

Comparative Analysis of the Portrayal of Islamic Feminist Ideals in A Woman is No Man and The Henna Artist

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords

Comparative analysis, content analysis, diverse perspectives, Islamic feminism, qualitative approach, social realities

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DOI: [1820.vfast-tir.v12i1/21015.10](https://doi.org/10.21015.10)

Article History

Received

June 07, 2024

Accepted

June 07, 2024

Published

June 15, 2024

ABSTRACT

This study aims at employing content analysis for undertaking a comparative analysis of the portrayal of Islamic feminist ideals in two contemporary literary works: A Woman is No Man by Etaf Rum and The Henna Artist by Alka Joshi. Since both novels provides narratives of the lives of women in Muslim societies, therefore, this study explores issues such as women's struggle for agency, autonomy, and empowerment in the context of male dominated norms and cultural expectations. Utilizing theoretical framework of Islamic feminism, Margot Badran (2009) discusses its episteme in terms of its being a combination of activist and intellectual work carried out in diverse parts of the world. Islamic feminism is self-containing as it addresses the diversity of culture and negotiates multiplicity of identity which features the lives of Muslims across the globe today. Utilizing textual evidence, this research explores the authors' portrayals of Islamic feminist ideals specifically, gender equality, female education, and women's rights. Also, whether these ideals are negotiated and contested through a critical engagement of the cultural and social realities contained within the Muslim communities portrayed by the authors. In sum, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the multiple voices and perspectives that make up the Islamic feminist movement of today as well as to the complexities of gender relations in current Muslim societies.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is a greatly diverse field which serves the kids from birth up to eight years of age. Children take part in different kinds of educational activities during these early years. Irrespective of where they work or what kind of their job titles are, however, preschool teachers are professionals. It means, they make all their decisions based on a specific amount of knowledge, continue to learn throughout their practical lives, and are committed to provide the best possible education and care for all the children. The opportunity to do something different in this exciting and thrilling field has never been greater. ECE benefits to great extent from increasing respect, public recognition and financial support. Even in challenging economic times, continued funding reflects increasing public recognition of the benefits of ECE, especially for kids at risk of later school failure, but also for middle class students. Many policy makers, researchers and parents now consider ECE programs important for adopting school readiness and long-term achievement in life. Many groups also take ECE crucial for the development of a country (Bertram and Pascal, 2016).

Contemporary literary works have been important in the representation and exploration of the complex ideals at the heart of Islamic feminism. Examples such as Etaf Rum's A Woman is No Man [17] and Alka Joshi's The Henna Artist [11] have been lauded for the nuanced ways in which they tackle issues such as the experiences of Muslim women, their attempts to negotiate the demands of a patriarchal

order and the cultural expectations that shape and circumscribe their everyday lives. By depicting these experiences, these texts have contributed to a broader articulation of the intersections of Islam and feminism, showing the diversity of Muslim women's lives and vantage points. Since the portrayal of Islamic feminist ideals in the works of contemporary literature is one of feminism's most important tasks, therefore, this study seeks to provide a comparative analysis of how those ideas were represented in Alka Joshi's *The Henna Artist* [11] and Etaf Rum's *A Woman is No Man* [17].

By fostering a better comprehension of the intricate interplay between Islam and feminism in contemporary literature, this study sheds light on the diverse voices that comprise the Islamic feminist movement. Indeed, a comparative analysis of these texts reveals how divergent cultural and social contexts shape Islamic feminist expression. This research underscores the importance of examining the agency and autonomy of characters vis-à-vis patriarchal norms and cultural expectations, an understanding that illuminates the struggles women face as they seek to enjoy their rights and achieve gender equality. Therefore, in offering these larger implications about the function of feminism in Muslim societies, this study provides a richer view of the complex interplay of gender and Islam in the global context of the present. This research, then, points to the ways that these works offer a fresh outlook on Muslim women and provides a venue for women's diverse experiences and voices to challenge old tropes and find new recognition.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of two selected novels, *The Henna Artist* [11] and *A Woman is No Man* [17] using content analysis with qualitative approach to the study. This study aims at exploring how Islamic feminist ideals are portrayed in these two novels, specifically through an exploration of gender equality, female education and women's rights as represented by these authors. In recent years, the representation of Islamic feminist ideas in literature has gained popularity. Islamic feminism is a multifaceted movement that aims to reconcile Islamic teachings with feminist principles, advocating for gender equality, women's rights and social justice within Muslim societies Afkhami, 1995, as cited in [1]. Despite its increasing influence, the movement remains highly contested and contentious, reflecting the varied cultural and political landscapes of Muslim communities worldwide.

1.0 Research Questions This study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the Islamic feminist ideals portrayed in *A Woman is No Man* and *The Henna Artist*?
2. How do the authors of the novels represent gender equality, female education, and women's rights within Muslim communities?
3. In what ways are Islamic feminist ideals negotiated and contested within the cultural and social contexts depicted in the novels?
4. How do the female characters in the novels navigate patriarchal norms and cultural expectations to assert their agency and autonomy?

Literature Review

Islamic feminism has become a powerful presence in contemporary discourses on gender and Islam. At its core, Islamic feminism aims to align the Islamic religion with feminist ideals in the effort to resist the patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and to support the humanitarian message within them. This branch of feminism also strives to promote gender equality within Muslim societies [4]. It has been especially riveting in literature, as many authors have mobilized their pens to challenge the traditional roles and expectations of Muslim women.

Several studies have examined the ways in which Islamic feminist ideals are portrayed in novels. [16] focused on the representation of Islamic feminist ideals in the three selected novels by Elif Shafak using

close reading and textual analysis. Applying similar framework, [9] comparatively analyzed two novels and foregrounded that Aboulela subverts Eurocentric orientalist stereotypes and promotes Islamic feminist discourse, reflecting ideals such as gender equality, women's agency, and female education in the two novels. Employing postcolonial feminism and Islamic feminism as theoretical frameworks, [21] comparatively analyzed two novels by Arab women to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender equality. The researcher portrayed feminist ideas where one explicitly espouses feminist ideologies, while the other does not.

Using descriptive and analytical method of research, [15] revealed in a study that it is against Islam and Quranic studies that women should not be given equal rights to men and should be subjugated. It is also suggested that Islam should be understood from its source (The Holy Quran) rather from the personal opinions of people. [5] applied Abdulkarim Soroush's theory employing social psychological perspective on gender as a critical approach to Islamic feminism in a study. [13] depicted the patriarchal cruelty in one of Qaisra Shahraz's novels where a man Habib does not permit his eldest daughter Zarri Bano to get married and confines her to Shahzadi Ibadat (a traditional norm in which if the woman is only heir to the family then she is not allowed to get marry to a man but to Holy Quran so that they cannot lose their inheritance).

[8] used textual analysis to study one of Atiq Rahimi's works and employed Gyatri Spivak's concept of subalternity to foreground the marginalization of women in a colonized society. [14] applied Islamic feminism in two of Pamuk's works and identified that the female characters in both novels resist the patriarchal rule of religion and the demeaning perceptions of Muslim women as timid, subservient, and backward. Working on the similar framework, [23] explored Elif Shafak's novel and highlighted that there are two types of generations: one which is submissive and has no equal rights to men whereas the other concerns with the generation which is rebel to the old rituals and male dominance and want to assert its own power. The woman from first generation is being killed in the hands of her own son for honor killing whereas women from the second generation protest against patriarchal and religious authorities.

The textual understanding of misogynistic hadiths with respect to the values of justice and equality in gender are refuted by the Islamic feminists in Makassar City, Indonesia. In Makassar City, the campaign by Islamic feminists regarding women's rights in various aspects of life, with special reference to education, work, and politics has played a significant role in promoting gender equality in religious contexts by re-interpreting these misogynistic hadiths, which spread contradictory views among Muslims in the camouflage of Islam, [22]. [10] attempted to explore Qaisra Shahraz's *Typhoon* in the lens of Islamic feminism and found out that the socially constructed notion of honor is directly related to women not to men and in this way, womanhood has become a burden for women which can be analyzed in the characters of Gulshan and Naghmana. Gulshan is Haroon's wife who is considered inferior because she is unable to satisfy her husband's wishes on bed. He steals away from his wife's arms into another one (Naghmana) just because she is unsuccessful in satisfying what a man wants from his wife.

A Woman is No Man [17] and *The Henna Artist* [11] explore on the trials and triumphs of Muslim women who fight for their emancipation and for social justice. The former recounts the stories of three generations of Palestinian women by giving a glimpse into the internal conflict traditional Muslim women experience as they yearn for both freedom and self-determination. The novel also shows the importance of education and critical thinking as necessary for questioning patriarchal norms within Muslim communities and as enablers of gender equality among Muslim women and their rejection of tradition. Similarly, *The Henna Artist* [11] is a fascinating narrative about gender relations in pre-independent India which tells the story of Lakshmi (a gifted henna artist who tries to forge her independence and self-determination in a society that severely restrains the roles and choices of women). Journeying with Lakshmi, we learn of the critical importance of education, economic power, and societal support for the struggle for gender equality and social justice within Muslim communities.

In combination, these novels provide powerful insights into the rich and complex terrain of Islam and feminism, challenging stereotypes, and broadening understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of Muslim women. By situating the portrayal of Islamic feminist ideas in these novels, scholars can better illuminate the possibilities and pitfalls immanent in contemporary Muslim women's movement for empowerment and social justice. [2] explored marginalization, loss, trauma and resilience of third world women in Joshi's *Henna The Artist* with the help of the character Lakshmi.

Employing Patricia Hill Collins' theory of Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition and using a descriptive-analytical method,[19] analyzed *A Woman Is No Man* by Etaf Rum to explore women's resistance against the cruelty of men who oppress them through structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domain of power. The men are considered free from family reputation and domestic duties whereas the women have to bear this burden that turn them into a docile individual. The women gather their self-worth to oppose the oppression through the act of being brave in voicing their thoughts, going to college, and living on their own, and encouraging each other to raise awareness of self-definition. Working on the similar text, [18] applied Slya Walby's concept of patriarchy to highlight subjugation of women in a patriarchal society.

[6] used Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism theory in a study and analyzed Arab American women from a three-generation family who emigrated from Palestine to America and concluded that four Arab American female characters were influenced by generational differences when they were exposed to Arab culture in Palestine. Collecting similar data for their study, Khan, [12] employed multidisciplinary approach to foreground domestic violence against women in the name of the set of beliefs, culture and traditions. [20] used Butler's theory of gender performativity to highlight gender stereotypes where culturally constructed stereotypes associated with male and female members of the society make them different bodies.

The analysis of the selected novels indicates that some of researchers analyzed the similar themes in the selected novels the researchers want to analyze through this study, but none of them applied Islamic Feminism in their studies. This is the gap between the former studies and this one which the researchers want to fill through this study. This study is significant in the way that it offers an analysis of Muslim women's lived experiences and struggles in communities where cultural, social, and religious practices are intertwined. It makes a contribution to a more equitable representation and understanding of Muslim women and their fight for liberation gladiolus religious and social systems. It can contribute to a broader and ongoing conversation that explores the ways in which women in Muslim societies have negotiated and will continue to negotiate cultural, religious, and social expectations. In doing so, this study holds potential to deconstruct the stereotypes and misconceptions of the monolith that signifies the Muslim woman and to examine the intersections that significantly shape how they understand and express their womanhood.

Research Methodology

Using content analysis with qualitative approach, the aim of this study is to comparatively analyze *A Woman is No Man* (2019) and *The Henna Artist* (2020) to identify the Islamic feminist ideals (specifically gender equality, female education, and women's rights within Muslim societies) portrayed in the selected novels. Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research. Content analysis is a qualitative research tool used to analyze content and its features and quantified qualitative information by sorting data and comparing different pieces of information to summarize it into useful information.

Keeping in view the portrayal of Islamic feminist ideas as well as the social and cultural context in which the female characters in the novels challenge patriarchal norms and expectations, the data are

collected for the present study. Then, the data are organized thematically in order to recognize common themes and patterns related to the portrayal of Islamic feminist ideas within the novels. Analysis was conducted pursuant to feminist literary theory and Islamic feminist scholarship which provided a lens through which to assess how gender roles, women's rights, and cultural expectations are portrayed in the novels. The analysis was guided by rereading of relevant scenes and sections of the novels, followed by literature review as related to both Islamic feminism, as well as the social and cultural context within which the novels were set (Islamic Republic of Iran).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs this research is anchored in feminist literary theory and Islamic feminist scholarship. A central aim of feminist literary theory is to elucidate the manner in which gender operates within literature, elucidating how the representation of gender and gendered identity within literature can symbolize and replicate or interrogate and resist patriarchal power structures [7]. Similarly, Islamic feminist scholarship also seeks to analyze the constructions of gender and gendered identity and to offer an alternative reading of the Qur'an and Shari'a, in order to place women's rights within a comprehensive religious framework [1]. [3] defines Islamic Feminism as the explication of the ideal of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all human beings and calls for the implementation of gender equality in real life. Given that both the novels under analysis represent gender roles, women's rights, and cultural expectations in Islamic Republic of Iran. The framework of feminist literary theory and Islamic feminist scholarship creates a lens that allows for an analysis of the representation of these themes in the novels.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Both the selected novels illustrate Islamic feminist ideals through their protagonists' journeys towards self-discovery, independence, and the challenge of oppressive cultural norms. They highlight the importance of education, autonomy, and the right to make personal choices, advocating for a more equitable society.

In *A Woman is No Man*, Etaf Rum presents Islamic feminist ideas by depicting the challenge traditional gender roles and oppressive practices that are often legitimized under religious terms. The novel deals with the struggles of three generations of Palestinian women struggling to forge their independence and agency in the conservative community in which they live in Brooklyn, New York. The book highlights themes like forced marriage, spousal abuse and intra-family power dynamics under patriarchy, because they intersect with the women's identity as Muslim Americans.

Similarly, in *The Henna Artist*, Alka Joshi presents Islamic feminist ideas by telling the story of Lakshmi, a young girl who leaves her abusive home — where she was a virtual slave to become an unusually successful henna artist in Jaipur, India, in the 1950s. Lakshmi must navigate around the cultural and social constraints that would prevent her from ever breaking free and instead marrying someone ethnically suitable and busy in the kitchen. The novel deals with themes such as female education, economic empowerment as well as women's need and ability for autonomy and independence.

Overall, as the two novels portray gender equality, female education, women's rights within Muslim communities as central Islamic feminist principles. These ideals challenge the traditional patriarchal norms and promote women's empowerment and autonomy.

2.0 A Woman is No Man by Etaf Rum

1.2.0 Education and Independence:In *A Woman is No Man*, the protagonist Isra dreams of reading books and gaining an education despite societal expectations. For instance: "She had always imagined a world outside of Brooklyn, one where she could read and learn, where she could go to school and make something of herself."

2.2.0 Breaking Free from Oppression:The character Deya represents a new generation that strives to break free from oppressive traditions. Deya questions her family's values and seeks her own path:

"Deya knew that she didn't want to live the same life her mother had. She wanted choices, freedom, and the right to live for herself."

3.2.0 Challenging Gender Roles:The novel frequently addresses the restrictive gender roles imposed on women. The character Fareeda voices her frustrations about these limitations:

"Fareeda believed that a woman's place was in the home, but deep down, she resented that she never had a choice."

3.0 The Henna Artist by Alka Joshi

1.3.0 Self-Sufficiency and Entrepreneurship:Lakshmi, the protagonist of *The Henna Artist*, epitomizes self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial spirit. She defies traditional expectations by becoming a successful henna artist:

"Lakshmi's work as a henna artist not only provided her with financial independence but also gave her a sense of purpose and autonomy."

2.3.0 Empowerment through Knowledge:The novel emphasizes the importance of knowledge and education as tools for empowerment. Lakshmi educates herself about herbal remedies and uses this knowledge to help other women:

"She had spent years learning the secrets of the herbs and how they could heal, empower, and transform. Knowledge was her weapon."

3.3.0 Challenging Social Norms:Lakshmi often challenges societal norms, especially in her interactions with clients who come from various social backgrounds. She advocates for women's autonomy and their right to make choices about their lives and bodies:

"Lakshmi's advice to the women she adorned was always the same: You are the mistress of your own destiny. Do not let anyone else dictate your choices."

Discussion

In *A Woman is No Man*, Etaf Rum represents gender equality as a central Islamic feminist principle that subverts traditional gender roles and the oppressive practices often legitimized under the guise of religion. The novel portrays female education as a means of empowerment and a crucial ingredient in the realization of autonomy and self-determination. Through Deya's insistence on attending college despite her conservative family's objections, the author underscores the transformative power of education for Muslim women in challenging patriarchal norms and in striving to realize their dreams.

The two novels also present the importance of women's rights within Muslim communities as a central Islamic feminist principle. In *A Woman is No Man*, the author depicts women's struggle to assert their rights against a conservative and patriarchal Palestinian community. It is not only about having their voices to be heard in their communities but also for their rights to be respected. Similarly, in *The Henna Artist*, Alka Joshi represents gender equality as one of the most important Islamic feminist ideals, also highlighting the role of female education and economic empowerment may play in enabling women to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. In the novel, Lakshmi's success as a henna artist represents not only her perseverance and her will to overcome the patriarchal norms that limit the opportunities of their husbands, but the importance of their education and enter working women would leap it. As a

writer, I do not portray how they navigate their struggles to be able to follow their passions, but also call attention to how they must recognize woman being respected in their own communities and how traditional and cultural and cultural and cultural reforms pertain to women.

A Woman is No Man portrays how Islamic feminist ideals are negotiated and contested in a conservative Palestinian community in Brooklyn, New York. The novel demonstrates the tension between the traditional patriarchal norms and the desire for women's agency and independence, often justified in the name of religion. But while the novel demonstrates the struggle to claim rights and assert moral agency within one's community, it also shows the ways in which those rights are constrained and limited, particularly in the context of forced marriage and domestic violence. These specific concerns draw attention to the ways in which Islamic feminist ideals are negotiated and contested in the cultural and social context of the novel.

Similarly, in *The Henna Artist*, Islamic feminist ideals are negotiated and contested within the cultural and social context of 1950s Jaipur, India. The novel portrays the tension between traditional patriarchal norms and the desire for women's autonomy and independence, particularly in the context of economic empowerment. While the novel portrays the success of the protagonist Lakshmi as a henna artist, it also portrays the challenges and barriers she faces in achieving recognition and respect within her community, particularly as an unmarried woman. These issues highlight the ways in which Islamic feminist ideals are negotiated and contested within the cultural and social context of the novel.

In *A Woman is No Man*, female characters seek to carve out agency and autonomy in a world that is steeped in patriarchal norms and cultural expectations. For instance, the protagonist Deya goes against expectations when she seeks higher education in defiance of her conservative Palestinian community, which believes and perpetuates the idea that "a woman's place is in the home." Instead, she insists on applying for colleges, knowing that her future depends on it. By rejecting an arranged marriage and declining a marriage proposal from a man she doesn't love, Deya also asserts her agency. Likewise, for instance, Isra, who tried to fight against the control of her abusive, oppressive husband and escape her circumstances after she was married off.

In *The Henna Artist*, the female characters negotiate patriarchal norms and cultural expectations to assert their agency and autonomy. The protagonist Lakshmi, who is an unmarried woman, challenges traditional gender roles by working as a henna artist, despite the disapproval of her community. She asserts her agency by taking control of her life and her trade, even when faced with numerous obstacles, including a male client who pressures her into sex. Similarly, Radha, who comes from an abusive marriage and retains only a few teeth, works with Lakshmi in a mutually empowering relationship. Accepting the constraints of some of her class status, Ladli too comes into her own as a brave and a resourceful woman.

The novels in general underscore the many means by which female characters assert their agency and autonomy against restraints of patriarchal norms and cultural expectations. In addition to challenging gender roles, they resist oppression and pursue their own desires. Their characters attest to the resilience and fortitude of Muslim women subject to various forms of adversity.

In much the same way, *The Henna Artist* embodies the many voices and perspectives within Islamic feminism. Lakshmi's clients hail from varying backgrounds and worship different gods, allowing her to reflect on the complexity of an inherently homogenized minority experience. Likewise, *The Henna Artist* illustrates the myriad ways in which sexist and oppressive beliefs are held up among older and younger generations of women in India and "in any community, where shame and honor act as the barometers of morals and ethics." As in *A Woman is No Man*, the older generations adhere to a strict adherence to patriarchal values and ritual in the name of religion. The younger generation, on the other hand, feels emboldened to speak out and to continue fighting for those rights which their older counterparts were either forced to cede or deemed unattainable.

In *The Henna Artist*, this tension is evident as Lakshmi challenges traditional gender roles in pursuit of economic empowerment. Her story demonstrates that the Islamic feminist movement is not based on a

singular, monolithic view of what women's rights should entail within the Islamic tradition. Rather, it enables Muslim women themselves to navigate and negotiate various discourses about women's rights at the intersection of their social, cultural and religious lived experiences. Lakshmi embodies one manifestation of this movement—a vision of female autonomy and independence that may not necessarily require the complete rejection of religious and/or cultural norms and practices. Yet *The Henna Artist* also shows the diversity of voices within this movement, as there are other female characters who appear more traditional and accepting of their roles as women.

Both novels, then, offer insights into the diverse perspectives and experiences of Muslim women, and underscore the complexity both of Muslim women's lives and of the Islamic feminist movement. They show that, within Muslim communities, there are not only diverse Muslim communities, there are diverse women, with their own diverse experiences, experiences that are shaped by myriad intersecting factors, including cultural, social and religious norms.

Conclusion

In sum, the comparative analysis of the portrayals of Islamic feminist ideals in *A Woman is No Man* (2019) by Etaf Rum and *The Henna Artist* (2020) by Alka Joshi reveals the complexity and diversity of Muslim women's experiences and struggles for agency and empowerment. The novels nullify any notion of a single Islamic feminism and instead illustrate how Islamic feminist ideals are negotiated and contested within Muslim women's cultural and social contexts. Gender equality, female education, and women's rights are depicted as central themes of negotiation and contestation within Muslim communities. The negotiation of and resistance to patriarchal norms, cultural expectations, and assertions of agency and autonomy by female characters are illustrated in both novels. The diversity of voices and perspectives within the Islamic feminist movement that range from liberal interpretations of Islamic teachings to those that require adherence to traditional cultural practices are depicted in this analysis. Moreover, the novels provide keen insights into the multiple perspectives and experiences of Muslim women that attest to the complexity and diversity of the Islamic feminist movement. It is demonstrated that women's experiences are situated within an array of intersecting contexts including cultural, social, and religious norms.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Dr. Muhammad Ajmal: Writing Original Draft Preparation, **Dr. Safia Siddiqui:**, Conceptualization, Methodology. Data Analysis, **Muazma Batool:** Reviewing, Editing.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

It is declared that all authors don't have any conflict of interest. Furthermore, informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants included in the study. It is also declared that this article was not published by any other author.

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