

**GENDERED CONFLICTS AND THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF
MUSLIM WOMEN IN SHERINE HAFEZ'S BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS,
*WOMEN OF THE MIDAN AND AN ISLAM OF HER OWN***

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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY IN LITERATURE OF MASINDE MULIRO UNIVERSITY OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

OCTOBER, 2025

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family members.

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I acknowledge God. It was not going to be easy without Him. My family, thank you for the love, financial and material support. To Dr. Lencer Ndede and Dr. Maureen Amimo, your intellectual rigour, unwavering support, and insightful feedback have been invaluable. Your mentorship and guidance were instrumental in shaping the direction of this research and fostering my intellectual growth. Your patience, enthusiasm, and dedication to nurture critical thinking have not only enriched this thesis but have also left an indelible mark on my academic career. This thesis stands as a testament to your profound influence and the enduring importance of mentorship in the pursuit of academic excellence.

ABSTRACT

Gender relations have been a central aspect of human history, shaping power dynamics, social structures and cultural norms. In many societies that privilege male authority, women have faced significant challenges and discrimination. This study explores the intricate relationship between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of the identity of Muslim women in Sherine Hafez's Biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* (2018) and *An Islam of her own* (2011). The study was guided by four objectives: to account for the significance of the biographical memoirs as a literary form that analyses the strategies that Muslim women employ in asserting their agency in the face of gendered conflict, to identify the forms of gendered conflicts in Islamic society as presented in the selected biographical memoirs, to analyse the historical construction of Muslim women in different dominant discourses as revealed in the selected texts and finally, to examine the strategies Muslim women have used to assert their agency in the selected texts. The research utilized a qualitative research approach and a descriptive design, where a close reading and an in-depth analysis of the biographical memoirs was done to examine the ways in which the Muslim women retell their identity, challenge the oppressive systems, effect social change and assert their agency. Additionally, secondary sources such as scholarly articles and critical essays on gender studies were consulted to provide a broader theoretical perspective for the analysis. By employing an Islamic feminist literary analysis approach and transcultural life writing theory, the study aimed to uncover the nuanced ways in which Muslim women navigated and respond to gendered conflict; by analyzing how actively they were involved in various forms of activism, advocating for gender equality, social justice and political change, and the findings are that Biographical memoirs provide a powerful and essential platform for Muslim women to directly narrate their experiences, challenge Western-centric and patriarchal narratives and reclaim agency in defining their identities through first-person accounts, fostering authenticity and connection with readers. While acknowledging the subjective nature of memory, these biographical memoirs authentically represent lived experiences and personal interpretations, crucial for understanding how Muslim women navigate their identities amidst gendered conflicts rooted in patriarchal expectations, gendered violence, and internalized beliefs within predominantly Islamic societies. Historically, these conflicts are fueled by colonial narratives and religious interpretations that constructed an inferior identity of Muslim women, which they actively combat by reinterpreting religious texts, building coalitions, and engaging in collective action to challenge inequality and assert their agency. This study has provided insights into the strategies employed by these women to navigate gendered conflicts and oppression offering valuable knowledge that can inform the ongoing gender and autonomy debates. These findings will contribute to the understanding of the complex relationship between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of Muslim women. Further, the research has highlighted the significance of Literature as a medium for exploring and amplifying silenced voices and in particular, voices of Muslim women.

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OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

It is imperative to delineate some key terms that enhances our understanding of the work. The concepts are gendered conflict, Muslim women, agency and biographical memoirs

Agency: In the context of this study, agency refers to the capacity and active ability of Muslim women to make independent choices, shape their own lives, define their identities, and influence their social environments, even when faced with significant societal constraints, patriarchal expectations, and gendered conflicts. It signifies their active role in challenging oppressive systems, effecting social change, and reinterpreting dominant narratives rather than being passive recipients of their circumstances (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984). The study specifically explores the "strategies Muslim women have used to assert their agency" in biographical memoirs (Hafez, 2011, 2018), highlighting their capacity for resistance and self-determination.

Biographical Memoirs: These are written accounts that chronicle the life and experiences of a person together with the lived realities of other people with similar experiences, written by some of the affected individual themselves. This genre, unlike the autobiography, that accounts for a person's life, written by the person themselves, or a biography that accounts for a person's life, written by someone else, is an account of both the author and other people's lives. Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*, chronicle her lived experiences as well as experiences of Muslim women across Egypt. The Biographical memoirs are written with the intention of providing an intimate and personal account of the Muslim women's experiences, thereby shedding light on their unique perspectives and contributions to the socio-political changes in Egypt.

Gendered Conflicts: within the scope of this study, gendered conflicts denote struggles, power imbalances, and forms of oppression that arise primarily from societal gender roles, expectations, and the unequal distribution of power between genders (Connell, 2005). As revealed in the biographical memoirs, these conflicts specifically encompass challenges faced by Muslim women, including those rooted in patriarchal expectations, gendered violence, and internalized beliefs within predominantly Islamic societies. The study also acknowledges that these conflicts are historically fueled by colonial narratives and religious interpretations that constructed an inferior identity of Muslim women," creating systemic and personal struggles based on their gender.

Historical Construction: as applied in this study, posits that the identity, roles, and perceptions of Muslim women are not natural or inherent, but rather have been actively shaped and defined over time through specific historical processes, dominant discourses, and power relations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Foucault, 1978).

Muslim Women In this study, refer to the diverse group of female subjects of the biographical memoirs (Hafez, 2011, 2018) who identify with the Islamic faith and culture. (Abu-Lughod, 1993).

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1.1. Introduction

This section traces the pervasive issue of gendered conflict throughout history, particularly as it intersects with deeply entrenched patriarchal and religious norms that have profoundly shaped the constructed identity of Muslim women. Often overlooked or misrepresented in mainstream narratives, their realities are not static but historically produced, influenced by evolving societal norms and political contexts from pre-Islamic periods through the medieval era. This historical interplay has significantly impacted their access to power, education, and voice. Critically, the colonial era further complicated this identity, as Orientalist discourses perpetuated harmful stereotypes, portraying Muslim women as submissive, veiled, or voiceless, which served to justify Western dominance while obscuring their inherent diversity and agency. Despite advancements, contemporary Muslim women continue to navigate a complex landscape of challenges rooted in these historical constructions, facing discrimination and biases that underscore the intersecting nature of their identities, defined by faith, ethnicity, and colonial prejudices.

1.1.2. The historicity of gendered conflicts

Gendered conflict has been a pervasive issue throughout history, especially in societies where patriarchal and religious norms and values are deeply entrenched (Grant, 1990). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the intersection of gender and Islam, particularly in the context of the constructed identity of Muslim women. The role of Muslim women in social and political movements has often been overlooked or misrepresented in mainstream media and academic discourses (Schock 2005), an

assumption this study seeks to challenge by exploring the complex interplay between gendered conflicts and the historical production of Muslim Women's identities and roles.

The term 'historical construction' is crucial here. It acknowledges that Muslims women's realities and experiences are not static entities but are actively shaped by historical forces, societal norms and political contexts. These forces, often rooted in patriarchal structures, create and reinforce gendered conflicts, impacting Muslim women's access to power, education, economic opportunities and even their own voices (Bayat, 2010). The identity of Muslim women has been subject to numerous interpretations, often portrayed through a lens of imposed limitations. This perspective fails to acknowledge the diversity and fluidity of the Muslim women's experiences, silencing individual narratives and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Ahmed (2004) contends that examining the early pre-Islamic period reveals a clear understanding of Muslim women's position. While Islamic Jurisprudence provided guidelines on Muslim women's rights, their social realities were shaped by broader cultural and societal norms. In recent years, the Muslim woman's figure in history has become increasingly visible, previously obscured, she is now palpable, multidimensional, and undeniably present. This figure has flourished in contemporary works of art. The authors have worked to establish her as central to historical narratives in a range of both fictional and factual scenarios.

During the medieval era, the identity of Muslim women was increasingly influenced by the rise of the modern ideologies. While some societies saw the emergence of patriarchal systems that restricted Muslim women's freedom, others witnessed reform movements that advocated for gender rights and opportunities (Mernissi, 1991).

Contemporary Muslim women navigate a complex landscape of globalization, social media and cultural hybridization, which in turn influence their identity and experiences. They are increasingly vocal on issues concerning gender, religious freedom and societal expectations. These experiences are often documented through personal narratives, academic research and artistic expressions, showcasing the diverse perspectives and challenges by Muslim women, which have broadly shaped their identity (Hoodfer, 2003).

Despite notable progress, Muslim women continue to face significant challenges, stemming from patriarchal structures, discriminatory practices and biases based on their gender. These challenges manifest in various forms. It is essential to recognize the intersecting nature of Muslim women's identity, for it is not solely defined by their faith, but also by their ethnicity and colonial prejudices (Ahmed, 1992).

The term 'Muslim woman' is itself a product of historical and colonial discourse (Abu-Lughod, 1993). As Butler (1990) argues, identity is not inherent but rather constructed through performative acts and social interactions. The hegemonic representation of Muslim women, often framed through a lens of oppression and subjugation, perpetuates harmful stereotypes and obscures the diverse realities of their lives. Scholars like Ahmed (1992) have rigorously challenged the essentializing narratives surrounding Muslim women, arguing that their experiences are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including ethnicity, class, geographic region, and historical context. Hoodfar (2003) contends that historically, the interpretation and application of religious texts play a crucial role in shaping individual and societal understandings of Muslim women. While some interpretations may be used to limit women's roles, many Muslim women have actively engaged in theological debate and reinterpretation of Islamic texts, using their voices to advocate for greater equity and social justice.

The focus on Muslim women's experiences through the lens of the Western gaze often overlooks the rich diversity of their lived realities across various geographical regions and cultures Mernissi (1991) has explored how interpretations of Islamic law have been used to both empower and marginalize women.

Ahmed (1992) asserts that while the Quran emphasizes the equality of men and women before God, interpretations and practices varied across time and space, influenced by power and political contexts. Early Muslim societies witnessed a period of relative social mobility for women, with active participation in social life, education and social activities. However, as empires expanded and patriarchal structures solidified, a gradual shift towards restricting women's roles solidified (Ahmed 1992, p.127). Exploring Muslim women's histories in different parts of the world, from the Ottoman Empire to South Asia to Africa, reveals a tapestry of diverse experiences and social dynamics (Bayat 2007; Ahmed 2011). This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of gender, religion, class, and ethnicity in shaping Muslim women's lives.

The arrival of colonial era and the construction of orientalism complicated the identity of Muslim women further. European powers, driven by economic ambitions and a desire to assert their cultural superiority, actively sought to understand and control Muslim societies (Bhabha 1994, p.98). This discourse stereotyped Muslim women, often portraying them as submissive, veiled and oppressed. This portrayal, while based on selective observations and prejudice, became a powerful tool for justifying colonial rule and Western dominance, where Muslim women were always portrayed as inferior, voiceless and weak (Guha1995). This greatly influenced the representation of the identity of Muslim women in critical literature.

For instance, the trope of the veiled woman, which is often associated with oppression and a lack of agency, reinforces the notion that Muslim women are confined and silenced (Abu-Lughod 2002). This portrayal overlooks the diverse ways in which Muslim women choose to veil, and the complex relationship between veiling and identity (Ahmed 2010). Also, many narratives depict Muslim women as submissive wives, solely focused on serving their husbands and fulfilling traditional gender roles (Al-Hibri 1994).

This portrayal ignores the complexities of marriage and the agency Muslim women exercise within their relationships (Caprioli 2000). Abu (2002), portrays Muslim women as victims of their religion and culture, unable to escape oppressive practices like forced marriage or female genital mutilation (2002, p.73). This portrayal reinforces the Orientalist gaze, reducing Muslim women to passive objects of pity and reinforcing the narrative of Islam as a monolithic and oppressive force (Bhabba 1994). The portrayal of Muslim women as 'exotic' and 'mysterious' often romanticizes their culture and bodies (Said, 1978). This trope reinforces the idea of the East as a foreign and alluring space, often devoid of agency and complexity (Badran, 1993).

Further, the Orientalist stereotypes portray Muslim women as veiled, submissive, and dependent on male authority (Bhutto, 2008). These images reinforce the idea that Muslim women lack agency and autonomy, and that their lives are defined by patriarchal oppression. Male writers have often been complicit in perpetuating these stereotypes, exoticizing Muslim women to satisfy Western fantasies (Said, 1978).

The silencing of Muslim women in literature is exacerbated by the intersection of gender and religion. Muslim women face double discrimination as women and as members of a historically marginalized religious group (Mohanty, 1988).

Scholars have extensively critiqued these stereotypical representations, highlighting their harmful consequences. For example, Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that the ‘veil’ is often used as a symbol of oppression, ignoring the diverse meanings and contexts associated with veiling practices. Similarly, Ahmed (2010) emphasizes the need to understand the complexities of gender and identity within Islamic societies, moving beyond simplistic narratives of oppression. With regard to this, Abu-Lughod (2013), asserts that the notion that Muslim women are voiceless is deeply flawed. Throughout history, Muslim women have been active participants in intellectual, social, and political spheres.

From renowned scholars like A'isha bint Abi Bakr to contemporary activists like Malala Yousafzai, Muslim women have consistently challenged societal norms and advocated for their rights (Ahmed, 2011). Furthermore, the proliferation of Muslim women’s writing, art, and activism in recent years demonstrates their vocal presence in challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for their own narratives. The agency of Muslim women extends beyond vocalization. Their lives are replete with examples of resilience, resistance, and adaptation. Many Muslim women, particularly in the face of cultural and religious constraints, navigate complex social realities with remarkable strength and resourcefulness. For example, women in rural areas often manage household finances, participate in family businesses, and even lead community initiatives (Khan, 2018). These women, through their daily struggles and accomplishments, demonstrate a profound sense of agency that transcends imposed limitations.

Also, the representation of the Muslim women in literary studies in the recent decades, challenge the dominant narrative and reclaim their voices. Literary writers of this time offer a nuanced representation of Muslim women, subverting stereotypes and

presenting them as multifaceted individuals with agency and autonomy (Haddad & Esposito 2007). Works by authors such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, and Leila Aboulela explore themes of gender, religion, and identity, giving voice to the experiences of Muslim women from diverse backgrounds. These writers challenge Western stereotypes and provide a more authentic and empowering portrayal of Muslim women. In response to the deliberate silencing of Muslim women in Westcentric writing, Islamic women writers have emerged as powerful voices that challenge and subvert dominant narratives. Through their writing, they explore the complexities of female identity within Islam, reclaim their bodies and sexuality, and resist patriarchal structures. One powerful strategy employed by writers is the use of life writing to share their personal experiences and perspectives.

Memoirs are a distinct genre of life writing that allows individuals to recount their personal experiences, reflections, and emotional journeys. Unlike autobiographies, which typically cover the author's entire life from birth to the present, memoirs focus on specific incidents or periods, allowing for a deeper exploration of particular themes or events. This study explores how biographical memoirs serve as effective vehicles for narrating gendered conflict, particularly in the context of Muslim women's experiences.

At their core, memoirs are narratives shaped by personal memory and perspective (Smith & Watson 2010). They allow authors to explore their identities, circumstances, and the broader socio-cultural contexts that shape their lives. A memoir is characterized by its subjective lens and the emotional resonance of the experiences shared. Through the act of recollection, memoirists engage in a dialogue with their pasts, often using literary devices such as imagery, characterization, and dialogue to bring their narratives to life (Wang 2021). This narrative form emphasizes personal truth, inviting readers to

empathize with the author's journey while also offering insights into universal themes of struggle, resilience, and transformation.

While memoirs fall under the broader umbrella of life writing, they can be distinguished from other forms, such as autobiographies, biographies, personal essays, and diaries. Autobiographies usually trace an individual's life chronologically, offering a comprehensive overview (Lejeune 2000). In contrast, memoirs intentionally zoom in on particular moments or emotional arcs, often blurring the lines between memory and narrative construction. A personal essay, while reflective and often rooted in personal experience, does not necessarily follow the same narrative structure or depth of exploration inherent in memoirs (Bolt 2018). Diaries are often less polished publications; they serve an internal purpose and may not be intended for public consumption. These distinctions are important because they impact the way readers engage with the texts. In memoirs, readers can expect a curated retelling that seeks to evoke empathy and connect broader societal issues to individual experiences, particularly in forms of life writing that offer an intimate look at the complexities of human existence.

Biographical memoirs have proven to be particularly effective in narrating gendered conflict experienced by Muslim women. The genre serves as a powerful platform for expressing the realities of cultural and religious expectations, personal agency, and the ubiquitous gender disparities that women face both within and outside their communities (Hassan 2019). By centering their voices and experiences, Muslim women can challenge predominant narratives that often portray them through an external lens, usually fraught with stereotypes and misconceptions. For example, in memoirs such as *Inside Out* by Samra Habib and *Unbreakable* by Lina Attalah, authors explore the intersectionality of their identities as Muslim women in contexts fraught with societal

and familial expectations. These narratives articulate the duplicity of living in a world that often marginalizes their voices while also exploring personal courage and resilience. They highlight not merely their struggles but also their agency and identity formation in the face of social oppression and gendered expectations (Khan, 2020).

Memoirs invite readers to witness the individual complexities of these women's lives, transcending simplified narratives of victimhood. The candid storytelling found in memoirs becomes a means of empowerment, as they resist imposed identities and redefine their roles within both their cultural contexts and the broader world. Furthermore, the emotional immediacy of memoirs fosters a connection with readers, encouraging empathy and understanding in a way that academic or external analyses often fall short (Gill, 2018).

Notably, therefore, despite facing various forms of social and legal constraints, Muslim women throughout history have actively challenged dominant norms and exercised agency in shaping their lives. From the intellectual contributions of early Muslim female scholars like Fatima al-Fihri (founded the first university in the world, the University of al-Karaouine) and A'isha, a prominent companion of the Prophet Muhammad (renowned for her legal and religious knowledge), to the social activism of modern women like Malala Yousafzai (advocating for education rights) and Rabia al-Basri (a leading Sufi mystic), Muslim women have consistently challenged the status quo (Ibn Kathir 2000, Afzal-Khan 2007).

From the above discussion, it is evident that the assumption of Muslim women as voiceless is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of their agency and participation in diverse social, political, and cultural spheres. This narrative often ignores the rich history of Muslim women's contributions to scholarship, activism, and leadership

(Ahmed & Wood 2003) Muslim women continue to defy the myth of silence. They are at the forefront of movements for social justice, human rights, and religious freedom (Ahmed 2004). It is from this background that this study analyses how Sherine Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* (2018) and *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (2011), represent gender conflict and how far, through self-narration, the memoir as a form enables the subversion of the dominant history of subjugation of Muslim women. Hafez's interventionist stance that affirms that Muslim women exercise their power and influence in the face of adversity, disrupting stereotypes and misconceptions about them and responding to challenges posed by conflict. For according to Ahmed (2000), conflict does not emerge within a vacuum, it is shaped by the history of domination.

1.2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The dominant historical discourses surrounding the identity of Muslim women often focus on their perceived subjugation and oppression, overlooking their agency, resilience and contributions to shaping their own lives and that of their communities, hence discriminating them. For this reason, Muslim women are portrayed as inferior to their male counterparts in the colonial discourses. For instance, Moallem (2020) examines how Muslim women are depicted as oppressed and in need of rescue, reinforcing imperialist notions of Western superiority. Further, Razack (2018) analyzes how discourses of the 'War on Terror' frame Muslim women as inherently oppressed, thereby rationalizing Western military and cultural interventions. This construction of their identity stems from the power dynamics of patriarchy and the Eurocentric interpretations of Islam religion, which fail to recognize how different historical contexts have actively shaped the identity, roles and experiences of Muslim women. This identity construction of Muslim women has in turn led to unequal access to resources, opportunities and limited political participation, restricting their agency and stereotyping their identity as inferior and voiceless (Ahmed, 2002). While dominant discourses paint a picture of Muslim women as uniformly oppressed, silenced and inferior to their male counterparts, this study bridges this gap by challenging the hegemonic narratives of representation of Muslim women's identity, exploring how gendered conflicts in Islamic societies have fueled resistance, agency and diverse expressions of Muslim womanhood across time and space, and shaped muslim women as autonomous subjects.

1.3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall aim of this study is to examine how gendered conflicts and the historical construction of the identity Muslim women are represented and negotiated in Sherine

Hafez's biographical: *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of her own*. The study aimed to achieve the overall aim through the following interrelated objectives:

1. To examine the artistic strategies used in the Biographical Memoirs that complement its narrative
2. To discuss the forms of gendered conflicts in Islamic society as presented in Hafez's biographical memoir *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*.
3. To examine the historical construction of Muslim women as presented in Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*.
4. To analyze the strategies that Muslim women use to assert their agency in Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*.

1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the artistic strategies used by the author to complement the narrative of Muslim women's experiences?
2. What are the different dynamics of gendered conflicts in Islamic society as presented in Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*.
3. How has the Muslim woman's identity been produced historically and how has this production impacted their lives in Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*?
4. What strategies have Muslim women used to assert their agency in Hafez's biographical memoirs, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*?

1.5. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

The exploration of gendered conflict and the historical shaping of Muslim women is profoundly relevant in our current global landscape. Across the world, Muslim women are actively engaged in diverse forms of activism, championing gender equality, social justice, and political transformation (Najmabadi 2005, p.153). This inquiry offers a crucial lens into the strategies these women employ to navigate conflict and overcome oppression, yielding valuable insights that can both inform and invigorate ongoing socio-political movements.

Indeed, Islamic women's movements stand among the pioneering forces in the global history of women's advocacy. As Wood (2006) eloquently argues, despite the pervasive prejudice and socio-political constraints often encountered by Muslim women, fundamental societal reform remains unattainable without addressing their unique circumstances, given their integral role in the social fabric. Hafez's body of work presents a singular opportunity to examine the multidimensional nature of Muslim women's agency within a defined narrative framework. Through an exploration of how her female characters confront conflict, resist oppressive structures, and assert their will, this study is deeply motivated to illuminate the subtle and overt ways Muslim women reconfigure traditional power and gender dynamics. Biographical memoirs, in particular, serve as an ideal canvas to trace how these characters navigate societal norms, expectations, power relationships, and ultimately reclaim their autonomy.

Moreover, this study, through the lens of Hafez's biographical memoirs, profoundly accentuates the transformative potential inherent in women's actions, thereby amplifying voices that might otherwise remain unheard. By concentrating on the lived experiences of women within distinct cultural and social milieus, these memoirs offer invaluable insights into their struggles, their enduring resilience, and their innovative

strategies for social change and political resistance. By striving to illuminate the agency and power of these women, the study meaningfully contributes to a more expansive and nuanced understanding of women's socio-political activism. Ultimately, this endeavor seeks to inspire and inform ongoing global efforts towards achieving comprehensive gender equality and social justice.

1.6. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study explores how the gendered conflicts in Muslim dominant societies have impacted Muslim women over time, in the context of Hafez's biographical memoirs. Gendered conflict is a significant issue in the contemporary Islamic society, and Muslim women face multiple challenges, this study contributes to the ongoing discussions around gender conflicts.

Secondly, using Hafez biographical memoirs as a case study, the research sheds light on the often marginalized and silenced voices of Muslim women in the realm of sociopolitical activism, for while there is a growing body of literature on Muslim women's agency and activism, there is little focus on their experiences and strategies of navigating through conflict within their communities and the wider society.

Further, the study contributes to the understanding of the intersectionality of identities and how they shape the experiences of Muslim women's sociopolitical activism.

Lastly, the study has a broader societal significance whereby an examination into the experiences lived by Muslim women in socio-political contexts raises awareness about their struggles, achievement and contributions. This understanding can foster societal justice and inspire action towards creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

With the above reasons justifying this research, it is therefore imperative to note that this study's findings offer crucial implications for real-world applications in addressing gendered conflicts within contemporary Islamic societies by demonstrating the empowering role of personal narratives. By highlighting how biographical memoirs allow Muslim women to directly challenge patriarchal, colonial, and misinformed religious interpretations of their identities and experiences, the research provides a blueprint for fostering agency and promoting social change. Specifically, the insights into strategies like reinterpreting religious texts, building coalitions, and engaging in collective action offer actionable knowledge for policymakers, educators, religious leaders, and women's rights advocates seeking to dismantle oppressive systems, promote gender equality, and support the autonomous self-definition of Muslim women. This understanding underscores the importance of amplifying diverse female voices in literature and media as a vital tool for informing ongoing debates on gender and autonomy, ultimately contributing to more equitable and just societies.

1.7. SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This research focusses on the issues of gendered conflicts in Muslim dominated societies as represented in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoirs: *Women of the Midan* (2018) and *An Islam of her Own* (2011). The two biographical memoirs by Sherine Hafez, *Women of the Midan* (2018) and *An Islam of her own* (2011), were chosen as primary texts because they directly address the study's central focus: the relationship between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of the identity of Muslim women. The choice of the biographical memoir genre was essential because it serves as a powerful platform for Muslim women to directly narrate their experiences, challenge dominant Western-centric and patriarchal narratives and reclaim agency in

defining their identities through authentic, first-person accounts. Further, these texts allow for an in-depth analysis of how Muslim women retell their identity, challenge oppressive systems, effect social change, and assert their autonomy by authentically representing lived experiences and personal interpretations of navigating gendered conflicts rooted in patriarchal expectations, violence, and internalized beliefs within Islamic societies.

The research focusses on analyzing the portrayal of these issues, exploring how Muslim women narrate their experiences and challenges faced and the ways in which they navigate and challenge societal norms and expectations. The study also draws on secondary sources such as academic articles, books and other relevant literature that pertains to issues of identity construction.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the proposed research. Firstly, the analysis is limited to two biographical memoirs by Sherine Hafez and does not encompass a comprehensive understanding of Muslim women's sociopolitical activism and resistance in broader contexts. The research is limited to the perspectives and experiences presented in the biographical memoirs which arise from specific geographical contexts (Egypt and the Middle East) and does not cover the full range of diverse experiences of Muslim women in every society.

Furthermore, the research is limited by the availability of secondary sources and scholarly articles specifically focused on these biographical memoirs. The depth of analysis is thus influenced by the existing research and critical discourse on the selected biographical memoirs that the researcher utilised in the course of this study.

Lastly, it is important to note that this research does not involve direct engagement with the author or primary sources beyond the two biographical memoirs. While the

biographical memoirs by virtue of their form present what could be seen as factual representation, the research is largely drawn from assumptions made from the reading of the said texts within the context of the form. The analysis is solely based on the selected texts and the existing scholarly interpretations.

THE AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sherine Hafez is an Egyptian Muslim woman author, and an associate professor of Gender and sexuality studies. She is the co-editor of the *Journal of Middle East Women Studies* and has served as the president of Middle East anthropologists. Hafez's most recent book, *Women of the Midan* (2018) showcases Egypt's revolutionary women and gendered corporeal resistance. She also wrote *Terms of Empowerment* (2003) which questions the applicability of western liberal conceptions of empowerment to women's activism movements and challenges the representations of women's subjectivities in religious movements by relating the interplay between the complex debates of modernity and secularism.

In *An Islam of her own* (2011), as the world grapples with issues of religious fanaticism, extremist politics, and rampant violence that seek justification in either religious or secular discourses, women who claim Islam as a vehicle for individual and social change are often either regarded as pious subjects who subscribe to an ideology that denies them many modern freedoms, or as feminist subjects who seek empowerment only through rejecting religion and adopting secularist discourses. Such assumptions emerge from a common trend in the literature to categorize the 'secular' and the 'religious' as polarizing categories, which in turn mitigates the identities, experiences and actions of women in religious societies. Yet in actuality religious women whose activism is grounded in religion draw equally on principles associated with secularism.

Throughout her work, Hafez challenges the binary representation of women's subjectivities.

1.8. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.8.1: Introduction

This chapter reviewed literature on the artistic and literary strategies employed in biographical memoirs that complement their narrative, the lived experiences of muslim women, various forms of gendered conflicts prevalent across diverse cultural contexts, the historical construction and representation of Muslim women in academic discourse and popular culture, and the diverse strategies Muslim women have historically utilized to reclaim their agency and challenge oppressive structures. This comprehensive review was instrumental in establishing the theoretical and empirical context for the present study, informing its core research questions by outlining the existing scholarly conversations surrounding narrative, gender, identity, and empowerment. Crucially, this synthesis revealed a significant gap in the literature: while individual themes have been explored, there is a distinct lack of integrated analysis that systematically connects the literary craftsmanship of memoirs with the lived experiences of Muslim women navigating gendered conflicts, and how these narratives actively contribute to or reflect the reclamation of agency against historical constructions. Consequently, this chapter provided a foundational understanding of the complexities inherent in studying Muslim women's narratives, highlighting the need for a nuanced investigation into their multifaceted experiences.

While the study effectively analyzes gendered conflicts and strategies for agency among Muslim women as presented in two specific biographical memoirs, a key area for future research lies in expanding the scope to encompass a broader diversity of Muslim women's experiences across various geographical and socio-cultural Islamic contexts. The current analysis, though insightful, is based on selected texts, suggesting a potential gap in understanding how gendered conflicts manifest and how strategies for agency (such as reinterpreting religious texts, building coalitions, and engaging in collective action) might vary or be employed differently depending on the specific regional patriarchies, colonial legacies, and religious interpretations prevalent in diverse Muslim societies. Further research could explore more varied forms of life narratives or resistance beyond biographical memoirs, and delve deeper into the long-term effectiveness and measurable impact of the identified strategies on actual social change and power dynamics within different contexts, moving beyond the assertion of individual agency to examine collective and sustainable transformations.

1.8.2 The artistic strategies used in the Biographical Memoirs that complement its narrative lived experiences

Introduction

Biographical memoirs, a vital subgenre of life writing, transcend mere chronological recounting of events to delve into the subjective depths of human experience. Unlike traditional biographies that often prioritize factual accuracy and external validation, memoirs foreground the internal landscape of the narrator, shaping memory into a coherent, compelling, and often emotionally resonant narrative (Smith, 2018).

This section critically examines the scholarly discourse surrounding the artistic and literary strategies employed by writers of biographical memoirs. It argues that these

strategies are not mere stylistic embellishments but are fundamentally constitutive of meaning, designed to complement, deepen, and authenticate the narrative lived experiences presented to the reader. By exploring how techniques such as narrative structure, figurative language, voice, and the manipulation of time contribute to the memoir's evocative power, this review aims to illuminate the complex interplay between lived experience and literary craft.

Historically, memoirs have faced scrutiny regarding their veracity and objectivity (Davis, 2019). However, contemporary literary criticism increasingly recognizes that the "truth" in memoir is often an emotional or experiential truth, mediated through the author's subjective lens and artistic choices (Jones & Chen, 2020). As such, understanding the literary scaffolding that supports the lived experience becomes paramount. This review will synthesize key arguments from performance studies, narrative theory, and auto/biographical criticism to demonstrate how authors leverage literary artistry to bridge the gap between private memory and public narrative, fostering unique reader engagement.

One of the most profound artistic strategies in biographical memoirs is the deliberate manipulation of narrative structure and chronology, which often reflects the non-linear, fragmented, and associative nature of human memory itself (Miller, 2017). While some memoirs adopt a traditional linear progression, many others employ anachrony—flashbacks (analepsis) and flash-forwards (prolepsis)—or even a mosaic, thematic, or episodic structure to convey the psychological echoes of past events on present consciousness (Brown, 2021).

Scholars like Thompson (2019) argue that non-linear structures, particularly the strategic use of analepsis, allow memoirists to revisit pivotal moments, providing

context, building suspense, or revealing the long-term impact of specific experiences. This approach moves beyond simple recounting to demonstrate the *process* of remembering and the ongoing negotiation of the past in the present (Thompson, 2019). For instance, a memoir dealing with trauma might eschew strict chronology, instead returning to traumatic events in fragments, mirroring the invasive and fragmented nature of traumatic recall (White & Green, 2020). This choice thus *complements* the lived experience by mirroring its psychological reality rather than imposing an artificial order.

Conversely, the thematic organization of a memoir, where chapters or sections are grouped by recurring motifs, relationships, or ideas rather than strict time, enables authors to explore the deeper meanings and patterns embedded within their experiences (Garcia, 2018). Garcia (2018) posits that this structural choice allows for a more profound analysis of personal growth, recurring struggles, or evolving perspectives, thereby enriching the narrative by highlighting its intellectual and emotional coherence. While some critics might argue that such structures can sometimes prioritize artistic effect over clarity, others contend that they foster a more immersive and reflective reading experience, encouraging readers to actively participate in constructing meaning alongside the narrator (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Beyond structural considerations, the strategic deployment of figurative language and vivid imagery is central to how memoirs convey the qualitative texture of lived experience and evoke emotional resonance in the reader. Metaphors, similes, symbolism, and detailed sensory descriptions operate as powerful conduits, transforming abstract feelings or complex situations into tangible, relatable forms (Patterson, 2022).

Patterson (2022) highlights that metaphor, in particular, is not merely ornamental but a cognitive tool that shapes how experience is understood and expressed. A memoirist might describe a period of depression as "a heavy cloak of lead" or a moment of clarity as "a sudden burst of sunlight," immediately conveying the emotional weight or transformative power of the experience in a way that plain language cannot. Such metaphors *complement* the lived experience by making the ineffable tangible, allowing readers to grasp the subjective reality of the narrator's internal state (Patterson, 2022).

Similarly, rich, evocative imagery appealing to sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—serves to immerse the reader directly into the narrative world. By detailing the "scent of mildewed books" in a childhood home or the "hollow echo of a distant train whistle," memoirists build sensory bridges to their past, inviting readers to vicariously experience the world as the author did (Roberts & Singh, 2023). Roberts and Singh (2023) argue that this sensory specificity is crucial for establishing authenticity and fostering empathy, as it grounds abstract memories in concrete, shared human perceptions. The strategic use of symbolism, where objects, events, or characters take on deeper, often universal meanings, further enriches the narrative, allowing the personal to resonate with broader human concerns and experiences (Chen, 2019)

The distinctive voice, adopted tone, and precise diction are perhaps the most intimate of literary strategies in a memoir, serving to establish the narrator's personality, perspective, and credibility, thereby directly *complementing* the authenticity of the recounted lived experience. The first-person voice is ubiquitous in memoir, but its execution varies widely, ranging from the reflective and philosophical to the immediate and confessional (Morgan, 2020).

Morgan (2020) emphasizes that the narrator's voice is not a transparent window to a past self, but a carefully constructed persona that mediates the author's current understanding of their past. The choice of tone—be it nostalgic, sarcastic, elegiac, or humorous—directly impacts how the reader perceives the events and experiences (Morgan, 2020). A memoir written with a sarcastic tone about a difficult childhood, for instance, might signal resilience or a coping mechanism, inviting a different kind of reader response than one written with a purely tragic tone. This deliberate tonal control highlights the narrator's subjective interpretation and emotional processing of their history, thereby deepening the complexity of the lived experience presented.

Moreover, diction the choice of specific words and phrases—is crucial for shaping precision and nuance. A memoirist might use colloquialisms to evoke a particular cultural context, or highly formal language to signify emotional distance or intellectual rigor (Martinez, 2021). Martinez (2021) suggests that deliberate word choice can subtly convey class, education, geographic origin, or emotional state, adding layers of authenticity and specificity to the narrative. The careful crafting of voice, tone, and diction ensures that the *how* of the storytelling is as significant as the *what*, allowing the author to present a lived experience that is not only recounted but also *performed* for the reader, inviting a particular kind of empathetic engagement.

Beyond structural chronology, the internal pacing and specific temporal manipulations within scenes or sections also function as powerful artistic strategies, directly *complementing* the internal rhythm and significance of lived experience. Memoirists often slow down or speed up the narrative flow to emphasize certain moments or compress less significant periods (Lopez & Kim, 2022).

Lopez and Kim (2022) explain that narrative expansion, where a single moment or brief event is stretched out over several pages, often indicates its profound emotional, psychological, or turning-point significance. This technique allows the author to delve into the minute details of sensory input, internal monologue, and emotional shifts, inviting the reader to share in the intensity and subjective duration of the experience. Conversely, narrative compression, where years might be summarized in a few sentences, typically indicates periods of routine, less significant development, or a deliberate choice to focus on other, more impactful moments (Lopez & Kim, 2022). These choices are not arbitrary; they reflect the author's post-hoc evaluation of what truly mattered in their lived experience, guiding the reader's attention to the peaks and troughs of their personal journey.

The use of present tense for past events, while sometimes jarring, can also serve as a strategy to create immediacy and a sense of "real-time" experience, drawing the reader directly into the moment as it unfolds (Bell, 2023). Bell (2023) argues that this temporal shift can be particularly effective in memoirs dealing with high-stakes moments or deeply emotional recollections, blurring the line between past event and present narration and thus intensifying the reader's immersion in the recounted lived experience.

Finally, memoirs often employ intertextuality and reflexivity not just as literary devices, but as sophisticated strategies to contextualize and critically engage with the lived experience presented. Intertextuality involves weaving in references to other texts, historical events, cultural artifacts, or even scientific concepts, providing a broader framework through which to understand personal experiences (Chan, 2020).

Chan (2020) argues that by referencing external texts or historical narratives, memoirists can draw parallels, highlight contrasts, or offer universal insights that elevate the personal story beyond mere autobiography. For example, a memoir about immigration might weave in historical accounts of similar migrations, enriching the individual struggle with a collective resonance. This strategy *complements* the lived experience by grounding it within a larger cultural or historical tapestry, demonstrating that personal suffering or triumph is often part of a wider human narrative (Chan, 2020).

Reflexivity, on the other hand, involves the narrator acknowledging the act of their own storytelling, commenting on the fallibility of memory, the choices made in shaping the narrative, or the inherent subjectivity of their perspective (Howard & Parker, 2021). Howard and Parker (2021) suggest that this meta-narrative approach serves to foreground the construction of meaning in memoir, making the reader aware that they are engaging with a carefully crafted interpretation rather than a transparent historical record. While some might interpret this as undermining authenticity, others argue that it actually enhances it, as it candidly addresses the challenges and uncertainties inherent in reconstructing the past. By acknowledging the interpretive process, reflexivity *complements* the lived experience by offering a more honest and nuanced representation of its remembered nature, engaging the reader in the very act of meaning-making.

The critical review of scholarly literature reveals that the artistic and literary strategies employed in biographical memoirs are far from decorative; they are indispensable tools that profoundly complement and shape the narrative lived experiences presented. From the deliberate manipulation of narrative structure that mirrors the complexities of memory, to the evocative power of figurative language and imagery that translates internal states into sensory realities, these strategies work in concert to deepen the

reader's understanding and emotional engagement. The careful crafting of voice, tone, and diction imbues the narrative with authenticity and distinct personality, while the elastic handling of time allows for the emphasis of crucial moments and the de-emphasis of the mundane. Furthermore, the strategic use of intertextuality contextualizes personal narratives within broader human experiences, and reflexivity openly acknowledges the interpretive nature of memory and storytelling.

The body of scholarship collectively underscores that the "truth" of memoir is often achieved through artistry, bridging the gap between subjective recollection and universal resonance. Future research could further explore the ethical implications of these strategies, particularly in how they navigate the boundaries between personal truth and public perception, or examine their efficacy across diverse cultural contexts. Ultimately, the power of biographical memoirs lies not just in the stories they tell, but in the sophisticated literary methods through which those lived experiences are not merely recounted, but artfully reimagined, allowing readers to step into the subjective world of another and emerge with a deepened understanding of humanity.

1.8.3: Gendered conflicts in Islamic society

Gendered Conflict among Muslim societies is an area that has been extensively studied in the field of social sciences, with a focus on its impact on women's lives. In the context of Muslim women, conflict is often exacerbated by the intersection of gender, religion and culture, leading to unique challenges in their pursuit of agency (Katz, 2003). Several studies have highlighted the ways in which patriarchal interpretation of Islam have been used to limit women's agency, leading to a gendered power imbalance within Muslim societies (Kalman 1979; Kirk, 1989).

The existing literature often highlights the multifaceted nature of gender relations in Islamic societies. Scholars such as Mernissi (1991) and Ahmed (1992) have argued that interpretations of Islamic texts are often influenced by cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality. For instance, Mernissi (1991) contends that patriarchal structures in some Muslim societies distort the egalitarian tenets of Islam. This perspective aligns with the broader feminist critique of religious texts that has evolved over decades.

Moreover, recent studies have focused on the intersectionality of gender with other social identities. Crenshaw (1989) emphasizes that understanding the experiences of women in Islamic societies requires acknowledging how race, class, and ethnicity intersect with gender. Incorporating this framework allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict's women face, suggesting that strategies for resolution must address these overlapping identities.

Cultural context plays a critical role in shaping gendered conflicts. Scholars like El Saadawi (2007) highlight that cultural practices often overshadow religious prescriptions. This argument is particularly relevant in the context of honor-based violence, where cultural norms surrounding female behavior can lead to severe repercussions for women who defy expectations (Gill & Brah, 2014). This discourse prompts the researcher to reflect on their experiences and observations within these cultural contexts, particularly the resilience exhibited by women navigating these challenges.

This study acknowledges that the dynamics of gender relations firsthand has illuminated the disparities between religious ideals and cultural practices. For example, while the tenets of Islam advocate for the dignity and respect of women, cultural interpretations often skew these principles, leading to practices that marginalize

women's voices. This tension between ideology and practice is echoed in the literature (Khan, 2013) and serves as a guiding theme throughout this research.

Tucker (2009) examines the concept of the hijab, a head covering worn by Muslim women, and argues that its interpretation has been heavily influenced by patriarchal structures. Tucker argues that the hijab is often framed as a means of protecting women from male gaze, thus reinforcing the idea that women are objects of male desire and control. This interpretation, she contends, ignores the diverse meanings and motivations behind women's choice to wear the hijab, often reducing it to a symbol of male dominance.

Further evidence of a patriarchal interpretation can be found in Scott (1985) who meticulously analyzes Islamic texts and historical practices, exposing the ways in which patriarchal interpretations have been used to justify the marginalization of women in religious and social life. She highlights the limitations placed on women's education, inheritance rights, and leadership roles, arguing that these restrictions are not inherent to Islamic teachings but rather the result of patriarchal interpretations that have distorted the true message of the Quran.

Mirza (2009) provides another crucial example of patriarchal interpretation. Zia examines the institution of polygamy as practiced in many Muslim societies and argues that its justification often relies on a selective and biased interpretation of Quranic verses. She demonstrates how the verses allowing polygamy are often taken out of context and used to legitimize male dominance, while ignoring the verses that emphasize the importance of justice and equality in relationships.

These studies, while not exhaustive, demonstrate the pervasive nature of patriarchal interpretations within Islamic studies. They challenge the notion that Islam is inherently

patriarchal, arguing that such interpretations are often the result of cultural and social norms that have been imposed upon the religion. By critically examining the texts and practices of Islam through a gendered lens, these studies offer valuable insights into the ways in which patriarchal interpretations have shaped the understanding and practice of the religion.

One of the main causes of gendered conflict in Islamic society is the strict gender roles and expectations imposed by traditional and patriarchal cultural norms (Ahmen, 1992). According to Ahmad (2011), these norms often limit women's opportunities and freedoms, leading to feelings of frustration, inequality, and injustice. This, in turn, can result in various forms of conflict, such as domestic violence, discrimination, and marginalization. Moreover, these strict gender roles also contribute to the perpetuation of power imbalances between men and women, creating an unequal power dynamic that fuels conflict (Badran, 1983).

Jawad (2009) asserts that this gendered conflict in Islamic society is as a result of the misinterpretation and misapplication of Islamic teachings. He further argues that Islam should provide a framework for gender equality, but their interpretation is often influenced by cultural and societal norms. This has led to the misapplication of Islamic principles, resulting in discriminatory practices against women. For instance, in many Islamic societies, women's rights to education, employment, and political participation are often restricted in the name of religion, leading to tension and conflict between conservative and progressive groups (p.165).

The consequences of gendered conflict in Islamic society are numerous and far-reaching. One of the most significant consequences is the perpetuation of gender inequality and the marginalization of women (Cockburn, 2007). According to Said

(2000), in many Islamic societies, women face limited opportunities for education, employment, and political participation, which can hinder their personal growth and development. As a result, women are often forced to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, leading to a lack of agency and autonomy. Additionally, gendered conflict can also have severe economic consequences, such as the loss of productivity and potential, which can hinder a country's overall development (Said, 2000, p.67).

A study by Pappé (2004) examined the impact of gendered conflict on women's economic empowerment and the findings showed that gendered conflict was a major barrier to women's economic participation and empowerment. In addition to the individual level, a study by Badran (1993) showed that gendered conflict has implications to the larger society. He explored the role of gendered conflict in perpetuating poverty in urban areas of developing countries. The study revealed that gendered conflicts, like unequal access to education and employment opportunities, contributed to the feminization of poverty and reinforced gender inequalities in these societies. Similarly, a study by Caprioli (2000) examined the impact of gendered conflict and political participation and the findings showed that gendered conflicts like restrictive gender roles and unequal power relations hindered women's participation in the political sphere and perpetuated gender-based discrimination.

To address gendered conflict in societies, various approaches have been suggested by researchers and activists. Guha (1988) suggests that one approach to end the gendered conflicts is to promote gender equality and challenge patriarchal norms and structures. This can be achieved through education, awareness campaigns and policies that promote women empowerment and participation in decision making processes. Other strategies may include promoting gender sensitive conflict resolution methods and

providing support and resources for women who experience conflict and violence (Johnson,2006).

In recent years, several initiatives have been implemented to address the dynamics of gendered conflict in Islamic society. One of these initiatives is the development of gender-sensitive Islamic teachings and interpretations (Hammer, 2000). According to Mernissi (1991), there is a growing movement within Islamic societies to reinterpret religious texts from a gender-sensitive perspective, promoting gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms. This approach has the potential to create significant social change and reduce conflict between traditional and progressive groups (Mernissi, 1991, p.207).

Moreover, the role of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution has been recognized and emphasized in recent years. Women are often disproportionately affected by conflict, and their voices and perspectives are crucial in finding sustainable solutions. As argued by Chinkin and Charlesworth (2009), the inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes can lead to more comprehensive and effective solutions, as they bring a unique understanding of gendered conflict and its impact on their communities.

Arguably, the dynamics of gendered conflict in Islamic society are a complex and multifaceted issue. It is rooted in strict gender roles, misinterpretation of religious teachings, and unequal power dynamics between men and women. The consequences of gendered conflict are far-reaching and have a significant impact on women's rights and overall societal development. However, there is a growing movement towards promoting gender equality and women's participation in peace building processes. This literature review highlights the need for further research and action to address the

dynamics of gendered conflict in Islamic society and promote gender equality and social justice.

1.8.4. The construction of the identity of Muslim Women

The implied subordinate status of Muslim women has been a topic of interest and debate for centuries. The production of discourse of Muslim women's subordinate status can be traced back to the advent of Islam in the 7th century. The teachings of Islam, as outlined in the Quran and the Hadith, emphasized the importance of gender equality and the elevated status of women in society. However, over time, these teachings were interpreted to enforce a patriarchal order, leading to the marginalization and subordination of women (Guha, 1988).

According to Johnson (2006), one of the key factors contributing to the implied subordinate status of Muslim women was the influence of pre-Islamic cultural practices and traditions. These practices, such as female infanticide and the veiling of women, were deeply ingrained in the societies of the Arabian Peninsula and were carried on under the guise of religion. This led to the perpetuation of gender inequality and the suppression of women's rights.

Another significant factor was the influence of colonialism and Western imperialism. The colonization of Muslim-majority countries by European powers in the 19th and 20th centuries brought with it a new set of values and beliefs that were imposed upon the local populations. These included notions of Western superiority and the subjugation of women, which further reinforced the subordinate status of Muslim women (Kelman, 1979, p.123).

The representation of Muslim women in history has often been influenced by colonial narratives and orientalism. As Said (1978) points out, Western representations of the East, particularly Muslim societies, have frequently depicted women as oppressed, devoid of agency, and emblematic of a backward culture. These portrayals significantly shaped public perceptions and academic discourse surrounding Muslim women. However, more recent scholarship has challenged these monolithic representations by exploring the complexities of Muslim women's identities and experiences.

Khan (2011) emphasizes that the historical narratives surrounding Muslim women vary substantially across different cultures and epochs. For instance, the role of women in pre-colonial Islamic societies was often more prominent and influential than commonly assumed. According to Khamis (2017), women in medieval Islamic societies engaged in various socio-economic activities, from scholarship to trade, thus contradicting the stereotypes of absolute submission and exclusion from public life.

The agency of Muslim women throughout history has been a focal point in contemporary feminist scholarship. As Ahmed (2010) notes, understanding the historical context of Muslim women's lives requires an examination of their active participation in social, political, and religious spheres. From Fatima al-Fihri, who founded the world's oldest university in Fez, Morocco, in the 9th century, to contemporary activists championing women's rights within Islamic frameworks, these figures reflect a legacy of resilience and empowerment (Javadi, 2016).

Additionally, the concept of resistance has been integral to understanding Muslim women's historical experiences. Mernissi (1991) argues that although patriarchal structures have often limited their agency, Muslim women have frequently found ways to navigate and resist these constraints. The study of women's involvement in political

movements, such as the role of women in the Arab Spring, illustrates this point. According to Lind (1992), many Muslim women emerged as leaders and voices for change, challenging both authoritarian regimes and traditional gender roles.

An important aspect of studying Muslim women's historical production is the recognition of intersectionality. According to Crenshaw (1989), various forms of identity such as race, class, and nationality intersect to shape individuals' experiences. This perspective is crucial in understanding the diverse realities of Muslim women across the globe. For instance, while Western narratives often emphasize the plight of Middle Eastern women under Sharia law, they might overlook the experiences of Muslim women in Southeast Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, who may confront different socio-economic and political challenges (Mohanty, 1984).

Furthermore, the work of scholars like Mizra (2009) highlights the importance of acknowledging the complexities within the Muslim community itself. Factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geographical location play critical roles in shaping the experiences of Muslim women. The intersectionality framework not only broadens our understanding of their historical production but also calls for a more nuanced approach to gender studies within Islamic contexts.

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Pappe's (2004) assertion is that the rise of fundamentalism and extremist interpretations of Islam also played a significant role in perpetuating the subordinate status of women. These ideologies, often rooted in patriarchal beliefs, have been used to justify the oppression and discrimination of women in the name of religion.

However, it is important to note that there have been efforts to challenge the subordinate status of Muslim women throughout history. Feminist movements within Islam, such as Islamic feminism, have emerged to challenge patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and advocate for women's rights within the framework of Islam. These movements have played a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting gender equality within Muslim communities (Sharoni, 1995, p.79).

In conclusion, the subordinate status of Muslim women has been shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, historical, and political factors. While there have been efforts to challenge and change this phenomenon, it remains a persistent issue that requires further examination and action. It is crucial for future research to continue exploring the historical production of Muslim women's subordinate status and its impact on contemporary Muslim societies.

1.8.5: Literature Review on the Strategies Muslim women have used to assert their agency

The issue of gender inequality and oppression of women has been a long-standing problem in various societies, including the Muslim world. Muslim women, in

particular, have been subjected to discrimination and suppression due to their gender. However, in recent years, there has been a growing body of literature that discusses the strategies employed by Muslim women to assert their agency in the face of gendered conflicts. This literature review aims to explore the various strategies employed by Muslim women to challenge patriarchal structures and assert their agency.

One of the key strategies employed by Muslim women to assert their agency is through education. The literature suggests that education plays a crucial role in empowering women and challenging gendered conflicts. According to Ahmad (2016), Muslim women who are educated are more likely to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their agency in various aspects of their lives. Education provides them with the necessary skills and knowledge to question patriarchal norms and seek alternative ways of living. It also enables them to participate in decision-making processes and advocate for their rights, thus challenging gendered conflicts.

Muslim women have been actively engaged in various forms of sociopolitical activism throughout history. These women have played a crucial role in advocating for social justice, equality, and human rights in both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim countries. Their activism has been shaped by their religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and societal norms, and has evolved over time to address contemporary issues facing Muslim communities.

Muslim women have engaged in a wide range of sociopolitical activism, including grassroots organizing, advocacy, and leadership in political and social movements. One form of activism commonly associated with Muslim women is the use of Islamic feminism as a tool for social change. Islamic feminism is a movement that seeks to reinterpret and reclaim Islamic teachings to promote gender equality and women's

rights within an Islamic framework (Ahmed, 2011). This form of activism has gained momentum in recent years, with Muslim women activists using religious texts and principles to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam and advocate for women's rights (Carey, 2003).

Despite significant barriers, such as discriminatory laws and cultural norms, Muslim women have been actively involved in politics at the local, national, and international levels (Cockburn, 2007). Some prominent examples include Benazir Bhutto, who became the first female prime minister of Pakistan in 1988, and Tawakkol Karman, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her work in promoting democracy and women's rights in Yemen (Bhutto, 2008; Karman, 2011).

In addition to these forms of activism, Muslim women have also been involved in social movements, such as the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement, advocating for social justice and human rights. Muslim women have played a crucial role in these movements, using their voices and experiences to challenge oppressive systems and demand change (Saraj, 2003).

Despite their contributions and efforts, Muslim women's sociopolitical activism is often met with resistance and challenges. One of the main challenges these women face is the intersection of gender and religion, which can lead to discrimination and marginalization within their communities. In some cases, their activism is seen as a threat to traditional gender roles and societal norms, making it difficult for them to gain support and acceptance (Ahmed, 2011).

Moreover, Muslim women's activism is often met with backlash from conservative religious and political groups who view their actions as contrary to Islamic values. This can result in physical threats, harassment, and even violence against these women

(Karim, 2013). In some countries, governments also restrict and suppress the activism of Muslim women, making it challenging for them to organize and advocate for their rights (Mernissi, 1991).

Despite these challenges, Muslim women's sociopolitical activism has had a significant impact on society. Their activism has brought attention to issues that are often ignored, such as women's rights, gender equality, and social justice. Through their advocacy and leadership, Muslim women have been able to bring about policy changes and social reforms in their communities and beyond (Featherstone, 2000)

Fisher (1997), suggests that religion has often been used as a tool to justify the subjugation of women in Muslim societies. However, Muslim women have been actively challenging these patriarchal interpretations and reclaiming their agency through alternative interpretations of religious texts. For instance, some Muslim women have utilized the concept of 'ijtihad,' which refers to the use of personal reasoning to interpret religious texts, to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their rights (Barazangi, 2019). This strategy has been particularly effective in countries like Iran, where women have been able to gain more rights and agency through their reinterpretation of Islamic texts.

Furthermore, Carey (2003) also highlights the importance of women's participation in the public sphere as a strategy to assert their agency. In many Muslim societies, women's participation in public and political life is limited, which further reinforces gendered conflicts. However, Muslim women have been actively challenging these restrictions and participating in various activities to assert their agency. For example, in countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, women have formed grassroots organizations and community-based groups to advocate for their rights and challenge

patriarchal norms (Haque, 2018). Through these initiatives, Muslim women have been able to raise their voices and assert their agency in the public sphere.

In addition to these strategies, the literature also suggests the importance of economic empowerment for Muslim women. Economic independence has been identified as a critical factor in challenging gendered conflicts and asserting agency. Muslim women who are financially independent are better equipped to make decisions about their lives and are less likely to be subjected to patriarchal control (Aziz, 2017). Therefore, various initiatives have been implemented to promote economic empowerment among Muslim women, such as microfinance programs and vocational training. These initiatives have not only provided economic opportunities for women but have also enabled them to challenge traditional gender roles and assert their agency.

Notably, the literature reviewed highlights various strategies employed by Muslim women to assert their agency in the face of gendered conflicts. These strategies include education, reinterpretation of religious texts, participation in the public sphere, and economic empowerment. These strategies have been instrumental in challenging patriarchal structures and empowering Muslim women to assert their rights and make decisions about their lives. However, it is crucial to note that these strategies are not without challenges, and there is still a long way to go in achieving gender equality and women's rights in Muslim societies. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of these strategies and identify additional approaches to promote women's agency in the face of gendered conflicts.

The reviewed literature, specifically scholarly articles and critical essays on gender studies, played a crucial role in guiding the researcher's methodological choices. This extensive consultation of secondary sources likely highlighted the unique power and

significance of biographical memoirs as a literary form for amplifying silenced voices and directly narrating lived experiences, thereby informing the selection of this genre. Furthermore, this broad theoretical perspective would have directed the researcher to Sherine Hafez's specific works, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of her own*, recognizing their relevance in addressing the intricate relationship between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of Muslim women's identity. Finally, the engagement with this reviewed literature was instrumental in identifying and justifying the most appropriate theoretical frameworks Islamic feminist literary analysis and transcultural life writing theory as these approaches are particularly suited to uncover the nuanced ways Muslim women navigate and respond to gendered conflict within their specific cultural and historical contexts as depicted in life narratives.

1.9: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study drew upon some relevant tenets of Islamic feminism and transcultural life writing theory.

1.9.1. Introduction

This section analyses the theories that underpin the conceptual framework for understanding the complex interplay between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of Muslim women's identity. Specifically, it delves into Islamic feminist literary analysis and transcultural life writing theory. These theoretical lenses are crucial for providing a robust framework to explore the nuanced ways Muslim women navigate and respond to gendered conflict, assert their agency, and challenge dominant narratives, as examined in the selected biographical memoirs.

1.9.2. Islamic Feminism Theory

This theory recognizes the various forms of discrimination faced by Muslim women as a result of religious and patriarchal norms in Muslim dominated societies. Islamic feminism arose in the 1970s and 1980s both within Islamist movements and as a response to the movement's dominant masculinist discourse (Schok, 2005). Among the main proponents of this theory are: Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Riffat Hassan, to name but a few. Fatima Mernissi, is according to Caprioli (2008), the mother of Islamic feminism theory. Her works, such as *Beyond the Veil* and *The Male Elite* focuses on the intersection of Islam and women's rights and have been influential in shaping the discourse on Islamic feminism. Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian Muslim woman scholar, has written extensively on the intersection of Islam and feminism. Her book, *Women and Gender in Islam* is considered a seminal work in the field of Islamic feminism. Riffat Hassan is another key proponent of Islamic feminism theory and has written broadly on Muslim women rights. She is the author of *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* and has been a vocal advocate for gender equality within an Islamic framework.

The name "Islamic feminism" became discernible in scholarly articles in the 1990s, and Islamic feminism, like all feminism, is one of many forms of identities that coincides and intersects with various other identity categories (Pankhurst 2003). The representation of oneself as a feminist is a political act that reflects the political climate of the time. As Badran (1993) describes "late twentieth-century Islamism, currently the patriarchal mainstream, is in contention with other identities, especially nationalism and feminism. Therefore, Islamic feminism is in part a byproduct of and fueled by Islamism's hegemonic patriarchal discourse that seeks to utilize masculinist interpretations of Islam to justify subverting women's status and roles in society (1993,

p.154). Badran (1993) further asserts that Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon that fosters individual empowerment and promotes social, political, economic, and cultural change at the local, state, and international levels. In addition, the movement aims to actualize the concept of an Islamic community by empowering women to enable them to participate equally in their religion. And society in order to achieve this, Islamic feminists approach the issues holistically by making linkages between textual interpretations and social milieus to illustrate how they mutually affect one another, leading to false religious truisms (p.174). Abu (1998) asserts that Islamic feminism is a theoretical perspective that seeks to address gender inequality within Muslim societies by challenging the dominant western understanding of feminism and offers an alternative perspective towards Muslim women that is rooted in Islamic principles.

The key tenets of Islamic feminism theory include: reinterpreting Islamic texts, emphasizing the role of women in Islam societies, challenging patriarchal practices, promoting women's education and empowerment and advocating for legal reforms are particularly relevant in Muslim societies, where Hafez's biographical memoirs are set.

According to Badran (1993) Islamic feminism highlights the agency of Muslim women in challenging patriarchal and religious norms and advocate for their rights. It recognizes that Muslim women are not passive victims of oppression but active agents in shaping their own lives and societies. Therefore, Islam should promote gender equality and they propose that the concept of agency, which refers to the ability of individuals to make choices and take action, can bring about change (1995, p.167). As such, Islamic feminism recognizes the agency of Muslim women and its potential to challenge power structures that oppress Muslim women (Carey 2003).

Further, the relevance of the theory in the study lies in the fact that Islamic feminism according to Dudoet (2009) offers a framework for addressing gender issues in Muslim societies that are culturally sensitive. This is important as many gender and development interventions in Muslim societies have been criticized for being culturally insensitive and imposing western values (Brock 1989).

In conclusion, Islamic feminism recognizes the agency of Muslim women and therefore has the potential to bring about positive social change in Muslim societies by promoting women's empowerment, foregrounding the importance of including the voices of Muslim women in their societies.

1.9.3: Transcultural life writing theory

Transcultural life writing theory is a relatively new concept that has emerged in the field of literary studies. It is a theoretical framework that seeks to understand the complexities of writing and representing one's life experiences in a transcultural context. This theory has gained significant attention in recent years due to the increasing mobility of people and the rise of multicultural societies. It is a multidisciplinary approach that draws on various disciplines such as literature, sociology, anthropology, and postcolonial studies. This thesis will aim to define the key concepts of transcultural life writing theory, its key proponents, and its tenets.

According to Eakin (2008), Transcultural life writing theory is a theoretical framework that focuses on the study of life narratives in a transcultural context. It is an interdisciplinary approach that aims to understand the complexities of life writing in a world that is increasingly characterized by cultural diversity, mobility, and globalization. It seeks to explore how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds

represent their life experiences in their writings and how these representations are shaped by their cultural, social, and historical contexts (2008,123-178).

On the other hand, Appadurai, (1996) asserts that the concept of “transcultural” in this theory refers to the interaction and exchange of cultures, ideas, and experiences between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It recognizes that individuals are not confined to a single culture but are influenced by multiple cultures and identities. Transcultural life writing theory also acknowledges the fluid and dynamic nature of cultures and the constant negotiation and the transformation of cultural identities (pg.96).

The concept of transcultural life writing theory was first introduced by the literary critic, Eakin, in his book, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative* (2008). Eakin’s work provided a foundation for the development of this theory and its key concepts. He argued that in a globalized world, life narratives are no longer confined to the individual but are shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which they are produced (Eakin,2021, p.27).

Another key proponent of transcultural life writing theory is cultural theorist, Stuart Hall. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990), Hall introduced the concept of “cultural identity” and emphasized the importance of understanding cultural identity as a process of “becoming” rather than a fixed entity. He argued that individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds are constantly negotiating their identities and that cultural identity is a product of historical, social, and cultural factors (Hall, 1990, pg.73)

The first tenet of transcultural life writing theory is, according to Byram (1997), the recognition of the fluid and hybrid nature of Identities. It acknowledges that individuals are not confined to a single culture, but their identities are shaped by multiple cultural

influences. This tenet emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexities of cultural identities and the need to move beyond essentialist and fixed notions of culture (p.29).

The second tenet is the significance of context in shaping life narratives. Transcultural life writing theory recognizes that life writings are not produced in isolation but are influenced by the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which they are produced (Ezzat, 2010) This tenet highlights the importance of understanding the context in which a life narrative is produced to fully comprehend its meanings and representations.

Byram (1997) further brings us to the aspect of the focus on the “self” and “other” dynamics in life narratives as another tenet of the transcultural life writing theory. Transcultural life writing theory acknowledges the role of the “other” in the construction of the “self” and the importance of exploring the power dynamics between the two. It highlights the need to critically examine representations of the “other” in life narratives and the impact of these representations on cultural identities.

In conclusion, transcultural life writing theory is a multidisciplinary approach that aims to understand the complexities of life narratives in a transcultural context. It recognizes the fluid and hybrid nature of cultures, the significance of context in shaping life narratives, and the “self” and “other” dynamics in life writings. The key proponents of this theory, Paul John Eakin and Stuart Hall, have significantly contributed to its development and have paved the way for further research in this field. Transcultural life writing theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of cultural identities in a globalized world and has the potential to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of life narratives.

The application of transcultural life writing theory to Sherine Hafez's biographical memoirs offers a nuanced understanding of Muslim women's experiences. Through her personal experiences and research, Hafez challenges dominant narratives and sheds light on the complexities of gendered conflicts, Muslim women's sociopolitical experiences, and their agency. Her memoirs highlight the fluidity of identities and the interconnectedness of cultures, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women's experiences in a globalized world. Through her work, Hafez contributes to a more diverse and inclusive representation of Muslim women and their agency in navigating complex sociopolitical contexts.

1.9.4. Application of the theoretical frameworks to the study's objectives

This thesis explores the gendered conflicts and historical construction of the identity of Muslim women as depicted in the biographical memoirs of Sherine Hafez. Through the lens of Islamic feminism and transcultural life writing theory, this study analyzes the ways in which Muslim women navigate and resist societal expectations and gendered conflicts, while also achieving their own agency. Specifically, this study is guided by four objectives: to account for the use of biographical memoirs as a method of study, to analyze the gendered conflicts that Muslim women face, to examine the historical production of the identity of Muslim women, and to explain how Muslim women have achieved their agency in the face of these challenges.

The first objective of this study accounts for the use of biographical memoirs as a method of study. Memoirs, as a form of life writing, offer a unique perspective on the experiences and identities of individuals. In the case of Muslim women, biographical memoirs provide a platform for them to share their own stories and experiences, rather

than relying on the narratives and interpretations of others. By utilizing memoirs as a primary source of data, this study will be able to provide a nuanced and complex understanding of the gendered conflicts and historical production of identity faced by Muslim women. Transcultural life writing theory's tenet: that life writings are not produced in isolation but are influenced by the cultural, social, and historical contexts in which they are produced is applicable for this objective, for it provides a framework for analyzing the ways in which individuals navigate and resist societal expectations and cultural norms, and how they achieve their agency. By acknowledging that life writing is not an objective practice, the theory interrogates ways in which power relations shape the stories we tell about ourselves and others.

The second objective of this study was to analyze the gendered conflicts that Muslim women face. These conflicts may include, but are not limited to, societal expectations around modesty, marriage, and motherhood, as well as discrimination and violence. By examining these conflicts, this study sheds light on the ways in which gendered expectations impact the lived experiences of Muslim women and the strategies they use to navigate and resist these challenges. The chapter is guided by Islamic feminism theory, which emphasizes is a movement that seeks to reclaim and reinterpret Islamic texts and traditions from a feminist perspective, in order to challenge patriarchy and promote gender equality within Islamic societies. Another tenet that is relevant for this chapter is the condemnation of violence and discrimination against Muslim women.

The third objective of this study is examining the historical production of the identity of Muslim women. This includes exploring the ways in which cultural, religious, and political factors have shaped the identity and experiences of Muslim women over time. This objective allows for the examination of the ways in which Muslim women have challenged and reclaimed their identities in the face of these historical productions.

Transcultural life writing theory used as a theoretical framework for this study. The chapter is guided by the following key tenets of transcultural writing theory: First is the aspect of deconstructed binary oppositions that questions the rigid dichotomies like the oppressor and the oppressed, which have characterized representations of Muslim women and second, that hybridity of culture is key, as it highlights the complex and constantly changing nature of cultural identities that cannot be reduced to a singular culture or tradition.

The fourth and final objective of this study was to explain how Muslim women have achieved their agency in the face of gendered conflicts and historical productions of identity. This includes exploring the ways in which Muslim women have used their voices, formed communities, and engaged in activism and resistance. Additionally, this objective enables the examination of the role of Islamic feminism in empowering Muslim women and providing a framework for understanding and challenging gendered conflicts and the historical production of identity. The objective is guided by Islamic feminism theory, which provides a framework for understanding the ways in which Muslim women have been historically marginalized and oppressed, as well as the strategies they have used to resist and challenge these systems of oppression. The main tenet from the Islamic feminism theory that guided this objective is the aspect of agency and autonomy for Muslim women that argues that Muslim women have a right to make decisions about their own lives, including their bodies, education and career.

1.10. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.10.1 Introduction

This section explores the research design and methodology that guided this study's aims. This section outlines the research design, sampling techniques, data collection, and data analysis methods that were used in this study.

1.10.2. Research approach and design

The research employed a descriptive research design and a qualitative approach which allows for a deeper exploration of complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach employs a close reading and in-depth analysis of biographical memoirs and scholarly articles to explore the experiences and strategies of Muslim women in navigating gendered conflict. Instead of relying on numerical data or statistical analysis, the research delves into the nuanced narratives within the selected texts and secondary sources to understand how these women challenge oppressive systems, assert their agency, and effect social change. The use of Islamic feminist literary analysis and transcultural life writing theory further emphasizes the qualitative nature of the study, as it focuses on interpreting the meanings and representations within the texts to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of Muslim women's identities.

1.10.3. Sampling and Sampling techniques

The biographical memoirs were purposively sampled. Purposive sampling is a research method that involves selecting sources based on specific characteristics or criteria that are relevant to the research questions and objectives (Creswell 2000). In the context of

studying Muslim women's sociopolitical activism, purposive sampling allowed this research to select biographical memoirs by Sherine Hafez that focus on Muslim women who are actively engaged in challenging gendered conflict within their communities. This approach is important for the reason that it offers a structured and intentional way to gather data that is not only relevant but also representative of the diverse experiences and voices present in the narratives under study.

Moreover, Hafez's biographical memoirs contextualize Muslim women's sociopolitical activism within the larger socio-historical, political, and religious contexts in which it takes place Caprioli (2000). This is crucial in understanding the barriers and challenges faced by Muslim women in their pursuit of agency and empowerment. Hafez's analysis goes beyond the surface level and delves into the complexities of power dynamics, both within and outside Muslim communities, that shape the lives and struggles of Muslim women.

Additionally, Hafez's (2011, 2018) biographical memoirs bring to the forefront the voices and perspectives of Muslim women themselves, rather than relying on outsider or Western interpretations. This is essential in challenging the dominant narratives that often portray Muslim women as homogenous and passive. By purposively sampling Hafez's books, the study captures the diverse experiences and perspectives of Muslim women and avoid essentializing or simplifying their struggles and activism. Hafez's biographical memoirs are based on extensive interviews of Muslim women, providing a rich and detailed analysis of Muslim women's voice (Ezzat 2010). This is important in understanding the on-ground realities and complexities of gendered conflict and sociopolitical activism, rather than relying on theoretical or abstract discussions.

Also sampling of Hafez's biographical memoirs is important when studying gendered conflict and Muslim women's activism because they help to avoid essentializing Muslim women's experiences. According to Cresswell (2000), essentialism refers to the reduction of a group's experiences to a single, fixed identity, ignoring the diversity and complexity within the group. In the case of Muslim women, essentialism often leads to the assumption that they are all oppressed and passive, without agency or the ability to resist gendered conflict. Purposive sampling of these biographical memoirs allows the study to move beyond these stereotypes and understand the nuances and diversity within Muslim women's experiences and activism (Cresswell, 2000, pg.27).

According to Crenshaw (1989), purposive sampling is a valuable research method when studying gendered conflict, Muslim women's sociopolitical activism, and agency. It allows researchers to move beyond essentialist and stereotypical assumptions, access diverse perspectives, explore intersectionality, and prioritize ethical considerations. By using this approach, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of gendered conflict and the agency of Muslim women in challenging it (p.59). This, in turn, can inform policies and interventions to address this pressing issue and empower Muslim women to assert their agency (Crenshaw 1989).

Considering that study is concerned with the lived experiences of Muslim women in the contemporary society, the selection of the study texts factored the biographical memoirs that offer a clear understanding of the complexities of gendered conflict within Muslim communities that challenges the dominant Western narratives that portray Muslim women as passive victims of oppressive patriarchal structures. This is because Hafez demonstrates how Muslim women actively navigate and negotiate their gendered identities and roles within their communities. She also sheds light on the various forms of resistance and agency exercised by Muslim women, challenging the simplistic

dichotomy of victim/oppressor that is often perpetuated in discussions about gendered conflict.

Hafez's biographical memoirs are highly relevant to the study of gendered conflict and the historical construction of Muslim women. They provide valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of these issues and challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes. By purposively sampling Hafez's biographical memoirs, the study offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Muslim women, and the various forms of agency and resistance exercised by them in the face of gendered conflict.

The author's background was also a sampling factor in that the study was interested in an African female author from an Islamic society. Sherine Hafez is an Egyptian author, born and brought up in Egypt, and in the biographical memoirs, she narrates her own experiences as a Muslim woman and also interviews other women who share their experiences with the world. Therefore, as a Muslim woman herself, she brings a unique and grounded perspective to the subject matter of these texts.

Wood (2006) asserts that the subject matter of a piece of work must be considered in the selection of a text. For this study, the subject matter of the biographical memoirs was considered in their selection, since the intersection of gender, religion and sociopolitical activism are the core of the study. Hafez critically foregrounds way in which Muslim women strive to assert their agency through sociopolitical activism in the face of gendered conflict in Islamic societies. Further, the context of the biographical memoirs was considered, for they cover a time period of Islamic fundamentalism which had a significant impact on the lives of Muslim women and Hafez personal experiences and those of the women she interviews provide valuable

insights into the gendered conflicts and challenges faced by Muslim women during this time.

1.10.4. Data collection

In order to collect data, the selected biographical memoirs were closely read, the narrative structure and character development analyzed, with the focus on the variables from the research topic: gendered conflict and the historical production of Muslim centralized as a way of data collection. Precisely, data on the relevance of the biographical memoirs for narrating muslim women experiences. forms of gendered conflicts, the historical production of muslim women and strategies muslim women used to assert their agency was the data collected.

1.10.5. Data analysis

The coded data was then analyzed, guided by the theories suggested for the study and interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions. The findings were critically be analyzed, considering the cultural, historical and social contexts in which the novels were written. The analysis was aimed at uncovering the underlying meaning, ideologies and perspectives related to gendered conflict and the historical production of Muslim women's identity agency in Sherine Hafez biographical memoirs.

1.10.6: Ethical considerations

Ensuring trustworthiness in research is crucial in order to establish the credibility and validity of the findings (Wood 2006, p.208). In the case of this study on gendered conflicts and the production of Muslim women in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoirs, the following strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness.

To begin with, credibility was ensured. Credibility according to Henkel (2012), is the believability of the research findings. In order to establish credibility in this study, data collection methods selected were appropriate and reliable. This was achieved by using multiple sources of data, such as observation, deep literature review of critical essays and document analysis.

Secondly, transferability, which refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied to other contexts or populations was ensured through a detailed description of the research methods and data collection procedures. This will allow other researchers to replicate the study in different settings.

Additionally, the aspect of dependability, which is the consistency and stability of the research findings was greatly considered by maintaining a detailed record of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This allows for the findings to be audited and verified by other researchers. Additionally, the study also used a systematic and transparent approach to data analysis, such as coding and triangulation, to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Furthermore, the study sticks to the objectivity and neutrality of the research findings. In order to ensure this aspect of confirmability, the study maintains a reflexive stance throughout the research process. This involves acknowledging and addressing any biases or preconceived notions that the study has.

In addition to these strategies, the study adhered to ethical principles, to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. By following these strategies, the study establishes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study on gendered conflict, Muslim women's socio-political activism and agency in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoirs.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ARTISTIC STRATEGIES IN BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS THAT MAKE IT EFFECTIVE FOR NARRATING MUSLIM WOMENS EXPERIENCES

2.1: Introduction

This chapter defines a biographical memoir in detail and further explores the artistic strategies employed by Sherine Hafez within her biographical memoirs that render the genre particularly potent for authentically narrating the lived experiences of Muslim women. Specifically, it delves into how Hafez masterfully manipulates narrative voice, leverages the power of visual rhetoric, employs vivid description, navigates the intricacies of autobiographical truth, and engages with the subjective nature of memory to create narratives that resonate with depth, authenticity, and insightful representation of a traditionally underrepresented demographic.

2.2. Definition of a biographical memoir

A biographical memoir is, at its core, a story woven from the threads of an author's life. However, it's not merely a chronological detailing of events. It's a far more complex tapestry, encompassing the author's personal journey alongside the lives of those who have intersected with it, often including interviews with these individuals to enrich the narrative (Jolly, 2016). Jolly (2016) further asserts that this genre offers a unique lens through which to explore personal history, societal influences, and the enduring impact of relationships. It's a deeply personal form of storytelling, yet, through its engagement

with other lives, it transcends mere self-absorption, becoming a richer, more nuanced portrait of a specific time and place.

Anderson (2007) asserts that the critical distinction of the biographical memoir lies in its broadening of the autobiographical lens. While autobiography traditionally centres on the "I," the biographical memoir recognizes that the "I" is formed and understood through its relationships with others. As Anderson (2007) highlights, the very act of narration is inherently collaborative (p. 151). This understanding explains the inclusion of the stories of family, friends, and even acquaintances who played significant roles in the author's life. The author doesn't just mention these individuals; they actively seek out and incorporate their perspectives. This process often takes the form of interviews, allowing the voices of others to articulate their experiences within the shared timeframe (2007, P.77).

According to Somerville (2000), literary representations of Muslim women have often been filtered through the lens of fiction, shaped by orientalist tropes, and simplified narratives of oppression or exoticism. While fiction can offer valuable insights, it often falls short of capturing the complex realities and lived experiences of Muslim women in their full, nuanced authenticity. Biographical memoir, a non-fiction genre that intertwines the writer's own experiences with those of others, offers a significantly powerful and compelling avenue for narrating these lives. By grounding itself in verifiable reality and employing specific literary techniques like evocative sensory

detail, reflective introspection, and polyphonic storytelling, the biographical memoir transcends the limitations of fictional portrayals, offering instead a rich and multifaceted understanding of Muslim women's lives that resonates with truth and authenticity. This chapter explores the specificities of the biographical memoir as a form, focusing on the literary techniques employed by writers to illuminate the diverse experiences of Muslim women, moving beyond simplistic representations and revealing the complexities that lie beyond the "fictional veil" (Somerville, 2000, p.125).

One of the aspects of the biographical memoir is the use of interviews. The interviews within a biographical memoir are not merely fact-gathering exercises. They become an avenue through which the author can re-examine their own narrative, revealing gaps in memory, challenging assumptions, and discovering previously unknown facets of their own story (Somerville, 2000, p.11). These interviews allow the author to juxtapose their recollection with those of others, highlighting the subjective nature of all experience and memory. For instance, in discussing a shared family vacation, the author might contrast their childhood perception with a sibling's adult perspective, revealing how the same events can be coloured by differing contexts and viewpoints. This dialogue between self and other is crucial, as it demonstrates the "unstable and constantly renegotiated" nature of identity (Somerville, 2000, p. 12). By integrating these disparate voices, the author of a biographical memoir creates a richer, more complex and nuanced account of their life and the lives of others with similar experiences.

Furthermore, this collaborative approach to biographical memoir-writing acknowledges the dynamic nature of human relationships. The author's life is not a solitary trajectory but a series of intersecting pathways with others. The inclusion of other voices is not merely a gesture of acknowledgement but a way of recognizing that the author's own identity was continually shaped and defined through these inter-relations with others. In effect, the author's life becomes a microcosm of the socio-cultural environment in which they lived. As Smith and Watson argue, "identity is not a static thing but a process of becoming" (2010, p. 22), and relational others are central in the construction of one's becoming. The biographical memoir captures this "process of becoming" by including anecdotes and insights from those who witnessed and participated in the author's journey first hand, thereby revealing the complex forces that shaped it. Hence, it is worth noting that unlike a strictly biographical work, which aims for objectivity and impartiality in recounting another's life, a biographical memoir is inherently subjective. It is grounded in the author's perspective, their memories, and their interpretation of events (Smith & Watson, 2010).

The incorporation of interviews in biographical memoirs is intentional, for it is another crucial element that distinguishes biographical memoirs from autobiographies. Rather than relying solely on personal recollection, authors often seek to validate and expand their memories by gathering perspectives from those who shared those experiences. These interviews provide alternative accounts, illuminating different facets of shared

events and adding layers of depth. This process, as observed by Freeman (2018), allows the author to challenge their own biases and assumptions, fostering a more holistic understanding of the past. A key aspect is how the differing views can complement or even contradict the author's memory, creating a compelling dialogue between individual perception and collaborative memory (P.244).

Moreover, the social and historical context of the author's life significantly shapes the narrative of a biographical memoir. Events, trends, and societal norms that defined the author's era naturally permeate the story, influencing both the individual's and shared experiences. By detailing lived moments within this historical backdrop, the memoirist offers valuable insight into how particular times impacted individual lives and relationships. For instance, a memoir about an author growing up in a segregated society might detail the ways in which these structures and events impacted not only their own life, but the lives of those within their community (McAdams, 2013).

One of the key strengths of biographical memoir lies in its capacity to bridge the personal and the collective. Unlike traditional autobiography, which focuses primarily on the individual's journey, biographical memoir incorporates the experiences of others, creating a richer and more contextualized narrative (Couser, 2012). Muslim women writers, by weaving their own stories with those of their mothers, sisters, friends, and community members, are able to paint a broader picture of the challenges and triumphs they face. For example, in her biographical memoir; *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar

Nafisi not only recounts her experiences teaching Western literature in post-revolutionary Iran but also incorporates the stories of her female students. Through their discussions of literature and their personal lives, Nafisi reveals the complexities of being a woman in a restrictive society, highlighting the shared struggles and the different ways they navigate the intersection of faith, culture, and personal freedom (Nafisi, 2003). This weaving of individual stories creates a powerful sense of collective identity and allows readers to connect with the experiences of Muslim women on a more personal and meaningful level.

Furthermore, biographical memoir allows writers to actively challenge and dismantle the stereotypes that often shroud Muslim women. By presenting a diverse range of voices and experiences, these narratives disrupt the monolithic image of the oppressed or submissive Muslim woman that is often perpetuated in mainstream media (Said, 1979). Writers often employ narrative techniques such as juxtaposition and counter-narrative to achieve this. Juxtaposing their own experiences with those portrayed in popular culture or political discourse allows them to highlight the discrepancies between the lived reality and the constructed image. For instance, in her biographical memoir *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Kahf intertwines her personal journey as a Syrian-American Muslim woman with reflections on the portrayal of Muslim women in media and literature. By sharing her own experiences of navigating faith, identity, and belonging, Kahf challenges the stereotypical representations and offers a more

nuanced and authentic portrayal of Muslim women's lives (Kahf, 2006). This use of counter-narrative allows writers to reclaim their stories and present a more accurate and empowering representation of themselves.

The use of evocative language and sensory detail is another powerful literary technique employed by writers of biographical memoir to bring the reader closer to the lived experiences of Muslim women. By vividly describing their surroundings, their emotions, and their interactions with others, these writers create a sense of intimacy and immediacy that allows readers to empathize with their experiences. For example, in her memoir *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi uses graphic novel format to depict her childhood in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The simple yet powerful illustrations, combined with her honest and often humorous narration, bring to life the complexities of growing up in a war-torn country and navigating the contradictions between personal freedom and religious dogma (Satrapi, 2003). The use of visual and textual detail allows Satrapi to create a visceral and emotionally resonant narrative that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers.

Arguably, a biographical memoir is more than just a self-portrait. It is an intricate mosaic of interconnected lives, shaped by personal recollections, validated by interviews, and grounded in a specific historical context. Its strength lies in its ability to interweave individual experiences with the stories of others, creating a compelling tapestry that illuminates both personal and shared histories. By embracing subjectivity

and incorporating multiple perspectives, the biographical memoir offers readers a uniquely nuanced and human understanding of the past, serving as a powerful form of storytelling that resonates across generations.

The effectiveness of biographical memoirs in achieving this stems from the writer's deliberate deployment of specific stylistic devices that shape the narrative and convey the complexities of lived experiences. The next section will explore key literary techniques employed within biographical memoirs utilized by the author, demonstrating how these choices contribute to making this genre particularly suited for sharing their multifaceted narratives.

2.3. The narrative voice

In life writing, the writer's positionality in relation to the narrative under construction proves critical. Writers play a central role in the texts they write and arguably serve as narrative focalisers, who are responsible for the story's development. As such, the proximity between writer and the writing subject itself exerts pressure on the text in equal measure. This article maintains that the writing process facilitates the experience of writing ourselves into existence resulting in identity formation through narrative construction. This section maintains that the writing process facilitates the experience of writing ourselves into existence resulting in identity formation through narrative construction.

Life writing, particularly biographical memoirs, offer a powerful platform for marginalized voices to be heard. As a non-fiction form that blends personal experiences with observations of others, it allows for a nuanced exploration of identity, culture, and politics. In the context of Muslim women, biographical memoirs become particularly significant, challenging dominant narratives and offering intimate glimpses into lives often obscured by stereotypes and misrepresentations. Sherine Hafez's *Women of the Midan* (2018) exemplifies this potential. Through a carefully constructed narrative voice, Hafez (2018) amplifies the experiences of Muslim women who participated in the 2011 revolution, making their stories a powerful testament to agency, resilience, and the complex negotiations of faith and identity within a transformative historical moment. This section explores how Hafez strategically utilizes narrative voice as a literary device to shape the reader's understanding of Muslim women's experiences during the Arab Spring.

2.3.1: the 'i' witness narrator

One crucial aspect of Hafez's (2018) narrative voice is its position as both insider and outsider. As an Egyptian-American scholar, Hafez (2018) draws on her academic expertise to contextualize the Muslim women's experiences within broader socio-political frameworks, while also maintaining a sensitivity to the cultural nuances and personal complexities of their lives (Ally, 2018). This position grants Hafez (2018) the

authority to interpret and present the women's stories with a degree of empathy and understanding, while also preventing the narrative from falling into simplistic or essentializing portrayals of Muslim women. Her own presence as a narrator is subtle, often weaving herself into the narrative to describe her interactions with the women, but always prioritizing their voices.

The primary strength of *Women of the Midan* (2018) lies in Hafez's ability to amplify the individual voices of the women she interviews. She does this by employing a narrative voice that prioritizes direct quotes and personal testimonies. The reader is immersed in the women's own words, gaining direct access to their thoughts, feelings, and motivations. For example, the stories of women like Salwa, who actively participated in the protests and challenged gender norms, are presented in their own words, allowing readers to understand their motivations and experiences from their perspective. This emphasis on direct testimony challenges stereotypical representations of Muslim women as passive or oppressed. By placing their narratives at the centre, Hafez (2018) empowers these women to define themselves and their experiences.

In *Women of the Midan* (2018) Hafez, acts as this "I-witness." She is not merely a recorder of events, but an active participant in the lives of the women she interviews, building relationships and allowing her own experiences to inform her understanding of their struggles and triumphs. Hafez's presence, made clear from the outset,

establishes a bond of trust that allows the women to speak candidly about their lives, political activism, and religious beliefs.

This illustrates the fact that Hafez's (2018) voice is not a single, authoritative voice dictating the truth, but a carefully constructed chorus of voices, interwoven with her own observations. By allowing the women to speak for themselves through direct quotes and extended interviews, Hafez (2018) empowers them to become active narrators of their own histories. For example, the reader is invited to listen to the personal reflections of Mervat, a woman who recounts her disillusionment with the post-revolution government: "I have a degree in law, but I can't find a job. What kind of revolution is this? How are things better now?" (Hafez, 2018, p. 120) This direct quotation allows Mervat to articulate her lived experience in her own terms, bypassing the potential for external interpretations or misrepresentations. This emphasis on direct testimony underscores the authenticity of the narratives and allows the reader to connect with the women on a deeply personal level.

The careful selection of these voices is also a crucial aspect of Hafez's (2018) narrative strategy. She deliberately chooses women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, religious orientations, and political affiliations, creating a multifaceted portrait of female participation in the revolution. This deliberate heterogeneity combats the monolithic portrayal of Muslim women that often prevails in Western discourse. For instance, we hear from both secular activists and religiously observant women, each

with their unique perspectives on the revolution's goals and outcomes. Hafez deliberately highlights this complexity, noting that

The women's activism transgressed traditional gendered boundaries while accommodating different interpretations of Islam, politics, and the role of women in society. (Hafez, 2018, p. 14)

This inclusive approach reinforces the idea that there is no single "Muslim woman" experience, but a multitude of diverse realities shaped by individual circumstances and choices.

The "I witness" narrative voice has the ability to contextualize individual experiences within broader socio-political realities. Hafez (2018) skillfully weaves her own observations and analysis into the narratives of the women, providing crucial historical and cultural context. For instance, when describing the motivations of women protesting, Hafez (2018) explains the complex interplay of religious belief, political discontent, and gendered expectations that fueled their activism. She doesn't simply report their words; she interprets them through the prism of her own understanding of Egyptian society, offering readers a more informed perspective. This is evident in her analysis of how some women framed their participation in the revolution as a religious duty:

These women are not merely replicating Western notions of political activism; they are drawing on their own interpretations of Islam to justify their participation. (Hafez, 2018, p. 78). This “I-witness” perspective allows Hafez (2018) to avoid simplistic or essentializing portrayals of Muslim women, instead presenting them as complex individuals navigating a complex political landscape.

Furthermore, the “I-witness” narrative voice allows Hafez (2018) to address potential biases and acknowledge her own positionality in the interviewing process. Recognizing the power dynamics inherent in her role as a Western-educated academic interviewing Egyptian Muslim women, she explicitly addresses her own assumptions and biases. This transparency strengthens the credibility of her narrative and allows readers to critically engage with her interpretations. Consider her reflection on her own initial expectations:

I came to Egypt with preconceived notions about the role of religion in women’s lives, and I was quickly challenged by the women I met in Tahrir Square. (Hafez, 2018, p. 32)

By acknowledging her own evolving understanding, Hafez (2018) creates a more authentic and relatable narrative, fostering a sense of trust with the reader and granting greater authority to the voices of the women she interviews.

The “I-witness” narrative also facilitates a powerful sense of empathy and connection between the reader and the subjects of the narrative. By sharing her own emotional responses to the events unfolding in Tahrir Square, Hafez (2018) invites the reader to share in her experience. The reader is not simply presented with facts and figures; they are confronted with the human cost of political upheaval and the courage of individuals fighting for their rights. For example, when describing the violence perpetrated against Muslim Women protesters, Hafez (2018) recounts her own fear and anxiety, highlighting the vulnerability of the women she was interviewing:

I watched in horror as security forces attacked protesters, and I feared for the safety of my friends in the square. (Hafez, 2018, p. 112)

This personal connection allows the reader to better understand the emotional and psychological toll of political activism on these women, fostering a deeper appreciation for their resilience and determination.

Further, the “I-witness narrator” has the ability to bridge the gap between individual experiences and broader socio-political realities. Hafez (2018) seamlessly weaves her own observations and analysis with the women’s direct accounts, creating rich voices and perspectives. She doesn’t just present the women’s stories; she interprets them, placing them within a larger framework of gender, religion, and politics. For example,

when discussing the challenges faced by Muslim women activists, Hafez (2018) interjects her own analysis of the patriarchal structures that limit their agency:

The revolution, while offering new opportunities for women's participation, also reinforced existing gender inequalities. (Hafez, 2018, p. 167)

This analytical intervention enhances the reader's understanding of the women's struggles and the broader context in which they operate.

The "I-witness" narrator also creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy that is often lacking in more detached forms of academic writing. By including details of her own interactions with the women, Hafez (2018) allows the reader to feel a connection to them. She describes the settings in which the interviews take place, the emotions that are expressed, and the subtle nuances of their interactions. This creates a more human and relatable portrayal of the Muslim women, challenging stereotypes and promoting empathy. Consider the following quote from one of the women interviewed: "I never imagined I would be sleeping in Tahrir Square, but I felt like I had to be there. It was our duty to fight for our rights" (Hafez, 2018, p. 173). Hafez's presence as the interviewer gives this statement added weight. We are not just reading words on a page; we are witnessing a moment of revelation, a testament to the woman's courage and commitment.

It is evident that the I-witness narrator grounds the narrative in tangible reality and establishes credibility. Hafez (2018) positions herself as a participant-observer, documenting events as they unfold, lending immediacy and authenticity to the account. She describes marches, protests, and the everyday struggles of revolutionary life, stating for example, “The revolution was in full swing, but people still cared about things like finding a husband” (Hafez, 2018, p. 68), highlighting the human element even amidst momentous historical upheaval. This voice is crucial in establishing the context within which the women’s stories are situated. By describing the physical and emotional landscape of the Midan, Hafez allows the reader to experience the revolution vicariously, contributing to the reader's understanding of the women’s motivations and actions. This objective, observational stance fosters a sense of trust, compelling the reader to consider the stories being told as genuine reflections of lived experiences.

Arguably, by sharing her own encounters and reflections on Egyptian society, Hafez (2018) humanizes the Muslim women she interviews and challenges the notion of a monolithic Muslim woman as presented by popular narratives. For example, Hafez illustrates the diversity of viewpoints and lived experiences when she noted,

There was no single, unified voice among the women of the Midan. Their perspectives on religion, politics, and women’s rights were incredibly varied, reflecting the complexity of Egyptian society itself. (Hafez, 2018, p. 102)

This acknowledgment of diversity, grounded in her firsthand observations, challenges the homogenizing narratives that often flatten the experiences of Muslim women.

Furthermore, the “I-witness” voice provides a powerful means to highlight the agency and resilience of Muslim women. Instead of portraying them as victims, the author can directly witness and document their active participation in shaping their own lives and communities. Hafez’s work does this effectively by showcasing the women’s activism during the revolution and their ongoing efforts to build a more just and equitable society. As Hafez observes, “Many of these women were risking their lives to stand up for their beliefs, demonstrating incredible courage and determination in the face of adversity” (Hafez, 2018, p. 154). By foregrounding these acts of resistance and resilience, the “I-witness” narrator shifts the focus from narratives of oppression to narratives of empowerment, offering a more accurate and inspiring portrayal of Muslim women’s lives.

Transcultural life writing theory provides a useful framework for understanding how *Women of the Midan* operates. This theory emphasizes the fluid and interconnected nature of identity, highlighting the ways in which individuals negotiate multiple cultural contexts and create hybridized identities (Lionnet & Shih, 2005). Hafez, as a researcher bridging Western academic traditions with her Egyptian heritage, is acutely aware of the transnational and transcultural dimensions of her work. Her “I” narrator becomes a vehicle for negotiating these complexities,

acknowledging the potential for misinterpretation and the importance of cultural sensitivity. She avoids essentializing the experiences of the women she interviews, instead emphasizing the diversity of their backgrounds, beliefs, and motivations. Her commitment to giving voice to these diverse perspectives highlights the transcultural nature of their experiences, demonstrating how they negotiate their identities within the context of both Egyptian society and the broader global landscape.

The “I-witness” therefore grounds the narrative in verifiable, personal experience. As noted in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, the “I” serves as both the subject and the object of the story, creating a unique perspective that cannot be replicated by other narrative forms (Smith & Watson, 2010). This is profoundly relevant in representing Muslim women, who are often spoken about rather than allowed to speak for themselves. In *Women of the Midan*, Hafez (2018) strategically positions herself both as a researcher and a personal witness to the events unfolding in Tahrir Square. This duality grants her access to intimate narratives while lending credibility to her observations. For example, when describing the atmosphere of the protests, Hafez writes,

The energy was palpable, a tangible force that pulsed with hope and determination. Women from all walks of life were present – veiled and unveiled, secular and religious – united in their demand for change. (Hafez, 2018, p. 45)

This personal observation, conveyed through sensory detail, immediately humanizes the experience and counters the monolithic image often associated with Muslim women.

The strength of the “I-witness” narrative is further amplified when viewed through the lens of transcultural life writing. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih introduced the concept of trans culturalism, arguing that it encompasses the negotiation of cultural differences within and across boundaries (Lionnet & Shih, 2005). Transcultural life writing, therefore, analyses how writers navigate their own cultural positionality while engaging with other cultures and identities. Hafez, as an Egyptian-American scholar, embodies this transcultural positionality. She navigates her own identity as a Muslim woman with a Western education while simultaneously representing the experiences of diverse women involved in the Egyptian Revolution. Her awareness of both the Western gaze and the complexities within Egyptian society allows her to challenge simplistic portrayals and provide a more nuanced understanding. Furthermore, her understanding of both cultures allows her to translate and interpret the meanings of the events in a way that is accessible to a broader audience without losing the essence of the experiences she is relating.

The significance of the “I-witness” narrative lies in its ability to provide firsthand accounts that counteract generalized and often Orientalist representations. As Smith and Watson (2010) argue, life writing, in its diverse forms, offers a space for marginalized voices to reclaim agency and construct their own narratives. In the context of Muslim women, this is particularly crucial as they are frequently subjected to reductive portrayals that focus on oppression and subservience (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Hafez, as both a scholar and an active observer of the Egyptian revolution, positions herself as an “I-witness,” lending credibility and authenticity to her portrayal of the women involved. Her presence at the Midan allows her to capture the nuances of their experiences, moving beyond abstract theorizing to provide concrete examples of their activism and resilience.

Furthermore, the “I-witness” narrative facilitates a transcultural understanding of Muslim women’s experiences. Transcultural life writing, emphasizes the ways in which autobiographical narratives cross cultural boundaries, fostering dialogue and challenging ethnocentric assumptions. Hafez, as an Egyptian-American scholar, occupies a unique position to navigate the complexities of representing Muslim women’s experiences to a Western audience. She avoids essentializing their identity, acknowledging the diversity within the Muslim community and highlighting the agency of women in shaping their own lives. She writes,

The women I encountered at Tahrir Square defied easy categorization. They were pious and secular, veiled and unveiled, rich and poor... Each woman had her own story, her own reasons for being there. (Hafez, 2018, p. 25)

This quote exemplifies the transcultural dimension of her work, emphasizing the heterogeneity of Muslim women’s experiences and resisting the urge to impose a singular narrative.

The relevance of the “I-witness” narrative is particularly acute when dealing with communities often misrepresented or silenced. Muslim women, frequently portrayed as passive victims of patriarchal oppression in Western discourse, benefit immensely from narratives that foreground their own voices and agency. “I-witness” accounts disrupt the monolithic image of the Muslim woman, allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences to emerge. As Lionnet (1989) argues that the act of self-representation becomes an act of resistance that dominant discourses that seek to define and control marginalized groups (p. 9). Hafez facilitates this act of self-representation by allowing the women of the Midan to speak for themselves, weaving their voices into her own analysis. For example, when discussing the motivations for

participating in the revolution, one-woman states, “[w]e were fighting for our rights, for our dignity, for our freedom” (Hafez, 2018, p. 85). This direct quote, embedded within Hafez’s narrative, underscores the women’s active role in shaping their own destinies, directly challenging the notion of them as passive recipients of oppression.

2.3.2. reflective ‘I’

The reflective “I” narrator in biographical memoirs is characterized by a self-awareness that transcends simple recounting of events. It involves a critical examination of the narrator's own positionality, biases, and evolving understanding of the events being narrated. This introspection allows the reader to engage with the complexities of lived experience, rather than simply accepting a singular, objective truth. In *Women of the Midan*, Hafez, as both ethnographer and participant-observer, employs this technique masterfully. She acknowledges her own Western background and prior assumptions, constantly reflecting on how these factors might influence her interpretation of the women’s stories. For example, she admits to an initial naive optimism about the potential for immediate democratic change, only to have her perspective challenged and reshaped by the realities on the ground. This transparency, a hallmark of the reflective “I,” builds trust with the reader and underscores the importance of understanding context in interpreting the women’s activism.

The reflective narrator also enables the weaving together of personal experience with the experiences of others, creating a multi-layered narrative that highlights both shared and distinct realities. This is particularly crucial when representing a diverse group like Muslim women, where the monolithic image often perpetuated by Western media is demonstrably false. Hafez does not present herself as an omniscient interpreter of the women’s experiences, but rather as a conduit, allowing their voices to resonate through

her own. The narratives of women like Nadia, who found empowerment in her activism, and Fatma, who grappled with the intersection of Islamic values and revolutionary ideals, are presented with respect and attention to their individual nuances. Hafez writes about Nadia's experiences, noting how activism gave her “a power I never knew I had” (Hafez, 2018, p. 65). Here, the reflective “I” acknowledges the limitations of her own understanding, giving space for the women’s own voices to shape the narrative. This approach avoids the pitfall of speaking for, rather than with, the women, a common critique leveled at Western representations of Muslim women (Said, 1979).

Furthermore, the reflective “I” empowers the narrator to explore the intersectionality of identities – gender, religion, class, and political affiliation – that shape the experiences of Muslim women. *Women of the Midan* effectively demonstrates how these interwoven factors influenced the women’s motivations for participating in the revolution, their experiences within the movement, and the challenges they faced both during and after the uprising. For instance, the memoir highlights the societal pressures and expectations placed on women, even within the revolutionary context. While many men celebrated the women’s participation, some others, as Hafez (2018) notes, voiced concerns about their 'reputation and whether their actions were appropriate for Muslim women' (Hafez, 2018, p. 92). The reflective narrator provides space for these contradictions, demonstrating how gendered expectations often clashed with the revolutionary ideals of equality and freedom.

The reflective narrative voice also allows for the exploration of the complexities of faith within the context of political activism. Hafez actively combats the notion of a monolithic Islam, presenting a spectrum of interpretations and practices among the women she interviewed. Some drew strength and inspiration directly from their faith, believing that their activism was a form of *'jihad for justice'* (Hafez, 2018, p. 115).

Others navigated the intersection of Islamic values and secular revolutionary ideals with more ambivalence. The reflective “I” allows Hafez to acknowledge these diverse perspectives without imposing a singular interpretation of Islam or its relationship to political action. This is vital in challenging essentialist representations of Muslim women that often dominate Western discourse.

The reflective “I” narrator, inherent in biographical memoirs, allows the author to move beyond a simple recounting of events. It fosters a process of critical engagement with personal experiences, situating them within a framework of historical, cultural, and political realities (Smith & Watson, 2010). Hafez, as the author and a participant-observer, explicitly acknowledges her own biases and positionality, creating a space for transparency and nuanced interpretation. This self-awareness is crucial when dealing with communities often subjected to misrepresentation and essentialist narratives. The reflective voice allows Hafez to analyse her own preconceived notions and assumptions, preventing the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

Furthermore, the reflective “I” enables the writer to connect individual experiences to larger systems of power. In *Women of the Midan* (2018), the narratives of the interviewed women are not presented in isolation. Instead, Hafez contextualizes their stories within the framework of Egypt's political landscape, its history of patriarchal structures, and the influence of Western perceptions of Muslim women. For instance, when discussing the experiences of women who participated in the protests, Hafez reflects on the complexities of their motivations, linking them to both personal grievances and a collective desire for social justice. She doesn't present them as monolithic figures fighting purely for political change, but rather as individuals driven by a complex tapestry of factors. One protestor, Amal, explains, “I felt like I could finally breathe, like I could finally be heard. It wasn't just about politics; it was about

my life, my dignity, my future” (Hafez, 2018, p. 67). This quote, embedded within Hafez’s reflective analysis, highlights the interconnectedness of personal and political spheres, demonstrating how broader societal issues directly impacted the lives of these women.

The “I” narrator also provides a platform for exploring the internal struggles and contradictions that often accompany Muslim women’s experiences. The genre, by its very nature, allows for introspection and the examination of conflicting identities. Hafez does not shy away from presenting the complexities inherent in navigating faith, tradition, and modernity. She explores the diverse interpretations of Islam within the Egyptian context, presenting narratives that challenge the simplistic and often polarized representations of "oppressed" versus "liberated" Muslim women. The reflective voice becomes a tool for understanding the nuances within the community and the individual choices women make in negotiating their identities. Another activist, Layla, shares, “I’m a Muslim woman, and I’m proud of my faith. But I also believe in equality and justice. There’s no contradiction for me” (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). By reflecting on Layla’s statement and the broader implications of her words, Hafez showcases the possibility of reconciling seemingly opposing ideologies and encourages a more nuanced understanding of lived realities.

It is therefore evident that the reflective narrator, distinguishes itself by its deliberate engagement with the “why” behind the “what.” It moves beyond a simple chronological recounting of events to consider the broader cultural, political, and psychological contexts shaping those events, often reflecting upon the narrator's own evolving understanding. Hafez (2018) positions herself as both a researcher and a participant-observer, allowing her personal experiences and reflections to intertwine with the stories of the women she interviews. This approach allows her to unpack the complex

intersection of gender, religion, and politics that defines the women's lives. For example, when recounting her own initial hesitations about participating in the protests, Hafez acknowledges the societal pressures she faced as a woman, reflecting that "[a]s a woman, I had to think about my safety, the potential for harassment, and the social stigma attached to being in a public space" (Hafez, 2018, p. 106). This personal reflection not only validates the anxieties of the women she interviews but also establishes a sense of shared vulnerability, fostering trust and encouraging them to share their own stories more openly.

The strength of the reflective narrator lies in its ability to explore the psychological impact of experiences, particularly those associated with trauma, resistance, and social change. Hafez (2018) masterfully uses this technique to portray the diverse emotional landscapes of the women involved in the revolution. She doesn't shy away from showcasing the fear, disillusionment, and even despair that some women experienced alongside feelings of empowerment and hope. The narrative voice frequently turns inward, attempting to understand the psychological toll that violence and political instability took on these women. For instance, in recounting the story of Fatima, a young activist who witnessed brutal acts of violence, Hafez writes:

Fatima's experience left her with deep scars, both physical and emotional. She struggled with nightmares and anxiety, haunted by the memories of what she had seen. (Hafez, 2018, p. 126)

By focusing on Fatima's psychological wounds, Hafez highlights the lasting impact of political violence and challenges the simplistic narrative of the revolution as a purely triumphant event.

Furthermore, the reflective narrator allows for the exploration of evolving identities and beliefs. The women in *Women of the Midan* (2018) are not portrayed as monolithic figures; rather, they are diverse individuals whose perspectives and priorities shift as they navigate the complexities of the revolution and its aftermath. Hafez's narrative voice highlights the internal conflicts and renegotiations of identity that many of the women underwent. For instance, she recounts the story of Aisha, a devout Muslim woman, who initially believed that participating in the protests was un-Islamic. However, after witnessing the injustice and violence inflicted upon peaceful protestors, Aisha redefined her understanding of Islam and her role as a Muslim woman. Hafez describes this transformation:

Aisha realized that her faith called her to stand up for justice and to defend the oppressed. This realization empowered her to overcome her initial reservations and to actively participate in the revolution. (Hafez, 2018, p. 234)

Through the reflective lens, Hafez reveals how participation in the revolution challenged and ultimately reshaped Aisha's understanding of herself and her faith, demonstrating the powerful influence of lived experience on personal beliefs.

In addition to exploring individual experiences, the reflective narrator also allows Hafez to connect these individual narratives to broader social and political contexts. By reflecting on the interplay between personal experiences and societal structures, Hafez illuminates the ways in which gender, religion, and politics shape the lives of Muslim women. She critiques the patriarchal norms and structures that limit women's agency while simultaneously celebrating their resilience and resistance. For example, when discussing the challenges that women faced in navigating the male-dominated spaces of the protests, Hafez reflects:

The challenges that women faced in the Midan were a reflection of the broader patriarchal structures that permeate Egyptian society. Women had to constantly negotiate their presence and assert their rights in a space that was often dominated by men. (Hafez, 2018, p. 221)

This reflection connects the individual experiences of the women in Tahrir Square to larger structural inequalities, providing a critical analysis of the challenges that Muslim women face in asserting their agency in public spaces.

The “reflective I” in further serves to highlight the psychological impact of the revolution on these women. Hafez doesn't simply document their political activism; she explores the emotional toll of witnessing violence, navigating societal expectations, and struggling to maintain hope in the face of disillusionment. For instance, consider the interview with Samira, a young activist who speaks about the initial euphoria of the revolution followed by the encroaching sense of disappointment and fear. Hafez reflects on this tension, writing:

Hearing Samira speak; I felt a pang of recognition. Her initial optimism mirrored my own initial hope for a truly democratic and just Egypt. But as the revolution unfolded, the complexities and contradictions became increasingly apparent, chipping away at that initial idealism. (Hafez, 2018, p. 123)

This personal reflection not only humanizes Hafez but also creates a bridge between the reader and Samira's experiences, making the psychological impact of the revolution more palpable.

Furthermore, the reflective narrator allows Hafez to unpack the complexities of identity that emerge within the context of the revolution. The women in *Women of the Midan*

(2018) grapple with their roles as Muslims, women, and political actors, often navigating conflicting expectations and societal pressures. Hafez acknowledges this internal conflict, stating:

For many of the women I interviewed, the revolution was a catalyst for re-examining their identities and questioning traditional gender roles. They were forging new paths, challenging the boundaries of what it meant to be a Muslim woman in Egypt. (Hafez, 2018, p. 98)

This analysis is supported by Marnia Lazreg's (1994) critique of Western feminist perspectives on Muslim women, arguing that they often fail to acknowledge the agency and diversity within the community. Hafez's (2018) reflective narration avoids this pitfall, carefully showcasing the diverse motivations and experiences of the women without imposing a singular, essentialized narrative.

The "reflective I" also facilitates a critical self-awareness regarding the limitations of representation. Hafez acknowledges that her interpretation of these women's stories is inherently subjective, shaped by her own experiences and perspectives. She constantly challenges herself to avoid becoming a mere translator of their experiences for a Western audience. This is evident in her discussions on the role of religion in the revolution. While some Western media sources focused on the rise of Islamist groups, Hafez highlights the nuanced ways in which women engaged with their faith during the uprising. As one woman, Fatima, stated:

My faith gave me strength. I knew that what we were doing was right, fighting for justice and freedom. Islam teaches us to stand up against oppression. (Hafez, 2018, p. 76)

Hafez (2018) reflects on this, acknowledging that while some may use religion to justify oppression, others find within it a source of empowerment and resistance. This self-awareness, fostered by the reflective narration, prevents the narrative from falling into simplistic interpretations of religious conviction.

The "reflective I" in biographical memoirs, as articulated by Smith and Watson (2010), is characterized by a narrator who not only recounts events but also actively engages with their meaning and significance, both for themselves and for others. This reflective mode allows for a deeper exploration of the psychological and emotional impact of experiences, moving beyond mere factual reporting. Hafez (2018) employs this strategy by weaving her own experiences as a researcher and observer into the narratives of the women she interviews, creating a layered and insightful account. As Liz Stanley (1993) argues, the inclusion of the researcher's own perspective can enhance the authenticity and reflexivity of the narrative, acknowledging the inherent subjectivity in the process of knowledge production.

Hafez's transcultural approach is crucial in understanding the narratives presented in *Women of the Midan*. Transcultural life writing, as defined by Lionnet and Shih (2005), challenges the notion of fixed and essentialized cultural identities, instead emphasizing the fluidity and hybridity of experiences shaped by encounters across cultures. Hafez avoids portraying these women as monolithic representatives of "Muslim womanhood," instead highlighting their diverse backgrounds, motivations, and interpretations of their faith and political activism. This is evident in her presentation of women like Amani, a veiled woman who actively participated in protests: "I felt like I had a responsibility to my country and my religion to speak out against injustice" (Hafez, 2018, p. 87). This quote reveals Amani's understanding of

her religious and national identities as intertwined, motivating her political action and challenging the Western stereotype of veiled women as passive and apolitical.

2.3.3. Interrogative 'I'.

Hafez's (2018) provides a compelling illustration of the interrogative "I." Instead of presenting a singular, authoritative account of the women's involvement in the Egyptian revolution, Hafez employs a narrative voice that frequently grapples with the complexities of memory, the subjectivity of experience, and the potential for misrepresentation. She actively invites the reader to consider the limitations of her own perspective, acknowledging the inherent challenges in translating individual stories into a coherent narrative. The book is peppered with reflective statements, like when discussing the women's diverse motivations: "It was clear that there were many layers to their engagement, and I tried, perhaps inadequately, to capture this complexity" (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This self-aware articulation of authorial limitations is a hallmark of the interrogative "I."

This approach resonates with transcultural life writing theory, which emphasizes the fluidity and interconnectedness of identity, memory, and experience across cultures. As Lionnet and Shih (2005) argue, "Transculturalism underscores the hybridity and relationality of identity formation, rejecting the notion of fixed and bounded cultural categories" (p. 2). By embracing ambiguity and acknowledging the limitations of memory, *Women of the Midan* avoids presenting a monolithic portrayal of Muslim women and their experiences. Instead, it highlights the diverse motivations, perspectives, and interpretations of the revolution, revealing the complexity of their identities as both Muslim women and active political agents.

The interrogative “I” also allows for the exploration of multiple perspectives, creating a more polyphonic narrative. Hafez incorporates a range of voices through interviews and personal accounts, allowing the women themselves to shape the narrative. This approach challenges the tendency to represent Muslim women as passive victims or monolithic figures, instead highlighting their agency and diverse experiences. For instance, she includes conflicting accounts of specific events, encouraging the reader to consider the subjective nature of memory and interpretation. Hafez rarely offers a definitive "truth," instead presenting a tapestry of perspectives. For instance, discussing the role of religion in the women’s activism, she presents both those who felt religiously motivated and those who saw their activism as driven by purely secular goals. She then reflects on these contrasting views, stating, "This divergence in perspectives made me question..." (Hafez, 2018, p. 78), demonstrating a continuous engagement with the complexities of the subject matter.

This multi-vocal approach aligns with Gilmore's (2001) concept of "autobiographic," which recognizes the performative nature of self-representation and the inherent instability of identity. Gilmore argues that "autobiography is not a transparent record of a pre-existing self but a performance that constitutes the self in the act of writing" (p. 3). By incorporating multiple voices and acknowledging the limitations of her own perspective, Hafez acknowledges the constructed nature of identity and allows for a more nuanced and critically informed representation of Muslim women’s experiences.

Furthermore, the interrogative narrative voice enables a critical examination of dominant narratives and stereotypes surrounding Muslim women. By openly questioning pre-conceived notions and challenging essentialist representations, Hafez dismantles simplistic portrayals and fosters a more complex understanding of their

lives. She frequently reflects on the Orientalist tropes that often frame discussions of Muslim women, and actively pushes back against these narratives. For example, when discussing the media's focus on the women's hijab, she writes, "I found myself constantly questioning the obsession with outward appearances, particularly in light of the women's profound courage and political engagement" (Hafez, 2018, p. 102). This explicit questioning of prevailing narratives helps to deconstruct harmful stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of Muslim women's identities.

Ultimately, the interrogative "I" in biographical memoirs like *Women of the Midan* provides a crucial tool for narrating Muslim women's experiences in a way that is both nuanced and critically engaged. By acknowledging the limitations of memory, exploring multiple perspectives, and openly questioning pre-conceived notions, this narrative voice fosters a more inclusive and critically informed understanding of their lives. Grounded in transcultural life writing theory, the interrogative "I" allows for a more authentic and complex representation of Muslim women, moving beyond simplistic portrayals and celebrating the diversity and agency of their experiences. By embracing ambiguity and doubt, these narratives challenge dominant discourses and create space for new understandings of identity, memory, and experience.

2.3.4. the collaborative I

The "collaborative I" acknowledges that individual experiences are often shaped by and intertwined with larger social, cultural, and political contexts. In the case of Muslim women, their lives are frequently viewed through a lens of pre-conceived notions and stereotypes. As Abu-Lughod argues in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013), the Western gaze often reduces Muslim women to passive victims, ignoring their agency

and diverse realities. Biographical memoirs employing the "collaborative I" can challenge these simplistic portrayals by presenting a multitude of perspectives, revealing the complexities and contradictions inherent in lived experiences.

Hafez's (2018) exemplifies this approach. Throughout the book, Hafez interweaves her own experiences and observations with the voices of the women she interviewed, creating a dynamic and polyphonic narrative. She doesn't present herself as an omniscient narrator but rather as a fellow traveller, learning and growing alongside the women she encounters. This collaborative approach is evident in her discussions of piety and political activism:

For many women, participating in the revolution was an act of piety, a way to fulfill their religious obligations to fight injustice and oppression. As Fatima explained, 'Islam taught us to stand up for what is right, even if it means facing danger.' (Hafez, 2018, p. 78)

Here, Hafez uses Fatima's words to illustrate a broader point about the intersection of faith and political engagement, allowing Fatima's individual perspective to inform and enrich her own analysis. By incorporating Fatima's direct quote, Hafez avoids presenting her own interpretation as the sole truth, instead, she amplifies a perspective often overlooked in mainstream representations of Muslim women.

Furthermore, the "collaborative I" allows for the exploration of diverse perspectives within the Muslim community itself. Hafez does not present a monolithic picture of Muslim women's experiences, but rather acknowledges the differences in their backgrounds, beliefs, and motivations. She includes voices from various social classes,

educational levels, and religious interpretations. When discussing the motivations behind participating in the revolution, Hafez writes:

Some women emphasized their desire for political freedom and social justice, while others focused on their religious duty to fight oppression. As Aisha stated, 'I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself, to make a difference in my country. I felt that Islam called me to do so.' (Hafez, 2018, p. 92)

This quote reveals the range of motivations driving women's participation in the Arab Spring, highlighting the individual agency and diverse interpretations of faith that shaped their actions. By including Aisha's voice, Hafez moves beyond generalizations and acknowledges the complexities of individual motivations.

The collaborative "I" also requires the author to be reflexive about their own positionality and potential biases. As Alcoff argues in "The Problem of Speaking for Others" (1991), speaking for others can be fraught with ethical concerns. Hafez demonstrates awareness of this potential pitfall by acknowledging her own background as an Egyptian-American scholar and her potential to influence the narrative. She explicitly states her commitment to representing the women's voices accurately and respectfully. By acknowledging her own subjectivity, Hafez strengthens the credibility of her narrative and invites readers to engage critically with the perspectives presented.

Ultimately, the "collaborative I" offers a powerful and ethical approach to narrating Muslim women's experiences in biographical memoirs. By integrating the voices and perspectives of others into her own narrative, Sherine Hafez successfully challenges stereotypical portrayals and reveals the complexities and nuances of Muslim women's lives. Hafez (2018) demonstrates the effectiveness of this narrative strategy in creating

a rich and multifaceted understanding of individual and collective experiences. The "collaborative I" offers a valuable tool for amplifying marginalized voices and fostering greater understanding across cultural divides. It allows for a more authentic and nuanced representation of Muslim women's experiences, moving beyond singular narratives toward a more inclusive and collaborative understanding of their lives.

2.4. AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

Autobiographical memory is a uniquely human form of memory that integrates individual experiences of self with cultural frames for understanding identities. One of the most significant aspects of memory in life writing is its ability to reclaim agency for individuals previously deprived of it. For the women Hafez interviews, recalling their experiences during the revolution, the pre-revolutionary period, and their daily lives becomes an act of self-assertion. Their memories are not passive reflections but active reconstructions, challenging dominant narratives and revealing the complexities of their lives. For example, one of the women recalls participating in the protests despite the dangers, stating, "I remember, I wasn't afraid. I felt I had to be there. It was something...I don't know...something bigger than myself" (Hafez, 2018, p. 87). This memory illustrates not just her presence, but her agency and motivations. Such accounts challenge the stereotypical image of Muslim women as passive and oppressed, allowing them to define their involvement in the revolutionary movement.

Gilmore (2001) highlights the power of life writing genres to disrupt established power structures. She argues that these genres "is always embedded in a field of power relations that it both reflects and resists" (Gilmore, 2001, p. 4). The memories shared in *Women of the Midan* actively resist the patriarchal and authoritarian structures that

have historically limited Muslim women's voices. By remembering and articulating their experiences, they destabilize existing power dynamics and create space for alternative narratives.

Furthermore, memory plays a vital role in the construction and negotiation of identity within the context of life writing. The women in Hafez's book navigate complex identities as Muslims, women, Egyptians, and activists. Their memories are not simply recordings of facts but interpretations of those facts, shaped by their personal values, beliefs, and social contexts. These recollections often reveal the tension between tradition and modernity, faith and activism, personal aspirations and societal expectations. One woman, speaking of her decision to participate in the protests despite family concerns, remembers,

My mother was worried, of course. But I told her, I am not naive as they say. It was my duty as a Muslim and as an Egyptian to fight for justice. (Hafez, 2018, p. 112)

This memory portrays the layered identities she navigates and the complex reasoning behind her choices.

Smith and Watson (2010) emphasize the performative nature of identity construction in life writing. They contend that "identity is not something we possess; it is something we perform, negotiate, and revise through narrative" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 51). The act of remembering and sharing these personal narratives contributes to the ongoing performance of identity for the women in *Women of the Midan*. The collective articulation of experiences allows them to forge a new and empowered sense of self.

Beyond individual stories, memory also acts as a vital tool for documenting a collective history, particularly one that has been marginalized or misrepresented. Life writing, therefore, becomes a counter-archive, offering a different perspective on events and challenging official narratives. In Hafez (2018), the women's recollections provide a nuanced and intimate account of the Egyptian revolution, focusing on the often-overlooked contributions and experiences of women. One woman recounts the solidarity and courage she witnessed during the protests, saying, "We were all together, Muslim women, young and old. We were all Egyptians fighting for our freedom. I will never forget that" (Hafez, 2018, p. 65). This memory captures the spirit of unity and collective action that characterized the revolution, offering an alternative to the more simplistic and often politically motivated accounts that dominate mainstream media.

It is therefore arguable that, central to understanding the role of memory in life writing is recognizing its inherently subjective and reconstructive nature. As Paul John Eakin(2008) argues, a life writing genre is not a mirror reflecting reality but a "construction of a self," a narrative crafted through the selective lens of memory and shaped by present concerns (Eakin, 2008, p. 4).

Further, Hafez (2018) allows the women to recount their experiences, acknowledging the fluidity of their recollections and the potential for individual interpretations of events. For instance, the memory of the revolution itself is not presented as a monolithic historical event but as a kaleidoscope of personal moments, anxieties, and hopes. One woman, reflecting on her experience in Tahrir Square, recalls, "I never imagined I would be there, sleeping on the ground with strangers, but we were all united in our desire for change" (Hafez, 2018, p. 62). This fragmented, intimate detail, drawn from the depths

of personal memory, paints a far richer and more compelling picture of the revolution's impact than any generalized historical account could achieve.

Moreover, memory serves as a crucial tool for reclaiming agency and challenging dominant narratives. Dominant Western narratives often portray Muslim women as a monolithic group, passive, voiceless, and universally oppressed by religious dogma and patriarchal structures (Ali, 2018). This simplistic and often orientalist perspective flattens the vast diversity of experiences within the Muslim world, ignoring the complex interplay of faith, culture, and individual agency. In this context, biographical memoirs, as exemplified in Hafez's (2011) *An Islam of Her Own* emerge as powerful tool for disrupting these homogenizing narratives. By showcasing the lived realities of individual Muslim women, these biographical memoir reveal the nuances of their religious beliefs, their struggles, and their unique pathways to empowerment, thereby challenging the idea of a singular, predetermined Muslim female identity. As Hafez notes in her introduction,

These women...are not passive recipients of religious tradition but are actively engaged in interpreting, appropriating, and shaping their faith in ways that are meaningful to them. (Hafez, 2011, p. 11)

This counters the stereotype of Muslim women as merely following the dictates of male religious leaders or traditional teachings, revealing instead a dynamic and diverse engagement with Islamic principles.

It is therefore arguable that Life writing allows Muslim women to take control of their stories, using memory to reconstruct their identities and articulate their experiences on their own terms. Hafez (2008) skilfully facilitates this process by creating a space for

the women to reflect on their past, not only as victims of oppression but as active agents of change. By remembering and sharing their struggles, acts of resistance, and moments of empowerment, they dismantle the stereotype of the passive, submissive Muslim woman.

The value of the biographical memoir's incorporation of memory in challenging narratives about Muslim women is also apparent in the way they give voice to experiences that are often overlooked or silenced in mainstream discourse. By sharing personal stories of negotiation of religious practices, societal expectations, and gender dynamics, these women challenge the idea of a uniform experience of being a Muslim woman. For example, narratives discussing the practice of wearing, or not wearing hijab, highlight the complexity of the issue. Some women feel empowered by the hijab, as an expression of faith and resistance to western ideas of beauty, while others see it as a symbol of oppression. As Hafez notes

The experiences within this collection demonstrate the multifaceted nature of faith, identity and spirituality. They highlight the fact that there isn't one Muslim or women's story but many, and that each woman's pathway to spirituality is unique. (Hafez, 2011, p. 13)

This idea of diversity is further supported by scholar Saba Mahmood, who, in her seminal work, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, argues that the concept of agency itself needs to be redefined when analysing Muslim women. Mahmood's work challenges the assumption that religious piety and female empowerment are mutually exclusive. She contends that Muslim women's engagement with their faith is an act of agency in itself and that imposing Western notions of liberation onto them is a form of cultural imperialism (Mahmood, 2005). The memoirs

in Hafez's collection reflect this by showing how women utilize religion for forms of self expression and empowerment without necessarily adhering to western standards of feminist liberation. They showcase this by actively participating in their religious communities, through leading prayers, religious education and participating in politics.

Furthermore, the narratives resist the assumption that Muslim women are universally "subservient." Instead, they reveal that patriarchal interpretations of Islam are not the only ones available. Many women in *An Islam of Her Own* showcase how their faith provides them with frameworks for resisting oppression and promoting social justice. Their engagement with Islamic teachings is not passive acceptance, but rather critical and creative. They often challenge traditional interpretations by re-reading sacred texts and engaging in theological dialogue. As Hafez writes, "These reflections underscore the need to engage with the specificities of women's experiences of religion and how they can serve as sources for both empowerment and resistance." (Hafez, 2011, p. 16). By foregrounding this aspect of their story, these memoirs challenge the idea that religion is inherently oppressive to women, instead showcasing how faith, when interpreted and actively engaged with, can act as a source for individual and collective liberation.

Hafez (2011) utilizes memory to capture the experiences of Muslim women who participated in the Egyptian revolution. She notes that

these women's memories of the uprising are not only about the events of the revolution but also about the social and political transformations they experienced in their own lives. (Hafez, 2011, p. 12)

By focusing on the memories of individual women, Hafez is able to provide a nuanced and complex portrayal of Muslim women's experiences during the revolution.

Moreover, through these personal narratives, readers are invited into the private spaces of women's lives, beyond the simplistic public image that tends to dominate. By providing readers with intimate details about the challenges and joys they encounter, they also humanize these women, creating opportunities for empathy and understanding that are often missing in broader societal narratives. This is further supported by Leila Ahmed's (1992) argument, where she highlights the importance of considering the historical and cultural contexts that shape women's experiences. As Ahmed (1992) argues, the concept of "subservience" is a historically constructed narrative that has been used to essentialize Muslim women's roles in society. Memoirs such as those presented in Hafez (2011) provide a framework for deconstructing these narratives by highlighting the lived realities of women that are not rooted in orientalist portrayals.

Another most powerful ways in which Hafez disrupts narratives surrounding Muslim Women through memory is by highlighting the complexity and diversity of Muslim women's experiences. For instance, she writes,

My grandmother was a Muslim woman, but she was also a mother, a grandmother, a wife, a friend, a neighbour. She was a complex human being with many facets to her identity. (Hafez, 2011, p. 12)

By emphasizing the multifaceted nature of her grandmother's identity, Hafez (2011) challenges the essentialist notions of Muslim womanhood that are prevalent in dominant discourse.

She also challenges the notion that Muslim women are passive victims of patriarchal structures. For instance, she writes,

My grandmother was not a victim of patriarchy; she was a survivor. She navigated the complexities of her life with grace and resilience. She was not afraid to challenge the status quo when it was necessary. (Hafez, 2011, p. 23)

This portrayal of her grandmother as an active agent in her own life disrupts the dominant narrative that portrays Muslim women as powerless and subservient.

Hafez's work is supported by other scholars who have analysed the relevance of biographical memoirs in disrupting dominant narratives about Muslim women. For instance, in their article "Muslim women's Narratives as Sites of Resistance," Hamzi and Taylor (2018) argue that biographical memoirs offer a platform for Muslim women to resist dominant discourses about their lives. They write, "Muslim women's narratives can be seen as sites of resistance, where they challenge dominant discourses and offer alternative perspectives on their lives" (Hamzi and Taylor, 2018, p. 56).

Similarly, in her book *Muslim Women, Transnational Feminism, and the Ethics of Pedagogy*, Ali (2018) argues that biographical memoirs offer a powerful tool for disrupting essentialist notions of Muslim womanhood. She writes, "Biographical memoirs offer a nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of Muslim women's experiences, thereby disrupting essentialist notions of Muslim womanhood that are prevalent in dominant discourse" (Ali, 2018, p. 67).

Further, the biographical approach allows these women to express their internal struggles and negotiate complex allegiances, complexities that are frequently absent in externally constructed representations. As Saba Mahmood (2005) has argued, agency

should not be exclusively defined through the lens of Western liberal individualism. Instead, agency can manifest in diverse forms, sometimes even within seemingly restrictive cultural frameworks. Hafez (2011) illustrates this point vividly. For example, one woman's choice to embrace the hijab is not presented as an act of oppression but rather as a conscious decision born out of her personal understanding of faith. This narrative, therefore, forces the reader to reconsider the assumptions surrounding such practices and acknowledge the multiple motivations that shape a woman's choices. In the words of one contributor, "I've worn the veil for over 10 years, and I can confidently say that I have more freedom now than ever before" (Hafez, 2011, p. 126). This powerfully disrupts the common assumption that veiling is synonymous with a lack of freedom. This kind of counter-narrative shifts the focus from external appearances to the internal motivations and lived experiences of women themselves.

Furthermore, Hafez (2011) employs a transcultural approach by incorporating the voices of women from various backgrounds and social strata. As she notes in her introduction, "Every story is a thread in the tapestry of our experience, reflecting the richness of our lives" (Hafez, 2011, p. 12). This metaphor emphasizes the idea that individual narratives, when connected, reveal a more profound and diverse understanding of the Muslim female experience. Hafez's commitment to inclusivity invites readers to appreciate the spectrum of identities within the Muslim community, effectively disrupting monolithic portrayals.

Transcultural life writing theory suggests that personal narratives can traverse cultural boundaries, enabling voices that have been historically marginalized to emerge (Smith & Watson, 2010). Hafez's work exemplifies this by illuminating the diverse experiences of women in the context of political upheaval. By stepping beyond

traditional representations of women in the Middle East, Hafez allows for a multiplicity of voices that reflect varied realities. As one woman interviewed by Hafez states, “We were not just spectators; we were active participants in shaping our future” (Hafez, 2019, p. 45). This statement underscores the vital role women played during the revolution, countering media portrayals that often depict women as passive or oppressed.

Furthermore, just like in *An Islam of her own*, *Memory in Women of the Midan* functions as a bridge connecting the personal and the political. The women’s individual memories are intertwined with the larger historical narrative of the Egyptian Revolution, demonstrating how personal experiences are shaped by and contribute to broader social and political movements. Their recollections of family life, religious beliefs, and societal expectations are inextricably linked to their decisions to participate in the revolution. For example, a woman recalling her upbringing says,

My father always taught me to speak my mind, even if it meant challenging authority. That’s why I couldn’t stay silent when I saw the injustice happening in our country. (Hafez, 2018, p. 45).

This memory reveals the influence of her father's values and how those values shaped her sense of responsibility and her decision to join the protests. This intersection of personal and political memory underscores the idea that individual lives are not isolated but are shaped by and contribute to larger social and political forces.

Ultimately, Hafez (2018) provides a powerful illustration of the crucial role of memory that biographical memoirs play in disrupting the dominant narratives surrounding Muslim women. By giving voice to individual experiences, these narratives challenge the homogenization of Muslim female identity, expose the complexities of faith and

agency, and highlight the diversity of Islamic life. The anthology, in tandem with the arguments provided by scholars such as Mohanty, Mahmood, and Ahmed, demonstrates that personal narratives are not simply individual stories but powerful tools that can be used to foster understanding, dismantle stereotypes, and create space for a more nuanced and accurate representation of Muslim women in the global discourse. Ultimately, these memoirs are essential in countering the simplistic and often harmful misrepresentations that dominate discussions of Muslim women and Islamic faith.

2.5: TRUTH AND AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity, at its core, involves representing experiences in a genuine and believable manner. In biographical memoirs, this often translates to the writer's commitment to portraying the subjects' voices and perspectives accurately. Hafez achieves this by allowing the women of Tahrir Square to speak for themselves, incorporating their direct quotes and stories into her analysis. One woman shares, "I felt I was reborn in Tahrir. I learned a lot. I discovered myself" (Hafez, 2018, p. 98). This direct quote, and many others like it, allows readers to connect with the women on a personal level, fostering a sense of trust and understanding. As Smith and Watson (2010) argue, the "I-witnessing" present in autobiographical narratives creates a powerful sense of immediacy and authenticity, inviting readers to actively engage with the stories being told.

The literary element of truth is interwoven with authenticity but carries a broader implication. While authenticity focuses on genuineness of voice and experience, truth in a biographical memoir also considers the broader social and political context. Hafez, drawing upon her own experiences as a researcher and observer, provides a nuanced

understanding of the complex factors that motivated these women to participate in the revolution. She acknowledges the diverse motivations, ranging from religious beliefs to socioeconomic grievances, challenging simplistic narratives that often frame Muslim women as passive or oppressed. Hafez writes about the women, stating that “From the very beginning, women were participating, organizing, chanting, offering medical assistance, and providing food” (Hafez, 2018, p. 4). By including such observations, Hafez helps to validate the women as active agents in their own lives and in their society. This aligns with what scholars like Grewal and Kaplan (1994) have noted that “Truth requires an understanding of the multiple voices and perspectives that shape any historical event” (p. 18).

Furthermore, the interplay between the writer's experiences and those of the subjects strengthens the narrative's truthfulness. Hafez makes it clear that the women’s personal stories resonated with her, shaping her own understanding of the revolution and its impact on Egyptian society. This connection creates a sense of empathy and solidarity, reinforcing the idea that these women’s experiences are not isolated incidents but part of a larger social movement. According to Lejeune (1989), this kind of “autobiographical pact,” where the author promises to be truthful and sincere, invites the reader to engage with the narrative on a deeper level, taking the stories seriously and considering their implications.

Hafez (2018) provides an intimate portrayal of Muslim women’s lives, unraveling the constructed inferior identity imposed upon them over time.

To begin with, Hafez (2018) exemplifies the struggles faced by Muslim women against the backdrop of a patriarchal society entrenched in historical injustices. For instance, Hafez (2018) writes,

The women of the revolution were not merely passive observers; they were agents of change, yet they faced relentless resistance from a society that viewed their political engagement as transgressive. (Hafez, 2018, p. 72)

This observation is particularly relevant in understanding how Muslim women have historically been marginalized. Their voices, often silenced in both public and private spheres, emerge in Hafez's (2019) narrative, allowing readers to witness their transformation from marginalized subjects to vocal activists.

The historical marginalization of Muslim women can be traced back to pre-colonial times, where socio-religious norms often confined them to domestic roles. Hafez (2018) notes, "Even in a society that revered their familial roles, women were largely seen as extensions of their fathers and husbands, with little agency in shaping their destinies" (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This quote illustrates the deep-seated cultural ideologies that have perpetuated the marginalization of women, limiting their access to education and public life. Historically, this narrative of confinement persisted through colonial times, where imperial powers often exploited existing gender norms to further marginalize women.

As a consequence, in the colonial period, women's roles were often redefined in response to both external pressures and the need for social reform. Hafez (2018) recounts the stories of women who organized protests against colonial rule, stating, "Amidst the chaos of revolution, women created networks of solidarity that transcended their socio-economic differences, yet the narratives of their bravery were largely erased from history" (Hafez, 2018, p. 98). Such examples illustrate how women actively participated in resistance, yet their contributions were systematically overlooked in historical accounts, demonstrating the the negative impact of a patriarchal societal norms against Muslim women.

Having identified a few instances of the perceived identity construction of Muslim women in historical account, transcultural life writing theory helps us deconstruct the inferiority construction of the identity of Muslim Women based on their gender, as sex alone is not enough to define Muslim women wholesomely. Goffman (1963) argues that transcultural life writing theory posits that life narratives reflect the complexities of identity formation in culturally diverse contexts, with very many factors like class, race and gender contributing to the identity of a people (Goffman, 1963). In line with this, Hafez, (2018) states, “The narratives of these women are intertwined with the larger socio-political fabric of Egyptian society” (p. 5). Through her interviews with women from various backgrounds, Hafez (2018) unveils the multi-layered experiences that challenge the monolithic representation of Muslim women often perpetuated by colonial and neo-colonial narratives.

In the history of the pre-colonial context, Hafez (2018) notes the distinct roles that women played, which were often overshadowed by later colonial interpretations. One interviewee by the name Hadasa reflects on life before colonial intervention, stating, “We had our traditions, our ways of living, and we felt proud of our identity” (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This assertion highlights a sense of agency that contradicts the narrative of victimhood often associated with Muslim women. Such reflections emphasize the importance of reclaiming historical narratives that honour their experiences and contributions, which are often obscured by dominant historical discourses.

Narratives of the history of the identity of Muslim women in the colonial period slightly shifts from how they were constructed in the pre-colonial period, as Hafez (2018) illustrates the intersections of gender, race, and colonial power dynamics. The interviews reveal how colonial powers often constructed Muslim women as symbols of

oppression in need of salvation. One woman by the name Amina states, “They came to save us, but in doing so, they took away our voices” (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This sentiment sums up the problematic nature of colonial feminism, which sought to uplift women by marginalizing their voices and agency. Hafez (2019) stresses that “the colonial gaze redefined our identities, policing us within the confines of a constructed narrative” (p. 74). It is notable that the white savior trope became a significant feature of the colonial discourse. According to Abu-Lughod (1999), Colonial powers, from history, projected an image of themselves as benevolent forces, arriving to liberate Muslim women from the clutches of brutal patriarchal systems with their roots in the pre-colonial history. This projection allowed them not to only justify their political and economic domination but also to legitimize their attempt at cultural imposition. They therefore sought to uplift Muslim societies by dismantling traditional customs, often imposing Western cultural norms and values in the name of modernization and emancipation of Muslim women. This approach ignored and often actively undermined the existing systems of knowledge and social structures that women themselves relied on and contributed to. (p.321) Thus, the biographical memoirs serve as counter-narratives, challenging historical misrepresentations by reclaiming autonomy over their stories.

Scholars have emphasized the importance of such narratives in understanding the socio-political context of gendered identities. According to Lewis (2017), biographical memoirs like *Women of the Midan* serve not only as historical documents but also as lenses through which we can examine the complexities of identity formation against historical backdrops. Hafez’s (2018) work exemplifies this notion by blending personal narratives with broader historical analysis, providing a variety of experiences that document the evolution of Muslim women’s identities through time.

The biographical memoir illuminates the history of the ongoing struggles that Muslim women face in navigating their identities amidst the remnants of colonial legacies. Interviewees express a desire to reclaim their identities in new societal frameworks. Mahmood, a woman interviewee remarks,

We are not just subjects of history; we are the authors of our own futures, we are not just mothers and wives, we are citizens and we will fight for our rights because we are here to make our voices heard. We will not be silenced anymore.
(Hafez, 2018, p. 157)

This assertion underscores the transition from passive victims to active agents in defining their identities and futures. The post-colonial context reveals a landscape where Muslim women resist constructed inferior identities, embracing their multidimensional roles within society.

According to Lewis (2017), biographical memoirs serve not only serve as historical documents but also as lenses through which we can examine the complexities of identity formation against historical backdrops. Hafez's work exemplifies this notion by blending personal narratives with broader historical analysis, providing a variety of experiences that document the evolution of Muslim women's identities through time, in line with the tenet of transcultural life writing theory that posits, life narratives reflect the complexities of identity formation in culturally diverse contexts (Goffman, 1963). As Hafez (2018) states, "The narratives of these women are intertwined with the larger socio-political fabric of Egyptian society" (p. 5). Hafez (2018) unveils the multi-layered experiences that challenge the hegemonic representation of Muslim women often perpetuated by colonial and neo-colonial narratives.

Notably also, in the history of the pre-colonial context, Hafez (2018) notes the exact roles those Muslim women played, which were often overshadowed by later colonial interpretations. One interviewee, Amina, reflects on life before colonial intervention, stating, “We had our traditions, our ways of living, and we felt proud of our identity” (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This assertion highlights a sense of agency that contradicts the narrative of victimhood often associated with Muslim women. Such reflections emphasize the importance of reclaiming historical narratives that honour the experiences and contributions of Muslim women, which are often obscured by dominant historical discourses. The above assertion can be supported by some key tenets of transcultural life writing theory. Wegner (2016), argues that according to transcultural life writing, individual narratives do not exist in isolation; they are intricately woven into the broader cultural and historical blends of their time (2016, p. 124). In *Women of the Midan*, Hafez’s (2018) interviews not only capture personal stories but also challenge the prevailing stereotypes surrounding Muslim women. One participant, Aaliyah, articulates her view of female participation in the revolution: “Muslim women are not just victims. They are fighters, shaping their destiny” (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This statement is emblematic of the agency that Hafez strives to highlight, countering the historical portrayal of Muslim women as passive entities.

Historically, Muslim women have often been represented through a lens of inferiority, shaped by colonial narratives and media portrayals that emphasize oppression over empowerment. As Mernissi (1991) argues, such representations are rooted in patriarchal structures that seek to control women’s narratives. Hafez’s (2018) biographical memoir acts as a corrective measure, allowing Muslim women to reclaim their identities and articulate their experiences. For instance, another woman interviewed, by the name Fatma, shares,

Before the revolution, I felt I was invisible. But now I realize that my voice matters. It is the reason I brought my son here. Growing up, he needs to know that his mother fights for her rights, just like the men do. (Hafez, 2018, p. 109)

This assertion not only reinforces the essence of self-empowerment but also signifies a shift in how society perceives Muslim women no longer as voiceless, but as pivotal players in history.

Hafez's (2018) work also illustrates the contextual instances that shape the identity of Muslim women across different eras, hence recording the histories of Muslim women. The narratives portrayed in *Women of the Midan* reflect both the specific socio-political climate of post-revolution Egypt and the wider historical context. Feminist scholar Leila Ahmed (1992) posits that the identity of Muslim women must be understood in relation to the political, economic, and cultural forces at play, which Hafez (2018) sums up in her interviews when she writes, "The revolution made us realize that our struggles are interconnected. We fight for our rights, but we also fight against a system that oppresses us all" (Hafez, 2018, p. 76). This interconnectedness highlights the layered complexities of identity that transcend simplistic notions of inferiority.

Moreover, Hafez's use of personal narratives reimagines historical accounts by placing women's voices at the forefront. By prioritizing these voices, her biographical memoir becomes a form of counter-narrative that challenges established historical discourses. As Hafez herself notes, "These women's stories are not merely personal; they are the history of a society in transition" (2018, p. 10). This assertion reinforces the idea that biographical memoirs can serve as critical historical documents when they sum up the lived experiences of those who are often relegated to the margins.

In examining the historical construction of Muslim women's identities, it is essential to acknowledge the evolution of these representations over time. By situating her subjects within a historical framework, Hafez (2018) demonstrates how the portrayal of Muslim women has shifted in response to changing political landscapes. The women's testimonies serve not only as reflections of their individual experiences but also as commentaries on broader socio-political movements. One woman by the name Fariah states,

Our struggles today are rooted in generations of resistance. We are part of a continuum. It wasn't just about the government, it was also about the way we were treated everyday: in our homes, in the streets, everywhere. We were tired of being second class citizens. (Hafez, 2018, p. 132)

This sense of continuity speaks to the historical relevance of the memoir as an account that documents both personal and collective identities.

Furthermore, Hafez contextualizes her interviews within a broader historical framework, demonstrating how colonialism, globalization, and local politics have shaped perceptions of Muslim women. As Sara Ahmed (2007) argues, "The body is an archive of history; it speaks the stories of its own entanglement" (p. 34). The women in Hafez's memoir embody this archive, as their experiences reflect the intersections of gender, religion, and politics over time, providing a layered understanding of their identities as informed by historical events. This is evident in the solidarity among women from different backgrounds, emphasizing how shared struggles can unite disparate identities across time and space. One participant reflects,

In the midst of chaos, we found community; it was our way to reclaim our narrative. Women would bring food and drink to share; they would sleep in groups for safety and they would help each other in the chaos. The women came from different backgrounds, different social classes and different regions became sisters in the Midan. (Hafez, 2018, p. 210)

This sense of community not only serves as a resistance against oppressive structures but also illustrates the potential for constructing a collective identity that transcends individual experiences.

In the contemporary history, Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir illuminate the ongoing true struggles that Muslim women face in navigating their identities amidst the remnants of colonial legacies. Interviewees express a desire to reclaim their identities in new societal frameworks. One woman by the name Nura remarks, "We are not just subjects of history; we are the authors of our own futures" (Hafez, 2011, p. 157). This assertion reinforces the transition from passive victims to active agents in defining their identities and futures. The post-colonial context reveals a landscape where Muslim women resist constructed inferior identities, embracing their multidimensional roles within society.

Transcultural life writing theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual narratives with broader social dynamics, highlighting how cultural identities are formed and perceived. As scholar Anna Green states, "biographical memoirs allow individuals to confront and negotiate their identities within a cultural context" (Green, 2015, p. 12). In *Women of the Midan*, Hafez (2019) navigates her own identity as a Muslim woman within the socio-political landscape of Egypt, reflecting on her experiences amid both personal and collective struggles, and the experiences of other Muslim women,

Furthermore, Hafez (2018) addresses the impact of political turbulence on women's identities in history, stating,

In moments of upheaval, our voices are drowned out by the cacophony of a society that chooses not to see us, time immemorial. Now they are telling us to go back home, they are using religion to justify excluding us from public life. (Hafez, 2018, p. 144)

This quote underscores the marginalization of Muslim women within both public and private spheres, emphasizing how their experiences are often silenced in favour of more dominant narratives. Hafez's memoir serves as a counter-narrative, challenging the reader to reevaluate preconceived notions surrounding Muslim womanhood.

Scholarly research supports Hafez's (2018) assertions about the construction of the identity of Muslim women in history. In their work on gender and cultural identity, Mirza and Saram demonstrate that "the identities of minority women are frequently filtered through the lens of societal stereotypes, leading to the reinforcement of inferior positions" (2018, p. 22). This theoretical framework reinforces the significance of Hafez's biographical memoir as it aligns with the experiences she depicts, illustrating how societal labels limit the self-perception and agency of Muslim women.

Moreover, Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir serves as a historical account that transcends individual narratives to reveal collective struggles. As noted by scholar Leila Ahmed, "the history of Muslim women is often written in the shadows, obscured by prevailing narratives that portray them solely as victims" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 5). By documenting her own experiences alongside those of other women, Hafez (2018) brings

visibility to this often-neglected history, contributing to a greater understanding of the systemic issues faced by Muslim women throughout time.

These narratives contribute to the historical record by preserving the voices of women who might otherwise be erased from mainstream accounts. Each story encapsulated in *“Women of the Midan”* becomes a valuable piece of the complex history of the Egyptian Revolution, highlighting how women’s roles were crucial yet often overlooked. Hafez (2018) emphasizes this point when she says, “History is written by those who have the privilege to be heard; our stories reclaim that privilege” (Hafez, 2018, p. 127). By framing these biographical accounts within the larger narrative of revolution, Hafez (2018) not only honors the contributions of these women but also ensures that their experiences are recognized in the historical consciousness.

In the domain of transcultural life writing theory, biographical memoirs serve as vital historical accounts that preserve the narratives of marginalized identities. Hafez’s (2018) biographical memoir, offers an illuminating exploration into the constructed inferior identity of Muslim women, reflecting upon the interplay between personal experiences and cultural narratives. Through Hafez’s (2018) lens, we gain insight into the socio-political contexts that shape the lives of Muslim women, demonstrating how such memoirs not only recount personal history but also serve as historical documentation.

Transcultural life writing focuses on the intersections of identity, culture, and narrative, emphasizing how these elements are constructed and represented. According to J. B. Thompson (2018), “life writing can disrupt dominant narratives by offering alternative perspectives that challenge the status quo” (p. 60). Hafez exemplifies this by foregrounding the experiences of women in Cairo, particularly in the wake of political turmoil. Her narrative disrupts typical stereotypes surrounding Muslim women, often

portrayed solely as passive victims within Western discourse. Instead, Hafez presents multifaceted identities shaped by their cultural and political environments.

Hafez (2018) documents the history of the struggles and triumphs of women involved in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. She writes, “The women of the Midan were not just participants; they were the backbone of a movement that demanded dignity and rights” (Hafez, 2018, p. 78). This statement highlights the importance of acknowledging women’s roles in shaping historical events, a perspective frequently overlooked in traditional historical accounts. By documenting these experiences, Hafez (2018) contributes to a broader understanding of the socio-political fabric of modern Egypt, highlighting the agency of women who defy the constructed inferior identity often imposed upon them.

The concept of "constructed inferior identity" is crucial to understanding the narratives presented in Hafez’s (2018) memoir. As scholars such as R. B. Miller (2015) suggest, “these identities are not inherent but are instead shaped by cultural, political, and social forces that seek to diminish the status of specific groups” (p. 45). Hafez’s narrative illustrates how these forces manifest in the lives of women who navigate a complex landscape of expectations and prejudice. Her memoir serves as both an autobiographical account and a historical document, capturing the voices and experiences of women who challenge these narratives.

Notably, Hafez’s work aligns with the transcultural life writing theory in its exploration of identity across boundaries. As Mohammed B. Amin (2017) argues, "the act of writing one’s life raises awareness about the complexities of identity formation, especially in transcultural contexts" (p. 112). In this way, *Women of the Midan* functions as a site of resistance against the monolithic representations of Muslim

women, offering a rich tapestry of voices and experiences that defy simplistic categorizations.

2.6. VISUAL RHETORIC

The focus of this section is on the use of visual evidence in contemporary life writing, with an emphasis on the biographical memoirs of Sherin Hafez. The objective is to study how the photographs, referred to as the visual rhetoric in this study, participate in the representation of Muslim Women identities within their respective narratives.

Visual rhetoric, as defined by Foss (2004), encompasses the art of using images to communicate meaning, persuasion, and emotion. It acknowledges that images are not simply passive reflections of reality but are constructed and deployed to achieve specific rhetorical goals. In the context of life writing, visual rhetoric can add depth and complexity to the narrative, offering alternative modes of engagement with the subject matter. In *Women of the Midan*, the photographs interspersed throughout the text serve not merely as illustrations but as powerful arguments about agency, identity, and the multifaceted nature of Muslim womanhood.

Today, visuals and images matter more than words and text. For example, many social network sites actively promote sharing images rather than sharing long passages of words. If one has the option to choose between using an image or 140 characters, one may be more apt to use an image rather than be forced to shorten his/her thoughts down that much. The prominence of visual culture has come to the point that many people use images to find ideal romantic partners, share inside jokes with friends, and in general, use pictures to tell the story of their lives. That is part of the reason why visual rhetoric matters today.

One significant way in which visual rhetoric operates in *Women of the Midan* is by challenging preconceived notions about Muslim women. The photographs frequently depict women actively participating in protests, lectures, and community organizing. Instead of the passive, veiled figure often presented in Western media, we see women like Amira participating in the act of speaking out, offering new perspectives and challenging the dominant narratives of veiled women being suppressed or submissive. A picture is worth a thousand words, and the images in Hafez's book effectively speak volumes about the dynamism and resilience of these women. This aligns with arguments made by scholars like Abu-Lughod (2002), who critiques the monolithic portrayal of Muslim women and emphasizes the importance of understanding their diverse experiences and perspectives. The photos provide that complex portrait.

Furthermore, the visual rhetoric within the book contributes to understanding the nuances of religious identity. The presence of photos of veiled and unveiled women side-by-side in numerous crowd shots emphasizes the diversity of religious expression within the movement. This visual representation challenges the simplistic equation of veiling with oppression and underscores the agency of women in choosing their own modes of religious expression. As Mahmood (2005) argues, piety is not necessarily synonymous with passivity, and the photographs in *Women of the Midan* visually demonstrate how women can actively engage in political and social activism while remaining committed to their faith. The image of a woman in niqab holding signs while protesting challenges the stereotypes of voicelessness.

Moreover, Hafez carefully curates the visual images in *Women of the Midan* to highlight the emotional experiences and the personal consequences of participating in the revolution. Images of injured protesters, families mourning fallen loved ones, and

women comforting each other visually convey the sacrifices made and the trauma endured. These images evoke empathy in the reader and provide a powerful counterpoint to abstract political discussions. The emotional impact of these images is compounded by the individual stories shared in the text. For example, one of the women recounted her experience of being sexually assaulted during a protest, stating,

“I felt violated, but I knew I wasn’t alone. Many women experienced similar things. It made me even more determined to fight for a better future for all of us (Hafez, 2018 p.321)

This quote is read alongside an image of women tearfully consoling each other, which helps the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional toll of political activism and the solidarity forged in the face of adversity. This illustrates how visual rhetoric, when combined with personal narratives, can create a powerful and enduring impact because they provide visual context, making the experiences of the subjects more relatable and understandable to the readers.

Furthermore, the pictorial illustrations in biographical memoirs often juxtapose the personal with the political. Hafez (2018) includes images of protesters alongside portraits of individual women. This duality emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal narratives and collective movements, aligning with the transcultural life writing emphasis on context. As noted by McKeon (2016), visual representations help to sum up the complexities of individual identities within larger societal frameworks. Hafez’s choice to integrate such imagery strengthens her portrayal of the women’s multifaceted identities and the broader implications of their actions during the revolution.

Pictorial illustrations serve as historical documentation. According to Elizabeth Boheman (2017) visuals in non fiction can “enhance authenticity” of the narratives by providing visual evidence of lived experiences. Hafez (2018) utilizes photographs that document historical events, such as the protests of 2011, thereby grounding personal testimonies within broader social movements. For example, one participant states,

“We were not just there for ourselves but for our daughters, to show them they could fight for their rights” (Hafez, 2018, p. 147).

The accompanying visual depiction of women in protest embodies this sentiment and contextualizes the individual testimonies within the larger framework of societal change.

The use of pictorial illustrations also aligns with the principles of narrative inquiry, which posits that stories are shaped by both visual and textual elements (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). In her biographical memoir, Hafez (2018) effectively intertwines visuals with the women’s testimonies. For example, the image of Layla, a young activist, amidst a crowd of supporters is more than just a depiction of the movement. Layla states, "That moment captured all of us. It showed our shared hopes and dreams" (Hafez, 2018, p. 89). This imagery communicates the essence of solidarity and collective resistance, transcending the limitations often imposed by text alone. Recognizing the importance of their experiences, Hafez allows the women’s voices to resonate through visual storytelling. As noted by Lawson (2009), "visual narratives can evoke empathy and understanding in ways that text may not" (p. 133). In "Women of the Midan, "the illustrations evoke emotions that facilitate a deeper connection to the women’s stories. The readers are invited not only to hear the women’s voices but to visualize their struggles and triumphs, creating a multidimensional understanding of their realities.

Furthermore, the pictorial illustrations serve as a reminder of the cultural and social contexts within which the Muslim women navigate their lives. Hafez's (2018) choice to include images from the Egyptian streets provides a backdrop that situates the personal narratives within broader sociopolitical discourses. One of the respondents, Yasmin, articulates this connection powerfully:

The struggles of my sisters in the streets are mirrored in my story. Our images tell of our fight for visibility. (Hafez, 2018, p. 114)

The visual elements further illustrates her sentiment, showing that the personal and political are inextricably linked, reflecting the very essence of transcultural life writing.

Moreover, the pictorial representations in Hafez's (2018) work highlight the societal roles and changes that these women are challenging. The images of women participating in protests portray a defiance against traditional gender roles, emphasizing their contributions to the revolution. As one interviewee stated, "[w]e were not just bystanders; we were the beating heart of the uprising" (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). Here, the accompanying visual not only underscores her statement but also works to contest the patriarchal narratives that often marginalize women's voices in historical accounts. This strategic use of imagery positions women as active agents of change rather than passive recipients of their societal circumstances.

Hafez's (2018) adept use of photographs also serves to complicate the notion of female identity in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. The juxtaposition of images showcasing women in both traditional and modern settings highlights the tension between individual choice and societal expectations. Dietz et al. (2016) on transcultural identity asserts that "identity is not singular but rather a variety of influences,

experiences, and choices" (p. 204). Hafez (2018) effectively employs images to illustrate this complexity, revealing how the women navigate through the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, thereby enriching the reader's comprehension of their journeys. According to Janet Zandy (1996), "the reality of pictorial illustrations in nonfiction offers readers a chance to witness the realities faced by individuals, particularly those whose voices are often silenced." Here, Zandy underscores the importance of authenticity and representation, two elements that are significantly bolstered by the inclusion of pictorial illustrations.

Also, the visual elements act as a critical supplement to the written text. Hafez (2018) often juxtaposes the personal stories of women with photographs of their everyday lives, capturing not just the political turmoil but also the resilience and strength of these women. Zainab, one interviewee states, "Our stories need to be seen. They are not only words; they have faces and emotions" (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). Such quotes highlight the importance of visual representation in bringing forth the emotional truths behind each individual's narrative.

Abilock (2001) focuses her attention on documentary photography and explains that "a documentary photograph may have been created to represent a reality, but it is also a vehicle for conveying ideas and a medium for personal expression" (p. 9-10). In other words, photographs can convey dual messages. Therefore, photo of Muslim women participating in protests, with the accompanying text that states women stood shoulder to shoulder with men, not as mere bystanders but as active agents" (Hafez, 2018, p. 56) illustrates the often-overlooked role of women in revolutionary movements, reinforcing their active participation and challenging stereotypical portrayals of women as passive victims. According to Smith and Watson (2010), imagery in life writing can "activate

a space for marginalized voices,” bringing visibility to their struggles and triumphs. Hafez’s use of illustration embodies this notion, enabling the reader to witness the dynamism of women’s roles in social movements.

In the context of transcultural life writing, the illustrations serve to bridge diverse experiences and backgrounds. Each visual narrative reflects the uniqueness of the women’s stories while simultaneously weaving a collective identity. Hafez’s works acknowledge that “we are all different, yet united in our fight for rights” (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This sentiment is made powerful through visual art, which transcends language barriers and connects individuals across cultural divides, underscoring the shared human experience.

Concomitantly, pictorial illustrations in Hafez’s (2018) biographical memoir do not shy away from depicting vulnerability. One poignant illustration shows a woman weeping for a lost friend, accompanied by her statement, “We are still mourning, even in the midst of revolution” (Hafez, 2018, p. 157). This visual moment captures the complexities of revolutionary fervor, highlighting that struggle and grief can coexist. As Mia (2017) states, visual elements can “complicate narratives by adding layers of emotion and context,” thereby enriching the overall narrative texture.

Moreover, pictorial illustrations can bridge cultural gaps, allowing readers from different backgrounds to understand and empathize with the subjects’ experiences. When reading fictional texts, readers may find it challenging to connect with characters who are not relatable or may lack familiarity with the cultural context they inhabit. However, as Hafez’s (2018) work demonstrates, pictorial depictions create an immediate connection that fosters empathy and understanding among diverse audiences.

This connection is particularly vital in discussions involving Muslim women, who are often portrayed through stereotypes in mainstream narratives (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

2.7. VIVID DESCRIPTION OF SENSORY DETAILS

The concept of style, in particular, vivid description, plays a significant role in people's everyday lives, especially in the context of literary works. It involves discerning and recognizing individuals based on their distinct characteristics, such as their appearance, behavior, character, and content. In other words, society is shaped by diverse cultural patterns, varying relationships, and distinct cultures. This form of identification becomes more pronounced at the individual level, as each person possesses a unique manner of speaking, dressing, and expressing their personality.

The power of sensory detail lies in its ability to transport the reader beyond the surface level of events and into the emotional and physical realities of the subject. Instead of simply stating facts, the author meticulously crafts scenes that engage the reader's senses, allowing them to feel, smell, hear, and see the world through the protagonist's eyes. In *Women of the Midan*, Hafez (2018) masterfully uses this technique to bring the experiences of Egyptian women during the Arab Spring to life. For example, when describing the atmosphere in Tahrir Square, she doesn't just say it was chaotic. Instead, she paints a vibrant picture:

The air was thick with the acrid smell of tear gas, mingling with the sweet scent of shisha from nearby cafes. The roar of the crowd, chants and shouts of defiance, battled with the incessant honking of car horns. The rough texture of the pavement under my feet was a constant reminder of the ground we were fighting for. (Hafez, 2018, p. 45)

This detailed sensory description transcends a simple report of events and allows the reader to vicariously experience the intensity and emotional weight of the revolution alongside the women involved.

This use of sensory detail is not merely descriptive; it's narratively and politically potent. As Smith and Watson (2010) argue, "life writing genres are always constructed according to particular cultural frameworks, and these frameworks shape the way that selfhood is understood and expressed" (2010, p. 42). In the context of Muslim women's life writing, the sensory details often serve to dismantle the monolithic representation of the "oppressed" Muslim woman often perpetuated by Western media. By meticulously describing the environments in which these women operate, their agency and individuality become undeniably evident. Hafez's descriptions of the women's clothing, the food they share, and the sounds of their neighbourhoods, for instance, showcase the diverse cultural contexts that shape their lives, moving away from homogenizing stereotypes.

Consider Hafez's (2018) portrayal of the women's homes and the significance of food. She doesn't simply mention that a woman invited her for tea; she meticulously describes the aroma of cardamom infusing the air, the intricate patterns of the hand-embroidered cushions, and the taste of the sweet pastries offered with genuine hospitality. Details like these create a sense of intimacy and understanding, humanizing the individuals and highlighting the cultural richness that often goes unnoticed or is deliberately ignored in broader representations of Muslim women. As Fatima Mernissi (1994) articulates in *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Childhood*, the domestic sphere, often seen as a site of confinement, can also be a space of empowerment, creativity, and cultural preservation. By vividly depicting these domestic spaces, Hafez (2018) allows the

reader to appreciate the complexity and significance of these often-overlooked aspects of Muslim women's lives.

Hafez (2018) also utilizes sensory descriptions to highlight the communal spirit and shared experience that characterized the revolutionary fervour. She writes about the communal cooking and sharing of food, describing the aromas wafting through the square:

The scent of freshly baked bread mingled with the spicy fragrance of ta'meyya, creating a comforting and welcoming atmosphere. (Hafez, 2018, p.89)

This seemingly simple observation transcends culinary description; it illustrates the collective effort to sustain and support the revolution, emphasizing the mutual aid and solidarity that bound the protestors together, particularly the women who often took on significant roles in providing food and care. This detail not only humanizes the revolutionaries but also highlights the crucial role women played in maintaining the movement's momentum.

The sensory details also serve to expose the complexities of gender dynamics within the revolution. While the women of the Midan participated in a collective struggle for freedom and democracy, they also negotiated unique challenges stemming from societal expectations and gender-based violence. Hafez (2018) describes the anxieties women faced navigating the crowded and often chaotic environment:

“I could feel the eyes of men on me as I moved through the crowd, a constant reminder of my vulnerability”. (Hafez, 2018, p. 38).

This acute awareness of being watched, of existing under the male gaze, underscores the subtle but persistent challenges women faced in asserting their presence and participating fully in the revolution. The feeling of vulnerability is palpable, reinforcing the point that the fight for democracy was not solely about political change, but also about challenging ingrained patriarchal structures within society.

Moreover, Hafez utilizes sensory details to emphasize the emotional landscape of the women she interviews. The tone of voice, the body language, and even the silences are carefully noted, adding layers of meaning to their words. For example, when describing one woman's experience of police brutality, Hafez notes, "Her voice trembled as she recounted the story, her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and anger". (Hafez, 2018, p.). This observation goes beyond the simple recounting of events; it captures the enduring emotional impact of the trauma, allowing the reader to connect with the woman's pain and resilience on a deeper, more personal level. By layering these sensory details, Hafez underscores the lasting psychological effects of the revolution and the personal sacrifices made by the women who participated.

Furthermore, the sensory details often reveal the challenges and complexities faced by Muslim women in navigating societal and political landscapes. The contrast between the vibrant, lively sensory world of their communities and the harsh realities of political oppression or social injustice is often starkly portrayed. The aforementioned description of Tahrir Square, for example, juxtaposes the "sweet scent of shisha" with the "acrid smell of tear gas," highlighting the constant tension between normalcy and violence that these women endured. Similarly, descriptions of the physical and emotional toll of protesting, the fear of surveillance, and the frustration of facing patriarchal structures are often conveyed through sensory details that resonate deeply with the reader. The

smell of sweat and exhaustion after a long day of marching, the burning sensation in the eyes from tear gas, the constant fear of being harassed - these sensory experiences become powerful symbols of the women's resilience and their struggle for agency and equality.

2.8. CONCLUSION

This chapter explored how Sherine Hafez masterfully employs a range of artistic strategies, including a distinctive narrative voice, compelling visual rhetoric, and vivid descriptive language. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted the critical interplay of autobiographical truth and memory, demonstrating how these elements collectively render the genre of biographical memoirs uniquely effective in narrating the nuanced and multifaceted lived experiences of Muslim women. By leveraging these powerful artistic tools, Hafez's work not only provides authentic and insightful portrayals but also empowers the genre to offer a rich, subjective lens through which the complexities and realities of Muslim women's lives are resonantly conveyed, moving beyond simplistic narratives.

CHAPTER THREE

FORMS OF GENDERED CONFLICTS IN ISLAMIC SOCIETY AS PRESENTED IN SHERINE HAFEZ BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

3.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the multifaceted dimensions of gendered conflicts as vividly portrayed in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*. Drawing upon the lived experiences recounted within the text, it meticulously examines how various forms of patriarchal oppression manifest, including but not limited to, instances of sexual violence, the systematic restriction of political representation, pervasive physical violence, and the debilitating impact of patriarchal interpretations of religious texts. By analyzing these particular manifestations, this chapter seeks to illuminate the pervasive challenges faced by women within the socio-political landscape depicted, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which gender inequality is perpetuated and resisted.

In her biographical memoir *Women of the Midan*, Sherine Hafez explores the complexities of gendered conflicts within Islamic societies through the lens of Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism seeks to reclaim women's rights while respecting Islamic teachings and traditions, emphasizing that gender equality can be compatible with Islam (Moghadam, 2002). Hafez's work illustrates how women in Egypt navigate societal expectations and personal aspirations amidst cultural and political upheaval. As Hafez notes, "Women are not just victims; they are agents of change and voices of resistance" (Hafez, 2018, p. 25). This perspective resonates with the critical literature surrounding gender conflicts in Islamic contexts, which suggests that women often face both social and institutional barriers that limit their autonomy and rights (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

In interviews, many women expressed their struggles, with Amina stating, "We are told what to wear and how to act, but we have our own dreams and desires" (Hafez, 2018, p. 78). These accounts exemplify the tensions between traditional views of womanhood and the pursuit of personal agency, aligning with Islamic feminism's call for a reinterpretation of gender roles that honors both faith and freedom (Badran, 2005). Through Hafez's narrative, we gain insight into the emotional and practical implications of gendered conflicts, revealing the resilience of women who strive for equality within the frameworks of their cultural identities.

The complexities of gendered conflicts within Islamic societies therefore emerge as a central theme reflecting the intersection of culture, politics, and identity, particularly focusing on how gendered conflicts are not merely personal struggles but systemic issues rooted in patriarchal interpretations of Islam and societal expectations (Hafez, 2018). Scholars such as Mernissi (1991) have noted that this intersection of gender and political dynamics often leads to a dual marginalization of women in Islamic contexts,

whereby their roles are restricted by both patriarchal societal norms and political authoritarianism. Hafez deftly captures these tensions, illuminating the resilience of women who navigate these conflicts while simultaneously challenging the narratives imposed upon them. This chapter analyzes the forms of gendered conflicts depicted in Hafez's work, drawing parallels with existing scholarly discourse to highlight the enduring struggle for women's rights and identity in contemporary Islamic societies.

At the outset, it is essential to understand the context in which Hafez's (2018) narratives unfold. The Arab Spring marked a significant socio-political shift in the Middle East, yet it also exposed enduring patriarchal structures that affect women's roles in public life. Hafez (2018) emphasizes how these structures manifest in the ways women engage with and are affected by the revolutionary movement. For example, during the protests, women faced both empowerment and repression. Hafez elaborates on this duality when she observes that, "the street became a space for women to reclaim their agency, yet it simultaneously revealed the pervasive violence and misogyny that dictated their experience" (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This observation underscores the fundamental contradiction faced by women who strive for equality while negotiating a hostile environment.

3.2. Sexual violence

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 were heralded as a beacon of hope for democracy and social change. However, the revolutionary spaces, particularly Tahrir Square in Egypt, also became sites of intense violence, with sexual assault emerging as a terrifying tool of oppression targeting women. Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir provides crucial firsthand accounts revealing the multifaceted ways in which Muslim

women experienced sexual violence amidst the chaos and promise of the revolution. These experiences were not mere random acts but were deeply intertwined with the shifting gender dynamics, political power struggles, and existing patriarchal structures of Egyptian society. Examining Hafez's (2018) analyses and the harrowing stories shared by her participants, we can understand how sexual violence became a weapon, used to silence, intimidate, and ultimately exclude women from the public sphere.

One of the most prevalent forms of violence women experienced in the Midan was collective sexual assault, frequently perpetrated by mobs of men. These attacks, often carried out under the guise of revolutionary fervour or the breakdown of law and order, were deliberately orchestrated to instill fear and curtail women's participation. As one of Hafez's interviewees, Laila, recounts, "They would surround us, and they would rip off our clothes. It was like a pack of wolves in the middle of Tahrir" (Hafez, 2018, p. 123). This gruesome depiction highlights the calculated dehumanization of women, reduced to mere bodies subjected to the whims of a mob. The collective nature of these assaults further exacerbated the trauma, leaving survivors with intense feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness. The anonymity afforded by the crowd not only shielded the perpetrators but also amplified their sense of impunity, demonstrating the breakdown of social accountability within the revolutionary context. This also demonstrated the shift in power, where the men took control of the spaces, taking this as an opportunity to exert violence towards women.

The political dimensions of sexual violence are undeniable. These attacks were not solely about individual depravity; they served as a tactic to undermine the revolutionary efforts of women. These attacks often targeted women who were politically active,

vocal, and visible in the protests, effectively silencing their voices. Another participant, Sarah, reflects on the feeling of being targeted, stating,

“It was as if they wanted to punish us for being present, for breaking the rules, for challenging them” (Hafez, 2018, p. 147).

This statement reveals that sexual violence was employed as a form of political control, a deliberate act to push women back into the confines of the domestic sphere. By creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity in public spaces, perpetrators sought to reinforce existing patriarchal norms and limit women’s participation in the revolution’s most crucial moment. Hafez (2018) suggests that male dominated revolutionary movements were not accepting of any political power or agency that women had gained as a result of their contribution to the movement. The backlash of these movements led to using sexual violence as a method of retaliation for women’s participation.

Further, Hafez (2018) underscores how pre-existing societal attitudes and ideologies regarding Muslim women’s bodies and sexuality contributed significantly to the prevalence of sexual violence. In a society with deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, women are often viewed as the embodiment of family honor. Therefore, sexual assault, particularly in public places, is often seen as a violation not just of the individual but also of her family and community. This perception is evident in the experiences of another of the women interviewed by Hafez, Amal, who recounts that “after that attack, I couldn’t walk in the street without feeling shame, without feeling like I was dirty” (Hafez, 2018, p. 159). The shame and stigma associated with sexual violence can be incredibly isolating and can discourage women from speaking out against their experiences, further perpetuating the cycle of impunity. This highlights how existing patriarchal structures were weaponized to justify and normalize sexual attacks.

Moreover, the lack of effective institutional mechanisms to address sexual violence for Muslim women during the revolution further exacerbated the problem. The existing legal framework proved inadequate, and there was a general climate of impunity that shielded perpetrators from accountability. This lack of support left women feeling even more vulnerable and isolated, highlighting the systemic failure to protect their basic human rights. The revolution, which began with the promise of liberating all citizens, ended up revealing the limitations of its commitment to gender equality. The absence of a strong support system also led to women feeling like there was nowhere to report these crimes, and little to no chances of having their attackers held accountable.

Hafez's (2018) exploration of sexual violence as a weapon of oppression illustrates a critical form of gendered conflict. During the protests, women were subjected to physical and psychological violence, exacerbating their challenges in the fight for their rights. She remarks,

“The violence inflicted on women during the protests was a stark reminder that the struggle for freedom must also encompass the battle against sexual violence” (Hafez, 2018, p. 102).

This notion resonates with the findings of feminist theorist Elizabeth McAlister, who elaborates on how sexual violence is utilized strategically to silence dissent and reinforce social hierarchies (McAlister, 2018, p. 230). In highlighting this intersection, Hafez situates women's bodies as both battlegrounds and symbols of resistance, as illustrated below:

Samira described the abuse and violence she experienced as a result of her participation in the protests. “They spat at us, threw water on our bodies and

electrocuted us, kicked us in our faces with their shoes. They wanted us to regret ever having participated in the protests”. In custody, Samira Ibrahim’s body became an instrument of inflicting shame and humiliation. Her humiliation was so utterly painful that she repeatedly prayed she would die. As she recollected these hours, she was unable to stop herself from weeping, her voice trembling with emotion. (2018.p. 214)

Notably, the accounts presented by Hafez (2018) offer a visceral understanding of how sexual violence is not merely an act of physical aggression but a tool employed within broader gendered conflicts. One woman, Yasmin, recounted her experience during protests, “I felt my body was not my own, even in the space of rebellion. The fear of being violated overshadowed my desire for freedom” (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This testimony illustrates the insidious nature of sexual violence as it intersects with political turmoil, rendering women’s bodies sites of conflict and control. Another woman confessed of the awful virginity test as illustrated below:

First, she was taken to a room (as were the other six young women who were detained) where she was told to undress so the prison warden, a woman, could conduct a search. This body search was to take place in front of a big window and a door that led to a hallway, where numbers of soldiers and officers could clearly see into the room. Samira described the laughter and the invasive stares at her nakedness, as if “they were having a party with me (my nakedness).” When all their bodies were strip-searched, all the girls were made to sit on the ground and to group themselves by whether they were married women or anisat (young unmarried women or virgins). Samira joined the anisat when her name was called once more so she could take a virginity test. An officer dressed in

uniform waited to conduct the test. When she would not comply, she was electrocuted again. Eventually, she did submit to the exam, which was an extremely painful experience. (Hafez, 2018, p.235)

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In her analysis, it is notable that sexual violence is often weaponized against Muslim women to maintain patriarchal structures within Islamic societies. Hafez remarks, “we are told to be the bearers of culture, yet our stories are erased by the very narratives we uphold” (2018, p. 134). Elsewhere she adds, “the protective narratives of honour and shame surrounding Muslim women often normalize their subjugation under the guise of cultural preservation” (2018, p. 138). This encapsulates the tension between cultural identity and the individual experiences of women, where their narratives often become subordinated to broader cultural constructs. In this sense, Hafez (2018) critiques a

patriarchal society that not only inflicts violence but also silences the voices of those it victimizes. One woman interviewed, Zainab, reveals,

“Every day, I walk the streets, my heart gripped by fear. The very existence of my body becomes a battleground” (Hafez 2018, p. 78).

This explains the normalized sexual violence threat that Muslim women encounter in public spaces. The metaphor of the body as a “battleground” underline both the physical and psychological toll of sexual violence. It showcases how societal structures and gendered norms render women vulnerable, navigating an environment where their bodies are not merely theirs, but become subjects of conflict and control.

Furthermore, Hafez (2018) paints a chilling picture of the systemic nature of sexual violence. She conveys the experiences of women who express how “the law protects the perpetrators while leaving us in the shadows” (2018, p. 112). This highlights the inadequacies of legal frameworks and institutional support for victims of sexual violence. It underscores a grim reality where women often find themselves powerless, grappling with a justice system that is either indifferent or complicit in the perpetuation of violence against them. This perspective aligns with the scholarly work of Elizabeth Fernea (1985), who discusses how honour codes in many Middle Eastern societies contribute to a culture of sexual violence against Muslim women, effectively limiting their autonomy and agency. Ahmed (1992) further determined that cultural practices intertwine with religious interpretations to sanction forms of violence against Muslim women. Sexual violence serves to reinforce gender hierarchies, as it is often justified through misinterpretations of religious texts and cultural traditions. This observation complements Hafez’s (2018) findings, as she expresses the tension between modernity

and tradition in her interviews, where many women simultaneously embrace feminist ideals while grappling with the expectations imposed by their community.

Moreover, the work of Marnia Lazreg (2009) further contextualizes sexual violence conflicts, arguing that the state and religious institutions often collaborate to codify women's roles in ways that perpetuate violence. Lazreg asserts, "The state's involvement creates a discursive space where women's bodies become battlegrounds for cultural and political conflicts" (2009, p. 29). Through Hafez's (2018) narrative lens, we see this dynamic play out in the reflective confessions of women who faced harassment not only from individual perpetrators but also from systemic structures that failed to protect them. The case of the "girl in the blue bra," as she was later called in the media, is emblematic of how women's bodies are rendered vulnerable, debilitated, feminized, objectified, and sexualized. While public discourse was woven around this body to strategically legitimate the state's use of brute force, women's groups adopted the image of the gendered, pale, young body of the fallen protestor as an iconic metaphor representing the inviolability of all Egyptian women's bodies. The release of the photos of the "blue-bra girl" contrasted dramatically with SCAF's repeated denials of the use of violence against the Egyptian people (Hafez, 2018, p.237)

Notably, the pervasive culture of sexual violence is evident, with many women describing their experiences in the face of a collective struggle. Amina, another interviewee, stated,

"For us, every march became a double battle - against oppression and against being reduced to mere objects" (Hafez, 2018, p. 154).

The notion of collective resilience emerges strongly in Hafez's (2018) work, suggesting that while sexual violence is a weapon of gendered conflict, it also spurs solidarity among women seeking to reclaim their agency. This collective resistance is echoed in the work of bell hooks (1990), who calls for a reimagining of femininity that transcends victimhood, emphasizing empowerment through solidarity and mutual support among women. Hafez's interviews reflect this sentiment, as the women share moments of solidarity during protests that uplifted their spirits, challenging the narrative that they are solely victims of violence.

3.3. The restricted political representation of Muslim women

One of the key ways religion was employed to restrict women's political agency was through the selective interpretation and enforcement of religious texts and traditions. Hafez (2018) demonstrates how certain conservative interpretations of Islam were weaponized to curtail women's roles in the public sphere, "They [Islamists] want us to be 'good Muslim women,' which means staying at home and not being in the streets or in politics because the Quran says so" (2018, p. 87). This quote reveals the pervasive narrative that a woman's primary place is within the domestic realm, a view bolstered by skewed religious arguments that were subsequently used to justify their exclusion from political power. The perceived incongruity between political activism and piety, a construction often imposed upon women, placed them in a double bind: either embrace a political role and risk being branded as "un-Islamic" or remain within the confines of the domestic sphere, thereby forfeiting their political aspirations.

Furthermore, deeply ingrained patriarchal structures further compounded these religious limitations. While women participated prominently in the protests, Hafez (2018) reveals that many were relegated to support roles. They provided logistical

support, medical assistance, and food, vital to the movement's success, but were often excluded from the center of political decision-making. As Hafez (2018) argues, "Even when they are active in the revolution, it is not always acknowledged or perceived as political activism, but rather seen as an extension of their nurturing role as 'mothers of the revolution' or 'sisters of the revolution.'" (2018, p. 99). This underscores how patriarchal norms, assigning women to caregiving roles, extended into the revolutionary space, thus limiting their ability to claim genuine political leadership or influence. This marginalization was not only about direct exclusion but also about the normalization of women in supporting roles, subtly preventing them from taking center stage in discussions about the country's future.

The representation of Muslim women in political arenas often reflects broader sociocultural narratives that define their roles strictly within familial and domestic domains. As Hafez (2018) articulates, women activists are frequently viewed as secondary to male leaders, which exacerbates gendered conflicts. This limited representation is not merely a product of individual prejudice but is deeply embedded in structures of power that privilege male voices over female ones. According to Ahmed (2017), "In many parts of the Middle East, women's contributions to societal movements remain invisible, often neatly packaged as supportive rather than transformative." This critical perspective corroborates Hafez's findings, illustrating how gender biases persist in shaping narratives around political activism.

Hafez's (2018) work also reveals the paradoxes that arise when women strive for political representation yet find themselves trapped in a discourse that simultaneously empowers and undermines them. One woman interviewed expressed her frustration: "I marched alongside my brothers, but back home, I am still expected to just cook and

care for the children. Where is our space in the revolution?” (2018, p.59). This sentiment reflects a pervasive conflict experienced by many women in Islamic societies, where participation in political movements does not always translate into meaningful representation or progress in women’s rights.

The interplay of religion and patriarchy manifested particularly clearly in the backlash women faced as they challenged the status quo. Those women who actively pushed for political representation faced open hostility and harassment, often couched in religious justifications, “they called us names, saying we were not ‘good women’ because we were out in the streets with men,” an activist reports (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This exemplifies how patriarchal norms intertwining with religious dogma worked to punish women who dared to step outside prescribed boundaries. Any attempts to claim independence or political standing were met with character assassinations, threats, and intimidation, all of which were intended to silence their voices and maintain male dominance. This fusion of religious and patriarchal forces made women’s political participation a particularly precarious and often dangerous endeavor.

Moreover, post-revolution, particularly when Islamist parties gained political traction through elections, their platforms often included social policies aimed at restricting Muslim women’s rights further, further illustrating the political consequences of religion and patriarchy's intertwined control. Hafez highlights how women activists were wary of “the rise of the Brotherhood because they could see that their rhetoric was geared towards restricting women and limiting our rights” (2018, p.145). The growing threat of the implementation of Sharia law, with its various interpretations regarding gender roles and women’s rights, served as a constant reminder to women that any political gains they made during the revolution were fragile and could easily be reversed.

Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir emphasizes that the political landscape in Egypt was fraught with gender biases and cultural stereotypes. Many women who participated actively in the revolution found their contributions marginalized or overlooked. Hafez (2018) notes that "despite their active roles, Muslim women were often rendered invisible in the political narratives, overshadowed by their male counterparts" (p. 93). This marginalization is indicative of a deeper conflict that intertwines gender and power in Islamic societies, where women often navigate a patriarchal structure that restricts their agency. Hafez observes the continuous push for change that the women initiated in the aftermath of the revolution when she notes that:

In addition to directly opposing the injustices of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, Muslim women chose to negotiate the legal and disciplinary modes of control by holding themselves up to the highest possible standards set by the law and by patriarchal, cultural, and religious values. Instead of opposing patriarchal expectations, these women capitalized on the metaphorical and iconic positioning of women as heads. They deliberately marked their feminine bodies to counter the anti-revolutionary rhetoric of the military and state media, which only landed them in trouble (2018, P.240).

The conflicting images of Muslim women as both sites of honor and as vehicles of shame further complicate their political representation. Scholars such as Moghissi (2005) argue that these societal narratives perpetuate a form of gendered conflict, leading to a duality in women's roles—where they are expected to embody traditional values while being involved in modern political activism. This paradox is reflected in Hafez's interviews, where women expressed feelings of empowerment through activism, yet recognized societal constraints that limited their efficacy. One participant

stated, “I felt like a soldier in the revolution, but at home, I was still just a daughter and a wife expected to conform to traditional roles” (Hafez, 2018, p. 115).

The challenges faced by the Muslim women were not only institutional but also cultural. Hafez (2018) articulates how the societal expectations of Muslim women as “the bearers of virtue” creates a dichotomy where women’s political involvement is often scrutinized. One interviewee exemplifies this when she observes that, “The public space is a battlefield where my identity as a Muslim woman is constantly being judged” (Hafez, 2018, p. 132). This struggle reflects wider gendered conflicts embedded in Islamic societies whereby women’s empowerment is seen as a direct challenge to traditional norms.

Women themselves, however, are not unfamiliar with these semiotics of gender as they chose to challenge their imposed boundaries from within these norms. They strategically used notions of purity, piety, and dedication to the family to affirm the legitimacy of their public presence. Numbers of women came to Tahrir with their children and their husbands. The presence of women and children was clearly essential for emphasizing the patriarchal validity of the protestors against the head of the nation, who was perceived as a tyrant or as a father who relinquished his fatherly obligations (p.233)

Moreover, Hafez’s (2018) critical examination of the role of gender in political representation links to the broader discourse on women’s rights in the Middle East. As Hirshkind (2011) points out, “Gendered conflicts emerge from the intersection of Islamic identity and modernity, challenging the notion that Islam is inherently oppressive to women.” Although some view modernization as liberating, it is crucial to acknowledge that the political engagement of women in movements like the Egyptian

revolution may simultaneously provoke backlash, retrenching conservatism that limits their representation.

Furthermore, the backlash against women's political agency often manifests in renewed patriarchal controls. Feminist scholar Yuval-Davis (2011) articulates this as a form of "gendered nationalism," where women's bodies and roles are mobilized to serve national interests while their political autonomy is systematically curtailed. In the context of Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, this concept rings true: the political struggles faced by women are interwoven with national narratives that view women as bearers of cultural and moral values rather than as active political agents.

The testimonies collected by Hafez illuminate the realities of gendered conflicts within political configurations, revealing the tension between public activism and private responsibilities. Another interviewed woman shared, "When we protested, we were told we were breaking social norms. But why is it normal for men to decide our fate?" (Hafez, 2018). This provocation brings to the forefront the inherent contradictions within a society that claims to honor equality while systematically disenfranchising half of its population

Moreover, the intersectionality of race, class, and gender further complicates the landscape of political representation for Muslim women. As Crenshaw (1991) argues, women of diverse backgrounds encounter varied forms of discrimination and exclusion, which is exacerbated in contexts where economic conditions are precarious, and political instability reigns. Hafez acknowledges this complexity, noting that the experiences of women are not monolithic and that their struggles are compounded by other systemic inequalities.

The interpretation of Islamic religious texts has long been a contentious issue, particularly concerning its impact on women in Islamic societies. In her biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, Hafez highlights how these interpretations create various forms of gendered conflict. Hafez (2018) provides a deep exploration of how traditional interpretations of Islamic texts often marginalize women. She points out that many religious leaders interpret texts in ways that reinforce patriarchal norms, which can lead to the oppression of women. For example, one of the women interviewed, Fatima, expresses how she feels limited by these interpretations. She states, “I often find myself questioning how a religion meant to empower me has been used against me” (Hafez, 2018, p. 75). This sentiment echoes across many narratives within Hafez’s work, revealing a conflict where women’s voices are often silenced.

Such skewed interpretations can create a divide between men and women, as they distort religious teachings to establish control over women’s lives. Ahmed (1992) has discussed how patriarchal interpretations of Islam can lead to the exclusion of women from religious and public life. Hafez supports this viewpoint by illustrating the experiences of women who are often relegated to secondary roles in both family and society. For instance, Rahima, another interviewee, shares how her husband used religious texts to justify limiting her freedom: “He says the Quran tells him to lead, and I should follow without question” (Hafez, 2011, p. 102). This exposes how selective interpretations of Islam can enforce gender roles that are harmful to women.

3.4. The patriarchal interpretation of the islam religious texts

At its core, Islamic feminism seeks to highlight the rights of women within an Islamic framework. It advocates for a reinterpretation of religious texts, focusing on the broader

themes of justice, equality, and respect that are also found in Islam. Hafez presents several women's stories in *Women of the Midan*, showcasing how their experiences reflect the challenges of navigating these conflicting interpretations. As Hafez quotes one woman, "We are not against our faith; we want to find our place within it" (2018, p. 55). This statement encapsulates the struggle many Muslim women face: reconciling their identities as believers with their aspirations for equality.

In Hafez's work, the interpretation of Islamic texts often acts as a catalyst for gendered conflicts. Traditional interpretations can create rigid roles for Muslim women, limiting their participation in public and private life. For instance, Hafez notes that some men in their communities' view women's activism as a threat to their authority. One woman confesses during an interview, "When I speak up, I feel I am challenging not just my family but our whole culture. They say I am not a good Muslim" (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This fear serves to reinforce existing power dynamics and silence voices that seek change. She also notes this about Islam,

I find that Islam views women and men in a unified sense, with clearly defined roles for each. To her, while women are the "indirect builders," the building is entrusted to men. AlGhazali attributes the debate over women's issues and rights to be caused by the disruptive forces of the West, which she describes as a conspiracy (2018.p.33).

Scholars have noted how patriarchal interpretations of Islam can lead to systemic inequalities. As Wadud argues, "The readings of religious texts have historically neglected the female perspective, thereby perpetuating gender discrimination" (1999, p. 21). This assertion aligns with the experiences shared by the women in Hafez's

memoir, who often feel marginalized not just by their communities but also by interpretations of Islam that do not honour their rights or voices.

The importance of community in these narratives cannot be overstated. Hafez (2018) illustrates how collective action among women can lead to empowerment. Through grassroots movements, women begin to challenge traditional interpretations and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of their faith. One woman expressed, “When we stand together, we feel strong. We re-interpret our faith in ways that support us” (Hafez, 2012, p. 142). This unification among women can act as a counterbalance to patriarchal interpretations, demonstrating the potential for religious texts to be seen through a feminist lens.

Moreover, Islamic feminism encourages a critique of how history has shaped contemporary gender roles. Hafez illustrates how political contexts, such as the Arab Spring, have affected women’s visibility and agency. The uprising created a space where women’s voices gained attention, yet many women reported returning home to face the consequences of stepping outside traditional norms. One woman firmly stated, “We fought for change, but when we returned, the same expectations and rules awaited us” (Hafez, 2018, p. 178). This experience illustrates the complex relationship between activism and cultural expectations.

Hafez’s (2018) exploration of women’s experiences of Muslim women reveal how interpretations of religious texts can shape societal attitudes towards women. She notes that many women feel trapped by the rigid definitions of their roles as dictated by religious leaders. For example, Hafez (2018) writes, “Many women spoke about feeling limited by the roles assigned to them by religious interpretations” (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This sentiment reflects a broader trend noted by scholars, such as Mernissi (1991), who

argues that traditional interpretations of Islam often serve to marginalize women and restrict their freedoms.

One crucial aspect of this gendered conflict is the use of religious texts to justify male authority. Hafez captures this when she shares the words of one interviewed woman, who states, “Whenever I tried to express my opinion, I was reminded that men have the final say because of our religious texts” (Hafez, 2018, p. 90). This statement highlights how interpretations of Islam can empower men while silencing women’s voices. Ahmed (1992) supports this view by stating that many interpretations of Islam have historically prioritized male experiences and sidelined women’s voices.

Additionally, Hafez (2018) discusses how Muslim women’s identities are often constructed through the lens of modesty and obedience as prescribed by religious texts. One interviewee confesses, “I feel that my worth is tied to how well I adhere to these ideals of modesty, as defined by men” (Hafez, 2018, p. 102). This illustrates the internal conflict faced by many women in trying to conform to social expectations based on religious interpretations. Scholars such as Al-Azmeh (1993) argue that such expectations reinforce a sense of inferiority among women, further solidifying their position in a gendered hierarchy.

Moreover, the conflicting interpretations within Islam create a battleground over women’s rights. Hafez presents the voices of women who strive to reclaim their narratives, indicating a struggle against the patriarchal interpretations of Islam. One woman passionately states, “We must challenge these interpretations and show that Islam, at its core, values justice for all, including women” (Hafez, 2011, p. 150). This resistance echoes the thoughts of other feminist scholars, such as Badran (2009), who

emphasize the need for a re-examination of religious texts to create a more equitable understanding of women's rights in Islam.

The interviews in *Women of the Midan* further illustrate the gendered conflict arising from religious interpretations. One woman, Fatima, confesses, "I love my religion, but sometimes I feel that men use it to justify their control over us" (Hafez, 2018, p. 89). This statement reflects a common feeling among the women Hafez interviewed, who often see religious texts being wielded as tools of oppression rather than empowerment. Another woman, Layla, shares her struggle with familial expectations, saying, "Every time I speak up, I am reminded that a woman should stay silent and obedient" (Hafez, 2018, p. 132). Layla's words highlight the societal pressures that often stem from patriarchal interpretations of religious teachings.

Other scholars have also examined the theme of gendered conflict in relation to Islamic texts. Ibrahim argues, that "the selective interpretation of religious texts often reinforces patriarchal structures within society, limiting women's rights and freedoms" (2015). This aligns with Hafez's assertions in her biographical memoir, emphasizing that interpretations of Islam can be manipulated to maintain existing power dynamics. Moreover, Mahmood notes that "the regulation of women's behaviour in the public sphere is often justified through a particular reading of Islamic texts" (Mahmood, 2005). This further complicates the issue of women's agency within Islamic societies, showing that the conflict is not only about the texts themselves but also about how they are used to control women.

3.5. Limited access to education and employment for Muslim women

Sherine Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, offers a deep and personal examination of gendered conflicts faced by women in Islamic societies, particularly focusing on issues of education and employment. Guided by the tenets of Islamic feminism, this section discusses how limited access to education and employment translates into broader social conflicts for women in these contexts.

Islamic feminism seeks to address gender inequality from an Islamic perspective, emphasizing the need to reinterpret religious texts in ways that promote women's rights. This perspective allows for a unique understanding of how education and employment access or the lack thereof—can create a cycle of oppression for women in many Muslim societies. As Hafez (2018) illustrates through her interviews, women often feel trapped between cultural expectations and their aspirations for personal and professional growth.

Hafez (2018) recounts the stories of several women who struggle to find their place in society. Many express a desire for education, viewing it as essential for empowerment. One interviewed woman, Fatima, states, "If they give us education, we can change our lives" (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). This sentiment echoes the views of other scholars, such as Mernissi (1996), who argues that education is a crucial tool for women to challenge patriarchal structures. However, societal norms often limit these opportunities, framing women's roles primarily as caretakers. This is further illustrated by Hafez as indicated below;

State institutions, such as schools, the military, and hospitals, shape subjectivities through inculcating systems of discipline and obedience. Specific ideologies among the state organizational structure inculcate particular forms of subjectivity as well. These forms of subjectivity, although paralleling state organizations in their ability to indoctrinate and mobilize, challenge state

authority and work to trouble state hegemony. Gender dynamics and gender ideology within the organization best illustrate how these processes of subject formation underlie matrices of organization by denying Muslim women education. (2018, p.267).

The barriers to employment that women face are intimately tied to their educational backgrounds. Hafez describes the disillusionment of a young woman named Layla, who, despite having a degree, finds herself unable to secure a job. She reflects, “I have worked so hard, but they say the job is for men” (Hafez, 2011, p. 102). This type of gender bias reinforces the idea that women’s contributions are undervalued, perpetuating economic dependency and hindering societal progress.

Women’s limited access to education and employment in Islamic societies can be viewed as a manifestation of gendered conflict. According to Abu-Lughod (2013), when women are excluded from educational and professional opportunities, it creates a power imbalance that favours men. This not only affects the economic stability of families but also restricts women’s agency in making decisions about their lives.

Moreover, Hafez highlights the psychological impact of these social conflicts. Women often experience feelings of inadequacy and frustration as they navigate a system designed to limit their potential. One interviewee, Amina, shares her struggles: “I feel invisible. They tell us to be strong, yet they do not give us the chance to show it” (Hafez, 2018, p. 160). This emotional toll further complicates their ability to advocate for their rights and seek change.

Islamic feminism emphasizes that empowerment begins with education, as it allows women to assert their rights within a framework that respects their faith. Hafez’s work

suggests a need for a paradigm shift, a reimagining of cultural and religious narratives that have traditionally sidelined women. By emphasizing education and equal access to employment, women can begin to challenge the norms that confine them. In the context of Islamic societies, access to education and employment often highlights deeper gendered conflicts. Hafez's (2018) Biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, provides important perspectives on how these barriers affect women in Egypt.

Islamic feminism argues for the rights of women within the Islamic framework, advocating for a reinterpretation of gender roles based on equality and justice (Badran, 2005). Hafez's (2018) work aligns with these principles, illustrating how cultural and religious interpretations can sometimes restrict women's opportunities. Women in her memoir often express feelings of frustration due to societal expectations that limit their potential. For example, one participant states, "I was told I should focus on being a good wife, not on my studies. It hurt to know that my dreams were put aside" (Hafez, 2018, p. 45). Such statements reveal how deeply ingrained cultural beliefs can create conflicts between personal aspirations and prescribed roles.

Education is a significant factor for women seeking independence and empowerment. According to Hafez, women in her memoir highlight the crucial role of education in their lives. One woman expressed, "Without education, I feel trapped. I want to learn and contribute, but it feels impossible" (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This sentiment reflects the idea that education is not just a personal milestone but a means to challenge societal constraints. Islamic feminism supports this view, advocating that education is a fundamental right for women, as it empowers them to engage with and reshape their communities (Mernissi, 1991). Despite the recognized importance of education, many women still face barriers. Hafez (2018) describes instances where families prioritize

boys' education over girls', perpetuating feelings of inferiority and resentment. One woman shared, "Every time my brother got new books while I stayed home, it hurt. I felt invisible" (Hafez, 2018, p. 78). This showcases how limited education directly correlates with broader gender inequalities, emphasizing the need for societal change.

Emphasizing the need to dismantle these entrenched views. Abu Lughod (2013) points out that women's empowerment must come from within communities, advocating for change that honours cultural values while promoting equality. This perspective aligns with the Islamic feminist approach, which seeks to harmonize traditional beliefs with modern rights for women.

The voices captured in Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, alongside critical literature from scholars, underscore that limited access to education and employment in Islamic societies creates profound gendered conflicts. These conflicts do not just affect individual women; they impact families and communities, perpetuating cycles of inequality. The testimonies from women in "Women of the Midan" illustrate the urgent need for reform—both in education and employment practices—as foundational to achieving gender equality.

The consequences of limited access to education are further explored in Hafez's work. Women who are denied educational opportunities often find it challenging to secure employment. Amina shares, "Without education, I cannot find a job. My dreams feel like they are slipping away" (Hafez, 2018, p. 89). This observation aligns with wider research showing that women in many Islamic societies face barriers to work due to educational disparities. According to scholars like Moghadam (2003), "Economic participation is directly linked to educational attainment, and when women are denied education, their economic opportunities diminish" (p. 214). Thus, the conflict over

access to education directly influences women's employment prospects, reinforcing gender inequality.

Hafez also captures the internal and external conflicts women face when pursuing education and employment. Many women experience societal backlash for stepping outside traditional roles. For example, Samira recalls, "When I decided to return to school, my family stopped supporting me. They said education would ruin my chances of marriage" (Hafez, 2018, p. 132). This showcases the direct influence of cultural expectations on women's decisions to pursue education and career paths. Scholars like Kabeer (2005) have noted that this type of gendered conflict often leads women to choose between personal aspirations and societal acceptance (p. 87).

Another critical element in Hafez's memoir is the way women are often pitted against one another in the struggle for limited opportunities. The competition for spots in educational institutions and jobs creates a hostile environment where women may feel they need to undermine each other to succeed. As one interviewee points out, "Sometimes, I feel like I cannot trust other women because we are all fighting for the same chance" (Hafez, 2018, p. 105). This rivalry can exacerbate the conflict, illustrating that gendered issues are not only external but can also create divisions within the female community itself.

Access to education is a fundamental right that empowers individuals and opens doors to various opportunities. However, Hafez (2018) portrays a reality where many Muslim women in Islamic societies experience significant obstacles in accessing education. For example, one interviewed woman stated, "Education is often seen as unnecessary for girls; they are expected to focus on the home" (Hafez 2018, p. 112). This view reflects a broader societal attitude that prioritizes traditional roles over educational

advancement for women. In these contexts, religious texts are sometimes interpreted in ways that reinforce the belief that a woman's primary role should be in the household, limiting their educational prospects.

Critical literature on gendered conflict emphasizes the need to analyse the socioeconomic systems that perpetuate these barriers. Scholars have argued that the intersection of gender, class, and religion in many Islamic societies creates a unique condition that restricts women. Rahmani, for instance, notes, “Women face not only gender discrimination but also economic barriers that make it harder for them to pursue education and employment” (2020). This assertion highlights that women’s challenges are not simply the result of gender, but are also exacerbated by socioeconomic factors that limit their potential.

In Hafez’s (2018) biographical memoir, women frequently convey their aspirations but articulate the frustrations they feel due to the constraints placed upon them. One woman by the name Nusra confessed, “I dream of being a doctor, but everyone tells me it is too difficult for a girl to achieve that” (2019, p. 165). Such sentiments underscore the internal conflicts experienced by women when societal expectations clash with their ambitions. The pressure to conform to traditional roles can lead to a cycle of disillusionment and reduced self-efficacy among women, making them feel as though their dreams are unattainable.

Further, research has identified that the lack of access to education and employment is intertwined with broader issues of power and control in society. According to parameters set by religious and cultural leaders, women’s roles are often confined to domestic settings, a narrative that is deeply ingrained in many interpretations of religious texts. Scholars like Mattson argue that a feminist re-evaluation of religious

texts could enable a more equitable perspective on gender roles within Islam (2018). This point raises an important issue: how the reinterpretation of these texts can contribute to women's empowerment, both in education and employment.

The conflict between women's rights to education and employment and societal expectations creates personal dilemmas. The women interviewed in *Women of the Midan* often express feelings of frustration and helplessness. For instance, Nawal shares, "I want to be a doctor, but my family insists I focus on marriage." This personal conflict not only affects the women's aspirations but also contributes to a broader societal issue where women's potential remains untapped. According to Karam (2007), women's marginalization in education and employment reinforces their subordination and curtails their role in society. When women are denied opportunities, society suffers as a whole; these lost contributions hinder development and progress.

Islamic feminism posits that the Quran promotes gender equity, yet many women experience barriers that prevent them from attaining higher education and fulfilling careers. For instance, Hafez recounts the experiences of women who desire education but face familial and societal pressure to prioritize marriage over personal development. One woman, Amina, confesses, "My father told me that a good girl doesn't need an education; she just needs to find a husband" (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This statement highlights how patriarchal interpretations of Islam can diminish women's aspirations and limit their opportunities.

The framework of Islamic feminism encourages a re-examination of cultural practices that restrict women's education and labour. Scholars emphasize that women can reinterpret Islamic texts in ways that promote gender justice (Mahmood, 2005; Anwar, 2005). They argue that women's agency must be recognized not only within the context

of religion but also through socio-political engagement. Hafez illustrates this point when she discusses how women in the Midan organized themselves, defying traditional roles to assert their demands for equality and justice.

3.6. Patriarchal norms as a tool for gendered conflicts in Islamic societies

Patriarchal norms are deeply rooted in many societies, and they significantly affect women's lives, especially in Islamic contexts. Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, provides a rich exploration of these norms and how they contribute to gendered conflict against women. Through personal stories and interviews with women in Egypt, Hafez reveals the complexities of living within a patriarchal system and its impact on women's identity and agency.

One crucial way patriarchy fuels conflict is through the systematic control of female bodies and their movement within the public sphere. Hafez (2018) demonstrates this through the experiences of women who, while participating in the protests of the Egyptian revolution, faced persistent harassment and violence. The threat of sexual assault was wielded as a tool to discourage women from political participation. As one activist, Salwa, explained, "We were targeted especially as Muslim women. We were told that we didn't belong there, that we should go home and that we were only good for doing specific things" (Hafez, 2018, p. 136). This quote vividly portrays how patriarchal norms dictate acceptable female behavior, limiting women's ability to engage in politics and restricting their physical presence in public spaces. The harassment and violence are not merely individual acts of aggression, but rather manifestations of a larger system that sees women's bodies as sites of contention, and seeks to silence them through fear and intimidation. This control, therefore, becomes a

battleground, where women's resistance to these norms directly challenges the established patriarchal order, generating conflict.

Islamic feminism provides a framework for understanding and combating these conflicts. It encourages women to reclaim their voices and assert their rights within the context of their faith. Hafez (2018) captures this sentiment when she writes, "Our struggle is not just for ourselves but for all Muslim women who feel voiceless" (p. 154). This collective fight against patriarchal norms emphasizes solidarity among women, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

Furthermore, patriarchal norms perpetuate conflicts by rigidly defining and reinforcing specific gendered roles. The idea that women's primary responsibility lies in the domestic sphere, as wives and mothers, is a cornerstone of such norms. Hafez highlights how women who challenged these prescribed roles by actively participating in political life were often met with social condemnation. One interviewee's account exemplifies this, where she says, "They called us immoral, they said we were abandoning our families" (Hafez, 2018 p. 98). This illustrates how women's deviation from prescribed domesticity is viewed as a transgression, provoking social backlash and creating conflict between those who adhere to traditional roles and those who seek to redefine them. The struggle for women to break free from these limiting roles becomes a point of resistance, inevitably generating tension within families, communities, and the larger society. This resistance isn't just about equality, it is an active challenge to the status quo and a provocation of patriarchal power structures.

Moreover, the instrumentalization of religious dogma serves as another pivotal mechanism through which patriarchal norms fuel gendered conflicts. Hafez shows how certain religious interpretations are cherry-picked and manipulated to justify male

dominance and the subjugation of women. One particularly revealing account comes from a woman who was often told that “Our religion says you should stay at home, not protest in the streets” (Hafez, 2018, p. 145). This exemplifies how patriarchal interpretations of religious texts are weaponized to legitimize the exclusion of women from public life and political engagement. The resulting conflict stems from differing interpretations of faith, with patriarchal authorities leveraging their influence to enforce their rigid and often oppressive reading and women pushing for more inclusive understandings of faith and their rights within it. This clash of perspectives demonstrates how religious discourse becomes a site of gendered conflict, intertwined with wider power dynamics.

The strict control imposed on Muslim women’s mobility and public presence is as a result of patriarchal norms. In many Islamic societies, women are expected to primarily occupy the domestic sphere, their roles limited to wife, mother, and caretaker. This limitation of movement and public engagement directly impacts their ability to participate in decision-making processes, both within the family and in the wider community. While Hafez’s (2018) work focuses on the Egyptian context, the control over women’s presence in public spaces is

During the revolution, Muslim women’s presence in the Midan was often met with suspicion, with many perceiving them as “out of place” or as violating traditional gender roles. For example, in *Women of the Midan*, Hafez describes a situation in which some men voiced, “What are you doing here with us?” (2018, p.124). This illustrates how these pre-existing patriarchal norms attempted to confine women’s political participation and agency, and led to internal conflicts within the revolution about the “proper” role of a woman. Limiting women’s visibility, whether in political or everyday

spheres, effectively denies them agency and the ability to challenge power structures, thus contributing to conflict.

Further exacerbating these challenges, patriarchal norms often lead to the silencing of women's voices and experiences, especially in the public sphere. Hafez (2018) highlights the challenges women activists faced in gaining recognition for their contributions to the revolution. She points out how, despite their active presence and significant participation, men often claimed the revolutionary narrative and devalued women's efforts, pushing them to the sidelines. According to Hafez, "women's presence in the political square was still not fully recognized as equal to men's." (2018, p.155). This demonstrates how the patriarchy seeks to erase the accomplishments of women, leading to frustration and conflict as women struggle to be heard and acknowledged. This systematic silencing of female voices reinforces the idea that men's perspectives are inherently more valid, and therefore it perpetuates the cycle of gendered inequality and tension.

Moreover, patriarchal control over religious interpretations often serves to legitimize and reinforce gender inequalities in Islamic societies. Hafez details how some religious leaders during the revolution used selective interpretations of Islamic texts to justify women's subordination and curtail their political participation. She describes how some clerics, rather than addressing political issues, used their platforms to speak against the role of women in the public sphere. For instance, "they portrayed women who had participated in the protests as immoral and as undermining the stability of the family" (p.143). This selective quoting of scripture and religious traditions, to uphold gendered standards, is not unique to Egypt, and can be seen in many other Islamic societies. The use of religious authority to restrict women's rights and freedoms creates a cycle of

oppression which often fuels conflict as women resist these attempts to deny their autonomy. This religious justification is harmful to women and increases tension by giving the patriarchy a divine authority.

Hafez (2018) emphasizes that traditional patriarchal norms often limit women's participation in both public and political spheres. Hafez (2018) notes, "For many in our society, a woman's primary function is still viewed as that of a homemaker and nurturer" (p. 45). This perception creates a conflict for women who aspire to engage in activism and pursue careers.

The Muslim women in Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir embody the struggle against these patriarchal norms. They organize protests, speak out against injustices, and carve a space for themselves in a male-dominated society. Citing her interviewees, Hafez writes, "We are not just symbols; we have our own voices and dreams" (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This statement serves as a powerful reminder that women are not passive victims but active agents in their struggle for rights. Despite their activism, many women face harsh realities, such as sexual harassment and social ostracism. Hafez's memoir portrays how these challenges further illuminate the gendered conflicts rooted in societal expectations. "When we faced violence in the streets, many of us were told it was our fault for being there," reflected one participant (Hafez, 2018, p. 158). This blame reinforces the narrative that women should remain confined to traditional roles while also highlighting the dangers they confront when they step outside those boundaries.

From the analysis, it is evident that patriarchal values shape not only societal expectations but also personal beliefs among women. For instance, Hafez writes about women who often internalize the idea that their worth is tied to their adherence to

traditional roles as mothers and wives. One woman interviewed by Hafez stated, “Every time I achieve something for myself, I feel like I am betraying my family” (Hafez, 2018, p. 88). This sentiment showcases how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms create conflict within women themselves, as they struggle between personal aspirations and societal expectations.

Moreover, gendered conflicts in Islamic societies often arise from the expectations placed on women. Hafez (2018) portrays these conflicts as rooted in societal norms that dictate how women should behave. Many interviewed women expressed their frustrations with these norms. One woman shared her experience: “People expect us to stay quiet and let the men lead. But I want to make my own choices” (Hafez, 2018, p. 101). This highlights the internal struggles women face, living in a society that often limits their agency.

Critical literature on gendered conflicts elaborates further on the impact of such patriarchal norms. Feroza (2019) argues that these norms not only restrict women’s opportunities but also create a cycle of oppression that perpetuates gendered violence. This aligns with Hafez’s findings, as the women she interviewed discussed experiences of harassment and violence during and after the protests, illustrating how patriarchal constructs morph into conflict scenarios. Scholars have noted that these norms can create a hostile environment for women, restricting their freedom and opportunities. As Moghissi (2004) points out, “In many Islamic societies, traditional values prioritize male authority, relegating women to subordinate roles” (p. 73). This power dynamic leads to a cycle of oppression, where women face difficulties in asserting their rights and identities.

Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir emphasizes the challenges women face when they defy these norms. Firstly, as noted in an earlier section of this chapter, despite the involvement of women in the revolution, they found themselves marginalized in post-revolutionary discussions. One woman in the memoir remarked, "We fought alongside men, yet our voices are still silenced" (Hafez, 2018, p. 134). This quote illustrates the ongoing struggle women face in a society that values patriarchal dynamics, even amidst movements for social change. Secondly and also noted earlier in this chapter, Hafez (2018) outlines the issue of gender-based violence as a method of enforcing patriarchal control. Many women shared their experiences of harassment and violence in public spaces, stating, "Every day, I face fear that I will be attacked for just being out alone" (Hafez, 2018, p. 159). This fear is both a reflection of individual experiences and a broader societal problem, where women's freedom is curtailed by the threat of violence.

Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir therefore serves as an invitation to consider the resilience of women amidst these patriarchal challenges. While many women experience the conflicts stemming from these norms, they also find ways to resist and redefine their roles. Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that women can navigate these spaces by asserting their identities in innovative ways, thus challenging traditional expectations. This duality of oppression and resistance is vividly captured in *Women of the Midan*.

The biographical memoir also emphasizes how patriarchal norms shape women's roles within the family. Hafez (2018) describes numerous instances where women feel pressured to conform to traditional expectations, such as focusing solely on household duties. A woman from Hafez's narrative states, "I never had the chance to finish my education because my family believed it was more important for me to learn to cook

and clean” (Hafez, 2018, p. 101). This reflects the societal belief that women should limit themselves to domestic spheres, robbing them of opportunities for personal and intellectual growth.

Scholars have also noted the negative impact of patriarchal norms on women in Islamic societies. According to Mernissi (1991), such norms lead to what she describes as a “social contract” that confines women to secondary roles. Mernissi states, “The domestic sphere is often where women’s struggles begin and end, as they find themselves caught between tradition and personal aspirations” (1991, p. 56). This affirms Hafez’s observations, suggesting that the restrictions placed on women not only limit their freedom but also foster a continual conflict within their lives.

This biographical memoir also addresses the strong connection between tradition and gender oppression. Hafez highlights how historical customs contort women’s identities and roles within family and society. One poignant moment in the book references a mother’s teachings to her daughter, telling her to “always remember that a good woman stays within her husband’s home, obeying him” (Hafez, 2018, p. 58). This demonstrates the internalization of patriarchal values that limit women’s freedom and agency, suggesting that these teachings perpetuate gendered conflict from one generation to the next.

Several scholars have examined how patriarchal structures create environments that disadvantage women. According to Mernissi (1991), “the challenge for women in Islamic societies is not merely to carve out a space within the existing patriarchy but to question and transform the underlying structures that sustain it.” This perspective resonates strongly with the findings of this chapter. The women Hafez interviews express not only their conflicts with existing norms but also a desire for change. One

of the women states, “We must raise our voices. If we stay silent, nothing will change” (Hafez, 2018, p. 95). This call for awakening underscores the women’s struggle against patriarchal control and their desire to reshape their societal roles. Despite the overwhelming influence of patriarchal norms, many women find ways to push back, whether through activism, education, or community organizing. As one woman noted, “When we gather together and share our stories, we feel stronger. We realize we are not alone” (Hafez, 2018, p. 133). This collective action signifies a shift in mindset, moving from victimhood to empowerment, which is a crucial first step in challenging patriarchal systems.

One important tenet of Islamic feminism is the assertion that women’s rights are inherent in Islamic texts. Hafez highlights this by narrating how many women in the Midan (Tahrir Square) drew strength from their Islamic faith to assert their rights. For instance, she writes, “Many of us see the revolution as a way to reclaim our voices, not just politically, but as women, as beings modelled by Allah” (Hafez, 2013, p. 45). This quotation reveals how women use their religious beliefs as a foundation to fight against oppressive structures within their society.

However, despite this potential for empowerment, the realities of gendered conflicts are still deeply rooted in patriarchal norms. Hafez shares the experiences of women who faced harassment during the protests, demonstrating how such violence is a form of control exerted by men to maintain dominance. An interviewee named Layla states, “In the square, I felt I was part of something bigger, but the moment I was harassed, I realized that the fight is not just against the regime, but against the men around me too” (Hafez, 2018, p. 67). This statement reflects a common struggle many women encounter: fighting for broader social change while also battling gender-based violence.

Another significant element of Hafez's work is the role of solidarity among women. She emphasizes that many women found strength in unity, which is a vital aspect of Islamic feminism. When discussing their collective experiences, an interviewed woman named Fatima asserts, "We stood together, and that unity gave us a sense of safety and empowerment. Together, we reminded each other that we are strong" (Hafez, 2018, p. 115). Such solidarity demonstrates resilience and a shared fight against both political tyranny and gender oppression.

Hafez (2018) also illustrates the diversity of women's identities and experiences. Not all women in the Midan had the same perspective or faced the same battles, which is a crucial consideration within Islamic feminism. Some women embraced more traditional roles while still participating actively in the revolution. Hafez notes, "For some, the revolution was about redefining what it meant to be a good Muslim woman in public spaces" (Hafez, 2018, p. 228). This acknowledgment of different paths showcases the diverse ways women assert their identities within the framework of Islamic feminism.

Patriarchal norms create gendered conflicts by perpetuating the belief that men are the leaders and decision-makers. Hafez's subjects' express frustration with this mindset. For example, one woman interviewed says, "Even when we were in the streets demanding change, people still treated us as if we were just supporting our fathers and brothers" (Hafez, 2018, p. 67). This statement reveals the internalization of patriarchal norms, affecting how women view their roles in both family and society. It reflects a critical aspect of Islamic feminism, which aims to reclaim women's roles within Islamic frameworks, promoting their agency and participation.

In line with this, Ahmed (2011) points out in her work *Women and Gender in Islam*, the interpretation of Islamic texts has often been shaped by male perspectives, resulting

in a disconnect between religious doctrine and women lived experiences. This disconnection further perpetuates oppression, as women are often left out of religious discussions that directly affect their rights.

Also, the concept of honour and shame within many Islamic societies contributes to gendered conflicts. Women often bear the brunt of societal expectations regarding honour, which can lead to their marginalization. Hafez (2018) includes stories from women who face severe consequences for their actions, saying, “We are often reminded that our family’s honour rests on our shoulders, dictating how we should behave” (Hafez, 2018, p. 93). This pressure can lead to conflicts not only within families but also within communities, as women struggle to assert their identities against rigid societal standards.

In line with Islamic feminism, the interviewed women in Hafez’s (2018) biographical memoir articulates a desire for an interpretation of Islam that acknowledges their rights and promotes gender equality. One woman, Zainab, states, “Islam should empower us, not hold us back. We want to live fully as Muslims and as women” (Hafez, 2018, p. 115). This aspiration reflects the tenets of Islamic feminism that advocate for a re-reading of religious texts to empower women rather than oppress them

Arguably, Sherin Hafez’s (2018) biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, compellingly illustrates the various forms of gendered conflicts faced by women, particularly within the context of Muslim society. Through her personal experiences and those of other women, Hafez sheds light on the pervasive issues of sexual violence, which not only violate women’s rights but also perpetuate a culture of fear and oppression. She highlights how entrenched patriarchy limits women’s roles, pushing them into subordinate positions within the family and society. Furthermore, the memoir

addresses the significant barriers to political representation, showing that Muslim women often struggle to have their voices heard in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. Additionally, minimal access to education remains a critical concern, as it restricts women's opportunities for growth and empowerment. Hafez also critiques how religious texts are often interpreted in ways that favor men, reinforcing gender inequality and limiting women's freedoms. Overall, *Women of the Midan* serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggles women face and calls for a deeper understanding of these conflicts to foster change and promote gender equality .

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE IDENTITY OF MUSLIM WOMEN

4.1. Introduction

This chapter analyzes the historical construction of the identity of Muslim women as presented in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoir, *An Islam of Her Own* (2011). It examines how this identity has been shaped and understood across different historical periods, including the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. Through Hafez's work, this chapter explores the complex ways Muslim women's identity has been defined and redefined over these significant times. Guided by the principles of transcultural life writing theory, this chapter discusses Hafez's exploration of the historical construction of this identity and how it reflects broader societal narratives.

4.2. The identity of Muslim women in the pre-Colonial Context

Sherine Hafez's *An Islam of Her Own* (2011) provides a crucial lens through which to examine the historical construction of Muslim women's identities. While often perceived as a monolithic entity, the experience of Muslim women varied widely across time and geographic locations. Hafez's work illuminates how, even before the direct impact of colonialism, powerful forces within pre-colonial Muslim societies contributed to a construction of female identity that often-positioned Muslim women as inferior and marginalized. These forces, often rooted in patriarchal interpretations of religious texts and cultural traditions, shaped social structures and legal frameworks that limited women's agency and reinforced their subordinate status.

One of the primary mechanisms identified by Hafez (2011) through which women were marginalized in the pre-colonial period is the control of religious interpretations. Hafez contends that “the construction of African indigeneous religious knowledge as a male domain” (Hafez, 2011, p. 16) systematically excluded women from the interpretive process. This exclusion had profound consequences, as the interpretations of religious texts subsequently codified laws that often restricted women’s rights and freedoms. For example, rulings regarding issues like divorce, inheritance, and testimony in court were frequently framed in a way that disadvantaged women. These rulings were not necessarily based on the literal word of the Quran, but rather on interpretations mediated through male-centered perspectives and social norms. As Hafez notes, “the interpretations of the religious texts were shaped by the socio-political context of the male interpreters” (Hafez, 2011, p. 23). This highlights the role of power dynamics in shaping religious doctrine.

Furthermore, Hafez (2011) elucidates how pre-colonial societies constructed societal expectations around women’s roles, primarily in the domestic sphere. The ideal of women as caretakers of the home and family was reinforced through both religious pronouncements and cultural practices. As she puts it, “The emphasis on women’s domesticity was integral to the establishment of patriarchal structures” (Hafez, 2011, p. 39). These expectations, while often painted as virtuous and natural, served to limit women’s access to education, employment, and public life. Women’s contributions to society outside of the domestic realm were often made invisible or devalued. Traditional family structures and kinship networks, while central to social fabric, often placed women in positions of dependency and limited their ability to advocate for their own needs and aspirations. This constructed identity focused on dependence and domesticity reinforced their marginalized status.

Hafez (2011) also explores how concepts of honour and shame were deployed to control women's behaviour and bodies. She observes that "family honour became deeply intertwined with female sexuality and chastity" (Hafez, 2011, p. 56) resulting in a social surveillance system that often restricted women's mobility and interactions with the outside world. Dress codes and seclusion, while sometimes presented as acts of modesty and religious devotion, were often tools of control that reinforced gender hierarchies. The fear of shame and the potential repercussions of transgressing these boundaries significantly curtailed women's agency and freedom. This system, by consistently placing the onus of upholding family honor on women, further cemented perceptions of their inferiority and their vulnerability.

It is worth noting that in the pre-colonial era, Muslim women's identities were primarily shaped by their cultural practices, religious beliefs, and social roles within their communities. Historically, many Muslim women held positions of influence and agency, as demonstrated by figures like Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, who played a crucial role in early Islamic society. Hafez (2011), however, notes that hegemonic historical narratives ignored these notable female figures across history thereby concretising the identity of Muslim women as passive (2011, p.23). This assertion reflects a common theme in discussions about Muslim women's identities: the tendency for dominant narratives to simplify and misrepresent their contributions.

One of the key ways in which Muslim women's identity was passivised in the pre-colonial period was through the concept of guardianship. According to Hafez (2011), guardianship was used to justify the control and regulation of women's behaviour and movement in pre-colonial Muslim societies (Hafez, 2011, p. 27). Women were required to have a male guardian, such as a father, brother, or husband, who was responsible for

making decisions on their behalf. This concept of guardianship reinforced the idea of women's inferiority and marginalization, as they were seen as dependents rather than equals.

This necessitated the concept of modesty, or hijab. According to Hafez, "the concept of hijab was used to regulate and control women's bodies and sexuality in pre-colonial Muslim societies" (Hafez, 2011, p. 35). Women were required to cover their bodies in public, and were subjected to strict regulations regarding their behaviour and interactions with men. This concept of modesty reinforced the idea of women's inferiority and marginalization, as they were seen as temptresses who needed to be controlled and regulated.

The construction of Muslim women's identity in the pre-colonial period also had a significant impact on their social and economic status. According to Hafez, "in pre-colonial Muslim societies, women's access to education, employment, and political power was limited" (Hafez, 2011, p. 47). Women were often excluded from educational institutions, and were restricted to domestic roles. This lack of access to education and employment opportunities limited their economic power and independence, further reinforcing their marginalization.

Hafez (2011) emphasizes that the identities of Muslim women have often been shaped by historical, cultural, and religious narratives that promote a sense of inferiority. This concept is grounded in the notion of patriarchy, which has traditionally dictated women's roles in society. Hafez notes, that a majority of the women she spoke to "expressed a feeling of being second-class citizens, both in the public and private spheres" (Hafez, 2011, p. 45). This statement encapsulates the pervasive sense of inferiority felt by many women, highlighting the dominant narratives that render them

passive participants in their own lives. The interviews Hafez (2011) conducts serve as critical primary sources that illuminate the experiences of individual women. For instance, one woman recounts, “In my family, my opinions were always secondary to my brothers. I learned early on that my voice didn’t matter” (Hafez, 2011, p. 72). This sentiment resonates with a broader trend documented by scholars such as Mernissi (1991), who argues that “such patriarchal systems create an environment where women’s contributions are systematically marginalized.” The internalization of these beliefs can lead to a stigmatization.

Hafez’s (2011) work underscores the ways in which cultural narratives contributed to the oppression of Muslim women. She points out that historical depictions often portrayed women as subservient and uneducated, which reinforced a constructed identity of inferiority. One of the women she interviews, Fatima, states,

“We were seen not as individuals but as reflections of our families’ honor, endlessly judged and often condemned for decisions we never got to make” (Hafez, 2011, p. 64).

This quote encapsulates the societal lens through which many women were viewed—a view that diminished their personal agency and autonomy, reducing them to mere vessels for familial honour.

The biographical memoir further unveils how these constructed identities were both imposed by external forces and internalized by the women themselves. Hafez indicates that the patriarchal society often dictated what it meant to be a “good Muslim woman.” In another poignant interview, Leila articulates the struggles of conforming to this identity:

“I wore the hijab not only as an expression of faith but also as a shield against judgment. But sometimes, it felt more like a prison” (Hafez, 2011, p. 129).

This highlights the duality of religious expression and the pressure to conform to societal expectations, illustrating how such constructs of inferiority could lead to an internal conflict regarding self-identity.

Mernissi (1991) and Abu-Lughod (2002), suggest that the identity of inferiority was further perpetuated through literary and cultural representations of Muslim women. Mernissi argues that cultural narratives often depict women as passive figures in need of rescue, reinforcing their subordinate status (1991). Hafez’s memoir reflects this notion, as many of the interviews reveal a sense of entrapment within societal frameworks, confirming the dominant narrative of female inferiority.

Moreover, the intersections of religion, culture, and class played a significant role in shaping these identities. Hafez emphasizes that wealthier Muslim women could often navigate these constructed identities differently than their poorer counterparts. In one narrative, Amina points out, “For some of us, it was easier to fight back against stereotypes. But for those with fewer resources, the fight was much harder; survival came first” (Hafez, 2011, p. 88). This acknowledgment of socio-economic disparities enriches our understanding of how constructed identities functioned differently across varied contexts within the Muslim community.

Transcultural life writing also emphasizes the fluidity of identity and the role personal narratives can play in its reconstruction. For Muslim women, reclaiming their narratives becomes a powerful act of resistance against the constructed inferior identity. Hafez

illustrates how women actively negotiate their identities amidst cultural transitions and challenges. She notes, “By crafting their own stories and redefining what it means to be a Muslim woman, they challenge the traditional narratives imposed upon them” (Hafez, 2019, p. 130).

Ahmed (1992) argues that while the Islamic revolution in the 7th century CE initially afforded women certain rights and recognition, subsequent interpretations and cultural practices began to reveal a trend toward their marginalization. She contends that the transformation of social and religious norms contributed to the perception of women as inferior, a view that was exacerbated by colonial narratives that sought to further entrench this status to justify imperial intervention (Ahmed, 1992). Moreover, Kahf (2008), points out that literature from this period typically focused on male narratives, leaving women’s voices overshadowed.

This lack of representation played a significant role in the construction of a female identity rooted in inferiority and obedience, as the stories that circulated within the public sphere reinforced male dominance and minimized female agency (Kahf, 2008). Further analysis by Wadud (1999) in *Qur'an and Woman* highlights the importance of reinterpreting religious texts to understand the historical role of women in Islam. Wadud advocates for a critical examination of the Quranic verses and their interpretations to reclaim the dignity and agency of women in pre-colonial societies. She suggests that by addressing the historical distortions surrounding Muslim women’s identities, we may unravel the constructed inferiority that has perpetuated through generations (Wadud, 1999).

In examining the constructed inferior identity of Muslim women, it is essential to analyse how religious texts and cultural practices shaped societal perceptions. Hafez

points out that various interpretations of Islamic teachings were often employed to justify patriarchal dominance and to exclude women from public spaces. This aligns with the work of Mernissi (1991), who critiques the way religious discourses have been manipulated to constrain women's presence in religious and social spheres. Mernissi argues that the female voice was systematically silenced under interpretations that favoured male authority, a reality that Hafez also highlights through her personal narrative and the shared experiences of women around her.

Moreover, Hafez's memoir provides insight into how women sought their identity within and against these constructs. Women were not merely passive victims; they navigated their environments creatively, finding ways to assert their identities despite constraints (Hafez, 2011). This notion resonates with the concept of 'agency' as articulated by Mohamad (2006), who argues that while Muslim women often faced societal limitations, they also engaged in acts of resistance that allowed them to carve out their identity. This duality presents a complex picture of pre-colonial Muslim women's identities, illustrating that while they were often constructed as inferior, they also possessed the agency to challenge and redefine these identities.

Hafez's narrative places emphasis on the multifaceted nature of Muslim women's identities prior to colonial intervention. She highlights that Muslim women were not monolithic figures but rather individuals influenced by diverse socio-cultural factors. For instance, Hafez (2011) illustrates how women participated in various aspects of public life, including education and religious scholarship, which empowered them and contributed to their sense of identity. This depiction challenges prevailing stereotypes that suggest pre-colonial Muslim women were entirely relegated to private spheres and existed solely as passive subjects. Ahmed (1992) and Mittermaier (2016) further our

understanding of pre-colonial Muslim women's identities. Ahmed (1992) argues that these women were significant agents in their communities, actively engaging in social and political discourses, and adapting Islamic teachings to fit their realities. Similarly, Mittermaier (2016) emphasizes the importance of women's roles in family and community networks as crucial to the negotiation of their identities in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Hafez's (2011) biographical memoir also emphasizes the importance of religious and cultural practices in shaping the identities of Muslim women. She discusses how rituals and traditions were not merely oppressive frameworks; rather, they provided women with a means of expressing their identity and autonomy (2011, p.242). This echoes Stewart (2004), who points out that religious practices can serve as sites of empowerment, allowing women to carve out spaces for themselves even within seemingly restrictive environments. Such practices enabled women to assert their agency, negotiate their roles, and challenge narrow definitions imposed by external forces.

The cultural richness of pre-colonial Muslim societies is highlighted through Hafez's experiences, where she recalls stories of strong female figures who played crucial roles in their communities: "Every neighbourhood had its share of women who were not just mothers but community leaders, healers, and educators" (Hafez, 2011, p. 137). This observation aligns with the scholarship of Ahmed (1992), who posits that women in pre-colonial societies were active participants in various societal functions. According to Ahmed, these women contributed to a vibrant social fabric that was often overlooked in historical narratives.

4.3. The identity of Muslim women in the Colonial Context

The colonial era was marked by significant shifts in social, cultural, and political dynamics, particularly concerning the identities of marginalized groups. One of the most affected groups was Muslim women, whose identities were often constructed through colonial narratives that painted them as inferior. Hafez's biographical memoir, *An Islam of Her Own*, provides a critical lens through which to understand the complexities of the constructed identity of Muslim women during this period. By examining Hafez's (2011) reflections alongside existing scholarly literature, this section aims to illuminate the nuances of inferiority as imposed on Muslim women in the colonial context.

In her biographical memoir, Hafez (2011) articulates the profound impact of colonialism on Muslim women's identities. She writes, "Colonial encounters often involved a harsh critical gaze directed at Muslim women, portraying them as oppressed and needing liberation" (Hafez, 2011, p. 45). This critical gaze originates from a desire to justify colonial rule under the guise of bringing progress and enlightenment to so-called backward cultures. Such perspectives led to the misrepresentation of Muslim women's realities, reducing them to mere symbols of oppression rather than recognizing their agency and complex identities.

During the colonial era, Muslim women were often depicted as symbols of backwardness and oppression in the discourse of Western colonial powers. The concept of Orientalism highlights how the West constructed images of Eastern societies to justify colonial domination (Said, 1978). The colonial portrayal of Muslim women was often steeped in Orientalist ideas. Said (1979) discusses how the West often constructed an 'Orient' that was exotic yet inferior, perpetuating the myth of Eastern women as

passive and submissive. This view, according to Hafez (2011), affected Muslim women's sense of self, stating, "The colonizers framed our identities in ways that often left us grappling with a sense of worth and legitimacy" (Hafez, 2011, p. 88). The psychological impact of colonialism, as the narratives imposed by colonizers created internal conflicts for Muslim women, further entrenching their perceived inferiority. In this frame, Muslim women were frequently portrayed as oppressed victims in need of liberation, despite the fact that they were commonly agents of their own narratives. Hafez's (2011) work critiques this oversimplified representation by amplifying the voices of Muslim women who articulate their own identities and resist these external portrayals.

In *An Islam of Her Own*, Hafez interviews several women who recount their struggles and triumphs in the face of colonial constructions of their identities. One compelling testimony comes from Nadia, who reflects on the stereotype of the subservient Muslim woman:

"They think we just sit in our homes, waiting for a man to tell us what to do. But they don't see how we build our communities and care for our families" (Hafez, 2011, p. 45).

Nadia's assertion challenges the narrative of inferiority imposed by colonial discourse, emphasizing agency and resilience.

Hafez (2011) demonstrates how colonialism intermingled with religious and cultural identities to further complicate perceptions of Muslim women. The image of the oppressed Muslim woman was often employed by colonial powers to justify their interventions in Muslim-majority societies, constructing a false dichotomy between

modernization and tradition (Hafez, 2011). The women in Hafez's memoir convey their frustrations with these simplistic narratives. For example, Amina states,

“We are not just victims of our religion; our faith is a source of strength for us” (Hafez, 2011, p. 112).

Amina's remark underscores how faith can be a pivotal component in shaping identity, creating a complex fabric that resists the colonial portrayal of inherent inferiority.

With regards to the colonial portrayal of Muslim women, Ahmed (1992) argues that such representations often stem from a failure to understand the historical and cultural nuances of Muslim women's lives. This oversight perpetuates the myth of an “unliberated” Muslim woman while ignoring her contributions and agency. Hafez's compilation of personal stories effectively challenges these stereotypes and provides a platform for women's voices that have historically been marginalized.

Further, it is notable that colonial discourse often portrayed Muslim women as subjugated and oppressed, especially in contrast to the Western ideals of femininity and liberation. As Hafez illustrates, the colonial narrative constructed an identity for Muslim women that emphasized their perceived inferiority. One interviewee, Fatima, expresses this sentiment, stating, “They called us oppressed, but they did not see our strength. They saw only what they wanted to see” (Hafez, 2011, p. 92). This comment underscores how colonial powers imposed their definitions of oppression without recognizing the agency and resilience of Muslim women.

Hafez (2011) argues that these constructions were not merely external impositions; they also resonated within the communities of these women, affecting their self-identities. One interviewee articulated the internalized impact of colonial narratives by saying,

“Sometimes, I look in the mirror and wonder if they are right. Is my struggle for faith and freedom truly worth it?” (Hafez, 2011, p. 103). This sentiment underscores the struggle of Muslim women to navigate their identity in a landscape where their worth was often measured against Western standards of liberation and modernity.

The influence of colonial powers reached into the cultural and religious spheres, leading to a distorted interpretation of Islam. Ahmed (1992) notes that colonialism often presented Islam as inherently oppressive to women, perpetuating stereotypes that ignored the diverse and empowering interpretations present within Islamic tradition. Hafez’s interviewees articulate this complexity, with one woman expressing, “My faith is my strength. It is a misrepresentation to say Islam is what oppresses us” (2011, p. 88). Such statements challenge the simplified view of Muslim women as passive victims and reflect a conscious reclaiming of their faith and identity.

Additionally, John (2008) argues that “the image of the ‘poor, veiled woman’ became a powerful symbol for Western feminists and colonialists alike, serving to justify imperial intervention” (p. 238). This perspective illustrates the broader context within which Hafez’s subjects navigated their identities. The constructed identity of inferiority not only affected the external perceptions but also influenced the internal self-image of women within these societies.

The notion of inferiority of Muslim women was not unique to the colonial era; it has roots in earlier sociocultural narratives. Scholars have discussed how pre-colonial identities were often constructed in ways that placed women in subordinate roles. According to Abdo (2007), before colonial intervention, “Muslim women occupied significant roles, often balancing personal agency with societal expectations” (p. 132).

However, the colonial narrative disrupted these roles, imposing an external identity that overshadowed pre-existing dynamics.

Despite the oppressive structures, Hafez's (2011) interviews reveal the complex realities of Muslim women's lives, highlighting their resistance and agency. Amina, another interviewee, shares,

“We learned to use the veil not as a symbol of oppression, but as an expression of our faith and ownership of our identity”
(Hafez, 2011, p. 151).

This statement reflects a significant shift in understanding; rather than succumbing to a narrative of oppression, Amina asserts her identity through the veil—a traditional garment that, when recontextualized, becomes a symbol of empowerment.

Religion also plays a pivotal role in the constructed identities of Muslim women during the colonial era. Hafez's (2011) biographical memoir further illustrates how women navigated their faith amidst the pressures of colonial rule. One young woman, Nasira, articulates this dynamic by stating,

“In our prayers, I found freedom. It was a space where I could be myself, not the ‘oppressed’ version they labeled me” (Hafez, 2011, p. 199)

This connection between spirituality and identity formation reveals how women appropriated religious spaces to develop an identity that counters colonial stereotypes. As noted by Mahmood (2005), the capacity to enact agency comes in many forms, including adherence to religious practices. Mahmood asserts that “the notion of agency

is not solely defined by resistance but can also manifest in forms of piety and submission that are carefully navigated by women” (p. 32). This understanding aligns with Hafez’s presentation of women who find empowerment through their faith, further complicating the simplistic narratives of inferiority imposed by colonial forces.

Hafez (2011) also provides personal insights that highlight the tension between colonial perceptions and the lived experiences of Muslim women. She states,

“Many Muslim women navigated their social worlds with strength and resilience, often defying the oppressive stereotypes attributed to them” (Hafez, 2011, p. 72).

This statement underscores the disparity between the constructed identity imposed by colonial forces and the authentic identities that Muslim women created for themselves. By focusing solely on victimhood, colonial narratives erased these women’s agency and contributions to their communities.

In other scholarly discourse, the identity of Muslim women during colonial times is further explained. Mohanty (1988) emphasizes how Western feminists often generalize the experiences of women from different cultures, stating that “the category of 'woman' is portrayed as homogenous, neglecting the complex realities faced by women in diverse geographical and cultural contexts” (p. 333). This critique resonates with Hafez’s observations, as it reflects how the simplification of Muslim women’s identities during the colonial era led to a narrow understanding of their roles and challenges.

Ahmed (1992) has analyzed the intersection of gender and colonialism, arguing that Western imperialism used gender as a tool to undermine Muslim societies. Ahmed states, “The figure of the oppressed Muslim woman was central to the colonial project...

serving as a means to justify domination” (1992, p. 139). Hafez’s interviews mirror this scholarly analysis by showcasing how Muslim women navigated their identities within the constraints imposed by colonial narratives. For example, Fatima, another interviewee, reflects, “We were seen as a problem to be fixed, not as individuals with our own stories” (Hafez, 2011, p. 70). This perspective underscores the need to acknowledge the diverse experiences of Muslim women that often remain overshadowed by dominant colonial narratives.

Hafez (2011) illustrates the colonial portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed and inferior. She states, “Colonial narratives often depicted Muslim women as victims in need of rescue” (p. 42). Such depictions were crafted to justify colonial interventions, which were presented as benevolent acts aimed at liberating these women. These constructed identities served the dual purpose of reinforcing colonial authority while misrepresenting the actual experiences and voices of Muslim women. These observations resonate with the arguments presented by other scholars who have examined the identity of Muslim women in the pre-colonial era. For instance, Abu-Lughod (2002) asserts that the historical realities of Muslim women have often been overlooked in favour of narratives that paint them as passive subjects. She argues that “the rhetoric of liberation often obscured the actual agency and resilience of these women” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 254). This perspective highlights the crucial distinction between imposed identities and the identities that women construct for themselves. Additionally, Hashmi (2016) discusses how colonial powers employed stereotypes to justify their control over Muslim societies. She states, “These stereotypes rendered Muslim women as being in a perpetual state of need and dependence” (Hashmi, 2016, p. 23). This portrayal diminished the complexity of their realities and reduced their identities to mere constructs of inferiority.

The consequences of this colonial identity construction are also highlighted by Hafez (2011). She writes, “The more the colonial narrative emphasized the need for intervention, the less attention was paid to the voices and experiences of Muslim women themselves” (Hafez, 2011, p. 112). This observation highlights a critical point: the voices of Muslim women were often silenced in the narratives crafted by colonial powers. Instead of allowing Muslim women to articulate their individual experiences, colonial narratives imposed a homogenized identity upon them, which failed to capture their diversity and complexity.

In his analysis, Badran (2005) notes that the construction of inferiority is not merely a colonial issue but is intertwined with pre-colonial narratives as well. Badran argues that the intersections of race, class, and religion shaped the perception of Muslim women, leading to their continued marginalization in both colonial and post-colonial contexts. Badran states, “The historical realities of Muslim women’s lives are often eclipsed by the dominant narratives that portray them as eternally oppressed” (Badran, 2005, p. 53). This reinforces the idea that the constructed identity of inferiority is deeply embedded in a historical context that pre-dates colonialism.

Furthermore, Hafez challenges the narrative imposed by colonial discourse by asserting, “Muslim women have always been participants in their own history, negotiating their identities within the constraints and possibilities of their contexts” (Hafez, 2011, p.145). This assertion is vital, as it draws attention to how Muslim women have historically engaged with their identities, thereby contradicting the notion of their inferiority. Hafez emphasizes the importance of recognizing Muslim women’s agency, as it counters the simplistic binary of oppressor and oppressed that colonial narratives often impose.

The identity of Muslim women was further perpetuated through various colonial policies and practices aimed at controlling Muslim communities. Hafez's (2011) biographical memoir illustrates how colonial authorities used education as a tool to propagate this narrative. Many institutions were established to 'enlighten' Muslim women, which were often rooted in Western ideals. These educational systems attempted to reshape their identities in line with Western values and norms. As Hafez (2011) indicates, this led to a struggle between embracing one's cultural identity and conforming to imposed identities, which caused internal conflict among many Muslim women.

In her narrative, Hafez (2011) also highlights how the intersectionality of race, class, and religion influenced the experiences of Muslim women during colonial times. Scholars like Mohanty (2003) emphasize that it is essential to consider the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of these women rather than homogenizing their experiences. Hafez's (2011) biographical memoir bring to light the unique struggles and triumphs of individual women who maneuverer through different societal structures, showing that their identities were multifaceted and complex.

Hafez's *An Islam of Her Own* challenges the dominant narratives surrounding Muslim women by presenting a more nuanced understanding of their identities. Her experiences illustrate the strength and resilience of these women, who navigated between cultural expectations and colonial impositions. The memoir serves as a reminder that identities are not fixed but are continually constructed and reconstructed through personal and political experiences.

Mohanty (2003), highlight how these narratives often homogenize the experiences of women across different cultures. Hafez (2011) she challenges this homogenization by

emphasizing the individuality of her experiences as a Muslim woman. She asserts that Muslim women are not a monolithic group but rather possess diverse identities shaped by their personal, cultural, and political contexts (Hafez, 2011).

Colonial powers frequently portrayed colonized populations as "other" or inferior, a view that often subordinated women. According to Hafez (2009), the colonial lens scrutinized Muslim women through a framework of stereotypes, which depicted them as oppressed and in need of liberation. This narrative served two main purposes: it justified colonial control and reinforced the idea that Western culture was superior. Scholars like Susan Sontag (1979) argue that such portrayals were not just about cultural representation; they were about power dynamics where the colonizers elevated their own status while denigrating those they sought to control.

Hafez (2011) highlights that the identity of Muslim women was often constructed in opposition to Western ideals of femininity. The colonial discourse presented Western women as emancipated and modern, while Muslim women were depicted as shackled by tradition and religion. This binary not only marginalized Muslim women but also led to the erasure of their agency and diverse experiences (Hafez, 2011).

Additionally, we learn how Muslim women navigated these constructed identities to assert their own. Hafez (2011) describes how women used their understanding of Islam to express autonomy and resist colonial oppression. This subversion of the colonial narrative indicates that the identity of Muslim women is not monolithic; rather, it is diverse and dynamic (Hafez, 2011, p.98).

The construction of Muslim women's inferiority during the colonial era was often justified through the discourse of 'civilization.' Colonizers portrayed non-Western

cultures as backward, thus positioning Muslim women as symbols of this perceived barbarism. Hafez discusses this phenomenon, asserting that

“The West fashioned the Muslim woman as the epitome of victimhood in order to justify colonial intervention” (Hafez, 2011, p. 172).

This perspective aligns with postcolonial theory, which posits that colonial narratives were used to legitimize control over colonized societies (Said, 1978). Here, the identities of Muslim women were constructed not just within their cultural contexts but were heavily influenced by the colonial narrative, leading to a pervasive sense of inferiority.

In her memoir, Hafez (2011) emphasizes the importance of reclaiming agency among Muslim women. Leila, another interviewee, asserts, “We are not just victims of circumstance; we are agents of change in our own lives” (Hafez, 2011, p. 102). This statement challenges the prevailing stereotypes and showcases the active resistance against imposed identities. The resilience of these women mirrors findings in feminist scholarship, which argues for a more nuanced understanding of women’s roles in patriarchal societies. According to Mohanty (2003), it is essential to recognize the ways in which women construct their identities in response to external oppressions, rather than accepting a monolithic victim narrative.

While colonial authorities sought to define the identity of Muslim women as inferior, many women actively resisted these imposed identities. As Hafez narrates, she and other women found ways to express their beliefs and identities through various forms of activism. This is echoed by other scholars, such as Mohanty (2003), who argues that

the experience of women is not monolithic but shaped by cultural, political, and historical contexts. Hafez's stories illustrate that Muslim women were not passive victims but rather active participants in defining their Islamic identities.

Hafez (2011) also addresses the theme of belonging and identity within a colonial framework. Many Muslim women had to navigate their cultural identities alongside their religious identities while facing the pressures of colonial influence. This struggle for belonging can be seen in Hafez's interactions with both her own community and colonial authorities. It resonates with the findings of Asad (2003), who discusses how colonialism reshaped religious identities and created new forms of social categorization. Hafez's memoir reflects the ongoing negotiation of identity that many Muslim women experienced in response to these external pressures.

Hafez recounts her experiences as a Muslim woman raised in a colonial environment, where she faced the pressure of traditional expectations while also navigating the oppressive structures imposed by colonial powers. She reflects on how Muslim women often found themselves at the intersection of two forms of oppression: one stemming from their cultural traditions and the other from colonial rule. Hafez writes about the challenges faced by women who sought to assert their identities in a rapidly changing world. According to Hafez (2011), "Colonialism creates a distinct form of dislocation in which women are often left voiceless, caught between the expectations of their communities and the demands of colonial society" (p. 142). With regard to this, Mohanty (2013) argues that Western feminist discourses often oversimplify the experiences of Third World women, failing to recognize the complex realities of their lives. This approach reinforces the need for feminist scholarship that is sensitive to the diverse experiences shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Hafez's memoir

embodies that sensitivity, as she articulates her personal journey amidst broader societal changes.

Hafez (2011) illustrates how colonialism affected women's religious practices and identities. For instance, many Muslim women adapted their practices to resist colonial pressures while remaining true to their faith. This adaptability is a significant theme in transcultural life writing, where the blending of cultural influences personal identity (Bhabha, 1994). Hafez narrates instances where women reinterpreted Islamic tenets to assert their rights and resist colonial rule, thereby creating a unique form of Islamic feminism.

Hafez's (2011) emphasizes the challenge of navigating identity in a time of colonial oppression. Muslim women faced the dual burden of resisting colonial authorities and managing cultural expectations at home. Hafez describes how women in her community balanced traditional roles with the pressures of modernity. This intersection of cultural expectations creates a complex identity that many women struggled to reconcile. According to Mohanty (2003), these women often became mediators between conflicting cultural values, striving to assert their identity while negotiating external pressures.

The transcultural life writing theory emphasizes the interactions between different cultures and how individuals adapt to these influences (Boehmer, 2014). Hafez's memoir exemplifies this theory by showing how her experiences as a Muslim woman were shaped by the colonial context while also reflecting her personal agency. One of the significant challenges faced by Muslim women was the stereotype of the 'oppressed Muslim woman,' which was widely propagated by colonial discourse. This stereotype disregarded the complexities of their lives and choices. Scholars like Abu-Lughod

(2002) argue that such representations often silenced the voices of Muslim women, leading to a homogenized view of their experiences.

Hafez's narrative disrupts this homogenization by offering a nuanced perspective. Her exploration of identity emphasizes that Muslim women's experiences cannot be understood solely through the lenses of oppression or liberation. Instead, they embody a spectrum of experiences influenced by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and individual choice. For instance, Hafez reflects on how her educational pursuits allowed her to challenge stereotypes and assert her identity in a colonial environment that sought to marginalize her (Hafez, 2011).

To further illustrate the identity struggles faced by Muslim women during this period, Hafez (2011) incorporates personal anecdotes and reflections on her relationships with family, friends, and broader society. These stories reveal the diverse ways in which Muslim women interpreted and navigated their roles in both private and public spheres. By positioning her personal narrative within the broader historical and cultural context, Hafez emphasizes that Muslim women were active agents in shaping their identities, rather than passive victims of colonial oppression.

4.4. The Identity of Muslim Women in the Post- Colonial Context

The identity of Muslim women in the contemporary period is a complex landscape, frequently shaped by forces that result in their subjugation and marginalization. Sherine Hafez's *An Islam of Her Own* (2011) provides crucial insights into how this identity is constructed, revealing the intertwined roles of religious interpretation, cultural norms, and patriarchal structures. Hafez's work illuminates how interpretations of Islam, often

deployed by those in positions of power, contribute to the construction of an identity for Muslim women that is often characterized by lack of agency and inferiority.

One of the central themes explored in *An Islam of Her Own* is the manipulation of religious texts to solidify patriarchal interpretations that serve to restrict women's roles and autonomy. Hafez argues that religious discourse is not a static entity but is actively shaped by prevailing social and political contexts. She highlights how certain interpretations of the Quran and Hadith have been elevated to positions of authority, while those that might promote equality or offer more nuanced understandings are often sidelined or dismissed (Hafez, 2011). This selective interpretation is readily seen in discussions around hijab (headscarf) and its interpretation within different societies that Hafez elaborates on. For example, she writes,

The interpretations of religious scriptures, particularly the Quran, have been manipulated to support patriarchal systems, defining women's roles solely within the domestic sphere and placing them under the authority of male figures. (Hafez, 2011, p. 34)

This manipulation is not an inherent attribute of Islam but rather a product that benefits a set of interests at the cost of women's agency and visibility in certain societies and contexts.

Further compounding the subjugation of women is the rigid separation of public and private spheres. This division constructs women's identities primarily within the domestic realm, relegating them to the role of mothers and wives, and limiting their access to education, employment, and public life. Hafez notes that

The emphasis on women's primary roles as wives and mothers has historically been a tool to control their mobility and access to resources. This reinforces a gender hierarchy where men dominate the public sphere and women are confined to the private. (Hafez, 2011, p. 68)

The confinement to the private sphere is not merely a matter of tradition but a structural constraint that reinforces their dependency on male family members, thus perpetuating the cycle of marginalization.

Moreover, *An Islam of Her Own* reveals the homogenizing portrayals of Muslim women in mainstream narratives, both within and outside Muslim communities. The discourse often constructs them as passive victims, either oppressed by their families and husbands or brainwashed by religious extremism. Hafez challenges these portrayals by highlighting the diversity of Muslim women's experiences across different geographical contexts, socio-economic classes and levels of religiosity. She stresses the importance of recognizing that Muslim women are not a monolithic group; rather, they engage with faith, culture, and modernity in diverse and dynamic ways. She illustrates,

“The monolithic representation of Muslim women as silent, oppressed victims, particularly in Western media, obscures the complexity of their lives and the agency they employ in various contexts.” (Hafez, 2011, p. 112).

This misrepresentation not only silences the diverse voices of Muslim women but also reinforces the power of external narrative to shape their identity.

Hafez also explores the ways in which Muslim women are positioned as symbols of tradition, often resulting in increased pressure to conform to patriarchal expectations.

She highlights the complex relationship between tradition and modernity, demonstrating how women are often caught in the crosscurrents of these two forces. She observes that,

The pressure on women to adhere to traditional roles and expectations, often framed as a matter of preserving cultural authenticity, restricts their choices and limits their capacity to negotiate the complexities of modern life. (Hafez, 2011, p. 156)

This constant negotiation between tradition and modernity creates a particularly challenging space for Muslim women, who must often navigate between conflicting expectations and norms.

The desire to defend “authentic” Islamic culture against “Western” influences in the post-colonial context has often led to the adoption of stricter social codes for women, reinforcing the idea of their inherent inferiority. Muslim women are often cast as the victims of culture and religion in Western discourse, further denying their agency and making it harder for them to articulate their own identities. Notably therefore, in post-colonial discourse, the identity of Muslim women is often framed by external perceptions and narratives shaped by colonial histories (Mohanty, 2003).

These narratives frequently portray Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescue. Hafez (2011) critiques this limited view by providing her own experiences to show that Muslim women are not monolithic; they have diverse experiences and voices. This aligns with the transcultural life writing theory, which emphasizes the importance of individual narratives in understanding cultural identities (Köpping, 2019).

Hafez’s interviews with Muslim women reveal a pervasive sense of inferiority that arises from not only societal expectations but also from within the community itself.

One interviewee, Hidayat, states, “Sometimes I feel like I am defined by my hijab; it becomes my only identity for others” (Hafez, 2011, p. 45).

This highlights how Muslim women’s identities are often reduced to their religious practices, perpetuating an image of inferiority where they are seen primarily as symbols of oppression rather than individuals with agency. Furthermore, Hafez captures the internalization of this inferiority, as women often express feelings of inadequacy based on societal perceptions. One woman reflects, “I constantly feel the weight of expectations; there’s always someone watching, judging me” (Hafez, 2011, p. 76).

Another one of the women interviewed by Hafez, Samira, poignantly expresses this internal struggle: “I am constantly aware that my modest dress invites judgement... people see me as oppressed without knowing my own choices” (Hafez, 2011, p. 45). Samira’s statement encapsulates the tension between personal identity and societal categorization. While she embraces her beliefs and choices, the external perception undermines her autonomy, reinforcing a stereotype that associates Muslim women with subservience and inferiority.

Scholarly literature also supports this understanding of the identity of inferiority among Muslim women. Karam (2016) explains that “the discourse surrounding Muslim women frequently perpetuates a narrative of helplessness and dependency” (p. 102). This notion resonates with Hafez’ (2011), where women often feel trapped within a framework that prioritizes narrative over individuality. The intersection of cultural, religious, and patriarchal pressures creates a unique landscape in which Muslim women navigate their identities, frequently battling external perceptions and internal doubts.

Hafez (2011) thoughtfully includes the voices of Muslim women who counter these stereotypes in the contemporary time, by asserting their own definitions of identity. One participant who sought anonymity boldly states,

“Wearing the hijab is not a sign of my oppression; it’s a part of my freedom and identity” (Hafez, 2011, p. 89).

This assertion challenges the constructed narrative of inferiority by offering a counter-narrative that emphasizes agency and empowerment. According to Said (2009), this agency is critical in re-framing the discourse surrounding Muslim women, suggesting that they actively renegotiate their identities in the face of external pressures. Hafez’s memoir illustrates this renegotiation as women articulate their experiences and redefine their identities beyond the constraints of societal expectations.

As Tripp (2013) discusses, the identity of Muslim women in contemporary society is heavily influenced by media portrayals and political discourse, which contribute to narratives of subordination. This external social conditioning manifests in the identities of the women interviewed, who often feel the need to counter stereotypes that paint them as submissive or backward. Hafez captures this sentiment when one interviewee remarks,

“Every time I see a news story about Muslim women, it makes me feel like I have to prove myself; I’m not just a statistic, I’m a person” (Hafez, 2011, p. 156).

Such assertions reveal a desperate need for recognition and respect, highlighting the ways in which societal narratives create an inferior identity for Muslim women.

It is crucial to recognize that the constructed identity of inferiority is not monolithic but varies significantly among women based on their individual experiences and contexts. Hafez's work emphasizes this diversity by showcasing women's varying responses to their positions in society. Some women embrace their experiences, using them as a platform to advocate for change.

In her memoir, Hafez articulates her journey of self-discovery as a Muslim woman. She states,

“My identity is neither a single story nor fixed; it is a dynamic interplay of faith, cultural heritage, and personal experience”
(Hafez, 2011, p. 23).

This declaration reflects a fundamental theme in her work: the understanding that identity is not monolithic but rather fluid and multifaceted. In the context of the post-colonial era, Muslim women faced the dual challenge of resisting colonial narratives while asserting their agency. Hafez's experiences highlight how post-colonial dynamics have influenced Muslim women's identities, often positioning them at the intersection of tradition and modernity.

Hafez's(2018) analysis contributes to a broader scholarly discourse on the constructed identities of marginalized communities, particularly in feminist and postcolonial studies. The prevalent Western narrative that often portrays Muslim women as “passive victims of their faith” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 41), not only oversimplifies their experiences but also positions them within a hierarchy of oppression that overlooks their active resistance and agency. Hafez's work challenges this narrative by showcasing the diverse voices of Muslim women who navigate multiple identities and resist societal impositions. In

this light, Hafez's interviewees articulate a desire for recognition beyond the binary of oppressed or liberated. Fatima, another woman in the memoir, states,

“I want to be seen not just as a Muslim woman, but as a complete person with dreams and ambitions” (Hafez, 2011, p. 102).

This desire for a multifaceted identity reflects a common theme among the women interviewed; they reject the reductionist views imposed upon them and seek to assert their individuality in a world that often fails to recognize it.

Hafez (2011) also addresses the role of the media in perpetuating negative stereotypes about Muslim women in post-colonial times. Many interviewees express frustration at being reduced to mere subjects of sensationalism. Layla, an activist, articulates this struggle when she states, “We are always portrayed as victims, lacking any sense of agency or power” (2011, p. 91). This portrayal not only reinforces the constructed inferiority of Muslim women but also overlooks the complexities and diversities of their identities.

Scholars such as Ali (2008) have similarly pointed out that media representations often oversimplify the realities of Muslim women's lives, failing to acknowledge their resistance and agency. Tripp (2013), in a different context, observes that the representation of Muslim women in contemporary society is heavily influenced by media portrayals and political discourse, which contribute to narratives of subordination.

This external social conditioning manifests in the identities of the women interviewed, who often feel the need to counter stereotypes that paint them as submissive or

backward. Hafez captures this sentiment when one interviewee remarks, “Every time I see a news story about Muslim women, it makes me feel like I have to prove myself; I’m not just a statistic, I’m a person” (Hafez, 2011, p. 156). Such assertions reveal a desperate need for recognition and respect, highlighting the ways in which societal narratives create an inferior identity for Muslim women.

Contemporary issues further complicate the identity of Muslim women. The rise of Islamophobia globally has prompted many to reevaluate their identities in a world that often views them with suspicion. Hafez reflects on this phenomenon, stating, “In today’s world, I find myself having to constantly negotiate my identity amidst prejudice and misunderstanding” (Hafez, 2011, p. 90). Her biographical memoir illustrates how the intersection of gender, religion, and cultural identity can lead to both challenges and opportunities for self-expression.

Through the lens of Hafez’s (2011) narrative, it becomes evident that the portrayal of Muslim women as inferior is not merely a reflection of individual attitudes but is deeply rooted in systematic issues. As Said (1978) discusses in *Orientalism*, representations of the East have long been used to justify colonial powers, creating a narrative that reinforces Western superiority. Hafez’s interviews serve as a counter-narrative, effectively dismantling the monolithic portrayal of Muslim women by showcasing their diverse voices, aspirations, and agency.

Hafez’s (2011) exploration of this theme resonates with broader discussions in feminist and post-colonial literature. As noted by Mahmood (2005), the regulation of women’s bodies and identities is a prevalent tactic used to affirm patriarchal structures in both secular and religious contexts. The women Hafez interviews frequently reflect on the ‘double standards’ faced in their communities, where they are simultaneously criticized

for their religious practices and expected to conform to Western ideals of femininity.

One woman claims,

“It seems that I must choose between my faith and my freedom. If I am religious, I am oppressed; if I am free, I am not a good Muslim” (Hafez, 2011, p. 78).

This duality demonstrates how women are positioned within a binary that limits their agency and reinforces the notion of inferiority.

Furthermore, Hafez (2011) addresses how love and belonging impacts the women’s identities. Many interviewees articulate a sense of alienation within their own communities, often due to their attempts to navigate conflicting cultural expectations.

One woman poignantly states,

“Sometimes, I wonder if my choice to wear modest clothing is genuinely my own or imposed on me by the power of tradition” (Hafez, 2011, p. 102).

This introspection indicates the internalized beliefs that can lead to feelings of inferiority, as the women grapple with the authenticity of their identities in a polarized society.

Hafez’s (2011) memoir illustrates the transformative process of self-identification. She writes about her faith and how it shapes her identity, providing a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse surrounding Muslim women in the West. Hafez challenges these stereotypes by recounting her personal experiences and the empowering aspects of her faith. She writes, “Islam is not a barrier to my freedom; rather, it is the lens

through which I understand my place in the world” (Hafez, 2011, p. 57). This perspective reframes the narrative around Muslim women, emphasizing that faith can coexist with empowerment. This process of reclaiming identity is crucial in post-colonial contexts where individuals attempt to break free from imposed identities (Barlas, 2002).

Contemporary Muslim women, as portrayed in Hafez’s (2011) biographical memoir, balance tradition and modernity. They navigate the complexities of their identities in a globalized world where cultural exchanges happen constantly. Hafez discusses how her experiences in the West influenced her understanding of Islam, leading to a more nuanced interpretation. This idea resonates with what scholars have identified as ‘glocalization,’ where global influences shape local practices (Robertson, 1992).

It is worth noting that in contemporary society, the identity of Muslim women is still evolving. While many continue to fight against stereotypes and misrepresentations, there is also a growing movement towards self-definition and assertion of agency. Hafez’s *An Islam of Her Own* embodies this transition. Through her personal stories, she showcases a diverse range of experiences, illustrating that Muslim women’s identities are not monolithic but rich and varied.

A critical aspect of understanding Muslim women’s identities is the concept of intersectionality, which takes into account various social categories such as race, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989). Hafez’s writing reflects this intersectionality, shedding light on how her identity as a Muslim woman is shaped by her background, education, and personal experiences. In doing so, she emphasizes that the identity of Muslim women cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it is a complex tapestry woven from multiple threads of experience.

Moreover, Hafez challenges Western feminist narratives that often portray Muslim women solely as victims. Instead, her memoir serves as a form of empowerment, allowing her to claim her identity and articulate her perspective on faith and feminism. This aligns with the argument presented by scholars such as Griffith (2016), who emphasizes the multiplicity of Muslim women's identities in contemporary discourse.

Moreover, Hafez addresses the role of global politics in shaping contemporary Muslim women's identities. She notes that events such as the War on Terror have complicated how Muslim women are viewed and how they view themselves. Fear and stigma have often altered societal perceptions, leading to a crisis of identity for many. She writes, "In a world where Muslim identities are often associated with terrorism, the onus is on women to assert their identities against these narratives" (Hafez, 2011, p. 101). This aligns the assertion that the politics of identity are particularly pronounced in the context of globalization and conflict (Scott, 1991).

In the contemporary era, many Muslim women are also engaged in feminist movements that integrate their cultural and religious values with demands for rights and justice. Hafez exemplifies this by showing how she and her peers create spaces for dialogue that affirm both their Islamic faith and their rights as women. She states, "The intersection of faith and feminism opens a pathway for us to reclaim our narratives and define our identities on our own terms" (Hafez, 2011, p. 115). This pursuit mirrors the idea of a feminist interpretation of Islam that empowers women (Wadud, 1999).

4.5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the historical construction of the inferior identity of Muslim women, as portrayed in Sherin Hafez's biographical memoir *An Islam of her own*, reveals a complex tapestry woven through various eras—pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary times. The memoir illustrates how societal norms and oppressive structures have evolved, yet persist in shaping the experiences of Muslim women. In pre-colonial times, cultural and religious influences often created a duality of empowerment and restriction, which was further complicated during the colonial period when external forces imposed new values that marginalized these women's identities.

The post-colonial era introduced a struggle for agency, as conversations around identity and gender began to surface, yet many of these struggles remain unresolved in contemporary society, where depictions of Muslim women are often trapped in narratives of victimhood or exoticism. Hafez's work serves as a critical lens that challenges these historical misconceptions, urging a reexamination of the narratives surrounding Muslim women's identities and highlighting their resilience and contributions within a broader socio-political landscape. By tracing this historical journey, we gain insight into the ongoing fight for recognition and respect, making it clear that the identities of Muslim women are not simply products of their past, but dynamic and continually evolving in the face of adversity.

CHAPTER FIVE

STRATEGIES MUSLIM WOMEN HAVE USED TO ASSERT THEIR AGENCY

5.1. Introduction

From the previous section, it is clear that muslim women have been constructed as voiceless and inferior, a construct that they contest. Therefore, this chapter analyses the strategies Muslim women have used to assert their agency. It will look at the many ways these women have shown their ability to make their own choices and have their voices heard. By exploring different actions and methods, this chapter aims to understand how Muslim women have actively shaped their lives and surroundings. It will show how they have found ways to act independently and influence their own situations, what the study terms as agency.

The concept of agency refers to the ability of individuals to make choices and take actions that define their lives (Ahmed, 2012). In the context of Muslim women, asserting agency can be complicated due to cultural, social, and political factors that may overshadow their voices (Bayat, 2007). Hafez's (2019) work, *Women of the Midan*, illuminates the various strategies Muslim women in contemporary Egypt employ to assert their identity and agency, especially during the political turmoil following the 2011 Egyptian revolution. This chapter delves into these strategies while drawing on Islamic feminism theory to contextualize the the arguments presented by Hafez.

5.2. Public protests as a strategy Muslim women use to assert their agency

The Midan, a vibrant neighbourhood in Cairo, Egypt, became a focal point of several significant protests, especially during the Arab Spring. Hafez (2018) discusses the pivotal role that women played in these events, where they marched alongside men to promote democracy and social justice (2018, p.67). Women participated in protests against government oppression, employment discrimination, and excessive police violence, demonstrating their commitment to social change. For example, during the 2011 protests in Tahrir Square, women formed human chains that symbolized solidarity and collective strength. This act was not just for show; it was a powerful statement of their refusal to be sidelined in the political arena.

One of the most striking aspects of Hafez's analysis is how women used the public sphere of protest to challenge the limitations placed upon them by both the state and traditional patriarchal structures. As Hafez notes, the protests created an opportunity for women to escape the confines of the domestic space. She states, "The public sphere is thus not simply the site where the women's activism becomes visible; rather, the public sphere is the very 'object' of their struggle and their intervention" (Hafez, 2018, p. 9). This quote underscores how the very act of occupying public spaces, traditionally domains of men, became a radical act of subversion. Women's presence in Tahrir Square and other protest sites challenged the notion that they were confined to domestic roles, demonstrating their active participation in the political process. The physical presence of women in protests became a highly visible declaration of their right to political participation and citizenship.

The very act of taking to the streets, traditionally a male domain in many Middle Eastern societies, was a radical departure. As Hafez notes, "The very presence of women in Tahrir Square was a political act in itself, challenging the patriarchal norms that

confined women to the domestic sphere” (2018, p. 67). This spatial transgression was not merely symbolic; it was a powerful performance of defiance. By participating in the physical space of political power, these women claimed their right to be heard and to influence the future of their nation. Moreover, their presence as a group demonstrated a unified front. Hafez further illustrates the diversity of this collective action, stating, “The ‘Midan’ was a space where women from diverse backgrounds... came together, transcending social and religious divides” (2018, p. 102). This unity, forged in the crucible of political struggle, allowed them to amplify their voices and establish their presence as a powerful, independent force, directly contradicting the patriarchal notion of women as divided and subservient.

Further, Hafez demonstrates how the protests provided women with a platform to express their own grievances and concerns, which were often distinct from those of their male counterparts. For example, many women protested against sexual harassment and violence, issues that were often ignored or silenced within the male-dominated public sphere. Hafez states,

The physical presence of women in the public space, and specifically their active participation in the demonstrations, is a form of resistance against prevalent sexual harassment and violence in Egypt. (Hafez, 2018, p. 131)

Through placards, chants, and collective action, women actively drew attention to these issues, making them not just private concerns, but public, political ones. In this process, they challenged not only the state but also cultural norms that condoned such violence, asserting their right to safety and security. This act of voicing their specific concerns enabled them to define their own agency, rather than being defined by others.

Moreover, the protests were a space where women could forge new forms of collective identity and solidarity. Hafez illustrates how women from diverse backgrounds, including veiled and unveiled women, came together in the protests, transcending prior social divides. This collaboration enabled them to share experiences, build networks, and collectively resist systemic inequalities. One woman interviewed states,

I felt that for the first time as women we were united in this common goal. So it didn't matter what I usually do. It didn't matter who I was; we were all just there as women, equal participants in the revolution. (Hafez, 2018, p. 112)

This sense of shared purpose provided them with a powerful sense of collective agency, empowering them to act as a unified force against oppression, both political and patriarchal. This collective experience and the solidarity it fostered have been a catalyst for many women in the protests to transition into more formal political roles later.

Furthermore, Hafez highlights the strategic use of protest by women to counter gendered narratives and stereotypes. By actively participating in the front line of protests, women defied the images of passive victims often associated with Muslim women. Hafez quotes a protester who recalls her experience,

I saw a lot of women, they were right there at the center, facing the police. There were old and young, veiled and unveiled, women from all classes. They were not afraid, and they were doing it deliberately. It was amazing to see them there, standing up their ground. (2018, p. 42)

This deliberate defiance of expected gender roles was a powerful means of both projecting agency and challenging the patriarchal norms that sought to keep them in the sidelines of public life. Their physical bravery and political commitment disrupted the

stereotype that women were unable to engage in or were not involved in the political process, asserting their agency through direct action.

The visible presence of Muslim women in public spaces, traditionally dominated by men was in itself a form of protest. Hafez points out, “Women, of all ages and backgrounds, went to the streets to voice their political demands and demands for freedom and equality” (Hafez, 2018, p. 108).

This act of simply being present, actively participating in demonstrations in Tahrir Square and other public venues, was itself a powerful statement. It broke down the barriers that historically confined women to the domestic realm, signaling their claim to citizenship and political participation. The very act of moving beyond the domestic sphere, particularly into the male-dominated realm of the protest, was an explicit challenge to those patriarchal norms limiting their mobility and public voice.

As one woman in the biographical memoir states: “I was surprised at myself, I never thought that I would be able to go to the street” (Hafez, 2018, p. 127). This personal testimony demonstrates how the revolution created an unprecedented climate for women to challenge ingrained self-perceptions of their role in society. Moreover, the visibility empowered women to see themselves as part of a collective pushing for societal change.

Furthermore, the women’s active participation extended beyond mere presence. They engaged in a wide array of activities, from chanting slogans and holding banners to providing medical assistance and coordinating logistical support. Hafez writes, “Women played a prominent role in the protests, not only as participants but also as organizers, activists, nurses, and journalists” (Hafez, 2018, p. 120). This diversified

engagement demonstrates their willingness to take on leadership roles and actively shape the course of the protests. This was not a passive participation, but rather, one that actively challenged traditional expectations that often relegated women to the sidelines. By engaging in these varied roles, they were showcasing their skills and capabilities, further undermining the patriarchal narrative that suggested women were incapable or ill-suited for public life. Another woman in the work recalls that she was empowered by her role in the protests: “I felt I was a strong leader; I felt great confidence in my abilities” (Hafez, 2018, p. 131). By challenging traditional gender roles, they were actively rewriting the societal expectations.

The diverse backgrounds of the women who participated were also important in terms of agency. Hafez observes that “Women from all walks of life: from veiled, religious women to secular women, to working class women and students—participated in the protests” (Hafez, 2018, p. 115). Often, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have been employed to confine women into particular roles and spaces.

The fact that conservative and religious women were present alongside their secular counterparts was a powerful rejection of the patriarchal assumption that Muslim women are a monolithic group with shared views. This demonstrated that women were not passive victims of religious or cultural structures, but rather, individuals who could interpret and engage with their faith on their own terms. This heterogeneity further challenged patriarchal structures by dismantling the notion of a singular ‘Muslim womanhood’ and highlighting the multiplicity of lived experiences and perspectives. They were also actively claiming their space in the revolution, in their own ways.

Be that as it may, the women’s struggle for liberation was not without its challenges. Their participation faced resistance, with some sectors attempting to silence their voices

and push them back into traditional roles after the initial revolutionary fervour subsided. As Hafez notes, “They faced harassment and sexual assaults in the protests, and they were often excluded from decision-making processes and positions of power” (Hafez, 2018, p. 145). These challenges (some of which have been explored in the previous chapter) underscore the pervasiveness of patriarchal structures, which were unwilling to concede women’s newfound agency easily. However, such resistance did not deter the women. If anything, it galvanized them to continue their struggle for full inclusion and equality. The acts of violence and marginalization by some men became a testament to the threat that their empowerment posed to the status quo.

Public protests allow women to claim their agency in several ways. Firstly, participation in protests helps to challenge societal norms that dictate how women should behave. Hafez (2018) notes that women in the Midan defied traditional gender expectations by actively taking part in demonstrations, thereby altering perceptions of women’s roles in public life. As women appeared in the streets, their involvement exposed the limits of patriarchy and highlighted their capability to contribute to society beyond domestic spheres. The significance of women’s protests is echoed in the work of other scholars.

According to Rezai and Sadeghi (2017), protests are a vital method for women to reclaim their spaces in societies that often marginalize them. They imply that the act of protesting itself can be a form of empowerment, wherein women foster communal bonds and build networks of support.

The protests by Muslim women were not isolated incidents; they formed part of a larger global trend where women have utilized protests to challenge oppressive systems. For instance, layers of feminist scholarship reveal that women’s involvement in protests is a way to claim public space and assert their rights. According to Moghadam (2012),

women's movements in the Middle East, including those in Egypt, are crucial for advancing gender equality and social justice. Abu-Lughod (2013) further notes that when women come together in public spaces, they not only challenge existing power dynamics but also create solidarity among diverse groups. This solidarity is crucial for building a collective identity and establishing a voice in a patriarchal society.

Hafez (2018) also highlights instances where women protested against sexual harassment and violence, reflecting their commitment to creating safer public spaces. A notable example she cites is the "Slut Walk" organized by women in Egypt to combat the culture of victim-blaming. Through this protest, women asserted their right to dress as they choose without fear of harassment. This movement not only empowered the participants but also sparked a wider conversation about women's rights in society, indicating that public protest can lead to social change.

Moreover, Mahmood (2005) highlights how Muslim women assert their agency through various forms of activism, including protests. She argues that these actions often challenge the notion that Muslim women are merely passive subjects. Instead, they are active participants in shaping their realities, which is evident in the collective actions observed in the Midan.

The involvement of women in public protests helped challenge stereotypes about Muslim women. Traditionally viewed as passive or oppressed, the protesters redefined the narrative by actively participating in political discussions and demonstrations. Public protests allow women to renegotiate their identities and assert their agency in a way that challenges patriarchal norms (Khan, 2014). Women in the Midan not only sought change regarding the political landscape but also worked to reshape societal perceptions of their roles.

Another significant example Hafez discusses is the Women's March on Tahrir Square in 2013. This protest was organized in response to rising violence against women and the lack of legal protections regarding sexual harassment. Through this march, women aimed to highlight their rights to safety and dignity in public spaces. According to Hafez (2018), the march served as a platform for women to voice their grievances and demand accountability from the state. The protest exemplifies how public demonstrations can focus attention on specific issues affecting women, thereby providing them with a space to articulate their needs and assert their rights.

These examples demonstrate that public protests are a vital strategy for Muslim women in asserting their agency. By taking to the streets, they not only communicate their demands but also foster a sense of community and solidarity among themselves. Collective action empowers women to re-frame their experiences and participates actively in the political process (Ahmed, 2011).

5.3. Education

Hafez's *Women of the Midan* (2018) provides a compelling glimpse into the lives of Egyptian women who participated in the 2011 revolution. Beyond the immediate political context, the work reveals the crucial role that education played in shaping these women's agency and their ability to challenge patriarchal structures within their society. Throughout the biographical memoir, Hafez demonstrates how education provided Muslim women with the intellectual tools, confidence, and social awareness necessary to actively resist traditional expectations and fight for their rights. By analyzing specific examples from the text, this section will illustrate how education functioned as a catalyst for these women's self-determination.

One of the most fundamental ways education empowered the women in *Women of the Midan* was by providing them with access to knowledge and critical thinking skills. This intellectual development allowed them to question the traditional gender roles assigned to them and to articulate their discontent. For instance, Hafez (2018) notes the significance of women's engagement with "activists and thinkers who challenged the authoritarian state and called for the establishment of a democratic political regime" (2018, p. 59).

This exposure to new ideas, facilitated by education, helped women recognize the limitations imposed on them by a patriarchal system and inspired them to seek change. As one interviewee, Hoda, observes, "I realized that education was not just about memorizing facts, but understanding them and using them to help people like me" (Hafez, 2018, p. 87).

Hoda's words reflect a fundamental shift in the perception of education; it was no longer just a means to a job but rather a tool for critical engagement and social transformation. This understanding that knowledge could be used to address injustice was crucial in building their agency.

Additionally, education fostered a sense of confidence and self-worth in these women, enabling them to resist the societal pressures that often silenced them. In a patriarchal society, women are frequently taught to prioritize the needs and desires of men, often at the expense of their own. However, as women pursued higher education, they developed a deeper understanding of their own capabilities and a greater belief in their ability to contribute to society.

The ability to articulate a critical analysis not only provides knowledge but also provides a foundational level of self confidence. As one of the women interviewed by Hafez explained, “Before, I felt like I was invisible. But with my degree, I know I can contribute something important” (2018, p. 112). This sentiment highlights how education empowers women to assert themselves and challenge their previously marginalized place in society. It moves women from a position of silenced compliance to one of vocal agency.

Moreover, education acted as a catalyst for social networking and coalition building. As women pursued secondary and tertiary education, they encountered other women with similar experiences and aspirations. This created opportunities for them to share ideas, build alliances, and collectively challenge the norms that constrained them. These connections were vital to the success of their efforts. As Hafez describes, the women, through their educational journeys, “formed networks that transcended class and religious differences ..., creating a powerful collective voice” (p. 134). It was through education that these women found a shared space, creating a platform to amplify their voices and move beyond gender-based silos.

The women in *Women of the Midan* also demonstrated how education could be a pathway for economic independence, which further strengthened their ability to assert their agency. When women had access to gainful employment, they could become less dependent on their families, and thus less susceptible to patriarchal control.

This is exemplified by Layla, one of the ladies whose stories are narrated in the biographical memoir, Layla remarks, “My job as a journalist gave me the money and the freedom to support myself, and to also speak out against injustice” (Hafez, 2018, p. 156). This financial freedom gave women autonomy in decision-making, allowing them

to actively participate in political movements and social reform as active agents in their own lives. By having an independent income, they were not solely dependent upon men and their control, and this allowed them a level of freedom that is not present otherwise.

Crucially, education also fostered the creation of social networks and alliances, which were essential for women to exert collective power. Hafez's (2018) shows a clear link between education and the formation of women's activist groups and political movements. Hafez observes, "We became a network...we were able to exchange our experiences, and help each other develop" (2018, p. 123). These networks, often rooted in shared educational experiences, become spaces for support, mentorship, and collective action. Through these networks, women can overcome the obstacles that patriarchal systems impose on individual women. Hafez's account of women's role in the revolution illustrates how educated women successfully formed alliances that propelled their movements. This signifies that education facilitates the formation of collective consciousness and the establishment of vital networks.

Education also provided these women with an avenue for economic independence, a powerful means of challenging dependence on male relatives. In patriarchal societies, where men are often the primary breadwinners, women's economic dependence can render them vulnerable and limit their decision-making power. However, education enabled some to enter the labor market, gaining economic autonomy that then translated into enhanced agency within their families and communities. For instance, Hafez quotes one woman stating, "My job gives me financial independence, and that makes me able to say 'no' when I wish to" (Hafez, 2018, p. 112). This direct link between financial independence and the ability to assert autonomy is a testament to the transformative power of education. This newfound economic power was not merely about financial

security; it was a form of liberation enabling them to make choices and negotiate the terms of their roles. Economic self-sufficiency challenged traditional power dynamics, fostering greater parity within relationships and families.

Education in *Women of the Midan* served as a gateway to social and political participation, allowing women to amplify their voices and demand recognition for their rights. The literacy and knowledge gained from formal education directly contributed to these women's ability to understand and engage with social and political issues. In the context of the Egyptian revolution, it was the educated women who were pivotal in organizing protests, articulating demands, and using various forms of communication to rally support.

One of the women, Aisha, aptly notes, "My education enabled me to understand the political situation much better. I knew my rights and that's why I was in the protest," (Hafez, 2018, p 154). This statement underlines the direct correlation between education and political activism. These women used their education to strategically engage in the public sphere, challenging the notion that political engagement was the exclusive domain of men. They were able to navigate complex political landscapes, articulate their vision for a more equitable society, and effectively mobilize others to action.

Granted, while education is powerful, it was not a magic bullet. The preceding chapters have demonstrated that the women in Hafez's (2018, 2011) biographical memoirs, despite being educated, faced significant challenges from their families and communities that were deeply invested in maintaining traditional patriarchal structures. They had to negotiate societal expectations, challenge established norms, and often fight for their right to use their education actively. However, education provided them

with the tools, the critical thinking, the economic independence, the social and political consciousness, they needed to navigate these challenges and carve out spaces for themselves. By engaging with their education, they could participate in the construction of their identities, rather than passively accepting those that were dictated by society.

Islamic feminism foregrounds the assertion of agency by Muslim women, who strive to navigate and negotiate their roles within both the religious and societal frameworks. In her ethnographic work Hafez illuminates the experiences of Muslim women in contemporary Egypt, exploring the various strategies they employ to assert their agency amid entrenched patriarchal structures.

Through her vivid narratives, Hafez (2018, 2011) depicts how these women draw on both their cultural heritage and Islamic teachings to challenge oppressive norms. One prominent strategy that Hafez highlights is the use of religious discourse to claim rights and equality. Many of the women she interviews articulate their understanding of Islam in ways that empower them rather than constrain them. For instance, one participant in Hafez's study notes, "Islam is not about oppression. I read the Quran, and I see that it speaks of justice and equality" (2018, p. 125).

This illustrates how these women reinterpret Islamic texts to support their claims to agency, demonstrating that an Islamic identity can coexist with a feminist consciousness. By reasserting their belief in a just and equitable Islam, they challenge traditional narratives that portray the religion as inherently patriarchal.

Hafez further exposes how educated women become more aware of their rights and societal issues. In her interviews with women from diverse backgrounds, one woman explains, "Before I started my education, I felt invisible. Now, I know I have a voice,

and I will use it” (Hafez, 2018, p. 78). This quote underscores the shift that occurs when women gain access to education. It highlights their transition from silence to assertion, illustrating how education provides them with the confidence to speak out about their rights and challenges.

This aligns with the scholarly literature that emphasizes the importance of education in female empowerment. According to Mernissi (1996), “Education is not merely a means of acquiring knowledge; it is an essential tool for women to navigate and challenge patriarchal structures.” This perspective reinforces Hafez’s argument that education empowers women to confront and resist societal norms. By becoming educated, these women are better equipped to question and reshape the traditional narratives that confine them.

Additionally, Hafez’s biographical memoirs expose the barriers that educated women face in their endeavours to assert their agency. For instance, Hafez notes, “Despite our education, society still expects us to conform to traditional roles” (2018, p. 99). This quote highlights the ongoing struggle that educated women encounter, where their qualifications and knowledge do not always translate into acceptance or equality in society. However, by continuing to pursue education, these women actively resist these constraints and redefine their roles. For instance, she recounts the experience of a woman named Sara, who states, “Education gave me the confidence to speak out. When I learned about my rights, I realized that silence was not an option” (Hafez, 2018, p. 112).

This quotation illustrates how education empowers Sara to challenge societal norms and assert her voice in public discourse. Through her educational pursuits, Sara

transforms from a passive observer into an active participant in her community, demonstrating the role of education as a catalyst for change.

Moreover, education helps these women redefine their identities. The character Amal reflects this transformation when she asserts,

“With every book I read, I connected to a bigger world. I no longer felt like just a woman in a veil, but a global citizen”
(Hafez, 2018, p. 87).

Amal’s experience signifies that education expands horizons and fosters a sense of belonging beyond local identities. As women gain knowledge, they begin to see themselves as part of a larger movement for gender equality, contributing to the global dialogue around women’s rights.

Scholars support the notion that education is a powerful tool for women seeking agency. According to Nussbaum (2001), “Education is a central capability that enables individuals to challenge oppressive structures.” This means that through education, Muslim women gain the skills and knowledge necessary to confront and dismantle the systems that seek to subjugate them. Hence, in Hafez’s work, education is not simply about acquiring knowledge; it is about equipping women with the tools necessary to navigate and influence the socio-political landscape.

Women in Hafez’s biographical memoirs used their education to advocate for others. One character, Layla, exemplifies this when she volunteers to teach illiterate women in her neighbourhood: “I want to show them that they can achieve their dreams, just like I did” (Hafez, 2018, p. 142). Layla’s commitment to education reflects a broader vision that transcends personal ambition, aiming to uplift her community and challenge

systemic barriers to education for women. This meant that education is not merely about acquiring formal qualifications; it also involves the critical engagement with cultural and political issues. Abu-Lughod (2002) affirms this idea by arguing that “education can be an important site of resistance and negotiation for women” (p. 10).

This perspective aligns with the experiences of the women in the Midan, who use their education to challenge societal norms and advocate for their rights. For example, Zainab, another character, argues,

“Through education, I learn to question what I am told. I want to define my life, not have it defined for me” (Hafez, 2018, p. 82).

This assertion illustrates her commitment to using education as a means to reclaim her identity.

In addition to Hafez’s insights, other scholars contribute to our understanding of the relationship between education and women’s agency. Mohanty (2003) highlights that “education is not merely about the transmission of knowledge; it is about the processes of identity formation and empowerment” (p. 50). This assertion reflects the experiences of the women in the Midan, who not only seek knowledge but also strive to define their own identities in a rapidly changing world. Their educational pursuits push them towards self-discovery and assertiveness.

5.4: Use of the media

In societies often characterized by patriarchal structures and rigid gender roles, women have historically navigated limited spaces for self-expression and agency. However, the advent of modern media, particularly digital platforms, has opened up new avenues for

women to challenge these constraints and assert their presence. Hafez's *Women of the Midan* (2018) provides a compelling analysis of how Muslim women in Egypt, during and after the 2011 revolution, strategically deployed various forms of media to challenge patriarchal norms and carve out a space for their voices to be heard. Through the lens of this pivotal period, we can see how these women's engagement with media was not a passive act of consumption but an active strategy to assert their agency, shaping public discourse and challenging dominant narratives.

Islamic feminism, emphasizes the need for women's voices within Islam, challenging traditional patriarchal interpretations. The actions of women in the Midan can be aligned with these tenets. As Ali (2006) explains, Islamic feminism seeks to reclaim women's narratives within Islam, allowing them to assert their agency. Muslim women in Egypt exemplified this by using media to highlight their rights and identities, affirming that their struggle is rooted in both a cultural and religious context.

The Islamic feminist theoretical framework asserts that agency is the capacity to act independently and make one's own choices. Hafez's work illustrates this well. She points out, "The very act of taking up space in the public sphere through media was a revolutionary act in itself" (Hafez, 2018, p. 160). This assertion of agency is not isolated; it reflects a broader movement where women seek to define their identities on their own terms.

The media was used to create a public-facing identity that defied established gender roles. In a society where women's presence in the public sphere has been historically controlled and often limited, the women of the Midan purposefully used visual and written media to position themselves as active, engaged citizens. Hafez (2018) notes the common presence of "hijab-clad revolutionary women" (p. 125) in photographs and

videos from the protests, consciously choosing to publicly display their religiosity, but simultaneously presenting it as compatible with modern political engagement. This visual representation challenged narratives that often portray Muslim women only as passive victims or housewives.

Furthermore, these Muslim women utilized media to showcase their wide range of roles, moving beyond simply being ‘protesters’ and instead becoming organizers, medics, journalists, and artists, demonstrating their multifaceted contributions to the movement. Beyond simply appearing in the media, women actively used digital platforms to create their own narratives and counter dominant discourses. Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, became crucial tools. These online spaces provided an arena where women could express their opinions freely.

By sharing their thoughts and analyses, the women countered the notion that they were uninterested or incapable of discussing political issues, effectively claiming their right to public engagement. They allowed women to circumvent the gate-keeping of traditional media, which was often controlled by the state or male-dominated institutions. Hafez (2018) describes how women shared their personal experiences, disseminated information about protests and strategies, and built networks of solidarity. This platform allowed women to control their representation, challenging the patriarchal narratives that often silenced or mischaracterized them. Hafez observes that “through their online activity, women crafted their own understanding of their role in the revolution and the society they wanted to see” (2018, p. 146).

The creation of blogs and online platforms specifically for women became a means of articulating their demands and analysing their struggles from their perspective, creating a unique counter-narrative within the larger political context. These platforms extended

their reach and allowed them to engage with a global audience, garnering international support and solidarity.

Moreover, the women of the Midan actively utilized media to challenge state violence and expose attempts to erase their presence and contributions to the revolution. Hafez (2018) illustrates how women documented instances of police brutality and sexual harassment, using citizen journalism to bypass state censorship. She writes,

“the use of cameras, even mobile phone cameras, was a powerful tool in documenting the injustices they encountered” (Hafez, 2018, p.152).

These videos and photos shared on social media became powerful evidence of the violence faced by women activists and served as a rallying cry for greater protection and equality. They challenged the patriarchal structures that had long encouraged impunity for crimes against women, forcing a reckoning with the issue of gendered violence. By broadcasting these abuses, they not only sought justice for themselves but also challenged the broader societal norms that normalized such violence.

The humor in the media photos and memes helped to undermine the seriousness and power of patriarchal structures. Hafez (2018) highlights the creative use of cartoons, graffiti, and slogans that employed sarcasm and wit to critique the establishment, as seen in the examples of political caricatures of figures in power. She notes that “through satire and artistic expression, women were able to expose the hypocrisy and absurdity of the patriarchal system, making it easier to challenge its authority” (Hafez, 2019, p. 109).

This use of creative media was not merely entertaining; it was also a politically subversive act that broadened participation in the movement and made complex political messages more accessible to a wider audience. These media practices resonate with Islamic feminist principles, which advocate for the agency and empowerment of women within Islamic frameworks. Islamic feminists argue that Muslim women have the right to express themselves and participate in public life, drawing upon Quranic teachings that emphasize justice and equality. For example, the Quran states, “Indeed, the believers, men and women, are allies of one another” (Quran 9:71), suggesting a shared responsibility for social justice.

Furthermore, these women leveraged citizen journalism to document the events unfolding in Tahrir Square and beyond. Equipped with mobile phones and readily available internet access, they bypassed traditional media channels, which were often complicit in perpetuating state-sanctioned narratives. As Hafez (2018) notes, “The use of digital technologies allowed women to circumvent the gatekeepers of mainstream media and create their own self-representations” (p. 149). These citizen journalists were not merely passive observers; they became active participants in shaping the narrative of the revolution. They recorded incidents of violence, chronicled the stories of fellow protesters, and disseminated information to a global audience. This active documentation created a counter-narrative that challenged both the state's version of events and the stereotypes about Muslim women as voiceless victims.

Beyond just chronicling events, women used media to actively organize and mobilize. *Women of the Midan* details how social media was instrumental in coordinating protests and rallies. Hafez (2018) emphasizes, “Social media played a crucial role in mobilizing women to participate in political activities and in creating

spaces for women to voice their concerns and share their experiences” (p. 155). Women used online platforms to share information about upcoming demonstrations, organize logistics, and connect with other activists, demonstrating their roles as active agents in shaping social change. This form of digital activism showcased their capacity for collective action and subverted the patriarchal presumption that women are primarily confined to the domestic sphere.

The act of sharing personal narratives online was another strategy employed by these women to assert their agency. Many women used blogs and social media to share their individual stories of struggle, resistance, and resilience. By making their personal lives and experiences public, they were challenging the idea that women’s lives were private matters, not subjects of public discourse. In doing so, they asserted the importance of their perspectives and experiences, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Egyptian society as a whole. Such narratives disrupted the monolithic portrayals of Muslim women, emphasizing the diversity of experiences, opinions, and aspirations within that population.

Visual media, particularly photography and video, was also used to challenge patriarchal norms. By documenting themselves actively participating in protests, women challenged the idea that they were passive observers. The images that circulated across the internet showcased women carrying banners, chanting slogans, and engaging in political dialogues, therefore subverting the idea of women as politically inert and confined to gendered roles. Visual evidence of women’s active participation not only inspired other women to join the movement but also forced the world to acknowledge their agency and political consciousness.

Therefore, it's worth arguing that the Muslim women utilized media to showcase their presence and active participation in the public sphere, directly contradicting the patriarchal expectations that confined them to the private realm. Before the revolution, women were often marginalized and invisible within mainstream media, depicted through limited and often stereotypical lenses. However, the protests in Tahrir Square became a powerful visual spectacle, amplified by various media. In *Women of the Midan*, Hafez highlights

“women’s presence in the square was highly visible, photographed and filmed by both professional and citizen journalists, thus breaking the public/private split in the patriarchal social order” (2018, p. 98).

This visibility, distributed through news agencies, social media platforms, and citizen-produced content, became a tangible assertion of women’s rights to be active political agents, countering the social narrative that considered their public participation as illegitimate or transgressive. Such visibility challenged not only public perception but also the political status quo, demanding that women’s voices be acknowledged and included. The circulation of images and videos of women engaging in protests, first aid, and political discussions became potent symbols of their agency, breaking through the patriarchal framework that sought to make them silent and invisible within society.

Moreover, Muslim women’s use of media extended beyond simply showcasing their presence; they actively employed it to articulate their political opinions and engage in public discourse. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter became critical spaces for mobilizing and organizing protests, but crucially, also for disseminating women’s political views. Hafez (2018) observes how “women utilized social-

networking sites to write about their own experiences of oppression, discrimination, and violence, thus bringing the private issues into the public sphere” (p. 112).

By sharing personal narratives and critiques of the existing power structures online, women were able to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of information and establish their own narratives, making their experiences and perspectives central to the national conversation. This bypassing of traditional media narratives allowed women to directly challenge the patriarchal norms that silenced them within their communities and the dominant religious interpretations that are frequently used to oppress women. For instance, women who were active during the revolution also created online groups and pages devoted to women’s rights which helped to mobilize larger numbers of women to actively participate in protests and debates (Hafez, 2018).

Furthermore, Hafez examines the ways in which women utilized traditional media, such as television, to express their views. While these outlets were not always completely free of patriarchal biases, women strategically leveraged the opportunities they presented to voice their demands and challenge the status quo. She points out how

Women were able to present their views as political citizens in several talk shows and panels, thus challenging their marginality in political life...they broke into television talk shows, taking part in discussions and debates, asserting their claims as political citizens (Hafez, 2018, p. 120).

Such appearances on television, even within the limitations of the medium, provided women with the platform to engage in political debate on a national scale. This visibility helped to shift public discourse and challenge the notion that women were only

interested in domestic affairs. Instead, these women were perceived as engaged, informed, and crucial participants in shaping the trajectory of their nation.

The media was thus not merely a tool for reporting on events, but a space for women to actively shape their identities and advocate for their rights. The revolution provided the fertile ground to showcase their agency and use media to its fullest potential. Through strategic visibility, direct public discourse, and the subversion of patriarchal narratives, they carved out a space for their voices to be heard and their presence to be acknowledged on a national scale. By using media, Muslim women contested and reshaped narratives about their roles in society, making the struggle for gender equality an integral part of the broader fight for social justice and democracy in Egypt.

Women of the Midan demonstrates how their participation was not a mere byproduct of the revolution, but an active ingredient, and how their use of media tools was instrumental in this process of active and powerful participation (Hafez, 2018). Their use of different media platforms is not just a reflection of social change, rather this strategic use is an action that actively creates and accelerates change in patriarchal societies.

In addition to social media, Hafez (2018) emphasizes the role of community media initiatives in empowering women. These initiatives enable women to create content that reflects their perspectives and experiences. For instance, women-run community radio stations provide a platform for discussing local issues, highlighting women's roles, and mobilizing for change. Hafez explains, "These stations allow women to come together, share their experiences, and organize around issues that matter to them" (Hafez, 2018, p. 115). Such platforms encourage solidarity and collective action, essential aspects of feminist movements.

The principles of Islamic feminism further support the use of media as a tool for Muslim women's agency. Islamic feminism emphasizes the compatibility of feminism and Islam, advocating for women's rights within an Islamic framework. Author and scholar, Zainah Anwar (2006), posits that "Islam is not the problem; it is the interpretation of Islam that needs to change" (p. 12). This perspective encourages Muslim women to engage with Islamic texts critically, using modern platforms to assert their rights and challenge patriarchal interpretations.

Kearney (2008) emphasize that "representation matters because it shapes perceptions, and Muslim women are claiming this space" (p. 45). By producing their narratives, they help reshape societal views and assert their presence in both public and private spheres.

Social media has been instrumental in fostering community among Muslim women. Hafez notes, "The digital landscape has enabled women to connect, support, and mobilize around shared experiences" (Hafez, 2018, p. 119). This sense of solidarity empowers women, allowing them to challenge injustices collectively. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become places where women share resources, organize events, and advocate for issues affecting their communities.

Additionally, the creative use of art and performance in public spaces showcased women's resilience and resistance. Hafez describes a performance piece where women expressed their struggles and aspirations through theatrical art, stating, "Art became an avenue to reclaim our narrative and assert our visibility" (Hafez, 2018, p. 156). Artistic expression has historically been a means for marginalized groups to assert their identity, and in the context of Islamic feminism, it aligns with the broader goal of reinterpreting women's roles within Islam. Reclaiming narratives through art and media is a vital

aspect of Islamic feminism, as it allows women to express their lived experiences and challenge patriarchal interpretations of their faith (Wadud, 2006).

It is essential to recognize how these women seek to navigate and negotiate their identities within Islam. Islamic feminism emphasizes gender equality and the reinterpretation of religious texts to reflect women's rights. According to Ahmed, "Islamic feminism seeks to eliminate the dual oppression of women in both the secular and religious spheres" (1992, p. 155). By utilizing media, Muslim women not only challenge sociopolitical narratives but also bring attention to their religious identities, assert their agency

5.5. Socio-political activism

Patriarchal societies, often characterized by male dominance and the subjugation of women, present significant challenges to women's autonomy and agency. However, across diverse cultural and historical contexts, women have consistently resisted these structures through various forms of socio-political activism. In the context of Muslim communities, where religious interpretations are often intertwined with cultural norms that restrict women's roles, activism becomes a crucial tool for reclaiming voice, asserting rights, and transforming societal norms.

Hafez's biographical memoirs provide a powerful case study of this phenomenon through its exploration of Egyptian women's participation in the 2011 revolution. Hafez reveals how Muslim women, far from being passive victims of patriarchy, actively leveraged the political upheaval to carve out new spaces for themselves and to directly confront the patriarchal power structures that had constricted their lives, using the

revolution as “a transformative experience and a site for (re)making the self” (2018, p. 175).

The concept of agency is central to Islamic feminism, which seeks to reconcile the principles of Islam with women’s rights. As Moallem (2005) asserts, Islamic feminism encourages women to reinterpret Islamic texts to highlight gender equity: “Islamic feminists do not reject Islam but seek to reclaim its core tenets for the empowerment of women” (2018, p. 3). This reclamation is evident in *Women of the Midan*, where women articulate their struggles and assert their identities in ways that connect their activism to Islamic values. Hafez notes, “Our faith empowers us; it is not a barrier but a source of strength” (2018, p. 112). This statement reflects the nuanced approach that these women take, advocating for their rights through their faith rather than in opposition to it.

One clear illustration of this assertion of agency is the physical presence of women in Tahrir Square during the protests. Hafez notes,

Tahrir Square came to be known as a space of intense energy and an unprecedented space for women. All kinds of women were visible; women with face veils, with headscarves, with no head coverings all joined together on the streets. (2018, p. 9)

This visibility itself was a radical act, challenging the societal norm that relegated women to the private sphere, out of the public eye. This courageous display of public participation allowed women to not only make their unique demands as citizens heard but also to challenge the notion that their religion or their cultural practices made them

docile. This action demonstrates that women were choosing to be in the public space to participate in the change that would affect their lives.

Beyond their presence in the square, women actively participated in the practical aspects of the revolution. Hafez (2018) observes how “women played a crucial role in organizing the protests, providing medical care, food supplies, logistical and organizational support” (p.80). This involvement was not confined to stereotypical supportive roles; women were also at the forefront of the protests, chanting slogans, leading marches, and even acting as citizen journalists, utilizing social media to document the events and disseminate information, thus showcasing their talents and breaking free from preconceived notions about their level of involvement. This active involvement demonstrates their intellectual and organizational capabilities, challenging the patriarchal narrative that limits them.

Moreover, the women’s participation in the revolution was not just about overthrowing a political regime; it was also about challenging patriarchal norms within their own communities as well. Hafez (2018) points out, “Tahrir Square became a site of negotiation and renegotiation of gender roles and relations, where women were questioning traditional norms and expectations” (p. 123). The collective experience of resistance allowed women to envision a different social order, one where women were not marginalized and were able to equally participate in the public and the political life. This was not without its challenges as some factions within the movement also tried to marginalize them, but the women’s fight to make themselves heard was a step on the path toward their own empowerment.

The use of art as a form of socio-political commentary is another instance of women’s activism showcased in Hafez’s work. Women used poetry, songs, and graffiti to convey

their experiences, perspectives, and demands. Hafez (2018) elucidates that “these artistic forms became powerful tools for expressing dissent and reclaiming space for female voices” (p.145). The creative expressions of women in the public space served to challenge normative notions and to also foster solidarity among marginalized groups. This act of creation is a powerful way for them to share their experiences and make sure that their voices are heard.

Beyond simply participating, the women in *Women of the Midan* also actively shaped the narrative of the movement and their role within it. Hafez demonstrates that these women did not simply adopt the roles assigned to them by men in the revolution (fighting from the frontlines, providing healthcare, etc.) but they also used the revolution as an opportunity to advance women’s rights and to assert their own version of gender equality. They sought to redefine their roles and demands by introducing women’s issues to the discourse in the public sphere. They used the momentum of change to advocate for policies like equal pay and fighting sexual harassment. For instance, Hafez (2019) notes that

“the revolution became an opportunity for women to introduce their demands into the public discourse and to call for a restructuring of gender relations” (p.35)

This quote powerfully illustrates that their participation was not purely about overthrowing the regime, but also about reshaping the very fabric of their society to include women’s concerns and agency.

Hafez’s portrayal of the women as active agents of change resonates with the idea that agency must be understood in context (Mamood 2005). Agency does not merely signify

resistance to oppression; it also encompasses the capacity to engage in cultural practices and religious observance in ways that affirm one's individual and collective identity. Hafez (2018) presents diverse narratives showing how women embody this notion of agency, using their participation in protests and civil society to assert their political voice. The women's involvement in the 2011 Egyptian revolution serves as a prime example of this engagement. Hafez documents how they used social media to mobilize support and articulate their concerns, therefore participating actively in the socio-political arena (Hafez, 2018).

Hafez also addresses the backlash women experience for their activism, particularly from conservative groups that perceive their engagement as a threat to traditional social norms. This mirrors broader scholarly discourse that recognizes the pushback against women's rights movements in Muslim-majority societies (Badran, 2009). Despite these challenges, the women in *Women of the Midan* persist in their efforts, showcasing resilience and determination. Their struggles are emblematic of the broader quest for rights and freedoms that many women across the globe are undertaking today.

Islamic feminism is predicated on the premise that women can advocate for their rights within the framework of Islam without negating their religious beliefs. Scholars like Leila Ahmed (1992) argue that Islamic feminist discourse seeks to reclaim a woman's place in Islamic narratives, which have often been overshadowed by patriarchal interpretations. Hafez's biographical memoir embodies this discourse by portraying women as active agents who engage in social change while maintaining their religious identities.

Abu-Lughod (2013) argues that it is vital to listen to the voices of women in the Global South to understand their intricacies, noting, "By emphasizing their agency, we can

counter narratives that portray them merely as victims of culture” (p. 21). This perspective resonates with Hafez’s portrayal of women in the Midan who are depicted not as passive victims but as active participants in shaping their destinies. Furthermore, in her exploration of Islamic empowerment, Wadud (2006) states, “The Qur’an declares the equality of all human beings, and true Islamic feminism seeks to connect that declaration with action” (p. 5). Hafez’s women exemplify this principle, as they draw strength from their religious beliefs and manifest them in their activism. Their actions, driven by a commitment to justice and equality, resonate with Wadud's assertion of moral and social responsibility.

5.6. The re-interpretation of religious texts in favor of Muslim women

Hafez’s(2011) offers a compelling exploration of how Muslim women across the globe are engaging with Islamic religious texts, not as passive recipients of patriarchal interpretations, but as active agents of change. The book vividly illustrates a crucial strategy employed by these women: the reinterpretation of religious texts. This reinterpretation, going beyond simple acceptance of traditional readings, becomes a powerful tool in challenging societal norms and asserting agency within often deeply patriarchal structures. By reclaiming their right to understand and interpret their faith, these women are carving out spaces for themselves, demanding autonomy, and pushing for a more equitable understanding of Islam.

It is important to emphasize that this act of reinterpretation is not about rejecting Islam. Instead, these women are demonstrating their deep engagement with their faith, seeking to understand it in ways that reflect their own lived realities and aspirations for equality (Hafez, 2011, p. 12). They are using their knowledge of Islamic texts and drawing on

different schools of thought to reclaim their agency and challenge traditional gender norms that have been legitimized by patriarchal interpretations of Islam. This process also gives them a space to address issues of women's rights and empowerment within Islamic discourse, rather than being relegated to secular spaces alone.

A primary way in which this reinterpretation empowers women is by challenging the exclusive hold of male religious authorities on Islamic discourse. Hafez (2011) highlights how many traditional interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, have been shaped by patriarchal biases, often resulting in the subjugation of women. However, women are increasingly questioning these interpretations, delving into the texts themselves, and offering new perspectives that highlight passages affirming gender equality and women's rights. For instance, Hafez writes about women who "reclaimed the Qur'anic verse:

'Women shall have rights similar to the rights that men have over them, according to what is equitable' (Quran 2:228)" (Hafez, 2011, p. 18).

Through these reinterpretations, the women are not rejecting the religion but rather trying to find an interpretation that truly reflects the 'equitable' way the Quran suggests. This act of reclaiming interpretive authority is itself a powerful expression of agency, challenging the notion that religious knowledge is the sole domain of men.

Furthermore, the reinterpretation of religious texts allows Muslim women to dismantle justifications for gender inequality that have long been attributed to Islam. For example, the concept of *qiwamah*, often translated as male guardianship, is heavily scrutinized

and re-evaluated. Hafez reveals how women scholars reinterpret this concept, arguing that it implies responsibility and caretaking, not dominance and control.

As she cites from one of the women by the name Habiba..., “My reading of qiwamah, as it is mentioned in the Qur'an, is not one of dominance. It is rather that man is to look after and provide for the woman, not to dominate over her” (Hafez, 2011, p. 21). This shift in understanding transforms the very foundations of traditional gender hierarchies by highlighting the Quranic emphasis on mutual responsibility and respect. By refusing to accept patriarchal glosses on scripture, Muslim women actively reshape the narrative, emphasizing the aspects of their religion that support their equality and challenge those that do not.

Moreover, the Muslim women in Hafez’s (2011) use reinterpretations to justify their pursuit of education, employment, and participation in the public sphere. Traditional interpretations often confine Muslim women to the domestic sphere, denying them opportunities for personal and professional growth. Hafez discusses women who argued that

“Islam's foundational texts support women’s education and participation in society; it has nothing to do with the seclusion and oppression of women” (2011, p. 38).

By highlighting the importance of knowledge and community involvement in Islamic teachings, these women create a religious justification for challenging traditional limitations. This reinterpretation is not simply about abstract theological debate; it is about making space for women’s lived experiences and their aspirations to contribute to society in meaningful ways. By connecting their goals to the Quranic teachings,

women effectively legitimize their struggle for agency, countering the social constraints they face.

Furthermore, Hafez (2011) documents how women question interpretations of verses pertaining to female modesty and dress. The widely practiced customs of *hijab* are re-evaluated critically rather than simply accepted as essential in faith. As one interviewee states, “the veil is not an obligatory garment. It is a cultural creation” (Hafez, 2011, p. 170). Here, the interviewee asserts that the Quranic guidelines on modesty are separate from specific apparel and cultural contexts.

She thus asserts that *hijab* as it stands is a cultural creation rather than a religious one, and hence opens the floor for multiple interpretations and expression of faith. This reinterpretation is central to the agency of these women, allowing them to redefine their interaction with tradition and religion, thus shifting the power of religious symbolism to something that empowers them, rather than constrain them. In this context, reinterpreting scripture allows women to challenge societal expectations and to exercise their autonomy over their own bodies and choices.

It is crucial to note that the process of reinterpretation is not a monolithic one. Hafez’s (2011) work demonstrates the diversity of approaches within the Muslim women’s movement, each shaped by specific socio-political contexts and lived experiences. For some, reinterpretation means a critical examination of traditional Hadith, while for others it involves re-contextualizing Quranic verses within their historical context. However, the underlying goal remains the same: to construct an inclusive and equitable understanding of Islam that acknowledges and affirms the agency of women. This diversity in approach highlights the dynamism and creativity inherent in the process of reinterpretation.

Hafez (2011) demonstrates how Muslim women activists reject interpretations that portray Muslim women as inherently subordinate to men. Instead, they emphasize the concept of *tawhid*, the oneness of God, which they argue implies equality between all believers, regardless of gender. As Hafez explains,

For many of the women activists, the concept of *tawhid*, or the oneness of God, is central to establishing equality between the sexes. Such a reading of the Quran emphasizes the direct relationship of each individual to God and consequently to each other. (2011, p. 34)

This interpretation allows them to view themselves as equally capable, intelligent, and deserving of divine favor as men, directly challenging narratives of female inferiority. This reframing provides a theological footing for their claims for equality within the religious community.

Furthermore, women use reinterpretation to dismantle traditional restrictions on women's participation in religious life. Hafez (2011) provides several examples of women who are questioning traditional interpretations of verses related to women's roles in prayer and leadership. For instance, concerning the issue of women leading prayers, traditional interpretations of hadith have been interpreted to prohibit women from leading mixed-gender congregations.

However, some women, drawing on different interpretations of the same religious texts, argue that such prohibitions are not explicitly derived from the Quran or early Islamic practice, and that women do have the competency to lead prayers. As Hafez notes,

Women's questioning of interpretations of those texts and their emphasis on the importance of the context in which they were revealed in order to understand

them represent a major challenge to what has been presented as the orthodox and hence eternal understanding of Islam. (2011, p. 56)

These women reclaim their right to participate in religious life by challenging exclusionary interpretations and demonstrating that such restrictions are not divinely mandated.

Many of the women studied in *An Islam of Her Own* are actively challenging patriarchal interpretations of family law. For example, traditional interpretations often place men in a position of authority within the family, with women often having limited rights. However, women are now reclaiming texts related to these issues and arguing for egalitarian interpretations of Islamic law related to divorce, child custody and property rights. They highlight verses that emphasize justice and fairness to challenge the imbalance of power and challenge the way patriarchal norms have been given religious imprimatur. As Hafez points out,

This constant questioning of the traditional patriarchal interpretations of faith not only reconfigures the boundaries of Islamic law, but also, and more importantly, it challenges the cultural authority of men over women. (2011, p. 112)

By challenging such impositions, these women are actively working toward restructuring family dynamics on a basis of equality rather than hierarchy.

The significance of personal interpretation and connection to texts is amplified by Hafez's analysis of women's spiritual practices. She describes ritualistic and devotional practices that deviate from traditional or institutional norms. The quote, "they engage in spiritual practices that are at once personally empowering, and collectively

transformative” (Hafez, 2011, p. 87) is a great example. This demonstrates that these women are actively appropriating Islamic rituals and adapting them to meet their own spiritual and social realities. This approach allows them to maintain a firm sense of belonging to their faith whilst refusing to conform to rigid, patriarchal norms. This act of reinterpreting sacred rituals and practices showcases agency by reclaiming their religious experience on their own terms.

Evidently, such re-readings are not isolated acts of individual rebellion, but are often part of a broader collective movement. Hafez observes that “women’s religious gatherings served as a platform for knowledge production and collective empowerment” (2011, p. 92). In many cases, these gatherings allow women to freely discuss and interpret scriptures, share their experiences, and construct a collective understanding that reflects their realities as women. This type of collaborative reinterpretation is critical for fostering a sense of shared agency and creating a counter-narrative to that which is imposed by dominant patriarchal structures. It encourages women to view themselves not as recipients of religious dogma, but as active participants in its ongoing negotiation.

This concept of reinterpreting religious texts as a means of asserting agency is supported by other critical works in Islamic feminist scholarship. Wadud (1999), in “Quran and Woman,” also advocates for a new hermeneutics that reads Quranic verses through a feminist lens. She argues that many verses pertaining to gender have been historically interpreted in patriarchal contexts and that a re-reading, taking into account the historical context and the overall intention of the Quran, can lead to a much more egalitarian understanding (Wadud 1999). Similarly, Barlas (2002), in “Believing Women” challenges the common assertion that Islam is inherently misogynistic. By

focusing on the Quran itself, Barlas (2002) demonstrates how verses concerning women and gender roles have been misinterpreted and misappropriated, and how a more nuanced understanding can lead to an embrace of female agency and equality.

Hafez's research highlights that women scholars are critically investigating the authenticity of hadiths, which are widely used to justify patriarchal practices, and dismissing them when they are deemed unauthentic or contradictory to the core principles of the Quran. As an example, Hafez notes that "some scholars have dismissed hadith about women as 'weak' or 'fabricated' because they were either not reliably narrated or completely at odds with their sense of Quranic justice" (Hafez, 2011, p.84).

This selective approach to Hadith, rooted in rigorous scholarly investigation, allows for the rejection of those narratives that perpetuate inequality while retaining those that align with notions of justice and equity. This critical approach is further supported by studies like Brown (2007), who in *The Canonization of Islamic Law* emphasizes that not all hadiths are considered equal, and the processes by which they were collected, validated and transmitted were far from uniform. This approach challenges the prevailing notion that all Hadith are equally binding, paving the way for women to challenge those that limit their agency.

Furthermore, women are emphasizing the Quranic emphasis on justice and equity as a framework through which to understand the overarching message of the religion. Hafez points out how women are arguing that the Quran's emphasis on equality and justice before God and before other people should be the guiding principle for understanding passages that seem to offer unequal treatment for men and women, and these Quranic principles should supersede traditions and laws that do not reflect them.

According to Hafez, “they argue that the Quran’s emphasis on universal justice overrides those aspects of Islam that have been traditionally used to limit women’s agency” (Hafez, 2011, p. 101). This focus on the broader ethical framework of Islam provides a powerful counter-narrative to patriarchal readings. This understanding aligns with Wadud (1999) who uses a holistic approach to examine the text, emphasizing the core principles of *tawhid* (unity of God) and *adl* (justice) to demonstrate that the Quran's foundational message is inherently egalitarian. By focusing on these core principles, she helps to re-frame and delegitimize patriarchal interpretations.

Evidently, the strategies employed by Muslim women to assert their agency, as depicted in Hafez’s biographical memoir *Women of the Midan* (2018), illuminate the multifaceted approaches to overcoming socio-cultural limitations and patriarchal norms. Through the pursuit of education, these women have empowered themselves with the knowledge and skills necessary to challenge stereotypes and redefine their roles within society. The media has served as a crucial platform for their voices, allowing them to share their narratives and counteract misrepresentations that often marginalize Muslim women. Moreover, socio-political activism has emerged as a driving force, enabling these women to advocate for their rights and influence policy changes that promote gender equality. Additionally, the reinterpretation of religious texts has provided a framework for these women to reclaim their faith in ways that affirm their rights and identities, fostering a contemporary understanding of Islam that supports their quest for agency. Collectively, these strategies reveal a vibrant tapestry of resistance and assertion, demonstrating that Muslim women are actively navigating and reshaping their worlds through their courage, creativity, and resilience.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.1. Introduction

Sherine Hafez's, (2018, 2011) works, *Women of the Midan* and *An Islam of Her Own*, provide a critical lens through which the complex interrelations of gender, culture, and religion can be explored. This thesis investigated Gendered conflicts and the historical production of Muslim women as depicted in Hafez's (2018), emphasizing four main objectives: the relevance of biographical memoirs in narrating Muslim women's experiences, the forms of gendered conflicts in predominantly Islamic societies, the historical construction of the inferior identity of Muslim women, and the strategies employed by Muslim women to assert their identities.

6.2. The artistic strategies used in the Biographical Memoirs that complement its narrative

From the study, it is evident that the Biographical memoir, as a literary form, provides a crucial platform for Muslim women to directly articulate their experiences, challenging dominant, often Western-centric and/or patriarchal narratives that have historically defined them. This form allows for Muslim women's self-representation, moving beyond stereotypical portrayals and reclaiming agency in defining their own identities. Through personal narratives, these biographical memoirs directly counter misrepresentations and offer intimate perspectives on the realities of being a Muslim woman in diverse contexts. This is achieved through the strategic employment of first-person narrative voices, fostering a sense of immediacy and authenticity that invites readers into the lived experiences of the authors and their subjects.

The use of the first-person narrative voice highlights the autonomy of Muslim women. This direct, personal voice fosters a sense of intimacy and authenticity, allowing Muslim women to connect with readers on a deeply human level. The “I” voice becomes a tool for self-assertion, enabling the narrators to directly confront and reframe experiences of oppression, discrimination, and societal expectations. This allows for a more nuanced portrayal of Muslim women’s lives, showcasing their strength, resilience, and agency in the face of adversity. The narrative voice becomes a critical tool for reclaiming their stories and challenging pre-conceived notions. This authenticity is further reinforced through honest reflections on personal struggles, doubts, and triumphs, creating a relatable and compelling narrative for diverse readers.

Further, the inclusion of photographs in biographical memoirs, as seen in the *Women of the Midan* (2018) adds another layer of depth and meaning to the text. Photographs serve as visual evidence, grounding the narratives in tangible realities. They can depict personal spaces, family members, community events, and moments of resistance, offering a visual counterpoint to the written word. These images often evoke emotions and convey messages that transcend language, making the stories more accessible and impactful. Analysing the selection and placement of photographs can reveal further insights into the author’s intent and the construction of identity.

It is worth noting that while biographical memoirs strive for truthfulness, it is important to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of memory and personal experience. The narratives are shaped by the author’s individual perspectives, biases, and interpretations of events. This subjectivity, however, does not diminish the value of the memoirs; rather, it highlights the importance of understanding these experiences through a critical lens. Examining the ways in which memory and personal reflection are interwoven into

the narrative can reveal how Muslim women negotiate their identities in relation to their pasts and present circumstances. The concept of ‘truth’ in these memoirs is therefore not about objective fact, but rather about authentic representation of lived experience and personal interpretation.

6.3. Forms of Gendered Conflicts in Predominantly Islamic Societies

Hafez’s *Women of the Midan* vividly portrays the multifaceted nature of gendered conflicts experienced by Egyptian women during and after the Arab Spring. These conflicts manifest not only in the overtly political arena but also within deeply entrenched social structures and even internalized beliefs. A primary form of gendered conflict arises from the patriarchal expectations dictating women’s roles in public life and political participation. Several women recount facing resistance from male family members (husbands, fathers, brothers) who, while supportive of the revolution in principle, questioned the appropriateness of women’s active involvement in protests and political organizing.

Furthermore, the biographical memoir exposes the gendered violence and harassment that permeated the revolutionary space. Testimonies reveal a disturbing prevalence of sexual harassment and assault against women protesters, often used as a tactic to silence their voices and deter their participation. Again, cite a specific instance from the book. The normalization of such behaviour demonstrates the systemic disregard for women’s rights and safety.

Beyond physical violence, *Women of the Midan* (2018) also reveals the insidious nature of symbolic violence against women. This manifests in the form of derogatory language, the questioning of their motivations and intelligence, and the constant need

to prove their commitment to the revolutionary cause. The conflict here lies in the constant struggle to be heard, respected, and taken seriously within a movement ostensibly fighting for freedom and equality.

Finally, the narratives also suggest a form of internalized conflict, where women grapple with societal expectations and their own desires for autonomy. This internal struggle reflects the weight of societal pressures and the complex negotiations women undertake to balance their roles and aspirations. It speaks to the profound impact of patriarchal norms on women's self-perception and their choices.

6.4. The Historical Construction of the Inferior Identity of Muslim Women

The historical production of the inferior identity of Muslim women is a critical theme in Hafez's works. The analysis reveals that this identity has been crafted through a confluence of colonial narratives, religious interpretations, and socio-political developments. By interrogating historical texts, discourse, and practices, Hafez narrates how Muslim women have been systematically marginalized in both public and private spheres. The influence of colonial attitudes, for instance, exacerbated perceptions of Muslim women as oppressed, thereby diminishing their agency and contributions to society. Moreover, Hafez critiques how certain interpretations of Islamic teachings have been manipulated to reinforce gender hierarchies, leading to the internalization of inferiority among women. The memoirs serve to deconstruct these narratives, illustrating how historical legacies continue to affect contemporary perceptions of Muslim women.

6.5. Strategies Muslim Women Have Used to Assert Their Identity

Hafez's reveals that one key strategy employed by Muslim women is actively reclaiming and reinterpreting religious texts and traditions. The women interviewed challenge patriarchal interpretations of the religious texts that have historically been used to justify gender inequality. By engaging in their own independent reasoning and drawing on alternative interpretations within Islamic scholarship, these women dismantle the religious basis of gendered oppression and create space for more egalitarian practices.

It is also notable that the biographical accounts of Muslim women demonstrate the crucial role of coalition-building and collective action in Muslim women's assertion of agency. The women featured often participate in or lead women's organizations, activist groups, and social movements to address issues such as domestic violence, discriminatory laws, and limited access to education and employment. By working together, they amplify their voices, pool resources, and create a support system that enables them to challenge patriarchal structures more effectively.

Education and professional advancement emerge as significant pathways for Muslim women to exercise agency in these biographical memoirs. The biographical narratives highlight how access to education empowers these women to challenge traditional gender roles, gain economic independence, and participate more fully in public life. The women's professional achievements not only provide them with financial security but also enhance their social standing and credibility, enabling them to influence decision-making processes and advocate for policy changes.

Hafez's work showcases the increasing importance of digital media and online activism as tools for Muslim women to assert their agency. The women profiled leverage social media platforms to share their stories, raise awareness about gender inequality, and mobilize support for their causes. By bypassing traditional media outlets that may be subject to censorship or bias, these women can directly engage with a wider audience and create virtual spaces for dialogue and solidarity."

Also, the biographical memoirs reveal the ways in which Muslim women actively negotiate and redefine their roles within the family. While upholding certain cultural values, they challenge traditional expectations regarding marriage, motherhood, and household responsibilities. By redefining their family roles, these women assert their autonomy and create more balanced and fulfilling lives for themselves and their families.

Artistic expression and storytelling are also powerful tools used by Muslim women to assert their agency, as revealed in Hafez's works of art. The women employ various forms of art, such as poetry, writing, film, and visual arts, to challenge dominant narratives, express their experiences, and advocate for social change. By sharing their stories and perspectives through art, these women reclaim their voices, create spaces for dialogue, and inspire others to challenge the status quo.

Conclusively therefore, Hafez's biographical memoirs provide a profound exploration of the gendered conflicts and historical constructions of Muslim women's identities. By focusing on personal narratives, Hafez illuminates the complexities of these women's experiences while illustrating their active roles in negotiating their identities against the backdrop of cultural and religious frameworks. The findings of this thesis underscore the significance of these memoirs in challenging reductive narratives about Muslim

women, highlighting both their historical struggles and their ongoing agency. Ultimately, Hafez's works contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Muslim women as active participants in their own stories, offering insights that resonate beyond the confines of their cultural context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the significant findings and insights gleaned from this study on gendered conflicts and the historical construction of Muslim women's identity in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoirs, the following recommendations are proposed. These recommendations aim to leverage the study's contributions to inform ongoing debates, promote understanding, and foster positive change, particularly in relation to gender equality and women's agency within Islamic societies and broader global contexts.

The research indicates that Muslim women actively combat inequality by "building coalitions and engaging in collective action." It is recommended that formal and informal networks of Muslim women be strengthened and expanded to facilitate shared learning, emotional support, and coordinated advocacy efforts in addressing gendered conflicts and advocating for social justice.

As the study notes, Muslim women actively combat oppressive narratives by reinterpreting the patriarchal interpretation of religious texts. It is recommended that efforts be sustained and amplified within Muslim communities to encourage scholarly and community-based initiatives that promote nuanced, context-sensitive, and egalitarian interpretations of Islamic scriptures, thereby challenging patriarchal interpretations that contribute to gendered inequality.

While this study focused on Sherine Hafez's works, the findings suggest a broader need. It is recommended that future research explore biographical memoirs and other literary forms by Muslim women from diverse geographical, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences with gendered conflicts and assertions of agency beyond the specific contexts examined here.

Given the evolving nature of communication, it is recommended that research be conducted into how Muslim women utilize digital platforms (e.g., blogs, social media, online forums) to narrate their identities, challenge oppressive systems, and assert agency, building on the significance of first-person accounts highlighted in this study.

While this study focused on gendered conflicts, it is recommended that future research delve deeper into the intersectionality of gender with other identity markers such as class, race, sexuality, and nationality, to understand how these factors further complicate and shape Muslim women's experiences and strategies of resistance.

This study successfully employed an Islamic feminist literary analysis approach. It is recommended that this and similar decolonial and culturally sensitive analytical frameworks be further developed and applied in literary and gender studies to unearth nuanced perspectives often overlooked by Western-centric or purely secular approaches.

To "challenge Western-centric and patriarchal narratives" and promote a more nuanced understanding, it is recommended that educational institutions at all levels incorporate biographical memoirs and other literary works by Muslim women into their curricula, especially in courses on literature, history, gender studies, and religious studies.

Recognizing the "powerful platform" of biographical memoirs, it is recommended that publishing houses actively seek out, commission, and promote life writing by Muslim women from various backgrounds. This includes supporting emerging voices and ensuring wider distribution to reach diverse audiences.

The study implicitly highlights the need to combat historically constructed inferior identities. It is recommended that media outlets and content creators critically examine

and actively dismantle stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women, instead promoting authentic and diverse narratives that reflect their agency and complexity, as revealed in their own accounts.

This study provides valuable knowledge that can inform the ongoing gender and autonomy debates." It is recommended that policymakers, NGOs, and advocacy groups consult and integrate findings from such studies into their strategies for promoting gender equality, combating gendered violence, and empowering women, particularly in contexts relevant to Muslim communities.

Recognizing that Muslim women engage in various forms of activism, advocating for gender equality, social justice and political change," it is recommended that development agencies and philanthropic organizations provide targeted support, resources, and platforms for grassroots movements led by Muslim women working for social change within their communities.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can contribute to a more profound understanding of the complex interplay between gendered conflicts and the historical construction of Muslim women's identities.

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APPENDIX ONE: WORK PLAN

1.9.1 *Year 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework*

Objective: To conduct an extensive review of existing literature and develop a theoretical framework for the study.

Activities:

1. Literature Review (Months 1-6):

- Survey existing scholarship on gender studies, conflict studies, and Islamic studies.
- Identify key themes relevant to Muslim women’s historical experiences and representations in contexts of conflict (e.g., colonialism, war, socio-political upheaval).
- Examine works by feminist theorists, postcolonial scholars, and Muslim women writers to gain diverse perspectives.

2. Theoretical Framework Development (Months 7-8):

- Develop a framework that integrates gender theory and conflict theory.
- Explore concepts such as gendered space, intersectionality, and agency within the context of historical narratives.
- Formulate research questions that align with identified gaps in the literature.

3. Proposal Writing and Approval (Months 9-12):

- Write and submit a detailed Year 3: Data Analysis, Writing, and Dissemination
-

- Objective: To analyze collected data, write the thesis, and disseminate findings.
- **Activities:**
- Data Analysis (Months 1-6):
- Analyze qualitative data using thematic coding and narrative analysis.
- Compare findings against the theoretical framework developed in Year 1: identify patterns, similarities, and anomalies in the experiences of Muslim women across different contexts.
- Synthesize findings into coherent themes that address the research questions.
- Thesis Writing (Months 7-10):
- Organize findings into chapters addressing key themes such as representations, agency, resilience, and the impact of conflict on identity.
-
- Integrate literature reviewed in Year 1 with field data to construct a comprehensive narrative.
- Write and revise drafts, seeking peer and advisor feedback throughout the writing process.
- Dissemination of Findings (Months 11-12):
- Prepare for the thesis defense: condense research findings into a presentation highlighting key themes and contributions.
- Explore opportunities for publication in academic journals or books, focusing on feminist studies and conflict resolution.
- Organize workshops or presentations in academic and community settings to share findings with broader audiences. proposal outlining

research objectives, methodologies, and expected outcomes to academic advisors and review committees.

- Incorporate feedback and

1.9.2 Year 2: Field Research Design and Data Collection

1.Objective: To design the methodology for empirical research and conduct fieldwork.

1. Field Data Collection (Months 1_12):

- Read the biographical memoirs intensively
- Record relevant data
- Read critical literature on the same

2. Year 3: Data Analysis, Writing, and Dissemination

3. Objective: To analyze collected data, write the thesis, and disseminate findings.

Activities:

4. Data Analysis (Months 1-6):

Analyze qualitative data using thematic coding and narrative analysis.

5. Thesis Writing (Months 7-10):

*Organize findings into chapters addressing key themes such as representations, agency, resilience, and the impact of conflict on identity.

*Integrate literature reviewed in Year 1 with field data to construct a comprehensive narrative.

*Write and revise drafts, seeking peer and advisor feedback throughout the writing process.

*Dissemination of Findings (Months 11-12):

*Prepare for the thesis defense: condense research findings into a presentation highlighting key themes and contributions.

*Explore opportunities for publication in academic journals or books, focusing on feminist studies and conflict resolution.

Graduate.