

DIASPORIC IDENTITY AFTER 9/11 ATTACKS: AN EXISTENTIAL STUDY OF SAFFRON DREAMS

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ABSTRACT

This research probes identity sustenance of a Muslim lady rooted from Pakistan after September 11, 2001 attacks on World Trade Center how she suffered from a disastrous change in identity and met Sartre's existential believe of existence precedes essence focusing Shaila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams*. The 9/11 attacks in America damaged not only Americans but many diasporic Muslim families also. This paper deals with Abdullah's protagonist Arissa Illahi's life after the catastrophic assault that results in the death of her husband giving an existential stroke to her especially, and her relationships with the other members in her family generally. Arissa gives totally new meanings to her life, and bears and overcomes multiple challenges that she encounters in her life after 9/11 attacks and becomes a new changed character who is more independent and self-decisive. This research is significant as it deals the important historical event and its aftermaths that press on the lives of the Muslims and the Muslims are able to sort and coin meanings for their lives even after their huge losses and identity shifts.

Key Words: Muslim Diaspora, Identity, Existence, Essence, Being for-itself

INTRODUCTION

This research article investigates *Saffron Dreams*, a novel written by a Pakistani diasporic anglophile writer Shaila Abdullah currently residing in America. She has tried to portray the existential struggle of life of a Muslim lady in America after terrorist attacks on World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 but ends on positive note as Arissa is satisfied with her lot and successfully discovered her meanings of life. At Manhattan, Arissa alongwith her husband Faizan was living a happy life. She was fulfilling her dream as an artist, and Faizan was working as a cook in a restaurant situated in World Trade Center as well as working on a novel titled *Soul Searcher*. The terrorist attacks killed Faizan, moreover the catastrophe doubled when Arissa gave birth to Raian with "charge syndrome" meaning the kid had multiple disabilities. Being a Muslim it was difficult to wear hijab at that time (Abdullah, 2009). Doing so could easily put anyone in vulnerable condition so happened with Arissa when some skinned people attacked on her.

This attack works as turning point in the novel, and Arissa finds new meanings to her life: to bring up Raian happily and to complete Faizan's incomplete novel. She gives up hijab but stays stick to her Muslim identity and she forgets all the misfortunes, challenges, sufferings and tribulations in her life. Sartre's (1943) "*being for-itself*" is very much clear here as the novel end as Arissa changes her identity and finds new meanings of her life. The research is important as it provides a new hope in the course of disappointing happenings in life and motivates the diasporic Muslims who suffered after terrorist attacks on World Trade Center in America and shows second picture of the grieved Muslims due to this unfortunate event of 9/11.

Review of Literature

Due to the intense impact of 9/11, writers, novelists, poets, songwriters, and playwrights have searched into contemporary issues such as terrorism, violence, Islamism, and jihadism, as well as exploring the

effect on individuals. Furthermore, these visionary minds have addressed American immigration policies and national security measures. The duty of these writers is to skillfully grasp and portray these bold topics, contributing to the shaping of public conception regarding the unimaginable nature of terrorism in general and the particular events of 9/11. Martin Amis justly notes that “after a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12, 2001, all the writers on earth were reluctantly considering a change of occupation” (Aronstein, 2012). Carver and Scheier argue that it falls upon literary figures, particularly novelists, to create alternative narratives — the tales of all individuals — conveying and encompassing the experiences of people’s lives shaped by the consequences of the attacks and to “take us beyond the hard numbers of dead and missing and give us a glimpse of elevated being” (Carver & Scheier, 2001). In essence, the 9/11 narrative sets out as a platform through which writers “can bring together the documentary and the emotional sensitivities”. Accordingly, Dempsey the editor of the journal *Recovering the Self: A Journal of Hope and Healing* in 2010 finds an echo among both American and non-American novelists as the post-9/11 has witnessed a huge number of published novels to depict the trauma of the attacks from different perspectives. The post-9/11 era has witnessed a significant stream of published novels, each offering a distinctive perspective on the trauma developing from the attacks. Some delve into the tragedy from the point of view of American individuals, recognizing Muslim fundamentalists as a primary threat to the United States. Others take a look at the impact on Muslim American residents, considering the events of 9/11 as a response to American hubris and its single-minded pursuit of global financial and political power”

In her second novel, *Saffron Dreams*, Shaila Abdullah unfolds the story of 9/11 attacks where Arissa Illahi, a widow, adopting America “as her home that would rather root her out and label her as the enemy” moreover, as a novelist, Shaila Abdullah attempts to display and shed light on the often-overlooked lives of the women in Pakistan. Through her work, she addresses worldwide challenges faced by these women, including forced marriage, divorce, a struggle for individuality and self-esteem, experiences with incest, the clash between tradition and modernity, issues of acceptance and denial, as

well as themes of betrayal and misunderstanding (Birch & Drabble, 2009).

As a South Asian-American female writer steering between two worlds, Shaila Abdullah is the writer who does not focus to draw comparisons between the American and homeland worlds; instead, she directs her focus towards her homeland. She remains a writer who lives in one world but holds memories of the other, utilizing her imaginative and literary expertise as a platform not just for monetary gain or fame but to portray the lives of Pakistani women in both Pakistan and the United States. Moreover, she sheds light on the experiences of the Muslim-American community, addressing the challenges and difficulties they come across.

Through her written works, including articles and essays, Shaila Abdullah tries to breathe life into and relight the dream once envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr. Her aim is to bring visibility to the Muslim-American community within American society. In pieces such as ‘An Open Letter to the President,’ Abdullah addresses the problem of marginalization faced by the Muslim-American community. She points out that regardless of an estimated 8 million Muslims in America, they remain politically marginalized, with little representation in key positions within the administration. In this letter, she calls upon the President, urging a re-evaluation of the silent majority within the Muslim-American community — individuals who are good, loyal, and law-abiding citizens, who have fully embraced the laws of this land, making significant contributions to its development by engaging in diverse fields, fulfilling tax duties, and nurturing their children as “multilingual and multicultural with pluralistic hearts” (Appelbaum, 1996).

Olivia Baumgartner-Jackson, an interpreter, mediator, and manager in the United States, commends Shaila Abdullah’s abundant imaginative and topical skills in a review for Reader Views, Modern History Press. In her evaluation, she states that some books are exquisite only by virtue of their cheerfulness and positivity. And yet some people are able to maintain their beauty despite their internal anguish, sorrow, and heartbreak. Jackson goes on to say, *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah is both. Her prose is captivating. It has the feel of a well-cut diamond on the one hand—precise, brilliant, breathtakingly gorgeous, but also quite sharp (Jackson, 2017).

Like Dempsey (2010), Shaila Abdullah comes across with the Western perception of Muslim fundamentalism, especially the view that the role of Muslim women is a conflicting issue within the Muslim world. Within this perspective, conservatives often adopt a narrow interpretation of Islam, using it to rationalize limitations on women's mobility and interactions with the external world, some extremists even willing to resort to violence. In contrast, moderate believers support equal rights for women.

In patriarchal societies, women's autonomy over their bodies is often constrained, with men exerting control. In Muslim societies there is often a focus on regulating women's bodies and sexuality (Dempsey, 2010). The author endeavors to highlight the adverse impact of assaults on the daily lives of average American Muslims. Additionally, Arissa's narrative provides valuable insights into Pakistani customs and the challenges confronted by Muslim immigrants in the United States, including racism, discrimination, extremism, antipathy, and religious bias. Within this context, Abdullah in an interview with Tyler R Tichelaar, delves into Arissa's journey as she navigates around "the balancing act between her newfound liberties and the clash with her Pakistani heritage, while also facing biases against the Muslim faith among numerous Americans" (Abdullah, 2009).

Research Methodology and Analysis:

In this research paper, the researcher has explored the image of women as Sartre's *being for itself* portrayed in *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah with respect to existentialist perspective on how women were treated in America and other civilizations, as well as the influence of religion, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. It's an intriguing topic that sheds light on women's experiences during that time. The research differentiates between existential *being in self* i.e. consciousness is taken as lump just like animals or plants that cannot change their beings and live and nourish as they are meant to be, and *being for itself* i.e. consciousness can be controlled by human beings' free will and all the societal stereotypical or artificially created truths are nothing and lead towards nothingness; an individual have control over his own identity and can construct meaning for himself. According to Sartre, predetermined realities estrangement, fear, foolishness, honesty, obligation, duty, and anguish

by the society are nothing. According to Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*, humanity primarily exists, undergoes self-experience, emerges on the planet, and subsequently defines itself. For Sartre, existence is active rather than passive. Human existence involves shaping one's reality through choices, actively deciding to pursue certain actions while disregarding others, thereby giving substance to one's own existence (Cuddon, 1998, p. 295).

"Sartre understands history and the social in terms of a multiplicity of uneven and non-synchronous temporalizations, rejecting the notion of time as a universal container within which events take place." Moreover, the originality of Sartre's approach is that it establishes a link between the notion of the plurality of temporalities and the problem of the freedom and domination" (Lievens, 2021). In this research, all above mentioned ideas help shed light on the status of women within the society with reference to *Saffron Dreams*.

Sartre articulated the foundational concepts of Existentialism in his works *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Emphasizing the individual and their freedom, Sartre posited that humanity is accountable for its actions, dismissing the significance of dreams and hopes that lack grounding in reality. Regardless of circumstances, man is condemned to be free, not having chosen his existence but having the liberty to act as he pleases. Existentialism, viewed broadly, is depicted as an optimism fueled by robust human deeds. Human beings are inherently free, unbound by religious or authoritative doctrines, and thus must take responsibility and act in accordance with conscience and philosophy. Delving into the emotional world of women, Abdullah investigates the deep factors affecting the psychology and sensibility of women. This tendency leads her to investigate the mind of her female lead, Arissa, who is forced to deal with the absurdity of life as a result of broken relationships. Abdullah sets Arissa up as a widow from Pakistan battling against the odds in a harsh and hostile atmosphere in the New World. The tragic tension between the individual and her challenging surroundings takes on the dimension of existential angst.

In *Saffron Dreams* (2009), Arissa ultimately experiences solitude, resembling an isolated island in a tangible world. However, she holds complete autonomy over her internal essence, and her value emanates solely from within. Existentialism

advocates the concept of "Existence precedes Essence," asserting that individuals lack a predetermined nature or essence that governs them. In "Being and Nothingness" (1943), Sartre's belief about *being for itself* a hidden significance in being, revealed only when individuals fully engage their capacities in making decisions about their circumstances. This notion aligns with Abdullah's portrayal of Arissa. Amidst pervasive losses, Arissa harnesses her capabilities to regain stability. Before becoming a widow, Abdullah doesn't deeply penetrate her thoughts, as her mental state isn't prominent. However, with Faizan's unnatural death, Arissa loses the equilibrium of her world, prompting Abdullah to influence the protagonist's mental state. Abdullah delves into the depths of Arissa's psyche, illustrating the definition of her essence or character. The progression is intricate, with diverse stages and complexities impacting Arissa both physically and mentally. She deflects sorrow and despair by adapting and accepting her circumstances, affirming Sartre's view that surrendering to misery leads to inevitable destruction. Arissa becomes so resilient that she fearlessly confronts everything.

Following Faizan's death, Arissa grapples with the question of what to do with her life, facing a vague and uncertain vision of her future. This existential inquiry, characterized by inner conflict, reflects Arissa's ongoing and indefinite struggle. Her efforts to confront and contend with challenges underscore that life is not devoid of pain, misery, or encounters with adversaries, whether direct or indirect. Behind each step she takes lies an enduring battle, navigating the constraints of social, psychological, and physical realms. Bound on multiple levels, from her personal perspective to the broader environmental interconnectedness of life, Arissa contends with significant limitations that shape her actions and reactions, defining the course of her existence.

Abdullah's portrayal in *Saffron Dreams* (2009) represents the culmination of a struggle evolving into survival. While conflict is transient, survival endures. The commencement of battle signifies a new beginning, a constant thread woven into Arissa's life from birth. Placed in circumstances predisposed to sorrow and disappointment, Arissa confronts the void left by her biological mother. In Chapter Four, Abdullah (2009) articulates, "Abhor such a strong word, yet it was also a mother's last parting gift to us, the knowledge that she hated us, me most of all." On the contrary, survival is comprehensive and

intertwined with achievement. The struggle against adversity, the desire to overcome it, and ultimate resolution are not physical endeavors but rather instinctual. It is a psychological evolution achieved through resolute decisions within the mind. Faizan's novel, 'Soul Searcher,' symbolizes the quest for a soul, life's journey, and the ebb and flow of existence. Upon completing it, Arissa claims her identity, stating, "Saffron. It reminded me of an unfinished project that was much closer to completion than it was a year ago" (Abdullah, 2009). Searching for the meaning of her life, Arissa attains legitimacy and authenticity by making her own choices. Laden with the responsibilities of widowhood, she cautiously advances, addressing a constant barrage of issues that challenge the conventional reality of being a widow. Experiencing profound existential angst, Arissa confronts a sense of utter despair upon Raian's birth, acknowledging the newfound freedom that accompanies it. She describes this as envisioning herself as a toy horse, trotting with constrained legs, her purpose sharply defined, filled with fortune but tinged with naivety (Abdullah, 2009). A similar anxiety grips her when opting to part ways with Zaki, choosing the security of the past over an uncertain future. Arissa embraces Faizan and Raian as companions in her misery and allies in her journey. This theme resurfaces when she meets her biological mother, who apologizes years later for the void and hardships in Arissa's life. Despite this, Arissa clings to the dignity of her solitary struggles, rejecting the belated outpouring of maternal love and refusing to forget the pain she endured in isolation.

Walking through the realms of time embodies an existential resolve, a concept Sartre asserts exists within every individual. Those who shape their identities can unearth their capacities, and Arissa serves as a testament to such autonomy. Abdullah suggests that life unfolds not as a whole, but in fragmented moments, each minute constituting the journey. Arissa, through a deliberate exercise of her free will and a demonstration of her capacity to choose and act, symbolically ignites a forest at the novel's conclusion. This fire, sparked by her existential angst, aims to obliterate the old and purposeless, paving the way for the new and meaningful—an affirmation of her quest for values in an otherwise seemingly futile existence. Embracing isolation as the essence of her life, Arissa welcomes it with contentment. If Raian becomes her strength, she accepts and cherishes it. Abdullah's

protagonists, including Arissa, defy societal conventions and maltreatment, maintaining their connections in life. The portrayal encapsulates a struggle that doesn't conclude in futility but promises a brighter future, affirming the belief that survival is achievable despite challenging norms. Rooted in Existentialist principles, it becomes apparent that resilience and the ability to endure undesirable circumstances arise from one's valuation of their life, allowing them to explore the essence of existence.

Saffron Dreams (2009) revolves around the significance of self-discovery. The journey toward self is an endeavor to get a clear, authentic, and a well-established awareness of self-identity. The capability to reclaim a fundamental aspect of personality lost when circumstances overwhelm you defines the essence of *self*. The character of Arissa takes its shape through the choices she opts and the emotions she confronts, bringing her closer to self-identity. Arissa evolves by discarding what superfluous and adopting what is necessary for her. She re-defines her priorities of life by giving the most value to Raian, and considering Zaki as her potential partner, a trivial distraction. Arissa undergoes this process in steps, contributing in the change of her mind and psyche. Existentialists believe that man has the choice to live in void and mud, and he opts to lead a passive, prostrate submissive existence. Contrarily, Sartre believes and urges the necessary changes in identity and one should frame oneself according to the situation.

Abdullah consistently employs images of ugliness, devastation, obliteration, and despair to convey the existential undertone of the novel. Through imagery in the novel, a potent environment of individual reflection has been crafted. The solitude imbedded in the external environment evokes a profound sense of internal solitude. The novel commences with the peak of autumn, depicting leaves in hues of "shining golds, bloodlike reds, barefaced brown, and intense yellows". While this colorful depiction presents vitality and life, Abdullah juxtaposes them with the cracking of fresh leaves beneath Arissa's feet, described as motionless but not voiceless". She intertwines hope with inertia, discussing the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks in chapters one and eight. The expression as "a new coating of dust coating ash and debris had left a perpetual imprint on the riverbed after 9/11 attacks on World Trade Center and New York skyline dominated by violent swords of fire" depicts the

devastation. Faizan's untimely death strips Arissa of her sanctuary, and thus, nature reflects her mood, establishing an existential backdrop for the novel (Abdullah, 2009).

Tragedy, separation, and longing permeate Arissa's thoughts, with the fear of sudden and complete isolation haunting her intensely. In Chapter eight of Abdullah's work (2009), the narrative emphasizes how destiny dictates the course of Arissa's life, leading her to lament. Her vulnerability imparts a profoundly melancholic tone, as she articulates, "I refused to rest or lie down. I felt that if I did, I'd lose him forever" (Abdullah, 2009).

Arissa confronts a profound sense of existential facticity in her personality, feeling as if she exists in a world not suitable or fit for her and totally unsympathetic to her anxieties, longings, and aspirations. She does not perceive herself as the architect of her world, life, identity and reality but as someone thrust into an uncontrollable world. She articulates, "Waking was a nightmare, an acknowledgment of an existence stretching before me without a partner" (Abdullah, 2009). Additionally, Arissa manifests anxiety in her behavior, grappling with the duty of determining her own identity, ethics and virtues. This entails a significant duty of selecting ethics, virtues, and nature of humanity via autonomous decisions that create realities of life. The struggle to delimit realities is quite evident when Arissa decides to live her life with altogether new meanings i.e. life for her son Raian and Faizan's incomplete work but still her distress and unease stem from the loss of balance, prompting her to express, "until I have everything in order in my grasp, I stay anxious and unsettled. The new turn in my life has caught me off guard, and I have not found my balance yet" (Abdullah, 2009). This depicts that challenging to existing so called autonomous realities is not an easy task but at the same not impossible.

Saffron Dreams (2009) represents an ideal piece of literature that provides existential approach in true sense, raising numerous questions and providing answers simultaneously. An existential perspective posits that the world often contradicts human aspirations, making it thought-provoking to realize one's dreams come true. The absurdist approach in the world is exposed through life's moments, enigmatic reality, death and unpredictable truths. Throughout the novel, a common thread of distance emerges in the pursuit of distinction, freedom, and

dreams. The narrative delves into a search for reality, sincerity, truths and pure identity in a world saturated with delusions and absurdities, particularly expressed through Arissa's sense of isolation and alienation in a society she struggles to fit in. She contends for the necessity of her connection with rest of the people in surrounding. Existentialism asserts that to survive successfully in absurdities that society offers, everyone must navigate through while remaining well-aware of the illusions that surround humanity, aiming for a lasting sense of purpose and meaning. Abdullah aims to empower women by raising their awareness of their rights and the obstacles they face. Her message to women is: to discover their voices and embrace the powerful role bestowed upon them by their religion. She encourages them to break free from societal constraints and find their own liberation, as the key to freedom resides within each of them. It's just a matter of unlocking it.

Conclusion:

To sum up, Abdullah has presented her character of Arissa in *Saffron Dreams* who suffers through her life after 9/11 attacks on World Trade Center killing her beloved husband and facing threats and murdering assaults by the natives due to her Muslim identity. Furthermore, crippled Raian added more miseries to her life. Abdullah gives Arissa reasons to live a new life with different identity that appropriates to her existing life by sorting different meanings to live life in comfort even in alien world of Manhattan. She completely changes her life and gets new meaning of life setting novel goals in life: giving priority to Raian, completing the incomplete work of Faizan, and moving forward in her life becoming a successful editor and artist. It rightly fits to Sartre's philosophic view that existence precedes essence and human existence involves in shaping the reality.

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