Spaces of Hope: Third Space Identity in Selected Muslim Chick Lit

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ABSTRACT

Minority Muslim women living in Western societies have been continuously marginalised in several contexts. One example is their freedom to visibly project their identity as Muslims and practice Islam as their way of life without being misrepresented or misunderstood. Another is the discriminating cultural practices towards them within the community that they belong to. Using two Muslim chick lit novels as case studies and the theme of 'spaces of hope' as explored by Phillips et al., this paper sets out to address the abovementioned issues. The methodology adapts and appropriates the third space theory as a lens to examine public and private experiences of the Muslim female characters in the selected Muslim chick lit. The finding indicates that Muslim chick lit creates female characters who carved out physical space to foreground the negotiation of culture and identity within the Western context. In addition, the finding also shows that the hijab functions as a material space allowing the Muslim female characters to move in and out of the public and personal spheres. Finally, the narratives also present a digital space from which the Muslim female characters can create a site of contestation between culture and identity. This digital space also contests the misrepresentations of and negative assumptions about female Muslim characters. As illustrated in the selected chick lit, spaces of hope are evident in three permutations – physical, material and digital. In conclusion, through this research into selected Muslim chick lit, the theme of spaces of hope is seen as a negotiation area of meaning and representation. It empowers the Muslim storytellers to open up spaces for contemplation and reinterpretation of their identity as Muslim women writers. In the process, it establishes the voices and presence of minority Muslim women within Western popular fiction genre.

Keywords: minority identity; Muslim chick lit; Muslim women; spaces of hope; third space

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INTRODUCTION

Neo-orientalist writings have unfairly portrayed Muslim women as oppressed, belittled, and subjugated by men with no equal rights (Hasan, 2015). In addition, Muslim women also face limited representation in the mainstream Western media largely due to clashes between unadulterated and culturally-enacted Islamic practices, and the Western representation triggered by Islamophobes (Basu, 2022; Chambers et al., 2019; Hasan, 2015; Newns, 2018; Patoari, 2019; Raihanah et al., 2015; Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015; Siti Hawa, 2021). In addition to the stereotype that "Muslims tend to form segregated communities, living separate lives" (Phillips, 2009, p. 6), the persistent idea that Muslim women are victims, as well as the inaccurate representations of Muslims and Muslim women in Western popular media, fracture Muslims' ability to fully integrate into Western society (Chambers et al., 2019). There is a need to challenge this negative labelling, and instead seek to find spaces of hope for the Muslims generally and Muslim women specifically as suggested by Phillips et al. (2009). Using the theme of 'spaces of hope', this paper explores how Muslim chick lit *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged* (2015) by Ayisha Malik and *Ayesha At Last* (2018) by Uzma Jalaluddin can offer an alternative space of hope in the form of narration. Phillips (2009, p.7) states that in order to reorganize Muslim geographies into spaces of hope, one has to "interrogate and contest allegations that stereotype Muslims as self-segregated, metaphorical and literal ghetto-dwellers". Spaces of hope could be seen as potential spaces where Muslim subjectivities are viewed positively within various aspects of their lives. This optimistic perspective is important in multicultural societies where the characters of the selected corpus live, as it encourages them to feel empowered. The empowerment of the Muslim female characters is vital as it reacts to and corrects the distortion of their identities by the Western media. The empowerment is seen as a form of counter-narrative to the narratives of misery which have often been associated with Muslim women. It is hypothesised that spaces of hope function to allow Muslim female characters in the selected novels to transform and make their lives better. Using this as a premise, the discussion will be grounded on two objectives. First, to explore the category of spaces of hope presented in the novels, and second, to analyse the function of these spaces in the third space identity formation within the public and private experiences of the Muslim female characters. The reason why the analysis on spaces of hope covers both the public and private experiences of the characters is to gauge a more multi-dimensional discussion of the spaces.

MUSLIM CHICK LIT AND SPACES OF HOPE LITERATURE

Literature on spaces of hope begins with a review of Muslim women's problems in the West. Being Muslims in the West, particularly Muslim women in hijab has its risks of being labelled negatively. This negative labelling is particularly reverberated through media pre- and post-9/11 (Newns, 2018, p.1). Hijab or headscarves are seen as a symbol of mutual oppression, with the veiling practice thought to be forced rather than by choice, attributable to the negative connotation attached to it post-9/11 and the patriarchal society of Muslim countries (Alkarawi & Ida Baizura, 2013). Besides veiling, another common misconception about Muslim women is they are widely perceived to be uniform in experience and there are still generalizations about them as a homogeneous group with one shared universal history, identity, burden of oppression, and way of doing things (Roselind et al., 2012).

In terms of narrative production, Muslim women writers face challenging politics of reception that attempt to relegate their voices within the "limited binaries of East and West, traditional and modern, Islamic and secular" (Newns, 2018, p. 1). Within these binaries, there is

an implicit assumption of an inherent incompatibility that exists between Islam and the "Western values" especially when it comes to gender equality (Newns, 2018). The negative misrepresentations of Muslim women also bring about another disconcerting issue – their limited self-representation (Basu, 2022). Muslim authors also spend a lot of time and effort to correct the stereotypical misrepresentations and this "diminishes the time and space for thoughtful representation of their lives" (Basu, 2022, p. 159). Opportunities for genuine portrayals of Muslim lives are also constrained due to the conditions of the audience who are groomed to only accept the stereotypes (Basu, 2022).

Muslim women are also subjected to clashes between pure, untainted Islamic practices and culturally-enacted ones. Misconceptions prevail due to misinterpretations of the Qur'an and the hadith (the tradition containing sayings and accounts of daily practice, the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH) regarding women's rights although the Qur'an and the hadith do emphasis on status, dignity, gender equality and rights of women (Patoari, 2019). In many cases, the power to explain the religious rules is preserved by men as most *ulama* (religious leaders) are men. Therefore, patriarchal importance is reflected and politicized in the interpretation of the Qur'an (Patoari, 2019; Siddika & Khatun, 2014). Similarly, some historical accounts do not render visible the Muslim women in political and socio-cultural contexts, with inconsistencies and disputes in the existing Shariah jurisdiction and constitutional laws (Ayshath et al., 2018, p. 215).

This paper proposes that this is where Muslim chick lit offers a narrative space of hope. Curr (2017) suggests that chick lit genre creates potential spaces for resistance and identity. The stereotypical representations of Muslim women in Western culture have resulted in counter-narratives written by Muslim women, and Muslim chick lit is one such narratives. These counter-discourses challenge and present an alternative to mainstream discourses to correct the stereotypical, orientalist misrepresentations of Muslim women and to produce positive images of Islam and its believers (Chambers et al., 2019; Hidayatullah & Zaman, 2013; Newns, 2018; Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015). These narratives aim to establish positive images of the multifaceted realities of Muslim women "that have often been misunderstood" (Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015, p. 125). For example, a number of British Muslim women have written back to the "oppressed" and "downtrodden" images of Muslim women propagated through media discourses and popular memoirs particularly before and after 9/11 (Newns, 2018, p. 1). One such writer is Shelina Zahra Janmohamed who writes *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One* (2009), a cross between memoir and chick lit that personifies her idea of what it means to be a British Asian Muslim woman, and in the process, "she has disrupted all the cliched expressions of Muslim womanhood" (Girishkumar, 2016, p. 366). Muslim chick lit is also viewed as promoting Islamophilia, "love of Islam" or "the expression of affection and adoration of Islam" (Allali, 2016, p. 112). The nature of the genre makes it suitable to analyse the concept of spaces of hope. This is because spaces of hope are congruous with the concept of Islamophilia. Murray (2013) in *Islamophilia: A Very Metropolitan Malady* states that Islam should be acknowledged thoughtfully especially by the Western societies since as a religion, it has great achievement and moreover, its teaching promotes love and denounces hate. It is then hypothesised that the Muslim chick lit genre attests to the concept of Islamophilia by debunking the stereotypes of Islam as a religion of hate and presenting a different side of Islam as a religion that rejoices love where "humor, hope, and humanity flourish" (Raihanah et al., 2015, p. 113).

In her 2015 Muslim chicklit, *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged*, British Pakistani author Ayisha Malik draws on her personal experiences as a hijabi woman in Britain. Sofia Khan, the protagonist, is a Pakistani-British woman in her thirties residing in London who is unable to resolve the conflict

between tradition and personal choice when it comes to meeting men. Indian-Canadian author Uzma Jalaluddin depicts the daily struggles of a hijabi in her 2018 chick lit, *Ayesha At Last*. Ayesha Shamsi, the protagonist, is a 27-year-old aspiring poet who struggles to balance her career as a substitute teacher with the expectations of her community for marriage. Ayesha, like Sofia, questions the normative view of *rishta* and arranged marriage. The chick lit novels were chosen to demonstrate how authors can use protagonists from within an ethnocultural community to question norms that are commonly accepted in a Western setting.

Out of the two selected novels for the purpose of this analysis, only *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged* (2015) has been subjected to a number of literary criticisms. Nahar et al. (2019) focuses on the Muslim female character's practice of *haya'* or modesty through hijab wearing and the analysis reiterates that wearing hijab is more akin to inner spirituality than it does to personal or political statement. Similarly, Saleem (2021) emphasises that hijab wearing "reshapes the understanding of religious experience" and is "an embodied modality of action" (p. 449) which becomes everyday resistance against gender inequality among British Muslim women. Analysis by Chandio et al. (2021) emphasises on the novel's response to the timid, docile and submissive portrayal of Muslim women by utilizing Edward Said's Orientalism theoretical framework. The findings indicate that Sofia Khan the heroine, being independent, confident and assertive, challenges Western notions of Muslim women (Chandio et al. 2021). Chandio and Buriro (2020, p. 270), using Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry, also analyse how Muslim female characters such as Sofia attempt to assimilate into their host/home country and locate their agency in the "in-between space" within the mimicry process. Another study by Basu (2022) discusses *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged* as a novel that responses strongly to post-9/11 Islamophobia and reflects the obstacles of authentic Muslim self-representation which is limited in a world where stereotypical media images of Muslim women are overwhelming. From the previous studies, it is noted that the existing analyses revolved around the protagonist's experience in inner spirituality and resisting gender inequality through hijab, challenging stereotypical Western ideas of Muslim women and attempting to assimilate in the host/home country while locating her agency. Echoing the aforementioned findings, there is a need for diversity in analysing how Muslim female characters overcome the negative experiences of living in the West and scrutinising novels that put forward the idea of spaces of hope. Therefore, through the lens of third space theory, this paper also hypothesises the possible spaces of hope and their function in forming the identity of the minority Muslim women. Looking at *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged* (2015) and *Ayesha At Last* (2018) as case studies, these spaces are presumed to challenge the ongoing setbacks of living as minorities.

SPACES OF HOPE AS AN APPROPRIATION OF THE THIRD SPACE: A METHODOLOGY

Spaces of hope in this study is viewed as an appropriation of Homi K. Bhabha's third space theory. It is operationalized by appropriating the third space within the Muslim diasporic narrative, the space being "a meeting point of reconciliation" in terms of integration of "highly contested value concepts" such as "contradictions, dilemmas, paradoxes, and ambiguities posed by both the self and others" (Raihanah et al., 2014, p. 372). Within this struggle, "'the third space', or creative imaginary site" (ibid.) is brought to bear. Potential spaces of hope for Muslims are refashioned from a series of Muslim geographies that are shaped by major events such as the war on terror, injustices and the idea of the West itself, which is "fundamentally imperial construct" and

organised around a series of binaries such as West against East, Christian against Muslim or heathen, and asserts the superiority of the former (Bonnett, 2004 as cited in Phillips, 2009). Muslim geographies are also shaped by Western nations in which these nations structure the lives of Muslim minorities (Hopkins & Gale, 2008 as cited in Phillips, 2009). Another contributing factor to the shaping of Muslim geographies is the segregation and integration of Muslim communities in the West (ibid.). These geographies range from local to global, abstract to intimate, material to imaginative, and concrete to textual spaces (Phillips, 2009, p. 6).

The discussion on spaces of hope in this paper focuses on three primary categories namely physical, material, and digital. Physical space centres around human interactions with natural or built environments that produce "a set of embodied experiences that variously create, inform, enforce, reinstate or challenge our senses of our social selves" (Lewis, 2009, p. 69). Material space on the other hand centres around how the Muslim women use their public attire including hijab and modest dressing to create opportunities for visibility. As Lewis (2009, p. 69) asserts the use of the Muslim women's public attire is akin to an expression of their fashion which signals "how [they] understand the different spaces [they] inhabit". Dress features in the spatialized processes by which bodies come to be read as Muslim and informs how Muslims see and are seen in specific spaces (p. 69). Repeated episodes of "moral panic about Islam" position women's Islamic dress such as the hijab in an "antithetical" position to the "positive qualities associated with hip cosmopolitanism" of the West (p. 69). Lewis (2009) therefore resituates the veil not only as a sign of religious allegiance but also as an item of clothing. By this way, it resists attempts to "close down definitions of the veil" which are often negative "in favour of an emphasis on its multiple potential meanings for the women who wear it and those who observe them" (p. 70). The final category, digital space centres around the cyberspace such as the social media platform and the blog. This space is "unfiltered" and allows Muslim women to carve a space for themselves to rectify their images as hijabis despite the pressures from their respective societies (Raihanah, 2018, p. 109). The digital space is also perceived to materialise the idea of celebrating Islam that transcends beyond local community and reaches out globally.

One more example of space of hope for Muslim minorities is their segregated communities. Sardar (2009) argues that the problem between the Western majority and the Muslim minorities begins with the general perception that Muslims live in segregated communities, and this geography of segregation can be turned into a hopeful space. Fears towards Muslim communities should be diffused with "more mundane realities" of everyday lives and aspirations of the Muslims by recognizing their hopeful spaces (Sardar, 2009, p.16). In segregated Muslim communities, new generation of Muslim youths strive to tackle problems associated with poor, segregated communities such as drug, gang and lack of education, demonstrating that such effort requires engagement of the hopes, aspirations and values of the community (Sardar, 2009). Acknowledging these Muslim youths' effort is recognizing their spaces of hope.

The present work proposes that the concept of spaces of hope for minority Muslim women provides a crucial vantage point to look at the representation of Muslim women's identity in a Western discourse such as chick lit. As abovementioned, spaces of hope in the selected texts will be analysed by recognizing and categorizing them into physical, material, and digital spaces. This paper looks into the discussion of spaces of hope within the public and private experiences of the characters in the Muslim community itself, i.e., the spaces that Muslim women define for themselves within the family unit and within the community. It also explores the spaces of hope for Muslim women within the mainstream society and outside the public domain. The heroines of the novels, in their mid-twenties and early thirties, are first-generation and second-generation

South Asian immigrants respectively. One is a substitute teacher-cum-poet, twenty-seven-year-old Indian Canadian Ayesha Shamsi, while the other is a book publicist, thirty-year-old British Pakistani Sofia Khan. Both heroines grow up within their community and cultural enclave, and do encounter the Western mainstream society. Therefore, the questions that form the basis of the forthcoming analysis are: What are the spaces of hope presented by the novelists in the selected chick lit? How do these spaces function to form third space identity within the public and private experiences of the Muslim women characters?

PHYSICAL SPACE OF HOPE

In *Ayesha At Last*, Ayesha graduates from a teacher's college and becomes a substitute high school teacher. Poetry writing and regularly reciting her poems at a lounge called Bella's become a physical space of hope for Ayesha. Ayesha needs this space because she has to put on the sideline her dream to become a poet (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 76) due to familial expectations. She wants her family's sacrifice as immigrants to mean something. Leaving India, "her mother and grandparents had left behind so much when they immigrated to Canada" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 10). Ayesha is manifesting the immigrant dream of her family – to have a better life in the host country. According to Ayesha, "there was so much pressure to take the road more travelled" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 316), that is to secure a teaching job. Her best friend Clara (who is white) encourages her to chase her dreams; "Writing poems. Exploring the world. Falling in love" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 7-8) but her family wants her to be a teacher and settle down.

Ayesha's family does not really encourage her love for poetry writing except for her grandfather, Nana who had read to her every night when she was small, introducing young Ayesha to Shakespeare (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 25). They were "a little concerned" when Ayesha started to perform poetry (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 33). Her teenage brother, Idris also looks down on her aspiration and love for poetry: "Somebody's gotta make it big in this family. It's certainly not going to be you, Little Miss Poet" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 27). Ayesha's family is also counting on her to set a good example for Hafsa, her young cousin as she is the eldest child in the family (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 9). Ayesha could not refuse Sulaiman Mamu's request to her to focus on becoming a teacher since he was the one who sponsored her tuition fee (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 33). He was also the one who hosted Ayesha, her mother, her brother and her grandparents when they first arrived from India (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 27) after the death of her father, Syed, a journalist in a religious riot. It is typical of South Asian culture where family obligation, loyalty, self-sacrifice and obedience towards the elders are of utmost importance (Shariff, 2009).

Despite being communal-centric, communal based cultures like South Asian culture do not restrict individuals from thriving and prospering (Raihanah, 2008). Culture orientation such as communal-centric and individual-centric values are not located geographically as "priorities of the personal, the communal and the national are not exclusive orientations of either Eastern or Western societies" (Raihanah, 2008, p. 93). Rather, the concerns for the personal and communal for example, exist in everyone and are part of the human community (Raihanah, 2008). Individuals like Ayesha, though are expected to sacrifice their personal desires to ensure the well-being of their families when individual and group goals conflict, are still allowed to pursue their personal goals. Nonetheless, Ayesha feeling obligated to her family, puts their aspiration first. Ayesha is trapped between Asian value of fulfilling one's filial duty, and her ambition. This also correlates with Bhabha's notion of hybridized subjectivity whereby Ayesha has to negotiate the contrary demands in her life – to follow her personal dream or fulfil her familial obligation. Due to these circumstances, Ayesha turns to her physical space of hope, reciting her poems at Bella's. On her

first day at school as a substitute teacher, Ayesha cannot control her students and hides in the washroom. She calls Clara for comfort. The latter who wants to calm her down invites her to Bella's, where "a long time ago, a different Ayesha had performed poetry" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 9). Ayesha's love interest Khalid on the other hand, feels that Ayesha has little regards for her poems and is not proud of them when she is reluctant to perform at the mosque conference that they are handling (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 245) although she is talented. It is only towards the end of the novel however, after a letter from Khalid encouraging her to take pride in her poetry writing and recitation, that Ayesha is ready to chase her dream and resigns from her teaching post (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 316). Ayesha's situation in which she has to juggle differing viewpoints and play different roles – a teacher, an aspiring poet and a role model to her younger family members also showcases heterogeneity in her self-identity.

Reciting poems at Bella's becomes a physical space for Ayesha to negotiate her identity as a minority Muslim woman in hijab. In "*What do you See?*" Ayesha states in the first part of the poem of how she wonders what people think of her appearance as a hijabi – do they see her as oppressed and originating from 'backward nations and swirling sand, humpbacked camels and domineering man,' referring to the Middle East as some people, particularly the Westerners have this fallacy idea that all Muslims are monolithic and Arabs (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 39). She points out that both the Western society and the conservative Muslim men fail to see that the hijab Ayesha wears does not "cover" her brain (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 40). As a dignified and mature Muslim woman, Ayesha thinks and speaks her mind. Both the west and conservative Muslim men would rather she remain unseen and unheard than being in the public sphere reciting her poems. They refuse to accept her beliefs, the way she dresses and the fact that she, like most Muslim women, is not oppressed. All the same, Ayesha still needs to navigate between her ambition to become a poet and her obligation towards her family, as discussed earlier. The ending of the poem questions the ignorance of those who do not have a clue of the actual reality of a Muslim woman. The mainstream non-Muslims might view hijabis like Ayesha as oppressed while judgmental Muslim men might stereotype them as merely suitable for marriage and procreation, and therefore are expected to be submissive. To be outspoken, to speak through her poems in a public and physical space like Bella's is Ayesha's way to break the stereotype of a supposedly "docile" Muslim women. Her identity is seen as out of the norm. Ayesha as a person, does not fit the template of a quiet, passive and acquiescent veiled Muslim woman.

MATERIAL SPACE OF HOPE

The second space is material – the hijab. Both Sofia and Ayesha wear hijab in accord with their own choice. Hijab has for a long time been a site of contestation within the discussion of Muslim women subjectivity. In *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged*, the conflict involving the female character's experience with hijab starts within the private sphere, the family unit. It is between Sofia and her mother who is not pleased with the former's decision to wear one. Sofia's mother, Mehnaz, a first-generation immigrant from Pakistan advises Sofia not to wear the hijab for fear of confrontation by members of the Western majority. To discourage her daughter, she tells how "her friend Nargis's daughter, who put on a hijab had some gang follow her after work, calling her a Paki and telling her to go back home" (Malik, 2015, p. 10). Sofia herself had been called a "terrorist" on board of the train on the way to work because of her hijab (Malik, 2015, p. 13). Mehnaz's disapproval is not unfounded. It is Muslim women with headscarves who primarily receive the full force of physical and metaphorical sufferings of post-9/11 and post-7/7 (Hasan, 2015).

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In *Ayesha At Last*, hijab contestation exists within the public sphere. The female character, Ayesha has conflicting encounters with Western men who think that hijabis are "exotic" and conservative Muslim men who believe that the veil limits where women should be seen and heard. Ayesha encounters a "veil chaser", the term refers to men who think that women in hijab are "an exotic challenge" at Bella's (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 36). Muslim women's so-called exoticism has always pricked the imagination of the west, an ostensible conception that traced its root back to the Orientalist's fascination of the harem. Ayesha had several experiences with "veil-chasers"; during high school when a white boy asked her to prom every year and even offered to wear an Indian outfit and turban if she accepted; men who tried to pick her up at bus stops and malls, and administered her driving exam (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 36). Her experiences with the "veil-chasers" are often unpleasant as they are oblivious and always commented on her headscarf. Moreover, Khalid who is conservative, has an unfavourable first impression towards her. Khalid is not a veil-chaser. Rather he is prejudice in his view of what constitutes a good Muslim hijabi. He is introduced to Ayesha at Bella's and clarifies that he has no interest to be acquainted with her. He believes "a good Muslim would never frequent such an establishment" i.e., Ayesha, as a hijabi should not be seen 'sitting comfortably in a seedy lounge' like Bella's (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 47).

The tension caused in the private and public spheres as a result of the heroines' practice of wearing hijab reveals the need to place the garment, hence the wearer in a positive light. Much like how Sardar (2009) contested the view of Muslim neighbourhoods as segregated hence are marked as problematic, and later showed that this geographical segregation could be turned into a hopeful space, positive appraisals should be made about the hijab too for it to be seen as a hopeful space. Previous studies view the hijab presented in the selected corpus as embodying the inner spirituality and understanding of religious experience (Nahar, 2019; Saleem, 2021). While acknowledging that hijab is a visible marker of spirituality, this paper is also suggesting a slightly different angle to view the hijab: how hijab features in spatialized processes by which bodies come to be read as Muslim, i.e., hijab "informs the ways in which Muslims see and are seen in specific spaces at specific times" (Lewis, 2009, p. 69). Bodies, Lewis (2009) explains, switch to different identities as they move from one space to another, and individuals never belong to a single spatial community. The bodily identities are fluid. Veiling facilitates the gender segregation of society since it is "a spatializing device" and "a spatial system" that is mainly intended as an outerwear to preserve modesty between sexes in different spaces; outside the gender-secluded space of a Muslim home in the public space, and in the presence of non-familial men in the domestic space (Lewis, 2009, p. 74). Hijab is a material space of hope for Muslim women in public because it preserves their modesty, away from the prying eyes of non-familial men. Both characters only don the hijab when they are out in the public; at work and when socializing with their friends, love interests and communities, and do not wear one at home in the presence of only family members. On a lighter note, the hijab is represented as fashion with changing trends and style emphasizing its status as a form of individual self-expression tied to modern lifestyle consumer culture (Balasescu, 2003; Kılıçbay & Binark, 2002; Lewis, 2009). Moreover, the form of hijab changes over time in the lifespan of a Muslim woman. (Lewis, 2009). Understanding hijab from a spatial perspective and its sartorial value distinguishes young hijabis as "religiously authoritative persona" with knowledge of Islamic teachings hence the wearing of hijab which signifies social aspiration as much as piety (Lewis, 2009, p. 80). It is also proposed, in this analysis, viewing hijab from spatial and sartorial perspectives might change its negative connotation as an oppressive device or as "the veil of ignorance" (Hasan, 2015, p. 90).

The hijab to Sofia is a path of enlightenment, a win-win situation for her and her Muslim community, that embodies her social aspiration and community spirit in the public space despite her mother's objection in private (Malik, 2015, p. 6). Sofia decided to wear hijab two weeks after returning from the mosque, where the imam gave a sermon about their duties as Muslims and told them to pray for the people who had lost their loved ones in New York on 9/11 (Malik, 2015, p. 47) – a proof that she embraces Muslim communal spirit. The imam's words: "a person who has faith is never separated from hope" (Malik, 2015, p. 47) resonate with Sofia's decision to wear the hijab. Hijab for Sofia symbolises her hope and faith. She adheres to the veiling spatial system and preserves her modesty through her choice of not wearing tight-knit material in public (Malik, 2015, p. 6). Sofia is also a fashionable hijabi that does not conform to the terrorist look standard (Malik, 2015, p. 13). Her decision shows that she has already chosen her space of hope, the hijab, as a site that signifies several bodily spatial processes – an agent of modesty, a marker of faith, a symbol of community spirit, and a purveyor of fashion.

Similarly for Ayesha, despite her encounter with the veil-chasers in public, remains steadfast in preserving her modesty with hijab, "an act of faith and bravery" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 111). She knows how to refuse the veil-chasers politely and firmly. Moreover, to see hijab as an embodiment of hope is not only to create a favourable image of it but also to understand how hijab works in the veiling spatial system. It is not only women who constantly shift in and out of public and private spaces to accommodate the spatial process of hijab-wearing. Men play an important role too. Respect for the female bodies such as lowering their gazes in the vicinity of veiled women also constitutes a part of the veiling spatial system (Lewis, 2009, p. 75), which is practiced by Ayesha's love interest Khalid: "*It is not appropriate to stare at women, no matter how interesting their purple hijabs*, Khalid reminded himself" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 1).

Although hijab is viewed as a space of hope for Muslim women like Ayesha and Sofia, it is not without its vicissitude. This analysis acknowledges the other side of the argument, that hijab as a space of hope is not utopian. Ayesha for example, does feel out of place at times with her hijab:

> Ayesha tugged self-consciously at her carefully chosen teacher clothes: blue button-down shirt and serviceable black pants. Her hands nervously smoothed the top of her purple hijab. *Part of both worlds*, *yet part of neither*, she thought.
>
> (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 5)

The excerpt shows that Ayesha is nervous on her first day as a substitute high school teacher at Brookridge High School. The staff are mostly white, dressed in business-formal slacks while the students are mostly brown and black in jeans. Seeing this, Ayesha has an existential crisis and a lacking sense of belonging, probably referring to her situation in which as an Asian immigrant, a teacher, and a Muslim hijabi, she feels that she belongs neither here nor there. Likewise, at times Sofia does face some dilemma in hijab. She does not want to be seen as an oddity, as "the other" simply because of her religious identity (Malik, 2015, p. 27). The concept, developed by Frantz Fanon, views "the other" as lacking in identity, propriety, unfamiliar, as well as does not have similar customs, and does not belong to a group (Al-Saidi, 2014). Sofia believes that the concept of "otherness" divides both Muslims and non-Muslims, because it discerns the world as mutually divided into opposites, i.e., "the self" is rational and good, while "the other" is irrational and evil (Al-Saidi, 2014, p. 96). Being a Muslim hijabi in a Western society puts Sofia on "the other" end of the opposites. It marginalised Muslim women like her from being fully accepted into the society. Nonetheless, despite the unidealistic reality of hijab as a material space

of hope, the characters still hold on to it. Sofia has no intention to remove her hijab. It is one of her spaces of hope that she tries to carve for herself: "You can't help what you love, and I think I've at least learned what is and isn't worth compromising" (Malik, 2015, p. 434). Equally, Ayesha too does not feel the need to explain her choice of wearing hijab to the veil-chasers at Bella's (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 75). She does not want to date men that question her hijab because she believes that they will not understand what hijab really means to her. Even if the veil-chasers do understand the meaning of the garment to Ayesha, she is not one who will willingly accept men who questions and suggests she takes off her hijab (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 74).

DIGITAL SPACE OF HOPE

The final space of hope that can be delineated from the selected corpus is digital space. In *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged*, Sofia shares her experiences in a blog, hence the digital space. Sofia laments about her break-up just before Ramadan and its aftermath in her blog, www.sofiasblog.co.uk, with the title *'Fight the Good Fight' by Yes, I'm Muslim, Please Get Over It* (Malik, 2015, p. 3). The personal conflict starts because she rejects the culture of living with in-laws and breaks up with her boyfriend who wants them to live with his extended family after their marriage (Malik, 2015, p. 3). Explaining her situation to her relatives does not get her any sympathy (Malik, 2015, p. 3). Instead, it is through her space of hope, her blog, that Sofia challenges the articulation of her culture. In Asian cultures, it is often obligatory for a woman to live with her in-laws after marriage. However, in Islamic teaching, there is no obligation for a woman to live with and serve her in-laws. Rather, Islam encourages the husband to prepare a separate dwelling for the wife, at least a private room that is only accessible to both of them (Badat, 2020). Living with in-laws then is an example of clashes between pure, untainted Islamic practices and culturally-enacted ones that some Muslim women are subjected to. By sharing her personal story of rejecting this practice, Sofia is actually opening up a digital space of hope, where her "over five thousand followers" (Malik, 2015, p. 30) who might be made up of women from all walks of life read, empathize and relate to her experience. In addition, this digital space becomes global, reaches out to and creates awareness as well as curiosity about Muslim cultural practices among her white colleagues, who also get to know about the existence of the blog (Malik, 2015, p. 30). It could be seen as an attempt to give more visibility to Muslim way of life, hence encouraging empathy from non-Muslims towards Muslims.

Sofia's blog is also a cyberspace to encourage empathy and understanding towards Muslim hijabis. It is where she takes ownership of her hijab and positions her public image as a hijabi in the cyberspace. The blog becomes an instrument that promotes greater visibility for Sofia as a practicing Muslim woman and creates awareness of hijab as a form of self-identification. The availability of digital and global space such as the cyberspace for the hijabis allow them the attempt to self-position themselves as individuals with rights and agency (Raihanah, 2018). In the blog, Sofia's voice is heard as she speaks for herself instead of being spoken for. She is also exercising her agency by making a choice to tell her stories of rejecting the idea of living with in-laws after marriage and being regarded as "the other" in her hijab. Currently, detractors of Islam are misinterpreting the hijabis as lacking self-empowerment and freedom (Raihanah, 2018). By positioning the hijab in the digital space such as her blog, Sofia is also positioning a counternarrative against the misrepresentations of veiled Muslim women.

Sofia's blog postings of her cultural and religious experiences demonstrate that Muslim women's identity exist in layers, and are not monolithic and homogeneous. There is heterogeneity in Sofia's life as a Muslim hijabi. The interpretation of "static Muslim femininity" (Ayshath et al. 2016) does not apply to her. Rather, her individuality is shaped by different variables of gender, culture and religion. As a Muslim woman, she breaks gender stereotype, speaks out her mind and is opinionated, not only verbally but also in her writings. Her concerns towards the cultural practice of arranged marriage and being treated as "the other" reveal different layers and multiplicity of herself. Sofia's self should be seen as complex and not one-dimensional. Her blog postings, advocating visibility for Muslim hijabi experiences, may ignite a mutual understanding regarding Muslim women's lives between Muslim hijabis and non-Muslims, and carve out minute spaces of hope that her life as a Muslim woman, and the lives of her Muslim readers in the Western society will be better.

CONCLUSION

In *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged* by Ayisha Malik and *Ayesha At Last* by Uzma Jalaluddin, both novels converge in terms of the characters facing conflict regarding their hijabs. The novels diverge however, in terms of portraying conflict between cultural values and true Islamic teachings, and conflict between upholding filial piety and following one's dream. Nevertheless in all circumstances, both female characters create spaces of hope to overcome these conflicts. These characters, like a majority of Muslims in the West, face challenges of being labelled negatively as troublesome minorities. The idea of spaces of hope is then created to discover hopeful spaces for the Muslims in many areas of their everyday lives (Phillips et al., 2009, p. 1). Based on the discussions above, a number of spaces of hope for minority Muslim women have been identified from the selected texts. The novelists showcase characters who create spaces of hope – physical, material and digital for themselves to offset the tensions that they face in their private and public spheres. These spaces provide possibilities for the construction of third space identity for minority Muslim women.

In *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged*, material space of hope, hijab provides hopeful spaces to contest its misappropriation as a symbol of female oppression and hostile treatment of the West towards Muslim women. Personally, Sofia does not receive the support of her mother in her decision to wear hijab. In public, she had been called a "terrorist" (Malik, 2015, p. 13) by a member of the Western mainstream society. Nonetheless, she dons the hijab as her path to enlightenment that also embodies her community spirit. It also symbolises her hope and faith.

Similarly, in *Ayesha At Last*, hijab is a space of hope for Ayesha against the prejudice views of men who think that Muslim women are "exotic" (Jalaluddin, 2018, p. 36). Instead of a symbol of subjugation, hijab is seen as "a spatializing device" within "a spatial system" (Lewis, 2009, p. 74) that accommodates Muslim women as they move in and out of the public and personal spaces. This spatial system requires cooperation from men too, to lower their gazes in the presence of a Muslim hijabi, as exemplified by Khalid. Thus, hijab preserves the modesty of Muslim women in public spaces and facilitates the gender segregation in society. It is also seen as fashion with changing trends over time and recreates the persona of young hijabi like Sofia for example, as a fashionable Muslim woman with as much religious knowledge as social aspiration. Even though there are moments when both characters feel out of place in their hijabs, they strongly hold on to this space of hope that they carve for themselves.

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In the selected novels, both characters open up digital and physical spaces of hope by utilising their chosen discourse to share their personal experiences in public. In *Sofia Khan Is Not Obliged*, the blog for Sofia is a digital space where she contests the culture of living with in-laws that is not parallel to the actual Islamic teaching. It is also a space where she creates recognition for her identity as a Muslim hijabi. By creating this digital space, Sofia is promoting the visibility of South Asian culture and Islam to her white colleagues, as well as vying for empathy and identification from her readers who might be in a similar situation.

In *Ayesha At Last*, reciting her poems at Bella's is how Ayesha creates a physical space where she negotiates the conflicting demands between observing filial piety and chasing her own dreams. Filial piety is an integral part of South Asian culture and Ayesha is pressured to prioritise the value. Nonetheless, this creates conflict because despite being an immigrant, she has grown up in the west where individualistic ideals such as pursuing one's dream is eminent. Her poetry recitation is her space to sort out these conflicting values, and added by encouragement from Khalid, eventually lead her to make the decision to focus on poetry writing. She also questions the unfamiliarity of the west with veiled Muslim women. This physical space allows Ayesha to challenge the ill-informed Western society about the hijab and establish her identity as a hijabi who stands up for her Muslim identity, where she reiterates her personality as an intelligent, outspoken woman and stands up against the nonsensical treatment from men.

The importance of these spaces is they alleviate the negative and stereotypical perceptions towards Muslims (Sardar, 2009). In the context of this paper, spaces of hope challenge the impediments faced by both characters and in the process, create more hopeful situations for them. The concept of spaces of hope for Muslim women provides a crucial vantage point to look at the representation of Muslim women's third space identity. In the process of identity construction, the Muslim female characters in the selected texts have deconstructed and reconstructed their sense of selves, identities and agencies within traces of identifiable "spaces of hope". These spaces enable the manifestation of the deconstruct and reconstruct processes of selves, and subsequently allow for their transformation. This study concludes that spaces of hope in the novels establish the voices and presence of minority Muslim women within Western popular fiction genre, producing new realities to the narration of Muslim women in the discourse of Islamophilia.

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