

Reinventing Identities in Sheila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

Sadia Nazeer & James J. Connolly

Abstract

*This paper explores South Asian American women's diasporic identities with a specific focus on Sheila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009). The paper studies Pakistani American women's struggle for identity in the aftermath of 9/11 to argue that Abdullah establishes a unique identity for her protagonist that defies homogeneous identity categories of both native and host cultures. Drawing on Burke and Stets's (2009) notion of the process of identity formation both as an individual and as part of an ethnic group, the study analyzes the selected text's reinvention of identities for its heterogeneous protagonist at a cross-cultural level. The paper presents a diverse reading of the representation of contemporary South Asian American women by emphasizing Abdullah's narrative approach and the ways in which it complicates conventional understandings of immigrant experiences.*

Keywords: Diasporic identities, Pakistani American women, Immigrant fiction, transnational identities

Sadia Nazeer is Assistant Professor at Department of English Language & Literature, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar, KPK.

James J. Connolly, George and Frances Ball Distinguished Professor of History Director, Center for Middletown Studies, Ball State University, Muncie, U.S.A.

1. Introduction

This study examines the unique identities created for the protagonist in Sheila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams* from the perspective of Burke and Stets's (2009) notion of identity. *Saffron Dreams* revolves around the experiences of its protagonist in the aftermath of 9/11. Arissa Illahi, a Muslim artist and writer, reevaluates her life and recovers her faith in love after this dark hour of American history. Her husband dies during the tragedy of World Trade Center, and she later discovers his unpublished manuscript of a novel. This unfinished novel and her unborn son reconnect Arissa to her life and restore her faith in it. Debunking social, political, and religious stereotypes, Arissa insists on being different by drawing on her cultural roots as well as her immigrant experience. The novel is about her evolving identity amidst tragedy.

Sheila Abdullah explores in her fiction the ethnic and national differences between South Asian and American settings. *Saffron Dreams* is focused on themes such as gender, ethnicity, religion, patriotism, and nostalgia. Like many contemporary feminist writers, Abdullah explores the subject of identity formation and represents women's struggle for their identity in different settings. Arissa becomes an exponent of change and hence takes control of her life, prompting the reader to rethink identities beyond social and cultural stereotypes.

The current study explores Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* from Burke and Stets's concept of identity to analyze the east-west binaries and the co-existence of eastern and western cultural narratives. For

instance, western narratives revolve around a single protagonist, her journey of resistance and survival struggle (Lowe 5). These narratives explore an individual's triumph. The protagonists are exceptionally smart and have big aims. Consequently, with enough courage and decisiveness, the protagonists achieve their aims and goals by the end of the narrative. While Arissa is not an exclusively western character given her immigrant identity, in the novel Abdullah uses a western narrative paradigm to represent her struggle for identity.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To explore the representation of women characters in *Saffron Dreams* and their defying of cultural stereotypes
2. To investigate the method of integration of existing identities into the re-invented ones in fiction
3. To explore differences in the practices of Muslim Pakistani American women and other immigrants of South Asian origin in the U.S.

1.2. Research Questions

1. In what ways does Arissa's search for individualism in *Saffron Dreams* defy the stereotypical ethnic identities associated with her diasporic group?
2. How does Abdullah integrate Arissa's existing ethnic identities to create a unique identity?

3. What are the differences in the practices of Muslim Pakistani American women and other immigrants from South Asia in the U.S. and how do they define their identities?

1.3. Rationale

This novel is chosen for the current study due to its representation of Pakistani American women in contemporary fiction. The novel attempts to demystify Pakistani American Muslim women's identities and histories through a narrative account of the healing they experience in the aftermath of the traumatic event of 9/11. Arissa, the protagonist heals and does not succumb to socio-ethnic pressures. She remains mentally stable and emerges as a stronger woman. In other words, she is a survivor. This narrative arc creates an opportunity to investigate and challenge assumptions about Pakistani women's experiences in the U.S.

1.4. Theoretical Framework

This study analyzes the unique identity formation of characters, especially the protagonist, Arissa, in *Saffron Dreams*. Arissa denies the cultural stereotypes associated with South Asian women and insists on being different by drawing on her cultural roots. In order to study the character's identity shift, this research takes into account the concept of identity given by Burke and Stets (2009). According to Burke and Stets, an individual's identity changes through the process of social interaction, particularly when they are placed in a society that is different from their native country. This is so because a great deal of an individual's nature owes to the society in which they reside (4). They also believe that the authentication of a society and its identity raises an individual's self-esteem and provides a general sense of being valuable. Such a

feeling in return generates a sense of being one's true self (5-6). This study uses this framework to analyze the representation of Abdullah's protagonist in arguing that an individual's value, efficacy, and worth are linked to a confirmation from the society in which they live (Burke and Stets 9).

2. Literature Review

There has been considerable research on Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* from a variety of perspectives. Saima Majeed and Naila Zaidi's "Saffron Dreams—A Journey of Evolving Identity" discusses the novel as a tale of immigrants who must withstand hatred and challenges that threaten their life and subsistence. It also discusses the immigrants' evolving strength to cope with these problems (1-5). Similarly, Deborah Hall writes that the novel is a tale of Arissa's transformation from a traumatized daughter to a strengthened widow. According to her, *Saffron Dreams* is a novel of hope that explores how Arissa deals patiently with cruel times (2). Likewise, M. Rajenthiran and Dr. K. R. Vijaya in their study "Survival Struggles in Abdullah's Saffron Dreams: A Neo-Orientalist Perspective" analyze Arissa's character as a survivor amid Islamophobia in the U.S. in the aftermath of 9/11. Their study discusses the Neo-Orientalist approach to Islamophobia and deals with death, loneliness, nostalgia (2-3).

Muhammad Tufail Chandio in his study "Locating Muslim Female's Agency in Post-9/11 Fiction: A Reading of *Once in a Promised Land* and *Saffron Dreams*" writes about the fate of Muslim women as immigrants in the promised land of America. His study analyzes the way Muslim women bargain their female agency in the acquired space of America after the 9/11 tragedy. Consequently, these women characters emerge as confident, self-

reliant, and progressive individuals in their host land (3-4). In a similar line of argument, Rabia Ashraf in her “An Optimistic Evolution of Existence in *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah” highlights the fact that Arissa’s journey is unique in its own way. After the tragedy, she thinks that nothing is left in her life but then she gathers courage and attempts to rebuild it. This shows her hope and positivity (1-5). Similarly, Zahra Ghasimi in her article “Trauma and Recovery in Sheila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams*” analyses the novel with a focus on the impact of trauma on an individual’s life and the resultant recovery. Although the trauma of 9/11 has tragic effects on Arissa’s life, she gathers her courage and frames herself as an artist.

The current study is different from the above in that it explores the novel from the perspective of re-making identity through Arissa’s experiences and locating it within the Pakistani American experience based in her cultural roots. It builds on the arguments of Chandio and Ashraf in particular through its emphasis on both the South Asian and Muslim dimensions of her experience. It also suggests that Abdullah’s use of a western, individualistic narrative framing demonstrates tensions that characterize the experiences of Pakistani-American women.

Historical Background

The immigrant experience that Abdullah explores is a relatively recent phenomenon. Migrants from British India and surrounding areas made up a very small portion of newcomers to the U.S. through the 19th and early 20th centuries. The passage of restrictive immigration laws in 1924 all but shut off the flow of South Asians into the country. Only with the revision of those laws in 1965 did the number of immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and neighboring countries become substantial part of an enormous

influx of people into the U.S. that came from Asia and Latin America. Census estimates reported 4.6 million Indian Americans and more than half a million Pakistani immigrants in the United States as of 2019 (Budiman, 2021). South Asians tended to be better educated and more likely to assume professional roles than other groups of immigrants arriving during this period and, therefore, have been relatively prosperous. Nevertheless, they have historically faced considerable racial and ethnic discrimination, particularly in the wake of the September 11 attacks on the United States (Daniels, 360-364; Reimers 186-206).

Classifying people as South Asian obscures meaningful cultural distinctions. Post-1965 immigrants from India are chiefly Hindu and can also be sorted by ethnic and caste differences, although most Indian immigrants are from higher castes and well educated. Pakistani immigrants to the U.S. are also well educated but are predominantly Muslim, a religious affiliation that places them in a more suspect position in post-9/11 America. As Muslims, they fall within a category that includes groups originating in the Middle East, Africa, southeastern Europe, and further fractions of Asia. Of course, the forms and precepts of Islam vary considerably, including with regard to women's roles and identities that *Saffron Dreams* deconstructs.

There is also an important transnational dimension to recent immigration that Abdullah explores. To a greater extent than in the past, recent immigrants are able to maintain ties to the homeland as a result of faster, cheaper travel and easier international communication. These connections help sustain ethnic identities against the pressures of conformity and assimilation exerted by the host culture. Educated immigrants, such as those featured in *Saffron Dreams*, are particularly well positioned to keep a foothold in both worlds, a point Abdullah illustrates by shifting the narrative between the U.S. and Pakistan onwards and backwards, and between the present and the past.

These complexities provide the context in which Arissa strives to define herself. Her narrative defies popular and simplistic stereotypes of a patriarchal Muslim culture in which women are subservient in several ways. She comes from a family where parenting roles seem inverted, accepts an arranged marriage that results in a loving relationship; alternately wears and discards a hijab; and over time deepens her faith. The death of her husband aligns her experience with Americans after the September 11 attacks, yet she is not fully accepted in, nor does she entirely accept, mainstream American culture. These and other plot elements rest upon the liminal qualities of recent South Asian and Muslim immigrant experiences, raising questions about belonging and non-belonging that suffuse Abdullah's novel.

3. Analysis

Sheila Abdullah explores the different experiences of South Asian women in America. She shows that there are immigrants from South Asia with different religious and ethnic backgrounds, which makes them stand apart from each other. Indeed, she is herself at the receiving end of Muslim socio-ethnic stereotyping in the U.S., which is why she brings forward the dual marginalization of a Pakistani Muslim American woman encountering after 9/11.

3.1 Identity of the Other/Diasporic Identity

Abdullah shows the personal trauma at individual level through all the women characters to represent their difference in contexts. It is here that I argue for the essentially different position of the Pakistani American woman by placing Arissa's experience in a socio-religious context, which is different from both American as well as other South Asian American women. Her reaction to the

trauma and her healing process afterwards are likewise different. At every level of this process of reforming her identity, she feels being 'otherized' in her own society, that is, the U.S. She wears *hijab* that makes her Muslim identity prominent due to which she suffers harassment, "prejudice", "barriers" and "grief" (Abdullah 23); however, interestingly, she also feels happy and receives acceptance from other sections of the same society. In such a situation, she defines herself as "the ethnic Other" as per her beliefs and values. She is harassed at the subway station due to which she believes herself to be "different"—"an individual who is homesick ... in an adopted homeland" (Abdullah 24). She feels that she cannot "break free" (24) from her origins and merge with her "adopted land" (24), hence becoming an outsider to both American and Pakistani life. This shows the difficulty of "letting go" of the typecasts associated with a Muslim Pakistani woman in the American culture. This makes the process of identity formation even more complex.

Islamophobia forms one source of hostility toward Pakistani women. The "silent blank stares of strangers, the angry wounded looks wanting to hurt, the accusatory sidelong glances" at Muslim immigrants because of their religious faith and ethnic attire, propagate the othering that leads to harassment and prejudice faced and nurtured by both groups (3). Arissa is unable to mix in with others in her American social circles because of her sartorial preferences and her religion. She believes that Americans do not trust women who wear hijab, which complicates her own sense of identity for her.

The aftermath of 9/11 forms the crucible for Arissa's experiences as a distrusted Other. Her husband, Faizan, dies in the fall of the

Towers; as a result, Arissa strives to take control of her life. Unfortunately, Arissa being a Muslim does not receive the required or justified sympathy that is offered to the survivors of other victims. Instead, she is harassed in the subway station for being a “hijabi”. She is ostracized and marginalized as the Other in America. Throughout the novel, Abdullah describes the racial and ethnic discrimination in American society in a post-9/11 world. Acceptance and rejection play a very important role in the process of identity formation of a subject in a host society. According to Burke and Stets’s theory of identity, when a situational identity is activated, the meanings that define the identity become the standards for individuals. This creates a reactionary sphere that has many parts; an identity standard, output (behaviour), input (people’s perception of an individual), and a comparison (24-26).

In this regard, for Arissa, hostility emanating from the host society is entangled with personal baggage tied to the prescribed gender roles in Pakistan, particularly her rejection by her mother. She is born in a patriarchal society back at home where the birth of a daughter is not as celebrated as the birth of a son. Her mother tells her, “I wish I never had you, Arissa! ... It’s because of you that your abu and I were never happy together” (Abdullah 26). This experience shapes Arissa’s self-understanding for many years, and she always has this thought at the back of her mind. However, her life with Faizan is different who is an open-minded person. Likewise, his family, Arissa’s in-laws are not stereotypical. Her own father also has a good relationship with her. This makes her change her outlook on life and reassures her about her identity as a member of a larger society. She is not excluded and hence is able

to cope with her psychological issues. In America, she also comes to have the same support system. It is only after the 9/11 tragedy that she is excluded based on her religion.

The majority of South Asian Americans are excluded on account of being outsiders, but Arissa's exclusion is not only on the basis of her ethnicity but also her religion. She dresses differently from the rest of her friends in America. Her relationship with her Indian American friend, Juhi, for instance, highlights this difference. The stress and pressure that Arissa experiences increase in comparison to her friend. Juhi defies her social and cultural norms by dressing the way she likes, which is mostly Western. Similarly, she has many relations and has a child outside of marriage. Indeed, Juhi fits in with others around her as she lives a more "liberal", western life; this makes her suffer less discrimination and exclusion. However, she has to withstand the otherization directed at her due to her ethnicity, religion, and gender.

3.2 Cultural Encounter

Arissa thus becomes the Other not only in relation to Americans but also to other South Asians living in America. Abdullah shows that even a multicultural America does not accept the Other on its own terms; instead, it exerts pressure on them to conform as in the case of Juhi. This pressure works for a certain period of time as Arissa also stops wearing *hijab* in order to amalgamate into the host culture because "Muslim women who wore the hijab bore the consequences of blatant stereotyping [and t]hey became the objects of both harassment and pity as Americans began to wonder what kind of women they were that they participated in their own oppression" (29). Arissa does this mainly for her unborn child. But

this act of letting go of her cultural values and her consequent success raises questions about multiculturalism in America. It suggests that the multiculturalism practiced in America was shattered after 9/11, as pressure intensified on outsiders to integrate into the host society by letting go of their traditions and culture. As Donna Gherke White argues, “In America, all Muslim women took the decision to demonstrate and reiterate their Islamic identity in the public space after 9/11, so that they stop being seen as outsiders, and start being seen as an important part of the U.S. society” (28). This shows that Arissa is following a personal trajectory as she reasserts her faith privately as opposed to publicly.

There is another element which helps Arissa redefine her identity while living in American society; this is a realization of her own value and worth in her familial and professional life. She works for a women’s magazine; she paints; she plans to finish writing the novel left by her husband; and she accepts and takes care of her differently abled son. All these activities heal her from the trauma she had experienced and add to her feeling of self worth. The tragedy of 9/11 and her religion both trigger her hidden strength and reshape her life. Both assist her in redefining her individual and religious identity. She decides to let go of her hijab but inwardly she becomes a more devout Muslim whose beliefs are more strengthened than before. She says: “It was a matter of perspective—to an onlooker I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart” (31). She does not display her religion outwardly but finds strength in and through it. She looks back at her religious beliefs not

because she follows her faith blindly but because she takes refuge in it and derives strength from it: “For the first time in many days, I took the rosary from the bedside table and started praying.... I saw it all, the benefactor’s name on my lips, as the chronicle of my life opened up in my mind and spread its pages before me...” (32). This helps her survive after the trauma of 9/11.

3.3 Self-Realization

An individual’s self-esteem is increased when their roles and identities are confirmed by the society in which they live (Burke and Stets 29). However, Arissa finds her way out through her individual accomplishments during the traumatic experience of the post-9/11 period. Arissa’s own achievement-pushed healing is set as a contrast to her response to her ordeals in Pakistan after her mother leaves the family. Back in her homeland, Arissa takes strength from her responsibilities as a family member and a caretaker of her family. A larger portion of her self-importance and happiness is derived from her siblings’ success in Pakistan. She takes her strength from the fact that others in her family can depend on her for their happiness and success. As a contrast, when she is in the U.S., it is only her personal accomplishments from which she derives strength and happiness. Evolving reactions to individual values, from family-oriented to self-oriented, signify Arissa’s development of her American self despite her diasporic roots. Arissa lets go of her imposed identity to find her personal character while in the U.S., exemplifying the values of the American Dream. Abdullah’s use of individualism as opposed to collectivism in the healing process that is obvious in contemporary South Asian women’s fiction in English makes *Saffron Dreams* more “American” in its tone.

Nevertheless, Abdullah's narrative is not one of straightforward assimilation. Arissa, broken by loss, gathers her courage and reframes her individual identity, grounded in her personal success and in her Muslim and Pakistani roots. She lets go of her baggage and escapes the cluster of identities that outsiders use to define Muslim immigrants. She reframes herself as an independent figure, an artist, and a mother, but also an immigrant who knows how to accept and merge into her host land without compromising on her cultural identity. *Saffron Dreams* is different from other South Asian American texts as it focuses on a Pakistani American woman who is marginalized in multiple ways; Arissa is a widow responsible for raising a differently abled child in a diasporic social set-up without the support of an extensive family structure. Her eventual healing and redefining of identity follow the individualist model of her host culture backed by her cultural roots.

4. Conclusion

This study critically analyzes Pakistani American writer, Sheila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*, and the representation of its protagonist Arissa's struggle for identity in the aftermath of 9/11. The ethno-religious differences in the host land of America and the heterogeneous histories back at home in Pakistan make it possible for Arissa to re-build a unique individual identity. Personal identities involve culturally identified traits of an individual which define a person in distinct ways (Burke and Stets 29). This new identity resides outside the already existing ethno-religious identities customarily ascribed to immigrants. Abdullah shows us a different model of identity formation through her exploration of a Pakistani American Muslim woman's experience.

Reinventing Identities in...

Abdullah's adoption of a westernized narrative structure that centers on an individual protagonist's evolution helps her highlight the complexities of identity formation in the context of South Asian Muslim immigrants in the U.S. As a Pakistani and a Muslim, Arissa faces pressures that are different from those encountered by other South Asian American women. Her embrace of her cultural heritage and her religious values challenges the conventional assimilation narrative of similar fiction and shows the complex process of identity formation for South Asian Muslim women in the U.S. As Chandio and Ashray have argued, Abdullah employs distinctive elements of the Pakistani American experience to construct a complex identity for Arissa, one not easily fitting the customary immigration binaries of assimilation and resistance, independence and conformity. Abdullah's employment of a framework that foregrounds personal evolution is one important reason why she is able to illuminate the intricacies of the Pakistani American experience so well through her fiction.

Sadia Nazeer & James J. Connolly

Works Cited

- “A Disobedient Girl, Ru Freeman.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. 13 Jul. 2009. 30 Mar. 2012.
- Abdullah, Shaila. *Saffron Dreams*. Ann Arbor: Modern History, 2009.
- Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. Piscataway: Transaction Printing, 2012.
- Afzal-Khan, Fawzia, and Kalpana Seshadri- Crooks, eds. *The Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.
- Agnew, Vijay. *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005.
- Alam, Fakrul. “Guest Editor’s Coloumn.” *ASIATIC* 6:1 (June 2012): 3- 6.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006 (new edition).
- Anthias, Flora, and Nira Yuval-Davis. *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the anti-racist struggle*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin, 2007.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge, 2006.

- Ashraf, Rabia. "An Optimistic Evolution of Existence in Saffron Dreams by Shaila Abdullah." *Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow* Volume 15: 6 June 2015 ISSN 1930-2940 (2015): 92.
- Avakian, Arlene Voski, eds. *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Exploring the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*. Oxford: Berg, 2005.
- Ayyagari, Kameshwari. "Cuisine in Indian Literature." *Muse India* 37. 2011.
- Bahri, Deepika . "With Kaleidoscope Eyes." *A Part yet Apart*. Ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. 25-48.
- Bahri, Deepika, and Mary Vasudeva, eds. *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996.
- Budiman, Abby. "Pakistanis in the U.S. Fact Sheet." Pew Research Center. 2021.
- Chandio, Muhammad Tufail, and Muhammad Khan Sangi. "Locating Muslim Female's Agency in Post-9/11 Fiction: A Reading of Once in a Promised Land and Saffron Dreams." *International Research Journal of Arts and Humanities* 48.48 (2020): 35-54.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Ed. K.Sangari and S.Vaid. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990. 233-253.
- Chatterjee, Priya. "De/ Colonizing the Exotic: Teaching 'Asian

Sadia Nazeer & James J. Connolly

Women' in a U.S. Classroom." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21: 1/2. Asian American Women (2000): 87-110.

Cheah, Peng, and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.

Daniels, Roger. *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*. New York: Perrenial, 2002.

Ghasemi, Zahra, Nasser Dashtpeyma, and Sayyed Majid Alavi Shooshtari. "Trauma and Recovery in Shaila Abdullah's Saffron Dreams." *Critical Literary Studies* 4.1 (2022): 163-182.

Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Hussain, Yasmin. *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005.

Islam, Nasheed. "In the Belly of the Multicultural Beast I am named South Asian." *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of South Asian Diaspora*. Ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993. 242-245.

Iyer, Nalini, and Bonnie Zare, eds. *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009.

Khan, Shahnaz. "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space." *Signs* 23:2 (Winter 1998): 463- 494.

Majeed, Saima, Najia Asrar Zaidi, and Zarina Waheed. "Saffron

Reinventing Identities in...

Dreams-A Journey Of Evolving Identity." *Al-Burz* 9.1 (2017): 30-54.

Reimers, David M. *Other Immigrants: The Global Origins of the American People*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little, 1989.

Williams, Raymond Brady. "Asian Indian and Pakistani Religions in the United States." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558. Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July 1998): 178 -195.

Women of South Asian Descent Collective (Organization). *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993.