
‘They Don’t Know Us, What We Are’: An Analysis of Two Young Adult Texts with Arab-Western Protagonists

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Since 9/11, when Arabs in the West found themselves under suspicion, the way Arabs could be portrayed in Young Adult fiction has become complicated. This paper will look at two examples of this fiction to explore the difficult position characters in these texts now find themselves in. The short story ‘Alone and All Together’ (Geha 2002) is written by an Arab-American author. In it, Labibeh and her sister must negotiate their relationship with America both by maintaining their Arab identification in the days after 9/11 whilst at the same time proving that they are real and loyal Americans. Similarly, in the Young Adult novel *Does My Head Look Big in This* (Abdel-Fattah 2005) authored by a self-proclaimed ‘Australian-born-Muslim-Palestinian-Egyptian-choc-o-holic’ writer, a young Muslim girl must contend with racism and misunderstanding at her private school in Melbourne when she decides to wear the hijab. As in the first text, she too must prove her status as a ‘normal’ Western girl while at the same time proudly maintaining her commitment to Islam. This delicate balance does not come easily for any of these characters, nor is it without sacrifice as the protagonists negotiate their cultural identities in acceptable ways.

The ideas that are important in this paper include the postcolonial theories of racial and ethnic hybridity. Though ethnic identification has always been difficult to define, even prior to 9/11, some cultural theorists such as Bhabha (2003) have suggested 9/11 shifted anew race and ethnic politics in the West. For instance, the terrorist attacks on New York made visible in a new way the difficulties of being both patriotic to the West *and* loyal to ones Arab roots. This paper questions whether the fluid, hybrid, hyphenated ethnicities heralded pre-9/11 are increasingly difficult to enact, and explores how this is demonstrated in the selected texts.

As Stuart Hall (1997) suggests, identity is a strategic, positional construction, produced in specific historical and institutional sites, within specific discursive formations and practices. It is not surprising, then, that 9/11, as a pivotal historical event, altered aspects of cultural and ethnic identity. Various political agendas after 9/11 renewed a desire to privilege some cultural practices and beliefs as normal and others as disloyal to the State. In the two texts analysed, ‘Alone and All Together’ and *Does My*

Head Look Big in This? readers are positioned by the texts to understand the renewed importance of choosing ethnic loyalty. In a post 9/11 world Arab protagonists must publicly identify themselves as ‘us’ or ‘them’. One can only be ‘alone’ or ‘all together’ now. The two texts in question present divided ethnic loyalty as the central issue for Arabs in post 9/11 times.

Postcolonial theories of border crossing and hybridity explain how people may perform different identities at different times. In theory, one can be both culturally Western in orientation *and* Muslim, even though these identities may also regularly find themselves in competition. This fluidity posed less obvious problems in a pre-9/11 world where multiculturalism was at least *publicly* lauded, though race politics were never far from the surface (Carter, 2006). However, Giroux (2002) and Bhabha (1996) use the concept of ‘borders’ to explain how cultural boundaries may be crossed as people take on suitable identities for particular circumstances, and for a variety of purposes. Though this border crossing is in itself neither good nor bad in itself, the idea of ‘hybrid subjectivities’ (Chen 2004, p. 9) was *potentially* liberating, at least in the imagined possibility that the subject could be free of ethnic boundaries. At least in theory, if not indeed in practice, prior to 9/11 there was little reason one couldn’t be both Arab and American, or Arab and Australian.

The impact of race, however, became once again visible since 9/11 exemplified, for example, by the racial targeting of those of ‘Middle Eastern’ appearance (see Hage 2003). Though race itself may be based on erroneous ideas about biological difference, the effects of race or race *politics* most certainly exists. Bhabha (2003) noted how the discourses of culture were disrupted after 9/11, reviving ‘the embattled and embalmed narrative of civilisational clash’ (p.27). It seemed that how one identified ethnically became once more either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘civilised’ or ‘uncivilised’. Rizvi (2004) also alerts us to the ways border crossing may have been reconceptualised after 9/11 as America (and Australia) closed its borders, discouraging rather than encouraging this embrace of movement between and amongst cultures. Judith Butler (2004) also writes that after 9/11 there was a ‘shoring-up of the borders against what is perceived as alien; a heightened surveillance of Arab peoples and anyone



who looks vaguely Arab in the dominant racial imaginary, anyone who looks like someone you once knew who was of Arab decent or who you thought was' (p. 39). It seemed that the ethnic fluidity that seemed to herald a positive global change was put into question by 9/11.

The story 'Alone and All Together' (Geha 2002) is anthologised in a collection called *Big City Cool: Short stories about urban youth*. Set on and in the days after 9/11, the central problem for the protagonist, Labibeh is that of her cultural identification. How can she still belong as an American if she is visibly Arab? This raises questions about identity post 9/11 for the main character and her sister, who identify as Arab but are American-born. Even if in the end an American of 'Middle Eastern appearance' can be both Arab and American, a hybrid identity does not come easily, nor is it without sacrifice. The events of 9/11 appear in this story to have required from Arab-Americans a re-working of their cultural identity. In essence, this is a story about the way in which the girls must negotiate their solidarity with America and seems to bring to the forefront a problem with identity that did not previously exist for the main character, Labibeh. The text insists repeatedly that she is an American. When Labibeh says, "I want to be home. But I *am* home. Does that make sense?" (p.55) the reader is positioned to recognize a struggle between her loyalties, and to understand the character's dilemma as one that makes sense in this new post 9/11 world. The story is informed by complex discourses about cultural and ethnic identification and it concurs with some of the claims that 9/11 pressured Arab-Americans to identify as *either Arab or American* in new ways; to choose sides.

In the second text, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* The teenaged Amal makes a radical decision to start wearing the hijab permanently, to become, as she puts it, a 'full-timer' (p.10). Not surprisingly, this has effects on her relationships with teachers and friends at her Melbourne private school. She too, albeit in an Australian rather than an American setting, must negotiate her cultural and ethnic identities. In choosing to 'go public', rather than 'suppress her Muslimness' (p.10) as she has in the past, her crossing of those cultural borders is difficult after 9/11. Though she is absolutely Australian, Amal's Muslim voice is allowed to be rebellious, and her Muslim identity is announced

with pride, in contrast to Labibeh, who is encouraged in the text to blend in.

Issues of cultural identity arise in various ways in 'Alone and All Together'. Although the story appears at first to avoid the binary by presenting characters who seem to identify *both* as Arab and as American (and alone and all together), an analysis of the story examines how the American cultural identity is privileged over the Arab identity. 9/11 (as it is told in *this* narrative, at any rate) seems from this story to have intensified a search for a harmonious collective American identity *without* the fragmentation embraced by theories of border crossing. Throughout the story, Labibeh, the narrator, relates her own feelings about being both proud and ashamed of being Arab. The story takes place in the days after 9/11, beginning with Labibeh's watching of the news, and continuing on as her sister, in New York, tries to come to terms with what has happened. In the wake of 9/11, Labibeh's voice makes meaning of the Arab-American experience, as she struggles with her Arab identity. She feels pressure to identify one way or the other. Labibeh thinks, "Maybe my sister is right – *ibn Amerikain!* Any other time I'd laugh, but now I just say Tch..." (p.53). She reflects on how 'Americans' may now be viewing her, her Arab friends and her family. Is she, in fact, an insider or an outsider? A part-timer', or a 'full-timer', like Amal in the second book? She is blond and fair haired, and indeed, Christian, so can 'pass' as 'American, though she wears her Arab-ness in her home-life, her language, and some of her cultural practices. Labibeh's sister, Sally, takes up the extreme cultural option, identifying as 'just' American, rejecting her Arab roots as much as is possible (though she is hindered by her Arab looks, which 'out' her ethnic background, written on her body). Labibeh and her sister Sally illustrate two sides of the coin. Neither of the two sisters in the story can say absolutely '*ibn Arab*' or '*ibn Amerikain*' (p. 56), but 9/11 has forced them to think about their strategies of identity and to negotiate their difference in altered ways. The narrative repeatedly forces both sisters to take sides, putting them in an uncomfortable position, in opposition to each other. The reader is positioned to empathise with Labibeh's divided ethnic loyalties, not only in the overt discussions of ethnicity, but in her general confusion after 9/11. It is this confusion that is at the centre

of her statement, 'But then my heart sinks, imagining everything so quiet, so empty, and me alone in the middle of it all' (p.53). Labibeh's 'alone-ness in the middle of it all' directs the reader to understand that her confusion is born not only of 9/11 itself, but of her ethnic place in the centre of the crisis.

It is choice or agency that distinguishes the two stories. Amal, in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* also has 'fair hair and coloured eyes' (p. 126). In wearing the hijab, she 'invites obstacles into her life', as her uncle puts it (p. 100). But despite public identification as Arab, she too understands the consequences of her brave act, knowing it makes her a geek at school and having part-time jobs refused to her. For example, a shop keeper refuses her job application, saying 'the thing on your head, love, that's what I mean' (p.300). Most significantly, her decision loses her a boyfriend. Labibeh in the other story longs to be 'all together' with her American family, where Amal, in this one, in many ways chooses the opposite, or at least resists more fiercely the idea that she must blend in to belong. For example, when questioned on her intentions by her mother, Amal says,

Ma! I know what I'm doing and I know what's right and wrong. We're just good friends. And as if Adam would even think of me in that way. I'm wearing the hijab. He knows I'm not the type to do anything and anyway, he's way too hot and cool to even consider me!

(p.219)

Here, the narrative highlights the binary. Amal can *either* be cool enough to warrant desire, *or* she can wear the hijab, which identifies her as out of the realm of possibility. The choice between the two identity positions comes to appear obvious through repeated use of the word "and" which builds that argument one point at a time. The text forces Amal and her friends to choose between two positions: to be cool and Australian, or to be devoutly Muslim. Though linguistically, she often performs a border crossing through her use of teenage language ('he's way too hot and cool'), the opposition between the Australian 'normal' and the Arab 'difference' goes unquestioned.

It is not, however, that the binaries of 'us' and 'them' did not exist before 9/11. Both texts acknowledge this, relating in their narratives racist incidents that pre-dated the terrorist attacks. For instance, Labibeh had often been subject to name-calling at school. A class-mate had once teased her by calling her a 'Camel Jockey'. She believed there was 'no meanness in it', but she acknowledges that some names 'cross the line', like 'Sand Nigger and Raghead' (p. 58). Labibeh is represented in the story as having an already existing role to play out, as Arab 'Other'. However, she interprets this teasing before 9/11 as different from the name-calling that occurs afterwards whence it takes on a menacing, more physically threatening tone. Labibeh is de-centred as she finds herself increasingly visible as the suspicious Other after 9/11. Now Labibeh doesn't have the luxury of taking her time over her cultural identification, since at school they're 'talking about 'the events' in almost every class' (p. 58). She has, at the very least, to pretend that her American identity is solid and aligned with the right team. In both stories, the discourse of 'us' and 'them' represents new identity struggles. Labibeh is aware that she is scared to be identified as Arab. 'They don't know us, what we are, and I'm glad. I'm ashamed that I'm glad' (p. 58), she says.

A key incident of racism in this story occurs the first time Labibeh has left her house since 9/11. She is already nervous about how she will be perceived; a nearby mosque has been threatened and though she looks American, she feels newly visible. She is 'sort of relieved' that she doesn't look like a terrorist (p. 61). Labibeh watches while the little brother of her devout Muslim friend is harassed as he leaves a shop. A group of 'normal' American boys (wearing ball caps on backwards and shiny, tight muscle shirts, the symbols or embodiment of American masculinity), surround the Arab boy and aggressively ask him, 'so are you or aren't you?' When Ahmed, the boy, asks, 'What do you care?' they repeat it. 'Just say it – you are or you aren't' (p. 60). The question, 'are you one of them or one of us', is implicit, but in the end Ahmed is 'outed' (a word which suits the purposes here – he is out rather than in), as a 'Raghead' (p. 81). When she defends Ahmed against his bullies, yelling 'You let him go!' she does not out herself or self-identify as Arab (p. 61) Although her voice is low and confident,

and they back off scared, she does not identify herself as being *like* Ahmed. Instead, she seems to align herself with a White American woman, who defends Ahmed as well. It is, 'some middle-aged woman in the crowd, a University type with a bandanna in her hair. She's giving me a you-go-girl smile. Everybody else, shoppers, deli clerks, a pan-handler, they're all watching' (p.62). It is the acceptance of (and furthermore, the support from) this White community, 'all watching' that positions the reader to accept Labibeh as part of the American community. As text, 'Alone and All Together' organizes a way for Labibeh to maintain a relationship with her Arab identity, whilst achieving the American acceptance she so desires. This fulfills a larger agenda confirming America's cultural tolerance and collective solidarity.

Amal, in the second text, also experiences racism, but responds by standing out rather than blending in: her ethnicity is visible in the wearing of the hijab. Like Labibeh, she also incurs name-calling. This ranges from the blatancy of the fellow student who says 'you must feel awful knowing you come from such a violent culture' (p. 147), to the more covert reaction of the principal of her private school who believes Amal is being forced against her will to wear the veil. As an Australian, she especially feels it after the Bali bombings, when she feels like a suspect. The individual and institutional racism Amal experiences test and attempt to force her loyalties in a way she refuses, ultimately to accept. Amal must explain her position often. For instance, she is asked by her debating team to give a speech on the topic of Islam and terrorism:

It'll be really valuable, Amal. I mean, what those Muslims did in Bali was so horrible, so if you could explain to everybody why they did it and how Islam justifies it, we could all try to understand
(Abdel-Fattah 2005, p. 242)

This provides an example of how Amal is allowed to be 'us' but can never truly escape her 'them'. The text, however, allows agency to its character, who refuses the binary. She says she'll do the speech if the other girl, a Christian, will give a speech about the Klu Klux Klan. Indeed, she finally belts a girl who has taunted her too often, shouting 'This is my country and if you ever forget it again I'm going

to rip your head off!' (p.232). More radically positioned than Labibeh, Amal's behaviour insists the reader take a stronger position.

The girls in both stories appear at first to have three identity choices. They can identify exclusively as Arab, which will isolate them. There are older women in each book who do this, but they are represented as old fashioned and ignorant, like Amal's friend's mother who tries to force her daughter into an arranged marriage. Their second choice is to exclusively identify as Western, which is seen in both texts as a rejection of the Arab identity. Those who do this are represented, in both texts as having 'sold out'. As Labibeh says,

I may look like the American one, but it's my sister Sally who always refused to answer Sitti in Arabic, and who kept saying 'Not this again!' when she served us her special Sunday chicken stuffed with rice and lamb heshweh. There's hot dogs in the fridge, Mom would offer.

(Geha 2002, p. 57)

Sally chooses the symbolic hot dogs, but Labibeh, protagonist and first-person narrator, does not reject her grandmother's cooking. Sally's choice thus comes to appear superficial, an outright rejection in contrast to Labibeh's more acceptable identity, where she still embraces some elements of her ethnic background. In this respect, Labibeh is allowed to 'keep' some of her Arab identity (though mostly the exotic features, like 'cultural' foods and some use of Arab language). This fairly superficial embracement of multiculturalism is treated favorably in the text. After all, Labibeh cannot, even post 9/11, reject her Arab ethnicity outright. Another example of selling out is constructed in the text through Labibeh's father, who abandons his Arab identity, leaving, changing his name and remarrying an all-American woman named Dusty. In *Does My Head Look Big in This*, this choice is represented by Amal's ridiculous uncle, who is desperate to assimilate. His farcical use of Aussie slang prompts Amal to wonder when he will realise that thongs and a Bond singlet aren't going to make him more Aussie (p. 178). Neither text comfortably allows Arab and Western identity to share space without conflict but nor do they advocate total assimilation. Years of

multicultural discourse make outright rejection of diversity an unacceptable answer, even post 9/11.

The third option for the girls would be a hybrid identification which comfortably moves between Arab and 'American' identity. At the end of 'Alone and All Together', Labibeh sees herself as 'half in and half out' (part Arab and part American), distinctions made within the story itself, for example when Labibeh says, 'I'm half way out the door' (p. 51). Prior to 9/11 she was reasonably comfortable with her double or hyphenated culture. She helped her grandmother cook traditional foods like *loubyeh* and *kusa* and *beitenjan mihsee*, but she also 'hangs out' with her friends in a suburb where there are bookstores, coffee shops, delis and 'places that sell used vintage clothing' (p. 59) and she goes to a 'regular' American school where one of her subjects is Western Civ. Labibeh had refused any dogmatic insistence that she identify as *either* Arabic or American, and she had tried her best to embrace her more fragmented self. It is only after 9/11 that she feels increased tension to hold the two now incompatible cultures together, and it is this tension that provides the catalyst for the story.

Popular culture is used in both texts as proof of hybrid identity. Amal, in *Does my Head Look Big in This?* listens to Shania Twain and Celine Dion when she wants to wallow in love-sickness, and she talks endlessly with her friends about *Big Brother* convictions (p. 240) and *Friends* (p.73). These characters are not wrapped in cotton wool. Amal, though, she says she wants to pick and choose what [she] likes and what she doesn't like from culture (p. 312) and sees her Muslim beliefs as un-negotiable, as represented by her refusal to kiss a boy. Though at the end of the book she says she's 'through with identity' (p.340) she actually makes a radical identity choice, to be adamantly Australian, yes, but to put her *Arab* self first. Her biggest challenge, and the central plotline, is how to deal with the Anglo-Australian Adam, on whom she has a crush. It comes to a head when Amal and Adam, who have been flirting for months, must decide where to go from there. Amal takes a breath and explains to him why they can't kiss, much less have sex: 'I don't want physical intimacy with a list of people in my life... That's my faith. It's not about guys slutting around and virgin girls waiting patiently for a guy to come along. It's... look... in my religion we both have to

be... pure... untouched' (p. 229). Adam does not accept this lightly. He's angry and they are awkward from that point on. The text thus defines the 'real world', where Amal must make choices, political, cultural, gendered and complex, and must live with them. This book thus defines the limitations of tolerance, but posits resistance as an option.

It is in a conversation with her sister Sally that the discourse of us and them becomes revealing. Labibeh and Sally both fear the racial targeting that took place immediately after 9/11, when all people of Middle-Eastern appearance were under suspicion; however where Labibeh understands herself as mostly Arab, Sally refuses to do so. In a telephone discussion about the identity of the terrorists on 9/11 itself, Labibeh and her sister have a concerned discussion:

"I just wish they wouldn't say it's us," I say, "until they're like, sure."

"Us?" my sister says. "What us?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. We were born here, and so were Mom and Dad, right here in Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A."

You're not here, I want to remind her. I am.

"What I want to know," Sally goes on, "is when 'us' stops meaning ibn Arab and starts meaning American!"

(Geha 2002, p. 53).

Labibeh claims her identification with her Arab community, though despite this the text argues both girls' desire to belong more solidly to the American collective. In some ways, the debate utilising 'us' and 'them' argues a similar point. Labibeh makes it clear that she is 'here' on American soil, whilst Sally distances herself from her sister as exclusively American.

The text in 'Alone and All Together' pressures the reader to accept a more ambivalent blend; to be part of a larger American community, but somehow to maintain a healthy self esteem about an Arab background. *Does My Head Look Big in This* constructs a different option, one where the Australian Amal can be more visibly different, more resistant, and less compliant. In Australia, it is more possible for the text to advocate an outsider position. In neither

text, however, is embracing multiple identities, traveling seamlessly across cultural borders an easy task. At the conclusion of the story, Labibeh's sister Sally explains that she feels less 'alone' once she participates in a candlelight vigil alongside other Americans:

But as soon as I got off the train I found myself walking in a crowd. There were all nationalities. Muslim women. There were Asians. Lots of people with their children. And dogs. People stood outside their shops. Everyone was really respectful. We walked to the Promenade. People were praying. They held candles and pictures. Then everyone went quiet. The light was gleaming off the buildings across the river and off the column of smoke rising from where the World Trade Centre once was. Every one of us. Mom, I was alone, and we were all together. Oh, it was such a beautiful day.

(Geha 2002, p. 63)

Labibeh has just had a similar collective experience to her sister's. Her desire to belong ends up being the same as Sally's: as in a trance, she follows the 'high beacons' (p.62) of Chicago's Sear Towers, becoming 'brave' in her solidarity with other Americans. She is all alone no more. A romanticized melting-pot of a nation, this story is seductive in constructing the collective national identity, reviving a narrative of hope that seemed on shaky ground. America is represented as a culturally diverse, respectful, spiritual, quiet and beautiful nation. Why would one want to be 'alone' when one could be 'all together' in this world?

Australia is, of course, a different nation than America, and the text offers different options for its Arab-Western characters. The text is less adamant about its patriotism, more able to resist a utopian solution. However, there are common ideologies expressed. On her last day of school, Amal similarly expounds on how happy she is to be a hyphenated Australian in a multicultural world:

It's been the 'wogs', the 'nappy heads', the 'foreigners' the 'persons of Middle Eastern appearance', the Asians, the 'oppressed' women, the Greek Orthodox pensioner chain-smoker, the 'salami eaters', the 'ethnics', the pom-turned-curry munchers, the narrow minded and the educated... It's their stories and confrontations and pains and

joys which have empowered me to know myself, challenges me to embrace my identity as a young Australian-Palestinian-Muslim girl.
(Abdel-Fattah 2005, p. 340)

In some ways, this appears to share qualities with the other text in its vision of diversity and in its construction of a sense of collective solidarity amongst disparate groups. But this list of stereotypes and catch phrases is somehow satiric (as demonstrated by the use of quotation marks around words like "oppressed"). The reader is positioned to accept that Amal stands up for her Arab self in aligning herself with a good many others who are, in this list, constructed as having been equally mistreated. In its use of the word 'empowering' it is different from the other text, where 'everyone was really respectful' (63).

Abdel-Fattah's novel constructs the possibility of a more vocally resistant Muslim identity, but in the end, the texts share similar ideology: a world that integrates difference without entirely diluting it, and a world where a choice between 'us' and 'them' comes to seem natural, now unavoidable and difficult to negotiate. It's a hard ask, being both alone and all together, but it's situated through both texts as the only way forward, negotiating this complex task of cultural border crossing in times when the world increasingly culturally, racially, ethnically and religiously divided.



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