Teaching Diaspora Literature: Muslim American Literature as an Emerging Field

by

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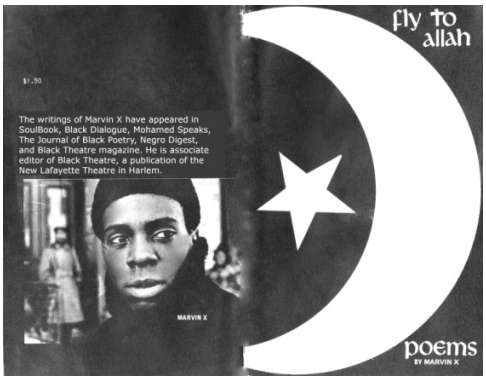

The beginning of Muslim American literature?

Is there such a thing as Muslim American literature (MAL)? I argue that there is: It begins with the Muslims of the Black Arts Movement (1965–75). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is one of its iconic texts; it includes American Sufi writing, secular ethnic novels, writing by immigrant and second-generation Muslims, and religious American Muslim literature.

Many of the works I would put into this category can and do also get read in other categories, such as African American, Arab American, and South Asian literature, "Third World" women's writing, diasporic Muslim literature in English, and so forth.

While the place of these works in other categories cannot be denied, something is gained in reading them together as part of an American Muslim cultural landscape. Like Jewish American literature by the 1930s, Muslim American literature is in a formative stage. It will be interesting to see how it develops (and who will be its Philip Roth!)

I suggest the following typology of MAL only as a foothold, a means of bringing a tentative order to the many texts, one that should be challenged, and maybe ultimately dropped altogether.

My first grouping, the "Prophets of Dissent," suggests that Muslim works in the Black Arts Movement (BAM) are the first set of writings in American literature to voice a cultural position identifiable as Muslim. Contemporary Muslim writing that takes the achievements of the BAM as an important literary influence also belongs here, and is characterized similarly by its "outsider"status, moral critique of mainstream American values, and often prophetic, visionary tone.

In contrast, the writers of what I call "the Multi-Ethnic Multitudes" tend to enjoy "insider" status in American letters, often entering through MFA programs and the literary establishment, getting published through trade and university book industries, garnering reviews in the mainstream press. They do not share an overall aesthetic but are individual writers of various ethnicities and a wide range of secularisms and spiritualities, and indeed I question my placing them all in one group, and do so temporarily only for the sake of convenience.

On the other hand, my third group, the "New American Transcendentalists," appears to cohere, in aesthetic terms, as writers who share a broad Sufi cultural foundation undergirding their literary work. Their writings often show familiarity with the Sufi poets of several classical Muslim literatures (e.g., in Turkish, Farsi, Arabic, Urdu), as well as with American Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century, and that which tends toward the spiritual and the ecstatic in modern American poetry.

Finally, the "New Pilgrims" is my term for a loose grouping of writers for whom Islam is not merely a mode of dissent, cultural background, or spiritual foundation for their writing, but its aim and explicit topic. Of the four groups, the New Pilgrims are the ones who write in an overtly religious mode and motivation, like Ann Bradstreet, Cotton Mather, and the Puritans of early American history. This does not prevent them from being capable of producing great literature, any more than it prevented the great Puritan writers.

Here is an example of just a few writers in each category, by no means a comprehensive list:

Prophets of Dissent From the Black Arts Movement:

Marvin X, whose *Fly to Allah* (1969) is possibly the first book of poems published in English by a Muslim American author.

Sonia Sanchez, whose *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Wome*n (1974) is the work of her Muslim period.

Amiri Baraka, whose *A Black Mass* (2002) [1966] renders the Nation of Islam's Yacoub genesis theology into drama. As with Sanchez, the author was Muslim only briefly but the influence of the Islamic period stretches over a significant part of his overall production.

Askia Muhammad Toure was deep into Islamic poetry during the BAM period. He is one of the founders of BAM as well.

Later Prophets of Dissent:

Calligraphy of Thought, the Bay area poetry venue for young "Generation M" Muslim American spoken word artists who today continue in the visionary and dissenting mode of the BAM.

Suheir Hammad, Palestinian New Yorker, diva of Def Poetry Jam (on Broadway and HBO), whose tribute to June Jordan in her first book of poetry, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996), establishes her line of descent from the BAM, at least as one (major) influence on her work.

El Hajj Malik El Shabazz (Malcolm X) is an iconic figure for this mode of Muslim American writing and, indeed, for many writers in all four categories.

Multi-Ethnic Multitudes:

Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali, an influential figure in the mainstream American poetry scene, with a literary prize named after him at the University of Utah, brought the ghazal into fashion in English so that it is now taught among other forms in MFA programs.

Naomi Shihab Nye, Palestinian American, likewise a "crossover" poet whose work enjoys prominence in American letters, takes on Muslim content in a significant amount of her work.

Sam Hamod, an Arab midwesterner who was publishing poetry in journals at the same time as Marvin X.

Nahid Rachlin's fiction has been published since well before the recent wave of literature by others who, like her, are Iranian immigrants.

Mustafa Mutabaruka, an African American Muslim, debut novel *Seed* (2002).

Samina Ali, midwesterner of Indian parentage, debut novel *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004), was featured on the June 2004 cover of Poets & Writers.

Khaled Hosseini, debut novel *The Kite Runner* (2003).

Michael Muhammad Knight, a Muslim of New York Irish Catholic background, whose punk rock novel *The Taqwacores* (2004) delves deeply into Muslim identity issues.

There are a number of journals where Muslim American literature of various ethnicities can be found today, among them *Chowrangi*, a Pakistani American magazine out of New Jersey, and Mizna, an Arab American poetry magazine out of Minneapolis.

New American Transcendentalists

Daniel (Abd al-Hayy) Moore is an excellent example of this mode of Muslim American writing. California-born, he published as a Beat poet in the early sixties, became a Sufi Muslim, renounced poetry for a decade, then renounced his renouncement and began publishing again, prolifically and with a rare talent. His *Ramadan Sonnets* (City Lights, 1986) is a marriage of content and form that exemplifies the "Muslim/American" simultaneity of Muslim American art.

The Rumi phenomenon: apparently the most read poet in America is a Muslim. He merits mention for that, although technically I am not including literature in translation. Then again, why not? As with so many other of my limits, this is arbitrary and only awaits someone to make a case against it.

Journals publishing poetry in this mode include *The American Muslim*, *Sufi, Qalbi*, and others.

New American Pilgrims

Pamela Taylor writes Muslim American science fiction. Iman Yusuf writes "Islamic romance." This group of writers is not limited to genre writers, however. Dasham Brookins writes and performs poetry and maintains a website, MuslimPoet.com, where poets such as Samantha Sanchez post. Umm Zakiyya (pseud.) has written a novel, *If I Should Speak* (2001), about a young Muslim American and her roommates in college.

Writers in this group also come from many ethnicities but, unlike those in my second category, come together around a more or less coherent, more or less conservative Muslim identity.

Websites tend to ban erotica and blasphemy, for example. *The Islamic Writers Alliance*, a group formed by Muslim American women, has just put out its first anthology. Major published authors have yet to emerge in this grouping, but there is no reason to think they will not eventually do so.

My criteria for Muslim American literature are a flexible combination of three factors: Muslim authorship. Including this factor, however vague or tenuous, prevents widening the scope to the point of meaninglessness, rather than simply including any work about Muslims by an author with no biographical connection to the slightest sliver of Muslim identity (such as Robert Ferrigno with his recent dystopian novel about a fanatical Muslim takeover of America). It is a cultural, not religious, notion of Muslim that is relevant. A "lapsed Muslim" author, as one poet on my roster called himself, is still a Muslim author for my purposes. I am not interested in levels of commitment or practice, but in literary Muslimness.

Language and Aesthetic of the Writing

In a few cases, there is a deliberate espousal of an aesthetic that has Islamic roots, such as the Afrocentric Islamic aesthetic of the Muslim authors in the Black Arts Movement.

Relevance of Themes or Content

If the Muslim identity of the author is vague or not explicitly professed, which is often the case with authors in the "Multi-Ethnic Multitudes," but the content itself is relevant to Muslim American experience, I take that as a signal that the text is choosing to enter the conversation of Muslim American literature and ought to be included.

In defining boundaries for research that could become impossibly diffuse, I choose to look mainly at fiction and poetry, with autobiography and memoir writings selectively included. I have not included writings in languages other than English, although there are Muslims in America who write in Arabic, Urdu, and other languages. I have looked at the twentieth century onward, and there is archival digging to be done in earlier periods: the Spanish colonial era may yield Muslim writing, and we already know that some enslaved Muslims in the nineteenth century have left narratives. More research is needed. If one expands the field from "literature" to "Muslim American culture," one can also include Motown, rap, and hip-hop lyrics by Muslim artists, screenplays such as the Muslim American classic The Message by the late Syrian American producer Mustapha Aqqad, books written for children, sermons, essays, and other genres.

There are pleasures and patterns that emerge from reading this profusion of disparate texts under the rubric of Muslim American cultural narrative. It is time! I hope, as this field emerges, that others will do work in areas I have left aside in this brief initial exploration.