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Breaking and Believing: The Reflexive Journey of Muslim Identity in Mafi's *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*

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Abstract

In an era saturated and disrupted by persistent Islamophobia and cultural polarization, nuanced representations of how diasporic Muslim youth navigate and negotiate their subjectivities are increasingly critical. Through the lens of Anthony Giddens's reflexive modernity, this study demonstrates the selective reconstruction of the Muslim identity in *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (2018) by Tahereh Mafi. Using qualitative textual analysis and thematic analysis, the objective of the study is to examine how Shirin negotiates her identity in terms of religion, the hijab, cultural participation, and interpersonal relationships. The research reveals that Shirin's identity is not merely inherited nor entirely rejected; she reconstructs it selectively, using cultural and religious practices as a means of self-assertion against the structural constraints of post-9/11 Islamophobia and the surveillance of her high school. The further analysis depicts her identity formation marked by the moment of continuous tension between resistance and negotiation, revealing the multiple realities of diasporic experience in late modernity. This study extends the previous literature on Muslim identity by employing Giddens's reflexive modernity to argue that Muslim identities are selectively reconstructed in and through everyday practice instead of mainly through resistance or hybridity. It contributes to current literary and cultural studies by foregrounding young adult literature as a site for representing complex Muslim subjectivities.

Keywords: *Diasporic Identity, Muslim Identity, Reflexive Modernity, Selective Reconstruction, Reflexive Modernity, Young Adult Literature.*

Introduction

Literature has been crucial in examining social anxieties, especially regarding the impact of national crises on the treatment of marginalized communities. In the United States, Muslim identities were culturally and literarily changed after the attacks of 9/11. In the aftermath of 9/11, many works of fiction tended to reproduce binary oppositions such as "us versus them" or "good versus evil" in their narrative and representation. Moreover, they reinforce the stereotype of Muslims as cultural Others, and their collective identity is inscribed in the discourse of fear, security, and suspicion (Javed et al., 2024). In recent post-9/11 literature, the tendency is more towards migration, hybridity, and the complexity of cross-cultural identities. These narratives often give up the rigidity of binaries in favour of understanding identity as something to be shaped through negotiation, experience, and socio-political context.

Muslim youths living in diasporic contexts often find themselves in a particularly complex social situation as they need to negotiate and make sense of multiple and sometimes potentially conflicting systems of meaning. Family traditions, religious commitments, peer relationships, and dominant cultural expectations frequently intersect in ways that require ongoing negotiation and compromise to resolve conflicts. Consequently, identity formation cannot be understood simply as a process of either retention or assimilation. Instead, it requires ongoing reflection on the values, practices, and affiliations that should be preserved, modified, or reinterpreted in response to ever-changing circumstances. It has been increasingly recognised by scholars who study migration and youth identity that belonging is not a comfortable and fixed condition but rather a continual process that is negotiated through everyday experiences, social interactions, and institutional structures (Nilan 2017; Boland 2020; Ghatas 2023). These dynamics are especially visible in the literary representations of Muslim youth, where questions of religion, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship often converge, becoming a site of struggle and contention.

With the shift in focus away from cultural and geopolitical stereotypes to the layered realities of diaspora and hyphenated identities, young adult (YA) literature has emerged as a key site of intellectual inquiry into the identity formation of Muslim youth. As noted by scholars, YA fiction plays a key role in shaping how young people come to understand themselves and their place in this world (Bold and Phillip, 2019). Tahereh Mafi's *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (2018) explores this process through the character of Shirin, a Muslim teenager of Iranian descent who must contend with Islamophobia, cultural expectations, and personal identity in the post-9/11 context. As a visible Muslim subject who wears hijab, Shirin is in overlapping structures of racialization and marginalization, thereby forcing her to constantly observe and examine herself in relation to her cultural heritage and that of dominant American society.

Recent scholarship has deepened the conversation on Muslim identity in literature and youth studies through resistance to Islamophobia, agency, and hybrid forms of belonging (Khachab, 2020; Ismah, 2020; Boland, 2020). For instance, Merlins (2024) and Yuniarti (2022) examine Muslim identity as negotiation shaped by cultural tension; Nilan (2017) studies Muslim youth subjectivity that is fluid, relational, and socially mediated. Other researchers have further examined daily practices such as dress, language, and cultural participation as locations of identity negotiation (Latif, 2024; Ullah et al., 2024). These researches have proven important in making clear that Muslim identity is both dynamic and contested, however they frame identity in terms of resistance or hybridity rather than its reflexive self-reconstruction by way of ordinary practices.

Such perspectives did not see how individuals often retain, alter, or reinterpret inherited elements and discourses in selective ways in changing social conditions. In the meantime, this process indicates that there are forms of identity negotiation that extend beyond resistance and hybridity and involve the constant remaking of inherited cultural and religious resources. Consequently, there has been relatively little inquiry into the possibility that Muslim adolescents selectively reconstruct a religious and cultural identity through acts of not only resistance, but also negotiation, ambivalence, and strategic self-positioning. To date, limited scholarship has applied these processes to Anthony Giddens's notion of reflexive modernity, especially in readings of post-9/11 young adult texts.

This study aims to explore the concept of selective reconstruction, where the inherited religious and cultural elements are not only accepted or rejected but are also reworked through everyday practices. In other words, the Muslim identity of the protagonist in *A Very*

Large Expanse of Sea is not contested and defined through a back-and-forth and tension between two cultural poles, but is crafted instead as a reflexive project, determined by agentic and structural constraint.

Giddens' concept of reflexive modernity views identity as an ongoing "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991). In the concept of late modernity, identity is not passively inherited through tradition, but rather actively constructed through an ongoing reflective process in response to changing social conditions. This process involves what Giddens describes as 'disembedding,' where social practices are lifted from traditional contexts and rearticulated within new frameworks, allowing individuals to engage with inherited values rather than simply reproducing them. This framework is relevant to understanding the experiences of Muslim diasporic adolescents, whose identities are constructed between inherited religious and cultural values and the demands of a secular and individualistic society. In this regard, identity is not formed through a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, but through ambivalence, adaptation, and constraint.

Through a close reading of Shirin's experiences in *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, this study presents how Muslim identity is not so much unilaterally negotiated between two poles, but rather being reconstructed selectively and unevenly as a reflexive project shaped by agency and structural constraint. By observing how Shirin navigates multiple domains, we see how she redefines the hijab as a site of personal and political expression. In similar fashion, she selectively engages with religious practices to curate her own experiences of religion. In another context, we observe her utilizing breakdancing to gain visibility within dominant cultures. In the end, we see her interfaith love affair as a site where she negotiates intimacy, belief, and belonging.

The present study attempts to show that Shirin's identity becomes a site of negotiation and compromise that is marked by tension between agency and constraint by focusing on these intersections. In doing so, it aims to contribute to wider discussions about the issues on diaspora, religion, and identity by offering a more nuanced understanding of identity construction in contemporary multicultural contexts.

Method

This study employs textual analysis to examine the construction of Muslim identity in *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (2018) by Tahereh Mafi. Qualitative research is appropriate for exploring meaning, representation, and experience within social and cultural contexts (Creswell, 2013, and Flick, 2009). Within literature studies, this allows us to interpret how identity is constructed and represented in narrative texts.

The analysis focuses on selected excerpts depicting Shirin's experiences related to religion, social relationships, and identity negotiation, including her wearing of the hijab, breakdancing, and romantic relationships. Through close reading, these text portrayals are interrogated for recurrences of negotiated identity and selective reconstruction within the text. In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis, which is a widely used and useful method in literary research as it provides a systematic, transparent framework to trace complex social patterns through a text, the study will involve close reading of the text, coding of relevant passages, and identification of recurring patterns.

The study employs textual analysis and thematic analysis together. Through a close reading, this study analyses the use of narrative language, techniques, and characterization as well as the context that the extract shows. Through a thematic analysis, one can

systematically identify patterns related to identity negotiation across the text. Together, these approaches facilitate an interpretation of how Muslim identity is represented, contested, and selectively reconstructed through multiple domains of Shirin's experience.

Upon engaging with the novel several times, the study discovered four main themes in the text, i.e., religious practice, hijab, cultural participation, and interpersonal relationships, which are identified as repeated sites through which Muslim identity is negotiated and reconstructed. Giddens's concept of reflexive modernity was used to interpret these themes. Giddens's notions and definitions of reflexivity, agency, and structural constraint work as enabling analytical lenses through which Shirin is seen as constantly reworking her inherited religious and cultural identities in response to changing social conditions.

Results and Discussions

Hijab as a Site of Reflexive Identity Negotiation

The hijab is a visible marker of Muslim identity that is often contested in Western sociocultural discourse. In Islamic contexts, the hijab is associated with modesty and religion. However, Western discourse depicts it more negatively with arguments that it is associated with autonomy, control, and gendered expectations (Williams and Vashi; Barth et al., 2024). Rather than carrying a fixed meaning, the hijab is shaped by competing interpretations. The dominant discourses may frame it as a symbol of confinement, while Muslim women might negotiate its meaning as a part of their religious identity (Merlins, 2024). The stress indicates that the meaning of hijab is not pre-given but rather produced within social and cultural discourses, making it a site of intersection of power, representation, and identity.

Shirin is a hijab wearing Muslim girl, and in this contested space, her experience shows how visibility creates hyper recognition and marginalisation. As the hijab identifies her as a Muslim woman, it makes her susceptible to verbal and physical violence, as highlighted by the Islamophobic attacks she suffers from in public. Shirin tells how she always gets bullied wherever she is: "Strangers would scream at me in the street, at school, in the grocery store, at gas stations and restaurants to go home, go home, go back to Afghanistan you camel-fucking terrorist" (Mafi 6). The Strangers also assaulted her on the road. They tear the scarf from her head and attempt to strangle her with it (Mafi 7). Incidents of aggression and violence reflect not just individual prejudices but also broader Islamophobic discourses that depict Muslim identities as racialized and typically associated with the threat and otherness (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2022). Thus, Shirin becomes what she refers to as an "uncomfortable topic of conversation" (Mafi 150-151), indicating how her subjectivity is displaced by the symbolic weight of her visible identity.

Shirin's subjectivity crisis takes place under these conditions, wherein she cannot exist as a regular person but instead is constructed through the other's gaze and is unable to perceive herself otherwise. The act of withdrawing from social interaction, such as eating her lunch in the toilet (Mafi 6), does not suggest a mere lack of confidence but a structural condition where visibility is also vulnerability. In this sense, the hijab functions not only as a religious symbol but as a sign that places her within a hierarchy of belonging and exclusion.

Instead of passively conforming to this identity, Shirin reflexively negotiates it. In line with Giddens' notion of the "reflexive project of the self," identity is not inherited as a stable tradition but continuously re-evaluated in response to lived experience (Giddens, 1991). This understanding leads to the hijab becoming part of the reflexive monitoring of self whereby

identity is continually revised as a consequence of social risk and lived experience. Shirin's othering impacts her greatly. It causes her to rethink not whether she should wear the hijab, but rather how she should wear it and what it means in her socio-cultural context.

We see this reflexivity in Shirin's stylistic choices, particularly her combination of the hijab with tight jeans (Mafi 116). She mentions, "I didn't like pinning my scarf in place, so I usually wrapped it loosely around my head, tossing the longer ends over my shoulders -and reemerged" (Mafi 6). Shirin's choice of unconventional hijab fashion, alongside taking elements of mainstream youth fashion, signifies a selective management of visible difference that reduces social hostility while remaining religiously identifiable. This could also mean that it asserts her right not to conform to the stereotypes of Western society and those within her community. However, this choice also exposes a certain ambivalence. Though this seems to affirm agency, it also suggests a strategic self-positioning in relation to dominant cultural norms, which implies some degree of internalization of those expectations.

In this way, Shirin's clothing choices should not be seen merely as resistance, which would be equivalent to a straightforward rejection or resistance against a dominating order, but rather as contestation, or how she negotiates within a dominant culture to create her own identity. Instead of making high-profile claims and arguments about being discriminated against for being Muslim, she adopts a style that reduces markers of "difference". She remains identifiable as Muslim, but the intensity of social hostility is reduced. This means that her identity is not a freely chosen one but is shaped in negotiation between agency and constraint; thus, the limits of autonomy are visible.

Shirin's statement in the novel illustrated an increasing ambivalence about what the hijab means for Shirin.

People—and often guys—liked to say that Muslim women wore headscarves because they were trying to be demure, or because they were trying to cover up their beauty, and I knew that there were ladies in the world who felt that way. I couldn't speak for all Muslim women—no one could—but it was a sentiment with which I fundamentally disagreed. I didn't believe it was possible to hide a woman's beauty. I thought women were gorgeous no matter what they wore, and I didn't think they owed anyone an explanation for their sartorial choices. Different women felt comfortable in different outfits. They were all beautiful. (Mafi 47)

Shirin thinks that the hijab is an expression of one's choice and beauty. Thus, when she rejects the notion that the hijab is to conceal beauty, it is clear. This is counter to Western stereotypes that define the hijab as oppression, yet this also fits into liberal discourses that translate religion into a matter of choice. As a result, the hijab does not reposition itself simply as a theological obligation, but rather as a "sartorial choice", thereby raising questions about whether this is a sign of agency or of assimilation.

Shirin experiences similar tension when she continues to wear the hijab despite of ongoing discrimination. In stating that getting rid of it would mean "giving the bullies all the power" (Mafi 264), the hijab serves as a form of resistance. Nevertheless, the act of resistance is shaped by the social conditions that engender it. Her decision is therefore not made in a neutral space of freedom but in the context of a space where identity has to be constantly defended and negotiated. This suggests that tradition does not merely get preserved or rejected but is actively reconstructed (Giddens, 1991). Shirin neither gives up the hijab nor strictly conforms to its traditional interpretations. Shirin leaves the hijab but does not follow

its classical interpretations fully either. Instead, she redefines this in ways that allow her to negotiate the competing demands of faith, society, and her own self-expression. This process reflects a form of situated agency, where individual choice is exercised within structural constraints rather than outside them.

The hijab in this context cannot be understood as oppression or empowerment. Instead, it is a site where identity is negotiated through the interplay of agency, social risk, and structural constraint. The hijab in the novel represents not simply a mere preservation of 'tradition' or 'resistance', but a form of selective reconstruction which is important to the reflexive project of Muslim identity.

Negotiating Faith in a Plural Society: Religion Beyond Tradition

The pluralistic and liberal character of contemporary society creates a socio-cultural environment in which one's religious identity is not only regulated publicly and privately by the institutions of religion, but is also formed within a broader culture and society. In this context, religion is not immutable but is reshaped in experience and practice. Recent studies note that the religious identity is continuously reconstructed through cultural, social, and religious factors in migration and minority contexts (Beaman, 2021; Cascino and Vicini, 2026). The practice of religion is not merely inherited but reflexively interpreted and reworked in the light of lived experience and everyday practice.

In this context, Shirin's relationship to Islam is marked by tension between inherited religious traditions and the demands of a secular, pluralist society. Shirin's mother employs the cultural and religious system of Islam to make her children comply with practices, particularly prayer. Shirin and her brother most often displace these expectations by pretending to practice (Mafi 286). This difference implies not just a generation dispute but a wider change in how religious authority is experienced and negotiated. As AlMasarweh (2022) suggests, religious identity is constructed within transnational social fields, where practices and meanings are shaped through social interactions, cultural contexts, and collective experiences, and not solely determined by institutional authority.

Interpreting Shirin's withdrawal from prayer as a rejection of religion would, however, would be simplistic. Her selective involvement shows that she is actively re-engaging in religion. She abstains from prayer yet maintains a close bond with fasting during Ramadan. She said, "I loved how it made me feel. It gave me a sharpness of heart and mind; I experienced clarity then as I rarely did during the rest of the year. Somehow, it made me stronger. After surviving a month of serious focus and self-discipline, I felt like I could overcome anything" (Mafi 188). This selective practice of rituals indicates that she does not abandon practices but instead assesses her personal relevance.

From the perspective of Giddens' reflexive modernity, this trend highlights a shift from tradition-based religiosity to what may be termed experiential spirituality. In late modernity, individuals have to reflectively build their identities while choosing what to keep and what to change from tradition (Giddens, 1991). Shirin's preference for fasting rather than praying illustrates this selection process, where particular practices are retained not because of their doctrinal value but rather for their ability to create meaning.

This change can be understood in the context of changes in the character of religiosity in late modernity. As Giddens (1991) points out, modernity weakens the authority of tradition by exposing people to many ideas, values, and ways of living. Thus, modernity involves reflexive choice about how to live. Religious identity, therefore, is becoming less dependent

on unthinking adherence to received norms and more on personal thought and experience. People do not accept religious obligations just because their families, social groups, or religious organisations advise them to do so. They assess such obligations according to their meaning and relevance in everyday life. In this context, faith is not discarded but rather reconfigured through selectivity, reinterpretation, and personal appropriation. Shirin is engaged with Islam in this tendency. Despite her disengagement from prayer, her enduring attachment to fasting indicates that engagement with a religious commitment is organized less around what institutionally we ought to do and more around what she finds personally meaningful. She is neither wholly traditional nor secular in her religiosity, but in between, where what is inherited is reflexively evaluated and selectively incorporated in her ongoing project of self-formation.

However, this process of reflexive selection is not without tension. By regarding fasting as a form of emotional “therapy”, Shirin is distancing her understanding from one that strictly views it as an act of worship. Although it can be interpreted as an assertion of agency, this raises further questions about the degree to which religious meaning is transformed or recontextualised through the alignment with a modern therapeutic discourse. This can be interpreted as not only reflecting autonomy but also the impact of dominant cultural directives, which reframe spirituality in individualised and psychological terms.

Overall, Shirin’s manner of practicing the faith cannot be interpreted as either acceptance or rejection of Islam. This indicates that it is necessary to reinterpret, recontextualize, and reflect on faith within a broader framework of its meaning. Her choices of faith reflect a negotiation between religious tradition, individual experience, and cultural assimilation, shedding light on the difficulties of practicing faith in a secular and plural society. Shirin’s relationship with Islam reflects her own interests, which positions her religious identity as part of a reflexive project of self. Faith is thus not merely transformed but continually reconfigured through the interplay of agency, structural constraint, tradition, and modernity. Shirin’s religiosity does not represent either negotiation or resistance. Rather, it emerges as a selective reconstruction of her diasporic conditions.

Breakdancing as a Space of Reflexive Identity Construction

In the novel, breakdancing functions not merely as a space of self-expression but as a reflexive site where Shirin negotiates recognition, belonging, and alternative forms of identity beyond Islamophobic categorization. As a Muslim girl subjected to persistent Islamophobic bullying, Shirin occupies a social position defined by otherness and stigma. The line “all that mattered in this particular world was talent. If I were a decent breakdancer, these people would respect me. Here, I could be more than the settings applied to my life by society” (Mafi 79) signals a shift from imposed identity toward self-redefinition, where skill becomes a means of reshaping how she is perceived. Rather than being reduced to “the girl who wore that thing on her head,” she hopes to be called a “b-girl” (Mafi 72). Thus, she repositions herself within a different symbolic framework.

It indicates identity formation involves both negotiation and contestation within a range of discursive resources. Through breakdancing, a form associated with American hip-hop, Shirin strategically engages with a mode of expression that holds value within the dominant cultural field. This allows her to momentarily gain approval and acceptance in a culture that had previously rejected her. However, the process in itself of empowerment also signifies that

acceptance is conditional. A woman is recognized not for her humanity, but for her ability to act in accordance with valued cultural norms.

Recent studies show that breakdancing is a cultural practice through which marginalized people negotiate identity and assert visibility in environments of social exclusion (Benvenga, 2022). Despite this space's formation, one marked by unequal power relations, participants must continue negotiating for recognition and legitimacy, particularly concerning gender and representation (Gunn, 2021). In this sense, Shirin's involvement may be interpreted as a form of resistance against stereotypes that characterize Muslim women. Furthermore, as a hijab-wearing female dancer, she challenges the male-dominated nature of breakdancing culture while complicating gendered and religious expectations. The fact that she can do movements that need physical strength with a hijab on disrupts the perceptions of Muslim women's bodily incapacity and social roles.

Viewing breakdancing only as a liberatory space would overlook the ambivalence embedded in Shirin's experience. The way she is seen after her performance shows not a total breakdown of prejudice but more an alteration in it.

By the end of January, I had an entirely different social status than I'd had just weeks prior. It was insane... Somehow, I wasn't a terrorist anymore. I'd leveled up. They now saw me as some kind of exotic-looking breakdancer. Our performance had deactivated their alarms." (Mafi 73)

The fact that she shifts from being 'a terrorist' to 'an exotic-looking breakdancer' suggests that the negative connotations attached to the former description are erased for the time being. However, the latter phrase still marks her as different, as the other. Consequently, acceptance is mediated through exoticization and not real inclusion.

This dynamic demonstrates the limitations of cultural performance to overcome marginalization. Through breakdancing, Shirin can negotiate her identity and gain visibility, but to do this, she may have to appeal to a dominant audience. What defines her success is her ability to translate herself into something recognizable and acceptable within that culture. In this sense, her identity can be understood as co-produced through the gaze of others, while affecting the extent to which she is able to gain autonomy.

From Giddens' perspective, Shirin's dancing is part of a reflexive project of the self in which identity is actively constructed through an ongoing interaction with social conditions. The breakdancing culture embodies a process of "disembedding" that describes how certain aspects of identity are detached from social norms that we inherit and rearticulated within a different cultural form. Through breakdancing, the rigidifications of Muslim identity – which are often encapsulated within religious, cultural, or ethnic categories – get reworked in alternative practices of recognition and belonging. Nevertheless, the receiving-end process does not happen in a vacuum but rather is shaped continuously by the structural inequalities and cultural hierarchies in her surroundings.

Thus, breakdancing is both a space of possibility and a site of constraint. Shirin's assertion of her Muslim identity allows her to confront and rework mainstream ideas about Muslim identity, while also subjecting her to different categorization and surveillance. Labelling herself a "Muslim breakdancer" doesn't signal a resolution of these tensions; rather, it indicates a negotiation between visibility and belonging, and between agency and constraint.

Shirin's breakdancing performance demonstrates how identity construction in a diasporic milieu is not simply about being liberated from stereotypes; rather, it is about being

positioned, with all the associated recognition and power entailed. She does not escape marginalization but repositions herself within it. This demonstrates that identity in late modernity is always constitutive. It is constructed through strategic self-positioning within existing social structures. Through breakdancing, the novel renegotiates Muslim identity within unequal social relations. Consequently, these social relations enable and restrict agency through which breakdancing is reflexively practiced as selective reconstruction and not just freedom from marginalization.

Relationships as a Site of Identity Negotiation

In the novel *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, Shirin's romantic relationship is an important site of negotiation of her religious, cultural, and personal identity. As a familiar subject of young adult fiction, romance is not just a narrative device but also a space through which socio-cultural tensions are articulated. Shirin's relationship with Ocean highlights the incompatibility between her inherited Iranian-Islamic values and those of a liberal American society.

Shirin is aware that the relationship will not get approved by her parents, particularly regarding physical intimacy. She states, "I was also pretty sure my parents would've had simultaneous heart attacks if they knew I was even thinking about kissing a boy, which, surprisingly, did not at all factor into my considerations" (Mafi 141). Her observation has reinforced the power of the cultural and religious norms imparted to her family. These norms on intimacy are in turn deeply rooted in an Iranian-Islamic socio-cultural system in which premarital intimacy is both religiously prohibited and socially regulated. Sexual relationships are considered legitimate only within marriage and are reinforced through legal, cultural, and familial expectations (Farahani, 2020). At the same time, these norms are not uniformly interpreted, as studies have indicated that youth may distinguish among forms of intimacy and negotiate demarcations between emotional relationships, non-physical interaction, and physical contact (Mehrolohasani et al., 2020).

This negotiation becomes particularly visible in Shirin's ambivalence toward physical intimacy. At the beginning of her relationship with Ocean, Shirin feels uncomfortable being close to him, suggesting that she has internalized Iranian cultural and familial notions regarding intimacy. She hesitates, revealing that inherited moral boundaries structure and affect her affective responses even as she begins to question these norms. However, the pervasive feeling of discomfort lessens the more she speaks to Ocean and the more she cares. Dating and even kissing no longer come to be seen as acts that threaten her identity, but get reinterpreted through trust, connection, and choice. This shift suggests not simply discarding inherited values, but a reflexive reworking of those boundaries through lived experience. Intimacy is reconceived as a site of selective reconstruction rather than reworking values through violation.

This process is made further explicit through Shirin's relationship with Ocean, who accepts her identity as a hijab-wearing Muslim girl. This relationship provides her with a form of recognition and validation in a context in which it is otherwise lacking (Mafi 141). Through this acceptance, her perception of what she is permitted to do is being reconfigured as the emotional validation allows her to renegotiate previously accepted prohibitions. In this way, intimacy is framed no longer in terms of religious or cultural taboos, but in terms of individual feeling and mutual consent characteristic of liberal Western values.

This is evidence of the transformation of personal relationships in late modernity. According to Giddens (1992), there is an emergence of what he calls the "pure relationship,"

which is sustained by emotional gratification rather than obligation. It is not a type of relationship created by social customs, religious authority, family obligation or community expectation. Giddens (1992) suggests that intimacy in contemporary society is increasingly sustained by personal satisfaction rather than obedience to social or cultural mandates. This conceptual framework explains how Shirin's relationship with Ocean becomes significant despite conflicting with some of her inherited culture. She assesses the relationship in terms of personal experience, emotional trust, and reciprocal understanding, rather than by set moral categories. Ocean's acceptance of her religious and cultural identity also reinforces this process, offering a relational space for self-definition. As a result, intimacy serves not just as a romantic space; it is also a reflexive space through which Shirin reconsiders inherited ideas about belonging, agency, and personal choice.

However, this transformation is not without challenges. Shirin's involvement in romantic intimacy raises the issue not simply of cultural assimilation but of how inherited norms are reflexively reinterpreted within plural social contexts. Although her decisions demonstrated agency, they also result from the social environment in which conflicting cultural expectations interact. This dynamic reflects broader patterns seen with studies of Muslim diasporic youth that negotiate their identities through the reinterpretation of family traditions and social expectations, resulting in context-dependent forms of belonging (Boland, 2020; Ghatas, 2023). In this sense, Shirin's experience shows that identity is not merely a legacy of what we inherit, but also a selective reconstruction through negotiation.

However, negotiations of identity in the novel are marked not just by intimacy with the dominant culture, but also by contestation within Muslim interpretive communities. The tension is particularly noticeable in Shirin's confrontation with Amna, which illustrates how one's religious identity must be debated rather than passively inherited.

[Amna] "You are not allowed to go around kissing boys!" she cried.

I looked her over. "Have you never kissed a boy?"

[Amna] "This isn't about me," she huffed, "this is about you. You wear hijab," she said. "You're disrespecting everything you're supposed to stand for."

[Shirin] "Um. Okay." I squinted at her. Half smiled. Flipped her off and kept walking ...

[Amna] "Girls like you don't deserve to wear hijab," she said, matching my pace. "It'd be better for everyone if you just took it off." ...

[Shirin] "You are, like, everything that is wrong with people, you know? You," I said, "are what's wrong with religion. People like you make the rest of us look crazy, and I don't think you even realize it." I shook my head. "You don't know shit about me, okay? You don't know shit about how I've lived or what I've been through or why I choose to wear hijab and it's not your place to judge me or how I live my life. I get to be a fucking human being, okay? And you can go straight to hell." (Mafi 195)

Amna's critique that Shirin's actions go against the values represented by the hijab reestablishes a normative framework in which religious identity is believed to conform to specific moral actions. Conversely, Shirin's reaction undermines this normative construction by implying that experience and context should take precedence. Her insistence that other people 'don't know' reflects an important pivot away from communal definitions of identity toward individual self-definition.

The tension highlights the presence of varying forms of Muslim identity among diasporas. Amna's more normative regulated understanding of religious identity contrasts with Shirin's reflexive orientation, where religious meaning is continually interpreted through her personal experience. As a result, the clash goes beyond a mere disagreement on conduct;

it becomes a struggle over who has the power to define a Muslim Woman. Shirin refuses to accept a shared community standard and uses her own biographical experience as a basis for selfhood. The weakening of unquestioned traditional authority and the accompanying rise of self-authored narratives illustrate a feature of reflexive modernity.

Shirin's rejection of Amma's viewpoint, on the other hand, also demonstrates the internal fragmentation of the diaspora Muslim identity. The novel does not provide an integrated or coherent understanding of religious identity. Instead, it details various, often contradictory interpretations of religious identity within the same community. This implies that negotiating identity is not only about dealing with pressures from other cultures but also about dealing with differences and tensions within the community.

The ensuing act of reconciliation that Shirin and Amna extend to each other due to Islamophobic discrimination complicates the dynamic. The way they are showing solidarity together despite external pressures indicates how the collective identity can be reactivated when situated in marginal conditions. All this means that identity is not fixed but instead situational and context-dependent.

The changes in positions also indicate the way identity is held through reflexive self-narration. Shirin does not have a set understanding of herself. She constantly revises what religion, intimacy, and belonging mean to her with her changing experiences. Through the dynamic integration of varying and conflicting social expectations into a coherent self, a person's identity emerges. The novel, in this connection, proves Giddens's argument about selfhood in late modernity that it should be sustained through continuous reflection and biographical reconstruction rather than through fixed traditions.

To sum up, Shirin's relationship with Ocean and her confrontation with Amna reveal that interpersonal relations are not simply a departure from religious tradition, but as a reflexive site where belonging, desire, and Muslim subjectivity are continually negotiated. Ocean demonstrates how intimacy can provide an opening for reinterpreting inherited boundaries, while Amna shows how such reinterpretation causes tensions within Muslim communal frameworks. The novel thus presents intimacy not as a simple opposition between tradition and modernity, but as a reflexive practice of selective reconstruction through which identity is renegotiated across both external cultural pressures and internal communal contestation. Identity emerges not as adherence or transgression but as a practice of negotiating multiple and often competing moral worlds.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how Shirin's identity in Mafi's *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* is best read as not something that is passively inherited, or completely rejected, but rather something that is actively worked on through everyday practices, cultural engagement, and interpersonal relations in a post 9/11 American space. Utilising Giddens's concept of the reflexive project of the self, this study builds on previous scholarship to conceptualise Muslim identity as a selective reconstruction that is shaped through the intersection of agency, structural constraint, resistance, and negotiation. Instead of simple representations of Muslim women as oppressed or empowered, the findings make identity identifiable as ambivalent, negotiated, and contextual; and young adult literature as a site for representation of complex Muslims subjectivities. These processes unfold within the structural realities of post 9/11, where everyday identity practices become acts of both negotiation and self-definition. Through this particular literary text, we have attempted to open up a space for future comparative literary studies on Muslim identity and other broader

explorations of reflexivity in diasporic literature. To conclude, this study argues that identity in the late modern diasporic contexts is not a stable category. It is a situated practice of reflexive modernity. Individuals like Shirin continually negotiate and redefine the boundaries of their religious and cultural identities amid competing expectations.

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