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# ‘Does My Bomb Look Big in This?’ Representing Muslim Girls in Recent Australian Cultural Texts

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Since 9/11 there has been a spate of cultural texts for young people which attempt to move away from the sensationalised connotation and reductive stereotyping of the Muslim as the homogenised, dehumanised, violent and/or exoticised pariah/Other, and to represent Muslim characters sympathetically instead of as potential terrorists (see, for example, Nadia Jamal and Taghred Chandrab’s *The Glory Garage* (2005), and Morris Gleitzman’s *Boy Overboard* (2002) and *Girl Underground* (2004)). One of the first of these was John Doyle’s *Marking Time*, which was shown on ABC television in 2003, and which the promotion material describes as ‘a Romeo and Juliet story set in a rural Australian town. Told with warmth, humour and acute observation, *Marking Time* traces Hal Flemming’s journey from boy to man... [It] is the coming of age of a boy and a nation’ (<http://www.abc.net.au/markingtime/>). *Marking Time* shows a changing Australian society, with the innocent euphoria brought about by the Sydney Olympics distorted into fear and distrust following the Tampa incident. Literally Hal is ‘marking time’ until he goes to uni, spending an aimless gap year in the company of lowlife friends. Indeed, the text’s strength lies in the comic depiction of young Australians like Hal’s friends Bullet, Shane and Belinda, whose rowdy, raucous, partying behaviour is also a response to terminal boredom; in this case it seems to be the only recourse of those not bright enough to make their way out of this small town.

*Marking Time* is a worthy, well-meaning story, and a moving one, offering, in Edward Said’s words, that ‘marvellous instance of the interrelations between society, history and textuality’ (Said 1979, p.24) which accompanies Orientalist discourse. For example, in one key scene the town conservatives and progressives meet to thrash out arrangements for their upcoming festival, and the talk turns to the Afghans on Temporary Protection Visas who live in the town and work in the cannery while their refugee status is assessed. The town villains - that is, those who swallow the Howard rhetoric about refugees and believe that ‘the boaties could be terrorists’ - are stereotyped as insular and ignorant (one is also guilty of raping his assistant), and are contrasted with Hal’s father Geoff, the enlightened high school teacher who believes in fair play and the Olympic ideal, and whose voice of reason is not listened to in this

hysterical microcosm of Australian society. Meanwhile the objects of this heated discussion are discursively silent, unable to represent themselves, passively ‘participat[ing] in [their own] Orientalizing’ (Said, 1979, p.345). Non-participating, non-autonomous, non-sovereign, they are seen as the mere objects of history, not the creators (Said 1979). In all fairness, it should be noted that Doyle is aware of their passivity, and various characters offer the reason that they had to behave like that in order to survive under the Taliban. Nonetheless the impression remains that Doyle knows little about Afghans, whereas he is very familiar with the two types of Australians depicted in this story.

And so *Marking Time* offers a wonderfully literal example of Ghassan Hage’s notion in *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, that the Arab is the passive exotic object in an argument between whites over the mastery of the national space; an argument in which white racists and white multiculturalists both see their nation structured around a white culture which they control, with Aboriginal people and migrants as exotic objects - the ethnic and racial Other - within this space. Both sides have given themselves the national governmental right to ‘worry’ about the nation, and to ‘bestow’ tolerance or to revoke it, and Islam is part of this multicultural system of difference which is only provisionally tolerated, especially when there is a perception that the racialised Other could change the fabric of white Australian life and identity. This is in keeping with Said’s observation that the discourse of Orientalism, while ostensibly ‘about’ the Orient, really tells us more about the machinery that produced this discourse: ‘it has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world’ (Said 1979, p.12); ‘Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object, which was also produced by the West’ (Said 1979, p.22). According to Ian Ang, ‘in the ideology of tolerance the dominant majority is structurally placed in a position of power inasmuch as it is granted the active power to tolerate while minorities can only be at the end of tolerance’ (Ang 1996, p.39-40). Meanwhile Homi Bhabha exposes the myth of pluralist tolerance as a power-laden division between the tolerating and the tolerated: ‘the discourse of multiculturalism entails simultaneously a *creation* of cultural diversity and a *containment* of cultural difference’



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(Bhabha 1990, p.208). To express it another way, according to Randa Abdel-Fattah, the author of the second text to be considered in this paper, 'To tolerate is akin to granting a self-righteous assent of approval. It cannot work without a hierarchy of greater and lesser. Of a subject and an object. Of a judge and a judged'. And finally, she seems to sigh in exasperation, 'there is something worse than being demonised, stigmatised, theorised. It's being tolerated...' (Abdel-Fattah 2005b, p.203).

*Marking Time* is told from Hal's perspective, and through his voice-overs we see his growth to awareness about the Other. Like the other Afghans, Hal's love-interest Randa is always marginalised and objectified. She is represented as mysterious, exotic, and different, although, as Rana Kabbani has noted elsewhere, the desirable woman, as in an Orientalist painting, is not exactly 'foreign-looking', but always conforms to conventional standards of European beauty (Kabbani 1994, p.81). Randa's subsequent sexual relationship with Hal also seems to endorse Kabbani's argument that in Orientalist texts the native woman's surrender to the man is not because he is powerful and she is forced to serve him, but because he has seduced her with his personal charm and holds her in willing captivity (Kabbani 1994, p.80). This sexual fantasy of the capture of the elusive and the taboo seems even more unlikely given that up to now Hal's romantic technique has consisted of getting a huge crush, then waiting around, hang-dog style, for someone to take pity on him. In her discussion of the cinematic Orient Ela Shohat argues that the real purpose of the Orientalist narrative is to permit the male viewer to project his 'unthinkable' sexual fantasies into an erotic imaginary space 'where women are defenceless' (Shohat 1997, p.102). According to Shohat film is a product of the Western male gaze, and by acting as the 'Id', the hero allows the heroine to overcome her sexual repression. Arguably this is the case here, for in the early stages of their friendship the decorous, dignified Randa finds the easy morality of Australian young people very confronting. The trope of the Orient as an erotic space, together with woman's pivotal role in the sexualising of the Orient, is reproduced here via the stock image of the doe-eyed woman with latent sensuality; this is neatly indicated when the newly sexually emancipated Randa applauds their first physical encounter

as 'the perfect One'. And so colonialist and patriarchal ideologies inform and mutually support each other in this narrative which involves the Western construction of the Orient as a sexualised, sexually compliant space to be colonised, and in which the Muslim woman is a simulacra, a shimmering illusory vision, rather than a fully realised active agent. It is entirely fitting then that in the end Hal goes to Pakistan to find Randa and bring her back, reinforcing the message about belated personal and national awareness as the thoughtful white man/Australia comes to the rescue of the powerless female Other. And so *Marking Time* conforms to the Orientalist pattern where 'the unveiling of the mysteries of an unknown space becomes a rite of passage allegorizing the Western achievement of virile heroic stature' (Shohat 1997, p.27). Of course Romeo learns how to become a man, but, unlike Shakespeare's more famous duo, this particular Juliet doesn't get nearly equal billing.

#### **To veil or not to veil?**

In *Marking Time* the veil is seen as a signifier of female imprisonment and difference, a sign of the Other, largely silent and invisible. Early into their friendship Randa voluntarily removes her hijab to show Hal her hair. This process of exposing the female Other, of Western unveiling for comprehension – literally denuding her and encouraging scopical desire – of course allegorizes the power of the Western man to possess her, when, as a metaphor for the land, she becomes available for Western penetration and domination in the form of the masculine redeemer who conquers the feminine wilderness, liberating her from the yoke of Muslim men (Shohat 1997, p.40). According to Meyda Yegenoglu the veil is associated with the fear of the Other, erecting as it does a barrier between the body of the Oriental woman and the Western gaze (Yegenoglu 1998, p.47). By donning the veil the wearer has a surveillant gaze, frustrating the voyeuristic desire of the colonialist and displacing *his* surveillant eye, dispossessing him of his own gaze (Yegenoglu 1998, p.63). Because the veil works as a kind of panopticon, a way for Islam to see out, while keeping outsiders from looking in, unveiling can clearly be understood as the colonial desire to reveal and control the colonised country, and the fetishising of the veil, this obsessive desire to lift the veil in the name

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of 'liberation', 'is characterised by a desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible' (Yegenoglu 1998, p.64).

Of course the veil as signifier is nuanced and ambiguous, subject to polysemous cultural inscriptions; dictionary definitions note that it is 'an article of attire, especially worn by women to conceal or protect the face', but also it is 'something which conceals, covers or hides', it is a 'disguising medium, a cloak or mask'; and it is that which 'conceals from apprehension, knowledge or perception' (Yegenoglu 1998, p.47). Not the least of these meanings is that it is a metaphor of membrane, serving as a screen around which Western fantasies of penetration revolve, and indeed one dictionary definition refers to 'a membrane, membranous appendage, serving as a cover or screen' (Yegenoglu 1998, p.47). It is clear that the veil is subject to negotiation and multiple misinterpretations, and, as Daphne Grace notes, 'oppositional viewpoints revolving around binaries of oppression/opportunity, incarceration/insurrection, denial/expression of identity, and entrapment/agency, are clearly contingent upon cultural and individual positioning' (Grace 2004, p.3). Whether or not the veil indicates or eradicates agency and identity involves the important question of women's ability to make choices (Grace 2004, p.7), and there is no doubt that in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005a) the hijab is put on as an instrument of liberation, and presented as an embodiment of agency, constituting a dignified, spiritually empowered space where veiled Muslim girls choose to engender their own subjectivity, as well as discouraging men from invading their private space. Like *Marking Time*, *Head* is also a rites-of-passage text, and it has been praised as 'an enlightened, accessible and educative view of Muslim life in modern Australia' and 'a timely and realistic picture of post September 11 Australia from a Muslim point of view' (Franzway 2005, p.12). For one reviewer '[it] shows the distinction between culture and Islam' (*Reading Time* 2005, p.36) and for another 'it works hard at showing the dignity and diversity of Islamic culture without resorting to compromise and assimilation, and on the whole it succeeds' (Franzway 2005, p.13). The novel is primarily concerned with demythologising and dismantling monolithic and homogenous assumptions

about Muslims in the West, and Abdel-Fattah is happy to represent Muslim women 'because I'll never get sick of talking about the hijab. My life's journey is to confront those stereotypes about Muslim women being oppressed and ignorant, and to show them for what they really are: generalisations and misconceptions' (cited in Minus 2005, p.14). Furthermore she remarks that 'the only literature you find about Muslims concerns honour killings or girls escaping the Taliban' (cited in Minus 2005, p.14). According to Abdel-Fattah, one publisher said that if there wasn't an honour killing, they weren't interested (cited in Lord 2005, p.104). 'I thought, "wow, why can't there be a teenage Muslim voice out there?... I wanted to show that Muslim teenagers experience the same issues as Anglo teenagers, but they also deal with the pressure of being called a terrorist, fanatic, extremist or fundamentalist"' (cited in Blake 2005, p.17). 'The difference is they can't escape the stereotypes that they are forced by men to wear the hijab and that they spend their weekends making bombs' (cited in Lloyd 2005, p.4).

The focus of this book is not the Muslim religion, but central character Amal's anxiety about her public commitment to it, when this 'Alibrandi in a hijab' (Minus 2005, p.14) finds the courage to morph into an UCO (Unidentified Covered Object). This text can most usefully be examined by drawing on Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridised subjectivity in the third space to explain how individuals negotiate the contradictory demands and polarities of their lives, disrupting the concept of original and homogenous culture. Just as Hal in the previous text is emblematic of White male Australia, Amal personifies the ambivalence and disorientation experienced by Muslim girls in Australia, in their struggle for agency and an identity which, rather than being a fixed entity, is continually evolving and adapting to new circumstances, in a space of contradiction, repetition, ambiguity and disavowal of colonial authority that does not allow for original signifiers and symbols in oppositional polarities, but instead these signs are appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and reread (Bhabha 1990). Such discursive conditions of enunciation allow for possibilities of supplementary sites of resistance and renegotiation: 'Once [the third space] opens up, we are in a different space, we are making different presumptions

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and mobilizing emergent, unanticipated forms of historical agency' (Bhabha 1994, p.114). These dynamic and contradictory forms of agency, where dialectical polarities demand the subject's allegiance at the same moment, mean that hybridized individuals, caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation, inhabit the rim of an 'in-between reality' marked by shifting psychic, cultural and territorial boundaries. And in this space Amal negotiates and strategizes practices of collusion and resistance, while the text indicates a movement away from narrow identity politics determined by static or essentialized notions of race, gender and class – as in *Marking Time* – towards a rearticulated politics of difference.

Following Bhabha's argument that 'we should remember that it is the "inter" – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' (Bhabha 1995, p.209), Grace contends that this state of both physical and temporal 'in-betweenness' could also describe the position of the woman behind the veil, who is always located in-between space. The veil creates just such an ambiguous space which defines identity and yet simultaneously removes any identity. This conceptualisation of the veil as a borderline, a barrier between spaces and identities, this prioritising of internal, subjective space could be argued as a site for women's agency, and this certainly appears to be the case in Abdel-Fattah's text.

According to Bhabha's theory of the third space individuals construct culture from national as well as religious texts and often transform them into Western symbols, signifiers of technology, language or dress. This notion has particular resonance in this text. For critics like Sam Franzway (2005, p.12), the author tries too hard to be cool, pushing her pop-cultural credentials to a young audience in an attempt to win their approval (for example, Amal watches *Sex and the City*, and stresses about her hijab as fashion statement: 'Is the front curve okay? I mean, are there any dents in the shape? Is it too tight? Are my cheeks squashed up so my face looks fat? I take a mirror out and scrutinise my veil' [Abdel-Fattah 2005, p.131]). For Franzway the book is strongest when it stays within the bounds of cultural and religious consideration and explanation rather than straying into the world of bright and funky teenage life. Yet I would

argue that surely such contradictions capture the dynamic multiplicities of culture and ethnicity, registering the ways in which identity formation draws on and combines different elements to create something new. Hybridity can involve both assimilation and destabilisation, and does not always disrupt and challenge the hegemonic centre. As Bryan Turner has wryly commented elsewhere, 'The threat to Islam is not the legacy of Jesus, but that of Madonna' (Turner 1994, p.15). And this is also in keeping with Abdel-Fattah's intention to show how 'normal' Australian teenage Muslim girls are: 'They deal with the same issues that all teenagers deal with; even wearing the hijab, they bring to that the same fashion concerns and issues as any other person' (cited in Minus 2005, p.14). 'Muslim teenagers generally face the same dramas of adolescence as any other teenager – crushes, fashions, diet, body image, family' (cited in Lloyd 2005, p.4). However it is also clear from this text that the dynamic minority subject can also act as an unsettling agent, and unlike *Marking Time*, an inter-racial romance is never a real option here. Amal rejects the coolest boy in school when she realises the direction in which their relationship is heading: 'Sure there was a bit of flirting now and again but I never actually thought that I was inviting him to think I wanted him on that boyfriend/girlfriend level... It's all very confusing and if it was the movies we'd probably kiss and make up and then things would go back to normal, except in our case it's the kissing part that's holding up the making up' (Abdel-Fattah 2005, p.304). In examples such as this Abdel-Fattah indicates the mixing that occurs in urban spaces in contemporary diasporic communities in our postmodern, postcolonial world, and where identity renegotiation is fluid and dynamic, going beyond the contained grid of fixed identities and binary oppositions through the production of hybrid cultural forms and meanings in that space between sameness and otherness symbolised by the veil.

According to Bhabha, 'cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation to Self or Other' (Bhabha 1995, p.207). According to Leela Gandhi a 'double consciousness' emerges, where individuals come to possess multiple layers of identity, allegiance and loyalty, across different registers that may be local, regional or national (Gandhi 1998, p.124). This proliferation

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of consciousness is 'an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity' (Bhabha 1995, p.209). In *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Randa Abdel-Fattah indicates the possibility for social co-existence and cultural multiplicity; standing in that indetermined threshold place signified by the wearing of her veil, Amal has selfhood and agency. This text negotiates dynamic identities of collusion, resistance, and contestation of the symbolic freight entailed with the 'exotic/erotic Other' that is reinforced in *Marking Time*. In *Does My Head Look Big in This?* the racialised and ethnic Other is positioned so as to represent agency and textual presence. She is now no longer marginalised or just tolerated in Australia's national space, but stands squarely there in the middle.



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