

Constructing and Deconstructing Identity through Fiction

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The subject of identity is complex as it encompasses the totality of social experience, much of which is influenced by history. Identity – rather the confusion as a child of who I really was – has always been a dark companion. An identity further confused by being a “child of divorce” at a time when it was unfashionable for women to be too independent. Add a white strain, being Muslim, marrying an Iranian in an immigrant country, having Canadian children, and the scene’s set for an identity crisis. It wasn’t until after the reviews of *The Middle Children* (1994), a collection of short stories, that I realised just how wrapped up I was in issues of identity, culture, religion, and displacement.

In *The Middle Children*, Sabah is a product of the environment of her youth – the “neurotic middle child of a dysfunctional womb”. She harbors feelings of rejection, abandonment, destructiveness, yet a deep love for the country that has rejected her. Canada, her adoptive mother, heals her wounds, and Sabah, votes for the first time. In real life, of course, Canada had restored me - given me back my self-esteem, and made me well enough to return. I’d ditched the insecurity, lost the bitterness. But not without cost. The loneliness of a confused childhood. Displacement in a country filled with immigrants. Further displacement upon my return. A recovery of identity.

Culture and identity are inextricably linked with religion. You cannot look at the culture of a people without understanding its beliefs. The way of life of indigenous peoples is intimately linked to the land. In *Eyes of the Sky* (1996), when the white man arrives in the barren northwestern Cape, there is a struggle for land. One needs it for basic survival, and for one’s cultural, spiritual and psychological well-being. The other also needs it to eke out a livelihood. There is a jockeying for power. Out of this struggle is born hatred and dislocation. Three hundred and fifty years later, the fight hasn’t stopped. The descendants of the Khoisan are still displaced. Of all the peoples of South Africa, they are the least catered to, the least educated, they’ve been stripped of their land, and are the most marginalised if you take into account the annihilation of their spiritual well-being.

The bastard, Harman, born at the end of the tale, is the protagonist in *The Slave Book* (1998). The son of the young Eyes of the Sky, and a Sonqua girl, Harman dilutes the strain further by marrying a Muslim slave. There is a temporary struggle between his Calvinist upbringing and the faith he will adopt, but he is spared displacement by completely submitting to Islam.

My writing always has at its heart the desire to make my faith friendly and accessible to those who might have a skewered perspective of Islam, and to foster understanding of all faiths. If you know why a Hare Krishna chants the name of the Lord in public with a string of beads – so that you, the onlooker, can get purified from material existence – perhaps the next time you see it, you won't scoff. If I know about you and you know about me, there's respect. Not tolerance. Tolerance is such an intolerable and arrogant state to be in to be able to accept another man's beliefs. We're not better just because we've been given the Verifier of the earlier Books. Actually, we've been charged with a huge responsibility.

I was asked once by a Muslim student at the Gatesville Mosque, why in my writing for the One City Many Cultures for the *Cape Times* I had not made Islam bigger than the other religions because we are number one. My response was that I was not better than anyone, and that if I wanted someone to discover my faith, the way to do it would not be to be arrogant, but to invite them in another way – and this I do through fiction. I wrote an entire novel - *Eyes of the Sky* – to include one fact about Jesus. It was astounding to me how many non-Muslims did not know that Jesus was revered in the Qur'an, and that a Muslim could love Jesus. It was even more astounding how little Muslims themselves knew about this holy Prophet. They knew he was Nabi Isa, but knew virtually nothing about his teachings.

My latest novel *Sachs Street* (2001) was an outright attempt to pick up the thread on Jesus when the Muslim female protagonist meets a born-again Christian and falls desperately in love. A Muslim woman who sins, but has a strong sense of identity, knows who she is, and despite moments of great weakness, resists the persistent efforts of the born-again who tries to convert her. The book was also an attempt to highlight the Bo-Kaap and its people and to clarify without being didactic, certain issues - especially polygamy, and the rights of women - in the Muslim community.

As well, the novel emphasises the love of books and the protagonist's desire to be a writer. The young Khadidja is given books by her mother, but her mother never listens to the stories. The great-grandmother is both a story-teller, and the rescuer of this young girl who has many questions about God. Khadidja is told many things about Jesus as a child, which stands her in

good stead when she meets Storm. She is well-read and reads not only the Qur'an, but is deeply interested in the earlier scriptures.

As Muslims, we don't encourage our children in the arts. It is not considered to be real work. As a very young child, it was a loving grandfather who always bought me books for Christmas and birthdays. This grandfather let us have the experience of other people's celebrations, and at Christmas and Easter there were always presents and chocolates and bunny hunts. Perhaps I had always been destined to be a writer – I have rejection slips from age 12 to prove my love for the written word – but it was probably all those *Grimms Fairy Tales* and *School Friends* and *Girls Crystals* I received as a child that set the ball rolling. Even then I was conscious, albeit perhaps in an unconscious way, of identity. Fair-skinned and fatherless. The other kids weren't kind.

Social identity involves cultural practices that distinguish a social group as having a common identity distinct from other social groups. Identity is more a negative process—that is, a process of distinction — than a positive process. The idea of an “other”. “We are not like them”. And so we, too, make distinctions. And sometimes there's a self-righteousness. We are guilty ourselves of disdain towards our darker brothers. We identify with the Arabs when we are in fact African and the offspring of slaves. We are not encouraged to study other cultures and beliefs for fear it might take us away from Islam when it can only enhance our understanding of the people around us.

As South Africans we have all had identity issues. Being Muslim on top of it in a climate of fear and hate, especially in light of recent events in the U.S., singles us out. Something happens in the Middle East, and we are cross-questioned and thought of as barbaric and fanatic.

An incident while living in Toronto during the time of Salman Rushdie's fatwa springs to mind. I was singled out in a group of Canadian writers and pointedly asked if I agreed with the fatwa. It was a difficult position to be in. I believe in freedom of speech, but also did not agree with the fatwa as I believe in a fair trial. Rushdie wanted to be controversial, he wanted to sell books, and he did it at the expense of Islam. I was angry that I was put upon simply because I was Muslim. *The Satanic Verses* would have fallen between two cracks and disappeared if the Iranians had ignored it. With all the bad press, the fatwa was damaging to Islam.

Not long after this incident, Rushdie was whisked into Toronto by Scotland Yard to be the surprise guest at a conference organised by Pen International. The audience was told he would take questions. A Muslim man stood up and asked why Rushdie had chosen to portray the holy Prophet in such a light. He was virtually shut up. The question was never answered.

Identity, depending on which side you're on, can work for you, also against you. I was constantly told by people who met me for the first time that I did not "look" like a Muslim. I did not know what a Muslim should look like. A veil? A stiletto? Was it more about my dress than my sensibility? Of course it was. Because they didn't know I was Muslim before they started to talk to me, there was no prejudgement. They listened with an open mind, and so discovered quite an ordinary human being. An Afrikaans reviewer stunned me recently when she said that she didn't know until after reading *Sachs Street* that Muslims had a sense of humour. She had lived in South Africa her whole life.

A writer always brings his or her own experiences to a tale. As someone who has suffered a major identity crisis, my work will probably always reflect the pain and longing of a South African childhood and upbringing. But a writer, fortunately, has release, and for the year or two it takes to produce a novel, she can dream, and hopefully be a small cog in the big wheel of change.