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Researching The Muslim Diaspora: Towards Developing New Approaches of Reading

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Abstract

This paper discusses the current postgraduate level research into the corpus of Muslim Diaspora at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics which reflects the increasing interests into the corpus by students from within and outside the country. The first research focuses on minority Muslim women writers who reside in different host countries: *Standing Alone* by Indian American, Asra Q. Nomani, *We are a Muslim, Please* by Pakistani British, Zaiba Malik and *The Land of Invisible Strangers* by Pakistani British, Qanta A. Ahmed. In these narratives, the Muslim women's selves often face competing binary discourses of Islam and the West/Orientalism. The second research is on three Iranian diasporic memoirs – Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Marina Nemat's *Prisoner of Tehran*. The study explores how these memoirists play the role of a native informer for imperialism by presenting Iranian Muslims as the Other while presenting discourses that justify the 'war on terror' under the guise of women's rights. The final study explores how resistance and nature appear to coexist throughout the twenty-six years of the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish's diasporic writing life. The study synthesizes Darwish's modes of colonialist resistance and in doing so, forge an eco-resistance conceptual framework as a lens for reading resistance in Muslim diasporic writers' works. The range of researches showcased here illustrates the diversity of issues vis-a-vis the representations of Muslims in diasporic fiction in the West. Each conceptual framework developed towards examining the individual research corpus, as shown in these theses-in-progress, establishes new approaches of reading, elicited from the contexts of the situations that give rise to the production of the texts under scrutiny.

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Key Keywords: Self narratives; Memoir; Native informer; Eco-resistance; Muslim Diaspora

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1. Introduction

This paper presents three on-going studies at the postgraduate level by three doctoral candidates in the area of Muslim diaspora. Each research is guided by a specific narrative and context from which the author outlines a particular theme. This paper discusses the conceptual framework of each study and illustrates the significance of the current research on the Muslim Diaspora at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at the National University of Malaysia.

2. From Conflict To Transformation And Healing: A Reading of Selected Muslim Women's self-Narratives

The first study focuses on three selected self-narratives by minority Muslim women writers of various descents who are currently residing in different host countries: *Standing Alone* by Indian American, Asra Q. Nomani, *We are a Muslim, Please* by Pakistani British, Zaiba Malik and *In the Land of Invisible Strangers* by Pakistani British, Qanta A. Ahmed. The texts selected are based on their unique portrayals of the spiritual/moral struggles and life challenges faced by minority Muslim women positioned in multiple contexts. In these narratives, one of the distinctive features of Muslim women's self-narratives is the marked pattern of multiple critique, a term coined by Miriam Cooke (2001). Cooke explains that this oppositional stance represents the way Muslim women criticize gender discrimination within their own culture and the Islamic faith, while at the same time maintaining a critical stand against western feminism for their inherent stereotypes of Islam as oppressive, and that Islam, Muslim women and their everyday practices are monolithic.

It is through the very practice of understanding multiple critique and specifically how each individual Muslim woman constructs meanings and evaluates life values in relations to her own self and others that we are able to arrive at a more enlightened understanding 'of how social reality is itself constructed' (Harrison 2009: xxxii). Essentially, in this study, the self is reconceptualised as being constructed within discourse and historical contexts, and not outside of them. Thus, in the exploration of these selected Muslim women's narratives, the Muslim women protagonists are repositioned in multi-sites. In oscillating between different expected or demanded practices that reveal the relational self and the self as process that embody multilayered identities, roles and values, these selected Muslim women characters actively and continuously challenge the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman's Self.

The constant dilemma also supports what Gullestad (1996) has outlined as the moral struggles that the Disenchanted Self has to face in challenging and reconciling competing value concepts. In dealing with the confusing arrays of contradictions, dilemmas, paradoxes, and ambiguities posed by both the self and others, the self struggles for a meeting point of reconciliation, not in terms of either/or, or neither/nor, but in terms of integration of these highly contested value concepts. It is within this struggle that the 'third space', or creative imaginary site, is invoked. The third space, conceived within the premise of this study, is a creative imaginary known as the 'Spaces of Hope' (Phillips, 2009), which represent spaces where characters confront, deconstruct and reconstruct conflicting issues of concern. In traversing these points of divergence and convergence, these Muslim women often experience and demonstrate binary discordance/concordance (adapted from Ricoeur

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