Veiled experiences: re-writing women's identities and experiences in contemporary Muslim fiction in English

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Abstract

In dominant contemporary Western representations, including various media texts, popular fiction and life-narratives, both the Islamic faith in general and Muslim women in particular are often vilified and stereotyped. In many such representations Islam is introduced as a backward and violent religion, and Muslim women are represented as either its victims or its fortunate survivors. This trend in the representations of Islam and Muslim women has been markedly intensified following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001.

This thesis takes a postpositivist realist approach to reading selected contemporary women's fiction, written in English, and foregrounding the lives and religious identities of Muslim women who are neither victims nor escapees of Islam but willingly committed to their faith. Texts include *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Sweetness in the belly* (2005) by Camilla Gibb and *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) by Mohja Kahf. Attempting to explain how these fictional texts can be read as variously writing back to the often monolithic representations of Islam and Muslim women characteristic of mainstream Western texts (such as those depicted in popular life narratives), the thesis draws attention to the ways in which particular narrative techniques highlight the complexities of Muslim women's religious identities and experiences. Since the novels depict the lives of Muslim female characters in the West, this study is especially concerned with the exploration of the tensions and contradictions of women's Muslim identities in Western countries, and

addresses Western people’s interests and prejudices in their encounter with Muslim women. Finally, given that various aspects to Muslim women's identities and experiences are typically elided in dominant representations, it is argued that a disruption of the stereotypes of Muslim women signals the potential for the compatibility of Muslim women's distinct identities with Western values.

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Chapter One: Introduction

> It is a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for the agents who enact them.
>
> (Baum 2006, 1077)

For many people in the West, Islam means terrorism and/or burqa-clad women. A number of horrendous terrorist acts carried out in Western countries by people who claim Muslim faith, culminating in the watershed events of 9/11, have persuaded some Westerners to associate Islam with terrorism and given rise to the idea that they are living in an 'age of terror', one in which Muslim threat is ever-present.[1] Obsession with Islamic terrorism perhaps parallels obsession with Muslim women's veil in the West. A Muslim woman's veil both disgusts many Westerners and arouses their pity, and for many of them is an epitome of cruelty of Islam. As a result of negative attitudes toward Muslims, as various polls show, Muslims in the West are the main targets of racist attitudes and behaviours.[2] Iconic symbols, particularly Muslim women's hijab and Muslim mosques have been controversial issues in various

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[1]Research indicates that some people in the West see Muslims as threats to their national security. See, for example, Kabir (2004); Oborne (2008).

[2] According to a new Gallup Centre for Muslim Studies report released on 10 January 2010, 43% of Americans admit to feeling some prejudice against Muslims. See http://www.gallup.com/poll/125312/Religious-Prejudice-Stronger-Against-Muslims.aspx.
A study conducted by leading Australian universities in February 2011 also reveals that almost 50% of Australians have anti-Muslim sentiments. See http://www.rediff.com/news/report/slide-show-1-50-per-cent-aussies-anti-muslim-25-per-cent-racist-towards-asians-finds-poll/20110223.htm.
A CBC-commissioned poll conducted in 2010 also suggests that one in three Canadians believe that Muslims and aboriginal people are discriminated against. See http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2010/03/15/discrimination-poll-2010.html.

European countries. Thus, being a Muslim, especially a practising Muslim woman in the West, is certainly not easy these days.

Neither do Islam and Muslims fare well in many contemporary Western representations. Any study of Western representations of these topics, including various media texts, popular fiction and life-narratives, is likely to reveal that in many of them the Islamic faith in general and Muslim women in particular are often vilified and stereotyped. In many such representations Islam is introduced as a backward and violent religion, Muslim men as controlling, barbarian sadists and Muslim women as either Islam's victims or its fortunate survivors. This trend in the representations of Islam and Muslim people markedly intensified following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.[3]

[3] In Chapter Three of this thesis I will discuss popular Muslim memoirs. Here, very briefly I refer to representations of contemporary Western media of Islam and Muslims. Western media can clearly be pinpointed as representing Islam negatively. Broadly speaking, media representations of Islam in the West, including print and electronic media, TV, radio and cinema productions do not paint a pleasant picture of Islam, and stereotypical representations abound. H V Brasted, who has carried out a research on Australian media's representations of Muslims between 1950 and 2000, reports that all studies related to this question, which he has had the chance to examine, yield similar answers. All these studies say that Islam has been represented through stereotypical images, that the press has been 'less than fair, at times farcical' toward Islam, that the repeated images of 'mosques, bearded Mullahs, menacing Muslim crowds, and burqa-clad women… collectively come to symbolise irrationality, fanaticism, intolerance and discrimination on an almost medieval scale' (2001, 206-207). Brasted maintains that studies of newspapers in Britain, Canada, Europe and the United States yield similar results in regard to attitudes expressed about Islam in them (2001, 208).
Here, I refer to one recent news story published on the subject of Muslims in a Western newspaper. The story, which appeared in *The Sun*, 28 March 2008, is about a Muslim bus driver in England who had ordered his passengers to get off the bus so as he could pray. The footage of the driver praying was also widely circulated. In fact it was a fabricated story as the passengers had got off for another reason. Since the bus had been delayed, the bus company had ordered the driver to allow passengers to get off the bus and board on the bus behind. However, this information was missing from the account of the story in *the Sun* (Aly 2011). In my personal experience, during my stay in Australia between 2005 and 2010, I regularly read *The West Australian* newspaper, published in Perth. The part of the newspaper which I considered to represent the most anti-Muslim attitudes was 'the letters to the editor' section. On 26 June 2008, I emailed the editor, complaining about the perpetuation of racist attitudes toward Muslims by this newspaper through the publication of these letters and the titles chosen for the letters. I never received a reply.
An Islamic Human Rights Commission report released in 25 January 2007 has referred to some Hollywood films, arguing that these films stereotype Arabs and Muslims and reinforce prejudices against them. Some of the films referred to in the report are as following: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *The Siege* (1998), *Executive decision* (1996), *House of Sand and Fog* (2003). See http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/jan/25/broadcasting.race.
A more recent program which represents Muslims negatively is the serial *24* (2001-2010).
The media, as Malik has argued, through stereotyping and exclusion, or in Snead's words through marking and omission, maintain ideas about the essential difference of Muslims (Snead 1994, Malik

Muslim women have received special attention in Western discourses, including Western media and popular literature, and the focus on their oppression has been extensive. Research shows that this way of representing Islam and Muslim women in Western discourses is not new and has a history of about 200 years, since at least colonial times.[4] As Mohja Kahf puts it: 'The dominant narrative of the Muslim women in Western discourse from about the eighteenth century to the present basically states, often in quite sophisticated ways, that the Muslim woman is innately oppressed' (1999, 177). In this narrative Muslim women's oppression is explained as the effect of Islam, which is portrayed as a religion imposed on Muslim women; thus, these women's

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2002, 176). In fact, as Brasted also contends, the major problem with the media representations of Islam is that they only portray a small part of the reality, and the lives of the majority of Muslims are not reflected there. In Brasted's words, the media focuses 'on a narrow segment of Muslim activity'; it gives 'snapshots' of 'conflicts' and of 'ferment and fervour', and these snapshots are 'not balanced by the lives of the majority of Muslims' (2001, 222). These representations especially attribute whatever problems that exist in Muslim communities to Islam (Brasted 2001, 223).
For a further study of the texts that discuss the stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims in Western media see, for example, Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey et al. (2011); Saeed (2007); Smeeta Mishra (2006); Richardson (2004); Poole (2002); Said (1981).

[4] See, for example, Navarro (2010); Smeeta Mishra (2007); Kahf (1999); Yeğenoğlu (1998); Kabbani (1986) and Chapter Three of this thesis for further study of the subject of Western representations of Muslim women. An example of the way Muslim women are represented in contemporary Western media within the paradigm of the victimhood is the story of Mukhtaran Mai, the Pakistni woman. In June 2002she was gang-raped by men from an elite tribe in her village in Pakistan. This violent crime was perpetrated so as to punish her brother for having an affair with one of the women from the men's tribe. The rapists prevented Mukhtaran's father and uncle from coming to her aid. Following the rape, her father threw his shirt around her and walked her home. The village Imam, in the Friday sermon, condemned the act and persuaded the family to file a complaint against the rapists and contacted a local journalist asking him to publicize the case. The rapists were initially condemned to death, though later the death sentences were ruled out and lighter sentences were imposed.
The story was picked up by international media a few months after the incident. The September 29 issue of *New York Times* in 2004 includes an article on this subject by the columnist Nicholas D. Kristof, entitled, 'Sentenced to be raped'. The article represents Mukhtaran as a victim under Islam. It thus introduces the Muslim culture: 'a much more ubiquitous form of evil and terror: a culture, stretching across about half the globe that chews up women and spits them out'. The article tells the story, but it does not tell everything. No mention of the positive role of the village Imam is made because it is Muslim culture in general which is attacked as the culprit: 'In Pakistan's conservative Muslim society, Ms. Mukhtaran's duty was now clear: she was supposed to commit suicide.' The West is represented as the saviour: 'We in the West could help chip away at that oppression, with health and literacy programs and by simply speaking out against it, just as we once stood up against slavery and totalitarianism.' There is no reference to the villagers' support of Mukhtaran, or to her courage and strength. There is also no reference to the fact that there are harsh punishments in Sharia for rapists. Kahf (2006) also criticizes this article for similar reasons.

liberation from misery is suggested to be bound to their distancing themselves from Islam and Muslim culture and subscribing to Western ways of life.

In the chapters that follow, I explore selected contemporary women's fiction, written in English, which foregrounds the lives and religious identities of Muslim women, living in the West, who are neither victims nor escapees of Islam but willingly committed to their faith. The foregrounding of religious identity and the focus on the experiences of Muslim women who deem their religious identity as inseparable from and empowering of their identity have raised a range of issues related to Muslim women not usually addressed in dominant representations, that is, mainstream representations found in various media, popular culture and literature. In order to set the background out of which these novels have emerged, I also discuss popular life narratives by Muslim women published recently in the West, which, I argue, generally represent Muslim women particularly as victims or escapees of Islam. In contrast, my exploration of the selected novels and the Muslim female characters' identities and experiences represented in them, attempts to draw attention to the complexities of Muslim women's religious identities and experiences, in response to the often monolithic descriptions of Muslim women's identities and experiences in dominant Western representations. The thesis also attempts to explain how these fictional texts can be read as countering the representations of Islam in the West and how they variously write back to dominant Western discourses about Islam and Muslim communities. However, I do not argue that any 'true' representation of any culture, including the Muslim culture, exists. Rather, the discussion works on the premise that all representations, both dominant and marginal, need to be scrutinized and engaged with critically.

Muslim women's identities and postcolonial literature

As will be further discussed in Chapter Three, it is especially since colonial times that Muslim women are depicted as oppressed and repressed in Western representations. This colonial image of Muslim women, however, has not remained unchallenged. In the postcolonial era, some writers, including some Muslim women writers, have written back to this discourse. "Postcolonial" and "postcolonialism" are terms about whose definition there is no general consensus among critics; however, they are the most widely used critical terms when referring to the condition created as a result of the colonial relationship between West and non-West. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge define postcolonialism as 'a neologism that grew out of older elements to capture a seemingly unique moment in world history, a configuration of experiences and insights, hopes and dreams arising from a hitherto silenced part of the world, taking advantage of new conditions to search for alternatives to the discourses of the colonial era' (2005, 378). Further, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in their definition of postcolonial, remark that it covers 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day' (1989, 2).

Also, as Georg M. Gugelberger observes, postcolonial theory deals with 'the totality of texts (in the larger sense of 'text') that participate in hegemonizing other cultures and the study of texts that write back to correct and undo Western hegemony' (1994, 582).

In the postcolonial era, Muslim women have produced many literary works, both in vernacular and European languages that defy the colonial representation of them as oppressed, silent victims. Rather, they represent Muslim women as strong, articulate and prepared to fight oppressive forces. Their writings show that they are capable of

recognizing and challenging patriarchal forces. These literary works have challenged the dominant image of Muslim women at two levels: at one level is a Muslim woman, also an articulate writer, who sees and talks about the problems of women in her society; at another level, is the depiction of a fictional character who refuses to remain silent and oppressed when faced with oppressive forces. Some of the more well-known of these writers in the West are Nawal el Saadawi, Fatima Mernissi, Ahdaf Soueif, Assia Djebar, whose major works have dealt with women in Muslim societies.[5] There are also scholarly works which have discussed how these texts have collectively and individually challenged the discourses about Muslim women in the West.[6]

However, most of the literary works by these Muslim women are about Muslim women's struggles against patriarchal or colonial forces, particularly in Muslim countries. In other words, the thrust of the works are anticolonial and/or feminist, in the mainstream understanding of feminism as upholding the rights of women against the rule of the patriarchs. These are legitimate concerns, as patriarchy, of the kind peculiar to the societies which have a predominant Muslim population, and colonialism have both induced much suffering in the lives of Muslim women.
Also, in most of the studies on these literary works, the label of 'Muslim' has been taken as a cultural attribute, and a Muslim woman in them is to be understood as a

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[5] Nawal el Saadawi is an Egyptian feminist writer, activist and psychiatrist. Some of her important works of fiction are *The hidden face of Eve: women in the Arab world* (1977), *Women at point zero* (1979), *The Fall of the Imam* (1987).
Fatima Mernissi is a Moroccan writer and sociologist. *Dreams of trespass: tales of a harem girlhood* (1995) is a memoir by her. Some other important non-literary works by her on the subject of Muslim women are *Beyond the veil:male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society* (1987) and *The Veil and the male elite: a feminist interpretation of Islam* (1991).
Ahdaf Soueif is an Anglo-Egyptian writer and cultural commentator. Her major works of fiction include *In the eye of the sun* (1992), *Sandpiper* (1996), *The Map of love* (1999).
Assia Djebar is an Algerian novelist and film maker. Her most important works of fiction in French are *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) and *L'Amour, la Fantasia* (1985).
[6] I will refer to some of these works below.

woman from a Muslim background and Muslim culture. 'Muslim' as a religious designation does not come out as especially significant in almost any of them.[7] With the setting of most of the works being in Muslim countries, perhaps the Muslimness of the characters, with its religious significance, does not really stand out as important compared to other issues, such as the fact that they are women oppressed by colonialists or patriarchs. However, these characters are still most often and most conveniently referred to as Muslim women.

Nevertheless, if these postcolonial primary and secondary texts by Muslim women have challenged a part of the discourses about Muslim women, that of the silent Muslim woman, they have not addressed an important dimension of these discourses, which is the relationship between Islam and Muslim women. A Muslim woman is of course, a woman who not only comes from a Muslim culture but whose religion is Islam. Indeed (as will be argued in Chapter Three) in dominant Western representations, a close relationship between the religion of Islam and the condition of the oppressed Muslim woman has been depicted. As Leila Ahmed argues, a central part of colonial discourse on Islam has been 'that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies' (Ahmed 1992, 152). The focus of these literary works by Arab Muslim women, however, has not challenged mainstream Western discourses on Islam, which frequently deem Islam backward and violent and oppressive to Muslim women. As will be argued in more detail in Chapter Three,

[7] This point, however, does not apply to Fatima Mernissi, who, in many of her works, deals with the question of being a Muslim woman. Still, she is particularly concerned with Muslim women's rights and the patriarchal interpretations of these rights in Muslim societies in the course of history. See footnote 5 of this thesis for references to some of her works.

some critics even believe that some of these works even reaffirm this discourse through offering Western readers what they already know or expect to hear about Muslim women (Amireh and Majaj 2000; Kahf 2006).

It might be argued that indifference to this Western discourse on Islam by many postcolonial Muslim women writers may be partly because these writers and their intended audience would take their Muslim identity for granted (such as those referred to on page 6 of this thesis). We must remember that the writers were writing within their indigenous setting for indigenous people of Muslim countries, and neither they nor their readers could be expected to feel threatened in their identity as Muslims. However, globalization, mass migration and the rise of fundamentalism have created new conditions, giving rise to new concerns. With these modern complexities, religious identity neither in Muslim societies nor in Western countries can be as easily taken for granted by Muslim people as in the past.

In my opinion, Muslim identity in modern times faces two specific challenges felt more intensely by Muslims in the West. The first challenge is the vilification of Islam both by people who claim Muslim identity and yet perform horrendous terrorist acts, and by the Western media and publishing industries, which perpetuate negative images of Islam and Muslims. The second challenge to Muslim identity is the new complexities of modern life and the age of information, which require Muslims to evaluate their religious identities and experiences against different discourses and ideologies to which they are exposed. Thus, a renewed need for Muslims to defend and define their religious identity has become Muslim women's new concern, added to their feminist and nationalist concerns. I believe the novels selected for examination in

this thesis, unlike their predecessors, address these new issues in relation to Muslim identity.[8]

With Muslims now becoming an important minority in Western countries, such issues cannot be ignored any longer, and Muslim women's religious identity and their experiences need to be explicitly confronted and critically engaged with even more than ever before.

Religion and religious identity in postcolonial literature

Within a postcolonial critical framework it is not easy to find approaches that deal with religious identity. I would argue that in postcolonial literature and criticism, which deal with the answering back of the colonized, religion has not been paid enough attention to, an issue that critics acknowledge and address. The absence of religion from postcolonial criticism has been traced to the absence of religion in cultural studies more broadly. Cultural studies cannot easily engage with religion because, as Guari Viswanathan argues, the investment of cultural studies is 'in the secular and the materialist' (1998, xiv), and as Mishra and Hodge comment, because there has been a separation in the enlightened state between 'the secular and the religious, where the latter is seen as a primarily personal affair, while the great passions of modernity are played out in the secular domain' (2005, 392). Amin Malak complains about 'the dearth of useful "postcolonial" theoretical material germane to the issue of religion or the sacred as a key conceptual category, as compared to the valorised ones of race, class, gender, nation, migration , and hybridity' (2005,16). He

[8] It is especially because of these tensions around and misrepresentations of Muslim identity, especially its binding with terrorism and security issues, that the concept of Muslim identity and the politics of identity for Muslims, especially those in the West, are still relevant. It is in spite of poststructuralists ' proposition that we need to move beyond identity politics. This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

calls the absence of such theoretical material a serious discursive problem, since religion is highly important in 'the debate about contemporary neocolonial reality' (Malak 2005, 17). What he sees behind this marginalization of religion is the 'privileging of a secular, Euro-American stance that seems to shape the parameters of postcolonial discourses' (Malak 2005, 17). Mishra and Hodge also see this a problem in postcolonial theory and claim that if postcolonialism is to survive, it needs to engage more seriously with religion and other 'premodern (and countermodern) tendencies', not perhaps explainable in modern terms 'that colonial instrumentalism systematically excised under the sign of the "rational" man' (2005,391). Drawing on Dispesh Chakrabarty (2000), Mishra and Hodge suggest that postcolonialism should 'let newer, generally subaltern, postcolonial historicities surface, replete with those life-practices or forms… that [have] hitherto been consigned to what we may call a nonrational nativism' (2005, 395). Anouar Majid especially believes that, postcolonial theory's lack of attention to religion is most evident when it comes to Islamic culture (2000, 19).

The significance of religion

The fact that few fictional, non-fictional or postcolonial theoretical works deal with religion and religious identity does not mean that religion is absent from people's lives. Despite many modern and postmodern thinkers such as Fredrick Jameson confidently believing that this world is 'effortlessly secular'(1991, 387), religion has not disappeared from people's lives even in our time. John A. McClure observes that 'Jameson ignores the persistence here in America and around the globe of all sorts of religious traditions' (1995, 142). Mark R. Woodward also in this regard contends that 'even in the most modern societies religion does not disappear' (2002, 82). Mishra and

Hodge criticise this downplaying of religion and assert that 'religion is a key lived experience, arguably one that touches more than most' (2005, 392). Bruce Baum also argues for the importance and meaningfulness of religious identity in many people's lives and argues that ' it is a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for the agents who enact them' (2006,1077).

For many Muslims, likewise, religion is an important aspect of their identity. As Amin Malak states:

> Religion-based identity may not be exclusive to Islam qua religion, for one might argue likewise about Judaism or Tibetan Buddhism. However, given the fact that Islam is the second largest religion on earth, tenacious, voluntary attachment demonstrated so pronouncedly by its adherents from diverse cultures and from different corners of the world is both solid and striking. (2005, 5)

Malak also defines Muslim's engagement with Islam as spiritual, theological, intellectual and emotional: 'Islam, however one conceives it, commands affection even from its dissenters' (2005, 152). Malak refers to Islam's values of justice and generosity, courage and creativity, which endow it with 'endearing and enduring loyalty', loyalty that, as he says, 'many outsiders miss, misunderstand or misinterpret' (2005, 153).

Locating the thesis in postcolonial studies

This thesis's key focus is on selected fiction published in English-speaking countries in the West between 1999 and 2006, which explores the ignored subjects of religion and religious identity, here the religion of Islam and Muslim identity, from the perspective of devout female characters in contexts unfriendly to Islam. I call these novels postcolonial for a number of reasons: because of their strategy of writing back to dominant discourses about Muslim women in the West; because of their representing Muslim women from non Euro-centric perspectives, and representing the challenges faced by female characters from a variety of Muslim backgrounds living in Western societies. The novels give voice to those 'hitherto silenced' group of people, Muslim women, and, at least in part, 'write back to correct and undo Western hegemony' (Mishra and Hodge 2005, 378; Gugelberger 1994, 582).

Five novels have been chosen for critical exploration and reflection in this thesis: *Minaret* (2005) and *The translator* (1999) by Leila Aboulela; *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) by Mohja Kahf; *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, and *Sweetness in the belly* (2005) by Camilla Gibb. Camilla Gibb is the only non-Muslim of the authors.

I am examining only these five novels in my thesis both because few critically acclaimed contemporary novels fall into the category I cover and because I intend to offer detailed reflections rather than an overview or survey of several texts. However, the field of fiction in English by or about Muslim women who show different degrees

of commitment to their religion and religious identity is a growing one and there are many possibilities for research in this area.[9]

As mentioned above, a number of critical works in recent years has examined literary creation of Muslim women, analyzing them especially from a feminist point of view. Below I offer a brief overview of the more important critical volumes on literary writings by Muslim women and discuss how they differ from my own study.

The first collection of Arab and Muslim women's feminist writing published in English was *Opening the gates: a century of Arab feminist writing* (1990), edited by Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke**.** This collection covers over 50 pieces—short stories, essays, folktales, poems, film scripts , memoirs, lectures/speeches—by Arab (and mostly) Muslim women. The contributions, which are mostly translated from Arabic into English, are categorized under three main headings of 'Awareness', 'Rejection' and 'Activism', suggesting how Muslim women are aware of the injustices against them, have started resisting oppressive practices and are actively engaged in feminist practices so as to make a difference in their conditions. A new edition of this book (2004), also adds a new section, 'Transition', which includes feminist writings by Muslim women from 1990 onwards. The introduction by the two editors sets the focus of the book; however, the works are not individually analysed. This work is an example of critical works in which 'Muslim woman' is taken as meaning a woman from a Muslim background and culture, and in which concern for the religious aspect of the identity of Muslim women fades next to the predominantly feminist concerns of the authors and editors.

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[9] See also footnote 54 of this thesis.

Another important work in this field is *Women claim Islam: creating Islamic feminism through literature* (2001) by Miriam Cooke**.** This book surveys the literature, fiction and memoirs of contemporary Islamic feminist writers and examines how these women, through their works as well as through involvement in some organizations and NGOs, challenge their being left out from the discourses of history, war, exile, emigration and religion. Studying the works of a range of writers as different as Zaynab al-Ghazali and Nawal el Saadawi, the text shows how these women, who claim Islam as their identity and use Islam as a tool of self-empowerment, develop a gendered Islamic epistemology which challenges both the indigenous male authority in the interpretation of Islamic doctrine and colonial racist discourses about Muslim women. The book, in addition to chapters which focus on the literary analysis of fiction and autobiographies of Arab Muslim women, includes chapters on the history and development of Islamic feminism as a valid quest for justice for Muslim women. Although my work shares with this one an emphasis on the commitment to Islam of most of the authors studied, still Cooke's work is interested in Islamic feminism in relation to commitment to Islam, the genealogy of this type of feminism and its development.

Liberating Shahrazad : feminism, postcolonialism, and Islam (2006) by Suzanne Gauch focuses on the works by Maghrebian and North-African women writers and film-makers and argues that in the same way that the legendary Shahrazad uses her art of story-telling to combat injustice and transform the perceptions of Shahryar, these contemporary artists, through their artistic creations, are affecting the perceptions of both local audience and those outside Muslim culture about North-African Muslim

women, challenging both misogyny at home and stereotypical views about women held by many Westerners. These artists, also like Shahrazad, always defer the final word about their subjects and do not offer definitive characterizations, and in this way ever more engage the interest of their audience. The writers from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria whose works are examined in the different chapters of this book are Moufida Tlatli, Fatima Mernissi, Assia Djebar, and Leila Sebbar. In this work, which limits its scope to North African Muslim writers, the emphasis is on the significant role of the artists in combating the stereotypes about North African Muslim women.

Another anthology of the works of Muslim women published recently in the West is *Shattering the stereotypes*: *Muslim women speak out* (2005) by Fawzia Afzal-Khan. It is a collection of essays, poetry, fiction, plays and memoirs by Muslim American women, reflecting their attitudes and experiences especially in their encounter with 9/11. The anthology seeks to give voice to Muslim women, engage American Muslim women writers in a conversation and separate Islam from oppression of women and terrorism. However, the most striking point about the collection is the diversity of the voices of Muslim women that it presents. It contains, for example, both works by and about women who criticize hijab and those who see hijab as a defining aspect of their identity; both works by women who think of Islam as only 'one spoke in the wheel of their lives' and women who think of Islam as defining all aspects of their lives (Afzal-Khan 2005, 1). Therefore, it can be argued that the main message that the book conveys is that Arab Muslim American women are not a monolithic category. The collection, apart from its introduction and afterword, offers little analysis or criticism of the works it presents, In Afzal Khan's collection, commitment to Islam is not the

concern of all the authors who, nevertheless, are all identified as Muslim because they are from Muslim backgrounds.[10]

These volumes have generally endeavoured to show how literary texts by Muslim women writers in their own vernaculars or in European languages can both subvert Western stereotypes about them and challenge indigenous patriarchal practices, how feminist activism through literature has grown among Muslim women intellectuals, and finally how diverse Muslim women intellectuals are. It is hoped that the present study can further expand the field of studies of fiction by and about Muslim women in two ways. Firstly, it seeks to focus on the religious lives and experiences of Muslim women as depicted in the selected fiction; therefore, it examines, in particular, how this fiction challenges Western stereotypes in regard to the relationship between Muslim women and Islam. Secondly, it seeks to look at fiction recently published in English in the West that explores the complexities and contradictions of Muslim women's identities and experiences as manifested in a Western context. Although this thesis does not directly deal with literary representations of Muslim women's struggle against patriarchy and gender inequality, that is, it is not a dedicated feminist research project, it can still be claimed that the literary explorations here are based on the premises of feminism. However, this research is interested in a more expansive version of feminism, a feminism that accommodates the commitments of religion, here Islam, as integral to Muslim women's identities and attaches significance to the perspectives of devoutly religious women. This is close to Jasmin Zine's definition of a faith-centred feminism:

[10] Also three chapters of Amin Malak's book, *Muslim narratives and the discourse of English* (2005), have to do with literary production of Muslim women in English. The works introduced in these chapters are also about Muslim women who take pride in their religion and reject both patriarchal practices and Western feminist hegemonic attitudes toward them.

> [T]he critical faith-centered perspective attends to the salience of faith and spirituality in framing the worldviews, beliefs and practices of faith-centered people and accepts this as a valid way of negotiating and understanding of notions of community, selfhood, gender, identity and feminist engagement and praxis.
>
> (Zine 2004, 182)

The approach adopted by this thesis, then, shares with Islamic feminism an epistemology which acknowledges Muslim women's possible attachments to and alignment with their faith; however, fighting for the rights of Muslim women through a return to the Quran and reinterpretation of the Quranic verses in relation to women, an important concern of Islamic feminism, does not apply to the methodology of the present research.[11]

An overview of the thesis

Chapter Two focuses on the theoretical framework underpinning my thesis. This theoretical framework prepares the readers for the arguments presented in the thesis about contemporary literary representation of Muslim women's identities and experiences in the West, both dominant ones and those that challenge them. The theoretical strands of representation, identity and experience cohere in that they variously help illuminate ways through which we can engage critically with literary texts of realist fiction and memoirs.

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[11] Margot Badran defines Islamic feminism thus: ' It is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence…the basic argument of Islamic feminism is that the Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men… has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas … and practices' (2002). For a more detailed study of Islamic feminism see, for example, Yamani (1996); Wadud (1999, 2006); Majid (2002); Badran (1999); Barlas (2002); Bodman and Tohidi (1998); Moghadam (2002); Jeenah (2001); Ahmed (1992).

In Chapter Three I turn to the specific subject of contemporary dominant literary representations of Muslim women in the West. Offering a brief survey of the history of such representations in the West, I argue that the discourse of Orientalism, expounded by Said, can be explained as the main discourse embodied in the majority of Western literary and non-literary representation of Muslim women from the colonial times up to now. Therefore, the chapter contains a brief discussion of Said's critique of Orientalism. I introduce popular memoirs by Muslim women recently published in the West as the literary genre central to contemporary Western representations of Muslim women, and discuss how Orientalist discourse persists through this genre. Through a survey of the contexts of production and reception of this genre, I try to account for the popularity and persistence of such representations about Muslim women even at the present time. As an example of contemporary popular Muslim memoirs I will discuss Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*, arguing how some features of the dominant reductionist discourse on Islam and Muslim women that perpetuates the idea of Islam as a backward cruel religion and Muslim women as 'exotic others', victims without agency, with monolithic identities and experiences, is highlighted in this memoir. Then, discussing some evident flaws in the arguments of the memoir about Islam and Muslim women, I problematize the significant media and public attention that this and similar memoirs have received and the truth value attached to them in the West.

Chapter Four serves as an introduction to the selected novels of this thesis. It is intended to prepare the reader for the discussions of selected contemporary fiction published in the West, which write back to stereotypical and monolithic Western representations of Muslim women's identities and experiences, including popular

memoirs. In this section, we are reminded that in the study of these novels, we encounter a variety of experiences with religion and a variety of conceptualizations of Muslim identity, which are, of course, articulated within the main discourse of the possibility of voluntary commitment to Islam. This variety suggests a complexity for Muslim women's identities and experiences, which need to be engaged with critically.

Chapter Five focuses on two novels by Leila Aboulela, *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005). These two novels introduce the most Islamically-orthodox principal characters and the most orthodox views about Islam and Muslim identity in this thesis. I argue how the novels mainly write back to Western discourses through depicting the centrality of Muslim identity in the lives of Muslim women and how they represent experience with Islam as much more satisfying and nourishing for the main characters than their experiences in the secular realm. However, I also critique Aboulela's all-too-positive representation of Muslim culture, experience and communities, and her not engaging with the complexities, contradictions and/or problems that Muslim women face in their understanding of and dealing with their Muslim identities and/or communities.

Chapter Six examines Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel, *Does my head look big in this?* I argue that this novel mainly challenges the Western conception of practising, hijabed Muslim women as 'exotic others' and problematizes these women's 'othering' in Western societies. Therefore, the complexity that this narrative suggests for Muslim woman's identity is the possibility of reconciliation of Muslim identity with the Western national identities of Muslim women. This novel introduces the devout

Muslim women not as strangers but as familiar figures in the West, women undeserving of the discrimination they experience.

Chapter Seven analyses Mohja Kahf's novel, *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006). This novel, I argue, challenges another aspect of the dominant Western discourse on Muslim women: the idea that Muslim women either miserably submit to their Muslim culture and definition of Muslim identity defined for them by others or abandon Islam and opt for a Western way of life. I try to show that the narrative, through employing specific narrative techniques, suggests a complexity for Muslim women's identities and experiences. This complexity entails a dialectical process between loving and admiring Islam on the one hand, and allowing oneself to be self-reflexive about Muslim identity and Muslim communities on the other.

Chapter Eight turns to *Sweetness in the belly* (2005) by the only non-Muslim novelist of this thesis, Camilla Gibb. This novel, I argue, challenges the stereotype of Muslim identity as oppositional to other identities and cultures. Rather, the narrative shows the potential of a relationship between and across borders, identities, faiths, cultures and traditions. It does this through showing the development of identity in the devout Muslim woman character, whose background, as well as her understanding of religious identity, is associated with both Western culture and Islamic traditions. This novel, then, represents the least orthodox view of Muslim identity. The narrative suggests, however, that this view needs to be accepted as one of the various possible interpretations of Islam, since the main character strongly knows herself a Muslim and has deep bonds with the spirituality of Islam and the main text of Islam, the Quran.

In the conclusion, I draw on the various themes explored by these novels and argue for representations that admit the complexity of Muslim women's identities and experiences. Recognizing this complexity, I argue, challenges the monolithic views of Muslim women's identities and experiences and helps toward breaking down the myth that practising Muslim women in the West are impenetrable, unapproachable exotic others. Such recognition also invokes the potential of the compatibility of their identities with values also embraced by Western communities.

Chapter Two: Approaching and evaluating literary representations: Theoretical considerations

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the discussion of both the selected novels and dominant Western representations of Islam, especially popular Muslim life narratives, which serve as a background for the study of those novels. As this thesis explores literary representations which arguably represent Muslim women's identities and experiences differently from the way they are often represented in dominant Western representations, including popular Muslim life narratives, here I attempt to present theories which help illuminate the notions of representation, identity and experience. The theoretical exploration aims to elucidate the anti-essentialist position of this thesis in relation to contemporary fictional representations of Muslim women.

In formulating my arguments about identity, experience, and representation, I have drawn on different theories; however, postpositivist realist approaches, especially related to questions of identity and experience, are central. In fact, I find many arguments of the postpositivist approach close to my understanding of identity and experience, given the postpositivist emphasis on the epistemic and political significance of identity and experience for individuals and on the role of individuals in interpreting their identities and experiences. Paula Moya thus defines postpositivism as:

> …an epistemological position and political vision … [and] an alternative to the reductionism and inadequacy of essentialist and

> postmodernist approaches to identity … While [postpositivist] realists will readily acknowledge that ideologies have constitutive effects on the social world such that 'the world' is what it is at least partially because of the way humans interact with and understand it, they will insist that reality is not exhausted by how any given individual or group perceives it ideologically.
>
> (2002, 27)

As will be further explained below, postpositivist realists, in spite of believing in the role of ideologies and discourses in the formation of knowledge, identities and experiences, still assert that objective knowledge is possible, and people's identities and experiences are, in some sense, real, and valuable for being real. These points are important for the study of the realist fiction critiqued in this thesis, which explores the identities and experiences of a range of Muslim women characters.

Representations

Representations—whether mass media, memoir or fiction—are central to this thesis. Thus, it is necessary to examine the concept of representation closely at the outset.

W. J. T. Mitchell asserts that 'representation is an extremely elastic notion which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing a day in the life of several Dubliners' (1995, 13). Stuart Hall, a prominent scholar of cultural studies, defines representation as 'an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It *does involve* the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things' (1997, 15; italics in

original). Stressing throughout that meaning is produced through representation, Hall refers to three main approaches to representation of meaning through language: the reflexive approach in which language is believed 'to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world' (1997, 24); the intentional approach which focuses on the speaker or the author and holds that 'it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language' (1997, 25); and the constructionist approach according to which 'neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't *mean*: we *construct* meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs' (1997, 25; italics in original).

The semiotic approach to representation, a variant of the constructionist approach, influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Ronald Barthes, argues that words and images and objects work like signifiers in the production of meaning, and 'representation [is] understood on the basis of the way words function[ ] as signs within language' (Hall 1997, 42). That is to say, according to this approach, representations are part of a system of signs, in the sense that an image or a text is not meaningful in isolation and its meaning is produced through representation and in differentiation from other signs.

In the discursive approach to representation, the other variant of the constructionist approach, influenced by Michele Foucault, meaning is 'constructed within discourse' (Hall 1997, 44). Foucault defines discourse as 'an entity of sequences of signs in that they are enouncements (enoncés)' (1969, 141). As Hall puts it, by discourse, Foucault refers to

> a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment … Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But … since all social practices entail *meaning,* and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect.
>
> (Hall 1997, 44; italics in original)

Foucault expands his theory of the discursive approach to representation by proposing theories about power, knowledge and truth and the link between them. He maintains that discourse produces knowledge, and knowledge is always implicated in relations of power. As he puts it , 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations' (Foucault 1977, 27). In Foucault's view knowledge linked to power can be taken as truth, and it is in this way that knowledge can have real effects and can be used to regulate the conduct of people because this knowledge is taken to be the 'truth'. Foucault, however, historicises truth, believing that each society in a specific period produces what he calls its 'regime of truth', which is discursively formed and has to do with the acceptable discourses at that time in that society:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the

> techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1980, 131)

Also, distancing himself from the conventional notion of the subject as an independent, stable entity, Foucault historicises the subject and talks about 'the constitution of the subject within a historical framework' (Foucault 1980, 115). According to Foucault, subjects, both those represented (those who are the subjects of discourse) and the recipients of representations (those who are subjected to discourse), are also produced within discourse (Foucault 1982, 1980). In other words, as Hall interprets Foucault, 'all discourses … construct subject-positions, from which alone they make sense' (Hall 1997, 56).

The discursive approach to representation, especially the Foucauldian model, with its emphasis on the relationship between power and knowledge, on the idea of the 'regime of truth', and on the way discourses produce knowledge, subjects and subject positions helps illuminate discussions about representations of Muslim women in the West in this thesis. As referred to in Chapter One and as I will argue further in Chapter Three in relation to orientalist discourse, there is a regime of truth and a balance of power in the West, which allows a discourse describing Muslim women as the victims of a cruel religion and Islam as a backward cruel religion to dominate. It can also be argued that because of the prevalence of this discourse in mainstream Western representations, the subjects of this discourse and/or knowledge need to struggle to escape from it or resist it. On the other hand, based on this approach, I argue that the selected fictional works, as representations, embody discourses and

ideologies which challenge the dominant discourses on Islam. In this regard, Mitchell comments that 'representation, even purely "aesthetic" representation of fictional persons and events, can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions' (1995, 15). Thus, it is also important to analyse and critique the discourses and ideologies informing these fictional works. However, because of the present power relations in the West, I also argue that discourses that challenge the dominant discourses about Islam might encounter more resistance from their recipients, who are mainly people in the West.

As well, the semiotic approach to representation is important for my purposes because the fictional representations are to be studied against competing or alternative representations. These different representations produce different meanings such as, on the one hand, that Muslim identity is imposed on Muslim women (as in dominant representations) and, on the other hand, that Muslim identity can be desired by Muslim women (as in the selected fiction). A semiotic comparison of these two sets of representations makes their meanings more pronounced for us.

In spite of the valid arguments in the constructionist approach to representation, some critics, including postpositivist realist ones, warn us of its excessive emphasis on discourses and language, and argue that there are some realities in the world which exist independently of discourses. As Linda Alcoff puts it, 'it is possible for human beings to have knowledge that is about the world as it is ... we are not caught in the " prison house of language" to such an extent that we can know nothing about the world at all' (2000, 315–316). In other words, postpositivists believe that there is an extra-linguistic reality which should be emphasised as much as language and

discourses when thinking about representation, and that objective knowledge, though mediated by language and theoretical presuppositions, is possible. This postpositivist theory of knowledge and reality also holds true for my thesis, since I argue that all forms of representation of Muslim women, whether dominant or marginal, are not wholly fabricated and are based on some version of reality. However, because of the overrepresentation of the reality of oppression of some Muslim women (or the discourse perpetuating the idea of oppression of Muslim women), many people might conclude that oppression is the only valid reality about Muslim women.

On the whole, I will draw on both constructionist and postpositivist theories of representation in the chapters that follow. The theories of representation discussed here can be applied almost equally to all the genres—media productions, memoirs and realist fiction—referred to or analysed in this thesis. All produce meaning about their subjects (a constructionist notion); all of them become meaningful when compared with other representations of the same subject (a semiotic notion); and finally all of them, to different degrees, are based on some version of reality in the social world (a postpositivist notion).

Identity

The exploration of religious identity, mainly in the selected novels, is one of the key areas of focus in this thesis. 'Identity is generally used to define and describe an individual's sense of self, group affiliations, structural positions, and ascribed and achieved statuses' (Peek 2005, 216–217). The question of identity in our contemporary world where culture clashes are a fact of life for many people has been one of the

important topics of investigation in cultural studies and postcolonial criticism, and a number of theories about identity have evolved in recent years.

A notion of identity that sees it as unified and fixed is no longer tenable, and especially based on the views of poststructuralists, identity now is conceived as 'becoming' rather than 'being', evolving, and always in a state of being re-constructed (Dillon 1999, 250). According to Gayatry Spivak, identity is not predetermined but is multifaceted and variable. In Spivak`s words,'there are many subject positions that one must inhabit; one is not just one thing' (Spivak 1990, 60). Hall is also against an essentialist model and argues for a discursive model of identity formation, in which discourses have a significant role in the construction of identity. As he puts it, 'identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions' (1996, 4). Hall sees a very close relationship between identity and representation. According to him, 'identities are … constituted within, not outside representation' (1996, 4). Identity is both the result of internal processes, such as self-reflection, subjective perception, and external circumstances such as the social environment (Peek 2005).

Postpositivist realists agree with postmodernists that identities are not essences, which have to be discovered; however, they believe that identities are not free-floating or totally constructed by discourses and forces beyond our control either. Identities, in the views of postpositivists, are partly determined by our social contexts. Postpositivists also take the view that individuals have agency in interpreting their identities. As Linda Alcoff argues,

> the postpositivist realists are against the conclusion that identities are merely fictions imposed from above … Identities are socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary(if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world … They are always subject to an individual's interpretation of their meaningfulness and salience in her or his own life. (2006, 4)

Paula Moya explains that according to the postpositivist realist theory of identity, identities are both constructed and real: 'identities are constructed because they are based on interpreted experience and on theories that explain the social and natural world, but they are also real because they refer outward to causally significant features of the world. Identities are thus context-specific ideological constructs' (2002, 86). Importantly, postpositivists also argue for the epistemic status of identity, believing that the way we interpret the world is largely determined by our identity (Moya 2002, 187). In this regard, Satya Mohanty argues that 'identities are ways of making sense of our experiences. They are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways' (1993, 55). According to this view, then, holders of different identities can have different interpretations of the world partly because of their different identities.

Such a view about identity prevents postpositivists from considering identity or identity politics as problematic. Their formulation of identity admits the variable, dynamic and negotiable character of identity and thus negates any essentialist notion of identity. Postpositivists also believe that identity politics—the relevance of identity

to political struggle—need not be feared. Rather, they admit the role of different discourses and ideologies in the interpretation of identity, and thus do not presume sameness and homogenization for those who identify with one category of identity because of their similar social locations. They also emphasize that our social locations and our identities can affect our actions, our interpretations of the world and our politics and that we can relate to certain communities because of our similar experiences. Hence, postpositivists introduce identity politics as a sometimes inevitable phenomenon rather than one to be avoided because it risks encouraging separatism or because it is based on a misconception of identity.[12] According to Alcoff:

> A realistic identity politics … is one that acknowledges the variability in an identity's felt significance and cultural meaning. Yet it is also one that recognizes that social categories of identity often helpfully name specific social locations from which individuals engage in, among other things, political judgment. What is there to fear in acknowledging that? (2000, 341)

Postpositivist theories of identity draw attention to the internal processes of identity formation, processes which are, of course, affected by the outer world and our social locations. This view about identity resonates with theories that foreground identity's dialogic nature, in the sense that the way the others view one affects the way one

[12] For an argument about the poststructuralist concerns about identity and the politics of identity see, for example, Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power,' in Dreyfus and Rabinow (eds.) (1982); Derrida, 'Women in the Beehive,' in Jardine and Smith (eds.) (1987) ; Derrida, 'Deconstruction and the Other,' in Kearney (ed.) (1984) and Butler(1990,1997).
For a postpositivist defence of identity politics see Moya (2000); Moya (2002) and Alcoff (2006).

views oneself.[13] This concept especially holds true for social identities. Erikson defines identity as a 'psycho-social phenomenon, where the sense of me and myself is formed in relation to others and their responses' (1980, 20–21). Charles Taylor, in his elaboration of his theory of the politics of recognition, reveals his dialogic conception of identity and comments that 'the making and sustaining of our identity, in the absence of a great effort to break out of ordinary existence, remains dialogic throughout our lives (1994, 32).[14] In line with the idea of the dialogic nature of identity, as also mentioned above, Hall especially sees identities as constructed within representations which embody discourses and ideologies, and argues that we are positioned by and position ourselves within the narratives and representations about us (Hall 1997). In Hall's words, identity is 'formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us' (1992, 277).

In short, identity is viewed in this thesis as context-specific, many-sided and always evolving, with an epistemic status and with real consequences in a person's life, partly constructed by ideologies to which one is exposed, personally interpreted, and finally with the social component of it having a dialogic nature, affected by how others view self and how the self is represented.

[13] These theories are based on Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave which stresses the importance of the existence of someone outside the self for the self to know itself. See Hegel (1931).

[14] I will further explain the theory of the politics of recognition in Chapter Six of this thesis.

Islamic identity[15]

Religious identity can be located as part of the repertoire of identities that individuals inhabit alongside their national, sexual, racial, class and ethnic identities (Zine 2007, 115). The saliency of religious identity differs from individual to individual and also can change in different stages of an individual's life. Based on this model, certain aspects of identity can become less or more salient and move up or down the so-called hierarchy model of identities (Peek 2005; Mol 1976; Vryan et al. 2003; Duderija 2007).

Although as Jasmin Zine says, 'being a Muslim is not simply a label divested of any associations to the religion of Islam' (2007, 116), not all people who have the identity label of Muslim are religiously observant. Ake Sander, for example, talks about four categories of people who are identified as Muslims: ethnic Muslims, cultural Muslims, religious Muslims and political Muslims. An ethnic Muslim is one who considers herself Muslim because of her Muslim parents and ethnic Muslim background; ethnic Muslims are, thus ethnically but not religiously oriented. A cultural Muslim is one who acts and socializes according to her Muslim ethnic and cultural origins, so a cultural Muslim is also culturally but not religiously oriented. Religious Muslims are those who actively practise Islam and who believe in specific religious ideas; they are religiously rather than ethnically or culturally oriented. Finally, political Muslims are the ones who believe in Islam, but this belief for them is mainly used for socio-political purposes (1997, 187). Of course, Muslims can belong to more than one of these categories. The fictional works I explore have, as their main characters, women

[15] Throughout the thesis, I have used both Islamic identity and Muslim identity to refer to the religious identity of Muslims; however, the term Muslim identity is used more because, as Zine suggests, the term Muslim identity 'allows more variability in the ways that Islam can be taken up and defined,' as opposed to the term 'Islamic identity', which evokes ideas of Islamic and un-Islamic practices, a contested area (2007, 127).

who, to different degrees, can be considered ethnic, cultural and especially and most importantly, as mentioned in Chapter One, religious Muslims.

Some critics, in discussing religious identity, highlight the significance of both the religious and the social designation of religious identity (Eid 2002; Zine 2007; Duderija 2007). Zine, elaborating on this model, explains that the social component of religious identity can be discursively constructed through representations and is complicated by 'discontinuities, contradictions and opposing frameworks' (2007, 112). The religious designation, however, is more firmly fixed by Islamic ideologies, beliefs and practices, which are mainly based on the foundational texts of Islam, especially the Quran. The religious designation is more related to internal processes of identity formation, as this designation is also a matter of personal interpretation of Islamic beliefs and practices as well as the foundational texts of Islam. Zine, drawing on Abou El Fadl (2002), Barlas (2002) and Wadud (1999), emphasises that although foundational texts of Islam are limited in number, religiously oriented Muslims do not share the same interpretations of these texts, and interpretations of these texts are 'shaped and informed by the social, political, moral and gendered location of the interpreter' (Zine 2007, 114).[16] Therefore, there are multiple interpretations of Islam and multiple forms of religious designation of religious identity. Thus, both the social and religious components of Muslim identity are partly, though not wholly, discursively constructed.

Nonetheless, Muslim identity, especially its religious designation, because of its being evaluated by adherence to Muslim religious tenets and spirituality, cannot be treated as

[16] It can be argued that the social and religious designations of Muslim identity are not separable from each other as one certainly affects the other.

free-floating, and 'there can still be said to be certain constant references in the construction of Islamic identity' (Zine 2007, 112). Zine challenges those anti-essentialist models of construction of Muslim identity which fragment it to the extent that it is divested of spirituality and reduced to a social designation 'devoid of attachment to religious practice' (Zine 2007, 114). Thus Zine sees and defines Muslim identity in relation to belief in Islam and not just as a cultural identity, applicable to those who are only culturally and/or ethnically Muslim. Zine, in her explanation of Muslim identity, walks the narrow line between essentialist and discursive orientations to identity and argues that:

> While it is necessary to avoid the dangers of religious fundamentalism and narrow and rigid formulations of Islamic identification, we can at the same time, argue for locating the basis for an Islamic identity within the framework of spiritual beliefs and practices. This perspective does not detract from acknowledging epistemological diversity within the Islamic tradition, yet does locate Islamic identity within its spiritual grounding… I believe that it is possible to honour the diversity of the ways in which Islam is practiced and lived without divesting the notion of Islamic identity from its grounding in a broad spiritual framework.
>
> (Zine 2007, 116)

Zine's model of Muslim identity formation, significant to the argument I develop, can also be explained in postpositivist terms. I argued above that postpositivism emphasises that identities are context-specific and have epistemic status. Although

postpositivism does not specifically explain religious identity, it is possible to argue that in the case of religious identity, Islam's foundational texts and spirituality form the specific contexts of Muslim identity, preventing Muslim identity from being free-floating. Also, we can argue that, within the frame of postpositivist realism and in relation to their idea of the epistemic component of identity, having the identity of Muslim can give Muslim people some specific knowledge about the world. Being religiously oriented, according to Zine, equips Muslim women, for example, with 'an alternative faith-centred epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it' (Zine 2004,181). However, this knowledge of the world, as postpositivists also argue, is not singular because competing discourses and ideologies intervene in our interpretations of the world and because 'Muslim women occupy a variety of ideological, sectarian and discursive spaces within the broad parameters of Islamic tradition' (Zine 2004, 181).

Experience and experience-oriented texts

Because I argue that Muslim women's identities and experiences with religion can be different from what we see in dominant representations, and that the selected novels depict experiences with the religion of Islam which are underrepresented in the West, a brief exploration of the notion of experience and of experience-oriented texts is warranted.

Experience has been defined as 'the fact of personally observing, encountering, or undergoing a particular event or situation' (Moya 2002, 38). The notion of experience, like identity, has undergone various re-evaluations in cultural studies in recent years. That experience is to be taken as incontestable evidence and the origin of knowledge,

as some historians treat it, has been challenged by poststructuralists, as this way of viewing experience, they argue, essentializes identity, naturalizes experience and ignores the role of discourses in the construction of experience.[17] As Joan Scott, for example, argues, when we conceive experience in this way, what happens is that:

> Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.
>
> (Scott 1991, 777)

These arguments about experience are important. Nonetheless, they should not distract us from the importance of experience to the extent that we ignore it completely. Shari Stone-Mediatore critiques Scott's work, arguing that although she is right in drawing our attention to the crucial point of the discursive nature of experience, experience and narratives of experience still need to be taken as important, especially because of their role in social resistances. Drawing on the ideas of Chandra Talpade Mohanty on experience, she proposes a description that does not explain experience as unquestionable evidence (Stone-Mediatore 2000, 116) or as 'transparent and prior to language' (Stone-Mediatore 2000, 119). However, in this view, experience is not

[17] On the subject of experience treated like incontestable evidence, see, for example, LaCapra (1987).

defined only as a mirror of available discourses (2000, 115) or a 'linguistic event' (Stone- Mediatore2000, 112, quoted from Joan Scott 1991, 793), as the poststructuralists might argue. This notion recognizes the role of cultural processes that help create experiences and identities (2000, 116), yet it does not dismiss experience and especially recognizes the importance of stories of experience in resistance praxis.

A postpositivist perspective proposes a similar approach to experience, especially in the importance attached to people's experiences. A close relationship between identity and experience is affirmed in this approach, arguing that one's experience largely affects one's social identity and vice versa. Thus, for the postpositivists, experiences are 'not wholly external events'; 'experiences happen to us' and they are mediated by theories in the sense that 'the meanings we give our experiences are inescapably conditioned by the ideologies and theories through which we view the world' (Moya 2002, 38–39). Also postpositivists argue for the epistemic component of experience. As Moya puts it, postpositivist realists believe that 'experience *in its mediated form* contains an epistemic component through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world' (2002, 39; italics in original). That is to say, in the same way that experience is informed by discourses and ideologies, the experiences that we have themselves partly cause us to have certain ideas about the world.

Postpositivists also emphasise that the experiences that we are likely to have are largely determined by our social location (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) or identities. As an example Paula Moya argues that in North American society the

experiences that a person who is 'racially coded' as "white" has differ significantly from the experiences of a person who is 'racially coded' as black (2002, 39).[18] In this thesis, as I consider an individual's religion as part of her/his social location, in line with postpositivist arguments, I also argue that being coded as a Muslim, especially in a Western country, can result in people's having different experiences from those of people who are not coded as Muslims. These experiences can include discrimination, misrepresentation, stereotyping and othering.[19] Therefore, the politics of identity for Muslims in Western societies, in objection to and in the hope of changing their unpleasant experiences, is still relevant.

Thus, fiction and non-fiction texts based on experiences of people, especially those based on marginal experiences, are also significant as these texts are sources of knowledge; they help readers see the world from the perspective of others, and they can show the tensions constituting those experiences (Mohanty, 1991). Mohanty, who especially focuses on the experience-oriented texts of third-world women, importantly, describes such texts as 'significant mode[s] of remembering and recording experience and struggles' (Mohanty 1991, 33), and as a site for the production of knowledge about 'lived relations' (1991, 35). Texts that deal with the experiences of the marginalized, as critics argue, can facilitate readers' rethinking their view of the world (Mohanty 1991; Harding 1991; Stone-Mediatore 2000). In effect, we can recognize such texts as an opportunity for 'thinking from the

[18] The postpositivist view of the relationship between identity and experience and of the consequences of asserting certain identities in the world explains once more why identity politics is viewed in this approach as sometimes unavoidable; members of minority groups can form political alliances because they need to change their conditions of life: conditions, in this case, which may be, in part, the results of their shared identities.
[19] Subjective religious and spiritual experiences form another set of experiences which a religiously oriented Muslim can have.

standpoint' of the lives of other people (Harding1991; Stone-Mediatore 2000, 123). In other words, these texts help readers see the familiar world with awareness of issues that hegemonic discourses do not allow us to see. Moreover, these texts can show tensions within experience, 'tensions that reflect the kinds of agency, community, or consciousness' that hegemonic discourses do not often represent (Stone-Mediatore 2000, 123).

The novels explored in this thesis quite obviously reimagine marginalized experiences. They delve into the lives of Muslim women in the West, offering insights difficult to find in Western hegemonic discourses. The novels thus invite Western readers to reconsider Muslim women's lives in light of these narratives, and to witness the tensions and complexities inherent in these women's experience of Islam. The popular Muslim memoirs published in the West are also stories of experience; however, I argue the discourses about Muslim women that these memoirs embody are not really very different from dominant Western discourses that stereotype Muslim women.

Realist novels

As the selected texts for this thesis are realist novels, in this section, I aim to show how the technique of realism in particular narratives help us account for the representational and political functions of these narratives.

The selected texts are all realist novels in the sense that they are not, in general, experimental texts, and they 'gesture towards a non-verbal materiality' (Morris 2003,

155), which, for the purposes of this study, means gesturing to what the life of a Muslim woman, especially in the West, might be like. Of course, the claims of exact correspondence between these stories and the real life of people are less strong than the claims of autobiographical texts. However, these realist novels, as Pam Morris contends in her definition of the realist text, are based on a 'consensual contract with the reader that communication about a non-textual reality is possible' (2003, 162). In other words, the implied reader is encouraged to accept that there are Muslim women in the real world whose lives might be similar to the protagonists imagined in these novels.

Various strands of modernist, postmodernist and especially poststructuralist criticism have raised some challenges against realist fiction, describing realism as inadequate in portraying the lives of contemporary men and women. The defenders of realism, however, have attempted to reply to the critics of realism. Below, some of these challenges and defences of realism are presented.

One important premise of realist novels, namely that knowledge and communication about an external world is possible, has been the subject of criticism by modernists, postmodernists and poststructuralists. Virginia Woolf complains that reality is too elusive to be put within the orderly frames of the realist novel (1924, 1925). Poststructuralists, such as Ronald Barthes, insist that our knowledge of the world is mediated through language and the discourses of our time and they stress the fictionality of all knowledge (1957). Adorno and associates of the Frankfurt School, linking the realist novel to the Enlightenment view of rational knowledge and human

progress, believe that realist novels naturalize the status quo and bourgeois morality. They carry the message that this is the way things are (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Morris 2003, 14–44).

However, realism has been defended against these charges. Two main points that need to be addressed in this defence are the idea about the possibility of having knowledge of the world and the idea about the way the realist novels produce this knowledge of the world. As to the idea about the knowledge of the world that we can have, postpositivist theorists, for example, argue that we do not have to accept either of the extremes that reality is an object that can be understood by us, the subjects, the project of Enlightenment rationality, or that reality cannot be grasped by us at all, the poststructuralist proposition. Postpositivists, such as Donald Davidson, take the middle ground and argue, first like postmodernists, that the world we know is always an interpreted world and the contact with reality is always mediated by language; however, they also maintain that it does not mean that objective reality does not exist (Davidson 1984). Moya, also thus describes the postpositivist conception of objectivity: '(1) all knowledge and observation is theory mediated (that is, mediated by language, bias, or theoretical presuppositions—as, indeed, postmodernists argue) *and* that (2) a theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable' (2002, 14). Then, based on this theory, it can be argued that the fictional world that the realist novels represent is a mediated one, but the point is that this mediated objective knowledge of this world, this reality, is possible. In Matthew Beaumont's words, 'in realism the assumption is that it is possible through an act of representation to provide access to reality… which though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, by language, is nonetheless independent of it' (2007, 2).

By extension, critics such as Jurgen Habermas believe that the knowledge of the world that realist texts create is never based on a kind of subject/object knowledge production. In other words, readers cannot be perceived as passive receivers of information in the novels about the real world. Instead, because of the illocutionary force of any language or speech, including novelistic language, people pass judgement on the truth of reality as presented in the novel. In other words, reading of novels is an interactive, creative act, and the role of the reader should not be ignored. Habermas, in this regard, states, 'as soon as we conceive of knowledge as communicatively mediated, rationality is assessed in terms of the capacity of responsible participants to orient themselves in relation to validity claims geared to intersubjective recognition' (1987,314). This intersubjective communication requires the reader to constantly adjust her ideas to that of the text and judge and question the text.[20] However, as argued earlier, different factors can affect the interpretive frameworks of readers.

Another challenge raised against realist novels is that they naturalize already-established beliefs. Although it is true that the formal aspects of realist text can produce a 'comforting sense of the world as we expect it to be', the same formal aspects can produce an opposite effect (Morris 2003, 99). The same formal structures, as Morris reminds us, can 'draw attention to underlying epistemological assumptions that shape our perception of social reality [and] de-naturalize these structures so that they become visible to us and we are able to think beyond their limits' (2003, 99). In other words, realist texts have the potential to disrupt our perceptions of reality, a potential which can be discovered by discerning readers. Also, speaking in the

[20] The same argument can be made about reading memoirs.

language of the discursive approach to representations, we can argue that all texts, realist and nonrealist, can, through what they present, what they omit and what they emphasise, embody discourses different from what the regime of truth of the society prescribes, thus ever more questioning the naturalized views of the readers.

Finally, poststructuralists argue that realist texts cannot sufficiently convey the multiplicity and plurality of identity. In fact, the dependence of the realist text on the representation of unified individuals has aroused the resistance of poststructuralists who believe in plural identities. The realist text arguably delineates the development of an individual with a single identity, an individual who in the course of the narrative finally comes to a "truth" in her/his life, issues that the poststructuralists cannot agree with. As Morris puts it, poststructuralism 'has shattered the traditional concept of individual identity as the authenticating origin of meaning and truth: of individuals as conscious agents of their own history and as authors of their own stories … poststructuralist thinking asserts the always plural nature of identity and the indeterminacy of meaning' (1993, 158–159).

There is truth in the argument of poststructuralists about the inadequacy of realist style in describing the multiplicity of identity. However, it can still be argued that realist texts best suit the representation of identities, the stories/histories and political purposes of marginalized groups, whose histories and particular concerns need to be exposed. It has been pointed out that poststructuralism suffers from ahistoricism and universalism, and poststructuralist theories of gender construction have constructed "women", for example, with no political or historical specificity. For marginalized

groups, however, such as blacks, lesbians and also Muslim women, the political agenda of enacting identity politics is very important (Morris, 1993).

In the case of Muslim women, for example, as has been discussed so far in the thesis, we can safely say that a Muslim woman's identity is regularly stereotyped and demeaned in dominant Western discourses. Therefore, although espousing the essentialist notions of identity, especially after the works of poststructuralists, is no longer acceptable, we can still argue that as far as political issues are concerned, marginalized people, such as Muslim women in the West, cannot afford descriptions of identity as only mobile and multiple. As Morris puts it, 'an empowering notion of a shared and knowable identity *is* necessary to activate political struggle against homophobia' (1993, 173; italics in original), and many poststructuralists seem to pay 'little attention to the urgency with which many women have turned to literary texts as a means of finding a positive identity in opposition to demeaning cultural images' (1993, 165). Moreover, the realist texts' power to represent the everyday lives, routines and experiences of characters also serves those marginalized groups whose experiences are generally either not represented or misrepresented in dominant discourses. Therefore, realist texts which explore identities of individuals or groups, especially marginalized ones, are valid, even after weighing up the merits of poststructuralist interventions.

The question of authenticity

Another area in the study of representations of identity and experience that deserves our attention is the relationship between the source of representation—whether memoirs or fiction—and the value that can be attached to that representation. Can we

judge representations based on their sources (the origins and historical positioning of their authors or creators)? Are some representations truer than some others because of their sources? Does having a certain identity guarantee the truth of representations of that identity or experiences offered by the holder of that identity? Does any authentic representation ever exist? How much importance do we need to ascribe to authenticity?

These questions are important for this thesis, firstly because an important part of the background against which the selected novels are studied are life narratives by Muslim women, especially well-received because of the native status of the author. Secondly, the selected novels in this thesis are by authors three of whom are Muslim and one of whom is a non-Muslim.

To discuss this point, I briefly explain three forms of representations: our representation of people from a different social location to our own, our representation of people from the same social location as ours, and our representation of self. By social location, following Mohanty, I mean the cultural, ethnic, class, racial and religious backgrounds of people (1984). Then I argue that the connection between the source of representation and the truth or falsehood of that representation is not strong enough to be depended upon and that no representations are unproblematic.

Representing or speaking for people from different social locations to our own can be problematic because of the role of social locations in determining our knowledge of

the world and our experiences (Mohanty, 1984). People from different social locations, as also argued by the postpositivists, can have different knowledge about the world and different interpretations of their experiences. Therefore, representations of them which are based on universalist assumptions or on our own experiences affected by our particular social locations are not necessarily true. However, these arguments do not mean that if one is from a certain culture, one can represent the people of the same culture with no problem. People with similar social locations do not necessarily have the same experiences or knowledge of the world as each other. Not only are there many sub-cultures in all cultures but there are individual differences between people within any culture (Narayan, 2000). In other words, people with similar social locations can have different conceptualization of reality as realities are mediated by discourses. Even self-representations cannot give a true picture of the self as there are many mediatory forces, discourses and ideologies that affect the way we might represent ourselves, and that we might not be aware of (Alcoff 1991).[21]

Based on the above discussion, we might come to the view that we perhaps need to be more cautious when talking about the authenticity of representations, especially the authenticity of the accounts of 'native informants'.[22] Granting authenticity to the accounts of some people from a culture means disregarding the perspectives of others from the same culture (Kaplan, 1996, 187) and disregarding the mediatory discourses

[21] For a brilliant discussion of the problems of self-representation and of speaking for others, see Alcoff (1991).
[22]The term, 'native informant', was first used by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present* (1999).

and ideologies affecting that representation.[23] In other words, non-natives who represent us should not be our only suspects.

It seems that representation becomes a less problematic field if we focus on the discourses constituting representations rather than their truth or authenticity based on their sources and the knowledge of the sources of "reality" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 215). Although we need to acknowledge that there are few representations that are wholly fabricated and have no basis in some external reality, we also learn through especially postpositivist theories that realities are mediated by discourses and ideologies. In other words, examining the discourse or ideology embodied in a particular representation and then analysing/criticizing that discourse is much safer than examining the truth or authenticity of a representation. Examining the discourses entails analysing the power relations implicated in that discourse, the predominance of the discourse and the effects of that discourse on the represented. In fact, the effects of representation need to be considered as even more important than the source, the truth or the authenticity of it.[24] If representations, for example, keep on stereotyping and dehumanizing the subjects of representation, then we need to question them.

[23]As Caren Kaplan and other critics have asserted, the politics of location, which emphasises locality and specificity in women's lives in response to homogenizing and universalizing tendencies, suggested by Adrianne Rich, in spite of its advantages including the deconstruction of hegemonic understandings of gender, for example, can lead us to believe that every local informant can speak for her own culture and on behalf of all her people (Mohanty is considered a more contemporary upholder of the politics of location). In other words, location is dangerous when it is constructed 'to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and reaffirmed' (Kaplan 1996, 187). Kaplan, as we see, is worried about the uses of the politics of location, especially in the case of essentialist conceptualizations of it and attaching excessive importance to the authenticity of the accounts of 'native informants'.

[24] Linda Alcoff also argues that the central point in representation is not the source of representation, but the effect of representation (1991, 28). As she puts it, 'source is relevant only to the extent that it has an impact on effect' (1991, 29). Instead of focusing on the source of the view we should see what the effects of the view are 'on material and discursive practices through which it traverses and the particular configuration of power relations emergent from these' (1991, 28-29). In short, Alcoff rightly argues that 'one must look at where the speech goes and what it does there' (1991, 26).

If we focus on discourses, then, we can perhaps argue that anyone can represent anyone else's and her own identity and experience. We need, of course, to be careful not to take any representation, of self and other, as pure truths about the subjects of representations, as all representations are complicated processes involving selections and omissions of different 'realities', selections and omissions which are based on power relations, discourses and ideologies.

The representation of identity and experiences is apparently never free of problems. However, this does not mean that representations need to be abandoned. As Spivak comments, 'as long as one remains aware that it is a problematic field, there is some hope' (1990, 63). Linda Alcoff argues that if the person who represents is conscious of 'the particular power relations and discursive effects involved', representations become less dangerous acts (1991, 24).

The arguments in this section about the source of representation and the authenticity or falsehood of its account are applicable both to memoirs and to realist novels as two forms of representations; however, since an important reason for the positive reception of memoirs is the link in popular culture between the authenticity of memoirs and the status of their authors as native informants, the arguments become even more important for the discussion of popular memoirs.

The next chapter deals with the contemporary mainstream representations of Muslim women in the West, with a focus on popular genre of Muslim women's memoirs published in the West. The theoretical issues discussed in this chapter will be applied to the discussion of this genre.

Chapter Three: Contemporary Western literary representations of Muslim women

In the introduction to this thesis, I made the point that since colonial times Western representations of Muslim women have predominantly produced the image of abject, oppressed Muslim women. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss the history of literary representations of Muslim women in the West since the Middle Ages, as well as Said's critique of orientalist discourse, which is claimed to be the dominant discourse embodied in the representations of Muslim women in the West, both literary and non-literary, since the eighteenth century. However, the main focus of this chapter will be on one form of contemporary literary representations of Islam and Muslim women in Western popular culture, namely, popular memoirs by Muslim women. Thus, I will argue in this chapter, through the discussion of significant features of such contemporary memoirs, that the discourse that still largely shapes these contemporary representations of Muslim women and Islam is not very different from well-worn Orientalist discourses on Muslim women: the Muslim women in these memoirs are still represented as 'exotic others' and as victims in need of liberation. I also argue that such representations of Islam and Muslim women are still received as credible and "truthful" in the West, an important reason for the perpetuation of such representations.

At the same time, I argue that these representations are based on some aspects of real experience about the lives of Muslim women, although the predominance of Orientalist representations suggests that it is the only reality. Therefore, this chapter

takes both a discursive and a postpositivist approach to the representations of Muslim women through which I argue that the image of oppressed Muslim woman is partly constructed and partly real.

Orientalism

Orientalism (Said, 1978), despite the number of significant challenges mounted against its premises in the years following its publication, is still considered the seminal text for scholars when trying to define the way Muslim women have been represented in recent Western representations; therefore, a brief overview of the work is necessary here. In that book Said argues that the idea of the Orient is a construct by Western writers, travellers and commentators—Orientalists—of particularly the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that the knowledge that these Orientalists have constructed gives a picture of the Orient, including Muslim culture, as twisted, backward and inferior. This knowledge, he argues, has been fully at the service of the colonialist project, providing excuses for expansion and exploitation.

In Said's own words 'Orientalism was the discourse by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period' (1978, 3).[25] This discourse, 'supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an

[25] Said, in formulating his ideas about the discourse of Orientalism, draws on Michel Foucault's theories about discourse, on the relationship between power and knowledge and the idea of regime of truth and on Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony. See pages 3, 14, 22, 23, 94, 119, 130, 135, 188 of *Orientalism* (1978) for references to Foucault and pages 6, 7, 11, 14, 24 and 26 of the same book for references to Gramsci. Also see Gramsci (2010, 1994).

atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics' (Said 1978, 42). Orientalism, as explained by Said, deals with the Orient by 'making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it' (Said 1978, 3). In short, the discourse of Orientalism is 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said1978, 3). In fact, it is especially the idea of Orientalism as a *discourse* that, according to critics like Robert Young, accounts for the success of Said's *Orientalism* (Young 2001, 308).

Nonetheless, Said's text (1978) has been taken to task and criticised by a range of critics. Most agree with Said's general framework but point out the shortfalls in its methodological approach. Some have complained that Said has overgeneralized about all Orientalists and the Western discourse on the Orient over some two millennia (Porter 1994, Malik1996); others have argued that *Orientalism* is a pessimistic work (Johansen 1990); some such as Albert Hourani have written of the necessity of locating orientalist discourse in its historical context (1979). Also, some critics have criticised Said for not specifying the characteristics of the Orient while critiquing the discourse of Orientalism (Kerr 1980, Turner 1989).

However, as some other critics argue, in spite of some valid criticism, there is still a lot of truth in Said's critique of Orientalism. For example, and as Hamid Dabashi also observes, Said validly argues that the discourse of Orientalism needs to be criticized because Orientalism is a kind of *representation* of Orientals by the West (2009; italics added). This representation considers 'the Orient' as a knowable entity, produces a

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certain type of knowledge about it and takes this knowledge as the truth about 'the Orient'. It is in spite of the fact that all representations are 'flawed', especially because of the role of power relations in the production of knowledge and because of differences in the cultural and intellectual backgrounds of the represented and those who represent (Said 2004, 48). In this regard Said himself states in *Orientalism* (1978) that

> My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence—in which I do not for a moment believe—but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting. (1978, 273)

Mani and Frankenberg (1985) also dismiss the criticisms of Orientalism which ask for real definitions of 'the Orient'. Rather, they argue that 'Said's task … is not to articulate the 'real' Orient but to elaborate Orientalism: the context in which a Western discourse about the Orient was produced, the intellectual traditions that fed it and its internal logic and consistency' (1985, 186). In other words, the central theme of *Orientalism* calls into suspicion the practice of giving truth status to the knowledge produced through Orientalist scholarship without considering the conditions under which this knowledge is produced. The central theme of *Orientalism*, unlike its methodology, cannot easily be challenged.

As will be further explained below, most of the criteria that, according to Said, determine the discourse of Orientalism, including the role of power relations in the

construction of knowledge about oriental subjects, the particular aim or purpose of the Orientalists in their representations, and the constructedness of the image of the oriental subjects hold true for the dominant Western discourse on Muslim women. This discourse exoticizes and essentializes all Muslim women 'as an undifferentiated category marked by oppression', creating an image of them which can serve those in power in the West both politically and financially (Zine 2002, 13); hence this type of Western discourse is designated as an Orientalist discourse on Muslim women.[26] However, as discussed throughout this thesis, I believe that this discourse is only partly constructed, and there are Muslim women whose agency is inarguably restricted in their Muslim societies.

A history of Western literary representation of Muslim women

Mohja Kahf in her book *Western representations of the Muslim woman: from termagant to odalisque* (1999) has carried out a survey of literary representations of Muslim women in Western discourses from medieval times up to eighteenth century. An important point that she makes in her book is that such representations have not always been the same during the course of history, and the Orientalist image of a victim Muslim woman, the predominant contemporary image, which seems natural and timeless, has not been the image that Western discourses have always produced about Muslim women. Studying a number of texts, especially literary books and travel books written originally in English, French, Italian and Spanish, from medieval to Romantic periods in the history of Europe, Kahf argues that this image before the eighteenth century had not been a unified one. She argues that what could affect the

[26] See below for further explanation of the relationship between the Orientalist image of Muslim women and the political and financial profits of the powerful in the West.

representations of Muslim women and the construction of knowledge about them have been the geographical origins of the representing texts, the preoccupations of the time, the material or ideological conditions affecting the relationship between the West and Islamic societies, and the shift in the balance of power relations between the West and the Muslim world (1999, 3–9).[27]

Muslim women of the European medieval texts are not submissive or oppressed. Rather, they are 'masculinized' warriors, reflecting the European discourse on Islam as the creed of idol-worshipping enemies (Kahf 1999, 53). Kahf argues that in the Middle Ages there was a clear enmity between the Islamic empire and the Christian world which finally led to the Crusades. The Islamic empire (especially the Ottoman Turks and the Moors of North Africa) was the subject of envy and a source of threat for Europe because of its material wealth and power. Also, Muslims were loathed by the Christians because of their 'heretical' religion. That is the reason why, in medieval texts, the archetype of Muslim woman which emerges is that of a 'termagant', a medieval term for a 'quarrelsome and overbearing woman' (Kahf 1999, 33). In medieval romances this bold and powerful Muslim noblewoman falls in love with a Christian hero and finally converts to Christianity, immigrates to Christian lands and allows the Christians to capture the citadel and the fortunes of her father, maintaining balance between Christians and Muslims (Kahf 1999, 19).

Renaissance views on Islam are more lenient, as during the Renaissance religious difference is less of an issue than it had been in medieval times. In fact, there is an

[27] Of course, there has always been so much diversity among Muslims, and the idea of the existence of a 'Muslim world' is only an ideological construct, strategically used as a binary opposition to the 'Christian world'. In the same way, the Western world has never been homogenous, and the terms 'the West' and 'the Western world' are used strategically in this thesis.

'equilibrium' (Kahf 1999, 60) in representations of Muslim women in Renaissance texts, and these women are represented as much more feminine than women in medieval texts.[28] However, with the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in the sixteenth century and the desire to purge Spain of everything associated with Moors, a shift in the Renaissance image starts. Kahf argues that *Don Quixote* by Cervantes (1605) is the text where a new archetype enters Renaissance texts, which embodies the Spanish fear of alien forces. In Cervantes' text the Muslim princess is reinvented as the 'rescued Muslim maiden', her role shifting from active to passive, her agency lost. (Kahf1999, 56–58).

In the eighteenth century and with the colonial intervention of Europe in Muslim lands, Muslim women come to be represented in Western discourses as helpless repressed victims, odalisques, still without agency, and in need of rescue from their misogynist cultures. This kind of representation was the sort the colonialists needed as it 'helped generate a supportive cultural environment for the colonization of the Islamic lands' (1999, 117), creating consent and justification for colonial expansions. The inaccessibility produced by the veil also gave rise to the creation of colonialists' various fantasies about Muslim women.

No significant shift in the representation of Muslim women has happened since then (Kahf 1999, 2000; Zine 2002). As Kahf puts it:

[28] Also, and as another reason for this change of attitude toward Muslim women, we can refer to the point that the Muslim world was no longer the main threat to Christianity as Mongol invaders and Persians enter the scene as well. Europe's increase in wealth due to expanding trade and relationship with the wider world also result in Europe acquiring greater economic equality with the Muslim world (Kahf 1999, 65).

> The dominant narrative of the Muslim women in Western discourse from about the eighteenth century to the present basically states, often in quite sophisticated ways, that the Muslim woman is innately oppressed; it produces Muslim women who affirm this statement by being either submissive nonentities or rebellious renegades—rebellious against their own Islamic world, that is, and conforming to Western gender roles. (1999, 177)

In recent years a new image, that of a militant pawn of male power, has also appeared in Western discourses, in addition to the image of the victim or escapee Muslim woman; 'still these new images are being absorbed into the paradigm of the oppressed Muslim female' (Kahf 1999, 177; 2000) .

This thesis also argues, along with a number of critics, that the discourse of Orientalism, even today, forms the backbone of many Western representations of Islam and Muslim people in popular culture, especially media representations and popular memoirs, and that Muslim people and Muslim women in particular are still in these representations constructed as inferior and backward (Kahf 1999, 2000; Keshavarz 2007; Zine 2002; Dabashi 2006; Smith 2007). In Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's words, 'the discourse of Orientalism persists into the present, particularly in the West's relationship with "Islam", as evidenced in its study, its reporting in the media, its representation in general' (2007,164). This discourse fixes Muslim woman's identity and emphasises that Muslim identity is imposed on Muslim women, situating them as victims. Nevertheless, I acknowledge throughout the thesis that the experience of oppression that Orientalist representations also refer to is what some

Muslim women, though by no means all, have experienced in their lives mostly due to patriarchal systems of their societies rather than the women's belief that their religion is imposed on them.

Since an important and unchallenged part of this discourse is that Muslim women are oppressed *because* of Islam, described as a backward, cruel religion, I will focus on Orientalist representations of both Islam and Muslim women in the following sections.

Muslim popular memoirs

Media representations of Muslims (the press, TV and radio programs, cinema productions, internet texts) do not comprise the only contemporary representations of Muslims to which people in the West are exposed. There are many scholarly books and articles and books of fiction or non-fiction about Muslim issues that are published every day in Western countries. Among these publications, the genres of life narratives as well as popular fiction about Muslim women have a wide readership in the West.

Memoirs and popular literature about Islam, Muslim women and Muslim countries have been among the best sellers in the West. It is not just the memoirs of Muslim women that sell well. Sales of memoirs in general are thriving, perhaps particularly as a result of their claim to authenticity and their fulfilling the reader's 'desire for facts

and truth…promised by the autobiographical pact' (Whitlock 2007, 111; Gilmore 2001).[29]

The emergence of the genre of memoirs by Muslim women might be considered an improvement on Western media representations of Islam and of Muslims women, because with popular memoirs of Muslim women, it appears that we are at least moving from the representation of 'others' (Western media or Western non-Muslims representing Muslim women) to self-representation. However, a closer study of these memoirs demonstrates that they harness discourses similar to those favoured by the media and it is still the reductionist, Orientalist framework in defining Muslim women which is generally embodied in these works.[30]

Although these memoirs, as narratives of experience, should be valued for the experiences of Muslim women that they embody and despite my emphasis in this thesis on the importance of narrating experience, I still consider that the texts falling into this genre typically resort to Orientalist representations and continue to stereotype Muslim women's identities. A number of other scholars have similarly suggested that traces of Orientalist discourse can be found in the genre of life narrative or memoir. Aminah McCloud, an American scholar in gender and Islam, wonders if they are a 'new kind of Orientalism' as they 'continue to present Muslim women as exotic others'

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[29] For a further study of the subject of autobiography, see, for example, Smith and Watson (2008); Anderson (2001); and Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield (2000).
Generally speaking, the term 'life narrative' refers to stories about our lives or the lives of others. Autobiography and memoir, sometimes used interchangeably, are both about the life of a person, written by that person. However, autobiography typically covers the author's entire life span, while memoir usually focuses on an aspect or a period of a person's life.
[30] Some critics argue that certain contemporary Western feminist scholarship reproduces reductionist and stereotypical discourses about 'Third World' women; in such scholarship Muslim women are still constructed in colonial and Orientalist terms. See, for example, Chandra Mohanty (1984, 1991, 2003) and Zine (2002). The focus of this thesis, however, is the contemporary literary representations of Muslim women rather than feminist writing on them.

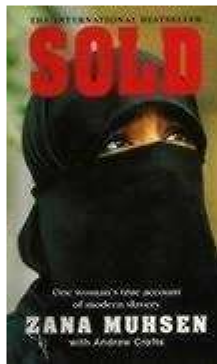
(Smith 2007, 22). Fatemeh Keshavarz is even more blunt in her citing of these memoirs as examples of the practice of a new Orientalism (2007).

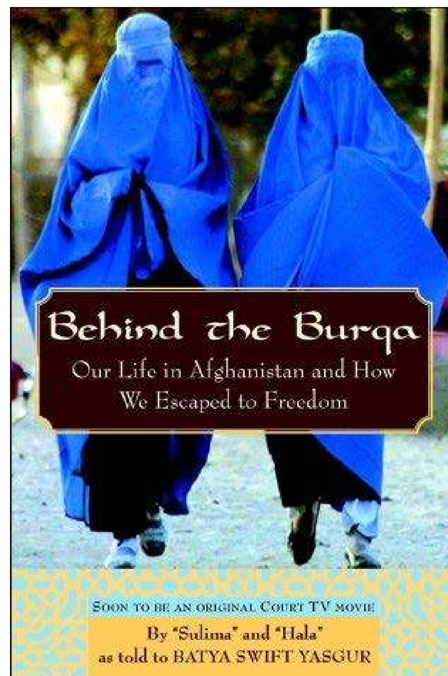
In what follows I firstly explore what meaning and knowledge these life narratives can produce in regard to Islam and Muslim culture, and I then discuss the production and reception contexts of this genre, as both these have an important role to play in the persistence of dominant knowledge about Muslim women that these memoirs produce in popular culture.

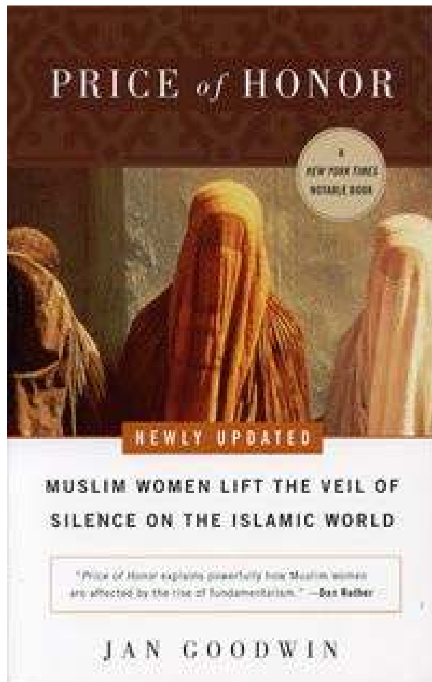
As to the meaning that these memoirs produce, it can be argued that the content and paratexts of this popular literature about Muslim women pursue the argument/ discourse that Muslim women under Islam are oppressed, abject and in need of liberation by Westerners, and that Islam is violent and backward.[31] The titles, subtitles and images on the cover form the peritexts of the memoirs. Some of the titles of these memoirs are as follows: *Burned alive: the survivor of an honor killing speaks* (Souad, 2005); *Sold: one woman's true account of Modern slavery* (Muhsin, 1994); *My forbidden face*: *growing up under the Taliban: a young woman's story* (Latifa, 2002); *Behind the burqa: our life in Afghanistan and how we escaped to freedom* (Swift Yasqur, 2002); *Price of Honor: Muslim Women lift the veil of silence on the Islamic world* (Goodwin, 1995)*; Princess: a true story of life behind the veil in Saudi Arabia* (Sasson, 2001).[32] Clearly, the sensationalist language used in the titles draws the reader or even the viewer's attention to the idea of victimhood of Muslim women.

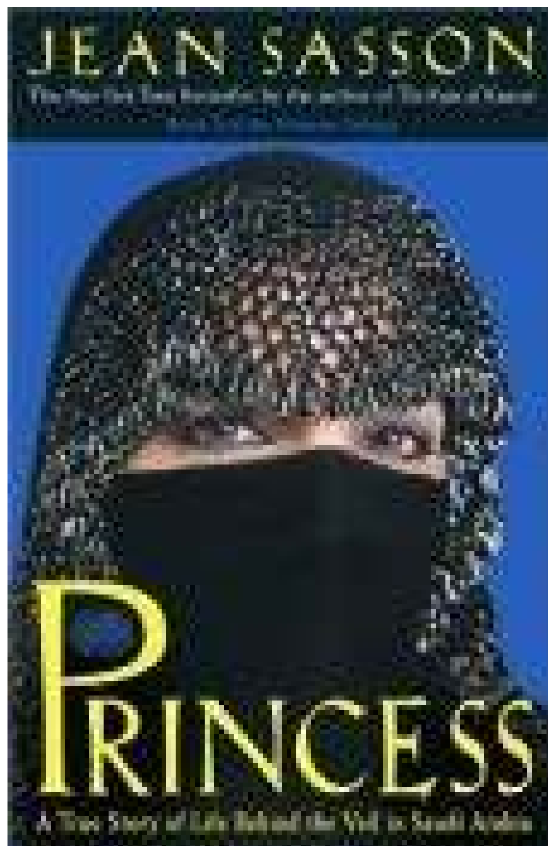
[31] Paratexts include epitexts and peritexts of books which can be defined as the images and title on the cover (peritext) and the endorsement, commentaries and reviews about the text (epitext) respectively. For further study, see Genette (1997); Whitlock (2007).
[32] The last three books belong to the group of those memoirs that are supposedly written by the ghost writers to whom Muslim women have narrated their stories.

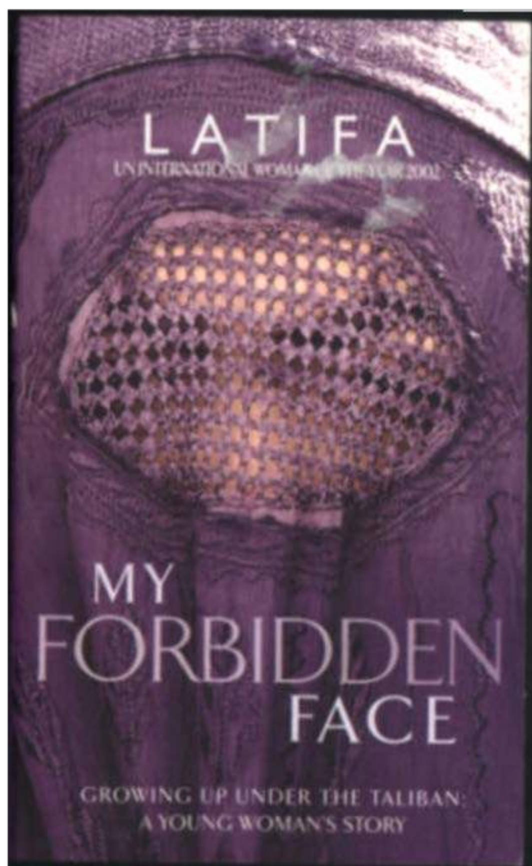
The images on the covers that accompany these titles are even more provocative. On the next two pages I have reproduced some of them.






PRICE of HONOR
NEWLY UPDATED
MUSLIM WOMEN LIFT THE VEIL OF
SILENCE ON THE ISLAMIC WORLD
JAN GOODWIN


JEAN SASSON
PRINCESS



One important point about these images on the covers is that either the women's faces on them are covered (partly or fully) or the women's gazes are averted, so that 'no relationship of affinity with viewers' is constructed, ever emphasising the women's 'otherness'(Bradford 2007, 48).[33] Both the women's sad expressions and the use of dark, gloomy colours on the covers create a mood of sadness and misery.

Also, the main point in the narrative of most of these memoirs is the deep suffering of Muslim women because of the cruelty of irrational Muslim men, because of women being forced to veil or because of their being forced to marry against their will, all in one way or another, even if only implicitly, attributed to the religion of Islam. In this regard, Dabashi believes that an important point about these memoirs is that in them

[33] The emphasis in these memoirs on images of women with face covers is interesting as only a small percentage of Muslim women who veil cover their faces.

Islam is 'vile, violent, and above all abusive of women—and thus fighting against Islamic terrorism, *ipso facto*, is also to save Muslim women from the evil of their men. "White men saving brown women from brown men," as …Gayatri Spivak puts it' (Dabashi 2006 par.8; Spivak 1988, 297). Gillian Whitlock also believes that these memoirs, for which there is a large market in the West, represent Islam as 'monolithic and threatening' (2007, 53–54).

These memoirs also present Muslim women as 'exotic others' to Western readers. The veiled Muslim woman is represented in them as impenetrable and as living in misery not comprehensible to Western women. It is only after the Muslim woman has unveiled and escaped to the West, an important development in the plot of many of these memoirs, that the aura of exoticism is removed from her.[34] An important point is that sometimes the covers of these works have an even bigger role than the texts in fixing the stereotype of Muslim women as the oppressed exotic other. As Whitlock asserts, 'the images, the titles and the subtitles' of these memoirs 'are designed to grab the Western eye with a glimpse of absolute difference, of the exotic' (2007, 59). Sometimes the texts do not insist on the idea of Muslim woman as 'the exotic other', but the images and the titles of such works are so sensationalist that the image of the mysterious and oppressed woman under Islam is ever more fixed, even if people do not read the texts themselves. The effect is even stronger when a number of these works are exhibited together (Whitlock 2007; Bradford 2007).

[34] Some of these texts that follow the trajectory of happiness through women's escape to the West are as follows: *Sold: one woman's true account of Modern slavery* (Muhsin, 1994); *Behind the burqa: our life in Afghanistan and how we escaped to freedom* (Swift Yasqur, 2002*);* and *My Forbidden Face: growing up under the Taliban: A young woman's story* (Latifa, 2003).

Moreover, these memoirs portray Muslim culture as black and white and devoid of any complexity. In fact, the complexity of lives and cultures of people from Muslim background does not show itself in this genre and the possibility that anything good can come from this culture is also generally excluded. Keshavarz uses the terms 'the Islamization of wickedness' and 'Westernization of goodness' when describing this genre's treatment of Islam and the West, in the sense that everything about Islam and Muslim culture in this genre is bad and everything about the West is good (2007, 119). Whitlock, also complains that these stories, for example those about Arab Muslim women, dehumanize them, exclude 'more historical and appropriate ways of representing Arab culture', and reduces the Arab world to 'an estranged ahistorical land of Bedouin custom and ancient tradition' (2007, 129). In short, a monolithic account of the experiences, identities and lives of Muslim women is offered in this genre.

The points explained above concerning the meaning that this genre might produce suggest why the genre can be viewed a continuation of old Orientalist representations. Keshavarz also dubs these memoirs 'new Orientalist narratives' as she sees many similarities between this genre and the older Orientalist texts. For example, she argues that such a narrative, like some Orientalist texts of the past, 'simplifies its subject', it 'does not hide its clear preference for a western political and cultural takeover, and 'it replicates the totalizing—and silencing—tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing … the complexity and richness in the local culture' (2007, 3). Zine, likewise, states that the four paradigms which shaped the colonial literary representations of Muslim women, as discussed by Kahf (1999), still persist into contemporary Western feminist writing about Muslim women. These paradigms and

motifs, are that of 'Oppressed Muslim woman', of 'Muslim maiden in need of rescue', 'conversion' and 'enclosure' (Kahf 1999, Zine 2002).[35] I also argue that the same paradigms continue into the genre of contemporary Muslim popular memoirs, a similarity which suggests the closeness of Western feminist scholarship with the themes of these memoirs.

The contexts of production and reception of popular Muslim life narratives are also worth studying for their role in reinforcing the meanings this genre generates. First, we can argue that works created for popular consumption fall into a distinct context, 'distinguished by the whole apparatus of production, distribution, advertising, promotion, and consumption' (Whitlock 2007, 94). The popular is dependent for its profit on the market and produces for the market; therefore, with regard to popular genres, market forces, which are important constituents of contemporary power relations in the representation of Muslim women, to a great extent, decide what type of books will be published. In fact, the production apparatus of the genre knows the perspective and expectations of general readers and tries to satisfy these expectations so as to sell well and this is where production and reception contexts meet.

With regard to the reception context of these memoirs, it can perhaps be claimed that the target readership of these texts comprises Westerners, the majority of whom are daily exposed to similar discourses about Muslims.[36] These are especially the colonial

[35] Zine explains the paradigm of 'enclosure' as the representations of Muslim women who are being jealously guarded or enclosed by Muslim men. She also believes that the paradigm of 'conversion' in its renewed form means the Westernization of Muslim women (2002, 8, 14).
[36] In this thesis, I use the terms 'Westerners' and 'Western readers' cautiously, acutely aware that readers are not a homogenous group, with a uniform approach to making meanings of texts. However, the term is useful because it does convey the idea that certain assumptions about a shared belief system are made in the process of writing, reproducing and subverting stereotypes in particular cultural contexts.

and Orientalist discourses that arguably produce the non-West for Europeans (Shohat and Stam 1994), or in Whitlock's words, it is 'the deeply embedded interpretive frameworks of Orientalism, exoticism and neoprimitivism that produce the East for Euro-American consumption' (2007, 49). With this genre supporting these discourses, a readership is produced for this genre which takes interest in it because the genre affirms these readers' 'preexisting perceptions' (Keshavarz 2007, 112). Moreover, these memoirs can appeal in particular to Western women. The genre's representation of Muslim women as oppressed and in need of the benevolence of Westerners can both make Western women feel privileged in comparison with Muslim women and can trigger patronizing feelings in Western women, who might think of themselves as 'agent[s] of social change and humanitarian betterment' (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 14; Whitlock 2007; Zine 2002).

The reception context of the popular memoirs also attaches great importance to the status of the authors as 'native informants', trusting, to a great extent, what the memoirs present as a reality about Muslim women (Lalami 2006; Whitlock 2007). In other words, these memoirs giving 'the impression of authority through having a native—or seminative—insider tone' are taken seriously by many of their readers (Keshavarz 2007, 3).

Therefore, in the production of many of the bestselling life narratives and popular works of fiction about Muslim women, this special reception context is taken into account. In fact the Western perspectives and Western values of individualism, secularism and feminism can be recognized in many memoirs or life narratives written by Muslim women. As Amireh and Majaj, focusing on third world women's

popular texts, point out, 'Third world women's texts are commodified, as literary decisions come together with marketing strategies and assessments of audience appeal (ranging from interest in the "exotic" to feminist solidarity) to foreground certain texts and repackage or silence others' (2000, 4).[37] Thus, what is absent is usually a more complex engagement with the perspective of a range of Muslim women from Muslim backgrounds, whose experiences and identities might not be exactly interpretable by Western standards.

The popular memoirs' narration of experiences of oppression of Muslim women and criticism of these memoirs

Although it is important to recognize that these memoirs, to a great extent, embody Orientalist discourses on Muslim women, and that as popular literature, their production is influenced by market forces, they are nonetheless produced as embodying the experiences of individual Muslim women, and they tell stories of oppression that need to be told. This should be a reason for considering these memoirs valuable.[38] As well, I do not wish to suggest that memoirs by women from Muslim backgrounds, even of the kind that finds a ready market, should not have been written, or that the experience represented in them is all false, or that no Muslim

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[37] Feminist solidarity refers to a Western feminist idea that stresses that all women have a common identity and are very similar in their needs and interests. Since it is usually Western values that are taken as the standard for assessing the needs and values of all women, some critics argue that belief in feminist solidarity can result in ethnographic reading of lives and experience of non-Western women by Western feminists. See, for example, Min- ha (1989), Young (1997).

[38] A reviewer of Fatemeh Keshavarz's work (2007) asks: 'Is she [Keshavarz] saying that those memoirs that present a deleterious or less flattering view should not be represented in literature because of their contribution to Orientalist stereotypes?... What indeed must be done about those women who *do* face oppression and who cannot state their case or their stories within solely indigenous contexts … should they be denied the right to tell their stories of abuse to an international audience because they may malign Iran, Pakistan, or Oman?' (http://www.forusa.org/fellowship/winter08/zakaria.html, accessed 8/12/2008).

woman can feel oppressed in a Muslim culture. As discussed earlier, there is still a long way for Muslim women to go to enjoy an oppression-free life in countries and communities with a predominantly Muslim culture. Also, it is important to render experiences of oppression as these memoirs do, and that some Muslim women's experiences of oppression are received better in the West by Western readers should not devalue the narrating and recording of these experiences.

However, as explained above and as I will further explain in my discussion of Hirsi Ali's memoir, *Infidel* (2007), in many of these memoirs the experiences of suffering of Muslim women are treated simplistically, pointing the accusing finger at Islam for all the problems that typically have complex causes. Also, and even more importantly, the way many of these works are packaged, especially through their epitexts and peritexts, serves only to add assenting voices to the stereotypical Orientalist discourses about Islam. In fact, the present climate of representation of Muslim women's experiences, as already discussed, is the main reason for objections to these memoirs. The special packaging of these memoirs and the circumstances of their production and reception can reinforce the misconception that women's oppression under Islam is the only story and the whole truth about Muslim women, and that any experience other than that of oppression for Muslim women in relation to Islamic culture is the exception. This meaning is further emphasised in popular culture with the readers' reliance on the authenticity of the accounts of native informants. Drawing on Kaplan's words, in relation to her quarrel with the uncritical use of the politics of location, we can argue that, 'inappropriate assumptions of sameness' in regard to Muslim women is inevitable due to the way these memoirs are

often received, that is, as the only truth about Muslim women's lives (1996,187).[39] This is a dangerous notion which needs to be engaged with critically. The concern is not as much the works themselves as their packaging; the publicity machinery that promotes them to a wide readership; and the way the reviews and commentaries (epitexts) can direct their consumption. As Chandra Mohanty says, what is 'of paramount importance' is 'the way in which' these works by third world women 'are read, understood, and located institutionally' (1991,36). She further states that, 'the point is not just "to record" one's history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant' (Mohanty 1991, 36).

As this thesis has thus far argued through reference to primary and secondary sources, dominant representations of Muslim women in the West, including popular Muslim memoirs, in different forms, further stereotype them.[40] In other words, it is an

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[39] See Chapter Two of his thesis for a discussion of the politics of location.

[40] Another point applicable to the question of the existence of popular Muslim memoirs is the argument that their publication in Western countries does not necessarily help alleviate Muslim women's oppressions in their communities; however, it can be claimed with more certainty that the publication of these memoirs in the west can reinforce the stereotypes. The point made by Stuart Hall, when he refers to jokes about Jews told by Jews themselves, can be applied to the case of Muslim women memoirs. Hall argues that if these jokes are told among Jews, they are not usually very harmful, but if they are told among non-Jews in contexts in which racist attitudes toward Jews exist, these jokes can strengthen these racist ideas and ever more highlight the difference of Jews. As he puts it, 'Jewish jokes told by Jews among themselves are part of the self-awareness of the community. They are unlikely to function by "putting down" the race, because both teller and audience belong on equal terms to the same group. Telling racist jokes across the racial line, in conditions where relations of racial inferiority and superiority prevail, reinforces the *difference* and reproduces the unequal relations because, in those situations, the point of the joke depends on the existence of racism. Thus they reproduce the categories and relations of racism, even while normalizing them through laughter. The stated good intentions of the joke-makers do not resolve the problem here, because they are not in control of the circumstances—conditions of continuing racism—in which their joke discourse will be read and heard' (Hall, 1981, 278-279). The same argument as Hall's about Jewish jokes can be made about Muslim women's stories of oppression, when told in the indigenous culture as compared to when they are told outside Muslim communities. When these stories, fiction or nonfiction, enter a Western reception context, because of the special reception context of the stories of Muslim women in the West, it is very likely that they will reinforce the stereotypes about Muslim women among Western readers rather than effect any real changes in the lives of Muslim women in Muslim societies.

immediate effect of these representations. This might not be the aim of the writers of life narratives. However, the most tangible and immediate effect of these texts is to entrench stereotypical images of Muslim women and, as a result, their further degradation.[41] Patricia Geesey, for example, in a discussion of an autobiography, by an Algerian woman living in France, by the title of *Le voile du silence* (1991) [The veil of silence], talks about the effect of some works, which might not really be intended by the authors. About *Le voile du silence* she claims that this text 'may very well have an opposite effect from the author's intention, because, once published in France, her text circulates in and contributes to a discursive exchange… which reifies women in a unidimensional cultural identity' (2000,192). Therefore, even if it is argued that many of these memoirs are initially written to talk of the experiences of Muslim women who have felt oppression in their culture, the way they are packaged by market forces makes them complicit with mainstream stereotypical representations.

Further, and as Whitlock remarks, the uses that these memoirs are put to makes them problematic. Whitlock acknowledges that these life narratives can be used 'to describe experiences of unbearable oppression and violence across a cultural divide' (2007, 55). However, she refers to two other uses of these life narratives: their having become profitable commodities 'in terms of exotic appeal of cultural difference', and their being used to get consent from the public for military actions and intervention in Muslim countries which are represented in these works as 'primitive or dysfunctional national communities' (2007, 55).

[41] Gayatri Spivak also refers to the complicity of third world and first world women in 'degradation' of third world women (1982).

Infidel

In this section, I discuss Ayaan Hirsi Ali's memoir, *Infidel* (2007) as an example of contemporary popular Muslim memoirs published in the West. Here, I critique *Infidel*'s representation of Islam and Muslims in the light of existing criticism about popular Muslim memoirs. I expose the key discourses constituting the memoir so as to argue that in *Infidel* Islam and Muslim women's identities are treated in a negative, reductionist way and Muslim identity is introduced as imposed on Muslim women, while the arguments supporting these discourses are, at best, tenuously developed and sustained. Thus, I also argue that Hirsi Ali's memoir, because of its faulty argumentation, should be treated more cautiously and that the celebration of the book and its writer requires further scrutiny and evaluation. Thus, I both criticize the meanings that this memoir produces and its reception contexts and effects.

In evaluating Hirsi Ali's work, much attention has been paid to her experience with Islam as a Muslim woman, while the discourse represented through her work, which is most conspicuously the discourse of Orientalism, is mostly ignored. Also, it seems that the account of her experience is treated uncritically, and its authenticity is assumed as given.

Infidel (2007) is the English translation of Hirsi Ali's memoir originally written in Dutch and published as *My freedom.* I chose this memoir for analysis specifically because of the high profile of the memoir and its author. Hirsi Ali was chosen by *Time* magazine in 2005 as one of the 100 most influential people of the world, in the category of leaders and revolutionaries. She was voted the European of the Year for 2006 by the European editors of *Reader's Digest* magazine. On September 11 2008,

she was presented with the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for nonfiction for *Infidel* (2007).[42] She has been praised by many commentators and reviewers for her courage and for her ability to stand up for her ideas and for not remaining silent in the face of oppression of Muslim women. She has been given many human rights awards for fighting for the rights of Muslim women. She has been granted interviews and appearances on many major TV shows, in prestigious newspapers, at conferences and book fairs. The deputy secretary of state of the United States himself went to welcome her when she first came to the USA.

Infidel is Hirsi Ali's life story from her girlhood in Somalia to her present life in the US as a fellow in the American Enterprise Institute, a neo-conservative think tank. The memoir especially portrays Hirsi Ali's relationship with Islam, when, as she says, she was a devout Muslim as a young girl, and goes on to portray the time when she felt disappointed with Islam and began to attack Islam for denying the rights of women, in the Netherlands, where she had gone as a refugee. It also gives the account of how she denounced Islam after 9/11 and how she became later in the Netherlands and the USA, the target of Muslim extremists' threats, especially after making the film *Submission* (2004) with Theo Van Gogh.[43]

Hirsi Ali herself shares many characteristics of writers of the popular Muslim memoirs discussed in the previous section: She is a 'native informant'; she advocates

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[42]On its website, the award is described thus: The Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards recognize books that have made important contributions to our understanding of racism and our appreciation of the rich diversity of human cultures. See http://www.anisfield-wolf.org/.

[43] A part of the film showed some verses of the Quran about women written on the naked bodies of some Muslim women, who were being oppressed by Muslim men. Van Gogh was assassinated by a Moroccan- Dutch Muslim shortly after the film was broadcast and Hirsi Ali received a death threat.

the rights of Muslim women oppressed under Islam; she not only blames Islam for the oppression of women but directly criticises the tenets of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad himself; her works, especially her memoir, *Infidel,* are among the bestsellers in the Western market; and she is a celebrity in the West and in the media spotlight.

The memoir *Infidel* portrays the life of a Muslim woman who feels oppressed in a Muslim culture, so she finally rebels against her religion and culture, escapes to the West, finding freedom and happiness there. I argue, then, that the knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world that Hirsi Ali offers through her memoir has many similarities with a Eurocentric, Orientalist account of the Muslim world.

Recent popular Muslim memoirs have been accused, by critics such as Keshavarz, of demonizing everything that is indigenous and valorising everything that is Western, a Eurocentric stance, and of commodifying cultural difference. *Infidel* very clearly embraces this 'Westernization of goodness' (Keshavarz 2007, 117). In many instances in the memoir, Hirsi Ali expresses her admiration for the West and her contempt for the non-West. For instance, she contemplates the effects of colonization on Somalia thus:

> In 1960 the colonizers left, leaving behind them a brand-new, independent state. A unified nation was born. This new country, Somalia, had a democracy, a president, a flag, an army, even its own currency… They thrilled to the idea of building one nation, great and powerful. So many hopes would be dashed in the coming years by

> the clan infightings, the corruption and violence into which, the country, like so much of Africa, fell. (2007, 13)

On another occasion, she describes the colonial buildings in Somalia, 'the graceful old Italian buildings were surrounded by filthy, densely packed streets' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 14). Hirsi Ali here appears to be an advocate of colonialism, suggesting that with the colonialists' departure people returned to their "savage" state. As might be clear from these lines, Hirsi Ali's understanding and experience of colonialism is contrary to much evidence and literature about the adverse effects of colonialism on colonized nations. Also, recounting her first days in Europe, she expresses similar attitudes about Europeans as compared with Africans. We are told, for example, how good and kind German people are (Hirsi Ali 2007, 184). However, when it comes to Somalis, the positive attributes disappear and they are described as foolish, clumsy and 'useless' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 184). This picture of Somalis that is given in the narrative might be taken as true by some readers, particularly as it is the account of a 'native informant'.

On another occasion, she compares the streets of Düsseldorf with the streets of Nairobi, expressing wonder how in Germany everything is 'so well kept' and 'clean' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 185). Then thinking about Somalia, she says, 'I was used to heaps of stinking rubbish and streets pockmarked with huge potholes, where the dirt comes at you and nothing ever stays clean … I felt as though I was thrown into another world (Hirsi Ali 2007, 185).

This might be how Hirsi Ali really feels about Europe and Africa, but the effects of juxtaposing these two "worlds" and representing them in such a way by a Somali undeniably involves the humiliation of the Africans for the benefit of Western readers. In short, the non-West is represented as barbaric, uncivilized, dirty and retarded, as contrasted with the clean, civilized, and enlightened West. We need to remember that the non-West being described is the Muslim world, a fact she keeps on reminding the reader. This strategy recalls Hall's assertion about telling racist jokes across racial lines, discussed above: 'telling racist jokes across the racial line, in conditions where relations of racial inferiority and superiority prevail, reinforces the *difference*' (Hall, 1981, 278).

Another theme, which is reminiscent of orientalist discourse, pursued in Hirsi Ali's and in other recent Muslim memoirs, is that there are essential problems with Islam and Muslim culture and that Islam is fundamentally cruel, backward and irrational. In other words, Hirsi Ali performs the act of 'Islamization of wickedness' in her memoir, which also suggests how the author, a Muslim woman, dislikes Islam (Keshavarz 2007, 119).

Hirsi Ali provides readers, who have put their trust in her, with details about Islam, which at the same time can confirm the readers' extant knowledge about this religion. These details share three main characteristics. Firstly, they include information which can be considered a distortion of the facts about Islam and Muslims. Secondly, the details represent contested subjects among Muslims and Muslim scholars articulated as if they were unchanging facts about Islam on which there is consensus among Muslims. Third, problems having complex causes are reduced to a single problem

with a single cause, which is Islam. In each of these cases, Western liberal values serve as the normative background. The use of language when describing all things Islamic or indigenous is typically explicitly negative. Optimistically speaking, we might consider Hirsi Ali's description of Islam as simply an expression of her knowledge and feelings about Islam, that is, her own experience with Islam. Nonetheless, given the truth status accorded to her position and her reception in the West as the representative and defender of Muslim women, it is very important to scrutinize her position.

The distortion of the facts about Islam in *Infidel* appears in different forms. Sometimes, Hirsi Ali gives information that is simply inaccurate. At other times, she presents her own understanding of a religious point as a final definition and interpretation of that point. At times it is a combination of these two. As an example of inaccurate information, we can refer to the way she describes Muslim prayer. She describes it as an arduous, unbearably long ritual, calling it 'the long ritual of submission to God' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 80), and in her description she adds some parts to Muslim prayer which are not necessary at all to be performed for a prayer to be complete in any Islamic school. Using the prayer beads to praise God, thank Him and ask for forgiveness 99 times is not a required part of the prayer rituals, but she gives such an impression (Hirsi Ali 2007, 84). Neither does she modify her description by saying, for example, that Muslim prayer, according to the way she had learned it, should be performed in this way. But because she comes from a Muslim culture, and many other readers do not, she is allowed to describe Muslim prayer in this way without her assertions being questioned.

Also, Hirsi Ali tends to overgeneralise about Islam and Muslim people or presents her own ideas and information about Islam as truth. The following statements in the memoir are examples of such over-generalizations or definitive and unmodified assertions about Islam and Muslims: 'It was unIslamic to fall in love' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 127); 'women in all Muslim countries … are married against their will' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 192); about 9/11 she says, 'It was not Islam, it was the core of Islam' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 269); or 'every devout Muslim approved of it [what happened at 9/11]' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 270); 'True Islam, as a rigid belief system and a moral framework, leads to cruelty' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 272); or 'I said Islam is like a mental cage' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 285); 'Islam is submission. You should not argue' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 132); or 'innovation is forbidden for Muslims' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 271). All of these claims can be challenged based on the Quranic verses, historical information or even common sense; however, more important to the arguments of my thesis is that these assertions suggest a hate relation rather than a love relation on the part of Hirsi Ali, the Muslim or the former Muslim author, with Islam, a relation that the reader might extend to all Muslim women.

Her main argument about Islam is that 'In Islam, you are Allah's slave. You behave well because you fear Allah' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 281), and love and affection are absent from the religious life and experiences she describes. She believes that the relationship of the adherents of other religions such as Christianity with God is about 'dialogue and love' while in Islam this relationship is about 'fear and submission' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 215), and that it is 'a master-slave relationship' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 216). Two arguments can be made against this claim. Firstly and with regard to the comparison that she makes between Islam and other religions, it can be argued that

the idea that God is above everything is not peculiar to Islam. As Laila Lalami puts it, 'whatever one thinks of this hierarchy, however, it is hardly unique to Islam; one can make the same argument about other monotheistic religions' (2006, par. 11). Secondly, the very existence of Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, and the vast literature on it can provide a good reason to doubt Hirsi Ali's argument that there is no love relation between God and people in Islam, as Sufism is all about love between God and human beings.[44]

Hirsi Ali also presents contested areas in the interpretation of the Quran and the Islamic law, Sharia, as areas with singular and already-decided-upon meanings, usually misogynist meanings; thus, in this way Islam is represented ever more negatively in her work. An example is the way some verses of the Quran are presented in the film *Submission* (2004), recounted in the memoir. In this film, some verses of the Quran about women, which, out of context, can be interpreted as misogynist are written on the naked bodies of some women.[45] However, the same verses can be interpreted differently, and this is precisely what many scholars, including Islamic feminists, are doing. Islamic feminism, active in most Muslim countries, including Iran, Egypt and Pakistan, has had many gains in recent years in reinterpreting Muslim religious texts and in restoring the rights of Muslim women based on the Quran, though strong patriarchal control still demands much struggle and sacrifice.[46] Islamic feminists are only one group of the Islamic reformists. There

[44] In the WorldCat listings of books, checked on 6 February 2009, there are 10971 entries on Sufism; a search in Google done on 5 June 2009 reveals 1,400,000 entries on Sufism. On 'mysticism, Islam', there are 1581 entries in WorldCat and 858000 entries in Google (Checked on 5 June 2009).

[45] See footnote 43 of this thesis.

[46] There have been many scholars and Quran interpreters, especially among Muslim modernists and reformists, such as Aminah Wadud, Asra Nomani, Asma Barlas, who are fighting against out-of-context, ahistorical, literal interpretations of the Quran that justify misogynist treatments of women. These scholars, especially women scholars, in Aminah Wadud's words, 'by going back to primary sources and interpreting them afresh … are endeavouring to remove the fetters imposed by centuries of

are, in addition, many credible modernist Muslim scholars who call for and are working in the area of the reinterpretation of many areas in the Quran, and who insist that some of the verses of the Quran should be understood in the contexts of the time of their revelation, though many of them, especially those with ethical, philosophical and moral content have the quality of being called timeless.[47] Therefore, Hirsi Ali's representing some parts of some verses of the Quran as "proof" that Islam is inherently misogynist and arguing that Muslim women should be saved from this cruel religion is thus exposed as crude and reductionist in light of what informed scholars are doing in this regard.

Infidel also represents Islam as the cause of some problems which in fact often have very complicated causes. As Hesham A Hassaballa puts it, Hirsi Ali makes 'one-sided accusations and generalizations about the evils of Islam and how this religion is the sole reason for the depressing state of the Arab and Muslim worlds' (2007, par. 11). Often, the conflation of incongruent causes and effects come in the form of rhetorical questions. Some of Hirsi Ali's questions about Western countries and Muslim countries are produced thus: 'Shouldn't the places where Allah was worshipped and His laws obeyed have been at peace and wealthy, and the unbeliever's countries ignorant, poor, and at war? ... Why should infidels have peace, and Muslims be

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patriarchal interpretation and practice' (2002, 1). See: http://www.newint.org/features/2002/05/01/aishahs-legacy/).
According to Fareena Alam in her comment about Ali's precursor to *Infidel* (2007), *The Caged virgin: an emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (2006), 'long before Hirsi Ali arrived in Europe, Muslim women were fighting against ignorance, religious prejudice and cultural misunderstanding. They are still pushing the boundaries, playing an increasingly important public role and advocating real long-term change-slowly but surely' (2006, par. 10) Unfortunately, the endeavours and findings of these scholars do not draw the same public attention as Hirsi Ali's film or the misogynist Islam of the Taliban and their like.

[47] Among these scholars, we can refer to Abdolkarim Soroush, Mostafa Malekian, Ali Shariati, Mohammad Abduh. One of Soroush's main arguments is that we should distinguish between religion and the interpretation of religion, which is based on socio-historical factors. For further study of the views of these scholars, see, for example, Soroush (1994, 1998, 2000); Malekian (2002, 2007); Shariati (1982, 1979, 1979a); Abduh (1966).

killing each other, when we were the ones who worshipped the true God?'(Hirsi Ali 2007, 222).[48] However, there are many historical, geographical, political and social reasons, apart from religion, why some countries in the world are prosperous and some are not. Colonialism, for example, is not an unimportant factor in this regard for both the colonized and colonizing countries. Moreover, Muslim immigrants in *Infidel* are represented as jobless and poor, relating their condition to their being Muslims: 'I didn't feel ready to step back and ask myself why so many immigrants—so many Muslim immigrants—were violent, on welfare, poor' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 245). The rhetoric is striking. It is not, for example, Somali, Iranian, African or Asian immigrants who are in this state; instead, by describing these immigrants as Muslims, she is explicitly linking their situation to their religious identity.

However, as Lalami argues 'there are political, national and linguistic considerations to take into account, particularly when one is making claims about fifty-seven nations spread out across Asia and Africa. But Hirsi Ali addresses none of these. In her view, they simply do not matter. Rather, she sees Islam itself as the problem' (2006, par. 9).[49] The reviewer of *The Economist* also questions ascribing all the problems of Muslims to Islam and draws attention to the complexity of many of these problems as well as to the appeal of books such as Hirsi Ali's in the Western market:

> Mental illness, abortion, failed marriages, illicit affairs and differing interpretations of religion: much as she tries, the kind of problems

[48] Hirsi Ali here implies that the God of Islam is different from the God of other religions, though believers in Abrahamic religions all believe in one unique almighty God.

[49] Lalami and Alam's comments used in this chapter are about Hirsi Ali's other book *The Caged virgin: an emancipation proclamation for women and Islam* (2006) and her interviews before the publication of *Infidel* (2007). However, since Hirsi Ali's arguments about Islam in all of her books are similar, I have drawn on these criticisms for this discussion.

> that Ms Hirsi Ali describes in *Infidel* are all too human to be blamed entirely on Islam. Her book shows that her life, like those of other Muslims, is more complex than many people in the West may have realised. But the West's tendency to seek simplistic explanations is a weakness that Ms Hirsi Ali also shows she has been happy to exploit. (2007)

Even in an article in *The Village Voice*, which mostly appreciates the author's courage and calls *Infidel* a memoir which deserves wide readership, we can still find this comment about her work: 'she leaves behind questions she doesn't seem to have time to unravel. Hirsi Ali is certain that Islam causes terror, period … She comes off as brave, righteous, and determined where she might be more curious' (Whitney 2007). The writer of the article quotes from *Infidel* (2007): 'Among immigrants [in Holland], unemployment is highest for Moroccans and Turks, the largest Muslim groups, although their average level of skills is roughly the same as all the other immigrant populations' (Hirsi Ali, 2007, 278). Then the writer comments: 'Could racism play into this even a little? Presumably not: She doesn't even ask' (Whitney 2007).

Thus, there are several cases of generalizations, stereotyping, and reductionism about Islam, Muslim culture and Muslim women in *Infidel* (2007). Hirsi Ali presents a rigid interpretation of Islam and suggests that this understanding of Islam is the only one, that the vast majority of Muslims who might think differently do not understand Islam, and that their different experiences are false, dispensable, and not worth paying attention to. Hirsi Ali encapsulates such a belief of hers in the memoir itself, 'Infuriating stupid analysts … who seemed to know next to nothing about the reality of the Islamic world, wrote reams of commentary… about Islam being a religion of

peace and tolerance, not the slightest bit violent. These were fairy tales, nothing to do with the real world *I knew*' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 270; italics added). Here, she gives the impression that *she* is the authentic person to talk about this real world of Islam. Hirsi Ali in her memoir represents the majority of Muslims as people who never read nor have the ability to analyse or criticize: 'Most Muslims never delve into theology, and we rarely read the Quran…. As a result, most people *think* that Islam is about peace. It is from these people, honest and kind, that the fallacy has arisen that Islam is peaceful and tolerant' (Hirsi Ali 2007, 272; italics in original).

The reception of Hirsi Ali's work in the West has been overwhelmingly positive and she is regarded as a defender of the cause of Muslim women. This is despite the problems with her arguments, for example, in her memoir, as I have raised them.[50] Why is it so? How is it that Hirsi Ali in her books, interviews and articles, can easily comment about the Muslim culture with the authority of an expert, can present arguments many of which are not indubitably sound, and then hear much more praise than criticism about what she has said?[51] But first of all who is her audience? How can we define the reception context of her memoir? Are many of her readers Muslim people?

It can be argued that the way Hirsi Ali represents Islam and Muslim women can possibly hinder many Muslim women from reading or supporting her views. Hirsi Ali defines her mission as fighting for the rights of Muslim women, a necessary and valuable mission. However, she describes Muslim women as mostly oppressed and

[50] Laila Lalami wonders 'whether the cause of women's emancipation can be advanced when it is argued in such a sloppy and factually inaccurate manner' (2006, par. 21).

[51] Fatemeh Keshavarz, commenting about *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), complains that 'unlike American, European or many kinds of history, for which you need to gain some kind of knowledge and expertise, becoming qualified to write Muslim history is easy. If you have so much as travelled to a Muslim country… there is a good chance you can address various aspects of the culture in writing. In the case of native lineage… the odds will improve significantly (2007, 55).

victims with no agency in their lives, and her criticism can be interpreted as slandering their religion and its Prophet. This approach to Muslim women can strip them of their dignity and insult their religious identity.[52] Lorraine Ali, in this regard, says, 'How can you change the lives of your former sisters, and work toward reform, when you've forged a career upon renouncing the religion and insulting its followers?' (2007, par. 7). Fareena Alam also finds it unacceptable that with Hirsi Ali's approach she can have supporters among Muslim women and rather angrily asserts, 'Hirsi Ali recently said that her audience consists mainly of Muslims. Nonsense. Her hatred of Islam and her patronising attitude towards Muslim women who disagree with her make her ideas palatable only to the "white liberals" whose prejudices she reinforces' (2006, par. 11). In this regard, Lalami also believes that because Hirsi Ali's arguments are based on two premises—that 'the native is silent' and 'the native informant knows best'—her addressees are most probably Western advocates for Muslim women rather than Muslims themselves 'who, in any case, Hirsi Ali believes to be deficient in individual and critical thinking' (2006, par. 21)

Thus, it seems that her readers are mostly Westerners from non-Muslim cultures who trust Hirsi Ali because of her being from a Muslim culture and because of her confirming what they already know through works informed by Western perspectives and values. The reception of these works in the West provides another proof for the idea that, in popular culture, the status of 'native informant' can qualify the writers of memoirs as authoritative in the eyes of the reader. It is in spite of the fact that, as argued in Chapter Two of this thesis, being from a certain background does not guarantee the authenticity of the account the person gives about that background. In

[52] In the refugee camp in Holland she thus describes the Arab Muslim women: 'There were a few huddled heaps of cloth: these were the Arab women' (2007, 191).

fact it seems that in popular culture 'the critic's supposed authority as a 'native informant'… alone, and without scholarly training, qualifies her to speak of the entire religion' (Lalami 2006, par. 18). No matter how flawed a testimony by a native informant might be and no matter how unqualified the writer of this testimony is in the fields she/he comments on, for many readers as long as it is a testimony from a native informant who draws on discursive reserves they are familiar with, it is acceptable. It is an important problem that cannot be overlooked.

A classic case of the Western reception of such testimonies is that of bestseller *Honor Lost: Love and Death in Modern Day Jordan* (2003), by Norma Khouri, claimed as a true story, which later on proved to be a hoax and totally fabricated. Whitlock asks why 'readers valued this narrative despite the ethical flaws that follow from blatant ethnicized stereotypes', why the publishers didn't bother to check the authenticity and also why those who endorsed the book were so easily taken in by the author (2007, 112). The answer she comes up with is that 'to our embarrassment and shame … Western women readers and the literary intelligentsia more generally may be especially vulnerable to propaganda in the form of testimony and capable of an unquestioning acceptance of some categories about other cultures if it takes certain generic forms of address' (2007,121). *Infidel* (2007) also comes into this generic form of address, the testimony, about other cultures, in this case the Muslim culture, so it is accepted with little hesitation by many readers.

This thesis, despite highlighting the faulty arguments in *Infidel* (2007), is not arguing that all the experiences that Hirsi Ali describes are false or could not possibly have happened. That aspects of the Muslim world are in need of reform and that there are

Muslim women who are victims of religious bigotry cannot be denied. What many Muslims or critics are not happy about, I argue, is that in this memoir, a limited set of experiences, those which stereotype Muslim women, are being represented as if they are the only experiences that Muslim women have of Islam. Especially the experience of love and connection that Muslim people feel toward their religion is ignored in her memoir. As Alam states 'Many Muslim women want to maintain a strong , spiritual connection with their faith, a choice Hirsi Ali seeks to deny them' (2006, 54). Hessaballa, also arguing that Hirsi Ali's experience is real and that it is her choice to leave Islam, insists that although problems in the Muslim world are also real, 'that does not make it right, proper, truthful, or honourable to malign the faith of 1.2 billion people who derive strength and comfort from that faith' (2007, par. 20). Therefore, the effect of the representations of Islam and Muslim women offered in *Infidel* are the reinforcement rather than expansion of Western conceptions of Muslim women, maligning Islam and preparing the ground for misuses (Morgan 2007; Smith 2007).

As Hirsi Ali's work is a popular Muslim memoir among Western readers, *Infidel* has been selected for analysis in this thesis as representative of the dominant contemporary representations of Muslim women in the West. Through this brief analysis, I have aimed to demonstrate that certain discourses on Islam and Muslim woman have been dominant in the West for too long and it is high time to offer Western readers representations of Muslim women that challenge these persistent versions. In the following chapters, therefore, I present alternative representations of Islam and Muslim identity in the form of novels which depict the different experiences of Muslim women with Islam and different representations of Muslim women's identities from those presented in popular Muslim memoirs. However, since

these alternative representations are not necessarily heavily informed by Western perspectives, they face a significant task in attracting Western readers.

Chapter Four: Introduction to the selected novels

Having discussed the theoretical framework for the thesis, as well as the contexts in which the selected novels are produced and circulated, in the following pages I provide further background details pertinent to a study of these texts.

The selected novels for this thesis, published in Western countries between 1999 and 2006, offer fictional representations of the experiences and developing identities of devout Muslim women. As realist novels, the conventions they harness are different from those of media representations and memoirs; however, just as popular memoirs and media representations produce specific and generalized meanings about Muslim women, these novels do too. I claim that the themes and subjects that these realist novels embody challenge rather than reinforce the assumptions of their predominantly Western readers. For a reader whose life experience is affected by liberal humanist paradigms of individualism, modernism and secularism, or mediated by Western discourses, including dominant Western discourses on Islam, some of the notions in these novels in relation to Muslim women may be quite challenging. Reading these novels, for example, a reader with a secular background enters a religious world with quite different standards from those she might be familiar with, encountering relationships with religion which might challenge her assumptions.

In her first encounter with each of these texts and in her first reading of them, the reader may notice two points that distinguish these narratives from dominant Western narratives of Muslim women—both fictional and nonfictional—available in Western

markets. Firstly, the paratexts of the selected novels challenge the stereotype of a victimised, oppressed Muslim woman. The images on the covers, the titles and the back-cover endorsements tell a different story from those of dominant Western narratives. Secondly, the selected novels do not represent Muslim women as either victims or escapees of Islam, but as committed to Islam and spiritually, emotionally and morally connected to it. These two points are perhaps enough to make the selected novels examples of alternative representations of Muslim women, even if not 'true' or necessarily positive representations of them.[53]

The novels can be analysed in various ways. My analysis of the novels in this thesis revolves around two main issues. One point I discuss is how each of the novels can be read as challenging stereotypes about Islam and writing back to dominant Western discourses about Islam and Muslim women. Although similar techniques for writing back to the dominant discourses are evident in the individual novels, I will discuss how each also writes back in its own unique way and in accordance with the main theme of the novel. Second and even more importantly, I discuss how each of the novels variously offers an alternative representation of the identity and experience of its Muslim woman characters, presenting an aspect of this complex identity, which itself can be considered an important way of writing back to those descriptions of the identities and experiences of Muslim women that are monolithic. In other words, the selected novels show, how within the commitment to Islam, there are different ways of thinking and practising, a variety of experiences with religion and different definitions of Muslim identity, some of which might be interpreted as apparent contradictions by Western readers. The selected novels, I argue, answer back to four

[53] As has already been discussed in Chapter Two, the idea of 'true' representations is of course problematic.

elements of the Western discourse on Muslim women's identities and experiences: that she is miserable and a victim under Islam; that Muslim identity is imposed on Muslim women; that she is 'the exotic' other to Westerners; and that her experience and/or identity is a monolithic one, devoid of complexity. I argue that each novel emphasises one or two aspects of this counter-discourse.

Although religious identity is only one facet of identity, I argue that in almost all of the novels, it has a high salience for the main character in comparison to other facets of identity, affecting all aspects of the main character's identity.[54] In fact, an important point about these texts is their serious engagement with the religious experiences of fictional characters. In other words, there is a shift of focus in the representations of the experiences of Muslim women in these novels from the usual representations of their experiences in Western discourses. That these novels have taken religious identity and experience seriously is a timely reminder that religion is still an important, if not integral, aspect of everyday life for many people around the world, although, as discussed in Chapter One, this is still not acknowledged in much literature and literary criticism. Thus, the thesis is also a tribute to the highlighting of experiences to do with religion depicted in these novels and an affirmation that, contrary to Western secular thinking, religion is a vital and complex affair for many people, including many Muslim women.

[54] I have chosen the selected texts after reading a number of novels and deciding that the issue of religion in these five novels is taken more seriously than in some other contemporary novels, which nonetheless do not ignore the subject of religion and have Muslim principal characters. These novels include Monica Ali's *Brick lane* (2003), Farhanah Sheikh's *Red box* (1991), Rayda Jacobs's *Confessions of a gambler* (2007), *Sachs Street* (2001) and Samina Ali's *Madras on rainy days* (2004). I also found some novels by Indonesian, Malaysian and Turkish authors and authors from other Muslim majority countries that dealt with experiences of their main characters with Islam. However, since they were in translation, I did not include them in my selection, as my thesis focuses on women writers' Muslim fiction in English.

Studying these texts, then, can be considered an exercise in understanding what we can learn imaginatively about a subject when we move beyond the domain of the dominant discourses about it. These texts, as Stone-Mediatore argues in relation to experienced-oriented texts, can 'bring into public discussion, questions and concerns excluded in dominant ideologies, ideologies which sustain and are sustained by political and economic hierarchies' (2000, 120). Critical engagement with these narratives can tell us what other experiences Muslim women committed to their religion can have, what other sufferings they have to endure and what other issues, contradictions or problems with regard to their identities they can have, apart from those experiences, concerns and oppressions delineated in the dominant Western representations about Muslim women. If the term 'oppressed', as Moya argues, can also be applied to people about whom 'distorted representations' (2002, 44) are repeatedly rehearsed, these novels can be read as the outcome of 'granting … epistemic privilege to the oppressed' (Satya Mohanty 1993, 72).[55] Therefore, it is important to read these novels and through them to listen to the voices of the oppressed.

It can be argued that if representations of Muslim women such as those found in the selected novels, which include these other concerns and experiences of Muslim women, are also publicized and discussed along with dominant ones, perhaps a more complex image of Muslim women can dislodge the stereotyped version. As Mohja Kahf argues, 'the alternative if difficult path' through which we can deconstruct and

[55] However, I do not really believe that the term oppressed can be applied to the characters in the selected novels, as the characters as well as the novels defy their negative representations and are proud of who they are.

demystify the stereotype of Muslim women is to approach them and their texts 'with as much nuance, rigor and openness of paradigm as is applied to the study of European and American women's literature and literary history' (2000, 151). In fact, this nuance, rigour and openness of paradigm needs to be applied to the study of all narratives about Muslim women, including both dominant Western narratives, such as Muslim popular memoirs, and alternative representations such as the selected novels, so as to avoid reaching simplistic conclusions from any texts about Muslim women and to unravel what they embody. Therefore, the following chapters, far from trying to uncritically advertise these novels, are attempts at a critical engagement with the texts, an endeavour directed at exploring alternative discourses about Muslim women's identities and experiences, the ways through which these novels challenge the Western dominant discourses, and the problems, tensions and contradictions that they reveal in the course of re-writing Muslim women's identities.

I chose popular Muslim memoirs as the contemporary literary context for the analysis of the selected novels for two main reasons. Firstly, and as discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, the memoir genre has been a very popular genre in recent years, attracting many readers, establishing itself as an important source of knowledge in the West about the lives of Muslim women. Secondly, there is closeness between the genre of memoir and fiction, especially the genre of realist novels. The fictionality of autobiography and the autobiographical nature of some novels, including the selected novels, have been discussed by several critics.[56] In fact, in recent years we have seen

[56] Whitlock, for example, refers to 'the ambiguous location of life narrative somewhere between fiction and history' (2007, 11). George Gusdorf also writes 'every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us individual seen from the outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy not as he was not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and have been' (1980, 45).

examples which represent the slippage between fiction and autobiography as there have been works that were presented as autobiography but later were known to be fictions.[57] Also the autobiographical elements of each of the selected novels are strong. We can see aspects of each of the authors' lives rearticulated in the novels. Even the mini-biographies on the covers of the novels, referred to in each chapter, imply similarities between the authors' lives and those of their characters.

However, it can be argued that fiction perhaps provides a better opportunity for the exploration of identity than non-fiction. Firstly, the complexity and ambiguity of identity can be better explored in fiction. Novels, among all the literary genres, have traditionally provided the best space for the exploration of the development of identity. One reason for this capacity is that in fiction there are no final statements, and counter-discourses can disrupt definitive statements. According to the writer of an article which appeared in *The Age* newspaper on 13 September 2003, 'fiction offers creative freedoms that allow authors to reach truths that non-fiction writers, constrained by facts, can't always find'; thus, fiction can better delineate the shifting, unfixed nature of identity. Also, I believe fiction is a more capacious vessel for the portrayal of experiences of people. Fiction, even realist fiction, in spite of its claim to the imitation of reality, does not rely on the idea of authenticity as much as memoirs do, which, following the discussions about authenticity in Chapters Two and Three, might even be considered an advantage for fiction. In other words, realist fiction claims that it provides access to an extra-textual reality about people's lives, but it does not insist nor does it necessarily create the false impression that the reality presented is the 'truth' about people's lives.

[57] As examples of such works, we can refer to Norma Kouri's *Honor lost: love and death in modern day Jordan* (2003), James Frey's *A million little pieces* (2003) and Helen Demidenko's *The hand that signed the paper* (1994).

In the following chapters I will explore five novels which I believe can be considered as contemporary alternative fictional representations of Muslim women in the West. Therefore, the next chapters will include respectively the analysis of two novels by Leila Aboulela, *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005); Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does my head look big in this?* (2005); Mohja Kahf's *the girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006); and Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the belly* (2005).

Chapter Five: Leila Aboulela, *The translator* and *Minaret*

This chapter explores two novels, *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, a Sudanese Muslim first-generation immigrant living in Britain.[58] Among all the novels explored in this thesis, these two novels challenge the dominant Western discourses on Islam more directly and more assuredly than the other novels, which also allow for some criticisms of Muslim communities and Islamic lifestyle as well. In fact, in Aboulela's novels, an 'Islamization of goodness' is evident.[59] Therefore, in the analysis of her fiction perhaps more can be said about the positive representations of Islam and Islamic lifestyle, while in the discussions of the other novels there is a focus on the representation of the complexities, tensions and contradictions of Muslim identity. Although *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) are two distinct novels, some very similar trends can be traced in each; therefore, I will discuss them together in this chapter.

I argue that Aboulela's fiction suggests that Muslim identity can be so central to Muslim women's lives that it is a form of consciousness for them, affecting all aspects of their lives and essential for their sense of well-being. In this way, the narratives naturalize Islam-centred lifestyles and experiences and denaturalize secular experiences for Muslim women. Such representations of Muslim identity are especially opposed to those Western representations which suggest Muslim identity

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[58] Leila Aboulela lived for many years in Aberdeen and wrote some of her works there. She is the winner of Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000 for her short story 'The Museum', which appeared in Aboulela's collection of short stories, *Coloured lights* (2001). Her two novels, *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), have been nominated for Orange Prize and IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards respectively.

[59] This refers to Keshavarz's idea, discussed in Chapter Three, that in Orientalist and neoorientalist works, a 'Westenization of goodness' and an 'Islamization of wickedness' is evident (Keshavarz 2007, 117, 119).

as imposed on Muslim women and a Muslim life as one from which women from Muslim backgrounds wish to escape. Aboulela's works, in showing the rootedness of religion in the lives of many Muslim women, thus fill a gap in Western representations of Muslim women. However, since the narratives only focus on the positive sides of upholding religion and religious identity without any reference to the challenges that a Muslim woman might have with her religious identity or the problems existing in Muslim culture, some readers might respond negatively to the texts and overlook the richness of the narratives about the identities and experiences they explore.

In what follows, I argue how these two novels suggest the salience as well as the positive effects of religion in Muslim women's lives. I firstly argue that the rootedness of Muslim identity and the 'naturalness' of a Muslim way of life for Muslim women have been suggested in Aboulela's works by the narratives' depictions, in an almost unprecedented way in English literature, of the states of mind, the minutiae of lives and experiences of devout Muslim women with religion. I go on to argue that the narratives depict a devout Muslim life as spontaneous and joyous for Muslim women through the way they represent various positive effects on their lives. I then argue that the very structure of the novels and the narrative techniques the author harnesses also support the orientation to representing the naturalness of religious life and significance of religious identity for Muslim women. I also explore how Aboulela's fiction reverses some stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women and writes back to dominant Western discourses about Islam, even more conspicuously and vigorously than the other novels in this thesis do, with a

vehemence that, arguably, produces the narratives as rather one-sided and prejudiced in their insistently positive representations of Muslim culture and Muslims.

I conclude the chapter with a critical evaluation of Aboulela's all-too-positive representation of Muslim women's identities and experiences in these two novels, discussing both the problems of and possible justifications for such an approach.

Representation of the centrality of religious consciousness/identity for Muslim women in *The translator and Minaret*

Aboulela presents devout Muslim women as the main characters in her novels, characters who show an ever-present awareness of their religious identity. In other words, they know themselves deeply as Muslims and both consciously and unconsciously live as Muslims. In an interview Aboulela herself refers to this point, saying that, 'I am interested in writing about Islam not as an identity but going deeper and showing the state of mind and feelings of a Muslim who has faith' (Eissa 2005, par. 3).[60] Thus, at times, in describing the conditions of Aboulela's characters, the term religious consciousness might be more appropriate than religious identity. [61] Such usage can also be justified considering the fact that the two narratives mainly explore the principal characters' sense of (interior) self in relation to Islam, apparently independently of the (social) views of others, or the inner component, rather than the

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[60] In another interview she repeats the same issue and asserts: 'I want to pass knowledge (I am wary of using the word teach) about Islam. The knowledge would not only be facts but also the psychology, the state of mind, and the emotions of a person who has faith. I am interested in going deep, not just looking at 'Muslim' as a culture or political identity but something close to the center, something that transcends but doesn't deny gender, nationality, class, and race' (Larsen 2002, 250).

[61] The term 'religious consciousness' in description of Aboulela's fiction was first used by Geoffrey Nash (2002). In this chapter I use religious consciousness interchangeably with religious identity when discussing the identities of the main characters.

social component, of the Muslim identity of the characters.[62] Both novels depict the main characters' religious states of mind and the pervasiveness of religion in their daily lives. In this way, the narratives represent Muslim identity for Muslim women as far from imposed but central to their lives and well-being. The main characters' religious states of mind even align the narrative logic of Aboulela's fiction to a religious one. As Ferial J Ghazoul puts it there is 'a certain narrative logic in Aboulela's fiction where faith and rituals become moving modes of living' (2001, par. 1). Wail Hassan likewise argues that the narrative logic of Aboulela's fiction 'express[es] a religious worldview that does not normally inform modern literature' (2008, 310).

I begin this discussion with *The translator,* Leila Aboulela's first novel. It is the story of Sammar, a Sudanese Muslim widow in Aberdeen, who falls in love with her employer, Dr. Rae, an academic in the University of Aberdeen, for whom she works as a translator of Arabic texts. Sammar comes to know that Rae is also attracted to her; however, according to the rules of Islam, their union in marriage is not possible, unless he converts to Islam. Sammar asks Rae to convert so that they can marry, a request to which Rae says no. Hearing this, Sammar resigns from her job and leaves Scotland and Rae in anger with the intention of not seeing Rae anymore. However, back in Khartoum, she cannot forget Rae and keeps praying for him to convert. After more than a year, she receives a letter from a mutual friend, informing her that Rae has converted and has asked for Sammar's hand in marriage. Sammar eagerly accepts his proposal and Rae comes to Khartoum to marry her and takes her and her son with him to Scotland.

[62] See Chapter Two of this thesis.

The plot of this realist narrative follows a linear pattern and, apart from flashbacks provided by Sammar's remembering of past events, follows her life from when she is already working at University in Aberdeen to when she and Rae get married in Khartoum and return to Aberdeen. The world of the story is seen through Sammar's eyes, enabling the reader to share Sammar's thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Technically speaking, Sammar is the narrative's focalizer and her inner world is also part of what is focalized. However, the narrative is directed by a third-person omniscient narrator. Sammar's being the focalizer of the novel, taking us to her thoughts and feelings, helps show the way she views Islam as the pillar and centre of her life.[63]

The translator skilfully portrays how Islam is firmly ingrained in Sammar's life, and how religious convictions significantly affect her worldview and her way of life in the real world. Generally speaking, the narrative does not explain in detail the peculiarities of Muslim faith but depicts them as innate parts of a Muslim woman's life. Joanne McEwan refers to how Sammar would sit for *tasbih* (praising God, thanking God and asking Him for forgiveness) after prayer or how she would switch off the light when she was looking out so as not to be seen by men or how she would not put on the perfume, a gift from Rae, in public. McEwan then comments that Aboulela 'merely touched upon these peculiarities without explanation or reference to

[63] Focalization is defined as the 'perspective', 'angle of vision' or 'prism' through which the story gets presented in the text, 'verbalized by the narrator', though this angle of vision is not necessarily the narrator's (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 71). Then, 'focalizer' is the subject of focalization or 'the agent whose perception orients the presentation', and the 'focalized' is the object of focalization or 'what the focalizer perceives' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 74). Focalization can be external or internal to the story, and there can be narrator-focalizers and character-focalizers. The narrator is the agent who speaks or 'at the very least narrates or engages in some activity serving the needs of narration' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 88). The narrators can have different levels of participation in the story, different degrees of perceptibility and different degrees of reliability (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 98-106).

their significance in Islamic doctrines, indirectly elucidating a lifestyle naturally ingrained in the hero' (2001, par. 13). As some other examples, we can refer to the following instances in the novel. When, for example Sammar cannot sleep at night, she begins to recite religious sayings 'Ya Allah, Ya Arhaman El-Rahim'[Oh God, the Compassionate, the Merciful] until she falls asleep (Aboulela 1999, 23), or when Sammar is having a driving lesson, at the sight of an approaching car, she turns away her steering wheel and 'instinctively [goes] over the *shahadah* (Islamic proclamation of faith, also recited by Muslims when they feel that this is the moment of their death) (Aboulela 1999, 70). [64] In short, for almost every situation, Sammar responds with a Muslim recitation from the Quran. These sayings and recitations usually have a consoling effect on her, an experience that arguably has been mediated by the Islamic ideology she, as a person from a Muslim family, has grown up with. The examples of the religious language that Sammar naturally uses in her everyday speech can also support the poststructuralist argument that language, the words and phrases that are handed down to us, can significantly affect the formation of our experiences. However, as Stone-Mediatore (2000) argues, and as discussed in Chapter Two, the mediation of language, ideologies and discourses do not diminish the importance or reality of the experiences for the people who have them.

In *Minaret* too the strong religious consciousness of Najwa, the main character, is shown through depicting her lifestyle and her language use. *Minaret* (2005) is Aboulela's second novel. It tells the story of Najwa, a Sudanese woman who has immigrated to Britain. Najwa is from an aristocratic family, who, after the coups in Sudan and the execution of her father, has come to live what seems like a life of exile

[64] In Shahaddah Muslims recite: I bear witness there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Mohammad is the Prophet of God.

in London. In Britain she does not enjoy the aristocratic life she had before, and she has to work as a maid in the houses of upper-class people. Having lived a secular way of life both in Khartoum and in the first years of her life in Britain, she becomes gradually attracted to a devout way of life as a Muslim woman, breaks with Anwar, her boyfriend, and starts wearing a scarf. She finds in Tamer, 20 years her junior and the devout brother of the woman she works for, a soul mate. Their class and age difference, however, remain the obstacle to their marriage. At the end of the story, she is separated from Tamer, but she is not devastated. She is planning to go to Mecca with money that she has recently received. The narrative moves back and forth between London and Khartoum and spans a period of about 20 years. Najwa in this novel is both the narrator and the focalizer.

Najwa's religious consciousness in *Minaret* is represented as similar to Sammar's, as strong and all-encompassing in such a way that it affects all aspects of her life, including the words and expressions she uses in her everyday speech. In depicting how religious consciousness is ever-present and pervasive for Najwa, Aboulela represents Najwa as reciting the verses of the Quran and Muslim prayers in different instances: when she is happy about something she says Alhamdullilah , when she wants to wish for something she says insha'Allah' (Aboulela 2005, 74), and when she is afraid of something she recites some verses of the Quran, such as *Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of Daybreak* (Aboulela 2005, 80), recited by Muslims at times when they are scared. Again, it can be argued that the rootedness of her religious consciousness or her spontaneous use of religious sayings on different occasions is not as natural a process as it looks and there are many mediatory ideologies and discourses that have caused Najwa to respond to different situations in the language of religion. Still, this

lifestyle is the one that is narrated as meaningful to Najwa, the devout Muslim woman, and she is shown to be in her comfort zone when she lives a religious life.

Aboulela's narratives also emphasise the centrality of religious consciousness/identity in the main characters' lives through depicting how religious logic or a religious system of cause and effect governs their lives. As Aboulela has said in interview: 'I want also to write fiction that follows Islamic logic. This is different than writing "Islamically correct" literature—I do not do that' (Eissa 2005, par. 3). In another interview, she describes fiction that reflects Islamic logic as 'fictional worlds where cause and effect are governed by Muslim rather than non-Muslim rationale' (Larson 2002, 4).This religious system of cause and effect, an important feature of the characters' religious consciousness, is behind the way Aboulela's main characters explain the events in their lives. In *The translator*, Sammar is quite surprised to read what is written in a postcard that Rae's daughter has given to her father, '"Get well soon, Dad", the card said and it had a picture of a bandaged bear. Sammar found the wording strange without "I wish" or "I pray", it was an order and she wondered if the child was taught to believe that his father's health was in his hands, under his command' (1999, 104). Of course in Sammar's view one's health is always in God's hands. On another occasion in the same novel, when Rae tells Sammar that her soup was the catalyst that made him recover, she reminds him that the only true healer is God: 'She said, "Allah is the one who heals." She wanted him to look beyond the causes to the First, the Real' (1999, 102). Sammar is represented as having no doubt that her fate is designed by God and not by anyone or anything else: 'My fate is etched out by the Allah Almighty, if and who I will marry, what I eat, the work I find,

my health, the day I will die are as He alone wants them to be. To think otherwise was to slip down, to feel the world narrowing, dreary and tight' (Aboulela 1999, 74).

In *Minaret*, likewise, Najwa's strong religious consciousness is represented in her system of reasoning and justification. Najwa is also characterized in such a way that to her, modern reason is not the supreme ruler, and it is God's will that determines everything. For example, one day in the house where she is working as a maid, the pearl necklace belonging to Lamya, the woman she works for, is lost. Najwa feels that she is under suspicion, even though her employers do not directly accuse her. So she starts her meditation: 'I start to pray; the words tumble in my head. Allah, please get me out of this mess. Stop this from happening. I know you are punishing me because I tried this necklace on in the morning in front of the mirror. I put it round my neck and I will never do that again, ever' (Aboulela 2005, 113). When, after a few minutes, the necklace is found somewhere in the house, she feels that a miracle has happened and the finding of the necklace has not been accidental. She says, 'This is the kind of miracle that makes me queasy. … My stomach heaves. I can lose this job easily. Rely on Allah, I tell myself. He is looking after you in this job or in another job' (Aboulela 2005, 114). There are other instances in the novel which further show that Najwa's system of justification for what happens to her and to her family is based on the religious logic that divine will is operating in whatever happens to us. The disaster that has befallen her family, her father's execution, her mother's death and her brother's imprisonment are all, to Najwa, the results of their lack of faith and their disobeying God (Aboulela 2005, 95). The highlighting of this religious system of cause and effect in the consciousness of the protagonist, in *Minaret* as well as in *The*

translator, is a variation on the realist novel's material system of cause and effect.[65] As will be further discussed below, we can thus see how the strong religious consciousness of the fictional characters requires various transformations of the Western genres with which we are familiar.

Such representations in the narratives of Najwa and Sammar's way of living, thinking and feeling and of the way they are always aware of their identity as Muslims, then, strongly suggests how Islam for some Muslim women is a central feature of their lives and a system of belief they feel comfortable with, rather than an ideology imposed on them with which they cannot connect, the way many Western representations suggest. Through such representations, the narratives also provide a support for Zine's idea, discussed in Chapter Two, about how Muslim identity is rooted in Muslims' lives because of its having basis in the spirituality and sacred texts of Islam, attractive to many Muslims (2007).

Naturalization of a devout way of life for Muslims in the novels

The novels also naturalize a devout Muslim life style and identity, denaturalize secular experience and emphasise the centrality of religion in the well-being of Muslim women through showing how living a religious life can be satisfying, nourishing and energizing to the characters. In both novels, especially in *Minaret,* the narratives, through associating religion with love, security and peace of mind, and showing the secular experience as devoid of these qualities, suggest that living

[65] Another variation on the realist text that Aboulela's fiction shows is that in her novels, the element of the confrontation between the self and society, an important characteristic of realist novels, is not strong. What is strong is the inner negotiations of the self with the self. In fact, the main characters of these two novels are not as actively involved in the social life or the material secular world as they are engaged with their inner worlds, their faith and its enrichment. In other words, in Aboulela's novels, most of the drama happens in the inner world of the person.

religiously and upholding religious identity are preferable and more natural for the Muslim main fictional characters than living a secular life.

The theories about experience, discussed in Chapter Two, need to be remembered when analysing Sammar's and Najwa's positive experiences with religion. We need to remember that their experiences are partly constructed, and are based on the discourses to which they have been exposed; therefore, the experiences do not have to be taken as objective reality. However, these experiences, as well as the enjoyment derived from them, are represented as real for the characters Sammar and Najwa. That these experiences do not equal objective reality does not therefore mean that they are devoid of value.

In *The translator*, for example, Sammar's feeling of serenity or peace of mind is related in the narrative to her being religious and devout. The narrative shows, especially through the use of free indirect discourse, how Sammar's religious beliefs are there to console her at the most critical moments in her life, as they help her feel that the all-merciful and all-powerful God is with her at all times. Free indirect discourse is a kind of speech presentation which is 'grammatically and mimetically intermediate between indirect and direct discourse' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 110). Thus in free indirect discourse, there may be 'the co-presence of two voices, the narrator's voice and a character's pre-verbal perception or feeling' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 111). Free indirect discourse can have different thematic functions within the fictional texts: it can enhance the 'polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes'; it is a convenient vehicle for stream of consciousness because of its ' capacity to reproduce the idiolect of a character's speech or thought … within

the narrator's reporting language', and finally it assists the reader 'in reconstructing the implied author's attitude toward the character(s) involved'. This attitude can be ironic or empathetic (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 113–114).

Free indirect discourse, through providing access to Sammar's 'preverbal perceptions' (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 114), reveals to us how Sammar's mind, in trying moments, associates belief in God with integrity, stability and support. She thinks of prayer and connection to God as 'the only stability in life, unreliable life' (Aboulela 1999, 37), and when she is praying, the narrator goes on to say that 'the certainty of the words [praising the Compassionate and Merciful God] brought unexpected tears, something deeper than happiness, all the splinters inside her coming together' (Aboulela 1999, 75). Also, the thought consoling her in most horrible situations is that, 'there [is] something bigger than all of this, above everything. *Allah Akba, Allah akbar…r* [God is greater]' (Aboulela 1999, 145) or that 'Only Allah is eternal…. Life is temporary, fleeting' (Aboulela 1999, 9). In short, in *The translator* (1999), consolation and the experience of calm and happiness for the main woman character comes through her religious belief. The use of free indirect discourse in this narrative has the further benefit of showing the empathetic attitude of the implied author toward the main character, ever more affirming the point that Sammar rejoices in her religious teachings.

In *Minaret* too the significance of religion and upholding religious identity in the well-being of the Muslim woman character, the joys of religious experience and, as a result, the preference for a devout life over a secular life have been suggested. In this novel religious identity finds increasing prominence for the main character in the

course of the novel. In fact, unlike in *The translator*, the woman protagonist of *Minaret* has not been a devout Muslim all her life, and her transformation to a devout person only happens within the space of the narrative. Thus, Najwa's Muslim identity evolves in the course of the novel, though this evolution does not involve any tackling of contradictions relating to her identity. Since the narrative depicts a process of change from the non-practising to the practising life of a Muslim woman, the opportunity has been provided in the narrative, even more than in *The translator*, for comparing the two worlds and describing the positive effects on the protagonist of following a religious life. The narrative pursues the point that the protagonist's experiences with the religious world are necessarily better. According to Chandrahas Choudhury, although in a secularized world religion is treated like a lifestyle choice, in *Minaret* 'we are invited to consider religion … more like a necessity' (2005, par. 6). Significantly, the religious and the sacred are never ironized in Aboulela's fiction; they are always cherished. As Hassan explains, 'in Aboulela's episteme of faith, there is neither room nor use for irony. In matters of faith, the faithful lack a sense of irony, because irony identifies a discrepancy or a lack that diminishes the status of its object. By contrast, faith elevates and exalts' (2008, 311).

I argue that Aboulela in *Minaret* focuses on three issues in relation to Islam that make experience with Islam or living a religious life an advantage for its Muslim protagonist, making her life more natural and more bearable compared with the time when she was not mindful of her religion: firstly, the feeling of connection to a loving protective God, which devotion to Islam creates; secondly, the sense of belonging to the community of believers that Muslims can enjoy; and thirdly the structure and order that practising Islam can give to Muslims' lives. In fact, the world of religion in

this novel is depicted as a loving nourishing family in which love, binding and structure are provided for the family members. Such an analogy might seem appropriate as Najwa, who has lost her family and is destitute as a result, recuperates and feels content after opting for a devout way of life. Najwa herself refers to the relationship between religious and family life, and associates the God of religion with safety and parental protection: 'I yearned to go back to being safe with God. I yearned to see my parents again, be with them again like in my dreams' (Aboulela 2005, 242). In Steiner's words 'Aboulela's texts thus support Mernissi's claim that Islam can function as a "set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surroundings"'(Mernissi in Steiner 2008, 13).[66]

The reader learns about Najwa's association of religion with love, protection, stability, security and company, and, as a result, her positive view about the experience with Islam, through her comments, and reflections about religion, and facilitated through her being the focalizer and the narrator. This foregrounds the special relationship with religion as Najwa's direct experience, as everything is seen through her eyes. Therefore the focalization of the narrative helps suggest both that the particular experiences with religion are real and genuine for the character and that these experiences belong uniquely to her.

[66] Two of the positive effects of religion on Najwa's life are also what Malekian explains as the positive effects of religion on the psychological well-being of people. One effect he mentions is the person's increase in self-confidence as a result of feeling that God loves him/her and cares for him/her. The second effect is the person's feeling that she belongs to the community of her co-religionists, which, in turn, makes the individual feel that there is some kind of social support at times of difficulty (Malekian 2004).

Najwa thinks of religious experience as joyous mostly because through living a devout life she can establish an intimate relationship with God, who to her is not the one to be feared. To Najwa, God is a loving protective being with whom she feels secure. This feeling is especially shown in the narrative through the language she uses when thinking about God, a language that ever reflects intimacy and security. For example, she thinks that the message that religious programs give her is, 'Don't worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him…' (Aboulea 2005, 98). Or, she thinks that reading the Quran is like talking directly and intimately with God, 'He is talking to us, aren't we lucky? We can open the Quran and he is directly talking to us' (Aboulela 2005, 185). Najwa's association of God with warmth, shelter and protection is, also, evident in this part of a sermon she remembers: '*… His mercy is in many things, first the womb, the rahim, he gave it part of his name, Al-Rahman- the All-merciful. It is a place we have all experienced. It sheltered us, gave us warmth and food… do you remember…?*' (Aboulela 2005, 247; italics in original). The reference to womb underscores Najwa's sense of her relationship with God as intimate and immediate. Intense spiritual moments are created for Najwa at the moments when she feels this connection and intimacy with God, giving her joy that can easily replace things she does not have in her material life. Najwa thus talks about one of those moments of intense spirituality after she has been reminded of God's mercy in a sermon:

> Sometimes the tears ran down my face. I sweated and felt a burning along my skin in my chest. This was the scrub I needed. Exfoliation, clarifying, deep-pore cleanse—words I knew from the beauty pages of magazines and the counters of Selfridges. Now they were for my soul not my skin.

(Aboulela 2005, 247)

As this extract shows, visceral/physical experiences are used as metaphors for religious experience in the novel, for which there is no adequate language in the secular world.

By extension, the narrative explores the security that Najwa experiences as the result of feeling that she belongs to the community of believers. This community acts like a family for Najwa. With them and in the mosque, she feels happy because, as she says, 'I belong here … I am no longer outside, no longer defiant' (2005, 184). With the characterization of Najwa as shy and with her status as a visible immigrant in London, the secure environment of the mosque comes as the best possible place for her to socialize and forge bonds with others. In the mosque she feels equal with everybody regardless of class and status, issues they never ask about as in Najwa's words 'there was no need—we had come here to worship and it was enough' (Aboulela 2005, 188).

The narrative also implies that Najwa also prefers a religious to a non-religious way of life because through religious structure and ritual she finds stability in life. She thinks of Western freedom, especially in relation to sexuality, as an 'empty space' (Aboulela 2005, 175). According to Chandrahas Choudhury, Najwa 'begins to head toward the world she has always yearned for but never felt herself able to reach out to: the ordered way of life laid down by the Quran. The prospect of "being safe with God" gives her a sense of direction and calm' (2005, par. 5). Dipika Guha believes that one of the reasons why Najwa loves Ramadan and 'thrives' in this month is that

for her during Ramadan 'life becomes communal, regulated, disciplined and focused. Without this structure, life is fragmented and difficult' (2005, 20). The novel, through showing how Najwa enjoys this way of life, implies that the disciplined way of life that religion offers suits some people. In other words, the narrative presents a type of experience that can be pleasurable for some people, because of their particular identities and the ideological discourses that resonate with their beliefs.

The religious experience of the protagonist in *Minaret*, as discussed above, is represented as nourishing and empowering. However, as I have suggested, it is important to read this experience, as the postpositivist would argue, as discursively constructed, but at the same time real for the person involved in the experience, here the fictional character Najwa. In her experience, life without attachment to religion is fundamentally lacking.

Religious consciousness/identity, religious experience and the structure of the novel

In this section I discuss how the narratives through structurally bearing the mark of their main characters' strong Muslim consciousness further indicate the centrality of religion for the Muslim women protagonists. In fact, all the elements of the narrative, including its structure, define Islamic identity and experience with Islam as important. Thus, in this part, I try to show how some moves in the structure turn the narratives to Islamically-oriented ones, which in turn helps suggest the importance and naturalness of Muslim identity and experience for some Muslim women.

The translator (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) are in certain respects comparable to particular variants of Western realist texts: romance and migrant fiction. I argue, however, that the Western reader of these novels encounters a quite different form of realism, a quite different migrant novel and a quite different romance novel from those she may be used to reading. The most usual conventions of these genres, I argue, are transformed and overshadowed by representations of the strong religious consciousness of the protagonists. In fact, the narratives, through reconstructing the conventions of these genres based on Muslim perspectives, furthermore naturalize the religious world and make strange the secular world, thereby emphasising the salience of religion and religious identity and experience.

Aboulela's novels are migrant novels, written by a migrant author. Aboulela deals with issues important in many migrant novels such as nostalgia and the pressures for assimilation.[67] In Nash's words, Aboulela's novels work 'through many of the usual exile's routines' (2002, 30). However, it is also interesting how Aboulela makes the migrant genre one affected by the religious consciousness of her devout Muslim characters, making it possible to call her novels Muslim migrant novels. [68] For example, the sense of nostalgia in *The translator* shows itself not only in how Sammar misses a sunny Sudan and a blue Nile, but also in how she is shown to miss the religious symbols and elements such as azan, or the interspersion of Quranic verses in her everyday speech. She misses azan so badly that 'sometimes she fancied she heard it in the rumble of central-heating pipes, in a sound coming from a neighbouring flat' (Aboulela 1999, 145). She is also shown thinking how she misses

[67] For further study of the genre of migrant novels, see, for example, Dunphy (2001); Mardorossian (2002); Adelson (2005).
[68] Wail S. Hassan argues that Aboulela's works are contributions to a new trend, 'Muslim immigrant literature', which he defines as 'a literature that seeks to articulate an alternative episteme derived from Islam but shaped specifically by immigrant perspectives' (2008, 299).

using the word *insha'Allah* (God willing), when she is speaking English: 'She had enjoyed talking in Arabic, words like *insha'Allah*, fitting naturally in everything that was said, part of the sentences, the vision' (Aboulela 1999, 107). Her nostalgia for religious symbols such as azan, indicates how she only feels at home where she finds the symbols of her faith. She longs for a spiritual home and her nostalgic vision, according to Steiner, is 'an actualisation of home in Islam' (2008, 16).

If assimilation is one of the ways of making the condition of exile more bearable, as Zygmunt Bauman suggests (1998, 321), Aboulela does not make this available for her migrant characters (Steiner 2008, 18). Najwa and Sammar, in the way they dress, in what they eat and in all aspects of their lives, follow the Islamic paradigm rather than the models more common in the host Western countries. Aboulela's characters do not feel the need to assimilate because, given their spiritual identity, home is where the faith is. Sammar comes to understand that 'home … is a state of mind rather than a geographical location' (Steiner 2008, 23). Her return to Scotland with the newly Muslim Rae at the end of the novel can be interpreted in this light. This change in the meaning of 'home' and the undesirability of assimilation in Aboulela's fiction demonstrate specific variations on mainstream migrant novels.

As *The translator* and *Minaret* can be considered, at least in part, to be love stories between men and women, they can also be categorised as romance novels.[69] The romance novel is a genre familiar to Western readers; however, the reader of these two novels encounters elements in the texts which reimagine the conventions of Western realist romances in the context of Muslim culture. Hence, I argue that these

[69] The terms romance and romance novels are sometimes used interchangeably in literary criticism.

two novels, because of having protagonists with strong religious consciousness, offer a variation on the conventional romance. In fact, in Aboulela's fiction it is mainly religion that determines the narrative logic rather than the conventions of the genre. John A. Stotesbury explains how Aboulela in *The translator* refracts the genre of romance novel and creates an especially Muslim romance. He explains that this novel has many of the characteristics of the romance and shares similarities with *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte.[70] However, the obstacle to love in Sammar's story is different from that in many Western romance novels. This obstacle to Sammar is faith, as Sammar cannot imagine marrying Rae without his converting to Islam (2004, 74–75). Therefore, as Stotesbury says, 'a major challenge for Western readers may be the degree of understanding that can be achieved not only with Aboulela's transformation of what constitutes one of the fundamental *stories* contained in Western literature, that of the nature of a loving relationship between woman and man but also with the intellectual and discursive premises upon which the whole novel is constructed' (2004, 75). The way the conflict is resolved is also different from other love stories because although there is a union between the lovers at the end, the Muslim woman does not compromise her faith but waits for her Western partner to convert to Islam. To Sammar, faith is above love and she is even prepared to sacrifice her love so as to remain faithful to the tenets of her religion. As McEwan puts it, 'despite Sammar's human weaknesses, her Islam remains the dominant force in her choice between earthly and heavenly pleasures … we find that she will not sell her faith to a man, no matter how much she loves him' (2001, 12).

[70] John Cawelti in his definition of romance novels says, 'the crucial defining characteristic of romance is … that its organizing action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman … the moral fantasy of romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties (1976, 41-42). Further, Pamela Regis defines a romance novel as 'a work of prose fiction that tells the story of courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines' (2003, 19). See also Radway (1984).

Romance in *Minaret* is introduced when Najwa and Tammar, her employer's young brother, meet each other. Interestingly, what attracts them to each other more than anything else is their both being devout. Najwa fails in love; however, the narrative shows that she moves on peacefully as by then she has the hope of being able to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca with the money she receives from Tammar's mother. In the romance of *Minaret* earthly love also fades next to spiritual love.

Writing back / Reversing the stereotypes

So far in this chapter I have attempted to show how Aboulela's narratives represent the rootedness of Muslim women's identity and how they naturalize the religious over the secular way of life for Muslim women, suggesting how a religious way of life can affect these women positively. These in themselves can be considered important ways of writing back to the discourse that suggests Islam is imposed on Muslim women and/or that Islam is marginal to Muslim women's lives. However, in this section I intend to show other, more direct ways in which Aboulela's fiction counters dominant discourses on Islam and Muslim communities.[71]

Both novels write back at different levels, including their paratexts, their characterization, some elements in their plots and their creation of alternative images of Islamic symbols. An important part of what can be called a self-conscious counter-

[71] As to the point about writing back in Aboulela's novels, Hassan argues that, since in Aboulela's fiction a complete 'epistemological break' with the discourse of Euro-centrism occurs, and the epistemology and logic working in her novels are inspired by 'Quranic and other forms of Islamic literature (sufi poetry, allegory, hadith and so forth)', we cannot refer to what Aboulela does in her fiction as writing back (2008, 299). I agree with Hassan that the religious episteme is so prevalent in Aboulela's works that in many cases descriptions other than writing back suit what the narrative does. However, I argue that Aboulela's works still write back since the religious episteme, integral to her work, is represented in preference to the secular epistemology (as discussed in this chapter in the section about the naturalization of religious life).

representation is the paratexts of the two novels, which, I argue, disrupt the familiar stereotypes of Muslim women. On the front cover of *The translator* (Heinemann edition), there is an illustration by Hassan Aliyu, a British-Nigerian artist. The painting shows a black African woman in white veil and clothes, standing in what looks like a Western market place. Surrounding her are buildings that look like churches with crosses on them. On the horizon are buildings that look like mosques with minarets and crescents on top of the domes. On this background, brighter colours are used, perhaps signifying the association of Muslim mosques with light and hope. The back cover of *The translator* includes a smiling photograph of Aboulela in a white scarf, a description of the novel and some appreciative comments by some reviewers, including J. M. Coetzee. In my opinion, the most powerful part of the peritexts of Aboulela's novels, including *The translator*, in terms of countering dominant discourses, is her own photo with hijab on the back cover, as it can give the impression that she is showing off her hijab in a Western context that may not be very sympathetic to hijab. On the front cover of *Minaret* (the Black Cat edition), there is a veiled dark-eyed girl, looking at the viewer, rather than looking away, which as discussed in Chapter Three can evoke the mysterious and the exotic. In the background there is a mosque, depicted in shades of orange. There are flowers at the bottom of both front and back covers. The back cover contains endorsements of the novel which positively refer to the Muslim themes in the novel. On the back cover of this novel, also, there is a photograph of Aboulela in her Muslim hijab next to a short biography.

Aboulela's articles and the interviews she has given, which form an important part of the epitext of her works, also reiterate similar themes as represented in the novels,

challenging negative representations of Islam.[72] However, challenging the stereotypes about Islam in Aboulela's fiction is not limited to the paratexts of her works, and she uses different aspects of the narratives for this purpose. Below I refer to some of these.

An example of the reversal of Orientalist discourse in *The translator* is the creation of women characters that do not correspond to Western stereotypes of Muslim women. The characterization of Sammar, the main character, significantly, provides a challenge to Orientalist discourses. Sammar is an educated working woman. She is also the one who proposes marriage to Rae and actively asks him to convert so that they can marry.[73] Ghazoul in this regard argues that 'Sammar is by no means a stock character , and she is not a model widow devoted to her only son, and she admits the need to remarry …' (2001, par. 8). But most of all Sammar does not look like the stereotype of helpless voiceless Muslim women because she is agential in giving priority to the rules of her religious faith in spite of being in love and in need of connecting her life with someone else's and settling down.[74]

In *Minaret*, one of the elements which can be read as contributing to writing back is the creation of characters who contradict the stereotypes about Muslims. In one of her interviews Aboulela says,

[72] Some references to these interviews have been made in this chapter.
[73] Sammar is not the only Muslim woman represented in this novel. Other Muslim women in the text, including Yasmin, her Pakistani colleague at university, and Hanan, Sammar's sister-in-law, a dentist in Khartoum, also do not fit in the description of abject Muslim women. Most importantly, the description of Mahasen, Sammar's aunt and mother-in-law, a woman belonging to an older generation, as a strong, assertive woman with a royal air about her, is especially noteworthy.
[74] Sammar, as a Muslim woman, is not characterized stereotypically; however, she is not represented as a confident and independent woman, one of the ideals of feminism. Sammar is shy, introverted and in love with domestic life. In other words, in characterization, the attempt to shatter the stereotype of Muslim woman has not, in this case, led to a reactive position on the part of the writer to create a character quite opposite to theWestern stereotype of Muslim women.

> in my personal experience I have found religious people to be very interesting and positive—yet they are often depicted in novels as dull and harsh. I wanted to put my own experience in my fiction and pay tribute to the religious people who have enhanced my life.
>
> (Eissa 2005, par. 4)

In *Minaret* the characterization of religious versus non-religious people provides this challenging of the stereotypes of Muslim people. Perhaps, in order to compensate for this vilification of religious people, almost all devout Muslim people in Aboulela's works are represented as kind, sincere and selfless. It is the non-religious people who are represented as cruel, mean and shallow, generally providing a black-and-white picture. Anwar, young Najwa's boyfriend and Omar, Najwa's brother, are the examples of non-religious people in the novel whose characters are such that they are endowed with many negative traits, such as opportunism and irresponsibility. On the other hand, the characterization of religious people is such that many good qualities are invoked. Najwa, the protagonist narrator, describes religious people or converts to Islam, such as Waffa and Ali, with words of admiration or positive adjectives such as 'kind' and 'protective to others' (Aboulela 2005, 242).

Writing back through positive representation of symbols of Islam such as hijab, which are frequently vilified in the West, is another feature of the two novels. We see this in the following description, when Sammar puts on her hijab. The representation of hijab in dominant Western discourses as something dark and ugly is clearly deconstructed here, and hijab is represented as something beautiful and elegant:

> She covered her hair with Italian silk, her arms with tropical colours. She wanted to look as elegant as Benazir Bhutto, as mesmerizing as the Afghan princess she had seen on TV wearing hijab,the daughter of an exiled leader of the mujahedin.
>
> (Aboulela 1999, 14)

A similar deconstruction of the negative image of hijab is also to be found in *Minaret,* when Najwa leaves her friend's home with her first hijab: 'When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought "not bad, not so bad". Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me anymore' (Aboulela 2005, 247). The use of the positive adjective and noun ('smiling' and 'gentleness') in relation to hijab contrasts starkly with the typically far-from-benign Western representations of hijab.

Certain points in the plots of Aboulela's novels also seem to be designed to dismantle a stereotype about Islam. In *The translator*, the job assigned to Rae and his conversion to Islam can be read as strategies in the plot to write back to Western discourses about Islam. Rae is an expert in Middle Eastern studies. Yasmin, importantly, calls him an Orientalist, a term that Sammar is averse to. However, Rae, the Orientalist of *The translator* is an Orientalist with favourable views toward Islam, accomplishing, according to Nash, 'a reversal of the Orientalism of the imperial past' (Nash 2002, 30). He considers the Quran of divine origin, the way Muslims do, and has written a book with the title of *The illusion of an Islamic threat.* It can be argued

that Aboulela has used the space of her novel to create a role for her character which is perhaps what she has always dreamt about: an Orientalist with sympathetic views about Muslims. As evidence to this claim, I refer to an article by Aboulela in which she recalls reading a book about Africa when she was sixteen. The writer of the book had expressed surprise over seeing poor African people praying, remarking that there was little these people could thank God for. Aboulela remarks:

> I remember reading these words … I remember the shock, the first inkling that the West is wrong, that the West doesn't know ... day in day out I saw that sight he had described, I lived it all around me, lived in it, was part of it and understood that it was independent of the "little enough to thank God for," knew that it was of value and dignity in itself, that it was something beautiful, something nice.
>
> (Aboulela 2002, 204)

In other words, the character of Rae can be explained as the realization of a dream: the dream that there are Orientalists who understand the dignity and value of other ways of life. As author, Aboulela exercises the power to represent as she wishes, offering a different orientation to Muslim issues in the West.

Likewise, Rae's conversion to Islam, as designed in the plot, can be read as a strong case of writing back and, in Nash's words, 'a subtle exercise in counter-acculturation' (2002, 30). With his conversion, it is not the Muslim woman who assimilates and forsakes her faith to marry the Western man; it is the Western man who becomes Muslim to marry the Muslim woman. Therefore, in the space of her fiction, Aboulela

imagines reversing power relations between Muslims and European colonisers: the missionary in *The translator* is the Muslim woman rather than the Western Christian man (Steiner 2008, 23) and Islam as a world view is validated as it is approved by a Western academic elite (Smyth 2007, 178). In Steiner's words, 'Orientalist discourse loses its authority in her narrative' (2008, 23). Brendan Smyth refers to Spivak's argument about one of the justifications of imperialist powers and colonizers for colonizing or invading third world countries, namely, white men's liberating brown women from brown men. Smyth argues that with the role that Sammar has in the physical and spiritual well-being of Rae, 'the conventional rescue narrative' is reversed in *The translator*. Here it is the brown woman who saves the white man (2007, 177). In other words, contrary to the Orientalist belief that Muslims need to convert to European ways to be happy, the novel suggests that it is conversion to Islam that can make people happy. In this way, the oppositional stance between the East and the West is not dismantled; rather, the power relations are, even if somewhat crudely for some readers, reversed.

Also, both narratives, especially *The translator,* include passages providing a positive image of Islam. In *The translator* the narrative provides this opportunity by assigning the role of The translator of the Arabic texts to the devout Muslim woman who, in addition to translating, as the native informant, gives information from her background to Rae, the Western man.[75] The information sometimes looks like a basic course in learning about Islam for non-Muslims, such as the time when Sammar is giving some explanation to Rae about the Quran (Aboulela1999, 126), an explanation which is a mix of information about and admiration of the Quran, hitting at the

[75] The point about the reversal of power relations raised in the previous paragraph applies to this case as well.

profound effect that even the words of the Quran, apart from its meanings, have had on the people who have first heard them. On another occasion, she is reading from a text to Rae which includes one of Prophet Muhammad's sayings, known as a sacred hadith, which describes how God explains His relationship with human beings. It is a long hadith, part of which goes as '… *And if he draws near to Me a hand's span, I draw near to him an arm's length; and if he draws near to me an arm's length, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him at speed'* (1999, 42–43; italics in original). The hadith she reads indicates the possibility of the intimate personal relationship between human beings and a sincere God. The God depicted in this saying is all too eager to embrace the man if he or she shows the slightest indication of wishing to have this relationship. The intense spirituality of this hadith, attributed to the prophet of Islam and included in the narrative, can be appealing to many readers. This mode of writing in Aboulela's works sometimes borders on a 'direct form of da`wah or propagation of Islam' (McEwan 2001, par. 14). Nevertheless, this might not be considered a big problem for most people because Aboulela does not do it aggressively, and as McEwan puts it, Aboulela 'does not exceed the limits' and although she 'takes her religion seriously', she does it with 'pure moderation' (2001, par. 15).

Even Sharia law, anathema to many in the West, is treated more kindly in Aboulela's fiction, a treatment that can be considered a way of writing back.[76]

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[76] Contrary to popular view, Sharia law is not just a series of laws about punishment, but it has to do with how Islam should be practised. There are different interpretations of that and different ways Sharia law is practised among different groups of Muslims; however, there are also many points about which there is agreement. Aboulela, significantly, does not refer in her fiction to those controversial parts of Sharia law. She makes her characters talk about those parts of Sharia which seem to be more helpful in people's lives, such as the reference in *The translator to* Sharia's mourning period for the widow, four

One can agree with Hassan that Aboulela's fiction, sometimes, becomes 'reverse-Eurocentrism' (2008, 316), In other words, if in Eurocentrism everything about the West is seen as 'good', in her fiction, everything about Islam and Muslim culture is seen as 'good', in such a way that a black and white picture of Islam and Western culture is represented (this point in *Minaret* is made more strongly than in *The translator*). That is to say, in opposition to Hirsi Ali's work, Aboulela's shows 'an Islamization of goodness' and 'a Westernization of wickedness'. However, we might argue that the present climate of representation of Islam in the West is such that reactive responses such as demonstrated by Aboulela's fiction are to be expected. Aboulela, in an interview, clearly refers to her intent in writing back to such representations: 'I started writing more or less as a reaction against the Gulf War and the anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the media' (Eissa 2005, par. 3). It can be argued that Aboulela's novels as pioneers in contemporary Islam-friendly fiction in the West have a lot to answer for, a situation which can lead to one-sided defences of Islam against misrepresentations.

Aboulela's representations, convincing or unconvincing?

In this chapter I have argued that Aboulela's novels write back to dominant discourses about Islam, and that they embody a different discourse—that Islam is central to Muslim women's lives and nourishing and empowering for them—especially through representations of positive experiences with religion. Through such representations, the narratives provide some support for the argument that Muslim identity, contrary to the postmodernist view, is not free-floating, but, for practising and observing

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months and ten days, which must pass before she can get married again. Sammar admires Sharia law in this regard for its practicality: 'such a specifically laid out time, not too short and not too long. She thought of how Allah's Sharia was kinder and more balanced than the rules people set up for themselves' (Aboulela 1999, 69).

Muslims, it is firmly rooted in the spirituality of Islam and the main religious texts of Islam, as argued by Zine.[77]

Aboulela's fiction importantly challenges many Western readers' perceptions about the relationship between Islam and Muslim women, disrupting the stereotypes about both. Through such alternative representations new discursive reserves can also be formed for Western people to draw on when forming opinions about Muslim women. However, there are some points about Aboulela's counter-representation to dominant Western discourses that might be read as unconvincing.

The fiction finds no fault with Islamic lifestyle; rather, a utopian picture of a religious life is depicted. In Najwa and Sammar's eyes everything about Islam and Muslim culture is perfect. Bigoted religious people or extremists have no place in this fiction. Also, only the positive effects of engagement with Islam, usually its spiritual side and the feeling of being protected by and connected with God, are emphasised. Moreover, Aboulela's fiction shows signs of one of the hazards of being a devout adherent of any religion, which is, thinking that one's way of life, one's religion and co-religionists are better and more natural than those of everyone else. Also, Aboulela's characters, to some Western readers or even some Muslim readers, might seem deluded in thinking that they are happy in their devout life or in ascribing all life's positive aspects to a devout Muslim lifestyle.

However, this last point can be looked at from a different angle as well. We can argue that no matter how deluded we might think Aboulela's characters are from our own

[77] See Chapter Two of this thesis.

perspective, they are fictional representations of devout Muslim characters depicted as contented with their way of life and religion. These characters, their experiences and their world views, have their counterparts in a world beyond fiction. Thus, they have a right to exist, to be appreciated, to be recognized, to be respected and their experiences to be represented. Recognizing their way of life means appreciating the idea that there are many ways of being in the world, each important in its own way. This point has become ever more important in recent years, as mainstream contemporary Western discourses mainly prescribe a Eurocentric formula for the happiness of all in the world. Thus, as long as we can read a novel like *Minaret* and/or *The translator* as fictional representations of a set of human experiences, rather than as sociological documents which reflect the truth about Muslim experience, we can forgive Aboulela for idealizing Muslims and an Islamic way of life in her narratives.

A reader of fiction need not be convinced of all that happens in a narrative, nor need she be persuaded by the ideas or views of the main character. However, fiction has the capacity to facilitate the reader's understanding of other ways of being in the world and to encourage their imaginative empathy with the characters (Nussbaum, 1997). Iris Marion Young, however, reminds us that we cannot expect to gain full understanding of each other's perspectives (1997, 53). All we can hope for is getting a taste of each other's worlds and eventually trying to respect each other's perspectives. I believe that Aboulela's fiction similarly needs to be approached, analysed and appreciated as a type of fiction which gives Western readers a taste of the experiences of devout women with Islam.[78]

[78] Hassan points out that Aboulela's novels and short stories, 'seek to extend the knowledge through cultural translation (and also by indicating the limits of translation), but not the faith. They do not aim to convert' (2008, 308).

Chapter Six: Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Does my head look big in this*?

On 11 December 2005, in the Sydney beach-side suburb of Cronulla, one of the worst race riots ever recorded in Australia erupted, following a confrontation between a larger group of white Australian youths and a smaller group of Lebanese youths. The angry riot did not, however, occur in a vacuum; it had been fermenting for some time fuelled by 'the politics of fear and suspicion' directed towards people from Muslim and/or Middle Eastern backgrounds (Pearson 2008, 1). In 2000, the gang rape of six Australian women in Sydney by a group of Lebanese youth and the concomitant media coverage comprised another significant event in relation to Muslims in Australia.[79] Among more recent appearances of Muslim people and Islam in the Australian public domain are Sheikh Taj El-Din Hilaly's 2006 outrageous sermon about the relationship between women's being uncovered and their being raped.[80] More recently the former immigration minister, Kevin Andrews, commented on the problem of Muslim migrants not assimilating into the wider community and backed a debate on the growth of the Muslim population in Australia.[81] Based on these and other similar events, we can talk about 'the Muslim problem' in Australia, in the sense that Muslims in Australia are viewed by some Australians as troubling strangers who need to be dealt with.

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[79]One point about the media coverage of this event is that the identity of the rapists as Muslim Lebanese was especially highlighted. See, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald* (13 July, 2002); *The Age* (17 September, 2002).

[80] The sermon was delivered to a congregation of about 500 people. However, it became headline news in a number of newspapers and television programs in Australia. Many people and groups, including many Muslim organizations, condemned the comments as crude and insulting to both men and women. See for example, *The Australian* (26 October, 2006); *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 December, 2006).

[81]See *The Australian* (29 October, 2009).

The novel examined in this chapter also deals with the subject of Muslims in Australia and with their question of belonging to the nation. However, the novel, pertinent to the focus of this thesis, particularly problematizes the idea that Muslims, and in particular Muslim women with hijab, are 'a problem' and instead suggests that these women need to be considered by Australian society as belonging.[82] In fact, the narrative proposes that Muslim identity is compatible with being a patriotic Australian, and, as a result, suggests that Muslim identity is more complex and many-sided than is usually perceived in the West.

The chapter focuses on *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) by the Australian–Palestinian–Egyptian Muslim author, Randa Abdel-Fattah.[83] With teenagers as its target readership, this novel covers the life of an Australian–Palestinian Muslim girl, Amal, in the second semester of year 11 in high school, in Australia, which coincides with the time when she decides to wear her headscarf whenever she is in the presence of a man who is not a relative, in the way many Muslim women do. The events of the novel mostly emerge in relation to Amal's making herself visibly Muslim by wearing

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[82] Based on the 2001 Australian Census results, about 1.5% of Australians are Muslim and about 36% of them are Australian born, and about 50% of them are under the age of 24.

[83] Randa Abdel-Fattah, the author and lawyer, is an Australian-born Muslim–Palestinian–Egyptian, who lives in Australia. She reluctantly abandoned her *hijab* when she failed to get a job in the Australian labour market. She is the author of the following novels for young adults: *Does my head look big in this?* (2005), *Ten things I hate about me* (2006), *Where the streets had a name* (2008) and *Noah's law* (2010).*Does my head look big in this?* was awarded the Australian Book Industry Award 2006 as the Australian Book of the Year for Older Children. It received widely and uniformly positive reviews. The book also received both national and international commendation from the newspapers such as the British newspaper *The Times* (cited in *Weekend Australian* (23-24 September 2006, 4)), the *Courier-Mail* (30 August 2005, 1), the online British newspaper *The Independent* (8 May 2006). The author herself says in an interview with *The Weekend Australian* (23-24 September 2006, 4) that the book's appeal is due to 'an overwhelming thirst for alternative narratives', and adds: 'I think most intelligent people can see past the demonic and one-dimensional images of Muslims and are thirsting for an insight into the Muslim community'.

the headscarf. She faces resistance from some people in her community to accept her as one of them and has a series of experiences, usually unpleasant, which she had not faced before wearing hijab, the sign of being Muslim. The novel, however, ends when she is more accepting of herself and her community is more accepting of her.

Thus, in this chapter, I argue that *Does my head look big in this?* challenges some stereotypes about Muslim women especially the stereotype of Muslim women as 'exotic others' and that it suggests the complexity of Muslim women's identities and experiences by introducing these women as familiar in spite of their being practising Muslims. The narrative, I argue, shows that these women's identities and experiences are still reconcilable with those familiar to Western societies, and that Muslims in the West can still forge identities that negate neither their religious nor national orientations.

In the analysis of this novel, then, I firstly argue how Amal is depicted as being othered in her community after deciding to wear her Muslim head scarf, and I attempt to explain the reasons for her othering, drawing on theories of multiculturalism to do so. I go on to argue how the narrative challenges this othering and persuades the reader, through different narrative techniques, to regard Amal, the Muslim teenager, as a familiar figure in the West and as one who can have both the identity of a Muslim and an Australian. I also describe the narrative's further problematizing the othering of Muslim in Australian society through depicting Amal's suffering due to discrimination and due to her self-doubt about her identity as a result of society's non-recognition of her identity. Finally, I describe how the narrative, in its conclusion, reaffirms the possibility of this recognition from Western society and the possibility

of the Muslim girl's again feeling truly an Australian–Muslim. The development of identity through the reconciliation of self and society represented in the novel, I argue, is traced through the narrative form of the Bildungsroman—the novel of self-development—as the Muslim protagonist has many clashes with her Australian society before her identity develops and before she can confidently know herself and others can know her as an Australian–Muslim.[84]

That this novel is dealing with identity issues is apt, as the issue of identity—who the teenager is, how she both wants to be an individual and wants to be the same as others—makes it relevant to the imaginative and social lives of young adults. It is perhaps more important for them at a personal rather than a political level. Nonetheless, the political implications of the novel, in the sense of objecting to an existing condition and offering an alternative, also cannot be ignored.

Amal and the challenges to her identity as an Australian–Muslim

This narrative, like many other realist narratives and in line with the narrative form of the Bildungsroman, is concerned with the development of the identity of the main character. It thus introduces complications in the forging of her identity, and closes where the protagonist is feeling comfortable about who she is. The crisis of identity that *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) mostly explores has to do with the point at

[84] Petra Rau explains that 'the *Bildungsroman* (the novel of personal development or of education) originated in Germany in the latter half of the 18th century and has since become one of the major narrative genres in European and Anglo-American literature. It charts the protagonist's actual or metaphorical journey from youth to maturity. Initially the aim of this journey is reconciliation between the desire for individuation (self-fulfilment) and the demands of socialisation (adaptation to a given social reality).Since the genre deals with subjectivity and the relationship between self and society, many novels concerned with psychological characterisation and questions of identity use *Bildungsroman* elements' (2002).
For further scholarly insights into the Bildungsroman see, for example, Buckley (2002) and Summerfield and Downward (2010).

which the national and religious facets of identity of the main character meet. That is to say, the novel depicts how the protagonist grapples with and tries to forge her religious-national identity as a Muslim–Australian.

The narrative almost mutes the other aspects of Amal's identity (gender, race, class, etc.), leaving room for the negotiation of religious and national identity.[85]Amal has no identity confusions over her gendered identity. Also, as she is the daughter of two doctors, class is not a concern for her when she is with her classmates at her private school. Neither her racial identity nor her ethnic identity, per se, features much before she dons the hijab. As well, her being light-skinned and green-eyed causes her not to be racially distinctive. Following some critics who argue that religious identity can be racialized (Imtaoul, 2006), we can argue that the novel also shows that Amal is only considered to represent the racialized other by some *after* she puts on the scarf.

It is hard for Amal to believe that forging the identity of Australian–Muslim is not easy, as she initially sees no contradiction between being a Muslim and being an Australian. She introduces herself thus at first: 'I'm an Australian–Muslim–Palestinian. That means I was born an Aussie and whacked with some bloody confusing identity hyphens' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 5). Amal, however, as a result of society's treatment of her as a stranger, suddenly becomes aware of her identity issues and loses her confidence in herself as someone with the identity of Australian–Muslim. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, 'one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs' (1995, 82). Therefore, the complication with regard to Amal's identity that needs to be resolved in the narrative has to do with Amal's reasserting

[85] Of course, as will be explained below, Amal, in one sense, is a gendered subject because there are certain expectations of her as a girl so that she can be viewed an 'ordinary' Australian girl.

her confidence as an Australian–Muslim. Amal, having assumed the hijab, firstly comes to realize that her outward identity as an Australian–Muslim is not readily accepted in her society and she is considered as 'the other'.[86] Such a realization also weakens the way she knows herself inwardly as an Australian–Muslim. This novel thus conforms to an important characteristic of realist texts, which is to show that the development of identity evolves 'as a process of interaction between a person and his or her social world' (Morris 1995, 31). The construction of national-religious identity of the Muslim protagonist of this novel, then, is significantly affected by the perception of people around her about Muslims and by the representation of Muslims, especially through the media.

There are a number of scenes through which the narrative shows how Amal is not considered an Australian and is othered by some (largely white Anglo-Saxon) Australians. An example is the following scene which presents a conversation between Amal and her arch-enemy at school, Tia:

> 'Why don't you just fucking leave our country and go back to some desert cave where you belong?' I stand over her, my heart drumming in my chest. 'This is my country and if you ever forget it again I'm going to rip your head off!'
>
> (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 232)

Intense anger and violence dominates the languages of both characters in this scene, as each of them passionately believes she is right. The narrative aptly employs the

[86] We need, however, to remember that Australian identity is itself unstable and a matter of ongoing debate. See, for example, Healey (2000); Elder (2008).

vernacular, a hallmark of teenagers' language, in this conversation as well as in others between Amal and her classmates. Importantly, with Amal as the first-person focalizer, the reader has access to her thoughts and feelings and knows her motivations better. I further elaborate on the effects of this focalization below.

On another occasion, the narrative shows how, after the Bali bomb attacks (2002), Amal's status as an alien in Australia is intensified for many people around her.[87] She hears the news of bombings the day after the attacks, at the school assembly. The principal is giving a speech about the event, and Amal feels really distressed.

> I cry, but it's bizarre because I can't even break down and grieve without wondering about what people are thinking of me. I wince every time Ms Walsh says the word 'massacre' with the word 'Islamic', as though these barbarians somehow belong to my Muslim community. (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 237)

That she feels that she is not even allowed to cry for her fellow Australians because of the fact that she is a Muslim shows the depth of her loneliness at this time and her self-consciousness that her classmates consider her to be positioned in the enemy camp. This scene also shows the narrative's acknowledgement of the role of extremist Muslims in exacerbating the experience of alienation of Muslims in the West.

[87] The Bali bombing occurred on 12 October 2002 in the tourist area of Kuta in Bali, Indonesia, targeting two nightclubs with mostly Western clients. It claimed the lives of 202 people, including 88 Australians. Some members of Jemaah Islamiyah, an Islamist group in Indonesia, were found responsible for the bombings and three of them were sentenced to death.

The novel thus portrays how Australian Muslims such as Amal can be excluded from their nation. With the increasing number of people who carry the label 'Muslim' among their important identity-makers in Western countries, every day there are more people who, like Amal, 'feel forever excluded from the nation in which they live and excluded from its fundamental values' (Mishra 2009, 49).[88]

The othering of Muslims in Australia, however, is a much more complex issue than teenage Muslims such as Amal can grasp. Media representations comprise an important factor in this regard. Research indicates that 'a systematic bias in some Australian media' is one important reason for tarnished image of Muslims in the Australian society (Brasted 2001; Kabir 2006, par. 30). Based on the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission data (2004), an increasing number of Muslims in Australia believe that because of media bias, they are demonized in society and discriminated against in the workplace (Kabir, 2006). Research on the effects of Australian media on Muslims in Australia also supports this claim (Aly 2007; Dreher 2005; Dunn et al 2007; Kabir 2006; Saniotis 2004). Arthur Saniotis refers to the consistent marginalization and misrepresentation of Australian Muslims over the past hundred years, arguing that Muslim Australians are 'frequently represented by the

[88] Abdel-Fattah remembers a speech by Peter Costello, the then-Liberal Government's Federal Treasurer who had said: 'If the Arab traders that brought Islam to Indonesia had brought Islam to Australia and settled, or spread their faith among the Indigenous population, our country today would be very different. Our laws, our institutions, would all be vastly different. But that did not happen… Our society was founded by British colonists. And the single most decisive feature that determined the way it developed was the Judeo-Christian-Western tradition. As a society we are who we are, because of that heritage' (Costello 2004). Recalling this assertion by Costello, Abdel-Fattah remarks, 'I read that speech and I felt I was being threatened. Threatened against daring to ever think I form a part of my country's heritage, identity and core'. She then expresses her concern about a generation behind her, her younger Muslim brothers and sisters still in school, 'still trying to forge their identities, still desperately seeking to make sense of their place in their country'. Then she asks, 'Will the threats anger them? Terrify them? Repel them? Sadden them? Do our leaders care?' (Abdel-Fattah 2005a, 8-9).

press and ordinary citizens as morally reprobate, and associated with a series of pejorative images' (2004, par. 5).

However, as mentioned in Chapter One, media representations often simply reinforce ideologies and discourses that already have currency, rather than creating new ones. Some of these concepts and ideologies related to the issue of othering of Muslims are discussed below.

One point in this regard, as Mishra reminds us, is that in settler countries like Australia, the first settlers and those who have come later are never viewed as equal, and it is the first settlers who are considered to have more rights:

> There will always be a cultural imbalance between those (one or two communities) whose history is foundational to the nation and those who have come, as equal citizens, no doubt,but whose presence can only have the same legitimacy (in terms of national ideology) retrospectively and even then only after their discrepant narratives have been incorporated into the 'foundational narrative' or when the necessity for the latter has been dispensed with altogether.
>
> (2004, 2–3)

In Australia it is the white Anglo-Saxon, largely Christian people from Britain who comprise the founding nation of modern Australia.[89] This notion is also affirmed by research which argues that the imaginary Australian identity is mainly defined by

[89] However, it should be noted that Gaelic-speaking Irish migrants to Australia were not Anglo-Saxon.

'whiteness' and Christianity (Hage 1998; Randel-Moon 2005; Maddox 2005). Although the common claim is that Australia is a secular state, the discourse of Christianity is implicit in public discourses, including media discourses and political discussions and decisions (Imtaoul 2006; Randel-Moon 2005). As related to the discussion of *Does my head look big in this?* (2005), Amal is neither Christian nor 'white' (in the sense of being Anglo-Saxon or of European origin), which further complicates her belonging to the Australian nation.

The issue of Westerners' concern about their national security is also a point particularly pertinent to the situation of Muslims in Western countries, especially after terrorist attacks against Western targets performed by extremist Muslims in recent years. Nahid Kabir, in a study of the history of Muslims in Australia, reports that they have been historically discriminated against due to their race, faith and, most importantly, due to 'national security' concerns of the majority of Australians, especially because of 'the rise of militant Islamic group activities against the Western world' (2004,323).[90] Her research shows that since 1990, after a number of events such as the 1990-1991 Gulf War, 9/11 2001, and the Bali bombings (2002), the sense of suspicion of Australians against Muslim immigrants has intensified. The London underground bombing (2005) is also another significant terrorist event that happened after Kabir had published her research. What all the research agrees on is that the vilification and othering of Muslims has intensified since 11 September, 2001.

Moreover, and as another reason for her othering in Australia, that Amal has made herself a visible Muslim by wearing the headscarf has added to the difficulty of the

[90] Although Kabir's research focuses on the Australian context, as discussed in Chapter One, the idea of 'Muslims as threats to national security' can be ascribed to people in other Western countries as well.

recognition of her national identity as an Australian. As Mishra points out, 'It is important … to locate multiculturalism as a problematic essentially around the visible, for without that cultural visibility (colour, religion, dress, food) multicultural theory may be replaced by a theory of 'critical assimilation' (2005, 4). Ghassan Hage, a cultural studies scholar, also argues that there are some attributes that individuals need to acquire in order to make their belonging to a nation possible. He believes in a hierarchy in these factors and states that visual appearance has more value than idiom and accent (1998, 56–64). This point is also true in the depiction of Amal in the novel. The language of Amal in the novel is the Australian vernacular. Also, nowhere in the novel it is mentioned that anybody has picked on her for her accent. Her visual appearance, her hijab, however, obscures other factors that can signify her as Australian. In Imtaoul's words, 'the hijab is the primary sign by which non-Muslim viewers make meanings. In many cases it is read as a sign of migrancy' (2006, 198).

The ethnicizing of Amal's identity, as represented in the novel, is especially intensified because she is also a gendered subject. As a young woman Amal needs to subscribe to the expectations of an Australian teenager so as to be viewed an 'ordinary' Australian girl. Lana Zannettino in this regard states that one of the reasons for Amal's anxiety and suffering after wearing the headscarf is 'the pressure to conform to a Westernized construction of feminine identity—an ideal that places high value on personal image and a capacity to achieve a femininity that is simultaneously sexualised (and therefore provocative and appealing) and de-sexualized (and therefore chaste and virtuous)' (2007, 103). Amal's hijab and behaviour marks her as fulfilling only one side of this construction, which is the virtuous side. In this regard Kristen Philips also observes that one of the reasons why Amal cannot be considered

an assimilated identity and as a result becomes 'transgressive' and illegible in terms of the Australian nation is that she refuses 'to make herself sexually/physically available to Adam, her Anglo-Australian classmate and friend, to whom she is secretly attracted' (2009, 602). Philips argues that by this refusal, she is in fact refusing to accept 'the white social order and integration into the white nation' and as a result is refusing to 'assimilate into the nation' not only 'in social terms, but also in personal and/or sexual terms' (2009, 602). In fact, after Amal refuses to kiss Adam, their relationship changes and there is always a barrier between them.

Challenging othering, challenging stereotypes

Even more than depicting the othering of Amal, the narrative attempts to deconstruct the image of a Muslim Australian girl as not belonging to the nation and to show that Muslims need to feel they belong to their Western nations. Thus the key stereotype challenged in this novel is that of Muslim woman as the exotic other. The narrative challenges this stereotype through representing Muslim women as recognisable and familiar identities. The paratext and the plot of the novel, the characterization of the main character as well as the narrative techniques used in *Does my head look big in this?* all represent Muslim culture in such a way that the Muslim woman is not the exotic other and is not very different from other Western women, suggesting the reconcilability of Muslim and Australian identities. The narrative also generally challenges some other misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslim communities, though criticism of these communities also features in the novel.

The novel's suggestion of the recognisability of the Muslim girl starts with the cover. Unlike many other texts about Muslim women, the cover of this novel does not

reproduce the stereotypical representation of Muslim women; rather, through a combination of bright colours and the expression on the face of the happy and confident girl featured, the cover helps represent a Muslim girl similar to the ideal of her teenage peers Western people are familiar with. On the cover of the latest edition (2008), a girl with dark green eyes and a red scarf looks up at the sky. The background is white and around her are some colourful circles. The back cover also is white with big colourful circles. The back flap carries an introduction to the author as well as another picture of the girl on the cover with a smile in her eyes, looking straight at the reader, unlike the covers of the popular memoirs, which, as we saw in Chapter Three, are characterized by women whose gaze is averted .The cover of the first edition shows a smiling pretty girl, adjusting a pink scarf on a white cap. There are two unveiled girls in the background, who as we read the novel we can identify as the protagonists' close friends. Clare Bradford comments that the veiled girl's depiction among the girls in Western clothes implies that she is living with Western non-Muslim people, and 'that she is agential and active in her identity formation' (2007, 61). The peritext of the novel also helps reinforce the epitext. The author, in different interviews and essays, which form part of the peritext, discusses themes about Muslim women similar to those explored in the novel.[91]

After the paratext, a device deployed in the novel which helps challenge the misconceptions about Muslims and introduces the Muslim girl as a recognisable identity is the use of humour.[92] Humour, which in this text typically appears in the form of irony, can both cut the edge of many controversial subjects such as hijab and arouse empathy in the reader towards the protagonist. Of course the novel's title,

[91] I have referred to some of these interviews and essays in this chapter.
[92] Peta Stephenson also contends that 'Adbel-Fattah makes strategic use of humour and satire to challenge negative characterizations of Muslims and Islam' (2010, 8).

'Does *my head look big in this*?', is itself humorous, parodying the well-worn question, 'Does my bottom look big in this?'. The title can indicate to the reader that she is going to read something which is both familiar and strange and, at the same time, funny. The answer to the more famous question should be 'no', especially if we want to be polite and if we wish not to hurt the feelings of the wearer of the trousers or the skirt. Perhaps it can be said that the author by putting this question as the title on the cover wants the reader to say 'no' to the question in this case as well and to give heart to the scarf-wearer by saying that there is nothing wrong with you or your head, even though you are wearing this head scarf. The very fact that the veiled girl on the cover is looking directly and smilingly at the viewer implies that she is asking us the question on the title and expects an answer (Bradford 2007, 47). So from the outset, the direction is toward a positive communication between the reader and the Muslim woman.

Humour and irony run through the novel, and given Amal's being the focalizer and the narrator, humour can be found in her speech. The witty comments Amal makes when describing how Muslim women in hijab might be viewed in the West have the effect of poking friendly fun at some readers for their attitudes to practising Muslim women, causing them to look differently, and perhaps more compassionately, at hijab-wearers. This is how once Amal describes people's reaction to her hijab:

> There seems to be something almost X-Men-like about this piece of Lincraft material on my head. Too many people look at it as though it has bizarre, uncanny powers sewn into its micro-fibres. Powers

> which transform Muslim girls into UCOs (unidentified covered objects), which turn Muslim girls from an 'us' into a 'them'.
>
> (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 34)

Here hijab, loaded with negative connotations in the West, is talked of humorously, so that the imagined reader's assumptions about hijab are challenged, though not directly or bitterly. The irony lacing Amal's words in the following excerpt demonstrates a similar strategy:

> 'Yes, yes, I'm aware of that,' I groan. *The first Muslim she* (her classmate,Tia) *has ever met.*It makes me sound like an alien. Oh, it was my first encounter with a Muslim! Wow! I even had my camera! Can't wait to ring the National Museum. I'm sure they'll be interested in putting on an exhibition!'
>
> (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 138)

What she sees as the inappropriateness of the reaction of her classmates to what she is wearing also is reflected in the following comment: 'Everybody else is staring like I've dyed my hair green or showed up to school wrapped in toilet paper' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 38).

The focalization of the novel also helps the narrative introduce Amal as a familiar figure.[93] Making Amal the focalizer, and thus letting the reader share her thoughts and feelings, at one level, encourages the reader to sympathize with Amal. It is also a

[93] See Chapter Five of this thesis for a definition of focalization.

way of giving epistemic privilege to a generally misrepresented or underrepresented subject. As discussed in Chapter Two postpositivist realists consider this granting of focalization to the marginalized character an important move.[94] With Amal as the first-person focalizer, the narrative takes the reader to the inner world of Amal and the outside world of her family and community, where the reader comes across people, worldviews and lifestyles both rather familiar and yet different from many other negative or essentialized or exotic representations of Muslims she might have encountered before. Through this focalization, which makes Amal's thoughts and feelings available to the reader, the narrative especially represents Amal as an agent who chooses her hijab, willingly adheres to her religion and loves her country.

Through making Amal the focalizer, the narrative shows how Amal knows herself simultaneously as an Australian and as a Muslim. Different scenes in the novel illustrate how loyal Amal is to both her Muslim and her national identities, and how she sees no contradiction in being both Muslim and Australian.[95] Evidently, Amal's sense of self, with regard both to her religious and national identity, as argued by postpositivists and as I will explain below, is informed by the discourses available to her, and in which she believes.

[94] This move is evident in all the novels of this thesis.
[95]In her study on 60 Australian Muslim students aged 15–18 years, Kabir (2007) notes that the greatest strength of the Australian Muslim youths is their 'bi-cultural identity'. Woodlock and her co-researchers at Monash University, who analyzed questionnaires completed by Australian-born practising Muslims, found that most of them considered themselves as 'true blue' Aussies (Woodlock 2009, 30).

With regard to her Muslim identity, she believes that wearing hijab is part and parcel of being a Muslim woman.[96] She calls hijab 'the symbol of [her] faith' and such describes the experience of wearing hijab:

> I believe it will make me feel so close to God….[When I am wearing my hijab, it is as if] something special and warm and extraordinary is happening and nobody in the world knows about it because it is your own experience, your own personal friendship with your creator. I guess when I am not wearing the hijab, I feel like I'm missing out. I feel cheated out of that special bond.
>
> (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 6)

As the extract suggests, Amal sees wearing hijab as having a spiritual connection with God, represented in the text as a visceral experience associated with warmth, passion, intimacy and friendship. The use of colloquial language in this example and in all the instances when Amal talks, represents the language of a teenager. The vernacular style of her reflections also highlight Amal's spontaneity and, by extension, the authenticity of her remarks.

As to her national identity, she believes that her having been born in Australia, having Australian citizenship and knowing Australia as her country leave no doubt that she is

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[96] Some Muslim scholars, however, do not agree that hijab is a religious requirement and insist, instead, that what is required in the Quran is modesty for both men and women. See, for example, Ahmed (1992); Barlas (2002); Mernissi (1991); and Wadud (1999). However, scholars still argue that hijab should be respected on the grounds that it is an identity-marker for Muslim women and that it represents the freedom of choice that Muslim women should be given in representing their bodies. See, for example, Zine (2004) and Woodlock (2000).

an Australian. On different occasions, Amal is put in situations where she asserts herself as an Australian who cares for her country, Australia, but which nevertheless shows that her understanding of being an Australian is different from some of her classmates' understanding of Australianness. As an example of how she thinks about her national identity when she feels that her being an Australian is being questioned by people around her, we can refer to the following assertion by her the day after the Bali bomb attacks:

> I have nowhere else to go and nowhere else I want to go. Once again I don't know where I stand in the country in which I took my first breath of life. (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 237–238)

The use of the phrase 'taking my first breath of life' in the example above shows Amal's intimate and emotional attachment to Australia. To Amal, being born in Australia and feeling that Australia is your country is enough for being a true Australian. However, as discussed above, the question of Australianness, from the perspective of some Australians, is rather different.

Yet it is not just through Amal's assertions, passionate and sincere, accessible to the reader because of Amal's being a focalizer, that the narrative tries to win the reader's confidence that the devout Muslim main character of the novel feels Australian and is an Australian youngster like any other Australian teenage girl. Amal's lifestyle, interests, likes and dislikes, as depicted in the novel, define her as a typical Australian girl (rather than, for example, an English one). She loves Vegemite and Nutella; on Thursday nights she hangs around in smart clothes with her friends in shopping

centres; she has fashion sense and believes that she can never give up her Portmans and Sportsgirl shopping sprees. Through this way of defining an Australian girl, we perhaps run the risk of creating another stereotype, but as David Dale observes, 'You can tell a lot about a nation from the way it shops, talks, eats, laughs, worships, competes and entertains itself' (2006, 2). In other words, there are ways that define people as Australians, and it seems that in creating the character of Amal, the author has these defining ways in mind to some degree. Indeed one reviewer of the novel, Michele Perry (n.d., par. 7), refers to 'familiar settings' as part of 'the magic ingredients' of the narrative. She says, 'my family has lived in Camberwell and the surrounding areas. Much to my delight this was where Amal lives and she and her friends frequent Chadstone shopping centre, my local place to shop'. Also the colloquialisms and the slang that Amal uses represent her as a 'true' Aussie (although as discussed, according to some scholars, accent comes second to appearance with regard to a person's recognition as belonging to a nation). Perhaps an American reader would have to check an Australian slang dictionary when encountering words and expressions in the narrative, such as 'crook', 'stubbies', or 'chuck a sickie' the way Amal uses them, but an Australian girl certainly would not have such a problem. Also, the narrative shows how Amal is committed to her religion, Islam, and says her prayers wherever she is and fasts in Ramadan, even though she needs to sit the important Tertiary Entrance exams during this month. Therefore, the narrative throughout suggests that she is an Australian–Muslim, and in fact naturalizes her identity as such, showing the othering of her identity in the Australian society as unnatural.

Thus, it is perhaps not hard to be persuaded by the narrative that Amal is an Australian–Muslim. Zannettino (2007) observes that Homi Bhaba's concept of the hybrid or in-between identity is illuminating in making sense of Amal's identity, as she is, like the model of a hybrid identity, suspended between two cultures: Muslim and Australian culture. According to Bhabha, a subject with such an identity is in a state of all-at-once 'belonging' and 'non-belonging' to the dominant culture, of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' and of 'sameness' and 'otherness' (1994). However, I believe a reading of Amal's identity as hybrid needs to be offered with caution, for two reasons. First of all, a hybrid identity is conceptualized as slippery without any anchorage. As I have argued, such a conception of identity is problematic because it downplays the social location, situationality and rootedness of identity. Second, I consider Amal's national-religious identity as more a combination of being a Muslim and being an Australian than being in-between a Muslim and an Australian. She does not compromise either aspect of her national-religious identity, and her conception of a Muslim–Australian does not entail a weakening of her conception of herself either as a Muslim or as an Australian.[97]

Thus the main stereotype that the novel challenges is that of Muslim–Australian women as exotic others to the nation; however, the narrative also deconstructs some misconceptions about Islam and Muslims in an effort to educate people about Islam. The plot, for example, includes events which directly target assumptions held by some Western people about Muslim women. The view of her principal and her classmates that Amal's parents have forced her to wear the hijab is negated by representing the circumstances through which Amal has decided to wear it, and the

[97] Nevertheless, I agree that she is viewed by some other Australians as at once belonging and not belonging to the Australian nation.

way she persuades her parents to accept her wearing of it. In response to her parents who express their worry about people's bad reaction to her hijab, she tells them: 'I can deal with the crap … I want to try … and I want that identity. You know, that symbol of my faith' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 22). The broken sentences in this extract show that Amal, as a teenager, cannot articulately argue her reasons for wearing hijab; however, the same broken sentences also show her persistent attempts to convince her parents that she is determined to wear it.

That all Muslim girls are circumcised, a point mentioned by Tia, is questioned by Amal's angry reaction to this accusation. The assumption that there is a particular 'Muslim appearance' or an essential Muslim identity is further questioned by the narrative's representing an array of people, from different backgrounds, different skin colours and different levels of religious orthodoxy, who all claim Muslim identity. Amal, on one occasion and among her different Muslim friends, cannot help commenting how people can think of a Muslim appearance in spite of so many differences in the appearances of people who are Muslim (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 127).[98]

The special characterization of Amal also helps the narrative present a different image of Muslim women. Amal, unlike many stereotypes of the young Muslim women, is characterized as intelligent, articulate, witty and determined, who, predictably for a teenager, is moody at times. The narrative ever more challenges the stereotype of the secluded, inarticulate Muslim woman through representing the time when Amal takes

[98] Some conversations represented in the text can be read as self-consciously designed in that they work to educate the readers about Islam. As examples, we can refer to conversations between Amal and Adam when Amal needs to explain points about Muslim prayer (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 137); Muslim beliefs about Jesus Christ (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 136), and so on.

part in a debating competition, has an important role in her team's winning and is chosen as the best debater (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 308).

However, unlike Aboulela's novels, *Does my head look big in this?* never represents a perfect or unblemished image of a Muslim lifestyle and society. For example, the narrative does not solely represent educated open-minded Muslims such as Amal's family and is not reticent about exposing the backward views of some people within Muslim communities. The introduction of Leila's family in the novel shows how narrow-minded her mother is with regard to the role of women in society, and how she attributes her views to Islam. The narrative also shows how this family discriminates between the boy and the girl of the family, giving the boy lots of freedom, while limiting the girl's. It also shows how the boy of the family has turned into a bully. Furthermore, and as already mentioned, the terrorist attacks of extremist Muslims also feature, showing that the novel is not in denial about these problems. The Bali terrorist attacks of 2002 as well as the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, also receive mention. In fact, the last chapters of the novel depict Amal's life following the events in Bali.

Moreover, Amal shows that stereotyping works both ways. On one occasion, she tells Adam, her classmate, that

> 'Anyway, it goes both ways. I've got family friends who think all Anglos are drunk wife-bashers who walk around barefoot with a stubby in their hands. Or they think Anglos sit around in their thongs

> and Bonds singlets, rorting the dole or chucking a sickie, sculling down VBs, watching Jerry Springer and bashing their girlfriends.'
>
> 'Are you serious?'
>
> 'Yes. Dead serious. Should I make an excuse for them? Oh*, they're allowed to think that. After all they've never really had a conversation with a sober Anglo.* If it sounds so ridiculous for your background, then why doesn't it for ours?'
>
> (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, 139; italics in original)

The portrayal of these problems in the Muslim community saves the novel from depicting a one-sided rosy picture of Muslim people. However, the novel does not just expose the problems within the Muslim community such as terrorism and reactionary attitudes; rather, it uses those as opportunities for disavowing Islam as a religion that has caused these problems. In fact, Amal is put to express her opinion about them, challenging their being related to Islam. She is disgusted by the Bali bombings. She expresses wonder at how killers of innocent people could be considered Muslims or the representatives of any religion: '… why can't you and other people get that you can't be very holy if you're going around blowing people to smithereens?' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 148). Amal is also very angry that Leila's mother considers the traditions of her village as the instructions of Islam: 'any moron would realise that she's following her village's culture, not Islam. So for her to go around and tell the world it's Islam is so dumb' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 83). Leila, likewise, tells Amal that her mum has never read the Quran. 'Do you know my mum hasn't even read the Koran? She goes on what her mum told her and what her mum's mum told

her. That's her scripture … She is the one offending Islam … not me' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 86).

In short, the representation of Muslim culture, Muslim women and Islam that the novel offers aims to challenge popular and populist misconceptions, to emphasise commonalties in spite of differences and to arouse the empathy of the reader through the focalization and humour of the novel. That is to say, the representation of Muslim people in this novel is aimed at reconciliation rather than provocation.

Problematizing the othering: Oppression as a result of othering

The narrative also problematizes and criticizes the othering of Muslim women in the West and challenges the concepts and ideologies responsible for this alienation of Muslims through dramatizing these women's suffering as a result of being othered. In this section, I discuss the issue of suffering of Muslim women, a suffering which can also be considered an important challenge for Muslims in the West to reconcile with their societies and forge identities that affirm both their religious and national belongings.

Under the surface humour of the novel, the novel depicts the suffering of Amal, who is othered mainly because of her hijab. The novel shows that this othering, for whatever reasons, is indeed a source of oppression for visible Muslim women, and even non-visible Muslims, in the West. Abdel-Fattah's novel deals with this issue, in a more sustained way than the other novels of this thesis. The narrative, in this way and by drawing attention to this oppression, is different from dominant

representations, which mainly focus on the sexual exploitation of women by religious zealots.[99] However, the oppression of women in the world is not limited to sexist treatment. Iris Marion Young, for example, describes five forms of oppression that can affect people as members of groups: cultural imperialism, marginalization, violence, exploitation, and powerlessness (1990, 48–65). The non-recognition of identity, as argued by Charles Taylor in his theory of the politics of recognition, which I will explain below, should be considered another form of oppression, and is related, however, to Young's concept of marginalization as a form of oppression.

In order to theorize Amal's oppression and suffering as a result of othering, I now draw on the theories referred to in Chapter Two, which stress that our identity is built as a result of a dialectic between self and other. Charles Taylor is among those who argue that not only identity is dialogic in nature, but also, because of its dialogic nature, if we do not recognize the identity of people, we induce suffering in their lives and oppress them, an issue which he discusses in his seminal essay, 'The politics of recognition' (1994). Taylor strongly opposes the idea that identity is a matter defined by the individuals themselves and maintains that, an essential element of human life, as argued by Bakhtin, is its dialogic nature; therefore, our identity is defined in dialogue with 'significant others', which follows that the denial of recognition is a form of oppression. [100] As Taylor points out, 'nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and, reduced form of being' (1994, 25). He further emphasises that 'due recognition is

[99] A point about the peritext of this novel can provide a support for the point that the existence of other forms of oppression of Muslim women is widely overlooked. The novelist in an interview with *the Weekend Australian* states that when she first took her manuscript to a publisher, they asked her if it was about honour-killing or genital mutilation, as if they were the only oppressions that existed, or the only important subjects to be mentioned about Muslim women (23–24 September 2006, 5).

[100] A term borrowed from George Herbert Mead (1934).

not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need' (1994, 26). In the case of the protagonist of this novel, it is the non-recognition of the national orientation of her as an *Australian* Muslim, which becomes a particular cause of suffering for Amal.

The recognition of the rights of groups does not deny the complexity of others, neither does it contradict the postmodernist view of a nonessentialist, fluid identity, nor the concept of Western individualism (Mishra 2004; May 2002). In relation to the compatibility of politics of group recognition and individualism Mishra, explaining May's position, contends that a 'person's identity is constructed in terms of an individual self, albeit one recognized by an individual Other. However, in the modern nation-state individual rights for many minorities can work only on the back of collective rights, since, it is argued, their individualism, their identity, is formed as members of a collective' (2004, 10). Following such a view, we see how Amal cannot separate herself and her identity from Islam and Muslim issues, that is from the group she belongs to and from her life context. When, for example, she reads newspaper articles that present a negative picture of Islam, she feels deeply offended. She confides these feelings of hers to Adam about how it is to be a Muslim in Australia:

> It's just … overwhelming. Do you have any idea how it feels to be me, a *Muslim,* today?I mean, just turn on the television, open a newspaper. There will be some feature article analysing, deconstructing, whipping up some theory about Islam and Muslims. Another chance to make *sense* of this *phenomenon* called "the Muslim". You know what I'm saying? It feels like you're drowning in it all. Like you can never come up for air. Another

> headline or documentary comes back and slams you under the water again. (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 148)

The metaphor 'drowning' that she uses to describe how she feels when she sees that Islam and Muslims are vilified in media, suggests that she is never indifferent to these attacks, but is having her life breath stifled.

What a work of literature such as this novel can contribute to theories of multiculturalism, and the theory of politics of recognition in particular, is the dramatizing and the humanising of suffering resulting from association with a vilified identity marker, such as a particular religion. In this way, literature makes a case for the protection of these individuals against racism and vilification and helps highlight the importance of this protection in cultural and multicultural theory. In other words, a fictional work such as Abdel-Fattah's can suggest that practising Muslim women in Western societies can really suffer and that their suffering needs to be taken seriously. In what follows I refer to some instances in which the text portrays how Amal is undeservedly discriminated against and how she suffers as a result.

Much of Amal's suffering, as the text shows in different instances, is related to media's representations about Islam which stereotype and malign Muslims. A scene in which she is on the bus with the radio of the bus on, especially, highlights her feeling of hurt on such occasions. In this scene the narrative puts Amal in the spotlight, and puts the reader in the position of an onlooker of the scene. The radio program—a talkback show—is focusing on the topic of Islam and terrorism and, all of a sudden, Amal becomes for the bus driver the living symbol of Islamic terrorism:

> As we talk 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 are 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 a living proof of everything being said. I feel almost faint with embarrassment as the angry voice blasts through the bus for everyone to hear. (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 152)

The imagery is brutal. The description of Amal in the enclosed space of a bus with angry and threatening voices and looks directed at her reminds one of a person in a torture cell. Amal's visceral response to this experience ('my face goes bright red', 'my stomach turns', 'faint with embarrassment') is also confronting, showing how she feels this othering with her whole body.[101] The scene also indicates, as referred to in Chapters One and Two, the extent of people's being especially affected by media representations, when they form judgements about other people and how much the subject of representation is affected by these judgements. As Linda Alcoff puts it, 'even if someone never hears the discursive self I present of them they may be affected by the decisions others make after hearing it' (1991, 10).

[101] Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that there are different orders of suffering, and the suffering induced by, for example, the practice of genital mutilation is of a different order from suffering induced by stereotyping and discrimination. Still, it can be admitted that for a teenager, any experience of discrimination and humiliation, such as the one experienced by Amal on the bus, can create intense feelings of suffering.

The narrative also reveals how Amal feels under pressure as a result of being considered by others the spokesperson of Islam, especially when she knows, unlike her non-Muslim friends, that what many documentaries represent about Islam is wide of the mark. When she is expected to give these explanations, it is as if she is viewed by the Australian society as one of 'them' who needs to justify 'their' ways (Muslim ways) to 'true' Australians. The narrative traces three instances, over three successive days, when Amal is subjected to questioning about the content of TV documentaries about Islam. Here are the opening lines of each of these three episodes. 'I'm sitting in home room on Monday morning fuming over a newspaper article' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 146). After the description of the short, tense conversation between Tia and Amal, this part ends and the next episode begins with this sentence, 'Tuesday morning. I'm at my desk in home room, fuming over an article about terror suspects and "people of Middle Eastern appearance" when Tia walks up to my desk' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 146–147). This conversation concerns a 'doco' about Muslim fundamentalists, in the course of which Tia again tells Amal that she should be ashamed of herself for being Muslim and Amal replies angrily and sarcastically. Then comes the next episode which starts in this way, 'Wednesday morning. I'm at my desk in home room, reading an article…' This time it is Adam, her crush, who approaches her to ask her a question about a documentary he has seen:

> 'There was a mad doco last night on September 11. Man, there were showing how these guys were all religious and holy and shit. Spin out! Did you see it?' I've had it. I try to think of daffodil meadows. The moment the ugly stepsisters realise Cinderella's got the prince.

> Sunsets at the beach, the instant you take a bite of food after a day of fasting in Ramadan, and why people just won't give me a break. Do they think I'm a walking ambassador, that because I'm wearing hijab I'm watching every single documentary about Islam? I take a deep breath. 'Look, Adam, sorry to disappoint you but just because I'm Muslim doesn't mean I'm a walking TV guide for every "let's deal with the Muslim dilemma" documentary churned out'.
>
> (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 148)

The narrative shows that people's reliance on media in forming assumptions about Muslims really bothers Amal. However, the self-assured and sarcastic tone of her replies shows that she, unlike her classmates, does not take these documentaries and articles seriously and does not attach truth value to them.

The narrative also shows that because of her hijab, Amal does not have the same opportunities as other Australians. For example, when Amal applies for a casual job in a fast food restaurant, the owner frankly tells her that 'we can't accept people like you' because of the 'thing on your head' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 301). The owner of the shop is not malicious, but he is, as he explains, simply worried that he might lose customers if a girl with hijab works at the counter of his shop. He knows well enough that many people in Australian society do not like a veiled girl to serve them in a restaurant. The narrative shows this social fact through representing the matter-of-fact attitude of the owner. The narrative also shows how Amal suffers as a result of this rejection:

> 'I'm just… look I just want to go home. I JUST WANT TO GO HOME!'
>
> 'Why are you yelling? Don't yell at me [Amal's Mum] like that, Amal!'
>
> I look at her and burst into tears. We're in the middle of shopping centre and people are staring at us. A veiled mum and her daughter bawling in the shops. There are times when you just need to be whisked away. You just need to blink and disappear. It has to happen, your body tells you, or you will scream and become hysterical and combust. I run through crowd and out of the centre, to where our car is parked. My mum runs after me, calling out my name, but I ignore her. My body won't let me stop. I get to our car and lean against it sobbing so badly that my head feels drenched with the sweat of it.
>
> (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 301–302)

Amal's reaction offers the reader a spectacle of uncontrolled sorrow, the feelings of shame and anger of a Muslim girl in her Western country, when she feels that her rights have been denied. In this example, again, Amal's visceral, emotional response to this unjust treatment of her is visible, suggesting how discrimination is a felt, relational experience.

The reaffirmation of the identity of Australian–Muslim

So far in this chapter, I have shown how the novel problematizes the othering of Muslims in Australia through introducing the identity of Australian–Muslim as a

recognizable one in Australia and through dramatizing the suffering of the veiled Muslim girl in the West. However, importantly, the novel does not finish where Amal is devastated by her experience of being othered, nor where she is in doubt about her national and religious identities. Rather, at its conclusion, the narrative represents Amal as more confident about her identity as an Australian–Muslim and shows her school community as more accepting of her. In other words, Amal, in the small society of her school, overcomes the challenges of othering and is reconciled with her society once more, ready to 'embrace [her] identity as a young Australian–Palestinian–Muslim girl' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 340). She is also more hopeful about future and there are many things she is looking forward to (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 339). Amal's feeling comfortable with her identity and her accepting of herself as 'a colourful adjective' forms the resolution of this bildungsroman, and in this way the paradox of Australian–Muslim is resolved for Amal and for those who know her, at least within the framework of the novel (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 339).[102]

Amal's acceptance into her community is a gradual process; however, interestingly, Amal most noticeably gets the recognition she expected, from people in her school, especially after she represents her school in a debating competition, and wins. It is then that even Tia, her arch-enemy at school, and the principal, who was always suspicious of Amal, come to be on her side (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 307, 308, 338). In other words, Amal, through patience and yet active engagement with her society rather than isolation from it, is represented as belonging, and recognized as belonging by her community.

[102] One cannot help thinking that if the story did not end where it did and Amal's life was followed into adulthood, the reader would notice more cases of her othering in society.

Amal manages to win the confidence of her fellow Australians through her social participation. This novel, by also involving the reader in the life of a sympathetic Muslim character and introducing her as a familiar face, contributes to combating the fear of Australians of Muslims as threats to Australian national security. In Bradford's words, this kind of teenage fiction 'carries with it an implicit pedagogy' which has 'the potential to subvert oppressive binary dualism of race and gender', so this novel may also serve to counter the simplistic discourses that deny the possibility of being both a devout Muslim and a patriotic Australian.[103] (2007, 113–114).

[103] A novel such as *Does my head look big in this*? can be read as a political one because through its alternative representations of Muslim women and Islam, and through its creating sympathy, empathy in the readers through the representation of experiences of veiled Muslim women in the West, it can affect the balance of representations of Muslims in the West, which, in turn, can affect the lives of Muslim people in the West. That it is intended to be primarily read by teenage readers is also an advantage, as these readers are going to be the makers of the future of Australian society. It has been suggested in some reviews of this novel that *Does my head look big in this?* should be part of the high school curriculum in Australia. Lana Zannetino, commenting on this novel and two other teenage novels, *Looking for Alibrandi*(1992) and *Girl underground* (2004), suggests that this kind of teenage literature 'must become an integral part of school curriculum' especially 'for the cultivation of young people's capacity for civic engagement and participation in Australia's increasingly culturally diverse and pluralistic society' (2007, 113). The necessity of multicultural education in culturally diverse societies has been reminded by a number of scholars, including Paula Moya who contends, 'a truly multiperspectival, multicultural education is a necessary component of a just and democratic society' (2002, 139).

Chapter Seven: Mohja Kahf, *The girl in the tangerine scarf*

Black American women's literature is said to have passed through different phases since the 1970s, ranging from depictions of racism in American society to criticism of sexism of black men to representations of counterstereotypes, to critical appraisals of black experience.[104] With contemporary Muslim women's fiction in English, which emphasises Muslim identity, we can see all phases of writing back and critiquing compressed in a rather shorter period during the last decade. From Aboulela's creating of positive images and Abdel-Fattah's critique of the othering of Muslims, we come to *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) by Mohja Kahf, which, arguably, transcends the condemnation of othering and stereotyping of Muslims and instead critically explores Muslim experience and identity.[105] *The girl in the tangerine scarf* , like the other novels, foregrounds the Muslim identity of its female protagonist and shares many of the qualities of the other novels by Muslim women writers studied in the thesis, such as writing back to dominant discourses about Islam and exploring different aspects of the religious identities of Muslim women. However, it can be argued that Kahf's is the most complex of the four novels as it shows, along with a depiction of the attractions of Islam for Muslim people, a more critical engagement with Muslim communities and Muslim women's identities than the other novels, so that criticism and empathy go hand in hand in representing Muslim issues.[106]

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[104] See, for example, McKay (1997).

[105] As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, Aboulela and Abdel-Fattah's novels also explore some aspects of the complexity of Muslim women identities and experiences.

[106] Mohja Kahf is a Syrian-American Muslim writer, immigrating as a child with her family from Syria to the USA. She is the author of *Western representations of the Muslim woman: from termagant to odalisque* (1999) and *E-mails from Scheherazad* (2003). A finalist in the 2004 Paterson Poetry Prize, she has won an Arkansas Arts Council award for achievements in poetry.

The girl in the tangerine scarf, then, is an important example of alternative representations of Muslim women's experience and identity in a Western context. In this chapter my focus is on the main character, Khadra, a Syrian-American Muslim girl. The narrative works to persuade readers that Khadra's self-understanding and self-development to a great extent depend on her coming to terms with her religious identity. Khadra's religious upbringing produces her Muslimness as a salient facet of her identity, more important than, for example, her sense of national, racial or gender identity, and also affecting all other aspects of who she is.

I argue in this chapter that, in addition to offering a representation of Islam that differs from its dominant discursive production in the West and challenging Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslim communities, the narrative importantly suggests that it is possible and desirable for a Muslim, on the one hand, to cherish Muslim identity and experiences, to love its characteristic symbols and to deem upholding this identity as vital to one's sense of well-being. On the other hand, the narrative also implies that such a devout Muslim can be critical and self-reflexive about Muslim identity and experiences and hold flexible views about them. In other words, the novel proposes that a Muslim can allow for the reflective evolution of her religious identity without weakening her bonds with the basic tenets of or lessening her emotional attachment to her religion. These apparently contradictory dimensions, the narrative suggests, may be in dialectical relation with each other, resulting in the evolution of an interpretation of Muslim identity that is spiritually-oriented and flexible. This concept disrupts dominant discourses that oversimplify and reduce Muslim identities and experiences to suggest that one must either criticize Islam or

embrace it, as proposed by both dominant representations in the West and certain Islamist representations.[107]

Khadra, the main character of *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, is brought up in a highly devout Muslim family and community in Indiana, USA. In fact, her parents are among the founders of a Dawah community in Indiana whose mission is helping Muslims in the USA and spreading Islam. It is in her late teenage years that she begins to acknowledge some hypocrisies and contradictions in the Dawah's views about Islam. She starts to doubt her religious community and subsequently her religious faith. However, this moment of doubt becomes a starting point for her to embark on a spiritual journey which culminates in a much deeper faith than that she enjoyed previously. Meanwhile, she has entered university and married a Kuwaiti man; the marriage, however, due to their incompatibility ends in a divorce. Following her divorce and her having quit college, Khadra travels to Syria, from where her parents had brought her to America when she was three years old. In Syria, Khadra, who has now released herself from her dogmatic views about religion, experiences spiritual moments that make her willing to return to her faith. Back in the USA, Khadra decides to make a new start in life. She does a course in photography, works as a journalist and even thinks of marrying again. She still cares deeply for Islam; however, now she holds a much more flexible view towards her religion than in the past.

[107] Related to this point, Anouar Majid states that 'capitalism has confined Muslim people's options to either the alienating process of Westernization or traditionalization' (1998, 383). This stance in the novel also is close to the idea of 'multiple critique' suggested by Miriam Cooke, which explains the critical rhetorical strategies of some Muslim women feminists who, asserting and also balancing multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory allegiances, simultaneously critique the Western racist attitudes toward Muslim women and Islamists' sexist attitudes toward these women (Cooke 2000, 107).

In the following sections, I will firstly show how the theme I propose for the novel is also traceable in the way Muslim communities are described in the novel, in the sense that they are both criticized and affirmed. In successive sections focusing on the representations of religious experience and identity in the novel, I describe the way the narrative shows its preference for an interpretation of Muslim identity which takes as important both attachment to Islam and flexibility in its interpretation. In this regard, I will discuss how the narrative criticizes inflexibility about religious identity through an ironic and rather negative representation of Khadra's Muslim community, constructed as representing rigidity in religion, and how the novel privileges an evolving, self-reflexive approach to religious identity through depicting the positive effects resulting from this stand, including deep spiritual experiences of the main character as well as the expansion of her relationships with other people. I will further argue that the narrative draws the readers' attention to the emotional attachment that Muslims may feel towards the symbols and rituals of Islam. I conclude by discussing how the novel further represents a contradictory, dialectical religious identity as healthier and more plausible than a rigid religious identity. I also show throughout how the novel makes effective use of specific narrative techniques to convey these themes about Muslim identities and experiences.

Challenging the stereotypes/a different look at Muslim communities

The representations of Islam and Muslim communities in this novel are different from dominant representations we often encounter in the West. The novel firstly shares with the other selected novels paratexts which are different from those of many of popular Muslim memoirs. The image on the cover, for example, is not that of a demure woman with a black veil. The cover shows a woman wearing a bright

tangerine scarf loosely around her face, looking directly at the viewer.[108] There is also a photograph of the novelist wearing a coloured head scarf on the back cover. The back-cover endorsements, as well as the interviews that Mohja Kahf has given, excerpts from which are quoted below, also, all suggest that one of the author's motivations for writing is the opportunity it offers to challenge the stereotyping of Muslims.[109]

More importantly, content-wise, is that with the main character's disappointment in, and later return to Islam, the novel diverges from the trajectory of victim–escapee of dominant representations. The narrative, however, comes very close to the escapee model half-way through, only to go in another direction from that point on. It then shows that the main character, in spite of her many challenges with her religious identity and doubts about her commitment to Islam, finally remains committed to it, though her understanding of her religious identity is transformed in the course of the novel. Another feature, related to writing back, that this novel shares with the other novels, is the explanation and clarification of some issues about Islam, about which there are frequent misconceptions in the West. These explanations, which, however, in this novel, are less conspicuous than, for example, in Aboulela's novels, usually come in the form of a dialogue between the principal character and other characters.

[108] The novelist, however, says that she is still not satisfied with the image. She only had to compromise because the publisher originally planned to put what she saw as an offensive image; that of a hijabed Muslim girl with a bare midriff and her eyes cut off (again implying Orientalist ideas of Muslim women's eroticism and lack of agency). Kahf says that she 'wanted a cover that featured praying, not navel-baring'. She even tried to withdraw her contract before they came to a compromise. Kahf insists: 'The compromised cover still does not appeal to me, but at least it is no longer deeply offensive (2006a, par. 41).

[109] See, for example, Kahf (2008); Davis, Zine and Taylor (2007).

However, writing back in this novel through challenging the stereotypes is certainly not reactive, in the sense that the narrative, in order to counter the vilifications of Islam, does not just show the most attractive elements of Muslim communities. In this novel, as I will outline in the following sections, the good and the bad about Muslim communities are represented together, and the prejudices and the narrow-mindedness of some Muslim people and even the misogyny of some Muslim men, are exposed and criticised. The novel, at many points, celebrates Muslim culture, though at many other points finds fault with it. The narrative, mostly through its focalizer, Khadra, emphasises the importance of such critique. When Khadra, in her job as a magazine photographer, is planning (despite her brother's objection) to include the photos of some yelling, violent-looking Muslims in a rally against Israel and Zionism, Khadra explains, 'we still need to face our darkness too. Negatives and positives. No, for our *own* sake, not to pander to *them.* For the sake of "*studying what our own souls put forth*," you know?' [110] (Kahf 2006, 436; italics in original).

However, as far as critique is concerned, there is a difference in approach to representation in this text as compared with popular forms that demonize Muslim culture. Kahf's novel does not dehumanize those narrow-minded Muslim people whom it represents; in other words, it is not a black-and-white picture of Muslims that is offered here. Rather, the novel, through focalization and other narrative techniques, including free indirect discourse, which allow the reader's engagement and even sympathy with the characters and their inner thoughts, represents these people as complex human beings with vices and virtues. Therefore, in this novel, an important feature of challenging the stereotypes involves humanizing the stereotyped without

[110] A reference to a Quranic idea.

resorting to idealization.[111] Such a representation of Muslim communities is in line with the theme of the possibility of the simultaneous attachment of importance to and critique of Muslim experience and identity. Accordingly, Muslim people's ideas, identities and experiences need to be recognized and appreciated; however, they also need to be treated reflectively even by Muslims themselves and particularly now when Muslims are concerned about the prevalence of negative representations of themselves in Western discourses.

The key narrative techniques that help the narrative achieve the simultaneous critique and humanizing of the Muslim characters are the use of free indirect discourse and the special focalization of the novel. Focalization in this text is multiple, alternating between different characters; however, the main focalizer is Khadra. With free indirect discourse, the narrator reports the preverbal perceptions and feelings of the characters in the characters' idiolects. Then, through this focalization and this special narrative mode, the reader is provided with access to the thoughts and feelings of many characters without having an authorial voice directly commenting on them. In this way, different groups with different ideologies are allowed to appear without the narrative's explicitly supporting or condemning any of them. At the same time, the capacity of free indirect discourse to show both the ironic and the empathetic attitude of the implied author toward the characters helps the narrative's many-layered presentation of the characters. The narrative introduces a variety of Muslim people, especially women, who all, from the devout Ebtehaj to the almost secular Seemi, claim Muslim identity, but who are very different in their attitude toward religion and in the way they practise religion. Thus, the narrative, through the capacities of free

[111] I will further explain this point in the last section of this chapter.

indirect discourse, gives space to all these characters to think, act and speak, and allows us to see that these people can be right sometimes and wrong at others.[112] However, what is important, as the novel seems to imply, is that they and their ideas exist; therefore, they need to be validated and represented. Representing the views of people with different ideas parallels Khadra's view, in her mature phase, when she tells her friend, Seemi, about what she thinks about narrow-minded Muslims. Seemi accuses Khadra of defending narrow-minded and rigid Muslims. Khadra, however, says, 'I'm not defending their *views.* I'm defending their right to have their views. There's a difference. I'm humanizing them' (Kahf 2006, 334; italics in original). Of course, those characters granted a voice in this novel are not extremists or terrorists. About the latter, the narrative, either through the narrator or Khadra's own discourse, makes harsh comments (Kahf 2006, 334).

In her simultaneous criticism and validation of Muslim identities and experiences, Kahf puts into practice what she has argued about the representation of Muslims by Muslims elsewhere. In an article, Kahf , quoting a verse from the Quran, which reads, 'Examine yourself before you be examined', argues that we cannot deny bitter realities about Muslim communities, such as that 'there are real Muslim women who are victims', or that 'Muslim sexism exists'; neither can we avoid our responsibility to do something about these realities. However, as she argues, the representations of these realities in many Western texts are usually mixed with 'anti-Muslim bigotry', which turn the representations into 'insupportable monolithic claims' about Islam and Muslim communities (Kahf 2007, 2). Therefore, she recommends Muslims avoid 'sugar-coating' and try to treat these problems and bitter realities in their own terms.

[112] As also mentioned in Chapter Five, Rimmon-Kenan asserts that free indirect discourse 'enhances the bivocality or polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes' (2002, 113).

She also argues that Muslim writers, unhappy with the present climate of representation of Islam, should not avoid sensitive matters, but should try to tackle them differently.[113]

Thus, we can see that Kahf's novel too, as much as writing back to Western discourses, is writing to and for Muslims. In other words, the interlocutors of this novel are not imagined as mostly or only non-Muslim Westerners.[114] The interlocutors are also Muslims, who might identify their experiences in the novel and take pleasure in that the novel represents their rituals and familiar world. However, they might also identify with and relate to the challenges, the hypocrisies and the contradictions represented in the novel that they might have experienced in their own religious communities.

Representation of religious identity: realism versus experimentalism

Like the other novels studied in this thesis, *The girl in the tangerine scarf* is a realist text. However, more experimental modes of writing, such as stream of consciousness and intertextuality, are also integrated frequently and conspicuously. In Chapter Two it was explained that the realist and experimental modes each have their particular role in the delineation of identity. Here I will discuss the function of each of these

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[113] Kahf also warns Muslim writers against being reactive: 'Just because the West has its stereotypes does not mean that fear of what the West will think gets to determine everything we write. That is self-crippling. It is a reaction to a reaction. You can't live that way: second-guessing how the West will read every move you make and tiptoeing around your community's dirty laundry. Nor is it an ethically sound position. Do not let the mischief of a people swerve you from doing justice, the Quran says (Al-Maidah, verse 8). You do not avoid truth-telling because it makes your tribe uncomfortable, and then create a rationale for that swerving based on the whine of minority victimization (2006a, par. 32).

[114] Dabashi also argues that 'the West' needs not be considered by the rest of the world as 'the principal interlocutor of the world' and convincing 'the West' needs not be the primary aim of non-Western writers when they are representing the non-West (2009, 272).

modes in the representation of Muslim identity and experience in this particular narrative, though I will present the examples later.

The dominant narrative mode is realism, which, with its emphasis on the unified individual, helps to show that identity is real and has consequences in the real world for the holders of identity. Certain aspects of Khadra and her community's Muslim identities and experiences are best demonstrated by the realist mode. For example, through depicting the lives of Khadra and her community in the realist style, the narrative represents how almost every thought and action in the life of Khadra's Muslim community is, in a way, related to their conception of their Muslim identity and their unique interpretation of Islam. The realist narrative also helps show how all through Khadra's life, her understanding of her religion and religious identity affects her worldview and her relationship with others. Also, the narrative represents how her life, both as a child and an adult, is affected by the fact that Muslims, a marginalized group in American society, are stereotyped. The linear, realist narrative mode, better than any other style, can show the regularity and frequency of these states, events and actions in these people's lives.

On the other hand, the use of the experimental mode helps suggests that religious identity can possibly be unconventional, contradictory, many-sided and fluid or flexible, as proposed by the narrative. The experimental techniques employed in this narrative include stream of consciousness, quasi-poetic language and intertextuality.

This stylistic variety in the novel helps suggest that identity is as much real and important as it is in a flux and evolving, and that we can ignore neither its reality nor

its flexibility, a view that postpositivist theorists of identity uphold, as outlined in previous chapters.

An inflexible view of religious identity and its drawbacks

The narrative, at one level, suggests the drawbacks for people sticking rigidly to their understandings of religious identity, not allowing themselves to be critical about it and not allowing this identity to evolve. These negative effects include stereotyping others, developing feelings of superiority over others, sticking to the superficial rather than the spiritual side of religion, and exercising hypocrisy as a result of closing one's eyes to the problems characterising one's way of life. Khadra's community and family are especially representative of this rigidity in religion in the novel. I will argue below that the narrative mainly in the realist mode and through the use of various techniques, particularly irony, can be interpreted as critiquing such a stance, representing a static Muslim identity as negative.

Khadra' family and community's religiosity is represented as inflexible, closely associated with limits and borders. What they are really concerned about in relation to religion are strict observance of religious rules, exact definitions of a 'true' Muslim and the qualities of people they can communicate with. The religious rules they are extremely careful about include those related to purities and impurities; *halal* and *haram* objects and actions; the exact timing of prayer; and the exact ritual of performing ablutions before praying. All through the years in which their lives are depicted they show no development in their view about religion, no willingness to re-evaluate or be self-reflexive about their way of thinking and no enthusiasm to expand their circle of friends and acquaintances.

The narrative shows how Khadra's family's being strict about these rules also can lead to their communicating only with a few people, and their othering, stereotyping and distancing themselves from the Americans or non-Muslims or other Muslims who do not think or act like them. The narrator, for example, explains how Khadra's mother, Ebtehaj, who thinks like many people in her community, runs the laundry twice in the laundry room with the coin machines because 'Americans' have used it before her. The narrator gives us Ebtehaj's discourse: 'because what if the person who used the washer before you had a dog? You never knew with the Americans. Pee, poop, vomit, dog spit and beer were impurities. Americans didn't care about impurities…. How Americans tolerate living in such filth is beyond me, her mother said' (Kahf 2006, 4). In this case, as in many other cases, Ebtehaj generalizes about Americans, which inevitably leads to stereotyping them.

The most obvious case of the Muslim community's stereotyping of Americans is the following description of Americans in which the discourse of the community is presented through free indirect speech filtered through the community's perspective:

> Generally speaking, Americans cussed, smoke and drank, and the Shamys [Khadra's family] had it on good authority that a fair number of them used drugs. Americans dated and fornicated and committed adultery. They had broken families and lots of divorces. Americans were not generous or hospitable like Uncle Abdulla and Aunt Fatma....
>
> Americans believed the individual was more important than the family, and money was more important than anything. Khadra's dad

said Americans threw out their sons and daughters when they were eighteen unless they could pay rent—to their own parents! ... All in all, Americans led shallow, wasteful, materialistic lives.
Islam could solve their social ills, if they but knew…

(Kahf 2006, 68)

Here the narrative takes an ironic tone through the self-assured tone of free indirect discourse and through the use of phrases such as 'generally speaking' and 'the Shamys had it on good authority', showing how the community does not allow any exceptions to their rules about Americans. They also smugly lump together other non-Sunni Muslims of other sects, including the followers of Elijah Mohammad and the minority Shia Muslims of the community as misled: 'all the Sunnies *knew* the Shias had wrong beliefs but tried to be polite and not talk about it (Kahf 2006, 34, 23–24) (Kahf 2006, 34; italics added).

Self-assuredness and inflexibility are, therefore, represented, on different occasions, to be salient features of the worldview of this community. The language the narrator uses for describing Khadra's family and the Dawah community, on different occasions, indicates how sure they are of their ways and their worldview. Again through the use of free indirect discourse, the narrative gives us the discourse of Ebtehaj when she is thinking about her attitude toward faith, 'the sure footing is the straight path, the rock-solid first ground of faith, *where she wa*s, she settled into the thin pillow ' (Kahf 2006, 103; italics added). Settling into the pillow can be read perhaps as a metaphor for the feeling of self-assuredness and comfort which Ebtehaj feels with regard to her faith.

The community's inflexibility of worldview and attitude is represented as leading to self-censorship and hypocrisy in the family and community. The narrative reveals that at least the members of the community try to stick to their principles and be good Muslims, the way they interpret being 'good Muslims'. However, the novel shows that no matter how hard they try, on several occasions they diverge from 'the right path', though, importantly, they do not confess or acknowledge doing so, pretending all the time that they are as good as their picture of an ideal Muslim. Delving into this issue is important because the narrative, through exposing the contradictions that Khadra's family close their eyes to, represents what type of mentality Khadra leaves behind later in the novel. Khadra's family and community are represented as having become masters of self-censorship and denial of the fact that they are ordinary human beings and not necessarily exemplars of religiosity and virtue. For example, the narrator explains that 'Khadra's parents felt that music, while not outright haram, tended toward frivolity and the forgetfulness of God' (Kahf 2006, 77). However, Khadra's father kept some music tapes, which he describes as the ones belonging to his '*jahilya* days', before 'he [woke up] to Islamic consciousness' (Kahf 2006, 77; italics in original). [115] Although Wajdy, Khadra's father, talks very negatively about his music tapes, we are told by the narrator that 'he couldn't bring himself to put them in the trash' and that 'in moments of weakness' he would listen to them 'in delight' and dance with them, of course '*in spite of himself*', and that even Ebtehaj 'had been known to smile at moments like these and sway in Wajdy's open arms, *in spite of herself*' (Kahf 2006, 77; italics added). Here the narrator's tone is ironic with regard to how Ebtehaj and Wajdy believe they should think and act and how they do, in fact, think and act. Another example of the contradictions that exist between the principles they are

[115] Jahilya is an Arabic word and Jahilya days roughly means days of ignorance.

passionate about and how Ebtehaj and Wajdy really think and act is their view of interracial marriages. The Dawah Center insists that there is no racism in Islam. However, when Khadra's brother expresses his wish to marry a beautiful and educated Muslim girl from a good family who, however, is dark-skinned, the narrator describes how Wajdy and Ebtehaj cannot conceal their strong disagreement with this marriage because of the girl's skin colour. Nevertheless, their spontaneous remarks and reactions, revealing their racist bias, contradict the justifications they bring for their disagreement (Kahf 2006, 139).

Nonetheless, the narrative shows that, in spite of their rigid perceptions of religion and separatist ideology and their habit of self-censorship, these people are not 'bad'. They are not greedy because, for example, as the narrator tells us 'the Shamy family had come to Indiana for God. It wasn't much pay' (Kahf 2006, 18). And we learn about their selflessness too. They 'worked long hours for low pay' (Kahf 2006, 40). They also did all the maintenance jobs of the centre themselves: 'the Centre wives took turns cleaning house… and the Dawah men mowed the lawn and did the maintenance work themselves. Service for the sake of the On-high' (Kahf 2006, 40).

They also try to be helpful and generous to others, though mostly and especially to those who think like they do. Importantly the narrator, in spite of describing different religious practices of the community, never describes any deep spiritual moments for these people, even when their praying is described, thus suggesting a sort of superficiality in their experience with religion. It is a point worth considering in the light of the fact that such spiritual moments are described later in relation to a religious identity that is allowed to evolve, represented in relation to Khadra's experience.

Khadra is growing up in such a family and community among people who, in spite of being selfless, generous and devout, have a very rule-bound, inflexible view of religion and themselves in relation to religion and are also represented as demonstrating self-censorship and a superiority complex.[116] Khadra, the child and the teenager, is as sure about the rightness of her way of thinking about religion and people as her parents and her community are. In this way, the novel also represents the important role of the family in the formation of religious identity of children.

The narrative shows several instances of Khadra's acting upon this attitude of superiority and self-righteousness in her relationship with others. One occasion is when the narrator explains that once Khadra finds Hanifa, one of the community's girls, 'in some unIslamic behaviour on the back seat of the wrecked car' and that then Khadra gives her 'a good talking-to for it' (Kahf 2006, 129). In fact, the narrative shows how Khadra self-righteously allows herself to judge and hurt others. The most dramatic incident of this kind involves Khadra and her Christian friend Livvy. Khadra and Livvy are very good friends until the time that the narrator describes as 'Hellfire Showdown' (Kahf 2006, 127). Khadra tells Livvy that you are going to hell because you believe that God has a son. She says it 'in a quavering voice' (Kahf 2006, 128). Livvy also, 'tearfully' tells Khadra that she will go to hell because she does not accept Jesus as her saviour (Kahf 2006, 128). Following this exchange, 'Livvy put her head down on her Paddington Bear and cried. Khadra went home feeling miserable. After that, Livvy and Khadra could only look at each other across the lunchroom with big

[116] Malekian, likewise, enumerates a number of negative effects for the rigid upholding of religion such as egotism, intolerance, superstition and feelings of anger and hatred towards those who do not follow the same religion (2004).

sad eyes and weren't friends anymore' (Kahf 2006, 128). This separation is narrated as a tragedy for both Khadra and Livvy, resulting from religious self-righteousness.

As discussed above, the narrative techniques of free indirect discourse and irony, exposing these people's instances of ignorance and revealing the narrator's unfavourable view toward this form of religiosity, foreground the limitations of this particular religious attitude. However, the novel also emphatically portrays the possibility of having a flexible view of Muslim identity, proposing the positive effects of such a view.

Development of a critical eye and the evolution of Muslim identity

The novel criticises a static view of religious identity and rather suggests the possibility and desirability of the evolution of Muslim identity. The development proposed by the narrative is enabled through loosening constraints, allowing oneself to see the problems in relation to one's view of religion and reflecting upon them. In short this evolution is brought about through developing a self-reflexive stance.

If a rather static religious identity is represented through the depiction of Khadra's family and community's worldview and way of life, for the depiction of a dynamic critical perspective on Muslim identity, the narrative focuses on Khadra. I have argued that the novel's representation of Khadra's family is an explicit demonstration of the problems arising from a slavish upholding of religious identity, showing that it can reach a point that the person neither is honest with herself, nor ready to relate to people who are of different creeds and religions. However, this is not the last picture of the practice of Islam to be depicted, as the novel shows that Khadra's experience is

different. Khadra's evolution in her identity is shown to be possible because, unlike her family members and most of the people in her community, she confronts and considers problems and contradictions. These steps provide the first stage of identity evolution for Khadra.

The development of Khadra's identity is deployed through both its linear and gradual unfolding in the realist mode, and through abrupt and intense transformations, represented in the novel through various experimental styles. The introduction of the metaphor of the metamorphosis of insects into the narrative explains evolution in Khadra's religious identity as metamorphosis also involves both gradual and intense changes.

Khadra's field of study at university is entomology—the scientific study of insects. Significantly, there are at least three references to the metamorphosis of insects in the novel. One is an explanation by Khadra to one of her friends, Joy, about the different stages of a bug's life, in which she says that a bug who is still changing is called an 'instar', while the mature bug is called an 'imagine'. Khadra talks about the stages of the metamorphosis of a bug after she feels impressed by Joy's not mixing her personal ideas with her feelings for a friend, and after thinking to herself that, 'I've never been a real friend, or had one. I've demanded that my friends conform to what I approve and disapprove' (Kahf 2006, 249). In other words, she starts thinking about metamorphosis as she comes to realize what cost sticking to strict definitions of religious identity has had for her. The second reference to metamorphosis is in an epigraph, extracted from a book about bugs, at the beginning of the chapter in which Khadra angrily breaks with her community and their religious views. The epigraph

can be considered an indication of the start of such a process in her. The third reference to the metamorphosis appears in a description of Khadra's thoughts, narrated through stream of consciousness, at the time when she is going through intense spiritual upheaval.[117] All three instances signify and underscore the idea of change or the necessity for change in Khadra's life.

The gradual development of Khadra's identity, as she allows herself to be critical about her religious identity and her Muslim community, is represented by the linear realist style. The narrative shows that as Khadra grows older, she is able to see the cracks in the hard and beautiful shell of her parents and her community's religious world. When, for example, Hakim, her playmate and the African-American son of one of Dawah's families, protests that the slogan, 'no racism in Islam' is just a beautiful sentence that is not observed by the Dawah community, the narrator tells us that Khadra admits as much to herself, though at this stage, she does not openly acknowledge this. After she rejects Hakim's claim that Dawah community members are racist toward black people, the narrator explains Khadra's inner acknowledgement of the racism of her community: 'she bit her lip, knowing he was right. Syrian Arabs like her parents sure didn't think black was beautiful' (Kahf 2006, 137). At this stage, Khadra can see glimpses of a reality, which of course, she tries to deny.

Frustration follows frustration as Khadra sees more dark points in relation to her Muslim community and other Muslim communities. She faces hypocrisy, corruption and cases of the abuse of the rights of women in her trip to Mecca (Kahf 2006, 166). In her Muslim community at her American university, she faces the sexism of the

[117] See pages below for an expanded discussion on this idea.

male students (Kahf 2006, 199, 204). Khadra, thus, comes to learn that her community, contrary to what she used to think, is far from being perfect. In a university course about Islamic theology, she also comes to know that 'the belief system of her parents and their entire circle, including the Dawah Center, was just one point on a whole spectrum of Islamic faith. It wasn't identical to Islam itself, just one little corner of it' (Kahf 2006, 232). The narrator tells us that Khadra tries hard to resist such facts, which are, of course, so powerful, so she 'heroically' resists them (Kahf 2006, 233). Nevertheless, these realities keep pressing Khadra into re-evaluating her thoughts.

As well, Khadra progressively learns that the separatist ideology she has grown up with has led to her missing a great deal in life. The narrator, on one occasion, takes us into Khadra's thoughts when she is coming to a new awareness, and when she feels how mistaken they, she and her family, have been in excluding others from their circle. When Khadra accompanies her friend to the house of a Christian Arab, the familiarity of the house and hostess shakes her and creates another experience for her of seeing beyond her parents' boundaries: 'Khadra glanced at their hostess's face, her features so familiarly Syrian, her cadence and voice equally so. What other homes of similar sweetness and joy had they passed by all these years, insisting as they did on their separateness and specialness, then? What a waste!' (Kahf 2006, 189). It is at this point that the narrator tells us that Khadra's transformation is inevitable and imminent. The narrator comments that 'something started to unravel in Khadra there in the kitchen, bringing her almost to the point of secret tears. Confused, she kept them in' (Kahf 2006, 189). It is the beginning of a long journey for Khadra. If in what happened between Khadra and Leevy, her Christian friend, Khadra the child is

represented just to be suffering without being able to probe the causes of her suffering, in this incident Khadra the adult is shown to regret the loss of human connection that she has endured through her adherence to a separatist ideology borne of religious inflexibility.

Thus, the novel, in its linear unfolding of the development of Khadra's religious identity and of her critical eye, reveals how pressure gradually builds up for her. With the revelation to Khadra that her former Islamic teacher at the community sells alcoholic drinks in his restaurant, another indication of hypocrisy, Khadra's already shaky foundation of trust on her community receives the final blow, and the already-accumulated pressure reaches a point of explosion. It is at this stage that she wishes to turn her back on her family, her community and their whole value system. This moment is a turning point for her. She does not know where she is going. She only knows that she hates her former life: 'the sudden *revulsion* … for everything. For her life up till now. She wanted to *abort* the Dawah Center and its entire community…. Twenty one years of *useless head-clutter*. It all had to go. All those hard polished surfaces posing as spiritual guidance. All that *smug* knowledge. Islam is this, Islam is that' (Kahf 2006, 261–262; italics added).

However, the sentences immediately following suggest that, in spite of this hatred, she wishes to re-evaluate her beliefs, not abandon them for good, 'maybe she believed some of it, maybe she didn't—but it needed to be cleared out so she could find out for herself this time. Not as a given. Not ladled on her plate and she had to eat it just because it was there' (Kahf 2006, 262). Importantly, as these thoughts indicate, Khadra gives herself another chance to see for herself what the best way for her is;

her bonds with her religion, culture and community are too strong to allow her to abandon them completely.

The rootedness of religion in Khadra's character is also shown through the images that come to her mind during these hard 'rock bottom' days, when she feels 'exhausted', 'through' and as if 'in a free fall, unmoored, safety net gone', with nothing to 'anchor' (Kahf 2006, 265) her. It is interesting that in describing these experiences, the narrator tells us that Khadra thinks of Quranic descriptions, such as those in the Quran of Holy Mary's ordeals, as sources of comparison to her own situation (Kahf 2006, 264). It is not easy for Khadra to separate herself from her former life in which the Quran had a central place and to renounce Islam, no matter what negative points she has observed in her Muslim community. What Khadra needs, the narrative suggests, is in fact a different interpretation of her religious identity. In this phase of Khadra's identity development, she destroys the edifice of her Muslim identity, mourning its destruction all through, though hoping to reconstruct it anew more strongly and with new materials.

Evolution of religious identity, moments of epiphany

Khadra's allowing herself to develop a critical eye results in her re-evaluating her religious views, beginnig the process of her identity development. Still, her trust that there is more to Islam than her community represents saves her from abandoning her religion for good. Now that she no longer holds dogmatic views about religion, the narrative suggests, Khadra is more prepared to take the opportunities which enable her to redefine her relationship with religion. Thus, the second phase of Khadra's evolution of Muslim identity involves her going through spiritual experiences,

triggered by situations that, as I will further explain below, a dogmatic Khadra could never apprehend the significance of. In this way Khadra's religious identity is rebuilt in such a way that it keeps both its self-reflexivity and its deep spiritual and emotional bonds with Islam. The narrative, through the description of this second phase, also represents the other side of the metamorphosis of Khadra's identity, which is its intense transformation.[118]

Interestingly, the narrative shows that for the depiction of this deep development of Khadra's identity, which is associated with spiritual moments, no other method but the experimental style of narrative can be used. Thus the narrative employs the technique of stream of consciousness, and a quasi-poetic language rather than the linear realist method for such a representation. In the technique of stream of consciousness, there is no transition mark between sentences and the link between parts of a sentence is based on free association. In relation to poetic language, we can refer to Julia Kristeva's theories about the relationship between poetic language and that 'unruly' aspect of our psyche called the semiotic; in the symbolic, order predominates, though in the semiotic, order is minimal (1974). Kristeva believes that the language that is most open to the semiotic is poetic language, characterized, in Morris's words, by 'rhythmic qualities, a heightening of sound patterning, disruption of syntax and heterogeneity' (Morris, 1993, 145).[119] Stream of consciousness and poetic language both foreground that evolving, flexible, transgressive aspect of

[118] It can be argued that Khadra in fact has left behind an institutional conception of religiosity in which observing the rituals and guarding the beliefs of the religious community are of high importance and instead has opted for an individualistic conception of religiosity in which each person's unique way in understanding religion and spirituality has high value. A number of psychologists of religion have asserted that the second form of religiosity is preferable to the first one, among whom we can refer to James (1902); Dewey (1934); Fromm(1950); Clark (1958); and Maslow (1964).
[119] In Kristeva's view, the self is not unified and this constant disruption of the symbolic order by the semiotic further indicates this multiple, changing and unstable nature of identity (1974).

identity and serve to capture spiritual moments when logic and rationality are inadequate.

It is in Syria where Khadra travels to after frustration with her former way of life that she first has these spiritual experiences. Her travel to Syria symbolizes a new start for her, as Syria is the country from which her parents brought her to America when she was three. There are two scenes in Syria in which Khadra's pivotal spiritual moments and deep religious experiences are described. The readers are prepared for these two climatic scenes with the introduction of the 'poet' into Khadra's life. Interestingly, in a modal shift to the techniques of magic realism, in Syria Khadra meets a mysterious figure, a poet, who may be—it remains unclear in the text—a real person or a figment of her imagination. With the poet's encouragement, Khadra learns to trust herself and love herself again and this love, as will be explained below, extends to other people and ultimately to God.

The first scene has to do with how Khadra returns to prayer. She had stopped praying, because she had realized that up to that point in her life she had been praying just to perform a duty. It is in Syria that she starts to pray again and it is just before she comes back to prayer that she experiences the deepest inner transformation and the most intense spiritual moments. Significantly, the narrative shows that what prompts this return to God in Khadra is a sudden and unexpected feeling of affection for an old rabbi she meets in Damuscus. For Khadra, Jews, whom she has always associated with the occupation of Palestine, were always the Others. However, she is no longer the Khadra who used to exclude people from her life. Now she meets a rabbi who looks so familiar to her, making her feel, to her astonishment, that this Jewish man is

much closer to her than she had ever imagined: 'she could suddenly imagine *being* his granddaughter. Blood and soil and home, boiling coffee in the kitchen, puttering about in faded house slippers to find him dozing in his chair, his fingers on a word in the holy book in his lap' (Kahf 2006, 306; italics in original). As Khadra imagines the rabbi to be her grandfather, as evident in the above lines, the language is heightened, quasi-poetic, and a form of stream of consciousness is presented as Khadra's discourse in these moments, suggesting an upheaval in her thoughts and emotions.

And it is just then that the narrator tells us that Khadra, more strongly than ever, questions herself and her identity, suggesting that what she desires for herself is a rebirth: 'Who was she? What was she, what cells of matter, sewn up into this Khadra shape, this instar? Imagine!' (Kahf 2006, 306). She begins to gasp then, 'Great gasping sobs poured out and wouldn't stop' (Kahf 2006, 306).

This recognition of love for the old rabbi, as explained, is described as being too much for her. She then remembers all the people she could have loved but did not love because of their different ideas, and she remembers them as she is crying and blessing:

> She slept and woke. Slept again. Dreamt, cried and blessed. They came to her, all the people she had once held at bay, as if behind a fibreglass wall. Now the barrier was removed, and they all rushed into her heart, and it hurt: Livy, Hanifa, Im Litfy, Joy's Assyrian boyfriend, whose holocaust she had denied. Droves of people, strangers and neighbours. *We are your kin, we are part of you.*

(Kahf 2006, 306–307)

Again it is the quasi-poetic language which is employed to describe this experience of feeling love for the people she used to keep her distance from. Then, we encounter an innovative form of stream of consciousness, one made up of Hadith Qudsis and verses of the Quran:[120]

> Where are those who love one another through my Glory?', *'Their souls are in the roundness of green birds, roaming freely in paradise'*,[121] 'She called out for a caller to call for her and listened; she was the caller and the Call. *Your Lord delights in a shephard who, on the peak of a mountain crag, gives The call to prayer and prays …* And if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running … *Let not any of you belittle herself …* And no soul knows what joy for them has been hidden … *I was a hidden treasure… and I wished to be known.* O soul made peaceful, return to your Lord, accepted and accepting. Come in among my worshipers, and in my garden, enter. *Come to prayer, come to prayer*).[122]
>
> (Kahf 2006, 307; italics in original)

The common theme of all these hadiths and Quranic verses is unmediated love between God and human, spiritual pleasure and peace. Khadra here is shown to move

[120] Hadith Qudsis or sacred hadiths are what Muslims believe to be the revelations from God but with the wording of the Prophet, unlike the Quran about which Muslims believe to be a totally divine revelation.

[121] This is part of a hadith Qudsi about the martyrs, implying that, perhaps, in Khadra's new understanding, those who love each other through God's glory are as valuable as martyrs.

[122] The sentence, 'Come to prayer' is a part of Muslims' 'Azan' or call to prayer.

from love for other people, the people she has newly learned to love, to love for God. It is at this moment that she reconciles with God and religion and as the narrator tells us 'Khadra came to prayer' (Kahf 2006, 307). Khadra starts to pray; however, it is not like the prayers she used to perform habitually and dutifully. Here, as the narrator explains, Khadra has a new experience of prayer: 'she felt as though she were praying for the first time, as if all that long-ago praying, rakat after rakat, had been only the illusion of prayer. And this—what she began to do now—was the real thing. All that had been lost was returning. All that was disconnected was connected again—*alo, Centrale?*' (Kahf 2006, 307; italics in original). The connection has finally been established and the rebirth that she so much wanted has happened. All through this scene the relationship between loving people regardless of their creed and religion and the spiritual awakening of Khadra has been emphasised. Loving these people, it is implied, could not have been brought about if Khadra had not decided to loosen her inflexibility with regard to her understanding of religion.

Another instance in the novel when Khadra experiences a deeply spiritual moment, is again in Syria when she unveils outside the house for the first time. In this scene the language is again markedly poetic. If the coming back to prayer scene, described above, is associated with love for other human beings, in this scene what is remarkable about Khadra's religious experience is its unconventionality and its basis in spirituality, in this case, rather than in visible symbols and rituals. Here once again the narrator's discourse merges into Khadra's. From the beginning of the description of this scene of unveiling, an unorthodox practice according to many Muslims, the language used emphatically suggests that what is described is a religious act, as the way she is standing is likened to the first stand of prayer: 'Khadra paused, standing

there in the fading rays with her palms spread, her hands spiralled up to the sky like question marks. She was in a position like the first stand of prayer' (Kahf 2006, 309).[123] Then we read:

> A yellow butterfly flittered by. The scarf was slipping off. She shrugged. The chiffon fell across her shoulders. She closed her eyes and let the sunshine through the thin skin of her eyelids, warm her body to the very core of her. She opened her eyes, and she knew deep In the place of yaqin [a Quranic word which means certainty] that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders. *Alhamdu, Alhamdulillah.* (Kahf 2006, 309)

At this moment, as the above lines indicate, she intuitively knows that unveiling is acceptable in the eyes of God. The continuation of the use of religious language such as a 'blessing' and the Quranic sentence '(Alhamdulillah)', which means 'Only God is worth worshipping', further implies that the narrative represents her unveiling as a religious act. The scene continues in a language that uses the metaphor of photography, Khadra's new passion, of a film developing under the light, in order to realise a spiritual experience visually. The Quranic sentences continue into this part as well: 'the sunshine on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her. *Sami allahu liman hamidah* (Allah hears whoever praises Him). Here was an exposure, her soul an unmarked sheet shadowing into distinct shapes under the fluids. Fresh film. Her self developing' (Kahf 2006, 309; italics in original). The narrator tells us that at

[123] In the first stand of prayer, Muslims stand with their hands either hanging or folded, reciting some specific chapters of the Quran.

this moment Khadra sees Teta looking at her and feels that she understands her and understands as Khadra now understands, 'how veiling and unveiling are part of the same process, the same cycle, how both are necessary; how both light and dark are connected moments in the development of the soul in its darkroom' (Kahf 2006, 309).[124] In this scene, once again incorporating the film development metaphor, what the narrative depicts is unveiling, an unconventional act as far as religious precepts are concerned, which is nevertheless accompanied by a transformative spiritual experience.

In both these cases superbly satisfying spiritual pleasure for Khadra has been represented as an outcome of breaking free from religious orthodoxy. Thus, the narrative, variously and on different occasions, shows its preference for flexibility and the transformative potential of religious identity.

Emotional attachment to religious identity, symbols and rituals

Throughout the novel, the narrative suggests that religion and religious identity are important to Khadra, though it also suggests that it is only the flexible and self-reflexive engagement with religion that benefits Khadra morally and spiritually and results in any meaningful evolution of her religious identity. In this regard, Khadra understands the importance of privileging spirituality over the rituals and symbols of religion and over insistence on a rigid definition of Muslim identity. However, the narrative suggests that Khadra's religious identity and the symbols of Islam, which at one level distinguish Muslim from other religious identities, still matter to Khadra. In this section I will argue that Khadra feels an emotional attachment toward her

[124]Khadra calls her father's aunt, who is like a grandmother to her, Teta. In some European languages, including Czech, Serbo-Croatian and Slovene, Teta means aunt.

religious identity and the rituals and symbols of Islam, an emotional attachment that does not contradict either her passion for the spirituality of religion nor her choice of the flexible practice of religion. Indeed, with regard to deep affection that Muslims may feel for their religion, Malak contends:

> … living Islam is not merely a spiritual practice or theological adherence, but also an intellectual and emotional engagement … Islam, however one conceives it, commands affection even from its own dissenters: Islam's values of justice and generosity, of courage and creativity, endow it with endearing and enduring loyalty. This loyalty is one of Islam's hallmarks that many outsiders miss, misunderstand or misinterpret. (2005, 152–153)

Interestingly, the narrative shows that the rituals and symbols of Islam form part of the attractions of Islam for Khadra. In this way, the novel goes beyond the celebration of spirituality without religion. Rather, it represents the pleasures of spiritual experience through formalized and ritualized religion.

The narrative, on various occasions, shows that Muslim identity, though a mystery to Khadra, matters to her and the attachment that she feels toward her religious identity and its symbols and rituals is very important to her sense of well-being. The reader, for example, learns that Khadra, in Philadelphia and away from the Dawah community in Indiana, rarely goes to a mosque to pray, as she believes that she needs space to think through things for herself, alone. However, when her Teta dies, she needs to do something to mourn. When a Muslim dies, one of the ceremonies which

is performed is the congregational prayer, with the dead body located in front of the congregation. Khadra finds an imam in a mosque who is prepared to do the absentee funeral prayer in the mosque for her grandmother.[125] The narrator tells us how Khadra feels when the whole congregation prays for Teta:

> Such a comfort for Khadra, the sound of their prayer and their breaths, and she didn't even mind that the women prayed on a secluded mezzanine. … She felt the tenderness of being in a space she knew intimately, of hearing the collective "amen," of sharing the loss of her Teta in this prayer language. (Kahf 2006, 29)

The words, 'comfort', 'tenderness' and 'intimately' explain Khadra's feelings during this congregational prayer. Importantly, the narrator tells us that at this moment, other questions, such as the separation of women from men in mosques, an issue that she has always criticised, do not matter to her. At this moment, she is overwhelmed by the tenderness, intimacy and security of being in a familiar space. In other words, her involvement with religion at this moment is on another level: the haven that religion provides.

On another occasion, the narrative puts Khadra in a position where she needs to explain why being Muslim matters to her or why she cares for her identity as a Muslim. At this stage of her life, she has, of course, left the "Muslims are better" attitude behind, and believes that, as she tells her friend, 'Muslims aren't necessarily better spiritually than people in any other faith. They might be as close and even

[125] Absentee funeral prayer refers to a prayer for a deceased Muslim person, when the corpse of the dead person is not located in front of the person who performs the prayer.

closer to God and not be Muslims', and 'maybe divine law manifests in many ways in the world. Maybe you don't always have to have it set in stone as *the* so-called "Islamic lifestyle". Maybe it's all about process' (Kahf 2006, 402). Hearing such arguments from Khadra, her friend asks: 'Well, why are you Muslim then? If anything else is just as good' (Kahf 2006, 402). Khadra's answer is simple but important, an answer that many believers in any creed might be able to relate to: 'Khadra thinks for a minute. "Love," she says slowly. "Love and attachment. I love the Quran, for example. And the forms and rhythms of salah. I keep coming back to it. It has a resonance for me"' (Kahf 2006, 402). The novel clearly dramatizes the point, made by critics such as Bruce Baum, that the emotional attachment people might have to their religion is often underestimated in many popular and scholarly discourses (Baum, 2006). The adherents of a religion can feel such an attachment to their religion both because of the spiritual and moral attractions of that religion and because of the fact that people can simply be habituated to the rituals and symbols of their religion and the spiritual and emotional responses that these rituals and symbols evoke.

Another example of Khadra's attaching importance to the symbols of religion and religious identity even after opting for a less rigid practice and deciding that spirituality in religion matters much more than its exterior manifestations is how she still insists on wearing her hijab, though not all the time. After the experience of unveiling, described above, she no longer believes in the necessity of wearing hijab as much as before. Rather, now she believes that she needs to adhere to the principle of modesty behind hijab: 'going out without hijab meant that she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behaviour, she realized one day, with a jolt. It's in how I act, how I move, what I choose every minute' (Kahf 2006, 312). However, she keeps

on wearing this symbol of her religious identity off and on for different reasons, including the fact that wearing hijab still is a pleasurable act for her. In this regard, the narrator explains that Khadra is so used to her hijab that she cannot easily put it away: 'Still, hijab had been her comrade through many years. 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' (Kahf 2006, 312). The language—'comrade', 'old friends' and 'caress'—reveals Khadra's intimate attachment to her hijab.[126]

Contradictions as both possible and desirable

The narrative develops through the exploration of the apparent contradictions of the possibility of being attached to religious identity and being self-reflexive about it at the same time. The way Khadra's identity develops shows that these dimensions can exist side by side in a dialectic relationship, a point that Khadra ultimately understands with regard to her religious identity.[127] Towards the end of the narrative, she is represented as being at peace with the idea that cherishing religious identity as she does does not equal rigid adherence to religious precepts. It is an issue that she sees she needs to argue both with the secular and hyper-religious people in her life, two groups who are each orthodox in their own way. In a scene when Khadra is having a conversation with Chrif, a secular friend, we read:

> Khadra sighed. She just wanted to make him admit that being Muslim wasn't such a straightjacket. It was the same argument she

[126] However, we also learn through the narrator that Khadra also considers hijab related to the spirituality of religion: 'hijab was also more than that for her. It was the outer sign of an inner quality she wants to be reminded of, more often that she could manage without it (Kahf 2006, 425).
[127] Stuart Hall also points out that identities can be possibly contradictory and engaged in dialectic processes. See Hall (1991).

> had with her mother. She didn't expect Chrif to be arguing for the same thing as her mother, that Islam was rigid and homogeneous. It's like they both wanted Islam to be this monolith, only for her mother it was good, for him bad. She knew it wasn't that simple.
>
> (Kahf 2006, 344)

However, having a flexible and self-reflexive orientation to Muslim identity can lead to other instabilities and contradictions in relation to one's understanding of religion. A Muslim who adheres to this way of thinking cannot easily settle once and for all with her religious identity. She is always asking about, always evaluating and always questioning it. She might be never sure what the 'true' path is. Nevertheless, the narrative suggests that being in a dynamic and dialectic engagement with religious identity is preferable to having a static view of it, the way Khadra's family and community do. It is on the last pages of the novel that Khadra thinking of her friend Hakim, points out the similarity between him and her: 'He's on some kind of journey, he's somewhere betwixt and between, like she is' (Kahf 2006, 411). When Chrif refers to this point about Khadra, Khadra replies, 'most people are …full of contradictions' (Kahf 2006, 341). Apparently, to her, this way of being now seems to be more natural and acceptable than being rigid and inflexible.[128]

Through drawing attention to different discourses influential in the development of Khadra's Muslim identity, the narrative suggests in another way why Khadra's

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[128] Malekian calls the sort of belief that, for example, the mature Khadra holds as heuristic belief. It is the sort of belief that the person holds only temporarily and as long as she/he has not come to a better and truer belief. The holder of such a belief does not worship her ideas and is always ready to correct her/his beliefs and ideas and replace them with better ones, which are also the result of her/his own endeavors to understand better (2004).

religious identity cannot escape being many-sided or dynamic. Throughout the narrative, the reader sees how Khadra is exposed both to discourses rooted in her American upbringing and to those rooted in her Islamic upbringing, To show the dialectical relationship of these discourses in the formation of Khadra's identity, the narrative uses the technique of intertextuality. [129] The epigraphs of different chapters of the novel, for example, carry excerpts from both Western and Eastern sources, old and new, including the Quran and literary and scientific books. Each extract is somehow related to the theme of the chapter. In this way the narrative locates the themes of the novel in a wider context and suggests that the main character lives in a polyphonic world and is exposed to different discourses and ideologies. More directly related to the delineation of religious identity and experience is the way the narrative blends American slang, phrases from American literature and pop music with Quranic verses and Muslim themes. Sometimes these phrases appear in the least likely situations. It is, for example, noteworthy that the narrative shows that Khadra, on first seeing the sacred Kaba in Mecca, cannot stop her mind from thinking of the lines of a Phil Collins's song, *'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…'* (Kahf 2006, 162; italics in original). This scene suggests that Khadra's identity formation is affected by various discourses, including those from both her Muslim and her American cultural backgrounds. No identity, as both the poststructuralists and postpositivists agree, is really shaped by a singular discourse.[130]

[129] M H Abram and Geoffrey Harpham thus define intertextuality: 'The term intertextuality, popularized byJulia Kristeva, is used to signify multiple ways in which any one literary text is in fact made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are 'always-already' in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born' (2005, 364). See also, Allen (2000) and Orr (2003) for more debate on the subject of intertextuality.
[130] However, intertexuality, especially the use of Arabic and Quranic verses and sentences, can have other effects as well, such as, in Khaled Mattawa's words about Kahf's poetry, making 'the Muslim

Importantly, towards the end of the novel, there is another scene which shows Khadra's contradictions, this time, in passing judgement on the Muslim community of her childhood: here we see that she cannot come to any final conclusions when judging them. The discussion of this section also offers a fitting conclusion to the discussion of this novel. As one of the final representations of Khadra's feelings about her religious identity, we see Khadra as possessing of a contradictory, complex religious identity, an identity that as intensely loves its religion, religious symbols, religious practices and religious communities as it views them critically. However, she is represented to be accepting of and at peace with this identity and also accepting of other people with even different views, whom she has learnt not to judge because of their views but to love because of their humanity:

> Here, they are then, she thinks, during salah. My beloved community… My God, they're still pottering along the same way, the same old tired language, the same old restrictive ideas and crabbed beliefs. Oh, sure, some people thought about changing the old mentality. Sure, sure, it was significant … And, of course, the people of Dawah weren't all the same. Some were really quite freethinking, on their own, when it came down to it. But the Dawah as an *institution* is still what it is. Institutions tend to be like that, holding on to systems and perpetuating them. And it's so—limited and cramped and—she sighs—just out-and-out *wrong*. Always stressing the wrong side of religion, the fear-God side instead of love-God. Always stressing the outer forms over the inner light.

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visibly and audibly recognizable in, and thus native to, the West' (2008, 1591). A novel like Kahf's is a part of contemporary American literature, no matter how central Muslim themes are within it.

> …Well, now wait, Khadra pauses, in the last rakat. How arrogant of me. Do I know that for sure? Maybe they're right after all, on some other level I am not aware of. A right principle wrongly applied, or something. Could be. *Yeah, uh, I don't think so honey*, an ironic voice inside her says. *Stop making excuses for them.* That's what the poet would say, Khadra thinks drily. Okay. Fine. They're dead wrong. Yeah. They really are. My God. About God and everything. God is not an asshole. Alhamdulilah … But *still*, Khadra reflects, after salam. Why not? If all paths lead to God, this one also leads to God. There is inner light here, too. Wrong they may or may not be, but still I would not have a single one of them harmed. I'd—I'd— I'd give my life to protect any of them, if it came to that! Well, or something ... Wrong and mulish they could be, but dear to her, and maddening and conformist and awful, but full of surprising beauty sometimes, and kindness, and, then, just as full of ugliness and pettiness and, overall, really quite mediocre mostly. But no, some were really quite remarkable, possessed of nobility and courage—yet the pride, the pride of holding themselves *above* the way they do, and thinking they *know*. In the end, then, they were just so very human and vulnerable, like anyone else. Really, so vulnerable, when you think about it. Especially now, Khadra realizes. Especially now.
>
> (Kahf 2006, 421– 423; italics in original)

As the extended extract above shows, Khadra has ambivalent feelings toward these people. She is not sure whether they are right or wrong, but she is sure they are

ordinary human beings and combine a complex of positive and negative qualities. She is also sure that these vulnerable, fallible, narrow-minded people, who still have some very endearing qualities, are important to her. Khadra's checking herself after making any definitive statement and her frequent use of 'but', 'yet' and the use of positive and negative qualities together, such as 'nobility' and 'ugliness', attributed to the same people, all show the tension in Khadra's mind and the complexity of her feelings and attitudes toward them. Tension, complexity, contradiction and attachment, as discussed in this chapter, are terms that help us define Khadra's relationship with her religion, Islam, as well.

Chapter Eight: Camilla Gibb's novel, *Sweetness in the belly*

The four novels discussed so far in this thesis variously challenge popular Western assumptions about Muslim identity and experience. Each of them, with a unique theme, focus and style, explores some dimension of a Muslim woman's identity and experience little known to Western non-Muslim readers and illuminating for Muslim readers. In fact, these narratives help resolve what to many Western people may appear to be irresolvable contradictions about devout Muslim women's lives. The constant of the contradictions in all these novels, however, is the deep belief of the characters in the spirituality of Islam. Aboulela's works demonstrate how a Muslim woman can believe deeply in Islam and deeply feel happy in her life. Abdel-Fattah's work suggests the compatibility of Muslim women's cherishing their religion and religious identity with their attaching importance to their national identity. Kahf's work explores the possibility of being at the same time a true believer in Islam and a critic of specific views about Islam held by even devout Muslims.

Sweetness in the belly (2005) by Camilla Gibb, the last novel analysed in this thesis, in addition to challenging Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslim communities, also suggests the possibility of an interpretation of Muslim identity that is compatible with Western modernity and individualism, a contradiction to many people.[131] In fact, I read the narrative as representing how the idea of identities, experiences, borders and cultures as necessarily oppositional, a "clash of civilizations" theory, can be

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[131] Camilla Gibb was born in London and grew up in Toronto. She is not a Muslim. She was chosen by the jury of the Orange Prize as one of the talents to watch for in 21 century. She is also the author of two other novels, *Mouthing the words* (2002), and *The petty details of so-and-so's li*fe (2002). Her novel, *Sweetness in the belly* (2005), was short-listed for the Giller Prize,was chosen as a Best Book of the Year by *The Globe and Mail* and amazon.ca, won Ontario's Trillium Book Award and was long-listed for the 2007 IMPAC Award.

challenged and transformed, so that the potential of a relationship between and across borders, identities, faiths, cultures, and traditions can be suggested. Through such a transformation, however, the idea of a spirituality (enabled in *Sweetness* through the main character's Muslim faith) is not relinquished, a spirituality which retains its power, meaningfulness and centrality in Muslims' lives. The text especially emphasizes the possibility of overcoming the dualism of Western culture and an Islamic worldview through the creation of a character who, while allowing herself to enjoy the spiritual and mystical aspects of Islam, takes to an individualistic, reason-based interpretation of Islam. This rational individualistic approach, generally considered a conspicuous attribute of Western culture, is nevertheless suggested by the narrative to be attuned to Islam, rather than being alien to it.[132]

I present my arguments in this chapter in four sections, all related to the theme of unification and reconciliation of identities and cultures. Firstly, I argue that in the representation of Islam in this novel, as well as encountering Islam as a source of peace and empowerment for Muslims (and thus in contrast to many Western representations), the reader's attention is drawn to the unifying aspect of Islam and

[132] This way of interpreting Muslim identity, I argue, is in line with what Adis Duderija (2009) terms 'critical- progressive Islamic hermeneutics', outlined by a number of Muslim scholar activists such as Hasan Hanafi, a professor of philosophy at Cairo University, Egypt; Khaled Abou El Fadl, professor of Islamic Law at UCLA; Amina Wadud, an associate professor of Islamic Studies at the Virginia Commonwealth University, United States; Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd , a professor of 'Islam and Humanism' in the University of Humanistics in Utrecht, Netherlands; Ali Asghar Engineer, a Muslim scholar in India; Kecia Ali, an assistant professor of Religion at Boston University, USA. I will further explain this notion below.
Western culture is usually defined as individualist (Fiske 2002; Trandis, McCusker and Hui 1990). As Steve Lukes observes, individualism 'embraces a wide diversity of meanings… yet it has been repeatedly used … by historians and scholars of literature in search of the emergence or rise of "the individual," by anthropologists and others claiming that there are different, culturally shaped conceptions of the individual or "person," by philosophers of social science debating the appropriate form of explanation and by political theorists and moral and political philosophers discussing the claims and presuppositions of contemporary liberalism, defending liberal principles' (2006,1). In this chapter, I am mostly concerned with the idea of Western individualism as a belief in self-reliance and the primacy of the individual, believed to be prevalent in Western societies.

Muslim identity for Muslims. Secondly, I explain how the narrative introduces the main character as one who belongs simultaneously to different worlds, cultures and identities: an Afrikaner, a European and a Muslim. Thirdly, I discuss how in this novel the main character moves from rigidity to flexibility in the interpretation of religion, and through both cherishing the spiritual, mystical sides of Islam and opting for an individualistic interpretations of Islam, familiar to a person from a Western culture, comes to an understanding of her Muslim identity that overcomes the dualism of Muslim identity and Western identity. Finally, I discuss the issue of the origin of Camilla Gibb, a writer of Western non-Muslim background, explaining both the possible effects of knowing about this origin on the way the novel is read and the relationship between the non-Muslim origin of Gibb and the main theme of this chapter.

The plot of the novel

The novel tells the story of, Lilly, a woman of an Irish mother and an English father, who has lived as a child in Morocco, as a teenager in Harar, Ethiopia and, due to the political instability, in Africa lives as an adult as a refugee in London. We come to know that her parents died in Morocco, leaving Lilly to the care of Great Abdal, a Sufi spiritual leader who was her teacher, her guide, and a father figure to her, and Muhammad Bruce Mahmud, a British convert to Islam who was her guardian (Gibb2005, 12). Great Abdal introduces Lilly to the Quran and Islam, teaching her both the orthodox Islam and Sufism, with the latter having a priority in his teachings.

Great Abdal looks after Lilly until she is 16, and then the political unrest in Morocco causes him to send her to Harar where she stays with Nouria, a poor Harari woman.

Lilly becomes the local Quran teacher of the children there. Her rather uneventful and calm life in Harar soon becomes disturbed when she meets and falls in love with Aziz Abdelnasser, a young doctor from the local hospital. Aziz and his attractions provide a challenge to Lilly's way of life, way of thinking and her religious views. Political unrest once again strikes Harari people's lives and Aziz sends Lilly to London, although he himself stays in Ethiopia.

In London, Lilly works as a nurse in a nearby hospital, which is the local hospital for the Ethiopian, mostly Muslim, refugees. There, she and a friend start running a voluntary office which sets out to unite family members and locate missing individuals. There is no news from Aziz and Lilly is depressed without him. She keeps on refusing the amorous approaches of a young Indian doctor at the hospital. Finally, one day, after 17 years of waiting she learns that Aziz has been killed in the war. She learns this, but she lives on. A new Lilly is ready to start a new life.

Challenging the stereotypes, representing Muslim identity as reconciling borders and identities

In this section, I describe the narrative's representation of the attractions of Islam and Muslim identity for the devout Muslim protagonist, Lilly. Also, as related to the main theme of this chapter, I argue that the narrative draws the reader's attention to the idea that having the common identity of Muslim can provide the opportunity of a relationship across borders and cultures for Muslims, binding them to each other. Important as this point is, it will be further discussed that, as the story develops, the notion of relationship between borders and cultures in the novel is extended to other identities, and is not limited to the concept of unity among Muslims.

The representation of Islam in this novel is certainly different from dominant representations in the West. It has been said that *Sweetness in the belly* is one of the novels that 'speak to Western misconceptions of Islam' and a novel that 'shows us a side of Islam—a pious, reflective aspect—currently in short supply on the nightly news' (Bradshaw 2006, par. 7). In representing Islam, the narrative relates religion to a sense of security and the peace of mind enjoyed by the devout person, and associates religion with love, in its broadest sense. The way Lilly talks about her introduction to Islam, for example, suggests her associating Islam with a sense of tranquility: 'I was not always a Muslim, but once I was led into the absorption of prayer and the mysteries of the Qur'an, something troubled in me became still' (Gibb 2005, 9). Lilly also links her religion to love and affection such as on the following occasion when she is thinking about the teachings of Great Abdal and Muhammed Bruce after she has suffered the trauma of the loss of her parents. 'They worked hard to fill the hollow and replace the horror with love and Islam. And so for me, the two have always been one' (Gibb 2005, 12). Lilly also values the sense of order and security that she feels accompanies living the life of a devout Muslim. Lilly's description of Harar, for example, betrays such an association in her mind:

> There was comfort in the order and predictability of our world. Ours was a city of ninety-nine mosques and more than three hundred saints, their shrines organized along seven co-centric circles. There were five gates punctuating the city wall and five raised clay platforms in Harari houses, just as our days revolved around five daily prayers and our lives were governed by the five pillars of faith.
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> (Gibb 2005, 271)

The language of mathematics used in the description of an Islamic Harar in the above quotation suggests a kind of mathematical predictability and pattern in the life of Muslim people of Harar because of Islam. In the representation of the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, the elements of love, order and security are also emphasized, as in the following example when Lilly is thinking about the Quran: 'Each utterance prefaced by bismillah al-rahman al-rahim, in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. The world within the book was whole, and there was an order, a process, a logical sequence of steps. It was the antithesis of the peripatetic life I had lived with my parents; it was the antidote to their death' (Gibb 2005, 68). The example shows how Lilly relishes the predictability and order in the Quran and how she regards the Quran as the solace in her sad life at the time. Significantly, Lilly's relating religion to love, peace and security, in spite of all the ups and downs in her life, remains consistent throughout the novel both when she is in London and when she is in Harar. Such a representation of Islam as a source of love, peace and security for Muslims suggests why to Lilly, Muslim identity can be so attractive and important.[133]

Lilly, whose interpretation of religion and religious identity undergoes many changes throughout the novel, nevertheless also sees a stability about her Muslim identity

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[133] The representation of Islam in this novel, in some ways, resembles the representation of Islam in Aboulela's fiction. For example, as explained about the above extracts, Lilly appreciates Islam for similar reasons to Najwa in *Minaret*—she enjoys the stability it brings into her life. Also Lilly, like Najwa and Sammar in Aboulela's novels, relates Islam to love, security and peace of mind. Such associations, in various degrees, are not absent from the works of the other novelists of this thesis. There are also other similarities between representations of Islam in this novel and the representations of Islam in the other novels, such as the clarification of some popular misconceptions about Islam. For example, in order to present a different interpretation of 'Jihad', Gibb puts Hussein and Lilly in a situation where they talk about the meaning of this word. They are talking about the war in the north. 'Hussein says, "This is not the true meaning of jihad," he spoke into the starless sky. "Jihad is the holy war we have within ourselves. That is the meaning below the surface. Our internal struggle for purity," he said with emphasis, pressing his forefinger into his chest. "It is the war of ascendance over our basal instincts. It has absolutely nothing to do with others. The only thing we can have control over is ourselves"' (Gibb 2005, 56).

which provides her with an anchor that other facets of her identity cannot provide. This perceived stability can be partly explained by the idea, elaborated on in Chapter Two, that there are some constants about Islam—its spirituality and its major texts, mainly the Quran—which, irrespective of various understandings of this religion, remain always the same.[134] There is also the possibility that faith will accompany the bearer wherever she goes, which further suggests the reason as to why the quality of stability can be ascribed to religious identity. It is probable that this stability will become even more important in conditions of exile, when people feel rootless and insecure.[135] In London, for example, Lilly takes recourse in praying in the Muslim way in stressful situations (Gibb 2005, 346). Also when she is in London she feels most secure when she recognizes signs and symbols of Islam. She prefers to live in the same blocks of apartments as the other Muslims. When she describes the street where the estate house where she lives is located, she, specifically and emphatically, refers to locations on the street which are Muslim-friendly, such as the halal meat shop, 'the Mecca Hair Salon, with its special enclosed room at the back where hijab-wearing women can reveal themselves without shame'; 'Quranic classes at the back of the church,' and a place for daily worship at 'the Refugee Referral Service just down the road' (Gibb 2005, 34). Then Lilly comments that 'This is where we are reassured of our place in the world. Our place in the eyes of God' (Gibb 2005, 34). The Muslim identity-affirming nature of the street renders it a safe haven for Muslims, a place to which they feel attached and a place where they are sure that one important facet of their identity, their religious identity, is recognized and respected.

[134] It is important to note that although the Quran is a fixed text, it has been variously interpreted by different scholars in the course of history.
[135] In Chapter Five, the chapter on Aboulela's works, it was mentioned how Sammar and Najwa, the main characters of *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), also associate their faith and Muslim identities with the idea of home and feel psychologically empowered in the condition of exile because of their faith.

Moreover, and closely related to the main theme of this chapter, the capacity of Muslim identity to bind Muslims of different backgrounds is stressed in the narrative. Lilly is represented as being aware of the binding aspect of her Muslim identity. When she is reflecting on her religion she, on several occasions, clearly refers to this notion. In the following extract which represents Lilly's contemplations over prayer, for example, the unifying power of Muslim identity in a world in which there are numerous forces tending to separate people from each other is suggested: 'The sound of communal prayer—its growling honesty, its rhythm as relentless and essential as heartbeats—moves me with direction and makes me believe that distance can be overcome. It 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' (Gibb 2005, 34). Here Lilly, through reference to the rhythm and regularity in communal prayer, symbolizing the stability in religion, relates the ideas of stability of religion and religious identity to their binding capacities. The same theme of the potential of Muslim identity to unite Muslims is expressed in the description that she gives of her journey to Harar with Hussein and their guide. 'Our Tuareg guide hadn't spoken Arabic or French or English, but we'd prayed together after performing our ablutions with desert dust, and slept side by side on the ground like mummies wrapped in sheets under night's mist of sand. Islam unites us, where language and borders do not' (Gibb 2005, 55). The words 'together', 'side by side' and 'unites', used in relation to Islam shows the capacity of this identity to dissolve differences between people. The novel also insists on the representation of Muslim identity as one that transcends race or class: 'Conspicuous wealth, backbreaking servitude and drifting poverty—secular distinctions all erased in the presence of God' (Gibb 2005, 42).

Lilly's attachment to her religious identity is represented as firm and uncompromising throughout the novel. In relation to the issue of the resilience of religious identity in the devout person's heart, Lilly comments on the views of Richard Burton, who, in his book on Harar, had 'boasted of being the one to break the guardian spell of the city' and 'to tear away the shroud of Islam and render the Harari people naked'. 'Burton or no Burton,' Lilly says, 'Islam was within and all around us … Even if they'd come and destroyed all the mosques and all the shrines, Islam would not have been broken' (Gibb 2005, 213).[136] As the extract shows, to Lilly, Muslim identity all through remains stable, its sustenance independent of material or physical appearances.[137]

The binding aspect of Muslim identity makes Lilly feel secure when she is with other Muslims; however, the narrative later on shows that Lilly is capable of feeling bound to and secure with many other people, regardless of their background. In other words, the narrative goes beyond the politics of identity to suggest the possibility of relationship across differences and also links the development of Lilly's Muslim identity to her overcoming her oppositional views about Muslim and Western worldviews and lifestyles.

Lilly's background and the reconciliation of cultures

The narrative's theme of unification and reconciliation further develops and finds other dimensions through an important feature of the story—the special

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[136] Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890) was a British explorer, writer, poet, linguist, ethnologist, spy and diplomat. He travelled extensively within Africa, Asia and America. Nouria is here talking about Richard Burton's book, *First footsteps in East Africa: a journey to Harar* (1856), in which Burton has given a negative representation of Harar and Hararis.

[137] The themes concerning religion, as exemplified in the extracts above, bear considerable resemblance to the themes that Aboulela emphasizes in her works. A sympathetic examination of any religion makes these descriptions of religion as a source of security, love and peace of mind for the devout adherents believable. Admittedly, the misuses of religion are not emphasized in the works of either author.

circumstances of Lilly's growing up and her background. In fact the character of Lilly, as a Muslim with a Western background, living in Africa can be considered an important metaphor in the novel for the relation between and reconciliation of diverse cultures and identities. In this section I firstly argue that the novel, through depicting Lilly's life from childhood to adulthood, represents the social designation of Lilly's identity—the way she is known by others—as one which simultaneously belongs to different cultures. Such a depiction, arguably, prepares the reader for accepting the inner designation of Lilly's identity—the way she knows herself—as also one which reconciles the most conspicuous features of Western culture and Islam, rationality on the one hand and mysticism and spirituality on the other.

Lilly is conspicuously represented as both an outsider and insider in relation to Muslim culture, simultaneously belonging and not belonging to it. In fact, the perspective in the novel is that of a European-born convert to Islam, who is only gradually being introduced to the ways and ideas of Muslims. Lilly's initiation into Islam, first at the age of eight, is through a Sufi master who also takes the responsibility of bringing her up. However, she has a guardian, Muhammed Bruce, a British convert, who makes sure that as Lilly is growing up, she is equally exposed to Western discourses through the texts of Western philosophy and literature that he always brings her, books such as Dickens and Austen's works, *Alice's adventures in wonderland, Gulliver's travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*. As she comments about her childhood education, 'Muhammed Bruce's choices were more deliberate than I've ever realized. He supplemented my diet of Islam with doses of other realities' (Gibb 2005,

247–248).[138] In Harar, although she lives in the house of a Harari woman as a family member, prays like Muslim Harari people, speaks like them and even teaches the Quran to their children, she is never considered a full Harari by Harari people and is called a 'farenji', meaning foreigner. Her acceptance into the culture is very gradual. Interestingly, Harari people expect her to, one day, tell other farenji people like her, good things about Harar, suggesting that people of Harar cannot forget her 'farenji' side. Nouria, the Harari woman she lives with, tells Lilly of the distress caused to local people by Richard Burton's book on Harar, saying, 'Maybe one day you will write another farenji book and tell the truth' (Gibb 2005, 213). Therefore, she is a Muslim-farenji to the Muslim people of Harar.

When she is in London, she is also aware of her in-between position in the eyes of people and feels that she has more responsibility toward people to help them because of belonging to different worlds:

> My white face and white uniform give me the appearance of authority in this new world, though my experiences, as my neighbors quickly come to discover, are rooted in the old. I am 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. I can translate the forms for them before kneeling down and putting my forehead to the same ground. Linoleum, concrete, industrial carpet. Five times a day, wherever we might be, however

[138] Through emphasis on the effects of the literary works on Lilly's worldview and her identity formation, Gibb, arguably, draws the readers' attention to the value of literature and introduces literature as an influential discourse.

> much we might doubt ourselves and the world around us. (Gibb 2005, 9)

The use of a series of contrasting concepts in this extract, such as the 'new' and 'old' world, 'past' and 'future', to which Lilly feels she simultaneously belongs, as well as the repetition of the preposition 'between', and the verb 'translate' in Lilly's description of how Muslim African immigrants know her, indicate that she is sure that she belongs to different worlds simultaneously rather than one. On another occasion, Lilly, talking about Amina's husband, who is now in London, comments that he knows that she belongs both to the old and new world. 'He appeals to me, knowing somehow that part of me still remains in the old world, unwilling to let go, while Amina is "moving with the times."' (Gibb 2005, 241). In short, she is represented as someone who is known to be, at the same time, culturally both an African Muslim and a Westerner.

Such a depiction of Lilly's identity as belonging to different worlds demonstrates the multiple functions of the narrative: in addition to providing a metaphor for the larger theme of the novel, the reconciliation of identities and cultures, such a depiction creates a world and a character which are at the same time both familiar and unfamiliar to both Muslim readers and secular readers of the novel, disrupting the familiar worlds of both these groups, suggesting the possibility of new conceptualization of identity. Also, it prepares the reader for accepting the final resolution of Lilly's identity as meaningful in different cultures through introducing her identity as one affected by different discourses.

Lilly in her position as a Muslim Westerner, both familiar and unfamiliar to both Muslims and non-Muslim Westerners tries to explain what to the Western mind might seem inexplicable in relation to some Islamic practices. In this way, she challenges the view that the Muslim world, with its mystical spiritual practices, is completely separate from a Western, rationalist perspective. Western secular readers, on some occasions, might identify with Lilly and on some others might see her as living in a different world. They are aided by Lilly, a partly Western character, in understanding unfamiliar situations. Lilly sometimes takes the readers with her to pre-modern situations, but then evaluates these situations, with explanations which are addressed to the readers' modern reason and secular mind.[139] On some occasions, also, the narrative offers such explanations through Aziz, who is the voice of reason in the novel. Through these explanations and justifications, Muslim identity can become recognizable to Western secular-minded readers and the theme of unity and reconciliation is thus further pursued.[140]

One of the types of pre-modern scenes the narrative colourfully describes is the ceremonies of honouring the saints, which is part of Harari Islam. The practices involved in honouring the saints, with its many peculiar ceremonies, might not be easily digestible for many people in the West. However, Lilly sets out to explain it. Lilly, on one occasion, describes how in one such ceremony in a shrine full of people, the Sheikh 'was leading the heaving mass through a series of dhikr, religious chants',

[139] A pre-modern phenomenon can be defined as one that eludes modern reason, though it does not necessarily contradict modern reason. In this sense, many religious beliefs and rituals can be described as pre-modern. See Malekian (2004); Mishra (2005).

[140] An important interlocutor in this novel is the secular-minded reader and Gibb in this novel can be considered even more as a translator of the religious to the secular world than as a translator of Islam to non-Muslims.

how 'women were clacking wooden blocks together high above their heads as they repeated the dhikr over and over', how the people gradually reached 'a point of near ecstasy where they began hissing through their teeth and their eyes rolled so far back their pupils disappeared and they spun around in blind circles', and finally how 'when they lost their balance, they were pushed gently back upright by the crowd' (Gibb 2005, 42–43). It is likely that people in the contemporary West very rarely encounter such scenes of religious ecstasy. However, the narrative puts Lilly and Aziz in a situation in which they discuss and explain the ritual of honouring a Harari saint. Aziz remarks about the participants in these ceremonies: '*They* need to believe in something closer than God, because God often feels too distant' (Gibb 2005, 317; italics added). Lilly then thinks to herself, 'He was right: the saints offer *us* a ladder to reach Him more easily. "And they bring people together," I contributed' (Gibb 2005, 317; italics added). The character Aziz, himself not a believer in saints, uses the pronoun 'They' on this occasion. Lilly, however, herself a believer in honouring the saints and a participant in such ceremonies, uses the pronoun 'us', when affirming Aziz's ideas; however, they both have similar ideas about saint worship in Harar. This conversation, then, is presented as a justification of honouring the saint by explaining this religious action through relating it to the secular convention of relying on mediators when we are involved in difficult situations. Lilly also justifies the practice of saint worship to herself, and by extension to the reader, both Muslim and non-Muslim, basing her justification on the Sufi philosophy of 'Batin' or hidden meanings, the meanings that rational mind cannot easily grasp. Lilly, on one occasion, thinks to herself that many might call what they did in the shrine 'culture, local culture which people attributed to Islam. Orthodox imams were known to say such things, dismissing our traditions as rooted in superstition, but if you look deeply for the inner

meanings in the book you will find God's friends, the saints, hidden there' (Gibb 2005, 98).[141] On this occasion and other different occasions, Lilly participates in these reason-eluding ceremonies; then, she explains those actions to non-initiates, roles which are acceptable to the readers because of their knowledge about Lilly's background. In this way, Muslim identity and experience do not remain in the novel for the non-Muslim and rationally-minded readers as strange; rather they become understandable and approachable.

It was also mentioned that Lilly's Muslim identity is represented in such a way that it is at the same time both familiar and unfamiliar for some Muslim readers of the novel. Many ways in which Lilly thinks and acts as a Muslim woman take Muslim readers to a familiar world. However, what can make Lilly's identity rather unfamiliar for some Muslim readers, especially orthodox ones, is the final resolution of Lilly's Muslim identity which includes some elements that devout Muslims can identify with and others that might surprise them. I explain below how the evolution of Lilly's identity culminates in such a resolution.

Such a depiction of Lilly's background and of the way she is known in the world as both a Westerner and a tradition-loving Muslim also makes it easier to believe that varying discourses have been influential in the evolution of her identity. The novel represents Lilly's religious identity, corresponding to postpositivist model of identity formation, as evolving, affected by various discourses and ideologies she is exposed to, but finally individually interpreted. Such a representation of Muslim identity is also in line with the theories about this identity especially those proposed by Zine,

[141]This point at the same time represents and affirms an interpretation of religion with emphasis on the local discourses.

discussed in Chapter Two, which emphasize that Muslim identity, especially its inner or religious designation, is based on the religious texts and spirituality of Islam, but open to different interpretations by different individuals from different backgrounds (Zine 2007). [142]

Lilly's moving from an oppositional to a relational view of culture and identity

The teenage Lilly, in spite of enjoying the spiritual sides of religion almost from the start of her journey, before meeting Aziz and before her major life experiences, such as the experience of war and exile, has a rule-bound, rather dogmatic view of religion and religious identity. However, she moves from rigidity to flexibility and from an oppositional to a relational view of culture and identity in the course of the narrative, a transformation facilitated by her unique background.

In this process, Lilly's comfortable and dogmatic faith is tested by reason and secular love. Aziz, the voice of reason and individualism in the novel, is the figure who interrupts her ascetic adherence to religion and introduces reason, earthly love and the possibility of flexibility of interpretation into it. Lilly, of course, is prepared for Aziz's influences because her education from the beginning has been drawn from different sources. Aziz introduces to Lilly an interpretation of religion which places more emphasis on the exercise of reason and personal interpretations, very close to Western

[142] See Chapter Two of this thesis for a full account of Zine's discussion.

individualism. On several occasions Lilly resists these challenges and is shocked by Aziz's remarks and suggestions. However, she gradually allows herself to consider his ideas.

Aziz occasionally jolts Lilly from her faith-centered world to a world in which reason also matters, with the insistence that faith and belief without the exercise of reason is incomplete. On one of her first encounters with Aziz, when she notices that he, unlike many other Muslims, including herself, does not use Muslim prayers in his everyday language, the following conversation goes on between them:

> 'Are you a Muslim doctor Aziz?
>
> 'Yes, of course', he said. Did you think I was not?
>
> 'Do you discount the power of religion to heal?
>
> 'I do not discount belief in a general sense. Particularly the role of optimism.'
>
> 'You're different from most Muslims I know', I said.
>
> (Gibb 2005, 90)

Aziz is never scornful of belief and religion; rather, he does not think of it as all that matters. The narrative, for example, depicts how Lilly is shocked when Aziz insists that in order for Nouria's daughter's wound to be healed, 'it is not enough just to pray'; rather, medicine needs to be used. At that stage, Lilly feels offended by Aziz's remarks: 'He must have known he'd just insulted us both, dismissing the things in which we believed, particularly prayer' (Gibb 2005, 96). Such an assertion by Lilly contrasts with her more reason-based attitude toward religion later in the novel and

can be considered a narrative strategy aiming to show the extent of change in Lilly's interpretive approach later in the novel.

Aziz, as Lilly calls him, is a very 'practical' Muslim who pushes the boundaries of the interpretation of faith much further than Lilly is used to. He allows himself to interpret and encourages Lilly to interpret as well. Once they are together in a café in a nearby city and Aziz orders an alcoholic drink for both of them. He comments that he sees no harm in occasional and controlled drinking of alcohol and says: 'I think true discipline comes through exercising moderation. I see the rules as simply guidelines for those times when we lack the strength or wisdom to decide for ourselves' (Gibb 2005, 314). Lilly drinks with little resistance. Aziz's language, as in the example above, is all through distinguishable from Lilly's as in his language, logic and reason dominate, while in Lilly's language faith and spirituality dominate.

Lilly, on different occasions, admits that it is much easier to remain where rules define the degree of one's religiosity than to interpret, much easier to stick to religious rules and beliefs you have learned from others and to feel that because of your beliefs you have achieved salvation and are superior to others. She is shown to think about Aziz's liberal thinking in regard to religion 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 then you have no assurance you are doing right in the eyes of God, no confidence you will be rewarded in the afterlife' (Gibb 2005, 314). Nevertheless, under Aziz's influence, she gradually leaves her old mindset and overcomes her judgmental attitudes toward others and her dualistic views, though she admits that reaching that point is at a cost: 'It was so much easier to divide the world in two: male and female, dead and alive,

black and white, misguided and Muslim. It was easier to be bitter and condemn, deny the relationship and keep the distance' (Gibb 2005, 317). Also she acknowledges that without allowing herself to examine herself and her faith, as she did before meeting Aziz, she could be a prejudiced person, a Muslim who thought of non-Muslims, even her own parents, as 'hedonistic', 'selfish', and 'unethical', 'because it is easier than having to reconcile it all' (315).[143] As the examples show, as an important outcome of Lilly's allowing herself to see the possibility inherent in Islam to interpret, rather than following the views of others, Lilly gradually challenges the dualistic model ('black and white', 'misguided and Muslim') to reach an interpretation of Muslim identity that reconciles seemingly opposed elements through seeing the similarities or accepting the dialectical tensions between them.

Once Lilly sets on allowing reason and personal interpretations into her understanding of her religion, it is hard to return:

> When I first met Aziz, my religious beliefs had been much more dogmatic than this. But then he held my hand and in so doing, loosened my grip. And now? Without his hand? I was devastated. I longed for an easier time when being Muslim was rigid and rule-bound and the past belonged clearly to a pre-Islamic era. I wished there were something absolute in which to believe. It was a time after all, when one didn't know what to believe, where to turn.
>
> (Gibb 2005, 358)

[143] These sentences could have been uttered by Khadra in Kahf's novel (see Chapter Seven), as one of Khadra's biggest regrets as she was developing in her identity, also, was her former condemning and distancing herself from people who did not think like her. However, as I argue below, there are also differences between Lilly and Khadra's final understanding of religion.

Lilly's agitated tone in these last few extracts reveals her inner conflict in choosing between a comfortable faith and a faith which embraces challenges, a conflict which is resolved by her choosing the more difficult path.

This new look at religion, nevertheless, does not cause the weakening of Lilly's love of Islam, nor does it stop her from enjoying the spirituality and mysticism of Islam. Islam, all through, remains for Lilly what she strongly believes in and is a source of strength and hope for her though her understanding of Islam is not the same throughout the novel. In London, at times, when she is desperate and miserable, missing Aziz, or confused over what to do with her life, it is her religion to which she turns. When Robin approaches her for an explanation of why she rejects him, the distressed Lilly runs to the toilet, as the only place in the hospital where she can pray, and prays there to feel calmer (Gibb 2005, 346). Lilly observes Harari religious rituals when she is in London and as she says, 'Amina and I thank God the Harari way. Once a month, we burn crystals of incense over coals in a flowerpot in her kitchen garden. We raise our palms to the English sky and offer special prayers in honour of Bilal al-Habash which the smoke carries heavenward' (Gibb 2005, 139–140). This quasi-poetic language, unlike Aziz's logical discourse, here represents the language of strong faith. As the above example shows, to Lilly no matter where you are, whether you pray to the English sky or African sky, God hears you; the lofty sacred is available and accessible for everyone, everywhere. That she both keeps to these pre-modern practices and believes in reason-based religion shows that she allows the mystical and the rational to live side by side in her.

Towards the end of the novel, there comes a point when Lilly, more surely than ever, overcomes the turbulence of her identity development and is shown to settle into her understanding of religion and her religious identity. The Islam Lilly believes in at the end of the novel is neither Sufi Islam, nor Harari Islam, nor the 'so-called' orthodox Islam preached by some Imams in London, nor even Aziz's Islam. It is Lilly's individually interpreted Islam, which is, of course, affected by all the interpretations and discourses she has been exposed to. Lilly's Islam is an interpretation of Islam she feels at home with, and an interpretation which reminds us of both Islamic traditions and Western individualism, overcoming the oppositional views about the two:

> … to become as orthodox as this Imam demands, I would have to abandon the religion I know. He's asking for nothing less than conversion. Why would I do such a thing? My religion is full of colour, possibility and choice; it's a moderate interpretation, one that Aziz showed me was possible, one that allows you to use whatever means allow you to feel closer to God, be it saints, prayer beads or qat, one that allows you to have the occasional drink, work alongside men, go without a veil when you choose, sit alone with an unrelated man in a room, even hold his hand, or even dare I say it, to feel love for a Hindu. (Gibb 2005, 404)

This interpretation by Lilly might sound outrageous to some Muslims, but it is significant both because personal interpretation is not incompatible with Islam and because identity, as postpositivists also argue, is finally a matter of individual interpretation. We can more specifically explain Lilly's religious identity on the basis

of Zine's model of Muslim identity and argue that her identity, like the Muslim identity of many other Muslims, is bound by 'Islam's foundational texts and spirituality'; however, this identity is 'shaped and informed by the social, political, moral and gendered location of the interpreter' (Zine 2007, 114).

Lilly's revised perspective on her Muslim identity corresponds with the notion of critically-progressive Islamic hermeneutics, which as Duderija explains, considers 'rationality and ethical objectivity' as not alien to Islam and 'highlights the role of the interpreter in the process of meaning derivation and subscribes … to the view that the Qur'anic text can withstand or accommodate various interpretative strategies eliciting different readings of the same (piece of) text by different communities of interpretation' (2009, 5). As such, an indigenous modernity is proposed through this hermeneutics for Islamic worldview which is not in opposition with the modern West.

Lilly's eventual overcoming of the dualistic model of her childhood, and her embracing of all people regardless of their religion is seen in her everyday life as well as her interiority. Lilly's relocation from the estate houses of the refugees to a livelier flat in the city reflects the changes in her concept of identity. She no longer feels at home only among those who have the identity of 'Muslim'. Also, she thinks more seriously about Robin, the Hindu doctor who loves her. Both events indicate that although she holds steadfastly to her religion, she thinks about the possibility of finding peace of mind not just in the company of Muslims but with other groups of people as well.

Comparing Lilly with the other main characters of the selected novels, we notice a

difference which explains why I consider this novel, among the selected novels, one which especially emphasizes the reconciliation of Western and Islamic cultures. The difference, as this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, is that among all the main characters presented here, Lilly gains the most open-ended understanding and the least rule-bound interpretation of her Muslim identity; this interpretation, as argued above, is, among the main characters of the novels studied, the closest to Western individualism. It can be claimed that the principal characters in the other novels show various instances of attention to rules of the religion of Islam in their interpretation of religion and religious identity and experience. Needless to say, Aboulela's characters show the greatest concern for religious rules. But even when we compare Lilly with Kahf's character, Khadra, as Muslim characters who both show rebellion against rigidity in religion, we notice that Kahf's character shows more awareness of the boundaries that religion sets. It is partly for the same reason, being conscious about religious rules and limitations, that Khadra even towards the end is not sure what the true path is or who a real Muslim is and she describes herself as 'full of contradictions' (Kahf 2006, 341). However, Lilly, who eventually gives more weight to personal interpretation and feels less worried about religious precepts, more freely chooses her path and more surely defines her understanding of her religious identity. Generally speaking, the mature Lilly, compared with the other characters is more prepared to interpret her religion personally, less worried about involvement in sexual relationships, and more ready to make any sacrifice for her love.[144] I believe, then,

[144] Arguably, Gibb's non-Muslim origins give her the freedom in writing about Muslim issues that the three other writers of Muslim origin do not have. Gibb's narrative is the least cautious in describing sex scenes. There are, for example, at least two explicit sex scenes between Aziz and Lilly in the novel, including the scene when she loses her virginity to Aziz (Gibb 2005, 369). However, in the works of the other three novelists there are no explicit sex scenes, not even in the description of Khadra's married life. It is as if these Muslim writers self-consciously are aware of their position as Muslim writers of whom there are certain expectations such as creating works with minimal reference to sexuality. This point might be more strongly felt in relation to the three Muslim authors referred to in this thesis, as their works are among the few found in the Western book market that endeavour to offer a

that Lilly's view about love, sexuality and religion may be more readily understood by Western readers than Khadra's view or that of Sammar (in *The translator*), who is prepared to say goodbye to the love of her life because he is not prepared to convert to Islam. In short, although some scenes and occasions in *Sweetness in the belly*, including saint worship scenes, are among the most pre-modern scenes in all five novels, overall, the Western reader may find herself in more familiar territory in this novel than in the other four. The approach of this novel to the notion of Muslim identity and experience is perhaps the least representative approach and open to contestation; however, as discussed, it is still viable.

The importance of the origin of Camilla Gibb as the author

As discussed in Chapter Two, the origin of the author is a controversial issue in the critical discussions of fictional narratives. Arguably, in the case of the Muslim novelists selected for this thesis, both because of the political purposes and the experiential components of the novels, the issue of their origins as Muslim authors cannot be ignored.[145] Nonetheless, and as argued in Chapter Two, this does not mean that the Muslim origin of these authors makes their narratives more authentic accounts of Muslim life. It has also been argued that one does not have to be from a

predominantly positive depiction of Islam. Therefore, perhaps, the authors, as contemporary writers of the 'Muslim genre', are careful not to shock their audience and sometimes even self-censor, limitations that Gibb has not observed.

[145] However, perhaps, it is not invalid to argue that Gibb has had experiential authority to be able to represent a culture different from her own in this way. As a doctoral student of anthropology, Camilla Gibb lived for one year in Ethiopia in the houses of Ethiopian Muslims to do her field work. As it is apparent from her interviews she has liked the experience, an experience she could not quite represent in her doctoral thesis. In an interview she says: Part of what depressed me about my thesis was that I felt all the humanity had been expunged in the name of bigger theoretical statements. All the colour and texture and flavour of the place was missing. As were the people and their stories, the things that moved me while I lived there for a year with a local family (Moore 2005, par. 6).

certain place to be able to represent the people of that place or to speak with them, since the discourses embodied in representations and the effects of representation are more important than the sources of those representations.[146]

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It can also be argued that effects of the representations of Islam and Muslim culture which *Sweetness in the belly* offers are very similar to the effects or meanings produced through or the discourses embodied in the works of the other, Muslim writers of this thesis. Gibb's narrative, similar to the other selected narratives, emphasizes the importance of religion in the well-being of the main characters and generally represents Islam positively. [147]

Moreover, the non-Muslim origin of Camilla Gibb, makes the narrative a case of the representation of a culture by someone from another culture, the fictional representation of Muslim culture of Harar by a Westerner. It seems that certain identities, in certain historical periods, attract more attention than others. Muslim identity, in contemporary times, is one such identity. Therefore, the Muslimness or non-Muslimness of the author is a point that is unlikely to be ignored by either the readers or the critics of this novel. The way some reviewers have described the novel in relation to its representation of Islam, indicates that they have noticed a different representation of Islam being articulated by a Western writer. This novel has been called 'an exquisite homage to Islam' (Evaristo 2006*)*, as a novel that 'captures the intricate beauty of Islam through the eyes of a true pilgrim' (Leask 2006, 166), and 'a poem to belief' (Kirkus Reviews 2005). It has also been said that the text 'transcends

[146] See Chapter Two of this thesis.
[147] I have delayed my argument concerning the author's origins until this part of the chapter, in the hope that by this point I have made it clear that *Sweetness in the belly* presents a mostly positive representation of Islam and Muslims.

the boundaries that are defined by the propaganda-makers that pit Islam and the West against one another' (Stone, 2005, par. 9). Also that 'through the white figure of Lilly, Gibb deculturalizes Islam and reveals the vibrant possibilities it affords—a fact often forgotten in today's political landscape' (Vasantakumar 2005, par. 7). As the quotations testify, various critics agree that the Western Gibb has offered a positive representation of Islam in *Sweetness in the belly*.

The positive, sympathetic, even empathetic representation of the Muslim culture of the people of Harar in this novel combined with the fact that the author is a non-Muslim Westerner, I believe, also contributes to the theme of relationship and reconciliation of cultures and identities which I claim the narrative supports. The novel by a non-Muslim which testifies to the importance of religion in the lives of some Muslim people, shows a belief in what is expressed by the character Aziz, himself a nonbeliever in many of his people's beliefs: 'I believe people believe' (Gibb 2005, 316): even if we cannot believe in the beliefs of people, we need to admit that people have some beliefs that they cherish and enrich their lives and then we need to respect these beliefs. This sympathetic, creative exploration of a Muslim culture, which takes into account the worldviews and values of the Muslim people of Harar and the worth and dignity of their culture, makes this novel by a Western author an important, imaginative exception to many Western representations of Muslim culture both past and present, and a significant alternative representation of Islam and Muslim culture available in the Western fiction market. [148]

[148] The non-Muslimness of the author and the sympathetic representation of Islam through a credible realist narrative, can together arguably challenge any possible assumption that the novel is propaganda which does not need to be taken seriously.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion

This thesis has focused on contemporary literary representations of Muslim women in the West. As I complete the thesis, the stereotype of the Muslim woman as a miserable victim is still firmly entrenched in many Western representations, a predicament that undermines the complexities of Muslim women's identities and experiences. In 2010 in the USA, for example, the extensive media coverage of the life story of Amani Mustafa, a former Muslim and a new Christian convert who fled Egypt for the USA, demonstrates the currency of such stereotypes in the West.[149] Mustafa, in different interviews and TV programs, talks about the oppression of Muslim women under Islam. She hosts the weekly TV show, *The Muslim woman*, which, according to its website, aims at reaching out to Muslim women because 'women raised under the tyrannical hand of Islam live in a terrifying world of intimidation and isolation. These women often have no sense of self worth and live in great fear. They need to be set free …'[150] Of course, this may well be Mustafa's experience with Islam, but describing her story as though it was a universal one does not contribute any nuance to what many people in the West already know about Muslim women. Also, the continuing infliction of terrorist acts by extremist groups who profess Islamic faith such as the 2011 attacks on churches in Egypt has arguably exacerbated the fear and suspicion of Western people of Islam and Muslims and further strengthened the stereotypes held in the West about Islam.[151] In this process

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[149] See, for example, Lane (2010); http://www.cbn.com/media/player/index.aspx?s=/vod/GLA99v2_WS, and http://www.faithradionet.com/2011/amani-mustafa-at-grace-church/ .

[150] See http://ministriesnetwork.org/Projects/TheMuslimWoman.aspx.

[151] See, for example, Kareem and Liam (2011) and http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/04/us-egypt-church-idUSTRE7010M020110104 for references to this event in the media.

the power of visual media, through which people receive most of the news, cannot be underestimated: a 24/7 media news cycle which reports rather than deliberates.[152]

In order to analyse the representations of identities and experiences of Muslim women, I have explored theories that illuminate the concepts of identity, experience and representation, and through the postpositivist realist approach have argued that representations, identities and experiences are partly discursively constructed and partly real. They are real in the sense that representations can be based on some experiential reality; identities are rooted in specific contexts; and experiences are real to those who experience them. Therefore, I conducted this research with the awareness that in the study of all forms of representations of identity and experience, both the discourses involved and their real-life contexts need to be considered and examined.

The thesis's brief survey of Western representations of Muslim women [in popular life narratives] argued that these continue to reinforce mainstream, stereotypical views about the victimhood of Muslim women, and claimed that we see the persistence of Orientalist discourse in such contemporary representations. I argued there that although some of these texts talk of the bitter experiences of some Muslim women, they need to be critiqued because their market dominance, prevalence and packaging together suggest that the discourses through which they are articulated shape dominant understandings about Muslim women. For example, popular Muslim memoirs published in the West, such as Hirsi Ali's *Infidel*, appear to "prove" that Muslim women are victims of Islam and their happiness depends on their distancing

[152] For further study of some texts that address this problem and call for ethical approaches to media representations, see, for example, Robertson (2010); Silverstone (2007).

themselves from their faith and adopting Western habits—a kind of 'regime of truth' in the West concerning Muslim women. By contrast, the realist novels selected for study in this thesis, I have argued, refer to another set of realities and discourses in relation to Muslim women. They suggest that Muslim women can remain committed to Islam and be, at the same time, complex identities, and agents who are capable of living fulfilling lives. In fact, these novels, as I have attempted to show, challenge the dualistic, either/or discourse about Muslim women and imply that cherishing Muslim identity is compatible with Muslim women's being happy and with their holding many of the ideals that Western people are also seen to cherish. Therefore, in one way or another, in the discussion of each of the novels, I have referred to some such compatibility. Leila Aboulela's novels, *The translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), suggest that being a devout Muslim also affords women a sense of well-being. Abdel-Fattah's novel, *Does my head look big in this?* (2005), shows that caring for one's Muslim identity is commensurate with being a patriotic citizen of a secular state. Kahf's novel, *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006), depicts the complementarity of feeling affection for one's Muslim identity and being self-reflexive about one's religious identity and one's way of life. And finally, Gibb's novel, *Sweetness in the belly*, explores how being both committed to Islam and having an individual, rationally-based interpretation of one's faith is possible. In this way, each novel introduces Muslim women's identities and experiences as complex rather than monolithic, in the sense that each represents aspects of Muslim women's identities not usually emphasised in dominant Western representations.

Nonetheless, the individual novels' exploration of Muslim women's identities and experiences is differently approached. For instance, some readers might feel that

'writing back' in a novel such as *The translator* or *Minaret* verges on the idealisation of the Muslim world and a skewed, even bigoted depiction of the West and Western people, while a novel such as *The girl in the tangerine scarf* offers a more nuanced depiction of Muslim people and the West. Still, we need to remember that similar contexts can draw different responses from different people. Some authors might feel that in the present condition of the prevalence of negative representations of Islam, the priority is with inverting the stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. In this process, as some of the selected novels show, the attempt to present a more rounded picture of Muslims can sometimes lead to the depiction of an unbalanced or reductive picture of the West.

I have also argued that these texts can help render Muslim women recognizable to Western and non-Muslim readers (who presumably constitute a good percentage of the readers of these novels), through their highlighting some under-represented dimensions of Muslim women's identities and experiences. Depicting Muslim women as familiar, rather than as 'exotic others' is achieved both through the texts' pointing out different aspects of Muslim women characters' lifestyles and worldviews and through the capacity of fiction to help readers imaginatively empathize with the characters with different experiences from their own, as Nussbaum suggests (1997). Significantly, these women are presented as familiar to Western readers in these texts in spite of the fact that they cannot be called characters who have fully assimilated into Western culture. Rather, the texts show the possibility of these women's keeping their distinct qualities as practising Muslim women *and* their being recognizable identities to Western readers. Moreover, although, to different degrees, the texts

variously mobilise identity politics, this strategy results in highlighting various characters' mutual compatibility rather than their irreconcilable differences.

I believe that reading these texts collectively and comparing and contrasting them with each other also offers insights into alternative representations of Muslim women. Read alongside each other, the texts foreground the idea that there are various ways of practising and interpreting Islam. This further challenges the monolithic descriptions of Muslim identity and suggests the complexity of Muslim women's identities and experiences. Each of the main characters in the novels is represented as having a different relationship to orthodoxy and a different understanding of Islam, although each also knows herself a Muslim and cares for Islam and her religious identity. At this juncture it is important to reiterate that the thesis has not been concerned with whether the representations of Muslim identities and experiences that I have focused on are necessarily Islamically orthodox or not. This point is beyond the scope of a thesis in literature. While the thesis has examined *literary* representations of the religious lives of *fictional* devout Muslim characters, it makes no claim to judge the competence of Islamic knowledge, or degree of orthodoxy of the characters. Rather, the focus has been on subjective interpretation of religious identity as those are represented in literature.

Related to the above point is the idea that although the main characters show different ways of interpreting and practising Islam, the constant in all of the novels is the main characters' love, affection and respect for the tenets, the sacred texts and spirituality of Islam. The main characters all show emotional attachment to their faith, its symbols and its rituals, independent of how orthodox they are. The language used for

expressing such feelings in all the novels is also similar. Visceral or poetic language and stream of consciousness techniques are variously used to articulate spiritual moments for whose expression prosaic language is shown to be inadequate. The emotional attachment that Muslims have to their religion, represented through the selected novels, can also explain why and how Islam has inspired literary creations such as the novels discussed here.

This literary exploration of Muslim identity and experience, I believe, is offered as a significant means for non-Muslim and Muslim readers alike to pause and reflect on the complexities of identities of Muslims through the study of literature at a time when there is usually no time for such reflections. As to the exploration of Muslim identity that this fiction offers, we can see that in this fiction the main characters, except for Amal in Abdel-Fattah's novel, seem to be more concerned with their interior lives and deliberations over their religious identities—how they understand their religion and how they define themselves as Muslims—than with the social side of their Muslim identity, showing that the exploration of this inner dimension has been a major concern for the authors even more than the issue of how Muslims are known and treated in their societies. Nevertheless, their inner debates about religion are admittedly worked through in terms of their social relationships and everyday practices. In other words, we cannot easily conceive the spiritual and social designation of Muslim identities as separate from each other. Also these texts, in different ways, narrate the journeys to understanding religious identity to be full of ups and downs, tensions and contradictions. This highlights the notion that identities are developed and modified over time; they are not simply given and static.

My study is not, of course, without its limitations. I have focused on texts with Muslim women as their main characters. The study of the religious designation of Muslim men's identities and experiences are not, of course, separable from those of women's, and remains an area for exploration by other researchers. These novels, and others examining similar themes, can also be critiqued from a more singularly feminist point of view by other researchers, in order to examine the extent to which they, given that their main characters trace narrative trajectories that ultimately define them as fulfilled women, conform to the ideals of Western feminism. Such a study, I believe, would contribute to the debate about the tensions between universal and local conceptualizations of feminism.

Finally, this thesis has been concerned with representations, fictional and non-fictional, written with the awareness that none can ever fully represent lived experiences and that in all representations certain narratives, identities, discourses and ideologies are emphasized while others are downplayed. Since, as I have argued, representations of Muslim women in the West which present their identities as complex and their relationship with Islam as one of love and devotion are generally lost in the midst of popular texts, which show Muslim women as miserable, fiction such as that explored in the preceding chapters also needs to be privileged for critique.

As a Muslim woman, I have found many of my own concerns and the reflection of many of my experiences addressed in these texts, though I concede that they are by no means the only authentic or valid representations possible. I look forward to future studies on such texts and more public discussion of them so that Muslim women in

Western societies and elsewhere can feel that alternative stories about their identities and experiences are also heard and taken seriously. If this happens, we may well see more Muslim women participating proudly and confidently in their societies for the welfare of everybody, regardless of creed. And we may well also see, in non-Muslim and Muslim states alike, more textured treatment and understanding of, and empathy for, the range and complexity of contemporary Muslim identities.

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