Article

Spiritual Transformation under Family Strain: The African American Muslim Revert's Journey in Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice*

Hassan Majid Ahmed[1] & Raihanah M. M.[2]

[1]Department of English, University of Basrah, 61004 Basra, Iraq
[2]Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia,
43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: hassan.majid@uobasrah.edu.iq

Abstract: This study performs a rigorous analytical reading of Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice* via the Qur'ānic ethical framework incorporating *tawḥīd–istiqāmah* (oneness and steadfastness), *sabr–tawakkul* (patience and trust), *jihād al-nafs–tazkiyah* (inner striving and purification), and *birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ* (filial piety during trials), with the aim of examining the novel's African American Muslim revert character's transformation whilst navigating strong maternal opposition. The analysis demonstrates the novel's form in performing its ethics: internal monologues elucidating theology; calibrated dialogues and strategic silences enacting speech ethics; pacing and repetitions modelling patience and trust; and recurrent threshold, sound, and touch motifs translating filial duty into personified care. It is revealed that ethical heroism is embodied by domestic spaces such as the kitchen, doorways, phone line, and hospital ward; speech restraint represents moral agency, clearly distinct from tenderness; and the four clusters are interdependent on one another, with virtue under trial being anchored by *tawḥīd*, sustained by *sabr–tawakkul*, refined by *jihād al-nafs*, and concretized by *birr*. Positioned within the African American reversion narrative, *A Voice* puts the spotlight on the female protagonist and the intimate labour of belief. The study provides a Qur'ānic ethical framework replicable for literary criticism, emphasizing craft while shedding light on theological issues. The notion of "steadfast tenderness" can be used to guide Muslim minority communities, mentor reverts, and lead interfaith family interactions.

Keywords: African American Muslim literature; reversion narratives in fiction; Qur'anic ethics in literary analysis; Islamic spirituality in literature; Umm Zakiyyah *A Voice*

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, African American Muslim literature, especially within the Young Adult (YA) genre, has delved deeply into the complex intersections of race, faith, and identity. These stories often center on the everyday realities of resilience and spiritual commitment. One of the most influential voices in this space is Umm Zakiyyah, best known for her novels *If I Should Speak* and *A Voice*. Writing in the aftermath of 9/11, Zakiyyah emphasises that her fiction reflects "the moral, spiritual, and intercultural struggles of Muslims as minorities in a country where Muslims have been systematically marginalized" (Zakiyyah, 2018, p. 2).

The post-9/11 era profoundly reshaped what it means to be Muslim in America. Aziz (2021) notes that Muslims are increasingly cast as a "suspect race" (p. 45), a form of racialisation that intensified the insecurities faced by African American Muslims who are already navigating marginalisation within both racial and

religious spheres. Recent studies beyond the confines of America similarly display Muslims encountering restricted belonging and institutional suspicion; Mabvurira and Yasin (2023) find that Islamophobia in higher education notably reproduces racial and moral hierarchies akin to the wider "suspect race" discourse. Despite representing a significant part of the US Muslim community, their literary voices have often been overlooked (McCloud, 1995). Against this backdrop, Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice* stands out as a powerful counter-narrative, addressing Islamophobia, racial exclusion, and family resistance via a lens grounded in faith and moral growth.

While Muslim American fiction has gained more visibility in recent years, the spiritual and ethical dimensions of African American Muslim women's stories remain underexplored. Much of the existing scholarship centers on trauma, identity politics, and cultural conflict (Peek, 2011), always overlooking how Qur'anic virtues inform moral agency. Empirical studies like *Being Black and Muslim in America* (Yaqeen Institute, 2018) and *Triple Discrimination* (American Bar Association, 2024) reveal the intertwined challenges of race, religion, and gender which shape the experiences of belonging and belief. Alas, very few literary studies have examined how African American Muslim reverts demonstrate spiritual transformation amidst these intersecting pressures.

This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing how Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice* depicts the spiritual transformation of an African American Muslim revert facing familial tension. It focuses on how Qur'anic virtues such as *ṣalāh* (prayer), *dhikr* (remembrance), *ṣabr* (patience), *taqwā* (God-consciousness), *ʿadl* (justice), and *amānah* (trustworthiness) guide the protagonist's balancing of faith, identity, and belonging. The paper essentially argues that *A Voice* serves as a post-9/11 counter-narrative that reframes reversion not as a single act of reversion, but rather as an ongoing ethical practice rooted in steadfastness and familial care.

By bringing the moral and spiritual dimensions of African American Muslim fiction to the forefront, this study contributes to broader conversations about ethics and representation in American minority literatures. It proposes a framework for incorporating Qur'anic virtue ethics into literary analysis, situating this work within key scholarship on African American reversion, Muslim women's narratives, Islamic ethics, and Young Adult Muslim fiction.

Literature Review

1. African American Reversion Narratives: from Christian Awakenings to Sunni Islam
African American reversion narratives have historically presented faith transformation as a path towards moral renewal, spiritual freedom, and collective empowerment. Early Christian awakenings and slave narratives depicted reversion as an act of reclaiming dignity and truth in the face of oppression, as seen in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) and Douglass's autobiographies (Andrews, 1986). These works affirm the power of divine unity and moral steadfastness, what Islamic thought terms as *tawḥīd* and *istiqāma*h, as sources of strength in times of injustice.

In the 20th century, the Nation of Islam (NOI) redefined reversion through the language of racial pride and self-determination. Jackson (2005) notes that "the Nation of Islam not only offered an alternative theology but also a reimagined Black self" (p. 88), while Shakir (2014) describes Islam as "a reclamation of dignity, identity, and agency in a hostile racial climate" (p. 22). This spiritual and ethical persistence reflects the very essence of *istiqāmah*. Under Warith Deen Mohammed, the post-1975 transition to Sunni Islam reconnected African American Muslims with the global ummah (McCloud, 1995). Qur'anic virtues such as *ṣabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (trust in God) became central to lived reversion, shaping how believers reintegrated into communities and deepened their spiritual orientation. As Yusuf (2002) reminds us, reversion "is not merely an event, but a sustained process of aligning one's life with divine guidance" (p. 14).

Despite this rich history, literary representations remain scarce. Wadud (2006) points out the lack of portrayals that center women's ethical and spiritual experiences, while Abdul Khabeer (2016) highlights the ongoing absence of narratives that weave together race, gender, and theology. Abd-Allah (2006) calls for situating African American Muslim experiences within the broader landscape of American religious history to close the gap between sociological observation and lived theology. More recent scholars like Makki (2018), Salem (2020), Considine (2020), and Rashid (2021) stress the importance of integrating Islamic ethics into

literary criticism as a way to humanise Muslim identities via faith-based frameworks. Extending this trajectory, Knight (2023) examines the ethics of becoming in Muslim American women's fiction, consistent with this study's emphasis on faith-based transformation.

These critical gaps in representation, methodology, and theme highlight the significance of this current work, which offers an in-depth reading of Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice*. Through a Qur'an-centred ethical lens, the study explores how the novel embodies and negotiates faith principles amid familial and societal pressures. *A Voice* dramatises the spiritual agency that arises through *ṣabr* and *tawakkul*, tracing the protagonist's journey from reactive defensiveness to a more mature restraint based on *jihād al-nafs-tazkiyah*.

2. African American Muslim Women in Literature: Representation and Insider Perspectives

Although African American Muslim women have played a vital role in shaping Islam in the United States, their stories are still rarely heard. Abdul Khabeer (2016) describes this as a "double marginalization", i.e., being left out of dominant Muslim narratives while also being stereotyped in mainstream American culture (p. 12). Guided by *tawḥīd* and *istiqāmah*, these women have learned to navigate racial, gendered, and religious barriers with quiet resilience. In Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice*, family opposition serves as both a challenge and a divinely guided test (*ibtilāʾ*), pushing the protagonist towards spiritual maturity and moral clarity. Through Tamika's journey, Zakiyyah weaves Qur'anic ethics into a deeply personal story that echoes the long tradition of moral endurance in African American literature.

Even as Muslim American writing gains wider recognition, the experiences of African American women often remain outshone by Middle Eastern and South Asian voices (Wilson, 2019). Makki (2018) observes that when these women do appear in fiction, they are often portrayed through themes of activism or cultural conflict, with little attention paid to their inner spiritual lives. This narrow framing misses the depth of theological resilience that defines so many of their lived experiences of faith.

In light of this, Salem (2020) calls for the use of Islamic ethical frameworks in literary analysis, while Considine (2020) emphasises the need for authentic, insider perspectives that humanise Muslim characters rather than reducing them to symbols or stereotypes. Together, these approaches help close the gap between social reality and literary imagination. Building on this momentum, the present study reads Zakiyyah's *A Voice* through a Qur'anic ethical lens, exploring how spiritual conviction and moral struggle shape both character and narrative. The next section turns to Islamic ethics in literature, considering how Qur'anic moral concepts can serve as powerful tools for literary interpretation.

3. Scholarship on Islamic Ethics in Literature

Although Islamic ethical thought offers rich interpretive tools, it has largely been overlooked in the study of African American Muslim literature. Nasr (2002) reminds us that "beauty in the Islamic tradition is not merely decorative; it is the manifestation of the Real, and thus must reflect moral truth" (p. 145). Similarly, Abou El Fadl (2018) situates Qur'anic ethics within the realm of "goodness, beauty, and Divinity" (p. 85). Both perspectives echo the principles of *jihād al-nafs* and *tazkiyah*, underscoring literature's capacity to nurture moral awareness and ethical growth.

Considine (2020) observes that stories grounded in Qur'anic ethics "humanize Islam to audiences otherwise unfamiliar with its moral principles" (p. 61), while Salem (2020) argues that bringing Qur'anic ethics into literary criticism "enriches interpretation and connects text to the moral lifeworld of Muslim communities" (p. 67). Afsaruddin (2019) calls for the revival of classical virtues such as *iḥsān* (spiritual excellence) and *ʿadl* (justice) within contemporary critical frameworks, cautioning that Muslim characters risk being flattened into secular archetypes without them. Congruently, Abdul Razak, Hamzah, and Zakaria (2022) display that self-hisbah (self-monitoring) improves moral appreciation among Muslim students, demonstrating the ceremonial dimension of *tazkiyah* and *niyyah* that this paper equally traces within Zakiyyah's fiction. In the same spirit, Ramadan (2004) emphasises that Muslim minority literature carries a dual responsibility, namely to unite ethical vision with artistic expression without collapsing into moral instruction.

Mattson (2010) adds that the Qur'an's own narrative strategies, its use of repetition, symbolism, and moral exemplars, offer models for how stories can cultivate character and conscience. These approaches open powerful avenues for reading African American Muslim fiction, especially works that explore resilience, patience, and spiritual growth. Abd-Allah (2006) and Patel (2007) similarly view literature as a means of fostering empathy and moral imagination across cultural boundaries.

Even so, key Qur'anic virtues such as *ṣabr–tawakkul* and *birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ* continue to be largely unexamined in this context. This study hence employs a structured Qur'anic ethical framework to analyse Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice*, highlighting how these virtues function both theologically and artistically within the novel's portrayal of spiritual transformation.

4. Young Adult Muslim Fiction: Identity Formation and Moral Storytelling

In the realm of minorities, Young Adult (YA) Muslim fiction serves as a cultural mirror as well as an ethical guide for young Muslims. Patel (2007) observes that accessible stories "form the moral imagination" that can inspire interfaith understanding and engagement (p. 42). For African American Muslim adolescents navigating peer pressure, racialized suspicion, and questions of identity, the principles of *tawḥīd* and *istiqāmah* often provide grounding and stability.

Makki (2018) underlines that YA fiction allows young readers "to see themselves as agents in their own stories, not merely as objects of someone else's gaze" (p. 45). Knight (2020) meanwhile describes minority-centred YA literature as a kind of "literary apprenticeship", cultivating ethical reasoning and self-reflection (p. 89). For African American Muslim youths, such narratives validate both cultural fluency and spiritual resilience. Zakiyyah's protagonist exemplifies this, modelling ethical agency based on Qur'anic virtues.

This study looks at persistent gaps including the underrepresentation of African American Muslim women's voices, the limited application of Islamic ethics in literary interpretation, and the scarce attention to Qur'anic concepts such as *birr al-wālidayn* in YA fiction. Through the four clusters of Qur'anic virtues integrated into the reading of *A Voice*, the study frames the novel as both a literary text and a source of ethical guidance.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

In this study, an integrated Qur'anic ethical framework based on traditional Islamic philosophy and modern Muslim thought is employed in the reading of Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice*, entailing four interrelated clusters namely *tawḥīd–istiqāmah*, *sabr–tawakkul*, *jihād al-nafs–tazkiyah*, and *birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ*. Qur'anic injunctions and prophetic traditions make up the foundation of each cluster, while also leveraging the works of Muslim philosophers, Sufi mystics, theologians, and sociological accounts of American Muslim reversion.

The study focuses on individual scenes, dialogues, inner monologues, and recurring motifs as its core units of analysis, namely moments where ethical meaning comes to life and is embodied within the story. These textual elements are explored both narratively and thematically, tracing how virtues shape characters' actions, emotions, and moral reflections throughout the novel.

1. *Tawḥīd* and *istiqāmah* (oneness of God and steadfastness in faith)

The main pillar of Islamic theology is *Tawḥīd*, which anchors the Muslim identity by affirming the totality of divine unity. *Tawḥīd* is both the metaphysical and ethical essence of Muslim life as asserted by the philosopher Al-Kindi that "true happiness lies in knowing the First Cause" (*On First Philosophy*, p. 44), and Ibn Arabi who contextualized all existence as "a theophany of the One" (*Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, p. 67). According to Jackson (2005), *tawḥīd* in the African American Muslim context is a liberatory doctrine that deconstructs all forms of political, racial, or material idolatry. *Istiqāmah*, which refers to the resoluteness in upholding *tawḥīd* via unwavering practice, is deeply rooted in the Qur'an (Qur'an 41:30). It is examined in Ibn Miskawayh's ethics as one's sustained habit of ensuring alignment between one's will and the divine command (*Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, p. 112). Tariq Ramadan presented a modern reframing of *istiqāmah* for minority Muslims as "remaining faithful to divine principles while engaging the world with wisdom" (2004, p. 76). *Istiqāmah* in

the context of American Muslim reverts typically involves the navigation of pressures exerted by the family and secular society. According to Ali (2011), maintaining *istiqāmah* demands one to balance between spiritual integrity and social engagement. Using this concept, we examine how the protagonist, Tamika navigates her family's strong oppositions to her newfound faith in Islam.

2. *Sabr* and *tawakkul* (patience and trust in Allah)

The Qur'an (3:200; 65:3) repeatedly highlighted the virtues of *sabr* (patience, perseverance) and *tawakkul* (trust in Allah). *Sabr* is defined by Al-Ghazali as "restraining the self from complaint while fulfilling the requirements of divine service" (*Ihya'*, vol. 4, p. 125), and *tawakkul* as "the repose of the heart in God's guarantee" (ibid., p. 141). *Tawakkul* is interpreted by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi as one's belief that divine wisdom determines all outcomes, thus relieving one from unnecessary anxiety (*Mafatih al-Ghayb*, vol. 16, p. 312). According to Nasr, *sabr* and *tawakkul* are linked to an "Islamic cosmology of trust" whereby human beings embrace trials in their life as platforms for spiritual elevation, cognizant of their ontological reliance on the Creator (2002, p. 233). *Tawakkul*, according to Yusuf, is "not passive fatalism, but active trust coupled with moral effort" (2004, p. 58). *Sabr* and *tawakkul* are the survival ethics for Muslim converts post-9/11. Discrimination is commonly framed by converts as a test of faith that ultimately results in resilience, observed Ghazala Anwar (2015). This paper examines how Umm Zakiyyah positions her protagonist straddles the tension of *Sabr* and *tawakkul* in *A Voice*.

3. *Jihād al-nafs* and *tazkiyah* (inner striving and spiritual purification)

Traditional Islamic literature defined "greater jihad" (*jihād al-akbar*) as the fight against the lower self (*nafs*). Ibn Tufail's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* portrays a seeker who is led to the knowledge of God due to his internal struggles (p. 83). *Tazkiyah* or the purification of the soul is highlighted by Mulla Sadra as essential towards unveiling one's true nature (*The Four Journeys*, p. 212). *Tazkiyah* entails three stages as outlined by Al-Ghazali: the recognition of the soul's diseases, the fights against those diseases (*mujāhadah*), and the cultivation of virtues (*Ihya'*, vol. 3, p. 59). As affirmed in the Qur'an 91:9–10: "He has succeeded who purifies it, and he has failed who corrupts it." Ibn Khaldun further elucidated that societal reform requires, first and foremost, personal moral reform (*Muqaddimah*, p. 421). *Jihād al-nafs* typically entails the confrontation of assumed prejudices, material attachments, and fear of alienation in the context of reversion narratives. As noted by Bullock (2011), reverts often replace ego-centric desires with God-driven existence. Using *Jihād al-nafs,* we examine how Umm Zakiyyah repositions her protagonist sense of compassion and self-restraint in the face of anger and personal crisis.

4. *Birr al-wālidayn* under *ibtilāʾ* (filial piety toward parents during trials)

The honouring of parents or *birr al-wālidayn* is a key Qur'anic ethic (31:14–15), provided that the act does not lead to *shirk* (associating God with others). Filial piety is defined by Al-Amiri as a moral obligation as well as a training ground for virtues like gratitude and humility (*On the Excellences of Islam*, p. 97). Kindness towards parents, according to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, is an act of worship regardless of one's faith (*Madarij al-Salikin*, p. 216). For reverts, maintaining *birr* whilst upholding *tawḥīd* is a major trial (*ibtilāʾ*) in view of their contact with their non-Muslim family members. Such situation is melting pot for spiritual growth, according to Ali Shariati, where the converts' love for their parents is reconciled with their love for God (*Reflections of Humanity*, p. 144). This balance, as asserted by Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi, necessitates "moral courage and emotional intelligence" (*Al-Tawhid*, p. 132). *Birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ* will be used to examine the extent Tamika exercises respect and cordiality toward her mother despite the latter's differences in faith.

In terms of methodology, this study uses a qualitative close-reading approach that draws on both narratology and Islamic ethics. Each analytical unit, whether a scene, dialogue, inner monologue, or recurring motif, is examined inductively through the lens of four Qur'anic virtue clusters, tracing how these virtues are enacted, embodied, or tested in the text. Rather than relying on overt moral statements, the analysis highlights how ethical meaning unfolds through narrative strategies such as focalisation, silence, repetition, and symbolism. Table 1 maps the four Qur'anic clusters onto the narrative techniques as they depicted in *A Voice*.

Table 1. *Mapping Qurʾānic Ethical Clusters to Narrative Techniques in Umm Zakiyyah's A Voice*

Qurʾānic Ethical Cluster	Core Virtue(s)	Narrative Technique(s)	Illustrative Function in the Text
Tawḥīd–istiqāmah	Oneness of God; steadfastness in faith	Interior monologue; reflective dialogue	Reveals Tamika's theological clarity and moral constancy amid familial pressure.
Sabr–tawakkul	Patience; trust in Allah	Narrative pacing; rhythmic alternation between tension and calm	Models endurance and divine reliance through temporal structure and tone.
Jihād al-nafs–tazkiyah	Inner striving; purification of the self	Bodily imagery; silence; restraint in speech	Depicts moral struggle and self-mastery through gesture and withheld response.
Birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ	Filial piety under trial	Motifs of touch, proximity, and distance	Translates faith into tenderness, reconciling belief with care.

Triangulation in this study is achieved by bringing together four interpretive sources: Qur'anic injunctions (textual ethics), Prophetic traditions (exemplary praxis), classical and modern Muslim moral philosophy (conceptual grounding), and close textual analysis (literary form and discourse). This multi-source approach strengthens the plausibility of the interpretations while avoiding doctrinal overreach.

The researchers also reflect on their own positionality, shaped by both academic training in literary analysis and personal familiarity with Islamic ethical frameworks. This awareness allows for a sensitive reading of religious meaning without forcing prescriptive interpretations. Taken together, this replicable framework illustrates how *A Voice* transforms Islamic ethical principles into lived, relational practices, resonating with the everyday realities of Muslim minority communities.

The Findings

1. *Tawḥīd–Istiqāmah* in the Face of Opposition

Tamika Douglas's moral and spiritual journey in *A Voice* is anchored in her steadfast *tawḥīd*, i.e., her faith in the oneness of God, and her firm *istiqāmah*, i.e., the effort to live that belief through both conviction and action. Set against the backdrop of post-9/11 America, the novel places her faith under the dual pressures of Islamophobic scrutiny and a family environment shaped by a generational Christian worldview, creating a complex tension between belief, emotion, and social expectation.

A particularly illuminating moment of theological insight occurs during Tamika's talk with her aunt Jackie about the Trinity:

"I started to wonder if I believed in it because it was true or because it was all I knew… I wondered if I really believed God could be a man and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the same time. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized I never believed that, at least not completely. I just accepted it because it was wrong to question God" (Zakiyyah, 2004, p. 351).

Zakiyyah's interior monologue in this scene does more than provide exposition; it serves as a window into Tamika's psychological awakening, a shift from inherited conformity towards conscious, self-directed belief. Here, *tawḥīd* emerges as a form of epistemic liberation, echoing Al-Kindi's proclamation that truth must be accepted "from wherever it comes" (*On First Philosophy*, p. 44) and Iqbal's notion that "faith is a living experience which must be constantly won" (*Reconstruction*, p. 123). The novel's gradual, reflective tone captures *istiqāmah* as steadfast perseverance in truth, even amid familial and cultural disruption.

Tamika's first happenstance with Islam was "just to get my term paper over with" (p. 351). It is reframed by Zakiyyah as providential as opposed to accidental, rooting her reversion in realism instead of romanticised reversion. This perspective resonates with Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, who underscored that moral excellence arises from sustained truth living, not dramatic beginnings (Nasirean Ethics, p. 45). *Tawḥīd* is further reinforced through Tamika's reflective insight: "If one believed that God placed humans on the earth

with guidance and purpose, then… the truth was one" (p. 35). Her conviction reminds us of Ibn ʿArabi's "station of constancy" (*Futūḥāt*, p. 67) and highlights, as per *tawhid*, the moral misalignment of misplaced devotion: "the prophet… became the object of worship himself" (p. 36).

For African American Muslims, this moral courage resonates with Sherman Jackson's view of *tawḥīd* as the rejection of "all false masters", racial, cultural, or familial (2005, p. 42). Tamika's steadfastness parallels earlier reversion narratives, such as Malcolm X's acceptance of orthodox Sunni, where faith demanded both sacrifice and ethical discipline. Zakiyyah depicts *tawḥīd–istiqāmah* as a dual practice: internal self-reflection and external composure. Tamika grapples with doubt and dialogue while navigating strained family ties and social isolation with quiet resolve.

Through this lens, Zakiyyah combines theology and narrative craft, employing interior monologue and reflective dialogue to embellish moral awakening. Spiritual conviction in *A Voice* is not portrayed as a triumphant reversion but as disciplined constancy, i.e., *tawḥīd* lived through relational ethics. This foundation naturally sets the stage for the next cluster, *ṣabr–tawakkul*, where faith transforms into pressurised endurance.

2. *Sabr–Tawakkul* as Emotional Anchors

In *A Voice*, Tamika's spiritual resilience is rooted in her steadfast *sabr* (patience) and *tawakkul* (trust in God), allowing her to transform hardship into heightened awareness of the divine. Zakiyyah presents these virtues not as passive endurance but as intentional, active disciplines that require both emotional composure and thoughtful submission to God's wisdom. *Sabr* is not merely resignation, nor is *tawakkul* merely passive surrender; they are in fact deliberate moral choices.

> *"The God-fearing, those who believed in life beyond, were the most content and at peace with life… It was the knowledge that there was something beyond this life that gave them the little solace they had… That was when all the patience and faith would finally win through"* (Zakiyyah, 2004, p. 196).

The repeated phrases "life beyond", "solace", and "faith" create a meditative rhythm that reflects genuine *tawakkul*. This resonates with Al-Ghazālī's explanation of *sabr* as "restraining complaint while fulfilling divine commands" (*Iḥyāʾ*, vol. 4, p. 125) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's delineation of *tawakkul* as complete reliance on the wisdom of the Divine (*Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, vol. 16, p. 312).

Tamika comes to accept adversity as an expected part of life: "No one could escape the bumps and bruises of life… it took more strength to accept the ones thrown your way" (p. 196). The metaphor of "bruises" captures the endurance required to navigate trials, echoing the Qurʾān's assurance that "Indeed, with hardship comes ease" (94:5–6). Nasr (2002) similarly describes *tawakkul* as trusting the divine order, which transforms suffering into spiritual elevation.

Faith is tested further when it clashes with family obligation: "Pleasing parents was virtuous only if it didn't interfere with pleasing God… No one should have to give up her soul" (p. 208). In this instance, *sabr* is the strength to maintain integrity under emotional strain, while *tawakkul* is the conscious act of entrusting outcomes to God. Zakiyyah's careful shift between narrative tension and calm is an embodiment of patience, while repeated affirmations of divine control embody trust.

Zakkiyah uses *sabr–tawakkul* to construct a combined emotional and theological framework stabilizing Tamika's faith. Patience keeps her istiqāmah from being hardened into rigidity, while trust protects it from despair. The novel's rhythmic interplay of tension and stillness transforms endurance into a kind of spiritual artistry, preparing both Tamika and the reader for a more profound internal struggle of *jihād al-nafs–tazkiyah* as elaborated next.

3. *Jihād al-Nafs–Tazkiyah*: The Inner Journey

Tamika's deepest challenges in *A Voice* are internal, namely against *jihād al-nafs* which is her lower self. She then moves toward *tazkiyah*, or spiritual purification. Zakiyyah represents these moments with striking emotional meticulousness, revealing that true purification demands not only self-discipline and mastery over impulses but also the conscious, repeated choice to act virtuously.

"She used all her energy to keep the mask on her face, for fear that if she let it fall off, tears of frustration and anger would be let loose… Tamika fought the fire of rage that burned as the woman's words pulsated in her mind" (Zakiyyah, 2004, p. 286).

The "mask" here is a powerful symbol of self-governance, where restraint itself is an act of spiritual labour. Zakiyyah captures Al-Ghazālī's first stage of *tazkiyah*, i.e., recognition, showing how the believer must first perceive a moral fault before choosing how to respond. When Tamika stops herself from hurling her teacup, she enacts the second stage, i.e., resistance, turning her anger into disciplined control. The deliberate pacing mirrors Ibn Miskawayh's idea of the "median virtue", where emotions are neither suppressed nor indulged but rather carefully regulated.

But her inner victory comes at a cost. Following a heated phone call with her mother, "each tear was blood escaping from a gaping wound in her heart" (p. 207). Pain lingers while restraint persists, marking the third stage of *tazkiyah*, i.e., replacement, where damaging urges gradually transform into patience, humility, and compassion. Tamika's stillness during confrontation, "refusing to look anywhere but out the window into the growing darkness" (p. 286), is an indication of moral maturity. Her silence is a mindful choice rather than avoidance.

Through these moments, Zakiyyah presents *jihād al-nafs* not as a single triumph but as a gradual, embodied process. Each act of restraint deepens Tamika's moral awareness and strengthens her *birr al-wālidayn*, positioning filial devotion in the same space as steadfast faith.

By translating the theology of inner struggle into narrative form, Zakiyyah uses bodily imagery and measured silence to externalise moral refinement. Spiritual growth in *A Voice* unfolds quietly, where victory is measured not in conquest but in composure. This inward cultivation lays the ethical foundation for the next stage of her journey, namely *birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ*, where faith transforms into tenderness and resilience amidst family challenges.

4. *Birr al-Wālidayn–Ibtilāʾ*: Honouring Parents Amid Trials

Birr al-wālidayn in *A Voice* is neither sentimental obedience nor outright rebellion. Zakiyyah describes it as a delicate balance between proximity and boundary under the trials of *ibtilāʾ*. This ethic is presented through small and profound gestures like a touch, a word, a silence, a step back, resonating with the Qur'anic guidance to "accompany them in [this] world with appropriate kindness" (31:15). But what is "appropriate" constantly shifts with emotion, circumstance, and faith.

Tamika frames her own moral compass clearly: "God didn't create humans to serve their parents. He created them to serve Him… Pleasing parents was virtuous only if it didn't interfere with pleasing God" (p. 208). Her words reorder loyalty without omitting love, showing *birr* as spiritual refinement rather than detachment. Even when conflict pierces her heart, her affection remains strong: *"She loved her mother more than she could bear… Her mother's displeasure would indeed tear her apart"* (p. 208). Here, devotion and *tawḥīd* coexist in a poetics of restraint, where love is tempered by faith, intimacy navigated with care.

Birr becomes tangible in action. At the hospital, "Her palm stroked her mother's hair… She leaned forward to brush it with a kiss. Tears slid down her cheeks" (p. 352), Here, touch replaces argument, care becomes sanctification. Every gesture carries spiritual weight: the higher the cost, the purer the love. Tamika's whispered thought, "She wondered if her mother would ever rethink her religious conviction for the sake of her soul" (p. 352) is a prayer, not persuasion. Patience and hope, rather than force, shape her filial devotion.

Zakiyyah situates these moments in liminal spaces like doorways, phone lines, hospital curtains, where access and distance coexist. The hurtful "click" of disconnection (p. 207) diverges starkly from the quiet reconciliation in the hospital ward. Even silence becomes a moral act: "Fearing any remark would only make matters worse" (p. 286). In this vein, restraint is eloquence, protecting dignity while upholding faith. Thelma, Tamika's mother, is neither a villain nor a saint; she hurts people as much as she is hurt by them, showing that *birr* becomes virtuous only when under strain.

Over the course of the novel, through rupture, wound, and near-loss, Tamika shifts from defensive justification to calm presence. Trials (*ibtilāʾ*) become repeated instruction. The four ethical clusters converge

seamlessly: *tawḥīd* anchoring conviction; *sabr–tawakkul* stabilising emotion; *jihād al-nafs* governing speech; *birr* transforming belief into tender action.

Zakiyyah reimagines filial piety as disciplined tenderness, turning doctrinal fidelity into everyday ethics of care. *Birr al-wālidayn* under trial completes the moral architecture of *A Voice*, showing that the truest measure of faith is not proclamation but rather compassion amid difficulties, where belief transforms into love as polished by endurance.

Discussion

This close analysis of *A Voice* using the four-clustered Qurʾānic ethical framework demonstrates that the novel serves as both literature and lived theology. The outcome is a crafted narrative, rather than a didactic tract, whereby *tawḥīd–istiqāmah*, *sabr–tawakkul*, *jihād al-nafs–tazkiyah*, and *birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ* are portrayed across scenes, voices, pacing, and motifs. Essentially, the novel presents its points of view, repetitions, and sensory details to depict the ways in which a believer reasons, feels, and acts under pressure.

Zakiyyah employs narrative techniques that transform abstract virtues into readable actions. *Tawḥīd* is rendered as an epistemic practice via interior monologues, putting inherited belief to test, trimming self-deception, and achieving singular devotion. Next, *istiqāmah* is rendered as calculated steadiness instead of belligerence via dialogues and strategic silences. Meanwhile, *sabr* is embodied by narrative pacing, i.e., instances of high tension followed by thoughtful silence. *Tawakkul* is enacted by recurring assurances of divine oversight. *Jihād al-nafs* is staged by the phenomenological depictions of breath, grip, tears, and touch as bodily self-commands. Finally, *Birr* is translated into sacramental tenderness by the choreography of care in the form of hair stroking and kissing on the cheek. The novel hence highlights that ethics go beyond the characters' declaration of their belief; it also entails their bodily reactions when their belief is put to test.

Instead of public proclamations, the intricacies of reversion in *A Voice* are relocated to the kitchen, living room, phone calls, and hospital ward. The two-pronged effect of this relocation firstly entails the expansion of the reversion narrative genre to incorporate slow trials, repeated rejections of compromise, daily strained courtesies, therefore distinguishing domestic resolution as moral heroism. Secondly, the sense of agency is revised: Tamika is victorious not for bringing down her opponents, but for having unswerving faith in God and showing familial tenderness. Triumph is hence reframed as devotion, where growth is measured by preserved worship and sustained love.

The verbal nature of familial conflict in the novel renders the significance of the ethics of speech. Zakiyyah portrays silence as an ethical act, i.e., the preservation of truth without the incitement of harm. *A Voice* is consequently a dialectical title: a voice testifying the divinity of God and a demonstration of strategic silence. This speech ethic incorporates the four clusters of *tawḥīd* (ordering of truth-telling), *sabr* (regulation of timing), *jihād al-nafs* (suppression of anger), and *birr* (protection of dignity), culminating in a rhetoric of gentle boundaries: clear lines held with soft hands.

The recurrent thresholds (doorways, phone clicks, curtains) in the novel embody the push-pull between intimacy and distance necessitated by *birr* under *ibtilāʾ*. Inclusion and exclusion are registered by the sound design (the final "click", the hush of the ward), whereby touch resolves what words fail to repair. The two-pronged function of motifs entails the advancement of the plot and the education of readers of how love can be sustained without it becoming ultimate.

Interdependence is a key finding in the analysis. Without *sabr*, *tawḥīd* loses its resolve; without *tawakkul*, *sabr* becomes despair; without *birr*, *jihād al-nafs* is merely a personal win; without *tawḥīd*, *birr* is merely an appeasement. Zakiyyah's crafty weaving of the scenes ensures that the clusters complement each other. Tamika's arc is presented iteratively rather than linearly, portraying the testing of her conviction (*tawḥīd*), the sustainment of her steadiness (*istiqāmah*) via patience and trust, the refinement of her responses via her inner struggles, and the translation of her filial piety into solid acts of care.

A Voice serves as a moral lesson for Young Adult readers without diving into moralism. Readers are encouraged to examine Tamika's reasoning and practice her restraint, understanding the incremental embodiment of ethics: the holding of the tongue, the softening of the tone, the returned call, the bedside wake.

The novel teaches YA readers how to negotiate between identity and belonging, how to say no and remain respectful, how to love without total submission, and how to persevere without losing oneself.

Compared to other Muslim YA fiction like S. K. Ali's *Saints and Misfits* (2017) or Samira Ahmed's *Love, Hate & Other Filters* (2018), Zakiyyah's *A Voice* stands out for its inward turn. While Ali and Ahmed foreground sociocultural confrontation and the negotiation of public identity, *A Voice* centres the ethics of private endurance and filial care. Its focus on the interior signifies a departure from the central discourse of Muslim self-representation in modern YA fiction. In this sense, Zakiyyah's work resonates more closely with the spiritual realism of Leila Aboulela, where faith is tested in the home front instead of the political realm.

The four-cluster Qurʾānic ethical framework used in this study provides a systematic way to read such works. It traces how virtues are enacted, dramatised, and embodied across scenes, dialogues, and recurring motifs. At the same time, it allows literary analysis to attend to narrative craft, while capturing the theological stakes that sociological approaches might overlook, namely what the believer deems as success or failure.

This study contributes in three key ways. First, it broadens the field of African American and Muslim YA fiction by framing reversion stories as journeys of spiritual ethics instead of sociopolitical awakening. Second, methodology-wise, it introduces a transferable model that bridges literary interpretation and moral philosophy, preserving interpretive nuance without reducing the novel to religious instruction. Third, theology-wise, it highlights how the divine virtues of *tawḥīd, sabr–tawakkul, jihād al-nafs,* and *birr al-wālidayn* shape emotion, speech, and relational conduct, revealing how Qurʾānic ethics are embedded in modern American Muslim narratives.

However, two tensions remain. The first is recognition without reconciliation. Although the ethical work is realised where love is sustained and dignity is preserved, doctrinal alignment between Tamika and her mother is never achieved. The second is the privacy of pain. Even in its most intimate moments, the novel retains an interiority that cannot be fully bridged. In *A Voice*, faith governs love instead of vice versa, and these boundaries reflect ethical commitment instead of narrative flaw.

Conclusion

Umm Zakiyyah's *A Voice* converts the spiritual journey of an African American Muslim revert into a vivid model of ethical resilience. Using the familial tension befalling Tamika, Zakiyyah shows how Qurʾānic virtues shape both moral endurance and familial care. *Tawḥīd–istiqāmah* grounds conviction and steadiness; *sabr–tawakkul* turns challenges into meaningful lessons in patience and trust; *jihād al-nafs–tazkiyah* channels impulses into disciplined virtue; and *birr al-wālidayn–ibtilāʾ* transforms faith into acts of filial tenderness while keeping faith intact. These four clusters work together: faith orienting patience, trust sustaining steadfastness, inner struggle refining truth, and filial devotion enacting virtue amidst duress.

In her work, Zakiyyah conveys ethics through form, not exposition. Faith is internalized through Tamika's monologues. Patience is felt in the ebb and flow of narrative rhythm while filial piety is embodied in recurring gestures, touches, silences, and thresholds. Domestic spaces like the kitchen, doorways, phone lines, and hospital wards become the retreat for quiet moral heroism, reframing reversion from loud declarations to silent perseverance.

This study contributes in three key ways. First of all, it centers *A Voice* as a milestone in African American Muslim and Young Adult fiction, depicting spiritual transformation through restraint and domestic tenderness as opposed to confrontation or activism. Secondly, it introduces a replicable four-cluster Qurʾānic ethical framework for analyzing Muslim minority literatures, allowing insight into how virtues operate narratively and thematically text-wide. Lastly, it demonstrates how Qurʾānic moral philosophy is embodied by literary form: virtue emerges not only as an inner disposition but also as an enacted practice, discernable through emotion, silence, and care.

The findings highlight that Muslim fiction holds both ethical and educational value. *A Voice* models "steadfast tenderness", i.e., then upholding of boundaries with compassion, as a paradigm for interfaith and familial understanding. Practical applications are offered for moral education, literature curricula, and community dialogue, demonstrating the role of faith-oriented fiction in guiding reverts and their families while working through differences with empathy and discipline.

This study focuses on a single text with a female protagonist, which limits generalisability. Comparative studies could expand the framework to other Muslim YA novels like Hafsah Faizal's *We Hunt the Flame* or Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* in order to explore the adaptation of Qurʾānic ethics across genders and genres. Studies on male reversion narratives or intergenerational family dynamics could further illuminate ethical embodiment in minority Muslim literature.

Although the study focuses on a single text highlighting a female protagonist, its framework can be applied more broadly. Future studies could use the Qurʾānic ethical model to compare contemporary Muslim YA fiction works like those by S. K. Ali, Samira Ahmed, Hafsah Faizal, or Sabaa Tahir, examining how virtues shift across gender, geography, and genre. The model can also be applied to works other than Islamic fiction, opening up avenues for comparative studies in African American, interfaith, and postcolonial literatures.

Ultimately, *A Voice* models a distinctive Qurʾānic ethic: steadfast tenderness. By highlighting the female experience and transforming doctrinal clarity into daily acts of care, Zakiyyah expands African American reversion narratives, showing that virtue is both felt and enacted. The novel demonstrates how internal moral struggle translates into relational fidelity, offering readers an aesthetic and ethical vision of faith in action. It provides the groundwork for a broader understanding of how reverts might navigate their beliefs amid familial tension, marking *A Voice* as both a literary achievement and a guide for ethical living.

Essentially, *A Voice* operates as both narrative and praxis. It is an aesthetic of belief that shows how steadfast faith and tender care can coexist. Zakiyyah redefines moral heroism for Muslim reverts, portraying it as a daily composition of patience, restraint, and love held accountable before God.

Conflicts of Interest: The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abd-Allah, U. F. (2006). *Islam and the cultural imperative.* Nawawi Foundation. https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v1i1.10

Abdul Khabeer, S. (2016). *Muslim cool: Race, religion, and hip hop in the United States.* New York University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1bj4sbr

Abou El Fadl, K. (2001). *Speaking in God's name: Islamic law, authority, and women.* Oneworld.

Afsaruddin, A. (2019). *Jihad: What everyone needs to know.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/wentk/9780190647315.001.0001

al-Fārūqī, I. R. (1986). *Al-Tawhid: Its implications for thought and life.* International Institute of Islamic Thought.

al-Ghazālī, A. H. M. (2004). *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* [The revival of the religious sciences] (Vols. 1–4). Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah. (Original work published ca. 1100)

al-Kindī, Y. I. (1974). *Al-Kindī's metaphysics: A translation of "On first philosophy"* (A. L. Ivry, Ed. & Trans.). State University of New York Press.

al-Rāzī, F. al-D. (1981). *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb (al-tafsīr al-kabīr)* (3rd ed.). Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī.

al-ʿĀmirī, A. al-Ḥ. (1990). *On the excellences of Islam* (M. Arkoun, Ed.). Dar al-Fikr.

Ali, A. i. H. (2018). *Preserving the freedom for faith: Reevaluating the politics of compulsion.* Lamppost Productions.

Ali, S., & Rippy, C. (2021). Documenting and assessing the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Americans. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health, 15*(2), 45–66. https://doi.org/10.3998/jmmh.119

American Bar Association. (2024, November). Triple discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and religion. *ABA Human Rights Magazine*. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/human-rights/2024-november/triple-discrimination/

Andrews, W. L. (1986). *To tell a free story: The first century of Afro-American autobiography, 1760–1865.* University of Illinois Press.

Anwar, G. (2001, October 5–6). Islam, homosexuality and migration. *Islam in the West and Homosexuality—Strategies for Action, Yoesuf Foundation Conference*, Utrecht. [Conference presentation]

Aziz, S. F. (2022). *The racial Muslim: When racism quashes religious freedom.* University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520382305

Bullock, K. (2011). *Rethinking Muslim women and the veil: Challenging historical & modern stereotypes.* International Institute of Islamic Thought.

Considine, C. (2020). *The humanity of Muhammad: A Christian view.* Blue Dome Press.

Ibn Khaldūn, A. R. (1967). *The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history* (F. Rosenthal, Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published ca. 1377)

Ibn Miskawayh, A. A. (1968). *Tahdhīb al-akhlaq* [The refinement of character]. Dar al-Maʿarif. (Original work published ca. 1030)

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, M. (1972). *Madārij al-sālikīn bayna manāzil "iyyāka naʿbudu wa-iyyāka nastaʿīn."* Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī.

Ibn Ṭufayl, A. B. (2003). *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (L. E. Goodman, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published ca. 1185). https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226307763.001.0001

Ibn ʿArabī, M. (1980). *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* [The Meccan revelations]. Dar Sadir. (Original work published ca. 1238)

Iqbal, M. (1934/2012). *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam.* Stanford University Press.

Jackson, S. A. (2005). *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the third resurrection.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195180817.001.0001

Knight, N. M. (2020). Apprenticeships in moral reasoning: Ethics and identity in contemporary young adult fiction. *Journal of Youth Literature Studies, 12*(2), 85–102.

Knight, N. M. (2023). Faith and formation: Ethics of becoming in Muslim American women's fiction. *Journal of Contemporary Literature, 18*(1), 45–62. https://doi.org/10.54075/jcl.v18i1.2045

Mabvurira, V., & Yasin, A. (2023). *Islamophobia and the challenge of being Muslim in institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 20*(2), 1–8.

Makki, H. (2018). Muslims in young adult fiction. In S. Karim (Ed.), *Muslims and the media* (pp. 41–53). Chicago Muslim Educational Trust.

Mattson, I. (2010). *The story of the Qur'an: Its history and place in Muslim life* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

McCloud, A. B. (1995). *African American Islam.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315021546

Mullā Ṣadrā. (1981). *al-Ḥikma al-mutaʿāliya fī l-asfār al-ʿaqliyya al-arbaʿa (al-asfār al-arbaʿa)* (3rd ed.). Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī.

Nasr, S. H. (2002). *The heart of Islam: Enduring values for humanity.* HarperOne.

Patel, E. (2007). *Acts of faith: The story of an American Muslim, the struggle for the soul of a generation.* Beacon Press.

Peek, L. (2011). *Behind the backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11.* Temple University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrdf3dw

Ramadan, T. (2004). *Western Muslims and the future of Islam.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195183566.001.0001

Rashid, H. (2021). *Muslim voices in contemporary American literature: Identity, ethics, and belonging.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003134568

Salem, F. (2022). ʿAḍud al-Dīn Ījī's ethics: A translation of *al-Akhlaq al-ʿAḍudiyya* and some notes on its commentaries. In B. Orfali, A. Khalil, & M. Rustom (Eds.), *Mysticism and ethics in Islam* (pp. 249–272). American University of Beirut Press.

School Library Journal. (2019, August 5). Muslim Americans in YA: Great books for teens. *School Library Journal*. https://www.slj.com/story/muslim-americans-in-ya

Shakir, Z. (2014). *Scattered pictures: Reflections of an American Muslim.* New Islamic Directions.

Shariati, A. (1984). *Reflections of humanity.* Book Distribution Center.

Stephens, J. (2016). Power, difference, and representation in young adult fiction. *International Research in Children's Literature, 9*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.3366/ircl.2016.0189

Umm Zakiyyah. (2004a). *A voice.* Al-Walaa Publications.

Umm Zakiyyah. (2004b). *If I should speak.* Al-Walaa Publications.

Wadud, A. (2006). *Inside the gender jihad: Women's reform in Islam.* Oneworld.

Wilson, G. W. (2010). *The butterfly mosque: A young woman's journey to love and Islam.* Grove Press.

Wilson, J. A. (2019). *Afro-Muslim cool: Blackness, religion, and hip hop.* Oxford University Press.

Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. (2018). *Being Black and Muslim in America: Identity and well-being*. Yaqeen Institute. https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/being-black-and-muslim-in-america

Yusuf, H. (2004). *Purification of the heart: Signs, symptoms and cures of the spiritual diseases of the heart.* Starlatch Press.

Zakaria, R., Hamzah, M. I., & Abdul Razak, K. (2022). Analysis of self-hisbah factors on moral appreciation among Muslim secondary school students in Malaysia: Fuzzy Delphi method application. *e-Bangi: Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities, 19*(2), 16–34.