Does Literary Fiction Challenge Racial Stereotypes?

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*A book is a mirror: if a fool looks in, do not expect an apostle to look out.*

Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799)

Reading literary fiction can be highly pleasurable, but does it also make you a better person? Conventional wisdom and intuition lead us to believe that reading can indeed improve us. However, as the philosopher Emrys Westacott has recently pointed out in his essay for 3Quarksdaily (1), we may overestimate the capacity of literary fiction to foster moral improvement. A slew of scientific studies have taken on the task of studying the impact of literary fiction on our emotions and thoughts. Some of the recent research has centered on the question of whether literary fiction can increase empathy. In 2013, Bal and Veltkamp published a paper in the journal *PLOS One* (2) showing that subjects who read excerpts from literary texts scored higher on an empathy scale than those who had read a nonfiction text. This increase in empathy was predominantly found in the participants who felt “transported” (emotionally and cognitively involved) into the literary narrative. Another 2013 study published in the journal *Science by Kidd and Castano* (3) suggested that reading literary fiction texts increased the ability to understand and relate to the thoughts and emotions of other humans when compared to reading either non-fiction or popular fiction texts.

Scientific assessments of how fiction affects empathy are fraught with difficulties, and critics raise many legitimate questions. Do “empathy scales” used in psychology studies truly capture the psychological phenomenon of “empathy?” How long does the effect of reading literary fiction last, and does it translate into meaningful shifts in behavior? How does one select appropriate literary fiction texts and control texts and conduct such studies in
a heterogeneous group of participants who probably have very diverse literary tastes? Kidd and Castano, for example, used an excerpt of *The Tiger’s Wife* (4) by Téa Obreht as a literary fiction text because the book was a finalist for the National Book Award, whereas an excerpt of *Gone Girl* (5) by Gillian Flynn was used as a “popular fiction” text even though it was long-listed for the prestigious Women’s Prize for Fiction. (6)

The recent study *Changing Race Boundary Perception by Reading Narrative Fiction* (7) led by the psychology researcher Dan Johnson from Washington and Lee University took a somewhat different approach. Instead of assessing global changes in empathy, Johnson and colleagues focused on a more specific question: Could the reading of a fictional narrative change the perception of racial stereotypes?

Johnson and his colleagues chose an excerpt from the novel *Saffron Dreams* (8) by the Pakistani-American author Shaila Abdullah. In this novel, the protagonist is a recently widowed pregnant Muslim woman Arissa whose husband Faizan was working in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and killed when the building collapsed. The excerpt from the novel provided to the participants in Johnson’s research study describes a scene in which Arissa is traveling alone late at night and is attacked by a group of male teenagers. The teenagers mock and threaten her with a knife because of her Muslim headscarf (*hijab*), use racial and ethnic slurs, and make references to the 9/11 attacks. The narrative excerpt does not specifically mention the word Caucasian, but one of the attackers is identified as blond, and another one has a swastika tattoo. They do not believe her when she tries to explain that she was also a victim of the 9/11 attacks and instead refer to her as belonging to a “race of murderers.”

The researchers used a second text in their experiment, a synopsis of the literary excerpt from *Saffron Dreams*. This allowed Johnson colleagues to distinguish between the effects of the literary narrative style of the text with its inner monologue and description of emotions versus the effects of the content of the text. Samples of the literary text and the synopsis used by the researchers can be found at the end of this article (scroll down) for those readers who would like to compare their own reactions to the two texts.

The researchers recruited 68 U.S. participants (mean age 36 years, roughly half were female, 81% Caucasian, reporting seven different religious affiliations but none of them were Muslim) and randomly assigned them to the full literary narrative group (33 participants) or the synopsis group (35 participants). After the participants read the texts, they were asked to complete a number of questions about the text and its impact on them. They were also presented with 18 male faces that the researchers had designed with special software in a manner that they appeared ambiguous in terms of Caucasian or Arab characteristics. For example, the faces combined blue eyes with darker skin tones. The participants were asked to grade the faces as being:

1. Arab
2. mixed, more Arab than Caucasian
3. mixed, more Caucasian than Arab
4. Caucasian
The participants were also asked to estimate the genetic overlap between Caucasians and Arabs on a scale from 0% to 100%.

Participants in the narrative fiction group were more likely to choose one of the ambiguous options (mixed, more Arab than Caucasian or mixed, more Caucasian than Arab) and less likely to choose the categorical options (Arab or Caucasian) than those who read the synopsis. Even more interesting is the finding that the average percentage of genetic overlap between Caucasians and Arabs estimated by the synopsis group was 33%, whereas it was 57% in the narrative fiction group.

Both of these estimates are way off. The genetic overlap between any one human being and another human being on our planet is approximately 99.9%. Even much of the 0.1% variation in the human genome sequences is not due to “racial” differences. As pointed out in a *Nature Genetics* article by Lynn Jorde and Stephen Wooding (9), approximately 90% of total genetic variation between humans would be present in a collection of individuals from any one continent (Asia, Europe, or Africa). Only an additional 10% genetic variation would be found if the collection consisted of a mixture of Europeans, Asians, and Africans.

It is surprising that both groups of study participants heavily underestimated the genetic overlap between Arabs and Caucasians and that simply reading the fictional text changed their views of the human genome. This latter finding is also a red flag that informs us about the poor state of general knowledge of genetics, which appears to be so fragile that views can be swayed by nonscientific literary texts.

This study is the first to systematically test the impact of reading literary fiction on an individual’s assessment of race boundaries and genetic similarity. It suggests that fiction can indeed blur the perception of race boundaries and challenge our stereotypes. The text chosen by the researchers is especially well suited to defy stereotypical views held by the readers. The protagonist’s Muslim husband was killed in the 9/11 attacks, and she herself is being harassed by non-Muslim thugs. This may challenge assumptions held by some readers that only non-Muslims were the victims of the 9/11 attacks.

The effect of reading the narrative text seemed to have effects on the readers that went far beyond the content matter – the story of a Muslim woman who is showing significant courage while being threatened. The faces shown to the study participants were those of men, and the question of genetic overlap between Caucasians and Arabs was a rather abstract question that had little to do with Arissa’s story. Perhaps Arissa’s story had a broader effect on the readers. The study did not measure the impact of the narrative on additional stereotypes or assumptions held by the readers such as those regarding other races or sexual orientations, but this is a question that ought to be investigated.

One of the limitations of the study is that it assessed the impact of the story only at a single time-point, immediately after reading the text. Without measuring the effect a few days or weeks later, it is difficult to ascertain whether this was a lasting effect. Another limitation of this study is that it purposefully chose an anti-stereotypical text but did not test the opposite hypothesis, that some fictional narratives may potentially foster negative stereotypes.
One of my earliest memories of an English-language novel about Muslim characters is the spy novel *The Mahdi* (10) by the British author A.J Quinnell (pen name for Philip Nicholson) (11) written in 1981. The basic plot is that (spoiler alert) U.S. and British intelligence agencies want to manipulate and control the Muslim world by installing a Mahdi, the long-awaited spiritual and political leader of Muslims foretold by Muslim tradition. The ridiculous part of the plan is that the puppet leader is accepted by the Muslim world as the true incarnation of the Mahdi because of a green laser beam emanating from a satellite. The beam incinerates a sacrificial animal in front of a crowd of millions of Muslims at the Hajj pilgrimage and convinces them (and the rest of the Muslim world) that God sent this green laser beam as a sign. This novel portrayed Muslims as gullible idiots who would simply accept the divine nature of a green laser beam. One can only wonder what impact reading an excerpt from that novel would have had on the perception of race boundaries by study participants.

The study by Johnson and colleagues is an important contribution to the research of how reading can change our perceptions of race and possibly stereotypes in general. It shows that reading fiction can blur the perception of race boundaries, but it also raises a number of additional questions about how long this effect lasts, how pervasive it is, and whether fiction might also have the opposite effect. Hopefully, these questions will be addressed in future research studies.

Acknowledgments:

Image Credit: Saffron Woman by N.M. Rehman (generated from an attribution-free, public domain photograph)

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Excerpt of the literary fiction sample from *Saffron Dreams* (8) by Shaila Abdullah

This is just an excerpt from the narrative sample used by the researchers, which was 3,108 words in length (pages 57 to 64 from the book):

*I got off the northbound No. 2 IRT and found out almost immediately that I was not alone. The late October evening inside the station felt unusually weighty on my senses.*

*I heard heavy breathing behind me. Angry, smoky, scared. I could tell there were several of them, probably four. Not pros, perhaps in their teens. They walked closer sometimes, and other times the heavy thud of spiked boots on concrete and clanking chains receded into the distance. They walked like boys wanting to be men. They fell short. Why was there no fear in my heart? Probably because there was no more room in my heart for terror. When horror comes face-to-face with you and causes a loved one's death, fear leaves your heart. In its place, merciful God places pain. Throbbing, pulsating, oozing pus, a wound that stays fresh and raw no matter how carefully you treat it. How can you be afraid when you have no one to be fearful for? The safety of your loved ones is what breeds fear in your heart. They are*
the weak links in your life. Unraveled from them, you are fearless. You can dangle by a thread, hang from the rooftop, bungee jump, skydive, walk a pole, hold your hand over the flame of a candle. Burnt, scalded, crashed, lost, dead, the only loss would be to your own self. Certain things you are not allowed to say or do. Defiant as I am, I say and do them anyway.

And so I traveled with a purse that I held protectively on one side. My hijab covered my head and body as the cool breeze threatened to unveil me. I laughed inwardly as I realized I was more afraid of losing the veil than of being mugged. The funny part of it is, I desperately wanted to lose my hijab when I came to America, but Faizan had stood in my way. For generations, women in his household had worn the veil, although none of them seemed particularly devout. It’s just something that was done, no questions asked, no explanations needed. My argument was that we should try to assimilate into the new culture as much as possible, not stand out. Now that he was gone, losing the hijab meant losing a portion of our time together.

It had been just 41 days. My iddat, bereavement period, was over. Technically I was a free woman, not tied to anyone, but what could I do about the skeletons in my closet that wouldn’t leave me alone?

Excerpt of the Synopsis used by the researchers as a comparator:

This is the corresponding excerpt from the synopsis used by the researchers. The full-length synopsis was 491 words long:

The scene starts with Arissa getting off the subway train. She is being followed. Most commuters have already returned home, so it is not the safest time to be traveling alone. Four people are walking behind her. Initially confused by the lack of fear in her heart, she realizes that it is the consequence of losing someone so close to her. It is ironic that she is wearing her hijab, a Muslim veil. She wanted to get rid of it when she came to America, but her husband, Faizan, insisted she keep it. Following his death, keeping the hijab was a way of keeping some of their time together. It has been 41 days since the attack, and Arissa’s iddat, bereavement period, is over. She is a free woman, but cannot put aside her grave feelings of loss.
References


