

***Randa Abdel-Fattah***

## THE DOUBLE BIND OF WRITING AS AN AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM WOMAN

### **Abstract**

I could have been rich years ago. Every Muslim woman writer knows this about herself. The Muslim woman as victim or escapee dominates the publishing world's imaginings of Muslim women. Nothing titillates the literary world more than the Muslim woman "native informant" who bravely "bares all" to confess her journey from false consciousness to good liberal (preferably atheist) subject. In this article I share my experiences as a writer attempting to subvert this paradigm in the young adult and children's literature world. The choices I have made and face reinforce the tensions and challenges of "writing Muslim." Can writing be self-determined? Can narcissism be accommodated, or are the stakes too high? Can it be forgiven? How does one avoid double consciousness in a climate of Islamophobia? How does one negotiate the endless vacillation between "the universal" and "the particular"?



### ON WISHING I WAS KYLIE OR LIZ. . .

The enduring question for minority writers who understand the homogenizing effects of a sweeping universalism when it comes to the mainstream literary and film world is how to negotiate what Lewis Gordon describes as the "doubled dimensions and contradictions of a society's self-conceptions."<sup>1</sup> The Muslim is outside the category of the general and therefore target audience. The Muslim is not of the mass market or of the "mainstream." In this article I want to share my personal experiences and insights about what it means to write from a racialized minority position, particularly as one of a handful of Australian novelists of Muslim Arab background.

The cupboards of my house are filled with boxes of journals, poems, bound manuscripts, and short stories I wrote as a child and teenager. I now read through these battered, hand-written stories and I notice they are all stories set in America or England, weaving tales around innocent love triangles in sorority and fraternity clubs or

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English countryside boarding schools. I wrote tragic tales of running away from home, chaos at summer camps and all-American proms, and snow fights at school. My characters ate “Twinkies,” “pretzels,” and even the occasional ham and cheese sandwich. My characters’ names were as vanilla as they come: Lisa, Samantha, Liz, or Kylie. They always had straight blonde hair, blue eyes and “milky white” skin (the cliché machine was working overtime). There is absolutely nothing of my own life or experience in the stories I wrote as a child. Mimicking the teenage fiction I read growing up, my Arab and Muslim identity is invisible in my early writing.

In the literary world, there were, of course, stories about Muslims, but never for Muslims. These stories continue to dominate the most celebrated literary spaces. Nothing titillates the literary world more than the Muslim woman “native informant” who bravely “bares all” to confess her journey from false consciousness to good liberal (preferably atheist) subject. Representations and stories of Muslims in Western popular fiction invariably feature a plethora of oppressed women, accompanied by cover images of women in face veils, their haunted eyes beseeching their “white savior” author and reader to rescue them.

Arab-American author Mohja Kahf (2006) identifies two “Eurocentrically slanted slots for Muslim women’s stories: Victim and Escapee.”<sup>2</sup> She offers a typology of the Muslim-Woman-as-Victim stories. The “mute marionette” is characterized by the Muslim woman who is powerless to speak but for her Western writer giving her a voice. The “meek mother” involves a mother figure in the story who is often powerless and oppressed. Kahf offers an example of the English translation of the Egyptian feminist Huda Sharawi’s memoirs which leave out the strong personality of Sharawi’s mother to make it seem as if Sharawi’s feminism was due to her European mentors. Also in these “Victim” narratives is the figure of the “forbidding father,” who is, like most if not all male characters, a tyrannical misogynist. Then there is “rotten religion” (based on a long-constructed image of Islam as unjust, as despotic), “stifled sexuality” (based on the stereotype of Islam as authoritarian), and the “vile veil” (based on perceptions of Muslim veiling practices as repressive). As for Escapee stories, these negotiate the so-called paradox of strong Muslim women by shaping a story into one about escaping Islam and Muslims to achieve liberation—books by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Nonie Darwish, and Irshad Manji come to mind. In this way, Muslim women who fight patriarchy are condescendingly described as “brave,” religion is still seen as the

problem, never part of the solution, and there is an assumption that any expression of free will and agency originates from the West.

It is important to acknowledge, as Chandra Mohanty argues, that although Western feminist discourses are “neither singular nor homogenous” it is nonetheless “possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of ‘the West’ as the primary referent.”<sup>3</sup> This is certainly the case with the repertoire of victim/escapee books. The Muslim woman offered to readers does not exist beyond language, beyond the political, ideological, and economic mediations that have historically framed representations of Muslim women. The represented Muslim woman exists in, according to Jasmin Zine, a wider meta-narrative that “constructs a binary framework that juxtaposes the West’s ‘liberated’ women with Islam’s ‘oppressed’ women.”<sup>4</sup> Muslim women enter readers’ imagination and interpretive filters not as individuals in their own right, but as “a universal, ahistorical, and undifferentiated category who become essentialized through the uniqueness of their difference.”<sup>5</sup> The point is that the Muslim woman enters the literary world as an “*a priori* social category with embedded qualities,”<sup>6</sup> such as being “oppressed,” “subjugated,” and lacking freedom and agency.

This insatiable appetite for stories about Muslim women as victims or escapees is part of what motivated me to write my first novel when I was fifteen years old. From a childhood of books populated with characters and stories that bore little resemblance to my own life, to my teenage years growing up in the context of the First Gulf War – in which I was called a raghead, nappy-head, tea-towel head, sand nigger, camel jockey, wog, terrorist – to witnessing the extraordinary popularity of books such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) by Betty Mahmody or Jean Sassoon’s<sup>7</sup> *Princess* series, I felt compelled to try and offer a counter-narrative. If most people were reading books that typecast Muslim women as downtrodden and oppressed, I reasoned, then that must be what most people were thinking. Nigerian author, Chimamanda Adichie, speaks about the “danger of a single story” when she says:

Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of power: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the

story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.<sup>8</sup>

And so, aged fifteen, I set out to challenge the idea that there is a definitive story of Muslim women by writing a book about an Australian teenage Muslim girl who decides to wear a hijab while attending a private school in Melbourne. Amal is the only Muslim at her school and the story explored how her decision impacts her own sense of identity, and her relationship with her peers and teachers.

The story was universally rejected because the initial draft was too didactic. In hindsight this was a completely understandable decision given how earnest my adolescent writing was. I put the manuscript aside and revisited it about ten years later—a year after September 11 when, to my dismay, not only had things not changed, they seemed far worse. Rewriting the original manuscript, the result was my first published novel, *Does My Head Look Big In This?* Of all my novels, this has been my most popular work, taught in schools, staged as a play in the United States, and currently being adapted to a feature film. My Muslim readers around the world tell me that the novel validates their experiences and empowers them to embrace their faith choices. For the majority of my readers—who are, in fact not Muslims—I am told that the book has changed their perceptions about Muslims, particularly Muslim women who wear the veil.

Writing is an apprenticeship for life. As a writer, you grow with every book. You hone your craft and, as you change, your craft changes too. You move on, sometimes politically. I must confess I have a mixed relationship with *Does My Head Look Big In This?* I see it as very “early 2000s,” reflective of a political consciousness that emerged closely after September 11 in which Muslims sought to reframe the narrative of terrorism and oppression through “myth-busting,” through “breaking down stereotypes” and “bridge-building,” and through “humanizing the Other.” I see it very much as a book at the start of my “apprenticeship.” I now look back on *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, and there are parts in it that jar with my recent studies in critical race theory and Islamophobia. Indeed, adapting *Does My Head Look Big In This?* to a feature film has involved me changing elements of the book to reflect the evolution of my own anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia political activism and consciousness. Yet I can forgive myself for the novel’s politics because it speaks to a certain time and space in dissenting and resisting, where the most urgent task was to demystify

and debunk prevailing stereotypes and provide a narrative that simply had not been given a platform before. It is very much a book that speaks to a mode of existence that is based on proving one is “not-terrorist,” and the impact this has on a teenage girl in the context of a post-9/11 world and the 2003 Bali terrorist bombings.

When I wrote *Does My Head Look Big In This?* and was searching for an agent, I spoke to one agent at length, explaining the basic plot of the novel. After my pitch, she had the audacity to joke: “Is there an honor killing in it?” This was the stock standard narrative space for the Muslim novel. The bar was set very low. Here I was presenting a feisty, free-spirited adolescent Muslim girl speaking on her own terms and, importantly, delivering a story written by a Muslim woman. What an indictment on the literary world that this was, in 2005, subversive and risky, and also a complete novelty.

And yet, one can see clearly here that even writing that dissents, that seeks to challenge white normativity, still implicitly operates under a logic that acknowledges that normativity. *While Does My Head Look Big In This?* sought to validate the experiences of young Muslim girls, I wrote with a “white” audience in mind given the context of me writing in a white-dominated society and publishing industry. I wrote for Muslims but to a white audience. This is the double-bind, a convergence of Fanon’s dialectic of self-recognition and Du Bois’s double consciousness. In dissenting I am still, to an extent, privileging white privilege. I am interpellated to write as the “not oppressed,” “not terrorist,” “not mainstream.” This is the haunting fact of writing as a minority within the mainstream. One is constantly working to reinvent the literary world to face its white-centrism and resist being treated as the fetishized and exotic other, and yet the labor of doing so, in a white-dominated industry, necessarily reinforces the very social and affective structures one seeks to challenge. The result one must accept is that the struggle will be one of slow transformation.

I am very much aware that to be a writer of Muslim background is to constantly negotiate my voice and position in a marketplace that is entrenched with everyday racism, exclusionary practices, and power imbalances. What I have sensed, although I hasten to add that the positive interpersonal encounters have vastly outweighed the negative, is that work like mine reveals the subtle ways in which ideas about equality shape western ways of dealing with “diversity” – the buzzword particularly in young adult fiction in recent times. I argue that diversity elides the real challenge, which is not inclusion into a

white “universal” space, but challenging the particularity of white universality.

I have encountered situations where my writing is lauded for reflecting the cultural pluralism within our society. And yet, this idea that the stories I tell are “other,” are “exotic,” “different,” a tick for “diversity,” is because over here in Australia to the left or right of a white center, we have all these nice authors writing diverse fiction for “us,” and these nice, diverse writers are simultaneously outside the category of “us.” The Muslim woman writer can therefore be treated as spectacle; her work packaged into familiar tropes and fantasies of the exotic other. She can be celebrated for enhancing diversity. I recall, for instance, one early review of *Does My Head Look Big In This?* was extremely positive, but then ended with a patronizing “hope” that I would go on to write books about “other regular characters,” not just Muslims.

Of course, sometimes, and this is the most exasperating aspect about being a racialized person, the denial of your particularity – ignoring your “difference” – is equally marginalizing. Ghassan Hage puts it thus:

The racialized person in general fluctuates between a desire for particularity and a desire for universality. . . this vacillation. . . between the desire for the universal and the particular is very much the norm among most racialized people. . . it is this vacillation that is inherent to the human condition. When people aspire to integrate in a new cultural group, or choose to continue to be part of a group they were born into, they do not just fear being particularized and having their universality denied, and they do not just fear being universalized and having their particularity denied. They fear both, and being “fixed” in both; that is, they fear not being able to have a space where they can vacillate at will between the universal and the particular.<sup>9</sup>

I know this fear and frustration well. I have seen all-white panels assembled to discuss race or identity and wondered why my expert opinion is not called upon. There have also been interviews where I am asked only about race or identity, and I’ve questioned why my craft is being ignored. Following a talk at a writer’s festival, a white male journalist who has written a children’s book approached me and

complained that “people like me” have an “asset” because they “get more publicity” for being “different.” He resented that I could “play the exotic card” and in doing so implied that this censored, marginalized, white, middle class, heterosexual male journalists.

I recall the time I was mingling with co-panelists before our book panel discussion at a writer’s festival. Our chair, a prominent journalist, swept into the greenroom, warmly welcomed us all to the event, confessed that she had not read my book, although she had read the other (white male) author’s novels. She assured me she wanted to read *Does My Head Look Big In This?* in order to understand Muslim women. Such a simple statement serves to collapse “Muslim women” into a singular category. Mohanty writes about the “production of the Third World Woman as a singular monolithic subject” which involves a “suppression . . . of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.”<sup>10</sup> One of the key problems is that Muslim women are treated as a category of analysis and literary practices erase Muslim women’s (and men’s) individuality and agency, and the socio-historical and cultural specificities of their experience.<sup>11</sup> We cannot possibly imagine doing the same to “white women,” for example, because whiteness is never a homogenous, flattened, frozen category, it is never a subject for analysis, observation and study. And it can never be “contained” in “one” book. Further, what constitutes this “understanding” of the Muslim woman through literature? As a Muslim woman, the idea that I can be “understood” would be laughable for its absurdity (as laughable and ridiculous as claiming to know “Western” or “white” women), if it was not so dangerous in its consequences. Claims to “understand” how Muslims think and act have justified (as demonstrated by countless scholars, notably Edward Said) colonial expansion, military interventions into Muslim countries and paternalistic discussions around the Muslim “other” in Western societies.

This leads me to my next point. The legacy of the Mute Marionette is very difficult to erase completely. For every book like mine, another two or three stock standard Muslim-woman-as-victim or -escapee lines the shelves. Academic and community cultural development worker Paula Abood, has identified female-centered Orientalist literature as a distinct genre.<sup>12</sup> Texts within this genre are written predominantly by women about “Middle Eastern” or Muslim women and are told from first-hand experience, often through an interlocutor (usually a Westerner). The western woman giving the pitiful, oppressed Muslim woman a voice is consistent with Orientalist

imaginings of the Muslim woman who is invisible and silent behind the veil or in the harem. Claims that the stories told are based on true accounts constitute an important feature in this genre.<sup>13</sup> The idea that these Western writers are giving voice to what would otherwise be a silenced truth reveals the way power operates to reinforce the idea that Muslim women need to be liberated and rescued by the “enlightened” West.

A recently published Australian young adult fiction novel, *Promising Azra*,<sup>14</sup> illustrates this white savior complex and the literary world’s perpetuation of Orientalist feminist literature, this time with a young adult twist. I want to focus on this particular book because I argue that it speaks to many of the questions raised in wider debates around so-called “identity politics” and fiction. Indeed, it would be remiss of me not to reference the recent debate played out following American author Lionel Shriver’s controversial opening address at the Brisbane Writer’s Festival in Australia in September 2016. Shriver essentially used her keynote to lambast “the concept” of “cultural appropriation” and “a larger climate of super-sensitivity,” which, she argued, “constrains” and “burdens” fiction writers.<sup>15</sup> Many of the arguments deployed in Shriver’s defense of the right of fiction writers to “step into other people’s shoes, and try on their hats,” dove-tail with my discussion of *Promising Azra*.

Published in August 2016 by Allen and Unwin Australia, *Promising Azra* is written by Helen Thurloe. Neither Muslim nor Pakistani, Thurloe has written a story about a Pakistani Muslim girl growing up in Sydney’s Western suburbs whose dreams of attending university are thwarted by her family’s plans to arrange her marriage to an older cousin from Pakistan. Thurloe specifically states that her intention in writing the book “was to give a voice to, and frame the context for, girls who are unable to perceive, or properly articulate, the choices they could make. As well as to give them some practical ideas about how they might go about creating an alternative future for themselves, if that’s what they want.” In the teacher’s notes to the book, Thurloe addresses some critiques of her book as follows:

Several people questioned my sanity for tackling this issue, especially as it is not my own story. Unlike Azra, I am not Muslim or Pakistani. However, my strong feeling is that teenagers who are pressured into forced marriages (whatever their background) are not in a position to tell their stories, or to



warn others. If those of us that can do the research, and write about it in a compassionate and balanced way, are prepared to bear witness, then how is that a bad thing? Besides, I wrote this book because I wanted to understand how it could come about. Why does it happen, and how does it feel? What are the complications and complexities?<sup>16</sup>

Thurloe and her publisher make constant reference to Thurloe's "extensive research." The teacher's notes to the book explain, for example, that "the manuscript was trialed on the girls in Helen's creative writing class—some of whom were from Pakistan like Azra, and all of whom connected with Azra's story."<sup>17</sup> Thurloe explains that she "did a huge amount of research into legal cases where girls challenged the forced marriages they were facing, read every report about forced marriage available in Australia, and spoke with case workers, academics, lawyers, police, counselors and teachers."<sup>18</sup> She says she wrote the book

based on extensive interviews with students (from a range of nationalities including Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Egypt, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, India, South Sudan, Somalia), most of whom attended a girls' high school in Sydney. . . . Several students (fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds) read the third draft of my novel, and they all provided very positive feedback about the authenticity of the characters and the situation.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, no amount of "interviewing girls" and reading case law detracts from the fact that Thurloe is a white woman who has assumed some kind of heroic role of writing for and on behalf of a Pakistani Muslim girl.

Even if we accept that Thurloe's "research" entitles her to infuse some kind of empirical quality to her "strong feeling" that "teenagers who are pressured into forced marriages are not in a position to tell their stories, or to warn others," there is arguably still an unsettling sense of entitlement to step in and "bear witness" for them. And if "bearing witness" does not sufficiently respond to the criticisms leveled at her, Thurloe adds, "besides, I wrote this book because I wanted to understand how it could come about. Why does it happen, and how does it feel? What are the complications and complexities?"<sup>20</sup>

We have, here, Thurloe at the center of this book—whether as the entitled white feminist bearing witness, or as the curious white woman who can stand on firm, solid historical ground and dip into and out of “other” cultures and lives, and treat these teenage girls as anthropological subjects.

By staging her research via her interviews at these culturally diverse schools, Thurloe presents herself as having gained some kind of special access to an “inner sanctum” of different, so very other ethnic and cultural ways of being and thinking. All the white writer needs to do to rubber stamp her story as “authentic” is speak to the girls, invite them to read her manuscript and gain their approval. Throwing in some statistics and blurring the line between fiction and reality is another way of adding a kind of sociological legitimacy and credibility to the novel. Thurloe becomes the authorial voice on arranged marriages—not the girls, families, and communities who actually have the authenticity to write and speak about this issue. But even more unsettling, are the logics and presumptions that underlie the idea that somebody like Thurloe can represent the girls and community she claims to speak on behalf of. In an ABC radio interview, Thurloe talks about her

cultural research with girls in that demographic, where I spent some time working in a school teaching them creative writing as well and just talking to them about what they did on the weekends, whether they were on Facebook, what rules they had around, you know, going to parties, what they wanted to do when they left school, um, how they would meet their future husbands, and how a marriage might come about, and stories about what things had happened to other girls that they’d known at school, um, so that was the cultural background.<sup>21</sup>

The problem with Orientalist feminism is how it can operate in a benevolent, politically naive space of well-meaning white researcher and brown research objects. The posture of benevolence and “good intentions” is crucial. Like respectability politics and left liberal casual racism, it is the language of benevolence, neutrality, and balance that serves to obscure questions of power. Again, the teacher’s notes and Thurloe’s interviews are at pains to recognize that the book is not about one particular culture or religion, that there are complications in writing stories outside one’s “own life and culture,” that “there is no

such thing as a typical family in any culture." And yet, despite flagging these problems, the decision to write the book always triumphs. On what grounds do white researchers invoke the right to study, access and "research" brown others? Must non-white or minority readers and authors simply accept that speaking to "girls in that demographic" about Facebook, parties, and marriage is sufficient to understand them? Is it sufficient to simply argue that knowing "these girls" through the research process is justification for writing about and for them?

I always wonder what possesses these authors to write these stories despite their apparent understanding of the politics behind their intervention. While I have written books with main characters outside the Muslim-Arab experience, I have always been conscious of the politics of my positionality in relation to the stories I narrate. Put simply, I always ask myself: am I co-opting somebody else's voice? Am I exploiting or fetishizing somebody else's identity and experience? Is it likely that my character will be widely interpreted as "standing in" for a so-called monolithic community? Will my story do harm? Am I honoring all I have learnt around critical race theory in writing this character or story? This is a necessary self-interrogation if a writer seeks to write outside of one's own experience. These are the kinds of questions I asked myself when, for example, I wrote the Sudanese refugee boy character of Majur in *The Friendship Matchmaker Goes Undercover*, or the Turkish, Jewish, Greek, and Indian girls in *No Sex in the City*. There are myriad social injustices within and across communities but I would never dare to presume the right to write for or about them because I recognize that my positionality, my voice and intervention, will always sit at the intersection of a certain politics, power, and privilege. That is how entitlement works. It persuades writers that it is not power and privilege that allows them to tell these stories but "good intentions." It cajoles them into believing that they are being benevolent and noble. That they are offering a neutral story. It renders their whiteness invisible, as whiteness always is, when it is really only a white point of view that could claim "this book is not about religion; it is about culture" and then proceed to write a book about a Pakistani Muslim girl as though the cumulative weight of a body of stereotypes and preconceptions that exist about Muslims will somehow disappear from the reading of the text.

*Promising Azra* is pitched, framed, and represented in that blurry space that is often reserved for stories involving non-white characters, where fiction is in fact creative non-fiction and the white

writer is called upon to testify to the “issues” she has exposed and revealed in the book. The media release for the book provides a series of statistics on forced marriage rates in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Pakistan. These are then picked up by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) radio, which references the statistics in their promotion of Thurloe’s interview—“in 2012–2013, at least 250 Australian girls under eighteen were forced into marriage.” The book’s media release also includes the following quote by Thurloe: “Azra Ajmal is a fictional character. However, the things that happen to her are all based on true and/or possible events. The stories on which I based *Promising Azra* were either told to me by people I interviewed, or discovered in my reading of legal cases and other published articles.”<sup>22</sup>

In Thurloe’s interview on ABC radio, the interviewer describes the book as “a fictionalized kind of look at arranged marriage in Australia,” and introduces *Promising Azra* as follows: “Thurloe stepped into the shoes of sixteen-year-old Azra in . . . *Promising Azra* to explore what it might be like to be a Pakistani Muslim girl growing up in Sydney’s Western suburbs—grappling with the prospect of an arranged marriage.”<sup>23</sup> The interviewer then opens by asking Thurloe “what is an arranged marriage?” While there is in fact nothing particularly problematic about the content of Thurloe’s explanation, it is her third person, outsider commentary that is noteworthy. This is because her commentary is, specifically, a white woman’s third person account invested with authority to speak on behalf of The interviewer goes on to refer to Thurloe’s “nuanced” exploration of arranged marriage in the novel. But for all such nuance, where is the recognition and self-reflexivity to understand the nuance of power and privilege in the writing of this book? “Step into the shoes;” “explore what it might be like to be a Pakistani Muslim girl.” What happens to nuance when writers like Thurloe (and the media, reviewers, and book publishing world) borrow from and collude with Orientalist feminism? When they treat minority cultures and identities as some kind of exercise in dress-ups, which are easy to slip in and out of? This kind of logic resonated in Lionel Shriver’s comments on identity in her speech. It is a logic that sees identity—“ethnicities, nationalities, races, sexual and gender categories, classes of economic under-privilege and disability,” as Shriver put it—as something people “embrace;” experiences some people are “possessive of.” For Shriver, “membership of a larger group is not an identity.” It is this idea of identity as somehow malleable, voluntary, neutral even, that allows writers like Thurloe and Shriver to play “dress ups” with the identities of their characters. Where is the

nuance in Thurloe's failure to understand the power and privilege that allows a white Western feminist writer to presume the right to "step into the shoes" of "the Other" – as though the Other is not burdened by the relentless package of prior understandings about her individuality, sexuality, identity, and so on? As though, replying to Shriver's argument, being Pakistani Muslim is not an over-determined subject position; a pre-defined identity.

To raise questions of power in debates is often condescendingly interpreted and represented in wider debates as a call for censorship or, as Shriver cynically suggested, the end of fiction, leaving only "memoir." I am not making the argument that writers should never write outside their own background and experience. What I am arguing is that writers who enjoy the privilege of belonging to a dominant culture need to stop acting as though writing operates in a kind of post-race space; as though the choice of story, the narrator, the reader and the reviewer are suspended above race, history, politics, power equations. For all Thurloe's "good intentions," it is the idea that this "demographic" can be understood through the mediation of a white Western feminist that speaks to the fundamental flaw and implicit conceit in the book, and reveals the relentless grip Orientalist feminism continues to hold over the literary world, even in contemporary young adult fiction.

#### MUSLIM WOMEN AS "TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED" AUTHORITIES

When it comes to Muslim women writers, there is an assumption that the Muslim woman storyteller is not only speaking the truth, but is the representative of all Muslim women – the Muslim woman becomes a homogenous entity, a single narrative subject requiring a single narrator. Paula Abood describes this as "taken-for-granted" authority.<sup>24</sup>

Following the publication of *Does My Head Look Big In This?* I found myself in an interesting and paradoxical position. On the one hand, I had written a novel, loosely inspired by my own experiences of prejudice when I wore the veil, but no more directly based on my life than any writer creating a work of fiction who finds themselves tapping into their bank of emotional experiences and memories to help craft a scene. And yet, the widespread media interest in my book, both here in Australia, as well as in the United States and Europe, was partly due to an assumption that this novel was autobiographical. On several occasions I found myself in an awkward situation where the

interviewer would refer to the main character as me, and her parents as my own: “So, when this happened to you in this scene . . .”, “So, tell us about the scene in which your friends said this to you. . .”

Occasions have and continue to occur when I am conducting an interview on the radio and I have to interrupt the interviewer and point out I had written a novel, not a memoir. There was no denying the sheer fascination with the story I was telling, and how I was some kind of insider who speaks with authority about “Muslim culture” and is revealing the truth about Muslim girls who wear the hijab. This, of course reflects how, as Lila Abu-Lughod suggests, Islamophobia works in the shadows to produce Muslim women as a singular category,<sup>25</sup> eliding all their complexities and diversities. I never claim to speak on behalf of anybody, nor do I advocate the nonsensical idea that there is a normative Muslim experience. I don’t purport to tell *the* Muslim story because there is no such thing. On the other hand, my authenticity has also been questioned. Celebrated and internationally acclaimed writer Geraldine Brooks wrote a review of my book in the *New York Times*. After offering some praise, she inserted her own explanation for why women wear the veil, and then said:

I also found it highly implausible that in Australia, where elite private schools are overwhelmingly single-sex institutions, an observant Muslim family would choose to send their daughter to a coed high school. . . Abdel-Fattah, a lawyer, attended a Catholic primary school and an Islamic college; at thirteen, she decided to wear the hijab full time. She says she stopped wearing it outside of school at seventeen, anxious about prejudicing her job prospects. A novel based more closely on her own difficult choices might have had an authenticity – of voice and of emotion – that this one, sadly, too often does not.<sup>26</sup>

I am not hyper-sensitive to a critical review. Yet this review still stands out for me because it so neatly encapsulates the racism inherent in the literary world. In the tradition of *mansplaining* or *whitesplaining*, here we have Brooks *Muslimsplaining* why women wear the veil, or questioning where a Muslim family would send their daughter to school. The choice of Brooks to review the book was not a coincidence. *Nine Parts of Desire* secured her as the authorial voice on “the world of Islamic women,” as the blurb to that book stated. She was the white Western authority called in to determine whether my book passed the

white woman's test of authenticity. Notice how audaciously and arrogantly she declared it implausible that the character would attend a coeducational school. My native informant voice failed to even save me there. Brooks was the true expert on the subject. And last, but not least, we had the lament that I did not write an autobiography, because, it seems, as Brooks's review implicitly suggests, Muslim women are incapable of self-determined writing, or fiction. Muslim female writers must always satisfy the white voyeuristic desire to confess their real selves and lives.

The double-binds and contradictions that Muslim female writers face are ever-present. When our authenticity is not being questioned by a white Orientalist feminist, our fiction is transformed into expert commentary. This was reinforced for me in 2012 when I published *No Sex in the City*, a cheeky dissent to conventional, largely white-centric chick-lit. The novel is narrated by an Australian woman of Turkish background but is an ensemble book, also following the lives of her friends of Greek, Jewish, and Indian background. The main protagonist is searching for "Mr. Right" and is not averse to being introduced to him through family in a diluted version of an arranged marriage. Although I created a variety of characters, I did seek to address the misconception that non-Anglo women's experiences are normative and homogenous by exploring the rich variety and complexity of story and experience. Reviewers and the wider media were first and foremost interested in whether it was autobiographical. Again, while I had some ambivalence about such interviews, I tolerated such a line of questioning and was initially comfortable talking about my own experience meeting my husband through family because I naively considered it was fair enough to ask a writer where the line between fact and fiction blurs. Yet in hindsight, and to be perfectly frank, it is something I deeply regret having indulged because I cannot help but suspect that part of the allure of the book was the so-called "exotic ethnic voices and stories" contained within. I say this because in interviews I was also asked about Indian and Greek-Orthodox marital practices. Was I now an authority on these cultures too, simply because my book contained characters of those backgrounds? I received several media requests, including from the United Kingdom in light of legislative interventions into forced marriage in that country, in the months after the book's publication to comment on arranged and forced marriage practices, as if I was somehow qualified because I had written a work of fiction on the same topic.

I felt as though the interest surrounding my work ran the risk of reinforcing the fetishization of the veiled Muslim woman, or the so-called arranged marriage. And yet, both books seek to directly challenge such fetishization, revealing how perverse and deep-seated racialized readings – and writings – can often be. The problem is that the media and some reviewers do not seem to cope with the idea of a writer who happens to be Muslim, preferring to view me, and others like me, as Muslim writers, attributing authoritative weight to our fiction writing, our Muslim identity somehow casting us as the authentic authorial voice of contemporary multiculturalism.

This distinction is crucial. “Muslim writer” suggests a kind of reactive or responsive writing, versus the possibilities of self-determined imaginations and writing that is written for the self. The “Muslim writer” is seemingly incapable of writing about anything except her own life and Muslim experience. She is seen as representative of “the Muslim story.” Nuance, imagination, diversity, and freedom are denied to her. When a white person writes a book that contains white characters, we do not label the writer as a “White or Anglo writer.”

The world of identity politics does not just, as writer Eli Shafak reflects, “affect the way stories are being circulated, read and reviewed,”<sup>27</sup> it also affects how one’s work is received by readers from one’s own minority community. Kahf calls this “read[ing] to ‘media watch’ what others say about us, not for our own education or delight.”<sup>28</sup> That is, a kind of defensive reading where one’s writing is judged purely in terms of *how it will make us look in front of non-Muslims*. Kahf refers to this bind in terms of DuBois’s double consciousness, so that the writer is burdened with a split perspective: between how they see themselves and, because it is necessary for their survival, how they perceive themselves being seen by white people. This resonates with me deeply. The road to “neutrality,” to the freedom to be an unhyphenated writer – that is, to *not* simply be a Muslim writer – is full of potholes and roadblocks. One does not want to be “fixed,” as Hage argues above. The freedom to be fluid, to dip into and out of one’s identities, is denied. *Representation* haunts us hyphenated writers. There are myriad of ways of living Muslim and Arab and yet every story told freezes Muslim and Arab lives into a few narrow possibilities.

My latest novel, *When Michael Met Mina*, published eleven years after *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, reflects my more critical political



consciousness. It has taken ten books in between to have the authority and platform to write this book, which is what I meant earlier about painstakingly slow change. In *When Michael Met Mina*, I address racism, Islamophobia, anti-refugee movements, class relations in Sydney, and the wonderful, complex, vibrant world of secondary school. The idea for the novel came to me while attending an anti-asylum seeker rally during my PhD fieldwork on Islamophobia from the point of view of the perpetrators. A character popped into my head. Well, two characters in fact. One was a young Afghan refugee. A “boat person,” systematically maligned and stigmatized by callous politicians and vulgar tabloid media. Smart, fierce, courageous, and scarred, this character would not budge from my head. I called her Mina. I thought about what it would mean for this young girl to have fled Afghanistan, be locked up in Australia’s notorious and illegal detention centers, grow-up in the lower socio-economic suburbs of Western Sydney, only for me to then throw her into a private school in the wealthy and demographically largely white lower north shore of Sydney. The other person who popped into my head was a boy called Michael, whose middle-class, liberal, and quite likeable parents have started a political organization called “Aussie Values” which opposes multiculturalism, further immigration, asylum seekers, and “Islam.” As I interviewed people about their “fears of being swamped by boats,” their claims about the “Islamisation of Australia,” and their so-called “clash of civilizations” arguments, I wondered how it would feel to be a teenager growing up in a family peddling such racism and paranoia. How do you “unlearn” racism? How do you find the courage to question your parents’ beliefs? How do you rise to the challenge of interrogating the sensationalized narratives that bombard us in tabloid media, talkback radio, current affairs, and breakfast talk programs and public debates? That is when I decided to write a story that took these two characters, Michael and Mina, and threw them at each other.

So much of Michael’s journey involves him confronting not only his privilege, and the power it offers him, but also how his privilege burdens him with the responsibility of challenging racism and exposing the myths and tropes that circulate so widely and easily in our society. Mina is blunt with Michael that she is not going to “rescue” him from his racism; “babysit” him through his “enlightenment.” “The first step,” she tells him, “would be for you to realize that you need to figure it out on your own.” Mina is uncompromising and not interested in myth-busting or helping her white peers who have traveled to the “country” of “Africa” on school

excursions for “self-discovery,” but rarely venture into Western Sydney. She says:

*I've come from the place of “go back to where you came from”  
From unmarked graves and stinking camps  
From seas that wanted to swallow me  
And prisons that wanted to disappear me  
From places other people will travel to  
With travel blogs, and itineraries highlighted in fluorescent Sharpies,  
and Instagram accounts that show how they “found themselves”  
In places some people are allowed to visit  
While others are never allowed to leave.*

*The exotic are a short drive up the road  
Postcodes vending an experience of elsewhere  
But without the frequent flyer points and itinerary  
They are just ghettos.*

*When you feel like a dandelion  
Just a wish from being blown away  
When you feel like a spice  
Just a sprinkle of flavour to your taste  
When you feel like a souvenir  
In a bazaar of identity that peddles fear*

*You feel  
That you must carve yourself out of resistance*

The material, psychological, and emotional impact of Michael’s family and their organization’s racism on Mina’s family is something I was keen for my young readers to understand and how racist discourses and practices impact deeply on people’s lives. But unlike much of the writing I felt we see around race, I wanted to be clear that ultimately it is not up to racialized people to do all the hard work that is needed to dismantle the racial logics of our society. It is time we

unsettle the common sense understanding that racism is human nature or an “individual” flaw. As though it were “behaviour, action, or attitude rather than. . . the expression of systemized racial logics with complex and multi-routed underpinnings.”<sup>29</sup> In doing so, we can start to see how those who benefit from racism bear the greatest responsibility for fighting it. It was my hope that Michael, a seventeen-year-old boy, might offer some insights into the struggle and rewards of taking up that fight.

The thing about dissenting in mainstream cultural production is this: the racism embedded in mainstream white-dominated creative institutions and spaces steals a little from you each time. It is insidious because it is unavoidable. We creative writers can never tell the full story the way we want to. We cannot be self-indulgent—a luxury afforded to most white artists—nor can we avoid the white gaze, because publishers, reviewers, funding bodies, media, and paying audiences are the rank and file to which the survival of our work depends. So how does one maintain artistic integrity, if you have not chosen to completely exit the mainstream publishing arena? The space we send our stories into is bound by imaginations defined by white normativity. Therefore the task is for one’s writing to be guided by a politics of social transformation. Writing for young adults places particular constraints so it is a slower and somewhat more restrained process than fiction for adults. Often it is about being strategic, bending some rules in the game so that the next time you play it you have changed the game that little bit more. Change is incremental, and while the mainstream publishing arena has rigid boundaries, there are opportunities for those boundaries to be pushed and reshaped. As more people of color are being published, taking risks and building networks of solidarity that calls out the racism and throws paintballs of color over the white literary canvas, it turns out that writing in the mainstream can both “steal a little from you,” but also give something back.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Mohja Kahf, “On Being a Muslim Woman Writer in the West,” *The Islamic Monthly*, 2 July 2006, <http://theislamicmonthly.com/on-being-a-muslim-woman-writer-in-the-west/>.

<sup>3</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (2002): 333–58; 334.

<sup>4</sup> Jasmine Zine "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2002): 1–22, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sassoon's website is in fact specifically headlined, "A Voice for Women of the Middle East."

<sup>8</sup> Adichie Chimamanda, "The Danger of a Single Story," TED, July 2009, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en).

<sup>9</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2015), 125–26.

<sup>10</sup> Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 333.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>12</sup> Paula Abood, "The Arab as Spectacle: Race, Gender and Representation in Australian Popular Culture" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Thurloe, *Promising Azra* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Lionel Shriver, "I Hope the Concept of Cultural Appropriation is a Passing Fad," *The Guardian*, 13 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>.

<sup>16</sup> "Teacher's Notes for Promising Azra," accessed 20 August 2016, <https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/young-adult-fiction/Promising-Azra-Helen-Thurloe-9781760113278>.

<sup>17</sup> "Teacher's Notes for Promising Azra."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Helen Thurloe, interview by Ellen Fanning, *Life Matters*, July 2016, <https://radio.abc.net.au/programitem/pgzE7J5zpV?play=true>.

<sup>22</sup> "Promising Azra Media Release, accessed 20 August 2016, <http://www.helenthurloe.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Promising-Azra-Helen-Thurloe-media-release-August-2016.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Thurloe, interview by Fanning, *Life Matters*.

<sup>24</sup> Abood, *The Arab as Spectacle*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Geraldine Brooks, "Sunday Book Review: Children's Books" *New York Times*, September 16, 2007,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/0916/books/review/Brooks-t.html?r=0>.

<sup>27</sup> Elif Shafak, "The Politics of Fiction" TED,  
<https://www.ted.com/talks/elifshafakthepoliticsoffiction/transcript?language=en>.

<sup>28</sup> Kahf, "On Being a Muslim Woman Writer in the West."

<sup>29</sup> Alana Lentin, "Racism in Public or Public Racism: Doing Anti-Racism in 'Post-Racial' Times," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 1 (2016): 33-48, 36.