

**Event Title**

Surviving Patriarchy: Colonialism and its Impact on Muslim Women's Literature

**Event Category**

Artistic & Professional Development

**Event Description**

Historically, Muslim women made significant literary contributions. However, many of these contributions have been muted, dismissed, or deliberately misused due to patriarchal constructs which suppressed vibrant, minority voices. Subduing women's literature manifested due to colonialism and patriarchal constructs around the world, and it is prevalent up to recent day. Together, we will journey into the lives of Muslim women literary legends and unearth staggering accounts of rising women's voices.

**Event Organizer & Moderator**

Afshan Malik is a Chicago native turned southern belle who authored the 2019 YA novel *Pieces* by Daybreak Press. She holds an MA in the nonprofit field and brings her interests together at Rabata, an organization promoting positive cultural change through education, spirituality and community care.

**Event Participants**

Tayyaba Syed is a multiple award-winning author, who has written over 20 children's books. As a journalist, her byline has been in numerous publications like NPR. She conducts literary and faith-based presentations as a teacher and fun storyteller, weaving great lessons and heart into everything.

Carla Taylor lives in California, where she homeschools her 3 children and writes book reviews for Daybreak Press. She has a particular interest in reading and reviewing non-fiction books addressing sociological themes, religion, and history. She is very passionate about early childhood literacy.

**Afshan Malik: Opening Remarks and Overview**

An anecdote comes to mind as we begin our discussion. This example is the real story of a friend who earned her doctorate degree in Education. She created a presentation and spoke at an educational conference last year and a few months later, found that her presentation had been taken without her consent and presented by a man at a completely different conference.

Any women who are in the academic field might be shaking their heads in dismay and understanding, because this incident is sad, but not hard to believe.

Not only was her work taken without consent, but when presenters who were using her work were asked where the author of the research was, they made an excuse (in other words, they lied) and said she could not attend to present her own research because she had obligations with her children. Now I hope you're as shocked and appalled as I was that even in 2022, we have situations in which a woman's effort through her blood sweat and tears are taken, mishandled, and provided to others with the misrepresentation that her domestic obligations prevented her from convening with her colleagues at a conference. The truth was that she wasn't even given the respect of being invited. Nevermind granting permission to use her work.

According to Islamic law, women can inherit properly, hold the rights to manage her finances, hold seats in political office, lead an army, fight in battle, be doctors, scholars, poets and writers and anything they wish. This is true Islamic law.

For context, Islam is a religion that comes from a system of belief that Muslims believe as a natural progression of Abrahamic faiths. Muslims believe God created Adam and his companion Eve (known as Hawa in Islamic literature) and many well-known prophets Jesus and Moses - who are familiar to those who have studied other faiths.

Now what's happened is that the image of a Muslim woman has become the symbol of oppressed. What's happened to modern society that countries in the quote end quote first world are forcing the removal of hijab, a headscarf that Muslim women wear to identify themselves as women who believe in God? We see the pattern of how the first world countries can enforce their own understanding of what freedom means causing all over the world third world countries follow - India's oppression of Muslim students has been in headlines in recent weeks.

We can see the patterns of patriarchy and colonialism come into play when we look at the identity of Muslim women manipulated for the public eye. Women who cover their heads must be at a lower intellectual capacity than women who don't. Women who believe in God must be spiritually confused.

Historically, we've seen women all over the world trapped by the suffocating claws of imposition. Western, colonialist powers have intruded upon fully functioning countries and regions and forcibly removed the women's voice, the women's authentic narrative, and the woman's agency from places where they had freely and successfully impacted for centuries.

Slowly, Muslim majority countries began taking on these patriarchal constructs and began to see women as lesser. Less intellectual, less significant, less worthy. It became impossible for ANY woman to be recognized for her contributions and in British and American literature - we see how women were forced to use pen names so that their work could be accepted by the public. JK Rowling wrote under a pen name because she feared boys wouldn't read her books.

Why not? Because our younger generations have been passed on this conditioning. That women's voices are less interesting and wouldn't connect with men and boys.

Modern colonialism began in a period we call the Age of Discovery. This caused a period of Dark Ages for the Muslim populations because women were being stripped away of their rights, their voice, and their ability to be involved members of their society.

The same colonialist powers that were going into regions of the world where Muslim women were engaged contributors in the literary landscape were the same global powers who did not allow women to even vote until the 1900's.

Razia Sultan of the Delhi Sultanate in the 13 century was given reign and authority to rule. She was appointed by her father, who actually passed over her brother because he recognized his son lacked the skill and intelligence his daughter had.

Researcher Jean Boyd was sent by the British to educate Nigerians and discovered Nana Asma'u by accident. She reflected, "There is literacy here, there is God, so let me go back and try to learn from the very people I was supposed to educate" (Chahrouk). Her ignorance in Muslim women's scholarship and spiritual authority continues to be a reflection on a global scale where Muslim women are viewed as a population that is oppressed and needs saving.

My colleagues will introduce you to many women - from as early as the first century all the way to present day. Muslim women who have excelled in areas of literary pursuits and scholarship, women whose words are still being sought after and translated to derive benefit and inspiration from today.

When we venture into thinking about Muslim women's literature, I invite you to first reflect with us about the context in which Muslim women have been mentioned IN literature BY Muslims themselves. This is especially important in heritage texts like the Quran, the holy book in Islam and hadith, thousands of Prophetic narrations that were compiled by companions who lived around the Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him.

Why should we feel it's especially significant to understand what heritage Islamic text say about Muslim women's identity and agency? Because religious text has been commonly misused through colonial and patriarchal influence to oppress and marginalize half the population.

Maryam, or the Virgin Mary, is mentioned in the Quran 70 times and is identified as the greatest woman who ever lived. Khadijah the wife of the Prophet (pbuh) is amongst the 4 women

mentioned in the Quran who are considered the “women of heaven.” Maryam is also included in that number.

Present day Muslim women authors I recommend we read include Dr. Ingrid Mattson author of *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, Dr. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer author of *Muslim Cool Race Religion & Hip Hop in the United States*, Dr. Sylvia Chan Malik author of *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*, and Dr. Jamillah Karim author of *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*.

I also bring in the research done by present day Muslim woman scholar, Dr. Tamara Gray. Dr. Tamara Gray is the Executive Director of Rabata and has filled the digital space with authentic voices of Muslim women in literature - both past and present. On Rabata's website you'll find many free resources to use to enhance your own understanding.

Dr. Gray writes that the history of Muslim women is a history of action, acumen and resilience. It is a history of intelligence, interest and stamina. It is a history of personal power, community care and global grit. And few exemplify this history like Nana Asma'u of the early nineteenth century. Nana Asma'u's, like we mentioned before, life was sandwiched between the French Revolution, which concluded in the year of her birth, and the United States Civil War, which ended the year of her death. The Sokoto did not fall to colonial rule until 1903.

Before I ask Tayyaba Syed to speak, I leave you with the words of Shaykh Usman don Fodio, father of Nana Asma'u, and his advice to Muslim women. Nana Asma'u was not only a renowned poet and scholar, but she was also someone her father consulted while he was in power.

“Oh Muslim women, do not listen to the words of the misguided ones who seek to lead you astray by ordering you to obey your husbands instead of telling you to obey God and His Messenger. They tell you that a woman's happiness lies on obeying her husband. This is not more than a camouflage to make you satisfy their needs. They impose on you duties which neither God nor His Messenger imposed on you. They make you cook, wash clothes and do other things which they desire while they fail to teach you that which Allah and His apostle have prescribed for you. Neither God nor His apostle charges you with such duties.”

### **Presenter Tayyaba Syed**

- Introduction
  - Thank AWP for having us and then recognize my fellow presenters.
  - For most of their history, Muslims have been great contributors to society with
- advancements in science, art, literature, philosophy, technology, environment and culture.

- Some inventions that were founded by Muslims have shaped ancient world civilizations and are still important and needed in our modern times include coffee, clocks, cameras, universities, flying machines, surgical instruments, maps, music, and algebra.
- Muslim women have always been amongst these contributors and still are.
- Seeking and sharing knowledge has been part of the Islamic doctrine and creed, since the religion began.
  - In the 2nd chapter of the Quran, God states, “And He [God] taught Adam the names [of things], all of them...” He then told him, “O Adam, tell them the names of all these.” (Holy Quran 2:31, 33)
  - “Read!” (Holy Quran 96:1). That was the first word that was revealed of the Quran in the year 610 AD to a simple, illiterate man named Muhammad ibn Abdullah from the town of Mecca.
  - Because of God’s first command, knowledge is considered sacred in Islam and must be preserved through education, scholarship and prolific works.
- Over a period of 23 years, Muhammad received revelations from God through angel Gabriel. Even though Muhammad could not read or write, he was able to memorize the verses and recite them to his companions. These early Muslims would then memorize those same verses and write them down on animal skins, pieces of tree bark and palm branches, since paper was expensive and not easily available in the desert.
  - Before the Qur’an was readily available in written form, it was taught orally (by means of speech or verbally), which was a normal practice of the time. Many women of the time also memorized and taught the Quran. They became great reciters and scholars of the Quran like:
    - Umm Waraqah: of the older generation and a great reciter of the Quran and an imam of women
    - Hafsa bint Umar: a youth and a guardian and preserver of the Quran
    - Ash-Shifaa’ bint Abdullah was a doctor, teacher and minister of economics in Medina, who would practice medicine and teach women how to read and write.
- The Qur’an was revealed in the Arabic language and is still memorized to this day by millions of people around the world, young and old, in its original form. When it is recited, it has very rhythmic and melodious sounds to it like poetry and song.
  - It is composed of 114 chapters or surahs of various lengths. It consists of over
  - 6,000 verses and is more than 600 pages long.
- We see in our Islamic history that authorship and scholarship were synonymous. The global practice of female scholarship in Islam has transcended the last 15 centuries.
  - These women learned and passed on their knowledge through their teachings and writings.
- As we can see, from the time Islam began, women have been educated and prolific.

- Women like Hind bint Abi Umayyah (Umm Salamah), who migrated to modern day Ethiopia with the early Muslims and documented the entire account of them facing the Christian King of Abyssinia in such detail
- Tumadir bint ‘Amr (Al Khansa), the poet famous for the eulogies she wrote for her brothers that remain to this day influential and is being taught in universities today in their Arabic studies programs. and full of sorrow and emotion. She would recite poetry in public and inspire the hearts of her listeners.
- Asma’ bint Yazeed was a spokeswoman for the women of Medina. Bashfulness was never an obstacle for her. She was a leader and a contributor to the educational movement in the first Islamic state.
- After Prophet Muhammad (S) passed, we have more women like Aisha bint Talha, who the caliph would invite to sit amongst other scholars as she was ‘of the most knowledgeable.’
  - Hafsa bint Ibn Sireen knew more knowledge of the Quran than her brother Muhammad, who was also a great scholar like her
- I didnt see muslim women in history class and then took part in L&L for Fatima al Fihri and then i went to Georgetown Qatar

### **Presenter Carla Taylor**

Muslim women have such a rich history in literature. They have occupied diverse spaces in the literary world, such as poetry, academia, leadership, activism, and so much more. I’d like to first start by just going over a few women who in my opinion really stand out, when I think about positive change makers and contributors within and outside of the literary scope.

Muslim Women’s Impact on the literary world from long ago...

#### A. Who were they?

In the past, Muslim women have occupied diverse spaces in the literary world.

- a. Nana Asma’u (West Africa, Nigerian States)- 1793- 1864 - She was a spiritual leader, scholarly teacher, and social visionary. She was beloved by her people, respected by her colleagues and long remembered by her students. Her contributions are still remembered today. She was a *hafitha* (one who memorized the Quran), scholar in Islamic sciences, experienced in military science and an expert in the ability to translate sacred text into practical community values.
- b. Walladah bint Khalifah al-Mustakfi (1010-1091 Cordoba, Spain)- 11th Century

She was an outspoken Andalusian poet and feminist as well. Her writing has inspired some of the greatest writers of the eleventh-century in Spain as well as writers and artists in more recent times. She’s well known for creating a space where women and men could connect and share their work with one another.

She was a pioneer of that time, in that region of the world in elevating women's voices and shining light on who the women of her time were (their achievements, their struggles, their perseverance) through her poetry. She knew the importance of mentioning women and making them a part of history. She taught poetry as well. She served as an early example of feminine strength in the Muslim society.

- c. **Fatima al-Fihri (9th Century Morocco)** - Was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and was so passionate about learning that she used her inheritance that she received to fully architect the **University of al-Qarawiyyin**, which is the oldest operating university in the world and the oldest library in the world. Opening its doors in 857ce.

Fatima al-Fihri was well respected for her contributions among both men and women, due to large hand she had in transforming Fes, Morocco into a major intellectual, cultural, and spiritual hub for the Muslim world and the Christian-dominated West. What originally started as a religious and political teaching institute, extended its education to all subjects including the natural sciences.

The university had an impact on different cultures and civilizations, and was the institute for many innovative thinkers.

Some of the former students of the university are:

1. Ibn Rushd- developer of philosophy and mathematics
2. Muhaamad Al adrissi - well known cartographer and geographer
3. Pope Sylvester II - Introduced his knowledge of Arabic Numerals to Europe, giving us the number system today.

## B. Their Contributions

- a. So, the general theme that we have seen among these women is their drive and persistence to empower others to become original thinkers and educators and to uplift those around them who are doing the work to create change.
  - i. The diversity among these writers mentioned, provides us more insight into the way in which women hundreds and thousands of years ago were perceived, the situations they faced, and how impactful their literature was and still is.
  - ii. The literary impact of women long ago has also provided us with historical insight on the way the world was during those times as well as women's positions that they held within the world.

## The decline of Muslim Women Literature

### A. What happened?

- a. Colonialism - What happened? Why did we go from seeing such visible contribution among Muslim Women in literature to a very large decrease in their active involvement.
  - i. As a large amount of the Muslim world became colonized, what we started seeing was a shift in the way that women were perceived and recognized for their achievements and skills.
  - ii. Colonialism caused these areas to experience a lot of psychological, political, technological, cultural, or economic dependency, which led to the destruction of these societies.
- b. The patriarchal society that existed in the western part of the world and the lack of rights and participation in society that women were given, slowly started to be adopted by Muslim regions that had a history of inclusivity of women.
  - i. This had a monumental impact on literature and Muslim women's involvement in it, because now their social position, education and opinions weren't being respected or appreciated as they had prior to colonialism.
    1. Lack of recognition- they aren't being cited, they aren't being heard.
    2. No space - When they aren't being recognized or cited, they aren't taking up any space in literature.
    3. Unconscious and conscious bias towards Muslim women

### B. What's the result from all of this? The result is the lack of visibility and knowledge of the work that has been created by Muslim women

- a. If a society has deemed you to be not as intellectually or socially valuable due to stereotypes, then you're less likely to be given the opportunities to share your knowledge and views.

Unfortunately, that is what we are battling with today as Muslim Women.

- b. Muslim Women are often times described as quiet, oppressed, uneducated people, who don't have decision making skills or opinionated thoughts. This image is something that has been created through mainstream media and stereotypes throughout the world about Muslim women.

## The rise of Muslim Women in Modern times

### A. Modern Muslim Women Literary Contributors

In the 20th and 21st century we have started see more engagement among Muslim women activists, writers, leaders, and change makers. A few Muslim women who have really worked hard at creating a space for themselves are:

a. Aminah Assilmi (1945- 2010) American

She was an American Muslim woman who devoted most of her life to being an activist, Scholar, writer, and advocate for women's rights. Throughout her life she worked tirelessly as an advocate for women's rights, and social justice, through her writing and public engagements.

After losing custody of her 2 children, because of her choice in religion, she used her power of writing to advocate for change. She was successful in getting the law in Colorado changed, which now respects religious diversity in parents. And In 1993 she was a key player in assisting the National Organization of Women in declaring rape a war crime in Bosnia.

She is most recognized for being the woman responsible for bringing the Eid stamp to the US Postal Service, this is really important because this makes it the first official recognition of American Muslim's holidays.

b. Malala Yousfzai (1997- Present) Pakistani

Born in Pakistan, Malala is a woman who is deeply passionate about social justice and education. She's an activist who focuses on educational equality and the work she has done in just a short time is impressive.

Through her personal experiences with educational inequality and passionate engagement in empowering other girls and women throughout the world, she has successfully drawn global attention to the education that girls in Pakistan are receiving, which raised awareness in the type of education girls across the globe are receiving. Between her books, workshops, foundation, and speaking engagements, she has been extremely instrumental in creating change throughout the world.

c. Clara Muhammad (1899-1972) African American Muslim

She was the co-builder of the Nation of Islam (1931-1975) along with her husband. Clara Muhammad's impact on women, education and Muslim leaders has spanned five generations influencing the largest identifiable community of Muslims in the US.

Although she was very involved within the community on a daily basis (solving problems and organizing various programs), she took pride in her responsibility as a mother, wife and homemaker, never feeling that she had to sacrifice one for the other, but rather creating a lifestyle that blended the two so beautifully. She was the primary motivator behind the pioneering of University of Islam Schools, which began in her home with her children. She was also responsible for bringing the Qur'an into correctional institutions, upholding the rights of the first amendment of freedom of religion. She really is a true example of what integrity, grace, and perseverance for women, particularly Muslim Women looks like.

c. Tayibbah Taylor (1952- 2014) African American

She was the cofounder of *Azizah Magazine*, a magazine that was created for North American Muslim girls and women. Tayibbah was an international voice for Muslim women everywhere. Through her *Azizah* magazine and advocacy efforts, she helped people of all faiths to broaden their perceptions of the lives and potential of Muslim women, by acknowledging their accomplishments and talents. Her work has helped people see beyond stereotypes and focus on how diversity can bring greater economic success to communities.

B. Significance of Muslim Women writers/ Diversity among Muslim Women

Mentioning and discussing these Muslim women who have in recent years been and still are important figures in our literary community helps us to focus in on why it's crucial that Muslim women have active roles in literature

- a. It's important that we change the narrative about Muslim women through the literary avenues that are available, in order to correct the misinformation and skewed understandings about who they are.
- b. many of which have been created through stereotypes and mainstream media.
  - i. The idea that Muslim women all fit under the same umbrella of Arab culture, couldn't be further from the truth. Where in fact we are much more diverse than that. Muslim women are from China, India, America, Brazil and so many more.
  - ii. Aside from racial and cultural diversity, Muslim women are well educated, which can at times be over looked.
    - 1. In a survey taken by 257 Muslim women, 100% had graduated highschool and 95% of them attended college.
- c. The fact that Muslim women come from various racial and cultural backgrounds combined with their level of education, provides us with intellectually unique perspectives that illuminates the similarities and differences among people in the world.

C. How to take action

Well first off it's important to note that change can't happen in any community without partnership and this really applies in the literary community. Readers, publishers, editors, writers, scholars - anyone who takes up space in this community has the power and the responsibility to create awareness and initiate a change in the types of books that we are seeing and the people who are writing them.

- a. Inclusivity - It's a word that keeps popping up all the time, specifically when we are focusing on literature. Well I think most of us are aware that there are damaging effects when we lack inclusion on our shelves.
  - i. Narrow views and opinions on people, ideas, culture, as well as stereotyping people will continue.
  - ii. Lack of knowledge about people and historical events from other parts of the world.
- b. It's Being more mindful about the type of libraries we are creating, by asking ourselves if they are a true representation of the world we live in. This ensures we aren't recycling through the same styles of writers and topics and it provides readers with a broader range of reading experiences.

The lack of exposure to good literature is equal to depriving oneself from the opportunity to grow. Muslims make up a significant part of the American fabric both historically and presently, so to not give Muslim women an opportunity to share our thoughts, views, or ideas, would be doing an injustice to this country and the world.

#### **Moderator Afshan Malik Closing Remarks**

As we wrap up today's presentation, I invite everyone attending to re-evaluate the absence of Muslim women's voices in the literary landscape. Voices of Muslim women have undergone a global erasure due to colonialist rule and patriarchal constructs that we still battle with as Carla mentioned. While we see the emergence of Muslim women's voices in the areas of fiction, academic research, poetry, and journalism - we know that some of the platform given to Muslim women's voices in books is due to tokenism - wanting to exoticize a minority population for the majority's amusement. There are platforms that exist to help the rise of Muslim women's include Daybreak Press, the publishing project of Rabata. Contributions such as Tayyaba's manuscripts add to children's literature and magazines and help prove that the Muslim women's experience is her own world experience, unique and inspirational.

As members of the AWP conference, all of us can use this opportunity of understanding to explore Muslim women mentioned by our presenters today and also pass the mic to Muslim women in literature. Find and uplift these voices. Provide your local library with a list of books by Muslim women authors, request your academic spaces to diversify their panels, and reach out to Muslim women - anywhere in the world - who you can help find their voice again in the literary landscape and return our global construct to the wholesome and empowering space it was in for centuries.