

UNBECOMING SUBJECT, BECOMING MUSLIM WOMAN IN SHELINA ZAHRA JANMOHAMED'S *LOVE IN A HEADSCARF: MUSLIM WOMAN SEEKS THE ONE*

Saiqa Siddiq Khan*

PhD Scholar, English Dept. International Islamic University Islamabad.
Saiqa.phdeng124@iiu.edu.pk

Saiyma Aslam

Assistant Professor, International Islamic University Islamabad.
saiyma.aslam@iiu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Drawing on Judith Butler's conceptualizations of 'subject formation' and 'desire' and Jasmine Zine's notion of 'Muslim identity' we intend to extrapolate that how the protagonist in Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the one, overcomes otherness through desire and dismantles her true strengths through her Muslim identity in diaspora. Our research contribution is to develop a nexus between subject formation and Islamic Feminism and to examine emergence of the protagonist as a Muslim woman in diaspora.

Keywords: Subject formation, Desire, Muslim identity, Islamic Feminism

DISCUSSION

The process of becoming runs parallel to the emergence of the subject, it is something that is achieved and gained and not something that is given. We shall examine how Janmohamed in *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the one*, emerges as a Muslim woman after passing through the process of subject formation. In *Love in a Headscarf*, Janmohamed mentions the deep penetration of religious identity in her roots and states of mind and intricacies of her experiences with her religion. She does not describe the distinctive characteristics of her (Islamic) religion but shines light on it as an inborn part of a Muslim female's life. We intend to extrapolate that how in diaspora the protagonist in the selected narrative tries to negotiate her sense of belonging and prefers her Muslim identity with new explanation of her faith.

Zine conceptualizations of Islamic identity is pertinent to the argument that we shall take up in this article. She opines that religious identity, arms and equips females with "an alternative faith-centred epistemology that speaks to the way Muslim women who actively align with their faith see the world and their place within it" (Zine 2004, p.181). The investigation of religious identity and then the subject formation associated with religious identity in the selected narrative is the focus in this article. We argue that Muslim identity in Janmohamed's case "is a part of repertoire of identities that [she] inhabits along with [her] racial, sexual, national, class and ethnic identities" (Zine 2007, p.115).

Janmohamed's *Love in A Headscarf: Muslim woman Seeks the one* (2009) is a memoir. Janmohamed shares search for her suitable life partner through arranged marriage in this memoir. She wears hijab and is a practicing Muslim but in a modern way. In the prologue of the memoir, Janmohamed presents herself to the readers as a hijab wearing Muslim female. She wants to follow the traditional marriage culture of Muslims via "arranged marriage system". The westerns portray Islam as intrinsically oppressive and they deem measures i.e. entering matrimonial relationship via arranged marriages, hijab and segregation, as symbolized oppression. According to these discourses, these practices highlight the backwardness and inferiority of Islam. The western discourses underline that Muslims should refuse these (oppressive) religious measures or at least reform these measures. The selected narrative acclimatizes devout Muslim females' consciousness and deacclimatize secular and non-religious practices. It stresses the centrality and significance of religion (Islam) in the well-being of Muslim females by depicting that how living their lives according to the instructions of their religion can be energizing, satisfying and beneficial. The selected narrative associate religion with security, peace of mind and love. Their religious belief consoles them at different situations in their lives as it helps them to feel that God is with them all the time.

* Corresponding Author

Janmohamed's search for her life partner guides her in finding her own self, her faith and her love for God. Muslims around the globe believe that God, faith and marriages are interlinked, and marriage and faith cannot stand aloof without one's faith and belief in God. Janmohamed highlights the conceptions of marriages and love in both East and West in their true spirits. She strives to prevent exclusion of Islam from feminist discourses. She forces others to re-think and re-consider the fictitious binarism between Islam and feminism. She adopts her religion (Islam) as the central point of her identity and a way of life that leads her through desire towards subject formation and empowerment.

In Butler's notion of subject formation, desire is the motivating force and is always deemed as intentional in the sense of having an object, which includes everything that we perform e.g. it comprises of not only the passive experiences of sensory perception but also action, imagination, emotion, thought, volition. She explains further that "desire is intentional in that it is always desire *of or for* a given object or Other" (Butler 1987, p.25). Desire appears spontaneous and, in this article, to examine the process of becoming, it will be dismantled as the process of how a subject (Janmohamed), is formed through the desire for overcoming otherness, and in which she is both "discovered and enhanced" (p.25). Butler develops a connection between subject formation and responsibility by undergoing productive transformations. Drawing on Butler, we argue that one way to understand a linkage between subject formation and responsibility is to consider the root of responsibility through response. Giving response in a situation suggests that there is an "I" and that "I" consider herself responsible for response. But there has to be demand in the form of social norms that the subject would encounter. The subject then develops and give response as demanded. Subject formation is an understanding of a distinction between the "I" and other. The emergence of "I" is an awakening and a step forward towards subject formation. We shall extrapolate emergence of that "I" in Janmohamed in the selected narrative. We shall develop a nexus between Islamic feminism and subject formation to show how Janmohamed questions otherness. This otherness is imposed by human beings with different priorities, that favor some people and institutions at the cost of others. She shares the challenges that a Muslim woman experiences in diaspora.

The central conceptualization in Butler's (1997) inquiries into subject formation is her interpretation of this process as 'subjectivation'. Butler opines that the procedure of becoming a subject is a procedure of encountering and resisting power mechanisms through asserting her personal strength: power countered by and overcome by the subject's own personal power. The initial subjection interestingly becomes the reason for the existence of the subject and its self-actualization. Butler deems power not only "as forming the subject," but also "as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire" (p.2).

The form of this (individual) power is the "turning back upon oneself or even a turning on oneself" (p.3); this is a violent and passionate turn that forms the subject. This process in Butlerian terms; exposes the paradox of referentiality in subjection because of the necessity to refer to that which does not yet exist, namely the subject. The turn, in the self-reflexive movement- (that brings about the subject), develops the subject as having an awareness of itself and a history of its own. This movement is introduced and perpetually maintained by the economy of passionate attachment to life in general that is a will and desire "to be". Subjectivation thus explains the power dynamics that influence a subject as well as are influenced by the subject: that is, between subjected and becoming a subject. Subjectivation always takes place in the social arena because the subjectivating force is power and power is understood as the interconnectedness and multiplicity of power vectors in society, for example, the intricate relationship between socio-political institutions and culture, custom, taboos. Janmohamed passes through the tough and challenging phase of subjectivating movement to achieve Muslim identity in diaspora. Butler (1997) terms the subjectivating movement as a "tropological movement" (p.3). She derives this term from rhetorical theory to show the performative attribute of this tropological subjectivating movement. This tropological movement develops a self-reflective subject. According to Hayden White, trope; "is always not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation towards another meaning" (p.2). In the context of subject formation, this (trope) connotes that the subjectivating turn suggests an undoing of the subject since it is a turning of the subject on itself. Turn on at the same time is not only an unbecoming deviation undoing the subject, but it is productive in the sense that it brings forth the subject in the mode of deviation that is a mode of irrecoverable nonidentity. Subject formation (as a tropological movement) depicts self-consciousness as produced in

its turning on itself; however, this turning is deemed as the process of emergence of the subject, there is no subject prior to the turn (topological movement) that is then making the turn.

Janmohamed develops a persona that challenges rather than succumbs, that questions rather than obeys that evolves rather than diminishes. Janmohamed rejects the disorientation, turmoil, drab monotony, harassment, humiliation, severe subjugation in pursuit of identity, happiness and self-fulfillment. Overcoming the dispossession and loss, she retrieves the sense of self-respect and becomes conscious, challenging, bold and empowered and this according to Butler is 'satisfaction of desire', which she defines as the, "transformation of difference into identity: the discovery of the strange and novel as familiar, the arrival of the awaited, the reemergence of what has been absent or lost" (p.9).

The subject formation is a social process, therefore, Janmohamed as the resilient emerging subject has to be historical because a self-conscious subject becomes aware of itself as extended over time and having a history. This movement is started and sustained by the 'passionate attachment' to life in general that is a will and desire "to be". This 'passionate attachment' to life forces Janmohamed to depend on and be susceptible to the conditions of being. This desire to live, is easily exploitable, since, as Friedrich Nietzsche shares in his *Genealogy of Morals*, the yearning to live and to get away from the ceaseless (incessant) circle of transience and to seek some rest is "a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presuppositions of life; but it is and remains a will! ... [M]an would rather will nothingness than not will ..." (p.163). The longing to live thus proves to be an uncertain and ambivalent attachment to life that conditions Janmohamed (as subjects) complicit in her dependency on and subjection to the conditions of its emergence by willing them. The young child who is dependent and passionately attached to his parents clarify the ambivalence of the passionate attachment to the situations or conditions of one's being. Butler, in the introduction to *The Psychic Life of Power*, underscores that this attachment holds even when it is not unconditional love and care that the child experiences. The child cannot but adhere to the attachment, even if this bond is dysfunctional, with his parents, and the more this connection is at stake, the more fiercely and violently this connection is desired. The child cannot but will and desire the conditions of its possibility by showing passionate attachment to his parents. We argue that Janmohamed is passionately attached to the urge to negate the philosophy forcefully imposed on Muslim women with which they cannot show connection and to depict how religion for some women is a system of belief that is deemed as a prominent and central feature of their lives.

Religious identity is one of the tenets of faith-centered feminism. According to Mernissi, Islamic Feminism reinterprets and contextualizes Islam as an egalitarian revolution for women. Muslim feminist scholars, Asma Barlas (Pakistani), Laila Ahmad (Egyptian-American), Margot Badran (American Historian), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Iranian) Amina Wadud (African American), under the umbrella of Islamic feminism elaborate the same points. Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One* examines that Muslims associate themselves with their religion with different levels. The foreign media misrepresents social realities when they present that all Muslim female figures are abject individuals, and all Muslims are fundamentalists. Janmohamed rebuts these (distorted) images of Islam and Muslim Identity in diaspora, excels in her life and shows firm belief in Islam which gives her peace and solace in the true sense. Keeping in line with Sabah Feroz Uddin, we argue that Janmohamed in the selected narrative merges Islam and the West so that both are fluid and no longer separate and hostile, and to create a consciousness which can successfully integrate the principles of Islam with the demands of modernity (p.154).

Muslim women face challenging situations (as mentioned above) in diaspora, but they struggle for survival amidst such hardships. Janmohamed in *Love in the Headscarf* adopts stratagems for survival and proves her empowerment as Muslim woman. Deniz Kandiyoti (2004) opines that in the (Muslim) world, there are two options for females: "either by denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that Islamic practices are not necessarily Islamic" (p.9). Kandiyoti further elaborates that the subsequent option shows that an "uncorrupted original Islam against which current discriminatory practices may be denounced as falling short of truly Islamic ideals" (p.10). In the same connection, Zine shares that, "being a Muslim is not simply a label divested of any associations to the religion of Islam" (2007, p. 116). In the same line Ake Sander describes four categories of Muslims i.e. political Muslims, cultural Muslims, ethnic Muslims and religious Muslims. Political Muslims are those who use Islam for their socio-political purposes. Cultural Muslims being culturally oriented are the ones who socialize and act according to their cultural origin. Ethnic Muslims are

ethnically oriented. They deem themselves Muslims as their parents are Muslim and they have Islamic background and lastly, Religious Muslims (actively) practice Islam and believe in (specific) religious ideas (1997, p.187). Muslims can fit in more than one of these groups. Some critics bring into limelight the distinctive features (social and religious descriptions) of Islamic identity. Zine, in this connection, shares that “the social designation of religious identity can be discursively constituted through representations and is complicated by discontinuities, contradictions and opposing frameworks” (2007, p.112). The religious consciousness is based on Islamic beliefs, practices and ideologies which are grounded in foundational texts of Islam especially the Quran. Keeping in line with Abou El Fadl, Barlasand Wadud, Zine argues that religious Muslims do not give similar explanation of the foundational texts of Islam. Explanation of these books are “shaped and informed by the social, political, moral and gendered location of the interpreter” (2007, p.114). There are, therefore, manifold elucidations of Islam and various levels of religious consciousness. Zine refutes those models of formation of Muslim identity which opine that it is “devoid of attachment to religious practice” (2007, p.114). Zine, therefore, elucidates that Muslim identity is not related to cultural or ethnic identity but is related to firm belief in Islam.

Janmohamed examines the enunciation of religious Muslim identity at the crossroad of culture, class, gender and race. Janmohamed rebuts the stereotypical notions of Muslims and Islam in diaspora. She discovers the mystic realm of Islamic faith during her struggle towards subject formation. She likes adventurous challenges like mountaineering, driving her personal sports car and going for Hajj. Janmohamed strives to blend and unite the different separated parts of herself. She merges the cultural and Islamic patterns with her contemporary views to re-build a modern compact whole. In her telephonic interview with Divya Girishkumar (2014) she shares that she struggled with various aspects of her identity to keep them separate but with the passage of time she learns that each culture has its own value and it plays its specific role to the culture that she is living now. (She writes in many-coloured headscarves!)

Love in a Headscarf: Muslim woman seeks the one examines that Muslim’s wisdom is extracted and obtained from the religious archives that prompts the process of subject formation. Janmohamed depicts her visit to different parts of the world particularly her visit to Mecca for the annual pilgrimage called *Hajj* with the modern London life. She feels herself in comfort zone whenever she practices religious measures. Amin Malak shares that Muslim’s assignation with their religion is spiritual, theological, emotional and intellectual: “Islam, however one conceives it, commands affection even from its dissenters” (2005, p.152). Malak shares Islam’s “values of courage, creativity, generosity and justice which award it with 'endearing and enduring loyalty', loyalty, according to him, 'many outsiders miss, misunderstand or misinterpret’” (2005, p.153). Janmohamed is the practical embodiment of this conception because she performs religious practices with freedom. She opines that Hajj gives a lesson to Muslims because it is a physical as well as spiritual journey. Three million people present themselves as part of diverse community by wearing white attire without any discrimination. There is no concept of superiority and inferiority because everyone is just a soul.

She observes different people from different parts of the world during pilgrimage. She gets a lesson and shares that we should adopt the pattern of Hajj while living in Britain. She thinks while observing different people during Hajj that there is no option of “othering” and everyone is of equal status. Janmohamed after performing Hajj, discovers her own self as well as a Muslim woman’s true identity. She compares her struggle of creating balance between the sublime and mundane in her life with that of Hager’s (wife of Prophet Ibrahim and mother of Prophet Ismael). Hager in search of water for her newborn baby ran to and fro in Safa and Marwa (place in Mecca). The sacrifice of a female figure for her child reverberates in the day-to-day life experiences of modern woman in contemporary society. Janmohamed dislocates and disturbs the notion of living in a lost past that is deemed as usual trait of living in diaspora, but she anchors herself with the current realities of her life and enables herself to say “I am Me” (p.152).

Janmohammad emerges as a strong Muslim woman towards the end of the novel. She says in the Epilogue, that she enters her car and begins her (marital) journey with the name of Allah. She hopes that marriage will bring love, peace and contentment in her life.

CONCLUSION

Janmohamed has three important points of contact with her religion that make her life more comfortable and bearable. The first one is her feeling of affiliation and connection with God, due to which she shows

complete devotion to Islam. The second one is the feeling of belonging to the Muslim community and the third is the framework that practicing Islam offers to Muslim's lives. Janmohamed passes through the process of subject formation to achieve Muslim identity. Janmohamed is a "competent partner in the debate over the limitations (or prospects) of a religious frame for woman's liberation. A paternalist silence and unconditional support for their agenda signals the opposite". (Moghissi 2007, p. 9)

REFERENCES

- Butler, Judith. (1987). *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. New York: Columbia.
- (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- (1998). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 519-531.
- (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*.
- (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- (2003). Values of Difficulty. In *Just Being Difficult?: Academic Writing in the Public Arena*, edited by Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp.199-216.
- (2010). *Gender Trouble*. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. Print.
- (2012). *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. Columbia university Press.
- Janmohamed, Shelina Zahra. (2009). *Love in a Headscarf: Muslim Woman Seeks the One* London: Aurum Press Ltd. 2009.
- (2014). "She writes in many-coloured headscarves! A conversation with Shelina Zahra Janmohamed." Cardiff, Summer.
- Malak, Amin. (2004). *Muslim narratives and the discourse of English*. SUNY Press.
- (2005). *Muslim narratives and the discourse of English*. Albany, State University of New York Press
- Mernissi, Fatima. (1987). *Beyond the veil: Male-female dynamics in modern Muslim society*, 423, Indiana University Press.
- (1991). *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- (2001). *Scheherazade goes West: Different Cultures, Different harems*. Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- Moghissi, Haideh, editor (2007). *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture and Identity*. vol. 2, Routledge.
- (2011). Islamic Feminism Revisited. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp.76-84.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1999). *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Trans. of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Kritische Studienausgabe 5. Ed. Giorgio Colli and MazzinoMontinari. Munich: DTV.
- Sander, Åke. (1997). To what extent is the Swedish Muslim Religious?. *Islam in Europe: The Politics of Religion and Community*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp.179-210.
- Uddin, Sabah Firoz. (2013). *Navigating between the Religious and the Secular: Responding to the Muslim Woman Question' in Diasporic Britain*. Diss. UCLA.
- White, Hayden V. (1978). Tropics of Discourse Essays in Cultural Criticism.
- Zine, Jasmine. (2002). "Muslim women and the politics of representation." *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19,1-22.
- (2004) . Creating a critical faith-centered space for antiracist feminism: reflections of a Muslim scholar-activist. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20,167-187.
- (2007). De-constructing Islamic identity: engaging multiple discourses. In *Diasporic ruptures: globality, migrancy and expressions of identity* 1,111-129.