

# Pakistani-American Muslim women identity negotiation as reflected in diaspora literature

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## ABSTRACT

Identity has become the global problem. Pakistani-American Muslim women have often faced the problems of identity because they have got different treatments in the society. This study reveals how Pakistani-American Muslim women negotiate their identity and the result of the negotiation. This study used descriptive qualitative research. The data of the research were the words, phrases, and sentences from diaspora literature entitled *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah published in 2009. To analyze the data, this study employed postcolonial theory based on Bhabha's hybridity and Tomez's identity negotiation concept. The finding suggested that Pakistani-American Muslim women negotiated their identity with mindful negotiation by adapting American culture and shaping hybrid identity. They changed their fashion style by putting off their veils. They changed their Arabic names into Americans to hide their religious identity. They also built their houses like Americans' but still included Arabian nuance. However, in assimilating the culture to get a job, Pakistani-American Muslim women must have fought harder because of the striking differences in culture and idealism that they have embraced.

**Keywords:** *hybrid, Identity Negotiation, mindful.*

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## Introduction

Identity is a crucial thing in this world. Identity usually refers to individual attributes or individual characteristics that cannot be naturally stated. Having certain identity can be source of proudness, happiness and self-confidence (Sen, 2016:3). One can have several identities at once. For the example, Ahmad was a Muslim student in America coming from Indonesia, joined reading community and loved travelling. This condition shows that Muslim, Indonesia, reading, and travelling are the complex identity referring to a single person, Ahmad. Thus, complex identity of many people in the society can be the source of fighting and killing that make people die (Sen, 2016:4). Violence also often happened because sometime single identity tries to be forced into others. This case has been the problems of diaspora people as well. Most of diaspora people have encountered the clash of identities that leads into the conflict.

Some of the early Muslims moved from one to another country because of the need or the aspiration for better living conditions and greater economic opportunities, while others were due to familial, tribal, political, ethnic, or sectarian conflicts. People migrating to other countries are well known as diaspora. As stated by Swayd, a diaspora is "a group of people that 1) originates in one geographical location and/or looks toward a common sacred place, 2) disperses to two or more host lands, and 3) considers itself, and is considered by a large number of scholars and other observers, as a distinctive diaspora community, society, or association" (2007: 8). Diaspora has increasingly developed to be diaspora concept within postcolonial studies during the past decades.

The phenomena of diaspora have also been reflected in literary works. Muslim diaspora wrote their life experience as the reflection of mimetic and creation. The American Muslim also

expressed their mind into imaginative works that can be felt by the readers. Muslim American Literature (MAL) began with the Muslims of the Black Arts Movement (1965–1975). The Autobiography of Malcolm X is one of iconic texts; it includes American Sufi writing, secular ethnic novel, writing by immigrant and second-generation Muslim, and religious American Muslim literature (Kahf, 2010: 165-166). One of interesting diaspora literatures is Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*. This work depicts the way of Pakistani-American Muslim women facing problems in their lives.

Besides diaspora, Islam and postcolonial issue are interesting topics to be discussed. Hasan Majed from University of Sunderland wrote his dissertation entitled *Islam and Muslim Identities in Four Contemporary British Novels* in 2012. This research discusses Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, and Leila Abdullela's *Minaret*. Islam and Postcolonialism were used as the foundation of his research. Islam postcolonialism is the blend between Islam and postcolonial. It gives the new perspective in the research. In addition, there has been another study discussing *Saffron Dreams* employing interdisciplinary approach. It discusses how the prominent figure struggling to survive in America. As observed so far, there has not been any other research bringing forward the integration of postcolonial and identity negotiation employed theories in the present study. This paper tries to see the perspective of diaspora Muslim women after the deadliest 9/11 incident especially depicted by the main character in the novel namely Arrisa Illahi as Pakistani-American Muslim woman.

This research aimed to answer how Pakistani-American Muslim women negotiate their identity and explain what the results of their negotiation are. Based on the problems, this research used postcolonial approach to discuss the way Pakistani-American Muslim women negotiate their identity. They got oppressed in the society they lived and were treated differently from white American woman. This research clearly gave explanation about the condition of Muslim women after the midst of 9/11. Therefore, it could provide the knowledge and strategy for

Muslim women from different countries in facing the similar problems. Also, this paper hopefully could contribute to the solution to similar problems all Muslim women encounter.

### **Theoretical Review**

This research was conducted under American Studies approach. New American Studies discusses various perspectives including subalterns and minorities as forming the Americanism. It includes the study of postcolonial namely black writing post-colonial which focuses on ethnic namely Muslim America. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's text *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Postcolonial discourse was the outcome of the work of several writers such as Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Edward Said, Bill Ashcroft and his collaborators, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aizaz Ahmad and others (Sawan, et al, 2012: 120). In addition, in describing identity and culture, Bhabha introduced the characteristics of "neither nor" from culture or identity, namely the third space. The third room is a way to articulate new possibilities. A space to interrupt, interrogate and reveal new forms of cultural meaning to produce blurred boundaries. The third room questions both established and universal categories of identity. This room is a negotiating space "all forms of culture are a continuous process of hybridity" (Rutheford 1990: 221).

Postcolonial deals with minority that is Pakistani-American Muslim women closely related to identity. Identity can refer to personal characteristics. It can be defined as: in ordinary language, at least, one can use identity "to refer to personal characteristics or attributes that cannot naturally be expressed. In terms of a social category, and in some contexts, certain categories can be described as "identities even though no one see them as central to their personal identity. Nonetheless, identity in its present incarnation reflects and evokes the idea that social categories are bound up with the bases of an individual's self-respect (Fearon, 1999:2).

In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall stated that there are two identities: strong identities

and weak identity (1989). Those identities can be culturally shaped or constructed but the identity given cannot be changed. To preserve their identity, Pakistani-American Muslim Woman needs negotiation. Identity negotiation is the process of how a person negotiates his identity. Ting-Toomey asserted that negotiation is a self-conception which is seen as an explanatory mechanism for the process of intercultural communication (1999: 39-40). Identity is seen as a reflective self-image that is constructed, experienced, and communicated by individuals in one culture and in one interactive situation. The concept of negotiation is defined as the process of transactional interaction in which individuals in an intercultural situation try to impose, define, change, challenge, and /or support the desired self-image of them or others. Identity negotiation is a communication activity. Some individuals are mindless in the face of identity negotiations, while other individuals are mindful of the dynamics of this process. Mindfulness is a process of "cognitive focusing" which is learned through repeated skill exercises. The experiences of Muslim women in America have dynamically changed from mind to mindful negotiation.

## Method

This study was done under descriptive qualitative research. Qualitative method is a research procedure, which produces descriptive data in the form of written or oral words from people and their behavior that are observed (Bodgan and Taylor, 1975: 5). Denzin and Lincoln also stated that qualitative research covers multi methods approach to understand human experience (2005: 7). "Qualitative research uses semiotics, narrative, content, discourse, archival, and phonemic analysis, even statistics, tables, graphs, and numbers". The research is to find out the conception of human experience. The data of this research were the words, phrase, sentences in the diaspora literature namely *Saffron Dreams*, a novel written by Shaila Abdullah published in 2009.

The data were analyzed by using descriptive analysis and processed in several steps. The first step was data identification, followed by inventory data record in a field note. The researcher categorized the inventory data based on the

theme that constantly emerged. Then the data were checked and rechecked to obtain the most significant ones to the research focus. In the next step, the researcher interpreted and described data to answer the formulation of the problem being studied. Finally, the valuable data were analyzed and explained descriptively by using post-colonialism approach. The data analysis was conducted to lead into the research findings.

## Finding and Discussion

Pakistani-American Muslim women reflected in *Saffron Dreams* got oppressed from the society. The explicit oppression emerged right after the deadliest incident 9/11. Arrisa Illahi as the main character in the novel saw how Muslims were discriminated. "They walked faster when alone. Some women took down their hijabs, afraid of being targeted, and adopted a conservative but western style of dressing. Men cut their beards. Many postponed plans to visit the country of their origin any time soon". It indicates that Muslim was being the target of host land namely American people. They were regarded as the trouble-maker of the great tragedy of WTC. Muslim was regarded as wire puller of this phenomenal event. Not only Muslim men, Muslim women also got double oppression: as Muslim minority and as women. "I, too, had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks wanting to hurt, the accusatory side long glances screaming silently, You did it, your people brought the towers down. My people? They were not my people, those few whose beliefs don't even reflect the religion they rely so heavily on to justify their cause" (Abdullah, 2009: 60).

Those oppressions happened because most people regarded Muslims as terrorists that attacked and wanted to destroy the country. There are three different perspectives on society toward Muslim in this situation. Beverley stated that three different opinions after the tragedy of 9/11 about Islam are that Islam is a peace, dark side of Islam and Islam is terror (2003: 74-77). Those three made Muslim both men and women do not feel comfortable in the society even saving Muslim women became part of the post-9/11

western agenda (Haddad, 2006: 3). After the attack, American people treated Muslim and veiled woman differently. They have changed their perspective. They are afraid of Muslim doing terrorism. They did not want to clarify but made a conclusion as if a veiled woman is a terrorist and the religion permits them to kill people. "He almost always got the reaction he wanted. He thrived on seeing their absolute shock and surprise at the brazenness of a South Asian man and the veiled woman by his side" (Abdullah, 2009: 120). Reacting to this oppression, Pakistani-American Muslim Women thought how to negotiate their identity, especially their religious identity.

### **Feeling Dilemma**

Facing the dilemma of such situation, Arrisa Illahi was confused whether she should keep her appearance or not. Consider insisting her style with the veil but to be the target or taking it off. "I got off as if floating on air, tightening my hijab or veil around the back of my head. I had to be hysteria, this feeling within me of floating on air. For a brief Sickening moment, I debated on which should go the veil me (Abdullah, 2009: 2). Getting through her confusion, she finally entertained herself by thinking that she would move the veil from the head into the heart. "I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart" (Abdullah, 2009:3). Some of western people regarded that woman in veil is in colonization, repression, and subordination. It is kind of oppression and symbol of backward civilization. They are trapped in traditional condition that they cannot freely express the modernity. But some others regard that veil is symbol of purity and of religious identity. Women wear veil for many reasons (Bartkowski and Read 2003; David and Ayouby 2002; Haddad and Lummis 1987; Read and Bartkowski 2000; William s and Vashi 2007). Although in reality there are some prefer this appearance (Haddad dan Lummis 1987: 133-34; Haddad et al 2006: 9)

Arrisa Illahi tried to keep her religious identity from tangible, wearing veil, but she failed. This condition indicates mindless negotiation. "I slide the hijab from my neck. The wind

felt chilly on my bare head. It was a new sensation. You can do anything you set your mind to, Arrisa Illahi, a voice from the past whispered to me" (Abdullah, 2009: 2). The failure of keeping the veil tended to redesign a new plan in diaspora places.

### **Keeping a mindful identity negotiation**

The finding of the research reveals that American Muslim Women represented in the novel changed the negotiation from mindless to mindful. Arrisa Illahi as the main character of the novel negotiated her religious identity by trying to adapt American culture. Tomey stated that: "or individualists a conflict is effectively resolved when personal opinions are voiced and acknowledged, interest are defined and clarified, each side's goals are either reached or compromised, and action plans are drawn up for avoiding trouble in the future" (1999: 219).

Avoiding trouble in the future is one of the characteristics of conflict management in negotiation. Most of women negotiate through education. Education is the power to show their ability to participate in the society. By having a good education, they will be respected and trusted. It is a part of negotiation, building the trust. Tomey emphasized that "another skill that is critical in intercultural negotiation competence is that trust building" (1999: 222). Every *Desi*, a person of Indian or Pakistani origin, believes that education can increase their ability and capability to get a good trust from the society. Therefore, they will be educated since their early years. "How can I not?" asked Fatima. "Every *Desi* is taught that education is everything, I am not going to go against all that I have been taught from the time I was two..." (Husain, 2010: 237).

Arrisa Illahi as educated person tried to negotiate her family about the way to choose a husband not by agreeing the match maker to marry soon. She tried to get the appropriate man as the best choice for her future. She also showed that by having a good education she could work and fulfill her daily needs and break the myth that women are the burden of the family until they are married.

Another way of negotiation is by hiding the real religious identity such as changing the name to western. They made of the story as if they followed American culture to make them save from the attack. "Those who did travel preferred to remain quiet during their journey and chose not to converse in their native language even among family members. A few close friends changed their names – *Salim* became *Sam*, *Ali* converted to *Alan* – in an attempt to hide identities. When asked their nationality, they offered evasive answers. We were homesick individuals in an adopted homeland. We couldn't break free from our origin, and yet we wanted to soar. The tension in our hearts left us suspended in the mid-air" (Abdullah, 2009:60).

### Assimilating the culture by working hard

As a single parent of one child, Arrisa Illahi worked hard day and night to finish the legacy of her husband. "Saffron. It reminded me of an unfinished project that was much closer to completion than it was a year ago. I felt my culinary project bubbling and walked into the den to turn on the computer. I lost the minutes and then the hours as I swam in a sea of words, oblivious to the world around me." (Abdullah, 2009: 8). She worked until the midnight. Then, she took a rest to get fresh idea and she started again. She believed that no one can change her life without the great effort. By trying her best to endeavor, she could finish her works with trial and error. Days went away, weeks and month changed into years. She never gave up finishing her job "I watched the colors on my hand and with renewed determination turned to the canvas and started painting" (Abdullah, 2009: 9).

She imagined her works to be the real life that she was facing. "They say if rain arrives after it has flowered, the saffron flower dies suddenly. I watched the colors on my hand and with renewed determination turned to the canvas and started painting. I stepped back in satisfaction and studied the orange sky on the canvas - the color of saffron, just how Faizan had wanted it" (Abdullah, 2009: 9). Trying to find the inspiration from the daily event and symbol of beautify in her imagination, she thought and tried another way. Not only trying to finish the legacy of her

husband but she also worked as freelance writer. "My feet landed on some papers that I'd worked on the night before, freelance for a beauty salon's newsletter. I slept in the nude most days. I found the heated apartment too hot and sweated profusely during the night (Abdullah, 2009: 50)". Practices makes perfect, after the hard effort Arrisa Illahi succeed in finishing the work or the legacy from her husband entitled soul searcher. Then she could buy anything she wanted. "Dearest Faizan, I completed soul searcher! It took me six years to complete your legacy" (Abdullah, 2009: 229).

### Maintaining a hybrid identity

The ideality that crashed with reality made Arrisa confused to face her future life in America. The condition forced her to be a dilemmatic Muslim woman requiring her whether she had to keep her fundamentalism with the whole identities or she should change her appearances and her mindset in facing the people around her. After getting mockery and oppression from society, she tried to assimilate the new culture, blending her original culture with the western. "For generations, women in his household had worn the veil, although none of them seemed particularly devout. It's just something that was done, no questions asked, no explanations needed. My argument was that we should try to assimilate into new culture as much as possible, not stand out. Now that he was gone, losing the hijab meant losing a portion of our time together" (Abdullah, 2009: 58). Arrisa Illahi put off her veil but not following the western fashion. After getting oppressed and feeling dilemma, she decided to put off her veil as her symbol of religious identity. "I went to the bureau and kissed a folded veil that lay on top, a reminder of my past and a symbol of what I had given up. Faizan had harbored a reverence for the veil - to him it defined a woman (Abdullah, 2009: 10)". She had given up after the long struggle, getting mockery, and feeling failure in getting her idea she hoped in America, the land of promise, the land of dream, the land of future where she started to paint her dream with her husband and the baby. In the middle of the pregnancy, her husband was being a victim of the deadliest incident. She was power-

less; no one could take care of her.

Putting off the veil is the way to negotiate her identity to be respected and do not be blamed by the society. She felt that the burden of her life was lighter. "The wind tore the veil from my hand, making my task easier. I grasped the cold railing with one hand and swatted at the fleeting piece of my life with the other as the wind picked up speed. It teasingly brought the veil closer to my face. I could have grabbed it. The veil sailed down toward the depth, its grave" (Abdullah, 2009: 10).

She got another reaction from the society after knowing that she changed the way she looked. "That day he stared, and his eyes widened in disbelief at the absence of my veil (Abdullah, 2009: 120)". The different appearance of fashion got the different treatment. Some of them were shocked knowing her change. "A scarf? I offered. He snapped his fingers. "That's it, a scarf." He looked at me curiously. (Abdullah, 2009: 120)

Muslim women wonder about American people questioning the veil. "Is the veil really a barrier, as Jack Straw indicated, or is it a symbol of modesty? It is different for different women. It irritated me that it was a political game for some high-ranking individuals, a tug-of-war of sorts, a way of attaining the limelight albeit negatively" (Abdullah, 2009: 120). Some people regarded that the way wearing clothes reflected the ideology and political game. Pakistani-American women adjusted the way of wearing clothes in difficult time in the society. "Pardon me, I apologized, adjusting my veil" (Abdullah, 2009: 120).

Besides hybridity in clothing and changing name into western, Arrisa Illahi built the hybrid building, nuanced house. "The first thing I did after buying my own home was plant Arabian and night blooming jasmines. The curtains danced to the rhythm of the breeze" (Abdullah, 2009: 230).

### Resisting by keeping the faith and fundamentalism

Arrisa Illahi really understood that all people should understand that Islam does not teach terrorism. It is only some irresponsible people who hate Islam killing other people on behalf of terrorism. "Or did the love for our own religion really mean that we should hate other Faith's? It made me reflect on what being a Muslim meant to Me. Wasn't the whole concept of Islam based on tolerance, peace and bridge-building, or what it just a very well-kept secret that only a handful knew? (Abdullah, 2009: 120)". This context also shows to the society that presenting the tragedy is the way to negotiate that the killing is actually not based on Islamic values because Islam teaches the peace concept for all people in the world not for Muslim only. Trainers of Living values education in Rachman (2015: 5-14) stated that the concept of Islamic peace consists of three words that is *ashshulhu*, *assilmu* and *al amnu*. *Ashshulhu* is the antonym of *alfasadu*. Those three words can be applied in the three circles they are: the peace which a human being has within himself, peace with God in his faith, and peace with his fellow human beings and the environment (Zakzouk, 2004:126). It means that the one that feels peace does not have hatred feeling to others both man and woman. It also means giving benefit to others. Therefore, by having peaceful feeling means avoiding destruction as happened in 9/11 terrorism. *Assilmu* means feeling calm in the heart. It is a comfortable feeling. It means someone fully accepts the judgment from the authority. Muslim will bow and obey the rules of God and the *ulil amri*, the leader of worldly problems. They will happily work together and help the people in need. *Alamnu* is feeling safe, being calm soul in facing every problem. The one that keeps these characteristics will respect the other right, for example the right of neighbor to feel safe from disturbance.

Arrisa Illahi succeeded to assimilate the new condition with her ideality. She could get what she dreamt about: wealthy and pride. Unfortunately, she felt that she lost the deepest happiness of her life, the spiritual happiness. "— I looked up to see a woman in a head scarf and a tall man Pass by, the woman's hands barely touching her companion's. She turned to us apologetically, embarrassed at the intensity of her joy. I saw my past in her. In my present, I am a centu-

ry old" (Abdullah, 2009: 232). This data emphasized that she wanted her religious identity but she could not afford that. Since then, her life changed, her dreams were redesigned, and new plans were drawn.

### Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that, identity can be constructed by the influence of the society. Knowledge and strong religious belief of different people bring the various negotiations. Pakistani-American Muslim women changed their negotiation from mindless to mindful negotiation. They got difficulties in adapting to the new culture. One of the most crucial things was about the clothes. Veil as the prominent identity was the problem in the society. Putting on American Muslim style namely modest dress is more acceptable than wearing *shari* veil. Arrisa Illahi put off her veil and created the hybrid identity by

wearing sexy clothes. Speaking in American dialect is another way to overcome language problem since Arabic name was being one of religious identities that induced different treatments. Changing name from Arabic language into American style is one of the ways to hide the frankly religious identity because they got oppression and different treatment aftermaths of 9/11. Arrisa Illahi made the hybrid building, by decorating American building with Arabic nuance.

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