

Living between two cultures: Muslim Women's Identity in Soueif's "In the Eye of the Sun" & "Janmohamed's Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One"



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ABSTRACT: This study aimed at negotiating the paradoxical representation of Muslim women identity in two literary text; Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed memoir *Love in a Headscarf* (2009) in a multicultural British society. These two texts show and explore a third space, reclaiming Muslim identity reconciled with Britishness. The two texts run against Orientalist perspective that respectively represent Muslim women as concubines, harem and other apparatuses of female subjugation and thus gives Muslim women a demeaning identity. Both authors refuse to fit into the conventional categories and stereotypes of subservient Muslim women portrayed by Orientalists. Moreover, they attempt to make sense of being British and Muslim and dispel the assumed irreconcilability between Islam and many key traditional British values. Instead of rejecting their Muslim identity, they reconcile it with Britishness. They belong to a British-based growing group of writers who capture the various moments of their life in Britain as Muslims as well as British citizens. The two texts undermined the dominant narratives of Muslim women as silent victims by means of representations of love, sex, romance in multicultural Britain.

KEYWORDS: hybridity; Islam; liminality; third space; veil

1. INTRODUCTION

Ahdaf Soueif and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed create possibilities for articulations of Muslim femininity that move beyond the binary. Hybridity is a product of the post-colonial era where 'the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure' producing a new culture (Bhaba, 2005, p.71). A comparative study of both texts will expose how the two authors deal with the effects of dynamic upbringing and identity in their fictional writings. This analysis will be preceded by a discussion of the existing body of academic theories on the topic of hybridity in postcolonial studies. The Third Space is an in-between state which is characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence (Bolatagici, 2004, p.78), where the traditional binaries of culture 'enter, encounter and transform each other' (Papastergiadis, 1997 cited in Werbner and Modood, 1997, p.258). Soueif's and Janmohamed's protagonists experience a sense of in betweenness or liminality. Liminality is successfully negotiated a hybrid identity of Eastern and Western cultures.

2. DISCUSSION

Ahdaf Soueif's fiction shows that no one can describe with certainty who s/he is, as Edward Said (1994) says, "No one today is purely one thing" (p. 407), In her fictional writings, on the other hand, hybridity is consolidated as a theme and expressed either peacefully as the condition of bilingual/bicultural upbringing. Geoffrey Nash (2009) states that education creates isolation and exile. Amin Malak (2005) describes Soueif's fiction as a hybrid of numerous forms, East and West, urban and rural, and classical and modern (p. 127). In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif explores many polemical issues she often discusses in her writings such as nationalism, identarian Islam, gender politics and female sexuality. The book is a dense epic-length novel that expands into eight hundred pages depicting the emotional, sexual and intellectual journey of Asya in Egypt and England. Asya is portrayed as a contemporary hybrid; an Arabic speaking woman who speaks English as though "she'd 'just come from Oxford'" (Soueif, 1999, p. 97). Asya is obsessively concerned with her sexuality and intellectual identity throughout the novel.

3. NARRATION

When Saif and Asya meet at the library steps, Saif calls Asya by her first name, and he will never call her by her name after that. Asya narrates the same scene and the voice of Saif limits her sentences and subverts the normal rules of narrative: "he was proud of his perfect feet and his smooth, muscled, brown back. 'So what the hell did you feel when you touched the bastard'" (Soueif, 1999, p. 99). Boccardi (2004) describes their encounter as "epidermic" (p. 316) and it is seen that the multiplicity of perspectives

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decentres the consciousness in the novel when the reader learns in the opening that Asya will betray Saif. Booth (1994) emphasises that the first-person musings of Saif "cut across our intimate knowledge of Asya" (p. 204). As a correlative way of interpreting, Asya's narrative stands as a testimony and after-narrative because it is clear that she knows Saif as if they met long ago.

She draws flowcharts about her emotions and rejects when Saif wants her to describe her betrayal in a flowchart. She theoretically and coldly defines the components of life: "Love: a quarterly visit to a husband who treats her like a pet; to be indulged and given treats as long as she behaves – a husband who turns his back on her every night" (Soueif, 1999, p. 353). She criticizes Saif because he likes naming feelings. She likes exams because they are defined and finite and when she writes her dissertation, only one category does not trouble her: time. The novel's conclusion reasserts her contradictions and does not solve them because ambivalence is at the center of the novel, and hybridity and alterity keep this center at the center.

Like Dorothea, Asya constructs her identity as a response to her husband and her increasing understanding of her marriage puts her in a confining cul-de-sac. Gerald wants her to excise herself completely and to survive, as a subaltern female, on the negativity of annihilation. He wants her to be his self-reflection. Post-colonial voice stems from the web of filaments that maintain her connection to Egypt, and she recognizes that she cannot reconcile either with England or Egypt, but with her hybridity. The ending shows that she can do this, as Edward Said (2012) says

Soueif does not in the end fall for the East versus West, or Arab versus European, formulas. Instead, she works them out patiently, and then goes with Asya, who is neither fully one thing nor another, at least so far as ideologies of that sort are concerned (p. 410).

3.1. A novel of self-discovery in the midst of clashing cultures. her self-discovery is filled with self-doubt, self-contradiction and sometimes self-destruction

This section attempts to explore and evaluate the hybridity in Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* and the ways in which Soueif interweaves the Eastern (Arabic-Islamic) tradition with the Western tradition(s). Soueif's text rests on ambivalence and hybridity. Indeed, living in the in-between spaces and between two different worlds brings the person a merged identity and full of ambivalence and contradictory. Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) voices intercultural love and marriage of Asya al-Ulama. Asya has been trapped between two cultures. Yet, characters' hybrid identities and the situation of being torn between two identities, two spaces and cultures led to a traumatic and painful experience along with a psychological disturbance. Asya, harbors the values of two different cultures; Egyptian and British cultures but, unlike, Shelina, cannot integrate them into a coherent whole. She is a young Egyptian woman who grows up in an upper-middle-class family in Cairo and travels to England to do her Ph.D. Asya's family is 'secular' (Ahmed, 1993). Asya's father is an image of an educated and open-minded man, but at the same time, he is "patriarch". Asya's mother is successful and empowered woman, but behind the closed doors she is submissive wife. Asya inherits from her mother "a whole freer way of life and thought" (Soueif, 1999, pp. 458-459).

The novel details Asya's relationship with her husband Saif Madi and her English lover Gerald Stone. Saif refuses to consummate their sexual desires before marriage despite Asya's insistent requests, because they 'are not married.' (190). The unconsummated relationship led to Asya's loneliness which has been intensified by her husband indifferent attitude. In addition to Asya's suffering is her unexpected pregnancy "You are pregnant. You're a married woman and you are pregnant. (261). Asya's reaction reflects her desire not to have a child now since things are not going well with Saif as they hardly sleep with each other and, at the same time, she doesn't want to live on pretence that she is the happily perfect wife when she is not (444). In an act of resistance of her painful situation, we find Asya falls in love with Mario and Umberto. (391). After thinking of more than one man other than her husband, she has met Gerald Stone, an English man, with whom she has a complicated affair; an affair of which she doesn't feel guilty (550). In spite of her failed marriage with Saif and a disastrous affair with Gerald, Asya has eventually reached her own individuality (Valassapoulos, 2008, p. 126). She eventually completes her doctorate and then returns to Egypt. When she goes back to Egypt and starts teaching at the university, she ridicules the way the veiled girls look by describing them as 'those who wear those horrible long pastel-coloured gowns, the gloves and the angled veil; they've screened themselves off entirely, held on to their privacy' (Soueif 2000, p. 753). Asya seems to be in binary opposition to the veiled student and all 'the others who thought like her', representation of either a pure, veiled East or a degenerate West (Chakravorty, 2007, p. 146)

To conclude, Asya harbors the values of two different cultures and cannot integrate them into a coherent whole. Asya behaves conservatively in Egypt and keeps the western values in England. She swings between the values of the Egyptian culture of chastity and western culture of sexual freedom. In the following section I shall discuss Love in a Headscarf's liminality in order to articulate concerns similar or rather dissimilar to those found in Soueif's *In the Eye of The Sun*.

3.2. Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One

Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf* can be regarded as a response to a long tradition of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist literatures. Her literary revolution constitutes a post-colonial intervention and a departure from the usual *conflict between the colonizers and the once-colonized*, as it includes a cultural battle "between those within the same culture, where one adopts a colonial perspective

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toward those who challenge them". This new literary tradition seeks fulfilment through Islam which is not confined to any geographical boundary. *Love in a Headscarf* is a memoir, a Bildungsroman and, and chick lit novel. Evaluating Muslim matrimonial sites such as 'Buxom Aunties' and other fixers, who are depicted in *Love in a Headscarf* (2009: 46) as setting up meetings with potential husbands. Without straying too far from our primary focus, it should also be observed that chick lit in general and Janmohamed's work in particular often reinforce traditional gender binaries. She reframes British Muslim female sexuality as happy, healthy and ordinary. The Internet is regarded as a convenient and efficient space in which to find a fellow Muslim life partner without having to adjust to the risky world of "'Western-style' dating' (2016: 92). She suggests, 'discussions that were already happening about Islam and sexuality, pushing for greater openness and understanding' (2016: 189). She then moves swiftly on to repeat a rather conservative point made in 'What Muslim Women Really Want in the Bedroom' – namely, that the modern world's 'highly sexualized' atmosphere is difficult and fraught for 'those Muslims who want to live a chaste life – especially in environments where virginity is often seen as freakish' (2016: 189; see also 2013: n.p.).

Janmohamed refers religion to the private sphere. Janmohamed integrates an experience of speed dating into *Love in a Headscarf* by depicting the 'paired' couples at the event dissolving into the multitudes surrounding the sacred Kaaba at Mecca on her subsequent Hajj pilgrimage. Watching the respectful crowd, her narrator positions love as a communitarian:

"I had been searching to find a partner to love and had been trying to learn about Divine love. In front of me now I realized that there was one more kind of love that was essential: the love for other human beings" (2009: 246).

To conclude, *Love in a Headscarf* can be regarded as one of the foundational pieces of global "Islamic literature" that articulate the life stories of Muslim women who "are neither victims nor escapees of Islam but willingly committed to their faith", they rather gain activity from Islam and hence do not need any Western rescue mission to counteract patriarchy. Widely regarded as Islamic feminists, Janmohamed invents and as well as initiates new forms of conversations across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable gaps. Importantly and Janmohamed indirectly and subtly fictionalize the concept of the so-called dar al-Islam (literally abode of Islam) as one not confined to any territorial limits. It is rather a question of security and insecurity and the freedom for Muslims to practise their religion. In her respect, the question—not generally asked in reference to other religious groups—whether British Muslims are British first or Muslim first is irrelevant. If both Islam and Britishness were territorial entities, then Muslims would have to make a choice. But Islam crosses spatiotemporal boundaries and has the potential to feel at home in various parts of the world; hence, it cannot be equated with spatial differentiation or geographical space. By presenting Muslim women's identity in such an open and enabling way, Janmohamed writes back to multiple discourses that project Islam and Muslim women in a narrow and essentialist way. The protagonist in Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf* is in continuous conflict not necessarily with the West, her difficulty is not defined in geographical terms and hence she does not harbor any hatred to the host society which enables her Muslim identity.

4. CONCLUSION

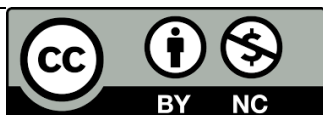
Soueif's and Janmohamed's personalities appear to have been influenced by their parents as well as western education. They belong to a British- group of writers who quench their thirst for alternative narratives and capture the various moments of their life in Britain as Muslims. *Love in a Headscarf* investigated the failure of secularism and re-emergence of Islam. Her image of Islam and Muslims is and more authentic Muslim voice. Janmohamed adopts Islam as her first identity in metropolitan London, to be inside both of them, unlike some of the western writers who look at Islam from outside, and unlike, too, those Muslim writers who look at the West from the outside. She builds into her writing a constructive spirit which attempts to facilitate better understanding of each other's cultures. By contrast Soueif's is in harmony with the immigrants gradually absorb the values and norms which predominate in their host society. Unlike, Soueif, Janmohamed adjusts the conventions by reorganizing them within an Islamic framework, where the text departs from sexual relations. Janmohamed's and Soueif's enact alternatives to the perceived binary between Islam and the liberal values. Soueif's protagonist Asya suffers in the host society of London, but it is also the place where she re-discovers herself. Equally, Janmohamed's protagonist does not harbour any hatred to the host society which enables her Muslim identity. D'Alessandro (2011) emphasizes that Soueif's female characters cannot manage to see themselves as "integrated subjects" (p. 44)

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