

Challenging Stereotypes: Randa Abdel-Fattah's Use of Parody in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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This article explores anti-Muslim stereotypes and strategies for combating them as presented in Randa Abdel-Fattah's first novel for young readers, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* First published in 2005, in the wake of terrorist attacks in the United States and Bali, the novel focuses on the everyday life of a second-generation Palestinian teenager who decides, as she puts it, to wear the hijab "full time" in a predominantly non-Muslim school in Australia. As will be argued here, stereotypes of Muslims and, in particular, Muslim women present not only challenges for the novel's central protagonist but also sites for her intervention. Central to this discussion is theoretical work by Judith Butler, whose notion of parody emphasizes the destabilizing effect that parody has for otherwise oppressive images and stereotypes. Rather than engage in a patient, rational, and didactic discussion with what are essentially impatient and irrational representations, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* adopts a strategy of parody—an exaggerated, often funny, redeployment of anti-Muslim stereotypes—in order to expose the ignorance wherein they originate. In this way, it will be argued, the protagonist of Abdel-Fattah's novel is not only "challenged" by anti-Muslim stereotypes, she "challenges back."

Originally published in 2005, following terrorist attacks in the United States and Bali, Randa Abdel-Fattah's first novel for young adults, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, is concerned with the everyday life of a Muslim teenager in a predominantly non-Muslim society. Central to the novel

are issues of identity and respect, brought to the fore by the protagonist's decision to wear the hijab "full time" in an upper-middle-class private school in Melbourne, Australia. Previous scholarship on *Does My Head Look Big in This?* has tended to approach the novel in terms of postcolonial theory, particularly that of Homi K. Corrected Bhabha, Ien Ang, and Stuart

Hall. Common to studies by Jo Lampert, Sharyn Pearce, Lana Zannettino, and Karine Ancellin is a focus on cultural hybridity: the way in which the central protagonist of the novel negotiates "in between" multiple and, at times, conflicting cultural positions—her avowal of Muslim faith and heritage on the one hand, and the skepticism and prejudice she meets in predominantly Anglo-Australian society on the other. Of the studies cited here, all develop analyses in tandem with other texts and contexts. Lampert, for example, analyzes a similar young adult short story from the United States and gages the impact of 9/11 on Muslim youth in Western societies more generally. Pearce compares it with another Australian work, examining the reception and status of Islam in that country. Zannettino compares *Does My Head Look Big in This?* to novels with similar "diasporic" themes, combining both postcolonial and post-structural feminist approaches. Ancellin places it within the corpus of Muslim women's writing post-9/11. The current study, however, seeks to examine how the protagonist of *Does My Head Look Big in This?* occupies not a space "in between" two conflicting cultures but how she occupies both simultaneously. In particular, I would like to focus on stereotypes, or what Randa Abdel-Fattah has called "lazy generalizations" (Abdel-Fattah and Seabrook), and the various means by which the novel engages in such depictions as a way of educating those who articulate them.

As Abdel-Fattah notes, her "primary motivation" for writing the novel was to "explore the world of the young people and how the 'war on terror' and the politics that we live in today impacts upon them." "What does it feel like," she asks, "when your Prime Minister gets up and talks about Muslims as terrorists and is lazy in his language associating entire communities and countries with terrorism? How does that impact on you as a sixteen year old?" (Abdel-Fattah and Seabrook). Typically assumed to be the product of ignorance, stereotypes are likewise assumed to be "solvable" once the people who hold them are exposed to information about the culture the stereotypes otherwise denigrate. As will be argued here, however, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* adopts a somewhat different strategy: Rather than engage in a patient, rational, and didactic discussion with what are essentially impatient and irrational representations, the novel engages in a practice of parody—an exaggerated, often funny, redeployment of stereo-

types in order to expose the ignorance wherein they originate.

"The whole idea of a stereotype," according to Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, "is to simplify. Instead of going through the problem of all of this great diversity—that it's this or maybe that—you have just one large statement: It is this" (Achebe). Inherent in Achebe's formulation of stereotype are not only issues of simplification and generalization but also of definition and power. In a stereotype, one person or group undertakes to represent another and, in so doing, defines that other in terms that are reduced, general, and seldom—if ever—terms that the other would apply to him or herself. For the person or group represented, the stereotype is no less defining; he, she, or they are left to negotiate a definition someone else has conferred. Although there are many different ways to contest one's representation by others, that contestation presumes, first of all, the ability to speak in one's own behalf and to offer an alternative representation that may counter that of the stereotype. This is not enough. Because the persistence of stereotype is not based on truth (but rather on simplicity and ease), the stereotype itself must be engaged.

For feminist and queer theorists working in the latter part of the twentieth century, "parody" has constituted one such engagement. Here, the stereotype is willfully repeated, but in such an exaggerated or hyperbolic way as to deflate or subvert the supposed "truth" the stereotype purports to convey. To borrow a phrase from Diana Fuss, parody is, in this context, "to undo by overdoing" (32). To give an example from *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, one may look at the description of Hidayah, the Islamic school that the first-person narrator, Amal Abdel-Hakim, attended prior to entering McCleans, the upper-middle-class grammar school mentioned earlier.

School from Year Seven to Year Ten was Hidayah—The Guidance—Islamic college.

Where they indoctrinate students and teach them how to form Muslim ghettos, where they train with Al-Qaeda for school camp and sing overseas national anthems. Not.

(Abdel-Fattah 10-11)

Here, Amal repeats Western fears of Islamic schools by reciting a number of stereotypes commonly held

about Muslims: that they are "indoctrinated," that they do not integrate, that they are terrorists, and that they are more loyal to predominantly Muslim countries than to those in which they live. Nevertheless, that she is able to list four such stereotypes in the space of three lines demonstrates how simplistic the stereotypes are. Simplifying what are already simplistic representations, Amal calls attention to the way in which stereotypes work—a refusal of knowledge in favor of simplicity. This is, in effect, to stereotype stereotypes: to undo the stereotype by overdoing it. More than this, her inclusion of the word "not" at the end of this description not only negates all of the stereotypes listed in a humorous way, it also works to counter at least one of them: far from being "un-integrated," Amal speaks a form of colloquial, teenage English, common throughout the English-speaking world.

This notion of parody (undoing a stereotype by overdoing it) is not without risk. At stake is the repetition of a stereotype, the very representation or image that one is otherwise attempting to subvert. The risk is that the ironic or satiric element will go unrecognized—or will be misrecognized—on the part of the audience so that the stereotype itself remains in full force. In other words, it is not enough simply to replay the stereotype with the intent of parodying it. Parody must be observable and unmistakable to the audience for whom the recitation is performed. This concern, that the parody may be misinterpreted, appears to inform the first American edition of *Does My Head Look Big in This?* In the Australian edition, cited in the example above, the word "not" is presented as a simple sentence (or sentence fragment), with the first letter capitalized and ending in a period. In the American edition, the same word (sentence fragment) is emphasized, being placed *all* in capital letters and followed by an exclamation mark.¹¹ It appears as though the American publisher feared misunderstanding on the part of book's readers—that Amal's negation would be overlooked and that the stereotypes she recites would be taken as truth. By emphasizing the word "not," then, the publishers appear to compensate for this fear.

In her own work on parody, feminist philosopher Judith Butler addresses this concern. "Parody in itself is not subversive," she writes,

and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions

effectively disruptive ... and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered. (Butler 139)

In other words, it is impossible to tell in advance what kinds of parodic repetitions will succeed as parodic and what others will fail to do so, to the degree that they may wind up upholding stereotypes rather than subverting them. To this end, Butler refuses to catalogue types of what she considers "successful parody," for each instance will depend upon its own context and audience. Nevertheless, it should be possible, as Butler claims, to examine those contexts, as well as audiences, and to determine when and how certain parodies succeed.

In *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, parody is deployed in a number of ways. Not only does Abdel-Fattah exaggerate anti-Muslim stereotypes, she also juxtaposes those representations with others in order to show how stereotypes single out and define "Muslims" vis-à-vis other groups. Crucial in this regard is the presence of the first-person narrator Amal, whose perceptions not only unite the narrative in a structural way but also offer a source of identification for readers. Through Amal, readers learn, for example, that the decision to wear the hijab "full time" was her own and not that of her parents or religious community. This is important, for the central stereotype with which the novel contends is the Western belief that women in Islam are "oppressed."

"Oppressed" is a word that Amal hears not only from classmates who whisper it behind her back when she begins term three at McCleans wearing a hijab (Abdel-Fattah 58). It also informs the judgment of school administrators and friends who assume that Amal has been made to wear it by her parents (35, 139). Amal parodies this assumption when, a few weeks into the term, some classmates finally don the courage to ask her about it:

Somehow, in between classes after lunch on Monday, everybody suddenly finds the guts to approach me, wanting to know what's going on with my new look.

'Did your parents force you?' Kristy asks, all wide-eyed and appalled.

'My dad told me if I don't wear it he'll marry me off to a sixty-five year old camel owner in Egypt.'

'No!' She's actually horrified.

'I was invited to the wedding,' Eileen adds.

'Really?' This is definitely a case of dropped from the cradle.

'Hey! Amal!' Tim Manne calls out. 'What's the deal with that thing on your head?'

'I've gone bald.'

'Get out!'

'I'm on the Advanced Hair Program.'

For a second his eyes flicker with shock. Then Josh punches him on the shoulder. 'Rocked!'

'Like I believed her,' Tim says, looking sheepish. (65-66)

Rather than disabuse Kristy of her guiding assumption (namely, that Amal is forced to wear the hijab by her parents), Amal repeats that assumption, exaggerating it even to the point of introducing another anti-Muslim stereotype herself, that of arranged—or, rather, forced—marriage. That this is parody is guaranteed into two ways. First, the narrative voice of Amal criticizes Kristy for her apparent naïveté: "This is definitely a case of dropped from the cradle" (65). Second, the context in which the parody is situated emphasizes that this *is* parody: Amal's exchange with Tim which immediately follows, mirrors that of Amal's with Kristy—both Tim and Kristy are shown to be easily duped. In this way, the novel educates its readers away from stereotypes. Reader identification is with Amal. Not only have they seen that the hijab was, in her case, a matter of personal conviction rather than of coercion, they now see that the stereotype equating the hijab with oppression is, at best, simplistic and naïve.

This is not to suggest, however, that parental pressure does not exist and that Muslim girls are not subject to it. Amal's friend and former classmate at Hidayah, Leila, is forced to undergo her mother's attempts to arrange her marriage at the age of sixteen. To this end, Gulchin, Leila's mother, subjects her daughter to a series of respectable male suitors looking for a bride. For her part, Leila would defer marriage and family life until after she has complet-

ed university and established a career in law. At the center of the conflict between mother and daughter are competing interpretations of Islam and women's place therein. For Gulchin, the hijab, for example, is a sign of women's modesty and sexual apartness; she cannot understand why her daughter would wear it while, at the same time, talking "*to boys at school*" (85, emphasis in original). Indeed, she sought to remove her daughter from school altogether (85). Leila's duty in Islam, according to Gulchin, is to get married. For Leila, the opposite is true: "I didn't wear the hijab," she says, "because [my mother] wanted me to. I'm going by what *I* feel is right and what *I* know about my faith. Like I'd really follow something that locked me in the house to cook and clean" (86). Matters come to a head when Leila eventually runs away from home, seeking refuge at a women's shelter in the city (323).

Although Leila's story may be seen to conform to a stereotype of "oppression of women," it is juxtaposed with another, similar story—that of Simone, one of Amal's non-Muslim friends and classmates at McCleans. Suffering from a poor body image, Simone is constantly dieting in an attempt to achieve a standard of female beauty presented in Western print and broadcast media. Not only is Simone teased by her peers for being overweight, she is, like Leila, subject to parental pressure. "Mum has her figure," she says, "even after having my sister, Liz, and me. She is constantly complaining about how I'll end up lonely and single if I'm not thinner and find myself a boyfriend. She seems to be embarrassed by me" (145). Like Leila's mother, Gulchin, Simone's mother sits her daughter down for "debriefing sessions" before Simone's sister and her sister's popular boyfriend come for visits. The point is to get Simone to diet further so that she will appear attractive to her sister's boyfriend so that he, in turn, will set her up with one of his friends—that is, find her a boyfriend of her own (145). In her attempt to conform to Western standards of beauty, Simone engages in a host of self-destructive activities such as bingeing and purging and eventually smoking to suppress her appetite (42, 221-222).

In its juxtaposition of these two stories or subplots—that of Leila and Simone—the novel does not attempt to explain or rationalize a stereotype positing Muslim women as being oppressed. What it does, however, is to point out that *women* are op-

pressed regardless of religious or cultural affiliation and that the difference between their experiences is one of degree. In this sense, the novel further educates readers away from a stereotype that singles out young Muslim women as objects of oppression while, at the same time, ignoring the similar plight of young women in Western contexts. As Leila puts it, "which way do you turn? According to my mum, the normal thing is to get married; according to everybody else out there, the normal thing is to get drunk, lose your virginity to somebody you speak to once at a party, and become 'liberated' or, like, whatever" (85).

Another way in which cultural representations are juxtaposed is through substitution—inserting the stereotype of one group in place of another. When friend and classmate Adam, for example, attempts to explain another classmate's apparent racism on the basis of her upbringing and experience, Amal refuses to accept what she considers Adam's "excuses." "[Y]ou really can't blame [Tia]," Adam says,

'It's what she hears at home. I know 'cause my dad knows her dad. They're not friends but they used to bump into each other at the golf club. That was ages ago but even then her dad would see somebody Asian or dark-skinned and he'd hail them over assuming they were a waiter or something. They really don't mix with anybody outside their circle. You're probably the first Muslim—' (138)

For Adam, Tia's racism is to be "explained." As part of her cultural background and upbringing, Tia's views should be tolerated according to Adam, at least to the degree that she cannot be expected to know any differently or better. For Amal, however, explaining racism in this way is to excuse, rather than remedy it. "Anyway," she counters,

'it goes both ways. I've got family friends who think all Anglos are drunk wife-bashers who walk around barefoot with a stubby in their hands. Or they think Anglos sit around in their thongs and Bonds singlets, rorting the dole or chucking a sickie, sculling down VBs, watching Jerry Springer and bashing their girlfriends.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yes. Dead serious. Should I make an excuse

for them? *Oh, they're allowed to think that. After all they've never really had a conversation with a sober Anglo.* If it sounds so ridiculous for your background, then why doesn't it for ours?' (138-139, emphasis in original)

Here, Amal substitutes one stereotype for another. In doing so, she demonstrates not only how ignorant racism is but also how *racist* the act of excusing it is. Adam does not accept the stereotype of his own community as voiced by Amal's family friends, "Are you serious?" he says (138), and yet remains willing to excuse his own community's stereotypes of others. For Amal, excusing the stereotype of her family friends would "sound ridiculous," even to her own ears. That Adam would not feel the same belies the implicit privilege he accords to his own, but not to others.

None of this is to suggest, however, that Amal is somehow independent or "outside" stereotypical thinking. Although she would insist on judging individuals rather than groups (138), she herself resorts to stereotypes. When she explains what has happened with Leila to two of her non-Muslim friends, Amal fears their reaction, thinking that they will define Leila's situation along the lines of stereotype: "*Oh typical Muslim nutters. Locking their girls up in the house*" (281, emphasis in original). Here, it is not that Amal has internalized an anti-Muslim stereotype. Rather, it is her assumption that her friends already have and that they will dismiss both her and Leila accordingly. If the question, as indicated at the outset of this study, is how the current political climate singling out Muslims impacts upon Muslim youth, then the answer may well be found here: expect rejection. Nevertheless, this expectation would likewise be to reduce, to simplify, and to stereotype the people from whom such treatment is expected. For, as Amal discovers, once she confides in Simone and Eileen, that expectation is, in this case, utterly false: "they don't tell me it's a Muslim story. They don't tell me it's a Turkish story. They understand that it is Leila's story, and I feel ashamed to think that I ever could have doubted them" (285). Here, Amal's own ignorance is exposed.

Ultimately, the problem of stereotypes is one of representation. If, as Achebe maintains, "the whole idea of a stereotype is to simplify," then a stereotype is also an attempt to define and, crucially, define

away. For, once definition is made easy, dismissal is the same. To assert information in the face of a stereotype is not necessarily to challenge it; the very appeal of the stereotype lies in its simplicity and ease. To mount an effective challenge, the stereotype must be confronted directly and all its inadequacies revealed. Parody, an exaggerated repetition of stereotype, represents one such strategy. Not only does it deflate the supposed truth of the stereotype in a humorous way, it may, as in the examples of Kristy and Amal given above, put the person who holds it to shame. None of us would like to be seen as thinking so simply. In the end, it may be that this parodic laughter—laughter with an edge—is the best means to re-educate ourselves about others, the world, and all its diversity.

ENDNOTES

¹ Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* New York: Orchard, 2005, p. 12.

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