



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Interview with Umm Zakiyyah

Nadira Brioua and Mohammad A. Quayum

Umm Zakiyyah was born in 1975 in Long Island, New York, in the family of an American converts to Islam, Clark and Delores Moore. She grew up mostly in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she started writing articles for local newspapers at an early age. Later, as a student of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, she wrote articles for the university's publications and won many prizes for her leadership role as well as for her academic achievements. In 1997, she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education and embarked on a career of teaching. She also has a Master's degree in English language learning. She has given talks and interviews on radio and TV, and given lectures at youth events and at conferences within the United States and abroad.

Umm Zakiyyah's first novel, If I Should Speak, came out in 2001. This marked a turning point in her life as the novel became an instant bestseller in the US and attracted readers from as far as Malaysia and Australia. In his review of this book, Dr. Robert D. Crane, advisor to former US President Richard Nixon, commented,

I could not put it down.... I was fascinated not only by the plot of the novel, but especially by the brilliance of the writing itself. As a life-long professional writer and editor, I can say that I have never encountered Umm Zakiyyah's equal in portraying the nuances of encounters between persons at all levels from the most superficial to the most profound.

Umm Zakiyyah has since published several other novels, including A Voice (2004) and Footsteps (2007), which form the later two volumes of her If I Should Speak trilogy. Her other novels include Realities of Submission (2008), Heart We Lost (2011), A Friendship, Promise (2012) Muslim Girl (2014) and His Other Wife (2016), which has been adapted into a short film. She has also published a self-help book for Muslim survivors of abuse: Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You (2017). Her books have been taught at several universities in the US, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, and have been the focus of doctoral theses both at home and abroad.

Umm Zakiyyah also writes under her birth name Ruby Moore. Because she was born the year her parents converted to Islam and because she was their first child to be born into Islam, when the family changed their names to Islamic ones, her parents chose the name 'Baiyinah'

for Umm Zakiyyah, because it meant 'clear evidence' – signifying that with her birth the family found its spiritual clarity and its right religious and spiritual path.

*Umm Zakiyyah is one of the most prominent African-American Muslim writers writing about Muslims and Islam in the post-9/11 period. Her novels touch on the interfaith struggles of Muslims and Christians in a post-modern world and on the moral, spiritual and intercultural struggles of Muslims as minorities in a country where Muslims have been systematically marginalised after twin-tower attacks in 2001 and the subsequent American invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). She also writes about racism, women's issues, the practice of Muslim women wearing headscarfs, and polygamy. In this interview, Umm Zakiyyah talks about her favourite writers, about the function of the writer in general, about the critical reception of her novels and about the influence of Islam on her imagination. She also addresses the issues of Islamophobia in the West, the future of Islamic fiction and questions pertaining to *If I Should Speak* and other novels. This interview was conducted in late 2017 via email.*

Q: Do you remember the first novels you read? Have they left any significant mark on your imagination? Who are your favourite local and international novelists? What motivates you to write? When and what was your first piece of writing?

A: I can't say I remember the first novels I read, but I remember the ones that made a lasting impression on me. They were the books by Mildred D. Taylor: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Let the Circle Be Unbroken* and *The Road To Memphis*. My favorite authors include Na'ima B. Robert and Richard Paul Evans. Generally, I am motivated to share with the world stories that show the human side of the Muslim life. I am also motivated to write stories that, prayerfully, are encouraging to Muslims striving to please their Creator. I want to show the complexity of this struggle such that we all understand that no one is perfect, but there is still hope for all of us if we hold on to our faith. I've been writing since I was a child, so I don't remember my very first piece of writing. But I remember completing a short book for the first time when I was in middle school or high school. However, I don't remember the details of it, and I've since misplaced it.

Q: How did you get your first novel published, especially given the widespread bias and racism or religious prejudice that seem to prevail in the publication industry worldwide?

UZ: I founded my own publishing company.

Q: Your books have attracted readers from several countries such as America, the UK, Australia, Malaysia and Nigeria. In your view, what are reasons that attract these diverse readers to your fiction?

A: Based on the feedback I've received from readers internationally, what has attracted diverse readership is the presentation of the Muslim struggle in a complex yet realistic context. There are not a lot of novels about Muslims by American Muslims, and the few that exist are very stereotypical and sometimes anti-Islam. Thus, it's difficult for many Muslims to relate to what is happening in the story.

Q: What do you think is the primary function of the writer? Is it to delight the reader by telling a good, well-crafted story or to act as a conscience of society and as ‘doctor’ of his or her own culture? How have you fulfilled these roles in your writing? Is the function of the Muslim writer different in any way from writers generally?

A: I think every writer is different. Even amongst Muslim writers, everyone writes for a different reason. For me, I view my writing as both a joy and a huge responsibility. Though I enjoy what I do, I don’t believe I have the right to craft any story I want and publish it for the world. As a Muslim, I am very conscious of the fact that everything I say and do will be asked about on the Day of Judgment. And this is even more so the case with what I write because it will most likely remain on earth long after I am gone. For this reason, I generally make lots of du’aa and pray Istikhaarah before publishing anything. Personally, I believe that the role of the Muslim writer should be different from other writers in that we have a greater responsibility to share Islam with the world. However, some Muslim writers feel that religion and writing should not overlap. I find this separation impossible, even for those who imagine they are separating their beliefs from their writing. We cannot ever separate our hearts and souls from our actions or writing. It simply is not possible, even if we never overtly mention religion.

Q: Tell us to what extent Islam has influenced your writing: do you write consciously as a Muslim African-American or do you write as an African-American writer of Muslim background? In other words, how do you negotiate your multiple identities in your fiction?

A: Islam is at the heart of everything I write. When I’m writing, I am definitely conscious of my Muslim identity because Islam forms the basis of my entire life and decision-making. As I mentioned earlier, I generally pray Istikhaarah before publishing any book, so I’m very conscious of my responsibility to my soul and meeting my Creator after I die. Regarding also being an African-American woman, I don’t feel a conscious need to ‘negotiate’ my multiple identities. I am human like everyone else, and it is the world that has trouble negotiating my identities. However, because I am African-American, this experience will naturally be mirrored in my writing.

Q: In 2008, you were awarded the Muslim Girls Unity Conference Distinguished Authors Award. What does it mean to you?

A: I was honoured to receive the award.

Q: Why do you use Arabic words in your novels?

A: Some of the characters in my novels are Muslims, and Arabic words are part of the vocabulary of most Muslims.

Q: Inayah Donald in *Muslim Girl*, Durrah Gonzales in *If I Should Speak* and Salima in *His Other Wife* struggle between their desire to wear as they like and following the Islamic dress code for women. Is this a common experience for Muslim women in the US? If not, then what did you want to represent through this struggle?

A: With the exception of Durrah, I don't think of these characters' struggles being rooted in a desire to dress 'as they like' so much as they are navigating the very real human struggle that comes from being in a society that doesn't accept hijab. If they were in a Muslim-friendly environment, perhaps the struggle wouldn't exist for them. In this, even a young woman like Durrah might not have felt compelled to drift so far from Islam. Similarly, for Muslim women in the US, it is less about wanting to dress like they want than wanting to not be stared at, mistreated, or discriminated against in wider society. I don't believe most Muslim women want to remove their hijab. They feel pressured due to the environment in which they live.

Q: In *His Other Wife*, Deanna Bivens keeps blaming Aliyah for accepting Nikki as her husband's second wife; however, she asks Jacob to marry her as his second wife and accepts Aliyah as his first wife. Why did she backtrack? Is it really for her children as she said or is it because she could not abandon her husband? Polygamy is also a theme in *Footsteps*. Is polygamy prevalent in the African-American Muslim community? What is your personal view about the practice?

A: Polygamy is a well-known marriage choice amongst Muslims worldwide and is not specifically unique to African-Americans. As a Muslim, I don't have a personal view on polygamy except that I understand it is a type of marriage ordained by Allah, and thus is the personal choice of every believer, as is monogamy. However, I do find it quite odd that Muslims continuously ask me about polygamy in my books as if believers entering a halaal marriage requires an explanation. That this same question isn't asked about monogamy in my books suggests that the Westernisation of the Muslim ummah is much more widespread than I could have imagined. My books portray the experiences of Muslims, and marriage is part of that experience, in both monogamy and polygamy. Regarding African-American Muslims or any other group, I have no idea what the statistics are for practising polygamy.

Q: Aliyah is rejected by her family after her conversion to Islam. Tamika in *A Voice* experiences a similar situation with her Christian mother who makes the church the heartbeat of the family. Is this a commonplace experience among those in the US who embrace Islam against their family's wishes?

A: Yes, this happens very often. However, there are also many families that accept their children's conversion to Islam, though there are almost always some struggles involved.

Q: Which of your novels do you prefer most and why? Is there a novel that you would like to rewrite if you were given the opportunity? Why so?

A: Every novel is different, so I don't have a specific preference unless there is a specific topic that one is looking for. But generally speaking, the novel I've written the most recently tends to be the closest to my heart at the moment. No, I don't think I would rewrite any of my novels.

Q: Do you think Islamic fiction will survive the current Islamophobia in the West? If so, how?

A: I don't see any reason why it wouldn't survive. In fact, it is sometimes the Islamophobia itself that inspires curiosity in the Muslim experience, which makes some non-Muslims want to read Islamic fiction. Even for Muslims, their experience with anti-Muslim bigotry often makes them want to find comfort wherever they can, and Islamic fiction offers this comfort.

Q: Do you think that one day African-American Muslim fiction will become an integral part of the American literary scene?

A: As a genre, my books are Muslim fiction though they include African-American characters. It is my hope and prayer that Muslim fiction with diverse characters will become an integral part of the American literary scene.

Q: What have you been writing lately? When do you expect your next novel/book to come out?

A: Earlier this year I released a non-fiction self-help book inspired by the true story of a Muslim sister I know. It is entitled [Reverencing the Wombs That Broke You: A Daughter of Rape Inspires Healing and Healthy Family](#). I'm currently working on another non-fiction book based on the true story of a bipolar American woman who converted to Islam. It is scheduled to be released later this year, inshaaAllah.

***Nadira Brioua** has a Master's degree in English Literature. She wrote a thesis on Black American Civil Rights Movement Between 1954 and 1968 for her Master's degree. Nadira is currently pursuing her PhD in English Literary Studies at International Islamic University Malaysia. Her research focuses on a comparative study of three Muslim writers in the West: Umm Zakiyyah (USA), Na'ima B. Robert (UK) and Randa Abdel-Fattah (Australia).*

***Mohammad A. Quayum** is Professor of English at International Islamic University Malaysia and Honorary Professor of English and Creative Writing at Flinders University, Australia. He has published 32 books and numerous articles in the areas of American Literature, Postcolonial Literatures and Bengali Literature. Quayum is also a well-known translator who has translated the works of Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Begum Rokeya. He is the Founding Editor and Editor-in-Chief of Asiatic: An International Journal of Asian Literatures, Cultures and Englishes.*