

Islamic Post-feminism and Muslim Chick-lit: Preserving One's Muslim Identity in a Non-Muslim Environment

Zairil Azmir Zaiyadi
Universiti Islam Selangor
zairilazmir@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The novel *Will You Stay?* by Norhafsa Hamid is a post-feminist chick-lit novel about a female Malay-Muslim doctor (the protagonist in the novel) who is in conflict with her mother who wants her to get married early despite her insistence on completing her training to be a surgeon. The protagonist also disagrees with her mother's way of arranging the marriage for her because she wants the freedom to be able to choose the right person to be her life partner. This novel also highlights the protagonist's ability to preserve her Muslim identity despite living in a non-Muslim environment. This study, therefore, aims to: 1) investigate the elements of post-feminism that are found in the novel and, 2) the ways the protagonist in the novel tries to preserve her Islamic identity whilst living in a non-Muslim country. The research method employed for this study is text analysis where the researcher does an in-depth reading of the text in order to look for the post-feminist elements in the novel and also to identify the ways how the protagonist of the novel tries to preserve her Muslim identity despite living in a non-Muslim environment. Based on the analysis of the novel, the researcher discovers the elements of post-feminism i.e. we can see the female character in the story is not only concerned about her career, but she also acknowledges her femininity that is the need of being loved by a man whom she herself cares and loves. As for the way she preserves her Muslim identity, we find in the story, even though the protagonist lives in a non-Muslim environment she still observes Islamic laws and teachings such as performing the obligatory daily prayers, covering her *awrah* (the minimum limit of parts of the body that are obligatory to be covered due to obeying Allah SWT's commandment), abstaining from sex before marriage, not going on dates and being a filial daughter.

Keywords: Post-feminism, Muslim chick-lit, Muslim identity, novel

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Will You Stay?* (2021) by Norhafsa Hamid is about a female Malay-Muslim doctor named Amy who lives in Britain to pursue her ambition to be a surgeon. Even though Amy lives in a non-Muslim environment, she still manages to preserve her Muslim identity. The conflict that Amy has to face in her life is her domineering mother who pushes Amy to get married as soon as possible despite Amy's insistence on completing her training first. To Amy, even if she was to get married, it had to be with a man of her own choice.

This Chick Lit novel definitely has a strong Islamic post-feminism theme to it and it is present throughout the story. In post-feminism literary works, women are no longer portrayed as just fighting for their place in the world, but they are also acknowledging their femininity, rejoicing in their beauty and bodily well-being, as well as being concerned about family affairs. *Will You Stay?* is a work that truly represents Islamic Post-feminism because the protagonist of the story really shows how a Muslim woman can balance between her pursuit of professional achievement, but also acknowledging her natural needs as a woman, without having to compromise her faith and religious conviction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Criticism

According to Brizee, Tompkins, Chernouski, and Boyle (2010), there are 3 waves of feminism as follows:

1. First wave feminism that highlights the inequalities between the sexes.
2. Second wave feminism that builds on more equal working conditions
3. Third wave feminism that resists ideologies to expand on marginalized populations' experiences

The first wave of feminist criticism was born out of the influential writings of female writers like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Both Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1977) and de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) gave rise to the discussion about the issues that relate to women and their writings. Woolf, in her opinion, said that the lack in the number of female writers was not due to women lacking the ability to write but because of hindrances that they had to face like financial problems and the fact that women have to carry out the responsibility at home. De Beauvoir meanwhile saw that women were only tools for men. In addition to that, women also were seen to be unable to do things on their own (without assistance from men). De Beauvoir also made the distinction between sex (connected to biology) and gender (connected to culture). Thus, from making this distinction she could differentiate the notions of 'being female' and 'constructed as a woman'. In essence, the first wave of feminist criticism looks at the equality between women and men rather than trying to look at the differences between the sexes (Sohaimi Abdul Aziz, 2014).

However, the second wave of feminist criticism, according to Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2014), amplifies the question concerning the difference between men and women. In other words, the political struggle among female writers is to free themselves from the shackles of the patriarchal society. Feminist women see that every aspect of life is owned by men and this even includes language. Therefore, the shackles need to be broken so that they can set themselves free.

Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2014) further explains that the political struggle in feminism stems from the feminists' social perception towards a culture that is known as the patriarchal culture. This patriarchal culture gives rise to what is called the patriarchal ideology. When talking about patriarchy, it does not only make references to the family institution but also the system that favours the male society and this system also allows the male to lead and dominate. The scope of patriarchy encompasses power and ideology and it involves a wider dimension that includes politics, economics and social. As a culture, patriarchy is seen to be dominating and suppressing women's lives. Thus, because of this, the feminists oppose this kind of ideology because to them it is the cause of why women are being oppressed.

Post-Feminism

According to Abdullah & Awan (2017), post-feminism can be looked at from 2 aspects: 1) it is a mature form of feminism that has turned into a body of knowledge where it is appreciative of diversity within feminist circles and, 2) a feminist facet that is more relatable for modern, urban women of today.

While, others look at post-feminism as a reconnection of women to a pre-feminist stage, where they are concerned about domestic affairs, no less than their professional commitments

and familial affairs (Modleski, 1991, and Whelehan, 2000, as cited in Abdullah and Awan, 2017).

Meanwhile, according to Faludi (1991) as cited in Abdullah and Awan (2017), post-feminism is in a sense a form of anti-feminism, where women who had won their way to political, economic, and social equality of genders, now wanted to rejoice in their beauty and bodily well-being.

Post-feminism may be summed up as what is stated by Gill and Scharff (2011) as cited in Abdullah and Awan (2017) as follows:

One understanding of the concept of postfeminism is that feminism has achieved its objectives in emancipating women during the long struggle starting from the first-wave suffrage movement to the radical second-wave agenda. Now there is no relevance of it in modern women's lives; this is an era of 'new femininities'

According to Abdullah and Awan (2017), in the domain of literary studies, postfeminist literature is characterized by chick-lit, romance literature, genre fiction or popular fiction.

Chick-Lit or Chick-Literature

Chick-Lit or Chick-Literature is a form of popular fiction that can be traced back to the female-oriented novels of Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen (Smith, 2007, as cited in Abdullah & Awan, 2017). Meanwhile, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1998) marks the beginning of the chick-lit tradition in the contemporary tradition (Ferris & Young, 2006, as cited in Abdullah & Awan, 2017).

This genre of fiction exhibits characteristics that include humour, an urban heroine, love, marriage, dating, relationship, and a rebellious attitude towards convention (Abdullah & Awan, 2017).

Muslim chick-lit can be referred to as chick-lit written by Muslim women writers. According to Siti Hawa Muhamad (2021), chick-lit written by Muslim women in English is mostly produced in the diaspora or in the Indian subcontinent such as in India and Pakistan. One such example is Zahrah Janmohamed's memoir *Love in a Headscarf* (2009) which informs the readers about the actual experiences and thoughts of a young Muslim woman living in Britain.

According to Imelda and Whelehan (2005) as cited in Abdullah and Awan (2017), chick-lit looks into tensions, contradictions, and realities of young women's lives that until very recently remained unattended to. To its readers, it is like a self-help book that assists them shuffling between traditionalism and post modernity. These works have the potential to train them to cope with urban lifestyles and combat patriarchy courageously.

Issues Highlighted in Muslim Chick-Lit Works

In the study by Abdullah and Awan (2017), their analyses of two Chick Lit works *Beautiful from this Angle* (2010) by Maha Khan and *Karachi You're Killing Me* (2014) by Saba Imtiaz reveal the existence of carefree, smoking, drinking, dating, buoyant Muslim women who live their lives to their will. In the story *Karachi You're Killing Me* (2014), it looks into the life of the protagonist, Ayesha, a postmodern Pakistani Urban girl who makes personal freedom and pleasure as her top most priorities. Throughout the novel, appearance, beauty, body and self-

care are emphasized as essential elements of a woman's life. In addition to that, sex and relationships outside marriage is one important theme that emerges out of the story.

Meanwhile, the novel *Beautiful from this Angle* (2010) is about three girls, Aynah, Mumtaz and Henna. Aynah is portrayed as a bold girl who dates men and has sexual relationships outside marriage. It is also told in the story that she writes about the hedonistic lifestyle that exists in her city (Karachi) and about the oppressed women in Pakistan.

In both novels, it can be seen that the characters are created in such a way by the writers in order to challenge the cultural and religious stereotypes often attached to Asian-Muslim women.

In contrast to the study by Abdullah and Awan (2017), Siti Hawa Muhamad et al. (2023), however, focus theirs on looking at Muslim Women's problems in the West, particularly concerning Muslim women in hijab who are at risk of being labelled negatively especially in the media. Among the challenges faced by Muslim women in the West are dealing with the wrong perception about them, such as by donning hijab or head scarves they are seen as being oppressed rather than they are doing it out of their own choice. In addition to that, Muslim women in the West have to break the stereotypes that are attached to them, for example the prejudiced views of men who think that Muslim women are "exotic". Besides having to deal with the challenges from outside, Muslim women too have to deal with challenges from within, such as they are subjected to clashes between pure, untainted Islamic practices and culturally-enacted ones, for example Muslim women wear hijab not because they simply want to follow the cultural practices, but they choose to do it as a path of enlightenment (to strengthen their inner spirituality), and to preserve their modesty in public spaces.

In their study, Siti Hawa Muhamad et al. have identified that Muslim Chick Lit can offer a narrative space of hope i.e. to establish positive images of the multifaceted realities of Muslim women. To explore the theme of 'spaces of hope', the researchers have selected two literary works identified as Muslim Chick Lit namely *Sofia Khan Is Not Obligated* (2005) by Ayisha Malik and *Aysha At Last* (2018) by Uzma Jalaluddin as the texts used for the analyses.

Male Feminist Critic

Feminist criticism is not the domain of female critics only. Male critics are also making their way into feminist criticism. However, according to Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2014), there is a tendency to dismiss the ability of the male feminist critics. This is because there is doubt whether male critics can be as objective and impartial as the female feminist critics. Showalter (as cited in Sohaimi Abdul Aziz, 2014) disagrees that feminist criticism should only be the domain of female critics but should be extended to male critics as well. According to Showalter, "This enterprise (feminist criticism) should not be confined to women; I invite Criticus, Poeticus and Plutarchus to share it with us". With the invitation from Showalter, there is a surge in the number of male feminist critics, in particular those who use feminist critique on works by male writers.

The main thing to be emphasized here is that there is a connection between feminist critique, male feminist critics and literary works by male writers and this connection is still within the corpus of feminist criticism (Sohaimi Abdul Aziz, 2014). The examples of this are the feminist critique of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* by Mohd Rasid and Zaiyadi (2017) and the radical feminist critique of Faisal Tehrani's *The Professor* by Zaiyadi (2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed for this study is text analysis and post-feminist theory is utilized in order to analyze the text (i.e. the novel *Will You Stay?* by Norhafsa Hamid).

Post-feminism is a reconnection of women to a pre-feminist stage, where they are concerned about domestic affairs, no less than their professional commitments and familial affairs (Modleski, 1991, and Whelehan, 2000, as cited in Abdullah and Awan, 2017).

Also, post-feminism is in a sense a form of anti-feminism, where women who had won their way to political, economic, and social equality of genders, now wanted to rejoice in their beauty and bodily well-being (Faludi, 1991, as cited in Abdullah and Awan, 2017).

The text used for the analysis is the novel *Will You Stay?* written by Norhafsa Hamid which was published by IMAN Publication in 2021.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Elements of Post-feminism found in the novel

As stated by Modleski (1991) and Whelehan, (2000), in post-feminism, women are concerned about domestic affairs, no less than their professional commitments and familial affairs. In addition to that, Faludi (1991) looks at post-feminism as a form of anti-feminism, where women who had won their way to political, economic, and social equality of genders, now wanted to rejoice in their beauty and bodily well-being.

In the novel, we can see that the female character (the protagonist) in the story is not only concerned about her career, but she also acknowledges her femininity that is the need of being loved by a man whom she herself cares and loves. She is also concerned about the expectation that her parents (especially her mother) have of her as much as she is concerned about what she wants to achieve in life and in her career. In addition to that, in pursuing worldly objectives, the female character is not compromising her religious belief that she holds strongly in her life. So, here we can see that the element of post-feminism as has been suggested by Modleski (1991) and Whelehan (2000) is very much established in the story.

Although Amy is a professional who works as a doctor, she is a believer in the institution of marriage which she holds as something sacred.

The following is what Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (2010) says about marriage from the religious perspective:

Allah has created in men a desire for the opposite sex and lodged a similar desire in women. Each feels this need which is direr than the need for food and drink and which keeps on summoning them over and over again; each one feels a vacuum, which is not filled by anything other than that this union based on the divine law of marriage. Only then each of them attains peace of mind...

Also, according to Al-Qaradawi, the purposes of a marriage include: marriage results in progeny, it preserves the existence of humankind until the time Allah has planned for its

cessation, it safeguards the religion of a person, it is the only way to raise a family, it enhances social bonds and it provides opportunity for the maturity of the human being.

Amy is also an observant and dutiful Muslim. She observes all the laws like the strict adherence to non-sexual relationships before marriage. In fact, out of her own choice, she does not go out on a date with any man even with the person whom she likes.

From the religious perspective, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (2010) explains about the concept of chastity and moral pre-eminence in Islam as follows:

The Muslim society is one which is based on cleanliness, chastity and immaculate presentation. It forbids fornication, both open and hidden, and considers intoxicants and gambling as Satan's deeds; it ordains the faithful men and women to lower their gaze and protect their private parts; it forbids shameless behavior and seduction, whether verbal or physical, so that the sickness of heart does not ravage and revel in indecency without care for morality or religion.

"Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean." [2:222]

Even though Amy is an independent woman, out of respect for the Islamic tradition, she plays the role as a filial daughter to her parents. In the novel, we learn that Amy is in conflict with her mother who always looks down on her decision to become a surgeon. Her mother expects her to marry early with a man of her mother's choice. Although Amy feels so uncomfortable with her relationship with her mother, she tries to fulfill her mother's expectations as she does not want to be a disobedient daughter.

In the Qur'an, there are many verses where God instructs children to be dutiful and responsible towards their parents, for example in surah Al-Nisa, verse 36 and surah Al-Isra, verse 23 God says:

Worship Allāh and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed, Allāh does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful, (4:36)

— Saheeh International

And your Lord has decreed that you worship not except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them [so much as], "uff," and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word. (17:23)

— Saheeh International

Ways how the main character preserves her Muslim identity whilst living in a non-Muslim environment

Amy, even though she is a professional independent woman, she observes very strictly Islamic laws and codes of conduct, for example she still observes formal worships like fasting and the obligatory daily prayers. She also wears the hijab in order to cover her *awrah* (the

minimum limit of parts of the body that are obligatory to be covered due to obeying Allah SWT's commandment) which is important in Islam.

When Amy first started her training, Elise was the one who made sure she settled in well. Elise knew that Amy is a Muslim from her head covering, so she put in the effort to find a room for Amy to pray when she was at the ward. Amy was touched by Elise's thoughtful gesture. (page 50)

From Amy, Elise learnt about Ramadhan (fasting), prayers, and many other things pertaining to Islam. Once, Elise fasted together with Amy, just to feel what it is like to control one's hunger and thirst. (page 52)

Amy aspires to get married with a man of her dreams/ choice and build a family with her partner. In Islam, marriage is a sacred institution.

Amy couldn't help laughing at Elise's description of unwanted pregnancy, "So you believe in an arranged marriage? I've seen a documentary about those on telly, the other day." Elise continued asking.

"Yes, I do but it doesn't mean it's a forced marriage like how it's wrongly portrayed by the media. Those forced marriages were mainly due to customs rather than religion. In Islam, I am entitled to choose my own husband. That means, if my parents have found someone they like, I can say 'no' if I don't like the guy. And if I do like the guy, I can choose him. It's just that we don't get to know each other or go on dates, like other couples. Even if we do meet, it will be chaperoned. Like the olden, Jane Austen days." (page 51)

Amy does not go on a date as sexual-romantic relationships outside of marriage between a man and a woman are prohibited in Islam.

"I'm a Muslim, Elise. My religion is Islam. In Islam, sexual intercourse before marriage is strictly forbidden. Dating can lead to that hence dating is also forbidden. I'm sure no guy wants to go out with a girl without any physical contact involved," explained Amy. (pages 50-51)

"Yes, you're right. It is to preserve the dignity and chastity of women. Plus, I feel that virginity is something so precious that it shouldn't be given away freely regardless of religion." (pages 51-52)

Even though she can make a decision on her own, prior to accepting Rasyid's proposal, Amy did an *istikharah* prayer (asking God for His guidance) in order to ensure that the decision she makes is the right one.

"You're sure, girl? It does seem awfully sudden. I mean, how long have you known this Rasyid?" asked Amy's dad, Fareed, concern clearly heavy in his voice.

"Yes, I'm sure dad. Believe it or not, I did my istikharah even before he asked me. I knew that I really liked him, and I was sure that he would make a good husband for me. If he didn't ask me, I'd probably gather the guts to ask him, later," said Amy, giggling. (page 156)

5. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the novel *Will You Stay?* (2021) is a Chick Lit novel that has a strong element of Islamic post-feminism. From the analysis too, the researcher has managed to identify the ways how the protagonist of the novel preserves her identity as a Muslim woman even though she has to live in a non-Muslim environment.

Also, it can be seen that the analysis and findings of this study are in line with what has been discussed by Siti Hawa Muhamad et al. (2023) as opposed to the analysis and findings of the study by Abdullah and Awan (2017).

REFERENCES

- Abdullah, M. & Awan, S. (2017). Islamic Postfeminism and Muslim Chick-Lit: Coexistence of Conflicting Discourses. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* Vol. 24, No. 2, 2017, pp.93-105. ISSN: 1024-1256
- Brizee, A., Tompkins, J.C., Chernouski, L. & Boyle, E. (2010). *Feminist Criticism: 1960s-present*. Retrieved from <file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/Feminist-Theory-Overview.pdf>
- Lewis, J. J. (2020, November 25). What Is Radical Feminism? Thoughtco.com. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-radical-feminism-3528997>
- Mohd Rasid, N.A. & Zaiyadi, Z.A. (2017). A Feminist Critique of Season of Migration to the North. *Proceeding of the 4th International Conference on Management and Muamalah 2017 (ICoMM 2017)*. Retrieved from <chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnibpcjpcglclefindmkaj/http://conference.kuis.edu.my/icomm/4th/e proceedings/IC%20024.pdf>
- Muhammad Abdul Hadi Bin Ismut. (2021, June 29). Al-Kafi #1810: Awrah of The Parents in front of Their Children. Retrieved from <https://muftiwp.gov.my/en/artikel/al-kafi-li-al-fatawi/4848-al-kafi-1810-awrah-of-the-parents-in-front-of-their-children>
- O'Connor, K. [n.d.] *Feminist Approaches to Literature*. Creative Commons BY-NC-SA (2.0 UK) etrieved from <http://writersinspire.org/content/feminist-approaches-literature>
- Quran.com. Translation of surah Al-Nisa, verse 36. Retrieved from: <https://quran.com/4/36?translations=17,18,20,21,22,84,85,19,95,101>
- Quran.com. Translation of surah Al-Isra, verse 23. Retrieved from <https://quran.com/17/23?translations=32,42,21,101,85,84,22,20,19,18,17,95>
- Quran Explorer (2022, July 3) What Islam says about parents. Retrieved from: <https://www.quranexplorer.com/blog/Education-In-The-Light-Of-Sunnah-And-Qura'an/What-Islam-says-about-parents#:~:text=Allah%20has%20further%20says%20in,%E2%80%9D%20%5B17%3A23%5D>.
- Siti Hawa Muhamad (2021). Muslim Chick Lit as a Space of Counter Narrative: A Literature Review. *Proceeding of the 8th International Conference on Management and Muamalah 2021 (ICoMM 2021)*. e-ISSN: 2756-8938
- Siti Hawa Muhammad, Raihanah M.M. & Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2023). Spaces of Hope: Third Space Identity in Selected Muslim Chick Lit. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies* Volume 23(3), August 2023 <http://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2023-2303-11>
- Sohaimi Abdul Aziz (2014). *Teori dan kritikan sastra (Edisi kedua)*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (2010). *Islam: An Introduction*. Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Islamic Book Trust

Zaiyadi, Z.A. (2022). Faisal Tehrani's *The Professor: A Radical Feminism Critique of Patriarchal Ideology in the Malay Muslim Society*. Proceedings of the International Conference on Malay, Arabic and English Literature (ICMAEL 2022). Retrieved from chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/http://irep.iium.edu.my/100265/1/Prosiding-ICMAEL-22.pdf