A Different *Jihad*: Autobiographical Narratives of Three Philippine Muslim Women Writers

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I started writing this paper more than twenty years ago, though I did not know it then. At that time, I was a young and over-eager college lecturer taking up my master's degree. The first National Conference on Muslim-Christian Women's Dialogue was held in De La Salle University, Manila in 1994. It was a strange ocean of nuns in habits, women in *hijab*, and teachers from the Religious Studies department. I do not remember why I was there, except that I was curious. I took away only one thing from that event: that the veil is not obligatory for Muslim women in the Philippines, but that they choose to wear it because they believe women's hair is a source of temptation for men. I must admit that I scoffed at the idea, being a liberal Christian and a feminist.

Nine years later, I was asked to do a book review of the bestselling memoir, *My Forbidden Face, Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story,* written by Latifa, a twenty-one-year-old woman whose family had fled Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Thus continued my informal and sporadic education in the status of women in Islam. Although again, I must admit that my attitude toward what I then considered my Other was still uncomprehending, and at worst, disdainful. The book cover of a woman wearing not just a veil, but a *burka* (the head-to-toe veil with only a meshwork peephole to see through) was evocative of this obscurity surrounding Muslim women. The Muslim woman's experience seemed so different and distant, and I did not feel the urgency of understanding it.

I was guilty of what Marnia Lazreg long ago described as "the difficulty researchers have in dealing with a reality with which they are unfamiliar" (85). Even feminist scholars commit this injustice when they focus only on the *suras* concerning women, particularly the ones saying that women should obey men; thus fetishizing what they view as oppression from their own perspective. Writing about how Islamic women in Algeria have been (mis)represented, Lazreg explains that this paradigm

> [...] preclude(s) any understanding of Algerian women *in their lived reality*: as subjects in their own right. Instead, they are reified, made into mere bearers of unexplained categories. Algerian women have no existence outside these categories; they have no individuality. What is true of one is true of all; just as what is true of Algerian women is also held to be true of all women deemed to be like them over the space generously defined as the "Muslim world" or the "Arab world" (94-95).

Seen in this light, good intentions to urge the Islamic woman to free herself from a patriarchal institution we do not understand are revealed as misguided self-righteousness. It is an injustice we do to ourselves too as feminist writers and scholars from the Asia-Pacific region. Yet, to a certain extent, this "worlding" of the Other could not be helped.

On the other hand, nine years ago, due to personal circumstances and decision, I moved to the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, where majority of the Philippines' Muslim population resides. And I'd like to think that this has lifted the veil from my eyes, so to speak. Kit Collier's country situationer in the contemporary sourcebook *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia* (2006) states that there are approximately four million Muslims in the Philippines, mostly concentrated in southwestern provinces of Mindanao, where they are continually evolving what is known as the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, established in 1990 in efforts to end the decades-long *jihad* for Muslim liberation. While they comprise only four to five percent of the Philippine population, Philippine Muslims have been hard put to define a "collective Islamic

identity." Collier confirms that this difficulty stems from "tribal loyalties based on ethno-linguistic distinctions" (64). A shared religion and history of struggle have not unified our thirteen Muslim tribes with different cultures and languages.

I live in Davao City, which hosts a Muslim minority in specific enclaves. Teaching in the state university has introduced me to different kinds of Muslim students, particularly women, very few of whom wear the *hijab*. As a matter of fact, I know that some of them purposely wear "normal" attire in order not to draw attention to their so-called Muslim identity. Some of them even wear clothes that would be considered "lewd" and *haram* or forbidden in their culture. It is their individual stories of courage that have prompted me to take up my old challenge of understanding my Other. I wondered if I were now ready to truly see the Philippine Muslim woman as an individual, not just as a symbol of women's oppression. And the only way to undertake this project was by listening to their own voices in their autobiographical narratives.

By studying three Muslim women writers' autobiographical narratives, this paper aims to show how each woman struggles to assert her individuality against the patriarchal demands of how Islam is interpreted and practiced in the Philippines. It examines how Pearlsha Abubakar, Janesa Mariam Ladjiman, and Diandra-Ditma Macarambon have taken various risks to subvert the Islamic culture they belong to, in both their lives and in their writing. And yet by choosing to remain within the Muslim community, they have also remained subject to its hegemony, which has thus resulted in a divided self.

I am guided in particular by Shari Benstock's framework on the study of women's autobiographies, which asks, "How do the fissures of female discontinuity display themselves, and what are the identifying features?" (1047). She explains that "autobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse" (1041). The self-disclosure in the narratives can be studied in the light of what is not said; the speaking subject aims to locate herself within her life and her community, but is also dislocated or decentered by her own efforts to articulate her position. As Benstock notes, the self only *appears* to be organic. Harnessing the tools of poststructuralism, she suggests examining

the following elements: "representation; tone; perspective; figures of speech; even the shift between first-, second-, and third-person pronouns" (1048) in order to reveal the "fissures of female discontinuity" in a text. This reading strategy allows a feminist reader like me, who presumes to be an empathetic observer, to illuminate the "relation between the psychic and the political, the personal and the social, in the linguistic fabric" (1048). In this manner, I hope to be able to contribute to the evolving discourse on women in Islam as it is practiced in the Philippines.

While it is true, as Lazreg warns, that "a feminist engaged in the act of representing women who belong to a different culture, ethnic group, race, or social class wields a form of power over them; a power of interpretation" (96), I would like to add here that what I aim to do is less of an interpretation, and more of an "explication" in its Latin sense of "unfold, set forth," as I do not presume to know these women writers or Islamic culture more than they do. In a manner of speaking, I have also taken a risk in undertaking this project, one that I hope will create more opportunities for understanding rather than discord.

My title, "A Different *Jihad*," suggests that the Philippine Muslim woman writer's efforts to write her life is not simply a matter of examining her memories in relation to whom she has become, but is part of a larger religious and cultural context in which she struggles to belong. The word "*jihad*" literally means to endeavor, to strive, to struggle, and to fight. "It can mean the personal struggle to make oneself a better Muslim through prayer and fasting, and by acquiring a deeper knowledge of the faith… It can also mean fighting against injustice, ignorance and oppression through preaching and *writing*" (Fealy 353, emphasis mine). *Jihad* is further classified into the "lesser *jihad*," (*jihaadun asgharun*) which refers to armed struggle or holy war, and the "greater *jihad*," (*jihaadun akbarun*) which "entails struggling against one's own personal desires, such as greed, lust and vanity" (353). In these senses, women share the same *jihad* with Muslim men. The difference, I posit, arises from the woman writer's two-step with the Islamic culture. She pushes against its borders to see how far it might stretch to accommodate her individuality, then when she feels the strain, she pulls back towards the center of its protection. This retreat leads to the decentering of her articulated self. As Adamson discovers in her anthropological study of Javanese Muslim women, when gender

identities are challenged, especially within relationships, it "simultaneously (disrupts) one of the most subjective ways of knowing oneself and one's place in an otherwise unstable world" (8), thus causing what she calls "gendered anxiety." But the risks for these women writers I study are not merely discursive; they are real.

Pearlsha Abubakar: Along the Path of Piety

I begin with Pearlsha Abubakar, who, among the three, occupies a privileged position, having been born, raised, and educated in Metro Manila, the capital of the country. She has been a fellow in two national writers workshops, has won a prestigious Philippine literary award for her fiction, and has been published in two landmark anthologies of Muslim writing. Born to Tausug parents who have been living in exile from their home in Sulu, she describes herself as a "decadent urbanite" who often had arguments with her father about "his conservative worldviews— that women and men have divinely-defined roles, for instance." In an essay entitled "No Dowry, No Cry," first published in a now-defunct website in 2000, and reprinted in May this year in the *Dagmay* literary journal of the Davao Writers Guild, she writes about her subversive decision to marry R, a Christian.

Initially, she presents herself as an unseemly Muslim woman, with a "skimpy dress on that merely flattened out whatever curves remained in my ectomorphic body. I didn't have a veil on…" She also reveals a somewhat derisive attitude towards her family name "Abubakar," which suggests "automatic cross references to Abu Sayyaf, Camp Abubakar, and Abubakar Janjalani (we are not related, by the way)." These references have negative connotations in the Philippine setting, bringing to mind acts of terror perpetrated by the renegade *jihadist* group Abu Sayyaf. She brings home a Christian who wants her hand in marriage, despite knowing that, according to her father, "back in Sulu, a Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim was downright unthinkable." What's worse, R was poor and did not have anything to offer as a dowry.

Abubakar goes on to explain her knowledge of the Islamic rules in her community: "A dowry could actually be anything from a million pesos to a prayer mat, depending on the man's ability to pay and the woman's capacity to reciprocate his affections. If the woman is not particularly smitten with the

man, her family raises her dowry to a level that is sure to turn the poor suitor away." She adds that "not only does it serve as compensation for the parents for raising a marriageable maiden; the dowry is also a security blanket for the wife if the marriage leaves her cold." Here, we see that Abubakar appreciates the power gender dynamics in Islam as it is practiced in the Philippines: the woman does have a say in whom she wants to marry; and if the marriage does not make her happy, she can give it up. Islamic law prohibits forcing a woman to marry; whether she is a virgin or a matron, her consent must be sought (Naseef 89). As for dowry, the Qur'an says "Wed them with the permission of their own folk and give them their *mahr* according to what is reasonable" (4:25 in Naseef 174). Thus, it must be paid to show the husband's commitment to his responsibility toward his wife. Yet the Prophet also said, "When you marry, do so even with an iron ring" (176).

After Abubakar and R are wedded in a traditional Muslim ceremony called *kawin*, in which the man is cleansed and baptized, then asked to recite the Islamic prayer, *Al Fatiha*, her dowry is set officially at Php50,000 and one sheet of gold. This was a huge sum of money at that time, so the poor groom is incredulous. The essay ends with: "I left him to ponder the question as I sang Jennifer Lopez's "Love Don't Cost a Thing." When she refers to this song, Abubakar shows her stand against the practice of *mahr*; she identifies with the Western ideal of love. Some of the lyrics of the song say:

> Even if you were broke
> my love don't cost a thing…
>
> All that matters is that you treat me right
> Give me all the things I need that money can't buy
>
> When I took a chance, thought you'd understand…
> so you're trying to buy what's already yours…

She gives the new husband hope that it does not really matter whether he has the funds to pay the dowry or not. They are already married, after all. We can assume that she will subvert the culture by accepting this marriage even without a dowry, which is a risk she is taking in the name of love. And sex. Elsewhere in the essay, she admits, "We were

so in love, we just couldn't wait another day. And we definitely wanted to have sex any time, any day without my father scowling at us at the back of our minds."

On the other hand, let me draw attention to how the female subject is dis/located. Abubakar says:

> I also saw the whole situation as a test; if R. were nonchalant about this whole dowry business and about Islam in general, then maybe he couldn't be that serious about me. I had inherited my religion and my surname from my father, and I wanted R. to realize that if he were going to love me, he also had to love the assortment of strange people I loved, since I did not subscribe to the you-and-me-against-the-world school of relationships.

In this passage, she reveals that she is on the same side as her father on the matter of the dowry, as well as the prohibition against mixed marriages. Not only does the man need to pay the dowry, he has to do it to pass a "test." The metaphor she uses suggests that in order for the non-Muslim to deserve marriage to a Muslim woman, he has to embrace the Islamic family and culture to which she belongs, strange though it may be. Because she does not believe in "you-and-me-against-the-world," something has got to give. And in this case, it is the non-Muslim. In fact, when the *kawin* ceremony is held, he is ritually baptized into the religion. He does not have a choice.

Moreover, she admits, "I wanted to get married right away to appease my father." She explains that in the Philippines it is considered a sin for a Muslim woman to enjoy the company of man who is not her relative or husband. Thus, marriage will make her a righteous Muslim woman. In a way, she knows that her father's protests are only superficial, because she is actually doing the right thing.

A particularly poignant moment in the essay is when Abubakar admits that "Islam was the scaffold that supported my otherwise ambivalent relationship with my father." She uses the scaffold as a metaphor for the role that Islam plays in her family. I assume she means it as "a temporary structure for holding workers and materials during the erection of a build-

ing," in which case she pushes against the rules, revealing the power of the religion as temporary and precarious. And yet, a scaffold also refers to "an elevated platform on which a criminal is executed, usually by hanging," in which case she judges herself as having done something unlawful and thus must be punished with death.

Five years after, Abubakar publishes a short sequel in the anthology *Children of the Ever-Changing Moon* (2007). It is a letter to her father; it is one of reconciliation, not just with her father, but with her Muslim self. Initially, she asserts her stand against her father's request for a second wedding, a grand and traditional one in their hometown, which will also mark the groom's conversion to Islam. She asks her father to stop asking for this, as it will not likely happen.

She adds that in her process of growth as a person, she discovered "not religion, but art. Music. Poetry. Literature" (3). She further distances herself from her father and the Islamic culture by sharing that "prayer for you is five times a day and *khutbah* on Fridays. Prayer for me is every time I play the piano, compose a song, and write an essay." Reading this would have broken her father's heart, as prayer or *salawaat* is one of the pillars of Islam. But she also apologizes to him for this: "Sorry that I have to live that life differently from what you'd envisioned for me" (2).

On the other hand, the letter also aims to appease her father. She assures him that she is still a dutiful Muslim wife and mother. "Your grandchild will be fine. He'll know all the paths, and I'll show him the ways. R and I are good" (4). These, in fact, are the obligations of a Muslim wife: obedience to her husband, reproduction, and "increasing the numbers of the Muslim nation" (Naseef 197). It is said that the spiritual education of children is an obligation of the mother; she is expected to teach them the fundamentals of faith, as well as be a good example (237). Perhaps Abubakar here tries to reach a compromise with her father and the culture that he represents. She may not be a good example of the practices, but at least she is raising her child with knowledge of the religion so he would not become a lost soul.

Lastly, she assures her father that she is in a state of greater *jihad*: "that's the challenge I'm constantly battling, the challenge to overcome myself…Overcoming through surrendering—how beautiful it is! Someday I might just find myself along that path" (4). Here, she says what her father wants to hear—that one day, she will stop resisting her Islamic identity; that she will "surrender" her subversive notions, give herself up. And then

she will finally become a beautiful Muslim woman, one who has overcome a long and worthy *jihad* despite her seemingly unconventional approach. *Inshaa'llah*.

Janesa Mariam Ladjiman: A Plea for Help

Of the three writers in this study, Janesa Mariam Ladjiman is the youngest, having only graduated from college in 2012. She finished a Bachelor of Arts in English, major in Creative Writing, cum laude, in the University of the Philippines Mindanao. And yet, among the three, her individual accomplishment as a female Muslim writer is most significant. To complete her degree, she needed to write a book-length manuscript as a thesis; she chose to write personal essays exploring her struggles as a Muslim "in the borderline," because she had thought she was "a Muslim (with) many questions about her religion but who didn't want to start finding answers" (xii). She admits, though, that in the process of writing her thesis, she discovered that she did not want to step outside the borderline because she did not want to give up her family and her identity as an Islamic woman. She claims, "I love who I am" (xii). That is, she loves who she thinks she is in relation to the Islamic culture she belongs to. She also reveals in her preface that "Writing was my way of making that hazy road I had been walking through all this time, a bit clearer." She wrote eight essays, each about an aspect of Islam, plus a preface, and titled her collection, *Outside the Masjid* (2012).

I discuss here the essay "Five Deadly Sins," which has been published in *Dagmay Literary Folio*, which comes out in print in the local daily *Sun. Star Davao* and is also available online at dagmay.kom.ph. The essay revolves around what Ladjiman defines as five deadly sins: Gluttony, Pride, Greed, Lust, and Boasting. And yet the reader soon realizes that she is not really writing about the above sins per se, but only of her disobedience or resistance to the pillars and rules of Islam, particularly in regard to prayer.

One cannot help but admire the candor and the courage of this writer, who dares to risk the ire of the Muslim community in her admission of her failings. Ladjiman begins her essay by admitting that she does not perform the prayer or *sambahayang* five times a day: "I do it five times a month when I have the time, or at least once every three months." Not only does she claim that she does not have time to pray, she also confesses that " the

sambahayang is one of the things that I readily sacrifice to attend to other things I consider more important." But what could be more important than prayer for a Muslim? Prayer is obligatory because it is meant "to fully realise spiritual contact with God" (Hooker 95); it is a "reminder of God's presence" (96). The Qur'an states that "prayer is a duty incumbent on the faithful, to be conducted at appointed hours" (4:103 in Naseef 121). Thus, it is tantamount to sacrilege when Ladjiman writes that "it seems that when it is time to pray, all of a sudden I remember that I have other things to do. Sometimes, I tell myself that I have to go to school or I have assignments to do or I have somewhere else to go. I know that all of these are mere excuses but I don't really care." It is possible that other Muslims share the same attitude towards prayer, but they will not dare say it, or publish it.

She further narrates that when she was twelve, her mother taught her the *wudhu,* or the ritual of cleansing the body before praying. She remembers having many questions about the process: "I wondered why it had to be done three times. Will it make any difference if I skipped one act and proceeded to the next one? What would happen if I only did it twice?" But she did not dare ask her mother directly. She describes the ritual as "punishment" and as "torture." At nineteen, she does know how to perform *wudhu* and *sambahayang,* but she does not practice them. She ends this section by comparing *sambahayang* to "walking around school in heels and with a big bag of stones." It may make her look good, but it is a burden, a source of suffering.

In the section entitled "Gluttony," Ladjiman tells us about a time when she dared eat a slice of bread after she had performed *wudhu,* and her mother commanded her to perform the ritual again to prepare for a visit to the *masjid*. But by the time they arrived at the mosque, the prayer had begun. So the young Ladjiman was not allowed entry; she waited for her mother outside the *masjid*. This is what the title of the collection refers to literally. "I sat there for almost an hour eating and drinking what satisfied my hunger"—seemingly as a way to get back at the culture that did not make any sense to her—and which her mother only expressed as: "Just follow what I tell you. I only teach you what good Muslims do." She ends this section with no remorse: "I don't regret eating that slice of bread because I know it would have been much better than joining the ceremony and praying to Allah that the Imam make the *sambahayang* faster."

The second sin, "Pride," focuses on her travail of preventing coming into contact with a male tricycle driver after having performed *wudhu*. In this section, her impiety is inadvertently caused by the driver, who was ignorant of her need to stay clean. She seems eager to be pure enough to perform *sambahayang*, but the narrative later reveals that she is only avoiding contact with the man because she "did not want to go about the same ritual," which suggests that her consternation was only a matter of ritual, and not of reason or faith.

In the third section, "Greed," Ladjiman expresses her concerns about why Muslim women are seated at the back of the *masjid*, while the men are in front. Her mother explains that "women are more capable of 'concentrating' than men." But the child admits that "I didn't understand what she meant because whenever I stepped into the mosque, I immediately felt drowsy and sleepy." Islamic scholar Abdul-ati explains that the segregation of males and females in a mosque does not imply rank: "If men mix with women in the same lines, it is possible that something disturbing or distracting may happen. [...] The result will be a loss of the purpose of prayers, besides an offense of adultery committed by the eye, because the eye—by looking at forbidden things—can be guilty of adultery as much as the heart itself" (*Jannah.Org*). On the other hand, feminist scholar Dagher finds an *Hadith* in which the Prophet once said, "Three things corrupt prayer: Women, dogs, and donkeys." (*Light of Life*). Further, she mentions a saying attributed to the Prophet: "I think that women were created for nothing but evil." Thus the child's questions about whether Allah loves boys more than girls have some weight. But as usual, the mother refuses to discuss it further.

In a scatological turn of events, the child experiences stomach discomfort during prayers, but her mother refuses to give her leave to go to the toilet. Thus, Ladjiman ends up praying "intently to Allah to make the ceremony faster for [her] suffering to end. [She] prayed even harder that [she] won't poop in [her] underpants because [she] was wearing a white *luko*." Yet in the midst of her gastrointestinal despair, which all of us have experienced at some point or other, she also has a moment of lucid rebellion: "I wondered if Allah heard my prayers because about one hundred other people were praying all at the same time." This, again, is a dangerous question to ask because it seems to doubt the omnipotence of Allah.

The fourth sin, "Lust," begins with another reference to the segregation of the sexes in the mosque. Her mother explains that women have to sit behind the men so that the men will not be tempted. But she fails to enlighten the girl about what "tempting" means, perhaps because of her reluctance to discuss sex. Temptation or *fitnah* is central to many rules surrounding Muslim women, e.g. covering the *juyubihinna* (bodies, faces, necks and bosoms) with the *hijab* (Naseef 110). This practice has been interpreted as a means of protecting women "from any potential threat to her honour and dignity" (107). Dagher maintains, however, that the Prophet has said "I fear no temptation that would befall my people but for the temptation of women and wine" (*Light of Life*), which firmly assigns a negative role to women.

On the other hand, this section in Ladjiman's essay is not about the *hijab*, but about her brazen decision to attend a Christian worship session, and even enjoy it because of the music, singing, and dancing. She dares voice out that she would love to be invited again, which is tantamount to being converted. The section ends with: "If only praying in my religion were like this, I would go to the mosque and pray as often as I could. I do not understand why we pray the way we do." On one level, it is only a hypothetical statement, but on another, it is a betrayal of her religion's practices.

In the last section, "Boasting," Ladjiman further reveals her uneasiness with Islamic rituals, which always make her sleepy at best, and resentful at worst. "It is a language so alien to me that whenever I hear the *Imam,* my mind starts to wander. I am there but my mind is somewhere else. No matter how hard I try, I can't concentrate. Sometimes, I spend the hour sitting there, listening but not understanding a single thing… Nothing makes any sense." As a child, she boastfully demands that "*Imams* should make sure that everybody can understand what they are saying." Once again, she dares to voice out what many Muslims probably experience but do not express—the incomprehension and frustration during congregational prayers in Arabic.

In 2011, at a writers' workshop in which Ladjiman was a fellow, one of the senior panelists asked, "Are you ready for the risk of publishing your essays?" He even gave the famous example of the fatwa on Salman Rushdie. She was dumbfounded because at that point, she admitted, "Before the workshop, it was only the fear of being rejected by the panelists. But

after, it was both the fear of being rejected by the panelists and all the other Muslims out there, including my own family" (xiii). It is true that those of us who write essays are often more concerned with what is going on inside us than how our writing will be received by the public. But as Ladjiman herself admits, her subversive essays have actually shown her the way back to Islam.

For instance, the essay is titled "Five Deadly Sins," which seems to give the essay a pontifical tone, as though it meant to preach about how to avoid these so-called sins. It is an allusion to the Christian concept of the "Seven Deadly Sins," and the reader thus expects perhaps an Islamic version. But reading closely, one notices that the sections labeled with the names of the sins are not exactly about the identified sins. Thus, the title and sections function as red herrings, meant to confuse or disarm the reader, who must now struggle to make sense of the essay's strategies. On the other hand, this ambiguity may also be rooted in the writer's own confusion about what constitutes a "deadly sin" in her own religion as it is practiced by her family and community. Her narrative is peppered with her frustration about not being able to understand why something must be done or not done in Islam, as well as her inability to ask her mother for clarification for fear of her anger. She ends her essay with, "Allah knows how much I want to understand the Muslim language, if only to feel what most Muslims in the *masjid* feel when praying. In this way, I will finally belong." This essay is actually a plea for somebody to help her understand.

Moreover, when she sees her mother crying while praying, she says, "She listened to the Imam, bowed her head, and cried. I did not want to distract her from crying. When I looked at every woman I see inside the *masjid,* I felt like I was the only person who did not understand what was going on around me." This seems to highlight the alienation she feels and her lack of appreciation for the spiritual experience. Piety in a woman is highly valued in any religion. It has been said that a pious Islamic woman "will easily be moved to tears because of God. Her heart will easily cry and moan because of the sins she has committed" (Tuskan qtd. in Fealy and Hooker 277). Ladjiman writes, "I want to feel what Mommy feels whenever she is inside the *masjid*." This sentiment establishes the hegemony of the Islamic culture over her—the only way for her to be moved to tears is to acknowledge one's sinfulness. In a way, she does not need to understand,

she only needs to feel guilty for not being the best example of piety, which, essentially, has to do with obedience to God and his prophet, and later, to her husband (277).

So what are the deadly sins in Islam? One will not find the answer in this autobiographical narrative.

Diandra-Ditma Macarambon: To Say *Bismillah*

I met Diandra-Ditma Macarambon at the Taboan Philippine International Writers Festival in February in 2013. She was in a panel on gender and writing in which I delivered a keynote address. I had not read her work because she was quite new to the literary scene, having attended a National Writers' Workshop only the previous year. When it was her turn to speak, I noticed that her introductory paragraphs were unusually long, as if she were stalling. Then when she finally got to her point, I understood the delay. After a deep breath and a long pause, she said, "I am a woman-loving woman. So, yes, that's where the apprehension was coming from and now I've actually said it, I can officially start my talk." There was an audible gasp from our small audience of about twenty. I am certain that none of us in that audience had ever seen a Muslim lesbian in the flesh. Macarambon herself said it was unthinkable: "Most people in my community don't even recognize the existence or even the concept of a woman-loving woman! I don't need to talk about how the religious take this kind of lifestyle or choice because I'd say all of us know about that already. In fact, if you really think about how people in my community take this, you'd arrive at the conclusion that the word Muslim and the word lesbian or gay just don't go together! So, what does that make me?"

I must admit that meeting Macarambon was quite the turning point in my twenty-year journey of trying to understand the Muslim woman. I just knew that her particular story of womanly courage had to be listened to. When I asked her for her work, she submitted a story, explaining that she was not really out as a lesbian. She said she only gathered the courage to come out during the Iligan National Writers' Workshop and at the festival because she felt safe in the company of people who would not judge her: "I liked how it felt, being able to tell everyone what and who I really am. But, as to the world outside the literary world, I'm afraid I'm not as thrilled about coming out."

When I published her story in the *Dagmay Literary Folio*, I asked her if she preferred to use a pseudonym to protect her family, which comes from royal Meranao lineage. But she bravely allowed me to print her real name, saying that she can always excuse herself, if necessary, by claiming that it is fiction (as many women writers have done before her). But I am presenting her story, "The Right Choice," in this paper as an autobiographical narrative. As Carolyn Heilbrun once defined it: "to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; (or) she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction" (11). Macarambon has admitted to me that the story is "semi-autobiographical." Yet each time I speak about her work in public, I need to be conscious that she is still in the process of coming out to her family, and that I need to protect her "semi-secret."

Told by an unnamed first-person narrator, the story begins with a woman preparing for her wedding. However, by the end of the narrative, she is seen spending her honeymoon night throwing up in the toilet. The narrator describes everyone as happy about the wedding, except, of course, her. What makes this story different is its conflict: the narrator has given up her lesbian partner for this marriage. On their last meeting, Macarambon writes, "I couldn't eat as I felt my insides churning with every bite. I wanted to throw up… She looked at me with imploring eyes. I held her in my gaze for a few seconds as I felt something build up at the pit of my stomach. But, I kept staring. Not answering." It is this "something" that bothers her the entire wedding day and which finally finds release on her wedding night. It is how her body expresses her lack of acceptance of the transaction that she has had to swallow in order to do what is right for a Muslim woman. It sits at the pit of her stomach, or her gut, which knows what is right for her as an individual. Her lesbian partner implores her to say "no," suggesting that she recognizes the Islamic rule that a woman cannot be forced to marry; she must give her consent. Her silence is taken as consent (Naseef 89). Thus, all the narrator really has to do is to say no. Her partner mutters, "Do what's right," which suggests that the right thing to do is not to get married without her true consent. She is not even asking the narrator to choose her; although readers can assume that if she does not marry the man, she will be able to continue her lesbian relationship. When the story ends with her finally throwing up, the message is that she does not accept what she has done. But of course, it is too late.

But what does Islam actually say about lesbianism? Macarambon says in her speech: "I don't need to talk about how the religious take this kind of lifestyle or choice because I'd say all of us know about that already." She takes it for granted that it is considered a sin in every religion. On the other hand, according to Faris Malik, in an essay about queer sexuality in the Qur'an and *Hadith*, the verses that are used to prohibit homosexuality refer to acts of "indecency" or "lewdness" (*fahishah*), which are not defined specifically, and which also apply to heterosexual couples. He adds, "in order for someone to be convicted of the offense, four eyewitnesses have to testify to it, which seems to indicate some sort of public act" (*Born Eunuchs*). Thus, some liberal Muslims accept homosexuality as long as erotic behavior is not displayed publicly. Elsewhere, however, prohibitions against illicit intercourse are read in relation to sex outside of marriage, which may certainly cover homosexual relationships (Naseef), but it has to do specifically with sexual intercourse. May we infer that if two women want to be in a long-term relationship, they can do so as long as they do not have sex? The matter continues to provoke debate and further studies. Yet "the feminist and reformist argument (is) that *shar'iah* should be put in its historical and social context, as this would make other and more progressive interpretations of the Qur'an possible" (Jivraj and de Jong), making same-sex relationships permissible.

But should Macarambon feel threatened by having written this "lesbian story?" Has she put her family to shame? Definitely not, considering all the narrative strategies she uses to promote the hegemonic stand on lesbianism. First, the story begins at dawn, before light, as the narrator looks out a window: "It felt like *Ramadhan*, the peace and quiet. I continued looking into the dark, seeing nothing. I shivered in the cold." The peace she refers to here is artificial; it is cold, and she is not seeing, she is in the dark. To prepare for the wedding, she takes a bath, which she describes as: "I felt my life, as I knew it, being washed away. Whatever tears and protests I had were drowned by the strong stream from the shower." This is the appropriate attitude for an Islamic woman to take, much like the *wudhu* or cleansing ritual described by Ladjiman. *Wudhu* cleanses one of iniquities and prepares one for communion with God. This shower, which washes away her life as she knew it, is symbolic of baptism.

In addition, we are told that when the narrator and her lesbian partner part ways, she drives off, not knowing where to go: "I just drove

round and round the city. Truth is I had no confidence to go far. I had no confidence to go out of the city just like that. I was not one for that kind of adventure." It is thus revealed that she will not go against the Islamic culture. She owed it to her mother, especially, who had struggled to keep the family afloat after the father's untimely death, and who successfully arranged this "ideal" marriage. "This was all her work," the narrator reiterates, reminding herself to be grateful. As she and her groom walk down the aisle, she clings to him, "as though [her] life depended on it" because it really does, as a Muslim husband is tasked to take care of every need of his wife and children. In exchange, she will obey him.

By the end of the story, it is night, and she stares at her reflection, tearful that "it is no longer [her] face; it is a face [she doesn't] recognize." When she is effaced, it actually signifies the Islamic ideal earlier referred to by Abubakar in her letter to her father as the beautiful surrender that is the goal of each person's greater *jihad*. It is the ideal state of "*Bismillah*"—giving one's life completely over to Allah. As Wahiduddin explains, "To say *bismillah* is to humbly offer one's self as a vehicle for the glory and majesty of The One" (Shelquist). Thus, the title of the story, "The Right Choice," actually refers to the choice she has made, to sacrifice her personal desires for her family, her community, and her God.

In a Philippine study of Islamic jurisprudence and women's rights, Mejia contends that what makes the laws patriarchal are the interpretations of the Qur'an and Sharia, as well as the socio-political aspect of the religion. Yet she also finds that "A major feature of Islamic jurisprudence is that its laws may change to adapt to the change of time, place and/or circumstance. *Shari'ah* recognizes the dynamism of societies; societies differ in place and time" (9). This gives gender activists in Islamic countries hope in continuing the struggle for more equitable interpretations of the law. The first openly queer American Imam Daayiee Abdullah adds that "culture supersedes religion and dictates how religion and religious laws are imposed. I think the work of [...] queer Muslim activists has helped people better understand that what they've been taught is a cultural manifestation of what the Koran means" (Rathod). Thus, as in hermeneutics, the Qur'an is a site of struggle for signification. As Macarambon herself bravely declared in her speech: "That is why I am here! I would want to be a voice. A voice for those who are too afraid to be themselves… A voice for those who are like me, who've hidden how special they are because of this fear

of judgment and intolerance. I would like to be a voice for these people. I know that I am not alone in this struggle."

Indeed she is not alone. Pearlsha Abubakar, Janesa Ladjiman, and Diandra Macarambon represent three Islamic voices in Philippine literature that have courageously sung their heart's desires in the midst of the danger of reprisal. While I have shown how their voices have been overpowered by the louder chorus of the culture they belong to, it does not diminish their achievement of speaking up against what they do not understand or what they question about the Islamic culture. Their voices ring true and loud nonetheless, proving that there is not only one *jihad*, and that each of us is called to find our own way to win it.

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