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Arts: Fiction and Fiction Writers: The Americas

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Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures
Arts: Fiction and Fiction Writers: The Americas
Rachel Norman

Introduction

The last several years have seen a proliferation of literature published by Arab and Muslim American authors in the United States. In the wake of the 1990/91 Gulf War, 9/11, and the wars in the Middle East that followed, these two groups have gone from “the most invisible of the invisibles,” as scholar Joanna Kadi put it in 1994 (xix), to acutely visible. In many ways, these authors have used this sudden exposure as a platform from which to speak, and the number of publications produced by self-identified members of the community has grown exponentially. As readership has also grown, many of these authors now enjoy both popular and critical success, a trend most recently culminating in Laila Lalami’s novel *The Moor’s account* being named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2015.

Although it is clear that 9/11 was a watershed for Arab and Muslim literature, scholars have cautioned against oversimplifying the causes of the recent publication trends and the apparent need felt by authors to speak out and “present what they believe is a truer face of Islam” (Mustafa 2009, 282). Juliane Hammer argues that although explaining the sudden surge in publication as a reaction to 9/11 is “easy and tempting,” it “may be too easy” (Hammer 2012, 2). She suggests that the trends seen in Muslim American women’s narratives in the past ten years have roots that stretch “farther back and cannot be explained by the impact of 9/11” (Hammer 2012, 2). Carol Fadda-Conrey agrees, stating that despite a shift in biases and mainstream attention following 9/11, “Arab-Americans have occupied these precarious positionalities well before 2001” (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 2). Regardless of the origins of the trend, Muslim women in the United States have felt a need for self-definition, as the narrative of “oppressed, choiceless Muslim women” proliferates within Western society (Alvi, Hoodfar, and McDonough 2003, xii). The issues raised by these women in their monographs, essays, and talks—what Hammer refers to as “speaking out” literature (Hammer 2012, 2)—are reflected in the contemporary fiction being produced. This desire to speak back and claim the right to self-definition, coupled with the sudden attention from the publishing industry, has led to an upsurge in the publication of a number of contemporary fictional works by Muslim women. Illustrating the impressive number of works that have recently been published in the United States is the fact that Muslim fiction can now be divided into a variety of categories. This entry examines these categories, including children’s and young adult fiction, before attending to the plurality of approaches taken in adult novels in particular.

The burgeoning market for Muslim women’s young adult fiction, as well as a quickly growing children’s literature market, has seen authors such as G. Willow Wilson and Hena Khan gain popularity. This growth can be attributed both to the publishing industry’s recent interest in promoting multiculturalism in children’s and young adult literature, and to a push from within the Muslim community for more texts that accurately represent Islam and instruct young readers. Similarly, the education system

in the United States has increasingly focused attention on multiculturalism, to “contest racism through culturally relevant education,” and education scholars have called on teachers to “consider Muslim young adult literature as you seek to educate and transform the young people who sit in your classrooms” (Baer and Glasgow 2010, 24). Children’s literature has heavily emphasized introducing particular and universal ideas and concepts, such as in Hena Khan’s popular *Golden domes and silver lanterns. A Muslim book of colors* (2012), in which colors and Islamic traditions are presented side by side. In young adult fiction—such as Sheba Karim’s *Skunk girl* (2009)—the subject matter is typically focused on the specific challenges of coming of age, including balancing conflicting social mores, the decision to veil, and first love.

Unsurprisingly, the themes found in novels aimed at adults are more complex and include a wide range of approaches to being both female and Muslim within a predominantly Christian society. Samaa Abdurraqib (2006) suggests that two types of Muslim literature predominate in North America: depictions of assimilation and depictions of cultural hybridity. Because wider society in the United States often considers Islam a “foreign” implant, Muslim characters are frequently caught negotiating conflicts similar to those experienced by immigrants, regardless of ethnicity or country of origin—a perception that is cyclically reinforced because many of the authors share an immigrant identity. As a result, some works treat Islam as a facet of the heritage culture that must be negotiated as assimilation takes place, while other works give primacy to Islam as characters explore a cultural hybridity that allows for escape from the dichotomy of choice presented in assimilation. Novels such as Rajia Hassib’s *In the language of miracles* and Mohja Kahf’s *The girl in the tangerine scarf* fall at this end of the spectrum. They give enormous importance to characters’ relationships with Islam and the development of their Muslim identities within an American context. In contrast, Islam is barely discussed in novels such as Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian jazz* and Laila Halaby’s *Once in a promised land*. Somewhere between these two methods for presenting fictional Muslim American characters are novels like Randa Jarrar’s *A map of home*, which lacks the carefully constructed exploration of religious identity as related to cultural hybridity found in *The girl in the tangerine scarf* but still includes more pointed discussions of Islam than *Once in a promised land*. To illustrate this spectrum and the plurality of approaches found within it, there follows a brief analysis of a few of the common themes found in *Once in a promised land*, *A map of home*, and *The girl in the tangerine scarf*.

Laila Halaby's *Once in a promised land*

The two central characters of *Once in a promised land*, Jassim and Salwa, are Palestinian by way of Jordan, and have been living in the United States for years. The novel follows their failing marriage, as each succumbs to personal struggles that they refuse to share with each other. Notably, the crumbling relationship falters not in the face of racism or xenophobia, but rather for much more mundane reasons: a lack of communication. Despite both Salwa and Jassim being Muslim, a point that is made very clear in the prologue, Islam is hardly mentioned in the novel. The prologue, “Before,” ends by introducing the story: “Our main characters are Salwa and Jassim. We really come to know them only after the World Trade Center buildings have been flattened by

planes flown by Arabs, by Muslims. Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center” (Halaby 2007, vii–viii). This attention to their religious affiliation at the outset dispels any notion that religion is simply irrelevant, even though it is rarely mentioned. Rather, Islam plays an enormous role, doing so via its absence. After the prologue, Islam is really only brought up by secondary characters—their questions generally thinly veiled orientalism or Islamophobia—and this dynamic of presence-through-absence evokes and challenges a conflation of Arab and Muslim with terrorist that has thrived in a post-9/11 America. This presentation of an ordinary couple, who happen to be Middle Eastern and Muslim within the context of post-9/11 suspicions, rejects the self-imposed orientalism and “essentialist identity politics” (Salaita 2001, 425) for which Arab and Muslim American fiction has occasionally been criticized. Instead, it forces the reader to confront the prevalent stereotypes that allow for a conflation of Arab and Muslim with terrorist.

The longest discussion of Islam in the novel is barely a page long and takes place between Salwa and her Anglo coworker. Jake, still a college student and working part time at Salwa’s bank, has taken an interest in the Middle East and Islam following 9/11. He is taking Arabic language classes, and often greets Salwa in Arabic. He asks her about Ramadan and Eid, and on this particular occasion Salwa tells him about the differences between celebrating in the United States and in Jordan. She recalls fondly how in Jordan it is celebrated by almost everyone, comparing it to the Christmas season in the United States. Despite this being the longest discussion of Islamic tradition in the novel, the descriptions and comparisons fail to give any religious motivation for these traditions. Instead, the focus is on the nostalgic aspects that Salwa fondly describes as cultural and familial. When she finishes explaining how her family celebrates in Jordan, Jake asks if she misses “home,” triggering intensely melancholic homesickness in Salwa, a homesickness that “grip[s] her, [shakes] her, squeeze[s] something in her throat that [makes] her eyes water” (Halaby 2007, 148). This nostalgia affirms the mostly secular context of the conversation: at no point is Islam, or being Muslim, mentioned outright.

Jassim, despite accepting the label “Muslim,” is nonpracticing, having “not prayed in a mosque since [he] was a young man” (Halaby 2007, 231). It is only peripheral characters that raise questions about his religion. When the FBI begins to investigate him at his work after a xenophobic coworker calls in a tip, they interview Jassim and his coworkers. In response, his boss vouches for him, laughing at the absurdity of the investigation and calling him “apolitical and unreligious” (Halaby 2007, 224). As his boss recounts his conversation with the detectives and assures Jassim that “anyone who knows you knows that you aren’t religious, knows that you don’t talk about religion,” Jassim remains silent (Halaby 2007, 225). Although Jassim says nothing, and although it has been made clear earlier in the novel that Jassim is nonpracticing, the very insistence in both the FBI’s line of questioning and Jassim’s boss’s response is troubling because it illustrates the extent to which Islam is being conflated with terrorism. Although his boss points out the racism inherent in basing the investigation on Jassim’s Middle Eastern heritage (Halaby 2007, 235), he does not make the same rhetorical

move for his faith. Rather than point out the absurdity of Jassim's faith being at issue, he attempts to place Jassim outside of suspicion by denying any connection to religion. This negation suggests a validation of the FBI's profiling and reifies the conflation of Muslim with terrorist, even as it dismantles the same conflation for Arab and terrorist. The logical fallacy is certainly not lost on the reader, though, and is pointed out within other contexts, including by Jassim himself at one point, as he states, "just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe I am capable of evil-doing" (Halaby 2007, 232). As the novel progresses, Jassim continues to be a sympathetic character cast in contrast to the FBI's and other secondary characters' openly xenophobic tactics.

Randa Jarrar's *A map of home*

Like *Once in a promised land*, *A map of home* follows a main character, Nidali, who is raised Muslim but is largely nonpracticing. As a novel, though, *A map of home* spends significantly more time exploring Islam as a faith than does *Once in a promised land*. Despite characters' lack of spirituality—Nidali's interest in Islam is generally fleeting, and her parents are also not fully practicing—questions about the Qur'an, prayer, and veiling are raised at various points. For the most part, Islam looms in the background of the text, informing the culture in which Nidali grows up without much influencing her directly. The exception is an early chapter that also serves as an extended discussion of Islam by focusing on a Qur'anic recital competition at Nidali's school, an event that coincides with the arrival of her devoutly Muslim cousin, Esam, who acts as a temporary foil for the immediate family's relationship with Islam.

The announcement of the recital is preceded by a discussion of what Nidali's mother believes about the afterlife—a sort of personalized view of reincarnation—and Nidali shares these ideas with her friends. When word gets back to Nidali's teacher, he is quick to make clear that reincarnation is not an Islamic belief, but rather than internalize what he is saying, Nidali's inner monologue during his lecture is dismissive and irreverent, thinking "please shut up" as he speaks (Jarrar 2008, 40). When he announces the Qur'anic recital, Nidali immediately decides that she wants to win, but not out of religious fervor. Rather, she wants to win because she enjoys winning. Nidali's behavior in religion class, coupled with the presentation of her mother's belief in reincarnation rather than paradise, contextualize the extended focus in this chapter on Qur'anic recital, making it clear that although the family is Muslim, their faith is an expression of personal connection to culture, and not a dogmatic or rote performance of ritual.

To prepare for the recital, Nidali practices with her father. Although he is zealous about her preparation for the competition, his focus, like hers, is largely on the success that comes with winning rather than on a larger religious purpose. Despite expressing a desire for the verses to help guide and instruct her, it is clear that what excites him the most about the competition is the prospect of having Nidali, a girl, beat the boys. This momentary excitement turns to frustration as Nidali mispronounces words and forgets lines, and before long her father's championing of his daughter gives way to domestic violence. The end of the scene, though, closes with Nidali taking comfort in the words

she is memorizing: “I stopped crying. I remembered the words *sadrak*, and *wizrak*, and *thahrak*, because those were the places that hurt me. So I said them right; the questions God once asked Muhammad. But my pronunciation and my recitation became most powerful when I recited: ‘With every hardship there is ease. With every hardship there is ease’” (Jarrar 2008, 50). Beyond learning the words as a result of her father’s physical abuse, the pain brings Nidali temporarily closer to her faith and allows her to locate strength within the words of the Qur’an—a theme that is not continued as the novel progresses. Rather, as the novel progresses, Islamic practices—such as fasting during Ramadan—are only noted in passing, and an extended meditation such as this one is not repeated.

Although short, this section’s engagement with Islam is accentuated by the brief addition of another character to the household: Nidali’s cousin Esam, repeatedly described by Nidali as “my religious cousin” (Jarrar 2008, 44). Having just arrived from Palestine and staying with the family while looking for a more permanent living situation, Esam is quick to voice his concerns and opinions about the family’s spiritual welfare. His attempts to convince his uncle that he “need[s]” to visit Mecca (Jarrar 2008, 45), that watching the weather forecast is “blasphemous,” (Jarrar 2008, 46) and that “God has decreed that women cover themselves” (Jarrar 2008, 49) are met with quiet disdain, outright ridicule, and occasional anger. Nidali’s father’s responses make it clear that the dedication he displayed to the Qur’an during recital practice is a more poetic one, and that he has no intention of practicing more quotidian rituals such as abstaining from alcohol. It is also through Esam’s presence in the household that the reader is introduced to more routine Islamic practices such as daily prayer, which allow the reader to understand the extent to which Nidali’s family is nonpracticing. This schism in the household illustrates the plurality of belief and practice within Islam.

In addition to the arguments between Esam and Nidali’s father, Nidali’s own observations of Esam reinforce this presentation of the various ways in which Muslims can practice their faith. As Nidali watches him pray, she is both mesmerized and confused, asking to borrow a friend’s watch so she can time him and referring to his prayers as “wishes” (Jarrar 2008, 48). A few days later, when she returns from having won the Qur’anic recital, she discovers he has destroyed one of her prized possessions, a set of Wonder Woman stickers stuck to the headboard of her bed. Nidali treasures these stickers as a symbol of her own abilities—a strong female character with raven hair, capable of anything. Upset and crying, she asks Esam why he has destroyed them. His response is that Wonder Woman is “a shameless prostitute,” and it is wrong to admire her (Jarrar 2008, 53). Rather than accept and integrate what Esam says about blasphemy into her understanding of faith, Nidali creates her own profoundly feminist meaning, finding religious symbolism in the residue left behind by the stickers: “For a long, long time after she vanished, these white spots were, to me, parts of God” (Jarrar 2008, 53). Similarly, as the chapter comes to a close and Esam moves out of the house, Nidali comments that he should take an umbrella, as it’s going to rain. She notes that she hasn’t actually seen the weather report all week, due to Esam’s zealotry, but that she simply knows by the way the wind is blowing and by the scent in the air. Esam retorts, once again, that only God can know the weather. Nidali watches him waiting for

the bus, and she takes a certain amount of pleasure when it begins to rain, soaking Esam and his belongings. With Esam standing in the rain, his clothes becoming increasingly transparent, and Nidali feeling like a “woman of wonder,” the chapter ends, and the novel stops discussing Islam in detail (Jarrar 2008, 54).

Mohja Kahf's *The girl in the tangerine scarf*

A similar investigation and analysis of different approaches to Islam is found throughout *The girl in the tangerine scarf*. The novel uses a variety of characters to challenge notions of ethnic and religious identity, as well as what it means to be part of a community. It opens with the protagonist's return to her hometown, Simonsville, Indiana, and the emotional upheaval this sparks for the young woman. The very first word of the novel is spoken, like an acerbic warning: “Liar,” a venomous response produced in reaction to a passing highway sign that reads “The People of Indiana Welcome You” (Kahf 2006, 1). The next line describes the as-yet unidentified owner of the disembodied voice as “olive-skinned, dark-haired,” and the third line reveals a Qurʻan on the car seat next to her. Within these first three lines questions of identity, belonging, race, and religion are all raised before the protagonist is even identified, and the bigotry that haunts the novel is set up as these social markers efface the protagonist's personhood from the very beginning. The paragraph goes on to deliver the contradiction that drives the narrative conflict: this still unnamed woman grew up in this place, which is how she knows with certainty that the sign lies, and that she is, in fact, not welcome. Her comprehension of her social standing within this society is deeper than the superficial information imparted by the sign, and because she has been kept on the periphery of Indiana's society she perhaps knows Indiana better than it knows itself.

A few pages later the narrative slips into analepsis as it flashes back to the Shamy family's arrival in Indiana. As they unpack their U-Haul, the narrator describes what the rest of the neighborhood's residents see: “a bunch of foreigners. Dark and wrong. Dressed funny. Their talk was gross sounds, like someone throwing up” (Kahf 2006, 6). Three things mark the Shamys as “foreign”: the color of their skin, their clothes (especially hijab), and their language. These three things form motifs that run through the novel. They create a text in which Khadra Shamy struggles to define her identity in relation to the small Muslim community in which she is raised and the larger American community that surrounds her. Religion, especially, is examined at a variety of levels, beginning with Khadra's personal relationship with Islam, before extending into the immediate community and moving out into the wider American society. The role of religion in Khadra's life shifts as she moves through various life phases, from adolescence to college to adulthood. At various points her faith means different things to her and she practices differently, wavering from a very conservative, strict, and nearly militaristic interpretation of Islam, to an interest in the beauty found in Qurʻanic recital, to disillusion with the treatment of women, to a more liberal and personal relationship with her faith. As she moves through these stages she is also confronted by the members of her religious community, who practice Islam in a wide variety of ways—from those who practice polygamy to those drawn to Sufism. Each of these encounters with other characters informs not only Khadra's view of her faith, but also the reader's. Contrary to the popular media representation of Islam as a monolithic set of practices, the novel

demonstrates an enormous plurality of practice. Observing the variety of Islamic practices that surround her is not the only thing that raises questions of faith for Khadra, though, and major plot points revolve around the tension between the Muslim community and the less-than-accepting larger community in Indiana. Racial and religious slurs, and physical violence—assault, rape, and even murder—are part of Khadra’s childhood in Simonsville. As Khadra escapes—first to the Middle East, then to Philadelphia—she must come to terms with the rejection and abuse she has faced, as well as clarify her own relationship with her faith.

When read together, these three novels—*Once in a promised land*, *A map of home*, and *The girl in the tangerine scarf*—illustrate the spectrum on which Arab Muslim American women’s fiction exists. From being central to the novel to being notable only by its absence, Islam plays starkly different roles. Within these narratives that treat the same religion in distinctly different ways, though, are several repeating themes dealing with gender—ones both clearly tied to Islam, and ones that are less clearly related.

Gender

Veiling

Like Hammer’s categorization of Muslim American women’s publications as “speaking out” literature, scholars such as Sajida Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough have posited that in addition to the traditional religious meanings of hijab, veiling in North America takes on the added meaning of “self-assertion,” allowing its wearers to visibly “claim their space in society” (Alvi, Hoodfar, and McDonough 2003, xii). Citing clothing as a “potent channel of symbolic communication,” they argue that Muslim American women’s choosing to veil is a way of responding silently to frustrations that arise from being ostracized. For Muslim American women authors, the veil often figures as a literary symbol that carries a multiplicity of meanings. It is a lens through which a character defines and negotiates her own spirituality, and also her relationship to the communities that surround her.

Veiling is an exceptionally important theme in *The girl in the tangerine scarf*. Throughout the novel, Khadra’s relationship to Islam is often described to the reader via the metaphor of the veil, from the moment she gets to pick the fabric for her first veils, to her years of teenage angst and wearing only black hijab, to allowing her veil to slip from her head as she experiences a radical personal transformation in an orchard in Syria. By the novel’s end, Khadra finds balance in both her spiritual life and her veiling, as she begins to feel empowered in choosing when and where to wear her veil.

Similarly, *A map of home* addresses veiling from a variety of viewpoints, but rather than through the personal transformation of a single character, it does so briefly and via an assortment of characters. Prior to the Qur’anic recital, Nidali is instructed to cover her hair, to which her father takes offense: “‘What? Don’t even consider it,’ he told me that evening. ‘Forget those retarded idiots! You must be cleansed to read the Koran, but no one ever said you had to be covered’” (Jarrar 2008, 49). Esam challenges Nidali’s father, clearing his throat before announcing that that is incorrect, stating “God has decreed that women cover themselves” (Jarrar 2008, 49). Although no discussion of

these two differing stances is offered, as Nidali's father dismisses his nephew with a brusque "shut up," the importance lies in the presentation of the differing opinions. Despite Nidali's delight that her father has told someone besides her to "shut up," she ultimately disobeys him, tying a handkerchief around her hair for the recital. This decision to veil stands in contrast to the male perspectives on veiling presented by her father and cousin. For Nidali, rather than being a question of Islamic law, it is merely one of practicality: she wants to participate in the recital, and sees the handkerchief as the easiest means to that end. Her decision also stands in contrast to Khadra's struggle and the deeply personal questions raised about veiling in *The girl in the tangerine scarf*. Indeed, just as *Tangerine scarf* provides an extended meditation on Khadra's relationship to her faith via her choices surrounding veiling, here Nidali's decision is less about providing an external reflection of her inner faith, or even complying with what she views to be the correct interpretation of her faith, and more about adhering to the social norms of the society in which she finds herself.

In *Once in a promised land*, veiling is barely discussed, and only in passing. As is the case with the other questions about faith raised in the novel, veiling is not raised by Salwa or Jassim, but by an obtrusive Anglo American who corners Jassim while the two work out at the gym and asks him pointed personal questions. Veiling is brought up and cast as a method for control, as Jassim's interlocutor mentions how attractive he thinks Arab women are, and how he understands why "you fellas cover them up" (Halaby 2007, 7). Jassim, taken aback, participates only minimally in the conversation, answering questions with short yeses and nos, and silence. This introduction of the topic of veiling and Jassim's refusal to engage with it emphasize Islam's absence not only from Jassim and Salwa's lives but also from the larger text, setting the stage for later issues surrounding invasive questions about their religion made by aggressively xenophobic characters. Although the question posed by the secondary character displays a clear misunderstanding of the practice of veiling, no explanation or correction is offered. This pattern of orientalism and Islamophobia is repeated through the novel, but rather than offer a calculated deconstruction of these prejudices, as is the case with *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, the novel meets them with silence. These silences serve a similar function to the detailed explanations found in *Tangerine scarf*, though, and the novel claims a powerful rhetorical position by refusing to engage with a binary "us–them" thinking that perpetuates attacks on and misunderstandings of Islam.

Marriage and divorce

Similar to the way in which *The girl in the tangerine scarf* engages a plurality of Islamic practices in regards to veiling, a variety of marriages are modeled in the novel—from arranged marriages to love marriages, from aunties who choose never to marry to polygamy. Khadra's own marriage and subsequent divorce are the most closely examined, and Khadra's understanding of Islam is changed and deepened through both events. Khadra meets her husband, Juma, at the university in Indiana, and after a brief courtship they are married. Juma, a Kuwaiti national only temporarily in the United States, is initially attracted to Khadra's strong personality and independence, and they agree that Khadra will continue with her schooling after they are married. While the novel offers small warning signs before their wedding that the two have differing cultural

views of marriage, Khadra is unprepared for and surprised by the reality of married life with Juma. Shortly after their marriage it becomes clear that their notions of a wife's role are incompatible; what initially drew Juma to Khadra now infuriates him. Their arguments range from expectations about who will do the cooking to whether or not Khadra is allowed to ride a bicycle. As the marriage deteriorates, Khadra and Juma each retreat into themselves, and the chasm between them becomes insurmountable. Although Khadra takes birth control, she becomes pregnant. The marriage finally fails when she insists on having an abortion. She is the one who initiates the divorce, offering Juma a "*khulu'*, or wife-initiated divorce" (Kahf 2006, 251). She does so for financial reasons (so that he won't have to pay for the separation), but he refuses. Juma is both furious and skeptical. Having never heard of a wife-initiated divorce, he considers Khadra's knowledge of Islam to be less than his own because she is both a woman and an American, and therefore cannot be trusted on matters of shari'a. For the sake of the reader the novel lays out clearly what wife-initiated divorce is: "Popular Islam mostly buried *khulu'*, and Muslim women the world over did not know they had this right" (Kahf 2006, 251). As with every major plot point, including Khadra's earlier marriage and abortion, the moment is used to explore, explain, and teach about Islamic practices—especially those that are subject to feministic *ijtihad*, or interpretation.

Wife-initiated divorce is also brought up in *A map of home*. Nidali's parents' marriage is a complicated and showcases her mother as a dynamic character who is capable, independent, and self-sufficient. On the first few pages of the novel the reader is greeted with a woman who has no problem standing up to her husband, calling him an "ass" repeatedly. Their marriage is a rocky one; domestic wars rage over laundry, pianos, and children's names. When frustrated, Nidali's father often turns to physical violence, becoming, in Nidali's words, a "monster" (Jarrar 2008, 50). Although there are repeated scenes of Nidali's mother, Ruza, being hit, kicked, and dragged across the floor by her hair, there is also a detailed history of her parents' courtship, one that is striking and heartwarming, predicated on mutual interest and love. Further, despite being a victim of domestic violence, Ruza is hardly a victim in any other area of the marriage. Rather, she is presented repeatedly as a strong-willed individual who wields enormous power within the home. When she is dissatisfied with how she is being treated, she leaves for several days, allowing the house to descend into chaos until her husband begs her to return and agrees to her demands. When she decides she wants to have a piano, she simply goes out and buys one, enlisting the help of her friends to bring it home. And when her husband is repeatedly denied a mortgage, she is the one who eventually succeeds in securing the money so they can purchase a house. Like Khadra in *The girl in the tangerine scarf*, she rejects a passive role within her marriage and demands to be treated as an equal.

An unstable marriage also plays a central role in *Once in a promised land*, although the sources of strife are quite different. The novel begins after Salwa and Jassim have already been married for nine years, have well-paying jobs, and are living the "American Dream." Similar to the other two novels, the two met in a university and are both educated. What destroys their marriage, though, is not gendered power struggles stemming from religious or cultural expectations of women, but something far more

common and mundane: a drifting apart, leading to broken communication and then infidelity by both parties. Unlike the other two novels, which both focus on the gender expectations and dynamics within marriage in Arab and Muslim communities, *Once in a promised land* presents no such plot point. While *The girl in the tangerine scarf* explores marriage by offering a story that revolves around the complexities of Islam, and humanizes its characters by explaining in detail their different religious and cultural practices, *Once in a promised land* takes an entirely different approach: it presents a marriage in crisis while refusing to give the reader answers about cultural differences. Any questions of “Arabness” or “Muslimness” are thrust on Salwa and Jassim from the outside, while their marriage deteriorates from within due to easily recognizable and quotidian reasons, including a lack of trust, communication, and ultimately love.

Sexuality and reproductive rights

In *A map of home*, Nidali’s explorations of her sexuality drive her character development in a variety of ways, and differing views on sex and sexuality are presented. Although Nidali considers sex to be permissible outside marriage, her father does not. Despite frequently and vocally encouraging her to delay marriage in favor of an education (including a PhD), he also constantly reminds her about protecting her virginity. These remonstrations do not seem to have much effect on her, and the sexual identity she constructs for herself is robust and guilt free. Beginning at a young age, Nidali masturbates frequently, and these masturbatory episodes are presented in detail and without shame. As Nidali moves through puberty and her teenage years, she begins to explore her sexuality with others, starting with kissing—with both male and female partners—and moves through a progression of sexual experiences that culminate in her losing her virginity. Like earlier sexual experiences, her loss of virginity is both sensual and empowering, and it is Nidali who sets the terms and is the aggressor.

Sex in *The Girl in the tangerine scarf* is initially presented in similarly positive terms. Within the confines of marriage and in keeping with Islamic teaching, Khadra and Juma’s initial experiences together are filled with giddy hopefulness for what the future holds—as well as a fair amount of lust. Both Khadra and Juma revel in the physicality of their relationship, and, as a result, at least at first, “married life is bliss” (Kahf 2006, 222). As they explore sex and get to know each other’s bodies, Khadra relishes the way that Juma makes her feel feminine and safe. This marital bliss doesn’t last long, though, as they begin to disagree about gender roles within the home—an argument that they cannot disentangle from sex itself. Khadra uses birth control, and while Juma doesn’t tell her to stop, it is clear he doesn’t approve. Further, although Juma initially thinks that Khadra is the perfect wife—“an observant Muslim, of course, but also a modern, educated woman” (Kahf 2006, 222)—differing opinions on when to have children eventually become one of the major sources of conflict in their relationship. The community stifles them with advice about whether or not birth control is allowed in Islam and when they should begin trying for children. This ongoing conversation turns venomous when Khadra’s birth control fails, she becomes pregnant, and she decides to have an abortion. She explains her decision to her family, telling them that to have a child now would mean giving up her identity and herself, that it would “kill” her (Kahf 2006, 246). Although her family strongly condemns the abortion, and she knows it

means the end of her marriage, Khadra cites Islamic law allowing abortion and goes through with the procedure, accompanied by a female Arab American friend. Despite the cacophony of voices that surrounds her, she ultimately makes the decision for herself and reconciles it with her faith.

Difficult decisions surrounding reproduction also play a central role in *Once in a promised land*. Much of Salwa's story line centers on her desire to have a child and her struggle to communicate that desire to her husband, whom she believes does not want children. As the novel opens, she speculates about the void in her life, despite having not one but two successful careers, and concludes that what is missing is a child. Rather than discuss the possibility of children with Jassim, Salwa makes her own choice about reproduction and "forgets" to take her birth control pill. The following day she "accidentally" drops it down the drain, and for two days after that fails to take it. Afterward she dwells on the differences between big and small lies, and if questioned, plans to admit what happened without mentioning that she had intended it. In a reversal of Khadra's story, she becomes pregnant, but miscarries early on. Instead of confiding in Jassim about what is happening, she sits alone in the bathtub as she loses the baby, and later takes comfort with a friend, a fellow Arab American woman.

In these twin moments in *Once in a promised land* and *The girl in the tangerine scarf*—filled with opposite hopes but the same outcome—each protagonist makes her own decisions about reproduction independently of her husband and, in the trauma that follows, finds comfort in her female community. For Nidali in *A map of home*, although her sexual experiences are encapsulated within her exploration of self, sex is not linked with reproduction or the difficult decisions that surround it. In a way that *A map of home* does not, *Once in a promised land* and *The girl in the tangerine scarf* complicate sex by tying it to childbearing and, ultimately, to a woman's autonomy.

Conclusion

Female Muslim American authors must negotiate an intersectional identity, being at once American and part of a transnational Muslim network, while mediating the unique gender roles that exist within each sphere. As miriam cooke has suggested about Muslim women the world over, it is "only by concentrating on their collective cultural production" (cooke 2001, xxv) that a picture begins to emerge both of what it means to be a Muslim and a woman, and of the ways in which these women speak back to the hierarchies in which they find themselves. As Gisella Webb argues, "these women's writings can be seen as the product of the gradual but steady emergence of a movement among many—perhaps a critical mass of—Muslim women who insist that their religious self-identity not be dismissed" (Webb 2000, xi). The multiplicity of approaches to the fictional representation of Islam reflects the diversity found within the Muslim American community, and these writings address a Muslim audience as readily as they do a secular American one. Although many of the novels are written within the intra-Muslim literary conversation, they are still encapsulated by a specific American context. These authors not only "expose but also ... intervene in the material and palpable workings of the complicit apparatuses of racism" (Gana 2008, 1573), regardless of how they approach the presentation of Islam in their fiction.

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