

THE RISE OF DIASPORIC MUSLIM WRITERS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: MOHJAKAHF, KHALED HOSSEINI, ASRANOMANI & SAMIMA ALI

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ABSTRACT

America, being a country of extreme liberalism, individual freedom, choice and existence and modern & lavish way of living is a center of attraction for the people of Third world. And the new rise of globalization and capitalism has also added to its glory. So, people from the other part of world in search of better ways of living, high standard and for monetary gain often go to settle there. Even the people of literary world are not apart from it. They also migrate for better popularity and monetary gain. But everything is not as easy as it appears as more or less they have to face some problems in a new atmosphere. And the most important issue is adjustment or assimilation. The fact is that some people find it difficult to adapt themselves in a new surrounding which is totally different than the society of their native country. They experience culture shock as American culture and society is very different from their traditional one. This is especially a vital issue with the Muslim communities when they migrate to United States. In the recent times, there is a rise of diasporic writer there is a rise of diasporic writer who are also enriching the American literature by sharing their immigrant experiences. Though there are many such writers but I am focusing on MohjaKahf, Khaled Hosseini, AsraNomani and Samima Ali.

Key words: Diasporic Muslim writers, American Literature, Immigrant experience, Third world country.

Introduction

United States of America is considered as the most developed country. A nation, which belongs to the category of First World countries and is consider as a Superpower. The language widely spoken in this country is English, so the literature of this country is basically in English. There are many famous writers belonging to America like- Arthur Miller, Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain and many others. Now this link had further expanded with diasporic writers from different countries who have though not born in America but made it as their abode defining its multicultural culture.

People from other parts of the world migrate to America in a large scale due to various reasons. They have various dreams and aspirations but not every time, there dreams are fulfilled or it takes half of their lifetime. Living in an alien land is not so easy and they had to face minor or major problems; the most important is assimilation in a culture which is totally different than theirs. Now many people, for expressing their feelings, experiences and problems have taken the help of Literature. Since literature is the only medium of the expression of a person's experiences, there has been an abundance of diasporic literature in the past few years, who want to share their views and experiences with other people of the world. As Paul Brians speak:

Indeed, "postcolonial" writers often move to England or North America (because they have been exiled, or because they find a more receptive audience there, or simply in search of a more comfortable mode of living) and even sometimes—like Soyinka—call upon the governments of these "neo-colonialist" nations to the aid of freedom movements seeking to overthrow native tyrants. (2: Brians)

These writers are unable to detach their minds from the land from where they belong. There is nostalgia in these writers that colours their works. There is also a concern for homeland which they have left behind."

The diasporic authors engage in cultural transmission that is equitably exchanged in the manner of translating a map of reality for multiple readerships. Moreover, they are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experience." In this way diasporic literature is a major part of contemporary literature because of the global understanding it imparts to the readers. Sometimes it also helps in depicting the genuine problems of any country. It is 'imagined experience' but the fundamental of this imagination is rooted in reality.

Some terms that are usually associated with diaspora are like exile, alienation, nostalgia, despair, dislocation, abandonment and disintegration. But at the same time it is also truth what Aizaz Ahmad opines. He says, "Diasporic writings are to some extent about the business of finding new Angles to enter reality; the distance, geographical and cultural enables new structures of feeling. The hybridity is subversive. It resists cultural authoritarianism and challenges official truths." (126) In the contemporary scenario Diaspora has become an effective tool of postmodernism by means of which the big voice of Master Narratives could be challenged. Those living on the margin, who feel exiled and alienated from their roots and find no place of their own, can effectively discharge their voice. Muslims also constitutes a major part of American population.

And they have also developed a literature known as Muslim American Literature, which is denied by many people.

But MohjaKahf, one of the famous poet and author of America argues that there is a writing known as Muslim American Literature (MAL). She elaborates her point by saying that:

It begins with the Muslims of the Black Arts Movement (1965-75) *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is one of its iconic texts; it includes American Sufi writing, secular ethnic novels, writing by immigrant and Second-generation Muslims and religious American Muslim literature. Many of the works I would put into this category can and do also get read in other categories, such as African American, Arab American, and South Asian literature, "Third World" women's writing, diasporic Muslim literature in English, and so forth.(163)

She believes that the place of these works in other categories cannot be denied and when u read them you will gain something together as part of an American Muslim cultural landscape. She compares Muslim American Literature with the Jewish American Literature by the 1930s, but says that it is in a formative stage.

MohjaKahf is a Syrian born Arab-American poet and author and currently working as an Associate Professor of comparative literature in King Fahad Centre for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. She has earned a PhD in comparative literature from Rutgers University, USA. She is the author of *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), *E-mails from Scheherazad* (poetry, 2003), and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (novel, 2006).

Her book, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* is highly praised by the scholars all around the world. As Farzaneh Milani, Professor of University of Virginia says:

An insightful and provocative book. With an impressive knowledge of European literature from the medieval period to the mod-nineteenth century and in command of literary and feminist criticisms as well as Islamic history, MohjaKahf unearths and revives conveniently forgotten images of Muslim women. This fascinating genealogy relegated to oblivion, pushed in the footnotes, forced into invisibility reveals the evolving images of the Muslim women in the West.

Not only MohjaKahf but there are many other Muslim Writers from across the world who made America their new dwelling place like- Khaled Hosseini, AsraNomani,

Samina Ali to name few. These names are of great significance as they have gain name and fame around the world.

Khaled Hosseini is another American based English fiction writer. Not only a novelist but he is also a physician who was born in Afghanistan but has acquired most of his education in the United States. He completed his residency in internal medicine at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre in Los Angeles in 1996. He practiced medicine until a year and a half after the release of *The Kite Runner*.

Hosseini was interested in writing so in 2003; he was able to publish his debut novel, *the Kite Runner*, which became an international bestseller, selling in more than 12 million copies worldwide. His second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, was released in 2007 and became the bestselling novel in the UK.

The novel, *The Kite Runner* is very close to Khaled Hosseini and sometimes it seems to be an autobiographical novel. It is a story set in Pre-Soviet occupied Afghanistan. He says, "I have very fond memories of my childhood in Afghanistan." Hosseini memories of peaceful Pre-Soviet era Afghanistan as well as his personal experiences with Afghanistan's Hazara people led to the writing of his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. A man named, Hossein Khan, who was a Hazara, worked for the Hosseinis when they were living in Iran. When Khaled was a kid and studying in school, he taught Khan to read and write. Although his relation with Hossein Khan was brief and rather formal, Hosseini's fond memories of this relationship served as an inspiration for the relationship between Hassan and Amir in the book.

The Kite Runner shows the life-long guilt consciousness of the protagonist, Amir and the way by which he is able to redeem himself from it. So in this way it is story of guilt and redemption. The novel revolves around Amir, who has a guilt consciousness because in childhood he is not able to save his friend, Hassan from being molested being a coward. And later on he was also responsible for droving Hassan and his father Ali, who is his father's faithful servant, out of the house. Throughout his life, he is haunted by the guilt consciousness of his childhood misdeed. Not only this, there are other themes included in the novel like– the ethnic tensions between the Pashtuns and Hazaras in Afghanistan and the immigrant experiences of Amir and his father in the United States.

Throughout the novel, Hosseini has tried to show the ethnic rivalry existing between the high class and the low class i.e. Pashtuns and Hazaras. The Pashtun community which considers themselves as high class is totally dominant in the country and they have a hatred for the Hazara community, which is considered by them as low class. One of the reasons for this hatred is that Pashtuns belong to the Sunni community and Hazara to Shias, resulting in the age-old clash of Sunnis and Shias.

So, Hosseini has tried to show the ethnic rivalry existing in Afghanistan between Pashtuns and Hazara. He has also tried to show the destruction which Taliban regime has done there and how the people are sufferings because of it. But there are no evidences of US led destruction in any of his novel.

It is a commonplace of modernism that the exiled writers benefits from his or her uprooting, and that what is left behind is seen more clearly from a distance, while the new abode is seen in a sharper focus than its indigenes can manage. This rule, however, seems only to apply to Western writers: the rest are only too likely to find themselves categorized as one of GayatriSpivak's 'privileged native informants'— thus rendering themselves 'inoperative within the Third World literary discourse' (outcast indeed) which Amin Malak has defined as 'critical (at times severely critical) of its cultural roots, yet... militantly committed to them. (184)

AsraNomani is an Indian diasporic writer who deals with Muslim Women Reforms Movement. She is controversial around the world because of her liberal attitude. She teaches journalism in Georgetown University and is co-director of the Pearl Project.

Nomani was born in 1965 in Bombay (now Mumbai), India and when she was four years old moved to United States with her elder brother to join their parents in New Jersey, where her father was earning a Phd at Rutgers University. At ten, she moved with her family to Morgantown, West Virginia. She received her B.A. in Liberal Studies from West Virginia University in 1986 and M.A. from American University in International Communications in 1990. By career, Nomani is a journalist and is former Wall Street correspondent and has written for the Washington Post, the New York Times, Slate, 'The American Prospects, and 'Time'. She was correspondent for Salon.com in Pakistan after 9/11 and her works appears in numerous other publications, 'People, Sport Illustrated for Women, Cosmopolitan and Women's Health. She has delivered commentary on National Public Radio. She is the author of two books and other writings. Her books include:

1. *Standing Alone in Mecca*—An American Woman struggle for the soul of Islam.
2. *Tantrika*—Traveling the Road of Divine Love.

Her other works include:

1. *Islamic Bills for the Rights for Women in Bedroom.*
2. *Islamic Bills for the Rights for Women in Mosque.*
3. *"99" Precepts for Opening Hearts, Minds and Doors in the Muslim World."*

In her autobiographies, *Standing Alone in Mecca* and *Tantrika*, she claims Mawlana Shibli Nomani, the famous Indian Muslim Scholar known for writing a biography of Prophet Muhammed (SAW) as a “paternal ancestor”, a fact which is denied by many Muslims.

She had an affair with an American, who was ready to convert to Islam but at the age of 27, she left her long-time love to marry a Pakistani, living in Washington. Their wedding was held in Pakistan for many days but the marriage did not last long and they were divorced after three months. And shortly after her divorce in 1993, she met Danny Pearl and from here their friendship started. It was Pearl from whom she got inspiration to start her crusade.

In January 2002, when Nomani was working as a journalist to Salon.com, she got an opportunity to cover war on terror in Pakistan, in the same year; Pearl was also investigating links to Al-Qaeda there. He came to visit Nomani in Karachi where she was living in a rented house. He also brought his wife, Marianne who was pregnant. They hung out, listening to music and talking into the wee hours. The next day, Pearl left for an interview and never came back.

Three weeks after his disappearance, Nomani discovered that she was pregnant. She being guilty of “zina” was abandoned by her parents. So she was left all alone in the world, single and pregnant. After some time, she found out that Pearl had been murdered by terrorists, who forced him to declare “I am a Jew” on videotape before he was beheaded by them. A little later, she returned to her parent’s house and on Oct 16, 2002, nine months after Pearl’s disappearance, she gave birth to her son whom she named as ShibliDaneelNomani.

Standing Alone in Mecca, is an autobiography in which AsraNomani is describing about her dangerous journey from Middle America to the Middle East, where she is joined by more than two millions fellow Muslims on Hajj.

Nomani, who was abandoned by her father because of giving birth to her son as an unwed mother describes her journey to Mecca to perform the Hajj in order to investigate and rediscover her religion. Nomani is a Wall Street Journal Correspondent from America and so, it is a journey perilous enough for any American reporters, and she is determined to take along her infant son, Shibli, a living proof that she, an unmarried Muslim woman is guilty of *Zina* or “illegal sex.” If she is found out guilty, the puritanical law of the Wahabbis in Saudi Arabia may mete out terrifying punishment. But Nomani discovers she is not alone. She is following in the four-thousand-year-old footsteps of another single mother, Hajar (known in the West as Hagar), the original

pilgrim of Mecca and the mother of the Islamic nation.

Nomani is the founder and creator of the Muslim Women's Freedom Tour. She has also defied literalist interpretations of Islam that segregate women from men in prayers at Mosques and was a lead organizer of the women-led Muslim prayer in New York City on March 18, 2005, which has also been described as "the first mixed-gender prayer on record led by a Muslim woman in 1,400 years. She has said, the prayer was the first publicly led Friday prayer in modern day history. On that day, she stated:

We are standing up for rights as women in Islam. We will no longer accept the back door or the shadows, at the end of the of the day, we'll be leaders in the Muslim world. We are ushering Islam into the 21st century, reclaiming the voice that the Prophet gave us 1400 years ago. ([http://asranomani.com / writings / archives/ 2005 / 12 / post. php # more](http://asranomani.com/writings/archives/2005/12/post.php#more)).

Although it was a big event in the history of Islam as she has dared to challenge the entire Male Muslim community by an effort which nobody can think so. Though Shamima Shaikh, an African Muslim has led various mixed-gender prayers privately, including a funeral prayer in 1997. But Nomani was the first to do it publicly. Though she was highly praised by many people in doing so but she was also criticized around the world. Michael Mohammed Knight, in his book, *Blue-Eyed Devil*, recalls the events as follows:

Inside the chapel there might have been as many reporters and camera crews as there were praying Muslims. The imam of the day, Amina Wadud, was so distracted by the long rows of popping flash-bulbs that in the middle of the prayer she forgot her ayats. At PMU's first board meeting, Ahmed Nassef would read to us an email from DrWadud that completely washed her hands of the event. Though she still believed in women-led prayer, she wanted nothing to do with PMU orAsraNomani. Wadud has drawn a clear line between the Truth and media whores, and we knew that PMU was on the wrong side. To avoid public criticism, PMU's website made no mention of Asra's role in organizing the prayer. Asra complained of PMU shutting her out. (<http://www.slate.com/id/21289061>) It is a view expressed by a male who does not want women to rise to a status equivalent to men. It is a biased view regarding Nomani's attempt which nobody has earlier dreamt of doing it publicly. It is so because from the evolution of humankind, the society is male-dominated and so still though women have distinguished themselves in almost all the fields but still male-mentality is not changing. They still want the women to remain in the four walls of the houses like in the ancient times. But she was praised and encouraged by many groups and institutions around the world. Not only this, but different Newspapers and magazines around the world have

also praised her attempt and given their views regarding Nomani. According to Publishers Weekly:

Through memorable personal narrative, Nomani gently instructs readers about Islam and her role as a woman in it.

Chicago Tribune says about her:

...the ideal introduction to contemporary Islam.... A stirring account of her journey to Mecca on the Hajj... Her tale is made doubly illuminating by her courage in making the journey as a single mother alongside her infant son, and by the fact that in the course of journey she rediscovers the formidable roots of Islamic feminism.

According to Booklist:

Nomani's riveting, cogent, and inspiring account urges the moderate majority in all faiths to rescue their traditions from those who twist religion into a weapon of mass oppression and terror. Outlook Magazine of New Delhi (India) gives its review of Nomani:

Without being insulting, Nomani confronts her faith with issues of sex, sin and female sensuality. In the process, she emerges as a powerful voice for change in the Muslim World.

So, Nomani is hated as well as supported by many groups around the world. Not only this, she is also advocating the Muslims Woman's rights to give the *khutba*, or sermon, to men at mosques.

The Quran, which is addressed to all Muslims and the most part of it does not differentiate between male and female. Man and Woman, it says "were created of a single soul," and are more equals in the sight of God. According to Islam, woman has the right to divorce, to inherit property, to conduct business and to have access to knowledge. So, if a woman has got all the rights in Islam than why are they segregated or prohibited in religious places by men. They should also get equal rights with men in religious places.

Samina Ali is one of the young dynamic writers of United States who has earned her name with her writing. She was born in Hyderabad but migrated to US with her parents. Her first novel, *Madras on Rainy Days*, was published in 2004 by Farrar, Straus, Giroux. The novel is set in the city, Hyderabad, the birth-place of the novelist. She has

done so because she wanted to start from the roots and then branch out. The novel is based on her own experience during the time of riots in her city. But she had not a very good experience in America because writing by a Muslim woman is seen in a different way as she describes:

The act of writing for me is political. But for me, as a Muslim woman in post-9/11 America, almost every act is political: the way I dress, speak, present myself, raise my child, write! In my paper, I have tried to highlight the efforts and attempts of some Muslim Writers trying to establish themselves in a place (America) which is totally different from their land, culture & ideology.

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