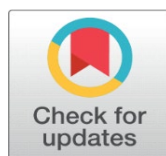
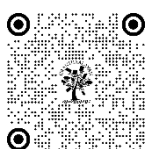


REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA IN MUSLIM GIRL: A COMING OF AGE

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ABSTRACT

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh is a young American author and activist. She was born in a Middle Eastern immigrant family in 1992 in the U.S. Her father is of Jordanian descent, while her mother is Palestinian. Al-Khatahtbeh rose to prominence as the founder of *MuslimGirl.com*, a ground breaking digital platform dedicated to amplifying the voices of Muslim women and challenging their misrepresentation in mainstream media. This initiative earned her a place on the prestigious *Forbes 30 Under 30 in Media* list in 2016. *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age* is her first book which was published in 2016. It was written in the form of a memoir, where Al-Khatahtbeh writes about her experience of living in America after the infamous attacks of September 11, 2001. In this paper, an attempt has been made to trace how the Islamophobic attitude, in the Western world, affects the identity of the author of this memoir. It also presents an overview of the issues faced by the first-generation Muslim immigrants. The paper deals with various other aspects which lead to the hybrid identity of the author and how she creates an online / digital space to deal with the identity crisis.

Keywords: Hybridity, Identity, Diaspora, Misrepresentation, Digital Media

1. INTRODUCTION

The best I can possibly do is speak on my own behalf, to be brutally true to my own lived experience, and share with you a snapshot of a walk of life that I believe has been shared by many of my brothers and sisters wandering the same familiar corridors of our English-speaking diaspora, never cultured enough for home and never American enough to truly belong (Al-Khatahtbeh 4).

The given excerpt from *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age* by Amani Al-Khatahtbeh presents an overview of this memoir in a nutshell. The book is an attempt to convey the true experience of a Muslim girl living in post 9/11 America. 9/11 refers to the series of horrible attacks, that were committed in New York and Washington D.C. by 19 terrorists who were associated with *Al-Qaeda*, group of Islamic extremists. These attacks were carried out on 11th September 2001, and led to the death of nearly 3000 people and thousands were left injured. This attack was carried out by a handful of Muslim terrorists but the Western media and society blamed the whole Muslim community for it. This changed the perception of Muslims throughout the world. They got stigmatized as terrorists, religious extremists, backward and anti-secularists. Hate crimes against Muslims increased manifold. The worst hit of the stigmatisation were Muslims who lived in the U.S,

as they got the first-hand experience of the hate narrative, that was being propagated against them and also against all the Muslims in general.

The subtitle of *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age*, suggests that this memoir works along the lines of bildungsroman. The term is originally related to the genre of novel and according to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "The subject of these novels is development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences... into maturity" (255). Amani Al-Khatahtbeh was 9 years old when the twin towers in New York were attacked on September 11, 2001 and this memoirs covers her life from the time of that incident to her adulthood. Hence, the main tenet of the bildungsroman i.e., journey from 'youth to adulthood' perfectly fits in the case of Al-Khatahtbeh. The memoir is divided into seven chapters excluding the epilogue. Throughout the course of this memoir, the horrible attacks of 9/11 form a significant theme and an important identity marker in the case of the author and many other Muslim girls like her. Cynthia White Tindogan also comments in her article entitled, "Negotiating Muslim Youth Identity in a Post-9/11 World" about the after effect of 9/11 where Muslims for years and even today got defined by those attacks. She writes:

The colonized history of the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and North Africa created these troubled diasporic transitions, but they were exacerbated by the attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11). When Muslim and/or Middle Eastern peoples enter the United States, where a vast majority of U.S. citizens know little of the history of colonization, Islam, or how this global faith is situated in the world, these migrants are set up to be easily Othered. (Tindongan)

Cynthia White Tindogan blames media, Western government and religious associations for the Othering of Muslim community. Western media has continuously targeted Muslims, which has led to their typecasting as backward, extremists and even terrorists. She is of the opinion that Muslim immigrants were "held hostage to Orientalist misunderstandings and exoticized impressions perpetuated by Western governments, media, religions, and hysteria" (Tindogan). She further explains that after the attacks of 11th September 2001, Muslim immigrants, as well as their children, were hugely impacted by the reactions and responses of the American society. It led to the number of problems that Muslims had to face on a daily basis in the U.S, but the worst thing according to her was that, "the events of 9/11 have not only altered the cultural landscape for U.S. mainstream communities, but have changed the way Muslim peoples identify themselves and are identified by others" (Tindongan).

Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age sheds fair amount of light Amani's Diasporic and hybrid identity. Being born in the U.S, to the immigrant parents, she felt she had a foot in both the cultures. Living in diaspora did not detach her from her parents' homeland. She writes that her father made sure that she and his other children learn about customs and language of the place where he hailed from. Due to this reason Al-Khatahtbeh grew up "with this hybrid sense of identity that's always somehow hyphenated" (Al-Khatahtbeh 43). She further adds to it, "As a millennial woman in the post-9/11 era, I have truly felt that our generation has been the first to navigate this new plane of evolving Muslim identity and the unique issues we must face today" (Al-Khatahtbeh 43).

Incidents of hate crimes mentioned by Al-Khatahtbeh in the book had a very adverse effect on her young mind. She felt everyone around her hated her for being a Muslim. She even wished that God had created her as Christian, which would have made her life easier in America. This led to her alienation and she started feeling shy around people. Her hesitation made her hide her religious identity around her peers. She writes, "I constantly tried to blend away my differences and fit in" (Al-Khatahtbeh 18). She tried to conceal her Muslim identity to fit in and to protect herself from the inherent bullying. She was yet to find her voice and was dictated by the caged image that society had created for her. According to her, she was suffering from the inferiority complex and also a syndrome, which she called as:

Racialized imposter syndrome; I feared I would be outed as undeserving of being here among the rest. I was made to believe I actually wasn't as smart, or as hardworking, or as worthy. Of course, as the law of attraction would have it, my peers treated me the same way I was expecting to be treated, which only affirmed how I felt. I was an outcast and I didn't belong. (62)

Al-Khatahtbeh tried to live up to the Western societal norms. She always thought of herself as 'less-than' white people around her. Such kind of thoughts usually arise from the way White people behave with migrant Muslim women. They believe all the women following Islamic faith, cover their heads and are suppressed, and need the intervention of non-Muslim, White people to save them. Al-Khatahtbeh believes that "In societal terms, that means a lighter complexion is a major bonus" (93). So, if a Muslim woman is of colour, she will face racism based on her religion as well as her colour.

As Al-Khatahtbeh was not White, moreover, she was a bit tall and overweight which added to her inferiority complex. She continuously tried to fit in the beauty standards set up by the Western society and popularised by television. She thought of herself as an abnormal being in the beautiful white world around her. She considered her own body to be very different from the bodies of the white girls which were considered normal by the society. She writes, "I was a gigantic blob who loomed over people, in doorway – who was, in the way I saw myself, always in the way. Mine wasn't a woman's body – it didn't look like the bodies I saw on TV" (Al-Khatahtbeh 64). Representation and depiction of women on TV acted as a mode of objectification of women, as depicted in the works of migrant women writings especially who are from to middle eastern or south Asian countries. Television serials and movies usually help in setting the beauty standards, which most of the women across the world dream to achieve.

Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age, records various episodes of racism faced by its author throughout her life, due to which, she was conditioned to think about herself as "less than" even at those times when there were no instances of racism. The feeling of being inferior to the people around her always loomed on her head. She confesses that she always looked at herself through the eyes of her school mates who were mostly White. She described this feeling in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, who had talked about the similar sense of limitation and restriction in the black community. He had also witnessed the double-conscious attitude of looking at oneself through the eyes of others and "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Al-Khatahtbeh 22). He talked about the idea of double-consciousness with respect to the Black community, who suffered racism in Western society due to their colour. But after 9/11, this notion also got incorporated in the Muslim identity, who faced hate due to their religion. Al-Khatahtbeh terms the condition of feeling inferior to her White non-Muslim peers as an illness. She writes:

The effects of this illness vary widely and, to be frank, the greatest symptom may be that we have possibly spent most of our lives searching for a WebMD of this nature, that affirms this phenomenon we have been feeling, that echoes our symptoms and their effects right back at us. That's probably how MuslimGirl.com came to exist: the WebMD of patriarchy and Islamophobia, all wrapped up in one and sealed with a media-friendly pretty hot-pink bow. (22)

The ridicule that Amani Al-Khatahtbeh felt all the time for demanding to get treated equally and fairly, created a sort of insecurity that got ingrained in her identity from very early in her life. She felt in school "it was like it was some sort of expectation ingrained in me that the second was the highest I could go. There had to be someone before me, someone above me" (Al-Khatahtbeh 24). But at the end of the first chapter, Amani writes "I needed to decide that I wanted to be first. That I could be first. That I, too, deserved to be first" (Al-Khatahtbeh 25). This resolution probably helped her in future, where she formed a platform to speak up and also let others like her to speak up as well.

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh describes in her memoir the need to start *MuslimGirl.com*. She states that she was extremely fed up with bigotry and anti-Muslim stereotypes which affected her identity severely. It became difficult for her to make friends or connections, so she searched for online spaces to serve her purpose of finding people like herself. In her search she landed in *LiveJournal*, a digital platform which first exposed Amani to, "feminist, self-realized interpretations of Islam" (Al-Khatahtbeh 73). *LiveJournal* allowed its users to form 'Communities', where like-minded users could share messages or information regarding particular subject. Al-Khatahtbeh writes that there were not many Islamic *LiveJournal* communities, and a small number of communities which revolved around Muslims were mostly run by men or much older women. She writes that limited number of discussions were focused on women of her age and most of those were, "shallow conversations in which women were being mansplained to about how to practice Islam correctly in their gendered circumstances" (Al-Khatahtbeh 73-74). Al-Khatahtbeh did not feel connected with the discussions around Muslim women on such platforms, she says that, "the problems I was facing as a Muslim girl growing up in America went far beyond a superficial discussion of how I should dress in public and the proper way to wrap my headscarf" (Al-Khatahtbeh 73-74).

With the help of *MuslimGirl.com*, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh wanted to fight stereotypes related to Muslims girls. She felt that Muslim girls no longer needed mainstream media to cover the issues that are important to them, they were capable of telling their own stories. She calls her project of *MuslimGirl.com* as her "own alternative media channel" (Al-Khatahtbeh 46), where she and other Muslim girls like her, were free to tell their own stories and portray their identities. She also writes that while growing up in the U.S, she always felt that people like her were being robbed of the opportunity to voice their problems. But, after the launch of her website, she was happy with the kind of discussions and conversations they were having on *MuslimGirl.com*. Al-Khatahtbeh writes that:

Our work has been built in the consciousness of a long line and tradition of Muslim women speaking truth to power, taking a central role in revolutionizing societies and propelling their respective generations forward towards emancipation. If we seem further along, it is by standing on the shoulders of superwomen. (Al-Khatahtbeh 46)

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh feels content with the working of her website. She writes, “I was increasingly astonished and elated that the conversations we were starting on *MuslimGirl.com* were reaching audiences far and wide” (Al-Khatahtbeh 70). She believes that there was not much of digital space available for Muslims, when she thought to launch *MuslimGirl.com*. Some of the *LiveJournal* communities with Muslim users were either barely operating or completely inactive. While there were some other active Muslim digital platforms but they were mostly focused on men or slightly older women, whose conversations were “not always relatable to the distinct issues” (Al-Khatahtbeh 79) that Al-Khatahtbeh’s generation was facing. Keeping in mind, all the given circumstances, Al-Khatahtbeh launched *MuslimGirl.com* in 2009.

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh launched *Muslim Girl.com* with the idea of creating a platform where both Muslim, as well as non-Muslim girls can ask questions about Islam that they could not ask anyone else. She wanted this platform to be free from judgements and embarrassment, where women can discuss any random topic. She also wanted this platform to be informative and inspirational where along with girly conversations, Muslim women could talk about serious issues related to their identities. The platform brought Muslims girls together, irrespective of their nationalities. Al-Khatahtbeh believes that one of the other important reasons behind the success of *MuslimGirl.com* is that through this platform, Muslim girls were capable of telling their stories to the world in the least possible time.

One of the major goals of launching *MuslimGirl.com* was to boost the digital media representation of the women following the Islamic faith. Al-Khatahtbeh became quite successful in this pursuit. She helped Muslim women to reclaim their narratives by providing them the online platform which served as the best available medium for them to voice their concerns. Al-Khatahtbeh is of the opinion that digital platform melted away the borders and brought people together from across the globe. She declares that the tagline of *MuslimGirl.com* was “Muslim Women Talk Back,” because that’s exactly what we chose to do” (85). She believes there is a need to thank social media and internet, which paved way for the rise of Muslim women. She writes that, “Muslim girls were already experiencing so much abuse in the outside world that we wanted there to be one place online that could be our little haven” (Al-Khatahtbeh 80).

In the introduction of this memoir, Al-Khatahtbeh refers to the launch of her blog which in no time turned into a full-fledged website as breaking the glass ceiling. The phrase “glass ceiling” is originally used as a metaphor, “for the evident but intangible hierarchical impediment that prevents minorities and women from achieving elevated professional success (Reiners). But in the case of *MuslimGirl.com* this phrase is used for achieving equal rights, which also includes professional success, for Muslim women. Al-Khatahtbeh is of the opinion that:

We have become commodified in every demeaning way: Our bodies have become political targets in the service of returning America to the imaginary greatness it once enjoyed, which I can only assume was during the days of outright racial comfort and superiority of white people; at the same time, our bodies have been reprinted, sold, contorted to fit the only cool narrative society can accept, sold to us Muslim women in a way that makes us eagerly jump to celebrate the shattering of another glass ceiling. (Al-Khatahtbeh 3)

Al-Khatahtbeh’s activism on digital platform can be associated with digital feminism. In one of the articles entitled, “One Day of #Feminism: Twitter as a Complex Digital Arena for Wielding, Shielding, and Trolling talk on Feminism”, published in the journal, *Leisure Science*, writers speak about the need of digital feminism. They believe that the virtual media is a powerful tool to present the counter-narrative against the mainstream media which had dominated the world until very recently. They are of the opinion that:

Gendered discourses on a public forum with massive reach could further propel critical discussions on misogyny, women’s rights, and illuminate other gendered injustices. Tweets are multivocal: tweeting enables individuals with different privileges and levels of influence to post, comment on, and share ideas. Virtual voices on Twitter are also enabled and represented on other widely consumed broadcasts (i.e., in news and popular television) (Lopez *et al*).

The article from which the given excerpt was taken is focused on the importance of twitter in spreading the ideology of feminism, accepting the fact that, “learning about the nuances of feminism may be precarious through such a fragmented forum such as Twitter” (One Day of #Feminism: Twitter as a Complex Digital Arena for Wielding, Shielding, and Trolling talk on Feminism’) But they believe that Twitter, now called as X, and also the other social networking sites, “may serve to stimulate interest as well as build and fortify communities of feminists” (Lopez *et al*). Jessamy Gleeson in

her essay, "What's Next for Digital Feminism" also speaks about some important aspects of Digital Feminism. According to her the most important element of such kind of activism is that people can listen and learn about certain issue before participating in it. She is of the opinion that digital feminism, "has an ability to bring to the fore the experiences of women from all backgrounds" (Gleeson). She writes that people may not be always able to associate themselves with different issues faced by women across the globe but it better to focus on listening that striving to be heard all the time. She believes that internet helps us to access the stories and experiences of women across the globe and hence educate ourselves on the issues that we may not come across otherwise.

Women are getting active online not just to narrate their own experiences but also to support other women who have faced gendered discrimination, violence or sexual assault. Online platforms have also helped women to create and circulate the feminist discourse with the help of online campaigns and webinars. Online events get wide recognition and support due to wide range of participants from different parts of the world. Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose are of the opinion that such platforms also, "interrupt rape culture through a variety of creative interventions, such as the mobile phone app 'Not Your Baby' and the organization and participation in the global SlutWalk" (Keller *et al.* 3). Digital activism has been recognised as the, "new source of empowerment for feminist activism and are often considered as having largely contributed to its revival" (Keller *et al.* 3). Josiane Jouet also comments on the aspect Digital activism for the feminists:

Younger feminists are experts in using the technical and narrative frames of digital media and in developing innovative discourses. Furthermore, on the web, there is no limit for editorial content. The enormous number of feminist materials provided, daily and on an immediate and free access in the cyberspace, appears to be one of the major changes between activism in the seventies and in early 21st century (Jouet).

Many important online campaigns like #MeToo and #YesAllWomen, have provided space to many women to speak about misogyny, sexual harassment, rape and violence. These online platforms are popularising the voices of women that had been either subjugated or entirely subsided by dominant mainstream media till now. Mendes and Keller in their article, "#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture through Digital Feminist Activism" write about the aftermath of #MeToo movement that created a type of ripple effect in the society, according to them, "many powerful, (mainly white) men are being held accountable for historic instances of abuse and harassment" (Keller *et al.*). This campaign became a kind of turning point in the journey of digital activism. Such events attempted to create awareness about women subjugation, which had led to the different kinds of crimes against them. *MuslimGirl.com* became an important website for Muslim women to raise awareness about various issues. It became an influential forum for Muslim women in general and Muslim-American in particular, to share their stories of survival in the misogynistic world. This website also features the diverse stories on various socio-political complexities that has an effect on the immigrant Muslims in the West.

These everyday interactions are leaking remnants of our colonial history, and the way we interact with and view minorities in our society as being outsiders that are less-than. Consider the ways in which this is playing out on a national level in our politics today. (Al-Khatahtbeh 127)

Throughout her memoir, Amani Al-Khatahtbeh wants to indulge the reader into the lives of American-Muslim women to present the lucid picture of how these women suffer stereotypes in their daily lives. Amani believes that media plays a very crucial role in forming this type-casted identity of Muslim women. In one of the public events, where Amani was asked to speak, she asked the audience to pick up their phones and type the term 'Muslim women' in Google Image Search, she writes everyone felt silent after they saw the kind of pictures displayed on their phones. There were bleak images of "faceless women hidden behind veils" (Al-Khatahtbeh 123). By this act, Al-Khatahtbeh wanted to show to her audience how information reaching to people on their phones, "had become saturated with the same monolithic stereotypical image of Muslim women" (Al-Khatahtbeh 124). She is of opinion that, Muslim women are denied the diversity of identity and representation, due to which it is easy to create their monolithic image. It also makes it uncomplicated for media and Western society to generalise their issues and subjugate or victimize them collectively.

Muslim Girl was written to stop people from robbing narrative of Muslim women from them. It was written as testimony by a Muslim girl to present her resistance against the incorrect narrative, being passed by media and people of power, about her. She writes that she feels devastated by the fact that being an American citizen, "still today my own society saw me as nothing more than a brown body that only belonged in another world ... We were the barbarians from a backward, inhuman civilization. We were the savages with no respect for life or human dignity, apparently" (Al-

Khatahtbeh 60). And in response to this feeling, Al-Khatahtbeh launched her online blog, *MuslimGirl*. This blog gave her an opportunity to share her story. It also gave space to other Muslim women, who wanted to share their own narratives.

Al-Khatahtbeh feels proud of herself and her team, for working hard on making the dream of *MuslimGirl.com* come true. She is happy to accept the role of “Token Muslim Girl” (Al-Khatahtbeh 2), whom girls, with issues like her, follow. But on the other hand, she feels it is disheartening when many people, especially from other parts of the world, consider her problems to be petty. She is aware of this situation where her life and point of view is considered lucrative as compared to Abeer Qassim Al-Janabi, who “was fourteen years old when American soldiers in Iraq gang raped her girl-child body while holding her family hostage in another room” (Al-Khatahtbeh 2). Al-Khatahtbeh knows that the stories of girls like Abeer are ruthless but that should not nullify the plight of Muslim women living in the West and facing different kind of subjugation. Both suffer misery, but of different degrees. She alludes to the quote of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warned us of the dangers of the single story, and mine—as privileged and seemingly mediocre as it may appear to us Western Muslims, and as endlessly fascinating as it may seem to those looking in—carries the weight of a generation of little girls eagerly searching for a reflection of themselves in the world around them. (Al-Khatahtbeh 1)

Hence, Al-Khatahtbeh wants the readers not to take her work lightly. Muslim women have until recently been represented by others, they now want to reclaim their own space and tell their stories themselves. However, she further writes that the Western privilege enjoyed by some Muslim women like her, does not make them eligible enough to give a generalized view of the plight of other Muslim women. Women coming from different parts of the world and different walks of life, cannot have the same issues. Their lives are different and so are their problems, hence talking on behalf of them is not always justified. But sometimes, many women lack the opportunity to voice their concerns and need other women with better resources to help them and bring their stories to forefronts. Such women take a crucial stand in making a radical change in the lives of voiceless women. Al-Khatahtbeh is of the opinion that:

When we do not have the opportunity to uplift them into these spaces, the best that we can do is use our unique position to create an impact that we hope will ripple out. This is the premise upon which Muslim Girl was founded. Knowing that failed domestic and foreign policy has fallen on the mischaracterization of the Muslim woman’s narrative, reclaiming it would alter the public’s perception of our needs and opinions and cultivate a stronger presence for us in the public sphere. (95-96)

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, through her memoir wants to convey how Western media perceives Muslim women. She accuses the media of spewing the venom against them and presenting them to be meek and submissive. Media represents Muslim women as “Girls hidden behind veils who are only told what to do, who only have the mind to either follow a male family member or outrageously commit to violence as our only animalistic form of expression” (Al-Khatahtbeh 20). She further writes that it is actually the Western society that imposes pressure on Muslim girls to assimilate in their culture and submit to the ways of the Western world. Hence, Al-Khatahtbeh blames the Western society of subjugating Muslim women. She gives an example of the French government, who claim to be working on liberating Muslim women from the oppression they are facing with regard to their religious attire. While ironically if a Muslim woman chooses to wear her religious garment, they make her to pay a fine for it. So somehow, Western society is forcing Muslim women to submit. This oppression of Muslim women in Western society made Amani to look out for endeavors to voice her story and try to create space for narratives of other Muslim women as well, which led her to the online/digital platform.

Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age touches upon a number of themes, including the gender equality within the Islamic religion. The focus of the memoir was more on reclaiming identity in Western diaspora. Digital activism also forms a significant part which has been used to fight back oppression and stereotypes. The concept of digital activism has gained prominence and success quite recently. It has further added to the cause of globalization as digital platforms have global outreach. Few years back when people were fighting the global pandemic of Covid-19, digital medium turned out to be a saviour to a great extent. As people were confined to their homes for a long period of time, digital platforms emerged as the only significant medium to keep the world going. Al-Khatahtbeh has made a good use of such platform to portray her diasporic identity and present her resistance against Islamophobia and misogyny.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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