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Uncovering true Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's trilogy *If I Should Speak*

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**Abstract.** Religion themed literature has always been a norm in the literary traditions across the globe. However, it is observed that in the context of representing Islam and Muslims, Western literature and media misrepresent them, and that thereby leads to the building of a mistaken global view of Islam. The relevant literature plays a profound role in shaping the readers' perception of reality. It has been argued by several experts that the portrayal of Islam throughout English literature demonstrates ignorance and prejudice [Schönemann, 2013, p.10]. Western literature largely portrays Islamic religion and Muslims as erotic, primitive, ignorant, and slave traders [Schönemann, 2013, p.1]. The depiction took another drastic turn post-9/11, only making it worse. The post 9/11 literature has depicted Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, lunatics, fundamentalists, and haters among other prevalent depictions. This literary trend in the West has only expanded the gap between Muslims and the world community. As opposed to the conviction that Islam is a religion of terrorism, polygamy, hatred, oppression, Umm Zakiyyah manages to present the true picture of Islam. Umm Zakiyyah's trilogy *If I Should Speak* addresses the topics of the struggle between Muslims and Christians, racism, polygamy, hijab, jihad, and other misrepresented issues pertaining to Islam. This paper will give a detailed description of how Umm Zakiyyah's trilogy correctly presents Islam in contrast to the misrepresentation of Islam in Western literature.

**Key words:** Islam; Misrepresentation; Umm Zakiyyah; *If I should speak*; Western literature.

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### Introduction

Most Western narratives portray the distorted and fabricated images of the Islamic faith and Muslims [Shadid & Koningsveld, 2002, pp. 174-96]. The negative attitude towards Islam is largely formed due to the stereotypes and prejudice. The motive behind such a practice is to make a distinction between the 'we' and 'them'; "we" being the majority Western population and "them" being the Muslim minority population [Schönemann, 2013, p.4]. The 'we' and

'them' propaganda makes people consider Muslims as excluded from the world community. Commonly, a stereotype is considered as a fixed opinion or a depiction that the majority of people have of a specific entity such as religion; however, it is often false in reality. In Sociology, a stereotype is defined as an exaggerated and frequently prejudiced image of a group of people on the basis of little or no evidence and is resistant to change by evidence [Petkova & Lehtonen, 2005, p.63]. It must be understood that

stereotypes and prejudice fog the observation of others and simultaneously form distorted images. The pseudo presentation of Islam in the Western literature initiates adverse influence in the intercultural associations between the parties.

There are a range of novels that misrepresent Islam and Muslims, such as V.S. Naipaul's *Beyond Belief*, Don Delillo's *Falling Man*, and John Updike's *The Terrorist* [Alireza & Abolfaz, 2015, pp.1-13]. Most of these novels misrepresent Islamic faith and the Muslim population by suggesting that Islam supports terrorism. These explain the psychological, economic, political, cultural, and religious realities that may underpin terrorism in Islam. They further suggest that Muslims are violent by dehumanizing and marginalizing them so that they could be labeled as terrorists. Overall, these novels account Islam as a backward and misogynist faith and Muslim women as oppressed victims in Islam due to the compulsion of hijab, polygamy, etc. Usually, these novels are based more on stereotyping instead of scientific evidence.

Islamic faith and Muslims have been portrayed in a negative light through numerous channels including Western literature and media since the time of crusades, and it worsened post 9/11. During the Iranian Revolution, in 1979, Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeni was set on throne after winning over pro-western king Reza Shah Pahlavi [Patrikarakos, 2009]. Due to the revolution, the Western nations lost power over huge oil sources [Patrikarakos, 2009]. This incident led to an anti-Islamic hysteria in the West and made Islam a topic of interest and phobia.

In response, a range of novels were written by several authors to defend Islam, such as Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, and Umm Zakiyyah's *If I should speak*. Islamic faith and Muslims are represented in these novels several ways by correctly deliberating on the issues of religiosity, fundamentalism, terrorism, hijab, and women issues. Most of

these novels clearly explore the commitment of Muslim characters with the sacred through Islamic customs and practices. The focus on the significance of these practices is to show that the Islamic spiritual experiences are similar to those of individuals of other faiths.

The theory of Edward Said's Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an "ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of time) the Occident" [Said, 1978, p.1]. The theory of Orientalism is based on the interplay between the "Occident" and the "Orient." The Occident (self) is the word given to the West, and the Orient is the word given to the misinterpreted Middle East and Islam [Said, 1978, p.5]. He believes that the Islamic faith and Muslim people are seen with prejudice and racism. By taking advantage of the unawareness, the West has built a culture, history, and future promise for them. Said argues that the entire Western European and American research, literature, and cultural representation develops and strengthens prejudice against non-Western cultures, placing them in the category of Oriental (or "Others") [Said, 1978, p.57]. As per Said's Orientalism theory, this Orient vs. Occident is a power relationship in which Occident uses different means to use and interpret the Orient as per their own terms [Moosavinia, Niazi, & Ghaforian, 2011, pp.103-113].

#### **Main Text**

Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* is a counter narrative to the clichés about Islam. The first book of the Umm Zakiyyah's trilogy is *If I Should Speak*, which has Tamika Douglass, Aminah Ali and Durrah 'Dee' Gonzalez as the central characters. In a range of their dialogues, the values of Islamic da'wah are seen. Various Western texts frequently exploit the term jihad to validate Muslims as the suspects of terrorism such as in the book *Prayers* for the assassin Robert ferrigno in which it was suggested that Islam teaches its devotees to do holy war against people of other faiths. Another book which suggests that Islam encourages terrorism is John Updike's *Terrorist*. Various texts use the

term Jihad to illustrate terrorism and thereby labeling Islam as a religion of violence. But in Umm Zakiyyah's novel, she clarifies the correct meaning of jihad in Islam as explained in the following dialogue:

*'So what is jihad then?' Tamika asked. 'Well,' Aminah replied, 'in Islam, it's similar to that. Just like America does not tolerate oppression in the world and at times goes to help those who are oppressed, Muslims are not allowed to permit people to be oppressed. And when the oppression occurs, Muslims must defend and help the oppressed. These are the two types of jihad, the first being when Muslims fight to help people who are being oppressed, like America does at times, and the second being when Muslims defend themselves from attack.' 'Harming the innocent is not something taken lightly in our religion.' She continued, 'Terrorism is not allowed in Islam whatsoever; and whoever does take part in it, no matter what religion they claim to be a part of, is risking punishment in the Hereafter for that grave sin.'* [Zakiyyah, 2000, p.110].

The previous dialogue in her novel illuminates that jihad is taught in Islam to safeguard the peace from things that could harm it. If a situation of intolerable oppression occurs, Islam instructs its devotees to help the oppressed, and in situations where Muslims are oppressed, they must protect themselves from the oppressor. Therefore, world peace can only be maintained when jihad is taught and practiced as people can live in peace when they are not oppressed in any form. Further, if get oppressed, they should safeguard themselves to get their rights as human. So, while various Western texts have portrayed jihad as a form of terrorism, it's exactly opposite and Umm Zakiyyah explains this correct concept of jihad in Islam.

Islamic misrepresentation through Western literature shows that Orientalism is still relevant. For the misrepresentation of Islam, Said's theory is particularly illuminating. As in this situation West has regarded the Muslims as "other" people, people not like us, people who have bizarre norms and standards thereby the inferior ones. Islam is misunderstood and distorted when the prejudicial connotations of the past are not challenged. The research and study of religion, language and culture conducted in the West on Islam has not encouraged an improved understanding of Islam. There is a great ignorance about the reality which allows the fostering of this inaccurate and stereotyped depiction. Awareness of this "Orientalism" is an important first step. Said's assertion in Orientalism is that the West has an extended history of intentionally misunderstanding the Islamic faith and the Western vision of Islam and Muslims has little to no similarity to the reality. *In, Covering Islam, Said states:*

The associations created deliberately between the Islam and the fundamentalism guarantee that the common reader starts to see both as being essentially the same thing. Due to the tendency to reduce the Islam to some rules, stereotypes and generalizations regarding faith, its founders and all its people, the reinforcement of all the negative fact linked to Islam – its violence, primitiveness and atavism, threatening qualities – it's perpetuated. And all this without any serious effort to define the term "fundamentalism", or give a meaning to the precious "radicalism, to "extremism", or contextualize this phenomenon (for example, to say that of all Muslims are fundamentalists. [Said, 2007, p.xvi]

Another targeted issue by Western literature is the practice of polygamy by Muslims. Western literature portrays the

allowance of keeping four wives in Islam as oppression and objectification of woman and depicts the Muslim man as a sexual creature. But Umm Zakiyyah clarifies the misconception on that in her novels. Umm Zakiyyah's third novel in the trilogy entitled the *Footsteps* clarifies the concept of polygamy and elucidates its benefits over harm. She explains that polygamy is not mandatory; it is just allowed, which means that if an individual is not willing to do it, then he does not have to. Likewise, if a woman is unwilling to marry into a polygamous relationship, she does not have to. The permissibility is granted for those who choose it. She also explains the benefits of polygamy such as a chance to have more children, safeguarding rights of women by entering into holy matrimony as they aren't fated to be mistresses or equals without the man having any kind of responsibility towards those women as in polygamy, he has to provide them and treat them justly [Zakiyyah, 1999, pp.99-105].

Almost all of the Western nations have targeted the Islamic ritual of veil or hijab as oppressing for women and dangerous for others. Western literature and media have criticized this Islamic ritual practiced by Muslim women so much that various countries have banned the covering of faces. The novel entitled, *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* is a memoir of an Iranian journalist, Masih Alinejad, who is in exile. This book sparked a digital reform against compulsory hijab [Alinejad, 2018]. Umm Zakiyyah in her first novel explains the details of hijab along with the reasoning to wear it through the following dialogues:

*'So you don't think that's extreme?' 'To cover your face?' Yeah.' 'No,' Aminah replied emphatically, shaking her head. 'I think it's the best thing for a woman... she clarified, 'for my own comfort and protection.' Tamika wrinkled her nose. 'You don't mind walking around in all of those clothes?' 'No.' 'Even in the summer?'*

*She found that hard to believe. Aminah shook her head. 'But won't you get hot?' 'Do you get hot in the summer?' she inquired. 'Yeah!' Tamika told her. 'Well, I'm sure it's not too much different,' Aminah commented. 'And you're wearing shorts, and you're still hot.' She laughed. 'If it's hot, it's hot.' "All those clothes make you hotter though,' Tamika argued. 'Actually,' Aminah corrected, 'all those clothes make me cooler.' Tamika stared at her as if she were crazy. 'You're hotter uncovered in the sun,' Aminah told her, smiling. 'You don't find people in the desert protecting themselves from the heat by taking clothes off,' she reminded. 'You find them putting clothes on. Besides,' she continued, 'even in America, you see people with umbrellas to protect them from the sun, and people put on sunscreen, don't they?' 'Yeah, that's true.' 'Well,' she said with satisfaction, 'my clothes are my sunscreen' [Zakiyyah, 2000, pp.112-113].*

While the Western literature has persistently depicted hijab as a symbol of oppression against Muslim women, this clearly shows that women who wear hijab are not oppressed; instead, they feel liberated, safe and protected. Further, it is a case of stereotyping again as the Christianity and Judaism faiths also teach the practice of veil.

Apart from the practice of veil, Western literature has portrayed Muslim women as oppressed in Islam in general. It has been said again and again that Muslim men oppress Muslim women. For example, V. S. Naipaul in his novel, *Beyond Belief*, offers a picture in which mosques, the adhan, Islamic literature, dress and households integrate to build an oppressive atmosphere which is difficult to breathe in [Hassan, 2013, pp. 48-58]. But Umm Zakiyyah again clarifies that it is also a case of prejudice and stereotyping through following dialogues:



*'Don't the Muslim men oppress their women?' Tamika now asked it carefully, as if she wanted to know, having realized how the original statement must have sounded to Aminah. 'Before I answer that, let me ask you something...Do Christian men oppress women?' 'Some,' she replied impatiently. 'Do Jewish men oppress women?' She sighed. 'Some.' 'Do atheist men oppress women...' 'Do Muslim men oppress women?' She nodded. 'Yes, some do. Just like other men. But,' she said, emphasizing, 'if your question is, does Islam tell them to? Then the answer is no. And quite the contrary.' Tamika nodded, understanding, embarrassed because she had not thought of the obvious herself, suddenly feeling like a bigot, her ignorance too apparent to hide. [Zakiyyah, 2000, p.133]*

Through this dialogue, Umm Zakiyyah portrays that Men may oppress women from different religions. But again Islam is targeted for propagating oppression of women as if Muslim men are oppressing their women because Islam commands them to. On the contrary, Islam propagates provision of love and respect to women. In Qura'an, 4:19, it is said that, "O you who believe! It is not permitted for you to inherit women against their will. And do not coerce them in order to take away some of what you had given them, unless they commit a proven adultery. And live with them in kindness. If you dislike them, it may be that you dislike something in which God has placed much good."

### Conclusion

Western literature for the past few centuries has been portraying Islam in bad light using the issues of certain Islamic rituals and practices such as polygamy, jihad, hijab and oppression of women. In fact, the majority of these texts are based on prejudicial rather than empirical research on true Islam. There are innumerable novels that misrepresent Islam pre and post 9/11. But

there are several examples of novels which defend Islam. Among those is Umm Zakiyyah's trilogy *If I Should Speak*. The trilogy uncovers the true concepts of Islam by giving a clarification on the debated topics. Therefore, it can be said that by portraying the correct and authentic information of Islamic faith, the trilogy of Umm Zakiyyah uncovers true Islam.

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