Australian and Muslim: women taking control

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Abstract: This paper will examine the contribution made by the authors of two books, *The Glory Garage* and *Does my head look big in this?* which endeavoured to provide a voice for Muslim women within the Australian context. The books were written by Muslim women at a time when members of the Muslim community were battling negative publicity. Not only do they set out to provide a voice for Muslim women and girls but also to educate fellow Australians about Islamic beliefs and practices. While doing so, they demonstrate how Muslim women are active agents of their own destiny, valuing aspects of their religion, culture and family and integrating these into the way in which they choose to be Australian.
Key words: Australia, Islam, women.

Introduction

Nadia Jamal and Taghred Chandab's non-fiction publication *The Glory Garage* (2005) and Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does my head look big in this?* (2005) explore the lives of Muslim women and girls living in Australia. In *The Glory Garage*, individual and diverse stories of sometimes contradictory experiences are recounted while *Does my head look big in this?* develops a fictional narrative of a teenager grappling with her identity as a Muslim-Australian. Both books were published in 2005 and provided a much needed voice for Muslim women and timely reading for the broader youth market. *Does my head look big in this?* has been reprinted several times, including four reprints in 2006, and is used as a text in schools.

Assumptions regarding Islam

When teaching a course on Islam in Australia for students undertaking their studies to become a teacher, I start by asking them "What percentage of the Australian population do you think identify themselves as Muslim?". Estimates generally range from 10 to 30%. In numerical terms this means that the students believe that, out of a population of just over 22 million, there are between 2.2 and 6.6 million Muslims in Australia. In fact, at the last census in 2006, only around 340,000 people in Australia identified themselves as Muslim. Students also believe, incorrectly, that Islam is the fastest growing non-Christian religion in Australia and the largest non-Christian group.

There is evidence that Muslims were present in Australia before British settlement in 1788 with the seasonal visits by Macassans to Australia's northern shores (Nabulsi, 2000).

After settlement Muslims, or Mohammadans as they were referred to at the time, were part of the early establishment of settlements in outback Australian with the work of the so-called Afghan camel handlers. The first substantial mosque was built in Australia in Adelaide in 1888 (Nabulsi, 2000).

Apart from a terrorist attack in outback Australia in 1915 provoked by a dispute over the ritual killing of animals when two men, one a Mullah, attacked a train carrying picnickers, killing four people and injuring 7 others, Muslims attracted little attention in the press until recently (Stevens 2005). These two books entered the Australian youth book market at a time when the Australian Muslim community was battling negative publicity and physical abuse after a series of attacks in the name of Islam in the USA in 2001 and, closer to Australia, in Bali in 2002 when 202 people were killed, including 88 Australians. Women were often singled out for abuse as they were seen to be the visible face of Islam.

The perception created in recent times is not only that Australia has a very large Muslim community, but that Muslim women are often oppressed and controlled by male members of their families. Books such as Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* which, in one poll, Australians voted as one of the top 100 books (Knox, 2004), fuel this perception. Both *The Glory Garage* and *Does my head look big in this?* provide a timely alternative voice for Muslim women and girls.

The Glory Garage

The Glory Garage presents different female voices and different experiences in a series of short stories. The authors state explicitly that:

> We are writing this book because there have been critical and damaging things written and said about Muslims especially Lebanese who follow this religion. We felt there was a need to give you an insight into the everyday dilemmas that some of us face growing up in a secular society. In particular we have tried to highlight some of the key principles of Islam, including the five pillars or foundations of the religion (Jamal & Chandab, 2005: 6).

The title itself refers to the goods that young women accumulate in anticipation of their marriage – sometimes too extensive to be kept inside the house and therefore kept in the garage. The broad topics of marriage, clothing, religious traditions, family and difficulties with communities are dealt with in 21 short stories, with a number of these looking at the distinction between religion and culture.

The control that women have over their lives is an important theme in many of these chapters. For example, “The Teenage Bride” where Sarah persuades her parents to let her become engaged in year 10 of her high school education, looks at the way in which this decision was driven by the girl herself, much to the horror of her teachers, who assumed her parents, because they were Muslim, had forced her into an early marriage. In “You’ll die a Virgin”, Dalia’s decision to remain chaste at 28 years of age demonstrates her conviction and her reasons for it, contrasting to the norms of the wider Australian community.

One of the more powerful demonstrations of the control women have taken over their lives is illustrated by Fatima in “Keeping it in the family”. Fatima initially become engaged to her first cousin after visiting Lebanon and later sponsored him to come to Australia in order to marry. She then changed her mind, much to her family’s opposition, as it had been her decision to become engaged in the first place. She secretly notified the migration department she was no longer willing to sponsor her cousin, so his visa application would be rejected. At a later stage, she changed her mind yet again and decided to marry him after renewing contact with him.

A further example of the family accepting decisions made by young women in spite of it conflicting with the wishes of the family is demonstrated in “Divorcing the community”. This short story is concerned with the rejection of many aspects of being Lebanese and Muslim. Samla makes the observation “My brother epitomises what I dislike about Lebanese people” (Jamal & Chandab, 2005: 45) but, after rejecting much of what she saw around her, mixing outside the Lebanese community at university, and travelling overseas by herself, she has come to a renewed understanding of herself. It is about, as she says, “having the choice” (Jamal & Chandab, 2005: 54) of doing what she thinks it right, rather having societal expectations thrust upon her.

Making the decision to wear the *hijab* full time, gaining the confidence to confront harassment and forging ahead with undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca in spite the lack of spousal approval are other examples from the stories of the ways in which women take control of their lives and the practice of religion.

Within the different stories, there is also an understanding of the actions and expectations of parents and brothers and the community that comes through although ultimately, it is girls trusting their own judgement without the need for protection. This could be from mixing with others, interaction with boys, going to restaurants or travelling overseas.

Does my head look big in this?

Does my head look big in this? develops the story of Amal, the only child of Palestinian born parents who migrated to Australia in the late 1970s. The story is introduced with Amal working out the pros and cons of becoming a 'fulltimer', wearing the *hijab* full time, rather than for special occasions. This decision has been made more complex as she is no longer attending an Islamic school but an elite private school in an upmarket Melbourne suburb and, as the only Muslim student at the school, she is concerned about reactions of others, as well as her own commitment to her faith.

When she arrives at school, the general reaction from the female Principal and many of the fellow students is to assume that she has been forced to wear the *hijab* by her parents. Rather than her parents forcing her, they were, in fact, concerned that she was not ready to face any challenges which may occur because of her decision. Friends at the school were supportive or became so once they understood her motives.

Wearing the *hijab* was only one aspect of her religious expression which is touched upon. Other Pillars of Islam, including her daily prayer rituals and the impact of fasting for Ramadan during her final year exams, were explained in some detail.

A number of subplots identified alternative ways of engaging with religion and culture. We have the uncle and aunt who are ridiculed by Amal as they have tried to adapt to being Aussie by rejecting their own heritage. Their efforts are embarrassing and their behaviour almost grotesque as they Anglicize their name, call others 'mate' and take on a gross stereotype of the typical Aussie.

Another subplot involves the elderly Greek neighbour who is estranged from her son as his conversion from the Greek Orthodox faith to being Jehovah's Witness has caused a rift lasting many years. With new insights about accepting difference, Amal manages to encourage Mrs Vasilli to become reconciled with her son.

One of the more poignant subplots highlights the different cultural expectations between Muslims of different backgrounds, for example, from urban Palestinian and rural Turkish regions. The sixteen year old Leila, one of Amal's friends, faces pressure from her mother to contract an early marriage. The treatment and experiences of her and her brother demonstrate traditional and different gender expectations within some groups migrating to Australia. This subplot enables the author to illustrate the difference between cultural and

religious practices and expectations. Leila is able to extricate herself from the situation when it becomes too much for her at home, while remaining true to her own religious expectations, until a reconciliation can be arranged through the intervention of a Muslim teacher.

Conclusion

As can be seen, neither book aims at depicting Muslims in Australia in purely positive terms, nor do they shy away from the controversial issues. In fact, they confront them head on. *Does my Head look big in this?* deals with Amal's reactions to the attack on the twin towers, the Bali bombing and the much publicised rapes in Sydney of young women by Lebanese men. The negative behaviour and double standards demonstrated by some Muslim men and criticism of others from the Lebanese Muslim community are issues considered in *The Glory Garage*. Islam itself, however, is always portrayed positively and a distinction is clearly made by the authors between cultural and religious practices, as well as different interpretations of Islam.

Both books are didactic in nature, with considerable detail supplied regarding Islam and, in particular, the Five Pillars of Islam, especially the daily ritual prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. Other aspects, such as modesty, receive considerable attention.

Analogies are made between the way in which there is diversity, prejudice and misrepresentations of other religions and ethnic groups and also for individuals who do not fit with dominant expectations. Both books look at the way in which women and girls negotiate these different situations, in order to find an identity and path in life. The women in the texts were able to negotiate and construct identities they were comfortable with and which reflected their religion and culture, at the same time developing their own understanding of what it is to be both Australian and Muslim.

While doing this, in a variety of ways the women demonstrated their position as active agents in working positively and creatively within their own cultural and religious understandings, as well as in the Australian environment. The women in *The Glory Garage* and *Does my head look big in this?* were the authors of their own destinies rather than being subjugated by familial and cultural expectations.

As I was writing this paper, a newspaper article appeared on the front page of the state daily "The Advertiser" with the headline "Taskforce to tackle abuse of Muslim women" (Novak, 2010: 1). Regardless of the efforts at educating the general community

about Islam, women, as the most visible face of the religion, are still being misrepresented and targets of abuse. It is not surprising, therefore, that Muslim women and girls struggle to find an identity within the Australian community as Muslim-Australians. Texts such as *The Glory Garage* and *Does my head look big in this?* provide important starting points for a better understanding of an important aspect of Australia's multicultural community; really, though, little has changed regarding perceptions, and there is a continuing need for the voices of Muslim women to be heard.

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