

REASSESSING TABOO: RESHAPING THE PERCEPTION AND REORIENTING THE APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper examines how Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009) and Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) portray actions commonly labelled as taboo and invite readers to move beyond immediate moral judgment. Focusing on Arissa Illahi's decision to remove her hijab and Faten Khatibi's decision to enter sex work, the study argues that these actions should be read in relation to the social, religious, emotional, and material pressures that shape them. Using qualitative close textual analysis, the paper applies the frameworks of Muslimah narratives, Islamic feminism, and resistance to examine the protagonists' conditions before, during, and after their decisions. The analysis shows that both novels situate transgressive acts within contexts of Islamophobia, migration, economic vulnerability, gendered expectation, and social exclusion. As a result, Arissa's and Faten's choices emerge not as simple violations of religious or social norms, but as complex forms of negotiation, survival, and constrained agency. The findings suggest that Abdullah and Lalami use narrative empathy to challenge reductive perceptions of Muslim women and to reveal the human complexity behind stigmatized actions. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that both novels encourage a more patient and humane approach to interpreting taboo choices.

Keywords: muslimah narratives; transgression; resistance; empathy and judgment

INTRODUCTION

Actions that are labelled taboo are often judged before they are understood. When someone acts outside what society considers ordinary, moral, or acceptable, public response commonly takes the form of suspicion, blame, or rejection. Yet such immediate judgment can obscure the circumstances that shape a person's decision. In many cases, actions that appear improper from the outside are closely connected to fear, vulnerability, survival, or the need to regain control in difficult conditions. This article therefore examines how Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009) and Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) invite readers to reconsider actions that are commonly viewed as taboo. Instead of approaching these actions through a purely judgmental perspective,

the two novels encourage a more empathetic reading that pays attention to the social and emotional pressures surrounding the characters.

The contextual significance of these novels lies in the way they place Muslim women's choices within wider global issues. *Saffron Dreams* is set against the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a period marked by heightened suspicion toward Muslims and by the racialization of visible Islamic identity in Western societies. In this context, everyday signs of Muslim belonging, such as a hijab, a Muslim name, an accent, or immigrant status, can be misread through fear and political hostility. This concern is supported by studies of veiling and Muslim women in diaspora: Ruby (2004) shows that the hijab can become a site where Muslim women negotiate identity and belonging, while Jones-Gailani (2019) argues that veiling in diaspora is often politicized and publicly contested. These studies help explain why Arissa's hijab is not merely a private religious practice in the novel, but a visible sign through which others interpret and misrecognize her. Through Arissa Illahi, a Pakistani Muslim woman who loses her husband in the attack and then faces hostility because of her hijab, Abdullah shows how Islamophobia turns religious visibility into a site of danger and misrecognition. Her grief is therefore not only personal, but also social: she must mourn her husband while also defending herself against public suspicion directed at Muslims after the attack. *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, on the other hand, addresses migration, economic inequality, and the precarious lives of undocumented migrants moving from Morocco to Spain. The novel's migration context is shaped by the desire for work, security, and dignity across borders, but also by the risks of illegal crossing, unstable employment, social invisibility, and dependence on informal networks. Lamghari's (2022) discussion of Arab migrant women in Lalami's fiction is useful here because it links migration to gendered vulnerability and shows how female migrant characters are represented through the intersecting pressures of displacement, desire, and social judgment. Through Faten Khatibi, Lalami explores how poverty, displacement, and limited opportunity can push a woman into choices that are socially stigmatized but necessary for survival. Read together, the novels connect personal decisions to larger structures of discrimination, migration, gendered vulnerability, and social exclusion.

These examples are important because they show that taboo is not created only by religion or personal morality. It is also produced by social conditions that decide which bodies, choices, and identities are considered acceptable. Arissa's decision to remove her hijab becomes meaningful within a climate where Muslim visibility is treated with suspicion, while Faten's decision to enter sex work becomes meaningful within a migrant economy where survival depends on whatever options remain available. The scholarship on hijab removal further clarifies this point. Kaur and Choo (2021) show that removing the hijab can involve complex negotiations of identity, social pressure, and personal conviction, while Yunianti (2022) emphasizes that hijab should not be treated as a simple measurement of piety or moral character. These arguments support the reading of Arissa's decision as a contextual and emotional negotiation rather than a straightforward rejection of faith. By placing the protagonists in these specific contexts, the novels ask readers to

consider how external pressures can transform private decisions into controversial public acts.

Within these contexts, both protagonists make decisions that seem to contradict religious teachings and social expectations: Arissa stops wearing her hijab, while Faten enters sex work. These choices are significant not because the novels present them as simple acts of rebellion, but because they reveal how Muslim women's agency can emerge under pressure and constraint. As Sehlikoglu (2018) suggests, Muslim women's agency should not be understood only through conventional ideas of freedom, but through the complex negotiations they make within religious, cultural, and social structures. This article argues that Abdullah and Lalami use Arissa's and Faten's taboo decisions to challenge quick moral judgment and to guide readers toward a more empathetic understanding of actions shaped by fear, survival, migration, Islamophobia, and gendered expectation. In doing so, the novels contribute to broader discussions about Muslimah narratives, Islamic feminism, and the representation of women whose choices are often misunderstood when separated from their contexts.

METHOD

This study uses qualitative close textual analysis to examine *Saffron Dreams* (2009) by Shaila Abdullah and *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) by Laila Lalami. The analysis focuses on how both novels portray actions that are commonly considered taboo, particularly Arissa Illahi's decision to remove her hijab and Faten Khatibi's decision to enter sex work. Rather than treating these actions as isolated moral choices, this method reads them in relation to the social, religious, emotional, and material pressures surrounding each character.

The study is guided by three related frameworks: Muslimah narratives, gender discussion through Islamic feminism, and themes of resistance. Muslimah narratives are used to examine how Muslim women's identities, voices, and experiences are represented in the two novels. Islamic feminism helps analyze how the female characters negotiate agency within religious, patriarchal, and social expectations. Meanwhile, resistance theory is used to understand how controversial actions may function as forms of survival, self-protection, or self-definition under oppressive conditions.

These frameworks are applied to the protagonists' conditions before, during, and after their taboo decisions. This structure allows the analysis to trace how each decision develops from a particular context rather than appearing suddenly or without reason. By using this approach, the paper aims to show that Arissa's and Faten's choices are shaped by complex negotiations of faith, identity, safety, migration, gender, and survival.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the researcher seeks to show that the seemingly unusual or taboo choices made by Arissa Illahi in *Saffron Dreams* (2009) and Faten Khatibi in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) are intentional narrative strategies employed by Shaila Abdullah

and Laila Lalami. Rather than presenting these actions simply to shock or unsettle, both authors use them to encourage readers to reconsider how they respond to decisions that fall outside familiar moral or cultural expectations. By placing their characters in situations shaped by pressure, instability, and emotional turmoil, Abdullah and Lalami create moments that challenge readers to look beyond quick judgments. The purpose is not to justify every action, but to open a space where empathy becomes possible—where readers can acknowledge the weight of circumstances that lead individuals to choices that might otherwise be misunderstood. Through these portrayals, the authors subtly guide readers from a stance of judgment toward one of thoughtful understanding.

To develop this argument clearly, the discussion is divided into three connected stages: the characters' conditions before the decision, the moment when the decision is made, and the consequences that follow afterward. This structure allows the analysis to show that Arissa's and Faten's choices do not appear suddenly, but grow out of specific personal, social, and material pressures. By tracing this sequence, the discussion can reveal the layered reasons behind each decision and strengthen the paper's aim of moving readers from judgment toward empathy.

Although Arissa and Faten face different social realities, their stories are connected by the same narrative movement: both women begin within recognizable religious and cultural expectations, encounter circumstances that destabilize those expectations, and eventually make choices that outsiders may misread as moral failure. This parallel allows the two novels to be read together as narratives that complicate simple judgments about Muslim women's agency.

Before the Decision is Made

Before examining the decisions themselves, it is necessary to understand each character's relationship with faith, identity, and social expectation. This first stage establishes the starting point from which Arissa and Faten later move. Arissa, the protagonist in *Saffron Dreams* (2009), is a Pakistani Muslim woman who migrates to America with her husband, Faizan. At the beginning of the novel, her life is marked by love, marriage, and an attempt to settle into a new environment. However, after Faizan dies in the 9/11 attack, Arissa is forced to confront grief as well as the suspicion and prejudice directed at her as a visibly Muslim woman. This background is important because it shows that her later decision to remove her hijab must be read against a history of emotional loss, social hostility, and conflicted religious expression.

"The funny part of it is, I desperately wanted to lose my hijab when I came to America, but Faizan had stood in my way. For generations, women in his household had worn the veil, although none of them seemed particularly devout. It's just something that was done, no questions asked, no explanations needed." (Abdullah, 2009)

This tension becomes clearer in the first passage, where Arissa admits that her relationship with the hijab has never been simple. Although she understands that veiling is commonly expected of Muslim women, she also observes that the women in Faizan's household wore it largely because "it's just something that was done." This suggests that the hijab functions not only as a religious practice, but also as an inherited social custom. Mowafy's (2022) discussion of counter-narratives helps clarify the significance of Arissa's voice here. When Mowafy argues that storytelling can challenge stereotypes, that argument supports reading Arissa's narration as a Muslim woman's attempt to explain herself rather than be defined from the outside. Her statement that the women in Faizan's family were not "particularly devout" also complicates the assumption that visible veiling always reflects a person's level of faith. Ruby's (2004) study of immigrant Muslim women and the hijab strengthens this reading because it shows that hijab may serve different purposes depending on the wearer's intention and the surrounding community's interpretation. In Arissa's case, the veil becomes meaningful precisely because it is shaped by both personal feeling and social expectation.

"I went to the bureau and kissed a folded veil that lay on top, a reminder of my past and a symbol of what I had given up. Faizan had harbored a reverence for the veil—to him it defined a woman." (Abdullah, 2009)

The second passage extends this conflict by showing that Arissa also resists allowing the veil to become the only measure of womanhood. When she recalls that Faizan believed the veil "defined a woman," her act of kissing the folded veil goodbye suggests both respect and refusal: she acknowledges its meaning, but does not accept it as the sole definition of her identity. This distinction is important because her desire to remove the hijab is not simply a rejection of Islam. Rather, it reflects her attempt to negotiate how faith, gender, and belonging are read in a new social environment. Juwariyah's (2019) discussion of Muslim women and veiling supports this point by emphasizing that the meaning of hijab can shift across social and cultural contexts. In Arissa's American context, the veil no longer signals only religious devotion; it also marks her as visibly "Other." Jones-Gailani's (2019) work further clarifies this shift by showing how veiling in Western diaspora can become politicized through public suspicion and difference. Together, these sources help explain why Arissa's relationship with the hijab becomes unstable once the social environment around her changes.

While Arissa's conflict begins with the visibility of the hijab in a hostile American context, Faten's situation develops from a different but equally restrictive set of pressures. In *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, Faten is a Moroccan Muslim woman who attempts to cross the Strait of Gibraltar illegally into Spain in search of a better future. Before this migration, however, she is portrayed as a college student with a strong attachment to religious life, as shown in the passage below.

"She'd stayed there for six years—and in that short time she had managed to graduate high school, go to college, find God, and join the Islamic Student Organization." (Lalami, 2005)

This description initially places Faten within a more recognizable image of Muslim female devotion. Lamghari's (2022) discussion of Arab migrant women in Lalami's fiction helps frame this portrayal because it shows how Muslim female characters may be read through expectations of religious identity, sexuality, and social respectability. However, the novel does not leave Faten in a fixed image of obedience. Although she presents herself as religiously committed, she is also outspoken and willing to make decisions that others may find controversial. This shift is where Islamic feminism becomes relevant. Khan and Arain (2025) explain that Islamic feminism challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islam while advocating gender justice grounded in Islamic theology. Applied to Faten, this framework shows that religious commitment does not erase agency. Instead, Faten complicates the stereotype of the passive religious woman: her faith does not silence her, but exists alongside her capacity to speak, choose, and negotiate her own path.

At this early stage, the contrast between the two characters is significant. Arissa's conflict is centered on the meaning of visible religious identity in a non-Muslim society, while Faten's conflict begins within a Muslim-majority context where religious belonging appears more socially familiar. Yet both women show that religious identity is not fixed or simple; it is negotiated differently depending on place, pressure, and personal circumstance.

The Moment when the Decision is Made

After establishing the characters' initial positions, the analysis can now turn to the moments when their taboo decisions begin to take shape. This stage examines not only what Arissa and Faten choose, but also the pressures and conflicts that make those choices feel necessary. In Arissa's case, the death of her husband during the 9/11 attack is followed by public suspicion, displaced anger, and anti-Muslim hostility. She is targeted not because of her individual actions, but because others associate her visible Muslim identity with terrorism. The following passage shows how that hostility is directed specifically at her veil.

"I saw something shine in the hand he held behind his back. "The veil that you wear," he continued, pulling out his knife and aiming the point at my hijab. "It's all a facade. You try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the nonbelievers, not us." I felt the thin veil rip as it came away from my shoulder." (Abdullah, 2009)

This passage demonstrates that Arissa is easily identified and targeted because of her hijab. The attacker does not treat the veil as a personal religious practice, but as a sign through which he projects suspicion, hatred, and blame. In this moment, the hijab becomes more than clothing; it becomes the visible marker that allows others to misread Arissa as dangerous. Therefore, her later decision to remove it should not be reduced to a simple

rejection of religion. It develops from the realization that a symbol meaningful to her faith has been turned, by others, into a source of exposure and danger.

Viewed through the framework of resistance theory, Arissa's action can be understood as a defensive and adaptive response to vulnerability. However, this does not mean that the paper celebrates the removal of the hijab as inherently liberating, nor does it suggest that veiling itself is oppressive. Instead, the significance of the act lies in Arissa's specific context. She chooses to alter her public appearance because the society around her has transformed her visible Muslim identity into a target. In this sense, the removal of the hijab becomes a limited but meaningful form of agency: it allows her to reduce immediate danger while still preserving faith internally. Her resistance is therefore quiet and complicated, shaped less by open rebellion than by the need to survive within a hostile environment.

"So when her imam suggested she leave the country, she had not argued with him. She had done as she was told. Except her imam wasn't there when the Spanish coast guard caught her and the other illegal immigrants, nor was he around when she had to fend for herself in Spain." (Lalami, 2005)

The analysis of Arissa's decision prepares the way for Faten's case, where the movement from dependence to constrained agency appears under different conditions. Whereas Arissa responds to public hostility attached to religious visibility, Faten responds to the instability of migration and economic insecurity. Leaving Morocco was not originally presented as a personal dream or carefully planned ambition. Instead, Faten follows the advice of her imam, trusting religious authority to guide her toward a better life. Yet once she arrives in Spain and must survive as an undocumented migrant, the authority that once directed her is absent. The promise of guidance gives way to isolation, and Faten is forced to make decisions under conditions far harsher than she expected.

Faten's decision requires an equally careful reading. It would be too simple to describe her entry into sex work only as empowerment, because the novel presents her situation as one of desperation, precarity, and limited choice. At the same time, it would also be too simple to see her only as a passive victim. Her action is better understood as constrained agency: she makes a decision, but the range of choices available to her has already been narrowed by poverty, undocumented migration, gendered vulnerability, and the absence of reliable support. Djohar's (2024) discussion of contemporary Muslimah literature is useful here because it reads Faten's work as a challenge to male control over her body and choices. In this paper, that argument is taken carefully: Faten's decision is not treated as complete liberation, but as a painful survival strategy that contains a limited attempt to reclaim control under unjust circumstances.

Seen side by side, Arissa and Faten demonstrate two forms of agency under constraint. Arissa modifies the visibility of her faith in order to protect herself from Islamophobic violence, while Faten uses the limited means available to her to survive

economic and migratory precarity. Their choices are not identical, but both reveal how taboo actions can emerge when women are forced to negotiate between moral expectation and immediate survival.

After the Decision is Made

Having discussed the pressures that lead to Arissa's and Faten's decisions, the analysis must also consider what happens after those decisions are made. This final stage is important because conscious choices are not always free from hesitation, emotional weight, or moral conflict. By examining the characters' later reflections and reactions, the discussion can move beyond surface-level judgment and show how each woman understands her own action. In Arissa's case, removing the hijab does not mean abandoning faith; rather, she explains the decision as a shift in how faith is carried and expressed.

"It was a matter of perspective—to an onlooker I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart." (Abdullah, 2009)

This reflection confirms the argument developed earlier: Arissa does not equate faith with a single visible marker. For her, belief is carried in the heart and practiced through intention, rather than judged only through outward appearance. Yunianti's (2022) analysis of *hijab* removal reinforces this interpretation by arguing that *hijab cannot* be used as a simple *measure of a woman's piety, personality, or moral character*. This idea captures the essence of Arissa's position. She recognizes that while the veil holds deep meaning for many Muslim women, it is not the sole indicator of one's devotion or ethical selfhood.

From this perspective, Arissa's decision to take off her hijab is neither impulsive nor rooted in a desire to distance herself from Islam. It is a response to the circumstances she faces after moving to America, where her veil becomes a source of unwanted attention and even danger. She is targeted not for who she is, but for what others believe her hijab represents. In such a setting, letting go of the veil becomes a way for her to reclaim a sense of safety and control. It is a choice shaped by fear, responsibility, and the need to navigate a world that suddenly treats her as a symbol rather than a person.

This is why the aftermath of Arissa's decision must be read as a transformation of expression rather than a loss of belief. Even after removing her hijab, she continues to pray, reflect, and hold onto the values she has lived by for years. Her Muslim identity remains steady, but it is expressed differently. What changes is not her faith, but the outward form through which she negotiates her place in society. Viewed in this light, Arissa's choice becomes deeply human: an attempt to survive, protect herself, and adapt without losing her inner sense of self. It reminds readers that faith can persist even when its visible expression must shift in response to the realities of life.

Faten's response after her decision reveals a different kind of emotional burden. Unlike Arissa, who frames her action as an inward relocation of faith, Faten must live with

a choice that remains socially stigmatized and personally painful. Her decision to become a sex worker is not presented as something she embraces proudly, but as a survival strategy shaped by the limited options available to her as an undocumented migrant. The following conversation with her roommate shows that Faten is deeply affected when others reduce her entire identity to this one decision.

“‘I’m sure Ana’s mother wouldn’t want you giving that to her anyway,” Faten said. “What would you know of what she wants?” “She’ll probably laugh at you and throw it out.” “You’re the one that people laugh at—the way you sell your body.” Faten felt her anger take over her fatigue.” (Lalami, 2005, p. 82)

The roommate’s remark shows how quickly Faten’s identity is reduced to the stigma attached to sex work. Her anger is therefore more than a reaction to insult; it reveals how deeply the comment threatens her dignity. Although she is working as a sex worker, the remark treats this fact as if it explains her entire existence and as if the circumstances that led her there carry no weight. What troubles Faten is not only the insult itself, but the assumption that ridicule is an appropriate response to her survival.

Faten’s anger emerges from the complex reality behind her choice. By entering sex work, she does not gain full freedom; rather, she gains a narrow form of control within an exploitative situation. She can decide certain terms of how her body is used, but this agency exists inside conditions that are unjust and limiting. This distinction is important because it prevents the analysis from romanticizing her situation. Faten’s decision is neither pure liberation nor complete victimhood. It is an example of how agency can still appear in damaged and restricted circumstances, especially when survival leaves a person with few acceptable options.

This aftermath also distinguishes Faten from Arissa while strengthening the comparison between them. Arissa is able to reinterpret her decision through an inward language of faith, whereas Faten must confront a social label that continues to wound her. Nevertheless, both characters experience the emotional cost of being judged from the outside, and both narratives ask readers to consider what remains unseen behind that judgment.

This judgment feels especially cruel because it ignores the life Faten hoped to have. The life she is living is not the one she imagined, nor is it the life she would have chosen if real opportunities had been available to her. Instead, she has been pushed into survival mode and forced to adopt a role that carries heavy social judgment. Her roommate’s mockery dismisses all of this, treating her struggle as something laughable rather than acknowledging the painful compromises she has had to make. This is why her anger feels not only justified, but deeply human.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the three stages of analysis show that Shaila Abdullah and Laila Lalami invite readers to shift from quick judgment toward a more patient and empathetic form of understanding. By first presenting the characters' initial conditions, then tracing the pressures behind their decisions, and finally examining the consequences that follow, both novels reveal the deeper layers behind actions that may first appear unusual or taboo. When these layers are uncovered, Arissa and Faten can no longer be read through a purely moralistic lens; instead, they appear as individuals responding to circumstances that are overwhelming, restrictive, and deeply personal.

Arissa's decision to stop wearing her hijab, for instance, is not an act of rebellion against her faith. Rather, it is an act of survival. After repeatedly being identified, targeted, and humiliated because of her veil, she begins to understand that her hijab, which once symbolized dignity and devotion, has become a point of vulnerability in her new environment. Choosing to remove it is her way of resisting the discrimination that threatens her sense of safety. It is a painful decision, but one that allows her to navigate daily life without constantly fearing violence or hostility. Seeing her choice through this lens invites readers to recognize the emotional and psychological burden she carries, instead of reducing her action to a simple abandonment of religious practice.

Similarly, Faten's decision to become a sex worker in Spain cannot be read merely as a moral failing. Her situation is shaped by desperation, limited options, and the harsh reality of surviving as an undocumented migrant. However, the analysis must also avoid presenting sex work as a simple or uncomplicated form of empowerment. Faten's choice is best understood as constrained agency: she acts, but she acts within conditions that have already restricted what is possible for her. By choosing this path, she claims a small degree of control over her own body and survival, even though the circumstances forcing that decision remain unjust. Understanding this does not require readers to approve of her choice; rather, it asks them to recognize the pressure, vulnerability, and emotional cost behind it.

The comparison between Arissa and Faten therefore reveals that taboo does not function in the same way in every context. For Arissa, taboo is attached to altering a visible religious practice; for Faten, it is attached to using her body as a means of survival. Yet in both cases, the novels challenge readers to ask not only what the women have done, but what social conditions made those choices imaginable or necessary.

Ultimately, the two novels ask the reader to remember something fundamental: that human lives are shaped by pressures, fears, and hopes that are not always visible from the outside. Empathy and sympathy—core values that ground our humanity—are essential when encountering stories like Arissa's and Faten's. They remind us that before judging the actions of others, we must first understand the weight of the world they are carrying.

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