

# Can the Subaltern Muslim Female Character “Speak” through Cross-Cultural Marriage? An Analysis of Four Novels

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**Abstract** This article will analyze four novels that deal with the subject of cross-cultural marriage. Two novels are written by Muslim authors: Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999) and Safi Abdi’s *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* (2002). While the other two novels are written by Western authors: Laura Fitzgerald’s *Veil of Roses* (2007) and Nell Freudenberg’s *The Newlyweds* (2013). The four novels revolve around a marriage between a Muslim female character and a Western male character. This selected corpus will be studied from the theoretical viewpoint of Gayatri Spivak’s article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” More specifically, I will discuss three main points in this article. First, I will study whether the Muslim female characters in the novels “can speak” and “have voice” since they are considered as “the least powerful” group by Spivak. Second, I will find out if those Muslim female characters are seeking a cross-cultural relationship with a Western man in order to escape their patriarchal and oppressive societies. In other words, as Spivak expresses this, are “White men saving brown women from brown men?” Finally, I will analyze the issue of cross-cultural marriage, between Muslim female characters with someone who is culturally and religiously different, from a Western point of view. Spivak argues that those who recount the experience of the subalterns cannot fully understand what this group is going through because they are outside the group. In addition to Spivak’s theory, I will adopt Edward Said’s viewpoint of “Orientalism” in order to analyze the last point discussed in the article. According to Said, Orientalist scholars provide a distorted image of the Orient and Orientals. Orientals are presented as “inferiors” and are seen as the “others.” Therefore, I will examine to what extent is the representation of the Muslim female experience by the Western authors accurate.

**Key words** Cross-cultural marriage; Gayatri Spivak; Edward Said; Leila Aboulela; Safi Abdi; Laura Fitzgerald; Nell Freudenberg.

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### Introduction

Cross-cultural marriage has become more widespread with the increase of migration especially from third world countries to the West. This led to different encounters across cultures, religions, and races. Many writers, Arabs and Westerners, have focused on this subject in their literary works. This study will analyze four novels that revolve around cross-cultural marriage between a Muslim female character and a Western male character. Two novels are written by Muslim authors: Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999) and Safi Abdi’s *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* (2002). While the other two novels are written by Western authors: Laura Fitzgerald’s *Veil of Roses* (2007) and Nell Freudenberg’s *The Newlyweds* (2013).

The two Arab authors under study are: Leila Aboulela and Safi Abdi. Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer and the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2000. Her novel *The Translator* (1999) was longlisted for the Orange Prize and the IMPAC Dublin Award and was chosen as a “Notable Book of the Year” by The New York Times in 2006, as stated by Albashir and Alkafi (33). The novel narrates the life of a Muslim Sudanese protagonist, Sammar, who falls in love with her Scottish employer. This cross-cultural relationship is forbidden according to the Islamic law; thus, she tries to suppress her feelings, and follows her religious teachings. In addition, Safi Abdi is a Somalian writer whose novel *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* is her first published work in the year 2002. As the title suggests, a collision occurs between Anisa, a Muslim from Rako Island, and Mike, a white American who has no particular religious belongings, during their cross-cultural marriage.

As for the Western authors, Laura Fitzgerald is an American author who lives with her family in Arizona. She is an author of four novels among which *Veil*

*of Roses* was published in 2007. The novel revolves around Tamila, an Iranian protagonist who has to find a husband in America in order to stay in the country. She must find an Iranian-born husband, but her friendship with an American man grows stronger. Moreover, Nell Freudenberg is an American author who was born in New York in 1975. She won many awards and wrote several novels and short stories. *The Newlyweds* is her third novel and was published in 2013. The story revolves around a young Bengali woman who had come to the United States to marry an American man she had met on the Internet.

I have chosen these four particular novels to work on because they meet the following criteria: they all deal with a cross-cultural marriage between a Muslim female character and a Western male character. In addition, all of the four novels are written by female authors: two of them are written by Arab Muslim authors and the other two by American authors.

This paper aims to focus on the Muslim female characters in the novels. First, it aims to examine whether these female characters “have voice,” because they are considered as the least powerful group according to Gayatri Spivak. Second, it seeks to find out whether these female characters are seeking a marriage from a Westerner in order to escape their patriarchal societies. Finally, it tries to reveal how the protagonists’ experiences are recounted from the Western authors’ point of view.

### **Literature Review**

Looking through books, journals, and internet resources to find information about the novels under study reveals an inconsiderable number of resources that analyze the novels. While no study was found on the novel *The Newly Wed*, two important studies have been done on the novel *Veil of Roses*: One by Pratama using the feminist approach, and the other by Prasetyaningsih using the individual psychological approach. Concerning *The Translator*, several studies have been found on the novel such as: Smyth, “To Love the Orientalist: Masculinity in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*,” and Abulmaaty, “Alienation in Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator*,” among several others. Moreover, few studies were found on *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds*, the most important are the ones done by Nyongesa from a postcolonial approach.

The significance of this research lies in the contribution it offers to extant literature, manifested in applying Gayatri Spivak’s concept of the “subaltern” and Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” on the novels under study, which have not been analyzed yet from such viewpoints.

### Research Questions

This article aims at inspecting and answering the following research questions:

1. Do the Muslim female characters in the novels have “voice,” i.e. can they speak as they are considered as “the subalterns”?
2. Are the Muslim female characters in the novels seeking to escape their patriarchal societies by marrying Western men to save them?
3. To what extent is the representation of the Muslim female characters’ experience from a Western author’s point of view accurate?

### Theoretical Framework

Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said’s viewpoints will be used as a theoretical framework in this article. Spivak wrote her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in response to the Sati practice in which a South Asian woman, especially the Hindus, used to burn herself to death when her husband dies by sitting on top of his funeral pyre (Jain). This practice was abolished in 1987 although four cases were recorded between 2000 and 2015 (Jain). This affirms Spivak’s argument when she said: “The women actually wanted to die” (Spivak).

In her article, Spivak (90) concludes that the “subaltern women” cannot speak because they are silenced or spoken for by those who are in power; i.e. the colonizer and men. And if they do speak, they are not being heard.

Moreover, Spivak (93) in her essay argues: “The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men.’ ” This means that South Asian women are being oppressed by their husbands, fathers, or brothers; and seeking the help of white men is the only solution of escaping such oppression.

Furthermore, Ross (386) points to the fact that “the widows in the sati texts, all of which are written from a Western perspective, are portrayed as victims of an inhumane, religious, offence...” This point reflects Edward Said’s concept of the Orientalist who distorts the image of the East and Eastern people by misrepresenting them. He states: “those representations of the Orient had very little to do with what I knew about my own background in life” (Jhally 3).

### Methodology

The main theoretical issues that will be consulted to analyze the novels are: First, Spivak’s point of a “woman’s voice” will be applied to check whether the Muslim female characters are being heard or marginalized by their Eastern patriarchal

societies. In addition, Spivak's quote that states white men are saving brown women would be appropriate to investigate the goal of the cross-cultural marriage in the novels. In other words, it would be suitable to check whether the Muslim female "brown" characters are seeking to be saved by "white men." Finally, the issue of the Western misrepresentation of Eastern people will be employed in examining the extent to which the experiences of the Eastern characters as depicted by the Western authors is accurate.

A qualitative content analysis will be followed in this study in order to analyze the textual data which are derived from the utterances of the main characters in the novels. Thus, suitable data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted to answer my research questions.

### **Analysis and Findings**

Starting with the first point, concerning Spivak's viewpoint of woman's voice and being silenced by her society, it is noticed that in *The Translator* Sammar is not controlled by any patriarchal figure. Her father is not mentioned in the novel; her husband is dead; and her brother is the only male figure in her life, but she does not succumb to his opinions. For example, when her brother knows that she will quit her job in Aberdeen, he shouts: "You must never do that. Do you think jobs are lying about waiting for people to pick them up? Do you think you're going to find a job here?" (Aboulela 152). However, Sammar does not listen to her brother and insists on her resignation from her job as a translator at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland and on coming back to her home country, Sudan. Ironically, while no male authority appears in Sammar's life, it is observed that she is controlled by a female figure who is her aunt and her mother-in-law at the same time. She always interferes in Sammar's decisions, as the narrator states: "she [Sammar's aunt] was a woman who had an opinion on all things" (Aboulela 5). Sammar simply lets her aunt decide her way of life, as the narrator depicts her internal thoughts: "letting Mahasen decide what you should dress, how you should fix your hair. You were happy with that, content, waiting for the day you would take her only son away from her" (Aboulela 7). Not only is she letting her aunt decide her way of dress, but also her life's path. When Sammar had a marriage proposal after her husband's death, her aunt said: "An educated girl like you, you know English... you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage" (Aboulela 13). She added: "In the past, widows needed protection, life is different now" (Aboulela 13). Her aunt wants her to live in Aberdeen, work, and be responsible for herself and her son, and this is what Sammar had done.

While Sammar’s aunt is the female authority behind Sammar’s decisions, in Abdi’s novel, Anisa’s mother is the one behind her acts. Anisa seems obedient to her mother who decides her way of life. She opposes the opportunity offered to her daughter to travel to the United States as an exchange student, because she does not want her daughter to be lost in the Western culture. In addition, an arranged marriage was planned for Anisa at the beginning of the novel who was only fifteen years old. However, Anisa convinced her parents of her travel to the U.S. and off she flew to a new culture that opposed her own. In the beginning, she used to lie at her parents when she stopped practicing her religious teachings. She did not tell her family about her civil marriage and didn’t want her American husband, Mike, to inform them either until he converts to Islam (Abdi 123). This reflects her fear of her family and her submissive position. Living in a different culture that values individual’s choices made Anisa change and adapt to the host culture. She realized the importance of individuality and freedom of choice. She is no longer the subservient girl whose parents control her. She has her own “voice” now and can speak; she told her friend Faiza when she went back home for a visit: “I’m not the frightened Anisa they shipped off to America. I’ve learned quite a bit since, and one of the skills that I’ve picked up is how to say a simple no” (Abdi 81). Anisa simply rebels against her parents’ decisions and against her cultural customs by refusing to marry in a traditional way.

When it comes to Amina in *The Newlyweds*, the protagonist seems to be under the control of her mother too. She told Amina not to have sex with her husband-to-be until the wedding is carried out officially according to the Islamic Sharia:

She’d made Amina promise that she and George would wait to do *that* until after they’d had the ceremony at whichever Rochester mosque seemed most suitable. She had talked about the one thing Amina could lose that she would never be able to get back. (Freudenberger 29)

Amina’s father, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to be a patriarchal figure whose word must be followed. He is encouraging his daughter to marry a Western man through matchmaking websites and did not oblige her to marry a Bengali man in a traditional way (Freudenberger 13). As noticed so far, Amina has “voice” in her family, she is doing what she wants under the guidance of her mother but without being obliged on doing anything she does not like or approve of.

It is coincidental that the four authors under study employ a female figure in their novels to guide and control the female protagonists. In the *Veil of Roses*, it

is noticed too that the protagonist's eldest sister has a say in Tamila's actions and decisions as the following quote shows:

I promised my sister I would not befriend any American men,...why do you let your sister tell you what to do?...she is only looking out for me. Bullshit, she's trying to control you. We don't think that way in my culture. She is my sister and she is thinking only for me. If I have a reputation that is tarnished, it will be very difficult for me to find a husband. (Fitzgerald 122)

As it is observed from the above quote, the protagonist views her sister's control over her as care and love. She is her eldest sister and she knows better what's right for her. She convinces herself and accepts such a domination as it is obvious in this quote: "He is right. I do let Maryam push me around. But she is my older sister, and she is only looking out for me" (Fitzgerald 149).

It is worth noting here that the image of the Iranian woman is depicted in the novel as one who does not have much freedom and who cannot act as she likes. There are cultural norms and customs that she should follow and obey as it is shown in the following quote:

Nine-year-old girls in Iran do not shout gleefully on playgrounds, in public view of passerby. They do not draw attention to themselves; they do not go to school with boys. They do not swing their long red hair and expect with Ella's certainty that romantic love is in their future. And they do not, not, not sing of sitting in trees with boys, kissing, and producing babies. (Fitzgerald 2)

Not only that, but also when a woman gets married she "goes into her husband's family in a white gown and she leaves it only in a white shroud, in death. That is our culture. And that is our future, inescapable for most girls. Inescapable, it had begun to seem, even for me" (Fitzgerald 3). Looking at their future as inescapable explains the reason why Iranian women feel free when they travel abroad; "When the pilot announces we have left Iranian airspace, a cheer breaks out. Women on the flight.... yank off their headscarves and run their fingers through their hair. They have left Iran, and the future is theirs, to make of it what they will" (Fitzgerald 11). Leaving Iran and living in the United States for a while has taught Tamila how to stand for herself and "speak" in Gayatri's terms. She has the courage now to say "No" and to stop people from interfering in her life's decisions:

Yes. I want you to stop running my life...I came to America for the freedoms it offers. One of those is the freedom to disagree with those in authority.... I think I should be able to marry whomever I decide to...I am a grown and university-educated woman. I have as many brains as Ardishir or any man. And where there are decisions to be made about my future, it is I who should make them. (Fitzgerald 148)

Moving to the second point of discussion in which Spivak thinks that white men are saving brown women from brown men; it is observed that this does not apply in *The Translator*. First of all, Sammar seems to love her late husband and this is manifested in the novel through flashbacks and through her constant memories of him. She wanted to see the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike, and where she had walked every day after school to see him (Aboulela 33). She needed to speak about everything related to Tarig; his bike, his room, his singing with imaginary microphones, guitars, and drums. She stayed faithful to him after his death by following the Sharia law: “Sammar had not worn make-up or perfume since Tarig died four years earlier. Four months and ten days, was the sharia’s mourning period for a widow, the time that was for her alone...” (Aboulela 69). In addition, when Yasmin asked her if she is going to marry a non-Muslim, she answered: “Of course not, that would be against the sharia” (Aboulela 91). Sticking to her religious teachings made Sammar reject marriage to a non-Muslim Western man. In fact, she made him convert to Islam at the end of the novel in order to marry her. So, if Sammar was seeking a Western man to save her, she wouldn’t have adhered to her religious and cultural norms.

Similarly, it is observed that Anisa, in *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds*, experiences feelings of remorse for her transgression which is marrying a non-Muslim Western man. She is now conscious that faith is more important to her than her love for Mike: “I love Allah, and I love my faith. I just can’t understand why I chose you over my faith. Ya Allah, what have I done? All these years of my life, where have I been? Ya Allah! Rescue me just this once!” (Abdi 118-119) This quote is evidence that Anisa was not looking for a Western man in order to save her from her society. In fact, she couldn’t handle her husband’s non-belief practices, and thus she returned to her home country and committed herself to her religious teachings.

While Sammar and Anisa were attached to their home country and at the end of the novel they went back home, Amina in *The Newlyweds* was finding a way to escape her country and the only way for her was to find an American husband: “of course, the easiest way to come to America is to find an American and get married”



(Freudenberger 25). In fact, Amina is interested in traveling abroad not for the sake of saving herself from her society, but rather to save her parents from poverty. In fact, her parents are encouraging her to become legally married to an American man. They are using their daughter as a way out to go to America. Her father said: “why should we spend so much money here in Dhaka when we are only waiting to come to America?” (Freudenberger 108). He is dreaming that once his daughter marries an American, she can get the green card that enables her to sponsor her parents:

Only once she was married could she get the green card, and only once she had the green card could she apply for her citizenship. As a citizen, her father knew, she could sponsor her parents, and in his mind the sponsorship was the only thing keeping him and her mother from making the journey to America. (Freudenberger 41)

In addition, another reason that makes Amina seeks a Western husband is the fact that Bengali men view their women as incompetent, weak, and do not listen to their wives. This is what Amina admitted in the following quote:

Fariq took the phone without asking and redialed the number, as if her difficulty might be the result of general female incompetence. She reminded herself that this characteristic in Bengali men was one of the things she’d left the country to escape... (Freudenberger 214- 215)..... And I bet he listens to you-not like Bengali husbands. (Freudenberger 238)

When it comes to Tamila, in *Veil of Roses*, it is observed that the main purpose of escaping her country, Iran, and finding a husband in America is that she is looking for the freedom and joy which her country has denied her as she admits in the following quote: “I must find a husband who will sponsor my application for residency... being married is a small price to pay if it means I can stay in the Land of Opportunities and raise my children, my daughters, in the freedom that would be denied them in Iran” (Fitzgerald 14).

Moreover, freedom is not the sole thing that Tamila is looking for in America; in fact, she is seeking a husband who respects his wife and is interested in her as a person, not just viewing her as a bearer of his children: “We’re not in Iran, Masoud. This is why I left Iran. Because of men like you” (Fitzgerald 279).

Moving to the third point of discussion which concerns the extent to which the representation of the Muslim female experiences by Western authors is accurate, it

is noticed that there are a lot of utterances in *The Newlyweds* that reflect prejudiced ideas about Eastern countries and Eastern women as manifested in the following quote: “She asks that because you’re from someplace else, George had said. She sees brown skin and all she can think of is housecleaning or baby-sitting” (Freudenberger 7). Western characters in the novel think that all Eastern women are housemaids, preserved, and ugly. “Eileen and Jessica hadn’t really heard what she was saying, because they’d been so surprised to hear that there were beauty shops in Bangladesh at all” (Freudenberger 21). They thought that Bengali women are always covered under their chador and don’t take care of their beauty. “ ‘But what about the women who cover their hair?’ Eileen had asked, and Amina said she guessed that even those women enjoyed looking nice underneath the chador” (Freudenberger 21).

Not only do Western characters in the novel have a preconceived idea about Muslim women, but also about Islam. They see it as a religion that embraces many terrorists:

She hadn’t yet encountered anyone who blamed her for the September 11 attacks because she was a Muslim or because she came from a country that had once been part of Pakistan, but this was a misperception she’d anticipated and been prepared to correct. (Freudenberger 114)

Even Amina’s husband thinks of Islam as the “other” religion despite the fact that he is going to convert to it in order to marry her. “She always felt slightly offended when George referred to Islam as ‘her religion,’ ..... as if her faith were a wild animal whose behavior couldn’t be reliably predicted” (Freudenberger 69).

Moreover, it is noticed that the Western characters haven’t heard of the country Bangladesh at all, and they don’t even know where it is located: “It was possible that this person couldn’t spell “Bangladesh” or, like Lisa, had never even heard of it” (Freudenberger 66). Amina explained to them that “Bangladesh is not the Middle East....It is in South Asia” (Freudenberger 114). All the above mentioned evidence from the novel reflect Edward Said’s concept of the Orientalist who distorts the image of the East and Eastern people by misrepresenting them. Not all Bengali women remain hidden under their chador and don’t care about their beauty and not all of them are housewives. A lot of women have proven that they have a respected social status and rank in society. Many of them have become writers in addition to their work in other fields. Also, not all Muslims are terrorists, many of them are respectful members living in Western societies and following the rules of the host

society.

The same preconceived ideas about Eastern countries are repeated in the *Veil of Roses*, where the author depicts the image of Iran through the characters who think that Iran is a bad and oppressive country especially for women as depicted in the following quote: “What is I-ran like? Is it as bad as the news says it is?...it is not so good for womens” (Fitzgerald 58). The author also employs the protagonist herself to portray the image of Iranian women as oppressed, veiled, and subordinate. Tamila expresses her wish “to open a school for girls. I would teach them to think for themselves... they do not need to veil themselves from the world.... I would teach them it is okay for girls and boys to be friends” (Fitzgerald 74).

Moreover, the author uses offensive terms to describe hijab and Iranian customs. For example, Tamila said that she would gladly wear that “stupid” hijab forever if she could look at men in the eye without being afraid of her world coming to an end. In addition, one of the Western characters thinks that it is “stupid” to have direct official relationships with men without dating them (Fitzgerald 81), and this goes against Islamic Shariah.

In short, all of the above mentioned quotes in the two novels that are written by Western authors prove that there is a preconceived idea about Eastern countries and Eastern women that matches Said’s viewpoint of the Orientalist.

### **Conclusion**

This study has explored the subject of women’s “voice” in four novels: Leila Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999), Safi Abdi’s *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* (2002), Laura Fitzgerald’s *Veil of Roses* (2007), and Nell Freudenberg’s *The Newlyweds* (2013). Results show that: first, the female characters in the four novels “have voice” although they are controlled by a female authority whether she is their mother, aunt, or sister. However, Tamila, in the *Veil of Roses*, seems to be oppressed by her Iranian society and is deprived of freedom. Second, the Muslim female characters, Sammar and Anisa, did not marry a Western man in order to escape their patriarchal societies, because they were committed to their Islamic teachings and went back to their home country at the end of the novels. In contrast, Amina and Tamila sought American men to save them from poverty and to provide them the freedom they were missing in their countries. Third, the representation of the Muslim female characters’ experiences by Western authors is not accurate as there are several preconceived and prejudiced ideas in the two novels by the Western authors that do not apply on Muslim women in general.

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