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Unhomely Experiences and Cultural Integration in Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl*

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Abstract

This study investigates how unhomely experiences shape the process of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation in Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl*, focusing on the protagonist, Inaya, a Muslim girl who moves from Saudi to America. This study examines how Inaya's unhomely experiences lead her to negotiate identity and develop strategies for cultural integration. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, this study analyzes textual data drawn from the novel. Two theories are used in this research: the first, Homi Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, which reveals how Inaya feels alienated in society; and the second, John W. Berry's acculturation theory, which explains how the prominent figure accepts and adapts to the new culture through integration. The findings reveal that Inaya's unhomely experiences manifest as awkwardness, uncanniness, incoherence, and instability. These conditions are shaped by cultural differences, religious visibility, and social interaction in the host society. However, these experiences do not remain unresolved. Inaya gradually develops coping strategies through school participation, social recognition, and identity negotiation, which lead her toward cultural integration. With several experiences, Inaya's growth has involved being an open minded, adapting to new environments, participating in social events, achieving academically, and respecting others. This research demonstrates that unhomely experiences transform into an integrated identity through the negotiation of a hybrid identity while maintaining her religious faith. Thus, this research contributes to diaspora studies, Muslim identities, and modern intercultural communication.

Keywords: *Acculturation, Diaspora, Identity Integration, Muslim Identity, Unhomely.*

Introduction

In the contemporary world of migration, identity is no longer a stable possession inherited from one's place of origin; it becomes a fragile and continuously negotiated space. Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of positioning shaped by history, representation, and difference (Hall). This idea highlights that identity as dynamic and continuously constructed. Identities are very complex (Bilá et al.). This complexity reflects the interaction of multiple social, cultural, and psychological factors in identity formation. Identity has been framed in personal and social terms (Yau et al.). In migration issues, Muslim involves not only in crossing geographical borders but also

in crossing ideological, cultural, racial, and religious boundaries. In Western societies, Islamophobia constructs Orientalist discourse. Where Islam is represented as foreign, threatening, backward, or incompatible with Western modernity (Said). This representation becomes more intense in the post-9/11 context, where Muslim bodies, names, accents, clothes, and religious practices are frequently politicized and racialized. Maira argues that Muslim youth in America live under the pressure of citizenship, surveillance, and imperial suspicion, while Farooqui and Kaushik show that Muslim youth identity is deeply affected by Islamophobia, discrimination, and social exclusion (Maira; Farooqui and Kaushik). Therefore, Muslim diaspora literature becomes a crucial cultural site for examining how Muslim subjects survive, adapt, and reclaim their identities in unfamiliar environments.(Lefort)

Diaspora is not simply a physical movement from homeland to host land. Brah conceptualizes diaspora as a contested cartography of identity, memory, belonging, and difference (Brah). In this sense, “home” is no longer singular, stable, or innocent. This idea is relevant to Muslim diasporic narratives because Muslim migrants often occupy an in-between position: they are expected to adapt to the dominant culture while being reminded that they remain religiously and culturally different.

Moghissi and Ghorashi further explain that the Muslim diaspora in the West involves complex negotiations of gender, home, belonging, and cultural expectation (Moghissi and Ghorashi). For young Muslim women, this negotiation is more visible, as religious markers such as hijab, khimaar, modest clothing, and religious conduct can be a form of social judgment.

Previous research has discussed the Muslim diaspora, representation, and identity formation from various studies. Abdurraqib’s study on hijab in immigrant Muslim literature demonstrates that Muslim women’s veiling practices cannot be reduced to oppression or submission; rather, they function as complex signs of migration, visibility, vulnerability, and agency (AbdurraqibSamaa). Al-Azraki argues that Islamic diasporic narratives are important in reframing Muslim identity against dominant Western and Islamophobic representations (Al-Azraki). Asiyah’s study on Pakistani-American Muslim women shows that diaspora literature represents identity negotiation as a process of maintaining Muslim selfhood while responding to social pressures in the host culture (Asiyah, “Pakistani-American Muslim Women Identity Negotiation as Reflected in Diaspora Literature”), “Pakistani-American Muslim Women Identity Negotiation”. In line with this study, Asiyah’s article in *Muslim English Literature* on mimicry in Aliya Husain’s *Neither This Nor That* reveals that Muslim female characters often experience ambivalent positions when they survive between cultural expectations and dominant social norms (Asiyah, “Fatima’s Mimicry in Aliya Husain’s *Neither This Nor That*”). These studies show that Muslim diaspora literature is not only about migration but also about the struggle for recognition.

Other studies of Islamophobia continue to shape Muslim in diasporic literature. Dahlan’s study on *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* highlights how post-9/11 America produces religious prejudice that must be countered through moderation, dialogue, and ethical coexistence (Dahlan). Ramadhan, Widianingsih, Zulfa, and Hayatullah show that media



representation has sustained Islamophobic narratives in Europe from 2015 to 2023 (Ramadhan et al.) Shahimi, Block, and Alisic's scoping review on young people with refugee backgrounds also demonstrates that identity formation among displaced youth is shaped by social acceptance, a sense of belonging, and cultural recognition (Shahimi et al.). Meanwhile, McCallum Guiney emphasizes that diaspora identity is shaped by generational memory and homeland-oriented attachments (McCallum Guiney). These studies confirm that diaspora identity is never merely individual; it is shaped by collective memory, public discourse, institutional structures, and representation. Diaspora identity also shaped hybrid identity: it combined one or more aspects of religious, cultural, or ethnic identity (Boland).

However, limited attention has been given to Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl*, particularly through the combined lens of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely and John W. Berry's theory of cultural adaptation. *Muslim Girl* presents Inaya, a Saudi Arabian Muslim girl who moves to America and struggles to live between two cultural worlds (Zakiyyah). Her unhomely experiences occurred in several contexts, such as at school, where she felt uncomfortable with the language and accent. Another condition is the negotiation of religious appearance, and her participation in American society while maintaining her Muslim identity. These things make the novel a significant text for examining the Muslim diaspora experience. Unlike narratives that only emphasize oppression or assimilation, *Muslim Girl* offers a more layered portrayal of a Muslim girl who experiences alienation but also develops strategies of adaptation, resilience, and integration. This becomes the state of the art of this study: reading Muslim diaspora literature through a framework that connects emotional displacement with cultural adaptation.

Bhabha's concept of the unhomely provides a theoretical framework for examining Inaya's psychological and cultural displacement. For Bhabha, the unhomely is not simply being away from home; it is the disturbing moment when the boundary between home and world becomes blurred and private identity is invaded by public histories of power, race, culture, and colonial discourse (Bhabha, *The Location of The Culture*). The unhomely captures the instability, awkwardness, and ambivalence experienced by diasporic subjects who cannot fully return to an original home but are not fully accepted in the new society either. In *Muslim Girl*, Inaya's Muslim identity becomes unhomely because it is both intimate and exposed: it belongs to her private faith and family life, yet it is constantly judged in public spaces such as school, peer interaction, and institutional recognition.

To understand more about the way to resolve unhomely experiences, Berry identifies four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration (Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation"). Inaya meets the characteristics of integration rather than the other categories since she studies about American culture at once she still preserves her Muslim Identity.

Based on this background, this study examines how *Muslim Girl* represents unhomely experiences and cultural adaptation through Inaya's life as a Muslim diasporic subject. It addresses two research questions: first, how are Inaya's unhomely



experiences represented in Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl*? Second, how does Inaya resolve her unhomely tension through cultural adaptation while maintaining her Muslim identity? By combining Bhabha's concept of the unhomely and Berry's acculturation theory, this article contributes to Muslim diaspora literary studies by showing that Muslim female identity is not merely a passive victim of displacement, but an active site of endurance, negotiation, and integration. The article argues that Inaya resolves her unhomely tension through gradual identity integration. She learns to negotiate her Muslim identity by moving from concealment to selective visibility. Later, she became actively involved in American school life while still preserving her religious values. This integration stage is chosen rather than assimilating or withdrawing from American society.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method. This study interprets meanings, experiences, conflicts, and identity formations represented in a literary text. Creswell explains that qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem (Creswell). Therefore, this method is relevant for examining how Inaya's unhomely experiences and cultural adaptation are represented in Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl*. This study also applies a postcolonial and acculturation approach, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely and John W. Berry's theory of acculturation.

The primary data of this research are words, phrases, sentences, dialogues, and narrative events in *Muslim Girl* that represent Inaya's displacement, cultural tension, religious identity, social interaction, and adaptation in American society. The secondary data are taken from books, journal articles, and previous studies related to Muslim diaspora, unhomeliness, cultural identity, Islamophobia, and acculturation. These sources are used to support the interpretation and to situate the study within existing scholarly discussions.

The data collection was conducted through several procedures. First, the novel was read closely and repeatedly to cope with Inaya's experience. Second, relevant textual evidence was identified and selected based on its relation to three main issues: unhomely experiences in Muslim diaspora life, cultural adaptation in American society, and maintaining Muslim identity through integration. Third, the selected data were classified into analytical categories based on Bhabha's concept of the unhomely and Berry's integration (Bhabha, *The Location of The Culture*; Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures").

The data analysis follows the qualitative data analysis stages proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al.). In the data condensation stage, selected textual evidence was reduced and organized to align with the research focus. In the data display stage, the data were arranged thematically into three sub-sections of findings. Finally, in the conclusion-drawing stage, the data were interpreted by connecting Inaya's experiences to the theories of unhomeliness and acculturation. Through these procedures, this study



explains how Inaya experiences displacement, adapts to American society, and maintains her Muslim identity through integration.

Results and Discussions

This part discusses the representation of unhomely experiences and cultural adaptation in Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl*. The analysis is divided into three parts: unhomely experiences in Muslim diaspora life, cultural adaptation in American society, and the maintenance of Muslim identity through integration. These three parts answer the research questions by showing that Inaya's experience as a Saudi Arabian Muslim girl in America is not merely an individual psychological struggle but also a cultural and diasporic condition. Her sense of discomfort, concealment, and fragmented identity reflects Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, while her gradual participation in American school life without fully abandoning her Muslim identity reflects Berry's acculturation strategy of integration.

Unhomely Experiences in Muslim Diaspora Life

In *Muslim Girl*, Inaya's unhomely experiences are represented through four conditions: awkwardness, uncanniness, incoherence, and instability. These conditions show how Inaya, as a Saudi Arabian Muslim girl living in America, experiences identity tension not only as a personal feeling but also as a diasporic and cultural problem. Bhabha's concept of the unhomely refers to a disturbing condition in which the boundary between home and the world becomes blurred, making the subject feel displaced even in spaces that should provide comfort and belonging (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" Source: Spring 1984: Discipleship") Therefore, Inaya's unhomely experience is not merely caused by living in a foreign country, but by the way her Muslim identity becomes exposed, questioned, hidden, and redefined in American society. However, these conditions are not presented as fixed or unresolved conflicts. They become the starting point of Inaya's gradual movement toward identity negotiation. Through awkward social encounters, discomfort with Muslim visibility, a divided school and home identity, and fear of public recognition, Inaya begins to understand that hiding her Muslim self cannot fully solve her tension. Instead, her experience gradually moves toward integration, a form of acculturation in which she maintains her Muslim identity while participating in American school life (Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures").

The meaning of the unhomely is closely related to the German term *unheimlich*, which refers to the uncanny or unfamiliar. Rostami and Parvaneh explain that "unhomely" is the opposite of *heimlich*, which suggests familiarity, intimacy, and security (157). Mato also argues that "being home" refers to living within familiar, safe, and protected boundaries, while "not being home" means realizing that home itself can be an illusion of coherence and safety (127). This idea is important for reading Inaya's condition because America does not only function as a new geographical place; it becomes a space where her familiar Muslim identity feels strange and unsafe. The



unhomely, then, appears when Inaya cannot fully feel at home either in her Muslim self or in the American school environment.

Awkwardness

The first form of Inaya's unhomely experience is awkwardness. Awkwardness appears when ordinary social interactions become uncomfortable because they reveal Inaya's cultural and religious differences. Huddart explains that the unhomely is associated with an awkward, uncanny sense of foreignness (54). Inaya's awkwardness is clearly shown when Raymond notices her Arab accent:

"Do you speak Arabic?" Inaya nodded. "A bit." "Maybe that's where the accent comes from." Inaya was silent, unsure how she felt about having an Arab accent. She would have to be more careful when she spoke. An awkward silence followed. (Zakiyyah 21)

This data encompasses a site of discomfort. Raymond's question seems simple, but it makes Inaya suddenly aware that her voice carries cultural differences. Her Arab accent, which should be a natural part of her background, becomes something she feels she must control. The sentence "she would have to be more careful when she spoke" indicates that Inaya begins to monitor herself. She is no longer simply communicating; she is trying to manage how her identity is heard by others.

Based on Bhabha's unhomely concept, Inaya's private cultural background enters the public space through her speech. Her accent exposes her Arabness before she can define herself. Hall argues that cultural identity shaped by positioning and difference rather than through a fixed core (Hall). Inaya is positioned as different through her accent, and this difference creates silence. The "awkward silence" is not empty; it contains the tension between wanting to belong and being marked as foreign.

Awkwardness is also shown in Inaya's encounter with Raymond's handshake:

"Forgive me." He smiled and stuck out his hand. "I didn't introduce myself. I'm Raymond." It took a moment for Inaya to realize that he was waiting for her to shake his hand. Her cheeks grew warm, and her heart pounded wildly in her chest. "I'm Inaya," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She tucked her hands deep into the pockets of her hijab and smiled widely at him. (Zakiyyah 22)

In American culture, shaking hands is a common sign of politeness. For Inaya, physical contact with a male is religiously sensitive except for a *mahram* (a close relative whom a person cannot marry in Islam). Her warm cheeks, pounding heart, low voice, and hidden hands show that her body becomes the place where two cultural systems crash. She wants to be polite while maintain her religious boundary.

Her words become a strategy to reduce social tension. She smiles to avoid appearing rude, but she hides her hands to preserve her Muslim practice. This is the awkwardness of Muslim diaspora life: Inaya must explain her religious values in an environment that may not understand them. The unhomeliness is not always dramatic; sometimes it appears in small gestures, pauses, and bodily hesitation.



Uncanniness

The second form of Inaya's unhomely experience is the uncanny. The uncanny appears when something familiar becomes strange. For Inaya, her khimaar and modest clothing are familiar signs of Muslim identity, but in American school life they become objects of judgment and embarrassment. This can be seen when Raymond makes an assumption about her:

"I just assumed..." "You shouldn't assume." Inaya's voice was tight. Raymond remained silent, and Inaya sensed he had no idea what he'd done wrong. Inaya was suddenly self-conscious of the black khimaar that framed her face and the wide black over-garment that she was sure looked like a stupid oversized dress. (Zakiyyah 9)

Inaya's Muslim clothing becomes uncanny because it is both familiar and strange at the same time. The khimaar is part of her religious identity. However, under Raymond's gaze, it becomes something that makes her feel exposed. Her sudden self-consciousness shows that she begins to see herself through the eyes of others. The phrase "stupid oversized dress" is especially important because it reveals exaggerated discomfort. Inaya's clothing is not objectively stupid.

This moment can be linked to Said's argument that Muslim identities in the West are regarded as foreign, backward, or threatening (Said). Inaya's clothing is not read merely as modest dress; it is surrounded by assumptions. Raymond's unfinished sentence, "I just assumed," suggests that he has already placed Inaya within a stereotype. The uncanny emerges because a familiar religious marker becomes strange when interpreted through another cultural gaze.

The uncanny also appears when Inaya must take her student ID picture:

"Inaya was settled on the student I.D. chair now, and she had no choice but to take her school picture. Anyway, it wasn't her fault that the khimaar was completely ruined. And even if it were, there was nothing Inaya could do about it now. (Zakiyyah 21)

The student ID picture should be an ordinary school procedure, it becomes an uncomfortable moment of representation for Inaya. She has "no choice," and her khimaar is "completely ruined." Inaya loses control over how her Muslim identity appears in public. The school ID fixes her image institutionally, yet the image does not fully represent the self she wants to preserve.

Mato argues that the unhomely allows readers to see that home cannot be understood as a fully stable or secure place (136). Inaya's school is supposed to be a space of education and belonging, but it becomes a space where her Muslim appearance is disturbed and made strange. The uncanny, therefore, appears when Inaya's familiar religious identity is transformed into an uncomfortable public image.

Incoherence



The third form of Inaya's unhomely experience is incoherence. Incoherence refers to the fragmentation of identity when the subject cannot maintain a unified self. Rostami and Parvaneh state that if the homely implies stability and coherence, the unhomely implies instability and incoherence (158). Inaya's incoherence is most clearly shown through her double life:

In all the months Inaya had lived the double life of "regular girl" at school and "Muslim girl" at home, she never had to speak the lie aloud. (Zakiyyah 128)

This quotation is central to Inaya's unhomely experience. The phrase "double life" shows that Inaya's identity is divided into two separate roles. At school, she performs the identity of a "regular girl," which implies conformity to American teenage norms. At home, she returns to the identity of a "Muslim girl," connected to family, faith, and religious expectations. The problem is that these two roles do not exist harmoniously. They create a hidden contradiction that Inaya calls a "lie."

This fragmentation becomes problematic because it prevents the formation of a stable yet flexible subjectivity. Instead of generating hybridity as a negotiated space, Inaya's condition reflects the formation of classified identity, in which each identity operates in isolation, intensifying psychological dissonance and limiting reflexive integration. The fact that she never had to "speak the lie aloud" further indicates that this division is internal rather than openly contested, meaning the conflict functions as an internal structuring of selfhood where identity remains split across social domains without mediation or synthesis.

Bhabha's concept of the unhomely explains that unhomeliness involves the distinction between what should be hidden and what should be shown (Bhabha, *The Location of The Culture* 15). Inaya's Muslim identity is shown at home but hidden at school. This separation creates incoherence because she cannot live as a complete self in both spaces. Her identity depends on location: school demands concealment, while home demands religious authenticity.

The same incoherence appears when Inaya decides to hide her Islam:

At the beginning of the academic year, Inaya had decided to hide her Islam at school, claiming it would make her life easier. But it had brought her nothing but headache and hardship. (Zakiyyah 121).

Concealment does not resolve Inaya's problem. Instead, it produces "headache and hardship." The "headache" represents psychological pressure, while "hardship" suggests the emotional and social consequences of hiding. Inaya imagines that concealing Islam will help her adapt, but the result is fragmentation. She remains Muslim internally, yet she removes Muslim visibility externally.

This incoherence also reflects Brah's view of diaspora as a contested space of identity, memory, and belonging (Brah). Inaya's diasporic self is contested because she cannot fully belong to one cultural space without losing another part of herself. Her school self and home self remain separated. Thus, Inaya's unhomely experience is not



only caused by discrimination from others; it also appears through the internal split created by concealment.

Unstability

The fourth form of Inaya's unhomely experience is instability. Instability arises when Inaya's identity shifts in response to social pressure, visibility, and fear of judgment. Rostami and Parvaneh explain that culture is never fully stable because it is always changing and made meaningful by others (158). Inaya's instability is shown through her desire to become invisible:

"I'm used to being looked at as normal, sweetheart," he said. "And as crazy as this may sound, I don't want that to change." The word normal made Inaya think of her own desire to be invisible at school. It had even pushed her to remove her Islamic headdress. (Zakiyyah 63)

The word "normal" becomes powerful in this quotation. It suggests that visible Muslim identity is positioned as abnormal in the school environment. Inaya does not only want to be accepted; she wants to be invisible. Her desire for invisibility shows that Muslim visibility has become a burden. She removes her Islamic headdress not because she no longer believes in Islam, but because the social environment makes Muslim appearance feel risky.

This instability becomes stronger when Inaya realizes that public recognition may expose her hidden identity:

"Inaya felt sick as she realized what it would mean if she won. She would have to stand before cameras to have pictures and videos of herself publicized for the world to see. If she were to remain the anonymous Muslim she had become at school, she would have to stand before the world without hijab and humiliate herself and her family". (Zakiyyah 102)

This scene shows that success itself becomes threatening. Winning an award should be a proud achievement, but for Inaya it creates fear because it will make her visible. The phrase "anonymous Muslim" is significant. It shows that Inaya has not abandoned Islam; she has only made her Muslim identity anonymous. Her identity becomes unstable because it depends on whether she is hidden or exposed, private or public, invisible or recognized.

Maira's discussion of Muslim youth in post-9/11 America helps explain this fear. Muslim youth often live under the pressure of suspicion, surveillance, and the need to prove belonging (Maira). Inaya's fear of public visibility reflects this pressure. She is not only worried about herself, but also about humiliating her family. Her body becomes representative of a larger Muslim identity, and this makes visibility emotionally heavy.

However, the same visibility that frightens Inaya also has the potential to become empowering. Veronica tells her:



"Imagine the whole world seeing a Muslim girl accept that award." Veronica smiled and patted Inaya softly on the cheek. "You would make the world proud, Inaya." She shook her head. "May Allah bless it for you. (Zakiyyah 107).

This quotation shows the turning point of instability. For Inaya, being seen as a Muslim girl means exposure. For Veronica, it means representation. This difference shows that Muslim visibility is unstable because it can be interpreted either as danger or as empowerment. Al-Azraki argues that Islamic diasporic narratives can reframe Muslim identity against dominant Western and Islamophobic representations (Al-Azraki). Veronica's statement reflects this reframing because she imagines Inaya's success as a positive public image of Muslim girlhood.

Therefore, Inaya's instability is not a sign of weakness. It is the result of living in a society where Muslim identity is constantly interpreted by others. Her movement between hiding and showing, fear and pride, invisibility and representation reveals the unstable nature of diasporic identity. This instability becomes the starting point for cultural adaptation. Inaya must understand American society without completely erasing her Muslim self.

Overall, Inaya's unhomely experiences are represented through awkwardness, uncanniness, incoherence, and instability. Yet these experiences do not merely trap her in conflict. They gradually push her to search for a more workable form of belonging. Her discomfort with accent, clothing, concealment, and public visibility reveals that assimilation through hiding is not enough to give her peace. This becomes the turning point of her identity development. Inaya begins to move from passive concealment toward a more active negotiation of identity, which later appears through school participation, ethical self-expression, and cultural integration.

Cultural Adaptation in American Society

After experiencing unhomely feelings, Inaya's identity problem develops into the process of cultural adaptation. In *Muslim Girl*, adaptation does not appear as a smooth movement from Saudi Arabian Muslim culture to American society. Rather, it is represented as a difficult negotiation between visibility and concealment, participation and fear, religious commitment and social acceptance. Berry explains that acculturation occurs when individuals or groups come into continuous contact with a different culture and then respond through several strategies, namely assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration (Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures"). Inaya's experience shows that cultural adaptation begins with an attempt at assimilation, but slowly moves toward contribution in American social life without completely abandoning her Muslim identity.

At the beginning of her adaptation, Inaya believes that hiding her Muslim identity will make her school life easier. This can be seen when she decides to remove her head cover at school:

"Oh my God," Kayla said in the bathroom after Inaya removed her head cover. They were standing in front of the mirrors, and Inaya was stuffing the cloth into her bag. "Are you



really taking all that off?" Annoyed, Inaya rolled her eyes. "Yeah, so what?" Kayla threw up her palms in defense. "Chill. I don't care what you do." She shrugged. "I'm just surprised, that's all." (Zakiyyah 51).

Inaya's early adaptation takes the form of bodily concealment. The head cover is not merely a piece of clothing; it is a visible sign of her Muslim identity. By removing it in the school bathroom, Inaya symbolically separates her public-school identity from her religious identity. The bathroom becomes an important transitional space because it allows her to move from being visibly Muslim to being less visibly different. Her act of "stuffing the cloth into her bag" indicates that Islam is not rejected, but hidden. She does not throw the head cover away; she carries it privately, keeping it out of public view.

This act can be read through Berry's concept of assimilation. Assimilation occurs when individuals do not wish to maintain their original cultural identity and instead seek interaction with the dominant society (Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures"). However, Inaya's case is more complex because she does not truly abandon Islam. She only attempts to reduce its visibility. Therefore, her adaptation is not full assimilation but an attempt at assimilation. She tries to appear more acceptable in American school life by minimizing the markers that make her different. This supports Maira's argument that Muslim youth in post-9/11 America often experience pressure to manage their visibility because Muslim identity can be associated with suspicion, difference, or social discomfort (Maira). Inaya's removal of the head cover reflects this pressure to become socially "normal."

However, the novel shows that assimilation does not bring peace. Inaya's attempt to hide her Islam produces anxiety rather than belonging. This is seen in the statement:

"At the beginning of the academic year, Inaya had decided to hide her Islam at school, claiming it would make her life easier. But it had brought her nothing but headache and hardship". (Zakiyyah 121)

This quotation reveals the failure of concealment as an adaptive strategy. Inaya expects that hiding Islam will reduce conflict, but the result is "headache and hardship." The headache indicates psychological tension, while hardship points to the emotional cost of living between two identities. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham explain that cross-cultural adaptation involves both sociocultural adjustment and psychological adjustment. A person may learn how to behave in a new society, but still experience emotional stress when the adaptation requires suppressing important parts of the self (Ward et al.). Inaya's case illustrates this problem clearly. She may look more acceptable at school, but internally she becomes more divided.

The concealment also appears in her relationship with Mrs. Ford. The thesis data notes that Inaya never tells Mrs. Ford that she is Christian, but she deliberately avoids saying that she is Muslim:

"Inaya had never said to Mrs. Ford that she was Christian. But from the day that Inaya entered Mrs. Ford's office to take her I.D. picture, she'd purposefully avoided mentioning that she was Muslim". (Zakiyyah 86)



This quotation shows that adaptation is not only about clothing but also about speech. Inaya's silence becomes a strategy. She does not lie directly, but she allows misunderstanding to continue because revealing her Muslim identity may disturb her acceptance in school. Ting-Toomey argues that identity negotiation happens when individuals communicate, manage, and adjust their identities in intercultural encounters (Ting-Toomey). Inaya's silence is therefore a form of identity negotiation, but it is still defensive. She manages her identity by withholding information, not by openly presenting herself.

This silence is connected to the power relation within American society. As a Muslim girl in a Christian-influenced school environment, Inaya senses that religious identity is not neutral. When Mrs. Ford discusses the Future Hope program, Inaya worries about whether non-Christian students are equally included. The novel states:

Was Inaya now to approve only Christian students? "We have to exclude other religions?" Inaya hoped she didn't sound as exasperated as she felt. Mrs. Ford smiled, but Inaya sensed the faculty advisor was enjoying a private joke herself. "Of course not," Mrs. Ford said, but Inaya heard the obligatory tone of Mrs. Ford's voice. "But that would be ideal." Inaya forced a smile, but she didn't know what to say. (Zakiyyah 83)

Inaya's adaptation takes place in a social structure where Christianity is subtly treated as the ideal norm. Mrs. Ford's statement, "But that would be ideal," creates discomfort because it implies that Christian identity is preferable. Inaya's forced smile shows that she recognizes the omission but does not yet have enough confidence to challenge it openly. Hall argues that identity is produced through positioning. People understand how they are positioned by dominant discourse (Hall). In this scene, Inaya is positioned as religiously different, even before she fully reveals her Muslim identity.

Nevertheless, Inaya's adaptation does not stop at concealment. She also begins to participate in American school life. This movement is important because it shows that she is not completely separated from the host society. When Mrs. Ford invites her to be involved in a school program, Inaya hesitates but still accepts the role:

"Inaya met Mrs. Ford's gaze with her eyes widened. She opened her mouth to protest, but no sound came out. "But no need to worry about all that now." A grin formed on Mrs. Ford's face as she handed a binder to Inaya. "For now, we're just happy to have you on board." (Zakiyyah 83)

This quotation marks a shift from avoidance to participation. Inaya's widened eyes and inability to protest show that she is still uncertain. However, the phrase "happy to have you on board" indicates that the school community begins to recognize her capability. In Berry's acculturation model, this moment moves Inaya away from separation and toward integration because she participates in the dominant society while still carrying her Muslim background (Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures"). Her participation in the school board becomes a form of social adaptation: she learns to function within American institutional life, not merely as a hidden Muslim girl, but as a student whose ability is acknowledged.



This process is also supported by the concept of social and cultural capital. Inaya's competence allows her to gain trust from others. Raymond's statement strengthens this point:

"I appreciate anything you can do," Raymond had told her. "I don't think there's anyone else I could ask." (Zakiyyah 119)

Raymond's trust indicates that Inaya's presence in school is no longer defined only by her difference. She is also recognized through her ability, responsibility, and usefulness. This is significant because adaptation is not merely about becoming similar to the dominant group. It also involves gaining social recognition while maintaining one's own identity. Moghissi and Ghorashi argue that Muslim diasporic subjects in the West negotiate gender, home, and belonging through complex interactions with both Muslim and non-Muslim environments (Moghissi and Ghorashi). Inaya's participation in the school program reflects this complexity. She is still dealing with religious anxiety, but she is also becoming socially active.

At the same time, her adaptation remains tense because school participation may expose the very identity she tries to hide. The Future Hope Scholar program becomes a crucial point in this process. On the one hand, it offers recognition and academic achievement. On the other hand, it threatens to make Inaya publicly visible. The previous section has shown that public visibility makes her feel unstable. This moment can be understood as a test of cultural adaptation. Inaya cannot remain hidden forever if she wants to participate meaningfully in American society. Her achievement forces her to confront the contradiction between social success and religious concealment.

Thus, Inaya's cultural adaptation in American society develops through three movements. First, she attempts assimilation by removing her head cover and hiding her Islam. Second, she experiences psychological pressure because concealment produces headache, hardship, and fear of exposure. Third, she begins to participate in American school life through the student board and Future Hope Scholar program. These movements show that adaptation is not a simple acceptance of American culture, but a gradual and painful process of learning how to belong without self-erasure.

In this sense, *Muslim Girl* presents cultural adaptation as a transitional stage between unhomely experience and identity integration. Inaya's early adaptation remains defensive because it relies on silence and invisibility. However, her participation in school opens the possibility of a more positive strategy. She begins to move from hiding differences to negotiating differences. Therefore, cultural adaptation in the novel does not end in assimilation. It lays the groundwork for integration, allowing Inaya to maintain her Muslim identity while participating in American society. Overall, Inaya's adaptation does not lead to full assimilation. Instead, it reflects a gradual transition toward integration, where she learns to function in American school culture while maintaining her Islamic identity through negotiation and controlled self-presentation.

Maintaining Muslim Identity through Integration



The final finding shows that Inaya's cultural adaptation develops into integration. In Berry's acculturation theory, integration refers to a strategy in which individuals maintain their heritage culture while also participating in the larger society (Berry, "Acculturation: Living Successfully in Two Cultures"). This concept is important for reading Inaya's development because her adaptation does not end in assimilation. Although she initially hides her Islam and removes her Islamic headdress at school, the novel gradually shows that Inaya learns to participate in American society without completely abandoning her Muslim identity. Therefore, integration becomes the most significant form of her identity development. It allows Inaya to move from fear and concealment toward ethical confidence, social participation, and Muslim visibility. This reaction is: the challenges of identity negotiation include choosing to embrace and actively declare one's Muslim identity (Fahira and Oktafiyani)

Integration in *Muslim Girl* does not mean that Inaya becomes free from tension. Rather, it means that she begins to manage cultural tension more consciously. Ward argues that integration is not merely a simple combination of two cultures, but a complex process involving identity, adaptation, and participation in social life. Inaya's integration is complex because she still experiences hesitation, embarrassment, and fear of judgment. However, she no longer responds only through silence or concealment. She begins to speak, participate, and represent her Muslim identity in public spaces.

One important sign of this integration appears when Inaya begins to correct Mrs. Ford's narrow understanding of religious commitment:

"This is the first time I met a young person as committed to God as you." Inaya felt the beginning of a headache. She wasn't in the mood for this conversation. "A lot of people believe in God," Inaya said, hoping her irritation showed in her tone. "Not only Christian." Mrs. Ford nodded. "That's true." (Zakiyyah 117)

This quotation shows a significant transformation in Inaya's response. In the earlier parts of the novel, Inaya often chooses silence when facing religious discomfort. She hides her Islam, avoids direct explanation, and allows others to misunderstand her. However, in this scene, she begins to speak. Her statement, "Not only Christian," is short but powerful because it challenges the Christian-centered assumption in her school environment. She does not openly attack Mrs. Ford, but she corrects the idea that belief in God belongs only to Christianity.

This moment reflects integration because Inaya participates in the conversation while maintaining her religious consciousness. She does not withdraw from the American school environment, but she also refuses to let that environment define religious devotion only through Christianity. In Berry's terms, she maintains her heritage identity while engaging with the larger society. Her irritation also matters because it shows that integration is not a passive adjustment. It involves the courage to respond when one's identity is misunderstood.

This scene also connects with Bhabha's concept of the unhomely. Earlier, Inaya's Muslim identity becomes unhomely because it is hidden, exposed, and judged. Here, however, the unhomely condition begins to transform into articulation. The tension



between private faith and public space does not disappear, but Inaya starts to speak from within that tension. Her Muslim identity is no longer only something to be concealed; it becomes a perspective from which she can question dominant assumptions.

Inaya's integration becomes clearer when she expresses an ethics of interreligious respect:

"We don't have to believe what they believe. But we do have to respect them." (Zakiyyah 118)

This statement represents the central logic of integration. Inaya does not suggest that adaptation requires religious sameness. She clearly maintains difference through the phrase "We don't have to believe what they believe." However, she also affirms social coexistence through the phrase "we do have to respect them." This balance between difference and respect is the heart of Berry's integration strategy. Integration does not erase the original identity; it allows the subject to preserve identity while building meaningful relations with others.

This quotation also strengthens the moral dimension of Inaya's Muslim identity. Her Islam is not represented as isolation, hostility, or refusal of others. Instead, it becomes the basis for ethical coexistence. Dahlan's study on Muslim American literature argues that religious moderation can challenge Islamophobia by promoting harmony, dialogue, and respectful coexistence (Dahlan). Inaya's statement reflects this form of moderation. She does not abandon Islam to be accepted, and she does not reject others to protect Islam. She creates a middle space where Muslim identity and social respect can exist together.

This middle space is important because Inaya's earlier adaptation was dominated by fear of visibility. She wanted to become invisible at school because visible Muslim identity made her feel abnormal. However, integration requires a different attitude toward visibility. Instead of seeing Muslim identity only as a burden, Inaya begins to understand that Muslim identity can become meaningful in public. This possibility is voiced by Veronica:

"Imagine the whole world seeing a Muslim girl accept that award." Veronica smiled and patted Inaya softly on the cheek. "You would make the world proud, Inaya." She shook her head. "May Allah bless it for you." (Zakiyyah 107)

Veronica's statement reframes Muslim visibility as representation. For Inaya, being seen as a Muslim girl produces fear because it may expose the double life she has built at school. For Veronica, however, visibility is a chance to show the world a positive image of Muslim girlhood. This contrast is crucial. It shows that Muslim identity in diaspora is unstable because it can be experienced either as exposure or empowerment. Al-Azraki argues that Islamic diasporic narratives can reframe Muslim identity against dominant and Islamophobic representations (Al-Azraki). Veronica's words reflect this reframing because she imagines Inaya's public achievement as a counter-image to stereotypes



about Muslim girls. Stereotyping frequently leads to discrimination, misrepresentation, and the erosion of basic rights (Akbar and Utami)

The award, therefore, becomes more than academic recognition. It becomes a test of whether Inaya can appear publicly without erasing her Muslim identity. If she accepts the award while hiding her Islam, she may gain social success but lose personal coherence. If she appears as a Muslim girl, she risks judgment but also gains the possibility of integrity. This is why integration is stronger than assimilation. Assimilation would require Inaya to succeed by becoming less visibly Muslim. Integration allows her to succeed while still being Muslim.

Inaya's integration is also evident in the trust others place in her. Raymond says:

"I appreciate anything you can do," Raymond had told her. "I don't think there's anyone else I could ask." (Zakiyyah 119)

Raymond's statement indicates that Inaya is no longer positioned only as a strange or foreign girl. She is recognized as capable, reliable, and socially meaningful. This recognition is important because integration is not only an internal decision; it also depends on social interaction. Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder explain that immigrant youth adaptation is shaped by American society. She participates, contributes, and becomes trusted by both cultural maintenance and involvement in the larger society. Inaya's involvement in school activities shows that she is not separated from America.

However, the novel does not portray participation as the same as assimilation. Inaya's social contribution does not require her to abandon Muslim values. Instead, her reliability can be read as part of her ethical formation. Her Muslim identity gives her a moral framework for responsibility, modesty, and respect. In this sense, the novel challenges the binary idea that a Muslim girl must choose between being religious and being socially successful. Inaya's journey shows that Muslim identity can become a source of contribution within American society.

The clearest symbolic sign of integration appears near the end of the novel when Raymond greets Inaya with Islamic words:

"As-salaamu'alaikum," Raymond greeted as he handed Inaya the gift box. "Wa'alaikum-salaam," Inaya replied, averting her gaze, a hesitant grin on her face. "What?" Kayla said, prompting Inaya and Raymond to look toward her. "You too?" Raymond smiled and nodded. "Yep," he said, an embarrassed expression on his face. "I'm Muslim now." (Zakiyyah 167)

This quotation is significant because it reverses the earlier relationship between Inaya and Raymond. At the beginning, Raymond's questions about her accent and his attempt to shake her hand make Inaya feel awkward and unhomely. At the end, Raymond enters the linguistic and religious space that once made Inaya feel exposed. The Arabic greeting "*As-salaamu'alaikum*" no longer functions as a marker of foreignness; it becomes a shared expression of faith and recognition.

This scene should not be read only as Raymond's conversion. More importantly, it shows that cultural adaptation in the novel is not one-directional. Inaya does not simply



adapt to American society; American society, represented through Raymond, is also affected by Inaya's Muslim presence. This makes the integration process reciprocal. Inaya learns how to participate in American social life, while others also learn to recognize and respect her Muslim identity. Berry explains that acculturation occurs when individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds meet and influence one another. Raymond's greeting shows this mutual influence.

At the same time, the details of Inaya's response show that integration does not erase modesty or emotional complexity. She "avert[s] her gaze" and smiles hesitantly. These details show that she still maintains her religious manners and emotional boundaries. She does not become fully absorbed into a dominant social style. Her modesty remains visible. Thus, the scene represents integration rather than assimilation: Inaya participates in social interaction, but she does so in accordance with Muslim ethical conduct.

This final movement is also connected to Asiyah's study on Muslim women's identity negotiation in diaspora literature. Asiyah argues that Muslim female characters often negotiate identity by maintaining Muslim selfhood while responding to pressures from the host society (Asiyah, "Pakistani-American Muslim Women Identity Negotiation"). Inaya's journey follows this pattern, but the novel gives it a specific form through unhomely experience and acculturation. She begins with discomfort and concealment, moves through school participation, and finally reaches a point where Muslim identity can be maintained in public. This proves that cultural heritage must be embodied in people's words and deeds (Tian et al.)

Therefore, maintaining Muslim identity through integration becomes the primary resolution of Inaya's experience of diaspora. She does not solve her problem by rejecting American society, because she continues to participate in school life and build relationships with others. She also does not solve it by abandoning Islam, because her Muslim identity remains central to her moral choices, speech, and self-representation. Her integration lies in her ability to hold both dimensions together: being socially present in America and religiously grounded as a Muslim girl.

Overall, Inaya's final development is not assimilation but integration. Her journey proves that cultural adaptation does not always mean self-erasure. Through her religious assertion, ethical respect, public visibility, and social participation, Inaya transforms Muslim identity from a hidden burden into a meaningful source of representation. In this way, *Muslim Girl* presents Muslim female identity as active, resilient, and dialogic. Therefore, Inaya's resolution of unhomely experiences is achieved not through the elimination of cultural tension, but through the ability to manage it by negotiating identity, participating in institutional spaces, and maintaining religious commitment within a multicultural environment.

Conclusion

This study shows that first, Inaya's unhomely experiences manifested in awkwardness, uncanniness, incoherence, and instability. These conditions emerge from cultural displacement, religious visibility, and social positioning within American school life. The



second: Inaya's resolution of unhomely tension is therefore not achieved by eliminating conflict but by learning to manage it. She moves from concealment to selective visibility, from fear of exposure to social participation, and from fragmented identity to a more integrated Muslim self. Through this process, *Muslim Girl* shows that diasporic Muslim female identity is not merely trapped in displacement, but actively reconstructed through negotiation, recognition, and religious commitment within a multicultural society.

The implication of this study lies in its contribution to Muslim diaspora literary studies. By combining Bhabha's concept of the unhomely and Berry's theory of acculturation, this study shows that Muslim female identity in diaspora is not passive, fixed, or merely victimized. Instead, it is active, negotiated, and capable of producing ethical participation in multicultural society. However, this study is limited to one novel and focuses mainly on Inaya's experience as the central character. It does not compare *Muslim Girl* with other Muslim diaspora texts or examine readers' responses to the novel. Further studies may compare Umm Zakiyyah's *Muslim Girl* with other Muslim young adult novels, especially those dealing with hijab, Islamophobia, gender, and identity formation in Western societies. Such studies may expand the discussion of how Muslim female characters negotiate belonging without losing their religious selfhood.

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