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"Ready to wear the hijab": The coexistence of Muslim identity and Western culture in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?*

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Abstract

It is unarguable that *hijab* is one of the most visible representations of the religion of Islam. The *hijab*, which is usually translated as a piece of clothing used to cover women's heads, is actually a wider concept that involves dressing modestly among other elements. Most women tend to wear it from an early age, usually when they are between twelve and fifteen years old. It is commonly known that teenagers are easily influenced by their surroundings; therefore, wearing the *hijab* is a decision that requires a strong conviction of one's identity. This reality, however, is not portrayed often enough in fictional works, thus, making it hard for young Muslim girls to identify themselves in representation. Abdel-Fattah's YA novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), is one of the few works in which not only there is a representation of *hijab*, but the author also furthers the reading into relevant sociological aspects. That is to say, the novel allows us to grasp the concept of *hijab* in a Western culture context, in this case that of Australia.

Through conviction, confidence and faith, Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, the main character of Abdel-Fattah's novel, decides to wear a *hijab*. She is a sixteen year old Australian Palestinian Muslim girl, whose life partially changes after this turn of events. Amal's decision does not only impact her as a person, but also affects how those around her perceive her. Wearing the *hijab* makes her 'peculiar' through other people's eyes, in spite of the fact that the only difference is her clothing. Her decision is not easy to take as an Australian since it is not commonly seen in the community. Her Muslim identity is a crucial aspect of her life, which makes her less susceptible to be influenced by external factors. For instance, people her age, the entertainment industry, and so on. She tries to embrace her Muslim identity without neglecting her Australian culture. Therefore, her life combines both these elements.

Amal is a primordial and ideal instance of religion and culture being intermingled in one's self. Thus, in my dissertation, I aim to corroborate that through Amal, the author allows us to see how two circles that seem to be immiscible, can in fact, overlap. That is to say, that the coexistence of Muslim identity and Western culture is feasible and can even be well balanced.

Keywords: *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, Randa Abdel-Fattah, YA (young adult) fiction, Australia, hijab, Western romantic discourse, Muslim identity, Islam, identity.

Introduction

Randa Abdel-Fattah, born in Sydney on 6 June 1979, is an Australian writer of Egyptian and Palestinian background. She has written numerous YA fiction novels, among which the most recognized are *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), T*en Things I Hate About Me* (2006) and *Where The Streets Had A Name* (2008). Abdel-Fattah is well-know for the topics presented in her works. She deals with a variety of topics concerning specifically Islam in the West; among which identity, Muslim individuality, Islamophobia, ethnicity and nationality are the most prominent.

Abdel-Fattah's debut novel *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005) is one of the few existing young adult works that addresses *hijab* in a Western context. Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, the main character of the novel, is a sixteen-year-old Australian-Muslim-Palestinian girl. One day, she finally decides that she is ready to start wearing a *hijab*. It is a rather difficult decision to make as an Australian, considering that the veil is not widely accepted in the community. Nonetheless, her strong conviction in her faith motivates her to wear it. Consequently, Amal faces discrimination and hate; specially since the 9/11 attacks had just taken place a year before and her Australian identity had never been questioned up to this moment. However, now that she is visibly Muslim, white Australians distinguish her as "the other". They no longer consider her Australian, given the fact that they do not visualize being simultaneously Muslim and Australian feasible.

The present study aims to refute the latter statement by proving that Western culture and Muslim identity can and do coexist through Amal's persona. Abdel-Fattah's main character embraces both aspects without forsaking any of the two. Therefore, she is the ideal instance of Muslim identity and Western culture being successfully amalgamated in one person.

This dissertation is divided into two different parts. To begin with, chapter I will concentrate on the idea of *hijab*. Taking into account that hijab is a relevant element in the novel, it is crucial to understand its origin. Therefore, this concept will be explained from a theoretical standpoint, that is to say, by reading what the Quran says about *hijab*. Moreover, the concept will also be approached from Abdel-Fattah's perspective in *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005) since it is the factor that leads to Amal being othered in the narrative. Subsequently, chapter II will focus on proving the thesis statement of this dissertation: that the coexistence of Muslim identity and Western culture is possible and indeed a source of personal happiness. To demonstrate this statement, I will analyze two prevalent aspects of Amal's life: the presence of popular culture in her life, and her relationship with her classmate Adam.

I have chosen Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005) in particular since it tackles a significant topic that is not highly displayed in fiction works: *hijab* in a non-Muslim environment. I first read this novel when I was fifteen years old, two years after I started wearing the *hijab*. Reading about Amal's experience made me feel represented since it was the first time I could relate to someone in fiction. The subject matter that this narrative discusses is a current reality for many young hijabi[1] girls, yet there is a lack of representation. Hence, it can be claimed with no doubt that it is a relevant issue to investigate.

Lastly, before closing this segment, I would like to briefly define some notions I will use in section '1.1 A theoretical approach to hijab: Islam.' The first word is *surah*. This is the Arabic notion used to refer to a chapter of the Quran (e.g Surah Fussilat, Surah Mariam, etc). Furthermore, I will also utilize the concept *ayah*. This notion is the

[1] An English notion used to refer to Muslim women who wear the *hijab*.

Arabic word used to refer to a verse of the Quran. Additionally, I will make use of the abbreviations ‘pbuh’ and ‘swt’, which are Islamic honorifics. ‘Pbuh’ is the abbreviation for ‘peace be upon him’ and it will be employed after prophet names (e.g. Muhammad pbuh, Isa pbuh, etc). Finally, ‘swt’ is the Arabic transliteration of *Subhanahu Wa Taala*. It means ‘Glory to Him, the Exalted’ (in Learn Religions online) and it will be applied after the name of Allah (e.g. Allah swt).

Chapter I: The use of *hijab*

1.1 A theoretical approach to *hijab*: Islam

The notion of *hijab* (/hɪˈdʒɑːb/) has been a topic of great debate in the West. In order to understand this complex concept, I will begin by breaking it down into simpler terms. The Arabic language is rich in linguistic and symbolic meaning, thus, making it challenging to find straightforward equivalents in another language such as English. To understand the essence of *hijab*, it is essential to explore the core of its origins, that is to say: the Holy Quran. In this work, I will use the English translation of the Quran by Dr. Mustapha Khattab, given the fact that its interpretation is simple and easy to comprehend.

Linguistically speaking, *hijab* (حِجَاب) derives from the Arabic infinitive verb *hajaba* (حَجَبَ), which is defined as "veiling, covering, screening, hiding, concealing" (Baalbaki, 1995: 244). In the Quran, the term *hijab* symbolizes an entity that covers or separates two spaces. Nonetheless, the exact meaning given to this word differs depending on the context in which it is mentioned. That is to say, the noun is presented as an either abstract or physical entity according to the situation. To elucidate this concept, I will analyze some of its appearances thorughout the Quran.

The first time the notion of *hijab* appears in the Quran is in *surah Al-A'araf* (7:46):

> 46. There will be a barrier between Paradise and Hell. And on the heights ˹of that barrier˺ will be people [315] who will recognize ˹the residents of˺ both by their appearance. [316] They will call out to the residents of Paradise, "Peace be upon

> you!" They will have not yet entered Paradise, but eagerly hope to. (Khattab, 2007: 181) [2]

As the translation of this ayah already portrays, the first meaning given to *hijab* in the Quran is that of a barrier. It represents a physical entity that separates two opposite areas: paradise and hell.

Notwithstanding, the significance of *hijab* in *surah Mariam* (19:16-17) is different: "16. And mention in the Book ˹O Prophet, the story of˺ Mary when she withdrew from her family to a place in the east, 17. screening herself off from them. Then We sent to her Our angel, ˹Gabriel,˺ appearing before her as a man, perfectly formed" (333). Unlike the previous appearance of *hijab*, here it symbolizes an abstract entity. Back then, Mariam[3] spent her time in *Al-Quds*[4] worshiping God. She isolated herself from those around her and braced herself for what was coming: her pregnancy with Isa[5] (pbuh). *Hijab* in this context symbolizes the separation created between her and the rest of the people, not elicited by a rule, but caused by her spirituality. Therefore, it does not represent a tangible partition of two spaces, but an abstract one.

Another mention of *hijab* in the Quran takes place in *surah Al-Ahzab* (33:53):

> 53. (…) And when you ˹believers˺ ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a barrier. This is purer for your hearts and theirs. And it is not right for you to annoy the Messenger of Allah, nor ever marry his wives after him. This would certainly be a major offence in the sight of Allah. (459)

During 610-632 AD approximately, many people had doubts and questions about Islam. Hence, they went to prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) house to get them resolved. There were cases in which men directly asked the prophet's wives. Therefore, Allah ordered

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[2] Henceforth, I will cite Khattab's translation of the Quran simply by referring to the page number.
[3] Known as the Virgin Mary in the Bible. Muslims believe she was Jesus' mother.
[4] Arabic name for Jerusalem.
[5] Arabic name for Jesus. In Islam, he was one of Allah's (swt) messengers.

that whenever that was the case, there had to be a barrier that separated them because having direct contact with these women could deviate the men from their main objective, since they could have lustful intentions. This was prohibited because the wives of the prophet were considered to be the mothers of the believers. Returning to the meaning of *hijab* in this *ayah*, it is evident that the term *hijab* in this context represents a literal physical entity that divides two people. That being the case, it could be referring to a curtain, door or wall, among many other possibilities.

An additional instance in which *hijab* is mentioned is in *surah Fussilat* (41:5): "5. They say, "Our hearts are veiled against what you are calling us to, there is deafness in our ears, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do ˹whatever you want˺ and so shall we!" (517) In this situation, prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was making *dawah.*[6] This *ayah* describes the words uttered by those who refused to accept the religion. The notion of *hijab* in this passage represents an abstract barrier between Muslims and non-Muslims. It does not stand for an actual, tangible, visible barrier. As a matter of fact, it symbolizes how the prophet's message was not penetrating nor affecting them, given the fact that they did not believe him.

Finally, the last appearance I will analyze occurs in *surah Ash-Shura* (42:51): "51. It is not ˹possible˺ for a human being to have Allah communicate with them, except through inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger-angel to reveal whatever He wills by His permission. He is surely Most High, All-Wise" (530). This *ayah* describes the forms of divine communication and presents "behind a *hijab"* as one of them. To comprehend this passage, it is important to take into account that it makes

[6] Arabic word for preaching. Muhammad (pbuh) was preaching Allah's message and inviting people to convert to Islam.

reference to prophet Musa's[7] (pbuh) experience. In Islam, Musa (pbuh) is known as the speaker of God since he had the chance to communicate directly with Allah (swt). In his experience, there was a *hijab* that separated him from God. He was not able to see Allah (swt) when he talked to Him. For that reason, it can be understood that *hijab* in this case implies a physical barrier. Namely, a visible separation that does not allow Musa (pbuh) see what is behind it.

After having seen various of the instances in which this notion appears and its significances, it can be stated that what we know today as *hijab* was not asserted in the Quran. On that account, it is essential to state that today's understanding of *hijab* is a result of society's doings. That is to say, *hijab* is a term that Muslims have adopted to refer to women's Islamic attire. Consequently, this may raise the following question: how do we know about women's dress code in Islam if it does not come out as *hijab* in the Quran?

Women's Islamic attire is, in fact, instructed in the Holy book. Notwithstanding, the terms used to refer to it differ. The first chapter in which this subject matter is addressed is in *surah An-Noor* (24:31): "31. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chests (…)" (384). As Khattab's translation describes, Allah (swt) orders Muslim women to "draw their veils over their chests". In order to understand this extract correctly, it is important to take into consideration the original language of the Quran and the context in which it took place. "Their veils" is the translation given to *khumurihinna* (خُمُرِهِنَّ), which is a plural form of the notion *khimar* (خِمَار). During prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) era, a *khimar* was known to be a head covering item used by both men and women. Women used to wear them open or

[7] Known as Moses in the Bible. In Islam, he was one of Allah's (swt) messengers.

tied behind their neck; leaving their upper chest and neck visible. Therefore, when Allah (swt) commands women to draw their *khimars* over their chest, He is implying that they have to grab the loose remaining piece of material and cover both their neck and upper chest with it, leaving only the face visible. Furthermore, the same *ayah* addresses in front of whom the *khimar* can be removed:

> Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their ˹hidden˺ adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, their fellow women, those ˹bondwomen˺ in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still unaware of women's nakedness. (384)

Hence, those who can see Muslim hijabi women without it are other women and *mahrams.*[8]

As the explanation provided of ayah 24:31 has presented, *khimar* indicates the coverage of the head (hair, neck and chest). Nevertheless, what about the rest of the body? Is there any reference to it in the Quran? Allah (swt) introduces this point in *surah Al-Ahzab* (33:59): "59. O Prophet! Ask your wives, daughters, and believing women to draw their cloaks over their bodies. In this way it is more likely that they will be recognized ˹as virtuous˺ and not be harassed. And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful" (460). As Khattab's translation presents, Allah (swt) orders women to cover their bodies with cloaks. "Their cloaks" is the translation appointed to *jalabibihinna* (جَلَٰبِيبِهِنَّ), which is a plural form of *jilbab* (جِلْبَاب). *Jilbab* makes reference to a traditional loose and long outer garment that leaves the head and the hands visible. Hence, when Allah (swt) instructs women to wear *jilbabs*, He conveys that Muslim women have to cover their bodies with clothes that do not show nor reveal their body shape.

[8] Arabic term used to refer to men who are the direct relatives of a woman.

As a result, these two *ayahs* combined are what define women's modest attire in Islam. Allah employs the term *khimar* to instruct the coverage of the hair, neck, and chest; and *jilbab* for the rest of the body. On that account, it can be asserted that even though *hijab*'s significance in the Quran is not that of women's Islamic attire, its contemporary understanding in society amalgamates both points. At present, *hijab* is understood to be a concept that describes Muslim women's entire modest dress code, that is, both the coverage of the head and the body. Nonetheless, attention must be drawn to the fact that *hijab* can also refer to a headscarf (known as *khimar* in the Quran). This stems from the fact that the concepts *hijab* and *khimar* are synonyms. They both can be defined as "veil", which is why it is comprehensible that *hijab* can be also used as a substitution of the latter.

Lastly, it is crucial to address the reason behind Muslim women's modest dress code or as it is known presently: *hijab*. Given the fact that it is a considerably controversial topic, many theories and beliefs have been made based on unreliable sources. Notwithstanding, it is essential to, once again, go back to the source from which this concept first emerged: the Quran. The purpose of women's modest attire is declared in surah *Al-Ahzab* (33:59): "(…) In this way it is more likely that they will be recognized ˹as virtuous˺ and not be harassed." (360) That being the case, it can be concluded that women's *hijab* in Islam is a symbol of religious identification and an act of worship.

1.2. *Hijab* in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?*

Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005) approaches the topic of *hijab* in a non-Muslim environment. Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, the main character of the novel, is a sixteen-year-old Australian-Muslim-Palestinian

girl. She decides to start wearing the *hijab* while being a student at a private high school located in Melbourne: the McCleans. Owing to this fact, I present the following research question: how does the author present this issue in the book?

To begin with, it is important to take into consideration the definition given to *hijab* in this novel. When Amal first talks about her decision to wear the *hijab* in chapter 1, she establishes this refers to "the head scarf" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005: 9).[9] On that account, it can be stated that Abdel-Fattah's description of *hijab* throughout the novel is that of a literal veil that covers the head. She does not use *hijab* as a concept that encompasses the idea of dressing modestly as a unit; that is, both the head and the body. Notwithstanding, using the notion *hijab* to refer to a veil or head scarf is not erroneous. As it has been previously stated in the latter section, *hijab* can also be defined as a "veil" because it is a synonym of the notion *khimar*.

Despite the fact that Abdel-Fattah's understanding of *hijab* in the book is not that of the whole concept, she does not discard wearing a modest attire for the rest of the body. In chapter 3, Amal states that if she decides to wear the *hijab* she will be wearing clothes which cover her entire body except for her face and hands (23). On that account, it can be stated that the author's understanding of *hijab* in the novel agrees with the instructed dress code for women in the Quran. However, it is important to comment the following statement by Amal: "every girl is going to interpret the hijab differently. It depends on their culture or their fashion sense. There's no one uniform for it" (60-61). By saying that *hijab* is interpreted differently depending on each culture, it could be understood that the rule for *hijab* varies depending on the country. Notwithstanding, the dress code for *hijab* applies equally to every Muslim woman anywhere. What Amal aims to convey through this message is that even though the rule for *hijab* is universal,

[9] From now on, I will cite Abdel-Fattah's novel simply by referring to the page number.

there are not particular items of clothing that have to be worn. Each hijabi can wear whatever she pleases as long as it is modest and covers the parts of the body that Islam states.

Secondly, mention should be made about Amal's reasoning behind her decision to wear "the head scarf, full-time" (9). As she narrates in chapter 1, Amal gets "a rush of absolute power and conviction" (8) while watching a rerun of the American show *Friends* (1994-2004) and seeing Rachel take an important decision regardless of what others think. However, her choice is reinforced by much more deeper ideas and goals. Amal writes a list regarding her decision to wear the *hijab* and the first point registered is the following:

> The Religious/Scriptures/Sacred stuff: I believe in Allah/God's commandments contained in the Koran. God says men and women should act and dress modestly. The way I see it, I'd rather follow God's fashion dictates than some ugly solarium-tanned old fart in Milan who's getting by on a pretty self-serving theory of less is more when it comes to female dress. (12)

As this passage reveals, Amal's determining factor for this verdict is God and His message. Through *hijab,* Amal aims to improve her relationship with Allah (swt). This subject is enhanced when she claims that not wearing the *hijab* makes her feel cheated out of that special bond (12). To further prove this matter, it is relevant to note that *hijab* is a journey for Amal. This decision is the first step she takes to ameliorate her devotion as a young Muslim woman. An instance that corroborates this idea is when she visits Mr. Pearse, a teacher at her high school, to ask for a room to pray. Up until that point, Amal had not been giving much attention to performing the five daily prayers on time; in fact, she had been delaying them until she arrived home. Nonetheless, after becoming a hijabi she feels the need to strengthen her religious performance. With this in mind, it can be declared that *hijab* for Amal functions as an act of worship.

Even though Amal is extremely confident in her decision, she cannot help but worry. Apart from the fact that the 9/11 attacks had just taken place a year prior and Muslims were perceived in a negative light, "press discourse indicates the hijab-wearing women's refusal to integrate into the national identity by practicing the hijab" (Khir-Allah, 2021: 404). Therefore, by making this choice, Amal is concerned about being treated as the "other". Putting on the *hijab* in a society in which it is not commonly found makes her different in the others' perspective. As of yet, her Australian identity had not been questioned because of her "fair hair and coloured eyes" (108). Amal's physical appearance, in short, does not match the common stereotypical image of a Muslim: a dark-skinned Middle Eastern person. At this stage, it is important to note the difference between culture and religion. As Bonney claims, "cultures tend to be localized, whereas religions are not" (2005: 25). That being the case, it can be stated that Muslims do not belong to a certain area or country, that is to say, despite the stereotypes, not all Middle Easterners are Muslims and vice versa.

Amal describes herself as "Australian-Muslim-Palestinian" (11). Simply put, she is a born and raised Australian, who is ethnically Palestinian and practices Islam as a religion. Amal's parents, Mohamed and Jamila, were born in Bethlehem, Palestine. Nonetheless, they migrated to Australia when they were young and lived the majority of their lives there. As Amal states, "there are fifty-two years of Australian citizenship between them" (9), thus, making them citizens of the country. Contrary to her parents, Amal is not a migrant. As she claims: "I was born an Aussie and whacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens" (11). She was born in Australia, and for this reason, she is Australian by birth, not by adoption as a migrant. Naturally, Amal's Palestinian ethnicity plays an important role in her life; however, it does not affect the fact that she is Australian. Abdel-Fattah portrays Amal as an ordinary Australian girl

who has the same ideas and preoccupations as any other teenager at her school McCleans. However, once she starts wearing the *hijab* she is othered by those around her. As Amal tells her friend Leila on the phone while explaining her experience with the *hijab* during the first day of school: "everybody was staring and kind of freaked out and avoiding me" (43). With such reactions, it can be noticed that other Australians no longer consider her one of them, even though the only aspect that changes is the way she dresses. Amal addresses this issue ironically by stating that the *hijab* turns girls into UCOs (Unidentified Covered Objects), hence turning them from an "us" into a "them" (35). As Saeed claims, this "is largely based on the idea that Islam is a religion which is against modernity and Western values" (2003: 198). Notwithstanding, Amal fights her rejection with a strong sense of conviction in her faith. She embraces both her religious identity and her Australian culture in her own way, which is the subject I will address in the following chapter.

Through this protagonist, Abdel-Fattah portrays the reality of many young hijabi girls living in the West. On that account, Amal's experience with the *hijab* is highly relatable. Many Muslim girls start wearing it in high school, having to face discrimination and othering because of it. Nevertheless, it is relevant to highlight that back in 2002 the antipathy towards Muslims had increased because of the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, Amal's experience is more intense. Two decades later, it can be stated that *hijab* is perceived far more positively. Nevertheless, Muslim hijabi women still have a long way to go for their decision to be accepted in the West.

Chapter II: The coexistence of Western Culture and Muslim Identity

Up until now, *hijab* has been explained using a theoretical approach as well as on the basis of Abdel-Fattah's novel. *Hijab* is what makes Amal's fellow Australians other her, hence, declaring the impossibility of being both Muslim and Australian. In this chapter, I will undermine this attitude by defending the idea that these two aspects combine well in Amal's characterization.

2.1. The influence of popular culture on Amal's life

As the thesis statement of this dissertation claims, Amal's Muslim identity does not prevent her from embracing her Australian side. She is a clear example of the coexistence of both. To prove this point, this section will focus on the presence of popular culture in Amal's life. Since it is a broad concept, I will specify that this term (popular culture) will be used in reference to the mainstream media consumed by members of a society, including movies, television shows, music, and fashion, among others. Western popular culture is a remarkably present aspect in Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005). Amal, being part of the Australian society, consumes these media like any other citizen. Not only that, but her life is so immersed in media consumption that every decision or situation that takes place in her life is accompanied with a comment about some aspect of popular culture. I will present some of these instances consecutively.

To begin with, the most relevant appearance of popular culture in the narrative takes place in the beginning of the first chapter of the novel: "I was ready to wear the hijab. That's right. Rachel from *Friends* inspired me" (8). To contextualize, Amal is

watching a rerun of the American television show *Friends* (1994-2004) while working out on the treadmill. Then, a scene in which Jennifer Aniston jumps on stage in an ugly dress to sing in her ex boyfriend's wedding takes place. After witnessing the scene, Amal gets the courage to make the decision of wearing the *hijab*. In this moment we can see both sides of Amal being intermingled: her Muslim identity and her Western culture. *Hijab* is a religious aspect; however, this does not imply that it cannot be influenced by other factors such as popular culture. As this instance portrays, a scene of a Western television show inspires Amal to make a spiritual decision. Apart from *Friends* (1994-2004) , Amal also makes reference to other television shows that are part of her daily life. For instance, *Big Brother* (2001-), *Survivor* (2002-) or *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005).

Western music is also a primordial aspect in Amal's life. In certain moments, she thinks of specific songs depending on the situation she faces. An example that demonstrates this aspect takes place during the first day she goes to high school with the *hijab*. Amal goes to talk to the principal about her decision. When the principal asks her why she has come to see her, Amal thinks of two specific songs' titles: "Take my Breath Away" (1986) by Berlin and "It's in Your Eyes" (2001) by Kylie Minogue. These two songs' titles could be interpreted as Amal's non vocalized answer to the principal's question. The first could be seen as a way of stating that she does not want to confront this situation, and the latter could be a literal answer to the principal's question.

Amal also uses music as a way to deal with her emotions. She listens to different genres depending on how she feels. For instance, when she misses Adam after rejecting his physical show of affection (explained in detail in section 2.2), she listens to Celine Dion and Shania Twain, two well-known Western singers famous for their heartbreak

songs. Additionally, she quotes Aretha Franklin's popular song "Respect" (1967) to Tia Tamos, Amal's classmate at McCleans. This stems from the fact that she is openly racist and ignorant towards Amal—and everything related to her Muslim identity (predominantly *hijab*). Therefore, while being angry at Tia, Amal and her friends sing this song expressing that she should learn how to respect others. As she states: "each line in each song is a perfect description of my life" (199). Through these words, Amal declares how the issues presented in the songs are relatable to her as a person. Besides, Amal also makes use of teenager magazines such as *Dolly* or *Cleo* and *Cosmo*, to consult her doubts in regards to her personal life. Her religious identity does not prevent her from experiencing similar teenager issues as other Australians, since she is, in fact, Australian too.

Fashion is an important aspect of Amal's life as well. When she starts wearing the *hijab*, she claims she is not going to abandon her fashion sense: "you'd better believe I'd never give up my Portmans and Sportsgirl shopping sprees" (13). Dressing according to the concept of *hijab* does not force her to wear a specific uniform. Therefore, she can still shop in Australian stores, sticking to what is trendy in terms of fashion in the West. The only difference is that she will now have to select modest clothing pieces.

To finalize, after having analysed some aspects of Amal's life that are influenced by popular culture, it is pertinent to claim that its presence and significance in her as a person demonstrate her existing Western side. Having a Muslim identity does not prevent Amal from embracing her native country's culture. Amal is a sixteen-year-old girl. Therefore, she is heavily influenced by popular culture like any other Australian teenager. In fact, popular culture is a factor that connects Amal with her friends since it "strengthens interactions between people with the same likes and dislikes."

(Vyomakesisri, Sonu, Srikanth, 2020: 12) This can be appreciated through Amal's relationship with Adam, her classmate at her school McCleans. Popular culture is a relevant aspect in their bond since it is a factor that fortifies it. Notwithstanding, Amal and Adam's relationship is more profound. By means of Adam, we get to see how even though Amal is Australian, she does not follow the Western romantic discourse, a topic I will discuss more in depth in the following section.

2.2. Contradicting the Western romantic discourse: Amal and Adam

Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim and Adam Keane meet during the first two weeks of Amal's enrolment in McCleans high school. They start their relationship by being laboratory partners for their Chemistry class. As she states, they had "class-room relationship. The kind that ends when the bell rings" (39). However, she eventually develops a crush on him and it is evident from practically the beginning of the novel that Amal fancies Adam. She thinks about him constantly, especially when she decides to start wearing the *hijab*: "I can't sleep. What will Adam say? Adam? Who gives a crap about Adam? Not me. Uh-uh. Nope. He'll probably laugh. Hey, that's not fair. He's not like that" (17). In this extract, we can see how she worries about Adam's reaction. Nonetheless, her preoccupation does not only focus on his response, but also on how her decision is going to affect their relationship. It is pertinent to mention that at this stage of the story, their relationship is not solid yet, but simply a budding friendship.

As the novel progresses, their relationship evolves and goes from being classmates to really close friends. Amal and Adam discover that they have much in common. On that account, they start spending more time together. As this situation evolves, Amal is aware of her growing feelings for Adam. Furthermore, the reader may

assume that she is conscious about Adam's romantic feelings towards her too. Nevertheless, she knows that she does not want this relationship to become a romantic one because when it comes to love, Amal does not follow the Western romantic discourse, that is to say, the frequent romantic practices seen in the Western context in contrast to traditional love. As a Muslim, she prioritizes her faith's values. For this reason, she denies that Adam might have feelings for her every time someone around her brings attention to the topic, since she does not want to admit it to herself either. As Amal tells her concerned mother:

> "Ma! I know what I'm doing and I know what's right and wrong. We're just good friends. And as if Adam would even think of me in that way. I'm wearing the hijab. He knows I'm not the type to do anything and, anyway, he's way too hot and cool to even consider me!" (181)

As this passage indicates, she wrongly supposes that Adam will never think of her in a romantic way because of the *hijab*. To better understand this point, it is essential to highlight that she had never shown Adam her point of view regards this matter; therefore, Amal mistakenly assumes that he is aware of her prudence and need for modesty. Nevertheless, she is a sixteen-year-old trying to manage her feelings for a boy, while also embracing the faith that she has an enormous conviction for, and that dictates that she should only be interested in the man she will marry. On that account, this could be seen as a way of Amal justifying to herself the relationship as merely "friendship". Regardless, it is primordial to note that hers is also normal teenage behaviour.

The inevitable eventually happens in Adam's birthday party. This is a key scene in regards to the development of Amal and Adam's bond. To contextualize it, after many attempts at convincing her parents, Amal ultimately is allowed to attend Adam's party. During this event, one of Adam's friends approaches Amal and teasingly tells her about a rumour that has been circulating. The rumour, which greatly shocks Amal, is

that her crush, Adam, had a hidden intention with his invitation. Allegedly, he intends to sleep with her during that night. Later on, Adam takes her away from the crowd to an intimate place. Amal is still processing the ghastly rumour, when Adam suddenly leans towards her, intending to kiss her. However, Amal reacts speedily and dodges him. Her response to his action leaves Adam utterly confused because he believes that their relationship is more than a friendship. They begin then to voice their unspoken beliefs, which marks a before and after to the narrative.

From Adam's perspective, his feelings were reciprocated. The long night calls, the oversharing of family issues, their common preferences in popular culture, and so on, led him to believe there was more to their friendship. Adam does not see the limits that Amal can see, not being bounded by religion. He seems to believe it is the ideal time to take a step forward in their romantic relationship. Therefore, he does not understand her unfavourable reaction, particularly because he is unaware that in Islam romantic relationships are exclusive to marriage. Although Adam's feelings are actually reciprocated by Amal, she has definite limits. She knows that no matter what she feels, she is not going to give in. Amal's vehement stand on her religion makes her confident of her choices.

To Adam, Amal's self-restraint is associated to a negative connotation. He tells her: "I don't get it… that means you can never live for the moment. You'll always be repressing yourself" (190, original ellipsis). As Adam claims, he thinks she is "repressing" herself, meaning that, she is not acting of her own accord. This white man/exotic woman pairing is widely seen in popular media such as movies and novels, among others. As a white Australian boy, he feels attracted to the exoticness of Amal, while simultaneously rejecting what contradicts his beliefs and his attraction for her. It should be mentioned that Adam seemed to be unaware of Amal's 'exoticness' until she

decided to wear the *hijab*. Since his understanding of romance is that of the Western romantic discourse, he wants her to be free from this 'oppressive' faith. He tells her: "That's crap. You need experience. How will you know if he's the right one if you don't know who the wrong one is?" (191) Adam wants her to experience what she is missing: kissing, having sexual intercourse and physical affectionate behaviour. He believes that she will not be able to find 'the one' she is going to marry if she is not experienced.

On the other hand, Amal views her religious conviction as a powerful tool. She tells Adam: "I'm not repressed. I don't feel left out. I can still care and share with a guy without having to get physical with him" (191). She believes that self-restraint does not have a negative connotation since it gives her the power to control her own actions. That is to say, despite her strong desire, Amal refuses to submit to the temptation. In contrast to Adam's romantic expectation, Amal's values do not meet the Western romantic discourse, therefore, these two particular circles clash. Amal, then, embraces some aspects or values of each of her two sides (her Australian upbringing and Muslim identity). Yet, regarding this matter, Lampert states that "the text forces Amal (…) to choose between two positions: to be cool and Australian, or to be devoutly Muslim" (2006: 8). With this claim, Lampert insinuates that these two aspects collide and that Amal's rejection of physical touch from her crush makes her less Australian (or not at all). However, this statement can be easily refuted by observing Amal's embrace of both facets. Even though she rejects this specific point of romantic Western discourse (physical touch), she is still Australian; her personal decision does not dismiss this fact. Lampert indicates that you can be either Australian and cool or a practicing Muslim, making them mutually exclusive. With such an affirmation, Lampert is othering Amal; however, Amal is a clear example of how both can coexist.

Up until now, I have mentioned the concept of othering in a brief manner. As Valdivia states: "othering is a strategy that reinforces the mainstream by differentiating individuals and groups and relegating them to a range of socially constructed categories" (2017: 133). In Abdel-Fattah's novel this issue is presented in this failed romantic scene as well. After the events, Adam feels defensive because she pushes him away. On that note, Adam remarks: "I thought we had something more than *friendship*. But I guess we are different. *Too different*" (192, original italics). He had been on the same page as Amal until this point. However, he now realizes that there is a barrier (which is precisely what *hijab* means in the Quran, as I have noted) that separates them. He does not comprehend Amal's logic; hence, he starts othering her like many other white Australians. Notwithstanding, in an attempt to make him understand her perception, she tells him:

> Why is it that when I believe in something different, I'm the one apparently judging you? What about you judging me? Why is it so bloody offensive that there are people out there who don't do the whole sex thing before they get married? Or who don't do the whole physical thing? Who gives a shit? Isn't it my business? Or is that just too weird to accept? I'm obviously a bitchy love-me-do because I'm different. Yeah, great logic there, Adam. (191)

As Amal explains, her 'difference' makes Adam feel judged and vice versa. Adam feels somehow attacked by Amal now that he is aware of her prudence. He believes that Amal feels superior by judging those who do not act like her (not having sexual intercourse before marriage). Notwithstanding, Adam is the one judging Amal's stance in regards to romance compared to non-Muslim Australians. He feels offended by a factor that does not involve him at all. He makes Amal's personal decision about him (and other Australians). However, Amal's determination is a factor that she makes for herself and God, and not to judge nor please anybody else.

As this section has thoroughly discussed, Amal does not follow the Western romantic discourse. Nonetheless, this is not an aspect that dismisses her Australian culture. She makes a balance embracing some aspects of each of her two sides (Muslim and Australian). Hence, proving, yet again, how the coexistence of Muslim identity and Western culture is attainable.

Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have studied and analysed Amal's character in Randa Abdel-Fattah's YA novel *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005). Particularly, I have focused on proving that the coexistence of Muslim identity and Western culture is feasible through her persona. These two identity aspects are regularly perceived as immiscible; nonetheless, Amal is the ideal proof of the antithesis.

The first chapter of this dissertation has focused on *hijab*, the Islamic dress code for Muslim women. In the first subsection of this chapter, this concept has been approached from a theoretical perspective; that is to say, from the Quran. It has been explained that the notion *hijab* in the holy book does not make reference to women's Islamic attire, but to an either abstract or physical barrier that separates two spaces. For this reason, attention must be brought to the fact that what is known today as *hijab* has been settled by society. Women's Islamic dress code does, indeed, appear in the Quran. Notwithstanding, the notions used to determine it are *khimar* and *jilbab*. Subsequently, the second subsection of this chapter has analysed *hijab* from Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005). It has been elucidated that the author's understanding of *hijab* agrees with the one stated in the Quran. Furthermore, *hijab* has been introduced as the factor that makes those surrounding Amal other her. Up until that point, her Australian identity had not been questioned. However, Amal's decision makes her fellow Australians not consider her one of them anymore. Hence, implying the contrariety of being Australian and Muslim at the same time.

The second chapter of this dissertation has centred on the coexistence of Muslim identity and Western culture. To prove this statement, this chapter has focused on two different aspects of Abdel-Fattah's main character. The first subsection of this chapter has focused on popular culture. Amal, like any other Australian, consumes the

mainstream media of her country. Therefore, it has been explained that Australia's popular culture influences Amal in many facets of her life. Her Muslim identity does not prevent her from embracing this aspect. To further demonstrate this matter, the second subsection of this chapter has explained how despite Amal's understanding of love is not that of the Western romantic discourse, she does not reject her Australian side when she turns down Adam. Instead, she embraces some aspects or values of each of her two sides (Australian and Muslim). On that account, this works as evidence for the coexistence of both points.

For further research, it would be interesting to compare Abdel-Fattah's novel with other works that deal with the same concept. Even though Amal is an extremely reliable example of a Muslim girl living in the West, it only portrays the experience of one particular girl living in Australia. Exploring other Muslim women's experiences in comparison to Abdel-Fattah's main character would allow more room for discussion. Juxtaposing Amal's experience in Australia with other non-Muslim countries would allow us to understand better whether the experience varies depending on the country or not, inter alia.

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