



Debunking the Western Feminist Framework of the Veiled Woman in Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love In A Headscarf* (2010)

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ABSTRACT

For a very long time, a section of western society has viewed that the Muslim community as the 'racial Other'. Mashuq Ally (2011) argues that this notion is the result of the Western lopsided perception towards the non-whites and even more so when it comes to the Muslim women. Being the second Other (Beauvoir, 1949), Muslim women have to counter inaccurate notions about their perceived gender oppression as well as the lack of agency (to hear their voices). According to the Western feminist framework, Muslim women in *hijab* (the veiled women) are deemed as the victim of oppression and backwardness. Using Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism theories as propounded by Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, and Margot Badran, the findings reveal that the framework (*ijtihad* and *tafsir* of Holy Quran and Hadith), have aptly supported the justification of the main character's act in donning of the *hijab* as a symbol of Muslim identity that represents emancipation and empowerment.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism, *hijab*, agency, Western feminist framework, *ijtihad*

INTRODUCTION

Within the western hemisphere, the repercussions of the 9/11 continue to be felt by minority Muslim communities living within the larger non-Muslim mainstream society such as America and Britain... Muslims living in the west, especially those who overtly exercise their religious sensibilities, be that in the form of the hijab for women or beard for men, bear the brunt of xenophobia exhibited by the mainstream society.

(Raihanah, Hashim & Md. Yusof, 2015, p. 1)

As highlighted by Raihanah M.M., Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Noraini Md Yusof (2015), the Muslim living in the West, particularly in America and Britain, have continuously been marginalised and unjustly misrepresented. The rise of Xenophobia and Islamophobia worldwide have become rampant following the tragedies of 9/11, London bombings 7/7, the shooting at Christchurch Mosque in 2019, and the slain of a French teacher in October 2020. As such, the bearded Muslim men and *hijab* (headscarf) Muslim women have since become the victims of hate crimes and violence. Any Muslim woman who dons the headscarf is labelled as “an icon of cultural backwardness” (Hasan, 2015: 43). Such perceptions substantiate the binary system of the West/Occidental as the ‘Self’, and the East/Muslims as the ‘Other’.

BACKGROUND

For a very long time, a section of western society has viewed the Muslim community as the ‘racial Other’. Mashuq Ally (2011) argues that this notion of ‘racial Other’ is the result of the ‘negation of the social-affirmed self’, in which the black, Jew, and now the Muslims have been deemed as “Other to the White West” (ibid, 2011). Young (2005: 47) highlights the fact that the Whites subjugate the term as “racial object to an alien Other”, which promotes the idea of white supremacy through their claims that the Other as “not me, not human, not clean, not inhibited, not civilised”. Consequently, these derogatory terms have ignited consciousness among the subaltern, as Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (2005, p. 199) put it, they:

...are writers from formerly colonized countries writing in colonial languages, particularly English, demonstrated the counter discursive potential of the tools appropriated from the colonizers.

Interestingly, this has given rise to the feminist consciousness within the second and third generation of British Muslim community (whose ancestors are the first-generation Muslim migrant groups who have brought along the inherited cultural practices with them to the host country). Alas, the second and third generation British Muslim writers have used their writings in English language (the tool from the colonizers) as an effective medium to counter any marginalisation from the wider British society (the colonizers in colonial context).

British Muslim Women

To the Muslim women in general and the British Muslim women in particular, it is even harder for them as they have to counter lopsided and inaccurate notions about their perceived gender oppression as well as the lack of agency, i.e., being the second Other (Beauvoir, 1949). According to the Western feminist framework, Muslim women in *hijab* (the veiled women) are deemed as the victim of oppression and backwardness.

In a similar tone, Hussain (2005) highlights the current trends of the British Muslim women of the South Asian community to identify themselves with their religion as well as define their manifestation of identity through the dress (*hijab*) that they wear. Indeed, to these women, it is not an easy path. There are factors like physical, structural, cultural expectations that need to be countered upon. First, the physical obstacle would be in these women's appearance. Those who wear *hijab* are often subjected to racial discrimination and racial hatred; marginalised as the Muslim to the West are merely the "racial Other".

Being deprived of agency (support system) that could be their saviour, one of the British Muslim women writers, such as Shelina Zahra Janmohamed has placed herself in a third space, allowing her and fellow Muslim women writers to participate actively and creatively via literary medium (printed and electronic narratives) intending to educate their readers with informative and affirmative outlook on their religious identity. Md Mahmudul Hasan (2015, p. 93) lauds such movement for it is high time for Muslim women writers to have female characters that "do not resonate with Western stereotypes of Muslim women".

Thus, it is pertinent for the Muslim women writers to write about the Muslim women characters (the protagonists and minor characters) as well as to have a customised framework of Islamic Feminism (branching out of postcolonial feminism) rather than analysing the literary texts based solely on a Western feminist framework. In addition, a staunch supporter of Muslim women donning the *hijab*, Ramadan (2004) defines the meaning of emancipation to the Muslim women when they are allowed to use their moral sense, sound convictions and religious beliefs in dealing with making choices. Therefore, when Muslim women want to don the *hijab*, the West should respect their choices and way of life.

The Novel *Love in a Headscarf* (2010)

The different cultures, histories, religions and heritages of being a British Muslim woman had made me who I was. Those different strands were not burdens, but instead gave me a unique perspective so that I could see things from many different angles. I could bring together my cultures, my faith and the clear vision that Islam offered to start building a more hopeful future.

(Prologue in *Love in a Headscarf*, 2010)

In the portrayal of her protagonist and minor characters and brilliant themes, Janmohamed (2010) has succeeded in her mission in educating the public (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) by subtly and obviously countering the Western stereotype perceptions of the Muslim women as being suppressed, particularly when it comes to the donning of the *hijab*. Hence, this paper intends to debunk the Western feminist framework by unfolding the instances of stereotypical assumptions about Muslim women in *hijab* as being subjugated as the 'insignificant Other' (Beauvoir, 1949).

METHODOLOGY

In narrowing down a suitable methodology/literary criticism for this paper, the definition by Tuttle (1986) where feminist criticism acts as a saviour to liberate and relieve women's oppression whenever they are being mistreated or misunderstood by the society could aptly be used as a preliminary ground. Further socially derogative labels such as the 'Second Sex', insignificant 'Other', or the second-class citizen and specific prejudices against women should not be placed upon any women irrespective of their race or skin colour. To the blacks and women of the Third World countries, the emergence of Third wave feminism as an alternative to the previous two waves of feminism has somehow buttressed the solidarity among diverse women (sisterhood). Therefore, it is crucially important to acknowledge the discipline that recognises "the diversities and complexities of women's issues" as paved by Third wave feminism (Tuppurainen, 2010, p. 21). Postcolonial feminism and Islamic feminism are example of literary criticisms born out of Third Wave Feminism.

Feminist Literary Criticism

The term 'feminism' is derived from the Latin word *femina*, which originally meant having the quality of females. In the 1890s, the term was used in reference to the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women's rights, in place of womanism (Tuttle, 1986, p. 107). The activism in the early 20th century led to the "enfranchisement of women", sometimes referred to as the "First Wave" of feminism. It was in the late 1960s that there was a period of dramatic change in the influence of feminism; or better known as the "Second Wave"; when the women's liberation movement gathered strength with the line-up of prominent writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Toril Moi - focusing their concerns on patriarchy, literature and cultural activities.

Weedon (1987, p.1) however, defines 'feminism' as Politics, which is aimed at "changing existing power relations between men and women in society. From the early 1990s till the present, with the rising number of incidents involving the marginalisation of blacks and Asians, it has given rise to the birth of postcolonial, multiracial feminism. Among the pioneers of postcolonial or multiracial feminism are Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Ania Loomba.

According to Brizee and Tompkins (2010) in Purdue Online Writing Lab, feminist criticism can be grouped into three waves. The first wave started from the late 1700s and moved on to the early 1900s. Feminist critics like Mary Wollstonecraft highlighted the inequalities between the sexes in her ground-breaking book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) retelling the scenario post French Revolution era. In America, activists like Susan B. Anthony and Victoria Woodhull had contributed to the American women's suffrage movement, which led to National Universal Suffrage, with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (Mead, 2018).

This was then followed by the Second Wave of Feminism, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, which concentrated on equality. This period saw the rise of active movements such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. The movement's main objective was to work on more equal working conditions necessary in America during World War II. Writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter established the groundwork for the dissemination of feminist theories dove-tailed with the American Civil Rights movement through the publication of *The Second Sex* (1972) and *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) respectively.

The Third Wave Feminism recorded issues and events beginning from the early 1990s to the present century. Having emerged as a platform to resist over-generalised, over-simplified ideologies, while refuting the whites, heterosexual, middle class monopoly of second wave feminism, third wave feminism expands on the experience of marginalised populations. In order to do that, this criticism uses the notions set from post-structural and contemporary gender and race theories.

Postcolonial Feminism

At first glance, 'Postcolonialism' and 'Feminism', with their shared reference to the history of subjugation of the colonised and women at the hands of an unforgiving patriarchy, appear to be similar to the two peas in a pod. As such, Loomba (2005) suggests that these two disciplines share the assumption on the possibilities of historical change. The western romanticism of the 'Other' enriched through pseudo-scholarship of the sciences such as Herbert Spencer's (1820-1902) theory of "social darwinism" (the strongest/fittest vs the weak/unfit); where the fascination with the Orient often went hand in hand with the exploitation of the subaltern, as inferior in every biological and spiritual condition.

Thus, the 'Other' became the spring board for neuroses and fantasies. For instance, the Orientalist perception of the subject of harem is full of fantasy and eroticism. *Harem* is represented as a place where Muslim women are caged, secluded and oppressed. However, it is now clear that Muslim women are oppressed by both imperialists and the local patriarchy. From the time of the early colonial enterprise, imperialist perceptions had characterised indigenous people as childish, feminine, lazy and uncivilized (Wisker, 2007). Coupled with the existing systems of patriarchy

(colonialist and otherwise) the situation of the subaltern woman is unenviable, as they suffer under the "double bind" or "dual oppression patriarchy" (Katrak, 1989, p. 12).

Postcolonialism popularised 'world literatures' in the 1980s. It concerns mainly with fiction written by disaffected peoples of white imperialism whose aim was to dispel misconceptions about the subaltern. Naturally the struggle for cultural recognition has its gender biases. Nationalism, for example, is often aligned with rigid conservatism which devalues and undermines the opinions of the female subaltern. Third-wave feminists postulated a "rainbow sisterhood"; which has now been changed to a more liberal and plural notion, 'feminisms'. Accordingly, both Mohanty (1991) and Suleri (1994) solicit for a demarcation between white feminism and 'third-world' feminism, in addition to gender and race. Being critical of what she regards as 'UN-style universalist feminism', in "A Critique of Postcolonial Reason" (1999, p. 7), Spivak strongly urges the Asian women to break away from the old postcolonialism practice.

In another article, "The Barebones Analysis of South Asian Feminism" (2008, p. 41), Spivak has highlighted the necessity of being selective in studying the plurality of the representation of Asian women for the fear of being carried away by the manipulation of the US foreign policy. The Asian woman should not become passive subjects (gendered subaltern) to 'the politics of progressivism' (Ibid: 6), which subtly refers to the ambitions of the Western (white) feminists. Undeniably, it is disturbing to the global unity of sisterhood to be criticized by its own sisters. For instance, the Orientalist and Secular Feminists' tendencies to over generalize all the Muslim women as being oppressed and victimised by the Muslim men further causing racist and condescending attitudes towards Muslim women. As such, there is a need for Muslim women to rely on a New Feminist Discourse (Islamic feminism) that may do justice in representing them.

Islamic Feminism

The birth of the women's liberation movement has occurred within and through Islam itself. In early Islam, religious studies were the favourite subject for women. A considerable number of women beginning from Aisha bint Abu Bakr (RA), the wife of the Prophet (pbuh), Umm al-Darda, Aisha bint Sa'ad bin Abi Waqqas, to name a few, were known to be renowned scholars of their time (Zaynab Aliyah, 2016). One pertinent example would be in their determination to seek religious knowledge (Islam). In a hadith narrated by Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri:

Some women requested the Prophet (ﷺ) to fix a day for them as the men were taking all his time. On that he promised them one day for religious lessons and commandments. Once during such a lesson the Prophet said, "A woman whose three children die will be shielded by them from the Hell fire." On that a woman asked, "If only two die?" He replied, "Even two (will shield her from the Hell-fire). (Sahih al-Bukhari 101).

Furthermore, in his article, "In Recognition of Women", Khalid Abou El Fadl (1992), records that Aisha's (RA) foresight and advice in the affairs of the Islamic community was regarded as highly important by the early Islamic rulers. Geissenger (2017) also approves on Aisha's (RA) intelligence and knowledge based on its appearance in Sunni sources as well as recorded in proof texts in the late 19th century.

Hence, Islamic Feminism is a movement that originates from the strain of Third Wave Feminism and has made its debut in the 1980s. In "Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name", Badran (2002, p. 1) defines it as "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm [it] derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence". In other words, Badran (2002) has emphasized on the 'fluid' nature of the feminist discourse as it defies boundaries and can be used at anytime, anyplace. In addition, it is a feminist discourse that uses both *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) in dealing with arising issues involving Muslim women. Names like Asma Barlas, Elizabeth W. Fernea, Leila Ahmed, to name a few, are among the earlier proponents of Islamic feminism whom have been known to fight for justice for wives in domestic violence cases.

Islamic feminism also helps these women (the second generation) to untangle patriarchal and cultural inflicted customs and presents them with Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and self-potential (Hussain, 2005). Furthermore, this discourse also promotes one's individual and collective obligations. Apart from serving people to lead their individual lives, Islamic feminism can also be a guidance for a community to be a united *ummah* that addresses on *amal makruf nahi mungkar* (doing good deeds, avoid evil deeds).

DISCUSSION AND FINDING

Muslim Women and the *Hijab*

The donning of the *hijab* and headscarf symbolises a "badge of otherness" that announces to the world that the wearer professes a particular faith, Islam. However, this pure declaration of faith is often misinterpreted and misused by the West and East (Muslim countries) itself. In the eyes of the West, with respect to Orientalism and mysterious persona of the East, the more the Muslim women cover up their body, the more the Western eyes become interested to unravel what lies within. In this regard, the *hijab* is widely assumed to be the mark of Muslim women's subjugation. Bullock (2003) rightly asserts that the colonial discourse of the veil characterised the *hijab* as a means of Muslim women's spatial confinement. Hence, Muslim women are constantly in dilemma over the issue of liberty (emancipation) versus safety and job security.

The meaning of emancipation to the Islamic feminists is when the Muslim women are allowed to use their moral sense, sound convictions and religious beliefs in dealing with making choices (Ramadan, 2004). With the current trend of associating themselves with religious identification as a form of identity, these British Muslim

women have been actively seen in public donning hijab (Muslim dress code for women). Such development indicates that these women are “far more confident with external expressions of ethnicity and religion than that of the preceding generation of women” (Hussain, 2005, p. 28-29). Therefore, when Muslim women want to don the hijab, the West should respect their choices and way of life.

The Hijab – Debunking The Western Feminist Framework

To the West, the Muslim women who adorn the *hijab* are inflicted with stigmatisation of being oppressed as well as the symbol of the religion (Islam) backwardness. In other words, the Muslim women and other subaltern women are perceived as mere subjects rather than solidarity sisters in plight (Hasan, 2005). In chapter six, “Semiotic Headscarf”, Janmohamed (2010) highlighted Shelina’s liberating stand in donning the *hijab* as a faith proclamation:

Wearing hijab was not a decision I had taken lightly. Hijab is an Arabic word that means “to cover,” which includes covering the whole body in loose clothing, but it was used commonly to refer to the headscarf itself. When I first made the decision to “wear hijab,” I did it simply because it was “the thing to do.”... I was immersed in wanting to live a fully Islamic lifestyle as part of who I was, and I decided that wearing hijab was a fundamental part of that desire. Wearing modest clothing was described in the Qur’an as something that the believing men and women engaged in. I believed in God and I believed in the Qur’an, and I wanted to be considered one of the believing men and women.

(Shelina in *Love in a Headscarf*, 2010, p. 162)

In debunking the dominant Western perception of the Muslim women being oppressed or forced into donning the headscarf (*hijab*), Janmohamed (2010) has tackled this issue wittily in these dialogues between a French girl, Anne, and the protagonist, Shelina, who is accompanied by her Muslim travelling friend, Sara, “You Muslim women are oppressed, forced to cover up and not express yourselves. You have to stay at home and men run everything.”

I pulled out my cell phone. “Sara, could you call your husband...oh no, that’s right, you don’t have a husband. Let’s call mine. Oh! I don’t have one either.”

“Let’s call your dad,” she countered. She held the phone to her ear. “Is that Shelina’s father? Yes, yes. She is oppressed, isn’t she? Yes, yes, understand. You forced her to suggest that she goes travelling on her own to show her how repressed and subjugated she is. Yes, yes, it makes complete sense. And, yes, of course you insisted that she should be unaccompanied.”

(Shelina in *Love in a Headscarf*, 2010, p. 185)

In exacerbation to the issue of donning a headscarf or *hijab*, the colonial discourse of the veil symbolises the enclosed oppression placed upon the Muslim women by the Orientalist (Bullock, 2003). Even though the presence of Shelina and Sara joining the tour group (Anne and other English tourists) with the absence of male companion, still it does not suffice Anne's preconceived prejudice on oppressed Muslim women's attire.

She looked at us as though we were duck droppings. "You only think you are free but they are still controlling you women. Stop kidding yourselves. Muslims are evil and Islam is a religion of barbaric people."

(*Love in a Headscarf*, 2010, p. 185)

CONCLUSION

In countering the preconceived notion of *hijab*, Islamic feminism as a discourse has been used to justify the actions of the Muslim women characters. To exemplify, when Shelina decides to wear the headscarf, that decision should neither be termed as being subservient nor indoctrinated. Instead, refuting such assumptions, Shelina replied defiantly by saying she is single and:

My father hasn't forced me to wear the headscarf either ... In choosing to wear the headscarf, it meant being willing to address these difficulties and tensions because they were worth bearing, in order to practice my faith and try to make the world a better place by challenging stereotypes of women, Muslim women in particular. As a woman, I had a choice about what to wear, and I fully exercised that choice. It was my decision.

(*Love in a Headscarf*, 2010, pp. 151-152)

From the literary analysis of the novel, *Love in a Headscarf* (2010), Muslim and non-Muslim readers have been presented with the fact that the Muslim women's religious identity (donning the *hijab*) is the proof of their emancipation, they are neither being forced to don the *hijab* nor is she being restricted from travelling alone. As for countering cultural imposition, it is imperative that the Muslims men and women to adhere to the true Islamic teachings; going back to the source, the holy Qur'an and the Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad, pbuh). It is beautifully summarised by Janmohamed in the novel, *Love in a Headscarf* (2010, p. 164), "... inequality wasn't part of the blueprint of Islam. Islam talks about equal value and worth for both genders both equal as creations".

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