



Module 2: Reading Muslim Women: Annotated Bibliography and Teacher Guides For Developing Critical Literacy

| *Being a Canadian Muslim Woman in the 21st Century*

module 2: reading muslim women: annotated bibliography and teacher guides for developing critical literacy

INTRODUCTION

This module contains three lists of recommended books, both fiction and non-fiction, that focus on the lives of Muslim women. The women represented come from a range of backgrounds, ages, time periods, and relationships to Islam. None of these works should be taken as representative of Muslim women as a whole, but all offer interesting starting points for discussion and learning. The books challenge the stereotypes of Muslim girls and women as passive, obedient, and/or exotic.

- **Section 1** includes descriptions and teacher guides for three books that are recommended for their portrayals of Muslim women and of related social and political issues. Questions are provided as starting points for discussions in the classroom, and suggestions are given for possible research that expands on some of the topics raised in each book.
- **Section 2** is a further list of books that might be of interest, either for classroom discussions or for external reading. The short reviews provided in this section, as well as most of the reviews in Section 3, are taken from longer pieces posted on *Muslimah Media Watch* (www.muslimahmediawatch.org), a blog that looks at media and popular culture representations of Muslim women.
- The books in **Section 3** would be unlikely classroom choices because of their lighter tone and less complex writing, but they raise important issues. They might be worthwhile as further reading for students looking for additional representations of Muslim women in young adult literature.

section one: recommended books with teacher guide

Ask Me No Questions by Marina Budhos (Ginee Seo Books, 2006)

Ask Me No Questions is the story of Nadira, the narrator, and her older sister Aisha, who came to the United States from Bangladesh when they were young and do not have legal status in the country. The sisters are forced to move in with their aunt and uncle when their father is arrested for immigration violations, and further accused of terrorist links. Nadira and Aisha struggle with the uncertainty and upheaval in their lives, with conflicts among people inside and outside of their cultural community, and with the system that has imprisoned their father.

The book paints a powerful picture of the life of teenaged girls living in the United States without legal immigration status, as well as the social isolation and marginalization that the family faces. It places particular emphasis on the post-9/11 context, in which immigrant Muslim men have been seen with suspicion, and many have been deported to their home countries.

Teachers using the novel in their classrooms should be sensitive to the possibility that they might have students in their own classrooms who do not have legal immigration status, and for whom some of these discussions might be very personal and even dangerous. It is also important to be aware of language: although Nadira talks about herself as “illegal” in the United States, language painting human beings as illegal contains a lot of violence. “Non-status” is a better alternative.

- *Discussion questions before reading:*
 - What does it mean to live in a country without legal immigration status? What effect would this have on someone’s everyday life?
 - What do you know about Canada’s policies about accepting refugees?
- *Discussion questions after reading:*
 - What did you learn about what life might be like for someone without legal status in the United States? How did this affect Nadira’s and Aisha’s social and academic lives?
 - Was the ending realistic? What are the other possible ways that this story could have ended? What do you think would have happened to Nadira and her family if they had been deported?
 - How realistic is the family’s goal of eventually coming to Canada to claim refugee status? What barriers (legal and otherwise) might make this difficult or impossible for them?

- *Directions for further research:*
 - Read more about the arrests and deportations of Muslim men in the United States after 9/11, and compare this to similar measures in Canada.
 - Research the history of Canada’s Safe Third Country Agreement, and explain the impact that this would have on a family like Nadira’s, trying to claim refugee status in Canada after having lived in the United States. This should also be linked to historical research on the Komagata Maru and the S.S. St. Louis, as well as current reactions to boats of Tamil refugee claimants that have recently arrived in British Columbia.

Baghdad Burning by Riverbend (Feminist Press at CUNY, 2005)

Compiled from blog posts written between August 2003 and September 2004, *Baghdad Burning* is the real-life account of a young woman living in Baghdad during the war. Writing under the pseudonym “Riverbend,” the author describes the impact of the war on her family and her city, while also reflecting on pre-war Iraq and on the misconceptions that international readers may have about her country. The book is well-written and engaging, and combines Riverbend’s personal experiences and insights with an informative general picture of recent events in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq.

- *Discussion questions before reading:*
 - What do you know about Iraq as a country?
 - What do you know about the current war in Iraq? What do you know about specific major events during the war (the occupation of Baghdad, the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison)?
 - What are your usual sources for news about the war in Iraq or about other global events?
- *Discussion questions after reading:*
 - Was there anything that surprised you about this book? What did you learn about Iraq and about the war that you didn’t know before?
 - How does Riverbend’s description of the war in Iraq compare to other information sources: media reports, humanitarian organizations, other blogs, etc.?

- What is the effect of the first-person narration of this book on how we receive the information? How does the style of the blog writing affect how we read the book?
- What does this book say about Iraqi women or about Muslim women?
- *Directions for further research:*
 - Compare the writing from this blog to others written by Iraqis during the same time (for example, Salam Pax, known as the “Baghdad Blogger,” at <http://salampax.wordpress.com>; other blogs are also referred to within *Baghdad Burning*.) What do the different bloggers say about major events? How do their accounts of their day-to-day lives compare to one another?
 - Pick an event or theme that Riverbend discusses (the Iraqi Governing Council, the murder of Aqila al-Hashimi, army raids, Abu Ghraib) and look at how it was covered in different media sources.

The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf by Mohja Kahf (PublicAffairs, 2006)

This novel follows the life of Khadra Shamy and her Syrian family living in a small Muslim community in Indiana. It chronicles the evolution of her religious identity and practice from young childhood to early adulthood; the interactions she has with the Muslim and non-Muslim members of the community; and the complicated relationship that she has with America and ideas of home and belonging. National and international politics involving racism, sexism, imperialism, war and occupation are woven into the narrative, as are poignant personal reflections on spirituality, family and identity.

Note: The novel touches on several issues that may be contentious within the classroom (such as Palestine/Israel and abortion), and there is some sexual content.

- *Discussion questions before reading:*
 - What do you know about the history of Muslims in the United States and Canada?
 - What do you think are some of the difficulties that Muslims living in North America may face?
- *Discussion questions after reading:*
 - What does the novel say about the challenges of interfaith relationships? How do these compare to some of the novel’s depictions of relationships among Muslims who may practice differently from each other?

- What stereotypes about Muslim or Arab women did the novel challenge or confirm?
- What are the different ways that racism is manifested in the novel? How does this affect Khadra and her community, and their relationship to where they live?
- At the end of the novel, Khadra seems relatively secure in how she has come to understand and embody her religious identity, with a sense that she has finally figured things out. Do you think this latest understanding is really more permanent, or is it another stage from which she will evolve further?
- *Directions for further research:*
 - Choose a character with whom Khadra disagrees, or whose experiences are significantly different from Khadra's. Write about what their perspectives might be on the issues of disagreement, or what they might think of Khadra.
 - Do further research on one of the major political events discussed in the novel. How did some of the international events affect diasporic Muslim communities living in North America?
 - Look at the history and composition of Muslim communities in Canada. How might Khadra's experience have been different (or similar) if her family had been in Canada instead?

section two: additional suggested material

Minaret by Leila Aboulela (Black Cat, 2006)

Reviewed by Faith Barrow-Waheed; full review available at <http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2008/12/minaret-by-leila-aboulela/>

Minaret's protagonist, Najwa, is a Sudanese immigrant in the U.K., who works as a maid for a wealthy Arab family but used to be part of wealthy family herself in her native Sudan. The novel goes back and forth between two periods in Najwa's life: her present as a maid, and her upbringing as part of an elite family in the Sudan. Her father is an advisor to the president, her mother a housewife who spends lots of time doing philanthropy. Najwa appears to be completely oblivious to the world outside her privileged life. Because she is so privileged, she doesn't notice the turmoil that is erupting in her country (and will eventually cause the downfall of her family). The class division is very apparent in Najwa's interaction with the house staff, whom she rarely seems to notice.

When a Socialist coup occurs in Sudan, Najwa's father is tried for corruption and killed, while she and her family narrowly escape to London. From this point on, Najwa's life becomes more difficult, leading her to look more closely at Islam and to a spiritual journey that lasts throughout the remainder of the novel. It is through an introspective spiritual lens that Najwa looks at her past, present and future. Throughout the novel, there is a sense that Najwa is looking for personal redemption and a way to make sense out of her current situation.

There isn't a preachy tone to the novel, nor is the protagonist supposed to represent all Muslim women. This is clearly a tale about one Muslim woman and her struggles and triumphs. There is also a refreshing frankness about various issues, including class, sex and race. Najwa is human and easy to relate to. It is easy to see her pain and disappointment and to also share her journey.

***Mother of the Believers* by Kamran Pasha (Washington Square Press, 2009)**

Reviewed by Safiyyah Surtee; full review available at <http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2009/12/pashas-perfection-mother-of-the-believers/>

Mother of the Believers is a work of fiction about the youngest and most beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Pasha has brought to life the story of A'isha, one of Islam's most controversial and enigmatic characters. It is important to note that Muslims and non-Muslims alike dispute everything about A'isha: her age, her actions and even her intentions. The book is a staggering 527 pages, and holds detailed insight into early Islamic life from the eyes of A'isha as an old woman. The first-person narration is refreshing in a world where the Muslim woman is always spoken about, spoken to, and seldom heard.

The novel deals with issues that scholars and historians have grappled with for centuries, such as the strained relationships between A'isha and the Prophet's family, the accusation of adultery made against her, her role in the Battle of the Camel, the bloody and tragic events at Karbala, and the power politics amongst members of the Prophet's community.

A'isha spent the most part of her life as a widow, in fact her story only really begins after the death of her husband, when she takes up her role as scholar, preacher and advisor. Pasha rations the story accordingly, without focusing too much on her marriage, but on her independence, her own worth separate from her husband, father and other male figures. Pasha even managed to maneuver sexuality its own place in the novel, maintaining both the Prophetic example of openness and transparency about taboo subjects, as well as the Islamic principle of modesty. This novel is a pioneer in that practically non-existent genre of Islamic fiction (fiction written within the framework of Islamic ethics and principles). The point of *Mother of the Believers* is that if flawed, passionate, complex people like the founders of Islam could find spiritual enlightenment, maybe we can too.

***Nomad Diaries* by Yasmeen Maxamuud (Dynastiebooks, 2009)**

Reviewed by Azra Thakur; full review available at

<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2010/07/yasmeen-maxamuuds-nomad-diaries/>

In Yasmeen Maxamuud's novel, *Nomad Diaries*, Maxamuud tells the story of an upper-class Somali woman, Nadifo, who comes to Minneapolis as a refugee in the mid-1990s during a time of civil unrest in Somalia. Maxamuud highlights the challenges Somali women face as they transition to life in America as the story follows Nadifo and her family's life. Maxamuud tackles a range of complex issues the women of the book face: interpersonal relationships (including polygamy, marital infidelity, abuse, and rape), generational differences, educational attainment, race relations, and economic freedom, to name a few. These issues are presented as the women navigate differing cultural expectations of identity from their Somali and American environments.

Nadifo and her granddaughter, Idil, are presented as flawed characters who are driven to accomplish their goals. The women of *Nomad Diaries* are strong, independent women who face their challenging situations with tenacity and a strength of resolve. Islam is depicted as the source of peace and strength to carry on with life in a world rife with the damaging cultural expectations women are faced with everyday.

***The Butterfly Mosque* by G. Willow Wilson (McClelland & Stewart, 2010)**

Reviewed by Azra Thakur; full review available at

<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2010/06/book-review-g-willow-wilson%e2%80%99s-the-butterfly-mosque/>

In G. Willow Wilson's *The Butterfly Mosque*, Wilson presents her personal experience as a young American Muslim woman coming to terms with an understanding of herself as she navigates evolving concepts of religion, cross-cultural dynamics, and womanhood while she pursues a romantic relationship. Wilson explores both the negative and positive aspects of a conversion to Islam and ensuing efforts to reconcile Eastern and Western beliefs, the inaccurate portrayals of Muslims in the media and public discourse, the role of women in Islamic society, and cultivating a healthy, romantic relationship in an Islamic context. In portraying both positive and negative aspects throughout her memoir, Wilson presents an affirmative appraisal of an American Muslim woman's relationship with Islam.

Wilson's prose is fluid and beautifully describes the nuances of everyday life she experiences while in Egypt. While Wilson presents a positive appraisal of her life's experiences with faith and love, she does not hesitate to share her anxieties regarding her conversion to Islam or her relationship with Omar. Wilson's willingness to portray these anxieties within her memoir contribute to a more complete portrayal of her experience—while on the whole her experience is positive, her mentioning of her anxieties makes for a more realistic read.

Wilson also elucidates women's roles in Islamic societies in both personal and religious spheres as she goes about her life in Egypt, actively contrasting them with Western views of Eastern women. The memoir presents an affirmative representation of Islam from an American Muslim woman's perspective and makes for an important contribution to the growing body of work by contemporary Muslim authors.

***The Shadow Speaker* by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu (Jump at the Sun, 2009)**

Reviewed by Melinda Széll; full review available at

<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2009/02/the-shadow-speaker-features-muslim-protagonist-of-2070/>

Young adult novel *The Shadow Speaker* explores science fiction and fantasy with a story that plays out in a futuristic, magical universe with worlds beyond Earth. It does so starring a Muslim protagonist, 14- to 15-year-old Ejii Ugabe. In Ejii's world, it is 2070. And instead of a futuristic Britain or America, Ejii lives in Niger. She is black, but this is not a "race novel." English is but one of the many languages she speaks, which include the more useful Hausa and Arabic. Ejii lives in a world post-"Peace Bomb." Nuclear war led to the release of these bombs, which aimed to spread peace by causing mutations in the human population. (The goal to make people so different they wouldn't be able to unite against each other.) What the bombs did was release magic into the world. This is a world of desert magicians, screaming storms that intend to kill lone travelers, and talking camels. And Ejii, as a "shadow speaker," has a special talent: She can tap into the thoughts of feelings of anything or anyone, from plants to murderous chiefs.

It's an interesting mix between old and new. Ejii and her friends use a technological device called the *elegba* to communicate with each other, write essays, and research information. At the same time, Ejii travels by camel and occasionally wears a burqa. The book is engaging and creative. Okorafor-Mbachu develops a complex and detailed world and her vision of a futuristic Africa sprinkled in magic is fascinating. Her break out of the traditional setting for science fiction and fantasy is refreshing. Interesting too is her take on Islam. A mix of positive and negative, Islam is both a source of strength and a source of not-so-great treatment of women. Tradition is both upheld and challenged: burqas and palm wine coexist peacefully.

The Shadow Speaker is worth a read for anyone looking for a good story featuring a strong female protagonist who is Muslim.

section three: further reading

***At My Mother's Feet*, Edited by Sadia Zaman (Quarry Press, 1999)**

For more information, see http://www.ccmw.com/resources/res_pub_Mother_Feet.html

North American Muslim women have been relegated to the back stage of history and society, recognized, if at all, for how they helped their husbands. This series of stories by Muslim women shows them instead as 20th-century pioneers whose vision and determination, despite enormous negative forces from within their own communities—and beyond, helped to create the first Muslim social institutions in North America and inspired a new generation of women to move ahead with pride in their religion and cultures. The first Muslim woman to run for political office in Canada, Lila Fahlman recounts her efforts to found the Canadian Council of Muslim Women and to save the oldest mosque in North America from demolition. Mariam Bhabha's commitment to improve the lives of Muslim women took her to the refugee camps of Croatia. Born into a Catholic family in Quebec, Miriam Bhabha tells the story of her conversion to Islam. These and other moving first-person stories of hardship, struggle, and spiritual growth counter the current preoccupation of the media with portraying these women as victims of their faith.

***Does My Head Look Big In This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah (Scholastic Paperbacks, 2008)**

Reviewed by Melinda Széll; full review available at

<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2007/12/does-my-head-look-big-in-this-a-look-at-muslim-women-in-young-adult-fiction-2/>

Does My Head Look Big in This?, published in 2005, is the story of 16-year-old Amal, an Australian-Palestinian who struggles with standard high school drama, in the context of being a Muslim girl who has recently adopted the hijab. It's refreshing to see Muslim teenage girls finally represented in young adult/teen fiction.

Author Randa Abdel-Fattah takes on the hijab, the image of Islam in the context of modern-day terrorism (specifically a major bombing in Bali), boys and dating, culture vs. Islam, sexism within the Muslim community, racism, Islamophobia, prayer and wudu, fasting, and being the lone Muslim in an upper-class Australian prep school. It's a lot to cover, and Abdul-Fattah has 360 pages to do it, but often her attempts to address the topics come off rather heavy-handed. She also might be seen

to present only narrow visions of Islam. For Amal, Islam involves wearing hijab and abstaining from romantic relationships until marriage. Anything less is presented as against her beliefs. These are pretty mainstream Islamic ideas, but they may leave the non-Muslim reader with the firm belief that no “real” Muslim ever considers dating or sees hijab as not obligatory.

Despite its flaws, the book succeeds in one of its very important goals: normalizing Muslim girls. Here is Amal. She’s not a “fanatic,” she’s not a terrorist, and she doesn’t lead a life of misery and abuse. She’s just a teenage girl, dealing with standard high school problems — but she navigates them her own Islamic way.

***Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow* by Faïza Guène (Harcourt, Inc., 2006)**

Reviewed by Krista Riley; full review available at www.muslimahmediawatch.org

Kiffe-Kiffe Tomorrow is written by Faïza Guène, a young French woman of Algerian origin, who wrote the book when she was nineteen, and follows a year in the life of Doria, a 15-year-old girl of Moroccan background who lives in a low-income housing project outside of Paris. Doria’s father has recently left to return to Morocco (with hopes to remarry and have a son), and Doria lives alone with her mother and narrates her experiences and relationships with her family, neighbours, friends, classmates, counsellor, and social worker.

Muslim immigrants in French suburbs represent a marginalized population that is often viewed with suspicion, and the author of this book has succeeded in telling a story from a perspective that doesn’t often get published. The national and international attention that this book received becomes a lot more significant given this context.

The divide between Doria’s community and the mainstream French community isn’t always in the foreground of the narrative, but its presence is clear and constant. The disconnect presents itself, for example, when Doria’s mother visits the Eiffel Tower for the first time, despite having lived just outside of Paris for almost two decades. Another area where the book succeeds is in its ability to talk about sexism without giving off an image of poor Muslim women who need saving.

This is a story full of strong Muslim women responding to difficult circumstances: Doria’s mother, who is fired from a terrible job with a racist employer and eventually finds confidence and independence through taking literacy classes; Lila, a single mother raising a four-year-old daughter; Samra, a neighbour who escaped an oppressive family to live with the man she loves. Doria herself recognizes by the end of the book how much she has grown, especially in the time that her father has been away, and dreams of changing her world in the future.

***Skunk Girl* by Sheba Karim (FSG Kids, 2009)**

Reviewed by Melinda Széll; full review at

<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2009/06/skunk-girl-a-review/>

Skunk Girl is Sheba Karim's first novel. It is told from the point of view of 16-year-old Nina Khan, self-described as "a Pakistani Muslim girl" and from a small white town in upstate New York. Although published in 2009, the story is set in approximately 1993. In a fast-paced, entertaining read, Nina narrates her life and drama as the only Pakistani and Muslim girl in her high school. She deals with worries about school and boys, as well as body hair and strict parents.

Karim keeps a light-hearted tone throughout the novel, balancing Nina's self-deprecation with her humorous critique of others around her. She takes on stereotypes in a way that isn't heavy-handed, and uses humor to poke fun at, and thus challenge, popular portrayals of Muslims. At the same time, Karim doesn't shy away from portraying a Muslim family with parents that are strict and conservative. But even while Nina bemoans her plight as the only high schooler at home on a Friday night, she never takes herself too seriously, and despite their strictness, Nina's parents fail to become stereotypes. The rest of the cast is also complex and engaging. Some characters, who start out as archetypes, such as Nina's sister, Sonia, the "nerd girl," and classmate Serena, popular mean girl, develop through the novel as Nina gets to know them better. The characters also display a diversity of belief amongst Muslims, with Nina herself questioning what it means to be a "good Muslim."

Skunk Girl paints a picture of a believable Muslim teenager—not necessarily one CAIR would send out to represent Muslim youth, but a girl with struggles and desires beyond fulfilling her mother's image of the perfect Pakistani Muslim girl. The novel is a fast and enjoyable read. At 231 pages, in a comfortable font size and spacing, the book goes quickly. Karim maintains the pace with short chapters, an engaging plot, and an entertaining and likable narrator. Nina's story is compelling, touching on issues many young people face, whether or not they are Pakistani Muslim girls. But even when she takes on serious issues, Karim keeps the novel optimistic and funny. The message, in the end, is one of self-acceptance.

***Ten Things I Hate About Me* by Randa Abdel-Fattah (Scholastic Press, 2009)**

Reviewed by Krista Riley; full review available at

<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/2009/03/balancing-jamie-and-jamilah-a-review-of-ten-things-i-hate-about-me/>

The novel takes us through the stress and anxiety that a young woman faces in keeping her culture and religion hidden, and her eventual path towards finding a sense of comfort to be able to express all elements of her identity. Jamilah, the protagonist of this book, works hard to keep her Australian identity separate from her Lebanese-Muslim identity. At school, she is Jamie, and with her bleached hair and coloured contacts—no one knows that she is Arab or Muslim.

Although it sometimes tries too hard to make its points, the novel raises a lot of themes that are worthy of discussion and reflection. Racist remarks at school (complicated by the fact that the main instigator is one of the most popular guys in the school and spends a lot of the book flirting with Jamilah) arise throughout the story, and along with this is a really honest portrayal of the effect that racism has on Jamilah. She explains that she hides her background at school to avoid the assumptions people would make about her if they knew she was Lebanese. This silence, however, takes its toll. Jamilah's sense of vulnerability and shame is palpable throughout the novel, and conveys a strong message about the personal impact of racism. As the story progresses and Jamilah's hold on the strict separation of her Australian and Lebanese/Muslim identities begins to weaken, she begins to realize the effect that this separation has had on her and on her relationships to the people around her, and as she realizes that her attempts at self-preservation in fact become a form of self-destruction and self-silencing, and ultimately prove to be unsustainable.

The novel also looks at themes of gendered relationships and roles within the family, and portrays a range of religious understandings and practices. Overall, while it was often trying too hard to make its points, this book was an entertaining read, and an interesting look into the life of a girl trying to balance her cultures and religion, to cope with the racism and sexism that she faces, and to find a space where she feels at home.