Muslimness in the United States and Spaces of Individual Identity: Scrutinizing Mattu and Maznavi's American Muslim Characters

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Abstract

The present study examines the dynamics of a few representative stories from the collection *Love, Inshallah* (2012) by Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi. Previous studies on the collection lack specific focus on identity from a poststructural perspective. The present study implements Derrida's concept of différance and his discussion of the conjunction "and" to show that identity is not something which an individual can comfortably have access to or possess. Any possible tension that might come from perceived differences between the aspects of identity can not be reconciled in the strict sense of that term. Furthermore, identity, even in its most strictly individualistic understanding, can be far from individualistic, and flows into and from the communal. Through the aforesaid concepts, it is demonstrated that Muslimness and Americanness are subject to an eternal interplay of the individual and the communal.

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1. Introduction

Whatever the initial point of the professed tensions between Islam and the West (both very loosely designated), these tensions have apparently remained in existence for a long time (Lewis, 1990, p. 49). The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, further simplified—in a manner of speaking—the opposition between the two perceived polarities. Even before 9/11, which can be deemed the culmination of the demonstration of the conflict between Islam and the West—and in particular the United States as the "epicenter of globalization and secularization" (Renner, 2017, p. 50)—there were objections against "negative mass-mediated stereotypes" of Muslims by the Muslim community all over the United States (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2003, p. 134) who were, especially in the wake of 9/11, targeted by patriotic vigilantes and subjected to "stereotypical images" of Muslims as terrorists (p. 133).

Norris and Inglehart (2003) explain that the events of 9/11 were understood by many through Samuel Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations" (p. 203). The relation between Islam and the West, between their respective values, has thus been deemed one of incompatibility and antagonism, and the Muslim community subsequently considered unassimilable in the Western society (Salla, 1997, p. 729; Hurd, 2003, pp. 27-32; Lewis, 1990; Ho, 2007, p. 290). In the face of ongoing accusations hurled against Islam and Muslims, particularly in the United States, following the events of 9/11, many Muslims naturally felt the need or rather the responsibility to defend both their faith *and* their American identity—through attributing "the realities of experience" to "errors of interpretation or incompetent practices" (Wadud, 2008, pp. 5-6)—while others, like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, decided to outright renounce the faith which they saw as the origin of such disaster (Todorov, 2010, p. 131). The first approach, denying that terrorists possess the "true" Islam, implies a statement of possessing the true Islam (Wadud, 2008, p. 6), while the second denounces Islam as an essentially defective and violent system of thought. *Love, InshAllah*,

in its stereotype-shattering purpose and defense of the Americanness of its representative authors, perhaps fits into the first.

There are a few studies and brief references to *Love, InshAllah* in academic and popular discussions. Adra (2013), like many other sources, refers to the authors' depiction of diversity and its expansion of perspectives on ways of being a Muslim. Gorman (2015), Riley (2016), and Tiller (2018) are concerned with the impact of social networking and online interactions on the Muslim and Western Muslim communities. Riley refers to *Love, InshAllah* as privileging the voices and stories of Muslim women, the reflections "on what it means to be a Muslim woman in contexts influenced by Islamophobia, racism, homophobia, and sexism" (p. 13). Gorman briefly characterizes *Love, InshAllah* and similar writings as outdone by "captivity narratives" pervading the religious debates of feminine oppression. He also mentions *Love, InshAllah* as an example of "speaking back in popular media" and countering the "captivity narratives" of oppression in certain religions (p. 19). Tiller examines dating websites, self-presentation online, and agency "agency over presentation" (p. 4) and in "navigating people's perceptions" (p. 3) of oneself.

The book is examined to various degrees with regard to postfeminism and political and social discussions of the context (Hidayatullah and Zaman, 2013; Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015 and 2016; Lesko et al. , 2015), faith and sexuality (Siraj, 2013; Ali-Faisal, 2014), punk Islam (Fiscella, 2012; Nilan, 2017), and online communities, activism, and surveillance (Riley, 2016; Shresthova, 2016; Tiller, 2018). Discussion or reference to *Love, InshAllah* mostly concern with diversity and inclusivity, such as that of Muslim communities in Europe or the United States or the inclusion of homosexual Muslims in the Islamic communities, the tensions between representations of the self and of the community, and the dynamics of the treatment of stereotypes by such writings as *Love, InshAllah*.

Despite the recent increase in the literature on *Love, InshAllah* and similar works, what seems to be lacking, at least on this collection, as a defense both of Americanness and Muslimness, is that earlier studies do not focus on the notion of identity through the poststructural, specifically Derridean, theories pertaining to identity, as something other than present even to the subject of identification, which

nonetheless can be beneficial in getting a better view of the subject of (hyphenated) identity.

The book's resistance, so to speak, of falling into a specific category such as "religion, academia or chick lit" (MacFarquhar, 2012, para. 11) perhaps finds correspondence in the variety and diversity of the stories that constitute the book, "each as unique as the woman behind it" (Mattu & Maznavi, 2012, p. xi). This quality is not unparalleled to an implicit perception of faith as a space to which everyone can belong regardless of their differences, and with less controversy than in the case of the genre distinction conflict. Contrary to objections against the book as to being inadvertently carrying an "annoyingly anti-feminist" function, it is said that "writing about emotional and sexual experiences" is empowering for those "surrounded by stereotypes of silence, forced marriages and oppression" (Qureshi, 2012, para. 7).

Mattu and Maznavi (2012) remark in the Introduction that the intention, through the presentation of the "complex lives and identities" of these writers as a few yet varying representatives of the Muslim community of America, is to dispel two assumptions: a) that the Islamic "faith" stands in contrast to Americanness, and b) that "adherence to practice" is a good measure of "Muslimness" (Mattu & Maznavi, 2012, p. x). The purpose of the book is therefore to refute the notion of irreconcilability of Islamic identity and the Western, in this case American, identity whose accounts of interaction is supposed to be the material of this book. The importance of the Introduction of the book lies in the fact that the editors of the book, as the writers of the Introduction, the Glossary, and the Questions for Discussions, have also contributed their own stories. Their presence and inclusion in the "main" body of the work, and their indication of the book's *raisons d'être* in the Introduction, puts the Introduction in a necessary central position which thus determines the meaning(s) of the stories, and around which all the stories (as well as the other parts of the book) are arranged. This requires a constant moving back and forth, inside to outside, from the main body (the stories) to the Introduction and the other parts so as to measure the functioning of the stories against the statements in the Introduction. The topics covered in this study are therefore the book's effort at invalidating the Muslim/American binary and the relation between Americanness and Muslimness.

As stated earlier, *Love, InshAllah* consists of twenty-five stories by different women of various backgrounds whose common point of convergence is their self-identification as both American and Muslim. However, despite the arguments in the Introduction, wherever the perceived American and Muslim facets must necessarily interact, certain points of tension in the attempt to strike a balance (Mattu & Maznavi, 2012, p. 306; Qureshi, 2012, para. 9) between these two aspects of their identity can be indicated. The nature of this interaction, and therefore the identity situation of the women who have contributed to this collection, can be discussed through Derridean notion of différance and "and," and his reading of Kafka's short parable "Before the Law," to illustrate the deconstruction of both Americanness and Muslimness. A basic hypothesis is that Americanness is generally privileged in this book, implied in the title and subtitle. The stories will be discussed in pairings in which to examine the statuses of Americanness and Muslimness, determined in each story through points of tension between the "values" held by the writers where each writer may demonstrate inclination towards either side, whether considered religious or national.

In discussing the identity situation through those notions, the aim, in particular, is threefold: a) to examine the nature of the interaction between these two aspects of identity navigated by individuals; b) to investigate the logic of différance working in the presentation of identities; and c) to explore the way in which the stories altogether subvert the American identity (with or without Muslimness) and identity in general.

2. Derrida and Muslim Identity

The concept of identity becomes problematic in Derrida. Concepts, Derrida says, do not exist. A concept is "a certain determination or direction taken by a sequence or 'chain,'" involving a movement of différance, "a 'productive,' conflictual movement which cannot be preceded by any identity, any unity, or any original simplicity" (1971, p. 6). The necessary chain of signification takes the place of things themselves. In other words, a sign "takes the place of the present" "in its absence" (Derrida, 1973, p. 138). The necessary movement of différance neutralizes the metaphysical idea of coherent whole—a quality traditionally attributed to the individual—an identity present to itself.

On the nature of the interrelation and interaction of the American and the Muslim aspects of identity, the notion of associative and dissociative "and," discussed in Derrida's "Et Cetera… (and so on, und so weiter, and so forth, et ainsi de suite, und so überall, etc.)" is significant. As Derrida writes, "Wondering what the *'and' is*, what *and* […] means and does not mean, does and does not do […] is perhaps […] the most constant task of any deconstruction" (Derrida, 2004, p. 285). Therefore, what this syncategoreme does in putting in the same order the categoremes "Americanness" and "Muslimness", how it functions in the mixing, as it were, of these notions, can be explored as to their conditions and consequences of amalgamation. This can be generalized to any two or more elements placed together in any possible assortment that ultimately comes to be called "an identity". One basic hypothesis here, considering the book's title and subtitle, is that Americanness is privileged as the more inclusive space in which Muslimness can be incorporated. This privileging can be seen, for example, in the subtitle of the book, "The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women". As Kadivar (2003, p. 664) points, Islam disapproves confession in case of "sins" committed "in private," and the this book is closer to the Christian tradition of confession in that respect.

Différance is also involved in the presentation of identities in *Love, InshAllah.* By etymology, "identity" refers to the sameness of something with itself, while "individual" suggests indivisibility. Based on the notion of différance, identity is divided in itself by "intervals" that separate each, taken to be "present" (Derrida, 1973 p. 143), from what it is not, subverting identity, subjecting it instead to an interminable chain of identification and production. The expression of identity in a manner that would suggest the "presentation of the thing itself in its presence," the presentation of "Muslim", "American," and "Muslim American" identity, is to be substituted with "active interpretation" and "incessant deciphering" (Derrida, 1973, p. 149). This is where the all the pillars of Muslim identity, as laid out by Ramadan, are involved. But in particular, since "practice" is not a measure of Muslimnes, that is, Muslim identity is not necessarily performed or performative, it must be "present" inside the individual, independent of outsiders to the individual. This non-performativity and presence is undeniable to the Americanness, as indicated by the example of the flag (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 48).

Blending Derrida's views with post 9/11 discourse, one needs to refer to the roots of Muslim identity. Bernard Lewis (1990) in "The Roots of Muslim Rage" observes that Islam and Christendom—the latter of which he equates with "the West" (p. 48)—have been in conflict ever since the emergence of Islam (p. 49). He draws attention to one difference, for instance, in their conception of the relation between religion and politics (p. 48). The attacks on September 11th, perhaps accompanied by President Bush's diction in his speech (Silberstein, 2002, p. 156), recalled the history of the Crusades, emphasizing the continuity of the conflict.

Norris and Inglehart (2003) discuss the views held by Muslims and Western non-Muslims on certain values which are especially focused in the discussions of conflicts between the Islamic and the Western civilizations (p. 204), which, emphasized by the events of 9/11, justified Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations" (p. 203). They conclude that, despite Huntingtonian view's emphasis on differences in democratic values, these values are almost equally favored in both cultures (p. 224), while there are in fact differences with regard to "gender equality," "sexual liberalization" and the West is marked by "more expressive lifestyles" (p. 225).

Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2003) study the presentations of American Muslims in the news before and after 9/11, arguing that the limited, stereotypical coverage of the pre-9/11 transformed into "comprehensive, inclusive, and less stereotypical news presentation", especially choosing American Muslims and Arabs as sources, in the aftermath of those events (p. 151). The news, despite the religious affiliation of the attackers, tried to ease the atmosphere by clearing most Muslims from terrorism and Islam from teaching violence (p. 151). Such depictions and presentations in the news differ, they note, from depictions of Arabs and Muslims in the popular media, such as movies, television shows, and fiction (p. 134). They indicate, however, that after the attacks on 9/11, Muslims in the United States became "victims of hate crimes and of the stereotypical image[s]" (p. 133).

Presentations in the popular media, however, were strong enough to prompt efforts at shattering the stereotypes. One such form of effort is storytelling which Shresthova (2016) discusses especially with regard to the new media, surveillance, and profiling of American Muslims (pp. 149-185). Storytelling by American Muslims was, or is, an effort to

control narratives (p. 164) that create stereotypes, but also "bridging cultural experiences and political concerns" (p. 166). With regard to the depiction of private lives in the public sphere, especially through the new media, Shresthova (2016) and also Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2015; 2016) refer to surveillance as well as self-surveillance through postfeminist scripts, Shresthova also referring to the inevitably political condition of Muslims in the United States (p. 150).

Hidayatullah and Zaman (2013), Lesko et al. (2015), and Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2016) discuss presentations of female subjectivities and postfeminist views represented in such presentations. Hidayatullah and Zaman argue that writings such as *Love, InshAllah* depict depoliticized individuality (p. 53) despite aspirations to contribute to social change (p. 51), while Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2016) indicate the politicization of the confessional genre (p. 88) and its disruption of the "limiting cultural scripts" (p. 87). Lesko et al. also discuss the disruption of normative narratives about Muslim women, referring to "a western-centric understanding of human capacity to achieve private and public good through individualized action and voice" (p. 37).

3. When Mattu and Maznavi Define American Muslimness

In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, the Muslim community of the United States came under pressure. The attacks increased issues with regard to the act of self-identification as Muslim *and* American. To claim to be a Muslim, on the one hand, and an American, on the other, could not be simply taken for granted in the post-9/11 era, and patriotism was as much in need of proof as was adherence to Islam, even if as simple as hanging an American flag outside one's home (Mattu & Maznavi, 2012, p. 48).

Love, InshAllah (2012) is a collection of twenty-five accounts of real experiences by American Muslim women and is edited by Ayesha Mattu, an international development consultant, and Nura Maznavi, a civil rights attorney. They address the diversity of approaches to Islam as well as the stereotypes of Muslims in the West. This section is the application Derrida's notions of différance and discussion of "and" to reach a conclusion regarding breaks in the identity of the contributors. Of the stories included in *Love, InshAllah,* six are chosen for the present

study and put together into three pairs to be compared and contrasted in terms of Derridean method of interpretation.

3. 1. Faith or Punk Love?

The first story, "Leap of Faith," narrates Aisha Saeed's "semiarranged" marriage (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 4). Aisha Saeed is a Pakistani-American whose story consists of her thoughts regarding arranged marriages common in Pakistani culture. Central to her process of deciding to accept the marriage is the matter of knowledge about the other person necessary to make such a decision. Saeed explains that her upbringing in a "Pakistani culture" makes the arrangement less outrageous for her than it is for her friend whose description of concern opens the story.

This story, already depicting a conflict in itself, is in another conflict with Tanzila Ahmed's "Punk-Drunk Love," the account of her adherence to punk Islam and life according to its established fundamental rules. Tanzila Ahmed is also a Pakistani-American who lives a Muslim life mixed with punk culture that originated from her experience of defiance pride of "being *desi* and Muslim in an Islamophobic and racist America" (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 60). She has previously begun a relationship with Yusuf, a punk bandleader, and picks up on this relationship on the tour of the band. She is aware of Yusuf's liberal behavior regarding sexual relationships and, during the tour, finds out that he has a girlfriend. None of these is considered carefully in her treatment of the relationship, the former not moving her to stop the relationship at the beginning of the tour, the former not moving her to question the possibility of its future at the end.

Fiscella (2012) and Nilan (2017) present a history and discussion of the relationship between Islam and punk. Fiscella refers to the waves of punk, the third being the re-imagination of Islam through punk eyes and the challenging of religious authority (p. 261), and Nilan touches on "the DIY ethos of punk" as a match for "the mobilising egalitarianism of Islam" and refers to the "rich iconoclasm" of the incongruity of the integration (p. 135). Saeed and Ahmed both come from a "desi" culture (although Saeed does not use that label explicitly). While Saeed goes with the marriage arranged for her, Ahmed's "in-your-face" (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 60) style of punk deters her parents from such arrangements for her. Nevertheless, more important than such differences in appearances and arrangements from outside, is their dissimilarity in decision-making based on knowledge. They both take contradictory

stands regarding knowledge and its importance in decision-making, especially interesting since the subheading in which their stories occur invoke the One who is omniscient, the greater that they are trying to find (Mattu & Maznavi, p. x).

Saeed, in opposition to her non-Muslim friend Amy's opinion, accepts the semi-proposal of Kashif, about whom Saeed knew what she needs (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 9) in order to make the decision and make the "leap of faith. " At the same time, she qualifies this statement in the form of a contradictory statement: that she had a desire "very much to know him" (p. 9). That is, it is undecideble whether it is what she knew about Kashif or her desire to know him that is the basis of making one such decision.

Ahmed, who accompanied a Muslim punk band on its tour and attended its concerts and in the meanwhile resumed her previously begun relationship with the bandleader Yusuf, faces a dilemma around what course to take regarding her passionate relationship this wayward punk artist who "went through girls like candy" (p. 59). During the tour, she finds out that Yusuf has a girlfriend in Washington, D. C. , but she refrains from asking about her own relationship with Yusuf, and ultimately breaks up with him, justifying it with the adequacy of appreciation of the moment for what it was (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 72). She refrains from acting on either her knowledge of Yusuf's girlfriend, which would at least bring determination to the relationship in its currency, or her desire to pursue the relationship.

Saeed and Ahmed, both as Muslim individuals, make different decisions in rather similar situations, however similar, if not to say identical, their point of reference may be. They both believe in an all-knowing God who has the best intention for the individuals, yet one accepts an offer based on verbal statements and internal feelings, and the other rejects a situation without taking action to make its status explicit. Here is the break in their instances of Muslimness and Americanness, making the "and" of the association of their two aspects of identity very dissimilar. While Saeed acts upon her belief in the necessity of a "leap" as a factor in faith in having a future despite the American culture's voting against it, Ahmed refrains from acting on her knowledge, abandoning the relationship in an unfinished condition. Further, their common identity as American Muslims as well as their individual instances of identity faces the logic of différance, in that, in

addition to the previous difference, both leave the situations undeciphered in their ultimate effects on their future.

3. 2. Sexuality is Hard to Define

Another possible such pair to discuss is Tolu Adiba's "A Prayer Answered" and Najva Sol's "The First Time. " These contributors are both homosexual Muslims, the former an African-American convert, the latter a Muslim-born Iranian-American who migrated to the United States at the age of six.

Tolu Adiba is a homosexual African-American convert to Islam. Facing the multitude of disparaging remarks about homosexuality that she hears from religious leaders and friends, she remains closeted until the very end of the story except to two or three friends. Her struggle is between her faith, the interpretations she has learned from others, and her sexuality, both of which she considers essential parts of her identity. After she comes out to Hafsa, another homosexual Muslim, the two begin to live together, but still closeted to their community.

Najva Sol, the Iranian-American migrant to the United States is also homosexual. She gives an account of her experience as it led to her discovering her sexual orientation and her parents' accepting it. The struggle in her story is similar to Adiba's, but with less emphasis on the Islamic notions and precepts.

Siraj (2013) and Ali-Faisal (2014) discuss the relationship between sexuality and faith. Siraj focuses on the condition of homosexual Muslims reclaiming their Islamic identity, while Ali-Faisal's study concerns sexual health and guilt and "the framework of religious, cultural, and American identities" and the expectations attached to identities (p. 15). Adiba recounts her struggle in reconciling her sexuality with her faith. Raised in the "American" culture, she connects with her friend over their "shared American cultural nuances and values'' (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 22). Her said struggle is that between the "two integral components" of her identity (p. 23), her faith, and her sexuality, "both of which," she believes, "stemmed from God" (p. 19). What she sees as the obstacle to living a full life that does justice to her identity is both the "seemingly stern textual prohibition on homosexuality" and the disparaging remarks of both religious leaders and friends on homosexuals.

Her focus in the story is on the notion of "trial", to which she initially attributes her sexual orientation. It is, however, the discovering "the hidden world of gay Muslims" and befriending Hafsa, another closeted homosexual, that she, along with the notion of "trial", undergoes a transformation. After Hafsa and Adiba befriend each other, Hafsa divorces her husband and the two women begin living together. To inquiries by others, they state the reasons like being good friends, helping with rent, and living closer the mosque (p. 26). Ultimately, the Islamic notion of trial is transformed, as if explicitly, from taking in control one's internal desires to move in a specific direction to one that either encourages, if not commands, living one's full identity and embracing internal wishes.

Sol takes a more liberated course in her life, living in accordance to the norms of "America's MTV" (p. 116). As it is revealed in the end of her story, her parents have been long reading her blog and checking her web history. When they confront her about her sexual orientation, they are reservedly accepting, confirming that she can "be gay, and a good daughter, and a good person. " Unlike Adiba's story, there is no mention of sexuality and religion, but only the cultural and social concerns such as marriage. What she ultimately hopes for is a transformation of spaces in which she is supposed to have a standing, "[her parents' hearts, in [her] family, [her] Iran, or [her] religion" (p. 117). This movement of change, similar to Adiba's individualistic transformation of "trial", has become possible only in the new cultural context of the United States.

Sol leaves out the matter of the religious concepts that Adiba is more explicit about and struggles to reconcile. In Adiba, there is the interval that separates her identity as a homosexual from the mainstream heterosexuals who take the law as heterosexually determined. She fills this interval by a reinterpretation of the concept of trial. In Sol, there is the overall dismissal (already contrasting Adiba's approach) of that difference between her and her heterosexual fellow Muslim. That is, while both emphasize their Americanness in its individualism, Adiba is more explicit in addressing her conflict with faith, Sol stressing more strongly the social aspects of her sexual orientation.

3. 3. How to Practice Muslimness

To focus strictly on the notion of practice and Muslimness, one pair to discuss is S. E. Jihad Levine's "From Shalom to Salaam" and Nijla Baseema Mu'min's "Wild Wind. " S. E. Jihad Levine was born Jewish

and converted to Islam after marriage. However, soon after marriage, her husband, Habeeb, divorced her. Despite that shock and pressures from her family, she remained Muslim and was later introduced to possible suitors for marriage. She describes the conditions of her encounters with these suitors with special attention to their conduct regarding the established law. She supplicates God, asking for guidance and makes a determination to stay alone, realizing that her divorce from Habeeb was her own fault. After a few years, she is reunited with Habeeb.

Nijla Baseema Mu'min was born from Muslim-American parents. Her story consists of her observations of her parents and sister, and her encounter with Theo, a former-gangster, "saved" Christian, who was looking for a companion in his plan to serve his God. The differences in conduct between her parents, her sister, and herself are ultimately dismissed, and they are comfortably put in same category— "Muslim"— and the difference between her attitude towards theology and that of Theo's is preserved as integral to her identity.

Levine expresses the importance of practice and appearances, referring to the living conditions of one of her prospective suitors, "Easter decorations," his daughters' lack of hijab, and his delaying of praying (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 223). Mu'min (Mattu & Maznavi, pp. 39-45), on the other hand, in naming what are implied to be contradictory behaviors of her father, mother, and sister—such as drinking alcohol, dancing with individuals of the opposite sex, and having boyfriends and girlfriends while also praying regularly and reciting the Qur'an—dismisses the importance of practice or appearances, concluding "And we were all Muslims" (Mattu & Maznavi, p. 45). In her interaction with the gangster-turned-zealous Christian Theo, where she refuses to drink on account of her religion, she remarks that she "wasn't going to compromise [her] identity in order to make him feel better about his (p. 44). The identity of the natural "wild wind" is fully internal and to be preserved. This introduces a problem in the solidarity of a "Muslim" identity to which anyone can adhere, regardless of practice or lack thereof.

While Levine takes practice to be an integral part of Muslimness, making it a more active process rather than a "being-already Muslim", Mu'min rejects such importance, implying identity to be an internally determined and fixed concept. Similar to Saeed/Ahmed case, they

display a difference in the "and" of their American-Muslimness, Mu'min emphasizing the individual assertiveness associated with Americanness. Levine and Mu'min both leave de-emphasized Americanness and Muslimness, respectively, especially where the established laws of Islam are concerned.

Bernard Lewis (1993, pp. 43-57) in his presentation of the historical study of the Western civilization and the Islamic civilization, introduces the status of the law as the main difference between the two. However, although the law is considered divine in the Islamic tradition, rulers and jurists have come upon problems without "explicit answers" in the revelation and tried to find the answers themselves. The distinction he makes there is between "custom," "regulation," and "interpretation," coming from the people, the government, and the jurists, respectively. In the context of the United States, as shown by the comparison of story pairs above, can be inferred a movement toward a more individualistic approach to Islam, since, as an institution, it is nothing but the laws and concepts that constitute it and that are to be common among those who are Muslim together in a space called Islam.

This is significant since, as Ramadan (2004, pp. 77-85) describes, the essence of Muslimness is based on four pillars: "faith, practice, spirituality"; "understanding of the texts and the contexts"; "education and transmission"; and "action and participation. " Of these, only the first is strictly individual. The other three involve communal discussion and association not only to educate others, but also to transform, where necessary, one's surroundings. This is where difference and continuous discussion and possible synthesis can emerge, since each individual can, and should, have his or her own understanding, discuss it with others, and where possible, reach a conclusion so as to avoid conflicts.

While the three pairs discussed here display differences in their interpretations of Islamic concepts and laws, as well as attitudes towards their American identity. they all self-identify as American Muslims, or Muslim Americans.

4. Conclusion

This paper scrutinized how Mattu and Maznavi's *Love, InshAllah* approach an establishment of American Muslim identity. The six chosen stories put in three pairs for the present study depict different approaches toward religion in both its theoretical and legislative

concepts. Saeed's Muslimness in "Leap of Faith" is different from Ahmed's in "Punk-Drunk Love" in her attitude towards the omniscient Alim, among other points of major difference. As Adiba's "A Prayer Answered"—and to a lesser extent Sol's "The First Time"—shows, the communal is as important to one's identity as is the strictly individual practices. Mu'min's "Wild Wind," who refuses to drink alcohol with Theo, shares her Muslimness with all the members of her family who drink liberally, while Levine in "From Shalom to Salam" leaves room for doubt with regard to Muslimness and practice. It is taken for granted that one can drink while aware of and ignoring the communally established prohibition against alcohol. Both American and Muslim identities require more than an individual who can "possess" that identity. There is need for a "law" as well as other individuals who either adhere to it or ignore it. There are Derridean breaks and intervals, to be filled or left ignored, between the expressions of identity in these six stories, differences and deferrings that can be expressed and simultaneously be taken into the inclusive notions of Muslimness, Americanness, and their combination.

Muslimness and Americanness as "identities" can thus never be what they are assumed to be, nor can they be said comfortably to have been expressed or affirmed, no matter which term is taken to be the dominant, more inclusive field, since identity and self-identification depends "on unique qualities that distinguish oneself from most others […] as well as similarities to others (Schlenker, p. 23). What Muslimness and Americanness mean is only defined with regard to the other. The movement of the individual between the perceived spaces of the two categories is constant and their existence is constitutive to the identity of every individual. One might take the concept of the "trial" and live by it in the closet, as Adiba did in her closetedness to the community, or transform it in the space that allows such explicit transformation, like she did to a few select friends/partners, such as Hafsa. Identity is not fixed, not even at the moment it is affirmed.

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