

Cultural Representations of Muslim Women in Contemporary Arab Anglophone Poetry:

A Study of Nimah Nawwab's *The Unfurling*

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of an extended history of misrepresentations of Muslim women that interrelate with Islam in a complex manner, this paper seeks to investigate diversity of contemporary poetic Arab Anglophone texts. Situating her work within a specific cultural context, the paper specifically focuses on the poetry of Saudi Anglophone poet Nimah Ismail Nawwab as a compelling case study in this field. It investigates three major archetypes among Nawwab's female Muslim characters: Muslim women as agents of social change, Muslim women behind the veil, and Muslim women as agents of peace and reconciliation. In examining the dominant prototypes in Nawwab's poetry, the paper seeks to highlight the poet's endeavor to introduce authentic cultural portrayals of Muslim women to dismantle the prevalent representations of Muslim women living in the Arab/Muslim world.

Keywords: Arab Anglophone poetry, cultural representations, , Middle East, Muslim women Orientalism, public space.

Introduction

Drawing upon the work of prominent anthropological scholars, Edward Saïd and Mohja Kahf, among others, this paper attempts first to map out the key recurrent cultural misrepresentations of Muslim women in Western discourse and culture. Next, it sheds some light on the significant role of Arab texts, specifically those written by Anglophone writers, and their role in dismantling the distorted cultural representations of Muslim women in the Western literary tradition.

The study then shifts its focus to the poetry of the contemporary Saudi-Anglophone poet Nimah Ismail Nawwab, presenting her work as an important case study that calls to attention the authenticity of traditions, values, and culture of Muslim women. The study analyzes a collection of selected poems from Nawwab's volume *The Unfurling* (2004 a) to examine three types of female characters: Muslim women as agents of social change, Muslim women behind the veil, and Muslim women as agents of peace and reconciliation.

Finally, I conclude by commenting on the vitality of Nimah Nawwab's poetic contribution, which not only saliently confronts distorted representations, but also articulates a genuine cultural identity of Muslim women that has continually been marginalized.

1.Exploring Representations of Muslim Women in Western Contexts

While mapping the representations of Muslim women in Western texts from medieval Europe through the Renaissance to colonial and post-colonial eras, one encounters overtly intimidating images that have been rendered predominant and archetypal over the course of history. In this section, I briefly review a number of influential critical studies that have investigated the cultural misrepresentations of Muslim women in Western discourse. Many historical and feminist contemporary writings, several travelogues, works of fiction, and popular culture and media products have contributed to the creation of this chain of false representations of Muslim women, particularly Middle Eastern Muslim women, in the Western literary tradition.

Muslim women are often depicted as victimized, veiled, secluded, and disempowered in Western literary texts, even in relatively recent texts written by women. Patricia Jeffery's *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (1979), Juliette Minces' *House of Obedience* (1992), and Katherine Govier's "Shrouded in Black, Women Rendered Invisible, Voiceless," (1995) are only a few examples of the contemporary Western feminist writing that tend to reproduce representations of Muslim women as "victimized," "secluded," and "repressed" (Zine, 2002, pp. 3-13). According to Mohja Kahf, who wrote *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: from Termagant to Odalisque* (2008), this dilemma has become intrinsically connected to the political, ideological, and colonial relationships between the West and the Islamic world. On exploring some of the recurrent images of Muslim women within Western contexts, Sajidah Kutty (1997) underlines three prevalent personas: "the mysterious Muslim woman of the Orient"; "the oppressed Muslim woman," often represented in the *hijab* (headscarf); and "the militant Muslim woman" (p.14). These negative Oriental images have become not only universalized but also as what Homa Hoodfar describes as "mechanisms by which Western dominant culture re-creates and perpetuates beliefs about their superiority and dominance" (1993, p. 16).

Suha Sabbagh further observes various cultural misrepresentations of Muslim women when she points out that "[t]hrough Western eyes, Arab women" are often perceived by popular Western culture as "docile, male dominated, speechless, veiled, secluded, subdued, and unidentifiable beings" (2003, p. xi). She goes on to emphasize that these representations, among others, have become what "many westerners uphold as stereotypes of Arab women" (2003, p. xi). In addition

to these stereotypes, many scholars in various disciplines elucidate other ways in which the contentious positions of Muslim women are manifested and viewed through the cultural lens of the Western observer. Edward Saïd, for instance, discusses the role of media-propagated illusions in distorting the reality of Islam for the sake of political interests: “[t]his powerful concentration of mass media can be said to constitute a communal core of interpretations providing a certain picture of Islam and, of course, reflecting powerful interests in the society served by the media” (1981, pp. 48-49). Scholars Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline-Nagel present crucial readings of this issue in their effort to challenge such misrepresentations, writing that “[i]n the present political climate, in which Muslim women more than ever are subject to stereotypes, negative representations, and constant scrutiny within their own societies and by others, it becomes important to present more complicated readings of the Muslim women category” (Falah & Nagel, 2005, p. 5).

2. Arab Anglophone Texts: Role and Impact

Several critical studies have examined the impact and reception of Arabic texts in Western contexts in order to underline the vital role of Muslim women as representatives of their native cultures in theory and practice. Regarding such scholarship, many writers in cultural studies have noted that the emphasis on the local and cultural specificity of Muslim women’s lives may perhaps “deconstruct the hegemonic use of gender as a universal category and encourage interest in receptivity to other cultures” (Amireh & Majaj, 2000, p. 9). Accordingly, Anglophone texts by Arab writers have not only been welcomed for their “authenticity,” but perhaps they have also been admitted by the Western feminist circle in particular because understandings of their work were originally based on stereotypes and ignorance (2000, p.9). It is important to note that, in the words of Sabbagh, these misrepresentations will disappear “on the day that the titles and the text of articles about Arab women stress their strength, their resistance, and the commonality of their experiences with those of women in the West” (2003, p. xxi).

In practice, the current multicultural landscapes in which Muslim women appear call into question efforts that hitherto have been made to interrogate cultural misrepresentations and consider which prominent resolutions should be recognized and adopted. Furthermore, against the backdrop of multiple misrepresentations of Muslim women, scholars have begun to examine the role of Arab women writers—mainly Anglophone ones—and, more significantly, the elements inherent to relevant cultural contexts, in order to correct these problematic representations.

In recent years, interest in cultural representations has grown, stimulating a great deal of scholarly investigation by leading Arab women writers like Leila Ahmed and Lila Abu-Lughod, among others. However, a number of literary texts by contemporary Middle Eastern Anglophone women writers have still received little critical attention, and representations of Muslim women have continued to be hostile as superficial images of their societies as inferior and uncivilized have proliferated globally. These damaging views gained wide currency in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. As such negative representations of Muslim women spread through Western culture and media, several Saudi women writers worked to gradually elucidate the authentic roles and identities of Muslim women. Regarding the Saudi scene, several Saudi female writers and poets have gradually begun to elucidate the vitality of the status and role of Muslim women. Samar Fatany, the author of *Saudi Perceptions and Western Misconceptions* (2005), argues that, due to negative media coverage in the West, Saudi Arabia has been seen as a refuge for terrorism and intolerance as well as a place inhabited by radical extremists. In her

documentary book, Fatany explains to the Western reader specifically the true reality of Saudi Arabia through historical allusions and compelling snapshots of women's issues and social reforms, among other aspects.

By journeying into the poetic world of Saudi Anglophone poet Nimah Ismail Nawwab (1966-), one recognizes the poet's endeavor to offer a variety of cultural representations that contradict the prevailing stereotypes and distorted representations shaping Western perceptions. Nawwab is considered one of the promising newly emergent woman poets and writers in Saudi Arabia. She published two volumes of poetry in English in the United States; *The Unfurling* (2004 a), and *Canvas of the Soul* (2012). In global and regional tones, Nawwab's work deals with culture, Muslim women agency and empowerment, and peace. Nawwab has gained an international acclaim where most of her poems have been translated into several languages. *The Unfurling* (2004 a) is published in English and addresses English-speaking readers. In three distinct sections—"Awakenings," "Contours," and "Crossroads" Nawwab reflects various Muslim women's experiences and tackles women's principal issues.

For the sake of this study, three major prototypes of Nawwab's female characters will be investigated: women as agents of social change, Muslim women behind the veil, and Muslim women as agents of peace and reconciliation. In the undertaken poems, these prototypes emphasize Nawwab's keen intention to dismantle the repertoire of subordinate representations of Muslim women so prevalent in Western discourse and media.

3. The Predicament of Cultural Representation: Muslim Women in *The Unfurling*

In dealing with the concept of "culture" in recent critical writing, one is likely to become overwhelmed by all the nuances of this immensely intricate term, considered "one of the most difficult concepts in human and social sciences" (Hall 2003, p. 22). The study of this concept grows even more complicated because of its correlations with crucial elements such as "representation," "meaning," and "language" (2003, p. 22). The element of representation itself is considered specifically significant, because it stands for "experiences, people, voices which are reinterpreted and represented and constitute our realities" (Howarth, 2002, p. 8). Thus, representations are products of the different interrelated aspects of "self, other, and the object-world" (Jovchelovitch, 2007, p. 11) that collectively shape our identities and are originally constructed within discourse through narratives told about us (Hall, 2003, p. 4). Particularly remarkable is that recent criticism once again acknowledges the significance of representation, as well as the vital role it plays: "the reality of the human world is in its entirety made of representation: in fact there is no sense of reality for our human world without the work of representation" (Jovchelovitch, p. 11).

In his noteworthy book, *Culture and the Customs of Saudi Arabia* (2005), David E. Long argues that "Arabia is not only the cradle of Islam but also of the Arabs." Discussing the challenge of depicting the Saudi cultural scene, Long observes that "having never been under Western colonial rule, they have not developed a feeling of cultural inferiority acquired by many colonial people" (2005, p. 26). Bearing in mind Long's comment, Nawwab attempts to address this peculiarity of the cultural predicament of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia in several poems. Fundamentally, she relies on the three categories that I have already introduced—namely, Muslim women as agents of social change, as behind the veil, and as agents of peace and reconciliation, which together enable the poet to render vibrant reflections of her personal experiences with Saudi women, her observations of them, and her knowledge of their history and culture. Her discussion of the above-mentioned character types therefore remains within a

specifically constructed cultural framework that represents a wide array of Muslim women depicted as living individuals with divergent values and attitudes regardless of their common environment and heritage. The poems that I will analyze below are among the most influential in Nawwab's oeuvre. More significantly, in them, she explores how various aspects of theme, language, and imagery can work to transform the predominant representations of Saudi culture into multifaceted portrayals. In this way, Nawwab attempts to dispel the recurrent, stereotypical misrepresentations of Muslim women from not only the Saudi community but also the larger Muslim and Arab world.

The concerns of women dictate the majority of Nawwab's provocative poems. Nawwab herself asserts that "writing about women is just as important as writing about an abused child, the homeless, the downtrodden, or the political and social life where women play a vital role" (Nawwab, 2004 b). The diverse nature of Nawwab's female characters enables her to examine a range of facets, complexities, and paradoxes affecting the Muslim woman's experience. She deliberately explores gendered contexts in varied settings, and probes beneath the surface to expose Muslim women's hidden experiences. The cluster of her women-centered poems discussed here are symbolic of the intricate worlds of actual women living in the Saudi milieu. The poems cover the past and present, addressing religion and culture, gender and family, war and peace. Nawwab therefore shares with her readers not only her own thoughts, emotions, and personal experiences but also reflections and creative reconstructions of the communal identity of Muslim women.

3.1. *Muslim Women as Agents of Social Change*

The Muslim women in this category are intellectual individuals eager to act as social agents in their community. The poem "The Road Taken" sums up the spirit of Nawwab's entire collection, expressing a yearning for positive social change and reform. As the title ironically suggests, the speaker in the poem is a Muslim woman whose life has been transformed into a journey defined by "twists" and "hollows." The introductory stanza introduces the speaker's struggle to survive despite the hardships that overshadow her life:

The valley of life,
Invites us to explore,
The valley of life,
With its twists, turns,
Its highest peaks, hollows
Draws one on the journey. ("The Road Taken"1-6)

This sense of perseverance becomes even more prevalent as the speaker proceeds to the next stanza, which captures the essence of her life as she continues to redefine her life in anticipation of a meaningful and significant future regardless of the "thrills," "dilemmas," and other challenges life may offer. This knowledge empowers the speaker to convert the challenges she often faces into a mature way of living despite the hardships associated with her life :

Living the stages, layers, phases
Evolving, changing, growing,
Taking on the thrills and dilemmas,
Each leaving its mark,
Shaping pieces of the puzzle,
Shaping life. ("The Road Taken"7-12)

Despite the agitated tone and gloomy landscape evoked, the poet interweaves visual images such as “valley of life,” “highest hollows,” and “pieces of the puzzle,” to modify the poem’s theme, which is, again, the speaker’s search for social transformation. Nawwab intentionally hides the identity of the speaker to allow the reader to wonder who this woman might be: an artist, a critic, a social reformer, or simply an enlightened individual. The poem hence reveals itself as an allegory of a woman eager to reduce the glaring cultural gaps others have recognized, as Long does when he notes, “[s]ocial change has occurred so rapidly that one could argue that there is not one but several generational Saudi cultural gaps” (2005, p. 26). Nawwab alludes to such gaps when she writes,

As we live several lives,
Each a different stage,
A stage with its goals, dreams, frustrations,
Touched throughout by the lives of others,
Joining us all,
Binding all in a circle of ever-changing lives. (“The Road Taken”13-18)

The poem ends without any sense of resolution for the dilemmas it broaches, leaving the reader with a tremendous feeling of anticipation and presumably urging him or her to share in the speaker’s anguish. The speaker’s predicament might only be resolved if Muslim women manage to restore the spirit of hope of their ancestors, who previously “navigated” the “rugged” valley of life:

The valley, will it be long and winding.
Will it be rugged and cut short?
Can our essence, spirit,
Leave a bit, a glimmer
In the hearts,
The memories of those left behind,
Those navigating,
The valley of life? (“The Road Taken”19–26)

Just as “The Road Taken” records the first chapter in the life of a Muslim woman caught between two worlds, “Equilibrium” presents an intricate, metaphorical scenario with a woman at its center who has witnessed the transformation of her former world. The gap between the speaker and her community lessens as she assimilates to the crucial changes that have taken place around her. The phase of integration she experiences yields internal conflicts:

As the world I know changes, alters, transforms,
Caught between two worlds,
The clamoring of each tugging at one,
Each pulling in a different direction,
The mind and heart at war. (“Equilibrium” 1-5)

An air of mystery overshadows this poem, contributing to the dramatic tension that characterizes each of its lines. Despite the strong implication that the speaker in this poem is more fortunate than her counterpart in “The Road Taken,” her experience still makes her ambivalent about the decisions she must make in the future. The use of seemingly random line lengths contributes to the foreboding effect of the poem, suggesting the psychological state of the speaker, who pours her conflicting emotions into the narrative:

Buffeted by the demands of opposites,
Balancing on a tight tangled wire,

Teetering as I look down at my feet,
 Carefully placing each foot,
 Weaving, wavering, peeking down at the looming abyss. ("Equilibrium" 6-10)

The above lines indirectly explain the poem's title. Amidst such murkiness, the speaker engages in a struggle to maintain her equilibrium as she balances between two opposing worlds. The abundant symbolism in the poem's stanzas further contributes to its ambiguous air. While "a tight tangled wire" could be read as suggesting the old world, "the looming abyss" could stand in for the hazy new one. The personality of the speaker suits the poem's theme: she is neither traditional nor liberal but has adopted a moderate attitude and is aware of the complexities inherent in her decision to do so. The speaker expresses a sense of bewilderment regarding the behavior of people in her community:

As people take up the banner
 For a way of life,
 For a way of thought,
 Each puts forth arguments, logic, merits,
 Espousing and advocating
 New thoughts, entrenched thoughts,
 Different outlooks, familiar outlooks,
 I adjust internally, adjust externally,

The two worlds affecting the depth of my core. ("Equilibrium" 15-23)

In the above stanza, "Equilibrium" appears at first to paint a bright picture of people who absorb changes and advocate "new thoughts." However, its sense of mystery returns and the situation again becomes vague when "different" and "familiar" outlooks merge on the surface; the speaker recognizes her experience as an ordeal as it creeps into "the depth of [her] core." The poem concludes by presenting the woman as perplexed between two worlds and two prospects regarding her identity: "Will the two worlds finally converge, / Or will they tear the fabric of my identity/ Bringing forth a rebirth?" ("Equilibrium" 24 -26). The poem's concluding lines implicitly call out for change through exploring new paths and advocating potential thoughts much in tune with maintaining one's individual identity.

3.2. Muslim Women behind the Veil

The second category of Nawwab's female characters represents the majority of Muslim women in Saudi Arabia. Because they live behind the veil, shrouded from most people's view, these women have become especially compelling and fertile subjects of investigation. Despite obvious cultural, ethnic, and religious divides, the poems take multiple approaches to dialogue that not only correct several Western misconceptions but also preserve the integrity of Muslim identity. For instance, at the outset of "Shrouded Mystery," the reader meets a spectrum of Muslim women "cloaked in black." In this provocative poem, Nawwab attempts to dispel the mystery that surrounds the image of Muslim women wearing the *abaya* (a loose black, traditional garment that covers the wearer from head to toe). She does so by immediately depicting what the speaker calls "figures of mystery," codifying the Western misconceptions of Muslim women behind the veil:

Shrouded, cloaked in black,
 Figures of mystery,
 Tales abound of their lives,
 True or false, that is the question.

What does one do
With masked figures

While looking deep into the hidden folds? (“Shrouded Mystery” 1-7)

The previous lines clearly adopt the attitude of the “other” towards the second category of Nawwab’s women, namely, the masked figures. Representations of this group of Muslim women trap them in a complex, contested space in which “true and false” tales about them that proliferate in the West affect their cultural position. The narrative presents a series of relatively indirect, perplexing questions, attempting to arrive at a definite answer:

Are their lives as secluded as they appear?
Or are they full of personal successes,
Of strong family ties,
Unbreakable friendships,
Of an unshakeable faith? (“Shrouded Mystery” 11-15)

These lines evoke complex cultural experiences. The lives of Muslim women have always come under heavy scrutiny because of misleading perceptions of their personal relationships, accomplishments, and faith. The chain of questions in this poem not only echoes the vague nature of the title but also suggests disguise and deception by adopting a conventionally Western tone. The poem closes by drawing attention to the wealth of human relationships and cultural ties behind the veil.

Where “Shrouded Mystery” ends provocatively, “The Hidden Layers” presents a determined female Muslim character who reveals the hidden truths behind the “cloaked figures of mystery.” Comprised of five stanzas, “The Hidden Layers” offers greater insight into Muslim women’s prospects and status in a Saudi milieu. With an explicitly unwavering tone, the speaker seeks to build sturdy bridges of understanding between two opposing cultures. This figure begins with a confrontation between the speaker and the “other”:

Some think I am hiding
Underneath my long black cloak,
With little narrow slits for my eyes,
Cloaked in mystery, medieval modesty,

Wondering, what is going on behind the mask? (“The Hidden Layers” 1-5)

These stanzas revolve around a crucial question, namely, how do we affirm and maintain our identities in a world that does not acknowledge we exist? In vividly portraying a Muslim woman wearing her traditional costume—namely, the black *abayas*—this poem also alludes to the mistaken Western tendency to associate the veil with a mask of deception or symbol of ignorance. The speaker grows more confident in the following lines:

Little knowing that I am proud,
Proud of my identity,
Proud of my femininity,
Proud of my spirit,
My faith,
My mind, not just my body,

Proud of my heritage, culture, long-entrenched traditions. (“The Hidden” 8-14)

These lines underline the speaker’s pride in her “long black cloak” because it sustains her faith, identity, and culture, creating a distinct, powerful sense of identification between the speaker and her female counterparts. This identification is voiced in the following lines:

Does my cloak, my masked visage,

Long viewed by outsiders with pity,
 Barricade me from the world?
 Or does it open up vistas of wonder,
 Open up doors for exploration into the unseen,
 Open up the world through a different hidden sharp lens? ("The Hidden " 20-25)

The poem reaches its climax when the speaker attempts to bridge this cultural divide by questioning the significance of Saudi female identity that exists behind "cloak [and] masked visage." This group of Muslim women is caught between their "masked visage" as a barricade and a potential portal for "exploration into the unseen." The poem concludes by conveying a subtle awareness of the fact that the once-secluded women have transformed into spirits of freedom who aspire to reach "vistas of wonder" and knowledge.

In her examination of representations of Middle Eastern Muslim women in the Western press, Karin Wilkins argues that "[t]he Western view of Middle Eastern women serves to accentuate the differences between East and West, perpetuating negative stereotypes [...]." She proceeds to explain that these women are "portrayed as distant, shielded from direct view through the veil; as passive, reacting to events rather than actively participating in them" (1997, p. 60). Wilkins further observes that these images, among others, signify "the mystery that seems to shroud Western understanding of other cultural groups" (1997, p. 50). The poet is thus keenly aware of the negativity of these stereotypes and their impact on Western culture and media. Hence she not only articulates the issue of the veil in her poem "Shrouded Mystery" to respond to what Wilkins, among other writers, have acknowledged, but also to bring to light the essential status and roles of Muslim women behind the veil in the Saudi community and elsewhere.

3.3 Muslim Women as Agents of Peace and Reconciliation

The third category of Muslim women in Nawwab's poetry includes Muslim women who serve as concrete examples of true Muslim womanhood, representing the authentic spirit of Islam as the religion of peace and brotherhood. As Long remarks, "Islam as a political ideology is neither a doctrine of hatred nor of bloodshed, as has been often characterized." Unlike the image perpetuated by Western popular culture, Long continues, "Islam, and indeed all world religions, offer their believers a wide array of references on the virtue of maintaining peace" (p. 26). The Muslim women in this category develop local concerns in international settings and voice their concerns powerfully, rejecting global terror and violence.

The speaker of Nawwab's next poem speaks in such a voice. From its introductory lines, "Banishment" employs a classical tone immediately reminiscent of ancient elegies. The first set of stanzas creates a melancholic atmosphere, arousing in the reader empathy for this pained Muslim woman:

I let you out,
 Your rule is at an end,
 I let you out,
 With all that is in me,
 Grief,
 I let you go,
 Pent up wrath,
 Clawing at my heart,
 Clenching my hands . . . ("Banishment" 1-9)

The word “grief” is not only key in these lines but also a major theme around which the poem revolves. To heighten the dramatic effect, Nawwab does not initially reveal the cause of the speaker’s misery. The lines thus depict an ambiguous, pathetic struggle, which intensifies when the personification of grief devours the woman’s heart and body. The next set of lines does finally reveal the reality behind the conflict:

I give you back
 To the oppressors,
 Tyrants,
 Soulless,
 Callous of human decency,
 Giddy with hysterical racism,
 Puffed with blind arrogance,
 Thriving on their mastery,
 Stealing, raping, conquering,
 The Arab world, African continent, Asian lands. (“Banishment” 12-21)

The speaker’s outrage undoubtedly comes from the fact that she has witnessed the atrocities of tyrannical powers who continue to steal, rape, and conquer “the Arab world, African continent, [and] Asian lands.” The speaker does not name any specific imperial power; however, she articulates this issue with the deep-seated wisdom of a Muslim woman who understands that the history of imperialism looms over the past and present. Unlike Nawwab’s previous poems, “Banishment” transcends personal dilemmas and regional borders to introduce a Muslim woman who feels entirely estranged from a world that has been shattered by wars and terrorism. Subsequently, the poem succeeds in depicting the distance between the speaker and her world. The speaker adopts the voice of the masses while still depicting the deeply felt agonies of the oppressed at the hands of the oppressor and the conflicts between the colonizer and colonized:

I let you out,
 As the agony of generations
 Birthed,
 Matured,
 Ingrown,
 Stamp our collective memory,
 Moaning mothers,
 Massacred young innocents,
 Shamed helpless males,
 Weaved in and out of the centuries. (“Banishment” 22-31)

These lines bear broken images of a nation whose collective memory has been distorted by colonizing powers depict people who are among the world’s most wretched nations. The speaker observes that grief has characterized her people for many centuries, exposing a disturbing scene of devastated families crushed mercilessly by their oppressors. The speaker confronts her grief directly in the following stanza:

I let you go, Grief,
 So you can no longer hold me in thrall,
 Keep me from restful sleep,
 Smothering my dreams,
 With bleak, murky future for my loved ones. (“Banishment” 42-46)

These lines suggest the early phases of personal triumph over not only grief but also the sense of inferiority that burdens the speaker. One can easily detect the drastic change in her personality: her mood of fear and anxiety transforms into one of optimism and faith. She manages to overcome “a bleak, murky” stage in her life, as expressed in the following lines:

I let you out,
Grief,
And pick up the mantle of joy,
Pulling its swirling warmth tightly,
Deeply drinking up bubbling pleasure,
Dancing and twirling
To the ecstatic, mighty music of human bonding,
Soothing,
Supporting,
Succoring me,
Bringing me peace, peace, peace, peace. . . (“Banishment” 47-57)

These lines present the shift that leads to a remarkable episode in the female speaker’s struggle. A chain of images illustrate the state of overwhelming ecstasy the speaker enters, specifically describing her as wearing “the mantle of joy” and drinking up “bubbling pleasure.” Because of the almost musical richness of these words and verbal gestures, these lines read as more rhetorical than literal. The reader may feel as though he or she is sharing in the speaker’s joy and tranquility, especially since the poem depicts the speaker’s progress toward this point. The poem initially introduces a female character perplexed by the fragmented condition of her world. As it draws to a close, her dilemma has been resolved with certainty—she has found solace in “human bonding,” because it heals the wounds of the past and, more importantly, yields future prosperity. The speaker of “Banishment” thus manages to arrive at her lost harbor, where peace prevails over the acts of evil that result from racism, war, and colonialism.

In essence, the poet has largely occupied herself with the colonial predicament and its aftermath, as evident in several Arab and Muslim countries including Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The titles of her poems notably imply the common burden of warfare and colonialism. “Nightmare,” the final poem I will discuss here, presents the plea of another female speaker for deliverance from an outside power’s tactics of oppression and injustice. It vividly depicts the plight of the Iraqi people during and after the Second Gulf War, largely at the hands of the United States and Great Britain. The poem begins by describing a veritable whirlwind that ruins “the cradle of civilization”:

The bleak, owl-omened cloud thunders,
Peeling woes, worries, rage and rancor,
As the ‘mighty’ unleash their ferocity
At the helpless. (“Nightmare” 1-4)

The introductory lines describe a tyrannical war between what the speaker calls the “mighty” and “helpless.” The images of the war are absurd, described as causing feelings that range from “rage” to the only slightly less intense “rancor.” The following lines further explore the tale of this war:

Forgotten:
The richness of the past,
The milk of human kindness.
Bomber jets sweep the skies,

Raining their fatal bounties. ("Nightmare" 31-35)

The speaker laments the fact that human wickedness could triumph over one of the prominent, ancient Arab nations, which now stands "on the edge of obscurity." She is utterly aware that Iraq has been transformed into a colony stripped of its identity and culture: "Remnants of museums and mosques / Stand sentinel / Silent and bare", (24–26)

The speaker cannot hide her fury as she depicts the wasteland of the present:

All is laid to waste

As Baghdad, Basra and Mosul

Are assaulted yet again,

In the name of "good." ("Nightmare" 27-30)

Each one of the cities she cites had witnessed "a golden era / Of discovery, learning and science" (10–11). However, these cities as they once were have been erased from the map of the world. She draws an impactful analogy between two wars, both led primarily by the United States and Great Britain, one in the present and one with Mongolia in the past. For her, both wars were and are milestones in the collapse of human civilization. The female in "Nightmare," though different from the one in "Banishment," has also developed a remarkable political awareness of the clash between civilizations.

Conclusion

After several readings of the poems under discussion, the observation that remains is of a noteworthy woman poet with moderate views, whose poetry is a voice of her people and a vehicle for exploring their native culture. In so doing, these poems bring about the conspicuous vision of an Anglophone Saudi poet who is constantly caught within a poetic locale that blends faith and belief, past and present, gender and family, history and culture, and war and peace. By introducing these three major archetypes; Muslim women as agents of social change, behind the veil, and as agents of peace and reconciliation, Nawwab addresses vital cultural expressions that transcend current clichés. Woven into the very fabric of some of Nawwab's most influential poems, these three prototypes introduce a fascinating gallery of female Muslim speakers, captured in memorable snapshots that bear a fine resemblance to their real-life counterparts.

The first category of Nawwab's female characters negotiates the role of Muslim women as agents of social change. Regardless of the fact that they are caught grappling between two opposing worlds, they still preserve a moderate position neither liberal nor traditional towards the several acts of social transformation in their milieu. They are ordinary women torn between agonies and dreams, pains and joys, failures and triumphs. Nevertheless, they are aware of the perplexities of life and often appear independent individuals eager to maintain different modes of survival.

Muslim women behind the veil underlines the second category of Nawwab's female characters. These poems explicitly seek to build sturdy bridges of mutual understanding between two disparate cultures against the negative stereotypes associating the veil with a mask of deception and ignorance. Through introducing intellectual females characters wearing the veil, Nawwab seeks to sustain not only their pride, but also their faith, individuality, and national culture.

The third and last category of Nawwab's female characters are presented as agents of peace and reconciliation. The cultural representations of this group are not meant to arouse the empathy of readers regarding the agonies of wars and violence of the modern world, but rather sharpen

their perceptions of the role of Muslim women who advocate peace and reconciliation. In so doing, Nawwab introduces the true spirit of Islam as the religion of peace and tolerance.

Eventually, not only does Nawwab create a multifaceted portrayal of cultural representations of Muslim women in the Saudi milieu but also the Arab/Muslim world. The previous poems not only stand in confrontation against false representations but also articulate a genuine cultural identity of Muslim women that had been formerly marginalized. Against the complex artificial misrepresentations of Muslim women, specifically Saudi women, the poems evoke a sensuous twilight of lived experiences that blossom with countless tales of faith, endurance, and aspiration.

About The Author

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