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## Non-Muslim Perspectives on Hijab in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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### Abstract

This study investigates non-Muslim perceptions of the hijab as depicted in Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?*. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research analyzes the novel and relevant scholarly articles to explore how the hijab is represented and interpreted within a Western multicultural context. Findings indicate that many non-Muslims in Australia frequently associate the hijab with negative stereotypes, such as oppression, extremism, and lack of freedom. The novel vividly portrays the challenges faced by Muslim women who wear the hijab in public spaces, as well as the prejudice and misunderstanding they encounter. By applying Stuart Hall's representation theory, this study interprets the hijab as a cultural symbol that communicates identity, faith, and resistance, yet is often distorted by dominant social discourses. The analysis reveals that the hijab becomes a site of ideological tension between self-expression and societal expectations. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of understanding the hijab from multiple perspectives to challenge misconceptions, foster cross-cultural empathy, and encourage a more inclusive perception of Muslim identity in Western societies.

## INTRODUCTION

The proceeding paper should be between 2000-3500 words written in English. The introduction in a scientific paper plays an important role in capturing the reader's interest and providing clear context about the research conducted. It should provide a brief background of the research resulting from an analysis of related previous studies. Here are some key elements that should be included in the introduction: Societal perceptions of the hijab are shaped by exposure and interaction. Interaction with individuals who do not wear the hijab can either increase or decrease its visibility, illustrating how exposure to norm breakers influences the reinforcement of conservative social norms (Majid, 2016). The hijab functions as a significant form of religious and cultural self-expression. In broader social contexts, however, interpretations of the hijab are frequently influenced by the biases and experiences of observers. In Western societies, the hijab is often regarded as foreign or unusual.

The hijab, or act of veiling, is intended to protect a Muslim woman's modesty both physically and mentally (Hassim, 2017). As a symbol of religious identity and cultural expression, it has been widely discussed among non-Muslim communities. Randa Abdel-Fattah's *'Does My Head Look Big in This?'* provides a contemporary examination of these issues through the experiences of Amal, a 15-year-old Muslim girl who chooses to wear the hijab at school and in public. Her experiences highlight the challenges of maintaining identity in a Western society where the hijab is often perceived as unfamiliar. These themes establish the context for analyzing non-Muslim perspectives on the hijab as depicted in the novel.

Although numerous studies examine the hijab from a Muslim perspective, few address non-Muslim viewpoints, particularly within fictional contexts. This gap is significant because non-Muslim perceptions can substantially influence broader social relationships. Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel is relevant to this discussion as it portrays both the struggles of a young Muslim woman and the attitudes of surrounding non-Muslim characters. By analyzing these perspectives, this research aims to broaden understanding of the hijab as both a religious symbol and a cultural marker within wider social interactions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Previous work

Several previous studies have discussed Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Majid (2016), for example, focused on the hijab as a marker of faith and identity,

showing how Amal negotiates her position in Australian society. Haines (2015) analyzed the use of parody and satire in the novel as tools to resist Western stereotypes about the hijab. Musa et al. (2021) examined the novel from (de)colonial and Orientalist perspectives, emphasizing how the hijab is portrayed as a counter discourse against Western dominance. More recently, Chaoui (2023) highlighted how the hijab embodies Amal's self-identity and agency as a character.

Among these works, Ayudiana & Rokhman (2019) specifically examined tolerance and intolerance toward Muslims in Australia as represented in the novel. However, most existing studies focus on the hijab as a symbol of Muslim identity or on broader societal attitudes toward Muslims. Few have investigated how non-Muslim characters represent and perceive the hijab in everyday interactions within the novel. This study aims to address this gap by applying Stuart Hall's theory of representation to analyze non-Muslim perspectives on the hijab.

### **Theoretical basis**

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory provides the main theoretical foundation for this research. Representation theory explains how meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture (Hall, 1997). Through representation, people assign meaning or significance to things, which is crucial in understanding any culture. For example, in Muslim culture, the hijab symbolizes modesty and religious identity. However, non-Muslim perspectives vary, reflecting differences in cultural understanding and interpretation. By applying this theory, the research can better analyze how the meaning of the hijab shifts between different groups.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This research uses a qualitative approach to interpret how non-Muslim characters in Abdel-Fattah's *'Does My Head Look Big in This?'* represent the hijab. As Cresswell (2014) notes, qualitative research is designed to explore and understand meanings attributed to social or human phenomena. Instead of gathering field data, this study relies on textual analysis of the novel as its primary source, thereby reinforcing the connection between the methodology and the research focus.

The data for this study consist of dialogues and narrative descriptions that reveal non-Muslim characters' representations of the hijab. Following McKee (2003), textual analysis allows the researcher to interpret these excerpts based on their cultural meanings and assumptions. Stuart Hall's representation theory then guides the

interpretation of selected dialogues and narrative passages, uncovering how stereotypes and perspectives toward the hijab emerge in textual interactions. This approach links textual evidence directly to the research framework.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Representation of Non-Muslim Perspectives on Hijab

In the context of the quote below, Amal, the main character, is discussing her decision to wear the hijab with her parents. Her parents express concern and skepticism about the reactions and prejudices she might face from society.

“Exactly our point,” my dad says. “Why are you doing it if you know what you’re up for? Are you mentally prepared for the staring and small-minded stereotyping and misconceptions?” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005:51)

In this part, Amal's parents are worried about how others will react to her wearing the hijab. They want to protect her and are unsure if she is prepared for the prejudice and stereotypes she might face. When her dad asks, “Why would you do that if you knew it would cause problems?” it shows he believes wearing the hijab could attract negative attention and trouble for Amal. From a non-Muslim perspective, this could be viewed as a source of potential conflict to avoid. This conversation also reflects fear of stereotypes and misunderstandings from society. It shows non-Muslims’ concerns about how they are seen through these stereotypes, possibly affecting their personal and work lives. This quote illustrates a range of non-Muslim attitudes toward the hijab, from full support to indifference, or excessive politeness due to uncertainty. This concerns the dominant positions the hijab as a source of conflict, echoing stereotypes present in wider non-Muslim society. As Hall (1997) argues, representation is not merely descriptive but open alternative constitutive, shaping how meaning is produced. Amal’s father’s words thus both reproduce dominant views (the hijab as problem) and open alternative interpretation (hijab as valid personal choice).

“The only people who haven’t freaked out about my hijab have been Simone and Eileen. Oh, and Josh Goldberg. Josh’s Jewish. He’s got orthodox Jewish cousins, but, from what I can tell, he’s a secular Jew. I don’t think my hijab’s really strange to him, though. Orthodox Jewish women also cover their hair, and there are many more similarities between our faiths. We kind of hit it off from my first week at McCleans. As for the rest of my class, it’s been two whole days since the start of term, and there’s still an uncomfortable politeness between me and everybody else.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005:59)

Simone, Eileen, and Josh Goldberg responded positively to Amal's decision to wear the hijab. Josh, although a secular Jew, was familiar with the practice due to his Orthodox Jewish relatives, which facilitated his understanding and acceptance. Their shared religious customs contributed to an early friendship. In contrast, other classmates exhibited discomfort and uncertainty in their interactions with Amal, responding with polite but awkward behavior. Tia, Claire, and Rita maintained a relaxed and welcoming attitude. As Hall (1997) explains, representation is a process of negotiation—different cultural position produce different meanings of the same sign. These varied responses indicate that non-Muslim perspectives on the hijab are significantly influenced by cultural background and social environment.

“Didn't you hear?” Eileen whispers in my ear as Ms Walsh walks across the stage and the teachers all start their shushing chants. “Hear about what?” I whisper back. “Bali,” Simone says. “Huh?” They look at me in surprise. “Terrorists bombed a nightclub in Bali on Saturday. It's horrific.” It's like a sandpit in my throat.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005:206)

The response to the terrorist attack in Bali demonstrates how non-Muslims may associate such incidents with the Muslim community, thereby intensifying prejudice against individuals who wear the hijab. Following the nightclub bombing, there was a widespread assumption that Muslims were responsible, which heightened bias toward hijab-wearing individuals. Nevertheless, Muslim leaders in Bali promptly condemned the attack and emphasized that Islam does not condone violence. Hall (1997) explain that representation is not neutral, but often reflects power and stereotypes. In this case, the hijab becomes linked to terrorism, even though Amal herself has nothing to do with the event. The booming shows how Muslims can be represented in a negative way, but also how these views are challenged by Muslim leaders (organizations) who reject violence.

“When he ignores me like this, it feels as though somebody has a potato peeler and is tortuously peeling away the layers of my skin. This morning, I'm in the hallway when I overhear some girls talking about me next to the lockers. One of them says the word “oppressed,” and the other one is saying something about me looking like a dag.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005:59-60).

In this scene, the protagonist overhears peers using stereotypical terms such as "oppressed," illustrating how prejudice and stereotypes about the hijab and Muslims manifest in everyday school interactions. These comments reveal an unsupportive environment that can heighten Amal's sensitivity to negative perceptions. The use of the term "oppressed" based solely on her wearing the hijab demonstrates how

unfamiliarity can foster negative assumptions in Australian society. Such experiences may lead to feelings of pressure, identity struggle, and social exclusion. These dynamics underscore the tendency to generalize that Muslim women who wear the hijab are oppressed. According to Hall (1997), stereotypes reduce complex identities into fixed and simplified signs that circulate as cultural “truths.” The word “oppressed” function as a signifier that not only reflects but also reproduces cultural misunderstandings about Muslim woman. Through this language, the hijab is represented as a symbol of passivity and lack of agency, reinforcing dominant discourses while limiting alternative understanding of Muslim identity.

## CONCLUSION(S)

This research demonstrates that non-Muslims frequently view the hijab through the lens of prejudice and stereotypes. Amal's experiences in the novel exemplify the challenges faced by Muslim girls who encounter such negative perceptions, particularly in non-Muslim majority societies. The hijab is often perceived as foreign in Western contexts, leading to misunderstandings.

Promoting awareness and respect for individual choices regarding the hijab can improve social relationships and foster harmony. Future research could examine the psychological impact of stereotypes and prejudice on Amal's character to further deepen understanding of this issue.

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