

## **Cultural Affliction: A Study of Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams***

**T.Christena<sup>a</sup>, R.David Raja Bose<sup>b</sup>**

Reg.No: 17233064012001, Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Lekshmipuram college of Arts, and Science, Neyyoor, Kanyakumari, India

Guide & Supervisor, Principal, Department of English, Lekshmipuram college of Arts and Science, Neyyoor, Kanyakumari, India

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### **Abstract**

After colonialism people from all over the earth find difficult to follow their culture. This has been taken in the hands of terrorist. After the attack of New York's World Trade Centre on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, Muslim writers come out with their religious affiliations and affinities. Shaila Abdulla who was born in Pakistan and moves to United States after her marriage uses her sharp and precise images to tear open the façade of the conventional practices a society nurtures. By probing into the psychology of her protagonist, Abdulla delineates different levels of struggles that the women have to go through in order to establish her culture and the true meaning of their existence. In her novel *Saffron Dreams*, Arissallahi, the protagonist faces a tragedy when she moved to New York after her marriage. Abdulla shows in the novel the cultural affliction in the life of Arissa and how she recovery from that. Being a Pakistani immigrant Arissa faces difficulty in following her culture. Abdulla provides the inter-cultural and intra- cultural affiliation and affinities through the character in the novel.

**KEYWORDS:** culture, struggle, oppressions, recovery, faith

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In everyday life of human beings culture plays a vital role. It is about the routine practices like lifestyle, consumption, social interactions or relations. The 'cultural' constitutes the 'social (ie) the social realm in society. The society is constituted by the cultural artefactused by the people, even as the cultural artefacts are themselves produced and consumed by society. The analysis of everyday life is the social realm of cultural artefact. Everyday life is specific to locations and cultures. It is expressed through language by means of speech or listen. A culture is the combination of the language that one speaks and the geographical location that one belong to. T.S.Eliot in Notes towards the Definition of Culture says that "The culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class and that the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs" (21). Cultural studies proceed in everyday life. Raymond Williams called it as 'lived cultures' because the culture is produced through everyday living like food, fashions, entertainment or festivals. It is in the everyday life that culture is made.

The word 'culture' is derived from the Latin word 'colera' and 'culture' which means 'to cultivate'. It also means to honor and protect. During nineteenth century in Europe it was meant as the habits, customs and tastes of the upper classes. Culture studies

argue that “culture is about the meanings a community or society generates” (5). Culture is occasionally used to refer to the highest intellectual endeavours and the quest of perfection and beauty. Mathew Arnold says that culture is the best that has been thought and known in the world. Culture can be defined as the arts, customs and habits that characterize a particular society or nation or the beliefs, values, behaviors and material objects that constitute a people’s way of life.

In the post-colonial era, there is so much of cultural mixing. It has given birth to hybrid-culture. Bill Ashcroft et al observes in *The Empire Writes Back*

Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybrid phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the gratified European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreates an independent local identity. Such construction or reconstruction occurs in a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic and ‘peripheral’ subversions of them.(195)

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* argues that cultural translation is a part of the spatial histories of displacement. He argues that culture is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific historical situations of displacement. It is translational because it makes “the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, rather complex issue” (172).

Culture is a complex term that includes all the activities of life both original and inherited in the course of one’s life. One can presume the undeniable truth that man and culture are inseparable and it enables one to live in harmony with his surroundings. Cultural studies took its origin from human being’s interest and curiosity in understanding the background and environment which elevated his/her growth for ages.

In literature various cultures were introduced by writers either of their own native land or the problems which they face in the alien land. After the British rule, colonizer culture was wide spread all over the nations. People struggle to expose their culture. Due to this the religious fundamentalist concentrate more on their religion and force the people to follow their culture. Because of the lack of freedom people immigrates to other countries where the feel free and safer.

While India fought for independence from Great Britain, the Muslim League of India was also striving to establish an independent Islamic nation. Ali Jinnah, the Muslim leader began to advocate and work for a separate Muslim state. When India got independence from British, Pakistan became a Muslim nation. Pakistan was the first region in the Indian subcontinent to be fully impacted by Islam. Pakistani literature originated in Pakistan when it got independence in 1947.

Pakistani women’s writing in English has been made popular through the works of Shaila Abdulla. Her novel *Saffron Dreams* signifies the aftermath of 9/11. The impact of 9/11 not only changed the perception of Muslims in the United States, but also altered the Muslim American’s acceptance of their own culture. The change in the social

landscape in America and the acceptance, rejection and negotiation of Pakistani American culture which is interlinked with Muslim religion is explored in this novel.

The novel tells the story of a Pakistani American Muslim woman Arissa Illahi, the protagonist who had adopted America narrates her miseries, sufferings and challenges she faced after her husband's death in the collapse of twin towers in America during September 11. She faces tragedy when she moved to New York after her marriage. Arissa's story insights into Pakistani culture, the difficulties such as discrimination and religious prejudice that Muslim immigrants face in the United States. Abdulla shows in the novel the cultural affliction in the life of Arissa and the journey of self-discovery with her differently abled son. Being a Pakistani immigrant she follows the culture in the alien land. In an interview in the Readers View the narrator says that the construct of cultural identification is to extent the individuals feel with their culture. Abdulla provides the inter-cultural and intra-cultural affiliation and affinities through the characters in the novel. She highlights how the Pakistani Muslim American experience is different to the other immigrant experiences of South Asians in America and the battles for personal issues.

Abdulla threw light on the Muslim immigrants' experience of lack of cultural liberty. As a Pakistani American Muslim woman in America she feels and becomes the other in her society. Her hijab defines her as a Muslim woman and she reaches to things as the other. The death of her husband prompts her to take control of her own life. She was five months of pregnant when her husband died in the collapse of twin towers. The Muslims in America were afraid to expose their cultures. After publishing "the list of hijackers' names and nationalities", (60) many of the Arabs and Asian immigrants attempted to show loyalty to the United States by putting up American flags on cars and shops, signs of solidarity laced with the hope of evading discrimination and "God Bless America" (60) signs on ethnic restaurants. During their journey "those who did travel preferred to remain quiet and chose not to converse in their native language even among family members" (60). In addition, men cut their beards while others changed "their names Salim became Sam, Ali converted to Alan"(60).

Like the men's beard, veil display the Muslim women's identity. Veil is the marker of Muslim women. Veil denotes the oppression of women in Muslim cultures and offers evidence for many Americans. After the collapse of the twin towers on September 11, the veil becomes a symbol of the enemy. "Ironically, after losing him, the veil that she had worn the day they got married had performed the role of that Scarlet letter, now it follow the same religion with the attackers" (106). Arissa noted that "some women took down their hijabs, afraid of being targeted, and adopted a conservative but Western style of dressing" (60).

Despite of her own tragedy Arissa is targeted as the cultural other. Her ethnicity and religion are highlighted. She faced violent crimes because of wearing the veil. She was attacked by four angry and sacred teens. They tried to attack her to avenge the collapse of twin towers. Because of her veil they identified her as a Muslim. Focusing on her veil the blond guy pulling out his knife and aiming the point at her hijab "It's all a façade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the nonbelievers, not us"

(62). They lack cultural flexibility. The Americans were scared. They were once proud of their nations but due to the incidents of 9/11 they lost their fame. They were furious with the Muslim community. The blond boy accused her for what she never did. He shouts at her “You race of murderers” (61). It was due to the lack of multicultural education in their schools. Multicultural education aims at learners how to respect and value other cultures.

Abdulla in this novel says that the Muslim minority community was voiceless in America. Arissa feels loneliness after the death of her husband. Even the host land of America too never accepts her. She thinks of her childhood and the neglect she felt by her mother “I wish I never had you, ... It’s because of you that your Abu and I were never happy together!” (26) becomes her “baggage for many years” (27). She is not comfortable being on the inside and considers herself the eternal outside. But the relationship with her husband Faizan, her father and her in-laws enables her to reassert her value as a member of the larger society. But the exclusion he faces within the American society is due to her religious affiliations. She looked as an outsider because of her hijab. She was not free to wear her veil as a part of her cultural identity and found it very difficult to remove it. For her, veil was a symbol of her self-identification as a Muslim woman and a reminder of her past life with her husband, Faizan. To lose her hijab meant losing a part of their living together. In deciding to remove it, she wondered that “Who was I bidding farewell to? the age- old tradition or the husband I had kept live in my heart? (62). She had no choice but to remove it, remarking that “some choices are never yours: your life’s events choose them for you, and you merely obey, whether you agree or not” (106).

Losing the veil she was saddened in her life. She suffered a lot. Giving up what her husband once desired to be, she felt guilty when she saw the veil. She “felt naked, like a prostitute, her wares exposed for all to see” (116).The country she believed that she had been accepted was left alone.” They wrecked people like me more than anyone, who come to this country t lead a freer, safer life, to live among a civilization unaware of the struggles” (60).She and the other immigrants gained nothing in this country. “They just gained alienation and segregation from their home land” (162).Removing her hijab means never to free her or to throw her homeland culture and religion, only to save and protect her unborn and disabled son. Physically she had removed the veil but spiritually she had “shifted it from her head to her heart” (3).

Abdulla makes a distinction between Muslims and religious fundamentalists. Muslims submit themselves to Allah and His law. Arissa’s mother-in-law Ma totally submits herself to Allah. She never show anger or despair when she lose her only son Faizan. She understood that everything happens according to Allah’s wish. All Muslims have to accept it. “The truth is that there is time reserved for eachof us. When it comes, we have no say, no power to stop it” (109). Arissa started praying and reciting the Quran “for the first time in many days, I took the rosary from the bedside table and started praying verses from Qur’an on my breath flowed into my soul” (70). The verses cleansed her insides “she felt light-headed, safe” (75).

The birth of her child changed her life and decided “after Faizan, the child within me had provided me the will to go on” (70). She rejected her idea of going back to her homeland and prefer to stay in United States, a country of opportunities and breakthrough. From New York she moved to Houston, Texas, where she can live peacefully. Faizan’s unfinished novel, *Soul Searcher* offered her a spiritual meaning. It gave her an opportunity to finalize her own soul searching. She decided to fulfill his dream by completing his novel “to keep him alive in minds- in this baby’s life!” (98).

To conclude, Abdullah attempts to increase women’s awareness of their rights and privileges as human beings and how to overcome the obstacles and barriers that hinder their peaceful existence. She proves herself to be a world avatar whose role is to save humanity from destruction and violence. She draw attention to the changing nature of Pakistani Muslim American and the host society. She highlights how culture does not necessarily construct their life choices, but can become a source of strength depending on individual preferences. Her emphasis power of love brings all human beings together. Thus, her message to woman is to find their voices and reaffirm the strong role assigned to them by their culture and religion.

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