

## Faith, Love and Spiritual Growth in Norhafsa Hamid's *Will You Stay?* and *Will You Love Me?*

*Iman, Cinta dan Pertumbuhan Rohani dalam "Will You Stay?"  
dan "Will You Love Me?" Karya Norhafsa Hamid*

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines Norhafsa Hamid's "Will You Stay? and Will You Love Me?" as Anglophone Malaysian romance novels that reframe love and desire within an Islamic ethical framework. Though often categorized as 'chick lit' and dismissed for their stylistic flaws and commercial appeal, these novels offer a valuable literary intervention by centering Muslim women's emotional and spiritual journeys. Drawing on Layla Abdullah-Poulos' concept of the Stable Muslim Love Triangle (SMLT), this paper argues that Norhafsa's narratives portray romance as a spiritual undertaking, where God occupies the apex of the love triangle and serves as the moral reference point for navigating romantic emotions. The analysis highlights how romantic love, when guided by Islamic principles, is not opposed to faith but serves to deepen it. Instead, the novels portray the possibility of romantic love as growing in tandem with faith and spirituality. This reading also expands the scope of SMLT beyond its original context in African American Muslim fiction, demonstrating a shared theological and ethical sensibility across distinct Muslim societies. The primary conflict in these novels lies not in external pressures but in the protagonists' internal negotiations to reconcile emotion with spiritual commitment. Ultimately, this paper shows that love in Norhafsa's work is both a divine test and a reward – integral to the heroines' journey toward spiritual maturity.*

*Keywords: Malaysian Literature in English; religion in fiction; Norhafsa Hamid, romance in Muslim women's writing*

### ABSTRAK

*Makalah ini meneliti "Will You Stay? dan Will You Love Me?" karya Norhafsa Hamid sebagai novel cinta yang ditulis di dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini mbingkai semula konsep cinta dan keberahian dalam kerangka etika Islam. Walaupun sering dikategorikan sebagai 'chick lit' dan diketepikan kerana kelemahan gaya serta tarikan komersialnya, novel-novel ini menawarkan intervensi sastera dengan memberi tumpuan kepada perjalanan emosi dan kerohanian wanita Muslim. Dengan merujuk kepada konsep Stable Muslim Love Triangle (SMLT) oleh Layla Abdullah-Poulos, kajian ini berhujah bahawa naratif Norhafsa menggambarkan percintaan sebagai satu usaha kerohanian, yang meletakkan Tuhan di puncak segitiga cinta dan menjadi rujukan moral dalam mengendalikan emosi romantik. Analisis ini menekankan bahawa cinta romantik, apabila dipandu oleh prinsip-prinsip Islam, bukan sahaja tidak bertentangan dengan iman, malah mampu memperdalamkannya. Sebaliknya, novel-novel ini menggambarkan kemungkinan cinta berkembang seiring dengan keimanan dan spiritualiti. Pembacaan ini turut memperluas konteks SMLT daripada asal-usulnya dalam kajian fiksyen penulis Muslim berbangsa Afrika-Amerika, sekaligus menunjukkan keserasian teologi dan etika yang dikongsi antara masyarakat Islam yang berbeza. Konflik utama dalam novel-novel ini bukanlah tekanan luaran, tetapi rundingan dalaman watak utama untuk mendamaikan emosi dengan komitmen spiritual. Akhirnya, makalah ini menunjukkan bahawa cinta dalam karya Norhafsa merupakan ujian dan ganjaran Ilahi – yang penting dalam perjalanan watak utama menuju kematangan rohani.*

*Kata kunci: Sastera Malaysia di dalam Bahasa Inggeris; agama di dalam fiksyen; Norhafsa Hamid; genre cinta di dalam penulisan wanita Islam*

## MALAY MUSLIM IDENTITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC ROMANCE IN MALAYSIAN LITERATURE

Article 160(2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution defines a “Malay” as someone who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and follows Malay customs. This legal conflation between ethnic and religious identity establishes Islam not merely as a personal faith, but as an essential marker of Malayness. As a result, Islam becomes embedded in the very fabric of Malay identity, shaping communal belonging, state policies, and cultural norms. The public consciousness of what it means to be Malay is thus deeply intertwined with religious piety and adherence to Islamic values. This was further reinforced during the modern revival of Islam, which Bob Olivier (2020) traced to several different factors including politics, economics, as well as racial relations. This saw the (re)emergence of a spiritual commitment to Islam within the Malay Muslim community, where Islam was considered a solution to many societal issues. Islam became the backbone of individual ethics and morality, marking a commitment to its practices in all aspects of life.

Within the literary sphere, the influence of Islam has become increasingly visible since the 1970s and 1980s. This can be seen in how Islam has influenced the popular romance genre in Malay literature. Romance themes date back to the classical Malay literary texts from the Malay Archipelago, where expressions of desire were often explicit and personal. There are overt descriptions of longing where “the author... has to describe his own experiences or his own desire... [and] seems to relish in it” (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2011, p. 18). The romantic-sexual undertone continues well into the 1980s and finally, in the 1990s, it began to be subdued (Mohd Zariat, 2014). Following this is the emergence of romance genre intertwined with Islamic themes in the 2000s, offering a counter-narrative to sexualized depictions of love. This development reflects how the Islamic revival reshaped not only religious practices but also the affective and imaginative possibilities of Malay Muslim identity in contemporary literature. Islamic romance fiction became a vehicle of moral instruction, echoing the revivalist impulse to discipline desire within a faith-based framework. Such novels often promote spiritual growth, moral perseverance, and gendered virtue as prerequisites for romantic fulfilment, establishing a didactic tone that privileges faith over passion. The popularity of this genre also significantly reflects a broader transformation in public literary taste, signalling a strong market preference for narratives framed within an Islamic moral worldview (Mohd Zariat, 2014).

While Malay popular fiction in Bahasa Malaysia responded to the sociocultural climate by producing Islamic-themed romance narratives that reinforce socially sanctioned ideals of piety and femininity, the landscape has been more complex for Malay Muslim writers working in English. Writing in English often places these authors at the margins of the national literary canon due to longstanding postcolonial anxieties, thus their language choice “impl[ies] their ambivalent adherence to their Muslim identity and heritage” (Ng, 2009, p. 128). This was the result of the enactment of the National Language Act of 1967. While this Act cemented Malay as the official language of Malaysia, it was seen as “a deliberately repressive move towards writers using English or other minority languages in Malaysia... as their creative medium” (Quayum, 2020, p. 3), pushing literary works in English in the category of sectional literature. This tension is further intensified by the legal and cultural conflation of Malayness with Islam, which casts modernity – frequently associated with secular or Western liberal values – as potentially corrosive to religious and communal authenticity. Consequently, writers often grapple with portraying characters caught between the demands of Islamic traditionalism and the allure of modern, individualist values

(Nadiah, 2021). This narrative tension commonly surfaces in depictions of political Islam's intersections with personal autonomy, especially in relation to gender dynamics, sexuality, and the structures of Islamic marriage and law. Such anxieties are not new. Colonial-era Malay fiction reflected the early influence of Western ideologies, largely facilitated by the secular education system introduced during British rule (Mohd Zariat, 2007). The adoption of Western literary forms during this period enabled Malay writers to both assimilate and critique Western values—an ambivalence that continues to shape contemporary Malaysian literature in English, particularly in its treatment of identity, gender, and faith.

However, this interpretation of ambiguity warrants further reflection. In Ng's (2009) analysis, Islam is presented through an individualised perspective where Malay writers, “however liberal and Westernized, continue to tread carefully in their negotiation with, and representation of, the faith” (p. 137). Yet, he downplays this framing by suggesting that representations of faith often use irony as a narrative device to critique “parochial practices (which are often also gender-biased)” (p. 137) that are embedded in traditional Islam than a sincere engagement with the religious and legal realities of being Muslims in Malaysia. This reading privileges a secular-liberal lens that looks at religion in opposition to modernity. In fact, the linguistic divide that has been haunting Anglophone Malaysian authors actually work to ensure that contemporary Malaysian literature in English does not remain a singular, monolithic entity; instead, its various sub-traditions operate under distinct pressures and cater to different audiences. This differentiation significantly influences how Islamic ideology is expressed and received across these diverse literary spheres and may not always reflect the dualism of religion and modernity. English-language works may offer more globalized or critical perspectives on Islamic identity and relationships.

Norhafsa Hamid's English-language works therefore, represent this distinct intervention into this discourse. Rather than resisting modernity, her narratives conflate it with Malay-Muslim identity – featuring overt religious themes with protagonists who wear the hijab, pray five times a day, while also portraying them managing personal ambitions as well as romantic feelings. This synthesis challenges the oppositional framing proposed by Ng (2009), offering instead a vision of complementarity, where spiritual integrity and worldly success are mutually reinforcing. As such, Norhafsa's works reflect a unique attempt to realign Malay-Muslim identity within contemporary realities, while maintaining religious orthodoxy as the moral compass of romantic and personal fulfilment.

## NORHAFSAH HAMID'S NOVELS

Norhafsa Hamid's *Will You Stay?* (2024a), henceforth *WYS*, first published in 2021, and *Will You Love Me?* (2024b), henceforth *WYLM*, first published in 2023, are part of a series that began with *Letters to God* (2018). However, *WYS* and *WYLM* are more closely linked, as they follow the same characters and explore similar thematic concerns. *WYLM* takes place several years after the events of *WYS*, continuing the narrative arc of the minor characters in *WYS*. Both novels center on Malay Muslim women who are devout in their Islamic faith. In *WYS*, Amy is pursuing surgical training, while Nieza is specializing in cardiology, both based in Liverpool, England. By the time of *WYLM*, they have completed their medical training and are working in Malaysia, contributing to their communities. Across both novels, Amy and Nieza experience romantic developments and navigate their emotions while remaining committed to their faith.

As of October 2024, *WYS* has gone through fourteen reprints, while *WYLM* has reached six as of February 2024, indicating significant commercial popularity. However, this reveals a paradox in the reception of the novels. Despite their religious undertone, they are often labelled as ‘chick lit’ (Jariah & Diana, 2023; Zairil, 2023), a category that risks dismissing them as frivolous or light reading. Indeed, they are marketed with strong romantic elements and borrow some characteristics from the conventional Malay chick lit formula outlined by Diana & Jariah (2022), particularly in the depiction of strong social settings featuring family and friends, as well as a dramatic challenge that the love interests have to go through before finally arriving at marital bliss that confirms their romantic feelings for each other. Their success mirrors the popular reception of ‘*novel picisan*’ in Malay literary discourse, which are often described as “poor quality writings or mass market ‘schlock’ which have very little literary merit” (Ruzy & Shahizah, 2010, p. 67). Critical assessments of the novels often highlight their stylistic flaws. *WYS* for example, has been critiqued for its “unsophisticated” plot and “language errors reminiscent of a poorly translated article from the Malay language” (Jariah & Diana, 2023, p. 214). My reading supports this critique, noting the presence of grammatical errors, redundant scenes, linear plot development, and flat characters – shortcomings that could have been mitigated with more rigorous editorial work. These flaws risk overshadowing the significance of Norhafisah’s contribution to include religious themes in Anglophone Malaysian romantic fiction.

Nevertheless, Norhafisah’s novels do offer an alternative to dominant representations of Islam as primarily a site of tension or political critique. For one, unlike similarly themed works that present “predictable ending of marital bliss” (Diana & Jariah, 2022, p. 215) that often prioritize emotional and romantic fulfilment over religious imperatives (Mohd Zariat, 2014), Norhafisah’s novels situate marriage not as a promised happy ending, one that the protagonists need to spiritually work for, aligning romantic love with Islamic ethics. Furthermore, her presentation of independent female protagonists contrasts with the stereotypical presentation of passive women in popular Malay fiction (Izharuddin, 2021). Thus, Norhafisah’s authorial decision to write in English reflects an intentional move to foreground overtly religious themes within Anglophone Malaysian writing.

To present this departure, I suggest that Norhafisah Hamid’s novels resonate with Layla Abdullah-Poulos’ (2018) concept of the Stable Muslim Love Triangle, which highlights narratives where Muslim characters – especially women – navigate romantic relationships without compromising their faith. Abdullah-Poulos argues that such narratives are significant because they resist the Western literary trope that positions Muslim identity and romantic fulfilment in opposition, often framing religion as a source of tension or restriction. Instead, in Norhafisah’s *WYS* and *WYLM*, romance is not only permissible but spiritually fulfilling when aligned with Islamic values. Amy’s and Nieza’s stories embody this model by presenting emotionally resonant relationships that evolve within the boundaries of religious propriety, affirming that love and desire can coexist with religious commitment. While the novels may be dismissed for their structural weaknesses or commercial genre, they contribute meaningfully to the growing corpus of fiction that centres Islam not as a site of conflict, but as a stable moral compass that shapes and deepens romantic experiences – thus advancing Abdullah-Poulos’ argument within the context of Anglophone Malaysian literature.

## REFRAMING ROMANCE: THE STABLE MUSLIM LOVE TRIANGLE AND ISLAMIC ETHICS ON ROMANCE

Layla Abullah-Poulos' (2018) the Stable Muslim Love Triangle (SMLT) - which consists of the self, the beloved, and God - offers a useful interpretive model of reading Norhafsa Hamid's novels. Within this triangle, love is neither autonomous nor purely interpersonal. Instead, it is triangular and God-centred, where the vertical axis (self-God relationship) sustains and regulates the horizontal axis (self-beloved relationship). Drawing from René Girard's theory of triangular desire, where a mediator influences the subject's longing for the object, Abdullah-Poulos adapts this theory to portray the pattern prominent in romance fiction written by African American Muslim writers. She explains that these novels assert that Allah remains the unwavering point of reference and mediator. The protagonists' desire for each other must pass through divine scrutiny; their internal conflicts often centre on reconciling romantic longing with religious obligation. This structure creates a form of narrative catharsis, wherein characters must undergo spiritual and emotional growth before achieving a *halal* union. *Halal* means "permissible" in Arabic and it is a concept that is commonly associated with dietary laws but also encompasses all aspects of life for Muslims. Within the context of the novels, this includes the protagonists' lifestyle choices, specifically in their romantic relationships. As Abdullah-Poulos observes, the SMLT "can serve as an internal barrier against as well as a catalyst for the union of romantic protagonists" (p. 81), highlighting how divine will can both delay and sanctify human love.

The original application of this model to African American Muslim romance fiction is underpinned not only by the characters' experience of love but also through experiences of marginalization, Islamophobia and constant negotiations of Muslim identity in secular spaces. However, I believe that the framework is not inherently limited to one cultural expression. Rather, it can be adapted to allow for its application to other Muslim communities, including the Malay Muslim context represented in Norhafsa Hamid's novels. This is because the framework emphasizes Islam's holistic view of desire – not as something to be repressed but to be guided through divine ethics. Romantic relationships must conform to the moral code of Islam, which upholds chastity and romantic commitment through marriage. The SMLT ensures that emotional and physical intimacy only become permissible through marriage, reinforcing the sanctity of love as an act of devotion. Thus, the characters' emotional journeys are as much about spiritual fulfilment as they are about romantic union. By placing Allah at the centre of the romantic triangle, SMLT frames love not merely as personal desire but as a sacred trust, one that must align with divine will to be complete and enduring. Romantic love becomes a spiritual journey, where both individuals must align their desires with Islamic principles. Thus, in Norhafsa's Malay Muslim romance narratives, love is both a test and a mercy – one that demands submission, self-restraint, and spiritual growth, elevating the relationship from emotional attachment to a sacred bond rooted in worship and accountability to God. This contrasts with Western conceptions of romantic love, which often foreground emotion and intimacy. These ideals are also evident in many other Malay Muslim romance fictions that, while mindful of cultural sensitivities in their portrayal of love, do not place Islamic principles at the heart of their narratives.

To deepen the ethical and metaphysical underpinnings of this framework, I turn to Islamic theological perspectives on love particularly as SMLT reflects a similar perspective on how love is viewed in Islamic thought. Love (*ḥubb*) is not merely an emotional impulse or a private, individual experience; rather, it is a deeply spiritual principle embedded in the ontological structure of the universe and rooted in the very nature of God. The Quranic portrayal of God as *al-Wadūd*

(The Most Loving) affirms that love is one of the Divine Attributes, suggesting that the origin and ideal expression of love flow directly from the Divine. This emphasizes the notion that “the highest form of love is the absolute and true love of God above all else” (Abdin, 2004, p. 96). As the classical Islamic theological scholar, Al-Ghazali (1993) suggests, true love is a path to knowing and loving God.

Al Ghazali and other classical Islamic scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Hazam offer nuanced treatments of love that integrate both emotional experience and spiritual responsibility. Al-Ghazali (1993) argues that the heart’s capacity for emotional love is essential for understanding divine realities. One cannot attain true knowledge of God without first experiencing and reflecting on love in its human manifestations. Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah (2018) articulates that love (*al-hubb*) and desire (*al-irādah*) are the primary drivers of all human action. He writes: “Every movement is based on love and desire” (p. 18), and insists that the correctness of these movements lies in their orientation toward God. Even undesirable actions may be undertaken if they serve a higher spiritual purpose. Thus, desire itself is not vilified in Islam; rather, it is redirected toward a divine telos. This redirection is what Ibn Taymiyyah refers to as praiseworthy love, a form of love that is governed by submission, humility, and moral clarity.

Ibn Taymiyyah (2018) also acknowledges the intense psychological effects of love, cautioning that “love can be more intoxicating than alcohol” (p. 81) and may cloud judgment when not guided by proper belief and purpose. He distinguishes between *‘ishq* (obsessive, potentially delusional love) and spiritually guided affection, warning that unchecked passion may lead to a state of *fana*’ (annihilation of self) that is emotionally overwhelming and morally confusing. In contrast, when love is governed by divine purpose, it becomes a stabilizing force that fosters ethical responsibility and self-awareness. Ibn Hazam (1994) similarly defends the legitimacy of romantic love, asserting that it is a feeling that is neither disapproved nor prohibited by religion since the inclinations of the heart are ultimately within God’s control. He thus affirms romantic love as a natural and potentially sacred phenomenon, provided it is approached with moral intentionality.

Within this theological tradition, romantic love is not understood as an end in itself, but as a means to spiritual growth and divine proximity. The Islamic view embeds these emotional dynamics within a metaphysical and ethical framework. Love in Islam is purposeful and connected to God (Karimullah et al. 2023). This is because it is directed towards harmony, responsibility, and accountability before God. Love, when properly understood and practiced, becomes a form of worship and a path to spiritual fulfilment. In this sense, it is both a spiritual essence and a moral discipline. The gentle affection between spouses serves as both the motivation and the method for cultivating a meaningful, God-oriented life.

This integration of theological insights and the SMLT framework allows for a deeper appreciation of how love functions in Norhafsa Hamid’s fiction – not only as a personal or romantic journey but as a vehicle for spiritual discipline and growth. With this conceptual foundation in place, I turn to how these dynamics play out in the narratives. This paper finds that applying the Stable Muslim Love Triangle (SMLT) framework to Norhafsa Hamid’s novels yields two key insights. First, the novels extend the interpretive reach of SMLT beyond its original cultural context by emphasizing that the foundation of Islamic love lies not only in the permissibility of romantic relationships but in the continuity of moral and spiritual striving. The protagonists’ challenges, therefore, do not emerge from pressures against their beliefs, but instead, from internal negotiations to align religious values against emotional responses to different life challenges, including romantic feelings. They also demonstrate that emotional fulfilment and marital harmony are not automatically secured through legal union (marriage); rather, they require

a sustained commitment to aligning the self with divine expectations. Love, in this context, becomes an evolving act of spiritual discipline. In this way, these novels are distinct from other romantic fiction that is religious in nature which highlights the “rivalry between the human beloved and God” (Selinger and Vivanco, 2021, p. 494). Instead, they depict how love becomes “a conduit to the divine” (p. 495).

Secondly, the novels shift the focus away from premarital anxieties. Instead, they explore challenges such as emotional disconnection, spiritual growth, and the ethical labour required to uphold Islamic principles not only in search of a *halal* relationship, but also while within one. Therefore, within this context, the core of SMLT remains intact as the novels reflect similar “prioritiz[ation of] Allah (swt) in the development of the romantic plot” (Abdullah-Poulos, 2018, p. 6). The SMLT model, however, is reinterpreted by shifting the barrier and tension inward – that is within the protagonists’ own emotional responses to challenges of life. The love triangle remains intact, and God retains at the apex although the drama is no longer about choosing between Islam and love. Ultimately, this application of SMLT not only affirms its flexibility but also highlights how Islamic romantic ethics are grounded in a commitment to God.

## ANALYSIS

### FAITH AS THE FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLE TOWARDS LOVE

The most direct and compelling parallel between Abdullah-Poulos's (2018) SMLT and Norhafsa Hamid’s Malay Muslim romance novels is the explicit and pervasive presence of God as the ultimate mediator of desire and destiny. The novels consistently frame romantic happiness and fulfilment as a direct blessing from God, explicitly stating that it is contingent upon the protagonists’ unwavering devotion to Him. This directly mirrors the SMLT's apex, where God “firmly maintains position as mediator of desire” (p. 2), thereby driving the viability and direction of love in the plots. However, unlike the recurring motif of faith put to the test apparent in Abdullah-Poulos’ chosen novels, Hamid’s novels delete the tension between faith and love. Instead, the novels present protagonists whose faith remains a stable axis throughout their lives and even when they pursue romantic journeys.

Amy and Nieza are portrayed as observant Muslim women even though they live or have lived in a non-Muslim society for an extended period of time. Thus, their approach towards romantic love is in tandem with their devotion to Islam. When probed by non-Muslim friends about finding ‘boyfriends’, both characters present similar responses. Amy explains that she is unable to do so, firmly declaring: “I’m a Muslim... My religion is Islam” (Norhafsa, 2024a, p. 50). Nieza too asserts that she is a Muslim and that “[t]he religion [she] follow[s] is Islam” (2024b, p. 95). These moments mark critical instances in the novels where the protagonists reaffirm their commitment to Islamic values in cross-cultural contexts that may not share or understand their boundaries around love and sexuality.

The scenes that follow these declarations further highlight their moral clarity and spiritual awareness. Both Amy and Nieza go on to explain that Islam prohibits romantic relationships outside the bounds of marriage because they may lead to emotional and physical temptation. Their explanations are underpinned by Quranic teachings such as Surah Al-Isra’ (17: 32): “Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils)”. This verse is not wielded as a tool of sexual repression but as a spiritual compass towards appropriate sexual behaviour that is only allowed within marriage. Indeed, both protagonists express a capacity

for desire by silently expressing physical attractions to their potential partners. When her love interest, Rasyid visits Amy at the hospital where she works, she gushes over his good looks, silently declaring that he looks “[l]ike an Arab prince” (Norhafsa, 2024a, p. 131). She then quickly tells herself to “guard her dignity and guard her heart from falling to the whims of her feelings” (p. 131). Nieza is similarly captivated by the physical presence of her love interest, Harris, noticing his “muscular arms” and “perfectly white teeth” (2024b, p. 69). But she too chides herself by forcing herself “to lower [her] gaze and not ogle after him” (p. 77). These moments of physical attractions and the responses to them are important because they dismantle the stereotype that Muslim women – particularly those who are visibly religious – are emotionally or physically indifferent to romantic or sexual attraction. On the contrary, these women do experience desire. However, they are both adamant to contain them within a framework of self-restraint, religious discipline, and intentionality. This aligns with SMLT where the vertical relationship between the love interests is governed by “the immediate superior status of the deity in the love triangle” (Abdullah-Poulus, 2018, p. 8), reinforcing Islamic doctrines in facing romantic desire.

#### MARRIAGE AS THE PATHWAY TO INTIMACY

While the protagonists’ silent and disciplined desires reflect an internalization of Islamic principles around modesty and restraint, these desires are not suppressed; instead, they are carefully deferred until they can be ethically realized. The deferred longing culminates not in casual relationships but in a structured pursuit of marriage. In this way, desire is not seen as sinful, but as something to be honoured within the bounds of divine law. In this model, God forms the apex of the triangle, guiding not only emotional attachments but also the timing and mode of expressing physical desire.

The divine-centred model also shapes how the protagonists orient themselves towards love and marriage. Both Amy and Nieza, at the beginning of their respective narratives, are not actively seeking romantic partners. Instead, they rely on God’s plan for when and how love may emerge. Amy consistently resists her mother’s matchmaking efforts, firmly believing that “when the time comes and with the right person, she will settle down; provided that is what’s written for her, by God... [as] [s]he believes in God’s decree and she accepts His decisions” (Norhafsa, 2024a, p. 100). Nieza, too, refuses to begin any romantic relationship outside the institution of marriage, grounding her position in her religious commitment. When love does enter their lives, it does so in a manner consistent with their faith: both Rasyid and Harris pursue the protagonists with the clear intention of marriage. This progression frames marriage not as the final goal of romance, but as its rightful beginning – a space where emotional and physical intimacy can be fully realized within the ethical boundaries of Islam.

Amy’s and Nieza’s perspectives on marriage echoes the broader Islamic ethos which uphold marriage as a relationship of dignity and mutual support between men and women. The Quran presents marriage as a form of divine blessing and a source of tranquillity:

And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect.

(Surah Al-Rum, 30:21)

This verse highlights marriage as a union founded on harmony, love, and divine wisdom. Supporting this, Al-Ghazali, (2007) argues that Islam strongly encourages marriage and that there is no disapproval of marriage “without qualification” (p. 13). Although he outlines both the



benefits and potential drawbacks of marriage, he stresses that these should be treated as a “criterion and touchstone” (p. 38), not absolute rules. Al-Ghazali lists the purposes of marriage as procreation, protection against lust, spiritual relaxation, assistance with domestic responsibilities, and self-discipline, reinforcing marriage as a moral and practical framework for managing human life, including desire.

In *WYS* and *WYLM*, Norhafisah depicts female protagonists who exercise clear agency in their marital choice, guided by Islamic ethical principles instead of being passive recipients of marital arrangements. Amy, for instance, refuses her mother’s attempt to arrange a meeting with a potential suitor who asks to meet her at his hotel in London rather than travelling to Liverpool to see her. She perceives the suggestion as “so demeaning... [l]ike [she is] really desperate for a man. Any man” (Norhafisah, 2024a, p. 104). Nieza meanwhile, exercises caution when Harris, initially a non-Muslim proposes marriage. It is only after she finds out that he has converted to Islam out of personal conviction and not merely for love does she consider his proposal. Her immediate response to his confession of love – “I can only marry a Muslim” (2024b, p. 267) – reaffirms her unwavering commitment to Islam as the boundary for her marital decision.

In both narratives, Norhafisah highlights that romantic love, while meaningful, must exist within the ethical and spiritual confines of Islam. The women’s agency is not expressed through rebellion or individualism but through a deeply rooted religious autonomy. They choose to love – and to marry – only when the relationship is sanctioned by divine law and when their emotional lives can remain in harmony with their faith, positioning divine approval as the highest moral arbiter. This is a stark contrast to what Izharuddin (2021) describes as the popular “forced marriage” theme in a “female-dominated preoccupation with the pursuit and tribulations of heterosexual romantic love” (Izharuddin, 2021, p. 3) in contemporary Malay romance. Instead, Norhafisah’s protagonists are not passive recipients of romance; they are discerning believers navigating their expectations of romantic love through the lens of Islamic ethics, portraying a model of faith-centred agency in the contemporary Muslim romantic imaginary.

Furthermore, the protagonists evaluate their partners based on criteria grounded in Islamic ethics. This reflects the Islamic principle of *kafā’ah* (compatibility), which emphasizes on balance in a spousal choice (Abdul Hadi, 2020). This does not only refer to physical attraction or social status but also include spiritual and intellectual alignment, working as an effort to avoid marital conflicts. Thus, the concept extends beyond mere economic compatibility to include emotional and psychological alignment between spouses. In *WYS*, this is demonstrated through Amy’s cautious response towards Rasyid’s marriage proposal. Despite her attraction to Rasyid, Amy only considers marriage after he assures her that she can continue her career as a surgeon. Her pointed questions – whether she must “quit [her] job after marriage” and whether she “can continue with [her] training, no matter how long it takes” (Norhafisah, 2024a, p. 139–140) – underscore that her interest to marry does not come at the cost of her personal growth. Nieza echoes a similar perspective. As Harris is a British citizen, she expresses no qualm in telling him that she has “no plans to go back to the UK” (2024b, p. 269). This is not simply a logistical preference but a clear assertion of her independence and a commitment to retain it. Both women demonstrate a strong sense of rootedness and self-direction and they both approach marriage not as an act of personal sacrifice, but as a negotiation of values where faith and ambitions are fully integrated. In both cases, it is the men who finds themselves submitting to the requests of their potential spouses.

Therefore, both novels do not position love as a transformative project that redefines the self. Instead, it is a continuation of an already grounded life. The protagonists do not need saving or reshaping through love; instead, they seek partners who align with their life choices and spiritual

path. In this way, the novels affirm a model of romantic love where emotional fulfilment is possible only within the framework of divine accountability. It reflects Abdullah-Poulus' (2018) model of SMLT where there is a practice of rejection of spiritually flawed characters when there is a failure to retain God at the apex of the triangle. Norhafsa's protagonists express similar readiness to reject potential suitors if they endanger their physical and spiritual journeys. This suggests a fortification of the triangle in which they visualize a successful romantic relationship when spouses are carefully chosen in accordance with Islamic ideals.

#### FAITH AS THE FUNDAMENTAL BASIS FOR NAVIGATING EMOTIONS

I have argued above of how the novels portray the protagonists as individuals who have a firm stand in their faith, particularly in their careful and principled choice of spouses. This spiritual strength becomes increasingly significant as the narratives bring forth unexpected challenges for both Amy and Nieza. In *WYS*, Amy's relationship with her mother, Rohana, is marked by pivotal scenes that convey long-standing resentment and emotional distance. Rohana initially disapproves of Amy's career-focused lifestyle and only shows approval when Amy marries Rasyid, especially upon learning of his affluent family background and financial stability. However, shortly after their wedding, when Rasyid is diagnosed with brain cancer, Rohana harshly advises Amy to leave him, claiming that "[i]t is better to be a divorcee than a widow" (Norhafsa, 2024a, p. 249). Although she is initially angered at her mother's insensitivity, Amy turns to divine accountability. Amy instinctively interprets the illness through a spiritual lens, wondering if God is punishing her for her inability to tolerate her mother's overbearing nature. Her paradoxical guilt and emotional suffering are filtered through her belief that God's will is connected to personal moral responsibility. She considers if Rasyid's illness is a consequence of her own perceived moral shortcomings. It is only when a close friend reminds her to "belie[ve] in God's decree [as] He will never put [her] in trouble or cause harm to [her]" (p. 288) that Amy is able to let go of these feelings. Faith, in this sense, is not a passive belief system that is simplistic and blindly comforting. Instead, it becomes an active and complex interpretive framework for moral negotiation where Amy seeks meaning and accountability in her relationship with God. As such, she looks at her different personal relationships as an extension of a relationship with God. It is only when she is assured of the stability of her relationship with God is she able to accept her complicated relationship with her mother and her husband's illness. Amy's guilt and introspection reflect a sincere attempt to understand suffering in light of divine justice and mercy, even if it leads to momentary emotional turmoil.

Similarly, Nieza's faith is tested through profound loss. When Harris dies suddenly shortly before they are married, her response is anger at God. She laments:

I am ashamed with God. I have memorised the entire Quran. I understood the meaning of the verses and I try very hard to follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad SAW but when Harris died, I got very angry with God. I was disappointed in Him...

I thought of Him as being cruel for torturing me like that. It seemed completely unfair to me. Why did He send Harris to me, only to take Harris away before we could be married. Why take Harris away after getting my hopes up?

(Norhafsa, 2024b, p. 296-298)

Notably, the narrative does not dwell on this spiritual lapse. Instead, by the time Nieza voices her anger to her friends, she is already aware and seeking ways to move beyond it. The emphasis, therefore, shifts to her spiritual recovery. Her friends reassure her that her “role in this story is [to be] the source of happiness for Harris... to grant light and happiness to Harris before he died” (p. 301). She also comes to realize that “the heart needs to be coaxed into acceptance” (p. 309). These measured and reflective responses towards personal predicament and tragedy are reflections of the Islamic theological concept of *al-qada'* and *al-qadar* or fate as divine predestination. As Wan Fariza (2015) explains, this concept operates not only as a belief in destiny but also as a core system that enables Muslims to find meaning in suffering, promoting both a sense of responsibility and a redirection toward positivity in the aftermath of adversity.

I would like to draw attention to the resolutions offered to both characters in *WYS* and *WYLM*. Amy’s husband survives his illness, and they are later blessed with four children. Nieza finds love again with a man who shares a similar grief, forming a relationship based on mutual understanding and emotional healing. These happy endings function not merely as romantic rewards but as narrative affirmations of faith. The narrative structure where faith is tested serves a dual purpose: it provides dramatic tension characteristic of romance, but more importantly, it functions as a moral compass. It reinforces the idea that true love and happiness are not just about finding a partner but about aligning one's life, including romantic aspirations, with God's will. It shapes a worldview where challenges are not random but divinely ordained tests for spiritual growth.

## CONCLUSION

### IDEALIZED MASCULINITY OR FEMALE SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT?

This paper has presented Norhafsa Hamid’s *Will You Stay?* and *Will You Love Me?* as more than conventional romance fiction. Both works chart the protagonists’ individual journeys towards spiritual maturity, in which love and romance functions not merely as emotional experiences, but as both a test and a reward for their perseverance in faith. Despite their stylistic shortcomings, the novels depict a compelling intersection of emotional struggle and religious reflection that ultimately leads to inner strength and resilience. However, the analysis also points towards a troubling presentation of idealized love and Muslim masculinity. Both Amy’s and Nieza’s romantic partners, Rasyid and Harris, are depicted as nearly flawless. They are consistently shown as emotionally intelligent, respectful of the heroines’ boundaries, spiritually grounded, and unwavering in their support. While these portrayals can be read as aspirational models of ethical Muslim masculinity, they also risk constructing an unrealistic standard of male perfection. Love, in this framework, appears attainable only when men are already paragons of virtue. This idealization subtly limits the representation of growth or vulnerability in male characters. It also sidesteps the complexities of gender relations and patriarchal norms in Malay society, undermining real-world conditions of romance and marriage.

Another particularly significant element in Norhafsa’s novels is the description of spiritual growth which is disproportionately assigned to women. The male characters do experience emotional spiritual journey, but they mainly remain stable, wise, and emotionally intact from the beginning. Rasyid is portrayed as a figure of calm resilience in face of his health crisis. Harris similarly exhibits a composure in his spiritual journey that ultimately leads to his conversion to Islam. It is the female protagonists who must undergo personal trials, navigate emotional pain,

and emerge spiritually stronger. Rather than depicting shared growth within relationships, the narratives suggest a gendered imbalance – where the reward for female endurance is male stability, not mutual transformation.

While I acknowledge the limitations of these novels, the application of Layla Abdullah-Poulos' (2018) Stable Muslim Love Triangle (SMLT) framework as an alternative mode of interpretation to read Norhafsa Hamid's novels allows the analysis to move beyond conventional critiques of the gender relations and explore how faith, rather than male authority, becomes the central pillar of romantic relationships. Both Amy and Nieza are portrayed as already successful women prior to their romantic entanglements. Their choice to pursue love is not about seeking completion, but about embracing companionship rooted in respect and spiritual alignment. These choices are framed not as submission to patriarchal norms, but as acts of self-determination grounded in religious conviction.

Viewed through the SMLT lens, the emotional and spiritual labour of the heroines is not a sign of passivity but of active moral agency. As the framework positions God at the centre of romantic relationships, the women's emotional journeys are transformed into spiritual practices. This movement toward God-oriented love redefines feminine resilience – not as silent suffering, but as conscious, ethical self-fashioning in accordance with divine principles. Norhafsa's protagonists are not defined by male validation; instead, they embody a form of moral strength that is inwardly cultivated and outwardly manifested in their relationships. While the novels do portray gendered experiences of hardship, they resist simplistic portrayals of female suffering. The protagonists are not passive recipients of fate, but women who work to guide their emotions in alignment with their religious beliefs. Their eventual romantic fulfilment – marked by love, peace, and happiness – is not simply a reward for patience, but a reflection of their spiritual maturity and readiness for divine love, mirrored in human companionship.

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