

Conforming to Belong vs Resisting to Remain in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

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Abstract. This study examines the process of Muslim female identity formation through a comparative reading of the characters Faten in Laila Lalami's novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) and Arissa in Shaila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams* (2009). Responding to the tendency of existing research to view identity as an end result, a form of resistance, or a social position, this study addresses the relative lack of attention to how identity is gradually formed throughout the characters' life journeys. This study integrates Muslimah Narratives, the Bildungsroman, and Postcolonial Feminism to examine character development, diasporic experiences, religious identity, and colonial power relations in shaping the characters' identities across different diasporic contexts. The findings reveal two contrasting patterns of identity formation. Faten represents a negative Bildungsroman, in which religious idealism and personal agency are gradually eroded by economic uncertainty, illegal migration, and patriarchal-colonial power structures, resulting in self-disruption and arrested maturation. In contrast, Arissa exemplifies a transcultural Bildungsroman, in which trauma, Islamophobia, and loss become catalysts for emotional and spiritual growth through reflective religiosity and narrative agency, particularly through writing. This comparative analysis demonstrates that the identities of Muslim women in the diaspora are neither static nor homogeneous; rather, they are shaped by legal status, material conditions, and access to symbolic spaces of agency. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Muslim women's identity formation in diasporic contexts and highlights the subjectivity of Muslim women's literature beyond reductive stereotypes of victimhood or resistance.

Keywords: *Identity, Diaspora, Muslim Women, Bildungsroman, Agency.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, literature and media have often portrayed Muslim women in ways that emphasize the conflict between Islam and modernity, as well as between oppression and freedom. Such portrayals not only shape global perceptions but also influence how Muslim women navigate their identities within diverse socio-cultural contexts. The formation of Muslim women's identity has become a major issue in postcolonial and feminist literary studies, reflecting broader concerns about agency, belonging, and resistance (K.K., 2025). Religion, gender, and politics often shape how Muslim women are perceived and how they perceive themselves in relation to Islamic and Western cultural frameworks. These experiences are represented in literature as responses to socio-political systems that shape beliefs about women, as well as their personal journeys.

This is particularly evident in literary representations of Muslim women, who not only face negative stereotypes about Islam but also contend with stereotypes of women as weak and oppressed victims. In previous research, Faten's identity has been portrayed as a victim of masculinity and patriarchy, a male-dominated social system (Lubis et al., 2024). She has also been depicted as the object of Orientalist sexual fantasy; Faten represents Arab migrant women who are constructed as exotic, sexual, and submissive figures in the Western imagination (Lamghari, 2022). Meanwhile, Arissa is portrayed as an indirect victim of the 9/11 tragedy who lost her husband and had to endure the discrimination he faced from Western society (Azzahra et al., 2024). Arissa is also portrayed as a victim of external pressures, showing how American Orientalism disrupts her identity as a Pakistani Muslim woman in America; however, she is also depicted as continually striving to adapt in order to survive (Musakar et al., 2023).

In the characters of Faten in Laila Lalami's novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and Arissa in Shaila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams*, Muslim women are portrayed through challenging life journeys that lead them to form new identities. Therefore, this study examines the process of constructing Muslim female identity through the characters of Faten in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* and Arissa in *Saffron Dreams*, exploring the narrative development of each character, the socio-political challenges they face, and the representation of Muslim female identity formed through their experiences and life choices. Both characters demonstrate how Muslim female figures in literary works negotiate faith, identity, migration, trauma, and social pressures in different ways as active subjects possessing agency.

This study analyzes the character of Faten, a Moroccan woman who immigrated to Spain and begins her journey in the novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (Lalami, 2005). She is juxtaposed with Arissa, a Muslim widow who lost her husband in the 9/11 attacks and must struggle to cope with life after his death and the effects of 9/11 in the novel *Saffron Dreams*, written by Shaila Abdullah in 2009 (Abdullah,

2009). Both novels depict different Muslim journeys, yet they are equally relevant. Faten in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* migrates to fight for her freedom amid social limitations in her home country, while Arissa in *Saffron Dreams* struggles against discrimination and Islamophobia. Both represent Muslim women who attempt to challenge stereotypes and construct their own identities.

The characters Faten and Arissa are analyzed with a focus on Muslim narratives, combined with Bildungsroman and postcolonial feminist theory, to examine how both negotiate Muslim female identity. Although studies on the representation of Muslim women in diaspora literature continue to develop, most previous studies have still used separate theoretical frameworks, such as postcolonial feminism or migrant Bildungsroman. There is still limited research that integrates Bildungsroman theory, Muslimah narratives, and postcolonial feminism to examine how Muslim female characters actively construct and negotiate their identities.

Several comparative studies have examined the formation of Muslim women's identities within diaspora literature. For example, Ouhiba (2021) conducted a comparative analysis of *The Translator* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* to demonstrate how Muslim women challenge homogeneous Western representations and reconstruct multidimensional identities through religious and cultural negotiations (Ouhiba, 2021). Similarly, Jones-Gailani (2019) compares the experiences of Iraqi Sunni women of Arab and Kurdish backgrounds who migrated to Toronto and Detroit to show how the hijab serves as a symbol of politics, identity, and Islamic feminism in diaspora life. In this research, the hijab is an expression of political consciousness constructed through religion while simultaneously affirming agency (free will) as women (Jones-Gailani, 2019). Other studies focus on the negotiation of identity and belonging among Muslim women in diaspora spaces through postcolonial or Islamic feminist perspectives (Sulaiman et al., 2018).

Several studies have compared how Muslim women maintain or negotiate their religious identities within Western societies. However, most research has viewed identity as an end result, a form of resistance, or a social position, while few studies discuss how that identity is gradually formed throughout characters' life journeys. There is still limited discussion of character formation that negotiates between Islamic tradition, diasporic experience, and postcolonial power structures. Moreover, in studies of Faten and Arissa, both characters are still rarely discussed as subjects who actively construct their own identities; instead, they are more often discussed as victims of culture or patriarchy. Furthermore, there is a lack of comparative studies across different Muslim diasporic experiences (Arab-North African in Faten and South Asian-American in Arissa); most studies focus on Muslim Americans in relation to other Muslim Americans, or Arab diaspora in relation to the wider Arab diaspora. As a result, few studies examine how cultural contexts shape distinct patterns of identity development in Muslim women's literature. Previous studies have also predominantly employed postcolonial feminism or Islamic feminism to examine the position of Muslim women. Therefore, this study integrates Muslimah narratives, the Bildungsroman, and postcolonial feminism to analyze how character development, diasporic experiences, religious identity, and colonial power relations shape the characters' identities.

The Bildungsroman perspective is used to analyze how the journeys of the two characters form their identities in response to patriarchy and in the discovery of

self-agency, as well as how the authors depict them through Muslimah narratives—whether as victims/oppressed subjects or as active subjects with a voice, and whether their experiences show negotiations between Islam, local culture, modernity, or diaspora. Additionally, these perspectives are intertwined to analyze how these characters construct their identities through religious experience, modern life, social pressure, and social injustice. Postcolonial feminist theory is used to analyze the challenges and conflicts they face in forming themselves as postcolonial subjects, as well as how colonialism, race, class, culture, and local traditions influence women's experiences alongside gender factors. The analysis considers whether Faten and Arissa are portrayed as victims of culture or tradition, whether their freedom is measured by Western standards, and whether they are subaltern or have agency, focusing on narrative representation.

The Bildungsroman provides a structural framework for tracing each character's maturation, while female and immigrant variants of the genre highlight how gendered and diasporic experiences create nonlinear and discontinuous paths. This model serves as the main foundation for reading character journeys, although Moretti focuses heavily on European traditions and male experiences, thereby requiring enrichment from gender and ethnic perspectives (Franco Moretti, 2000). Maxine Hong Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior* (1976), shows that the journey to adulthood for women is not linear and is full of structural obstacles (race, gender, tradition). In her work, Kingston describes female characters who struggle against multiple social pressures (gender, race, class, and culture) (Pin-chia Feng, 1998). Women's journeys often involve alienation, the body, sexuality, and power relations. In Atwood's version of the female Bildungsroman, the journey to adulthood is not one of obedience but of critical awareness and resistance (Ellen McWilliams, 2017). In addition, Muslimah narratives further sharpen this analysis by highlighting Islamic identity, piety, spirituality, and agency as central elements in self-formation (Bodman & Tohidi, 1999).

In *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2004), Amin Malak expands the scope of Muslim narratives to include not only Muslim writers but also those who are "affiliated" or "ambivalent" toward Islam. This opens space to read Muslim women from diverse perspectives. Muslim women are not merely objects of exoticization or stereotypes but are also subjects of narratives that present their own experiences (Malak, 2004). In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Saba Mahmood also argues that Muslim women should be understood as complex subjects rather than passive objects or stereotypes. Mahmood emphasizes that women's experiences shape what can be called a "subject of freedom" in a sense that differs from liberal freedom. According to her, freedom is not merely freedom from norms, but freedom within and through norms, through self-cultivation within norms (Mahmood, 2005).

Furthermore, postcolonial feminist theory reveals how colonialism, race, class, culture, and local traditions influence women's experiences, in addition to gender itself, and how they come to understand themselves. Postcolonial feminism emerged to challenge singular narratives and to emphasize the diversity of women's experiences across social, political, cultural, and colonial historical contexts (McEwan, 2001). In *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988), Mohanty shows that Western feminism often depicts Third

World women as homogeneous: poor, oppressed, passive, and in need of rescue. Mohanty emphasizes that the term "Third World women" is not a neutral empirical category but a construct formed through assumptions, generalizations, and interpretations that overlook local heterogeneity, including class, ethnicity, and history (Mohanty, 1988). Postcolonial feminism also emphasizes that non-Western women often experience double oppression. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the most marginalized groups or subalterns cannot truly "speak" in unmediated ways. She criticizes how Western scholarship often fails to represent subaltern voices, instead replacing them through mediated, translated, or silenced representations within power structures. According to Spivak, postcolonial feminism is not only a critique of patriarchy but also an examination of how colonial discourse silences women in the Global South (Spivak, 1988).

Together, these frameworks form an intersecting model that allows a comprehensive understanding of Muslim women's identity formation. The Bildungsroman traces narrative arcs; female and immigrant variants reveal structural barriers; Muslimah narratives center faith; and postcolonial feminism reveals power dynamics shaping identity.

This study aims to analyze how the narratives of Faten and Arissa combine elements of the Bildungsroman with Muslim women's narratives, highlighting how Muslim women negotiate identity, belief, and belonging in diasporic contexts. It also focuses on how Faten and Arissa represent distinct processes of maturation across two socio-political contexts, and how they articulate their identities amid migration, trauma, and discrimination. The analysis highlights how both characters face multiple forms of constraint, including religion, patriarchy, migration, and gender, which ultimately influence the formation of their identities.

This article is expected to contribute to literary studies by addressing the limited discussion of hybrid frameworks combining Bildungsroman and Muslim narratives. Overall, this study offers a new perspective by integrating Bildungsroman and Muslim narrative approaches informed by postcolonial feminism. It also aims to contribute to understanding how identity formation is shaped by discrimination and by the position of subjects whose voices are constrained by structural power relations. A character's identity can shift significantly under social pressures and external constraints that are often beyond individual control and that shape identity formation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive method because the data consist of textual narratives drawn from two selected novels. A comparative approach was employed to analyze similarities and differences in the characterization of the protagonists. Qualitative comparative methods treat cases as configurations of attributes and aim to identify how combinations of conditions relate to outcomes; they blend case-oriented and variable-oriented logic and are based on set-theoretic relations (Mello, Patrick A., 2021). This study used primary data consisting of textual evidence, including narratives, dialogues, and character actions, from *Hope and*

Other Dangerous Pursuits by Laila Lalami (2005) and *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah (2009). Secondary data included theoretical books, previous studies, and journal articles related to character analysis and literary criticism. Data were collected through in-depth reading of both novels. Relevant text units from dialogues and important scenes were identified, marked, and coded or categorized to reveal character traits, conflicts, and character development. Document analysis was also applied to collect relevant supporting theories. The data were analyzed using Murphy's characterization framework (1972), which includes personal description, character as seen by others, speech, past life, conversations with others, reactions, direct comments, thoughts, and habits (Nisah et al., 2023). The study focuses only on selected dominant characterization techniques that are relevant to the topic of discussion. The analysis of the characters Faten and Arissa was conducted in three stages: (1) identifying textual evidence related to the characters, (2) classifying and analyzing the data based on Murphy's technique, and (3) comparing the results of the two novels to determine similarities and differences in characterization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Identity, Faith, and Religious Negotiation

The construction of Muslim female identity in both novels is closely related to how the characters negotiate their faith and religious practices amid social and political pressures. In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005), Faten is portrayed as a highly religious individual who was actively involved in Islamic organizations during her studies. However, after migrating illegally to Spain, her religious practices decline significantly, and she becomes a sex worker in order to survive in her new country. This stands in contrast to her earlier expectations, in which she strongly upheld religious ideals and promoted values that were sometimes considered extreme by those around her. She is now forced to confront a reality that is far removed from her former idealism and the religious values she previously upheld.

Her transformation from a devout individual into a pragmatic survivor leaves her torn between her sacred past and a present defined by moral compromise. The values she once defended are now in conflict with her current circumstances. She experiences a profound dilemma between faith and survival.

"She stared at the ceiling for a while and then turned to look at her nightstand, where a pocket-size edition of the Qur'an lay, a thin film of dust over it. She remembered her college days, when she'd decided to wear the hijab and preached to every woman she met that she should do the same. How foolish she had been" (Lalami, 2005. p, 144).

Faten's life is characterized by dilemmas and regret following her migration. This excerpt illustrates the dilemmas and regret she experiences. Her gaze at a dusty Quran reflects her internal conflict, as she deeply regrets abandoning the religious values she once held dear. In literary analysis of novels, a sustained gaze at an object often symbolizes a character's internal conflict, such as emotional dilemma, regret,

or the revelation of a hidden identity through object symbolism. This technique is commonly used to depict trauma or psychological struggle, where the object becomes a representation of abandoned or remembered values, reinforcing the Bildungsroman narrative and character development (Djohar & Komalasari, 2024).

In reality, she was forced to remove her hijab to avoid being detected by the police and became a sex worker as a means of survival. She deeply regrets her inability to uphold these values and her involvement in actions that contradict them, while also questioning how she can return to her former life under the pressures of illegal immigration. Her regret over her past decisions is also evident, showing how her earlier idealism contributed to her current suffering.

In contrast, Arissa in *Saffron Dreams* demonstrates a different pattern of faith negotiation. After 9/11, the hijab is no longer merely a symbol of culture and religion but becomes a potential source of discrimination, violence, and social exclusion. Arissa experiences a moment in which she physically “discards” her hijab, or removes part of her religious appearance, not because she has abandoned her faith, but for her own safety in response to Islamophobia.

“Ma, I have decided to let go of my hijab.”

.....

Ma turned around slowly and then sat down on the blanket I had laid out earlier. I couldn't read her expression, but tiredness oozed from her. I kept standing, unsure of what to do with the rest of my sandwich. (Abdullah, 2009. p, 82)

Arissa's decision to remove her hijab after the 9/11 tragedy is not a rejection of Islam but a reflective attempt to question the meaning of faith amid trauma and Islamophobia. Her decision becomes a way to communicate with both God and herself. This raises the question of whether faith is solely measured through the hijab as a religious symbol. For Arissa, the hijab is part of her belief system; however, after 9/11, it also becomes a symbolic burden that produces feelings of alienation and suspicion within American society. This reflects a form of identity negotiation rather than a rejection of faith. Arissa chooses to alter her relationship with the symbol rather than renounce her belief.

Arissa is also representative of cases within the Muslim community in which identity and self-formation are profoundly affected by traumatic social conditions (Majeed et al., 2017). A parallel can be drawn with the story of Ammar ibn Yasir, who was forced to utter words of disbelief to escape torture, a narrative acknowledged in the Qur'an, Surah An-Nahl (16:106) (Dashti et al., 2019). Ammar was a close companion of the Prophet who endured brutal torture at the hands of Abu Jahl and the Quraysh.

In *The Story of Ammar ibn Yasir* by Aisha Stacey (2018), Ammar reached a breaking point after witnessing the brutal killing of his family. In a state of severe emotional distress, fear, and psychological collapse, he engaged in a form of survival “negotiation” by complying with Abu Jahl's demand to verbally denounce Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). This act was not performed because his faith had weakened, but because the physical and psychological pressure exceeded human endurance. The Qur'an in Surah An-Nahl explains that

accountability is determined by what resides in the heart, not by statements made under coercion. This form of survival under extreme oppression is recognized in Islam as a dispensation (*rukhsah*) in emergency situations. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself defended Ammar against accusations of apostasy and affirmed that “Ammar is filled with faith from head to toe” (*The Story of Ammar ibn Yasir*, 2018). Thus, the actions of Arissa and Ammar ibn Yasir in survival contexts are not acts of religious betrayal but compromises under coercion, while their inner faith remains intact.

Migration, Trauma, and Socio-Political Pressures

Migration and trauma are crucial factors in shaping Faten and Arissa’s identity formation. Faten experiences illegal migration from Morocco to Spain as a response to academic failure and social repression in her home country. Her undocumented status places her in a vulnerable position, exposing her to exploitation and structural violence.

Faten experiences multiple forms of discrimination and exploitation during the process of identity formation. Before migrating and living in Morocco, her decision to wear the hijab, participate in Islamic organizations, and criticize corruption and social issues led to negative perceptions from Noura’s family and the surrounding community. This reflects the discrimination faced by Muslim women and demonstrates how social pressure functions as a form of oppression. She is perceived as unconventional and associated with radical ideas.

After leaving Morocco and migrating to Spain, she faces further exploitation and discrimination, not only as a Muslim woman but also as an undocumented migrant.

“Women in this country,” he said, shaking his head. “They don’t know how to treat a man. Not the way you Arab girls do.”

.....

“I’ve been reading up,” he said. “About the duties of the woman to the man and all that. It’s a fascinating subject.” (Lalami, 2005, p. 148 -149).

In the excerpt above, Martin, the man who hires Faten, discriminates against her. He not only belittles her as a woman and sex worker but also as a Muslim. The phrase “about the duties of the woman to the man and all that” illustrates male domination over women; in other words, it suggests that women must submit to men. In this excerpt, Faten is positioned as an object of ideology rather than as a subject with her own will. As an undocumented migrant from an Arab country and a sex worker, she is constructed as a symbol of an obedient, exotic woman who is ready to serve.

Martin’s perception of Faten reflects a long-standing Orientalist discourse that portrays Arab women as exotic and submissive figures who can be controlled by men. Rather than viewing Faten as an autonomous individual with agency, Martin interprets her through stereotypical assumptions about Arab women, thereby reinforcing what Said (1978) described as the Orientalist imagination of the East. In other words, Orientalist discourse and certain Western representations construct

women from Africa, Asia, and Latin America as passive beings destined to serve men and satisfy male desires (Lamghari, 2022).

Furthermore, when Faten realizes that Martin is like other Western men, she decides to reject his fantasies and challenge his assumptions. When Martin continues speaking about helping her with immigration papers and expressing care for her, she raises her hand to stop him. "I don't need your help," she says (Lalami, 2005: 150). Faten's decision to end her interaction with Martin—"I think you should just find someone else next time" (Lalami, 2005: 150)—affirms her autonomy and control over her body, choices, and decisions. She is not a prototype of the passive, obedient, and silent Arab woman whose sole purpose is to satisfy men, but rather an independent subject with agency. Her actions constitute a form of resistance against Western stereotypes about Arab women; she refuses to be reduced to a passive sexual object and negotiates her identity as an active, autonomous agent.

Meanwhile, Arissa's migration to the United States occurs in a different context. She had settled legally and maintained a stable domestic life before the 9/11 tragedy. However, the attacks become a traumatic turning point that drastically alters her position in the public sphere. Arissa faces systemic Islamophobia, social suspicion, and media pressure that force her to repeatedly explain her identity as a Muslim.

"They are not my people."

"They have the same religion as you."

"No, they don't. They don't have a religion." (Abdullah, 2009. p, 93).

This excerpt is an example of the discrimination against Islam experienced by Arissa. The dialogue takes place after the 9/11 tragedy, when Arissa faces social stigma against Muslims. She is perceived as one of the perpetrators of the attacks and is othered, even though she is also a victim of the incident. The multiculturalism previously embraced by society is no longer the same, as Muslim identity becomes increasingly associated with threat and suspicion (Majeed et al., 2017).

Arissa refuses to be associated with perpetrators of violence who act in the name of religion. The statement "They are not my people" signifies a rejection of generalization and the Orientalist gaze, a Western perspective that constructs Muslims as a unified threat. She rejects the Western monopoly of interpretation that reduces Islam to a discourse of terrorism.

Agency, Voice, and Subalternity

The issue of agency and voice becomes the main differentiator in the formation of Faten and Arissa's identities. Faten is portrayed as a subaltern figure who has lost the capacity to speak for herself. She experiences double marginalization, having no agency or voice either in her home country of Morocco or in Spain, where she migrates. In Morocco, as a young woman who critically engages with religion, she is excluded from the public sphere by male and elite power. She is silenced by patriarchal social structures. In Spain, as an undocumented immigrant from the Global South, she has no legal rights, social status, or recognition. She loses her voice and can only express her suffering.

“The guard had taken her to one of the private exam rooms, away from everyone else. Now they were just a part of a repertoire she’d learned by heart and had to put up with if she wanted to make a living.” (Lalami, 2005. p. 147)

The above excerpt illustrates how she loses her capacity to express her will. She is forced into sex work in order to survive and loses her right to choose. Her voice is silenced by structural and colonial systems in Spain.

“She stared at Martín in silence, trying to visualize herself in the way he saw her, the way he wanted her to be—that was the price she would have to pay every time if she wanted to see him.” (Lalami, 2005. p. 149).

In this excerpt, Faten has no space for self-expression. She attempts to imagine herself through Martín’s perspective rather than her own. She realizes that, in order to be accepted, she must conform to the image of a woman constructed by male desire. “That was the price she would have to pay” indicates that her existence is conditioned by male approval. She no longer has a self-defined identity; instead, her identity is shaped by Martín’s colonial and patriarchal gaze. Faten becomes a representation of the subaltern woman who internalizes oppression: she is aware of domination but remains constrained by it, as it is the only means of “existence.” This reflects how the subaltern cannot fully exist as herself but is only recognized when conforming to dominant colonial and patriarchal discourse.

Laila Lalami, as a Muslim diaspora writer, presents Faten as a complex figure. Faten is portrayed not only as a passive victim but also as a subject who continues to seek agency within structural constraints. She struggles to redefine herself as a modern Muslim woman, not only as a symbol of purity but also as a human being with desires, sins, and hopes. Faten becomes part of a Muslimah narrative that resists reduction to Western stereotypes (as oppressed) or local patriarchy (as moral guardians), and instead foregrounds her perspective as a woman struggling for existence and dignity. Meanwhile, Arissa gradually rebuilds her agency through writing.

“I had had enough of answering pestering reporters and funneling my way in and out of the building through them. They were all looking for one story because they had beaten the rest to a pulp. Muslim harmed by Muslim, how do you react? How do you?” (Abdullah, 2009. p. 93)

Arissa undergoes a process of becoming subaltern, which ultimately enables her to regain agency. She is subaltern in three dimensions: as a woman in a patriarchal society, as a Muslim woman subjected to Western stereotypes, and as an immigrant from the Middle East positioned within a Western-controlled discourse. This excerpt illustrates her exhaustion in facing Western media, which continually frames her through biased narratives. The phrase “They were all looking for one story” shows how Western media controls representation; they do not seek Arissa’s voice but rather a narrative that fits their framework.

However, her decision to continue her late husband's manuscript not only allows Arissa to revisit the past but also enables her to reconstruct her identity as an empowered Muslim woman. Writing becomes a medium for rejecting Western media narratives that reduce Muslims to perpetrators or victims of violence. In this context, Arissa moves from a subaltern position to a subject capable of producing meaning and representing herself. She escapes subalternity and regains her voice through the manuscript she writes.

Patterns of Growth: Negative vs Transcultural Bildungsroman

The fundamental differences in the outcomes of Faten and Arissa's life journeys can be understood through the framework of the Bildungsroman. The character Faten in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* represents a negative Bildungsroman or a failure in the process of maturation. A negative Bildungsroman refers to novels that undermine the classical Bildungsroman narrative by preventing the protagonist from achieving successful integration or maturity in society, often resulting in failure, withdrawal, or unresolved stagnation (Rüggemeier, 2023).

Faten is a teenager from Morocco with a modest economic background. She is described as a highly religious individual and was actively involved in Islamic organizations during her studies. A conflict with Larbi, the father of her friend Noura, leads to her academic failure and ultimately to her decision to migrate illegally to Spain. Once in Spain, she is forced to work as a sex worker to survive.

This trajectory is considered a negative Bildungsroman because it depicts Faten's failure to uphold the strong religious values she previously held. She shifts from an idealistic figure to a pragmatic one, engaging in actions that contradict her earlier beliefs. In her process of maturation, she fails to achieve self-realization and instead experiences self-disintegration. She becomes trapped between two worlds—Morocco and Spain—and is alienated from her friends, family, and religion, experiencing guilt and a loss of her Islamic values. Her story ends in solitude and sadness.

Her narrative, which does not conclude in a "happy" resolution aligned with her ideals, demonstrates that the process of maturation does not always lead to enlightenment but may result in self-destruction. The drastic transformation from a religiously devout individual to a sex worker, along with discrimination and loss of narrative voice, reflects the culmination of Faten's identity loss and her failure to achieve idealized development, making her an example of a negative Bildungsroman.

In contrast to Faten, Arissa represents a successful transcultural Bildungsroman. A transcultural Bildungsroman is a novel in which the protagonist's development is shaped by crossing cultural, linguistic, or national borders rather than integrating into a single national culture (Helff, 2014).

Arissa is a Pakistani-American Muslim woman who migrates to New York and lives there with her husband. Her life is initially peaceful and filled with love with her husband, Faizan, until the tragic events of 9/11 result in his death. Following this event, Arissa faces significant discrimination and conflict. She struggles to find meaning in life after this loss.

She experiences discrimination, loneliness, and trauma but gradually recovers through writing and devotion to her unborn child. Arissa continues writing her husband's manuscript and expresses her ideas as a Muslim woman through it. Her struggle against grief, combined with social discrimination as a Muslim woman and the birth of her disabled child, leads her toward self-acceptance and maturity, both spiritually and emotionally.

Amid her despair, she chooses to rebuild her life, raise her disabled child, and find new meaning in her existence. Arissa maintains her Muslim identity while also adapting certain aspects of her life to the social demands of her environment. She perseveres by transforming herself while preserving the core of her identity. This demonstrates that the Bildungsroman is not merely physical or external but also psychological and internal. Her process of self-transformation and identity formation serves as a successful example of a transcultural Bildungsroman.

Comparative Synthesis: Identity Formation of Muslim Women in Diaspora

Faten and Arissa come from different geographical backgrounds, ethnicities, and diasporic experiences. However, both face similar challenges as Muslim women within postcolonial diasporic contexts. Differences in structural conditions and access to agency result in markedly different patterns of identity formation. Both characters initially appear as active religious individuals; however, subsequent developments show that their faith and religious identities evolve along different trajectories under structural pressures.

The most significant difference in the formation of their identities lies in migration context and legal status. Faten migrates illegally to Spain, which immediately places her in a highly vulnerable social position. This undocumented status deprives her of legal and social protections, exposing her to exploitative power relations. Under these conditions, Faten's life choices cannot be understood solely as individual decisions but must be seen as the result of structural coercion. In contrast, Arissa lives as a legal immigrant in the United States and has access to a relatively secure domestic environment. Although she experiences discrimination after 9/11, her legally recognized status allows her to continue participating in social and symbolic spaces. This contrast demonstrates that legal status and class position play a crucial role in shaping the possibilities of Muslim women's agency in diaspora contexts.

In terms of religious practice, both Faten and Arissa experience a crisis of faith, but with different outcomes. In Faten's case, this crisis leads to a shift in religious practice that reveals a misalignment between belief, identity, and lived experience. Her religiosity, which was previously public and ideological—expressed through hijab, modest clothing, and active religious engagement—becomes more fragmented under social pressure. In other words, she no longer performs visible religious practices in the same way; however, this does not necessarily indicate a loss of faith, but rather a forced adaptation to the social injustice she experiences. Her religiosity, once a source of meaning, becomes a source of guilt and alienation, and no longer functions as a stable framework for self-development.

In contrast, Arissa's crisis of faith is reflective and dialogical. Her decision to remove her hijab does not signify a rejection of Islam but rather a reinterpretation

of piety in the context of trauma and Islamophobia. She reconfigures her relationship with religious symbols rather than abandoning her faith. This difference underscores that piety in Muslim women's narratives is contextual and strongly shaped by surrounding social conditions.

The most striking difference between the two characters lies in their capacity for agency and voice. Faten gradually loses her ability to define herself; her identity is shaped by patriarchal and colonial structures that force her into survival-based conformity. Although she is aware of this inequality, this awareness does not translate into effective resistance, leaving her in a subaltern position, as described by Spivak. In contrast, Arissa rebuilds her agency through writing, which enables her to reconstruct her self-narrative and challenge Western representations that reduce Muslim identity to simplified categories.

Overall, this comparative synthesis confirms that the formation of Muslim women's identities in diasporic literature is not homogeneous. Although both Faten and Arissa face patriarchy, religious discrimination, and postcolonial pressures, the outcomes of their trajectories are shaped by material conditions, legal status, and access to symbolic spaces such as literacy. This study demonstrates that Muslim women's agency is highly dependent on social structures that enable or constrain their ability to act and speak. Therefore, readings of Muslim women's narratives must remain contextual and comparative.

CONCLUSION

Through a comparative study of two novels by Lalami and Abdullah, focusing on the characters Faten and Arissa, this research demonstrates how Muslim female characters in literary works negotiate faith, identity, migration, trauma, and socio-political pressures in diverse ways. Furthermore, this study challenges monolithic understandings of Muslim women. Dominant representations in the West often generalize Muslim women within a single interpretative framework, thereby disregarding the social, cultural, political, and personal factors that shape their life experiences and religious practices. Such reductive representations contribute to the persistence of stereotypes and, in many cases, hinder efforts to present a more balanced and complex portrayal of Muslim women.

Thus, the significance of this research lies not only in revealing the processes of identity negotiation experienced by Faten and Arissa but also in showing how literary representation functions as a narrative intervention that challenges reductive portrayals of Muslim women. Rather than portraying Muslim women as passive victims of culture, religion, or socio-political conditions, both novels highlight their agency, complexity, and capacity to actively shape their identities within diasporic contexts. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Muslim women's identities as dynamic, multidimensional, and highly context-dependent.

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