

MUSLIM WOMEN'S FICTION LITERARY SALON

IDENTITY

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MUSLIM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?
HOW DO MUSLIM WOMEN AUTHORS WRITE ABOUT IDENTITY?

PRIMARY TEXT, *Alif the Unseen* by G. Willow Wilson

"Do you know how many words for foreigner I know?" the convert asked. She didn't turn to speak; her voice seemed to float from the back of her silk-clad head. "Many. Ajnabi. Ferenghi. Khawagga. Gori. Pardesi. And I've been called all of them. They're not nice words, no matter what you people claim. [...]. It doesn't matter to you what concessions we make—whether we dress respectfully, learn the language, follow all the insane rules about when to speak and how and to whom. I even adopted your religion—adopted it, out of my own free will, thinking I was doing something noble and righteous. But it's not enough. You'll always second-guess every thought and opinion that comes out of my mouth. [...] I'll always be foreign." [...] "What I don't get," she said in a more conciliatory tone, "is how non-westerners can move back and forth between civilizations so easily. I think westerners never get the hang of it. It's not in our cultural DNA to be adaptive."

[...] With a haughty glance, Vikram walked toward the limestone edifice, turned right, and disappeared. [...] Moving aside, he revealed the strangest tangle of architecture Alif had ever seen: it was an alley, certainly, but it did not behave like one. [...] Stone staircases led from street level halfway up the walls, then stopped or turned in odd directions; staring at them for too long made Alif's head hurt. Doorways perched ten feet above the ground or stretched out at perpendicular angles into the main thoroughfare, such that you could see either side at once.

[...] Vikram led them through the crowd toward a shop built into the left wall several hundred feet away. A woman with dark brown hair bound up in an elaborate network of braids stood within it, leaning against a wooden counter fronting the street. Her eyes, like Vikram's, were yellowish; her features lacked any discernible ethnic trait or distinction. She smiled at Vikram as he approached, with the easy familiarity of long acquaintance.

"As-salaamu alaykum," he said to her, touching his forehead.

"W'alaykum salaam," she replied. Her voice was low and liquid. [...] "Why have you brought them here?" she asked Vikram in Arabic. "The Alley isn't as safe as it used to be, you know. And I don't think the girl is taking it very well."

Alif glanced at the convert: her eyes were glassy and she kept swaying back and forth as though falling asleep and catching herself each time she dozed off.

"She's an American," said Vikram, apparently by way of explanation.

"Ah." The woman gave the convert a look of pity. "Half in, half out. She may not remember much of what passes here."

GENRE FOCUS: FANTASY

CRITICAL QUOTES

"Because science fiction so often dramatizes anxieties related to the depiction of the 'alien' other, hybridity and imperialism, it lends itself particularly well to critical enquiry informed by postcolonial theories and perspectives" (Murphy, p. 105).

"I was tired of being forced into boxes. Pre-Arab Spring, people only seemed to want to hear about a handful of things when it came to the Middle East: terrorists, the exotic undeveloped Orient (which no longer exists), and The Crisis Of Muslim Women, about which most honest-to-God Muslim women are somewhat perplexed. Even for nonfiction, there was a script, a narrative one was supposed to follow. The fact that Arab youth were not only adopting cutting-edge technology, but using it in revolutionary ways, was not interesting to people. It didn't fit the script. It didn't involve camels or gender segregation. It was very, very frustrating. So I said screw it, I'm writing a novel." (G. Willow Wilson)