From Heartbreak to Healing: Spiritual Purification and African American Muslim Reversion in Umm Zakiyyah's *Hearts We Lost*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Umm Zakiyyah's reversion narrative *Hearts We Lost* (2011) and its co-constitution of inner purification and external racialisation, arguing that the novel portrays African American Muslim reversion as a process of spiritual renewal continually tested by racialised and gendered surveillance. While post-9/11 Muslim fiction has received growing attention, African American reversion narratives remain underexplored, and Islamic ethical concepts are often detached from their literary form. The study addresses this gap by analysing how repentance (*tawbah*), self-purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), and intention (*niyyah*) shape the novel's moral and narrative design. Combining Islamic ethics with postcolonial critique (Said's *Orientalism* and Fanon's racial alienation), it adopts a braided methodology in which ethics explicates the turning, restraining, and repairing of characters, while criticism exposes the distortions created by law, culture, and intra-Ummah hierarchies. Through close reading of scenes set in the mosque, home, and diaspora, the analysis follows the paired logic of "ethics elucidates why" and "critique demonstrates how." Three findings emerge: (1) *niyyah* is formalised through interior monologue and focalisation, rendering intention audible; (2) the novel's slowed tempo—restraint, habit, and delay—enacts *tazkiyah* as purification; and (3) spatial settings dramatise *tawbah* as public struggle under racialised scrutiny. The novel's portrayal of African American reversion thus signifies decolonial healing, transforming loss into God-anchored dignity and positioning Black Muslim cultural expression as counter-public resistance. Overall, the paper offers a transferable interpretive model linking Islamic ethics and literary form within post-9/11 fiction.

Keywords: African American Muslim fiction; reversion; *Tawbah* (repentance); *Tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification); *Niyyah* (intention); Decolonial healing.

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من انكسار القلب إلى شفاء الروح : التزكية والعودة إلى الإسلام في السرد الأفرو - أمريكي في رواية *القلوب التي لم نَقوَ على استعادتها* لأم زكية

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الملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث سردية العودة إلى الإسلام في رواية *القلوب التي لم نَقوَ على استعادتها* (2011) لأم زكية، كاشفًا تداخل مساري التزكية الباطنية والتعرّض للتمييز العرقي في بناء التجربة الروحية للمسلمين الأمريكيين من أصول إفريقية، إذ تُصوّر الرواية العودة إلى الإسلام بوصفها رحلة تجددٍ داخلي تخضع باستمرار لاختبارات المراقبة العرقية والجندرية. وعلى الرغم من تنامي الاهتمام بأدب المسلمين بعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر، تبقى سرديات العودة لدى الأفارقة الأمريكيين محدودة الحضور النقدي، كما تُفصَل المفاهيم الأخلاقية الإسلامية غالبًا عن بنيتها السردية. ويعالج البحث هذه الفجوة من خلال تحليل كيفية تشكّل مفاهيم التوبة وتزكية النفس والنيّة في النسيج الأخلاقي للرواية، مستندًا إلى منهجٍ متداخل يمزج بين الأخلاق الإسلامية والنقد ما بعد الكولونيالي عند كلٍّ من إدوارد سعيد في نقد الاستشراق وفرانز فانون في تحليل الاغتراب العرقي، بحيث تتولى الأخلاق تفسير تحوّل الشخصيات وكبح النفس وجبر الانكسار، فيما يكشف النقد عن اختلالات القانون والثقافة وطبقات التراتبية داخل الجالية المسلمة. ومن خلال القراءة الدقيقة لمشاهد المسجد والمنزل والفضاءات الاغترابية، يتقدّم التحليل وفق منطق ثنائي قوامه أن الأخلاق توضّح الدوافع فيما يبيّن النقد الكيفيات، ليخلص إلى أن الرواية تُجسّد النيّة عبر المونولوج الداخلي وتوزيع البؤرة السردية، وتُحاكي التزكية من خلال إبطاء الإيقاع القائم على الكفّ والاعتياد والتأجيل، وتُدرِك التوبة كجهادٍ علني يخضع لمساءلة النظرة العرقية .وبذلك تنهض الرواية بإعادة صياغة العودة إلى الإسلام لدى الأفارقة الأمريكيين بوصفها شفاءً يفكّ الارتباطات الكولونيالية، محوّلةً الفقد إلى كرامة مؤسَّسة على الارتباط بالله، ومُبرِزةً التعبير الثقافي للمسلمين السود باعتباره فعل مقاومة مضادّة للفضاء العام، ليقدّم البحث في مجمله نموذجًا تأويليًا قابلًا للتطبيق يربط بين الأخلاق الإسلامية والشكل الأدبي في سرديات ما بعد أحداث سبتمبر.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الأدب الإسلامي للأمريكيين من أصول إفريقية ، العودة إلى الإسلام ، التوبة ؛ تزكية النفس ، الشفاء التفكيكي من الإرث الكولونيالي .

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Introduction :

Anglophone debates on post-9/11 American Muslim works have critically leaned more toward immigrant narratives and "Islamophobia", sidelining the African American Muslim experience especially reversion (return to Islam). But earlier narratives of American Islam assert the long-standing role of Black Muslims in shaping the religious and intellectual fronts of the nation, notwithstanding the post-1965 immigration or security discourse (Jackson, 2005; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Karim, 2009). Against this account, the analysis of Umm Zakiyyah's *Hearts We Lost* (2011) addresses an insistent disparity: instead of framing reversion as a representation subplot, the novel frames it as a literary form of racialised ethical self-fashioning.

This paper presents a dual assertion. Firstly, reversion in *Hearts We Lost* is narrated as spiritual purification denoted by the Islamic ethics of *tawbah* (repentance), *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification), and *niyyah* (intention), shifting heartbreak to repair. Anchored by their standard theological definitions, there terms can be found throughout the paper: *tawbah* = repentance/return; *tazkiyah al-nafs* = purification of the self; *niyyah* = intention; and *qalb* = spiritual heart. Deeper conceptual insight is provided by the classics: *tawbah* and *niyyah* are framed by al-Ghazālī as the drivers of the revitalisation of the *qalb* (heart) (al-Ghazālī, 2014), whilst *tazkiyah* is highlighted by Ṭabāṭabāʾī as an enduring discipline (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1977/2010). Secondly, this inner labour is framed by the novel within post-9/11 racial governance which paints Muslims as a "suspect community" or the "Racial Muslim" as perceived by Aziz (2022) and routinisation of suspicion as noted by Hilal (2022). A braided life condition is formed by the novel's interior grammar (*tawbah–tazkiyah–niyyah*) and external horizon (surveillance, suspicion).

The 1990^{s} and 2000^{s} saw mosque leadership dominance by immigrants, representing complex religious and social landscapes especially in Maryland, Washington DC, Atlanta, and Chicago which had to be navigated by the Black Sunni communities there (Morrow, 2021). The period was also marked by a surge in security-state suspicion during the late-Cold War and pre-9/11 (Allen, 2023), as well as continuous divisions of intra-Black class and colour which affected the sense of authority and belonging (Abu-Zahra, 2019). Amidst these

pressures, these communities built their own rich expressions of Sunni practice and ethical community life—forms that existed well before the post-9/11 struggles over representation. This is the world Zakiyyah writes from: her fiction echoes the layered histories of Black Sunni resilience, everyday negotiation, and the ongoing emotional and spiritual work needed to sustain faith under overlapping racial, social, and religious pressures.

This context is further refined by recent works on African American Muslim reversion. Abdullah (2024) fuses deliberations on Black Muslim belonging. Empirical data, i.e., ISPU's *American Muslim Poll 2022*; CAIR's record-high incident counts (2023–24); Pew's 2024 findings highlight current pressures whilst the *Journal of Africana Religions'* article (2024) on "Black Muslim racial reimagining" demonstrates the rearticulation of identity. These studies collectively chart terrain, regulate pressures, and record emerging self-definitions (Abdullah, 2024; ISPU, 2022; CAIR/Reuters, 2024; Pew, 2024; JAR, 2024). But a narratological bridge continues to be underdeveloped, i.e., how such pressures are translated into interior struggles by works of fiction such as *Hearts We Lost*.

This gap is filled by placing *Hearts We Lost* between Islamic ethics and postcolonial critique. Criticism typically utilise Western theories therefore reducing Islamic categories as "content", or sums up Islamophobia without examining intra-*Ummah* hierarchies. This study, on the other hand, uses Islamic ethics as analytical tools: focalisation formalises *niyyah*, restraint and delay characterise *tazkiyah*, whilst voice and temporality are restructured by *tawbah*. This reinforces Said's Orientalist gaze (1979) and Fanon's racial alienation (2008) within Islam's lexicon, demonstrating the co-constituency of interior formation and racialisation.

Without Islamic ethics, one can identify pressure but not response. Similarly, without Said and Fanon, one can elucidate devotion but not the limitations that caused it. The *qalb* (heart) in Zakkiyah's novel turns toward God due to the pressures from the neighbours, employers, and Muslim peers, with the text registering both movements simultaneously. The study contributes by holding these together, with the operationalisation of Islamic ethics for narratology, i.e., voice, temporality, space and the retainment of postcolonial critique as theory of the gaze. Instead of mere descriptive moral themes, this study uses *tawbah*,

tazkiyah al-nafs, and *niyyah* as active analytical operators forming the narrative voice, structure, and temporality. This single-text, theory-building analysis is transferable to other narratives on African American Muslim.

For American Muslim literary studies, this study reframes the African American reversion to align with studies on Black Muslim cultural production (Jackson, 2005; Curtis, 2009; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Abdullah, 2024). For religion-and-literature, this paper presents a fiction reading framework employing Islam's ethical vocabulary (*tawbah*, *tazkiyah*, *niyyah*) together with critical theory (al-Ghazālī, 2011/2014; Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1977/2010). For post-9/11 studies, this research hones "Islamophobia" by demonstrating the intersection between state surveillance (CAIR/Reuters, 2024; Pew, 2024) and intra-*Ummah* hierarchies (Karim, 2009; Abdul Khabeer, 2016), leading to the formation of double marginalisation. *Hearts We Lost* thus denotes a decolonial healing narrative: heartbreak turning into dignity by reorienting the *qalb* under racialised pressure. Against this backdrop, it is vital to recognise that African American Islam is neither a by-product of post-1965 immigration nor merely a reactive formation to *Islamophobia*. Situating *Hearts We Lost* within this lineage reveals a deep genealogy of reversion, resistance, and ethical renewal rooted in African American spiritual self-definition.

It is important to acknowledge that African American Islam is not a product of immigration post-1965 or a mere reaction to "Islamophobia" in the effort to place *Hearts We Lost* within a strong genealogy. It is an indigenous current in American history, originating from imprisoned African Muslims and evolved into Sunni congregational life through Black Muslim organizations in the 20th century (Curtis, 2009; Jackson, 2005). While Jackson (2005) theorises a unique "Blackamerican" Sunni path and authority difficulties following the demise of Black nationalist formations, Curtis (2009) centres the American Muslim tale around Black Muslims. Accordingly, reversion appears as a renewal within an established African American horizon rather than as a departure from an immigrant norm.

Under racial pressure, reversion, doctrinally linked to *fiṭrah*, the primordial disposition, is also experienced as an ethical reorientation. Karim's ethnography of Chicago and Atlanta shows how enduring racial, class, and gender hierarchies

within the *ummah* clash with Islamic equality ideals (Karim, 2009). Mosque committees, marriage markets, and study groups turn into places where people negotiate their sense of belonging. The micropolitics of recognition, who teaches, who is heard, and whose piety is acknowledged, are captured by Karim, while Curtis and Jackson provide the historical and doctrinal context.

Abdul Khabeer (2016) expands on this by demonstrating how Blackness itself serves as a model for Muslim self-construction. Black Muslim youth execute ʿ*ibādah* in public through the adoption of hip-hop aesthetics, such as clothing, cadence, and sampling, to oppose anti-Black sentiment in Muslim settings and to reject secular calls for the privatisation of faith. This realisation is essential to literary analysis: piety mediated through gesture, style, and sound should manifest in fiction as changes in voice, tone, and embodiment. While communal assessments of genuineness manifest in the dance of doors opened or closed, a revert's *niyyah* (intention) may manifest in an internal monologue, a spot where faith becomes hearable to the self before it is visible to the world. This inward articulation of devotion, though, does not happen in total isolation. Instead, it is interwoven with the social and aesthetic politics of Muslim womanhood, where affect becomes both a form of resistance and a spiritual register. According to Chan-Malik (2018), Muslim femininity is an "affective insurgency" that ties Black protest religion to universalist Muslim claims, further highlighting women of colour as creators of American Islam. If Abdul Khabeer stresses the poetics of public piety, Chan-Malik demonstrates how friendships, modesty, and mosque involvement create a sense of belonging in emotional and domestic contexts. Her work, along with Karim's, highlight how the reversion of African American women involves emotional and spatial reorganisations that make the *qalb*'s labour socially intelligible. In scenes where the focus of a *khutbah* anecdote or who speaks at a study circle becomes the stage of ethical training, Zakiyyah dramatises this dynamic.

While Karim, Abdul Khabeer, and Chan-Malik chart internal dynamics, Aziz (2022) and Hilal (2022) delineate the external regime as the legal-cultural production of the "Racial Muslim" and the normalisation of Muslims as suspects during the War on Terror. Hilal illustrates how distrust has been ingrained during two decades of counterterrorism governance, while Aziz demonstrates how racializing religion weakens human rights protections. Their

work reframes reversion as practice inside frameworks that pre-mark Muslim individuals as dangerous, according to Curtis and Jackson. This manifests in fiction as surveillance aesthetics, such as vigilant neighbours, HR compliance scripts, and the need to practice "good citizenship".

This terrain is solidified by recent interventions. Discussions about Black Muslim aesthetics and identity are highlighted in Abdullah's *Routledge Handbook of Islam and Race* (2024). However, there is also a dearth of literary criticism that combines racialisation theory with Islamic ethical standards, particularly for African American reversion. Existing ones focus on rich histories (Curtis, 2009), genealogies of authority (Jackson, 2005), intra-*Ummah* ethnographies (Karim, 2009; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Chan-Malik, 2018), and macro-analyses of suspicion (Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022). What is lacking is a literary approach that uses Islam's own ethical terminology as a narrative and analytical tool.

In the classical Islamic tradition, such vocabulary is available. *Niyyah* is the pivot of action, while *tawbah* is the ongoing work of the *qalb,* i.e., the disciplines that control speech, concealment, and disclosure, the coordinates of narrative voice (al-Ghazālī, 2014). Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1977/2010) suggests that purification is a process rather than an epiphany and that *tazkiyah al-nafs* is the route to moral clarity. These ideas, combined with those of Aziz and Hilal, shed light on reversion as internal *mujāhada* under external constraints: heart-work performed inside organizations and looked upon by others.

The field has transcended perspectives that are centred on immigrants (Curtis, 2009; Jackson, 2005) toward the documentation of Black Muslim cultural production and intra-*Ummah* complexity (Karim, 2009; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Chan-Malik, 2018), whilst legal-political scholarship elucidates racialisation (Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022). However, approaches that combine postcolonial critique with *tawbah*, *tazkiyah*, and *niyyah* are still lacking. By treating Islamic ethics as interpretive categories for narrative voice, focalisation, temporality, and space rather than as background, this article fills that gap and adds a nuanced account of interior formation to studies of race and governance.

Literature Review:

Though not equally, research on American Muslim literature and cultural expression has grown during the last 20 years. African American Muslim literature has received relatively little critical attention because most of the critical attention has been directed toward immigrant narratives, which are frequently framed through Islamophobia, surveillance, and intercultural belonging. Earlier studies like that of Edward E. Curtis, Sherman A. (2005), and Jamillah Karim (2009) prove that the religious history of the United States is centred on African American Islam. However, rather than being a consistent topic of narratological investigation, African American reversion in literature usually only occurs episodically as a subplot in larger discussions on representation.

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer and Sylvia Chan-Malik (2018) change the perspective by emphasising Black Muslim youth culture, women of colour, and aesthetics. Both disavow an immigrant-only conception of American Islam and demonstrate how cultural norms and daily life influence Muslim subjectivity. Nevertheless, despite their thoroughness, these studies mostly examine history and culture. When used in literary criticism, it is typically at the contextual background level rather than as a conceptual tool to explain how novels themselves stage temporality, interiority, or ethical voice.

Recent research accentuates the significance of temporality, interiority, or ethical voice. *The Walking Qur'an* (2014) by Rudolph Ware illustrates the embodied epistemology of African Muslim traditions, contending that recitation, memory, and physical discipline are the means by which Islam is practiced. Fictional depictions of *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the self) or *niyyah* (intention) through speech and body language are consistent with this emphasis on embodied ethics. African American Muslims create new spaces of visibility and care, as demonstrated by Donna Auston's research on Black Muslim cultural practices such as Ramadan observance and #BlackMuslimRamadan activism (Auston, 2019). In a similar vein, *Fashioning Black Islam* (2021) by Kayla Renée Wheeler demonstrates how fashion aesthetics serve as both theological declarations and negotiations of membership. These works maintain that the formation of African American Muslim identity involves both creative ethical

labour and a response to Islamophobia. However, these discoveries have rarely been incorporated into the methodological foundation of literary criticism.

A History of Islam in America (2010) by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri underlines the lengthy history of Muslim presence, but like Curtis's work, it rarely makes it into close readings of books. There is a widespread inclination to distinguish between history and form: literary critics underscore Islamophobia and representation, while historians value persistence and contribution. A link between ethical form as portrayed in fiction and ethical practice as posited by Muslim philosophers oftentimes remained unexplored. Bridging this gap entails examining how narrative voice and moral reasoning embody the lived ethics of adab (comportment) and ihsan (spiritual excellence), giving rise to Muslim writers who translate theological sensibilities into narrative form.

Umm Zakiyyah is frequently mentioned as a trailblazing Muslim novelist in this broader realm. There is a growing research interest on how piety, identity, and conversion are represented in fiction as indicated by studies on Umm Zakiyyah and Muslim American women authors. Existing works on Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* trilogy had explored Muslim feminism, modesty, and post-9/11 gendered belonging (Badruddeen, 2016; Alhazmi, 2018). Other studies on fiction authored by Muslim American women underscored the role of narrative voice, ethical self-making, and racialised visibility in shaping the spiritual agency of women, notably in the post-9/11 landscape (Kahf, 2014; Chan-Malik, 2018). Studies on Black Muslim womanhood and literary representation frame African American Muslim women in the light of race, gender, and religious identity formation (Williams & Alim, 2020). Even so, there is a dire under-exploration of *Hearts We Lost*, as evident by the lack of studies on the novel's narratological reading or its formal usage of Islamic ethics. This is where the current study steps in, braiding an approach that analyses reversion from the lens of Islamic ethical vocabulary and racialised critique.

Her 2001–2003 *If I Should Speak* trilogy has garnered academic interest in discussions of Islamophobia, postcolonial critique, and Muslim feminism (e.g., Badruddeen, 2016; Alhazmi, 2018). Yet, there is a striking lack of peer-reviewed critique regarding *Hearts We Lost* (2011). Instead of academic journals, the majority of references can be found in catalogues, trade publications, or

instructional materials. This disregard is serious: *Hearts We Lost* is Zakiyyah's body of work that most overtly stresses African American reversion as a racialised subjectivity and ethical discipline. Overlooking it could lead to a recurrence that the marginalisation research seeks to challenge, making African American Muslim fiction relegated even in works that criticise exclusion. The persistence of such blind spots signals a methodological gap where ethical and aesthetic dimensions are overshadowed by political critique.

Reversion, Conversion, and Narrative

Reversion, instead of conversion, is often used by African American Muslims to describe their return to Islam, a choice word that is linguistically and theologically rooted in the Qurʾānic notion of *fiṭrah*, the ancient predisposition towards monotheism. Historically, reversion in the African American religious frame refers to one's return to a repressed ethical legacy disrupted by enslavement, racialisation, and Christianisation. Hence, in African American narratives, reversion is typically illustrated as an ethical homecoming instead of a doctrinal transformation. In *Hearts We Lost*, this is shown in the repeated depictions of remorse, restraint, and remembrance, rendering a re-direction back to God as iterative self-work instead of a sudden transformation.

This is countered by the classical conversion theory. The stage-model by Rambo (1993) paints conversion as a step-by-step process starting with crisis, followed by encounter, and ending with commitment. McGinty (2006), meanwhile, asserts conversion as a gendered self-negotiation upon entering a new moral community. Even with the emphasis on process, both methods do not fully capture the racialised pressures shaping the subjectivity of the African American Muslim. This is addressed by recent studies: Casey (2022) shows that Black American Muslim converts typically undergo racial exclusion in immigrant-dense Muslim communities; Miller (2024) theorises Black Muslim "racial reimagining" as a relentless self-definition initiative; while Chen and Dorairajoo (2020) describe processual pathways to Islam via care work, direct and indirect *daʿwah*, and personified ethics. These studies collectively show that reversion is a racially mediated ethical practice, not a singular event, formed by community dynamics, misrecognition, and incessant recalibration.

Using a braided method integrating Islamic ethical categories (*tawbah*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, *niyyah*) with postcolonial critique (Said's Orientalist gaze; Fanon's racial alienation), this current study draws upon these findings. As opposed to conversion studies that clarify the structural and communal influences on faith, this braided method depicts reversion in African American Muslim fiction as formalised via narrative voice, temporality, pacing, and spatial design. Reversion is explained as a mix of the *qalb*'s inner labour and racialised surveillance's outer optics. Therefore, Islamic ethics is approached as narrative operators rather than thematic labels, driving insight on the dramatization of sincerity, purification, and return under racial pressure in African American Muslim fiction.

There are two obvious blind spots. Firstly, a large portion of literary criticism ignores Islam's own ethical lexicon in favour of Western theory, such as postcolonial, critical race, and surveillance studies. Thereby, *tawbah*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *niyyah* are not interpretive keys for analysing focalization, pacing, or narrative structure; rather, they appear as "themes" personified by characters. Secondly, the intra-Ummah hierarchies that define everyday belonging are flattened out when race is considered since it is frequently generalised under the aegis of "Islamophobia". Race, class, and gender dynamics within American Muslim communities have a significant impact on whose piety is acknowledged and whose voice has authority, as Karim (2009) shows. Narrative structures are under-theorised since these dynamics are rarely considered in literary analysis.

It takes a framework that intertwines postcolonial critique and Islamic ethics to interpret African American reversion as ethical self-fashioning. In the *Iḥyāʾ*, al-Ghazālī designates *niyyah* as the pivot of action and *tawbah* as a recurrent discipline of the *qalb* (heart), controlling speech, concealment, and disclosure (al-Ghazālī, 2014). Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1977/2010) underscores *tazkiyah al-nafs* as a constant path for moral clarity. The narratological operationalisation of these ideas is possible: *niyyah* is in line with interior monologue and focalisation, allowing for self-awareness, hesitancy, and sincerity; *tazkiyah al-nafs* correlates to plot and chronology, as seen in arcs of renunciation, restraint, and ethical habit-formation; *tawbah* charts voice and structure, where confession, lapse, and recommitment reorder narrative progression and reconfigure moral trajectory.

These maps demonstrate that Islamic ethics are more than just a theme. More specifically, they actively influence the plot, pacing, and resolution of stories. This theory explains how novels both register external forces such as surveillance and racialisation, and recount internal responses such as repentance, purification, and sincerity, when compared to Said's critique of Orientalism (1979) and Fanon's study of racial alienation (2008). Reversion is thus discernible as both a spiritual exercise and a racialized negotiation as interior labour takes place beneath external gazes.

The void this piece fills is made clear by a comparative perspective. Historical and ethnographic works (Curtis, 2009; Jackson, 2005; Karim, 2009; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Chan-Malik, 2018; Auston, 2019) underscore the significance of Black Muslim life. Legal-cultural studies (Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022) demonstrate how Muslim subjectivity is reshaped by post-9/11 suspicion, whilst media research (Alsultany, 2012) examines representational constraint. But rather than analysing reversion as a formal mechanism controlled by Islamic ethics, literary criticism has focused on Islamophobia, feminism, and belonging. This stresses the necessity of a braided approach: postcolonial critique refrains from spiritualising history, while Islamic ethics forbids reduction to dominance.

The field is still being shaped by three interconnecting gaps. The first is textual gap: *Hearts We Lost* is still not well examined in peer-reviewed research, particularly in contrast to Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* trilogy, which has received comparatively more attention. Secondly, there is still a conceptual gap because very few studies had endeavoured to analyse African American reversion as a matter of formal structure instead of mere thematic presence by tying Islamic ethical principles with postcolonial theory. Thirdly, there is still a sociological gap because literary studies rarely address the intra-*Ummah* racial, social, and gender hierarchies that influence African American identity. By interpreting *tawbah* (repentance), *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification), and *niyyah* (intention) as narrative operators via the critical lenses of Said and Fanon, this article aims to rectify these omissions. This way, it promotes a perspective that views fiction as a vehicle for ethical reflection, i.e., a narrative space where the *qalb* (heart) is depicted attempting to purify itself under the influence of racialized pressure.

This recentring of African American reversion realigns the discipline with its own cultural and historical centre for American Muslim literary studies. It serves as an example of how to read fiction using Islamic ethical categories in conjunction with critical theory for the study of religion and literature. It explains how the disciplines of *tazkiyah* and *niyyah* interact with state surveillance and intra-*Ummah* hierarchies to produce narrative conflict and resolution for post-9/11 studies.

Theoretical Framework

Further analysis of *Hearts We Lost* is shaped by two interrelated movements. The novel internally dramatizes the ethical labour of the *qalb* (heart) via *tawbah* (repentance/return), *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification), and *niyyah* (intention). At the same time, it externally stages labour under racialized suspicion, theorised by Edward Said as the Orientalist "gaze" and Frantz Fanon as racial alienation. If read individually, each axis may become distorted: ethic-less critique renders fiction as sociological evidence of dominance, whilst power-less ethics renders fiction as a private moralism. But when read in tandem, anchored by African American Muslim studies, they construct a coherent paradigm where reversion is both racialised becoming and ethical self-cultivation.

Tawbah (Repentance/Return)

The Qur'an presents *tawbah* as an indication of God's merciful "turning" toward believers and their "turning back" in repentance (Q 24:31; 66:8). Classical scholars insist that it is cyclical. In the *Iḥyāʾ*, Al-Ghazālī delineates that repentance begins with knowledge, followed by remorse, and culminates in resolve (2014, p. 27). Similarly, Ṭabāṭabāʾī (1977/2010) denotes *tawbah* as the unremitting renewal of sincerity rather than a one-time act.

Lived practice is the context for this in American Muslim research. Abdul Khabeer (2016) exhibits how Black Muslim adolescents represent return through outward recalibration, signifying a newfound orientation through style, rhythm, and cultural aesthetics. For Auston (2019), public devotion and ceremonial fasting serve as collective *tawbah* throughout Ramadan, which is a time of communal penance. The characters' journeys of heartache, regret, and resolute dedication in *Hearts We Lost* are both socially visible acts of moral realignment

and inward cycles of conscience. Repentance becomes a structural drive in narrative, rearranging voice and chapters around frequent "turns back".

Tazkiyah al-nafs (Self-Purification)

Purification is linked to human flourishing in the Qur'an: "He has succeeded who purifies it, and he has failed who corrupts it" (Q 91:9–10). For Ṭabāṭabāʾī (2010, pp. 64–65), *tazkiyah al-nafs* is an enduring refinement process for preparing the soul to receive divine knowledge. Al-Ghazālī refers to it as vigilant self-discipline, where desire is regulated via habit and perseverance.

African American Muslim critics shed light on the ways in which racialised environments embody cleansing. Karim (2009) explains how African American women navigate exclusion in mosques dominated by immigrants while fostering *tazkiyah* via modesty and constraint. Purification is depicted in *Hearts We Lost* through self-discipline in community leadership, renunciation in romance, and moderation in speech, all of which slow down the plot. Purification consequently takes the form of arcs of delay and moral tenacity in *tazkiyah al-nafs*, which maps directly onto plot and temporality.

Niyyah (Intention)

The Prophetic dictum, *innamā al-aʿmāl bi-l-niyyāt* ("actions are judged only by intentions"), positions intention within Islamic ethics. For al-Ghazālī (2014, pp. 12–15), *niyyah* is a deliberate alignment of desire with divine purpose that necessitates discipline and attentiveness; it is not a passing notion.

Intention is continuously socially read in the African American Muslim experience. Sincerity is not only evaluated internally but also communally in Black American Islam, as Jackson (2005) explains, since authenticity and authority are determined by contested hierarchies. According to Abdul Khabeer (2016), style, cultural practice, and aesthetics serve as indicators for assessing sincerity. This tension is dramatised in Zakiyyah's work through internal monologues, as the protagonist examines their own motivations in preparation for societal mistrust. According to narrative theory, *niyyah* corresponds to internal monologue and focalization, wherein purpose is expressed through hesitancy, sincerity, or deceit while being judged by others.

Orientalism (Said)

The rhetoric that constructs Muslims as foreign, inferior, or dangerous is identified in Said's 1979 book *Orientalism*. This gaze permeates daily life in post-9/11 America as pervasive distrust. Aziz (2022) illustrates how Orientalist misinterpretation is enshrined in the law as the "Racial Muslim", while Chan-Malik (2018) illustrates how women of colour encounter it both within and outside of Muslim communities. Orientalist distrust exacerbates anti-Blackness among African American reverts, making their religiosity doubly dubious. *Hearts We Lost* shows this through neighbourhood interactions, employment dynamics, and mosque politics, where meaning is predetermined by distrust before the characters even speak. Orientalism permeates scenography and setting in narrative, incorporating surveillance into scene design.

Racial Alienation (Fanon):

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon defines the psychic division triggered by racialisation: "I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects" (2008, p. 89). Although alienation can cause wounds, it can also spur resistance. Aziz (2022) emphasises how suspicion is enshrined in law; Karim (2009) illustrates how African American Muslims face intra-*Ummah* hierarchies that portray them as less genuine; and Hilal (2022) illustrates how the War on Terror routinised Muslims as a suspect community, requiring performances of innocence. The split is doubled for reverts: they are marked on the inside by their Muslim identity and on the outside by their Blackness. The protagonists in *Hearts We Lost* anticipate criticism and modify their actions, describing Fanon's alienation as internal self-doubt expressed in the face of external examination.

Integrated Model: Revert Subjectivity as Ethical Becoming

These axes collectively create a braid in which postcolonial critique and Islamic ethics function together. While Orientalism (Said, 1979) and racial alienation (Fanon, 2008) represent the external forces that shape ethical self-cultivation, the inner disciplines of the *qalb, tawbah, tazkiyah al-nafs,* and *niyyah*, provide the grammar of that cultivation. Together, they portray the African American Muslim revert as a process of ethical becoming sincerity and purification negotiated within environments affected by racialised surveillance

and collective misrecognition, rather than being solely determined by private piety or outside dominance. Critique alone runs the risk of flattening agency; ethics alone runs the risk of privatising conflict. They explain how reversion is narrativized as moral labour under authority, synthesising and contextualising it through African American Muslim studies. Jackson (2005), Karim (2009), Abdul Khabeer (2016), Auston (2019), and Wheeler (2021) demonstrate the practice and judgment of intention, purification, and repentance, whilst Aziz (2022), Hilal (2022), and Chan-Malik (2018) elucidate the reasons causing strained practices.

As a result, the novel turns into an ethical laboratory that concurrently stages inward aspirations and external monitoring across voice, time, and geography. By highlighting the dual accountability of the *qalb* and the gaze, co-indexing the interior and exterior in close reading avoids reduction, romanticizing devotion out of context, or flattening Muslim life into control.

Instead of treating Islamic categories as surface themes, this framework treats them as interpretive tools that link sociology with narratology by linking intra-*Ummah* hierarchies (Karim, 2009), Black Muslim aesthetics (Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Wheeler, 2021), and communal ritual (Auston, 2019) with other racialization structures (Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022). It also enables the examination of *Hearts We Lost* as an ethical becoming narrative.

It re-centres African American reversion for American Muslim literary studies; demonstrates the reading of fiction via Islamic ethics and critical theory in the context of religion-and-literature; and grounds Said and Fanon in African American contexts for postcolonial studies. These concepts are highlighted in the subsequent analysis, straight from the novel's scenes to bring forth the textual evidence. The subsequent section examines *Hearts We Lost* to show how scenes of post-9/11 heartbreak, restraint, and return are animated by *niyyah, tazkiyah al-nafs,* and *tawbah*.

Methodology

Umm Zakiyyah's *Hearts We Lost* is closely examined using a qualitative method in this study, triangulating it with contextual studies mapped in Sections 2 to 3. A scene-based protocol is used in the analysis, grounded in the theoretical braid: (1) identifying the gaze or structure framing a moment (Said's

Orientalism; Fanon's racial alienation; Aziz and Hilal's racial-security optics); (2) surface intention via focalization and interior monologue, analysing *niyyah* as narrated sincerity or hesitation; (3) tracing purification via pacing and delay, treating *tazkiyah al-nafs* as a plot-temporal discipline of restraint, renunciation, and habit-formation; and (4) marking return via shifts in voice and structure, analysing *tawbah* where confession, lapse, and recommitment restructure chapters or scene sequences. The design entails a simple labour division: ethics elucidates why characters act (the inner grammar), whilst critique demonstrates how such actions are inhibited or misinterpreted (the outer optics). Interpretive choices, counter-readings, and negative cases are documented by analytic memos; quotable textual evidence grounds claims, which are then triangulated against secondary literature.

Prominent African American revert author, Zakiyyah, has published works broadly read by Muslim American communities. The selection of *Hearts We Lost* (2011) is due to its unique staging of imamship, mosque politics, transnational ties, romantic trials, and the *qalb's* purification following loss, focusing on African American reversion instead of immigrant experience. Its under-examination in peer-reviewed criticism, compared to the *If I Should Speak* trilogy, renders it methodologically strategic for elucidating the key gap in the field.

Rather than statistical generalization, this single-text study's goal is to enable analytic transferability. The foundation of validity is a clear concept-to-form coding protocol, triangulation with African American Muslim studies on gender/race, authority, aesthetics, and ritual publics, as well as post-9/11 legal-cultural analyses (e.g., Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022), negative-case analysis, and a written record of interpretive memos. Reliance on a single text, the possibility of overinterpreting Islamic ideas, and the lack of representation of the Black Muslim experience are some of the limitations. The approach can be used on various reversion narratives as these are lessened by using counterexamples, disciplined citation, and Islamic terminology as analytical categories.

Analysis

This section offers an ethical and critical reading of *Hearts We Lost*, showing how Zakiyyah weaves *niyyah*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *tawbah* with race, surveillance, and gender to portray moral selfhood in African American Muslim life.

Heartbreak, Temptation, and the Ethics of Return

Hasna finds herself at the nexus of affect and ethics early in the book as a result of her experiences with temptation and betrayal.

> "Currently, the guilt for these transgressions created an uncomfortable knotting in her chest, but in the solitude of the office suite, a smile formed on her face as she felt triumph for having tormented Vernon like she had." (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 11).

She dresses revealingly for Vernon despite her inner uneasiness, which is one of the most telling moments.

The Islamic ethical perspective frames this scene as a dramatization of the tension between the *qalb's* longing for sincerity (*niyyah*) and the *nafs's* attraction to desire. Hasna's "knotting" of guilt denotes her conscience stirring and anticipation of *tawbah*—her ultimate desire to return. This is explained by ethics: when chastity is broken, Hasna's heart responds, referencing the Islamic belief that sin disturbs the soul. The how is demonstrated by criticism: the cultural script of "fun with married men" and gendered power influence Vernon's gaze, reflecting ambient Orientalism that presents Muslim women as highly visible, sexually perceptible bodies. Fanon enables us to perceive this as a misrecognition moment in which Hasna's subjectivity is diminished to an object. Therefore, the story depicts temptation as entangled in mechanisms that undermine authenticity rather than just a personal decline.

After quitting her work, Hasna confronts Vernon, causing a second instance of heartbreak: "'And no,' she said, raising her voice, not budging from her place, 'I don't expect one red cent from you to pay for our child… I'm perfectly fine with raising this child alone'" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 10). In this scene, resistance

enacts *tawbah*. Not only does Hasna's refusal of financial and emotional support denotes condemnation of Vernon's treachery, it also morally repositions her as a mother-to-be with dignity. Ethically, this is where she reorients herself: shifting from seduction and guilt to responsibility and resolve, an enaction of the Ghazālian cycle of knowledge, remorse, and resolve. Critically, however, the backdrop of the public corridor accentuates how reverts must act morally in front of onlookers: Vernon worries about appearances while Hasna's boss overhears. In this vein, Muslim women's personal problems are transformed into spectacles, echoing Said's Orientalist "ambient gaze". The book maintains that repentance is inextricably linked to the racial and gendered contexts in which it is scrutinised, criticised, and occasionally used as a weapon.

Iman's silent contemplation of her sister's pain represents a third instance of heartbreak and return: "But there were some transgressions that were too heartrending to mollify, and too errant to set right. These are the sins, Iman recalled her father saying once, that are punishments in themselves" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 119). This quote reveals the moral centrality of the novel. Hasna's loss and betrayal are a kind of retribution in and of itself, therefore her pain is never really gone. Ethically, this scene demonstrates the pain from which *tazkiyah al-nafs* typically comes from, suffering itself turns into purification. Theologically, this echoes the Qur'anic notion of sin carrying its own worldly repercussions, directing the spirit toward purity. Critically, Fanon's theory of estrangement as a trigger and a hurt is supported by this passage: Hasna's suffering reflects other difficulties that African American Muslim women face, being betrayed by romantic partners, being watched by communities, and still having to uphold the honour of Islam. The inability to "set right" in this situation is comparable to the fact that structural mistrust cannot be easily eliminated; rather, it must be experienced, resolved, and narratively converted into resilience.

When combined, these three events show a progression from temptation to conflict and finally to introspection. Each portrays heartbreak as an ethical dilemma as well as an emotional breakdown. First, sincerity is undermined by want; second, moral resolution is used to enact return; and third, loss is reframed as purification. Because the *qalb* is sensitive to divine accountability, *ethics clarifies why* Hasna experiences remorse, humiliation, and resolve. This is made evident by the analytical braid. Criticism demonstrates how racial

misrecognition, Orientalist distrust, and cultural scripts magnify and distort these feelings.

By portraying temptation and heartache as spiritual trials, Zakiyyah prevents emotion from being unadulterated. Rather, she shifts the story's focus from passion to purification and from treachery to *tawbah*. Repentance is always performed in settings where women's sincerity is observed, questioned, and evaluated, nonetheless the novel also rejects the idea of social spiritualisation. In *Hearts We Lost*, sadness is not just a personal injury but also a furnace where morality and criticism meet to create a subjectivity that is both remorseful and unyielding.

Niyyah and Narrative Voice

Hearts We Lost produces *niyyah* (intention) as a formal engine that shapes who speaks, what the text allows us to perceive, and how situations shift from impulse to moral self-examination. Intention becomes audible and visible in focalised interiority, micro-confessions, and charged decision-scenes through a shift in point of view, a pause before speaking, or a pressure in the sentence. In each case, ethics elucidates why characters move (or fail to move) toward sincerity, whilst critique demonstrates how the inner labour is misread, constrained, or corroded by ambient gazes, institutional scripts, and racialised suspicion.

The first clear example is Sharif's inner monologue throughout the transatlantic flight. He is confronted with a moment of seduction that is coded through closeness and gaze, and he is split by urges that cancel each other out: "He hated himself for wanting her to be quiet, and he hated himself for not wanting her to stop—a selfish desire that would protect him from participating but allow him to benefit from the conversation nonetheless" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 13). *Niyyah* formally emerges via tight focalization and conflicted inner speech; the sentence contradicts itself by portraying sincerity as a struggle instead of static purity. Ethically, the scenario captures the heart's self-awareness and repulsion, an intention struggling to gain clarity. Critically, social optics overdetermine self-surveillance: the "look" that assesses and sexualizes male piety is also a misrecognition technology. Competing gazes (male/female;

pious/secular) that demand legibility fill the moment in a Said–Fanon register. Accordingly, the story converts "intention" into felt grammar and illustrates how extrinsic scripts make it more difficult to intend the good.

A second, completely distinct example activates decision as a speech-act. Yasmin tersely asserts ownership of the contraband bag as it is exhibited in front of the Islamic Studies class: "*It's mine*" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 18). The spareness of the line is important. It reroutes authority and arrests the moment, narratively. However, Zakiyyah instantly supports that choice with interiority aftershocks, such as loneliness, fear, and a bodily chill, demonstrating that confession in this case is not just a story device but also an ethical wager about who should take responsibility. Ethics elucidates why: Under humiliation, Yasmin's *niyyah* decides on responsibility and protection. Critique demonstrates how: she is scripted into a sacrificial posture by school surveillance, adult suspicion, and intra-*Ummah* reputational politics. The pressure field that forces intention to speak is provided by the panopticism of the class, entailing the classmates, teachers, and even helpers. Thus, voice is not free; its audibility is subject to regulation. The novel maintains that intention is materially mediated by situating "It's mine" within an echo chamber of institutional gazes.

Third, when the book shifts to Sharif's learning arc, Zakiyyah allows *niyyah* to solidify into a reflective method. In an honest assessment, centred on his self-evaluation, the text observes:

> "He had been praying this prayer for more than ten years, yet he had never taken time to learn what he had been asking for all these years, yet he had never taken time to learn what he had been asking for all these years" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 91).

Intention is narrativized here as cognitive re-alignment: his meaning (understanding) must be used to re-align his words (ritual). *Niyyah* becomes literate, accurate, and teachable as a result of the sentence's stylistic removal of the lyrical veil to a straightforward, nearly prosecutorial admission. Ethically, knowledge must re-specify the "hinge" of action (intention); critically, in a racial setting where Muslims are expected to practice "good citizenship" while their piety is pre-coded as questionable, the passage also reads as a decolonial corrective of drift, prayer saved from unchecked habit. The novel's solution is

intelligibility rather than showmanship: exposition folded back into voice once intention was amplified into it.

Hearts We Lost consistently returns to the craft's assertion that *niyyah* is form-bearing throughout these passages. In the prayer-reformulation, introspective exposition resets the novel's epistemic stakes. In Yasmin's confession, a single line interrupts institutional choreography; in Sharif's troubled monologue, literary grammar bends around the attempt to will wisely. The language allows us to "overhear" intention in each instance via narrated thought, decision-speech, or internal monologue. Additionally, the text consistently frames that internal struggle within a gaze-world, classroom monitoring, masculine/feminine optics, legal-cultural suspicion, where the subject never fully controls the legibility of purpose.

A twofold approach that is sensitive to both directions is what follows for reading practice. This study monitors intention as a narrative operator on one hand (who speaks, what is revealed or not, how time slows down at the point of resolution). On the other hand, this study notices the pressure of misrecognition that distorts the arc of intention on the page. Hence, ethics elucidates why; critique demonstrates how. The novel's voice, rhythm, and focalisation are recomposed beneath the eyes that read, police, and demand; intention does more than just "motivate" action.

Tazkiyah as Plot: Renunciation, Restraint, and Everyday Piety

In *Hearts We Lost, tazkiyah al-nafs* is a procedure rather than an epiphany. Small, repeatable, testable actions, habits, *duʿāʾ*, and self-checking, that gradually reroute desire and rearrange story time are how Zakiyyah depicts purification. This procedural ethics is exemplified by three moments: disciplined midnight prayers, public confessions as renunciation, and the initial halting embrace of perceptible piety.

Tazkiyah first manifests as a nightly routine as opposed to abrupt illumination. After returning from Riyadh, Sharif performs the lengthy prayer with a dance that is almost workmanlike: "He… pulled [the thobe] over himself in preparation for Qiyaam, the voluntary prayer that the Prophet prayed each night" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 90). The situation declines to be a spectacle. We get

wudūʾ, garments, orientation, recitation—craft. Ethics elucidates why: The day is centred on remembrance as *qiyaam* renews the course of the heart. Criticism demonstrates how the practice is reconfigured by the American setting, the absence of *adhān* forces him to read a "columned chart" of prayer times, lamenting that he does not want to rely on "something as lifeless as this" (Zakiyyah, 2011, pp. 88–90). Zakiyyah presents *tazkiyah* as tempo: time slows down for restraint (night vigil), speeds up for public rhythms (work, airports, surveillance), and slows down again for ritual. The ordinary is the crucible; purification is a schedule.

Secondly, *tazkiyah* is presented as renunciation via speech, one sentence that transforms life. When another girl is in danger of being exposed by a contraband bag, Yasmin exclaims: "It's mine" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 30). The line serves as a hinge in narrative, shifting the blame and rearranging fate. Ethics elucidates why: renunciation, owning harm, shielding another, purifies by placing protection and truth above reputation. Criticism demonstrates how power permeates the scene, the "bag search", the "assistant supervisor's" broken English, the vice-principal's presence. This is Fanonian misrecognition, with moral risk interpreted via racialised assumption, as well as Said's gaze domesticated into school bureaucracy. The misreading of Yasmin's confession ("We already have a pretty good idea whose bag this is") demonstrates how inner work is distorted by outer optics. However, Zakiyyah maintains that cleansing is performed under duress and that ethics are upheld even when its indications are not taken seriously.

Third, *tazkiyah* is initiated in domestic apprenticeship. Shaken by her own moral decline, Hasna discreetly puts on her sister's *khimār*: "This was supposed to be a private moment… 'Can you show me how to put this on?'" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 104). This small line has significant implications. Ethics elucidates why the need to acquire a skill (how to wrap, pin, wear) denotes purification as procedural knowledge, not a conversion flash, but manual competence and repeatable care. Kayla Renée Wheeler's (2021) Fashioning Black Islam depicts the usage of clothing, mainly the scarf and modest apparel, by Black Muslim women as a way to foster spiritual dignity, proclaim ethical agency, and navigate belonging in communities under racialised and gendered pressures. This echoes Wheeler's (2021) assertion that Black Muslim sartorial practice also serves as a discipline of dignity, where communal and racialised belonging are negotiated.

Criticism demonstrates how a world that has already interpreted the scarf shapes even this private initial step—family prestige, professional norms (the law office), American optics coding visible Islam as risky. The tactfulness of the scene, Mona "withholds" embrace to not "disrupt the delicacy of this moment", gives the learner their agency back; the person who practices *tazkiyah* is the one who owns it.

Purification is neither instantaneous nor disembodied throughout these three instances. Zakiyyah presents it as a protocol: (i) ritual habituation re-timing the day (Qiyaam, scheduled prayers); (ii) renunciatory speech-acts reordering social risk and self-image ("It's mine"); and (iii) embodied pedagogy in rooms and mirrors (learning the *khimār*). In every register, the novel connects external shapes to internal calibration. Sharif's vigil without the *adhān;* Yasmin's confession within disciplinary bureaucracy; Hasna's scarf lesson within a family history of colourism and class, these are instances where ethics become readable, not where they are embellished.

Crucially, plot and temporality are reorganised by *tazkiyah*. The night is divided into planned sections via *qiyaam*; confession produces a before/after that reverberates over years (expulsion, reputation, and marriage chances); and the scarf lesson initiates a new arc of the many repetitions of "trying". The pace of the novel tightens (brief, declarative confession), lingers (the careful donning of cloth), or stretches (night prayer) consistent with the work of purification. Hence, *tazkiyah* is a structural force rather than a topic: it decides the pauses in chapters, the holds in scenes, and the withholding of anything.

Lastly, Zakiyyah maintains the braid's tension: "ethics elucidates why; criticism demonstrates how". Why the persistence with Qiyaam? To maintain a woke heart. How is this made difficult? A secular soundscape and suspicion of visible Islam. Why confess? To protect another and restore oneself. How is this misread? Via institutional optics pre-assigning guilt. Why learn the scarf? To pray, to belong, to submit. How is that politicised? Via workplace norms and family histories pre-valuing faces and fabrics. Hence, *Hearts We Lost* frames purification as procedural and public: choreographing restraint, *duʿāʾ*, and self-checking under a gaze and with a spine.

Mosque, Home, and the Racialised Gaze

Hearts We Lost present spatial settings, mosque, home, and diaspora households, as arenas charged with tested sincerity and negotiated belonging rather than as neutral backdrops. Each embodying discipline and vulnerability: the Maryland mosque denotes authority and suspicion, the home is a dramatization of familial conflict, and diaspora ties reveal fault lines between nationality, ideology, and Muslim identity. Across these sites, Zakiyyah depicts the double marginalisation of African American reverts, trapped between American surveillance and intra-*Ummah* colour lines.

Sharif's resignation at the mosque highlights how distrust and piety are intertwined. Iman remembers how her family felt both pity and guilt as they sat in the prayer hall:

> "There was no doubt in Iman's mind that her family owed Sharif at least moral support during this time, but their presence at his resignation could be taken to mean the opposite, Iman felt. Iman knew too that she and her family would be stared at and pitied, as if Sharif's offer of marriage was a moral crime that robbed Iman and her family of some irreplaceable peace" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 134).

Here, ethics elucidates why Sharif relinquishes his imamship due to humility and conscience. Criticism demonstrates how the mosque becomes a place of Orientalist misrecognition, consistent with Aziz's (2022) "Racial Muslim" framework which codes religiosity as suspect. Karim's (2009) insight into intra-Muslim racial hierarchies is also borne out of the *Ummah*: As though their very affiliation taints social position, Iman's family is demonized. Therefore, the mosque is a courthouse rather than a refuge.

In the domestic front, Sharif faces criticism from his mother for his relationships with Hasna and Iman:

> "Do you think that marriage is some game? ... If you can't have this one, you can have that one." (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 259).

> "The moment felt surreal. He didn't want to believe it was his mother standing before him livid and furious with him. In that moment, Sharif saw just how abhorrent his actions had been, and how grossly naive. What had he been thinking? Was he insane? How could he have imagined that things would transpire any differently?" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 259).

This scene shows how acute moral clarity drives *tawbah*: the shock and self-reproach experienced by Sharif awakened the heart to its errors, aligning with al-Ghazālī's first phase of repentance. Meanwhile, the maternal rebuke is a dramatization of Fanon's racial alienation, pushing him into defensiveness caused by external judgments. An ethical crisis emerges from the clash between spiritual aspiration and social condemnation, propelling Sharif to fix his behaviour. This emotional scene is used by Zakiyyah to depict the unfolding of reversion as both the internal rectification and navigation of familial, racialised pressures. Ethics elucidates why his mother refers to marriage as a covenant, evoking the gravity and constraint seen in the Qur'an. Criticism demonstrates how Sharif's experience "over there" (Saudi Arabia) is interpreted as contamination, and the domestic becomes a continuation of the diasporic judgment. This split is made clear by Fanon's theory of alienation; Sharif is not only corrected but also racially misunderstood in his own family. When maternal authority and the intra-*Ummah* distrust collide, the home becomes a place of alienation.

When Sharif considers Jafar's incarceration and his family's choice to leave Maryland, diaspora links further muddy the waters of belonging:

> "Fully American and fully Muslim, they were. Or was this an oxymoron in the eyes of those who had sealed Jafar's fate…? Rashad and his wife were American citizens, as were Jafar and their other children, and they had expected to taste the fruits of what that meant. And they had. Though it was not the fruit they expected to find on the tree. Fully American and fully Muslim, they were. Or was this an oxymoron in the eyes of those who had sealed Jafar's fate…?" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 159).

Ethics elucidates why the family maintains their faith, promoting selflessness and going back to "home" as a means of endurance-based purification. Criticism demonstrates how: the contradiction of being "fully American and fully Muslim"

is revealed when American citizenship is unable to provide protection. In this regard, Hilal's (2022) assessment of Muslims as a suspicious group makes sense: Jafar's incarceration without a prior record signifies the breakdown of the legal system into surveillance. Thus, the double bind, citizenship offers belonging but delivers estrangement, is crystallised by diaspora.

These incidents collectively demonstrate how subjectivity is structured by space in Zakiyyah's novel. The mosque, which is supposed to be a place of safety, turns into a monitoring and pitying arena. The home, which is perceived as a haven, turns into a place of distrust and estrangement. Diaspora links, which are perceived as continuous, might break down. Purification and discipline are sought in each instance, but the surrounding optics recast those endeavours as liabilities.

Therefore, in addition to Aziz and Hilal's depictions of Muslims under governmental suspicion, Zakiyyah produces what Karim (2009) refers to as the racialised boundaries of belonging within the *Ummah.* In addition to being inspected at home and in the mosque by intra-Muslim hierarchies, African American reverts are also marginalised in public as "Racial Muslims". In *Hearts We Lost*, belonging is never given but is always fought and manifested in settings where power, race, and religion converge.

Decolonial Healing: From Loss to Dignity

By portraying suffering as a testing ground for moral recommitment rather than a fatal injury, Zakiyyah transforms anguish into dignity rooted in God. As remembered guidance, one of the book's most obvious assertions is made: "there were some transgressions that were too heartrending to mollify, and too errant to set right. These are the sins … that are punishments in themselves" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 119). Ethics elucidates why grief can serve as a divinely mandated teacher, guiding the *qalb* back toward return and humility (*tawbah*). Criticism demonstrates how according to a racially framed perspective, Black Muslim women must transform surveillance and shame into survivable meaning, where their suffering becomes a tool for self-making because the system rejects their innocence. The novel's premise is decolonial: injured characters reclaim their

stories using an Islamic grammar of repair rather than accepting the external script (criminality, overexposure, and unbelonging).

Healing is then shown in the novel as a procedure, habits that gradually restore form. In a peaceful home setting, Hasna queries her mother: "Can you show me how to put this on?" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 104). The action is significant, yet the line is gentle and unadorned: donning the *khimār* becomes a learned habit, involving fingers, pins, folds, and measures, where dignity is carefully worn rather than theatrically declared. Ethics elucidates why: *tazkiyah al-nafs* is a discipline that is gradually acquired via consistent actions, such as prayer times, dressing, and quiet speaking, until it is feasible to adopt a new self. Criticism demonstrates how the scarf has already become politicized in this world (American optics, neighborhood repute, and workplace respectability). Here, healing is not a personal revelation but rather a leisurely dance performed in front of eyes that misinterpret Muslim cues; steadiness, not spectacle, is the triumph.

Zakiyyah crucially frames healing as collective and artistic. The Friday *khutbah* combines scripture, sermon, and youth poetry into communal upheaval: "These are the characteristics of the righteous, those who do not merely say, 'I believe' and then expect an eternal reward after they die" (Zakiyyah, 2011, p. 128). The sermon's exhortation to have an embodied religion is interwoven with local poetry ("O *Mujāhid*, Shall I Tell You?"), initially published under the pen name "Umm Sumayyah", it was later narrated from the minbar—an artistic transmission from youth to congregation to imam. Ethics elucidates why exhortation, *duʿāʾ*, and remembrance (*dhikr*) are the ways that a wounded community takes itself seriously in front of God. Criticism demonstrates how: this denotes Black Muslim cultural production as counter-public technology (Abdul Khabeer): a poem composed in a Maryland house is transformed into a liturgy that re-centres Black Muslim thoughts and feelings within the mosque's auditory environment. The action is decolonial because it redistributes power; African American voices, women, and youth decide what is right and what needs to be fixed.

In spite of these instances of community art, procedural modesty, and punitive grief, the novel maintains that dignity is neither representation nor secular self-esteem. It is a God-anchored pose that is executed in opposition to

adversarial optics, such as intra-*Ummah* colour lines (Karim) and the state's distrust (Aziz; Hilal). Accordingly, the healing arc is twofold: on the inside, characters align intention, restraint, and return; on the outside, they create counter-public forms, such as study circles, poetry, and khutbah, which teach new attentional habits and resist erasure. *Hearts We Lost* transforms "loss" into a pedagogy of resistance by fusing cultural production with everyday piety. The community gains the ability to identify injury, reframe shame, and work together to create a more robust, lived Islam.

Discussion

Hearts We Lost extends post-9/11 critique while directly building on African American Muslim research. Jackson (2005) underlines how Zakiyyah's portrayals of mosque and family authority produce the unique Sunni ancestry of Black American Islam. Blackness serves as a model for Muslim self-making through cultural output, as showed by Abdul Khabeer (2016), reflected in the novel's poetry and sermons. While Chan-Malik (2018) highlights the emotive labour of women of colour, exactly the work Zakiyyah portrays as the catalyst for renewal, Karim (2009) details intra-Ummah race/gender hierarchies, which are evident in Hasna and Iman's efforts for recognition. These findings are extended to the racial-security state by Aziz (2022) and Hilal (2022), who demonstrate how culture and legislation make Muslims suspicious; the novel illustrates this with scenes of resignations from mosques, interrogations at schools, and home suspicion where surveillance disciplines truthfulness.

This analysis pushes beyond general "Islamophobia novel" frames by interpreting *Hearts We Lost* as a reversion-centred narrative where *niyyah, tazkiyah al-nafs,* and *tawbah* operate as analytic categories. Betrayal and heartbreak manifest as moral trials requiring purpose, purification, and return in addition to being wounds. In contrast to Courtney's *All-American Muslim Girl* (2019) which highlights the external constraints of Islamophobia on a white American Muslim revert, Zakiyyah places more emphasis on the *qalb*'s internal struggle under racial and social criticism. Since *Hearts We Lost* incorporates Qur'anic themes into voice, story, and temporality, it sharpens its ethical focus in contrast to *If I Should Speak* trilogy (2001–2003), which leaned towards feminist and postcolonial critique.

Consequently, the novel functions as an ethical laboratory, transforming grief into dignity rooted in God, evoking distrust and estrangement, and illustrating how Islamic ethics can serve as interpretive tools in literary analysis.

Compared to Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* trilogy, which brings forward the public navigation of feminism and Islamophobia, *Hearts We Lost* focuses on reversion and its internal ethical work. It's similar to Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, which depicts the Arab American's visible piety and racialised belonging. From this distinction emerges Zakiyyah's unique contribution to the narration of African American Muslim ethical self-formation.

Conclusion

According to this analysis, Umm Zakiyyah's *Hearts We Lost* produces two movements: the external pressures of racialisation under Orientalist optics and post-9/11 distrust, and the internal effort of purification through *tawbah, tazkiyah al-nafs,* and *niyyah*. These dimensions are inseparable: the intra-*Ummah* hierarchies recorded by Karim (2009) and the legal-cultural gaze outlined by Aziz (2022) and Hilal (2022) both continuously reflect the *qalb*'s pursuit of sincerity. Then, African American Muslim reversion appears as a simultaneous confrontation of internal ethics and external constraints.

Lessons of dignity, agency, and decolonial healing are also taught via the novel. Betrayal and heartbreak serve as testing grounds for moral self-fashioning, where humility is transformed into God-anchored resilience via repentance and self-control. Cultural forms—sermons, poetry, duʿāʾ, and modest practice reflect Abdul Khabeer's (2016) portrayal of Black Muslim creation as resistance, revealing how ordinary piety can operate as counter-public production. Dignity for African American reverts is not the removal of suffering, but its conversion into social witness and procedural discipline.

This braided approach, which combines postcolonial critique with Islamic ethics, provides a portable framework for analysing other Muslim fictions, such as Courtney's *All-American Muslim Girl* (2019) and Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* trilogy. Hence, *Hearts We Lost* is a prime example of Muslim literature as ethical philosophy: a narrative laboratory in which loss becomes dignity, distrust becomes resiliency, and heartbreak becomes return.

These findings could be further expanded in future studies, through the examination of Islamic ethical categories and their roles in shaping the narrative form in other African American Muslim novels, such as Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* trilogy. Reversion narratives in Arab American or South Asian American Muslim fiction can be compared to determine similarities and differences in ethical self-fashioning. Explorations of poetry, memoir, or digital storytelling by Black Muslim writers may explain the cross-genre operations of *tawbah*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and *niyyah*. These future directions may enrich insight on reversion as an ethical and narrative practice, expanding upon the findings derived from *Hearts We Lost*.

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