



THE BILDUNGSROMAN OF DIASPORIC MUSLIM
WOMEN: A STUDY OF MOHJA KAHF'S
THE GIRL IN THE TANGERINE SCARF (2006) AND
UMM ZAKIYYAH'S *REALITIES OF SUBMISSION* (2008)

BY

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ABSTRACT

Muslim women are often portrayed and perceived in a negative light in the dominant Western narrative, especially in the post-9/11 era. Western misconceptions of Islam have proliferated a distorted identity of Muslims. For the Muslim diaspora, struggling with hyphenated identity has further complicated their image as Muslims, which is especially the case with Muslim women. This study examines the process of identity formation of contemporary diasporic Muslim women living in America. The two works chosen are Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Umm Zakiyyah's *Realities of Submission* (2008). The discussion is based on each writer's representation of the Muslim self with various themes including challenging the Western stereotypes of Muslims, confronting the identity crisis as well as overcoming differences between culture and religion. The novels are analyzed as bildungsroman texts, as this study discusses the characters' spiritual journey and the development of Muslim identity. The study demonstrates how Islam gives Muslim women a sense of identity through the wearing of hijab and performing salah (prayer). Apart from examining the authors' ability to counter the perceptions of Muslims that are often negative, this study investigates how women are empowered in the selected novels by way of showing that their characters are able to exercise their volitions on issues raised within the texts while maintaining their identity as Muslims.

ملخص البحث

النساء المسلمات غالبا ما ينظر إليهن نظرة سلبية في الروى الغربية المهيمنة، وخاصة في حقبة ما بعد ١١/٩. وقد أضرت المفاهيم الغربية الخاطئة للإسلام بهوية المسلمين. أما بالنسبة للمغتربين المسلمين، فقد عانوا من التعقيد المتصل بهويتهم كمسلمين، ولا سيما النساء. هذه الدراسة تبحث عملية تكوين الهوية للنساء المسلمات المعاصرات في الشتات اللاتني يعيشن في أمريكا. والعملان المختاران هما: "الفتاة" في الوشاح البرتقالي من فيلم "كهف المهجى" (٢٠٠٦) و"حقائق خضوع أم زكية" (٢٠٠٨). ويستند النقاش على نسخة كل كاتب عن ذات المسلم مع موضوعات متعددة بما فيها تحدي القوالب النمطية الغربية للمسلمين، ومواجهة أزمة الهوية، وكذلك التغلب على الفرق بين الثقافة والدين. يتم تحليل الروايات كنصوص نفسية لمناقشة طبائع رحلة روحية وتطوير الهوية الإسلامية. وتظهر الدراسة كيف يعطي الإسلام للمرأة المسلمة شعورا بالهوية من خلال ارتداء الحجاب وأداء الصلاة. وبصرف النظر عن دراسة قدرة المؤلفين على مواجهة تصورات المسلمين التي غالبا ما تكون سلبية، فإن هذه الدراسة تلاحظ كيف يتم تمكين المرأة في الروايات المختارة إذ أن الشخصيات قادرة على ممارسة مطالبهم بشأن القضايا المثارة داخل النصوص مع الحفاظ على هويتهم كمسلمين.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Literary Studies.

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Md. Mahmudul Hasan
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents

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Praise be to Allah for lending me the ability to learn and the strength to endure and to complete this so far the most significant academic endeavour in my life. The completion of this thesis does not mean the end of my effort to seek knowledge and of my journey as a student. There are still so much more to experience and to discover.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Identity is perhaps one's most valuable possession. It creates a sense of belonging and strengthens self-esteem to enable an individual to establish communication as well as relationships with others. Identity makes a person unique, carrying certain characteristics and personalities to distinguish one from the other. Gender, nationality, religion, and ancestry are among the main elements that contribute to one's identity formation. Religious identity becomes the foundation of this study as it highlights the construction of identity in relation to religion. The formation of identity is a dynamic process as human is a complex being. The self is versatile and context dependent (Packer & Van Bavel, 2014, p.228). In other words, humans identify themselves with multiple dimensions, such as age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and occupation. These dimensions may rapidly change a person psychologically and emotionally. This is because the construction of the self is an active and ongoing process. The self also changes as the individual associates himself/herself in a group or society. This is natural to facilitate the individual's daily activities and social interaction. If each individual refuse to cooperate with other group members, a society will descend into chaos. This study investigates the representation of diasporic Muslim women, observing their lives and challenges as they construct their identity as Muslims practicing Islam in the West, particularly in the USA.

There are several misconceptions of the Muslim diaspora regarding the group and their identity. The Muslim diaspora is a term often used, referring to Muslim

populations that live in the West but originated from Africa or Asia. In addition, Islamic populations within the United States are typically perceived as one and the same. Since the event of September 11, 2001, studies have emphasized Muslims as associates of an “emerging collective identity” (Sirin et al., 2008, p.261). However, identifying them as members of a collective group disregards the diversity within the Islamic religion. Islam is understood and practiced differently in different countries by different groups, depending on their sociocultural and ethnic background. According to Sara Silvestri, “each subgroup has distinct leanings and preferences — spiritual, intellectual, and political — and its own theological points of reference” (2016, p.2). Although the pillars of Islam remain fixed, the norms and practices are polycentric due to the various schools of thought (i.e. Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali and Shafi’e). Practicing a religion always involves a certain degree of being influenced by, and adapting, local culture. Culture or tradition is not fixed and is constantly renegotiated and reinvented, in various contexts and historical ages, by individuals and by groups. This should not be confused with the traditions (the *Sunnah*) of Prophet Muhammad as they remain authentic and sacred. Nevertheless, Islam is likely to adapt and diversify across history and in different parts of the world.

The detestation of Islam has long been practiced, and the coinage of the term Islamophobia suggests prejudice against the religion and its adherents. The major events of September 11, 2001 in USA, July 7, 2005 in Britain and other unfortunate events in the West have further contributed to a vicious propaganda against and misinformation about Islam. Osman Bakar states that the September 11 event has heightened the scourge of Islamophobia, causing Muslims particularly in America to endure severe insults and attacks on their religion and community (“Post -9/11 Islamophobia and the Future of American Islam”, n.d.). As Hussain and Bagguley

state: “The discovery that the perpetrators of the 7/7 bombings in London were British born Muslims compounded reactions to the 9/11 attacks” (2012, p.1). The finding has intensified the prejudice against Islam that resides deeply in the Western consciousness. Islamophobia has created severe consequences for the Muslim faith. It is dreadful enough to have the media that will always be the first with the tendency to be giving wrong or distorted information to the public. The extreme responses from certain Muslim groups to Western nations and non-Muslims to fight Islamophobia have further contributed to the endless negative reactions and counter-reactions that threaten the relations between the West and the Islamic world.

Prior to winning the vote as the new President of America, Donald J. Trump made a statement on 7 December 2015:

Without looking at the various polling data, it is obvious to anybody the hatred is beyond comprehension. Where this hatred comes from and why we will have to determine. Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life. If I win the election for President, we are going to Make America Great Again. (“Donald J. Trump Statement on Preventing Muslim Immigration”)

The polling data was gathered from the Centre for Security. The statistic shows that 25% violence against Americans in the United States is “justified as part of the global jihad.” The data merely indicates an insignificant number of votes mainly from participants that presumably have no knowledge of Islam and the concept of Jihad. Subsequently, after Trump’s election as the President of the United States, he issued several executive orders on 27 January 2017 that has affected many Muslims. They include the suspension of the entire US refugee admission system for 120 days, banning the entry from seven Muslim-majority countries (i.e. Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) for 90 days, temporarily banning the entry of dual-

nationals of those from these countries and the indefinite suspension of the Syrian refugee program. As the consequences of these orders, a “confusion and despair have occurred at the ports and airports as approved refugees, valid visa holders, non-US dual citizens and US legal residents were detained, barred from planes or ordered out of the US” (“Is this a Muslim Ban? Trump’s Executive Order Explained”, 2017). Students, patients, workers and others are affected and banned from universities, hospitals and companies. The vagueness of Trump’s orders has created chaos and arbitrary detentions and questionings as the signed executive orders become part of the local law enforcement at ports and borders.

The aftermaths of the September 11, 2001 attacks have not only tainted the identity of Muslims but have endangered the existing relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims. It may hinder or affect the establishment of any kind of relations – personal, political or economic – between them. Many Muslims living as minority communities have to face more complexities due to “the internal tension, polarized public debate and enduring stereotypes” (Dobson, 2012, p.92). As a result, their identity has been compromised. They undertake critical responsibilities to preserve their identity as well as to create a sense of belonging. Recognizing oneself creates a sense of pride and it becomes more significant for the individual to protect it. For the Muslim diaspora, struggling with hyphenated identity has further complicated their identity as Muslims, particularly Muslim women. The stereotypical perceptions of Muslim women and their subordinate position within their religious communities have still not abated. Words like ‘oppressed’ and ‘backward’ are some of the common labels being used to dub Muslim women. Dobson comments: “The French headscarf controversy demonstrated these perceptions as framed within their secular desires to ‘liberate’ women from their supposedly ‘suppressive’ religious practices” (Dobson,

2012, p.96). In reality, wearing hijab is a choice for many Muslim women. According to Dalia Mogahed, Muslim women choose to wear hijab because it is part of their religious tenets and “taking away the ability to practice one’s faith is ... a violation of one’s religious freedom” (“Transcript of Muslimah Dilemma: What Do Muslim Women Want in the Muslim World?”, 2009).

Based on these observations, the conflicts can be related to the nature of social norms. Living as minorities has caused the Muslim diaspora to have different belief, norms and practices from Western society. “When people deviate from norms, they are often punished, and this punishment is typically parochial...” (Packer & Van Bavel, 2014, p.234). Since the Muslim diaspora are considered different and “deviating” from Western norms, they are “punished” with misconceptions and all kinds of attacks.

The proposed study will touch on identity issues faced by the Muslim diaspora, particularly Muslim women. It will discuss more specific life matters to observe their ability to sustain their identity as Muslim women living in the West. The works chosen for this study are Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Umm Zakiyyah’s *Realities of Submission* (2008). Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria but moved to the United States with her parents at an early age. Umm Zakiyyah, on the other hand, is of African-American descent and born in Long Island, New York. By comparing their different backgrounds and the issues they have highlighted, this study intends to explore the similarities and differences of the characters as they define and form their identities. The novels will also be analyzed to draw out the challenges faced by diasporic Muslim women in the United States

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 in America and London bombings in 2005 have heightened the scourge of Islamophobia among the non-Muslims towards the Muslims. It has without a doubt impacted Muslims around the world. In the United Kingdom for example, a study by Robert Lambert and Jonathan Githens-Mazer (2010) provides a list of Islamophobia attacks particularly on Muslim places of worship. This includes criminal damage against masjids, Islamic institutions, and Muslims organizations; the methods of attacks include bombings, throwing missiles and the displaying of pig's heads at masjid areas. The crimes are attempts to disrupt the daily activities of Muslims and simply to hurt and even to murder.

Living in the West further complicates the identity construction of the Muslim diaspora. Carrying a hyphenated identity often creates a need for diasporic people to define the self and balance the cultures in order to feel accepted in society. For a diasporic female Muslim, it is far more challenging as both gender and religious belief contribute to her predicaments. The role and status of women have long been discussed and debated. The concern about women's status and rights has generally been voiced out. According to Stephanie Brzuzy and Amy Lind, "Western feminism has long been understood as the standard feminist method of discussing and writing about issues of race, gender" and they promote women's rights such as having control over their bodies and gaining equality at workplace (2008, p.597). However, the white feminists have achieved certain forms of equality and overlooked the issues of women from other races and social status. This indicates that little attention is given to minority groups such as diasporic Muslim women. Western feminism is also criticized for universalizing issues of privileged, white Western women. Issues of social class and ethnicity are often left out from their discussions. However, these issues need to

be addressed along with gender when dealing with oppression and inequality. Hence, they are seen as insufficient to represent women globally.

The reality for these diasporic Muslim women living in the West does not reflect the success of Western feminism, as minority women encounter a specific assault on account of their sartorial choice. Muslim women wearing hijabs, niqabs or burkas have been assaulted, abused and intimidated in public spaces. They “face a far greater risk of attack, abuse or hostility than Muslim women who wear Western style dress” (Lambert & Githens-Mazer, 2010, p.118). Their identity as Muslim women has now been negotiated and compromised. Muslim women writers living in the West have been communicating this reality through their creative works. The major characters which are often female encounter challenges from Western society, as they choose to maintain their identity as Muslim women in diaspora.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Irrational hatred of Islam and prejudice against Muslims are not new. However, it is also true that, despite endless hostility against Islam, there is an increasing interest among non-Muslims, especially in the West, to know about the religion. According to Osman Bakar, this is manifested in “conversion to Islam, coverage or projection of Islam for public consumption, and the visibility of Islam in the public square” (“Post - 9/11 Islamophobia and the Future of American Islam”, n.d.). This directly contradicts some predictions and concerns that Islam will not be taken seriously and the public will lose interest to learn about Islam. Instead of a sharp decline, it is reported that 34,000 Americans in a few months have converted to Islam following the September 11 tragedy, which is simultaneously marked as the highest rate of conversion in the

United States since the arrival of Islam in the country (“Post -9/11 Islamophobia and the Future of American Islam”, n.d.).

Perhaps due to this growing interest in Islam, somewhat generated by the September 11 event, there is an increase in sales of books and publications on Islam. The Qur’an became a best-seller and the coverage of Islam multiplied on both print and electronic media. The tragedy has also boosted the visibility of Islam in the public sphere. It is apparent that Muslims have been participating actively on the political front. The year 2006 marked a momentous event as Keith Ellison, an American Muslim, became America’s first Muslim member of Congress as the representative of Minnesota’s fifth congressional district. His decision to swear his oath of office on the Qur’an was a symbolic landmark with regard to the presence of Islam in public life. Osman Bakar adds: “His swearing on the Qur’an became more significant for the American public when he used a copy of the Muslim holy book once owned by Thomas Jefferson, author of America’s Declaration of Independence and its third President” (“Post -9/11 Islamophobia and the Future of American Islam”, n.d.). This historic event signifies Ellison’s effort to retain his identity as a Muslim and as an excellent public relation exercise.

The election of Keith Ellison as a member of Congress gives Muslims a stamp of acknowledgement. Muslim population forms “a growing segment of the world’s contemporary migrant and refugee population” (Moghissi, 2006: i). However, they continue to encounter rising intolerance and Islamophobia by the majority of Western society and media. Muslim Americans are ridiculed, assaulted and even at times murdered for their religious identification. More importantly, the hijab-wearing Muslim women often have to endure the impact of this bigotry. Nevertheless, they refuse to remain silent and “lead the charge in advocating for the rights of minority

groups and taking America to task for its ongoing failure to uphold its founding values of “life, liberty and justice for all” (“17 Muslim American Women Who Made America Great in 2016”, 2016). American Muslim women of diverse backgrounds including Dalia Mogahed, Ilhan Omar, Ibtihaj Muhammad, and Linda Sarsour are some of the prominent figures who have adopted public roles to change the negative perceptions of Islamic women as oppressed and uneducated.

The presence of Muslim women in a variety of professions such as journalists, politicians, educators, and activists indicates their effort to serve their country and to provide better understanding of Islam as well as to fight for Muslim women’s and girls’ right. In literary world, there are many contemporary Muslim women writers, such as Leila Aboulela (1964–), Shelina Zahra Janmohamed (1974–), and Na’ima B Roberts (1977–), who upend the Western community’s limited notions. Fictional works of these writers explore “the making and representation of Muslim identity in Britain” and they “identify some key political events which have proved crucial to Muslim identity formation, including the Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War, 9/11, 7/7 and the Israeli attack in Gaza in 2008” (Ather, 2012, p.7). However, despite burgeoning work on diasporic literature in the wake of postcolonial studies, literature on American Muslim women writers and their works remain under-discussed. Muslim women’s writing concerns their experience of living in a new land, “gender dimension of migrant/diaspora communities, and even less on Muslim women’s issues within these communities” (Hashim & Manaf, 2009, p.545). Thus, it is crucial to discuss Muslim identity, especially that of Muslim women, given the world today where Muslims are continuously facing several challenges due to the social and cultural contestations.

Identity is often constructed in relation to others. Religious identity particularly in diaspora is mediated by several factors including gender, class, ethnic origin and national status (Moghissi, 2006). This study explores the challenges faced by diasporic Muslim women in constructing their identities while living in America. It includes a discussion of Western stereotypes of Muslim women and issues within Muslim communities. The research also focuses on the journey of women in diaspora to construct their Muslim identity. It is an attempt to contest the stereotypes of Muslim women while highlighting the various aspects of their identities and experiences that are often elided in dominant representations. It also discusses the potential for the compatibility of Muslim women's identity with Western values.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims to achieve these objectives:

1. To understand how Islam provides Muslim women in the United States of America with personal meaning in life and a sense of identity.
2. To discuss the impact/s of Islamophobia and the differences within Muslim communities on the construction of identity of Muslim women in the United States of America.
3. To analyze the spiritual development of diasporic Muslim women through their identity construction in the United States of America as a part of Bildungsroman.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How does Islam provide Muslim women in the United States of America with personal meaning in life and a sense of identity?
2. What is/are the impact/s of Islamophobia and the differences within Muslim communities on the construction of identity of Muslim women in the United States of America?
3. How is the spiritual development through the identity construction of diasporic Muslim women in the United States of America linked to Bildungsroman?

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted in a qualitative non-empirical form which requires extensive reading activity. Post-colonial literature is regarded as the area of this study. Theory of diaspora, particularly the Muslim diaspora in the West and Bildungsroman are used to frame the study. The study looks at the identity formulation of Muslim women based on the portrayal of women in literary works by diasporic Muslim women writers. Two novels selected for this study are Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Umm Zakiyyah's *Realities of Submission* (2008). Reading materials or data on the Muslim diaspora in the West, gender, culture and identity studies as well as on the selected authors and their works will be gathered.

Library visit will be made in order to collect relevant and required texts mainly published materials i.e. books. Apart from that, data collection is made from scholarly online database like Google Scholar, Google Book, JSTOR, Research Gate and Academia.edu. The collected materials include journal articles, book reviews and reports from year 2002-2017. The study conducts textual analysis as it focuses on the findings that are found during the researcher's reading and examining of the selected

works. The researcher deals with the topic and analysis of the novels using theoretical approach. Based on the proposed topic, the analysis will revolve around the characters and issues in the two novels while observing the similarities and differences of ideas in the scholarly articles.

1.7 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One: Introduction: The first chapter of the thesis places the background of the study including its objectives, observing the problems within the area of study, its significance and methodology used.

Chapter Two: Literature Review: Literature review is discussed in this chapter. In addition, this chapter aims to discuss the theoretical framework extensively. The researcher will examine the selected novels as Bildungsroman (“the novel of formation and self-discovery”) while relating it to the theory of diaspora. It observes particularly the construction of identity, the culture and the Islamic practices of Muslim women living in the United States. This chapter reviews ideas and thoughts from prominent scholars in the respective fields.

Chapter Three: Negotiating Liminal Identities in Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*: It highlights the challenges to cope with a hyphenated identity, particularly in the diaspora. Multiculturalism in America is set as the background, which has enabled the protagonist to experience a change in her personality as she develops a new understanding of religion and relationships with other Muslims from different backgrounds which have also contributed to her spiritual advancement. This occurs through her journey around America and at a point where she returns to her homeland. The issues of hijab and prayer are analyzed as the key factors that influence the complex formation of the protagonist’s identity.

Chapter Four: Forming the Self in a New Faith in Umm Zakiyyah's *Realities of*

Submission: The discussion will touch on the condition and challenges of being converted American Muslims. Multiculturalism in America is seen and reflected through the relationship of the protagonist as a new Muslim with non-Muslim relatives and peers, as well as with other Muslims. The Bildungsroman motif is reflected through the protagonist's challenging journey of discovering her new self as a Muslim. This will contribute to the discussion of the other Islamic practices including the wearing of hijab and prayer.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: This section conducts a comparative study of the selected novels. Muslim women experience discrimination and marginalization during the process of discovering and constructing their identities. The writers have explored in several ways the difficulties in reconciling religion and cultures, the interaction between Muslims and Western nations. Their encounter with challenges eventually leads to the success of the protagonists to form their authentic selves. The chapter is concluded by stating the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

This study analyzes Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and Umm Zakiyyah's *Realities of Submission* (2008) to explore the complex formation of identity of diasporic Muslim women living in America. Existing secondary sources on the authors, their works, the Muslim diaspora and Bildungsroman are discussed below.

The growing interest in diaspora becomes apparent based on the increase of literature on transnationalism and diaspora. Google charted a significant amount of entries on "diaspora", approximately 750,000 in the year 2004 (Mirdal & Ryyänen-Karjalainen, 2004, p.8). Migration of people has occurred since the beginning of time, which has always brought about multiple affiliations and identities. The diversity of ethnicity and culture has contributed to different consequences and meanings throughout history. Having a "mixed" origin would enable one to be multicultural. On the other hand, it creates unpleasant consequences when the combination is not accepted socially. This has been the case for many Muslim minorities living in the West. Nevertheless, the current situation of diaspora establishes global affiliations as opposed to the traditional positions of immigrants and minorities. The "classical models of integration and assimilation" are now replaced with "simultaneous local and pluralistic identities, simultaneous ethnic and transnational affiliation, and simultaneous collectivistic and individualistic attitude" (Mirdal & Ryyänen-Karjalainen, 2004, p.8). This challenges the recognized concepts and theories not only

in the spheres of social, economic and political sciences but the other subjects of the humanities such as history, psychology, religion, linguistics and education.

The lives of Muslims particularly in America are impacted by the event of September 11, 2001. The discrimination they experience has prompted them to negotiate their identities as Muslims as well as Americans. A study entitled “Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict” by Sirin and Fine (2007) examines how Muslim youths in the United States shape their identities under the discourse of suspicion. This is because Muslims are put under surveillance as they are wrongly perceived as threats to the safety of society. The research found that gender has influenced identity negotiation of young Muslims in the United States. According to Sirin and Fine, “young men and women did not differ in terms of their perceived discrimination, acculturation practices, and anxiety, but the ways in which they negotiated their identities was quite different” (2007, p.159). The study has also recorded that young Muslim men generally view their identity as Muslim and American as two different identities. They experience difficulties expressing themselves as Muslim American and have a higher tendency to return to their homelands where they feel more comfortable to fit with people of the same culture and religion. The young women on the other hand, appear to feel more empowered as they view Muslim and American as complementary, rather than contradictory, to one another.

US President Donald Trump’s anti-Islam rhetoric has prompted some Muslims to speak out against the stereotypes of Muslims in America. Clare Foran recorded the voices of some American Muslim women against Trump. Sarwat Husain, a national board member of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) says, “As Americans and Muslim women, we need to make our presence known so that people