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HOST: Writing is a responsibility in many ways, perhaps none more so than when we think about the cultural expectations inherent in writing as a minority - of any kind. As a woman, as LGBTQ, as a person of colour, as a person with a disability. As writers, what is our responsibility to the rest of our culture? And why does it seem so much heavier than that of CIS-male writers? After all, does Linwood Barclay worry about representing all men from Oakville as obsessed with crime? Welcome to The Conversation Piece. This is Noor Naga, speaking at The Walrus Talks in Toronto:

NOOR NAGA: Two years ago, I wrote a verse-novel called *The Mistress Washes Prays* about a young Muslim woman in Toronto who becomes romantically involved with a married man. When an excerpt of this won the Bronwen Wallace Award, I read a few of the poems at the ceremony. The reading was recorded. The recording was sent to my father, who sent it to my mother, who sent it to my grandmother in Egypt. Suddenly, the verse-novel became a family affair. "They'll think you're the mistress!" my mother objected.

My father waited until we were alone together to "warn" me that with writing comes a moral responsibility, and that in a few years, my own ethics might evolve in contradiction to something I've already published, and "it will be too late to retract it." He was right, of course. This is, rather, an aspiration of mine. I hope my ethics will be always evolving to meet my level of experience, always slipping out from under my feet. But my father's comment begged the question: was the verse-novel I'd written somehow an articulation of my ethics?

There is a belief in Islam that if you build a school or plant a tree or dig a well, or discover a new cure for disease or produce a work of useful scholarship, then you've left behind a good that keeps on multiplying when you're gone. The Qur'an describes it as "a grain of corn which grows seven ears, and each ear has a hundred grains" (2:261). The flipside of this formula is also inferred. A wrong committed or a misguidance transmitted can continue to hurt both you and others ad infinitum. This is what my father is worried about. Islamically, even just airing out your own sins or shortcomings is considered injurious because of the possibility that it will inspire others. How then can illicit love serve as my plot? You begin to see my problem. To complicate things further, I didn't just write about a Muslim Mistress, I wrote about her in English, in Canada.

My grandmother and I are exactly fifty years apart. We were living together when I came home one day to find her sitting on the leather couch with something to say in her mouth.

"If your character is going to be a Muslim, why make her a mistress?" she began. I tried to explain that the whole verse-novel was about an affair, but my grandmother countered, "If she must be a mistress, why make her a Muslim?"

"Yes. Okay," she conceded. "That might be true, but they are already saying about us what you are now saying about us: that we're wicked and animal and dangerous. They already hate us and they love to see you agree with them."

My grandmother didn't say, "You're hurting us." She didn't have to.

It's impossible to be a Muslim, exposed to Western literature, media and pop culture, without feeling that we're living in a time of representational warfare. From the young, unshaven suicide bombers to the obese tyrannical oil sheikhs to the abused submissive hijab-wearing wives, the



stereotypes come in many flavours, none of which are positive, and many of which end up being deadly to people in the Middle East. The invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, which collectively resulted in over 200,000 civilian deaths, was predicated on years of pathologizing those same civilians as threatening and sub-human. This is not just an American problem. Since 2001, over 40,000 Canadian Forces personnel have been deployed to Afghanistan. Canada is the second largest arms exporter to the Middle East, second only to the US. But foreign policy is always a story here before it's boots on the ground or drones in the air over there. All mechanisms of violence depend on the dramatization of difference between self and other.

Given the dominant narrative around Muslims right now, and the bloodshed that it engenders, there is an understandable anxiety within the larger Muslim imaginary about how to rescue our image on the international stage. There's been a movement of writers, poets in particular, scrabbling to produce positive representations of us that demonstrate our peacefulness, intelligence, modernity, relatability, even our moral superiority. Horse sense dictates that, in order to prove to someone who thinks you are an animal that you are a human, you have to show them that you are a saint and a martyr. You have to overshoot the mark in order to land on it; hence the plethora of activist literature allegedly combatting the demonization of Muslims by making an opera of our victimhood. If a book written by one of us is not loudly objecting or defending or educating in this way, it is often considered not just irrelevant, but actually incorrect, as though literature were a kind of political mathematics. This is most apparent in English. Among ourselves, in our own languages, we can afford to explore other questions, but as minorities in populations that have the power to hurt us both here and overseas, there is an expectation that literary works will double as activism.

My problem with this species of protest, however, is that it invalidates itself. When all the art a marginalized group produces is reactionary—defensive, didactic, outraged—it empowers the voice of the centre by talking to it. I am reminded of a tweet by the Muslim Australian poet Omar Sakr, in which he says, “If we stay stuck in a news cycle of Muslim Monster v Muslim Human, we lose. To debate your humanity is to implicitly agree it is uncertain.” When literature considers itself a corrective prescription for xenophobes, it privileges xenophobic readers by respecting their accusations enough to challenge them. The more energy exhausted in communicating with an aggressor, the more their power and centrality is affirmed. Hence, to write in response to hatred is to fail before you've begun.

My grandmother's objection turned out to be a composite of my parents'. Like my mother, she is concerned that the verse-novel will be read autobiographically, as a collective confession on behalf of an entire religion. Like my father, her concern is ethical rather than aesthetic. She is less interested in what the work is than in what it will do in the world. She worries that a Canadian audience will read about a Muslim mistress and take Islam itself to be licentious. She thinks this country isn't ready to allow a muslim character that much individuality. After a year of ruminating on this question, I turn it to you, are we ready?

For Muslim writers in Canada, we can't escape the possibility that our work will be read in the service of bigotry, but we can, I think, choose to ignore the bigots. Let them talk to themselves. We elect the imaginary readers that we write for and so we are responsible for the host of expectations or restrictions that they bring to our pages.

Personally, I believe there is space in CanLit, between the Muslim terrorist and the Muslim martyr, for a Muslim mistress.



## The Conversation Piece Podcast: Noor Naga from The Walrus Talks

In fact, I believe she's necessary if we are going to escape the defence position we've been occupying for years. I realize that writing such a character means I may be understood as having betrayed my community by showing outsiders our lingerie, our desire for touch, our disappointment in god sometimes, our difficulty praying sometimes. There is this pressure as a Muslim writer in Canada to have all your characters on their best behaviour, perfect table-manners. But I want to write as though I have nothing to prove, as though I were writing to a country that loves me and my mother's hijab and my father's beard. Toronto, I want to be on my worst behaviour. And to have you know what I mean.

HOST: Noor Naga spoke at The Walrus Talks "The Future of the Arts," in 2018, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked and wheeled the stage at The Walrus Talks.

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