

Faith, Culture and Empowerment: The Significance of Hijab in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the role of hijab as a tool for empowering woman in Abdel-Fattah's (2007) novel Does My Head Look Big in This? This study examines how the protagonist, Amal, navigates the challenges of self-expression, cultural identity and faith as a Muslim teenager who chooses to wear the hijab. Through a textual analysis of Amal's journey and by applying Theory of Intersectional Feminism by Crenshaw (1989), the research highlights how the hijab is not merely a symbol of religious obligation but also an act of personal empowerment, allowing women to reclaim control over their identities in a multicultural society. The novel portrays the hijab as a means of self-expression that intersects with cultural and religious values, challenging societal stereotypes and promoting a broader understanding of women's autonomy in defining their beliefs and appearances. The research discusses the changes in Amal's attitude towards the hijab comes from a desire to lead a religious lifestyle, with the aim to become a better Muslim. It points out the religious and spiritual functions of the hijab from Amal's perspective. First, the hijab is viewed as a tool for improving a believer's relationship with God, and secondly, it also works to encourage the perfection of other religious practices such as praying and fasting. In the last section, it discusses how hijab functions in a social environment, particularly in helping to refine the protagonist's conduct in social spaces, improving her personality. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the empowerment of women within the context of faith, culture and personal choice illustrating how the hijab can serve as a powerful vehicle for self-determination and individuality.

Keywords: Hijab, Faith, Culture, Women Empowerment, Feminism

INTRODUCTION

The hijab has been a subject of extensive debate in both academic and public discourse, often interpreted through contrasting narratives of oppression and empowerment. While Western perspectives frequently associate it with religious conservatism and patriarchal control, many Muslim women view it as an essential aspect of their faith, identity, and self-expression. In Abdel-Fattah's (2007) novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* the hijab is portrayed not as a tool of subjugation but as an empowering choice that allows the protagonist, Amal, to assert her independence, deepen her spiritual connection, and navigate her multicultural environment on her own terms. Several scholars have explored the multiple meanings of the hijab in different socio-cultural contexts. Bullock (2002) argues that Western feminist discourse often presents veiled Muslim women as passive victims of male dominance, disregarding the voices of women who actively choose to wear the hijab as a form of agency. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) challenges the notion that veiling is solely an imposition, suggesting instead that it can serve as a conscious engagement with faith and self-discipline. Taha and Baizura (2014) further

emphasize that the hijab functions as “an empowering tool of self-expression through which women increase their relationship with their own faith and culture” (p. 256). Similarly, Said (1978) discusses how Orientalist portrayals often depict Muslim women as oppressed and in need of liberation, a stereotype that persists in media and literature today (Hassan, 2011). Studies by Siraj (2011) and Zine (2006) reveal that Muslim women who wear the hijab in Western countries often face discrimination and are perceived as outsiders, reinforcing negative stereotypes about Islam as inherently restrictive toward women.

This research explores the hijab’s significance in the novel through the lens of faith, culture, and empowerment, emphasizing how it functions beyond its religious symbolism. Applying feminist and postcolonial theories, this study examines how Amal’s journey disrupts Western representations of Muslim women as passive or subjugated, instead portraying the hijab as an act of agency and self-determination. Additionally, it analyzes the spiritual and social dimensions of the hijab in Amal’s life, highlighting its role in deepening her relationship with God, shaping her behavior, and helping her navigate societal challenges. By unpacking these themes, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on women’s empowerment within the context of faith, culture, and personal choice. It argues that the hijab, as depicted in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* serves as a powerful vehicle for self-determination, identity formation, and resistance against societal stereotypes, challenging Islamophobic attitudes and promoting a broader understanding of Muslim women’s agency.

THE REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The hijab has been a subject of scholarly discourse across multiple disciplines, including religious studies, gender studies, and cultural identity. While some narratives depict it as a tool of oppression, many studies highlight its role in empowerment and self-expression. Abdel-Fattah’s (2007) novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* offers a unique literary exploration of the hijab as a symbol of faith, cultural identity, and autonomy. This literature review examines various studies that have analyzed the hijab from different perspectives, emphasizing its role in personal empowerment, religious identity, and the challenge of societal stereotypes. Several scholars argue that wearing the hijab is an act of religious devotion and personal growth. Abdul Majid (2016) examined the role of hijab in personal spiritual journeys, arguing that it serves as a conscious act of religious commitment rather than a forced obligation. Through interviews with Muslim women who chose to wear the hijab, the study found that many viewed it as a tool for self-discipline and a reminder of their faith in daily life. Similarly, Mahmood (2005) in *Politics of Piety* explored the idea that religious practices, such as the hijab, can be understood as forms of self-empowerment rather than subjugation. She argued that adopting the hijab is a means of cultivating a moral and religious self, allowing women to actively engage with their faith. One of the dominant narratives surrounding the hijab in Western societies is its association with oppression. Said (1978) in *Orientalism* argued that the Western gaze often portrays Muslim women as submissive, failing to recognize their agency. Musa et al. (2021) built upon this framework, analyzing *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and its rejection of such stereotypes. They concluded that Abdel-Fattah’s protagonist challenges preconceived notions of Muslim women by asserting her autonomy and actively resisting societal pressures. The hijab is not only a religious symbol but also a cultural identifier that plays a significant role in shaping identity, particularly in multicultural societies. Lampert (2006) explored the representation of Arab and Muslim protagonists in young adult literature, finding that characters often struggle to balance their heritage with societal expectations. Her study highlighted how the hijab can become a contested symbol, representing both inclusion and exclusion in different social contexts. Siraj (2011) examined British Muslim women’s experiences with the hijab and found that while it could lead to discrimination, it also provided a sense of belonging within the Muslim community. Beckmann (2014) conducted a qualitative study on Muslim American women and found that the hijab gave them control over their self-presentation, allowing them to define their own beauty standards rather than conforming to Western ideals. Similarly, Ruby (2006) argued that the hijab enables women to assert their independence by emphasizing their intellect and personality over physical appearance. Hopkins (2004) examined the experiences

of hijabi women in Britain and found that many felt pressured to defend their choice against negative stereotypes. The study also revealed that such discrimination often stems from media representations that associate the hijab with extremism.

The reviewed literature illustrates that the hijab is a multifaceted symbol that extends beyond religious obligation to encompass cultural identity, self-expression, and empowerment. While dominant narratives often frame it as a form of oppression, numerous scholars and literary representations emphasize its role in agency and autonomy. Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* contributes to this discourse by presenting a protagonist who challenges stereotypes, navigates cultural tensions, and reclaims the hijab as a tool for self-determination. This study builds upon these insights to further explore how the novel underscores the intersections of faith, culture, and empowerment in the contemporary world.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically textual analysis to examine the portrayal of hijab in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by (Abdel-Fattah, 2007). The research focused on interpretive approach by using close reading of novel, analyzing the novel's themes, character development and narrative structure to explore how hijab functions as a symbol of faith, cultural identity and empowerment. The data of this research were collected by using purposive sampling as the study focused on themes of faith, culture and empowerment in the novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Specific text, dialogues, character interactions and important events in the novel where hijab played a significant role were selected for detailed analysis. The sampling strategy ensured that the most relevant data were collected to analyze the role of hijab in the novel.

In the context of novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* The theory of intersectional feminism presented by Crenshaw (1989) provides a lens to analyze how Amal, the Muslim teenager protagonist experiences wearing hijab in a western society that is shaped by discrimination. The novel challenged the stereotypical western feminist view of hijab as a tool of oppression by presenting it as a source of faith, empowerment and self-expression. Amal's experiences illustrate the intersection of gender, religion and cultural identity showing how Muslim women face multiple layers of societal expectations and discrimination.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Keeping in view Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, this analysis examines how Amal, the protagonist, faces various forms of discrimination based on her gender, religion and ethnicity. Through textual references, this study highlights how these prevailing issues shape Amal's experiences, particularly her choice to wear the hijab in a predominantly western society.

The novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* challenges Western feminist stereotypes that hijab symbolizes oppression as Amal, the protagonist stands for her own identity and claims that Muslim women can be feminists and can choose wearing hijab on their own choice and autonomous decision makers.

"Wearing the hijab is my choice. It gives me a sense of who I am." (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 45)

This showed that Amal is not imposed by external forces like family, culture or religion, rather she chooses to wear hijab by her own will. This also showed her devotion in religion that advocates women's rights to make their autonomous choices within the framework of faith.

Similarly, there is a line from the text of novel that denotes hijab as a feminist act such as:

"People tell me that feminism is about freedom. Well, my hijab is my freedom." (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P.212)

Amal reclaims the hijab within a feminist framework, arguing that feminism should mean respecting women's choice, including religious ones. The novel challenges western-centric feminism which often excludes religious women from feminist discourse.

In the same way, there is another text that dominates self-empowerment and self-acceptance such as,

"I don't care what people think anymore. This is who I am, and I refuse to be ashamed of it" (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 184)

Amal shows through her expression of wearing hijab that she resists western oppression to remove hijab and she embraces self-acceptance, showing that hijab is integral to her identity. Likewise, the following lines reveal her hijab as a source of empowerment, not a sign of oppression such as,

"It makes me feel like I have this strong, invisible shield. Like I'm standing up for what I believe in, even when people stare at me" (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P.98)

The text shows that she finds strength in her faith and identity, demonstrating self-empowerment through religious expression. The metaphor "strong, invisible shield" indicates her confidence and resilience.

A major argument in the novel is that feminism should not be limited to Western ideals of liberation. Amal consistently challenges the notion that empowerment is solely about rejecting traditional or religious practices such as,

"Feminism isn't just about wearing whatever you want—it's about respecting women's choices." (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 189)

This quote directly engages with feminist debates, arguing that choice is the true measure of empowerment. Whether a woman chooses to wear a hijab or not should be equally respected.

In another place, Amal questions the western feminism by raising the argument such as,

"If feminism is about equality, then why do people think my hijab makes me less free?" (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 222)

Amal challenges the inconsistency in feminist discourse. The novel challenges western centric views of freedom, arguing that true feminism must be intersectional and inclusive.

The novel provides a powerful exploration of gendered stereotyping, illustrating how Muslim women face intersecting forms of discrimination based on both religion and gender. This can be seen by textual evidence such as,

"When people see my hijab, they think I'm either oppressed, brainwashed, or a terrorist's wife." (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P.112)

Through the text it has been revealed that Muslim women are oppressed in west, it is assumed that hijab is forced upon them. They are considered as brainwashed victims or who lack independent thought. Moreover, they are supposed as terrorist's wife as their practice of wearing hijab is considered as extremism. Therefore, these stereotypical approaches reinforce how Muslim women are treated differently and are vulnerable to public judgement and prejudice.

Another textual evidence that identifies oppressed Muslim women gender stereotypical approach is,

"I can't count the number of times I've been asked if my dad forced me to wear it. As if I have no brain of my own." (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 102)

In the above lines, the phrase "I can't count the number of times" suggests frustration on stereotypical approach that Muslim women lack their independent will. Another phrase "as if I have no brain of my own" critiques identity of Muslim women and reveals that they need Western intervention to save them from oppression.

There is another perspective from the text that highlights Amal's resistance to assimilation to western secular freedom such as,

"Why should I take it off just to make others feel comfortable?" (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 200)

The text highlights Amal's reaction towards societal pressure as she refuses to compromise on her beliefs for social acceptance. This also reveals how she challenges Western secular feminism that is based on liberation abandoning religious symbols.

In the same way she faces the gender discrimination and cultural othering as shown in the text such as,

“When I walk into the classroom, I feel like an alien. The looks I get aren’t just curious, they’re judgmental.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 78)

The quote from the novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* highlights Amal’s experience with gender stereotyping in west. It shows how she faced exclusion and othering because of wearing hijab in western society. The judgmental looks she received signifies prejudice and discrimination instead her hijab was seen as a religious or cultural choice. Amal’s hijab symbolizes her faith in a secular western setting where it is misinterpreted as foreign, oppressive and even threatening.

While much of discussion about hijab in Western discourse focuses on its social and gender nuances, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* emphasizes its spiritual significance. For Amal, wearing hijab is not just about identity but also about deepening her connection with her faith such as,

“It’s not just about covering my hair. It’s about being closer to God, about reminding myself of my values.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 67)

This quote reveals Amal’s connection with God. It highlights the function of hijab beyond modesty, it serves as a constant reminder of Amal’s spiritual commitments. Her hijab reflects both her external and internal practice of devotion.

Similarly, there is another textual evidence that reflects Amal’s strong faith in religion. Hijab in novel symbolizes spiritual elevation such as,

“Wearing it reminds me of who I am, where I come from, and what I believe in.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 152)

The text shows that the hijab is not merely a religious obligation but also a cultural and personal affirmation. It reflects Amal’s identity as a Muslim woman living in West facing the social and cultural oppression of wearing hijab.

In the same way, the text in novel highlights the decision of Amal for wearing hijab is intertwined with her desire to live a more religious life. Such as,

“Sometimes it’s hard, but my faith keeps me strong.” (Abdel-Fattah, 2007, P. 173)

The text acknowledges that wearing hijab comes with challenges but she finds resilience in her belief system. The line reflects empowerment through faith.

This analysis reveals that the novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* challenges Western Feminist Stereotypes that consider the hijab as a symbol of oppression instead of source of empowerment, faith and self-expression. Amal’s journey demonstrates how gender, religion and cultural identity shape her experiences in western society. The Muslim women in west were subjected to gender discrimination, otherness and societal prejudice. Through textual evidence, the analysis reveals how Amal resists western secular feminist ideals and stereotypes that depict Muslim women as submissive. The novel claims the hijab within a feminist framework, advocating for a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of feminism.

CONCLUSION

The novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* provides a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of hijab as a symbol of empowerment, faith and cultural identity. Through the protagonist, Amal, the novel challenges Western feminism that depicts hijab as a tool of female oppression. However, Amal emphasizes that wearing hijab is her own choice and its deeply rooted in her faith and cultural identity. Her decision to adopt hijab is never imposed by societal pressure. The analysis of Amal’s journey of experiences is examined by the lens of intersectional feminism that reveals the multiple layers of discrimination she faces a young Muslim in a predominantly western society. She faces islamophobia, gender discrimination and cultural nuances, all of which create significant challenges in her life. The novel critiques these challenges by portraying Amal’s resilience. Her refusal to remove her hijab despite social pressures reveals that feminism is not solely about rejecting religious traditions but about having the freedom to choose how to embody one’s identity. Additionally, the novel also

demonstrates how hijab serves as a transformative role in Amal's personal and spiritual journey. She views it as a means of strengthening her connection with God. This perspective challenges the assumption that hijab is merely a visible marker of religious affiliation instead it is an empowering choice that shapes Amal's character and interactions with the world around her. By portraying Amal's journey, the novel contributes to a broader conversation on complexities of feminism, faith and cultural identity. The theoretical framework of intersectional feminism acknowledges the diverse experiences of women from different backgrounds and challenges the idea that empowerment can only be achieved through western norms of liberation. Amal's journey highlights the necessity of embracing multiple feminist perspectives and advocating for a more inclusive and cultural identity of women's rights. In conclusion, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* exemplifies how hijab can be a powerful symbol of agency, self-expression, resistance against societal expectations. Amal's experiences illustrate that true empowerment lies in ability to make one's own choices. Through the intersectional lens, the novel highlights the challenges faced by Muslim women in navigating their identities within multicultural society. The novel plays a crucial role in expanding feminist discourse, ensuring that diverse perspectives are to be heard and respected.

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