

Decrees and Troubles in Muslim Womanhood: A Study in Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings out the critical situations of the Muslim community in America after the 9/11 attack. It focuses on the faith, gender, and identity of the characters. The author, Shaila Abdullah, highlights the troubles the protagonist Arissa faces in the country and how she overcomes them, in the novel *Saffron Dreams*. Arissa is a Muslim woman who loses her husband in the 9/11 Twin Towers' attack. She confronts personal tragedy, cultural alienation, and the redefinition of her identity in an atmosphere of prejudice. At last, she assimilates to the culture of America, by hiding her own culture, to take care of her son who suffers from different ailments.

Keywords: Trauma, Identity, Faith, Motherhood, Resilience.

Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* signifies the consequences of the September 11 attacks. This incident changed the livelihood of Muslims in America and forced them to accept their ethno-religious identity. Based on the host society reactions, they evaluated their own traditions and cultures. The result of this started showing in literature. While comparing the literary works of the Pakistani diasporic writers, the writings about the aftermath of 9/11 represent numerous ethnic and cultural changes.

Abdullah's protagonist Arissa Illahi narrates the miseries, sufferings, and challenges that she faces after the death of her husband, Faizan, in the destruction of the Twin Towers in America during 9<sup>th</sup> September 2011. She follows her culture even when she lives in America, but circumstances create violence in her life. Arissa's life reflects the Pakistani culture and the difficulties such as discrimination and religious prejudices that Muslim immigrants face in the United States. Being a Pakistani immigrant, she follows her culture according to the wish of her husband. Abdullah provides inter-cultural and intra-cultural affiliation and affinities through the characters in the novel. She highlights how the Pakistani Muslim American experience is different from other immigrant experiences of South Asians in America. Abdullah brings forth the Muslim women's battles for their personal issues, in the aftermath of 9/11.

After the calamity of the twin towers in the United States, Muslims become a target for Americans. The critics Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato and Jen Webb signify the words of Foucault in their work *Understanding Foucault*. According to Foucault, the world is subject to dividing practices, a "process of distinguishing people on the basis of their perceived normality" (60). The incident shrinks the normal condition and tightens the situation. Names, features and attires of Arabs or Muslims are checked. The problem changes the situation from normal to subjective.

Arissa, being a Pakistani Muslim woman, experiences some changes in her life. The aftermath of 9/11 increases the number of Muslims who wear hijab as their identity. The Muslim women, who thought hijab as an old culture, now embrace it to show their identity. Katherine Bullock in *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* says, "The hijab had become an integral part of revolutionary and anti-colonial struggle, illustrated most vividly in Algeria in the 1950s and Iran in the 1970s" (87). The aftermath of 9/11 makes many young Muslim women wear hijab to make it a symbol of the American Islamic identity. One of the Muslim leaders says hijab makes the Americans recognise that these are American Muslims. The veil becomes a debate between Muslims and their tormentors. Many Muslims feel a new crusade has arisen. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad in the article "The Post 9/11 'Hijab' as Icon",

brings out the statement, "... the veil has acquired new meaning and significance as it has been appropriated as a symbol of an identity threatened by a ruthless enemy" (256). Some of the Muslim women who wore hijab before 9/11 remove it as a precaution to avoid harassment.

Hijab becomes a marker of identification in the life of Muslim women. It indicates their culture. But for the Americans it represents both religion and ethnicity. After the collapse of the twin towers on Sept. 11, hijab becomes a symbol of hostility. Arissa declares, "Some choices are never yours; your life's events choose them for you, and you merely obey, whether you agree or not.... the veil that I had worn since the day we got married had performed the role of that scarlet letter he'd marked on my chest... was associated with supporting the acts of the attackers" (Abdullah106).

Arissa's hijab becomes crucial for her in the United States. The hijab shows to the society that Arissa is a Muslim and that makes her react as one. She defines herself as culturally different from the beliefs of America. After the ruin of Sept 11, she says "... the biggest loss of my life to where I am now. It is a tale of grief and happiness, of control and losing control, of barriers and openings, of prejudices and acceptance, of holding on and letting go. It is about turning my heart inside out, mending it, and putting it right back... trapped in time" (Abdullah 6). After the death of her husband Faizan, she takes control of her own life. She has not expected her life will be in such a mess. Unlike the other victims of 9/11, she has not received any sympathy from the society around her because of her culture and religion.

Arissa faces violence for wearing hijab. After she loses her husband in the catastrophe of the twin towers, she feels lonely to be at home. "It had been just 41 days. My *iddat*, bereavement period was over" (Abdullah 58). To recover from the departure of her husband, she takes a walk near the subway station. At the time, four angry and scared teens start to chase and attack her. The veil makes them take revenge for the 9/11 attack. A blond guy grabs her chin, cups it in his palm and shouts at her: "You race of murderers'. ... 'The veil that you wear', he continued, pulling out his knife and aiming the

point at [her] hijab. 'It's all a façade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the non-believers, not us'" (61). These teens might have known that she is pregnant and that she has lost her husband in the ruin of the twin towers, but they continue to assault her and attempt to stab her. At that time the boys hear the footsteps of a man. They leave her collapsed on her knees and fail to stab her because of the stranger's arrival. Due to this, the baby inside her womb gets seriously affected. The medical report proves that the baby will be with "... heart defect, urinary tract malformations, kidney abnormalities, cleft lip" (67). May be, if Arissa had escaped the four guys, this might have been avoided, or if the terrorists had not hit and ruined the twin tower, the Muslim community might have been free and safe.

Arissa's hijab becomes an emblem for others to chase her wherever she goes. But she also feels that removing the hijab after her husband's death would be a kind of betrayal. She feels "... that he was gone, losing the hijab meant losing a portion of our time together" (Abdullah 58). She does not want to lose the desire of her husband permanently. Hijab stands as a symbol between Arissa and Faizan. Arissa is unable to change her culture as she wishes. For her, veil or hijab is the symbol of a Muslim woman, and it recalls the past life with her husband, Faizan. Losing her hijab is like leaving behind her husband and the life she lived with him. While she decides to remove it, she thinks, "Who was I bidding farewell to? I wondered: the age-old tradition or the husband I had kept alive in my heart?" (Abdullah 3). She never wants to give up her husband's desire. It is not only the desire of her husband, but also the desire of her mother-in-law. When Arissa decides to lose the veil, her mother-in-law raises a question, "How do you let a tradition to go or justify it to people?" (106). Losing the veil is the saddest thing in Arissa's life. Without veil she "... felt naked, like a prostitute... [and] longed for the veil" (116). In utter confusion she continues her life journey. Nawal El Saadawi observes "The woman's struggle is twofold-against her society and against herself" (43).

Arissa's mother-in-law, Ma totally submits herself to Allah. She knows everything happens according to God's wish. The Muslims accept this view. Ma trusts in God and says, "Allah knows I

prayed for the safety of my child every day! . . . The truth is that there is a time reserved for each one of us. When it comes, we have no say, no power to stop it” (Abdullah 109). Arissa looks at Ma in wonder. She is not able to find answers for the question that arises within her. “Why didn’t I have her ability to absolve others, her conviction, her clarity of vision? Does that only come with age?” (109). Ma’s belief in God shakes Arissa. Though Ma has lost her only loving son, and is surrounded by miseries and distress, she has the confidence that God will console and lead her.

Abdullah portrays that Pakistani Muslim women do not easily throw away their culture or tradition, because they learn, follow and obey the words of their God, traditions, and culture. Americans might not know the real culture of Muslims. They might think that the Muslims and the terrorists are the same. Arissa “... winced. Don’t they know that terror has no religion? That religions don’t preach terror?” (Abdullah 155), because every day the analysts interpret about the religion.

Through Arissa, Abdullah reveals the primary step to think about the future. The novel encourages readers to keep the past alive and to focus on a better future. Retention is the link that enables one to create bridge between the present and the future. Arissa and the other Muslim immigrants are not only confronted with aggression but also perceived as dangers. Arissa’s decision of removing hijab is not because of fright, but only to free her from this nuisance. She decides to be in America only for the betterment of her disabled child. In Pakistan, she cannot give treatment for her child:

Raian had nine surgeries in a span of five years, including an open-heart surgery to repair a large ventricular defect when he was three weeks old, a gastrostomy to assist with feeding at one month, and removal of adenoids due to recurrent obstructive sleep apnea at age two.... At age five, he was still tube-fed... went to the Children’s Hospital once a week for swallowing therapy. (Abdullah 174 -175)

Despite all these challenges and efforts, she is diligent as a mother. Arissa chooses assimilation as the best strategy in the American society for the sake of her disabled child. She assimilates into the American culture. Though she loses her veil, she keeps in touch with culture. Every day she “got dressed for work and kissed the folded veil on the bureau before [she] left” (Abdullah 179). Finally, she is ready to call the new place as her homeland: “I had survived, I realized with a degree of pride. I had not succumbed to the pain of my loss” (162). Arissa secretly acknowledges her culture and to the outer world she pretends to be an American.

Abdullah points out in this novel that Muslims are brought up to live in peace, harmony, love, humanity, and forgiveness. The terrorists do not represent the mainstream of the religion. The death of Arissa’s husband Faizan shows that terrorism has no religion. All the religions teach adoration, compassion, and sympathy towards human beings and prohibit killing or harming the people. The conflict lies in the acceptance or non-acceptance of another culture.

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