

## Analysis Personal Conflicts in Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in A Headscarf*

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### Abstract:

This study aims to unveil conflicts that experienced by Shelina in *Love in a Headscarf* (2009), which narrates the author's challenging journey to find love as a South Asian Muslim woman in Western England. Shelina's adherence to the traditional practice of arranged blind dates within a modern context critically exposes a dual this research employs the New Criticism theory. This formalistic approach emphasizes close reading of the text, focusing on literary devices, structure, and characterization to derive meaning solely from the work itself, independent of external historical or biographical context. The study aims to categorize and analyze the various conflicts Shelina experiences through her repeated failures in the blind dates process. The results illuminate how the novel utilizes dialogue and character reactions to portray the complexity and often contradictory pressures faced by the modern Muslim woman navigating love across cultural boundaries.

**Keywords:** conflict; blind date; close reading

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap konflik yang dialami Shelina dalam novel *Love in a Headscarf* (2009), yang menceritakan perjalanan penuh tantangan penulis dalam mencari cinta sebagai seorang wanita Muslim Asia Selatan di Inggris Barat. Ketaatan Shelina pada praktik tradisional perjodohan buta dalam konteks modern secara kritis mengungkapkan dualitas. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori New Criticism. Pendekatan formalistik ini menekankan pembacaan mendalam terhadap teks, dengan fokus pada perangkat sastra, struktur, dan karakterisasi untuk mengekstrak makna secara eksklusif dari karya itu sendiri, tanpa mempertimbangkan konteks historis atau biografis eksternal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengklasifikasikan dan menganalisis berbagai konflik yang dialami Shelina melalui kegagalan berulang dalam proses perjodohan buta. Hasilnya menjelaskan bagaimana novel ini memanfaatkan dialog dan reaksi karakter untuk menggambarkan kompleksitas dan tekanan yang sering bertentangan yang dihadapi oleh wanita Muslim modern dalam menavigasi cinta melintasi batas-batas budaya.

**Kata kunci:** konflik; kencana buta; pembacaan mendalam

## INTRODUCTION

The Religion is a cultural system that exists in human behavior (Jeppe Sinding Jensen, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). It consists of symbols through which humans bestow meaning on their existence. Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist from America in his book



entitled “The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books” tells that religion is a system of symbols shapes deep and enduring emotions and motivations in people by creating broad understandings of existence and presenting them so convincingly that these feelings and beliefs appear unquestionably real. Geertz emphasised that human phenomenological experience is significantly shaped by religion as an integral part of human culture, part of human culture. Like languages, religious cultural systems exist outside of individual humans, and when they become internalized, they come to guide human perception and cognition (Clifford Geertz, 1973).

When a religion is embraced by the majority of a community in a particular region, the integration between beliefs and culture generally runs more harmoniously, so that the potential for conflict in that region is relatively small. Vice versa, the social situation and conditions become more complicated, because the differences in values and worldviews among the community in that region tend to converge on the most widely held beliefs or religion, making it easier for friction and even conflict to arise. As stated by (Hussein & Al-Mamary, 2019) conflict is a dynamic that happens because of the differences human view one another. Conflict occurs as a result of interactions between people who need each other but feel that their interests are contradictory. Conflict can be seen in various media; literature can be a medium that portrays conflict through a work in the form of a novel. In literary works, novels are a medium that reflects conflict in everyday life. Therefore, memoir novels often describe real conflicts experienced by the author.

The tension of this conflict is significantly reflected in a literary work written by Shelina Zahra Janmohamed entitled *Love in a Headscarf*. This novel tells the author's personal memoir. Shelina recounts her life experiences as a South Asian Muslim woman living in the western part of England. She is on a journey to find her true love. However, her journey to find her true soulmate is supported by her family's cultural tradition, namely the matchmaking system or blind dating. This matchmaking tradition is carried out through a matchmaker (aunt) who recommends several single men who will come with their families with the aim of getting to know each other. Meanwhile, the man and woman will be placed in a separate room alone, which serves as a way to get to know each other and also as a sign of whether the blind date was successful or not. During her journey to find true love, Shelina has met several potential partners. However, despite the efforts of this tradition, Shelina has not yet found a partner who she feels is right for her. Her journey



to find a soulmate has not been as easy as she imagined. Shelina faces many conflicts during the blind date process to find the lover she desires.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This research discusses the conflicts of Shelina as the main character in her journey looking for perfect husband through the blind date in the memoir novel entitled *Love in a Headscarf*. In the novel, Shelina was described as a woman who had three different identities namely South Asian, British and Muslim identities. This research aims to identify the struggle of having multiple identities and how the main character managed three different identities in her life. The researchers concludes that Shelina used three management techniques to solve her identity conflict namely Reconciliation (integrating identities), Realignment (choosing one identity over the others), and Reflection (selecting identities based on the current situation/others). Although there have been studies of this novel, researchers have found flaw from this novel. Therefore, this research this study aims to explore what conflicts Shelina experienced through her blind date. This research uses a new criticism theory that emphasizes an in-depth analysis of literary texts to unveil how Shelina's conflicts are represented in the novel *Love in a Headscarf*.

## RESEARCH METHODS

To conduct a study, the researchers would use qualitative method for this research. Qualitative data usually consist of words, either created directly by those under study, or passively by the researcher”, this means that qualitative is a data that focuses on deep understanding on information that served to achieve a precise context among specific analyses. In doing the research study, Data source needs to be researched. It means that data source refers to the origins or repositories from which data is obtained for analysis. While in doing this study the researcher has two data sources. Which are primary sources and secondary sources. The primary data for this research is taken from the novel entitled *Love in a Headscarf* by Helina Janmohamed, was published in 2009. The secondary data that would be used are from journal articles, books, website pages, and reviewing the material to help the researcher gain a better understanding of his research. Additionally, the researchers gain several steps for doing his research: After collecting and classifying the data from the novel *Love in a Headscarf*. The data obtained from the novel will be categorized based on the results of conflicts that she experienced through the novel.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Emotional Connection and Incompatibility**

“My mother, in tune, glances at both of us and smiles. We have to go, faux-apologise our guests. No, please, stay for another cup of tea, faux-responds my father, it’s early yet. No, no, we have a very long way to get home, they counter-respond. Their answer reveals their participation in the etiquette of departure: they live only three miles away.” (p.19)

Based on the quote below, this meeting was Shelina's first blind date with her prospective partner, Ali. Shelina felt very excited because she had imagined a man who matched her expectations and hopes. They were placed in a special room to get to know each other and talk, while outside the room, their families were also present and getting to know each other. At first, Shelina felt happy and enthusiastic, hoping that the meeting would be the first step towards a serious relationship. However, as the conversation progressed, she began to feel that they were incompatible. Shelina felt that Ali spoke in a stiff manner and seemed to not be himself. Their conversation felt awkward and silent, without the emotional closeness or “click” that she had hoped for. This situation made Shelina realize that there was no chemistry between them. Even Ali's family implied a subtle rejection when they argued that the distance between their homes was too far—an indirect expression that signaled that the relationship could not continue. Through this experience, Shelina began to understand that the process of finding a partner does not always go according to expectations and often brings unexpected disappointment.

### **Intellectual Differences Regarding Knowledge and Self-Development**

“He turned and looked at me witheringly and said, ‘I hate books, I hate all books. I never ever read and I don’t like people who like books.’” (p.30)

On their second blind date, Shelina was again introduced by a matchmaker to a man named Samir. However, the incompatibility between the two resurfaced from the very beginning of the meeting. Shelina, who greatly valued intelligence and insight, lost interest when she found out that Samir did not like books. For Shelina, reading was a way to sharpen her intellect and broaden her perspective on the world. Therefore, she considered Samir's dislike of reading as a sign of his lack of interest in self-improvement and knowledge. Slowly, Shelina began to realize that these differences in values and interests made it difficult for them to find common ground. This experience added to the list of disappointments in her search for a life partner, making her feel that every encounter was always colored by incompatibility with her expectations and ideal image of a companion who was in tune with her.

### **Quiet Personality**

“Ahmed was not an attractive man. He was also not an intelligent man. I tried to ignore his looks and get to know him for who he was. When he came home to meet our family, he sat in the single armchair, surveying the room. He was aloof. His silence made me feel uncomfortable.” (p.45)

In this excerpt, Shelina is described as remaining persistent in her search for a partner who can accompany her in continuing her life with meaning. After experiencing disappointment several times, she is reunited with a man named Ahmed. This encounter initially gives Shelina new hope, but inner conflict arises again when she begins to notice Ahmed's innocent and slightly awkward appearance. Ahmed's simple appearance made Shelina feel uncertain, as if her initial assessment had been influenced by social standards of male attractiveness. Not only that, Shelina's discomfort grew when she realized that Ahmed had a very quiet personality. During their meetings, Ahmed rarely initiated conversation and seemed to have difficulty finding topics to talk about, making the atmosphere awkward and stiff. This made it difficult for Shelina to build an emotional connection with him. Through this experience, it is clear that Shelina is still struggling to balance her personal desires, social expectations, and the values she holds dear in her search for an ideal life partner.

### **Arrogance and Body Shaming**

‘I just wanted to let you know that I could never marry someone who is only five foot three,’ he said in a very genuine tone. ‘I know we get on so well. And I’m sure you are very attractive from what other people have told me. But you are just too short for me. So please don’t get your hopes up when we meet tomorrow.’ (p.86)

However, Shelina did not give up on her desire to find a partner who matched her expectations and principles as a modern woman who adhered to her religious values. She tried blind dating again through a matchmaker, hoping that this time she would meet someone who was truly compatible with her. The meeting brought her together with Khalil, a man who, at the beginning of the conversation, seemed attractive and intellectually intelligent. Shelina felt a connection in the way they thought and discussed things. However, as the meeting and conversation progressed, Shelina began to realize that behind Khalil's intelligence lay a bad character and behavior. Khalil often displayed an arrogant attitude and belittled others. He frequently made body-shaming comments about Shelina's appearance, as if judging someone solely by their outward appearance. She also understood that intelligence alone was not enough to build a healthy relationship that aligned with the values she believed in.



## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*, it can be concluded that the novel portrays the complex inner and social conflicts experienced by a Muslim woman living in a Western cultural environment. Through the lens of New Criticism, the conflicts are revealed intrinsically within the text, particularly through characterization, dialogue, and narrative structure. Shelina's journey of finding her true love through a series of blind dates becomes a medium through which her personal values, cultural expectations, and emotional struggles are depicted. Each blind date reflects a different form of conflict. In her first encounter with Ali, the conflict arises from a lack of emotional connection and incompatibility despite social expectations. With Samir, the conflict emerges from intellectual differences and contrasting values regarding knowledge and self-development. Meanwhile, her meeting with Ahmed reveals Shelina's struggle in reconciling her personal expectations with societal standards of appearance and communication. Finally, in her interaction with Khalil, conflict surfaces through arrogance and body shaming, which highlight issues of pride and superficial judgment.

Through these experiences, Shelina's character development becomes evident. Her repeated failures in finding a suitable partner do not depict weakness, but rather resilience and self-awareness. She learns that love and compatibility cannot be based merely on appearance, intellect, or social approval, but must be grounded in mutual respect, shared values, and emotional sincerity. In conclusion, *Love in a Headscarf* serves not only as a personal memoir but also as a reflection of the broader struggles faced by many women navigating between cultural tradition and individual freedom. By employing the New Criticism approach, this study reveals how the internal structure of the novel—its conflicts, character dynamics, and narrative coherence—forms a unified meaning about a woman's persistence, faith, and search for identity in love and life.

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