

**Veiled experiences: re-writing women's
identities and experiences in contemporary
Muslim fiction in English**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Abstract

In dominant contemporary Western representations, including various media texts, popular fiction and life-narratives, both the Islamic faith in general and Muslim women in particular are often vilified and stereotyped. In many such representations Islam is introduced as a backward and violent religion, and Muslim women are represented as either its victims or its fortunate survivors. This trend in the representations of Islam and Muslim women has been markedly intensified following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 2001.

This thesis takes a postpositivist realist approach to reading selected contemporary women's fiction, written in English, and foregrounding the lives and religious identities of Muslim women who are neither victims nor escapees of Islam but willingly committed to their faith. Texts include *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Sweetness in the belly* (2005) by Camilla Gibb and *The girl in the tangerine scarf* (2006) by Mohja Kahf. Attempting to explain how these fictional texts can be read as variously writing back to the often monolithic representations of Islam and Muslim women characteristic of mainstream Western texts (such as those depicted in popular life narratives), the thesis draws attention to the ways in which particular narrative techniques highlight the complexities of Muslim women's religious identities and experiences. Since the novels depict the lives of Muslim female characters in the West, this study is especially concerned with the exploration of the tensions and contradictions of women's Muslim identities in Western countries, and

addresses Western people's interests and prejudices in their encounter with Muslim women. Finally, given that various aspects to Muslim women's identities and experiences are typically elided in dominant representations, it is argued that a disruption of the stereotypes of Muslim women signals the potential for the compatibility of Muslim women's distinct identities with Western values.

Table of Contents

Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Approaching and evaluating literary representations: Theoretical considerations	22
Chapter Three: Contemporary Western literary representations of Muslim women	51
Chapter Four: Introduction to the selected novels	89
Chapter Five: Leila Aboulela, <i>The translator</i> and <i>Minaret</i>	96
Chapter Six: Randa Abdel-Fattah, <i>Does my head look big in this?</i>	127
Chapter Seven: Mohja Kahf, <i>The girl in the tangerine scarf</i>	160
Chapter Eight: Camilla Gibb, <i>Sweetness in the belly</i>	198
Chapter Nine: Conclusion	224
References	232

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