

The Voice of Faith

A short note by a female Muslim writer

By Asma Nadia (Indonesia)

As a teenager I didn't know I could be a writer, even though my older sister, who had published her writing in various magazines, encouraged me to write. So, I wrote a short story and sent it to a popular teen magazine. It took a great deal of courage to send it. I waited for a response for days, weeks, but it never came. I failed.

When I showed my story to my Junior High school theatre coach, he said my story was shallow and clichéd. I buried my belief that I could write.

A couple of years later, my sister tried again to interest me in writing. She did not give up on me, even when I had given up on writing. She was in college and managing her own magazine, and kept encouraging me. She said I had the talent to be a writer. Still, I did not believe in myself.

But then she said something that finally changed my mind. She asked me how many writers that I knew. And of those, how many were female, and of those few female writers, how many were Muslim? I couldn't think of many. Then she said that because there were so few Muslim female writers, I had to write because we needed women Muslim writers. I did not really understand what she meant, but I knew she was right, so I began writing again.

After my first short story was published, I started gaining a little confidence. Then more were published. I tried my hand at writing competitions and won some of them. I continued writing and never got tired of it and now, I am a female Muslim writer with 49 books published, and a respectable list of prizes

Finally, I understand why Muslim women need female Muslim writers--there are, simply, topics that are better written by female Muslim writers. Unlike Muslim men, Muslim women are easily identifiable from their clothes and are subject to all kind of negative assumptions by other people. When I was in Korea, an old woman yelled at me, "Muslim! Muslim!" I nodded. She said, "Not good! Terrorist!"

In a European country a man asked me, "Are you Muslim? Does your husband have more than one wife?"

The more I travel, the more I realize that there is much misunderstanding about Islam. Not only by other people, but also by Muslims.

In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad said, "When you see evil, you must change it with your hand, or with your tongue, or with your heart, but that is the lowest level of faith."

The hand is the symbol of power, and I do not have any power, especially as I try my best to avoid politics. To protest with my heart seems too weak, and I hate to be weak. Still, I want to be one of the agents of change in our society.

As a writer I can speak with my tongue, I can defend what I believe, I can fight for people, for justice. It's a Muslim duty to do *amar makruf nahi munkar*, as is written in Al Qur'an: "And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful." (QS Al Imran: 104)

Or in hadith, as The Prophet Muhammad SAW said: *Those who guide others to goodness will receive the same rewards as the ones doing goodness.*

Islam gives me both the spirit and the way to fight for my gender and for humanity. To speak anything necessary in life because Islam is *Rahmatan lil alamin*, a blessing for the universe, every Muslim should only bring good, kindness and peace to the people around them, and that's exactly what I want to do with my writing.

After meeting many women who were victims of domestic abuse, I wrote a book called *Catatan Hati Seorang Istri (Notes from a Woman's Heart)* and many of my readers said that they felt their reality was well-represented in the story. When I encountered novels and books that promoted pornographic scenes, as has been happening, for example, in Indonesia since the year 2000, I tried to show in my work that there was an elegant, appropriate way to write about sex. When people committed terrorism in the name of Islam, I wrote against it.

So yes, my opinions, my responses, my writings are based on Islam and its mission (so I don't write pornography). But there are no limits to creativity. There are many forms, metaphors and symbols Muslim writers can use.

My hope is that more writers will write not only because they find a good story idea—though of course there is nothing wrong with that—but also write something good to enlighten readers, inspire and move them to do good deeds and make a difference. Those of us who have this 'super power' should use it for good, and good things only.

The Prophet said that when you die, all your deeds come to an end except three. Your charity to other people, your knowledge that benefits other people, and the prayers of your children.

I know I will die sooner or later, but I hope my writing will live forever.