

Feminism in Samira Ahmed's *Interment*

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses women's efforts to obtain justice when their lives, religious practices, and social existence as a Muslim minority in a non-Muslim-majority society are marginalized in Samira Ahmed's *Interment*. The study focuses on two questions: what the main character struggles for and how the main character carries out that struggle. This research uses feminism as the main theoretical framework and applies a qualitative descriptive method in literary analysis. The data were taken from the novel in the form of the main character's utterances, actions, and narrative descriptions related to oppression, resistance, and identity. The findings show that the main character struggles against Islamophobia, discrimination, social exclusion, and the restriction of Muslim civil rights. They also show that her struggle is carried out through intellect, self-awareness, courage, and solidarity with other Muslim women. Therefore, the study reveals that feminism in *Interment* is represented not only through women's resistance to injustice in general, but also through the defense of religious identity and minority rights in a democratic society.

Keywords: Feminism; Islamophobia; Struggle

INTRODUCTION

Woman is disadvantageous culturally because through culture woman is marginalized (Saguy et al., 2021). Accordingly, unfair judgment falls on woman that they have no freedom for their right expression, no education as well as work equality and no freedom in life choice (Hardiyanti, 2024). Olive Schreiner states that woman possesses something profoundly distinctive to donate to the whole of social awareness, and her activity is very important, not only as individuality but

also as collectivity and as a class (Brooke, 2020). However, in the course of time, woman undergoes objectification that she becomes the other that is worthy of opposition, attack, and elimination (Cruz, 2024). Accordingly, feminism emerges, one of whose example is demanding sexual equality (Lovibond, 2015) as well as a social justice (Brodsky, 2022) which is a characteristically modern movement. Feminism then becomes unavoidable for women (Benzie, 2024).

Feminism then develops into religious area with its ritual characteristics (Irshai, 2024), into criticisms of nationalism, colonialism, and fascism (Carrol, 2024), into the loss of mothers and mother, maternal bloodline, maternal metaphors, maternity and maternal politics (Nash, 2024), into economy (Michaeli, 2021, also Wallace, 2024, Cameron, 2023), into woman's body (Heaney, 2024, also Malson, 2024), into social and politics (Misero, 2022), that refers to the gender inequality (Oksala, 2024, also Milstein, 2024), to inquiry patriarchal rules of their humbleness (Nelson, 2024), to female marginalization and oppression (Abdullah, 2025), to supremacy as well as dependence (Oeur, 2023), to profession (Clark, 2024), and to class struggle (Andeweg, 2024).

Thus, feminism is the need of self-awareness fight against a more general philosophy of domination (Woodson, 2024). Such domination leads to the enslavement of woman and children in their family, whose freedom is universally acknowledged (Payne, et. al., 2024). Further, feminism refers to the woman's struggle against racism, capitalism, attractiveness (Marso, 2024), and patriarchy (Hijab, 2019). One of the novels discussing of feminism is Samira Ahmed's *Interment*. Feminism is performed by a Muslim teenager named Layla Amin who struggles to defend her rights against the authority of the elected president who limits her personal rights. Government authority forces several families to move to internment camps where they are isolated from the outside world. Layla continues to fight for her rights together with other female friends she meets at the camp. Through her intellect, Layla and her friends defend her religion that has been humiliated in non-Muslim majority. This novel tells clearly how women persist in their stance and how women are treated inferiorly by men as well as their resistance to this oppression produced by racism.

Commonly speaking, feminism refers to women's demand equality with men that is quite different from the researcher's study that is about religious rights, therefore, it becomes the gap of the researcher's study. Besides, human beings are created differently in tribes and nations in order that they know one another, because of which, the issue of feminism is raised. Then, the research questions go as follows, first, what does the main character struggle for? Second, how does the main character struggle for her race?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies

To identify the research gap, this study reviews several previous works on feminism in literary texts. First, Thesya (2020), in “Radical Feminism in Eka Kurniawan’s *Beauty is a Wound*,” discusses women’s domination and oppression in the colonial era. Using radical feminism, the study shows that women are oppressed, exploited, and treated unjustly. Second, Yusuf (2020), in “Existentialist Feminism of Woman’s Struggle in Ratih Kumala’s *Cigarette Girl*,” examines women’s resistance to male domination. Using existentialist feminism, the study finds that women can work, study, and transcend social limitations traditionally imposed on them. Third, Arwansyah (2021), in “Study of Feminism and Women’s Existence in Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Bumi Manusia*,” explains that women’s rights are often positioned unequally in comparison with men’s lives. Through socialist feminism, the study concludes that women experience marginalization, subordination, and stereotyping. Fourth, Martinus et al. (2022), in their study of existentialist feminism in Acevedo’s *With the Fire on High*, analyze how Emoni Santiago is portrayed as a young woman who faces subjugation yet resists dependence on men. The study finds that Emoni overcomes social and economic limitations through her personal choices and agency. Lastly, Anggraeni (2026), in “Gendered Oppression in the Film *Mai* (2024): An Analysis of Resistance Strategies through Young’s Five Faces of Oppression,” examines the experiences of the main character in a patriarchal culture. Using a visual narrative approach, the study concludes that oppressed women are not passive but actively develop strategies of resistance.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the previous studies above, this research positions itself within feminist literary criticism while offering a different focus. Most earlier studies discuss women’s oppression in relation to colonialism, patriarchy, social class, or male domination. In contrast, this study examines how feminism can also be understood in relation to religious identity and minority rights. Therefore, feminism is used here not only as a framework for analyzing women’s struggle against patriarchal structures, but also as an approach to understanding a Muslim woman’s resistance to injustice, exclusion, and unequal treatment in a non-Muslim-majority society. In addition, this study employs the concept of Islamophobia to explain the hostility, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward Islam and Muslims, which may appear in the form of exclusion, hate speech, or social and political oppression. Through these two concepts, the study analyzes both what the main character struggles for and how she resists the oppression represented in Samira Ahmed’s *Interment*.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study is about a struggle of a woman for woman’s right in a certain society whose religion is marginalized. As it happens in a society in a novel, therefore, a qualitative descriptive method is used inasmuch as it analyzes the social aspect of

the research (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018) and the social aspect is feminism in Samira Ahmed's *Interment*. As a novel is full of description, speech and action of characters, therefore, the researcher refers to the descriptive and dramatic method. It means that the researcher merely analyses the dialogue spoken by the character and her action in the novel and his description by the author related to the given theory. Therefore, the data the researcher takes is from the novel of Samira Ahmed's *Interment* because *Interment* is quite interesting as the character fights for her religious rights that becomes the novelty aforesaid. Then, the characters' speech, action as well as description by the author are the focus of the researcher's study.

Instrument and Procedure

As it is a literary research, the main instrument of this study is the researcher herself, because the researcher is the one who reads, selects, classifies, and interprets the data based on the research questions and the theoretical framework. In collecting the data, the researcher read Samira Ahmed's *Interment* repeatedly and carefully in order to understand the whole story, the characterization of the main character, and the social context presented in the novel. After that, the researcher identified utterances, descriptions, actions, and narrative events related to the main character's struggle as a Muslim woman. The collected data were then organized into two tables. The first table contains data related to what the main character struggles for, while the second table contains data related to how the main character struggles. By using these tables, the researcher was able to group relevant quotations systematically, to avoid irrelevant data, and to make the classification process more focused. This procedure also helped the researcher connect each piece of textual evidence with the concepts of feminism and Islamophobia used in this study.

Data Analysis

To conduct the data analysis, the researcher analyzed the data in several stages. First, the researcher selected and classified the relevant data from the novel in the form of the main character's descriptions, dialogues, actions, and responses to social oppression. Second, the researcher grouped the data into two major categories based on the research questions, namely what the main character struggles for and how the main character struggles for her rights. Third, the researcher interpreted the meaning of each quotation and narrative event by relating it to the concepts of feminism and Islamophobia as the theoretical foundation of the study. In this stage, the researcher paid attention to the context of the events, the position of the main character, and the forms of oppression and resistance represented in the story. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions from the patterns found in the data and presented them descriptively in the discussion. Therefore, the analysis is not only concerned with collecting quotations from the novel, but also with explaining how those quotations reflect the main character's struggle, awareness, and resistance as a Muslim woman in Samira Ahmed's *Interment*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reason of the Main Character's Struggles for Her Race

Islamophobia

As explained above that Islamophobia is defined as a group of people that have shock, hatred, or predisposition against Islam and Muslims that leads to discriminate and speak hatefully as well as fiercely in Muslim populations. Examples of the islamophobia is as follows: firstly, anti-Muslim sentiment leading to the limitation of Muslim's freedom. It happens because the new elected President supports the extremists' idea of Nazi ideology emphasizing on their own white race as superior, on one hand, on other race such as Muslim as inferior, on the other hand. Therefore, Muslims' life is kept being investigated as they are considered as a threat in the country. This then leads the Muslims to live fearfully as well as insecurely.

“One month since the president of the United States gave a televised speech to Congress declaring that “Muslims are a threat to America.”
(Ahmed, 2019:13-14).

Further, another anti-Muslim sentiment can be seen in the burning of books inscribed by Muslim authors or books associated with Islam. Such actions then lead to block as well as to eliminate Muslims' voice and experiences in public narratives. Besides, such actions leads to the culture and identity of Muslim rejection from the discriminatory policies.

“Two and half years since the election. Two years since the Nazis marched on DC. Eighteen months since the Muslim ban. One year since our answers on the census landed us on the registry. Nine months since the first book burning.”
(Ahmed, 2019:13)

Secondly, it is a negative stigma on Moslem. It turns out that the anti-Muslim by the government above goes down to the people that people of America view Muslim as a threat as well. Therefore, they consider Muslim as bringing negative effects to their life and force Muslim population to confront isolation in society.

“Mrs. Brown owns the Sweet Spot on Jefferson Street. She made my favorite birthday cake ever, a green-frosted Tinkerbelle confection for my fifth birthday. She narrows her eyes at me, opens her mouth to speak, and then clamps it shut. She looks down and pushes past me. She won't even say my name”
(Ahmed, 2019:15)

The quotation above is a negative stigma of Mrs. Brown towards Layla, both of whom are cake seller and customer. Mrs. Brown, a non-Muslim, as the cake seller whose cake is Layla's favorite (Layla is the customer), no longer addresses as well as says hello and even gives eye contact to Layla since she is regarded as a threat. This is a negative stigma on Layla as a Muslim by Mrs. Brown, whose relationship

has been good before the anti-Muslim by the government comes into surface and becomes the public understanding. Layla's identity as a Muslim is rejected by Mrs. Brown.

Thirdly, it is a right discrimination on Muslim. Discrimination is a kind of phobia that the superior discriminates the inferior. Discrimination is to judge an individual and or a group unfairly because of their race, religion, gender, or social orientation, example of which is the illegal taking over of Muslim's rights.

"My dad teaches poetry and writing. Did teach, I should say. Until he was fired— mysteriously deemed unqualified for the tenured professorship he'd had for over a decade. That's another "Before": two months since my dad lost his job"

(Ahmed, 2019:.15)

The quotation above shows that a kind of unfairness towards Muslim's right is in the procession through the explanation of Layla whose father is a teacher of poetry as well as a professor at a university, is pushed to retire from his job. 'Mysteriously deemed unqualified' is the reflection of the unjust actions without a legal justification that puts somebody's carrier in an end. The effect is that both economy and social life of Layla's family are down.

"Through the political dog whistles and hijabis having their headscarves ripped off and mosques vandalized with swastikas and the Muslims who went missing"

(Ahmed, 2019:28)

Fourthly, it refers to the government's power towards Muslim. The government turns out to abuse the law should play fairly to the citizens. In fact, the law is not upheld when confronting Muslim's issues. In other words, because of islamophobia, the government oppresses Muslims, fails to create balance in the whole society, and fails to uphold the law regarding certain ethnic group in the society and belief.

"Our government is jailing us because of our faith," a voice from behind me says. I spin around to face a girl who looks about my age. "They can do whatever they want. They already are. It's a brave new world."

(Ahmed, 2019:.50)

The quotation is about how power is abused by government in order that certain religious ethnic and beliefs are oppressed. Such condition leads to the loss of human rights and to the oppression as well as humiliation of the certain community. It is also about the reflection of Muslim's powerlessness to confront the power of the government that acts unjustly. The characters confess that the government is able to do whatever he wants to do due to their powerless minority.

Lastly, it is abolition of culture or knowledge. It turns out Muslim population experiences not only physical abuse but the elimination of the thought freedom and idea expression as well that is in contradiction to what they campaign for, reflecting

a totalitarian strategy where government seeks to subdue intellectual freedom to take control over the people. The quotation of the aforesaid explanation runs thus.

“They’re burning his poems. He pretends it’s not happening. But those words are him. He’s trying to hide it, but I know it’s killing him. Both of my parents. All of us. Is this how the end begins?”
(Ahmed, 2019:19)

The quotation shows how islamophobia attempts to compulsorily eliminate the Muslim community’s culture as well as identity by burning Layla's father's poem. In other words, it can be said that islamophobia either does the discrimination towards Muslims or takes pains to avoid of the values, traditions, and cultural heritage devoted to the Muslim communal. All of these happen insomuch as they wish to decrease the existence as well as the affluence of Islam in society. Unfortunately, the Muslim society has no power to resist as described how Layla's father chooses to keep silent and feign ignorance of the incident he faces. This is also a reflection of the Muslim community's rejection of the damaging effect that distinguishes Muslim’s rights. Even though Layla's father is aware that this event is also “killing him,” however, he understands that they have no voice as well as decision to resist or deny this action and will only do the Muslims bad.

The Main Character’s Struggles for Her Race

Through Her Intellect

Her intellectuality has been derived from her father who is a professor as well as from her mother who is a teacher. Such academic upbringing and family sustenance has created a strong basis to form Layla's personality as well as resilience against oppression. Further, this can give influences to Layla's thoughtfulness and bravery in struggling for her rights as a Muslim. Then, by intellectuality, firstly, Layla uses strategy for her struggle that can be seen in the following quotation.

“I doubt he’s suddenly grown a conscience. I don’t know. I might be grasping at straws, but that’s all I’ve got right now.”
(Ahmed, 2019:84)

The quotation above is the explanation of the beginning of Layla's strategy to attempt to seek for a help in a difficult condition. Transferred to Moebius camp, she has no accesses for conveying what happens in the camp to outsiders. She refers to David’s family background - her boyfriend - who is regarded as being very influential in the state department and is in the hope of utilizing his connection as a useful source of sustenance, though Layla understands that it is impossible to succeed. Thus, Layla's movements are the reflection of a woman's intellect as she is aware and manages to discover a path to be unrestricted from the chains of oppression.

Secondly, Layla awakens other Moslems to speak up for their rights. Even though Layla and the other women are aware of the significance of resisting oppression, they confront challenges both from the islamophobia and from the Muslim communal itself. Most of the time, Layla is confronted with Muslims who ignore intellectuality in facing a big problem. They regard a big problem as not a big one, instead. However, they are mostly in the fear of voicing their ideas, consequently, silence is their priority for their safety. Thus, not only is Layla's struggle to fight against discrimination but also to involve the procedure of constructing understanding and support within the Muslim communal itself.

“A younger woman with a pale-pink chiffon dupatta wrapped loosely around her braided hair yells, “Adil’s right. These foolish kids pulled this stupid act, refusing to eat like they’re Gandhi or something. What were you thinking?” She wags a finger at me. “Look what you’ve done. That kid got what he deserved.” (Ahmed, 2019:179)

The quotation above is about the internal dispute between Layla and other Muslim members. Other Muslims member turn out to criticize and make a protest to Layla for her sudden act that leads the Director to be more preventive as well as supervising for their activities. In fact, they think that such a proverb as silence is golden is worthy of application as it makes them survive and bear no other harassment. It is then understandable that not all people especially Muslim have common understanding of how to act against oppression; on one hand, for marginalized population, making a fuss can lead to the worse situation and it is the mere way to struggle for their rights, on the other hand.

Being Herself

Firstly, Layla is aware of her identity as a Moslem. Layla and other female Muslims come to the self-awareness and realization of their identity as Muslim women. This realization consists of not only the performance of religious obligations, such as covering the body but the understanding of being Muslim to be their true identity as well that lead them to struggle against injustice.

“I know. I’m on the inside, remember? But I can’t sit by and do nothing.” Sophie Scholl’s words come to mind. “Someone has to make a start” (Ahmed, 2019:131)

It is the reflection of Layla's self-awareness of her identity as well as the condition she confronts. In Layla’s mind, Muslims should struggle for justice instead of taking the situation for granted. Whilst, to be herself, it is necessary for Layla to donate to the change instead of sitting by and doing nothing. Besides, Layla refers to Sophie's quotation as a reflection of her faith as a Muslim and someone who possesses the right for freedom as a citizen. To be herself means to stand up against society's negative views and assert the right to be oneself without fear of judgment and discrimination.

Secondly, Layla has a desire to be free and to get civil rights. The female characters turn out to undergo a difficult journey to regain their privileges. It is shown by the government's effort to limit Muslim's movement by transferring them to the Mobius camp which also restrict their civil rights. The reason of their transfer is that they are considered as a threat in America, endangering the country's security. Accordingly, Layla and other Muslim women take pain to struggle against this discrimination through confrontation as well as their rights' awareness.

“Survive? Is that all we want now? To survive? What about wanting to live? Have we all forgotten that? Have we all decided that our entire lives are going to be spent here? Did I miss the memo?”
(Ahmed, 2019:103)

This quotation shows Layla's consciousness of both survival and the wish to meaningful life with meaning and purpose though she has to reject her own father's words asking her to go with the Director's way in order that they remain safe. Yet, being aware as a Muslim having legal rights as a citizen, Layla rejects this new norm oppression. In the context of being herself, Layla performs a fearless attitude to get more not only physical existence but to a complete, true and significant life as well. Thus, Layla comes up with her identity awareness and the journey in returning their full rights notwithstanding being in a predicament in every condition.

Realizing Themselves

Firstly, it is solidarity built by the women build among female Muslim. The Muslim women come to the awareness of the importance of both individual free life and social life among Muslim women that mean they have to support one another to be against.

“I'm so grateful I have Ayesha. I smile at her and say, “I'm freaked, too. But we won't be stupid. We'll plan. We'll hide in plain sight. We'll protect one another. We'll try our best”
(Ahmed, 2019:120).

It is Ayesha that keeps supporting Layla's struggle, though they are new friends at the Mobius camp, yet they come up with the idea of developing a long-standing comradeship. Layla is aware that to make dream of having a profound impact on her achievement of freedom comes true, she has to be hand in hand with others. Together with Ayesha, Layla has a tactic of various resistance strategies as well as seeks for ways to safety during the resistance.

Secondly, Layla's empowerment through activism. Existence does not refer to individual's birth since it does not have a fixed essence, in fact essence is created from choices and actions that shape their personality. Accordingly, activity leaves room for women for action based on their morals as well as consciousness instead of following social expectations. Thus, Layla and the other female Muslim

characters are aware themselves as a communal group that also have equal rights by struggle and real action to strive against this social discrimination.

“Jake nods. “Sorry, yes. Noor. You know how she wore an American flag hijab?”

I nod. “Apparently, it got torn off somewhere in the struggle, and it showed up this morning on the door of the admin building. Ripped, stained with blood. And scrawled across it in black marker was the word ‘Resist’”

(Ahmed, 2019:142)

The quotation above shows that Noor positively and bravely puts on the hijab she gets from the American flag. Such an action both demonstrates her personality as a Muslim and highlights her independence of privileges as an American citizen. In other words Noor is able to be aware of herself as a Muslim and an American citizen at the same time that is not necessary to ignore one of them. Furthermore, there is noticeable of the inscription of 'resist' on her hijab that shows part of her self-consciousness to be against the trials of those wishing to erase her existence. Though Noor understands the risk of her action, she courageously decides her own existence regardless the society's view.

In this sub-title, the researcher would like to discuss the gap of the study because the researcher hardly finds feminism is used in the area of religion. At first, the researcher is in hesitance whether or not feminism is worthy an application in the study. On second thoughts, the researcher comes to the understanding that woman's involvement in the matters of economy and society is categorized as feminism as well (English, 2015:03). The society's issue in the discussed novel refers to the religious matters. As mentioned in the background that feminism can be in religious area with its ritual characteristics. When the female's religious teaching is humiliated by others, she comes to a protest. The protest to defend her faith by the woman refers to feminism.

Besides, what the character has struggled for through her intellect, being herself, and realizing themselves indicates that she donates her capability for the sake of the society. Her role as a female person in the involvement of the larger society, to the researcher's understanding, is a part of the feminist role. At last, the main character's role as a woman donating herself for the sake of the larger society becomes the gap of the study since as aforesaid previous studies no studies involving women in the religious area in talking about feminism; Thesya with woman in colonization, Yusuf with woman against man's domination, Arwansyah with woman's rights compared to man, Martinus with woman defeated in her environment, and Anggraeni with woman's oppression in patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, the researcher comes to highlight three things. First of all, in discussion of common feminism, women always fight for their right that should be equal to men, whilst, in this discussion, the women strive not only for themselves but also for the sake of the Islamic teaching that is objectified by the non-Muslim

majority due to Islamophobia. Second of all, their role for spreading Islam in the non-Muslim majority through protesting unfair justice towards Muslim is regarded as feminism. There are rooms for the feminist to fight for their rights, one of which is religion issue that goes to the minority living in the majority. Last of all, the researcher is in a considerable hope that in the future, researcher uses radical feminism as theory to develop the study.

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