

## Reading the Hijab as a Marker of Faith in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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### ABSTRACT

Randa Abdel-Fattah's 2006 novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, is about a teenage Australian Muslim protagonist who voluntarily chooses to wear the hijab to her elite private school in Melbourne, and the personal and social challenges that she faces after making this decision. In this paper, I suggest that the novel portrays the action of wearing the hijab as mainly apolitical, and that it is instead a spiritual and religious act which demonstrates aspects of the hijab as empowering to an individual's life. This subverts the stereotypical understanding of the hijab, particularly by the West, as either a tool of control and subjugation of Muslim women, or as a stand against Western society and ideology. By using Saba Mahmood's (2005) study of Muslim women piety, which argues that Islam and its practices can be used as a tool for women's empowerment, particularly for achieving self-improvement and self-actualization, this paper pays attention to the representation of the hijab in the novel. The decision to wear the hijab opens a path for the protagonist to become more adherent to her religion, as well as improving her attributes and individuality as a whole. This creates a wholesome young woman who is not only committed to her religion, but is also mindful of her character.

**Keywords:** Muslim women writers; the hijab; Randa Abdel-Fattah; Saba Mahmood; Islam

### INTRODUCTION

In a writing career which began in 2006, Australian writer, Randa Abdel-Fattah has published ten books, most of which are aimed at children or young adult readers.<sup>1</sup> Her first novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* which is at the centre of this paper, narrates the implications of sixteen-year-old Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, an Australian-Palestinian girl's decision to wear the hijab (head scarf) to the MacCleans Grammar School, an elite private school in Melbourne. The novel is set a few months after the tragedy of 11th September 2001, until shortly after the Bali bombings of 2002. Although they happened outside Australian soil, these events, particularly the Bali bombings which killed 88 Australians holiday-makers, traumatized the general public. This fear intensified when threats were also visible within the country with an increase of terrorist activities including, most prominently, the threat posed by the Benbrika group, led by Algerian-born Abdel Nacer Benbrika who was planning to attack several popular places around Sydney and Melbourne, with the biggest attack aimed at the 90,000 seats Australian Football League Stadium in Melbourne (Schurmaan, Harris-Hogan, Lentini & Zammit, 2014, p. 93). Consequently, following these incidents, 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; Kampmark, 2003, p. 93).

As portrayed in the novel, Muslim women who wear the hijab in Australia are viewed as not only different and potentially dangerous, but also as a symbol of patriarchal oppression which is said to be prevalent in Islamic teachings. Here, while the Muslim woman is recognized for her Muslim identity, there is little or no interest in her socio-economic

background or her individuality. The hijab therefore, becomes an ambiguous marker of cultural and religious identity that both defines and hides the individual (Grace, 2004, p. 3) where her Muslim identity works as a justification of Islam as a violent and patriarchal religion, while at the same time, denies her a positive presence within the community. When Abdel-Fattah presents a protagonist who voluntarily decides to wear the hijab, it encapsulates the author's attempt to present an alternative portrait of a young, religious Muslim woman as the exact opposite of the stereotypical representation of submissive and subjugated Muslim women. The act of independently choosing to wear the hijab is important in the novel as it emphasizes the hijab as "an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture" (Susan Taha & Ida Baizura, 2014, p. 256).

The positive reinforcement of the hijab on women's agency as portrayed in fiction has been previously discussed by other scholars. Daphne Grace (2004) and Shirin Edwin (2008) both explore how some works of fiction by Muslim women writers suggest that the veil should not be entirely viewed as an element of female control and subjugation. In her discussion on the works of both Muslim and non-Muslim postcolonial writers who put the veil at the centre of their writing, Grace suggests that writers present the veil not as an oppressive material used to control women but as a mark of their increasing freedom and mobility through the availability of choice to either reject or uphold the veil (p. 203). If the veil is imposed on women by outside forces, it will be an element of control. If however, the women decide to wear the veil on their own, it will then mark the women's ability to choose (p. 206). When viewed this way, the veil defies the society, media and fashion industry's dictation on women's physical image. Edwin meanwhile, points out that some African women writers posit the hijab as "a profoundly religious embodiment of modesty, reserve and sobriety in clothing and behaviour" (p. 212). Their hijab-wearing female protagonists are also portrayed as strong and independent women, thus subverting the image of the hijab as an element that is used to control Muslim women. Meanwhile, Samaa Abdurraqib (2006) and Mais Yusuf Al Qutami (2009) both discuss the position of the hijab in immigrant literature in America, where it becomes a marker of difference that forces the wearer to negotiate her identity as a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim community. This negotiation results in the hijab being a part of American society and no longer different from it, acknowledging the growing presence of Muslims in the country.

This paper pays attention to the teenage protagonist's action of wearing the hijab, which is discussed through the concept of Muslim women agency as explored by Saba Mahmood in her book, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. The fact that she comes up with this decision on her own suggests the personal ability to make an informed decision. Thus, I discuss how Amal comes up with this decision, outlining her initial perceptions about the hijab based on her experience living in a non-Muslim environment. I discuss how the changes in Amal's attitude towards the hijab comes from a desire to lead a religious lifestyle, with the aim to become a better Muslim. I then point out the religious and spiritual functions of the hijab from Amal's perspective. First, the hijab is viewed as a tool for improving a believer's relationship with God, and secondly, it also works to encourage the perfection of other religious practices such as praying and fasting. In the last section of the paper, I discuss how the hijab functions in a social environment, particularly in helping to refine the protagonist's conduct in social spaces, improving her personhood.

## THE NOVEL AND ITS CONTEXT

Abdel-Fattah's protagonist, Amal, is an only child to a doctor, Mohamed and his dentist wife, Jamila, who were both born in Bethlehem, Palestine, and moved to Australia to pursue their

studies. As a well-to-do family, they reside in Camberwell, an upscale suburb in Melbourne. The family is portrayed as devout Muslims who make the effort to perform Islamic practices and rituals regularly, and to make religious edicts as a part of their everyday life. This reverence however, does not set Amal apart from other girls her age. Abdel-Fattah portrays Amal as a typical teenage girl who argues with her parents, enjoys spending time with her best friends, worries about her appearance, works hard to do well in school and even has a romantic interest in one of her schoolmates, a popular boy named Adam Keane. What makes her experience different from many other Australian teenage girls is how Amal carefully deals with personal issues within her own understanding of the teachings of Islam. In an interview with Hazel Rochman (2007), Abdel-Fattah said that she was intent on writing a book that serves as an alternative portrayal of young Muslim girls while aiming to “shock readers into realizing that teenagers, no matter their faith or culture have common experiences; that there is more in common, than there is different; and that the differences should be respected, not feared” (p. 54).

Thus, with the presentation of a teenage protagonist who willingly chooses to wear the hijab amidst negative surroundings, Abdel-Fattah is challenging the common perception of the hijab as a tool for female subjugation and control. Many critics however, view the action as an act of resistance that underlines the character’s determination to be recognized as an Australian regardless of her religious identity. The impact that Islam and its practices may have on the protagonist, particularly in assisting the development of her individuality and subjectivity as a Muslim in Australia is overlooked or even dismissed. These readings of the novel pay attention to the issue of multicultural relations, thus often relating it to Homi Bhabha’s theory of the third space and hybridity. As a result, little or no attention has been paid to the impact that Islam and its practices may have on her personhood, particularly in improving her personality and morality, apart from associating the protagonist’s adherence to Islamic practices to acts of resistance. For example, Sharyn Pearce (2006), dismisses the religious aspects of the novel by arguing that the focus of the novel is mainly on “Amal’s anxiety about her public commitment to it” (p. 60) and thus, her decision to wear the hijab is a response against bullying. Meanwhile, Firouzeh Ameri (2012) suggests that the hijab is a prerogative of Amal’s identity search, which begins as a result of her alienation from the larger Australian society. The wearing of the hijab therefore, is a sign of her being recognized as a hybrid individual – an Australian Muslim (p. 129).

While these readings of the novel are valid and important, in this paper, I suggest that there is a more private and religious reasoning behind her decision to wear the hijab. I argue that for the sixteen-year-old protagonist of *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the decision to wear the hijab goes beyond the idea of resistance or simply as an attempt for her to be recognized for her multiple identities. Instead, I suggest that this has much to do with her personal belief that the action is God’s decree, and that they promise an improvement of inner piety which in return, helps to improve her individuality at communal and moral levels. This also inadvertently fulfills the very human desire for self-betterment. Her decision to wear the hijab is an acknowledgement of the act as God’s commandment and a sign of her devotion to God. This in return, creates a desire for further self-improvement, both in terms of religious as well as social and moral attributes. Through this reading, Amal’s religious devotion can be read as having spiritual undertones that are both personal and apolitical.

### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The paper analyzes the protagonist’s decision to wear the hijab by suggesting that the action is a personal response of the human desire for self-improvement, leading her to become a wholesome individual. This can be understood through Saba Mahmood’s (2005) study, which

looks at women from various socio-economic and educational backgrounds who were actively involved in mosque activities in six mosques across Cairo, Egypt in the 1990s.<sup>ii</sup> The women were exposed to a more secular lifestyle, but they saw this standard of living as a threat to the moral development of Egyptian society, and thus, they opted for a religious way of life. Their interest in mosque activities opened a path for what was traditionally seen as a male-dominated realm, without going against what they considered as religious edicts and commandments. Instead, rather than having these decrees be viewed as a sign of their subjugation, they utilized them to justify and explain their active involvement in religious activities.

The religious actions of the women in Mahmood's study were aimed at achieving personal development through the building of a specific model of a pious individual. Islamic rituals and practices were used as structural components of their daily lives with which they governed their lives. This opened a path towards the realization of personal "agency" where religious actions (bodily acts) were both, (a) an expression of, and (b) a way towards, their fuller self-realization. For Mahmood (2005), agency is not a single quality, but instead, is a concept that can be defined in multiple ways, in relation to one's personal cultural and historical background. She says that:

the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms (pp. 14-15).

Mahmood defines the concept of norms to mean both mundane and religious acts which govern one's daily life through a routine of repetitive actions. These actions then encourage the emergence of a specific model of the self. Thus, there are a "variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated" (p. 23). Norms work to open a path for an individual to possess specific qualities which he or she wishes to acquire, while at the same time, responding to the surrounding world. Bodily behaviours allow the self to attain "certain kinds of capacities to provide the substance from which the world has acted upon" (p. 27). This is based on the understanding of Islam as outlining a specific method of living, based on the Qur'an, the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad and various religious literature by respected scholars, in which believers are to follow. However, Mahmood notes that for the women in the mosque movement, there was no governing body to enforce these edicts on them, and that they had the freedom to undertake these practices based on their own understanding of the traditional texts (p. 30-31).<sup>iii</sup> Thus, the women's voluntary submission to religious actions had specific personal agendas and aims which they believed could be achieved through the repetition of bodily behaviours. Bodily actions therefore, are not perceived as a form of control, but as a method to achieve specific potentials (p. 31).

In relation to Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel, I discuss the protagonist's decision to wear the hijab based on Mahmood's discussion of the operational processes of her subjects' aims towards piety. I suggest that the protagonist, Amal views herself as an inadequate individual, which is a human feeling of imperfection where she feels the need to improve her temperament and attitude in both religiously and socially defined spaces. She begins this

journey through the decision to wear the hijab. At first, this repeated action of wearing the hijab begins as an answer to what Amal sees as a tool for worshipping God. However, she soon realizes that her decision inadvertently creates a reciprocal process that not only encourages the continuous performance of this act, but also in stimulating a self-understanding that finds other acts of worship as being essential to the self. Thus, her decision to wear the hijab also opens up a path towards the improvement of other religious acts, such as praying and fasting.

Furthermore, the effect of wearing the hijab goes beyond the religious and spiritual sphere as it encourages the creation of a moral self. Amal realizes that the wearing of the hijab cannot come without an improved morality, particularly in the way she conducts herself among her family, friends and the people around her. This is based on Mahmood's (2005) argument that there is a relationship between daily, mundane actions with morality and religious actions thus, one cannot exist without the other. Religious devotion is "conjoined and interdependent with pragmatic actions of daily life, [thus] actions must be monitored and honed as conditions necessary for the felicitous performance of the ritual itself" (p. 127). I argue that the novel looks at how Amal's everyday actions stand hand in hand with her devotion to religion. A moral self is both a predecessor and a result of piety. Her aim to become a more religiously-observant individual must also come with the aim of achieving a certain code of conduct to govern her life. However, as the novel explores, the path towards achieving these aims is not without its challenges, and Amal comes to realize that her devotion to God alone does not make her a good individual. In fact, what is needed is a continuous striving towards this aim.

### STRUGGLES WITH THE HIJAB

The character Amal is introduced as a young Muslim girl who is facing a dilemma when she decides to wear the hijab. Although she first proudly declares her sudden decision to wear the hijab to her private school, the MacCleans Grammar School, which she had just enrolled into a few months before the novel begins, this comes with an imbued sense of insecurity. This emphasizes the difficulties that she faces in coming to this decision, as well as foreshadowing the challenges that she is about to come across. This ambivalence is highlighted when she recalls her early days growing up as a Muslim in a non-Muslim environment. As a young girl, she went to a Catholic primary school where she often found her religious attachment as the defining factor in differentiating her from the rest of her peers. This created a sense of alienation in which Amal, as "a non-pork eating, *Eid*-celebrating Mossie (as in taunting nickname for Muslim, not mosquito) with an unpronounceable surname...[finds that] a quiet existence is impossible" (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 10), until it became necessary for her to hide her religious identity in order to be deemed 'normal' in school.

Regardless of this experience, coming from a devout family who regularly practices various religious rituals, Amal still sees religion as an integral part of her life. The wearing of the hijab, for example, is nothing strange for Amal as her own mother wears it, as did she when she was attending *Hidaya*, an Islamic college. However, the negative perspectives towards her religion by the general public initially create a sense of anxiety that problematizes the way Amal views the hijab. The hijab is seen as an item that further separates her from her non-Muslim peers. For example, she finds that wearing the hijab outside her Islamic school takes courage as she would feel "exposed" (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 12). Clearly, for Amal, the wearing of the hijab would uncover her Muslim identity, without which, she has what she herself terms as "an unhyphenated Aussie" appearance (p. 104), with her light skin and green eyes (p. 49), allowing her to pass easily as a typical Australian teenager. Therefore, Amal understands that the action of putting the hijab encourages others

to consider her as a “racialized other” (Ameri, 2012, p. 131), thus becoming a clearer and easier target for discrimination.

However, this sense of unease also suggests that Amal’s decision to wear the hijab is an informed one. While it heightens her insecurities, at the same time, it signals her personal attempts to overcome these feelings, signalling her desire to declare her loyalty to her religious affiliation. Thus, the decision to wear the hijab is neither simple nor easy for Amal. It is, in fact, a personal struggle. The novel explores this struggle and how the protagonist learns to overcome her anxiety. Hence, in understanding Amal’s decision, it is important to unearth her motivation to wear the hijab.

At the beginning of the novel, when Amal decides to wear the hijab, she outlines a clear recognition of an inner consciousness that encourages her towards wearing the hijab. Consider what she says to her parents:

“But this decision, it’s coming from my heart. I can’t explain or rationalize it. OK, I’m doing it because I believe it’s my duty and defines me as a Muslim female but it’s not as... I don’t know how to put it... it’s more than just that” (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 52).

It becomes clear here that Amal’s decision to wear the hijab is a response to her personal aim, highlighting this decision as one made by her own volition. Therefore, she does not view the hijab only as a tool to declare her religious affiliation within the Australian environment, but most importantly, it is *the* affirmation of her devotion to Islam. As I argue further in this paper, this novel negates the common perception that the hijab is worn as a response towards bullying by suggesting that Amal uses the hijab as a way to deny the human-centric scrutiny that she falls under. This is done by re-centring her desires towards a more spiritual approach with God as the centre of her decision. Secondly, as Saba Mahmood argues in her study, there is a specific agenda that comes with the desire to submit to repeated bodily behaviours. Amal believes that wearing the hijab would encourage the creation of the self that she wishes to achieve.

## **RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL FUNCTIONS OF THE HIJAB**

### **WEARING THE HIJAB AS AN ANSWER TO GOD’S COMMANDMENT**

Amal chooses to wear the hijab as a response to what she believes is a religious commandment. This can be seen early on in the novel when she attempts to convince herself to stand by her decision to wear the hijab. Amal writes down a list of reasons for choosing to do so and the following reason heads the list:

... The Religious/Scriptures/Sacred stuff, I belief in Allah/God’s commandments contained in the Koran. God says men and women should act and dress modestly. The way I see it, I’d rather follow God’s fashion dictates than some ugly solarium-tanned old fart in Milan who’s getting by on a pretty self-serving theory of less is more when it comes to female dress (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 8).

It should be noted that in this context, the wearing of the hijab is a response to a religious edict. In fact, Amal believes that the action would help improve and maintain her relationship with God. She says: “I guess when I’m not wearing the hijab I feel like I’m missing out. I feel cheated out of the special bond [with God].” (p. 8). This in itself is a basis

of the Islamic belief system. As Toshihiko Izutsu (2008) argues, Islamic tradition emphasizes the inherent relationship between human beings and God, that is based on the belief that human existence is a form of God's grace. Thus, humans are forever beholden to God for their existence, based on the knowledge that one exists only because God allows him or her to exist. This relationship is one that needs nurturing, particularly in order for humans to achieve a more successful mode of existence. Izutsu suggests that within this relationship, God is the one who initiates it as it is He who creates humans and sends down guidance (in the forms of revelation and messengers – the Prophets and their disciples). The guidance reminds people of their duties and purpose on earth, putting human beings at the receiving end of the relationship. Thus, in order for this relationship to flourish, there must be continuous initiatives to maintain and strengthen it (p. 142).

Echoing Izutsu, Frithjof Schuon (1987) also explained that there is an emphasis on the connection between God and human beings that are both direct and indirect. Direct relationship covers a physical aspect – the performance of rituals and practices which are considered as God's commands, while indirect relationship revolves around the regulation of one's daily lives, including one's daily routine, behaviour and temperament. Both of these relationships have a similar purpose, which is to encourage the development of a specific mode of being, and thus, are interconnected to one another. While the direct relationship is focused on the carrying out of duties with the important aim of achieving piety, the indirect emphasizes the need to regulate one's daily lives and behaviour in order to extend this piety into important virtues, allowing one's life to be formed by these virtues. Essentially, the end result is the creation of an individual who is focused on God (p. 48).

However, while the aim of achieving a God-centric approach in life is the main aim in choosing to wear the hijab, Amal also believes that the maintenance of this relationship would have a reciprocal effect on other aspects of her religiosity. She believes that there is a positive outcome from her efforts in the form of *barakah* or grace in her daily life (Nasr, 1987, p.xvii). For example, despite her earlier nervousness in wearing the hijab, as she becomes more convinced in her decision, the more she emphasizes her desire to do so as an answer to God's decree. This can be seen when she wakes up early one morning to perform the *Fajr* (morning) prayer with her parents:

... it's when I'm standing there this morning, in my PJs and a hijab, next to my mom and dad, kneeling before God, that I feel a strange sense of calm. I feel like nothing can hurt me, and nothing else matters. And that's when I know I'm ready [to wear the hijab] (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 29).

Thus, her decision to wear the hijab does not stand alone, and is in fact accompanied by a larger desire to improve her piety as a young Muslim girl. There is a cyclical effect of her actions – when the action of wearing the hijab is directed to God, they connect her with Him and in return, she is bestowed with peace and calmness that is mentally preparing her to overcome any insecurities and fear in following His edict.

#### **THE HIJAB AS A TOOL TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF OTHER RELIGIOUS PRACTICES**

Furthermore, the quote discussed above shows how the hijab is related to the action of praying. Amal's thoughts underline the connection that exists between one religious act and other religious acts. Performing religious actions encourage the training of the body towards 'becoming' – the physical, bodily push towards doing things in a specific manner in order to produce a specific subject (Luksaite, 2010, p. 19). Saba Mahmood (2005) pointed this out when she said that religious practices work as a means to conduct one's life. The actions

become the foundation of pious disposition, while at the same time, they create and strengthen a desire for worship. Thus:

outward bodily gestures and acts ... are indispensable aspects of the pious self in two senses: first in the sense that the self can acquire its particular form only through the performance of precise bodily enactments; and second in the sense that the prescribed bodily forms are necessary attributes of the self (p. 133).

For Amal, the wearing of the hijab brings forth the desire for the creation of an ideal pious individual, thus, her attempt does not stop at the singular action of wearing the hijab. In fact, the hijab helps to create a desire towards the performance of other acts of worship. Soon after she starts wearing the hijab, she realizes the need to improve other aspects of her practice of Islam; this time, without fear of judgement:

I need a place to pray, so at lunch time I go see Mr Pearse [her teacher]. All through the year I've been carrying out my two afternoon prayers at home after school but I'd go through them at supersonic speed so that I could make it in time to watch *Home and Away*. It never felt right and now I really want to try to pray at the set times, the way it's supposed to be (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 46).

This is a self-directed action, similar to her decision to wear the hijab, outlining the desire to continuously submit to God in her daily life. Thus, the hijab not only becomes her recognition of God's power and her desire to submit to this Being, it also becomes the base of her motivation towards the perfection of other rituals.

Amal's perception about religion demonstrates that religious behaviours and norms are not an ingrained part of an individual, thus they need to be continuously governed and practiced to create a specific way of being. The achievement of religiosity is therefore part of a continuous learning process. This can be seen in Amal's narration of her experiences in performing the Ramadan fast. She started fasting in Year Four when she begged her mother to let her fast for a whole day. The fast first lasted until recess but gradually, as she grew older, "recess became lunch time, lunch time became an afternoon snack [and] [p]retty soon [she] was fasting for the full haul." (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 325). This suggests the evidence of a continuous learning process from a young age in order for fasting to become a natural act. However, this process is not without its challenges, especially for an individual who is situated within a majority-non-Muslim society. Even as she grows older, Amal finds the experience of fasting in the month of Ramadan particularly difficult, especially when it falls in the summer when days are longer and dusk begins much later in the evening. Tiredness and hunger often create a desire to cheat, particularly as she realizes that nobody will suspect her of any wrongdoing. Interestingly, when this inclination comes about, she brushes it off with an affirmation of her belief in the higher power:

But it kind of dawned on me then that at the end of the day nobody knows what I do behind closed doors. *Except God...* "We have created man and know what his soul is whispering within him. We are closer than his jugular veins".<sup>iv</sup>

Boy does that verse give me the shivers. I think about my jugular vein, how it collects the blood from my head, runs it down my neck to unite with my



other major veins, and *I suddenly grasp how certain I am that God is watching over me* (p. 326-327, emphasis added).

This direct quote from the Qur'an, which is from Surah Qaf (50:16): "It was We who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein". It underscores an obvious connection between religious practices and the belief in God. For Amal, this belief becomes the backbone of her actions in her daily life. It does not only invite her to develop a desire to perform religious actions, it also becomes the very reason to follow through with those actions, hence shaping a specific behaviour of the self – one whose behaviour is centred on God.

However, the novel also demonstrates that religious actions are not only God-centric, but are also influenced by the people around the believer. In the context of Muslims in the diaspora, the performance of religious practices is also aimed at creating a sense of a Muslim consciousness through the ability to define and be defined by others around them (Luksaite 2010, p. 21). Consider Amal's narration of what happened one day during the month of Ramadan in Year Six, when coincidentally, there was also a birthday party organized by her classmate:

It took me some time to realize that Ramadan is not just about hunger and thirst. I guess when we're a McValue meal away from relieving hunger pain in a world where millions of people are dying of starvation, empathy does more to your conscience than a news report.

I remember understanding what Ramadan was all about when I was in Grade Six, at a birthday party. It was the usual primary school scene: cake, fairy bread, chocolate, lollies, chips and not a single Muslim friend connected to my family who could lag on me if I cheated. It took half an hour and I caved in. Big time. I wiped out the Mars Bars, squashed CCs on top of my party pies and ravaged through the jelly beans. And then, when we were playing musical chairs and I was burping and hiccupping proof that I'd been a fat guts, I was overwhelmed with guilt. I broke down in tears... (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 325-326).

This suggests that there is a positive instead of a negative outcome through Amal's association with the non-Muslims around her who do not observe the Ramadan fast. Although she succumbs to the desire to break her fast, she attributes this failure to her own weakness in being unable to avoid temptation, thus, leading her to be overcome by regret. Here, she views her placement among non-Muslims who do not observe the fasting ritual as a positive positioning that teaches her the psychological aspect of fasting she was initially unaware of. Fasting works as a way to regulate one's body – a disciplinary regime that is an extension of one's act of devotion to God.

## **THE HIJAB FROM SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES**

### **THE HIJAB AND THE LESSON ON SOCIAL RESPECT**

*Does My Head Look Big In This?* is highly critical of the view that the perfection of individual piety and morality is successfully achieved when a young Muslim woman starts wearing the hijab. Instead, Abdel-Fattah portrays Amal as an impatient young woman, who is at times insolent, finding herself in hot water due to her hot-headedness. Amal makes a grave

mistake when she thinks that wearing the hijab has automatically made her a better person, rather than viewing the action as the beginning of a journey towards self-improvement. While Amal is aware of the benefits that the hijab holds for her in terms of improving her religious observance, she does not attain an understanding of how the hijab should also impact the development of her character and disposition. This can be seen in the difficulties she faces in accepting, respecting and being tolerant of the people around her, particularly with those who do not share her worldview and experience.

This pompous attitude is reflected in the dispute Amal has with Gulchin, the mother to her best friend, Leila. Unlike herself, Leila is the only daughter of a working class family whose parents married at a very young age and are uneducated. Thus, Leila's parents' outlook on life is starkly different from Amal's parents' more progressive outlook. Gulchin and her husband see Leila as a burden of responsibilities which can only be eased off when she marries well. Thus, Gulchin's goal is to find Leila a suitable husband, and she aims to marry her off at a young age. This causes a complicated and tense relationship between Gulchin and Leila, a straight-A student who is otherwise an obedient daughter. Leila often relates her anger towards her mother to Amal, who in turn, uses these complaints to create preconceived notions of Gulchin, and is thus, often critical of her actions.

Amal's animosity towards Gulchin heightened after an incident that occurs on Leila's birthday. Despite knowing of Gulchin's strict disapproval of her daughter being seen in public, especially at night, Amal, Leila and their friend, Yasmeen lie to Leila's parents in order to take her out for dinner. The girls find themselves in trouble when Leila's brother caught them, causing a family row. Leila, who has always felt oppressed by her parents' treatment, decides to run away from home. In return, this causes a huge argument between Gulchin and Amal as they blame one another for her disappearance:

... "You don't deserve her!"

... Leila's mum looks at me in shock. "Why you talk like this to me? I older than you! You show manners!"

"You're just so bloody ignorant!"

"... How can you think you're religious? You don't know the first thing about Islam..."

Leila's mum gasps, holding her hand to her throat as though I've got her in a headlock. "Oh Allah! This girl is crazy!"

"Don't you *dare* bring Allah into this!"

She stares back at me, her mouth snapping shut.

... "I always thinking you good girl. You wear hijab, you praying. You telling me I no know religion. Where your religion when you liar and you talking back to your friend mum?"

Her words suck the wind out of me; I feel as though she's shoved a Hoover down my throat and switched it on maximum power (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, 303-304).

There is a specific lesson that Amal learns from this exchange. Just as she faces discrimination from her non-Muslim peers because of her Muslim identity, she too is guilty of the same unjust thoughts and actions against Gulchin. This demonstrates Abdel-Fattah's attempt at suggesting that "prejudice exists in everybody, and that everybody is guilty of it as well as a victim of it" (Rochman, 2007, p. 54). Gulchin may have a limited understanding of religion and Amal may be right in pointing this out, but there is also a great need for Amal to maintain respect towards someone older than her. This does not signify an acceptance of a restricted worldview but is instead, simply a need for respectful disagreement particularly when dealing with someone older. The irony of the argument is that despite the fact that Amal views Gulchin as having an inferior understanding of religion and the world around her, Gulchin is the one who is more able to understand the relationship between religious practices and moral behaviour – a lesson that escapes Amal's understanding. This outlines an important aspect of religious practices – they do not only serve as a path for pious dispositions that are seen as symbolic acts with no pragmatic and utilitarian values (Mahmood, 2005, p. 128). As Gulchin points out to Amal, Amal's quest for the perfection of her religious practices should be reflected in her attitude; in this case, the act of having respect for an older person.

#### **THE HIJAB AND SEXUAL MORALITY**

As I have mentioned earlier, Amal's devotion to Islam cannot escape the consideration of the people around her. Her determination often attracts the attention of her peers in school, both positively and negatively. While she has a group of friends who strongly supports her decision to become a more observant Muslim, she finds herself constantly at odds with those who misunderstand her actions. One particular incident is her encounter with Adam Keane, her classmate whom she is romantically attracted to. Throughout the novel, Amal bonds with Adam through school work, gossip, hobbies and stories about their families. She finds that both of them have a lot in common, and she greatly enjoys his company. Unfortunately, the intimate friendship that they share inadvertently leads him to thinking that she is looking for more than a friendship. He is unaware that Amal has a clear personal stand against any involvement in romantic relationships outside of marriage. This is based on her fear that any romantic attachment could potentially lead to sexual relations outside marriage, which is strongly prohibited in the Qur'an. The warning against this is mentioned in Surah Al-Isra' (17:32), "Nor come nigh to adultery; for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils)". When he approaches Amal, she is caught by surprise and abruptly rejects Adam's interest in her:

"So you don't date then?"

"Er... no."

"I don't get it... that means you can never live for the moment. You'll always be repressing yourself."...

"There's no formula to love! If I got with ten guys, each time will be different and each time I'll be thinking this is a risk. And when I finally meet someone I'm still going to be facing the biggest risk of my life but ten other experiences aren't going to tell me if this guy is the right one. Each person is... too unique to be judged by ten others."...

“So what you’re saying then is that we’re all sluts and sleazes and you’re above that?”...

“Why is it when I believe in something different, I’m the one apparently judging you? What about you judging me? Why is it so bloody offensive that there are people out there who don’t do the whole sex thing before they get married? Or who don’t do the whole physical thing? Who gives a shit? Isn’t it my business? Or is that just too weird to accept? I’m obviously a bitchy love-me-do because I’m different. Yeah, great logic there, Adam” (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, pp. 236-238)

Some critics have read Amal’s response in this encounter as her assertion of her Muslim identity, rejecting the Australian multicultural identity, and wishing to remain separate from the non-Muslims around her (Lampert, 2006, p. 55; Phillips, 2009, p. 602). I on the other hand, disagree with the simplification of identity where Amal is expected to be either an Australian or a Muslim, and not both. Amal’s rejection of Adam’s advances cannot be read as a result of her judgment of his cultural and religious background, but must instead be viewed from the perspective of a young Muslim woman who is adamant on standing by her religious principles. This is a reflection of how the Islamic belief system works to encourage individuals to overcome human desires through the practice of self-control. It is therefore, a personal sacrifice that Amal feels the need to make in order to attest to her religious beliefs. She says:

... on one level I really would love to be kissed by Adam and I can imagine it in my head with digital TV precision. I don’t know if it’s a bad thing to feel this kind of desire for him. I can’t help it though. He smelt *so* good. It would have been special.

But I know that what’s even more special to me is being true to what I believe in. I want to be with one person in my life. I want to know that the guy I spend the rest of my life with is the first person I share something so intimate and exciting with (Abdel-Fattah, 2006, p. 242).

Amal fears committing a grave sin, which leads her to deny herself a romantic relationship, despite her own attractions to Adam. Her determination can therefore be read as a sign of her faith in God as the higher power, for which she is willing to overcome personal desires and peer pressures. This marks the growth of her character. If, in the beginning of the novel, she finds herself struggling with wearing the hijab because of societal expectations, her control of her sexuality through her determination to maintain the observance of her faith marks a move towards becoming a believer whose life is centred on God.

## CONCLUSION

By presenting a protagonist who lives her life around her religious identity in an Australian environment, Randa Abdel-Fattah is providing the opportunity for non-Muslim readers to understand the lives of Australian Muslims as well as the different aspects of their faith. Intelligent, confident and outspoken Amal is also a challenge to the stereotypical assumptions of Muslim women in Australia, countering the belief that Muslim women are subjugated and weak. This is done through the representation of the protagonist’s voluntary submission to

wear the hijab, which helps reinforce her religious identity and commitment while also improving her personal attributes, particularly in relation to her social attachments.

My reading of the novel focuses on how Abdel-Fattah pays close attention to the descriptions of daily religious rituals in her protagonist's life. Indeed, these descriptions work to present Muslims and their faith in a positive light, but at the same time, her portrayal also attempts to discuss the holistic aspect of a believer's life. Amal's devotion to religion does not only affect her religious being, but also her social and moral being. These actions must therefore, be read apart from the understanding of religion as a private affair that must be separated from other aspects of living. As I argue throughout this paper, although Amal's decision to wear the hijab has personal meanings of their own, it has also helped her be a better individual as a whole.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> To date, she has published only one novel aimed at adult readers. *No Sex in the City*, which came out in 2012 is about an Australian Muslim woman in Sydney who is adamant in finding her future husband.

<sup>ii</sup> The women's mosque movement is a part of the Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening movement that became active in the Muslim world since the 1970s. The larger movement is not entirely political, and is also focused on "a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 3).

<sup>iii</sup> The women in Mahmood's study emphasized their desire to develop their own understanding of religious decree, which can be achieved when Islam is looked at as a discursive tradition. This is based on Talal Asad's (1986) work on the anthropology of Islam, in which he proposed that the study of Islam and its societies must acknowledge Islam "as a discursive tradition that connects with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge" (7). This is achieved through references to authentic sources of Islam – the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. It recognizes that while the discourse of religion is based on these sources, they are also affected by personal and social circumstances as well as historically-specific events, ensuring that the tradition maintains its relevance in various social structures. Meanwhile, the view of Islam as a tradition and not a custom ensures the preservation and continuity of past knowledge and practices into the present.

<sup>iv</sup> This quote is from Surah Qaf (50:16): "It was We who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein". In the Qur'an, the collective pronoun 'we' refers to God, emphasizing His authority as the ultimate power.

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