

**An Analysis of Muslim Sacred Spaces in English Literature:  
Exploring the selected Novels of Muslim Women English  
Writers**

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**Abstract**

*This paper aims at exploring the idea of Muslim sacred in modern-day English literature through the selected four novels written by the Muslim women writers residing in the west. These novels include Camilla’s “Sweetness in the Belly” (2005), Leila’s “The Translator” (1999), and “Minaret” (2005) and Mohja’s “The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf” (2006). Edward Said in his Orientalism (1978) had ardently argued about the Islam and its false representation and the portrayal of Muslim women as uncivilized in the Western discourse. Besides, the western discourse of the last two decades have also portrayed Muslim veiled women as marginalized, symbols of threat, fear and escapees of Islam particularly in the post 9/11 era. However, contemporary Muslim writers living in the west have composed different novels which highlight a completely different perspective of Muslim women. The female characters in the novel highlight strong engrossment with Islam due to which metaphoric sacred spaces are created by these characters which have never been known in English literature. The findings of this paper reflect the demonstration of certain novelistic techniques used by the individual narratives for validating the idea of Muslim sacred. The paper concludes that the strong connection of Muslim women with their religion create sacred space for them to have fortification as well as refuge instead to escape from.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim Sacred Space, English literature, Muslim women, selected novels*

**Introduction**

The literary tradition for many centuries around the world is composed of literature with religious themes and same goes with English literature. In the previous eras, a major portion of English literature comprises of symbols, themes and subjects which belong to Judaism, Hellenistic religion or Christianity. However, principally,

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Christianity has been the religious tradition in English literature (Detweiler & Jasper, 2000).

In the countries with major English-speaking population, Islam as a religion is in minority. Although Islam has been represented in European literature from Medieval times, even then historically it has been less privileged in English literature than Christianity or Judaism (the other two Abrahamic religions). The famous scholars Edward Said and Kahf assert that the Western Literature particularly during the era of Dark Ages as well as the Renaissance period described Islam from the European ideology. This ideology considered Islam to be sacrilegious; in other words, a belief system that spreads hatred among people. Though, orientalist discourse, notably following the middle of the eighteenth century provided a different representation of Islam through the novels written in English literature (Kahf 1999; Said, 1978, p 4-5). In some of the colonized countries, the official language became English and it was during this time that the colonized Muslim writers began to compose their own experiences about the Muslim world along with the composition of certain literary texts which highlighted Muslim issues. Commenting on *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) by Ahmed Ali, Malak (2005) pointed out that this book was a trend setter in highlighting the Muslim issues in the colonized countries. He further added that “Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s” *Sultana’s dream* (1905) however, leads as a pioneer of Muslim themes and characters in English literature (p.30).

“various works in English were created by the Muslim writers who wrote fiction with the themes of Muslim communities. These writers include “Mena Abdullah” and “Adib Khan”. Some other writers who included major Islamic themes in their fiction works include “Farhana Sheikh” and “M.G Vassanji”. Besides, “Abdulrazak Gurnah”, “Ahdaf Sueif” and “Nurroddin Farah” are also among such Muslim writers (Pazargadi, 2012). The present research describes, explores and interprets the Muslim sacred notion by using the text of the selected four novels written by female writers who have given their own experiences about Muslim sacred and this is what makes these novels distinguished. In the West, the last decade marks these novels as most crucially acclaimed with the major themes of spirituality and mysticism. In this paper, the sacred has nothing to do with the facets of experiences based on gender, hence, no distinction on part of female or male sacred experiences (spiritual or religious) has been made. Even then, keeping the cultural aspects into consideration, the representation of the spiritual lives of Muslim women is comparatively crucial than the Muslim male and his sacred experiences.

### **The notion of Sacred in different Domains of Knowledge**

The notion of sacred has been defined and elaborated by different writers, theorists and scholars. In general, sacred refers to religious, different, unordinary and special. Eliade (cited in Livingston, 2005), elucidates that the sacred things give rise to the divine existence; however, anything can be considered sacred if it contains the sacred attributes (p. 46). The famous sociologist Emile Durkheim (cited in Paden, 2003) asserts that sacred refers to objects given with a particular value (p.31). He also

observes that of all religious spectacles, sacredness is a collective element. In the field of theology, Rudolf Otto believes “sacred to be the root of religious experience” (cited in Livingston, 2005). This paper mainly focuses on the notion of Muslim sacred through realistic novels, real characters taken from everyday life experiences (under domestic settings) which David Hall terms as “the lived religion” (Hall, 1997).

The importance in the immersion of the notion of sacred can be realized with the fact that in the modern, chiefly materialistic era the notion of sacred has been ignored or represented to be a matter of the past; a relic, outdated, something that disappeared or is out of inquiry mode (Griffiths, 2001, p. 425). However, the involvement in sacred (whether literature or elsewhere) still holds importance to many people which can be a major reason to take this notion somber. As in views of Woodward (2001), the essential characteristic of humanity is to talk about the sacred (p.113).

### **Representation of Muslim Women Sacred in the Selected Novels**

The selected novels have four major characters with the following names: *Sammar*, *Najwa*, *Khadra* and *Lily*. The novel “The Translator” contains the major character of a woman who is a Sudanese Muslim named *Sammar*. She leaves her career in Scotland. This is because she realizes that *Rae* (the man who wants to be her life partner) is a non-Muslim. He does not turn to Islam due to which their Nikah is not possible. The couple gets married later in the novel when *Rae* converts to Islam. In “Minaret” the leading character *Najwa* works as a maid in United Kingdom since she loses her family as well as finances due to the political aggression in Sudan. She gets complete mental relaxation by turning into a real Muslim woman during the political turmoil in Sudan. In “Sweetness in the Belly”, *Lily* the leading character is living under the guardianship of a Sufi master who belongs to Africa and teaches her about Islam. Due to the eruption of the war, *Lily* leaves for United Kingdom to take protection after spending some time in Harar (Ethiopia). The main character *Khadra* (A Syrian-American) girl in “The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf” is also interesting since *Khadra* belongs to a highly reverent Muslim family living in Indiana however at one stage in her life she begins to question the faith of her own community. The doubt on her own faith takes her to a spiritual journey and she comes out with the culmination of a stronger faith in her religion Islam than she ever had before.

The novelists have effectively harnessed “Focalization” as a novelistic technique to highlight the sympathetic characters. The focalizers as well as the narrators in “Minaret” and “Sweetness in the Belly” are *Najwa* and *Lily* respectively which indicates that the respective stories are narrated by these two characters with their own perspectives. The use of external narrator-focalizers can be observed in “The girl in the Tangerine Scarf” and “The Translator”, having read the private lives of the leading characters, *Khadra* and *Sammar* likewise. Hence the technique of both kinds of focalizations enable the readers to understand the emotions of the characters deeply, which ultimately creates a profound congruence between the characters and the readers.

## Reflection on the Islamic Sacred with Rituals and Symbols in the Selected Novels

The novels contain characters who are involved in prayers, recitation, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan which highlight the importance of these rituals in connection to the sacred. As Livingston (2005) explains that language is a source to communicate with our sacred whether base on a historical or social practice (p. 48). When people are engaged with religious rituals, only then the spiritual moments are created. For instance, Khadra after not praying for a long time starts offering prayer when her mind receives different verses from the Holy Quran. The spiritual energy she receives from these Quranic verses motivates her to offer prayer. For instance, Khadra listens to the Quranic verses which makes her soul “peaceful”. She feels a different kind of strength and calls herself “a hidden treasure”. She further wishes to “know herself”. Khadra feels someone calling her asking her to join prayer:

“Come in among my worshipers, and in my garden, enter. Come to prayer, come to prayer”.

The author of the novel explains khadra’s feelings in the following words:

“She felt as though she were praying for the first time, as if all that long-ago praying, rakat after rakat, had been only the illusion of prayer, and this—what she began to do now—was the real thing” (Kahf, 2006, p.307).

In the novel “Minaret”, *Najwa* attends religious classes as well as visits the mosque more often. There are references of mosques, sufi shrines and spiritual celebrations in “Sweetness in the Belly” which indicate sacred spaces of the Muslims which are physical in nature. Howes (2007) asserts that the psychological sources that make us draw intensely towards religious feelings are religious buildings (p.76). This is supported by Gibb (2005) who expresses that even the visitors get an ecstatic effect after visiting a religious building (p.43). Hence *Najwa* always feels peace and solitude in the mosque,

“I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant” (Aboulela, 2005, p.184).

The same experience is shared by *Lily* in “Sweetness in the Belly” where she finds all humans equal regardless of colour, race or creed,

Whether the elites, the “urban Hararis”, “the white galabayas” or “the black Sudanese”; Nomads, Landlords and serfs; all erased in the presence of God” (Gibb, 2005, p.42).

Another aspect of physical Muslim sacred space depicted in these novels is the religious architecture. Commenting on the religious architecture Howes (2001) expresses that the architecture which is religious in nature communicates from the aspect of religious practice, history, cosmology, sagacity of worship, history of community, and the idea of communication between “microcosm and macrocosm” (p.77). In “Sweetness in the Belly”, *Lily* points out the religious architecture and the splendor of the mosques as well as the shrines. She says that her town had “ninety-nine mosques” with “more than three hundred saints”. The shrines had five gates: “similar to our routine of offering

five daily prayers; besides just like the five pillars of faith which govern our lives (p.271).

The selected four novels are a beautiful reflection of “unconventional sacred spaces” as well. Sacred spaces with unconventionality are places not associated with history or special architecture. These spaces are basically commonplace, however made extraordinary by the humans according to their needs. For instance, in the novel “Sweetness in the Belly”, the major character *Lily* is in the hospital. Since the war has brokeout and she has no place to offer prayer therefore she simply goes to the washroom, spreads her gown and offers her prayer. In this way she makes washroom a scared place to offer prayer when she is left with no option (during war) to offer her prayer. Another example can be found in “The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf”, where Khadra’s friend does not visit the mosques to offer prayer although she was deeply religious however she does not consider it “necessary” Moreover, she had set a place *zawiya* to offer prayer in her home (p.367).Hence the famous scholar Lane (1988) explains that a sacred place is a place which is ordinary, however, ritually set apart and therefore becomes extraordinary (p.21). Similarly, in the novel “The Translator”, while going to Sudan, *Sammar* hears Azan and connects it to the sound of the heating pipe she had heard in Aberdeen. As mentioned in the novel,

“It now came as a relief, the reminder that there was something bigger than all this, above everything. *Allah akbar, Allah akbar...*” (Aboulela, 1999, p.145).

In the Western context, the characters feel deprived of the sacred spaces as they used to have in their own native lands and therefore, they create those sacred spaces for them in imagination to soothe them. In “The Translator” *Sammar* says that when her friend Diane used to go away from home, she used to lock the room and offer her prayer with peace. She had to adjust with the new place and offer her prayer in private; although she was used to of offering prayer on the grass and even in public places in her hometown. However, she had realized in this new place that people surrounding her would feel strange; observing her “forehead, nose and palms touching the ground” (p.76).

Hence *Sammar* wishes to pray comfortably in Aberdeen as was in Khartoum (her own native land). Besides, the confusion of *Sammar* whether to pray in private or in the public is a result of cultural boundaries which refugees need to adjust once they start living in other countries.

### **Validation of the Sacred under Premodern Perspective of the characters**

The main characters in the novel hold beliefs which are neither modern nor bogus. This phenomenon is well explained by Mishra and Hodge concept of premodern as they claim in the following line,

“those life worlds of spirits, myths, religions, indeed of poetry, that cannot be explained in totally modern terms” (2005, p.391). Hence modern people may consider it irrational but not antirational. Many religious people hold belief in cause and effect which depicts their “premodern”. Religious people have strong reliance on

God which assures them that nothing can be happened without God's will. *Najwa* the leading character in "Minaret" is accused of stealing a necklace which recovers suddenly, which for *Najwa* is a miracle. She considers this recovery as a miracle as she could lose her job otherwise. Her stomach "heaves", however she completely relies on Allah and subdues everything to the will of the Almighty. She knows Allah has a much better job for her than her current job (p.114). Similarly, *Sammar* in the novel "The Translator" receives a postcard and gets confused after reading the post card that said, "Get Well Soon". Since *Sammar* is a religious character with staunch faith on God, she feels that the word "I pray" should be added before this comment on the post card (Aboulela 1999, p.104).

### Conclusion

The notion of Muslim sacred in the selected novels adds deep worth to these novels particularly relating to the Islamic perspective in the west. The dominant paradigms highlighted about the Muslim women in the west can be altered by reading and comprehending the spiritual relationship of Muslim women with Islam. Muslim women find real solace in the teachings of Islam. Besides, the sacred space provided to women by Islam is a refuge and not something to escape.

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