

MUSLIM CHICK LIT AS A SPACE OF COUNTER-NARRATIVE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Three decades after 9/11, there is a growing number of popular fictions written by Muslim women writers. These fictions are called chick lit or chick literature, which consists of heroine-centred narratives chronicling the trials and tribulations of their female protagonists in romantic relationships, family matters and professional endeavours. Although chick lit is Anglo-American and white in origin, through the decades, it has shifted to encompass writings produced by coloured women and more recently, Muslim women. This transformation is much welcomed. This is because Muslim women have been misrepresented as oppressed, silenced and mistreated in western popular media, thus this genre paints a positive picture of Islam as a universal religion that embraces love, not hatred as politically projected by Islamophobes. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to present a literature review that discusses Muslim chick lit as a possible space to counter the narratives of the west. The findings indicate that Muslim chick lit represents the voices and presence of Muslim women in western fiction which offers counter-narratives by Muslim writers carving out the spaces of hope in the discourse of Islamophilia.

Keywords: *Muslim women, chick lit, Muslim chick lit, counter-narrative*

INTRODUCTION

The 9/11 tragedy had brought extreme changes to the lives of the Muslims especially Muslim minorities living in the western mainstream society. Fear towards Muslims triggered by Islamophobes had instigated prejudice and hatred, and Muslim women, outstanding because of their hijabs, had bore the brunt the most. Their voices have been stifled for the past three decades. They have been misrepresented or unfairly portrayed as oppressed, silenced and mistreated by western popular media.

Despite the misrepresentation, there has been a rise in writings by Muslim women to repel the negative portrayals. Since 2009 onwards, there have been more publications of chick lit novels by minority Muslim women and the trend has grown significantly for the past five years. Chick lit as a genre is often portrayed as trivial and lack in depth (Curr, 2017; Rode Schaefer, 2015), however, this is not the focus of the novels' storylines though as the novels often raise questions which address the different ways women engage the world (Rode Schaefer, 2015). This is especially true for minority Muslim women who use this genre to paint an actual picture of contemporary Muslim women's lives and the Muslim society which are different than the western's imaginings. Thus, it is the objective of this paper to present a literature review that discusses Muslim chick lit as a possible space to counter the narratives of the west. The discussion will start with a literature review of chick lit in general, methodology, past studies on Muslim chick lit and finally, conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chick lit or chick literature is the intersection between popular culture and women's writing. The term, originated from a euphemism for Princeton University's Female Literary Tradition course in the 1980s, was first introduced in print by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell in 1995 to name an anthology of women's writing that was described as "unapologetic, and overwhelmingly emancipated" (Mazza, 2006, p.18).

According to Ferriss (2015), this genre can be defined as "contemporary fiction featuring identifiable, young heroines facing a series of romantic, professional, and cultural hurdles specific to their generation" (Ferriss, 2015, p.175). There are two major issues addressed in the chick lit genre. They are consumerisms which include subjects such as shopping, fashion and diet, and female identity that focuses on sub-topics such as romance and marriage (Lu, 2014).

In its early phase, chick lit novels were mainly written by white female writers thus the genre focuses on the trials and tribulations of its white, female protagonists. Moreover, it is made popular mainstream by the seminal publications of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, published in 1996 and 1997 respectively. Sophie Kinsella and Meg Cabbot are among well-known white chick lit genre writers.

Folie (2020) states that by 2011 however, the genre seemed to have reached its impending demise with decline in sales figure and ending of well-known chick lit imprints such as Harlequin's *Red Dress Ink*. Likewise, the flow of academic publications on chick lit had also dwindled until five years later with the publication of Heike Misler's *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation* (2016). Misler argues that chick lit novels have not become obsolete but rather have evolved and diversified beyond having only white women protagonists (Folie, 2020). The genre now includes novels written by women of colour with multi-ethnic characters such as Kim Wong Keltner's *The Dim Sum of All Things* (2004), Anjali Banerjee's *Imaginary Men* (2005) and Lara Rios's *Becoming Latina in 10 Easy Steps* (2006).

Chick lit written by Muslim women in English are mostly produced in the diaspora or in the subcontinent such as in India or Pakistan. Among the earliest works that could be traced are written in the diaspora such as British Bangladeshi writer Rekha Waheed's *The A-Z Guide to Arranged Marriage* (2004). Waheed has two more novels under her belt, *Saris and the City* and *My Bollywood Wedding*, both published in 2010. British Indian writer, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed meanwhile published a memoir that takes the form of chick lit, *Love in a Headscarf* (2009). Australian Arab writers, Amal Awad published *Courting Samira* in 2011 while Randa Abdel-Fattah published *No Sex in the City* in 2012. British Pakistani Ayisha Malik has written two novels, *Sofia Khan is Not Obligated* (2015) and its sequel, *The Other Half of Happiness* (2017). Canadian Indian writers, Uzma Jalaluddin and Farah Heron respectively published *Ayesha at Last* (2018) and *The Chai Factor* (2019). Chick lit are also produced in the subcontinent such as the ones by Pakistani writers, Saba Imtiaz's *Karachi, You're Killing Me!* (2014), and Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019).

METHODOLOGY

Several articles were selected and these articles are academic publications focused on Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's memoir *Love in a Headscarf* (2009). These articles were published between 2012 to 2017 and they discussed Janmohamed's memoir as a form of counter-narrative. Janmohamed's memoir-cum-chick lit focuses on the writer's experience of meeting several prospective suitors through family and matchmakers before finally finding her husband. It also details on a young Muslim women's experience of practicing hijab-wearing in a country where Muslims live as minorities as well as her thought on Islam as a religion. Overall, the

memoir informs readers on the actual experiences and thoughts of a young, professional minority Muslim woman living in Britain.

MUSLIM CHICK LIT AS A SPACE OF COUNTER-NARRATIVE

In contemporary neo-Orientalist writings, Muslim women have often been portrayed as disempowered, oppressed and belittled by Muslim men, subservient to their husbands with no equal rights, always kept under the veil of ignorance and at home (Hasan, 2015). One example of an unfair portrayal is in the form of media and political commentary (Chambers et al. 2019). A number of British Muslim women for example, wanted to set the record straight and to correct the Orientalist representation by writing back to these images of “oppressed” and “downtrodden” Muslim women especially the ones circulating in the media discourses and memoirs pre- and post-9/11 (Hasan, 2015; Newns, 2017). Janmohamed is one such writers, and according to her, the miserable images within the misery memoirs about Muslim women that she encountered at a bookshop are not her story (Girishkumar, 2016). She wanted to write a story that had a universal appeal and that was the reason she wrote *Love in a Headscarf* (2009).

Since chick lit creates a space for resistance and identity (Curr, 2017), a number of studies have been conducted to investigate how the novels of that genre become a form of writing back to rectify the misrepresentation of Muslim women in the mainstream Western media. Janmohamed’s memoir-cum-chick lit for example has been studied a number of times. A study by Raihanah et. al (2012) for example looks at how Janmohamed’s *Love in a Headscarf* responds to the issue of misconception about Islam by telling the writer’s own quest for love to demystify the myths about oppressed Muslim women. According to Raihanah et. al (2012), the repercussions of 9/11 continue to be felt by the minority Muslim communities living in the non-Muslim mainstream society and this is especially true for Muslims who visibly practice their religion, such as women in hijab. Janmohamed, as a minority writer and a Muslim woman, wants to show a different facet of Islam as a religion where humour, hope and humanity flourish (Raihanah et al. 2012). Additionally, by telling her quest for love stories, Janmohamed shows that Islam is a religion that teaches and celebrates love (Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015).

Another study by Ruzy Suliza and Noraini (2015) examines Janmohamed’s writing as a form of counter-discourse to establish positive images of the multifaceted realities of Muslim women that have often been misunderstood. This is especially true as post 9/11 has seen an increased production of Muslim writings due to the reasons that there is genuine interest in how “native” Muslims speak of their experiences and to counter western stereotypical depictions of Muslims and Islam (Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015). Janmohamed’s memoir highlights the ways in which young Muslim women negotiate traditional rituals and western practices by choosing a universal subject matter, love (Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015). In Janmohamed’s memoir, trying to find the right one brings her closer to the One – God. This idea is shared by Newns (2017) in her study which mentions Janmohamed’s approach to finding love fits with the principles of her Islamic faith and is different than the chick lit convention of “finding yourself”. Rather than taking a self-centred and nihilistic approach on finding oneself, Janmohamed reframes “finding yourself” as a spiritual journey towards God (Newns, 2017). This line of thought corresponds with chick lit convention as one of the themes of chick lit is growth and maturity (Lu, 2014).

According to Ruzy Suliza and Noraini (2015), Janmohamed’s writing as counter-discourse goes beyond stereotypical depictions of being Muslims and does not attempt to conceal certain practices that the Muslims have problems with. The difficulty of Muslim women realities is being revealed through the ways in which the Muslim women support or challenge their interpretations of religion and cultural practices (Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015).

Though Janmohamed is well-versed about British life and has impressive academic qualification, she remains firm about her family's conventional practices and pious upbringing (Raihanah et al. 2012; Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015). Both studies agree that Janmohamed makes adaptations that do not compromise Islam (Raihanah et al. 2012; Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015). Janmohamed practices matchmaking as a mean to find potential suitors, a practice unfamiliar in the modern western society and could be seen as belittling a woman's agency to find her own partner (Raihanah et al. 2012). By going through matchmaking processes though, Janmohamed is depicted as happy to reject unsuitable suitors that do not meet her criteria and it also reaffirms her voice and agency because she has the final say in who she wants as a husband (Raihanah et al. 2012; Ruzy Suliza & Noraini, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The literature review suggests that Muslim chick lit provides possible spaces to counter the narratives of western popular media that are often bias towards Muslim women. Through this genre, Muslim women are given an outlet to voice out their true experiences and these experiences are in contrast to the negative portrayals that have often been touted by the west. Rather than the image of downtrodden, mistreated and oppressed Muslim women, they are pleasantly depicted in stories that show Islam as a religion that celebrates and honours love, in which these women have their own voices. It is undeniable then that Muslim chick lit represents the voices and presence of Muslim women in western fiction which offers counter-narratives by Muslim writers carving out the spaces of hope in the discourse of Islamophilia.

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