The Muslim Woman and Self : Reframing Conflict and Spiritual Awakening in Asra Nomani's *Standing Alone*

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses primarily on Asra Nomani's self-narrative, Standing Alone and the intertwined concepts of self, conflict and spiritual awakening. Previous extensive works done in women's scholarship and Islam were mainly influenced by Western ideological constructs which predominantly view women and Muslims as possessing monolithic qualities. As such, this paper critically explores Standing Alone as it offers an alternative view to the stereotypical depiction of Muslim women. This study adopts an eclectic framework based on Slee's (2004) stages/generative themes of concern and the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. The analysis traces and explores thematic concerns particularly Nomani's physical and spiritual journeys which transcend both geographical and imaginary borders and spaces. These transformations are reflected in her stages of conflict and spiritual awakening. They are also revealed through the depiction of Nomani's relationships with God and Others, termed as "hablum min Allah wa hablum min al-nas" and her spiritual battles against wrongdoings, labeled as "amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar" which are two Islamic concepts informed by the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Thus, through careful examination of Standing Alone based on this framework, we challenge much-accepted assumptions of a monolithic Islam as typically static and traditional. This self-narrative, which showcases an example of the multiplicity and fluidity of the Muslim self, proves that present available frameworks are insufficient in capturing the rich, subtle nuances of symbolic Muslim women's traditions.

Keywords: Muslim women; self-narrative; concepts of self; conflict; spiritual awakening

INTRODUCTION

As writers, Muslim women, akin to the other women who originate from diverse spaces and places, often experience the unique inevitable paradoxes - feelings of simultaneous escapism and entrapment, safety and fear, and solace and discomfort. Such extreme binary realities may explain the growing literary corpus of women's narratives. Themes such as ambiguity and ambivalence of the 'self' in relation to problematic notions of 'home', place and displacement, and feelings of uprootedness are

central in the writings of women who have travelled extensively or emigrated abroad (Ruzy Suliza Hashim & Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf 2009). This perspective is reverberative of the current need to explore new identity constructs since multiplicity and diversity are conceived as the "cornerstone of social, cultural and political well-being" (Mohammad Subakir & Ravichandran 2011).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY: WOMEN, ISLAM AND WRITING IN THE POST-9/11 ERA

Owing to many research and works done so far in women's studies, Islam, women and Muslims do not have monolithic qualities (Cooke 2001), although in general perception and realities, they may capture a different story. There are still strong tendencies to generalize hastily a cluster of seemingly related groups, and in this case, Muslim women, as homogeneous: sharing one universal history, one universal identity, one burden of oppression and one universal way of doing and performing things. This common western paradigm on Muslim women, in fact, has failed to process the fundamental symbols of Muslim women's faith and identity narratives (Kahf 1999).

Thus, in resisting this stereotypical representation, the Muslim women writers face the contemporary challenge of what is termed as a shift, transformation or new synthesis in rewriting Muslim identity particularly so in the case of Muslims living in Western societies (Ancellin 2009). This highly contingent yet contested identity is evident in both their daily lives and emerging literature. It is noted that Muslims are now more actively involved or engaged in redefining the notion of difference in relation to Muslim identity markers in the Western public sphere. It is found that more and more Muslims are rejecting the imposed ultimatum that they must choose either to be good Muslims or good Americans or good British citizens (Moodod and Ahmad 2007). This trend greatly challenges the premise of loyalty, either to oneself, one's own ethnicity and belief or, one's place of dwelling.

The aftermath of 9/11 saw greater emergence of Muslim narratives as a form of alternative expression deem valuable in redressing the balance of Muslim portrayal in the media and literary works (Ancellin 2009). The only marked difference is that these new breed of narratives are fertile with self-invention (Wadud 2006). These narratives predominantly re-examine troubled notions of the political, cultural and religious self and identities, and simultaneously seek new ways of renaming these experiences. This is understandable given the context of 9/11 trauma which results in a worldwide backlash of heightened Islamophobia and violence (Siddiqui 2008), instantly affecting American Muslims, and Muslims in other countries too notwithstanding. In particular, this study seeks to explore a chosen self-narrative of a Muslim woman of Indian descent who was born and bred in America. The next three sections will deal with first, a brief description of the selected narrative followed by a brief discussion of the framework and third, the analytical discussion.

ASRA Q. NOMANI'S *STANDING ALONE:* THE JOURNEY OF THE MUSLIM SELF

In this paper, we will explore *Standing Alone–An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (thereafter referred to as *Standing Alone*) by Asra Q. Nomani, an autobiographical text that is categorically a post 9/11 self-narrative. This text reveals the gendered realities - the day-to-day experiences to expressions of religious beliefs and responses to seeming sexism and discrimination found in the host country, the United States of America. Essentially, *Standing Alone* depicts constant dissonance between the author's own internal authorship and the restrictive external social constructs

by which Muslim women have been defined publicly and globally. It is commonplace to find that Muslim women authors often embark on a physical and spiritual journey that establishes immediately the narratives' preoccupations with place and displacement. This is also the case with *Standing Alone*. What makes *Standing Alone* crucial is the author's physical and spiritual journeys which transcend both the geographical and imaginary borders and spaces. This self-narrative is a metaphoric reflection of Nomani's journey of self, formation of identities, and growth of consciousness.

Hjarpe (1997) explains that religion "provides patterns of interpretation for what happens in one's personal life" (p.267) and we contend that this view of religion or religious belief is in tandem with the focus of this study which is to analyse the worldview of a chosen Muslim woman author that reflect her spiritual perspectives about the events and experiences that she goes through in her everyday lives.

SELF-NARRATIVES AND AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN

Self-narratives, particularly autobiographies and memoirs, provide popular avenues for American Muslim women to express their authorships and worldviews. This can also be viewed as serious attempts on the writers' parts to fill in the void of what Abdul Ghafur's (2005) has described as a very rare phenomenon to see images of American Muslim as empowering. This trend of self-narrative started since the late 1980s, and this particular genre of writing has captured keen interest of both mainstream publishers and readers (Hammer 2010). However, critical readings of these self-narratives reveal that the popular themes depicted almost always involve journeys of struggles for independence and liberation from subjugation imposed by dominant families and patriarchal structure.

It has been found that the root of most, if not all, of these writings is typically faith struggles pitted against patriarchal forms of religion (Mahmood 2007). Hence, the writings are often viewed with suspect and appropriated, willingly or unknowingly, to serve certain agendas of both the authors themselves, and others. In fact, it has been observed that those self-narratives that are published and circulated within the American mainstream are mainly those considered liberal and progressive American Muslim women writers. These women writers have been described as those that have, by choice, embraced the multifaceted nature of their identities, as being both Muslims and Americans. These two are critically overlapping and highly contested signifiers.

REPRESENTATION OF SELF IN *STANDING ALONE*: A VANTAGE POINT

Generally, critics of *Standing Alone* have identified that some of the major arguments put forth in *Standing Alone* are unsupported and unfounded, if not misguided. The major arguments too are said to be sweeping statements and severely lack evidence (Fatemeh 2009) Detractors have, in fact expressed rage towards Nomani's publication of SA including other bold acts, which include her infamous Morgantown parade, calls for transformation on the mosque management throughout United States, appeal for women's inclusivity and full participation in mosque area and activities, and Bills of Rights for Muslim women and her other journalistic writings (Sahib 2005).

Given the above framing, we believe that a careful analysis of *Standing Alone* is, therefore, imperative and a crucial perspective to consider. More critically too, it is timely to examine closely the currency of *Standing Alone* as a work of self-narrative that collectively represents modern, alternative views that may or may not share the traditional Islamic worldviews, paradigms and norms. Furthermore, the findings from such careful analysis can be used to support or demystify the commonly held perceptions made by certain commentators that writings by Western educated and liberal Muslim women largely tend to represent neo-Orientalism and seemingly perpetuate Western agenda (Keshavarz

2007; Wassef 1998). Hence, *Standing Alone* provides a much richer piece of work to be analysed as it represents multiplicity and fluidity of identity, which directly and indirectly challenges the age-old and set ways that determine the norm and order of things.

Consequently, it can be argued that through the examination of *Standing Alone*, this study attempts to problematise and challenge the much-accepted assumptions of a monolithic Islam as typically static and traditional. A detailed exploration of *Standing Alone* will reveal the contested cultural and religious traditions and practices. At the same time, it will also shed light into a particular Muslim woman's activism and resistance to subordination within the perceived patriarchal structure. In general, Nomani's *Standing Alone* manifests unique patterns in the presentation of everyday concerns pertaining to life and its surrounding spiritual concerns.

Consequently, given the complex nature of *Standing Alone* as a self-narrative written by a Muslim woman positioned in multiple contexts, the framework deployed is eclectic. The framework of this study comprises two big umbrellas or paradigms of Self. The first paradigm is Slee's stages or generative themes of concern, and the second paradigm is The Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Brief discussion on these two paradigms will be outlined in the following section on framework.

FRAMEWORK : THE FIRST PARADIGM OF SELF –
SLEE'S STAGES/ THEMES OF CONCERN

In discussing the human faith development as depicted in the selected text, we would like to borrow the paradigm outlined in James Fowler's notable work, *Stages of Faith* (1980) which explains human's spiritual development and which has become generally the standard reference for studies in patterns of faith development. Nevertheless, Fowler's (1980) work has also received ongoing wide interest and debate. One particular debate is on Fowler's (1980) cognitive approach that is based majorly on theories of human growth and development based largely on the works of Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg et al. An interesting insight is offered by Nicola Slee (2004,) who highlights the gaps by studying women's life stories and traces their meaning making strategies. Slee identifies marked differences and apparent difficulties with Fowler's images, models, and metaphors when applied in other various contexts and backgrounds particularly in reference to women's faith experiences.

Slee (2004) observes that women's spirituality is distinctly founded in the relational and connectional ways. Broadly, Slee (2004) identifies three stages of faith development which she refers to as stages or generative themes. These themes, Slee 2004) stresses, are not intended to be comprehensive, exhaustive nor do they need to follow rigidly or sequentially the order of development presented. Slee (2004), however notes that, more importantly, the themes illuminate women's core patterns of faith experiences.

The first generative theme highlighted by Slee (2004) is the alienation stage marked by metaphors which take many diverse forms. These forms include silence, linguistic deprivation, loss of reality or not knowing the self, a sense of being disconnected, a sense of paralysis or impasses or a sense of being in the wilderness. Interestingly, Slee (2004) discovers that the spiritual journeys that the women have gone through are not as easily discernible and articulated by the women themselves. Slee (2004) notes that the so-called proverbial, profound journey of discovery or conquest seems to be more uniquely male, and apparently not so in the case of these women. Each of these women's journey is more of one that is wrought with a sense of longing for that particular *something* which is more or less is out of reach. Slee (2004) further points out that it is in this stage of alienation that these women still cling to the hope of home coming, and as a result, this bears the potential for transformation.

The second generative theme discussed deals with the notions of the spiritual awakening stage. Although the experiences among these women are diverse, there are still striking similarities worth noting. For instance, Slee (2004) explains that for some women, they experience having the recognition that things that are usually considered commonplace and ordinary in usual contexts, are in fact potentially significant loci in the experience of awakening. Additionally, this recognition is accompanied by intuition and bodily knowing, which rarely involves rational, logical thinking. Subsequently, there is also possibility of period of preparation preceding the experience of awakening. Additionally, there is often the impression of things coalescing which involve the outer and inner self or the secular and religious self. Finally, it is particularly crucial to highlight that Slee (2004) claims that the experience of awakening among these women often requires a new naming of self and reality. From her works, Slee (2004) argues that having gone through the process of awakening, women seem to need a new language, new terms, and new images to describe the experiences felt.

The third generative theme discussed by Slee (2004) refers to what she terms as relationality or the relational stage. Slee(2004) posits that it is indeed dangerous to oversimplify the idea of connectedness among women. Slee (2004) also observes that in the alienation stage, women still require moments of separateness. This however, does not downplay the crucial role of the mentioned relational energy that exists in the women's experiences, although in reality they are expressed differently among these diverse women.

Hence, in discussing the religious themes of *Standing Alone*, the stages or generative themes as highlighted by Slee (2004) will be adapted. Thus, the framework of this study comprises two themes, first, *themes of conflict*, and second, *themes of spiritual awakening*. Specifically, themes of conflict is adapted from Slee's (2004) original first stage of alienation, while themes of spiritual awakening is based on Slee's(2004) second and third stages of spiritual awakening and relationality.

At this point, we would like to re-highlight Slee's (2004) contention that these themes are not necessarily exhaustive nor do they occur neatly in a linear fashion among women. As such, we embrace the fact that, in reality, women's spiritual experiences are not necessarily exhaustive nor is there a need to be examined rigidly or sequentially according to the order presented above. However, strictly for the benefit of this paper, the analytical discussion of *Standing Alone* will be organized according to these two themes, themes of conflict and spiritual awakening. It is the primary intention of this study to shed some light into the spiritual experiences and practices portrayed in *Standing Alone*. Therefore, we hope that by analyzing the chosen narrative according to these thematic styles, the findings will contribute towards enriching the existing literary corpus on and by Muslim women.

FRAMEWORK : THE SECOND PARADIGM OF SELF - THE ISLAMIC PARADIGM OF THE CORRELATIONAL SELF

In relation to the first paradigm, the second paradigm of Self is the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. It is extremely relevant to deploy the Islamic paradigm of Self in exploring the Muslim women's narratives because in Islam, the concept of 'self' is always bound and intertwines with the existence of Others. This harmony is captured within the paradigm of the Divine Superstructure of Existence (Kamar Oniah 2009), or as reconceptualised, in this study, as the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Specifically, in this Islamic paradigm, the concept of 'self' outlines both the spiritual and social dimensions of responsibilities and accountability in Islam which can be further understood by the two correlations of *hablum min Allah wa hablum min al-nas* (2009). Kamar Oniah (2009) explains that in this concept of correlations, the first correlation is *hablum min Allah* which means the correlation between a human being (a God's servant) and Allah the Almighty (the Creator). The second correlation,

wa hablum min al-nas is the correlation one has with other mankind. Kamar Oniah (2009) reveals that the Holy Qur'an lays out the responsibilities and accountability of each individual Muslim within his or her context, position and roles in relation to specifically, first and foremost, Allah the Almighty, other fellow human beings, both Muslims and non-Muslims, and other creations in both human and non-human worlds. In addition, specifically for this study, the concept of *wa hablum min al-nas* will also loosely includes the relationships among fellow human beings within the context of nature, space and place.

Given this framing, The Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self, takes seriously matters of responsibilities and accountability that human beings have towards themselves and others, and more importantly, towards the Creator, Allah the Almighty. Kamar Oniah (2009) explains that human beings were created on the sole basis that they must submit and serve wholly and solely to Allah the Almighty. Part of this concept includes carrying out rituals and rites that enable fellow Muslims to enhance and strengthen their faith and spirituality. Therefore, governed by this concept, human beings are perceived by Islam as being physically and spiritually bound by their responsibilities as vicegerents of Allah the Almighty in this world and they are fully accountable for their own actions while at the same time, to constantly submit and prostrate themselves to the will and grace of Allah the Almighty.

The responsibilities entrusted upon mankind mentioned above directly entails the noble concept of *amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar* (2009) or loosely translated as *to bring goodness into the world and to fight the bad and evil*. This Islamic concept marks human being's greatest mission and sole purpose of being in this world. Simply put, the mission generally means a true Muslim is one who does the right, good and proper actions and shuns all evil deeds or wrongdoings (2009). Thus, these two concepts, *hablum min Allah wa hablum min al-nas* and *amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar* form the core of the the Islamic paradigm of the Correlational Self which provides a crucial perspective in the analysis of *Standing Alone*.

In short, the framework of this study bears two paradigms of Self. The first paradigm consists of Slee's stages or generative themes of concerns and the second paradigm is the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Therefore, based on this framework, conceptually, the *self* within the premise of this study is repositioned as a *process* as encapsulated in Slee's stages or generative themes. The self is also treated as *relational,* which is informed by concepts in The Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self.

Next, to ease the flow and understanding of the discussion of *Standing Alone*, the first paradigm of Self will provide the narrative structure. Hence, in the presentation of the analysis, the discussion will be arranged thematically according to the two subsections, themes of conflict and themes of religious awakening. Within these two subsections, emerging themes from *Standing Alone* will also be discussed in relation to the second paradigm, the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. The following section provides the detailed discussion.

ANALYSIS

THEMES OF CONFLICT

The first paradigm of Self adapted from Slee (2004) which will be dealt with is themes of conflict. It is highly relevant to explore *Standing Alone* as this self-narrative commonly depicts deep-seated everyday concerns, emotional turmoil and spiritual struggles with sources of conflict within themselves and from their significant others. These conflicts are often described in the narratives as the main source of

constraint to the intended visions. The emerging themes in the ensuing analysis of *Standing Alone* will also be discussed in relation to the second paradigm, the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self.

<div align="center">THE FIRST THEME OF CONFLICT: THE INCEPTION OF THE DISENCHANTED SELF</div>

Nomani's narrative, boldly entitled *Standing Alone, an American Woman's struggle for the Soul of Islam* immediately sets the tone and establishes the proclamation of self as being and coming from one tradition, "…I, a daughter of Islam…" (ibid, p.5) to self that is complex, multifaceted and of multiple borders and ideologies, "…my Indian world is divided into a 'North' that includes the West and a 'South' that includes the East" (p.11). Symbolically, the self is spatially-constructed and the mapped space of self represent borders that are intertwined and yet, geographically-defined and territorially-divided. This is the crux of Nomani's narrative, which encapsulates her paradoxical life and realities; a life deeply challenged by painful struggles to conceive her identity and role as a Muslim in multiple contexts.

The onset of conflict is transparent from the very beginning of the narrative when Nomani professes point blank, "I was very much at odds with my religion" (p.ix). The initial exploration of this self at odds can be traced even from the tender age of seven or eight where Nomani questions her Islamic Sunday school teacher the loaded question on the absence of women prophets in the Islamic tradition. This manifests Nomani's initial desire to establish connection with the Others, the other Muslim female referents, which reflect the Islamic concept of *wa hablum min al-nas*. Nomani goes on to describe how her reply is treated in such a dignified manner by her teacher who explains simply but graciously that there does exist great women. This reveals the binary need for Nomani's self to establish the being-as-present, and the being-as-absent with the latter strongly suggesting that the lack, loss or absence of familiar, female religious icons somehow affects a certain level of internal anguish and melancholy for Nomani.

Furthermore, Nomani even acknowledges this initial exchange of Islamic discourse as the precursor to her lifetime mission of being on the 'path of inquiry', finding her own contested space and place within the Islamic tradition. This marks Nomani's journey for the noble quest of *amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar* or the fight for the truth and good versus evil or wrongdoing.

<div align="center">THE SECOND THEME OF CONFLICT: GENDERED SPACE AND PLACE</div>

In relation to the second theme of conflict, Nomani recounts her childhood days where she already has an early comprehension of the clear cultural demarcation of the spatial and gender divides. She relates how it is considered as religious and cultural taboos for girls to indulge in physical activities in public space,

> In traditional Muslim cultures around the world, girls aren't allowed to ride bikes in public;
> they aren't allowed to play baseball with their brothers; and they most certainly aren't allowed
> to walk home alone (p.9).

This observation reveals Nomani's constant preoccupation with her physical and metaphorical journeys of "walking that path, eager to find my spiritual home as a woman born into Islam" (p.5). This is reflective of the Self as process which goes through transformations in the continuum of the undertaken journey. Nomani further explains her spiritual struggles in making sense of the multiple boundaries that define the contested Islamic cultures and beliefs. She also juxtaposes her own conflict with that of her father's and offers his perspective regarding the matter,

> As I entered into adulthood I began confronting the boundaries in my life, accepting them at times and daring to challenge them at other times. My father had his own struggles reconciling his culture with his beliefs, but as a scientist he firmly believed in having an open mind and pursuing intellectual inquiry (p.10).

Critically, it is this preoccupation with the spiritual journey that takes Nomani and her family to the three holiest mosques in the Muslim world, Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The treatment and exploration of space and place in *Standing Alone* are closely related to the binary notions of the private space as being feminine and public space as being masculine. This conception is further problematised and compounded in *Standing Alone*. It is found that in this text, the position of space in subverting life's trials and tribulations has been conceived and translated into diverse ways, so much so, that it transcends the traditional concept of space. The treatment of space is no longer just a mere reference to the typical, physical boundary that provides socio-political areas but also alludes to other contested, invisible lines of binary contradictions. Thus, it can be theorized that this conception of space found in *Standing Alone* re-echoes spatial theory which encompasses constructs that theory travels, knowledges are situated, subjects localized, communities and public spheres are both diasporic and globalized (Friedman 1998).

THE THIRD THEME OF CONFLICT: THE PARADOXICAL SPACE – BLURRING THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

In witnessing mixed images found at a shopping mall in Saudi Arabia, Nomani is shocked to see a moniker of mismatched items: a female mannequin wearing a tee, printed 'Remember Elvis', high-heeled shoes "Made in Italy" abundantly filled the racks and an assortment of sexy, raunchy lingerie and tight-fitting sky blue shirt with plunging neckline emblazoned with suggestive, emotionally-charged words, 'memory', 'ecstasy', tyranny, hypocrisy, unity, notoriety, and 'no time to think' (92) filled the clothing line. This shock that Nomani experiences is probably due to the explicit images of 'Elvis', the sexy, raunchy lingerie and suggestive words which are commonly associated with the Western-inspired, wild and decadent style of living. Nomani may have been caught off guard and does not expect to find such images to be so openly displayed in a Saudi Arabia's shopping mall. Nomani may perceive these images as antitheses particularly within the context of the much perceived conservative Saudi Arabia which Nomani associates intimately with the Islamic Holy lands of Mecca and Medina.

In response to this display, Nomani makes a reference to Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) "…like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom…An absurd fictionality ruled our lives" (91). The blurring of the sacred and the profane is further evoked when Asra describes how, "my mother and Safiyyah spent [our first] night [in Mecca] watching a Saudi soap opera whose drama rivaled that of any American soap opera" (p.93). In witnessing these conflicting realities, Nomani confesses her affinity with the paradoxical borders of self and the sacred space,

> Saudi Arabian society seems to be defined by these contradictions. For women particularly, but not exclusively, the restrictions and repression breed not always compliance but rather conflict and dissonance. I know this because I lived this way myself for a decade, from my late teens into my late twenties. I lived a double-life, secretly satisfying my curiosities about men while lying to my parents because I knew that I was crossing boundaries that weren't supposed to be crossed (p.93)

By acknowledging this existing dissonance, Nomani is directly juxtaposing her own struggles in navigating her conflict-riddled life with those symbolic paradoxical manifestations that she has observed in Saudi Arabia. Suggestive nuances such as 'double-life', 'secretly', 'satisfying', 'curiosities about men', 'lying to my parents', and 'crossing boundaries' all strongly allude to provocative notions of taboo, acts of intimacy and forbidden sensuality, and acts of rebellion by defying authority and committing transgression.

<div align="center">THEMES OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING</div>

In this section, the next paradigm of self adapted from Slee (2004) which will be discussed is themes of spiritual awakening. This dimension is characterised by the recognition of divine experiences usually accompanied by intuition and bodily knowing. It is described that there is often the impression of things coalescing which involve the outer and inner self or the secular and spiritual self. In the discussion of the emerging themes, relationships will also be made to the second paradigm, the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self.

<div align="center">THE FIRST THEME OF RELIGIOUS AWAKENING: THE HAJJ –
THE JOURNEY THAT AWAKENS THE SELF</div>

For Nomani, she conceptualises the Hajj as a sacred, momentous yet personal moment where Muslims congregate,

> to absorb the central messages of Islam: that Islam means having a special relationship with God based on surrendering to divine will and praying to and revering God; that there is a kinship among people that expresses itself through sacrifices for the benefit of others; that life is about struggle (p.7)

Nomani's perception of the Hajj captures her core belief of the Islamic correlation of the self which is holistically intertwined with Allah the Almighty as the Supreme God and Creator. This core belief is reflective of the concept of *hablum min Allah*, the relationship between a human being, (a God's servant) and Allah the Almighty, (the Creator), as outlined in The Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Nomani substantiate this belief by explaining further that by taking the Hajj, Muslims are able to strengthen and deepen one's relationship with Allah the Almighty through total submission of the self as exemplified through proper religious acts and conducts as prescribed in the Islamic faith. Nomani also reinstates that for women, the Hajj is conceptually synonymous with jihad as the Hajj embodies acts and values of struggle. Nomani further argues that the meaning of jihad goes beyond the traditional and superficial understanding of one that usually involves military combat. She posits that jihad primarily concerns "a struggle within our souls to live by the highest spiritual principles we can embrace" (ibid). This revelation by Nomani reflect the concept of *amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar* which means *to bring goodness into the world and to fight the bad and evil* as outlined in the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Interestingly, Nomani also likens the concept of Hajj as that of the emigration of her family, the early pilgrims, to America.

In fact, it is through her own pilgrimage to these Holy land of Mecca and Medina, Nomani symbolically reconciles the perceived absence of Muslim female referents in her life,

> The Hajj…is best described as a journey that follows the path of Adam, the first prophet in Islam; Abraham, the father of Islam; and Muhammad, the prophet of Islam and the last messenger of God, and a man so revered by Muslims the words "peace and blessings be upon him" follow his name. But I walked with a different mindfulness, following the struggles, strengths, and

triumphs of the women of my religion. I traced the path of the great women in Islam starting with Eve, who, contrary to biblical opinion, was not responsible for original sin; Hajar (or Hagar), the single mother of Islam; and Khadijah, the first wife and patroness of the messenger of Islam (p.ix-x).

The above, in essence, also demonstrates how Nomani affects her desire to reclaim the absence or lost of her religious icons. Nomani does this by symbolically evoking both the concept of *hablum min Allah* and the spatial vertical axis relationship of Self-God, in "I felt beneath my feet the earth where the first Muslims risked death to practice their religion. And I gazed up at the sky that served as the canopy for the forgotten mother of Islam, Hajar" (p.x). "The feet" bears testimony to Nomani's physical state of being grounded on earth, revealing Nomani in all her state of 'humanness' and fragility as Allah the Almighty's servant, like Hajar, the single, forgotten mother. 'The earth' beneath Nomani's feet further propounds her state of humility as "the earth" evokes the humble origin of mankind identical to their forefather, Adam who was made from clay.

"The feet" also evokes metaphorically the feet of a mother, which in Islam is highly regarded as noble and sacred as the paradise lies beneath the feet of a mother. By doing this, Nomani is juxtaposing her own self, as a single mother with Hajar, who was also a single mother. However in this case, Hajar was no ordinary example, Hajar was and is the mother of Islam, thus this manifests Nomani's desire to elevate herself and her cause to be worthy in God's eyes. "The earth" is also a powerful imagery akin to the pull of the gravitational force which foregrounds Nomani within the context of the innate responsibility as *Khalifah* (vicegerent) on this earth as commanded by Allah the Almighty.

Furthermore, by stating that her feet touched "the earth where the first Muslims risked death" establishes immediately Nomani's position as the witness bearer to this holy cause, and indirectly reveals Nomani's spiritual awakening to her life's mission. Subsequently, when Nomani "gazed up at the sky as the canopy for…Hajar", Nomani is ultimately positioning herself as an obedient servant ready to answer Allah the Almighty's call for the noble and holy act of fighting for the truth and justice as encapsulated in the Islamic Paradigm of *amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar*.

THE SECOND THEME OF RELIGIOUS AWAKENING: THE OTHERS – SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Despite struggling with multiple conflicts caused by Others, Muslim women writers also often express the Others as sources of inspiration. For Nomani, her filial relationship plays a fundamental role throughout her life. It is mentioned how her father, who was born in India during the British colonial rule, is moved by expressions of human struggle and it is the environment then that dramatically shapes his worldview,

> Since his earliest days, my father firmly believed that Islam is a religion of peace, love, justice, equality, respect and accountability. He had long felt that Islam's principle of equity, justice and respect apply to everybody – Muslim and non-Muslim, black and white, male and female, adult and child (p.102).

It can be assumed that her father's clarity of thoughts and belief on the issue of equity and human rights is deeply influential to Nomani and provides strong grounding for her particularly during her bouts of conflict. At several points in her narrative, Nomani subtly invokes patriarchal images in relation to the body or Self and sacred spaces which are symbolically representative of the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. This is evidential during the pilgrimage undertaken by Nomani and her father,

> Medina – My father felt a special connection to the prophet of Islam as he walked the streets where the prophet of Islam once walked. Like the prophet who was moved to start a new community of believers, my father was always committed to building inclusive Muslim communities (p.102)

Take note how Nomani builds the premise of the argument by alluding to a valid, religious mission, usually undertaken by God-appointed men of piety, "my father", "special connection"," to the prophet of Islam", "he walked the streets where the prophet once walked", and "like the prophet, my father was always committed to building…". The fusions made involved three forces consisting of body as the social self and the space as sacred practice: the first force, 'my father', the powerful, unrestrained, patriarchal other, symbolic of the body as social is fused with the second force, 'the prophet of Islam', the ultimate sacred prototype endorsed by Allah the Almighty himself and these two 'bodies' are fused with the third force, 'the street' as a sacred space, establishing at once the reaffirmation and validity of her battle of reclaiming her own Self and sacred space. Although Nomani does not proceed by making direct establishment of the similarity of her own Mosque mission with these men, she already provides a premonition of this at an earlier entry in her writing,

> I stood at Safa where Hajar once stood. At the time of Hajar, Safa was a hill. She had a desert sand beneath her feet. I had cool marble. I had wanted my feet to touch the ground where Hajar stood. But I felt closer to her on the roof of the opulent…On the roof I felt I was closer to the spirit of Hajar released to the heavens. I gazed at the dark sky, the stars winking at me, and I breathed in the spirit of this noble woman who lived centuries before me. (p.64)

The above revelation indicates Nomani's spiritual awakening and submission to Allah the Almighty as a God's servant akin to Hajar who made a great sacrifice in the name of Islam. This is in line with the previously established notion of Self which is governed by the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. Within this paradigm, humankind are perceived by Islam as being physically and spiritually bound by their responsibilities as vicegerents of Allah in this world who must constantly submit and prostrate themselves to the will and grace of Allah the Almighty.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the analysis on Nomani's *Standing Alone* and its findings as a self-narrative provide fertile grounds for capturing the self as both relational and a process. This is revealed thematically according to the framework of this study which consists of two paradigms, Slee's stages/generative themes of concerns and the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self. We strongly contend that this is true in the case of *Standing Alone* in capturing the multiple transformation of the relational self, and the mixed responses of the communities at large with this Muslim self as process. Through careful examination of Nomani's self-narrative based on this framework, we problematise and challenge much-accepted assumptions of a monolithic Islam as typically static and traditional. This self-narrative which showcases an example of the multiplicity and fluidity of the dynamic Muslim self proves that present available frameworks are insufficient in capturing the rich, subtle nuances of symbolic Muslim women's traditions. Generally, it can be argued that human beings strive for the betterment of Self and Others. Everyday concerns related to how people respond to this disenchantment and how each individual strive to navigate their conflicts and spiritual awakening in response to this shared disenchantment reveal the universal and persistent moral impulse in people's life stories.

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