



CONVERT EXPERIENCES: A STUDY OF THE
DIALOGICAL SELF IN LENA WINFREY SEDER'S
THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A MUSLIM:
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY CONVERSION AND
KRISTIANE BACKER'S *FROM MTV TO MECCA:*
HOW ISLAM INSPIRED MY LIFE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Autobiography documenting religious conversions has reportedly been around since the fourth century. Today this genre has expanded to include writings of various formats and from various faiths. Prominent convert narratives by male Muslims like Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali are now being followed by those by female converts. The latter provide counter-narratives to the pervasive misery memoirs, with more representative and unbiased insights into Muslims' religious and cultural practices and how they see the world. Narratives by Muslim converts from the West are especially important as they seek to bridge the cultural gap between the Western and Muslim worlds. Using the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) and Islamic concept of the self, this research aims to examine self-representation as described in the works of the selected authors: Lena Winfrey Seder's *The Metamorphosis of a Muslim: Autobiography of my Conversion* and Kristiane Backer's *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired my Life*. In addition to analyzing their characterization, this study will also look at the authors' emplotment methods and discuss the significance of both these narrative elements to the autobiographies as the authors adapt their I-positions to speak to a heterogeneous audience.

ملخص البحث

السيرة الذاتية التي توثق التحويلات الدينية كانت موجودة منذ القرن الرابع. وقد توسع هذا النوع اليوم ليشمل كتابات من أشكال مختلفة ومن مختلف الأديان. ويتبع الآن المسلمون مثل رواية مالكوم X ومحمد علي روايات تحويلية بارزة من قبل المتحولين الإنانث الذين يقدمون روايات مضادة لمذكرات البؤس المتفشية، مع رؤى أكثر تمثيلا وغير متحيزة للممارسات الدينية والثقافية للمسلمين وكيف يرون العالم. والروايات من المتحولين المسلمين من الغرب لها أهمية خاصة لأنها تسعى إلى سد الفجوة الثقافية بين العالمين الغربي والإسلامي. باستخدام النظرية الذاتية الحوارية (DST) والمفهوم الإسلامي للذات. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة التمثيل الذاتي كما هو موضح في أعمال المؤلفين المختارين: لينا وينفري سيدير تحول المسلم: "السيرة الذاتية للتحويل" و كريستيان باكر من (MTV) إلى مكة المكرمة: "كيف استلهم الإسلام حياتي". بالإضافة إلى تحليل توصيفها، وستنظر هذه الدراسة أيضا في المنهجية التجميع التي يقوم بها المؤلفون ومناقشة أهمية كل من هذه العناصر السردية في السيرة الذاتية حيث وكيف المؤلفون مواقفهم الأولى للتحدث إلى جمهور غير متجانس.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion; it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Literary Studies.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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For my parents, Ali Akbar and Marializa,

whose hearts so big yet overflow

whose love leaves me aglow

whose wisdom reflects their years

whose patience never disappears.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In current discourse on autobiographical narratives, although there is still a deficit in the narratives of female Muslim writers, their numbers are steadily rising. More Muslim women are sharing their life experiences while acting as unofficial ambassadors of Islam. However, despite active efforts of many Muslims to correct misconceptions about Islam, there is still a lot of misunderstanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. One explanation could be the ‘negativity bias’ which psychologists explain as “our collective hunger to hear, and remember bad news” (Stafford, 2014). This might be one of the reasons why trauma narratives about the Muslim world are so popular. These selective representations of outdated cultural practices that are merged with Islamic teachings add fuel to the already negative representation of Islam, as they tend to validate the most commonly-held assumptions about Islam; that it is a backward religion which promotes violence and strips women of their rights.

One very famous example of a trauma narrative, mentioned in a number of studies, is Betty Mahmoudian’s *Not without My Daughter* (1987) which was adapted into a film (of the same title) in 1991. Others include Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), and Nujood Ali’s and Delphine Minoui’s *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced* (2010). These narratives concern cultural customs within Muslim societies that do not necessarily adhere to Islamic teachings but are nonetheless taken as examples of putative Islamic practices. Given the popular literary discourse involving

Islam and Muslims, perhaps there is a need to academically engage in it and to discuss alternative narratives that apparently counteract these misery memoirs.

As the number of Muslims in the West increases both by immigration and conversion, Islam continues to be the world's fastest growing religion according to research done by Lipka and Hackett (2015). In the US and the UK the majority of Muslim converts are female (Peppiatt, 2016; Haddad et al., 2006). It should be noted that, when referring to someone who has embraced Islam, many Muslims prefer the term 'revert' over 'convert'. This is because 'revert' is understood to signify someone who comes back to Islam, while 'convert' simply refers to a person who changes their religion or adopts a new religious belief. Moreover, in Islam humans are innately Muslim and 'reversion' refers to their return to the original state of being, as explained in a prophetic narration.¹ Some scholars prefer the term 'new Muslim' to assume a more nonpartisan position when discussing Muslim converts. This study will principally use the term 'convert', as it is more widely recognizable in academic discourse; however, the terms mentioned may be used interchangeably in this thesis.

While the number of Muslims continues to increase, there has also been a recent increase in the number of hate crimes against them. As Kishi (2016) reports: "The number of physical assaults against Muslims in the United States reached 9/11-era levels last year, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of new hate crimes statistics from the FBI." Since the 9/11 incident of 2001, Islamophobia has increased dramatically in Britain as well (Moosavi, 2014, p.46). This calls for more interfaith dialogues; and Muslims converts can perhaps take on a greater role, acting as

¹ Sahih Muslim Book 33 Hadith 6423: "There is none born but is created to his true nature ([fitrah, that is,] Islam). It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian quite as beasts produce their young with their limbs perfect. Do you see anything deficient in them? Then he quoted [from] the Qur'an., The nature made by Allah in which He has created men there is no altering of Allah's creation; that is the right religion."

intermediaries between non-Muslims and the Muslim community, especially in the West.

The narratives female Muslim converts produce based on their experiences are particularly valuable, as the unique space they occupy enables them to look upon their lives reflectively and distinguish Islamic teachings from their distorted, cultural, and strictly literal interpretations, or at least question certain dubious practices within Muslim communities. Roald (2004, p.113) explains that new Muslims are exposed to various Islamic views, which is why they are more motivated to seek out purer sources in Islamic teachings, instead of simply adopting cultural interpretations of the Islamic message. Their strategic position, in turn, enables them to have a foothold in both their native community and the Islamic community, as they understand the cultural codes of their home countries and are also capable of translating information about Islam to their fellow countrymen. Furthermore, they are also able to act as representatives of their country to the Muslim world (Roald, 2004, p.289). The authors of the books selected for this study can be seen doing this through their narratives.

The autobiographies selected for this study are Lena Winfrey Seder's *The Metamorphosis of a Muslim: Autobiography of My Conversion* (2011) and Kristiane Backer's *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012). Both authors are Muslim converts. The autobiographies will be examined through theories of the self, especially in relation to Dialogical Self Theory (DST) and Islamic concepts of the self. Interestingly, there are many short anecdotes, articles, testimonials and interviews written by and about female Muslim converts, but there are not many full-fledged autobiographies produced by them. This is one of the reasons why these two autobiographies are important and hence selected for this study.

1.2 THE AUTHORS

Lena Winfrey Seder (1969 —) is an American Muslim convert. She was born in Bluefield, Virginia into a loving Christian family. Her fascination with spiritual matters began at the young age of 16 when her close friend, Donna, passed away. She became fascinated with death and spirituality; but her curiosity was not satisfied with the answers provided by her Christian preacher. Thus, her quest for learning began. When she went to a local Baptist college to study English Literature, through some Arab students taking extra courses there, she was exposed to Arabic culture as well as Islam. Her attraction to their culture sparked Seder's interest in their religion; and after in-depth reading, she eventually embraced Islam in April 1989.

At the time of her graduation, she was the only Muslim in a Baptist college and wore an Islamic dress at the ceremony. Her father was not supportive of her conversion and their relationship suffered for many years until he finally accepted her choice of faith. Other members of her family also distanced themselves from her after she embraced Islam. Seder mentions: "It is strange to me how people who watched me grow up from infancy to adulthood, who knew my family and me, would then treat me so differently – becoming almost afraid of me or angry with me – just because I changed my religion" (Seder, 2011, p.99). Nevertheless, Seder also documents other instances where her family tried to keep an open mind in regards to her conversion.

Seder speaks about her experiences of living in Muslim countries, and how they fell short of her expectations of a Muslim utopia. She concludes her book by expressing her hope that her autobiography will serve as a useful insight into the life of a Muslim convert. She also expresses the need for people to study and familiarize themselves with other people's cultures for the benefit of humanity (Seder, 2001, p.131).

Kristiane Backer (1965 —) is a German-born British Muslim convert. She was once famous for being the first German VJ for MTV Europe. In 1992, she met the legendary Pakistani cricket player, Imran Khan, who introduced her to Islam. During their relationship, she frequently travelled to Pakistan, exposing herself to its culture and religious practices, especially *Qawali* which is a form of *sufi* devotional music. She began dressing more modestly but the change in her lifestyle was attacked by the media. It was reported that she converted to Islam for her boyfriend, to which she replied that she hadn't but "was a Muslim 'at heart'" (Backer, 2012, p.123). Backer also mentions that some journalists even suggested she supported terrorism (Backer, 2012, p.127). After three years, Backer's relationship with Imran ended. She then started studying Islam more intensely and eventually embraced the religion in 1995.

In her book, Backer mentions that she was married twice. Her first marriage was to an Austrian Muslim convert, Alfred, and her second marriage was to a born Muslim, Rachid. Backer talks more about her second marriage in her book, and expresses her hope to become a better Muslim with the guidance of her supposedly pious husband. She describes Rachid, her second husband, as someone with a strict and inflexible interpretation of the Islamic message which was grounded in his culture. Eventually, they were divorced. Although devastated, Backer found that her experience allowed her to truly distinguish culture from Islam. Today, Backer uses her agency and media exposure to expound various issues relating to Islam.

Although Backer's book is technically in the memoir genre, for the purpose of this study it shall be dealt with as an autobiographical narrative or life writing as both Seder and Backer recount a large portion of their lives from the pre-conversion to the post-conversion period. Based on the narratives of Seder and Backer, this study aims

to provide an insight into the represented selves of the authors and explore how they use their narratives to negotiate between their heterogeneous identities.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Autobiographies have been criticized for not being reliable or authentic accounts of the narrators' lives because the narratives are highly subjective. Autobiographical narrators are therefore, under more scrutiny than narrators of fiction, for they talk about real events, portray themselves as the protagonists of their stories. This said, readers of autobiographies must exercise an active role in not only policing the truth in these narratives but also deciphering the narrators' interpretations of their own life events which can provide insightful truths about themselves.

Most of the theories and research that involve religious autobiographical narratives available are derived from Christian narratives using a Western or European understanding of religion, which differs from the Islamic understanding of religion (see Buitelaar & Zock, 2013). Even when examining texts by Muslim narrators, researchers make comments that display a secularized notion of religion compartmentalized into traditional religiosity, which subdues individual freedom, and individual spirituality (Buitelaar & Zock, 2013, p.19-23). Models of behavior which distinguish between belief, behavior, and experience (Hood, 2009, p.665-678) also cannot be applied to Muslims as for them they are one and the same. Religious self-narratives by Muslims do not fit in the same molds as the conventional narratives used to derive theories of the self. Therefore, the study of Muslim religious narratives would have to be supplemented with the Islamic concepts of the self, such as *fitrah*, *nafs* and *niyyah*.

For female Muslim converts who reveal details of their personal lives along with the lives of their family, significant others and friends, there lies a stigma attached to them, for in Islam it is considered a very serious thing to expose the *aib* (faults) of others. If one were to do so, they would have to have a valid reason and must act out of good *niyyah* (intention). Perhaps the gap in convert self-narratives, especially by female Muslim converts, is partly due to this fact. As the books selected for this study are produced by authors residing in countries where Muslims are minorities, it would be interesting to see how their self-representation adapts to identify with marginalized Muslim communities and also with their native non-Muslim communities. Thus, this study aims to examine Muslim convert self-narratives using theories of the self derived from Hubert J. M. Hermans's DST and Islamic concepts of the self.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

As mentioned earlier, there are no previous studies on the autobiographies of female Muslim converts. This study is hoped to be a valuable contribution to understanding the self-representation of female Muslim converts and will hopefully be of use to future researchers who wish to study their autobiographical narratives. This research would also be a useful addition to the existing body of analysis of Islamic literature.

By studying the autobiographies of Muslim convert women, this study will be able to delineate actual lives of Muslims to provide an alternative narrative from the predominantly negative representation of Islam and of its adherents in the media and in literary discourses. For female Muslim converts, this study will help them relate to the experiences of other Muslim converts and their unique position in Western society that enables them to act as cultural bridge builders between the Western and Islamic

worlds.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to fulfil these three objectives:

1. To demonstrate how the modes of emplotment and characterization in the autobiographies selected are significant in revealing the authors' characters.
2. To analyze the self as represented by the authors using theories derived from DST and Islamic concepts of the self.
3. To evaluate the adaptation of the authors' positions of the self that aim to address a heterogeneous, multidimensional audience.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that will guide this study are as follows:

1. How can an understanding of the self, using DST and Islamic concepts of the self, enrich the analysis of the represented self in Muslim convert autobiographies?
2. How can the deciphering of the authors' modes of emplotment and characterization be significant in understanding the authors' selves?
3. How can the positioning of the authors' selves in their self-narratives help them address a heterogeneous audience and become cultural bridge-builders between the Western and Islamic worlds?

1.7 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study is a qualitative non-empirical research and was carried out holistically through extensive reading and textual analysis. Initially an area of interest was selected, which is Muslim conversion narratives. The two autobiographies were selected as they address important issues that aid in the understanding of female Muslims converts in the West. The selected books are autobiographies written by female Muslim converts: Lena Winfrey Seder's *The Metamorphosis of a Muslim: Autobiography of My Conversion* (2011) and Kristiane Backer's *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012). So far, no significant critical work has been carried out on these books, partly because they are relatively new. This also explains the reason why they were selected for this study, as the study intends to highlight the gap in literature that needs to be filled. The books were then studied in light of theories of the self, derived from DST and the Islamic concepts of the self.

As there is no prior significant research on the autobiographies selected for the study, an extensive search was also carried out on the issues that are highlighted in the books and on the theories used to study autobiographical narratives. Using the qualitative research method, the primary materials (the selected autobiographies), and secondary materials on the issues and theories concerned, were thoroughly analyzed. This inquiry made use of online search engines and library resources. The materials collected for this study were also briefly summarized and comprehensively discussed in the "Literature Review" chapter of the study.

After reviewing the literature, a textual analysis of the autobiographies studied was carried out, and such an exercise was guided by the theoretical framework. Finally, from the findings a comprehensive conclusion was made which is relevant to

the study.

1.8 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The thesis will be divided into five chapters:

Chapter One: Introduction includes an introductory section which provides a background for the study and the statement of problem. The significance of the study is also discussed and the research objectives and research questions are also stated to guide the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review provides a review of the existing secondary works done on the relevant areas of the current study, especially the texts chosen for this research. This chapter also includes a theoretical framework that discusses the Dialogical Self Theory and the Islamic concepts of the self, which are used in examining the selected texts.

Chapter Three: Seder's Unconventional Conversion Narrative in *The Metamorphosis of a Muslim* looks at Lena Winfrey Seder's atypical conversion narrative which makes use of a more fragmented, rather than linear plotment. Seder's characterization is also analyzed to determine how she negotiates between different I-positions to arrive at a more multidimensional identity while examining the way she uses these positions to also connect with a heterogeneous audience.

Chapter Four: Backer's Dynamic Journey in *From MTV to Mecca* explores Kristiane Backer's use of narrative patterns and discusses their significance to the understanding of her conversion narrative. In addition, the multiple I-positions she assumes when telling her story are also identified and dissected. It is also observed how Backer juggles her complex identities, and the significance of her plotment patterns to the understanding of her self-representation is also studied.

Chapter Five: In the concluding chapter for this study, a comprehensive wrap-up of the study is made. In addition, based on the progression and trajectory of this dissertation, suggestions for future research are also made to address relevant areas this research has not addressed.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the 1990s, when awareness about Muslim converts peaked, many new Muslims saw this as an opportunity to correct misperceptions about Islam (Roald, 2004: ix). Roald, herself a Muslim convert, has done extensive research on new Muslims in Scandinavian countries. The current literature on Muslim converts, according to Brice (2010, p.5), is divided into two main categories: “academic literature on different aspects of conversion to Islam which normally concentrates on the conversion process; and the Islamic missionary type literature where converts describe their experiences.” He also mentions that between the two categories, the latter is relatively more readily found and this highlights a gap in literature that needs to be filled (Brice, 2010, p.5). Evans (2015) also highlights this gap in her study on American Muslim converts. She believes that it is “vital to fill the gap in current research by including this growing demographic in the conversation regarding Muslims in America.” Studies like Evans’s focus on the experiences of Muslim converts in a country where they are considered a minority and evidently showcase the converts’ reason for embracing a new faith.

Köse’s study on native British converts in 1996 discusses many conversion models. He repeatedly emphasizes that previous studies done on converts indicate that new religions mostly appeal to those with troubled backgrounds and dismiss the cognitive factors which ultimately lead a person to conversion (Köse, 1996, p.32). Ullman (1989), for example, finds that converts often have unhappier childhoods than

non-converts (as cited in Köse, 1996, p.32). Freud's psychoanalytic view on the other hand claims that the need for a religious belief stems from children's disappointment in their parents or the occurrence of an oedipal situation, although, he does later admit that not all conversions are as simply understood as this (Köse, 1996, p.40). Köse instead proposes to look at the conversion process as a continuous one and to take into account converts' pre-conversion and post-conversion experiences as well to fully understand what they go through (1996, p.40).

Although there is a substantial amount of research done on conversion to Islam in the West, not much work has been done on the autobiographies of Muslim converts, especially those written by women. This is probably due to the lack of autobiographical narratives produced by female Muslim converts. Nevertheless, this study finds their narratives essential in understanding the self as represented by female converts. Roald (2004, p.88-89) mentions that in her research on new Muslims, she finds that the narratives on their conversion process change over time as their outlook, personal beliefs, and faith develop. In retrospect they may recall their experiences through different eyes, and this makes studying their autobiographies interesting. This reflective narrative allows the narrators to not only develop their characters but to also make sense of the events in their lives by forming a structure in telling their life stories. This aspect of autobiographical narratives will be dealt with in more detail in the theoretical framework of this study.

Research on Muslim converts often includes the question why the subjects embrace Islam to determine their reasons for conversion. As stated before, many studies suggest that childhood trauma is a major factor in a person's conversion. However, the reality of the situation is that there are a myriad of reasons why people embrace Islam and it must not be forgotten that many people experience childhood

trauma and do not convert. Carol Anway's *Daughters of another Path: American Women Choosing Islam* (2002) discusses some significant reasons why American women revert to Islam. Along with testimonials from female Muslim converts, Anway identifies the following reasons for conversion divided in the chapters of her book: (1) the witness of the significant other (observing the behavior of their partners), (2) the witness of Muslim neighbors and acquaintances (observing the behavior of Muslims acquaintances), (3) learning about Islam in the college setting, (4) searching (attempting to become more spiritual), (5) sensing the authority of the Quran, (6) finding answers in Islam, and (7) finding something similar in Islam (discovering Islamic teachings are very similar to teachings of other Abrahamic religions). Anway's study showcases the complexities behind the Muslim conversion process, especially for American women.

It is important to remember that the conversion process is multifaceted and might involve multiple reasons behind the desire to embrace Islam. This study does not attempt to dismiss the existence of conversions of convenience; they might occur in many Muslim marriages but this does not undermine the fact that many Muslims actually experience conversions of conviction. Moreover, converts of convenience tend to be viewed more as cultural Muslims at most. Roald (2004, p.116-117) finds that many Muslims credit their conversion to a spiritual experience. However, in Scandanavia, it is the rational trend which is responsible for more conversions as the *da'wah* movements (movements inviting people to Islam) there are more inclined toward a rational approach to Islam. Köse (1996, p.142) on the other hand, contends that Sufism is the major agent of Islam in Britain.