

Deakin Research Online

Deakin University's institutional research repository

This is the authors final peer reviewed version of the item published as:

Bradford, Clare 2007, Representing Islam: female subjects in Suzanne Fisher Staples's novels, *Children's literature association quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring, pp. 47-61.

Copyright : 2007, Johns Hopkins University Press

**Representing Islam:
Female Subjects in Suzanne Fisher Staples' Novels**

Clare Bradford

Professor Clare Bradford
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood 3125
Australia

Phone: 61 3 9244 6487
Fax: 61 3 9244 6755
Email: clarex@deakin.edu.au

Representing Islam:
Female Subjects in Suzanne Fisher Staples' Novels

In her essay “The Skin of the Burqa: Recent Life Narratives from Afghanistan”, Gillian Whitlock describes visiting a bookshop in Melbourne, Australia, in 2003, where she noticed a display of books featuring Muslim women. In fact, Whitlock recalls, only three titles were on show (Latifa’s *My Forbidden Face*, Jean Sasson’s *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq*, and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*); but multiple copies of each had been arranged in a mass display which drew viewers’ attention to the icon of the *burqa* on the covers of all these books. Whitlock asks: “How can one resist interpellation as a liberal Western consumer who desires nothing more than to liberate and humanize ‘Latifa’ by lifting the *burqa* and bringing her alongside us, barefaced in the West?” (55). Her essay goes on to argue that the desire for unveiling which was such a prominent aspect of Western discourses after 9/11, and which, it was proposed, signified the liberation of Muslim women, produced an homogenized and over-simplified version of the *burqa* and of Islamic societies.

Leila Ahmed notes that the reasons why women wear veils across Muslim societies are “as varied, multiple, complex, and shifting ... as are the women themselves” (164). The title of Ahmed’s essay, “The Veil Debate – Again”, aptly describes the iterative and cumulative nature of the extensive body of scholarly work dealing with the semiotics of the veil in Muslim and Western societies, scholarship which is always

informed by the politics of the times and places in which it is carried out.¹ Yet across scholarly texts on Muslim women, feminism and the veil, and specifically across writing on literary and popular texts, scant attention has been paid to children's and Young Adult literature which thematizes Muslim cultures and relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim protagonists.

The spate of life narratives dealing with the experience of women living in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan which has been a prominent feature of cultural production for adults during the last few years has had its counterpart in children's literature in the shape of first-person and character-focalized narratives thematizing the identity-formation of Muslim girls, including Suzanne Fisher Staples' *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* (1989),² *Haveli* (1993) and *Under the Persimmon Tree* (2005); Deborah Ellis's novels, *The Breadwinner* (2000), *Parvana's Journey* (2002), and *Mud City* (2003); Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi* (1997), and Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in My Hand* (2004). Ellis's *Parvana's Journey* and *Mud City*, and, to some extent, Staples' *Under the Persimmon Tree* are also refugee narratives, tracing the journeys and experiences of girls who flee Afghanistan for camps in Pakistan. My focus here is on Staples' three novels, and specifically on their representations of Muslim girls and women, and I begin by considering how their covers market these books to Western audiences.

If, as in the display described by Whitlock, Staples' novels were to be arranged *en masse* in their various editions, we would see multiple images of veiled young women. These women are depicted alone, sometimes against backgrounds which hint at elemental forces, wind or sun; in the 2002 Walker Books edition, *Shabanu* appears as a solitary figure walking across a desert landscape. The only *group* of children featuring on the

covers appears on the cover of the 2006 Walker Books edition of *Under the Persimmon Tree*, where boys and girls together gather under the persimmon tree of the book's title and look toward the night sky. Intimations of the exotic (and, arguably, of the erotic) appear in the extreme close-up of the 2003 Random House edition of *Shabanu*, which features a young woman's face—or at least half her face—adorned with strings of gold around her hairline, a veil embossed with embroidery, eyes made up with kohl. The 1995 Random House edition of *Haveli* deploys a color range modulating from orange tones into sepia as Shabanu's translucent veil, caught in the wind, simultaneously conceals and reveals her profile and the suggestion of a shapely body.

The women on these covers do not look at viewers in a way that constructs a relationship of affinity with viewers. In some images, such as the Random House issues of *Shabanu* (2003), *Haveli* (1995) and the 2005 edition of *Under the Persimmon Tree*, young women gaze in profile or obliquely toward scenes inaccessible to viewers. The Dell Laurel-Leaf editions of *Shabanu* (1994) and *Haveli* (1993) place the figures on their covers within oval vignettes which invest these images with formality and remoteness. Indeed, the figures of Shabanu and her daughter Mumtaz on the cover of *Haveli* evoke iconic depictions of Madonna and child, their bodies leaning into one another in a way that both emphasizes their symbiotic connection and also renders the image emblematic rather than representational. One cover stands out from the others: the veiled woman featured on the cover of the 1991 Knopf edition of *Shabanu* looks directly out to the viewer in a manner that appears confrontational or angry. The darkness of the woman's skin color and the fullness of her mouth racialize her, representing a Muslim other described as follows in the blurb which appears next to the cover image: "From the heart

of the world of Islam....” The ethnocentric and homogenizing discourses informing this phrase are evident if we replace “Islam” with “Christianity”: “From the heart of the world of Christianity”. Where, exactly, might this heart be located in relation to either religious tradition? Who determines what constitutes the heart of a religion?

The fact that these covers depict veiled young women is in itself unremarkable, since Muslim girls and women commonly wear veils of many kinds across national and cultural settings. My analysis focuses rather on the semiotics of these cover images, and the significations that they produce. Collectively, the visual configurations I have described position readers as detached viewers of otherness, prohibited by the remoteness, hostility or obliquity of protagonists’ expressions from imagining an affinity with them. The implied “we” who observe these women comprise a Western and non-Muslim audience viewing a Muslim other (“them”), whose world is remote from “ours”. The young women on these covers are isolated and beautiful; their geographical and cultural settings are coded as exotic and as ancient; and their facial expressions suggest sadness, wistfulness and (in the case of the Knopf cover) anger. Their treatment is thus in accord with the interpretive frame of Orientalism, which interpellates Western readers as sympathetic and knowing viewers of oppressed Muslim women.³ Irrespective of the contents of these books, their covers draw upon stereotypes and assumptions calculated to reinforce Orientalist discourses.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, first published in 1984, is a seminal work in the field of postcolonial studies, and its incisive treatment of the assumptions that inform Western feminist scholars writing on the “Third World woman” (255) applies also to fictive

representations by Western authors such as Staples. Mohanty uses the term “colonization” to refer to writing which “implies a relation of structural domination and suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (256). That a “relation of structural domination” underpins the production of Staples’ texts is very obvious: these are novels written by an educated, Western professional woman about Third World protagonists; they are published by mainstream American publishing companies; and as I have argued they are marketed in a way which constructs the female Muslim subject as a unified, oppressed figure.

A notable component of publishers’ marketing strategies and of Staples’ promotion of herself as an author relates to the question of the “truthfulness” of the novels and of their stories about Muslim women. Staples is described paratextually in all three novels as a former UPI correspondent in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. Like Deborah Ellis, whose books similarly insist on the author’s close knowledge of the settings on which she writes, Staples is an outsider to Islamic cultures, and information about her background might be seen merely to assure readers as to her experience and knowledge. I would argue, however, that such information asserts truth-claims which blur the lines between truth, facts and fiction. In the “Questions and Answers” section of her website, Staples responds as follows to the question “Is [*Under the Persimmon Tree*] a true story?”: “It is true in that almost every scene is based on a story told to me by an Afghan, either inside of Afghanistan, or in the refugee camps in Pakistan.”⁴ To accept Staples’ response as simply testifying to the accuracy of her writing is to overlook exactly those varieties of “structural domination” to which Mohanty refers, and which inevitably inform the processes and politics of Staples’ interviews with her Afghani informants, as

well as the transformation of their “stories” into fiction for Western readers. My intention here is not to engage in personal criticism of Staples for constructing herself as an expert on Muslim politics and culture; but to raise questions about how relations of power play out in representations of Muslim girls in her novels; and about the extent to which cultural assumptions and rhetorics inform these representations.

Shabanu and *Haveli* are set in Pakistan. In *Shabanu*, the eponymous protagonist is the narrator of events which occur mainly in the Cholistan Desert; in *Haveli*, Shabanu has become the fourth and youngest wife of Rahim, a wealthy landowner, and lives at first within his household in the village of Okurabad, and then in the habitus of his old family home (*haveli*) in Lahore.⁵ In *Under the Persimmon Tree*, the narrative divides between the first-person perspective of Najmah, a girl from Northern Afghanistan, and character-focalized sequences involving Nusrat, an American woman married to an Afghan doctor. The events of *Under the Persimmon Tree* are set in the period immediately following 9/11, when the United States engaged in military intervention against the Taliban as part of the “War on Terrorism”. However, the West is also powerfully present in *Shabanu* and *Haveli*, since as I will argue, these novels present a view of Muslim women seen through “Western eyes”.

Mohanty identifies three analytical frames which shape Western representations of Third World women: first, the assumption that such women form “an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires”; secondly, an uncritical acceptance of ““proof” of universality and cross-cultural validity”; and thirdly, the notion of an “average Third-World woman” defined as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized” in contrast to Western women, who are

implicitly represented as “educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (258-9). The plot of *Haveli* plays out mainly in the prosperous setting of Rahim’s homes, where his older wives, well-educated and indulged, do not accord with the unitary view of the “ignorant, poor, uneducated” woman referred to by Mohanty. Nonetheless, they are “tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized”, their security dependent upon patriarchal systems which rely on economic control. A key strategy in Staples’ novels is the construction of protagonists treated as exceptional within their cultures and hence as more “like us” than those homogenized women with whom they are compared.⁶

Rhetorics of exceptionalism

The character of Shabanu in *Shabanu* and *Haveli* is presented as just such an exceptional figure. Unlike her sister Phulan, she prefers activities coded as masculine, such as tending the family’s camels; she is her father’s companion when he travels to a distant market to sell camels and purchase supplies; and she attempts to escape the marriage her parents have arranged. The signifier of the veil is introduced early in *Shabanu*. As Shabanu sets out with her father for the market, her aunt produces a *chadr* which she drapes around the girl’s head and shoulders, with the words, “A young lady shouldn’t go with her head uncovered. You’re too old to act like a boy” (33). The text here engages in a strategy of displacement, attributing these words to Shabanu’s aunt, previously established as unlikable and peevish, rather than to her mother, whose words soften but do not contradict those of her sister-in-law: “Shabanu, it matches your new dress,” says Mama, pleading with her eyes. “It’ll keep the sun off your head” (33). Negative significations

attach to the veil, since it suggests a restriction of Shabanu's freedom and because it is her aunt's promptings that force her to wear it. This small exchange establishes a pattern which permeates Staples' depictions of Muslim women, and which relies on binary oppositions: between Shabanu (freedom-loving, active, adventurous) and other women (her mother, her aunt, her sister Phulan) who are content with the constraints which limit their freedom and self-expression). Through its deployment of first-person narration and present tense, the narrative controls the extent to which readers are offered a variety of subject positions, inviting identification with the figure of Shabanu, whose selfhood is represented according to the liberal humanist paradigms of individualism and personal growth which dominate texts featuring Western protagonists.

The figure of Sharma, Shabanu's aunt, might appear to disrupt the binaries which I have identified in *Shabanu* and *Haveli*. Together with her daughter, Fatima, Sharma lives outside the structures of marriage and family, since she has left her abusive husband and set up a home for herself and her daughter. Sharma is represented as a wise woman in touch with the natural world and endowed with cunning and "feminine" wiles which enable her to evade patriarchal orders. In *Shabanu* she conducts a makeover during which she transforms Shabanu from a tomboyish younger sister to a beautiful young woman; in *Haveli*, she provides Shabanu and her cousin Zabo with contraceptive advice. Far from offering an alternative to the downtrodden wives of Staples' novels, Sharma operates within the patriarchal system, advising Shabanu not to "waste yourself on the things you cannot change" (*Haveli* 29), and advocating strategies of deception and subterfuge, a representational mode which accords with Orientalist stereotypes of Eastern women as subtle and devious.

Staples' depiction of Sharma might perhaps be read in relation to representations of female protagonists in Western children's texts more broadly, in that Sharma and Shabanu, like the independent and determined girl characters described by Lissa Paul in her essay "Enigma Variations", exercise agency by way of "deceit, guile, fraud, and other forms of trickery" (190). However, Sharma and Shabanu are not simply female protagonists but specifically Muslim protagonists, and to lump them together with female characters in children's literature is to produce girls and women, in Mohanty's words, "as a category of analysis" (259) in which it is assumed that "all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified prior to the process of analysis" (259). I would argue that Sharma and Shabanu are represented in relation to that strand of Orientalist discourse which depicts Orientals, in Said's words, as capable of "cleverly devious intrigues" (287) but as essentially inferior to Westerners. That is, readers of *Shabanu* and *Haveli* are positioned to admire the subterfuges through which Sharma and Shabanu resist patriarchal control, even as the narratives of both texts underline the futility of resistance, enforcing the idea that women are ultimately powerless within Muslim societies.

Much of the action of *Haveli* is set in Rahim's home, where Shabanu is the youngest of his wives, and involves sequences in which the women of the family prepare for two weddings which have been arranged to consolidate alliances and property ownership among Rahim and his two brothers. Orientalist discourses evidenced an early obsession with the harem, or *seraglio*: Elizabeth Shakman Hurd points out that harem discourse exemplified by Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* "served to rationalize the 'kinder, gentler' European version of patriarchy in contradistinction to the crude and

degrading repressive apparatus represented by the ‘seraglio’ (34), and this idea remains a defining feature of modern Orientalism. Leila Ahmed notes that “there are ... those powerfully evocative words – for Westerners – harem, the veil, polygamy, all of which are almost synonymous in [the United States] with female oppression” (“Western Ethnocentrism” 522-3).⁷

Staples’ treatment of the women’s household in *Haveli* accords with Orientalist traditions which are concerned with reaching “behind the veil” to the private world of women’s lives. Shabanu’s situation within Rahim’s family is metaphorized somewhat transparently when Mumtaz observes “the ritual of her mother adorning herself for her father”. To Shabanu’s question “How do I look?”, Mumtaz replies “Like Papa’s birds” (*Haveli* 11); that is, like the desert birds caged on the veranda of Rahim’s house. While each of the three older wives has “her own private grudge” (6) about her position in the household, Shabanu is in the most marginalized position as the youngest of the wives and, as a simple desert girl, out of her depth in a world represented as a “hothouse of intrigues” (21).

The fact that Shabanu is not protected by her status as Rahim’s favorite wife heightens the sense of malevolent female power in the household, as the text dwells on incidents in which she and Mumtaz are persecuted: Mumtaz’s puppy and pet deer are killed; the severed foot of a camel is left in Shabanu’s sewing basket; Shabanu is accused unjustly of having a servant as her lover. Along with these accounts of the women’s cruelty, the text lingers on signifiers of exoticism, a discursive strategy that again connects Staples’ novels with discourses of Orientalism. Referring to Graham Huggan’s discussion of exoticism in postcolonial literature, Whitlock notes his emphasis on the fact

that “objects, places, and people are not inherently ‘exotic’ and ‘strange,’ but rather exoticism is a particular way of ‘manufacturing otherness’” (61). As it lingers on details of the women’s clothes and jewels and on the ornate decorations of Rahim’s house, *Faveli* constructs difference at the heart of similarity.

One of the weddings for which the household prepares is that of Zabo, who is forced to marry Ahmed, Rahim’s retarded son by Amina, his eldest wife. The text’s expansive description of Zabo’s dowry enumerates her “elaborately embroidered and jeweled saris, *shalwar kameez*, and shawls” (213); the colors of silks and jewels; the “bangles, chains, and pendants” (217) piled up for her father to view. Readers are positioned here as observers of a scene which has its equivalent in the Western world, in the bridal industry and its marketing of imaginings of “the perfect bride”. However, the very excess of Staples’ description, which lingers on the richness of Zabo’s dowry, its colors and textures, defamiliarizes the scene so as to “manufacture otherness”. Moreover, appearances are shown to be illusory: readers are also aware that many of the gold bangles Zabo shows her father are in fact imitation rolled gold, since she has squirreled away much of the money he has given her as insurance against the time when she will escape from her despised husband-to-be. Exoticism, then, here carries meanings of excess and of duplicity, so that as Zabo deceives her father she embodies not merely an exemplar of the duplicitous Oriental woman, but points to the distance between the West and the Orient. Evoking the happy bride of Western fashion magazines, the figure of Zabo draws attention to the powerlessness and victimization of the Muslim woman. Staples’ description of Zabo’s wedding finery can thus be seen to gesture toward a larger contrast between East and West.

The representations of oppression and of exoticism which permeate depictions of girls and women in *Shabanu* and *Haveli* imply as their opposite Western women who are in charge of their own lives and who do not rely on the magnanimity of men. This implied comparison develops into an explicit contrast between American and Muslim women in a scene where Shabanu encounters Omar, the American-educated son of Mahood, Rahim’s brother. Shabanu, in love with Omar (who is to marry his cousin Leyla), questions him about American women. Omar tells her: “In one way I’ve changed forever. I will never again regard women in the old way” (162). For her part, Shabanu is conscious that she herself does not conform to the “old way” of being a woman; indeed, she reports to Omar: “Amina told me once that I was as brazen as an American” (162). When she questions Omar as to whether “women in America” look directly at men when they speak, whether they interrupt men and offer their opinions in conversation, Omar assures her that this is indeed how American women act. The oppositions which *Shabanu* and *Haveli* construct between Western (that is, American) and Muslim women can be summarized as follows:

<i>Western (American) women</i>	<i>Muslim women</i>
Open, straightforward	Cunning, devious
Of equal status to men	Inferior to men
Expressive, articulate	Silent before men
Independent	Dependent on men
Proactive and decisive	Passive

If Shabanu is depicted as a “Western” rather than “Muslim” woman, the text collapses into incoherence in attempting to account for her exceptionalism: on the one hand, she claims that her “brazenness” derives from the fact that “it was the Cholistani way” (162); on the other, she acknowledges that she is utterly unlike her (Cholistani) sister Phulan and her parents, and that her life has been “a struggle to appear to be doing what’s expected of me while I continue to think as I please” (163). The false universalisms which structure these oppositions between liberated American women and oppressed Muslim women seek to reassure Western readers of the otherness of Muslim culture and of their own great good fortune as Western subjects, with Shabanu established as a figure whose desires and impulses are “essentially” the same as those of implied readers.

My heart belongs to Dadi

Values attributed to individualism and romantic love within Western culture are implied as normal and natural in Staples’ novels, and hence practices such as the sexual division of labor, the enclosure of women and arranged marriages are represented as barbaric and cruel. Shabanu’s dependence upon Rahim in *Haveli* is mapped onto her relationship with her father in *Shabanu* in a way which unsettlingly blends erotic with father-daughter relations. This is especially obvious in an episode at the end of the novel, after Shabanu has run away to avoid marrying Rahim. The young camel she has taken with her has broken his leg and Shabanu, unwilling to leave him to die, is stranded in the desert, where her father finds her:

Without speaking [Dadi] lifts me to my feet and brings his stout stick down

across my shoulders. I stand straight and let the stick fall against my ribs and shoulders. I am silent. “Keep your reserves hidden.” I repeat Sharma’s words over and over, drawing on the strength of my will.

I refuse to cry out, and Dadi in his fury is like Tipu, blood-lust in his eyes. He can beat me to death if he likes. The pain grows worse as the blows strike already bruised flesh. But I take Sharma’s advice. I recall the beautiful things in my world and, like a bride admiring her dowry, I take them out, one by one, then fold them away again, deep into my heart.

I hear sobbing, as if from a great distance, and my knees crumple. Dadi catches me in his arms and buries his face against my bloody tunic. He holds me against him, and through a haze of pain, I realize it is Dadi sobbing, not me. (239-40)

Staples’ deployment of first-person narration constructs the illusion that readers here access an interior world where Shabanu keeps “her reserves hidden”—the world, in fact, of the Muslim woman, identified with interiority, silence and stillness, and contrasted with a Muslim masculinity represented as violent, active and exterior. Discussing the power of life narratives from Afghanistan, Whitlock remarks that “When members of privileged groups imaginatively represent to themselves the perspective of the oppressed, their representations can often carry projections and fantasies through which their own complementary image of themselves is enhanced and reinforced” (72). In this instance, Shabanu’s physical helplessness at the hands of her father invites pity and outrage, enhancing and reinforcing images of Western female subjects who are agential and independent.

The text's demonization of Muslim men is reinforced through the comparison between Dadi and Tipu, the stud camel of the family's flock. Earlier in the book Shabanu and Phulan watch Tipu mating with one of the young females, in a sustained description of the animal's display of virility, so that the simile "Dadi in his fury is like Tipu" evokes "lust" as much as "blood-lust". Dadi's outbreak of sobbing and his embrace of Shabanu (which suggests those patterns of domestic violence where women are first beaten and then embraced), modulates into Shabanu's imagining of her relationship with Rahim: "Rahim-*sahib* will reach out to me for the rest of his life and never unlock the secrets of my heart" (240). The significations of this scene, in which Shabanu experiences violence at the hands of a father who has arranged her marriage for the sake of security and financial rewards, construct relations between father and daughter in terms of what Hurd describes as "a negative ideal" (32), a manifestation of domestic and familial disorder metonymic of an Islamic order characterized by violence and corruption.

The idea that Muslim women are inescapably and inevitably subject to patriarchal control is introduced early in *Shabanu*, in an episode that prefigures Shabanu's beating at the hands of her father. As Shabanu and her father take their camels to market, they meet a group of Bugti desert-dwellers who are searching for a woman of their family who has abandoned her husband and eloped with a Marri tribesman. Following this meeting Dadi says to Shabanu, "'You know, little one, these men will kill the woman when they find her'. I don't answer. He is reminding me that I must abide by the rules" (43-4).⁸ The "rules" of patriarchy are, then, both brutal and inescapable; and the implication here is that they constitute a monolithic "Muslim" system. In *Haveli*, Shabanu escapes by withdrawing into herself, a strategy advocated by Sharma and which Shabanu recalls

when her father beats her: “Keep your reserves hidden.” In an episode in *Haveli* during which Rahim pressures Shabanu into having sex with him, the text returns to the imagery of a secret and secluded space: “Shabanu barely acknowledged her resentment. She stuffed it back into her heart, just as she and her sister had once stuffed feathered quilts into camel bags”; and as her body “responded to the rhythm of [Rahim’s] passion...her eyes stared into the dark, at the ceiling, and, as they turned in the bed, at the wall, at the pillow. All the while she murmured sweetly against his ear, and her plans took shape in her mind” (35). The erotic charge of this episode relies on its Orientalist imaginings of a duplicitous and sensual female subject whose inner life is disclosed to readers.

The injunction “Keep your reserves hidden” suggests a metaphorical veiling in which Shabanu takes refuge in interiority. Although the text implies in this episode that Shabanu possesses the capacity to outwit Rahim and to protect her inner self, the larger shape of the narrative struggles against any easy notion of her empowerment. By the end of *Haveli* Rahim has been killed by his brother; Shabanu has lost even her tenuous status as Rahim’s youngest wife; she has been separated from her beloved daughter and given up for dead by her family; and she has no choice but to “live her life as a ghost” (304). If the novel ends with Shabanu looking to the day when she will be reunited with Mumtaz, it also depicts her romantic attachment to Omar, whose loyalty is to his dynastic obligations: “Omar is my heart; and Mumtaz, Mumtaz is my freedom” (320). The closure of the novel thus reveals its discursive confusion: Western notions of romance and individual agency are at odds with Orientalist discourses which insist on the powerlessness of the Muslim woman. Indeed, the novel’s ending is strikingly similar to Said’s description of how Orientalism attempts to imaginatively grasp the Orient but

cannot do so, falling back on metaphors of “depth, secrecy, and sexual promise” (222) to express the “cultural, temporal, and geographic distance” between the Orientalist and the Orient.

The personal and the political: Najmah, Nusrat

Whereas *Shabanu* and *Haveli* concern themselves with the politics of familial and dynastic orders, *Under the Persimmon Tree* addresses the sociopolitical contexts of events in Afghanistan and Pakistan following 9/11. Najmah, a girl living with her family in the Kunduz Province of Northern Afghanistan, is left to take care of the family’s land when her father and brother are taken by the Taliban as conscripted soldiers. Then, when her mother and new-born brother are killed by American bombs which destroy much of the village of Golestan, Najmah dresses as a boy to embark on the long, slow journey to a refugee camp in Pakistan. Like Rahim and his brothers in *Haveli*, her father and his brother contend for ownership over land; and as in *Haveli* differences between the brothers are incorporated into oppositions between admirable and evil figures. Najmah’s father disapproves of the fact that Uncle grows opium poppies in his fields, and the hint (*Under the Persimmon Tree* 61) that Uncle is protected by the Taliban constructs a relatively simplistic set of associations between Uncle, the Taliban and opium-production on the one hand, and the mujahideen on the other. By providing the information that Najmah’s father gives the mujahideen food because, in his words, they “need help to keep the Pashtun talib out of Kunduz” (10), the text constructs the mujahideen as patriots opposing the Taliban.⁹

As Najmah makes her way toward Peshawar, the American woman Nusrat (Elaine) waits in the same city for news of her husband, Faiz, who has traveled to Afghanistan in order to establish a medical clinic. Nusrat has set up a small school in her home, where she teaches refugee children from the nearby camp. The bulk of the novel alternates between chapters dealing with Nusrat's activities as she waits for news of Faiz, and Najmah's account of her journey, which ends in the seventeenth chapter when Najmah reaches Nusrat's home. While readers are situated in subject positions aligned with Najmah, they are also positioned to see Nusrat's home as the desirable end of Najmah's journey and Nusrat as her protector (for instance, she hides Najmah from her uncle when he comes in search of her). Thus, the shape of the narrative underlines the idea that Najmah requires American intervention and support in order to survive. At the same time, it is clear to readers that Faiz has been killed or imprisoned, even though it is not until the end of the novel, when Najmah is reunited with her brother Nur, that Nusrat learns that Faiz has perished during the "accidental" (268) bombing of his clinic. By representing both protagonists, Najmah and Nusrat, as suffering bereavement as a consequence of American bombing raids, the text draws attention to what they have in common, an idea made explicit at the end of the novel:

How can a woman named Help not return to America to make peace with her family? Perhaps she will return to Afghanistan to honor the name her husband gave her by building a school there.

And how can a girl named Star and a boy named Light not go back to their

land in the shadow of a mountain named to honor their ancestors' hearts? For there is great value to lives lived in a village called Golestan, which means "beautiful garden." (270)

The heightened language of this passage, realized in the repetition of sentence-structure ("How can a woman...And how can a girl"), in the formality of phrases such as "honor the name her husband gave her" and "honor their ancestors' hearts", and in instances of overwording ("a woman named Help"; "a girl named Star and a boy named Light"), intends a solemn and emotive closure which transcends difference. Yet here again Mohanty's observations are apt. Her ironic use of the assertion "We Are All Sisters in Struggle" (259) draws attention to what is elided and silenced when Western women claim sisterhood with Third World women: that is, the culturally and historically-specific material conditions which women experience. Seen in this light, the ending of *Under the Persimmon Tree* elides the differentials of access to resources, family support and political stability available to Najmah and to Nusrat, producing a sense of a universalized female subject.

The symbolism of stars, meteors and constellations functions as a leitmotif in *Under the Persimmon Tree*: the names "Najmah" and "Nur" mean "star" and "light" respectively; Nusrat teaches the refugee children about the solar system; and meteor showers figure both in Nusrat's memories of her American childhood and in the night sky above Peshawar. Like the novel more generally, this strand of symbolism lurches across various schemes of signification. On the one hand, the solar system is represented as producing a context for cross-cultural negotiations, as when Nusrat and her pupils

exchange stories of cultural beliefs around the meanings attributed to stars and their properties. On the other hand, one of her brightest pupils warns her that according to his fundamentalist uncle her teaching about the solar system is “an un-Islamic idea” (76), thus sketching a contrast between advanced (Western) and primitive (Muslim) world views.

When Nusrat invites Faiz’s family to her home to observe a meteor shower from her garden, her mother-in-law Fatima tells her that “In this part of the world people believe everything is an omen. They call shooting stars ‘swords,’ and they believe seeing one means that you will soon breath your last allotted breath in this lifetime” (49). Despite the fact that Fatima and Asma do not believe in the ominous power of falling stars, they refuse to stay in the garden, so that only Sultan and Nusrat see the first meteorite. This contrast between Nusrat and her female in-laws points to the larger opposition which structures the novel: between an agential female Western subject capable of interrogating the values and traditions of her culture, and a Muslim subject imprisoned by superstition and by primitive, immutable signifying systems.

“A part of her own past that she’d almost forgotten”

If Shabanu is constructed in *Haveli* as being quasi-American, Nusrat is represented in *The Persimmon Tree* as innately and instinctively Muslim. The narrative retraces the story of her “becoming Muslim” through analeptic accounts of her relationship with Faiz. Born in Watertown, New York, Nusrat has grown up as Elaine, “a name she’d never really felt had much to do with her” (21). Her first encounter with Islam occurs when she enters Faiz’s apartment, when “she felt she was entering a world where she belonged”. The

exoticism of this world, with its “beautiful deep red carpets and large, hand-woven cushions on the floor, dark, carved tables..., old brass samovars, and embroidered wall hangings..., the most exquisite book she’d ever seen” (121), compares favorably with Elaine/Nusrat’s memories of her family home, with its “handmade chintz curtains,...the chenille spread on the bed,...the plastic ivy tucked into the valance over the kitchen curtains,...her father’s vinyl recliner chair” (122). The opposition between the two worlds—Faiz’s and that of Elaine/Nusrat’s parents—is, then, produced through a contrast of aesthetics: antiquity, richness and ornamentation against an artificial and shallow modernity.

Staples relies here on a concept common in literary humanism, where identity is envisaged as a transcendent and essential core of selfhood which exists independently of cultural and ideological systems. Thus, Elaine/Nusrat is here depicted as “naturally” drawn to Islam, or at least to a version of Islam represented by the habitus of Faiz’s flat and by the antique Koran which is his prized possession, so that she experiences “a sense of having found something familiar and significant—a connection to a history and a way of life, as if it were a part of her own past that she’d almost forgotten” (122-3). In accordance with this view of identity as a selfhood waiting to be discovered, her conversion to Islam is encoded in her adoption of the name “Nusrat”, a name given her by Faiz and meaning “help” or “one who helps” (140).

After Nusrat reaches the conclusion that Faiz is dead, she decides to return to her family in the United States, explaining to Faiz’s sister, Asma: “I’ve been thinking about my parents.... For them my converting to Islam was a little as if I’d died. They felt they’d lost me” (236). Whereas previously Nusrat has found in Christianity no answers to

existential problems such as how the notion of a merciful God is to be reconciled with the death of her young sister, the text now proposes a unitary view of religious belief: Nusrat says that, “If I’d been open to it, Christianity might have taught me the same things” (237)—that is, the same things that she has learned from Islam. Similarly, when Najmah asks Nusrat about the difference between Allah and the God of Christianity, Nusrat says, “They are the same. I don’t believe God cares by which language we name Him” (222-3). In a textual moment which signals how this exchange is to be understood, Najmah’s first-person narration continues, “I think she is right” (223).

These oscillations between the novel’s agenda of interpreting Islam to non-Muslim readers and its claims as to the universality of human experiences and needs are premised upon the assumption that Western notions of agency and subjectivity are normal and natural. Nusrat/Elaine’s epiphanic moment in Faiz’s apartment, when she recognizes her “innate” sense of belonging within a “Muslim world”, identifies Islam with the cultural practices of Faiz’s middle-class Afghan habitus. Near the end of the novel, when Nusrat resolves to return to America, she assures Asma, “You are my family and my culture of choice” (238). That is, as a middle-class Western woman Nusrat is in a position to choose familial and cultural affiliations, to “mix and match” religious beliefs and ideologies.

That Najmah does not enjoy an equivalent degree of autonomy is demonstrated by the fact that when Nusrat urges Najmah to accompany her to America and to make a new life there, Najmah is unable to imagine herself living anywhere except in Kunduz. She is thus defined by her attachment to traditional ways, to the land her father and grandfather have farmed, to the routines of farm life, “the smell of grass, the gentle sounds of the

animals” (240). Indeed, the loyalty to place and traditions demonstrated by Najmah and her brother Nur is valorized through the approval they receive from Nusrat’s brother-in-law Sultan, who arranges safe passage for them to Golestan: when Nur thanks him, Sultan says, “There is no need to thank me.... We are all Afghans and we know what we must do” (265). Within the larger ideologies of the text, Nusrat’s identity as a Western subject endowed with agency and freedom is affirmed by Najmah and Nur’s resolve to remain in Afghanistan and to maintain the rural simplicity of their lives, since this opposition buys into the Orientalist practice whereby Western culture, in Edward Said’s words, “gain[s] in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (3).

Conclusion

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler reflects on the meanings attributed to the *burqa* and to those public moments, much celebrated in the West, where Muslim women have divested themselves of their veils.¹⁰ To read the *burqa* as a sign that the woman wearing it lacks agency, she says, “not only misunderstands the various cultural meanings that the burka might carry for women who wear it, but also denies the very idioms of agency that are relevant for such women” (47). Staples’ treatment of Muslim women and girls in the three novels I have discussed rarely breaks free from the notion that the Western world offers the normative model of female agency. Even when *Under the Persimmon Tree* affirms Najmah’s decision to return to her family home at the end of the novel, the text emphasizes that Najmah has no choice in the matter; that she cannot but go back.

There are differences of tone and orientation between *Shabanu* and *Haveli*, and *Under the Persimmon Tree*, in that the first two books are more straightforwardly Orientalist in their treatment of the exotic and oppressed female other, whereas *Under the Persimmon Tree* reflects and responds to events associated with the “War on Terrorism”. But what all three novels demonstrate is the potency of the assumptions, beliefs and epistemologies which structure Western thought, and which are blind to the fact that “such notions as modernity, enlightenment and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living-room” (Said xiv). I noted at the beginning of this essay that the covers of the three books, with their images of veiled young women, draw on and reinforce Orientalist discourses irrespective of the contents of these texts. My conclusion is that the stereotypes and assumptions evident in the books’ covers are consonant with how these novels represent female Muslim subjects: as the objects of Western eyes which see them as exotic, mysterious and ineffably other.

* Page references to *Shabanu* in this article are to the 1994 paperback Random House edition; references to *Haveli* are to the 1993 paperback Random House edition; and references to *Under the Persimmon Tree* are to the 2005 paperback Douglas & McIntyre edition.

Notes

1. Recent scholarly work on the veil and Muslim women in Muslim and Western societies includes writing by Ahmed, Ayotte and Husain, El Guindi, Hoodfar, and Whitlock.
2. The novel *Shabanu* appears in its British edition as *Daughter of the Wind* (Walker Books, London, 2002).
3. A very different effect obtains, for instance, in the cover illustration of the Australian book *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, by Randa Abdel-Fattah. Here a veiled girl looks directly and smilingly out from the cover, as though asking the question which comprises the book's title. As she smiles she adjusts her veil, suggesting that she is producing herself as Muslim. Presented as hazy figures in the background two girls are seated chatting, wearing summery, Western clothes. The implications here are that the protagonist lives in the modern world, that she engages with non-Muslim protagonists, and that she is agential and active in her identity-formation. See the cover image on the Pan Macmillan (Australia) website at:

http://www.panmacmillan.com.au/pandemonium/display_title.asp?ISBN=0330421859&Author=Abdel-Fattah,%20Randa
4. See Staples' website at: <http://www.suzannefisherstaples.com/>
5. Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of *habitus*, "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (78), offers a framework for viewing habitation in the context of habits of behavior which shape human practices. Settings such as Rahim's *haveli*, the desert home of Shabanu's family, and Nusrat's home in Pakistan, can usefully

be theorized in relation to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which incorporates a person's knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as interpersonal relations and modes of social behavior.

6. This is a common feature also in settler society historical fiction for children and adolescents, in which Indigenous characters are routinely treated as exceptional within their cultures. This is particularly the case in depictions of young girls who resist arranged marriages or refuse to accede to expectations that they carry out domestic tasks. See Clare Bradford, *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*.

7. See also Reina Lewis's *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (2004); and Christine Isom-Verhaaren's "Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem", both of which demonstrate the potency of the harem as an idea central to Orientalist thought.

8. The region of Baluchistan in Pakistan is inhabited by many tribal groups including Bugti and Marri. See Plamen Tonchev, "Pakistan at Fifty-Five" (15-16).

9. The implication, in *Under the Persimmon Tree*, that the Taliban condone Uncle's opium-production, and that the mujahideen are a group of patriots defending Afghanistan, accords with the over-simplified treatment of the "war on terror" which dominated political discourses in the United States after 9/11. In their essay "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency", Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood point out that "according to the United Nations, the Taliban all but eliminated heroin production in the first year from the areas under their control" (344), and that "where heroin production did continue to flourish was in areas controlled by the Northern Alliance" (344). Far from

simply patriots opposing the fundamentalist Taliban, the mujahideen included extremist groups (supported by US aid) whose misogynistic views of women were similar to those of the Taliban (Hirschkind and Mahmood 342-6).

10. As Whitlock (60) points out, these celebrations of public liberation from the *burqa* should not blind us to the fact that in many countries another kind of public stripping has taken place, when Muslim women have had their veils forcibly torn off.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Leila. *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey*.

New York: Penguin, 2000.

———, “The Veil Debate – Again.” *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the*

Global Era. Ed. Fereshteh Nourai-Simone. New York: Feminist Press at The City

University of New York, 2005. 153-171.

———, “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem.” *Feminist Studies* 8.3

(1982): 521-534.

Ayotte, Kevin J., and Mary E. Husain. “Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism,

Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil.” *National Women's Studies*

Association Journal 17.3 (2005): 112-133.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1977.

Bradford, Clare. *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature*.

Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007.

- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- El Guindi, Fadwa. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. Oxford, UK: Berg, 1999.
- Hirschkind, Charles, and Saba Mahmood. "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.2 (2002): 339-354.
- Hoodfar, Homa. "More than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy." *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*. Ed. Sajida S. Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough. Toronto: Women's Press, 2003. 3-40.
- Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. "Appropriating Islam: The Islamic Other in the Consolidation of Western Modernity." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 12.1 (2003): 25-41.
- Isom-Verhaaren, Christine. "Royal French Women in the Ottoman Sultans' Harem: The Political Uses of Fabricated Accounts from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-first Century." *Journal of World History* 17.2 (2006): 159-196.
- Lewis, Reina. *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel, and the Ottoman Harem*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. 255-277.
- Paul, Lissa. "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature." *Signal* 54 (1987): 186-201.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Reprinted 2003.
- Staples, Suzanne Fisher. *Haveli*. New York: Random House, 1993.

———. *Shabanu*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.

———. *Under the Persimmon Tree*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

“Suzanne Fisher Staples”. 8 June 2006 <<http://www.suzannefisherstaples.com>>.

Tonchev, Plamen. “Pakistan at Fifty-Five: From Jinnah to Musharraf.” European

Institute for Asian Studies. Briefing Paper 02/03 (2002). 8 June 2006.

< <http://www.eias.org/briefpapers.html>>.

Whitlock, Gillian. “The Skin of the Burqa: Recent Life Narratives from Afghanistan.”

Biography 28.1 (2005): 54-76.

Biographical Note:

Clare Bradford is Professor of Literary Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia, where she teaches children’s literature and supervises students engaged in MA and PhD programs. She has published widely on children’s literature and its relationships with cultural contexts and practices, with an emphasis on colonial and postcolonial texts. Her 2001 book, *Reading Race: Aboriginality and Australian Literature*, won the ChLA Book Award and the IRSCL Award for outstanding research.