

Breaking Free of the American Gaze:  
#OwnVoices, *Amal Unbound*, and the Rewriting of Muslim Stereotypes

Abstract

The complex insider/outsider debate over cultural authenticity in literary representation has a long history. According to Donna L. Gilton, the question of who should get to write children's books about marginalized peoples and cultures has been conceptualized in three distinct frameworks: multicultural literature should be written by all; write what you know from personal experience; and write what you have carefully researched. #OwnVoices, a movement within the children's literature community, is a recent articulation of the second school of thought. It advocates for increased representation of authors from marginalized cultures who write what they know. This presentation argues that much of what has been written about Muslim girls and lauded as multicultural literature connecting to our growing consciousness of the Muslim world is written from what I propose to call "the American Gaze": a lens that cannot see Muslim people or culture as separate from the post-9/11 American experience of terrorism and war. This Gaze situates the reader in a place of power, continuously viewing the story in relation to America's dominant—largely white—culture, and looking to that same culture to act as salvation to the problems that the story presents. This presentation suggests that #OwnVoices authors are the storytellers most needed in the growing canon of Muslim and Muslim-American literature. They have the most potential for accurate, complex representation, which provide what Sandra Hughes-Hassel calls "counter-stories" to the stereotypes of the American Gaze that serve to marginalize and oppress.

My analysis of *Amal Unbound*, written by Pakistani-American Aisha Saeed, focuses on the stereotypes the author rewrites, and on my own experience of what Sara Sterner has defined as "reading whitely." I place *Amal Unbound* in conversation with other stories of Muslim girls to compare the influence of the American Gaze on the text as well as its ability to break free of that same Gaze. Finally, I consider the implications for young readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, whose reading experiences serve as both windows and mirrors that shape their understanding of self and other.