Abstract: This paper presents the discussion into three memoirs by women from three Muslim diasporic contexts – Afghan Australian, Pakistani British and Palestinian American. The first is Mahboba’s Promise which recounts the story of Afghanistan-born Mahboba Rawi surviving the trauma of escaping from Afghanistan following the Russian invasion. The second is Love in a Headscarf which narrates the story of Oxford-educated Shelina Janmohamed who opts for an arranged marriage in her minority Indian-East African community in England. The third is Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood which relates the childhood of Ibtisam Barakat who was faced with the angst of being displaced from her Palestine home during the ravages of Israel occupation. It is in the thematic mapping of these memoirs that offers glimpses of the “spaces of hope” that inhabit the lives of Muslim diasporic women. Based on their personal and at times very traumatic life stories, the memoirists present the possible hopes that reside in the lives of Muslim women.

Key- Words: Muslim women memoirists; memory; spaces of hope; agency; love; home

1 Introduction
Memoirs, in general, provide an avenue to share experiences on a personal level, written in the voice of a participating observer. By narrating particular events and the activities and deeds of others, memoirists illuminate the specific context in which their personal experience and developments are made overt [1]. In view of this trajectory, there are many Muslim women memoirists who write remarkable accounts of themselves and contribute to the growth of the Muslim women memoirs. Writers such as Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El-Saadawi and Hanan Ashrawi have become the founding ‘sisters of Shahrazad’ with their ability to capture their personal and communal life stories and engage the attention of the wider local and global audience. Nevertheless, studies on Muslim women’s memoirs are quite limited and rarely discussed. Over the last few years, a globalized Euro-American discourse of the Muslim women has proliferated to dismantle the western-packaged image of the Muslim women and its Islamophobic view against Muslims as ‘liberty’ and ‘democracy’ make their way into the Muslim world [2]. Western views of Islam, as couched within the discourse of Islamophobia, represent Muslims as terrorists [3] while the Muslim women in particular are represented as oppressed and enslaved by the Islamic rules that govern their lives [4]. In the three memoirs discussed in the paper, we position that regardless of the current world view of Islam and the Muslim women, memoirists, to quote Richard Phillips’ [5] “recast” of “Muslim geographies”, continue to create “spaces of connection” between themselves and the readers. Based on their personal and at times very traumatic life stories, each of narrator discussed here presents the possible hopes that reside in the lives of Muslim women.

2 Mahboba’s Promise
The first memoir is by the Afghan born Mahboba Rawi entitled Mahboba’s Promise with the subtitle “How one woman made a world of difference.” It narrates the story of Rawi and her family growing up in pre-Russian invaded Afghanistan. From Afghanistan to Pakistan to India to Australia and finally back again to her motherland, this diasporic Muslim’s memoir maps the narrator’s ‘geography’ [6] and growth as an individual who endures multiple traumas only to discover her life mission. From the roots of her origins, she traverses several routes in her sojourn. By returning to her land of birth, Rawi circumnavigates her homecoming.
Juxtaposed against her traumatic departure from her homeland, the memoir begins with her memories of her girlhood which was filled with enjoyment: “Everything to do with [high school] was fun to me. I didn’t want to miss a single day…. We laughed all the time, sometimes at nothing, but we were smart and studied a lot too” [7] This nonchalant life was later to change dramatically with the ugliness of the occupation when she and her family suffered through the persecution of living under the “Russian regime” [7]. The teenager who was experiencing the freedom of living was suddenly awakened to the possibility of imprisonment due largely to her overt participation as one of the primary “organisers” in anti-occupation, anti-communist movement. Rawi’s involvement, like others during the time, nearly cost her her life. When the soldiers came to arrest her, she only saw her demise: “I didn’t shout; I didn’t scream. I thought about how crazy it was that my life was going to end like this. ... Most of the other girls stood at least some chance of being set free after being given a warning, but not me” [7]. However, the continued communal agency exercised by the young protesters saved Rawi from a certain death. While on the bus heading for prison, the girls intuitively decided to help Rawi escape: “I was standing near the back door. The girls around me started looking at each other, at me and at the door. They nudged me closer to it. When the bus had to stop at an intersection they pushed as hard as they could on the doors. No-one said a word. They just looked at each other and pushed. The doors opened enough for me to squeeze through and I jumped out” [7].

Rawi’s escape from being prosecuted for anti-authority participation would lead her to leave the country along with family and friends to Pakistan, mostly on foot or on donkeys and cars that were loaned to them. Her recollection of the episode captures the trauma that many war-torn refugees experience. Covered up in the burqa the whole time, she remembers hearing the “panting [of her] breath” and seeing the “stones beneath [her] feet” [7] as she walked from village to village trying to escape both the “Russian and Afgani soldiers” [7]. The ordeal of the car ride was equally disturbing:

_We’d have fifteen or so people crammed into one car, with people even jammed into the boot. I always hoped I didn’t have to get in first because that meant I’d have the weight of three or four people on top of me. I vomited over and over because the road was so rough and winding. ... Other people vomited too and the smell was horrible. We hadn’t bathed since we left Kabul. We cried and shouted and our guided tried to calm us down by promising that when we crossed the border into Pakistan there would be a bus waiting for us. [7]_

Notwithstanding the torment and trauma, she survived both the trip out of Afghanistan and later into India to get married. Rawi has since migrated to Australia and carved out a different space for herself. Rawi’s geography can be charted in the different cities around Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Australia that she stops in throughout the memoir. And in each city she finds “spaces of hope” [5] as she endures the trauma of life, first, as a refugee and later, a diasporic Afghan Australian.

Hence, the recollection of her past gives Rawi a sense of agency to recapture a part of her life that was stolen from her by the invasion of Afghanistan. The memories dictate her life choices in her new home in Australia. One such choice is in her need to assist with the suffering of the children and women in embattled Afghanistan. As she aptly states: “I came to understand why I am in this universe: to try and help others. And understanding why you’re here is the start of finding your power and strength. …you can take the pain and the sadness in your life and turn it into strength, and you can survive by choosing not to be a victim” [7]. She went on to set up a non-profit organization, Mahboba’s Promise, to help orphans in Afghanistan. Memory, or the Afghan word “khatera”, [7] thus endows the narrator with a personal and collective agency to redefine herself not as victims of circumstance but rather as survivor of a traumatic encounter who went on to make a difference in the lives of many other Afghans.

**3 Love in a Headscarf**

The second memoir, _Love in a Headscarf_ by Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, illustrates a different kind of memory. Janmohamed focuses on love and how she found the love of her life. By putting in the centre the story of her love, Janmohamed shares with her readers the tribulations of her journey. Her story is no different from the stories of million others, whether they are Muslims or not, who have looked for love or have fallen out of love. Janmohamed illuminates that being a Muslim does not make love easier or harder – her faith makes her search more interesting as she...
learns more about herself, her wants and needs, the men she has met and the well-meaning relatives who try to match her with what they consider to be “suitable” men. As Janmohamed says:

Civilizations do not clash whether love exists or not. They may differ about what or who should be the object of love. They fight over the same lover. They disagree about how love should be conducted. But love, Love with a capital L, lies deep within every psyche and culture, and fills books with laments and odes and paradigms from the beginning of time. [8]

Finding love takes patience, dedication, and selflessness, aspects of a person which will make one a better partner, believer and citizen of a community. Thus, Janmohamed’s memoir of her love story provides an excellent example of a Muslim narrative of hope.

This memoir tells the story of Janmohamed, an Oxford-educated Muslim woman, who opts for an arranged marriage which is still a tradition in her minority Indian-East African community in England. This situation itself is probably an anomaly – why does an intelligent woman agree with this problematic tradition when she could have easily found a suitor herself? By choosing to show the conventions of an arranged marriage, however, Janmohamed debunks our preconceptions of the process of matchmaking. The Western perception of an arranged marriage conveys that women have little say of their chosen partners. But Janmohamed shows a completely different picture of her long and interesting journey. Instead of being pressed into marriage by her suitors, Janmohamed evaluates each candidate carefully. As she narrates:

In order to enter the mating ritual, each candidate had to create a description of themselves, which would then be circulated among prospective families and matchmakers. This was usually done by word of mouth but was on occasion written as a document resembling a CV. It might even include a photograph of the individual. Once e-mail and Internet had arrived, these were even sent electronically to speed up the introduction process, whizzing information about prospective partners around the globe, one love-hungry electron after another. These extremely personal details were then packaged with a description of the protagonist’s character and the qualities and features they sought in a partner. [8]

While the matchmaking itself is an old practice, the processes leading to the meeting of the candidates are up-to-date. Without compromising the tenets of Islam, Janmohamed has the opportunity to meet her suitor to appraise him. She is free to reject him or follow up with further meetings, if they are mutually attracted to each other.

JanMohamed offers new ways of delineating young Muslim women. The memoirist is educated, funny, adventurous. Like many other single Muslim women, she navigates the demands of the new millenium, of desiring to do well at both personal and professional levels, and of keeping her veneration for the importance of ethnicity, religion, and identity. She is independent and yet community-minded, modern yet traditional. However, despite the possible tensions that may arise due to the polarities of these exigencies, Janmohamed remains level headed. She tackles challenges without feeling alienated or displaced. Through all of her life’s tribulations, she maintains a close relationship with her family, her community, and her faith. This is illustrated in her story; she shows the ability to see humour in life’s unpredictabilities, and discovers lessons from her short meetings with them. Despite some desolate moments of self-incrimination, the mission of finding love intensifies her devotion and understanding of Islam. In one example, Shelina says:

My experience with Syed also reminded me to trust my intuition. After two hours of waiting, and without an apology for tardiness, I should have seen him for what he really was. But the rules of culture had told me to pursue marriage at all costs and to subsume my own mind and instincts to the process. Instead, I should have trusted my fitrah, the inner conscience that the Creator has put into each of us to recognise what is right, and to assert what is our due. [8]

Fitrah can be defined as a human being’s innate inclination towards tawhid (Oneness). It is embedded in the fitrah that includes other attributes such as compassion, intelligence, capacity to attain excellence and all other characteristics that embody what it is to be human [9]. Raihanah Mohd. Mydin’s [10]
explanation of fitrah reveals the crucial need to “respect the dignity of others with just treatment” which should form “the basis of the relationships between Muslims.” In the memoirist’s case, while marriage is compulsory in Islam, it does not mean that a woman accepts any man that comes her way. Syed’s nonchalance about his unpunctuality may be a trivial matter, but it is not an attribute that endears him to Janmohamed. This shows that she expects her partner to respect her values. Therefore, Janmohamed illustrates the agency of a Muslim woman who knows what she wants in her journey to find the right man. Various snippets with other suitors further illuminate how she calls on her agency. By showing these instances, she dismantles the stereotypical view that Muslim women are oppressed and mindless.

4 Tasting the Sky A Palestinian Childhood

The third memoir analysed is Ibtisam Barakat’s *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* [11]. Barakat relates her life story when as a child, she faced the angst of being displaced from home during the ravages of war. In their paper entitled “Remembering Home: Palestine from a Distance”, Noraini Md Yusof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Raihanah M.M claim that the memoirist “is caught between forgetting and remembering; her mother’s advice is to forget, but she is unable to disregard the events that have taken place…[t]his epistaloric narrative shows the conflict of the diasporic writer trying to reconcile her past and her present” [12].

Remembering is central to memoirists. Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf [1] focus on the concepts of “memory” and “diaspora” when addressing the issues of identity and home in their paper “Notions of home for diasporic Muslim women writers.” Disporic writers, they argue, “still return to their respective homelands in their writings,”[1] but their notions of home are wrought with implications. The notion of home vary given their past and present circumstances; “the real home as remembered, and the physical one which they now inhabit” – these two “homes” convey use of memory for the exiled writers. As the writers further argue, “in remembering their respective homelands, the writers seem to view the remembered events from the outside, from the point of view of external observers” [1]. Positive or negative images of the homeland and the hostland impart certain emotions of sadness, anger or happiness that are embedded in their portrayals of home.

In *Tasting the Sky*, Barakat attempts to make sense of her experiences by going back into the past, remembering, the homeland that she has lost. Her home is re-imagined in her narratives. Her mother, Mirriam, alternatively yearns to forget. For Mirriam, when “a war ends, it does not go away…it hides inside us” [11]. She advises Barakat not to indulge in the suppressed emotions, forbidding her daughter from doing anything that can trigger repercussions from the Israeli soldiers. Her refrain – “Khalas, insay, insay...forget, just forget” – is her advice for Ibtisam on how to survive in Israeli-occupied West Bank [11]. For Barakat’s mother, forgetting is her way to deal with their losses. Noraini Md Yusof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Raihanah M.M [12] claim that “the absence of memory allows Mirriam to continue a semblance of life after being forcibly relocated to another place.”

Pertinent to the discussion on the diasporic memory of home is also Rushdie’s [13] concept of ‘imaginary homelands’ which are constructions of the writer’s creative and re-creative power of ‘imagination’. Similarly, Barakat’s home in Ramallah exists as the imaginary homeland in her narrative. When she remembers her past she is reminded of who she is; that lost home in Palestine actually affords her with a sense of identity, that of the Palestinian. It also gives her hope; this is the collective memory that shapes Barakat, allowing her to comprehend the traumatic experiences of the Palestinians in Palestine. It is this collective memory that allows Barakat to embark on "an active process of sense-making through time" [14].

However, contrary to her mother’s wishes, Barakat craves for the memories: “Sinking in the sea / Of forgetfulness / I reach for the raft / of remembering.” [11]. By remembering, Barakat has voice and agency. Her recollections of her homeland give her hope, her memories empower her. She survives in new locations with her reminiscence of what she once had and now yearns. Her conscious remembering reminds her of her past:

I am midway from forgetting to remembering. I do not know how long it will take before I return to all of myself. Yes, an echo still warns: "Learn to forget". But I am past this checkpoint
- I will never regret that I choose to remember. [11]

Home is, thus for Barakat, “signified not just by the house that she was born in, but also Palestine, the land of her forefathers” [12]. The bond she shares with the land is an intricate one; it is her soul, central to her sense of identity. By losing both the house and the land, Barakat is detached from her Self. The only hope for the writer to carry on is to recreate the home in her memoir.

5 Conclusion

This paper presents the discussion into three memoirs by Muslim women from three Muslim diasporic contexts – Afghan Australian Mahboba Rawi, Indian-East African British Shelina Zahra JanMohamed and Palestinian American Ibtisam Barakat. Each memoir discussed showcases a particular experience of being a woman and a member of the Muslim Diaspora in post 9/11era where one’s sense of identity is highly politicized.

However, despite the divergent contexts and experiences, these memoirs represent glimpses into the memories of the diasporic Muslim women around the world who continue to voice their stories about their past and present which, as we assert, echo the concerns of Muslim women collectively. It is in the thematic mapping of these memoirs that we get insights into the “spaces of hope” that offer promise despite trauma of the past or Islamophobic tensions of the present.

The voices of these three Muslim women illuminate the lived realities of their lives – the interconnectedness of their past history and the physicality of their present existence show their optimism to make good their stories of survival. The heterogeneity of memories – be that of trauma and/or hope and/or love and/or home, signals the direction taken by current generation Muslim memoirists who use their personal life stories to engage the global readership into Muslim geographies.

References: