NO SEX IN THE CITY AND POSTFEMINIST DISCURSIVITY FROM ARAB DIASPORA

Muhammad Abdullah
Department of English,
Forman Christian College, Lahore

Abstract

The novel No Sex in the City by Randa Abdel-Fattah juxtaposes Islamic progressive and Western secular viewpoints on dating culture, relationships, sex, and marriage. The patterns of halal dates are described in a light-hearted, yet meaningful tone. These are religio-culturally appropriate ways of approaching prospective life partners, where the agency of final decision, in most cases, is with the participants. Instead of being defensive or apologetic about Islamic traditions and values, Abdel-Fattah vocalizes them in a rational way through the lead lady, Esma. The protagonist, Esma, is an Australian Muslim with Turkish roots. Muslim diaspora in the West is in the middle of the continuum from liberalism to conservatism. Despite living in a non-Islamic culture, followers of Islamic ideology are connected through a shared culture driven by Islam. Faith-based practices are beyond any geographical bindings. So, for Muslims, wherever they may live, there are similarities in the way they conduct their lives. In fact, the blurring of boundaries between religious and cultural is minimal in diaspora Muslim communities. Abdel-Fattah has delicately balanced secular and religious in this work where freedom and right to exercise choice wins at the end. Pleasantly, these women possess sensual sensitivities and affectionate desires, but Saudi/Islamic sensibilities oblige them to tie the marriage knot before pursuing any physical pursuits. This in no way incapacitates them from loving men, but rather appropriates the meaning of love in an Islamic framework. The
diversity of situations and respective choices made by these girls during the novel also allude to the socio-cultural dynamics, patterns, and matrimonial preferences of Saudi women.

Keywords
Post feminism, Muslim Women’s fiction, diaspora, Arabs, dating, marriage, empowerment

Introduction

The diasporic intellectual acts as a perpetual party pooper because her impulse is to point to ambiguities, complexities and contradictions, to complicate matters rather than provide merely for solutions, ... to blur distinctions between colonizer and colonized, dominant and subordinate, oppressor and oppressed (Ang 2001, 2).

No Sex in the City (Abdel-Fattah, 2013) is a tale of four girls from different ethnicities and religious affiliations who tell their stories of search for Mr. Right in their lives. Esma, the protagonist, is a considerate daughter who courageously helps her father to pay their mortgage at the cost of her own dreams. As a girl warrior, she fights on multiple fronts: her professional duties, emotional combats, and supporting her father financially and socially by keeping his secrets of gambling buried. In parallel, she battles with sexual harassment at her workplace. Esma’s closest circle, ‘No Sex in the City’ club, was a multi-faith group of Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian friends. At no point does there appear to be any repugnance among the four girls, Lisa, Ruby, Esma, and Nirvana; they all like each other as if they were real sisters. The girls mutually console each other and share the happenings of their love lives at regular ‘No Sex in the City’ gatherings. This concept of comforting sisterhood has both feminist and postfeminist appeals. Their meetings under the name ‘No Sex in the City’ club are centred on girlie gossips—men, dates, and relationship stories. Popular culture significantly influences these young people’s realities. Typically, postfeminist women prefer individualism to sisterhood (Braitwaite 2004). This individualism of postfeminist woman may be considered ‘self-obsession’ (Bellefante, 1998). However, gender hierarchy does not appear to be a relevant category in the novel; none of the girls seems to suffer from patriarchy. In postmodern feminism, gender is treated as just one variable among many other variables relating to issues of women (Fraser and Nicholson, 1988).

The character of Esma personalises a postmodern Muslim woman, who is simultaneously gracious and belligerent. The identity she foregrounds is of a woman who believes in a value system driven by her faith position, Islam. Living in Australia, she connects and engages with people from multiple faith communities with varied worldviews.
Esma does not drink, yet she attends cocktail parties with her colleagues. There is an elusive equilibrium between assertion and assimilation of self and other in the novel. She does not disregard the practices of her Western friends and colleagues; however, at the same time there is no compromise on her own ideological positionality. She is a twenty-eight-year old virgin who has never had physical relationships with men. At parties, she confronted remarks from the guys like, "So you’re twenty-eight. And you’ve never had sex? Never even kissed a guy?" (p. 8); "How can you marry a guy you’ve never even kissed?" (p. 8); "So how do you get to know a guy before you get married? You need to try before you buy" (p. 8). Her ‘no sex before marriage’ slogan often wins her tags of ‘old-fashioned’, ‘prude’, ‘frigid’, ‘picky’, and ‘fussy’ woman (p. 9).

**Dynamics of Halal Dates in Diaspora**

Identity is not simply unitary but unstable and often contradictory (Khan, 2002). Muslim women are constantly unsettling and complicating their identity through their stories, particularly the construct of control. In challenging the stereotype, that Muslim girls are bound to say yes to their parents’ choice when it comes to the marriage question, Randa Abdel-Fattah effectively presents her case. Esma’s parents wanted her to marry; they facilitated her access to possibly suitable matches but did not force their will on her. In fact, they respected her decision whenever she said no to any of the guys presented for marriage. Nevertheless, at points, Esma’s mother advises her not to be too harsh on men while making her choices. Religion to Esma is a determining factor in marrying someone of her choice. She strongly believes in marriage as an institution and disapproves of cohabitation or girlfriend-boyfriend relationships.

Esma wanted a life partner who would be a Muslim with the same level of religiosity as hers, educated, employed, considerate of social justice, attractive (‘not super model’), and who brings something special to her life. She met many guys in a semi-arranged fashion, and the details of three of them, Yasir, Metin and Aydin, are given in this book, the others are briefly mentioned. There was always a shared understanding that both parties were seeing each other with the purpose of getting married. These meetings were driven by certain protocols, for example, the ‘rule of six’, which meant that to meet a guy there should be present at least six people; however it was eventually relaxed but still not the ‘rule of two’. Danny, Esma’s boss, the antihero, constantly challenged her Islamic choices and lifestyle. She mostly ignored him to avoid any argument on religion, but eventually at a colleague’s farewell party she decided to shut him up once for all. "Okay, forget the drinking thing,' I say. ‘Lots of people who aren’t Muslim don’t drink. But let’s look at the fact that I won’t have a relationship outside of marriage" (p. 24). "I want to marry a Muslim, that my faith is important to me and I want to be able to share it with my partner" (p. 24).
Following are some of the questions that are examined while reading the text for subtleties of *halal* dates: What aspects did Esma appreciate in those men? What did Esma’s checklist consist of? How did she praise men? What role did parents play in these *halal/permissible* dates? What did they talk about at these meetings? How did the conversation and connection move forward? On what basis did they accept or reject each other? How were the rejections received? How did men conduct themselves in these meetings?

Esma met Yasir through Muslim community connections, her first prospective match. They add each other to Facebook and decide to meet. Esma dresses up and puts on makeup to give Yasir a good impression. The scene of their meeting is described in a tongue-in-cheek fashion:

I enter the Strand, trying to remember all the magazine articles I’ve read about the most flattering and slimming way to walk. Keep my thighs close together, one foot crossing over the other, try to walk sideways (reducing frontal view of body mass), stick boobs out (don’t have much to stick out), keep shoulders back and head up to avoid any double chin ... Those poor models. They really do deserve their million-dollar salaries (p. 34).

This lively tone in describing the pattern of dates, too, is characteristic of postfeminist chick-lit. In order to counter postfeminist anxieties of staying a spinster and fear of facing an uncertain future, chick-lit heroines enjoy sexuality as a compensation to allude confidence. Ponzanesi relates the self-mockery of the chick-heroine to her negotiation of sexual volatility (Ponzanesi, 2014). To McRobbie, this frank sexuality is reclamation of the joyful, unapologetic femininity of these girlish girls (McRobbie, 2009).

Reflecting on the knowledge of dating that she developed by reading books on love by famous ‘love gurus’, Esma says: “[t]here are no rules for first dates, but I’ve been on enough to know there’s a standard repertoire of safe topics: travel, personal interests, friends, taste in music, film and books, and a bit of current affairs” (p. 34). Yasir shares with Esma his professional journey and the conversation later turns towards religion, since, as a coreligionist in a non-Muslim country religion becomes an unavoidable topic to create connections. Esma likes Yasir; he is a delightful man who makes her laugh: "His profile pic doesn’t do him justice. He’s a trendy dresser (tick!) and has a real presence about him (tick!). Some guys exude confidence and he’s one of them (two ticks!)” (p. 34). Humour and jokes work as a connector between Esma and Yasir. On their second date, Esma shares funny stories with Yasir about her job as a recruitment consultant. “If you can laugh with a guy for a couple of hours, I reckon it’s a safe bet that you’re onto a good thing” (p. 39). Esma was a highly organized and disciplined individual whereas Yasir was a relaxed,
nonchalant man. This difference of personalities did not affect their relationship. Esma’s mother always checked with her the progress of her halal dates; this time too, she asked her, if Yasir was serious or not. Because, according to her experience, in general, men were less interested in a married relationship and wanted mere companionship without commitment.

They meet for a third time too, but to Esma’s surprise, two days after their third meeting, Yasir rejects Esma without giving any reason. Yasir’s approach does not upset Esma but rather baffled her. A guy who was flirting and sharing plans with her two days ago, now thinks their relationship cannot work. His asking Esma to just stay friends, reflects that he is a weak guy who wants to be in a woman’s company but is not ready for commitment. Esma snubs him fiercely and remarks, “Stay friends? Listen here, you moron, I’m almost thirty, I have all the friends I want in my life” (p. 46). Though it was a strong reply from Esma, the mention of age hints at two connected probabilities: one, she is conscious of growing old; second, in our societies marriage is an age-based phenomenon, especially for women. If a woman crosses the age of thirty, her prospects of getting married become less. Later in the novel, when Esma tries to reject Metin, her mother also hints at her daughter’s age, saying she should be less critical of men while nearing thirty: “My own mother is basically telling me I’m approaching a use-by date” (p. 89).

Esma optimistically faces this rebuff from Yasir. In her words, “I know I can get through this. I’ve always had an endless capacity for optimism. I might whine and vent with my girlfriends, but deep down I know that love is waiting for me somewhere” (p. 47). No Sex in the City club girls work as a support system for Esma. She shares with her friends that more than Yasir’s rejection, she was upset by Yasir’s approach. He should not have backed out when they had developed good chemistry. Despite Esma’s remarks about her mom, she plays an important role in consoling her daughter by saying that whatever happened was good for her, it was in her kismet; things could have been even worse if the ‘idiot’, Yasir, had changed his mind at a later stage. Esma’s dad also supports her and his remarks about Yasir neatly sum up the male mentality: “The men nowadays are gutless! They want to have their fun, but when it comes to deciding about marriage, they’re like kids in a toyshop. They want everything and when you ask them to pick one, they can’t. They’re either greedy or too stupid to know what’s best for them” (p. 48).

Esma’s second halal date guy, suggested by her mother, is Metin—a German Turkish doctor settled in Sydney, a tall, sociable, and handsome man. Esma was blown away by his looks, but the weird aspect of his personality was his self-absorption; he hardly showed interest in Esma, however provided extended responses to Esma’s questions about himself. Despite the fact that she found him attractive, after their first meeting, Esma said to her mom that she did not want to consider him. On her mother’s insistence she meets...
him again as he apparently met all the requirements of Esma’s checklist. There she notices that random girls are showing interest in him. Esma felt good that Metin was her date for that night and confessed that in spite of his earlier anti-sociability, her eyes would get viewing pleasure for a few more hours. Adding further to the sensual description of Metin, Esma describes his voice as a "deep, masculine, sexy - SHUT UP - voice" (p. 98). In this meeting, Metin shares with Esma his first impressions of Australia when he moved there from Germany. By now, Esma knows much about Metin, and he still does not ask anything about her. Therefore, she takes the plunge and says, "Okay, Metin, some basic rules! Ask me questions... Hit me with your most ridiculous question, but at least ask me something!" (p. 100). Esma’s frustration at the lack of flow in their conversation marks Metin’s indifference. Metin did not seem to be making an effort to develop understanding with Esma. Clearly, Esma was showing interest in him, but he was cold in his response. Even the slightest attention from Metin makes her glow: “‘You know, you’re quite cute when you’re crazy,’ he says and my heart kind of explodes” (p. 100).

Eventually, there are signs of Metin showing interest in Esma, and their third meeting takes place in a Mexican restaurant, where they share the details of their past love lives. From there onward, a new aspect of Metin’s personality surfaces. He starts asking Esma about her male friends on Facebook. Consequently, their conversation becomes twitchier and they discuss the value of trust in relationships. Metin says he does not doubt her but cannot trust her male friends. Esma replies, “We can’t segregate ourselves from the opposite sex; that’s not how the world works. Each of us is going to be thrown into situations where we’re tested. Ultimately, it’s about our character” (p. 123). Later, over the phone. Metin asks Esma if she has ever kissed a guy; however she avoids the topic, at which Metin tags her as conservative. Next, Metin calls Esma and questions her about a party she attended the night before. Esma becomes furious at Metin’s questions and says that even her parents never interrogated her in this way. For the fourth time, they meet at dinner and Esma shares with him the story of Danny, the harasser. Once again, he infuriates Esma by implicitly blaming her for the happenings: “If you’d put a stop to things from the beginning, I guarantee it wouldn’t have continued. Joking around, innocent flirting—the way we behave gives people permission” (p. 155). Esma, all of sudden, breaks up with him and says, “I’ve got self-respect. And I won’t let you take that away from me... It was nice getting to know you, Metin, but I don’t see a future for us” (p. 155).

While she is developing familiarity with Metin, Esma’s mom convinces her to see Aydin, the third guy, a family connection. To her mom, it occurred that Aydin might be in his ‘kismat’, so she agreed to meet him. On their first meeting, there seems to be a greater connection and chemistry in conversation than she had had with Metin. Esma talks to him about his filmmaking and the politics of filmmaking. Aydin asks Esma about her job, hobbies, favourite books, and movies. After their first interaction ended pleasantly,
they meet again for a dinner. Their conversation on the second meeting once again goes seamlessly. Particularly, Esma shares her volunteering experiences at the refugee centre with him. On Esma’s question about what he would look for in his life partner, Aydin replies ‘shared values and similar goals’. They talk about religion, past relationships, gender equality and hypocrisy, and also discuss how values are a fluid concept, as well as the importance of having the ability to adjust to one’s partner in a relationship. Esma is impressed by his approach towards life: “I spend the night tossing and turning, my brain about to explode, because something tells me Aydin is The One” (p. 117).

After a few days, at their third meeting, Esma asks him about his family, information which he showed reluctance to share. Esma finds it contradictory that earlier he was talking about truth and honesty and now he is hiding his family details. Aydin also ducked the question about past relationships by saying that they should enjoy the present without worrying about the past. Later, Aydin decides to make a documentary on asylum seekers that pleases Esma a great deal and strengthens their bond further. Virginity of males is equally important when two people are getting married. At their fourth meeting, Aydin confesses that he had girlfriends in the past, but he is still a virgin. He justifies his choice of not going all the way with any of the women he met by saying that he himself wanted to marry a virgin girl, so he did not believe in double standards.

Although Esma expresses her guilt for leading on two guys simultaneously, and acknowledges that if it had happened to a woman she would feel betrayed, this provided her an opportunity to contrast the good and bad sides of the two men in deciding who was best for her. She chooses the intellectual capability of Aydin over the physical attractiveness of Metin. Aydin as a progressive male believes in openness and truthfulness in a relationship. He says to Esma, "Our parents’ generation is all about saving face. But things have changed. People our age tolerate and accept a lot more" (p. 164). Esma and Aydin come across Metin outside the refugee centre. At this point, Esma explains everything about the Metin-Esma-Aydin triangle to Aydin. He does not create a fuss about Esma’s earlier non-disclosure and hugs her for her honest expression. This was the moment when a male kissed her for the first time, her first kiss, “before I know what’s happening he’s in front of me, kissing me long and hard on the lips...There’s tenderness and forgiveness in his eyes” (p. 170). Aydin turns out to be the guy that Esma decides to marry; the following words sum up her regard for Aydin: "All the failed matches and arranged dates have been for a reason. Because waiting for me at the end of that long line was Aydin. The One. Mr Right. My soulmate. And the wait was worth it" (p. 179).

Online Dating and Social Media

The genre, chick-lit, in general, constructs itself by a confessional style, first-person narratives, and reliance on modern communication means, such as emails, chats, messages,
diaries, in writing style. Humour, wit, and colloquialism are common denominators of this genre (Cabot, 2003). As a sign of changing patterns of interactions, the book incorporates the use of social media and online dating websites. Esma was reluctant to use matchmaking websites, as to her, using them was a sign of desperation and failure to find a partner in the real world. Esma says, "But as adamant as I’ve been about never veering into online dating territory, I’m starting to reconsider. That’s what happens when the offline scene is so woeful—you change strategy and become more flexible" (p. 51). Meeting online, Esma considered, was putting one’s heart up for sale. Moreover, on these websites, "the majority of guys are pathetic, sad, idiotic losers who are socially dysfunctional" (p. 62). Some of them were not even willing to pay the fee to unlock the complete profile, and expected women to pay it. Esma receives an online message that reflects the male mentality: "I'm looking for a Muslim woman who adheres to the tenets of Islam and is able to assist me in all endeavours. She has to be attractive and beautiful with curves that excite my sacred minaret" (p. 121). The effect of social media on modern day relationships is also reflected in the novel. Metin inquires of Esma why she has so many male friends on Facebook. On another instance, Esma’s boss uses Facebook to suggest that they have some sort of relationship.

Intimacy and Sexuality

As Ariel Levy opines, overly confident sexuality self-reconfirms patriarchy rather than undoing it, thus reducing women to sex-beings (Levy, 2005). Describing it as ‘raunch culture’, she is of the view that an excessive display of sexuality is equivalent female chauvinism that re-enslaves women (ibid). Esma’s control over her sexuality is powerful. At no point during the novel does there take place an intimate talk between Esma and the men she dated. Metin tried to open up with Esma, which she tactfully ignored, and was tagged by him as conservative. Although there are a few mentions of intimacy, they are in the form of its negation. The descriptions of all the men Esma dated are amorous showing, of course, that she had intimate desires but was controlling them due to religious obligations. “I’m far from being the world’s most religious person, but if there’s one thing I won’t compromise on, it’s my ‘no touching before the ink dries on the marriage certificate’” (p. 38). In Esma’s search for Mr. Perfect, when there was a tie between Aydin and Metin, Esma admits that she is physically and sexually attracted towards Metin. She admits her lips are thirsty to kiss the lips of a man and be closer to someone’s chest. Esma fantasizes about being in the strong arms of Metin. However, she fears that if she allows an opening to her desires, she will not be able to control them.

That sexual desire is such a powerful intoxicating force that one small kiss can lead to much much more. If the end of that journey is forbidden to me, then so is the
start, because there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that if Metin were to start that journey, I wouldn’t want him to stop (p. 123).

NSC not only emphasizes the value of female virginity, even male virginity before marriage is valued. Esma cries with joy when she learns that Aydin is virgin. Esma and Aydin both present control over their feelings and desires, inspired by their self-determined, religiously-oriented boundaries. Later in the novel Esma develops good chemistry with Aydin; while sitting in the car with him, she thinks about why her parents did not allow her to be alone with a man. Esma’s non-Muslim friends, Lisa and Ruby, too did not appreciate the idea of casual sex. Lisa, the Jewish girl, says, “I’m not interested in the occasional fling or casual relationship. That’s not because I’m religious. It’s because I’m just not a casual person. I don’t fling anything or anybody to the side” (p. 57). Ruby, the Christian girl, had the same views; she wanted commitment from the guy before having any physical relationship: "Well, no, not if it was just casual, although God knows I’d love to. But that’s not me either. I know this confident exterior is deceiving, but deep down I’m old-fashioned too" (p. 57). Overall, sex outside marriage is disfavoured in the novel.

There is some discussion on sex in a married relationship too. Esma attends a gathering of her sister Senem’s married friends, who talk about their intimate life very frankly. She is the only virgin in the gathering, so she feels “embarrassed by how open and candid these women are about their sex lives, throwing out all the strict religious rules about keeping your relationship with your husband a private matter” (p. 79). The women also discussed how after having children it becomes difficult for women to enjoy sex. These women express the values of energy and peace of mind in enjoying sex. Zuleyha adds, “Men are just born lazier and hornier than women. So don’t get into any relationship with false expectations” (p. 80). When Senem was about to leave her house after marriage, her mother tried to give her a ‘birds-and-the-bees speech’, the instructional manual for sex. However, both sisters stopped her and said they were provided sex education at school: “our religion teacher at Turkish weekend school had answered all our questions about sex and periods, and taught us sex wasn’t something to be ashamed about so long as we experienced it only through marriage” (p. 80).

Discourse on Marriage

Without defying limits set by Islam, the only permissible way to physically actualise romantic love is to confine it to a married relationship. NSC mainly deals with aspects of approaching a prospective life partner and developing an understanding with the intention of getting married in the Arab diaspora. Post marriage life and its complexities are not given much space. However, the characters do reflect on some aspects of the concept of marriage in Arab women’s context that are applicable to other contexts too. Marriage is
presented as a source of joy and as an institution that solidifies love. This view is reflected in Esma’s remarks on her friend Nirvana’s engagement: "No matter your background, almost everybody seems to get it: the idealism, the joyous optimism, the wholehearted belief that your love is indestructible" (66). Furthermore, in Arab societies the age of a female is an important aspect of marriage prospects. If women pass a certain age, it becomes difficult for them to get married in an arranged fashion. However, Esma, the protagonist was resolute in challenging this norm: “I won’t force myself to settle just to satisfy some arbitrary time limit... ‘Well, I’m not a can of tomatoes, I’m a vintage cheese, and I’m only going to get better with age!’" (89). She also believed that in Arab societies, marriage is not about two individuals, but it is a bond of two families. Referring to Aydin, Esma says: “We’ve both had it drilled into us that you ‘marry a family, not a person’” (134). Marriage, either arranged or love, is entering an unknown territory; many things reveal themselves after marriage, for example sexual compatibility. Truthfulness is the most important element in a married relationship. Therefore presenting your real self to your prospective partner is essential. Referring to her father, Esma comments that even after marriage it is hard to know your partner completely and fully, as her mother believed that Esma’s dad was a responsible and supportive man, but surprisingly he had been addicted to gambling. Speaking of the ingredients of a successful marriage, Esma’s married sister, Senem, suggested economic stability, trust, and dependability as three key aspects. Esma’s mother gave the following profound remarks about conducting married life:

There’s no perfect relationship [...] Our marriage is far from perfect. We’re happy because it’s possible to be happy and flawed [...] marriages needed a reset button [...] A chance to reinvent yourself every three or five years. So you could start all over again, go back to when there was some mystery to the person you were getting involved with. Back to when you couldn’t possibly believe your life would be one endless routine [...] if you press reset, you lose all the shared experiences, the tenderness that comes with familiarity. It would be like learning a language and then suddenly forgetting it, having to start from scratch again (p. 152).

Marriage brings responsibility that not all women are able to handle easily. Child rearing is a complete job in itself. Esma’s friend Arzu finds it hard to breastfeed her baby: "my nipples are seriously aching", she whispers. "They’re all cracked, and honestly, when she latches on it’s like a million knives being stabbed" (pp. 28-29). Arzu and her husband Yasin often fight over taking care of children. Arzu says that before their son Malek was born, they used to have a perfect relationship. Now, they fuss over trivialities of how to bring up their child. Sanem’s friend Lana says, having babies disturbs even your sexual life: "Out the baby pops and then the only thing you think about when you see a bed is sleeping! It’s all you think about, day and night" (p. 79). There is also a debate on when to and when not to have children in a married life. A woman should not allow herself to get
pregnant if the two of them are not in a good relationship because if divorce happens the child will suffer. Anil’s sister Neela took pills and aborted the baby because she was sick of Sunil’s nastiness and bad behaviour. Lisa also criticised her client for having a child in a disturbed relationship. Esma’s boss Danny, too, appears as an anti-marriage fanatic. Danny’s views on marriage are very derogatory: “But trust me: you don’t want to get married. Only masochists choose that path” (p. 11). He remarked about Esma’s colleague Sara: “Don’t either of you even think about having a baby in the next five years if you want to see yourselves moving up in this place” (p. 55).

**Feminist Facets in *No Sex in the City***

Feminism and post feminism are apparently contrasting viewpoints, where feminism (second wave) theorizes concepts and post feminism deconstructs the category of woman. Feminism is generally perceived as against femininity, as feminists ‘kill joy’. However, this binary opposition and mutual exclusiveness are bridged in chick-lit. According to Rocio Montoro, in chick-lit “femaleness can be conceived of as an expression of ideas which are situated halfway between feminist and postfeminist ideals” (Montoro, 2012, p.121). The discourse, overall, in the book is centred on religiously inspired womanhood in diaspora. However, the ‘No Sex in City’ club is representative of female sisterhood, crossing all ethnic and gender boundaries. The protagonist explains the logic of this connectivity as “There are many things that unite us, not least that we’re active in the community, passionate about politics and human rights, single, living at home and time poor” (p. 8). The girls shared "emotional baggage, horror stories, impossible checklists, twenty-something angst and an appetite for a high-calorie emotional-eating pigout session[s]" (p. 9). Importantly, they helped Esma battle against Danny the harasser by advising her not to blame herself for his creepiness and assisting her legally to fight against him. Esma, speaking of Danny her boss, says, “He unfortunately belongs to the segment of the male population that thinks misogyny is endearing” (p. 154).

The novel exudes a feminist stance regarding girls on many occasions. Esma is a resolute girl: “I’m not one of those girls who needs a man to complete her. If that was the case I would have settled for the first, fifth or tenth guy I’ve met or been set up with. I want to settle down. But I don’t want to settle” (p. 28). She wants to get married, but it does not turn into her weakness. She considers it a religious, social and emotional need and not a financial support system or dependency on a man. Emotionally, too, she is in control of her feelings and has learned to tame them without denying their existence. “I’m whole, whether I’m single or married, in love or out of love. And I’m determined to be my own person no matter what” (155). It is important to clarify that Esma is not a man-hatter, but rather has a certain concept of manhood in her mind. At no point is she willing to compromise on her freedom: "I wanted to start working, enjoy financial independence,
travel. Work out who I was and what I wanted in life" (p. 32). There are quite a few instances in the novel where she expresses travel as an important element of her life. Esma commonly asked the question about travel experiences whenever she met a prospective life partner. One of the reasons that she liked Metin was that settling down with him could provide an opportunity to frequently travel to Europe, as his parents were living in Germany.

Along with these feminist instances, Esma also had a fear of staying single like a typical postfeminist chick-lit hero. Chick-lit is not aimed at showcasing feminist success, but rather the realities of postfeminist women today and their affinity with popular culture (Mazza 2006). She describes her hunt for men in a self-deprecating tone. The agony of unsuitable matches is visible in these words of Esma: "I have this secret fear that I'll be that girl [...] the girl nobody falls in love with" (p. 50); "[s]o should I be accepting the possibility that my destiny is to be single? To die a virgin? (What a chilling thought!) Childless? Loveless?" (p. 89). Staying single was socially burdensome for her. On every meeting with a prospective match, she used to go with utmost optimism that this connection would work. With every passing day, her anxiety level was creeping up in terms of her body image. She had a fear that she would get more body hair, her legs would become spiky, and no man would fancy her. On forcing curfew limits, Esma remarks, "My parents don’t enforce their rules with me. I can do whatever I want – they’re not with me every moment of the day. Ultimately, I’m the one who makes the choices about my life. They just raised me a certain way. I’ve embraced my traditions because I believe in them" (p. 117).

Workplace Harassment: Is Feminism still relevant?

Post feminism, a much debated and discussed theme in recent feminist pedagogical studies and culture studies, is defined and explained in various ways. To Genz and Barbor (2009, p. 178), it “mingles progress and retrogression, collusion and critique, resistance and recuperation.” Ponzanesi views it as “The coexistence of contradictory liberal and conservative values, that makes the postfeminist ‘momentum’ a far more sophisticated and pernicious reality than a simple backlash towards the feminism of the previous generations or return to the sex wars of the 1980s” (Ponzanesi, 2014, p. 172). Esma’s flirting boss, Danny, constantly harasses her in different ways. He would pass unwanted compliments, seek advice on his disturbed married life, generate excuses to go out with her, mock her decision of not marrying a non-Muslim, and ridicule Esma’s volunteering services for the Sydney refugee centre. During the course of the novel, he twice uses social media to create an impression that they are very close by posting messages on Esma’s Facebook wall. The range of Danny’s discussion topics becomes filthier with every passing day. Here are some examples: “What kind of lingerie do women like? Bra and undies set, or a corset type?” (p. 87); “I want to get her something to cheer her up. Make her feel sexy again, because she’s
feeling so depressed about her body that she won’t let me near her” (p. 118); and, “There’s something about you that makes me forget myself. I’m clearly too comfortable with you” (p. 118).

Danny wanted Esma to date Marco, his friend, and said things that were against her Islamic values: “you can have some fun, and Jesus, if it works out and you’re that desperate for commitment, he might even call himself your boyfriend” (11). Esma was annoyed at his behaviour from day one, but she was tolerating him; she expressed this passive response on many occasions: “The employer/employee handbook didn’t include a chapter on how bosses should seek marriage advice from their employees. But I can’t exactly tell him to piss off. I have to put on an act” (p. 22). She sometimes wonders to what extent it was her fault to give Danny this liberty to harass her by staying quiet. She eventually talks to Danny about his behaviour; instead of addressing the issue, he twisted the conversation and ended it with promotion bait, once again. Esma’s conscience is disturbed by her silence: “I feel ashamed... compromised somehow. I’ve always been so assertive. Demanded that people, especially guys, show me respect” (p. 119). Esma tells her ‘No Sex in the City’ friends that Danny has been harassing her. All of them scolded her for not sharing this fact earlier and insisted that she should not blame herself for all that has been happening. Ruby helps Esma draft a letter of demand against Danny and suggested that she find a new job meanwhile. Esma finally goes to Danny and gives him the letter of demand:

I’ve been putting up with your sexual harassment for too long. I’ve got two words for you, Danny: constructive dismissal. Because I’m hereby giving you notice. I refuse to spend one more day as a victim of sexual harassment (p. 174).

On religion and Family Values

During the conversations with Aydin, Esma clearly states that she highly values religion but is relaxed in practicing it. Islam to her is an ideology that directs her life and she would feel good if she and her partner could offer prayers together. Esma questions Aydin about drinking and clarifies to him, “Having an alcohol-free house is a big deal to me. But I’m not going to impose that on anybody, it needs to come from them” (p. 115). She further added that he might develop a sense that she is extremely religious, but she would not compromise on a few things. Esma and her mother were strong believers in God and the power of His will in human life, the fate or kismet mentioned in the novel. Esma made dua (prayer) to Allah for everything she needed:

Whenever I need something, I suddenly become devoted to my prayers. I begged God for the following: To send me Mr Right. To give me the intelligence to judge
fairly and wisely. To let me fall for the right Mr Right...I also asked for forgiveness...Then, for good measure, I jumped onto a charity website and donated some money to a well being built at an Indonesian orphanage (82).

Family is presented as a valuable unit in determining and developing relationships. When Esma was supporting her parents with their mortgage, her sister Senem and brother-in-law Farouk temporarily moved in to their house to save money for their new home. During that period, Senem and Farouk decide to make a foreign trip, one which Esma thought was an extravagance; she expressed her opinion very loudly in front of Farouk. Later she realised that this statement was disrespectful to her brother-in-law, so she apologized to him: "Tell Farouk I’m sorry and I’ll never speak to him again if he doesn’t move in because of me. Sorry for the tantrum. Bad day at work. I heard the shopping in Hawaii is amazing. I’ll give you my wish list when you go" (129). Furthermore, the reputation of the family is shown as an important element in making new relationships, particularly as marriage is about two families coming together. Aydin confessed to Esma that he did not tell her about his brother who was jailed, just because he feared that she might break up with him, as no one would want to marry in a family having criminal records.

Conclusion

NSC alludes to the fact that the secular and the religious can coexist. It presents postfeminist realities framed with Islamic sensibilities that are the premise of Islamic post feminism (Abdullah and Awan 2017). Esma, as a modern young Muslim female, balances her religious affiliations and emotional instincts. She likes men and dates them, but within certain set limits of Islam. Esma’s encounters with Yasir, Metin, and Aydin show some of the dynamics of halal dates. These are arranged meetings where none of the participants transgresses the boundaries set by Islam, which means strictly no physical touch, and two people meet with a clear purpose of getting married. Summing up a particular experience, one guy, Yasir, proved weak nerved and backed out from committing himself to marriage, despite the fact that they had developed a liking for each other. Esma and Metin’s halal-dating can be described as an affair of a Muslim male and a female in which an overly handsome guy and a smart, successful girl were trying to find compatibility for a life-long relationship that ended due to the male partner’s cynicism and over protectiveness.

With Aydin, out of all three men, Esma was able to have deep conversations on complex issues, which shows that for a young Muslim woman in diaspora, along with male appearance, ideology and worldview matter a great deal for marriageable material. Metin’s physical appeal and successful career could not win Esma, but Aydin’s morality and clear heartedness did. More importantly, the power of decision remained with Esma to pick either of the men, since both were interested in her—an aspect of strong feminist appeal in
the novel. Furthermore, religion is used as an ideological standpoint in the novel; nevertheless, its realisation is perceived in the form of values like truthfulness, honesty, and progressive worldview rather than as *ibadah* (acts of worship). With an important question, Randa Abdel-Fattah delineates, through the protagonist Esma, What does freedom and liberty of a woman in the West and elsewhere mean? To what extent are our viewpoints and conduct justified when we interfere with other people’s reality in the modern day globalised world? Can modernity and tradition co-exist? Probably the answers to these questions lie in accepting the diversity of the feminist cause and understanding that each of the feminist facets enriches the concept itself. Thereby, the Muslim diaspora in the West generates vistas of peaceful co-existence.

**Endnotes**

1. An Arabic word which means 'permissible'.
2. Will be referred to as NSC
3. Had she made public that her father had put their life at risk by losing all his possessions in gambling, this might have ended the wedlock between her father and mother, as it was a serious betrayal to the faith her mother had in him.
4. Esma met a few guys that she did not approve of: Syef who wanted a premarital relationship; Mohammad who wanted drinking and clubbing; Hassan who did not know much English; Kamil who was traditional and did not see the value of female education.
5. There are multiple references to Facebook in the novel, that allude to the role of social media, especially Facebook, as an element of popular culture and as a tool to connect with people.
6. There are a few more references to female age and marriage in the novel.
7. In Islamic ideology fate plays an important role. Fate vs. freewill debates are long-standing. But a great number of Muslims believe human beings have limited control over worldly affairs. They will have to face, what they are destined to. Fate can only be changed by praying to God.
8. Metin’s behaviour raises a question in my mind about whether his conduct should be read only as Muslim male behaviour or whether all men think the same way?
9. The meaning of a verse in the Qur’an is that good women are for good men and bad women for bad men.
10. Considering Muslim women’s history, travel has been used as an expression of freedom and desire to explore.
References


Muhammad Abdullah is an Assistant Professor of English at Forman Christian College Lahore. Earlier he worked at Government College University Faisalabad and Riphah International University. His academic interests, broadly, include discourse analysis, intercultural studies, and feminist literary studies. For his doctoral research project, he is engaging with Anglophone Arab and Pakistani postfeminist fiction, which he will be defending soon. He has published several papers in national journals.