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Transnationalism and Belonging: A Case Study of Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face*

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Language and Culture

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Dedication

To my beloved mother Arar Nora,

You are the first teacher I ever had—the one who taught me how to be strong, kind, and true to myself. Your constant encouragement, endless support, and unwavering belief in me have shaped who I am today. Every achievement of mine carries your voice, your strength, and your faith in my journey.

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Abstract

This study explores the complex interplay between transnationalism, identity, and belonging in Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face* (2020). It investigates whether transnational connections hinder or fuel the immigrant's sense of belonging, particularly within the post-9/11 American socio-political landscape. Drawing on postcolonial and transnational theoretical frameworks—including the works of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Edward Said, and Carol Fadda-Conrey—the study examines how identity is shaped and reshaped across cultural, racial, and spiritual dimensions. The analysis highlights how racism, white mainstream norms, and patriarchal expectations render identity formation complex and hinder immigrants' sense of belonging, within both American society and Arab-Muslim community.

The study also reveals how faith, emotional ties, and spiritual awakening—particularly through Islam—serve as powerful sources of belonging and resilience. By analyzing themes such as marginalization, Islamophobia, inherited trauma, and healing, the research demonstrates that Mustafah's protagonist undergoes a symbolic return to faith and cultural memory, which reconfigures her sense of self and community. The study ultimately presents identity as one that is not defined by geography, but by emotional and spiritual reconnection. Through a multidisciplinary lens, the dissertation affirms that transnational connections can offer immigrants a path to reclaim agency, identity, and belonging in a world that often renders them invisible.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Identity, Belonging, Trauma, Healing, Faith, Diaspora, Sahar Mustafah

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Résumé

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the concepts of transnationalism and belonging have emerged as central themes in contemporary literature, especially in narratives shaped by migration, diaspora, and identity politics. The interplay between place and self, origin and destination, tradition and transformation underlies the experience of many individuals whose lives unfold across national, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Accordingly, this dissertation investigates a central research question: does transnational connections fuel or deter the immigrant's sense of belonging?

Through an examination of Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face* (2020), the study explores how the protagonist Afaf Rahman—a Palestinian-American Muslim woman—navigates her identity in a socio-political context marked by Islamophobia, racism, exclusion, and inherited trauma. By analyzing the novel's portrayal of Afaf's journey toward faith and self-definition, the study aims to show how transnational connections, particularly spiritual and communal ties, can serve as a source of belonging rather than a barrier to it. The study also seeks to demonstrate how Mustafah portrays the complexities of transnational identity and the search for belonging.

The choice to focus on transnationalism and belonging in Mustafah's novel is driven by myriad reasons. Thematically, *The Beauty of Your Face* addresses some of the most pressing issues of our time: immigration, racism, religious discrimination, and the impact of 9/11 on Muslim identities in the United States. It does so not through sensationalism but through an intimate, character-driven narrative that foregrounds the inner life of its protagonist. Mustafah's background as a Palestinian-American writer offers an insider's perspective into a marginalized and often misrepresented community. Her novel challenges

Orientalist stereotypes and gives voice to Arab and Muslim women, who are frequently silenced in both literature and society.

This study also seeks to contribute to ongoing academic discussions about Arab-American literature, transnational identity, and the politics of belonging. The novel under study is particularly timely, given the persistent rise of Islamophobia and the cultural tensions surrounding Muslim representation in the West. By examining Mustafah's work through the lens of transnational theory, this research seeks to expand our understanding of how identity is shaped, contested, and healed in the diasporic experience.

This dissertation adopts a multidisciplinary framework that combines transnationalism, postcolonial theory, and trauma studies to examine how identity and belonging are represented in Mustafah's novel. The first chapter which is a theoretical chapter draws primarily on the works of Homi Bhabha (hybridity and third space), Stuart Hall (cultural identity), Avtar Brah (diaspora and imagined communities), and Carol Fadda-Conrey (Arab-American belonging). These frameworks are complemented by Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and critical views on Islamophobia and racialized exclusion in the post-9/11 American context. This chapter offers a definition of key concepts such as transnationalism, belonging, hybridity, and home. It also analyzes how these concepts are treated in transnational literature, particularly in works by Arab-American authors. This chapter establishes the groundwork for interpreting the fluidity and multiplicity of identity in diaspora.

The second chapter undertakes a close reading of *The Beauty of Your Face* with a focus on the theme of belonging. Divided into two parts, it first examines Afaf's exclusion from white mainstream society due to racism, Islamophobia, and Orientalist misrepresentation. It then investigates the limits of belonging within her own Arab-Muslim community, particularly the role of gender, tradition, and patriarchy in marginalizing women like Afaf.

Moreover, the third chapter analyzes trauma and healing in Afaf's life. It explores personal, collective, and intergenerational traumas including the loss of her sister, familial dysfunction, racism, and the school shooting. The chapter also highlights how Afaf's spiritual journey and embrace of Islam offer her a sense of purpose, agency, and belonging. Faith, teaching, and emotional reconnection become paths toward healing, demonstrating how identity reconstruction is deeply intertwined with community, memory, and resilience.

Ultimately, this dissertation will show that Mustafah's novel is a powerful case study in understanding the intricacies of transnational belonging. It reveals how trauma and marginalization are countered by spiritual awakening and emotional reconnection, allowing characters like Afaf to reclaim their narratives in a world that often silences them. This study proposes that such reconnections—especially Afaf's embrace of Islam and her integration into a faith-based community—constitute transnational ties that symbolically return her to her Arab cultural heritage. These connections enable Afaf to reclaim agency and belonging in a world that frequently renders her invisible.

Chapter I: A Theoretical Examination of Transnationalism and Belonging

This chapter offers a theoretical exploration of the concepts of transnationalism and belonging, structured into two sections. The first section provides definitions of transnationalism and belonging, drawing on the theories of scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Carol Fadda-Conrey. The second section examines the representation of home and identity in transnational literature, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of belonging, as well as the impact of migration and displacement in shaping individual and collective identities.

I.1. Defining Transnationalism and Cultural Belonging: Key Theoretical Perspectives

I.1.1. Transnationalism

> **"**America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors".
>
> Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-National America"

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term "transnational" was first used in 1921, defined as "extending or going beyond national boundaries." This definition captures the essence of transnationalism, encompassing identities, activities, and connections that operate across national borders rather than being confined to a single country. A century later, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (2020) described transnationalism as "[e]xtending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers". This broad definition illustrates that transnationalism is a multifaceted concept that involves movements, such as migration, cultural exchanges, and even activities that transcend beyond national borders, including business, and political activism.

The term transnational is often used as an adjective to describe social and cultural phenomena that extend across national borders, such as transnational identity, transnational diaspora, transnational family, transnational lives, and transnational activism (qtd. in Siegle). These terms all refer to processes or experiences that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of the nation-state, unfolding across countries and international borders. Each of these concepts highlights a different facet of transnationalism, illustrating how identity, culture, and belonging are shaped by global interconnectedness.

In the beginning of the 20th century, scholars started viewing transnationalism through the lens of migration. Glick Schiller, et al. observe "immigrants live their lives across borders and maintain their ties to home, even when their countries of origin and settlement are geographically distant" (ix). This builds directly upon the ideas of Randolph S. Bourne, who was the first to use the word 'trans-national' in association with immigrants. Bourne did not use the term transnationalism explicitly, but his illustrations laid eventually for its conceptualization and definitions. Transnationalism was used by social scientists to refer to "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al., 7). Transnationalism highlights how immigrants challenge the traditional definition of migration, through the sustainment of political, economic, and cultural interactions across national borders. Hence, they do not fully sever relations with their homeland, instead they maintain their connections through various means. These means vary from individual to other, and it can be in the shape of many forms, such as sending remittances to support family members, or receiving aid from loved ones, engaging in cultural practices, like celebrating traditional festivals, or speaking their native language. Political engagement, such as voting, fosters the sense of dual belonging experienced by migrants. Moreover, due to globalization and advancements in technology

these connections are more facilitated making cross-border interactions even easier, strengthening transnational ties, despite being geographically separated.

Indeed, Bourne asserts "America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors." Bourne's words remind me of the concept of cultural diversity, which opposes the 'melting pot' theory. According to this view, immigrants do not necessarily have to assimilate into a singular identity resembling that of the host country; rather, different cultures can coexist. In this context, according to "the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions", cultural diversity:

> refers to the manifold ways in which the cultures of group and societies find expression. These expressions are passed on within and among groups and societies. Cultural diversity is made manifest . . . through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment. (2005)

Bourne's expression "weaving back and forth" mirrors the actual experience of transmigrants, who are living between different nations, and cultures, and acknowledges that individuals remain connected to their homeland, and do not necessarily sever ties. "Transmigrants" is a term which designates those who are "firmly rooted in their new country but [maintain] multiple linkages to their homeland" (Basch et al., 48).

Building on this perspective, I argue that transmigrants differ from traditional migrants, who are often expected to assimilate completely into the host society. In contrast, transmigrants actively engage with the host society while maintaining, as Vertovec puts it, "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states" (447). This framework offers valuable insight into how 'transnationalism' should be understood and approached. Unlike passive subjects, transmigrants integrate into their new

environment while preserving connections to their home country. Furthermore, their descendants, raised in a transnational milieu, undoubtedly influence identity formation (Vertovec). I contend that this dual participation reinforces a 'fluid identity'—one not confined by national borders. Instead, it is primarily shaped by transnational experiences, extending beyond the traditional process of departure and arrival. Immigrants continue to maintain contact and interact across national boundaries, sharing ideas, encountering new cultures, and engaging in a variety of activities. Portes affirms this, noting that "[t]hrough these networks, an increasing number of people are able to live dual lives. Participants are often bilingual . . . frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require their presence in both (812). I argue that the participants in transnational practices include not only migrants but also individuals who remain in their country of origin and engage with diaspora communities. In her study on nomadism, Bouallegue suggests that migrants can experience what they perceive as the West "while they stay at home" ("The Modern Nomad", 105). She further notes that "media, books enable people to travel in thought" ("The Modern Nomad", 106), drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept that "to think is to voyage" (qtd. in Bouallegue, "The Modern Nomad", 482).

The idea of an individual balancing their sense of self between two different countries is inherently complex, leading to the creation of a culturally hybrid identity. The immigrant finds themselves in a situation "where difference is neither one nor the other but something else besides, in-between" (Bhabha 219). This "in-between" space, as Bhabha describes it, is "an interstitial passage between fixed identifications' that opens up the possibility for cultural hybridity—one that embraces difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). Known as the "third space," this space is fluid moving between cultures (313), where a conversation occurs between both cultures. This interaction can either challenge rigid

boundaries and promote more fluid relations, reinforce restrictive binaries, or, more likely, create a blend of both, due to the process of cultural hybridization. This "hybridization" may also "maintain a double perspective on reality" (Friedmann 78), influencing the immigrant's identity in various ways, starting with how they perceive the society they inhabit and how they are perceived by others.

The notion of fluid identity can be further explored through the concept of cultural identity. Stuart Hall proposed two distinct understandings of cultural identity. The first is "cultural identity as a shared culture, history, and ancestry. There is a true self that people with a shared ancestry hold in common" (318). The second view is "cultural identities as "positionalities": the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (320). The latter suggests that cultural identity is not a fixed concept but rather a dynamic one. This aligns with the idea that the relationship between identity and belonging is a "dynamic process, not a reified fixity" (Yuval-Davis 99). Hall connects cultural identity to the concept of "diaspora," arguing that diaspora is not a fixed essence but "a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being"" (52). "Being" is tied to an individual's past, their cultural background, and what is already present, referring to their origins and how they emerged from their homeland. In contrast, "becoming" refers to the evolving present and future, encompassing change and adaptation. Hall also explains that "diasporic identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (58). People move, interact with different cultures, and are exposed to new contexts, leading to the understanding that identity is fluid, not fixed.

Diasporic identity is closely linked to transnationalism. According to Avtar Brah, diasporic identities are "transnational identifications encompassing "imagined" and "encountered" communities" (196). She argues that "dispersed across nation-states, diasporic

collectivities lie at the heart of the debate about national identity" (243). Brah emphasizes the complexity and fluidity of diasporic identities, suggesting that these individuals are not confined to a single location. Instead, they exist in multiple places, navigating various cultural and national affiliations. This fluidity leads to ongoing discussions around memory, belonging, and personal experiences, raising the fundamental question: What does it mean to belong to a nation?

I.1.2. Belonging

According to *the Cambridge Dictionary*, belonging is defined as "a feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group and having a good relationship with the other members of the group because they welcome you and accept you." It is the sense in which individuals are included and accepted within a particular society, feeling valued for their contributions without the fear of discrimination or exclusion for being who they are. In literature, however, belonging is seen as more than just an emotional state. Hagerty et al. define belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (172). The phrase "personal involvement" underscores that belonging is not a passive process; rather, it requires active participation, interaction, and contribution to the environment in which individuals find themselves. This suggests that belonging is not automatic but must be built through connections to specific communities or societies.

Furthermore, the phrase "an integral part of that system or environment" suggests that belonging is not just about presence but about feeling valued and recognized as an essential member of society. The society itself plays a crucial role in shaping one's sense of belonging, as "the more a person feels that his needs are being satisfied in a particular group or system, the more he will feel he belongs to it" (Anant 26). Anant argues that societal acceptance is the most important condition for experiencing belonging, and being accepted by others is a key

factor in fostering inclusion. Between 2007 and 2009, a series of Australian studies were conducted, leading to the proposal of this definition of belonging:

> [A] deeply personal and contextually-mediated experience that envolves in response to the degree to which the individual feels: (a)secure, accepted, included, valued, and respected by a defined group, (b) connected with or integral to the group, and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group. The experience of belongingness may evolve passively in response to the actions of the group to which one aspires to belong and/or actively through the actions initiated by the individual. (Levett-Jones et al., 319)

Belongingness is strengthened only when individuals feel they are an integral part of a group, rather than being an 'outsider.' This experience does not develop in isolation; instead, it is shaped by various factors. On one hand, external factors play a role, where individuals feel a sense of belonging when the group shows acceptance, recognition, and embraces them. On the other hand, internal factors are also crucial, as individuals navigate their way through a particular community by engaging in its activities and aligning with its social norms, values, and expectations. Mahar et al. define a sense of belonging as:

> [A] subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics. These feelings of external connectedness are grounded to the context of referent group, to whom one chooses, wants and feels permission to belong. This dynamic phenomenon may be either hindered or promoted by complex interactions between environmental and personal factors. (1026)

This definition suggests that belonging is a deeply internal and personal experience, and it is not one-sided; rather, it occurs through mutual exchange. Belonging is not solely about how

the group views or treats a person. Even if the group includes and accepts the individual, this does not automatically result in a sense of belonging. Instead, belonging is subjective and develops through mutual exchanges between the person and their environment, shaped by both personal and environmental factors. Colhoun argues that belonging is not a voluntary or a detachable aspect of life but a fundamental condition of human existence:

> it is impossible not to belong to a social groups, relations, or culture . . . real people . . . are necessarily situated in particular webs of belonging [and] people are implicated in social actions which they are not entirely free to choose . . . Moreover, when the limits of belonging to specific webs of relationships are transcended, this is not into a freedom from relationships but into a different organizations of relationships [that creates] a patchwork of new connections (Colhoun 536-37).

Since transnational individuals often feel a mix of belonging to different places, groups, and it is a strong feeling that became a necessary part of their life. They do not fully leave behind their old relationships, but instead build new ones as they move between cultures and countries. Their identity is shaped by both, their past and their new experiences .

While Calhoun emphasizes that all individuals are deeply embedded in social relationships and cultural communities, the experience of belonging is not equally accessible to everyone. For members of marginalized groups—such as Arabs and Muslims in Western societies—belonging can be fraught with misrepresentation, prejudice, and exclusion. In transnational literature, characters from these backgrounds often face structural and cultural barriers that hinder their full participation in the social and cultural life of host countries. These barriers also shape how they are perceived and treated by the dominant culture. As Edward Said argues, “the East cannot represent itself; it must be represented” (Said 8),

pointing to a persistent dynamic in which the West often speaks about Arabs and Muslims rather than allowing them to speak for themselves.

These misrepresentations turn Arab and Muslim individuals into the "Other," marking them as different, alien, strange, or even dangerous and inferior. This process of othering weakens their sense of belonging, as society treats them as outsiders. As a result, transnational individuals often experience alienation, even in places they consider home. Little observes: "The Arabs, Africans and Asians who grace the *National Geographic* are backwards, exotic and occasionally dangerous folks who have needed and will continue to need U.S. help and guidance if they are to successfully undergo political and cultural modernization "(10–11). Such portrayals can make Arab Americans feel excluded, even if they were born and raised in the United States. Furthermore, Edward Said's theory of *Orientalism* explains how Western representations grant themselves the authority to define others while asserting cultural superiority. He writes:

> It would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was essentially an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality . . . There were—and are—cultures and nations whose location is in the East, and their lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them in the West. (5)

For transnational identities—especially those from the Middle East or Muslim-majority countries—such false representations foster a deep sense of alienation. Rather than being recognized as full members of society, they are frequently seen through the lens of Orientalism: portrayed as backward, dangerous, or in need of Western intervention. This perception complicates their ability to feel at home, even in the very countries where they were born.

The struggle to belong is thus not purely personal or psychological; it is shaped by systemic misrepresentation. Carol Fadda-Conrey points out that Arab-American belonging

has long been influenced by unstable and shifting definitions of race in the United States. She writes:

> One important structural framework that captures the difficulties and struggles that have historically defined Arab-American belonging draws heavily on evolving understandings of race, racial formations, and the racialization of minorities in the U.S. Ever since the first wave of Arab immigration to the U.S. in the nineteenth century, this group's racial identity has been mired in contradictory and changing labels... its racial status wavered as naturalization laws drew and redrew citizenship rights... on the basis of changing definitions of whiteness. (14)

This highlights how Arab Americans have been positioned on the margins of U.S. national identity—not because of who they are, but because of how they are socially categorized. Their belonging is not freely chosen or fully granted; rather, it is constrained by cultural systems that determine who is considered "white" and who remains "foreign." This reinforces Said's argument that the West imposes distorted and limiting images onto the East.

For Arab Americans, then, the experience of belonging becomes fragmented—not just across national borders, but within the very nation they strive to call home. Moreover, this feeling of "not belonging" is not confined to the U.S. Many transnational individuals also experience alienation in their countries of origin, where they may be perceived as too Americanized, too Western, or too detached from local culture and traditions. As a result, their identity is suspended between two worlds, belonging fully to neither.

I.2. The Representation of Home and Identity in Transnational Literature

I.2.1. The Concept of "Home" in Transnational Literature

"Any researcher engaging with the concept of home is faced with the dilemma of how to distill workable principles from such a vast literature" (Meers 599).

The concept of home is not a simple one as it appears since it resists a simple singular definition. For some, "home" is usually romanticized as a site of safety and belonging; for

others it may represent loss, displacement or longing. The word origin itself reflects this broader sense of meaning. As Hollander observes, "the Germanic words for home, Heim, ham, heem, are derived from the Indo-European kei meaning lying down and something dear or beloved. In other words, it means something like place to lay one's head" (35). This etymology reveals that "home" has always been connected to rest, comfort, and emotional attachment, highlighting its role as a space of intimacy and belonging rather than just a physical structure. However, in everyday language, the concepts "home" and "house" are often used interchangeably, despite their distinct connotations.

According to *Merriam-Webster* "home" is: "one's place of residence: DOMICILE" (1a), and "house" is: "a building that serves a living quarters for one or a few families: HOME" (1), both definitions provide a description that emphasizes physical location. However, "the concept of home and house differ, home refers to the non-materiality of the concept, it entails abstract notions of intimacy, comfort, and inhabitants' values." (Bouallegue, *Home and Exile* 24). In this context, "home" is a dynamic concept that goes beyond a mere physical structure or tangible materiality. It carries a deeper emotional and personal significance. This idea can be illustrated by a child's early attempts at drawing a house. At first, the child sketches a small square with a triangular roof, a door, and perhaps a window. To the child, this simple drawing represents a "house"—a material depiction of "home" as a physical space offering shelter and structure. However, as the child continues to draw, more figures begin to appear beside the house: a mother, a father, siblings, and perhaps even a pet. This evolution reflects a growing psychological awareness, where "home" becomes less about bricks and beams and more about relationships, warmth, and identity. In this small act of drawing, we witness how "home" transcends physical boundaries and becomes what Parween calls "a safe haven," a place where people seek peace, safety, comfort, healing, hope, and escape (143). Here, "home" represents a symbolic space of familiarity, emotional attachment, and security, as

noted by Hooks et al. (213). Yet, in literature, "home" often emerges as a double-edged symbol. On one hand, it can embody happiness, protection, and belonging. On the other, it may also serve as a site of conflict, oppression, longing, or trauma. Avtar Brah challenges idealized notions of "home" by stating:

> Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day …all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (192)

In literary studies—and for many transmigrants—"home" is not a fixed, rigid physical structure. Instead, it represents a fluid sense of belonging that transcends location. Many immigrants long for this "sense of home" and attempt to recreate aspects of it in their new country as a way to preserve identity and cultural heritage. This effort goes beyond replicating decorations or furniture; it includes forming ethnic communities, establishing religious and cultural institutions, sharing stories and oral histories, and preserving traditional foods.

Importantly, this "sense of home" can exist even when one is far from their original homeland. Belonging, therefore, is not static—it is shaped through emotional attachment to new surroundings. As individuals form memories, engage with new cultures, and learn the local language, they begin to redefine themselves. This process does not necessarily require full assimilation; instead, many adopt a hyphenated or hybrid identity. Identity, like home, is not fixed—it evolves through interaction with the host society. When individuals feel accepted and valued in their new environment, a deeper sense of belonging emerges, even when their native and adopted cultures differ significantly.

Thus, belonging becomes a fluid, evolving experience that reshapes both identity and the idea of home. As Lenhard and Samanani write, "If imaginaries of home span across time, then this leads us to an understanding of homes as dynamic, rather than as stable entities. Home is understood as a process" (14).

In transnational literature, the concept of "home" often reflects the complex experiences of migration, displacement, identity negotiation, and belonging. As diasporic individuals move across borders, their understanding of "home" shifts, becoming part of an ongoing process shaped by emotional, symbolic, and cultural meanings. These representations frequently challenge traditional views of "home" as a fixed homeland, instead offering alternative visions rooted in memory, relationships, and cultural hybridity.

"Home" is no longer seen as a singular, static location; it becomes a fluid, dynamic, and often contested space. This shift aligns closely with postcolonial and transnational identity theories, where "home" functions more as a metaphor than a material place. As Blunt and Dowling note, "these feelings, ideas, and imaginaries are intrinsically spatial. Home is thereby a spatial imaginary" (9). Similarly, a sense of belonging emerges through new emotional connections and lived experiences. Stivale elaborates: "home is … not a pre-existing space … It is the continual attempt to create a space of comfort for oneself, through the arrangement of objects, practices, feelings and affects" (79).

In Arab American literature, "home" is often tied to cultural heritage and familial expectations, yet these same elements can also become sources of alienation or conflict when confronted with the norms of the host society. As a result, "home" becomes a space where belonging may be either affirmed or denied, highlighting the tension between traditional, ancestral notions of home and more fluid, evolving interpretations.

Contemporary Arab American women writers play a crucial role in this debate about home, offering perspectives shaped by intersections of race, religion, and gender. Novels such

as *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf, *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber, and *West of Jordan* by Laila Halaby explore how women navigate identity and belonging, often challenging essentialist definitions of "home" through personal growth and transformation.

Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) offers a compelling exploration of "home" and identity through the experiences of Khadra Shamy, a Syrian American Muslim woman. Khadra grapples with a fragmented sense of belonging, caught between the cultural expectations of her Syrian Muslim heritage and the dominant American culture surrounding her. Although she grows up in Indiana, her relationship with her hometown is fraught with tension. In one early scene, as she returns to Indiana, she is met with a sign that reads, "The People of Indiana Welcome You." Her response is telling: "'Liar,' she says to the highway sign" (1). This moment sets the tone for her disconnection, underscoring how the local community's rejection of cultural difference undermines her sense of belonging.

As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Indiana's cultural climate offers little space for diversity, reinforcing Khadra's alienation and complicating her efforts to define "home" on her own terms:

> There are silver silos and pole barns, tufts of goldthread on the meridian, and the blue day beginning to pour into the dark sky. But it is not mine, she thinks, this blue and gold Indiana morning. None of it is for me. Between the flat and the land and the broad sky, she feels ground down to the grain, erased. She feels as if, were she to scream in this place, some Indiana mute button would be on, and no one would hear. (2)

Khadra is also subjected to racism early in the novel, when an American boy named Brian calls her a "raghead" (4–5). At this point, she does not identify as American and struggles with a deep sense of alienation. As a diasporic subject, Khadra experiences an identity crisis, longing for a sense of belonging that continues to elude her. Raised in a devout Muslim

household, she believed that Mecca—the spiritual heart of Islam—would offer her that feeling of "home." She travels there with her family to perform Hajj, the pilgrimage all Muslims are expected to make at least once if able. Upon arriving, she thinks, "At last . . . someplace where we really belong. It's the land of the Prophet. The land of all Muslims" (159).

However, her experiences in Mecca complicate this expectation. In one instance, she is prevented by policemen from entering the mosque to pray, leaving her feeling like "a bad woman" (168–69). These moments, among others, shatter her idealized vision of Mecca and reinforce her disconnection—even from a place she believed would welcome her unconditionally. Her sense of alienation continues in her marriage to Juma, a man she meets at university. The relationship proves restrictive and disappointing: Juma forbids her from riding a bicycle and attempts to control her, a dynamic unfamiliar to Khadra, whose own father treated her mother with respect and equality (230).

Through these experiences, Khadra's journey reveals that "home" is not a fixed destination but a complex and evolving emotional landscape. Later in the novel, she becomes pregnant but chooses to have an abortion, despite opposition from her husband, family, and friends. Her decision leads to her divorce and further alienation, as those closest to her begin to cut her off. Feeling isolated and disconnected, Khadra decides to return to her homeland: "[b]ack where she came from: Syria" (266).

In Syria, Khadra undergoes a period of personal transformation. She reconnects with her grandmother, Teta, and learns about her mother's and grandparents' pasts. She also meets new people, including a poet and a rabbi, whose diverse perspectives help her open up to otherness and deepen her understanding of identity and belonging. As she begins to pray again, Khadra reconnects with her faith and heritage. This spiritual reawakening brings her a sense of wholeness: "All that had been lost was returning. All that had been disconnected was connected again" (307). Eventually, she returns to American society, no longer seeking to

conform, but instead, to live authentically: "a girl looking for a way to be, just be" (358). Following the death of Zuhura, Khadra comes to a deeper realization that:

> She looks around at the white people, too – the Americans—no wait, she's American now – the other Americans . . . Midwesterners – Hoosiers – set in their ways, hardworking, steady, valuing God and family. Suspicious of change. In a funny way, Khadra realizes suddenly, as she surveys the crowd: they're us, and we're them. Hah! My folks are the perfect Hoosiers! (438)

Khadra's identity does not anchor itself in any one nation; rather, it emerges in the in-between spaces. Her identity is not fixed but fluid—constantly shifting and shaped by multiple forms of belonging. For Khadra, "home" was never tied to a specific geographical location. Instead, it was defined by a sense of comfort, connection, and belonging. It is only through her journeys, personal struggles, and transformative experiences that she comes to understand "home" as an emotional and spiritual state, rather than a physical place.

Crescent by Diana Abu-Jaber (2003) centers on Sirine, an Iraqi-American chef in Los Angeles who finds joy and purpose in cooking. She navigates the complexities of her cultural heritage and romantic relationships, caught between her American boyfriend and her deepening connection to her Iraqi roots. Han, a former mathematician and Iraqi exile, also enters her life, persistently seeking her affection. As Sirine tries to make sense of her identity, she attempts to reclaim her cultural heritage, though her physical appearance—blonde hair and green eyes inherited from her American mother and Arab father—makes her feel neither fully American nor Iraqi.

After losing her parents in a tribal conflict in Africa, where they served as Red Cross caregivers, Sirine turns to cooking as a source of comfort and connection. She begins preparing traditional dishes like stuffed grape leaves on her own and finds herself drawn to her past: "She looked through her parents' old recipes and began making the favorite—but

nearly forgotten—foods of her youth. She felt as if she was transported back to her parents' little kitchen and her first memories" (22).In these moments, the kitchen becomes a space of emotional return. Cooking her parents' recipes offers her a sense of "home," connecting her to memories, identity, and a heritage that might otherwise feel distant. Food serves as a powerful bridge between cultures, anchoring her in her traditions while also helping her process her experiences in the present. Her relationship with Han further deepens her understanding of exile, loss, and cultural displacement.

In *Crescent*, food and storytelling are not only tools for preserving heritage, but also for forging belonging in a foreign land. Sirine comes to realize that belonging is not about choosing one culture over another, but about reconciling both within herself. Ultimately, the novel reveals that "home" is not a physical place, but a feeling—shaped by memory, love, and acceptance.

In *West of the Jordan* (2003), Laila Halaby weaves together the intertwined stories of four Palestinian-American cousins—Mawal, Hala, Khadija, and Soraya—each with distinct personalities, navigating life between two nations: Palestine and the United States. Mawal lives in Palestine and maintains a close relationship with her parents. Deeply rooted in her heritage and traditions, she sometimes feels stifled by the restrictions imposed on her, yet she never openly rebels. In contrast, Khadija's experience in the U.S. is shaped by the violence of her father, who arrived in America with dreams of wealth but found only poverty and frustration.

Soraya, on the other hand, represents a stark departure from tradition. She is an independent woman living in Los Angeles who feels more comfortable outside the confines of her cultural "home." Hala's journey is more complicated: raised in Jordan, she later immigrates to the U.S. After returning for her mother's funeral, her father tries to take control of her life by insisting she continue her studies in Jordan. She resists and returns to the U.S.,

and when she comes back again for her grandmother's funeral, her father—afraid of losing her permanently—no longer pressures her. The novel explores themes of tradition, patriarchy, and displacement, as the cousins face challenges such as arranged marriage, abuse, and cultural alienation, each attempting to define her own path.

In sum, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, *Crescent*, and *West of the Jordan* all present "home" not as a fixed physical location but as an emotional and psychological space shaped through experiences of displacement, negotiation, and belonging. These novels portray protagonists who live at the intersections of multiple cultures, navigating inherited traditions, religious tensions, and the longing for rootedness. "Home" becomes a site of contradiction: it can offer refuge, yet also become a source of alienation and oppression. Identity, in turn, emerges not as a static trait but as a process of adaptation, resistance, and self-redefinition. Ultimately, these works of transnational literature reclaim "home" as a dynamic space—one where past and present intersect, and where identity is never fully lost or fully found, but always in motion.

Chapter II: The Search for Belonging in *The Beauty of Your Face*

The second chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the theme of belonging in Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face*. It demonstrates how transnational identity is negotiated in the life of Afaf Rahman, a Palestinian American woman navigating the complexities of dual heritage, religious identity, and social exclusion. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines Afaf's search for belonging within white mainstream society, focusing on her experiences with racism, Islamophobia, and cultural marginalization—especially in the aftermath of 9/11—and how these experiences contribute to a persistent sense of unbelonging. The second section turns to the question of belonging within Afaf's own ethnic and religious community. It explores her struggles with traditional gender roles and patriarchal expectations that limit her autonomy and complicate her sense of identity. Together, these sections highlight the emotional and psychological challenges Afaf faces as she attempts to define herself and find a place in a world that repeatedly marks her as an outsider.

II.1. A summary of *The Beauty of Your Face*

Afaf Rahman is a Palestinian-American woman, the daughter of Mahmood and Muntaha—Palestinian immigrants who left their homeland in search of a better life in the United States. They settled in Chicago after receiving sponsorship from Mahmood's cousin (25), though they carried with them the enduring weight of exile. Afaf is the middle child, with an older sister, Nada, and a younger brother, Majeed. From an early age, she was caught between two worlds. At school, Afaf endured racism and discrimination; her "olive hue skin" (31) and distinct features marked her as different, and she became the target of cruel mockery. To her American peers, she was too foreign; to the Arab students, she was too Americanized. Afaf existed in a constant state of in-betweenness—a liminal space where she belonged fully to neither culture. The disappearance of her sister Nada marked a profound turning point in

Afaf's life, shattering her family's foundation. Her father turned to alcohol, and her mother grew emotionally distant—especially from Afaf—leaving her isolated in a home that no longer felt like one. Everything changed when her father survived a near-fatal car accident. Broken but humbled, he experienced a spiritual awakening and returned to a faith they had never truly practiced. His reconnection with Islam opened a new path for Afaf. Through him, she was introduced to a welcoming Muslim community, where, for the first time, she felt a genuine sense of belonging. In this space, she discovered peace, purpose, and the beginning of a journey toward identity, healing, and self-discovery—an awakening that marked only the start of something much greater.

II.2. The Search for Belonging in White Mainstream Society

In *The Beauty of Your Face,* Mustafah tells the story of a young woman shaped by two cultures, illustrating how identity can become a source of pain and struggle when pulled in opposing directions. The protagonist, Afaf Rahman, is caught between the weight of her Palestinian heritage and the social expectations of American society. This cultural tension is not abstract—it manifests in racialized encounters, institutional exclusion, and everyday microaggressions. As she searches for a sense of belonging, Afaf is constantly reminded that she exists between two worlds, never fully accepted by either. Her Muslim identity, Arab heritage, and visible markers like the 'hijab', mark her as "other", denying her belonging and the inclusion promised by the American mainstream.

The theme of belonging in *The Beauty of Your Face* is deeply complicated by Afaf's experience as a Palestinian-American Muslim woman navigating multiple, and often conflicting, affiliations. Mustafah portrays Afaf's identity as fragmented; she belongs neither fully to her Palestinian roots nor to the United States. As a child, Afaf exists in a liminal space, described as "wrecked and lost" and "a mousy girl with no sense of self, an invisible child" (6). In contrast, her daughter Azmia asserts a confident sense of identity, declaring, "I

don't want anyone to make a mistake about who I am," as she chooses to wear the hijab at an early age (6). This generational contrast underscores the fluid and complex nature of identity within transmigrant families, where self-definition is not inherited but actively negotiated. Stuart Hall argues that diasporic identity is not fixed but dynamic, "a matter of becoming as well as being" (52), and Afaf is shaped by both her inherited Palestinian traditions and her American sociopolitical context—yet fully embraced by neither. Azmia, however, navigates this complexity with greater certainty, asserting her Muslim identity despite external pressures. In this way, belonging emerges not as a static cultural or national affiliation, but as a lived, relational process. Roberta Rubenstein emphasizes that "belonging is a relational, reciprocal condition that encompasses connection and community" (4), reinforcing the idea that belonging is shaped by displacement, racialization, and the struggle for recognition. For Afaf, belonging is something she must continually strive toward; for Azmia, it is more confidently claimed, though still shaped by the trauma of her mother—marked by exile and racism. Through this intergenerational contrast, Mustafah shows that belonging is fraught with emotional struggle and shaped by inherited wounds across time and place.

Afaf's early years are marked by a persistent sense of inadequacy and exclusion, shaping her self-perception and reinforcing a deep-seated internalized alienation. She reflects: "Afaf had silently considered this, never having quite felt like she ever belonged the same way Julie McNulty and Amber Reeves fit into the world like perfect puzzle pieces" (31). The metaphor of a puzzle piece highlights her peripheral status and the impossibility of seamlessly integrating into American society, underscoring feelings of misalignment and incompleteness. This alienation is reinforced at school. At Nightingale Elementary, Afaf is placed in the lowest-tier reading group, the "Owls," alongside "a white boy with thick spectacles and a speech impediment, and the only other arrabi child in her class, Wisam, whom Afaf also suspects could be a Cardinal if their teacher would only give them both a chance" (38). This

educational bias aligns with what Edward Said describes as "*The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony*" (5). In this context, Afaf's racialized and cultural identity positions her as the Other, someone who must be managed, silenced, or invisibilized within the white American institutions. The classroom, then, becomes an early site where she is racialized and denied recognition.She yearns to be placed in the "Cardinals," the highest reading group, believing she has the skills to belong there. However, "Mrs. Belmont keeps her with the Owls" (38), despite her evident academic potential. The teacher's decision to keep Afaf in a lower group, despite her capabilities, illustrates how schools can act as reproducing institutions of dominant ideology, privileging whiteness and marginalizing ethnic and racial minorities. In his seminal work *Orientalism* 1978, Said defines this ideological project as "A style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and (most of the time)"the Occident" (qtd in. Lutfi 2). This binary reinforces colonial hierarchies, presenting the East as inherently inferior to the West. In Afaf's case, institutional bias operates not only through overt racism but also through the quiet denial of opportunity, reinforcing her peripheral place in both the classroom and the larger cultural narrative. Thus, Afaf's alienation at school is not incidental but a structural outcome of a system that equates belonging with whiteness and conformity. This educational marginalization not only reflects Afaf's sense of invisibility but also exposes the institutional biases that hinder the academic potential of immigrant children.

Afaf's school experiences emphasize the complexity and conditional nature of belonging, particularly for students who exist outside dominant racial and cultural norms. Her placement in the lowest reading group, despite her abilities, signals an early form of institutional exclusion that sets the tone for her broader educational experience. This marginalization becomes more apparent through her observations of the teacher's behavior: "Like Mrs. Cass, her

English teacher. She ignores the only two Black students in Afaf's class unless they ask questions, then she gives them a phony smile. Or Mr. Abbott, the study hall supervisor. He lets the white kids slide on tradies, but diligently writes up everyone else" (86). In this environment, belonging transcends mere physical presence; it demands recognition, affirmation, and equitable treatment. In this context, belonging transcends mere physical presence; it demands recognition and equitable treatment, none of which Afaf or her racialized peers consistently receive. Said's theory of Orientalism is instructive here. While typically applied to geopolitical and cultural representations of the East by the West, Said broadens the concept as "*it is not political subject, nor it is text about the Orient, nor it is nefarious Western imperialist to hold down the Oriental world, it is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts*" (12). In other words, Orientalism becomes a system of knowledge production and cultural authority that extends into education also. This ideological framework works to naturalize the marginalization of students like Afaf by including racial and cultural hierarchies into everyday institutional practices. Thus, even in the classroom, Afaf is not only racialized but also Othered. Said adds:

> The idea of representation is usually based on a notion of being faithful to the original. However, representation is largely interwoven with many other things besides 'truth'. It is defined not just by inherent common subject matter, but also by a common history, tradition, and universe of discourse that exists within a particular field. (272-273)

In this quote, Said challenges the conventional belief that **representation is simply about faithfully depicting reality.** Instead, he argues that representation is shaped by broader **cultural, historical, and ideological contexts.** What we often take as "truth" is filtered

through systems of power—such as media, academia, or politics—that define how certain subjects are discussed and understood. For Said, especially in the context of Palestine, representation is not neutral; it is embedded in a "universe of discourse" that often reflects dominant Western or colonial narratives, rather than the lived realities of the people being represented.

Afaf's narrative illustrates how true inclusion is denied in educational institution, replaced instead by a performative tolerance that fails to address deeper inequities. For her, belonging is not a given, but a fragile and conditional status, continuously undermined by racial and cultural difference. One of the most dehumanizing moments she experiences occurs in the school cafeteria: "something cool slithers across her scalp and slides down her face. Afaf catches globs of green Jell-O in her hand" (83). This act of public humiliation—perpetrated by two white classmates—goes unpunished. Instead of receiving justice, Afaf is blamed for the incident, while Kelly McPherson and Angela Malone are protected by silence and institutional complicity. As Mustafah reveals, Coach Phillips "neglects to tell Mama that it was Angela Malone who grabbed her hair first" (84), a moment that underscores the emotional and psychological toll of being **"othered"** in an environment where belonging is neither unconditional nor universal. This incident reflects how Afaf is not merely bullied, but systematically otherized and marginalized. As Ashcroft explains, "The 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world" (154). Within this framework, Afaf's difference becomes a tool for reinforcing the perceived normalcy of those around her. Moreover, as Ashcroft notes, Orientalism "in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental and his world" (59), suggesting that Afaf is not just excluded, but constructed as foreign and inferior through dominant cultural narratives. Thus, the mockery and physical degradation she experiences are not isolated incidents but manifestations of a broader system of racial and cultural

exclusion.The green Jell-O becomes more than just a childish prank—it symbolizes the ease with which Afaf's dignity is violated in a setting where she is already vulnerable. Through this incident, Mustafah powerfully conveys the lasting psychological scars such marginalization inflicts, emphasizing that for students like Afaf, belonging comes at a cost that is both emotionally exhausting and deeply unjust.

In a similar vein, Afaf's physical appearance becomes a source of shame, alienation, and a persistent reminder of her otherness. Racialized beauty standards contribute to her feelings of non-belonging, as her features—unlike those of her white peers—draw constant scrutiny and self-consciousness. As the narrator notes, "They think she's exotic—not beautiful. Her nose seemed to double in size by the time she reached puberty; her skin was dark like a peanut husk" (93). Rather than being celebrated for her ethnic traits, Afaf internalizes the belief that her appearance deviates from the dominant norm. When Michael Wilson, a senior point guard at Hoover High School, tells her, "You're different" (80), Afaf immediately recognizes this as a judgment rather than praise: "But she realizes it's not in a good way, because difference is never good" (80). These microaggressions are not isolated incidents but part of a larger pattern that deepens her psychological wounds. Even within her home, her sister Nada expresses similar self-loathing in her diary: "Everything about me is WRONG, right down to my dump name…Everything I HATE: 1. my dump hair 2. my gross skin 3. my HUMONGOUS nose" (35). The near-identical expressions of shame from both sisters reflect how immigrant children internalize white-centric beauty standards and systemic racism. As sociologist Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth*:

> . . . "Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical

> hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for re-sources that men have appropriated for themselves. (12)

Thus, Afaf's physical identity becomes not only a barrier to inclusion but a constant marker of her exclusion. Her skin, nose, and hair serve as daily reminders that she is not meant to belong.

Moreover, The attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a pivotal turning point in the American sociopolitical landscape, particularly for Muslim communities. In his article, "Islam through Western Eyes", Said highlights the false image of Islam drawn by the West in their writings and media, and his discussion of the Orient is inseparable from the representation of Islam since Islam is a "lasting trauma" (Said 59) for the West. This shows how Western anxieties about Islam are **deeply embedded** in history and continue to influence media and policy. Said argues, "To speak of 'Islam' in the West today is to mean a lot of the unpleasant things I have been mentioning' (10). In *The Beauty of Your Face*, Sahar Mustafah poignantly illustrates how the event and its aftermath intensify Afaf's marginalization and complicate her pursuit of belonging. Islamophobia, racism, and institutional discrimination converge to undermine her sense of identity and threaten both her psychological well-being and communal safety.

Afaf's choice to wear the hijab becomes a bold public expression of faith, simultaneously exposing her to heightened vulnerability especially the stereotypical image of Islam spread at that period. Said affirms "American media coverage of foreign countries not only creates itself but also intensifies interests "we" already have there. Media points of view stress certain things for an American, others for an Italian or Russian. All of this converges around a common center, or consensus, which all the media organizations almost certainly

feel themselves to be clarifying, crystallizing, forming"" (Covering Islam, 52). Before 9/11, Afaf endures verbal abuse—"'raghead'. . . Afaf turns around, her heart thumping. Who said it?" (160). Her visibility in public spaces draws unwanted attention, mockery, and social exclusion, as she questions her resilience: "Is she strong enough to bear the taunts?" (160). Following the attacks, this hostility escalates. Like many Muslim families in post-9/11 America, Afaf's household becomes a collective target of suspicion and discrimination, a reality that extends to her children. One scene captures this vividly: "Her son Aymen . . . The day after the planes collided, a classmate called him a terrorist, a word he'd never heard before" (209). The casual use of "terrorist" by a child reveals how deeply racial and religious prejudice permeates society, reaching even its youngest members.

For Afaf, this moment is both heartbreaking and alienating, reinforcing her dislocation within a nation that criminalizes her faith. Mustafah uses this episode to expose the emotional toll of living under a racialized national gaze. The school which is meant to be a safe environment for her son becomes a reflection of the broader social hostility Afaf faced as a child herself, thereby reproducing a cycle of trauma and exclusion, creating 'intergenerational trauma'. 'Intergenerational trauma', often termed secondary or generational trauma, describes the transmission of traumatic effects from one generation to the next, manifesting in emotional and psychological patterns across time (Zerach 2018). In doing so, Mustafah emphasizes how the pursuit of belonging remains elusive under persistent structures of prejudice. In an article titled "The Coverage of Islam – Marginalized and Moralizing Narratives", it is highlighted that Muslims are represented as the Other, the uncivilized culture (Gomes 72). Said affirms that: "The majority of the Islamic world is crumbling with social divisions, frustrated by its material inferiority in relation to the West embittered at Western cultural influences" (qtd. In Gomes, 77), making the Muslims always inferior in the eyes of the West.

Afaf faces both racial and religious prejudice while teaching in Chicago public schools. During a conversation about the similarities between Christianity and Islam, a white colleague dismissively told her, “It’s not the same God” (210). When Afaf shared interfaith literature in an effort to foster understanding, she later found the pamphlet discarded atop a pile of foam coffee cups in the staff break room—a symbolic act of rejection that underscores how religious bias can persist even in professional settings. While public education is often presented as a progressive space committed to diversity, Afaf’s experiences demonstrate how secular liberal institutions can still function as mechanisms of exclusion. The refusal to engage with Afaf’s **religious initiative** is not a neutral act—it serves as a symbolic rejection of Muslim identity within professional spaces. As Critical Race Theory scholars assert, racism in the United States is “normal, not aberrational,” embedded in the everyday rather than confined to extreme cases. The subtle, covert hostility Afaf faces reveals how Islamophobia often operates not through overt slurs or violence, but through quiet acts of exclusion, erasure, and institutional indifference.

Afaf encounters a deep-rooted fanaticism and intolerance. The public perception of Muslims had deteriorated significantly: “They’d gone from towel-heads to terrorists” (210). This quote reflects how Islamophobia evolved into a more dangerous and violent form of hate, particularly after 9/11. The social pressure became so intense that many Muslim women in the Nur community—Muslim women community connected to the Islamic Center of Greater Chicago, which support each other—“have taken off their hijabs” (210). Afaf, however, refused. Despite her brother Majeed urging her to remove it “until things settle down” (210), Afaf felt that doing so would be “a humiliating surrender rather than protection” (210). For Afaf, as portrayed by Mustafah, faith is not just a private belief but an essential part of identity—one that demands dignity and visibility, not concealment. In his analysis of Muslim representation in the media, Nuruallah notes that scholar Van Der Veer (2004)

highlights how merely bearing an Arab or Muslim name is often enough to evoke associations with terrorism. The media, according to this perspective, has actively constructed and propagated stereotypical images that link Islam with acts of violence, reinforcing a harmful narrative that portrays Muslims as inherently dangerous (qtd. In Nuruallah 1021).

Afaf's husband Bilal also suffers from the post-9/11 wave of Islamophobia. His business declines as clients pull away: "Bilal pretends he hasn't lost three more clients this week, one who'd told him she was taking her business elsewhere, to 'real Americans'" (207). Another client simply closed his account. This demonstrates how economic exclusion becomes another weapon of racism, targeting livelihoods and reinforcing marginalization.

Even public spaces become sites of exclusion for Afaf, shaped by the racialized and gendered logics of Orientalism. As Sara Ahmed notes, "Orientalism... would involve not just making imaginary distinctions between the West and the Orient, but would also shape how bodies cohere, by facing the same direction" (120). In other words, Orientalism not only defines who belongs but also prescribes how bodies are expected to behave and move through public space. When Afaf visits Victoria's Secret to buy a bridal shower gift, what should be a mundane task turns into a humiliating encounter. She is met with sneers from "a middle-aged white woman and her friend," one of whom asks, "Isn't it a sin for them to shop here?" (211). This remark implies that Muslim women cannot be sensuous, autonomous, or feminine in ways deemed acceptable by Western norms.

The comment reflects a broader Western discourse in which the hijab—and by extension, the Muslim female body—is constructed as a site of cultural contradiction, often perceived as incompatible with freedom, sexuality, or modern womanhood. As Droogsma (2007) notes, citing Cloud (2004), Western narratives frequently frame the hijab as a symbol of female oppression in the Muslim world. Within this ideological framework, Afaf is not

seen as a woman or a customer, but as a cultural symbol—an outsider whose presence in a space associated with Western femininity is seen as intrusive or inappropriate.

Mustafah uses this moment to underscore how intersectional oppression functions: Afaf's hijab marks her as both hyper-visible and invisible—hyper-visible as a target of scrutiny, and invisible as a complex individual with agency. She is read not on her own terms, but through a distorted cultural lens that sees her as the "other." These microaggressions accumulate, reducing her humanity and contributing to a deep sense of unbelonging. In the country of her birth, Afaf is made to feel like a perpetual outsider, her actions questioned, her identity politicized, and her presence met with suspicion. Through such moments, Mustafah powerfully illustrates how Islamophobia and racism are embedded not only in major events, but in the everyday spaces and interactions that shape Afaf's experience of American life.

One of the most harrowing and Islamophobic moments Afaf Rahman experiences occurs at O'Hare International Airport as she prepares to embark on the sacred pilgrimage of Hajj. A female TSA officer instructs her to remove both her hijab and abaya: "It's TSA policy. If you refuse to remove these articles of clothing, we'll need to search you in private, ma'am" (224). In this moment, Afaf is reduced to an object of suspicion by the state. Her religious garments, symbols of devotion and modesty, are treated as threats. This moment echoes the concept of the Orientalist gaze, not simply as misrecognition but as an assertion of power over the Other. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, "What we must unlearn is not only the false knowledge of the Other but also the will to know the Other, to subject it to scrutiny, to arrange it for display." Under this gaze, Afaf is not perceived as a pilgrim but as a potential threat, her religious clothing transformed into signifiers of danger. When her husband intervenes in protest, the surrounding crowd reacts with fear: "People around them are suddenly more alert and skittish: Will this man attack us?" (224). The crowd's swift shift from passive observation

to alarm illustrates how deeply embedded fear of Muslim identity has become.This scene vividly illustrates how Muslim identities are constructed as inherently suspicious, irrational, or threatening. Afaf's body is not seen as sacred or inviolable, but as a potential weapon to be contained. The private search that follows is even more humiliating. Afaf is asked to *"undress to [her] undergarments"* (225), and is overwhelmed by the terror of public exposure: *"What if the partitions topple over? A hundred strangers gawking and pointing at her partial nakedness"* (225). This moment marks a profound violation of her privacy and dignity. It is not only her body that is exposed, but also her sense of safety and personhood. The physical inspection becomes symbolic of a deeper, systemic erasure of her rights—an act that reinforces her alienation within American society.The discrimination continues in the airport restroom, where a white woman flicks water at Afaf's headscarf and mutters: *"You're all evil"* (226). When Afaf confronts her, the other women offer no support. One woman snickers, while others avoid her gaze, rolling their luggage past without acknowledgment (226). This collective silence functions as a form of complicity. In that moment, Afaf realizes her faith, womanhood, and American identity are simultaneously denied. Her visible Muslim identity marks her as a perpetual outsider, someone whose presence evokes suspicion, discomfort, or disdain. The only moment of compassion comes from an elderly white woman who gently touches Afaf's shoulder and says, *"Human beings can be awful"* (226), before offering a kind smile in the mirror. This brief moment of solidarity, though fleeting, stands in stark contrast to the widespread indifference and hostility Afaf experiences. It underscores how rare empathy has become in a social landscape shaped by fear and division.

Afaf's role as principal of the Nurrideen School for Girls places her at the center of ongoing public scrutiny. The school, an Islamic institution, is portrayed as a space of discipline, faith, and intellectual growth, where young girls wear *"shapeless forest-green uniforms"* (6) and engage in prayer, learning, and music. However, following 9/11, the school

becomes a target of repeated hate crimes. Vandals throw explosives over the fence, spray-paint hateful graffiti like a pig's head on school property, and shatter classroom windows with beer bottles (12). These acts are clear messages of exclusion: *"You don't belong here"* (12). The school, intended as a place of education and safety, is redefined by outsiders as a threat.

The attacks escalate further, culminating in an act of mass violence. A white male shooter—who had long protested the school's existence—carries out a brutal mass shooting, revealing a deeply rooted ideological hatred. Years earlier, he stood at village hall meetings holding signs that read: *"Vote NO to Terror School"* and *"Keep Tempest Safe"* (144). His actions are not driven by immediate fear but by a long-standing belief that Muslim Americans threaten his vision of the nation. In his eyes, the school is not a place of learning but a dangerous incursion into American space.

The massacre is described in chilling detail: *"He examined each target before pulling the trigger. . . He took his time . . . the teacher . . .He held the trigger until her right arm nearly separated from her torso"* (141). His methodical violence shows his complete disregard for the humanity of his victims. He does not see the girls as children, nor as individuals with futures, but as enemies to be eliminated. The classroom—a space that should represent safety and growth—becomes a battleground where the right to exist is contested.

Afaf's confrontation with the shooter is especially revealing. When she tells him, *"I was born in this country—just like you"* (277), he replies with disbelief: *"You sure don't… act like it… Naw, lady, you don't belong here at all"* (277). His obsession with her hijab further reveals how her visible identity challenges dominant ideas of what it means to be American. He demands, *"Take that thing off your head. I want to see your hair"* (277), equating unveiling with belonging, and assuming her appearance reflects submission to men: *"Does*

your husband make you wear that thing?" (278). This interaction highlights the pervasive misunderstanding of Muslim women's agency and the way cultural ignorance is weaponized.

Afaf is shot multiple times: *"She feels each bullet penetrate her stomach, the pain so severe she ceases feeling it, like she's being plunged in fire"* (280). She survives, but both her body and mind are permanently scarred. Later, her physical trauma is described in fragmented terms: *"Stitches have left a tiny row of scar tissue like broken train tracks…In her nightmares… she passes from classroom to classroom… hearing nothing in return"* (288). These lines portray not only her personal suffering but also the long-lasting impact of racial and religious violence on the psyche.

In a chilling statement, the school's security guard later remarks about the shooter: *"He looked normal. Like he's there to do a job, you know?"* (288). This observation reflects the deeply embedded double standard in American society—where whiteness is perceived as default and nonthreatening, while Muslims, particularly women like Afaf, are subjected to suspicion and harsh scrutiny simply for existing. The shooting, though ideologically motivated and rooted in racial hatred, is not labeled as terrorism—highlighting the racialized double standard in American cultural and legal discourse.

In conclusion, *The Beauty of Your Face* reveals how post-9/11 America weaponizes visible Muslim identity, especially for women, turning faith and difference into grounds for suspicion and violence. Afaf's story exposes the harsh reality that belonging for Muslim Americans is often conditional—but also shows that resilience and faith can be powerful forms of resistance.

II.2. Patriarchy and the Limits of Belonging in the Ethnic Community

Afaf's struggle with belonging extends beyond her identity as a religious and racial minority in the United States; it is further complicated by emotional disconnection and rejection from within her own Arab ethnic community. While this community offers cultural proximity, it also imposes restrictive expectations grounded in patriarchy, tradition, and gender norms. As a result, Afaf is "othered" both in the American mainstream and within her own culture. This reflects intersectional oppression, where Afaf's religious identity, gender, and ethnicity converge to mark her as a perpetual outsider. Robert Young explains:

> For women, the problem centered on the fact that the conditions against which they were campaigning were the product of two kinds of oppression which put the antagonists of the nationalist struggle in the same camp: patriarchal systems of exploitation were common to both colonial regimes and indigenous societies. Women therefore had to fight the double colonization of patriarchal domination in its local as well as its imperial forms. (Young, 2001: 379)

Afaf's experience is not simply a one of racial or religious exclusion, but of a compounded identity crisis shaped by gendered cultural norms and familial exclusion. Her first experience of this exclusion begins at home. Her mother's favoritism toward Afaf's older sister, Nada, creates deep emotional insecurity, "Nada is her world" (31). When Nada runs away, the family dynamic collapses, leaving Afaf emotionally abandoned. The maternal bond—so critical in identity formation—becomes a source of alienation. Her mother even calls her a "lost girl" (79), setting the tone for Afaf's strained interactions with the broader Arab community.

Mustafah illustrates the patriarchal codes that govern behavior in the Arab diaspora. When Nada pleads to attend a sleepover, her mother snaps, "Ayb! A young girl never sleeps outside her father's home! Shame!" (31). The term *"Ayb"*, meaning shame, serves as a

powerful cultural mechanism used to suppress female autonomy. Even a simple act like a sleepover is deemed a threat to family honor. Nada's protest—"We're Americans but they don't want us to act like it" (31)—captures the generational tension that defines Afaf's early experiences. She and Nada are caught between two conflicting expectations: the freedoms of American culture and the rigid traditions of their parents' homeland. This dynamic shows how Afaf perceives her ethnic community's cultural expectations as further complicating her sense of identity. Rather than empowering her, traditional gender norms often restrict her agency.

When Afaf's friend Sameera is injured riding her bicycle, Sameera's mother blames the accident on "too much freedom." She declares, "Shayfa, shayfa! See what happens when you give a girl too much freedom in this country? She loses a finger" (44). This moral judgment conveys the fear that American society will corrupt Arab girls. Interestingly, Afaf's own mother does not forbid her from riding a bike, which provides a subtle contrast. Yet the underlying message is clear: to belong within her ethnic and religious community, Afaf must conform to limiting gender expectations. These cultural constraints are as alienating as the racism she faces from mainstream American society.

Additionally, the generational divide between Afaf and her parents reveals contrasting perceptions of home and identity. Her mother clings to the memory of *bilad*, their homeland, a place imbued with cultural and emotional significance. This nostalgia often translates into harsh criticism of Afaf's Americanization, as reflected in her remark: "You let her go out with these amarkan, doing God knows what" (46). The use of the word *amarkan*—a loaded term for Americans—underscores her mother's deep mistrust of Western culture, especially regarding her children's behavior. This generational tension exemplifies how the immigrant experience strains family dynamics, particularly when children assimilate more rapidly than

their parents. Mustafah deepens this portrayal through moments of emotional and linguistic estrangement.

Language, in particular, becomes a powerful symbol of displacement. Bouallegue notes that the cultural dislocation deeply affects both mothers and daughters, creating a significant barrier to mutual understanding. The breakdown in communication is a major obstacle—daughters reject speaking the ancestral language, while mothers struggle to master fluent American English. She adds, "The loss of the ancestral language for the American-born daughter contributed to cultural clashes" (*Chinese American Women* 71). Afaf's limited Arabic and her parents' limited English create barriers to emotional closeness and cultural continuity. Her mother, Muntaha, especially struggles with English and relies on her children in public spaces. Afaf recalls, "when Mama had taken the wrong bus all the way to the North Side…She instructed Nada to ask another passenger how to get home" (29). This episode illustrates how language barriers invert traditional roles, turning children into cultural intermediaries. Muntaha's inability to communicate effectively both outside and within the home contributes to her growing isolation and resentment, emotions that she often projects onto Afaf. The resulting emotional detachment weakens their bond, leaving Afaf feeling estranged even within her own family. This breakdown at home mirrors the cultural alienation Afaf experiences in the broader society, emphasizing the difficulty of forging a cohesive identity.

Moreover, Afaf's struggle for belonging extends beyond mainstream American society into her own Arab community, where she might expect acceptance but instead faces rejection and ridicule. A telling example occurs at a Thanksgiving gathering at her aunt Khalti Nesreen's house, where Afaf is mocked by two Arab girls her age: "One of the girls keeps kicking Afaf's shin and apologizes insincerely" (62). This event marks her first Thanksgiving

celebration with only her younger brother, Majeed, and without her parents or sister, making the situation feel especially unfamiliar and estranging. Longing for the past, Afaf reflects, "she wants Mama home . . . celebrating Thanksgiving in their tiny apartment despite her parents bickering . . . It was the only time of year they all gathered around the table—Baba, Mama, Nada, Majeed, and Afaf—to eat at precisely the same time. It was the closest she'd ever felt like amarkan" (62). The implication is clear: her American identity, marginalized in the larger society, becomes the basis for exclusion within her own cultural group. The alienation intensifies when the girls taunt her and her brother for not speaking Arabic fluently: "Dummies don't know how to speak arrabi!" (64). Here, language—rather than fostering connection—becomes a tool of exclusion. Afaf is not simply mocked; she is linguistically and culturally othered within her supposed community. This suggests that belonging is not guaranteed by shared ethnicity alone; it requires cultural fluency, social inclusion, and validation from the group.

Afaf's isolation extends to school, where her exclusion continues both from American peers and from girls within her own ethnic group. Her friendship with Sameera dissolves early on: "Their friendship fizzled in elementary school and now Sameera and the other girls keep away from Afaf like she's got the plague" (87). The "arabiyyat" girls represent a privileged, idealized version of Arab femininity—"beautiful and spoiled" (87), with expensive perms and gold amulets inscribed with "Allah" (87). These symbols of cultural pride and class contrast with Afaf's feelings of inadequacy. She reflects, "I've always been on the wrong side of the window, unable to conform to a mold Sameera and the other arabiyyat easily fit" (87). This moment captures how class, gender, and cultural norms intersect to determine who belongs—and who does not. Even within her own community, Afaf is on the margins. She inhabits a liminal zone—neither fully Arab nor fully American. In this space of "cultural hybridity", identity is negotiated rather than fixed, and belonging becomes painful process and even a

struggle. Afaf's experience shows how transnational identities contradict binary notions of cultural belonging, presenting a shattered space in which inclusion is conditional and exclusion is normalized.

Her violent encounter with Rami Asfoor—" He's a senior, the leader of a pack of arrabi boys who play intramural basketball after school but never join Hoover's team." (100)—is a devastating illustration of how patriarchal values are enforced through aggression. Rami slaps Afaf and pulls her hair while yelling, "respect yourself! Respect your people!" (103). His violent actions reflect a deeply internalized belief that a woman's behavior directly affects communal honor. This moment exposes how Afaf's body and identity are policed not just by outsiders but also by those within her own cultural circle. For Mustafah, this scene crystallizes a painful truth: ethnic belonging often requires female subjugation, forcing Afaf to confront her alienation from within.

Afaf's internal struggle is encapsulated in the line, "she's never been able to figure out who she is, how she wants others to see her" (92). Her difficulty with belonging is not solely about external rejection, but also about navigating the emotional dissonance of living between two worlds. This inner turmoil is intensified by her mother's dismissiveness toward Afaf's faith. When Afaf gently invites her to fast during Ramadan—"Fasting's good for the body and soul" (151)—her mother responds, "Don't you worry about my soul… I've got scores to settle" (151). Instead of becoming a shared space for healing and identity, religion becomes another point of division.

As an adult, Afaf becomes a teacher responsible for the well-being of her students. When she discovers that her Arab student, Layla Hamad, is being abused by her father, Afaf reports the incident to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), fulfilling her legal and moral duty. However, her decision is met with backlash from her own community.

Um Zuraib, a maternal figure and respected member of the Muslim community, encourages Afaf to speak with Sabrine Khalil—Layla's aunt—who attempts to dissuade Afaf from reporting the abuse (171–179). The plea is framed as an effort to preserve family unity rather than defend the abuser. Afaf consults her father, explaining, "I have to report it, Baba. I'm bound by the law," to which he replies, "Even if you were not, you are responsible for this child… You are her voice… A child is in harm's way, habibti… You have only one choice. To help her" (179–180). His support offers moral clarity, and Afaf makes the report.

After the incident, Afaf faces both external and internal scrutiny. The social worker, noting Afaf's hijab, says, "I know there's a code of silence among certain ethnic groups. You did the right thing, Afaf," her eyes lingering on the hijab (180). This moment stresses the double burden Afaf carries: she must confront injustice within her own community while also facing stereotypes from the outside. Her internal monologue—"Ethnic groups. Code of silence" (181)—captures her conflicted identity. Later, Um Zuraib comments, "Layla and her brothers and sisters are in foster care. With *amarkan*… not with their own people" (185), suggesting that true belonging in the Arab community is conditional, rooted in loyalty—even at the expense of justice. Though she eventually offers a blessing—"You did what you believed was best. Only Allah will judge" (186)—Afaf remains burdened by the weight of communal judgment.

Through these experiences, Mustafah powerfully conveys that for women like Afaf, belonging is never simple. Her journey reveals that identity is not fixed but shaped by ongoing negotiations between religion, gender, culture, and external perceptions. As a Palestinian-American Muslim woman, Afaf is subjected to systemic racism and Islamophobia—especially in the post-9/11 era—where her hijab and Arab features mark her as a perpetual

outsider. Despite her efforts, she is never fully accepted within the American mainstream, where she must constantly prove her worth against racialized and gendered expectations.

The ethnic community that should offer refuge often imposes its own exclusions. Cultural conformity, rigid gender roles, and loyalty to tradition leave little room for individual agency. Afaf learns that even among her "own people," acceptance comes with conditions. She is seen as not American enough, and not Arab enough. These intersecting rejections force her to question not just where she belongs—but if she belongs at all.

In the end, Mustafah shows that belonging is not a destination but a painful, continuous process of self-definition. Afaf's story dismantles the myth of assimilation and exposes the scars of both external and internal alienation. Her survival does not lie in obedience or conformity, but in reclaiming her narrative through education, faith, and resilience. For marginalized women navigating multiple cultural frameworks, Afaf's story affirms that belonging is not given—it must be forged, often in solitude, and always with courage.

Chapter III: Trauma, Faith, and the Path to Healing in *The Beauty of Your Face*

This chapter explores the intertwined themes of trauma and healing in Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face*. It is organized into two primary sections. The first section, "Unhealed Echoes: Afaf's Journey Through Trauma", examines how Afaf Rahman's identity is shaped by a constellation of personal, intergenerational, and collective traumas. These include the mysterious disappearance of her sister, the enduring effects of racism and cultural displacement, and the violence experienced in post-9/11 America. The second section, "Faith as a Route to Healing", investigates how Afaf turns to Islam as a transformative source of resilience, meaning, and identity reconstruction. Through her spiritual journey, the novel presents faith not only as a personal refuge but also as a powerful framework for healing and empowerment in the face of systemic and personal adversity.

III. 1. Unhealed Echoes: Afaf's Journey Through Trauma

Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face* foregrounds trauma not as an isolated psychological event but as a layered, intergenerational condition that shapes both the personal identity and collective memory of marginalized communities. Trauma in the novel is continuous, not episodic. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as follows:

> [Trauma] is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (4)

This quote highlights how trauma is not just a past event but an ongoing, often unspoken wound that seeks expression. It reveals hidden truths that surface belatedly, shaping both our behavior and language in ways we may not fully understand. Trauma speaks from the margins of consciousness, pointing to what is felt but not fully known.

Afaf Rahman's story captures this paradox—trauma as both lived and deferred, remembered and repressed. The first crack in Afaf's emotional world is the disappearance of her older sister, Nada, making it the earliest trauma she experiences, which triggers both immediate and long-term trauma. Mustafah uses tangible imagery to illustrate the event's destabilizing effect: "Nada's absence is like an earthquake rattling their house" (47). This metaphor of natural disaster conveys how traumatic loss disorients familial structures and permanently displaces everything emotionally and psychologically. Afaf's reaction is complex: she becomes scared and anxious about her older sister and dislikes being stopped by neighbors who question her about her. This discomfort is especially heightened during Halloween, "Afaf is happy to move about the neighborhood in disguise" (46). This unresolved loss becomes an ongoing psychic wound that destabilizes the family's emotional structure. "She [Afaf's mother] barely speaks to Afaf . . . the TV veiling the silence between them" (151). The absence of dialogue becomes a form of emotional abandonment.

The distance between Afaf and her parents is compounded by the parents' own traumatic memories of being Palestinian immigrants displaced by occupation and exile. Afaf's parents transmitted their memories to their children in a process which Hirsch calls postmemory. It describes how the traumas of the first generation -immigrant parents, are transmitted so powerfully to their children that they seem like memories of their own (Hirsch 103). Afaf's life is haunted not only by Nada's absence but also by the silences that her family has internalized across generations, "Afaf's mother and Afaf's father bicker even more . . . but the silences in between are tomb-like" (47). This highlights how grief consumes the household and mutes any chance of emotional recovery. Afaf not only endures her own pain but also inherits her parents' unresolved grief and silence provoked by the loss of home. This inherited emotional paralysis shapes her worldview, becoming a form of intergenerational

trauma, that can be understood as “emotional and psychological wounding that is transmitted across generations” (Cerdeña et al.)

These unspoken legacies leave Afaf with “no sense of self,” identifying herself as a “mousy girl… wrecked and lost” (6). Female freedom also triggers widespread panic within the Arab-American community, “This country will snatch her up” (46), one community member warns, exposing the fear that Western culture will corrupt or erase Arab girls. Here, trauma is culturally coded, girls are not only individuals but bearers of family and communal honor. The community’s response to Nada’s disappearance reinforces Afaf’s sense of alienation, as she is cast into a mold of caution and shame. This reinforces Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, in which “the Orient” is seen through a lens of Western fear and moral panic, placing the Muslim female body under constant scrutiny and regulation. (qtd. in Fadda-Conrey)

Postmemory, as defined by Hirsch, refers to the profound connection descendants have to their parents’ traumatic experiences—“experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (16). Individuals who carry postmemories do not directly experience the original trauma but inherit its emotional and psychological burden through transmitted stories, visual representations, and cultural practices (Hirsch 5).

Though Afaf has never set foot in Palestine, the sense of loss and exile is inscribed in her identity, shaping how she understands both home and self. She preserves the memory of her family’s displacement: “Afaf’s father’s parents were forced out of their home in Haifa in 1950” (25). Her father’s quiet sorrow is deeply rooted in this rupture—an inherited grief that lives on through silence, memory, and music. One of the most poignant expressions of this anguish surfaces when he plays his oud and sings in Arabic:

If only when I close and open my eyes

I will find you coming back

Coming back, O my loved ones (42)

This mournful refrain, echoing between Afaf and Majeed, becomes more than a nostalgic melody, it is an audible wound, carrying the weight of a life left behind and loved ones lost to exile. His longing for home is not merely sentimental; it is an instance of "postmemory", the powerful transmission of memories of displacement and loss from one generation to the next.

The trauma of Afaf's father is multilayered: he was forced out of his home in Haifa in 1950, stripped of cultural continuity, and relocated into a country where he is both invisible and misread. This exile is not resolved through integration; instead, it haunts him, making his American life a space of estrangement. He works hard but lives quietly in the background, his pain rarely verbalized except through his music. Afaf internalizes this melancholic performance of memory. His playing the oud is a ritual of remembrance, an attempt to reclaim dignity in a land that offers little recognition. In her father's silence and song, Afaf hears the echo of dispossession, a grief not entirely hers, but one she carries nevertheless, woven into the fabric of her own fragmented identity.

In addition, Afaf's father, once an aspiring musician, is disillusioned by the rejection he faces in American society. When he attempts to perform in local clubs, his music, deeply rooted in Arab traditions, is dismissed as foreign and unmarketable. The club owners perceive his oud-playing and "melancholic tunes" as "too exotic or 'Oriental'" (25), reducing his cultural expression to a stereotype. The remark, "You ain't singing in English, you ain't singing here" (25), triggers not only his personal disappointment but also the internalized pain of cultural dislocation. These moments reflect the intergenerational grief that arises when migrant identities and artistic forms are rendered invisible or incompatible with dominant

Western norms. This unresolved grief and cultural displacement are not contained within his own generation; instead, they seep into the family dynamic, particularly affecting Afaf. The father's disappointment and bitterness—expressed through both words and silence—reflect what Hirsch calls postmemory, the transmission of trauma to the next generation. This emotional legacy can cause symptoms like intrusive memories, which disrupt identity formation, especially during the stages of exploration (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Though Afaf's father is always portrayed with warmth and kindness, especially in contrast to her emotionally distant mother, his actions are not without consequence. In fact, part of her mother's trauma and emotional collapse beside Nada disappearance, is rooted in the quiet betrayals Afaf's father inflicts. He married her and brought her from Palestine to America, a land she neither desired nor ever learned to call home. Her displacement is not geographical but deeply existential; she is a woman pulled from everything familiar and placed in a foreign society where she lacks the language. The trauma of migration combined with the husband's treatment made her bitter. Afaf's father cheated on her with another woman that is "only twenty-four" (52). The narrator describes the mother's pain, "The loss of her daughter, a troubled marriage, a lonely existence in a country where she never felt home" (164). This explains much of Afaf's mother's emotional detachment and coldness. For Afaf, growing up in this climate of alienation and unspoken sorrow means inheriting not only her mother's silence, but the wounds of a woman who was uprooted, betrayed, and never given the space to heal. As Afaf's mother said when Afaf told her that the women at the Islamic Center asked about her "They still think they can save me. Idiots" (164), meaning that healing is difficult and contested at this stage. Afaf's mother has endured a "nervous breakdown" (55), in Afaf's childhood and in her adulthood her mother attempts for suicide, yet failed "mam's lying in the tub, which is half full with water . . . There's an empty bottle of Drãno on the floor" (192). Upon seeing Afaf in her hijab, Afaf's mother erupts with rage: "You think

you're so special now, wearing that thing? Ha! If I wear one on my head will Allah bring Nada back? Will this misery finally end?" (189). This aggressive outburst is not merely a rejection of Afaf's faith, it is a manifestation of Afaf's mother's unhealed trauma and her refusal to reconcile with the past. In a terrifying moment, Afaf's mother "lunges at Afaf, clawing at her headscarf" (189), and the struggle causes a pin to stab Afaf's scalp. The scene quickly descends into chaos as Majeed pulls their mother away and Afaf stumbles against the stove, accidentally knocking over a saucepan, "boiling liquid sears her arm" (189). The physical injury is only the surface of the deeper emotional wound inflicted in this scene: a mother attacking her daughter not out of hatred, but out of unbearable sorrow.

This failed act of self-destruction reveals the depths of Afaf's mother's despair, but also intensifies Afaf's emotional burden, forcing her to carry both her own trauma and the weight of her mother's suffering. In this moment, Sahar Mustafah powerfully portrays how intergenerational trauma manifests not only in silence and absence but in moments of explosive pain that leave visible and invisible scars.

Racial trauma emerges as another force shaping Afaf's identity. Racial trauma, often termed race-based traumatic stress, refers to the psychological and physiological harm that individuals may suffer as a result of racism, discriminatory acts, or racially motivated violence (Carter et al.). After the 9/11 attacks, her Muslimness becomes hyper-visible and politicized, transforming her from individual to symbol. The school shooting is the culmination of this racialized hate. The shooter sees her not as a human being but as a representation of a religion, and the public sees her as "the Muslim principal who sat face-to-face with the shooter" (288). Afaf's psychological response to this violence is marked by detachment and sensory dissociation, illustrating how trauma disrupts the ordinary functioning of perception and memory.

This racial trauma demonstrates that Afaf's trauma is not purely individual, it is also collective. According to Hirshberger, "The term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect a historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people" (1). As the novel shows, the Muslim community experiences shared racial trauma through bomb threats, TSA policy, and media criminalization. Mustafah aligns with trauma theorists like Yusin, who describes collective trauma as a rupture that damages not just the individual psyche but the social fabric—impacting schools, families, and religious institutions. The school shooting at the Nurrideen School for Girls is the biggest proof of racial and religious trauma, turning a sacred space into a site of terror. Afaf's trauma is both personal and communal, as she becomes the figurehead of a racialized spectacle: "The press won't stop hounding Afaf" (288). She becomes not only a survivor but a media symbol of Muslim victimhood. Mustafah illustrates the psychological residue of the attack: "She refuses even a mild sedative, afraid her nightmares will bloom into something much worse" (288), revealing her fear that rest will trigger unconscious replays of the violence.

In *The Beauty of Your Face*, trauma is not something that begins and ends with one moment; instead it continues through time and shapes Afaf's life on several levels—political, racial, familial, and spiritual. From the disappearance of her sister Nada, to the weight of her parents' exile from Palestine, and later the Islamophobic violence she endures, Afaf is constantly negotiating pain that does not belong to her alone. She is a daughter of immigrants, a principal of a Muslim school, and a mother raising children in a post 9/11 America. Each of these roles demands strength but also leaves her exposed to different kinds of wounds. Mustafah does not portray Afaf as someone merely surviving, her journey shows that healing is not just about endurance, but about understanding where the pain comes from, how it has

been passed on, and how faith, memory, and self-awareness can help rebuild what trauma once broke.

III.2. Faith as a Route to Healing

While trauma invades Afaf's life, Mustafah does not end her narrative in a sad way. Instead, she portrays faith, specifically Islam, as a vital resource for healing, resilience, and identity reconstruction. Afaf's spiritual journey is depicted not as a retreat from reality but as a transformative response to trauma. Her decision to embrace Islam and commit to practicing Muslim way of life becomes a turning point: a reclamation of control and meaning after years of being lost and aimless. Bouallegue explores the healing power of Islam and the Qur'an in restoring oppressed souls, citing Rassool's argument that the Qur'an "promotes healing and spiritual cure" (qtd. in Bouallegue, "Spirituality in the Black" 61).

Afaf's journey toward healing and belonging begins with her father, who introduces her and her brother Majeed to the "Islamic Center of Greater Chicago" (121), which "was built in the image of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem" (182). This marks a pivotal moment, not only in her spiritual growth but also in her reclamation of identity. For Afaf, this is a golden "chance to start over" (125), since "she is anonymous here" (125). She is embraced by Muslim women such as Um Zuraib and many others: "The older mulimat immediately flock around Afaf. They hug and kiss both of her cheeks, smoothing her hair, squeezing her shoulders" (122). These simple yet profound gestures mark the beginning of Afaf's integration into a community that embraces her not as an outsider, but as one of their own. When Um Zuraib warmly asks, "Why haven't you come sooner?" (123), the question—though spontaneous—resonates deeply with Afaf. It becomes a pivotal moment in the formation of her sense of self and belonging. For Afaf, it is more than a casual remark; it is a powerful affirmation that she belongs—and perhaps always has.

Within this newly discovered community, Afaf recognizes Kowkab Suleiman, "the only young person Afaf has seen wearing a headscarf at school" (123). Kowkab, who never judged her, becomes a gentle guide—teaching her how to pray and offering spiritual companionship. When Afaf tearfully refers to herself as a "rotten person" and hesitantly asks Kowkab if she still wants to be friends, Kowkab offers quiet reassurance: "You're not rotten. You're just lost" (135). She continues, "You just need to take your time and Allah will guide you. He wants us to be happy" (135). Afaf's sense of belonging within this community is profound. For the first time, she is embraced fully and unconditionally. This marks an emotional awakening: "Kowkab and the others had made her feel at home" (128).

The warmth and solidarity of these women create a space where Afaf feels accepted—not for how she looks or what she has endured, but for who she is and who she has the potential to become. Since Afaf had never prayed before, the experience was not initially "a spiritual thing. It was more like she belonged among them, those strangers" (128). Yet this collective embrace evokes a profound sense of belonging, making Afaf "feel like a stranger who's finally come home" (127). This metaphor powerfully captures her reconciliation with a long-suppressed part of herself—her deep need for faith and connection. Through Islam, Afaf cultivates a renewed sense of agency, one that challenges the limiting narratives imposed by both American racism and Arab patriarchy.

The Islamic Center of Great Chicago becomes a site of spiritual awakening, a sacred refuge and a space for rebirth. Within its walls, she begins to reconnect not only with her faith, but with a version of herself. Her integration into the Muslim community is gentle and reassuring, and her practices there "baking ma'moul" (137) with other Muslim women is more than a culinary task. Praying reconnects her to a collective identity, thus it becomes a symbolic gesture of belonging. As Carol Fadda-Conrey explains, "The reproduction of this

Arab homeland occurs primarily through material fragments, including food, Arabic text, photos, music, plants, and religious icons and scripture" (30). In this sense, Afaf's engagement with traditional Arab food within a sacred Islamic space represents a cultural and spiritual return—an embodied reconnection with her ancestral heritage. This moment signifies not only healing but also the formation of a grounded identity built through both faith and collective cultural memory. Through this experience, Afaf finds not merely community but a sense of home and belonging.

Afaf's journey is not only one of healing but also of rediscovering purpose and reclaiming agency. In a particularly poignant moment, the narrator describes, "Something stirs inside Afaf—it's small and feeble, like a narrow shaft of light straining under a heavy, sealed door" (138). This evocative metaphor of light breaking through darkness captures Afaf's tentative but growing connection to Islam—a source of inner transformation. Her evolving friendship with Kowkab becomes instrumental in this process. When Afaf visits Kowkab's home for the second time, it "was like coming home for the first time" (137), signaling a newfound sense of belonging. Kowkab serves as both a guide and a mirror, embodying confidence and clarity in her Muslim identity. Afaf is particularly struck by the dignity with which Kowkab wears the hijab, viewing it not as a constraint but as a "badge of honor—defiance, even" (137).

When Afaf eventually chooses to wear the hijab in 1993, it is a moment imbued with love, support, and spiritual meaning. Her first hijab is green—"the color of the Prophet" (149)—and her hijab celebration is hosted by Suha Bakri, "the previous woman to commit from the circle of women from the center" (149). This ritual marks a powerful assertion of agency. Afaf's embrace of Islam is not inherited but consciously chosen, a deliberate act of

self-definition and healing on her own terms. Through this choice, she constructs a sense of belonging rooted in spiritual conviction rather than external validation.

Moreover, Islam reshapes Afaf's relationship with her body. Once a source of shame and hypervisibility, her body becomes a site of dignity and discipline. The act of wearing the hijab reclaims bodily autonomy: "She feels as though she's on the cusp of something greater" (149). Crucially, Mustafah does not romanticize faith as a cure-all or a simple erasure of trauma. Afaf continues to grapple with fear, doubt, and social marginalization—especially when treated as an "other" for wearing the hijab. Yet, her spiritual practices offer a framework for resilience. Healing, in this context, is not a return to a pre-traumatized self, but the emergence of a new, spiritually informed identity capable of enduring and transforming pain.

In a similar vein, Afaf's commitment to the Nurrideen School for Girls stands as one of the most meaningful expressions of her healing and the search for belonging. As its principal, she is no longer the insecure girl yearning for belonging, she becomes a guide and a source of strength for the next generation of Muslim girls, "Young girls—twelve through eighteen . . . their heads swaddled in the compulsory white hijab, their bodies hidden under shapeless forest-green uniforms" (7). Teaching is a fundamental aspect in Afaf's healing, as she is not lost anymore. Through this setting, Mustafah presents an alternative vision of Muslim girlhood, one grounded in community, agency, and dignity.

While Afaf's healing is achieved through the act of embracing Islam which is a metaphoric return to her ancestral homeland, her mother's journey toward healing is accomplished through physical return where she "moved to Palestine" (212). This act can be understood through Carol Fadda-Conrey's concept of "rearrival", which she defines as the process by which "short-term returns to original Arab homelands ultimately lead to the reassessment and reclaiming of the *US* terrain" (67). In Mustafah's narrative, the mother's

relocation to Palestine functions not as an escape but as a form of grounding—a way to reestablish a lost connection with language, culture, and a sense of rootedness long denied in American society. For years, she lived as a displaced woman—but now, back in her native land, she begins to reclaim a space where her identity is no longer questioned, where the language and landscape feel familiar, and where she is no longer "the outsider." Mustafah suggests that healing can be geographical—that the soul begins to mend when it is grounded in the soil of belonging. Her return is not loud or triumphant, but a quiet act of resistance and recovery, affirming that while trauma may fracture the self, memory and homeland can serve as powerful agents of emotional repair.

Afaf's connection to her homeland is further embodied in her marriage to Bilal Hamzić, who "showed up one weekend to take the English-language class Afaf taught to new refugees at the Center" (155). Bilal becomes not just a husband but a true companion—someone who shares and affirms her Muslim identity. Their marriage is not romanticized; rather, it is grounded in mutual respect and a shared commitment to raising their children—Azmia, Aymen, and Akram—with a strong sense of faith in a society that often devalues their presence. Through marriage and motherhood, Afaf reconstructs a sense of home—one that is no longer defined by geography or the broken household of her past, but by the sanctuary of her new domestic life, where healing becomes not only possible, but sustainable. As Bouallegue affirms, "Home is not a mark on map because it is marked with fluidity and heterogeneity" (*Home and Exile* 2), a description that powerfully illustrates Afaf's redefined home: one rooted in faith, connection, and belonging rather than fixed territory. Home, for Afaf, is no longer linked to the physicality of her parents' Palestinian homeland, nor is it embedded in the hostile spaces of white American suburbia. Instead, it becomes a spiritual space cultivated through her roles as mother, wife, and principal of an Islamic school—a place

where she is no longer asked to explain or defend her identity. Within this fluid space, Afaf is able to foster a sense of peace and rootedness that was previously denied to her.

Afaf's sense of belonging deepens further during her pilgrimage to Mecca, which offers her a profound experience of unmediated acceptance, "For the first time in her life, she belongs. Here among the pilgrims who chant a palpable humming, lifting Afaf's spirit, she's found her place" (228). In this sacred space, Afaf is no longer seen as a suspect or outsider. Freed from the lens of suspicion and stereotype, she is simply a Muslim woman in worship—connected wholly and intimately to *Allah*. Surrounded by divine love, Mecca becomes the home she had always yearned for, a place where faith, identity, and peace converge.

Yet this spiritual awakening is also marked by deep sorrow. Her father's death in Mecca leaves a painful void. He had always been a gentle and affirming presence in Afaf's life—the one who lovingly called her his "good girl" (97), offering a kind of tenderness and validation her mother never could. His burial in *Jannat al-Baqi*—the resting place of the Prophet's closest companions in Medina—symbolizes his spiritual redemption. When Afaf is asked whether she wishes to repatriate his body to the United States, she declines, knowing that her father would have wanted to remain in that sacred land (234). Her decision reflects not only her respect for his devotion but also her own deepening faith and spiritual grounding.

Back in the United States, the Center hosts a special *azza* (237) in his honor. Surrounded by a community that held her father in high regard, Kowkab reassures her, "You're surrounded by love here" (238). Though marked by grief, his passing becomes a moment of long-awaited healing—an opening in the emotional landscape shaped by years of trauma and silence.

It is in this space of spiritual and emotional transition that Nada returns. Her reappearance surprises both Afaf and Majeed, who had long lived in the shadow of her disappearance. Afaf captures the devastating aftermath of Nada's absence in a single, weighty line: "Afaf's father drank. Afaf's mother slowly lost her mind" (252). This stark summary speaks volumes, encapsulating the emotional collapse of their household. Her father numbed his pain with alcohol, while her mother deteriorated mentally, consumed by the hope—and torment—of Nada's return. The reunion between the siblings offers a glimmer of familial healing; Afaf and Majeed embrace their sister, recognizing the possibility of rewriting their broken family narrative.

For their mother, Nada's return is deeply destabilizing, "Afaf's mother's life has been shaped by Nada's absence" (254); her grief and identity have become so intertwined with loss that facing Nada again threatens her emotional balance. Her entire existence has been structured around that void, and its sudden reversal unravels her fragile sense of self. The reunion does not erase the past, nor does it fully restore what was lost—but it initiates a quiet, tender reweaving of a long-frayed family fabric, where healing, though incomplete, begins to take root.

The final stage of Afaf's healing journey is marked by her spiritual closeness to Allah. Throughout *The Beauty of Your Face*, Mustafah presents Afaf's faith not merely as a coping strategy, but as the foundation of her strength, resilience, and sense of identity. During the harrowing shooting at the Nurrideen School for Girls, Afaf's trust in God remains unshaken. She recites, "No power or strength... except in Allah" (280) and reminds herself, "It's in Allah's hands" (279). In her daily life, too, she utters "La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah" (290), an invocation that reflects not only devotion but also a deep internalization of *tawakkul*—absolute reliance on Allah.

Afaf's faith becomes an embodied language through which she confronts trauma and finds clarity. Even when she confronts the imprisoned shooter, seeking an explanation for his violence, she remains composed, while he breaks into tears (293). Her language gradually becomes infused with religious expressions like "salaam" (235), demonstrating how Islam is no longer just a private belief, but the very framework through which she interprets and engages with the world. Whether facing the loss of her father or the reappearance of her sister, Afaf's responses are characterized by patience, grace, and spiritual grounding. Her healing, ultimately, is not defined by forgetting the pain—but by transforming it through faith.

To conclude, in *The Beauty of Your Face*, Sahar Mustafah powerfully illustrates that true belonging cannot exist without a sense of home. For Afaf Rahman, home was never found in the material confines of her American neighborhood or in the cultural expectations of her Arab community—both of which subjected her to rejection, racism, and patriarchal constraint. Instead, her spiritual awakening becomes the cornerstone of her recovery. Faith, in its most authentic form, offers Afaf the home she longed for: one rooted not in geography, but in purpose, compassion, and divine connection.

Within the Muslim community, represented by nurturing figures like Um Zuraib and Kowkab, Afaf finds not judgment, but unconditional embrace. Islam becomes the only space that accepts her entirely, granting her a stable identity, direction, and emotional refuge. Her resilience is intimately tied to her spiritual life—revealed in whispered prayers under threat, and in gentle rituals that restore her sense of self. As a young girl in the novel once reads from a children's book: "So many things are possible just as long as you don't know they're impossible" (168). This seemingly innocent line resonates across Afaf's journey. It is faith that makes the impossible possible: survival, forgiveness, healing, and ultimately, belonging.

Islam is not only Afaf's religion—it is her home, her mirror, and her shelter. Through it, she reclaims her voice and identity, and at last, finds peace. In this way, Mustafah presents faith not as escapism, but as revolution. In a post-9/11 America where both state and society often fail to offer protection or dignity, Islam becomes a radical site of psychological resistance and spiritual refuge. It gives Afaf the tools to confront trauma, assert her identity, and construct a sense of home in a world that has long denied her one.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the central question of whether transnational connections fuel or hinder the immigrant's sense of belonging, using Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face* as a case study. Through a combination of literary analysis and theoretical application, this study has revealed that Mustafah presents a deeply layered and emotionally resonant account of what it means to exist in the margins—as a woman, a Muslim, an Arab, and an American. The novel offers not only a critique of societal exclusion but also a vision of healing and self-discovery grounded in faith, community, and resilience.

The first chapter laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding transnationalism and belonging. Drawing on the works of Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Carol Fadda-Conrey, the chapter established that transnational identity is inherently fluid, shaped by intersecting experiences of migration, diaspora, race, and culture. It also showed that belonging is not a fixed or automatic status but a dynamic and relational process. The theoretical framework emphasized that some immigrants inhabit liminal spaces where they are simultaneously insiders and outsiders, negotiating conflicting demands from both host and ancestral cultures.

The second chapter applied these theories to analyze Afaf's quest for belonging in two principal contexts: white mainstream American society and the patriarchal structures of her ethnic community. The chapter demonstrated that in the dominant culture, Afaf is marginalized through racial profiling, Islamophobia, and Orientalist perceptions that render her an outsider. Her experiences at school, in public spaces, and during the post-9/11 period reflect the deep-rooted institutional and interpersonal forms of exclusion she faces. Within her own community, Afaf also encounters limitations on her identity through gendered expectations and patriarchal control. The chapter revealed that belonging is often withheld on both fronts, making her journey a complex negotiation between acceptance and resistance.

The final chapter examined the impact of trauma on Afaf's identity, and how she ultimately finds healing through faith and education. The analysis revealed that Afaf's trauma is multifaceted: it includes personal loss (the disappearance of her sister), familial breakdown, intergenerational exile, and racialized violence, including the harrowing school shooting. These experiences collectively shape a fractured sense of self. However, the chapter also showed how faith, particularly Afaf's spiritual awakening through Islam, offers a transformative path toward healing. Through the Islamic Center of Greater Chicago, she gains a new sense of purpose and community. Her role as the principal of the Nurrideen School allows her to give back, mentor young girls, and construct a space of belonging for others.

This study has shown that Mustafah's novel is more than a personal story of one woman; it is a broader narrative about what it means to seek belonging in a world that often imposes exclusion. Through the lens of transnationalism, *The Beauty of Your Face* becomes a powerful testament to resilience, faith, and the enduring search for home. Mustafah does not offer easy solutions, but rather affirms the complexity of diasporic identity, suggesting that healing and belonging require both internal growth and communal solidarity.

In conclusion, the journey of Afaf Rahman encapsulates the essence of transnational identity—a life shaped by movement, memory, trauma, and resistance. The novel insists on the need to listen to voices at the margins, to recognize the dignity of hybrid identities, and to reimagine belonging as a shared human endeavor rooted in empathy and recognition. Through Afaf's story, Sahar Mustafah demonstrates that transnational connections—whether cultural, spiritual, or emotional—do not hinder but rather fuel the immigrant's sense of belonging. For Afaf, this belonging is not rooted in a fixed geographical space but in her reconnection with faith, community, and personal identity. Her embrace of Islam, her role as an educator, and her ties to both ancestral memory and American society exemplify how belonging is fluid, negotiated, and deeply relational. Mustafah's work thus contributes meaningfully to both

literary scholarship and social discourse, offering a compelling narrative of identity, healing, and the quiet strength found in faith and community.

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الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة التداخل المعقد بين العلاقات العابرة للحدود، والهوية، والانتماء في رواية جمال وجهك (2020) للكاتبة سحر مصطفى. وتبحث فيما إذا كانت الروابط العابرة للحدود تعيق أم تعزز شعور المهاجر بالانتماء، لا سيما في سياق ما بعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر في الولايات المتحدة. ومن خلال الاعتماد على نظريات ما بعد الاستعمار والعلاقات العابرة للحدود، بما في ذلك أعمال هو مي بهابها، وستيوارت هول، وأفتار براء، وإدوارد سعيد، وكارول فادا-كونري، تستقصي الدراسة كيف تتشكل الهوية وتُعاد صياغتها عبر الأبعاد الثقافية، والعرقية، والروحية. يبرز التحليل كيف تُعقّد العنصرية، والمعايير السائدة للبيض، والتوقعات الأبوية عملية تشكيل الهوية وتُعيق شعور المهاجرين بالانتماء داخل المجتمع الأمريكي وكذلك ضمن المجتمع العربي-المسلم.

كما تكشف الدراسة أن الإيمان، والروابط العاطفية، والصحوة الروحية—وخاصة من خلال الإسلام—تُعد مصادر قوية للانتماء والقدرة على الصمود. ومن خلال تحليل موضوعات مثل التهميش، والإسلاموفوبيا، والصدمة الموروثة، والشفاء، تُظهر الدراسة كيف تخضع بطلة مصطفى لعودة رمزية إلى الإيمان والذاكرة الثقافية، مما يعيد تشكيل إحساسها بالذات والمجتمع. وتقدم الدراسة في النهاية فهماً للهوية بوصفها غير مرتبطة بالجغرافيا، بل بالتواصل العاطفي والروحي. ومن خلال عدسة متعددة التخصصات، تؤكد هذه الأطروحة أن الروابط العابرة للحدود يمكن أن تُمكّن المهاجرين من استعادة الوكالة، والهوية، والانتماء في عالم كثيرًا ما يُقصيهم ويجعلهم غير مرئيين.

Résumé

Cette étude explore l'interaction complexe entre le transnationalisme, l'identité et l'appartenance dans le roman The Beauty of Your Face (2020) de Sahar Mustafah. Elle examine si les connexions transnationales entravent ou renforcent le sentiment d'appartenance des immigrés, en particulier dans le contexte sociopolitique des États-Unis post-11 septembre. S'appuyant sur les cadres théoriques postcoloniaux et transnationaux—y compris les travaux de Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Edward Said et Carol Fadda-Conrey—l'étude analyse comment l'identité se forme et se transforme à travers les dimensions culturelles, raciales et spirituelles. L'analyse met en lumière comment le racisme, les normes dominantes blanches et les attentes patriarcales complexifient la construction identitaire et entravent le sentiment d'appartenance, aussi bien dans la société américaine que dans la communauté arabo-musulmane.

L'étude révèle également que la foi, les liens émotionnels et l'éveil spirituel—particulièrement à travers l'islam—constituent des sources puissantes d'appartenance et de résilience. En analysant des thèmes tels que la marginalisation, l'islamophobie, le traumatisme hérité et la guérison, la recherche démontre que la protagoniste de Mustafah effectue un retour symbolique à la foi et à la mémoire culturelle, redéfinissant ainsi son rapport à elle-même et à sa communauté. L'étude présente finalement l'identité comme étant définie non pas par la géographie, mais par la reconnexion émotionnelle et spirituelle. À travers une approche pluridisciplinaire, cette dissertation affirme que les liens transnationaux peuvent offrir aux immigrés une voie pour revendiquer leur agentivité, leur identité et leur sentiment d'appartenance dans un monde qui les rend souvent invisibles.