



## ***IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BURQA: TRANSVERSING HETEROTOPIA AND HYPOMNEMATA IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES***

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## **ABSTRACT**

### *It's Not About the Burqa: Transversing Heterotopia and Hypomnemata in Muslim Women's Life Narratives*

Muslim women who are forcibly displaced from their homophobic parent culture are further oppressed within the structures of Islamophobia in the host culture. Discursive re-imaginings based on their Islamic authenticity have skewed them as either veiled or unveiled women from other homogeneous ethnic cultures. Such cursory representations have cemented perceptions about them as outsiders and so a source of constant threat. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to aid discursive reconfigurations of partial representations affecting transculturally or forcibly displaced Muslim women at the intersections of racial, gender or religious persecutions.

Through a reading of the life-narratives by similarly displaced Muslim women in the anthology *It's Not About the Burqa*, this article examines two key questions: 1) How do these women negate discursive conceptions of single stories? 2) How do they reach a unique discourse that addresses such partial representations? The article proposes *heterotopia* and *hypomnemata* as two transversal possibilities. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds which mirror what is outside. They can contain differences and undesirable bodies. Whereas hypomnemata refers to personal notes used for later reading and meditation. There has been little work bringing together the transcultural and the transversal. While the transcultural is a system of thought that conceives of cultures as an ongoing flux of confluences,<sup>1</sup> transversality endorses plural possibilities. It offers tools to deterritorialize closed logics.<sup>2</sup> This article therefore calls for revisiting the collaborative dynamics of these concepts as contested through the life-narratives of displaced Muslim women.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Heterotopia, Hypomnemata, Michel Foucault, Transversal, Transcultural, Life-Narratives, Muslim Women*

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<sup>1</sup> Arianna Dagnino, 'Manifesto for a Transcultural Humanism', (2014) <<https://blogs.ubc.ca/ariannadagnino/research/manifesto-for-a-transcultural-humanism>> [Accessed 27 May, 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Gary Genosko, *Felix Guattari: An Aberrant Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2002), p.55.

## **IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BURQA: TRANSVERSING HETEROTOPIA AND HYPOMNEMATA AS ALTERNATES IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES**

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### **Introduction**

*To my siblings- I tried to survive and I failed, forgive me.*

*To my friends- It is a tough experience, and I am too weak to resist it, forgive me.*

*To the world- You were very harsh, but I forgive you.'*

*June 14, 2020.<sup>3</sup>*

So wrote Sara Hegazi on her suicide note. Hegazi was an Egyptian lesbian activist arrested and tortured for flying a rainbow flag in support of the LGBTQ+ community in her country. She fled from Egypt to seek asylum in Canada where she later committed suicide. Egypt, like most other Islamic governments in the Middle East or North Africa, has zero tolerance for homosexuality. These countries execute large-scale homophobic anti-gay purges, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings.<sup>4</sup>

An estimated 65 million people are stateless today. Stateless people are those who lack an effective nationality and who are consequently unable to enjoy the rights that are associated with citizenship.<sup>5</sup> It is not an accident but a logical result of a government's discriminatory official policy towards a particular minority. Displaced ethnic minorities and indigenous people may have formal citizenship rights, but they are often excluded from real political and social rights.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the UNHCR website reported that 82 percent of the world's refugees were from Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia and Sudan. Available statistics portend that Muslim women and their LGBTQ+

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<sup>3</sup> 'Egyptian LGBT activist dies by suicide in Canada', *Al-Jazeera*, 15 June 2020, para 3 of 10 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/15/egyptian-lgbt-activist-dies-by-suicide-in-canada>> [Accessed 20 July 2020].

<sup>4</sup> Mehdi Hasan, 'Chechnya Is Trying to Exterminate Gay People. Our Silence Only Emboldens Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov', *The Intercept*, (28 June 2020). <<https://theintercept.com/2020/06/28/welcome-to-chechnya-gay-men>> [Accessed 20 July 2020] (para 5 of 20).

<sup>5</sup> Carol A. Batchelor, 'Stateless Persons: Some Gaps in International Protection' in *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 7.2, (1995), 232-259 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/7.2.232>> [accessed 15 July 2021].

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Castles, 'Hierarchical Citizenship in a World of Unequal Nation-States', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 38.4 (2005), 689-692, (p. 689) <[http://meme.phpwebhosting.com/~migracion/rimd/documentos\\_miembros/13641PS\\_Symposium\\_Hierarch\\_cit\\_Castles-1.pdf](http://meme.phpwebhosting.com/~migracion/rimd/documentos_miembros/13641PS_Symposium_Hierarch_cit_Castles-1.pdf)> [Accessed 15 July 2021].

members are high-risk categories under the denationalisation or citizenship stripping policies today.

Well known examples include the cases of Shameema Begum and Hoda Muthana, the Daesh brides, who demonstrate that 'naturalised citizens and even citizens by birth of foreign descent were more likely to be stripped of citizenship and they could never be fully equal citizens to those who are seen as natives'.<sup>7</sup> Julija Sardelic demonstrates this with the stark difference in treatment of white converts who joined Daesh or other terrorist groups.<sup>8</sup> She particularly highlights the individual cases of Samantha Lewthwaite, the white widow of one of the 7/7 bombers, and Yago Riedijk, the Dutch-born husband of Shameema Begum (with UK and Irish dual citizenship) who were not stripped of citizenship despite facing serious charges of terrorism. This shows how Muslim women are made vulnerable under existing international laws.

Muslim women and particularly their LGBTQ+ members who are forcibly displaced from their homophobic parent culture are further oppressed in the structural violence of Islamophobia in the host culture. Discursive re-imaginings based on their Islamic authenticity have skewed them as veiled or unveiled women from other homogeneous ethnic cultures. Such cursory representations affect societal perceptions of them as the dangerous 'other,' a source of constant threat or terror. They trap them in the Islamophobia of the host culture and the homophobia of the parent culture. The main objective of this article is to reconfigure such skewed representations of Muslim women, especially their LGBTQ+ community, at the intersections of racial, gendered, and religious persecutions. Therefore, the first imperative of this article is to explore the dangers posed in these stereotypical conceptions and to articulate the need for reformulating such representations in popular discourses.

A key feature of stereotyping is that it perceives all members of a group to be the same, based on certain given characteristics, while simultaneously ignoring any potential variability within them. Stereotypes work to provide a particular explanation of events that get cemented through cultural narratives. In her TED talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the danger of a single story and explains that 'the problem with stereotypes is not that they are not true, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story'.<sup>9</sup> Stereotyping thus ostracises

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<sup>7</sup> Julija Sardelic, 'Does stripping people of citizenship lead to security and justice?', *Politics and Society*, (March 26 2019) <<https://www.thebigq.org/2019/03/26/does-stripping-people-of-citizenship-lead-to-security-and-justice/>> [Accessed June 20 2020] (para 8 of 19).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'The Danger of a Single Story', online video recording, TED, 2009, <[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)> [Accessed 27 May 2022].

humans in emphasising 'how we are different rather than how we are similar'.<sup>10</sup> Contiguously in *It's Not About the Burqa*, Nafisa Bakker writes on how such stereotypical representations limit the subjective possibilities of Muslim women. She points out how the representation of Muslim women is always synonymous with the burqa or niqab, and how it wavers between fitting a stereotype or breaking one. Nafisa argues instead for a middle ground in representation which is always 'fluid and based on their context and changing politics'.<sup>11</sup>

Representational disjunctions further prove troublesome for Muslim women and their LGBTQ+ members, who transverse transcultural spaces as a religious, racial or gendered minority. This is because transcultural spaces demand a fundamental understanding of the complexity of human identity as mixed and fluid. Transculturally scattered humans operate as 'neither a container for always-already constituted identities nor a completed closure of holism'.<sup>12</sup> As such, a transcultural narrative space in many ways allows for a reformulation of destructive single stories. They offer transversal possibilities for Muslim women displaced in terms of culture, religion, or gender. Therefore, in this article, I argue for the need to deconstruct the discursive legitimacy of essentialization and authenticity as categories to conceive these women by exploring their collateral transversal possibilities.

Despite a surge of invaluable research by Arab feminist scholars on the Muslim women's ever-contesting subjectivity and agency, there have not been many researchers who do so without risking the replication of stereotypical representation. Some previous research contests the use of modified expressions in place of the same Manichean thinking. For example, Lara Deeb in her ethnographic research *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* analyses the dehumanising stereotyping faced by Muslim women in the Shi'i community. She expands her argument using the binary pious and traditional against the secular and modern.<sup>13</sup> Deeb plays on the veiled/secular binary, using instead the suffixes 'traditional' and 'modern.' In this, she risks replicating the very stereotyping she is trying to negate.

Other studies work by policing essentialized representations or rethinking Muslim women as homogeneous units located in an authentic history or culture. For example, Sherine Hafez in her *An Islam of Her Own* (2011) explores the subjectivities of women of Gamiyat al-Hilal in the village of Mehmeit, Cairo. In this work, she challenges the representation of Muslim women as either pious

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Nafisa Bakker, 'On the Representation of Muslims: Terms and Conditions Apply', in *It's Not About the Burqa*, ed. by Mariam Khan (London: Picador, 2019), pp. 45-63, (p.46).

<sup>12</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p.1.

<sup>13</sup> Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) p.179.

or secular. Hafez notes that the subjectivity and desire of Shi'i Muslim women are heterogeneous but require an analysis based in the authentic culture and history of the community. Similarly, in her article 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival' (2001) Saba Mahmood concentrates on some Muslim women's desire for freedom as only a 'historically located subject'.<sup>14</sup> Their work, though invaluable, is limited in its re-imagining of Muslim women as ethnically homogeneous entities. There is almost no engagement with culturally or gender displaced Muslim women or their desire for freedom.

Refreshingly, Deniz Kandiyoti points out that the politics of religio-cultural authenticity in discourses on Muslim women are 'at the heart of utopian populism', and that 'this aspect of populist ideology, serves above all as a mechanism of social control'.<sup>15</sup> Aaron Hughes' infamous *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* explains vividly how researchers who promote the reiteration of stereotypes based on Islamic authenticity create weak narrative possibilities for Muslim women by engaging in mythopoetic research. In support of his argument, Hughes points that the discourses rooted in Islamic authenticity are those which deny 'Muslims their agency in favour of some ideologically imagined notion of what real Muslims either are or should be'.<sup>16</sup>

Islamic authenticity represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the complexity of identity as heterogeneous and fluid. This is especially so in the wake of modern immigration, displacement, and the accelerating number of culturally mobile Muslim women. It is only in embracing their scattered histories, locations, and transcultural contexts that the new transcultural and decolonial feminist research has become an engaging space for Muslim women. This offers a palimpsest to renegotiate their socio-political erasures in single stories. A transversal exploration of their transcultural realities could be one of the promising transits from where one could better realise the multi-dimensionality of their dispersed subjectivities and agency.

In what follows, I discuss the poetics and praxis of transversality as a necessary and complementary tool to destabilize the single stories on/about displaced Muslim women. Predicated on the understanding that narrative representations are an indispensable category in comprehending Muslim women's contested becomings, Muslim women's resonant life-narratives in the anthology *It's Not About the Burqa* (2019) are examined. Accordingly, this article further

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<sup>14</sup>Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival' in *Cultural Anthropology*, 16.2 (2001) 202-236, (p.223).

<sup>15</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p.8.

<sup>16</sup>Aaron Hughes, *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2015), p. xiii.

explores Heterotopia and Hypomnemata as transversal spaces for exploring their subjectivity beyond the confines of single stories.

### **What's Next in The Transcultural Turn: Exploring Transversal Poetics and It's Power Dynamics**

Gary Genosko defines 'transversality' as belonging 'to the processual subject's engendering of an existential territory and self-transportation beyond it.'<sup>17</sup> Transversality manifests reliability, possibilities, and pluralities. It is a tool to open closed logics and makes use of polydimensional or centric operations towards subjective pluralities. Genosko writes that the key concepts of transversality are 'mobility (traversing domains, levels, dimensions, the ability to carry and be carried beyond); creativity (productivity, adventurousness, aspiration, laying down lines of flight); and self-engendering (auto-production, self-positing subjectivity), as territories from which one can take off into new universes of reference.'<sup>18</sup> A transversal space is that de-territorializing middle space of becomings and experiments which has the potency to engage and move beyond the located and gendered feminist subject formations.

The term first appears in Jean Paul Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1955), where he writes about 'the play of transversal intentionalities' to describe how consciousnesses, which are concrete and real withholdings of the past, unify themselves.<sup>19</sup> While Sartre traversed the retentional vector of transversality, Felix Guattari engaged with its protentional vector.<sup>20</sup> Janell Watson in *Guattari's Diagrammatic Thought* (2009) explains how transversality evolved as a means of constructing alternative, non-hierarchical arrangements in mental asylums for analysing people with schizophrenia.<sup>21</sup> The concept further develops because of the micro-political academic advances between Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari with Michel Foucault, on the grappling between power and resistance.<sup>22</sup> While Foucault asserts that '[r]esistances come first [...] power relations are obliged to change with the resistance',<sup>23</sup> his critics argue that his philosophy

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<sup>17</sup> Gary Genosko, *Felix Guattari: An Aberrant Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: Octagon Books, 1955), p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin O. Schrag, 'Transversal Rationality' in *Deleuze and Guattari: Critical Assessments*, vol.2 ed. by Gary Genosko (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp.863-77.

<sup>21</sup> Janell Watson, *Guattari's Diagrammatic Thought* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Giles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power: A Discussion Between Giles Deleuze and Michel Foucault' in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. ed. by D.F Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.212.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity' in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. by R. Hurley, ed. by Paul Rainbow (New York: The New York Press, 1997), p.167.

precludes the possibility for revolutionary action.<sup>24</sup> D.M Halperin defends Foucault's notion of power as not only a dynamic situation which produces constraints, but also as one which facilitates action.<sup>25</sup> O'Hara, on the other hand, proposes that it is a model of agency that is 'a matter of plurality, mobility and conflict'.<sup>26</sup> Reading them together enable the magnification of a project that Foucault was attempting to develop in his later works - the poetics and praxis of transversality. Bryan Reynolds further develops the transversal theory through theatre and its workings. He works on how a transversal power can affect the alteration of subjectivity, and especially traces the genealogy of transversal poetics<sup>27</sup> in his *Transversal Subjects: From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida* (2009).<sup>28</sup> Reynolds defines transversal theory<sup>29</sup> as 'striving to engage everything conceivable' and to conceptualise 'subjectivity, experience, and events along with their contexts and processes of inauguration and propagation, as productively and affirmatively as possible'.<sup>30</sup> In many ways, Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (2010) and his conception of errantry echoes Reynold's transversality.<sup>31</sup> In Glissant's errantry, each identity extends through a relationship with the 'other'.<sup>32</sup> He writes, 'the thinking of errantry conceives of

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<sup>24</sup> Jerome Roos, 'Foucault and the Revolutionary Self- Castration of the Left', *Red and Black Writings*, (December 2011) <<https://redblackwritings.wordpress.com/2014/05/14/Jerome-roos-december-2011-foucault-and-the-revolutionary-self-castration-of-the-left/>> [Accessed 3 April 2019].

<sup>25</sup> David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Daniel T. O'Hara, *Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency after Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.66.

<sup>27</sup> In his *Glossary of Transversal Terms*, Bryan Reynolds defines Transversal Poetics thus: 'the combined aesthetics, theory, and methodologies of transversal poetics works to inspire critical inquiry, scholarship, pedagogy, artistic creation, and life experiences that are mutually supportive, adaptive, and felicitous. Transversal Poetics is innovative and versatile as it emphasises positive formulations of consciousness, desire, subjectivity, identity, expression, meaning and so on. It is exploratory and malleable as it constantly reappraises its premises, influences, methods, contexts and subject matters of inquiry to develop efficient modes of thought and action. It is collective and collaborative as it acknowledges as much as possible the conditions of its emergent activities, its histories, sources and conversations'. See *Transversal Subjects: From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida*. p. 287.

<sup>28</sup> Bryan Reynolds, 'The Devil's House: Transversal Power and Anti Theatrical Discourse in Early Modern England', *Theatre Journal*, xlix, no.2, (1997), 142-167.

<sup>29</sup> In his *Glossary of Transversal Terms*, Bryan Reynolds defines Transversal Theory thus: 'Striving to engage everything conceivable, affective, and subjunctive within and without discursive practices, transversal theory conceptualises subjectivity, experience and events, along with their contexts and processes of inauguration and propagation, as productively and affirmatively as possible. It emphasises presence and comparison; interconnectedness, relationality, and inclusion; agency, movement, and exploration; becomings and potential'. See Reynolds, *Glossary, Transversal Subjects: From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida*, (p. 287-288;pp. 272-289)

<[https://www.academia.edu/10402466/ Glossary of Transversal Terms in Transversal Subjects From Montaigne to Deleuze after Derrida](https://www.academia.edu/10402466/Glossary_of_Transversal_Terms_in_Transversal_Subjects_From_Montaigne_to_Deleuze_after_Derrida)> [accessed June 20, 2021].

<sup>30</sup> Reynolds, *Transversal Subjects*, p.287.

<sup>31</sup> Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2010) pp.11-22.

<sup>32</sup> Glissant, p.11.



totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it'.<sup>33</sup> Though Reynolds later develops his transversal poetics exclusively through his experiments in theatre, the concept has remained widely unexamined through the discursive space of life-narratives and its power plays. Through the life-narratives in *It's Not About the Burqa*, transversality is always already presented within the multiple axes of power. Life-narratives act as a vehicle for trans-territorial dynamics,<sup>34</sup> inviting an engaging space for Muslim women to reclaim and rewrite the single stories and partial representations on them.

### ***It's Not About the Burqa: A Fugitive Exploration of Self-Representations and its Transversal Power Dynamics in Life Narratives***

Narrative self-representations in life-writings are 'verbal formations' about one's self or life.<sup>35</sup> Pierre Bourdieu explains, representations as: 'performative statements which seek to bring about what they state, this is to give oneself the means of explaining 'reality' more completely, thus of understanding [...] the potentialities it contains [...] the chances it offers to different subjective demands'.<sup>36</sup>

*It's Not About the Burqa* (2019) compiles seventeen such performative statements by transculturally and gender-displaced Muslim women. The anthology is part of a movement for reclaiming and subverting their stereotyped representations. Muslim women conceived as the pious terrorist clad in black or the caged bird waiting to evade the bounds of her religion is a single story. When narratives reflect a single story for a specific point in time, they could turn out to be the only perceived societal reality. The narrative performances in the anthology also celebrate socio-cultural representations and cross-cultural liaisons invoking a play of transversal power that is already implicit in transcultural life-narratives. A transversal power is 'any[...] force that precipitates and drives deviations from the norms and encodings of subjective and official territories. It is a catalyst for transformations'.<sup>37</sup> All narrative acts of self-representation invoke the play of transversal power to destabilise the very structures that promote only conditional existences. This power is the:

physical, material, ideological, aesthetic, emotional, conceptual force that precipitates and drives deviations from the norms and encodings of subjective and official territories. Reconfigurations of thought, emotion and experience occur when subjectivity

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<sup>33</sup> Glissant, pp.19-21.

<sup>34</sup> Vrushali Patil, 'From Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We've Really Come' *Signs*, 38.4 (2013), 847-867, (p.848). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669560>>

<sup>35</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New Delhi: Wadsworth Cengage, 2005) p.191.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans by Gino Raymond and Mathew Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p.225

<sup>37</sup> Reynolds, *Transversal Subjects*, p.287.

transgresses the parameters maintaining subjective territory. By extension, the surrounding organisational structures may also undergo reconfiguration. Transversal power is a catalyst for such transformations.<sup>38</sup>

Narrative representations with this transversal power generate after-lives and multidirectional memories that eventualize beyond the narratives themselves. The conditional stances on Muslim women's citizenship, statelessness, inequalities, and breaches of their rights are in this sense, part of an after-life of the stereotypical representations of them. It is worth mentioning here that Muslim women as life-writers are also products of their socio-cultural conditioning. Their narrative constructions of alternate identities also reflect an automated affinity for ethnic authenticity as much as their transculturality. For example, Afia Ahmed in her 'The Clothes of My Faith' writes:

Muslim women are increasingly sexualized and objectified, and the tenets of our faith have been both appropriated and commoditized. The idea of an *essential* (my emphasis) Islam is being lost as we desperately try to reclaim a narrative about pluralism, individual experiences and insights. As we have fought vehemently not to be regarded as a homogeneous group or monolith, we have forgotten that there *is still a standard that we need to live up to* (my emphasis).<sup>39</sup>

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson conclude in their essay, *The Trouble with Autobiography* (2005), the narrative space of life-writings for Muslim women, like other women, could also be a space for play and growth in as much as it could be used as a platform for critical reflection and negotiating possibilities of their reading practices, audiences, and ethics.<sup>40</sup> In this direction, then, it is also worth noting that towards the later sections of her essay, Afia Ahmed critically reflects on how Muslim women are conditioned:

where we live, our upbringing, our experiences, and our contextual backdrops all have a part to play in what we identify with and what we believe represents us [...] In attempting to secure representation and break stereotypes, we inadvertently find ourselves playing straight into them [...] Contrary to what we are presented with, there is not one type of Muslim woman. There are millions of us occupying our own spaces, changing our own worlds in our own small ways, contributing to what we believe to be the greater good.<sup>41</sup>

Navigating the transversal power propositions at hand, Afia Ahmed beautifully renders her antipathy for cultural stereotyping; realising the multiple prospects of her partially represented narrative subjectivity. Reflecting critically on her culturally assimilated values and its gullibility, she catalyses transversal movements. In thus tuning into a transversal space, the Muslim woman

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Afia Ahmed, 'The Clothes of My Faith', *Burqa*, pp.65-79 (p.67).

<sup>40</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'The Trouble with Autobiography: Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists', *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp.356-371, p. 369.

<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, 'The Clothes of My Faith', p.75.

life-writer breaks open 'isomorphic container representations',<sup>42</sup> assimilated in cultural narratives, utilising its 'prosthetic memory'<sup>43</sup> for greater inclusivity and acceptance. It helps transcend the aporia of an essentialized/ethnocentred representation of Muslim women. They, as life-writers, become transversal agents who reflect, negotiate, and reclaim dominant narratives of themselves. For example, Nafisa Bakkar in 'On the Representation of Muslims' attempts to reclaim her identity on her own terms. She uses the transversal narrative power to unsettle the stereotype that has constrained her for so long. There is a conscious reconfiguration of her narrative presence, transgressing 'the parameters maintaining her subjective territory' (that is fitting a territory or breaking one). Bakkar re-establishes her identity as contextually 'fluid' and as belonging to the 'middle ground'. In this, Bakkar deterritorialized her essentialized/ethnocentred single story. The transversal power generated in the narrative middle space renegotiates the established stories of Muslim women that are otherwise controlled through societal/institutional 'terms and conditions'.<sup>44</sup>

In another essay in the anthology, 'Life Was Easier Before I Was Woke', Yassmin Midhat Abdel-Magied writes:

And so, I search for the middle ground. Seeing with the respite of the blink [...] I am not entirely 'woke', for that would mean a finished product, which I am far from being. I am on a journey of awakening [...] a constantly evolving project [...] That's why the space to talk about different realities for Muslim women is so important. Our lives are not uniform. My story is not representative; it is simply my own. It is not a reflection of anyone else's truth. It does not cancel another's pain or want to be seen as more than what it is. Mine is a single person's lived experience. An experience full of contradictions, imperfections and incongruities, but my lived experience nonetheless. Part of the journey for me is owning these inconsistencies in myself and my stories- we cannot change our past perspectives, but we can certainly reflect on them, own them, and commit to growing from them. We must cultivate compassion for our past selves, trusting that we did the best we could at the time, while simultaneously striving to do better.<sup>45</sup>

Abdel-Magied's search for the 'middle ground' is an exploration of the transversal. Her words evoke the retentional and protentional journey along the axes of transversal power. There is the everyday that she is trying to transgress (the subjective territory),<sup>46</sup> the middle space of her blink of the eye, where she is evolving (the subjunctive space),<sup>47</sup> and the place where she might go (the

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<sup>42</sup> Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory', *Parallax*, 17.4, (2011), 4-18.

<sup>43</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Nafisa Bakkar, 'On the Representation of Muslims', *Burqa*, pp. 45-65, (p.45).

<sup>45</sup> Yassmin Midhat Abdel-Magied, 'Life was Easier Before I Was Woke', *Burqa*, pp. 79-93, (p.90-91).

<sup>46</sup> Reynolds, p.285.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

transversal territory).<sup>48</sup> In other words, this errantry between the 'Not Awake – Partly Awake – Completely Awake' fluidity in identities initiate transversal movements. These three stages in negotiating her identity shifts the subject into a transversal agent who would then 'permeate and make permeable the parameters of her subjective territories, generating a continuously shifting series of conditions that challenge the underlying structures of her individuality and social identity.'<sup>49</sup> This allows for 'self-reinforcement and self-redefinition.'<sup>50</sup> Magied's errantry destabilises the stereotypes and moves towards transversal territories. The potential of these ephemerally constructed territories that engender plurality is infinite. Transversal power sustains through the production of such 'infinite momentous discoveries.'<sup>51</sup>

The next section will explore Foucauldian concepts of Heterotopia and Hypomnemata as two alternate transversal narrative sites of eventualizations which destabilise essentialized/ethnocentred single stories.

### **Engaging Heterotopia and Hypomnemata as Alternative Transversal Sites**

In his monograph *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* (1966), Michel Foucault conceives heterotopia as a real space which is simultaneously mythic and real. Using the metaphor of a mirror, he explains heterotopia as mythical or unreal, in as far as the image it mirrors does not exist. On the other hand, it is also real because the mirror, like a real object, shapes or reflects the image of oneself. Afshan D'Souza-Lodhi's essay, 'Hijabi (R) evolution' is a good example of heterotopia. The narrative of a fugitive is used to explore her relationship with the hijab, sexuality, and religion. She contests for an identity and reclaims herself as a queer Muslim woman. Religious by faith and bisexual, she confronts the mutually exclusive terrain of Islamic faith and her gender identity. For her, the narrative space acts as a heterotopia that would help her systematically contest and topple prescribed identities. She writes:

For most people, the queer scene (and by that, I mean the clubbing scene, because until recently a sober queer scene wasn't a thing) was accepting and open. But for a kinda Muslim, fat, South Asian hijabi, it just wasn't. My hijab covered my sexuality. I found myself being ignored in queer spaces, having to be overtly queer to be noticed- dropping hints in conversation and wearing anything rainbow coloured because otherwise people assumed I was in the wrong room. I was constantly told I didn't look queer enough and that I couldn't possibly be queer. I stopped wearing heels and dresses and started wearing military boots and leather jackets, a dress code I thought would allow me to be accepted. The only thing was, my skin colour and religion didn't allow for that. I didn't fit the stereotypes of what a queer woman looked like. I had to drop my use of *alhamdulillah* and

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<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, p.287.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.286.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.287.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.279.

*mashallah* and *inshallah* from my speech, exchanging those words for partial lies, introducing myself as 'culturally Muslim'. I was playing into the narrative that I was an oppressed Muslim girl who just wanted to come out and leave her religion behind. (emphasis in original)<sup>52</sup>

The narrative space of D'Souza-Lodhi's life writing offers her an alternative existential realm to the veiled, the secular or the ethnically authentic, wherein she is simultaneously 'represented, contested and inverted'.<sup>53</sup> This space enables her to negotiate her identity as a religious bisexual. The narrative neither contains her nor disowns her. She is the exiled, the queer, the Hijabi in and from nowhere. The writer experiences an alternate narrative subjective possibility in heterotopia, which 'offers a strange, empowering knowledge for the migrant'.<sup>54</sup> For example, she writes: 'What they saw was a hijab binary that didn't allow for complex, contradictory people to exist. I was a walking contradiction: a queer Muslim'.<sup>55</sup> Ostracized by her own religious community and the queer bars she frequented, D'Souza-Lodhi breaks free from the dominant narratives and experiences heterogeneous narrative subjectivities. As the heterotopic, she is advantageously universal and negates all closures of fixity and singularity of position. She narrates: 'I'm done engaging in conversation with people who don't understand that human beings are complex. That I can wear a hijab and a dress. That I can be queer and Muslim. That I can exist.'<sup>56</sup>

This brings to mind the question that Kamila Shamsie's character, Eamonn in *Home Fire*, asks Isma, "The Turban. Is that a style thing or Muslim thing?"<sup>57</sup> To Isma's reply that the only two people who have asked her about the turban wanted to know if it was, "a style thing or chemo thing",<sup>58</sup> Eamonn responds by asking another question: 'Cancer or Islam- which is the greater affliction? [...] I meant, it must be difficult to be a Muslim these days'.<sup>59</sup> Isma replies, 'I'd find it more difficult to not be a Muslim'.<sup>60</sup> The narrative offers Shamsie a space to render the idea that, in a transcultural context, the turban need not always carry the tag of one's religious beliefs or ethnicity. In Shamsie's arrangement, the turban carries multiple connotations—it can either be a part of one's dressing style, one's ailment, or religion. Interestingly, Shamsie's employment of 'the

<sup>52</sup> Afshan D'Souza Lodhi, 'Hijabi (R)evolution', in *Burqa*, pp. 115-125, (p.121).

<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowic, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', *Diacritics*, 16 (1986), 22-27, (p.24).

<sup>54</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) p.168.

<sup>55</sup> D'Souza Lodhi, 'Hijabi (R)evolution', (p.124).

<sup>56</sup> D'Souza Lodhi, 'Hijabi (R)evolution', (p.125).

<sup>57</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), p.22.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

turban' destabilizes ethnocentric perceptions of the veil or turban as essentially Muslim. The heterotopic space of the text in *Home Fire* is thus transversal for Muslim women and the writer herself.

Hypomnemata is yet another potential site for transversality. Michel Foucault explains it as 'a material memory of things read, heard or thought, offering these as an accumulated treasure for re-reading and later meditation'.<sup>61</sup> The word is defined as a note, a reminder, a public record, a commentary, an anecdotal record, a draft, a copy, and other variations on those terms, but Foucault uses the word in the sense of personal notes. It constitutes 'reading, rereading, mediating, conversing with oneself and with others'.<sup>62</sup> Its intent, however, is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary, to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.<sup>63</sup> Foucault writes that self-writing is an art of disparate truth:

a purposeful way of combining the traditional authority of the already said with the singularity of the truth that is affirmed therein and the particularity of the circumstances that determine its use [...] the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said.<sup>64</sup>

Muslim women's life-narratives could, in this context, be read as hypomnematas that extend into a subjunctive space for reading and re-reading. Each reading renders the reader with infinite ways of meaning-making that informs newer perspectives on their identity. A hypomnemata has the unique characteristic of unifying heterogeneous fragments through their subjectivation in the exercise of personal writing.<sup>65</sup> Some of the writers in *It's Not About the Burqa* write about their engagements with blogs, social media postings, and journals. These are all heterogeneous ways of inventing and making meaning of their plural and complex selves. Jens Brockmeier writes how writing the self overlaps with the process of identity construction. She suggests, 'both are processes of understanding one's self in time'.<sup>66</sup>

Salma Haidrani's essay 'Eight Notifications' can be read as a hypomnematic recollection. She experiments with making virtual notes in the digital space. Her tweets incite severe criticism and backlash from complete strangers and community. She refuses to be frightened and her struggles in constructing meaningful selves for many implicated subjects continue. From her

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<sup>61</sup>Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. by R. Hurley, ed. by Paul Rainbow (New York: The New York Press, 1997), p.273.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid, p.210.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid, p.211.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid, pp.212-213.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, p.273.

<sup>66</sup>Jens Brockmeier, 'Autobiographical Time', *Narrative Inquiry* 10.1 (2000), 51-73 (p.55).

endeavours as a hypomnematic, more Muslim women start feeling that they are finally being seen and heard. Haidrani's tweets offer a digital hypomnematic space to recollect not only all the hatred, but also the validation she receives later. She notes:

After all the hate I've received recently, I'm almost in tears to have my views validated. It reminds me that my message- campaigning for the right for Muslim women to be seen and heard on their own terms- can travel across the world'.<sup>67</sup>

Haidrani enters a transversal territory, wherein she fugitively constructs herself as a hypomnematic, as one who makes virtual notes. By pursuing the many 'slippages, loose threads and latent signifiers' in her tweets, she unsettles and dissolves her many dominant single stories. It reveals the transversal power of the narrative in meaning-making.

Sanah Ahsan in her performance poetry *My Dua is Love* brings together her experiences as a gender dissident Muslim woman. She explores social media as a transversal space to reconstruct her identity on her own terms. It enables her to destabilise stereotypical representations in narratives. She rewrites herself as the queer brown Muslim woman. She recites:

I am learning that the desire is not dirty,  
That I need not pray myself clean.  
That shame need not shove me to my knees  
Forehead to Zameen  
To bring me closer to my deen  
My Dua is Love. My Dua is Love  
It pours pure like  
Zam Zam through my body  
Through her body  
Through my body  
Through her body  
We are holy in liquid sighs and sweat soaked skin  
I cannot tell where she ends and I begin  
As love interweaves through estuaries of limb  
In this tapestry of brown.  
It is not a sin. It is not a sin. It is not a sin.  
Instead; A call to prayer. It is a call to prayer  
Whenever my name leaves her lips with devotion  
I know that God is here. Whenever I am with her  
I know that God is here. I know that God is here.<sup>68</sup>

Ahsan's performance poetry, including *Love Loving*, is a re-writing of the socio-culturally conditioned narratives of Muslim women. She particularly uses her language to resist the Islamic

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<sup>67</sup> Salma Haidrani, 'Eight Notifications', *Burqa*, pp.127-143, p. 138.

<sup>68</sup> Sanah Ahsan, 'Rewriting My Story with Poetry and Love as a Queer Muslim', online video recording, TED, 2020, <[https://www.ted.com/talks/sanah\\_ahsan\\_rewriting\\_my\\_story\\_with\\_poetry\\_and\\_love\\_as\\_a\\_queer\\_muslim](https://www.ted.com/talks/sanah_ahsan_rewriting_my_story_with_poetry_and_love_as_a_queer_muslim)> [Accessed 20 June 2020].

stereotyping of Muslim women as silenced, submissive, sexually inhibited, and other homophobic assumptions. Ahsan's *Dua* is loud in reiterating that her love for another woman is 'not a sin'.

Ahsan, a clinical psychologist asserts in her TED talk:

We live in a world where language is often manipulated and misused to serve those in power. It is often used to serve a particular structural agenda. The language around us constructs our realities. It builds the backing choir to our inner voice. For me that inner voice was muddled with melodies of shame.<sup>69</sup>

Ahsan uses the digital environment as the transversal middle space for new becomings. She streams her identity as a queer Muslim woman online and is alert in using the growth of new media to her advantage. Through such digital communications, Ahsan captures the moments of her very consciousness during her various performances. Disembodied from the immediate lifeworld, her self is scattered into the realm of digitised information. This decontextualizes the partial representation of her subjectivity as the essentialized or the ethnocentred. In its momentary divorce from the lifeworld and its historicity, Ahsan's subjectivity is dehistoricized. The historically located 'I' in the lifeworld of an either essentialized or ethnocentred Muslim woman transforms purely into a theoretical 'I' of disembodied, digitized information. According to John David Ebert, 'this theoretical "I" is of course the Cartesian *cogito* or the Kantian transcendental self, the subjective correlate of the realm of pure objects existing in a theoretical phase space.'<sup>70</sup> Ahsan thus confidently negates the stereotypical conception of her subjectivity as only the historically located or the ethnically authenticated entity.

To conclude, in arguing for a poetics of transversality to analyse the life-narratives of transculturally scattered Muslim women, this article attempted to unsettle the discursive representations of their essentialized/ethnocentred subjectivity. Predicated on the understanding that narrative representations are an indispensable category in comprehending Muslim women's contested becoming, this article explored their narratives in the anthology *It's Not About the Burqa* (2019) along with other resonant narratives. Explicating a few instances from the texts, it also engages with the notions of Heterotopia and Hypomnemata as two alternate transversal territories that enable new subjective experiences. Muslim women's subjectivity is thus not 'just' about the *Burqa* but also a palimpsest of many unexplored memories, histories, wounds, and life-stories.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> John David Ebert, *The New Media Invasion: Digital Technologies and the World they Unmake* (London: McFarland and Company, 2011), pp.141-142.



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