



Faith across Borders: A Study in Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings out the critical situations of the Muslim community in America after the destruction of September 11, 2001. It shows the identity, culture, faith, hijab and assimilation. The author Shaila Abdullah highlights the protagonist Arissa Illahi, a Pakistani Muslim woman who loses her husband Faizan in the destruction of the twin towers on September 11, 2001 and who faces an identity crisis, culture and faith. She confronts personal tragedy, cultural alienation and a redefinition of her identity in an atmosphere of prejudice. At the same time, her eventual removal of the hijab does not signify a complete rejection of her cultural identity. Rather, it represents a complex negotiation between faith, memory, motherhood, survival, and belonging. At last, she assimilates to the culture of America by concealing her own culture in order to take care of her son who suffers from various ailments.

Keywords: Identity, Culture, Faith, Hijab, Assimilation and Resilience

Introduction

Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* signifies the consequences of September 11, 2001. The novel focuses on the personal and cultural significance of the attacks and examines how Muslim immigrants negotiate their identities in a society increasingly influenced by fear. This incident changes the livelihood of Muslims in America and also forces them to accept their ethno-religious identity. Based on the host society's reactions, they evaluate their own traditions and cultures. This makes the Pakistani Muslim woman writer bring significant changes to her fiction. While comparing the literary works of Pakistani diasporic writers, the writers who write about the aftermath of September 11, 2001 represent numerous ethnic and cultural changes.

South Asian women writers also explore the position of women from various corners and attitudes in their writings from the view of within or without diasporic locations. Lisa Lau in *Making the Difference* states that

diasporic women writers "... are different, very different, from their Western and South Asian counterparts" (241). These writers prefer to bring out the position of women in their culture, their uniqueness in the host country, and the difference in following their culture. South Asian diasporic women writers narrate the distance between the cultures of East and West.

Scholars have scrutinized different aspects of *Saffron Dreams*. Chandio and Sangi read the novel in relation to Muslim female agency and argue that Muslim women negotiate their agency within the "third space" of the host country. Ghasemi, Dashtpeyma, and Alavi Shooshtari examine trauma and recovery in the novel and emphasize the relationship between Arissa's traumatic experiences and the formation of her identity. Atar, in her study of Muslim women's post-9/11 novels, considers *Saffron Dreams* in relation to Muslim masculinities and identifies Faizan as an innocent Muslim victim of the attacks. These studies establish the significance of agency, trauma, and



Muslim identity in Abdullah's novel. This reading adds to the existing symbolism of the hijab, tracing Arissa's larger movement from traumatic victimhood towards a negotiated form of identity.

Identity of Muslim American Women

The September 11, 2001 attacks produced profound social and political changes in the United States. For Muslim communities, the aftermath included heightened suspicion, categorization, discrimination, and public scrutiny. Abdullah represents these effects through Arissa's personal experience. Her Pakistani Muslim identity becomes increasingly visible in a society in which Muslim appearance and cultural practices are interpreted through the framework of terrorism. Arissa, as a Pakistani immigrant, follows the cultural practices associated with her family and marriage. Her life changes dramatically after Faizan's death. The novel presents her as a woman inhabiting several identities simultaneously: widow, mother, Pakistani immigrant, Muslim woman, and American resident.

Abdullah therefore does not portray identity as fixed. Instead, identity is frequently reshaped by social circumstances. Foucault's concept of "dividing practices" is useful in understanding this process. Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato, and Jen Webb explain that Foucault understood the process through which people are distinguished on the basis of perceived normality. In the novel, Muslim identity is subjected to precisely such a process. Names, appearances, religious practices, and forms of dress become signs through which individuals are categorized. Abdullah uses Arissa's experience to demonstrate how a personal religious practice can become a public marker through which the individual is treated as an "Other".

Hijab as Cultural Identity

Abdullah indicates in the novel the cultural affliction in the life of Arissa. Being a Pakistani immigrant, she follows her culture according to the wish of her husband. In an interview with *Readers View*, Abdullah says that the construct of cultural identification extends the individual's sense of belonging with their culture. Abdullah provides the inter-cultural and intra-cultural affiliations and affinities through the character in the novel. She highlights how the Pakistani Muslim American experience differs from other South Asian

immigrant experiences in America. Being Muslim, she also becomes emblematic of another cultural and religious identity in America. The author brings forth Muslim women's struggles with their personal issues in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

After the calamity of the twin towers in the United States, Muslims become a target for Americans. The critics Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato and Jen Webb reiterate the words of Foucault in their work *Understanding Foucault*. According to Foucault, the world is subject to dividing practices, a "... process of distinguishing people on the basis of their perceived normality" (60). The incident constricts the sense of normalcy and heightens tension. The names, features, and attire of Arabs or Muslims are scrutinized. The problem shifts the situation from normal to subjective.

Arissa, being a Pakistani Muslim woman, experiences significant changes in her life. In the aftermath of September 11, the number of Muslim women who wear the hijab as a marker of identity increases. Some immigrant Muslims, before the terrorist attack, had assimilated into American culture. The Muslim women who once thought of the hijab as an old custom now undertake it to assert their identity. Katherine Bullock in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* says that "the hijab had become an integral part of revolutionary and anti-colonial struggle, illustrated most vividly in Algeria in the 1950s and Iran in the 1970s" (87). The aftermath of September 11, 2001 leads many young Muslim women to wear the hijab as a symbol of American Islamic identity. One Muslim leader observes that the hijab makes Americans recognize that these are American Muslims.

The veil becomes a point of contention between Muslims and their detractors. Many Muslims feel harassed by a new crusade. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, in the journal "The Post-9/11 'Hijab' as Icon," discusses this tension. Some Muslim women who wore the hijab before September 11, 2001 remove it as a precaution to avoid harassment. Other Muslim women are convinced that wearing a headscarf is not prescribed in the Quran. Rather, they argue it is a matter of personal choice. In *Quran*, chapter 24, verse 31, the importance of the hijab is described: "And tell the believing women to restrain their looks, ... and not display their beauty except what is apparent thereof ... and they should not strike their feet to draw attention



... And repent to Allah, all of you believers, so that you may succeed” (131). This sacred word of the Quran impels the Muslim woman to wear the hijab as a witness of faith.

Ariッサ's hijab becomes crucial for her in the United States. The hijab becomes a marker of identification in the life of Muslim women. It indicates their culture and also entraps them within it. But for Americans, it represents both religion and ethnicity. After the collapse of the twin towers on September 11, the hijab becomes a symbol of hostility. Ariッサ declares: “Some choices are never yours; your life's events choose them for you, and you merely obey, whether you agree or not.... the veil that I had worn since the day we got married had performed the role of that scarlet letter he'd marked on my chest... was associated with supporting the acts of the attackers” (SD 106).

The hijab reveals to society that Ariッサ is a Muslim, and that marks her as an “other.” She defines herself as culturally different from the prevailing beliefs of America. After the ruin of September 11, she says, “... the biggest loss of my life to where I am now. It is a tale of grief and happiness, of control and losing control, of barriers and openings, of prejudices and acceptance, of holding on and letting go. It is about turning my heart inside out, mending it, and putting it right back ...trapped in time” (SD 6). After the death of her husband Faizan, she takes control of her own life. She has not expected her life to fall into such disarray. Unlike other victims of September 11, 2001, she has not received any sympathy from the society around her because of her culture and religion.

The protagonist Ariッサ faces violence for wearing the hijab. After she loses her husband in the catastrophe of the twin towers, she feels lonely at home. “It had been just 41 days. My iddat, bereavement period, was over” (SD 58). In order to recover from the departure of her husband, she takes a walk near the subway station. At this time, four angry and frightened teenagers begin to chase and attack her. The veil provokes them to seek revenge for the September 11, 2001 attack. The blond guy grabs her chin, cups it in his palm, and shouts at her: “You race of murderers... The veil that you wear,” he continues, pulling out his knife and aiming the point at her hijab. “It's all a façade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the non-believers, not us” (SD 61-2). These teens continue to assault her and

attempt to stab her with the knife. At that moment, the boys hear the footsteps of a man. They abandon her, collapsing onto her knees, and fail to stab her because of the stranger's arrival. As a result, the baby inside her womb has been seriously affected. The medical report indicates that the baby will be born with “... heart defect, urinary tract malformations, kidney abnormalities, cleft lip” (SD 67). Perhaps, if Ariッサ had reasoned with the four young men before they attacked her, this might have been avoided — or if the terrorists had not struck and destroyed the twin towers, the Muslim community might have been freer and safer.

Ariッサ's hijab becomes an emblem that provokes others to pursue her wherever she goes. Eventually, she comes to feel that removing the hijab after her husband's death would be a kind of betrayal. She feels “... that he was gone, losing the hijab meant losing a portion of our time together” (SD 58). She does not want to permanently relinquish her husband's wish.

Hijab as the Symbol of Faith

The hijab stands as an emblem between Ariッサ and Faizan. Ariッサ is not able to change her culture according to her own wish. For her, the veil or hijab is the symbol of being a Muslim woman, and it recalls her past life with her husband, Faizan. Losing her hijab feels akin to losing her husband and the life she shared with him. As she decides to remove it, she reflects: “*Who was I bidding farewell to?* I wondered: the age-old tradition or the husband I had kept alive in my heart?” (SD 3). She never wants to relinquish her husband's wish. It is not only her husband's wish but also that of her mother-in-law. When Ariッサ decides to give up the veil, her mother-in-law questions her, “How do you let a tradition go, or justify it to people?” (SD 106). Losing the veil is the saddest event in Ariッサ's life. Without the veil, she “... felt naked, like a prostitute... [and] longed for the veil” (SD 116). In a state of confused mourning, she continues her life's journey. Nawal El Saadawi observes, “The woman's struggle is twofold—against her society and against herself” (43).

This reveals the true character of Muslim faith. Ariッサ's mother-in-law, Ma, submits herself entirely to Allah. She knows that everything happens according to God's wish, and Muslims accept this. Ma trusts God and says: “Allah knows I prayed for the safety of my child every



day! . . . The truth is that there is a time reserved for each one of us. When it comes, we have no say, no power to stop it” (SD 109). Arissa looks at Ma (her mother-in-law) in wonder. She is unable to find answers to the question that arises within her: “Why didn't I have her ability to absolve others, her conviction, her clarity of vision? Does that only come with age?” (SD 109). Ma's belief in God unsettles Arissa. Though Ma lost her only beloved son and is surrounded by grief and hardship, she retains the confidence that God will console and guide her.

Abdullah deliberately suggests that Pakistani Muslim women do not easily discard their culture or tradition, because they have learned, followed, and obeyed the words of their God, their traditions and their culture. Americans might not have known the true culture of Muslims. They might have assumed that Muslims and terrorists were the same. Arissa “... winced. Don't they know that terror has no religion? That religions don't preach terror?” (SD 155), as analysts continue to interpret the connection between religion and violence.

Assimilation and Resilience

Through Arissa, Abdullah reveals the essential step of thinking about the future. The novel seeks to keep the past alive while focusing on a better future. Memory is the link that enables one to build a bridge between the present and the future. Arissa and other Muslim immigrants are not only confronted with aggression and exclusion but also perceive themselves as targets of betrayal and distrust.

Arissa's decision to remove the hijab is not born of fear, but a means of freeing herself from this burden. She decides to remain in America solely for the betterment of her disabled child. In Pakistan, she cannot obtain adequate treatment for her child:

Raian had nine surgeries in a span of five years, including an open-heart surgery to repair a large ventricular defect when he was three weeks old, a gastrostomy to assist with feeding at one month, and removal of adenoids due to recurrent obstructive sleep apnea at age two.... At age five, he was still tube-fed... went to the Children's Hospital once a week for swallowing therapy. (SD 174-175)

Despite all these challenges, she remains a diligent mother. Arissa chooses assimilation as the best strategy in American society for the sake of her disabled child. She assimilates into American culture. Though she loses her veil, she remains in touch with her culture. Every day she “... got dressed for work and kissed the folded veil on the bureau before [she] left” (SD 179). Finally, she is ready to call this new place her homeland: “I had survived, I realized with a degree of pride. I had not succumbed to the pain of my loss” (SD 162). Arissa secretly preserves her culture within herself while, to the outer world, she presents herself as American.

Conclusion

Abdullah demonstrates in this novel that Muslims are directed to live in peace, harmony, love, humanity and forgiveness. The attacks reshape the social environment in which Muslim Americans live and transform cultural markers such as the hijab into objects of suspicion.

The hijab occupies a particularly significant position in Arissa's story. It represents religious identity, Pakistani culture, marriage, memory, and belonging, while also exposing her to prejudice and violence. Abdullah therefore presents the veil as a contested symbol whose meaning changes according to social context.

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