Conditional Belonging in Muslim Women's Writing: S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z*

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Abstract: Conditional belonging refers to a set of rules to determine one's eligibility to belong to a certain group. In migration studies, it is used to understand the status hierarchy that exists between members of the dominant majority and the minority immigrant community. In this paper, I offer a two-part discussion on conditional belonging. I first attempt to contextualize its practice in the genre of Muslim women's writing in the West. I argue that their creative endeavours are often subjected to certain expectations of readers and publishers, leading to the creation of stock images. Ironically, within these restrictions, some writers subvert the marginalization of Muslims by offering positive stock images of Muslim characters. Here, in the second part of the article, I bring in S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z* (2020), a young adult (YA) novel, as an example. By portraying a young hijabi woman as the protagonist, the novel challenges the practice of conditional belonging both as a theme in the novel, and in the larger contextualization of the Western book industry. It demonstrates that the potential solution against prejudice is often found within the community that one is in and within the identity that one subscribes to.

Keywords: conditional belonging, Love from A to Z*,* Muslim women's writing, S. K. Ali

1. What is conditional belonging?

Belonging, as a concept, is an unstable and subjective one that is multifaceted in its nature (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2011; Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart 2013; Sadeghi 2023). It includes "both cognitive and emotional dimensions with varying degrees of attachment" (Yuval-Davis 2011: 15) which underline the ways social membership and system impact how individuals – both within the system and outside of it – feel. It is not simply related to social positionality as belonging is also an exploration of the positions of power and social attachments. Belonging is a narrative of identity that reflects stability, coherence and authority but can be contested by the self and others (Yuval-Davis 2011). Therefore, it is a "social citizenship" (Sadeghi 2023: 16) that is dependent on both an individual's desire and attempts to belong and on acceptance. As such, belonging demands constant connection and identification, beyond the matter of how well one individual can identify with and fit into an organization, institution, and society. Thus, as May (2011: 372) argues, belonging "is something we have to keep achieving through an active process".

The 'active process' for belonging suggests that it is an intrinsic concept within societal relations. An individual does not automatically belong to a group simply because he was born within a particular country or community, works in an organization or subscribes to a particular belief or culture. There are specific ways to belong, and this specificity leads to the creation of rules to decide who belongs (or does not belong). It also suggests that there must be attempts to continuously govern this set of rules. I argue that the creation and manifestation of these rules refer to practices of conditional belonging. Although it is a concept widely discussed in migration studies to analyse the relationship between the dominant majority and the immigrant minority (de Waal 2020; Ghaffar-Kucher et al. 2022; Gilliam 2022; Hackl 2022; Sadeghi 2023) conditional belonging does not have a succinct and clear definition. However, it is understood as a dynamic interaction between social inclusion and exclusion that requires a constant demand for an individual or a group to negotiate their identity based on certain perceptions and expectations.

Conditional belonging pushes an individual to submit to certain dominant perspectives, values, and norms in a particular community. This is a qualification process for belonging, one that questions the value of an individual to the community. In this sense, the characteristics of the 'value' itself are evaluated and contested as one element that might be valuable to one person, may not be so to the larger public. Therefore, conditional belonging emphasizes the importance of acceptance and reciprocity in the process of belonging.

In this paper, I reflect on how conditional belonging affects the genre of Muslim women's writing in the West, suggesting that female Muslim writers and their works are often affected by the complex and often violent relationships between the Muslim world and the West. This is because the Western book industry often has certain expectations for female Muslim writers and the context of their writings. These expectations highlight the practice of conditional belonging by both publishers and readers. There are overwhelming expectations for Muslim writers to submit to stereotypes about Muslims in their creative writing despite the growing encouragement and demands for the representation of diversity in fiction. These expected stock images complicate their position where they must either choose to submit to these demands or to work against them, often at the expense of their creativity. However, despite these restrictions, I advocate for voices that attempt to portray the challenges at being Muslim in the West as they represent a challenge against the status quo and stereotypes in the industry. The works of S.K. Ali, a Canadian Young Adult fiction writer reflect this endeavour. Using her second novel, *Love from A to Z* (2020) as an example, this paper moves forward with the discussion of how conditional belonging affects the life of a young American Muslim woman. The arguments are built on the premise that the protagonist's Muslim identity becomes an inherent source of discrimination that highlights the complex intersection of religion, race, and gender. This is due to the demands for inclusion from the mainstream community that she is expected to submit to, reflecting "the myth of immigrant America" (Sadeghi 2023: 11). The novel becomes a representation of how social belonging can be impossible for native-born children of immigrants. I then suggest that the novel's portrayal of marginalization as "pre-defined limited entitlements" (Hackl 2022: 990) encourages for the active creation of a space for endeavours against conditional belonging. This is done through a reiteration of her Muslim identity within the society that she is located in.

2. Conditional belonging and Muslim women's writing

2.1 What can Muslim writers write about?

From employees, agents, writers and book production, the publication industry in the West, particularly in the US and the UK, has always been overwhelmingly white (Saha and Van Lente 2020.; Tager and Shariyf 2022; Chambers and Hussain 2023; Alter and Harris 2024). There have however, been various attempts to diversify it, and this strategy has been particularly successful in the genres of Young Adult and children's writing. One such success is the development of a non-profit organization *We Need Diverse Books* that is encouraging the publishing industry to diversify and "make bookshelves more equitable" ("We Need Diverse Books" n.d.). Furthermore, as reported by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2024), there have been more books by and about black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) published from 2015 onwards.

The portrayal of teenage American Muslim identity in S.K. Ali's four young adult novels, therefore, represent an intersection of demands from the publishing industry, and the diverse society in America. Ali openly embraces her status as a Muslim writer by choosing to publish her novels with Salaam Reads, an imprint of a popular YA publisher, Simon and Schuster, that is solely dedicated to publishing stories by Muslim writers. In 2017, she also created the hashtag #muslimshelfspace to promote works by Muslim writers. These actions are overt identification of her Muslim identity, and it is a unique choice, considering that some writers with Muslim heritage deliberately choose to avoid this identification. British Bangladeshi writer Monica Ali, for example, had declined to be recognized as a Muslim writer so as "not to be pigeon-holed as an "ethnic", let alone "Muslim" writer" (Chambers 2011: 20). Even Leila Aboulela, a prominent British Sudanese writer who has been credited as the "First Lady" of "halal fiction" and "a Muslim literary icon" (Ismail 2021) due to her portrayal of practicing Muslims and the Islamic faith in her novels had been reluctant to be recognized as one. She explains that while it is "good to have this recognition, it does sort of constrict [her]" (Chambers 2009: 91). While this denomination would allow her to connect to and be a part of the Muslim community, it limits the discussion of her works to certain cultural perspectives.

Indeed, this categorization may lead to an uneasy condition for writers who subscribe to it. They become susceptible to carry the 'burden of representation' as a 'Muslim' writer comes with certain expectations that could limit their creative explorations. Monica Ali's writing career is a testament to this predicament. She garnered success with the publication of her first novel, *Brick Lane* in 2003. It is a novel about the life of a young Bangladeshi bride in London after her arranged marriage to a much older man and it explores the usual theme of the clash of cultures between the West and Islam. While it received rave reviews from critics and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, it also garnered criticism for its stereotypical portrayal of the Bengali Muslim communities in London's Brick Lane and Dhaka.

There were even attempts to stop the production of its film adaptation (Lea and Lewis 2006) which came out in 2007. After *Brick Lane*, Ali wrote two novels with non-brown and non-Muslim characters. Both novels receive lacklustre interests that sent her down into a period of self-doubt (Ali 2019). Although literary merit may provide an insight into the negative reaction towards these novels, the critiques that she received are baffling, with many amplifying on her inability to present the stories in an expected manner and to adequately represent her new subjects (Chambers 2011; Majid 2015). In response to these novels, she says: "People would ask 'Are you trying to get away from something?' To me the question they really seemed to be asking was 'Are you trying to get away from brown people? Are you trying to get away from your ethnicity?'" (Wolfe-Robinson 2022). Her latest book, *Love Marriage* published in 2022 is about an impending marriage between an Indian woman and a white man. Unsurprisingly, the novel brought Ali back in the good graces of literary critics. This outlines the difficulty of writing as a minority writer, pointing out how readers' and publishers' expectations are focused on portrayals that reflect images familiar to the eyes of Western readers. Monica Ali laments this as she says she "was really naive in thinking that [she] could write about whatever [she] wanted, like a white male writer can" (Graham 2022).

However, the crisis of expectations does not only involve general readers and publishers but also critics and scholars. As Basu (2022) argues, scholarships on Muslim writing have been focused on looking at their works through either a religious or a secular perspective, leading to a simplistic categorization and specific expectations and assumptions. 'Secular' Muslim writers are said to be more acutely aware of sociopolitical conditions than the ones in the 'religious' camp who are said to be more concerned about religiosity and religious observance. S.K. Ali's novels, therefore, can then be seen as attempts to achieve a balance. They address adolescent concerns and sociopolitical issues, as well as faith and religiosity (Young 2021; Belkhyr 2022). Yet, her portrayal of faith and religion has been panned as a demonstration of lax religiosity instead of 'proper' ones. Zaneefer (2023) for example, criticizes *Love from A to Z* for its portrayal of several "un-Islamic elements", particularly of "inappropriate gender relations" and unregulated teenage desires that are not focused on "endeavours to please Allah". Ali is also advised to "research and study the Shariah regarding the different elements [of Islam] present in [her] stories".

I believe this is an overtly critical perspective of the novel that overlooks its aspects as a work of fiction. It seems that the expectation now falls on the Muslim writer to represent 'authentic' representations of Muslims and interpretations of Islam, where faith-centric fiction is expected to be a tool to propagate religion. The problem with this, as Campbell and Crowe (2015) argue, is that it leads to fiction becoming preacher-like, limiting its ability to attract readers from different beliefs and cultures, and thus, impacting its marketability. S.K. Ali herself explains that writing a Muslim-centric story is already like "writing fantasy" because of underrepresentation of Muslims, and thus, Muslim stories should not limit themselves to be "didactic [or] explanatory"(Pasquarelli 2017). This would encourage the practice of creative liberty in fiction writing allowing greater representations of Muslims in fiction.

2.2 The demands for 'authentic' representations of Muslims and Islam

In *Love from A to Z*, the protagonist Zeynab wears the hijab and submits to different practices of Islam in her daily life. She is also an active member of her society and is attuned to social issues within her community and beyond. Not afraid to speak up her mind, she is always ready to address and criticize social injustices around her. Furthermore, as an exemplary student, she is also certain of her ambitions and her future. The protagonist's positive characteristics reflect Ali's narrative strategy to counter dominant discourse of the foreignness of Muslim women in Western literature (for examples of the negative perspectives of Muslim women in Western fiction, see Kahf 1999; Zine 2002; Raina 2009). It is also an attempt to counter how Muslim stories are forced into tropes of exoticization: "[t]he more exoticized a story is, the more it is believed to be authentic" (Chambers and Hussain 2023: 287).

Indeed, positive representations of female Muslim characters are increasingly becoming common in the works by Muslim women writers. The female Muslim protagonists in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Ayisha Malik's Sofia Khan's trilogy, Uzma Jalaluddin's romance novels and Melati Lum's Ayesha Dean's mystery novels, among others, share similar tropes and characteristics with S.K. Ali's novels. They are hijabis, religiously observant, independent, and intelligent individuals. They may not necessarily be successful, but they are ambitious. If they are adults, they are career-oriented, and if they are teenagers, they are good students who are idealistic about their future. These portrayals are, therefore, attempts to demonstrate aspirations of the female Muslim subject that would appeal to general readers, particularly Western readers. With this characterization, despite the religious undertone of their identities, young readers, both Muslims and non-Muslims, would be able to relate to their stories. Furthermore, as these characters are Muslims living in Western societies, their characterization also addresses pertinent issues with regards to Islam's compatibility with the West and how Islam can be practiced there. As these novels generally receive positive feedback from readers, it suggests their success in offering diverse representations of Muslims, portraying how faith can be integrated into fiction.

However, I suggest that such depictions of female Muslim identity, although wholesome and empowering representations, are ultimately defensive reactions against stereotypes of Muslim women. They pose the danger of creating specific tropes and cliché in the fictionalization of female Muslim subjects. Furthermore, they also demonstrate how Muslim writers are pressed to correct dominant understanding about their communities, displaying how they have "limited agency" because of the publishing industry's "limited receptivity toward cultural difference" (Basu 2022: 159) . In order to avoid conforming to stereotypes of Muslim women, they have to push to display and prove their characters' worth to belong to the various sections of Western society. This points towards Muslim writers' susceptibility to industry demands that ironically situate them at the centre of the very problem that they are addressing.

Nevertheless, I believe that because of the current precarious position of Muslims around the world, any positive and alternative representation of Muslim identities in fiction must be supported. What should be encouraged is a more complex perspective of different cultural positions and ideologies that could offer a promising possibility to dismantle damaging stereotypes of Muslim identities. This is particularly important for YA fiction where such diversity becomes a cultural obligation for writers. Young readers should be made able to artistically appreciate creativity in fiction and to relate to stories and characters in the books they read (Cart 2008). Advocating for inclusivity and the recognition of lived experiences will aid in one's maturing process into adulthood. S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z*, therefore, becomes a model for the representation of lived realities of a young American Muslim woman. Despite the romantic trope, the prevalent theme is on the protagonist's constant struggle to fit into the American society she was born and bred in. This echoes and addresses a distressing but common problem for young Muslims in America.

3. Conditional belonging and racialization of the American Muslim subjects

The relationship between the American and Muslim worlds has always been shaped by international crises and how America responds to them. The responses become the decisive backgrounds as to how Islam and its adherents are treated within America. While hostility against Muslims intensified and gained traction in the US after 9/11, Cainkar (2009: 2) argues that this discriminatory and negative treatment of Muslims did not start with 9/11 but was rather caused by "pre-existing conditions that configured people who would readily conduct and approve of such attacks". The Iranian Revolution, the Iranian Hostage crisis, the Gulf War, the Bosnian war, and the ongoing Palestine – Israel crisis have long been used as a pretext to paint the picture of the American-Muslim community as a security threat and a potential enemy within (Gerges 2008).

As the fear and hatred of Islam and its adherents became increasingly common, scholars have been compelled to analyse Islamophobia using the framework of racialization (for example, see Selod and Embrick 2013; Garner and Selod 2015; Husain 2017; Selod 2018). Racialization is used to describe the process of ascribing tropes and characteristics to a certain group of people due to their ideological and cultural traits. Within the context of the Muslim subjects in America, this relies heavily on "observable elements of culture" through their physical and racial features (Considine 2017: 5), and to foreign policy and the so-called war on terror (Sadeghi 2023), so much so that the ethnic and racial diversity of Muslims is no longer relevant (D'Urso and Bonilla 2023). It becomes possible to 'look Muslim', and any symbol related to the religion is given negative connotation and meaning. Muslims are seen as violent, angry, aggressive, and foreign, underscoring the incompatibility of the Muslim figure with the ideals and values of the West (Selod and Embrick 2013).

The racialization of Muslims in America leads to a process of essentialism to determine deserving and non-deserving individuals. For the dominant majority, the entitlement of citizenship becomes a predetermined 'right' that is contingent on certain competencies, characteristics, and efforts. Muslims may be legally recognized as American citizens yet find themselves pushed towards becoming models of "earned citizenship" (de Waal 2020: 239). They are expected to meet certain demands to fulfil certain types of behaviours and characteristics and to push away and make invisible 'undesirable aspects' of their identity (Gilliam 2022). This leads to the implicit practice of categorizing immigrants into different groups according to specific expectations (Park 2006; Gerken 2013; Baran 2017). In defining who the desirable immigrants are and who are not, white Americans are more accepting of immigrants with good English proficiency, higher levels of education and good employment (Ciftci 2012; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). Religion may also play a role in Americans deciding who belongs to the country (D'Urso and Bonilla 2023).

The racialized activity is based on the understanding that white Americans are "non-raced, while others are racialized"(White 2020: 124). This posits them as 'people' while the rest are seen 'the Other'. As such, citizenship becomes a myth because it contains a discourse of conditional inclusion that expresses hierarchy and sovereignty over the 'Other' (Hackl 2022). Citizens with immigrant background can be considered as citizens but only if they accept lower ranked designation based on their differences. Although this is practiced on different immigrant communities in America, it is especially apparent for the American-Muslim communities, particularly as the after-effect of the 9/11 attacks, where Muslims become heavily surveilled by the government and are automatically considered as suspects (Abdul Khabeer 2017; Casey 2018; Yazdiha 2023). Although none of the 9/11 attackers were homegrown terrorists, there exist the expectations that American Muslims would always be more loyal to Islam than to the nation thus, they are generally considered 'less American'. This suggests the view of Muslims as a cultural outgroup – those who are "falling outside of the mainstream of American society" (Kalkan et al. 2009: 847). As Muslims are viewed through an archetype of behaviours and cultures that are strange to the American ways (Considine 2017), it poses a challenge for American Muslims.

The process of determining who can and cannot belong is essentially a practice of conditional belonging and it becomes a form of control, in which the majority is to determine what and who model immigrants are. It is a form of power and domination that is used to 'tame' differences of identity among citizens. Here, citizenship becomes a myth where it "is not only divisive between 'us' and 'them' (between citizens and noncitizens) but also divisive in the sense that 'some of 'us' belong only as long as they continue to meet certain conditions" (Hackl 2022: 992).

There is, however, a constant active attempt to respond to domination although often, "the minorities' accommodating responses are in a mutually reinforcing relationship with such domination" (Hackl 2022: 1000). It suggests that for many immigrant minorities, life is a constant gamble as you need to choose what you can afford to lose in order to gain or solidify some standing within the society.

Although seemingly at the losing end of the bargain, this strategy allows the minority to constantly construct and re-construct their agency. Eventually, what may emerge within these struggles are different trajectories at the way the minority may want to present themselves.

In the following section, I examine how the realities of conditional belonging are experienced by a young American Muslim subject in S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z*. True to its name, it is a romance fiction between Zayneb and Adam, a Canadian Muslim boy who lives in Doha, Qatar. Despite falling into the category of YA romance fiction, Ali is successful in crafting a novel that pairs a light-hearted love story set mainly in Doha with complex issues of racism and discrimination in America. In my analysis, I pay attention only to the narrative that outlines the sociopolitical issues surrounding Zeynab's position as a Muslim in America rather than the romance narrative. However, I recognize that the tropes of the Muslim love story in the novel are a part of similar tropes presented by other female Muslim writers in the West, seen in the works of Uzma Jalaluddin, Na'ima B. Robert and Ayisha Malik. This suggests the emerging popularity of such tropes in Muslim stories.

Love from A to Z is the first part of a duology although it can be read on its own. Despite its popularity among readers, as of December 2024, the novel has received limited critical attention from academics and scholars. In one full-length study that I had located, Shoumi and Koiri (2021) categorize the different types of Islamophobia presented in the novel and explain that Zeynab overcomes oppression through the development of a minority identity model. In this paper, I extend their findings by suggesting that as Zeynab was born and bred in America, what she is experiencing is a form of conditional belonging. This is because regardless of her citizenship, her Muslim identity causes her to be racialized leading her to find difficulties in establishing herself as a Muslim in America. My analysis also portrays how the novel shows that discrimination and prejudice against Muslims in America is a systemic oppression that is perpetrated at different levels of society by those who are in authority and within America's own political governance. I conclude by suggesting that Zeynab overcomes these challenges through strategic alliances with people within her community, regardless of their racial and religious backgrounds, suggesting the novel's call for cooperation and collaboration between different members of the American community in dismantling any form of discrimination.

4. Conditional belonging in S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z*

4.1 The hijab as a gendered form of conditional belonging

Love from A to Z begins with an incident that leads to Zayneb's suspension from school. In her anger when her Islamophobe teacher, Mr. Fencer, shares yet another lesson on violent examples of 'Islamic culture' in class, Zayneb imprudently draws a picture of a knife attached to Fencer's name in a note to her best friend, Kavi. The note is confiscated and is deemed a threat against a teacher, and Zayneb is only spared from expulsion because of her good grades. This is a fictional account that closely mirrors the latest report on school bullying experiences of American

Muslim students by the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) California. It states that 25% of their respondents complained of a teacher or an administrator making offensive comments or acted in an offensive manner against Muslim students. Nearly half of them meanwhile, reported feeling "unsafe, unwelcome or uncomfortable at school because of their Muslim identity" (The Council of American-Islamic Relations California 2023). Here, the school becomes a site for "suspicion and stigmatization" of Muslims as "the figures of Islamic terrorist and the oppressed Muslim woman" (Gilliam 2022: 1098) have penetrated the classroom causing young American Muslims to experience racism and conditional inclusion.

Zayneb is not the first of Fencer's victims. One of her close friends, Ayaan, who is also a Muslim, has warned her about him. Zayneb thus, quickly notices that his treatment of her is more hostile than the way he treats Ayaan, who is a non-hijabi. I read this as a personal process of racializing the Muslim subjects into acceptable and unacceptable ones according to their physical appearance and behaviours. Fencer is aware of Ayaan's Muslim heritage from her full name, Ayaan Ahmed, yet the absence of the hijab and her silence when faced with his abuses cause him to be "[un]sure [of] what kind" of Muslim she is – whether "she cares about her identity or if she practices her faith" (Ali 2020:12). In Ayaan's presence, he simply revels in Ayaan's discomfort and at his ability to keep the Muslim 'other' under his control.

Zayneb, meanwhile, faces a more intense form of racialization because of both the hijab that she wears and her vocal stand against his propaganda. In all their encounters, Zayneb not only counters his gross stereotypes of Muslims, but she also attempts to undermine his authoritative position by refusing to address him with "sir" (Ali 2020: 8). As a response, he deliberately mispronounces her name even though she had corrected him many times, "[e]ven writing it phonetically on worksheets for him: ZAY-NUB" (p. 8). Ali narrates a similar scene outside of the school compound when Zayneb is on the plane to Doha. She is seated next to a "Hateful Woman" (p. 4) who curses when she first sees a hijabi. Zayneb retaliates by feeding the woman's prejudice: she loudly plays an Islamic prayer on her phone and writes several generic Arabic phrases in her journal, making sure that the woman is able to see them. These actions, although childish ones, prompt the woman to accuse Zayneb of threatening her.

The racialization process underlines similar negative views of the hijab. These Islamophobic characters see it as an element that works as a direct opposition of Western values. As such, just the mere physical appearance and presence of a hijabi is seen as a threat as she is viewed as an example of Islamic extremism. The concept of religiosity here is associated with radicalization, creating a negative stereotype that indicates how a Muslim identity "functions as racialized epistemological otherness" (Ali 2017: 2). However, I suggest that it is Zayneb's stand against their prejudices that turns their relationships into a contest of power. Within these social spaces, Zayneb's refusal to be silent reflects "the refusal to be defined by the Western media and war propaganda since 9/11" (Haddad 2007: 254), and the hijab amplifies the determination to avoid any form of control by the dominant majority. This defiance deepens the friction between the dominant majority and the Muslim subject with the former becoming increasingly hostile towards the latter. Thus, when Zayneb is reprimanded for her drawing, Fencer uses this opportunity to play the part of the victim of Islamic extremism and fundamentalism, resulting not only in her suspension, but also in her peers calling her "ISIS" and "terrorist cunt" (Ali 2020: 25)

These incidents reflect how a public space becomes a political site when it encounters the hijab, suggesting a form of spatial visibility that is based on the symbolic and stereotypical representation of the hijab. The situation alienates the Muslim subject, positioning her as an 'other' by highlighting that it is her visibility that is causing discomfort for the dominant majority. They then push for the regulation of the hijab, or in Zayneb's case, the regulation of her behaviours as a hijabi. Fencer's accusation, therefore, makes Zayneb the suspicious other, showing her the rejection of her rights and place within the community. From my analysis, the form of control reflects the culture of conditional belonging, portraying how the majority is able to both dictate and retain their ideas and beliefs about the Muslim minority, readily positioning Zayneb as a "troublemaker" and a "terrorist" (Ali 2020: 27).

4.2 Conditional belonging and global conflicts

These events, while humiliating and hurtful, are also positioned as empowering lessons for Zeynab. They open a path for her to be involved in social advocacy and activism. I have explained earlier that the amplification of Zeynab's voice does not go well with Islamophobes like Fencer and the 'Hateful Woman'. Interestingly, her parents are also less than delighted with her brashness and they see her as "a ball of anger" (Ali 2020: 5). Unlike Zeynab, they believe in a strategy of avoidance and acquiescence in the face of racism and discrimination. The focus is on gaining economic mobility, education, safety and security, urging Zayneb to "graduate in peace" (p. 12) and "*to challenge these Islamophobes… by succeeding in society"* (italics in original: 14). Their belief underlines a deeply ingrained conviction that in order to be accepted and respected within the society, the Muslim subject must work harder and thus, must obtain higher levels of education (D'Urso and Bonilla 2023). It is also driven by fear that any form of fighting against the status quo "would make things worse" (Ali 2020: 313). This is a generational gap that demonstrates different views towards conditional belonging. Zayneb's parents are keenly aware that for being Muslims in America, they are those "whom the privileges of liberal citizenship do not apply" (Ali 2017: 3), where there is a constant need to 'prove' their right to belong. Unlike Zayneb, they understand that for immigrants like them, fighting for their right to belong is a constant war and they must choose their battles carefully to be able to survive in America.

This defeatist view towards belonging, however, is questioned when a family tragedy strikes. Zayneb's paternal grandmother, whom she calls Daadi and whom she was extremely close to, died in a mysterious car accident in Pakistan before the novel begins. Towards the end of the novel, the family finds out that Daadi is a collateral damage of a drone attack in rural Pakistan, alluding to the American use of unmanned combat drones in northwest of Pakistan between 2004 to 2018. American military interventions in any Muslim land are often based on a complex conflation of politics, economics and social issues, and the attacks on the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) in rural Pakistan are no different. Cole (2009) argues that the attacks reflect the American refusal to consider and understand historical and undergoing tensions between secularism and Islamic fundamentalism in the country. It becomes a misgovernance as it is based on the easy assumptions that Pakistan is simply another Muslim country that is bent on terrorism rather than one that often "oscillates between religious and secular moorings" (Jalal 2014: 6). As such, the drone attacks are framed as a form of counterterrorism measure to combat the rise of extremism, particularly targeting key members of Al Qaeda and other militant groups. They are also often touted as overseas attempts to protect American citizens (Ahmad 2014). Daadi's death, however, questions the limits of this 'protection'. The claims of protection do not seem to show any concern for the very people the government seeks to protect.

Zeynab says to her friends: "And you know who [killed my grandmother], right?... We [America] did. Because we're okay with bombing other countries." (Ali 2020: 251). Ali's narration outlines the psychological impact of the drone warfare on American Muslim families of the victims. This is a perspective that does not receive attention from the media, scholars, as well as the American administration. Zayneb's use of the pronoun 'we' in discussing the perpetrators of the tragedy is a reference to how "the war at home and the war abroad actually work in tandem at the expense of ordinary people everywhere" (Maira 2004: 227). Furthermore, as she positions herself at the centre of the attack, it becomes a realization that it is her American citizenship that becomes the reason behind her grandmother's death. Here, her identity and her grandmother's identity become binary oppositions where "some lives [are] worth less" (Ali 2020: 234), while hers is considered more 'valuable' because of her citizenship.

Thus, I suggest that the narration of the aftereffect of the tragedy is not only a critique of the hostile American foreign policy towards Muslim countries. It also belies the claims of 'protection' in the military exercise of the drone attacks, underlining the latent form of conditional belonging on Muslim American subjects. It pushes Zeynab to question her position in the society that she is in. While she laments her part in the death of her grandmother (how can she be a part of a country that is responsible for grandmother's death?), she also recognizes that as a Muslim in America, she is in an 'unworthy' position. Her experiences, desires, demands and ultimately, the people she loves do not matter to the dominant majority, pushing her further into the margins of belonging.

4.3 Strategies for belonging and a contest against conditional belonging

Within the margins of belonging, Zeynab works for personal endeavours against conditional belonging. Hackl (2022) points out that as conditional belonging is a form of discourse of power, these demands push the minorities to develop strategies in responding to exclusions. I argue that in the novel, the efforts begin with self-realization, a recognition of the protagonist's marginalized and peripheral position and an acceptance of losses that allows her to subvert her position in this discourse of power. The loss of her grandmother is debilitating and tragic, but it can be transformed into a form of empowerment. As Zeynab mourns Daadi, she lets "a fortress [that separates her] heart from the outside world… crack" (Ali 2020: 314). This is a symbolic statement that focuses on Zayneb's extension of trust. Within the limits of marginalization, the protagonist discovers that there are alliances to be forged to assist her in her claims for belonging, and that they may come from unlikely places.

The process of creating alliances first begins with an establishment of identification and emotional attachments with individuals who share the same narratives of marginalization and victimization (Maghbouleh 2017). However, this identification at first, only serves as a strategy for survival. Zeynab is careful to choose her friends, preferring to pledge friendship and loyalty to those who share her plight. Apart from Ayaan, mentioned in the earlier section, her other best friend is Kavi, an American Tamil girl whom she stands up for when Kavi is teased because of her name and race. She and Kavi "usually [pass] under the radar of the other, mostly white kids" (Ali 2020: 112). This is a strategy of avoidance that does little to benefit both Zeynab and her friends. In fact, when a group of non-white students stick together, they become visible, leading them to be unable to curb racist attacks from Islamophobes like Fencer.

Zayneb eventually recognizes that she needs to open up to the members of the dominant majority too. She herself is prejudiced towards them, as can be seen through the way she describes Noemi, Zayneb's white classmate whom she first stereotypically describes as "Noemi of the blond bangs" (Ali 2020: 124). Here, Zayneb is also guilty of othering as she sees Noemi on the basis of her whiteness, and thus, completely different from her. Yet, it is this white person who later stands with her as she finally chooses to confront Mr. Fencer's prejudice when she returns to school after her suspension. As she tells Fencer of her "right to speak up freely [a]nd… to leave a place where [she is] subjected to discrimination and hate" (p. 328), Noemi says to her: "Where you go, I follow" (p. 329), cementing a sense of comradeship and trust. Noemi's expression of solidarity does not come from a bubble. She first admits to feeling sorry for "women-not-like-[her]" (p. 125) but experiences a change of mind as she studies cases of sexual violence against young girls where she recognizes that victimization happens regardless of skin colour and religion.

I suggest that Ali provides Noemi with redemption to demonstrate that for the Muslim subject, visibility may not always be problematic. When Zayneb chooses to make her mark as a Muslim by both wearing the hijab and by demanding for her place within the society, she is employing what Frisina (2010: 560) describes as "visibility tactics" which are tactics carried out to "generate a regime of visibility as recognition". Unknowingly for Zeynab, it is through her experiences of prejudice and how she stands against them that create support, and help can be achieved because of her voice. Noemi affirms this when she acknowledges that it is Zayneb's suspension that leads her to her to "awakening" and to break her from her "white feminism" (Ali 2020: 126). Therefore, Ali portrays how a Muslim subject's visibility can be used as a form of support for herself. It now becomes a site for the promotion of her rights to unconditional belonging, a form of "actively experienced, positively connoted visibility" (Frisina 2010: 560).

Zayneb is also allowed a form of revenge against Fencer. Fencer's Islamophobic online activities are known to Zayneb and her friends, and from the beginning of the novel, they have been unsuccessfully scheming to oust him. His online presence is a tactic to limit his physical visibility while disseminating his anti-Muslim sentiments, granting him no repercussions for his actions. Zeynab and her friends, therefore, develop a strategy to make him visible. They turn him into a subject of surveillance, after successfully trailing and tracking his online activities. Unknowingly for him, they are able to control his visibility, allowing it to become "something that belongs to another and that can be used as a tool to exert power over the surveilled" (Shams 2018: 78). Using her position in Qatar, she is able to override firewall and censorship to see the things that Fencer posts online that are not readily available on the web in America. These are used as evidence of his bullying and discrimination against his Muslim students.

I would like to draw attention to how the novel does not specify what happens to Fencer after this exposé. It hints that he may be reprimanded and possibly fired, but this leads to an ambiguous ending that does not focus on a happy-ever-after for the Muslim subject. Instead, it focuses on the transition of Zayneb's attitude towards the people around her. It advocates for the need for solidarity and understanding, where Zayneb realizes that her predicaments are not hers alone to struggle against. She says that she is "ready to let people in" as she realizes that "there were many more [people] that wanted in than out" (Ali 2020: 330). Her openness marks an embrace of her community. It is unlikely that her fight for inclusion and against conditional belonging is over, but it is possible to make it easier with these friendships and alliances.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to discuss how the genre of Muslim women's writing is facing challenges in the Western book industry due to demands of conditional belonging. On one hand, they face restrictions in their creative attempts as they are expected to portray Muslim characters, and that these characters must be ones that are familiar to mainly Western readers. On the other, as Muslim women's writing is often primed to respond to stereotypical and exotic depiction of Muslims in fiction, positive representations of female Muslim identities are in danger of becoming stock images. These unfortunate situations reflect the lack of freedom that is afforded to Muslim women writers. However, in a world where Islamophobia is deeply embedded and practiced, positive representations become a necessity. S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z,* therefore, is an example of a successful illustration of how one positive representation of a young Muslim woman has the potential to empower and inspire the very people she aims to represent.

The novel begins with Zayneb's sense of defeat as she becomes a subject of vilification and abuse that has become emotionally unbearable and agonizing. Her experience of discrimination demonstrates that the demands for inclusion both force the Muslim minority to be the subject of public attention and discourse, while pushing them into a marginalized position. However, Zayneb's strategies of belonging and embrace of her community outline the importance of organized and concerted efforts against discrimination. This is an active form of resistance against conditional belonging, destabilizing any form of control that the majority seeks to practice over the Muslim minority. Coupled with its ambiguous ending, the author reminds the reader, particular the Muslim reader, that the endeavour for social justice is not a one-off process, but rather a continuous one.

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