Exiles and Their Ethico-political Responsibility: Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

Mohammad Akbar Hosain

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Comilla University, Bangladesh, and PhD candidate, Department of English, Illinois State University, USA

mhosain@ilstu.edu | ORCID: 0009-0006-5968-9705

Abstract

Written in the form of a memoir, Shaila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams* (2009) is the fictional representation of a young Pakistani-US Muslim woman who lost her husband in the terrorist attack of 9/11. So contemporary realities such as rising Islamophobia in America, ethno-racial violence against Muslims, brewing tensions between mainstream Americans and Muslim immigrants are some of the main issues the book deals with. This paper focuses on the ethico-political responsibilities that exiles perform in their host country. I argue that Abdullah's novel, through fictional representation, shows that exiles have agency, and they play significant ethico-political roles in their host country, especially by representing (or imagining) their community. Drawing on the theorization of "exile" by Edward Said and Ashwini Vasanthakumar, first I will focus on the definition and function of the exile and then will examine how this human condition sketched in *Saffron Dreams* is "exilic" by those definitions. I will illustrate how and to what extent the protagonist plays the ethico-political responsibility for the Muslim community, and why that matters so much in the contemporary west.

Keywords: *Saffron Dreams*, Muslim immigrants, exile, 9/11, ethico-political responsibility, Islamophobia

The Exile

Edward Said defines the exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" and considers the "heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life" (we see these in literature and history) as the efforts "to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement" (173). Despite this overpowering sense of "estrangement" in exilic condition, Said also acknowledges optimistic aspects that point to the exile's great contributions to the host culture. Ashwini Vasanthakumar observes three significant elements in the condition of the exile: first, "exiles are physically absent from the political community with which they engage"; second, "exiles' absence is *compelled by political pressure*"; and finally, "exiles remain *politically oriented* towards their

homelands, often evinced by a notional aspiration to return" (Vasanthakumar 4). As she reviews the construction of the exilic condition in normative political theory, Vasanthakumar demonstrates how the exile has often been framed as a passive victim in the hands of either their homeland's oppressive regimes or the cruel and antagonistic policies of the receiving country. For her, "political agency and moral complexity are rarely acknowledged" in these "millions of so-called ordinary exiles" (Vasanthakumar, "Introduction" 1). However, she stresses on "a different story of exile and exile politics" (2). This is how she theorizes exile agency and ethico-political responsibility:

> On this telling, exiles can be rescuers and representatives, nation-builders, peace-makers, and witnesses to the suffering they have left behind. Exiles give expression to perspectives marginalized back home, activate and sustain transnational solidarity networks, advance their own ideals back home, and help hold powerful actors to account. In short, they are instrumental actors, in the countries they have *fled*, and in the transnational domain into which they have flung. (2)

So the crux of Vasanthakumar's theorizing of exile is that far from being an object of victimization by the oppressive regime in their homeland and the pathetic face of sorrow and grief awaiting humanitarian mercy and attention from the host country, exiles have very significant ethical-political roles to play in connection to their home country. While I do not mostly disagree with Vasanthakumar with regards to the exile agency, autonomy, and contribution to their native country they left behind, I also extend that they exercise this powerful agency in their present context, in their host country. Besides, I argue that Shaila Abdullah has also weaponized the idea of victimization which Vasanthakumar critiqued in her theorizing of exiles as simplified and typical.

Exiles in Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

By considering the theory proposed by both Said and Vasanthakumar, I argue that Arissa, the protagonist of *Saffron Dreams,* and her Pakistani American Muslim community are examples of the exile. First, they are territorially absent in their home country and displaced people living in the US. Second, this physical absence is caused by some "political pressure" in Pakistan, though there are no issues of forced displacement, threat of genocide, or mass enforced deportation or refugee crises. There are, however, sufficient background and hints in the novel which make the case that Arissa and her family are the victims of *displacement* and they acquire the status of *exiles*. There is at least one direct hint, among others, in the text, which makes a connection between the political instability back in Pakistan and Arissa's family's migration to the US. In chapter four, Abdullah has Arissa put an entry dated "May 1993" in which a wedding

ceremony at Khan's palace took place in Pakistan, and the conversations among Abu and his close friends illustrates the political deadlock in her home country resulting from overwhelming bureaucracy, corruption, bribery, instability, people's loss of trust on political leaders, and the interference of the military in the running of the state (Abdullah 18-19). Abdullah, through some historical glimpses of the time, tells a story of national corruption, overriding bureaucracy, and state malfunction when, for instance, one needed to wait "twenty months to get a phone line" (18). The scene illustrates vividly the malfunctioning of a state. Historically, this was the time when Pakistan faced a serious political crisis leading to anarchy and the probability of military intervention. However, the installation of Moin Qureshi as the Interim Prime Minister of the country gave a ray of flickering hope, especially with his anti-corruption programs and some important reform projects, but his short stay in office (three months) could not sustain that hope. The civil frustration over such political chaos and pandemonium in the home country may have accelerated Arissa-Faizan's decision to migrate to the US in the hope of a better, secure, and comfortable life far away from home. For Vasanthakumar, "exiles remain politically oriented towards their homelands" (4). But by making a little appropriation of that theory, for Arissa and the community represented in the novel, I assume that Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* is "politically oriented" to the host country, the current place they inhabit. Most importantly, in tune with Vasanthakumar's theory, Abdullah as a voice of exiles aims to perform ethico-political functions by writing and publishing *Saffron Dreams.* In parallel, Arissa as the protagonist does the same thing by finishing the book her husband left incomplete.

Why Write Fictional Narrative and Publish

In discussing Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*, we encounter two books and two authors. The first one is *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah, the primary text. The other is Arissa-Faizun's collaborative work *Soul Searcher,* the one Arissa completes after the tragic death of her husband in the 9/11 attack. What are Abdullah's aims for writing in the first place? What is the role she plays in focusing the 9/11? Is it simply just another fictional representation of exiles' lives, living, and daily disaster? Or is it a manifestation of an ethical duty to one's people or community? Or to the land one has left far away? An homage to her homeland? Abdullah as an immigrant writer might have several reasons for writing on 9/11. To start with, the attack was aimed at big US establishments (World Trade Center, the Pentagon, etc.) and American civilians by a small section of extremist Muslims from the Arab world (McFadden). No one involved in the attack were from Pakistan. Years later, a 9/11 commission report reveals that a Pakistani national named Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was the mastermind behind 9/11 ("September 11 Attacks"). This perhaps provides a reason for writing this novel

by Abdullah who is a Pakistani American immigrant writer. Even if no Pakistani nationals were involved in the attack, the possibility of writing such a novel by Abdullah does not diminish in the least because Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country and Abdullah identifies herself as a Muslim woman. Shaila Abdullah has taken this up as one of her subjects in *Saffron Dreams*. In a realistic mode, she describes how this incident has had a cataclysmic impact on the lives of refugees, immigrants, diasporas, and exiles living in the US for many years, including Arissa, Faizan, and their Pakistani-American family. It is undeniably true that Americans were primarily victimized in the attack; many of them lost their lives with their traumatized families and relatives mourning their deaths. On the other hand, the "other" people, the Muslim exiles and immigrants who were killed (no matter what country they hailed from), were doubly victimized. For example: Faizan, Arissa's lover and husband was killed in the Twin Tower plane crash, which has had severe traumatic consequences for her and her family members. On the one hand, she lost her husband in the terror attack; on the other, she and her family members (and the whole community of Muslims) were living in constant fear of being under racial and ethnic attack from mainstream white Americans.

Ashwini Vasanthakumar makes a compelling argument in her book *The Ethics of Exile: The Political Theory of Diaspora* that, contrary to the normative beliefs that exiles are simply victims and an object of mercy and sympathy, they are rather creatures of agency and have ethical-political responsibilities. Abdullah's novel, I believe, extends that idea of "responsibility" to the extent that exiles have and often perform the duty to the community they are living among/with. Exiles have very important ethical-moral responsibilities not only to their home community, the people they have left behind but also to the community they are now living in, that is, both to the people of their own nationality or religion and the people of their host or receiving country. In the case of *Saffron Dreams,* the community that is mostly invoked are mainstream Americans, exiles, or Pakistani-US Muslims and the community of global people with a conscience. In writing this novel, Abdullah has made Arissa, her protagonist, the mouthpiece of Muslim exiles coming from different nations into the US. When in the wake of 9/11, Islam was made a target for American victimization, it became the ethical responsibility of the exile populations to safeguard themselves from the ongoing attack of hate crime and other racial violence. Different methods might have been feasible, but as a writer of conscience, Abdullah has brought this ethico-political duty upon herself to represent her community's (Muslims in particular) suffering, trauma, and loss just after the disastrous 9/11 and show to the world how innocent and vulnerable they are in the post-9/11 America. *Saffron Dreams* has a strong voice in testifying and appealing to humanity and

the global conscience regarding their trauma and suffering in an effort to plead for something significant to be done to safeguard their lives so they can live in the "receiving country."

I argue that Abdullah's writing of fiction, that is, *Saffron Dreams*, has a close parallel to her main character's writing/completing the unfinished work, *Soul Searcher*, of her late husband Faizan. Why does Arissa need to finish Faizan's work? Why is it so important in Arissa's life as an exile? As is expected, she could mourn Faizan's death for a while and resume her own life by marrying another young man. That could be just as simple and straightforward as that. However, she does not do that. She chooses a much more difficult life for herself and her disabled son Raian to embark on a journey of commitment and responsibility. This is, however, not merely a question of finishing a book her husband left unfinished. The seriousness of Arissa's collaborative work with her now-dead husband can be realized when her relationship (after Faizan's death) with Zaki fails after some initial friendly moments. Zaki, cast like any other ordinary audience, raises the question and interrogates her because the project keeps her busy all the while and obstructs their blooming relationship from reaching maturity: "It's a book like a million others. I'm sorry but what would this one do for the world that others have not done already?" (Abdullah 205).

In a meta-narrative style, Zaki's question is poised more for the author Abdullah than it is for Arissa, the writer's fictional creation. My critical position is that this is where Abdullah addresses the justification for writing her novel on 9/11. Obviously, Arissa acts as the spokesperson for what the writer Abdullah intends to convey to the readers. A few lines later, Arissa is found to be openly addressing this question with a commitment: "It is not just another work. It's a legacy" (205). She adds later that the work is intended to give "life" to Faizan, to Zaki's utter bewilderment. As to the purpose of the book, Arissa also declares, "It's not for others, it's for him" (205). Despite such seemingly open declarations of *self-containment* and *subjective interest*, the book's purpose does not end up being parochial and personal. As Arissa struggles to finish the work of Faizan in which he also recounted the experiences of exile life, trauma, and racial encounters, these issues leap out of the pages and embrace the character Arissa or the writer Abdullah.

Saffron Dreams can be considered a "testimony" to Arissa's multifaceted traumas: her childhood life and growing up in a broken family, her husband's sudden death in the 9/11 attack, the ethno-racial attack on her in the NYC subway, the White American gaze on her as a Muslim woman, and her deep trauma emanating from Raian's CHARGE Syndrome of multiple birth defects (Abdullah 170). Given the theory of trauma and testimony that states "Testimony as a genre more

closely resembles a monologue than a dialogue," this novel is narrated in memoir mode (in fact, the first few chapters are written in the form of diary entries) and first-person narrative, and there is a predominance of the voice of *monologue* across the narrative structure ("About Trauma"). Besides, testimony aspires to be "definitive," true, and authentic, and it has "the quality of a declaration" ("Testimony creates the trauma it discovers"). In a mode of testimony, Abdullah has, with empathy and compassion, portrayed her protagonist Arissa Illahi, her loss, trauma, wounds, and her fight against racial injustice and stereotyping of which she is a direct victim along with others. Other than performing a victim, she also bears witness to trauma, hers and her exilic community's, which is unique to a "literary testimony": "Conceived as artistic semblances that refuse fixity and occur through encounter, literary testimony founded in affective gestures can bear witness in new and productive ways to tortures…." (Richardson, "Introduction" 22). So, in telling her own story, she is also telling the many stories of other people of her community. Arissa's personal narrative functions as an allegory of the suffering and trauma that other Muslim men and women undergo in the exile community. It is true, unlike the political agency that Vasanthakumar identifies as one of the significant characteristics of an exile, here, at least, one would not come across something of that scale. Evidently, the main character Arissa is not engaged in any serious political activity: in dethroning a corrupt/totalitarian regime or government or funding a guerilla group back home to oust an illegal regime and set up a new legitimate one in its place, or campaigning against a corrupt and oppressive regime at home to the global populations. We encounter nothing of the sort in this book. However, it does not imply that the book and its main characters lack any definite/explicit political connection to the outer world. In the first place, Abdullah, through representing Arissa, her personal narrative, and the violence targeted against her and her Muslim community, works as a mouthpiece of the exile populations living in the US. This choice of writing fiction in the realist mode, capturing an educated Muslim woman, her struggling life in the US, and her vulnerability as a believer in a faith that has been in many ways marginalized and labeled as a "terrorist religion" after 9/11, is an ethical-political choice.

The Effect of the Terror Attack on Muslim Exiles

The effect of 9/11 on Pakistani-American Muslims was really devastating and traumatic. The immediate effects were fraught with fear, tension, worry, and insecurity in the day-to-day life of the Muslim community. The first and foremost consequence was the public gaze: "a heightened awareness of any kind of glance" among the exiles leading to attempts to erase or hide their own religious and linguistic identity which they have brought to the US from their home country. In a long paragraph, Abdullah graphically describes the ways these desperate,

vulnerable, and minoritized population displays its "loyalty to a nation under attack": cutting their beard, stopping the wearing of hijabs, putting up American flags on shops, cabs, and other establishments, adopting silence in public places and not speaking in their native language for fear of being discriminated against (Abdullah 60).

The main responsibility that is thrust on exile Muslim writers is to re-present the people of a community in a way that would sufficiently foil the stereotyped stories which have been circulated against Islam and its adherents, that all Muslims are "terrorists" and there is an inherent *problem* with Islam, that its ideology promotes terrorism and violence. To achieve this end, Shaila Abdullah has created characters who are as diverse as any other community on earth: Arissa is an artist. She is an educated and sensible woman who has always been committed to her father's (and later her) family in the absence of her mother. Faizan is an English literature graduate, an ambitious writer, very sensitive, emotional, and committed to his wife and family. Abu is a cardiovascular specialist who is an idealist in politics but indifferent to his wife's demands and wishes. Ami is presented as a voice of female freedom who is languishing in a *prison* created by patriarchy. Divorced and lonely, Zaki is very rich and an engineer by vocation. He lives with his two grown-up children. Ma and Baba are just two ideal and loving parents who devoted all their time and energy to Faizan-Arissa and their special needs son, Raian. Besides, there are other minor characters who have also been created as diverse as possible with Abdullah's artistic craftsmanship.

An important mission of writing *Saffron Dreams* then is to re-present the characters and deal with the themes of a terror attack, Islam, and xenophobia in ways that can counter the existing propaganda poised in stereotyping and essentialism against Islam as a semitic faith and its adherents. Abdullah has done this by paying her focused attention to the personal lives of the Muslim exiles and immigrants, their cultural trauma, struggles in the host country, and their capacity for empathy for the fellow-victims even though they are doubly victimized.

The life of an exile is not all prototypical: they have their own negotiations, dialogue, argumentation, and issues of intricate problems and dilemmas in the context of the foreign host culture. Questions regarding the attitude of the exiles to the host country and its cultures where they now live arise as do questions like how they initiate dialogues between the two? How much do they appropriate and how much do they leave? To what extent do they carry from their homeland, the country they have left behind? How much do they embrace from the new culture? The following is a poignant description by Abdullah where she looks at a central problem in exile life, in particular its unbearable dilemma: "We are

homesick individuals in an adopted homeland. We could not break free of our origin, and yet we wanted to soar. The tension in our hearts left us suspended in mid-air" (Abdullah 60). This trauma of suspension or the condition of deadlock is an important condition of exile life. Edward Said calls this a "fundamentally discontinuous state of being" (Said 177). On the one hand, these people have brought their own faith (Islam), rituals, costumes, food habits, language, and so on to the host country. On the other hand, they have an ambition to avail the good opportunities in the US. Perhaps the writer wants readers as witnesses to see into the very dilemma of an exile life, which works as a counter-narrative to the existing propaganda that propagates the exiles as one-dimensional: they arrive at an alien land but do not belong to it. There is another important moment in the novel which also tells of a shared and co-existing reality of two cultures in an exile mind: the culture of their homeland and the host culture they have arrived at. This is the moment in which the writer also examines the exile *loyalty*. Do they forsake the old way of life completely and embrace the new and promising one? Or do they live in the host country while cherishing everything from their past life? Is this an "either…or" issue? Or a "both…and" issue? In a personal moment of nostalgic self-reflection, Arissa projects a future in which, as her son Raian grows up and asks her questions about their identity, she thinks of replying thus:

> I might also tell him that when you leave a land behind, you don't' shift loyalties – you just expand your heart and fit two lands in. You love them equally." (Abdullah 174)

In the context of multicultural exile identity, we hear a lot about "appropriation" and "hybridity." It appears that Abdullah has created Arissa in a mold to fit that category of multicultural identity. In response to populist stereotyping, essentialist ideas, and monolithic propaganda about Muslim exiles in the US, she has touched upon the ideas of hybridity and fluidity in the formation of identity. For instance, Arissa's veil/hijab is an important cultural issue in the text. There is an interesting dialogue between two opposite positions with regards to the hijab. Originally, she had no intention to wear it as she had never worn it in her father's house before marriage but the women of Faizan's family have been observing the tradition for ages (in fact this corresponds to a predominant Islamic culture existing in different Muslim countries, including Pakistan). So afterwards, out of respect for Faizan's long family tradition, she consents to wear a hijab. Over the years, she develops a sense of belonging to this garment and after Faizan's tragic death, she once considers dropping it (because after her "iddat time" as a Muslim woman, she is totally free from all marital responsibilities) but later she decides to continue the tradition as it is one of Faizan's legacy. Next, months

later when she is victimized in the NYC subway, she gives up wearing it. The following is the description how one day she feels without her hijab in public:

> I felt naked, like a prostitute, my wares exposed for all to see. In reality, the busy world around me scarcely noticed my loss or collective losses. I longed for the veil I had let go. (Abdullah 116)

So, in contrast to an outside gaze, the observation of a tradition like this is not always a personal choice, but rather a community ritual/convention which is thrust on women. But later in the subway occurrence, it is the hijab for which she is labeled as an "extremist" or "Islamic fundamentalist' to the teen gang who made an attack on her, cutting off her hijab in public, humiliating and name-calling her. So as the White Euro-American gaze fixes her identity in the box of "extreme Islam" or "fundamentalist Islam," her personal struggle with the hijab along with her subsequent negotiation with a long family tradition is utterly lost. The *one story* that is constructed, spread, and reproduced about a Muslim woman in the US is that she is a very conservative person with a monolithic existence, one in whose life there is hardly any argumentations/dialogue. Thus, *Saffron Dreams'* re-presentation of Arissa's hijab episode functions as a counter-narrative which underscores the dangers of creating one type of discourse about Muslims and their choices in life. Moreover, the way Abdullah portrays Arissa's affair with Faizan – their free mixing, erotic moments, and premarital sexuality – consolidates the notion that Muslims are not always the ones who the west is often predisposed to imagine. Another great example of a counter-narrative is the sketch of Ami, Arissa's freedom-loving and "irresponsible" mother who leaves her kids and husband in the hope of finding a new life with Uncle Jalal. Her passion for freedom, struggle to break down the shackles imposed on her by patriarchy, and her erotic journey with Arissa's Uncle Jalal are manifestations of a misfit character within the traditional Pakistani society. So, the point is that on Abdullah's large and diverse narrative canvas, there is a crowd of all kinds of people, good, bad, religious, erotic, dutiful, sensuous, ambitious, political, filial, conservative, and mysterious, and this canvas is the perfect space for resistance against stereotyping and essentialist ideas.

Reception of the Novel: The Role of Fiction and its Author

The overall reviews of the common readers on *Saffron Dreams* are positive. Of all global ratings, 60% rated the book as "five stars." Readers from the Euro-American zone are usually positive about the book's treatment of widowhood, a Pakistani-US Muslim woman's lone struggle over her husband's premature death in the World Trade Center attack, her subsequent grief management, and her emotional struggle with her son, Raian's CHARGE syndrome. However, readers stressed the theme of prejudices and stereotyping against Islam and

Muslims in the US. A reader named Edgar R. from the US wrote the following review on Amazon on May 25, 2013: "I was surprised by how much I liked this book. It opened my eyes to the prejudice against Muslims and how wrong it is" (Amazon.com: Customer Reviews). Another reviewer wrote on Goodreads: "The discovery of her husband's unfinished manuscript may be the key to her survival. And perhaps by finishing Faizan's legacy, Arissa will redeem a race" ("*Saffron Dreams* by Shaila M. Abdullah").

These kinds of comments are in abundance on Amazon and Goodreads' virtual platforms. The first reader-reviewer explicitly focused on the main concerns of the novel: clear images, stereotypes, and other myths against a religious community. In the Goodreads review cited above, the catchy phrase "[to] redeem a race" echoes the fundamental duty of exiles towards their community in the host country, not in the homeland. In both examples, Euro-American readers/reviewers underscored their reception by hinting at the functionality of the novel in a time of crisis for US Muslims or the social-ethical role that Abdullah played by writing the book in the aftermath of 9/11.

Writing Books/Memoirs as an Act of Representation and Resistance

Saffron Dreams is engaged with multiple books/memoirs and meta-narratives. First, Abdullah has written the novel in the form of a memoir. Then in the book, her main character Arissa is also engaged in writing/completing a novel (entitled as *Soul Searcher*) that was left unfinished by her late husband Faizan. Next, there is the mention of another of Arissa's memoir (14-page-long) about her personal life, her loss of Faizan, her trauma, grief and sorrow, and struggle over her disabled son written for the arts magazine Arissa works for. This is not a mere coincidence that all these narratives focus on self and subjectivity, Muslim identity, trauma, struggle, victimization, and a resistance against prejudices and stereotypes about Muslims in the US.

The Face of Victims and Weaponizing It: "I am as much a victim as you are"

One viral propaganda against Islam is that it is a terrorist religion and all Muslims are bad and dangerous believers. This kind of disinformation and myths spread across America and Europe giving rise to Islamophobia in the minds of the populations of the host country. Abdullah's portrayal of US Muslims as much *victims* as the Americans are, in some cases more vulnerable than the latter, is a counter-representation and has an edge of performativity in real life. Quite far from solely endorsing "art for art's sake," or writing fiction as simply an aesthetic practice the author of this novel makes connections with the crises brewing on the 9/11 terror attack and the life-shattering consequences in the lives of the real exile population. The writing of this novel renders such a deep impression which is an immediacy of performativity, the performance of a wake-up call:

See, you Americans and the world! That's not our face as you know, look, this is us, we are also victims. That is why, when in the subway incident Arissa is labeled as belonging to a "race of murderers" by the blond teen, she resolutely retorts, "I am as much a victim as you are" (Abdullah 62). I argue that this angry retaliation of Arissa is deeply significant and in writing the book Abdullah may be saying the same thing to her American audience (addressing her host country people is more important than her homeland people in the present context of crisis, racial trauma, and hate crime).

Though there is an equivalent scale of trauma, suffering and loss for the Americans and Muslim exiles, the scale weighs down for the exiles. First and foremost, they are displaced people who have left their homeland quite a long time ago. Their everyday life is engraved by a deep sense of loss: of homeland, of their own cultures, of political liaisons, and of self, a sense of "estrangement" for Said. When this sense of rootlessness is joined by other malaises such as racial violence, mainstream white gaze that is discriminating and stereotyping all the Muslims by one label, "terrorists," then the trauma and grief of these people is tripled, and they become the most vulnerable people on earth.

On Shaila Abdullah's personal website (shailaabdullah.com), readers will find an extensive book review by Debora Hall. She describes the novel thus: "S*affron Dreams* is an important American novel. The Pakistani American immigrant story has not seared enough the consciousness of the American psyche. *Americans often think that 9/11 was a singular American tragedy*. *Saffron Dreams* reminds us that 9/11 hurt Muslims in more devastating ways because it stole their innocence and reputation" (my emphasis). And the book reviews shared above confirm that far from "a singular American tragedy," 9/11 is also a tragedy for Muslim exiles and immigrants living in the US.

Transnational/Transcultural Trauma and Empathy

Abdullah's treatment of transnational trauma and empathy also works as a form of counter-narrative and subtle but powerful resistance on behalf of the exile experiences. In a disjointed post-9/11 era, identifying oneself as Muslim is an act of resistance and boldness. Again, the portrayal of a bond between an American and a Pakistani-American is more so. At the close of the novel, we encounter two characters: one is Zaki who is a Pakistani-American businessman and divorcee with two adult children. Arissa's meeting with him raises a hope in the audience that the novel may end in a restoration of conjugal happiness even in Faizan's absence. However, after some initial dates with him, Arissa keenly realizes that such a relationship is a far cry. However, there is another person, an American woman named Anne Marie who lost her husband in the Vietnam war many years ago. She is the person from whom Arissa can retrieve Faizan's last-

minute memories as the woman was a regular customer at the restaurant Faizan had worked for in the World Trade Center as an attendant before the terror attack. Her subsequent friendship and bond with this American woman during a critical time of trauma, fear, racial violence, and Islamophobia indicates the novel's capacity for endorsing a transnational trauma and empathy. This is how Arissa evaluates this moment of empathy across time and space based on similar traumatic experiences: "We were joined together by a chance meeting, unified in our sorrow, years apart in our losses" (Abdullah 127).

Below is another Goodreads review by a general reader who also emphasizes the book's transnational empathy and illustrates the novel's aim to be received across boundaries and borders:

> In the end, this book is not about 9/11, her husband's death, her child's disabilities or even her religion. *It's about what binds us together even though we are from different homelands and different cultural backgrounds*, which I believe is the crux of this book. Though not easy, it's definitely something that deserves to be read" ("*Saffron Dreams* by Shaila M. Abdullah," my emphasis).

Final Remarks

As a Pakistani-US Muslim immigrant writer in an exilic condition, Shaila Abdullah weaves a literary narrative centering around a young Muslim woman's loss, trauma, and grief around 9/11. Taking up a sensitive as well as sensational event as her subject, she underscores that Pakistani-American Muslim exiles are victims as much in the horrific terror attack as any American citizen. Making use of memoir, meta-narrative, and testimony, Abdullah, through her aesthetic and creative flair, writes a counter-narrative of resistance and rebellion which helps readers see into the heart of hearts of Pakistani-US Muslims in exile and their ethos. In a time fraught with Islamophobia, a zeal of "war on terror" and millions of false propaganda against Muslims around the world, identifying oneself as Muslim is an act of boldness and of resistance. In writing a fiction about a Muslim woman and in completing a book left by Faizan, both Abdullah (the writer) and Arissa (the writer's fictional creation) respectively embody an ethical responsibility thrust upon exiles on the eve of a transnational crisis and trauma.

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