



# Embodied Faith and the Limits of Female Agency in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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## Abstract

The present essay discusses Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by focusing on the rendition of Islam as an axis of social agency in an environment that is excessively antagonistic of any version of Islam that falls outside the contours of the “liberal model” morphed by the Western creed of equality, liberty. Amal, the protagonist, embodies the dilemmas of choice and agency within an ideological rubric which disassociates such notions from faith-based convictions. The analysis relies on the notion of Muslim agency as theorized by Saba Mahmood, for whom the conscious formation of deeply rooted religious subjectivities is sidelined within the modern secular rubrics of self-formation. The article also draws on W.E.B Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to highlight the extent to which Muslim female bodies are caught at the intersection between religion and nation. Hence, this essay discloses the challenges facing Muslim women whose exercise of agency is tied to their religious beliefs in a backdrop characterized by multicultural and secular economies. More particularly, it explores Amal's religious tradition of habituated practices—such as wearing the veil in a hostile environment—as embodiments of autonomous agency.

**Keywords** Religious agency · Muslim women · Performativity · Hijab · Double consciousness

## 1 Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11, the ubiquity of orientalist metanarratives that render Muslim women as “oppressed” and “downtrodden” has affected emerging Muslim voices by imprisoning their works within binary contours. In their strife to provide

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alternative narratives, Muslim women authors including Ayisha Malik, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, Leila Aboulela, and Randa Abdel-Fattah have been stricken by other challenges such as the issue of reception and marketability limiting their voices to binary prisms of East and West. Intrinsic to the latter idea is the premise that there is an essential incommensurability between Islam and “Western Values.” The rendition of Muslim women as anything other than victims or escapees has become a challenge to the publishing industry, particularly as it falls outside the contours of conventional representations of Muslim women (Abdel-Fattah 2017, 97). Alternative visions which provide everyday life and struggles of Muslim men and women are deemed “unmarketable” because they do not aspire to promote the westernization of Muslim identities.

In the face of a systematic representational enterprise pigeonholing Muslim female subjectivities into docile victims in need of “saving,” it has become incumbent upon Muslim women authors to invigorate novel ways of self-fashioning in order to construct a hermeneutic space devoid of orientalist images. The idea of “saving” penetrated the cultural landscape as much as it did foreign policy which underscores the intersection of feminist thought with imperial aspirations (Thobani 2018, 164). For instance, while the orientalist rendition of the veil paints Muslim women as agentless objects, female authors foreground alternative experiential realms in which the hijab is presented as a conscious choice. Such “unconventional” representations have penetrated contemporary forms of western-based media outlets, literature, cinema, television, and popular culture. In 2015, the American entertainment industry witnessed the birth of the first American Muslim Marvel superhero comic entitled Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel. This series approached religion as an everyday spiritual and worldly practice which guides and orients individuals. It reclaims an alternative Muslim representation that stresses a heterogeneity of images which break from the normativity associated with the figure of the Muslim in the American film industry ever since the end of the Cold War.

In the literary scene of the last two decades, the representations of Muslim women have received various nuanced, yet contradictory configurations of female subjectivities. Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Does My Head Look Big in This?* problematizes the topic of Muslim women’s agency, a subject that has garnered rigorous scrutiny ever since Islam’s visibility increased globally. Post-9/11, the political milieu in several Western countries has directed relentless focus toward Muslim women’s sartorial enterprise, namely to the issue of veiling or unveiling through which Muslim women have been symbolized as non-western signifiers of alterity and submissiveness specifically in diasporic contexts. Randa Abdel-Fattah, an Australian Muslim author of Palestinian and Egyptian descent, exposes these ethical dilemmas encountered by Muslim women in Australia and projects the multiple modalities of their identities through the intersection of gender, nation, and religion. Through the engagement of different modes of self-representations, her oeuvre centers around an axis which aspires to shed light on the experiential life of veiled Muslim women born or living within Western transnational contexts.

The veil is often constructed as synonymous with lack of autonomy and free will, and a symbol of Muslim women’s subordination. Such parochialism overlooks the variety of modalities upon which Muslim women ground their sartorial

choices, particularly when it comes to veiling. Additionally, it disassociates such choices from what Mahmood identifies as the ideal and active construction of selfhood (Mahmood 2005, 202) where the hijab becomes not only a praxis generating privacy and respect but also a means of contesting the stereotypical and dogmatic equation of Islam with extremism and fundamentalism. In other words, the hijab not only demystifies the overpoliticization of Islam as featured in discourses of terrorism in Western media, but also contributes to the gradual forging of a religious self in a context which is saturated with such propagandistic representations of Islam.

The dichotomous binary of oppression versus resistance predominates the feminist debates over veiled Muslim subjects. Sirma Bilge (2010) stresses the need to go beyond such dichotomy. Firstly, according to the liberal feminist framework, the association of Muslim veiling with submission to male domination undermines any form of agency and invalidates “the possibility of consent, coupling the voluntary submission argument with a false consciousness” (2010, 15). Such mode of thinking simultaneously transforms veiled women from “unconscious agents into dangerous agents of Islam qua diasporic political force threatening Western *Weltanschauung*” (2010, 15). As opposed to the subordination thesis associated with liberal feminism, Bilge locates postcolonial feminists—for whom the veil is an act of subverting western hegemony—within the resistance frame. Within this paradigm, Bilge contends that the veil becomes a symbol of contesting “western imperialism, global capitalism, commodification of women’s bodies or post-9/11 Islamophobia” (2010, 20). Such prevailing instrumentalist reductionisms, for Bilge, discourage the religious motivations for wearing the veil and as such account for the consensual experimental realm of Muslim women’s religious devotional praxis.

Women’s engagement with religious norms and virtues such as modesty proves to be a serious challenge for secular liberal imaginary on which feminist agency is predicated (Mahmood 202; Mack 432; Braidotti 3; Avishai 409; Jacobsen 56; Burke 122). Saba Mahmood’s groundbreaking book, *The Politics of Piety*, has been notably influential in unraveling the reductionist assumptions of secular liberal feminism about agency as resistance to norms. While ethnographically studying the grassroots piety movement mobilized by women in Cairo, Mahmood expounds how these women find agency by engaging with specific religious bodily practices and norms. In this sense, Mahmood proposes a definition of agency that incorporates “not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (2005, 15). Mahmood observes that the piety of Muslim women relies on “outward markers of religiosity—ritual practices, styles of comporting oneself, dress, and so on” (2005, 5). In her fieldwork, the women Mahmood collaborated with “did not regard trying to emulate authorized models of behavior as an external social imposition that constrained individual freedom” (2005, 31). Rather, they envisioned the institutional acuties of performances as potential grounds from which they could materialize selfhood. As such, Mahmood’s efforts to decouple agency from resistance and subversion seek to reformulate the concept of agency by developing a framework of how different modalities of moral actions and embodied practices are performed and permeated in the process of self-development and subject construction.

When engaging with Butler's formulation of performativity, Mahmood noted the incessant proclivity of allocating invocations of agency with their potentiality toward resistant anti-hegemonic ends, which in their rebellious capacity to re-imagine normative practices, engage in self-consolidation as well. Mahmood indicated that the subject in Butlerian philosophy is imprisoned in an economy of resistance and is reduced to an almost teleological strife toward unrepressing self-expression. Bulter claims, as Mahmood illuminates, "that the iterable and repetitive character of the performatives makes the structure of norms vulnerable and unstable because the reiteration may fail, be resignified, or be reappropriated for purposes other than the consolidation of norms" (2005, 162). The significance of an act or bodily practice should be understood within the transformative effects of that particular act upon the subject. In other words, for Mahmood, it is through this modality of actions and the repetition of bodily acts that enhance the subject to train "one's memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of a conduct" (2005, 157). She further explains that even the notion of freedom is "mediated by other capacities and desires" which are historically and socially specific, and for some societal change is taken to be trivial in comparison with the process of self-fashionability and ethical orientation. Thus, the subject is fleshed out through a set of embodied practices, "one in which the outward behavior of body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized" (2005, 159). Hence, the agential output through which performativity enables the construction of identity is premised upon the idea that acts of performativity do not correspond to an intrinsically essential form of identity. Rather, these acts construe an interior identity in the process of acting out the performative bodily markers.

Indeed, Mahmood's development of the concept of pious agency is not only restricted to an inward spiritual state, but also a disposition to practical conduct. In doing so, Mahmood contrasts the Kantian model of ethics, which is predicated on the basis of reason, with the Aristotelian tradition which put forth the idea that "morality was both realized through, and manifest in, outward behavioral forms" (2005, 25). Reaffirming the importance of Aristotelian ethics, Mahmood draws on his notions of virtue and habitus<sup>1</sup> to develop an understanding of agency as being displayed through the cultivation of embodied practices as integral to an ethical life.

Mahmoodian Habitus is embodied as an intentional act established through and by self-praxis; that is, it is cultivated when someone masters a craft; it is imbibed and developed through practical and repetitive ethical and pious gestures which eventually become indissociable from the person's instinctive actions. As such, the realm of virtue, i.e., the good, moral, ethical, honest life and values, are an amalgamation of both embodied outward behaviors which can manifest as sartorial or bodily practices, and inward proclivities which animate one's sentimental states, conceptual frameworks, and intentional acts in the world. Repetition is critical because it carves out those virtues through habitual behaviors that align with our internal dispositions. Both are implied and constitutive of each other.

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle's work on ethics, in which he stresses the relevance of exterior bodily activities to cultivation of inward dispositions, continues to inspire scholars to this day, especially in studies of religion.

Arguably, the influence of Mahmood's anthropological insights charted out the contours of the conditions which largely facilitated the entry of feminism into the postsecular landscape. In her "In spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," Rosi Braidotti concurs with Mahmood's contention that agency can be enacted and expressed through religious piety. What Braidotti characterizes as the postsecular turn in feminism hinges on how female agency is mediated through various modes of articulating the religious experience. In other words, posing a challenge to European feminism, Braidotti contends that the postsecular turn "makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality" (2008, 2). For Braidotti, this challenge is a double bind, as she aspires to foster an agential praxis from within religious experiences. On the one hand, she attempts to avert oppositional rationality, while on the other hand, she tries to dismiss the negative situatedness from which the only position that agency can achieve is juxtaposed against oppression. Alternatively, Braidotti proposes that subjectivities should be oriented by a form of "creative affirmation," not "by negation but rather by creative affirmation, not on loss but on vital generative forces" (2008, 19). In the same vein, Sarah Bracke expands the agential parameters of active-based subjectivities to incorporate "different (non-liberal, non-secular) understandings of the capacity to act and shape the world, and notably understandings of autonomy, of subjectivities shaped within a tradition and by the dynamics of that tradition, including their capacities to transform a tradition" (2008, 63–64). However, what characterizes the contours of the postsecular, as Bracke proposes, resides in the iterable disjunction between the secular and the modern (2008, 59); a spatial disarticulation where religion emerges as a complex and solid ground upon which women of faith base their embodied forms of agency. To this end, questions of religious agency, subjectivities, and autonomy are at the heart of this "new disarticulation" which can be attained by urging the modern to include faith-based worldviews and perspectives.

Furthermore, the assumption that modernity and secularism are inextricably intertwined is challenged by Lara Deeb, among others, who tackles the issue of incommensurability of Islam and modernity. This assumption that is widely circulated across several academic and media discourses, as Deeb points out, often holds the West as a prototypical model of modernity and morality. Within this discursive rubric "the West is positioned at the center of a universal modernity that radiates or seeps outward to the rest of the world, where its various characteristics are adopted with some local amendment" (2006, 14). Reacting to the same issue, the function of this secular/religious binary after 9/11, as pointed out by Sherene Razack, serves as "a color line, marking the difference between the white, modern, enlightened West and people of color, in particular, Muslims" (2008, 148). In this regard, Deeb proposes the notion of "enchanted modern" to account for the idea of how modernness can be imagined without disenchantment by emphasizing both the material and spiritual as necessary components in the progress of subject formation (2006, 5). By exploring the many ways in which modernity and piety intersect in daily social practices, Deeb demonstrates that an "enchanted modern" serves as a critique of the binary logic that categorizes Islam as "anti-modern" and the West as "modern". For Deeb, then, dislodging this dichotomy permits us to view spiritual unfolding as

a probable dimension of the modern (2006, 18). Likewise, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott (2007) draws attention to how the antithesis between religion and secularism reinforces the controversial idea that the emancipation of women originates from secularization in modern societies. Against this backdrop, Scott refuses such a binary by invoking that a lucid relation between the state and its religions can be more conducive to the problematic of agency particularly if it neither “forcibly repressing religion or giving up democracy- which remains a place where political resolution is never achieved on the grounds of religious truth” (2007, 95–96).

This paper argues that Abdel-Fattah’s novel neither succumbs to the submissional paradigm characterized by Western secular views of Muslim women, nor does it endorse the discourses of resistant nativism which imprison Muslim women in a dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed. It rather puts forward an alternative vision where Muslim women’s choices of veiling and unveiling are unraveled as personal ventures of what Saba Mahmoud designates as the politics of piety. This paper addresses the question of how Muslim women negotiate the headscarf within Australian public spaces where Islamic associated body practices are not easily tolerated. As such, the novel creates a space where Muslim women’s desires of affect and religious devotional praxis are presented as fundamentally intertwined with their forms of agency.

## 2 Muslims in Praxis: Piety, Performativity and Self-crafting

The politicization of the veil as a visible external marker through which Muslim women are to be mapped out within secular knowledge formations has generated various responses from multiple ideological angles (Asad 39; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 617; Fadil 83; Bracke and Fadile, 36). The latter scholarship focalizes on the agential choice which the veil represents as a religious act. With the proliferation of studies over the veil, there is an increasing body of literary productions among which *Does my Head Look Big in This?* can be regarded. These act as a responsive cultural productions which shed light on Islamic dress code and beyond such debates. In the novel, Amal willingly embraces the hijab as a crucial component of her identity signifying her understanding of Islam and her desire to display devotion to God. As a visible emblem of Muslim identity, Abdel-Fattah presents the hijab as a mode of self-expression and self-affirmation for the protagonist.

The narrative depicts the life of a 16-year-old Muslim girl named Amal who lives with her parents in Australia and chooses to wear the veil. It narrates her daily encounters with family and friends and the impact of such a choice on her personal and public life. Amal is depicted as highly intelligent, courageous, and autonomous along with a great sense of humor. At the center of the novel, Abdel-Fattah represents the notion of choice as intrinsic to the character’s agency. At the moment of making this choice, her perplexed feelings demonstrate that it was not an easy choice within a culture where her identity as a Muslim migrant is already mapped out in the imaginary of the Australian society. In fact, she is cognizant of the potential repercussions created by her veiling at her new school, stating that “it’s hard enough being an Arab Muslim at a new school with your hair tumbling down your

shoulders. Shawling up is just plain psychotic” (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 6). The hijab acquires a symbolic dimension beyond being a mere religious emblem. It becomes a means through which she is to be singled out and bound in a space where she is always presupposed to have an essence associated with the terrifying images the hijab triggers in people’s imagination. Through this, a presupposed identity is set upon her as a hijabi, an identity that she strives to dismantle within Australian society in order to demonstrate her true self.

In the opening of the novel, Amal creates a list to help her decide whether to wear the hijab or not. She decided to wear it, since “the hijab is a part of [her]” (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 49). The “To Wear or not To Wear List” she writes down can be conceptually fathomed through the bifurcational contingencies that are prone to polarize the process of identity formation. The latter is a dichotomous venture as the individual has to be cognizant of how they perceive themselves, how they are perceptually understood in different communities and how such perception is an external imposition upon them. In this vein, Amal’s decision to wear the veil is a courageous assertion of her individuality, and thus, a form of agency is being reaffirmed through her ability to make choices.

As Amal willingly decides to wear the veil to school, she sought out her parents for words of encouragement. However, they are taken aback by her decision: “[a]t dinner I tell my parents that I’m thinking about wearing the hijab and to my disbelief they look at each other nervously. I was expecting a cheerleader routine around the family room. Not two faces staring anxiously at me” (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 22–23). The reaction of her parents is typical of Muslims living in the west. They usually oscillate between being proud that their offspring embrace their religious and cultural heritage and being apprehensive and wary of the effect which the public display of such heritage might cause in a Western society. Her mother Jamila, a dentist who has faced political and cultural challenges as a result of her hijab, is specially concerned.

Though Amal is conservatively encouraged by her parents, she is also advised not to make any rash decisions. She finally decides to embrace it. Rather than being a mere performative act, Amal’s adoption of her Islamic faith stems from a deep sense of self-awareness which is deeply intertwined with the dialectic of resisting authority and recognizing self-autonomy (Tam 2018, 150). While considering the possibility of becoming a hijabi, Amal is questioning her motivations to make such a choice. The petrification which haunted her while considering becoming a hijabi did not hurdle her conviction. In fact, she states that,

I feel my passion and conviction in Islam are bursting inside me and I want to prove to myself that I’m strong enough to wear a badge of my faith. I believe it will make me feel so close to God [...] That’s when this warm feeling buzzes through you and you smile to yourself, knowing God’s watching you, knowing that He knows you’re trying to be strong to please Him. Like you’re both in on a private joke and something special and warm and extraordinary is happening and nobody in the world knows about it because it’s your own experience, your own personal friendship with your Creator. I guess when I’m not wearing

the hijab I feel like I'm missing out. I feel cheated out of that special bond. (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 7-8)

This explicitly accentuates the performative act of veiling as an embodied act and a means of cultivating spiritual dispositions. The veil, according to Amal, is a representational emblem of her Muslim identity and faith, and she intends to wear it full time in order to enhance her commitment to her religion. Developing a self-reflective religious subjectivity, according to Amal, requires the strengthening of piety, which is not merely associated with outward appearance, but also with inner moral transformation and her commitment to Allah. As such, the veil for Amal is not merely a sartorial symbol, but the bridge through which she aspires to bring about a desired new sense of self. It was also a soothing praxis which helped her persevere and channel the feelings of anger, exclusion, and unbelonging which have troubled her prior to her adoption of the veil as an emblem of religious piety. Her choice is not random, but inspired by her belief in crafting a Muslim identity at a crucial moment of transition from a multiethnic environment to a homogenous community. It is this moment of transition and external change which renders the idea of self-crafting as a prominent thread running through the narrative and weaved into how Amal manages the external incursions which make the process of identity formation difficult at various phases. She states,

All this time I've been walking around thinking I've become pious because I've made the difficult decision to wear the hijab. I've been assuming that now that I'm wearing it full-time, I've earned all my brownie points. But what's the good of being true to your religion on the outside, if you don't change what's on the inside, where it really counts? (*ibid.*, p. 333)

Rather than being rooted in a particular discursive formation, these affective and paralinguistic interpretations of religion—in theory and praxis—aim at the gradual configuration of the self and subject (Baldi 2021, 142). Therefore, in opposition to the secular understanding of religion as merely personal and individual, Amal clearly demonstrates that it is rather a process characterized by entanglements of the internal with the external; she showcases the potentiality of religious praxis to forge a cardinal part of how individuals ethically conduct themselves in the world, particularly for women through the act of wearing the scarf, praying, and fasting. In other words, while the modern secular matrix parochially prisons religion within the contours of the individual, multitudes of Muslim women incarnate a conceptualization of religion which they embody in performative and affective bodily practices that disrupts the Manicheanism of inward/outward and secular/religious ligatures of the modern world. As a potent character, Amal's performative act of donning hijab functions as an endeavor to articulate a Muslim identity, and she recounts.

I lie in bed that night and replay the scene over and over in my head. I'm experiencing a new identity, a new expression of who I am on the inside, but I know that I'm not alone. I'm not breaking new ground. I'm sharing something with millions of other women around the world and it feels so exciting. (Abdel-fattah 2005, 28)

The significance of this passage lies in its unearthing of the experiential realm which the hijab fosters as a means of transnational group belonging. The hijab, in this conceptualization, is rendered as a site where women from all over the globe are interconnected through the experience of sharing, in the sense that while the veil initially strikes us as an external sartorial praxis, in the case of Amal, it expresses her “inside” identity. It is a double-edged spiritual and sartorial praxis, as the first pertains to believing in Islam, and the second is manifested in the sense of belonging which is enabled through the phenomenon of veiling as being an Islamic praxis. The latter is particularly heightened because it is also a realm of affective solidarity. Those Muslims who choose to wear the veil in spite of the external pressures from their families and societies generate an affective realm where support becomes essential to the development of agency. In this respect, Abdel-Fattah draws on the agential potential of hijab as normative practice and its potential of making an affective connection. More importantly, the hijab is presented as an instrument of self-affirmation and embodiment of agency as it also shows women’s ability to make choices. As such, for Amal, the hijab is an empowering space where she finds in spiritual rejuvenation.

At her first day in school, Amal faces a typical situation in Muslim women’s life post-9/11. Her hijab was perceived as a violation of the dress code which the school allocates for students. Moreover, it is automatically assumed to be a parental imposition on a “helpless” child. The school principal, Ms. Walsh’s first encounter with Amal, is overwrought with a sense of anxiety which the hijab came to represent in secular discourses. The veil is invoked as an impingement upon long-established institutional traditions, and it is transformed from a mere symbol of piety to a signifier of dis-reputation. Consider the quote below:

“Well, Amal. I’m not sure what to do here. I hope you appreciate that this isn’t Hi-Hida – your old Coburg school. This is a reputable educational establishment. We have more than one hundred years of proud history. A history of tradition, Amal. Of conformity with the rules and policies of this institution. We have a strict uniform policy. And you have walked in, on your first day back from holidays, and been so presumptuous as to alter it without authorization.”  
(*ibid.*, p. 39-40)

The fact that the school’s long-standing reputation is at stake for the simple fact of wearing a cloth over someone’s head is in itself revealing of the anxiety-ridden Western consciousness when it comes to the veil and Muslim women. It is as if the veil taints the heritage and tradition of the school by its mere presence as a symbol of un-conformity. Such contradictory proclivities reveal the hypocritical stances of the West toward women in general; and the double standard with which Muslim women are treated specifically; namely that some are encouraged to express themselves through different sartorial praxes while others are reprimanded for such choices.

With her headscarf, Amal’s body stands as a figure that deviates from the norms of the Western cultural portrayal of femininity. As a result, Amal’s figure is reminiscent of what Mohanty illuminates as having an “essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained)” and as belonging to the “third

world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized" (Mohanty 1991, 56). The notion of Third World women according to Mohanty is juxtaposed with "Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions" (*ibid.*, p. 21). This asymmetrical system of representations tends to formulate "third world women" as an essentialized category denied from acting with agency. They also render them identical, and hence denying them heterogeneity which reiterates the monolithic and one-sided rhetoric of orientalism with regard to Muslim women.

The veil is designated in the liberal paradigm as being an epitome of passivity and disempowerment, further solidifying the colonial understanding of Muslim women as victims to be saved, dependent, and without agency. Against such colonial imposition, Amal performs conducts of modesty as embodied gestures through which her identity can be materially altered by the praxis of pious behavior. The idea of an agential will to self-realize is acted out by Amal through the daily act of veiling which comes from conviction not socio-patriarchal submission. As such, self-fashioning acquires an ethical dimension that Amal exercises through the agency of her will to wear the veil in a hostile environment. When Amal's classmates first encounter her wearing the hijab, they start inquiring about her new appearance. She is treated as an object of scrutiny. That is at this point that they begin to ask questions such as: "Did your parents force you?", "Doesn't it get hot?", "Can I touch it?", "Can you swim?", "Do you wear it in the shower?" "So is it like nuns? Are you married to Jesus now?" (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 70–71). The antagonistic inquiries from her classmates not only illustrate their exotic and ambivalent fascination with her hijab but also paint her as an incorporeal figure. With all eyes on her, Amal is objectified into a metaphysical reality where she becomes a thing to be displayed, touched, and marveled at. Her peers' reaction reflects a plethora of prejudices and a lack of knowledge about her religious motivations. However, Amal is keen on responding to the provocative curiosity about her decision; she says: "It's unreal. Everybody's asking me about my decision and seems genuinely interested in hearing what I have to say. They're all huddled around me and I'm having the best time explaining to them how I put it on and when I have to wear it" (*ibid.*, p. 71). In this vein, Abdel-Fattah embarks on a task of debunking the widely held conventional stereotypes about women's subjugation in Islam, which have received widespread attention particularly in post-9/11 era.

### 3 Islam, Nation, and the Problematic of Identity

The bifurcation of identity between selfhood and nation has been central in Abdel-Fattah's novel. Such a problematic is supplemented with a question of the female protagonist's locality within western history, values, culture, and attitudes as a Muslim subject. Referring to herself as an "Australian-born-Muslim-Palestinian-Egyptian-choc-a-holic," Abdel-Fattah is keenly interested in the double bind of being an Australian and Muslim. This resembles W.E.B. DuBois's underlying question of "How does it feel to be a problem?" in his most famous work, *The Souls of Black*

*Folk*. In accordance with Du Bois's well-known statement that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line," Eboo Patel, in his *Acts of Faith* (2007), contends that "the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line" (xv). Patel's statement is not intended to downplay the crucial role of bridging cultural differences. Rather, it encourages acknowledging that cultural diversity encompasses not just racial and ethnic differences but also religious ones.

In the novel, Abdel-Fattah stresses on portraying her protagonist as a typical Australian teenager, who is simultaneously proud of preserving her religious allegiance. Between these allegedly polarized streams, Amal produces her cultural identity based on negotiating between national and religious imaginations of belonging, which serve to refashion a new form of life as it is conceptualized by W.E.B DuBois as double consciousness. DuBois casts this double consciousness as a way to describe the Black American awareness of their societal position and perception as emerging in the form of twoness, in which "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (2007, xiii). Amal's double consciousness manifests itself at the very outset of the narrative as she proclaims, "I'm an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian. That means I was born an Aussie and whacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens" (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 6). This hyphenated existence fosters the development of Amal's double consciousness. Amal is certain about her identity as a Muslim and Australian, but what intensifies her sentiments of double consciousness and identity confusion is the racial prejudice and cultural stereotyping she encounters on several occasions in the novel. Amal highlights that she.

wasn't one of those children who had a mixed up, "syndrome" childhood. Yeah, sure, it didn't matter how much my parents told me to feel proud of my identity, there was always somebody in the playground to tell the wogs to go home. But as it turns out, I was pathetic at sport and obsessed with boy bands featured in Dolly magazine, so there were plenty of other ways to make me feel like an idiot. I learnt how to suppress my Muslimness, and I pretty much got on with having a fun and religiously anonymous primary school life. (*ibid.*, p. 12)

Amal's attempt to obliterate her Muslim identity comes as a result of being bullied at school, as well as of being unprepared for the backlash she might receive in the public sphere. As a result, Amal is finally tired of suppressing her difference and chooses to wear the hijab as an important step in her self-affirmation as an Australian Muslim girl who is no longer required to conceal her faith. By doing so, Amal's choice offers a complex terrain of identity negotiation suggesting that religious rituals are not at odds with Australian citizenship, rather they are both enacted and performed in a meaningful way. In this vein, Amal is perceived by some of her peers as not belonging to Australia when she adamantly condemns Tia's bigoted exclusion of Muslims from the Australian multicultural landscape. For instance, Tia tells her, "Why don't you just get out of our country and go back to some desert cave where you belong?" (*ibid.*, p. 245). Though Amal is defiantly reclaiming her Australian side, still the Muslim remains at stake as she is torn between her devotion to Islam

on one hand and to her birth country on the other. The nation does not lose its paramountcy as an identitarian demarcating reference. Rather it is supplanted by faith as a core constituent of the protagonist's subjectivity which dislodges from its originally rigid secular formation (Mishra 2020, 317).

Amal's devotion to her faith is perceived by people in the public space as a sign of terrorism, especially when terrorist attacks are prevalent in the media. As the news of the Bali Bombings circulate, anti-Muslim sentiment prevails, in which Muslims have been subjected to racial profiling. Against this backdrop, in which Muslims have been lumped into a homogenized category, Amal's performativity of faith manifests itself as a salient identity signifier symbolizing otherness that translates her religious identity as opposed to a national one. While going to school on public transport, Amal is regarded with suspicion due to her religious visibility which positions her as a representative of Islam. As she suddenly realizes that,

the volume of the radio has been raised so that it blares out through the bus. A voice on the early-morning talkback shouts words of outrage about "Muslims being violent", and how "they're all trouble", and how "Australians are under threat of being attacked by these Koran-wielding people who want to sabotage our way of life and our values". My face goes bright red, and my stomach turns as the bus driver eyeballs me through the reflection of the mirror, looking at me as though I am living proof of everything being said." (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 160)

The embodied performativity of Amal's religious identification becomes a site of public gaze, in which her hypervisibility as an emblem of otherness carries a potential threat. The bus driver's gaze made Amal feel as if she is interrogated and intensely scrutinized, which deems her a perpetually foreigner or "the familiar stranger" (2017) in Stuart Hall's words. Within this affective atmosphere of suspicion, Amal's experience of being othered and gazed at disapprovingly produces an assortment of feelings of embarrassment, stress, and anxiety. Regarding Amal's affective experience, however, an old Australian lady attempts to calm her down by requesting from the bus driver to turn off the radio. Amal is relatively comforted by the lady telling her that "I'm sixty-seven years old. And, dear, in my sixty-seven years, I've never let politics tell me how to treat people" (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 161). As such, the woman's simple act of compassion brings Amal her smile back as well as trust in people.

Amal's double consciousness is intensified as she learns the news of the 2002 Bali Bombings during the school assembly with the school principal Ms. Walsh who insists on seeking the guidance of teachers and school counselors in order to share their feelings and emotions in class about this horrific event. While Ms. Walsh is delivering her speech, Amal is in a state of anxiety, she ponders her turbulences,

Was I going to be incriminated for their crimes? Was I going to be allowed to share in my country's mourning or would I be blamed? [...] I cry, but it's bizarre because I can't even break down and grieve without wondering about what people are thinking of me. I wince every time Ms Walsh says the word "massacre" with the word "Islamic" as though these barbarians somehow

belong to my Muslim community. As though they're the black sheep in the flock, the thorn in our community's side. It gives them this legitimacy, this identity that they don't deserve. These people are aliens to our faith. (*ibid.*, p. 249-250)

Amal's fear of being a potential threat and conflated with terrorism leads her impotent to express her emotions toward the victims of the Bali bombings due to the association of her religious identity with violence as it is evident in Ms. Walsh's synonymizing Muslimness with terrorism. Such a stigmatization based on faith has further exacerbated Amal's sense of identity confusion and double consciousness compelling her to question the Australian aspect of her multilayered identity. In this vein, Amal wonders: "how naïve I was to ever think that I could find my place in my country and be unaffected by the horrors and politics in the world. I have nowhere else to go and nowhere else I want to go. Once again I don't know where I stand in the country in which I took my first breath of life" (*ibid.*, p. 251). Amal's awareness of her hyphenation is acutely heightened due to global politics which depend mostly on polarizing societies and individuals into "us" versus "them."

Amal feels that she is singled out by her peers to represent the religious and political views of all Muslims. She was even asked to explain her position regarding the Bali Bombings. In this context, Amal's dress has come to signify, in the words of Reina Lewis, "one of the key forms through which Muslim identities are performed and contested" (2013, 306). As such, the sartorial practices of Muslim women are transformed from being an individual choice to becoming a communal affair. She was asked by Lara, her peer, to deliver a speech on Islam and terrorism at the next forum meeting:

"It'll be really valuable, Amal. I mean, what those Muslims did in Bali was so horrible, so if you could explain to everybody why they did it and how Islam justifies it, we could all try to understand. What do you think?" "I think no."

"No? Oh, come on, Amal! Please. It'll really spice up our next Forum meeting. Everybody's got loads of questions and you're the perfect one to answer them."

"Why? Because I'm Muslim?"

"Yeah, obviously." She gives me a "well, duh" expression. Why do I have to deal with this? I feel like my head is permanently stuck inside an oven. Every time something happens in the world, and the politicians start barking out about Islamic terrorists and the journalists start their flashing headlines, it's as though they're turning up the oven heat dial. My head starts to roast and burn and I need air, coolness, somebody to keep me from exploding. (*ibid.*, p. 255-256)

This passage evokes one of the most pernicious issues facing Muslims today, especially Muslim women as "ambassadors" of their faith in Muslim minority countries. The problem resides in the almost instinctual proclivity of the West to call upon all Muslims to explain acts of terror when they are perpetrated by extremists who claim to be representative of Islam. By "explaining," "Muslims are compelled to publically display and prove their loyalty to the nation" (Thobani 2018, 166). It is

as if by the virtue of being a Muslim, one can almost unconsciously “explain to everybody” the terror which has been carried out by those fundamentalists. Such “calling upon” also implies that one can truly be representative of a diverse culture and religion that almost one-third of the world population adheres to. Amal’s frustration stems from her realization of being identified in a unique position as an authentic spokesperson and an ambassador of the Muslim faith. Identified primarily through her religious background, Amal yells at how “they think I’m a walking ambassador, that because I’m wearing hijab” (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 156). Consequently, the choice of wearing the hijab traps Amal into a fixed symbol without acknowledging how her agency functions through an individual praxis.

Furthermore, Abdel-Fattah showcases how multiculturalism is at stake when it comes to Muslim women, highlighting how religious gendered identities of Muslim women are subject to social injustices in everyday spaces. When Amal applied for a part-time job, she was turned down based on her demeanor. The restaurant owner tells her, “Sorry, love, we can’t accept people like you. What do you mean? The thing on your head, love, that’s what I mean. It’s not hygienic and it just don’t look good up at the front of the shop” (*ibid.*, p. 319). Rather than judging her personal capabilities as an individual, Amal is judged and scrutinized by outward appearance which stands in contrast to the employer’s concern of making a profit. The veil already implicates her in a network of relational symbolism associated with the image of the Muslim woman in Australian imaginary. He associates her with impurity, dirtiness, uncleanness, and disgust which will not only penetrate the food but also the veneer of his entire enterprise.

The contradictory character which has saturated multicultural societies has been absolved in the eyes of Amal. She ceased to see issues between interraciality, interfaith, and intercultural encounters. She has become steeped in various traditions which she sees as empowering rather than deflating. During the last day at school, Amal ponders on the events that animate her journey to self-realization and psychological maturity which is found in better expression in the Bildungsroman story (Jesmin 2022, 148). She evokes the kaleidoscopic rubric of Australian multiculturalism, with its ups and downs, racism and affinity, opprobrium and empathy, stating that,

It’s been the ‘wogs’, the ‘nappy heads’, the foreigners’ the ‘persons of Middle Eastern appearance’, the Asians, the ‘oppressed’ women, the Greek Orthodox pensioner chain-smoker, the ‘salami eaters’, the ‘ethnics’, the pom-turned-curry munchers, the narrow minded and the educated ... It’s their stories and confrontations and pains and joys which have empowered me to know myself, challenges me to embrace my identity as a young Australian-Palestinian-Muslim girl. (Abdel-Fattah 2005, 359)

Amal realizes that the multiplicity of the conflicting denominations which have been bestowed upon her, such as sartorial, ethnic, racial, religious, and gendered, instantiates the tensions of the multicultural environment in which her identity has “come of age.” It is the kaleidoscope of various experiences that construct Amal as a character dwelling in a double consciousness. What is at stake here is the role of Muslim women as subjects caught up between entangled discourses of nationhood,

citizenship, and cultural representation. The hijab within such interlockings is evoked as a problematic signifier troubling secular rigid definitions of nation, body, gender and female agency. Yet, the hijab and the act of veiling itself in the novel reveal to us the unremitting significations that arises through personal, religious, transnational, and diasporic acuties carried out by different experiences which Muslim women face in different contexts where the hijab is understood as submissiveness and regression.

## 4 Conclusion

This article contends that by conceptualizing an embodied agency within the spectrum of religion, the female body and its sartorial practices in Abdel-Fattah's narrative reshape our understanding of the crucial role of the religious experience for Muslim women in diaspora. As such, the hijab is reconfigured as a form of agency against the reductive stereotypical images of Muslim women in Australia. Desire, self-crafting, and embodiment are epitomized in Abdel-Fattah's text to symbolize how the hijab, as a bodily act, functions in the formation of an ethical and pious self, or in Saba Mahmood's words "forms of bodily comportment considered germane to the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self" (2005, 2). Through Amal's substantial sense of desire and will, Abdel-Fattah creates a new form of femininity beyond the secular/religious binary. Agency, then, is reconceptualized not in a straightforward matter of resistance to norms. Rather it is about the techniques used by women all over the world to craft their own subjectivities. As such, this article hopes to have shown that our understanding of agency cannot be limited to the contours of secularity or to resistant nativism but rather it can be envisioned on affective, sartorial, and creedal acuties. The act of veiling as means of embodying and cultivating the piety of selfhood provides us with a complex angle from which we may approach the plethora of Muslim narratives aspiring to derail from the secularist rigidity and domination of conceptual frameworks and build other alternative dimensions where religion might dialectically interact with agency, body, and sartorialism.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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