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Is Islamophobia Necessary in Neo-Orientalist Narratives? The Construction of Muslim Female Identity in Post-9/11 American Novel

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ABSTRACT

*In the American point of view, a good amount of Islamophobia is not a bad thing while representing Arab Muslims in literature. Maybe it's even warranted or maybe even necessary. Focusing on Arab Muslims and Islamic culture as the "responsible" parties in 9/11, Islamophobic concepts on representing Arab woman has been an important part of post-9/11 American narratives at every level. This study employs a qualitative methodology offering a close textual reading of the two novels to trace how literary narrative functions as a site of cultural communication that constructs and circulates Islamophobic representations of Arab Muslim women. As a collectively unique level of American literature, narratives provide an ideal opportunity to explore the amount of Islamophobia in the cultural constructions of the Arab Muslim woman in the post-9/11 period. This study finds that post-9/11 American writers have used the grief that turned into anger and made narratives as commemoration to pave the way for constructing Islamophobic identity. Analysis finds that Zoe Ferraris' *Finding Nouf* (2009) and Homa Pourasgari's *The Dawn of Saudi* (2010) contribute to the rethinking of the status of Muslim woman within Islamic society and encourage the Muslim woman to be critical of the culture she lives in. This study addresses this gap by selecting *Finding Nouf* and *The Dawn of Saudi* as comparative case studies and as examples of post-9/11 works by American women writers who center Arab Muslim women in conservative Islamic society.*

Keywords: Muslim woman, post-9/11 American novel, oppression, Islam.

ABSTRAK

Dalam sudut pandang Amerika, adanya kadar Islamofobia tertentu bukanlah hal yang buruk saat menampilkan sosok Muslim Arab dalam karya sastra; hal ini bahkan mungkin dianggap wajar atau bahkan perlu. Dengan menempatkan Muslim Arab dan budaya Islam sebagai pihak yang "bertanggung jawab" atas peristiwa 9/11, gagasan Islamofobik mengenai penggambaran perempuan Arab telah menjadi bagian penting dari narasi Amerika pasca-9/11 di berbagai tingkatan. Studi ini menggunakan metodologi kualitatif dengan melakukan pembacaan tekstual secara mendalam terhadap dua novel untuk menelusuri bagaimana narasi sastra berfungsi sebagai ruang komunikasi budaya yang mengonstruksi dan menyebarkan representasi Islamofobik terhadap perempuan Muslim Arab. Sebagai bagian unik dari sastra Amerika, narasi-narasi ini memberikan kesempatan ideal untuk mengeksplorasi kadar Islamofobia dalam konstruksi budaya mengenai perempuan Muslim Arab pada masa pasca-9/11. Studi ini menemukan bahwa para penulis Amerika pasca-9/11 memanfaatkan rasa duka yang berubah menjadi kemarahan serta menjadikan narasi sebagai bentuk peringatan untuk membuka jalan bagi pembentukan identitas yang

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bersifat Islamofobik. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa novel **Finding Nouf** (2009) karya Zoe Ferraris dan **The Dawn of Saudi** (2010) karya Homa Pourasgari turut berkontribusi dalam meninjau kembali status perempuan Muslim di dalam masyarakat Islam dan mendorong perempuan Muslim untuk bersikap kritis terhadap budaya tempat mereka hidup. Studi ini mengisi celah kajian tersebut dengan memilih **Finding Nouf** dan **The Dawn of Saudi** sebagai studi kasus komparatif serta contoh karya sastra pasca-9/11 oleh penulis perempuan Amerika yang menempatkan perempuan Muslim Arab dalam masyarakat Islam konservatif sebagai pusat perhatian.

Kata Kunci: Perempuan Muslim, novel Amerika pasca-9/11, penindasan, Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Post 9/11 American fiction on Muslim women is a part of the whole modern American institution of neo-orientalism, a part whose basic tenet is that Islam is innately and immutably oppressive to women. Islamic marriage, the veil, and gender segregation epitomize Islamic oppression of woman and these customs are the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies. Representing Arab woman in the light of her beliefs to find out how civilized she is a common trend in the post 9/11 novel. If a Muslim woman holds certain beliefs that are uncommon in the western culture, she is described as backward, no matter how highly assertive, educated or independent she is (Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2016; Alqahtani, 2018; Ta'ayakan, 2024). In other words, women are not judged on how they fit within their culture as much as they would fit in a Western culture. It is commonplace to point to Arab woman's dress as the quintessential sign of Islamic oppression of woman in the post 9/11 American texts. This dress code is perceived as a means of controlling woman's sexuality (Unal, 2023; Suleiman, 1999; Hussain & Mishra, 2022). This becomes a general view where both literary writers and politicians engage in wide and anxious discussion regarding this issue. For instance, the then First Lady Laura Bush in a radio address on November 17, 2001 states: "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Smith, 2002). These words have an insightful resonance for a reader who has knowledge of colonial discourse that uses women's right to justify imperial domination as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (296). The real mystery why coverage of Islamic dress becomes so dominant is answered by the Australian Brownyn Bishop: "It has become the icon, the symbol of the clash of cultures, and it runs much deeper than a piece of cloth" (2007).

The imbalance between the Arab Muslim East and the Christian American West remains obviously a function of changing cultural and historical patterns as explained by Edward

Said in *Orientalism*: the difference between the familiar/strange, superior/inferior. Said notes that the presence of this imbalance in the American Orientalist discourse has engendered failure to make accurate predictions. He traces this attitude through a study by the Middle East Studies Association on behalf of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1967 conducted by Morris Berger, an American sociologist. The study concludes with the observation that the modern Arab states are not areas of great cultural achievement, and that the area has no potential to become a political power center (Said, 1977: 288). Post 9/11 American narratives, especially the polemical ones, in their diffuse and polymorphous disseminations are part of the American illiteracy about Islam among both public and writers and based on traditional orientalist discourse. In a *questionnaire conducted by CAIR in 2005*, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, finds that only two percent of Americans say that they are “very knowledgeable” about Islam, thirty-nine percent felt “somewhat knowledgeable” while nearly sixty percent said they are “not knowledgeable” about the faith (CAIR, 2005). Hence, 9/11 narrative on Muslim woman is a reproduction of the old orientalist texts. Neo-orientalism, to be distinguished from classic orientalism which focuses on the eastern societies in general Muslims and non-Muslims, is a twenty-first century style of representation that, while indebted to classical Orientalism, focuses on “othering” the Arab world with the exclusion of some geographic parts, such as India and Turkey, from the classical map of orientalism. Therefore, if classical orientalism is a European phenomenon, neo-Orientalism represents the American shift in the selection of its subject and locale, it nonetheless reproduces certain repetitions of and conceptual continuities with its precursor. Like classical Orientalism, neo-Orientalism is a monolithic discourse based on binarism between the superior American values and the inferior Arab culture.

Many post-9/11 writers have heavily relied on a number of contemporary sources that are inaccurate, unauthentic and shallow as Sherry Jones in *The Jewel of Medina* (2008) states in the *Afterward* of her novel that her knowledge of Islam is new and the majority of her sources on Islam and Muslim women are books written on women living under Taliban: “[w]hen the U.S. sent troops into Afghanistan, I began hearing news about the reversals for women there under the Taliban, how girls were no longer allowed to go to school and women were required to wear *burqas*...I was disturbed by these reports and...I knew very little about Middle Eastern culture or Islam at the time” (Jones, 2008: 355-356). This study focuses on the projection of the Muslim woman in Zoe Ferraris’ *Finding Nouf* (2009) and Homa Pourasgari’s *The Dawn of Saudi* (2010), two post-9/11 American novels in which Arab Muslim women are confined to the periphery of social life, perpetually

denied access to the center of society in terms of expression, freedom, jobs, education, and self-determination. Both novels frame Islam as an inherently oppressive religion, casting Prophet Muhammad and his successors not as historical figures but as architects of women's subjugation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study on neo-orientalist narratives takes Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977) as the main reference in the analysis. In *Orientalism*, Said draws a distinction between 'unconscious positivity' which he calls 'latent Orientalism,' and "the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology," which he calls 'manifest Orientalism' (Said, 1977: 206). He writes: "Whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant" (206). Said notes that it does not matter how orientalists differ in their treatment of the Orient because such differences are only the "manifest" face of Orientalism while the only thing that unifies their effort is the "latent" side which is the deeper level of orientalism that introduces the Orient as inferior. Ferraris' and Pourasgari's approach toward Muslim woman lies on the manifest level of orientalism because what they are doing confirm earlier prejudices because of the fact that "Oriental material could not really be violated by anyone's discoveries" (205). Nonetheless, the approach used in both novels remains timely, extending even to the general western representation which is also marked by associating backwardness and submission with Islam.

Said's latent and manifest dimensions of orientalist representations furnish a rigorous analytical apparatus for interrogating how post-9/11 American novels construct Arab Muslim female identity. Latent orientalism denotes the deep structure of neo-orientalism which assumes the superiority of the American culture and values, civilizational superiority, rationality, and epistemic authority over an East perpetually imagined as static and exotic. Manifest orientalism, by contrast, names the concrete, historically contingent articulations of this deep structure within post-9/11 America texts, policies, and discursive formations of Arab Muslim female identity. This distinction allows the study to move beyond claim that the two novels merely reproduce classical orientalist claims, demonstrating instead the discursive mechanics through which they do so: reactivating latent assumptions of Arab Muslim women as oppressed, silenced, and culturally confined. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's critique of colonial representation provides a crucial theoretical lens for examining how post-9/11 American narratives construct marginalized Muslim women as subjects in

need of representation, intervention, and rescue. In her influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak interrogates the epistemic and political structures through which dominant Western culture claims the authority to speak for subaltern subjects while simultaneously suppressing their capacity for self-representation: “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (296). Spivak’s concept of the subaltern enables this study to examine how post-9/11 representations of Arab Muslim women may silence, appropriate, or speak over their subjectivities, transforming their experiences into textual evidence for American claims about gender, culture, religion, and emancipation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative analytical methodology focusing on close textual reading of Zoe Ferraris’ *Finding Nouf* (2009) and Homa Pourasgari’s *The Dawn of Saudi* (2010), selected as comparative case studies of post-9/11 American novels authored by women who argue for emancipation of the oppressed Arab Muslim women. The two novels are taken as a significant site of cultural communication that reaches broad public readerships and embeds ideological messaging within the seemingly neutral frame of fiction. Drawing on Said’s ideas in *Orientalism* and Spivak’s concept of the white savior complex, the analysis examines how these theoretical constructs manifest textually through characterization, plot resolution, narrative voice, and the framing of Muslim female agency within the two novels. This analysis is guided by the following research questions:

Question 1: How do post-9/11 American novels use neo-Orientalist tropes to construct the identity of Muslim women?

Question 2: In what ways do these narratives frame the American values as the sole agency for Muslim female liberation?

The two questions structure a constructive reading that identifies the patterns of representations in the two novels and generates a nuanced account of how post-9/11 American literary narrative constructs Islamophobic representations of Arab Muslim women as a form of cultural and political communication.

This qualitative design is used in this study for its capacity to support literary analysis of the two texts. The two novels were selected on the basis of four criteria: authorship by American women writing in the post-9/11 period; thematic centering of Arab Muslim women within discourses of oppression and liberation; substantial popular readership

and cultural circulation; and a shared Arabian setting, which enables a focused comparative analysis. Data comprised textual reference to Arab Muslim woman, plot resolution, narrative voice, and constructions of Muslim female identity. These elements are analyzed through close readings and organized into thematic categories derived from the study's theoretical framework. Analytical rigor was ensured through consistent grounding of interpretations in textual evidence, cross-checking of thematic categories for coherence across both novels, and triangulation with secondary scholarship on Orientalism, the white savior complex, and the 'saving Muslim women' discourse.

Text Selection Criteria

The two novels have been purposively selected according to the following criteria: (a) publication in the post-9/11 period by American women authors; (b) explicit thematic engagement with Arab Muslim women's oppression and liberation; (c) popular or commercial reach suggesting influence on broad public readership rather than niche/academic circulation; and (d) narrative structures that stage Western characters, values, or institutions as agents of resolution for the protagonists' circumstances. These criteria were applied to ensure the selected texts were representative of a broader discursive pattern rather than idiosyncratic outliers.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection consisted of a systematic identification of textual excerpts relevant to the study's theoretical framework. The two novels were read multiple times. During subsequent readings, passages depicting characterization of Muslim female characters, plot resolutions involving Western intervention or influence, shifts in narrative voice, and explicit or implicit framing of female agency were identified and extracted into a structured corpus of excerpts. Each excerpt was logged with contextual information (chapter, speaker/narrator, and surrounding plot event) to preserve its narrative context for later analysis.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, quotations in the corpus were coded according to categories derived from the theoretical framework: Orientalist tropes (e.g., veiling, victimhood, silence), white savior narrative structures (e.g., Western character as liberator, resolution contingent on Western intervention), and constructions of agency (self-directed vs. externally granted). Second, coded excerpts were compared within and

across the two novels to identify recurring patterns and points of divergence. Third, patterns were interpreted against Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism and Spivak's (1988) critique of the white savior complex to assess how the novels' formal features (characterization, plot resolution, narrative voice) construct Muslim female identity and agency for a Western readership.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure analytical rigor, different analytic approaches were adopted. First, analysis was grounded explicitly in established theoretical frameworks (Said, Spivak) rather than generated inductively, reducing interpretive drift. Second, quotations were checked against their full narrative context to avoid decontextualized readings that could distort meaning. Third, a constant comparative analysis was used across the two novels, allowing patterns identified in one text to be tested and refined against the other, which strengthened the credibility of cross-textual claims. Finally, the analysis maintained an explicit audit trail - a documented corpus of coded excerpts and coding rationale — allowing the interpretive process to be traced and evaluated for consistency.

DISCUSSION

Post-9/11 American Novel: Muslim Female Identity

Zoe Ferraris' *Finding Nouf* (2009) set in contemporary Muslim society of the Middle East and narrates the life of women who suffer all types of oppressions and are separated from men in most of the fields such as worship, education, and employment. *Finding Nouf* won many prizes when it was first published, including the *Los Angeles Times Book Prize winner*. It explores the harsh environment the woman lives and the unequal relationship between men and women in this Islamic societies in general. In *Finding Nouf*, Ferraris focuses on the issues of segregation, wearing burqa, and female abuse in the rigidly gender-segregated and gender-biased societies of the Middle East where women are not allowed to work in places where they may interact with male counterparts. The novel is about the sudden disappearance of a sixteen-year-old girl, Nouf, the daughter of a rich and highly influential family in an Arab society. Nouf is the main character who was not happy with her family and agreed to get her married to a man she didn't know and disappeared just few days before her marriage. The novel begins with the investigators, Nayir and Katya, in the desert searching for Nouf, who is rumored to have escaped her home. The death of Nouf, the beautiful young girl who was by all accounts offered all comforts by her family, requires much speculation.

Finding Nouf describes two codes of life: the east and the west, the Muslim and the Christian, and the liberal and the oppressive. It presents the Muslim woman as an object of desire for men and this theme occurs over and over again in contemporary American novel on Arab Muslim society in which woman is historically a male possession and a source of pleasure for him, however, Nouf rejected to live the way the society wants: "she was nervous about her wedding...She didn't know Qazi [her groom] that well" (Ferraris, 2009: 182) Nouf is presented as a part of commodities; a fact that represents the core of rivalry between the Muslim world and Christian America in the present time. Such a commodification is a tool of gender binarism that assumes the equality between Muslim and Christian woman: "a woman who shows her hair or skin is nothing but a whore" (18). According to Pourasgari, woman's rights are held with men; they are strictly prohibited to practice many activities:

Bicycles were forbidden for women because the orthodox Muslims thought that the movement of the legs and hips were provocative...Women were allowed to own cars but not drive them. The only time they were permitted to sit in the front was when their *mahram* was driving. Women without means whose husbands were at work were trapped at home...Music and dancing were forbidden in the Muslim religion because Islam forbade anything that might lead to lust and fornication. It was believed that music and dancing were used to stimulate thoughts of eroticism and filthy love." (39-40)

Patriarchal discourse in post 9/11 America contrasts a 'good' woman who is a paragon of the female autonomy with a 'bad' woman who epitomizes what is considered unfeminine. If American culture begins its encounter with Islam by representing the Muslim woman primarily as a submissive member, this submission to Islamic rules and teaching is declining in post 9/11 discourse. Muslim woman becomes more appreciative of her role in changing the patriarchal forces. In *Finding Nouf*, Nouf plans to run away to America because America offers her what is stolen in Arab society. Nayir, a devout Muslim "who can't even looking at a woman's uncovered face and feels his soul may be in jeopardy as he talks to women" investigates Nouf's disappearance is dazzled by her determination and sacrifice for freedom: "The fact that she wanted to run away to America set her in a category beyond what he had previously believed...Nouf in his mind was starkly deceptive, plotting a scheme to satisfy her desires and rebuke her family. She was not fearful; she was ambitious" (105). The increasing American dominant perception of the Islamic society as impotent, unproductive, ineffectual, is reflected in the general feminization of the Islamic Orient in cultural discourse, so that the Muslim woman, the most feminine part of that effeminate world, becomes its exemplary manifestation.

The ideal woman is not the one who accepts the oppressive treatment of Islamic culture, but the one who rebels. Nouf, before death, decides to accept marriage to Qazi and go with him to New York where she would escape from him in a hotel because in Arab society "women were not allowed to leave the country without an exit visa signed by their husbands or fathers" (101). Once in America, Nouf will embrace the "White Value" by escaping with her American friend, Eric Scarsberry: "She wanted to go to America...She gave him a million riyals. He was going to set her up in New York with an apartment...She wanted to leave...On her honeymoon. She was going to New York with Qazi...She was going to leave him in the hotel and meet Eric somewhere" (101). Eric, the American boy, is the saviour of Arab woman from the cruel culture of Islamic society. Eric tells the investigators: "I was helping her. She had no one-I was her only link to freedom" (158). However, to Arabs, Eric represents an evil intruder: "Eric was in some ways the evil American, the greedy man who comes to Arab and does anything for money, wreaking havoc with society-in this case, with innocent virgins" (160). The superiority of the American values becomes more definite over the Arabic ones at least in women's freedom. This superiority, Ferraris notes, fascinates Nouf to escape her family and live in the American society. Her driver, Muhammad, narrates:

She wanted to live in America...She saw this program on television one day, about a woman who studied wild dogs in Africa. She wanted to be just like that woman, even though the woman lived with these dogs- dogs! She was dirty...I think that impressed Nouf more than anything else, that this woman could live like a dog and be so happy. More than Nouf, at least. (102)

Nouf is found dead in the desert after ten days of search. Together they learn that Nouf had meetings with someone in an abandoned zoo and was planning to escape from the confines of Arab society to New York City. This discussion reveals that Nouf is killed because she is not happy getting married to Mr. Qazi. The three people are also puzzled by the way Nouf is buried with her belly facing Mecca because only pregnant women are buried that way and Nouf was not even married. Investigator's conclusion is based on three observations. First is that during the search for Nouf's body, the family was not eager to find out the reasons behind her death. Nayir is directed by the examining doctor: "You're here to pick up the body," she said, "so pick up the body and forget about the rest. The case is closed-they've decided it was an accidental death" (19). Second is that Nouf was pregnant and buried in the way pregnant women are buried: "Nouf's back was turned to Mecca. Not her feet, but her back...The image disturbed him. If what he suspected was true, why hadn't Miss Hijazi told him? A family buries a woman with her back to Mecca

only when she carries a baby in her belly, a baby whose face, in death, must be turned in the direction of the Holy Mosque” (27). Therefore, “the family would have to be behind it. They were the only people powerful enough” (19). Third is that Nayir and Katya observe many bruises that look like she has been attacked: “When she turned her attention to a series of bruises on Nouf’s wrists and hands, Nayir allows himself to watch. She stabbed one of the lesions. “Looks like sand,” she said. “There’s something beneath her fingernails too. These look like defensive wounds”” (27). The novel ends with a discussion between Nayir, Katya and the ophthalmologist that Nouf is a victim of honour killing and is not drowned because there are defensive wounds on her wrists.

Nouf is a victim of Islamic tradition in the modern time and social norms: “[she] would have been upset...the way that family raises their children bothers me...Nouf may have been a victim of her upbringing” (19). Though Nouf knows that committing suicide is a sin in Islam, she decided to kill herself in order to escape honor killing that may result from her refusal of arranged marriage as she writes in her memories: “In the name of Allah, all-merciful, all-knowing, I almost killed myself today, but I was too frightened to do it...Allah, please forgive me” (16). There is a common ground between the veil as a segregating tool and eroticism that the former prevents the latter as a religious act. *Finding Nouf* has two environments segregated by sex in which even looks are strictly prohibited and considered “as dangerous as staring at the sun” (123). Nayir represents the male segment of the society who never saw a woman in his life: “Everything he knew about women had been gleaned from rumor, the Quran, and an assortment of bootleg television videos...Although his friends laughed, it was sadly true, and Nayir was left with the depressing sense that the world of women was one that he would never be allowed to enter” (240). In the course of investigating the death of Nouf, Nayir is disturbed by existence of women who are not wholly covered: “There were too many ankles showing for his discomfort” (126). His inability to reach to a conclusion regarding the mysterious death of Nouf is largely because he fears Allah’s punishment for speaking and interacting with women: “He tried not to imagine her face or her body, but the more he thought about her, the more vivid she became. In his mind she was walking through the desert, leaning into the wind, back cloak whipping against her sunburned ankles. *Allah forgive me for imagining her ankles*, he thought” (75). Nayir is a typical Arab conservative Muslim who does not accept even looking at a woman’s face.

Katya plays an important role in establishing a good understanding between men and women in Arab society. Nayir, who works with Katya, has been a radical Muslim who never gazes at Katya’s face in the beginning: “Because her face was exposed, he averted

his gaze, blushing as he did so. Uncertain where to rest his eyes...she'd noticed Nayir's discomfort and was disappointed by it" (13). The first thing comes to Nayir's mind regarding Katya's freedom is that her parents must be a Westernized couple: "He could imagine her father wearing a business suit, speaking perfect English; her mother was perhaps one of those women who wrote letters to the king and the ministers complaining about the laws against women" (135). This female free association with male can alter radical thoughts of conservative men in Arab Muslim society. The result of this interaction between male and female can overcome radical beliefs and shape male personality too as Katya recognizes it in Nayir character:

...she marveled at how her opinion of him had undergone a shift. Instead of an imposing, overly righteous ayatollah, he now seemed like one of those men who, aware of their own physical power, develop a kind of masculine grace...He wasn't overbearing; he was kind, thoughtful, smart, and reliable. And now he is the only person she trusted with information about Nouf's case (223)

Inferiority calls into question of the basic rights of the Muslim woman as compared to their Western counterparts. Most of Muslim Arab women *The Dawn* and *Finding Nouf* are educated women who are prevented from entering the work field. A common tendency in representing educated women in the two novels is their reliance on educated unemployed Muslim women. This creates an impression that veiled Muslim woman is a well-educated woman with career aspirations but hindered by male patriarchy: "Women didn't have birth certificates until recently. They were included on their father's birth certificate, which made them the property of a man...And what's most unfair is that a 12-year-old brother of a 30-year-old single woman, for example, is allowed to make decisions for her and can forbid her to leave the house" (187). Katya Hijazi, who has received a PhD in molecular biology, is not allowed to apply for a job that suits her area of study because "[t]here were few jobs for women, especially educated women. Women were allowed to work only in places where they wouldn't interact with men...the country's scientific jobs were filled by men first" (118). This paradigm set up a special role for women in Orientalist discourse that "women are usually the creatures of a male-power fantasy" (Said, 1977: 207). Ferraris makes no effort to distinguish between Arab women who work and others who do not. The more conducive way of representation, which introduces the reader to women from all walks of life; this would include the educated, uneducated, employed, unemployed, rich, the poor, the courageous, the submissive, the stay-at-home mom and so on, is not relevant in Ferraris' tradition of approaching Muslim woman. Similarly, this

will include many examples of Muslim women who wear Islamic dress codes by choice and those who are forced to wear them.

Most of the women who live with Katya are fully controlled females who advise her: "You'd better start having children before you get too old. You may be too old already! What is a job compared to the value of children?" (177). In such society women do not even argue to get their rights: "When she [Katya] told her father about the job, he jerked upright and narrowed his eyes. "Come on, we're not *that poor*," he said. It had stung her so deeply that she'd wanted to cry. Letting a woman work was a desperate thing to do. They had sunk in the world. Her face must have showed her disappointment, because Abu backpedaled" (119). Accordingly, Katya gives up her ambitions and starts giving tuitions for girls, who are treated the same way by their male guardians: "All of her students were from the school for girls just down the street. They came in pairs with their escorts- usually brothers or cousins- who waited while Katya helped the girls with their homework...She'd hear their escorts tease them: "Why are you studying chemistry? Can you use it for cooking?" (117-118).

Violation of women's rights is attributed to Islamist thought, the most conservative school of Islamic thought. In Islamist belief, woman's duty is to remain at home; she is not allowed to practice activities that may involve interaction with men such as driving which is "a lot dangerous than stealing. It's illegal, too" (101). This school is represented by Shaikhs like Al Obeikan who issues the most controversial fatwa in which he advises women to breastfeed their foreign drivers so that they form a familial relationship with their drivers and get mixed with them: "Women could give their milk to men to establish a degree of maternal relations" (Raymond 2010). Sumner and Philip note that religion cannot be taken in isolation while dealing with Arab woman because the conservative tribal nature of Arab culture and the male interpretation of the sacred text have a major role. They refer to women's rights in Christianity: "If the church fathers were prejudiced against women, and we know it, then we should be careful not to absorb their bias" because "Traditional Christian thinking is not the same thing as biblical thinking about women" (Sumner & Johnson 44). Therefore, Ferraris' Orientalist view on Islam is *an ethnocentric one* because veiling has roots in Judeo-Christian tradition before Islam. In the Old Testament, for instance, one reads: "When Re-bek'ah raised her eyes, she caught sight of Isaac and she swung herself down from off the camel. Then she said to the servant "Who is that walking in the field to meet us?" and the servant said "It is my master." And she proceeded to take a head cloth and to cover herself" (*Bible: King James*: 24:64-65).

Post-9/11 Novel and Muslim Female Identity: *The Dawn of Saudi* (2009)

Feminist discourse on race revolves around the us/other dichotomy which includes specific victims and victimizers. In Post 9/11 literature, cultural dichotomies between Islamic and American societies hold the view that Islam is a backward, anti-woman and anti-West religion. This dichotomy is explained further in *The Dawn* where Pourasgari shows an attitude towards Islam by establishing the American point of view as a basis for judgment and as the ground against Islamic treatment of woman: "A Jew or Christian's life is worth 50 percent of a Muslim man's life, all others including Hindus are worth 1/16. An atheist's life is worth 0 percent and a woman's life is worth 50 percent of the males in each of these categories. That's how the judges base their decisions" (2012). Similarly, women living under Islamic rule receive the same injustice. *The Dawn* establishes a dichotomy between the two girls; Sahar, an Arab Muslim, and her friend, Dawn, an American Mormon married to an Arab man, in order to provide a strong basis for judgment. Dawn who marries her Arab boyfriend in Barcelona is fascinated by her husband's description of Arab life. She goes with him after he promises her a Western life style in Arab society:

There were apartment buildings where Westerners lived and men and women were allowed to mix and dress the way they wanted...They had grocery store, swimming pool, a large yard where the tenants could play sports...Women and men were even allowed to sit around in their bathing suits, make homemade alcohol from smuggled yeast, and watch films in a movie theatre, which was all *haram*-forbidden on the outside. (19).

Authenticity of narration in the text is determined by gender where female's voice is usually strong and authentic because a male's voice is inauthentic and rarely does the male speak about his views. The description of life in Arab society given by the Arab male does not carry the truth. Dawn's knowledge about life in Arab society comes from her husband who shows more freedom and open-mindedness in Barcelona. In fact, life is not as Dawn is told by her husband. Though Sahar tries to convince her not to go to Arab, Dawn believes in love rather than rationality "Can't you be happy for me? I am marrying someone I love...My boyfriend loves me. He said we would live in a Western compound and travel all the time" (19). Once in Arab, Dawn finds life is completely different from what she was previously told. Soon she realizes the result of her trust in this man: "After her marriage, she moved to Riyadh but not in a Western compound, which her boyfriend had promised, but in a house located in an Arab neighborhood. The man she had married lied to her about his liberal ways in order to manipulate her into marriage" (20). There is

direct evidence that the Oriental is being represented. This occurs when the male's voice is not speaking in the discourse of the culture portrayed.

Authentic knowledge about life in Islamic society comes only from female characters. The message that Islam is patriarch religion is conveyed by Sahar who has the most authentic voice in the novel. She believes that her suffering has a basis in her religion: "She often wondered which god supported such cruelty toward women. Which god created such inequality among men and women? After all, weren't all humans supposed to be equal? How much of this inequality was religion and how much was it the interpretation of men of her culture? She hadn't an answer but could no longer accept the life she was born into" (6). Had Dawn listened to Sahar's knowledge of her own society and religion she would not have been trapped in Arab:

In America, you are free to do as you wish even when your religion dictates otherwise but in Riyadh all your freedoms will be taken away. You will not be able to drink sangrias. You will not be allowed to leave the house without a *mahram*-a Guardian...You will not even be allowed to drive or ride a bicycle. Arab Arabia was the only country in the world where women were not allowed to drive cars. (9).

The binarism that American society is advanced and the Islamic is reinforced by introducing Arab characters who lived in the West and returned home with ambitions to Westernize their own society. This binarism of human/subhuman appears as the theme of sub-humanity. Pourasgari provides examples of young Arab men and women who live in the West and return to their native places as enlightened and civilized people. For instance, uncle Nadim, who received his education in the United States, represents the model of civilized Arab Muslim man: "He often wished that the laws of his country were based on civil laws instead of Sharia- a code of law derived from the Koran and teachings of Mohammad" (30). Uncle Nadim is the only male who believes in equal rights for men and women and prefers the Western way of life. He is a symbol of an Americanized Arab man who has certain features that make him a model for Sahar. Sahar's rejection of marriage is based on her knowledge of the American life that "women in America don't get married until they're into their 30s" (13). She has a preference for the American way of life because living in Arab society will bring more confinement to her. She comments on her arranged marriage: "I can't, and I will not be treated like an object. Didn't you even hear what he said? Obey him. As if I would. I would die before I obey anyone" (165). In other words, she believes that her society is a better place for males and not for females:

If the child is a boy, he can leave after age of 18, but if it's a girl, she may never be allowed to leave by the father, can be forced into marriage and be oppressed like a Arab woman for the rest of her life. (188)

Sahar and Dawn reach opposite ends. Sahar fakes her death by drinking chemical solution and, with the help of uncle Nadim, she goes the United States. Dawn is trapped in Riyadh and lives a miserable life with her husband. The evil of Arab patriarchy serves as the climax of the novel when Dawn's freedom is taken in Arab after she converts to Islam. Dawn has to live as submissive as Arab women where "woman is obliged to satisfy her husband whenever he asks" (20). She has been subject to this aggression by all around her including her husband: "He had an insatiable hunger for intercourse...He hurt her by biting, punching and whipping her...She had tried several times to go to the Arab courts to complain to officials, only to be sent back to her husband, telling her that she didn't have any proof. The officials requested that she obey him" (67). The invention of imagery of female heroism which manages to be very feminine and at the same time independent, tough, and consciously resisting traditional male authority, is a remarkable focus of *The Dawn*. All heroism in the novel is not of the American girl, Dawn but of the Arab Sahar's. Sahar pays a high cost for her freedom. When she arrives in America she suffers a lot before getting the American freedom. She works as a servant at Crowford Enterprise and is subjected to various assaults. The fact that she belongs to a very rich family is no more relevant during her search for freedom:

She was exhausted from cleaning all the toilets-nine downstairs, five upstairs, three at the guesthouses, four at the cottages, his and hers by the indoor and outdoor pools, the tennis courts and the stables. Once done, she mopped the floors, washed the sinks, cleaned the counters and restocked the bathrooms with toilet paper, fresh towels, liquid soap and hand lotion. (133)

Sahar represents the rebellious Arab woman who rejects religion and tradition and escapes to USA on her wedding day to live her own life, including a life of sexual freedom. She never thinks it is too late to start a new life in America; rather she insists: "My past is my past, and I have to now focus on the present" (238). The qualms she has regarding the American society do not frighten her: "Will she find a home in a country where people were too busy with their own lives to worry about their neighbors? Will she be able to make a family of her own in a place where the roles of women and men were no longer black and white but a shade of gray?" are overcome at the end" (238). There is direct evidence that her fear is overcome in American society: "America, the country that

supported her independence, expected her to make decisions, find work, make money, get lodging, pay for her own medical bills, look for a mate and figure out right from wrong. No longer were there laws that dictated her path. She was a caged bird who had been fed and protected all its life and now had been set free" (207)

One cannot help but observe that the gender limitations on woman's existence are reducible to the simple observation that oppression of woman is essentially Islamic. All women, Arabs or non-Arabs, share the same treatment in Islamic society. In Arab Islamic laws: "if a woman gets raped, nine out of ten times she gets blamed for luring the man into raping her" and therefore "[m]any women don't report being raped because they're afraid they'll get punished for it" (8). Asian female workers living in Arab Society are oppressed too: "Often young Filipinos with work permits in Arab Society were treated like slaves and had their passports taken away by their employers so that they could never leave the country. They were beaten by owner of the house or raped by male family members while the Arab courts ignored it" (164). Mistreatment of women, rather than being a serious problem, becomes an inevitability and thus a stereotype allowing the reader to accept the whole religion as an aggressive one. Sahar is fed up with all the practices of her society including her dress: "I needed my freedom. I needed to be able to walk out without being covered from head to toe. I felt suffocated under my *abaya*." (210). It is for these reasons Sahar escapes to America where she finds freedom: "From the day a girl is born, she's taught that her role in life is to get married and bear sons to carry out the husband's name" (164).

In America, life is changed for the better. Sahar is no longer oppressed; instead, she is free, independent, working a male-dominated job and refuses to wear the veil. The central change in her personality is indicated by the fact that Muslim woman is rescued by superior American values. Her personality is marked by features of a liberal Westernized woman. In America she is transformed into a sharp critic of the American policy towards violation of human rights in Arab societies: "The U.S. government has strong ties with the Arab government and they look the other way when there is any kind of human rights violations" (317). Sahar's American friend Alex feels the same: "That's terrible," Alex pondered the injustice of it all. "What's interesting is, I have never seen our president point to the Arab Society for violation of human rights and yet he has no problem pointing fingers at China, Russia, Cuba and Iran" (322). Sahar begins to work on many fronts against oppression of woman in Arab Society. She writes to journals and contact American politicians for the same purpose: "Sahar set up shop outside Pavilions to collect signatures asking California senators to speak up against the violation of human rights in Arab Society and to support

a bill to put sanctions against that country” (20). Not only is Sahar’s life changed, but also her way of thinking is transformed in the American society. She begins to search for women who suffer in other parts of the world including women in Latin America. She establishes a Women and Children’s Center which cares for abused women and children. She believes that she may not be able to save the world or have the power to change her country but she could at least reach out to the community around her.

The Orientalist notion that women are usually the creatures of a male-power fantasy is challenged by the American girl, Dawn. She is a product of the American values, who, despite the inevitability of her destruction, manages to leave behind a striking picture of the American superiority over the Arab Muslim. The forces she faces in the Arab society are both her husband and the whole judicial system. When she eventually finds out that “it was nearly impossible for a wife to get a divorce from a husband, but incredibly easy for a husband to divorce a wife, all he had to say was “I divorce you” three times” , Dawn does not submit to these forces” (210). She rather has to endure gender discrimination too: “Dawn tried divorcing Youssef but she wasn’t allowed to go in front of a judge. She needed a *mahram*[male guardian] to speak for her but she had no one. Even if she had a male guardian, the court would never allow a woman to divorce her husband. The police just sent her home and told her to work it out with her husband” (215). At the end Dawn is victorious. She stabs her husband fifteen times while he is sleeping. She gets killed by the same knife she uses to kill her husband. Dawn is dead but her soul is not. The soul is alive to enlighten and guide the oppressed Arab woman for freedom as her letter to Sahar indicates:

You are the voice in my head. You are the sister I never had. You are my best friend, my family and the only person I have in this dark, lonely world...I want you to live for both of us and be free. Do all the things I took for granted. Run on the beach, go out in the street without a *mahram*, vote, drive, work and have sex with a man who respects and cares about you...Don’t be scared. I may be dead, but my spirit lives on and will protect you. Take my strength and use it to escape. (226)

The theme of Arab women’s sexuality is integrated with the theme of Oriental submissiveness. The episode when Sahar is making love with her American boyfriend is related to gender submissiveness within Middle Eastern society. This episode indicates two things: first is the sexual submission of Arab Muslims before a Westerner: “Jason picked her up and carried her to the bedroom...His mouth caressed her breasts and shifted toward her navel and then to between her thighs but when he heard the sound of pleasure in her voice he lost control and pushed her legs open with his as he entered her in one sharp move” (227). Secondly, it suggests the ease with which Arabs fall before the Western

righteous force. After her sexual intercourse with the American boy, Sahar asserts: "I have violated everything I have always been taught, and yet I feel no remorse. I'm glad that it was you who made love to me instead of a husband I could never love. I wouldn't trade this night for anything" (227). These two indications reinforce the idea that there is an essential connection between Arabness and submissiveness to the American force.

Sahar feels violation of women's rights in Islamic society of Arab reflects the backwardness of her society. In America, she "felt ashamed that her country, which was supposed to be a model for Islamic states, was the biggest human rights violator in the world. If they couldn't get it right, how could their followers?" (248). The message is that if there is any divine spirit, it is manifest in the women's ambition to embrace the American values. Sahar is preoccupied with American conceptions of individual autonomy and freedom of choice: "That's why she loved the U.S. she may have been more conservative than others but she had choices. The choice to drive even if she couldn't afford to have a car, the choice to dress sexy, even if she preferred to dress modestly, the choice to vote even when she didn't have time to make it to polls" (200).

When the Orient is first Orientalized at the end of the nineteenth century, a vast and complex discourse on Islam and Muslim women developed simultaneously. In those colonial discourses, imperial culture is always introduced as a hospitable one for the Arab oppressed woman. Lazreg introduces the best example of the French freedom offered to Algerian women and how the French try to Westernize those women who lived under the oppressive rule of Islam and Arab culture. Lazreg describes a skit written by a French lady at an awards ceremony in a Muslim Girls' school in Algeria held on October 24, 1851 that is attended by French colonial Officials:

Oh! Protective France: Oh! Hospitable France!...
Noble land, where I felt free
Under Christian skies to pray to our God:
We believe that God
Loves a prayer said by a good child.
Oh! But we will strive to do good
So that He will fulfill your wishes...
God bless you for the happiness you bring us!
And you, adoptive mother, who taught us
That we have a share of this world,
We will cherish you forever! (Lazreg, 1999: 68-69)

The struggle for freedom is the principal focus in post 9/11 American discourse on Muslim women. This discourse presents the Muslim woman to the reader as a slave in Arab Muslim society while in America she has complete freedom. In America, the Arab Muslim woman is not subordinate to the authority of her male guardian or any other man. When Sahar receives "Welcome to America", she could not believe her eyes and ears: ""Does that mean...does that mean..." she burst into tears. It had taken her tremendous effort to hold back her fear: "Am I free to go?" (Pourasgari 312). America becomes a land of her freedom, hope and a space for raising families.

In America, the Puritans of the 19th century thought the Muslim woman needed a relief from overindulgence in sex. Interestingly, today's liberation of Arab women is perceived from an opposite direction. Today, the Americans believe that Arab women need a liberation that will enhance her sexual freedom. Thus, empowerment of Muslim women in American literature asserts liberation of woman from Islamic dress as a first step. This significant contradiction is seen in the post 9/11 novel. In *The Dawn*, Arab Muslim code of dress is the most convincing sign of oppression against Arab woman and therefore, Arab woman is encouraged to get rid of this tradition: "She thought it was unjust that she wasn't allowed to breathe the same fresh air that men did, that she was forced to look at the beautiful blue sky through the blackness of her veil, and that while men fornicated before marriage" (6).

The Muslim woman's dress signifies that Islamic law suppresses woman's sexuality. This dress, in Islamic point view, provides the Muslim woman the resistance against the possibility of her vulnerability to the Western culture. Sahar compares her society with the Western one: "When you travel through Europe or America, they have so much freedom that no one cares if you walk out in your underwear. People just go on about living their lives" (38). Accordingly Islamic law is incompatible with modernity because in Western society women are being granted certain freedoms that are not given by Islamic law: "Many Arabs and fundamentalists found the Western culture a threat to their Islamic values. This intensive fear applied not only to Arab Society but also to all countries that governed according to the laws of Sharia. The more the Western countries meddled in their affairs, the more religious and conservative they become" (38). Ideology has much to do in this issue. Arab Muslims hold the opposite view. They regard the Western dress as showy and perceive these women as prostitutes.

Binarism between East and West including contrasting descriptions as human/subhuman, advanced/backward, secular/fanatic implies that East remains East as inferior and West remains West as superior. This stereotype approaches the subhuman; she is a

woman who can work in very limited fields but not in the vicinity of man: "Some have jobs in women's banks and women's shopping malls, but this is all new" (186). This kind of discrimination does exist in Islamic society but, according to Islamic sources, is related to traditions rather than Islamic teachings. Therefore, it would be misleading to assume that this discrimination is exclusive to Arab Muslim society because Muslim societies are diverse in their class base and levels of education and employment, both for men and women, because traditional and cultural values do play a role in this issue. Discrimination against women is largely observed inside the United States too: "In the United States, occupational sex segregation is related to the fact that women hold, on average, jobs with less desirable characteristics than men's occupations" (Cartmill, 1999). Further, this tradition does not have basis in Islam because Prophet Muhammad didn't object to women working rather he married, Khadija, the woman he was working for.

The evil of Islamic law serves as the climax of the post 9/11 novel when it allows men to kill women in the name of honor. In *The Dawn*, the judicial laws extracted from Islam permit killing of women who violate the family honor. Sahar is followed by her husband to America not just because she escaped to America, but because she spoiled his name: "His goal was to kill Sahar one day and save his honor" (314). Husam is not violating the law here because what he is doing is a work granted by Sharia: "Why should he kill her when the Arab courts would gladly do it for him? All he had to do was to surrender her to Riyadh police and explain how she had violated their marriage contract. The courts would then throw her in prison, torture her...and then give her the death sentence" (279). This motif activates a whole new scene which includes, for the first time, the aggressive nature of Islamic law, *Sharia*, in issue related to women and thus becomes the most powerful evil force in the novel, more powerful even than the conservative tribal tradition of the Arabs.

It is easy here to see the role of the CIA at Los Angeles airport in saving Sahar from honour killing when she becomes in the grip of her husband and his personal pilot. The CIA agent warns them: "I'm asking you nicely to disappear and am warning you for the last time: If as much as a hair is missing on that girl's head, I will personally destroy yours lives. For your own interest I suggest that you move on and forget about her" (26). Her captivity at the airport becomes the springboard for transformation. With a cool deliberation, she preserves the life and status she wants for herself: "My duty to be a good wife was burdened on my forehead from the day my mother gave birth to me. But you see, my fate is no different than the fate of many girls who are often as young as 11

years old” (43). Sahar manages to defeat men who mistreat her and create from Islam a misogynistic religion that establishes honor killing as a symptom of masculinity.

In addition to being an unjust system, Islamic law is marked by contradictions. In Islamic laws of Arab Society, a woman who marries a non-Muslim is “condemned to death by her family and the courts even if she lived outside the country” (213). On the other hand, men who marry foreign women “were permitted to marry non-Muslims” (43). In Dawn’s case, the murder is justified by the claim of restoring her husband’s name while in reality her murder is revenge because: “[w]hen a male relative kills a woman in order to resort family honor, it is tolerated” (213). Though, her brother-in-law is avenging his brother whom she has killed: “he claimed that Dawn has been cheating on her husband and that he had gone home to confront her and she killed him to hide the truth” (213). The only possible conclusion here is that killing for restoring honour is more tolerated by Sharia laws than any other form of killing.

Figure 1. Recurring Thematic Patterns Identified Across the Two Novels

	Finding Nouf (2009)	Shared Pattern	The Dawn of Saudi (2010)
Cultural conflict with religion	Honor killing, forced marriage, and veiling presented as religiously mandated rather than tribal/cultural	Both novels isolate extreme practices (honor killing, forced marriage) and present them as representative of Islam	Sharia-based rulings on divorce, testimony value, and honor killing presented as core Islamic law
Benchmark of judgment	Nouf and Katya's choices judged against an implicit American standard of freedom	American lifestyle, dress, and values serve as the implicit civilizational benchmark in both texts	Sahar and Dawn's lives measured against American ideals of choice and autonomy
Framing of female agency	Nouf's escape plan and desire for America read as courage; compliance read as submission	Agency is legible only when oriented toward American values or American intervention	Sahar's rebellion and escape framed as awakening; Dawn's trust in her husband framed as naivety
Role of male authority	Nayir's discomfort with unveiled women frames Islamic male conduct as inherently restrictive	Islamic male authority (family, clergy, courts) is the consistent source of female constraint	Husband and Sharia courts jointly enable violence and blocked divorce
Resolution / outcome	Death linked to honor killing; American man (Eric) positioned as her intended path to freedom	Liberation is achieved through American values or American actors, not through change from within	Sahar rescued via U.S. intervention (CIA); Dawn dies resisting Arab patriarchal control

Note. Rows summarize the recurring patterns coded during analysis; the center column indicates convergence across both novels.

Figure 1. Summarizes the Recurring Thematic Patterns Identified across the Two Novels.

The above figure summarizes the recurring thematic patterns identified across the two novels, organized around the conflation of cultural and religious practice, the American benchmark of judgment, the framing of female agency, the role of male authority, and the narrative resolution.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Neo-Orientalist Narrative Mechanism

Synthesizing the discussion of *Finding Nouf* and *The Dawn of Saudi*

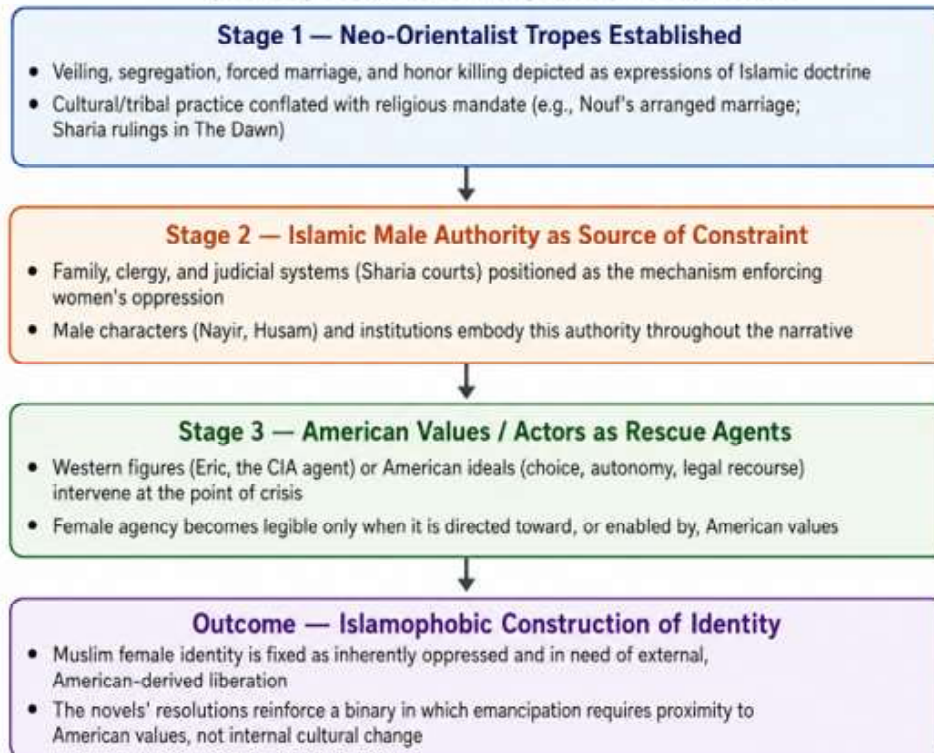


Figure 2. Conceptual Model of the Neo-Orientalist Narrative Mechanism Synthesizing The discussion.

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

This study finds that the construction of constructing Arab Muslim women identity in post-9/11 American novels *Finding Nouf* and *The Dawn of Saudi* reveals a well-noted tendency toward an overgeneralization of certain cultural practices and their conflation with religious ones. In both novels this conflation produces an image of an oppressed and silenced female, leaving the reader confused about which practices are cultural and which are religious. The two novels introduce inferiority, peculiarity, and backwardness as the dominant features of the system in which Arab Muslim woman lives in. Ferraris and Pourasgari isolate a single practice, often an extreme one such as honor killing or

other forms of abuse and present it to the reader as an Islamic practice, disregarding the diverse cultural and traditional groupings within the Islamic world; alongside this, both novels judge their Arab Muslim women protagonists against an implicit American standard of civilization. In the two texts, the American lifestyle, dress, food, likes, dislikes are the benchmark against which Arab Muslim woman is defined. This representation is reinforced in both texts by a recurring focus on Prophet Muhammad's treatment of women, through which the Muslim Arab woman is represented as either exotic and mysterious or as oppressed and backward, suffering male dominance since the coming of Islam, the same binarism that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe. In this way, both *Finding Nouf* and *The Dawn of Saudi* construct their Muslim female protagonists not only from the point of view of the American civilization supremacy but also also from the Christian perception of Islamic authority over women, positioning each protagonist as the silenced and oppressed.

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