

Rethinking Muslim Identity in Diaspora: Beyond Orientalism in Aliya Husain's *Neither This Nor That*

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Abstract:

This research explores Indian-American Identity representation in the diaspora context as depicted in the novel *Neither This Nor That* by Aliya Husain. In Exploring issues of Identity, culture, and social tension, this research applies the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said and Identity Negotiation by Ting-Tomey. This qualitative descriptive study analyzes textual data to examine how the prominent figure negotiates her identity within the contexts of religion, culture, and social interaction. The findings conclude that Identity is shaped not only by her ambivalence between East and West but also by personal agency and cultural environment. By rethinking these theories in the current context, this study argues that traditional frameworks fall short of fully capturing the dynamic nature of modern Muslim Identity. Therefore, it suggests a more contextual and flexible understanding of Identity negotiation in diaspora literature. This research contributes to ongoing discussions in postcolonial studies and contemporary literary analysis.

Keywords: Muslim Identity; diaspora; Orientalism; Identity negotiation; Indian-American

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi identitas Muslim dalam konteks diaspora Indian-Amerika sebagaimana tergambar dalam novel *Neither This Nor That* karya Aliya Husain. Teori Orientalisme dari Edward Said dan Teori Negosiasi Identitas dari Ting-Toomey sebagai kerangka analisis utama digunakan untuk mengkaji isu-isu identitas, budaya, dan ketegangan sosial. Penelitian deskriptif kualitatif ini menganalisa data tekstual untuk menguraikan bagaimana tokoh utama menegosiasikan identitasnya dalam persimpangan agama, budaya, dan ekspektasi sosial. Berdasarkan hasil penelitian, pembentukan identitas tidak semata-mata ditentukan oleh oposisi biner antara Timur dan Barat, tetapi juga dipengaruhi oleh agensi individu dan kompleksitas lingkungan multicultural. Dengan merekontekstualisasi penerapan teori-teori tersebut dalam konteks kontemporer, penelitian ini mengungkap keterbatasan kerangka teoretis tradisional dalam menjelaskan sifat dinamis identitas Muslim modern. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini mengusulkan pendekatan yang lebih kontekstual dan fleksibel dalam memahami negosiasi identitas dalam sastra diaspora. Studi ini diharapkan dapat berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian poskolonial dan analisis sastra kontemporer.

Kata kunci: identitas Muslim; diaspora; Orientalisme; negosiasi identitas; identitas Indian-Amerika

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora literature investigates how immigrants and minorities construct and negotiate identity across cultural, religious, and national boundaries (McCallum Guiney, 2023). In Western societies, Muslim diaspora communicate that identity formation often takes place within complex social conditions marked by migration, inherited cultural values, religious commitment, and pressure to adapt to the dominant culture (Moghissi & Ghorashi, 2010). Recent studies on transnational identities demonstrate that identity is not singular or fixed, but plural, contextual, and shaped by interaction with the surrounding sociocultural environment (Shahimi et al., 2024). Muslim identity in diaspora literature needs to be understood both as a matter of cultural conflict and as a process of negotiation, adaptation, and self-definition within transnational spaces (Bhabha, 2004; Brah, 1996; Maira, 2009). The representation of Muslims in the West has been connected to the Orientalist point of view. Said (1997) argues that Orientalism constructs the East through unequal relations of representation and power. It positions Muslim subjects as foreign, backward, and incompatible with Western modernity. Contemporary studies reveal that Islamophobia continues to reinforce such representations in media, politics, and literary discourse (Ramadhan et al., 2025). In literary studies, this issue manifests in how Muslim characters are represented, judged, and socially marked as different within Western settings.

Aliya Husain's novel "*Neither This Nor That*" presents this problem through the prominent figure, namely Fatima. She is an Indian-American Muslim girl who lives between religious values, Desi family expectations, and American social life. Fatima's identity conflict appears from external stereotypes and her efforts to define herself within multiple cultural demands. Asiyah (2022) argues that Fatima's experience reflects the identity problem faced by Muslim women in Indian diaspora communities in America. As a minority subject, she is treated as foreign despite her involvement in the host society. This makes the novel significant for discussing Muslim identity beyond simple oppositions between Muslims and Americans, East and West, or tradition and modernity.

Previous studies investigated Muslim identity, Islamophobia, and hybridity in diaspora literature. Dahlan (2024), for example, discusses Islamophobia and religious moderation in a post-9/11 Muslim-American novel, while Al-Azraki (2024) examines how Islamic diasporic

narratives negotiate Muslim representation and power within Western discourse. These studies show that Muslim diaspora literature does not merely reproduce images of oppression, but also challenges reductive representations through agency, resistance, and identity reconstruction. However, many discussions still tend to read Muslim identity through binary categories. This study addresses that limitation by combining Said's Orientalism with Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory. Ting-Toomey (1999) explains that identity is constructed, experienced, and communicated through intercultural interaction, making the theory useful for analyzing how Fatima negotiates religious, cultural, and personal identity in American society.

Thus, this research analyzes how Muslim identity is represented and negotiated in Aliya Husain's *Neither This Nor That*. It argues that Fatima's identity cannot be understood only through Orientalist othering, because the novel also presents hybridity, adaptation, and personal agency. This research aims to show that Muslim diaspora identity is fluid, contextual, and continuously reconstructed through intercultural experience. The study contributes to postcolonial literary studies by offering a more flexible reading of Muslim identity beyond stereotypes and cultural binaries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslim Diaspora Identity in Literature

Diaspora identity is continuously shaped through migration, religion, cultural memory, and interaction with the host society (Brah, 1996). Hall (1990) and Bhabha (2004) highlight that identity is fluid and hybrid rather than fixed, particularly within multicultural and transnational contexts. Recent studies explore that Muslim diaspora subjects negotiate identity through adaptation, religious visibility, and sociocultural experiences within Western societies (Asiyah, 2020; Moghissi & Ghorashi, 2010; Shahimi et al., 2024). Different from previous studies, this study emphasizes how Fatima's Muslim identity moves beyond Orientalist binary categories through identity negotiation

Orientalism and Muslim Otherness

Edward Said's Orientalism emphasizes central for understanding how Western discourse constructs the East and Muslim subjects as different, inferior, and culturally distant. Said (1979) defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). In this sense, Orientalism is not only a stereotype but also a system of knowledge and power that produces the Orient as an object of Western interpretation. In Muslim diaspora contexts, Orientalism is closely related to processes of othering in which Muslim identities are associated with oppression, backwardness, extremism, and cultural restriction. This binary representation positions the Western images as modern and rational, while Islam is traditional and restrictive. Contemporary studies further examine how representations remain connected to Islamophobia. Ramadhan et al. (2025) argue that media representation can reinforce Islamophobic attitudes, while Dahlan (2024) explains how Muslim-American literature portrays resistance to post-9/11 suspicion and exclusion. Similarly, Al-Azraki (2024) demonstrates that Islamic diasporic narratives negotiate both neo-Orientalist stereotyping and unequal structures of representation. These studies support the present research by showing that *Neither This Nor That* portrays Muslim identity not only through stereotyping, but also through agency, internal tension, and self-definition.

Identity Negotiation in Intercultural Context

Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory provides a relevant framework for analyzing how identity is constructed and negotiated in intercultural contexts. Ting-Toomey (1999) explains that identity is shaped and communicated through cultural interaction rather than remaining fixed. This perspective is useful for understanding Fatima's position as a Muslim, Indian-American, female, and member of a minority community. The theory also emphasizes adaptive communication processes through which individuals respond to social pressure, cultural expectations, and identity conflict. These concepts help explain Fatima's responses through adjustment, resistance, silence, and self-recognition. By combining Orientalism and Identity Negotiation Theory, this study examines both how Muslim subjects are positioned within dominant Western discourse and how they negotiate identity through adaptation and agency. This theoretical combination allows the study to move beyond binary readings of East versus West, Muslim versus American, and tradition versus modernity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method with a postcolonial approach. Textual data were used to analyze the representation and negotiation of Muslim identity in Aliya Husain's *Neither This Nor That*. The interpretation classifies representations, cultural meanings, and identity construction in the novel (Creswell, 2014). The postcolonial approach analyzes how Muslim identity is positioned within Western discourse, while the intercultural perspective explores how the prominent figure negotiates her religious, cultural, and personal identity.

The data source for this research was Aliya Husain's *Neither This Nor That* (Husain, 2010), which was used to interpret Muslim identity, Orientalist stereotypes, cultural conflict, hybridity, and identity negotiation. Data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. Relevant quotations were selected and categorized into themes such as Muslim otherness, hybridity, intercultural adaptation, and self-definition based on Said's (1997) *Orientalism* and Ting-Toomey's (1999) *Identity Negotiation Theory*. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's model, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). The findings were interpreted to explain how Muslim identity is represented and negotiated within the diaspora context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Muslim Otherness and Orientalist Social Perception

The analysis shows that Fatima's Muslim and Desi identity is frequently positioned as foreign within American society, although she was born and raised in the United States. This condition appears when Fatima questions why people continue to assume that she comes from another country. "I was born in New York and am living in New Jersey, as American as it can get, she would think to herself. So why did everyone just assume that she came from a foreign land?" (Husain, 2010, p. 3). This statement reveals Fatima's confusion about the way society defines her belonging. Her citizenship and birthplace were American. Her ethnic and religious background causes others to perceive her as an outsider. The issue is therefore not geographical, but representational. This statement explains Fatima's confusion about the way society views her identity. Her nationality and place of birth is American. Her ethnic and religious background causes people to consider her an outsider. Thus, the problem she faces is not geographical, but

the representation and perception of her identity.

"I was born in New York. So I guess I am from New York" (Husain, 2010, p. 3). Fatima becomes "foreign" because the dominant society interprets her identity through visible cultural and religious markers such as her name, appearance, religion, and family background.

This data reflects Said's orientalist concept of the difference between the West and the East. Fatima, viewed from the perspective of Orientalism, is not limited to political discourse and colonialism but is reflected in daily life. Fatima's American was questioned because it did not conform to what Americans imagined. These findings are consistent with Said's (1979) argument that Orientalism places Muslim subjects through unequal cultural representation structures and hierarchies. Thus, these findings show how Muslim differences operate through social assumptions that separate Muslim and Desi identities from the dominant notions of Americanness.

The quote also reveals the psychological impact of the process (othering). Fatima experiences external exclusion and internal identity anxiety when she begins to question her own social position. Her confusion reflects the tension between legal citizenship and social acceptance in the diaspora experience. Although Fatima was an American by birth, the dominant social perception still positioned her as a cultural outsider because she did not fit the imagined norms of "American" identity.

Identity Negotiation between Muslim, Desi, and American Values

The second finding reveals that Fatima does not passively accept the identity forced on her. Instead, she negotiates her identity by adjusting her characteristics in different social spaces. This can be seen when she creates an imagined version of her family life before her classmates: "With her classmates, Fatima lived in a world that was a product of her imagination... they just made her family sound more American than they actually were" (Husain, 2010, p. 13). This quotation represents Fatima's effort to manage how others remark on her identity. She strictly modifies her depiction in maintaining her Muslim and Desi identity to gain social acceptance within her peer environment. Her imaginative stories serve as a strategy for negotiating identity in lessening the cultural distance between herself and her American classmates. This condition shows that identity in diaspora contexts is not static but is continually shaped by interaction, social

expectations, and intercultural pressures.

Fatima's self-presentation aligns with Ting-Toomey's (1999) theory, which holds that identity is constructed and negotiated through communication and intercultural interaction. Her behavior reflects an adaptive strategy aimed at maintaining social belonging while managing cultural differences. Through this process, the novel illustrates how Muslim diaspora subjects often negotiate identity by balancing self-expression and social acceptance. Fatima's negotiation is further shaped by tension between family values and peer culture. At home, she receives strong Islamic and Desi cultural socialization, while outside the home, she faces pressure to appear more American. This condition places her between collective cultural identity and personal social identity. Her family expects religious and cultural values to remain central, whereas her school environment encourages conformity to dominant American norms.

Nevertheless, Fatima's negotiation of identity is not without its boundaries. As much as she wanted to be accepted by her schoolmates, the one difference that she was proud of was her faith. This was the only aspect in which she had no desire to assimilate. "She knew she was Muslim and she knew she was American; both were integral parts of her unique identity" (Husain, 2010, p. 56). This quote confirms the crucial point of the Fatima identity negotiation. Her desire to be socially accepted is not absolute. Both her family and she tried their hardest to maintain religious values. With the encouragement of ethnocentric family motivation, Fatima's tendencies in making friends or interacting changed her appearance, but she never changed her creed, which she believed to be a unique identity that merged Islam and America.

Beyond Orientalism: Hybrid and Negotiated Muslim Identity

The third finding about Fatima's identity cannot be fully understood through Orientalist othering. She experiences social exclusion and cultural anxiety; the novel presents Muslim identity as hybrid, adaptive, and self-defined. This case can be seen from the following quotation:

"Young Muslim women living in America. Muslim Americas. A new culture. A new identity, these young Muslims, born and raised in America, were pioneers of. After all, it was a new type of social and religious identity for most people to identify with. But when one looked upon this table of young women, there was no doubt that this was exactly who they were. American Muslim" (Husain, 2010, p. 226)

This quotation traces a shift from identity anxiety to identity affirmation. Fatima and other young Muslim women are no longer portrayed as individuals trapped between two incompatible

worlds. On the other hand, they appear as representatives of a new Muslim-American identity shaped through diaspora experience. The term "American Muslim" proposes that Muslim and American identities do not necessarily contradict one another, but can exist within a shared sense of selfhood.

This finding encounters Orientalist binary thinking that separates East and West, Muslim and American, and tradition and modernity into opposing categories. Instead, the novel presents Muslim-American identity as a legitimate and recognizable form of belonging. The identity is considered "new" because it emerges from the lived experiences of young Muslims born and raised in the United States, whose identities are simultaneously shaped by religion, citizenship, cultural adaptation, and social participation. This condition reflects Bhabha's (2004) concept of hybridity, in which cultural identity is continuously formed through negotiation rather than fixed cultural boundaries.

The quotation strengthens Ting-Toomey's (1999) concept of identity negotiation. Fatima's identity develops through interaction with family, peers, religious community, and wider American society. Her identity is not passively inherited, but continuously constructed, negotiated, and recognized through intercultural experience. Over this process, Fatima successfully negotiates her position not only as an Indian or a Muslim, but as a Muslim-American. Therefore, the novel moves beyond Orientalism by showing that Muslim diaspora identity is not static, marginal, or permanently foreign. Fatima's development validates that identity can be reconstructed through agency and intercultural experience. She does not erase her Muslim identity to become American, nor does she reject American identity to remain Muslim. Instead, she forms a hybrid Muslim-American identity that reflects the complexity of contemporary diaspora life.

CONCLUSION(S)

The findings show that Muslim identity in Aliya Husain's *Neither This Nor That* is represented as dynamic, hybrid, and continuously negotiated through intercultural experience. Fatima's identity reflects not only Orientalist othering but also personal agency, cultural adaptation, and self-definition within American society. The novel challenges rigid binaries between Muslim and American identity by presenting a hybrid Muslim-American identity as a legitimate form of

belonging in diaspora contexts. This study contributes to postcolonial and intercultural studies by offering a more contextual understanding of Muslim diaspora identity beyond reductive stereotypes and cultural binaries. Future researchers are encouraged to explore diaspora narratives using acculturation, othering, and transnational identity theories to enrich contemporary diaspora studies.

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