# Between Liberation and Representation: Muslim Women's Agency and the 'Savior' Narrative in Samira Ahmed's Novels

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the representation of Muslim women's agency in two novels by Samira Ahmed, Love, Hate & Other Filters (2018) and Mad, Bad & Dangerous to Know (2020), using a postcolonial feminist framework, specifically the thought of Mohanty, Spivak, and Abu-Lughod. This research uses textual analysis to identify the character constructions and cultural representations in both novels. The study focuses on three main aspects: (1) agency as a form of self-assertion (liberation as self-assertion), (2) the dynamics of savior narratives that present external savior figures, and (3) tendencies toward re-orientalism. Although Ahmed's novels attempt to present diasporic Muslim women as independent subjects, these narratives are often trapped within the framework of Western liberal feminism, which defines liberation as a release from cultural and religious values. The presence of external savior figures reinforces savior narratives that position Western validation as a prerequisite for Muslim women's freedom, while narratives that repeat Western perspectives on the East demonstrate a re-orientalist reproduction.

Keywords: Samira Ahmed, Muslim women's agency, postcolonial feminism, savior narrative, re-orientalism

## Introduction

Representations of Muslim women in popular literature and Western media are often positioned as victims or passive subjects. Kasirye [1] analyzed coverage of Muslim women in the New York Times and The Guardian. Her analysis showed that Muslim women are often portrayed negatively as extremists, terrorists, uneducated, housewives, or sexual objects, emphasizing aspects of torture and oppression. Bello [2] wrote about how the Western narrative shifted from portraying an "exotic object" to depicting an "oppressed victim" after the colonial era. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Western media often portrayed Muslim women as oppressed, lacking agency, and in need of "rescue" from the West. Eltantawy [3] also found that Western media often portrayed women wearing the hijab as passive, reactive, and inactive. This depiction then constructed Muslim women as foreign and inferior others. In fact, they can play an active role as professionals with various achievements [4]. This narrative ultimately creates a problematic dichotomy that portrays Muslim women solely as oppressed victims, perceived as lacking agency and education, thus posing a potential threat to Western "values of freedom."[2] Western discourse consistently portrays Muslim women (especially those who wear the hijab) as passive, backward, and in need of Western modernization. In this context, Western narratives create a construct that portrays Muslims as in need of salvation. This savior narrative positions parties (usually the West) as the saviors of Muslim women from cultural or religious "oppression." This further reinforces the position of Muslim women as "victims" constrained by their culture and religion.

Samira Ahmed is a Muslim diaspora in America, descended from Indian immigrants. She writes about the lives of adolescent Muslim diaspora women in her novels, Love, Hate & Other Filters (2018) and Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know (2020). In the first novel, she writes about Maya, a teenage Muslim immigrant from India in America, who reconstructs her

identity as a desi Muslim girl. In her second novel, she writes about a teenage girl, Khayyam, a descendant of Muslim immigrants from India, who is adventuring in France. In this novel, she also features a Muslim woman named Laila during the Ottoman period. The two stories unfold side by side, as Khayyam attempts to discover the truth about Laila in the past. Both novels attempt to represent Muslim women and give them a voice. In this regard, Samira Ahmed's position as an Indian-American Muslim diaspora writer also influences the ideology of her novels' narratives. She considers whether she gives her character agency or whether she is trapped in a Western-style narrative of salvation.

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, the American media was filled with discourse about the suffering of Middle Eastern communities under Islamic regimes. The American literary market was then flooded with works, especially memoirs by Muslim women, that highlighted issues of women, Islam, patriarchy, and oppressive states. While intended to be insightful, many of these narratives are filled with stereotypes and generalizations rather than presenting a realistic picture of Islam and Muslim women, and few studies have explored the perspectives of the female protagonists' agency. [5] In Iranian literature written by the diaspora, narratives tend to portray women as voiceless victims. However, there is an alternative narrative in Sacred Defense literature, which, although often state-sponsored, presents strong, independent, and articulate representations of Iranian women, thus challenging the Orientalist stereotype of female passivity. This narrative delegitimizes dominant perceptions and offers a new, more positive perspective on Iran and Iranian women [6]. Hannun [7], in this regard, discusses how in academic studies, particularly in the context of women and gender studies in the Middle East, Muslim women are often constructed not as "narrating agents" with their own voices, but as objects of narratives written to "challenge" (writing against) dominant stereotypes.

The imbalance between dominant stereotypes and the limited research that provides space for subjective narratives by diasporic writers led Aumeerally [8] to call for a rethinking of how academics recognize diasporic Muslim writers and narratives post-9/11. Her research concluded that adherence to known stereotypical patterns largely limits the creative agency of diasporic Muslim writers. On the other hand, in an interview with Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and Simone Brioni at the 2023 conference titled "Women and Islam: Agency in Italophone and Francophone Literatures," Morelli [9] highlighted how Muslim women writers of the European diaspora proactively shape their identities and agency through their narratives. They reject the homogenizing label of "Muslim women" by emphasizing the agency, diversity, and complexity of experiences often overlooked by Western stereotypes. They demonstrate that Muslim women are not passive victims, but rather active subjects contributing to more inclusive political, cultural, and humanitarian discourse. This means that Muslim diaspora writers are beginning to play an active role in breaking down Western stereotypes of Muslim women.

Previous research has largely focused on stereotypes of Muslim women in Western media or literature. Diasporic writers' narratives about Muslim women remain limited. Few have addressed the narrative bargaining power of diasporic writers themselves. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Muslim women's agency is constructed in Ahmed's two novels, how savior narratives emerge and interact with the characters' internal agency, and the extent to which Ahmed's works demonstrate re-orientalist tendencies.

## Method

This research analyzes two novels by Samira Ahmed: Love, Hate & Other Filters and Mad, Bad & Dangerous to Know. These novels were chosen because they are written by Muslim diaspora from India and represent Muslim women. It is interesting to examine how

Muslim women writers from the East represent women from their own cultures and religions. Textual analysis is used using the concept of savior narrative through a postcolonial feminist framework, utilizing the perspectives of Spivak and Mohanty. Furthermore, this analysis also utilizes the perspectives of Islamic feminism from Abu-Lughod and Lisa Lau's re-orientalism. Mohanty [10], in her essay "Under Western Eyes," critiques how Western feminists often depict Third World (or non-Western) women as a homogeneous, ahistorical category, primarily represented as victims of patriarchy, tradition, religion, or culture without considering the diversity of their experiences, social class, history, and local context. As a result, their agency, resistance, and history of struggle are erased. Mohanty sees parallels between Western feminist discourse and colonial discourse. Both position the West as the center of modernity, rationality, and agency, while the Third World is positioned as traditional, backward, and bound. In this way, Western feminists unwittingly reproduce a colonial logic that positions the West as the savior and the East/Third World as the one in need of saving. This forms a savior narrative that ignores women's agency. Mohanty emphasizes that women's experiences cannot be separated from the global political-economic context. Rather than viewing Third World women solely as victims, she proposes examining the agency, strategies of resistance, and subjectivities they construct.

Spivak [11], in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", coined the famous phrase "white men saving brown women from brown men" to describe the colonial logic that positions Eastern women as subjects unable to speak or act without Western assistance. Within this framework, Eastern women are often represented as voiceless victims, while the agents of liberation are placed in Western male figures or institutions.

Echoing Mohanty and Spivak, Abu-Lughod [12] in her article "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" also highlights the rhetoric of Muslim women's salvation that emerged post-9/11. She emphasizes that this narrative is often used to justify political or military intervention and rarely considers the diversity of experiences and choices of Muslim women themselves. She also challenges Western perceptions of the hijab, which is often seen as a symbol of oppression, even though for many Muslim women, the hijab has diverse meanings such as religious expression, cultural identity, personal choice, and even a form of resistance. Therefore, the hijab cannot be reduced to a mere "tool of patriarchy." Abu-Lughod argues that the rhetoric of salvation positions the West as superior and Muslims as inferior, thus reproducing colonial power relations. She then calls for shifting the focus from salvation to understanding the social, political, and cultural context.

In the context of literary works, Lisa Lau [13] examines how Eastern writers' representations of the East repeat or adapt stereotypes for the Western market. She calls this re-orientalism, which occurs when Eastern writers portray the East in ways that still meet Western expectations. Diasporic writers often possess narrative authority due to their perceived authenticity. However, they risk reproducing stereotypes about their homelands and cultures. In relation to the savior narrative, Eastern writers are often trapped within this discourse, resulting in the shadow of Orientalism within the narratives and intrinsic elements of literary works, as the West views the East, including how the West seems to need to save the East. In the case of Samira Ahmed's works, this is relevant to examine whether the liberation narrative of Muslim female characters stems entirely from internal agency or still allows for external savior figures who can elicit sympathy from Western readers.

The framework of postcolonial feminism and the savior narrative above is used to 1) identify moments in Ahmed's novels where Muslim female characters are portrayed as agents of self-liberation or, conversely, as objects of salvation; 2) assess how the liberation narrative negotiates between the female characters' internal agency and the intervention of external figures; 3) reveal the extent to which Ahmed's works avoid or reproduce the savior narrative,

particularly in the context of Young Adult literature targeting a Western audience. The analysis is conducted through close reading, theme identification, mapping agency versus savior figures, and then interpretation using theory. The analysis focuses on scenes that show the moment of the character's liberation, the role of external figures, and the representation of Eastern and Islamic culture.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Liberation as Self-Assertion

One of the main themes in Samira Ahmed's work is the efforts of young Muslim diaspora female characters to assert themselves (self-assertion) amidst cultural, religious, and stereotypical pressures on them. Rather than being positioned solely as victims, they are portrayed as agents who dare to reject traditional norms and external stereotypes. In the novel Love, Hate & Other Filters, Ahmed presents a young Muslim female character named Maya, a descendant of Muslim immigrants from India in America. She lives in a family environment with parents who are depicted as conservative towards Indian values and culture. Some of the values and rules instilled in Maya as a girl of Indian descent are 1) must be proficient in cooking, 2) not allowed to kiss the opposite sex before marriage, 3) must obey parental instructions, and 4) marry through an arranged marriage at a young age. Maya, born and raised in America, feels that the values instilled by her parents are outdated and unsuitable for her life as an American teenager who tends to want freedom and not be bound by traditional, "outdated" cultural values. She rejects the cultural values taught to her and prefers to be a modern "American girl."

Her choice to date a white American man, kiss him, and allow him to engage in casual sex can be read as a rejection of Eastern cultural values and an embrace of Western culture, which also constitutes a narrative of self-assertion. However, the representation of Maya's agency is framed within the binary opposition of traditional Indian cultural values versus Western culture, which is considered more modern. This risks homogenizing the experiences of Eastern women, leading to the notion of freedom that can be achieved if Eastern women abandon their values and culture of origin [10]. In this case, the character's agency is framed from a Western perspective on freedom.

This is reinforced by Maya's experience in dealing with negative sentiment after 9/11. The verbal and physical abuse she experienced led her to declare, "I want to be in New York already. You know, a place where I can live and do what I want and not be the Indian girl or the Muslim girl. A place where I can just be me." [14] This statement represents Maya's agency, which tends to follow the Western feminist framework of freedom, which considers values, culture, and Islam to be inappropriate for women. Traditional, restrictive cultural representations and the Islamic religion presented as unfavorable to be embraced in America, frame the perception that Eastern Muslim women should be given freedom.

Maya's presence in self-liberation as a self-assertion of cultural values is also carried out by Hina, Maya's aunt, who is presented as an independent Indian Muslim woman. Maya narrates it as follows: It's escaped me how truly rebellious Hina's life really is, as far as desi-Muslim standards go - even by American Born Confused Desi-Muslim standards. Hina is forty-something, single, childless, and lives by herself. She's not just a rebel; she's a pioneer—what a lonely road it must have been for her to travel. [14] This quote shows how Hina asserts her position as an independent woman amidst the complex cultural structures imposed on her as an Indian Muslim woman. From Maya's parents' perspective, she is considered to be defying cultural values with her single and overly free status. However, this has become the standard of freedom and independence for a woman in Western culture. Hina's achievements

make her a role model and validation for Maya in determining her choices and living her life as an Indian Muslim woman in America.

How Maya and Hina free themselves from the pressures of cultural values and religious identity is an adaptive strategy for acceptance in their environment, despite facing dual pressures from both the Western majority and their internal communities. In this regard, Ahmed grants both characters internal agency, challenging the stereotype of passive and oppressed women. They are constructed as Muslim women who can make strategic and independent decisions despite the pressures of cultural values.

However, this representation of Maya and Hina risks reproducing a dichotomy that positions tradition as a form of oppression and modernity as a form of liberation [10]. By presenting agency as resistance to Indian cultural values, Ahmed positions women's freedom and independence within the framework of Western liberal feminism, where independence and sexual freedom are key markers of liberation [15]. This framework can inadvertently homogenize South Asian Muslim women as oppressed by their culture, while simultaneously validating forms of agency familiar to Western readers. In this sense, Maya's self-assertion represents a tension. On the one hand, she challenges the patriarchal authority and Eastern cultural values within her family, and on the other, she presents Western feminist values that freedom can only be achieved by breaking away from cultural and religious heritage.

In line with the novel LH&oF, Khayyam in MBDTK is characterized as an independent, intelligent, highly proactive, and logical Muslim teenager. This contrasts with the stereotype of weak and backward Muslim women. Khayyam directly asserts herself as a feminist by stating, "Being a feminist means you believe that a woman's life and her choices are her own..." [16]. This sentence emphasizes her self-assertion, allowing her to freely determine her own path in life without pressure from any party.

In his position as a diaspora, the character Khayyam stated that "It's hard to explain to people who aren't American sometimes how I'm always conscious of being othered but also want to make sure I'm aware of my own privilege [16]. Through this statement, the character Khayyam does not want to only focus on the feeling of being othered as a Muslim diaspora, but also acknowledges that he still has advantages in terms of class and education that allow him to determine how to interact with the environment critically. This awareness also places him in a position to reject the stereotype trap that is usually given to the Muslim diaspora as a group that is always considered oppressed. The opportunity to access learning opportunities and his intelligence make him present as a woman who is free to determine her life path. In this case, he is also shown as a liberator for other women, namely the character Laila.

The character of Laila, who lived in a harem as a haseki during the Ottoman era, is also represented as a woman with strong agency, deciding to escape the harem and choose her own path. She fled to England in the 1840s, and Khayyam narrates, "She was a woman, utterly alone, who fought to survive."[16] In this case, she is represented as a woman who frees herself from the stereotype of Muslim women who are subject to patriarchal hegemony and the power of the harem. However, this representation emphasizes a narrative pattern of liberation that aligns with the expectations of Western readers. Referring to Abu-Lughod[12], this depiction perpetuates the Western notion that Muslim women can only be "saved" by leaving their cultural spaces.

In Ahmed's two works, liberation is a dynamic process born of identity negotiation, adaptive strategies, and the courage to assert oneself amidst complex power structures. Nevertheless, liberation as self-assertion in Ahmed's works can be read as a representation of Muslim women's agency that refuses to be confined to the dichotomy of "oppressed" versus "free" often found in Western narratives. Liberation here means breaking free from the label of "marginalized and oppressed" and moving toward a freer, successful, and independent

position. This representation emphasizes Ahmed's efforts to construct a Muslim woman who is intelligent, strong, and independent. However, this agency often does not exist entirely autonomously, as the success of the character's liberation is often linked to the support of external figures. This pattern brings us to a discussion of savior narrative dynamics.

## Savior Narrative Dynamics

Although the Muslim female characters in Samira Ahmed's novels demonstrate self-assertion, the narratives are often intertwined with moments that give a significant role to external savior figures or structures. The character Maya in the novel LH&OF is described as dating Phil, a white American teenage boy. Although Maya has other male options who are from India and fellow Muslims, she still chooses Phil despite their differences in culture and beliefs. This represents Maya's preference for American values over Indian cultural values. In her life in America, especially after the terrorist attacks, she often experiences negative sentiments both verbally and physically. In this case, Phil appears to be a hero who saves her from her attackers. Phil is not only a savior, but also a comfortable place that accepts her and frees her from judgment and condemnation for her identity as a Muslim. In this case, although the character Maya is characterized as an independent teenage girl, she still needs to be saved by another party, namely Phil, as a representation of the West, who plays a hero to the East. In the post-9/11 context, the savior narrative is often invoked to justify interventions against Muslim women under the pretext of liberating them from their own culture and religion [12]. Similarly, the character of Laila in the novel MB&DTK, although depicted as having strong agency to determine her own life and escape the bonds of the harem, remains unable to escape that place without the rescue of Lord Byron, a white poet, who helps her escape to England. In this case, Lord Byron is the Westerner who rescues Laila, representing the East and Muslims, from the harem, which is depicted as a constricting place. Laila is also indirectly "rescued" or given a new voice by Khayyam, a modern, intelligent, and independent young Muslim woman from the French diaspora. While Laila lacks a voice within the harem because she is bound by power, with the rescue of a modern woman, her voice is lifted again. This rescue by fellow women is a representation of liberal feminism, which seems to voice the subaltern voice but risks ignoring other alternative voices from the subaltern itself [11]. The character of Laila in this case can be read as a “subaltern made to speak” by feminist heroes from a Western perspective.

Laila's decision to flee to Europe and live independently is positioned as the only valid form of agency, thus excluding other possible forms of agency that might exist within the harem itself. However, as Peirce [17] argues, the harem is not merely a symbol of restraint but also a political space and strategy of power where women can play a significant role within the royal structure. By limiting the representation of the harem to a space of patriarchal oppression, Ahmed reproduces the Orientalist stereotype that views the harem narrowly as a prison for women. Thus, although Laila is presented as a strong woman, the construction of her agency actually reinforces the savior narrative, in which Muslim women's liberation is only valid through liberation from the Islamic world and into the Western realm [12]. This also represents independence that serves to validate Western liberal feminism.

Savior figures often come from positions of greater social capital, such as white identity, which is considered superior, while Muslim protagonists are in a position to overcome this inequality. This phenomenon can be called a white savior narrative, which positions the dominant group (often the West or the white majority) as the primary agent in saving marginalized groups [18]. This narrative impacts the formation of reader sympathy and perception. Cole [19] extends this critique to the realm of global activism by mentioning the

existence of a "white savior industrial complex" that prioritizes the moral satisfaction of the savior over the real needs of those being saved.

When a Muslim diaspora writer from the East narrates her female characters as agents using Western perspectives, such as challenging family traditions and rejecting religious practices, then such representation constitutes a form of internalization of Western feminist paradigms [20], marginalizing alternative forms of agency such as meaningful obedience [12], and risks re-orientalism. Thus, the presence of Western savior figures such as Phil and Lord Byron serves not only as companions but as figures who enable female agency to become more familiar to Western readers.

## Re-Orientalist Tendencies

In the works of writers affiliated with Eastern culture, Lau [20] sees patterns that often involve stereotypes, the use of exoticization, subalternism, marginalizing, and adjusting narratives to Western market expectations when representing Eastern culture. In the novel LH&OF, the author presents Indian culture in a stereotypical manner, namely as a traditional, outdated, and restrictive Eastern culture with various value rules within it. This Indian culture is also stereotyped with gender issues that do not favor women, because they are only used as assets in the acquisition of symbolic capital and legitimacy in a strong collectivist culture. Parents who are Indian immigrants in America in this novel are also typecast as conservative parents and do not place their children in an egalitarian parent-child relationship, so that the Indian cultural values they transmit cannot be accepted in the world of American teenagers. In addition, this novel also exoticizes the ritual of vows. The narrator, Maya, reveals, "...anytime I had any sort of school achievements, or even when I got what my mom refers to as 'compliments of envy,' especially when I would get sick, my mom would take the nazar off. Sometimes preemptively." [14] This ritual is represented as something exotic, mysterious, or strange by Oriental culture, which can create fascination and curiosity for Western readers. This exoticization is juxtaposed with the conservative typecast of immigrants who continue to maintain this 'strange' culture even though they are depicted as highly educated.

Thus, Indian culture in the novel LHOF is reduced to an inferior culture by emphasizing Oriental culture that is presented in a stereotypical, typecasting, and exotic manner. This indirectly reproduces Western readers' ideas about Eastern culture, which is shown to be unable to live or survive amidst Western culture due to the striking differences in habitus, especially because of the 'irrationality' of the East that continues to be maintained within a modern culture that prioritizes materialistic logic. Re-orientalism occurs here. The Indian author reduces her own culture and renders it other. Meanwhile, she creates a main character who is free to choose whatever she wants and frees her from Indian culture, which is represented by various oriental stereotypes.

The narrative of Islam as an unfavorable religion also emerges from Maya's desire for self-liberation. Her agency in becoming an independent young woman amidst cultural and religious values she perceives as restrictive and marginalizing demonstrates that these values are considered outdated and incompatible with American modernity. This narrative seems to repeat the Orientalist narrative of Eastern culture and Islam. In this context, Muslim women are portrayed as empowered only when they conform to Western notions of freedom. Thus, even novels written by Easterners reinforce the Western view that Islam and Eastern culture are constraints that must be abandoned for women to truly achieve their freedom.

In the novel MB&DTK, Laila is presented as a Haseki, an honorary title given to the Sultan's main or favorite concubine in the harem. In this novel, the story within the harem focuses on the relationship between Laila and the Sultan, where Laila must be loyal and follow the Sultan's rules. This limits the image of the harem as a space of sensuality and restrictions

on women's rights. This depiction is similar to the Orientalist depiction of the harem as a place of restraint that limits women's freedom and aspirations, even though women within the harem have broader roles and can even influence policy. [17] Ahmed validates this Orientalist representation with Leila's narrative, which shows that Muslim women within the harem remain controlled by patriarchal logic and masculine power.

Thus, the representation of the East, Indian culture, Islam, and the Ottoman harem in Ahmed's novels demonstrates a tendency toward re-orientalism. As a diasporic writer, Ahmed attempts to present an "inside" perspective, that is, from her own perspective as a Muslim writer of Eastern culture, but her narrative construction remains tied to market expectations and Western imaginations of the East.

## Conclusion

In LH&OF, Ahmed portrays Eastern culture and Islam as inferior. Successful Muslim women are portrayed as those who abandon traditional culture and religion, deemed unprofitable. However, Ahmed also presents a white American male character who acts as the protagonist's savior. In MB&DTK, through Khayyam, Ahmed also presents a modern, intelligent, and independent Muslim woman who can give a voice to other marginalized Muslim women. Through Laila, she presents a Muslim woman who is able to break through the traditions of the harem by abandoning the hegemony of power. However, this traps her in a representation of the harem that focuses solely on restrictive sensuality. Laila, on the other hand, must be rescued by the West to gain her freedom. In this case, the subaltern position of Muslim women is expressed through a Western perspective.

Thus, while Ahmed's novels aim to showcase Muslim women's agency, the cultural representations they construct remain trapped within the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity and within Orientalist stereotypes of Islam. Alongside a liberation narrative centered on Muslim women's agency, she still relies on external savior figures to liberate women from what she considers restrictive factors such as values, culture, tradition, and religion. The savior narrative in Ahmed's two novels demonstrates an ambivalence that, on the one hand, strengthens the characters' agency, but on the other hand, limits their autonomy by positioning the West as the guarantor of liberation. This dynamic is inextricably linked to Ahmed's representation of the East and Islam as a diasporic writer, which then places her within the re-orientalist tendency as a re-narrative of the West's perspective on the East.

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