University of Alberta

Dislodging (New) Orientalist Frames of Reference: Muslim Women in Diasporic and Immigrant Muslim Anglophone Narratives

by

Katayoun Zarei Toossi

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In
English

Department of English and Film Studies

© ©Katayoun Zarei Toossi
Fall 2012
Edmonton, Alberta

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Libraries to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only. Where the thesis is converted to, or otherwise made available in digital form, the University of Alberta will advise potential users of the thesis of these terms.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis and, except as herein before provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatsoever without the author's prior written permission.

Dedication

For Behzad and Bahar, for my parents, Mehdi Zarei Toossi and Maryam Davoodpour, and for my grandmother, Fatemeh Azghadi Khorasani with love and respect.

برای بهزاد و بهارم، پدر و مادر عزیزم و برای مادربزرگ نازنینم.

با عشق و احترام

Abstract

Aided by the methodologies of postcolonial theory, particularly critiques of Orientalist discourse, Muslim feminist scholarship, cultural studies and studies on diaspora this dissertation explores the ways in which an emergent body of Muslim immigrant/ diasporic narratives in English by women writers deals with the change in the landscape of dominant representations around Islam. Such representations mostly focus on a bifurcated conception of oppression and victimization of people, particularly women, by the patriarchal doctrines of Islam and/or the redemption from such fetters upon moving to the West and adopting Western values and lifestyles. These simplistic renditions become more significant when considered in the context of post-September 11 terrorist attacks which prompted concerns about the rise of Islamic extremism. This project explores how a variety of Muslim narratives in English problematize the perception of religiosity as always being a result of the imposition of external forces that are invariably oppressive or politically charged.

The dissertation starts with the original theorization of Orientalism offered by Edward Said and examines works by Azar Nafisi and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. These narratives represent the ways in which a new strand of Orientalist narratives, while adding nuances to the original theorization offered by Said, reiterate the Orientalist framework in portraying the Muslim woman as a homogenized category and her disadvantaged location between tradition and modernity without heeding to intricacies of larger power and knowledge discursive formations and historical specificities that impact these relations. The second chapter explores

how exemplary non-fiction by Leila Aboulela demonstrates the difficulty of communicating the experience of Muslim faith to a non-Muslim reader. The third chapter focuses on semiotic complexities of the Muslim veil as an object that has almost invariably become a defining feature of Muslim female subjectivity, as well as the ways in which Mohja Kahf's literary representations of the veil engage in scholarly conversations around Muslim hijab and identity in the context of diaspora and deconstruct meanings associated with the veil. Finally, and following Said's concept of affiliation, an analysis of Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* wraps up the dissertation by showing how it challenges exoticizing tendencies of Orientalist discourse in representing "Otherness" and unquestioned assumptions of authenticity accorded to exilic voices of the recently emerging popular autobiographical accounts of women writers from Muslim and/or Middle Eastern backgrounds. The concluding chapter discusses the challenges of balancing the political and literary demands on Muslim Anglophone narratives and examines the ways in which this literature can become an enduring and positive force in realm of minority Literatures. It calls for a solidarity model that starts in connection with the aesthetics and politics of the world of Islam and then moves beyond racial, gendered, classed, religious, and cultural divides. The conclusion argues that this model can provide a better opportunity for Muslim narratives in English to be heard and appreciated on a broader spectrum.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my gratitude to all those who made the completion of this dissertation possible. I owe the most gratitude to my supervisor, Stephen Slemon, for his continued intellectual guidance and support of my research. The writing of this dissertation has challenged me on many levels. Thank you for pushing me to find my own voice; thank you for your patience and for having faith in my academic capabilities. I would like to extend my gratitude to my committee members, Lahoucine Ouzgane and Ingrid Johnston. Many thanks to Lahoucine Ouzgane for selflessly sharing his knowledge, for his generosity, and for always having a kind word for me whenever we met in the hallway. I am grateful for Ingrid Johnston for her scholarly support and insight, and for being the quickest reader to respond to my drafts and e-mails — even while out of town. I am very grateful for Daphne Reed, who graciously chaired my defence. Many thanks go to Yasmeen Abu-Laban for her long lasting support and for accepting to act as my internal-external examiner. Thank you, as well, to Bert Almon for chairing my candidacy exam and to Cecily Devereux for acting as my departmental examiner for my candidacy exam. I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of my dissertation examiner, Dr. Susan Gingell; I greatly appreciate her post-defence advice which will be very constructive for future research.

Special thanks go to Heather Zwicker for her kind support and for introducing me to Camilla Gibb's work. I feel very blessed to have met Camilla Gibb during the time she was the Writer in Residence at the University of Alberta, and would also like to extend my thanks to her for always being responsive to my

queries. Teaching in the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Alberta has been one of my most rewarding teaching experiences. It has also introduced me to a group of erudite scholars and committed teachers who have enriched my life. I owe many thanks to Jo-Ann Wallace and Lise Gotell for this amazing experience and for having trust in my teaching abilities.

Our wonderful administrative team at the Department of English and Film Studies deserve special recognition: Many thanks to Kris Calhoun, Kim Brown, Marcie Whitecotton-Carroll, Mary Marshal Durrell, Liz Kukein, Carolyn Pershing, and Shamim Dattoo for their expert knowledge, assistance, and their generous and welcoming smiles.

I recognize that this research would not have been possible without the generous scholarship awarded by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology of Islamic Republic of Iran and the financial support from the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research and the Department of English and Film Studies.

My gratitude goes to Marco Katz and Betsy Boon. Thank you, Marco, for your constant intellectual and emotional support, for your insightful critical feedback, and for your wonderful teaching tips during numerous conversations over chai and coffee. Special thanks to my friends and colleagues Khatere Sheibani, Paulomi Chakraborty, Mridula Chakravarty, Lucas Crawford, Brenda Beckman, Lei Lei Chen, Paul Ugor, Charn Jagpal, Dorothy Woodman, Argelia González, Ana Kerbabian, Mary Chan, and Amanda Lim for their kind companionship along this long journey. I also wish to thank my former students in

Women Studies 360: Race, Class, and Gender for a very intellectually rewarding teaching experience during the Winter Semester of 2011. Special thanks go to Deborah Waldman and Breanna Mrozcek for their kind and timely assistance with copy-editing and polishing my draft.

I take this occasion to acknowledge my debt to my teachers in the past including Nasrin Khandemi, Vahide Sayedi, Zohre Taebe, and Ali Khazaeefarid. Without their knowledge and encouragement, I would not have started this journey.

I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity of taking some wonderful and intellectually stimulating courses during my doctoral program in the University of Alberta and would like to express my gratitude to Corrine Harol, Michael O'Driscoll, Stephen Slemon, Cecily Devereux, Yasmeen Abu-Laban, Paul Hjartarson, and Lahoucine Ouzgane for this invaluable and life changing experience.

I am greatly indebted to my friends and colleagues in the University of Birjand, Iran, particularly Vida Nooshinfar, Mohammad Hossein Ghorashi, Faride Farhadi, Hassan Emami, and Ali Alizade for their patient support during my long absence and at a time when our growing department needed me most. Thank you to my former and very first group of students of English at the University of Birjand. I will never forget you.

I owe many thanks to my close friends for all their love and valuable companionship over these years, particularly Mitra and Mohammad, Leila and

Naser, Payvand and Mehrdad, Elham and Ali, Nayyer, Marjan, Atefeh, Maryam, Soreh, Meimanat, Fatemeh, Zeinab and Mostafa, and Sara.

Words are insufficient to express my gratitude to my family in Iran and Sweden. Special thanks to my brilliant and strong grandmother, who has exemplified the value of learning and independence in my life. I owe many thanks to my father-in-law and my dear Maman Nasrin for all the encouragement and patience and for the care packages that brought home to us across three continents. Many heartful thanks to Tannaz and Majid, Taravat, Ali and Narges, my dear Azin and Rodeen, who have filled my life with love in every possible way, whether in proximity or from afar. I am very grateful of my loving aunts, Mahin, Mehri and Malihe, Nayyere, Tayebe, Mansooreh and Zahra, my uncles, and cousins, especially Faride for all their loving support, prayers, gifts, and long-distance phone calls. I am thankful of Farzad, Mehrzad, and Shahrzad, and my nieces and nephews for their kind support. Thanks to the loving memories of my grandfather and my mother-in-law who went above and beyond to instill the love and value of learning and education in all of us.

My affectionate gratitude goes to my dear parents who raised me to value honesty, hard work, and education: without you, neither I nor this document would exist. This journey has been rewarding but has also cost us all very dearly for its lasting pain of physical separation. I thank you for believing in me and for always inspiring me with your beautiful faith and positive attitude.

And finally: thanks to my emotional rock, my dear Behzad, who has set an example of hard work and perseverance on a daily basis and for over two decades

of our life together. Thank you for your grace and patience. Thanks to my daughter, Bahar, for brightening my life with all the willing and unwilling hugs and kisses, for your sense of humor, and for bringing Spring into our long Canadian Winters.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter One: The "Muslim Woman" in the Midst of the Old and the "New" Orientalist Paradigms 26

Chapter Two: How far is it from the Sudan to Scotland? Leila Aboulela's Fiction and Rendition of belief 84

Chapter Three: Always Improperly Covered: Conundrum of the Veil and Mohja Kahf's Literary Representations of *Hijab* 135

Chapter Four: Implanting Ethiopia or a Farenji's "Pilgrim's Progress": Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly* 184

Conclusion 224

Works Cited 248

Introduction

"Everything is offensive to them [censors]," said Manna. "It's either politically or sexually incorrect. Looking at her short but stylish hairdo, her blue sweatshirt and jeans, I thought how *misplaced* she looked *enveloped* in the *voluminous* fabric of her veil" (*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* 51, emphases added).

These sentences appear in a conversation between Azar Nafisi and her select group of female students on the issue of morality and human desires and their representations in fiction. The setting of the conversation is post-revolutionary Iran where veiling is compulsory for all women, whether Muslim or not. The description portrays a familiar, powerful, and yet un-nuanced picture replicated over and again in a number of narratives that represent the lives and experiences of Muslim women. This is the primary scene in the literature that revolves around the lives and the location of Muslim women in modernity by means of conveying a state of mind through the metaphor of clothing. Nafisi's statements re-instate a reworked dichotomy between tradition and modernity in which condoning the Muslim code of dress for women goes against being modern and stylish. In this example, the covered woman appears overwhelmed and insignificant under her massive veil. These representations place the Muslim woman in constant conflict as she cannot both be practising her faith and still be regarded as enlightened, outspoken, and agential. She either has to remain covered, passive, or oppressed if she chooses to comply with what the religion requires of her, and she becomes liberated and humanized only at the expense of her religion.

This dissertation explores the ways in which an emergent body of Muslim immigrant/ diasporic narratives in English by women writers deals with the change in the landscape of dominant representations around Islam. Such representations mostly focus on a bifurcated conception of oppression and victimization of people, particularly women, by the patriarchal doctrines of Islam and/or the redemption from such fetters upon moving to the West and adopting Western values and lifestyles. These simplistic renditions become more significant when considered in the context of post September 11 terrorist attacks and concerns about the rise of Islamic extremism. This project explores how a variety of Muslim narratives in English problematize perception of religiosity as always a result of the imposition of external forces that are invariably oppressive or politically charged.

This dissertation seeks to explore the ways in which an emergent body of "Muslim narratives" in English[1] written by women complicates such reductive and binary portrayals. In invoking the category of "Muslim narratives" in English I draw on Amin Malak's *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. Malak places particular emphasis on the inspirational aspects of the religion in the creation of literary productions within the world of Islam. Three criteria function as the "common denominator" for the worked addressed in the essays in his book: the writers' firsthand experience of Islam, the inspirational role Islam plays in their artistic creations, and the use of English as the medium of communication. My use of the term "Muslim narratives" in this project regards Islam as a world

[1] I borrow this designation from Amin Malak's *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English.*

view and as a faith that goes beyond the inspirational force Malak speaks about.[2] In a similar vein, I chose the term "Muslim" for its greater accuracy because while these narratives try to make sense of religious commitments in a complex and changing situation and thereby attend to resilient ties with Islam that keep a low profile in the theoretical corpus on the issues of hybridity and transcultural experiences, they are far from having a prescriptive approach to Islam.

The body of literature that is the focus of this study is in fact part of a larger field. I would situate this literature within a larger surround: the field of immigrant and diasporic writing and/or minority and ethnic literatures produced in English. These literatures try to make sense of the dual or multiple cultural and ethnic heritages of their home and host countries. This body of literature is also related to places where the literary, social, cultural and political traditions have been influenced by Islam, whether as a mainstream religion or a minor one. By making Muslim women's experiences central, this dissertation also finds itself engaged with the related fields of Arab and African women's writing. For more than half a century, these literatures have been exploring an array of issues and themes such as the search for identity in the context of postcolonial times, the revolt against patriarchal customs and traditions, and colonial, racist, civilizational, and nationalist ideologies that bring about women's subordination and oppression at various levels.

One of the major producers of this literature is the fast flourishing field of Arab-American writings that straddles Arab and American artistic traditions.

---

[2] Malak's reason for inclusion of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* is the identitarian role Islam plays as a cultural force for even the non-Muslim or the no-longer Muslim members of Muslim societies.

Arab-American Literary productions gained particular momentum after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and in an attempt to react to the consequent and ongoing demonization of Arabs and Muslims. The pace of this "qualitative and quantitative maturation" has been so fast that, according to Steven Salatia, by the time his *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* –"the first book-length study of Arab American Literature"–was published in 2007, "it was immediately outdated" (*Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide* 1-2). Arab-American writers have been particularly active in the task of confronting orientalist stereotypes by problematizing the homogenized notion of Arab-ness through revealing the diverse heritages of Arab nations in America, as well as by highlighting the importance of their American heritage[3] to the extent that "[t]he multidisciplinary explorations of Arab life in the United States can be said to compose an Arab American studies" (Salatia 5).

More specifically, the present study is about an emergent body of Muslim narratives in English that deals with the sensibilities of being a Muslim woman in the West through revealing the complexities embedded in the notion of being a devout Muslim. This dissertation seeks to complicate a monolithic conception of Muslim-ness in the current atmosphere of fear and distrust. The dissolving of geographical borders and the massive transcontinental movements of people in postcolonial times and in the context of globalization have already made it irrelevant to assume cultures and religions are sealed entities. Ali Mazrui calls one of the salient features of the second half of twentieth century–the intensified

[3] Khalil Gibran, Etel Adnan, Naomi Shihab Nye, Diana Abu-Jaber, Joseph Geha, and Leila Halaby are some well-known names in this fast-growing field.

demographical presence of Muslims in Western societies–the "Muslimization" of the West (15). Ironically, if we consider the European leaders' concerns about "Islamic immigration" as a phenomenon that, in their views, has created a "literal mess" in Europe (Cort Kirkwood "Sarkozi Joins Cameron, Merkel Condemns Multiculturalism" n.pag.), Mazrui's comment is not an exaggeration.

Notwithstanding Western leaders' homogenizing statements, Muslims comprise diverse ethnic, national, linguistic, and cultural communities. Moreover, there are distinct intergenerational differences between the conception of Islam held by Muslims born and raised in the West, their immigrant parents, and their counterparts in Muslim countries. Tariq Ramadan in *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* relates this difference to the need for recognizing the importance of crafting a new kind of Muslim identity in the Western societies, one that seeks independence from the paternalistic influence of Muslim countries (4). He notes that, unlike their parents, the children of Muslim immigrants to the West are not obsessed by the need to be overly self-protective of their religion and culture in an isolationist manner that, many times, leads to withdrawal from the mainstream society. Major priorities for this new generation are leading their lives according to the principles of their faith as well as being full participants in the societies in which they live and of which they are members (Ramadan 4-5). These cultural and identitarian sensibilities are explored in literary field.

A new generation of writers from diverse locations including, but not limited to, North America, Britain, and Australia has started crafting distinct

features of their Muslim identities through literature.[4] This fledging body of literature has emerged, at least partly, as a response to the needs of the second generation of Muslims who are not only trying to remain faithful to the principles of their religion, but are also very much rooted in the Western societies to which they belong. In an interview, Leila Aboulela, an Egyptian-Sudanese author, for example, describes her fiction as an instance of "'Muslim Immigrant' writing" and explains that her writing career came into being not only as a reaction to negative representations of Muslims in the mainstream Western media during the Gulf War in 1992, but also as an attempt to redress what she regards as the unrealistic absence of religion in some writings by Arab and Muslim writers (Saleh Eissa n.pag.). Aboulela started creative writing in an attempt to answer the need for self-representations on the part of the younger generation of Muslims. Islam is the epistemological force in these people's lives and the West is their home and yet they do not see an adequate representation of themselves in contemporary fiction and daily television programs and radio (Eissa n.pag.).[5]

More specifically, my work focuses on a rapidly growing body of fictional narratives, written in English and published in the West, that portray a world built and imagined around religious sensibilities of practicing Muslim women in Western societies, where Islam is a minority religion. In order to delineate the parameters of this project, I first need to clarify my approach to the concept of "Muslim-ness." Mohammed Arkoun in "Artistic Creativity in Islamic Contexts"

[4] Umm Zakiyya (the United States of America), Farhana Sheikh (Britain), Monica Ali (Britain), and Randa Abdel-Fattah (Australia) are some examples of this generation of young authors.
[5] The appearance of television shows such as CBC's *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (premiered in January 2007) and TLC's *All American Muslim* (premiered in November 2011) speak to this need.

argues against the generalizing assumption that gathers together all artistic productions created by Muslims under the rubric of "Islamic art" (65). He finds the label problematic because it does not reflect the spatial, chronological, social, cultural, and political specificities that shape this body of art (65). Arkoun relates this generalizing act of labeling on the one hand, to the issue of Orientalism and its tendencies to construct and appropriate the Orient for purposes of "intellectual consumption or aesthetic contemplation" of the West and, on the other hand, to the homogenizing ideological tendencies in the world of Islam that marginalize, assimilate, and eliminate in the name of unity (65-67). Arkoun proposes the term "*Islamic contexts*" as a substitute "for the misleading adjective 'Islamic' as applied not only to artistic creativity, but also used in regard to literature, philosophy, science, and even the law which supposedly derives from sacred texts" (65). Even though Arkoun manages to salvage the important specificities that tend to be overlooked in hasty and generalized nominations, his emphasis on the context overshadows the role the religious sensibilities of the artist play in the creation of the work of art whenever applicable. Moreover, Arkoun's designation is not inclusive of the kind of literature that revolves around people's Islamic sensibilities produced in non-Islamic contexts, as is the case with the narratives in this study.

Malak critiques Arkoun's choice of terminology for not nuancing the adjectives "Islamic" and "Muslim" both of which are assumed to be derived "from the same root" (6). Malak differentiates the adjective "Muslim" from "Islamic" by explicating the former as a "word that denotes the *person* who

espouses the religion of Islam or is shaped by its cultural impact, irrespective of being secular, agnostic, or practicing believer" (5). The latter, he maintains, is that which "emphasizes the faith of Islam" or what "denotes thoughts, rituals, activities, and institutions specifically proclaimed and sanctioned by Islam or directly associated with its theological traditions" (5-6). Malak's criteria for the category of "Muslim Narratives" are in this way flexible: the writer's firm belief in Islam, *or* his/her deliberate choice of this designation over a host of alternative "identitarian choices," or his/her formative and emotional rootedness in the culture of Islam. This third possibility explains Malak's inclusion of Rushdie's fiction within his category of Muslim Narratives in his book (7). Throughout this study, I borrow the term "Muslim narratives" from Malak in similar and yet different ways.

First, I have found this term useful since it allows for the specificities of individual representations impacted by historical, political, social, ethnic, and cultural diversities of the world of Islam without making a claim to represent inprescriptive or theologically correct picture. Second, while my focus is on the work as a literary production, I have deliberately selected narratives in which religious sensibilities occupy a *positive* focal point in the lives of the protagonists. And third, the term allows for my inclusion of Camilla Gibb, a non-Muslim writer, as an author of a "Muslim narrative". This inclusion serves to problematize the popular notion about the unwavering reliability of the insider's knowledge over that of the outsiders about the culture and religion he/she represents. Moreover, it opens up a space for affiliative identifications and thus shifts the focus from the

author to the narrative itself as a work of imagination. I should also clarify that styles and aesthetics, even though undeniably important, are not the primary concern of this study. This project is more concerned with the thematic issues of this literature. Creative productions in this fledging but fast growing body of literature dare to step on the tightrope of representing Muslim women, a job that can easily cast them into the pitfall of stereotyping.

This dissertation, without claiming to be the only study of its kind, is designed to counter stereotypes of Muslim women. It does not suggest any closure to the problem of representing Islam that exist in between Orientalist and religious absolutist polarities, but it does claim to shed some light on a less attended area in representations of Muslim women in literature, namely the new ways of imagining religion through the eyes of the believer. The literature deals with the challenges and rewards of being a practicing Muslim woman in the West, and in the dichotomous space she inhabits, a space in which the conception of remaining in the religion is understood as being oppressed while leaving it behind is translated into becoming liberated. The binary manner of representing Muslim women as either entrapped by oppressive patriarchal structures of their Islamic traditions or emancipated from such fetters by denying them, emanates from the logic that positions these women incessantly within a larger binary: Islamic absolutism on the one hand, the civilizational mission of neo-colonialist and neo-Orientalist ideologies on the other. Within this binary world, visible signs of faith – wearing the veil, for example – determine the Muslim woman's fate. The act of covering instantly translates her into anonymity, passivity, and victim-hood, and

she becomes the bearer of some sort of false consciousness, if not an oppressively backward tradition. The act of remaining uncovered denotes her secular state of mind to onlookers and marks her liberation from such fetters as a direct result of exposure to Western doctrines of modernity. Katherine Bullock relates the persistence of this "unsophisticated" binary picture and its insensitivity towards the actual nuances of the lives of Muslim women to a lack of methodological tools beyond what Orientalist or neo-Orientalist discourses offer that, according to Said, "has viewed Muslims through the prism of religion. Islam has been seen as a static, monolithic and backward doctrine that both explains and determines Muslim behavior. Colonialists, missionaries, and secular feminists have subscribed to this view" (xviii). The Muslim woman is granted a space in such representations only through affirmation or denial of her faith. A detailed discussion of the ways in which colonialists, (some) Western liberal feminists, and Muslim elites have inherited the Orientalist perspective, as well as the implications of such a perspective on the ways in which the West reacts to Islam, today will follow in the First Chapter.

The irony in circulating ideas about Islam in the contemporary Western context is that, despite its apparent global visibility, particularly in political arenas, little is known in the West about the ways in which it is associated with the lives of its practitioners. This lack of familiarity is partly (and understandably so) due to the invisibility of these associations in a lot of literary discourses produced by Muslim writers in diaspora, in the field of postcolonial studies, and in studies of the diaspora. Since the non-Muslim world comes to know Muslims primarily and

to a great extent through their religion,[6] many writers and scholars have been trying to show that religion is only one among many other elements, such as ethnicity, culture, language, and class that define Muslims. The scholarship has been mostly concerned with aspects of Muslim-ness that are not necessarily definitive of a practicing Muslim (cultural specificities, for example). As a result, the complexity of the issue of religious commitments in diaspora remains an area that calls for further unpacking and exploration; this dissertation aims to successfully address this gap.

In a Western secular context, attempting to explain values and sensibilities that are based on Islamic epistemology are fraught with difficulties partly caused by social and historical complexities of the relations between Islam and the West. Another challenge on my way within this dissertation is methodological and due to the difficulty of relating religious values and sensibilities with analytical tools provided by modern secularist epistemology. Part of this problem is rooted in three hundred years of contention between modernity and religion which goes back to eighteenth century Europe and the retirement of religion from the natural world that happened as a result of the philosophical and scientific developments of the Enlightenment. Islam and Christianity have distinct approaches to modernity. Such nuances, though, are usually glossed over in the ways in which the conflict between modernity and Islam is represented.[7] The peculiarity of the case of Islam, especially in the present baffling post-9/11 situation, is that there

[6] This accentuation does not mean a greater understanding or knowledge.
[7] For example, Mark Woodward in "Modernity and Disenchantment of life" attends to these neglected nuances that he links to the cosmological and sociological logics of the Bible and Qur'an in understanding the natural world.

seems to be no way other than defining it in fundamentalist terms. Undoubtedly, the ways in which the West continues to perceive and respond to Islam in the post-9/11 era reveal significant traces of a history of domination and colonialism. In "Am I a Muslim Woman: Nationalist Reactions and Postcolonial Transgressions" Minoo Moallem observes: "entering the realm of Islam requires a detour through colonial and postcolonial representational regimes of knowledge and power, including old and new forms of gendered and sexualized Orientalism characterized by the grotesque othering of Islam in the West—by, for example, the placing of Islam completely 'outside history'" (53). The discursive construction of Islam as a monolithic and ossified tradition that has remained unperturbed by centuries of contact, conflict, and interaction with the rest of the world has legitimated civilizational mission of the West. If this legitimization took place in the name of colonization in the past, it re-appeared during the first decade of the twenty-first century under the banner of the war against terrorism and exporting democracy. A more nuanced understanding of Islam requires its perception in the global context vis-a-vis the challenges and influences it has been subjected to.

In "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism," Mahmood Mamdani questions essentialist treatments of culture, such as Samuel Huntington's controversial theory of "clash of civilizations" that endorse reading politics in terms of culture. Mamdani draws on the current context and the so-called War on Terror in Afghanistan and observes that such essentialist readings "by equating political tendencies with entire communities

defined in nonhistorical cultural terms . . . encourage collective discipline and punishment—a practice characteristic of colonial encounters" (45). He differentiates "political states" from "cultures" by referring to the former as "territorial" entities while assuming the latter as more fluid and less reducible to demarcated boundaries. Mamdani suggests that as a "global civilization," Islam needs to be defined in "historical and extraterritorial terms" and in its contemporary context (45). This contextualization is particularly important in the present politicization of minority cultures.

The undifferentiated treatment of religious faith and religion as ideology in polarizing secularism and religion reveals another layer of difficulty in speaking and making sense of religious belongings that follow a different world order from that of secular modernity. According to Ashis Nandy in "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance" religion as faith is "non-monolithic and operationally plural" (62). It is "a way of life," while religion as ideology and as an identificatory category is "a sub-national, national or cross-national identifier" and an auxiliary tool for the ruling system to synchronize internal diversities and indeterminacies of the faith in favor of a purer and more manageable form of religion (62). This instrumental deployment of religion as an effective ideological apparatus in managing difference and tension and unifying an internally diverse nation can also result in the conflation of the two concepts of religion as faith and religion as ideology. In this dissertation I use the term faith as denoting a deeper connection between the believing Muslim and Islam. I suggest that experiences of displacement provide a critical distance in which Islam can be

viewed in a different light in a way that re-connecting with religion transforms filliative and unexamined connections into affiliative ties.[8]

This project deals with the literary representations of religion as faith and its role in the experiences of transculturation and interfaith relations of Muslim women in the West. It seeks its methodological tools in the scholarly allies that deal with the experiences of the marginal, including those scholars engaged in postcolonial studies, feminist scholarship, and diaspora and cultural studies. A major difficulty in writing about religion in general and Islam in particular, though, is the incompatibility of the tools of analysis with the subject being analyzed. Susan Harding in "Representing Fundamentalism: the Problem of Repugnant Cultural Other" deals with the question of modernity's abrogation of religious fundamentalism as its anachronistic, backward and irrational other. She challenges the factual authenticity of such "modernist presuppositions" through the recovery of the history of representations of fundamentalism in Christianity to show that they are, in fact, products of the contemporary times (375). This act of othering, Harding argues, is a consequence of scholars' selective approach in their failure to use "theoretical tools routinely used in cultural studies but not specifically for religious cultural 'others'" (375). It is obvious that even though postcolonial studies try to vindicate the "other," they have regarded religious discourse with skepticism, and this situation is despite the fact that many societies that struggled against colonialism have drawn on their strong religious belongings in their anti-colonial movements. This disfavor with Islam could be the result of

[8] Here I borrow the terms filliative and affiliative from Said. By filliative ties I mean unquestioned and taken for granted connections with Islam by virtue of being born a Muslim. Affiliation denotes the element of conscious choice.

the secular orientation of the field for which Marxism and poststructuralism have been the two major providers of theoretical foundations.

Disfavor with religion could also indicate the field's reservations about dangers of essentialist tendencies in celebrating the indigenous and the local and in attempts towards "codification of tradition" as Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez points out ("Indigenous Women, Nationalism and Feminism" 114). Similarly, and as far as postcolonial feminism in general is concerned, "regulation of gender" plays a central role in "the articulation of cultural identity and difference" (Deniz Kandiyoti "Identity and Its discontents: Women and the Nation" 440). Nationalist and independence movements have instrumentally deployed women's efforts and energies by symbolically elevating them as bearers of culture and mothers of nation only to relegate them again to the margins of the newly independent nation. The question of women and Islam entails controversies over the possibility of any change or betterment in women's status within Islamic legal and political systems and through a feminism framed in an Islamic discourse. At the core of such skepticism, and one visible in many liberal and socialist feminist reservations about the power of conservative and fundamentalist Islam, is an assumption that religion and feminism are structurally incompatible. The codification of gender roles and women's explicitly inferior status associated with these branches of Islam plays an important part in this skepticism (Valentine Moghadam "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: towards a Resolution of a Debate" 28-31).

However, we also know that Western secularism has its own cultural demons to conquer; Eurocentric biases lying underneath the objective and neutral

guise of tolerance are among them. Without belittling the contributions of the Euro-American cultural and scholarly traditions, Anouar Majid in *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* rightly points out that "the secular premises of scholarship have . . . increased the remoteness of Islam" and "prolonged the false belief that global harmonies remain elusive because of cultural conflicts, not because human cultures are being constantly battered by the capitalist system" (3). Capitalism, he continues, also "seems to have enriched elite minorities into a sort of intellectual complacency" that does not really allow for "more holistic transdisciplinary readings of cultures and civilizations" (6) and their alternative perspectives and epistemologies.[9] The works analyzed in this project demand a space for such alternative knowledges.

Being about experiences of dislocation, this project also contemplates the way in which such experiences complicate an understanding of religious belongings in diasporic and immigrant contexts. Scholarly works on diaspora and culture help challenge calcified assumptions about ethnic, racial, and national belongings. Such studies have now proven that identities are multiple and constantly changing (Hall "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 226), that individuals can create a sense of home and develop multiple belongings in different cultures and countries, and that home is a fluid concept and is not necessarily tied into a

[9] Slavoj Žižek in "Tolerance as Ideological Category" discusses the politicization of culture as an important component of the inconsistencies of capitalist liberal democracy.

geographical location or a single timeline or even material objects (Ben-Yoseph 119-122).[10]

In this dissertation, then, I would also argue that even though religious belongings are assumed amongst filiative ties that are rather involuntarily and naturally acquired (for example, by virtue of birth), experiences of dislocation, whether in the form of immigration or exile, provide new opportunities to look at these ties from another angle, in a way that affiliative relationships are looked at. I define this distinction at some length in Chapter Four but, for now, what I mean is that the defamiliarizing of these self-perpetuating ties in a new and less familiar location brings awareness to various historical, societal, cultural, and political issues that shape and shift them and, thus, promises freedom from narrowly viewing religious belongings. Diaspora studies help examine the complexities of cultural values and collective identities in experiences of dislocation and their connection with the nation. Women's oppression via cultural practices and in the name of religion is one such place since women's compliance with Islam is mostly regarded as a result of the imposition of outside factors and not as a voluntary choice. A lot of times religion and culture are conflated in attempts to explain mechanisms involved in women's subordination. Moreover, subversive potentialities of the diasporic condition should not prevent us from asking why some religious ties remain intact throughout the process of dislocation and formation of new roots. Studies on hybridity and religious belonging on Islam attend to the question of the faith flourishing in an environment that does not

[10] For a study of multiplicities of cultural identity and the shifting discourse on culture see Adam Kuper's *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account*. 5th ed. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

seem to be conductive to the formation of Islamic sensibilities. In *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain*, Tariq Modood discusses the nuances of discrimination on the basis of skin color and the "cultural racism" (8) that, in the case of South Asian Muslims in Britain, makes blackness an untenable collective identity politics in unifying Muslims (17). However, religious belongings prove to be more complex than they appear. For instance, the first generation immigrants' attempts to safeguard their ethnic identities and to cling to cultural practices of their homelands in the name of preserving Islamic roots are not necessarily taken up by the second generation immigrants in England (Ansari 6; Ramadan 126). The fading away of cultural aspects of religious identity is not, however, always synonymous with the loss of the religion. These studies indicate that an increasing number of young Muslims refer to themselves as Muslims rather than identifying with geographical entities such as Britain or their parents' countries of origin. This shift in identitarian belongings complicates theories of hybridity that seem to be more concerned with those elements that work toward disintegrating the so-called traditionalist identitarian tendencies than re-turning to them. One of the concerns of this project, then, is to explore the state of such affinities via a body of literary representations that focus on experiences of Muslim women in Western societies. More specifically, I will focus on the works of fiction produced by three authors: Leila Aboulela, Camilla Gibb, and Mohja Kahf.

The literary narratives produced by these authors complicate received notions of Muslim women in transculturation, and in order to show what those

received notions actually look like in narrative housing, the First Chapter examines how a particular dichotomous perspective controls and drives perceptions of the status of women within Islam. The chapter puts these polarities into perspective by examining two popular autobiographical narratives: Ayyan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. These narratives exemplify dichotomous conceptions that dominate the perception of the world of Islam since the nineteenth century European colonial project. Other complexities of power relations elided in these narratives include intersections of race and gender in liberal Western feminism in attempts at emancipation of Muslim women from the oppressive and patriarchal Islamic systems, women's in-between location in nationalisms, anti-colonial movements, and even in the contemporary neocolonial projects and their preoccupation with the democratization of Muslim societies. The chapter, then, discusses the centrality of the figure of the veiled Muslim woman in such bifurcating portrayals. She is at the centre of the work of justifying foreign intervention under the banner of a recurring civilizational mission, liberation, and democratization. She is also the target in nationalist discourses that try to legitimize exertion of (mechanisms of) control over women in the aftermath of anti-colonial movements. The recent outburst of autobiographical accounts of the lives of Muslim Middle Eastern women seems to be a promising move in filling a representational gap concerning these women's realities of experiences. However, as the chapter argues, one immediate trap in the way of these representations is that the complexity of women's experience is reduced into the polarizing binary of backwardness and progress.

The second chapter engages with the question of religious belongings in the experiences of displacement, and with the formation of these ties in an atmosphere that is not sympathetic to their emergence; particularly through acts of reversion and conversion into Islam. Chapter Two focuses on two novels by Leila Aboulela. Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese-Egyptian writer and the first winner of the Cane Prize for African literature for her short story "The Museum." Aboulela's collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (2001) and her two novels, *The Translator* (1999) long-listed for the Orange Prize (awarded to the best fiction by women writers in Britain), and *Minaret* (2003) portray the lives of Muslims in Britain and their challenges and triumphs. Her literary oeuvre, which appeared partly as a response to the outbursts of negative sentiments against Arabs and Muslims in the Gulf War, is an attempt to imagine the world through the eyes of a believing Muslim in alignment with "the Islamic logic" (Eissa n.pag.). It can be said that she is one of the first Muslim immigrant writers to deliberately set to the task of writing fiction that centers on Islamic logic. Hailed by some as "halal" fiction (qtd. in Ghazoul par.2), Aboulela's work deals with the difficult task of crafting a language to talk about a cultural and religious differences. The second chapter will also explicate the ways in which these narratives problematize the conflation of religion with culture through an examination of the role of dislocation in the (re)formation of affiliative ties with Islam. In the case of Islam, these ties are assumed to be filiative by the virtue of being born into the religion. Paradoxically, then, distance from the familiar setting plays a key role in (re)creating affiliative and stronger ties with Islam in Aboulela's fiction. She is

unapologetic in assuming Islam as a focal point, and as a positive thrust, in shaping her main characters' consciousness and identities. In doing this, she dares to tread on dangerous terrain, where her characters' unflinching faithfulness to Islam can be branded as another instance of essentialist portrayals in an unsuccessful act of "writing back". She remaps the cosmopolitan Western cities by imagining them through the eyes of the believing Muslim woman of postcolonial realities. As Aboulela's works show, these affiliative relations nuance theories of hybridity and their preoccupation with the de-centring potentialities of the "Third Space"; in *The Location of Culture* Bhabha defines the Third Space through its unrepresentability as it "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (55). The Third Space is a time-bound "alien territory" that exists in some sort of a never-land between "translation and negotiation" (Bhabha 56). Even though Bhabha's conceptualization of the Third Space and his advocacy of cultural difference are valuable in the discursive problematization of "politics of polarity," (56) his concerns with the concept's disruptions and displacements leave the issue of continuities of religious affiliations in need of further attention. In other words, the persistence of religion as an important and regenerative mode of knowledge production and the complicated relations between converts and society problematize the assumptions involved in confrontation of religion and modernity. In Aboulela's fiction geographical journeys become the catalyst for spiritual journeys.

Chapter Three examines the semiotic complexities involved in the Muslim veil as an object that has almost invariably become a defining feature of Muslim female subjectivity. The chapter's focus is Mohja Kahfa's literary writings and the ways in which they engage in the scholarly conversation on dress and identity in the context of diaspora and in an attempt to re-imagine new ways of being Muslim, Arab, and American. Kahf is a Syrian-born Arab-American writer and an associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas. She is the author of *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), and her collection of poetry, *E-mails from Scheherazade* (2003), won the 2004 Paterson Poetry Prize. Some of these poems and her first novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), will be discussed in Chapter Three. Like Aboulela, Kahf is concerned with Muslim women's religious sensibilities. She is also greatly interested in the dynamics of self and other and the need to belong. Kahf works towards humanizing Muslims through mending the breach that divides them from their American counterparts. Kahf questions the portrayal of the Muslim woman as always representing her community. Instead, she demands both the Muslim community and the mainstream society to "just let her be" (*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* 399). Adamant in its refusal to be representative, Kahf's work is a valuable contribution in complicating literary representations of Muslim women. It shows the difficult position that such a writer occupies in that she constantly has to navigate between outsiders' expecting her work to be a window to her culture and heritage, and to comply with the demands of a nurturing community that, at times, could be very

unforgiving in too quickly accusing her of betraying the faith. Kahf's work deconstructs the meanings associated with the veil that have made it a major signifier for Islam. In response to those who suspect the compatibility of women's rights with an Islamic epistemology, Kahf's work makes the point that confronting sexism and discrimination against women does not necessarily mean dispensing with one's religious commitments since the mechanisms of women's oppression are part and parcel of all patriarchal socio-cultural systems and are not peculiar to Islamic ones. Her work shows that Muslim women are both aware of the instrumental use of religion by the patriarchy in maintaining various levels of control over women, and able to draw on the resources available within Islam to betray and defy these mechanisms.[11] Kahf's novel adds nuance to the concept of hybridity by offering a glimpse into the internal diversities, complexities, and tensions within the term community that are less reflected in the celebration of hybridity.

The last chapter of this dissertation examines the ways in which Camilla Gibb's third novel, *Sweetness in the Belly* (2006), succeeds in problematizing Orientalist readings of women's ties with Islam in its unique manner of treating religious belongings in trans-cultural encounters. Gibb holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Oxford University and has won the City of Toronto Book Award in 2000, the CBC Canadian Literary Award for short fiction in 2001, and the Trillium Book Award in 2006. *Sweetness in the Belly* not only challenges an unexamined and popular conception of the authenticity and generalizability of

[11] An important progenitor is the novella *The Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey toward Independence and Other Stories* (1989) by the Moroccan author, Leila Abouzeid, which deals with the predicaments of a faithful Muslim woman in post-independent Morocco.

autobiographical accounts produced by indigenous authors as the only available source for knowing "other" cultures, but also plays with readers' expectations about religious and national belongings through creating a protagonist that cannot be comfortably emplaced in neat categories. The novel is successful in breaking apart the dichotomy of self/other by delving into the questions of belonging, assimilation, and inclusion. The final chapter argues that, despite its structural distance from the people it represents, the narrative successfully calls into question the writing conventions of the New Orientalist narratives. The final chapter will also show the ways in which Gibb's narrative problematizes the received notions about the wholeness and purity of communities whether mainstream or diasporic through engaging in contemporary debate about the relation between social identity and place. Critical works by Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and others on the concept of "belonging" have called our attention to the interrelatedness of virtual and literal experiences in transcultural contexts, and it is now clear that claims about "authentic" or "original" culture and identity are no longer tenable. By examining Gibb's careful consideration of interlocking categories of race, gender, class, religion, and ethnicity, the chapter addresses the less-attended to issues in such debates: the experiences of the supposedly "authentic" white mainstream Western population in exposing the hegemonic myth of a flawless, fixed identity through a process of identification with the marginal and liminal. Gibb complicates orientalist and white supremacist notions about religious and ethnic belongings based on which all Muslims are of Arab origins and all white people have a white history.

These narratives reveal the difficulty of theoretically locating and categorizing people's lived experiences. Through humanizing both the Westerner and the Oriental Muslim, these narratives engage in an act of bridge-building, calling for the recognition of all members of a society without making them disavow their other belongings, an act that proves far more challenging than either a happy-go-lucky multiculturalist or an assimilationist perspective would suggest. Throughout this dissertation, I will argue that dwelling on the hyphen is not always conducive to disappearance of faith from the lives of people whose lives are tied to more than one place and culture. Transnational movements can provide a productive critical distance and possibilities for reevaluating religious ties. This critical distance is an opportunity to actively reconnect with Islam as an affiliation.

Chapter One: The "Muslim Woman" in the Midst of the Old and the "New" Orientalist Paradigms

As I specified in the introduction, the job of this dissertation is to reflect on an emergent body of literature that complicates the popular, yet simplified, portrayals of the Muslim woman dictated by the binary logic driven by Orientalist discursive paradigms and perpetuated in a new register by Muslim women themselves. In this chapter I focus on two very well-received examples of such popular literary portrayals and try to explicate the continuance of an Orientalist conception of Muslim womanhood in them as well as the ways in which they nuance the original theorization offered by Edward Said. This chapter is an analysis of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's autobiography *Infidel* and Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* as two narratives that illustrate the continuation of Orientalist frames of reference about Muslim women into the twenty first century. Both Nafisi and Hirsi Ali have been well received in the United States of America. *Infidel*, published in English in 2007, is the autobiography of the Somali-born Holland's former Parliament member Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who appeared in the *New York Times*' list of the 100 most influential people of 2005. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has received highly positive reviews and was at the top of the *New York Times*' best sellers list for two years as well.[12]

In *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, Fatemeh Keshavarz coins the term "New Orientalist Narratives" to refer to Nafisi's book as well as a host of other narratives that are now proliferating and promise the

[12] See Mitra Rastegar's "Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and 'Liberating' Iranian Women" for a comprehensive analysis of the reviews of Nafisi's memoir.

authenticity of an eyewitness in providing the non-specialized reader with a window to the truth of the alien cultures.[13] In Keshararz's definition, these burgeoning narratives:

> explain almost all undesirable Middle Eastern incidents in terms of Muslim men's submission to God and Muslim women's submission to men. The old narrative was imbued with the authority of an all-knowing foreign expert. The emerging narrative varies in that it might have a native—or seminative—insider tone . . . it shows a relative awareness of its possible shortcomings. Yet it replicates the earlier narrative's strong undercurrent of superiority and of impatience with the locals, who are often portrayed as uncomplicated. The new narrative does not necessarily support overt colonial ambitions. But it does not hide its clear preference for a western political takeover. Most importantly, it replicates the totalizing—and silencing—tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness in the local culture. (3)

Based on this definition then, such narratives, consciously or unconsciously, perform a job similar to that of Orientalist discourses in providing the ground for cultural and political domination of the West in the Middle East. Their primary strategies for this take over are, first, the feeding of the present atmosphere of fear

[13] They comprise a wide range of narratives that might even differ significantly from each other. Some examples that Keshavarz cites are: *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* by Geraldine Brookes (1995); *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, by Azar Nafisi (2003); *The Bookseller of Kabul*, by Asne Sierstad (2003); and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Husseini (2003).

and distrust of Islam as a politically, economically, and culturally backward tradition, and second, the reductionist portrayal of the region and its peoples, with a focus on Muslim women as the gauge that reflects the inevitability of the conflict between Islam and the West.

The post-9/11 atmosphere created by the ongoing war in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise of home-grown Islamic extremism in Western metropolises have given currency to the hackneyed yet effective rhetoric of the clash of Islam and the West. Westerners have shown an intensified interest in the world of Islam and particularly Muslim women in this context. The recent mushrooming and commercial success of narratives that offer insider perspectives on the lives of women in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran is not unrelated to such international circumstances.[14] In addition to their promise of solving the mystery of the Middle East and its people, the New Orientalist narratives have stylistic features that help boost their popularity. According to Keshavarz, the "informal tone" of these works and their "hybrid nature" in terms of genre are among these features. They usually recount "an eventful journey" combining features of autobiographical writing, travel accounts, journalistic writing and social criticism (Keshavarz 4). These narratives are not simple recollections of life events. Keshavarz continues, "They show awareness of the power of the personal voice, nostalgia in exilic literature, the assurance that comes with insider knowledge, and the certainty of eyewitness accounts" yet without offering more than a superficial glimpse into the world they are talking about (4). Such memoirs, then, straddle the

[14] See, for example, Lorraine Adams' "Beyond the Burka" in *the New York Times' Sunday Book Review* 6 January 2008.

frontiers of fact and fiction, and are tacitly accepted as accounts of valid subjective personal experiences comparable to the supposedly more objective historical data in providing a peek into the reality of life in societies from which they come from. The figure of the Muslim woman that emerges out of the pages of these narratives re-affirms Islam as a monolithic, anti-modern civilization as well as the cause of all problems she encounters. Muslim women, whether practicing or not, are perceived through the category of the religion in the contemporary setting. They represent the either/or dichotomy between the worlds of tradition and modernity.[15] If they are observant, according to Shahnaz Khan, they are either "active promoters of religious ideology or passive recipients of prescriptions of religious texts" (18). A text that best illustrates this bifurcation is Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*, in which being a Muslim, for women, means either disappearing in their husband's shadow in submitting to Allah and in the hope of earning a piece of Paradise (90, 281). Being a Muslim also means being trapped in "a mental cage" by emulating the doctrines of Islam as propagated by organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood (130) that basically mummify young women into silent and submissive domestic laborers.

It was Said's influential conceptualization of complicity between knowledge production about the Orient and power in *Orientalism* that sparked the consequent debates about the dynamics of the relations between the East and the

[15] See for example, Soheir Kashoggi's *Mosaic* (2003) in which an Arab-American, modern, educated, great looking, and fair-skinned woman saves her two children from the narrow minded and rigidly traditional life their Jordanian father wants to create for them in his home country. Kashoggi keeps her secular, Westernized, and liberated protagonist in constant contrast with her veiled, unassimilated, and always sullen maid, Fatma, in the U.S. and her very traditional in-laws in Jordan she calls unenlightened (61).

West. Said's *Orientalism* analyzes the relation between the East and the West through his Gramscian-Foucauldian lens to show how the relations among the production of knowledge, power, and truth play out in the "positional superiority" (7) of the West. He defines Orientalism as:

> . . . not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions . . . . It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction . . . but also of a whole series of 'interests' which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different . . . world. (12)

For Said, in other words, Western representations of the Orient are part of a discourse that speaks of a series of uneven power exchanges in political and intellectual arenas. promoting the thesis of the Orient's alterity to and normalizing such power relations in the name of the inferiority of the Orient as the West's other for being feminine, backward, irrational, exotic, erotic, and immoral (66-67). There are, to be sure, obvious historical, geographical, cultural, and political contextual differences between the contemporary times and the height of European colonialism in the nineteenth century, yet there are striking similarities

between the representations of Muslim women in the classical discourse of Orientalism and in today's literary representations by some Muslim women themselves. Thus, this chapter examines the ways in which this literature constitutes a representational problem.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in Mogadishu, Somalia in 1967. Her father, Dr. Hirsi Magan Isse, was a linguist and a well-known religious opponent of the Somalian Siad Barre regime. He spent a period of time in prison and, after being released, joined his family who had left the country and migrated, first to Saudi Arabia, and afterwards to Ethiopia and Kenya. When Hirsi Ali was twenty-two years old, her father arranged a marriage with a distant relative in Canada. She managed to escape the marriage en route to Canada and decided to go to the Netherlands via Germany instead, where she obtained asylum and became a refugee and then a citizen. She worked as an interpreter for Somali asylum seekers and refugees and studied political science at the University of Leiden, where she gradually lost her faith in Islam and eventually became an atheist. After graduation, Hirsi Ali was employed by a scientific think tank affiliated with the Labor Party, but a year later, she became a member of the right wing VVD Party (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) for which she ran and won a seat in Parliament in 2003. Her reason for this switch in political allegiances was the greater opportunity she believed offered by VVD in advocating Muslim women's rights. Her pupularity soared after 2002 with the publication of *The Son Factory* that subjected her to death threats for lambasting Islam. Hirsi Ali's next book was a collection of essays entitled *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation*

for Women and Islam (published in English in 2004) that focuses on the status of women in Islam.

The controversy around the public perception of Hirsi Ali resulted from her writing the script to the film *Submission*, directed by Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. He was murdered by a man named Mohammed Bouyeri, whose parents were Moroccan immigrants. A letter secured with a knife into van Gogh's chest clarified that Hirsi Ali would be a target of retaliating actions too. The event, the ensuing heavy security measures to protect Hirsi Ali, and the media frenzy around it, brought Hirsi Ali into the public eye. She resigned from Parliament after the public revelation of her lying on her asylum application. The revelations sparked new debates initiated by Rita Verdonk, the Minister of Integration, on Hirsi Ali's eligibility to hold her Dutch citizenship. Even though she was not stripped of her citizenship, she announced her resignation from Parliament and moved to the United States, where she holds a position at the neoconservative think tank, American Enterprise Institute. Her autobiography, *Infidel* (published in English in 2007), was followed by *Nomad* (2010).

Undoubtedly, Hirsi Ali is passionate about her activism for, what she believes will lead to, the betterment of Muslim women's rights and living conditions. However, as I will argue in the following pages, the larger argument emerging out of the author's personal story is detrimental to the very subjects she claims she is defending. Apostasy was the price she had to pay for her emancipation and acquisition of individuality, which she believes is discrepant

with the tenets of Islam. Because of her father's key role in the movement opposing the dictatorship of Siad Barre's regime in Somalia, Hirsi Ali had to travel to different countries as a refugee almost her entire childhood and adolescence until she obtained Dutch citizenship as an adult. The account of her life experience in different countries (Islamic and non-Islamic, including Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia) boasts the expertise of an insider, a traveler, and a survivor of violence who has observed different versions of Islam practiced in different societies and, more or less, has come to the same conclusion about their state of backwardness and incompatibility with what life in a modern world signifies. Clearly, this chapter is not concerned with the facts of Hirsi Ali's life; what matters here is how she chooses to deploy these facts from her personal life in the context of her writing to generalize about women's condition in Islam. As the chapter will show, the author's personal story provides caché for her claim about the authenticity of her observations on the totality of the world of Islam, even though her representations fail to hint at political, national, cultural, and linguistic diversities of the Muslim world, a world comprised of fifty-seven nations throughout Africa and Asia.

The second document, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), has been one of the most successful memoirs of Middle Eastern women. It soon found a place in many book clubs as well as in undergraduate course syllabi across the United States. (Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars* 6).The book has been particularly praised in many reviews for promoting the reading of literature as "an act of political insubordination" (Hewet, "'Bad' Books Hidden under the Veil of Revolution:

Iranian women resist oppression by reading forbidden novels" n.pag.). It has also been extolled for endorsing the view of the universal value of the Western literary canon in cultivating democratic values.[16] *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has, on the other hand, also instigated debates particularly among Iranian-American scholars for what is believed to be a distorted representation of Iranian people, culture, and society.

The narrative covers Nafisi's experience as a professor of English in almost two decades of post-revolutionary Iran between 1979 and1997. As a member of a prominent family whose mother was in parliament and whose father was the mayor of Tehran in the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi regime, Nafisi enjoyed the privileges of an education in Europe and the United States during her childhood, throughout her post-secondary and graduate school. She obtained her Ph.D. in English and American Literature from the University of Oklahoma and returned to Iran after the demise of the Pahlavi regime to start her teaching career as an assistant professor, first at the University of Tehran and then at Allameh Tabatabai University. She returned to the United States in 1997 and currently teaches at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

The memoir has four main parts based on the ways in which it discusses four novels: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, Henry James' *Daisy Miller* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The discussions take place in weekly meetings during the last two years of the author's stay in Iran (1995-

[16] See Asian Review of Books by Douglas Crets. http://www.asianreviewofbooks.com/arb/article.php?article=314 . Also see "Literature as Freedom: Seven Women Read through a Revolution." by Sonja Ostrow. *The Yale Review of Books*. 7.2 (Spring 2003). http://www.yalereviewofbooks.com/archive/summer03/review02.shtml.htm

1997), in the privacy of her home and with seven of her best female former students referred to as: Azin, Manna, Mahshid, Mitra, Nassrin, Sanaz, and Yassi. The weekly exchanges serve as opportune moments for the girls' sharing and free out-pouring of their ideas, their views on their lives, and relationships they otherwise would not be able to share publically without being accused of committing ideological, religious, and moral offenses. In these meetings, the students draw analogies between their own lives and the lives of the fictional characters they encounter. Similar to Hirsi Ali's narrative, Nafisi's memoir advocates the liberating power of Western literature in delivering the mind from the political mechanisms of oppression. Yet unlike Hirsi Ali, Nafisi's memoir is not essentially against Islam but rather against political leaderships seeking to delimit individual freedoms and to perpetuate their powers in the name of ideologies, in particular of a religious type. The group members adopt a comparative approach to the literature they study in their meetings in an attempt to understand their own circumstances. They constantly draw parallels between the fictional world of the narratives they study and their own world. Thus, the first part of the book initially draws on Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, and compares it with Post- Revolutionary Iran, and then shifts its focus to Lolita, the child victim of a pedophile who symbolizes post-revolutionary Iranian society. The focus of the second part is Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* and the events such as the hostage-taking in the American embassy in Iran. The third part deals with James' *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square* in an attempt to draw parallels between the situation in World War II and the United State's involvement in the

war, the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, and the political situation within Iran. Finally, the last part discusses the issue of women's rebellion against the accepted mores and conventions of society with a focus on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, followed by the author's account of leaving the country for good and an epilogue that keeps the reader informed about the fate of the students as well as Nafisi's life after moving to America.

According to Said, Orientalism comprises a set of knowledges and beliefs about what "Orient" means: on the one hand, it is a system of knowledge production, and on the other hand, it is a myth that reflects a series of desires and disavowals that aim at achieving a unified goal in producing the Orient. It is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3).[17] Moreover, for Said Orientalism represents:

> [A]n exclusively *male* province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing. (207, emphasis added)

Contrary to Said's original theorization, we now know that the discourse of Orientalism is not necessarily gender or race specific. Said's theory does refer to, but does not elaborate on, the complicity of the Oriental elite in the reproduction and circulation of Orientalist imagery, and the ways in which they play a part in

[17] See Stephen Slemon's "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism" for an analysis of a two-tiered ambivalence in Said's theory and its impact on colonial discourse theory.

perpetuating the discourse of Orientalism. Likewise, *Orientalism* does not examine the role of Western female Orientalists in the reiteration of this discourse.

In order to show the ways in which the New Orientalist narratives produced by Muslim women fall under the rubric of Orientalism,[18] the following pages visit the scholarly works dealing with complexities in terms of gender, race, and class in this discourse to help tease out an answer to the question of the reiteration of Orientalist frames of reference in representations produced by Muslim women themselves. Reina Lewis' study of the role of European women as cultural producers of empire addresses the unelaborated complexities and paradoxes concerning gender issues and the imperialist project in Said's theory. *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* discusses the impossibility of the conception of a unified male subject position for the colonialist.[19] Lewis examines the role of European women artists as cultural producers of empire. Her comparative study of artists, such as painters Henriette Browne, and Elisabeth Jerichau-Bauman, and the novelist George Eliot,[20] and the reception of their works in England and France shows that Orientalist discourse is variegated and manifold, and it is by no means a unified male discourse as *Orientalism* implies.

---

[18] In this specific instance, I use the term Muslim in the sense deployed by Amin Malak that is not necessarily contingent on the issue of observance but functions more as a cultural constituent of Muslim identity. See the introduction for more information.

[19] For more feminist critiques of empire and postcolonial studies see for example, Ann McClintock's *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (1997) and Meyda Yeğenoğlu's *Colonial Fantasies* (1998).

[20] Lewis's study of the novel *Daniel Deronda* reveals the imposition of Orientalist frames of reference on the figure of the Jew as an internal Other and thus complicates, even further, issues of resistance and agency.

The ambivalence of the position of these women between privilege and marginalization and their "differentiated, gendered access to positionalities of imperial discourse," Lewis maintains, lays bare the internal inconstituencies within the category of imperial subject, challenging the notion of colonial subject as unified and male (4). As Lewis' analysis of Orientalist discourse produced by women indicates, in some Western women's representations, harem space appears as a respectable domestic sphere while those of others reframe the dominant conception of harem as populated with scantily clad odalisques, and as a result, render "women's relationship to Orientalism and imperialism as a series of identifications that did not have to be either simply supportive or simply oppositional, but that could be partial, fragmented and contradictory" (237). Such complexities and contradictory positions within the hegemonic system of Orientalist discourse could explain the reason for its resilience, malleability, and fluidity. "Orientalism," Lewis continues, is "perpetually fending off or responding to challenges from within and without: challenges that are not simply an unavoidable burden, but are themselves productive of dominant and alternative definitions of not only race or Orientalism, but also of gender, class and nation" (237). Lewis's study of Western representations of Oriental women's lives and the former's contradictory approaches towards the discourse of Orientalism, as re-affirmation as well as challenge, sign-posts a similar ambivalence in regard to Oriental women's self-representations. As we will see, some "Oriental" women's role in the perpetuation of Orientalist imagery through self-representation

suggests that Orientalist discourse is much more complicated than the works of male and even female classical Orientalists might suggest.

The authors discussed in this chapter are located, in one way or another, in between privilege and marginalization. This position resembles that of the women of empire that paradoxically exist both inside and outside of its architecture of power. In *Maps of Englishness*, Simon Gikandi engages with the issue of the women of empire (black or white), their liminal placement in the perimeters of the empire, and their privileged status within it due to certain circumstances. Gikandi's argument is that while these women challenge some patriarchal cultural norms, they at the same time re-inscribe and valorize the imperialist ideologies of domination and control. Gikandi observes, "When we talk about the women of empire—or colonial subjects in general—our subject is both the colonizer and the colonized, different groups of people written into the European narrative in asymmetrical—but sometimes identical—ways" (124). Instead of holding onto "the binary opposition—between self and other— promoted by the dominant (masculinist) narrative," he invites us to a re-reading of the culture of colonialism "in its contradictions and complicities, as a chiasmus in which the polarities that define domination and subordination shift with localities, genders, cultures and even periods" (124).The liminal location of some immigrant/diasporic Muslim women in the outskirts of secular Western culture speaks of a similar way of being "in and out" of the perimeters of the dominant culture (Gikandi 125) through elements such as race, gender, and religion. These authors' connection to the dominant culture, though, is not of a genealogical nature. In their self portraits,

they identify with the dominant culture by the virtue of education and memberships in those institutions of power (academia and think tanks as well as the parliament) that provide them with a space of opportunity and freedom.[21]

The overarching argument in *Infidel* is a re-statement of the thesis raised in a previous book, *The Caged Virgin*, on the lack of individual freedoms for women in Islam.This deprivation, Hirsi Ali maintains, is because a fundamental principle of this religion is the submission of the individual to God. From early childhood, the loss of the individual freedoms is gradually indoctrinated, especially in girls, via apparatuses such as their families and the Islamic education they receive at school. According to Hirsi Ali, Islam for a woman functions as an antidote to developing individuality. Submission goes against having any will of one's own. She says:

> A Muslim woman must not feel wild, or free, or any of the other emotions and longings . . . . A Muslim girl does not make her own decisions or seek control. She is trained to be docile. If you are a Muslim girl, you disappear, until there is almost no you inside you. In Islam, becoming an individual is not a necessary development; many people especially women, never develop a clear individual will. You submit: that is the literal meaning of the word *islam*: submission. The goal is to become quiet inside, so that you never raise your eyes, not even inside your mind. (*Infidel* 94)

[21] For further elaboration on the issue of authenticity of the self portraits on Muslim women and their relationship to the dominant power systems see Chapter Four.

Even though many Muslim girls are conditioned to be submissive as a result of their upbringing, Hirsi Ali's line of reasoning is very problematic. This passage elaborates little on what the term "submission" means, nor does it explain the issue of free-will and its importance in directing one's world views and actions in regard to his/her faith. One wonders how other Abrahamic religions approach the issue of submission, but Hirsi Ali offers no clue to a parallel reference in Judaism or Christianity, as if the issue of submission were peculiar to Islam. Clearly the course of human history has well revealed the instrumental use of such religious doctrines in subjugating and controlling people by power wielders, and Islam is no exception in this respect. Undeniably, the issue of submission has been instrumentally deployed in the name of Islam to subjugate both men and women (to a greater extent). Nonetheless, the existence and even domination of a practice does not necessarily vindicate Hirsi Ali's essentialist logic.

Ironically, soon after making these remarks, Hirsi Ali introduces strong willed independent Somali Muslim women who exemplify strong individualism. These women serve as contrary examples to her statements that render Islam incapable of offering such role models for young girls. One of these women is Farah Goureh's wife, Fadumo. Farah Goure is a powerful and wealthy businessman of Ayaan's clan in Kenya who sets to the task of taking care of families of Somali dissidents. Fadumo is in her middle ages at the time she is introduced in the narrative. Fadumo had left her clan at the age of fifteen to seek independence which, while usual for boys of her age, was quite unusual for girls, and to follow her dream of becoming a successful businesswoman owning trucks

"working all over Somalia" (*Infidel* 99). Not only did she materialize her dream, she also sponsored her future husband, Farah Goure. Without Fadumo's vision and perseverance, Goureh could not have reached his present status in terms of wealth and influence. Another powerful woman is Ayyan's aunt, Ibado Dhadey Magan, "who had taught herself to read and write, earned a nursing certificate, and had risen to become director of the Digfeer hospital" (*Infidel* 101). Even though Ibado explicitly emphasizes the importance of will power, education, and hard work for women in achieving prosperity, independence, and a comfortable life style similar to the one she enjoys, the narrator does not linger on her as an example of strong individuality. Whether intentional or subconscious, Hirsi Ali's glossing over that which does not fit into a black and white portrait is symptomatic of the New Orientalist narratives' "[replicating] the totalizing—and silencing—tendencies of the Old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness in the local culture," as Keshavarz points out (3). Hirsi Ali's mother (at least in her young age) also represents another example of a relentless individual will. She steps out of an arranged marriage, chooses to marry Ayyan's father for love, and starts a new life outside the familiar world of her clan. However, there is a gradual atrophy in her strong will which is, at least partly a result of frustration over her husband's political engagements that leave little space and time for attending to his responsibilities as a husband and father, as well as to his third marriage (Ayaan's mother herself is a second wife). Nonetheless, Hirsi Ali presents her mother's transformation, her loss of individuality, and the regression in her thoughts and

attitudes as heavily and un-interchangeably impacted by their few years of stay in Saudi Arabia as the heartland of what she presents as the true ideology of Islam.

According to Hirsi Ali, Saudi Arabian women are the prime example of subjugation and death of individualism in Islam. During the time Hirsi Ali's father was in prison in the 1970's, she spent a few years in Saudi Arabia and even though she was a child at the time, the experience seems to have put an indelible mark on her memory. It constantly serves as a platform from which she launches her battles against Islam. In these charges, her childhood observations of Saudi Arabia function as a strong powerhouse on which she draws on over and again to elucidate what living a so-called purely Islamic life can do with the individual. She explains:

> I first encountered the *full strength* of Islam as a young child in Saudi Arabia. It was very different from the *diluted* religion of my grandmother, which was mixed with magical practices and pre-Islamic beliefs. Saudi Arabia is the *source* of Islam and its *quintessence*. It is the place where the Muslim religion is practiced in its *purest form*, and it is the origin of much of the fundamentalist vision that has, in my life time, spread far beyond its borders. (*Infidel* 347, emphases added)

The explicit conflation of the Saudi Arabian version of Islam with the pure essence of the religion upholds the notion of purity of essences that remain intact throughout the passage of hundreds of years and outside the borders of their inception. It reduces Islam in its entirety to its Arabian origins and renders Saudi

Arabia in a time warp as if untouched by centuries of historical, political, and economic changes. Moreover, the narrative's portrayal of Saudi's is racist and demeaning.

Saudis do not appear as entirely human in the narrative; Hirsi Ali describes Saudi women in public spaces as "human shapes. The front of them was black and the back of them was black, too. You could see which way they were looking only by the direction their shoes pointed . . . . Saudi women had no faces" (40). According to the author, in Saudi Arabia everything finds meaning in stark contrasting lines between sinfulness and piety, yet her portrayals replicate the same logic; Saudi women remain as faceless in the narrative as their veiled bodies. Hirsi Ali is offended by Saudi women's racist remarks calling her "slave black girl" (49), yet her own descriptions of Arabs are no less racist. Saudis are referred to as "stupid as livestock" (50); Saudi men are described as violent wife beaters, yet Saudi women appear no more human in their lethargy and filthiness in Hirsi Ali's portrayals. They are painted with an Orientalist brush in this narrative; to the eight year old Ayyan, even ten year old girls moved their bodies "with meaningful glances" while dancing and "exuded a torrid, and completely unfamiliar, eroticism"(46). The image that forms in the reader's mind has a stark similarity to that of Orientalist clichés of lethargic dozing odalisques associating the Orient with sex. They remind us of Said's analysis of Flaubert's descriptions of Kuchuck Hanem, a famous Egyptian dancer and prostitute representing the illiticness and moral degeneracy of the Orient (*Orientalism* 186-190). It is also striking that the then-eight year old Ayaan was able to notice the eroticism in the dance moves of

ten year old Saudi girls. Saudi Arabia is described as nothing but "intense heat and filth and cruelty" where the "economy was booming" in 1970s while the society "seemed fixed in the Middle Ages" (43). Saudi Arabia is a place where Saudi law is described as "all barbaric, all Arab desert culture" with Saudis as equally barbaric for watching the scenes of execution and stoning as an entertainment show (51). These statements echo an Orientalist view of Arabs as unchanging, conveying what Said calls "an aura of apartness, definiteness, and collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histories" (*Orientalism* 229).

In *Infidel,* the issue of the loss of individualism as specific to Islam is irredeemably linked to the notion of sexual morality, and to women's role of gatekeepers of the honor of both family and tribe – by conforming to the cult of virginity, which itself is guarded by practices such as clitoridectomy and the practice of arranged marriages for girls at a young age. It is important to note that it was Hirsi Ali's grandmother who arranged for both her granddaughters' circumcision in the absence of their father and against his will. The practice of clitoridectomy, also known as female circumcision, FGC (female genital cutting), or FGM (female genital mutilation), is a key issue and a recurring subject in Hirsi Ali's activism for women's rights.[22] In Ayaan's case the culprit is her grandmother for whom a so-called "diluted" Islam gets mixed with "pre-Islamic beliefs," (347) Hirsi Ali does not make any distinction between various components of women's oppression. Even though her grandmother's religious

[22] For more information follow the World Health Organization's link: http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/e

beliefs appear as further removed from the "real" thing practiced in Saudi Arabia, the main culprit of her story is always of religious nature. Shifting between the Somali culture, Saudi Arabia's version of Islam, the extremist Islamist movements, and Islamic doctrines, and in her activism to abolish clitoridectomy in Holland, Hirsi Ali targets religion as a homogenous entity. Even though she once mentions that clitoridectomy is not a practice mandated by doctrines of Islam—nor is it practiced in Saudi Arabia, the source of Islam—she finds the religion complicit in continuation of the practice since the clergy continues to remain silent on it.

No doubt, clitoridectomy is a complicated and controversial practice that concerns many scholars, activists, and supporters of women's right yet it is one among numerous challenges Somali women face in the diaspora. In her analysis of Somali women's conditions in Canada, Hamdi Mohamed deals with these challenges and the question of priorities for Somali women. On the one hand, they try to recover from the traumatic experience of the civil war, and on the other hand have to survive in a new environment. She states it is baffling to many Somali women that this practice overshadows other no less important social and economic issues because of "the dramatic coverage of the issue and the constant attention it receives from both the Canadian government and public, while nobody seems to care about their overall discouraging condition" (52). Questions regarding priorities and realities of the lived experiences, authority, and political representation are all relevant issues when examining Hirsi Ali's work. In addressing clitoridectomy and its continued practice in diaspora her activism

though noteworthy, is not comprehensive of its complexities, nor is it inclusive of all Muslim women.

During the time Hirsi Ali served as a member of the Dutch Parliament, she proposed a bill that required an annual examination of young girls from immigrant families to make sure that they would not undergo clitoridectomy (Leila Lalami "The Missionary Position" n.pag.). As Lalami aptly notes, the fact that the majority of Muslim immigrants to the Netherlands are from Turkey and Morocco, where clitoridectomy is not practiced, needs particular attention because in the absence of careful considerations of factual data, it is the kind of "ignorant scholarship" that receives praise from "the American Press" (n.pag.). Hirsi Ali rightly pinpoints the particular border position of women as guardians of tradition and culture as an important reason why the practice is transplanted to the diaspora, but her line of reasoning and the conclusions she draws do not nuance the familiar Orientalist scenarios about the status of women in the Muslim world as an indication of its backwardness. As we know, Muslim women's oppression has been historically deployed as a pretext for the justification of colonizing enterprises.

Earlier, the chapter referred to complexities in issues of race and gender that nuance the concept of Orientalist discourse as predominantly male and Western. Now, I would like to shift to the complexities of the category of gender that help further nuance the issue of power relations in the discourse of Orientalism and on the side of the Orientalized. *The Colonial Harem* is an English translation of *Le Harem Colonial: Images d'un sous-erotisme* by the Algerian poet and critic

Malek Alloula published in France in 1981. It is a well-known anti-Orientalist and revisionist approach to the French postcards first produced during the colonization of Algeria as anthropological documents between 1900s and 1930s and simultaneous with "the Golden age of colonial postcards" from 1900 to 1930 (Alloula 5). Alloula's re-reading of these postcards seeks to lay bare the hidden colonial agenda and "to map out, from under the plethora of images, the obsessive scheme that regulates the totality of the output of this enterprise and endows it with meaning is to force the postcard to reveal what it holds back (the ideology of colonialism) and to expose what is repressed in it (the sexual phantasm)" (4-5). Alloula's re-arranging of the postcards displays a gradual unveiling of Algerian women that metaphorically allude to the conquest of Algeria. Such an intervention, in betraying supremacist intentions behind the pseudo-ethnographic guise of the postcards, however, has its own limitations. Alloula states that"[t]he postcard can represent them [Algerian women] in this way, runs the rationalization, because that which established and maintained the prohibition around them, namely male society, no longer exists" (122). The masculinist undertone of Alloula's act of writing back has been targeted in a substantial body of critical writings. For example, as Carol Shioss observes, Alloula's "cultural dialogue . . . remains male-centered and concerned with women as property and as symbolic marks of (dis)honor or status for the men in their families" ("Algeria, Conquered by Postcard" n.pag.). Alloula's critique conveys little concern for these women as human beings. Shioss continues: "If Algerian women were vulnerable and disgraced by their original display on colonial postcards, they are

once again exposed by their display in this book. Their images leave them still silent and newly imprisoned by the very text that purports to liberate them" (n.pag.). Whether during the colonial age — as an important target to break and subdue the colonized man and a key to modernization — or particularly in struggles for independence, women and their bodies have been symbolically significant and instrumentally useful. In the case of the Muslim woman, the veil and the role it played in the history of colonization are important motifs that display women's ambivalent position in between tradition and modernity. The public burning of veils by French colonial forces in Algeria, as well as the exclusion of women from participation in post-independence nationalist projects despite their active participation in the movement, exemplify the ways in which they are treated as "symbols of both the colony's resistance *and* its vulnerability to penetration" (Woodhull qtd. in Helie 276,).[23] In these moments of clash between two sets of patriarchal power systems, the reality of women's disadvantaged position become visible. According to Nasrin Rahimieh, there is a convergence in colonizers' views and those of Algerian men in that the latter confer no more agency to women than the French photographer does, since both "considered women their exclusive property" (40). Alloula's revisionist act of writing back, then, reveals the ways in which various hierarchies of power play out in discursive representations of the Muslim woman. Rahimieh rightly suggests "[i]f, as it seems, the male Orientals contributed as much as Europeans to the creation of the myth of Oriental woman, then the magnitude of the power exerted by the colonizer is, at least partially, determined by the colonized" (40-41). The

[23] For a detailed analysis of the semiotics of the veil see Chapter Three.

interconnectedness of gender and race in these representations reveals the ways in which indigenous voices might be complicit in perpetuation of Orientalist discursive practices. Alloula's act of nationalist resistance to colonialism through re-presenting and re-circulating the postcards repeats the binary manner of conceiving women's borderline location between tradition and modernity.

Hirsi Ali's position in dealing with Muslim women's bodies and their borderline positionalities is more straightforward than Alloula's since she does not even attempt to present a counter Orientalist discourse. Her own journey of emancipation and delivery into the civilized world starts from her total obeisance and wearing tent-like, head-to-toe covering *hijabs* to her gradual unveiling and awakening into dissidence. This transformation occurred under the influence of the liberal side of her education; it first began when she was exposed to Western literatures and continued later on during her postsecondary education in Holland. It is neither Ali's unveiling nor her loss of faith that is particularly important here; it is the text's binary approach that assigns to women one of the only two available and opposing positionalities in between traditionalism and Western modernity that problematically rewrites the trite notion of individual freedoms in terms of sexual liberties. A simple question to ask is whether or not societies in which sexual liberties are guaranteed are immune against gender-based violence. Hirsi Ali has a point in asserting that the burden of virginity falls mainly on women in most Muslim cultures, yet she fails to mention that the Quran emphasizes the importance of virginity for both men and women and forbids them both from having sex outside of marriage. Moreover, the importance of control of

sexuality is not peculiar to Islam. Both Judaism and Christianity emphasize that people control their sexualities, and if in some cultures men seem to be exempt from such efforts, it does not necessarily reflect the religion's view-point on the issue. For instance, the Bible says: "[f]lee from fornication. Every other sin that a man may commit is outside his body, but he that practices fornication is sinning against his own body" (Corinthians, 5:18).[24] Despite the role culture plays in giving an added emphasis to the issue of virginity as exclusive to women in some societies including Muslim ones, there seems to be no distinction between religious doctrines and cultural practices in the ways in which *Infidel* treats control of sexuality in Islam and the two are constantly conflated.

A similar binary approach in regard to Muslim women's location between tradition and modernity and the issue of sexual freedoms informs Nafisi's memoir. On one occasion, Nassrin, one of the students, describes her first-hand experience of living in-between "tradition and change" (53). Her mother, contrary to her secular and modern upbringing, had fallen in love with her religious, grim face father who was her teacher in the American school she used to attend (53). After their marriage, she started wearing a *chador* (Iranian women's traditional *hijab* that covers the whole body) and left the school, her English and French lessons, and a promising future for the mundane domestic life of a housewife (53). She left her world for her husband, and except for teaching her daughters English and making "weird food, fancy French food" as Nassrin's father used to call it, nothing of her old life style found its way into her husband's home (54). Despite all these sacrifices that Nassrin's mother made, she remained the outsider in her

[24] See also Corinthians 5:8-10.

husband's family. While Nassrin attributes a great deal of her proficiency in English to her mother's teachings, she also expresses her surprise at her luck for this opportunity since she finds it "[r]ather strange for a Muslim woman" to know English and to teach it to her kids. She states that her mother "should have taught [them] Arabic, but she never learned the language" (54). These remarks either indicate grave naivety, or speak of a deliberate factual distortion about the relationship between language and religion on the part of the narrative. English has been taught as a second language in schools in Iran for many decades before and after the regime change and up to the present day. Those who had attended high school would have learned the language. Teaching English in Iran is certainly not a phenomenon peculiar to American schools of pre-revolution times. The post hoc reasoning about the relationship between having proficiency in Arabic language and being a Muslim is even more problematic than the first hypothesis about the English language. Given the fact that, similar to English and French, Arabic and Farsi use common letters and sounds, even if Muslims know how to read the Qur'an, this ability is not necessarily a proof of their comprehension skills, nor is it an indication of their proficiency in Arabic language. Many Iranian Muslims are able to read the text of the Qur'an without being able to understand it or to communicate in Arabic. The question that inevitably pops up in my mind is whether or not this person knows that prior to Islam, and also after its advent, many Arabs have been practicing other religions. For many Arab Jews and Arab Christians, Arabic is the first and foremost medium of communication. Furthermore, there is no distinction between

manifestations of Islam, not as necessarily a religious but more as an identitarian category in the narrative. Being Muslim can include a various range of religious, social, cultural, and historical elements in one's experience, and by no means should it be treated as an indication of a person's espousal of the faith and his/her level of observance (Malak 5-7). Once again, the irreconcilability of being religious and being modern reappears in the form of a sharp divide that occurs between acts such as: wearing *hijab* or going out unveiled; quitting school or having an education; becoming a housewife or having a career and in putting English and Arabic languages in irreconcilably conflicting positions. Even worse, Nassrin's sorrow about her mother's loneliness, notwithstanding the latter's love for her husband, makes her wish that her mother "would commit adultery or something" (54). The question to ask is why a Muslim woman's act of insubordination should always be limited to sexual rebellion: why does the Muslim woman's body more often than not serve as the site on which both oppression and assertion of individuality put their mark?

Indeed, the average Muslim woman that emerges out of the pages of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Infidel* is again a passive victim, devoid of a sense of self, veiled, subservient, and subjugated. She epitomizes a singular category that Miriam Cooke dubs as "Muslimwoman". In "Deploying the Muslimwoman" Cooke introduces this cosmopolitan and singular identificatory category in transnational domain that "overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity" (91). She links this phenomenon to the post-9/11 atmosphere of Islamophobia: a "religious and gendered identification" which has

appeared as an outcome of imposition of "outside forces, whether non-Muslims or Islamist men," and is "increasingly tied to the idea of the veil" (91). This category is driven by the binary logic that assumes women as a border beings located in between the inside and outside world, turning them into symbolic entities that become substitutes "for all norms and values of the umma" (93), negatively for the Westerners and more positively for the Islamists. Even though Cooke attributes the creation of this collective category to the outsider, and to predominantly male forces, as the two aforementioned autobiographical accounts demonstrate, the category is also being reworked and perpetuated by women insiders whose narratives have become sites of cultural authenticity. They buy into the binary logic of this singular category and reiterate the already known Orientalist frames of reference concerning Muslim women. This singular category, Cooke maintains, can, nevertheless, positively function as a primary site of identification for women to be later on "deconstructed" and transformed specifically in transcultural domains (93). She mentions some Middle Eastern and African authors such as Hanan al-Shaykh, Nawal El-Saadawi, Leila Aboulela, and Mohja Kahf whose writings have successfully complicated a monolithic understanding dictated by the category "Muslimwoman" (*Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* 53-54).

Another feature of the New Orientalist narratives that appeals to the readers is the authors' hybrid positionalities. Being located in-between cultures and world views could be a promising position to be in: it conveys what Mary Louise Pratt considers the potentiality of dialogue, negotiation, and contestation of dominant

discourses as well as the reciprocity between the mainstream and the marginal (102). However, the inclusion of transcultural voices does not necessarily indicate their success in alteration of the received conceptions about the places and people they talk about, nor do they make these people more human in the eyes of the readers who have little familiarity with the worlds these narratives represent. Indeed, melting geographical frontiers does not necessarily mean the removal of culturally or racially erected barriers. Moreover, potentialities of the in-between position should not undercut the complexities of hybridity and the political and economic causes that underlie global movements and the reality of postcolonial and transcultural contexts as sites of unequal power relations with various levels of power hierarchies in local and global contexts. Therefore, the question of the resilience of Orientalist frames of reference about the Muslim woman, now in a wider global context of neo-Imperialist relations, cannot be analyzed without looking into intricacies of larger power and knowledge discursive formations as well as historical specificities that impact such relationships. Minoo Moallem in "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation" suggests that in order to know the extent to which the category "Muslimwoman" could function as a site for resistance and activism, one needs to carefully examine and historicize this category and not in isolation from "its imperialist and nationalist subtext" (107). Spivak's illuminating readings of the grand narratives of Enlightenment humanism and Hinduism in *A Critique of the Postcolonial Reason* have best articulated the contours and perils of this in-between position granted to a few select she calls the "native informant". It is a term whose trajectory goes back to

the discipline of anthropology and serves as a guide in critical engagement with reading literary representations and historical and cultural texts. The "native informant" phenomenon entails granting an elite class of migrant, postcolonial, and feminist intellectual women of the Third World a pre-existing circumscribed subjective position in the masculine system of Western rationality at the expense of the less privileged others and thus is complicit in the project of imperialism and exploitation.

In chapter one of her book and prior to unfolding the discussion about *Lolita*, Nafisi compares and contrasts two photographs that respectively display the reading group in public and private spaces. Nafisi, borrowing from Nabokov, refers to both as the embodiment of a 'fragile unreality' of life in Iran. Women in the former photo appear in their dark robes and *hijabs* that signify the wide gap between who they want to be and what they have become as a result of being "shaped by someone else's dreams" (24). The latter portrays them at home and without those covers; it also frames the beauty of nature and mountains seen in the background. Yet this seemingly unfettered scene represents another "unreality" (24) because, as Nafisi rightly observes, it is a mere façade for the bitter reality of the outside world which she calls the realm of "the bad witches and furies" lurking everywhere and ready to turn women into "hooded creatures of the first" (24). More than once, Nafisi compares Lolita's plight with the situation in Iran in the aftermath of the revolution when people especially women were turned into "figments of someone else's imagination," (25, 50) and, as proof, she compares the state of laws regarding women before and after the government

change. The former, she believes, was one of "the most progressive" ones in the world (27). Nafisi appears as an advocate of the modernization project in pre-revolutionary Iran. It could be argued, though, that the project of modernization is no better in turning Iranian women into "figments of someone else's imagination" than its post-revolutionary foil, since the Iranian Constitution in 1906, as Parvin Padidar observes, was modeled after the 1831 Belgian Constitution with the intention of modernizing the country by emulating Western models of progress (qtd. in Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* 1).The reality is that the battle over women's bodies has been an ongoing issue in the country and the pre-revolution era of Pahlavi regime was not, in essence, much different in this respect. People have not forgotten the forced de-veiling of women (as well as men's adoption of Western style clothes) as Reza Shah's first steps towards modernization translated as the forced liberation of many women from their veils in 1936. Iranian modernity in its origination in the late nineteenth century was, to a great extent, influenced by the ideals of Western modernity.[25] By the same token, the discourse of feminism advocated by elite Persian women during the late nineteenth and Pahlavi reign was informed by the discourse of Western feminism and its ideas of emancipation and its thesis of global sisterhood.[26] As we know, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her copiously quoted essay "Under the Western Eye," has argued that the relations between women in the discourse of global sisterhood are not a relation of "correspondence or simple implication"

[25] See Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 for an analysis of modernity in Iran.

[26] For a detailed discussion of this relationship see Nima Naghibi, *Rethinking Global sisterhood*, 2007.

(334). This relation conveys similar unequal power relations that address colonial relations and, thus, some feminist writers "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular "third world woman" (334). As Nima Naghibi observes in *Re-thinking Global Sisterhood*, in the case of the Iranian woman "the discourses of modernity and sisterhood intersect to position the Persian woman as the subjugated and passive Other to the modern (Western) female subject" (1). Moreover, she notes that the discourse of sisterhood advocated by "Pahlavi feminists" and their professed "solidarity" with their Western counterparts maintained this hierarchical relation amongst Iranian sisters as well (xvii). As a key component of Pahlavi regime, the ideology of modernization and Westernization, as Moallem argues, was promoted in a dichotomizing and racializing manner; the regime advocated the superiority of the West at the expense of the local culture. She continues, one obvious outcome of this perspective was fortifying rigid boundaries between the modern and the traditional. The "naturalization" of the state, Moallem points out, sanctioned a form of modern femininity engineered through deploying systems of control and discipline in the form of "national performance, modernist education, and print and media representations" (*Between the Warrior Brother and the Veiled Sister* 3). Nafisi's statements about women's condition in pre-revolutionary Iran do not reflect the intersections of these oppositional pro-Western and anti-Western modernities. At the end of the chapter, the author points to a fundamental difference between her students' generation and hers. She says:

> My generation complained of a loss, the void in our lives that was created when our past was stolen from us . . . . Yet we had a past to compare with the present; we had memories and images of what had been taken away. But my girls spoke constantly of stolen kisses, films they had never seen and the wind they had never felt on their skin. This generation had no past. Their memory was of a half-articulated desire, something they had never had. It was this lack, their sense of longing for the ordinary, taken-for-granted aspects of life, that gave their words a certain luminous quality akin to poetry. (76)

These words would have us assume Iranian women and their conception of their past as a homogenous totality. According to Douglas Crets, the passage implies that "in general," Iranian women "lacked a sense of self". He continues, "Reading fiction demonstrated, painfully, this hole in their lives – but then provided a way for them to find, and define, themselves. Trapped by a regime that refused the possibility of a private world of moral complexities, these ideas could come from no other source than Western literature" ("Review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi" n.pag.). These comments speak of a serious misconception about Iranian women, a misconception that turns them into passive victims that could do nothing but imagine — through reading Western literature — living a different life. At the same time, such misconceptions reduce Iranian women's issues to those that mainly concern sexual freedoms. In addition, the remarks about the role of Western literature as the only available resort for these women confirm the

view about the silencing tendencies of the New Orientalist narratives that espouse misconceptions about local cultures. In the absence of "issues of poverty, food, housing, education and the repercussions of the Iran-Iraq war", Mitra Rastegar notes, the narrative is similar to "Western human rights discourse on the Third World to focus on such practices of regulating women's bodies. . . " (116). Not surprisingly then, such reviews hail "a set of class-biased priorities and perceptions regarding hardships under the Islamic Republic become authenticated as the priorities of all Iranian women" (Rastegar 116).

In a similar vein, Hirsi Ali builds up her narrative on a series of binaries that follow the "civilizational thinking" common to the classical Orientalist discourse that, according to Moallem, "constructs Islam in cultural essentialist forms as the incarnation of barbaric otherness and religious violence as located outside modernity in the so-called premodern zone of tradition in danger of breaking into the space/time of the civilized and modern West" ("Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation" 108-109). In the memoir's polarized logic, modernity - as associated with the Enlightenment -, reason, and technological advancements is opposed to a blind faith that represents the absence of all these epitomized by the deplorable conditions of women in Islam. According to Meyda Yeğenoğlu in *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, there is a link between "representation of cultural and sexual difference" and "the discursive constitution of otherness" (2). Yeğenoğlu discusses this phenomenon in the work of Western female Orientalists yet, again, Hirsi Ali's thesis of Islam as the Other of the West, particularly its degenerate cultural practices and treatment and

control of women's bodies and sexualities, reveals that the phenomenon is not specific to the classical Orientalist narratives produced by Westerners.

As with Nafisi, for Hirsi Ali the only resource to immunize her against such paralyzing teachings of the religion is Western literature, whether great classical works or "the trashy" romance novels helping her experience rebellion from inside (*Infidel* 94). In fact, attending Muslim Girls' school in Kenya opens up a whole new world to Hirsi Ali. "At Muslim Girls'," she recounts:

> [A] dainty Luo woman called Mrs. Kataka taught us literature. We read *1984*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *the Thirty-Nine Steps*. Later we read English translation of Russian novels . . . . We imagined British moors in *Wuthering Heights* and the fight for racial equality in South Africa in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. An entire world of Western ideas began to take shape . . . . All these books, even the trashy ones, carried with them—Ideas—races were equal, women were equal to men—and concepts of freedom, struggle, and adventure that were new to me. Even our plain old biology and science textbooks seemed to follow a powerful narrative: you went out with knowledge and sought to advance humanity. (*Infidel* 69)

It is quite surprising that this passage glosses over the substantial body of scholarship exploring the complicated role of cultural productions, specifically literature, in maintaining uneven power relations. Ethnocentric implications or the particular "worlding" that, according to Spivak, fashions the Third World for the consumption of the First world has been a part and parcel of the ideological

phenomenon that controls "the cultural representation of England to the English" ("Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" 243) and between men and women of the First World. Yet, the narrative, in a naïve and unquestioning manner, glorifies the message of equality of humans irrespective of race and gender in *all* these books.

Not only is the way in which the knowledge, progress, and advancement of humanity are strung together prognostic of the civilizational thesis *Infidel* promotes, but the way it represents virtues such as equality and respect for humanity as mainly Western virtues is problematic. According to the narrative, these values are so rooted in Western cultures that even reading "trashy" literature and lowbrow romance novels engender liberating thoughts in the reader's mind. The issue of gender equality, however, becomes suspect when one considers the target readership of these novels and what these narratives imply in regard to the gender hierarchy within Western cultures. The romance novels with their promise of finding true love (within the perimeters of a heteronormative system) and prosperity for their heroines provide fantasy escapes for a female readership tired of day to day financial struggles and unequal gender dynamics in private and public circles. The promise of escape and power does not correspond to the reality of life in Western societies. As Leslie Rabine in "Romance in the Age of Electronics" points out, "[the] average woman . . . finds herself contending with a masculine power both at home and at work. By combining the sexual domination of a lover and the economic domination of an employer in the same masculine figure, Harlequins draw attention to the specificity of the contemporary feminine

situation" (979). Thus, Hirsi Ali's narrative is, first of all, insensitive to the socio-economic context of the emergence of these romances in 1960s and 1970s in the West and the link between the two (Rabine 979). Secondly, by fantasizing a world of women's triumph in finding the perfect partner in a heterosexual relationship, these romance novels offer some "emotional gratification" for a basically female readership (Janice Radway 585) whose real-life relationships are far removed from the ideal world imagined in these romances.

As we previously saw, reviews praise *Reading Lolita in Tehran* for its promoting the "universal" values endorsed by literature. Finding reciprocal relations between one's life and those of characters that populate the worlds of novels is a part of the reading experience, but attributing the job of cultivating "universal" values, particularly freedom, only to Western literatures as the main source of such values is already problematic. Indeed, one of the symptoms of the book's endorsing an Orientalist approach is its glorifying anything Western as superior as well as its remaining silent about corresponding potentialities in non-Western cultures and literatures. Given the political and societal atmosphere of Iran in the years after the revolution and particularly during the years of Iran-Iraq war, it is not difficult to understand the unfavorable atmosphere for anything pro-Western culture as part of the reality of those years that Nafisi's work addresses. Nevertheless, the risk attributed to reading and teaching Western literature in post-revolutionary Iran in the memoir seems a bit exaggerated. The book does not acknowledge the possibility of any change occurring in Iranian society during the time of the victory of the revolution, or when Nafisi decides to say farewell to her

homeland for good. In fact simple, everyday acts such as "eating ice cream in public, falling in love, holding hands, wearing lipstick, and laughing in public" (55) that, according to Nafisi, were once regarded outrageous if done in public in the aftermath of revolution had lost their sensitivity as taboos even before she had left the country. The Iran Nafisi came home to in 1979 was not the one she left in 1997, but the narrative is silent on this important transformation. It is somewhat incomprehensible why the author juxtaposes the significance of "reading *Lolita* in Tehran" (55) with such everyday activities as eating ice cream and laughing in public. Given the sociopolitical conditions of the country, this juxtaposing seems to indicate the extent to which such an act of reading could have been transgressive. Ultimately, it endows reading Western literatures in post-revolutionary Iran with more significance than it might have actually had especially because the novel in question, as Nafisi herself states, had created so much controversy among critics in the West (40).

The testimonial validity given to the personal voice and experience in autobiographical accounts of Muslim women for providing a peek into the "truth" of their cultures emboldens me to shift for a moment to my personal experience as an Iranian woman to help shed some light on the issue of reading Western literatures in Iran. I was doing my Masters in the University of Tehran (where Nafisi first started her teaching career as a professor) during the last couple of years of Nafisi's stay in Iran. Among the literary works we covered in a course on the novel, I can recall Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Franz Kafka's *the Castle*. Obviously, the formal and reserved

atmosphere of classroom did not allow for the kind of critique that took place in the private sphere of the author's house, but we were introduced to many interesting ideas and world views and had spirited scholarly conversations in those classes. Moreover, I was exposed to the polyphony of voices of scholars such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Greenblatt, Eagleton, and many others in those years, and I learned about various groundbreaking critical approaches and philosophies such as structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction, new historicism, feminism, and reader response theory in our courses on literary criticism. What I'm trying to say is that my personal experience during my Masters program in Iran provided exposure to anti-logocentric tenets of thought: I am unable, therefore, to share Nafisi's sense of the importance of reading Austen, James, Fitzgerald, and even Nabokov's *Lolita* in achieving a critical perspective. Don't we, as readers, get complicated views of moral complexities of human life and psyche in novels such as *Ulysses* or *The Sound and the Fury*? Do not the convoluted "Kafkaesque" fictional worlds of *The Castle* and *The Metamorphosis* offer to the reader an apt anti-establishment critique of disorientation, alienation, and meaninglessness of life in a totalitarian system?

Another important issue in regard to reading international and particularly Western literatures in Iran is that enjoying other literatures has not been a privilege for a limited number of people competent in the original languages in which those literary masterpieces were written. In fact, many literary masterpieces and/or popular works from all corners of the globe have been available in excellent translations whether before or after the revolution and up to the present

day. A few recent examples that come to mind are *the Harry Potter* series, *The Da Vinci Code*, and *The Kite Runner*; all of which appeared in translation shortly after their original publication in English. I had read novels such as Austen's *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Wuthering Heights*, Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* and works by Emile Zola, and many others in translation in my teen years after the victory of the Islamic revolution and during the time of Iran-Iraq war. Finding translations of the works by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges was not difficult, either. I also recall purchasing copies of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Woolf's *To the Light House*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, all translated by outstanding Iranian translators during my undergraduate years, which was around 1990. My hometown is Mashhad, one of the five most important cities in Iran, located in the north-eastern part of the country. Obviously, Mashhad is not on par, in terms of cultural capital, with Tehran, the hub of culture in which Nafisi was located, and so Nafisi could not have been unaware of such cultural possibilities within Iran during those decades. If it has been difficult to find Western literatures in original languages in the market in post-revolution Iran, spotting many of those titles in translation was not a difficulty. And clearly, many of these works are far from dealing with safe subjects that do not involve issues such as sex and politics. My point is that reading Western literatures in post-revolution Iran has not been such a big deal, at least the way *Reading Lolita in Tehran* wants to convince us. Moreover, apart from the anti-Western policies of the government in the aftermath of the revolution that made having access to Western cultural and artistic productions difficult, there are certainly other issues

that, in a broader sense, could have impacted the trade policies involving import and export between Iran and the Western world. The lack of access to works of literature in English is mainly attributed to the Iranian regime in the narrative, but it should be noted that continued coercive policies of enforcing sanctions on Iran by the U.S. and some of its European allies have also influenced the transit of the Western cultural products.

Reading Lolita in Tehran starts and ends with brief references to Scheherazade and *A Thousand and One Nights*, yet apart from these fleeting remarks, its focus is on Anglo-American canonical literatures. The memoir is, indeed, guilty for its negligence of Persian culture and the rich literary heritage Iranian people are particularly proud of. The absence of any explanation about the capacities of classical or contemporary Persian art, literature, and particularly, the internationally successful Iranian cinema should not escape the watchful reader's attention. In her timely literary rebuttal of Nafisi's memoir, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, Fatemeh Keshavarz addresses this gap by introducing and analyzing a variety of literary works from different genres produced by classical and contemporary masterminds of Iranian literature such as Attar, Saadi, Hafez, Rumi, Nizami of Ganjeh, and female contemporary literary figures such as the poet, Forugh Farrokhzad, and the novelist, Shahrnoosh Parsipur. Kashavarz hopes that her book offers a more comprehensive view about Iran and Iranians and aims to provide "a meaningful excursion into modern-day Iran: a culture as charming, creative, humorous, and humane as any" other culture (5-6). Indeed, challenging dominant ideologies is by no means an unfamiliar

practice in the scene of Persian letters. Interestingly, some of the most well known stars of Persian literature–such as Rumi, who is also "the most popular and widely read poet in the Western world," (Will Johnson 8) the master of ambivalence in mystic poetry, Hafez, and Forough Farrokhzad, the most famous woman in the history of Persian literature–are cases in point.

Interestingly, a similar silencing tendency concerning the existence of liberating models in non-Western local cultures with which Hirsi Ali comes into the contact informs her autobiography. Whether this huge paucity is the result of the author's unfamiliarity with the language of the indigenous literatures (for instance Arabic language), or of the young age at which Hirsi Ali came into contact with at least one of these cultures, or of intentional omission on her part, the end result is a notable absence of local literatures in the book. It is hard to believe that there exists no indigenous literatures promoting human values in these places, and that no literary genres in these literatures can be found to imagine modes of resistance against mechanisms of human subjugation, especially by women. How is it possible that an educated Somalian woman, in love with reading and keen on changing women's disadvantaged position, does not mention the bright star of the Somali literature, Nuruddin Farah, whose concern in many of his novels is women's issues? At least one modern Saudi Arabian counterpart to the romance novels Hirsi Ali used to read as a teenager is *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea, which explores the secret lives of rich Saudi youngsters and their account of seeking forbidden pleasures in the highly segregated Saudi society. This novel cannot boast high literary value and is

perhaps a counterpart of the Western "trashy" romances Hirsi Ali recalls, yet the value that such popular works might have is that, at least, they pose a challenge to sweeping generalizations made by the New Orientalist narratives such as *Infidel* about the lives of women in Muslim societies, and particularly in this case, in Saudi Arabia. These generalizations deprive Saudi Arabian women of any sort of will or agency to react to the mechanisms involved in restricting their lives and personal freedoms. The slightest contribution of *Girls of Riyadh* is its capacity to challenge Hirsi Ali's assumption about the purity of the religion in Saudi Arabia and the possibility that it remains intact in its place of inception.[27] Hirsi Ali asserts "[t]he kind of thinking I saw in Saudi Arabia, and among the Muslim Brotherhood in Kenya and Somalia, is incompatible with human rights and liberal values. It preserves a feudal mind-set based on tribal concepts of *honor and shame*. It rests on self deception, hypocrisy, and double standards . . . . This mind-set makes the transition to *modernity* very painful for all who practice Islam" (353). Given the interconnectivity of the capitalist mind-set and this conception of modernity, perhaps capitalism needs to account for a similar accusation in terms of "hypocrisy" and "double standards" that assume some as more human than others.

Hirsi Ali's diagnosis is familiar: the root of the problem lies in the lack of separation between religion and politics, and in the absence of a movement parallel to the Enlightenment in the world of Islam. This contested view reduces the totality of Islam to its Arabic origins; it conflates the so-called purist and

[27] For a study of the role of Internet in women's networking in Saudi Arabia see Miriam Cooke's *Women Claim Islam*, 2000.

extremist practices of Islam with the religion itself as well. It is also symptomatic of an un-nuanced understanding of modernity, one that collapses the category to Western modernity and that, as Leila Abu-Lughod points out, dismisses the idea of an "alternative modernity" (4) in non-Western Muslim societies. Furthermore, as Spivak has brilliantly spelled out, the issue of the "freedom for the rational will" is a loaded issue and its constitution goes back to the Western philosophical discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the foregrounding of a universal idea of the ethical subject in the classical narratives of Kant, Hegel, and Marx (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* 6). Hirsi Ali seems to be unaware of the problematic side of these grand narratives of Enlightenment humanism and their implications for the native informants such as herself.

Infidel's analysis of the Somali's deplorable present condition and the continued violence and bloodshed in Somalia presents the cause of the misery as mainly an internal flaw of the country, bred of tribal bigotry and prejudice, and inculcated into every Somali child from an early age. This process continues to affect his/her socialization skills among peers at school even after immigration to the West. The author's experience as an interpreter brings her to prisons and penitentiaries in Holland where she observes that the majority of allegations "were violent assault cases" (244); "Somalis weren't usually involved in stealing or dealing drugs. But if Somali men disagree, losing their temper and grabbing a weapon is almost second nature. One man had hit his landlord on the head with a hammer when he came to the flat to ask for the rent" (244). In another case that

concerned a child beating his classmate, she points out, “Doing this was completely congruent with his upbringing. In Somalia you attack. You hit first. If you wait to be hit, you’ll only be bullied more. I was taught that too” (244). In either case, the main reason for the problem is the Somali (and by extension Muslims) themselves. In other words, the problem is the outcome of internal societal elements. She doesn’t inquire into the external reasons (such as socio-historical factors) for instigating violence deep into the fabric of society and as a survival strategy. There is no doubt that internal fractions and the tribal conflicts in Somalia are major hurdles in the country’s achieving peace and stability, yet one wonders why there is almost no discussion of the long history of foreign occupation and its influence on the present state of affairs in Somalia, its state of economy and development. Somali’s modern history is marked by either the physical presence of Western powers, or their interference in internal and foreign affairs of the country as well as political and economic ramifications of such involvements. Somali had been a British protectorate from the late nineteenth century up until 1969. Its geopolitical importance also brought it under the rule of Italian and French governments without the slightest meaningful development in terms of agriculture and industry. Foreign influence did not come into termination in post-independence decades. Indeed, the coming into power of the socialist regime of Siad Barre, and the declaration of socialism in 1970s, introduced a new range of transformations especially during the Cold War era, which couldn’t be but influential in the contemporary state of the country. The West German support of Somali government in the war against Ethiopia, the financial aid the Soviet

Union gave to Somali regime during the Cold War and before the ascendancy of the socialist government of Mengistu in Ethiopia as well as the occurrence of draughts between 1972 -1974 and in 1992 make it hard to believe that the blame for Somali's present state of anarchy and violence falls squarely on Somali people's shoulders, particularly when the relationship between domination of the First and Third Worlds (for example the colonial reality) is masked in the narrative by an overriding attitude about internal conflicts as well as the role of the religion as the main reason for the barbarity and backwardness that plagues the country.[28]

With the continued commendation of the Dutch society in the memoir, few references are made (except for a brief note) to the Dutch history of colonization and presence in other countries. The narrative does not linger on the establishment of the Dutch West India Company and its domination over the parts of the Atlantic, the Americas, the West coast of Africa, and the consequent decimation, exploitation, and slavery of the native population. It might be argued that such a history is not the focus of the narrative; however, since Hirsi Ali's deep admiration of the Dutch system of human relationships, its respect for individual rights, and the humanitarian treatment she receives from the beginning of her arrival in Holland is in contrast to the deep contempt she has for what she believes to be human relations based on doctrines of Islam, a deeper look into Holland's history is necessary. She states: "[l]ife is better in Europe than it is in the Muslim world because human relations are better, and one reason human relations are

[28] For the historical information on Somaliland, I visited World History at KMLA. 10 Aug.2008. See <http://www.zum.de/whkmla/region/eastafrica/xsomaliland.html> for more information.

better is that in the West, life on earth is valued in the here and now, and individuals enjoy rights and freedoms that are recognized and protected by the state. To accept subordination and abuse because Allah willed it—that, for me, would be self-hatred" (348). The narrative seems to choose not to see the violence that turns outward towards the other by Europeans, but instead, focuses on the Somali violence that turns inward, and thus, it is basically the gendered based violence within Somali culture that receives most of the author's attention.

Hirsi Ali's references to Dutch history include its civil war and the bloodshed that occurred as a result of religious incompatibilities between Catholics and Protestants, ones finally resolved four hundred years ago, in the age of Enlightenment through the exclusion of the church from the politics of the state. The focus on this conflict is, again, its internal and religious nature that, according to the tenets of Western secularist ideology, should be restricted to personal domains of life. One wouldn't forget that the Enlightenment, with its glorification of individual liberties and civic peace, also coincides with the expansion of the Dutch empire overseas, an initiative that resulted in the violation of individual rights of "other" people beyond the Dutch borders. It is curious that Hirsi Ali chooses to gloss over these pages of the history except for a few fleeting remarks about the infamous ways the country behaved in Indonesia, or its guilt over the treatment of the Jews in the course of the Second World War. Hirsi Ali concludes that the government's flexibility in its non-coercive multicultural policy is in part an attempt to compensate for the guilt of the past in dealing with its others, but without really questioning "the guilt" itself (245-46).

Hirsi Ali's central agenda appears in what she calls her book's message. She declares, "[*We*] in the West would be wrong to prolong the pain of that transition [transition to modernity] unnecessarily, by elevating cultures full of bigotry and hatred toward women to the stature of respectable alternative ways of life" (348, emphasis added). She critiques multiculturalism for encouraging immigrants to create miniature versions of their backward societies in the heart of the advanced West and continue an isolationist style of living which perpetuates the traditional and barbaric structures of their cultures of origin. Her ideas ring similar to those in Susan Okin's "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?". Okin's essay asserts the incompatibility of multiculturalism and feminism. It is a liberal feminist critique of the policy of multiculturalism in allowing for curbing of individual rights, especially women's rights, by giving free reign to patriarchal and misogynist practices, and for continuing to oppress women in the name of group rights. She lists a broad range of diverse practices such as veiling, polygamy, clitoridectomy, and child marriage without elaborating on their context of practice and significance. The climatic point of the essay is when Okin suggests a solution to end the continuation of women's subjugation in the name of multiculturalis: that it is probably better that such cultures entirely "become extinct" (22).

Okin is right in her concerns about the internal power mechanisms within groups and the ensuing infringement of individual rights that tend to pale into insignificance in the light of the discourses such as multiculturalism that promote group rights. She is also right when she notes that women's rights are human rights and therefore, "when a woman from a more patriarchal culture" comes to a

liberal state, she shouldn't be "less protected from male violence than other women are" (20). However, as Bonnie Honig observes, addressing the contextual specificity and the meaning of such practices is important. She aptly notes that it is also necessary to probe into the "question of what constitutes male violence, and what counts as sex inequality, and what exactly 'culture' and its extinction have to do with either of these things" ("My Culture Made me Do it" 36). She notes that the concept of violence itself, irrespective of the ethnic and religious identity with which it is associated, is not probed into in Okin's study (36). Edward Said in the introduction to *Culture and Imperialism* states, "In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them,' almost always with some degree of xenophobia" (xiii). Okin's analysis and her demand for the extinction of some cultures (22) reveal such fears fueled by incomprehension of the other. According to Honig, Okin's essay implies a conflation of difference "with 'culture' and 'culture' with foreignness" (39). I suggest that Hirsi Ali goes farther than Okin, since she explicitly associates not just her nation or culture, but Islam in its entirety, with irrationality, violence, and barbarity. The way Ali's narrative constructs Somalia as the problem, and its women as the passive recipients of violence under the illusion of submitting to Allah, implies that women are unable to make any changes in their deplorable conditions as long as they adhere to Islam. As Homi Bhabha states, the more serious problem in this "inappropriate application of 'external' norms is the way in which the norms of Western liberalism become at once the measure and mentor of minority cultures—Western

liberalism, warts and all, as a salvage operation, if not salvation itself. With a zealousness not unlike the colonial civilizing mission . . .” (“Liberalism's Sacred Cow” 83). Bhabha refers to an important misconception in Okin’s theory that is chronologically and geographically confining. He critiques the civilizational tendencies in Okin’s argument that suggest only external forces can function as elements of change. Bhabha notes that “Asian and Middle Eastern feminists . . . from the 1920s onward, have been deeply engaged in those contradictions of the liberal tradition that become particularly visible in the colonial and postcolonial contexts, and carry over into the contemporary lives of diasporic or migratory communities” (83). He calls theirs “agonistic liberalism” because it “has to struggle against ‘indigenous’ patriarchies — political and religious — while strategically negotiating its own autonomy in relation to the paternalistic liberalisms of colonial modernity or Westernization” (83).

Hirsi Ali is one of the so called not “co-opted” (Okin 24) younger women who answer Okin’s call by asking to put an end to “elevating cultures full of bigotry” (Hirsi Ali 348). Similar to Okin, Hirsi Ali perceives Somali culture (and by extension Islam) as being essentially violent without looking deeper into the concept of violence and irrespective of its ethnic or religious components, as if violence were peculiar to certain cultures and not the liberal societies. There are also socio-economic factors that complicate the issue of violence in diaspora. Hibaaq Osman’s observations on the changes in gender roles within families in diaspora show that “[w]omen's roles have been revolutionized by the absence of men or by their failure to attend to the daily survival of their families” as a result

of the outbreak of the civil war in Somalia (Osman 12). Unemployment and the need to depend on the welfare system have a negative impact on men, who can then no longer perform their traditional roles as the breadwinners of their family. Such changes in gender mechanisms within the household could be degrading for many men and serve as potential sources of conflicts within the family unit. Moreover, there are considerable differences between immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in terms of their ability and speed in adjusting to their new conditions because factors such as choice and relative preparation for the change are not applicable to refuges and asylum seekers who, unlike immigrants, have little power to choose their destination and displacement conditions. Integration is not a one sided story" it is the receiving society as well as the newcomer that give resonance to the issue of integration. Such nuances are not attended to in Hirsi Ali's account.

Hirsi Ali denies that racism might exist in the contemporary Dutch society. She links Somali people's obsession with racism and their silence on the issue of abuse and oppression inside their communities as "a comfort mechanism, to keep people from feeling personally inadequate and to externalize the causes of their unhappiness" (232). There is no doubt that violence, abuse, and harassment of women and children is an ongoing issue with different degree of intensity whether in the West or elsewhere, yet making an assertion about Muslim's way of doing things as the root of all such problems within Muslim communities in diaspora is neither reasonable nor fair since it lumps all the Muslim world from Somalia, Turkey, Morocco, Iran, to Indonesia, or elsewhere together.

The whole world of Muslim immigrants that unfolds in Ali's account is populated by nothing but poor, violent, and uneducated subjects, inarticulate in the language of their host country. There is no single person from Somalia or any other African country that has achieved any success in Holland, except for Hirsi Ali herself. One wonders whether this is factually correct as well. As Hamdi Mohamed's analysis of Somali refugee women in Canada shows, despite the experience of victimization and the hardships they have gone through, these women are not victims. In fact, many of them have successfully managed to balance between both cultures and to craft "a new Somali—Canadian identity" as well as reconstructing a new life ("Resistance Strategies: Somali Women's Struggles to Reconstruct their Lives in Canada" 56). *Infidel* does not reflect the complexities of individual and collective experiences of refugees. Nevertheless, coming from one such backward culture seems enough reason for the truth of Ayaan's testimony. "Having made that journey", Hirsi Ali declares, "*I* know that one of those worlds is simply better than the other. Not because of its flashy gadgets, but fundamentally because of its *values*" (348). Such statements bring to mind Said's dire prediction about today's "triumph of Orientalism" (*Orientalism* 323) happening partially through the collaboration of the indigenous elite by virtue of their Western education and their role in "[repeating] to their local audiences the clichés" of what he calls their "Orientalist dogmas" (324). Even though the presence of other voices (native or non-native) calls into question the assumption about Orientalism as triumphant, these popular accounts prove to be legitimate heirs to classical Orientalism and the perseverence of Orientalist

discourse. The end product of such an elitist perspective is the emergence of two monoliths that claim to represent the enlightened West versus backward Islam while declaring the incompatibility of religion and reason.

Ultimately, Hirsi Ali's dichotomous approach towards Islam and the West and what it implies for us today can best be understood by the way she regards the relationship between the two, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in terms of the "clash between reason and our religion" (271) and a necessary choice between the two.[29] The mentality behind the terrorist attacks, she maintains, "was not just Islam" but "the core of Islam" (269). The attack exemplifies what the dissemination of a purist approach such as that of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology is capable of. In *Infidel* 9/11 epitomizes the expanse of the consequences of the malignant growth of the phenomenon of the Muslim Brotherhood, its rapid contagion to places such as Nairobi, and its convergence with Islamist extremism in the Muslim world. According to Hirsi Ali "[t]here were tens of thousands of people, in Africa, the Middle East—even in Holland—who thought this way. Every devout Muslim who aspired to practice genuine Islam—the Muslim Brotherhood Islam, the Islam of the Medina Quran schools—even if they didn't actively support the attacks, they must at least approved of them" (269). Thus, 9/11 is the watershed to decide which camp one belongs. Hirsi Ali contemplates ".now I had to make a choice. Which side was I on? I found I couldn't avoid the question" (269). It is hard to believe that she fails to understand the similarity between Bin Laden's assertion that "[e]ither you are with the Crusade, or you are

[29] See the conclusion for further information about the important role this dichotomy plays in the project concerning reforming Islam from within.

with Islam" and Bush's almost identical words in his initiation of "War on Terror". All complexities, all the blurry areas that define a person's identity and his/ her relationship with Islam, collapse in the face of the linearity of Hirsi Ali's narrative and her journey from bondage to freedom via her straightforward choice of reason over the religion.

The representational damage caused by books such as *Infidel* functions like a double-edged sword. It is related to both their uncomplicated and dichotomous portrayals as well as their claim to speak for their subjects. The latter is particularly important in the case of Hirsi Ali since she has represented Muslim women in the Dutch Parliament. The problem with the representational economy of this narrative is that it leaves only one way open for acceptance and belonging to the mainstream Western society. As Mark de Leeuw and Van Wichelen oberve in "'PLEASE, GO WAKE UP!' Submission, Hirsi Ali, and the 'War on Terror in the Netherlands,'" the binary nature of such representations is because of the "linearity" of the logic "of being the ultimate 'other' to becoming one of us" (330) that simplifies the complicated and challenging question of multiple belongings, dual citizenships, and in-between-ness. It leaves no space for any complexity and ambiguity in comprehending identities. Hirsi Ali's journey is a journey from belief into disbelief, from faith to reason, from victimization to emancipation, and from advocating leftist politics to representing the liberal right. Her claim of authentically representing Muslim woman excludes those who are located in-between these poles, but this path cannot be assumed to replicate every Muslim woman's journey from there to here.

This chapter attended to the continuance of the discourse of Orientalism, now in a new register and by Muslim women themselves. Hamid Dabashi calls the Orientalism of today as a "mutant" form of the Orientalisms of yesterday. Dabahsi asserts that changes in the course of history will inevitably transform the relationship between power and knowledge, and he differentiates amongst the plurality of Orientalisms such as:

> the Orientalism of *rivalry*, for example, that was rampant during the Greco-Persian wars and evident in Aeschylus's *Persians*, or the Orientalism of *fear*, as another example, that was evident say during the Ottoman period and quite evident in Mozart's '*Die* Entführung *aus dem Serail*' ("Abduction from the Seraglio" 1782), to Orientalism of *domination* that was coterminous with the classical age of European colonialism. ("Lolita and Beyond" par. 27)

In Dabashi's sociological map of Orientalism, the contemporary brand of Orientalism still hinges upon the relationship between power and knowledge. However, instead of serving in the territorial expansionism of the European empires the "latent Orientalism" of today, he states, is at the service of the U.S. imperial projects, and an ideological machinery that also justifies militarism and invasion. Mohja Kahf's *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: from Termagant to Odalisque* (1999) follows the impact of this shifting power/knowledge dynamics between Islam and the West on the European literary representations of the Muslim woman from Medieval to Romantic ages. The

political, economic, and cultural elements of this relationship, which transforms its dynamics from rivalry and fear to contempt and domination on the part of the West, put their marks on the figure of the Muslim woman so that her "material presence" gradually diminishes and she transforms from the prized, outspoken termagant to the silenced, "deadened", and "absented" odalisque (Kahf 134). In an interview with Foaad Khosmood, Keshavarz draws on the link between knowledge and power and the broader implications involved in reading literature to explain the important role of readership particularly in a democratic society such as the United States of America, where "public opinion does impact foreign policy" (n.pag.). She contends that in the same way that the European empire benefited from the classical Orientalism, New Orientalist writing can contribute to the policies of "neo-liberal capitalist drive" irrespective of an author's original intentions (n.pag.).This chapter is coming to a close at a very complex historical juncture for the international world community. As the world stays on watch over the outcomes of Arab Spring of 2011 and the consequences of transformations of power in Egypt, the active participation of women in the front lines of the movement in various places, and the demand for re-structuring the systems of governance in the region, once again bring Muslim and the Middle Eastern women's question and their prospect of social, political, and economic gains to the public eye. In today's world, telecommunication systems and interactive and social networks provide instant access to the news. It is interesting to see how the availability of images and stories about women's involvement in these decisive historical moments could introduce changes in the stereotypes around the figure

of the veiled Muslim woman. It would also be exciting to see whether or not easy access to different views into the realities of lives of Muslim and Middle Eastern women could change the power and the popularity of *the New* Orientalist narratives and that how such transformations would put a mark on the future of Muslim creative writings in the diaspora.

Chapter Two: How far is it from the Sudan to Scotland? Leila Aboulela's Fiction and Rendition of belief

"He didn't understand. Many things, years and landscapes, gulfs . . . . She would have patiently taught him another language, letters curved like the epsilon and gamma he knew from mathematics . . . If she was not small in the museum, if she was really strong, she would have made his trip to Mecca real, not only in a book" (Leila Aboulela, "The Museum" 119).

These are the concluding sentences in Leila Aboulela's short story "The Museum", which won the first Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 and appeared in her collection of short stories *The Coloured Lights* (2001). As we saw in the first chapter, contrary to her geographical, cultural, and religious ties, Hirsi Ali chooses to locate herself outside Africa. Her representations are, in a similar Orientalist fashion, predicated on the thesis of the exteriority of the world of Islam and its people (Said, *Orientalism* 20). Hirsi Ali's narrative voice, the act of distancing from the society, culture, and religion of her origin through a rhetoric of moral and intellectual superiority of "we in the West," and her linear evolutionary journey from Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya), and Saudi Arabia to Europe (Germany and Netherland), and finally the United States of America, are all indicators of the narrative's foregrounding of the Orientalist thesis of the "positional superiority" of the West. My intention in this chapter is to investigate the ways in which fictional works of Aboulela problematize the representations around Islam produced by the diasporic and immigrant New Orientalist narratives that consciously or unconsciously disseminate the idea of alterity (of Muslims, as

well as Islam) as essentially and "manifestly different" (Said, *Orientalism* 12) from the Western culture and civilization. I will analyze the ways in which this author engages in the challenging task of communicating the experience of being a believer in Islam and particularly in trans-cultural encounters when it is not the mainstream faith in the society. The chapter tracks a multi-faceted journey in Aboulela's work in which her protagonists' outer geographical journeys from Africa to Europe are also translational movements "within" English (Cooper 324) by means of which the author seeks to bring into life a distant culture as well as religion.

Born in Cairo in 1964, Aboulela grew up in Khartoum, Sudan. She studied Statistics at the University of Khartoum. After her marriage, Aboulela moved to London to pursue an MSc in Statistics at the London School of Economics in 1987. Later on, she left for Aberdeen, Scotland and then, Dubai (Eissa n.pag.).Travel plays a pivotal role in Aboulela's writing career; it kindled the flame for writing fiction in her scientific mind. For her, physical separation from home entails a distancing from the culture and the mainstream religion of her host country, Scotland, and writing provides an opportunity to take up the challenge to try to close such a distance in her stories (Saleh, n.pag.). As she has pointed out in an interview with Eisa Saleh in 1992, two factors in her experience of displacement compelled her to take creative writing more seriously: missing Sudan, and the Gulf War. Writing provided an outlet for her feelings of homesickness she was so reticent to speak about. It was also a reaction "against

the Gulf war and the anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the media" (Saleh, n.pag.).

Aboulela's writing is deeply rooted in her religious sensibilities. For example, she draws on the Qura'nic verses to describe the emotional shock she received as a result of her experience of displacement that took her away from the safety and predictability of home. These verses prophesize the end of mankind's life on Earth with a massive geological transformation that, according to the Qur'an, will distort the face of the Earth on Judgment Day with "the sky splitting into paste, melting away like grease" and "the mountains reduced to smithereens" ("Moving Away From Accuracy" 203). In "And my Fate was Scotland," Aboulela recalls having to live outside of the familiar religious atmosphere as the most difficult challenge in adjusting to her new home. She explains: "I moved from heat to cold, from the Third World to the First – I adjusted, got used to the change over time. But in coming to Scotland, I also moved from a religious Muslim culture to a secular one and that move was the most disturbing of all, the trauma that no amount of time could cure, an eternal culture shock" (189). As we will see, cultural encounters and ensuing complications, particularly in terms of the challenges of remaining a practicing Muslim woman, function as an important thematic powerhouse for many of Aboulela's stories. Examining these challenges is pivotal for the purposes of this chapter because Aboulela's works are part of a small but growing body of literature that deals with the ambitious and difficult task of portraying the world through the eyes of a believing immigrant and refugee Muslim women. I will start my argument in this chapter by analyzing an

important short story, "The Museum," which sets the scene for Aboulela's next novel, *The Translator* and contextualizes its translational challenges.

"The Museum" narrates the account of an impossible love story doomed to failure at its inception; it presents what I have called the "challenging" task of crafting a language to talk about a different culture and religion. Through a visit to a local museum in Aberdeen, the story portrays historically rooted obstacles that separate the rich Muslim Sudanese girl, Shadia, and Bryan, her Scottish classmate and a potential lover. The story begins by describing the cultural shock and challenges that Shadia and a group of other students from the Third World face upon coming to Scotland to obtain Master's degrees in statistics. This cultural shock, at first, physically impairs Shadia who feels "like someone tossed around by monstrous waves" (100). She is "battered" and "lost" and cannot find her way, nor can she locate the books she needs in the library. She even has difficulty hearing, seeing, and eating (100). From the beginning, the negative and historically-formed Manichean conceptions draw an impassable border between Shadia, her group of friends, and the rest. She believes that their fate is "predetermined," that they are "[u]s and them . . . . The ones who would do well, the ones who would crawl and sweat and barely pass" (100). Bryan, the brilliant Scottish student with his silver earring and long, soft, feminine hair, who Shadia asks for help, represents the strangeness of the West to her (99). At first, it seems the growth of a relationship between the two might be a possible narrative path: Shadia asks for Bryan's class notes to help her pass the final exam; Bryan seems to become attracted to her; they go to the museum for Bryan

to learn about Africa and Shadia to lessen her homesickness. However, it turns out that the choice of museum is not such a smart pick for a date since both the physical and imagined spaces of the museum plays a role in pulling Shadia and Bryan apart.

Clearly, both the university and the national museum, as hubs of the knowledges of the past and the present, have strong implications about the character of the nation and the makeup of the British Empire. The museum and the role it plays in the colonial narrative of civilization and modernity (Pieprzak 156) makes it even harder to close the gap between Shadia and Bryan. As a result, Shadia feels powerless and small and is unable to communicate with him about Africa and Islam, the two main components of her identity. In the imagined space of the museum, Africa is represented outside of modernity and in need of civilization. A poster reads, "[d]*uring the 18th and 19th centuries, north-east Scotland made a disproportionate impact on the world at large by contributing so many skilled and committed individuals . . . In serving an empire they gave and received, changed others and were themselves changed and often returned home with tangible reminders of their experiences*" (115). These somehow parodic statements on the museum representations point to their ideological role in construction and reproduction of the empire via an account of Scotland's well serving the supposedly uniformed British Empire.

Pieprzak observes that, as a technological prop of modern states, museums serve the "spirit of nationalism" and are meant to "physically unite the culturally and geographically diverse country under one roof" (160). Shadia notices that

this message is not intended for the African. A letter from 1762 reads, "*it was with great difficulty to make the natives understand my meaning, even by an interpreter*" (116). Shadia is repulsed at this misrepresentation of an account of plunder and humiliation of African people as heroic and feels resentful towards Bryan, who seems absorbed in taking in the information but unable to see it in the light that she does. Overwhelmed with the burden to represent and being unable to articulate the reality of this "technological prop," Shadia fails to disclose the lie of the museum.

In "Putting the Hierarchy in its Place" Arjun Appadurai calls Anthropology responsible for the formation of certain ideas and images that turn into "metonymic prisons for particular places" (40).[30] The term "native" is one such term. Such ideas and images, he maintains, cause an "intellectual and spatial confinement" of people to places (38). The problem with them, Appadurai contends, is their act of simplifying cultural complexities by their essentializing, exoticizing and totalizing way of characterizing others (45). Shadia is the proof of such a confining notion of indigeneity and the mobility of the benevolent colonizer who goes to the indigenous population to bring "change". Now, in the condition of postcoloniality, it is the native who has taken the opposite direction to come to the metropolis. The irrelevance of the representations of Africa for the African begs an important question about the intended addressee of such portrayals. These so-called "possessions from Africa" appear to the African

[30] For a comprehensive historiography of Victorian anthology as an intricate result of ethnological, historical, evolutionary, racialist, and biblical paradigms involved in the study of difference and practices of others, see George W. Stocking's *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press, 1987.

onlooker as a shameless display of an account of looting and repression under the guise of the civilizing motif of the narrative of progress. As David Howes in "The Museum as Sensescapes: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts" observes, two accounts of conquest are in play in a colonial museum: the one that narrates an act of physical conquest of a place, and the one that portrays a visual act of conquest. He calls "collecting" "a form of conquest" and regards "collected artefacts" as "signs of victory over their former owners and places of origin" (209). Howes explains that the integration of these artefacts into their "new social order requires the reduction of artefacts to "the visual, or–from a Western perspective–being civilized into the visual" which itself speaks of a symbolic act of disciplining the indigenous people's senses and sensory presences (210). In the story, there is a contrast between the ugly "life-like wispiness "of the Scottish colonizer's hair, "his determined expression," and the portrayal of Africa Shadia calls "cold and old" (115). This contrast between the life-likeness of the colonizer and the lifeless-ness of African artefacts implies the continuity of the discourse of domination and superiority of the former colonizers into the present. The irrelevance of the portrayals of Africa to its present-day reality is troubling to Shadia to whom the only warm and inviting items in the museum are the soft and thick blue carpets that invite her to take off her shoes. The lack of visitors, "the dim light," "the hushed silence," and the noise from the air conditioners make the museum a claustrophobic site of confinement comparable to "an aeroplane without windows, detached from the world outside" ("the Museum" 115-16).

What is missing from these fossilized representations, Aboulela implies, is the reality of the Africa Shadia knows. Shadia thinks that "she would not make a good exhibit" if put in one of those glass containers, being "too modern, too full of mathematics" would make her feel irrelevant in the museum (116). What is absent in these displays is the warmth of touch, the smells and colors of life in Africa, and its people. These realities are absent from imperial representations of Africa as unpopulated "jungles and antelopes" (119). Aboulela's intervention in the visual economy of representation includes offering a different paradigm of perception to bring Africa closer as a real place populated with people by employing several sensory levels when Shadia reminisces on the memories of her father, his hugs, the Listerine smell of his clinic and his pipe, the city minarets, the scene of boats on the Nile, and her mother. As this chapter will show, Aboulela deploys the same technique in her first novel *The Translator* to humanize Africa. Shadia is unable to convey this experience to Bryan through the medium of language even though she warns him not to believe the lie of the museums. Bryan is willing to change, yet the museum, with its overwhelming atmosphere, has a paralyzing impact on Shadia. Thus, the story comes to an end with a note of sadness with Shadia and Bryan unable to move beyond their cultural strictures. If Shadia had been strong enough to make it work between them, Aboulela notes, "she would have explained and not tired of explaining. She would have patiently taught him another language, letters curved like the epsilon and gamma he knew from mathematics. She would have showed him that words could be read from right to left. If she was not small in the museum, if she was

really strong, she would have made his trip to Mecca real, not only in a book" (119).

If the museum has nothing to offer to Shadia, its representations do not fit the present reality of Bryan's life either. Shadia notices that despite the resemblance in complexion between him and the colonizer in the picture, the latter's faith in his mission, reflected in his eyes, is absent from Bryan's; the museum has little relevance to the reality of life for both of them.

If the term "native" is a construction that intellectually and spatially confines indigenous peoples and if this imagined portrait of Africa is a part and parcel of its discursive construction as Other, the heavily loaded term "Westerner" as Aboulela implies, could be as confining and irrelevant. The termination of the story leaves no space for the author's elaboration of this issue; however, as we will see in *The Translator,* Aboulela deals with such received assumptions about the white Western male Orientalist.

Hamid Dabashi's recent book, *Post-Orientalism*, deals with a relevant issue: he returns to the question concerning the role of intellectual, the issue of moral agency, and resisting power in the present times. In his book, he critiques the continued assumption about the presence of a "fictive interlocutor" at the center of conversation and the problem that initiates from the need to always convince this fictive interlocutor (271). Dabashi's point is that the notion of the West itself is a "terrifying abstraction . . . a vacuous and vacated signifier, signifying nothing but the imperial arrogance of those who invoke it" (272). According to Dabashi, a major hurdle on the path towards achieving a system of knowledge production

that will not be complicit in the power circuit in our time of war and terror is to try to " write and act in a manner that 'the West' is no longer the principal interlocutor of our critical intelligence" (272). Given the almost inescapable pressure faced by the minority literatures to represent a collective experience and become exponents of their cultures, it can be argued that Dabashi is calling for an impossible mission. Nonetheless, I suggest that Aboulela's fiction thematizes the desire to change the dynamics of this power circuit by presenting an alternative worldview.

"The Museum" speaks of a "failed translation" (Cooper 337); it ends with an unarticulated wish and Shadia's silence. Her lack of competency in English, the poisonous atmosphere of museum, and the painful memories of the past make her feel small and powerless. But Shadia's silence speaks of other realities as well. The museum and its Manichean representations of Africa and Britain deny the signified African any agency to self-represent her world. As the narrative shows, the incommunicability of Shadia's world is caused by "years and landscapes, gulfs" that separates her from Bryan whose life, unlike hers, is "on a plateau" and his education, "a continuation" (118). As Homi Bhabha puts it, "the epistemological 'limits' of ethnocentric ideologies are also places with 'enunciative' potentiality from which 'a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices' begin their 'presencing'" (*The location of Culture* 7). Perhaps another way of reading this residing silence could align with Bahabha's approach. Shadia's presence, her unspeakable rage translated into a torrent of tears, and her sudden act of leaving the place speaks of one such moment of

interruption in the continuity of this process of signification that, according to Aboulela, is a lie that distorts other marginalized histories that haunt the present. However, the narrative also foregrounds the silence as an incomplete project and a call to Shadia to do more. Now that she has crossed the geographical borders, the formerly colonized Muslim woman needs *to find* a language to cross more challenging frontiers to be able to reciprocate Bryan's willingness to change.

Knowing the language is important and necessary here, yet it takes more than being articulate in English for Shadia to voice the untold story of such silences; the task of enunciating religious differences is also a daunting task of cultural translation. *The Translator* speaks of such an attempt, and the Muslim woman protagonist of this narrative endeavors to voice what Shadia was unable to express and accomplish. Set in Aberdeen, Scotland, *The Translator* tells the story of Sammar, a young, British-born Sudanese woman living in a self-imposed exile in Scotland. She is employed as a translator of Arabic texts by the University of Aberdeen. Sammar lives in a state of extended mourning over the death of her beloved husband and cousin, Tarig, killed in a car accident in Aberdeen four years ago. After four years of mourning, Sammar falls in love with Rae Isles, the distinguished middle-aged professor of postcolonial and Middle Eastern studies for whom she translates. Again, the story begins in an African space artificially recreated in Scotland. This time, and unlike the gloomy atmosphere of "The Museum," the opening scene occurs in the Winter Gardens, Aberdeen. This time, Aboulela places her characters not in a cold and vacated museum but in the midst

of flowers and plants, the sounds of the birds, and the hustle and bustle of life with children running and laughing.

The major conflict in the novel is the incompatibility of Sammar's and Rae's religious beliefs that makes their matrimonial union impossible under Islam, and perhaps the most perplexing event of the novel is the resolution of this problem via Rae's conversion— a resolution that marks the narrative's happy ending. It is communicating the account of this spiritual transformation that poses a challenge to the author. In fact, the issue of conversion in *The Translator* appears as discomfortingly teasing to many Muslim as well as non-Muslim and especially Western readers. I still remember my classmates' frustrated responses in a graduate course on postcolonial literatures and masculinity for finding Rae's conversion unconvincing. John Stotesbury in "Genre and Islam in Recent Anglophone Romantic Fiction" calls the narrative challenging in various respects, the most important being the narrative's approach to the issue of heterosexual love as well as "the intellectual and discursive premises upon which the whole novel is constructed" (75). Clearly, such a challenging capacity is partly due to the narrative's particular location in the category of immigrant and diasporic literatures. A location that, according to Stotesbury, is full of incompatibilities of the cultural structures and value systems that exist between the diasporic writings and their reception contexts ("Muslim Romance in Diaspora: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and the Ethics of Reading in the West"[31] n.pag.). Aboulela's work, which

[31] I am grateful of John Stotesbury for generously sharing with me the unpublished draft of his paper: "Muslim Romance in Diaspora: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and the Ethics of Reading in the West".

is consciously built on an explicitly Islamic value system, is an example of such incompatibilities and the dilemmas they present in receiving such works of literature. (Stotesbury, "Muslim Romance" n.pag.). As I will argue, part of the importance of Aboulela's portrayals in problematizing stereotypical conceptions about Islam and the West, particularly as seen in New Orientalist narratives, lies in foregrounding this conversional move that stirs discomfort in the reader. At the outset, I would like to ask my reader a few questions: How would reading responses differ if, instead of Rae changing his religious beliefs, Sammar had converted to atheism or agnosticism? Would it be a more convincing move if she had chosen to become a rebel and start a relationship with Rae outside the institution of marriage? Is it possible to make a narrative out of conversion into Islam? I suggest that had the narrative moved in such a direction, Sammar would have been lauded as a subversive rebel, a courageous Muslim woman who decided to emancipate herself and liberate her body from the fetters of a patriarchal ideological and value system. Marnia Lazreg in "Decolonizing Feminism" links such tendencies, on the one hand, to "the political bias in representations of difference" that fuels a Western feminist search for "the sensational and uncouth" and, on the other hand, to the desire on the part of some Third World women writers to be approved by their Western counterparts (70-71). Why is it that a Western scholar's conversion to Islam, one of the least endeared faiths in the popular imagination of the present times, appears as a conformist, irrational, and an unbecoming gesture referred to as "professional suicide" (118) and "midlife crisis" (204) in the novel?

In fact, both kinds of aforementioned conversions could be interpreted as either signs of insubordination or conformity depending on their respective contexts of occurrence. The unacceptability of Rae's move is linked, at least partly, to the complicated and multifaceted issue of conveying the experience of having faith that Gauri Viswanathan's meticulous argument in *Outside the Fold* tries to address. In this book she provides a critique of colonialism and modernity through a focus on cultural politics involved in the issue of conversion in nineteen century, England and India. Viswanathan points out: "to engage in discussions about belief, conviction, or religious identity in a secular age of postmodern scepticism is already fraught with infinite hazards, not least of which is the absence of an adequate vocabulary or language" (xiv). Such an absence, she explains, is rooted in the marginalization and privatization of religion through the secularization of societies, a phenomenon that renders religious belief "subordinate to claims of reason, logic and evidence . . . identified with the rationality of the state and its institutions" (12). As a result, religion in these societies has become "less a marker of the subjectivity of belief systems than a category of identification" sharing "features with the analytical categories of race and class" (xii), yet without receiving the same attention paid to other such categories. What Aboulela tries to accomplish is twofold then: she challenges the concept of religion as mainly a marker of identity while trying to craft a language that communicates the experience of having faith in Islam.

Susan Harding's focal point in her argument on the invention of fundamentalism is that an Othering process is the result of the discursive creation

of religious fundamentalism as modernity's "necessary antithesis" (375). This process, as she points out, is "systematically ignored by antiorientalist critiques, which otherwise had little hesitation in taking up issues involving race, class, and gender" (375). As Harding contends, it seems that "antiorientalizing tools of cultural criticism are better suited for some 'others' and not other 'others'—specifically, for cultural 'others' constituted by discourses of race/sex/class/ethnicity/colonialism but not religion" (375). A similar lack of scholarly information about the ties between the Middle Eastern and North African people and Islam, Rae explains to Sammar, intrigued him to study Islam. He says, "No one writing in the fifties and sixties predicted that Islam would play such a significant part in the politics of the area. Even Fanon . . . had no insight into the religious feelings of North African he wrote about. He never made a link between Islam and anti-colonialism" (109).

The issue of the incongruity of critical tools of study in research on Islam also informs Haifa Alfaisal Saud's central concern in *Religious Discourse in Postcolonial Studies: Magical Realism in Hombres de maiz* and *Bandarshah.* This problem, as Saud rightly observes, is particularly visible in postcolonial theory and its concerns with reflecting the perspectives of the oppressed. When one considers the important role of indigenous religions in struggles against colonialism, it is striking that contrary to this objective of giving a voice to the oppressed, postcolonial studies has "barred religious discourse from contributing to the development of postcolonial theory" (3). This discomfort with religion is partly because of the anti-metaphysical scholarly heritage to which postcolonial

theory is so indebted. This paradoxical situation is at least partly because, as Saud observes, both Marxism and poststructuralism as two schools of thought that have had key roles in "the development of postcolonial theory" are explicitly "anti-traditional" and "dismissive and sceptical towards metaphysical discourse" (10).[32] These reservations about the epistemological value of religion are linked to the essentializing tendencies on the part of the indigenous and the local.

As I argued in the previous chapter, *The Infidel*'s glossing over the ideological infrastructure that synchronized the project of colonization and modernity interprets the removal of religion from the public domain as a rational and necessary outcome of tracing an evolutionary path towards secularism. The narrative's one-sided argument renders Islam as sheer ideology and gives it little epistemological credit. However, as Viswanathan's analysis reveals, the issue of religion as the Other of modernity is far more complicated than such narratives suggest. The persistence of religion as an important and regenerative mode of knowledge production and the complicated relations of converts to the social field problematize the assumptions involved in confrontation of religion and modernity. "Conversion," Viswanathan maintains, "is not limited to the function of either preserving or erasing identity, but in far more complex usage, is associated with a deconstructive activity central to modernity itself" (76); it poses challenges to the liberal state by demanding systemic recognition of the individual's newly found affiliation "not in the capacity for change but in the authority of institutions to establish criteria for membership" (77) and by expecting its social, legal, and

[32] For a detailed analysis of the subordination of indigenous modes of resistance to secularist modes of thinking see chapter one of Saud's *Religious Discourse in Postcolonial Studies: Magical Realism in Hombres De Maiz and Bandarshah*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

political institutions to figure out legal ways for accommodating its members' diverse and, at times, incompatible legal rights within its liberal pluralistic normative structure (83-4).

Viswanathan's analysis of conversion in two separate socio-historical contexts in India and England via the phenomena of secularization of education in colonial India and religious tolerance in England helps understand conversion as a paradoxical sign of dissent as well as assimilation. She observes that "[a]s disruptive as it might seem, conversion also brings to a focus an essential role of the state in modernity: the restoration of a fixed, unassailable point of reference from which cleavages within communities are addressed" (17). She notes,

> if dissent expresses itself most powerfully as conversion, particularly to minority religions, the reasons are not hard to understand. By undoing the concept of fixed, unalterable identities, conversion unsettles the boundaries by which selfhood, citizenship, nationhood, and community are defined, exposing these as permeable borders. Shifts in religious consciousness traverse the contained order of culture and subtly dislodge its measured alignments, belying the false assurance that only change from outside has the power to disrupt. The indeterminacy of conversion poses a radical threat to the trajectory of nationhood. (16)

Viswanathan's probing into complexities of conversion and the societal, cultural and political contexts in which it occurs aids us in probing into a Western male scholar's conversion to Islam and weighting its subversive undertones in *The*

Translator. Rae's unexpected move not only sheds some light on the fissures of the homogenized and seemingly seamless notion of Britishness that formed British identity politics of 80s and early 90s, but as we will see, also demystifies the ideological framework of secularism. Aboulela's "The Museum" conveys a clear message that such notions of Britishness are no longer tenable. The story shows the representational incongruity of the Englishness in the museum with its lived reality in the figure of Bryan who, it can be said, anticipates the future Rae. Departure from the fold and following a different system of belief introduces "a different order of relationality" that "refuses to be made pliable by determined act of classification" (Viswanathan xii) and poses a challenge to the state and its engineered myth of seamless identity that exploits categories of race, nation, and religion.

Rae's "becoming Muslim" has interesting implications for his position in academia as well. Rae is "a Middle Eastern historian and a lecturer in postcolonial politics" whose authority over the object of his research has been credited by the praise and positive reviews he receives on his work (5). Yet, Sammar doesn't like calling him an Orientalist. She thinks that "Orientalists were bad people who distorted the image of the Arabs and Islam. Something from school history or literature, she could not remember. Maybe modern Orientalists were different" (22). Rae is highly sympathetic to the Muslim world, but as Stotesbury points out this "intellectual devotion . . . is constructed within the Western intellectual frame of the detached, objective inquirer . . ." (75). Rae's Pakistani secretary and Sammar's friend, Yasmin, assures her that Rae's interest in Islam is mainly

academic. He is complicit in a system in which he knows how to avoid being Eurocentric while studying "all sorts of sacred texts and being detached" (93). According to Yasmin, if he would convert into Islam "no one would take him seriously . . . and he would be looked at as "[a]nother ex-hippie gone off to join some weird cult. Worse than a weird cult, the religion of terrorists and fanatics" (22).For this reason, Rae's acceptance of the Islamic faith has professional hazards since his embracing Islam implies that his approach has no longer the scholarly validity it used to have.

The novel foreshadows this loss of the scholarly insight in a dream: Rae dreams about being chased for days in a mansion with many rooms. He proudly carries a sword smeared with his enemies' blood, but its handle breaks beyond repair upon entering a room full of smoke. Rae continues his search with no weapon to rely on and, in the end; he climbs a staircase to find Sammar in one of the top rooms cooking vegetables, who offers him a glass of milk (95-6). Rae's "terrible loss" (95) has different implications. The damage to the sword, an explicitly phallic image, symbolizes castration and de-masculinization. Its loss as a tool also metaphorically alludes to Rae's loss of detached academic temperament. According to Brendan Smyth "[t]he central thrust of the dream reinforces the notion that hegemonic Orientalist articulations of masculinity are no longer available to Rae," and the loss of the sword signals the end of religious disengagement for the Scottish scholar (6). The dream's reflection of Rae's personal struggle with the issue of accepting Islam, religious commitments, and engagement with the field of scholarly research touches upon an important issue

about whether or not a scholar's religious affiliation or lack thereof is necessarily conducive to a loss or gain of objectivity in his/her field of study within a secular academic atmosphere. This question is also inevitably entwined around the contested issue of the objectivity of scientific research.

If a scholar's affiliation with Islam is made tantamount to an inability to maintain objectivity in scholarly work, the aloof and disengaged detachment in an Orientalist fashion, as we know, has long appeared in the guise of objectivity too. The questions to ask then are whether or not there is always a direct link between a scholar's religious beliefs and the value and credibility of his/her academic and scholarly contributions, and what all this implies for the Muslim scholar in the Western academic Institution. Do scholars have to renounce their religious affiliations in order to be taken more seriously in academia? Azza Karam attends to the question regarding the existence of a hierarchy of power within academe and the hegemonic system of cultural domination that affects the production of knowledge and soils research by bias at three levels: male/female, First World/Third World and West/Islam (178). In other words, she foregrounds objectivity and detachment in a domain already afflicted by a different kind of bias that interferes in maintaining such a detached stance. According to Karam then, the academe is not immune against the larger unequal power struggles in terms of gender, ethnicity and culture. In "Am I A Muslim Woman? Nationalist Reactions and Postcolonial Transactions" Minoo Moallem expresses her doubts about the possibility of moving beyond such leanings because of a continuation of the civilizational trend in the First World hegemonic regimes of knowledge that

demand a Muslim scholar's identification of her religious beliefs or a lack thereof prior to her entry into the modern systems of knowledge production (52). Moallem's focus is on the disadvantaged position of the Muslim female scholar, but as Karam's analysis shows the unequal power dynamics could function at multiple levels, including categories of maleness and Muslim-ness. As Moallem aptly points out, such relations of domination require scholars to take "a detour through the colonial and postcolonial representational regimes of knowledge and power" to enter Islam (53). It can be argued, then, that Rae's jeopardized status in academic world can help make visible the tensions in the ideology of secularism and its claim on religious tolerance that masks the power inequalities, a process Slavoj Žižek calls a "culturalization of politics"(660). In other words, Rae's conversion and the presumed loss of his detached objective lens inevitably enters him into "the opposition between those who are ruled by culture, totally determined by the lifeworld into which they were born, and those who merely enjoy their culture, who are elevated above it, free to choose it" (Žižek 661). The skepticism towards the possibility of a Western scholar's acceptance of Islam in *The Translator* leads to an important question about how to envision such an act in a way to be regarded as credible.

Even though the narrative anticipates Rae's final move in various places, it was obvious- at least in my previously mentioned classroom experience- that the readers were hard to please with the author's endeavors in this respect. Sammar repeatedly describes Rae as "subversive" (39, 60) and different not only in terms of complexion in a way he could "easily pass for a Turk or a Persian" (6), but also

personality-wise (6). Early in the novel, Rae tells Sammar and Yasmin about his early ties with Islam. He was expelled from school in grade eight because of writing an essay in which he had compared Islam and Christianity. He had plagiarized his uncle's letter for this assignment. Rae's Uncle David was in the army in the WWII during which he went to Egypt where he "became interested in Sufism and converted to Islam" and eventually married an Egyptian woman (18). This all cost him dearly since he was not only ostracized from his family, but also was unable to return to England for fear of being arrested and accused of treason. During the years Rae lived in Morocco, he explains to Sammar, he became more and more interested in Africa, the Middle East, and Islam. Life experience brought to him a kind of knowledge, he admits, he didn't come across in university (59). "Learning Arabic . . . wandering into mosques, and living with Moroccans" (60) are the lived experiences he found missing from textual academic knowledge (60). Through Sammar's words, Rae is introduced as somebody who is "familiar" (6, 26) like "people from back home" (21); he is "not one of them [the Westerners], not modern like them, not impatient like them" (34). He is not surprised by Sammar's questions or remarks, either (39). Rae understands "not in a modern, deliberately non-judgmental way, but as if he was about to say, 'this has happened to me too'" (6). Rae explains to Sammar, who finds his detachment insulting and incongruous with his sympathetic attitude towards Islam and Muslims: "I believed the best I could do, what I owed a place and a people who had deep meaning for me, was to be objective, detached. In the

middle of all the prejudice and hypocrisy, I wanted to be one of the few who was saying what was reasonable and right" (128).

The credibility of a conversional move on the part of somebody like Rae is challenged on another level too: turning to religion is frequently looked at as a move out of helplessness.[33] During a conversation with Sammar, Rae asks why, in the inception of the first Islamic society, "[t]he first believers were mostly women and slaves" (126). In order to question the legitimacy of his invitation, Mohammad's opponents chastised: "[w]e see only the most abject among us following you" (The Qur'an 11:27). Sammar thinks maybe because "they had softer hearts," while Rae suggests that in accepting this change "they did not have much to lose" (126). Rae's response in linking the unprivileged people's reciprocity to the new faith echoes the dominant notion that equates belief in religions with helplessness. It can also positively refer to these people's being less bound by the traditions and standards that made the power holders reluctant to such a massive change and its demand for giving up all their power to submit to a transcendental kind of power that does not accept any partnership. While it is true that people's placement outside the power grid, whether in terms of race, class, or gender, could facilitate such conversional moves, Sammar's answer, which appears as less logically convincing, shows more depth in terms of the epistemological complexities of faith. This is a place where it becomes particularly difficult to explain belief with our rationally equipped scholarly minds. Aboulela draws on an Islamic concept: the limits of human logic in

[33] The idea of religion as the cultural capital of the poor is more or less similar to Marx's idea of religion as "opiate of the masses".

grasping the divine to emphasize the importance of recognition of spiritual matters by heart— "the seat of the 'intellect' [aql] in Qur'anic terminology)" (Yasin Dutton "Conversion to Islam: the Qur'anic Paradigm" 163). [34]

According to the Qur'an, human beings need to be aware of the destructive attractions of material success, wealth, and power, which can easily deceive and mislead them (17.64). Thus, even though women, slaves, and people in the lower crusts of society apparently have little to lose by accepting a new religion, according to the author, their becoming Muslim also indicates that they are spiritually healthier and thus have a greater potential for grasping truth. Moreover, the Qur'an cites examples of mighty and influential people (such as Pharaoh's wife and his magicians) who chose to become believers at the expense of their lives rather than staying in power at the cost of sacrificing what they believed to be the truth.

The idea of turning to religion as a last resource and as a motif propelled by helplessness is not peculiar to inter- faith conversions into Islam. Indeed, intra-faith reversion could provoke a similar response as Aboulela's second novel shows. *Minaret* tells the story of a reversion. Najwa, the daughter of a former

---

[34] The Qur'an warns:

As to those who reject Faith,
It is the same to them
Whether thou warn them
Or do not warn them;
They will not believe.
God hath set a seal
On their hearts and on their hearing,
And on their eyes is a veil; (2.6-7)

The seal on the heart is a kind of spiritual malaise, a kind of hardness brought about by arrogance not by a lack of belief. The sealing of the heart "is a consequence of the intentional, knowing and willing rejection of faith" (Al-Hariri Wendel 109).

Sudanese highly ranked government official is the female protagonist of this partly autobiographical novel. She finds peace in her newly found faith after a terrible turn of fortune that takes away from her, her family, her privileged social status, and her wealth. Following a coup in Sudan, Najwa arrives in London as a very rich refugee and, unlike many other asylum seekers; she enjoys a familiar lifestyle, shopping sprees, and the comforts of being competent in English. But the life in this fantasy land is transient. Najwa's father is executed for charges of corruption, and his bank account becomes frozen. Her twin brother's drug addiction and his stabbing of a policeman land him in jail and, lastly, their mother's hospitalization for leukemia and her subsequent death bring about the depletion of Najwa's now limited resources. Najwa, whose interrupted university education in Sudan leaves her little qualification for her new life in England, ends up as a maid serving rich Arab families. "I've come down in the world," (*Minaret* 1) she says. But it takes Najwa by surprise that sliding into "this servant role" (83) feels so natural:

> On my very first day as a maid . . . memories rushed back at me. All the ingratiating manners, the downcast eyes, the sideway movements of the servants I grew up with. I used to take them for granted. I didn't know a lot of them– our succession of Ethiopian maids, houseboys, our gardener–but I must have been close to them, absorbing their ways, so that now, years later and in another continent, I am one of them. (83-4)

Najwa receives her traumatic turn of fortune almost passively. Her descent almost coincides with her re-descovery of faith, and this combination invites unsympathetic responses from some readers.

In "Veiling Emotion," a weblog review of Aboulela's second novel *Minaret*, Victoria, the reviewer, describes Najwa's rediscovery of faith and reversion into Islam "not as a personal journey of discovery but as an abnegation of responsibility made under psychological pressure" (n.pag.). According to this reviewer, Najwa "doesn't make a positive choice to convert because she really has no choice; there are no other channels open to her" (n.pag.). Najwa's religiosity is viewed as a lazy choice of "obedience in the name of belief" and an excuse for the author to relieve her protagonist from the burden of making difficult decisions. "[T]he controlled world of the mosque" and its rules and regulations, the reviewer maintains, "cushion [Najwa] from her own doubts and fears" (Victoria n.pag.). As Kate Zebiri's study of British Muslim converts shows, contrary to the view in which crises are catalysts for conversion, studies on conversion to Islam indicate that becoming Muslim is less predicated on "life crises" than on "cognitive factors" and that in cases in which crises occur, they tend to follow conversion, particularly due to negative social reactions of family and friends (*British Muslim converts: Choosing alternative Lives* 54).

I suggest that the seemingly contrary responses to Najwa's reversion (as credible) and Rae's conversion (as otherwise) convey almost identical messages about the irrationality of the act of conversion into Islam in the light of a secular worldview in which, according to Rae, "the speculation is that God is out playing

golf" (43). As Wail Hassan explains, "[t]he narrative logic of this fiction" is "intertextual and translational" and "its ideological horizons express a religious worldview that does not normally inform modern literature" (310). In fact, Aboulela's narrative strategies introduce elements that are new to both "Arabic fiction" and "Anglophone literature" (Hassan 310). Thus, we need to read Najwa's return to Islam in a different light. In Aboulela's fiction, geographical journeys become catalysts for spiritual journeys. Najwa's traumatic loss of both parents and of a life of privilege as a daughter of a Sudanese government official, her becoming a poor refugee in London, and the rest of her tribulations bring about her spiritual growth in the long run. An alternative reading of Najwa's reversion could look at her afflictions as opening her to a totally different "channel" in the light of the Islamic worldview. Najwa can see through the sham of power, the transience of life, and the cruelty of human beings towards each other. Her tribulations bring her that "softness of heart" that facilitates her conversional move. Rae is right to link women's motifs for conversion to their unprivileged socio-economic status, but contrary to the implied helplessness that causes or facilitates the move as suggested by the above mentioned review, Aboulela tries to show that to a believer the choice of staying outside the attractions of worldly circuit of power is spiritually empowering and liberating. Rae admits: "'[w]hat I regret most . . . is that I used to write things like 'Islam gives dignity to those who otherwise would not have dignity in their lives'", as if I didn't need dignity myself" (200).[35] According to Smyth, "Rae realizes that Islam

[35] As Yasin Dutton explains, in the Arabic language there is no equivalent for the term "conversion". Instead, "there is the idea of 'becoming Muslim,' for which the verb *aslama*

offers a space for agency for those who have hitherto been denied one" (11). The issue of agency denotes a sense of individualism and self-sufficiency that is very much in alignment with Western liberal epistemology. A different way of reading this statement in the light of an Islamic worldview is to link it less to the issue of individual's agency and more to the idea of human beings' lack of significance in the larger scheme of things in general. Therefore, Rae's regrets that these words convey his sense of detached superiority towards the weak.[36] This perspective foregrounds a concept of submission that is very different from what Hirsi Ali suggests.[37]

Clearly, my intention in raising these issues is not to try to fathom the complex reasons behind conversion; my intention is to demonstrate the difficulty of representing the idea of having faith in Islam, and a transformation that appears in the form of establishing affiliative ties with the religion through acts of conversion and reversion in a time and place setting not favorable to such moves. If we regard such spiritual transformations as part of a larger trend in the search for meaning in our times, then could the narrative be looked at in a different light? The (re)turning to Islam portrayed in Aboulela's work is linked to a larger phenomenon. Will Herberg suggests that "the quest for a recovery of meaning in

---

(literally, 'to submit') is used. It is from this verb that the words 'Muslim,' which is, grammatically, the active participle and means 'one who submits, a submitter' and 'Islam,' which is the verbal noun-equivalent to the gerund in English-and means 'submitting, submission' are derived." Therefore, it can be argued that in Islam Rae's and Najwa's moves are the justified next steps in their spiritual quests (151).

[36] One of the central principles in Islam (as well as other Abrahamic religions) is a constant remembering of God as the sole arbiter of the affairs of the universe and the insignificanceess of oneself in the larger scheme of the universe; in God's presence the weak and the mighty are the same. This is the essence of the term submission and that "softness" and humility that Sammar mentions.

[37] See Chapter One.

life, (and) the new search for inwardness and personal authenticity amid collectivistic heteronomies of the present-day world" is an outcome of "the collapse of all secular securities in the historical crisis of our time" (qtd. in Sophie Gilliant-Ray 324-25). According to Gilliant-Ray, in the face of "the plurality of values, and the fragmented nature of modern Western society," Islam offers "a counterbalancing and complete package of 'alternative' values and meanings, combined by a sense of community and belonging" (326). On another level, faith provides an alternative answer for the gaps left by failed nationalist and secularist postcolonial projects of newly independent Arab and Muslim nations (Hassan 298).[38] In fact, for both Muslim reverts in Aboulela's second novel, despite their different experiences of displacement as a refugee (Najwa) and as an extensively travelled international student (her teenage lover, Tamer), it is the universality of their religion—and not their ethnicity, or their nationality—that becomes the major defining element of their identities, one that find expression in a cosmopolitan city, London. Tamar confides to Najwa, "[m]y mother is Egyptian. I've lived everywhere except in Sudan [his father's homeland]: Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity" (*Minaret* 110).

[38] For a thorough analysis of the ways in which Aboulela takes up the issues raised by the canonical works of her Sudanese predecessor, Tayyeb Salih, and tries to find solutions to the challenges raised in his works through a return to resources offered by Islam see Wail S. Hassan's "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction". See also Christine Sizemore's "The Return to Hijab in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pick-Up* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret"* for the analysis of an alternative spiritual worldview offered by the religion and formulated in terms of the community of women and their space.

There are quite a few places in which Aboulela refers to the power of Islam in giving a sense of "continuity" and "balance" to the otherwise transient and unjust material life. *Minaret* oscillates in time and place between the Sudan of the late 80s, London of 2003 and 2004, and London in late 80s and early 90s, and this use of temporality in the novel thematizes the disrupted continuity and the absence of balance from Najwa's life. Her forced exile to London and her multiple losses are compared to stages of a fall that at first seemed to continue "for eternity without ever landing" (61). The normalcy of her life is gone forever, and the loss is irretrievable. Najwa says, "[S]ometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I have become . . ." (1). This is perhaps the common denominator for many displaced people in whose life the past constantly and unexpectedly invades or revisits the present. Islam and its rituals bring certainty to Najwa's life. London is constantly shifting and moving, but "the minaret of Regent's Park" stands there tall and unchanging all year round (1). This facet of the faith, Aboulela contends, could not be fully grasped, despite the weight of the scholarly knowledge of experts like Rae, without living it (*The Translator* 9, 27, 37, 113, 119). Islam is a way of life that, according to Sophie Gilliant-Ray, includes personal, societal, economic, and political aspects. Moreover, the non-negotiability of Islamic tenets provides "a sense of cognitive and spiritual security as a result of its 'completeness' as a way of life and due to the fact that it has drawn boundaries around what may be questioned and developed, and what remains timeless and ultimate" (327). This sense of integrity and finality, despite the liberal critiques'

calling Islam non-progressive, has paradoxically become a major source of its power (Gilliant-Ray 327).

Aboulela's female protagonists also raise interesting yet difficult questions about a believing-Muslim women's place in society, and feminism. In this part of the chapter, I would like to return to Rae's conversion for one more time. Aboulela's explanation about Rae's conversion is interesting:

> I was often asked 'Why should Rae convert, why should religion be an obstacle etc. etc?' In my answer I would then fall back on *Jane Eyre* and say 'From an Islamic point of view, why can't Mr. Rochester be married to both Bertha and Jane?' In the same way that I, as a Muslim reader, respect and empathize with Jane's very Christian dilemma, I want Western/Christian readers to respect and empathize with Sammar's very Muslim dilemma. (qtd. in Stotesbury, "Genre and Islam" 81)

Aboulela defamiliarizes our naturalized assumptions about this "Christian dilemma". In other words, the non-Christian reader's accepting of Jane's religious problem is a response taken for granted while Sammar's needs a lot of explanation, and Rae's conversion remains almost totally unjustifiable.

The Translator's dependence on a Jane Eyre scenario emplaces this novel in an interesting position in between this famous classic novel and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Jane's victory, as we know, is compromised within the parameters of a Eurocentric masculine master narrative that defines her as the Other. The happy ending, Earl G. Ingersoll in "Ending Elsewhere: Jean Rhy's

Wide Sargasso Sea" points out, guarantees the perpetuation of the patriarchal order through the narrative's espousal of a masculine plot via an enclosure that marks "Jane's marrying a de-masculinized . . . Rochester" (179). On the other hand, as Spivak has elaborated on the link between the cultural representations of the nineteenth century literature and imperialism, a canonical literary masterpiece such as *Jane Eyre* promotes the ethnocentric tendencies of the imperialist project via its feminist agenda that invites an "'interpellation' of the subject not only as individual but as 'individualistic'" and at the expense of "the native female" (244-45).

Wide Sargasso Sea's task of "writing back" problematizes the Western masculine narrative paradigm and its preoccupation with a definite ending in a heterosexual union that aims at preserving the continuity of the patriarchal system. This happy ending maintains the system by reaffirming male, female, masculine, and feminine categories (Ingersoll178-79). The novel, quotes Ingersoll from Caroline Rody, presents a "revisionary paradigm" by discouraging readers' expectations for a definite ending (179). By "[leaving] Antoinette/Bertha in a middle ground of potential to act," without a dramatization of such an act, the novel also refuses to enliven the dichotomy of female plot versus traditionally male plot (qtd. in Ingersoll 189).

In *The Translator*, Sammar's victory resembles Jane's but in a reversal of its scenario by having made Rae to return to her, and only after he has "learned to pray like herself" (Geoffrey Nash 30). In the story, Rae's revelation of his feelings for Sammar and her upcoming assignment in Egypt makes separation

from Rae intolerable. On the day of her departure, she musters her courage and goes to Rae to unconventionally propose marriage to him! Since within the perimeters of Islam marrying a non-Muslim is out of the question for a woman, Sammar becomes even more outlandish by asking Rae to convert. Here Sammar not only reverses gender roles but also tries to bend conventions of Muslim tradition. Rae is taken aback and asks her to leave. After accomplishing her assignment in Egypt as an interpreter, Sammar returns to Sudan and tries to collect the broken pieces of her life. As time passes, she realizes that her hopes for Rae's conversion have been purely egotistical, and from then on she tries to pray for Rae with purer intentions for his finding his path to Allah. The happy tidings about Rae's conversion to Islam reach Sammar in a letter from a mutual friend, and the story ends with Rae returning to Sammar with a marriage proposal.

By reminding the reader of Jane Eyre's religious dilemma in *The Translator,* Aboulela defamiliarizes the inherent yet naturalized religious discourse of Bronte's novel. In turn, this asks the readers, who might have even rejoiced in Jane's victory as a result of the removal of the mad wife, why the impossibility of Jane and Rochester's union is accepted without question. Jane's victory could also bring to the mind the importance of the proselytizing project of colonialism in the novel and the intertwined nature of "territorial and subject-constituting projects" of imperialism (Spivak, "Three women's Texts" 249) particularly through the rather insanely zealous remarks of St. John Rivers and the weight of "the white man's burden" on his psyche. Even though the happy ending and the marriage within the parameters of Islam that marks the ending of

Aboulela's text resembles Bronte's narrative, the former refuses to obey the boundaries set by the Western romance narrative paradigm. Like Antoinette/Bertha Sammar is the Other, but unlike *Jane Eyre, The Translator* is not concerned with maintaining the racial purity or class structure that according to Ingersoll, the white upper class male characters such as Rochester and Mason try to guard via their choice of bride. As long as they can verify the racial 'purity' of their brides, they appear secure in their domination of the 'feminine'. This femininity generally comprises the Others that authorize whiteness, aristocracy, and maleness (180).

Like Jane's, Sammar's victory happens after a symbolic act of castration that mimics Rochester's loss of eye sight. The loss of sight for Rae is the loss of his scholarly vision as detached and objective in the Western paradigm of scholarly research. It can be argued that this reversal of the rescue mission (Muslim woman saving the non-Muslim man) also suggests a reversal of the well-known thesis of "White men . . . save brown women from brown men" (Spivak 287). Such a reversal, Smyth suggests, "asserts a story in which a brown woman saves a white man from white masculinity . . . she saves Rae, both physically and spiritually. Rae's conversion ascribes agency firmly in the hands of what the West would consider the Other" (9). With the novel's foregrounding of the protagonist's religious consciousness at the core of the narrative (Nash 28), however, the issue of Sammar's agency as an individual cannot stand on its own. In Islam, one cannot trust in human agency without first acknowledging the

Creator's role as its grantor.[39] Sammar eventually realizes that her attempts and prayers for Rae's conversion have been selfishly directed by her egotistical desire for marriage and companionship. She notes:

> There were people who drew others to Islam. People with deep faith, the type who slept little at night, had an energy in them. They did it for no personal gain, no worldly reason . . . And she, when she spoke to Rae, wanting this and that, full of it; wanting to drive with him to Stirling, to cook for him, to be settled, to be someone's wife.
>
> She had never, not once, prayed that he would become Muslim for his own sake, for his own good. . . . If she could rise above that, if she would clean her intentions. (178-79)

Sammar's own internal change in cleansing her intentions makes her pray for Rae "now from far away without him ever knowing. It would be her secret. If it took ten months or ten years or twenty or more" (179). Here while emphasizing the importance of cleansing one's intentions, the text provides a space to show complexities and tensions between emotional and rational appeals of Islam to converts. In "Conversion to Islam: the Qur'anic Paradigm" Yasin Dutton examines such tensions. He maintains that "a careful reading of the sources would suggest that becoming a Muslim is not a question of being convinced by rational means but rather by the recognition by heart (the seat of the 'intellect'[*aql*] in Qur'anic terminology)" (163). This recognition opens a space to consider "the

[39] The Qur'an states, ". . . Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves . . ." (13.1), but at the same time it warns people against taking too much pride in the scope of their agency, "Nor say of anything, 'I shall be sure to do so and so tomorrow' without adding, 'So please God!'" (18.23-24).

intervention of the Divine (i.e. the miraculous) (163) as a cardinal catalysts in Rae's conversional move towards Islam. Thus in the world Aboulela portrays, one simply cannot give all the credit for Rae's conversion to Sammar. The Individual's agency is only half of the story. Clearly, this concept of submission defined in relation to both individual agency and yet also full trust in God's will is very different from the kind of passive inaction Hirsi Ali's notion of submission suggests.

The happy resolution through the reunion of the lovers raises a plausible question about whether or not Sammar's unchanging devotion to Islam means that the novel's subversion of one patriarchal order results in maintaining another, which would mean that nothing has really changed for the woman here. Aboulela's female protagonists' attachment to the familiar familial and domestic circles would definitely raise some questions about maintaining a conservative and traditional system, even though it can also be argued that feminism and women's performing domestic roles are not necessarily at odd with each other. One can especially pose this question to Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret*. Not only is the fruitless love between Najwa and Tamer, her employer's brother, who is about two decades junior in age, unusual, but Najwa's rather masochistic fantasies about being "his family's concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights*, with life-long security and a sense of belonging" and her lament for settling "for freedom in this modern time" as a single woman (215) might take many readers aback. The choice of bondage over freedom, especially as a concubine, with this nostalgic reference to *The Arabian Nights* (an Orientalist

misnomer for *The Thousand and One Nights*) Hassan observes, "can *only* be explained by [the protagonist's] situation as a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive" (315, emphasis added). While I agree that these passages might cause representational problems, I do not agree that this reading is the "only" possible interpretation of these passages.

The protagonist's is not the only Muslim woman's voice in the narrative. Shahinaz, another observant Muslim woman and Najwa's best friend, reprimands her for these unhealthy thoughts and strongly believes, "[n]o one in their right mind wants to be a slave" (215). The emptiness Najwa associates with the notion of freedom is not necessarily a critique of the Western modernity as Hassan's reading indicates (315-16). What the term freedom signifies here could be the freedom many single people without responsibilities of family life possess. It is a kind of freedom that, if it continues into middle age, can convey a sense of emptiness and fruitlessness for some people, especially for those who desire family life but cannot have it. Shahinaz sometimes even envies her friend for being free from the obligations of being a mother, a wife, and a daughter-in-law, and I see this envy as a natural reaction to normal stresses that are parts and parcels of family life, not as something necessarily associated with oppressive Muslim family system. It is not quite fair to attribute Najwa's inability to enjoy her individual freedoms mainly to her choice of religion. Moreover, the novel itself shows the irrelevance of Najwa's nostalgic fantasies in the contemporary times. Tamer reminds us of "common rebellious [teenagers]" (254). He is spoiled,

dreamy, immature, and inexperienced; his dream of going past to "[a] time of horses and tents, swords, and raids" (255) that mimics the twenty five year old Prophet's marriage with the middle-aged Khadija is never taken seriously in the narrative. I look at Najwa's fruitless and somehow motherly love for Tamer as an impossible wish to go back in time and undo her own past. On the decisive night when her world turns upside down, Najwa is nineteen (Tamer's age). She is constantly hunted by the guilt feelings of the sinful and irresponsible life she led during her youth, and Tamer represents to her their (her brother's and hers) wasted youth. For this reason, Tamer's cutting off from his mother and sister in defiance against their rejecting Najwa as a potential daughter and sister-in-law reminds Najwa of her twin brother, Omar, who broke their mother's heart. According to Najwa, he caused her premature death before leukemia could take her life (256). She doesn't want any such bitterness between Tamer and his mother and convinces him to go back to her while reminding him that "'it's a sin to cut someone off for more than three days, especially your mother and sister'" (256). Without denying that Aboulela's protagonists could, at times, invite criticisms for representing Muslim subjectivity as stereotypical, I suggest that such readings, more than anything else, prove the difficulty of the task of translating belief.

Even though I find Najwa disappointing in many ways, I argue that her strong desire for having a family and performing domestic duties is not the outcome of her reversion to Islam. Unlike her friend Randa, who is admitted in a university in England, Najwa gets into Khartoum University with much difficulty

and does not have any particular plan for a career or further studies even later in England. If political upheavals had not turned her life upside down, she would have probably settled for the sort of lifestyle her mother led and envisioned for Najwa that included a suitably rich husband, a big house with servants and travels abroad (52, 132, 198).

The reviewer in "Veiling Emotions" has a point in disparaging Aboulela for allowing her characters in this novel to succeed only if they are observant Muslims (Shahinaz, for example) while letting those non-observant and secular minded characters, who fall short in performing their expected roles as mothers and wives (such as Lamya), face various obstacles (Victoria n.pag.). Nevertheless, it is very important to keep in mind that this narrative emplaces the issue of belief as its focal point. The point is *not* the superiority of believers in Islam to non-believers. Indeed, neither protagonist is very likeable. From the beginning Najwa, though attractive, is introduced as lazy, socially insensitive, unambitious, and not very intelligent. Sammar is not a very strong person either and is socially awkward. Aboulela's fiction is an attempt to shift the focus from imperfect human beings to the Divine. Naturally, this worldview might make little sense to those who regard belief in religions as contrary to values of individualism. Indeed, this is a kind of tension that is inevitable in reading Aboulela's work with its shift of emphasis from the individual to the higher powers of the Creator. Unfortunately, the protagonists' flaws make it difficult to elicit sympathy from the reader. Aboulela's female protagonists are not very strong individuals, and their lack of departure from the traditional gender roles might endorse negative stereotypes of

Muslim women. However, it can also be argued that in the world Aboulela portrays, characters are purposely far from being strong and self-sufficient. Her male characters, whether they are observant Muslims or not, do not fare better. Rae is not young and suffers from physical ailments. Tamer, though young and devoted to his faith, is immature and "not particularly bright, not quick and sharp" (*Minaret* 3). Anwar, the leftist Sudanese student, who criticizes Arab societies for their hypocrisy and "double standards for men and women" (*Minaret* 175), is a jerk and a hypocrite because even though he has no intention to marry Najwa—because he doesn't want her "father's blood flowing in his children's veins" (201)—starts a relationship with her, makes use of Najwa's competency in English for his own purposes by asking her to translate and edit his essays into English and borrows money from her to buy his computer and never returns the money. A reading that views *Minaret* as a denial of feminism and individual agency fails to see the protagonist's frustration with all the male characters that play a central role in her life. Najwa's father, her twin brother, her first lover Anwar, and even the devout Tamer all have serious flaws that "disappoint" her (Chambers, *British Muslim fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* 111). She does not rely on a man to authorize her, nor can she rely just on herself because, according to her Muslim worldview, she needs to be connected to the main powerhouse, to God, to be able to succeed.

Hassan criticizes Aboulela for allowing her female protagonists to relinquish their individual freedoms to a domestic life modeled after an idealized and yet patriarchal past and calls her brand of Islamism "regressive" because it

has "all the elements of fundamentalism" minus the "sense of political mission" that is present in "radical fundamentalism" (Hassan 316-17). Based on this comment then, could we conclude that, in a way, all observant Muslims are prone to fundamentalist tendencies whether or not their devotion has traces of political militancy?[40] How is it possible to be observant and yet not to be branded as a fundamentalist Muslim? What are the differences between the terms fundamentalist, extremist, and radical? Does the term fundamentalist best describe the brand of Islam portrayed in Aboulela's work? Geoffrey Nash offers a more nuanced description of Aboulela's writing as one that is situated "within the feminized space which may be said to operate between the continuing pressures of Western cultural imperialism and conservative, anti-modernist cultural Islamism" (28). If a woman's penchant for domestic life becomes our way of measuring her oppression, Sammar's character does not quite fit the bill.

Sammar calls Rae "subversive," yet what she does is not in alignment with the cultural norms and expectations she is associated with. Aboulela's portrayals of the observant Muslim woman do not resemble the familiarly veiled and silent woman. Defending or justifying *hijab* is not a direct concern in *The Translator*, but when it comes up in rare occasions, the veil is described lovingly and in a positive light. We read that Sammar "covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerising as the Afghan princess she had once seen on TV wearing *hijab*, the daughter of an exiled leader of mujahideen" (9). At the same time, these descriptions are juxtaposed with those of the ordinary stranger women, less

[40] See the conclusion.

educated and less well dressed, who come to her assistance right after Sammar loses her husband. They cook for her, take care of her son, spend the night with her, and pray for her not because of any familiarity or friendship between them but "only because they believed it was the right thing to do" (9). Sammar is "humbled" by their strength of belief and generosity that put them, spiritually, in a superior position (9).Aboulela portrays women of the community of the Regent Mosque in the same light in *Minaret.* It is these women's selfless generosity in helping their stranger sister, Najwa, when she loses her mother to cancer without questioning her background or judging her that make her venture to set foot in the mosque for the first time in her life. Admittedly, Aboulela's treatment of *hijab* is less careful in the next novel. Najwa's glorification of *hijab* in her constant contrasting her past Westernized and fashion forward days with her modestly covered present is a legitimate view of her own experience. However, her advocacy of *hijab* could also invite criticism for its simplistic approach towards Muslim women's choice of covered and non-covered modes as well as sartorial choices of non-Muslim women because it reads morality from the appearance in a simplifying manner.

Leaving her son behind is also unusual in a cultural context, in which one of the most important duties of a woman is taking care of her child, but for Sammar "[t]he part of her that did the mothering had disappeared" with Tarig's death (7), and her son became a physical reminder of her loss. Through a flashback to Sammar's past, we come to know that after a quarrel with her mother-in-law over her remarrying an old man who already has two wives, Sammar returns to

Scotland leaving her son at her care. Sammar's desire to re-marry at the cost of becoming a third wife to an uneducated and traditional man is shocking and difficult to understand. Ironically, it is a traditional woman, her mother-in-law, who reminds her that as an educated woman who knows English, Sammar does not need marriage. "In the past," she reminds Sammar, "*widows needed protection, life is different now*" (13). Mahasen does not understand why an educated and financially independent widow with a young child as the focus of her life might need marriage (13), and perhaps many readers share this view. Mahasen saves Sammar from becoming a co- wife and perhaps from falling into what Nana Wilson-Tagoe calls a "traditional pattern of female dependency" (104). However, despite her emphasis on the importance of education and a job that gives a modern twist to understanding women's role in society, Mahasen still values Sammar for performing her gender defined role as a mother, not as an individual who herself has a need for love, companionship, and stability. Thus, it can also be argued that, in a way, Mahasen voices the culture through her disapproval of Sammar's getting re-married. If Sammar's considering to become a co-wife is strange, her marriage proposal to Rae is no less unusual. She knew that in doing so, "she was rubbing her pride back and forth over barbed wire" (130) and that her act was unacceptable in the eyes of tradition and culture that regard it contrary to a woman's code of honor and dignity. In other words, we cannot easily decide that this is another example of traditionally minded and oppressed Muslim woman. Sammar's marrying a white westerner convert is, indeed, no less controversial in its own cultural context than Rae's acceptance of

Islam. This marriage would probably lead into Sammar's long term (if not permanent) ostracization from her family and home as well as her permanent separation from her beloved country. She has already lost her place in her aunt's heart after Tarig's untimely death. Sammar notes that Mahasen and the rest carry on as they used to, but it is she who loses her status and focus of her life. She becomes the one "carrying failure" for Tarig's death (145). It is as if, without him, she is nobody in people's eyes. Nash places Aboulela among the authors who engage in a task of "questioning traditional stereotyping of women's roles at the same time as negotiating their own way around contemporary Western norms" (28). Yet, Aboulela's protagonist is able to approach both cultures critically only after experiencing a painful exile. When Sammar returns home after four years, she does not have any space of her own, and her belongings are kept in the storage room. Sammar sees the contempt and disapproval in the looks of her aunt who, when she finds out that Sammar has resigned her job in Aberdeen and does not intend to return to Scotland, now regards her as a burden on the tightening financial budget of the family.

Sammar's critique of the idea of superiority of Western culture occurs in the parts that deal with the consumption of Western technology and products. In "Re-Thinking Nation and Narrative in a Global Era: Recent African Writing" Nana Wilson-Tagoe is concerned with the ways in which African contemporary literature problematizes the centre-periphery models in explaining complexities of global culture. Mahasen's views about the superiority of the West and the importance of Sammar's keeping her job in Scotland and raising her son there, her

habit of watching Hollywood movies, and her reliance on medicinal and beauty products such as Vaseline and Nivea cream, reflect "the general assumption that culture flows from the West to East" (Wilson-Tagoe 104). Yet, Aboulela challenges this idea through the power of love of a Muslim woman as a catalyst in the process of Rae's change and his accepting Islam is an important proof of narrative's challenging the general assumption about the flow of culture (Wilson-Tagoe 104) or what Nash calls an "exercise in counter-acculturation" (30). Moreover, the healing and medicinal powers of the food Sammar offers to Rae both in his and her dreams and at the time of his hospitalization suggest a reversal in the West to East pattern in the flow of culture. The food replaces words and expressions for Sammar and eases the difficulty of conveying her inner emotions in a second language since her "emotions were in the soup" (97). There are also recurring references to dreams in which Rae finds Samar cooking and offering him milk which he drinks to the end (185). Here, food consumption as spiritually healing and medicinally effective suggests that culture flows from the East to the West. However, as Wilson-Tagoe points out, even though Aboulela's fiction supports an "Islamic discourse", it offers complexities about Islam and Muslims that go beyond the familiar and simplifying trend of idealizing home while critiquing the West and its material culture (104). *The Translator* suggests that in the face of transnational journeys that connect cultures and places, it no longer makes sense to view cultures of the East and the West in a polarizing manner.

As Sammar endeavors to lose herself in this familiar loved world, she finds out that she has grown roots in Scotland and is not able to stop dreaming about

Rae, whom she never heard from or about since the time she left Aberdeen. Sammar experienced a different exile: "an exile from him" (167). She missed her job, "moulding Arabic into English . . . . She missed the cramped room with the hum of the computer. She missed Diane, the smell of her cheese and onion crisps . . ." (167). In such moments in the lives of exiles, Rochelle Davis observes, "the original home and culture and the new home and culture mix inside them, creating a confusing jumble of associations spanning the past and the present and the known and the unknown" (100). Similar to the experience of Mustafa Said, the protagonist in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, *The Translator*'s classical predecessor, Sammar realizes that the old, familiar, and unchanging notion of home is non-existent for her. But unlike both Salih's and the New Orientalist narratives, the encounter between the East and the West in *The Translator* does not occur in a polarized way.[41] Nor does Aboulela uphold a rigid concept of culture by advocating a return to an authentic Islamic culture. Cultural dynamics in Aboulela's fiction is a negation of the old and New Orientalist thesis of an unchanging static Muslim culture and mentality. She utilizes past and present memories, dreams, and hallucinations to show the ways in which Sammar's two modes of existence are in many ways interlaced and inseparable. She dreams about Africa in Scotland while in Khartoum she has dreams of Aberdeen. In a moment of hallucination in Aberdeen she thinks:

[41] For a critique that locates Aboulela's work in an in-between position in regard to the Arabic classic, see Stephen Guth's "Appropriating, or Secretly Undermining, the Secular Literary Heritage? Distant Echoes of *Mawsim Al-Hijra* in a Muslim Writer's Novel: Leila Aboulela, The Translator," in *Intertexuality in Modern Arabic Literature since 1967*. Eds. Luc Deheuvels, Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, and Paul Starkey. Durham: Durham University, 2006, 65-82.

> Home had come here. Its dimly lit streets, its sky and the feel of home had come here and balanced just for her. She saw the sky cloudless with too many stars, imagined the warm night warm, warmer than indoors. She smelled dust and heard the barking of stray dogs among the street rubble and pot-holes. A bicycle bell tinkled, frog croaked, the muezzin coughed into the microphone and began the azan for the *Isha* prayer. But this was Scotland and the reality left her dulled, unsure of herself (21).

This muddling of geographical demarcations with a swarm of memories speaks of the formation of new transcultural Muslim identities. According to Wilson-Tagoe, the novel shows a rethinking of the categories of "place, nation and religion" in its invitation to an awareness "of the mediating role of other places, other worlds, other people in a global era" (103). As Rae reminds her, their religion is not "tied to a particular place" (179). Ironically, Sammar's critical position in relation to both home and abroad as well as her domain of choices and actions are undeniably enhanced because of her British passport that provides her with a considerable mobility power."To prove that Khartoum is nicer than London," Aboulela writes, "more beautiful than Edinburgh . . . I don't think so. Not to prove, but to express, to show that it is a valid place, a valid way of life beyond the stereotypical images of famine and war, not a backward place to be written off" ("Moving Away" 204). Sammar describes Africa as a living paradox of:

> Deprivation and abundance, side by side like a miracle. Surrender to them both. Poverty and sunshine, poverty and jewels in the sky.

> Drought and the gushing Nile. Disease and clean hearts. Stories from neighbours, relations . . . . A challenge just to live from day to day, a struggle just to get by. But there were jokes. Jokes about the cuts, rationing and the government. Laughter on hot evenings in the garden, her aunt smiling like in the past, grasshoppers and frogs as loud as the children. (164-65)

This portrait of Africa as a real, legitimate place populated with real human beings conveys a totally different message from the one Shadia and Bryan observe in "the Museum". At the same time, Aboulela is realistic in her portrayals. Sammar's evoking "the sights and smells of home and the everyday acts that give purpose, stability and continuity to life," as Wilson-Tagoe points out, is juxtaposed "with another evocation of the nation as corrupt and already crumbling" (105).

In London, Najwa looks at:

> the English, the Gulf Arabs, the Spanish, Japanese, Malaysians, Americans and wonder[s] how it would feel to have, like them, a stable country. A place where [they] could make future plans and it wouldn't matter who the government was . . . . A country that was a familiar, reassuring background, a static landscape on which to paint dreams. A country [they] could leave at anytime, return to at any time and it would be there for [them], solid, waiting. (165)

In their beloved Sudan, this reassured security is missing. Anwar's knowledge of "facts and history" and his explanation about the connections between the present

situation and "history and economics" cannot offer any solace to Najwa's troubled mind. She cannot stop asking what was wrong with African people (165). *Minaret* comes to an end portraying decay: the story ends with the scene of Najwa's recurring dream, a going back in time as a feverishly sick child's snuggling in the protective safety of her parents' bed while the surrounding space is an image of decay. In her childhood home, "beyond the bed, the room is dark and cluttered, all the possessions that distinguish us in ruins . . . Carpets threadbare and curtains torn. Valuable squashed and stamped with filth. Things that must not be seen, shameful things are exposed. The ceiling has caved in, the floor is gutted and the crumbling walls are smeared with guilt" (276). Najwa is not surprised. She points out, "it is a natural decay and I accept it" (276). Najwa's accepting this irreversible condition is surprising though perhaps inevitable. Najwa does not give in to the nostalgic memories of the past. There is no coming back to Sudan for her, since no traveling in space can undo the colonial encounter and its aftermath, nor can the safety and the innocence of childhood be regained. Najwa feels that she cannot move on with her new life as a believer unless she endeavors to rectify her own sinful past and achieve peace through a kind of devotion, which she believes is contingent upon making the Hajj ritual first. Najwa's wish to go to Hajj is an indication of her strong desire to undo her past. The plot structure and its flashbacks and flash forwards mirror Najwa's constant recalling of her past and her wish to undo her sins. She confides to Tamer: "'[i]f my Hajj is accepted, I will come back without any sins and start my life again, fresh'" (209). Thus, instead of pining over the failure of her second love, she

accepts the money offered by Tamer's mother to leave his life for good and to go to Hajj pilgrimage instead. Najwa's opting for this pragmatic alternative might be disappointing to us. She could have completed the sacrifice of giving up Tamer by not accepting the money, but she doesn't. In a dream-like moment Najwa hears Shahinaz telling her: "[y]ou took the money, so it can't have been love" (275). It is up to the reader to interpret Najwa's act as selfish or not. Instead of a romantic, happy ending, "spiritual growth" (Hassan 309) is the fulfilling outcome that wraps up this unusual love story. According to Hassan "[t]he alternative Islamic discourse introduces a new narrative logic into Anglophone Arab and African fiction that finds its inspiration less in the European novel, as was the case with writers of an earlier generation, than in Qur'anic and other forms of Islamic literature (Sufi Poetry, allegory, hadith, and so forth)" (299). Clearly, when writing in English, Aboulela is well aware of the range of the audiences her work addresses.[42] But contrary to many of her Arab and Muslim counterparts, she does not tailor her writing to appease her non-Muslim (and, especially, Western) readers and interlocutors, in particular.

Instead, one of the ways in which Aboulela's translational narratives in making her narrative logic more perceptible is to show the commonality of human beings through their vulnerability and lack of control over the events and natural forces that control and transform their lives. In *The Translator*, through associations, evocation of dreams and memories, the boundaries between

[42] Stotesbury compares Aboulela's first and second novels, the former published in Scotland and the latter by Bloomsbury, "a major metropolitan publisher" to emphasize this broader range of audience (paper draft shared in personal correspondence, 2005). Wail Hassan in "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction." refers to the popularity of her work among teenage Muslims of the West (309).

Khartoum and Aberdeen melt down. Aboulela takes advantage of an unprecedented heavy snow that covers the city the day before Sammar's departure for Egypt to bring Africa and Scotland together. The distance between the two worlds is breached when the routine, orderly process of everyday life is paralyzed by this seasonal event that has brought chaos to the city. At this chaotic moment, Sammar finally finds something "sacred" in this city: people's insisting to follow the "daily rhythm" of life despite the overpowering schemes of Mother Nature (121). Sammar notes, "Over this chaos, the sun shone brighter than ever, dazzling on the white that covered the surface of things. There was sunshine like in Africa and the city slowed down, became inefficient, as if it were part of the developing world. From this came Sammar's strength. . . . It was familiar to her, natural and curing to the soul" (121).

In moments such as this one, the distance between Sammar's two worlds becomes minimal. In the inefficiency of the modern world in the face of a chaos brought by nature, Sammar finds beauty and sacredness in people's coming face to face with their vulnerability, their surrender to the higher power of nature, and their insistence in persevering no matter where they come from. The narrative's simultaneous placing of European and Islamic/African worlds thematizes an attempt to move beyond Manichean binaries such as colonizer/colonized, self/other, and Western/Oriental, and entails a re-thinking of the issues of representation in favor of models that are more congruent with complicated realities of trans-cultural connections in the global landscape of today.

Chapter Three: Always Improperly Covered: Conundrum of the Veil and Mohja Kahf's Literary Representations of *Hijab*

Seven years ago when I first arrived in Canada, homesickness, culture shock, and the challenges involved in being a graduate student in a new country all made me search longingly for Iranian people wherever I went, in streets, buses, and malls- but Iranians let me down. Many a time when I heard that familiar language that I most-desired and saw faces I was sure were from that beloved land, I was disappointed to find out how suddenly conversations switched into English and how people turned their backs or cast hostile glances towards me. It took me a while to figure out that the problem with this (mis)recognition was my *hijab*. People from my country disliked or perhaps feared me because they found it hard to understand why a woman would insist on holding onto the disreputed veil outside of the Iranian state unless she had some sort of association with the government. This was the only light in which they would see Iranian *hijabed* women. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September of 2001, I had anticipated being viewed with negative attention by the mainstream population (whatever that means in its Canadian context), yet I had never expected such a reception from my fellow countrymen and, especially, women. Once, a very observant Iranian male acquaintance implicitly criticized my imperfect way of donning *hijab* for letting some of my hair show (and perhaps for not forcing my daughter to cover her hair); he called this "shortcoming" peculiar to Iranian women since he believes one should either perfectly don the *hijab* or completely absolve from it. Ironically, outside of the Iranian community, I noticed a totally

new kind of positive attention I had never experienced before. Most of the time, when I came across a *hijab*ed non-Iranian Muslim woman, I was embraced by an endearing note of recognition: a smile and a warm Arabic greeting, "*salamu alaikum*", reminding me that I belong to a different supranational community as well. Thus, my *hijab* constantly regulates the ways in which people see me first (if not foremost). Finally, I had to face a contradiction in my own thinking. I was surprised at my reaction to women who wore the *niqab* (a facial veil that reveals only the eyes) in Edmonton. I say contradiction because on confronting these women, I experienced a sudden realization. Sensing the radical alterity of these women, the anger caused by what I simplistically assumed as their fanning the flames of Islamophobia for wearing *niqab*, and the desire to *dissociate* myself from them mirrored the treatment I'd been receiving from many of non-veiling Iranian women. How could I expect respect from them when I denied it to the *niqab*-wearing women?

Few religious clothing items and symbols can compete with *hijab* (female Muslim head cover) and its power in eliciting strong and contrasting reactions from onlookers. A powerful emblem in discussions on Islam and Muslim women's status, through the long course of the history of dealings of Islam and the West, the veil has not lost its potency as a "visual trope" that, according to Reina Lewis, "is endlessly repositioned by changing world events and constantly reframed by nuanced shifting responses of veiling communities" (10). In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it can perhaps be said that the veil

has reached the highest of its visibility in the public eye as a major definer of Islam and the Muslim woman's subjectivity.

In this chapter, I focus on the semiotic complexities involved in the Muslim veil as an object that has almost invariably become a defining feature of Muslim female subjectivity despite the fact that it is not the only distinctive emblem of Muslim identity (many Muslim men are easily identifiable by virtue of their appearances, specifically their beards and loose clothing), nor do the majority of Muslim women don the veil (Joanne Wallach Scott 4). More specifically, I endeavor to show that this object has acquired a monstrous power to the extent that even within a transcultural ambit of norms, the Muslim woman, whether veiling or not, is seen, either positively or negatively, through the presence or the absence of the veil and, thus, appears as always already improperly covered. To demonstrate this argument, I will focus on the ways in which the Syrian-American writer and scholar, Mohja Kahf, engages in scholarly conversations on dress and identity in the context of diaspora and, thereby, re-imagines new ways of being Muslim, Arab, and American. Kahf's work complicates literary representations of Muslim female subjectivity through de-constructing meanings associated with the veil as a major signifier for Islam. I will end the chapter with a reference to the works of the French guerrilla artist, Princess Hijab and the ways s/he helps queering and satirizing the dominant meanings attached to the veil in a different register and in the field of visual culture.

I need to clarify a couple of points before I start. First, I am aware of the differences between the terms veil and *hijab*, and the implications of the former

that, according to Joanne Wallach Scott, reflect anxieties "about the ways in which Islam is understood to handle the relations of the sexes" (16); however, I use the two interchangeably, partly for practical purposes and partly to show the difficulty of not falling into the trap of conflating them in the public imagination whenever the issue of Islam and women comes up. Second, I am also aware of the clearly problematic and homogenizing connotations of the terms West and Western. I use them with discomfort and only as ideological entities.

The practice of veiling did not originate with Islam; neither is it a quintessentially Islamic practice. It existed in ancient Greece, the Balkans, Byzantium and pre-Islamic Arabia as an indication of high class status (Leila Ahmed, 1992, 55; Fadwa El Guindi, 1999, 149; Mohja Kahf, 2010, 29). The veil has also been adopted by some communities of Jewish and Christian religions as El Guindi notes (149-150). We all know about the heterogeneity of the practice and cultural differences that influence the shape and physical features of the veil: the chador used to come in different colors and flowered patterns, since the revolution it has been predominantly black; *abayas* in Saudi Arabia; white haik in Algeria; colorful scarves in Iran, Turkey, and Egypt; tudong in Malaysia and Indonesia; and dupattas in Pakistan and India. The multiplicity of positive and negative meanings associated with the veil also displays a complex and, at times, contradictory range of meanings. It is positively associated with modesty, protection from unwanted male attention and desire, and liberation from the demands of consumerist capitalist economies and their investment in women's bodies. It signifies security and agency, and functions as a means of mobility in

the public sphere. It also negatively stands for Islam's resistance to modernity, the challenges it sets against secular democracy, women's oppression in a misogynist system that protects men and society from women's presumed destructive sexual attraction, lack of mobility and agency, domesticity, an extremist and militant religious ideology. It is the epitome of cultural stubbornness that stands in the way of assimilation, integration. Further, it poses a threat to the integrity of a presumed singularly secularist and individualist Western identity (particularly in France).

In this chapter, I will not argue for or against the veil; there is a huge archive of scholarly work that explicates why or why not Muslim women would or should veil. What concerns me here is the impact of all these positive and negative theories on the veiled, veiling, and not-veiling Muslim women. A very good starting point to unfold the intricate meanings of the veil is Nima Naghibi's "Bad Feminism or *Bad-Hejabi*? Moving Outside the *Hejab* Debate." In this essay, Naghibi attends to the complexities involved in the practice of veiling in twentieth century Iran. In an attempt to move out of the delimiting and re-worked definitions of the veil that describe this piece of Muslim clothing as either a sign of women's oppression or liberation, Naghibi contextualizes her study in contemporary Iranian history by focusing on two major historical moments: the forced unveiling of women by Reza Shah, the founder of Pahlavi Regime in 1936, in his pursuit of modernization and Westernization of Iran, as well as the decree issued by the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the aftermath of the revolution in 1983 that made the use of the veil mandatory for women in public spaces (Naghibi 556). Naghibi argues about the convergence of

contradictory and antagonistic discourses of Western, mainstream Iranian feminism and imperialism on the one hand and the "patriarchal nationalist" on the other hand. These discourses result in the emergence of a binarism that leaves no room for complexities that other issues such as gender and class bring to the argument. Naghibi introduces a neglected yet complicated category of the "*bad hijab*" woman meaning, (in Persian) inappropriately, not enough covered, as a discursive ally to move out of the stranglehold of this rooted dichotomy (557). The essay grants agency to the *bad-hijab* woman as a Spivakean "'concept metaphor without an adequate referent'"(569) for the woman's ability to avoid the pre-assigned polar positions of "veiled" and "unveiled," both of which are enforced upon the signified Iranian Muslim woman. Naghibi's essay, as she makes clear, is mainly concerned with the states' dominant ideologies and repressive ideological apparatuses, as well as the transgressing of such mechanisms by women in post-revolutionary Iran. The essay does not mention whether or not women's similar resistance mechanisms existed during the forced unveiling project during Reza Shah's days; fortunately it does discuss the issue of the class and the complicity of Iranian elite women and their western feminist counterparts in the state-engineered move towards the superficial modernization of the country that put its mark, first, on people's appearances. Nonetheless, the veiled woman of the pre-revolution stands at a disadvantaged position compared to her improperly veiled sister in post- revolutionary Iran. I fear that this unequal attention on the part of essay could again consolidate the issue of equating agency of the Muslim woman with transgressing the religion and thus subtly re-affirm the

veil as signifying either oppression or emancipation, the very binary that this insightful analysis aims to undermine. Towards the end of the essay, Naghibi raises an important question about the position "the *hejabi*" (569) woman occupies in the dynamics of the veil. The *hejabi* woman denotes the veiled woman who dons the veil by choice and yet, at the same time, displays feminist sensitivities and political concerns. One of the closing questions the author asks deals with the ways in which Western feminist discourse and secular Iranian feminists will come to terms with this chiasmus (570). But, how would it be possible to read the veil without invariably taking it as a metonym for oppression or extremist religious tendencies?

I would pick up the threads from here since I believe that "moving outside the *Hijab* debate" is far from being within reach. I raise this point not as a critique of Naghibi's argument but as an indication of the complexity of the veil debate. I argue that the Muslim Woman seems to be always already improperly covered. At the time of modernization, she is penalized for appearing veiled in public. At the time of anti-Western Islamic resurgencies, she is severely castigated if she is not. Take her outside the nation state, and she is judged as either oppressed or being complicit in the system from which she comes. She always seems to be wearing too much or not quite enough. Thus, taking Naghibi's argument to another level, I draw upon another category in-between those of the veiled and the unveiled, a category for which I cannot find a clear-cut designation since, as I would argue, it is devoid of subversive connotations implied by the term "*bad-hijab*." I would call this unnoticed and thus discursively silenced category as the "veiling" rather

than the "veiled woman" in an attempt to distinguish the willing act of veiling from the compulsory one. Nevertheless, this label is still problematic since it does not distinguish between, on the one hand, those who observe the practice with the intention of supporting the ideology of a theocratic state that might also actively promote the practice, and, on the other, those who want to have little to do with regimes and their ideological apparatuses in their holding on to their *hijab*s. Thus, one of the interesting outcomes of placing this "veiling woman" outside of the dominant hegemony of nation is that even in a Western society that allows for freedoms in sartorial choices, the "veiling woman" could easily elapse as the oppressed "veiled woman" or, in the case of the veiling Iranian woman, turn into the state-oriented veiling woman and as a cog in the apparatus of a theocratic ideology overseas. Indeed, even without displacing she is a non-being since, with regard to the case of veiling in Iran, this category remains invisible (because it is stripped of the element of choice). It seems that there is a residual meaning in the term *hijab*ed woman that always remains unspoken. In other words, within the category of the *hijabed* or the veiled, there exists a world of possible and even ambivalent variables that operate between categories of veiling/not-veiling as indications of being a dupe of ideology or completely free of it. Indeed, the visual power of the veil emanates not only from its function as a boundary regulating men's and women's contacts but from its serving as a contact zone for historically and ideologically loaded confrontations of the worlds of Islam and the West that many a times play out in tropes of veiling and unveiling and on women's bodies.

Here, Peter Schwenger's study of the gaze of the object in "Red Cannas, Sardine Canas, and the Gaze of the Object" provides us with a useful analytical tool to probe into the complexities regarding the visual power of the veil. He argues that the act of seeing is a product of an ideological act of filtering that has always been operating on us. In other words, it is not possible to see objects as they are. It is them gazing at us, not the other way around. Schwenger foregrounds his approach on the "optics" of the object via Lacan's theory of the gaze. The uncanniness of the gaze attributed to an object is partly related to what Schwenger calls the Otherness of a physical object in its being the "other of the subject" (55). Clearly, in the case of the veil and in a Western transcultural context, the issue is even more complicated due to cultural complexities involved in the issue of differences and their translation into otherness. In Lacan's theory, Schwenger observes, objects are not "the passive recipients of looking. Rather, in a reversal of the common view of vision, it is objects that look at us" (56). In other words, the way an image is observed is not determined by the physical eye that does the act of seeing. Rather, the visible objects acquire some sort of power over the human eye; they are not passive subjects to our gaze.

According to Lacan, the onlooker does not play an active role in the picture formation process, nor is the picture a mirrored reflection of the light on an object. It is an impression, "the shimmering of a surface that is not, in advance, situated for me in its distance. . . ." (96). Moreover, even though the picture is in the eye, the self and the eye are not located in the same place since, as Lacan argues, the location of the self coincides with that of the screen on which the image is formed:

"[t]he correlative of the picture, to be situated in the same place as it, that is to say, outside, is the point of gaze, while that which forms the mediation from the one to the other, that which is between the two, is something of another nature than geometrical, optical space, something that plays an exactly reverse role, which operates, not because it is opaque—I mean the screen" (96).

This screen, to which Lacan also refers as "the stain" or "the spot" functions like "a blind spot" similar to the one in our eyes and prevents us from seeing "the object's gaze" (qtd. in Schwenger 58). This blind spot, according to Schwenger, is a creation of our "cultural conditioning" that controls our way of seeing and conditions us to develop some sort of "selective blindness" (58). As Schwenger sums up, "The image does not inhere in the object, which is always other than one's image of it. Nor does it inhere in the subject, which is never sufficient in itself to produce the image" (60). Vision in this view, then, is "associated with loss" since the dynamics of the subject-object entail a frustrating "play of light and opacity" (Lacan 96).

If Schwenger is right and our "cultural conditioning" controls our way of seeing, and if the Muslim veil not only exemplifies the power of the gaze of the object, but also literally functions as a screen that blocks seeing, then it is important and necessary to study the social, political and historical forces that form and inform our visual memory of the veil. Part of today's potency of the veil in invoking "mixed emotions of fear, hostility, derision, curiosity and fascination," as Myra Macdonald observes, is linked to its perception and

invention in the colonial discourses obsessed with the mission of unveiling and civilizing alien cultures ("Muslim Women and the Veil" 8).

Meyda Yeğenoğlu in *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* deals with the analysis of this obsession. She argues that cultural and sexual differences are "constitutive of each other," (1) and, accordingly, the "discursive constitution of Otherness is achieved simultaneously through sexual as well as cultural modes of differentiation" (2). According to Yeğenoğlu, Western fascination with veiled Oriental females is rooted in the historical structural process of fashioning the Western subject and implications of the obsession with penetrating "the veiled surface of 'Otherness'" in the construction of " hegemonic colonial identity" (1). The veiled Muslim woman stands for the hidden "reality of Orient" which is always "*more and other than* what it appears to be" by virtue of appearing "in a veiled, disguised and deceptive manner" (48) and thus the veil represents simultaneously the truth and the concealment of truth" (47-8). Jannanne Al-Ani recounts in "Approaching Egypt for the first time, Edward W. Lane," the British Orientalist and the author of *the Manners and Customs of Egyptians*, "confessed to feeling like a bridegroom 'about to lift the veil off *his* bride'" (100, emphasis added). Here, the metaphorical deployment of the term "unveiling" with its sexual connotations, conjoins the desire to uncover the mystery of the Orient and its conception as "feminine, always veiled, seductive" and "dangerous" (Yeğenoğlu 11). As Yeğenoğlu observes, the "desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible" is an important feature of "the scopic regime of Modernity" (12). Recalling the

European Enlightenment principle of "the disenchantment of the world," and its tireless endeavors at the pursuit of knowledge and solving the mysteries of unknown faraway lands, Yeğenoğlu draws on Foucault's explication of the system of knowledge as power and its lack of tolerance for ambiguity and opacity. In this system, "space is organized in a particular way which makes its individual occupants and their behavior visible and transparent" (Yeğenoğlu 40). She contends that the veiled woman serves as an "object for both a branch of knowledge and a branch of power" with the veil meaning not "simply a signifier of cultural habit or identity that can be . . . good or bad," but "as the resisting data or tropology of this modern power whose program aims to construct the world in terms of a transparency provided by knowledge as power" (41).

On another level, as Fanon notes, the veiling "enabled the colonial administration to define a precise political doctrine" (37). According to this doctrine, if the colonizers wanted "to destroy the structure of Algerian society, and its capacity for resistance," they "must first of all conquer the women; [they] must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight" (37-38). Fanon's observation of the French colonizers' desire for unveiling Algerian women illustrates the links between the veil and colonial sexual fantasies. Removing the veil brings the inaccessible Algerian woman "within reach" and makes her "a possible object of possession. This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself." (qtd. in Wallach 160). This colonialist/Orientalist obsession with

the veil and its "lifting off" is, perhaps, best illustrated in Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem* and its account of the circulation of the postcards of Algerian women (photographic version of Turkish baths and the Orientalist paintings) by French soldiers during the1920s. [43]Alloula's re-arrangement of the postcards shows a gradual unveiling of Algerian women that metaphorically alludes to the conquest of Algeria. The author argues that one way of reading the theatrical lifting of the veil that occurs in the photographer's studio, is that it indicates the threat that the veiled women in public places posed to the French photographer. He did not have a way into their private domestic spaces because of the strict cultural and religious norms preventing him from performing a "gazing gaze" game (14). Indeed, the photographer is the one being photographed because, as Alloula argues, "the feminine gaze that filters through the veil . . . concentrated by the tiny orifice for the eye . . . is a little like the eye of a camera . . . that takes aim at everything" (14). Being similar to the photographer's own gaze when he is at work, this feminine gaze makes him feel "photographed; having himself become an object-to-be-seen . . ." (14). I suggest that here the threat, more than seeming to emanate from the Muslim woman, comes from the veil or the object; the uncanny power of the veil is psychologically detrimental to the photographer (Schwenger 65). What lies behind is not within the photographer's grasp, and since the he is unable to trespass the forbidden space created by the barrier of the veil, he stages his own illusory space in his studio in which he constructs the Oriental female bodies by recruiting prostitutes as models.

[43] For more information on the feminist critiques of Alloula's book, see Chapter One.

Time has passed, yet the colonial experience has put an indelible mark on the public imagination and the ways in which the veil is viewed in the West. As Leila Ahmed notes in *Women and Gender in Islam*: "Repeatedly throughout the twentieth century the issue of women and the veil, albeit occasionally in slightly different guise, has flared up in one or another Middle Eastern society . . . and always the debate is charged with other issues of culture and nationalism, 'Western' versus 'indigenous' or 'authentic' values . . . " (130). One specific contemporary example about the enduring legacy of colonial discourse in defining the veil is the way in which the George W. Bush Administration's attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq (despite their country's societal differences in regard to women's conditions) in the War on Terror were justified by drawing on the familiar civilizational and paternalizing discourse of saving the benighted burqa-clad and veiled Muslim woman.[44] The involvement of some feminists with these neo-colonial projects, as well as the role media plays in disseminating of Orientalist view of the veil, have made the issues around the veil in this particular war even more complicated. In "The War on Terror: Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism" Roksana Bahramitash observes that literature, particularly the genre of novel, as well as the media help popularize a concept of "Orientalist feminism" (227). Orientalist feminism, in a familiar fashion and similar to colonial discourse, aims "to bring democracy . . . with the same methods of the past: war and occupation" and also "by going to the proven colonial strategy of

[44] See for example, Nancy Lindisfarne's "Starting from Below: Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now." *Critique of Anthropology*. 22.4 (2002): 403–423.

focusing on the Muslim world's treatment of women" (Bahramitash 227).[45] As we saw in the first chapter, it is obvious that the New Orientalist narratives provide ample support for these interventions by hugely investing in representations of the veil as proof of the backward state of Muslim cultures and societies.

Literary portrayals of the Syrian-American scholar and author, Mohja Kahf, discuss ambivalences associated with the veil, veiled, and veiling women. Born in Damascus, Syria, Kahf immigrated to the United States of America as a child. She holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature and is currently an associate professor in the same field. Her work reflects concerns about political issues in the Middle East, and Syrians' resistance against the Baath totalitarian regime as well as the challenges that Muslim immigrants face when confronted by animosity and bigotry in America. She writes in the context of the diaspora in North America where *hijabed* women are outside of the nationalist hegemony of their societies of origin and at the same time are under the protection of the ideology of multiculturalism that allows them freedom to express their faith via their sartorial choices.

The first chapter demonstrates that the dominant mood in popular Muslim immigrant literature bears the imprint of the present polarized political and cultural ambience. In this literature, more often than not, Islam and culture are being conflated as the same and there is little opportunity to understand the religion as an epistemology in directing the everyday life of an individual.

---

[45] For studies on problems and issues of women in postcolonial times and the role played by Western liberal feminism as an accomplice in the dominant hegemony see: Chandra Mohanty's *Feminism without Borders*, 2003 and Nima Naghibi's *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*, 2007.

Whereas Ayyan Hirsi Ali's work (a prominent example of a body of writings called "new Orientalist narratives") regards religion as an obstacle on the road to assimilation and integration into the mainstream Western society with the veil as its visual and material representative, Kahf's central concern in her scholarly research in *Western Representations of Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*, 1999, and her creative literary writings have been problematizing such damaging notions about Muslim women. Both her collection of poetry, *E-mails from Scheharazade* (2003), the finalist in the 2004 Paterson Poetry Prize, and her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), examine the relationship between identity, displacement, and home in the experience of first generation Muslim immigrants and particularly of women in the U. S., with the veil as a key element in representing these relations.

E-mails from Scheherazade is as catchy a title as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and it presumably elicits a similar surprised response from the reader for deploying an "incongruous juxtaposition," imagining Scheherazade sending E-mails instead of the familiar backdrop of harems, captivity, and vengeful, abusive kings (Lisa Suhair Majaj n.pag.). This Scheherazade lives "in Hackensack, New Jersey" and has split up with her husband Shahriar, because he "wanted a wife & not so much an artist," while she "wanted publication." In fact, she is already on her "seventh novel and book tour" (Kahf, "Emails" line 20). Similar to her progenitor, this twenty-first century Scheherazade has exceptional storytelling powers, but she has obviously been blessed with greater powers of mobility as she has actually travelled across the continents; she is on a different mission now. In

"So You Think You Know Scheherazade," Kahf clarifies to the reader that this Scheherazade does not tell bedtime fairy tales to "please or soothe" (line 3) and/or help escape. Her stories, as Suhair Majaj observes in "Supplies of Grace': The Poetry of Mohja Kahf," are "not so much a vehicle for fantasy and escape as for self-confrontation" (n.pag.); she "awakens the demons" under our bed and "locks" us "in with them" (Kahf, "So You Think," 7). According to Suhair Majaj, the role that Scheherazade performs "is in many ways that of the Muslim woman writer in the U.S.". Kahf is one such author who "awaken[s] demons that are already present within the culture" ("Supplies" n.pag.). Some of these demons are assumptions and stereotyping preconceptions about the veiling Muslim woman. Kahf's intervention also entails her poetic techniques, including her use of a multiplicity of voices, various modes of covering such as wearing scarves, face veils, *jilbabs*, and offering "snippets" and moments instead of coherent experiences (Abdurraqib 62). As Samaa Abdurraqib observes, this technique of fragmentation of experience as well as individual narrators frustrates a reading of these women as representative of all Muslims (63).

"*Hijab* Scenes" is a series of numbered poems that deals with the diverse range of responses that the *hijab* elicits from observers who seem to never get used to its presence. "*Hijab* Scene # 3" is the first of these non-chronologically arranged poems and "*Hijab* Scene # 2" is the last with numbers 4 and 6 missing from the scenes. All these poems deal with the ways in which *hijab* appears as a visually overpowering object, a barrier to communication, and a demarcating sign that determines membership, or lack thereof, to one community of either Muslims

or the mainstream American society, but never simultaneously to both. Most of these poems seem to interpellate the non-Muslim American reader, demanding from him or her a more informed response. In the first *hijab* scene poem (number 3), an American mother tries to volunteer for the school PTA but never succeeds despite trying every means of communication. Her interlocutor never takes note of her presence next to another "regular American mother" (line 8). The *hijabed* mother sends up "flares," and beats "on drums," waves "navy flags"; she tries "smoke signals, American Sign Language, Morse code, Western Union, telex, fax," (11-13) to no avail. She is an invisible being because it seems that "the positronic force field of hijab / jammed all her cosmic coordinates" (17-18).

This poem thematizes challenges of belonging and points toward the complexities of American citizenship. The *hijab* appears as a strong marker of difference, so huge that it pulls a curtain before the eyes of the interlocutor. Even though they are in need of volunteers, the unnamed interlocutor does not see a *hijab*ed mother as equal to a so-called "regular" one as equally fit for becoming a member of the school PTA. The other issue that is linked with the first is the ways in which *hijab* functions as a barrier to communication. Reference to the various old and new means of communication implies not only the long history of the presence of Muslims in America, but also the negative visual impact of the veil as an historical barrier to communication.

In the "*Hijab* Scene # 7" the unnamed persona has obviously lost her cool. She is angry and tired of the ignorance of her imaginary but probably most mainstream American interlocutor whose knowledge about Islam goes no farther

than the stereotypical assumptions allow. The speaker retorts back: "[n]o, I'm not bald under the scarf / No I'm not from that country / where women can't drive cars" (lines1-3). She demands to be recognized as an American since she is one "already" (5). She is furious for having to explain that she knows how to buy "insurance," open "a bank account," reserve "a seat on a flight," and speak "English" (8-11). The speaker, then, draws on those same dominant and negative assumptions and threatens the ignorant addressee that she is carrying words as "explosives" (13) and will have no mercy for those who "don't get up / Off" their "assumptions" (15-16). Both speakers in these two poems demand to be recognized as Americans.

In "*Hijab* Scene # 1" and "*Hijab* Scene # 2" the attention shifts from the veiling woman to the mainstream American observer of the veil. In the former, a tenth–grade boy with a pierced tongue call the new *hijabed* student strange, unaware that the clicking sound of his tongue-rings while uttering "'tr' in 'strange'" (line 3) disrupts the flow of the words, not to mention that his look is no less conventional than that of the *hijabed* woman. This part is followed by "*Hijab* Scene # 2" in which a Western woman "hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose" (line 2) remarks on the restrictive dress codes of Muslim women. According to Abdurraqib, here the focus of the poems shifts to the people reading the *hijab*. In this way, the poet "calls attention to reading practices rather than practices of identity negotiation" (68) and, thus, reveals the role of the mainstream culture in keeping *hijab*ed women in "liminal positions" (68).

In "Descent into JFK," the veiled woman's first "[d]escent into New York airspace" (line 1) is compared to arriving in a world of "tensions" (4). Her arrival is marked not only by synchronizing to the local time, but also by having recourse to additional accessories to temper the visual impact of her different appearance as soon as she enters in this unfamiliar world. She needs "things that cover and reveal" (33) such as "lipstick to change the color of her words" (31) and "earrings to dangle like her fears," (32) since people would "never know Khaleda / has a Ph.D. / because she wears a veil they'll / never see beyond" (23-26). Here, the veil and the accompanying accessories underscore the role of clothes as a discursive system. As John Harvey observes, all clothing items function as "a punning language, expert in double meanings" (66). Here, the strategic neutralizing the negative presence of the veil is an apt example of this semiotic ambivalence.

"*Hijab* Scene #5" shows another aspect of the power of the veil as a screen that impairs seeing. It portrays the veil as an apparently positive marker of community belonging when, upon seeing a *hijabed* woman, "Black men" suddenly appear from nowhere, "like an army of chivalry, /opening doors, springing into gallantry" (lines 8-10). Ironically, this conditional gesture of respectful recognition disappears when the woman drops the veil: "Drop the scarf, and (if you're light) / you suddenly pass (lonely) for white" (11-12). Here again, the *hijab* appears as a boundary between two different and, perhaps, even non-conciliatory types of membership. In the eye of the beholder, this border dichotomously associates Muslim-ness with being colored and veiled. The poem

subtly hints that behind this positive recognition lies a grave misconception that not only excludes the white non-veiling Muslim women, but also is slanted towards racism.

It is against this backdrop that Kahf unfolds the coming of age story of Khadra Shamy, a second generation Muslim in America in the novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. Growing up Muslim and a child of Syrian immigrants in Indianapolis in 1970s, Khadra struggles to locates herself within the framework of American culture, which is at once her own and not hers. Both her parents are educated professionals yet, unlike many of their immigrant counterparts, their reason for immigration had less to do with joining the workforce than the open political atmosphere offered to them. They are revivalists who aspire to return to a "pure" Islam the way it was practiced by the Prophet Mohammad. When the story opens with the now-grownup Khadra returning to her hometown after seven years, on a job assignment as a photographer for the magazine *Alternative Americas*, she is, ironically, still a foreign presence against the familiar blue and gold back drop. Her tangerine scarf "flapping from the crosscurrent inside the car" draws hostile looks towards her (3). Here the veil functions as both a major definer of Muslim female subject-hood and a demarcating tool in drawing boundaries between American-ness and Muslim-ness in the monochromatic context of the small town of Simmonsville. In this otherwise typical coming-of-age story, the protagonist's path from childhood to adulthood and her maturation into a Syrian-American Muslim woman puts its mark on her *hijab*, its color, fabric, and style of wearing and even not wearing it.

Khadra's first years of living in America have an idyllic quality resembling that of Laura Ingalls Wilder's family in *Little House on the Prairie*. However, her earthly paradise is soon shattered when her family moves to the demographically homogenous American town of Simmonsville, Indiana where racial prejudice puts a lasting scar on her childhood memories. Nonetheless, the sense of belonging to the extra-territorial community of Islamic *ummah* seems to be able to sustain her in the face of harassment and discrimination in her school and neighborhood. The conception of a hyphenated identity is out of the question for her; she looks at her life in the U.S. as a temporary phase, at least until she and her family become naturalized citizens, although they don't actually want citizenship. They obtain it out of expediency, because of political circumstances in their home country. Citizenship signifies to them nothing more than an empty gesture "on paper" (145). This dichotomy of being American or Muslim, but not simultaneously both, is encouraged by a number of societal contextual elements. According to Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "political and ideological factors," the "time of immigration," and "the receiving place (the region)" are influential in perception of Muslim-ness in the North American context and thereby the individual's choice and the extent of acculturation (189-190). Political events in the Middle East like the hostage-taking in the U.S. embassy in post-revolutionary Iran in 1980, and the intensified bigotry of the residents of homogeneous Simmonsville negatively impact the family's process of acculturation. Khadra's parents, who in turn see their identities under siege, are equally rigid in their views. They constantly set impenetrable boundaries between the believers and *kufar* (non-Muslim Americans)

and they regard most of the latter as worldly, immoral, and filthy. At this stage, the teenage Khadra becomes fixated on the issue of authenticity that she strongly associates with looks and appearances. In her search for what she perceives as true Muslim identity, she is attracted to radical militant Islam and adopts black headscarves and navy blue *jilbabs*. In her black-scarf days, Khadra is caught in the process of acting and mimicking an image of Muslim femininity, which is steeped towards stereotypes. Adopting a black colored veil automatically and visually destabilizes Khadra's identity as American since, on the one hand, it is an ethnic clothing item and emphasizes her foreign-ness and, on the other hand, the black color stands for allegiance to an extremist militant ideology.

Ultimately, a trip to Mecca proves the futility of Khadra's search for a pure authentic Muslim identity she strictly associates with the façade of appearances and places. On leaving Indianapolis's airport to perform hajj, "the phrase leaving home" only enrages Khadra, or at least she thinks so in an act of self-denial and despite "the lump in her throat" while she remembers a catchphrase about "how a true Muslim feels at home whenever the call to prayer is sung, how a true Muslim feels no attachment to one nation or tribe over another" (157). Khadra, however, becomes confused when during the ritual of circling about Kaba; her *talbiya* becomes a bilingual chant. She keeps repeating *Labbaik, allahumma, labbaik* (which means: Here I am my Lord, Here I am!) crossed with Phil Collins', "'*I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lo-ord . . . I've been waiting for this moment for all my life, oh Lo-ord . . .* '" (162). In this momentary fusion of two sides of the identity in language, the young girl finds herself, subconsciously, in a site that

signifies Bhabha's "the Third Space" and its promise of the emergence of culturally enriched identities and new position takings that occur when different selves are joined. This in-between-ness, however, becomes dually disadvantageous to Khadra. That's because her idealized dream of leading a purely Islamic life in the heartland of Islam is shattered when she is confronted by gender discrimination when she is prevented from praying *fajr* in a mosque. Khadra is also confused and furious when she witnesses the double life that some of the rich Saudi youngsters lead behind the veil in the most sacred of places and months. Ironically, compared to her Saudi counterparts, Khadra's life the U.S. is more islamically approved. To her dismay, the Saudis do not acknowledge her as a real Arab or an observant Muslim. Her attempts to translate herself are futile; her Arabic accent, a hybrid amalgam of all Arabic languages spoken by members of her community, has no distinctive quality to reveal which Arab land is her country of origin. The discrepancy between the realities of life she observes in contemporary Saudi Arabia and her parents' teachings about what true Islam requires makes Khadra bitterly admit that, despite "being in a Muslim country" and "not just any Muslim country but *the* Muslim country, where Islam started, she had never felt so far from home" (177). This experience displays the ways in which gender further complicates the conception of religiosity for Muslim women in the diaspora.

Here the veil appears as a boundary between East/West and male/female as well as a meeting point for ideological confrontations. The important and yet disadvantaged in-between position of women reveals the overlapping zones of the

Eastern and Western patriarchal ideologies as Laura Nader argues in "Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women". Drawing on Said's Gramscian-Foucaultian approach in *Orientalism* and the role that culture plays in the "play of 'power' and 'truth'" (324), Nader identifies the ways in which "images of women in other societies can be prejudicial to women in one's own society" (323). In other words, "[b]y taking a position of superiority vis-a-vis the 'other,' both East and West can rationalize the position of their women and manage their relation to the 'other,' at least as long as they can keep the fiction of the other in place" (Nader 328). A famous example that comes to mind is Lord Cromer, the British colonial governor of Egypt (1883 to 1907) who was a professed opponent of the suffrage movement in England but appeared in the guise of a supporter of the rights of the Middle Eastern women in saving them from their misogynist traditions (Ahmed 152-53). In setting such double standards, the veil and segregation issues are powerful tropes of mistreating women in Muslim cultures and societies.

Nader also cites a fascinating counter example that best illustrates the in-between position of women in such power struggles. She refers to Egyptian Shaykh I-Sha'rawi's 1982 popular guide for leading a "truly Islamic" life for Muslim women (330). According to Nader, this guide not only represents "strategies on internalist controls," but also serves as a counter "strategy of positional superiority" of the Islamic tradition, its moral paradigms and civilization by placing much emphasis on women's status within Islam to display a contrasting image of the West as immoral, "barbaric" and "materialistic"(330-

31). This is the kind of lens through which Kahf's protagonist is viewed in Saudi Arabia. Both Khadra and the Saudi youngsters contradict this static view on the East/West dichotomy, but none of them is able to rise above it.

Khadra's Mecca episode provides her with a glimpse into the ways in which these competing ideologies target the Muslim woman; however, these snapshots of reality are not enough to trigger her full realization of her location at the cross-road of ideologies. Khadra's disillusionment with Saudi Arabia and her acceptance into the entomology department at Indiana University are starting points for her "neoclassical phase" (194). She retires her black scarf, storing it in the back of a closet, replacing it with light colored flowery *hijabs* while continuing her quest this time, in the traditional Islamic resources (194). The sexist and exclusionary treatments she encounters in the community are not in tandem with the doctrines of Islam she studies. While the Muslim identity offered to Khadra is not in alignment with what she knows as Islamic, it is also strongly shaped by cultures that are not even her own. The last straw is the collapse of the dreams of a successful marriage to a handsome mechanical engineering graduate student from Kuwait, as Khadra realizes she is unable to fit the profile of an ideal housewife and mother that her partner has in mind. An unwanted pregnancy and an abortion that Khadra's family harshly rebukes lead to a self-initiated divorce on Khadra's part. Through Khadra's challenges, Kahf thematizes the ways in which the Muslim woman becomes an inevitable target in the multiplicity of the discourses dealing with issues of faith, morality, culture, and particularly, the sartorial practices within Islam.

In an essay on the reception of the memoir of Egyptian feminist Huda Sharawi in the West, Kahf defines the dominant frames of reference for women of Arabo-Islamic cultures from the nineteenth century on. She writes that women are defined as either the "victim" of an "immutably oppressive" tradition or the "escapee" when the former mould is not fitting. She introduces a third category that emerged in the postcolonial era and particularly as a result of Palestinian resurgent movements and the Revolution in Iran in 1979. This third category, she observes, designates the Muslim woman as a "pawn" when she refuses to dispense with culture and common causes with men of her culture "under a false consciousness" (150-51). In *E-mails From Scheherazade* and in the poem "My Body Is Not Your Battleground," the persona expresses her anger against the ways in which various and antagonistic ideologies play out on the Muslim woman's body, expecting her breasts "to lead revolutions" (line 4) or her womb to become "the cradle of [their] soldiers" or else "the ship of [their] journey to the homeland" (26-27). The poem clarifies that covering or not covering the hair is not the major issue since the Muslim woman's "hair is neither sacred nor cheap, / neither the cause of [men's] disarray/nor the path to [their] liberation" (11-13); it will not "bring progress and clean water" either (14).[46] Kahf's feminist agenda cannot be pigeonholed into an either Eastern or Western mould, and she does not hesitate to display her animosity against any sexist ideology that targets women's bodies (Suhair Majaj n.pag.).

[46] See also the poem "Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective" from the same collection of poems.

There is a lot of ambivalence around the veil and the message it conveys. Obviously, Muslim scholars are not on the same page in regard to what the Qur'anic injunctions mean by women's proper dress code and the veil, in particular, whether it is historically mandated or a general and unchanging decree that needs to be observed at all times. The absence of a single term in Arabic as a synonym for the English term, the veil, as Fadwa Alguindi points out, implies the complexity of the veil and dangers of a monolithic manner of reading it (7)[47]. Given this mixture of messages within Islam, and the cacophony of voices from outside the *ummah* who comment on the veil in the diaspora, it is not surprising that feminist scholars differ on their readings of the *hijab*. Among the many positions now in play over the semiotics of the veil are those that refute the idea that *hijab* is a compulsory practice mandated to the entirety of Muslim community. For example, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi contends in *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, that veiling first appeared in a Qur'anic injunction as a makeshift solution to the problem of women's harassment in public spaces.[48] This temporarily intended sartorial practice, Mernissi contends, later became institutionalized through misogynist influences of Umar [Umar was a close companion of the Prophet and the Second Caliph after the latter passed away] (188). Mernissi claims that the Prophet had to

[47] There are four specific passages in the Qur'an that deal with the issue of covering and behaviour in public spaces for both men and women: (24:30-31); (24:60); (33:59); (33:53). For an analysis of the differing views amongst Muslim scholars see Ann Sofie Roald's *Women in Islam: The Western European Experience* as well as Fadwa El-Guindi's "Veiling Resistances".

[48] She regards veiling as a first and yet problematic step towards granting equality to all individuals. At those times, Mernissi maintains, slave women had no social rights and were treated as objects of men's sexual desire. The veiling granted distinctiveness to "a certain category of women" (183) and provided them with safety at the expense of their less privileged slave sisters. It was not a totally new clothing item; it was "a new way of wearing a usual item of clothing" (180).

sacrifice his egalitarian dreams for individuals for strategic reasons to save the newly emerged Muslim community from disintegration, at a time of military crisis during his last years (184-87). According to sociologist Katherine Bullock, here Mernissi deploys Islamic methodology by drawing on The Qur'an and Hadith via a secular point of view. Her idea of the Prophet giving in to pressures of Umar, rather than following what the Qur'an actually required, questions the authority of the divine book. Bullock argues that if the injunction is in the Qur'an, the Prophet would not disobey it (171).

Another well-known scholar who propounds the idea of veiling as historically specific is Leila Ahmed. *Women and Gender in Islam* analyzes veiling as a cultural practice and one that is not particular to Islam. Ahmed argues that the practice existed in ancient Mesopotamian, Persian, Hellenic, and Christian civilizations, and that all these patriarchal systems in different ways were responsible for infringing upon women's rights. Islamic civilization was one amongst such traditions which also borrowed "the controlling and reductive practices of its neighbours" (18) and, hence, Ahmed's reading of the Qur'an does not regard veiling as "explicitly prescribed" to women; it only instructs them "to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms" (55). Ann Sofie Roald calls Ahmed's reading of the *hijab* simplifying and "superficial" particularly since Ahmed's analysis, unlike Mernissi's, does not include the *hadith* tradition—the sayings and deeds of the Prophet (261-62). Conversely, according to Lamia ben Youssef Zayzafoon, Ahmed's analysis offers an insight into "heterogeneity of Islamic tradition, its constant change through time, and its

affinities with Judeo- Christian traditions" (23) while Mernissi's restricts Islamic culture within "a closed and localized notion of culture" based on her study of Moroccan society (ben Youssef Zayzafoon 23-24).

Valentine Moghaddam's "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: towards a Resolution of a Debate" sheds light on yet another angle of this multi-faceted debate in the context of Iranian society. Iranian feminist Nayereh Tohidi, views "the veil as a means to facilitate social presence rather than seclusion, or minimizing and diversifying the compulsory *hijab* and dress code into the fashionable styles," a view that goes against the idea of the veil as necessarily a sign of the negation of women's rights per se (qtd. in Moghadam 27). Tohidi states that it is important to differentiate between those "who are genuinely promoting women's rights and hence inclusionary in their politics from those who insist on fanatic or totalitarian Islam" (qtd. in Moghadam 27). Contrary to this view is the one that is sceptical towards the possibility of any act to promote women's rights within the parameters of Islam. For example, scholars such as Haideh Moghissi and Hamed Shahidian view as problematic a feminism that justifies "Muslim women's veiling, domesticity, moral behaviour, and adherence to Islamic precepts as signs of individual choice and identity" as problematic (qtd. in Moghadam 30).

Katherine Bullock is among the scholars who hold a positive view about *hijab*. While she supports the idea of the veil as a timeless decree and inclusive of all Muslim women, she strongly refutes the idea of the veil as a symbol of women's oppression. In *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging*

Historical and Modern Stereotypes, Bullock states her goal of research as offering a counter-argument to the Orientalist and Western liberalist approaches to the veil. More important, her goal reflects the viewpoint of the observant Muslim woman in regard to the veil, thereby offering what she calls "a positive theory of the veil" (183). Bullock acknowledges that the actual and material conditions of women in many Islamic societies are far from ideal, but she is against a reading of the Qur'an that considers these conditions as a reflection of the normative prescriptions of Islam (xxiv). Bullock maintains that the West's negative reactions to the veil are historically rooted and are further complicated by power politics and present dealings between the West and Islam. Those who insist in upholding a metonymic relationship between the veil and Islam, she argues, simplify a complex and variegated issue that also involves similarities between Christianity and Islam (xxxii). This mindset, Bullock points out, glosses over the fact that many Muslims are against Islam, and many others are not necessarily practicing Muslims (xxxii).

Bullock foregrounds her positive theory of the veil on the critical discourse of commodification and objectification of women's bodies in the capitalist and consumerist Western culture (189, 207).[49]Unlike some feminists such as Mernissi and Haleh Afshar, who argue that Islam views women's sexualities as potentially overactive and destructive and thus accountable for men's failure in guarding

[49] See Fatima Mernissi's *Scheherzad Goes West* for a theory of the Western harem that works through invisible walls and gates by mentally incarcerating women in an ideal size prison/harem.

their sexuality[50], Bullock argues that the veil does not "smother" femininity and, rather, "it regulates" sexuality in order to protect women and families "from the worst aspects of the male gaze" and "self-deprecation" (207). *Hijab* provides what she calls a "safety zone" that immunizes women from "catcalls, and whistles, stares, and other kinds of male harassment" in public spaces (207). She continues that the kind of attention *hijab* draws is a de-sexualized gaze that grows out of curiosity about differences (207). Even though Bullock (like many Muslims) has a point in putting forward the veil as a challenge to the commodification of women in the beauty industry, the thesis of the veil protecting from "male harassment" and a sexualized gaze is not strong enough, nor is it necessarily applicable in all settings. It should be mentioned that Bullock explicitly contextualizes her argument in Western societies and cultures in which she notices the effectiveness of the protective role of the veil. However, since she states that her argument offers a "theory" of the veil, I think it is necessary to mention that there are divergences in the thesis, according to which the veil provides a safety zone around the family and the Muslim woman.

In a society such as Iran, in which donning the veil in public spaces is not only a norm but a mandate that is vigilantly guarded on the part of the government, the veil, unfortunately, does not guarantee women's safety in public spaces. Every woman has to cover, whether due to personal beliefs, choice, or just in order to comply with the minimum codes of mandatory *hijab*. As a result, the veil's ever-present visibility seems to de-sensitize the observer about its role.

[50] See Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (1975) for a discussion of female sexuality and the veil as a symbol of control of women's dangerously overactive sexuality with a focus on Moroccan society; also see Afshar's "Islam and Feminism: an Analysis of Political Strategies" (1996).

Moreover, because guarding sexuality is assumed to be mainly a woman's job, failure to do so, whether or not for purposes of resisting the imposition of the veil, occurs in ways that are still within the range of covering. Thus, the Iranian male gaze is trained in ways that are very context-specific and incomprehensible to those who are not familiar with the nuances of the present day Iranian socio-cultural contexts. A mode of covering could be (wrongly) read as sexually suggestive enough to invite harassment (more or less similar to the common victim-blaming mentality that puts the responsibility for harassment on its victims). Moreover, even the most properly covered women are not immune from harassment and assault. On the other hand, the idea of donning the veil as a protective mechanism against the consumerist and capitalist Western culture could create a new binary, casting all *hijab*-less Muslim (and non-Muslim) women in the camp of the victims of the commodifying consumerist culture and turn *hijab* into what Fawzia Ahmad rightly calls, "a moral badge" that excludes others who don't wear one (100). My intention in citing these differing and, at times, opposing views among Muslim scholars in regard to *hijab* is to shed some light on this object's contentious location and to display the multiplicity of cultural and ideological lenses that regulate and empower the optics of the veil at the expense of the one who wears it.

It was necessary to detour to all these competing discourses within Islam to be able to discuss the ways in which Kahf's narrative illustrates the difficulty— if not the impossibility— of the choice of a mode of being outside of them. Two incidents in the novel, a murder case and Khadra's abortion, illustrate the ways in

which this dilemma marks women's bodies. Zuhura, the outspoken African-American Muslim student and the exemplary Muslim girl of the community, disappears and never returns home; later her body is discovered in a ditch. Simmonsville's small Muslim community is permanently scarred as a result of this tragic incident. Zuhura's raped and murdered body is the battle-ground for the competing discourses of nation and community that literally and metaphorically exploit the Muslim woman to promote their agendas. Zuhura's mother admits her role as a parent in burdening her child "to carry" her "vision" for her (*The Girl* 405). The public eye, in its turn, through phrases in tabloids such as "the first Muslim woman to head the African Students Organization at IU. . . .The first Muslim woman in *hijab*," (74) transfixes Zuhura (reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's famous J. Alfred Prufrock) like pins on the butterflies framed and displayed on the walls of entomology department. Zuhura's dream was not much different from that of a regular American Girl's. She wanted to be "just a regular Muslim girl trying to make her way through . . . the impossible, contradictory hopes of the Muslim community had for her, and the infuriating, confining assumptions the American put on her? A girl looking for a way to be, just *be*, outside that tug-of-war" (358).

The abortion scene, on the other hand, speaks of the protagonist's refusal to comply with such hopes. Her refusal, sadly, comes at a high price. Kahf draws on sartorial and *hijab* imagery to portray the abortion scene. The foetus "bleeding out of" Khadra "in agonizing bits and pieces" (261) epitomizes the start of a deeper transformation, this time, from inside out and at a much deeper level than a

change in the color of scarves and *jilbabs* suggests. The scene shows the difficulty, yet necessity, of moving beyond the confining assumptions that burden and contort the Muslim woman in the name of representation. This transformation is described as a descent into the "rock bottom . . . down the seven gates of hell, discarding at every door some breastplate or amulet that used to shore [Khadra] up" until "[s]he felt empty. Crumpled and empty, that was her. Like a *jilbab* you've taken off your body and hung on a nail" (264-5). In order to discover "the girl" in the tangerine scarf, Kahf needs to recover her out of all these confining layers of signification that the narrative metaphorically associates with protective body supplements such as "amulet" and "breastplate" that, while shielding the individual from probable dangers, prevent her exposure to reality as well. The empty dress, compared to the empty skin thrown away during the process of metamorphosis, represents the protagonist's severing ties with her past life as *Dawa* Center's "poster girl" and all she was spoon-fed about what the true "Islam" requires, to "find out for herself this time. Not as a given . . . just because it was there" (262).

The dissociation of the body from the dress also implies that the dress does not fit the body's proportions which I believe, again, calls into question the viability of the dominant frames of reference and a need for re-conceptualization of Muslim female subjectivity. Khadra's self-induced termination of her pregnancy in the face of her husband's and family's strong disapproval is an indication of her refusal to continue sacrificing her "self" in order to live up to an image of ideal wife and mother defined mainly by performing domestic roles.

This act, as individualist as it seems, is not an indication of wholesale rejection of the idea of motherhood or domesticity nor does it signify a shift to a Western Liberal mode of glorifying individual freedoms and agency. Kahf refuses to re-tell the familiar story of Muslim women's subjugation under *Sharia* law or the possibility of their liberation mainly via emulating some Western feminist models of liberation and progress. Being well-versed in the study of the Qur'an and aware of the possibility of different approaches to issues such as abortion within Islamic law, Kahf's protagonist is self-reliant and confident in seeking a solution for her problem within Islam.

The novel, therefore, stresses the need on the part of Muslim diasporic communities to seriously consider the need to distinguish what Radhakrishnan calls "'change as default or as the path of least resistance'" versus "'change as conscious and direct self-fashioning'" (210).[51] This proves to be far more challenging than what Khadra expects. Kahf compares the starting moment of (self) reformation to the moulting of the silverfish; it is an agonizing ordeal and a state far from the promise of the celebrated liberating in-between-space. Therefore, Khadra becomes depressed, misses prayers for the first time in her life, quits school, has suicidal thoughts, and does not renew the lease for her apartment. She returns to Syria, where revisiting the ties with the motherland, epitomized in Tata (her father's aunt), and her friendship with "the poet," a wise, old man, facilitate the post-traumatic healing process and her re-rooting. Through this journey Kahf provides her protagonist with an alternative lens through which she

[51] For a detailed study of the possibility of building a Western Muslim identity, see Tariq Ramadan's *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

re-engages with Islam and the homeland she had left at a very early age and imagined between memory and amnesia.

In Syria, Khadra purchases a beautiful silk fabric so delicate that it could be "pulled . . . through a ring" (329). Its tangerine color, Tata's favorite, is a token of Khadra's new found religiosity. She cuts it in half and makes two exquisite scarves for Tata and for herself. The tangerine scarf shared with Tata symbolizes the protagonist's re-connection with her heritage and religion. This synecdochic affinity between the scarf and the motherland also appeared in an earlier poem, "Voyager's Dust," that opens *E-mails from Scheherazade*. It portrays a scene in which immigrant children are playing under their mother's washed scarves. The "soft spray" (line 18) of water on children's faces triggers the rush of sad memories. The tiny particles of water are compared to "the ash of debris after the destruction of a city, / its citizens drive out across the earth" (19-20).The persona reminisces on this memory and the feelings of loss associated with it since, at that time, she never knew that "[i]t was Syria in her [mother's] scarves" (25). In the narrative, the tangerine scarf captures a certain feeling of sacredness associated with Khadra's grandmother, her original homeland, and "the Islam" she (re)discovers in folk songs and rich Syrian poetry, on mount Qasyoon, in cherry orchards, in the exquisite arches of the Ibn al-Arabi mosque, and in the Jobar synagogue where she realizes the interconnected history of cultures and religions. They become "architectural layers of each other . . . spokes on the same wheel. All connected to the hub" (*The Girl* 297). [52] The Syria Khadra discovers is where

[52] Some might regard this celebration of life and excitement over the synchrony of the world as trite. However, the author is well aware of this criticism. In the poem "The Cherries" Kahf

"[t]he ancient churches would kiss [her] forehead/The mosques would hold and rock [her] in their arches" and "[t]he synagogues would lay blessings on [her] shoulders like a shawl"(Kahf, "The Cherries" lines 35-37).

The tangerine scarf also symbolizes the protagonist's independent way of crafting her Muslim identity. For the first time, it is she who makes her own scarf and not her parents. Kahf's depiction of the father as the family's skilful dress maker hints at the determining role of the male parent who, by virtue of being a founder of the *Dawa* center, also stands for a systematic approach to the religion that constantly stresses "the outer forms over the inner light"(422) in fashioning the child's self. This time, the child refuses the mould offered by the male parent. The ways in which the author plays with the tangerine scarf, a key symbol in the narrative worn in an unfamiliar non-Arabic/Syrian style, also problematizes the binary manners of associating religiosity or a lack thereof with appearances. Indeed, the question of religious belief—at least in Abrahamic traditions—is wrought with two, at times, paradoxical issues: demonstrating unquestioning faithfulness in obeisance of the divine decrees and making an attempt in making sense of the logic of such decrees. Therefore, it is tempting to try to compare the triadic Lacanian concepts of "the thing" in the Symbolic Order, "the object," and the "*object petit a*" or the little thing that moves ceaselessly back and forth between the two (Schwenger 65) with parallel concepts in regard to the veil. The

---

foreshadows this reaction in an experience of re-visiting the motherland and a celebration of its multiplicity of languages, cultures and religions. The persona warns the reader that the experience would be melodramatic and similar to a "Hindi movie" (12) or a "soap opera" (13) since "[t]his is [her] poem and [she] can do what [she] want[s]/with the world in it)" (13). As Suhair Majaj notes, the poem reflects a "sense of loss [that] stands directly in proportion to–and hence serves to heighten—the celebration of what Syria is and could, in imagination be" (n. pag.).

first Lacanian concept, "the thing," reminds us of the conception of the Truth about the *hijab* within the Qur'anic injunction that the Lord revealed to the Prophet and the paradox of the subsequent seemingly futile yet necessary endeavors to discover this truth.[53] The next two concepts that parallel Lacan's "object" and "object petit a" are the veil in its materiality and various forms, and the numerous interpretations and approaches taken towards it whether negative or positive, Orientalist, Islamist, secularist, feminist, or Islamic feminist that, similar to the "object *petit a*," also change, develop, and hence transform this object. What I am trying to convey here follows my argument about the scant possibility of ending the debate over *hijab* and the disadvantaged position the Muslim woman occupies in this ever-changing process of signification. The above-mentioned analogy is not to prove, via a poststructuralist approach, the futility of an attempt to understand the truth of revelation and its application; it is an attempt to display a paradox: an encouragement to pursue knowledge as a valuable undertaking even though it might seem like attempting the impossible.

The tangerine scarf, then, represents the author's individual way of dealing with challenges that the complex issue of faith involves rather than finessing the problem by adopting an either/or approach in clinging to the veil in an orthodox

[53] The Qur'an says, "No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision . . ." (6:103). To believing Muslims, the Qur'an is the undisputable truth from the Lord (32:2-3) revealed through Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammad, the last messenger in the line of Abrahamic prophets, who was unable to read and write at the time the revelation took place. The first *Surah* revealed to the Prophet is *Al-Alaq* (The Clinging Clot [the early stages of the foetus]) in which the Lord commands the then illiterate Mohammad to "Read! in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, . . . (96:1). He Who taught (the use of) the pen. Taught the man that which he knew not" (96:4-5). These first revealed sentences foreground the elevated status of knowledge, the spoken, and the written word that all initiate from the Creator Himself and the need to seek such knowledge. Thus, even though it is obviously impossible to grasp that nugget of meaning buried in the Divine revelation, the endeavour to try to absorb as much as possible is also foregrounded in the emphasis these very first revealed Qur'anic verses place on reading, writing, teaching, and learning.

manner or taking it off (even though it happens for a short while). Kahf plays with and defamiliarizes the veil. She confuses the onlooker by her choice of the color, the style of wearing the veil and, particularly, by making her protagonist put it on and take it off. The polarizing view that endorses acts of veiling/ unveiling as standing for the irreconcilable values of the old world versus those of the modern or religiosity versus secularism also associates the veil with dehumanization, a lack of individuality, and alienation of the self and the body from each other. According to this perspective, veiling represents suppression of female sexuality, while unveiling is equated with regaining the normal and natural body, epitomized in the ability for free sexual self-expression. According to Yeğenoğlu, both veiling and unveiling are discursive acts and thus "the body that is not veiled is taken as the norm for specifying a genera, cross-culturally valid notion of what a feminine body is and must be" (115). While both mandatory acts of veiling and unveiling enforced by state ideologies (such as pre and post-revolutionary Iran, Turkey, Syria, and France) do speak of manipulating personal freedoms in regard to sexual and religious expressions in public spaces in a way that essentialize Muslim women's identities into a singular category defined primarily in relation to the veil, abnegation of the veil as abnormal leaves little space for attention to the nuances between such mandatory acts and the ones directed by individual choice and the contextual elements permitting such freedoms. Moreover, a simplistic attitude that invariably links bodily display and freedom of expressing sexuality with agency disregards the role of the fashion industry and consumerism and their exertion of more elusive mechanisms of

control over women's bodies compared to those associated with the dictates of the religion. Here, as Myra Macdonald states, "this 'natural,' 'open,' and 'unveiled' body is constructed through regimes of internalised management (diet, exercise, plastic surgery) as stringent as those imposed from without by Victorian corsetry, is masked by a fetishisation of 'choice' as the confirmation of liberation and self-determining agency" (13).

Kahf's narrative shows acts of veiling and unveiling in a different light. She deconstructs the composite and collective "Muslimwoman"[54] category by dissociating the veil from it. She problematizes a conception of religiosity as cogently associated with the veil when it functions as a "moral badge" (Ahmad 100). Ahmad finds a conception of "Muslimwomanhood" premised on a notion of the veil as "a moral badge" problematic since it excludes those who do not veil no matter how devout they might be (100). Kahf deconstructs a notion of religiosity that is always defined via observing the Islamic code of dress. In the novel, both acts of veiling and unveiling are treated as different stages in the process of the maturation of the Muslim self and in the light of epistemological aspects of the individual's relationship with the faith. Kahf carries insect taxonomy like an extended metaphor throughout the narrative and reflects on the ways in which the individual's internal changes visually put their mark on her appearance and her covering styles (181).Veiling and unveiling are likened to growing a new outer cover or shedding the old one during the process of metamorphosis. Moreover, the act of final re-veiling is imagined in a way that is —perhaps problematically

[54] See the first chapter (page 28) for Miriam Cooke's argument about the construction of this singular and essentializing category.

for some readers —contingent upon the imposition of patriarchal Islamic or Western patriarchal discourses. Kahf stresses the intimacy of the body and the veil that gradually grows on it and feels "as natural to her as a second skin, without which if she ventured into the outside world, she felt naked" (113). To start donning *hijab* is described as a thrilling experience, it is likened to acquiring "vestments of a higher order" and as "a crown" on Khadra's head.

These images might also encourage viewing the veil as a token of acceptance into a patriarchal institution. The adolescent girl's elation upon donning the veil indicates her acting under a false consciousness and as a dupe of ideology. However, Khadra's subsequent refusal in supporting the institution because of its preoccupation with the external and ritualistic aspects of the faith, her acts of de-veiling, and the final re-veiling, disappoint a reading that always attaches the veil to this ideology. Likewise, taking off the veil in this novel disappoints reading it as a gesture of embracing secular values or a celebrated moment of sexual liberation. Many a time, the moment of unveiling in Muslim immigrant fiction is celebrated as symbolizing the release from the stifling bound of tradition and (re)gaining individuality, as something one naturally desires.[55] It is difficult to find examples that do not conform to this double standard according to which taking off the veil almost invariably and, regardless of the context, is celebrated as a gesture of insubordination while it can also be read as a gesture of uniformity and conformity with a different set of dominant norms when it takes place in the context of secular Western societies. Kahf compares veiling and

[55] See Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and M.G. Vassanji's *Amriika* as examples of this celebratory treatment of the act of un-veiling.

unveiling to the light and dark shades of a photographic image, and as necessary parts of the development of the self as a whole (309). The act of unveiling in the narrative is only liberating in the sense that it is another step towards the individual's maturity and establishing an affiliative relationship with her faith and not an end in itself.

To a person for whom the covered mode is the familiar way of moving within public spaces, carrying oneself unveiled can be quite a challenge. As with any other dress item (such as high heels), As Lewis points out, wearing the veil requires learning a series of "body management" techniques "necessary to enact this particular gender-specific and socially sanctioned embodied practice" (426). However, stepping out of the veil leads to vulnerability, to feeling naked and exposed after shedding the old skin during the process of metamorphosis; it also needs new learnings. Therefore, not only does the unveiled mode seem unnatural to Kahf's protagonist, but she also needs to learn special techniques of body management to behave modestly outside of the familiar circumference the fabric draws around her. This idea of staying modest in the presence or absence of one's *hijab* challenges a binary approach to the veil that, consciously or subconsciously, excludes the non-*hijabed* woman as less moral. After a while, the protagonist discovers "the new, unveiled lightness familiar and comfortable in its own way" but still remembers her *hijab* with tenderness: "Her body would not forget its caress. Her loose clothes from the days of *hijab* were old friends. She had no wish to send them packing" (312). Eventually, Khadra decides it is the covered mode "her body" feels "at home in" (425). The establishment of affiliative ties with the

veil, and not taking it for granted simply because of being born a Muslim, are important. Now, *hijab* to Khadra is an "outer sign of an inner quality she wants to be reminded of, more often than she could manage to remind herself without it" (425).

In the end, Kahf returns her matured protagonist to her hometown, this time as a photographer as a part of a job assignment for *Alternative Americas* to photograph her community, a task that proves very challenging. Kahf reminds us of the pitfalls of taking the insider's view as the representative of one's community. In order not to reproduce another clichéd scene of Muslim communal prayer, Khadra decides to photograph it from the inside and not from the outside. The photographer's choice of "low angle shots" (54) puts the subject of photography in a relatively superior position in a way to allow the represented persons and/or objects to speak for themselves. The choice of this technique also stresses the photographer's subjective, limited view-point in capturing certain moments of the prayer scene. There is a touch of humor in the way Kahf portrays the disreputed prostration scene. "In prostration," she says, "you see the underbelly of things. Daddy longlegs moving carefully side to side. Old gum underneath a bleacher plank. Hems, sari edges, purse buckles beside your eye. Feet. Long bony toes of tall skinny women and little cushiony ones of short round women . . ." (54). The scene portrays a polychromatic picture of the community through mapping a geography of *hijab*. In this animated sartorial forest which, unlike Western dress can "flutter," "sweep," "rustle," "float," and "reach out," each and every one of *echarpes*, *khimars*, saris, *jilbabs*, *thobes* and *dupattas* can

savour distinct individual stories (55). Love is a central defining feature used to describe the narrative's portrayals of the relationship between the believer and her faith, but while the importance of the insider's perspective is stressed even in the photographic techniques in snapshots of the prayer scene, the writer does not seek to valorize these images as absolutely "true" versus the "false" ones produced by outsiders. Khadra muses, "Funny, the strange ways of the heart in its grasp of things, the way Reality unveils itself for an instant and then just when you think you've got a shot at it, the shutter goes down, and the light has evaporated. And all you can do is keep plodding along working it, working it, hoping for another glimpse . . ." (421). She refutes the possibility of capturing the "Reality" in her photographic shots; the author treats the shots as fleeting glimpses into the reality.

What adds another layer of complexity to the act of representation is the presence of a third party, the viewer, the reader, and/ or the audience. W.J.T. Mitchell's definition of representation as "always *of* something or someone, *by* something or someone, *to* someone" (12) underscores the act of interpretation in the meaning production process. According to Mitchell, the multiplicity of signification makes representation "a means of communication" as well as "a potential obstacle to it" (Mitchell 13). Kahf admits the difficulty of intervening in the dominant representations of Muslims in the face of the aggravating Islamophobia of the contemporary times; nevertheless, her narrative does not hesitate to critique the community Khadra dearly loves whenever she does not approve of its actions. As the narrative shows, a more complete picture of humanity comprises both its beautiful and appalling features. One such rare

illuminating moment is when the mainstream "hard working, steady, valuing God and family" and "[s]uspicious of change" Midwesterners suddenly appear as the replica of Khadra's parochial Muslim community. She exclaims, ". . . they're us, and we are them. Hah! My folks are perfect *Hoosiers*" (438)! This realization does not come easily, but to Kahf, the viewer of representation should not be viewed as a quite passive recipient either; she invests in the intelligence of the reader and his/her productive engagement in the process of meaning making.

I would like to end this chapter with a brief reference to the controversial French guerrilla artist "Princess Hijab," who capitalizes on the veil and its visual monstrosity to lead what she/he calls his/her anti-consumerist campaign via exploring "notions of space and possible types of representation, contrasting the normative representation of the public sphere with her personal iconoclastic approach" (qtd. in Katataney n.pag.). Some viewers praise this artist for bringing back the veil into the French public space, castigating "pop culture xenophobia and ignorance," while others criticize him/her for possibly fanning the fires of Islamic conservatism. Others view *hijab* as a tool for "dehumanizing and objectifying", and de-individualization of women.[56] According to Arwa Aburawa, the artist's *hijabizing* act as "a symbolic act of resistance meant to reassert a 'physical and mental integrity' against what she calls the 'visual terrorism' of advertising" (n.pag.). Princess Hijab points his/her finger at publicists, advertisers, and the machinery of capitalist and commodified culture for displacing the human right of expression. The artist explains: "[m]y work explores how something as

[56] See the posted responses following Arwa Aburawa's "Veiled Threat" http://bitchmagazine.org/article/veiled-threat.

intimate as the human body has become as distant as a message from your corporate sponsor'" (qtd. in Aburawa n.pag.). What I find fascinating is the re-appearance or mutation of the veil in, of all places, France, particularly in light of the renewed controversies on the legal ban of headscarves. It could be pointless and, perhaps, fallacious to try too hard to read Princess Hijab's works in the light of the religion. Nonetheless, it is important to take note of the ways in which critics of this artist are trying to discover whether or not s/he is an Islamist. In fact, it is hard to believe his/her re-invention of the veil is a straightforward gesture of his/her advocacy of Islamic sartorial preferences for women, at least partly because Princess Hijab's *hijabizing* acts do not spare men. There are billboard ads in which men's heads, faces and torsos are covered. Moreover, in many of these artistic creations, the artist covers the faces and upper parts of the body and leaves the bare legs untouched. As Tatiana Soubeille quotes from the artist: "Princess Hijab is the allegory of a matrix"; the artist deploys elements from atheist symbols existing within the Internet culture as well as "mythology and popular culture, in order to remove the *hijab* from its Muslim context and reinvest it with a 'Pop dimension'" ("Princess Hijab: 'A naughty girl with a bad habit.'" n.pag.).

What particularly interests me here is the power of the veil and how it shapes and shifts reading responses to this artist's work. I suggest that the power of the veil is also responsible for readers' assumptions about Princes Hijab's Muslim orientation or background of origin which could in turn impact readings of his/her work. In most of Princes Hijab's works, the models' faces, except for their eyes, are covered; this framing of the gaze through putting a screen or mask

on the face reminds me of Althusser's famous "Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses"[57] and his definition of ideology as an "illusion" that masks the reality by offering us an "imaginary representation of the world"(n.pag.)[58] Žižek defines ideology as a "process," "a mystification," and an "externalization of a social necessity" ("The Spectre of Ideology" 58). He explains that "the task of the critique of ideology . . . is precisely to discern the hidden necessity in what appears as a mere contingency" (58). It can be argued, then, that Princess Hijab's use of black masks, *hijabs,* balaclavas, and *niqabs* is an act of masking an invisible mask in an attempt to render (58) this process of ideological filtering visible and thereby defamiliarize consumerist global capitalist ideology's naturalized act of capitalization on human body (particularly women's). If the power of the veil emanates from the myriad of ideological lenses through which it appears to onlookers, then Princess Hijab's work also renders visible the blind spots of the normative system. Thus, whether or not Princess Hijab is a Muslim or whether or not she/he defends the veil, is not the point. The point is that by *queering* the veil, an object deemed in irreconcilable opposition with the values of the secular Laic France, she/he sheds light on the powerhouse that feeds the veil's semiotic energy. Black veils and masks overpower and tease the onlooker and refrain from offering easy answers. This unease is perhaps necessary. Princess Hijab's investment in the monstrosity of the veil suggests that the beauty or

---

[57] http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm

[58] Even though the concept of ideology and its relevance to the postmodern, globalized times has been amply challenged, I find Slavoj Žižek's approach more aligned with the lived realities of life particularly because, unlike Althusser, he locates ideology in the realm of action, not primarily that of knowledge.

ugliness of the veil and its empowering or oppressive dimensions are also, in a way, in the already conditioned eye of its beholder. In other words, the *hijab* debate will not come to an end any time soon.

Chapter Four: Implanting Ethiopia or a Farenji's "Pilgrim's Progress": Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*[59]

"'Maybe one day you will write another farenji book and tell the truth,' Nouria said" (*Sweetness in the Belly*, 213).

This chapter's central focus is Canadian author and anthropologist Camilla Gibb and her third novel *Sweetness in the Belly*. Like other chapters, this last one takes its reader on a transnational journey but, unlike the rest of the narratives I analyze in the pages of this document, Gibb's chooses a less trodden path. Hers is not focused on peregrinations of a Third World, Middle Eastern protagonist in the West. The novel is an outsider's atheist, liberal take on a different culture and religion. Despite its undeniable structural distance from the people it represents, it calls into question the writing conventions of the New Orientalist narratives by re-defining difference. More specifically, in this chapter, I examine the ways in which *Sweetness in the Belly* challenges essentialist tendencies of these narratives, including their emphasis on singular meanings and simplistic and bifurcating explanations of difference.

We know that Orientalism entails a system of thinking, "a will or intention to understand," and an ideology of domination "to control and manipulate what [is] manifestly different" (Said, *Orientalism* 12). We also know that a central problem with such ways of recognizing difference is a continuation of "the old dominant/subordinate mode of human relationship" (Audre Lorde 511) and the distance it maintains between the subject, the knower and the object of study—

[59] A version of this chapterhas been published. "Implanting Ethiopia: Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*." *The International Journal of Humanities* 8.8 (2010): 160-175

hence the "flexible positional superiority" of the Orientalist (Said, *Orientalism* 3). Closing this distance is easier in theory than in practice. Even well-intentioned attempts at reducing "the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to reach object" have proven that "the Orientalist" remains "outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident" (Said, *Orientalism* 222). As we saw in the first chapter, the burgeoning of a new generation of the Orientalist writings within the West further clarifies that this distance is not just geographical or even racial, but rather intellectual. As Moustafa Bayoumi contends, "[t]he fact that these explainers are themselves Western Muslims in some sense collapses the Orientalist distance between East and West; in other senses it does not, for there would be no need for explainers if there were no wide differences between peoples" (80). As we saw, part of the problem with these works is that they ultimately ask the oppressed to "recognize the master's difference in order to survive" (Lorde 511). Therefore, it is clear that including voices from formerly colonized and/or Third World elite groups is an attempt to consolidate the relations of domination rather than a genuine attempt at re-defining difference.

What is refreshing about Gibb's work is its honest— though ambitious— attempt at relating across differences. Through focusing the representational merits of the novel authored by this non-Muslim writer, this chapter analyzes Gibb's handling of difference without falling into the familiar trap of orientalizing or exoticizing the "Otherness" symptomatic of New Orientalist narratives. I draw on Said's formulation of characteristics of a responsible intellectual in *The World,*

the Text, the Critic to argue about the achievements of Gibb's work as a valuable "representational form of knowledge" (David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock 8). As an anthropologist who has taken a voluntarily exile from her scientific discipline into the world of literature, Gibb creates a novel that occupies an interesting interstitial space between fact and fiction. Her work successfully connects with the political realities of the Orient and the metropolis while meshing factual and fictional terrains in a text that explicitly locates the act of writing in the world. Gibb's work's interstitial location is particularly important to the purposes of this chapter. It brings the autobiographical accounts of the first chapter into a conversation with the fictional works of the second and the third chapters and, thus, also challenges an unquestioned attribution of authenticity to postcolonial autobiographical accounts and their presumed factual reliability.[60]

In *The World, the Text, the Critic*, Said argues for moving criticism beyond mere theorization and turning it into an agent of social change via re-connecting it to the social, historical, and political realities of human society. Said wrote this book as a response to the dominating influence of the New Criticism and its heavy reliance on textual analysis that, as he asserts, divorces the text and the critic from the actual world and all those material elements of human experiences that give rise to the creation of a text as a cultural product (130). Indeed, every literary text is grounded in its specific cultural, historical, and geographical context— hence its "worldliness"— and critical inquiry must address such complexities.

Camilla Gibb is a British-born Canadian author who holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology from Oxford University. She has authored four novels: *Mouthing*

[60] See the first chapter for a detailed discussion of the two popular examples of such narratives.

the Words (winner of the 2000 City of Toronto Book Award), *The Petty Details of So-and-so's Life*, *Sweetness in the Belly* (2006 Giller Prize nominee and Trillium Book Award finalist), and *The Beauty of Humanity Movement* (2010). Gibb's novels have been translated into more than a dozen languages. The jury of the prestigious Orange Prize has called her one of the twenty-one writers to watch in the new century. *Sweetness in the Belly* is a historical novel inspired by the author's doctoral and post-doctoral research (*Sweetness*, 411) on the Ethiopian walled city of Harar during 1994-1995 and on Ethiopian refugees in Toronto. The story covers the time span between the 1960s and 80s in Europe, Morocco, Ethiopia, and London. Moving back and forth between Harar in the last years of Emperor Haile Selassie in the 70s and Thatcher's London in the 80s, the narrative captures the dispossessed's agony of uprootedness and their search for belonging through its focus on the unusual experiences of the British protagonist, Lilly, who is raised in Africa as a Muslim. Similar to Tayeb Salih's masterpiece, *Season of Migration to the North*, *Sweetness in the Belly* chronicles encounters between the East and the West through migrations charted in a reverse direction; however, unlike the experiences of Mustafa Sa'eed, the protagonist of the former, "there is no seasonal pattern" to Lilly's nomadic migrations (10). Unlike Mustafa Sa'eed, Lilly's return to her land of origin is not really a homecoming. She does not quite fit anywhere. No sooner than when she starts growing roots, Lilly is forced to sever them in a "habit of dissimulation" (Said, "Reflections on Exile" 186). After losing her renegade parents at an early age in Morocco, Lilly is put under the guardianship of the British convert to Islam Muhammad Bruce Mahmoud and the

tutelage of the Great Abdal in a Sufi shrine "on a diet of Islam and love"(12). Lilly goes through multiple displacements, first from England to North Africa, then from Morocco to Ethiopia at the age of sixteen, and following the socio-political turn of events that caused the government's disfavour with Sufis, to the walled city of Harar in Ethiopia. Finally, when she is twenty two, she is forced to go through the pain of separation one more time because of the outbreak of the 1974 revolution that ends the reign of Emperor Haile Selassi and leads to the rise of the brutal Dergue regime. She is forced to leave behind the love of her life, Aziz, a Sudanese doctor. Even though she only stays in Ethiopia for six years, the experience puts an everlasting mark on Lilly, as Ethiopia becomes the place she identifies with as her home. Lilly ends up in her birthplace, London, but as a white Muslim refugee with accented English. Through Lilly's eyes, Gibb unfolds the reality of lives of refugees, their profound sense of loss and their need to belong in a diasporic world.

As a British Canadian and a Ph.D. cultural anthropologist writing about Muslim Ethiopians (Gibb decided to leave academia for a fulltime writing career in 2001), Gibb treads on dangerous grounds. No doubt, anthropology has historically played a role in promoting colonial discourse by fashioning colonized subjects as primitive, exotic, and inherently different. This discursive production of "Otherness" at the service of power has been critiqued by anthropologists themselves. According to Richard Fardon in "Localizing Strategies: The Regionalization of Ethnographic Accounts":

> To counterpose to an enlightened Europe we produced an African heart of darkness; to our rational, controlled west corresponded an irrational and sensuous Orient; our progressive civilization differed from the historical cul-de-sacs into which Oriental despots led their subjects; our maturity might be contrasted with the childhood of a darker humanity, but our youth and vigour distinguished us from the aged civilizations of the east whose splendour was past.[61] ("Localizing Strategies: The Regionalization of Ethnographic Accounts" 6)

Contemporary anthropology has displayed sensitivity about representing difference and the complacency of the scholarship in colonial projects. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford is optimistic about the prospects of changing this representational landscape. He argues that "while ethnographic writing cannot entirely escape the reductionist use of dichotomies and essences, it can at least struggle self-consciously to avoid portraying abstract ahistorical 'other'" (23). Nevertheless, representing difference is always wrought with risks and challenges, particularly when keeping in perspective the role of the market in today's world of publishing.

In *The Postcolonial Exotic* Graham Huggans explains a phenomenon called "the anthropological exotic," in the present-day reception of African literature. This phenomenon exploits "the exotic tendencies already inherent within

[61] See George Stocking's Victorian Anthropologists.

anthropology" (37).[62] He describes it as a form of "exotic discourse . . . a mode of both perception and consumption; it invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurabily 'foreign' cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the 'foreign culture' itself" (37). The popularity of Gibb's novel and its large sales of 80,000 copies, as Hannah McGregor observes, ties it to "questions of cultural appropriation and commodification of otherness" (100)[63] as well as the accusation of "fetishization of ethnic literature" (100). As the chapter will show, Gibb successfully puts these challenges behind. It is true that exoticization of difference sells well, but a big sale number is not necessarily an indication of a text's marketing "Otherness." The appeal of a literary work could also depend on its message. The value of Gibb's work lies both in its aesthetics and in its respect for the dignity of its human subject. It is a compelling account of love, pain, and suffering conveyed through a protagonist who is ironically, not quite identifiable or even appealing to either the white Westerner or Muslim reader[64]. The novel works deliberately to represent cultural "Otherness" outside the purview of the postcolonial exotic. And in order to do this, Gibb places her outsider protagonist in "there" not to observe "Otherness" from above but to learn to express respect for the unbreakable human spirit, perseverance, and hope.

---

[62] For a study of the construction of the third world women and their texts in Western contexts see Amireh Amal's and Lisa Suhair Mamaj's *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women.* Garland, 2002.

[63] Compare with the figure of 120,000 copies for *Infidel* in hardcover and Irshad Manji's sale of 60,000 copies of *The Trouble with Islam* (qtd. in Mustafa Bayoumi 81).

[64] This judgment is based on my experience of teaching the novel.

Gibb's decision to leave academia to pursue a fulltime career in writing, I suggest, echoes Said's concerns about the reconciliation of the scholar with the realities of the lived human experience outside of academe. Said's critique of the scholar's position in the academe, with its strong investment in the power of the vigilant and responsible intellectual is relevant in examining Gibb's work. *Sweetness in The Belly* speaks of Gibb's attempts over the years to establish a relationship or some sort of bridge between her "academic past" and her "present as a writer of fiction" as she notes in "Telling Tales out of School**,** A Research in Society Lecture Delivered at the 2007 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences" (39). Narrative intention is always a fraught field, but something of what Gibb *may* have intended in *Sweetness in the Belly* can be found in her own claims about the strictures and conventions of academic writing. The purpose of the essay is to explicate how Gibb's change of register seeks to bring to a close the contradiction about the representational value of ethnography as purely factual and literature as fictitious. She is also trying to reconcile the intellectual with the real world, its complexities, pains, and beauties. In *The World, The Text, and The Critic*, Said calls for "affiliation" as a redeeming critical principle to redress the limitations of the idea of filiation and the strictures of intellectual specialization. He creates "a new system" by moving criticism beyond mere textual theorization. However, Said also warns against the dangers of an uncritical investment in the potentials of affiliation, since it can lead to the development of a kind of " systematic exclusionary affiliative relationship" that creates new "filial" ties by "passing of the tradition to the younger generation (affiliatively)" (20) and thus,

"consecrating the pact between a canon of works, a band of initiate instructors, a group of younger affiliates; in a socially validated manner all this reproduces the filliative discipline supposedly transcended by the educational process" (*The World* 21). Amar Acheraiou, in *Rethinking Postcolonialism*, draws on a similar filliative and affiliative model in demonstrating some sort of a palimpsest "ideological and rhetorical" indebtedness of the new forms of imperialism to those of the past (53). Acheraiou argues that the present-time narratives of authority and power seek authority in establishing "a patrilinial, genealogical," "conceptual," "teacher-student" linkage with their ancient predecessors (214). In Ayyan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel,* a similar relationship resurfaces. She declares that "[h]aving made that journey, *I* know that one of those worlds [the Western and Islamic] is simply better than the other. Not because of its flashy gadgets, but fundamentally, because of its *values*" (348); her explicit worship of Western scholarship and culture, her feelings of superiority towards her people as well as her glossing over not-so-glorious European colonial history speak of a similar affiliative relationship to which both Said and Acheraiou have referred.[65] She appears as a legitimate affiliate in a system in which "what is ours is good, and therefore deserves incorporation and inclusion in our programs of humanistic study, and what is not ours in this ultimately provincial sense is simply left out" (Said, *The World* 21-22). Even though Hirsi Ali has a wealth of personal experience from Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Holland, her representations only validate "a fraction of real human relationships and interactions" (Said, *The*

[65] Also see Said's *Orientalism,* page 234.

World 21). Hirsi Ali is the sole artist of her narrative; it is basically a one-woman's show.

Gibb's decision to change registers was the result of what she calls disillusionment with the academic ideals she had invested in. Contrary to the idea of academia as a place for radical thinking and challenging conventions, Gibb declares that the institution eventually became a place that "engendered in [her] quite the opposite: a profound conformity, a rigidity, a conservatism, and an internalization of the hierarchy of this universe which resulted in a duty-bound performance that simply took [her], very safely, from one stage to the next" ("Telling Tales" 42). Staying in academia meant that she had to take care of the "proud tradition" she "had inherited" from her discipline (Gibb, "Telling Tales" 46). In her struggle to come to terms with her desire to switch fields from anthropology to creative writing, Gibb states writing fiction offered her "another way of expressing things" that freed her from the need to conform to a rigidly unforgiving system that made her "lament" the physical loss of "the intimacy" of the bond that developed between her and indigenous people during her field work ("Telling Tales" 42-43). Writing fiction also compensated for the requirement to "abandon" a significant amount of the subjective aspects of the engagement with the experience and knowledge in order to stay within the defined norms and standards of the ethnography as a science ("Telling Tales" 43). Gibb notes that this different mode of writing could not serve as a temporary diversion, a compensatory, complementary part of living a life of a scientist as it served some other anthropologists when they turned into writing a diary. Nor could writing a

diary redress the absence of the subjective and emotional side of the field work experience. Writing a diary, she believes, is as textually constructed as producing an anthropological document and entails much self censure ("Telling Tales" 44). The decision to switch fields, Gibb writes, was a total re-orientation, and a process of "unlearning" the academic perspective and language in an attempt to re-fashion a new approach to make a conversation between the intellectual and emotional aspects of her experience take place ("Telling Tales" 46-47). I would like to clarify that my intention in highlighting the author's own personal narrative is independent of the trajectory of the novel. If we accept Said's argument about the materiality of the text and its embededness in those human experiences it centres around, it is important to know the history of this particular work of fiction. As Hayden White argues in "The Fictions of Factual Presentation," one of the dimensions of the larger epistemic aspects of the world that an ethnographic text as a scientific document is part of, is the problematic conception of "a value-neutral" description of the facts (134). According to White, not only "all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated" (129). What is at issue here, as White mentions, "is not, what the facts are, but, rather how the facts [are] to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another" (134). The factual information is already present in Gibb's anthropological research, but it does not satisfy her. What is at stake in the novel is exactly a different mode of representation of reality, a shift of interest from the facts to the people. What I am trying to say is that the achievement of this particular book— what it does and how it re-defines

difference—cannot be understood without considering Gibb's choices of switching fields and her medium of communication that calls into question both the testimonial validity of native informants' accounts and exclusionary tendencies of the scientific knowledge.

Gibb's predicament in maintaining this equilibrium is the focal issue in the essay "The Fiction of Development: Literary Representation as a Source of Authoritative Knowledge" by David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock. The essay's overarching goal is to call for an extension of the scope of knowledge by re-defining the criteria for its validity. The authors go back to the old debate about the subjective and objective dimensions of any social reality, which also mirrors the "schism" between literature and social sciences over what does and what does not constitute valid knowledge (2). They contend that "[w]hile fiction may not always be 'reliable' data in the sense of constituting a set of replicable or stable research findings, it may, nevertheless, be 'valid' knowledge" since it can "offer a wide-ranging set of insights about development processes that are all too often either ignored or de-personalized within academic or policy accounts, without compromising either complexity, politics or readability in the way that academic literature is often accused of doing" (10).

For Gibb, recovering this "ignored or de-personalized" knowledge is crucial. She argues "[o]ur theoretical work about human experience might have huge implications for policy, but capturing it vividly might have implications for how we treat people in our midst. And that matters. Perhaps it's what matters most of all" ("Telling Tales" 52). Part of this discomfort with the specialized

knowledge comes from effacing people as a vital aspect of the knowledge producing process that as Gibb explains, could occur at two levels: treating people, the subjects of study, as mere instrumental elements in the experience and the sole purpose of conducting a research that is produced not for them but rather for a select, in-group circle of scholars ("Telling Tales" 44). Shifting to fiction writing enables Gibb to shift the focus from "investigator as subject" (Spivak 150) to the African "other woman" (152) and man and, thus, to lessen the distance between the observer and the observed. Spivak, in "French Feminism in an International Frame" and her critique of Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women*, has succinctly demonstrated the dangers that lay in the way of the Western scholar in relation to his/her institutional affiliations and studies conducted on the other cultures. As Spivak argues, despite Kristeva's best feminist intentions to detach her work from the ethnocentric tendencies of her predecessors' mode of research on other cultures, her treatment of Chinese women remains instrumental and secondary to her concerns about Western women's experiences. In other words, as Spivak asserts, "the focus remains defined by the investigator as subject" (179). This dual act of "effacement," as we saw, is symptomatic of the New Orientalist narratives as well. *Sweetness in the Belly* is the account of the journey that takes the Oxford-educated anthropologist "observer" to the place of the "observed," penury stricken subaltern that could not appear in the finished research document. The image of Ethiopia that emerges out of the pages of the novel is much more complicated than the "starving, impoverished nation with just about the highest rates of infant mortality, the lowest average life expectancy and

the lowest rates of literacy in the world" (Gibb, *Sweetness* 380). Even though these statements might be supported by the hard facts of science, as Lilly observes, it is unfortunate that Ethiopia signifies little beyond "a story of famine and refugees" to the Western imagination (Gibb, *Sweetness* 380). Thus, the novel speaks of an important shift, a change of focus that Spivak has also called for: "not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?" (179). I need to clarify that my purpose in this argument is not to suggest that the path Gibb has taken is a sure solution to the problem of representation, knowledge, and power. I will return to this important tissue in the concluding pages of this document.

Gibb's description of Harar through her protagonist's encounter with the city and its people upon Lilly's arrival as a white female foreigner marks the moment this shift takes place. As she passes through winding alleys, she wishes she could "disappear, to blend into the stench in the air, melt into the high white walls of the compounds that flanked us on each side, be *an observer*, not *the observed*" (51, emphasis added). The place resembles what Burton describes. It is a poverty stricken "rundown neighbourhood where the compound walls were crumbling and dust coloured. Makeshift shacks made of tin siding and wood scraps had been erected between broken walls. The streets reeked of urine, and there were people missing limbs . . ." (Gibb, *Sweetness* 52). There is not much physical beauty in the place or in the poor people Lilly encounters for the first time. However, as we will see, what distinguishes Gibb's narrative is that, unlike Burton, she literally walks past the descriptions and tries to see through the eyes

of the powerless, of "the observed," yet without the pretence to its authenticity of observations. Whether or not one reads this longing to be an "observer" as an implication of the scholar's desire to return to her former privileged position of authority, the narrative succeeds in mirroring the feelings of discomfort at being in a rather helpless, exposed, and scrutinized position of the other.

In the opening scene of the story, Lilly is one of three African women helping Amina, the Ethiopian refugee, deliver her baby on a rainy night on the pavement behind the former Lambeth Hospital in London. The baby's "wail" announces the arrival of them all in England; the reader has no clue that Lilly is different from her companions (*Sweetness* 7). Recalling the history of Lambeth Hospital, Lilly repeats over and again that, coming from a different history, she does not share this history of separating and institutionalizing the ailing and the marginal (8). She was conceived in Dublin, "born in Yugoslavia, breast fed in the Ukraine, weaned in Corsica, freed from nappies in Sicily" and started walking when she and her parents arrived in the Algarve (*Sweetness* 10). Lilly repeatedly admits her privileged status but wishes to dissociate herself from it; she notes that she does not share a white history:

> My white face and white uniform give me the appearance of authority in this new world, though my experiences, as my neighbours quickly come to discover, are rooted in the old. I'm a white Muslim woman raised in Africa, now employed by the National Health Service. I exist somewhere between what they know and what they fear, somewhere between the past and the future, which is not quite the present.

(*Sweetness* 9)

She is in between cultures or, rather, is an anomaly; she is British, but her English has an accent; she is white, but her family members are Africans; and she lives in the same council flats in which African refugees and asylum seekers live. She is Muslim but not colored, much to people's surprise. In Harar, she is a "*farenji*" meaning stranger, yet she is called a "*white fu'in Paki*" in London too (*Sweetness* 165).

Lilly's skin color displays complexities and contradictions within the category of whiteness. She is not simply another white Westerner-turned-native. Gibb's enigmatic protagonist conveys important messages about race. Robin, the Indian doctor, is attracted to Lilly because she is different. He asks about Lilly's "adventures in Ethiopia" (172) and is surprised to find out that she lives in council flats. His surprised reaction adds to Lilly's indignation at his ignorance that her life in "Ethiopia wasn't some gap year experience" (173). England is the place her parents, and not she, called "home" (13). She compares her parents' excursions with those of colonizers who "had roamed the earth in pursuit of adventure, largely oblivious to the lives and laws of the people in the countries they picked through like cherries. Spitting out the pits. Just like [her] parents. They had stomped on the world like the Burtons of their era, only worse somehow because they did not think that their shoes left marks" (250). Even though Lilly's hybridity seems to be a major asset in problematizing the dichotomous framework of self and other, it should be noted that hybridity per se is not necessarily an indication

of resisting such binaries.[66] In fact, we need to remind ourselves that the success of the phenomenon of the exilic autobiographies is also partly related to the ambivalent situation of their authors' being located in-between cultures, a position deployed strategically and instrumentally to manoeuvre between the self and other. Here, Gibb suggests that not being aware of one's position of privilege is no longer feasible, and that's how Lilly locates herself within privilege and marginalization.

Lilly's family tree has no semblance to those she tries to draw for the refugees who come to their community association in the hope of locating and reuniting with their missing family members. She calls her family map a "rubble strewn field" that includes the Great Abdal and Hussein from Morocco; Mohammad Bruce from England; Nouria and her children; Gishta from Harar; and Amina and her kids; with Aziz, the man she loves, "hanging in the middle"; Amina calls it "a map of love" (32). Lilly's decision to not include her parents indicates her desire to dissociate herself from their kind of careless tourist identity (McGregor 104) and, by extension, the whiteness her parents represent to her. This identification thorough affiliative ties rather than filiative ones is also key in the role Gibb's protagonist performs as a critic of culture, yet in the public eye she could still be associated with the privileged identity that her whiteness attaches to her.

She talks to Robin about her eccentric guardian Muhammed Bruce and how he filled the place of her missing parents and had an impact on her otherwise streamlined education in the Moroccan shrine (246). Thus, works by Dickens,

[66] See Hannah MacGregor's "Not Quite Ethiopian" for an analysis of hybrid identities.

Austen, and Rumi, and novels like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Gulliver's Travels*, "and of course *The Arabian Nights* (the original, quite brutal and salacious)" are part of the body of narratives that comprise the more well-rounded education Bruce plans for Lilly (247); these are the "points of reference" that differentiate Lilly from Amina, whose "orientation" Lilly regrets, "has shifted from east to West between the births of her two youngest children" (247). Amina does not share "this vocabulary" with Lilly, yet Lilly does not feel superior to her. Gibb's point, perhaps, is about Lilly's doubts and lack of trust in the system she has come home to, in a manner that makes her less leaning towards the West compared to Amina (247) for whom her traumatic rape in the refugee camp in Nairobi somehow marks "the end of Africa" (234).

My first chapter dealt at length with the superior position both Nafisi's and Hirsi Ali's narratives bestow on Western literatures. The difference in Gibb's treatment of literature lies in presenting her protagonist with a more diverse regimen of reading materials and, more important, in refraining from placing Western literature in a position of superiority. Lilly's exposure to these literatures is framed in terms of Bruce's "deliberate" choice to supplement her "diet of Islam with doses of other *realities*" to prepare her for encountering a less sheltered "wider world" (248, emphasis added). These books offer Lilly "lessons about war and mortality and disease and love and betrayal and, perhaps most important, survival . . . A world like the one we live in. A world like the one we left" (248), not merely lessons of equality and freedom that seem to only exist in the West as

Hirsi Ali's narrative points out.[67] Unlike the New Orientalists, Gibb refuses to treat her protagonist as an all-knowing focal point in the story. What differentiates Gibb from her native informant counterparts is her greater capacity for accountability in admitting her limitations of judgment. Therefore, when she misreads Robin's sincere response in reading Burton's *First Footsteps in Africa*, she is quick to admit that her defensiveness is childish and rude. Lilly confides to the reader that colonialism is "a history [Robin] knows all too well" and that she does not have to put her version "in context" for him (249)[68].

Lilly is a white British woman who comes to know the agony of marginalization and discrimination when, upon her arrival in Harar, she is rejected by the powerful spiritual leader, Sheikh Jami, for being a white, female Westerner. She observes that "[r]umour . . . seemed to neglect the fact that Hussein had arrived this way as well. But he was an Arab, a man and a Sufi, whereas I was an enigma and a threat" (53). Here, categories of race and gender intersect, putting Lilly at a disadvantage. Her privilege in Harar is not her whiteness but her Arabic language skills and her knowledge of the Qur'an, an area which is usually regarded as the domain of men. She moves in with a poor woman, Nouria. She shares her meager resources with Nouria and her children, and teaches the Qur'an to the poor neighborhood children. Gradually, her contributions to the household cause others to warm to her. The last barrier is

---

[67] See Chapter One.

[68] McGregor reads this incident as a resistance strategy that Gibb, the anthropologist and the writer, deploys to demonstrate both challenges and possibilities of representation. See her essay, "'Not Quite Ethiopian, But Not At All English': Ethnography, Hybridity, and Diaspora in Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly"*.

removed when Gishta, Nouria's cousin and one of Sheikh Jami's wives, accepts Lilly. As an Oromo girl, Gishta had tried hard to ascend the social ladder in Harari society. Her acceptance is Lilly's passport to Harari's culture. In "Negotiating Social and Spiritual Worlds," Gibb discusses the religious and gender-inclusive features of the walled city of Harar as an always multiethnic urban space that offers a particular way of accepting outsiders (non-*Ge usu'*) (30). Gibb notes that all local saints are regarded as powerful agents in the history of the city and representatives of its residents in the spiritual world, although their origins are, for the most part, not indigenous. "In serving the city," she observes, "they are understood to 'become' *Ge usu'*, which literally means 'people of the city,' mirroring processes of enculturation on the ground whereby non- *Ge usu'* aspire to and assimilate into the prestigious category of *Ge usu'* despite the projection of the category as closed, exclusive, and strictly endogamous ("Negotiating" 30)". Gishta and Nouria try to promote their class status, and Lilly becomes one of them by her contributions and through acculturation. The three women's successful assimilations into Harari society make sense in the light of these above mentioned possibilities for cultural integration. Gibb's thesis for inclusion is expressed in this passage:

> Once you step inside, history has to be rewritten to include you. A fiction develops, a story that weaves you into the social fabric, giving you roots and a local identity. You are assimilated, and in erasing your differences and making you one of their own, the community can maintain belief in its wholeness and purity. After two or three

> generations, nobody remembers the story is fiction. It has become fact. And this is how history is made. (*Sweetness* 126)

There is a passage in the novel that beautifully illustrates this point: Nouria's son, Anwar, teaches Lilly Harari words by naming objects around their compound. The last one is a plant growing in a Wellington boot; Anwar has no word for the boot, and he does not know that there should be another boot to make a pair, but he accepts it as a part of the household anyways. Except to Lilly, the object does not appear as odd, out of place, or even noticeable. In answering Lilly's question about what the plant is for, Anwar says, "It's for nothing"; "[it's] just for being a plant" (66). Lilly thinks, "[i]n this impoverished world where everything had its use, I found this one frivolous gesture reassuring" (66). Perhaps in Lilly's mind the lonely boot stands for her, and perhaps it foreshadows the possibility of becoming part of the place she tries hard to belong in.

Gibb's agenda for inclusion seems deceptively simple, but it conveys an important message about privilege and difference. Gibb suggests that stepping inside is enough for obtaining membership because the newcomer does not remain a discordant patch on social fabric forever; she/he is gradually woven into it and become an inseparable part of it. Here, Gibb shows the process by which normalcy is produced and become invisible and, thus, the border between what is the norm and what falls outside of it becomes murky. Gibb demystifies the aura around power and privilege by laying bare its foundations: norms are historically grounded, shifting, and changeable. It is the passage of time and mankind's propensity to amnesia that bestow factual authenticity to history. Gibb points out

that through blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction in due course, fiction (here Gishta's improved social status) is eventually treated as fact and gains a kind of ahistoric legitimacy. Gibb upholds a social constructionist view in regard to differences, norms and privileges. In other words, Gishta's story of success shows that "'essential' similarities are conferred and created rather than intrinsic to the phenomenon, that the way that a society identifies its members tells us more about the society than about the individuals so classified" (Rosenblum and Travis 36). From all the privileges that being one of Sheikh Jami's wives bring to her, Gishta particularly enjoys administering beating of servants. Lilly explains that this is the reward "for her hard work spent erasing her origins . . ." (*Sweetness* 196). Her "marrying a Harari man . . . was the cement that had solidified all the foundations she had spent years laying down" (196). Her advice for Lilly is that this "will be the only way" for her as well (196).

Lilly's physical transformation includes piercing her ears, dying her hair and nails with henna, waxing her arms with honey, and dressing up in Harari fashion once Gishta makes her an expensive looking pair of silk pants, and is an important step towards her assimilation. As Lilly observes, "the trousers were not simply a fashion statement . . . . conformity is induced through gifts. Through flattery. And gossip. Once I was wearing these trousers, the remaining rumours seemed to subside. I was now fully dressed. And thus began another sort of apprenticeship, becoming a young woman of Harar—Gish (Gishta), self-appointed as my guide" (130). Lilly's hard-won success in Harari society is, nevertheless, shaky and conditional. As a devout Muslim she feels guilty about

her budding relationship with Aziz and, as a woman, she is afraid of losing this place once her secret is revealed. But Aziz opens Lilly's eyes to another twist in her state of "Otherness"; Lilly's being a white Westerner deeply resonates with the bitter memories and outcomes of colonial experience in Africa's collective psyche. Aziz cautions her against the potential dangers of her rumoured connections with the Emperor that, in the changing political atmosphere, eventually force her to abruptly leave the country and start a new as a refugee in England (189-190). Being a woman is another disadvantage at this time. Lilly's students withdraw from her class and go to one taught by Sheikh Jami's apprentice, Idris. When Lilly confronts him, Idris explains, "[w]hen times are uncertain, people prefer the authority of a man . . . ." (359). At the time of unrest, Lilly's whiteness inevitably marks her, again, as an "other" in Harar again. She is looked at as an unchanging infidel and an accomplice in imperialist agendas.

While in Ethiopia her skin is a visual reminder of her "Otherness," though in England Lilly's Muslim veil marks her as not quite white. At the height of the rhetoric of English nationalism in the London of the '80s, Lilly is subject to similar racist slurs that target other racial and ethnic minorities. When on the occasion of "Friday prayers, the one time a week [Lilly] wears a veil," somebody calls her "[*a*] *white fu'in Paki*!" (165); this racist slur reminds the reader of the fluidity of the concept of race as a social construct (Rosenblum and Travis 45). Lilly's whiteness is no longer an "unmarked marker" (Rosenblum and Travis 42). Her whiteness falls into a sharp relief against her Muslim veil; Gibb defamiliarizes whiteness through Lilly's veil. Moreover, Lilly's temporary

(whenever she wears *hijab*) denial of membership in the mainstream white Anglo-Saxon community confirms the idea of race as a social construction rather than an inborn biological category. Here, Lilly's whiteness is not an automatic passport to British society; it is the visibility of her religious orientation marked on her body that determines her place on the color pallet of race. The moment Lilly's whiteness is defamiliarized in its normalized context, we can see it as a social and historical construct.

Racist reactions to Lilly's veil reveal further complexities of race beyond skin color. In her meticulous study of the politics of the veil in France, Joanne Wallach Scott draws on George Fredrickson's definition of racism. She notes that "'racism . . . has two components: difference and power. It originates from a mindset that regards 'them' and 'us' in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable" (45). According to Sedef Arat-Koç in "New Whiteness(es), beyond the Colour Line?", race involves "a technology of power that goes beyond skin color" and "involves 'historic repertoires and cultural, spatial, and signifying systems that stigmatize and depreciate one form of humanity for the purposes of another's health, development, safety, profit, and pleasure'" and as a result, "a race logic and a race-like language can be used in exclusion, stigmatization, and subordination of people *beyond*, as much as along, the colour line" (148). Lilly's donning the veil has a *browning* impact; her veil is not only an emblem of the unbridgeable alterity and in-assimilability of the Muslim immigrant woman, but a key to the repertoire of the past dealings of Islam and the West. By juxtaposing Lilly's and Amina's experiences, Gibb also shows that while Lilly has white

privilege on her side, allowing her to blend in once her veil is not in the picture, Amina's skin color fortifies the impact of her veil and puts her at a greater risk in facing racism, especially when she has to go out late in the evening. Amina "dons a heavier, darker veil" to feel "more protected," but Lilly believes "it also draws more attention." Lilly worries about "a day when Amina gets knocked about by one of those lager louts standing outside the tube station . . . shouting, 'Oi! Nig nog!" (142). Sadly enough, Gibb observes, the concept of race is so powerful that kids, even at a very young age, are quick to pick up racist slurs and mercilessly attack each other. For instance, Sitta's black cheek mole attracts a kid's attention. Lilly describes a fight between Ahmed and Sitta during which "Ahmed's been teasing her about her mole, saying it looks like an ink stain. It's not the worst of what kids say. I've heard other Ethiopian kids call her nig nog, Galla, Shankills. They have twice as many cruel words as their parents: the insults of both the old world and the new" (352).

"Black savage, African, slave, barbarian, pagan," (91) are the names people call Aziz, Lilly's lover and Harari, doctor of "mixed blood" whose very dark skin comes from his Sudanese father. Aziz is no less of a stranger than "[t]he white Muslim of Harar" (90) in his own home town. His medical education and career cannot quite neutralize the impact his skin color has on Harari's perception of his difference. Aziz's part-Harari ethnicity and education makes him "an enigma" to Hararis. As he notes, even though they take pride in not bearing a history of being colonized, they "live under a colonial regime of [their] own making" for being unable to go beyond a race thinking logic that calls "other Africans Barya—

slaves" and "Ethiopians in the south Shankilla" meaning "something like dirty blacks," while Oromos are called as "Galla" (389). These racial epithets also speak of sensitivity to different shades of skin color that link to cultural and class bearings that to a stranger *only* mean blackness. Gibb exposes how the ideology of race draws on the fluidity of racial stereotypes to legitimize unequal power relations by translating differences into "Otherness". Gibb shows that despite its increased sophistication and refractions, race remains a major category of difference.

Lilly's place in the not-so-privileged margins of British society and her association with poor refugees locate her in "cracks along the colour line" (Sedef Arat-Koç 148). In the essay, "New Whiteness(es), beyond the Colour Line?" Arat-Koç discusses how neo-liberal capitalist globalization nuances the logic of race by culturalizing and racializing the category of class, which means that economic marginalization carries a kind of cultural stigma that is perceived as "a form of humanity culturally apart" (150). This "shift in the meaning of class," (151) Arat-Koç argues, is the result of the emergence of a new type of modernity in which economic status has become a ticket for membership (152). It is "a form of 'whiteness' that sometimes imitates but also goes beyond the color line" (156).The criteria for membership in this new type of modernity are complicated. Muslim people of the West could be just another group denied membership because such shifts in the meaning of whiteness, Arat Koç concludes, still help "preserve white privileges" for white people "through anti-immigrant, anti-

refugee, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim sentiments, movements, and ideologies, as well as policies on immigration and 'the War on Terror'" (164).

This denial of membership, according to Wallach Scott, is because of Muslims' paradoxical status as targets of civilizing missions of colonial project and the failure of such missions (47). This paradox, she explains, is because, according to outsiders, Islam has "marked" its followers "as a race apart" in a way that the issue with it, unlike "French Catholicism," has been the impossibility of its taming "in the interests of science and reason" (46). There is "something excessive" about Islam that is assumed "at once the cause and effect of [Muslims] inferiority". Wallach Scott continues, "The logic ran this way: Muslims suffer from their religious beliefs, but these beliefs tell you something about the propensity of Arabs to decadence," and therefore, they "could not be civilized" (46-47). In other words, "[a] recurring theme in Orientalist work" as Bayoumi explains, "is that 'Islam' is the regulator of life from 'top to bottom'(Said 1981; xvi), a motif Said characterizes as not just intellectually lazy but as a model of intellectual production that would be inapplicable to the serious study of Western culture" (80). Bayoumi notes that according to such narratives, Islam is a producer of politics (80) as well an explainer of an otherwise long and complicated history of a vast and heterogeneous world (84)[69], a logic that "[underpins] their Grand Narratives to give them force to Western readers" (Bayoumi 84-85).

[69] See the first chapter and the conclusion for more explanation about the ways in which Hirsi Ali and Nafisi engage in such a straightforward act of reading of history from the religion.

The English soil Lilly and the rest of Ethiopian refugees arrive on is home to 1.5 million Muslims. This number includes Muslims who emigrated in the second half of 19th century as well as British citizens who converted (Ansari 4). This ethnically and geographically diverse population is absent from the generalizations that, according to Humayun Ansari, tend to centre on experience of South Asian Muslims. They comprise "the first and foremost" communities amongst Muslim population in England (Ansari 2). Gibb remaps Thatcher-era London by presenting a different trajectory of the place as seen and inhabited by its Muslim refugees arriving from Africa:

> Mr. J sells halal meat, and two doors down there is the Mecca Hair Salon, with its special enclosed room at the back where hijab-wearing women can reveal themselves without shame. Volunteers offer Qur'anic classes at the back of church on Saturdays, and while the Brixton Mosque, which draws us to Friday prayers, is only a bus ride away, the Refugee Referral Service just down the road offers a place in the neighbourhood for daily worship, clearing its reception room at dusk every day to receive the knees, foreheads, palms and prayers of men and women of all colours. (34)

Against the harsh realities of displacement, Lilly and other refugees find these familiar spaces reassuring. She admits that "[i]t is the only thing that offers me hope that where borders and wars and revolutions divide and scatter us, something singular and true unites us. It tames this English soil (34). As Gibb and Rothenberg argue in their comparative study of the West Bank Palestinian and

Harari communities in Canada, for many Muslim women in the diaspora, "religious identity" has acquired a greater significance than "the ethno-nationalist one" of the home country (243). In this one and-a-half-century history of Muslims living in England (Ansari 2), the Ethiopian Muslims are quite new. The religion and the community provide many of them with what could be the closest thing to the home they have lost. Lilly describes an emotional scene when, after the end of Yusuf's and Amina's reunion party, Yusuf starts reading the Qur'an while "tears [are] streaming down his face." She observes, "To read the Qur'an with your family around you is to be home" (235). Communal religious prayers, rituals, and celebrations are means of asserting a common sense of identification and belonging. For example, Eid al Fitr, the most important event of the year for many Muslims at the end of Ramadan, brings all the residents of the council building together in a recitation of religious songs accompanied by a multicultural feast (Gibb, *Sweetness*158-159). "Mosques and Muslim institutions," Gibb and Rothenberg observe, provide these refugees with "familiar landmarks in unfamiliar territories" (246). Moreover, the rising number of British-born and educated Muslims, as Ansari notes, demands a different kind of solidarity across linguistic and regional differences through the concept of *ummah* and by means of "the multi-ethnic constitution of committees" that preside over mosques and other Islamic organizations (6). Therefore, familiar spaces are significant in providing a sense of belonging for Muslims *of* England, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Through the few incidents in which Lilly and Amina become targets of racism, the narrative gives hints about international and local political events such as the

Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Rushdie and Honeyford affairs, and the internal shift in the political scene that benefitted the conservative party in 1979 (Ansari 236) and made the atmosphere increasingly less favorable for British Muslims. In this atmosphere of fear and distrust, the internal tensions and heterogeneity of Muslim communities are obliterated in favor of the generalizing logic that casts them all as the same. One of the ways in which Gibb critiques the treatment of Islam as a monolith is by reflecting on its variations and the transformations that occur in characters' religious beliefs and their religious practices as a result of their displacement.

By juxtaposing Lilly and Amina's different approaches to Islam, the novel brings this heterogeneity to the reader's attention. Gibb reflects on the complexity of issues of religious belonging, identity matters, and cultural practices. An important issue in practising Islam in the diaspora is the possibility of a gradual shift from adherence to "a culturally specific understanding revolving around highly localized practices to a more homogenized, globalized tradition of standardized practices" introduced and "reinforced" by other Muslims (Gibb and Rothenberg 243). Amina demonstrates a shift of interest from the Harari way of practising Islam to the dominant model preached in London mosques and madrasas. Her transformation manifests itself first in making excuses for not performing rituals in honor of Bilal al-Habash (Islam's first *muazzin*[70], a former slave and a famous Ethiopian companion of the Prophet). It becomes clear that the reason for Amina's transformations lies more in the education she receives though

[70] The person who calls people to prayer in public (usually from a mosque minaret) when it is prayer time

the "official," "orthodox," and so-called "*only* version of Islam" in the madrasa Ahmed attends at which "saints are called false gods" (140). The dominant way of practicing Islam in Britain, as Ansari explains, is comprised of "subcontinental Sunni beliefs and practices" influenced by the more orthodox views based on the four widely recognised schools of Islamic law—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali— that became ever more dominant throughout the 1960s and 1970s" (228). Thus, Amina does not follow the tradition of *ulma* (staying home for forty days) after giving birth to her third child Tariq either, partly because as a working mother she finds it unrealistic. She also "scoffs" at the idea of burying the placenta calling it "a silly superstition" (240). Lilly, who still clings to many of these customs, regretfully admits that somehow Amina has changed over the years (247). The local and culturally specific practices, then, have a very scant chance of surviving against the more powerful and dominant brand of the religion that demands conformity (*Sweetness* 249). Lilly is aware that these culturally specific practices, particularly saint worship, are dismissed by the Muslim community in London as relics from pagan times; she says that in Saudi Arabia such beliefs "are seen as a deadly plague" (221). The reason Lilly mentions Saudi Arabia is because of its position of power in defining the so-called orthodox way of practicing Islam in the diaspora.[71] It is interesting that Hirsi Ali also refers to the emergence of a master religious discourse in this context. Both these authors make an important point about the confluence of power and knowledge in Saudi Arabia's ability to disseminate the Saudi brand of Islam as authentic. The

[71] See the first chapter for the more detailed discussion of Hirsi Ali's views.

difference is that Hirsi Ali equates this brand of Islam with the "truth" of the religion while Gibb hints at the processes that grant a privileged status to this particular religious ideology. Moreover, through Lilly's example, the narrative offers an important observation about the many reasons people identify with a religion in the diaspora. As Lilly's case reveals, even observing Islamic rituals is not an indication that Islam itself acts as the sole arbiter of the individual's life in the way anti-Islam discourses claim. Sometimes, as Lilly's experience implies, being observant might be an attempt to bring to life a past (including places and especially people) that is no more. It could be a homecoming in one's imagination.

Contrary to the generalizing statements of the New Orientalist narratives, the reasons that a certain community (for example, the Middle Eastern Arab, particularly Lebanese and Palestinian in North America and South Asians in England) becomes the dominant definer of Islam are far more complicated. According to Gibb and Rothenberg, the ways in which a particular version of Islam acquires a dominant position is the product of various elements such as the history of the presence of a certain community in the diaspora, as well as the members' economic and social status. That status also defines the power they acquire, which shapes and directs the ways in which the community represents Islam (244-245)[72]. The discrepancy between Lilly's steadfast loyalty to local traditions and Amina's eagerness in cultural assimilation while paradoxically leaning towards an orthodox reading of Islamic rituals, adds nuance to theories about the failure of multiculturalism. Usually, immigrants, refugees, and members of minority cultures are considered responsible for this failure because they

[72] See also Humayun Ansari's *The Infidel Within*, p.6

choose to live separately from the wider society.[73] Multiculturalism has been critiqued for encouraging ghettoization and separatism, and for preserving misogynist cultural practices such as FGM and forced marriages that contradict the values of liberal democratic societies.[74] But those critiques are not valid in the case of British Muslims, whose engagement with mainstream society does not follow a homogenous or singular pattern. Ansari introduces four different modes of response that range from the desire to safeguard cultural differences, to partial and to complete assimilation (214). Particularities of age, gender, class status, type of displacement, generational differences, and personal specificities complicate these responses even further. Thus, Lilly eagerly immerses herself in Harari culture and language once she arrives in the walled city; in London, on the contrary, she is "such a habasha[75]" in clinging to the traditions of the past, to put it in Amina's words (342) while Amina's assimilation is a much speedier process. Such differences speak of the workings of a multiplicity of forces that can change religious identities and invite conformity and assimilation.

Hegemony deploys various mechanisms to persuade and pressure immigrants to conform to the dominant system of the larger society. Language, education, various qualifications and skills are important apparatuses that

---

[73] The presence of Muslims as a problem and a hindrance in achieving multiculturalism in the West is quite a familiar trope that once in a while captures the public eye. A recent example is comments by the top authorities of three powerful European nations in February 2011 that echoed each other in calling multiculturalism a failed project.

[74] See Susan Moller Okin's "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women." Also see the first chapter for references to this essay. Also see Neil Bissoondath's "Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada" for a critique of multiculturalism and its creation of self-enclosed ghettos.

[75] Ethiopian

immigrants and refugees find necessary for their survival. Even then, these qualifications might not be sufficient to ensure newcomers entry into social and economic structures and, if we add to these the role of the media and the dominant culture, it is quite clear that it is glossing over the other half of the story to hold only immigrants and refugees responsible for failing to integrate. By zooming in on the tribulations of Yusuf, Amina's husband, Gibb dis-alienates scapegoats of the anti-immigration discourse and puts human faces on them.

Yusuf is a former professor of agriculture who is finally reunited with his family and whose recovery from a traumatic prison experience proves to be "a slow thaw, ice retreating inward from the edges of a frozen lake" (238). Lilly and Yusuf become close friends, and she seems to be the only person who understands his lack of enthusiasm for life. She observes how hard it is "to imagine a place for Yusuf in this concrete world where the only green is that of moss clinging to damp brickwork, and weeds making tenacious gestures through broken pavement" (239). Perhaps the reason Lilly is closer to Yusuf is that when it comes to their respective cultures, they are both exceptions to the rules (257) and they share something in common that makes it easier for Yusuf to open up to Lilly and "relay small anecdotes about prison" (244). It is usual to hear accounts of the domestic abuse in refugee households in the New Orientalist writings. Without denying such abuses, Gibb's treatment of the issues and problems of exile is more careful and her lens is more inclusive in portraying human pain. Through Yusuf's character, she offers a glimpse into men's challenges in their experiences of displacement. One important challenge for many men is getting used to the

reversal of gender roles when the wife has to become the family breadwinner. Yusuf has a hard time babysitting Tariq and learning to cook. As the head of the household, he does not find it validating to stay home, especially since he is not a good housekeeper. Lilly explains that domestic kitchen chores are out of question for men of Harar because "even among the poorest" doing these chores "is a servant's job. In Ethiopia, there is always someone poorer than you. Even Nouria was able to procure a servant eventually" (251). The narrative shows the ways in trauma and cultural displacement unsettle marriages in such a quick way "that disappointment arrives as soon as what you have desired for so long steps over the threshold" (267). These hardships do not always result in a recurring pattern of domestic abuse. Gibb humanizes the Muslim man by drawing a portrait that is different from the familiar misogynist power-monger, wife-beater stereotype. To complete this picture, Gibb also offers a glimpse into the internal community tensions and post-displacement traumas via a purported case of suicide that speaks of the continuation of the wars at home or a reversal of the position of the victimizers and victims in the diaspora, allowing the latter to sometimes "even seek revenge" (260). Having said this, I obviously do not condone any justification for violence and abuse as reactions to such frustrations. My point is, attributing these behavorial anomalies to Muslim men only and regarding the former as innate aspects of their religion and culture at all times is questionable and an indication of irresponsible scholarship.

We saw in Aboulela's "The Museum" how Shadia desperately tries to make Bryan understand that Africa is not just "jungles and antelopes"; "it's *the people*"

(119, emphasis added). "Fiction—both reading it and writing it," Gibb explains, "is all about making empathic leaps into people's lives. It offers us privileged insight into people's innermost thoughts, their intimate worlds, their internal wars—and not just in a moment in time but over the course of as much time as you, the writer, choose to spend with them . . . if you desire" ("Telling Tales" 51-2). This "leap" in the context of Gibb's shift from anthropology to creative writing is also a literal leap of faith into the realm of storytelling. Gibb defines her change of field as a stepping away from didacticism by "showing" rather than "telling"; "[w]hat is on display," she explains, "ultimately, are your characters and the embodied knowledge they possess—knowledge they demonstrate through being, through living" ("Telling Tales" 48). On another level, Gibb's "leap" indicates a loss of the position of power and even a loss of cultural capital since the interpretation of her move in the hierarchic atmosphere of academe indicates sacrificing the language of research and its "higher level of sophistication and intellectuality" for the "raw, untrained, native" and "instinctive" language of fiction ("Telling Tales" 45). This shift, then, can be interpreted as a choice of amateurism over institutional professionalism. It represents her internal conflict, one between Gibb as "the theorist" and Gibb as "the socialised individual" (Said, *The World* 46). For Said, the term amateurism, as Ashcroft and Ahluwalia point out, connotes what it means in French, which is "'very involved in something without being professional'" (34), and therefore, "[i]ntellectuals themselves, like the texts they produce, are not theoretical machines but are constantly inflected with the complexity of their being in the world" (*The World* 46). In order for the

critic to not compromise such complexities, he/she needs to be "involved but never possessing, power: alert, forceful, undogmatic, ironic, unafraid of orthodoxies and dogmas . . . ." (Said, *The World* 27). Gibb's authenticity of representations is inevitably linked to the difficult choice of becoming an expatriate in the field and leaving behind the privileges of membership in academia.

On the other hand, while the "leap of empathy" Gibb calls for is relevant to her shift of register, it is first and foremost about instigating a "transformative" experience through creating a protagonist who has no place in neat categories of race, ethnicity, culture, and religion and, thus, remains basically an outsider. Lilly's unconventional life story proves that "[it] is harder in many ways to live in the middle than at the edges. Much harder to interpret as you see fit, because you have no assurance you are doing right in the eyes of God . . ." (314). The faith in Islam is emplanted in Lilly through the Sufi teachings of the Great Abdal, a purely devotional version of the faith that aims to eliminate the body. It then absorbs many of the local Harari practices and even superstitions until she meets Aziz who loosens her grip (358) and transforms her into a less conservative and more secular Muslim without lessening her uncertainties about religious observance (316).

According to Said in "Reflections on Exile," the worth of the experience of exiles lies in a challenging task of maintaining balance between the experience that has to be saved and the one that needs to be given up. In other words, he observes, "[o]nly someone who has achieved independence and detachment,

someone whose homeland is 'sweet' but whose circumstances make it impossible to recapture that sweetness" has the ability to accomplish the task (186). As Robin points out to Lilly, "[o]nce you are outside a place you can never go back. Not really" (391). Gibb's "empathic leap," I believe, enables her to capture this sweetness. *Sweetness in the Belly* opens up the reader's eyes to the ways in which a formerly non-existent term, "diaspora," found an unwelcomed niche in the Ethiopian contemporary history (306).[76] Unlike the typical New Orientalist narrative, the novel does not put the blame for the lack of development squarely on the shoulders of ordinary Ethiopians; it offers a comprehensive view of the problems of today as a result of a continued history of exploitation as well as corrupt and brutal dictatorship (379-80). According to Mohammed Hassen, *Sweetness in the Belly* is "the first widely read historical novel that brings the suffering of the Oromo and the plight of refugees from Ethiopia to the literary imagination of the Western world" (176). It also shows larger ramifications of geopolitical transformations that bring about a shift in the human geography of the world. Thus, if an odd pair of Wellington boots representing indelible footprints on Ethiopian soil becomes an unquestioned element of a Harari household, so can "a veiled Muslim woman skiing down the side of a Canadian mountain" be a part of Canadian landscape (Gibb, *Sweetness* 407). This is what our "new world" looks like (407). Gibb, then, also counts on "[t]he intelligence the reader brings to bear in interpreting characters and their stories" and on "a

[76] Here Gibb explains that the concept of "emigration" did not really exist in Harari culture before the regime change, and if people left the country, it was a temporary absence for purposes such as continuing education, performing haj pilgrimage, and doing business

social intelligence that allows us to read people, to interpret the meaning or emotion behind their actions" ("Telling Tales" 48).

When little Ahmed asks Lilly to tell stories "of the place he comes from" and not those of "ailing Sufis and orphaned girls" (163), he is frustrated to receive only silence. This silence, Lilly confides to the reader, is because of the difficulty of filling the gap between the past and the present, a gap she compares to "sites of amputation" (164). "Remembering," she explains (to the reader and not to the child), "only encourages the growth of phantom limbs. And it is not simply what one remembers, or why, but what to do with what one remembers, which of the scattered pieces to carry forward, what to protect and preserve, what to leave behind" (164). It is exactly what one does with this remembering that distinguishes this novel from the present day Orientalist narratives. Thus, while Hirsi Ali decides that her affiliations lie best with the American Enterprise Institute, in the new world picture Gibb depicts, she decides to root her protagonist in Ethiopia. Gibb portrays Ethiopia as a "picture of resilience" and the beauty of humanity that lies next to its ugliest aspects:

> For all the brutality that is inflicted upon us, we still possess the desire to be polite to strangers. We may have blackened eyes, but we still insist on brushing our hair. We may have our toes shot off by a nine-year-old, but we still believe in the innocence of children. We may have been raped, repeatedly by two men in a Kenyan refugee camp, but we still open ourselves to the ones we love. We may have

> lost everything, but we still insist on being generous and sharing the little that remains. We still have dreams. (407)

Perhaps Mohammed Hassen's description of the novel, as a work imbued with the power to "transport" this Ethiopian professor at Georgia State University "across three continents" (181), best demonstrates the success of Gibb's "empathic leap" that sparks a critical interaction between the text, its reader, and its critic.

Conclusion

This dissertation started by examining a continuing legacy of Orientalist writings in a new body of writings by women of Muslim cultural and religious background. It then moved to chart the ways in which a fledging body of fictional narratives, which I refer to as "Muslim Narratives in English," problematize these stifling, stereotypical, and homogenizing portrayals. By saying "a fledging body of narratives," I do not claim that this field is a totally new literary occurrence since writing about cultural and religious sensibilities of Muslims in the West is not a recent phenomenon. According to Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan, India and Pakistan were among the first places outside England and the United States of America to have used English "for literary purposes" (110). The first book published by a Muslim in English, they point out, was *Travels* by the South Asian author Sake Deen Mahomed published in 1794 (110). Another overlapping terrain is the now well-established and rapidly growing field of Arab American literature that has existed at least since the second decade of the twentieth century.[77] It was, however, the political transformations in dealings of the worlds of Islam and the West since the 1980s and particularly the terrorist attacks of September 2001that gave momentum to the production of literary creations that, in different ways, deal with the heterogeneous and culturally diverse world of Islam.

---

[77] An upsurge of ethnic literatures happened in The United States during 1970s. Taking precedence of multicultural policy over the melting pot approach to one's origin encouraged minorities to take pride in their ethnicity, search for their roots, and to explore hyphenated identities and thus fuelled more literary output. This field is very diverse and is enriched by the variegated religious and cultural backgrounds of its contributors; I don't refer to it as predominantly Muslim at all since Islam is only one among many other components of Arab-American identities, and for many, it matters only at the level of culture and not faith. See Peter Clark's "Translations without Translators" in *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab literature.* 2 (1998) and Steven Salatia's "Split Vision: Arab-American Literary Criticism" in *Al-Jadid* 32 (Summer 2000).

The works this dissertation examines carry, to greater or lesser degrees, a continuing burden in the work of political representation. They speak back to the phenomenon of "New Orientalism," but in doing so they carry the weight of creative engagement. This task, to some extent, weakens their capacity also to function within the full register of literary possibility. For future, I seek a balance between the demands of political and of the literary in the narratives of Muslim women in diaspora. I want to see how the experiences they describe, and especially their engagement with Islam at the level of faith, can become a real and enduring force in the scene of minority literatures. That, I think, is the promise of this body of literary writing that is changing rapidly in our time.

In fact, now we can also confidently speak of the burgeoning field of British Muslim writing in English.[78] This field comprises a diverse range of writers including, but not limited to, Salman Rushdie, Nadeem Aslan, Hanif Kureishi, Fadia Faqir, Ahdaf Soueif, Hanan al-Shaykh, Farhana Sheikh, Monica Ali, and Leila Aboulela. The fledging body of narratives that this dissertation is concerned with belongs to this larger field of Muslim writings. However, as I specified in the introduction, the former voluntarily *identifies* with the religious and spiritual sensibilities of Islam and foregrounds these ties at a central locus in its narratives. By this choice, I do not wish to create a binary between categories of religion and culture, nor do I claim that there is a possibility of recovering the

[78] Wail Hassan uses the term "Arab British literature" to refer to this fledging counterpart of Arab American literature, but I prefer Claire Chamber's more inclusive tem "Muslim British writings" because the majority of Muslim population in Britain are from South Asia. This term also includes other Muslims from places such as Africa and Iran. She uses the term "Muslim" in a similar vein as Amin Malak and mostly as an indication of the influence of Muslim culture and civilization rather than religious belongings. See Wail S. Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (2011) and Claire Chamber's *British Muslim Fictions: Interview with Contemporary Writers* (2011).

"truth" about Islam through reading this literature. The ways the characters—particularly women— view the religion and strive for spirituality interest me because I believe ample attention has been devoted to exploring commonalities of culture and religion[79] while exploring the heterogeneity of Islam through the category of religion remians a less explored terrain. Moreover, as I will argue in the following pages, Muslim writings do not appear in a politically neutral context. The ideological apparatus that fans the flames of Islamophobia partly functions through muddling the borders of religion and culture by investing in the popularity of native informants' autobiographical and fictional narratives. However, along with this group, the body of writings that explicitly pronounce the importance of Islamic epistemology to its narrative trajectory—at least in part—as a response to this malevolent trend is growing fast, too. At a time when the rise of religious extremism, problems with the global economy, and voluntary and involuntary global movements renew interest in issues of race, class, ethnicity, and religion in public debates, there are more opportunities for ethnic and minority literatures to articulate their voices. In this atmosphere, an important question that inevitably comes to mind concerns the durability of this literature and what an adequate future for it would look like. It should be noted again that here I am concerned with the fate of those narratives in which Islam plays a positively central role; otherwise, this question might not make sense when we look at the purview of the writings formed and informed by Muslim heritage and culture with the big names such as Rushdie, Tariq Ali, Soueif, and Kureishi. In these closing pages, in order to predict and explore the possibilities for the future

[79] See Claire Chamber's *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (2011).

of Muslim narratives in English, I will draw on speculations offered by scholars in fields of Arab American, Muslim British, and multi-ethnic literature.

In *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*, Wail Hassan draws on Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's definition of minority literature — with some modifications— as a useful model to describe Arab American and Arab British immigrant literatures. According to this model, one of the foundational features of Arab Anglophone literature, as any other minority literature, is its inseparability from political issues (Hassan 5). Laurie Grobman in "The *Value* and *Valuable* Work of Multi-ethnic Literature," deals with the question of value and literary evaluation of multiethnic literatures. She contends that even though many such works have important political contents, their most prominent feature cannot be limited to their political significance. A durable literary work, as Grobman points out, displays a "mutually enriching connection between the political and the creative in a process of cultural specificity and cross-cultural negotiation" (83). The process of connecting "cultural specificity and cross-cultural negotiation" is particularly complicated when we consider the creation and validation of Muslim narratives in English. Hassan explains that Arab American writings [and by extension—Muslim narratives in English] "[stand] between the culture of origin and that of the adoptive country and, equipped with first-hand knowledge of both, [and play] the role of mediator, interpreter, or cultural translator" (5). Playing this cultural translation role is related to another feature that adds further complexity to this process. Hassan defines this role in a quote from Deleuze and Guatari as

"'[t]he cramped space' of a minor literature' forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story [the story of the minority group] is vibrating within it'" (5). In other words, "'everything takes on a collective value'" in this kind of literature (Hassan 5).

As the first chapter demonstrated, this representational burden almost automatically falls on the shoulders of any writer who deals with Islam and Muslim cultures whether or not she/he intends to accept this responsibility. It is driven by "social pressures from the majority" (Hassan 5). Therefore, such challenges add to the difficulty of "aesthetic shaping of political content" (Grobman 86) in minority literatures. The issue of politics that concerns these literatures is not limited to *their* reactions to social and political events of their time; these works are also inevitably already politicized. In the case of Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim writings in English this politicization also concerns the historical relationships that includes "imperial interests and ventures" between the countries of origin and the host countries (Hassan xii). The Orientalist discourse, as we know, plays a foundational and lasting impact on the terms of this relationship to such an extent that the act of cultural translation "is always conducted through the prism of Orientalism, a hegemonic frame of reference that cannot be avoided, and is always framed, whether explicitly or implicitly, by the politics of empire" (Hassan xii). Hassan observes that even though the ways in which Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants confront with Orientalism "have evolved in step with the changing ideological functions of that discourse from the

late nineteenth century to the post-9/11 period," avoiding this prism is still next to impossible (xii).

Another relevant trend is the politicization of Muslim writings in English in the present political landscape of Islam and the West that play a role in the success and popularity of New Orientalist Narratives. Indeed, in what follows, we will see that the proliferation of this body of literature in the West and particularly in the U. S. cannot be separated from contemporary attempts to reshape the world of Islam and reform it from within. Saba Mahmood, in "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," explicates "[new] dimensions of knowledge at the service of power" in the form of "the theological campaign" accompanying the war against terror that aims at shaping sensibilities of ordinary Muslims whom the State Department regards as too dangerously inclined toward fundamentalist interpretations of Islam" (329). According to this view, Mahmood notes:

> [O]rthodox Islamic practices—from the veil to public prayers to abidance by rules of sexual segregation—are expressions of a fanatical literalist mentality and, as such, a threat to the entire edifice of our liberal political system. Thus the unequivocal opposition to the U.S. occupation of the Middle East is often seasoned with caveats about the necessity to fight the irrationality of Muslim beliefs and practices through cultural, if not military, means. (345)

She explains that liberal Muslims irrespective of their position in regard to U.S. foreign policies, are believed to be "most open to a 'Western vision of civilization, political order, and society,'" partly because of "a shared approach to scriptural

hermeneutics" and therefore are considered potential allies in this project (329). The main targets of this project, she explains, are traditionalist Muslims, even though they do not show any tendency toward terrorism and violence. The logic is that this group's loyal observance of the religious rituals and their belief in the Qur'an as the "actual word of God" (Mahmood 332) make them accept authority without question, "a condition 'causally linked with backwardness and underdevelopment" (Mahmood 333). Perhaps one of the best illustrations of the ways in which Muslim immigrant writings are implicated in this "theological campaign" is Hirsi Ali's most recent publication, *Nomad* (2010).

In yet *another* autobiographical narrative, Ayyan Hirsi Ali continues the task of bringing enlightenment to Muslims with the aid of the well-intentioned American people. The reason I keep coming back to Hirsi Ali is that her recent narrative best exemplifies a harmonious dovetailing of literature with the ideological underpinnings of American Orientalism of our times. This insistence on recycling and repackaging one personal story helps to explain the nature of contextual hurdles the rival, Muslim Anglophone narratives, has to face and overcome. In the chapter "Islam in America," Hirsi Ali justifies her choice of ideological allies by comparing American and European people's reactions to her stories. She notes that her anecdotes elicit stronger emotional responses from Americans whom, she claims, unlike the Europeans, seem to be unfamiliar with the accounts of domestic abuse in Muslim households in the West. She says "[most people in my] European audience already understand that Muslim immigrants create specific social problems in their countries and that they often

involve the oppression of women on European soil" (127). Hirsi Ali reiterates the same line of argument she followed in her critique of liberals for tolerating religious and cultural differences in *Infidel*, but as Mahmood shows, a difference in an approach to Islam between conservatives and liberals might not be the case anymore since, as she points out, there is now a consensus among leftists, liberals and the U.S. State Department in that the fate of democracy rests in "the institutionalization of secularism-both as a political doctrine and as a political ethic" (323) that involves solutions that "take on the form of theological prescription and a particular style of scriptural interpretation-all which aimed at the creation of an enlightened religious subject capable of realizing a 'religiously neutral political ethic'" (330).[80] Hirsi Ali is surprised that "in America . . . most people in [her] audiences perceive Islam as largely about foreign policy— an important question for America's national security, maybe, but essentially about people living *overseas*" (127).[81] She also praises Americans for being more eager

[80] As Mahmood points out, the particular understanding of secularism today "is rooted in the doctrine of religious tolerance" (324). In this view, the importance of regulating "individual and collective liberties" and various models at work for institutionalizing religious freedom in liberal democracies exist in a tension with the common concern about individuals' freedom in practicing religion "without coercion and state intervention" (324). She notes that the political solution that secularism offers is not so much about "tolerating difference and diversity but in remaking certain kinds of religious subjectivities (even if this requires the use of violence) so as to render them compliant with liberal political rule" (325). This act of remaking reminds us of Žižek's "Tolerance as an Ideological Category". He discusses how western secular societies adopt a selective approach towards culture. In the discourse of tolerance the more advanced and tolerant a culture appears, the more it seems to be equipped with the social mechanism (tolerance) to deal with conflicts represented as problems of intolerance. Thus being ruled by their culture, Muslims need to be emancipated from its shackles. Here as Žižek points out, culture appears as "something given" (660), not as a social construction.

[81] It is hard to believe this claim, particularly in the post- 9/11 environment with Islam in the spotlight. The media's role in furthering the perception that Muslims can be categorized into two camps of good and bad or secular and practicing is not negligible. See Genevieve Abdo, *Mecca and Main street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

in taking action, volunteering, and finding solutions. In her calculated yet predictable agenda, Hirsi Ali raises three issues. First of all, she shows that there is a gap in knowledge about Islam in America that justifies the dissemination of the sort of knowledge *she* aims to convey to her audience. Second, she emphasizes the urgent need for taking action against a threat that emanates from within Western societies. Third, she diagnoses that Muslim immigrants are the source of the problem because they bring social diseases from their own countries to the West. She asserts, "the whole point of my memoir, I tried to explain, is that I have been extraordinary *lucky*. I managed to make it out of the world of dogma and oppression and into the sunlight of independence and free ideas. I *did* escape, and at every stage of that process of escape I was assisted by the good will of ordinary non-Muslims, just like the people in those audiences" (129).

Next, Hirsi Ali distinguishes American from European Muslim students. The former she notes, were "highly articulate," could easily "take over the debate," and "spoke perfect English; they were mostly very well-mannered; and they appeared as far better assimilated than their European immigrant counterparts" (130). These differences seem to affect the students' appearances as well since, as she observes, "there were far fewer bearded young men in robes short enough to show their ankles, aping the tradition that says the Prophet's companions dressed this way out of humility, and fewer girls in hideous black veils . . . their whole demeanor was far less threatening, but they were omnipresent" (130-131). In Hirsi Ali's pathology of fundamentalism, these relatively positive descriptions of American Muslim students are indications of a

threat far more serious and amoebaean than their European counterparts. They are the smart enemy; their language proficiency and their assimilated appearance camouflage their threat. These descriptions present an uncanny similarity with the ways in which the post-9/11 security policies define the threat. "'Constructing the political spectacle' around the idea that foreigners" are a threat, Didier Bigo observes, is a feature of contemporary times especially the Cold War era (65). However, Bigo continues, the idea of "a deterritorialised enemy" (65) and anxieties over the blurry border between friend and foe has gained momentum since 9/11 (65-67). Hirsi Ali's surprised reaction to her American audiences' lack of awareness about the imminent danger of Muslims within the West and a decade after the decisive September of 2001 is hardly credible. In fact, after the attacks the U.S. government departments "almost instantly" transformed, changing their policies of immigration, security, and surveillance measures as early as 14 September 2001(Bigo 67). One of the repercussions of the 9/11 attacks, as Bigo points out, has been "individualization of the dangers" (66) in a way that "global vigilance" justifies the idea that "[s]urveillance must dwell inside the mind and the heart of everyone. Nevertheless, since 'thought police' are not yet operational on the agenda, it is necessary to find criteria to distinguish between the good and the bad Americans, implicitly with an association between the good, the citizen, the white, and the bad, the foreigners or those naturalised a short while ago, the Muslims" (Bigo 71). It makes sense to consider Hirsi Ali as a useful cog in the ideological apparatus that instils in people a "political demonology" that

says even those who look "too perfectly 'American', too white American'" have the potential to turn into enemies (Bigo73).

Compared *to Infidel*, Hirsi Ali's moves in *Nomad* seem more calculated. She reminds her opponents (defenders of Islam) that she is aware of the scholarly arguments around the issue of women in Islam and the colonial project. She notes that "[s]everal times I was informed that attacking Islam only serves the purpose of something called 'colonial feminism,' which in itself was allegedly a pretext for the War on Terror and the evil designs of the U.S. government" (131). Recalling a poster for a speakers' series at an American college, Hirsi Ali mentions references to two well-known scholars, Leila Ahmed and Lila Abu-Lughod, only to conclude that despite the few interesting points the poster made, it "veered off into academic nonsense. All its assumptions were either morally or factually empty" (132). Here, perhaps, is the place where the reader needs to draw a line between opinion and research. Even though it is proven that personal experiences can meaningfully enhance the depth of scholarly knowledge, the reader needs to be aware that ethnicity is not a replacement for scholarship. This also brings us back to the question of who is entitled to write about Muslims and Islam.

In response to Muslim students' critiques of the colonial project, Hirsi Ali draws on positive societal transformations as well as "political and legal infrastructures" that followed the colonial venture (132). These changes, she notes, "did improve the situation of women in significant ways" (132). Given the diversity of formerly colonized Muslim societies as well as colonialist nations,

some of the so-called "academic nonsense" which Hirsi Ali earlier pointed out, might come in handy to explore the complexities that her generalizing claim elides.[82] While colonialism did bring some positive changes to colonized societies, this dimension of the colonial project cannot completely redeem it.[83] In addition, justifying the colonial project in the name of intertwined goals of modernization and emancipation of women is a dated gimmick. Many scholars have referred to the hypocrisy and discrepancy inherent in drawing on a feminist discourse by comparing the colonial discourse of emancipating the "other" woman and the treatment of women at home.[84] A famous example is Lord Cromer, the founder of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in England, who appeared as a defender of Muslim women's rights in Egypt.[85] Moreover, the impact of industrial revolution, class issues and their impact on women's status need careful

[82] Marnia Lazreg in "Decolonizing Feminism" explains the challenges and reductive tendencies of labelling and categorizing experiences of other women. See "Decolonizing Feminism" in *African Gender Studies A Reader*. Ed. Oyeronke Oyewumi. New York: Palgrave, 2005. 67-80.

[83] It would be outside of the scope of this conclusion to delve into the complexities of this issue, but it makes sense to refer to the research that, for example, shows the ways in which introducing Western social, economic, and even familial models, transformed the formerly well functioning systems of colonized societies beyond repair. One example that comes to mind is Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*. The author explains that paradoxically, the ways in which women's limited range of freedoms (already infringed on through seclusion and harem institution), were even more intensified as a result of France's presence in Morocco.

[84] See Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*

[85] Hirsi Ali needs to be reminded that the Suffrage movement in the West came to fruition quite late in colonial history and only after World War I. A quick look at any one of the numerous books written on the early phases of the feminist movement, particularly in England, that covers issues such as, the suffragists' hunger strikes, imprisonment, violation of their body integrity by force feeding them should prove to even the most unaware reader that any "feminist" intentions on the part of colonial officials outside of Britain were a complete sham. See for example, *Gender, justice and welfare: bad girls in Britain, 1900-1950* by Pamela Cox.

unpacking and are not within the scope of Hirsi Ali's argument.[86] The American audiences for whom the paperback edition of *Nomad* has included a "Reading Group Guide" need to know and understand these historical facts as well before buying into Hirsi Ali's diagnosis of Islam's problems.

Hirsi Ali asks American Muslim students:

> Whether your country of origin is Pakistan, Morocco, or Somalia, you are not living there for a reason. Please, embrace what you and your parents bought that airplane ticket to America for: fair justice and a better life, in a place where you can be safe from tyranny, keep the fruits of your labor, and have a say in the running of the country. And if you believe that there should be Sharia's law in America, please, fly back home and take a look at what it's really like. (135)

It is true that, for many people, these are the reasons why they have decided to choose America as their adopted homeland, but this is not always the case. Not all Muslims who come to the U.S. are fleeing *Sharia* law. Drawing from the anti-immigrant logic of "go back to where you belong if you don't like this" is purely unprofessional for its casting Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, and Somalia in the same box of generalizations. Hirsi Ali's glossing over the Arabs of America is significant. This absence implies that she doesn't bother to make a

---

[86] We need to keep in mind the connections between colonialism and capitalism and their sexist and racist ideological components. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in "Revisiting 'Under Western Eyes' Decolonizing Feminist Scholarship: 1986," refers to the ways in which ideologies of a corporate Western scientific paradigm impact "indigenous knowledges, which are often communally generated and shared among tribal and peasant women for domestic, local, and public use" (512).

distinction between the political and societal factors that differentiates the history of U.S. immigrants from that of their English counterparts. The waves of migration to the U. S. and England follow different trajectories as well as different and diverse demographic patterns. As Hassan elucidates, the presence of Arabs in the U.S. goes back to one hundred and fifty years ago, while migration to Britain has a more contemporary history and a direct link to colonial history. Thus, it has a different demographic map. According to Hassan, Arab migration to the U.S. falls into three major waves each of which follows certain political situations in both the sending and receiving countries (14-15). Another serious flaw in Hirsi Ali's line of reasoning is its simplistic approach to the experiences of descendants of those immigrants who might hardly accept their parents' or grandparents' lands of origin as home. Apparently, to Hirsi Ali, a Muslim's homeland is always elsewhere. Having Hirsi Ali's thesis in mind, one might also ask whether or not *Sharia* law is enforced to the same degree in all Muslim lands. Is it a uniform body of rules and regulations? One wonders if, for instance, American converts to Islam are also expected to immigrate elsewhere because of their adherence to Islam.

Hirsi Ali then moves to the controversial verses of the Qur'an to remind the reader that every problem emanates from Islam. She notes that "[p]erhaps I was not changing the minds of the self-appointed defenders of Islam, but I was opening the eyes of the majority of non-Muslim students in the audience. Often I glimpsed the horror on their faces as they realized that these veiled and bearded youngsters, with whom for years they had shared cups of coffee, books, and

classes, did not share their most basic values" (135). If she is telling the truth about the non-Muslim audience's reactions, then indeed Hirsi Ali proves her loyalty to Huntington's doctrine, spreading seeds of hostility and distrust among the non-Muslim audiences by collectively calling the young Muslim citizens of Europe "almost a fifth column" (139). Quite predictably then, she jumps from women's issues in Islam to the presence of Muslims in the West as a threat not just to the Western democratic values but to the security of every Western nation. She calls being a practicing Muslim and "an American patriot" incompatible (139).

Undoubtedly, Hirsi Ali's case exemplifies the native informant phenomenon. She unabashedly explains that the U.S. government officials had tapped her as a source of "cultural intelligence" to enable them "to distinguish traditional and harmless customs from the new practices of politicized Muslims, so they could detect where something *dangerous* to the U.S. *interests* might be brewing" (140, emphases added). In other words, her experiences play a crucial role in showing the Pentagon how "'normal Muslims'" turn into abnormal or "*politically active*" Muslims (140). Also it is always the Muslim woman who functions as the litmus test to diagnose this anomaly. Thus, Hirsi Ali instructs the Pentagon officials: "[i]f you see women flocking to the mosque to pray, perhaps you should be suspicious" (141). In the process of disseminating this "cultural intelligence," Hirsi Ali basically informs the U. S. officials that there is no clear line between ordinary Muslims and the dangerous ones since every Muslim individual has the potential to become a ticking human bomb simply by the virtue of being born into

the religion. She assures her non-Muslim addressee that the seed of radical Islam is planted in each and every Muslim person in his or her infancy since "the prehistory of radicalism is a soft brainwashing in *submission*—the real meaning of the word Islam—from birth" (142). As we saw, the strong presence of the explicit Orientalist ideology of domination and control is at the heart of this narrative and the like; the popularity of these narratives[87] and the government support they receive create an atmosphere that is far from being a level playing field for the rival Muslim narrative that tries to combat their message through literary representations.

I needed to take this long detour through Hirsi Ali's new book to show the systemic hurdles that lie in the way of Muslim creative writings in English. In an atmosphere of distrust and hostility in which loyalty to Islam becomes the reason for alienating Muslims from Western societies, and at a time when people such as Hirsi Ali join media pundits to blur the line between friend and foe in pursuit of a carefully engineered plan, it is more difficult to write sympathetically about Islam without being branded a defender or apologist. An important and yet challenging question this literature needs to constantly revisit is, what is a Muslim? Islam is not a monolith, nor is "living Islam . . . merely a spiritual practice or theological adherence, but also an intellectual and emotional engagement that cannot be escaped or elided" (Malak 152). But even when we primarily consider its theological aspects, being a Muslim does not guarantee unquestioned acceptance within the extra-territorial community of Muslim *ummah* either. Like any other

[87] They are present on college and university course syllabi on women and Islam and are discussed in many reading clubs. Hirsi Ali was a guest speaker in The Festival of Ideas at the University of Alberta in 2011.

religion, Islam has a history filled with divergent views and interpretations, and internecine atrocities. However, many people are unaware that, for example, the *Wahhabi* Islam practiced by many Muslims (but not all) in Saudi Arabia is drastically different from the *Shia* Islam practiced in Iran. A lot of times, in academic and non-academic situations, I find myself in an unpleasant position where I'm expected to be an expert on all things Muslim including, inevitably, practices in Muslim cultures with which I have no more familiarity than the people who are putting me on the expert pedestal. The burden to represent falls on many visibly Muslim people, whether or not we are willing to accept it. Therefore, one of the important tasks the fledging field of Muslim Anglophone literature has been engaged in is to reflect the heterogeneity of the world of Islam. This political need for more representation should not beleaguer aesthetics of the work, however. If the value of a literary work is limited to its use in course curricula as "merely for representation or for politically correct content," (Grobman 84) its life span will not be very long. As a model of success, Grobman cites Alice Walker's canonized, Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*, whose aesthetic power lies in its creation of a "transformative space . . . through the interweaving of diverse cultural and artistic forms and materials" (84).

Arab and Muslim Anglophone literature has been engaged in exploring identity as an inexhaustible source of energy in demonstrating the heterogeneity of Arab and Muslim people and contesting stifling stereotypes. Authors such as Etel Adnan, Diana Abu-Jaber, Joseph Geha, Khaled Mattawa, Suheir Hammad, and Naomi Shihab Nye are a few among a host of others whose works engage in

exploring cultural, national, and linguistic aspects of identity. Some authors are against identification. For example, Edmonton-based Egyptian-born poet and scholar Iman Mersal is against the diasporic forces that impose a singular identity. She opts instead for the refusal of one identity amidst a multiplicity of possible identifications (1582). For some, religious commitments mainly belong to the domain of identity and self conception. In his much cited "What is a Muslim? Fundamental commitment and Cultural Identity," Akeel Bilgrami explores the possibilities of reform within Islam through a philosophical Marxist approach towards the issue of Muslim identity. He considers the present conflict between Islam and the West in terms of a conflict within Islam and between moderate and fundamentalist Muslims, a conflict that prevents the occurrence of a much-needed secular reform within Islam by rendering Muslim identities as non-negotiable. This conflict concerns fundamental commitments to the faith while opposing "Islamic absolutists" who constantly invoke these commitments "to their own benefits" (Bilgrami 823). Bilgrami's understanding of Islam is mainly in terms of identity, which he defines as fluid and historically contextual. Muslim identity, as Bilgrami views it, plays a "vital defensive function" in achieving "a sense of self-identity" in the historically rooted and humiliating experience of colonial and post-colonial times (832). There is no doubt that cultural and political dimensions of Muslim identity are important components of Islam. However, a view that treats religion in a purely functionalist manner is somehow reductionist. Moreover, Bilgrami's definition of Muslim identity as either moderate or secularly tempered or absolutist is homogenizing and binarist. The historical context in which he

locates Muslim identity revolves only around the colonial history, which is not necessarily every Muslim's history.

The homogenizing logic behind the well- or ill-intended project of reforming Islam from within as well as New Orientalist narratives displays little sensitivity about differences between Muslims of the West[88] and those who live in Muslim societies. Nor does it seriously consider the presence of Western converts to Islam. There are also considerable particularities in cultural and ethnic components of identities in the internally variegated community of Muslims in the West.[89]Young Muslims are among the target audience of Muslim writings in English. Their particular location between the older Muslim migrant generations and the mainstream societies create challenges such as multiple belongings, "intergenerational tensions" (Chambers 2), and the desire to be responsible citizens of their countries. These are the themes a lot of Muslim Anglophone writings revisit. According to Genevieve Abdo, the Muslim youths of America demand a kind of Islam that is compatible with their lives in the West. They do not want to compromise their religious beliefs, nor do they want a replica of their parents' religion, but they believe that the universality and vitality of Islam should allow it to adapt to the demands of life in contemporary times; they cannot accept

[88] I have deliberately used the term "Muslims of the West" instead of "Muslims in the West" because I prefer Tariq Ramadan's term. "Muslims of the West" is more nuanced and better displays the state of belongings in these groups of Muslims.

[89] According to Georgetown survey, Abdo demonstrates, the number of Muslims in America is estimated to be around six million from at least eighty different countries with two-thirds of them being born outside of their host country. "34 percent of these immigrants came from South Asia, 26 percent were Arabs, and 7 percent were Africans. Meanwhile, African American Muslims, both converts and those raised as Muslims, represent about one-fifth of total Muslim American population" (64). "The survey also found that the American Muslim community was better educated, better off, and younger than the nation as a whole. Muslims tend to graduate from college at a rate more than double the national average, with half enjoying an annual household income of at least fifty thousand dollars." (64).

and practice religious teachings blindly (19). These demands by no means indicate importing Islam from other places even though, at this point, the dominant models for preaching Islam come from elsewhere. There are quite a few writers in this fledging field whose writings try to address issues particular to Muslim youth born and/or growing up in the West. Some names that come to mind include: Randa Abdel-Fattah (Australia), Zarqa Nawaz (Canada), Robin Yassin-Kassab (England), and Willow Wilson (The U.S.A.). Abdel-Fattah writes for young adults. Her novels: *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005) and *Ten things I hate about Myself* (2006) deal with the challenges of young Muslim women who want to fit in the Western cultures they identify with while remaining observant of their religious doctrines. Nawaz is a Pakistani-born Canadian director and screenplay writer. Her sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007-present) deals with the challenges involved in interactions of a small community of Muslims with the non-Muslim residents of the townspeople of Mercy in the Canadian prairies, as well as the internal conflicts within the Muslim community. Yassin-Kassab's novel *The Road to Damascus* (2008), explores the complexities of spiritual struggles in the challenges of an atheist husband and his observant Muslim wife. To Yassin-Kassab, dogmatism is not peculiar to monotheistic religions. Any kind of "ism" can create its own rigid religious system. Finally, Willow Wilson is an American convert whose memoir, *The Butterfly Mosque* (2010), engages in an important and nuanced discussion about the spiritual striving and identity challenges of Western converts to Islam and their double marginalization in both their own country of origin and in the Muslim community,

especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Wilson also writes comic books for young adults. These are just a few examples in a fast growing field. This younger generation of writers shows the necessity of "rational justification in order to feel confident about their practicing religion and explaining it to non-Muslims, and particularly, the mainstream" society (Abdo 19).

Due to the lasting and evolving legacy of Orientalist discourse, stereotyping is a major problem that Muslim Anglophone literatures must constantly address. Because stereotypes are still a powerful outlet providing "information" about Islam and Muslims, many Muslim Anglophone writings are actively involved in combating and interrogating those often inaccurate impressions. Malak views stereotyping as a product of "laziness, sloppy professionalism, or sheer indifference" on the part of many "Western so-called experts" (152). He points out that "[t]he Islam of outsiders, like that of some influential contemporary Orientalists, is different from Islam experienced and expressed by many of the Muslim writers in English" (152). Even though I agree with Malak's explanation about the underlying causes for stereotyping, I think that to decide who is "in" or "out" is more complicated than the terms "insider" and "outsider" might suggest. As this dissertation discussed, one cannot trust every insider's view as authentic knowledge. No doubt it is burdensome and even sometimes counterproductive to artistic expression for authors to have to constantly keep vigil over stereotypes, yet since every Arab, Muslim, and Middle Easterner is viewed through the lens of Orientalism, it is almost equally impossible not to do so.

Similar to the field of Arab American writing, developing "a specific critical matrix," (Salatia 26) plays a significant role in Anglophone Muslim literature's becoming an important and serious literary force in the scene of multiethnic writings. Cultural and linguistic particularities of Muslim communities give this field the advantages of benefitting from the impressive achievements of the field of Arab American literature and criticism as well as the fast flourishing counterpart in England, Arab British literary studies. This growing body of critical writing follows artistic developments in the Muslim Anglophone literary landscape.[90] In a time of stronger pronouncement and contestation of ethnic and religious belongings, the inquiry into the question of who speaks for whom and what criteria for inclusion should be considered is crucial for the field of Muslim Anglophone writings. As Gibb's compelling narrative proves, affiliation should not be taken lightly. Stephen Salatia argues that defining the criteria for inclusion merely as filliation is "counterproductive" because "[f]iliation is pre-determined, but affiliation is a challenge that, when analyzed, can bring crucial issues into debate" (26). He observes that sometimes "ethnography must be put aside, for content and philosophical reasons" (26). By the same token, contributions of scholars from non-Muslim backgrounds need recognition. As we saw, *Sweetness in the Belly* has profound implications not only for humanizing Muslim Ethiopians and refugees in London, but for portraying a compelling picture of the beauty and pain that goes above and beyond images of

[90] Some examples include Amin Malak's *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005); Geoffrey Nash's *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (2007); Claire Chamber's *British Muslim Fictions: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (2011); Wail S. Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (2011).

famine and war. Indeed Gibb's novel succinctly manages an "aesthetic shaping of political content" (Grobman 86).

Finally, one of the ways in which Muslim narratives in English can make sense to a more diverse audience is to broaden its scope of inclusion to a range of various experiences. Gibb's leap of empathy ("Telling Tales" 51) is a valuable lesson for minority literatures, too. In fact, for any fledging field of minority literatures that inhabits in between languages, cultures, and religions of their origin and those of their adoptive and adopted countries, acceptance beyond the community is a reality that cannot be taken lightly. It is important that Muslim Anglophone writings connect their experiences to both mainstream society and other marginalized communities and, thereby, call into question "rigid boundaries of identification" and emphasize instead "multiple and often overlapping categories that constitute identity, including gender, ethnic origin, religion and geography" (Andrea Shalal-Esa 24). As Grobman quotes from Alpana Sharma Knippling, "a literary text is a fixed object, but the 'literary' is culturally, politically, and socially determined" (86). Chandra Talpade Mohanty in "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles" underscores the importance of taking into consideration "the interconnectedness of the histories, experiences, and struggles of U.S. women of color, white women, and women from the Third World/South" (522) in a way that "the focus is not just on the intersections of race, class, gender, nation, and sexuality in different communities of women, but on mutuality and complication, which suggests attentiveness to the interweaving of histories of these communities" (522).

Therefore, as much as dealing with internal community issues is important, a worthwhile political message takes into consideration both "individual and collective experiences of oppression and exploitation as well as struggle and resistance" (Mohanty 522). I believe such a solidarity model can provide a better opportunity for Muslim narratives in English to be heard and appreciated on a broader spectrum. This model reflects similar patterns of oppression across racial, gendered, classed, religious, and cultural divides without forgetting its location in the power network. A worthwhile political message is inclusive; it interrogates systemic power relations and addresses struggles and resistance in relation to patriarchy, racism, and global capitalism (Mohanty 510-11). For Anglophone Muslim literature, this message starts in connection (in varying degrees) with the aesthetics, politics, and/or peoples of the world of Islam and, then, it moves beyond.

Works Cited

Abdo, Genevieve. *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11*.New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.

Abdurraqib, Samaa. "Hijab Scenes: Muslim Women, Migration, and Hijab in Immigrant Muslim Literature." *MELUS*. 31. 4 (Winter 2006): 55-70. Web.

Abouzeid, Leila. *The Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey toward Independence and Other Stories*. Trans. Barbara Parmenter. Austin: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, 1989, 1-71. Print.

Aboulela, Leila. "Moving Away from Accuracy." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*. 22 (2002): 198-207. Web.

____ *Minaret*. New York: Black Cat, 2005. Print.

____ *The Translator*. NH, USA: Heinemann, 2001. Print.

____ "Travel is Part of Faith." *Wasafiri: The Transnational Journal of International Writing*. 31 (2000): 41-43. Print.

____ *Coloured Lights*. Edinburg: Polygon, 2001. Print.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. Introduction. *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. 3-33. Web.

Aburawa, Arwa. "Veiled Threat." *Bitch Media*. Nov. 27, 2009. n.pag. Web. 20 April 2010.

Acheraiou, Amar. *Rethinking Postcolonialism: Colonialist Discourse in Modern Literatures and the Legacy of Classical Write*. Palgrave, Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Adams. Lorraine. "Beyond the Burka." *the New York Times' Sunday Book Review*, 6 January, 2008. n.pag. Web. 16 Apr. 2008.

Afzal-Khan, Fawzia Ed. *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak out.* Northampton, MA: Olive Branch P, 2005. Print.

Ahmad, Fawzia. "Beyond the *Hijab* as Lodestone." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 24.1(Spring 2008): 99-101. Web.

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992. Print.

Al Hariri-Wendel, Tanja. *Symbols of Islam*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2002. Print.

Al-Ani, Jannanne. "Acting Out." *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*. Eds. David A. Bailey and Gillane Tawadros, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT P, 2003. 88-108. Print.

Alloula, Malek. *The Colonial Harem,* trans. Myrna Godzlch and Wlad Godzich, Introduction by Barbara Harlow. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.

Alsanea, Rajaa. *Girls of Riyadh*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

Altamirano-Jiménez, Isabel. "Indigenous Women, Nationalism and Feminism." *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century.* Eds. Sherene Razack, Malinda Smith, and Sunera Tobani. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010. 111-121. Print.

Amireh, Amal, and Lisa Suhair Majaj. Eds. *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women.* Garland, 2002. Print.

Ansari, Humayun. *'The Infidel within': Muslims in Britain since 1800*. London: C Hurts & Co Ltd., 2004. Print.

Appadurai, Arjun. "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place." *Cultural Anthropology*. 3.1 (Feb. 1988): 36-49. Web.

Arat-Koc, Sedef. "New Whiteness(es), beyond the Colour Line? Assessing the Contradictions and Complexities of 'Whiteness' in the (geo)political Economy of Capitalist Globalism." *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century*. Eds. Sherene Razack, Malinda Smith, and Sunera Thobani. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2010. 147-68. Print.

Arkoun, Mohammed. "Artistic Creativity in Islamic Contexts." *The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam's Impact on Contemporary Literature*. Ed. John C. Hawley. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 59-70. Print.

Ashcroft, Bill and Pal Ahluwalia. *Edward Said*. 2nd ed. Routledge Critical Thinkers. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Bayoumi, Moustafa. "The God That Failed: The Neo-Orientalism of Today's Muslim Commentators." *Islamophobia/Islaophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*. Ed. Andrew Shryock. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010. 79-93. Print.

Ben –Yoseph, Miriam. "Longing for Home: Displacement, Memory, and Identity." *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*. 30.1/2 (2005):117-25.Web.

Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, Lamia. *The Production of Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2005. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. "Liberalism's Sacred Cow." *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Ed. Susan Moller Okin, et al. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1999. 79-85. Print.

____ *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Bigo, Didier. "From Foreigners to 'Abnormal Aliens': How the Faces of Enemy Have Changed following September 11." International Migration and Security: Opportunities and Challenges. Ed. Elspeth Guild. New York: Routledge, 2005. 64-82. Print.

Bullock, Katherine. *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes*. Herndon VA: III T P, 2003. Print.

Chambers, Claire. "An Interview with Leila Aboulela."*Contemporary Women's Writing*. (2009):86-102. Web.

Classen, Constance and David Howes. "The Museum as Sensescapes: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts*." Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture.* Eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, Ruth B. Phillips. Oxford, New York: Berge, 2006. 199-222. Print.

Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. Print.

Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

____ "Religion, Gender, and the Muslimwoman." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 24.1, 2008: 91-106. Web.

Cooper, Brenda. "Look Who's Talking? Multiple Worlds, Migration and Translation in Leila Apulela's *The Translator*." *The Translator*. 12.2 (2006): 323-44. Print.

Cox, Pamela. *Gender, justice and welfare: bad girls in Britain, 1900-1950*. New York: Palgrave, 2003. Print.

Crets, Douglas. Rev. of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. *Asian Review of Books on the Web*. 19 Nov. 2003. N. pag. Web. 25 Feb. 2008. Web.

Dabashi, Hamid. "Lolita and Beyond." *Z.Net*. Aug. 2006. n.pag. Web. 18 June 2008.

____ "Native informers and the making of the American Empire." *Al Ahram*. 1 - 7 June 2006. Web. 21 Apr. 2008.

____ *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*. Transaction Publishers, 2009. Print.

Davis, Rochelle. "Language and Loss, or How to Bark Like a Dog and Other Lessons from al-Jahiz." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*. 13.1 Spring (2004):97-112. Print.

de Leeuw, Marc and Sonja van Wichelen. "PLEASE, GO WAKE UP!" Submission, Hirsi Ali, and the "War on Terror in the Netherlands." *Feminist Media Studies*. 5. 3 (2005): 325- 40. Web.

Dutton,Yasin. "Conversion to Islam: the Qur'anic Paradigm." *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*. Eds. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant. London: Cassell, 1999, 151-65. Print.

Eissa, Saleh. "Interview with Leila Aboulela." *The I Witness*. July 2005. n.pag. Web. 6 Nov. 2006.

El-Guindi, Fadwa. "Veiling Resistance." *Fashion Theory*. 3.1 (1999): 51-80. Web.

Fanon, Frantz. *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon chevalier. New York: Grove P, 1965. Print.

Fardon, Richard. "Localizing Strategies: The Regionalization of Ethnographic Accounts." *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*. Ed. Richard Fardon. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P. 1990, 1-37. Print.

Ghazoul, Ferial. "Halal Fiction."*Al-Ahram Weekly Online*. 542 (12 - 18 July 2001).Web. 17 Jan. 2006.

Gibb, Camilla and Celia Rothenberg. "Believing Women: Harari and Palestinian Women at Home and in the Canadian Diaspora." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. 20. 2 (2000): 243- 59. Web.

____ "Negotiating Social and Spiritual Worlds: The Gender of Sanctity in a Muslim City in Africa." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*. 16. 2 (Fall, 2000): 25-42. Web.

____ "Telling Tales out of School, A Research in Society Lecture Delivered at the 2007 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences." *English Studies in Canada*. 32.2-3(2006): 39-54. Print.

____ *Sweetness in the Belly*. Anchor Canada, 2006. Print.

Gikandi, Simon. *Maps of Englishness: Writing identity in The Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. Print.

Gilliat-Ray Sophie. "Rediscovering Islam: A Muslim Journey of Faith." *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*. Eds. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant. London: Cassel l, 1999, 315-32. Print.

Grace, Daphne. *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*. London: Pluto P, 2004. Print.

Grobman, Laurie. "The *Value* and *Valuable* Work of Multi-ethnic Literature." *MELUS*. 29.3/4 (2004): 81-93. Web.

Guth, Stephen. "Appropriating, or Secretly Undermining, the Secular Literary Heritage? Distant Echoes of Mawsim al-Hijra in a Muslim Writer's Novel: Leila Aboulela, *The Translator*." *Intertextuality in Modern Arabic Literature since 1967*. Eds. Luc Deheuvels, Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, Paul Starkey. Durham: Durham University, 2006, 65-82. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. J. Rutherford. New York: State U of New York P, 1990, 222-37. Web. 23 Feb. 2010.

____ "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." *Culture, Globalization, and the World System.* Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.41-69. Print.

____ "The Local and The Global: Globalization and Ethnicity." *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Ed. Anthony D. King. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1997, 19-39. Print.

Harding, Susan. "Representing Fundamentalism: the Problem of Repugnant Cultural Other." *Social Research*. 58.2 (1991): 373-93. Print.

Harvey, John. "Showing and Hiding: Equivocation in the Relations of Body and Dress." *Fashion Theory*. 11.1(2007): 65–94. Web.

Hassan, Wail. S. *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011. Print.

____ "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Spring/Summer (2008): 298-319. Web.

Hassen, Mohammed. "*Sweetness in the Belly*." *The Journal of Oromo Studies*. 13.1&2 (2006): 176-82. Print.

Helie, Anisa. "Between 'Becoming M'tourni and Going Native': Gender and Settler Society in Algeria." *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*. Eds. Davia Stasilulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1995. 263-90. Print.

Hewett, Heather**.** "'Bad' Books Hidden under the Veil of Revolution: Iranian women resist oppression by reading forbidden novels." Rev. of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. *The Christian Science Monitor*. 23rd Mar. 2003. n.pag. Web. 25 Feb. 2008.

Hirsi Ali, Ayaan. *Infidel*. New York: Free P, 2007. Print.

____ *Nomad*. New York: First Free P, 2010. Print.

Honig, Bonnie. "My Culture Made me Do it." *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Ed. Susan Moller Okin, et al. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1999. 35-41. Print.

Howes, David. "The Museum as Sensescapes: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts." *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums And Material Culture*. Eds. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, Ruth Bliss Phillips. New York: Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, 2006.199-222. Print.

Huggan, Graham. *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Ingersol, G. Earl. "Ending Elsewhere: Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel*. N.J. Cranbury: Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp., 2007, 178-89. Print.

Johnson, Will. *The Spiritual Practices of Rumi: Radical Techniques for Beholding the Divine*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2nd edition, 2007. Print.

Kahf, Mohja. *E-mails from Scheherazade*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003. Print.

____ *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. New York: Carrol and Graf Publishers, 2006. Print.

____ "Packaging Huda: Sharawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment." *Going Global: the Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*. Eds. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj. New York: Garland Publishing, 2000. 148-73. Print.

____ *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*. Austin: U of Texas P: 1999. Print.

Kandiyoti, Deniz. "Identity and Its discontents: Women and the Nation." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. 20.3 (1991): 428-43. Print.

Karam, Azza. "Muslim Feminists in Western Academia: Questions of Power, Matters of Necessity." *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim Attitudes towards Modernity and Identity*. Ed. Johan Meuleman. London: Routledge Ctuzon, 2002. Print.

Kashoggi, Soheir *Mosaic*. New York: Tom Doherty, 2003. Print.

Katataney, Ethar. "Princess Hijab." *Muslim Media Watch*. Dec.11, 2008. Web. 21 Apr. 2010.

Keshavarz, Fatemeh. Keshavarz, Fatemeh. "Jasmine and Stars." *Z Net*. June 2007. Web. 6 June 2008.

____ *Jasmine and Stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007. Print.

Khan, Shahnaz. *Aversion and Desire: Negotiating Muslim Female Identity in the Diaspora*. Toronto: Women's P, 2002. Print.

Kirkwood, Cort R. "Sarkozi Joins Cameron, Merkel Condemns Multiculturalism." *The New American*. Monday 14 Feb. 2011. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.

Kuper, Adam. *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account*. 5th ed. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. Norton, 1981. Print.

Lalami, Leila. "The Missionary Position." *The Nation*. June 19, 2006. Web. 6 July 2008.

Lazreg, Marnia. "Decolonizing Feminism." *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. Ed. Oyeronke Oyewumi. New York: Palgrave, 2005, 67-80. Print.

Lewis, David, Dennis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock. "The Fiction of Development: Literary Representation as a Source of Authoritative Knowledge." World Bank- Development Research Group; Harvard University-Kennedy School of Government, January 21, 2008. 1-10. Web.

Lewis, Reina. "Veils and Sales: Muslims and the Spaces of Postcolonial Fashion Retail." *Fashion Theory*.11.4 (2007): 423-42. Web.

____ *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*. New York. Routledge. 1996. Print.

Lindisfarne, Nancy. "Starting from Below: Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now." *Critique of Anthropology*. 22.4 (2002): 403–423. Print.

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*. Eds. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins.7th ed. New York: Wadsworth. 505-11. Print.

Mahmood, Saba. "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture*. 18.2 (2006): 323-47. Web.

Majid, Anouar. *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. Print.

Malak, Amin. *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. Albany: State University of New York P, 2005. Print.

Mamdani, Mahmood. "Good Muslims, Bad Muslims: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *Critical Views of September Eleven: Analyses from Around the World*. Ed. Eric Hersberg and Kevin W. More. New York: New P, 2002, 44-60. Print.

Mazrui, Ali. *Islam between Globalization and Counterterrorism*. New Jersey: Africa World P, 2006. Print.

McClintock, Ann. *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1997. Print.

Mcdonalds, Myra. "Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of Image and Voice in Media Representations." *Feminist Media Studies*. 6.1 (2006): 7-23. Web.

McGregor, Hannah. "Not Quite Ethiopian, But Not At All English": Ethnography, Hybridity, and Diaspora in Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*." *English Studies in Canada*. 35.5 (2009): 95-115. Web.

Mernissi, Fatima. *Dreams of Trespass*: *Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Addison-Wesley, 1994. Print.

____ *Scheherzade Goes West: Different Worlds, Different Harems*. New York: Washington Square P, 2001. Print.

____ *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland. New York: Perseus Books Publishing, 1991. Print.

Mersal, Iman. "Eliminating Diasporic Identities." *PMLA*. 123.5 (2008): 1581-89. Web.

Mitchell, William J. Thomas. "Representation." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. 2nd ed. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995. 11-22. Print.

Moallem, Minoo. "Am I a Muslim Woman: Nationalist Reactions and Postcolonial Transgressions. Afzal-Khan, Fawzia Ed. *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak out.* Northampton, MA: Olive Branch P, 2005, 51-6. Print.

____ *Between the Warrior Brother and the Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran.* California: U of California P, 2005. Print.

____ "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion.* 24.1, 2008: 106-10. Web.

Modood, Tariq. *Multicultural politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.

Moghadam, Valentine. "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: towards a Resolution of a Debate." *Gender, Politics, and Islam.* Eds. Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen, and Judith A. Howard. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002. 15-53. Print.

Mohamed, Hamdi S. "Resistance Strategies: Somali Women's Struggles to Reconstruct their Lives in Canada." *Canadian Woman Studies*. 19.3 (Fall 1999): 52-7. Web.

Mohanram, Radhika and Gita Rajan Eds. *English Postcoloniality: Literatures from Around the World*. Westport: Greenwood P, 1996. Web.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

____ "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse." *Boundary 2*. 12.3 & 13.1 (Spring-Autumn 1984): 333-358. Web.

____ "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles." *Signs*. 28.2 (Winter 2003): 499-535. Web.

Moller Okin, Susan. "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Ed. Susan Moller Okin, et al. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1999. 7-27. Print.

Nader, Laura. "Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women." *Cultural Dynamics*. 2.3 (1989): 323-55. Web.

Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. New York: Random, 2003. Print.

Naghibi, Nima. "*Bad feminist or Bad-Hejabi?* Moving Outside the *Hejab* Debate." *Interventions*. 1.4 (1999): 555-71. Print.

____ *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran. Minneapolis*: U of Minnesota P. 2007. Print.

Nandy, Ashis. “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance.” *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*. London: C. Hurts & Company, 2002, 61-88. Print.

Nash, Geoffrey. “Re-siting Religion and Creating Feminised Space in the Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela.” *Wasafiri: The Transnational Journal of International Writing*. 35 (2002): 28-31. New York: Rutledge, 2003. Print.

New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. Trans. New World Bible Translation Committee. New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, INC.1984. Print.

Osman, Hibaaq I. “Somalia: Will Reconstruction Threaten Women's Progress?” *Ms Magazine* 3.5 (March/April 1993): 12-13. Web.

Ostrow, Sonja. “Literature as Freedom: Seven Women Read through a Revolution.” *The Yale Review of Books*. 7.2 (Spring 2003). n.pag. Web. 7 Feb. 2008.

Paidar, Parvin. *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

Philips, Mike. “Faith Healing.” Rev. of *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela. *The Guardian* 11 July 2005. Web. 17 Jan. 2006.

Pieprzak, Katarzyna. “Whose Patrimony is it Anyway? The Quarrel between Ali Baba’s Cave and the National Museum of Morocco.” *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*. 49 (2001). 155-75. Print.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transmigration.* New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.

The Qur'an. Trans. Muhamed Asad. *Quranix: anything and everything Quranic*. Web. 28 Nov. 2009.

Rabine, Leslie. "Romance in the Age of Electronics: Harlequin Enterprises." *Feminisms: an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Robyn R. Warhol, Diane Price Herndl. Rutgers UP, 1997. 976-91. Print.

Radhakrishnan, Rajagopolan. "Is the Ethnic Authentic?" *Between Identity and Location: The Cultural Politics of Theory.* Hyderabad: Orient, Longman, 2007. Print.

Radway, Janice. "The Readers and their Romances." *Feminisms: an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Robyn R. Warhol, Diane Price Herndl. Rutgers UP, 1997. 574-609. Print.

Rahimieh, Nasrin. *Oriental Responses to the West: Comparative Essays in Select Writers from the Muslim World*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990, 37-55. Print.

Ramadan, Tariq. *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.

Rastegar, Mitra. "Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and 'Liberating' Iranian Women." *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 34: 1 & 2 Spring/Summer (2006): 108-128. Web.

Rice, Laura, Sayer. "Veiled Threats: Malek Alloula's *Colonial Harem*." *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, 1986 Fall-1987 Winter; 15 (1-2): 351-63. Web.

Roald, Ann Sofie. *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*. London: Rutledge, 2001. Print.

Rosenblum, Karen and Toni-Michelle Travis. "Constructing Categories of Difference." *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Selected Readings*. Eds. Joseph F. Healey and Eileen O'Brein. 2nd ed. Sage Publications, 2007. 35-47. Print.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage, 1994. Print.

____ *Orientalism* New York: Random House, 1978. Print.

_____ "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.173-86. Print.

____ *The World, the Text, the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. Print.

Salatia, Steven. "Split Vision: Arab-American Literary Criticism." *Aljadid*.6.32 (2000):26-27. Print.

Saud Alfaisal, *Haifa. Religious Discourse in Postcolonial Studies: Magical Realism in Hombres De Maiz and Bandarshah*. New York: Edwin Mellen P, 2006. Print.

Schwenger, Peter. "Red Cannas, Sardine Cans, and the Gaze of the Object." *Mosaic*. 35 (2002): 55- 71. Print.

Shalal-Esa, Andrea. "Arab-American Writers Identify with Communities of Color." *Aljadid*.9.42-43 (2003): 24-26. Print.

Shioss, Carol. "Algeria, Conquered by Postcard." Rev, of *The Colonial* Harem by Malek Alloula New York. *Times Book Review* 18 January 1987 Web. 1st Nov. 2011. Web.

Sizemore, Christine. "The Return to Hijab in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pick-Up* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret.*" *Journal of Commonwealth & Postcolonial Studies*. 15.2 (Sep. 2008): 70-84. Web.

Slemon, Stephen. "The Scramble for Post-Colonialism." *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*. Eds. Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson.New York: Routledge, 1994. 15-33. Print.

Smart, B. "The Politics of Truth and the Problems of Hegemony," David Couzenshoy Ed. *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 157-74. Print.

Smyth, Brendan. "To Love the Orientalist: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*." *Conference Proceedings from the 2nd annual MEAS Undergraduate/Graduate Conference: Engaging with Africa and the Middle East through Research January 26.* Edmonton: University of Alberta, 2007. Web.10 May 2009.

Sofie Roald, Ann. *Women in Islam: The Western European Experience*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Soubeille, Tatiana. "Princess Hijab: 'A naughty girl with a bad habit.'" *Kaukaus.* March 8, 2009. n.pag. Web. 11 Dec. 2009.

Spivak, Gayatri Chacravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.

____ "French Feminism in an International Frame." *Yale French Studies. Feminist Readings: French Texts/American Contexts*. 62 (1981): 154-84. Web.

____ "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*. 12.1 (Autumn, 1985): 243-261.

Salatia, Steven. *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2007. Print.

Stocking, George W. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free P, 1987.

Stotesbury, John A. "Genre and Islam in Recent Anglophone Romantic Fiction." Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben Eds. *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film.* Amesterdam: Rodopi, 2004, 69-82. Print.

____ "Muslim Romance in Diaspora: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and the Ethics of Reading in the West". Message to Katayoun Toossi. 23 Apr. 2009. E-mail

Suhair Majaj, Lisa. "Supplies of Grace': The Poetry of Mohja Kahf." *ArteNews*. September 2006. n.pag.Web. 17 Feb. 2010

Victoria. "Veiling Emotion." *Eve's Alexandra*. N.P., May 2012. n.pag. Web. 15 Nov. 2006.

Viswanathan, Guari. *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.

Wallach. Scott, Joanne. *The politics of the Veil*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2007. Print.

White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978. Print.

Wilson-Tagoe, Nana. "Re-Thinking Nation and Narrative in a Global Era: Recent African Writing." *African Literature Today*. 25 (2006), 94-108. Print.

Woodward, Mark. "Modernity and Disenchantment of life." *Islam in the Era of Globalization: Muslim attitudes towards Modernity and Identity*. Ed. Meuleman, Johan. London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002. 11-143. Print.

Yazbeck Haddad, Yvonne and Jane Idleman Smith. Eds. *Muslim Communities in North America*. Albany: State University of New York P, 1994. Print.

Yeğenoğlu, Mayda. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Zebiri, Kate. *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008. Print.

Zˇizˇek, Slavoj. "Tolerance as an Ideological Category." *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Summer 2008): 660-82. Web.

____ "The Spectre of Ideology." *The Žižek Reader*. Edmond and Elizabeth Wright. London: Blackwell. 55-86. Print.