

# **Women as a ‘Non-identity’ and the Politics of Gender in Tariq Ali’s *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* and *The Book of Saladin***

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**ABSTRACT:** *The research aims at attempting a post-colonial feminist reading of Tariq Ali’s *The Shadows of a Pomegranate Tree* (1992) and *The Book of Saladin* (1998) taken from the *Islam Quintet* series. It attempts to reinterpret patriarchal and imperial ideology that retraces history as it acts as a unifying factor rather than forming a divide between genders. It explores Tariq Ali’s manner of dealing with historiography that presents an alternative narrative in which rulers are not only shown as warriors of Islam but as people having vulnerabilities which humanize their characters. By presenting an alternative narrative, Ali’s work dismantles and exposes the Eurocentric universalism that ostracizes and devalues women’s place in history, and confides them only as members of a harem. It also explores how the historical account includes multiple voices, which encompasses the cultural landscape and experiences of the characters that lead to heightened consciousness in redefining their identity. The post-positivist realist approach helps to unveil the misrepresentation of the Eurocentric, monolithic view of Islam. It also attempts to subvert patriarchal and imperial ideologies by showcasing how women are subject to ‘double colonization’. By re-interpreting the re-inscribed identities and symbols in the traditions of Jerusalem and Moorish Spain during selected points in history, Ali repeatedly dismantles colonial hegemony stereotypes and narratives.*

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Women have been weighed down by social constraints across history. They are pictured as “mothers of the nation,” “privileged bearers of corporate identities and boundary markers of their communities,” the centre of culture and history and guardians of societal “particularisms” (Kandiyoti, pp. 382-388). Since these women's lives are dismantled and removed from their contexts, their experiences are overgeneralized in order to be compared to a common narrative of freedom and equality. Muslim women's voices have been silenced and their identities shrouded in darkness as dominant representatives of national, religious, and temporal domain boundaries. Feminist theorists examine how masculine and feminine consciousness have been depicted in men's and women's literature. According to Mohja Kahf, the idea that Muslim women have been marginalised from the eighteenth century to the present is frequently repeated in the dominant narrative of Muslim women in Western discourses (177).

In the postcolonial period, Muslim women have produced a multitude of works of literature in both vernacular and European dialects that question colonial depictions of them as oppressed, powerless subjects. Instead, they portray Muslim women as powerful, intelligent, and ready to stand up to dominant powers. Their writings help to understand patriarchal powers and question them. Such works of literature have questioned the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women on two grounds: on the one hand, a Muslim woman who is also seen as an outspoken individual who recognizes and raises the issues of women in the male-dominant society; and from the other, when faced with patriarchal powers, a fictional character refuses to keep quiet and oppressed.

Similarly, Ali's interpretation of Islamic history has not only depicted diversity as an important part of Muslim culture, but it has also called into question the Western concept of female self.

Salah al-Din has ordered me that I am not to be permitted to march with the army. . . I explained to him patiently that he was talking like a man whose brains had been replaced by the anus of a camel. . . I am warning you in advance, Ibn Yakub. I will not obey him this time. . . I have told him I am quite capable of looking after myself. I ride better than most of you, and I have often shot at the mark with an arrow. (Ali 256).

These lines depict Jamila, Saladin's wife's depiction of the female self. The fact that Jamila dared to compare Saladin's brain to an animal's anus demonstrates her courageous and unwavering nature. The simple existence of Jamila in a book about the Jerusalem holy war brings a new viewpoint to the story, making the Sultan's stern figure more human. In Tariq Ali's *The Book of Saladin*, Sultana Jamila is one of these characters. *The Book* recounts the story of one of Islam's heroes, but the sultan's life isn't the only focus of the story. is a biographical novel that follows the life and events of Salahuddin Ayyubi, a Kurdish Muslim leader who was rewarded with the title of Sultan of Egypt and Syria after successfully recapturing Jerusalem from the Crusaders and defending it against ensuing incursions in 1187. Ali attempts to rewrite the Eurocentric notion of history by concentrating on the historical figure Salah al-Din and seeing the Crusades through the eyes of a Jewish narrator who is neither Christian nor Muslim and recounts the events he witnessed and encountered with the court from Cairo to Damascus and eventually to Palestine. The focus doesn't solely rely on the Sultan, but mainly on the dissenters. By doing this, Ali manages to portray Saladin as a human figure instead of as an authoritative leader.

The other notable record is the representation of women in the series. Jamila, one of Saladin's wives, is described as a smart woman who isn't afraid to indulge in sexual impulses,

breaking the myth of a veiled woman in the harem. Ali challenges the Western conception of a Muslim woman based on such images, portraying them as actively participating instead of just being passive spectators. Despite Saladin's disapproval, Jamila, disguised as a man, accompanies the army going to Jerusalem. Being a part of Saladin's life, Jamila manages to form an identity of her own by relying on her strengths. Ali writes in the novel's explanatory note that "Women are a subject on which medieval history is usually silent. Salahuddin, we are told, had sixteen sons, but nothing has been written about their sisters or mothers" (Ali, 1998).

Therefore, a post-positivist approach has been used to examine women's representation, their identity, and experiences throughout the Islam Quintet. In post-positivist realist theory, understanding is derived through one's past and current experiences and interactions as interpreted in sociopolitical settings. As identities are constituted differently geographically, Ali weaves a narrative that gives the female characters their own voice, their own reality. In *Postmodernism, "Realism," and the Politics of Identity*, Paul Moya writes, "the first claim of a postpositivist realist theory of identity is that the different social categories (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) that together constitute an individual's social location are causally related to the experiences she will have" (81). The female characters in the novels are neither veiled nor oppressed rather, their lived experiences lead to the "formation of her cultural identity" (Moya 82).

Despite the fact that ideologies and narratives play an important role in the creation of knowledge, cultures, and perceptions, post-positivist realists maintain that empirical information is necessary, and that individual's identities and perceptions are accurate and factual in some way because they are real. Stuart Hall (1997), a well-known cultural studies expert, describes representation as, 'an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged

between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things' (15). In *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, Hall emphasizes that meaning is created by representation, and he describes three key methods to representing meaning through language: the path to language that is reflexive in nature, 'to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world' (24), the intentional approach that focuses on the subject or author and maintains that, 'it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language' (25); and the constructivist approach, in which, 'neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs' (25). The female characters in *The Islam Quintet* play roles that are distinct from one another while still being powerful and dynamic. The majority of female characters question power politics by portraying power and control as a part of their personalities, and these women are part of a culture that was created to control them.

Linda Alcoff describes representation as essential for individuals to gain insight of the reality as it is... as people are not trapped in the "prison house of language" to a point that they are unaware of the happenings of the world. (315-316). To put it another way, post-positivists conclude that when it comes to representation, there is an added-linguistic fact that must be emphasized just as often as language and narratives, also that the empirical understanding is possible, even if it is influenced by language and conceptual preconceptions. This means that all representations of Muslim women, be it dominant or subordinate, are centred on certain type of fact and are not completely made up. Ali manages to subvert the patriarchal and imperial ideology by placing the women in *The Islam Quintet* alongside men. Hind, Umar bin Abdallah's daughter, has also been depicted as a powerful woman born in Moorish Spain in the 15th century. Hind's fearlessness stemmed from her mother's decision not to instill conventional values and

beliefs in her children. Hind's elder sister had chosen to be submissive to customs, so no attempt was made to sway her from her beliefs. Hind, on the other hand, turned out to be Zubaida's daughter, with her fiery spirit and outspoken nature forming her personality from the moment she was born. Her canvass of life is limited; her entire character revolves around her life as a young woman and the intimate world of the family's female members. She plays the traditional role of a woman who is responsible for taking care of the home and the family. However, she does not allow herself to be constrained by the shackles of patriarchal normality.

At the age of eighteen, unlike others, she was fearless and managed to break all barriers surrounding her. When the idea of her marriage became a subject of discussion, she openly rejects the offer of Miguel to marry his son, Jaun; and her parents support her decision, as her mother tells Umar, "She would rather be wed to be a horse" (Ali 20). However, Hind breaks the stereotype of type/class of Muslim women, instead like Zahra (her grandmother), she is driven by sexuality and passion. A theologian who happened to be Hind's relative provided his analysis of the Quran during a debate about the fall of Al-Andalus. The theologian declared Muslim nobles' sensual practices to be "forbidden." Hind, noticing the scholar's inadequate knowledge, informed him that the angels valued three things, as per a hadith: "why horse-racing, shooting at a mark and copulation, of course!" The uncle from Ishbiliya had choked on the meat which he had, till then, been consuming quite happily." (Ali 146). From the beginning, Hind has been described as a fierce character. Her mother's refusal to tame her according to social standards aided her in cultivating a ruthless and unyielding personality. Many other characters, on the other hand, grew in authority and power over time. Zaynab, from the novel *Night of the Golden Butterfly* (2010), began her life as a woman who deferred to her family's males for major life decisions. Zaynab's journey demonstrates how she regained control of her life. Tariq Ali's depiction of various periods that illustrated the notion of female self in a male centred world is

diverse throughout periods of colonial occupations, religious wars, political upheavals, and economic unrest.

The female characters in *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* are diverse, and each one brings a unique dimension to the story. Some of the characters are liberal, while others are conservative and traditional. While post-positivist realists accept the postmodernist's view that identities are not impartial, they also argue that they are not entirely formed by discourses and factors outside our control. Post-positivists believe that our social backgrounds play a role in determining our identities. Individuals have power in defining their personalities, according to postpositivists. Despite these gaps, Tariq Ali has portrayed these characters in a way that allows their voices to be understood and their behaviour to be recognized.

Amira, an elderly maidservant who works for Umar's family, is known for her conservative and orthodox beliefs. The relationship with Amira is one of mutual respect. Zuhayr and Yazid, Umar's sons, are her favourites. While Amira is seen making remarks about the imminent threat of enemies with other characters, her views typically draw a straight line between Muslims and Christians, with Christians depicted as evil and unethical, and Muslims as their unfortunate victims. "Ya Allah! Save us from these crazed dogs and eaters of pigs. Protect us from these enemies of truth, who are so blinded by sectarian beliefs that they nail their God to a piece of wood and call it father, mother and son, drowning their followers in a sea of falsehood." (Ali 17). For Amira, Christianity was not a religion, but rather a symbol of infidels who were slaughtering People of faith. Despite her skewed perspective on the situation, Ama was well aware of the dangers that Muslims were facing: "If things go on like this . . . nothing will be left of us except a fragrant memory." (Ali 6). Ama turned to her beads, making them her friend, as her conventional mind-set and age desired. Religion became synonymous with Amira's

character, and if Ama made a statement about a topic, it was taken as a religious statement as interpreted by Ama. “He (Yazid) had tried to interest Ama in the game but the old woman had cackled at the thought and refused . . . Was not chess infinitely superior to the beads she was always fingering? Then why did this elementary fact always escaped her?” (Ali 6). Despite her traditional ways, Ama's opinion was valued highly. Her female self-awareness encouraged her to speak without hesitation at times. Even if her proposals were deemed absurd, she was persistent and opinionated. “Sometimes she would let her tongue loosen and the servants would be amazed by her boldness” (Ali 17). Amira's character stands in stark contrast to Hind and Zubayda's open-mindedness, but despite these disparities, she manages to leave a contentious impression that classifies her as a person who is vocal enough to express her viewpoint.

Umar's aunt, Zahra, plays a pivotal role in the book. She is depicted as a woman who challenged the norms by becoming a powerful and strong woman in the 15th century. Linda Alcoff puts forth the idea that, the argument that identities are simply enforced from the above is rejected by post-positivist realist, “... Identities are socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world ...” (4). They are often subjected to a person's perception of their significance and meaning in their life.

Despite the reality that she lived in the maristan for the entirety of her lifetime, Zahra appears to be an active participant in discussions about Gharnata's political situation, similar to Hind and Zubayda: “Why did we go into decline? We fell prey to the fool's sense of honour! Do you know what that is Hind? Yazid? Zuhayr? No? Fools regard forgiveness as wrong.” (Ali 54). Zahra's most incredible act was feigning insanity to get rid of the maristan. During this time, Zahra met some of Christianity's highest officials, men of strength, wisdom, and intelligence,



and she deceived the Captain General, the King of Castile. Zahra's manner of dealing with them demonstrated not only her intelligence but also her ability to remain emotionally detached. Paula Moya (2002) describes that identities are indeed formed and real, as per the post-positivist realist theory of identity: "Identities are constructed because they are based on interpreted experience and on theories that explain the social and natural world, but they are also real because they refer outward to causally significant features of the world. Identities are thus context-specific ideological constructs" (86).

So, taking into account the representation of women, and the identities women in the Islam Quintet create for themselves, they are able to voice out their opinions and concerns. "You see, my children, I wanted to get out. If I had told the truth . . . if I had let them know what I felt when that evil Ximenes burnt our books, I might still have been in the maristan or sent to some convent. You know they took all of us from the maristan to witness the bonfire of our culture." (Ali 56). Unlike Ama, Zahra was able to keep religion out of political matters. Her deceit and feigned insanity were the ones that set her free. Zahra and the maristan became acquainted as a result of her father's anger, which prevented her from marrying a maidservant's son. Zahra then left home and did not return during Ibn Farid's (Zahra's father's) lifetime. Zahra's explanation of her plight puts her at the centre of the story. "The fact that it was my father's temper that had landed me in the maristan was somehow ignored by both of us." (Ali 55). Ibn Farid was a powerful man whose decisions were never called into question. By being Ibn Farid's daughter, Zahra is depicted as a challenge for him in the novel.

Ali has placed both characters in a similar circumstance. Ibn Farid married a Christian maidservant's daughter, later known as Lady Asma, and Zahra fell in love with Ibn Zaydun, who was also a maidservant's son. Ibn Farid's marriage was secretly opposed, but Zahra's proposal to

marry Ibn Zaydun was explicitly refused. Zahra's defiance served to emphasize her significance as an individual and to establish the multilateral view of women. When Zahra was called in the presence of Ibn Farid she is supposed to have said: "Why should you be the only one to marry someone of your choice? I love Asma both as a wife of your choice and as my friend. Why could you not accept Ibn Zaydun? . . . she cursed him and cursed him till, Ibn Farid, feeling ashamed of himself . . . turned his back on her." (Ali 63-64). Zahra was also the kind of woman who didn't use a different scale to measure men's and women's desires. If falling in love with the daughter of a Christian servant was not forbidden for Ibn Farid, why should it be prohibited for her?

Post-positivist identity theories focus on the internal mechanisms of identity creation that are influenced by the outside world and our social environments. In keeping with the discursive essence of identity, Hall believes that identities are formed through representations that reflect narratives and ideologies, and that we are influenced through and placed within the constructs and ideologies that surround us. Moya goes on to explain, experiences are "not wholly external events" for post-positivists; "experiences happen to us," and that they are influenced by ideologies in the context that "the meanings we give our experiences are inseparably conditioned by the ideologies and theories by which we view the world." (38-39).

In Hall's words, identity is "formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us" (277). Similarly, in *The Islam Quintet*, the female characters validate their experiences by documenting it. "'Some things never change, do they brother? Fancy them meeting in the pomegranate grove!' Zuhayr's complexion changed colour. His father understood the reference" (Ali 62). Hind, Umar's younger daughter, made a comment in the presence of her father and brother that alluded to Zuhayr's sexual activities with the housemaids. Hind's character, for example, was

unapologetically quick-tempered and vocal. Hind's disposition was unusual among women, particularly for a child. She stunned the Ishbiliya scholar with her hadith expertise, rendering the man of honour, wisdom, and intellect lost for words: "The uncle from Ishbiliya has choked on the piece of meat which he had, till then, been consuming quiet happily. Zuhayr had excused himself and collapsed with laughter in the kitchen. Zubayda had been unable to control a smile and Umar had been left to divert the conversation." (Ali 146-147). Hind had also been honest about her feelings for Ibn Daud and had taken steps to continue the relationship despite the fact that she was a female. Hind asked Ibn Daud to take a stroll with her the night after the family dinner, something that a woman in the fifteenth century would never consider. "He took my hand and whispered that he loved me. At this point the maids began to cough loudly. I warned them that if they did that again I would send for the Inquisition to roast them alive. Then they could cough all the way to hell." (Ali 148). She was not bound by custom, unlike her elder sister Kalthum, and her audacity was not even silenced by her parents. Hind's self-assurance and boldness were not constrained by her home's four walls. The entire village was invited to a meeting held at Umar's residence to discuss the current political situation. Everyone but Yazid was taken aback by Hind's remark during Uncle Miguel's speech: "She had interrupted her Great Uncle several times, laughed hysterically at his attempted witticism and muttered the odd obscenity under her breath, but the night air had carried her voice and village women had applauded." (Ali 136).

Since Hind was non-restrictive, she was influential in labelling practices that were previously considered taboo for women as common. Kulthum, on the other hand, was a traditionalist who believed in traditional values. Ali has depicted all extremes within a single family while remaining uncritical. However, Hind's character had been explored in detailed manner rather than that of her sister. Tradition and conventional ideas, when adopted, are not

greeted with objection and disapproval, and this is what favoured Kulthum who “from her infancy had been a willing prisoner of tradition.”(Ali 184). “Hind- and even her father had noticed this when she was only two years old- was an iconoclast.” (Ali 184). Because of this, Amira, who was a blind adherent of religion, was always critical of Hind behaviour: “Hind bint Umar, unless they marry her off soon, she won’t even get to the first heaven. No, not her. . . I fear that she will be exposed to wild passions and shame will fall on the head of your father.” (Ali 9).

Mohanty argues, fiction and nonfiction texts centred on people's experiences, focusing primarily on marginalized life experience, are mostly important as sources of information; in a way that they help the reader view the world through the eyes of someone else, and then they can depict the complexities that characterize those experiences (33). Mohanty, who focuses on third world women's experience-oriented writings, defines them as important modes of recalling and documenting experiences and difficulties. By focusing on presenting a multilateral view of women, Ali places the women of *The Islam Quintet* parallel to men. Umar Ibn Abdullah's wife, Zubayda, has been depicted as a liberal woman from whom Hind obtained her bravery. Zubayda's beliefs were never severe because she was taught by a sceptic. Despite this, Zubayda was hesitant to consider Christianity as a religion. Zubayda has emerged as a vocal participant in the political debates. Umar was contemplating conversion out of desperation due to the worsening situation, but Zubayda remained firm in her decision, providing a rational reason to back up her decision: “And yet something in me rebels the act of conversion. . . I would rather die than cross myself and pretend that I am eating human flesh and drinking human blood. The cannibalism in their ritual repels me. It goes very deep.” (Ali 24).

Zubayda is not a timid harem entity because she is the lady of the house. She has read a variety of authors and is well-versed in her surroundings. She says, while speaking on the topic of the books burned by Christians, “The Inquisition goes one step further. Not content with burning ideas, they burn those who supply them. There is a logic. With every new century there are new advances.” (Ali 26). Learning has played a significant role in influencing these women's thinking patterns. Al-Zindiq taught Zahra theology, Hind had learned the hadith by the age of nine, and Zubayda was also educated. Tariq Ali, on the other hand, provides no detail about Ama's education, implying that her conservative views are due to her lack of education. Zubayda had made the decision because of her unconventional upbringing. “That the younger of her two daughters (Hind) will not be subjected to the straitjacket of superstition or made to conform to any strictly defined role in the household. . . . Despite Ama’s numerous forebodings and oft-repeated warnings, Zubayda encouraged this side, of her daughter.” (Ali 185).

Hind was intellectually intelligent and secure in her dealings due to Zubayda's help. Because of her open-minded father's teachings, Zubayda established her sense of female self at a young age, and she saw it fit to have her daughter follow in her footsteps. Since Zuhayr was a man, he had taken part in the anti-Christian crusade. Zubayda, as a woman, succeeded in accomplishing the same goal by persuading Umar that converting is not a choice: “Even if you allow your own sceptical mind to be crushed by Miguel, how will you convince your own children? For them your conversion would be as big a blow as the wall of fire.” (Ali 25). So, instead of standing down, Zubayda showed Umar a way out of this predicament by waging war against the Christians if necessary. The spirited essence of Zubayda and Hind was as normal as Ibn Farid's patriarchal conduct. This was not something these women acquired over time, but instead a part of their personalities that gave them a voice and dignity. Zubayda responded to Yazid's request to leave al-Hudayl and move to Fes with Hind, saying, “I would not exchange

this house, the streams and rivers which water your lands, the village and those who live in it, for any city in the world.” (Ali 239).

Sultan Saladin is the focus of *The Book of Saladin*, who is remembered as a key figure in the Third Crusade. Saladin's wife Jamila and Halima, whose captivating beauty entranced Saladin, are included in the novel since it is about Saladin's journey to Jerusalem. The book is set in the 12th century, when the harem was the place where women congregated. Halima's first encounter with Saladin occurred as a result of adultery, a crime punishable by death. “This one would not go willingly to the executioner. She would fight. Resistance is written on her face.” (Ali 23). This was Halima's first impression: a woman who, despite her guilt, just wouldn't give up. Halima seemed sad and worried about her fate only in the beginning. When confronted with the details of her crime, “the sadness had evaporated and she began to speak. Her voice changed too. She spoke with confidence and with trace of humility. She had entirely regained her self-possession, and spoke to the Sultan in a confident voice as though addressing an equal.” (Ali 24). As was the case with Hind, Halima's trust in front of the Sultan and her ability to speak up in a difficult situation were inherent.

Ali's representation of women is essential in the act of rewriting and subverting the colonialist ideology history. Throughout history, the colonial powers were the centre of the world, while the colonized were forced to the margins. Eurocentrism is the term used by Europeans as the benchmark against which all the existing diverse cultures are measured. Eurocentrism became the basis for setting out 'universal' themes as the standard for humanity. In *History as Critique and Critique(s) of History*, Edward Said's views on subaltern studies are quoted by Chakrabarty. Subaltern studies' "historiographical effort" is defined by Edward Said as "history as critique," with the implication that history is viewed as a rebuttal of Imperialism.

Taking Said's statement a step further, Chakrabarty claims that Subaltern Studies can play a key role in shaping history at its centre.

In her pioneering article "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak challenged the pattern of evaluating other cultures depending on a predominantly Eurocentric approach. Patriarchal oppression of women, for instance, is comparable to colonial oppression of indigenous peoples. Women and colonized communities are also devalued, as a result of this devaluation creates very similar issues for both communities in view of developing an autonomous personal and community identity, discovering new ideas and concepts, communicate, and develop, and acquiring control and influence and economic prosperity. These comparisons between feminist and postcolonial issues often highlight postcolonial women's double oppression. They are subjects of both colonialist and patriarchal ideologies, which invalidate them based on their race and cultural heritage, and patriarchal ideologies that devalues them based on their sex. Helen Tiffin observes that the "subversive [anti-colonialist] manoeuvre[e]...characteristic of post-colonial texts" may not always reside in the development or redevelopment of a nationalist culture and identity, instead it lies in "the rereading and rewriting" of the Western historical and literary records (95). Since it is difficult to reconstruct an early colonial history or a new cultural identity entirely free of the imperial legacy, Tiffin argues that almost all postcolonial literature has again sought to reconstruct a postcolonial history.

One of the many ways Tariq Ali has managed to subvert the patriarchal and imperial ideology is presenting the women in the harem their own individual identity and a voice. Halima's audacity and fierceness became more apparent after she joined the harem and lived with Jamila, Sultan's wife. Halima informs Ibn Yakub in a meeting that she "did not wish to bear

his (Sultan's) child." (Ali 90). Jamila, with whom she participated in experience which was originally outside Halima's understanding, is praised: "she (Jamila) started talking about us in very bold way. Not us in the harem, but us women . . . I had never heard talk like this in my whole life" (Ali 91-92). When Halima became the mother of Saladin's son, which she had previously opposed, her relationship with Jamila weakened. Halima's life changed the moment she became a mother, her "thirst for understanding had disappeared" (Ali 182) rather than being the vivacious woman she used to be, she became a cautious woman who carefully considered her actions. Since she was now responsible for someone other than herself, Halima's interpretation of religion was purely focused on the principles of right and wrong.

Halima's transformation, according to Jamila, came about as a result of her listening to the people around her. "Lowest of the low in the harem" who taught her that everything Jamila "taught me (Halima) was false. She wanted me to doubt the word of Allah." But in this case, being childless, Jamila failed to realize Halima's concerns. (Ali 229, 180). In Halima's case, the notion of a female self-bloomed at first but faded over time because she couldn't afford to be in touch with those ideas while still becoming a mother. After losing Halima's friendship, Jamila tells Ibn Yakub that "You and your beloved Sultan live in a male world. You simply cannot understand our world. The harem is like a desert. Nothing much can take root here. Women compete with each other for a night with the Sultan..." (Ali 183).

Jamila, Saladin's wife, is one of the main female characters in *The Islam Quintet*; a woman with power over the harem, knowledge of the world and hadith, and a powerful influence over Saladin, the conqueror of Jerusalem. The reader has been presented to Jamila as a woman worthy of swaying the Sultan and appearing as a woman valued by Islam's hero. "He would come see me often, as he still does, but it was usually to discuss the affairs of the state or poetry



or the hadith, but never anything intimate. It was almost as if, in his eyes, the knowledge I possessed had transformed me into his equal. I had become a temporary man.” (Ali 120). Jamila's emergence as a transient woman in the 12th century reflects her nature as a fearless woman who is brave enough to follow the army to Jerusalem and clever enough to win hadith debates with the Sultan. In an era where women's identity was continually debased, Ali provides such examples side by side in the Book through the example of Imam al-Din, “It was well-known that Imam al-Din did not care for women in any way. For him true satisfaction, intellectual and emotional, could only be derived from the company of men.” (Ali 142).

Wisdom and the concept of self are inextricably linked. *The Islam Quintet* has depicted women debating state affairs as a result of their educational backgrounds providing them with intelligence. Jamila is a very well-informed and educated woman because she has always held the door to doubt open. “I discussed questions of life and death without any restriction. . . Ibn Rushd and his friends in Andalus, who have studied, understood and developed Greek philosophy, are also inclined to doubt.” (Ali 121). On the other hand, Jamila was well aware that becoming a Sultana and an enlightened individual at the same time was a difficult combination that was not appreciated by everyone. Most of her intellectual conversations were with Ibn Yakub, since most men of experience who kept themselves occupied with the affairs of state had male lovers, and the thought of having an intellectual conversation with a woman was foreign to them. As she manages to deceive Ibn Yakub through her appearance and the scribe notes, “The voice was familiar, but the face . . . and then Amjad was laughing and I knew that the beard and turban were a disguise. Underneath lay the familiar features of the Sultana Jamila” (Ali 239). Jamila's worth is directly proportional to her intellect and astuteness. “To find an intelligent listener these days is not easy, especially if you happen to be married to the Sultan.” (Ali 177-178). Saladin did not regard Jamila as a tool for raising sons, and he admired her

intelligence. Jamila, on the other hand, derives her influence from her education, which she considers to be the most essential part of her life. After a disagreement with Halima, Jamila's main concern was Halima's dismissal of all of her teachings as fake. "If an uneducated person believed in all this rubbish I would simply laugh, but I have spent months teaching the finer points of philosophy to Halima. . . It is as if her brain has been eclipsed by a dark cloud, which refuses to be blown away." (Ali 176). Jamila has defied power politics by establishing herself as a fearless woman who has mesmerized Ibn Yakub and declared herself worthy in front of Saladin. She has depicted a world that extends beyond Saladin's male-dominated world, revealing the woman behind the veil.

In a speech made by Nimat Hafez Barazangi, the speaker stated that, while stereotypes may change from one generation to another, there has always been a negative stigma surrounding Muslim women who have been labelled as "the other." (Haddad 2007: 259). Someone in the audience commented, Oh, yes, isn't it sad that those women are suffering under illiteracy (1960s), that they are subject to polygamy and divorce (1970s), that they are forced into seclusion (1980s), that they cannot drive (1990s), that they are stoned and beaten in the streets (2000)?" (259). Muslim women seem to be facing the same challenge, despite the passing of time.

By portraying some characters who agree with the notion of gender and sexuality while others invert it, Ali's *The Islam Quintet* questions the idea of fixed gender roles. Judith Butler introduces the idea of gender performativity, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she describes that gender is essentially a performance. Both man and woman act in ways that are essential to the gender to which they conform, and so as a consequence, their output reiterates their gender. The fact that the gender specific body is performative implies it would have no

essential nature outside of the multiple actions that make up its existence. (Butler 136). Whenever this performance does not correspond to a specific gender, however, a gap occurs between both the gender and its performance. When Hind's character is seen behaving more boldly than Ibn Daud and Zuhayr, it reflects this discrepancy. There is no mention of Zuhayr challenging the elders' ideas during family gatherings, but Hind's unrelenting spirit is on display. Hind had shocked not just her uncle Miguel, but the entire village with her answer at a family gathering: "Her response to this avuncular declaration had been characteristic, but this time she had gone too far and isolated herself. 'When a serpent says he loves me I wear him as a necklace.' . . . Hind was not at all upset, since her own views had been made clear to the assembled company" (Ali 136). On the other hand, Saladin's wife, Jamila, does not stay in the harem for the rest of her life after giving Saladin two sons. "I am told that you are to be one of the three wise men who will accompany the Sultan and observe the mother of all battles. And I will be the only woman, wise or otherwise." (Ali 228).

Ali demonstrates a difference between gender and performance by Hind and Jamila. If the performer's anatomy is indeed distinguishable from his or her gender, these are both separate from the performance's gender, "then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance." (Butler 137). This is the reason that Jamila was described having "a brain so sharp that it could slice a camel in two." (Ali 241) rather than acknowledging her sharpness as a woman. Hind too, was considered a vessel of wild passions who won't even make to the first heaven. Tariq Ali identifies a status of advantage with these women by portraying them in such a way that they seem more bold than men and unflinching in their manner.

The multilateral view of women introduces a different aspect of Islamic culture, the female characters contribute to the notion of the female self that can be seen evolving from Moorish Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to Lahore in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By posing Muslim women who are emotionally resilient enough to battle an army and intellectually smart enough to participate in state affairs, the Western notion of a Muslim female figure is questioned.

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