

## **Rethinking Muslim Woman's Agency in Modern Literature**

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### **Abstract**

*In the present struggle for power between nations and civilizations, gender issues pertaining to the Muslim world have been politicized and in the process women's lives have been deconstructed and taken out of context. As the Muslim woman finds her position being shifted from subject to object, her voice is muted and her agency is nullified. This paper seeks to investigate Muslim woman's agency in the public and private space in English texts written by comprador intellectuals and then compare them to Arabic texts. The English texts that will be studied are *Midnight's Children* (Rusdie), *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Nafisi) and *Dreams of Trespass* (Mernissi), while the Arabic texts are *Alwarefah* (U Al-Khamees), *A Woman and Two Shadows* (K Al-Khamees) and *Masarratwa Alawaja* (Takarali). In comparing the English and Arabic texts' representations of Muslim women's will to power in the public and private space, this paper seeks to correct stereotypes about the Muslim woman's lack of agency as a first step to allowing her a voice and a say in her present and future. This paper also hopes to come to an understanding of what the similarities and differences in writers' representations may reveal about the human condition in its individual endeavor for verification and acceptance within the larger global political struggle for authority and power.*

**Key Words:** Muslim woman; agency; postcolonialism; orientalism; comprador intellectuals; gender issues; public space; private space

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, women have been weighed down by responsibilities of national stature. They have been anointed as 'mothers of the nation,' "privileged bearers of corporate identities and boundary markers of their communities," the very core and foundation of cultural heritage and "custodians of cultural particularisms" (Kandiyoti, 1994, p. 388; p. 382). Muslim women have also taken on the added burden of being considered "the repositories of religious beliefs and keepers of purity and integrity in the community" (Basu, 1997, p. 3). In most recent years, the forces that have been committed to politicizing gender have taken Muslim women hostage, their private lives, traditions and public demeanor gazed at and scrutinized. As these women's lives are deconstructed and taken out of context, their experiences are overgeneralized for the purpose of comparing them to some universal paradigm of 'freedom' and 'equality.' As privileged producers of boundaries of national, religious and spatial domains, Muslim women's voices have ended up being muted and their individuality frozen in time.

This is particularly evident in the literature of the present age, where Muslim women are stereotyped as a signifier who is displaced from one position to another without being allowed any real substance or agency. In an age where sensitivities and prejudices are growing against Muslims, literature becomes an important venue to correct or reinforce existing stereotypes about the Muslim woman. At a time where the political and literary are the one and the same, it is a certainty that what is to be found in the literary domain is a reflection of the political arena as well as the fact that the literary is an agent which aids and abets the political scenario. Recognizing the power of literature to affect world politics by correcting or reinforcing stereotypes, writers need to acknowledge how their work can be used as an instrument of ideology in the service of dynamic of power (Viswanthan, 1989, p. 4).

The works that will be analyzed in this study are English texts written about the Muslim and/or Arab world for an English speaking audience and Arabic texts written for an Arab audience. The English texts that have been chosen for this study are mainly those of comprador intellectuals, such as Salman Rushdie, Azar Nafisi and Fatima Mernissi.

The Arab writers that will be discussed are: 'Umayma al-Khamīs, Kholūd al-Khamīs and Fu'ād al-Takarālī. The works of these writers will be examined in relation to their portrayal of the Muslim and/or Arab woman's agency within gendered spaces, whether that is in the private or public domain. The texts of comprador intellectuals have been particularly chosen in this study as their privileged position at the "interstices" of two cultures gives them the credibility to speak about the Muslim world all the while assuming the language and authoritative demeanor of the western scholar. Fanon emphasizes the latter point when he states that "To speak means . . . above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization" (1952, p. 1-2). As interpreters between two cultures, these native informants take on the facial features of their ancestors only to reveal an intellect that has been influenced by the culture in whose language they are writing. By offsetting the English works against those written in Arabic for an Arab audience, comprador's set of "truths" about Muslim woman's agency is contested and re-read within a new set of paradigms and power equations. It is also important to note that two different genres, memoir and fiction, are given equal status in this study since it is the attitude and stance of the writers (as they reveal themselves in the selection of incidents and dialogues) rather than the form they use that is at the center of controversy.

As a study that surveys a large number of writers from different cultures and nations, it is essential to avoid making any generalizations or falling into the trap of objectifying writers or their characters into what Chandra Mohanty calls "a singular monolithic subject" (1995, p. 242). With the exception of those narratives that portray dimensionless characters, each text will be examined within its specific cultural background, taking care to factor in ethnic and gender differences and time frame. As a culture-specific study, the term 'agency' will be considered within a Muslim/Arab context which will not necessarily overlap with the feminisms of Western Europe. Private space in this study will essentially come to represent the home, sanctuary or privacy wherein women weave their lives. Public space, on the other hand, will qualify as anywhere else that is outside the home in non-segregated places, in the workplace or at leisure. The realm of segregated women's space outside the home is usually attributed to the private as it is thought of in terms of a sanctuary wherein women bond away from the overwhelming constraints of patriarchy. The dichotomy of private/public space can also be synonymous with inner/outer, family/ work, home/world, spiritual/material.

It is important to note that though the public and private domains are considered as separate spaces, they are not neutral or static realms that can be fixed in time and place, but are interactive areas that merge only to separate and realign. They are productive spaces that enter into dynamic relationship with their surroundings shaping and being shaped by social phenomenon. Reina Lewis states that gendered spaces "produce a series of spatial relations which map the bodies moving through and around them with a force both socializing and symbolic" (2004, p. 179). As spatial zones that are always in motion, they provide the perfect opportunity for identities to be reevaluated, restructured and restaged.

### **1. Rushdie**

The first work that will be examined is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. In this fictional autobiography that unfolds between 1950 and 1970, Saleem Sinai tries to represent the entirety of India within his individual self. As Saleem incorporates India's problems and struggles within his own private narrative, the many and one, the public and private seem to merge together. However, as tensions in India grow, a hole starts to develop inside of Saleem, a sign of his inability to contain the public and private as one.

Just as Saleem is unable to contain India's affairs into his personal account, the public and private also fail to coalesce when it comes to gendered spaces. Though women prove to be valuable to the nation, they are kept from participating in its public affairs. This is clearly shown in Jamila Singer's example. Though she is deemed to be worthy of being called "Pakistan's Angel," "the Nation's voice," and "Bulbul-edin," her voice is only heard as a medium through which the nation can thrive. As a teenager, Jamila used to be reckless and disobedient and as such her voice, like many other women's voices, was silenced into conformity and passivity. It is only as "a sword for purity . . . a weapon with which we shall cleanse men's souls" that Jamila's voice is allowed in the public arena and even then it is only her voice and not her face or her body that can show its presence (Rushdie, 1981, p.437). She must be covered with an "all concealing white silk chador, the curtain or veil, heavily embroidered in gold brocade-work and religious calligraphy, behind which she sat demurely whenever she performed in public."

Her attendants were also “veiled from head to foot” so that “their sex was impossible to determine . . . through their burqa’s” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 435). Completely covered by “curtains,” Jamila and her attendants are allowed to make a presence in the public arena only as sexless individuals. Showing no features of femininity and posing behind “religious calligraphy,” their presence does not pose a threat to the dominant male hegemony (Rushdie, 1981, p. 435). Hamid Dabashi’s introductory essay to Shirin Neshat’s photographic book of Iranian women posing behind Farsi calligraphy reveals a similar reading of Iranian women’s bodies being represented as an extension to and under the monopoly of patriarchal hegemony. Having been honored with the title “daughter of the nation,” Jamila has to even remain covered with “a gold-and-white burqa” inside the private segregated space of her aunt Alia’s school (Rushdie, 1981, p. 436).

This positioning of Jamila in a space of non-existence, that is neither within the private or public space recalls the figure of woman as a place of “non-identity” and “out-distancing of distance” itself (Derrida, 1978, p. 49). In *Spurs*, Derrida explains this condition as “the veiled movement” of non-existence where woman is a “non-figure,” “a simulacrum” which hides behind her “beguiling song of enchantment” (1978, p. 51; p. 49). As such, women’s existence as a “determinable identity” is negated and she hides the “untruth of truth” behind her “golden-embroidered veil” (Derrida, 1978, p. 51). Rushdie’s Jamila, in addition to many other female characters in the story, inhabits a place that is neither in the public or private realm but is a non-place that is invisible in its dimensions and frame, on the edge of humanity. Jamila’s position is so precarious that the “silk chador” that covers her is described as not just a veil but as a ‘curtain’ that is as dimensionless as that which lies behind it (Rushdie, 1981, p. 435).

Naseem, Aadama Aziz’s wife, also suffers from a similar condition of nihilism, though of a very different nature. Aadama tells Naseem to take off her “purdah” as he wanted her to “forget about being a good Kashmiri girl. Start thinking about being a modern Indian woman” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 39). As her husband takes her purdahs and sets fire to them, choice is taken away from her and she, like the rest of the women, is left without an identity or space she can call her own. Feeling denuded, she prefers not to venture into the public space as “They will see my deep-deep shame!” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 38). Irigaray’s defines this condition as “the shame that demands vicious conformity.” She explains that taught by a masculinist society that “woman’s ‘body’ has some ‘usefulness’” only on condition that she covers her deficiency as a non-male, woman feels “empty” with no being, no truth as her cover is taken away from her (1985, p. 115). Naseem’s sense of security, her place in the world is threatened as she loses what used to bring her wholeness and a sense of security. Irigaray states “woman weaves in order to veil herself, mask the faults of Nature, and restore her in her wholeness. By wrapping her up (1985, p. 115).

In “Algeria Unveiled,” Fanon gives a more accurate description of this condition. He says:

“Without the veil she has an impression of her body being cut into bits, put adrift; the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely . . . The unveiled body seems to escape, to dissolve. She has an impression of being improperly dressed, even of being naked. She experiences a sense of incompleteness with great intensity. She has an anxious feeling that something is unfinished, and along with this a frightful sense of disintegrating.” (1965, p. 59).

The concept of the veil as that which covers the body is defetishized here as Naseem describes how she considers this veil to be an indivisible part of her existence in the world. Just as she would feel the loss of an arm and a leg, Naseem grieves for the loss of this vital part of her makeup. Meyda Yegenoglu accurately describes the process of forced deveiling as one which is similar to that of the “peeling her skin off,” one that is very painful and to say the least intrusive (1998, p. 118). As Naseem is forced to take on ‘skin’ that is not her own and assume an identity that makes her feel incomplete and hollow, her existence becomes ethereal and she felt as if “she was adrift in the universe” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 49).

With or without a veil, the women in Rushdie’s story live in a non-space that denies them any identity or self-value. Whether they are in the public or private space, they inhabit a dimensionless position of non-being that is of an abyssal nature. Spivak describes this condition “as the radically other she does not really exist, yet her name remains one of the important names for displacement, the special mark of deconstruction” (1999, p. 184). Being nothing, they consequently have nothing to give so that even the men in their lives are affected by this state of ‘nothingness’ and begin to develop holes in their bodies that eventually make them “crack,” “split,” “flake,” “peel” and disintegrate into “powder” (Rushdie, 1981, p. 382).

Women's nothingness becomes symptomatic of everything around her. As the non-other "she engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property" (Derrida, 1978. P. 51). She becomes what Derrida calls the "untruth of truth" that takes up a space that is "distance's very chasm" (1978, p. 49).

## 2. Nafisi

Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* set in Iran in the 1990's presents another bleak picture of Muslim women who live an ethereal existence. As a memoir, Nafisi's text promises a 'true' to life depiction of Muslim women's lives. The fact that at different times in the text Nafisi claims that "her own life became a web of fiction" and that "memories have ways of becoming independent of the reality they evoke," however, points to the text's evidently fictive disposition (2003, p. 317).

Nafisi's concern with boundaries between the public and private reveals itself early on in the text. On page twenty-four, she comments on the two pictures she took of her private class at home. In the first picture she describes her students as wearing black robes and scarves "shaped by someone else's dreams" and in the second picture they appear without their veils "as we imagined ourselves to be." Nafisi says "In neither could we feel completely at home" (2003, p. 24). Her explanation for this is that the Islamic Republic had "invaded all private space and tried to shape every gesture" and in doing so had blurred "the lines and boundaries between the personal and political, thereby destroying both" (2003, p. 273). However, the narrator's comment at another point in the narrative reveals that what was being done to them was actually what they "allowed him to do?" (2003, p. 28). Her magician tells her, "you keep talking about democratic spaces, about the need for personal and for creative spaces. Well, go and create them, woman!" (2003, p. 282).

Nafisi's escape from the private and public realm is to immerse herself and her students in fiction, which she claimed had the power to "color" their dreams. The problem with this was that instead of making her students active participants who fought to be able to realize their dreams, "It entailed an active withdrawal from a reality" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11). Like Humbert in Nabokov, Nafisi entraps both herself and her alumni into becoming prisoners "in a state of exile" from the real world (2003, p.24). As such, Nafisi's representation of her female students takes on a very unrealistic aspect that is sketchy at best. What we get to learn about them are bits and pieces about their background and problems stated indirectly through her narration. The reader never gets to see them in a relationship interacting with others, except for when they are in the private space of Nafisi's home, within her made-up fantasy world of fiction.

The public realm as described by Nafisi has no place for females. Women have no agency in it and when they do, they are executed, as Mrs. Parsa, the minister of education, for not following the regime's orders. The first picture that Nafisi describes where her students are veiled is symptomatic of that public realm. In it they appear as "timid" and as inert as the veils they are wearing (2003, p. 6). Under its influence, she describes them as "shaped" by forces outside of themselves, helpless and "fragile," "figments" of someone else's (the regime's) imagination (2003, p. 24-25). The belief that "Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression" is clearly present in Nafisi's representation of her students' attire and demeanor (Ahmed, 1992, p. 152).

Though Nafisi describes her students in the second picture where they have taken off their veils in the private space of Nafisi's home as suddenly acquiring "splashes of color" and that they "Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self," this private space turns out to be as inert as any other public space (2003, p. 4-6). Neither Nafisi nor her students exhibit signs of agency or sense of identity in it. Living in their delusionary world of fiction, their conversations within this private space revolve around imaginary characters and events rather than viable solutions to the problems they face in Iran. Nafisi states "I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't" (2003, p.6). No matter the amount of clothes that these girls put on or take off their bodies, their material paraphernalia have no bearing upon their internal mental stagnancy. Their inertia arises out of an inability to acknowledge their real situation and to find viable ways to improve on it. Like the picture that Sanaz draws of herself, "the white of her body caught in a black bubble," these girls were suspended in time in as much the same way as was the half-alive butterfly pinned to the wall in Nabokov's story. Nafisi comments: "The butterfly is not an obvious symbol, but it does suggest that Humbert fixes Lolita in the same manner that the butterfly is fixed" (2003, p. 37). The same analogy paradoxically applies to Nafisi's representation of her students' lives.

Nafisi's depiction of her students as static and stagnant even within the private space and without the 'oppressive' veils that are supposedly weighing them down places them into the same abyssal place that Rushdie's women inhabit. As her students describe their existence "in the context of an outside reality," words like "fog," "figment" and "paradox" amounted to their perception of themselves (Nafisi, 2003, p. 37). Here, as in Rushdie's narrative, woman is a 'void not because she is concealed behind a "golden-embroidered veil," but because she seems to have no essence to reveal. Derrida's elaboration of Nietzsche's philosophy of truth, that "There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself . . . She engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property," becomes symptomatic of Nafisi's female characters (1978, p. 49). As "non-figures" without any particular determinable identity, Nafisi's characters appear ghost-like "drifting soundlessly down the street"(Derrida, 1978, p. 49; Nafisi, 2003, p. 168).

Like Nassrin who was suspended in between "many parallel world: the so-called real world of her family, work and society, the secret world of our class and her young man; and the world she had created out of her lies," Nafisi and her characters are suspended in between two time zones and two different worlds, the real and the imaginary (Nafisi, 2003, p. 297). The narrator looks at herself in the mirror at the end of the book and instead of seeing herself, she only finds the mountains and trees "as if you could have magically willed yourself away?" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 330). Living in a fantasy world where she believes that it was the outside world and not their inertia that "prevented them from defining themselves clearly," Nafisi is ironically as adamant as the regime to create "cocoon, elaborate lies to protect themselves. Like the veil" (2003, p. 174). Paradoxically, what Nafisi considers to be a shield or 'veil' that prevents them from being active in the public space is actually a lie that she has manufactured to make her students share in her own exilic condition.

The state of exile is so prevalent and strong in the story that some of her students find comfort in remaining in their veils even inside the private space of her home. When Nassrin decides at the end of the story to take her veil off, she is described as feeling so "awkward" that "she slumped, as if she were trying to cover something" and when she walked she felt "as if at any moment she would fall down" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 296). Irigaray's reading of Nietzsche's trope of the veil is that "By wrapping her up," woman felt she was restored "in her wholeness" (1985, p. 115). Fanon also describes this condition in "Algeria Unveiled" saying that "Without the veil she has an impression of her body being cut up into bits, put adrift" (1965, p. 59). Losing what had offered her protection and reassurance in the face of the disintegration and incompleteness that is experienced by Nafisi, Nassrin feels adrift, lost to the void that is Nafisi's life.

Unable to face the disintegration within her empty, rootless life, Nafisi opts to leave her responsibilities behind and move abroad. Most of her students do likewise. Manna says: "Nassrin has gotten the message from Dr. Nafisi . . . That we should all leave" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 324). In remaining inactive in the dialogue between the public and private worlds and in severing all ties with the real world, Nafisi loses any sense of self and becomes her own and her students' worst executioner. Her question at the end of the story: "How else do we know that we have existed, felt, desired, hated, feared?" becomes symptomatic of her own and her students' exilic condition (Nafisi, 2003, p. 339).

### 3. *Mernissi*

Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespassis* a memoir whose events unfold in Morocco between 1940-1950. In this narrative, the private realm is an interactive space through which women try to work out their sense of selfhood. Unlike Rushdie and Nafisi's works where the female characters are shadows fixed in their oppressive lives, Mernissi's female characters are presented as dynamic individuals who interact within the spaces around them, shaping and being shaped by them. Though many of Mernissi's females are unhappy with their limited agency, they are constantly testing the boundaries, probing for ways to improve their condition.

As a memoir recounted through the eyes of a child, many questions are naively posed that offer the opportunity for a dialogue that probes beyond the customary boundaries. Throughout the memoir, Fatima and her cousin Samir keep questioning the necessity of frontiers and how they can be measured? As an elusive and multi-faceted subject, the different responses to this question provide the opportunity for Fatima to survey her surroundings all the while testing these frontiers. Within the Fez household, two opposite camps exist, the traditional one that is represented by the older generation: Chama's mother, Lalla Radia and Lalla Mani; and the newer generation represented by Fatima's mother, Chama and Aunt Habiba.

While the older generation claim that boundaries and frontiers, like the harem, are a “good thing” that protect women from the “unsafe streets,” the younger generation feel that they were “choked” and needed to break free from all inhibitions found in such things as gates, veils and “qa’ida,”(invisible rules) (Mernissi, 1994, p. 40; 46; 110).

As Fatima grows older and she feels that she needs to map her surroundings in order to situate herself within shifting power equations, she realizes that these frontiers are elusive and not as obvious as she had previously thought them to be. Acquiring knowledge from her grandmother Yasmina that harems or the private space did not necessarily have to have “visible high walls,” Fatima learns how to redefine frontiers metaphorically (Mernissi, 1994, p. 39). As she listens to the stories that the strong women in the household, like Tamou, Mina and Chama recount of their adventurous lives, she begins to realize that whatever one did or wherever one was, “the worst of prisons is the self-created one” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 162). Her additional discovery that even the French colonizers in the Ville Nouvelle were also living in a sort of prison, “just like women, they could not walk freely in the Medina. So you could be powerful and still be the prisoner of a frontier” opens her eyes to the reality that private spaces do not define you but you define them (Mernissi, 1994, p. 23).

Fatima’s declaration in the middle of the text that “Life is a game” and that the first step is “Figuring out who has sulta (authority) over you” becomes the first stride she takes towards gaining power and remapping her environment (Mernissi, 1994, p. 152). In the early part of the memoir, Fatima thought that she had no power over the space around her, but as she acquires the insight and wisdom into gender equations in the latter part of the text, she becomes more agile at testing her frontiers. This desire to investigate and to test is explained by Fanon, “As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered . . . I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity in so far as I pursue something other than life” (1952, p. 218). Fatima’s desire is to have more freedom and control over her environment and as such this ‘negating activity’ transforms her from a victim of oppression to a free agent whose positive energy can redefine the boundaries around her.

As Fatima and Samir grow up and she notices that he is trying to have the upper hand in their relationship, Fatima learns how to use her femininity to contest power equations and challenge normative expectations of patriarchal hegemony. Her mother’s insistent advice to learn “to create a strong personality” in addition to Mina’s advice that “you always had a choice, when you are stuck in a pit, between pleasing the monster by looking down and screaming or surprising him by looking up,” reinforce Fatima’s sense of power and drive her to search for ways to rebalance her relationship with Samir (Mernissi, 1994, p. 10; 171). Taking courage from Chama who showed her how to entice men into doing what she wanted, Fatima practices the “love glance” on Samir as she tells him: “Samir, I know you can’t live without me. But I think it is time to realize that I have become a woman . . . Goodbye, Samir. You can start looking for another companion” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 221). Having been once threatened by Samir that he will not tolerate her new beauty regiment, Fatima takes control of the situation and tells Samir that it is her decision that her beauty regiment is much more important than him and that therefore he should look for someone else to play with.

Empowered by her new sense of agency and wisdom in the private space, she begins to experience her surroundings more proactively and to test her place within the public realm. When she is sent to a new French school, Fatima finds the courage to knock at the door of her classroom, an action that had been previously prohibited to her in her Fez house because “gates were either closed or open, and knocking would not do.” This simple act sends her into “ecstatic bliss” because she is finally able to experience what it feels like to “open a closed door or close an open one” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 198). Fatima declares “I could feel that I was crossing a frontier, stepping over a threshold, but I could not figure out what kind of space I was stepping into” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 241).

Fatima’s induction into a world where she has more agency within both the private and public space reshuffles her place within the frontiers and sets the conditions for more balanced power equations. As an active agent of change, Fatima’s persona becomes representative of Derrida’s notion of ‘supplementarity,’ where the old stereotype of the passive Muslim woman is substituted and enriched with one that is more active and daring. Mernissi’s ability to create a character who is in tune with her culture yet has doubts and misgivings about her limited agency within it, offers a multidimensionality that is realistic in its scope.

Unlike Rushdie's and Nafisi's female characters who live in the shadows without any agency or place to call their own, Mernissi's characters are wholesome individuals situated in a specific time and place with a desire to break barriers in the search for a better life.

#### 4. *U. al-Khamīs*

The Arabic texts written for an Arabic audience reveal very different attitudes and concerns about women's agency within the public and private realm. The first novel that will be discussed is *Al-Warīfa (Prosperity)* written by Kholūd al-Khamīs (2007), a Saudi female writer. Its events unfold mainly in the city of Riyadh between 2003-2007. In this novel, al-Jowhara, the narrator of the story, graduates from medical school and becomes the first female doctor in her family. As Saudi culture follows strict gender rules that require segregation of the sexes in the public arena, when al-Jowhara starts working in a hospital where mixing is permitted, she finds herself having to remap her new environment and her place in it. In the process of trying to find a happy medium between her own needs and society's pressures, she undergoes a journey of self-discovery where she reevaluates her commitment to cultural traditions.

*Al-Warīfa* depicts three very different types of women. The first group, which is represented mainly by al-Jowhara, hold on to their Muslim religion as an anchor and guide to life, but as they are exposed to new circumstances, they are forced to reevaluate their commitment to old traditions. Al-Jowhara's experiences in the public sphere also instigate reflections on her agency within the private realm. The second group of women in the story, like al-Jowhara's colleagues Kreman and Maḍawī, are careless about both cultural traditions and religious practices. Though al-Jowhara seems to envy this second group their nonchalant attitude towards life and their lack of concern for public opinion, there are times when she finds their audacity to take them beyond the sensitive feminine realm into the bodacious, aggressive masculine one. Harsh adjectives used to describe them, like "manly" and "defiant" are indicative of how unwelcome these traits are in a traditional society set up on clear gender differences (Umayma al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 27).<sup>1</sup> By taking on traits that are of the opposite sex, Maḍawī and Kreman flaunt "social customs" that demand that women "repress all signs of aggressivity" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 24). However, despite al-Jowhara's intrigue with their lackadaisical attitude towards life, when their indifference and carelessness transfer on to their job ethics and cause them to make medical mistakes, admiration turns into disapproval. The third type of woman in this story is the traditional one who is happy within her domestic responsibilities and tries to propagate the traditional set up of her society. This type of woman is mainly represented by al-Jowhara's mother and her friends and her older sister Hend.

Al-Jowhara's position in between the second and third group of women at the interstices between old customs and traditions and an unconventional attitude towards life places her in a liminal space, where she can comprehend, intercede, and eventually mediate towards achieving a more viable agency. As al-Jowhara maps out her new environment and her agency in it, she attempts to define her own attitude towards traditions like the veil, segregation, patriarchy and conventional marriages. Though the main theme in the story is the importance of time in a woman's reproductive years, the issue of the veil will be discussed here as representative of the dichotomy of public/private space and of modern women's endeavors at self-discovery.

Al-Jowhara's attitude towards the veil is very ambivalent. Though she is unhappy when her colleagues' comment on her "unnecessary" strict behavior that makes her resemble a "nun" when wearing the burqa' (cloth that covers the face except for the eyes), she at other times shows a certain restlessness in observing that same tradition (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 248). When, for instance, a female TV reporter is conducting interviews in the hospital, and al-Jowhara asks her if she could join the program with her burqa' on and the only response she gets is a "ridiculing" smile as she passes her by, she momentarily feels dissatisfied with this veil and imagines how things would be different for her if she were to take it off (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 89). This dissatisfaction with the veil, however, is momentary and even after she comes back from Canada she opts to continue using the burqa' because, she finds that it does give her a sense of security from "preying eyes" (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 105).

Similarly, when al-Jowhara leaves to train in Canada she decides to take off her burqa' (but not her head scarf) because she finds that her new environment is more accepting of her without it.

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own.

As she starts her work at the hospital, al-Jowhara feels a sense of “liberation” at being able to interact with people without any face cover, however, this soon changes and she experiences uncomfortable emotions when men pay special attention to her or look her in the eye. Feelings like “discomfort,” “fear” and “anxiety” take over and “she hurries to get away” as soon as possible (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 232). These feelings of fear and anxiety without her burqa’ and ’abaya (cloth that covers the body) is reminiscent of Fanon’s description of the Algerian woman who “Without the veil she has an impression of her body being cut up into bits, put adrift; the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely” (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 59). In Canada, al-Jowhara’s religious convictions are also put to the test. Her colleague Gia argues with her that she does not need to wear her head scarf to be a pious and virtuous woman, but that such characteristics should “live within you.” Al-Jowhara answers Gia by asking her a question: “What would happen to you if you were to leave the hospital naked from the waist up.” Having said that, al-Jowhara explains to Gia how virtue is not only an internal state of being but also involves “public rules and boundaries” within each culture that must be respected (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 243).

The experiences that al-Jowhara goes through in Canada where she has to choose what is right for her, far away from the rules of her cultural traditions, becomes a life changing experience, one where she discovers that given all the choices in the world, her choice is to define her relationship to the world within a Muslim context. When al-Jowhara goes back to Saudi Arabia after two years, she thus becomes less inclined to blame society for its masculinist attitudes and more confident of her ability to make choices that are in tune with her own particular nature and background. What al-Jowhara gains when she leaves to Canada is an “insider’s outsidersness” where she is able to acquire a new lens or perspective through which to evaluate her life and the choices she has made free from the pressures of society (Bhabha, 1994, p. 20). Her liminal place between insider/outside becomes the ideal space where cultural values are negotiated and where “space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). Her ‘difference’ becomes her ability to embrace her roots and Muslim identity all the while being open to changes that do not compromise her sense of selfhood.

As al-Jowhara finds her place within the public realm, she is also able to redefine the boundaries of her private life. In the last chapter of the novel, she says “I learned to draw the indefinite lines that divide the public and private realm, making it impossible for nosy people to investigate into my private affairs” (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 285). Having previously allowed others in her family to intrude into her private matters such as that of marriage, she learns to close all venues that lead to any such intrusions. In the last page of the story, al-Jowhara’s avowal that life is a journey where each time you felt you had grown up and was capable of giving your advice to others, life had a way of “bringing you back in a student’s chair” to learn new lessons reveals her ability to stand tall as a symbol of ‘difference,’ one where the new was a welcome addition rather than an obliteration of old values and traditions (U. al-Khamīs, 2008, p. 292).

### 5. K. al-Khamīs

Kholūd al-Khamīs’ *’Imra’ wa-ḡlan* (*A Woman and Two Shadows*) is a Kuwaiti novel that unfolds between 1994-2005. Like *’Umayma’s* text, this novel discusses the issue of boundaries within the larger dichotomy of cultural traditions/Islamic religious teachings. As in *Al-Warīfa*, the female narrator here is presented as enduring the inhibitions created by a patriarchal society. However, since the Kuwaiti culture is moderate in its approach to gender issues, the heroine of the story is seen as enjoying more freedoms than her Saudi counterpart.

In *’Imra’ wa-ḡlan*, Sheikha is aggravated by the tendency of her community to follow double standards. Living in a masculinist society, she finds it offensive how society turns a blind eye to men’s mistakes and unethical behavior, yet manages to hold women under deep scrutiny and severe judgment. The situation becomes even worse for people like Sheikha who have been divorced because then their every move is more severely scrutinized and judged for its adherence to proper standards of behavior.

As a strong and resourceful young woman, Sheikha is respected both by her family and her colleagues. Though she is free to make many of the decisions in her life, her ties to her family and their expectations of her always manage to temper her decisions. When she was eighteen and about to enter university, Sheikha explains that she had entered the college of her father’s choice because she felt that as an only child she was indebted to him. However, later on as the fulfillment of her family’s expectations becomes her only goal in life and all her dreams and desires are put aside, every ‘blessing’ in her life starts to become a heavy burden that weighs her down.

She says, “Everything I thought was a special blessing in my life is now a cord that engulfs my neck . . . my rich family . . . my being an only child . . . all put me under scrutiny and under the added pressure of unrealistic expectations and a planned future” (Kholoud al-Khamīs, 2009, p. 83).

When it comes to the public realm, the boundaries between what is culturally acceptable and unacceptable also becomes another threshold that she must overcome. Though Sheikha is a successful professor in Kuwait University who is recognized for her diligence and hard work, this success is sometimes overshadowed by her male colleagues’ attempts to try and take advantage of her position as a vulnerable divorcee. Even the provost of the university is not exempt from this group. Though he already has a wife and is thirty years her senior, he tries to take advantage of his position as her superior to pressure her into accepting his hand in marriage. His offensive question: “Don’t you want to get married again?” infuriates her and she makes it plain to him that she is even willing to leave her job rather than have anything to do with him (K. al-Khamīs, 2009, p. 57).

As the public and private interweave and separate, it is actually in the private realm that Sheikha is able to remap her boundaries and recreate her public persona. Finally realizing that “the person who imprisons me is only my own imagination,” she decides to cut loose from traditions that have made her life empty and she opens her heart to her Iranian friend Zada (K. al-Khamīs, 2009, p. 387). Though Kuwaiti culture looks down upon inter-racial marriages, she marries Zada careless about what anyone might say about her. When she comes back from her honeymoon to Kuwait and is invited by one of her friends to attend a party, everyone is curious to find out “about her experiences in life and where she sees herself now?” She answers them saying, “fear and anxiety . . . disappear only when we are willing to make it all the way to the other side . . . and the resolution is not in favor of who arrives first, because it is not a competition, but who arrives having made peace with why he has chosen that particular path” (K. al-Khamīs, 2009, p. 390).

As Sheikha confidently faces her community, her ‘differance’ manifests itself in her ability to break free from the traditional mold of the ‘kuwaiti woman’ and to forge her own fluid identity that is at once rooted and fluid enough to substitute stagnant traditions with new and more practical modes of existence. As a ‘supplementary’ version of the Kuwaiti woman, she becomes emblematic of the notion that “There is no such thing as the truth of Woman,” negating all notions of fixity and determinability assigned to the Muslim woman (Derrida, 1978, p. 51). Her ‘differance’ then becomes a willingness to reach beyond the preset boundaries set forth by society and to forge an identity that is independent yet still feels the need to hold on strong to its roots.

## 6. *Al-Tkaralī*

Though al-Jowhara and Shiekha are presented as active agents of change who are not afraid to negotiate their place within the private and public realm in their respective societies’, the women in al-Takaralī’s novel *al-Masarrāt wa- al-awjah (Delights and Tribulations)* appear as even more self-assured individuals with a very strong sense of selfhood. Taking place between 1950-1970, this novel unfolds at a time in Iraqi history when women enjoyed more rights than any of their counterparts in the Middle East. Al-Takaralī’s female characters – Fathya, Camilla, and her sister Thoraya – not only exhibit agency in the private and public space, but they seem to even play a more prominent role than the men. Despite the fact that the story is narrated from a male point of view, Tawfiq’s, all of the male characters are described as taking a back seat to the women in their lives. Fathya, Camilla and Thoraya’s decisions within both the private and public space seem to directly or indirectly precipitate Tawfiq’s journey from fortune to misfortune.

Tawfiq’s marriage to Camilla happens after an endless pursuit of fifteen years. After Camilla’s sister Thoraya marries Tawfiq’s brother, she becomes an almost “permanent resident” in his family’s estate (al-Takaralī, 1998, p. 38). She shows up from early morning and stays up until late night trying to get in his way as much as possible. She dresses provocatively and keeps barging in his room in the pretense that he might need some refreshments while he is studying. However, as Tawfiq’s finances deteriorate, his marriage to Camilla becomes inevitable. After their marriage, Camilla changes from a provocative woman to an aggressive monster. Making more money than him and owning the house they live in, she bosses him around and practices complete hegemony on their relationship. Tawfiq says, “When you have tried to have a relationship of equality with your partner, why does it have to be that when he is the stronger one that you should be the weaker?” (al-Takaralī, 1998, p. 172). Tawfiq’s inability to impregnate her becomes the final blunder that makes Camilla throw him out of the house and demand her divorce.

Though Camilla's sister Thoraya is of a more docile nature, she also practices hegemony over all those around her: her husband Tawfiq, Camilla, her mother-in-law. Tawfiq describes her as a "moderately conniving woman, who pursues her self-interests" and "is the brain behind all the reasonable actions of the whole family" (al-Takarālī, 1998, p. 172; 202). She plans Camilla's marriage to Tawfiq and then their subsequent divorce so that Camilla can marry another man; she pressures her husband into convincing his mother to take Tawfiq off of her will. As to her interference in the public space, she prohibits her husband from hiring Tawfiq to work with him in the store and when her father dies and he leaves Camilla's husband some money, she takes it upon herself to threaten him with a lawsuit.

Even though Camilla and Thoraya are working women, it is Fathya who exemplifies the savvy business woman in the public space. Having inherited money from her dead husband, she manages to use that money to build her own market and rent it to shop owners. Though in appearance, Fathya seems the most traditional of the three as she wears a 'abya to cover her body and she is the least educated of the three, she is presented as the most active in both the public and private space. Tawfiq comments, "This is a dangerous young lady; if it is her wish to accumulate money, then she will; If she desires to marry a man of position and stature, she will also do that. The danger lies in her wanting too much, and then she will annihilate herself" (al-Takarālī, 1998, p. 165). After Tawfiq divorces Camilla and he begins a casual relationship with Fathya, it is always on her terms and conditions and not his.

Camilla, Thoraya and Fathya are all strong women who have carved their place within the public/private realm, so much so that it is the men who seem to be deprived of any agency and suffer from low self-esteem. However, the use of words like "dangerous," "conniving," "disaster" and "annihilation" in relation to these women is indicative of the narrator's rejection of these masochistic qualities in women. Irigaray explains that as "there seems to be no permitted mode of female aggression," the only way that a paternalistic society can deal with women's aggression is by stigmatizing it as "masculinistic" and therefore unnatural (1985, p. 19). She says as "active" connotes the "masculine" and "passive" the "feminine," the only way that the male can deal with her hegemony is by showing that these qualities are "destructive" in a woman and will hurt her more than anyone else (Irigaray, 1985, p. 15; 20).

## 7. Conclusion

Having examined a variety of texts written in both the English and Arabic language, there are major differences that surface even after taking into consideration discrepancies in culture, gender and time period. If any similarities do show up, however, it is that in both the English and Arabic texts, the domestic space is the site where identities are cultivated and the point of departure for any public presence. Bhabha describes the domestic space as "the space of normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-is-the-political; the world-in-the-home" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 15). It is within the domestic space that personalities are nurtured and disciplined and attitudes created and reinforced. Those relationships that are formed within the private realm become the model or prototype for future public encounters.

As to the differences that exist between the Arabic and English texts, one major discrepancy in the development of female characters becomes the major element from which all the other differences emanate. Except for Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*, the two English texts that have been analyzed present only shadowy female characters that have no cultural attributes and seem to be suspended in time and place with no desires or ambitions. In Rushdie's novel, the female characters are as real as the holes that develop in both Saleem's and Aziz's bodies, whereas in Nafisi, her characters are as sketchy and fictional as the literary works that she keeps identifying with. Mernissi's female characters, however, are the exception in that they exhibit human qualities having fears, desires and ambitions that provide them with the agency to negotiate their identities primarily within the private space.

In contrast to the English texts, the Arabic texts not only present down-to-earth characters with inhibitions and realistic desires, but also women that have already worked out their sense of selfhood in the private space and are negotiating their agency within the public one. 'Umayma presents women who are working out their place within the public realm and using their new found strength to remap their private one.

Similarly, Kholūd describes women who are confident enough to break away from stagnant traditions and use their personal victories as an occasion for public triumph. Al-Takarālī's women are the extreme version of the confident woman who has worked her place within both the private and public and in the process has become a threat to the men in her life.

Having exhibited the difference in women's agency in English and Arabic texts, it becomes more comprehensible how other differences emerge. In all of the three English texts, the veil as representative of the boundaries between private and public space is stereotyped and condensed into a repressive tool that limits women's agency. In Rushdie and Nafisi, it also takes on the added stigma of representing the 'void' that is the veil and that exists behind the veil. As woman has no value or does not seem to exist, the veil also becomes synonymous with this negative state of 'nothingness'. Irigaray's statement that "beneath the veil subsists only veil" summarizes these female characters' condition as unknowable and indeterminate (1985, p. 110).

In comparison to the English texts, the veil in the Arabic texts takes a peripheral place. In 'Umayma's narrative, al-Jowhara discusses her burqa' in conjunction with other traditions that she is reevaluating now that she is working as a physician in a public hospital. Her decision as to whether to keep this burqa' or not is shown as a personal choice that she makes and which does not interfere with her agency in the workplace. Her choice to keep the head scarf on when she leaves to Canada is indicative of her religious commitment to Islam and her belief in the "rhythmic interweaving of patterns of worldly and sacred life" (el Guindi, 1999, p. 96). Having said that it is also important to note that veiling in 'Umayma's narrative takes a backstage to the more pertinent issue of the passing of time. In Kholūd and al-Takarālī's novels, however, the issue of the veil does not even present itself.

As Arabic texts break the stereotype of the helpless, victimized Muslim woman who has no control over her life, they succeed in portraying the real conundrums of Muslim women each within his different background. Writing for and about an Arab audience, their depictions need to be real representations of actual life experiences in order to hold their audience's attention. Thus, by comparing the English texts to the Arabic ones, the issue of authenticity comes to the forefront. In Rushdie's and Nafisi's case, divergence from the lived experience of Muslim women raises the question as to what is to be gained from this inauthenticity? Judith Butler is of the opinion that "the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices takes precedence over any other" consideration or commitment (1993, p. 19). What this essentially means is that when a writer writes about one culture for the consumption of a very different one, her/his primary concern is that the images be recognizable. Thus in Rushdie's and Nafisi's case, their primary concern is that their images be recognizable to the English speaking public. The use of stereotypes that have been previously established in the English literary tradition, what Bhabha calls "forked models," become a pre-condition to their acceptance in the English Literary canon. Bhabha describes this situation as an "ironic compromise," one where authenticity is sacrificed only to create an inauthentic self that is "human and not wholly human" (1994, p. 122).

The concept of writing a text with specific intentions and built in responses is very much in keeping with Umberto Eco's theory of the limits of interpretation of a text. His contention that meaning is derived from taking into consideration intentions of author, audience and text puts emphasis on a pre-conceptualized interaction between audience and text for the emergence of meaning. Eco's contention is that when an author writes a text, it is with a specific "Model Reader" in mind who will serve the strategic function of this text. He says that the model reader "uses the work as semantic machinery and is the victim of the strategies of the author who will lead him little by little along a series of previsions and expectations" (Eco, 1992, p. 92). Language, cultural references and style or vocabulary are three indicators of the type of audience the writer is targeting. In Rushdie's and Nafisi's texts, use of the English language, appropriation of stereotypes to be found in the English literary tradition in addition to affirmation of Western Europe's assumptions about the Muslim world all point to a Eurocentric English speaking public as the audience of choice. In keeping with this public, Rushdie's and Nafisi's texts need to conform to a pre-established set of 'truths' that are in harmony with the expectations of the model reader.

Nietzsche's essay "Supposing Truth is a Woman –What then?" presents a similar version of how fake 'truths' come into being. His contention is that dogmatist's tendency to make up 'truths' is nothing less than a need for acceptance into a universal canon. He claims that 'truth' is nothing short of a superficial erection that is structured upon a lie, a fake stability intended to give simplistic, determined and fixed values of things.

In order to have the acceptance of the many, this truth must be “thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified.” Usually, the more conventionally acceptable a form is, the more it will end up being hollowed out of its ‘truths’, until only a “superficial” “mask” remains (Nietzsche, 2009, p. 24). In addition, the more conventionally acceptable a form becomes, the more self-deluded is the belief that what was invented is indeed the truth. Nietzsche states that the “wicked and unfortunate are more favorably situated and have a greater likelihood of success” (Nietzsche, 2009, p. 24). Having said that, then Rushdie’s and Nafisi’s use of stereotypical ‘universal’ forms and models takes precedence over any need for authenticity as a precondition for their acceptance within the English literary canon. ‘Force of authority’ again emerges as Rushdie’s and Nafisi’s divergence from authentic representations of the lived experience of Muslim women.

Mernissi’s text, however, is an exception in that its invocation of certain stereotypes, as the repressive quality of the veil and the harem, serve ulterior functions other than the need for the ‘force of authority.’ She uses stereotypes that the reader can recognize as a medium through which to invoke the power of the ‘gaze’ within the visual images in the story. In the last picture of the memoir, her portrayal of the half-veiled woman who directly and authoritatively looks the reader in the eye displaces him from a position of subject to object of that gaze, consequently reversing power equations and forcing him to reevaluate his position within the text. As the reader suddenly finds himself the subject of perusal, he becomes more aware of his tendency to objectify others, here the Muslim woman, into preset molds that make boundaries insurmountable and frontiers rigid. Just like the French in the Ville Nouvelle who were imprisoned within the frontiers they had set up for others, Mernissi’s evocation of certain stereotypes become an occasion for the English reader to break free from preset attitudes and conditioned responses. Mernissi’s narrative becomes a prime example of how an English text can recall conventional images without “being deadened by the powerful stereotypes” it “must invoke in order to replace them” (Lewis, 2004, p. 168). What was static and stagnant in Rushdie and Nafisi becomes fluid and active in Mernissi. Her memoir becomes an occasion for “elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

Having said that, however, other questions regarding agency remain unanswered. For instance, though al-Takaralī’s and Mernissi’s texts share a common time frame (1950’s), what can account for the differences in their representation of women’s agency? Can it be due to the fact that Moroccan women’s movement did not become active until the 1970’s or are there more pertinent issues at hand? Could male/female point of view account for these differences or is it again the imposition of English paradigms and stereotypes that have become an indivisible part of the English language and culture? As Fanon says, “A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language.” Can it then be true that when Mernissi uses the English language, she inadvertently is “assuming the culture and bearing the weight of a civilization?” (1952, p. 1-2).

When considering the various ways that women’s agency unfold in the three Arabic texts, however, it is possible to account for these discrepancies in terms of different cultural backgrounds. The multifarious representations that emerge from these texts bring to the forefront the notion that there is no one true Muslim identity. The Muslim woman is depicted as fluid and daring as she is independent and willing to expand her horizons and her sphere of influence. She emerges as a symbol of ‘differance,’ on where she resists all attempts at fixation or stigmatization in the process of affirming life itself. Her “truth” is thus “not a becoming-conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined,” but is rather “a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth, as a process in infinitum, an active determining” that is best described as the “will to power” (Nietzsche, 2009, p. 298).

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