

Randa Abdel-Fattah in Conversation

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Randa Abdel-Fattah (1979-) is a writer and human rights activist with 11 novels to her credit, published in over 15 countries. Her first novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, a best seller which took her 6 years to complete, came out in 2005 when she was only 26 years old. Since then she has emerged as one of the most important

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Muslim voices in Australia. An ambassador of her religion and culture, she constantly tries, through her fiction, to project the values and lifestyle of her people, to her Australian audience and to the West in general. Her singular objective for doing this is to break the media-driven stereotypes about Islam and Muslims and to create a better understanding between Muslims and the West. Abdel-Fattah ardently believes in inter-faith dialogue and has been a member of various inter-faith networks.

Born to Palestinian and Egyptian migrant parents, Abdel-Fattah was brought up in a largely religious environment, which makes her a staunch advocate of her faith, and drives her to fight against the demonisation of Muslims and Islam in the post-9/11 era. She attended a Catholic primary school and an Islamic secondary college, and while at the University of Melbourne to study law, she worked as a Media Liaison Officer at the Islamic Council of Victoria. It is during this period that Abdel-Fattah first began to write in the local media about the circumstances of Muslims in Australia, and the challenges and injustices they often encounter in their adopted homeland – a role that she still plays passionately by writing in Australia’s leading newspapers such as *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and by regularly appearing on TV, giving talks at schools, at writer’s festivals and conferences in Australia and internationally. She has also volunteered her time with numerous human rights and migrant resource organisations. To counter the anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric of Australia’s most ethnocentric and xenophobic politician, Pauline Hanson, she stood in the 1998 federal election as a member of the Unity Party which was founded on the motto, “Say No to Pauline Hanson.”

Abdel-Fattah is currently working on the feature film adaptation of her novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* In 2017, her young adult novel, *Where the Streets Had a Name* (2008), dedicated to her grandmother Siti Jamilah, was adapted for the stage by Australia’s leading children’s theatrical company. She won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award and the People’s Choice Award in 2017 for her novel *When Michael Met Mina*, published in 2016. Abdel-Fattah has a PhD in Sociology and she lives with her family in Sydney, Australia.

This interview was conducted over Skype in March 2018. The interview covers a wide range of issues concerning Randa Abdel-Fattah’s personal and creative life. It begins with a discussion of Abdel-Fattah’s family background and childhood, in which the author explains how her childhood experiences as a diasporic Muslim, in a country where Muslims are generally seen as the outsider and increasingly as its fifth column, affected her identity formation and led her to take up writing as a “tool of resistance” to “challenge the racism” that she sees as a part of Australian culture. She also explains why, despite being a law graduate from the University of Melbourne, she gave up law after several years of practice and decided to pursue her PhD in Islamophobia, racism and everyday multiculturalism in Australia. The author explains when she began writing, who were the childhood inspirations behind her writing, how she came to write her first novel, her habits associated with writing and

how she has become an internationally successful writer. Moreover, she explains which of her eleven novels she favours most and why, the general message that she wants to communicate through her writing and how the issues of identity, race and religion play out within the Muslim community in Australia. Finally, the author explains what she is pursuing now and why she has decided to take a break from creative writing and focus on screenwriting and academic writing instead.

Would you please tell us about yourself concerning your background, your family, your childhood and education?

I was born in Australia in 1979. My father, who is Palestinian, came to Australia in 1972; my mother is Egyptian and she came in 1973, and they met in Australia where they got married after several years. My parents came in the aftermath of the Labor government's final stages of abandoning the White Australia Policy, which has had a profound impact on me growing up and learning about Australia's racial history and present-day racism. My parents became Australians because they migrated at the right time and the right place, simply because Australia had adopted laws which allowed them to come here. This has really influenced my own identity politics growing up, trying to make sense of negotiating my Australian, Muslim and Arabic identities and having that sort of understanding of my parents' separate but connecting experiences of immigration to this country.

During the 1980s, I attended a Catholic primary school at a time when multiculturalism was still in its earliest stages of policy development, and so the multicultural Australia celebrated and spoken about then was actually about celebrating minorities in terms of festivals, food, so-called "exotic" culture... it was a very cosmetic sort of celebration. I grew up with a very strong sense of my Arabic heritage. Then, at the conclusion of my Catholic primary school years, my parents decided that they would send me to Australia's first Islamic school where my mother was a teacher. That really changed the course of my life, because I was at that coming-of-age time when I was starting to really explore and develop an understanding of my identity as a Muslim woman, and this period in my life also coincided with the first Gulf War. And as an adolescent I was already facing the normal, everyday challenges of trying to figure out who I was as a young person, my place in the world, my sense of purpose and relationships with other people. This was all happening at a time when Muslims and Arabs were being represented as the Other, the fifth column or the internal enemy in Australia. It really impacted on my own identity, and I believe it made me a very strong person who wanted to fight against racism, and it shaped my own passion for writing as a means of doing just that.

As a Muslim in Australia, how do you negotiate identity with the mainstream culture?

My parents are highly educated and there was an intersection of religion, race and class that gave me opportunities and allowed me to participate in activities and opportunities that gave me a stronger sense of my identity, training me to confront those issues, speak to other Australian Muslims who were successful in terms of their career, which for me as a young person was very inspiring. When 9/11 happened, I was working at the Islamic Council of Victoria as well as at a law firm in my final year of university. I came, like almost all Muslims, under the microscope and my resistance to that, to construct my identity on my own terms was a struggle. A lot of Muslims, me included, reacted to 9/11, which I look back now and regret, but I understand that it was very much based on a time when we went on the defensive; we embarked on a campaign of proving our loyalty; proving that we were Australian and that we were *not terrorists*. So, that was an identity based on a negative and I did that for several years because I felt that if I could only prove that I was not a terrorist, not oppressed, not a threat then maybe I would belong, maybe I would be accepted. I think my actions were very reflective of the community politics at the time. But then I started to learn, read, mature, really immerse myself in current politics and the nature of power, and eventually I did a PhD in Islamophobia, racism and everyday multiculturalism in Australia. So I completely changed. My identity as an Australian Muslim must always start from an understanding of the nature of race relations in Australia. For example, I started this interview by talking about my parents coming to Australia. What I never properly reflected on while growing up was the fundamental truth that we are all complicit in the dispossession of the indigenous population of this country, who never ceded sovereignty and who subsequently remain the rightful owners of this land. We must recognise first and foremost what has happened to the indigenous inhabitants of colonised nations throughout history, and what continues to happen to them. Once you achieve this understanding, you can then comprehend why fighting racism in Australia must be built on solidarity with indigenous Australians. When I understand how race relations operate in Australia, I can then confront it in a way that addresses its core. For example, a recurring issue in racial discrimination within Australia is that people will say “it’s just your turn [i.e. to be persecuted]. The Italians copped it first, then the Greeks, then the ‘Asians’ and now it is just your turn!” The problem with this attitude is that not only does it (apparently) accept that in Australia there must always be an enemy, an Other whose “turn” it is to be vilified; it fails to ask *why* this is so. In order to facilitate a better understanding of identity, Australian racism needs to be considered within its historical context; likewise, the question of what it means to be Australian today should take into account the indigenous inhabitants as traditional “owners” of the land and their subsequent dispossession by white settlers.

You said that you have a Bachelor’s degree in Law, but you did your PhD in Islamophobia, racism and everyday multiculturalism in Australia. Why did you move away from Law, or is there a connection between a law degree and the PhD you have done?

Yes, I obtained a law degree and practiced as a lawyer for ten years until 2011. While I was practicing law, I never felt very happy in that profession. It was just not for me. At the time, I was doing a lot of work on the side, work that I am passionate about in terms of anti-racism, writing and human rights activism in Palestine. Eventually I realised that I did not want to continue in law for ever and my real passions lay within the domain of academia. So I left law and did my PhD. Now I am working in academia.

What inspired you to write? Can you also tell us a bit about your writing habit?

Yes, for me, writing is my first and foremost passion and I love it. It is something I have done since I was a child. The actual process of writing is a joy for me; that is, it's hard work, a labour of love, but I love it because I cherish words and I enjoy the creative writing process. I just love letting my imagination roam free and I love all of the games that you can play with words and the power to create sentences. The music and the lyricism of a beautiful sentence still excites me. It has been always the thing that attracted me to write. The creative process excited me as a child and I used to write short stories or sometimes a diary, and then I turned to writing a book when I was in high school. I was excited to use my writing as a tool of resistance by trying to write a story about a young Australian Muslim girl, and it ended up being the first draft of *Does My Head Look Big in This?* I continued with the book once I became a lawyer; I rewrote the whole thing and then proceeded to try and get it published. Since then I have continued writing books and now I write for the screen as well. Every part of the writing process, like I said, is a labour of love.

Do you remember when you wrote your first piece of writing?

I still have a copy of my first story, which I wrote when I was very young, maybe six years old. My actual first attempt to write a of full-length story, which I wanted to publish, was when I was eleven years old; my teacher at the time was really supportive; one day she found the story in my schoolbag and asked me to read it to my class. This really gave me the confidence to continue writing. I think that a lot of writers have similar stories, that is, the early encouragement to continue writing often comes from inspirational teachers when you're young, because they believe in you and motivate you to keep going.

Would you like to mention the names of your teachers or of any particular teacher?

One of them was Mrs. McDonald from my Catholic school, and then I had two incredible teachers in high school, one of them was named Miss Mila and she was also an actor. So she used to bring a lot of her love for Shakespeare to the classroom. She was of Indian background and she had a very strong passion for indigenous

Australia and justice, which in the 90s was a little unusual because it was still something not really spoken about in schools, certainly not as much as it should have been. My other teacher was called Mr. Nigel Jackson and was also deeply inspiring when it came to my writing.

When did you get your first novel published? Did you experience any prejudice from the publication industry for your cultural identity?

My first novel was published in 2005. I have had a really amazing and favourable publishing experience. I am very blessed to have wonderful publishers who have never, ever second-guessed my motivations and who have supported me in every way.

Your books have attracted readers from several countries such as Australia, the UK and Malaysia. What are the reasons you think that help you to attract such international readership?

I think when *Does My Head Look Big in This?* came out in 2005, the timing was right and I am very blessed in that sense. I think a lot of people who achieve success, you know, many of them mistakenly put it down to their own talents, and of course ability and talent have a role to play. But I also very strongly believe that I was blessed in that the time when I wrote the novel was right for a story like *Does My Head Look Big in This?* And this kind of story had not yet been done, so it was original at that time. I was very fortunate that I was able to see that gap and I wanted to try and fill it up. Also, I think it has touched a lot of readers who were, I guess, looking for a story that they could connect with and which had not really been told before. At once, that connection generated widespread appeal around the world. You know, as a writer, you develop your following and then they stick with your other books and so that's why I think it has been encouraging in a way.

In your view, what is the function of the writer in general? What does it mean to you to be a minority writer in Australia?

I think one of the functions of a writer is to think about what the reader wants out of a book. I want ultimately a change in some way, even if it is only a small change; I want a book that makes me laugh and elevates my mood. A book should ideally have a positive or constructive flow-on effect on your relationship with others. I think writing should do that when you read a book. You should be affected or influenced by it in some way. A book should make you see another person differently or empathise with him/her. It should grab you and move you in some way and that is what the writer should always aim to do.

Which is your favourite among your eleven novels and why? If we asked you to describe your novels in one sentence, what would it be?

I think when I get asked which is my favourite novel it is like asking a mother who is her favourite child. It is very difficult because each book means something to me at a certain time in my life. I think the book that I feel most closely connected to is *Where The Streets Have a Name* (2008), because it was my way of writing a book based on Palestine, which is so deeply close to my heart. It was very much dedicated to my father and my grandmother. Also, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* means a lot to me because it was my first book and it had taken so many years to write from when I was a teenager. So those two books have always been very special to me. To describe my books in one sentence, I will say, "I am using writing as a way of establishing social justice."

In 2008, you were awarded the Kathleen Mitchell Award. What does it mean to you?

I received the Kathleen Mitchell Award for my second novel, *Ten Things I Hate About Me* (2006). You know, any award you receive as a writer is huge and a momentous occasion. For me, it was validating. It means that the industry has recognised you as very competitive. It is very special to receive an award as a writer.

In Does My Head Look Big in This?, Amal Mohamed makes a list of whether to wear or not to wear el-hijab. In the end, she decides to wear it, saying, "the hijab is a part of me" (Abdel-Fattah, Does My Head Look Big in This? 25). Why is the hijab so important to Amal's identity? Wouldn't she be the same Muslim person without it?

The hijab is important to Amal's identity because at that point, she starts to learn more about her faith, and she feels that she is at a point where she wants to embrace it and it becomes an expression of her devotion to God as she understands it. Also, it is an element of her inner identity, inner expression and validation, because the hijab is a visible symbol of Muslim identity. That is why Amal decides to wear el-hijab. I think it was just about writing a story where I was looking at a particular girl's relationship with hijab because every Muslim girl, every Muslim woman wears hijab or connects with the hijab in different ways depending on their experiences.

You wrote: "changing religion and mama and papa culture like changing clothes" (Does My Head Look Big in This? 109). To what extent does this statement reflect the attitude of Muslims in Australia?

I think it is just a way of being funny. I think that, generally speaking, the Muslim community in Australia has become a lot more connected with their faith and they

have become more religious. I think the statement only indirectly suggests that the religion is something permanent for her and part of who she is.

In The Lines We Cross (2016), Michael's father states, "but people need to fit in with the majority instead of trying to mark themselves as different" (156). Where do you stand in relation to this view? Is it important for Muslims to adjust to the majority culture of the country or should they keep to their root cultures?

With *The Lines We Cross*, which is called *When Michael Met Mina* in Australia, I was trying to make Michael's papa convey that kind of assimilation mentality which at the core is racist, and by trying to expose its racism, I am of course rejecting it. It is basically about depicting a multicultural society where everyone is expected to conform to a uniform set of beliefs and behaviour. I was really trying to criticise it through that character.

In your novels, you generally focus on political, cultural and social customs. What is the message that you want to send through your writing?

In fact, there are a lot of messages, depending on the novel. I want people to try and interrogate what they know and how they know it; to think for themselves; to not judge other people based on their appearance, and to really challenge the racism that is a part of this country. Also, I want my novels to validate the experience of people who are the victims of racism and give them a voice. Additionally, I want to make people hopefully empathise with the other and be able to appreciate difference rather than be insular in their minds.

In writing The Lines We Cross, you clearly differentiate between Michael and Mina. However, Michael decides in the end to marry Mina regardless of their differences. Why?

They don't actually get married. I just suggest that there is a future between them. When somebody is actually willing to criticise his/her own beliefs and prejudices, then, you know sometimes, something really beautiful can happen from that, so that was really the goal with Michael and Mina.

How are issues of identity, race and religion played out in the Australian Arab Muslim community in particular and the Australian Muslim community in general?

The Australian Arab Muslim community is still very diverse. So it is very hard to talk about one community because there are so many variables. Arabs are from all different backgrounds, with so many variations and shades. Sometimes, people can have more in common based on a specific ethnicity rather than on a Pan Arab identity. So, it really depends very much on those sorts of variables. But as a

community in crisis in terms of the larger War on Terror and the way that Muslims are all lumped in either as Muslims or Arabs, this is a problem. A collective community is created through the media and political discourse. The Australian community is also incredibly diverse and I think one of the frustrations for Australian Muslims is this assumption that the Australian Muslim community is all Arab. I think what happens is that the voices of non-Arab Muslims get silenced or rendered invisible very much in terms of media, politics and political engagement. It is very hard to speak of one community as a whole. We are as divided and complex as any other community for any number of reasons. But ultimately there are moments when you do feel a sense of unity, particularly around Ramadan and Eid; even if we are not celebrating on the same day, still there is a sense of shared spiritual connection, at least among the religious Muslims.

Finally, what have you been writing recently? When do you expect your next book to come out?

At the moment, I am not writing a book. I am writing the screenplay for *Does My Head Look Big in This?* – that is, an adaptation of the book to a film. I am also working on a television series which investigates that a lot of things that I have already looked at in my writing. In addition, I am working on my latest academic research work, from which I am hoping to produce a book, but at the moment, a novel is not on the cards, nor will it be in the immediate future. The reason for this is that I wanted to take a creative break from writing a novel, allow myself time to hone my skills and craft more, and essentially be in the world more and try to expose myself to more experiences, in order to find fresh inspiration for another story.

Thank you very much for your answers.

Oh, it was my pleasure. Thanks to you both for your time and patience.