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Hijab-ing Dissent: Responses to Javeri's *Hijabistan* and the Limits of Academic Discourse in Pakistan

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Abstract
This article is a case study of the critical response generated by Sabyn Javeri's anthology of short stories Hijabistan in Pakistan, as gleaned from locally published literary and research publications. It argues that these responses, while often methodologically flawed, offer a valuable window into the prevailing ideological landscape of Pakistan. The stories are seen to be fuelled by 'liberal Western values', and are claimed to be demonising the hijab and, by extension, devout Muslims. In some cases, the course correction proposed is a reeducation in true Islamic teachings for local women, including Javeri herself. We situate such reactions in their larger ideological backdrop, claiming that they spring from a hesitancy to acknowledge and examine the challenge of modernity. The result is a tendency to essentialise the veil, and a reluctance to engage with the complexities of Javeri's work. The article also highlights counterarguments to its main proposition, while emphasising the need for a more nuanced understanding of the hijab and its representations in literature. Ultimately, the article calls for a deeper engagement with internal contestations within Muslim societies regarding modernity, identity, and women's rights.

Key words:
Sabyn Javeri, Hijab, Modernity and Islam, Islamophobia, Muslim misery narratives

Introduction

Sabyn Javeri's collection of short stories, *Hijabistan*, was published in 2019 causing quite a stir among Pakistani litterateurs. Javeri had chosen familiar territory: religious identity and the place and space for women in South Asia. Along these lines, the *hijab*, struggles of puberty, sexual identity, feminine propriety, misogyny, Pakistan and Pakistani-ness are recurrent features of Javeri's fiction. As the title suggests, *Hijabistan* offers a critique of social conventions and restrictions on women. The stories are varied in terms of setting, plot and character development, but focus on the politics of the female body and feminine sexuality. In 'The Lovers', for instance, the *hijab* plays a significant role as a symbol of cultural and religious identity, but in 'Coach Annie', it becomes a source of conflict between a mother and daughter. In 'A World Without Men', the *hijab* is presented as a symbol of rebellion and defiance against societal expectations. On the other hand, in 'The Hijab and Her', the veil is portrayed as a complex and multifaceted symbol that holds different meanings for different women.

Javeri's influences include the Urdu novelist Ismat Chughtai who shocked the Muslim intelligentsia in Pakistan and India with themes including female sexuality and femininity (Javeri 2017, n. pag.) The activist writer Rashid Jahan also inspired Javeri, along with Quratulain Haider, another pioneering fiction writer. Javeri's literary tendencies are evident in her choice of inspirations. She does not baulk at provoking, and believes in spawning debate through literary writing: 'I want to use my writing to create a conversation about taboos. I know I will get a lot of flak for it but then as a writer you have to get used to that' (Abbass 2018, n. pag.).

Many in the Pakistani English-reading public reacted acerbically to the perceived misrepresentation or West-inspired devaluation of the veil (we use *hijab* and veil interchangeably). Javeri herself acknowledged the mixed reception she received in Pakistan. Women donning the *hijab* seemed to enjoy the book while middle class scarf-less women — apparently believing that all Muslim women have a unified perspective on the veil — were offended and claimed Javeri had missed the point about covering the female body (Nooreyezdan 2019, n. pag.). In next-door India, opinion over *Hijabistan* was divided for different reasons. Lamat (2019) opined that the collection was overdone, focusing on the well-trodden topic of the veil, and offered little in terms of empowerment and emancipation. Some reviewers did enjoy the blurring of boundaries in her stories and credited Javeri with creating a world 'where women draw the line' (Fathima 2019, n. pag.).

But by and large, the failure of most (if not all) the protagonists in the stories to lead contented independent lives seemed to detract from the work's empowering potential. From the reactions noted above, we glean two major trends between 2019 and 2024: one sees Javeri's work as re-Orientalising Muslim women via the *hijab*, and the other denounces Javeri for not going far enough for women in a repressive society like Pakistan. We have discussed the latter trend in another study, and are focusing on the former in the present.

Scope and limitations

This article limits itself to the critical response generated by *Hijabistan* in English language research journals published locally. These journals are poorly edited, have dubious peer-review processes, are not listed in international indexing services, and charge fees in return for quick publication. 'Researchers' choosing to publish in these journals are either driven by flawed promotion policies that prioritise quantity over quality in academic output, or are unable to meet international publication standards. Although they write in English, their grasp of the language is weak, and their 'criticism' openly slanted.

We claim that it is owing precisely to these features that these articles need to be studied. Because academic gate-keeping is not vigilant, there is little fear of rejection. The lack of robust peer reviews provides space for local 'scholars' to peddle their opinions relatively unfiltered. Certainly, substandard scholarship and predatory journals should not be encouraged under any circumstances, but our premise is that the existence of such publishing houses and the plethora of resultant 'criticism' offers a window into prevailing discursive regimes. More informed and nuanced responses to Javeri's anthology published by Pakistani scholars in prestigious, leading academic journals represent other interpretive communities and socioeconomic moorings along the readership spectrum, which our case study does not admit in its scope.

By way of noting the caveats in this effort, we do not claim to present an analysis of the expanse of critical response to Javeri's body of work. Readership for English fiction, as we shall shortly discuss, is divided along class lines in Pakistan. At the same time, some ideological regimes straddle socioeconomic divisions, thus leading to what might be termed common interpretative communities. Consequently, whereas there is no such thing as a unitary, homogeneous reading community — and by extension, no singular, undifferentiated response to Javeri — there are consistencies in patterns of reading *Hijabistan* which can be gathered from published material.

Research questions

Our study is informed by the following questions: How does the locally published critical response to Javeri's *Hijabistan* reflect the broader ideological landscape of Pakistan? To what extent do these responses contribute to meaningful academic discourse on Javeri's work and the issues it raises? And how do these responses contribute to the ongoing debates about religion, modernity, and women's rights in Pakistan?

Basic premises and framework

Six articles published in Pakistani journals have been selected for this study. Since *Hijabistan* is a relatively recent work, critical assessments of Javeri are scarce. Five of the selected papers deal directly with *Hijabistan* (2019), while one focuses on Javeri's novel *Nobody Killed Her* (2017), related thematically to *Hijabistan* in that both the novel and the anthology reflect Javeri's oeuvre.

The ideas of postcolonial feminist writers form the larger backdrop to this article. We take it as a given, the prominent tendency in the selected material to take the veil as an inhibitor of sexual gratification. Mernissi writes that such habits of mind frame the male as unable to control his sexual conduct in the company of an unrelated female, and are, more or less, mainstream in many Muslim societies (Mernissi 2003, 492). Heterosexual relations outside marriage carry the threat of *fitna*; disruption, distress, and social chaos. The veil is thus seen as a deterrent against social strife.

One essentialist notion, among others, that this study complicates via *Hijabistan* is the neat bifurcation of religion and culture. As Abdullah (2018) reminds us, religion and culture are often considerably intertwined so that behaviours and practices cannot be neatly traced to either. Religion materialises through culture and culture manifests itself in religious expression. Yet, oft-used refrains for defending faith-based practices that sometimes conflict with modern values stress this very dichotomy (Visser 2016, 676). The practice is repeated in the articles analysed in this study, thus reflecting standard thinking and prevailing beliefs.

Is the use of the term 'standard thinking' an exercise in overgeneralization? The conventional wisdom on the space for and place of women, and related issues like the body, the veil, and sexual desire, strides confidently on talk-shows, motivation speeches, classroom lectures, and in the Urdu (and sometimes English) language press. Take for instance, former Prime Minister Imran Khan's (in office 2018 — 2022) view that the increase in sexual violence against women owed to women's Western/ immodest dressing (Sharma 2021, n. pag.). We are thus, not too far off the mark in generalising from the particular examples examined in this case study. These examples regurgitate views that are near-ubiquitous in mainstream media and public discussions. Thus we confidently state that the selected research articles (spanning 2017 — 2024) reveal prevalent conceptual structures which can be extrapolated for discursive mutualities in the reading public.

Louis Montrose (2004) noted that literary production and criticism do not merely reflect, but actively contribute to political discourse. In this way, examining the use of metaphors, framing devices, and other stylistic strategies, we identify key themes and arguments such as the portrayal of the *hijab*, the representation of women, and the perceived role of the West in Pakistan. Studying the critical response to a contentious literary work like *Hijabistan* allows us

to comprehend and comment on how power dynamics influence the production and consumption of knowledge.

We believe that Javeri's work deserves a more nuanced analysis beyond mere political accusations. Rather than seeing her as undermining Muslim morality, Javeri can be approached as an author who complicates straightforward understandings of faith-based practices. This entails a spectrum of possibilities for the *hijab*. It might be adopted to create a hidden parallel world, as in the story 'The Urge'. In other cases, it might be discarded, as in 'The Date,' where it becomes a mechanism of patriarchy. If Audrey Lorde (2003) pointed out that patriarchal tools reinforce the ideology they originate from, Javery provides a literary addendum to Lorde in some of her stories.

We also take to be rather 'conventional' Morey's understanding of what he has termed 'Muslim misery narratives'. Produced in the wake of 9/11, Muslim Anglophone writers, either already in, or enroute to, the West, create fiction that (re)exoticises Muslim societies, justifying American neo-imperial interventions in the Middle East. Not that we deny the existence of such voices, to reduce an entire spectrum of writing to a perceived 'agenda' is reductivist, to say the least, and fails to acknowledge the many tensions and contradictions that beset societies in the Middle East and South Asia. Jeveri's is not a 'Muslim misery narrative', even if we partially admit the category.

Who reads English fiction in Pakistan?

If 'class' has been taken as the primary denominator to approach said public, the six selected articles are not taken as the all-embracing definitive response of the authors' respective demographics. However, their responses also cannot be dismissed as non-representative. We are in a position to claim that the selected articles represent, to a certain degree, what might be seen as the typical ways people have grappled with modernity's impact on religion in Global South communities. This is so not simply because of our examination of most (if not all) of the available critical response to Javeri's anthology in Pakistan, but because the cognitive patterns the six articles divulge are corroborated by prevailing notions and familiar debates on modernity, religion and women.

The readership for Pakistani English fiction is increasing. However, in a country with poor literacy rates, people who can read English (even Urdu/ regional languages) remain few. In this vein, Anglophone writers cater to an elite. At the same time, as Naqvi (2018, n. pag.) notes, Pakistani fiction writers in English have not shown much familiarity with literary production in Urdu, revealing an unfortunate reciprocity. This means that Anglophone and Urdu writers largely remain confined to their separate spheres, and innovation and ingenuity (whether relating to form, content, or both in combination) in local language writing, in the main, goes unnoticed.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to trace the class moorings of Javeri's readership to situate the response to *Hijabistan.* The English-speaking (and fiction-reading) public in Pakistan is generally referred to as the 'English-medium' class. In addition to schooling, the term signals travel and job opportunities, world views, and general attitudes. Public schools often employ the national language Urdu (or provincial languages) as the medium of instruction, even though English is a compulsory subject beginning from the middle-school

level. These schools cater largely to the working class, and English standards are generally poor. Expensive private schools provide varying standards of instruction, some merely peddling education as a front for profit-making businesses in a country where the state-run schools are thoroughly lacking. 'Grammar' schools (claim to) mimic British public school values and standards while there is also an increasing number of 'American-themed' schools. There is a plethora of fancy names like 'American National School', 'Choueifat' and 'Roots Ivy International', housed in bespoke sprawling campuses with corridor locker rooms, rugby or 'football' coaches, and an abundance of fake American accents.

The articles selected in this case study, while representing the class (and thus educational) divide in Pakistan, also point towards epistemic frameworks and cultural formations that seem to constitute a common thread across the working and middle classes. While the present study has dissected Javeri's readership based on command over language as demonstrated in writing, it will demonstrate that private education and English proficiency do not completely mark off segments of the Pakistani middle class from the conceptual regimes of the so-called 'Urdu-medium' segments of society.

The abovementioned claim grounds itself in the response to Javeri in local English-language research journals, which, as we have already mentioned, are chosen by writers who usually struggle with English (reflecting poor schooling) and are unable to meet international publication standards. They are thus representative of the conservative lower-middle to middle class demographic. But at the same time, as Javeri herself notes, reactions to *Hijabistan* from the purportedly more educated, avowedly English-medium, social stratum, can also echo the ideological views of the Urdu-medium segment — which, itself, is not an internally consistent monolith. The point to note is that different demographics can form common discourse communities. The overlapping feature this study narrows down on is the perceived challenge to Muslim values from the West.

Analysis of selected articles

Offering an instance of the substandard material that passes on for research in the Pakistani publishing industry, Jutt et. alia (2021, 6427) assert that 'Islam spares females [sic] from the desire and modern action of Western world [sic] by giving her the regard [sic] and respect by deciding her [sic] get to inside her family [sic] and inquiring [sic] her to cover up'. If the grammar is disgraceful, it is complemented by a dreadful dearth of thinking. The *argument*, if one is permitted to use that term, falls back on the essentialist notion that all Muslim women must share a singular understanding of the veil. The family is presumed to always provide protection from monsters lurking outside the threshold of the home. But as we see in Javeri's 'The Urge', the family/ home can be full of menace for some women. Toxic relationships, violent spouses, elderly women who have internalised patriarchy, can all become monsters lurking inside the threshold. Furthermore, the article situates the Eastern woman as the object of male desire against which the veil is an armour. But what of female desire? On this issue, there is absolute silence in all six articles chosen for the case study. Women's physical needs are taboo, and ought not to be discussed publicly.

Related thematically to Jutt et. alia (2021), we have Anwar et. alia (2022, 7) where Javeri is accused of missing the true import of the veil, and of creating characters 'who view it [covering] as an obligatory, undeserving, and pointless article of clothing rather than one that

provides protection and comfort'. It is prescribed that all women in Pakistan (and elsewhere too) ought to see the veil as a protector against the male gaze, and an article providing comfort. A woman who finds the article uncomfortable or restricting has been indoctrinated by the Western propaganda machinery.

Javeri's denunciation by Batool et. alia (2021) springs from a partially stated (but tragically unselfaware) essentialism that sees 'nature' assigning stations to men and women: 'Western proponents want to change the scales of nature, there is a dangerous conspiracy to make women more responsible than they can [sic] in the name of equality' (2021, 50). The grammatically inadequate sentence prefigures a 'dangerous conspiracy', inspired or directed by the nefarious West through its local agents, in this instance, Javeri. Women, as the quote brings to light, are incapable of assuming more 'responsibility' than that which has been assigned to them in patriarchal society. Even if the roles women can 'responsibly' take on have not been mentioned, it can be surmised from the tone that they should not aspire to equality with men. There should be no open discussions of female sexuality, and desire ought to be regulated, what to speak of 'radical' notions like marital rape, abortion, and same-sex relations.

Furthermore, the article states that 'they want to target Muslim women to overturn [sic] their veils. And they [sic] should be dragged to the streets, bazaars, government offices and every public place' (Batool et. alia 2021, 50). Who is doing the dragging is not clear in the torturous English, but the veiled woman here is shown as a double victim: on one level, she is the target of a grand conspiracy, on another, the objective of the conspiracy is to shred the veil off of her, and subject her to public humiliation — although there is such an abysmal lack of clarity in the authors' thoughts that even government employment, which is much sought-after in Pakistan, has been equated with forcing women to march disrobed.
The fear that women will be de-hijabed may spring, in some measure, from public instances of racist/ Islamophobic attacks on veiled women in Western cities. In October 2023, a middle-aged Muslim woman in West Yorkshire (UK) was attacked by a man wielding a concrete slab, ostensibly for being veiled. Reporting the incident, *The Independent* noted that hate crimes against Muslims had risen by 140 percent in the UK in the aftermath of the Israel-Hamas conflict. Similarly, the Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU) of the UK recorded a 365 percent increase in reported cases of Islamophobic attacks in the country (Boffey and Gohil 2024, n. pag.) At the same time, the *Independent* report also noted that there had been a 1,350 per cent increase in hate crimes against Jewish people, according to Scotland Yard (Davis 2023, n. pag.).

However, in a parallel development, a Muslim teenager was attacked in southern France for wearing Western clothes in April 2024. The motives of the assailants were not clear but some reports suggest the assault was carried out by Muslim classmates who attacked the school-girl for being insufficiently dressed (Bettini 2024, n. pag.). The victim's mother was quoted as saying:

> Samara uses a bit of makeup, and the girl who assaulted her is veiled. She attacked her while accusing her of being a non-believer in Islam … My daughter dresses in a European style, which has led to numerous insults, attacks and derogatory labels against her. Despite being Muslims ourselves, I fail to comprehend their interpretation of Islam. (Bettini 2024, n. pag.)

Such real-life examples complicate straightforward claims to victimhood. How do we situate Muslim women who do not subscribe to tradition or dominant interpretations of faith-inspired practices? Might we draw a connection between Javeri's women, who either doff the *hijab*, or use it against its intended usage, to the real-life Samara from southern France?

In 'The Date,' the unnamed female protagonist, a lower-middle-class employee, finds herself the object of her superior's romantic interest. The initiation of the romance is the gift of a headscarf by the married man who suggests the protagonist veil her beauty. During an intimate encounter, the man criticises the woman's personal hygiene, claiming it does not adhere to Islamic standards. The story ends with her discarding the veil as she ruminates how she is going to spend the money her boss has offered as compensation. In 'The Urge', a thirteen-year old girl and her young aunt engage in little 'transgressive' activities under their *abayas*, such as experimenting with make-up (otherwise forbidden in the household), wearing sleeveless clothes, and stealing bits and bobs from shops. As she is emboldened by her actions, the young protagonist creates a secret world of sensual desire, and sexual manipulation in her body-covering cloak. Let us take note of Mernissi here when she draws an inverse relationship between the space available for establishing heterosexual relations in society, and the occurrence of homosocial relations. With gender segregation, seduction increasingly becomes a means of communication (Mernissi 2003, 491) — as Javeri shows in 'The Urge'.

In the stories, then, we find that Pakistani working or lower-middle class women do not all have similar motivations, nor do they share monologic interpretations of faith. Women don and doff the veil for different reasons, and these can be related to social class, emerging situations and circumstances, expectations of different kinds, and aspirations for life. Samara's use of make-up and Western attire, otherwise ordinary acts of exercising minimal agency in a liberal democracy like France, seemingly upset her more traditional classmates who saw her as betraying her faith. They may well have seen her as the erstwhile coloniser's collaborator who had been steered away from the true path. Their violent actions that nearly killed Samara, sprang from a refusal to recognise interpretative contestation of faith as legitimate. This essentialization of the veil is on a par with essentializing Islam. It is in itself, a re-Orientalisation as it takes Islam to be fixed, singular and immutable.

Jabeen and Waseem (2023) avoid the debate altogether in their study of Javeri, seeing 'Eastern patriarchy' as limiting women's agency, specifically in the public domain. As noted earlier, faith and religion do not necessarily form two distinct spheres of thought and activity (Abdullah 2018). In fact, Talal Assad (1993), claims that the separation of the temporal and spiritual, or the this- from other-wordly is itself a Western imposition. In this vein, the premise in Jabeen and Waseem (2023) is not only flawed but seems to be born of a reluctance to tackle the challenge of modernity. 'Eastern patriarchy' is presented as a monolith without contextual specificity. It is culpable for the plight of women across Asia and Africa, while no mention is made of faith-inspired practices that clash with modern-day aspirations of women. Such intellectual circumvention is detrimental to genuine debate.

According to Shah et. alia (2023), the likes of Javeri are influenced by a pernicious brand of radical feminism, so that men are 'subalterns' in *Hijabistan* (despite beating up women and using their bodies). Pakistani feminists are 'confused about their demands' (Shah et. alia 2023, 263), and resort to 'maligning our societal norms' (2023, 264). Once again, we have the presumption of homogenous moral standards (and singular interpretation of faith) for a country

of over two hundred fifty-one million people. Javeri contests such generalisations through her stories, particularly, 'Radha'.

In 'Radha' we have a protagonist who discards her given name of 'Ruqaiyah' for an obviously Hindu-sounding one. This might spring from her decision to become a sex-worker, a profession where an exotic name might attract a wider clientele. However, the narrator informs us that Radha 'preferred the soft "dha" sound to the harsh "qa" of her real name' (Javeri 2019, n. pag.). Moreover, the Muslim name betrayed her Muhajir background in Karachi's ethnic maze, even if the city is not explicitly mentioned. One can imagine the kind of censure an individual would draw for replacing their given Arabic name for a pagan one in present-day Karachi. It would be denounced as un-Islamic and, in this case, inspired by nefarious forces East of the border, who are taken to act in collusion with the usual Western enemy. But in the story, we see that the protagonist's choice is driven by multiple factors, and cannot be reduced solely to the manipulation campaigns of world powers. Ruqaiyah chooses an alternative identity, and is not a passive figure, even though she is subjected to emotional and physical abuse.

To summarise, the defining feature of five of the six articles selected is a threat perception of the West. The veil is taken as a value and marker of identity antithetical to liberal notions of women's emancipation. The argument goes that since (some) women can, and do, choose the veil independent of male influence, liberal feminists are guilty of prescribing submission to male dominance in every instance of the *hijab.* Furthermore, feminists of colour, like Javeri, who question the veil (and other faith-inspired practices), are *clearly* motivated, if not indoctrinated, by liberal feminism, and have failed to comprehend the underlying significance of the values behind the practices they criticise. Javeri's perceived failure to understand 'true' Islam is then used to conflate critical examination of attitudes, beliefs and mores with Islamophobia, resulting in rejection of debate on some mainstream cultural practices that might be counterproductive to women in some instances.

Counterpositions

There are divergent views on the creation of narratives centred on the plight of women in societies with restrictive gender roles. Anglophone writers are often charged with catering to a limited readership — privately schooled, Netflix-watching, and globe-trotting. English-fiction writers are thus usually 'writing from the vantage point of a passenger in flight out of the country' (Naqvi 2018, n. pag.). Criticism of faith based practices like the *hijab* can also be one-dimensional, seeing it is imposed on women who are unable to think independently. In her intriguingly titled essay 'Veiling Resistance', El Guindi (2003) shows that Muslim women in Egypt often adopted the *hijab* in the 1970s as a means of resisting dominant/ state narratives. This shows that there are wider possibilities for viewing the *hijab*. Unilateral censure of the veil too is counterproductive to genuine dialogue, and has led to the charge of appeasement. In this vein, Pakistani writers are clubbed together with writers from the larger post-colonial world, often accused of seeking recognition and approval from a Western audience/ readership.

For some critics, such literary capitulation leads to the production of 'Muslim misery narratives' (Morey 2018, 97); fiction that re-Orientalises the Muslim subject in its exotically blinkered depiction of women as brutally suppressed victims in male-dominated societies. Leading examples would include not only titles like Ayaan Ali's provocative *The Caged Virgin* (2008 [2006]), but, as Morey (2018) insists, conceivably more mainstream works like Khaled

Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). Such works, Morey alleges, contribute to the fear of Muslims and of Islam in Western societies.

Blaming Islam for the perceived failure of Muslim immigrants to adjust culturally in liberal democracies, coupled with the fear among the right-wing of *Sharia* slowly creeping into Western society, is real and often finds hostile manifestations (Bowen 2012). Nonetheless, 'Islamophobia' remains to be a much contested and largely vague term that elides definition (Allen 2010). Is it a manifestation of racism (and ought to treated as such in line with anti-semitism, colour prejudice and fear of or hostility towards 'outsiders'), or a distinct category in itself, charged by a millennia of competition from an older Christian civilisation, followed by colonialism, 9/ 11 and the War on Terror? As such questions foster debate, Morey (2018), following Dabashi (2015), sees many Muslim (or ex-Muslim) writers as 'native informers' of neo-colonial agendas. Is Javeri one such writer?

We argue that while there must certainly be subtle pressures, perhaps even overt encouragement, to write fiction aligning with political interests, yet to relegate a whole spectrum of writing simply to 'agenda' is not only reductionist, but exercises the same essentialism it attempts to critique in 'Muslim misery narratives'. If the thesis is that native informers rehash banal images of suffering women, package acceptable narratives arcs and familiar tropes of an East still in need of Western intervention, then Morey's sweeping charge also implies the inverse topos of an East uniformly submitting to a monolithic faith/ tradition that is opposed to Western values without internal contestation. In other words, if the characters searching for 'freedom' in Afghanistan or Somalia parrot America's post-9/11 constructions of self and other in most Anglophone fiction from *native informers*, the 'real' natives must be willing hordes of adherents of the very same faith-inspired practices/ traditions that the sell-outs denounce. The natives are thus cast as an indistinguishable mass, a long string of targets of a larger (dis)information campaign geared to convince them of the 'good' that comes from America's imperial policies. US psy-ops and propaganda campaigns are certainly real, and involve efforts to convince the American public too. But in its singular emphasis, Morey and Dabashi's dismissal of native informers is counterproductive to efforts to foster genuine introspection and debate in the Middle East and South Asia.

Take for example, the practice of the *hijab* itself. To say the least, it has not been uniform across Pakistan's history. In pre-independence Pakistan/ India, the veil denoted a variety of conceptions. In the Muslim and Hindu aristocracies, the veil was a status symbol. Simultaneously, it was a religious observance for the faithful, and a social marker of propriety for many. The evolution and avatars of the veil is a related topic that has not been pursued here, but the Arabic-style *abaya* became more popular than the South Asian *burqa* in Pakistan following the Saudi-American funded *jihad* in Afghanistan (Hoodbhoy 2017, 471). Women working the fields in rural Punjab and Sindh, while dressed modestly, have not veiled themselves from the men whom they work with.

There are growing tensions between different attitudes and ways of looking at the world in many post-colonial/ gender-segregated societies that cannot simply be shrugged off as 'foreign-funded' — a preferred term of denunciation in Pakistan. Have women not been resisting the theocratic regime's enforced veiling rules in Iran (See Hawley 2024)? Do honour killings not remain a tragic reality in Pakistan? Certainly, some criticism of traditional or faith-based values and practices may be Western-inspired, but the source of the idea alone does not detract from

its merit and utility. After all, many Muslim imams and traditional Hindu pundits maintain bank accounts despite verbal disapproval of interest/ usury; are adept in using the latest smartphones, travel to Western capitals (if only to preach), run personal brands and market merchandise, comfortably partaking of decadent Western capitalism. In other words, determining which Western influences are harmful and which are beneficial is a complex decision with both political and economic implications. By this token, ideas emanating from the West, particularly about gender roles, women's rights, LGBT, and so forth, cannot simply be called alien or wholescale detrimental to traditional societies like Pakistan in one fell swoop. Surely, there are things to discard, but there are also things to learn.

Pakistan made into law, a bill seeking to penalise harassment of women in public spaces in 2010. In the United States of America, the groundwork for making sexual harassment illegal was established in 1964. There is a similar trajectory of criminalising unwanted sexual advances and sexual offences in the UK, France and Germany. Put another way, Pakistan learned from the human and women's rights standards established by Western nations and borrowed from their legislation conducted mostly in the 1990s to make public spaces safer for women. While there certainly are aspects to reject, there are also valuable lessons to be learned from the West, whose sole purpose is not to brainwash the rest of the world into acquising to its policies by commissioning 'native informers' to malign and distort Eastern values — although of course Western powers like the US spend billions on psy-ops, propaganda, manipulation and outright war.

In this vein, indices that present them as targets of Western conspiracies bolster self-identification of Muslims as perpetual victims. Quite often in public discussions, this leads to the foreclosing of critical examination of 'tradition'. Any effort to debate faith-inspired practices is immediately denounced as loaded, Western-sponsored, and conspiracy-ridden. Voices of dissent are hence muffled. It might be these muffled voices that *Hijabistan*'s female protagonists represent. Labelling the stories as 'Muslim misery narrative' is all-too-convenient and refuses to recognise their complexity, motivations and internal diversity. What connects Javeri's women in the anthology is their suffering. But they hail from different social positions and experience different kinds of subjectivities, even as some attempt to shape their own. In these attempts they sometimes come into conflict with traditional practices, some ethnic/ cultural, others inspired by faith, although as we have already noted, religion and culture are often inextricably intertwined. The articles selected in this case study, while being unaware of Morey's coinage, reduce Javeri's anthology simply to misery narratives.

One viewpoint among those who are critical of multiculturalism sees Muslims as more sensitive to critical examination of faith, and argues that proceeding from this hypersensitivity, Islam is usually exempted from the kind of dispassionate critical debates on religion that, for example, Christianity or Judaism are subjected to in liberal Western democracies (Bruckner 2018, 29). Not that adherents of other religions are in any way less fervent in their devotion to faith; for, as Trigg (2013, 165–166) calls to mind, people generally display emotional reactivity to any criticism of their most cherished beliefs, and are uncomfortable when they are challenged irrespective of the particular faith they adhere to. As a result, while this research does not subscribe to pugnacious dismissals of Islamophobia as an 'imaginary racism', where 'a narcissistic wound … has been inverted into resentment' (Bruckner 2018, 34), we might cautiously permit ourselves to say that Muslims, generally speaking, have claimed a measure of immunity for their religious beliefs from critical academic dissection. Critical examination

of deeply held, faith-inspired beliefs is often conflated with prejudice, discrimination and hostility towards Islam/ Muslims. As the community whose beliefs are being discussed claims victimhood, meaningful debate is stifled.

On many occasions, outright dismissals of 'Westernised liberals' and their agendas remain oblivious of their own reductionist approach to Islam. When Javeri, and those of her 'ilk', are accused of parroting Western values, they are simultaneously charged with missing the 'true' import of the veil. As is obvious, such a logic proceeds from an assumption of a singular, unchanging theology that exists prior to, and remains independent of, historical context and interpretative disagreement. As a corollary, it also provides (at times by implication, otherwise overtly) the 'true' meaning and significance of faith-inspired practices such as the veil, thereby refusing to acknowledge challenges to simplistic understandings, and denying both the existence and value of interpretative multiplicity. While Javeri has pointed to singular interpretations of Muslim identity in the Western academy which she found superficial (Javeri 2017, n. pag.), but some Muslim constructions of the self can be equally shallow. When viewed from a broader perspective, such arguments seal off debate from counter-arguments, since they are resistant to the discovery of contradiction and the possibility of contestation.

Conclusion

This case study has examined current academic scholarship on Sabyn Javeri's anthology *Hijabistan* (2019), published in Pakistani research journals between 2019 and 2024, to bring to light underlying ideological perspectives that inform such discussions. Our objective was to highlight the contribution, positive or otherwise, of locally published criticism of Javeri to meaningful academic discourse on the author's work. The analysis, admittedly, is based on a small sample of six articles, which may not fully capture the breadth of critical responses to Javeri's work. But we are not concerned here with alternative responses to Javeri, as they do not form what might be termed the normative reaction when it comes to the challenge that modernity poses to traditional societies with gender segregation. Since we are cognisant of our limitations, we do not state that the articles analysed in our study reflect the entirety of the critical response to *Hijabistan.* But we do assert that these mainstream responses both reflect and significantly influence current discussions about religion, modernity, and women's rights in Pakistan

Accordingly, the study highlights that the mainstay of the 'critical' response to Javeri is a threat perception of the West. Sabyn Javeri, and like-minded writers, are taken to be puppets of nefarious alien forces whose objective in works like *Hijabistan* is to undermine traditional/ faith-based practices such as the *hijab.* We note that scholarly works of literary criticism and culture studies have highlighted the ways in which some creative writers, aspiring to acceptance and global recognition, perpetuate age-old Western stereotypes about post-colonial societies, inheriting the role played by 'native informers' in the service of Orientalists of the erstwhile British and French Empires. However, we have challenged such brush strokes when they are too broad in painting all contestations of tradition and faith-based practices (the *hijab* in this instance) as aligning with the neo-imperial policies of Western powers.

We have demonstrated that *Hijabistan* complicates monochromatic understandings of faith-based practices. The leading characters in the short stories, whether they are anonymous or choose their identities like Radha, adopt the veil or discard it for multiple reasons that are

related to gendered space, identity, and agency. Their motivations are varied and multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to a singular motive on the author's behalf. Javeri's own stated intentions and perspectives on her work complicate the overall context of their production. Thus, we demonstrate the lack of depth in estimations that denounce authors like Javeri for working on specific agendas at the behest of the ubiquitous West.

We have argued that the critical response to Javeri's anthology mirrors a broader societal hesitation to confront the complexities introduced by modernity. This reluctance is evident in the essentialization of the veil and a resistance to delving into the multifaceted nature of women's experiences. Our study underscores the contested interpretations of Islam and their implications for women's rights. It critiques the tendency to portray 'Eastern patriarchy' and 'Western feminism' as monolithic constructs, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of both. The veil emerges as a complex and multifaceted symbol carrying diverse meanings for different women.

What we propose is a deeper engagement not only with authors like Javeri, but with internal contestations in Muslim societies in light of the centrality of modern ideologies, the complexities of identity formation, and the challenges of navigating shared spaces in a globalised world. Practices like the *hijab* cannot be reduced simply to good or bad, but need to be contextualised in the socio-economic backdrop. Shryock (2010), exploring the challenges of countering Islamophobia, reminds us that Islamophilia can create its own set of stereotypes and exclusions. For greater involvement and meaningful discussion on the interaction between modernity and tradition, we need broader perspectives that go beyond simplistic binaries.

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