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Identity and Belonging in Na'ima B. Robert's Boys vs Girls (2010)

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Abstract

This paper investigates Na'ima B Robert's Boys vs Girls (2010), which relates the story of two children of a Pakistani-English family. It casts light on the impact of the parents' Pakistani culture on their children, Farhana and Faraz, who are born in England, but inherited a cultural legacy, with which they have never established any direct contact. Accordingly, Robert's novel deals with issues common in diasporic literature, namely, identity, alienation, and belonging. The paper examines their attempt to reconcile the two parts of their identity, Pakistani and English, and reduce the pernicious impacts of their feelings of alienation. While exploring the two children's process of identity formation in Robert's novel, we draw on scholars, such as Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Salman Rushdie, who, like Robert and the two main characters in this novel, face similar challenges in negotiating identity and expressing their sense of belonging. Further, we employ Avtar Brah's analysis of the cultural constrains imposed on young Asian Muslims in educational institutes as we trace Farhana and Faraz's endeavour to counter the stereotyped image of Muslims in the West while celebrating their Islamic culture at. Moreover, it depicts the parents' concerns that their children's espousal of their Islamic culture might negatively impact on their progress in the West. Depending on non-white feminists' notions, namely Hazel Carby, the paper critiques white feminism which marginalises the needs and aspirations of non-white women residing in the west.

Keywords: *Identity, Belonging, Robert, Diasporic, Pakistani, Muslim, Feminism.*

Introduction

Na'ima B. Roberts was born in Leeds, the UK, in 19 September, 1977. She is the daughter of a white (Scottish) father and black (Zulu) mother, who were both from South Africa. Two years after her birth, the family moved to Ethiopia, and, then, to Zimbabwe, when she was four. Her father, Robert McLaren, was a teacher at the University of Zimbabwe, and her mother, Thembi McLaren, an entrepreneur. Robert and her brother and sister were immersed in the Zimbabwean culture in addition to the South African culture, which their parents were keen to instil in them. After finishing her high school studies, Robert returned to England, where she graduated from the University of London. In an interview posted on Muslim Matters website, Robert stated that during the period of studying at the university, she travelled to Egypt and Guinea. Both trips were influential in her decision to convert to Islam during the second year of university studies, and to get married during the third year of study.

In 2000, Na'ima B. Robert moved to Brixton, where she worked as a teacher, and started a home school, when her first son was born. It was during this period that she focused on writing children's poems and stories and also books dealing with multicultural and Islamic themes to young adults, and children. This culminates in the publication of Robert's first book, *From My Sisters' Lips* (2006), which deals with women's experiences in the West. The majority of those women are converts to Islam, whose stories range from marriages, motherhood, sorrows, joys to faith and stereotypes. This work is followed by novels written for young adults or teenagers, namely, *From Somalia, with Love* (2008), *Boys vs Girls* (2010), *Far from Home* (2011), and *Black Sheep* (2013). Other than being an author interested in multicultural and Islamic issues, Robert is a widowed mother to five children, founder of Muslim women magazine, *Sisters*.

Na'ima B Robert's Interest in Writing About Muslim Diaspora

In her article titled "Black Muslims are almost invisible in Britain, but now we're carving out a space", Robert comments on the stereotyped image of Muslims portrayed across mass and social media in the British society as either "someone of Asian or Arab descent, with a beard, perhaps, or some sort of head

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covering" (*The Guardian*, 2014). As such, her interest in writing expresses her intention to subvert the dominant narrative that label non-white British and their experiences as "other" (*Book Trust Organisation*). Further, it also aims to convey the muted or uncelebrated experiences as well as "the complexity and beauty of our struggles and triumphs as nonmembers of the dominant culture" (*Book Trust Organisation*). In her article titled, "Where are all the Muslim characters in children's fiction?", Robert purports that she began writing about Muslim children since 1999 because she "couldn't find any books in our local library that featured Muslim children or celebrated Islamic culture" (*The Guardian*, 2014). Writing books, accordingly, depicts her interest in letting her son "see himself and his family reflected in the books we read" (*The Guardian*, 2014).

Further, she also aims to portray that not all Muslim girls "are forced to wear a Hijab", "not all Muslims are Pakistani or can speak Arabic or hate 'the West'" (*The Guardian*, 2014). In an interview with Bushra, Robert states that novels young Muslims or teenagers read in the West, and the UK in particular, revolve around characters they may not be able to relate to or identify with, such as *Harry Potter*, the *Twilight*, the vampires, and other characters (Being Na'ima B. Robert: An Interview with Award Winning Muslim Woman Author). Accordingly, in her works, she intends to provide alternative to represent Muslim teenagers though, she admits, that her writing is influenced by her Islamic views of life and youth. Despite challenging, Robert chose to write about the Pakistani culture, which she considered "suitable" for addressing the Pakistani- English parents' "double standards" of how their boys and girls are raised, which provide boys with more freedom of being outside, where they become vulnerable to drugs and gang culture (Interview). It is part of her project, in which "I wanted to focus on parents who are brought up in the UK, aged around the mid-40s", but are "clueless" about the "double life" their teenagers lead (Interview).

Discussion

This part comprises subdivisions to ensure that the argument runs smoothly. In this novel, *Boys vs Girls*, Robert explores the "challenges faced by the second-generation Pakistani protagonists" such as "low self-esteem, and inter-generational misunderstandings to the lure gang and forbidden love" while negotiating "their new-Islamic identities" during "their first 'true' Ramadan" (Interview). Commenting on the character of Auntie Najma, Rober notes that she is a character to convey that though "being a niqabi", one can be "appealing, understanding and fun". Further, she is employed to "subvert the stereotype and show that she wasn't the type to constantly give lectures" (Interview). The same can be said about Farhana, the clever student with A-grade at school. Robert wants Farhana to remind herself of her good intentions, especially the view that wearing hijab or covering is meant to please Allah not others, not to feel frustrated, and "to be patient with your parents, but stay strong" (Interview).

Na'ima B Robert's *Boys vs Girls* (2010) revolves around sixteen-year-old Pakistani-English twins, Farhana and Farzad, who live in London. Although they seem to share a lot, their characters and attitudes at school diverge. While Farhana is beautiful girl who excels both socially and academically, Faraz seems unable to fit in except in the art studio. With the help of their aunt, Auntie Najma, A niqabi who intends to marry a white convert, the twin decides to figure out their status as Muslims in Ramadan and appear adamant to express their great faith. As Farhana boldly decides to wear hijab, Faraz meets his cousin who introduces him to a street artist, with whom he could express his passion for art and drawing. Yet, Farhana starts to face difficulty in making her mother, classmates, and teachers respect her choice to be a hijabi, and Faraz's relationship with a gang, which leads to physical fights and drugs distribution, undermines his prayers hours at the masjid. Whereas Faraz thinks that he needs the gang to back him, Farhana starts counting the losses of her decision to wear hijab, which includes Malik, the young man who expresses his admiration to her. As both twins work hard to reconcile the drifting parts of their life, two painful incidents happen to accelerate this: Faraz's beating by a gang and Farhana's injury due to car accident. At hospital, the family reunites for almost a week before leaving it to celebrate Eid.

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Negotiating identity comes to the fore at the onset of the novel and is touched upon continuously in this novel indicating how its shadow haunts the lives of this Muslim Pakistani family living in England. A good example is how reference to body complexions in the novel turns to Islamic culture and identity. While Farhana refers to her skin "smooth, the colour of a latte, with a hint of mocha" and "her green eyes, framed by long, dark eyelashes and full lips", which make guys at school compare her to "Aishwara Rai, the famous Bollywood actress" (p. 1), her brother, Faraz, thinks of having tattoos but knows very well that his father and others at the mosque consider this "haram, forbidden in Islam" (p. 8). There are even references indicating how negotiation their Islamic identity does not mean that they are supposed to accept a ready-made one without situating it within a British context. Through a discussion between the father, Mahmood, and Uzma, the mother, over the beginning of Ramadan. Farhana wonders why they do not fast according to news they receive from the Muslims in the UK than from Pakistan (p. 10).

By conveying how children of this Pakistani minority are not permitted to make decisions about such issues or even discussing them, Robert cast light on an important issue in this novel, which is further explored, the two-sided character that the two children are forced to construct. Farhana, for instance, seems to have a two-side character, or what is called in the novel, "mild schizophrenia", that "all the Asian girls she knew suffered from", the "intelligent, a bit cheeky, chatty, and outgoing" one at school and the "quieter" and "less likely to offer an opinion, certainly not one to argue" one at home" (p. 42). This journey between the two contrastive sites is further portrayed in the novel, when Auntie Najma visits the family house to meet Farhana and Faraz and discuss their preparation for Ramadan. As the three depart in Najma's red Mini Cooper, Robert provides us with a vivid description of the neighbourhood that appears to be full of Pakistani immigrants: "Outside the car windows, it was as if the sights, sounds and smells of downtown Karachi had followed the immigrants who had come over in the fifties and had clung on, in spite of the concrete buildings and English weather" (p. 19). Those Karachi sights, sounds, and smells subvert the rigidness and confinement of the English concrete buildings to reconnect with those immigrants who have left the home of origin five decades ago. They also emphasise the impact of those immigrants' diasporic experiences on their children.

The impact of such diasporic experiences is succinctly explored in the works of various writers from migrant backgrounds. It refers to a process of reconciling drifting parts which Paul Gilroy call "unfinished identities" (1993, p. 1). Reconciling the drifting parts of one's identity is an ongoing process since, as Manfred Jurgensen proposes, it is "a process of cultural metamorphosis" (p. 84). This notion of cultural transformation, which Paul Gilroy calls the "unfinished business", aligns with Homi Bhabha who proposes 'the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection' (1994, p. 162). This premise also finds resonance in Avtar Brah's view of identity as being "neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity" (1996, p. 123) This viewpoint of the 'non-fixed' identity resonates with Stuart Hall's premise that "cultural identities" have temporal and spatial relations and "undergo constant transformation" (1997, p. 112).

Robert's novel is not the first to address migrant Asians in the UK. Hanif Kureshi and Salman Rushdie address similar issues in their works. However, rather than mixing the offspring's experiences with their parents or referring to residues the children of migrants remember or retain from their childhood experiences at the home of origin, Robert, in this novel, focuses on the two children's experiences in the UK and their process of identity formation in the host country, which is not interrupted by events from the home of origin. As such, it does not entail dealing with "broken images" or suffer from "infallible memory" that writers, such as Rushie, encounters (1991, pp. 10-11). Further, negotiating identity requires an engagement with the concept of home. This is, in turn, an important constituent in establishing a sense of belonging. The concept of home for the two children, which is disturbed by the conflict between the two concepts of home, the family home and the England, has been drastically impacted upon by including incidents or stories from the home of origin. As the family home, which is a main site for maintaining ties with the home of origin, poses hardships to maintain ties with the host country, a compromise has to implemented to lessen the pace of the oscillation between the two. Both spaces convey their role in negotiating identity. "Space is a dynamic field", asserts Nikos Papastergiadis, "in which identities are in

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constant state of interaction" (2007, p. 4). The relation between place and identity formation is touched upon by Kevin Hetherington who purports that "identity involves an identification with particular places, whether local or national" (1998, p. 105). As stated above, both places have their great impact on the Pakistani characters, especially Farhana and Faraz.

Farhana and Faraz are incapable of establishing a meaningful attachment to events that have not seen or encountered, especially those related to the journey of their parents from Pakistan to the UK. Further, their parents' insistence to stick to events taking place at the home of origin, especially deciding the beginning of Ramadan, has its negative impact on these two children and their relation to celebrate the Pakistani part of their identity. While identity entails a definition of who a person is or that person thinks s/he is and establishing bonds with other people regarded as "similar", belonging, Fiona Anthias posits, "allows more clearly questions about the actual spaces and places to which people are accepted as members or feel that they are members and broader questions about social inclusion" (p. 7). The notion of "social inclusion" suggests that there is a process of boundary making or, using Ghassan Hage's premise, "the dialectic or inclusion and exclusion", where he notes that "it is precisely the interest in their inclusion that activated the existing social progress of the exclusion, while at the same time setting limits on how far to the margin of society they ought to be excluded" (p. 136). This view extends beyond the political context to include as well social dimension, whether at an institute, place of work or study, and even the domestic space within a family. It is this attitude, which problematise the twin's endeavour to unravel the code of belonging. Ample evidence is how Farhana's decision to wear hijab is interpreted by her mother at home, and the teacher at school. As will be investigated later in this paper, the white teacher accepts willingly Farhana's presence in the class as long as Farhana restrains herself from being indifferent. Farhana becomes aware of the limits set against her presence in the class, or, taking this class as a miniature, her participation in the national space.

Stereotyping of Asian Muslims and White Feminism

The above reaction to hijab is an instance of Western Stereotyping of Muslim immigrants. Howard Brasted claims that Islam is depicted in major Western agencies, amongst which *The Guardian* and *The Times*, as not only "fallen" but also "rival world system" (1998, p. 6). Open Society Foundations note in their report, "The Situation of Muslims in the UK", that after 11 September, "the lives of Britain Muslims came under unprecedented scrutiny and examination" (2002, p. 363). Further, the report asserts that the severe experiences of prejudice and discrimination encountered by Muslims in the UK subvert their attempts to integrate (p. 363). Avtar Brah observes that Muslim women are the main target of stereotyping. Referring to the immigration law in the UK, Brah claims that whereas Asian male Muslims are considered as workers impacting negatively on the work opportunities of white British, Asian female Muslims are perceived as "dependants", who are "helpless" and looking forward to marriage as their pass for secured life expectations (1998, p. 134). It is worth noting that this notion is emphasised earlier by Hazel Carby in her essay "White Women Listen!" (pp. 46-47). Commenting on this negative perception of female Muslims, Brah points out that it has established a common understanding among teachers, and employment professionals concerning "Muslims women's education and employment prospects" (p. 134).

Brah considers those attitudes, including the above negative perception, "discriminatory practices" that are "constituted in and through a variety of racialised discourses and practices that construct the racialised group as inherently 'different'" (p. 134). Highlighting the process of stereotyping Muslim women, Brah observes that the "veil", and the same can extended, albeit to a lesser degree, to hijab, "frustrat[es] the Western gaze by its opaqueness and its apparent dismissal or disregard for its hegemonic moves" (p. 135). Indeed, such discriminatory acts and perceptions would have drastic impacts on Muslim women's existence and participation in western England and also other western counties. According to Home Office study, compared with other religious groups in the UK, Muslims appear the main target of discrimination and unfair treatment at schools, universities and work (Open Society Foundations, 2002, p. 364). It is important to stress that the above study reveals that discriminatory acts and unfair treatment are conducted in the educational institutes. This would surely influence young Muslims' trials to integrate simply because an educational institute "is the earliest and most significant point of contact with the wider contact" (p. 365).

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This would adequately be dealt with when discussing the students and the white teacher's reactions to Farhana's determination to wear hijab at school.

Stereotyping of Muslims in the West is portrayed in this novel through the character of Auntie Najma and Farhana. Auntie Najma is a young woman, who decided to wear niqab after her graduation from a university in London. However, her decision to wear niqab has become a barrier to earn the respect she deserves for her character not her outward appearance. This is succinctly explored in the following lines:

A few words exchanged in a shop or on the bus would not betray her First Class degree or love of world literature of Impressionist art. To passers-by, she was just another woman in purdah, a common enough sight in their part of town, an unwelcome oddity in the town centre and suburbs (pp. 15-16).

The above discloses the two images created of Najma according to the locality of the residence. While her niqab is considered "common" in the neighbourhood, where people from Pakistani background reside, she is perceived as "odd" in the centre and suburbs. Auntie Najma comes to visit her brother's house and see the twins' preparation for Ramadan. Both Farhana and Faraz appear determined to fast the whole month this year. Farhana decides to be a "hijabi" believing it to be that "a religious obligation, an act of worship that would be rewarded" (p. 30), and Faraz declares that in this Ramadan, he intends to be "a nice Pakistani boy who goes to mosque, prays on time, stays out of trouble" (p. 32). Both acts cast light of the twin's their process of identity formation.

Through Farhana's decision to wear hijab in the first day of Ramadan, Robert cast light on the discriminatory acts against female Muslims in the British educational institutes. This incident is the focus of chapter 10 in the novel, which explores the impact of such decision on Farhana and her relation to family, classmates, the English teacher at school, and also Malik, the Asian Muslim young boy, who has expressed his interest in her. Before going to school, Farhana is questioned by her mother about this decision. At first, her mother inquired why she wears a white scarf noting the expected problem the parents might have with the school: "That is not part of your school uniform is it? What are you trying to do? Cause a problem for your father and me with the school?" (p. 112) Through the word "problem", the mother refers to the impact of this decision not only on Farhana but also on her parents and the perception the school would constitute regarding this Muslim family.

Further, Farhana has an argument with Shazia, her close friend at school, which refers to the difficulties she will face with regard to other girls and also Malik. Robina, another Asian girl, tries to tease her emotionally by saying that she has not expected that Farhan's reaction to Malik's decision to leave her would be to become "all Islamic" (p. 115). Robina adds that Farhana is going to be "a social outcast" (p. 116). Robina's view aligns with the discriminatory acts against young Muslims at schools proposed by the report of the Open Society Foundations. This is also emphasised by Farhan's mother who, in chapter 14 of the novel, expresses her fears that the hijab would negatively affect Farhana's education and career in the UK, "the *hijab* would limit her opportunities, would affect her grades, make job-hunting harder, make her a social outcast" (p. 154). Another clue provided in the novel is through a white girl at the class, who is aware of the difficulties surrounding wearing hijab in a western country, encourages Farhan but admits that "I bet it was a tough decision to make" (p. 115).

When Ms Robinson, the white teacher of English, enters and starts handing the girls' essay, it takes her a moment to configure that it is Farhana who is wearing the white scarf. Contrary to the assumption that as a teacher who would promote or, at least, tolerate cultural diversity, Ms Robinson could not restrain herself from telling Farhana that she looks "different" (p. 118). The white teacher's statement overtly indicates how she perceives Farhana a different person simply because of a white scarf covering her hair. The teacher's words echo Brah's viewpoint that "racialised discourses and practices" against young Muslims at educational institutes "construct the racialised group as inherently 'different'" (p. 134). This notion is countered through Farhana, Robert's spokesman in the novel, who decides to seize this opportunity to defend her right to dress by disclosing the western conflation concerning covering female heads between

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Christian women, the nuns, and the Muslim women who wear scarfs or hijabs and also by expressing her right to wear what she likes:

"And you see nuns are oppressed?"

"No, of course not, that's their choice …"

"So is choice the issue then? What if a woman chooses to wear a scarf? Or a burqa, for that matter? Does that make *her* oppressed?"

"Well, the crucial issue here is choice and the fact that many Muslim women don't have a ch…"

"Is that an assumption Miss? Or a fact?"

"An assumption, I suppose …"

"Exactly! So what if an intelligent, educated, ambitious woman decides, of her own volition, to wear a scarf, is she any less intelligent than a woman who doesn't wear one?"

"Well, Farhana, it was merely a passing comment…."

"Well, Miss. I take issue with the fact that you or anyone else is prepared to judge the level of my intelligence by what I choose to wear on my head. I think it's wrong to judge you or any other by the length of your skirt. Wouldn't you agree?".

"Fair enough, Farhana, you 've made your point" (pp. 119-120).

In addition to highlighting a prevailing Western notion which considers nuns' decision to lead a religious life, in which they cover their female bodies as an expression of choice and Muslim females' decision as a demonstration of oppression or patriarchal coercion, the above excerpt reacts to white feminism. Rather than expressing solidarity with this female student, who are from an Asian background, but living in Britain, Ms Robinson rejects this young female Muslim's "difference", which she prefers it to remain invisible. The white teacher's stance resonates with Carby's opinion that "white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of" non-white women (p. 46). As indicated by the white teacher, white feminist plays a role in stereotyping Muslim women.

Carby's viewpoint is echoed by Maheen Haq, who claims in her essay "The War on Muslim Women's Bodies: A Critique of White Feminism", that white feminism considers hijab as a form of oppression and, thus, Muslim women wearing it are helpless who need to be liberated. Haq maintains that such "narrative creates social dynamics and policies that actively take away our right to exist with agency" and presents white feminism as "a movement that claims to protect, uplift, and fight for us while it really subjugates us even further". Unveiling the female body might be metaphorically explored to indicate white domination or supremacy. Farhana's defence of her right to wear hijab is an act of resistance as well as an expression of cultural identity. This aligns with Elizabeth Grosz's view of the female body as "a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic inscription" (p. 64)

Expressing Belonging in the UK

Other than expressing her right to express her faith, Farhana's act is an instance of negotiating identity. This is a major initiative towards expressing belonging. Belonging involves boundary breaking, Anthias posits, when it transcends "the originally essentialism characterised by ethnicised notions of identity" (p. 7). This is bravely depicted by Auntie Najma, who challenges the family's decision to marry a Pakistani-English male rather than the "white" Muslim she loves. Moreover, it is pithily conveyed by Farhana in chapter 16, when she disapproves her mother's rejection of the white Muslim proposing to Auntie Najma

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because he is not of "their kind", meaning Pakistani (p. 195). In a powerful reply that conveys her rejection of patriarchal ideas and assures her espousal of the British part of her identity, Farhana tells her mother

I was born in England! I grew up in England! I can barely speak Urdu! Why should I have more in common with a Pakistani from back home than someone born and raised here? We're British, Ammiji, British Asian, British Muslim, whatever! We will never go back to the way we would have been if we had stayed in Pakistan (pp. 196-197).

While depicting Farhana's celebration of her Pakistani-British identity, the novel also traces Faraz's process of identity formation. Ramadan has become the trigger for Faraz's process of negotiating his identity as a Muslim Pakistani. He joins his father in the *tarawih* prayer, and gets an English translation of the Quran to understand the meaning of its verses. At school, the art room is the only space where he feels that he fits in. He paints an Arabic calligraphy that impresses his teacher, Mr. McCarthy, and decides to join Ali Ahmed, the Muslim graffiti artist in drawing a big graffiti at the end of Ramadan. Unfortunately, Faraz's relationship with Skrooz, a young Asian who distributes drugs, backfires on him. To retaliate Faraz's decision to break off their relationship, Skrooz lets some young Asians beat Faraz and also intends to hit Faraz with a van he is driving. Unfortunately, he hits Farhana, who is about to cross the street to the family house. The novel ends with Farhana waking up for the first time in hospital. There, the whole family gather in the room and watch the beginning of the first day of Eid, while the sun shines "on the urban Islamic mural that blazed across the wall on the other side of the road. Shukr, it said: gratitude" (pp. 255-256). This gathering of the family bridges the chasm that was widening between the parents and their children and culminates in their recognition of their children's need not only for their parent's care but also their recognition of their status as Pakistanis living in England and influenced by its culture and lifestyle.

Conclusion

As depicted in this paper, Na'ima B Robert's *Boys vs Girls* traces the process of identity construction of the two children of a Pakistani-English family. While exploring their attempts of celebrating their Muslim part of their Pakistani culture and identity, the novel casts light of their trials to establishing belonging in England, where they are born and educated. While critiquing stereotyping, discriminations, and misunderstanding of Asian Muslims in the west, this study also traces the twin's determination to reconcile the two parts of their identity, Pakistani and English, and lessen the drastic impacts of their feelings of alienation. This is vividly portrayed at the end of the novel when both children and parents jointly participate the end of Ramadan and the beginning of Eid.

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