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Racism and Resistance: The Struggles of Muslim Youths in Randa Abdel Fattah's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights the issues of racism faced by Muslim youths in young adult fictions. The writer chosen is the Palestinian-Australian Randa Abdel Fattah, who writes Does My Head Look Big in This?, Ten Things that I Hate about Me, and The Lines We Cross. These three fictions are used in order to portray the discriminations that the Muslim youths have to endure in their community. Muslims in general face many difficulties with the rise of Islamophobia especially after the 9/11 tragedy in 2001. The Muslim youths in the novels are also part of the victims of racism as a result of their 'ethnic' background and being a Muslim. However, these youths have their own ways of challenging racism and be proud of their own unique identity as a hybridized young adult in contemporary multicultural Australia.

Keywords*: ethnic, multicultural, racism, Islamophobia, hybridized*

Introduction

With the current trend of Muslim jihadists joining IS (Islamic state) militant group, the world in particular the Western world, mostly views Islam as a religion that encourages violence and terrorism. This creates uneasiness and negative perceptions among the non-Muslims who might have been misinformed about the true nature of Islamic teachings that abhor the use of violence and instead promote peace in its conducts. This misinformation leads to misunderstanding and fear of the Muslims called Islamophobia. This phobia has existed way back from the 9/11 tragedy and IS in particular has further amplified the Muslim phobic situation.

A further look into the issue of Islamophobia reveals that innocent Muslims have been facing increasing prejudices for being Muslims. Since 9/11 in particular, Muslims have increasingly been the targets of discrimination in Australia (the context of our textual analysis) and other Western nations (Poynting & Mason, 2006). Dispute arises over the issue of whether negativity towards Muslim Australians can be considered a form of racism, as the terms 'Islamophobia' or 'anti-Islam' are preferable (McWhae, Paradies & Pedersen, 2015; Poynting & Mason, 2007). Yet, some researchers argue that the discrimination faced by the Muslims surpasses a criticism of the religion and instead involves a racialisation process that includes cultural, linguistic, and racial elements (Grosfoguel, 2012; Poynting & Mason, 2007). This racialisation process makes the distinction between racism and anti-Islamic

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racism not practical or necessary when applied to everyday life (McWhae, Paradies & Pedersen, 2015; Gulson & Webb, 2013; Moosavi, 2014; Sayyid, 2011). Thus, for the purposes of our analysis, the term that will be used is 'racism'.

Statement of Problem and Research Objective

Racism is defined as any belief, attitude, emotion, or action that maintains or worsens inequalities between racial, ethnic, or religious groups in society (Walton, Priest, & Paradies, 2013). Australian Muslims have been facing racism for quite some time. One survey's finding suggested that most of Sydney Muslims have faced racism in educational and workplace settings, due to their religion (Dunn, Atie & Mapedzahama, 2016). This finding also stated that the Muslims were subjected to name-calling and insulted.

Australian Muslims, in this case, the Muslim youths do face discrimination as a result of racism. This issue is highlighted in a study conducted in Dandenong, Melbourne, Australia by Chloe Patton (2015) from International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia. In this study, a number of Muslim youths were involved in creating self-portraits which were later exhibited at a public exhibition. To include participants' own voice, a group of ten Muslim youths from the locality of Dandenong were interviewed and they reflected on the themes they expressed through their portraits. Most of their reflections are on their ideas of self-identity and how they positioned themselves within Australian communities.

According to Patton's finding, a recurring theme found was of racist abuse on the street; this was an ordinary part of everyday life for the Muslim youths. A Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report on the racism experienced by Muslim and Arab Australians in the wake 9/11 supported this finding. Two-thirds of the report's respondents said that they had experienced racism in the street, ranging from verbal abuse shouted from cars and other rude or insulting behaviour to spitting and physical attacks (Patton, 2015; Poynting and Noble, 2004).

These real-life situations and experiences are also portrayed in Randa Abdel-Fattah's three young adult novels which share similar issues as those faced by Muslim Australian youths. Abdel-Fattah herself is a Muslim Australian of Palestinian and Egyptian parentage. Born in Australia, she has written nine young adult books inspired by her research on racism (Handal, 2015). Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore how the issues of racism towards Muslim Australian youths and their resistance are highlighted in Abdel-Fattah's novels.

Brief History of Muslims in Australia

The Australian Muslims are ethnically diverse and have had a longstanding presence in Australia. Large immigration waves of Muslims from Turkey and Lebanon to Australia began five decades ago in the late 1960s (Dunn, et al. 2016; Manderson, 1988; Young, 1988; Dunn, 2004). Around 36 per cent of all Muslims in 2001 were born in Australia; the Australia-born are the biggest birthplace group of Muslims (Dunn 2004).

Muslim immigrants have come to Australia in different eras under various categories of migration; they can be refugee, family migrant, assisted passage or skilled immigrant, and their settlement experiences have been varied, with various degrees of socio-economic well-being both across and within ancestry groups (Dunn, Atie & Mapedzahama, 2016). A personal survey of Australian Muslims in Hanifa Deen's book, *Caravanserai* (1995) regarding their diversity included Punjabi farm labourers and hawkers, pocket-money translators of the Turkish community, fiery Imams, partisans who fought the Nazis, Jordanian poets, nervous and confident AngloCelt converts, and Egyptian feminists (Dunn, Atie & Mapedzahama, 2016; Deen, 1995).

The Australian Muslims lead normal, ordinary lives. According to Dunn, Atie and Mapedzahama's survey in 2016, employment and education were identified as the main issues of life while international conflicts fell second. This shows that the important daily issues for Australian Muslims were very ordinary. Unfortunately, post 9/11 have seen a dramatic increase in the experience of racism by Muslims, and those perceived to be Muslims, in countries such as Australia (Dunn et.al, 2016; HREOC, 2004; Dreher, 2006; Poynting and Noble 2004; Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) 2007).

The Analysis

The Lines We Cross (2017)

The story revolves around the protagonists, a Muslim girl, Mina and a white boy, Michael, who are attracted to each other but unfortunately, are divided by the opposing groups their families belong to. Mina and her family fled their war-torn home in Afghanistan to find a better life in lower North Shore of Sydney, while Michael's family is at the forefront of a racist, anti-immigration and anti-Muslim group, Aussie Values.

There are a few instances of racism faced by Mina and the Muslims in the story. The first instance is when Mina's stepfather, Baba's restaurant is visited by reporters from News Tonight and an organization that wants to stop "Islamization of Australia" (Abdel-Fattah, 2017) called Aussie Values, aiming at fear-mongering of the Muslims among the locals. They demand to know whether the money that Baba's restaurant receives from the sales of the halal food is used to fund Islamic terrorism overseas (p. 134).

> "With reports of halal food funding terrorism overseas, can you confirm whether you know where the money you spend on halal food is actually going?"
> Baba looks utterly stricken. I run over to him, blocking him from the camera.
> […] "Do you have any concerns about where halal funds go?"
> (p. 134)

Mina and her family are saved by Tim, their neighbour. Unfortunately, the news was edited to make it sounds as if Mina and her family have something to hide regarding the fund. The media itself is used as a tool to promote Islamophobia:

> The report ends with the reporter outside a mosque, telling the audience about some people's fears of "creeping sharia." There's a shot of the man who harassed us in the restaurant. He's a member of a new organization that wants to stop the "Islamization of Australia." (p. 135)

The second instance is when Terrence, Mina's schoolmate confronts her when she defends her friend Paula who is accused of telling on Terrence to a teacher. Terrence resorts to name-calling and call her an associate of terrorist.

> "What are you going to do about it? Put an SOS call to your terrorist buddies?"
> "Yeah, that's right. I'm from the land of Al-Qaida, remember."
> […] Hey, when I want an opinion from a boat person I'll ask," he says smugly. (p. 326)

In both instances, Mina displays resistance upfront. This is obvious even at the beginning of the story when her schoolmates make Muslims-are-barbaric joke due to the hands cutting punishment for stealing practiced by Saudi Arabia (p. 34). Michael even comments that people have values in the West unlike the Muslims, and such barbaric act of hands cutting is not practiced in the West. Mina retorts and confronts them by saying:

> "Try telling that to the people locked up and abused in detention because they were naïve enough to think Australia would care about their lives." (p. 34)

This shows that even when the immigrants arrive by boat, they are not treated well by the Australian authority. Mina is well aware of this fact because she herself came by boat (p. 35). Instead of hiding the fact, she confronts her schoolmates directly, focusing on the fact that the West, the Australian authority themselves are not practicing the values that they claim they have, thus the so-called "barbaric Muslims" become the victims of the "civilized" West.

Does My Head Look Big in This? (2005)

Does My Head Look Big in This? is a young adult novel which focuses on a sixteen year old Muslim teenager, Amal, and how she faces the challenges of wearing the hijab full time. Amal is a Muslim Australian teenager from Palestinian descendent. She decides to wear the hijab full time during the school break before she continues her study at an elite private school. Amal has to deal with the stigma of wearing hijab, balancing her identity as a Muslim Palestinian Australian, as well as other teenage issues such as friendship; study and also the relationship with her secret crush, Adam. Due to her 'different' appearance, Amal faces the name-callings and subjugation by her snobbish white schoolmates who frequently taunt. Amal's decision of wearing the hijab full time is seen as a brave act and her parents are very concern about the consequences of her decision. Nevertheless, Amal proves to everybody that she is can accomplish many things in her life while still remains true to her religious and cultural belief.

The notion of racism is mentioned clearly from the interaction of Amal and Tia, the popular white girl in school. Tia has never missed an opportunity to put Amal down and make fun of her hijab or any sign of her religious belief as seen from this excerpt;

> "What are you doing?" Tia asks me in a mocking tone.
> "What does it look like?"

> "I don't know. You're not walking in the dessert, you know. We do have shoes in this country." (p.114)

Ablution is compulsory before one wants to pray. Tia clearly insults Amal with racist remarks such as 'walking in the dessert' and 'we do have shoes' to compare her act of performing an ablution as an act of cleaning one's feet due to the result of walking bare foot. This is also to suggest that Amal is an uncivilised and barbaric for walking barefoot when others are not. The word 'dessert' is an implied insult to Amal as to suggest her to go back to her 'homeland' which is the Middle East. This is very offensive as Amal was born and educated in Australia just like Tia and the others. She does not have any memory of her homeland unlike her parents who migrated to Australia for a better life. By right, she is an Australian with a hybridised identity, which is common in a multicultural country like Australia. Tia has no right to treat Amal like a second class citizen just because she is from a different cultural background.

The pronoun 'we' used my Tia is also an indication of racism. It is like Amal is not part of 'us' and she belongs to the 'others'. This type of binary opposition is explained by a renowned postcolonial scholar, Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism* (1978). Binary opposition can start as general as good vs bad to something which is culturally bound such as men vs women, white vs black, coloniser vs colonised etc. 'Self' according to Said, "The Self is the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the Other is strange (the Orient, the east, "them") (Said, 1978:43). The problem with binary opposition is that, it creates a social boundary between people from different religion and background. These two different groups simply cannot co-exist together due to the differences. The majority group may see 'the other' group as a threat to their existence. Hence, people will constantly living in judgement and marginalizing the 'other' group. In this case, Tia uses the different pronouns to indicate that they are not on the same standard despite the fact that Amal is also an Australian.

Amal and Muslims in general are being marginalised as a result of being Muslims and Arabs. After the infamous 9/11 incident, Muslims have been under the scrutiny of people especially the Western media. Western media contributes to the negative image of Islam when they associate terrorism with religion. People question the concept of Islam as a religion that promotes peace and equality when media highlights the words such as 'terrorism', 'bombings', 'Al-Qaeda' when they show images of terrorist or suicide bombers in Islamic attire. In this novel, Tia tries to provoke Amal by associating her ethnic background with violence as seen in this excerpt;

> "Hey Amal, how's it going? She asks in a sickly sweet voice. "Did you catch that doco on those Muslim fundamentalists last night? You're Arab aren't you? It must feel awful knowing you come from such a violent culture." (p. 152)

It is rather a stereotypical perception that Arabic culture is violent and barbaric. Violence has nothing to do with ethnicity or religion. It depends on the individual himself, his upbringing and personality. It is unfair to generalise all Arabs as violent based on a few news feed or documentaries about 'Arab like' Muslim extremists. The truth is that, it is not confirmed whether the criminals are really Muslims or Arabs. Despite Tia's provocation, Amal manages to resist her racist remark as she replies this to Tia;

> "You know, Tia, I came across a book the other day. The shortest book in world history. It was called *My Thoughts* by Tia Tamos." (p. 152)

Amal comments sarcastically at Tia regarding her narrow-mindedness about Arabs and Muslims in general. This can be seen as a form of resistance as Amal clearly despises Tia's racist remark. It is easy to see the reason how Tia develops such negative perception against Muslims and other 'coloured' ethnicities. It is mentioned in the novel that Tia's family is not used to socialise with other than the white Australians. Her father also stigmatise the Asians that he meets at the golf club as the workers of the club etc. Hence, he transfers the same negative mentality to Tia. Instead of keeping quiet, Amal is not afraid to speak her mind every time Tia mocks her appearance. When Tia mocks her appearance which is different than the rest, Amal mocks her lack of intelligence in thinking.

Another way Amal resists racism is by participating in the inter-school debate competition. She used to join debate competitions when she was in her old school, Hidaya. She is still passionate of debates and she is one of the debaters of her new school, McCleans. The freedom of delivering her arguments on stage for the audience to hear is a form of resistance for her;

> "I've been injected with the formula for confidence and butt kicking. Not in spite of my hijab but because of it. Because I want to prove to everybody that it's just a piece of material and that I'm here representing my school, supporting my team, kicking some serious rear ends." (pg. 318)

She gains her confidence and strength because of her hijab. She wants to show the audience that the hijab that she is wearing is just a piece of garment and she does not feel oppressed by wearing it. In fact, she can be wearing a hijab and still be outspoken and knowledgeable. A hijab is not a material that confined her but it is a medium of strength and determination for Amal to be successful in her life. Her hijab makes her stands out and she takes the opportunity to do something that will benefit her and her school as well.

Ten Things I Hate About Me **(2006)**

In *Ten Things I Hate About Me*, Randa Abdel Fattah explores the issues of double identity through its protagonist, Jamilah or also known as Jamie among her friends at school. Jamilah anglicised her name, dyed her hair blonde and put on blue contact lenses as she wants to conceal her real identity as a Muslim Lebanese. She does not want her friends to know her real identity because she finds it shameful to appear as a 'wog', a downgrading term used to refer to the non-white people. Hence, she tries to 'de-wog' herself and in doing so; she struggles with emotional pain in juggling multiple identities at the same time. She wants to be accepted as a true Australian and at the same time, she wishes that she can be accepted as a Muslim and a Lebanese as well. Peer pressure and self-image are among two biggest concerns of teenagers and Jamie faces the same issues as well. She is afraid to reveal her true self when people around her clearly reject and despise the non-whites. However, in the end, Jamie manages to stay out of the closet and be proud of her true identity.

The notion of racism can be seen through the conversation among a group of classmates when they talk about the racial riot that happened at the beach. The non-white people especially from the Middle-Eastern background are being called multiple offensive names as seen in the excerpt below;

> "Ahmed probably spends his weekends in a garage making bombs or training for a terrorist cell. I'm glad the riots broke out. My dad told me that it's been a long time coming. He used to surf those beaches when he was younger. Sure, there were Italians and Greeks but there weren't *too* many, so you didn't notice and it was OK. But now the Lebs have invaded the beaches and it's not the same." (p.5)

Jamie's classmate, who is also her secret crush, Peter gives negative and stereotypical images of a Muslim from the Middle Eastern background. What Peter is thinking about Muslims is actually the repetition of description or images of Muslims in the media. As this novel takes place after the 9/11 bombings, there are many examples of racism which target the Muslims, Asians and coloured people in general. The phrases such as 'making bombs' and 'terrorist cell' show the racist side of Peter. He generalised Ahmed as the extreme jihadist who involves in bombings and terrorism just because Ahmed is a Lebanese. Peter does not see Ahmed as a fellow 'fair-dinkum' Australian as he is from a different background with a different cultural and religious belief. The other European ethnicities such as the Italians and Greeks do not face as much double standard treatment due to their similar caucasion look just like the white Australians. Peter also refers to Ahmed and people from the similar background as 'Lebs' which is an abbreviation for Lebanese. It is a downgrading term much similar to 'Pakis' for Pakistanis, 'Japs' for Japanese and others.

> "When those teenage boys gang-raped girls in Sydney, it was the boys' Lebanese-Muslim background that was put on trial. I went to school and I watched Peter Clarkson cross-examine Ahmed for a crime he did not commit. I read headlines describing the crimes as 'Middle Eastern rape'. I've never heard of Anglo burglary or Caucasian murder. If an Anglo-Australian commits a crime, the only descriptions we get are the colour of his clothes and hair." (p.168)

The excerpt above is another example of racism faced by Muslims in Australia. Jamie voiced her frustrations and anger over the biased news regarding crimes committed by people. The media will use descriptions such as 'Lebanese-Muslim background' or 'Middle Eastern rape' in news. Such descriptions clearly carry a notion of racism as they highlight the ethnicity background rather than the crime itself. It is a double standard when the crimes are committed by the non-white people. As Jamie further mentions 'I've never heard of Anglo burglary or Caucasian murder', again it shows the double standard in regards of skin tone, religion and ethnicity. Not all Middle Easterners are Muslims and it is very inappropriate to label someone from how he or she seems to look like. Ethnicity is a wide concept and people are supposed to focus on the bigger subjects such as humanity issues or other issues that will benefit everybody regardless of their background.

Jamie or Jamilah does not have the courage to reveal her true identity as a Lebanese Australian due to the pressure to be accepted by her white friends at school. She is aware of the risks of being a Lebanese and also a Muslim – she will face the racist remarks and mockery from the dominant white group as she is 'different' from the others. She sees how her other classmates who are non-white being ridiculed and targeted for casual mockeries. She leads a double life as she has a double identity but none of her friends suspect anything. She is constantly in dilemma as part of her long for recognition for who she truly is but another part of her want to taste the 'white privilege' enjoyed by the whites. However, in the end of the story, Jamie gets her sense of agency or resistance towards racism and proudly reveals her true identity as seen in this excerpt;

> "I can't believe I'm here, at my formal, in front of all my classmates, exposing myself like this. There's no shame; there's no embarrassment. With every drumming down on the *darabuka* I'm announcing who I am. For the first time in my life, knowing the answer has never felt so sweet." (p.303)

Jamie finds solace every time she attends the traditional music practices with her band mates. It is one of the rare times when she has the freedom to express herself as a Muslim Lebanese Australian. She takes pride in her heritage and she feels the happiest when she does not have to cover her identity. Her band mates are all from the same ethnic background and they share the same passion in traditional music, with the combination of the modern western music. In this private domain, Amal does not have to worry about prejudice or false judgment that her people will face outside. In the excerpt, Amal admits that she is proud of herself. She uses the darabuka as a medium to introduce her real identity to her friends. She does not hide behind the anglicised name and the dyed hair anymore. She is Jamilah Towfeek, a Muslim Lebanese Australian and proud of it.

Conclusion

In multicultural countries such as Australia, racial unity among people from different cultural background can be challenging. However, it is not impossible to create a more positive environment where people can mingle together without any racial boundaries. As seen from the analysis of the three novels, all the Muslim characters face almost similar conflicts as the result of their religious and cultural background. All of them have to deal with racist remarks and double standard treatments from the dominant white group. The characters also find difficulty in balancing their hybridised identity as an Australian and also being Muslims. However, the characters manage to challenge racism as they have their own unique way to express their voice and be proud of whom they are.

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