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Identity, Resistance, and Empowerment: Examining Racism, Sexism, and Islamophobia in Susan Muaddi Darraj's *Farah Rocks*

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Abstract
This study analyzes Susan Muaddi Darraj's *Farah Rocks* as a powerful narrative that illuminates the lived experiences of minority children facing racism, sexism, and Islamophobia in Western societies. Through the story of Farah, an Arab American Muslim girl, the novel portrays how discriminatory behaviors at school and in public spaces can shape self-perception, belonging, and emotional well-being. Employing a thematic literary analysis, the research highlights Farah's resilience as she navigates bullying, cultural stereotyping, and gendered expectations. Despite systemic prejudice, Farah's strong family ties, personal determination, and cultural pride enable her to resist marginalization and reclaim her confidence. The study argues that the novel plays a significant role in children's literature by promoting empathy, diversity, and awareness of social inequities. It underscores how empowering stories like *Farah Rocks* help foster inclusive mindsets and support young readers in understanding complex issues of identity and discrimination.

Keywords: Identity and Resilience, Racism and Islamophobia, Sexism in Children's Literature, Arab American Representation, Susan Muaddi Darraj's *Farah Rocks*

Introduction

Farah Rocks by Susan Muaddi Darraj is a novel that is innovative within children literature as the main character of the story is a Palestinian-American Muslim girl, Farah Hajjar, who is in fifth grade. Although the novel relates to the common issues of the middle-school setting of the friendship, brotherhood, and school-related anxiety, the main strength of the novel is its subtly portrayed intersectional prejudices, which Farah can still experience in both school and neighborhood. This paper holds that the identity of Farah cannot be examined in distinct racial, gender, or religious terms but by employing the intersectionality model of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) that uncovers how these identities intersect to create a certain experience of oppression and strength.

The current children literary canon has tended to marginalize or stereotype the experiences of Arab-American and Muslim children, both as cultural otherness, and

as voices without voices. The novel by Darraj directly fills this blank by presenting a narrative that serves as a form of representation and resistance at the same time. The fact that Farah was placed into her story is what makes the novel subvert the hegemonic cultural narratives that exoticize or conceal the lives of the Arab and Muslim communities in the United States. Farah Rocks, in this sense, is not just a part of the multicultural children literature, but also connected with other debates of equity, inclusiveness, and social justice in education.

As a Palestinian, an American, a Muslim, a girl and an individual belonging to the working-class immigrant family, Farah creates a complex effect of applying the problem of the complexity of systemic power. The narrative illuminates the effect of prejudice, bullying and microaggressions that are all the more horrible when the child belongs to more than one marginalized group, and the means of resilience, family unity and cultural pride that help the child stay alive. This duality points out that Crenshaw assumes that intersectionality is neither a theory nor a practice which structures opportunity and marginalization.

Moreover, the novel has not only brought value to the literature world, but has been value pedagogical. The significance of children literature as a form of shaping of the identity, belongingness, and difference in the minds of the young reader is not a new discovery. It is possible to view Farah Rocks as a counter-narrative, one that goes against the key ideologies without offering the teachers, parents, and scholars the tools with the help of which children can be exposed to the complex argument on the subject of race, religion, and gender. Its availability provides the young readers with a chance to read into these themes at their age level, and the scholars and education institutions with an ability to interpret these articles as to its deeper meaning to diversity and representation in curriculum.

The intersections that take place in the life of Farah make this paper show the way in which the novel serves as a mirror to underrepresented readers, yet also as a window to other people, who may not necessarily share a similar background as Farah. Therefore, the story Farah Rocks is not just broadening the scope of children literature but the tales of young people of color is an instance of how the practice of exclusion can be observed and the youth can be empowered. In conclusion, the novel can be considered as one that is not only a kid story but it is a work that is critical in demonstrating how the collective power of the system works most in the least personal level and how the resilience can be formed in the context of compound discrimination.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality in Literature

Intersectionality theory Coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), this concept criticizes the method of analytical tradition that focuses on axes of oppression

(such as race, gender, and class) individually. The work of Crenshaw proved that Black women are not discriminated based on race + gender, but rather, a different and additional kind of subordination that comes over these identities interacting. By pointing out a lack of legal and social structures to explain such overlapping experience, Crenshaw, in attacking both the feminist and antiracist discourses, urged them to transcend single-axis analyses. The theory has since been extended and developed by many scholars including Patricia Hill Collins (2000) who introduced the matrix of domination to explain how race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and ability interplay with the broader systems of power and inequality.

Intersectional application on literature analysis offers a critiques approach that enables critics to go beyond simplistic or additive character identity. Instead of looking at categories like race, gender, or religion as individual or occasionally independent factors, intersectionality asserts that people are always in the convergence of such categories. The character Farah in Farah Rocks by Susan Muaddi Darraj is not periodically racialized, gendered, or religiously discriminated; she lives in the identity, in which these aspects are in a state of constant entanglement. The gendered nature of her experiences of Islamophobia are, at the same time, combined with her experiences of sexism, which are further combined with the racialized nature of experiences, and those of her family tied to their economic struggles as a working-class. Intersectionality, therefore, shows that the discriminations that she experiences are not disintegrated but constitutive of each other to create a discrete social location that cannot be conceptualized in a single category.

The intersectionality has an important role in children literature. Stories usually introduce young readers to the concept of identity and difference, and narratives with intersectional characters introduce young readers to the way power and prejudice work at various levels at an early stage. An intersectional reading approach also criticizes the move to diminish marginalized bodies to a one-dimensional identity. In its turn, it emphasizes that their experiences are rich and demonstrates that literature can expose structural inequalities as well as depict resilience strategies.

Due to this reason, the current paper employs the concept of intersectionality as a theoretical framework to analyze Farah Rocks. Putting the experiences of Farah into the perspective of intersectionality, the analysis proves how Darraj makes this idea the core of the story. Farah does not just go through the personal struggle; it is the way the oppression is interwoven, the power that arises on the intersection of identity and the ability of literature to become a place of representation, as well as a means of resistance.

Analysis: The Intersectional Self in *Farah Rocks*

1. The Confluence of Racism and Islamophobia

Farah Hajjar was at the center of several biases because of the national (Palestinian)

and religious (Muslim) identities. This background fact is revealed at the beginning of the story when she encounters Dana who is not only aggressive toward Farah as an individual, but also the cultural and religious identity that she embodies.

Quote: It is at their interaction at the first time when Dana squints at Farah and informs her, F-aruh? That's a weird name. Is it like Pharaoh? On purpose like one of those king-things of Egypt? ((Darraj, 2020, p. 24).

The scene is a paradigmatic example of a microaggression that, though it can seem insignificant initially, has both historical, political and cultural implications. The deliberate mispronouncing and a joke on the name is not a mere childish joke. It is metaphorical decimation of the culture of Farah, and the decimation is augmented by fading analogy of the pharaoh which applies Orientalist discourses to compare and exoticize the divergent Middle Eastern and North African cultures. Such Orientalist movements, as it has been argued by Said (1978) are never innocent; they both decrease the culturespecificity and recreate the hierarchical relations of power that position the East as backward, alien or menacing.

In reducing Farah to a caricatured allusion to an Egyptian Pharaoh, Dana commits discursive violence which blends the racial and religious bigotry. This would be an intersectional incident in the case of Crenshaw (1989): the ridicule of the ethnicity of the person, Farah (Palestinian, Arab) cannot be detached of the Islamophobic undercurrent as her Arabic name is a ethnic and religious label. Farah is very psychosocially impacted. The mechanism through which microaggressions accumulate to constitute a bigger system of exclusion is her inner reaction that is alternating between shame, anger, and fear. She is not only teased, but is also being erased and simultaneously is being hyper-present, as to the fact that she is different in a way that cannot be divided as to her multiple identities.

This is a peripheral yet significant scene that indicates how Darraj instills intersectionality into the content of the narrative. The insult in the playground is not an insult as a childish thing, but a metaphorical example of the structural mechanisms of racializing and religious discrimination, which elucidates the mechanisms of exercising power at the most personal levels of everyday life.

2. Gendered Expectations and Sexism

Farah is not only a racialized individual, but a gendered one. As a pre-teen Muslim girl, she is forced to juggle what is required of her both by the members of her cultural group and the rest of the American society. It is these pressures that lead to what scholars explain by the term a double bind (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000), in which the twining needs of patriarchy bind women of color.

On the one hand, Farah will have a role of a good obedient and modest daughter. On the other, she must confront the gendered norms of her American school where being assertive and a leader is perhaps more readily rewarded in boys than in girls. Resistance in itself is even the aspiration of Farah to study academically, or, in other words, to secure a place in a magnet school with a major in STEM. STEMs remain one

of the fields where gender remains predominant, and her choice to go to it is a sign of her both being nonconformist to the gendered norms and her willingness to disrupt the picture of success that could be achieved by a Muslim girl.

Quote: This is condensed within her good but heavy advice on the part of her mother: You are his big sister, Farah. You have to look out for him. I do not know what he is like sometimes, but you do" ((Darraj, 2020, p. 62).

This text puts Farah directly in gendered caregiver position. Her brother Samir has speech delay which further complicates her and she is not a simple sister but a sort of surrogate parent, interpreter, and protector. More importantly, this weight is gendered; it is hardly possible to imagine that this type of responsibility is imposed on a little boy to such an extent. The injunction brings out the clash between cultural norms of care giving and Farah who is at a given age and gender and this affects her line of development.

The conflict between her and her brother being not only familial, but also, systemic, her profound dilemma, the choice to either pursue academic future herself, or focus on the well-being of her brother is the manifestation of the conflict. It highlights how gender is being enacted in the crossover of culture, family expectation and institutional opportunity. The answer to this dilemma as it has finally been solved by Farah does not lie in not performing her duties but restructuring them. She discovers a way of living that will enable her to achieve her goals without compromising on her brother and in so doing, she is denying the false dichotomy presented in that she is required to choose between herself and family. Her course of action is a feminist agency: strength without giving up.

3. Class and the Intersectional Matrix

Although the central challenges by Farah are race, religion, and gender, the aspect of class cannot be ignored in the understanding of the story. The economic status of Hajjar family of working-class also influences almost all aspects of the story, even when it is not mentioned in the foreground.

Quote: She clearly recognizes this pressure when considering the application fee to the magnet school: I know better than to demand the sixty-dollar application fee. That's a lot of groceries. And that is enough Baba overtime of ((Darraj, 2020, p. 45).

Such self-definition is one way of showing that Farah has already realized financial precarity at a young age. The reason why the class structures are invading even childhood is the fact that a fifth-grader can contrast an academic application fee to grocery and overtime hours with her father. Her goals are not only dictated by the individual desire but also by the monetary limitation.

Besides, these limitations are exacerbated by the working hours of her parents and their immigrant status. They are unable to easily represent her in school not through negligence but through institutional systems which require the use of cultural as well as linguistic forms of capital which is often unavailable to working-class immigrant families (Bourdieu, 1986). The awareness of this fact by Farah forces her to develop

the policies of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. She gets to know how to solve her own problems not because her parents do not support her but because the two forces of the class plus the immigrant status does not give her parents the necessary tools to intervene.

In this case once again Darraj places Farah into an intersectional matrix (Collins, 2000), whereby, none of the classes can be isolated out of the others, i.e. race, gender, and religion. Rather, it is the vulnerabilities of her racialized and gendered subjectivity that are enhanced by the phenomenon of class. The strength of Farah, then, is not nearly emotional, but rather economic, made up of neglect, manhood, and resourcefulness.

Resilience as an Intersectional Practice

The resilience as exhibited by Farah is not a universal trait of character but a particular strategy that is developed after the convergence of race, gender, religion and class. Notably, this strength is cultivated in her family and community where the confirmation of identity is balanced with the outside aggression.

Quote: Her mother provides her with a crucial counter-narrative following one bullying episode: After one of the instances of bullying, her mother tells her an important quote: Our name is a gift... It is a strong name. An article of our history, and a location of our residence. You put in a show of pride, Farah Hajjar" ((Darraj, 2020p. 87).

This quote is an identity reclamation. Against the derision of Dana, her mother reinvents the name Farah as an inheritance, power, and perpetuity. Thus, she resists the erasure which is caused by racism and Islamophobia and gives Farah the psychological means to defeat shame and internalized oppression.

Another critical example of cross-cultural solidarity not within her family was having friends such as Allie Liu. Allie, a daughter of immigrants herself, proves out to be an ally that validates Farah in her struggles and helps her prepare how to escape. This coalition demonstrates that resilience may be shared, which is generated with the relations across the cultural divide.

And the last, Farah is not weak in intellectuality. She does not passively take her misfortune, she invents new and non violent methods to deal with it. The fact that she has no plans on crushing Dana at the expense of her own goals can be referred to as one of the forms of critical agency, i.e. having an opportunity to be conscious of the repressive systems and acting against them (Freire, 1970). This is what defines her strength as unlike passive endurance; it is more of an active, intersectional survival, resistance and empowerment.

Through these layers like racial and religious discrimination, gender roles, the conflict of classes and cultural affirmation, Farah Rocks becomes more than a middle grade novel. It becomes an educative text that dramatizes how systemic power works on the lives of children at more than one identities. Not only does Farah reveal the reality of the Palestinian-American Muslim girls, but she also gives an example of how a resilience can be created through family, togetherness and

intellectual independence. In this way, the work by Darraj gains the realm of children literature and critical theory a fine confirmation, as well as provides a scholar with an ideal location to examine the intersectionality in practice.

Conclusion

The fact that Farah Rocks introduces the intersectionality realities that were previously largely concealed to the young audience is what makes the book a milestone in the modern children literature. Susan Muaddi Darraj does not divide the plight of Farah into separate categories of race, gender, classes, and religion but she presents the plight in form of braids, which cannot be separated and tying together in the environment of her daily life. By doing it, the novel theatricalizes the operation of systems of power racism, sexism, Islamophobia, and classism which hardly work independently but interact with each other and increase each other, forming the subjectivity of marginalized people.

Perceptive and closely informed reading will show that the novel is a representation and a critique. It puts a strain on the singleness of identity politics, anticipating rather what Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) describes as the distinct subordination of the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. Farah does not experience discrimination in isolated situations at school, family life, and negotiations of restrictions under the category of classes but is experienced as interconnected dynamic that help us observe the holistic experience of discrimination.

Most importantly, the novel has no solution that destroys or defeats prejudice in a simple way. It does not focus on building a robust intersectional resilience on the cultural pride of Farah, her religious beliefs, family unity, and intellectual empowerment. Not a passive acceptance but a survival, bargaining and empowerment policy. Accordingly, Darraj presents one of the best counternarratives to rather popular literary tropes, which are more likely to depict marginalized characters as a victim to be sympathized with or those who are outsiders to be assimilated.

The Farah Rocks are much more significant than literary presentation. It offers an educator, scholars and young readers a map of understanding how identity is formed within systems of power which are comorbid with each other. The novel can teach young viewers how vital it is to be able to criticize the state of inequality and envision more equal futures by showing them the resilience as multifaceted and multilayered as the oppressions that it deals with. It provides an insight on how intersectionality can be embedded not only in the thematic content but also in the narrative and characterisation to the eyes of those who study children and young adult literature.

The intersectional approach to other literature on the minority children by future researchers might have as well involved literature writings on the characters of Arab-American, Muslim, immigrant or working-class. Such analysis of resilience, cultural affirmation and solidarity strategies would help to appreciate of whether

this is or is not occurring in multiple texts or that the other communities are, in some manner, defining their own survival. Such work would not only expand the literary canon, but would make us more familiar with how the negotiation of the unequal world occurs through the use of stories about young people as a pedagogical tool.

Lastly, Farah Rocks in general is a testimony to the existence of the fact that children literature is by no means children. Rather it is an essential cultural site and in negotiation of power, prejudice and resistance is exercised, as well as youthful readers, especially those of the marginalized groups, may discover their ambivalent identities confirmed. The novel by Darraj, therefore, is a very crucial part of the literary and social discourse because it is revealed that the stories can both reflect and transform the world in which they are being told.

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