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“Looking and feeling good on my own terms”

Amal’s Hybrid Identity in Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

The present chapter investigates the origins and importance of hybrid identity in sixteen-year-old Amal, Abdel-Fattah’s protagonist in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Amal’s hybrid identity becomes increasingly unified and stable. The symbol of this development is the hijab. With the aid of both Homi Bhabba’s notion of cultural identity, i.e. a duality that manifests itself as a split in the identity of the colonized other, whereby humans become a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer’s cultural identity, and Nassar Meer’s theory of double consciousness, in which identity exists both in and for itself, I demonstrate that Amal not only successfully negotiates the challenges presented by a hybrid identity but also embraces them. As a result, she is able to look and feel good on *her own* terms. Her country, her family and her faith become integrated by the end of the novel, forming a solid foundation on which to build a successful and happy future in Australia. Fairness and tolerance guide Amal in both her relationships and her actions. Her empathy with those who are different to her and her determination to be accepted by other, non-Muslims, inspire her peers and gain her the respect not only of her peers but also the adults in her community.

The Hijab, Empowerment and Hybrid Identity

Amal establishes early in the novel that the hijab, or head scarf, often regarded by non-Muslims as an obstacle to female liberty, can also be a source of both empowerment and freedom (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 29). At the end of her first day at school wearing the hijab, she reflects, “I was looking and feeling good *on my own terms*, and boy did that feel awesome” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 29, my italics). The decision to wear the hijab is Amal’s, and hers alone. The following morning, when she kneels beside her parents to pray, her hijab gives her “a strange sense of calm” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 29), allowing her to express who she is “on the inside” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 28). In this chapter, I explore Amal’s journey towards a unified, coherent identity as a young adult Muslim in a non-Muslim society. The hijab is the symbol of this journey. It is also the physical manifestation of the freedom and ability to choose. Underlying the following discussion is the conviction that cultural hybridity, i.e., maintaining a sense of balance among practices, values, and traditions of two or more different cultures, has the potential to cultivate

a climate of fairness and tolerance that not only permits but also celebrates difference based on mutual respect.¹ At the same time, Amal's journey towards a unified self-identity also excites and demands empathy not only among her friends but also from the reader, who follows Amal's progress closely and the various obstacles placed in her path.

Amal's hybrid identity is clearly established early on in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*: "I'm an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 6), she claims. She draws the conclusion that she is "whacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 6). As the story progresses, Amal gradually learns that her two very different national identities not only support but also encapsulate her religious one. Her Muslim identity is central to both her Australian and Palestinian identities, as illustrated by the placement of "Muslim" between the two national identities. As I hope to show, the hyphens in Amal's identity do not denote divisions: they are integral parts of an increasingly strong and unified hybrid whole.

Amal as an Adolescent

As a young, sixteen-year-old protagonist, the fictional Amal is in the middle age band for young adults, i.e. 16–20 years old. Identity is acknowledged to be a key concept in this critical period of development. It is a time when, as Jane Kroger demonstrates, "one is confronted with the task of self-definition" (1996, p. 18). Amal presents herself as a character to whom young adults who are exploring the nature of the "self" can easily relate and with whom they can empathise. The plotlines in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* depict the experiences of teenagers in general. The language of the novel is easily accessible to young adults. As Jeff Spanke (2010) argues, all three qualities, i.e. plotlines, experiences and language are essential characteristics of young adult literature.

In addition, and as in most young adult novels, the point of view is the first person. The story is told in the voice of teenage Amal "and not the voice of an adult looking back as a young person" (Herz & Gallo, 2005, p. 10). As Herz and Gallo also emphasise, "the outcome of the story is usually dependent upon the decisions and actions of the main character" (p. 11). It is Amal who decides her destiny. Her willpower and determination are based on personal convictions of right and wrong. Amal is determined to be herself and not who others wish her to be, even if/when this entails being "different". Part of being "different" is being a Muslim and wearing a hijab.

1 A recent study of the everyday experiences of young Muslims in Melbourne suggests that there is no contradiction between "Islamic rituals and faith-based practices and tradition" and enacting Australian citizenship in a harmonious and meaningful way (Johns et al., 2015, p. 171).

Wearing the Hijab

The hijab can be worn by an Australian or a Palestinian. It is a choice (only in Iran and Saudi Arabia is it obligatory for women to wear the hijab). Wearing the hijab denotes not only a set of beliefs but also an identity. This identity must develop in order to remain unified. It does not necessarily conflict with other identities. The hijab is a symbol of Amal’s journey towards understanding her hybrid identity. Towards the end of the novel she observes, “I’ve been kidding myself. Putting on the hijab isn’t the end of the journey. It’s just the beginning of it” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 324). The hijab is the symbol of her Muslim faith, which brings together the two most important parts of Amal’s hybrid self, namely Australian and Palestinian.

While a hybrid identity can be “a trap, a predicament” (Ang, 1996, p. 40), it can also be a source of, and indeed an expression of strength. Amal’s hijab is not only a religious symbol, it is also the outward expression of a decision to be true to herself, an important part of which, for Amal, is being a Muslim. It is, however, *only* a part. In wearing the hijab, Amal demonstrates that she is on her way to discovering who she is and, equally importantly, who she wishes to be as an adult.

Amal knows that she is different because of her hybrid identity. This can, in fact, as Homi Bhabha argues, be an advantage in identity formation because hybridity constitutes a

liminal space in-between the designation of identity [...] an interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed hierarchy. (1994, p. 4)

Amal sees herself as neither superior nor inferior to others. She is herself. Like many young adolescents, she becomes increasingly self-reflective (Eisenberg et al., 2006). But unlike many adolescents, the fictional Amal is not susceptible to peer pressure.² This is because, as Santor, Messervey and Kusumakar demonstrate, young people “who generally conform to rules will be less influenced by peer pressure” (2000, p. 172). Amal both obeys school rules *and* belongs to a small group of peers.

Conforming while at the same time developing a sense of self are parallel developments. However, during adolescence, conforming to peer group norms becomes less important (Erikson 1968; Newman & Newman 1976). This is seen particularly clearly in the area of morals. The fictional Amal is no exception in this regard.

Adolescents in general develop an ability to think morally. As noted by Smetana and Turiel:

² Peer pressure is defined here as “when people your own age encourage you to do something or to keep from doing something else, no matter if you personally want to or not” (Brown et al., 1986, p. 522).

The development of adolescents' moral thinking entails their ability to apply more abstract and complex moral concepts in complex or multi-faceted situations involving conflicts between moral and other social or non-social concerns. (2006, p. 264)

The fictional Amal's decision to wear the hijab is both a moral and a religious one. Indeed, the hijab is for her an expression of "what's on the inside, where it really counts" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 324). Here, Amal is not just describing her religious principles but also her moral ones: she believes that she must do what is right in terms of her own values, but she also takes into consideration the principles and reactions of those around her. When, for example, her headmistress tells her that she can only wear a maroon-coloured hijab, which matches her school uniform and is thus less conspicuous, Amal accepts this even though she would prefer to have a prettier colour and even change the colour of her hijab now and then, as Muslim women do. This is a moral decision, a compromise that is fair to others, and a demonstration that Amal wishes not only to be true to herself but also part of her community, socially as well as educationally. This decision also wins her the respect of her parents.

While in western cultures like Australia it is common to see the hijab as a symbol of female oppression, this is not an uncontested view in either Muslim or non-Muslim communities. Indeed, as Werbner (2007) argues, far from being a symbol of oppression, the veil is often used to demonstrate modesty and piety; it is not a purely religious statement. She argues that younger women have come to see that traditional Islam allows women greater freedom than is often supposed. Muslims use the hijab, for example, as a way of entering public spaces with fewer restrictions than would otherwise apply because the veil provides a measure of anonymity (Werbner, 2007, pp. 175–176).

In *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Amal proves herself worthy of wearing the hijab. She wears it for herself alone: it is not intended as a provocation to others. Her overall goal is to look and feel good on her own terms, be at peace with her personal values while at the same time part of a larger community. She learns to strike a balance between being fair to herself and being fair to the community. In this respect, Amal's story is also that of her creator, Randa Abdel-Fattah, who lives in Sydney and has worked for a number of years as a Muslim lawyer, human rights advocate and community volunteer.

The fictional Amal lives in real-life Camberwell, "one of Melbourne's trendy suburbs" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 5). This middle-class suburb boasts "beautiful tree-lined streets, Federation homes, manicured front lawns and winding drive-ways" (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 5). Her father is a doctor and her mother, a dentist. Most of the fictional inhabitants are Australian, as in the real-life community.

Muslims, the Quran and the Hijab

Although the Muslim presence in Australia is relatively small, Muslims have been in Australia since before white settlement (Saaed, 2003). Comprising 2.2 percent of the Australian population (Abdel-Fattah, 2017, p. 398), they are the third largest religious group after Christians and Buddhists (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). They have never, however, been accepted as part of the Australian cultural milieu (Brastad, 2001; Perera, 2009).

Conservative politicians have associated Muslims with social discord and stressed the importance of stricter assimilation measures (Jakubowicz, 2007; Perera, 2009). Surveys conducted during the early part of the twenty-first century indicate that many Australians believe that Muslims make Australia a less attractive place in which to live. The Issues Deliberation Australia survey (2020, see Rane et al., 2020), for example, states that some Australians believe that Muslims are a threat to the peace and security of the Australian way of life. Abdel-Fattah points out in her article on Islamophobia that Australian Muslims “are undoubtedly the most visible and problematized minority in Australia in the context of the global circulation of fears and moral panics about the Muslim Other” (2017, p. 398). Abdel-Fattah has herself experienced problems when wearing the hijab in Australia: as a teenager, for example, she was taunted by teenage boys, and her hijab was ripped off her head. She has also encountered racism in her work as a lawyer, author and activist, and has even been denied jobs on the grounds of her wearing a hijab.

Ironically, in view of what has been stated above regarding the position of Muslims in Australia, and wearing the hijab, The Quran makes few references to appropriate clothing for Muslim women. And where these occur, they present more general principles governing how to dress modestly. Chapter 24 verse 31 of the Quran states, for example:

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, [a list of relatives], [household servants], or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (Quran)

As Zeinab Zein demonstrates, veiling practices can be used to create a dichotomy between Islamic and Australian values. The veil has even been seen as a signifier

to represent the perceived threat posed by Islam and Muslims to Australian cultural values. The veiled Muslim woman in the political arena is marked not only as a culturally incompatible “other”, [...] but the perceived oppression of Muslim women is also highlighted to demonstrate the country’s vulnerability to Islamic terrorism. (2014, n.p.)

An article by Rachel Woodlock in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (6 June 2010) quotes Asiya Davidson-Allouche, a self-professed feminist Muslim living in northern Melbourne: “There are layers and layers of veils between us and Allah, which is the true reality [...]. To be hidden, to be concealed, is something truly beautiful. It enables us always to be reminded of that link.”

For the fictional Amal, the hijab is not only a link to and expression of Allah, but more importantly, a bridge to her true self. This bridge must give equal importance to the Australian and Palestinian sides of her identity. It provides *equal* access to both sides. For Amal, being a Muslim is a journey that begins with the hijab but does not end with it: while she is still wearing the hijab at the end of the story, she no longer needs it in order to face the future. The hijab is an external sign which, by the end of the novel, has also become an internalised feature of Amal’s identity. What the hijab is and what it symbolises are not the same thing, as Amal’s story so clearly illustrates.

In the above-mentioned article on Islamophobia and Australian Muslim political consciousness (2017), Abdel-Fattah’s presentation of Islamic identity is very close to the notion of “double consciousness” propounded by Nasar Meer. Double consciousness, Meer argues, exists *in* and *for* itself, a distinction that Abdel-Fattah regards as extremely important. Meer contends that a consciousness that exists *in* itself bears “a historically ascribed identity”, e.g. radicalisation, which makes it reactive (Meer, 2010, p. 199).³ A consciousness that exists *for* itself, on the other hand, is “capable of mobilising on its own terms for its own interests” (Meer, 2010, p. 4). This form of consciousness adopts a politically self-defined identity that goes beyond the narrative of Islamophobia. It is this identity that the fictional Amal both seeks and defends. She does so not only, and in fact, not even primarily, for political or religious reasons, but as a means of proclaiming her independence as a Muslim teenage girl in an Islamophobic Australia.

Above all, the hijab becomes for Amal a marker of identity and not a symbol of difference. It symbolises her acceptance and embracement of her hybrid identity, which becomes an increasingly significant part of her femininity. Amal claims that:

It’s mainly the migrants in my life who have inspired me to understand what it means to be an Aussie. To be a hyphenated Australian [...] It’s their stories and confrontations and pains and joys which have empowered me to

3 An interesting study of second-generation Muslim women immigrants in Australia demonstrates that, far from being “lost”, as many have supposed, such young women “are constructing blended identities which they reflect on consciously” (Poynting, 2009, p. 373) and which enable them to respond strategically to everyday racism. A study conducted in 2013, “Minority Youth and Social Transformation in Australia: Identities, Belonging and Cultural Capital”, suggests that “fluid identities” and “positive aspirations” are furthered by the local community, “that provides the bridge between [the] home cultures and the broader world” (Jakubowicz, 2007, p. 5). The fictional Amal is clearly situated in her local community in Melbourne.

know myself, challenged me to embrace my identity as a young Australian-Palestinian-Muslim girl. (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 350)

It should be noted that the operative word in Amal’s claim is the final one, namely “girl”. Amal is a girl who has the choice of wearing or not wearing the hijab. When read from this perspective, Abdel-Fattah’s novel demonstrates that wearing the hijab is a sign of independence rather than repression. In an interview with Hazel Rochman (2007), Abdel-Fattah claimed that *Does My Head Look Big in This?* is an attempt to “shock readers into realizing that teenagers, no matter their faith or culture, have common experiences; that there is more in common, than there is different; and that the differences should be respected, not feared” (Rochman, 2007, p. 54). The fictional Amal learns to celebrate rather than fear or hide her difference. She does so as a teenager who values and respects her Muslim and non-Muslim friends equally.

At the same time, Amal does not accept all the practices of her non-Muslim friends, as her boyfriend Adam soon discovers when he expresses his wish to have a physical relationship with her. She explains, “I want to be with one person in my life. I want to know that the guy I spend the rest of my life with is the first person I share something so intimate and exciting with” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 242). The repetition of “I want” makes it clear that Amal knows what is right for her. By extension, it is also right for Adam if his intentions towards Amal are serious, because if he does not accept her principles there can be no future for them together.

The fictional Amal does not attempt to achieve piety or perfection, as has already been noted by Amrah Abdul Majid (2016).⁴ Instead, she strives to be the best young adult she can be. As she reflects on her values and decisions, including the decision to wear the hijab, she notes that she adheres to values that are sometimes different to those of her friends. She neither believes nor claims that she is superior. This is particularly poignant given that at the time of writing *Does My Head Look Big in This?* its author was herself only fifteen years old. At this point in her life, Abdel-Fattah had just decided to wear a hijab to school – a private school in Melbourne where there were no other Muslims. Amal’s story is thus in no small part her creator’s story.⁵

4 Majid argues that “[t]he decision to wear the hijab opens a path for the protagonist to become more adherent to her religion, as well as improving her attributes and individuality as a whole. This creates a wholesome young woman who is not only committed to her religion, but is also mindful of her character” (p. 115). It is the notions of individuality and character that I wish to emphasise in the present article as they weigh more heavily than religious aspirations in understanding the development of the fictional Amal into a unified and balanced young member of her community.

5 Abdel-Fattah’s literary works are not “slices of reality as the artist does not plagiarise the real but shapes it”, argues Jean Francois Vernay in “Fictional reality strikes back: Koch’s novels from fiction to friction” (Vernay, 2008, p. 27). C. J. Koch argues that if an author loses touch with reality and fails to reflect a consistent personality in his/her works, readers cease to care

When asked in an interview “what do you see as some of the challenges of being an Australian Muslim”, Abdel-Fattah replied:

I think the major challenges for Muslims – especially young people – living in the west, and in Australia in particular, is overcoming the tendency to define your identity in terms of resistance: you need to be able to find who you are in Australia and make a contribution, to ignore the media and the so called war on terror and the way it feeds into how people perceive Muslims, to overcome the Islamophobia, and still make something of our contribution to Australia that’s positive. (Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, 2018, n.p.)

These are noble views, which are also clearly reflected in the character of Amal. They are a strong reason for feeling empathy for young Muslims in general, and Amal/Abdel-Fattah in particular.

Identity and Empathy

Through the story of Amal, the reader learns to understand how she consciously and consistently builds on her hybrid identity. This is a process of negotiation that necessitates a “vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect,” what Suzanne Keen calls “empathy” (2006, p. 208). “In empathy we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others” (Keen, 2006, p. 208). Empathy is not only seeing but also feeling someone else’s pain; sympathy, on the other hand, is only *feeling pity* for someone else’s pain. Amy Coplan explains that “(w)hen I empathize with another, I take up his or her psychological perspective and imaginatively experience [...] what he or she experiences” (2004, p. 143). Coplan stresses, nonetheless, that in so doing she keeps her own identity separate. In this way, it is possible to both identify with the fictional character and respect the singularity of the latter’s experience. Rogers (1959) puts this a little differently:

The state of empathy, or being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person but without ever losing the “as if” condition. (pp. 210–211)

At the same time, the experience of the reader and the character is not, of course, the same. As Suzanne Keen argues: “Real readers believe they have *legitimate* empathetic experiences as a result of their encounters with fictional characters and the imagined world they move in” (Keen, 2007, p. 99, my italics). From the very beginning of *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the narrator hopes that we will understand her decision to be a “full-timer”, i.e. one who wears the hijab all

and believe: “we lose interest, we can’t identify; it’s a private game, a minor entertainment” (2000, p. 163).

the time and especially “in the presence of males who aren’t immediate family” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 2).

This is why, at the beginning of the novel, Amal decides to list the reasons for wearing the hijab. She identifies three *main* justifications: it is better to follow “God’s fashion dictates than some ugly solarium-tanned old fart in Milan” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, pp. 8–9), who advocates skimpy clothing; wearing a hijab shows modesty; and the hijab makes it possible to avoid obsessing about one’s figure and weight. The list looks like an essay, Amal fears. Compiling it is not an academic assignment but a matter of life and death at this point in its creator’s development. The language Amal uses to express her reasons is strong and immature, and includes such slang/offensive words as “bitch”, “zit”, and “bloody stirrers”. The tone is facetious but at the same time deadly serious. It serves to demonstrate that Amal has no need to associate with members of her school class in general, most of whom she regards as shallow. Instead, she selects special friends, which include two Muslims, Leila and Yasmeen (Leila already wears the hijab full-time at the beginning of the story). She knows that her close friends, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, will not tease her if she wears the hijab to school.

Coming of age is “always riddled with anxieties, [but] holds particular dilemmas for young Muslims”, suggest Pajalik and Divaroren, editors of *Coming of Age: Growing up Muslim in Australia* (2014, p. 7). The path that Amal follows in establishing and reinforcing her identity as a Muslim in Australia is described more or less chronologically in the novel, each stage building on the previous one, and demonstrating Amal’s determination to follow the rules but at the same time enjoy the freedom to express her innermost convictions. The earlier mentioned list that she draws up indicates that she has a clear idea of who will and who will not approve of her wearing the hijab. Among those who will give her “attitude”, she lists several girls at school, check-out girls at supermarkets and “hard-core feminists” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 17). Few men are listed. Significantly, however, she mentions “people who will interview me if and when I apply for a job one day” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 18). Here fiction and reality meet as this echoes Abdel-Fattah’s own experience.

Amal’s first day at school wearing the hijab is all about looking good and *feeling* good. The forty-five minutes that she spends every morning fixing her hijab finally result in her achieving “a perfect shape, a perfect arch to frame my face” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 32). It is the shape that she has been aiming for. Amal also knows that she should have prepared the headmistress for her decision, as people tend to assume that the hijab “has bizarre powers sewn into its micro-fibres. Powers which transform Muslim girls into UCO’s (Unidentified Covered Objects), which turn Muslim girls from an ‘us’ into ‘them’” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 38). While Amal understands the headmistress’s initial reaction of horror, she knows that she “must stand up for herself” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 38). As already established, Amal does not wish to break rules. But she demands respect for her decision, just as she

shows respect to her headmistress. It is all about being fair to the community and to the individual. This, however, does not make it any easier for Amal to enter her first lesson after the holidays wearing a hijab. The reader empathises with her. We visualise her body language as she walks through the rows of desks feeling “like somebody has got a stapler and started punching holes all over my guts” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 42). As readers, we wish to fill those holes and lessen the pain in order, perhaps somewhat selfishly, to reduce our own pain. In talking to her mother about her first day at school wearing the hijab, Amal explains:

Maa! I'm not a kid! I've spent every last minute in these past four days thinking through every single potential obstacle [...] Yeah, I'm scared. OK, there, happy? I'm petrified. I walked into my classroom and I wanted to throw up from how nervous I was. But this decision, it's coming from my heart. I can't explain or rationalize it. OK, I'm doing it because I believe it's my duty and defines me as a Muslim female but it's not as ... I don't know how to put it ... it's more than just that. (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, pp. 51–52)

The above passage demonstrates that Amal is not a child any longer (she is sixteen). At the same time, her conviction cannot be questioned: wearing the hijab is a duty for her. It is also an expression of who she is.

Challenges inevitably arise at school as Amal attempts to negotiate an untrodden path between friendship, religion and tradition. When her friend Leila is banned by her mother from going out with Amal and their friends, for example, Amal's mother urges her daughter to understand the problem from different perspectives. She tells Amal, “If you want to understand a problem you look at its cause. You don't look at its manifestation” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 87). This helps Amal not only in her relationship with Adam but also to decide to take part in the school debate. Once she is convinced that her decision is correct, Amal typically prepares and performs well. She is strong enough to reject her uncle's advice to stop wearing the hijab because she will have no hope of a future. She knows that it would be so easy to remove her hijab and become an “unhyphenated Aussie” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 104), but that is clearly not what she wants. Also, it is neither fair to her, nor, equally importantly, to her faith.

Adam seems to understand this and gradually learns to respect Amal for who she is. He knows that her “smart-arse lines” and “feminist moods” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 154) do not represent the real Amal. What he does not quite understand yet, however, is the actual strength and depth of her convictions. As already mentioned, Amal refuses to have a physical relationship with Adam. This is not just a mark of her Muslim faith but also a demonstration of her desire to establish her own standards, however different these may be to those of her peers.

Increasingly, the narrator associates wearing the hijab and adhering to Muslim principles with Amal's future. As she drifts off to sleep, Amal ponders the words of one of her teachers, who has told her that she can achieve her goals and be anything she wants to be. Amal is bright and dedicated and must make the best of

her natural gifts; this, she realises, is her duty if she is to be fair to her gifts as well as to her loved ones and their expectations. The final sentence of the novel reads, “Ever since I wore the hijab I’ve been feeling pretty scared” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 218). Amal’s greatest fear, it seems, is that her future “won’t live up to all [she’s] dreamed it to be” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 218).

She gradually recognises, however, that her future lies in her own hands. Wearing the hijab and being faithful to Muslim principles are, Amal gradually learns, not enough for her. At the end of the novel, she understands that

All this time I’ve been walking around thinking I’ve become pious because I’ve made the difficult decision to wear the hijab. I’ve been assuming that now I’m wearing it full-time, I’ve earned all my brownie points.

But what’s the good of being true to your religion on the outside, if you don’t change what’s on the inside, where it really counts? (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 324)

With her “A” grade and her “best speaker” award, Amal finally acknowledges to herself that she *does* have a future,⁶ with or without the hijab. She has empowered herself to know herself, she claims. She no longer needs to think about her identity, because it is clear to her. She no longer needs to write lists about what she should or should not wear: she knows what she should do because she has decided to embrace head-on her “identity as a young Australian-Palestinian-Muslim girl” (Abdel-Fattah, 2005, p. 350). At the beginning of the novel, she describes herself as “Australian-Muslim-Palestinian”. The order changes by page 304 to “Australian-Palestinian-Muslim”. “Australian” is still Amal’s first identity. Nationality has become more important than religious affiliation: “Muslim” is no longer central. Amal knows exactly where she is going. The answers are inside herself, and are represented by her desires, dreams and visions for the future. There is no more fear because it has been replaced by self-knowledge and self-respect. The hijab is neither the cause nor the outcome but the physical manifestation of Amal’s *internal* journey. She can now look and feel good on her own terms because she has found a way to be fair to herself, her country, her family and her faith. These together form an integral part of Amal and are the foundations for her future in Australia.

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6 A recent study of the narratives of Australian young Muslim women and their aspirations with regard to higher education demonstrates that success and economic independence are dependent on agency, i.e. how they deploy their capabilities, financial, cultural and social resources “under cultural and structural constraints” [sic.] (Al-Deen, 2019, p. 598).

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