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**DE/COLONIZING HIJAB: AN ORIENTALIST STUDY OF RANDA
ABDEL FATTAH'S DOES MY HEAD LOOK BIG IN THIS?**

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Abstract

Few items of female clothing provoke debate to the extent that hijab, a piece of cloth wrapped around the head by a Muslim woman, has become a most complex and pressing issue. The overwhelming image of a Muslim woman wearing hijab, relying on political and gendered models of explanation, is one of subjugation, passivity and marginalization. Does the reason for this is, hijab? Randa Abdel Fattah in her text, Does My Head Look Big in This?, responds to this question by portraying the contradictions between these stereotypical constructions and the realities that a Muslim woman wearing hijab face in a Western society. Observing Muslim women as individuals, living with their families, and playing active roles in the society, the

reason for their oppression is concluded as the Western society which perpetuates such notions. The paper is an attempt to uncover a narrative of hidden oppression engendered by the society they live in. Edward Said's Orientalism remains a relevant study for understanding the stereotypes about the Muslim women for the explanation of their exploitation engendered by the Western societal attitude towards hijab.

1. Introduction

Western discourses of hijab propagated by their media and governments postulates the subjugation of Muslim women mostly without validating it by the actual experiences of Muslim women. Hijab is the word that has been connected with religious fanaticism which manipulates the female bodies as objects of control and domination. This narrative born out of politics is being challenged by Muslim women both by theory and practice. Among them, one such name is of Randa Abdel Fattah, who through her text *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2007) invites the readers to listen to the voices of Muslim women who are normally silenced in the creation of stereotypical discourses of hijab. In *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2007) Randa Abdel Fatah has exposed this stereotypical attitude of the West towards Muslim women who wear hijab. She rejected the orient's views through her Muslim protagonist who as a minority living in the West challenges the culture that equates hijab with oppression.

This paper opts for the word hijab, an Arabic word, instead of a popular term veil for three major reasons. Firstly, this choice carries broader connotations than the veil. Veil is normally taken as the material cloth which is worn around the head. Hijaab on the other hand refers both to the material manifestations but also the concept of privacy. According to Almila & Inglis (2017), "Today Muslim women often refer to their veils and veiling practices as 'hijab'. Hijab can mean a barrier, something that prevents, conceals, or protects"(p. 2). Both the material and ideological associations qualify this term over the more popular Western word veil in this paper. Moreover, terms related to the veil are constantly changing. The veil comes in a variety of styles, and as time passes, the names associated with the veil vary as well. The other reason for the selection of hijab is to evade the negative undertones which its English translation carries. According to El-Guindi (1999), there are four dimensions to the connotations attributed to the Western term veil in general: material, spatial, communicative, and religious. Clothing and ornament, such as a veil in the sense of a clothing article covering the head, shoulders, and face or ornamentation over a hat drawn over the eyes, compensate the material dimension. The term 'veil' in this context refers to a head and shoulder covering and a face veil. According to the Scott (2007) in France, Muslim women wear a hijab, also known as a foulard in French and a headscarf in English. This head covering was rapidly referred to as a veil (*voile*) in the media, implying that the wearer's entire body and face were hidden from view. Lastly, hijab is the word which is used by the writer Randa Abdel Fattah in her text. Randa Abdel Fattah in this novel fictionalizes her personal story through the character of Amal in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Amal is portrayed as a strong protagonist who in her adult years chooses to wear the hijab full time. The decision taken out of her own free will and personal choice ensues confrontational judgments of her classmates, neighbors, and strangers. Despite being exposed to numerous tribulations caused by the social pressure, she creates her new identity and garners the strength to keep true to Islamic ideologies. Despite the derogatory remarks she receives, Amal, the female protagonist of the novel sticks to her decision and proves that hijab has nothing to do with physical beauty and social activities. Amal maintains a happy and loving relationship with her parents and figures out what she wants to do with her destiny. She becomes more mature and

determined as she settles into a new stage of her life, and she has remained close to her friends, regardless of the fact that they do not share all of the same values and principles. As portrayed by Randa, Muslim women who wear hijab are labeled as victim of patriarchal oppression which according to the West, is instructed by the Islamic faith.

With hijab as the central theme of the text, also evident from the ironical undertones of the title that hints at the act of being looked down by wearing the hijab, Randa's work has been variously explored. The significance of this text lies in particular in its "presentation of a teenage protagonist who willingly chooses to wear hijab amidst negative surroundings, Abdel-Fattah is challenging the perception of hijab as a tool for female subjugation and control" (Majid 2016, p.117). The researches done on hijab as depicted in the text are done from different perspectives. Among the researches done on *Does My Head Look Big in This?* hijab is mainly explored from the perspective of identity crises or hijab as maker of faith. Little has been done from the perspective which may account the responsibility of the stereotypical attitude of the Western society towards creating the experiences of oppression of the protagonist who undergoes identity shift after wearing the hijab. For instance, the focus of the paper- 'In Reading the Hijab as a Maker of Faith in Randa Abdel Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*' (2016), remains on hijab as an apolitical entity that strengthens individual life. Another research entitled as 'Challenging Stereotype: Randa Abdel Fattah's Use of Parody in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*' (2015) considers the strategies of resistance which are used by the Muslim woman to combat her stereotypical treatment. Among the strategies, Haines (2015) majorly points out, "parodic laughter – laughter with an edge is the best means to re-educate ourselves about others, the world, and all its diversity" (p.35). The purpose of use of the parody is to re-educate other's opinion, beliefs and practices. In another study, Lana Zannettino (2007) did comparative research of three novels; Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibarandi* (1992), Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), and Morris Gleitzman's *Girl Underground* (2004). Zannettino (2007) with a purpose to "show how diasporic identities are represented in contemporary Australian teenage literature, and in doing so, shed light on how these representations can potentially reconstruct the ways in which we view and understand racialized-gendered identities in this country at both cultural and individual levels" (p.97). The researcher conducted this research based on feminist post-structural and post-colonial theories to construct the identities of female protagonists in novels. It analyzed the struggles of diasporic protagonists to fit in with other groups and create their identities. In *Negotiating Identities: Muslim Teenagers in the novel Does my Head look Big in This?* (2014) Zin & Mee analyse how Muslim teenagers, specifically Amal, Samantha, and Leila, have various identities in a multicultural Australian culture by claiming that "Amal's decision of wearing the hijab is not a wrong decision at all. It gives her the chance of creating an ambivalent identity, which she learns to appreciate later on" (189). In proving the hybrid identity in mixed society, the authors appreciated the Amal's decision of wearing the Hijab. For this study, Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity was adopted. These three Muslim teenaged characters are concluded to represent different types of hybrid identities in a mixed society.

However, none of the above mentioned researches have considered the role of the Western society, foregrounded in the text, in victimizing the Muslim women wearing hijab. This consideration is certainly needed in turbulent times when the Muslim women are increasingly been debated and victimized by the non- Muslim world for wearing hijab. In order to address this much needed issue, this paper endeavors to identify the negative stereotypical attitude of the

West faced by a Muslim woman who renews her identity through reclaiming to hijab in Does my Head Look Big in this? For this purpose, this paper utilizes Edward Said's ideas of Western preoccupation with veil which are propounded in *Orientalism* (1987). Said provides an outline of contemporary Orientalism in the book's last chapter. The image and symbol of Islam and the Arab pervades American popular culture as the United States' political power grows. According to Said, Orientalism's historical impact is creating such widespread representations in combination with increased Western engagement in Arab and Islamic states. Said expands on his concept of Orientalism in the second chapter by examining many cultural sources, focusing on Western studies of Islam. He discusses how philology and anthropology were important in promoting Orientalist conceptions of Islam. Western scholars and writers propagated the idea of a known Islam that was open to the general Western imagination by turning the study of Islam into a science of observation and description of objective reality. These Islamic concepts appeared in a broad range of Western cultural works, relying on Arab and Islamic stereotypes to portray Arabs and Islamic people as different, frightening, immoral, and inferior to Europeans. According to Said, the East-West dichotomy was developed to ensure that European colonization was justified based on this understanding of superiority and cultural differences. Said returns to historical representations of Muslims in general, but when he examines the construction in terms of women's presentation, he discovers a skewed portrayal of Muslim women.

2. Orientalism: Western Conceptions of Hijab

Orientalism, according to Said, is constructed by outside entities. Orientalism arose from the dominance of one culture, the Islamic world, over another, the West. The concept of orientalism, as suggested in Said's work, is the perceived superiority inherent in Western thoughts that divides the world in the binary terms of either being 'Orient' or the 'Occident'. According to Said, "Europe (the West, the 'self') is seen as being essentially rational, developed, humane, superior, authentic, active, creative and masculine, while the orient (the East, the 'other') (a sort of surrogate, underground version of the West or the 'self') is seen as being irrational, aberrant, backward, crude, despotic, inferior, inauthentic, passive, feminine and sexually corrupt" (Yapp, 2002, p. 4). He emphasized that Orientalism is a cultural construct with very significant consequences for the connection between the East and the West. It is a force that has shaped many intellectual and political activities in the West and the East. However, because the Orient is a culturally diverse, politically diverse, and geographically large area, the West returns to it in a never-ending attempt to control it. This attempt is driven by a self-fulfilling crisis: the more the West becomes involved with the Orient and claims to handle it, the more complex the Orient becomes for the West.

From orientalist perspective then, the Western world views those belonging and living in the Orient as inferior. According to Shohat (2013), Said's (1978) work was able to "transform the Other from the object into the subject of history" (p. 43). Shohat (2013) further examines Said's (1997) work about the use of the power-knowledge nexus, expanding Said's (1997) work to include Eurocentrism. In his follow up to *Orientalism*, Said (1997) continued to examine the media's depictions of the Muslim world in his book *Covering Islam* which argues that journalists may be "covering up" the "socioeconomic and political realities of the Middle East," which results in the "racist sentiments" of the Orientalists (Shohat, 2013). Kerboua (2016) adds that the "concept of Orientalism has been widely dealt with in the humanities and social sciences" and "helps explain a peculiar construction of the Arab-Muslim world" (Kerboua, 2016, p. 7). Kerboua (2016) defines a "general term that signifies a complex phenomenon" and states that it

“operates within a cultural frame that explains and links an individual’s behavior to their cultural and religious belongings”. These behaviors, he adds, lead to “essentialism, targeted stigmatization, and stereotyping” (Kerboua, 2016, p. 25).

In the Western secular media, all forms of hijab have become controversial and problematic. As a result of the West’s perception of the “veil” as a kind of oppression, Muslim women are portrayed as oppressed, submissive, and compliant. The veil is seen as a warning to female equality in the West. Berry, in 2002 says, “The West sees the veil as a sign of female tyranny, which is unethical and irrational behavior on their male family relatives”. Gerbner (1995) adds that the “rigid media formulas of omission and commission prevent us from facing that fact” and that “big mainstream media are trapped in the same global system of finance...”. Mowlana (1995) breaks down the explanation of these stereotypes into what he calls “images,” which he states impact the way Occident thinks of the Middle East and how those “images” are socialized. Edward Said’s Orientalism refers to the views which West has towards the East. Said (1978) states that the West believes these societies are “static,” “undeveloped”, and are far inferior to the “superior” Western society. He further argues that orientalism is linked to “knowledge of the Other,” who produces this knowledge and the reasons behind the “dissemination” in the Western world. He states that this knowledge production is subjective and biased at best, and this resulting knowledge impacts the Western view.

In contemporary times, West’s views and artistic representations of an imaginary East haven’t changed, but the label has. According to AlQallaf (2018), “East is now replaced by “Muslim or Islamic World”. Orientalism and the desire to disclose the East have led to the development, by Western media, of a visual shortage to represent Islam. The western media reinforces an orientalist past with a preoccupation of the veiled Muslim women whose voices are always suppressed by their religious dogmas. Veil carries a negative connotation in the West. It is considered a device that keeps women apart from men. Western writers and scholars are inclined towards ‘ascribing’ their meanings to the veil instead of ‘describing’ what it means to women who wear it. However, they also believe that all the Muslim women in both Islamic and Western society share the same issue of doing veil under the ‘religious constraint’. The veil suggests both sexiness and oppression in Orientalist portrayals, “The Arabian Orient was considered mysterious and attractive when countries were first colonized, and this was reflected in the image of the enigmatic yet beautiful veiled ladies” (Yegenoglu, P. 39). The veil’s interpretation as a symbol of oppression arose from works that portrayed Muslim culture as inferior and backward. The veil became a way to distinguish the West from Islam, but the veil is the only way to avoid being viewed as a sexual object for many Muslim women. The loudest proclamations made inside Western civilization are generally about freedom of choice and religion. However, there is a popular, almost naturalized assumption among Western society that a woman who wears hijab is forced to by the religion.

3. Hijab in Does My Head Look Big in This?

Randa Abdel Fattah has reflected her own story in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* through the character of Amal Mohammad, a young Palestinian girl whose parents shifted to Australia. She has debunked the common misconceptions attached to Muslim girls. Randa has exposed the domination of Western ideologies through the journey of a Muslim woman towards wearing hijab in a non-Muslim world. As the novel starts, Amal comes up with a conflict about the hijab

to wear or not; "It's now three twenty in the morning and I'm lying in bed trying to figure out if I'm really ready to go ahead with my decision" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Her puzzled sentiments at a time of making this decision reveal that it wasn't easier for her in a society where her identity was fixed a postcolonial migrant. Being a Muslim girl and an Australian resident, she questions her identity and freedom of choice. She decides to wear the hijab after struggling for four days and thinking about the challenges she will face in a non-Muslim state. Amal says: "I can't sleep from stressing about whether I've got the guts to do it" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Her self-awareness as an 'other' was the major tension that made her doubt the plausibility of this endeavor.

Randa highlights Amal's anxiety by detailing her fear of the derogatory remarks after wearing hijab. Amal says, "I'm terrified. But at the same time, I feel like my passion and conviction in Islam are bursting inside me, and I want to prove to myself that I'm strong enough to wear a badge of my faith" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). She wants to prove herself as strong enough to carry on with the decision of wearing the hijab. Randa has opposed the western ideology that women are oppressed by presenting Amal to wear the hijab by her choice. Amal decides to wear the hijab and defends her decision. Amal maintains her decision to wear the hijab despite her fears that society will reject her. She is worried about the reaction of her peers. As Amal say, "I can't imagine what my class will say if I walk in with the hijab on" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Her predicament lies in the fear of losing her near ones by opting for hijab. Amal discloses her decision to wear the hijab, and to her wonder, her parents do not seem happy with her decision of wearing the Hijab. She had a fear of losing his friends, but she did not think about her parent's reaction. Amal says, "At dinner, I tell my parents that I'm thinking about wearing the hijab and to my disbelief, they look at each other nervously. I was expecting a cheerleader routine around the family room" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Young Amal decides to wear the hijab without her parent's consent. Her sudden decision surprises them. Amal asks her parents about their unexpected behavior. She says, "I can't believe you guys aren't even happy for me! I thought you'd be ecstatic! Sheez! A little support would be nice! You're always encouraging me to pray more and talking to me about finding spirituality and all that, so why aren't you happy that I'm taking the extra step? Like you did, Mum? Huh? " (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). It is disappointing for Amal that her parent's reaction to the hijab is discouraging. She wanted support from her parents. Her parents asked her to review the decision.

Thereby, the reason behind their disapproval becomes evident when it is said, "The system is entirely different" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Amal's parents are not worried about her decision but worry for the safety of their daughter who could foresee the future troubles likely to arise in their daughter's life as hijabi. They have concern for her education, career and social activities. With parental concern, Amal's parents can foresee the consequences of wearing the hijab in non- Muslim state. Amal mother tells her that hijab is not a piece of cloth rather a great responsibility because when a woman publicly wears a hijab, it becomes her responsibility to represent the religion.

The reaction Amal got from her principal is not appealing. By constructing the image of the principal, Randa has portrayed an accurate picture of the western ideology about veil women. "So your parents have made you wear the veil permanently now? I'm rather disappointed they never mentioned this. I saw your mum wearing the veil, but I never suspected you would be wearing it too" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Orientalist believes that the hijab suppresses the voices of Muslim women. Moreover, patriarchal culture oppresses women, and they do not have the right

to their body. The same is the case with the principal's ideology. She associates Amal's decision with the imposition of the hijab from her parents. The principal warns Amal not to bring a bad reputation to the institute. The principal remarks, "Anyway, I'm sure there will be no problems. But I do need to advise you, Amal, that you are now under an even greater responsibility to represent this institution faithfully. With your veil, all eyes will be on you outside of school, so I trust you will not do our reputation any disservice. Understood, Amal?" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). The principal thinks that Amal will bring a bad reputation to the institute with the hijab on her head. She allowed Amal to wear the Hijab but with restrictions. Amal is taken aback not by the principal's refusal to allow her to wear the hijab at school but by her opinions on the imposition of the hijab on Amal from her parents.

The remarks from her classmates also discourage Amal. Amal thinks about the comments from her peers, like, "One of them says the word "oppressed" and the other one is saying something about me looking like a Dag" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). At a young age, the classmates' remarks show that their ideologies are inbuilt from their society. They got the idea of the hijab as oppression from their community. The deliberate effort of Western ideology to present veil women oppressive still persists in the world. Occident set the standards of life, and that representation of life is deeply rooted in the world. Those who deviate from the norms of life set by the occident is considered exotic, irrational and stuck in time. When Amal deviates from the norms of occident, society labels her thoughtless and oppressed girl. The other remarks which Amal got from her classmates are: "Did your parents force you?" Kristy asks, all wide-eyed and appalled. Doesn't it get hot?" someone asks. "Can I touch it?" "Can you swim?" "Do you wear it in the shower?" "So is it like nuns? Are you married to Jesus now?" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). These remarks raise the question about Amal's other activities. Amal's classmates consider the hijab a hindrance to social activities for Amal. Their comments show that the hijab has limited Amal's mobility. Finally, she encourages her decision of wearing hijab as, "Haven't I decided to wear the hijab because I feel proud of who I am?" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005) She thinks of not pleasing others but she took the decision for her peace.

Randa has constructed the strong character of Amal as she takes the decision which is largely unacceptable for the society around her. She feels weak when she gets derogatory remarks for her hijab. She thinks of her abilities to become dumb after taking the hijab. Before practicing the hijab, she was confident that she is ready to face society. She did not expect the rude attitude of society. She realized that society is not accepting her with the hijab. When her friend, Adam, encouraged Amal to take part in the debate competition. She says that "I don't know if I'm ready to get up in front of an audience made up of other rich private schools. They'll just stare at me and not listen to a word I say as they try to get over their shock that I know English" (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Amal is in fear of society. She supposed that if she stands up for debate, the people will not listen to her words, somewhat confused that I know how to speak English. Randa has depicted the typical attitude of the West that Muslim are backward and they need to be civilized. The West justifies its process of colonization in the East by presenting them as exotic. A process of orientalism has not ended; instead shifted its course. Now they present Islam and Muslim, especially women, as alien, irrational and backward. They represent Muslim women oppressed.

While travelling on public transport, she found that the bus driver is watching her as if she is alien to him. She heard a voice clip in which Muslims were presented as terrorists. Amal

remembers the incident, “I suddenly become aware that the volume of the radio has been raised so that it blares out through the bus. A voice on the early-morning talkback shouts words of outrage about “Muslims being violent”, and how “they’re all trouble”, and how “Australians are under threat of being attacked by these Koran-wielding people who want to sabotage our way of life and our values”. My face goes bright red, and my stomach turns as the bus driver eyeballs me through the reflection of the mirror, looking at me as though I am living proof of everything being said” (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). The gaze of the bus driver made Amal feel ashamed. Being Muslim and hijab on her head, the bus driver compared Amal with a terrorist. The reaction of the bus driver towards Amal is due to the already existing notion of hijab in society.

Also, the hijab is associated with Islamophobia. When Amal tried to apply for a job, she got a rejection because of her hijab. The manager remarked, “Sorry, love, we can’t accept people like you.” “What do you mean?” “The thing on your head, love, that’s what I mean. It’s not hygienic and it just does not look good up at the front of the shop. Sorry, love.” (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Amal became disappointed after being rejected by the manager. This attitude made Amal optimistic about proving that hijab has nothing to do with her personality. She decided to take part in debate competition. Amal said, “I’ve been injected with the formula for confidence and butt kicking. Not in spite of my hijab but because of it. Because I want to prove to everybody that it’s just a piece of material and that I’m here, representing my school, supporting my team, kicking some serious rear ends” (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Finally, Amal creates her new identity with the hijab. When Amal gets award for best speaker, her principal viewpoint changes. The principal warned Amal not to bring bad reputation to the institute but in the end appreciates her effort to make institute proud. Amal with proud feelings, says, “During the day, Ms. Walsh approaches me and offers me belated congratulations for my best speaker award. OK, so I’m a nerd deep down, craving the approval of the big-shot principal, because for some reason my stomach goes all goeey and fuzzy. “You’ve made this educational institution proud,” she says (Abdel-Fatteh, 2005). Amal feels happy after creating her new identity with hijab breaking the stereotypes in a non-Muslim state.

4. Conclusion

The practice of portraying the experience of hijab by a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim society is representative of the Muslim women’s lived experience. Unlike dominant Western discourses of hijab, this paper critiques the Western culture and political background, and calls for Western ideological revolutions in order to liberate Muslim women from oppression. In *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Randa Abdel Fatteh portrayed Amal, a powerful character who challenges the popular misconception of hijab as a marker of inferior Muslim identity as perceived by the West. By establishing the persona of Amal, Randa has uncovered the deliberate effort of the West to portray Muslim women as uncivilized, illogical, and underdeveloped. According to the popular stereotypes, Muslim women who wear hijab are oppressed. The veil is imposed on them by patriarchal Islamic society. This study concludes that Muslim women who choose to wear hijab as per choice brings forth an image of that being a Muslim woman is positive and that hijab is beneficial without restricting their success and progress in the public spaces. For Muslim women living in Western society as a minority, wearing hijab is uncomfortable and beleaguered.

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