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Othering Female Other in “*Does My Head Look Big in This?*” by Randa Abdel-Fattah

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Abstract

In an attempt to deconstruct stereotypical images about Islam and Muslim women, Arab Australian women writers have created a literary space whereby they can negotiate their identities and articulate their own experiences in multicultural contexts. They are basically concerned with articulating their own experiences and worries in the hope not only to correct the tarnished images propagated by a wide Western mainstream culture, but also to negotiate and reconstruct new identities as third space subjects beyond categorization and binarism. Randa Abdel-Fattah can be viewed as a typical example of an Arab woman diaspora writer who managed to carve out a space of her own in the Australian literary milieu especially through her debut novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* published in 2005. Drawing on the postcolonial feminist theoretical framework particularly Chandra Mohanty's (1986, 2003) conceptualizations, the present paper examines the novel and explores the complex process of constructing new hybrid identity as an Arab-Muslim Australian woman in the face of Australian mainstream culture. It argues that Amal, the protagonist of the novel, is constantly *othered* and demonized as a result of her abrupt decision to wear the veil (head scarf) and live as a Muslim Australian girl. The paper contends that the veil is not a tool of subjugation and /or symbol of patriarchal oppression imposed on girls by their parents, but rather it is a voluntary act which serves as a source of spirituality and empowerment.

Keywords: diaspora, veil, othering, hybridity, third space, identity



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Introduction

Randa Abdel-Fattah, the author and lawyer, is an Australian-born Muslim–Palestinian–Egyptian, who lives in Australia. She reluctantly abandoned her hijab when she failed to get a job in the Australian labour market. She is the author of the following novels for young adults: *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), *Ten Things I Hate About Me* (2006), *Where the Streets Had a Name* (2008), and *Noah's Law* (2010). “*Does my head look big in this?*” was awarded the Australian Book Industry Award in 2006 as the Australian Book of the Year for Older Children. The book tells the story of a sixteen-year-old Australian-Palestinian girl, Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, who has decided to wear the *hijab* as a full-time wearer to the MacCleans Grammar School, an elite private school in Melbourne. Abdel-Fattah’s protagonist, Amal, is an only child to a doctor, Mohamed and his dentist wife, Jamila. Amal’s parents are both born in Bethlehem, Palestine, and immigrated to Australia to pursue up their academic studies. Given that they belong to a well-to-do family, they reside in Camberwell, a very affluent countryside in Melbourne. Apparently, Amal’s parents are depicted as devout Muslims who are strongly attached to their religion by constantly and regularly performing Islamic practices and rituals as moderate Muslims. Hence, Amal is highly influenced by her parents’ adherence to the moderate Islamic teachings, yet she still maintains very close and strong friendship with her peers of different religions and races. In one of her interviews with Hazel Rochman (2007), Abdel-Fattah mentions that she had a determination to write a book that can serve as an alternative portrayal of young Muslim girls with the aim to “shock readers into realizing that teenagers, no matter what their faith or culture have common experiences; that there is more in common, than there is difference; and that the differences should be respected, not feared.”

Following a number of terrorist attacks, especially the 9/11 events in the USA and the Bali bombing event¹ in Indonesia and their concomitant repercussions on the lives of Muslim

¹The 2002 Bali bombings occurred on 12th, October 2002 in the tourist district of Kuta in the Indonesian island of Bali. The attack killed 202 people (including 88 Australian holiday-makers, 38 Indonesians, and people of more than 20 other nationalities). These terrorist acts had a strong influence and shocked the Australian general public although they took place outside the Australian soil.



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Arabs in the west, the Muslim community in Australia find themselves in the spotlight, particularly women in hijab as their dress code renders them visible representatives of Islam and Muslims (Hussein, 2010, p.159). Besides, several Arab Muslim women particularly writers have become bewildered as their identities have come to be more questioned than ever since by the western media and politics. In an attempt to deconstruct stereotypical and distorted images about Islam and Muslim women, Arab Australian women writers have created a literary space of their own whereby they can negotiate their identities and articulate their own experiences in multicultural contexts. With this in mind, it is fair to state that Randa Abdel-Fattah has emerged as a prominent young adult writer with her debut novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* in 2005. She is a highly successful Muslim diasporic writer not only for producing eight young adult fictions, but more importantly, for demonstrating noticeable concerns for issues affecting Muslims migrants facing identity crises and acute injustice in the host countries. The emergence of Abdel-Fattah's literary works to some extent has created visibility for Muslim diasporic community in Australia. Accordingly, this paper aims at giving insight into the hardships Muslim women go through while attempting to assert their religious identity as Muslims. It also examines the complex process of constructing new hybrid identity as an Arab-Muslim Australian woman in the face of Australian mainstream culture. The paper further argues that Amal, the protagonist of the novel, is constantly othered and painfully demonized as result of her abrupt decision to wear the veil and live as a Muslim Australian girl though she was born and raised in Australia. It also contends that the veil is not a tool of subjugation imposed on girls by their parents, but rather it is a voluntary act and serves as a means of empowerment.

Being highly concerned with contemporary Arab women Anglophone narratives; I have chosen to work on an Arab Australian writer Abdel-fattah to reveal the different experiences Arab women have encountered in different diaspora space and locations. In brief, the criteria I have used to select the novel under study is attributed to the fact that this text is contemporary and engages with issues that are relevant to the subject matter of this paper such as identity construction, migration, gender, diaspora, cultural diversity, displacement and hybridity. More importantly, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* is a typical novel that raises very important themes related to racism and discrimination, and therefore, it questions the concept of



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‘multiculturalism’ and the extent to which Australian people are tolerant towards others, especially Muslim others. To this end, the manuscript addresses the following questions: How is Amal, the protagonist of the novel, is othered and vilified upon her decision to wear the veil? And does she -with the veil- constitute a threat to the Australian liberal values? I believe these questions need a considerable coverage and attention in academia. To answer these questions, I essentially employ a postcolonial-transnational feminist theory to examine the plight and experience of Amal and explore the challenges she faces socially, culturally, politically and psychologically as a hybrid subject in the Australian dominant culture. The postcolonial feminist conceptual ground, I believe, serves as a relevant instrument and an analytical tool to study the lives of Arab women in Australia in which the different issues of identity, hybridity, third space, and border-crossing are widely tackled.

Hybridity and Third Space as Sites for Reconciliation

The evolution of the concept of ‘hybridity’ owes too much to a cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha. Put differently, the concept of ‘hybridity’ has been widely associated with his pioneering work the *Location of Culture* (1994), which has indeed had a profound impact on the evolution of hybridity theory, but has also become as a reference of its wide usage in a multitude of disciplines. Bhabha’s argument, in fact, has a key role in the discussion of hybridity, and he is the first scholar who has developed this concept in the field of cultural studies. In this regard, Said affirms that, Bhabha is that rare thing, a reader of enormous subtlety and wit, a theorist of uncommon power [and] his work *The Location of Culture* is a landmark in the exchange between ages, genres and cultures; the colonial, postcolonial, modernist and postmodern. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1)

Being one of the most influential figures in the field of postcolonialism, Bhabha contends while discussing the notion of hybridity with John Rutherford: “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity.” (Rutherford, 1999. p.211). For Bhabha, ‘the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to him is the, “‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge.” (Rutherford, 1999. p.211). Thus, Bhabha transfers the notion of hybridity from the biological and racist spheres to the spatial. Bhabha’s hybridity is one that proposes to shift the location of culture



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and identity to the liminal space which is outside the dualities of centre and margin; of Europe and the Third World. It represents the will to move from the fixed to the fluid, to the space of the ‘in-between’, for, ‘an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of otherness. “It connotes rigidity and an unchanging order,” maintains Bhabha. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 94)

He further contends that the ‘third space’ is a productive space from which alternative perspectives and new conceptions of identity are possible. However, since it is born of the attempt to undermine predetermined colonial identities and categorizations, Bhabha (1994, p.56) insists that the productive capacities of this ‘third space’ have a colonial or post-colonial provenance. It is now obvious that being as one of the most influential figures in the field of cultural studies and post-colonialism along with others such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, Bhabha mainly refutes the fixity and unchanging nature of the concept of identity held by essentialists and Eurocentric ideology and, therefore, he suggests hybridity as a strategic tool and an alternative position that allows multiculturalism and trans-nationalism in cultural dialogues.

Being among the first theorists to put forward the concept of ‘third space’, Bhabha brings up the possibility of rethinking the Western Manichean polarities and therefore providing different perceptions of national identities and national borders. In brief, ‘third space’ in Bhabha’s view opens up the possibility to destabilize essentialist perceptions of identity based on unitary set of beliefs and practices. In other words, Bhabha’s focal point is that the transcultural forms of cultures produced in ‘the third space’ serve as a counter-discourse to the discursive dominance of hegemonic structures and institutions of colonisation. This hybrid form of culture challenges what Bhabha (1994, p.2) calls ‘essentialist national narratives of culture and belonging’. The significance of these counter narratives is their “negotiation” of space where hegemonic discourses homogenise culture and society. This negotiation as a constant endeavour “seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.” Viewed in this way, Bhabha posits that the identity of the migrant, for instance, is as a kind of hybridity that subverts those stable categories of national identity.



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Amal's Act of Wearing the Veil

From the very beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Amal's abrupt decision to wear the hijab at all times in public spaces after she would wear it occasionally either at mosques and/or at Hidayah school, an Islamic college where the veil is regarded as a part of the school uniform. Given that she is a daughter of a devout family, the veil is not new to Amal as her mother; Jamila already wears it as a full time. It is not surprising that Amal starts thinking seriously to go ahead with her decision to wear the veil at all times to assert her religious identity as a Muslim –Australian girl as she sees no harm and contradiction in being both a Muslim and an Australian citizen. By doing so, she is seeking to gain visibility and find a place through her hyphenated identity in the Australian multicultural society. This is plainly proved when she openly avers: "I'm an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian. That means I was born an Aussie and wacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens." (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.6)

However, Amal is aware that asserting herself as a veiled Muslim girl within the Australian dominant culture entails constant struggles and resulted from the distorted and tarnished image of the Muslims that have been circulating in the Australian society in particular and in the West in general. Amal is deeply conscious of the potential challenges she can face upon her abrupt decision to put on the veil in a society and culture where the image of Muslims has been demonized and vilified by Western media especially after the terrorist attacks which have unenviably placed Muslims under close scrutiny and suspicion.

Accordingly, it is worth stating that the protagonist, as we come to realize throughout the novel, has been racially and religiously othered and mistreated on a number of racist attitudes within the Australian society. Amal's first encounter with estrangement and racial discrimination occurs at an early stage of the novel, mainly when she goes to a Catholic primary school as her parents would live far away from an Islamic school where she is supposed to be. There, she has experienced alienation and maltreatment by her peers and by the Australian cultural norms at large. She says:

When I was in elementary school, different-coloured socks were enough to get you teased. So, when you're a non-pork eating, Eid celebrating Mossie (as in taunting nickname for Muslim, not mosquito) with an unpronounceable last name a mother who picks you up from school wearing a hijab and Gucci shades, and drives a car with an



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“Islam means peace” bumper sticker, a quite existence is impossible. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.10) Amal explains here the hard times she experiences as being the only Muslim girl in the catholic school where particular clothes and certain eating habits makes her more subjected to alienation and confusion. This passage suggests that Amal is not at ease with her religious identity regarding the fact that she feels deeply separated from her peers as she realizes the necessity to conform to the dominant culture and more particularly to the Westernized construction of female identity. Regarding this, Abdel-fattah reveals through her protagonist, that Muslims can be easily prejudiced and maltreated once they try to maintain their cultural and religious identity in the face of the Western dominant culture.

Amal gradually develops a sense of identity crisis. She, therefore, starts to lose her confidence in herself as a person having an Australian– Muslim hybrid identity which makes ‘one’, to use Bauman (1995, p. 82) expression, “thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs. Moreover, Amal’s sense of confusion and crisis is increasingly developed, especially after she has decided to wear the veil permanently in a society where the image of Muslims has been stereotyped and tarnished by a set of Western institutions and discourses. In spite of Amal’s constant attempts and perseverance to assert herself as an Australian-Muslim girl, she is confronted with a number of recurring obstacles and challenges arising from her religious practices and identity. Put differently, Amal finds no harm in living peacefully as a Muslim girl within an Australian society, but yet she is constantly seen as the ‘other’ who threatens and spoils the Australian dominant culture.

Amal’s major challenge is to wear the veil at McClean high school as an Australian-Muslim girl and who can perform her religious practices without restrictions and harassment and to be accepted as such. Hence, before Amal appears with the veil at McClan School, she decides to go for a test-run at her local shopping mall in order to explore other people’s reactions and to test her own determination. Prior to that, she gets increasingly nervous, revealing her three greatest fears:

1. Smart-ass comments (e.g., I’m standing on the escalator and a group of guys yell out ‘nappy head’ or some equally original comment);

2. Humiliation (e.g., toilet paper on my shoes, tripping on my heels, the painful public moments made even more excruciating when you already stand out like a Big Mac in a health food store);

3. Fixated staring (e.g., I'm trying to order chips at the food court and the girl at the counter can't register that I don't want sauce because she's too preoccupied burning her retinas. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.27)

This passage invites the reader to learn that though Amal is previously aware of the potential repercussions and stir the veil will cause, she is ready to take on her decision. Amal's first endurance with the veil is witnessed right after she goes to do the shopping at the mall to examine people's reactions towards her new look. There she says:

So you can understand why I'm walking around the stores as if I am in combat mode, avoiding eye contact with other people and waiting for something to happen. But as I browse through the stores, I realize how uncomfortable and irrational I'm acting because it feels like most people couldn't care less. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.27)

As the above passage illustrates, Amal's first appearance in a public space as a full wearer of the veil does not go unnoticed, especially in a society where the veil and other religious markers are vastly questioned as they are loaded with negative social and cultural connotations. It can be, therefore, argued that Amal is not at ease with the veil due to the unwanted attention it has brought to her. This proves the sense that Amal raises the Australians' suspicion and she is accordingly viewed as the 'other' subject who threatens their sense of serenity through the act of the veil.

Indeed, Amal's second experience with her new decision to wear the veil at all times has pushed her to undergo miserable moments, especially at McClean high school, where nobody else has the same Islamic background and culture. This growing discomfort is perfectly illustrated when Amal draws comparison between her old Islamic Hidayah school and her new McCleans school. At Hidayah, she reveals, on one hand, her comfort and she avers "all that mattered was how hard you studied or shacked off, and your friendships. And it was no big deal if you didn't have a clue who you were because nobody was asking for an explanation anyway." (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p."35)



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On the other hand, she, however, expresses sort of alienation and estrangement at McCleans, where class and race highly define your status and identity. Here, Amal states “there’s something about McCleans. I just don’t feel at home. How much your dad earns, how many cars you have, whether your money’s “old,” all that sort of crap counts as your initiation ceremony.” (Abdel-fattah, 2005, pp.34-35). Finding herself in such a position means she has to face and struggle against all types of discriminations and stereotypes that have class and social bases.

Othering Amal

Amal is aware of her ‘unique’ position as a Muslim girl having a Middle Eastern background, and therefore, she knows that she is perceived as a different ‘other’ within the dominant Australian milieu where the class and race are decisive factors in one’s identity. This has certainly ensued more discomfort and unease at her school, yet it has helped her not only become more conscious of her true hybrid identity but also it has made her strong enough to challenge the bully and racism she has encountered within the Australian society. Amal describes her first encounter with her racist peers during her first day of school and says: “Tia Tamos, with her entourage of Mini-Mes, Claire Foster and Rita Mason, made that very clear to me on my first day of school. I was talking to another girl and she asked me where I lived. I overheard Tia snickering with the Mini-Mes about us probably living off welfare.” (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.35)

Being the only Muslim student at McClean school implies that Amal’s actions and appearances will be under rigorous scrutiny and spotlights from the part of her peers, especially Tia Tamos, Claire Foster, and Rita Mason, who have been maltreating her throughout their encounters. Once Amal is, for instance, back from the winter vacation during which she has come up with her decision to wear the veil, her first appearance with performing her religious practice prompts unwanted attention and reactions among those peers. Here she says:

My friends, Simone and Eileen, are grinning proudly at me. Everybody else is staring like I’ve dyed my hair green or shown up to school wrapped in toilet paper. Tia Tamos, Claire Foster, and Rita Mason look at me and the snigger amongst themselves. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.42)



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In spite of the support, she seems to receive from her two close friends Simone and Eileen, Amal apparently does not feel at ease in the first place with the veil as the passage suggests. She is even nervous about the repercussions her decision has caused her among her peers, and therefore, is unable to hide the deep sense of discomfort she is feeling upon these reactions.

Indeed, the novel is full of frequent instances which spotlight this othering and alienation Amal has experienced upon her decision to wear the veil in the Australian mainstream culture. In fact, this sufferance, on the one hand comes from her peers in particular as we have mentioned before and, on the other hand, it comes from white Anglo-Saxon Australians in general to whom Muslims are a real threat to their society. Accordingly, Amal's othering and maltreatment comes almost from her arch-enemy Tia Tamos, who represents orientalist views and ideologies towards others in general and Muslim Arabs in particular.

Tia maintains her constant affront and humiliating attitudes mostly throughout her encounters with Amal and this is revealed through her first verbal reaction towards Amal's appearance with the veil: "I just don't know what I'd do without my long hair!" she says to Claire and Rita... "I mean, what's a woman without hair? You have to have a model's face to get away with covering up. Don't you think so?" (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.78). Tia here shows strong rejection and intolerance to Amal's particularities and freedom of choice embodied in the veil wearing. In Tia's eyes, Hijab represents a very oppressive and repressive sign whereby women are subjugated and oppressed as it restricts their freedom and hinders them from exposing their femininity and physical beauty. Hence, Tia's view of the hijab is vastly based on the Eurocentric conceptualization of the sameness of all women regardless of their backgrounds, cultures and traditions, encouraging the assumed universal prescription of gender roles and particularly female's physical appearance which is always defined in accordance with Western beauty standards.

In this way, it can be argued that Tai's perception is based on Western feminist perspectives *par excellence* in which women, especially Third World women's particularities and cultural traditions, are reproached and trampled on as they fail to conform to the Westernized female identity. This view can draw our attention to Chandra Mohanty's breakthrough classic essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial



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Discourse” in which she reveals the shortcomings of Western feminism *vis-à-vis* Third World Women.

Mohanty directs sharp criticism to Western feminists as they, she argues, fail to recognize and acknowledge the assumed differences that concern gender, class, ethnicity, history, religion, and other important aspects. In other words, Mohanty (2003, p.22) accuses Western feminists of assuming “a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group’ which results in creating ‘the image of an “average Third World Woman”” who ‘leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc)”. She further contends that “Western feminists assume that all women are a coherent group with identical interests and desires without taking into consideration their class, ethnicity, racial formation, or different circumstances.” (Mohanty, 1986, p.337)

By wearing the veil, Amal is vilified and reviled as she fails to meet the Western expectations and constructions of gender roles and, by extension, femininity standards which trample on the social, political, religious and personal particularities of others. Instead of considering it as a personal choice and part of the individual’s freedom, wearing the veil is, therefore, a strong sign for backwardness and oppression in the eyes of the Westerners. This idea is perfectly revealed when Amal again encounters other peers at school and she says:

This morning I’m in the hallway when I overheard some girls talking about me next to the lockers. one of them says the word *oppressed* and the other one is saying something about me looking like a slob. I can’t go up to them, because they’ll know I’ve been eavesdropping. So, I walk slowly away, feeling like a boiling kettle of water about to whistle and screech. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.63)

This passage clearly reinforces Amal’s pain she experiences in the Australian dominant culture as result of her religious identity. Even though she finds no harm to live as both an Australian and Muslim girl within an Australian society, she is apparently not accepted as such due to the tarnished image of the veil and the Muslims in general in the Australian milieu.

Following this, the novel introduces us to a number of scenes through which we come to witness that Amal is not considered as an Australian, and therefore, she is alienated by some largely white Anglo-Saxon Australians on the basis of her religious signs and practices. When



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Amal, for instance, is doing ablutions for her prayer, Tia ironically comments: "...I don't know. You're not walking in the desert, you know. We do have shoes in this country." (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.117). Tia here shows extreme disapproval of and rejection to Amal's right and freedom to practice her religiosity believing that Islam is backward and oppressive. Hence, Randa Abdel-fattah tends to show through her character Amal the real hardships and obstacles of Muslims, especially Muslim women in the host countries while trying to maintain their religious and cultural identity.

It is very important to mention that Tia has kept her derogatory comments and insulting attitudes towards Amal since their first encounter as an attempt to humiliate and other her in front of her peers and classmates. The following passage is a relevant scene which presents a conversation between Amal and her arch-enemy at school, Tia:

Why don't you just fucking leave our country and go back to some desert cave where you belong?' I stand over her, my heart drumming in my chest. 'This is my country and if you ever forget it again, I'm going to rip your head off! (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.245)

This passage is very telling with regard to the orientalist discourse that is based on strict binary system of thinking. Put differently, the unwelcoming attitude Tia shows here perpetuates Western essentialist conception of others which homogenises and constructs 'others' as inferior, oppressed, and uncivilized. Tia here reminds Amal of her true Arab identity which is associated with backwardness and inferiority in the eyes of the West as a discursive ideology to dominate 'others' and keep them under control.

Not only is Amal othered at school by Tia and her peers, but she is also othered and seen as an outsider who threatens Australian security and culture by large number of Australians. In the first anniversary of the 9/11 events, Amal encounters hard moments on the bus upon the radio news covering these tragic events. There she says:

As we walk, I suddenly become aware that the volume of the radio has been raised so that it blares out through the bus. A voice on the early-morning talk show shouts words of outrage about "Muslims being violent", and how "they're all trouble", and how "Australians are under threat of being attacked by these Koran-wielding people who want to sabotage our way of life and our values". My face goes bright red, and my stomach turns as the bus driver eyeballs me through the reflection of the mirror, looking



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at me as though I am living proof of everything being said. I felt almost faint with embarrassment as the angry voice blasts through the bus for everyone to hear. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.160)

On another similar occasion, Abdel-fattah introduces us to Amal's alienation and estrangement after the Bali bomb attacks in 2002 during which 80 Australian tourists were killed. Amal's status as an alien in Australia is, therefore, more intensified and her suffering is aggravated by many people around her. She hears the news of bombings the day after the attacks at the school assembly. The principal is giving a speech about the event, and Amal feels really distressed.

I cry, but it's bizarre because I can't even break down and grieve without wondering about what people are thinking of me. I wince every time Ms Walsh says the word 'massacre' with the word 'Islamic', as though these barbarians somehow belong to my Muslim community. (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.250)

This passage reveals that Amal's religious identity causes her bewilderment and trauma in western society which views Muslims as fanatics and associates their religion with terrorism and violence. The fact that she, as a Muslim, feels she is not even allowed to sympathise for her fellow Australians tragedy reveals the depth of the loneliness and alienation she is undergoing at this time and her sense of guiltiness that her classmates consider her to be positioned in the terrorist camp.

Being the only Muslim girl at McCleans School can be described as a painful experience to Amal with regard to the follow-up of the Bali bombing and its concomitant reactions among her peers. Put differently, after these tragic events, Amal seems to bear the burden as though she is to blame for these events due to her religious identity as a Muslim. Hence, she is subjected to constant offensive remarks and bullies, especially from the part of her peers. In commenting on one of the many of such recurrent instances, she maintains:

Tuesday morning. I'm at my desk in home room, fuming over an article about terror suspects and "people of Middle Eastern appearance" when Tia walks up to my desk again.... "Did you watch that documentary on those Muslim fundamentalists last night? You're Arab, aren't you? It must feel awful knowing you come from such a violent culture." (Abdel-fattah, 2005, p.155)



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It can be contended from the above passage that Australia is not an exception from what is defined today as ‘Islamophobia.’²The passage then suggests that the wider community of Australia has little knowledge of Islam and this ignorance is perpetuated by the discursive depiction of Muslims by Western social institutions. Tia articulates through her practices these institutions and therefore she is reporting what she has already been exposed to, mainly by media depictions and reports.

Equally important, it is worth stating that Amal further represents a large number of Muslims who have been constantly racialized by media representations within Western countries in general and Australia in particular. In this regard, a number of researches have been relevantly conducted to elucidate the strong influence media exerts to demonize and tarnish the image of Islam in the Australian society and thereby raising anti-Muslim sentiments among Australians and perpetuating the biased policies against Muslims. Saniotis (2004), for instance, argues in his seminal article entitled, “Embodying Ambivalence: Muslim Australians as Other”, that the Nineteenth-century Australian policy-makers treated Muslims entering Australia with circumspection, referring to them as ‘undesirable immigrant. This accordingly accounts for why Muslim Australians were frequently represented by the press and ordinary citizens as morally reprobate, and they were associated with a series of pejorative images (Saniotis, 2004, p.50).

The book, however, has been positively mediatized. It has received both national and international recommendation from the newspapers such as the British newspaper, *The Times* (cited in *Weekend Australian* (23-24 September 2006, 4)), the *Courier Mail* (30 August 2005, 1), the online British newspaper *the Independent* (8 May 2006). The author herself says in an interview with the *Weekend Australian* (23-24 September 2006, 4) that the book's appeal is due to ‘an overwhelming thirst for alternative narratives’, and adds: ‘I think most intelligent people

²Islamophobia is a form of intolerance and discrimination motivated with fear, mistrust and hatred of Islam and its adherents. It is often manifested in combination with racism, xenophobia; anti-immigrant sentiments and religious intolerance. Manifestations of Islamophobia include hate speech, violent acts and discriminatory practices, which can be manifested by both non-state actors and state officials. Islamophobic rhetoric associates Muslims with terrorism and portrays them as an international and domestic threat. It makes stereotypical allegations about Muslims as a monolithic group of people whose culture is backward and incompatible with human rights and democracy. Retrieved on April, 12th, 2021 from: <https://www.emisco.eu/a-proposed-definition-of-islamophobia/>.



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can see past the demonic and one-dimensional images of Muslims and are thirsting for an insight into the Muslim community’.

The book has also received widely and uniformly positive reviews and considerable academic attention from critics and scholars. In his seminal and relevant article entitled “Challenging Stereotypes: Randa Abdel- Fattah’s Use of Parody in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*”, Colin Haines avers that the novel engages in a practice of parody—an exaggerated, often funny, redeployment of stereotypes in order to expose the ignorance wherein they originate.” (Colin, 2015, p.31). Equally important, Ameri (2007) argues that the worries of the fictional character are not without basis. Some mainstream Australians are not comfortable with the hijab at all. The hijab can remind them of Muslim identity, which they might have problems with for different reasons. There will be, he adds, “a lot of inner and outer battles she has to fight in order to re-establish her position among her friends and to deal with her identity hyphens in a society which considers a hijab-wearer not necessarily an insider.” (Ameri, 2007, p. 57). Abdul Majid (2016) further contends that the novel portrays the action of wearing the veil as mainly apolitical, and that it is instead a spiritual and religious act that demonstrates aspects of the *hijab* as empowering to an individual’s life.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that Randa Abdel-fattah depicts the othering and alienation processes that many Muslim immigrants like Amal and others undergo in the host countries *vis-a-vis* their attempt to maintain their religious and cultural identities. Amal, the protagonist of the novel under study is still perceived as an outsider and is, therefore, excluded from her nation especially when she decides to wear the veil in public. In spite of all these hard moments and suffering Amal has to undergo as an Australian-Muslim girl, she has strongly resisted and challenged all these stereotypes and tarnished images that have been associated with Arabs and Islam in the Australian society. More importantly, Abdelfattah has attempted to destabilize these images attributed to Muslim Australians through her protagonist Amal, who has been struggling to assert her sense of being as a Muslim and Australian citizen regardless of the difficulties she has encountered. Thus, the key stereotype challenged in this novel is that of Muslim woman as the exotic other. The narrative challenges this stereotype through



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representing Muslim women as recognisable and familiar identities. With this in mind, Abdel-fattah mainly challenges the Western conception of viewing Muslim women as ‘exotic others’ and problematizes these women’s othering in Western societies. Therefore, the alternative she suggests for Muslim woman’s identity is the possibility of reconciliation of Muslim identity with the Western national identities.

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