

Survival Struggles in Shaila Abdullah' *Saffron Dreams*; A Neo-Orientalist Perspective

M.Rajenthiran¹, Dr.K.R.Vijaya²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai

Abstract - Diasporic literature from the United States has achieved academic and disciplinary acclaim all around the globe. Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* is an important novel written in the aftermath of 9/11. The novel deals with the life of a Muslim immigrant protagonist who struggles to survive in the United States. This article examines Islamophobia in the novel through the approach of Neo-Orientalism. It also points out the survival struggles of Muslim immigrants amid an increasingly xenophobic climate. Throughout the fiction, the young pregnant widow encounters struggles like death, assimilation, the search for identity, lifelessness, cultural imbalances, loneliness, nostalgia, and alienation. The protagonist is struggling with a charge syndrome child throughout the novel. The study emphasizes the endless efforts of Immigrants to become assimilated into the new culture and yet maintain their own culture simultaneously. Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* is applied to analyze the protagonist's struggles to succeed despite uncertainties.

Index Terms - Neo-Orientalism, xenophobic, nostalgia, lifelessness, assimilate, Orientalism, uncertainties.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE OUTBREAK OF NEO ORIENTALISM

The term Neo-orientalism is typically a renaissance of traditional orientalism. It deals with the changing perception of Islam among westerners. Neo-orientalism also validates American imperialism and its hostile acts among Muslim countries such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Western civilization assumes that the Islam religion is a threat to society. Edward Said argues in his book *Orientalism* as; to believe that politics in the form of imperialism bears upon the production of literature, scholarship, social theory, and history writing is by no means equivalent to saying that culture is therefore a demeaned or denigrated thing. Quite the contrary: my whole point

is to say that we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, not unilaterally inhabiting (Said 14).

The Neo-Orientalists argues that many Muslims are fundamentalists of Islam who are "irreconcilable" with modern western independent culture and values. A famous Neo Orientalist Bernard Lewis in his *Islam and the West* book states that; "Fundamentalism as a whole is mismatched with the values of civil society and the Western vision of civilization, political order, and society..." (Lewis 4). As Shahid Alam writes:

"What makes this repackaged Orientalism new are its intentions, its proponents, and the enemy it has targeted for destruction. Its intention is to mobilize the United States behind a scheme to balkanize the Middle East into ethnic, sectarian and religious microstates, a new system of client states that would facilitate Israel's long-term hegemony over the regionOnce they had succeeded in creating Israel, the Zionists knew that its long-term survival depended on fomenting wars between the West and Islam. Zionism has pursued this goal by its own wars against Arabs and, since 1967, a brutal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; but equally, it has pulled out all the stops to convince the United States to support unconditionally Israel's depredations against Arabs. (<https://www.islamicity.org/2911>)

Shaila Abdullah is an immigrant settled in America. Shaila knows the situation and sufferings of women in Pakistan. An immigrant widow in the United States, Arissa narrates the painful story of her life. She struggles to survive as a single-handed mother of an abnormal child alienated in the new land. She encounters racism all over America. Because of these external pains and sufferings, she is entirely distorted internally. Her distress keeps increasing one after the

other. It is difficult for her to live alone in a new land without the support of her husband and to rear a child who has multiple abnormalities.

Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* presents the struggle and suffering of a Pakistani girl Arissa Illahi, a writer and an artist. She comes from an economically secure Muslim family in Karachi, Pakistan. Her family is open-minded and liberal. Arissa gets the freedom to work as a writer at Sahara, a fashion magazine. Even her father allows her to choose a suitor of her choice. However, both the sisters Arissa and Zoha go for an arranged marriage. Her mother finds them as unwanted and least bothered about family responsibilities. Arissa never gets love or affection from her mother also witnesses her mother's unusual relationship with her father. Arissa's mother maintains a relationship with Jalal, her father's friend. Her father tries to adjust to save their relationship but ends in vain. Her mother leaves the house often. Arissa is not the romantic, dreamy kind of girl who is not waiting for her marriage. Instead, she tells her father that she wants to concentrate on her career rather than marriage. She asks her father to think of her younger sister Zoha's marriage. Zoha's marriage is fixed by a matchmaker. And finally, Arissa got a match, Faizan, from Karachi but staying in New York.

Arissa begins a new life in America, with a new culture and new way of life. She finds herself lucky to have Faizan as her husband. He has all the good qualities a woman expects from a husband. She enjoys her life with Faizan. A couple of years later, she becomes pregnant. But things are not so easy and comfortable. Her life gets shattered, ruined when in the early morning of 9/11, she watches the news that there is a terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, the place where Faizan works. Her husband, whom she loves the most, has died. Everything comes to an end. She is entirely fragmented and finds it difficult to accept the loss. This is the first unexpected struggle she has had in her life. The enthusiasm in her life starts to diminish. Arissa encounters a series of hits in her life that makes it difficult for her to survive.

It is beyond her imagination to think of a life without Faizan, with whom she has seen the colours of life, that too at the time when she is pregnant. Her preparation for this situation is based on an incident involving the 'firedancer', who predicts their future tragedy. Both, Arissa and Faizan are unaware of it. The beggar says:

Firedancer! There's misfortune in your fate, she said, looking directly at Faizan. Her voice was eerily unreal, her grey eyes blazing with angry passion. She glanced over at me. Giant's flames will be his blanket one day. Tantalizing, scorching flames will chase him. She raised her index fingers in the air and twisted them around in a strange and madling dance. (SD 46)

Arissa refuses to accept the loss of her husband. She is completely under struggle, she runs to the place where the incident take place, only to see debris, scattered bodies, and people yelling. She even doesn't get the remains of his body for the funeral everything was scattered.

There was a red satin pillow on one end of it. There is where Faizan's head would have been, I thought to myself, trying to block the pain and let objective thinking take over, and here the toe, the entire 6 foot 3 inches of his body would fit inside, albeit a little tightly. How ironic that, being a Muslim, Faizan was cremated without his loved one's choice. There was nobody, no three pieces of cotton kafan that his body would be shrouded in. (SD 83)

She finds her life come to an end, and she has nothing in her life to live for. She always tells Faizan that "We live a sheltered existence" (SD 53), but now after this tragic incident, she feels: "Never again will I live the same way. We are sheltered no more" (SD 54). She feels she has no home, no support. The colours of her life vanished and the blanket of darkness has covered her life. She finds her life lonely, alienated, and painful. During the night, she does not sleep and fears that if she closes her eyes she may lose Faizan. The empty bed makes her more stressed. She is reminded of every incident and the time she has spent with him. The empty space next to me in the bed seemed to grow bigger each time I looked, and the darkness magnified my loss to an incomprehensible degree. Throughout the night, I kept throwing Faizaan's pillow on the floor and picking it back up, hugging it close for his warmth and scent. It still carried a faint whiff of his aftershave, which was diminishing by the day. I refused to launder the cover. Many nights, I just clutched his pillow and sat at the foot of the bed, trying to make up for the person I'd lost. (SD 72)

After Faizan, she has to face America alone, as a pregnant widow. Soon she gets the experience of actual America, a different place from her own country. She realizes and notices different treatment after the 9/11 incident. Muslims are viewed with

suspicion as they are all responsible for the World Trade Center attack. Her neighbours turn strangers. She witnesses the sudden patriotism of Americans.

I, too had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks waiting to hurt, the accusatory sidelong glances screaming silently, you did it, your people brought the towers down. (SD 60)

She also faces the same problem, when she goes out of apartment. She is followed by a few boys who chase her. She thinks they would be after her purse, her money but soon she realizes it was her hijab, veil that make them follow her. They blame her that:

Where is the good in you? The blond guy suddenly moved in and grabbed my chin, cupping it in his palm roughly. You race of murderers. How can you live with yourself? He jerked his hand from my chin. I left the rising ridge where his nail had scratched me. "The veil you wear, He continued, pulling out his knife and aiming the point at the hijab. It's all façade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the nonbelievers, not us" (SD 62).

She tries to explain to them that even she is a victim of that incident. She has lost everything in it. They refuse to believe her and try to stab her with a knife. She cries a lot but in vain, she then is taken to the hospital as she finds no movement of the baby in her womb. Non-end to her pains and shocks, the doctor declares that the growth of the baby is not normal and she can think about keeping the baby or aborting. This again is a great blow for her.

The room lost all of its oxygen. I felt something similar to physical agony and saw my loved one's faces turn ashen. Ma put her arms around me, cradling me like a child. I snatched my hand away from her and closed my eyes. I struggled to breathe, taking desperate gulps of air. I felt the baby kick and inhaled deeply to regulate my breathing. -I will carry my baby to term. (SD 68)

Her baby is the only reason for her survival and she also thinks of the baby as a final gift and memory. She decides to give birth to the baby, knowing that it is going to be a tough job. But she would do it. As she has the firm support of Abu and Ami, her mother in law and father in law. Arissa's parents-in-law support her well, attempting to bring out her grief. Though they know it is irreparable. She is more comfortable with them. Her mother has not even visited her to

console her. Arissa struggles to accept motherhood positively however, it depends on the relationship between husband and wife. If she loves her husband she welcomes her motherhood and one who is hostile towards her husband her thoughts may differ. Simone de Beauvoir writes that:

The woman who feels affectionate for her husband will often tailor her feelings to his: she will welcome pregnancy and motherhood with joy or misery depending on whether he is proud or put upon. Sometimes a child is desired to strengthen the relationship or marriage, and the mother's attachment depends on the success or failure of her plans. If she feels hostility toward the husband, the situation is quite different: she can fiercely devote herself to the child, denying the father possession, or, on the other hand, hate the offspring of the detested man. (611)

Arissa decides to give up her veil. She notices many Muslim women have given up their veils already. Most of them have changed their names too. Losing the veil becomes another grievous incident that saddens her life. Because of giving up what her husband has once desired, she always feels guilty when she sees it. Moreover, without the veil, she perceives herself as if she is a prostitute as she "felt naked, like a prostitute, my wares exposed for all to see ... I longed for the veil I had let go" (SD 116). She gives up her veil and goes on a journey of heartbreak and empowerment, suffering, and loss. Her story is about "grief and happiness, of control and losing control, of barriers and openings, of prejudices and acceptance, of holding on and letting go" (SD 6). In the country where she believes that she has been accepted, she is left alone, "Unseen. Unchallenged" (SD 1). Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* points out that;

Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor it is a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; nor is it representative and expressive of some nefarious "Western" imperialist plot to hold down the "Oriental" world. It is rather a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philosophical texts (Said 12)

The novel addresses the problems faced by the women in the religion specifying more on the veil's issue. The veil becomes a national issue when many question it without understanding it properly. Arissa shows her

anger towards such people as they use the issue of the veil to gain popularity. She says “it irritated me that it was a political game for some high-ranking individuals, a tug-of-war of sorts, a way of attaining the limelight albeit negativity.” (SD 81) She asks;

Or did the love for our religion mean that we should hate other faiths? It made me reflect on what being a Muslim meant to me. Wasn't the whole concept of Islam based on tolerance, peace and bridge building, or was it just a very well-kept secret that only a handful knows? (SD 81)

She gets pestering phone calls and reporters who ask the same questions in common. “Muslim harmed by Muslim, how do you react?” (SD 123) she feels hard to answer such questions. She has lost her husband in the same attack and has no clue about what is going on in her life. But this question makes her unanswerable. With a sullen and monotone, she replies “they are not my people.”(SD 123) The terrorist doesn't have a religion. In the novel, the state legitimizes liminal spaces as a way to repress minorities through the logic of exclusion and violence. Even she asks him whether he has lost anyone in the attack, he replies no. In the aftermath of the 9/11 event, she has gone lifeless, fragile and recalling memory. She replies rage to the reporter “When you put all your potatoes in a sack, you should know they all have flavours. Some are rotten, some fresh. Just because they are clumped together doesn't make them all the same.”(SD 124).

She gives birth to a boy, Raian, her world. He requires special care and attention because he is born with multiple abnormalities. Being a slow learner Raian learns to walk at the age of three. She uses to get happy to see any kind of progress in her son, though it comes late. Arissa's routine with Raian is the most memorable day of her life. His first step, the first word always excites her. She uses to take him to every place, to the shops, malls, school. Arissa manages it well with the support of Abu and Ami. She never has to worry about household matters as they are to manage everything. They treat her as their daughter. She also decides to do a job to fulfill the economic needs of her family. She even starts painting, her favourite hobby. But she never comes out of the memories of Faizan, her loneliness, her painful nights, her past with him. Her memories haunt her. It becomes part of her life. She never thinks in her dream that she would live without Faizan, her Jaan', means life. Her life fluctuates between past and present and the future, her son.

She again is caught in a dilemma, when she finds the incomplete book *Soul Searcher* by Faizan. It is his dream and used to work passionately on it. He even quits his job as an English teacher to work as a waiter at a hotel near the World Trade Center. Ami argues for her completion of the book as it is her duty as a wife to complete her husband's work. Arissa is not able to take any decision. She thinks that she is nowhere near Faizan in writing, in the selection of words. But finally, she decides to accomplish the dream of her husband.

During her visits to the hospital, as she has to go regularly for Raian's treatment, she meets Zaki, a Pakistani in the hospital. Arissa and Zaki start meeting frequently and are attracted to each other. Arissa is a little confused because she cannot move forward in her relationship with Zaki as she can never forget Faizan. She always compares Zaki and Faizan. Finally, she mends her mind to accept her relationship with Zaki. Even Ami and Abu have no objection rather they are very happy for Arissa and Raian. Zaki's presence in her life would have brought her out from her miseries, solitude, and would have filled her life with colours.

But tragedy never stops following Arissa. As she mentally prepares herself for moving in her life, an incident makes her change her mind. In one of their visits to the coffee shop, Arissa noticed that Zaki feels embarrassed when with Raian. His habits in public do not make him comfortable. This is a shock for Arissa, as Raian is everything for her, and she can never imagine anyone humiliating or making fun of her son. She immediately breaks her relationship with him. Ami and Abu plan to return to Karachi believing that Aissa is brave and ready to face the challenges of life. Again she fell into the well of darkness, solitude, loneliness.

Now she decides to move back to her work, her Faizan's dream. Day and night she works on it. Through this work, she finds herself very close to Faizan. At the same time, she makes herself busy as an editor of *Chamak*. And finally, after six years of perseverance and hard work she completes the book. *Saffron Dreams* moves around Arissa, her struggle causes due to the death of her husband in the 9/11 incident in America. She has come to America after her marriage with Faizan, her husband. She is full of zeal. But the tragic incidents one after the other keep on adding to her sufferings. This is causing her psyche to crumble.

CONCLUSION

Humans encounter problems and struggles in their journey of life. It is through these struggles that they reach higher levels. Shaila Abdullah's work also gives a glimpse into the plight of life and its tragedies. Abdullah probes deep into the psyche of women and explores the emotional world. Abdullah explores internal and external conflicts or wounds of immigrants. Arissa gradually tries to change herself, adjusting at every level like food, clothes, a way of life, and language. Though she adapts to the new culture and habits also undergoes a process of transformation. She transforms to the level that it becomes difficult to identify her. As a result of many struggles, she emerges as an independent individual. This paper presents the Muslim writers' narration of the boldness of Muslim identity and immigrants' struggle for survival. The theme of struggle includes confronting the identity crisis of minority adolescence. Finally, there are several options to suggest, including measurable goals like education, which plays a crucial role in eradicating ignorance and enhancing self-esteem. It is essential for women, not to place a high value on men while they need to accomplish self-esteem to overcome life's struggles.

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