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Veiled experiences: Rewriting women's identities and experiences in contemporary Muslim fiction in English

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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.

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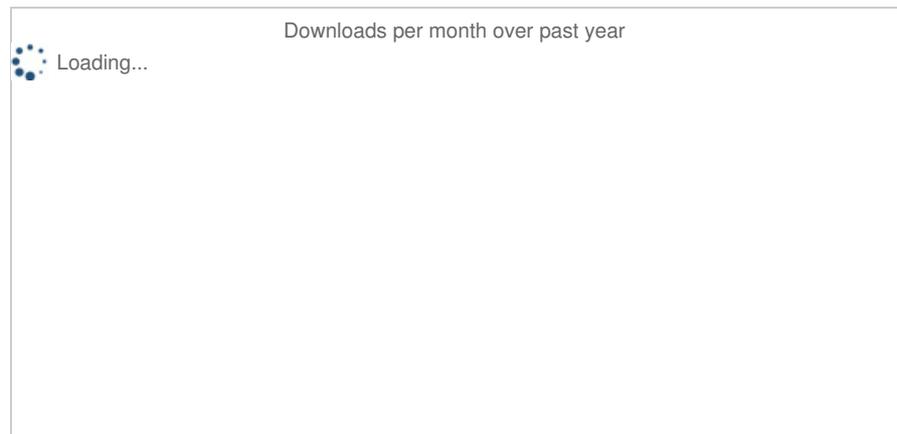
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Muslim women, and particularly Middle Eastern and North African women, have been among the most enduring subjects of discussion in the western media for the past two centuries. Without any doubt I can also assert that the issue of the veil and the oppression of Muslim women have been the most frequent topics of discussion I have been engaged in, often reluctantly, during some 20 years of my life in the western world (mostly in the UK and Canada). I had assumed that my experiences were unique and were the result of my moving in milieu that had little contact with or knowledge of Muslim communities or cultures. While Muslim women's experiences do not come close to being as oppressive as is popularly imagined, neither are they as rosy as some claim. While clearing up misconceptions is important, it should not come at the expense of women having a chance to really confront those issues that are of concern. Women cannot afford to let concerns be simply dismissed with the statement that "Islam liberated women" and therefore there is no cause for complaint. There are progressive voices within American Muslim communities addressing these topics today, though unless one is listening for them, they tend