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Victim or Winner: A Muslim Widow's *Saffron Dreams* in Post 9/11

America

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Abstract

This paper examines the struggle of a Muslim widow who lost her husband in 9/11 attack as portrayed in Shaila Abdullah's novel Saffron Dreams. The woman lives alone in post 9/11 America amidst all the hatred and class prejudices against Muslim Americans. She fights with her own sorrow to create a space for herself in a foreign country which does not sympathise with her and makes her life more difficult. Yet she decides to face the challenge. Despite being a victim of post 9/11 prejudices against Muslims, she creates an identity for herself and raises a special child all alone. Thus, she emerges as a winner.

Keywords: Saffron Dreams; struggle; identity; victim; prejudice

In the wake of 21st century, America witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack in its history which resulted in the destruction of the twin towers of World Trade Center. As the attack was launched by the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda, there was an increase of racial and religious animosity against the South Asian people especially the Muslims living in America. Muslim Americans faced adverse situation not only in terms of hate crimes but also in other areas of life such as education, law enforcements, discriminating attitude against women for wearing hijab as well as tremendous psychological trauma. They also experienced greater declines in incomes and employments post 9/11. In fact, Muslim Americans were not given any scope to mourn their personal loss as a result of 9/11 attack. Hence, this paper aims at analyzing the condition of a Muslim widow who lost her husband in 9/11 attack as portrayed in Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* and how she struggles to overcome her personal tragedy to pursue her dream in post 9/11 America with a special attention to the pros and cons of being a Muslim widow.



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The widow is a woman who has lost her husband. Widowhood is the most stressful of all life events and requires more psychological and behavioural adjustment than any other life transition. The death of a life partner requires certain alternative patterns of lifestyle so that the survivor can live a satisfactory social and personal life. Apart from the identity transition (from a married person to a widow), widowhood is associated with many other life-changing events. Loneliness is a major problem. Again there are certain prescriptions and proscriptions which widows from different cultures have to abide by like loss of status, economic problems, a difficult life influenced by patriarchal and religious dogma, prohibitions regarding remarriage as well as psychological turmoil. But the challenges faced by widows vary according to their socio-cultural backgrounds.

A Muslim widow enjoys many rights. According to the Sharee'ah (Islamic Law), a widow is entitled to a share of the inheritance from the property of her deceased husband. Islam also grants the widow the right to having a house and a shelter for her and the children. Again, Islam permits the marriage of a widow and sets a specific period for her '**Iddah**' (waiting period), which is four months and ten days or until delivery for pregnant women. Thus we can see that Islam keeps the financial, emotional and psychological rights of the widow intact and necessitates that the Muslim society should take proper care of her and her children.

Though a Muslim widow is blessed with certain rights which her counterparts from other socio-cultural backgrounds are denied, yet they are usually depicted as passive victims of masculine dominance especially by the western countries. Stereotypical representations of Muslim women in the West negate the multifaceted nature of different Muslim societies. There is also the notion that it is the mission of the West to rescue Muslim women from their subjugation and subservient position. Again, Muslim women easily become soft targets of hate crimes and other discriminating attitudes in the western countries which makes their lives in migration more difficult. Therefore a catastrophic event like September 11, 2001 attack made the lives of Muslim American women even more complex. In the wake of 9/11, FBI reported a 1,700 percent increase in hate crimes against Muslim Americans between 2000 to 2001. They came to be viewed as a potential threat to the safety of the nation in an environment of fear which quickly turned into "Islamophobia". Muslim American women were also not free from post 9/11 hate crimes. Many incidents have been recorded over the past years of Muslim women being subject to offensive and even physically harmful abuse by those who find their Islamic dress objectionable or think that such clothing is the marker of terrorist activities. Their



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‘veil’ or ‘hijab’, instead of becoming the symbol controlling their sexuality, personal freedom and life choices, marks them as representatives of the suspicious, inherently violent ‘terrorist other’. But 9/11 also has some positive effects on Muslim American women. As Muslim men largely became the targets of hate crimes, they started taking a lower profile. In such a condition, Muslim women took up the challenge to assert their identity and defend their religion, though they were as much at risk as men. Under such circumstances, it would be very interesting to study the life of a Muslim widow in post 9/11 America who has lost her husband in 9/11 attack as portrayed in Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams*.

In *Saffron Dreams*, the chief protagonist Arissa Illahi, a Muslim writer and artist, comes to America after her marriage with Faizan. They live happily together until Faizan gets killed in September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. After this catastrophe, Arissa’s struggle begins in America as a pregnant widow.

Immediately after the incident, Arissa gets traumatized. She cannot believe that Faizan is no more. She keeps on pleading, “I have to get to him. You don’t understand.” (*Saffron Dreams* 52, hereafter *SD*). She even rushes to the terrorstruck site to find out Faizan amidst the debris and smoke. She, in fact, cannot sleep at night without taking Valium for many days. Screams, wails, and horrible nightmares become part of her life. She cannot lead normal life after the tragedy for several days. She expresses her feelings during those days in the following way:

“Waking was a nightmare, a realization of a life stretching before me without a partner, holding a baby made by two but who will be brought up by one”(SD 56).

Such a feeling is common with most widows like Arissa. Anticipated death of the spouse allows the survivor with better coping strategies. But an unanticipated death like that of Faizan produces severe reactions like that of Arissa and longer adjustment periods.

But Arissa’s struggle does not end here. She is a Muslim widow living in post 9/11 America. Though she lost her husband in the 9/11 attack and was an equal victim of the devastating tragedy like other Americans, she was not allowed to grieve and granted sympathy like her fellow Americans because of her Muslim identity. She has to face post 9/11 hatred and animosity in such a condition.



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One late October evening, she is pursued by a group of ferocious American teenage boys. They threaten her and even try to harm her considering her belonging to a “race of murderers” (SD 61) because of the veil she is wearing. Though Arissa pleads with them that she is as much a victim of the incident as they are, they do not listen to her. They rip her veil apart and call it “a facade”. They do not sympathise with the pregnant widow and attack her with a knife. Only the sudden arrival of a man somehow saves Arissa. After the incident, Arissa decides to part with her veil which Faizan wanted her to wear. The incident shows the amount of hatred the Muslim Americans had to deal with post 9/11 even though they are as much victims as the white Americans. This also shows the helplessness of many Muslim American women who had to part with the age old tradition of the veil simply combat hate crimes.

Arissa also faces the biasness of American media. A reporter from *The Observer* makes Arissa uncomfortable by his so-called ‘American’ questions:

“Mrs. Illahi, being a Muslim, how does it feel to be attacked by your own people” (SD 123)?

It seems that the Muslim American women like Arissa do not get the sympathy of the media like their American counterparts. They are labelled out even in the midst of personal tragedy.

Arissa, however, does get sympathy from an American. A woman whom Faizan served on the morning of the 11th and who also lost her husband in Vietnam gives her the much needed information about the last moments of Faizan’s life. She also tries to help Arissa in coping with the pain of losing a companion. Thus, so far, Arissa seems to be a victim of her personal loss in a forlorn land.

But as the novel progresses, one finds that Arissa does not sit at home grief-stricken. She tries to combat her loneliness. The disress associated with conjugal bereavement diminishes over time.

Supports from friends and family are very much required in such a sensitive situation. Arissa gets the support of her own family, friend and even Faizan’s family. In fact, Faizan’s parents stay with her in America until she gets adjusted to her life. Her in-laws never blame her for their loss as Faizan was their only child. Rather they sympathise with her and try to soothe her. Faizan’s mother even inspires her to complete Faizan’s unfinished novel. According to Vachon and Stanley, the extent to which members of the social network provide various types of support to



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the bereaved is important in the pattern of recovery and adaptation. The emotional supports Arissa got helped her a lot to cope with the tragedy.

Financial security is an essential requirement in a widow's life. She has to become financially independent to provide for herself and her children. Arissa initially gets financial support from her in-laws. But soon she gets a job as an associate editor for a South Asian publication. She also decides to live alone with her child. Such a determination eventually helps her to finish Faizan's incomplete work *Soul Searcher*. Thus, Arissa becomes an example to those widows who are not prepared to handle financial responsibilities brought about by a husband's death.

A widow who is left with a child finds it more tough to reassemble her life. Arissa becomes a mother to Raian, a child who is not normal, only after Faizan's death. But she does not break down. She decides to face the world as a single mother and take care of her special child.

“I first found out about Raian's health problems- heart defect, breathing abnormalities, some vision impairment. Was there anything normal with my child?”

Such an attitude makes Arissa a glaring example for her counterparts to look forward to.

After widowhood, the question of remarriage becomes a relevant topic. According to Lopata, a tendency to idealize the former partner is very common with the widows. Again, after becoming a widow, many women acquire a new, independent identity which they do not want to part with easily. Arissa also faces the inevitable choice of remarriage. But this time, she is her own custodian. She gets engaged in a small affair with Zaki, a rich electrical engineer whom she met at a children's hospital where she took Raian for a routine ear checkup. But ultimately she comes out of the affair and decides to live alone with her child.

Hansson and Remondet concluded, “...for most persons, widowhood need not be considered the end of productive life, but rather the beginning of a major segment of the life course, and one that should be pursued vigorously in order for it to be successful and fulfilling.” In Arissa's case, this statement comes out to be very appropriate. She successfully handles every situation after Faizan's death in a country where her own safety was in question, where she had to face additional difficulties because of her Muslim identity instead of the much needed sympathy and support. Yet she raises her special child, becomes financially independent, fulfils Faizan's last dream by completing his *Soul Searcher*, and also realize her own dream of becoming a



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successful artist. Thus, we see that Arissa does not succumb under pressure and ultimately comes out victorious-a true winner.

Note

1. **Iddah**- In Islam, Iddah is the period a woman must observe after the death of her spouse or after a divorce, during which she may not marry another man. The length of Iddah varies according to a number of circumstances like a woman divorced by her husband should observe it for three months while a pregnant woman has to go through it until she gives birth. For a widow, Iddah is four lunar months and ten days after the death of their husband.
2. **Hijab**- Hijab is the veil that is typical to a Muslim woman and part of her Islamic way of dressing. However whether to wear it or not is a personal choice. The vast majority of Muslim women in America and in the Middle East do not wear Hijab. For those who choose to wear Hijab, they believe it is liberating for them because it helps them focus their attention on their actions and inner beauty as opposed to the outer, bodily features. It also frees them from the global obsession in the media of female objectification.

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