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FEMONATIONALISTIC STUDY OF NOT WITHOUT MY DAUGHTER BY BETTY MAHMOODY

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Abstract

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The present study aims to explore that femonationalism is not a new concept rather it can be found in later 80's Western literary discourses about Muslims. To carry out the study, the researcher has selected Not Without My Daughter written by Betty Mahmoody as a primary text. The research is an attempt to find out how such literary discourses sow the seeds for later (real) femonationalism in America. Not Without My Daughter (1987) by Betty Mahmoody depicts Muslim males and Islam as misogynistic and anti-modernist. It also blames Muslim males of 'love jihad' who convert non-Muslim women to Islam by marrying them. In the memoir, America is depicted as a utopia for women who suffer in Iran. The research aims at carrying out a qualitative analysis of the mentioned memoirs. It uses textual interpretation as a method to explore whether the selected text responds positively to the stance taken in the study or not. It seeks to find out whether most Western discourses about Muslims in the late 80's and early 90's carry the strain of femonationalism in them by demonizing Muslim males and Islam. If so, the study will find out that Western feminist memoirs about Muslims specifically written during the '80s and '90s have prepared the stage for real islamophobia, xenophobia and racism in post-9/11 America. The research paper will prove to be a significant contribution to the field of feminism and will further widen the horizon of scholars who are interested in the field of feminist studies and Muslim representation.

Keywords: Femonationalism, Islamophobia, Utopia, Xenophobia, Racism.

Introduction

The incident of 9/11 has impacted the lives of Muslims in many ways in America and the global North in general. The post 9/11 period and the resultant American invasion in many Muslim countries has seen a rising influx in cross-border migration of Muslims to many European countries. As Muslims have been held responsible for the act of the few Muslims who were allegedly involved in 9/11 attacks, the policy makers in America have introduced strict laws for the Muslim community in America so far. In the pre- 9/11 era, the dominant tendency of American feminist memoirs is to depict Muslim men as wild, oppressors and uncivilized and America is shown as utopia for Muslim women where they could take refuge from the atrocities of Muslim men (Ewing, 2008). However, in the post 9/11 American memoirs, many migrant Muslims have written about their actual experiences in America which show America as dystopia for Muslims. According to Federal Bureau of Investigation report (2009), hate crimes increased up to 1600% against Muslim population in America in the year after the incident of 9/11. (Syed, Samina, Shamsa, 2023), Muslim community in America faced the effects of 9/11 incident in many ways- their religious places and businesses were vandalized; Muslims who practiced their religion experienced both verbal and physical assaults. Betty Mahmoody's Pre 9/11 memoir *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) portrays Muslim men as abusive and oppressors and Iran as a dystopia for women. Writers like Betty Mahmoody sow the seeds of femonationalism which is actualized right after the incident of 9/11. *Not Without My Daughter* is a memoir which tends to portray women, especially American, as slaves of nationalized, militaristic, masculinized and hostile religious fanaticism. Such stories emit harsh response from American administration towards American Muslims and Muslim nation states (Goodwin, 2016), By depicting a bleak picture of Muslim

women in Muslim countries, they project the West (in this case America) as a paradise where they can take refuge and enjoy their life. This contentious tale is one of the leading selling books internationally which has sold more than 15 million books (Milani, *Words, Not Swords*, 215.). Americans still believe the book to be authentic representation of Muslims and Islam (Emami, 2016). Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* is the story of her escape from Iran with her daughter from her Muslim husband who is depicted as wild and barbarian. The research paper explores that literary texts like *Not Without My Daughter* which fuel racism, sexism, xenophobia and islamophobia due to which Muslims who stick to their religion in America face the brunt of such misrepresentation. (Soomro, Shayan, 2023), American readers rely on stories like the current memoir to form their opinion about Muslims and Islam. The (real) femonationalism that we experience in the global North specifically in the second decade of 21st century has been fed off by such narratives.

Research Questions

1. In what ways is Muslim Male represented in *Not Without My Daughter*?
2. Why is Iran depicted as *dystopia* and America as *utopia* for women in *Not Without My Daughter*?
3. How does the selected memoir pave the way for (real) femonationalism?

Research Objectives

1. To show how Muslim male is represented as wild and the Dangerous Other in the selected memoir.
2. To see how Iran is portrayed as *dystopia* and America as *utopia* for women across the globe.
3. To explore how Betty Mahmoody sows the seeds of femonationalism by demeaning Islamic culture and Iran.

Problem Statement

In the previous century specifically in the later 80's and early 90's in western feminist literary discourses like *Princess: A True Story of Life*

behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia, Muslim male is depicted as misogynistic, oppressor and wild. Islam is shown as a religion which is opposed to women rights. Such portrayal has created xenophobia, racism and islamophobia in America specifically in the second decade of 21st century. Muslim migrant women face many anti-Islamic laws which compel/force them to adapt to western ways of living.

Significance of Study

The present study is significant as it highlights how the misrepresentation of Muslims in western feminist literary discourses affects migrant Muslims in the West in general and America in particular. Such narratives feed off the dominant western discourses against Muslims by stigmatizing Muslim male and Islam. Moreover, the enactment of anti-Islamic laws like veil ban in the West is due to the reception of such narratives.

Delimitation of the Study

Femonationalism is a vast concept which shows the convergence of *some* feminists and Right Wing nationalists to demean Muslims and Islamic ways of life to propagate their own agenda. They try to force/compel Muslims to assimilate into western culture. Hence the concept of femonationalism in the present project is limited to *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) by Betty Mahmoody.

Literature Review

The portrayal of Islam and Muslims in western literature is based on prejudice and ignorance (Schonenmann, 2013: 10). The misrepresentation of Muslims in 20th century western discourses about Muslims has prepared a conducive background which is exploited after the incident of 9/11. Such pre 9/11 narratives depicted Muslim women as oppressed and marginalized at the hands of Muslim men who are represented as oppressors and wild. Islam is shown as a misogynistic religion which gives unlimited power to Muslim male to control the lives of Muslim women. Such representation of Muslim males and Islam set the stage for later

islamophobia in the post 9/11 America. Allen (2010) argues that 9/11 has nothing to do with islamophobia as islamophobia existed on 10th September 2001 in the same way it existed on 12th September 2001. He quotes European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia which states that islamophobia existed in fifteen European states before the incident of 9/11. It is true that the incident of 9/11 fomented and somewhat actualized islamophobia in the global North, but anti-Islam and anti-Muslim sentiments had already been there. Similarly, Milton & Edwards (2002) are of the opinion that the roots of Islamophobia lie deep in western societies even before crusades. They state that the dichotomy of West and East has been there in western mindset for a long time. Anti-Muslim sentiments had already been there; however, Muslims have come under the limelight since the commencement of 21st century. Abdullah (2015) advances the same idea that the concept of orientalism had been there in western societies. He studies both pre and post 9/11 literary discourses to show how Muslims have continuously been depicted as lustful, barbaric, irrational, anti-democratic and hot-tempered. (Aman, Muhammad, et. al. 2023), Numerous novels have been penned down about terrorism which seem to associate Muslims directly with violent acts. Similarly, the incident of 9/11 has fomented the production of movies which portray Muslims as terrorists and associate Islam with terrorisms. Hollywood movies like *True Lies* (1994) and *The Siege* (1997) depicts Muslims in a negative strain collided with Arab and Iranian nationalism. The images of Muslims as the dangerous other in western discourses have been made conspicuous by the recent historical conflicts between the Islamic Middle East and the West such as the Israel- Arab conflict, the TWA hijacking in Lebanon in 1985, the Salman Rushdie Affair, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the incident of 9/11. Most western feminist narratives about the Muslim

world have been written from the US perspective. No doubt the incident of 9/11 has proved disastrous for Americans, but the consequences of the event are even worse for Muslims specifically for Muslim community in America. Discriminatory actions and stereotypes were nothing new for American Muslims, however, the backlash after 9/11 was overwhelming, relentless and heartbreaking (Bakalian & Bozogmehr, 2009). Since then, Muslims have been under tight scrutiny, and they have suffered from institutionalized discrimination. They have been portrayed as perpetrators in many western literary works. Following the incident of 9/11, many Muslim organizations and businessmen in America received threatening calls and emails and there were confirmed cases of hate-motivated murders (Bakalian & Bozogmehr, 2009, p. 3). In many western countries, anti-hijab laws have been enacted to stop Muslim women from wearing hijab in public places. The purpose behind such laws is to force/compel Muslim women to assimilate into western culture. Muslim male is looked upon as the dangerous other, violent and wild towards women. Western feminist discourses like *Not Without My Daughter* fuel such femonationalist sentiments in the global North. The West has shown an increasing interest in the life style of the people of Iran specifically after Iranian Revolution 1979. Mugerle (2016) argues that the time of the publication of *Not Without My Daughter* is very critical as readers in the West mostly rely on such books to understand Iran and its people. The memoir is a harsh portrayal of Muslim male and Islam which reinforces stereotypes about Muslims and Islam in the global North. On the other hand, Kahf (2016) thinks that the memoir paves the way for bridging the gap between America and Iran. As the memoir deals mostly with politics and religion, she explicates that it offers great insight into Iranian politics and Islam. Such narratives seemingly feed off anti-Islamic ideas in the global North by delineating Muslims and

Islam in a negative strain. The (real) femonationalism that we experience in many countries in the Global North is the outcome of such misrepresentation of Muslim male. We see the enactment of anti-Islamic laws related to Muslim women in many countries in the Global North on the pretext of providing Muslim migrant women with absolute freedom. Such assimilation policies in the Global North have been on the rise since the dawn of the 21st century. According to Farris (2017), femonationalism is the conversion of two ideological threads- the first is the exploitation of feminist themes for nationalist objectives and the second is the elevation of western race by depicting Muslims as backward and uncivilized. Texts like *Not Without My Daughter* and *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age* (2016) make femonationalism a reality. *Not Without My Daughter* tells the story of an American who has been enslaved by Muslim male. *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age* is the story of a young American Muslim who is mistreated due to her religion in American society. According to Goodwin (2016), Betty Mahmoody depicts Muslim male as oppressor, sexual predator and hypocrite against the backdrop of Islamic revolution in Iran in her memoir. He thinks that such depiction of Muslim male and Islam strengthens western stereotypes. Betty Mahmoody symbolizes America to a female body who is in danger from the outsider Muslim male. The memoir is based on the concept of love jihad which states that Muslim men and women marry non-Muslims to convert them to Islam. Asrori (2022) argues that there are two kinds of religious discrimination in Amani's *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age* – direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. According to her, direct discrimination upon Muslims in America is inflicted by police officers, educational institutions and people around them. Indirect discrimination upon Muslims is carried out in an organized manner by state organizations. (Uddin, Anwar, 2024), The former is individual

based discrimination whereas the latter is state-sponsored discrimination. The study shows that the memoir suggests ways to resist religious discrimination based on hate and prejudice. In the same way, [Sebastian \(2018\)](#) thinks that the incident of 9/11 has sparked anti-Muslim sentiments in America to the level that they have put Muslim Americans in the spotlight. According to her, Muslim women have suffered double discrimination in the post 9/11 America. Since no work has been produced in Pakistan or abroad on the current memoir from femonationalist perspective, the present study aims to analyze it from femonationalist perspective to show how (adumbrated) femonationalism existed and paved the way in the second decade of the 21st century.

Theoretical Framework

The present study mainly exploits the concept of femonationalism by [Sara. R Farris \(2017\)](#) whereas orientalism, neo-racism and Third World feminism supplement my argument. Femonationalism is the exploitation of feminist tropes to fuel racism, xenophobia and islamophobia by mis/representing Muslims and their countries as backward, misogynistic and uncultured. Muslim male is depicted as the dangerous other and western countries are portrayed as paradise for Muslim women where they live free life without any religious restrictions. The study tries to explore that the concept of femonationalism is not new: pre 9/11 femonationalism is mostly theoretical whereas migrant Muslims in post 9/11 global North/America face real femonationalism. Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) and Chandra Talpade Mohanthy's book [Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism \(1991\)](#) support the argument of the study.

Methodology

The study mainly exploits the concept of femonationalism supplemented by feminism and Orientalism in the Global South. It, therefore, seeks to conduct textual analysis of *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) by Betty

Mahmoody from the perspective of femonationalism through qualitative approach. The study tries to show how (adumbrated) femonationalism in the 80's and 90's of the 20th century paves the way for (real) femonationalism in the second decade of 21st century through the enactment of different civic laws regarding Muslim migrant women in the Global North. We have recently witnessed 'the burqa ban' in France, Italy and Germany wherein Muslim women are forbidden to wear veil in public places and educational institutions.

Analysis and Discussion

Muslim Male as Wild and the Other in Not Without My Daughter

In this memoir, Betty Mahmoody narrates the constant worsening of her husband, Dr Bozorg Mahmoody, from an industrious and americanized medical practitioner into an oppressive, lunatic Iranian man. She depicts him as cruel and wild who has kept her captive in Iran. Bozorg Mahmoody tells her that situation in America is not suitable for Iranians, therefore, they will live in Iran permanently which she does not want. She does not like Iran and Iranians, therefore, she wants to go back to America as soon as possible. The memoir tends to portray Muslim males in a negative strain as they deceive non-Muslim women by marrying them and then forcibly converting them to Islam. It depicts them as wife-beaters and oppressive towards women in general ([Tebaldi, 2021](#)). [Gal & Irvin \(2019\)](#) opine that Muslim men in American rescue narratives are depicted as sexual predators who trap non-Muslim women beneath the cover of love. Betty Mahmoody mentions many American women who are married to Muslim males who have converted them to Islam. Ellen, who is an American, is married to Iranian Muslim who has compelled her to conform to Islamic ways of living. Her husband is depicted as wild, oppressive and cruel. Through the depiction of such Muslim men, the writer gives the idea that Muslim men should not be trusted. Not only

Muslim men but also Muslim women are blamed for converting their husbands to Islam. Former Texas Republican party leader Cathy Adams criticized conservative political advocate Grover Norquist because he marries a Muslim woman, keeps beard and has visible signs of converting to Islam due to his Muslim wife (Mark Potok & Janet Smith, 2015). The memoir is replete with the idea that Muslims hate non-Muslims (Not Without My Daughter, 1987: p. 144, 216). It tends to caution American women not to marry Muslim males as they would be forced to convert to Islam (Goodwin, 2016). *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) is not just a simple story of a daughter and mother but it is as an authentic account of Muslim men to the western readers. Though the contents of the memoir are questionable, yet Americans read it as an authentic account of the lives of Muslims in contemporary Iran (Farzaneh Milani, 2017). Milani (2017) argues that Mahmoody's narrative has unquestionably molded American understanding of both Muslim masculinity and Iran. According to Bahramitash feminist memoirs about the life of Muslim women in Muslim countries have so far affected the live of migrant Muslims in the global North as these works incite hatred, racism, sexism and Islamophobic sentiments. The memoir has undoubtedly played crucial role in forming western opinion of Muslim men as wild and extremists. It is based on such femonationalist texts that all Muslims in general and migrant Muslims in the global North in particular have been mistreated. Betty Mahmoody not only delineates her husband in stereotypical way rather she censures almost every Muslim male in the text. She uses every negative connotation for Muslim males in the text. For instance, she says, '...but all around me hovered insolent, superior-looking men...as women wrapped in chador sat in quiet subservience' (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 32). She describes the plight of women in Iran in the following words, '...how Iranian women were slaves to their husbands,

how their religion as well as their government coerced them at every turn' (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 33). The narrative is a blatant criticism of not only Muslim males but also Islam which, according to the writer, is a misogynistic religion. Betty Mahmoody loves her husband if he sticks to American culture as the quote in the text says, 'Hostages? Captives of this venomous stranger who had once been a loving husband and father?' (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 40). She hates her husband now because he becomes Iranian. He is now a stranger and venomous for her who has kept her as captive and hostage. Malik (2011) argues that the memoir seems to propagate the idea that Muslim male does not/cannot assimilate into American culture (Chan-Malik, Sylvia, 2011) as Betty says that Iranians remain stubborn about assimilating into American culture (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 46). Throughout the memoir, Betty Mahmoody calls her husband as jailor who hates her for being American (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 52). He is depicted as religious fanatic whose violence is confined to domestic sphere which is directed mainly towards his American wife. In the memoir, his domestic violence reflects his irrationality, fanaticism and extremism which, according to the writer, are inherent characteristics of Muslim male and Islam. She blames Dr Bozorg of beating her and justifies it in the name of Islam as he says, 'I am a Muslim' (Jack G. Shaheen, "Hollywood's Muslim Arabs," *Muslim World* 90, no. 1/2 (Spring 2000): 22.). According to her, Muslim males treat their wives as their personal property as she opines, '...as Moody's wife I was his chattel. He could do with me as he wished' (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 53). At another place in the memoir, she says that she is married to a Muslim madman (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 181). Her portrayal of her husband is censured by his friends in America who think that much of the story is fabricated (Goodwin, 2016). Betty thinks that Islam has allowed

Muslim husbands to treat their wives as their property, however, she does not cite a single reference to validate her point of view. Instead, many references can be quoted from the Holy Quran which confer many rights on women. Many scholars agree that Islam is more liberal towards women as compared to other religions (Engineer, 2008). Betty Mahmoody blames Islam and Muslim male simultaneously for not welcoming her daughter as the quote in the text says, 'His Islamic manhood wounded at the arrival of a firstborn daughter' (Mahmoody, *Not Without My Daughter*: p. 206). However, in *Lost Without My Daughter* (2013) Dr Bozorg Mahmoody gives vent to his love for his daughter. Even Betty's Mahmoody's memoir hardly contains an incident where her husband commits violence on his daughter. Instead, he displays great concern over the education and upbringing of her daughter. Betty Mahmoody draws a bleak picture of most Muslim males who interact with her in one way or the other. She calls them abusive, religious fanatic, and sexually predatory particularly towards foreign women. Due to the representation of Muslim males in such narratives, Pamela Geller posted a video in which Muslim males are shown having sex with goats (Potok, Smith, 2015). According to Betty Mahmoody, Muslim masculinity poses a potential threat to American women (Goodwin, 2016). K. Puar (2018) points out that Mahmoody succeeds in getting her freedom only when she rejected 'her illicit liaison with a racially and sexually perverse religious outsider' (Puar, Jasbir K, 2018). Islam is considered a racialized religious danger in the shape of Iranian Muslim males who try to take away the freedom of a white American woman. It is like using a female body for American nationalism which is to be rescued from the dangerous Muslim male. Despite stereotypical depiction of Muslim males in the memoir, many scholars have rejected Mahmoody's narrative as being fabricated (Nacim Pak-Shiraz, Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film

(London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.). So, Betty Mahmoody's portrayal of Muslim male as the dangerous other has deteriorated the image of Muslim male and Islam across the globe. Such narratives make femonationalism a reality by fueling hatred and prejudice towards a particular community (Muslims) in the West. ***Depiction of America as Utopia and Iran as Dystopia***

Another femonationalist perspective in *Not Without My Daughter* is the depiction of America as a dream place where women can enjoy absolute freedom and Iran, on the other hand, is portrayed as a country where women are at the mercy of wild Muslim males. There are many instances in the memoir where the writer terms Iran as an abominable and unwanted place. Discussing the connection between her husband and Iran, she says, '... and trapped in a country where the laws decreed that he was my absolute master' (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987: p. 67). The narrative shows that she compares Iran to a prison cell where women are at the mercy of their husbands who treat them the way they want. The book is full of her expressions of abhorrence of Iran as the quote in the text says, 'How I loathed Iran' (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987: p. 35). At another place she says, 'Even in this damnable Islamic Republic...' (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987: p. 194). Such abominable sentences of the writer incite revulsion in the minds of her readers towards Muslims and Muslim nation states. When she finds herself sexually assaulted by a 'particularly pungent Iranian' bus driver, her husband's niece tells her 'they do that to foreign women' (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987: p. 300). The implication of the narrative is that she compares America's liberated sexuality to Iran's suppressed lasciviousness (Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press, 2018). Mahmoody criticizes Iran as place where women cannot do anything of their own free will. She carries an IUD (An

intrauterine device (IUD) is T-shaped device that is placed inside the uterus to prevent pregnancy) in her body without the knowledge of her husband so that she may not be pregnant. She is afraid that her husband will kill her if she comes to know about the device in her body. She asks herself if women in Iran are punished for birth control and she answers herself in affirmative as in the text she states, 'In this country, men could and would do anything to women' (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987: p. 134). The narrative explicates the dangers a woman goes through in Iran. She believes that she is between the devil and the deep sea because if she rescues herself from her husband, the government will not spare her. Through her resistance, she draws a twisted picture of Muslim masculinity as sexually oppressive. She contrasts conservative Iranian government to that of liberal American government. She characterizes Tehran as a society which is full of hypersexualized Muslim men. She states that she takes a lot of risk for her excursions in Tehran without accompanied by man or another woman (*Not Without My Daughter*, 1987: p. 272). Memoirs like this propel Louie Gohmert (R-Texas)'s 2010 campaign (It was a 2010 campaign which warned American voters to about muslim 'terror babies' who are brought up as terrorists in America. It further propagated that Muslim terrorist would take over American population). and the rise of American conservative women who see Muslims as potential threat to the stability of America (Goodwin, 2016). She calls Iran a backward and filthy country which still must learn the basic lessons of social justice and hygiene (*Mahmoody, Not Without My Daughter*: p. 51). She shows her contempt for Iranian education which, according to her, makes Iranian meek followers of authority (*Mahmoody, Not Without My Daughter*: p. 105). The memoir shows Iran like a hell for her and she wants to get out of it. The narrative states that she considers her and her

daughter's life in danger in Tehran as the quote in the book says, 'We had to get out of this hell' (*Mahmoody, Not Without My Daughter*: p. 291). The narrative shows how she compares Iran to hell and America to paradise. She wants to return to a society where she could live the way she wants. The narrative explains that the one and strong desire of her life is to return to America where she led her life according to her wishes (*Mahmoody, Not Without My Daughter*: p. 301). She tells her readers that Iran is a place where women are choking as they cannot dress the way they want. However, Muslim women in some western countries cannot dress the way they want as they are forced to unveil themselves by enacting anti-hijab laws. She compares Iran to an alien society as if it does not consist of humans rather other creatures (*Mahmoody, Not Without My Daughter*: p. 398). Goodwin (2016) wrote in 2018 that *Not Without My Daughter* is a xenophobic and racist book which is still venerated in America as a feminist manifesto after thirty years of its publication (Goodwin, 2016). He further argues that the memoir instigates anti-Muslim sentiments in post 9/11 America and continues to thwart the image of Muslims and Islam in the minds of American readers. At the end of the book, Betty states that she wants to public her story so that she may warn other people of the dangers Muslims and Muslim countries pose to the world (*Mahmoody, Not Without My Daughter*: p. 398).

Conclusion

To sum up, it is obvious that most western feminist literary discourses about Muslims in the 80's and 90's of the previous century have portrayed Muslim males as oppressors and wild which still provide food for (real) femonationalism in the Global North. Betty Mahmoody's memoir *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) has provided background for western policy makers to consider Muslim Male as oppressive and antagonistic to women rights. It delineates a gloomy picture of Muslim

countries as compared to America which is depicted as *Utopia* for women. Such memoirs demean Islamic cultures by showing it as misogynist and anti-modern. Therefore, we see the enactment of anti-Islamic laws in the Global North in the name of giving freedom to Muslim women. This research, therefore, tried to answer the three basic questions which are postulated at the start of the research. Betty Mahmoody portrays an adverse picture of Islam and Muslim males in her memoir to reinforce the idea that Islam and Muslim males are misogynistic and resistant to every kind of advancement.

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