on their whole lives..." Therefore, this research examines the principles and practices of reversion to Islam within the theme of Muslim religious identity development, i.e. from a non-Muslim to a Muslim in the American landscape after the 9/11 bombings in New York, namely from cultural and Islamic perspectives as depicted in Jamilah Kolocotronis (2006) first novel *Echoes*.

The methodology of this study takes up Stuart Hall's (1996: 394) explication of the Being-Becoming dichotomy: "Being" is the first stage of the identity formation process in which an individual attains knowledge regarding the world. Thus, "being" is first of all "awareness" which according to Locke (1992:1-2) means "knowing one's own personal biases, values, and interest – which stem from culture – as well as one's own will [that] greatly enhance one's sensitivity towards the other cultures". Principally, Joshua, the protagonist, at the "Being" stage embodies the loss of awareness of '*fitrah*' which emphasizes the responsibility to one's self and one's actions, as Leaman and Ali (2008:40) point out: "Every soul has an innate knowledge of good and evil. Our innate understanding of good and evil is sometimes not strong enough to ensure correct behavior. The passions can confuse or obscure the *fitrah*." In the second stage of the identity formation process, the "Becoming", Joshua begins to reflect on the teachings of Islam and his own self-centered ways. With the help of his Muslim friends, Joshua decides to embrace Islam.

From a Muslim perspective, Joshua's reversion to Islam is seen as the return to the state of '*fitrah*' as the individual regains his state of God-consciousness and submission: "I would worship One God" (ibid.). The act of reflecting upon one's choices in life is an important feature of the journey back to Islam. The emptiness that Joshua felt in his life at the beginning of the narrative is now filled with some semblance of certainty and

expressive feelings that signify the development of self-awareness and religious consciousness. The protagonist is now free to find a new measure of hope, a zone of comfort, and above all a sense of striving for self-fulfillment which helps transform and modify his earlier traditions of being, believing, acting, and thinking. Finally, returning to the state of *'Fitrah'* highlights Joshua's realization and distinction between Allah and the prophet. Omar (2007:78) states: "God is the center of Islam, not Muhammad. Muslims believe in and pray to "the one true God" who is the source of all as well as the final destination for all." The unsaid in this quotation lies in Joshua's perception of "*Tawhid*" as the oneness of God, where in actual fact "*Tawhid*" is the single most central concept in Islam, which denotes staying away from "*shirk*" or associating God with other beings which is labelled as the gravest sin in Islam.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper presented four concluded research at the graduate level at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics that focused specifically on the ways in which Muslim writers narrate the polemic of Muslim identity in fiction. The themes of discussion include confronting identity crisis of a minority adolescence, challenging the fractured identity of a minority migrant, exoticizing identity of the Muslim landscape and defying religious identity representation of a revert. In this paper, we contend that the Muslim writers discussed problematize the issue of identity of Muslims in the world today given their diverse landscapes they now inhabit and social/cultural contestations that are constantly being negotiated. Muslim identity in narrative showcases the multitude of faces and shades of being a Muslim in today's globalized world given the constraints and uncertainties that Muslims face. Each represents a particular and distinct voice from a group of established Muslim writers whose works either hark to the western construction of the Muslim, and in so doing, fail to re-represent the identity of Muslims, or challenges one-dimensional construction of being Muslims that they themselves experience. By engaging in the discussion of these works, students are exposed to the myriad ways in which Muslim writers represent the self in negotiation.

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