ABSTRACT

This research proposes that Anglo-Arab encounter has definitely had an impact on the lives of native and migrant Arab Muslim women, but the cultural, religious and political power of the West could not influence the Arab-Islamic culture, a culture ingrained in its religion. Exposure to the West has broadened Arab Muslim women’s outlook on life, motivating them towards higher ambitions and firmer faith in Allah. The following chapters prove this proposition incorporating relevant critical theories in English literature.

The first chapter of this thesis, titled “Introduction”, traces the literary scene of the Arab regions, the role of radical pro-feminists like al-Tahtaawi, Qasim Amin and Ameen Rihani who were instrumental in bringing progressive changes like the growth of Literary salons, Literary Societies and Journals by Arab Muslim women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This chapter also gives a brief survey of all the major Anglo-Arab women writers including the novelists chosen for the thesis.

The second chapter titled “The Treasures Unveiled” presents a review of literature on Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela. It conveys the different ideas presented in various secondary sources that helped in arriving at the topic. It introduces the two Arab-British novelists namely Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela, gives the objective of this research, an outline of the novels namely, Fadia Faqir’s Nisanit (1988), Pillars of Salt (1996) and My Name is Salma (2007), and Leila Aboulela’s The Translator (1999), Minaret (2004) and Lyrics Alley (2010) and the chapter division of the thesis. The thrust
of the thesis is to observe and record the evolution of the women protagonists due to East-West encounter, visible in the characters’ changed life-style, their response to religious challenges and their attitude towards gender relationships.

The impact of Anglo-Arab encounter on the culture of Arab Muslim women protagonists is studied in the light of propositions laid by Raymond Williams, Bruce King, Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha and Azade Seyhan in the third chapter titled “Cross-Cultural Reverberations through the Veil.” It is observed that as a cross-cultural impact, the influence of the West is evident in many cultural aspects of Arab life, its people, their attitude and the national pulse as a whole. The chapter records that, be it the use of English or an upgraded lifestyle in their native land, or social behavior, attitudinal changes and emotional balance on the migrant land, the women characters either strive to hold on or retrieve their Arab cultural identity. Despite all struggles, acculturation is never a solution to their challenges. The Arab Muslim women remain custodians of their Arab Islamic culture.

The fourth chapter, “Unveiling Islam”, analyses Faqir’s and Aboulela’s treatment of religion in their novels. Cross-cultural experience with its own political inflections, affected by Islamophobia arising out of Islamic fundamentalism and global terrorism, might have altered the novelists’ perspectives towards religion, but it has not shaken their faith and allegiance to Islam. This is evident in the characters of both the novelists as they display unwavering faith in Allah, revere the Prophet and remain true Muslims in anti-Muslim and Christian territories. Critical ideas propounded by Nasr and Amin Malak have been incorporated to prove this point.

The fifth chapter “To Veil or not to Veil: Feminist Awakening”, is a feminist
analysis of the Anglo-Arab encounter’s impact on the Arab Muslim women’s perception of the power of women. In the course of this cultural interaction, the Arab Muslim women have begun to question the prejudiced interpretation of their religious texts and tenets which had kept them under male control for several years. The women characters in the novels exhibit an awareness of both the original sanctity of their religion and the biased interpretation. Faqir’s rebellious women are contrasted against Aboulela’s devout, assertive women. In common, encounter with the West throws a mirror to the dark side of Arab Muslim society’s prejudiced treatment of women. The novelists falsify the Oriental stereotype cast on Arab women as backward, veiled and docile. Theories of Islamic Feminism propounded by Margot Badran, Miriam Cooke and Fatima Mernissi, and critics like Lama Abu-Odeh, Shahrur, Abu Shaqqa, Afshar and Azzam have been quoted to prove the arguments posed in the chapter.

The final chapter “Conclusion” summarizes the analysis and the following findings have been recorded in the chapter. The Western influence ceases to be an object of oppression and is seen as a tool of progress. As it makes the characters aware of the inherent faults in their own culture and encourages them to repair it in their capacity. The novelists intend to correct it and hence their characters hold on to their cultural ties and never sever it. Contrary to the usual effect, where Christianity establishes itself decreasing the followers of indigenous faith, the faith of the Muslim women in Allah is strengthened at cross-cultural encounters. Various instances in the novels showcase their true allegiance to Islam and the support of umma (global Muslim community) in the migrant land. Western education empowers them to be economically independent. Due to cross-cultural exposure, the women shift from a rigid Arab-Muslim lifestyle to an easy-going, carefree one, which has an effect on their attitude towards
themselves. The women characters of the two novelists differ in their nature and ideologies. While Faqir sensitizes the helpless situation of rural Arab women in their own country, Aboulela draws the positivity of Islam coupled with exposure to the West as a liberating force. Thus this chapter puts forth that Anglo-Arab encounter has been a catalyst in the process of the evolution of the Arab Muslim women characters into independent, assertive and decisive women.