

## Islamophobia Experienced by Main Character in The Safia Elhillo' *Home is Not a Country*

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### Abstract:

This research aims to analyze the Islamophobia issue experienced by the main character in the novel entitled *Home is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo. The data were collected from any narrations and phrases that express prejudice, fear, and hostility from the main character due to the Islamophobia issue in the United States of America which is the country where the main character lives. Then, the researcher used the descriptive-qualitative method to conduct the research. The research is based on the decolonial feminism theory approach by Françoise Vergès. The researcher reveals that Islamophobia could appear in many forms including prejudice, fear, and hostility toward Muslims which become minorities in some countries including in United States of America. The data of the research indicate that the difference of religion could act the prejudice to Muslim people which is conducted by people other than Muslims because Muslims are the immigrants in United States and are often viewed as threats.

**Keywords:** Prejudice; Islamophobia; Moslem; Islam; Novel

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini memiliki tujuan yakni untuk menganalisis isu islamofobia yang dialami oleh tokoh utama dalam novel yang berjudul *Home is Not a Country* karya dari Safia Elhillo. Data penelitian ini diperoleh dari setiap narasi dan frasa yang mengekspresikan prasangka buruk, ketakutan, dan permusuhan yang dialami oleh tokoh utama akibat dari isu islamofobia di negara Amerika Serikat, yang merupakan negara tempat tinggal tokoh utama. Kemudian, peneliti juga menggunakan metode deskriptif-kualitatif untuk melakukan penelitian. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan teori feminisme dekolonial dari Françoise Vergès. Peneliti telah mengungkapkan bahwa islamofobia dapat muncul dalam berbagai macam bentuk termasuk prasangka, ketakutan, dan permusuhan terhadap umat Islam yang menjadi minoritas di beberapa negara termasuk di negara Amerika Serikat. Data dalam penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan dalam agama dapat menimbulkan prasangka buruk terhadap umat Muslim yang dilakukan oleh masyarakat selain beragama Islam karena umat Muslim yang merupakan imigran di negara Amerika Serikat dan sering dianggap sebagai ancaman.

**Kata kunci:** Nima; Muslim; Islam; Novel

## INTRODUCTION

Muslim literature also known as Islamic literature cannot be separated from the culture of the Middle East. Muslim literature is a literary work written by people of the Islamic faith. Or literary works that have issues about Islamic culture. However, not all writers of Islamic literature include culture or issues related to Islam in their literary works. Al Areqi (2016) reveals that “Islamic writers, critics, and researchers do not seem to pay enough attention to the Islamic issues in literary writings. Alternatively, they may not be interested in practicing Islamism as a critical theory in their literary criticism because it is not known globally or practiced by world critics”.

In Middle Eastern countries inhabited by Arabic people who are predominantly Muslims, there is literature characteristic from the Muslim people’s point of view. Yulianti (2017) assumed that “Islam and literature are two compelling elements to collaborate. Literature has a beautiful language that can entertain the reader. Then Islam enters the literature as a science”. However, the Muslim Literature also portrayed the struggle of Muslims in other countries, which defined them as a minority.

One of the Muslim literature issues is Islamophobia. Islamophobia refers to prejudice, fear, hatred, or discrimination against Islam or Muslims which particularly view Islam as inherently dangerous, and violent, or it can manifest as negative attitudes and biased stereotypes. According to Dauda (2021) “Consequently, Muslims have become targets of abusive and violent attacks”. Islamophobia frequently happened in the country where Islam became a minority religion.

In other countries, such as the United States and some countries on the European continent, Muslims are often viewed as minorities and are sometimes judged as threats. This phenomenon is called Islamophobia. In America, Muslims often experience bad stereotypes and discrimination. Many writers may avoid addressing Islamic themes in their literary works because Muslims are regarded as backward, uncivilized, and terrorists because of what they allege to be Muslim involvement in worldwide terrorism (Al Areqi, 2016). Also, a study from Tama & Sulistyningrum (2023) believes that “Due to a lack of knowledge and correct depiction of the Muslim community in the media, can contribute to erroneous and negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam”. This could mean that the media contributed to the view of the Muslim community as a minority group in the country.

One of the interesting novels that was written by a Muslim author is entitled *Home is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo. Safia Elhillo is a Sudanese-American poet who writes and performs poetry. Elhillo earned a BA from New York University's Gallatin School and an MFA in poetry from The New School. Safia released her novel entitled *Home is Not a Country* on March 2, 2021. She also wrote novels such as *The January Children* and *Girls That Never Die: Poems*. A novel entitled “Home is Not a Country Talks About Nima, a first-generation Muslim writer who is torn between her aspirations for her native country and her life in America. Nima is obsessed with the life she believes was stolen from her since she lost her father before she was even born. She could not help but think about her own country and the time when she was called a terrorist at school and bullied. The book was nominated for the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature in 2021.

The novel entitled *Home is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo is a novel that depicts Nima as a main character who felt tortured in her home country because she was often bullied by her classmates due to her religion and race. This phenomenon is called Islamophobia which Muslims become the minority in a country that is portrayed as terrorists and often has negative sentiment. A study from Aswar (2021) revealed that “The issue Islamophobia has become a global issue nowadays where Muslims become the target of discrimination, harassment, and physical assault. This issue mainly occurs in the Western world where Muslims become the minority group”. The issue of Islamophobia started after the 9/11 accident when Muslims often experienced many of discrimination and were stigmatized as a terrorists. Since the effects of 9/11 are still being felt in Muslim American communities more than ten years later, many people in our nation have had their lives completely transformed. The result has been widespread discrimination, harassment, dehumanization, and disempowerment of Muslims residing in America, which has been normalized by the country's official policies and mass media (Ali, 2017).

The novel entitled *Home is Not a Country* offers a heartfelt exploration of identity, belonging, and the immigrant experience through the eyes of Nima, a young Sudanese-American girl struggling to reconcile her sense of self. Written in free verse, the story follows Nima as she grapples with the tension between her mother's Sudanese heritage and her life in America. Through Safia Elhillo's lyrical and poetic prose, readers are taken on a deeply personal journey, exploring themes of displacement, cultural disconnect, and

the quest to find a sense of home, both emotionally and physically. The novel also portrays the Islamophobia experienced by Nima as the main character in the novel. Nima a Sudanese-American and Muslim girl often got bullied in the school because of her cultural and religious background which made her be treated differently from others.

This article discusses the Islamophobia issue in the novel which is experienced by the main character by analyzing through the dialogues or narrations. The researcher found 3 articles that related to the topic. The first article is from Widjayanti (2017) which tells about Islamophobia in the novel entitled “The Age of Reinvention” by Karine Tuil. The discussion centers on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the novel, highlighting how the author employs irony to express particular ideologies.

The second article is from Akbar (2024) and discusses heteropatriarchal Islamic principles. This article aims to challenge stereotypes of Islamic values, which advocate for the equality of men and women regardless of geopolitical and educational status.

The third article from Haqqani et al (2023) investigated the Islamophobia discourse and examined the cause and effect of the characters in the novel entitled *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Moja Kahf.

The previous study above discusses the Islamophobia issue that is contained in some literary works. Perhaps, none of them analyzed the Islamophobia issue in *Home is Not a Country* which was released in 2021. This article aims to examine the Islamophobia issue depicted by the main character in the novel entitled *Home is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Decolonial Feminism

According to Legg (2017), the terms colonizing and colonialism have very similar etymologies; they are both active and produce colonial objects. However, colonization creates colonies, and colonialism creates behaviors that exist inside colonies. The decolonial theory focuses on the significance of highlighting voices and perspectives that have historically been suppressed or inaccurately portrayed in literature is crucial. This encompasses ensuring the representation of narratives from colonized regions, indigenous communities, and other groups impacted by colonialism.

Sibanda (2021) in his article suggests that “since decoloniality is not a singular theoretical school of thought, but a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as the fundamental problem in the modern age”. Decolonial theory not only focuses on the marginalized groups that have a colonial history but also focuses on colonialism in the modern era.

De-colonialism highlights the fact that colonialism imposed not only political domination but also cultural and intellectual supremacy. The differences in cultural and intellectual aspects could affect racial minorities such as cultural discrimination, violence, and negative sentiments. De-colonialism also often occurs in the women which became the object of discrimination. Decolonial feminism focuses on colonial effects that influence gender inequality. Vergès et al (2021) argued Overcoming the goals of civilizational feminism is known as decolonial feminism. It welcomes a worldwide transformation endeavor that goes beyond the confines of liberalism, capitalism, and the state. And, Decolonial feminisms are all critical of the common assumptions regarding women's subjugation. They disagree with hegemonic feminism's conception of a universal woman represented by the gender category (Martínez & Agüero, 2023).

Also, Vergès et al (2021) believe that to create a world of true emancipation, decolonial feminism as a political movement calls for the destruction of these establishments. Vergès' decolonial feminism as a theory calls for a fundamental change in our comprehension of the structures that perpetuate oppressive and exploitative logic. Similar to the broader philosophy of decolonization, decolonial feminism emphasizes the necessity of emancipation not only from gender-based oppression but also from the colonial frameworks that persistently influence economies, cultures, and information systems. Decolonization in geography must also lack a single destination, which is the fully decolonized academic field. However, as long as decolonization persists, geography will inevitably change. Hopefully, it will become more conscious of the colonial legacies inside its institutions (Legg, 2017).

Decolonial feminism has a very long history, especially in its development throughout the times. The movement of decolonial feminism started in the first century and has been growing all over the world and advocating the liberation of women's struggles. Vergès et al., (2021) assumed that “Decolonial feminism leads to de-patriarchalizing revolutionary struggles. In other words, feminisms with decolonial

politics contribute to the struggle, undertaken for centuries by part of humanity, to assert its right to existence”. Is means that this approach affirms the right of entire communities to exist on their terms, with their own cultures and values, while also working toward gender equality and the emancipation of entire communities from the oppressive legacies of both male dominance and colonial authority.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers used the descriptive-qualitative method to conduct the data that obtained from the novel entitled *Home is Not a Country* by Safia Elhillo. Leavy (2023) found that in an open-ended focus group, students could discuss topics they believe are important in their own words and provide detailed accounts of their experiences, including examples and stories. The data of the research is taken from the novel that focuses on Islamophobia depicted by the main character named Nima. In collecting data, researchers collect data through narratives or dialogs in the novel that show indications of the issue of Islamophobia depicted through the main characters in the novel. Also, the researcher described the obtained data which depicted the Islamophobia experienced by Nima as a main character in the novel.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In *Home is Not a Country*, the main character Nima feels prejudice from her classmates.

### Prejudice

“I’m sorry I blamed your scarf  
when they called me a terrorist”  
(Chapter 43)

In this condition, Nima felt tortured and apologized to her mother. Nima mentions the scarf that was given by her mother and it is indirectly accused to her mother. "When they called me a terrorist" suggests that Nima was subjected to unfair charges or designations, including being classified as a terrorist. This is a grave charge that might be damaging and is what may have caused the scarf to be first blamed. The statement's general tone is one of regret, indicating that the scarf was mistakenly blamed for the wearer's unjustified terrorist designation. Nima admits her error and asks her mother which are she blame for forgiveness or understanding.

“Haitham rides with me to school & today walks with me to my locker joking about the costumes we pass who’s going to tell Jason that dumb jock isn’t a costume do you think Tara knows that costume is racist”  
(Chapter 24)

The text that is presented appears to depict a is traveling to school with her friend by the name of Haitham. They joke about the outfits they encounter along the route as they have a lighthearted time. The comment "who's going to tell Jason that dumb jock isn't a costume" raises a humorous critique of the stereotypical dress. The second text section poses a more serious query by speculating as to whether Tara is aware that a specific outfit is racist. This condition also portrayed Nima as expressing concern about Tara's understanding of cultural appropriation and insulting outfits, indicating an awareness or sensitivity to these concerns.

### **Fear**

In the novel, Nima shows her fear when bullied by her schoolmates. Based on conversations with her friends and family, Nima conveys her feelings.

“They hate us silence she does not tell me to speak Arabic why did you bring me here to be tortured to be alone why would you do that to me?”  
(Chapter 39)

An intense mixture of sorrow, frustration, and a sense of solitude is conveyed in the provided text. Nima implies that there is a discernible hostility toward their group that is shown in the quiet. The comment on the disabled being instructed to speak Arabic suggests a reluctance or fear of accepting one's cultural and linguistic identity that is directed to a group. The phrase "Why did you bring me here to be tortured, to be alone" conveys a profound sense of suffering and begs the issue of why the speaker was brought to this specific spot. The reference to torture may be allegorically used to allude to the psychological or emotional suffering of the main character. Feeling lonely might be a sign of isolation because of the experience depicted in the novel.

### **Hostility**

Muslims in America are often negatively stereotyped as “terrorists” due to events such as 9/11, which resulted in Muslims being seen as people to be avoided.

“I’m dressed as your terrorist mom & everyone howls with laughter another wraps a sweater

around his head like a turban & I'm  
your terrorist dad & Haitham steps in front  
don't say that her father's dead but his small voice  
drowns in all the chaos"  
(Chapter 24)

This text portrays a situation in which Nima is disguised as someone's "terrorist mom," and others participate by mocking Middle Eastern or Muslim stereotypes, such as tying a sweater around their head like a turban. But when Haitham steps in and tries to stop someone from remarking about the speaker's mother and bringing up the fact that her father has passed away, the tone shifts to one of seriousness. Haitham tries to say something, but his voice is lost in the flurry of laughing and movement.

"I don't know that I believe it  
myself what is it, Habiba? & I know  
I can't tell her so instead I say a boy at school  
called me a terrorist  
& the ready tear in her eye starts to fall"  
(Chapter 27)

In this quote from Safia Elhillo's *The Home is Not a Country*, Nima tells her mother (referred to as "Habiba") about being called a "terrorist" by a boy at school. This moment reveals the Islamophobia Nima experiences and the emotional impact it has on her and her mother. Her mother's tearful reaction signifies deep emotional pain. As a mother, she feels the severity of the discrimination her daughter has experienced. It also reflects a collective pain that Muslims and immigrants feel sadness and helplessness when their children face the same prejudice as they do.

"a strip of pale midriff showing on each torso  
one of them is silent then cuts in my dad's a pilot  
his voice wet with poison he could have been  
on that plane I think he might cry & the sound  
he chokes out makes the hair on the back of my neck  
prickle up he turns & shoves me  
& I feel the cold metal of the lockers against my back  
terrorist bitch he spits into my hair"  
(Chapter 36)

The above passage strongly depicts an incident of Islamophobic violence at Nima's school. The insulting slur "terrorist bitch" shouted at her by one of the males after he pushes her against the lockers highlights the prevalent and cruel prejudices connected with Muslim identity in a post-9/11 condition. The boy's claim that his father is a pilot, followed by the suggestion that he "could have been on that plane," exemplifies how

Muslims and individuals of Middle Eastern heritage have been unfairly blamed for terrorism, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. This incident demonstrates how deeply ingrained fear and prejudice may show in violent ways, leaving Nima physically and emotionally damaged. The incident highlights not just the physical violence that frequently accompanies Islamophobia, but also how many people associate Muslims with terrorism, which affects even the youngest members of society.

## CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, the researcher has proven the data that related to the Islamophobia issue which is depicted by the main character of the novel. Nima often got bullied and racism by her schoolmates because of the Islamic background that Nima had. The researcher demonstrates that islamophobia can take numerous forms, including prejudice, fear, and hostility toward Muslims, who have become a minority in several countries, including the United States of America. The study's findings show that religious differences can lead to bias against Muslims by those who are not Muslims, as Muslims are immigrants in the United States and are frequently perceived as dangerous. Moreover, in America, Islam is a marginalized religion because of the negative stereotypes against anything Arab and certainly Islam. The many “terrorist” stereotypes directed at Nima, a young Sudanese-American woman, prove that Islam has been viewed negatively whether male or female.

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