

**9/11 Widow: A study of Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*.**

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**Abstract**

Muslims in America experienced very bad treatment after the attack of September 11,2001 on the Twin Towers of World Trade Center in America. The attack was launched by Islamic Terrorist group Al- Qeada which resulted in hatred against Muslims in Europe particularly in America. This attack had a negative influence on Muslims as they were regarded as terrorists. Muslims in America became one of the most targeted groups. After this attack lot of literature was written about it. Post 9/11 literature depicts the mental and emotional trauma people were going through.It deals with the representation of the Muslims after this attack.“Literature after 9/11 defines ‘literatures perspective on 9/11’” (Kenniston and Quin 2). It shows how literature has participated in a larger way in representing the events of 9/11. One among such works is *Saffron dreams*, a novel written by Shaila Abdulla that deals with the tragedy of 9/11 from the perspective of a Muslim widow.This paper examines the struggle of a Muslim widow who lost her husband in 9/11 attack and then lives alone in post 9/11 America when there was hatred against Muslims in America. She has to face many difficulties in post 9/11 America, but she fights back and survives in a foreign country without her husband. Although she loses her husband in this attack, but she is also regarded as a terrorist due to her Muslim identity. She suffers twice for being a Widow and Muslim also. She faces all the challenges and survives in

the society. She handles all the situations and emerges as a strong lady. Despite being a victim of 9/11 attacks, she creates her own identity and lives an independent life.

**Key words:** Muslims, Terrorists, 9/11 attack, America, Widow, Hatred and Prejudice.

### **Introduction**

On September 11, 2001 America witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of World Trade Center. The terrorist attack was launched by Islamic Terrorist group Al- Qaeda which resulted in hatred against Muslims in America. After this attack Muslims in US experienced very bad treatment and were targeted. There was huge increase in hate crimes against Muslims all over the world and especially in the U.S. They faced an adverse situation in all aspects of life. This attack not only led the Twin Towers to collapse, and killings of thousands of people but the normal life of the people was changed. Though Muslims lost their loved ones in this attack but still they were regarded responsible for it. After this attack there was verbal and physical attack on Muslims. The event of 9/11 is undoubtedly traumatic for Americans but its consequences are even worse for Muslims especially for those living in America. MD Abu Shahid Abdullah in context of impact of 9/11 attacks mentions:

The traumatic event of 9/11 has a strong impact on westerner's attitude towards Islam and Muslims. This small community suddenly came under limelight and became visible and exposed to the public glare. Muslims started to be suspected as either terrorists or sympathetic to terrorism and terrorists, and were distrusted. This particular event marked the beginning

of a new era where Muslims became the victims of backlash (Abdullah 52).

After this incident Muslims suffered in all sectors of life. They were fired from their jobs and those unemployed were not given jobs. There was growing intolerance and hate crimes against them. Men shaved their beard and women removed their veils. Muslims were seen as most suspected individuals, and were regarded as a threat. This attack is considered as a most tragic and horrible attack in the history of mankind. Although it was done by single Islamic group but whole community was blamed worldwide.

### **Problems of Widows and Widowhood**

The widow is a woman who has lost her husband and has not married again and Widowhood is a state of being a Widow. Widowhood is a most devastating and stressful transition in life. It not only leads to transition of identity, but it is also related with many other life changing events. Each type of loss brings pain, sufferings and trauma but the death of the husband is most painful and traumatic experience. The death of a husband comes as a shock and with this the trails in a life start. The sufferings of a widow vary according to their culture and religion but widowhood in all cultures is regarded as a traumatic experience, which every married person faces. Widows all over the world experience financial problems, face violence and mistreatment and problems in child rearing etc. A Muslim widow does not face many difficulties. She is allowed to remarry after a specific period of time and also gets share from the property of her husband. She has not to follow the rituals associated with widowhood like those of Hindu widows. Muslim widows do not face many difficulties like those of widows of other religions, but Payal Choudhary rightly says; "Though a Muslim widow is blessed with certain rights which her counterparts from socio-

cultural backgrounds are denied, yet they are usually depicted as passive victims of masculine dominance especially by western countries” (Choudhary 52). Although Muslim widows don't face problems like those of Hindu widows but they are still “enslaved and have yet to free themselves from the socio-cultural stigma associated with the widowhood” (Ashraf and Jahangir 523). Absence of husband in their lives marginalizes them and makes them more vulnerable to sufferings.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This paper aims at analyzing the condition of Muslim woman who lost her husband in 9/11 attack as portrayed in Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* and how she struggles to survive in the society where she was blamed for the terrorist attack.

### **Through the eyes of 9/11 Widow**

*Saffron Dreams* is a story of a young Pakistani widow in New York, whose life and identity gets changed after the attack of 9/11. In this novel, the chief protagonist Arissa Illahi, a young Muslim woman who is an artist and writer from Pakistan comes to America after her marriage with Faizan. They were living a happy life until September 11, 2001 when Faizan got killed in an attack on the World Trade center. Her life got changed all of a sudden and she was suspected as a terrorist by American people because she belonged to the religion of attackers. Arissa narrates her experience of living as a Muslim immigrant in U.S where she has to face lot of miseries and pain after the death of her husband. Arissa had planned about her future but all her hopes and plans were vanished after the sudden death of her husband. Faizan was “snatched away like he was never hers. He had left the world without a trace” (Abdullah 82-83). She gets shocked by this

incident and cannot believe that Faizan is no more and keeps on saying “I have to get to him. You don’t understand” (Abdullah 52). She goes to the site of the terror attack to find her husband. She cannot sleep for long time and has to take anti-depressant pills. This novel has flashback scenes from Pakistan, but it mainly focuses on the life of Arissa in America aftermath 9/11. She cannot lead a normal life after the death of her husband that happens with all the widows worldwide. Her sufferings are not only due to her marital status but also due to her religious status. She suffers not only for being a widow but because she is 9/11 Muslim Widow. Women who are widowed undergo a change in identity in a negative aspect. Arissa herself says about her transition of identity that:

In all fairness, color defines me. Red reminds me of my marriage....But black reminds me of all that is sad and wrong in my life. Ironically, in this country it validates my state of being a widow. It is also the color of my hijab- the dividing line between my life with Faizan and the one without him” (Abdullah 5-6).

Arissa’s struggle begins in America as a Muslim pregnant widow. Her life changes all of sudden and she expresses her feelings as; “Waking was a nightmare, a realization of a life stretching before me without a partner, holding a baby made by two but who will be brought up by one” (Abdullah 56). These feelings are common in all widows, but Arissa has to struggle more due to her Muslim identity. Her pregnancy makes her weak and more prone to sufferings but at the same time it makes her strong. It gives her strength to move on further in her life. She gradually gains strength and confidence for the sake of her unborn child.

The story is told from Arissa's point of view who says how much difficult it was for Muslims to survive in America after the attack as the people of the country are becoming intolerant and prejudiced against Muslims. She was an equal victim of tragedy like other Americans, but she is not granted sympathy and is not allowed to grieve because of her Muslim identity. She has to face post 9/11 hatred. Arissa faced various trials as a Muslim because she was associated with terrorists. She explains the changes in the attitudes of people towards her;

I too had witnessed all sorts of looks in the past few days, the gazes from familiar friends who had turned unfamiliar, the silent blank stares of strangers, the angry, wounded looks wanting to hurt; the accusatory side-long glances screaming silently, you did it, your people brought the towers down (Abdullah 60).

Once Arissa is attacked by group of teenage boys who not only threaten her, but also try to harm her. They call her "race of murderers" (Abdullah 61), because of the veil she was wearing. The veiling made Muslim women more prone to discrimination. After this attack there was increase in violence against veiled women. They were subjected to "immense social, cultural and political scrutiny in the west" (Gidaris 1). The women wearing veil faced different forms of discrimination. This veil was regarded as a symbol that they belong to a terrorist group. These women have to face different challenges because of their Muslim identity. One boy in the group says her; "The veil you wear... It's all a facade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the nonbelievers not us." (Abdullah 62), though the group of boys knows that Arissa is pregnant and has also lost her husband that day but they continue assaulting her and attempt to slice her. They failed to stab her and then they lifted her and dropped her to the ground, falling

on her belly. Due to this attack, her unborn baby was seriously affected as the medical tests proved that it would be born disabled. Thus race conflict becomes explicit in the incident where she moves out of her apartment after bereavement period and is bullied and harassed by a clan of young American boys. This remark made Arissa to remove her veil that was a barrier between Muslim women and American society. Her decision to remove veil made her to suffer but that was the only option to survive in that society. Due to all these problems Arissa had psychological disorders and this too affected her child. This incident shows the hatred that Muslims in America had to face after 9/11 even though they were also victims as that of Americans. The second event that showed hatred against Muslims occurs at Public Park, where Arissa was sitting with her mother-in-law and one of the boys playing football kicked the ball so high that it missed Arissa by inches. Her mother instead of being sorry makes a prejudiced remark to her that "I am just sorry they missed you" (Abdullah 110). Arissa is a Muslim woman who due to her single identity becomes more available for attack by the Americans. She becomes more prone to attacks because she is a widow.

Losing a partner is devastating not only emotionally but also financially. Widows have to face economic hardships throughout their lives. The widows who are not working before the death of their husbands face more economic problems. Arissa like other women is financially dependent upon her husband but after his death she works herself so that she along with her child will not face any economic hardships. Earlier she gets support from her in laws but soon she decides to live alone with her child so that she will not be dependent on anyone. She handles all the situations despite many difficulties and raises her disabled child alone without help from anyone. She works hard to fulfill her husband's dream and completes his unfinished novel *Soul Searcher*.

She devotes all her life to her child. At one instance she thinks of re-marriage with Zaki who is an electrical engineer but later she decides to live alone with her son Raian. Abdullah herself describes the relation of Arissa and Raian in her words; “A widow who is left with a child finds it tougher to reassemble her life. Arissa become a mother to Raian, a child who is not normal, only after Faizan’s death. But she does not break down. She decides to face the world as a single mother and take care of her special child” (Abdullah 55).

In this novel American mass media also portrayed Muslims in a negative way as in reality. They were portrayed as terrorists. A reporter from *The Observer* asks Arissa; “Mrs. Illahi, being a Muslim, how does it feel to be attacked by your own people” (Abdullah 123). She didn’t get any sympathy from the media but is made uncomfortable by them too. All Muslims in America suffer after this incident but Arissa faces double discrimination. She is not only a Muslim but a widow too. She is a single woman who has no one to take care of her and it became easier for others to attack her. Her role gets changed all of a sudden and she faces all the trials. Arissa is a strong lady who despite all the hardships creates a space for herself in America without her husband. She raises her disabled child in a foreign country. “Arissa’s character at the end of this novel symbolizes a maturity and evolution that exemplifies one who has endured not one but many tragedies” (Hall 94).

### **Conclusion**

*Saffron Dreams* is a novel of hope from which we learn from Arissa how to deal gracefully and patiently with life’s cruel turns” (Hall 92). Americans think that the attack of 9/11 was the only tragedy for them, but this novel teaches us how it affected Muslims in much drastic way. This

novel highlights the difficulties faced by Muslims in the United States aftermath 9/11. Arissa in

this novel represents all men and women who have left their native lands to live a better life in America, but had to face many difficulties after the terrorist attack. The attack of 9/11 played an important role in the life of Arissa that happened with many Muslims in real life who lost their loved ones in this attack and at the same time became victims of hate crimes. Arissa is a 9/11 widow who has adopted America as her home that “would rather root her out and label her as the enemy” (Faraj 146). Harrison’s and Remondet’s statement “for most persons, widowhood need not to be considered the end of productive life, but rather the beginning of a major segment of the life course, and the one that should be pursued vigorously in order for it to be successful and fulfilling” is appropriate for Arissa. She handles every situation in a foreign country and overcomes all her difficulties. Arissa shows strength and capability by assuming the role of her husband. She raises her special abled child and becomes financially independent. Abdullah discusses about race conflict, cultural differences, widowhood and the challenges to raise a disabled child. Abdullah highlights the stereotyped patriarchal society which marginalizes a Muslim woman and regards her as a terrorist.

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