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A Postcritical Reading of Agency in Contemporary British Muslim Women's Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis studies five novels written by British Muslim women writers. Four of these novels have at their centre female characters who identify themselves as Muslim immigrants: *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, *My Name is Salma* (2007) by Fadia Faqir, and *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie. The fifth narrative is *This Green and Pleasant Land* (2019) by Ayisha Malik, which is not about a female protagonist per se, but in which women play vital roles, especially in relation to issues of identity and cultural representation. I observe a tendency in the current body of criticism to read these novels instrumentally – as realist documents, or as interventions in contemporary political debates, whether reinforcing or challenging existing images of Muslim women. I argue that this approach is well-intentioned but ultimately reductive, resulting in an effective ghettoizing of the texts and their authors. Inspired by the interpretive approach of post-critique, which is advanced by Rita Felski, and by her use of Actor-Network theory, developed by Bruno Latour, I aim first to provide readings of the current criticism around the novels, analysing them from a postcritical perspective. I understand these texts instead to carry artistic autonomy which transcends the dichotomy of being either politically and socially useful or damaging to real Muslim communities. While the agency of the novels and their writers has been generally understood in the context of the message they supposedly deliver to their readers about Muslim woman, I stress that there are nuances to such agency that are overlooked. Employing Latour's concept of Actor Network Theory as proposed by Felski, I want to bring to the surface the multiple kinds of agencies these narratives exhibit, and to do so while resisting the temptation to judge those agencies in terms of their utility to Muslim communities.

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Author's Declaration:

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Fahimah Alrashidy

Introduction

This thesis studies five novels written by British Muslim women writers. Four of these novels have at their centre female characters who identify themselves as Muslim immigrants: *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali, *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, *My Name is Salma* (2007) by Fadia Faqir, and *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie. The fifth narrative is *This Green and Pleasant Land* (2019) by Ayisha Malik, which is not about a female protagonist per se, but in which women play vital roles, especially in relation to issues of identity and cultural representation. These five texts provide an intensive portrayal of the social, cultural, and religious status of women in immigrant Muslim communities. Their shared thematic concerns is the starting point of my thesis, providing the fundamental rationale for my choice of primary material. However, whilst I acknowledge the importance of the ways in which these novels engage with real-world problems, I observe a tendency in the current body of criticism to read these novels instrumentally – as realist documents, or as interventions in contemporary political debates, whether reinforcing or challenging existing images of Muslim women. I argue that this approach is well-intentioned but ultimately reductive, resulting in an effective ghettoizing of the texts and their authors. I am not claiming that the contextualization of the novels in current criticism is invalid; rather, I am asking why and how such criticism is constructed, and what an alternative approach might look like, that understands these novels as works of art over and above the political representations that they have mostly been read for to date.

Inspired by the theory of post-critique, which is advanced by Rita Felski, and by her use of Actor-Network theory, developed by Bruno Latour, I aim first to provide readings of the current criticism around the novels, analysing them from a postcritical perspective. Moving away from what I see as attempts to read these five novels instrumentally, for their political and social significance to real Muslim communities, especially in relation to the West, I understand these texts instead to carry artistic autonomy which transcends the dichotomy of being either useful or damaging to real Muslim communities in political and social terms. While the agency of the

novels and their writers is often understood primarily in terms of the message they would deliver to their readers about the concept of "the Muslim woman", I stress that in such a context there are nuances to such agency that is overlooked. Employing Latour's concept of Actor Network Theory as proposed by Felski, I want to bring to the surface the multiple kinds of agency these narratives exhibit, and to do so while resisting the temptation to judge it as being either useful or not to Muslim communities. Each of the chapters ahead deals with different kinds of agency that have not yet received adequate critical attention. These range from the agency of the writers to negotiate their expected roles as representative of their Muslim backgrounds, to the agency of the texts themselves – which I find in characters, themes, writing styles and techniques that constitute the aesthetic quality of these narratives, primarily as works of the imagination, in relation with their real world social and political context, but not pre-determined by it.

Postcritique and Actor Network Theory

This thesis takes its methodological approach from the works of Rita Felski, who is a prominent figure in what has become known as 'postcritique'. Felski is the author of several books: *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989), *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), *Literature After Feminism* (2003), *Uses of Literature* (2008), *The Limits of Critique* (2015), and *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020). In her analysis of contemporary modes of criticism, Felski employs the idea of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" as articulated by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (which inspired many in the academic humanities to re-evaluate the ways literary texts are read and critiqued).[1] Most notably, in the works of Felski there is a detailed description of the limitations of the prevailing current models of critique and a call for finding new ways to study literature. Felski stresses the idea that, within academia, literature is usually interpreted with suspicion. The reason for this limitation is explained in Felski's

[1] The works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best all suggest alternative modes of literary criticism in response to Ricoeur's ideas on the "hermeneutics of suspicion".

comments on the problematic position a critic adopts while reading a fictional text. Here she makes an analogy between contemporary modes of criticism and the practices of investigating a crime:

> [The] critical ethos manifests itself, among other things, in an interest in plotting. In the process of reading texts against the grain to discover their hidden meanings, critics fashion causal connections, imagine personae engaging in purposeful activity, assign responsibility, and often attribute guilt. […] The role of these source texts is to offer a plenitude of traces, clues, or symptoms; the job of the suspicious critic is to interpret these clues by situating them within larger structures of social or linguistic determination ("Suspicious Minds").

The task of a critic is to become a distant observer who wants to investigate a text which is always seen as containing deep hidden meanings, ones that are different from those that appear on the surface. There is a hierarchical structure implicit in this process, as the critic assumes a higher position which enables them to place the text under examination. The critic sees the text as something that happens in the past, perceiving the text as an unsolved mystery which only discloses its meaning when the critic creates another story which recreates "the sequence of actions surrounding [the] original transgression" ("Suspicious Minds"). It is as if the text has a complete meaning ready to be discovered and that it is the critic's job to reveal it by reconstructing its narrative.

Although Felski does not argue for a wholesale repudiation of critique,[2] she is concerned that "the intellectual or political payoff of interrogating, demystifying, and defamiliarizing is no longer quite so self-evident" (*Critique and Postcritique* 1). Investigating literary texts for hidden meanings is an intellectual cul-de-sac, she argues, as it closes off the other potential meanings of

[2] In an interview, Felski confirms that: "my book has sometimes been misread as saying, 'we shouldn't be doing critique'. That is the last thing I'm saying! I was trained in the Frankfurt school tradition of Marxist thought, that is my intellectual history and it remains important" ("Interview with Professor Rita Felski by Sara Magno").

literature. This is explained in *The Limits of the Critique* (2015) where Felski asserts that "[r]ather than looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives – we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth [and] makes possible" (12). Hence, she advocates that literary "writing should be grasped in this context as a social practice which creates meaning rather than merely communicating it" (*Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* 73). I endorse postcritique as an approach that calls for texts to be read in a way that does not presuppose a hidden meaning, but instead understands them in terms of their active relationship with their context.

Two key issues that Felski touches on are especially useful to this thesis. The first is the "present-day ubiquity and predictability of critical method [that] makes its claims to intellectual novelty or political boldness ever harder to sustain" ("Suspicious Minds"). Felski asserts that "power relations" theories of reading literature, as she calls them, have come to dominate literary study excessively (*Limits* 21). She describes, for example, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, New Historicism, Marxism, feminism as literary theories that seek to reveal the hidden meanings behind texts by measuring them against a set of conditions predetermined by the context in which they were written. Instead, she pursues a critique where literature is read as having a "relational ontology" to the context in which it exists, and where the individual agency of the texts and their writers is central (Felski "Comparison and Translation" 747). In other words, Felski argues that most literary studies understand works of art as parts of a whole, and that they are only important for the ways in which they respond or react to the larger framework in which they exist:

> This macrolevel [of criticism] holds the cards, calls the tune, and specifies the rules of the game; the individual work, as a microunit encased within a larger whole, can only react or respond to these preestablished conditions. History, in this light, consists of a vertical pile of neatly stacked boxes—what we call periods—each of which surrounds, sustains, and subsumes a microculture. Understanding a text means clarifying the

> details of its placement in the box, highlighting the correlations and causalities between text-as-object and context-as-container. (*Limits* 162)

This is an analysis that I will build on in the subsequent five chapters, extending a discussion of the ways in which the critical reception of the five novels tends to orbit around fixed issues to do with their representational and materialist conditions. That reception mainly involves critical judgment of the novels as either positive or negative representations of Muslim people, or in relation to the demands of the literary marketplace; two paradigms that I will discuss further in the following pages of this introduction. The result of the current criticism around the five novels, I argue, is a self-fulfilling, circular argument that obscures the fluid identities of the female protagonists in Muslim women's fiction, and threatens to obscure the individual autonomy of the writers themselves. It is important here to mention that the perspective of postcritique is not a call to ignore the contexts of literary works, or the patterns of inequality, but a call to pay more "attention to divergence, unpredictability, and the ever-present possibility of being surprised" by fictional works (Felski, "My Sociology Envy").

The second point from Felski that is useful to my study is the alternative method of reading literature she proposes. Felski strongly stresses the need to find an alternative way for critical reading to credit the individual agency of the texts without looking for a hidden power that controls them. "Once we take on board the distinctive agency of art works", she writes, "—rather than their imagined role as minions of opaque social forces or heroes of the resistance—we cannot help orienting ourselves differently to the task of criticism" (*Limits* 19). Positing an alternative to current over-determined 'critique', Felski utilizes the Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour. ANT is an approach to critical studies that aims to recognize the individual agency of literary works. It is a sociological theory which posits both human and non-human actors as contributing to a network of constantly changing relationships in the social domain. Latour claims that social phenomena can only ever be described, not explained or proved

(*Reassembling the Social* 1). Felski uses Latour's work on ANT – a realignment of sociology away from the impact of social forces on human beings and towards the network of conditions affecting behaviour in the present – to re-envision critical thinking as more discerning, open and contemplative. My approach to the analysis of the five novels in this thesis both follows and deviates from Felski's. Like Felski herself, who refers to her application of ANT to the humanities in an "altered, revised … ANT-ish" (*Hooked* 12) way, I have sought in the pages ahead to carry her work into my own partially, in a way that might be described as 'Felski-ish'.

What is specifically helpful in Felski's thoughts about ANT is her argument that, when reading a literary text, critics need to think of society and culture as a context that is "not a preformed being but a doing, not a hidden entity underlying the realm of appearance, but the ongoing connections, disconnections, and reconnections between multiple actors" (*Limits* 164). Based on these ideas of the processual nature of culture and social connections, Felski urges critics not to "[s]oar like an eagle, gazing down critically or dispassionately at the distant multitudes below, [but] to slow down at each step, to forgo theoretical shortcuts and to attend to the words of our fellow actors rather than overriding them—and overwriting them—with our own" (*The Limits of Critique* 164). This is a useful way to approach the reading of an overtheorized text by a female Muslim writer about a female Muslim protagonist. Fashioning my study around Felski's ideas, I will question the frame that has been constructed for reading the fiction of 'Muslim women'. I will then proceed to examine the ways in which these narratives cannot be easily classified and confined to one category. More specifically, the five chapters will showcase how – when the texts are read instrumentally as representing positive/negative, secular/religious, authentic/inauthentic images of 'the Muslim woman' in the West – details of their narratives end up being subsumed by a critical emphasis on their meanings within the wider cultural encounter of East with West. Details become viewed as distractions from the reader's more important quest to uncover concealed meanings – meanings whose revelation is understood

to demonstrate the larger power structure to which the novel is in service.[3] Attending to details in the narratives that are "small, tender, and worthy of protection and cultivation" (Ruddick 77), I want to show how practices and behaviours of characters that are indisputably, intimately linked to Islam and Islamic identity, also carry aesthetic and affective weight beyond such descriptors.

Texts, Context and Postcolonial Theory

This thesis is an attempt to move away from binary political readings of Muslim writing and Muslim representations in literature. Its contextual counterpoint is a British literary imagination whose ideas about Islam and literature took shape in the 1980s, a decade defined by what came to be known as the "Rushdie Affair". In 1988, the celebrated novelist Salman Rushdie published his novel *The Satanic Verses* and was met with hostile reactions from Muslims around the world. The supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, issued a fatwa which authorized Muslims to kill Rushdie as a punishment for distorting the image of the prophet Muhammed in his novel. Hanif Kureishi called the fatwa "one of the most significant events in postwar literary history" as it ignited a division between Muslims and the West unprecedented in the twentieth century ("Looking back at Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*"). Rushdie's novel was written after the time of political pressure from British Muslims who demanded cultural recognition in the multicultural Britain of the 1970s. This movement became even more prominent in the 1980s during Margaret Thatcher's government, during which time identity politics were mobilised in oppositional British political discourse "in response to the resurgent racialized nationalism" (Morey *Islamophobia* 69). In such an atmosphere many Muslims found themselves thinking of their community as "simultaneously powerful and vulnerable […] distinct from other religions and secular groups, and not to be easily installed within the capacious but perhaps insufficiently specified category of 'British Asians'" (*Interviews* Chambers 10).

[3] Felski asserts that in a suspicious reading the text is seen as "not fully in control of its own discourse; it reveals, to the expert eye, semiotic contradictions that are at odds with its ostensible meaning and that can be traced back to hidden, subtextual dominations and exclusions". In this model, "appearance is no longer a gateway to a deeper reality, but a tactic for screening that reality from view" ("Suspicious Minds").

The debate over Rushdie's novel opened the way for fiction about minorities from South Asia to be labelled "Muslim fiction",[4] and it has also provoked a further debate around the opposition between Islam and freedom of speech in such narratives and their contexts. The fact that *The Satanic Verses* was written in multicultural Britain added to a sense of the West and the Islamic world as two oppositional, mutually exclusive places. Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa entrenched a public controversy about the supposed incompatibility of Islam with Western societies. This assumed opposition between East and West would later be described sensationally by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) – a book published at the end of the Cold War, in which Huntington predicted that there would be a cultural and religious conflict between the West and the rest of the world. It was not, however, until 2001 – specifically 9/11 – that Islamic fundamentalist terrorists were widely recognized as a threat to the West.

Since the attacks on the Twin Towers, literary work by Muslim writers has been associated with what Peter Morey – in his book *Islamophobia and the Novel* (2018) – calls "the Muslim problem" (1). Alluding to the sinisterly euphemistic phrase "the Jewish problem", in circulation for much of the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe, Morey posits Islamophobia as having become one of the major forms of discrimination in Western countries since the first years of the new millennium. Muslims have been especially under the spotlight since the waging of the War on Terror by the United States following the attacks of 9/11.[5] Hence, in Morey's words, "Muslims and Islam have emerged as the focal point of anxieties about citizenship, loyalty, and liberal values" (Morey 2). Muslims, especially those living in the West, are "read through the lens of race and politics, filters that frequently cast them as silent objects or a problem to be solved"

[4] Claire Chambers confirms that the year 1988 (when Rushdie published his novel) was "more of a turning point in perceptions of and by Muslims in Britain than 9/11". She explains that "the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel and the fatwa that followed a year later saw a flurry of fictional texts being produced by both orthodox and non-practising Muslim authors. Much of this fiction seeks to portray the concerns of British-based members of the transnational faith group of Islam". ("Muslim Representations of Britain").

[5] See *Contesting Islamophobia: Anti-Muslim Prejudice in Media, Culture and Politics* edited by Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin and Alaya Forte (2019).

(Ahmed et al.1). Dominant among these pathological representations is the image of the threatening Muslim male. Alongside him, in the mainstream media and in wider political debates, standds the popularized image of the oppressed Muslim female. Muslim immigrant communities have been stigmatized through stereotypical portrayals of Muslim men as a source of threat while Muslim women have been characterized as victims of misogyny, entirely lacking in agency.

A consequence of these problematic representations was increased demand in the Western marketplace for literature which offers insider insights into the marginalized Muslim communities living in the West. Many opportunities were given to West-residing Muslim authors to write about their personal experiences of living as Muslims in Western countries.[6] In response to this rise in the production of narratives by Muslim writers, a corresponding field in literary scholarship has also emerged. Claire Chambers, Geoffrey Nash, Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin, Rehana Ahmed, Stephen Morton, and Anshuman Mondal were among the early scholars to recognise the literary, cultural and sociological significance of fiction by second- and third-generation Muslim writers, and to establish a significant body of criticism that reads it in relation to a post-9/11 world.

This thesis is a continuation of the conversation begun by these foundational scholars – many of whom, as I have tried to emphasise throughout, offer erudite and nuanced readings. However, this thesis also diagnoses problems with a critical milieu in which narratives of Muslim writers tend typically to be read in light of the supposed cultural clash between East and West. In *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005), Amin Malak discusses the relationship between text and context. Referring to the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, he states that "if the 'Rushdie Affair' proves anything, it affirms the inseparability of text and context. Any previous notions we might have had about the insularity of literature have been proven false"

[6] See the introduction of *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing* (2012) by Rehana Ahmed et al. for details about the prizes, awards and associations which helped introduce new writers of Muslim backgrounds to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

(108). He also adds that we "cannot divorce text from context. Put differently, the production of any literary work is culturally conditioned; subsequently, the responses to the literary work are likewise culturally conditioned" (109). Malak's comment explicitly articulates the approach most critics of British Muslim literature follow when reading the novels on which I focus here. Conforming to the premise set out by Malak, Morey asserts that his book *Islamophobia and the Novel* "critically surveys some fictional dramatizations of cultural difference and conflict that take their cue from current anxieties" about the clash of civilizations (2). The foundation of Morey's book is, then, a perception that the novels he discusses are an artistic and imaginative "response" to real-world cultural conflict. He sets out his methodology as follows:

> Through contextualized close readings of a number of English-language texts from around the world, the book [will look at how the novels] demonstrate a range of positions: from the avowedly secular to the religious and from texts that appear to underwrite Western assumptions of cultural superiority to those that recognize and critique nonimperial impulses (2).

Within this dominant trend fictional narratives are classified according to the political allegiances they reveal, and for the ways in which they reflect "anxieties" around East/West relations. It is as if the literary works themselves are secondary to the cultural clash they enact; novels are critically significant less for what they do aesthetically than for the light they shed on the historical conflict. Morey is, however, admirably aware of the potential pitfalls of such an approach, asserting that if one overlooks key elements of the novels as works of art (such as ambiguity and irony), the result would be to fall "back on judgments based simply on whether a book is sympathetic to Muslims and Islam or not" (3). "Blanket denunciations," he adds, "are unhelpful because they tend to close down debate and are insufficiently attentive to the status of many of these texts as creative products of art and imagination – something that makes them prone to the same forces of hesitation and inconsistency that always animate those activities" (6).

Nevertheless, as we will see, when confronted with the choice of reading the text on its own aesthetic terms or as a source of potential sociological knowledge, Morey and most others opt for the latter. As Geoffrey Nash observes in the introduction to his book *Writing Muslim Identity* (2012), in a post-9/11 world, texts by Muslim writers are valued predominantly for their political impact rather than their artistic merit:

> I think it will become evident that reading texts for their play/pleasure (jouissance/plaisir) value is of less interest to me than what Edward Said pointed out, twenty years before the second attack on the Twin Towers, were the concrete effects of 'word politics' in the everyday lives of Muslims, and today we must say, of us all. (3)

The binary opposition Nash sets up here between reading a fictional text for its aesthetic features or for its political utility is alive in the scholarship on Muslim writers' fiction. In her article "Autobiography and Muslim Women's Lives", Amina Yaqin confirms that "there is a simplification both of identity and representation. What seems to turn these narratives into best sellers is the idea of a deeply rooted cultural authenticity which overrides questions of aesthetic quality" (175). This is true at the point of both production and publication, and it is helpful to be aware of perceived authenticity as a deciding factor in which books get published. In line with Yaqin's suggestion that these novels achieve commercial success because of a demand for "cultural authenticity", I argue that the same demand and problem are perpetuated in much of the scholarly criticism around them. I have found a postcritical solution to expectations of cultural authenticity in the suspension of that preoccupation in my own reading – focusing less on market forces, and more exclusively on aesthetics; considering what these narratives can offer at the point of reading rather than where they came from.

Astutely, Yaqin's remark illuminates the motivations behind the production and circulation of these novels – drawing attention to the fact that most are published in a marketplace that values political and cultural merits over aesthetic potential. This thesis starts from a similar

position to Yaqin's, but with a particular focus on the critical discourse around these books. I argue that the valuation of political and cultural over aesthetic merits often extends from publishers/readers to the critics who receive these works. Because they are written by Muslim writers, the texts are examined on the basis of their significance to the cultural encounter between Muslims and the West. This entails questions not always of cultural authenticity but of political utility to Muslims, along with ethical questions about the conditions under which the works of Muslim writers get published (I give examples of this criticism in Chapters Four and Five). In this case, the critic's job becomes to examine the text to make meaning not about the narrative itself but instead to investigate what it signifies in a context where Muslim writers are under the spotlight.

One of the difficulties this kind of scholarship faces is the way in which it defines the "Muslim" writer. In *British Muslim Fiction: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (2011), Claire Chambers interviews British Muslim writers "in order to shed light on communities that are marginalized and little-known beyond stereotypes" (2). She asserts that, due to the diversity of their works and backgrounds, the term "Muslim writers" becomes problematic (10). Thus, she chooses to utilize the term "writers of Muslim heritage" instead. With this approach she tries to avoid the problem of homogenizing a large number of individuals who have different relationships to Islam, as some of them are secular but have found themselves connected to the religion or cultural tradition for various reasons (10). After grouping these writers in one study, highlighting their commonalities and acknowledging their differences, Chambers has to confront the challenge of how to define writers who are born into a Muslim family but are no longer personally interested in Islam, and the fact that they might fit better into other identity groups, even that of white Britons (268). Although Chambers is aware of the risk of placing too much weight on the religious and cultural identity of the writers, she evaluates and justifies the grouping as follows:

> Because I am interested in texts by writers of Muslim heritage, there is an attendant danger of abstracting Muslims from the historical record (when often writers are not practicing or not very interested in Islam), and separating them from both other ethnic minority groups and White Britons with whom they have had a shared immigration history or other connections. On the other hand, there are also advantages to this approach, such as the fact that it brings writers together from Muslim communities with heritage in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia whose works may elucidate each other, while also highlighting divergences. (270)

There is a well-intentioned sensitivity here in trying to find an approach that does justice to these writers and their works. I admire and agree with Chambers' concern that focussing on the writers' Muslim identity might isolate their texts and confine them to a predetermined and limited interpretation. This is a concern that I want to uphold and extend in my analysis of the five novels in this thesis. Since I am using the potentially limiting label of "Muslim women" in my analysis of these texts, there is always a danger that my own readings will fall into the trap I seek to avoid. However, instead of focusing on what the texts can tell us about Islam, the West, and gender, I emphasize how each narrative is characterised by complex and rich cultural and religious differences that are hard to contain in one category. Hence, as Lorna Burns writes, the "departure from a priori structures as the guiding principle of interpretation results in an ontology in which the world is understood as an assemblage of forces and actors, none of which can be said to be either reducible or irreducible to anything other" (61). Crucially, this does not mean that I am simply celebrating a universality of human identity, nor claiming that cultural differences are insignificant. Rather, I am trying to navigate a way through the stories that gives a more complex reading of the identities of the characters being represented, with less interest in their disposition in the conflict between East and West.

Seen through the prism of postcolonial theory, the fact that the five novels in this thesis are written by Anglophone Muslim women and published in the UK – where Muslim communities

are under scrutiny – constrains the potential significance of the novels within the political parameters articulated by Edward Said and his followers Said's foundational, famous theory of Orientalism posited the West's fixation on "Eastern" difference as an instrument through which it could wield cultural and political hegemony. His work interrogated the particularities of the contemporary body of knowledge produced in the West about the East. In his influential book *Orientalism* (1978) the opposition between the West and East is fundamental.[7] Said's work critiques the unequal relation of representation between the two cultures, making his work an invaluable contribution towards identifying and resisting Western cultural hegemony, a concept which remains essential in the field of postcolonial studies that emerged from and after his work. At the core of Said's argument is an idea of the Western enlightened scholar who looks at the East's "people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on" as material that is worth studying (2). Orientalism in Said's work is concerned with "the basic distinction between East and West" and how this distinction is perpetuated in Western academia, mass media and political concerns (2). Orientalism manifests itself in "dealing with [the Orient] by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism [is] Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). Literature, in particular, was seen by Said as an instrument through which Western cultural and political hegemony over the East is maintained. Hence, his study interrogated the particularities of the body of knowledge (both real and imaginative) produced in the West about the East. Said himself articulates a fundamental inequality in modes of representation between the East and West:

> From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it

[7] In Said's *Orientalism*, Islam was not looked at as a main identifying component of some Eastern countries. It was after the American hostage crisis (1979–81) in which 66 American citizens were seized at the U.S. embassy in Tehran, that Said published his book *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. This book is the third in a trilogy of sorts, after *Orientalism* and *The Question of Palestine* (1979), and it focuses on the reductive images of Islam in Western media, especially in the US.

had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work. (283)

The metaphor of the refining fire Said uses here alludes to the modern industrial power of the West and its ability to produce knowledge (similar to products) under strict manufacturing conditions which always work to maintain the dominance of the West. It is also primarily a Judeo-Christian image[8], which points to the religious and cultural differences between the East and the West.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and all the stigmatization of Muslims in the West, contemporary Muslim writers found themselves expected to "challenge some of the stereotypical views" about their culture (Ahmed et al. 1). Hence, according to Morey, critics tend to classify Muslim novels into two main camps: texts that reinforce for westernized readers negative stereotypes about Muslims, and those that offer original representations of authentic modern Islam and thereby seek to subvert Muslim stereotypes about Muslims (2-3). Morey adds that the West "too often value[s] Muslim writing only for what it can tell about the supposedly alien mindset [of Muslims]" (11). These texts are viewed by critics as about people who are marginalized. Critics then resist this Western tendency by reading the texts as having political value to real Muslim communities: praising those texts which resist Western intrusion or provide a corrective portrayal to stereotypical images of Muslims, and criticizing those that reinforce the stereotypical perception of such communities.

The problem with expecting literature to represent the "real" Muslim community is connected to a broader "burden of representation" on minority writers of all kinds. Coined in the 1990s by the art critic Kobena Mercer, the term "burden of representation" describes a general expectation for artists and writers from minority groups to speak on behalf of their communities. It applies to readings of many authors from minority communities – from the work of African-

[8] The verse in Malachi's book is as following: "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver" (3:2-3).

American authors during the Harlem Renaissance to contemporary authors from minority backgrounds. Mercer's study is particularly relevant to my project as he refers to the tendency of privileging context at the expense of valuing fiction. In his essay "Black Art and the Burden of Representation" Mercer discusses the reception of *The Other Story*, the first exhibition of Afro-Asian artists in postwar Britain, which took place at the Hayward Gallery in 1989. Mercer notes that "[t]here was very little public debate about the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the diverse body of work that was shown, as critical attention was drawn more to a whole range of extra artistic issues concerning race and racism" (233). The artworks in the gallery were all produced by Black artists and hence, Mercer suggests, they were expected to tell the story of Black experience in UK. When discussing the reception of the novels of this thesis, I find Mercer's ideas vital as he offers a model for recognizing restrictive – indeed, burdensome – critical responses to texts by writers from minority groups.

An example of such a critical atmosphere that overstates the cultural identity of fictional writers is when Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) is read by Dave Gunning as marking a successful stage in Ali's career. In his article "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Empathy in the Realist Novel and Its Alternatives" Gunning suggests that there are two phases in the writing careers of authors from minority backgrounds: at first they write about subjects that seem to be connected to their own lives, and then they break free and "engage instead with ethical and political questions greater than those concerned with ethnicity alone" (782). In such a view, there is an assumption that the writers know that their works will be read in a reductive way and they want to upgrade to a space where they have the freedom to express more global concerns, ones that are not limited by the specificity of ethnicity and local experience. This is why Gunning does not provide an analysis of *Brick Lane* in his article as, according to him, the novel was written at a stage in Ali's career where there are strong connections – in this case, of gender and ethnicity – between her and the protagonist. Instead, Gunning prefers to discuss her next novel *In*

the Kitchen (2009), where he claims that Ali responds to the "post-Barthesian ethical potential of the novel" (788). He asserts that:

> Several black and Asian writers in Britain, including Ali and others, have attempted deliberately to fracture those links between the persona and biography of the author and the content and form of the text that may restrict ethical, storytelling potential. More interestingly still, this process has also often been marked by a reflection upon the idea of decentering the (ethnic/racial) self in order to relate to the other and offer an ethical perspective (788).

What Gunning alludes to here is that issues of ethnicity are more local and private than the global and public issues of politics and ethics, and that these latter issues can only be accessed by engaging with the Other, as in the case of Ali's second novel. Additionally, while Gunning criticizes the burden of representation that readers might place on authors, he at the same time runs the risk of requiring more of the political/ethical values of the narratives once they are no longer connected to the biographies of their authors. In other words, Gunning expects that minority writers respond to the burden of representation by moving to "greater" issues than ones of representativeness. The tension between the local/ethnic readings of the novel and the wider global/ethical ones is evident.

Western Implied Reader

A key point that I perceive in the current criticism around the five selected novels is the way in which critics investigate the meanings of these texts in relation to the figure of a Western implied reader (in Chapter Two I demonstrate how important the Western implied reader is in readings of Aboulela's *Minaret* and I continue to cite more examples in Chapters Three, Four and Five). What I mean by implied reader, here, is the concept that was first introduced by Wolfgang Iser. Rather than referring to the actual reader, it invokes instead the imagined addressee which the real author takes into consideration when creating their narrative; the real author consciously or unconsciously adapts their use of language and assumption of knowledge to fit certain groups of

people, for whom the text is thereby written. In his article "The Reader in the Book: Notes from Work in Progress", Aidan Chambers claims that the imagined reader "deliberately or otherwise […] is given certain attributes, a certain persona, created by the use of techniques and devices which help form the narrative. And this persona is guided by the author towards the book's potential meanings" (2). In much of the existing scholarship on novels by Muslim writers, the implied reader is identified as a secular Western audience who expects to be educated about Muslim communities.

Here, I want to build on Neil Cocks' criticism of the method of naming one implied reader of a fictional text. In Cocks' view, the process is overdetermined from the outset, since it "set[s] up as a dialectic movement towards a correct truth that must always already exist" (96). Critics use the establishment of an imagined reader to try to counter the traditional method of reading a text for an author's "real" or intended meaning, but in doing so perpetuate "the idea that meaning is something to be completed, a process, and that which is already always there waiting to be discovered" (97-8). The figure of the Islamic-curious Western reader means that texts will always be interpreted within the paradigm of the unequal relationship between Muslims and the West. They are expected to positively represent Muslim identity in a context in which this identity is perceived with negative connotations. The implied reader in such cases is an individual representative of a collective Western audience, anchored as a main component in how these texts are read and interpreted. As I will argue, this entails reading the novels for knowledge about an unknown Other: that is, reading them either for didactic reasons – to enlighten the West about who this Other is – or in a way that highlights their political significance in correcting stereotypical images about Muslims.

Postcolonialism and Postcritique

Discussing the urge to classify works of art as resisting or sustaining power structures, Felski claims that such a dichotomy pre-determines the role of the postcolonial critic and limits their work to a kind of reading that seeks evidence of hidden agendas. She argues that critics tend to

read literary works as either "sustaining inequality or opposing it" so that the "scholar's task [is] to sort [these works] into categories of the complicit or the resistant" in relation to powers that exist outside the text (*Hooked* 10). Within such an atmosphere, critics are predisposed to excavate "the anxieties of empire", closely inspecting texts to arrive at judgments about their political orientations (*Limits* 105). In an investigatory manner, each textual detail is treated as evidence of a larger social or political framework. Such a method of reading, Felski adds, treats texts as "microsomes" to larger scales that exist outside of them, and every "infinitesimal clue thus bears a much heavier burden of proof, as a sign of systemic rather than individual wrongdoing" (*Limits* 107). The process, Felski explains, carries risks: "the use of inappropriate categories, a forcing of explanations, [and] a jumping to conclusions" (*Limits* 106). At the core of her postcritical reading lies the idea that the critic associates a work of art with a pre-existing social or political condition, and that this limits the agency both of the text and its writer, fating them to be only respondents, or reactors, rather than active participants in the artistic process. This scepticism about the efficacy of a system-connective mode of critical thinking is liberating for Felski. It offers an emancipatory way of reassessing postcolonial texts, whereby readers are encouraged to read fictional narratives not as objects that either resist or sustain *Western* power structures, but as having agency in their negotiation of cultural encounters *between* East and West.

Felski's concerns about criticism that falls into "the forcing of explanations" and the "jumping to conclusions" has in fact been expressed by postcolonial critics who seek to transcend the clash between the East and the West in their readings, and to emphasise commonality rather than to reproduce division. Congruent with my own assessment of the problems with expecting literature to represent the Muslim community to a Western audience is the position established in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's book *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media (*1994). They call out what they describe as "neat binarisms [between the East and West] that ironically recenter Whiteness, while the 'rest' who fit only

awkwardly into such neat categories stand by as mere spectators" (6). As an alternative to such "binarisms" they put the onus on critics to "address overlapping multiplicities of identity and affiliation" (Shohat and Stam 6).[9] Through fictional narratives, culture can be seen not only as a means of isolating community groups but of expressing them as "in relation" to others, "without ever suggesting that their positionings are identical" (Shohat and Stam 6). They are not, they say, advocating for "hermeneutic nihilism", where all forms of art lose meaningful significance. This is instead a call, especially for Muslims' writing where authors and texts are burdened with political and social expectation, to see literature as "not directly reflecting the real, or even refracting the real" (180). They instead affirm that "artistic discourse constitutes a refraction of a refraction; that is, a mediated version of an already textualized and 'discursivized' socioideological world" (180). In this perspective each side (the West and East) is given equal weight; the West is "flattened" like the East; read on equal terms as a "socially constituted subject, [that is] deeply immersed in historical circumstance and social contingency" (180). As a consequence, criticism is liberated to explore the interconnectedness between different communities as expressed in literary works. In the case of works by Muslim writers, critics can move beyond viewing them as inevitable responses to misrepresentation, oppression and inequality – and beyond perspectives which recentre the West as a permanent opponent – allowing room instead for the inter-relational quality of art to emerge. The West is seen in this thesis neither as an abstract entity nor a repository of universal values that are above other ways of life, but rather as simply another social and cultural system. This is a useful way to break the closed cycle of the confrontational relationship between the East and West in reading works of

[9] In a useful account Shohat and Stam comment on what they call the "victimology" discourse which "reduces non- European life to a pathological response to Western penetration". They argue that within this context there is an irony where the colonialist ideology is reproduced but in a reversed way. They explain that "rather than saying "we" (that is, the West) have brought "them" civilization, it claims instead that everywhere "we" have brought diabolical evil, and everywhere "their" enfeebled societies have succumbed to "our" insidious influence" (3). This is similar to the irony in postcolonial criticism which seeks to deconstruct Western cultural hegemony but, at the same time, recentres the West as an essential component in studying the literary production of non-Western writers.

fiction. It is not easy to dispense with such categorical terms, but it is the goal of this thesis to study fictional works without being constrained by the fixed boundaries such categories produce.

The desire to move beyond such boundaries is occasionally expressed in the existent criticism, such as Morey's statement that "the framing act of literature may be formed by multiple and sometimes conflicting frames, but its power to take us beyond existing relationships to imagine new ones is surely something worth considering amid all the sound and fury of debates about civilizational difference" (18). This invitation towards a less reactive interpretation of these texts is also evident in parts of Chambers' article "Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*" (2018). Chambers touches on the idea that Shamsie's novel refuses to make "sweeping statements" about the West in general and the UK in particular, thereby allowing other interpretive possibilities to emerge:

> Shamsie condemns Britain's rising xenophobia and ideas about British purity, but also trumpets London's convivial diversity, replete as her fictionalization of the city is with Iranian neighbors, Scottish political assistants, and Latin American bodyguards. Despite her focus on acts of terror, this is a quiet, reflective novel, preoccupied by sound yet out of it creating lyricism rather than fury. (208)

Chambers here evaluates the artistic quality of Shamsie's novel as capable of capturing the dynamics of cultural encounter in an imaginative work. She appreciates the confidence the novel expresses in Britain as a Western country that at once bears positive and negative characteristics. In this understanding, Shamsie is not reduced to a position where she is expected to create a representative Muslim identity; instead, she works as an individual commentator who is capable of providing imaginative narrative in an artistic form that is not limited by the preoccupations of politics. Within this kind of appreciative rather than judgmental or evaluative attitude, I argue that there is room for the emergence of different kinds of interpretation of the texts under discussion.

Materialist Critique

As well as identifying and countering overly determined political and ideological readings, this thesis also tries to move away from critical approaches to work by Muslim women that foreground their market appeal. This is another common critical perspective, which questions the value of these narratives to Muslims by arguing that they are tainted by having been created in response to the demands of the Western market (examples of this kind of criticism are discussed in Chapter Three and Five). In this view, the writers of such fiction are judged for variously allowing or resisting the cultural commodification of their "otherness". This potentially adds another burden of responsibility to those already imposed on writers from a Muslim background – a new kind that is presented as serving the interests of the Muslim community but in effect perpetuates the same old problem of Westerners expecting to be pandered to by the Eastern Other. Along with responding to the demand that their narratives be culturally representative, Muslim writers are at the same time expected to anticipate and actively resist the possibility of their work being commodified as "exotic" cultural artefacts.

To explore these issues further, I will engage with Marxist and materialist critiques of the production of postcolonial literature – a category in which Muslim writers are often included.[10] One of the prominent figures in this field is Graham Huggan, who has published several studies emphasizing the relationship between literature in English by writers who are not from a Western background and the Western market that publishes the texts they produce. In his article "The Postcolonial Exotic," published in 1994, Huggan claims that "for every aspiring writer at the 'periphery,' there is a publisher at the 'centre,' eager to seize upon their work as a source of marketable 'otherness'" (29). This claim formed the essence of his later book *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2002), where he explains how the symbol of the "exotic" was largely invested in via the network of the global market. In this book, he uses two terms interchangeably – Sara Suleri's "alterity industry", and the "market for exoticism" – to refer to a

[10] See The Warwick Research Collective (WReC) definition for world literature, for example, which is a theory developed by a research group from the University of Warwick in the UK. From a Marxist and materialist point of view, they argue that world literature negatively exists in an uneven capitalist world where its aesthetics are standardized and controlled by the marketplace (Deckard et al, 1).

capitalist environment in which the cultural "otherness" of a postcolonial writer is valued and exploited. His starting point is that the emergence of "Indo-chic" literature and "multicultural writing" in the late twentieth century was the result of a shift of interest in the Western market towards "other" kinds of literature. This resulted in the commodification and packaging of such "exoticism" as a product to be circulated in a global market. Huggan argues that what appears at first glance as a literature that is anti-imperial and anti-exploitative, is in fact complicit with commercial values underpinned by the very ideological systems it purports to critique. In a similar vein, Sarah Brouillette claims in her book *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007) that today's postcolonial literature has been commodified through the late capitalist marketplace; it has been marketed as an authentic kind of literature, but this authenticity, in her view, is always mediated through the process of marketing for the sake of commercial profit (4).

Therefore, the well-established trope in postcolonial theory of the marginalized writer who resists the dominant culture by writing against its norms and conventions is disturbed in the arguments of Huggan and Brouillette. In their studies, they not only explore the capitalist nature of the publishing process in the UK and other Western countries, but also identify many individual writers involved in these processes. They argue that some postcolonial writers are aware of the ways their "otherness" is consumed, and that they themselves contribute to this commodification both by writing in English and by writing stories that are about their background cultures. Huggan discusses how writers such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi (both prominent figures in the construction of an idea of multicultural Britain) benefited from their marginality by emphasizing their difference, as both write about South Asian culture in works published and distributed in countries where these cultures are not dominant. Huggan observes that, despite being mainstream writers in UK they are still labelled as minority writers, and it is "rare" for either of them to be "designated as a *British* writer" (83). Hence, he concludes that these writers participate in "stage[ing]" their "marginality" and that they contribute to

making their cultural background "a valuable intellectual commodity" (83). However, Huggan refuses to reject postcolonial theory altogether, instead making a distinction between local postcolonialism and global postcoloniality. He asserts that the former is when "local" agencies (and writers) resist globalising and neo-imperial powers whereas the latter is a symptom of the marketplace which values the "global symbolic exchange" of "otherness" (ix).

However, this distinction between local/authentic and global/inauthentic literature is arguably too rigid a framework for the classification of literary works. Within this entrenched binary, the authors studied in this thesis could only be seen as complicit in their own commodification, thereby invalidating any potential cultural and aesthetic value their work might have. This is particularly true if the five female authors of this study are seen as successors to writers such as Rushdie and Kureishi, both of whom came to prominence in the 1980s. This terrain is explored in Brouillette's *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014), where Monica Ali's writing career is evaluated. Brouillette traces how Ali started by writing about an exotic and marginalized protagonist from East London in *Brick Lane*, and after some negative reaction to the novel (particularly local protests over the *Brick Lane* film), she shifted her emphasis to write about an entrepreneurial protagonist (who is not from a marginalised background) in her novel *In the Kitchen* (2009). Brouillette argues that "Ali's changed tone may have to do with the eruption of a controversy over her novel *Brick Lane* that saw her cast as a privileged member of the creative class, selling stories about Brick Lane's underprivileged minority population to delighted metropolitan consumers" (101). Hence, *In the Kitchen*, according to Brouillette, can be read as an apologetic or defensive strategy intended to gain a more sympathetic readership:

> If *In the Kitchen* responds to [the negative reception of *Brick Lane*] by taking on the psychoses of the creative elite to which her critics routinely connected her, it does so not by disavowing any connection to that elite but by presenting its foibles as culturally and economically significant and by urging its readers to approach those foibles with sympathy rather than derision. (113)

Brouillette's commentary reduces the discussion of both of Ali's novels to a medium through which the binary of the privileged and unprivileged is identified. In this materialist analysis, the work of art is seen as only a symptom of a hidden ideology or personal interest which determines and shapes it even prior to its publication, whereas discussion of the content of the narrative is instrumentalized so that it works as evidence of such claims. In other words, the contents of a literary work are only regarded as concrete examples of the conditions or the contexts in which they were produced. This positioning of Ali (and her work) runs the risk of addressing her as a writer on trial, who can be verified as being either guilty or innocent of exploiting her background as part of a marginalized community to pursue a career and become a member of the creative elite.

I do not want to dismiss the materialist critique of postcolonial literature out of hand, as it is true that structural issues are significant in terms of what gets published and how certain kinds of literature are marketed over others. However, I argue that Muslim writers often have their works examined on the basis of their relationship to the global literary marketplace in a way that minimizes their agency. They are treated as tools of a pernicious commercialism rather than creators of fictional worlds, and/or masters of their own literary projects.

The materialist critique is recognized in postcritique as an approach that magnifies socio-political contexts and limits literary agency. Felski argues that critics "pound home the importance of social fields, discursive regimes, or technologies of power—and yet fail to reckon with the fact that the artwork is one of the actors involved in the drama of its own making" (*Limits* 106). Investigating the literary work in terms of the ways in which it was produced, published and circulated "deprive[s] it of influence or impact, rendering it a puny, enfeebled, impoverished thing" (*Limits* 106). Indeed, materialist critique is about the notion that texts are governed by "a priori conditions" of the marketplace which it is a critic's job to trace and expose (Burns 61). In the case of fiction written by Muslim women there is the condition of a demanding literary marketplace, with its expectations of stories that tell the reader about the

Muslim woman. Within this context – if the texts are read from a materialist point of view – they will be interrogated as being vulnerable to the conditions of the marketplace, and will have their agency thereby devalued. Muslim women writers are also burdened with the responsibility of resisting the commodification of their otherness. Hence, their works are at risk of being judged as failing to fulfil such a mission.[11]

In an attempt to rethink the dominant critical approach, Felski posits ANT as a useful tool since it transcends the division of text and context by attributing agency to the texts themselves:

> Literary texts can be usefully thought of as nonhuman actors—a claim that […] requires a revision of common assumptions about the nature of agency. A text's ability to make a difference, in this line of thought, derives not from its refusal of the world but from its many ties to the world. (Felski *Limits* 162).

She extends her approach to ideas where a text is no longer thought of as a symptom of an outside force but an actor in the process of meaning creation. For Latour, every set of connections is an accumulation of translations and affairs "shaped via their relation to other actors within the network, and the work of the analyst becomes one of tracing these connections, mapping the network as it registers them, without, however, attempting to trace them back to a single, systemic cause" (Burns 86). This a perspective that leads to a more positive and affirmative approach to literary interpretation, since it restores the artistic quality to every individual work. Meanwhile, there is no refusal of the context as this too becomes part of the network of relations. As Latour puts it, "[w]e cannot say that an actant follows rules, laws, or structures, but neither can we say that it acts without these" (*The Pasteurization of France* 160). The difference that ANT seeks to exercise is, then, its refusal to predict or prefigure the forms of the relations actants have and instead to embrace the notion of distributed agency. Felski confirms that "such a framework would need to clarify how agency is distributed among a larger cohort of social actors; to refuse dichotomies of inside versus outside, transgression versus

[11] For instance, Faqir's and Malik's novels are commonly read as offering narratives about Muslim women that are complicit with the requirements of the literary marketplace.

containment; and to more fully acknowledge the complication and entanglement of text and [the reader]" (*Limits* 159). In the chapters ahead, I read the novels in the light of this relational network between the texts and their contexts, rejecting an assumption that these fictional works' meanings and artistic expressions are pre-determined by the cultural, political or materialist conditions in which they were written.

A Postcritical Reading of Agency

To sum up the methodological approach of this thesis it is important to outline how postcritique and ANT are used to read the five novels in the following chapters. As I mentioned earlier, I use Latour's ANT similarly to Felski, in her proposal for a new way of reading literature removed from what she calls the suspicious kinds of interpretations of texts. She clearly confirms that she does not "attempt to create a 'Latourian criticism'" as ANT to her is a "certain way of going about things rather than a theory or a self-contained system of ideas" (*Hooked* 12). In my analysis of the five novels, I do not claim that I apply ANT in full but in a manner that relates to Felski's approach. I identify two crucial concepts that I borrow from Felski's understanding of ANT: one is that I ease off from any assumptions about the text's political and social meaning; another is that I look closely at the different kinds of agency these texts exhibit. To explain the two points, I refer to Felski's description of what ANT means to her. She asserts that this theory allows us to withhold our judgment while reading fictional works:

> ANT perspective does not endorse a view of aesthetic experience as transcendent and timeless; but neither does it seek to demystify it by translating it into the categories of another domain—economics, politics, psychoanalysis—that is held to be more fundamental or more real. Instead, it slows down judgment in order to describe more carefully what aesthetic experiences are like and how they are made. Rather than seeking distance from such experiences, it strives to edge closer. (*Hooked* 12)

Part of the process of edging closer to the texts is to attribute to them an artistic agency in a non-conventional way. Agency in a Latourian perspective is distributed between human and non-

human co-creators of the texts' meanings. So, alongside the human agency of the writers of the novels, Felski mobilizes Latour's understanding of artistic agency to confirm that the category of nonhuman actors "can include not only individual novels or films but also fictional characters, plot devices, literary styles, filming techniques, and other formal devices that travel beyond the boundaries of their home texts to attract allies, [and] generate attachments" (57). Within this scope, I find that the novels reveal many types of agency that can include themes, narrative modes, characters and stylistic choices.

To pave the way to explore these kinds of agency each of the following chapters begins with discussing and responding to the ways each individual text has been reduced by some reviewers and critics to a focus on the cultural and religious tension between Muslim immigrants and the dominant Western culture. It will highlight problems with reading these texts as markers of a collective response – variously, as examples of writing back to real-life issues such as Islamophobia, institutional discrimination, and problematic modes of mainstream representation. Additionally, it strives to move beyond the question of whether Muslim women's writings allow or resist outsiders' consumerist readings; to relieve these writers and their texts of the burden of resisting commodification by a Western readership thirsting for knowledge of the "Other". Each chapter then posits a way of reading the texts post-critically, free from the pressure to classify them as either positively or negatively representing Muslim communities. After outlining how the text has been received and focusing on the critical paradigms through which the novel has been read, each chapter will provide a reading of the text, which draws on an awareness of such paradigms as a way to push the discussion about these novels further. These readings operate at another scale, exploring the novels as primarily artistic expressions that must not be fetishised by the abstractions of the political. The main questions that this thesis poses are these: what are the potential risks of seeing Muslim women's creative production only in terms of their political utility? What are the broader implications of reading these texts in didactic terms? What might it look like to read them without overdetermining their political, social, and even economic

interpretations, and to read them in such a way as to open up rather than close down their possible meanings?

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane,* I explore narrative techniques that allow us to read the text outside the realist mode (not as documentary evidence, but as a complex fictional narrative, rich in expressions of the text's, and the character's agency). Inspired by ANT theory, I set aside any conclusion that there is an overwhelming factor or force directly or solidly responsible for Nazneen's state of vulnerability. I try to embrace her story in a more open way, allowing her to be an active agent – a subject certainly, but also actively responsive to a complex network of co-constituted relations, rather than a sum of pre-existing conditions.

In Chapter Two, I read Aboulela's *Minaret* focusing on representations of the hijab, and specifically the various ways in which Najwa wears the veil, in terms of their multiple connotations, and the fascinating, contradictory effects around this. Aboulela offers no single narrative judgment on the meanings of hijab, and I emphasise this in order to argue that is unproductive to interpret that trope as representing Aboulela's message about hijab. I focus on the narrative's agency in being able to imply this variety of meanings through the presentation of contradictions, affording a less neat representation of hijab.

Chapter Three seeks a new approach to Faqir's *My Name is Salma,* using her unconventional incorporation of an alternative ending to engage with the text in a way that takes account of its multiple kinds of agency: Faqir's agency in combating the expectations of the global literary marketplace rather than being controlled by them; and her protagonist's agency within the world Faqir creates, rather than representation of an honour killing victimhood in reality.

In Chapter Four, I argue against idealised readings of Aneeka in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* as a symbol of female Muslim resistance; instead reading the complexity of the design of

the novel for its depiction of her as non-idealised, non-representative, fictional, and subject to multiplex interpretations. I read her as a flawed protagonist, and attempt to invest her with an agency she has been deprived of by superficial symbolic interpretations of her narrative role. A keynote of this chapter is that in the precursor text to *Home Fire* Sophocles created Antigone with character flaws that are essential to her endurance in literature, but that certain critics of Shamsie have worked to smooth these over when it comes to Aneeka.

In Chapter Five, I look at Ayisha Malik's *This Green and Pleasant Land*, whose optimistic tone has primarily been read as serving naïve or commercial purposes. I argue instead that Malik is neither naïve or cynically commercial, but rather subtle in her crafting of a fictional narrative. This chapter follows in Rita Felski's footsteps of retrieving criticism from accusations of "reflexive imputations of naïveté and complacency" (*Limits* 158). In *This Green and Pleasant Land* the image of happiness is delivered with a light-hearted tone and approach in a manner that brings joy to the fore – a marker of Malik's authorial skill, as it manages at the same time to ensure that the difficult issues related to the story are not flattened out.

Chapter One

Beyond Realism: A Postcritical Reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

In this chapter, I want first to elaborate on the controversy over the publication of Ali's novel as it is significant to the critical discourse around it. Then I will discuss scholarship on the novel that interrogates the text's supposed realist form and its political and social un/usefulness to the Bengali community. In the scholarship around *Brick Lane*, there is an argument that the novel influences perceptions of the real Bengali community in the UK. The novel is interpreted according to a limiting dualism – as either politically harmful or useful to the community, as represented by Peter Morey and Michael Perfect, respectively. I argue that the tendency to classify the text according to its political significance is close to what Rita Felski describes when she contends that contemporary modes of criticism charge literary works with the political expectation of either "sustaining inequality or opposing it". In such cases, "the scholar's task [is] to sort [literary works] into categories of the complicit or the resistant" in relation to unfair power structures that exists outside them (*Hooked* 10). With this paradigm in mind, I aim to push the critical discussion of the novel beyond questions of whether it positively or negatively represents and affects Muslim minority people in the West, and towards a broader, less prescriptive reading that incorporates Felski's emphases on the need to engage with the wide range of co-creators of a text's meaning and the multiple kinds of agency a work of art can exhibit.

What is stressed in the other readings (and what I want to move away from) is the conviction that the text's agency lies in informing its readers and determining a kind of didactic process. To explore other potentials of the novel, I want to discuss other kinds of agency, those that are not limited to the dichotomy of presenting political un/usefulness to a real community. To do this, I attempt first to rethink the context to *Brick Lane* in a way that *explores* the novel, rather than explains it. I pay close attention to details of context, but do not use this to assume anthropological knowledge of the novel's characters, let alone their supposed real-world

community counterparts. My reading aims to analyze the text on its own terms, rather than subsuming it within a larger framework. As a result of such an approach, I argue that Ali's novel is written using techniques that evade the expected mission of documenting Muslims' lives. I discuss slippages of the realist mode in the text, where untranslated passages and moments of fantasy remind the reader of limitations in our knowledge of the text's subjectivities, placing a limit on attempts to read it within a realistic framework.

Hence, contrary to the readings of the novel that I cite, in my own reading Nazneen is not represented as following a single, linear trajectory. I argue that her story is more complex than that of an oppressed woman who finally becomes free and liberated.[12] I highlight moments where she is invested with an agency that tends to get lost in analyses of the text's alleged didactic positive or negative message – whether to a fictional or real community. Inspired by an ANT perspective, I do not seek to identify a specific factor or force that is completely responsible for Nazneen's status of being underprivileged. I am instead in favour of embracing her story more openly, allowing her to be an active protagonist rather than the sum of a set of preexisting conditions. Such a method enables us to see the multiple associations and meanings that emerge from her story. Crucially, by attending to details that have been overlooked in contemporary criticism, I will also develop the idea that *Brick Lane* is not simply a realist novel designed to document the lives of immigrants for outsider readers. Its artistry has an agency of its own – an agency that is vital to the book's narrative and aesthetics but becomes difficult to discern through a lens that reads it only for political valence or as social realism. I argue that some of the richest episodes in Ali's novel involve her slipping free of the conventions of realism, exploring the complexities of individual and collective experience and identity outside of the constraints of linear plot and conventional dialogue.

A Controversial Reception

[12] Doing so, I still do not want to dismiss the fact that Nazneen is an individual who is shaped and influenced by her cultural heritage. My reading builds on Tariq Modood's remarks in his book *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* where he responds to the identity politics that tends to put the heaviest burden on an individual's own cultural background without paying attention to the dynamism that shapes their experience, especially in the case of immigration (42).

From its first publication, *Brick Lane* has been embroiled in political controversy. As such, it has been frequently compared to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses.*[13] Both novels are usually read in terms of the debates they caused in the literary mainstream. Like Rushdie's novel, *Brick Lane* received a backlash manifested in public demonstrations; in Ali's case the protests, however, followed the filming of an adaptation of the novel, rather than emerging with the publication of the book itself. Protest was raised by some Muslim residents in East London, who accused Ali of misrepresenting their community. The protests forced the production company to change the location of the filming to other sites in London. This incident sparked a debate between Salman Rushdie and Germaine Greer. Greer wrote an article supporting the protesters' rights to speak out against the film, claiming that "as British people know little and care less about the Bangladeshi people in their midst, their first appearance as characters in an English novel had the force of a defining caricature" (qtd. in Thompson). Rushdie replied, calling Greer's intervention in the *Brick Lane* controversy "philistine, sanctimonious and disgraceful, but not unexpected", and recalled the incidents of the 1989 fatwa:

> As I well remember, [Greer] has done this before […] at the height of the assault against *The Satanic Verses*, she stated, 'I refuse to sign petitions for this book of his, which was about his own troubles.' She went on to describe me as 'a megalomaniac, an Englishman with dark skin'. (qtd. in Thompson)

Rushdie argues for freedom of speech whereas Greer calls for respecting Muslims' rights in defending their public image. Before it became the subject of academic debate, then, Ali's novel was fought over by high profile public supporters and opponents, and always in relation to the alleged ideological conflict between Muslims and the West. Moreover, as Rehana Ahmed et al argue in their book *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, the reception of Ali's book was exceptional in nature. They assert that "while literary criticism long ago rejected a

13 See for example, Michael Perfect's "The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*" and Alistair Cormack's "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*".

static correlation between realism and reality, this notion was nevertheless applied to *Brick Lane* by reviewers and literary critics as well as by local Bangladeshi protestors in their reception of the novel" (12). Due to the geopolitical context in which the novel was written (the minority status of Bangladeshi-heritage citizens of Britain, and the history and practices of British colonialism that contextualise this status) the politics of representation dominated its reception. While its supporters praised Ali's choice to portray a community that has received little attention, others criticized the novel for allegedly failing to provide a positive image, or at least a corrective one, that might help elevate the status of the immigrants' community. In a *Guardian* article covering the demonstrations against the filmmaking of *Brick Lane,* Mahmoud Rauf, chairman of the Brick Lane Business Association, complained that Ali is "a good writer but she didn't use her skill to the benefit of the community" (Lea and Lewis, "Local Protests over Brick Lane Film"). Similarly, in another article, Ali was accused of wanting "to be famous at the cost of a community" (Lea and Lewis, "'Insulted' Residents"). On another level, the text's authenticity has been questioned by those who directly accuse Ali of not being a "real" Bengali. Greer stresses "the fact that Ali's father is Bangladeshi was enough to give her authority in the eyes of the non-Asian British, but not in the eyes of British Bangladeshis". Greer also states that "none of [the novel's publicity] would have happened if Ali had not created her own version of Bengaliness" (Greer). I would argue that the protesters were not expressing their need for an authentic representation as much as they were expressing their anger towards what they saw as the negative portrayal of Muslim and Bengali communities in the novel. Part of their concern was that their image would be distorted in the eyes of the white British community. In Kobena Mercer's book *Welcome to The Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* he asserts that such a situation already indicates a state of inferiority, as "the very notion that a single film or cultural artefact can 'speak for' an entire socio-ethnic community reinforce[s] the perceived marginality and 'secondariness' of that community" (12). Thus, the burden that the commentators put on the novel stems from their concerns about the marginality of the Bengali

community. This is evident too in Greer's statement as she is concerned that the novel will negatively affect the collective Bengali community and create an image that is "a defining caricature" of them. Her reading risks patronizing the group of people she wants precisely to protect from being misrepresented; the implication of her critique is that the Bengali community has an inevitably inferior status that needs to be elevated and that Ali needs to take responsibility for redressing this injustice. My own reading of *Brick Lane*rests on the following conviction: that putting an entire community in a box determined by ethnic background, and working to defend their right to be *fictionally* represented in a wholly positive way, serves to perpetuate rather than alleviate that community's otherness and marginality.

Critical Reception of *Brick Lane*

Like the public debate, scholarly conversations around the novel have involved detachment from the text, brought about through the isolation and interrogation of it as either resisting or allowing cultural domination over Muslim subjectivities in the West. I will demonstrate in the following pages that *Brick Lane* has been received by some critics with what Felski calls a "methodological asymmetry" (*Limits* 196). Within this approach critics tend to diagnose the "insufficiencies [or in some cases, the sufficiencies] of a work of art […] by invoking some larger frame". They look, Felski writes, "behind the text for some final explanation or cause: social, cultural, psychoanalytical, historical, or linguistic." Thereby, "the text is derived, in a fundamental sense, from something else" (*Limits* 196). Following Felski's lead, I argue that the readings I engage with below are limited by their desire to arrive at a final judgment about its political and social usefulness, at one end or the other of a binary scale, and specifically about Ali's novel as having either a positive or negative political and social influence on real Muslim communities in the West.

By extension, I seek to interrogate and complicate critical approaches in which critics have argued that the realist form of the novel predetermines its reception. Before presenting my alternative reading – based on *Brick Lane* not as a realist text but as one that slips the constraints

of that form – it is necessary to summarise some of the criticism that has read the novel as realist. In his essay "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Empathy in the Realist Novel and its Alternatives", Dave Gunning demonstrates how situating *Brick Lane* in the realms of realism adds to the expectations that already exist because of the narrative's centering of an ethnic minority.[14] He notes how the interior focalization of the protagonist Nazneen, which is only broken by the presentation of letters from Hasina, "increases the impression of a documentary aspect of Ali's exploration of the Bangladeshi communities and hence the seeming requirement for accuracy or political utility" (781-782). Although Gunning does not subscribe to the idea that the novel should be read as documentary realism, he asserts that it is hard for readers to avoid the anthropological gaze upon the text and that the realist mode only "increases" this gaze. He also stresses that the realist mode "plays some role in determining how the literary works of black British and British Asian writers are consumed" (782).

This is an argument that is supported by Morey in his analysis of Ali's narrative. Morey states that, along with other authors, Ali tends to employ "direct realism in a bid to correct misconceptions" about minority groups. However, he sees this as an acceptance of the terms of a discussion that have already been set up by an "outsider's anthropological gaze" (75). In other words, he claims that *Brick Lane* acts as a response to (Western) readers who want to know about the Bengali community, and moreover that it was tailored precisely to answer those readers' anticipated questions. Ali is positioned as a mediator between two worlds as, according to Morey, she "offers us supposedly unvarnished realism as a way to draw us in and ensure our sympathy for her downtrodden protagonist" (67). Realism here is a way of satisfying the text's readers' urge for knowledge: the word "in" in the previous statement indicates an already established sense of two separate realms, where we as readers are the outsiders of a community and Ali is an insider who wants to "draw us in" to ensure our sympathy; in this view, the text

[14] See also Ali Rezaie's article "Cultural dislocation in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: Freedom or anomie?" where he suggests that the fact that the novel is written in a realist mode with an end that suggests a female independence in the time of multicultural Britain, puts it in a place where it is always interpreted with reference to its political and moral messages to and about such communities (62).

thus functions as an imaginary alternative to the real community. However, for Morey, sympathy is an unhelpful reaction, as Ali is promoting the wrong economic and social stance for such a community by advocating an individualistic economic perspective that might elide the Bengali collective identity. I see this argument as ignoring some of the nuances of the text in order to stress the political issues brought to it by critics.

Morey argues that *Brick Lane* is written to support entrepreneurial principles among immigrants, and that this support enhances the capitalist system and suggests that the novel has a corrective agenda, since it tries to provide solutions to the problems of marginalized Bangladeshis in London. He wants us to pay attention to how *Brick Lane* becomes a tool to promote a "broader societal shift" and argues that it can be understood as celebrating the "entrepreneurial" nature of neoliberal multiculturalism (78). In his analysis he focuses on how Nazneen chooses to reject "collective identification in favor of [entrepreneurial] individualism" (66) and concludes that she is an individual who represents "an Islam [that] 'we' [sic] need not be phobic about" (26). To Morey, Nazneen is a successful model of neoliberal multiculturalism who moves gradually from being a housewife to becoming an emancipated entrepreneur using "her design skills to produce 'traditional' (and therefore exotic) garments for the wider market" (26). He wants to emphasize how the text celebrates neoliberal ideals; in his view, *Brick Lane* capitalizes on multiculturalism in order to encourage individual economic advancement at the cost of more collective goals. So, he reads multiculturalism as an economic project that bypasses issues of socio-economic inequality (85) rather than as a "community oriented" social project (66-67). In sum, Morey argues that Ali creates Nazneen as an embodiment of a new phase in the creative depiction of Muslim immigrants in the UK.

Morey reads the novel as a negative representation of the figure of the Muslim immigrant, emphasizing the way in which Ali utilizes stereotypes about Muslims. To him, the text encourages women to step out of their collective communities and instead present themselves as individuals who come from a particular ethnic background in order to sell their ethnicity as a

commodity in the multicultural marketplace. Morey overlooks the nuances of the text in order to present a neat argument that stresses the text's supposed political ideology. Specifically, he presents Nazneen as a helpless woman whose behaviour is determined by market forces; he sees her as a flat character who exemplifies Ali's neoliberal political agenda.[15] It is evident here how the reading of the text is predetermined by a political position. Morey's well-intentioned desire to protect real Muslim minorities and help them to preserve their cultural and religious identity obstructs any reading of the novel as more than a constricted documentation of the political and cultural context of those communities.[16] I aim to see Nazneen in less symbolic terms, reading her as an autonomous character rather than as a respondent to the forces around her.

Michael Perfect's reading, in his article "The Multicultural Bildungsroman: Stereotypes in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", gives a different account of Ali's writerly and political strategies. Perfect claims that Ali intentionally utilizes stereotypes in order to emphasize her protagonist's final positive moment of cultural integration. Perfect claims that even though the novel's title alone invites assumptions that it is representative of a single and isolated community, this has a positive function as it counterintuitively draws attention to stereotypes *as* stereotypes (110). He

[15] Later in the chapter I will explore some moments of the text where Nazneen observes the damaging powers of free-market capitalism which shows how her engagements with such forces are active and critical.

[16] The novel has received a number of similar critiques, explicitly expressing an expectation that it should serve as progressive and corrective. This is exemplified by Wendy O'Shea-Meddour's review, where she criticizes the failure of *Brick Lane* to provide realistic and non-Western answers to the problems of Nazneen who, in Meddour's view, represents the stereotypical Muslim woman in the UK. She asserts that: "The fatalistic and passive Nazneen, […] becomes strong and independent. In order to do so, she has an affair, listens to a bit of pop music, and goes ice-skating" (172–73). Meddour's continues to criticise the novel stating that it is not "provocative" enough as "Nazneen could have insisted on learning English at college with Razia before heading off into a glittering teaching career. She could have helped one of her daughters become the first "hijabed" bus driver or car mechanic in Tower Hamlets". Nazneen in Meddour's opinion does not turn to the prophet Muhammed's teaching as he "helped with the housework, mended his own shoes, and defended women's rights, Nazneen could at least have avoided her corn-duties" (172–73). There are two main facets to Meddour's review. The first is the satirical one where Nazneen is trivialized as a character who is weak and not fully developed. Alongside this there is another aspect that is couched in the language of progressive activism. Nazneen is blamed for not being aware of her rights as a British citizen, and there is also pressure put on the idea that she is a Muslim who is not enlightened about her status in Islam. This places the responsibility of educating and empowering individuals from marginalized communities on fictional writers. In this sense, Ali fails in setting a successful example of a woman who benefited first from being a devout Muslim and second as a good integrated citizen. Like the previous examples I have cited, this critique represents the novel as inauthentic and regressive towards the local community of *Brick Lane*.

invites us to transcend the urge to read the novel as a vehicle for challenging such stereotypes and wants us instead to question the role of such stereotypes in the narrative. He stresses that Ali uses stereotypes to emphasize the individual autonomy of her protagonist:

> I argue that the major concern of the novel is not the destabilization of stereotypes but the celebration of integration; the veneration of the potential for adaptation in both individuals and societies. I argue that Ali employs stereotypes as aesthetic counterpoints in order to further emphasize her protagonist's final integration into contemporary British society, and that the novel might usefully be understood as a "multicultural Bildungsroman" (110).

Perfect here deals with Nazneen's decision to remain an immigrant – that is, not to return with her husband to Bangladesh – as the optimal solution to her problems. He tries to set aside the progressive reading of *Brick Lane*, the goal of which is to prove that the novel dismantles stereotypes rather than emphasizing them. He asserts that there are "ways in which a particular configuration of 'progressiveness' itself within critical discourse has proved an obstacle to, rather than a means of, reading contemporary postcolonial texts" (111). Here Perfect is arguing against the postmodern analysis of the text conducted by Jane Hiddleston. Hiddleston reads Hasina's letters as ironic, arguing that Ali employs this irony to destabilize the stereotypical images of immigrants. Perfect claims that Hiddleston "overstates" the function of this irony so that the novel is read as culturally appropriate. He quotes Hiddleston's comment that Hasina's letters are constructed in the novel to evoke a certain kind of reaction:

> Ali's text can be read not as a "faithful" transcript of any "exemplary" letter-writing but rather as a forum where myths circulating around both cultures are exposed in order to provoke the reader. The stock images of Hasina's letters are themselves testimony to the pervasiveness of such stereotypes in Bangladesh as well as in Britain, and their inclusion in a novel such as this forces us to consider the difficulty of attempting to free any representation of cultural identity from their influence. (63)

Hiddleston defends Ali's choice not to avoid stereotypical images about the Bengali community. She contends that Ali deliberately intensifies the presentation of such stereotypes to elicit a reaction in readers, one that makes them investigate the circulation of such stereotypes. Her reading depends on – and perhaps overestimates – the cultural and political role of such a fictional narrative, especially in terms of how stereotypes are interpreted. The fact that the novel is controversial provides an incentive for critics to appropriate the text for a particular political agenda. This approach identifies an anxiety that often attends the reception of texts about minority communities, and it shows the way towards a more productive, reader-and-reception-focused critique of the politics in *Brick Lane.*

The key point that Hiddleston and Perfect debate is whether Hasina's letters function in the narrative to destabilize or else to emphasize the stereotypical image of oppressed Muslim women of the East. Hiddleston insists that Ali utilizes these letters to make readers question the preconceived ideas they have about such characters, while Perfect argues that the letters function to highlight Nazneen's agency in deciding to avoid her sister's fate. I agree with Perfect that there is a tendency to "read any contemporary text which deals with cultural difference in a particular, predetermined way", as some critics show uneasiness when a text like *Brick Lane* demonstrates an "apparent complicity with the propagation of stereotypes" instead of the expected destabilization of such negative images about minority people (116). However, Perfect does not go beyond the stance of investigating the cultural and political position of the novel in its context. While he criticizes the way *Brick Lane* is read by its champions as a postmodern text that deploys irony to produce a positive ethical effect on its readers, he suggests that the novel amplifies stereotypes only to highlight Nazneen's ability to survive her circumstances, ultimately promoting a positive image of Muslim women in the UK. Perfect asserts that:

> In the final stages of the novel, Ali seems to take particular delight in having Nazneen transcend other people's stereotypical notions of her; she certainly demonstrates that she is not the "simple" Bengali wife and mother that Karim believes her to be, and when a

> visiting councillor asks if she is finding it hard to cope, she simply replies "no" and he leaves looking "disappointed" (118).

Perfect suggests that Nazneen's triumph is a cultural one, in that she successfully rebels against the stereotypical image of the "simple" Muslim woman.[17] Thus, Perfect regards Hasina's letters as an embodiment of the otherness that Nazneen considers when she makes her decision to not leave England:

> As Nazneen dwells on the letter and finally resolves to defy her husband and remain in England, emphasis is placed on the ability of texts to inform personal decisions about the ways (and the places) in which life might best be lived; indeed, on the *agency* of textual representations of otherness. Rather than destabilizing its own sense of itself as an "authentic" textual account of cultural otherness, the novel's metatextuality often functions as an assertion of the agency of such accounts. (116).

Perfect here makes Hasina's letters stand for the whole text of *Brick Lane* as an empowering device that informs good life choices. Nazneen's dilemma is resolved with the help of her sister's letters. In the same way, disempowered readers might be encouraged by the story of Nazneen as a woman who is able to challenge her circumstances. This reading is mostly informed by the end of the novel as a moment that ostensibly celebrates and confirms the long, gradual, and linear growth of Nazneen's character; she is seen by Perfect as a woman who

[17] Similarly, Rohit Chatrath, in "Gender Ideologies and Inter-generational Diasporic Clashes in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane",* argues that the novel celebrates feminist ideals as it narrates the story of an oppressed Muslim woman who resists cultural convictions to gain personal freedom. He adds that the novel expresses "A triumph of feminism as well insomuch that all the male characters fail in establishing their cultural and social identities and eventually give up admitting defeat, while all the female characters come off in flying colours in their endeavours of garnering their identities with sheer intelligence, grit and gumption" (19). Chatrath here views the novel as staging a battle between men and women over identity-formation; he uses the terms "triumph" versus "defeat" and "give up" versus "gumption" to indicate how men and women deal differently with identity issues as immigrants. Chanu and Kareem, in this sense, oppose Nazneen's personal freedom, and the fact that they end up losing their battle is considered, by Chatrath, as a victory for Nazneen and her daughters. This reading argues for a utopian or at least optimistic end to the narrative, where the moral lessons of the novel are intensified as Nazneen becomes an independent woman even though she struggles to achieve this independency. What is implied in Chatrath's reading is that Ali utilizes the stereotypical image of men as oppressors to intensify the success of her protagonist in defending her rights as a woman.

moves from being innocent and powerless at the beginning of the novel to becoming a woman of agency at the very end. This form of Bildungsroman, as emphasized in Perfect's argument, has both traditional and liberal aspects and is not disturbed by the post-coloniality of the text: Nazneen's status as an immigrant (who moves from the periphery to the centre) is ignored by Perfect in a way that limits the text to its moral messages. In such a reading, Nazneen's decision to stay in England is treated as instantiating positive potential; this reading simplifies her struggle and presents it as if there is an objectively right or wrong choice. In other words, Perfect extracts Nazneen's emancipatory narrative in order to classify it as an example of a successful model of the contemporary Muslim woman.

Perfect is careful not to overstate the overall positivity of the novel, arguing that "Nazneen's decision not to return to Bangladesh is not made on account of the attractiveness of life in England so much as the fear of the sorts of horrors described by her sister" (115). This is a persuasive account, but he nonetheless ends up situating the narrative in a narrow pedagogical paradigm. He argues that Nazneen's individual autonomy is made possible only by the counterpart story of Hasina; that is, that the latter is embedded only to motivate Nazneen's emancipatory decisions. I argue that Perfect sidelines Hasina's story for the sake of a neat positive conclusion, at the cost of stripping away important themes of the narrative. These are expressed in the text's preface: Ivan Turgenev's quotation that "fate guides each one of us" is followed with the contrasting "a man's character is his fate" by Heraclitus (4). It is true that the novel starts with Nazneen as a powerless baby and ends with a scene of personal fulfilment (through ice skating), which might form a perfect beginning and end of a traditional Bildungsroman. However, as Alistair Cormack, in his article "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*", argues: "The form [of Ali's novel] is pulling in one way—toward nineteenth-century liberalism—but the content won't let it do its work without a struggle" (719). Nazneen and Hasina both break with their cultural and social norms, and share the disappointment of never reaching a point of resolution in their

struggle. However, it is too simplistic to posit Nazneen as a successful model of an empowered agent and Hasina as her foil.

Analysis of *Brick Lane*

Reading Nazneen's agency in relation to its political significance limits the discussion to the novel's didactic purpose, in turn obfuscating the multiple shapes and meanings of such agency. In the analysis ahead I have aimed for a stronger sense of those multiple shapes and meanings, finding a kinship (rather than an exact alliance) with Felski's critical methodology, which aims to "slow down judgment" in order to engage more closely with aesthetic experiences rather than keeping a distance from such experiences by drawing conclusions about their impacts and meanings in relation to real life issues (*Hooked* 12). This fits well with my way of reading *Brick Lane* where I seek not to provide a judgment about the text but rather to explore how the agency of the text manipulates the realist mode, so that the novel constitutes a great deal more than a documentary account of the life of a Muslim immigrant woman. I also read the character of Nazneen as one who does more than just informing readers about Muslim women. I try to capture some of the nuances that exist beyond the paradigm of perceiving Nazneen as either allowing or resisting cultural and social change. Two key points emerge as a result of such an approach: firstly, Nazneen's growth can be read as non-linear, disturbing the easy classification of her story as one about an oppressed woman who becomes free; and secondly, gender relations in the novel can be seen as not determined by the rigid dichotomy of free men and oppressed women. These complex relations are renegotiated in the novel, which creates a space to *read Brick Lane* not as a didactic text but rather one with rich and multiple meanings.

So, in this section I will challenge the straightforward conclusion that the novel is about a woman who is first oppressed/passive and becomes empowered and active, by suggesting that the novel presents Nazneen as a more complicated character. Her comments and self-aware observations about her status as an immigrant woman and her relationship with the two men in her life elevate her from the status of merely reacting to the context in which she lives to

someone who participates in creating a rich story. Nazneen in this sense is an active actor in her context and, as Latour explains, it is best "to follow the actors themselves, that is try to catch up with their often wild innovations in order to learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands" (12). So, from an ANT viewpoint, I suspend any view that there is a specific force that controls Nazneen and causes her status of being disadvantaged, aiming instead to read her story in a more open way. I read her as an active fictional character who is not predetermined by her conditions. This allows us to see the numerous connections and meanings that emerge from her story.

There are instances in *Brick Lane* where the realist mode is disrupted by fantasies and unrealistic gestures; I argue that disturbing the dominant realist mode of the narrative in this way hence disrupts the linearity or straightforwardness of Nazneen's personal growth. The following passage has been read documenting how a woman from the village is transformed by a totally new way of life, one that is based on Western indulgence rather than the supposedly austere values of the East:[18]

> Suddenly, she was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well. If she wore a skirt and a jacket and a pair of high heels then what else would she do but walk around the glass palaces on Bishopsgate, and talk into a slim phone and eat lunch out of a paper bag? If she wore trousers and underwear, like the girl with the big camera on Brick Lane, then she would roam the streets fearless and proud. And if she had a tiny tiny skirt with knickers to match and a tight bright top, then she would – how could she not? – skate through life with a sparkling smile and a handsome man who took her hand and made her spin, spin, spin. (277-278)

It is true that the kind of freedom that Nazneen thinks of here is a merchandized one, marked by clothing, food, technology, and so on. However, there are ironies and illusions in this passage

[18] This is an argument made by Morey, as aforementioned, where he asserts that Nazneen's sense of growth is only reached when she indulges herself in a materialistic lifestyle. He aims to read Nazneen as an embodiment of the person who moves from the moral and spiritual self to the materialistic and consuming one.

that suggest this is not a realistic depiction of a character as there is a satirical dimension to it. There is the sense of a fantastical transformation of Nazneen's life: the moment she changes her clothes, puts on high heels and uses a mobile phone, she will instantly become a "fearless and proud" woman who "skate[s] through life with a sparkling smile" (this skating metaphor, which relates also to the tiny skirt and top, refers to the figure skaters Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean, whose performance in the 1994 Olympics Nazneen admires). Nazneen's fantasy echoes the way TV images are circulated; and indeed, Nazneen can often be found watching television in her apartment alone. Additionally, the language in the piece is not straightforward as we have three repetitions of the conditional formation of "if … then", which are followed by two rhetorical questions, all of which makes room for interpretations of the passage as something other than a straightforward transformation. The final repetition of the word "spin" (again, a reference to Torvill and Dean) indicates the dreamy tone of the passage and the fragility of these ideas in her head. This is made clear in the lines which come immediately after this passage, when the narrator tells us that such ideas are not related to Nazneen's reality: "for a glorious moment it was clear that clothes, not fate, made her life. And if the moment had lasted she would have ripped the sari off and torn it to shreds" (278). These lines show how alert Nazneen is to her thoughts; she is not naïve, but rather a character who is self-knowing and critical of the pervasive merchandizing going on around her – especially the merchandizing of ideas of freedom and happiness.[19]

This awareness is clear earlier in the novel when Nazneen gets lost outside Brick Lane, reaching a place where everyone seems to have a specific destination which contrasts with her

[19] From a wider perspective we can also notice how the narrator is meticulous when describing the ecological effects of global capitalism on the metropolis of London from Nazneen's point of view. Alongside the clean and shiny commercial side of London, there is the cemented and grey part which is an "entire kingdom of rubbish piled high as fortresses with only the border skirmishes of plastic bottles and grease-stained cardboard to separate them" (55). The greenness of London is limited as Nazneen notices how "in this city, a bit of grass was something to be guarded, fenced about, as if there were a sprinkling of emeralds sown in among the blades" (55). The greenness is as rare as precious emeralds surrounded by the metal buildings of the city. This simile anticipates Hasina's words about Dhaka and how its streets are affected too by this devastating power: "plastic bag blowing everywhere [...] cover in bag on legs and arms and stomach" (179).

having nowhere to go. She describes the tall glass and steel buildings which are full of men in "dark suits":

> Every person who brushed past her on the pavement, every back she saw, was on a private, urgent mission to execute a precise and demanding plan: to get a promotion today, to be exactly on time for an appointment, to buy a newspaper with the right coins so that the exchange was swift and seamless, to walk without wasting a second and to reach the roadside just as the lights turned red. Nazneen, hobbling and halting, began to be aware of herself. Without a coat, without a suit, without a white face, without a destination. A leafshake of fear – or was it excitement? – passed through her legs (51-52).

This is a moment of self-consciousness. Nazneen becomes aware of the position she has in this unfamiliar place. The repetition of "without" indicates her realization of the lack that characterizes her life, which is intensified by the two contrasting images sketched in the scene: one is of the masculine, sharp, and fast world of London's commercial area, and the other is of the feminine, loose, and slow being of Nazneen. The division between herself and this world is stark, a result of her intersectional marginalization via class, race and gender. Hence, when Nazneen is confronted with this difference, her feelings of uncertainty are intensified: she is excited to delve into the unknown but at the same time she fears it. The passage above is marked by ambivalence as the question at the end of it is unanswered. This moment demonstrates how Nazneen is alert to the inequality of the new society, which is overlooked when she is read as promoting or passively accepting the terms and conditions of such a social system.

Nazneen's story is full of careful observations on how abstract values such as freedom, independence and happiness are commodified in London. She is explicitly introduced to the idea of marketing as a power that controls people's lives. While walking among the shops of Brick Lane she notices that there are Hindu effigies kept outside Muslims' restaurants to be seen by the public. Chanu tells her that these are Muslims' shops, but they keep Hindu idols for marketing

purposes: "'Not Hindus. Marketing. Biggest God of all.' The white people liked to see the gods. 'For authenticity'" (373). Nazneen is thus introduced to the idea that cultures are also commodified in capitalist London, and that authenticity itself is produced as a commodity. This is linked to how men in her community internalize the quest for authenticity, and how women are objectified to signal such authenticity.[20] To view Nazneen as a character who exemplifies the values of insatiable consumerism is to flatten out the complex contours of the novel. She is not a woman who only either resists or accepts the cultural and social change in the new country, but someone who is instead in constant negotiation with its implications.

Nazneen's Negotiation of Cultural and Social Divisions

Moving to another aspect of the novel, I argue that Nazneen can be read beyond the binary critical framework of positive or negative representations of Muslim women in the West. In the following section I argue that *Brick Lane* can be interpreted in a way that moves beyond the question of whether she resists or accepts patriarchy and female marginalization, which is a dominant concern around the fiction written about Muslim women. I argue that the relationship between men and women in the novel is not marked by a framework of conventional feminist demands of gender equality as much as by an exploration of how individuals (men and women) deal with issues of cultural representation, especially in the context of immigration. Reading the novel without attempting to attribute to it an overall moral message about gender equality gives space to explore how the characters deal with the complexity of their being. Hence, I try to bypass the conventional negative antagonism between men and women, with what I recognize as the positive attachment between male and female characters in the story.

[20] Interestingly, the novel touches on the ways in which the white community (as a reaction to the materialized values of the market) is in a constant search for authenticity. This echoes what Daniel Lea expresses in his article "The Anxieties of Authenticity in Post-2000 British Fiction". Lea explains how "at the level of daily Western praxis, [there is a] growing popularity of organic consumerism [...] lifestyles more attuned to natural processes and nostalgia chic" especially "among the middle classes, [who search for] the genuine and unvarnished" (459). Lea's remarks might be used to support the accusation that Ali is influenced by the market demand for supposedly authentic narratives. However, it is different in the sense that other critics see the consumption of minority writings as a desire for knowledge, whereas Lea sees it as searching for a lost authenticity. What is interesting, though, is *Brick Lane's* ability to present a nuanced picture, where Nazneen functions as an observer on both sides of her world.

There is a dominant motif in the narrative that shows a cultural division between the inside "us" and the outside "others", which is negotiated differently by the men and women in the novel. The main male characters, Chanu and Kareem, are interested in the reflection of their identity from the outside; they are concerned by their image as Bengali Muslims in the UK. Meanwhile, women – at least in the case of Nazneen, Hasina and Razia – are more flexible and more attached to their community or local surroundings. While trying to combat negative stereotypes, the male characters work within the scope of the outside. They are disturbed by abstract ideas of their identities. By contrast, the female characters are more concerned with people with whom they have a direct relationship. The potentially totalizing logic of this argument is remedied below by specific consideration of the ways in which men and women respond to issues of cultural representation, especially in an unwelcoming environment. Here I argue that, on the one hand, men in the novel usually seek to manage the representation of their identity by controlling women's appearance, social belonging, and overall image. Ali's female characters, on the other hand, tend to work on a smaller scale and are more flexible in the way they deal with cultural conflict. This gives the women in the novel more freedom than men, who are constrained by abstract perceptions about themselves.

A major example of this is how Chanu is characterized as a person who always needs to signify his identity. He is ambivalent towards what exactly that identity is: sometimes he sees himself as the immigrant who is well educated and thus deserves a better place in the UK, and at other times he wants to maintain his relationship to his cultural heritage. His entire education has been dedicated to ensuring him a place in England, and the narrator describes him as the "westernized" husband of Nazneen (45). One way in which he is shown as being westernized is labeling his people back home as a group of ignorant peasants, in order to rise to the status of a "Prince Among Peasants" (42). To Nazneen, he appears to have no affiliation with his home culture as he never prays or reads the Quran and he drinks alcohol. He also refuses to send his daughters to Islamic schools and he borrows money from Mrs. Islam, the usurer, which is

forbidden in Islam. In Nazneen's opinion, Chanu's "religion […] was education" (260). However, when he receives no recognition in London, and when he faces all the usual hardships of being an immigrant, his disappointment leads him to start criticizing western life. In his visit to Dr. Azad's home he gives a speech about the challenges of immigration:

> I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. (113)

The emphatic repetition of the phrase "I'm talking about" indicates how Chanu positions himself as having a higher status, as the patriarch of his family and the protector of its cultural identity. In this speech he tries to gain the sympathy of his audience – the listening Nazneen, Dr Azad and Dr. Azad's wife – by persuading them of the difficulty of his position. The dichotomy of the inside and outside is evident as Chanu shifts the pronouns of "our" and "one's"; he means to include his audience when he says "our" and exclude them when he says "one's". He declares that both families (Dr. Azad's and his own) have shared cultural values that are different from western ones. But when it comes to the effort of preserving a home culture, Chanu makes a distinction between himself and Dr. Azad where the latter is seen as less interested in such a commitment: there is an emphasis in Chanu's speech on the way Dr. Azad's wife and daughter do not show any symbolic attachment to their cultural heritage and instead embrace western culture, especially in the way they dress and behave. This characterizes Chanu's challenge as he regards himself as the protector of his family's cultural identity.

However, this commitment does not proceed in a linear path, as Chanu constantly renegotiates his principles. In the meeting of the Bengal Tigers (a local Muslim community in Tower Hamlets), where Nazneen and Chanu are confronted by the discourse of Islamist groups,

Nazneen notices how Chanu becomes "lost in his own private torment" (416). His embrace of western culture offers him no place in the angry Islamicists' group. Thus, he remains unsettled about his way of responding to multiple pressures. But what is interesting is how his ambivalent reactions are embodied in the way he instructs his daughters, especially the way they dress. We later read that:

> If [Chanu] had a Lion Hearts leaflet in his hand, he wanted his daughters covered. He would not be cowed by these Muslim-hating peasants. If he saw some girls go by in hijab he became agitated at this display of peasant ignorance. Then the girls went out in their skirts (265).

The satirical tone in the passage indicates how the narrator is alert to Chanu's contradictory behavior and his ambivalence towards the visual signifiers of his daughters' identity. Nazneen as a focalized character is reported to notice that when her husband tries to express the vagueness of his cultural identity he fails and "enter[s] his own private world of theory and refutation, striving and puzzlement" (265). Here Nazneen criticizes Chanu's attachment to an abstract ideas about his identity, which is always in a state of conflict and ambiguity. At the end of the novel Chanu's answer to his problems is to "go home" where he will "really know what's what" (464). So, in his imagination, physically returning to Bangladesh and the preservation of his culture go hand in hand, as being an authentic Bengali in the West is not possible. Eventually, when Nazneen asks him whether he found what he wants in Bangladesh, Chanu remains silent, which indicates his failure to resolve the enigma of his cultural belonging.

When Nazneen's relationship with Kareem develops, we see that, to her, the two men are similar in the way they look at her: Chanu chooses her as an "unspoilt girl. From the village" (18) and Kareem similarly thinks that she is the "real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother" (380). Nazneen realizes how similar the two men are when she asks Kareem why he wants to be with her:

> ‘Well, basically you’ve got two types. Make your choice. There’s your westernized girl, wears what she likes, all the make-up going on, short skirts and that soon as she’s out of her father’s sight. She’s into going out, getting good jobs, having a laugh. Then there’s your religious girl, wears the scarf or even the burkha. You’d think, right, they’d be good wife material. But they ain’t. Because all they want to do is *argue*. And they always think they know best because they’ve been off to all these summer camps for Muslim sisters.’ ‘What about me?’ He propped himself up on one elbow. She smelled his sweat and it stirred her. ‘Ah, you. *You* are the real thing.’ ‘Real thing?’ ‘You can arrange for a girl from the village. Bring her over here.’ He was still setting out his options. ‘But then there’s all the settling-in hassle. And you never know *what* you’re going to get.’ ‘I am the real thing?’ A conversation overheard in the early days of her marriage came to her mind. She stood in her nightdress in the hallway while Chanu was on the telephone. *An unspoilt girl. From the village. All things considered, I am satisfied*. (380)

In this epiphanic moment Nazneen realizes how the men in her life think about her. The fact that she is objectified as a “thing” is obvious here. She is being distinguished from other Muslim women, who are active in their choices, and resistant to male partners. She is raised above them because she is passive, and untouched by all that is around her. Nazneen, however, keeps herself alert to the way she is perceived as an authentic Bengali woman: one who is not touched by globalization in terms of her beliefs, social role and even way of dress. The novel suggests a similar process in the fictionalized version of Tower Hamlets more broadly, where men rely on women to signify the essence of their culture, as practiced in the exchange of leaflets between the Lion Heart group and the Bengal Tigers. The extremists from both sides use women’s bodies as a means of making a claim to cultural authenticity. The Lion Hearts write: “How long before the extremists are putting veils on our women and insulting our daughters for wearing short skirts?” and the Bengal Tigers reply that: “It is not us who like to degrade women by showing their body parts in public spaces” (258). This intrareligious conflict also speaks to the long

history of objectifying women's body in cultural conflicts: "the female body […] has recurrently been used as a rhetorical device in various political conflicts, turning [it] into a palimpsest on which different political, religious, and social discourses have been written and re-written" (Pereira-Ares 213). Women become victims of men's desire to objectify their understanding of cultural identity. However, what is not yet mapped fully is how women in such cases negotiate their being. I argue that in *Brick Lane* there is a space where women are portrayed as working from within the framework of cultural representation. What I want to stress here is that while male characters fight to preserve their culture, female characters are more flexible towards what is useful, especially on a daily basis. In the narrative, Kareem and Chanu never let go of their ideas about Nazneen; to them, she remains static, while we see in the end that she is the one who has the ability to shed the constraining effects of the idea of cultural representation. Nazneen develops an understanding about the men in her life and succeeds in freeing herself from the obligation of being representative of who these men are. However, there is no suggestion in the novel that Nazneen ends her relationships with either man (Kareem or Chanu) because they become obstacles to her personal or financial advancement. Rather, she comes to the realization that both of them are guilty of reifying her as a woman who could represent their cultural identity; they treasure her not for who she is but for what she symbolizes: "a Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of [themselves] that [they] found in her" (382).

While Nazneen resists this objectification, she also uses her agency to transcend the rigid division of men and women and narrates her personal story in a more open way. At the start of the novel Nazneen is described as alone and defeated by boredom. At this point she initiates a form of domestic rebellion:

> Unwashed socks were paired and put back in his drawer. The razor slipped when she cut his corns. His files got mixed up when she tidied. All her chores, peasants in his princely kingdom, rebelled in turn. Small insurrections, designed to destroy the state from within. (63)

In one sense this is an extravagant fantasy, in which Nazneen imagines her chores as workers who rebel against their master. Her intention to subvert a household that she is detached from is evident. The words "princely kingdom" express Nazneen's sense of alienation from her husband's rule; she rebels as she feels herself to be only a stranger who is forced to live in his domain. But again, these feelings never last long. Later in the story she realizes that her husband is not the main cause of her problems, as convention might dictate, and that she sympathizes with him instead of wanting to make him the main target of her anger. This happens when he takes care of her and their newborn baby in the hospital; the narrator tells us that "her irritation with her husband, instead of growing steadily as it had for three years, began to subside. For the first time she felt that he was not so different. At his core, he was the same as her" (121). From this moment Nazneen does not follow a predetermined trajectory defined by a liberal concept of self-realisation (that is, separating from her husband and finding a secure place in the new community) so much as she constantly navigates her way through a maze of conflicting paths. Although Nazneen and Chanu are similar in terms of their aims and desires, they respond differently to their situations:

> All the while, when Nazneen turned to her prayers and tried to empty her mind and accept each new thing with grace or indifference, Chanu worked his own method. He was looking for the same essential thing. But he thought he could grab it from the outside and hold it against his chest like a shield […] Where Nazneen turned in, he turned out; where she strove to accept, he was determined to struggle. (121)

In this moment, as in many others in the novel, the perspective of the narrator extends beyond the focalization of Nazneen. Here are Nazneen's views of Chanu's actions, and we get to know how the two characters deal with similar situations. The passage hints at Nazneen's power as a woman who is able to evaluate things more calmly and maturely than her husband.

Most readings of the novel neglect Nazneen's love for Chanu as it does not fit with any of the judgments about the rigid trajectory of Nazneen's supposed emancipation. When she ends

her affair with Kareem there are untranslated lines in Bengali, written using phonetic Latin script, that explain her love for Chanu:

> Apa yang tidak kuketahui-saat masih muda dulu-ada dua jenis cinta. Jenis yang bermula begitu dahsyatnya dan pelan-pelan menghilang, yang terasa seperti tak akan pernah habis lalu suatu hari tahu-tahu ludes. Lalu ada jenis yang tadinya tidak disadari, tetapi terus tumbuh sedikit demi sedikit setiap harinya, seperti kerang yang menghasilkan mutiara, bulir demi bulir, sebuah permata dari pasir. (258)

Crucially, none of the socially and politically focused readings I mentioned at the start of this chapter engage with these lines. Thinking about their significance to Ali's socially-engaged aesthetic, we get a glimpse of the enlarged critical possibilities afforded by access to multiple languages. The passage can be translated as follows: "What I didn't know—when I was young—there were two kinds of love. The kind that started so violently and slowly disappeared, that felt like it would never run out and then one day it sold out. Then there is the kind that was previously unnoticed, but which continues to grow little by little each day, like a shell that produces a pearl, grain by ear, a gem of sand". Here there is a metaphorical comparison of how Nazneen loves the two men in her life. It is interesting that the passage is left untranslated, since it implies a slippage of the realist form that dominates major parts of the novel. Choosing not to provide the non-Bengali speaking reader access to such a profound and revealing statement points to the limitations of language to convey meaning in a fictional story like Nazneen's. Meaning is always multilayered and hard to uncover.

I also want to comment on the ice-skating scene that comes at the very end of the novel. It might seem at first like a moment of transcendent freedom, especially with the voice of Razia declaring that "this is England you can do whatever you like" (492). However, looking again at the scene we find that the only information we get from Nazneen's perspective is that the experience is different from the one she expected: "A woman swooped by on one leg. No sequins, no short skirt. She wore jeans. She raced on, on two legs" (492). The televised image

of a skillful woman wearing delicate clothes skating with a handsome man is substituted with an image of a woman who is alone, wearing jeans and skating on both legs. The image hints at a new challenge Nazneen will encounter as she is separated from her culture and enters a new one that comes with its own difficulties. The absence of men (as only Nazneen, her daughters, and Razia are present in this scene) also signifies what Morey calls the transformation from collective dependency to a more individualist identity, and it is true that this transformation is evident. But if we transcend the need to judge this shift as either a positive or negative one, there will be room, for example, to see how the narrative describes Nazneen's relationship with her husband after separation. They still connect with each other, as demonstrated by the importance of his letters and the phone calls depicted in the last pages of the novel. He is the one who brings Nazneen news about Hasina and connects her to her home country. In a remarkable shift Chanu now becomes static and silent; his letters are written with a detailed description of how he lives, including the weather, his food, his weekly routine, and a map of the place: "week after week he sent the information. Everything else he kept to himself" (487). Even when Nazneen asks him if he finds it as he expected: "white noise filled the earpiece, like a gale caught in the telephone. Then the line cleared" (488). The way that silence (as a sign of sufferance) shifts from Nazneen to Chanu makes it possible to read the narrative as about the dynamics of the relations between these characters rather than just a moral commentary about an oppressed woman who finally becomes liberated.

Another significant detail overlooked by most other critics of the novel occurs at the start: when Nazneen looks for the last time at her village before leaving for England, the scene of a destructive tornado is described as a force that can choose and control its victims. One humble hut which "looked wrong: embarrassed, sliding down at one side, trying to hide. The tornado that had flattened half the neighboring village had selected this hut to be saved, but had relocated it" (12). The humble hut's destiny resembles Nazneen's, as she is not harmed but only uprooted. In the concluding sentence of this scene Nazneen observes the men in her village: "dark spots

moved through the far fields. Men, doing whatever they could in this world" (12). So, the force that moves the hut and relocated it is a metaphorical representation of the power of fate that chose to uproot Nazneen and force her to leave the village. But at the same time, the narrator refers to the men who try to do "whatever they could in this world" as "dark spots," which indicates their powerlessness. Nazneen's perception of these men is sympathetic and it indicates how she is positioned as an observer and commentator. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, this disturbs the way her story is judged in terms of its social utility: rather than offering a solution to political problems, it provokes unanswered questions and depicts the silent moments of the characters' struggles.

When Nazneen listens to her mother and her aunt whispering about their miserable lives, she knows that the source of their suffering "was [about] something to do with being a woman" (103). It is then that she is eager to become a woman to experience this herself: "she longed to be enriched by this hardship, to cast off her childish baggy pants and long shirt and begin to wear this suffering that was as rich and layered and deeply coloured as the saris which enfolded Amma's troubled bones" (103). *Brick Lane* is about the richness of the lives of these women, which I have sought to explore rather than evaluate. In one interview Ali was asked about the reason the novel became popular and was translated into many languages. She replied that:

> I read London journalists saying, "[*Brick Lane*] opened up a whole world that I didn't know about that was so fascinating," and I think, "Well, if you were so interested it was always there on your doorstep and there have been other things written about it." I don't actually think that's why they enjoyed the book. I think the fact that people will be reading it in Polish and all those other languages does say something about the real reason why some people relate to it. I wrote it simply to tell those stories. (351). ("Monica Ali with Diran Adebayo")

The value of fictional narratives cannot be limited to their informative quality or the moral lessons they can teach, as the theory of post-critique reminds us. I read *Brick Lane* as a tale that is about the imagined experience of one fictional character.

This chapter started by exploring the controversy over the publication of Ali's *Brick Lane*. It went on to discuss how some critics' responses tend to in/validate the novel's social and political value in a way that emphasizes the novel's usefulness to the Muslim minority community. Then – in a way that aimed to redirect attention from the context of the novel to the novel itself – I argued that Nazneen is a character who has agency to negotiate her position between the two paradigms of the East and West and that she chooses not to be defined by either.

In my reading I have highlighted moments where Nazneen is autonomous and able to change her future but understands that whatever path she takes would have consequences. Her achievements come at a heavy cost, as expressed in Gabriel García Márquez's words: "we have the freedom, but we feel the weight of the absent communal past" (qtd.in Cormack 719). This, in my view, goes beyond the restricting liberal vocabulary of free versus oppressed, and it shows how a fictional character such as Nazneen is more nuanced than this neoliberal paradigm allows for. Reading the novel with less emphasis on what it means in relation to the wider community of Muslim immigrants in the UK gives us a chance to explore the richness of Nazneen's story. The novel is the product of a diversity of formal and thematic choices whose importance should not be considered only in terms of delivering moral lessons about who the Muslim woman is.

Chapter Two

The Motif of Hijab in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

Minaret, published in 2005, is the second novel by the Sudanese author Leila Aboulela. The narrative centres on the character of Najwa, a wealthy Sudanese woman who is forced to flee to London as a result of a military coup against her father's government in 1984. In London, Najwa loses her family and money, then resigns herself to living alone and working as a housemaid. It is also in this context that Najwa joins a religious group in the mosque at Regent's Park, and starts praying, wearing hijab, and reading Quran. While she attends these classes, and befriends devout Muslim women in the mosque, Najwa's life becomes centred on her faith and worship. One important aspect of her story is her two romantic relationships: the first with Anwar, a Marxist friend from Khartoum University, and the second with Tamer, the devout younger brother of her employer Lamya. In the narrative, she recounts some episodes from her previous life (in both Sudan and London) and comments on specific experiences prior to and during her spiritual awakening. Najwa's story is retrospectively narrated from the perspectives both of an immigrant and relatively new Muslim. As such, it has polarised critics, who are divided between reading her as representing a devout Muslim woman and a radically ideologized one. In the following selected critical readings of *Minaret,* I suggest that current criticism around the novel tends to construct an implied – and essentialized – Western reader; one who receives the novel primarily – if not exclusively – for its positive or negative connotations about Muslim women. What is studied in such criticism is not the text itself, but the text's readerly impact in the context

of a cultural clash between the East and West.[21] Confined to such a context the novel becomes limited to the knowledge it can deliver to the implied, imaginary reader.[22]

My argument is again congruent with Rita Felski's, this time in relation to Felski's negative response to critics who understand readers' cultural context as the chief determining factor in the way a text is interpreted. In *The Limits* of *Critique,* she argues against critics like Tony Bennett, who reads fictional works as determined primarily by the cultural structures that formulate ways of receiving works of art. Bennet argues that there are "discursive and intertextual determinations that organize and animate the practice of reading" (7). According to this perspective, Bennet asserts that readers are "schooled" by their cultural backgrounds and that it is because of these cultural frameworks that they respond in a certain way and not another. Felski asserts that the paradigms of such an argument downplay texts by minimizing their potential impact on their readers:

> [Bennett's] use of the passive voice conveys a view of the inertness and passivity of texts, as ineffectual creatures at the beck and call of external forces. As described here by Bennett, films and novels dissolve into the cultural assumptions and interpretative frameworks of their audiences; mute objects, they possess no force, no heft, no presence of their own. (*Limits* 175)

In my reading of *Minaret,* I want to shed light on the agency of the text itself as a work of art – not just an object to be interpreted by one category of reader but as a work that also serves as a "framework and guide to interpretation" in itself (Felski *Limits* 170). My analysis of textual agency in *Minaret* sustains Felski's assertion that texts "can serve as cultural reference points for

[21] Felski argues that in the predominant mode of literary criticism critics tend to "slide from close readings of works to causal claims about their social impact, as if these two activities were somehow synonymous" (*Limits* 177).

[22] In this regard, I find Hayley Toth's account useful as she asserts that: "Postcolonial literature's readers are not only 'western'. And readerships are not monolithic. Simply because one can identify the location of reading (i.e. 'the West') does not entail that reading is determined by such a geopolitical/cultural identity in any straightforward way" (643).

interpretation as well as objects to be interpreted" (*Limits* 170). In other words, I want to posit the text not only as an object to be interpreted through the tracing of the structural and thematic choices behind it, but as an active agent which generates ways in which it can be read. To do so, I focus my discussion of *Minaret* on the issue of the hijab as a main subject of controversy. By focusing on this motif, which generates such polarized responses, I aim to unpack, and counter the issue of the 'implied', passively receptive reader. In my analysis, I read Aboulela's representation of the hijab in terms of the many ways in which Najwa wears the veil, and the fascinating, contradictory effects around this. I present a close reading of Najwa's relationship with Islamic veiling without interpreting it as either progressive or oppressive, refocusing attention onto the text's agency in exhibiting a wide range of meanings to do with this practice. I aim to do so without commenting conclusively about how the novel feeds into pre-established debates. Here, I am not arguing that the text is necessarily apolitical; rather, I want to explore the possibility of getting beyond the desire to classify it in relation to a fixed political or social idea – to embrace, instead, the non-ideological complexity of its representation of the Islamic veil.

Critical Reception of *Minaret*

Aboulela's novel has been received by many critics as representative of contemporary Muslim women who live in the West. In her book *At Freedom's Limit: Islam and the Postcolonial Predicament* (2014), Sadia Abbas asserts that Aboulela gained a reputation as a religious novelist with her first novel *The Translator* (2006), which was labelled as the first "halal novel written in English" (87). In this section I will discuss how Aboulela's subsequent novel *Minaret* was received in terms of a debate around the usefulness of its representation of pious Muslims – a debate in which most critics focused on whether this representation of Muslims was a positive or negative one especially in relation to the Western implied reader. As Najwa's narrative has been read as depicting a drastic transformation from secularity to spirituality, interpretations of the novel can be divided into two main categories: those that are sympathetic to the novel and its author, which read it as exemplifying the positive effect Islam can have on individuals; and those

that argue against what they call "ideological" Islam, which interpret *Minaret* as providing a model of radical Muslims who are a threat to Western values.

The first group receives the narrative with much enthusiasm, arguing that Aboulela is an 'insider' writer whose novel is positively representative. For example, Hasan Majed claims that "Aboulela's writing challenges the stereotypical images made by Rushdie, Kureishi and Ali" and that "she is 'writing back' in order to give voice to those Muslims who for some time were depicted negatively in British fiction" (196). In describing Aboulela as a writer who "writes back" to the colonial power, Majed draws on an established trope in postcolonial writing of texts that address the imperial centre from the (former) colonies.[23] But what is interesting here is that Majed puts postcolonial writers like Rushdie, Kureishi and Ali in the position of being supporters of colonialism as they provide "stereotypical images" about their communities. By contrast, Aboulela, to him, is a writer whose fictional works defy and correct such images by presenting counter positive images. In a similar vein, Geoffrey Nash considers Aboulela's *Minaret* as "significant" in comparison to other novels of the same genre. He states that this is due to Aboulela's ability to create a "sympathetic 'insider's' voice" that speaks for Muslim communities in the West. He also asserts that "rather than [conforming] to the stale Orientalist discourse of much western writing on Islam, fictional or otherwise, Aboulela adopts a subtle transgressive discourse which engages with Orientalist and postcolonial tropes in such a way as to project herself [...] as a representative for Islam" (45). Within this paradigm, Aboulela could not be a good, representative writer if she did not "adopt" the right way of dealing with the Western audience; the term "adopt" is telling, as if the correct approach is pre-existent and Aboulela need only to take it on. In reading the novel on these terms, Nash cultivates an image of Aboulela as a speaker for Islam in its battle against the West. He contends that Aboulela is a

[23] See Salman Rushdie's (1982) article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" and *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

successful writer because she acculturates herself "to western forms and codes supplied by the age of globalization" (44).

What Nash refers to here is what Aboulela herself describes, in an interview with Claire Chambers, as the uniqueness of her fictional characters, who "are largely based in Britain, which is not a Muslim country, and yet they as individuals want to practice Islam" (109). Najwa is exemplary of this, as an agnostic woman who moves from Sudan and finds her faith in the UK. This narrative asserts that Islam is a desire of the individual; exiles who are not forced by religious communities to be Muslim indicate that Islam is not a culturally inherited religion. What Nash means by Western "forms and codes" refers to the way in which Aboulela adopts the bildungsroman as a literary mode for narrating Najwa's story, including a character who *choose*s her faith without social pressure. The assumption here is that freedom of choice is a Western privilege that is constrained in Sudan, especially for women. Therefore, Islam is understood here as a religion that conforms to Western ideals of freedom of choice and individual agency. For Nash and other critics, Aboulela's greatest achievement is her ability to present this positive image of Islam to Western readers. In such readings there is an implied hierarchical system, as the faithful Muslim subject is appreciated only when he or she demonstrates Western values like freedom of choice, agency, and individuality. In my view, this demonstrates a paradox as the text is regarded as highly authentic (meaning representing a reality that is different from that of the West) but, at the same time, it is understood as structured and designed by Aboulela to conform to Western cultural codes and values.

The implied reader of *Minaret,* in Nash's reading, is a *Western* reader whose values (especially those of individuality and freedom of choice) are prioritized by Aboulela. Nash's reading draws heavily on the presence of the implied Western reader to celebrate Aboulela's artistic ability, writing that she is "sophisticated enough as a writer to know that whatever as a Muslim Arab-African woman she wants to say about faith and being a believer, this will be

construed according to the paradigms entertained by her largely secular western audience" (Nash 45).

There are echoes of Nash's idea in Mona Almaeen's study, as she also considers Aboulela a Muslim writer who writes with an awareness of an audience that is potentially unsympathetic. Almaeen views Aboulela's novel as primarily didactic, in that it tries to educate the West about who the pious Muslim woman is. At the same time, Almaeen reads the novel as a critique of Western culture from the point of view of a Muslim. Hence, Najwa is analyzed as a model of a Muslim woman who is offered two cultural systems and voluntarily picks one over the other; that is, she experiences a secular life and then abandons that for a more spiritual one. Almaeen extrapolates from Najwa's narrative to argue that Aboulela wants to deliver moral messages to her readers. For example, she cites Najwa daydreaming about becoming a slave in Tamer's family home: "I would like to be his family's concubine, like something out of *The Arabian Nights*, with life-long security and a sense of belonging. But I must settle for freedom in this modern time" (215). In relation to this, Almaeen asserts that Aboulela wants to show the effects of lacking a positive kind of patriarchy by creating this moment in Najwa's story where she fantasizes about being a slave in order to have a sense of familial contact and protection. Almaeen continues that "Aboulela uses Najwa's reflections and lack of a sense of security to underscore the impact of the absence of a supportive patriarchy on Muslim women's agency" (104). According to this reading, Najwa becomes a tool wielded by Aboulela to discuss political issues – to convey her views on patriarchy and Muslim women's agency. Najwa's capacities (as a fictional character) then become limited to the assumed (by Almaeen) intentions of the author. She is intentionally created as a fragile character to serve Aboulela's ideas about the West, as the author blames the West for deforming or at least misunderstanding the positive Islamic kind of patriarchy. Almaeen's interpretation implies that the Western audience needs to sympathize with Najwa as her reactions are legitimate and deserve to be considered sympathetically. Again, as in Nash's reading, a hierarchical system emerges, since the image of a Muslim woman who

justifies her acceptance of passivity (the desire to be a slave) to a superior (Western) audience is so powerful. For Almaeen, *Minaret* is suggesting that the West is responsible for the "absence of supportive patriarchy" and Muslim women should be excused (by the West) if they want to romanticize an ideal kind of patriarchy. Aboulela is, then, in a position where she must justify a cultural/religious practice that is not familiar to a supposedly Western readership. This is especially important in the contemporary Islamophobic atmosphere where Muslims' cultural beliefs are denounced as constituting a great threat to Western civilization.

What I find most useful in Almaeen's study is a remark in her conclusion where she touches on the complexity of Najwa's spiritual experience, admitting that Najwa cannot simply be understood as a woman who attains agency by embracing Islam. At the beginning of her study, Almaeen claims that Najwa's narrative provides an example of how marginalized Muslims can obtain a spiritual kind of agency by embracing feelings of guilt and seeking divine forgiveness. She stresses that "for Aboulela, the pain caused by guilt provides an opportunity to recover spirituality" (103). Almaeen advocates that "for Aboulela, individualism and its promises of autonomy distracts women from recognising their guilt and seeking forgiveness. Spirituality, on the other hand, facilitates this recognition and enables them to achieve agency" (106). Najwa, in particular, is "empowered as a result of [her] experience of guilt" (106). However, Almaeen's claim shifts in the conclusion of her article. In this part she states that *Minaret* "exemplifies the extent to which women's empowerment within Islam remains an object of complex controversies" (116). As such, she makes it possible to recognise that her own earlier claim of Najwa's spiritual agency is somewhat flattening:

> The ideological conflict between contemporary Salafism and Sufism has done little to make religious agency attainable. As far as the modern West is concerned, contemporary Sufism is a secular spirituality, and contemporary Salafism is a source of terrorism. As for Aboulela's [protagonist, she seeks] agency only to find [herself] caught in a web of Salafism, Sufism and Western modernity (117).

Here Almaeen expresses how problematic it is to trace the ideological and social forces that direct and redirect the process of agency formation in the case of immigrant Muslim women like Najwa. What she refers to is the difficulty of naming a single religious affiliation that determines Najwa's spiritual agency. In other words, Najwa cannot be defined as a pious Muslim without recognising the influence of the West within this identity: if she chooses to be a Sufi Muslim then her Islam is not complete, since it overlaps with secularity; and to become a Salafi would also not be acceptable as Salafism is a doctrine that is accused (by many commentators in the West) of radicalism. Almaeen is pessimistic as she does not identify any sort of empowerment in Najwa's narrative. She comments on the state of Muslim women's agency in *Minaret*: "their agencies are cast in the fragmented moulds of [many] ideologies. Muslim women's patterns of agency are lifeless in terms of their inability to evolve and to contain the requirements of modern-day aspects of empowerment" (116). Almaeen stresses that these women's agency is less than optimal due to the "requirements of modern-day aspects of empowerment" which eliminate the spiritual in favor of the material. Hence, Almaeen idealizes the past, where such spiritual kinds of agency were more useful to Muslim women. But what is helpful in her reading is that she is sensitive towards the inadequacy of labeling the kind of agency Najwa obtains in the West. At the beginning of her thesis Almaeen insists that Najwa has an agency (that is, the spiritual agency which is acquired through confronting her feelings of guilt then seeking Divine forgiveness) that is different from the present-day materialistic concept of agency. However, at the end of her study, Almaeen shifts her understanding and confirms that even this spiritual kind of agency is rather ambiguous given its entanglement within a broader cultural context. Later in this chapter, I will start where Almaeen ends: I will try to embrace the diversity of ideologies, social norms and personal preferences that affect Najwa's choices and orientations, specifically to the Islamic veil.

In sum, this collection of critical responses propose that *Minaret* is a novel with a special kind of content (its spiritual message) and that its aim is to educate its (Western) readers about

the way pious Muslim women live in a secular time. Such critics claim an expert or specialist knowledge of the text based on a perception that it is initially written for non-Muslim readers and one of their major concerns is the impact that the text will leave on such readers. This is related to the idea that the text is already exoticized in order to capture the attention of an outsider reader. As Nash puts it, "it is [the] positive image of Islam and Muslim identity which has attracted readers, and not only female Muslim ones, but others who recognize the conditions of possibility within which Aboulela writes, and out of which she translates her otherwise unfamiliar message to a wider readership" (49). Nash's use of the word "translates" reflects his expectations of the novel: he assumes readers should always learn from a novel like *Minaret*; Aboulela is thereby burdened with the duty to facilitate cultural communication between the East and the West. To uphold this position such critics must work anxiously to resolve what they see as contradictory themes and meanings in the novel, allowing it to perform its didactic function unambiguously.

Quite unlike the positive reception by the first group of critics who see *Minaret* as useful in representing contemporary Muslim women, another group argues that the text represents an ideological Islam that is in constant conflict with secular modernity. *Minaret* has been regarded by Waïl Hassan and Sadia Abbas as a novel that justifies Islamic fundamentalism. Hassan argues that "in its conservatism, its rejection of existential freedom and political responsibility *Minaret* [represents an] ideology [that] has all the elements of fundamentalism" (316-17). He condemns Najwa's longing for protective patriarchy and sees her evasion of political responsibility as an ideology that Aboulela wants to introduce to her non-Muslim readers. He asserts that "the version of Islam propagated in Aboulela's fiction […] involves a complete disavowal of personal liberty as incompatible with Islam, of feminism as a secular and godless ideology, of individual agency in favor of an all-encompassing notion of predetermination and of political agency as well" (313). Again, the implied reader in Hassan's reading is unquestioned as Western. Like Nash, he claims that the text becomes a tool for

Aboulela – this time used to promote the author's preferred kind of Islam to a non-Muslim readership (which is, in this case, a Western one). Responding to the same narrative moment that captivates Almaeen, Hassan comments thus on Najwa's longing for male protection:

> This absurd preference for slavery, in an idealized fantasy of the past, over a reductive notion of freedom as a modern invention, can only be explained by her situation as a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive. Touted in Eurocentric discourse as an exclusive Western privilege, "freedom" and "modernity" come to represent to her an "empty space" devoid of the jealous and sometimes violent protectiveness of male relatives, which nonetheless guarantee precisely what she lacks in Britain: "life-long security and a sense of belonging." Her notion of freedom, then, is a mixture of wholesale rejection of Western modernity, which means to her little more than secularism and Islamophobia, and nostalgia for an idealized Arab past paradoxically and unreflectively conceived in Orientalist terms. (315-16)

Hassan's language here denounces the novel, as he seeks to expose both Najwa's vulnerability and the danger she represents to modern-day values. The way Hassan victimizes Najwa and perceives her as only "a veiled Muslim woman in Britain, isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive" flattens Najwa's character, making her reactions seem conditioned and inevitable rather than multifaceted responses to her complex personal circumstances (315). For Hassan, she is a victim of Western Islamophobia and her anti-Western sentiment is directed by a general rejection of all that is modern and Western. What Hassan overlooks, however, is that the novel as a whole does not present Najwa only as a victim of Islamophobia in the West. She comes from an elite family in Sudan and has the privilege to enjoy the welcoming side of the West; here, I mainly refer to her memories of long summer holidays in London and shopping in its luxury markets. Even when she loses her wealth and remains living in central London, her contact with non-Muslim people is limited as she lives in a

ghettoized community of Arabs. The only incident where she encounters racist people is on the bus where she is called "Muslim scum" (81). Hassan's words about Najwa as an "isolated" and "constantly" abused Muslim woman suggests the projection of a stereotypical reading onto her, bolstered by the idea that her responses are both expected and in some ways beyond her control. He regards her as a woman who chooses to be veiled in London – and takes this as evidence enough that she is radicalised and that her actions and feelings are already determined by extremist Islam. When Hassan describes Najwa as "isolated and constantly bombarded by hostile representations of her religion as oppressive", he reads her as an example of an irritated Muslim who wants to take revenge against the West by abandoning all its inventions.[24]

Sadia Abbas goes further and claims that Aboulela's novel is not only about the inward state of faith or pure spirituality but is loaded with political agendas. She situates the narrative in the context of the political conflict between the right and left:

> In *Minaret*, it is the exiled, indigenous Marxist who is too committed to progress and to change, even as he is aggressively hostile to the West; he is the one who has burned the American flag and is an opponent of the IMF (156). The heroine (for whom Western culture and consumer goods are rarely an issue) can then stand in for an Islam that is able to make its peace with the West, in a way that the leftist will not. […] What Aboulela offers up are reasonably deft visions of Muslim women who desire their own

[24] Similarly, Eva Hunter asserts that "Najwa's abjectness is striking" and claims that her passivity is rather gendered as it is only because Najwa is a woman that she conforms to a subordinate position (93). Hunter compares the character of Najwa to Ustaz Badr, who is a pious male protagonist in Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* (2009). She asserts that Ustaz Badr is a religious man "who has an active public function" and emphasizes that the contrast between the passive female and active male characters in Aboulela's fiction is "problematic" (96). Hunter also comments on Najwa's fantasies of being a concubine to Tamer's family and asserts that her "limitations appear to reflect Aboulela's" and that "rather than criticising patriarchy, [Aboulela] is criticizing the fact that it does not work as it should" (93). Hence, in her conclusion, Hunter claims that "it does not seem unfair to wish that [Aboulela] showed some understanding of the intensity of the anger and suffering that animates Muslim women who are active in the cause of women's emancipation" (97). The political burden that Hunter puts on the narrative weighs heavy; she limits the narrative's value to its usefulness to the active Muslim women who strive for freedom in the "Arab street" (97). Implicit in Hunter's argument is that *Minaret* would not be of value if it was not about the "Muslim woman", who is in constant need of political and social attention. The novel is, hence, condemned because it works against the emancipatory project of Arab women by endorsing positive ideas about the patriarchy.

> subordination, thus making resistance to imperial dreams of female rescue simpler, more clean. So if Laura Bush, mercifully oblivious to her own predicament, could offer the vision of female suffering under (say) the Taliban as a justification for war, the anti-imperialists can, if they choose, cite Islamist women who loathe the burdens of modernity and wish for different times, whose consent to subordination is really the muscle-flex of "agency." (445)

Abbas, with much satire, reads *Minaret* as a novel that speaks for "a right-wing Islamist position" that has hidden agendas against the West (447). In her view, however, the twist happens as the Muslims as a minority group *use* the vulnerability of the political left to flourish as an ideology that will later work against the values of the left. In other words, Muslims benefit from the left's tolerance of religion while at the core of their ideology they coincide with the right in terms of their disagreement on ideals of freedom of expression. In Abbas' reading, Aboulela fictionalizes a political faction with a religious project that aims to conquer the secularist West. Presenting *Minaret* as a tool for radical ideology, Abbas urges readers to be aware of the underlying political agendas that a text like *Minaret* might promote.

Such critical responses revolve around the relationship between literature, religion, and politics. In some understandings (such as in readings by Nash, Almaeen, and Majed) secular modernity has turned literature into a sacred practice where literary texts are positioned as a means of anti-religious expression. These critics specifically refer to issues of freedom of expression, thinking of how literary texts sometimes offend religious communities while protected by secular institutions.[25] In this interpretive paradigm, novels like *Minaret* emerge as a counter kind of literature, in that it supports the religious against the secular. Critics here champion Aboulela's novel as one that is sympathetic to Muslims and represents them in a

[25] Saba Mahmood, for example, is a post-secularist critic who argues that secular literature functions as an imperial tool that works against religious communities, and that it builds on the western history of colonization and White supremacy ("Secularism" 346).

positive way, especially to a Western reader. On the other side, critics like Abbas and Hassan are suspicious of a novel like *Minaret*. They read it as a way of promoting a radical kind of Islam in the West. I agree with Morey where he critiques these kinds of readings; he asserts that these critics only point to the alleged clash between the two cultures in a polarized way and that literature is seen as exemplifying the conflict, effectively becoming an instrument that showcases the difference between the two worldviews (237). For these critics, the meanings of *Minaret* are predetermined by the fact of its Muslim author in a context where few such figures have a platform to publish. The novel is always already specific and cannot be read without the frame of its political significance – especially, as I demonstrated earlier, to the Western implied reader.

The Motif of Hijab in *Minaret*

The hijab in *Minaret* is read by some critics as a physical sign of the transformation from secularity to spirituality.[26] It is interpreted in a polarized way: either as a symbol of freedom from Western cultural hegemony, in which case it stands as part of a positive representation of the Muslim woman, or as an obstacle that excludes its wearer from the freedom of secular modernity, in which case it functions to signify radical ideology.[27] This is a viewpoint explained in Emma Tarlo's book *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (2010). In her study she considers the practice of the hijab as presenting two possible meanings: as either an expression of "idealized notions of modesty, privacy, protection from the male gaze, [and] rejection of consumerist values", or as an "aggressive political ideology of radical Islamic groups" (54).

The centralization of the veil in today's political and cultural debates regarding Muslim women is a continuation of historical discourse. Reina Lewis claims that, historically, the West

[26] See, for example, Morey's analysis of claims that Najwa's transformation is not a "product of self-assertion or personal ambition" but an endorsement of "the religious against the national and the personal against the political" (234). Her hijab, in his understanding, is only an expression of connection with the Divine, which reduces Najwa's earthly "personal ambition[s]" (234).
[27] See, for example, Waïl Hassan's article "Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction."

"always [privileged] the veil as a symbol of the hidden order of Oriental society and as proof of its inimical difference from the West" (15). Likewise, polarized views of the veil where "the veiled and unveiled mean: secular, modern and liberated or oppressed, victim and dangerous" (Tarlo 4) are widely expressed in the history of colonization. It is important, however, to emphasize that these arguments bypass the ways in which the veil is a site of debate within the Islamic world itself. Indeed, many studies have discussed that there is no single meaning of the veil in Islam; in most cases it is an expression of cultural, social, and economic conditions, which goes beyond signifying personal faith (Leila Ahmed, Emma Tarlo, and Sahar Amer). Understanding this is essential when reading a novel such as *Minaret*, as it negotiates the subject of the veil – as well as other forms of dress – in diverse ways, exploring both traditional ethnic and racialized clothing and the more modern, Western forms.

In her book, Tarlo provides an ethnographic study based on a comprehensive investigation of the dress choices of three Muslim women living in London. Her approach attempts to divert "the emphasis away from concerns about whether their clothes are Western or Eastern, religious or secular, traditional or modern towards an understanding of the wide range of experiences and concerns that inform the clothing choices of contemporary British Muslim women" (40). She enquires into the level of involvement that Islam has in determining Muslim women's appearance and asks whether the wide spectrum of ways of dressing for Muslim women in the West is ever explainable. However, one of the limits of Tarlo's study is that it only includes "non-typical" Muslim women, as the three women studied are "highly successful, educated middle-class professionals" who tend to experiment in their dress styles in order to perform sophisticated forms of personal expression that "contrast strongly with some of the more austere full-length all-black covered outfits favored by some Muslim women" (1).

Tarlo's main concern is to prove that Muslim women are not at odds with their Western counterparts in regard to fashion: she shows this by stressing that the veil or headscarf, in particular, is not a "dull uniformity", but rather "the most self-consciously" designed outfit "of

Muslim personal art" (1). Tarlo deconstructs the veil into two contrasting categories: one that is more colorful and artistically worn, and one that is further removed from Western high street fashion trends. Hence, the negotiation of positions is clear: Tarlo tries to familiarize a strange object by presenting it in the light of Western values of art and taste; the Western viewer or audience is prioritized here. This approach is built on and, at the same time, actively resists the presumption that "all forms of dress which identify their wearers as Muslims tend to be lumped together and perceived by outsiders as monotone, retrograde and repressive" (2). Tarlo, however, refuses to deal with this situation from the perspective of the "myth of clash of civilization", as she prefers to see it in "terms of complex debates about identity, faith, politics, ethics, aesthetics and belonging" which are highlighted in the diversity of Muslim women's choices (2). She urges people to move beyond the binary debates of East versus West, and to question "the diversity of meanings attributed to [Muslim women's clothing/the veil] and activities generated around it" (5). My study of *Minaret* is inspired by this encouragement to investigate the various ways that Najwa as a Muslim woman negotiates the veil, from refusing to accepting and even modifying it. I also aim to analyze the ways that Najwa and other women in the novel, wherever they may be located, usually have access to "images, ideas, and in some cases, goods, which come from elsewhere, leading to complex reformulations of Muslim clothing practices" (6). Discussing these physical practices reveals information about the power that these women have and how they formulate their own understanding of ideals, such as freedom and agency, in today's world. I endevour not to focus only on how many restrictions are imposed on them, but rather on how and how far they are able to accept or reject them. Instead of perceiving these characters as only reacting to outside forces, I highlight how they themselves create the changes around them. Ultimately, this chapter reads how such characters move in and out of the category of "Muslim women" by adopting or abandoning certain elements that align them to this identity. In Tarlo's words, this reading tries to "avoid the pitfalls of essentialism characteristic of frameworks which reduce people to their ethnic, regional, or religious backgrounds" (12). This is particularly

important in the case of Muslim women, who are too often grouped in a "monolithic category as if they speak and think with one voice" (Tarlo 5).

The Dichotomy of the Un/veiled Muslim Woman

As part of my attempt to steer away from naming one implied reader, and to embrace the idea that texts and readers are co-creators of meaning – 'indispensable link[s] in [a] chain of mediators whose response is never entirely predictable or knowable' (Felski 50) – I intend to explore the trope of the veiled/unveiled Muslim woman in *Minaret.* There is an agency to the novel recognised by critics in the delivery of a binary social, moral, and political message about the hijab. What I am aiming for is a more complex exploration of this practice. In my reading, *Minaret* is written in a way whereby both styles and meanings of hijabs are concealed and strategically revealed by the narrator, suggesting a more multi-layered and multi-faceted kind of agency. Within this exploration, I do not see the text as written with a single reader in the mind, the kind referred to by Felski when she warns against indulging in a critical practice which reduces readers to "the sum of [their] demographical data" (*Limits* 177). Rather, I understand the novel as having the ability to address readers from different backgrounds. Accordingly, in my analysis of the novel I argue that Najwa emerges as a more ambiguous character than criticism to date has recognised, and that her actions are not only indicative of certain political or social particularities. To formulate this argument, I will trace Najwa's story in relation to the veil. This is an important element in the novel that is mostly read by critics as a sign of Najwa's transformation from being secular to religious – hence, it is read for its political and social significance. I will elaborate on certain aspects of Najwa's engagement with the hijab, highlighting how she actively participates in making new meanings that transcend the established dichotomy of a veiled/unveiled Muslim woman, therefore creating a dynamic story about one woman who faces cultural, religious, and economic divisions but is not easily defined by any one of them.

In *Minaret* there are several structural choices that emphasise the juxtaposed images of the unveiled and veiled Najwa. The first is that the narrative is recounted by a first-person narrator, which explicitly indicates a highly subjective perspective. Along with this, the narrative is disclosed retrospectively, adopting the narrative past tense where the narrator is the veiled Najwa, who recounts her story beginning with a time before she began to wear hijab. Telling the story retrospectively provides Najwa with the privilege to guide us, as readers, throughout the novel. Accordingly, she easily draws the reader's attention to particular moments and events, often where she disapproves of her previous self or sometimes invites us to experience the ambivalence of some parts of her story. The time of the narrative is also manipulated: the novel is divided into thirty-six chapters, which move backwards and forwards between the years 1985 to 2004. This structural choice facilitates the comparison between the two images of Najwa as un/veiled woman; it helps to show how different the two are. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, many scholarly readings regard Najwa as either a good example of a successful Muslim woman who embodies her piety and faith by wearing hijab, or as a problematically radicalised Muslim woman who seeks to dictate her own perspective about hijab to readers. What both readings agree on is that Najwa recounts her own story to align readers with her position of judgment, and to persuade them of her own negative perspective on her previously unveiled self.

However, I would argue against such a rigid distinction, as the narrative is not consistently strict in such thematic choices. There are moments where slippages occur, demonstrating both the text's agency, and affording the reader the potential for an active role, and for new interpretations. What I want to focus on is how Najwa's complex and changing conception of the veil defies classification as simply a positive or negative representation of the veiled Muslim woman. The novel demonstrates how one individual woman's practice can oscillate between meanings that are not well defined. Indeed, the juxtaposition of a revealed and covered body parallels Najwa's approach as a narrator, which is characterised by in turn revealing and hiding information from readers. Such fluctuation in the narrative mood impacts the meaning of the

narrative in displaying how the veil has both spiritual and materialistic (political) significance. Najwa constantly moves in and out of the category of the veiled Muslim woman, as her relationship with its principles is never static.

To follow Najwa's journey of veiling, it is important to discuss how she is first inspired to wear the hijab and how her understanding of it evolves over the course of the novel. From the beginning of the narrative Najwa is confused about the values of modesty, piety, and femininity. She is raised by her mother who embraces a Westernized lifestyle, and Najwa never recounts her mother's connection to religion or nationality apart from her visits to a local orphanage (an act with an ethical motive, even if not exactly determined by faith), and her celebration of national events by wearing a Sudanese tobe (19-22). Hence, it is only through attending Khartoum University that Najwa becomes aware of local and even global forms of Islamic modesty. Her feelings regarding modesty are introduced in her observations about two fellow students:

> [They] wore white tobes and one of them was very cute with deep dimples and sparkling eyes. They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends. With them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes; my too short skirts and too tight blouses. Many girls dressed like me, so I was not unusual. Yet these provincial girls made me feel awkward. I was conscious of their modest grace, of the tobes that covered their slimness – pure white cotton covering their arms and hair. (14)

When Najwa says "I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends" she sets up the distance between her and her veiled peers as divided along urban/rural lines. When she repeats that her clothes are "too" tight and short, she invites the reader to perceive her immodesty. Hence, a major trope in the novel is the gaze, through which the hijab acquires significance. It is through an intensified focus on the gaze that Najwa informs us about her understanding of and approach to veiling. In the quoted passage, Najwa's narratorial gaze

reflects on how ideas about women's bodies are constructed in her mind. She looks at both her fellow students and herself while internally adopting a Muslim male gaze towards the bodies of females. Najwa admires the women's outfits as they cover their bodies more than they reveal. The sense of purity Najwa longs for is derived from her preconceived ideas about what is sexually attractive to men and what is not. Moreover, the word "slimness", which is associated here with the whiteness and pureness of the cotton hijab, stands for a body that is less attractive to men. Although the "slimness" of the girls is covered it is also there, written and therefore seen. Likewise, the arms and hair are named, and so summoned to the reader's attention. But, at the same time, the provincial girls are implicitly denoted as less attractive which, thus, brings them closer to spirituality than to sexual desire. The girls' covered bodies are contrasted with Najwa's body, which is covered (by short and tight clothes) yet its curves are highlighted by the very description of her clothes. The way she acts towards her thoughts indicates how she internalizes the gaze and judgements of others; it is as if there is a male moral authority that she focuses upon, as evident also in the following moments. When Najwa is introduced to the different forms of veiling at university she starts to feel "awkward" about her outfit, as if she is looked at and judged from the outside. When she describes her body as exposed, she is worried about the male gaze and having become attractive to men. In some instances it is explicitly mentioned that there is someone looking at her, hence, the authority is gendered, as Najwa's longing to be a faithful subject is specifically directed towards being a faithful female Muslim who is always conscious of male perspectives. At other times her feeling of awkwardness emerges from within (that is, we are not told that there is someone looking at her). An example of the former occurs at the swimming pool, where she feels uncomfortable because the lifeguard looks at her: "ever since I started university, I had begun to feel awkward, even in my black full-piece" (41). What is emphasized here is Najwa's awareness of the source of her feeling of awkwardness, which is the modest outfits of the university girls in comparison to her own. In the swimming pool it is stated that she feels this way because a man looks at her. However, at the

university she never says that anybody observes her figure, yet the feelings of embarrassment intensify as she compares herself to the village girls. If we trace Najwa's behaviour towards this feeling, we find that it is not stable; there are two moments in the novel when she describes feelings of awkwardness, although the way she acts towards this is paradoxical.

When Najwa attends the American club party (attended by both men and women), she checks herself in the mirror and reflects: "my trousers are too tight; an awkward twisting around to see my hips in the mirror" (23). Here, there is a shift in the distance that Najwa (as narrator) keeps between herself and the narrative. There is also a shift in time in the narrative as it moves into the present tense. Later, however, we are presented with Najwa's exact words as she speaks to her friend, Randa, which decreases the distance between the narrator and the characters. When she says, "an awkward twisting", the judgmental gaze of Najwa as a narrator emerges. She invites us as readers to see her body, and she reveals the image of her body to us precisely with a sense of disapproval. What is striking is how she acts towards this growing feeling of awkwardness. Whilst at the party Najwa keeps her blouse tucked in, revealing the contours of her body, and does not do anything to change how she looks. However, straight after the party, when she heads to her friend Randa's house, where no men are present, and narrates: "I pulled my blouse out of my trousers and, though the bottom part was all crumpled, at least that way it hid my hips and made me a little bit more respectable" (32). She only pulls her blouse out and seeks respectability when she sees her friend's parents. She also puts on "a long sleeved shirt over her halter-neck T-shirt" (27).

At certain times Najwa dresses modestly to be invisible to men or even to detract from her sexual status, while at other times she intentionally chooses an outfit to attract male attention: "I wore my denim skirt that evening […] As if by looking good I would annoy Anwar or show him that I didn't care" (28). There is a contrast between looking "good" and looking "respectable" in these two moments. Najwa always remains alert to the way people look at her, and she worries about their interpretations and judgments. Her idea of looking "good" emerges in relation to

Anwar: she wears a denim skirt that is “tight and longish”, an imported piece of cloth that is also worn in the “American club” parties and is explicitly stated to make Najwa look “good” in the eyes of Anwar (57). Looking “good”, here, means appearing attractive to and being desired by the opposite sex, which gives her a sense of power and control over Anwar. The contrast between looking “respectable” and looking “good” reflects Najwa’s confusion and struggle. This confusion does not diminish when she starts wearing the hijab in London; being covered with the hijab does not mean she is relieved from the anxiety about her body image and how she appears to others.

Najwa is not always consistent about avoiding the male gaze. Even after she begins wearing the hijab, she remains ambivalent about its function as either precluding male attention or attracting it. As narrator, Najwa presents a contrast between two incidents where she passes a group of male builders in one of London’s streets. The first time she is unveiled, and she receives comments about her appearance; another time she passes by the same group of men while wearing her hijab, and she notices how she has become invisible to them. In the first instance, she says: “I flushed, aware that all the weight I had gained had settled on my hips […] and my hair was long on my shoulders like Diana Ross’s” (130). Her hair is directly connected to her feminine image of her body in terms of what she thinks attracts the attention of the builders. The way she compares herself to Diana Ross emphasizes the contrast between her old and new looks:in the past she used to look like Diana Ross, a high-profile, glamorous singer, while later Najwa experiences herself differently, as an invisible woman. This is to stress how the hijab changes the way she is treated:

> The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn’t see me anymore. I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, ‘Oh, so this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-visual’ (247).

In Najwa's thinking, the hijab functions as a barrier to the workmen's gaze. However, the tone of her words reflects her feelings of disappointment and disillusionment, in comparison to the excitement she felt previously when receiving the comments from the workmen. The image of Najwa imitating the look of Diana Ross is associated in her mind with the bright lights of fame, as the two words "frissons" and "sparks" relate to temporary and short-lived moments of being under the spotlight. Meanwhile, when she says "the sparks died away" her feelings as a woman of no significance are intensified. She is invisible because of her hijab. But this is not always the case as, at other times, wearing hijab makes her hyper-visible. In one important episode occurring while Najwa is living in London she is attacked on the bus by a young men: one of them pours a Tizer (a distinctly British drink, made in Scotland) over her head and calls her "Muslim scum" (81). The type of drink poured magnifies the xenophobia of the act. The veil is perhaps the only way that the man can identify Najwa as Muslim.

The novel expresses the socially complex and even paradoxical dynamics of wearing hijab, whether inside or outside Muslim communities. As we have seen, in London the hijab works as hyper-visible (religious) discriminatory object that is even more powerful than Najwa's race and class. In the house belonging to Lamya and Lamya's mother Zeinab, Najwa becomes sensitive about the way she looks in comparison to her employers. She is a veiled, black, and poor woman who works for them, and she thinks that Lamya "will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin color, which is a shade darker than hers. She will see these things and these things only" (74). The repetition of the word "see" is crucial here as Najwa is always conscious of her state of being seen and watched by others even when she is literally veiled. We are presented with a different kind of gaze now – the gaze of unveiled Muslim women falling on those who are veiled. Such a gaze is emphasized elsewhere in the narrative, where Randa is irritated by the way the "Islamist" girls at Edinburgh University dress and act: "so many of them are Islamists. You know the type, the wife in hijab having one baby after the other" (84). In this instance, the hijab becomes a symbol of backwardness in Randa's

perspective, which conflicts with its abstract meaning as a religious practice and a symbol of a pious individual. The fact that the hijab becomes a means to divide Muslim women among themselves is powerful. When Najwa is in Khartoum she looks at the provincial girls and admires their style of covering as a sign of spirituality, but when she is covered herself, she becomes aware of other social meanings and effects of the hijab.

One important incident happens at the apartment of Najwa's employer. Lamya hosts a party which is attended only by Muslim women, most of whom are unveiled. One woman comes to the party wearing a hijab, much like Najwa's, and "starts to take off her coat, removes her headscarf, loosens her curly hair. When she throws her headscarf across the room […] Her smile and her gestures are theatrical; [then] moving slowly as if doing a striptease, unbuttoning her blouse to peals of laughter, untwisting her wrap-around skirt" (137). Najwa perceives this as a dramatic scene, the performance of which conforms to the orientalist trope of the Muslim woman as simultaneously veiled and seductive. The girl's "smile and […] gestures are theatrical", as "if doing a striptease", as Najwa notes (137). Even though Najwa does not state at any point that she feels offended by this scene, Tamer expresses his anger: "'This is terrible. This is wrong; they shouldn't do that. I'm sorry, Najwa. You must be upset, you must be offended.' 'Oh no,' I say, 'they are just young girls. […] It's nothing personal against me. I am nothing to them, nothing" (137-38). Through these statements Najwa wants to highlight how she is less than the abstract image of the veiled Muslim woman; she is not offended by what she sees as she detaches herself from the concept of being represented by it. Here, she is a devout and veiled Muslim, and she is perceived by others as such, including by Tamer. However, she steps out of this category when she kisses him, as she states: "he should not come close to me but he does and I cling to him, I cling to him because I am sour and he is sweet. He kisses me and he doesn't know how. I should push him away, not let him learn, but his smell holds me still" (138). The repetition of the word "should" tells us about the category into which Najwa puts herself along with Tamer, as religious people who do not commit sins. This is also the way she thinks that she is perceived by others. It

can be clearly seen how Najwa struggles to be both pious and to act on her desire at the same time.

This tension is evident when Najwa starts to cover her body, as she does not simply embrace faith and become completely guided by its principles. The narrative gap between the remembered "secular" Najwa – the "university girl in the tight, short skirt who spoke private-school English" – and the present, speaking, veiled one is only filled with a single episode, where she struggles to decide what is a more attractive and appropriate form of hijab for her: a cotton scarf, her mother's tobe, or a Tie Rack scarf (150). When fully covered with her mother's old tobe, she thinks that "perhaps this was attractive in itself, the skill of concealing rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer" (151). In this instance, Najwa experiments with the "skill" of being attractive while covered. Similarly, she later expresses her desire to "tease" Anwar while wearing a long skirt and headscarf (178). The veil here is associated more with how Najwa is viewed by males rather than functioning as a ritual practice of a devout subject. However, it cannot be claimed that this is the dominant mode of Najwa's relationship with the hijab: it simply demonstrates how she struggles to balance its spiritual and material functions.

This balance is linked to the complexity of the meanings of the hijab among Muslims. There is a debate about the meaning of the hijab which is not new to Islamic traditions of worship and practices: this concerns the opposition between the spiritual Sufism and the strict Salafism. Najwa struggles with this opposition, meaning her understanding of her faith is never stable. According to Almaeen, these two doctrines of Islam fall on the far ends of a spectrum when compared to Western modernity: the Sufi understanding is closer to secularism and Salafi stands as the opposite, which is a perceived source of threat to the West (117). Najwa's statement about looking attractive whilst covered is not acceptable in the doctrine of the Salafists, as the function of the hijab is to conceal the attractiveness of the female body and hide it as much as possible from the gaze of males. By contrast, in the Sufi concept of the hijab there is less of a social function; it is more of a spiritual practice that symbolises a close connection to God. In Najwa's

case it is not easy to decide which comes first: whether a commitment to piety leads to an exteriorised practice, or whether she becomes pious through the very act of wearing hijab. It is stated in the beginning of the narrative that Najwa is aware that she lacks a sense of religiosity:

> The sound of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me [...] and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me. [The servants] had dragged themselves from sleep in order to pray. I was wide awake, and I didn't. (31)

Najwa refers to her missing spirituality as a dark, "hollow place". This darkness contrasts with the whiteness and purity of the religious female students in the university. She also mentions that she cannot pray in the same manner as the veiled women, and even feels envious: "I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was. I didn't have a name for it" (134). The juxtaposition of "something" and the negative formulations "didn't have" and "didn't know" expresses the uncertainty that she feels while thinking of her identity as a Muslim woman. What is important here, however, is that it is through the hijab that Najwa notices the piety of her fellow students in the university; she later embodies her own connectedness to faith by wearing it.

As well as depicting the nuances of hijab from a personal and spiritual perspective, the novel also touches on the political and cultural significances of this practice. The hijab is an object that has many possible forms and meanings. The novel depicts many choices of hijab, including the full black cover of the Iranian women, the diverse colours and shapes of the Muslim women's hijabs in London, and the Sudanese tobe, which is perceived as both a religious garment (as worn by the "provincial girls") and a national costume (as worn by Najwa's mother). In the words of Randa, the tobe "isn't so strict. With [it], the front of your hair shows, your arms show. It depends how you wear it, what you wear underneath it" (30). Randa here argues that the tobe can be used as more or less Islamic; it can be worn in different ways. Repetition of the word

"show" indicates that the tobe is not constrained by the religious mandate to cover certain body parts, and thus, she focuses on the parts that are not covered to emphasise that it is not "so strict".

This image of the Sudanese tobe as "not strict" is repeated in Najwa's words regarding her mother's way of wearing it: "shining tobe, transparent enough to see her bare arms" (60). The word "bare" implies a moral judgement; it is as if Najwa is shaming her mother's appearance as the bareness contrasts with the purity of the village girls: "I […] thought of all the girls in university who wore hijab and all the ones who wore tobes. Hair and arms covered by our national costume" (21). The "Sudanese tobe" is a form of hijab, but while Najwa's mother is judged for the way she wears it, the university girls are praised for the same reason. In the latter situation, Najwa claims collective ownership of the tobe, as she refers to it using the pronoun "our". Yet she omits the pronoun in the second sentence excerpted here, rendering "hair and arms" as generic parts; she omits the pronoun "their" as if this act of covering is natural, and a local or traditional way of clothing, while her mother's practice of wearing the tobe is more of an individualistic choice. The hijab functions here to exclude and include individuals, forming a community of pious Muslims which is an important aspect of such a social practice.

As mentioned previously, Najwa is not representative of a politicalized kind of Muslim woman, although I do not dismiss the fact that she embraces and expresses some political beliefs. She is not completely passive towards politics, but instead has her own ways of negotiating it within the narrative. What I specifically refer to here is how Najwa deliberately chooses to reveal or hide her political opinions with regard to the hijab. One major example is the way she wears her hijab without directly telling us what kind of hijab it is. This functions to connect her with a large group of Muslims who embrace different social and political meanings of the hijab; by contrast, any particularising gesture of her preferences would place her in a smaller and more specific category. Accordingly, when Najwa mentions a particular kind of hijab she tends to distance herself from it. The full-length black Iranian chador, for example, is seen neither in Sudan nor in London; it is only depicted on the front cover of *Time* magazine,

about which Najwa and her friend debate. The magazine has a picture of Iranian university female students who are covered in black veils "from head to toe" (20) while marching for the Iranian revolution (when Khomeini overthrew Shah Mohammad and announced Iran as an Islamic republic in the late 1970s). Najwa remains silent while staring at the picture, while Randa, with much anger, says: "we're supposed to go forward, not go back to Middle Ages [...] Islam doesn't say you should do that" (20). Najwa and her friend do not discuss the revolution, or the fact that the pictured female university students hold guns; their focus is mainly on what the Iranian women wear. They perceive the chador as an indicator of the Islamic political revolution, as it only became popular during the time of Khomeini's rule.

None of the statements about what Islam "says" in regard to the hijab come from Najwa herself; she is always an observer and reporter of what others think about the meanings of the hijab. Mostly, her political opinions are not disclosed to us, and even when she argues with Anwar about her thoughts regarding Islam and politics, she says: "I did not want to look at these big things because they overwhelmed me. I wanted me, my feelings and dreams, my fear of illness, old age and ugliness" (241). Here, she explicitly says that she does not want to "look at" politics, which in her understanding requires thinking beyond one's self. Politics to her is something that already exists, not something she participates in creating. Hence, she deliberately wants to maintain her private way of thinking, and even the way she tells her story. Even later in London, when she starts to attend Quran classes, she retreats from the discussion groups where women discuss law, history, and politics. She says: "[t]he Tajweed class is my favourite. I learn how to pronounce the letters correctly, when to blur two letters together, when to pronounce the n in a nasal way, for how many beats to prolong a certain letter. This concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me" (78-9). The Tajweed classes are contrasted with the discussion groups in which Najwa finds herself alienated. However, Najwa's passivity towards political issues does not prohibit her reportage, as it is through her observations that we know, for example, about how the hijab can carry political significance.

In Regent's Park Mosque, Najwa observes how Muslim women from different races and ethnicities style their hijabs, and how these variations in style are politically and religiously significant. One example is when Um Waleed teaches the class how women in Lebanon style their headcovers: "it's how the Hizbullah women tie their scarves […] I see them on the satellite" (50-51). The hijab here provides these women with a distinctive identity, as they become "Hizbullah women", who have their own mode of dress. By contrast, Najwa's hijab is different from the Sudanese national tobe, the Iranian chador, and the hijab of the Hizbullah women, as they all manifest cultural and political belonging while hers is indistinct. It is noteworthy how Najwa's narration hides the kind of hijab she wears and leaves its details to our imagination. We only learn about her hijab in one passage describing a woman she sees at Lamya's party: "I look up and see a girl in hijab, wearing exactly what I wear when I go out, a beige headscarf, a floor-length skirt and a short coat that doesn't reach the knees" (137). Najwa here does not directly tell us about her hijab; the self-description is mediated through the appearance of another woman.

When Najwa describes the veil, it is in terms of what it covers and reveals. Her hijab (unlike those of other women in the narrative) does not specifically signal affiliation to any Islamic doctrine (like Sunni, Shiite, or any other branch) and nor does it hold any political reference. Its depiction is a rather vague form of veiling in comparison to other practices that feature in the narrative. However, it could be argued that the closest kind of hijab to Najwa's is the one adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood Women. The novel describes how women of this group cover their hair and wear long, wide outfits in a variety of colours and shapes (29). However, as Najwa does not claim any personal attachment to this political group, her hijab remains of a *general* kind. It can be argued, then, that this demonstrates an awareness in the narrative of the political implications of veiling; the veil never appears in *Minaret* only as a personal act of worship. Najwa decides to prefer the general over the specific, which can be read as a way of expressing her belonging to the larger Islamic community. She does not want herself to be

classified as a member of a particular political group nor of a specific ethnicity – as she could, for example, wear the Sudanese tobe in London to claim national belonging. Instead, she opts for a more open and inclusive practice of hijab.

In conclusion, a close analysis of Najwa's own observations on the hijab reveals the breadth of its contexts and significance, moving us beyond the dichotomy of the veiled and unveiled Muslim woman. Najwa is aware of the range of acts and meanings of the hijab, and she detaches herself from some meanings to engage with others – producing a set of subtle, rapid, and uncertain depictions of the image of the pious Muslim woman that provides a direct challenge to more simplified and rigid critical responses to the text and its author. Through my reading, we experience Najwa as active in both her dress and observations, challenging and complicating narrow and rigid perspectives on her relationship with the hijab and the image of the veiled Muslim woman. After Najwa embraces faith and starts to practice it, her feelings regarding modesty and sexual attraction fluctuate and they are always affected by context. Further, her feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence in relation to her appearance never fade away when she moves from being secular to spiritual. Najwa cannot be read as a symbol of a single understanding of Islam; instead, she emerges as an active participant in all its various facets.

Chapter Three

Fluidity of Identity in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*

Fadia Faqir's third novel, *My Name is Salma*, tells the story of Salma, a young shepherdess who lives in a Bedouin village in Jordan. She falls pregnant before marriage and is then taken to prison for her own protection. There, she delivers her daughter, Layla, who is bundled away by the prison guards. After eight years in prison, Salma seeks asylum in England, settling in Exeter and marrying an Englishman. Tragically, at the end of the novel she surrenders to the imagined cries of Layla and goes back to her village, where she is killed by her brother, Mahmoud.

This tragic ending is a focal point for the critical readings I cite in this chapter. In keeping with the rest of the thesis, I identify and address two distinct critical attitudes towards the novel. The first over-estimates the novel's agency in resisting a stereotypical depiction of Muslims in the West (as in readings by Suaad Alqahtani, Alaa Alghamdi snd Sibyl Adam). In this kind of reading, Faqir's novel is understood as resisting social and political pressure by portraying Salma as a character who works against various modes of injustice. In the second approach (exemplified by Majed), the novel's agency is under-estimated. He argues that Faqir writes in compliance with the demands of the global literary marketplace, and that the text is therefore complicit with the trade in stereotypes about Muslims in the West. From a postcritical standpoint, both readings scrutinize the same kind of agency, to do with the text's ability to deliver political or ethical messages to its readers.

To circle back to Felski, and to borrow again her terms, the text has been examined by these critics in a manner that limits discussion to the larger frameworks in which it exists rather reading it on its own terms. Shifting attention back onto the text itself, I argue that Faqir's themes and form are in fact impervious to readings that insist on its symbolic political and social significance. In this chapter I re-read the novel's ending, arguing that Faqir succeeds in her unconventional incorporation of an alternative to the tragic primary closure. In the alternative ending, which precedes and complicates the other, Salma can be seen living happily with her

husband and baby son in Exeter. This approach allows me to engage with the text in a way that takes account of its multiple kinds of agency: first, Faqir's ability to negotiate the expectations of a global literary marketplace which encourages the depiction of Muslim women as victims; and second, on the fictional level, Salma's autonomy, which has an artistic quality that transcends the real-world context in which the novel has been situated. This is particularly true of those moments where Salma as a main character narrates a multi-layered, fragmented, and ambivalent story – breaking free from stifling expectations that she should report on and represent the female Muslim condition. In my reading, the text is not conceived as a cultural object pre-determined by its context (that is, its conditions of production and circulation, and the social burden of representation) but as a work of art whose value is aesthetical before it is political or sociological.

Critical Reception of *My Name is Salma*

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski describes what she calls the deep modes of reading that critics apply when analysing a work of art. She argues that:

> [Most of the] styles of reading call up an ambient mood or disposition, encouraging critics to take up attitudes of trust or mistrust, affection or aversion. And here, the continuities between deep reading and distant reading leap to the eye, overshadowing, though not overriding, their differences. Both of these approaches, after all, bring a text into view in a certain kind of way. Both prime the reader to approach a text gingerly, with her guard up. Both encourage her to pit her wits against an imagined opponent, to treat a text as an antagonist, to assume that words and images must be misleading. […] The work of critical analysis simply is this work of estrangement, the labor of disrupting continuities and severing attachments. Both methods, moreover, treat a text as an inert object to be scrutinized rather than a phenomenon to be engaged. And in this sense, neither metaphors of depth nor surface get us very far in clarifying the complication [of the] text. (90)

Felski diagnoses a state of detachment from the text even as a critic sets out to provide a deep analysis of it. Applied to my argument, this is an apt description of the critical reception of *My Name is Salma*. The following three examples of critical readings embody a state of detachment from the text, since they scrutinize its meaning in a wider political and social context but remain disengaged from its content as a narrative about an individual autonomous woman.

Suaad Alqahtani and Sibyl Adam provide a positive interpretation of Faqir's text. Like the theorists Felski admonishes, they engage deeply with the text but do so only in order to prove its political influence in enlightening readers and expanding their knowledge about Muslim subjects in the West. As I argue throughout this thesis, this is a critical paradigm that instrumentalizes the meanings of fictional works and runs the risk of flattening those works' complexity. In her article "Western Feminism or Return to Authentic Islam? Jordanian Women in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name is Salma*", Alqahtani claims that "Faqir's feminist consciousness grows out of first-hand experience, dialogue with oppressed women, statistics, and a sense of responsibility towards her nation and people" (78). Alqahtani wants to prove that Faqir's advocacy of women's rights is not exported from the West but is rather inspired by the experiences of indigenous women of Jordan. According to her, Faqir demonstrates that women's marginalization is caused by the local culture of Jordan, which is distinct from the teachings of Islam. Alqahtani posits instead the concept of Islamic feminism in her discussion of *My Name is Salma*:

> Faqir's feminist strategy embodies the activism of feminists in some Muslim countries who upset and dismantle hegemonic patriarchy by returning to Sharia rules, from their authentic sources, i.e. the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's teachings. Here, feminists could protect women's rights against patriarchal misreading and misinterpretation of scriptures, on one hand, and rectify western stereotypical image[s] of women's status in Islam, on the other hand. (89)

Faqir here is understood as an activist who does not borrow ideals of female emancipation from the West but instead sources them from Islam: indeed, from the Quran and Sunnah.[28] In this way, Alqahtani positions Faqir as a distinctive feminist critic of the subjugation of women in Jordan; one who looks inwards for an answer and who rectifies the distorted image of Muslim women in the West by showing that Islam is not the reason for their subjugation. Despite her positive thesis and intentions, at the core of Alqahtani's argument lies an overstatement of the political – of the text's need to rectify Western conceptions of Islam – that ends up, paradoxically, patronizing the very religion and communities she seeks to safeguard.

In a similar vein, Alaa Alghamdi in his book *Transformations of the Liminal Self: Configurations of Home and Identity for Muslim Characters in British Postcolonial Fiction* he starts a chapter about *My Name is Salma* by assessing its position in relation to the West and East. He confirms that the novel transcends this dichotomy to express more "universal" concerns. He claims that:

> Salma's process of acclimatization to a new culture provides ample material for a postcolonial exploration of identity formation, offering grounds for comparison with other authors, and ultimately presenting the novel and its innovative concept of a type of cultural belonging which is transcendent and potentially universal without being defined by the Western hegemony. (178)

Alghamdi emphasizes that Salma's narrative moves beyond what he implies is normative Western culture. This, according to him, upgrades the novel to one that has "universal" qualities. Universality is defined by Alghamdi as anything but Western as he claims that "multicultural English narratives [including Faqir's novel] are no longer understood as English as they are produced by and about the other who is everything else than English" (35). Even though the

[28] Fictional texts like *My Name is Salma*, according to Alqahtani, could be seen as having the potential to correct both the misinterpretations of Islamic texts and the stereotypical image of Muslims in the West by referring to Islamic texts from a feminist perspective.

novel is written in English, he claims that English is only a medium to carry the meanings of the text, but its core meaning should be seen as the opposite to anything that is English. Salma, in this sense, is a woman who is not defined by Western traits, as Alghamdi affirms in his conclusion that her greatest virtue is her resistance to the liberal values which glorify the individual's autonomy. What Alghamdi wants to create is an image of a woman who is inherently different to Western women even if she does not live in her mother country. He starts his study by arguing that Salma conforms to the Western model of personal development, especially in terms of financial fulfilment, as she participates in the economic development of the host country. But then, he argues that she chooses to leave this behind and submit to a more authentic model. Central to his argument is to represent Salma as a symbol of resistance to the West. This aligns Alghamdi's reading with Alqahtini's: what unites them is the way they objectify Salma as a figure of resistance. What predicates their discussions is the question of whether Salma is or is not a symbol of resistance to Western cultural supremacy.

What is valorised in Alghamdi's and the many other such socio-political readings of *My Name is Salma* is the novel's didactic function: its capacity to teach the implied Western reader about Muslim subjectivities. Another example of such an approach is Sibyl Adam's article "Melancholic Migrations and Affective Objects in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*", in which Adam asserts that the novel affords readers a new understanding of immigrants' melancholia. First, Adam argues that in Western culture melancholia is perceived as a negative psychological state that affects individuals and communities. Then, she claims that Faqir introduces her readers to a more positive conception of melancholia. Immigrant subjects, Adam claims, benefit from collective melancholia and use it as a means of solidarity and attaining political agency. Again, the emphasis falls on what new information these texts can impart to an implied Western reader about minority Muslim communities in the West:

> Collective melancholia transcends the characterising of such a feeling as negatively pathological, and the way in which the novel depicts melancholia can be seen to serve a

> didactic function by reminding the reader of structural inequalities and how the history of European imperialism informs present-day xenophobia (20).

After Adam demonstrates Salma's marginalization by the white community in the West, she claims that Salma's feelings of sadness enable her to discover her own independence and freedom. The novel, she asserts, "engages with melancholia politically by transcending [the] nationalistic emotion in order to show the potential of communal emotion as a route to agency" (3). Through her own melancholia, Salma is able to sympathize with other immigrants with whom she does not share any nationalistic affiliation (since Salma becomes a British citizen). Adam praises the novel's ability to go beyond the distinction between local citizenship and immigration as she affirms that "the communal feeling of melancholia, mediated through [Salma's] first-person narrative, disrupts the assumption that this emotion can be regulated simply along the lines of national distinctions, of local citizens and immigrants" (18).
So, while at first Adam considers the state of melancholia as a direct result of oppression, she reconsiders it as a means of empowerment which, in her view, offers a new way of looking at immigrants' issues.

The principal focus of Adam's analysis of melancholia is how to enrich the "on-going discussions about cultural constructions of Muslim identity in Britain" (21). What is overlooked, however, is the fact that Muslim characters are, in and of themselves, active agents in the creation of such "Muslim identity in Britain". Within the parameters of Adam's analysis, Muslim characters are constructed by external Western forces. Salma's agency is restricted to the extent to which she resists and reacts to Western powers, as demonstrated in such claims as: "the novel shows how migrants are in a unique position to refute the national project that upholds designations of rights, citizenship and belonging" (3). This didactic function, rather than Salma's individual agency, is what Adam values most. And even if Salma performs a kind of social interaction, her attitude remains subject to scrutiny that attributes her actions to some kind of external influence. For example, Salma's connectedness to other immigrants is couched in terms

of being informed by a different culture (than the Western), making her a model immigrant tasked to set an example of immigrants. Describing Salma's feelings of sympathy towards an elderly Arab immigrant, Adam writes:

> After overhearing the man's paranoia, Salma feels great affection for him, declaring that she wished she could kiss 'the green protruding veins on the back of his ageing flaky hand' (35). To perform this intimate act would be to conform to the codes of her home in the Levant, exhibiting a solidarity with this man through the particularly affective element of this act. Such encounters reconfigure the political as intimate, everyday and emotional. Solidarity is not shown through, say, public protests, but through communal melancholia. (19)

Salma here is symbolized in Adam's reading as a *genuine* woman who comes from a traditional culture; one that is opposite to the known and culturalized West. Her every act is looked upon as needing to be explained, studied, and learned from. Adam uses the phrase "exhibiting a solidarity" which indicates that Salma performs an act that exists outside the known Western experience of politics as she conforms to norms of commonality (or social interaction) which belong to her indigenous culture. What Adam wants to extrapolate is the distinctiveness of Salma's identity (as an Arab Muslim immigrant) in comparison to the monolithic Western identity. This attempt to isolate and portray her identity as fundamentally separate from Western ideas of identity-formation dislocates the novel from its status as an anglophone text. Adam ignores the fact that the novel is written in a context where Eastern and Western cultures are inseparable. Hence, whatever behaviour Salma performs is interpreted as representing a larger ethical or moral standard; she is always caught up in a position where she must represent a minority identity that is unusual or at least unfamiliar to what Adam presumes as the Western audience. Here, as with Alqahtani, there is a close engagement with the details of text, but that engagement is pre-determined by the desire to link these details to a larger political and social framework. So, even though the novel has a tragic end, it is understood as symbolically resisting

the causes of such a tragedy, such as patriarchy in Jordanian society and the poor treatment of immigrants in the UK. In Alqahtani's reading, Salma – as a Muslim Jordanian – is understood as resisting women's subjugation in Jordan, and at the same time the text works as a corrective to the stereotypes that link Islam to violence against women. In Adam's reading, Salma is a woman who shows how Muslim immigrants are capable of forming unusual modes of resistance to marginalization in the West. In both readings, the close engagement with the text results in perceiving it as having political and social significance to such immigrants.

The other reading I will address, however, works in an opposite direction as it distances itself from the novel, arguing instead that Faqir writes her novel in a way that is predetermined by the force of a global literary marketplace. From a materialist angle, the novel's agency in correcting the social and political conditions of Muslims is underestimated, here. The novel is read as an example of how fiction by minority writers is shaped by the demand for negative depictions of Muslims in the global literary marketplace, thereby damaging the perception of the Muslim community by the West. One example of such a reading comes from Hassan Majed, who argues that Faqir has participated in that marketplace by trading on her difference. Her categorisation as "authentic" "has been very important for the novel in gaining [the market's] attention and praise" (130), he contends, citing Graham Huggan's comment that "for every aspiring writer at the 'periphery,' there is a publisher at the 'centre,' eager to seize upon their work as a source of marketable 'otherness'" ("The Postcolonial Exotic" 29).

Majed goes as far as to say that *My Name is Salma* misrepresents Islam and Muslims. Drawing on Faqir's biography to bolster his argument, he stresses that Faqir was not interested in Islam until the attacks of 9/11, and accuses her of cashing in when the demand for texts about Muslims was at its peak (142). This, in his opinion, is a reason to think of Faqir as a Muslim who is more attached to Western culture than to Islam. He asserts that "two factors, the hybrid identity of the writer and the need of meeting western expectations, might cause Muslim writers to obfuscate their representation of their native culture" (144). Majed sees Faqir as incapable of

presenting an accurate image of her culture, and he questions her loyalty to it. He condemns Faqir's dereliction in performing what he sees as her duty as a cultural ambassador to the West. He affirms that "contrary to their supposed contribution in bridging the divide and fostering understanding, some of the Anglo-Arab writers [like Faqir] seem to endorse the western prejudicial stereotypes [while] at the same time claiming authenticity for their own work" (155).[29] While at first he criticizes Faqir for adopting English as a language for her writing in deference to Western values, he then accuses her of not fulfilling her cultural duty of making the West understand the East in a positive way.[30] Majed defines the ideal writer as one whose works are attractive to the West but at the same time enlightens and educates the West about Muslims. In this perspective, writers are expected to dualize their interests by writing to the West but for the benefit of the East; they should write in such a way that their message to the West is successfully delivered while their cultural background is retained and emphasized.

Going back to the materialist criticism around the novel, I do not reject the idea that minority writers are subject to unjust practices of an industry that benefits from their "otherness" and even controls the shape of their literary production. Faqir herself, in an interview with Lindsay Moore, explains that the production process of her novels is pre-determined by her publishers. She remarks on the variety of the editions of her books in different countries:

[29] According to Majed, Faqir fails to fulfil her mission to attract Western readers without exposing Muslims to negative views. For example, he focuses on the honour killing issue as he regards it as a trigger of anti-Muslim sentiment in Faqir's novel. He comments that: "those who chased Salma and threatened her are at the end all Muslims. Hima is a Muslim village. There is a mosque, an imam, and Muslims there pray and read the Quran" (146). He concludes that "although Islam does not permit honour killing, Islam is depicted in the novel as a potential cause of this kind of crime" (146). Majed here claims a position of an authentic or loyal Muslim critic and treats Islam as if it is an entity that needs to be protected from unfaithful Muslim writers and their misrepresentation of its communities.

[30] Layla Al Maleh argues in her book, *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* that "distance does not always rescue [the Arab writers] from their critics 'back home', who take them to task in unsparingly vociferous attacks, relentlessly construing both their choice of foreign tongue and their subject-matter as a reflection of disaffection or lack of national feeling" (14). This is true of Majed's reading of *My Name is Salma* as he positions Faqir's fiction as a medium through which her authenticity and loyalty are interrogated, placing particular emphasis on the fact that she writes in a foreign language.

> All my books have a veiled woman on the cover. I don't see all of them before they get published and I don't approve them. The only editions of *Salma* without a veil are in Indonesia, France and India. *Nisanit* in the States has a totally veiled woman on the cover. The women in my books are not usually veiled: they either reject the veil or don't think about it. Other issues concern them. Yet the reduction continues. (6)

Similarly, *My Name is Salma* has another title in the United States, *The Cry of the Dove*, with the cover picture featuring a woman all in black walking outside what looks like a Persian building with Islamic design (while the novel recounts the story of a Bedouin Jordanian woman). Faqir comments on this in another interview, clarifying that she had little control over the final title of the book:

> We came up with about 15 titles, but my British and American publishers could not agree on one. I had two options: either reject the titles or break my contract with the American publisher. I grudgingly agreed because I wanted to be on Grove's list, a respectable publisher. The decision complicated my life and website. I will never agree to something like this again. (Bower 7)

Evidently, the voice of Faqir is delayed as she speaks out in print against such decisions only after her books have already been published. In the first comment, she admits that most of her books are intentionally linked by her publishers to the image of a veiled Muslim woman, presumably to gain more attention and to increase sales. As such, it could be argued that she is a writer attempting to access the publishing industry and allowing the 'exotic' aspects of her works to be exploited so that they sell better. Furthermore, based on the second comment, it also possible to argue that Faqir herself contributes to the reduction of her work since she agreed to such changes so that her book would be published by a "respectable" publisher, one that assures her more profit and prestige. Ultimately, however, neither of these approaches is very helpful in terms of thinking about the works themselves. What I propose, instead, is to read the novel as more than the product of its material contexts: as fiction, where the boundaries of the actual are

negotiated, revised and reconstructed. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss how Faqir succeeds in providing an alternative ending to her novel, which demonstrates her agency as a writer who challenges the demands of the literary marketplace.

Faqir's Engagement with the Global Literary Marketplace

The end of Salma's story, her death, is often read as "tragic".[31] Faqir herself has commented on this, stating that she wanted two endings to her narrative: "I wanted to have a happy ending—end number one – and then end number two. Not a single publishing house would accept that, because it was too experimental for them" (qtd. In Chambers 65).[32] Faqir also laments the way she, as an immigrant Arab writer who wants to write experimental fiction, is afforded limited space for creativity as she has to compromise her artistic choices for the sake of getting published. She adds that: "When we want to sell a publisher an experimental Arab book, we're told that it has to be linear. It has to be, 'Ah, they beat me up, I am oppressed'" (qtd. In Chambers 65). The publishing industry has preconceived expectations of a writer such as Faqir, based on the idea that the prospective audience is expecting an informative narrative that either reinforces or resists stereotypical images of Arab women.

I argue instead that the text itself could be read as performing a kind of agency that does battle with the already existing restrictions on its shape and meaning. In my view, Faqir – who is aware of the expectations of the marketplace – writes a novel which appears to conform to one of these stereotypes (telling the story of a victim of honour crime) but which, at the same time, constructs a narrative that is multi-layered and nuanced. Faqir successfully achieves a kind of circumventing or subverting of the gatekeeping work of the publishing industry as she manages to embed her two endings in a way that offers readers an aesthetic experience – one that can be read in an engaged and attached manner, as proposed by postcritique.

[31] See, for example, Alghamdi's *Transformations of the Liminal Self: Configurations of Home and Identity for Muslim Characters in British Postcolonial Fiction* (180).
[32] There are a number of novels that have alternative endings – for example, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

Incorporating the supplementary, happy ending is an unconventional technique. It problematises the linearity of a story that is ostensibly about an oppressed Arab woman. This ending takes place at the close of the penultimate chapter. Here, Salma recounts how she is happily married to John, and introduces their newly born son Imran, whose name means "harmonious cities and civilization" (183). She says: "If you did not know me you would have thought that we were an ordinary family on a day out enjoying the brief winter sunshine. I should have been happy, but something was holding my heart back" (185). The domestic narrative reaches its climax when Salma and her husband buy Swan Cottage and settle in Exeter among friends. Everyone is happy, and Salma is content with her new life. But the pleasing imagery of her enjoying her life with family, job and house is dissipated immediately in the opening scene of the last chapter. Titled "Black Iris", this chapter begins with an episode where Salma is suffering from insomnia. The narrator conveys the range of responses of Salma's loved ones on hearing her plan to go back to the village:

> 'This is madness. What's wrong with you? Since you've given birth you've gone downhill. You don't eat. You cry all the time. You look like a tramp. Have you started seeing men with rifles again?' 'I depressed. I dream of Layla almost every night. Something must have happened to her. Mother's heart know,' I said. 'I don't know what to say,' Gwen said. 'If Salma feels she should go, then we cannot stop her, I'm afraid.' 'I won't let you, Salma. What about our son? What about me?' John choked. (188)

This chapter differs from the others: the storyline is more straightforward, as if heading towards a definite destination; the action is faster, as if expressing a deterioration in Salma's mental health; and the dialogue seems different than in previous chapters. Parvin's voice – unattributed in the passage above – and the awkward repetition of the pronoun "you" might be read as an amplification of Salma's inner feelings, voicing her thoughts that she is responsible and guilty for what happens to herself and her daughter. The largely unmediated delivery of several

different voices creates a somewhat chaotic chorus, perhaps suggestive of the destabilising experience of postpartum depression, or alternatively interpretable as a delirious dream. The dream theory can be supported by other episodes in the novel where the narrator treats the real and the imaginative similarly. An example can be found when Salma imagines the ghostly presence of her dead lover Hamdan: "As for the lone assassin, he followed me back to work. His leather sandals worn out, his feet covered with desert dust, his yellow toenails long, chipped and lined with grime and his rifle slung on his right shoulder, he kept pace with me until I arrived at Lord's Tailors" (87). Having recently read a poem by the Japanese poet Suzume No-Kumo about a "lone assassin", Salma interweaves the fantastical (the figure of Hamdan haunting her in Exeter) with the factual (her journey to work).

As such, it is possible to argue that the incidents of the last chapter are confined to Salma's imagination, but this must remain conjectural as we are not offered any explanation. A more literal reading sees Salma indeed travel back to the village and be killed by her brother, in a fictional representation of the real problem of killing for so-called "honour" crimes. Indeed, the title of the chapter "Black Iris" refers to the national symbol of Jordan, where so-called "honour" killing is common.[33] As previously discussed, much of the critical reception of the novel has focused on Salma as a passive victim of the patriarchal system in her Bedouin society. In contrast, what I aim to emphasize in my reading is how Salma is rather an active individual who moves between two places and who recounts her own story in a way that reinforces her personal agency. Such a claim is particularly valid if the whole narrative is viewed as an active product of Salma's memory; since the narrative is recounted retrospectively, Salma as a narrator has power over her own narrative. The narrative defies conventions of linearity: the storyline is fragmented by oscillations in time and space, functioning as an expression of Salma's autonomy. The fragmented formal structure of the narrative inflects the trajectory of the story, and as a

[33] For more information see Adam Coogle's "Recorded 'Honor' Killings on the Rise in Jordan Alarm Grows With 26 Murders So Far This Year" and Hiba Balaha's "Until When?! Honor Killings and Other Domestic Violence Against Women in Jordan".

protagonist Salma does not conform easily to any collective cultural or social position. This makes her ill-suited to represent any social order or community.

The technique of shifting between times, places and perspectives enacts Faqir's ideas about the power of fragmented and multi-layered stories. She affirms that her narrative is written as a mosaic as she wants to capture a "larger chunk of the truth" (qtd. in Chambers 65). This is important if we consider the novel as writing back to the expectation of producing an informative or representative narrative about immigrants or Muslim women. Hence, Faqir's desire is to capture only aspects of the truth but not the truth itself, which is a very helpful way to avoid simplifying the conditions and experiences of Muslim women. This nuanced approach means that Salma can be read as more and at the same time less than the conventional image of the Muslim woman usually indicates. In other words, as a fictional story about a Muslim woman, *My Name is Salma* can tell us how one novel is never enough to represent the wide, diverse category of "Muslim women". The following section will discuss these points, building on Felski's encouragement to engage with the text not only in relation to its social and political meaning but for its artistic value and agency.

As a narrator Salma is positioned between two past versions of herself, and we are invited to read her experience from her personal perspective. The first two pages set up the nature of the story. There are three distinctive time periods in the narration: one recounts Salma's new life in Exeter, another concerns her old life in an unknown village of the Hima, and the third is located in the time after her story ends:

> The white sheep dotted the green hills like teased wool and the lights of the solitary mill floated on the calm surface of the River Exe. It was a new day, but the dewy greenness of the hills, the whiteness of the sheep, the greyness of the skies carried me to my distant past, the small mud village tucked away between the deserted hills, to Hima, to silver-green olive groves gleaming in the morning light. I used to be a

> shepherdess, who under a barefaced sun guided her goats to the scarce green patches with her reed pipe. (5)

There are two different images of Salma in this passage: Salma the narrator, who looks at her recent past in Exeter, and the remembered Salma who lived in Hima. She begins by using the first-person pronoun but then shifts to the gendered third person later in the same sentence, when looking at the more distant self: "I used to be a shepherdess, who under a barefaced sun guided her goats to the scarce green patches with her reed pipe". This passage indicates a detachment between the current version of Salma living in Exeter and Salma's past in the village. However, the visible split here, between Salma's present and past selves, gives way later in the story to a narrowing of the gap between the two images.

Most of the narration is told using the first-person point of view. However, sometimes the narrator invites the reader's engagement by utilizing other perspectives, as in the following episode:

> With a lubricated razor, I shaved my legs and underarms carefully. Before your wedding night they spread a paste of boiled sugar and lemon between your legs and yank away the hair. My grandmother Shahla said, 'When they finished with me I was covered with bruises, but as smooth and hairless as a nine-year-old girl. Your grandfather preferred it clean. I looked so pure and innocent, he said.' (12-13)

From her dual perspective on England and her homeland, Salma comments on a process that she sees as very different in the two cultures. She uses the first person to tell us about shaving her legs with a lubricated razor, but when she wants to introduce a different perspective, she uses the second person. The distancing effect of using "you" and "they" might be attributable to the fact that she is aware of this ritual but has not yet experienced it herself, as an unmarried woman. Another possibility is that, as a woman who has lived in England for a long time, she internalizes the judgment of an outsider (to the village) and invites us to partake in witnessing an exotic experience. She brings in the memories of her grandmother and then finishes with the

perspective of a male figure, her grandfather, whose words emerge out of layers of different voices. It is all filtered and delivered through the point of view of Salma, who is committed to not flattening these multiple perspectives.

The complex structure of the novel inflects its themes, especially its way of presenting images about the East and West. This can be traced by attending to a set of dichotomies related to the two different cultures. I argue that Salma indicates no clear preference for either of the two social systems. Instead, she embraces the complications of each culture in a meditative way, showing herself able to assess the positive and negative aspects of both. The first such juxtaposition in the novel shows the difference between life in a Bedouin Arabic village and a modern English city. The opposition between the rural and urban occupies a vital space in Salma's narration, as most of the chapters start and end in moments where Salma compares the landscapes of Hima and Exeter. Within this contrast there are some generic concepts of primitiveness and civilization that are conceptualized especially in regard to issues of oppression and freedom. The concepts of the oppressive society of the village and the free one of England are interrogated throughout Salma's narrative.

The authoritarian power in the village is the power of the tribe, as it has ultimate control over the land and its inhabitants. The Arabic name "Hima" means the protected place or the place with boundaries that separate insiders and outsiders. It may also mean the very action of defence and protection, which is usually performed by men over women. One of the tribe's goals is to keep the village under a specific social order: whoever breaks its law would become an outsider, to be excluded or even killed. In honour issues, and specifically in cases of sexual relationships outside wedlock, it is usually the woman who would receive the whole punishment and men who would be the executors. As is the case for Salma, the social system in the village mostly works against the will of individuals as it tries to perform its power in order to maintain homogeneity. It is a system that restricts freedom and provides its people with ready-made frameworks for their lives.

Hence, from Salma's perspective, the village is a place where social boundaries are clear and well defined. She perceives herself and others in the village as very close to nature, describing herself as wandering in the wild lands and "under a barefaced sun guid[ing] her goats to the scarce green patches with her reed pipe" (5). There are elements of romance in this description of herself in the pastoral scene. The term "barefaced" gives the impression that she is a woman who is not yet burdened with feelings of shame, or forced to mask herself; she is in harmony with nature as she is still a virgin woman. This sense is developed by other observations on how village life is aligned with nature. One example is when Salma describes Hima during springtime, observing that the village "at this time of the year would be teeming with camels, horses, cows, dogs, cats, butterflies and honeybees" (5). It is the time of "engagements" and she is aware of her existence as part of the natural world that surrounds her, describing herself as "ripe and ready to be plucked" at the time of "harvest" where "weddings and celebrations would be held" (5). The word "ripe" constructs the society as primitive, as it is coded as natural (for the villagers) that she is mature enough to be married. To put it more simply, she is here part of nature rather than the social structure – and thus dehumanized, so that whatever step she takes outside this context would be deemed as contrary to the order around her. Her affair with Hamdan can be read as an act of resistance to these restrictions in pursuit of individual freedom. In my view, however, the text offers a more complex portrait of Salma. It matters that the image of Salma as a primitive woman is conceived *after* she arrives in England, a sign perhaps that Salma is enacting the judgment of Western culture when looking back at her previous life. Such cultural meditation continues over the course of the narrative, as when she arrives in England, she starts to question the meaning of personal freedom in a way that shows how observant she is to both cultures.

When she moves to England, the generic idea of individual freedom is signified by a juxtaposition of the old, oppressed Salma with the new, ostensibly free one. This contrast is evident in the following passage:

> I stuck a liner to my pants, pulled them up my shaved and oiled legs and realized that I was free at last. Gone were the days when I used to chase the hens around in wide pantaloons and loose flowery dresses in the bright colours of my village: red to be noticed, black for anger, green for spring and bright orange for the hot sun. If this small glass bottle were full of snake venom I would drink it in one go. (7-8)

The complexity of Salma being a woman in both places is evident in the way she refers to her body as an emblem of cultural difference. In the first stance here, she is "free" to draw our attention to the lower parts of her body, through her vibrant clothing, yet some of its realities as a female body are still suppressed: its bleeding and its hair are still expected to be concealed. What is also stressed here is the effort required to maintain the regime of shaving and oiling her legs, and the fact that this effort is required by the culture she now finds herself in. In the village she used to be cautious of the "code of honor" between her legs, which is why she used to hide her body with "wide pantaloons and loose flowery dresses" (28). This complicates the notion that she is completely liberated in either community, a complication that is enhanced by the last line of the quoted section: "If this small glass bottle were full of snake venom I would drink it in one go". This line is in direct contradiction to the opening of the episode, when she says that she is "free at last". Salma's freedom is never absolute. She still suffers in England, which disturbs the linearity of the judgment that Salma is an oppressed Jordanian woman who becomes free once she leaves her home country.

Elsewhere in the novel we find that freedom is not exclusively connected to England. In one nostalgic moment when Salma is in a restaurant in Exeter she comes out to the street and smells fried street-food outside. This triggers a sensory memory of Hima, which is presented with feelings of freedom and belonging:

> I rushed out through the African door to the cold street sniffing the air for the aroma of home. The smell summoned me and I obliged as if in a trance. The smell of rich food being fried was mine. I sniffed the smell of familiarity, freedom and home. (20)

Salma is portrayed here as if she is half-conscious; she is driven by her senses, longing for a place where she feels at home. The repetition of the word "smell" indicates that her feeling cannot be rationalized; freedom is felt and experienced but is hard to define and make known. This is particularly true when we take into account the complication of the binary of freedom and oppression that occurs throughout the novel.

England is presented, at first, as a destination of generic freedom, but the connotation of free England does not last long. When Salma runs away from the prison in Jordan, she ironically spends her first months in an immigration detention centre in Southampton. After she is released, she recounts her first impressions of England and expresses her feeling that she has "landed on another planet, where men were working like machines and where giant lifts filled the sky" (88). Images of grey, industrial England persist in the narrative, confirming the opposition between modern England and rural Hima. Similarly, Salma observes the limited conditions of women's freedoms in England, noticing the advertisements that offer ways of controlling the effects of nature on their appearances: "The chemists promised that their dye would permanently cover grey hair, their body lotions would turn skin to smooth silk and their facial creams would iron out any wrinkles. Englishwomen were promised they would look 'ten years younger'" (11). Salma's critique of the ways in which women's bodies are constrained is not, then, reserved for Hima; the critical tone here notes the similarly restrictive conditions for women in the village and England. While in Hima she describes herself (and other women) as being seen merely as bodies; in England, women are treated no differently. Englishwomen are targets of a whole industry that aims to control and profit from their body image. In the previous lines Salma does not describe real women who look younger than their ages but, instead, the marketing processes of corporations who are mainly interested in selling their products. Body image is the oppressive force that influences the way Salma is perceived England.

Hence, the new culture comes with a set of conventions that are related to the way women should look. Sometimes Salma is ready to embrace the necessary changes, but at other times she

becomes incapable of following through. The first thing she changes is the way she wears clothes. Her friend Parvin tells her that she will never find a job unless she changes her look: "lighten up! Groom yourself! sell yourself! You are now in a capitalist society that is not your own" (51). The phrase 'lighten up' here might have a literal meaning, suggesting that Salma should aspire to look like white people, perhaps even to use skin-lightening cream, in order to maximise her chances of getting a job. It is also an injunction to appear cheerful, which is another burden that Salma and all women face when trying to assimilate into wider society. While looking for employment, Salma is confronted with various models of acceptability that mainly revolve around body image and external appearance. For example, a local newspaper advert recruiting for a salesgirl specifies that she must be "presentable" (17). At first, Salma manages to get a job as a seamstress and this requires no more than taking her veil off. However, things get more complicated when she applies for another job in a hotel bar as a glass collector. When she first meets the hotel manager, Allan, he says: "wear something decent", "a white shirt and a black skirt" (150). This word "decent" is repeated when her friend Gwen says: "you must wear decent clothes, but try to look classy, never wear tight short skirts, don't talk to customers and be as unobtrusive as possible" (152). Both Allan and Gwen ask for "decent" clothes but they mean different things: Allan refers to a professional kind of uniform, specifying the colour and items he has in mind; Gwen, on the other hand, describes the function of the dress, which is to give a "classy" and modest impression and not to attract the attention of the male customers. Allan and Gwen expect Salma to present different images to the patrons of the bar, who are predominantly constructed as male. In Gwen's definition, Salma should find the ideal balance between being professional but not being exposed to the harmful male gaze. As in the village, it is invisibility that will make her safe. Gwen here represents the conservative and protective part of English society. She advises Salma to follow the rules of English people, as she says: "you know English people. Dos and don'ts" (152). However, Gwen's advice does not work well in her hotel job: "last night [Allan] summoned me to his office and lectures me on my appearance. 'Our

customers want to be surrounded by beautiful women… you must try to be presentable like. . . like an air hostess, whenever I take a flight, I get tucked in, taken care of by girls with lined eyes, tight skirts and full red lips" (178). Allan here explicitly articulates his desire to turn Salma into a sexualized worker to please his male customers. He links this to his satisfaction (as a man) when he is served by women whose heterosexuality and sexual availability are made visible. For Salma, the ambiguous and shifting boundaries – which are more blurred than the ones in her village – are confusing. She struggles with what is acceptable and what is not, especially regarding how she dresses and the way she interacts with the males around her.

After receiving the note from Allan stating that she must please male customers with an attractive appearance, Salma's morning and evening personal care regime is highlighted in many passages of the novel:

> I had a bath, shaved my legs, washed my hair, rubbed my body with cream, sprayed myself with deodorant and powdered myself with perfume. I dried my hair enhancing its body, put on black tights, a short black skirt, black high-heeled shoes, a sleeveless frilly white shirt and painted a rainbow around my eyes. I looked at the mirror and saw a clown looking back at me. I might be attacked tonight. I might be gang-raped then killed. They might find my body under the yew tree by the river. When Elizabeth saw me she said, 'Sally, you are hustling these days, aren't you?' (178).

Salma's tone here is not one of satisfaction or personal pleasure: there is a resigned gloominess in the details of her appearance, and the language in the passage is not sentimentalized in the way that the description of her dress in the village is. Here, her phrases about her self-care routine are quick and direct, taking on the language of the ubiquitous advertisements. Salma is exposed to the culture of consumerism which always promises (and endlessly defers) happiness. The pace and irony of life around her also intensifies here, in the way she thinks that she might be raped and killed by a gang. In the abrupt comment that she might be attacked, Salma's fear is not real as much as it is about the way she looks at herself. This seems to be a self-punishing

fantasy, as the feeling of shame dominates. When she recalls Elizabeth's words – "'Sally, you are hustling these days, aren't you?'" – Salma is judged and judges herself for allowing her body to be sexually exploited. She internalizes the judgment of others which makes her feel that she deserves to be punished. This sense of vulnerability is even stronger when she reports on Allan's appraisal of her new look: "Allan liked the frizzy hair and the short skirt." (179) Noticing the way he follows her with his eyes, she can imagine how he perceives her: "My colour had faded away and was replaced by curves, flesh and promises" (179). She is conscious that her body is objectified by society; she becomes a consumer of many products in order to be acceptable and, at the same time, her body is itself consumed as a sexual object. The word "promises" is used in the context of the chemists who want to sell their products to women in order to change the way their bodies look, as well as here, where Salma's body is seen as a source of sexual possibility by her male employer.

Thus, whilst in the village Salma's body is a source of anxiety to her family, who require her to cover it until it is to be given to a man of their choosing, in England Salma's body becomes a source of anxiety to herself, as she is expected to conform to different social templates in order to make others feel comfortable, which in itself makes her feel uncomfortable. This is evident in the way she describes the clothes she wears when going to a local pub: "I chose the tightest and shortest skirt in the wardrobe and squeezed myself into it, slipped my legs into sheer transparent black tights then wore my shiny black high heeled shoes" (58). The clothes here are ready for her; all she needs to do is to squeeze her body into the skirt and slip her legs into the tights. She also "pulled the straps up to give [her] breasts a younger, fuller shape" (58). She must look attractive and young to be able to gain money or to have a relationship with others. Dressing like a "movie star" she heads to the pub, where she meets Jim and sleeps with him. When she wakes up, she wishes she "could put [herself] among the washing so [she] would come out at the other end 'squeaky clean' without dry stains or dark deeds" (105). She internalizes the objectification of her body and wishes (as if she were a commodity in an advertisement) that she could be

quickly and effectively turned into something processed; something that, with the help of a machine, is easily fixed. This emphasizes the contemporary societal pressure that is centered around consumption and indulgence. In England, Salma faces a culture that is based on gratification whereas her previous one was more about abnegation.

Due to such cultural differences, Salma at the very beginning of the novel provides us with two distinctive images of herself, the Bedouin (old) and the English (new). It is only towards the end of the novel that the split between the two images dissolves and the narrator acknowledges that they become one. This happens in one moment where three figures of Salma are introduced: the first is the proud English Sally who is "standing erect, head high, back straight" (165). This echoes the description of Elizabeth when Salma meets her for the first time: Elizabeth "stood erect as if inspecting her guards" (7). The second is the grieving Bedouin Salma, who is "sitting on the ground, swaying her upper half and sprinkling ashes over her head" (165). There is readiness and strength in the image of the English figure, which contrasts with reluctance and weakness in the Arabic one, as Salma's second image of herself is summoned from her memory of her mother's mourning when her sisters die: "under the moonlight I could only see the outline of her dark body rocking back and forth with grief" (177). These two images of Salma are explicitly borrowed, as she sees herself from the outside, through others' eyes. This, then, makes the third image different as she figuratively imagines herself to be "a tree neither of the East nor of the West" (165). What is striking is that the rest of the description of this third self of Salma is an allusion to the 35th verse of the 24th surah of the Quran (Surah of An nur). She says that she becomes an "a tree neither of the East nor of the West, olive oil in a glass lamp, doves cooing, white upon dark, dark upon white, light upon light just where the sky meets the dark outlines of the trees, lambs and hills at the end of the horizon" (166). The narrator here does not explicitly acknowledge the Quranic verse but simply borrows its images and embeds them into the rest of the description of Salma. It is as if these various images of her are mixed up and the distinction

between them is hard to locate. She transcends the differences and embraces a fluid identity in an autonomous way.

The reference to the Quranic verse points to another aspect of herself about which Salma is ambivalent – namely, her religious identity. Part of the text's thematic fluidity is the uncertainty that Salma shows towards her inherited religion. There is no direct trajectory that she follows in terms of her relationship with Islam; she does not simply move from being faithful to being secular. In the village she distances herself from God; when she recounts the villagers' prayer to ask for rain, she detaches herself from the rest of the community: "They all knelt in unison before their maker and pleaded with Him to send in the rain" (19). Yet the capitalisation of "Him" suggests a conventional piety, which makes her relationship to faith unstable. Salma does not identify herself among the worshippers of God, but at the same time she does not disown her affiliation with them or their associated cultural practices. Later, in Exeter, she performs a direct Islamic supplication to Allah: "Forgive me, Allah, for I have sinned. The heat of passion had made me bend" (8).

This ambivalent, fluctuating relationship with Islam is also reflected in Salma's use of the hijab. The narrative sometimes links the veil to Islamic principles, but more commonly it indicates cultural belonging. The novel indicates that hijab is only cultural to Salma when she has no problem unveiling herself to Hamdan while she is still in the village, which is predominantly Islamic. Paradoxically, it is when she leaves the village that she clings to the practice of veiling. This happens while she is on her way to England, when Miss Asher tries to convince her that "Jesus Christ loves" her the way she is and that he "has made [her] perfect" (189). At this point, in broken English, Salma explains what the veil means to her: "I cannot take off veil, Sister. My country, my language, my daughter. No piece of cloth. Feel naked, me" (189). At this stage, she feels threatened when asked to take it off because it connects her to her origins. As she is uprooted, she feels naked if she takes the veil off as her feelings of alienation would be intensified. She is an outsider but wants to tell everyone, by wearing the veil, that she

has a family, a country and language. Hijab is not of religious importance to Salma here. When she wears the veil in the village, she does so out of concern for the community; when she is out of their sight, she simply takes it off.

Furthermore, the only moment when Salma identifies the veil as having particular Islamic significance is when she voluntarily takes it off. This takes place in England after spending years away from the village, and in order to assimilate to the new society she decides that she wants to abandon the veil. At this moment she experiences terrible feelings:

> I wore blue jeans, a T-shirt and tied my white veil under my chin tightly. I looked again at my reflection then slowly began untying the knot of my white veil… I felt as dirty as a whore, with no name or family, as a sinner who would never see paradise and drink from its rivers of milk and honey. When a man walked by and looked at my hair my scalp twitched (129).

Salma's self-loathing is evident in the similes "as a whore" and "as a sinner"; she adopts the judgments of society and applies them to herself, while not being truly convinced of such judgments. She compares herself to the "whore" when she breaks the cultural boundaries of the Levant, and to the "sinner" when she breaks her vows to God, but at the same time distances herself from being overwhelmed by such judgments. Even her tone in saying that "she would never see paradise and drink from its rivers of milk and honey" seems partly ironic. This is evidenced in other places, such as when she recounts a story about her father. She says when she was a little girl her father told her "you are lucky to be born Muslim […] Because your final abode is paradise. You will sit there in a cloud of perfume drinking milk and honey" (19). The image of the "Islamic paradise," as Salma calls it, is then embodied in a worldly cup of "caramel milk" that she orders in a café in Exeter: "I had a sip of milk and honey and it tasted like Islamic paradise" (173). The way she looks at herself in relation to her culture and religion seems very paradoxical. However, this exemplifies what I have argued is the tension between the personal and the political, the intimate and the informative. In other words, her previous feelings of self-

loathing are not corrective or judgmental; they reflect the complex way she interacts with what is around her. Salma always detaches herself from what seem to be definitive and absolute social and religious values. This makes her a character who is not a complete, fixed, and easily defined version of herself at any stage of the story.

My Name is Salma is distinguished from the other texts under discussion in my thesis by its refusal to offer a blanket, apologetic denunciation of the collective moral restrictions of Salma's previous society. At the same time, the values of the West are not completely celebrated as an ideal alternative. Salma is able to evaluate both the positive and negative sides of the East and the West in an independent way. She refers to her family in positive terms: "I wanted to show John that I was not alcoholic, not a barbarian, and that I had been raised well by my parents, back there in Hima" (282). She also appreciates the opportunities that she has in the West: "Although Parvin had called him a racist, sexist pig, Max gave her a job when no one would" (280). And when Allan helps her to avoid harassment from the bar customers, she comments: "behind all that groomed look, sticky hair and bowties, Allan was a real gentleman" (183). This, again, reflects the maturity that Salma enjoys as an individual observer of both cultures. She is not simply reactive to social conditions nor resistant, but is an active participant as she tries to make her own path. Salma also powerfully comments on the nuances and complexities of inhabiting such a liminal space without reducing the narrative to be representative of any cultural or social ideologies. As I explained in the first part of this chapter, there are tensions between the individual and the collective in the context in which the novel exists, and in most previous readings this tension is overlooked in favour of the novel's perceived social and political value. In other words, in spite of the fact that the novel assertively presents the story of an individual female character, it is insistently read in terms of what this individual can tell us about the group she supposedly belongs to. Hence, in the second part of this chapter I have shown that Salma's allegiance to one culture over the other fluctuates over the course of the narrative. There is no hierarchical preference of any of the associations she has to the East and the West; she is subject

to dominating forces in both the village and in Exeter, and there are different kinds of restrictions and conventions that she must follow in each community. What is interesting is the way she deals with these dilemmas. In the village, she chooses to break the rules and take individual action, which is against the collective will of her people. Similarly, in the West, she refuses to be shaped by any of the powers over her. With the awareness that Salma shows about her position as a commentator on the two cultures, we can say that *My Name is Salma* is a novel where the personal and the political are interwoven to form an artistic narrative of the individual.

In conclusion, *My Name is Salma* provides space for a discussion that is not preoccupied by critical demands for Muslim fiction to be anti-stereotypical, culturally representative, or to demonstrate political utility with respect to "Muslim issues". I do not claim that the text exists outside such contexts, but that becoming aware of dominant preconceptions of meaning makes it possible to resist prematurely narrowing down the narrative. The form and themes of Faqir's novel provide perspectives that may not fit comfortably within the interpretative norms of cultural representation or political value. The agency of Salma's character as she is not depicted as a mere victim in both societies. She is depicted as one who navigates her way with an awareness that enables her to evaluate the two cultures without being strictly attached to either of them. The story's fragmented form works as a way to offer a glimpse of different possible truths, not truth itself.

Chapter Four

"The Fragility of Goodness" in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

Published in 2017, Shamsie's seventh novel, *Home Fire*, was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and, in 2018, won the Women's Prize for Fiction and was shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. The novel tells the story of a young Muslim woman, Aneeka, who defies the British government's refusal to bring her twin brother Parvaiz's body home after he is killed in Turkey while working for ISIS. It is a reimagining of Sophocles' classical play *Antigone,* and its five chapters reflect the five acts of the play. Each chapter is written from the perspective of one of the five main characters: Aneeka; Parvaiz; Isma, their older sister; Eamonn Lone, Aneeka's lover; and Eamonn's father, Karamat Lone.

The story begins with Isma being interrogated in Heathrow because she is known to the government as the daughter of the jihadist, Adil Pasha. After leaving his family to join ISIS, Pasha had been killed far from home. Isma is eventually released and reaches the USA to start her PhD programme, having taken a long break from academia to care for her younger siblings. Isma then meets Eamonn in Boston and learns that he is the son of Karamat Lone, the new British Home Secretary, a second-generation Pakistani immigrant who has turned his back on Muslims for political gain. At this time, Isma receives news from her sister that their brother has left the UK to join ISIS after being recruited by a member of the regime.

Eamonn leaves Isma in Boston and returns to the UK, where he meets Isma's younger sister, Aneeka, who intentionally builds a romantic relationship with him in the hope that he can help her bring Parvaiz home. When Karamat learns of their relationship he cuts ties with his son. Parvaiz is killed in Istanbul by a member of ISIS after he tries to escape the regime. As Home Secretary, Karamat refuses the repatriation of Parvaiz's body to the UK because Parvaiz was a dual citizen, and rules that it is the Pakistani government's responsibility to receive it. When Aneeka learns of the government's decision, she books a flight to Pakistan, refusing to allow her

brother's body to be buried away from his family in the UK. She stages a protest in a garden near the British High Commission in Karachi, displaying the body of her brother preserved in ice by his supporters. The scene is live-streamed in the news worldwide. In the final moments of the novel, Eamonn comes to join Aneeka against his father's will, but the two are killed dramatically in a terrorist bombing.

In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss two readings of the novel that focus particularly on its supposed didactic purpose, especially with reference to Western readers. I refer here to Rehana Ahmed's argument that Shamsie denies her readers their expectation of an identifiable main character, in order to teach them to read otherness in an ethical way. According to this reading, readers are also denied any kind of sympathy with the text's characters – especially, pointedly, with Aneeka. Hager Bin Driss's reading, on the other hand, values the novel's ability to bring its readers closer to characters who are accused of terrorism, allowing us to better understand such characters' violent motives and actions, and to thereby undergo the productive, difficult process of sympathising with them. In these critical responses, Shamsie's novel is understood as either distancing its readers to sustain an ethical kind of reading or bringing them closer to the character(s) so that sympathy and understanding are ensured. I argue that in both these approaches, the text – and particularly its protagonist, Aneeka – are posited as symbolizing a marginalized group whose main purpose is to be read and understood by the centre.

This is a limitation that is described by Felski as the "affective inhibition" of the current mode of criticism. She argues that "critique cannot yield to a text—a process that it perceives as a form of shameful abasement or ideological surrender" (*Limits* 195). This is a process that I recognize in the two readings I will discuss later in the chapter. What unites them is their common interrogation of the text for power relations – expressed in a way that "blocks receptivity and inhibits generosity" of *Home Fire* as a fictional narrative (*Limits* 195). In my view, what particularly blocks critical generosity and underplays the complex design and themes of Shamsie's novel is a corresponding critical overreliance on its context; both of the cited

readings overstate the hierarchy of power structures (oppressed versus oppressor, privileged versus unprivileged), limiting the possibilities of the text, and leaving little space for an interpretation that operates outside this paradigm.

To engage with the aesthetic experience of the text and to explore its various potential meanings, I aim to rethink the position of its central character, Aneeka, as more than a positive heroine of resistance. I stress that Aneeka is an imperfect character, believing that highlighting her complexities allows us to read her as a multi-faceted character who defies symbolic categorisation. A keynote of this chapter is that Sophocles created Antigone with character flaws that have proven essential to her endurance in literature, but that certain critics of Shamsie have worked to smooth over similar flaws when it comes to Aneeka. I will discuss two critical responses to Sophocles' Antigone that are presented by Slavoj Žižek and Martha Nussbaum. Their analysis of Antigone is particularly important for my reading of Aneeka, as they problematize the character of Antigone and break the sanctity of her as an absolute idol for ethical resistance to injustice, hence liberating the text from expectations of offering symbols of virtuous morality. Later in the chapter I devote a section to elaborate on the design of *Home Fire*, reading how three characters (Isma, Eamonn and Karamat) interact with Aneeka: she is a different person to each one of them, and these differences range from her being seen as a vulnerable and weak figure to one who embodies a possible danger to the state. From an ANT perspective *Home Fire* depicts Aneeka as an active character at the center of a set of connections and associations with the other characters, which attributes to her a kind of agency that is overlooked if she is read as only an idealised symbol of resistance to social and political pressures. As with all my readings of characters in works by female Muslim authors, I argue that focusing on her agency enables us to see her as multi-faceted and defying simplistic categorisation.

Critical Reception of *Home Fire*

I start with Rehana Ahmed's article "Towards an ethics of reading Muslims: encountering difference in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*". Ahmed argues that the text shows an awareness of how it will be read, negotiating and restructuring its position as a representation of cultural difference. She grounds this in the proposition that Shamsie's writing guides its readers towards an ethical viewpoint. What I find restricting in this argument is that it looks at the text as a means of empowering the Muslim minority in the UK. The text in this case is manoeuvred by the critic to make it appear primarily about real life situations – as if it were designed to teach its Western reader how to read the Other in an ethical way. As we saw in Chapter Two, the urge to read a text while specifying one kind of reader risks reducing literature to the context of power relations.

To explain her argument, Ahmed first defines what she means by "ethical reading" by drawing on the theory of "differentiated solidarity" articulated by Iris Marion Young. Young argues that the benefits of social otherness are based not on social segregation but on the freedom to formulate a distinctive cultural and religious identity. In the case of Muslim minorities in the West, Ahmed is especially interested in Young's idea of the "freedom to cluster". Young insists that such communities must be granted their rights to form cultural gatherings which "should be balanced with a commitment to non-discrimination; spatial and social clustering, that is, cannot be based on acts of exclusion, but rather on affinity attraction" (244). "Differentiated solidarity" is not based on understanding the other so much as it is on empathizing with their need to be different. For Ahmed, this raises the question of how to perform an ethical kind of reading of texts that are written by writers from culturally and religiously different groups, especially in the West, where there is a growing marketplace for fictional texts that represent conservative Muslim identities to be read by an audience that is predominantly liberal and secular (2). Applying Young's concept of "differentiated solidarity" as an ethical way to deal with the Other, Ahmed claims that *Home Fire* "facilitates" an ethical way of reading a narrative about Muslim subjects in the West (2). She comments on the structure of

the novel and its effect on readers: starting with what she calls the "overt theatricality" of the narrative, Ahmed claims that this structural choice suppresses the realist potential of the novel and, hence, reshapes its readers' experience (1). She reads the final scene where Aneeka and Eamonn are united and die together as "melodrama[tic]", suggesting that it "might be read as corroborating the corrosive stereotypes that circulate" (14). Here, Shamsie is seen by Ahmed as deliberately utilizing stereotypes of Muslims (as either the ones who conduct terrorist attacks or who get killed in such attacks) as a way to make her readers question such stereotypes.

Ahmed's argument is similar to the one Michael Perfect proposes with reference to *Brick Lane* (which we saw in Chapter One of this thesis) where Perfect argues that Ali intentionally "employs stereotypes as aesthetic counterpoints in order to further emphasize her protagonist's final integration into contemporary British society" (110). However, whereas Perfect reads this strategy as facilitating communication and promoting an understanding of the Other, Ahmed insists that Shamsie tries to distance the narrative from real-world contexts. In Ahmed's view, *Home Fire* can be seen to perform an act of resistance to the Westerner outsider's anthropological and consumerist reading. The act of hiding behind the stereotypical image as a way to resist the outsider's gaze is borrowed by Ahmed from Young's concept of the "freedom to cluster". Ahmed applies this concept to the novel and argues that the text itself resists the Western reader's desire for knowledge, by hiding or enveloping the difference of its characters behind the stereotypes. Her argument is thus focused on the reaction of Western readers: she affirms that the text is already written with such readers in mind and actively works to avoid their anthropological reading which, in her opinion, "can limit western, non-Muslim responses to fictional representations of Muslims" (4). As a result of this problematic relationship between Western non-Muslim reader and Muslim text, Ahmed confirms that the text does not give its readers the knowledge they want but instead makes them rethink the knowledge they already have – thus making possible an ethical reading of the Other.

The claim is reinforced elsewhere in Ahmed's essay, where she asserts that the division of *Home Fire* into five sections and the absence of a central character serves to deprive readers of feelings of sympathy, which might otherwise lead to an effect of feeling ownership over the narrative:

> Drawn into a network of different Muslim characters who are often 'reading' or misreading each other, the reader is denied an extended relationship of empathy with a single dominant narrator or focalising character – which in turn minimises what Madhu Krishnan, citing Marcus Wood, describes as the danger of 'fall[ing] into self-interested "appropriative empathy"', of developing an affective connection with a character that in fact fetishises or appropriates their difference and reduces them to the 'already-known', while 'mask[ing]', or at least attenuating, 'the inequality of the power relations' that structure the world we share. In this way, the decentred intra-Muslim perspective facilitates a more ethical mode of reading. (13)

The act of denying the reader an intimate relationship with the characters is seen here as empowering; the text is understood by Ahmed as representing a minority community, which resists the empathy that comes from a reader who is superior in terms of "power relations". The text in this case shifts its connection to real life situations (its fictional portrayal of the conditions of real Muslim immigrants) by offering fragmentation and disconnectedness as a shield that protects its characters from the scrutinizing gaze of the outsider. What is noteworthy here is that the responsibility of being ethical is not placed on the reader but on the text, as *Home Fire* is praised for fulfilling a duty of being ethically representative of the minority group it represents; in Ahmed's view, Shamsie's structural choices function as a progressive reaction to the inequality of real-life situations. The problem, however, is that while the text is read here as an active agent that performs the act of resistance, its readers are constructed as passive receivers – as non-autonomous beings, who are expected to submit to strategies devised to teach them how to perceive the represented community or culture. In such circumstances, even some apparently

positive effects of literature, such as empathy, are ethically questionable. Ahmed emphasises that for texts like *Home Fire*, empathetic reading is not welcomed as it may result in an unequal relationship of ownership or consumption.

Ahmed's argument goes even further, interrogating Shamsie's position as the writer of the novel, asserting that:

> Shamsie herself occupies a peripheral position in relation to the characters and community she renders. Indeed, the difficult encounters between the characters, the breakdown in communication which marks them, also points us to the uneasy position occupied by a narrative authored by an elite cosmopolitan Muslim that attempts to translate working-class Muslim lives to a middle-class white secular reader (15).

While Ahmed at first rejects the idea that literature is an effective means of cross-cultural communication, she here refers to Shamsie's purpose as being to "translate working-class Muslim lives". But for Ahmed, due to the thematic choices of the narrative, what is eventually translated is the author's distanced position as an elite writer who tries to represent an underprivileged community. This argument begs a number of questions. If Shamsie were a writer who came from a working-class Muslim community, how would this alter the dynamics that Ahmed is tracing? In this scenario, would her novel have been considered, by Ahmed, as closer to the community's concerns? If Shamsie envisaged the majority of her readers to be Muslims, would that have necessitated radical alterations to the novel? As in Chapters One to Three before this, I want to stress that the idea of an imagined hermetically sealed and singular/different Muslim community – an idea which sits at the heart of Ahmed's argument – is problematic. She interrogates both the text and its writer for the sake of an abstract community. The reader is distanced from any kind of communication or communion with the fictional characters. In my view, Ahmed's observations burden this fictional text with a political responsibility it does not owe. This burden of representation is part of a wider approach to fiction which treats it as a vehicle through which readers' political orientations are directed. The role of

writers then, is politicised, in Ahmed's reading: the main goal becomes to protect their communities from being misread. Shamsie's novel is seen as actively shaping its readers' responses while we as readers remain passive recipients.

However, in other parts of her article Ahmed is alert to some important concerns of the novel. In some of her comments there is an attempt to move beyond a focus on to the response of its readers or its political implications, to study the novel's thematic subjects. In one instance, Ahmed emphasizes that:

> [The] resistance, as well as thwarting the western, secular subject's knowledge, also works to 'destabilize the identificatory process of the subject' himself, or to disturb his sense of a coherent self. Just as Yeğenoğlou refocuses the spotlight from the object of western fantasies to the observing subject, so the novel scrutinises Eamonn (scrutinising Aneeka). What is under surveillance here, then, is not practices of veiling, or Islam more broadly, but what Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin describe as 'the locus of misrecognition', the viewer whose vision is flawed and whose self is split (6).

Ahmed here refers to how Yeğenoğlou, Morey and Yaqin consider issues like resistance and stereotypes from another perspective. In Yeğenoğlou's study there is an analysis of the way Algerian women were able to employ hijab in order to disturb the gaze of white and colonial men. He argues that French colonizers were trying to unveil Muslim women in Algeria in order to remove a barrier to their exploring gaze. However, with the help of hijab, such women were able to "look [at the colonist] without being seen", managing to "turn [themselves] into a surveillant gaze" (*Framing Muslims* 57). This, in Yeğenoğlou's view, disturbs the colonists, as not only do the women become invisible, but they also put the colonists under scrutiny; thus, the coloniser becomes knowable to the enemy. In another context, Morey and Yaqin adopt a similar approach where they study what they call the "hyperperformativity" of the British comedian Shazia Mirza. They argue that Mirza's employment of the stereotypical image of a veiled

Muslim woman enables her to make her viewer uncomfortable, as what becomes the subject matter is not the practice of piety, or religious identity in general, but the act of the "viewer doing the stereotyping" (196).

In the above situations, what is studied is not the religious significance of the practice of wearing hijab, but the dynamics of the mutual gaze (between the women and their viewers) and its implications in each context. Hence, in her reading of *Home Fire,* Ahmed asserts that it is not only the overall framework of terrorism and meanings of religiosity that are worth studying, but also the complicated network of interaction between characters themselves in the narrative. I want to develop this idea about the text, but without focusing on what these interactions mean in the larger context of the supposed cultural clash between the East and West. Instead, I want to concentrate on the way Muslim characters interact with each other within the narrative. Although the main characters of the novel are Muslims or of a Muslim background, they are usually interpreted in terms of what their presence and attitudes mean in the wider context of the novel. So, I suggest that we read it from within to see how the complications of the characters might take us to unexplored areas of the text. It is widely argued that in postcolonial texts "the aesthetic function of [the fictional narratives are] always implicitly positioned alongside a parallel and pre-existing socio-political discourse of representation" (Krishnan 213). However, I think in critical responses to *Home Fire* the "aesthetic function" has generally been overlooked for the sake of stressing the "socio-political discourse of representation". Ahmed is focused on the issue of representation in reading Aneeka, arguing that Shamsie works to supress readers' desires to read the character as a representation of Muslim women. She insists that: "by foregrounding the layers of mediation through which we observe the other, [*Home Fire*] withholds an 'authentic' Muslim subject, placing in metaphorical scare quotes the at times familiar, even hackneyed images it offers us, as well as encouraging us to reflect on our own reading practices" (7). This act of denying the reader a representation of the Muslim subject is understood by Ahmed as an act of resistance as it challenges the reader's previous knowledge about Muslims. I argue that

this approach entails a perpetuation of the position of otherness, leading to a state of wariness that overwhelms such a reading. Within this critical paradigm, the discussion ends up being limited to what is useful – that is, what we can learn about these characters for use in a real-life context. The aesthetics of the text, and its value as fiction, are appreciated only in connection to its use-value in the real world. Positions are predetermined, as Ahmed reads the text as contributing to the rebalancing of power relations.

The second critical response I want to discuss is presented by Hager Bin Driss. In her article "Global Epistemic Injustice: An Ethical Confrontation with Jihadism", Bin Driss sees *Home Fire* as facilitating a better understanding of Muslim subjectivities in the West, especially ones with extremist views. This is similar to Ahmed's reading in terms of its emphasis on the question of whether or not the novel promotes empathy. But, counter to Ahmed, she reads the novel as a work that facilitates empathy towards the jihadist. She asserts that Shamsie fictionalizes an already existing tension between ethics and politics, especially in the case of the current "war on terrorism" (23). The novel, she continues, is written about jihadists – who are usually not listened to – and works as a testimonial of what she calls "epistemic injustices" (23). She investigates the micro-aggressions that can happen to people who are seen as having extreme political agendas. Bin Driss argues that empathy as a constituent part of morality is not performed fully towards jihadists, which does not contribute to the solving of their problems (23). In her argument, empathy "does not mean to justify or apologize" but is a way to understand such people and, hence, do justice to them (33). She builds on Spivak's ideas about listening to the Other without judgment. Spivak, in her article "Terror: A Speech After 9/11," claims that:

> Epistemological constructions belong to the domain of the law, which seeks to know the other, in his or her case, as completely as possible, in order to punish or to acquit rationally, reason being defined by the limits set by the law itself. The ethical

> interrupts this imperfectly, to listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit (83).

To Bin Driss, *Home Fire* is, then, an articulation of the predicament of individuals with extremist views and it showcases the ability literature has to bridge the gap between what is moral and what is political (24). She asserts that the way *Home Fire* portrays the story of Parvaiz's radical actions invites us as readers "to engage in an empathetic reading, wherein understanding someone's actions has nothing to do with approving them" (33). This kind of knowing the Other seems less problematic than the one expressed in Ahmed's reading. Whereas in Ahmed's argument, readers' desire for knowledge and understanding is questioned, Bin Driss implies that readers come to the text with a desire to learn and understand. In this way, the novel becomes a means of enriching readers' understanding about radicalism. Fiction in this sense is an effective way of cultivating readers' empathy towards people with whom they do not share any political or social affiliations. Furthermore, in Bin Driss' perspective the role of Shamsie has shifted; the author is able to make the "subaltern speak", to borrow Spivak's terms, and is responsible for facilitating the oppressor's listening. Also, instead of the passive reader posited in Ahmed's reading, Bin Driss constructs an active kind of reader; as Bin Driss writes, Shamsie "baffles the objective reader, and incites a dynamic and participatory act of reading" (24). So, Bin Driss first assumes readers are by nature detached or passive, and then she argues that, through the particular qualities of the novel, readers are dragged into a world where their empathy is provoked and their positive engagement is eventually secured.

What Ahmed's and Bin Driss's readings have in common is their emphasis on empathy and the question of whether the novel promotes it. Ahmed insists that the novel's main goal is not to evoke its readers' feelings of empathy towards others but rather to teach them how to read otherness in an ethical way. Bin Driss, however, asserts that Shamsie wants to give a platform to people who are denied the chance to be listened to, and that readers are expected to empathize with them. In Ahmed's reading, the novel works as a way of resisting the hegemony of Western

culture over the minoritised Muslim communities, while in Bin Driss's view the novel is seen as a medium for giving a voice to supposedly marginalized subjects. Both views are concerned by the significance of hierarchical power structures (oppressed versus oppressor, privileged versus unprivileged), which limits the discussion around the novel to such a political paradigm.

In a different context, Martha Nussbaum expresses similar ideas about the potential of literature to make different experiences possible. In her book *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, she states:

> literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life. (48)

Nussbaum's focus is on readers themselves, since they are the ones who benefit from reading literature. But she neutralizes the meanings of power; power becomes attributed neither to the reader nor to the text, as reading is posited as an experience where power relations are blurred. Nussbaum's understanding is thus strikingly different from Ahmed's and Bin Driss', in which power differentials are made vivid. In readings like Ahmed's and Bin Driss' texts tend to be interpreted in terms of an inferior subject who is read by a more powerful one and – in some cases – in terms of the way they resist this oppressive dynamic. The risk with these paradigms about text and reader is that they might lead to the flattening of the complexities of fictional narratives. It is true that we should be conscious of the various issues pertaining to fictional texts, such as when they are consumed as a source of knowledge about the Other. However, as I explained earlier, in the existing scholarship on Shamsie's novel there is a sort of anxiety that comes to the surface whenever *Home Fire* is positioned as a representation of minority people. My aim is to find a space where *Home Fire* can be read not only as expressing an existing political hierarchy, but also as an imaginative text that narrates stories about fictional individuals.

To do so, I wish to follow the path that Claire Chambers encouraged in the conclusion of her article "Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*", where she asserts that:

> We need to be careful about wishful thinking around literature's prospect of saving the world. Yet literary fiction is contributing to global debate differently from social-science-based interventions. Novels add to that body of work, holding the potential to transform our understanding of radicalization by showing the confusion of both jihadists and those who oppose them. (218)

Analyzing *Home Fire*, Chambers focuses on how the novel can be useful in adding to the current sociological, psychological, and criminological knowledge about religious extremism. She asserts that novels in general have "a power and a truth that nonfiction does not possess to the same degree […] [and are able to] bring together different historical periods, geographical locations, and political contexts, while all the time keeping the emphasis firmly on people" (203). Echoing Nussbaum's ideas about the richness of literature that cannot be easily theorized the way other fields are, Chambers argues that Shamsie's novel "is one of the most plangent and multitonal novels that has yet been written about [extremists'] violence" (218). While Chambers' main attention is to the motif of sound that surfaces in the novel repeatedly, especially in relation to the male characters, I would like to extend her analysis to discuss how the main female character is also part of the predicament of terrorism, arguing that Aneeka should not be seen only in binary terms as either a heroine who opposes terrorism or as a victim of it. I would like to build on Chambers' discussion of Aneeka:

> Over and above the private stories of young European Muslims going to Syria to join Daesh and being denied citizenship when they try to return, Shamsie removes some of the noise surrounding such public matters as belonging, assimilation, difference, and justice. Despite exposing the flaws of her male characters Karamat and his son Eamonn (Haemon in the play), Shamsie does not idealize Aneeka. Although in Shamsie's rendition neither Aneeka nor Karamat are jihadists, in their unbending

> certainty they surprisingly articulate world views closer to that espoused by the violent extremist than does the novel's conflicted and self-doubting radical Parvaiz (209).

Here Chambers compares the attitudes of Parvaiz, as the one who is considered radical, with the others who are usually seen as at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum: namely, Aneeka and Karamat, who are advocates of the values of law and ethics. Chambers notices a sort of inflexibility that marks the stances of Aneeka and Karamat as individuals who aim to fulfil their duties dogmatically whereas Parvaiz, the ostensible extremist, is conversely beset by doubts. Chambers emphasises the novel's ability to explore issues that do not usually come to the surface when discussing terrorism. One of these issues, which I want to expand on, is the way women tend to be marginalized in critical discussions of fiction dealing with terrorism. To be more specific, I refer to the tendency to perceive men as the main agents in acts of terrorism and women as either victims or ideal/positive respondents to it. Shamsie's novel, as Chambers remarks, exemplifies the complexity of women's positions in such scenarios. This is evident in Chambers's previous comment where she asserts that Shamsie "surprisingly" does not idealise Aneeka and Karamat, which indicates that there is an already existent expectation (of Shamsie) to represent Aneeka, especially, as a symbol of some transcendental character that works against terrorism or acts of injustice in general. This expectation stems from the fact that the novel is read by some critics as symbolizing real Muslims.

Home Fire **and Sophocles'** ***Antigone***

Before presenting my reading of *Home Fire* I want to stress that my argument that Aneeka as an imperfect character is inspired by two critical responses to Sophocles' *Antigone* that are presented by Slavoj Žižek and Martha Nussbaum. Their analysis of *Antigone* is particularly important for mine as they problematize the character of Antigone (as I aim to do with Aneeka) and break the sanctity of her as an absolute idol for ethical resistance to injustice. Hence, liberating the text as from expectations of offering representatives of virtues moral symbols.

I start with Slavoj Žižek's study of Sophocles' *Antigone*, where he argues against Antigone's innocence. In 2016, Žižek published a rewriting of the classical play. In its introduction, he challenges the positioning of Antigone as an icon for ethical resistance against the illegitimate power of the state, asking whether there is a darker side to such an apparently pure figure. Scrutinizing her insistence on the ritual burial of her brother even if it leads to her own death, Žižek refers to it as an "unconditional insistence on the demand for the symbolic ritual, an insistence which allows for no displacement or other form of compromise" (xv). At the core of his argument is an unconventional claim about Antigone's motives; a claim that she in fact uses the ritual of the burial of her brother as a pretext for her own suicidal desires. "The monstrosity of her act", he goes on to say, "is covered up by its aestheticization: the moment she is excluded from the community of humans, she turns into a sublime appreciation evoking our sympathy by complaining about her plight" (xv). For Žižek, Antigone's insistence on Polyneices' burial is an extremist choice guided by pragmatic intentions, as it stems from her self-centered demand for empathy from the city and the audience. Antigone "does not stand for some extra-symbolic real", Žižek writes, "but for the pure signifier – her 'purity' is that of a signifier" (xv). In such a view, Antigone's concept of principled purity refuses to face her fragile humanity; she seeks to mask it by endowing herself with divine traits. Žižek here compares Antigone to her sister Ismene, stressing that while the former's suicidal action is justified by the aesthetics of being connected to higher values, the latter – usually seen as passive – is "more human, full of empathy" (xviii). In Žižek's view, Ismene is the more human of the two sisters as she is the one who sympathizes with others and does not desire to be raised above them. It is this willingness to remain sensitive to others that distinguishes her from Antigone, who is dogmatically concerned with her duty.

Žižek's argument is similar to that of Martha Nussbaum in the book she published in 1986, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, where she confirms that Antigone is not an ideal character. In Nussbaum's reading of Antigone she straightforwardly declares that "criticism of Antigone is not incompatible with the judgment that

she is morally superior to Creon" (63). It is a fact that the story showcases Antigone and Creon (Aneeka and Karamat in Shamsie's version) as opponents to each other, but I agree with Nussbaum that this does not rule out the possibility of reading Antigone/Aneeka as an independent character, one who can bear our positive and negative judgments simultaneously. Hence, Nussbaum starts by evaluating Antigone's prioritizing of her familial and religious commitments:

> [To Antigone] duty to the family dead is the supreme law and the supreme passion. And [she] structures her entire life and her entire vision of the world in accordance with this simple, self-contained system of duties. Even within this system, should a conflict ever arise, she is ready with a fixed priority ordering that will clearly dictate her choice. (64)

Antigone chooses to be recognized as the one who fulfils the duty of the "underworld" and is honoured for her heroic choice of burying her dead brother even at the high cost of losing her relationship with living relatives (Ismene, Haemon and even Creon) (9). Moreover, what particularly marks her choice as "practical", in Nussbaum's view, is that she is very dogmatic about her fate in the afterworld; she wishes to be honoured in her eternal life more than she cares about her fate in the mortal one.

In the first act of the play Antigone tries to convince her sister of the logic of her choice:

There'll be a glory in it.
I'll go down to the underworld
Hand in hand with a brother.
And I'll go with my head held high.
The gods will be proud of me.
The land of the living, sister,
Is neither here nor there.
We enter it and we leave it.

The dead in the land of the dead

Are the ones you'll be with longest.

And how are you going to face them,

Ismene, if you dishonour

Their laws and the gods' law? (Heaney 9-10)

Antigone is religiously devout and it is her pious self that dictates her actions. Any conflicts in her life will be resolved according to these higher values rather than the laws of the "under land" (9). She thinks of the predicament that she and her sister confront as "a test [that they are] facing" which will eventually result in their souls being remembered as icons of bravery and faithfulness (8). When she complains about her dilemma, she expects the addressee to sympathize with her and even appreciate her courage, which will ultimately elevate her to be a creature of the "sublime", as Žižek explains (xv).

It is crucial to ask whether Shamsie adopts this transcendental religious sentiment as a motive for the actions of Aneeka in *Home Fire*. The narrative shows that Aneeka's father and brother join ISIS, who fight on the pretext of establishing an Islamic Caliphate. However, we only learn about the journey of Parvaiz, who joins the extremist group as a reaction to the disillusionment he faces in an unwelcoming society, and who later regrets his choice and decides to go back to the UK. He is characterized as a young man who is family-oriented and who joins the jihad in search of a sense of belonging and acceptance. His father, Adil Pasha, leaves the family permanently and becomes a well-known jihadist who fights in several parts of the world. He is remembered as happy with his choices to the extent that he calls himself Abu Parvais (the father of Parvaiz) and wishes for his son to pursue a similar path (142). His absence creates a space for us to wonder about his influence on his children and how far Aneeka (similarly to Antigone) inherits the characteristics of her tough-minded father. This interpretation follows from Aneeka's silence towards the figure of her father, as she neither condemns him – as Isma does – nor reveres him, as Parvaiz does. I want to highlight here the disparity between Antigone and

Aneeka. In Aneeka's story, the religious devoutness and the respect for a father figure which explain Antigone's choices are almost absent. In Sophocles' play Antigone decides to commit suicide because she believes it will bring her to a better place; in this sense, she is a pragmatist. Aneeka's actions, however, are provoked by the experiences of her family and especially by their contested citizenship rights. She seeks to make a statement of her own and does not aim to fulfil a duty or achieve a clear-cut goal; she acts in a more impulsive way.

Building on Žižek's and Nussbaum's reading, as well as Chambers' ideas about Shamsie's refusal to idealize Aneeka, I aim in the next section to rethink the position that Aneeka is representative of the political resistance of Muslim woman. This is, again, a principle that is encouraged by Felski's employment of ANT as an approach where it "is no longer a matter of gesturing toward the hidden forces that explain everything; [but a] process of tracing the interconnections, attachments, and conflicts among actors and mediators as they come into view" (*Limits* 178). As I will discuss in the following section of this chapter, Aneeka's characterisation entails a set of connections and associations with other characters that renders her an imperfect or flawed character which, ultimately, makes her a character with an autonomy rather than a symbol for justice and ultimate goodness.

"The Fragility of Goodness" in *Home Fire*

Turning now to the aesthetic qualities of the book, let us explore how *Home Fire* creates a space where multiple characters propel the plot, as the novel is narrated through the viewpoints of five different characters. This multiplicity of narrative perspectives represents a shift in Shamsie's writing style. Whereas her earlier novels were based on the story of one character, *Home Fire* creates a "tapestry" woven from the stories of interconnected individuals (Chambers *British Fiction* 211). When Shamsie is asked about her approach to writing on the sensitive topic of Muslims, she answers that "when you write a novel you don't think about subjects as being sensitive or not—you just think of them as being interesting and complex, and you wonder how to tell them in a story that's about a group of characters" (qtd. in Heriyanto). It is through her

focus on a variety of characters that Shamsie offers a nuanced representation of her Muslim immigrant protagonists.

Aneeka is the main character of the novel but her part of the narrative is dominated by other voices – particularly the voices of the media covering her story. We are presented with newspaper reports investigating Aneeka and her family along with her lover Eamonn; Twitter threads comprising different degrees of hateful speech; and an anonymous poem. So, while Aneeka's section of the novel is overwhelmed by the reactions of the media to her story, we are introduced to her from the perspective of other characters. In the following section I will discuss how Aneeka is described by three characters in particular: Isma, Eamonn, and Karamat. I argue that there is a sort of movement from intimacy to publicity: she is described by her sister and Eamonn as a vulnerable character while Karamat presents her as a dangerous woman who threatens the security of the UK. Within this design of the novel, I argue that the reading of Aneeka as an innocent young woman who resists the unjust law of her government is a simplification of her story. As I discussed in the first part of this chapter, many readings of the novel argue that Shamsie's use of newspaper and social media reactions to narrate Aneeka's story is a way of symbolizing her resistance. It is true that we lose Aneeka's voice, especially after she learns about the death of her brother. It is possible, however, to argue that Shamsie adopts this narrative strategy to complicate the story of her protagonist and to showcase the novel as an artwork of connectedness.

At first, to her sister Isma, Aneeka is like a little child in need of protection. Isma treats her sister with a great deal of care and compassion. Aneeka, on the other hand, enjoys the freedom of expressing her anger to her sister without worrying about their relationship. In Isma's part of the story, Aneeka is described as "not quite nineteen, with her law student brain, who knew everything about her rights and nothing about the fragility of her place in the world" (9). There is a sense of sympathy for Aneeka's ambition to set everything in order, but at the same time a wry irony towards her ignorance of her powerlessness. Isma's sympathy for her young sister makes

her lenient towards her conflicting personality traits as we are told that: “there was an instant appeal in [Aneeka’s] contradictory characteristics: sharp-tongued and considerate, serious-minded and capable of unbridled goofiness, as open to absorbing other people’s pain as she was incapable of acknowledging the damage of being abandoned and orphaned” (30). The words “instant appeal” hint at Aneeka’s future as a rebellious woman: “appeal” here has a double meaning, referring both to Aneeka’s physical attractiveness as a beautiful woman and to her constant and urgent call to correct the injustice around her. The word “instant” gives an impression of a momentary and short-lived presence, which hints at her death at the end of the novel and suggests that her position is indeed as fragile as Isma believes. In any case, it is Isma who has greater authority as, with the help of her experience of motherhood, she is able to evaluate her sister’s strengths and weaknesses. From a holistic perspective, Isma is able to excuse the abrasive aspects of her sister’s behaviour as she understands that it is a way of masking her vulnerability. Yet Aneeka blames Isma for betraying her and Parvaiz, and until the end of the narrative remains implacably resentful: “‘I mean it. You betrayed us, both of us. And then you tried to hide it from me. Don’t call, don’t text, don’t send me. We have no sister’” (52-53). In spite of being disowned, Isma continues to support her sister. This view of Aneeka’s resentment is reinforced by the way she is perceived by Eamonn, the second voice in the novel. Eamonn, similarly to Isma, shows an awareness of other contradictions that distinguish Aneeka’s identity. One main issue that I want to discuss in my reading of Eamonn’s chapter is how Aneeka mobilises the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman in order to secure Eamonn’s help – a pragmatic choice that reveals Aneeka’s complexity. From the very first moment he sees Aneeka, Eamonn – the narrator tells us – has an “interest in the question of how he might use [his fingers] to unpin the white hijab that framed her face” (76). She is static in this fantasy scene, while Eamonn imaginatively performs the act of unveiling, which informs us about the way he looks at her. Eamonn’s investment in the relationship is marked by a quest for the exotic, while Aneeka accepts the role of the exotic Muslim woman who is ready to be discovered and

unveiled. A similar dynamic recurs when they go to his apartment and he wants to ask her: "*Why are you here?*" as it is "hard to know what to want of a silent beautiful woman in a hijab sipping coffee in your flat" (81). Arguably he does know what he wants, but that desire is inexpressible and forbidden. Again, Aneeka is reduced to being a "woman in a hijab", appearing in Eamonn's imagination as a symbol of the unexplored exotic. Aneeka self-consciously exploits the image in his mind and envelops herself in secrecy and "mystique" to ensure his interest (92). She manipulates Eamonn's sexual and emotional desires for excitement and adventure to ensure his willingness to help in her mission. Wearing the veil and praying in her lover's apartment, for example, denotes her strategic plan to be seen as other. In one episode, we are told that Eamonn wakes up in the morning "hearing the sound of the shower so early, he thought she was planning to leave without saying goodbye" but then he is surprised that she prays in the living room with "a towel as her prayer mat, the hijab nothing more alien than a scarf loosely covering her head without the elaborate pinning or the tightly fitted cap beneath" (76). Here, we learn that he could not leave but stands watching "this stranger, prostrating herself to God in the room where she'd been down on her knees for a very different purpose just hours earlier" (83). In Eamonn's experience Muslim women are supposed to wear the hijab closely fitted but here Aneeka wears it in a loose way. She is also a woman of contradictions: she prays devoutly but has a sexual relationship outside marriage, which is strictly forbidden in Islam. Eamonn seeks an explanation for this improvised version of her faith, and she answers him in a way that pushes him away yet makes her the centre of his attention. When he asks her about prayers, she says: "'Prayer isn't about transaction, Mr Capitalist. It's about starting the day right.'" (83-84). Identifying him as a capitalist who does not understand the value of spiritual experiences is a way of highlighting their difference. This, however, does not last long as Eamonn starts to realize that her commitment to her faith is performative. When she disappears for a long time, he wonders about the source of her uniqueness:

> He suspected it was her God and His demands that made her want to deny what she clearly had no wish to be denied; he knew he couldn't win an argument on that score, so there was nothing to do but stay quiet and trust that what he'd glimpsed of her headstrong nature would ensure that no abstract entity could set the rules of her life. (88)

Here Eamonn becomes silent and observant, in his devotion to and study of Aneeka rather than for religious reasons, while Aneeka is the one who is more active. What he "glimpsed" is not love or passion, but rather the unsettled nature of Aneeka, which becomes a new source of excitement to him.

When we get to Aneeka's part of the story, the narrative perspective starts to become unstable, which reflects the fluidity her character. This section of the novel starts with a few pages depicting Aneeka's feelings of grief, an emotion she has known since she was a little girl. To her, grief "was bad-tempered, grief was kind; grief saw nothing but itself, grief saw every speck of pain in the world; grief spread its wings large like an eagle, grief huddled small like a porcupine; grief needed company, grief craved solitude" (208). The very short clauses render the narrator's language more concise, and the repetition of the word "grief" at the beginning of each one sharpens their effect. This technique, along with Shamsie's use of vivid imagery, works to emphasize how grief is paradoxical to Aneeka: she feels empowered by the feeling of her loss (it gives her the chance to articulate her anger at injustice) and at the same time wrecked by it. The characterisation of her feeling as both very strong and at the same time vulnerable and merciful reveals how ambivalent her responses are to the death of her brother. However, after these moments of perplexity we lose Aneeka's voice, and the mode of narration changes. Aneeka's voice is crowded out by the media reaction to her story, which is presented in many forms. There are TV news reports, newspaper articles and social media hashtags that discuss the Pasha family's story and represent it as source material for the discussion of political and social issues pertaining to Muslim immigrants in the UK.

After this wave of news, Aneeka's voice returns, expressing a feeling of rage transferred from her brother:

> But this was not grief. It did not cleave to her, it flayed her. It did not envelop her, it leaked into her pores and bloated her beyond recognition. She did not hear his footsteps or his laughter, she no longer knew how to hunch down and inhabit his posture, she couldn't look into a mirror and see his eyes looking back at her. This was not grief. It was rage. It was his rage, the boy who allowed himself every emotion but rage, so it was the unfamiliar part of him, that was all he was allowing her now, it was all she had left of him. She held it to her breast, she fed it, she stroked its mane, she whispered love to it under the starless sky, and sharpened her teeth on its gleaming claws (217-18).

In this scene of fantasy, she embraces her anger and becomes the mother of a monstrous creature of rage. So, while grief is a "shapeshifter" and sometimes even "invisible", rage is well defined here (208). Aneeka strives for revenge and sacrifices herself (similarly to Antigone) in order to take action. And with this desire for action the narrative starts to accelerate, moving from the private and specific to the public and general. The expression also becomes more symbolic as in the passage above: rage is expressed in metaphorical terms (it has a mane and gleaming claws) while grief was described using similes (like an eagle, like a porcupine). This is different from Isma and Eammon's sections, where the style is of writing is plainer.

Aneeka's choice of action is, therefore, exaggerated and her request to have the body of her twin returned to the UK is made to signify ideas that are bigger than her personal story particularly in the way she is positioned by Karamat. This is exemplified in the last part of the novel, the section that is voiced by Karamat Lone, who becomes Aneeka's enemy. He perceives her story from a political viewpoint, searching for a larger framework for her rebellious action. So, the scenes in the narrative become increasingly theatrical, especially in the part where Aneeka protests in the park with the dead body of her brother; a situation that is described by

Karamat as an “apocalyptic mess” (257). In the next two passages, Karamat meditates on the scene of Aneeka in the park which he sees on the news channels, and each time his search for meaning behind Aneeka’s behaviour is evident. In the first one he “pressed the mute button, and watched the doe-eyed girl in white, head covered, surrounded by blood-red rose petals, the park railings looking like a backdrop of prison bars in close-up shots of her. Nothing accidental in any of it, but what was all the iconography of suffering meant to achieve?” (251). Karamat here literally and metaphorically tries to “mute” the voice of Aneeka; he distances himself from her case, limiting his interaction with her by watching but not listening. He then perceives her actions as having hidden meanings that it is his duty to decode. What he sees is an image of a young woman in white hijab who is surrounded by what he interprets as signs of destruction: “the blood-red rose petals” bring in images of scattered blood, and the “park railings” are compared to prison bars. But what Karamat ultimately reads from the scene is that Aneeka is not an innocent woman (as she wants to appear) and that instead she seeks to convey a message of her own. He perceives her actions as performative and he concludes that she seeks to be recognized as a female victim who exults her martyrdom. In the same scene, as Karamat watches the televised broadcast, the narrator observes:

> The driver of the ambulance opened the back doors, called out for some of the onlookers to help him. Far more men than were necessary lifted out the unadorned casket and carried it on their shoulders behind the girl who, pale but composed, led them back to the white sheet and rose petals – the scene of martyrdom now complete (254).

Here Aneeka is described as a woman who seeks confrontation as described in the passage. “The scene of martyrdom now complete” reflects on Karamat’s views about Aneeka; it is as if her bid for martyrdom tis completed Accordingly, Karamat thinks that it is his duty to stop what he sees as the chaos that might be caused by such rebellion.

I want here to rethink Aneeka's story, moving away from the perspective that positions her as an abstract representation of the silenced and underprivileged Muslim woman who has finally managed to make a statement of her own. Reading her as a flawed protagonist acknowledges an agency of which she is deprived by superficial symbolic interpretations of her role in the narrative. Highlighting her vulnerability as well as her strength makes her character more interesting and worthy of exploration. In other words, when Aneeka's choices are scrutinized it is possible to see her as a woman who actively chooses her actions, rather than as an abstract representation of justice and absolute virtue. Most importantly, she always hides behind things larger than herself, such as her dogmatic love for her brother and the stereotypical image of the enigmatic Muslim woman. She simplifies her familial commitment and insists that "here she would sit with her brother until the world changed or both of them crumbled into the soil around them" (241), refusing to be vulnerable to the uncertainty of her world.

This chapter began by critiquing the tendency to read *Home Fire* as a text that directly responds to real-life issues such as terrorism and geopolitics. It discussed two readings of the novel that stress the novel's didactic drive, especially in regards to Western readers. I argued that in both the readings by Ahmed and Bin Driss, the text – and mainly its protagonist Aneeka – are theorised as standing for Muslims as a disadvantaged group who should be read and understood by the West. In an attempt to complicate this appraisal, I read the novel in a postcritical way. Rather than reading it as a text constrained by its relationship to Western cultural hegemony, I tried to follow the structure of the narration, to highlight the ways in which Aneeka can be read as a nuanced individual with agency rather than in terms of symbolic politicised abstractions. In this context, Aneeka, who is usually represented as a symbol of resistance, emerges as a more dynamic, complex figure, transcending the abstract image of the positive example of Muslim women that has been imposed on her. This is an approach that Felski calls the surrender to the aesthetics of a text without the duty of demystifying its hidden causes or overestimating its social and didactic purposes. Such a reading gives Aneeka an aesthetic value, as she becomes a non-

idealized character with multiple connections and associations that cannot be contained within a purely symbolic paradigm. It moves us away from reductive perspectives that position her as a totemic, positive representation of the heroic Muslim woman who manages to make a bold political statement of her own, to read her, instead, as a flawed protagonist, investing her with an agency she has been deprived of by symbolic interpretations of her narrative role.

Chapter Five

Negotiating Happiness in Ayisha Malik's *This Green and Pleasant Land*

Ayisha Malik's novel *This Green and Pleasant Land* was published in 2019, following her debut novel *Sofia Khan is not Obliged* (2015) and its sequel, *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017).[34] It recounts the story of middle-aged accountant Bilal Hashim, who leaves Birmingham to establish a company in the sleepy village of Babbel's End. Bilal, his wife Mariam – a freelance journalist – and his stepson Harris are the only three Muslims in the village. They are welcomed into the community and Bilal joins the parish council. However, everything changes the moment Bilal's mother Sakeena asks him, as her last wish before she dies, to build a mosque in the village. As a setting Babbel's End brings together what are usually seen as two conflicting groups: Muslim newcomers and the local residents of the village. As the plot unfolds the village church is chosen to be deconsecrated and replaced by the planned mosque. As such, the novel explores how a range of people experience change in a place they all call home. The issue of cultural representation is central to the novel, as the characters react to their need to create or maintain an embodiment of their cultural identity in the place where they live.

There has been relatively little scholarship around *This Green and Pleasant Land* to date, but this chapter finds critical groundwork in two examples of how Malik's novel was received. The first is from Alfred Hickling, a journalist, who criticizes it for not being confrontational enough in comparison to Malik's first book, *Sophia Khan is not Obliged*. The second critical view is presented by Claire Chambers and other scholars, who argue that Malik's fiction is driven by the market's demand for a positive and "happy" representation of Muslims in the UK. As in the rest of the critical material examined in this thesis, I recognize these two readings as continuing the paradigmatic appraisals of narratives by Muslim writers, an appraisal characterized by the

[34] 'Green and pleasant land' is a phrase first used by William Blake in his poem "And did those feet in ancient time", written in 1804 as a preface to his epic poem *Milton*, to describe England. The phrase is commonly used either to praise the English countryside or to criticize it. It is used ironically, for example, in the Dire Straits' song "Iron Hand". For more information see: *Green and Pleasant Land: English Culture and the Romantic Countryside* (2004) edited by Amanda Gilroy.

expectation that a novel should be didactic and can be judged primarily according to its political utility. In these two critical readings of the novel, its optimistic tone is taken as evidence either of a naïve representation of Muslims or as a strategy for selling the novel in a market that demands such positive portrayals. In the pages ahead, I argue that that Malik's novel should be retrieved from what Felski calls the "reflexive imputations of naïveté and complacency" (*Limits* 158) and, I add, from accusations of being market driven. I argue that the light-hearted tone of Malik's novel does not diminish the difficulty of the topics of her narrative, nor does it represent them in a naïve way in order to sell. She writes in the way she does ultimately to affirm a kind of confidence and an agency that she enjoys as a writer. I aim to follow Felski's suggestion that criticism should acknowledge "the role of the individual [writer] as an essential point of reference", a role that "is frequently minimized or denied" (Limits 103).

To do so, I argue that Malik's novel touches on the theme of happiness, which is not typically associated with Muslim subjects in fiction except, for the most part, in the sense of showing how Muslims are deprived of or lack happiness. Malik invests in moving beyond the binaries that are usually associated with Muslim people in the West, and Muslim women in particular; she challenges such organising principles as happy versus miserable or oppressed versus free. Malik enables such possibilities by utilising narrative strategies that deviate from those usually associated with Muslim women's fiction; by locating the action in a small, rural village, rather than a multicultural urban metropolis, for example, and employing a democratic narrator who distributes their attention between six Muslim and non-Muslim characters. Thus, I will discuss how the three main Muslim women characters (Sakeena, Mariam and Rukhsana) represent different modes of happiness. I argue that Rukhsana, in particular, is at the heart of the novel as she creates a positive effect that encourages readers to engage with the text not by interrogating its relationship to real life issues, but by affirming its capacity to reimagine such reality, and thereby meditating otherness and cultural difference rather than explaining them. This is a perspective that, along with a Latourian understanding of agency, allows us to read

Rukhsana as an autonomous woman, since she effects a positive change in the village despite being in possession of little power in socio-economic or cultural terms. Her agency in terms of crating change is depicted in the novel as a means of happiness. This theme of happiness is delivered in a light-hearted tone and approach, a manner that brings joy to the fore; this is a marker of Malik's authorial skill, as it manages at the same time to ensure that the difficult issues related to the story are not flattened out.

Critical Reception of *This Green and Pleasant Land*

Malik's *This Green and Pleasant Land* won "Best Adult Book" in the Diverse Book Awards in 2020, and has received many positive reviews. However, there have also been negative responses due to the controversial nature of the topics it covers. I understand two of these more critical responses as perpetuating the paradigmatic criticism of the narratives of British Muslim writers: the demand that a novel should either be politically useful to Muslim communities and/or teach Western readers about who Muslims are.

In his review for *The Guardian*, Alfred Hickling first praises Malik for writing *This Green and Pleasant Land* in a "light" way. He asserts that "Malik's great gift is to present seemingly insoluble issues of faith and intolerance in a light, accessible manner". But he then compares this novel to Malik's earlier output, arguing that *This Green and Pleasant Land* is not confrontational enough compared with Malik's two previous works, about Sofia Khan:

> Above all, one misses the unrestrained, subversive voice of Sofia; a woman who clearly would be capable of shaking up the stultifying complacency of a place like Babbel's End. What this book really needs is someone not afraid to stand on the village green and shout, as Sofia once did: "Terrorists don't wear vintage shoes, you ignorant wanker." (1)

Hickling implies that Malik's later novel is softer towards issues of racism and Islamophobia than her earlier novels. The reviewer's dissatisfaction is connected to what he sees as Malik's failure to make the distinctions clearer between Muslim characters and the others in the village clearer and to voice their difference in an "unrestrained" way. He praises Sofia's courage to

publicly confront the bigoted association between Islam and terrorism, and implies that in comparison to the protagonists of Malik's latest novel, Sofia is a better heroine. In Babbel's End, in Hickling's opinion, the Muslim characters are not bold enough to confront the White majority of residents. Hence, he sees the book as lacking an expected quality: it fails to defend Muslims or subvert the stereotypes commonly attached to them.

Another discussion of Malik's fiction similarly accuses her novels of not being courageous enough. In their article "'Sexual misery' or 'happy British Muslims'?: Contemporary depictions of Muslim sexuality", Chambers et al. examine Malik's fiction and identify her as one of several British Muslim women authors whose fiction is "market driven" (84). They stress that Malik worked in the publishing industry for years before she wrote her own books, which, according to Chambers et al., suggests she knows about what kinds of books sell best and is instrumentalising this expertise (89). With this knowledge, they argue, Malik provides the market with fictional narratives about Muslims that are light-hearted and "positive in [their] efforts to work against the portrayal of misery and to demonstrate something light, breezy and undeniably engaged in the pursuit of happiness" (84). Here, happiness is seen as being used by Malik to contrast with the enduring image – especially prominent in Western media and journalism– of Muslims as miserable and burdened with problems. However, this positivity in Malik's books is seen by the writers of the article as strategic, and therefore problematic , as it is aimed – according to them – towards consumption by *readers* who want fictional tales about Muslims that are not issue-laden. The representation of happy Muslim subjects is designed for profit within a market that demands this kind of portrayal.

The limitation of Chambers et al.'s approach here is that it studies the narratives only to classify them into those that do justice to representing Muslims and those that fail to do so. This feeds into the paradigmatic division of narratives into those that provide accurate representations of Muslims and those that give false representation. The writers of this article want authors of fiction to avoid the journalistic and documentary style of representing Muslims as either

miserable or happy (70). There is an expectation that the novel must do justice to Muslim representation. What is limiting in this view is the way they interrogate the happy mode of the novel as a main concern for their judgment on the novel's representational agendas. In my view, such readings are compromised by their search for a didactic representation. They are clearly more nuanced than the journalistic readings they strive to avoid, but miss vital complexities in the narrative by searching to uncover what it teaches us. Shifting the way Malik's novels are read means moving away from a posture of evaluation, investigation and suspicion, which is prevalent in much contemporary criticism. But what is left if we want to transcend the judgement and evaluation of a text in relation to their representational usefulness to Muslims and Islam? To put the same question in Felski's terms:

> If we abstain from critique, if we swear to renounce the temptations of suspicion, what stars will guide our path? And what will save us from perdition, what will keep us from committing all those sins we've been warned against since we were bright-eyed neophytes: naïve reading, sentimental effusion, impressionistic judgment, fuzzy-headed amateurism, and mere "chatter about Shelley"? (*Limits* 153)

Felski then proposes what she calls an affirmative kind of reading, and defines it as a practice that "that looks to a work of art for solace and replenishment rather than viewing it as something to be interrogated and indicted" (*Limits* 158). She adds that:

> In recent years, various critics have explored the possibility of a more affirmative or engaged aesthetic response. Michael Snedeker, for example, offers a stirring defense of optimism against the fixation on melancholia, shame, and self-shattering in queer theory, striving to rescue the idea of happiness from reflexive imputations of naïveté and complacency. (*Limits* 153)

I argue that Malik's narrative is written in a way that invites an affirmative kind of reading, engaged more with its aesthetic quality as an imaginative work of art, and less with interrogation of its cultural, sociological or political connotations. To make this explicit in the following

section, I will discuss three stylistic and thematic choices that mark such an affirmative tone in the text: locating the story in a small village; employing a democratic narrator who distributes their attention between six (Muslim and non-Muslim) characters; and investment in the backstories of various events and character interactions.

The first important artistic choice that contributes to the affirmative mood of the novel is its concern with a small scale; the novel is about one small village and its residents. Comparing *This Green and Pleasant Land* to the other novels explored in this thesis, I argue that it marks a shift in the way Muslims are represented in fictional narratives. The preceding four novels are set in large cities and recount experiences of protagonists who resist different sorts of oppression. They also share a trope of international movement, with protagonists travelling either from East to West or vice versa. This common storyline contributes to the critical reception emphasising the novels' utility in explaining the supposed culture clash between East and West. In Malik's novel, by contrast, the shift to a particular and small place (a fictional place – as opposed to the real-world settings of the other novels) is complete at the book's outset. With multicultural Birmingham in the near background and Pakistan referenced at a further remove, *This Green and Pleasant Land* is a narrative about different kinds of people who share the small space of an English village. None of the characters in this text experience a recent movement from the East to the West. Instead, the movement that Bilal and his family make is within Britain: they move from Birmingham to a rural village in England, which signals a different kind of narrative. In my previous chapters I have focused on the analysis of details that are usually overlooked by current criticism that seeks to interpret the novels within a wider context. However, since all four novels have international movement embedded in their stories it requires some readerly resistance to localize the discussion as the effect of such movement is dominant in the narratives. Malik's novel expresses tensions that are not dissimilar to those addressed in the previous novels, but the difference is Malik's focus on a smaller scale. The politics in *This Green and Pleasant Land* are limited to those of the parish council. Thus, the "clash of civilizations" and other abstract ideas

are instead located within the framework of a local community. This is of course not to assume that the parochial setting of the novel means that its own ambitions are parochial, but instead it allows for a different kind of narration, especially in relation to the interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim characters in the village.

The second further difference between this novel and those explored above is that *This Green and Pleasant Land* shifts the focus from being exclusively about Muslim characters to include the White British community with whom the Muslim characters share space; the main characters of the novel are not only Muslims but also some White residents of Babbel's End. More than those previously studied in this thesis, this novel is interested in the impact of change on the English villagers as much as it is in the struggle of the Muslim characters. In the previous novels the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims was not emphasized as it is in this novel; instead, texts focused on the struggle of individual protagonists to fit into their new homes. It is true that this struggle necessarily involves interactions with non-Muslim characters as, for example, in *My Name is Salma* where Salma interacts with her landlady, the tailor shop boss, and the bar owner, but what is different in Malik's novel is that the novel is about six main characters whose perspectives are equally important. So, the individual Muslim female character whose perspective is centered in the previous novels is substituted here with six characters who all contribute to the patchwork construction of the narrative. This foregrounds interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim characters, highlighting that Muslims are not passive, marginalized or incapable of taking action but instead are depicted as co-actors of change. The novel is not naively optimistic; it does not depict a post-racial society where different people live in harmony. It is about a society where otherness does not dissolve but where connections and associations happen, nevertheless, and indeed asserts that these are worthy of our attention.

Interestingly, with the absence of a central character, the focus of the novel becomes the village itself as the medium through which encounters develop. Within the one shared place, the characters of the novel are democratically portrayed. This is especially true when considering

how the ostensible centrality of Bilal does not last long as he does not dominate the narrative; other voices take the lead, offering different perspectives and experiences. The narrator gives the main characters space and reports their inner thoughts and feelings in a democratic way. This evenly distributed attention between characters stresses both the locality and plurality of the narrative: it is set in a single place and concerns a group of people who share this place. Narrative focalisation is shared between six characters in rotation: Sakeena, Bilal, Mariam, Richard, Shelley and Rukhsana. The equal distribution of attention between these main characters is achieved by a narrator who maintains this democratic structure. These six main characters are all depicted with equal care. White society is not imagined here as antagonistic to the characters in the novel. The stories of the Muslim characters resident in the small village are narrated along with many interconnected side stories of other non-Muslim residents. All the characters are treated evenly, in a way that makes the novel not only about Muslim characters, hence, lessening the expected documentary style of such a narrative written by Muslim writer. Each character is multidimensional, with their personal story, which ensures the richness of their depiction.

This richness manifests in, for example, the fact that from the beginning of the novel there is always a backstory to any event or character interaction. Relatedly, the narrative is fashioned in such a way as to pay attention to the small and personal details regarding the characters, rather than the broad meanings of such stories. One example is when the main opponent to the building of the mosque, Shelley, is filmed hysterically cutting bushes belonging to Tom Lark[35], the main supporter of Bilal's family, and the clip goes viral. Here, we as readers get the chance to see two different realities: one that is publicly created via news channels, comments on YouTube and Twitter, and the other which is more intimate, local to the residents of Babbel's End. In other

[35] Lark is the name of a bird but can also refer to an act of good-natured mischief or a carefree adventure. There might also be allusions to Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* trilogy, set in an idealised version of the English countryside, and to the Larkin family, who are the main characters in H.E. Bates' novel *The Darling Buds of May*, a comic novel that represents a bucolic vision of life in a small English village.

words, we are given the chance to see more detail about an incident that is magnified and filtered through social media platforms and mainstream news media; we can notice how small, personal, but complex encounters between characters are made into incomplete and simplistic images that are then read as tales about cultural conflict. The novel implicitly, through satire, criticizes this tendency.

This critique of half-told or mis-told stories is further manifested in the way an anthropologist is interviewed on a news channel to give her opinion about events in Babbel's End:

> '*Joining us today is renowned anthropologist Fabiola Tocci. Fabiola, can you tell us a little about your thoughts on what's transpired in this remote village in England?*'
>
> '*Certainly, Harriet. As we know, from time immemorial, civilisations have been encroached upon—*'
>
> Mariam's mobile rang.
>
> It was Saif.
>
> '*How representative do you think Babbel's End is of the rest of the UK's attitude to Muslims?*' (213).

The name of the anthropologist "Fabiola" seems to play on "fable", suggesting perhaps that she tends to mythologise the subjects she studies. In the passage above there are two layers of a story: one in the background where the reporter wants to know about Muslims in Britain, and the second where Mariam answers the call of her ex-husband, Saif, and the voice of the reporter and the anthropologist disappears. This indicates that Mariam does not pay much attention to what is being said on the TV report, as if this kind of news coverage is expected. Meanwhile, there is a satirical commentary on the way interpersonal relationships are made into a bigger story of identities in conflict, as in the report when the anthropologist absurdly starts talking about ancient civilizational clashes.

One of the important moments in the text is when Reverend Richard Young questions the simplification of issues of cultural conflicts in response to the escalating conflict over the proposed mosque: "And why was there no longer nuance in an argument? Why did it have to be as simple as Christian vs Muslim; preservation vs change; old vs new? Wasn't there a happy medium in which something fresh could be created?" (217). I do not argue here that the novel has a direct or particular approach to teaching its readers how this "happy" medium could be reached. Neither to say that happiness is presented as a goal that everyone should aspire to. Rather, I argue for the novel as a work of art through which to reimagine happiness and portray it in a nuanced way. Happiness in the novel is a major trope and it is exhibited it in a subtle and multi-layered way. Here, I do not argue that Malik's choice is more useful to the cultural and political representation of Muslims in the West, but that it confidently moves in a different direction, posing questions rather than providing answers.

One example of the questions I am exploring comes when Bilal starts to recognize a relationship between the rejection he feels in the village and issues of race. In the parish council meeting, where he wants to announce his intention to build a mosque in the village, he experiences his skin colour as the biggest barrier between him and the White residents of Babbel's End:

> Bilal couldn't help but look at the familiar faces that were now somehow foreign. He glanced at his hands; the cut of his suit couldn't hide the fact that he was brown, and never before had this distinguishing feature felt like such a hindrance. It didn't matter how much of his faith and culture he shed – quite happily – he could never shed the colour of his skin.
>
> And why had he felt he had to? (81)

We do not hear Bilal's voice directly here: it is a third-person narration. Bilal's sentiments are being filtered through the narrator rather than being expressed directly. So, the gloominess of his situation is illuminated by the narrator who tells us that Bilal *chooses* to fit into White society by

reducing his attachment to his cultural and religious background. Bilal does not conform to the typical immigrant role of a victim who is forced to abandon his heritage in order to fit in. On the contrary, the narrator reveals that he "happily" decides to "shed" his commitment to his faith and culture to fit better in the society. However, ironically, when he realises that this is never enough and that his skin colour will always be a problem, we are told that he criticises himself asking "why had he felt he had to?". There is a moment of silence at the end of the episode as the narrator does not offer a direct answer to this question. However, the fact that Bilal here is described by the narrator as actively criticizing his own choices indicates his personal autonomy. Bilal's complex situation operates on another level than that of the passive oppressed versus the active oppressor. The novel does not provide answers to the problems of immigration and cultural cohesion; rather, it attempts to describe these complex predicaments without reducing the characters' stories to one answer or another.

Another example of such complexity is highlighted in the conversation between Bilal and his friend Vaseem. Their exchange subtly captures some aspects of the history and present of racial discrimination against Muslims in the UK:

> 'What did you expect?' laughed Vaseem. He opened up his arms and put on a posh accent. 'Yes, come along – build a mosque on our green land. We invaded and ruled your country for hundreds of years, so it's the least we could do.' He shook his head. 'Well, they never did *me* any personal harm,' replied Bilal. He wasn't fond of this historical blame ideology. 'You can't move forward if you hang on to the past,' he added. Vaseem thought about it. 'No, bro. But you can't move forward without thinking about what went wrong in the past either.' (189)

Many complicated issues are discussed in this novel, but it generally does not offer solutions to them. The text explores the ramifications of these problems in a way that refuses to foreground their negative effects on the Muslim characters. The text does not simply tell its readers that Muslims are treated as passive victims; neither does it portray the White community as a single

thing, with fixed views and predictable actions. Instead, racial and religious barriers are made visible, and the dynamics of such barriers are explored in the imaginative setting of Babbel's End.

The Nuances of Un/happy Muslim Women in *This Green and Pleasant Land*

In Malik's text, the representation of Muslim female characters is rich and diverse. The structure of the book, with the narrative focalised through multiple perspectives, gives an opportunity for many meanings related to Muslim women to emerge. The single female character who carries the weight of representation for Muslim women in critical readings of other novels is substituted in *This Green and Pleasant Land* by multiple central characters, allowing the nuances of their stories to emerge by the interaction they have with each other. This third novel by Malik follows two novels about the single female Muslim character of Sofia Khan. Khan's Islamic identity was her major defining factor, and hence her story is subject to scrutiny about what it means to be a Muslim woman living in the UK. In many readings Sofia Khan is seen as a successful, happy and positive model of a Muslim woman who resists oppression on several levels.[36]

This Green and Pleasant Land is not written exclusively about women, but it has four main female characters and three of them (Sakeena, Mariam, and Rukhsana) are Muslim. I argue that the novel does not seek to inform or educate its readers about the lives of real Muslim women: the female characters in this novel are multi-layered, which makes them ill-suited to represent any abstract, simple ideas about their correspondence to the 'real' world. To make this argument clear I focus my discussion on the novel's dominant theme of happiness, a concern especially in relation to issues of cultural belonging. As I will discuss, the dichotomy of the happy/miserable Muslim woman is explored in Malik's text in a nuanced way. Sakeena is presented as an immigrant whose happiness is deferred; happiness to her is when her Muslim identity is validated, as embodied by the prospect of building a mosque. Mariam is presented as a

[36] See, for example, Sumera Saleem's "Politics of Haya: Embodied Materiality of Piety as Everyday Resistance among British Muslim Women in Ayisha Malik's Fiction" (2021).

woman who is ambivalent towards the idea of happiness, as she sometimes thinks of it as a burden that complicates her life as a woman who is from a minority group. Finally, Rukhsana, similar to the other two characters, has her own views on happiness. As I will discuss later in this chapter, I read Rukhsana as a character that allows us to read her, in particular, as a woman with agency, since she effects a positive change in the village despite being in possession of little power in any measurable sense.

The book starts by narrating the past of Sakeena, Bilal's mother, who made the journey from Pakistan to Britain and set up a life and had a family in a country that was foreign to her. However, through Sakeena's death the novel explicitly showcases that here is a new generation which has a different experience but at the same time is still affected by the history of their ancestors' movement. Malik's narrator works as a mediator with its own judgment, interpretations and comic way of narrating the story, in a way that controls our access to the characters' inner thoughts and feelings. The following excerpt is an example of the narrator's use of satirical distance between themselves and the character of Sakeena. The first lines of the novel read:

> Sakeena Hasham had the ability to linger in a person's psyche like a vaguely traumatic experience. For sixty-three years she'd been the rare combination of practicality and hopefulness, reality and dreams. Her dreams, unfortunately, hadn't quite worked out. Real life had cast shadows over the rainbows she'd wanted to chase when she first left Rawalpindi, Pakistan, for Birmingham all those years ago. (1)

The comic use of the phrase 'ability to linger' and the word 'vaguely' in these opening sentences gives the novel a comic tone. Sakeena is evaluated by the narrator, who seems at first to be unsympathetic; she is described as an annoying person but the narrator soon shifts their opinion about Sakeena as they sum up her life as one marked by her attempts to be both pragmatic and idealistic, which is described as a "rare combination". Sakeena is looked at from a great distance and judged over a long period of time (sixty-three years). There are two layers to her character:

she is at once a confrontational woman who wants to enforce change in the place she occupies and at the same time a woman who hopes for a harmonious and balanced community. Hence, there is a tension in the narrator's way of presenting Sakeena's story, which manifests in the multifaceted tone of irreverence and sympathy all at once. In the last lines of the quotation above, the narrator expresses sympathy towards the character by noting how she failed to achieve her dreams, but the language used to describe that failure is of a comic nature. The image of a woman chasing a rainbow conveys an irreverent orientation towards Sakeena. This tone is even more evident when the narrator later tells us about the disappointment Sakeena experiences before she dies: "Then, straddling life and death, Sakeena's vision became clouded by a black fuzz instead of the light she'd always anticipated" (4). Here the sombreness of a deathbed scene for a religious woman is treated with unexpected levity. The narrator does not fetishise the figure of a devout mother on her deathbed, one who asks for her son to be faithful to his cultural and religious identity. This attitude of the narrator removes the weightiness usually associated with stories about Muslim immigrant women – as burdened by dreams that never come true, and perpetually awaiting realisation of the migrant promise through their offspring – and allows for Sakeena's other traits to emerge. In the following parts of the story we get to know Sakeena as a woman who is confrontational and obdurate.

When Sakeena utters her deathbed wish, there are some hints from the narrator about why she wants a mosque to be built in a secluded village:

> "'Babbel's End,' she said, unable to hide the contempt from her voice – remembering the village green and rolling hills, the bustling main street with its cobbled pavements and Victorian lamp posts, its two churches (how excessive!), the way the sun would glisten on the water as all those white, white people walked their dogs on the pebbled beach nearby in their wellies and big coats. What kind of people went to the beach in the middle of winter? Then she imagined a minaret, soaring in the midst of all of this, the call to prayer drowning out the noise of all the barking dogs, and the idea brought her that ever

> elusive sense of contentment (which, to Sakeena's mind, was superior to happiness). She smiled, a tear in her eye, thinking of how sad endings could be but also of the hope you could leave behind.
>
> 'Babbel's End …' she repeated, harnessing her last breath, 'is your Africa.' (11-12)

Between Sakeena's two utterances there is an intervention from the narrator that maintains an atmosphere of humour as a vehicle to explore difficult issues. Sakeena's way of perceiving the White community of Babbel's End is marked by her way of creating a distinction between herself and the people who live there. Her irritation about the existence of two churches is followed by the repetition of the word 'white', which is used both as an ethnic category and as a literal description of the pallid appearance of the villagers (from Sakeena's point of view). There is then a rhetorical question about who goes to the beach in winter, to show how she distances herself from the culture and lifestyle of White people. The concept of racial distinction (in this case, of Whiteness) is well founded in her view and is emphasized by the detailed description all signifiers of the whiteness of the place as in her words: "the way the sun would glisten on the water as all those white, white people walked their dogs on the pebbled beach nearby in their wellies and big coats". The word 'white' is repeated telling that in Sakeena's view the whiteness of the place is disturbing. There is then a shift in Sakeena's view when she imagines how the sound and image of the Islamic symbol of the mosque overlay the signs of the Englishness of the village. The narrator describes Sakeena's feeling of contentment as "elusive". However, they choose to distract any chance of further sentimentality found in the next sentence (where she hopes to leave something behind) by cutting this part and allocating a separate space for her last words to Bilal when she says: "Babbel's End […] is your Africa." This last statement features a mixture of provocation and confrontation. Her invocation of Africa is a reference to the colonial history of the continent. This is a provocative statement as it invokes the Islamaphobic trope that Muslim immigrants always plan to take over the place they arrive in. She wants her son to speak up for who he is and to lead a mission where he introduces Islam to the residents of the village:

"show these people our Islam" (12). There is an antagonism proposed here, as two identities are separated with the request for the Muslim identity to be signified and made visible. This entails an implied sense of superiority, as Sakeena thinks about the two cultures in a hierarchal way: one identity should be above the other as the minaret of Sakeena's imagined mosque "soaring above" in a clear visual hierarchy.

To do justice to Sakeena's character, it is important to highlight how her ideas about cultural hierarchy are problematized in the novel. Her understanding of cultural difference and her ideas about home and belonging are treated ambivalently. When she is described as having the "rare combination" of "practicality and hopefulness", it is to explain that her dream of building a mosque in a majority White village is driven by her naïve optimism to achieve the goal of mutual understanding and cultural balance. This is another side of Sakeena's personality that is explored through the novel. The desire to achieve understanding is the theme that is most associated with Sakeena. She insists that if Bilal makes his cultural and religious identity visible, it will make people around him understand him better: "If he didn't know who he was then how would others really know him? *Understand* him?" (11). Enforcing change is her way of communicating and making others understand her difference. The narrator emphasizes this quality in Sakeena's life as it marks her journey: "[w]hen her husband had left her in the first year of their marriage she knew she would have to make sense of things on her own; *to understand*. Understanding, her local imam had told her, was the key to everything" (10-11). She insists that building a mosque and establishing an Islamic community will make others not just understand their neighbours, including her son, but also understand Islam.

This focus on understanding is also evident in the way the prologue addresses the memories of Sakeena's immigration experience, moving all the way from Rawalpindi to Birmingham with the responsibility for raising her child alone. It touches on the phase of her life that was dominated by the sacrifice and effort made to secure her son's success. Signs and imagery related to skin colour, national and racial identity, and even food are important here to Sakeena,

as she views them from the point of view of a new immigrant who tries to navigate her way positively in the new community:

> She sighed inwardly – Bilal never did think about the important things like symbolism. To think she had cultivated forty years of her life with her son in this multi-coloured city. For *him*! She'd not have him be the only brown face for miles: as conspicuous as he was invisible. And she wasn't illiberal – she'd made sure from the beginning that Bilal had a mix of friends, unlike other children who were encouraged to 'keep to their kind'. No, she made cucumber sandwiches for his white friends and jerk chicken for the black ones. If he'd brought any Chinese or Japanese friends home then she'd have made noodles or sushi, or whatever it was they ate. She had noticed Bilal's cheeks redden at her culturally presumptive ways, but she was his mother – she knew what he needed, even when he didn't. (10)

Here the narrator depicts Sakeena's character as one that explicitly appreciates "symbolism" in order to understand herself and others. Her experience of living in a "multi-coloured city" makes her observant of varied cultural backgrounds and their impact on her son's life. She first makes sure that her son is protected from the paradox of being simultaneously both hyper-visible and invisible. The statement "she'd not have him be the only brown face for miles: as conspicuous as he was invisible" highlights a struggle not exclusive to Muslims but characteristic of the experience of most minority groups.[30] Then, in order to find a practical solution to such a problem, Sakeena aligns herself to the liberal value of inclusion as she tries to ensure that Bilal has a "mix of friends". She claims that her efforts to build connection with peers of different ethnicities through food is an effective way to make her son's integration easier. Her protective nature stems from her feeling of insecurity (her worries about her son's integration) and does not take account of Bilal's own views towards the issue of cultural "symbolism" and making his identity visible. His embarrassment at his mother's ways hints at him taking a different path for himself, as he manages to live in a majority White village where his religion and cultural

heritage are not a high priority to him. Part of Sakeena's later request for a mosque to be built in Babbel's End is to establish a symbol for – and perhaps a monument to – her son's identity, to create something permanent that reminds him that he is Muslim and secures his faith.

While Sakeena's strategy to achieve understanding and therefore harmony between the two communities is to emphasize difference, Bilal prefers to conceal difference so that he can fit into English society. The confrontational approach of Sakeena is contrasted with Bilal's conciliatory personality. There is a distinction between Sakeena's desire to physically express her belonging to a different culture and at the same time her constant observation of other cultural heritages and practices, and Bilal's tendency to overlook such matters as a means of adjusting to the dominant culture in England.

Hence, the first thing that Bilal thinks of when the idea of the mosque is raised is money. He tries to justify his reluctance by pointing to what he has already done through donations and sponsorship, but fails to alleviate his feelings of guilt:

> Since her death he'd donated a lot of money to their local mosque in Birmingham. Wasn't that almost the same thing? He'd even sponsored a child in Uganda. It was clear that his mum didn't know what she'd been talking about. Babbel's End was certainly *not* Africa. On a mission or not, Bilal wasn't here to colonise anyone. It would be a dreadful business not to have moved on from that kind of thing. Taking over things, after all, was incredibly impolite. But his mother's dying wish kept coming back to him after every cycle of his own reasoning, beginning again at the point of his guilt. (17)

Characteristically, the passage expresses Bilal's situation through a lightness of tone. He is constructed as a man defined by naivety, as evidenced by the use of the words "incredibly impolite", denoting his simple way of thinking, as if he is a child observing adults' judgments; indeed, he is positioned as a child preoccupied by his mother's wish. This simplistic quality to Bilal's character does not conceal his profound problem, which is his consciousness of the lack of spiritual aspects in his life. What is emphasized is the image of him being in an unending

cycle of self-questioning, doubt, guilt, anxiety and lack of determination, which appear ever more strongly as the novel unfolds. His way of dealing with this is again through material alleviation: he tries to relieve his guilt about not fulfilling his mother's wish by paying money to a mosque and sponsoring a child. This follows from his approach to other areas of his life: he is accustomed to buying products to ameliorate his body's mental and physical pain. Throughout the narrative there is a recurrent image of him buying items like "Gaviscon" (17, 29, 111), "Ativan" (18, 111, 244) and "sleeping pills" (24, 42), which never work as "Each crisis seemed to balloon with every product that he scanned at the self-service checkout" (18). It is the way he seems himself "as if he were just another prosaic product of material living" (30) that disturbs him the most. Bilal's "feeling of redundancy" that "bubbled to the surface" of his life is the main symptom of his struggle (20).

While Sakeena is convinced that the village could be changed, in Bilal's opinion it should be protected against any interference. The village is described from Bilal's point of view as a place of contradiction:

> Babbel's End feels like the type of place you discovered in the back of a magical cupboard: other-worldly but of the world, giving it an air of mystery. Though Babbel's End was not waiting to be discovered. It had always been a proud introvert. (17)

Bilal's description of Babbel's End as a place to be discovered in the back of a magical cupboard refers to C.S. Lewis's Narnia books – which have often been read as Christian allegories. This is an ironic part of Bilal's character as he frames his experience in Christian terms, which recalls his mother's demand that he imitate Christian missionaries to guide others to his religion. However, to Bilal, the village is a closed place; it is self-sufficient and does not need any input from an outsider. His view on the place comes from the outside and there is a sense of slight rejection in the words "proud introvert". This is related to Bilal's feeling of redundancy, as he imagines the place as fine with or without his presence.

Mariam's part is written in a less satirical way than the sections focalising Bilal and Sakeena. Mariam is portrayed as a person stuck in a cycle of confirmation and refutation, belief and doubt, that runs throughout the narrative. The pressing question here is this: Does the image of a miserable Mariam confirm the already existing expectation that Muslim women are unhappy? And does the text itself therefore conform to this convention? Or, does Malik's novel say something different? Since Mariam is not the only Muslim character, as the story is distributed between many characters, I argue that it is unproductive to burden one character with the responsibility of being so singularly representative.

Mariam is a second-generation immigrant, and she operates as a counterpart to Bilal's ostensible optimism, and pragmatic approach. At the beginning of the narrative Mariam is described as a middle-class journalist who invests her time in learning about how to be a happy person. Sufi life coaching lessons (40) and Yoga classes (143) are part of her daily schedule that "had been handy in her search for self-actualisation, but they hadn't fully done the trick" as sometimes she had to "take out the prayer mat and say her supplications, which could be soothing" (40). The description of Mariam's character is delivered in the same satirical tone that permeates much of the novel. The narrator's words that the Yoga is "handy" and that the prayer "could be soothing" indicate the superficiality of Mariam's "search for self-actualisation" (which is in itself a satirical phrase, as it suggests that Mariam follows a faddish trend). However, Mariam's characterisation sometimes comes with a less satirical description as personal doubts about her marriage and career affect the way she looks at bigger issues in her life, such as her family's position as the only Muslim family in their community. The following lines exemplify this observation:

> Mariam hated that the idea of fitting in played on her mind. She saw the way the aunts looked at the Christmas tree and Khala's attire, her life reduced to tinsel and clothing. She began to see it the way they must. It was all a façade. A beautifully packaged gift

> with nothing inside. The simplicity of the realisation diffused her sense of self, as if she wasn't an individual at all – just another person who'd lived a life of self-deceit. (192)

Mariam juxtaposes her attempts to be a good wife and mother with the attempts of her family to fit into the village community, a practice that she sees as meaningless. Celebrating Christmas reflects her constant attempts to suppress individual identity in favour of fitting the pattern of a good wife. There is a lucidity in the language here which explains that the source of her bitter feeling comes from within. She struggles to reconcile her desire to be an individual with being part of a group. Her distressed feeling is exemplified in the fact that her identity is reduced to objects like "tinsel" and "clothing", which identify her as a Muslim who celebrates Christmas in order to show her belonging to a culturally Christian place. The metaphor of a gift that is wrapped beautifully but empty inside indicates her self-image as a person who is preoccupied with signs, ideas and labels but who is ultimately "vacuous" (126).

Mariam experiences happiness as a burden, an obligation; she is expected to be happy. She articulates this when Bilal asks her directly whether she is happy:

> 'It's my own job to make me happy,' she replied. And she believed it. Why should anyone else bear the burden? And it was a burden – the constant need to be *happy*. As if sadness was like a cancer that should be fought at every stage. What if the real fight was accepting the sadness? (179)

The rhetorical question at the end of the passage shows how transient and fragile her thoughts are. The narrator here, as in many parts of the novel, mediates Mariam's thoughts, and the question at the end of the passage indicates a state of ambivalence. We never get an answer from Mariam, and she remains sceptical throughout the narrative. She is a woman who turns to herself to live with the required social pressure to be happy and find meaning in life. She reflects on this, saying: "Who we are is just a set of stories we tell ourselves" (40). She accepts that she struggles on a daily basis with balancing the important things in her life: marriage, motherhood, friendship, career, spirituality and community relationships. She believes that she does not need

to be a whole, complete person, but one who constantly attempts to achieve self-actualization. This makes her subject to different sorts of judgements from others: Bilal thinks that she is a self-sufficient woman (20), while Shelley thinks that she disguises her dependency on men and that she is a fake feminist (83), and her ex-husband thinks that she is an intellectual person (38).

Indeed, Malik's novel declines to provide an example of the holistically happy Muslim woman. This is equally true of the way Rukhsana is presented in the novel. Compared to Sakeena and Mariam in terms of their search for happiness, Rukhsana is a more confident and secure person as her sadness drives her to communicate and make positive connections. Sakeena wants to challenge the hegemony of English culture in Babbel's End by establishing the mosque as a condition for her happiness. Mariam is preoccupied with what she sees as the absurdity and meaninglessness of notions of personal and cultural identity, which hinder her from building positive interpersonal relationships. Rukhsana delivers the essence of the novel's ideas about constructive positivity. Although she is disadvantaged in many ways – she does not speak English, does not have an income of her own, and lives in her sister's house – Rukhsana remains the one who is able to make a positive change to the village. The narrator describes her as Bilal's aunt who comes from Pakistan to England to live in her sister's house:

> After thirty-four years of being in the country, Khala never had got the hang of shopping alone or the transport system. She had flown almost five-thousand miles from Rawalpindi, only to confine herself to within a two-mile radius of their home in Birmingham. And she had seemed content with it, no matter how much his mum urged her otherwise. (27)

If this passage is read through the lens of what Felski calls 'critique', seeking to demystify and reveal sources of oppression and unbalanced power structures or ideologies, Rukhsana would be reduced to a victim of unfair immigration processes. However, if we suspend such judgment, another possibility emerges: that Rukhsana is a character with agency who has a positive effect within the novel. Lacking conventional sources of power, Rukhsana's compassion and ability to

facilitate positive communication empower her and others. Hence, from a Latourian perspective Rukhsana is a well emancipated woman as "emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds" but being 'well-attached'" (*Reassembling the Social*, 218). Latour sees all entities in a social assemblage as actors capable of making changes and being changed, regardless of the strength of the social or political restrictions around them. In this context, it becomes possible to attribute to Rukhsana an agency that might be overlooked if she is read from a critical point of view that judges texts for their representation of unbalanced power structures. Her agency is embodied in the incidents at the end of the novel, as Rukhsana is the one who manages to make the idea of the mosque in the village possible by bringing the two parties closer to each other.[37]

In the village Rukhsana is referred to as Khala, which means "aunt" in Panjabi, and this creates a sense of togetherness; she belongs to everyone and she does not mind that. Most importantly, when she donates her necklace for the church's bell fund, she is celebrated by the community: "And then everyone cheered for Rukhsana […] and she found the feeling. Happiness" (255). The act of giving back to the community is what leads to her feeling of happiness. As we have seen, "happiness" is a key term in the novel, recurring in the parts of Sakeena, Mariam and Bilal, but the fact that it is given the space of a whole sentence here reflects the profound sense of well-being that Rukhsana feels. It is a plain, unconditional, and transparent kind of feeling that leads her to feel she belongs to Babbel's End. This sense of belonging is well expressed in her poem, written in Punjabi in the novel, but translated as follows at the end of the book:

> I left my country
> And shifted the direction of time
> In the crumbling of my sister's home
> I stitched together a world of my own

[37] This resonates with Felski's ideas on works of art as being about the present networks of actors; the present social ties are worth exploring are not ones that exist in a utopian future, and "the degree to which these attachments are enabling or limiting (or both) is not something to be known in advance; it requires empirical investigation, a willingness to be surprised, and attention to as many actors as is feasible". (*Limits* 196)

I fixed my gaze

On the English rain

However your life passed

My kismet was much the same

That you find something of which you wish to be a part

Is the flowering hope of my heart. (319)

The tone of the beginning of the poem at the start seems to be one of sadness about a life of misfortune, since her dreams are shattered when she leaves her country and lives in the "crumbling" of her sister's house. Yet the second part expresses resilience and self-sufficiency, as suggested by the words "I stitched together a world of my own," showing how Rukhsana creates something for herself despite her bad "kismet". At the end there is an expressed hope for a new home, and new future. This "flowering hope" is an image of endurance; Rukhsana dies at the end of the story, but the legacy of this hope remains in the form of her poem. The fact that it remains untranslated in the main narrative recalls the passage when Nazneen expresses her love for her husband in *Brick Lane* discussed in Chapter One. As was the case then, Malik's decision not to provide the non-Punjabi speaking reader access to this essential poem at the point of its narrative introduction hints at the limits of the ability of language to convey meanings in a fictional work. On the other hand, at one point in the novel Shelley, reflecting on the way that Rukhsana "observed people and seemed to just *get* them" without speaking the language, suggests that "Perhaps language isn't as big a barrier as we think" (309).

It is through Shelley's point of view that we know about Rukhsana's poem, as it is written for her as a friend. At the beginning of the novel, Shelley is the character who is most hostile to the building of a mosque. The relationship between Shelley and Rukhsana brings to the surface cultural differences in a confrontational way. But what soothes the intensity of this confrontation is the way Rukhsana responds to Shelley. Unlike Sakeena, who wants to make her cultural identity as visible as possible, or Bilal and Mariam, who shed large parts of their cultural

belonging, Rukhsana positively connects with others through common feelings of sadness, which paradoxically results in a shared positivity and happiness. This mainly happens when Rukhsana arrives in Babbel's End and befriends Shelley, even though Rukhsana barely speaks English. Shelley explains her relationship with Rukhsana as therapeutic:

> There was something cathartic about revealing her innermost soul to a woman who didn't understand her. Shelley didn't believe in this therapy nonsense – paying a *stranger* to listen. But here was a mutual exchange of stories and feelings. And there was something melodious about Khala's voice, and even, dare Shelley say it, the language? Listening to the dip and rise of Khala's intonation she knew, whatever life story she was telling, it was a sad one. (170-71)

Rukhsana does not know that Shelley is hostile towards Bilal's idea, and she does not understand most of what Shelley says, but what is interesting is the way the two women communicate. They are transformed by the way they exchange stories and feelings even though Rukhsana tells her story in a language that Shelley does not understand and vice versa. So, what remains solid at the end of the novel is this kind of transformation. This marks the novel's spirit of celebrating the complexity of the connectedness between its characters in an affirmative way.

This chapter began by reviewing a number of responses to Malik's fiction. It found that these responses coalesce on two points: a claim that Malik's writing is not confrontational enough in terms of its treatment of racism and Islamophobia, and a related claim that it is primarily written for commercial reasons. As argued elsewhere in the thesis, such a framework for reception conforms to well-established paradigms for the consideration and categorisation of fiction authored by Muslim women. The novel has been accused of eliding controversial issues and being commercial as it does not in the critics' eyes sufficiently commit to rectifying stereotypes, to teaching the audience lessons about Muslims, or to suggesting a straightforward answer to broad real-world political and social problems. That does not mean that the novel is not rich and worthy of exploration. The novel manages to stay light and fun to read as Malik employs

comedy to express serious issues, which helps transcend the tense atmosphere associated with such topics. Malik's employment of thematic and stylistic choices in the novel helps to frame sensitive issues as a chance to explore conflicts rather than solve them, to bring otherness to the forefront and reimagine it in a nuanced way. The fictional setting of Babbel's End offers a space in which to experiment with how issues of identity develop, especially when characters are presented as a continuation of a long history of cultural conflict and, at the same time, are not the sum of what they say or do. There is always a back story that explains their attitudes and ways of connecting to others. If Malik's book is concerned with identity and cultural belonging – and it indisputably is – we have seen that it is also about daily lives and small-scale worries; it is concerned with the intricacies of minor stories rather than passing judgment on bigger, abstract issues that affect Muslim life in Britain.

Conclusion

Sabrina Mahfouz, who is a British-Egyptian playwright, poet, and screenwriter, has edited an anthology titled *The Things I Would Tell you: British Muslim Women Write* (2017) in order to write back to and rectify the negative stereotypes that are associated with Muslim women. The anthology collects different fictional literary works and essays written by female Muslim writers who live in the UK. Mahfouz views literature as a vehicle for change:

> In the face of such misplaced hatred and genuine cause for fear, it seems difficult to employ the arts in a truly effective and empowering way. However, one of the aims of the anthology is to dispel the narrow image of what a Muslim woman—particularly a British Muslim woman—looks and lives like. (8)

Mahfouz expresses her doubts about the effectiveness of employing works of imagination to rectify real-life situations, and she explicitly declares her progressive intentions whilst editing the anthology, meaning that she wants to contribute to changing the reality of Muslim women by writing about them. She recounts that she was inspired by what Ahdaf Soueif says in her collection of essays *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (2004) about the image of Muslim women in the West. Soueif remarks that: "I felt upset and angered by the misrepresentations I encountered constantly, and I felt grateful when a clear-eyed truth was spoken about us. And then again who was 'us'?" (4). There is a tension in the words of Soueif between the initial idea that there is an "us" about whom truths can be spoken and the implication that the word implies "them" as a counterpart. As a writer Soueif is alert to the limitation of identifying a large group of people with a homogenous identifier such as Muslims (which in itself suggests that there is an other) and then taking on the burden of representing them in any form of art. So, in both the statements of Mahfouz and Soueif there is an awareness of the limitations of written narratives to correct the image of Muslim women and help them.

These statements shed light on the problematic connection between art and politics that manifests itself in most of the production and reception of Muslim writers.

My point of departure in this thesis was to redress this tendency: to engage with these texts primarily as works of art, whose meanings are multiple and elusive rather than always already determined by the historical and political contexts in which they have been produced. In 2020 Claire Chambers, Nafhesa Ali and Richard Philips published their anthology titled *Match Made in Heaven: British Muslim Women Write about Love and Desire*, a collection of short stories written by both established and emerging Muslim women writers from the UK. Chambers and the editors assert that their book is designed to represent the diversity of Muslim women writers, who are usually seen in a negative way:

> This entertaining collection of sixteen short stories about love, desire and relationships may wrongfoot some outsiders, who too often expect Muslim women to be both conservative and submissive. The reality, of course, is more complex. While some of the writers in this anthology do express a quiet piety and focus on poignant situations, others employ black humour and biting satire. Still others move fearlessly into the territory of a Muslim *Fifty Shades of Grey*. […] Our writers are sure to challenge some received ideas about the Muslim experience. In particular, we want to unsettle the notion that young Muslims are repressed individuals who neither know what their sexual desires are, nor how to express them. (ix)

The fact that the editors of this anthology seek to provide "outsiders" with a "complex" representation of the real Muslim women rather than the simplistic one they are assumed already to have, reflects the sociological premise of this sort of scholarship. They want this anthology to represent authentic Muslim women and show them in a positive light. The problem here is the way the editors want to normalize supposedly alien Muslim women by bringing them closer to standard Western notions, so that they become acceptable. They homogenize Muslim

subjectivities and situate them in a normative paradigm as they defend the protagonists in the texts as having "the same day-to-day concerns as anyone else" (ix). Showing these women as occupying two different ends of a spectrum of piety and religiosity as evidence that they are not exceptional arguably replaces one set of "received ideas" with another. It is as if these subjectivities constantly need to be explained and familiarized rather than being self-evident or speaking for their themselves.

In another recent study, published in 2021, about masculinity in the works of Muslim authors and filmmakers and titled *Muslim Masculinities in Literature and Film: Transcultural Identity and Migration in Britain* Peter Cherry follows a similar path to that of Chambers et.al. He claims that his book seeks to contrast "popular images of the British Muslim male as 'stuck' in values that originate from elsewhere" and that the novels and films chosen in his study "paint a very different picture of British Muslim masculinities as complex, varied and contradictory thereby challenging stereotypes by exposing the heterogeneity within British Muslim practices of masculinity" (3). The rhetoric here is similar to that used by Chambers et al. Cherry wants to naturalize the image of Muslim men – to challenge the notion that they are alienated from and outside of British society. Hence, he offers to explain how novels and films made by British Muslim creators speak back to the stereotypes circulated in Britain about Muslims, pointing out that not all Muslim men are the same; they are diverse in many ways, including the practices of their masculinities. Once again, the emphasis here is on the notion that these novels and films present a diverse, complex and heterogenous portrayal of Muslim subjectivities that contradicts the "popular images" of Muslim men.

The richness of the art produced by Muslim writers and filmmakers is in these various examples reduced to the idea of combating inequality, which in itself reproduces the unequal treatment of this body of artistic work. It is discouraging that these works are only recognized through the lens of an art that can tell its readers about Muslims and their diversity or to

enlighten readers and rectify their perspectives. Readers (who are mainly seen as Westerners), are entrenched as passive recipients of whatever values and lessons the texts want to teach them. Hence, in this thesis I have tried to identify and challenge the paradigms through which the chosen novels have been read: paradigms which primarily stress their educational and political agendas. In some cases, the novels are seen as having a direct positive political utility for Muslim communities in Britain, especially in terms of the message they have about correcting stereotypes about Muslims, while at other times the texts' negative influence is highlighted in the same terms. The other dominant paradigm for reading these texts is to look at the material conditions of their publication; their authors are commonly accused of commodifying the representation of Muslim identity to respond to the demand for this kind of representation in the Western marketplace. This paradigm rests on the assumption that there is an already deserved kind of positive representation for Muslims that only needs to be produced in an artistic form and then read in the right way.

This is a problem that is diagnosed by the Turkish author Elif Shafak as she aims to lessen the effect of what she calls the "politics of fiction". In one talk, she underlines the connection that has been made between storytelling and politics with special reference to Muslim women writers. She notes that contemporary political values have led to significant changes to the way stories are told as well as the way they are read and reviewed. In the case of Muslim women writers, she points out that many Muslim authors are urged (by publishers and even readers) to write about Muslim women and particularly about the negative aspects of occupying this subject position. In this respect, Muslim writers are expected to write "informative, poignant and characteristic stories and leave the experimental and avant-garde to [their] Western colleagues." Muslim writers are always under pressure to explain their religion and portray themselves; they do not have the privilege of being artists for the sake of art. As a fiction writer, Shafak argues that telling stories should be free from any political restrictions as she affirms that: "Stories lose their magic if and when they are seen as bigger than stories" ("The politics of fiction"). I agree

with Shafak here: products of the imagination are not only able to provide us with nuanced kinds of representation but also have the potential of recounting stories that move beyond existing political and cultural conflicts.

Hence, in a move to lessen the effect of the already existent exhortation to interpret Muslim women writers' work mainly through paradigms that entrench their status as literary productions of minority authors that are read by a culturally different and more dominant group, I have tried to read the selected novels in a way that highlights literature's ability to go beyond such paradigms and binary oppositions. Felski's call for readers to situate themselves "in front of the text" instead of "looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives" provides a helpful model for this thesis (*The Limits of Critique* 12). I have focused on what the texts offer us rather than looking for messages in the arena of conflicts between the two cultures of the West and East or identifying the conditions behind the production as delimiting their potential meanings. Accordingly, each one of the five novels is read as expressing stories of individuals who constantly negotiate and renegotiate their sense of self, actively and consistently contributing to maintaining, refusing or questioning the exclusive categories that others wish to impose on them. I do not pass judgment as to whether these novels contribute positively or negatively to the general representation of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. Rather, I have tried to capture how these novels express these Muslim women characters' identities as ambivalent, heterogenous and even sometimes paradoxical, indicating that Muslim women's identity "is never a one-time, unique process but a continuing, ongoing one, [and] specific to particular historical contexts". Meanwhile, it is "discursively entangled in a complicated and fraught relation with the notion of modernization imported from the West" (Khan 31).

The postcritical approach allows me to read the texts as in relation with their contexts rather than predetermined by them. It is articulated by Felski that:

> [postcritique] opted for a language of addition rather than subtraction, translation rather than separation, connection rather than isolation, composition rather than critique. Accounting for the social meanings of art becomes a matter of multiplying actors and adding mediators rather than pruning them away. Instead of typecasting the work of art as either beaten-down sycophant of power or dauntless dissident, we have sought to make room for a more diverse cast of characters. Refusing to stay cooped up in their containers, texts barge energetically across space and time. […] Instead of asking "What does this text undermine?" we inquire "What does this text create, build, make possible?" (*Limits* 189)

In my reading of the five novels, I have focused on exploring multiple kinds of agency that are usually ignored in favour of dichotomies such as positive and negative or authentic and inauthentic representations of the Muslim woman. Inspired by Latour's Actor Network Theory I have aimed to highlight and bring to the surface how these narratives express complex and diverse sets of connections and associations that cannot be contained in one category. In Chapter One I explored narrative techniques that make Ali's novel more than a realist documentation of the lives of Muslim immigrants in the West. In Chapter Two, I read Aboulela's depiction of the hijab, and the ways in which her protagonist Najwa wears it, shedding light on the diverse connotations and the captivating, paradoxical representation around this practice. In Chapter Three, I read Faqir's text focusing on her exceptional incorporation of an alternative ending to read the text in a way that considers its several kinds of agencies: Faqir's agency in negotiating the demands of a global literary marketplace; and Salma's autonomy as a character that defies the expected role of victimhood. In Chapter Four, I read Shamsie's Aneeka as a non-idealized character; I explored the complexity of the design of the novel for its portrayal of her as non-representative, fictional, and subject to multiplex interpretations. My reading aimed to invest Aneeka with an agency she has been denied by symbolic interpretations of her narrative role. Finally, in Chapter Five, I argued that in *This Green and Pleasant Land* Malik writes in a way

that affirms a kind of confidence and an agency that she enjoys as a writer by interrogating the theme of happiness in her novel.

In sum, the narratives are read as expressing imaginary situations that are sketched by the authors not only to be measured or rationalized but also to be explored in a more open-ended way. Whereas much of the scholarship on these novels fixes them in rigid subject positions, I have tried to emphasise the fluidity and fragility of such stories. This reflects my belief in the power of literature to capture the richness of the human condition and to pose questions rather than giving definite answers, representing literary works as having an ongoing agency that cannot be predetermined by their contexts.

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