



RIGHT TO READ

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“Not Everyone’s Darling”: Censorship and Knowledge Construction in *Habibi*

“If we don’t believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don’t believe in it at all.”

—Noam Chomsky

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We teach at religious, liberal arts universities that value young adult (YA) literature. The university students we teach claim Christian, Muslim, or other faiths, or no faiths at all, as parts of their identities. These identities influence the prior knowledge they bring to a text as they analyze literature. We view our own faiths as special interests that affect our values of literacy, but we know, too, that our students have special interests that may be different from ours via their cultural heritages and belief systems. Our students choose to be on our campuses, some to partake in religious education, but all to become more educated about the world in which we live. It is very important for us to consider how texts include or exclude worldviews as we work with groups of students who hold pluralistic beliefs about religion. As Eboo Patel (2017) observes:

A religious liberal education that emphasizes critical thinking about one’s own paradigm and a sympathetic understanding of others’ identities serves a kind of public health plan for societies like ours. It is particularly troubling, therefore, to see social justice conversations tend towards denouncement over engagement in the very places—college campuses—charged with advancing liberal education. (p. 32)

Craig Thompson’s graphic novels tread bravely into the context of world religions. Thompson’s *Blankets* (2015) autobiographically wrestles with the conflict between his parents’ Fundamentalist Christian beliefs and his own developing understandings of art and romantic relationships. *Habibi* (2011), an earlier graphic novel, explores the contradictions between the ideals of Islam and the ways that humans abuse each other and the natural world. The writing of *Habibi* was driven by Thompson’s desire to better understand Islam and present a story that both humanizes and highlights the beauty of Islamic cultures (Hogan, 2011). According to his website, *Habibi* explores the cultural divide between the religious heritages of Islam and Christianity, as well as between the third and first worlds (Penguin Random House, 2018).

In this column, we apply Foucault’s Theory of Rhetoric as Epistemic to the first chapter of *Habibi*. Such a process matters in light of talk about censoring this book, a move that could be seen as a knee-jerk reaction to nudity, sexual content, and the presentation of religion. The first chapter, entitled “River Map,” introduces readers to Dodola, who is sold as a child bride to a scribe. As readers enter Dodola’s world, they become familiar with the discursive, rule-bound literacy practices that give her the language and imagery to tell her story and provide the particular setting in which her story takes place. This setting, violent and likely unfamiliar to many, nonetheless allows readers to enter another place and build empathy

with an unlikely protagonist, who, by the end of the story, should clearly not be despised but valued for resilience and enduring love. We argue that the values and understandings connected to Dodola's literacy practices offer important lessons for students and can help readers overcome impulses to challenge or ban this and similar books.

Summarizing *Habibi* and Examining Its Opportunities and Challenges

Habibi is a harrowing tale. It focuses on Dodola, who is sold into marriage at age nine. Soon her husband is killed, and she is taken by slavers. She escapes, along with Habibi (also called Zam), an African baby whom she adopts as her brother. They make their home in an abandoned boat in the desert. As Zam grows older,

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he becomes smitten with Dodola and trails her when she leaves the boat. He sees her having sex with traders in return for food. Zam takes water to the local town to sell so that Dodola will not have to prostitute herself. Dodola goes to look for him but is captured and sold into the service of the Sultan as a concubine.

Zam, weak with hunger, is taken in by a group of eunuchs and, to continue eating with them, allows himself to be castrated. When times get hard, the eunuchs sell Zam

into slavery, this time to the same sultan to whom Dodola is in bondage. The sultan, displeased with Dodola, commands that she be executed by drowning. Zam dives into the waters with her and, once again, they escape. Dodola gets sick from the polluted water, and Zam nurses her back to health with the help of a lunatic junk trader named Noah. They try to return to their boat in the desert but find that a new landfill has mostly covered it.

Journeying back to the town, they make their home in a half-constructed, high-rise apartment building. Zam gets a job at a bottled water plant. Dodola

sets about making their squatters' apartment into a home. Dodola confesses that she wants to have a baby with Zam. He runs away, ashamed that, as a eunuch, he cannot help Dodola achieve her desire. Zam nearly commits suicide at the edge of a hydroelectric dam, then chooses to live. He returns to Dodola, and both agree to love each other. The building begins construction again, and they must leave. They use Zam's earnings to buy a boat and rescue a baby from slavery, then leave to raise the child in love.

This complicated epic, containing stories within the stories, has the potential to provide opportunities for class discussions covering a wide variety of topics related to economics, including pollution in a throw-away economy, the scarcity of resources, systemic poverty, inequity in health care, and income inequity. Topics connected to culture and morality include how violence affects children, what constitutes rape, the societal treatment of women, definitions of love, sex in connection with both hatred and love, the difference between suffering and sacrifice, and the similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity.

Habibi has been praised for its beautiful visual design and its impressive and delicate ornamentation in the tradition of Islamic culture. However, it has also received much criticism. It was named one of the most challenged books in 2015 for its "nudity, being sexually explicit, and [being] unsuited for age group" (American Library Association, 2017). Other criticisms include its depiction of Arabs and Arab culture. One reason for the challenges may be that adult readers often assume that graphic novels are intended for younger readers. We do not have space at this time to discuss how a book is positioned for a particular age of reader, but that may be a topic for a later column.

Several factors contribute to its challenges. The graphic novel contains explicit depictions of sexual violence and nudity. The sex and nudity described in *Habibi* do not convey the social bonding dimensions of sex that enhance human flourishing. Rather, sex is portrayed as abusive. It is a tool for men to satisfy physical wants and desires, a way for men to manifest their power over others. Women have forced sex in order to survive. In addition, women in *Habibi* are wholly objectified by other characters. Dodola lives without autonomy. She is sold by her poverty-driven parents. She is raped constantly: as a child by her first husband; as a child and teen by the men in the cara-

vans from whom she tries to steal food; by the sultan in whose harem she lives. In addition, women living with her in the harem are thrown away because the sultan becomes bored with them. Women are regarded as sexual objects rather than equal human beings in a radical patriarchal society.

Finally, to some readers, cultural xenophobia is presented in the story lines. The dramatic and heart-wrenching story is set in a Muslim world but created by a white, American writer. Slavery, child marriages, and rape portrayed in the novel may not be new to the majorities of extant cultures in the world. Nevertheless, the fact that a white writer authored this book may draw people to the conclusion that Islamic cultures should be despised. Less dramatic but still of concern are portrayals of another culture as “exotic” by a white author. Readers can see ethnocentricity in writing negative portrayals of cultures outside of one’s heritage.

Challenging Religion or Spirituality in YA Literature

Censorship challenges around this book have tended to focus on the nudity and sexually explicit scenes in the book, but Thompson’s treatment of Islam has also been challenged. That troubles us. Portrayals of world religions should not be censored without a great deal of thought.

Mention of religion or spirituality in mainstream YA literature remains rare (Campbell, 2015). That Thompson is willing to explore Islam sets this book apart from many novels that avoid religion and/or spirituality. Avoidance of religion or spirituality suggests that religion and spirituality are not present or even important in characters’ (or readers’) lives. Findings based on the National Study of Youth and Religion suggest that the majority of American youth are religious, in so far as they affiliate with some religious group or tradition, and that about half of American adolescents regularly participate in religious organizations, such as religious service attendance and participation in religious youth groups (Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002).

Challenges to YA literature must be thoughtfully undertaken. “Offensive” words and images should be interpreted in the context of entire story lines and with consideration of the potential knowledge that can be

obtained for a reader. The burden of proof for censorship must be on the critical reader. As Martha Nussbaum (2004) observes,

“All modern democracies are prone to hasty and sloppy thinking and to the substitution of invective for argument” (p. 44). Censoring young adult literature because of religious storylines or presentations of social groups, even those groups some despise, is anti-intellectual. Books do the work of spreading knowledge, including offering knowledge of religions and cultures that shapes

human actions and policies. The censoring of books, which inherently denies a culture or society access to ideas, must be subject to multiple tests and rigorous analysis to justify exclusion. Some of these tests include providing evidence that the content of the book is considered prurient, obscene by community standards, lacking in social value, or capable of inciting violence, according to the three-pronged Miller test determined in the case of *Miller v. California* (1973). Although *Habibi* is a jarring read and one of the top ten challenged books in 2015, it does not meet levels of obscenity for challenging YA literature.

Examining How Knowledge Is Created

A lucid argument for censorship requires investigation of how knowledge is constructed through language. Foucault’s theory of rhetoric as epistemic provides a useful process for analysis of inclusion or exclusion of texts for prurience, obscenity, lack of social value, or capability of inciting violence (Foss & Gill, 1987). Foucault’s framework of knowledge construction is also helpful for literacy brokers when they select or deny texts based on treatment of religious or spiritual matters that are set in a location (in the case of *Habibi*, the Arab world) that many people in our time and place have been taught to despise, thereby denying the humanness of inhabitants of that world.

Foucault believed that the central role of discourse and literacy is to structure knowledge. What a

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society believes to be acceptable or not acceptable is labeled through discursive practices that follow rules that a culture understands to be true and right; because they are marinated in such practices, the rules become common sense.

Rules for discourse determine, often implicitly, what can be talked about, who should be granted the power to be literate, and who or what should be denied literacy.

These rules are written, spoken, or practiced in social relationships. Discursive practices dictate the kinds of literature that are acceptable in school curricula (Foss & Gill, 1987). Acceptable discourse requires understanding the sociocultural context of a literacy act and the value of the individual or community engaging in reading, writing, or symbolic communication (Street,

1984).

Rules for discourse determine, often implicitly, what can be talked about, who should be granted the power to be literate, and who or what should be denied literacy. Rules become established for what can be presented to children or adolescents, such as the kinds of clothing (or lack of clothing) acceptable in texts; what gestures, behaviors, and life circumstances are appropriate in the lives of characters; and the literary forms that are most desirable. For example, the Common Core State Standards privilege nonfiction in content areas other than English Language Arts, causing some teachers and administrators to argue that nonfiction is more desirable in schools than fiction (Shanahan, 2012). Those who get to speak about books or have voices in books take on roles based upon a culture's discourses and literacies that are either allowed or eschewed. What results is that relationships around books take on forms, structures, and practices, and some people will not be considered worthy of inclusion. Those who are included and admired take on power granted by an "overall system, process, or network of force relations spread through the entire discursive formation" (Foss & Gill, p. 389). Discourse, rules, roles, and power coalesce to form knowledge—that which is considered to be true and worthy of literature study.

What We Learn about Dodola's World through Her Literacy Practices

Readers learn the discourses or literacies of Dodola's world through text and images that are fraught with rules—to which many readers cannot likely relate. Immediately and jarringly, readers learn, for example, that females should be virgins at marriage and that signs of virginity are important kinds of markings. Readers observe Dodola becoming a child bride through nonvoluntary transference of her body as the personal property of her parents through (il)literacy. Readers learn, too, that Dodola's world is unsafe. Relative safety is provided through place, but places change rapidly for Dodola. After her husband is killed, Dodola finds shelter on an abandoned ship, a physical place that provides refuge for her and an orphan named Zam. A map of this ship serves as an important literacy artifact for the reader, who learns that the shifting desert sands constantly change the shape of Dodola and Zam's world. They live in chaos.

Their religious literacy practices, however, offer Dodola and Zam some continuity and stories of resiliency to mirror. As readers enter the characters' world, they learn that when stories are written down, they take on significance. The act of writing allows the sacred to be told to others and become memorialized through generations. Religious discursive practices build knowledge that unites societies. The act of writing is beautiful in that it involves an art form, calligraphy, that requires great skill only achieved through much practice. Once learned, calligraphy preserves beautifully the stories that should be told and understood and experienced.

The literacy in Dodola and Zam's world is mystical. Nature reveals literacy. The markings on a turtle's shell, for instance, are important symbols that relay a message. Thus, the reader learns that in this world, discourse and literacy should mirror God, showing "mercy and compassion tangled in many forms" (Thompson, 2011, pp. 38–39). The mystical literacy in Dodola and Zam's world also comes through in the form of the heroic journey. Both characters must sacrifice themselves to find their real names, and the names they are born with are not who they become. Readers discover that in their world, humans are their experiences, and, therefore, names may be changed. Humans are significant, and the very names they hold

reflect the significant events they have overcome. Dodola and Zam must wrestle with their identities; as they do so, the literacy markers of their identities change, just as their geographies change.

The Rules behind the Literacies

Dodola's literacy practices are undergirded by rules from her world. These rules, likely foreign to most readers, nonetheless drive her reading and writing. Dodola lives life by the following expectations: a wife should have sex with her husband, regardless of whether the wife is a child and the husband is a grown man; women should be proud of being virgins at marriage, as "purity" is sexualized; and females are the property of males. These rules are exposed by acts of literacy, especially writing; the rules are mysterious symbols that reference what is important. For Dodola, the rules are manifest in the Qur'an through reading and writing, sacred acts that allow humans to know the names of things. For humans, such vocabulary is in contrast with Allah, who reserves the right to be mysterious. As Dodola explains, "Just as ALLAH taught Adam the NAMES when God created the LETTERS, He kept their SECRETS for Himself, and when He created Adam He shared these SECRETS with him, but continued to hide them from the angels" (Thompson, 2011, pp. 17–18). Sacred texts reveal the rules of discourse and literacy, as does nature, for example, when Zam finds water in the desert just like Ishmael, his forefather.

These rules reveal the highly symbolic nature of literacy for Dodola. Just as the river meanders, so do letters and words and sentences, she notes, ". . . looping like letters, letters extending into stories, until suddenly it stopped—dried up—a muted voice" (Thompson, 2011, p. 31). The rules emphasize creativity with language, using literacy devices like the simile above. Aesthetic appreciation is also an important rule for literacy. Dodola rejoices in the circle of the Bismillah, in how nature, including a turtle's shell, reveals symbolic communication. The rules tell Dodola that no human is insignificant, so she perseveres throughout inhumane conditions.

The Roles that Literacies Afford and the Power Literacy Yields

As Dodola tells her story, we see how she moves from less powerful to more powerful. In her world,

as in our own, children have less power than adults, females have less power than males, and the literate have more power than those lacking experience with reading and writing. But literacy is key in the changing of roles in *Habibi*; Allah's secrets are passed on through literacy, making man higher than the angels, as Dodola explains (Thompson, 2011, p. 31). With literacy comes power. When Dodola's husband teaches her to read and write, her power increases in ways she does not fully realize. She becomes a student and teacher, a storyteller and listener. These roles offer her protection and give her skills of strategy to survive dismal situations.

Dodola finds power in being able to produce written discourse. Because her husband is a scribe, he can sign official documentation to make Dodola his wife. Her father, in contrast, is illiterate, and as such, lacking in power, forcing him to sell Dodola as a child bride. Dodola notes that power comes from ALLAH and physical strength more typically found in males, but literacy is more powerful than worship, as seen when men transcend the angels as humans and are given the power by ALLAH to name what is on the earth (Thompson, 2011, p. 18).

Where Dodola's Knowledge Originates

For Dodola, knowledge emerges from the literacy practices found in nature, as well as the organizational features of the Qur'an. Teachings appear from longest to shortest revelation. Numbers play a conduit role in delivering knowledge to humans, as do individual letters (the refrain "B for Bismillah" and its circular appearance reveal values of Islam). As readers hailing from faiths other than Islam, we do not dismiss symbolic knowledge. Relative to sacred Christian texts, we believe that nature provides divine revela-

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tions related to literacy that hold great import. *Habibi* demonstrates multiple times that the stories presented in the Qur'an intersect with the stories of the Bible and the Torah that we have been taught. But this text tells the same stories from different points of view, and our consciousness of world religions expands as a result of reading it. As readers coming from Christian faith traditions, we find this remarkable and valuable and believe adolescent readers who are interested in religion will also.

The Right to Express Religious Beliefs

Our job as literacy brokers for adolescents is to find the texts that will help students build their own identities, examine their own discursive practices, and allow them to encounter literary characters who are building identities similar to or far different from their own through very similar or very different discursive practices. Religious beliefs that buttress many adolescent discursive practices are mired in misunderstanding. Modern society is often fearful of the religion or spirituality that differs from that of the majority; fear, for example, has conflated Muslims with radical terrorists; evangelical Christians with homophobic radicals who espouse hatred; and Mormons with polygamists.

How can we educate young adults to avoid such generalizations and recognize that people of different faiths, like people of different cultures, are not monolithic? How can we demonstrate to students that world religious traditions should never be painted with a single stroke? We believe one answer to these questions is to critically investigate challenged books that deal with religion and spirituality. We have found in our critical reading of *Habibi* that when we understand how those who are sometimes despised construct knowledge, and when we see how that process connects with how we construct knowledge, we no longer despise.

Other YA Books in which Protagonists Experience Spiritual or Religious Growth

We conclude with several other YA texts that offer opportunities for readers to enter worlds with accompanying spiritual and religious traditions:

- *In Darkness* (by Nick Lake, 2012, Bloomsbury) shows the importance of vodou traditions to

Shorty, the protagonist who is trapped in the rubble during the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The spirit of Toussaint L'Ouverture, his heroic ancestor, comes to his rescue.

- *The Wednesday Wars* (by Gary Schmidt, 2007, Clarion) portrays how Jewish traditions of coming into adulthood add to the gravitas of being human, as Holling Hoodhood, a Presbyterian, watches his best friend become a man during his bar mitzvah.
- *Boxers and Saints* (by Gene Luen Yang, 2013, First Second) shows two protagonists who build resilience among a cast of loving and caring characters against a backdrop of contrasts in religion and spirituality.
- *Anpao: An American Indian Odyssey* (by Jamake Highwater, 1977, J. B. Lippincott) is a love story in which mysticism and spirituality play key roles in Anpao's heroic journey.
- *Once Was Lost* (by Sara Zarr, 2009, Little, Brown) describes how 15-year-old Samara, the daughter of a pastor, begins to question her faith when a girl goes missing in her small town.
- *Devoted* (by Jennifer Mathieu, 2015, Roaring Brook Press) is the story of Rachel Walker, who seeks liberation from her family's devotion and commitment to the Calvary Christian Church, a facet of the Quiverfull movement.
- *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (by Randa Abdel-Fattah, 2007, Orchard Books) describes the intentions of 16-year-old Amal, who decides to wear the hijab full-time, and how this decision changes her entire world.
- *The Sculptor* (by Scott McCloud, 2015, First Second) is a retelling of the Faust story that deals with religious themes without any mention of formal religion.
- *Refugee* (by Alan Gratz, 2017, Scholastic) demonstrates in three stories how intolerance of belief systems causes many groups to be despised, partly because of religion, and how these groups are forced to leave their homelands in quests for freedom.

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