

## Countering Western Stereotypical Assumptions of the Reverts Muslims' Experiences in Na'ima b. Robert *From My Sisters' Lips* (2005)

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### Abstract

Islamophobia has placed the Muslims in Britain in a very tight spot. Placed in a double bind situation, the Muslim women in Britain have to face two layers of oppression, the racial and gender. These women and the contemporary British Muslim women writers in particular, have to counter lopsided and inaccurate notions about their perceived gender oppression as immensely discussed in the Western feminist framework (WFF). As such, the framework of Islamic feminism emerges as reformation attempts to elevate women's status within the variety of Islamic cultural traditions and the Western community at large. In her novel, Na'ima b. Robert has presented readers with an autobiographical collection of personal interviews with her Muslim revert sisters, Aliyah, Sara, Mei Ling, Claire, Umm Tariq, Jameela and Umm Muhammad. Entries on much-debated issues such as embracing Islam, hijab, marriage will be substantial evidence in disclosing the truth. By getting the facts right (via ijihad of the Holy Qur'an verses and Hadith), this paper intends to counter the stereotypical assumptions of the veiled women being portrayed as the victim of oppression and backwardness by the WFF. Hence, justifiable instances (narrated interviews) where the Western preconceptions about Islam and its believers could be set right.

**Keywords:** Islamic Feminism, ijihad, tafsir, revert

### INTRODUCTION

Following the tragedies of 9/11, London bombings 7/7, the shooting at Christchurch mosque in 2019, and the recent slain of a French teacher in October, regrettably, these turn of events have contributed to the rise of Xenophobia and Islamophobia worldwide. Islamophobia has placed the Muslims in Britain in a very tight spot. They find it hard to be accepted equally on the "public spheres and spaces of western societies" (Nagel and Staeheli, 2009: 108). As much as it is hard to be a Muslim in Britain, it is even harder for the Muslim women. *Hijab* (headscarf) wearers have since become victims of hate crimes and violence. Any Muslim woman who dons the headscarf is labelled as "an icon of cultural backwardness" (Hasan, 2015: 43).

Placed in a double bind situation, the Muslim women in Britain have to face two layers of oppression, the racial and gender. These women and the contemporary British Muslim women writers in particular, have to counter lopsided and inaccurate notions about their perceived gender oppression as immensely discussed in the Western feminist framework (WFF). In dealing with Islamophobia, British Muslims in general and British Muslim women in particular tend to put themselves in a third space that allows them to participate actively and creatively in literary works. A prominent scholar on hybridity, Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), introduces the notion of 'third space' and suggests the possibility of the third space to disassociate its subjects from the represented histories (homeland), and establishes new structures of power. The so called 'third space' is a kind of a hybrid identity of the British Muslims where it is supposed to be "anti-imperialist, anti-Islamophobic and internationalist in outlook" (Birt, 2009: 223).

Interestingly, the 'third space' can be conceptualized as the platform (the agency) for the British Muslim writers to debunk any stereotypical representations of Islam and its women in the form of literary works, where the image of real Islam is being depicted through the main characters and themes. For instance, Robin Yassin-Kassab, a second generation Muslim immigrants in Britain (was born in London to a Syrian father & English mother), has reacted to Islamophobia by informing the mainstream media of Islam in a new light through his novel, *The Road From Damascus* (2008), where the key to understanding Islam and its believers lies beyond the issues of *hijabs* and the beards (Rashid, 2012). The novel presents the struggle of the second generation of Muslim immigrants to uphold their religion and religious practice (donning *hijab* etc.) in a western society and how they deal with such bigotry.

In relation to the issues highlighted above, this paper intends to investigate how the writings of one of the British Muslim women writers, i.e Na'ima b. Robert, her autobiography, *From My Sisters' Lips* (2005) has successfully succeeded in reaching a wider audience with informative and affirmative outlook on their identity as Muslim women from the lens of Islamic feminism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The birth of the women's liberation movement has occurred within and through Islam itself. In early Islam, religious studies were the favourite subject for women. A considerable number of women beginning from Aisha (RA), the wife of the Prophet (pbuh), were known to be renowned scholars of their time. In his article, "In Recognition of Women", Khalid Abou El Fadl (2017), records that Aisha's (RA) foresight and advice in the affairs of the Islamic community was regarded as highly important by the early Islamic rulers.

By definition, Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse using the classic Islamic methodologies or basic *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) and how both are used alongside "the methods and tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology" and others (Badran, 2002: 5). This branch of third wave feminism is only applicable "within an Islamic paradigm", where intentions and actions must be used in the context of Islam (Badran, 2002:7).

In countering the perception of Islamic feminism as being an oxymoron, Badran (2002) refutes such notion as Islamic feminism provides its advocates a dynamic

solution to strive for women rights within the framework of Islam. Furthermore, this discourse also promotes one's individual and collective obligations. Apart from serving people to lead their individual lives, Islamic feminism can also be a guidance for a community to be a united *ummah* that addresses on *amal makruf nahi mungkar* (doing good deeds, avoid evil deeds). As far as Muslim women in Western diaspora communities and in Muslim minority communities are concerned, second generation Muslim women are often caught between the practices and norms of the original home cultures of parents who migrated from Middle Eastern or South Asian countries to the ways of life in their new countries. Islamic feminism helps these women (the second generation) untangle patriarchy and cultural inflicted customs and presents them with Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and self-potential (Hussain, 2005).

Proponents of Islamic feminism (Islamic feminists like Asma Barlas, Elizabeth W. Fernea, Leila Ahmed, to name a few) have secluded themselves from the rigid restrictive interpretations of the female gender and declared their opposition to discriminatory cultural practices, which is played out in false calls for Islamic identity and obedience. One strong example would be in their firm stand when it comes to domestic or sexual violence to women by husbands or male perpetrators. In reexamining the Qur'an and *Hadiths*, Badran (2002) and her Islamic feminists' sisters present the public with pertinent *surahs* and *sirahs* that condemn any acts of violence against women. In Abdul-Rauf Hussein's translation of the Qur'an (2013), the verse reads:

"... But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good."

(An-Nisaa, 4: 19)

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) further emphasizes this:

"The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family". "The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives".

(*Hadith* narrated by Ibn-Hanbal)

By using the framework of Islamic feminism, researcher will unfold instances where the reverts being interviewed by the author, Nai,ma b. Roberts in *From My Sisters' Lips* (2005), have been recorded as admitting to having the perseverance in securing the "recognition of their status, for equality, for the right to work and for an equal pay", without even having to forsake their faith (Ramadan, 2004: 142). In other words, Muslim women can restore their place in Islamic societies as well as stand resolute among non-Muslim community with a kind of emancipation that conforms to the principles of Islam.

## METHOD

This paper is the output of a textual and contextual research on one of the contemporary British Muslim women writers' novels that depict instances on the women characters facing two layers of oppression: gender and racial. The literary texts are analysed according to the issues of gender and race; of being the women in a traditional patriarchal family and the status of Muslim women in the eyes of the WWF (their identity). Using

Islamic Feminism theory as propounded by Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, and Margot Badran, the texts are analysed thematically according to the gender and race issues; gendered-expectation and culturally inflected practices in Na'ima b. Robert' autobiography, *From My Sisters' Lips* (2005).

The methodology that is employed in this research mainly relies on library research by way of reading and analysing written works and documents. The focus will be on both primary and secondary sources. In line with the information technology era, data from helpful websites are also considered as important sources. Electronic research is beneficial as a few of the original texts can be extracted from <https://openlibrary.org> and <https://www.gutenberg.org>.

## FINDINGS

In her autobiographical novel, Na'ima b. Robert has presented readers with a collection of personal interviews with her Muslim revert sisters, Aliyah, Sara, Mei Ling, Claire, Umm Tariq, Jameela and Umm Muhammad. Entries on much-debated issues such as embracing Islam, hijab, marriage will be substantial evidence in disclosing the truth. By getting the facts right (via ijtiḥād of the Holy Qur'an verses and Hadith), the journal entries have acted as evidence to counter the stereotypical assumptions of the veiled women being portrayed as the victim of oppression and backwardness by the WFF.

In the autobiographical novel, strong bonds of sisterhood, glamorous women-only parties, and friendships are being retold firsthand from the Muslim revert sisters from various background as well as those who were already born into Islam. From their stories we see the patience, determination, and faith of women who have steadfastly (*istiqomah*) by turning away from the hedonistic pleasures of irreligious life. For instance, one of the revert sisters, Umm Muhammad who used to attend parties before embracing Islam, shares her innermost feelings:

"I'm liberated from the unknown. I used to come home from parties and sit at the window and think, This is not life. This cannot be what I was created for. I believe there was a God and I believed He was out there... This cannot be my purpose. I'm not going to just die and discover that was my purpose but now I feel liberated (emancipated) and I feel happy with my *deen*. Allah has opened my heart. I've understood why I was created and I'm pleased with that."

(Umm Muhammad, p. 362)

In other words, Muslim women can restore their place in Islamic societies as well as stand resolute among non-Muslim community with a kind of emancipation that conforms to the principles of Islam. Ramadan (2004) hails the valor choice of Muslim women in donning the *hijab* as an act of emancipation (liberation) in line with their religious beliefs and practices. Hence, the West should cast aside their WFF and respect the Muslim women' choices and way of life. To exemplify, when Umm Tariq and Umm Muhammad *From My Sisters' Lips* (2005) decide to wear the *burqa*, that decision should neither be termed as being subservient nor indoctrinated. Another British Muslim women writer, Qaisra Shahraz is supportive of such act and through her response to the Western media

representatives, Shahraz was quoted as saying, “We are just women who like to dress in a modest fashion and believe in covering ourselves well” (Shaw, 2005: 2).

Relatively, Muslim women can restore their place in Islamic societies as well as stand resolute among non-Muslim community with a kind of emancipation that conforms to the principles of Islam. As acknowledged by another revert Muslim, Claire:

“Islam liberates you from certain things, like your image, presenting yourself to society as you think you should, achieving academic or career goals you think people want you to achieve. You still want them when you become a Muslim but you have a strong framework and principles to work by.”

(Claire, p. 362 – 363)

## DISCUSSION

In Na’ima b. Robert’ *From My Sisters’ Lips* (2005), the recorded journal entries (based on the interviews) have clearly refuted the West’s idea of fashion sense and claim as to possessing the key to liberty. To WFF, the veiled Muslim women are portrayed as being the victim of oppression, resulting in Islam being blamed for the backwardness of Muslim women. In an even harsher tone, *hijab* is associated with “the rise of militant extremism” (Hasan, 2018: 27), where the wearers and those accompanying would be subjected to heavy criticism by irresponsible bigots.

Western feminist writers like Elizabeth Fernea depicts Muslim women in the light of selfdiscovery and sisterhood. In her book, *In search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman’s Global Journey* (1998), Fernea acknowledges the misconception of the Western mind (the Orientalists) through their equation of wearing the veil (by the Muslim women) to oppression. In other words, Muslim women and other subaltern women are being marginalized and seen more as subjects of analysis (the Other) rather than sisters in plight. Orientalism in Western feminist representation, thus, causes the three-fold colonization of the Muslim women, namely as an Oriental, as a woman and as a Muslim (Hasan, 2015). One clear evidence would be in the research conducted by Hussain (2005: 29) on the trends of the British Muslim women of the South Asian community donning the *hijab* as manifestation of their religion were often subjected to racial discrimination and racial hatred. The Muslim to the WFF are marginalised, as the Muslim to the West are merely the “racial Other”.

## CONCLUSION

As to the question on why it is important to have a customised framework of Islamic Feminism rather than analysing the literary texts based on a WFF? The response would definitely be to serve as reformation attempts to counter lopsided criticisms by the WFF and champion the emancipation of the Muslim women by elevating their status through their manifestation of identity (donning *hijab*). In conclusion, the textual analysis has unfolded instances from the authentic artefacts (interviews) of the reverts in Robert’s autobiography that of Muslim women (reverts) have been recorded/depicted as having the perseverance in securing the “recognition of their status, for equality, for the right to work and for an equal pay”, without even having to forsake their faith (Ramadan, 2004: 142).

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