

“I Have a Name Without a Title”; Representations of Middle Eastern Muslim Women in Western  
Literature

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by

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## Abstract

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Abstract: Since September 11, 2001, novels about Middle Eastern Muslim women acclimating to Western society have been a popular genre for Western authors seeking to counter anti-Muslim prejudices. However, in their efforts to counteract Islamophobia, many of these authors perpetuate and reinforce harmful stereotypes, particularly regarding Middle Eastern Muslim women. This thesis will explore two such works, *Ten Things I Hate About Me* by Australian author Randa Abdel-Fattah and *A Large Expanse of Sea* by Tahereh Mafi. I will argue that the novels have problematic components such as the "White Savior" archetype and how the characters reinforce stereotypical representations of their religion and culture, perpetuating assumptions that all or most Middle Eastern Muslim women are dissatisfied with their culture, appearance, and/or faith, which is not entirely representative of reality.



To my motherland and all who call it home. Forever proclaiming our existence, battling for their roots to be planted and grow fearlessly.

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Middle Eastern Western authors, who balance a cultural hybridity of conflicting identities, are engaged in an ongoing conversation about the media representation of Middle Eastern Muslim characters. This is a critical discussion because truthful portrayals are still uncommon. While the works discussed in this thesis were published some years after the collapse of the Twin Towers, it is essential to note how such a tragedy prompted damaging depictions of Middle Eastern Muslim women in literature. The general public knows little about the untold stories and experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim women in the West navigating between two identities: culturally Middle Eastern but with a Western mindset. Both identities are depicted in literature as complex, but they are frequently depicted inaccurately, leaving some Middle Eastern-Western Muslims in the dark about their true identities. Furthermore, the novels I analyzed provided a compelling look at the realities of Islamophobia and made some attempts to empower their female protagonists; however, they both ultimately rely on the "white savior" to provide a connection to white, mainstream audiences.

My research examines two novels that depict the lives of two sixteen-year-old Middle Eastern Muslim girls and how both authors approach their work in developing their characters' representations in a Western world. The first of these novels is *Ten Things I Hate About Me* by Randa Abdel-Fattah, which depicts Jamilah Towfeek, a sixteen-year-old high school student in Sydney's Western Suburbs. Jamilah is a Lebanese Muslim, yet she has spent the last three years concealing her true identity from her classmates. While the novel contains elements that a young Middle Eastern Muslim woman may encounter, such as dealing with an identity crisis and feeling helpless when expressing one's ethnic and religious background in the face of hostility, the novel holds problematic elements. For example, Jamilah bleaches her hair blonde, adopts

Jamie as her name, and wears blue eye contact to disguise her identity. While the novel attempts to portray these tactics as unfavorable because they result in Jamie meeting her genuine friend/love interest, the novel both directly and indirectly advocates for Western assimilation. Jamie is divided between her desire to be proud of her background and her want to fit in with the Western high school crowd. While Jamilah cannot find comfort nor a sense of security in discussing these issues she faces, she is taken aback by how at ease she feels around Timothy, a white male she meets, via an anonymous email conversation that allows her to discuss her cultural and religious identity concerns. Due to Timothy's personality, she immediately becomes friends with him. Although Timothy allows Jamilah to take comfort in her true identity, one that has been conditioned to be suppressed by mainstream media and the false images of Middle Eastern Muslim women, he is an example of the White savior complex. In Felix Willuweit's article, "De-constructing the 'White Saviour Syndrome': A Manifestation of Neo-Imperialism, a 'White Saviour Syndrome,'" he defines the phenomenon as a white person who "guides people of colour from the margins to the mainstream with his or her own initiative and benevolence" which tends to render the people of colour "incapable of helping themselves" and disposes them of historical agency". This complex is problematic because it implies that Middle Eastern Muslim women should only be assisted or have their struggles viewed through the lens or narrative of a white person. Jamilah fights throughout the narrative to accept her true identity, fearful of ridicule and rejection from her classmates. We observe little to no character development in Jamilah for most of the novel. Jamilah, as the protagonist, is pretty judgmental of her heritage and the people that identify with it. She describes her father as a stereotypical Middle Eastern parent—overbearing and occasionally abusive.



In addition, the second novel I analyzed was *A Large Expanse of Sea* by Tahereh Mafi. The novel succeeds in depicting the harsh consequences that a Middle Eastern Muslim woman faces. In this novel, Shirin, a sixteen-year-old Iranian Muslim girl born in America to immigrant parents, faces intolerance and hatred at her school and in the broader world. Tahereh Mafi has a sizable fan base as the writer of the popular series *Shatter Me*, and while those with such a large platform can voice essential ideas, especially when the subject is personal, Mafi does an admirable job. While the protagonist is voiceless throughout the novel, readers are privy to Shirin's internal thoughts. While this enables readers to comprehend how these thoughts affect the protagonist, it does not give context for the frequent racist and Islamophobic acts directed at the protagonist; it frequently demonstrates how Middle Eastern Muslim women feel in reality. Shirin suffers physical and emotional abuse, and despite her attempts to communicate to others that she is not oppressed or in need of salvation, she remains voiceless. For example, right after the attack on the Twin Towers, Shirin was walking home from school when two strangers came and assaulted her by taking off her hijab and choking her with it. When her brother came to the rescue, he called the police to get the people who hurt his sister. When the police arrived and took note of what happened, the police stated to Shirin that it was merely a prank and stated, "'Here,' he said, and offered me a card. 'Call this number if you ever feel unsafe, okay?' I took the card. It was a number for Child Protective Services" (Mafi 182). This is an accurate representation of what Middle Eastern Muslims face in reality. Their struggles and stories are often dismissed because they are seen as the cause of the problem, even of crimes committed against them. The author demonstrates that the police view Shirin's family as a more significant threat than her attackers—giving her the number for child protective services indicates that they believe she requires protection from her family. This intensifies the violence she has endured:

first, she is assaulted physically, and then she is betrayed by the institution supposed to protect her, falsely accusing her family of being a threat while ignoring the actual attackers.

While Mafi does an excellent job of relating the matter of racism that Middle Eastern Muslim women receive, Mafi does not successfully do a good job overall in completing the narrative with an empowered position for Shirin. The novel contains a white savior complex. Shirin attempts to maintain an emotional distance from her peers to protect herself, but the tentative romance that develops between Shirin and Ocean James, a popular white boy, begins to grow throughout the novel. The novel relies on the same white savior trope in keeping with the theme. While a white character and a person of color can fall in love, this novel does not do it reasonably since the protagonist is more concerned with Ocean. Shirin's emotional distress is neglected, and both she and the spectator focus on Ocean's troubles. It is also worth noting how these authors, who share a common background with the characters they made up in their novels and may have encountered similar issues, write their characters out to be viewed through a white man's lens. This leaves the represented minority group and its readers to wonder whether this was intentional, as these white male characters can act as a conduit for assisting Middle Eastern Muslim women, or if they are simply a means to an end of assisting them in selling their work. Without Ocean, it seems as though Shirin would not have been a colorful character as there is a notion that in order to discuss these issues and topics, a white savior complex must be introduced. It is noted that having a white savior complex in these stories is detrimental because it diverts readers' attention away from the central issue discussed in these novels and keeps the voices of Middle Eastern Muslim women silent and in the shadows. Furthermore, it also maintains the idea that Middle Eastern Muslim women cannot voice their concerns or their issues

without the trope of white people believing they should offer a piece of their identity in narratives not focused on themselves.

In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, author Lila Abu-Lughod examines the ethics of the contemporary “War on Terrorism,” researching whether anthropology might help readers comprehend why Americans are involved in helping Afghan women. In her book, Abu-Lughod explores the West's early attitude to Muslim women. Months after the twin towers fell, the author analyzes the clamor of media outlets and mainstream media about how Islam treats its women. Although the writer refers to Afghani women, this can also be applied to a broader group of Middle Eastern Muslim women, as she states further in her work how, although the most well-known form of oppression of Afghan women occurred under the Taliban and terrorists, as she states, they were forced to wear the burqa. As the writer states, "Liberals sometimes confess their surprise that even though Afghanistan has been liberated from the Taliban, women do not seem to be throwing off their burqas. Someone who has worked in Muslim regions must ask why this is so surprising. Did we expect that once 'free' from the Taliban, they would go 'back' to belly shirts and blue jeans or dust off their Chanel suits? We need to be more sensible about the clothing of 'women of cover'" (Abu-Lughod 785). The West 'liberates' these women from their communities, but this is exactly what Muslim women want. In Mafi's novel *A Large Expanse of Sea*, Shirin frequently states that she is not oppressed, chose to wear it, and is confident in it. To 'liberate' these ladies from their purportedly constraining faith may be considered part of the White savior complex. Given that the burqua was designed to keep them safe from strange males in public by symbolically indicating that they were still in their houses despite their public movements, it is difficult to see how asking the Muslim woman to remove it is not itself harassment. We note this when Shirin was assaulted by a classmate who snapped her photo

without her headscarf and circulated it around the school. As Lughod proceeds to describe the alleged challenges faced by Muslim women, she redirects her audience to the title's goal. She points out that respect for difference is not the same as cultural relativism because it allows us to assess our own responsibilities for the situations in which people in other parts of the world find themselves. We are not observers of a world shaped by the strong engagement of Western forces in Middle Eastern lives. The author further notes, "More productive approach, it seems to me, is to ask how we might contribute to making the world a more just place" (Abu-Lughod 789) With this statement in mind, it might have educators ponder the notion of whether this productive approach Lughod mentions would have produced a more appropriate and relatable literature representation from *A Large Expanse of Sea* and *Ten Things I Hate About Me*. While these white male characters are allowed to play a role in helping these Muslim women and be in relationships with them, it is not appropriate for the white men to dismiss Jamilah and Shirin's issues nor take credit for helping these women be more comfortable in their religious and cultural identities; it should have been more focused on taking action on the issues that these Muslim female characters were faced with.

In general, it is worth noting that both protagonists are 16 years old, which appears to be a watershed moment in terms of self-awareness for young Middle Eastern women. The novels examine the two distinct ways in which those perceptions are received. It is a watershed moment for women, particularly for these characters and the group of persons who represent them. The thesis's initial objective was to examine how Middle Eastern Muslim women were portrayed in literature. The research has taught me that there is still a long way to go in reading accurate portrayals and representations of these young women.

The fundamental goal of this research is to raise awareness about the topic of Middle Eastern Muslim women's representation, which is rarely discussed in our current political and social milieu. The general public is unknowledgeable and uneducated about the untold stories and experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim women living in America who are navigating two identities: culturally Middle Eastern, but with a Western attitude. Both identities are portrayed as complex, but they are portrayed inaccurately, leaving some Middle Eastern American Muslims in the dark. Though I am aware that the Middle Eastern minority group not only includes Muslims but also other religions, cultures, and different backgrounds, I respectfully address the entire spectrum of experiences for which no single person can speak. However, I do not want to assume or use my voice to influence certain groups' feelings about specific difficulties they confront. Regardless of whether these groups are struggling with challenges relating to their culture, religion, or gender, they are all subjected to stereotypes in various forms due to misrepresentation and oppression. Furthermore, there may be Middle Eastern Western Muslim authors attempting to be expressive and representative to encourage young Middle Eastern Muslim women to express their worries and relate to a topic they have all encountered at some point in their lives: Islamophobia and anti-Middle Eastern sentiments. My goal in looking into Middle Eastern American Muslim literature is to examine whether there are any characters or stories that accurately depicts the complex existence of a Middle Eastern Muslim women living in America. This type of literature has the power to shape and reflect society's attitudes regarding these women. Furthermore, it gives a forum for introducing a variety of themes to explore, ranging from cultural and religious standards to misleading portrayals in the mainstream media, and how these factors may influence how Middle Eastern Muslim women view themselves.

## Background

To comprehend the literature written about the experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim women in the West, an understanding of their historical and political perspectives is required, as this provides much needed context and explains how this affects literature and, more importantly, their real-life identities. Micah Hughes' piece *Representations of Identity In Three Modern Arabic Novels* provides a literary study that takes a deeper look at Middle Easterners, or Arabs. As Hughes explores the literature on Arabs, I am aware that Arabs are a subset of a larger discussion of Middle Eastern identities. These writings convey the politics and history of these literary works. People find it difficult to imagine a Middle Eastern identity outside of realism because of the weight of politics and history. When discussing Middle Eastern women, as people of society and readers of literature cannot see past these things—we cannot see her as an identity, but only as a collection of politics and history.

Middle Eastern Muslim women have tried to convey their religious views and ideals through their hijab and outspokenness. Micah Hughes begins by introducing the prospect of reopening dialogues about the issue that Arab Muslims in America encounter regularly. By doing so, Hughes discusses how Arab Muslim women are more than simply the head covering they wear. By exploring literary works in each, he examines they are actual people contributing to society in his piece "Representations of identity in three modern Arabic novels." Muslim women are incredibly diverse, as they are not all Arab and hold various theological beliefs. The complicated forms of identity in contemporary Arabic literature in translation are discussed in Hughes' study. His research focuses on the relationship between identity and the religious, political, secular, social, and sexual variables shaping and reshaping intersubjective experiences. At the same time, it aims to investigate and problematize various reductionist notions of identity

as immaterial or simply fluid and dynamic in order to refute preconceptions that identity is static. Hughes uses identity as the study's object and 'problem space and further discusses how colonial practices' "political rationalities" generated new places for political and social existence, and therefore new ways of thinking and living, both within and outside the colonial encounter.

Authors Diana Abu-Jaber and Carol N. Fadda-Conrey first discuss the effects of the September 11 aftermath and the position of Middle Eastern Muslims in America. Before the tragedy, it appeared that the minority group coexisted in American society. In terms of research, not much is said about the group, neither politically or socially. There were tensions between the Middle Eastern countries, which were not simply a result of their presence. Because of the high-risk struggles of culture and religion for Middle Eastern women in their home countries, they essentially resulted in wanting out of the false idea of what the media has an idea of them now, leading these women to want liberation; the West. However, the aftermath of the twin towers' destruction has resulted in countless articles, videos, and media coverage about the hot topic of foreign terrorism. The focus is not on the tragedy itself but on how Middle Eastern Muslims became the enemy. Hate crimes are committed against potential characters, making the typical Middle Easterner a suspect that fits the socially constructed frame of terrorism. Characteristics included long beards, brown skin, modesty, and a foreign language that resembled Arabic. However, because terrorism comes in all shapes, colors, and sizes, the continuous stereotyping is incorrect in and of itself.

This misconception has also resulted in many non-Middle Eastern Muslim people being targeted—such as those of Indian and Hispanic origin. Western perspectives have deemed Middle Eastern Muslims to embody this new definition and image of terrorism as part of their

racial identity. After two decades, Middle Eastern Muslims still lack a platform to express their worries and challenges because they lack a distinct racial identity.

Diana Abu-Jaber states in her article that Arab communities themselves are invisible to American society and possibly outside the West. As she mentions a group that are classified as Middle Eastern, "The Arab American community currently faces a quandary in terms of its racial classification. With the US Census Bureau situating it within the "white" category, this group has no legal position within the spectrum of minority cultures from which it can legally articulate its communal concerns about discrimination" (Diana Abu-Jaber 188). It is almost demanding to get lost in fabrications of certain stereotypes, most notably, when these particular things are foreign and are surrounded by tragedy. However, these assumptions about the falling of the twin towers, came back to another tragedy, which targeted an ethnic group following a specific faith and connected their religion and culture with terrorism. There was a rise and widespread interest increasing in the aftermath of September 11th, which led to academic research about the war on terror and the masterminds behind Islamic culture and religions. Unfortunately, many of these projects were only seeing the dark matter of Middle Easterners, but taking all of the negative stereotypes and sticking it to one group. Moreover, the increasing immigration of Muslims in Europe and North America into Western liberal democracies led to the analytical situation going beyond the assumption of a severe dichotomy between Islam and in the West.

Nash Geoffrey's article *"Arab Voices in Western Writing: The politics of the Arabic Novel in English and the Anglophone Arab Novel"* discusses the difficulties Arab writers face when attempting to publish their work by Western publishing houses. While Geoffrey discusses a specific group of Middle Easterners, this argument can also be used to discuss and relate to larger groups of Middle Eastern people. It begins with the assumption that, in general, the latter



requires the reproduction of a specific repertoire of Arab representations and images. Arab authors, whether their works are translated from Arabic or inscribed directly in western languages, have the option of adapting to these requirements or risk not being published. The article frequently investigates claims about Anglophone Arab novels as a type of postcolonial writing that can avoid translational bias and undermine stereotyping. Essentially, this harms the story that needs to be told from the perspective of Arab Muslims, whether it is fictional or not; the story adapting to Western ideology to fit Western expectations continues, as stated before, to push the authentic representation that is attempting to be told from the minority group. With the tragedy of the Twin Towers falling, and a lack of understanding of Arab Muslim women's cultural and religious roles, much miscommunication and possible misinformation contributes to the idea that Arab Muslim women are oppressed or hide behind their hijabs to pose a potential threat to society.

Additionally, he states in a part of his article, "The Western point of view that Arabic literature is "problematic" and is still therefore to some degree "embargoed," for the reason that Said gave in 1990: that "Arabs and their language were somehow not respectable, and consequently dangerous, louche, unapproachable" (Geoffrey 27). With Geoffrey's comment in mind, readers might compare the way Arabs, their language, culture, and religion are treated in *Ten Things I Hate About Me*, especially when Jamliah talks about her father. Her remarks and interpretations of him for the audience are characteristic of Arab men, who are mocked for their "poison traits of being domineering," their urge to adhere to tradition, and much more.

#### *Ten Things I Hate About Me*

The Middle Eastern Muslim woman is often a misunderstood figure, since she is often portrayed as a defenseless and oppressed woman whose headscarf has enslaved her from what a

free woman should be. The two novels analyzed in this thesis attempt to contradict that portrayal and offer a more three-dimensional portrait of a Muslim woman. However, both, ultimately, rely on an equally problematic trope known as the “white savior.”

“The Struggle of the Veiled Woman ‘White Savior Complex’ and Rising Islamophobia Create a Two-Fold Plight” the white savior complex is addressed, with the author claiming that in Western countries, such notion exists that the veil is commonly associated with the concept of the white savior complex. Many Westerners believe they are more fortunate than people in other parts of the world, and as a result, some Westerners desire to 'liberate' the less fortunate, stating that “Veil-wearing women speak up to declare their sovereignty against pretentious intrusions, they are often silence by white liberal feminists who circumscribe their agency” (Yusuf Jailani 53). Although Jamilah does not wear the hijab in the novel, Timothy's character fits the white complex stereotype since he was the only person who could help Jamilah realize her genuine Arab Muslim identity. While the novel holds multiple problematic elements, by including these tropes, it is ironic how the main character required a white character to be more open to her own identity. Moreover, *A Large Expanse of Sea* is more detrimental than beneficial as the audience is more concerned with Ocean's issues, dismissing nor confronting Shirin's issues. Ocean represents the white reader who must confront their whiteness, who must acknowledge the invisible barrier between them and the rest of the world, who must ultimately confront their own white privilege.

The first novel, published in 2006 by Randa Abdel-Fattah *Ten Things I Hate About Me*, introduces Jamilah Towfeek, a 16-year-old from Sydney's Western Suburbs. Jamilah is a Lebanese Muslim who has kept her true identity disguised from her peers at school for the past

three years. She bleached her hair blonde, assumed the name Jamie, and wore blue contacts to hide her true identity. Jamie is in the tenth grade at Guildford High School, where the students are divided by their ethnic backgrounds.

Throughout the novel, Fattah's main character Jamilah spends the majority of the novel dismantling her identity in order to fit in with Westerners, but she never explains why she feels the need to do so. Jamilah says "You see, neither [popular classmate] Peter nor anybody else in my class has any idea about my Lebanese-Muslim background. My real name is Jamilah Towfeek, but I'm known as Jamie when I'm at school because I'm on a mission to de-wog myself" as if she has uncritically accepted bigoted views of Muslims. Assimilation is something many immigrants grapple with, but this novel provides little to no historical context to explain why Jamilah may want to assimilate.

A truly nuanced portrayal of a Middle Eastern identity would need to address the historical context that produced that identity. Any description of identity that does not consider the chronological character of its analysis risks merely recreating as universal a story of the secular, enlightened subject. For example: Fattah's novel makes no mention of her parents' decision to immigrate to Australia as a civil war erupted in Lebanon. The first Lebanese who immigrated to Australia arrived in the late 1800s, fleeing economic difficulties as well as religious and political persecution under the Ottoman Empire. Although some readers may believe it is unnecessary to include such information in a fictional novel, it is critical to do so since it raises awareness of the reasons why many Middle Easterners migrate to other countries. It is important to include the historical context in order to understand the significance of what Middle Easterners carry through different experiences of war, trauma, immigration and the complicated reactions of the histories associated with Middle Eastern identities.

As Hughes states,

Post-colonial narratives of subjectivity oftentimes rigorously outline the manner in which certain technologies of disciplinary power constitute new ideas of personhood through attempts at modernization by the colonial state. Talal Asad draws our attention and critical analysis deeper by suggesting that the scholar pay closer attention to the hegemony of Western formations of identity and therefore to the goal of the colonial project, not just its disruptive power. By drawing our attention to this contradiction, Asad illuminates the ways in which the "totalizing" efforts of colonial modernity function in a dubious manner. (7)

While Jamilah's character and narrative seek to symbolize and relate to real-world challenges confronting Middle Eastern Muslim women, this figure is unrealistic and reliant on an entertainment factor that spirals into over dramatization. Furthermore, Shirin's character and circumstances may resonate with Middle Eastern Muslim women, since she provides a more realistic representation of forced assimilation and a credible source for readers to learn about the Islamophobia she faces. While these literary depictions will not leave the audience satisfied or adequately educated about Middle Eastern women's experiences with colonial modernity, it is critical to evaluate what the fiction is teaching people. In Mafi's novel, the colonization of Middle Eastern Muslims has made it difficult to explore their identity and deal with the hatred from the outside world has left them lost in a void of cultural and religious identity. In a part of Fattah's novel, Jamilah overhears her peers talk about the recent riots that have been taking place in Australia over Lebanese immigration. Despite the rioters' cries of "No more Lebs! Wogs go home! Ethnic cleansing!" (Fattah 2) her peers downplay the seriousness of the riots. The popular

Peter Clarkson states, after hearing the mention of the recent riots, “Man, you ethics and Asians are always complaining. Oh help me! I’m a victim of racism. The white people are out to get me. Get over yourselves!” (Fattah 3).

Because of statements like these, Jamliah is afraid to express her Arab heritage and religion to her peers for fear of rejection and negative outcomes from other Middle Eastern Muslim peers who are prejudiced against her. Jamliah’s gender further complicates her challenges. Her brother does not seem to face the same insecurities as Jamliah nor the same restrictions. Bilal, her brother, is a high school dropout who aspires to be a mechanic. He drinks, listens to rap music and stays out late. In *A Large Expanse of Sea*, Shirin’s older brother Navid is also seen not facing any backlash in the novel due to his cultural and religious background. He is admired for his looks and as the main protagonist notes “he didn’t walk around wearing a metaphorical neon sign nailed to his forehead flashing CAUTION, TERRORIST APPROACHING” (Mafi 6). These depictions further the gender stereotype that men have more freedom than women, especially in Middle Eastern Muslim families. By depicting Jamilah’s attempts at assimilation while depicting her brother as being unaffected, it furthers the stereotype that women are not free to express themselves while minimizing the bigotry Muslim men may face. In addition, Abdel-Fattah's novel frequently and negatively repeats the stereotyped Middle Eastern father. He does not allow their daughters to do anything because Arab culture values reputation over following what religion has set for women. Although this is true for some Middle Eastern young daughters, Jamilah and the author fail to mention to readers that he is acting this way not because he is an Arab man who values people's opinions more than their daughters, but because he is a single father. Furthermore, we also note the double standards that Jamilah and her older brother have to go through. Bilal goes out whenever he pleases, smokes and drinks, and

acts out while the father allows him to because a man's reputation is not as important as the women's. Although this is still an issue that is still recurring in modern-day, it is more complicated than cultural stereotypes and blame. By embodying these negative stereotypes, she blames everyone for her difficulties rather than coming to terms with how she too is embodying these false allegations and stereotypes against her own kind. To further mention how little she provides to her friends and those around to allow them to feel a closer and deeper bond than a surface leveled, all the meanwhile she continues to shift blame of something that is almost out of reach.

Gender is explored in several places. There is this misconception within the Middle Eastern community to confuse religion and culture, thus influencing how the Westerners view the practices of the Middle East and its people. In the novel, Jamilah's older sister is portrayed as a powerful person to whom many Middle Eastern Muslim women can look up; she is described as politically active, confident in her headscarf, and overall content with who she is. That is not to say that Jamilah has not yet reached that point in her life and that not all women feel that way about themselves, but the question is why the author allowed the main character to mirror her older sister and would it have been more powerful if Jamilah had said it, which demonstrates the character lacked depth. Sheeren mentions in a part of the novel where the family has gathered for a family gathering to eat a feast, and she states, "We live in a patriarchal community, which finds it convenient to manipulate the sacred text to satisfy the male ego" (Fattah 79). Although these sentiments are not from Jamilah's point of view, the women around her have the necessary conversations about women's rights in Middle Eastern cultures and religions. If readers take one thing from this novel, Sheeren had to say about Arab culture, males, and religion as an ongoing issue that women are still aware of, educate others about and try to resolve. Further, having her

Aunt Sowsan add to the argument, "Shereen has a point though. If you look around the world, there are so many societies in which Muslim women are oppressed. The Koran has been manipulated and abused to exploit women... I'm not blaming the Koran, Hakim, I'm blaming men. If they were faithful to the Koran, we wouldn't see such oppression. But some men find it useful to misread, misquote, and take things out of context to deny women their God-given rights" (Fattah 80). Within these Arab communities, men know that this is the first religion to give women rights and privileges, sometimes even over men. Nevertheless, if they were to follow through and be faithful to God's word, they would have to contend with their inferiority. Although the novel is more negative than positive, it does raise a few issues that Arab Muslims deal with in and outside of their culture. An example of these discussions of the male ego fueled by the false interpretation and mistranslation of the religion could be how Jaime views her father. Although her father does all of these unnecessary things as a single father raising three children, Jaime still views him like that. While her father has good intentions, there is some cultural and religious male ego in that he cares about reputations and what others have to say. These conversations are still ongoing, as Arab women were labeled as radical feminists when the origins of the religion spoke for themselves.

Though the discussion of gender in the novel raises legitimate points, it undermines its more progressive elements by relying on the "white savior" trope. This trope is introduced when a bored "Jamie" receives an email from someone named John one day at school while she is having an identity crisis and trying to fit into a normal crowd. Jamie begins an email correspondence with John, spilling her deepest secrets. Simultaneously, Peter, the school's popular student who espoused bigoted beliefs, develops an interest in Jamie. Another student, Timothy, and Jamie, are assigned to work together on a project, but she later discovers that

Timothy is “John.” Timothy engages with the white savior trope in this scenario because he uplifts Jamilah and makes her feel as though he is liberating her in the sense that he permits her to be proud to be Arab Muslim.

An example of a more authentically representative text relates to more practical issues Middle Eastern Muslim women face. These women also have lives and have a place in society. They, too, work, study, and practice their religion and culture and attend to more than their background and beliefs. However, by relating to the practical issues Middle Eastern women face, authors can discuss in their work how often Middle Eastern women are pressured culturally rather than religiously as many confuse the two with one another.

### *A Large Expanse of Sea*

A young adult novel published in 2018, Tahereh Mafi's semi-autobiographical *A Large Expanse of Sea* is set in America one year after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The main protagonist, Shirin, a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl born in America to Persian immigrant parents from Iran, faces bigotry and hatred at school and in the community. Shirin tries to keep a safe distance from her peers to protect herself, but the tentative romance that develops between Shirin and Ocean Desmond James, a popular white student, is too strong to ignore. The novel was nominated for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature and was placed on the longlist.

Unlike the previous work described, the main character wears the hijab in Mafi's novel. Mafi still portrays the negatives of Shirin's identity: students and others make assumptions that she is an immigrant, does not speak English, and her parents force her to wear the hijab. The novel is set September of 2002—one year after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when terrorists associated with the Islamic extremist group al Qaeda killed thousands of Americans.



Shirin recalls vividly how, soon after the terrorist attacks, two of her classmates planned to follow her home. They pushed her to the ground, ripped off her hijab, and choked her with it. Shirin's brother had come to her aid, so a phone call was made to the police to ensure that justice was served. However, the police sided with the wrongdoers, claiming that it was a prank, leaving Shirin traumatized and concerned about how she will exist in a world that has portrayed her as something she is not. The accusations pinned on a young high school female have transpired to a life-or-death situation where she is forced to choose if she wants to follow her faith or be forced to abandon it for the sake of her safety.

The novel is intense, and it is meant to be. With the time frame of the conspiracy, it was a time when Islamic scholars advised Muslim women to remove their hijabs for protection. Sahar F. Aziz's article "The Muslim 'Veil' Post 9/11: Rethinking Women's Rights and Leadership" discusses the misfortunes that Muslim women faced and continue to face after the falling of the Twin Towers. Aziz mentions that during the post-9/11 period, Muslim women wearing headscarves in the United States found themselves caught at the crossroads of anti-Islam, anti-racialized Muslims, and anti-women prejudice. Stating:

The debate no longer centers on whether the pejorative 'veil' serves to oppress women by controlling their sexuality and, by extension, their personal freedoms and life choices, or if it symbolizes choice, freedom, and empowerment. Rather, it now 'marks' them as representatives of the suspicious, inherently violent, and forever foreign 'terrorist other' in our midst. Because most Americans view Islam as inherently foreign, most female Anglo converts to Islam are stereotyped as Arab particularly if they wear the headscarf (Aziz).

By reducing Middle Eastern women to their look and clothing choices, which are automatically seen as oppressive, we deprive these women of their freedom and choice, while remaining blind to the diverse personalities that exist beneath the characters. Shirin's personality is given some color by her brother's dance squad participation, as both siblings adore break dancing. Although Shirin is powerful and fights back, she chooses to stay away from her peers and people in general. I believe that giving the protagonist this touch shows readers and learners that Middle Eastern Muslim women are more than their culture and religion; they, too, have interests in which they participate.

Shirin's character is constructed to take on the hate, cruel remarks, and actions from those who want to belittle her and constantly remind her of something she did not do. Although she is strong and ignores them, she knows deep down that these remarks are not actual, but the hurt left in her aching heart and mind is too much to bear at times. Throughout the novel, Shirin encounters much racism, one of them being that she supposedly does not speak English. In one incident, the main character walks into her new Honors English course, only for her teacher to excuse her, stating that there could not possibly be a way that she can take such a course and that the ESL classroom is right down the hall. In Shirin's response, she remarks back at the teacher, "'My English,' I said, 'isn't really good. My English is fucking perfect'" (Mafi pg. 4). Although readers and scholars might note that the teacher might have been misinformed or just ignorant to the situation, Shirin had to state that her linguistic skills are fine the way they are as she was born and raised in America. One might note that in such an interaction between the teacher and Shirin, this might have been the author's method of having to set Shirin's character in her place, that she does not belong in this class, nor in this country. However, she gets in trouble for using such language towards a teacher and goes on about her day. Readers might question if the teacher was

too in trouble for assuming such stereotypical assumptions and if he ever apologized for such ignorance to Shirin, but these questions were never resurfaced for questioning or answering.

While still introducing characters in the novel, readers come across Ocean. Ocean's character, Shirin's love interest, is supposed to be innocent and possibly a supporting character who helps the main character shine brighter. Regardless, readers are left wondering why Shirin cannot shine brightly on her own. Ocean and Shirin's connection is lighthearted in the story. Both appreciate each other's presence and world.

On the other hand, Shirin's character is more concerned about how people would react if they see them hanging out together in school: "The day passed. People had butchered my name, teachers hadn't known what the hell to do with me, my math teacher looked at my face and gave me a five-minute speech to the class about how people who don't love those country should just go back to where they came from and I stared at my textbook so hard it was days before I could get the quadratic equation out of my head" (Mafi 11). As a result, Shirin repeatedly mentions to Ocean that they cannot be seen together due to his safety, not hers. Dating is a sin in the Islamic religion, especially among people of different faiths, as the author did not inform her audience. Although it may be easy to overlook, if authors want to highlight problems that appeal to their targeted audience in order to educate and raise awareness about the issues at hand, this may be a crucial thing to learn for individuals who do not follow the Islamic religion. While it is not always the author's responsibility to educate, it is critical to note how underrepresented communities are already grossly portrayed. While such literature is created to represent and relate to these ladies as they discover themselves and relate to these characters, one must question whether it is more educating or detrimental to relate to the stereotype rather than the real representation. Walking the line between entertainment and knowledge. It also raises the

question of how, as the novel progresses, this would further complicate things between the two protagonists. Ocean is confronted with his own problems of white teen angst in the midst of such a divisive topic. Nothing, however, could compare to the everyday experiences Shirin has with intolerance, racism, and hate crimes. Ocean's problems are more surface level, and while any issues must be addressed in order to receive the help needed to resolve the problem. His issues are more about his mixed emotions towards basketball and how everyone expects a lot from him when it comes to the sport, as he compares Shirin's issues to his. Ocean is dealing with less troubling and destructive high school issues than Shirin. Shirin's first threat came after September 11, 2001, when two men followed her home and tackled her before ripping off her headscarf and choking her with it. It's not just a religious statement; it's also akin to going out naked in public while holding such an alarming threat to citizens, having to be followed and threatened with something so innocuous to not only the woman, but to the faith itself.

To further add to the traumatizing incident that Shirin was faced with, is one of the most continually terrifying concerns that Middle Eastern women face today: being blackmailed or seen outside or inside the Middle Eastern community without the hijab, which Mafi addresses in her novel. Shirin wishes to please Ocean by showing him that things might be good with taking such a step in their relationship, so they agree to drive to school together in the novel's conclusion, but things do not go in their favor. Shirin is mocked, ridiculed, and referred to as a terrorist and Aladdin, among other derogatory terms. In addition, a high school coward throws a cinnamon bun in her face, embarrassing her even more. As she enters the school's bathroom to clean herself up and gather her mental courage to show no mercy, a fellow student walks into the bathroom as Shirin cleans her frosting-filled hijab and proceeds to shoot a photograph with her hair without her permission. Her commentary is as follows:

I knew little about digital cameras, but I didn't own one myself, so I couldn't understand how people were sharing photos of me so quickly. I only knew that someone had taken a photo of me without my scarf on—without my consent—and was now passing it around. It was a kind of violation I'd never experienced before. I wanted to scream. It was my hair. I wanted to scream. It was my hair, and it was my face, and it was my body and it was my fucking business what I wanted to do with it. Of course, nobody cared (Mafi 241).

The scene from the novel is a decisive moment as it shows that although the hijab is seen as a superpower for Muslim women, it can also be a weakness, and in the moment where Shirin was violated in the bathroom by a fellow school peer, the weakness and anger indeed shows an accurate emotional reaction from a nonfictional moment, which is often a real-life event for a Muslim woman.

After the incident, Shirin still tries to protect Ocean and her relationship from the world; she does so because she does not want to ruin his reputation as he would be seen with a Muslim girl. This in itself will confuse readers as it will allow them to assume that Muslim women are not content with who we are as women of Islam. The connection between the *A Large Expanse of Sea* and *Ten Things I Hate About Me* is that both female characters play into white ideology as of their relationship with these boys, mistranslation and miscommunication between cultures, giving power automatically to the white male perpetuates that these girls' identities are not worth fighting for, furthering the white savior complex. To further note, it is somewhat confusing to have the main character come off strong to the world while she brushes the cruel remarks off, but lets her guard down for a male character because she likes him.

Overall, the novel raises some alarming issues Middle Eastern women continue to face, such as being deemed not knowing how to speak English, racist and stereotypical comments, hate crimes, and much more. However, adding in the same concept of Fattah's plot, a male character of a different race must be introduced in order for the main female character to be self-conscious of her own race and religion, to be validated and accepted for who she is. In both novels, readers read into the main characters' inner thoughts as readers note the feelings and reactions they have when dealing with prejudice tying back to their cultural and religious identity. However, one of the fundamental concepts both authors highlighted is that no one, apart from the main characters, had stopped and asked for their thoughts and concerns about what they were facing, and this is mainly seen in the novel *A Large Expanse of Sea*. It further shows that Muslim women exist for themselves, but not for society to take concern of their issues. Along with such a concept, many reviewers have noted that these main male characters interested in these Middle Eastern females are only interested in them because white men like to experiment with exotic women. This might not have been the intention of these narratives, but many have pointed out this concept and those having to go through what Shirin and Jamilah had to go through, not only with the inner issues they have with themselves, but also the issues that just so happen to involve these white male characters in.

Although the novels did a fair job about the racial and gender difficulties that young Middle Eastern Muslim women continue to encounter, much of the problem-solving was unrealistic and not idealistic for the characters and readers. Scholars and general readers can better comprehend and research the experiences of young Muslim women in the Middle East by discussing their cultural expectations after they reach puberty. Much of their housework will be tied to being a housewife and how to provide for the spouse; many are taught this as early as the

age of ten. From being the smartest in class to being the best cook and cleaner at home, these young women are surrounded by sexism and misogyny, as many who follow the Islamic faith will misinterpret God's words in order to teach the allusion that women have no rights, but fail to realize that Islam was the first religion to grant women rights.

*Where does the Educator Turn For Accurate Representation?*

The Middle Eastern Muslim woman not only has to worry about herself and her loved ones in the West, but she also carries fear with her when she thinks about her struggles back in her native home. That they should return to Iraq when that young woman could be from Iran, or that if Palestine and Israel could get along, the war there would be over, when in reality it is much more complicated than a simple suggestion. That young woman could have three children, one of whom is now a martyr to the country for his bravery in giving up his life to protect his family and country. Incorporating stories about the real challenges that Middle Easterners face and how women are treated will help readers and learners gain a better understanding of the region, culture, language, and, most importantly, the faith that they practice. Additionally, these authors and poetry enrich their cuisines, love stories, and the splendor of their language and history. While the majority of their popular work is concerned with political themes, these same authors express themselves and their work through a variety of genres. Representing and discussing a minority group that has been misrepresented and viewed in a variety of negative stereotypes can be intimidating and difficult, all the more so when such representations will either help educators learn more accurate knowledge or further alienate educators from the narrative Middle Eastern Muslim women are attempting to present. The best-represented in Middle-Eastern examples or those that require discussion and integration into Western narratives

as we progress beyond the 9/11 cliché. Muslim novelists and poets from the Middle East, including Mahmoud Salim Darwish, Ghada Al-Samman, and Sahar Khalifeh, examine various images in their work from their culture, love stories, religion and much more. Darwish, whose name is synonymous with the Palestinian and Arab nationalistic revolutions, is a poet who has made significant contributions to the development of modern Arabic poetry. Mahmoud Darwish is a notable Palestinian poet who writes about Palestinian topics. His poetry is well-known for its treatment of the female form, the motherland, and the land. Mahmoud Darwish's poetry encapsulates both the Palestinian people's agony and the global struggle to occupation. In addition to Darwish, Sahar Khalifeh dialectics a connection between nationality and gender, demonstrating Khalifa's inventiveness in viewing these aspects through a Middle Eastern lens. In every way, her writings portray women as social martyrs. This motif is repeated throughout the author's works, expressing her support for women and condemnation of male behavior in a patriarchal Arab society.

Sahar Khalifeh's six novels include continual battlegrounds in which the author pushes men against women. Even when the circumstances of a national battle necessitate the uniting of troops against a common national adversary, Khalifeh continues to issue war cries against men for participating in the gender conflict without comprehending that gender norms oppress them as well. Nonetheless, the events and characters in her novels demonstrate that the gender question can never be resolved exclusively through combat with men; all sexes must battle manifestations of oppression on social and national levels, including those directed against women. Al-Samman is widely regarded as one of the most significant voices for female equality in the Arab world, among these authors, with over forty published works spanning from novels and short tales to poetry and diary entries. *Beirut Nightmares* documented life in Beirut during



the civil war. The second is *The Eve of Billion*, which delves into the horrors of war. According to some critics, these novels propelled her to the stature of a seminal contemporary Arab author. In comparison, Susan Darraj's novel *Arab Woman on Writing* eloquently explains what the majority of Arab American Muslim girls have and continue to experience, as well as how Arab and African American literature share numerous similarities, as both demonstrate the general gain that comes from studying the positions that mainstream white society applies to them individually and collectively. Darraj continues by quoting from an essay in Barbara Smith's *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*: "How much easier both my waking and sleeping hours would be if there was a single book that contained information about my life... Just one work to depict the reality that I, along with the Black women I adore, am attempting to build." (27) Darraj continues by stating that she, as an Arab American Muslim woman, understands the desire to speak out about the hardships she faced as a result of a post-9/11 cultural consciousness that negatively characterized and stigmatized Arab Muslims. She stated that she felt as if she were a stranger in both her Arab and American identities. Additionally, she notes, "What I needed was an Arab woman's voice speaking the truth through the filter of translation, without the influence of others tainting her experience, because her story might have been mine as well. Her tale might be a description of my own perplexity regarding feminism, marriage, education, identity, and hurdles" (Darraj 2). She explains that she discovered it one day in a bookstore—a novel by Ahdaf Soueif—with the optimism for which she had longed for a long time.

*In the Eye of the Sun*, by Egyptian novelist and political and cultural commentator Ahdaf Soueif, explores the inner thoughts of the majority of Arab American young girls who are confused about their identity, about culture in general, about women, and about sexual politics in

the Arab family and society: the pressure to marry, having children, issues of control within a marriage, and feminism.

This work should inspire many Arab women and men who have felt stuck and entangled between the worlds of politics and culture to speak up about the specific difficulties confronting these dual communities. Having an Western mindset while culturally being an Middle Eastern has difficulties both at home and in the West. As a child, like Darraj, the lack of representation available to me and other young Middle Eastern Muslim girls who looked like me and desired to be loved like me was insufficient to reflect the hurt and disappointment we felt as Westerners raised by a stereotype we did not fathom. When I returned to Palestine, I was introduced to Arab literature, like Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani, which featured much more than the occupation and ethnic cleansing suffered by my forefathers and contemporary people. Such writings are replete with references to culture, religion, gender and political roles, and love. Regardless of the labels and crimes heaped on Palestinians and Arabs in general, their literature fashioned beauty from the reality they faced. I was only reading literature from the perspectives of the voices who were generating it all at the time. Due to a lack of representation for Middle Eastern Muslim women in particular, Middle Eastern Muslim women may find themselves in circumstances where they are unsure if they may respond without giving a reason or if they are confident in doing so. We learn about history, love, sorrow, and identity, as well as a variety of other dimensions of who, what, and where Middle Eastern Muslims are, when we read Middle Eastern authors. As a result of this inspired generational Middle Eastern literature, readers and educators seek out the modern-day Middle Eastern face of this suppression as it branches out to another origin in order to learn what the branches have to give.

### *Conclusion*

Mohja Kahf, who examines translations of Arab women and has become a feminist icon in the West through statements and concerns on the topic of translating Arab women. Although Kahf mentions Arab women in her piece, I am applying the work to a broader demographic. Kahf's piece *Translating Arab Women* states, "The United States reading public, despite promising instances here and there, takes in data about women from the Arab world mainly by using conventions emergent from a long history of Western stereotypes about the Arab peoples and the Islamic religion. I find that these conventions take shape today in three stereotypes about Arab women. One is that she is a victim of gender oppression; the second portrays her as an escapee of her intrinsically oppressive culture; and the third represents her as a pawn of Arab male power. (Kahf 285-86) As Kahf explains, readers will fall into the three conventional patterns that the West has made Arab Muslim women exemplify without context and correct translation and interpretation, readers note all of these conventions in the text *Ten Things I Hate About Me*. While *A Large Expanse of Sea* mostly holds the supposed cultural oppression. Furthermore, the problem of publishing firms not accurately portraying the language of the Middle Eastern Muslim author will also harm the ability to address oppression at intersecting levels. Without adequately educating and translating the text that attempts to voice the accurate issues and experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim women, the absence of historical, cultural, and religious practices in the novels could have served to better interrupt the message being sent and to educate and mobilize readers to assist Middle Eastern Muslim women. Middle Eastern authors who have been raised in the West seek to integrate their characters into these Western civilizations, however the authors then jeopardize the imaginative possibilities of Middle Eastern

Muslim women and appear to fall into the three categories mentioned by Mohja Kahf; additionally, Mafi and Abdel-Fattah's characters Fattah's fall into these three categories.

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