

12-1-2019

An Interview with Aisha Sharif

Natalie Hayes
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer>

Recommended Citation

Hayes, Natalie (2019) "An Interview with Aisha Sharif," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 29.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol8/iss1/29>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.

An Interview with Aisha Sharif

Aisha Sharif is a Cave Canem fellow and Pushcart Prize recipient who has just debuted her first poetry collection, *To Keep from Undressing*. The collection explores the spaces Sharif has occupied, or has been unable to occupy, as a result of being an African American Muslim woman. She traverses her identities, and the ways in which those identities intersect, in life and on the page. Sharif resides in Shawnee, Kansas and teaches English at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, Missouri.

GANDY DANCER: At the onset of your collection *To Keep from Undressing*, it is made clear that it will be one about the intersection of personal identities—religious, racial, gender, and otherwise. I’m interested in the decision to have each of the poems in the book be explicitly about said identities; although they vary dramatically in their language, perspectives, forms, et cetera, there is a highly visible, traceable thread going through this collection. How, if at all, do you feel the presence of that thread might have affected your process? I’m curious about the ordering of the poems in that way, especially regarding the five sections into which they are divided.

AISHA SHARIF: I would love to say that I made a decision to have each of the poems in the book be explicitly about my various personal identities; however, the collection of the poems came about quite naturally and almost unintentionally. The poems in the book were written over a period of thirteen years before the book was picked up for publication. The poems were written at specific times of my life without me thinking about collecting them in a book. Some poems were written in graduate school for creative writing workshops; others were written within the first few years of my marriage

while struggling to find teaching jobs, and a few as a new mother dealing with the baby blues. So, the poems reflect these individual identities because they were written at a time where that identity was probably very prominent in my life. When it came to collecting them for publication, I collected them less to show each individual identity but more so to show the chronology and trajectory of my life.

The book is divided into five sections because initially I wanted the book to mirror the five pillars of Islam, five tenets that guide Muslims' beliefs and actions. However, that organizing strategy wasn't working in earlier drafts of the manuscript and was dropped, but the five sections stuck as clear breaks in the work.

GD: Your work, as I've noted, is very much informed by your identities. In what ways do these identities affect your daily life, both professionally and otherwise?

AS: As an African American Muslim woman, my identities are very much tied into how I go about my daily life. I wear hijab, so that is an act I perform daily and consciously. I literally put my hijab on every morning; I am conscious of being Black when I wrap the scarf up in a turban style that is so specific to the African American/African culture. As a college professor who teaches at a predominately white institution, I am also aware of my minority status the moment I walk into the classroom. This consciousness can be tiring at times; at other times, the majority of the times, it is enlightening and beautiful as it allows me to see the intersectionality in many ways of existing. I try to weave in this intersectionality into my poetry.

Over the years, though, I questioned whether I was too specific of a demographic to get published. That is, not only was I talking about Islam, but I was also talking about Black Islam, which is even narrower in focus. I questioned whether publishers would not be able to relate to my work. But I am glad I never stopped approaching my work professionally in light of intersectionality as it seems that audiences enjoy the overlapping, revealing just how relatable intersectional identity is for readers.

GD: I touched on the broad, identity-based narrative that comes across in this book, but there are also a lot of tangential narrative arcs present. Take, for instance, the series of poems about hijabs. Looking at the fifth section alone, four out of the seven poems are, in varying capacities, about hijabs/the experience of wearing a hijab. Were these poems written with one another in mind? In other words, were you intending on there being a collection of hijab poems in the book? Or was it perhaps more subconscious than that?

AS: The poems were written very independently of each other. I wrote them during different times of my adulthood, each one reflecting a different issue

at that time that I was dealing with when it came to understanding the role of hijab in my life. When collecting the poems for the book, I knew that I wanted to include poems about hijab because that is such a significant aspect of my Muslim identity and including a range of poems on this topic would reflect the range of ways I have interacted with it. I believe that we never feel the same way about a belief or tenet every day of our lives and presenting the shifts, changes in opinion and wrestlings we have with faith is necessary and is part of the faith journey itself.

GD: Your poems, when considered as a collective, maintain a simultaneous intimacy and distance between themselves and the works by which they are surrounded. By that I mean, they are all clearly connected thematically, though vary dramatically in their individual execution. In particular, you play with form quite a lot in your executions—"Conversion: A Mathematical Expression of Faith" and the five "If My Parents Hadn't Converted: Questions & Answers" poems come to mind. What do you feel your relationship with form is, and in what ways has that relationship manifested in the book?

AS: I have always been attracted to formal aspects of poetry. When I initially entered undergraduate school, I thought I would be a Greek and Roman studies major. I had taken Latin for about six years in junior high and high school and loved reading classical myths and translating books of *The Aeneid*. There was something about studying prosody that was challenging and engaging at the same time. I believe that writing poetic forms has that same type of rigor and excitement. I enjoy finding ways to express myself in set structures—a pantoum, a sonnet, a villanelle, or even using a nontraditional form (like a math problem) to present an idea poetically.

In many ways, I see using form to express my ideas about my life as similar to how a person expresses themselves in a traditional religious path like Christianity or Islam. Poetic forms (like religion) provides me with a framework, something that gets me started, something that points me in a true direction, something that gives me a goal. It is up to me to insert my ideas, my feelings, and my voice into the poem (or faith path) to give it life. I may follow the form truly or break it here or there, but I always keep its integrity. And, in many ways, I think the book tries to express that. Poems like "Caesura," "A Dua Before Making Love," and "Covenant" wrestle with the application of faith; as the faith changes, so does the form in which that expression is presented. Yet, regardless of the change, I never let them—faith and form—go completely, as they are my rock.

GD: I also found myself interested in the decision to bold certain lines and phrases within each of the poems. What was the intention behind the bolding, and what was the process of choosing which lines to or not to bold like?

AS: The decision to bold was based on the need to highlight certain Arabic words and spoken speech. My editors and I felt it was important to present those words and phrases as different from the speaker's voice and native tongue.

GD: Your poems often seem to occupy a hypothetical space—the “If My Parents Hadn’t Converted: Questions & Answers” series speaks to this, as does the poem “If My Daughter Does Not Wear Hijab.” Do you find the hypothetical is inherent to your poetic process? And, more generally, could you talk a bit about what your process is like?

AS: Yes! Quite ironically, the hypothetical is very necessary. We live in a time that is so focused on what is presented in front of you. And, unfortunately, religion is seen as very uncreative and “straight-laced.” I have always been someone who thinks, “What if?” sometimes to a fault. In light of religion and conversion, I felt it was very important to think about how the choices of one's parents affect the child. Choice is at the heart of faith. It is something we choose to enact and believe. So, what if my parents' choice ultimately affected me, and my choice affects my child? I wanted to enter into the hypothetical as an act of faith. We would typically not think of it as such—as faith is usually seen as just accepting what is in front of you. But if we think of faith as more of an on-going inquiry, then we have to consider the hypothetical as something that guides our actions, to inform us before we act and to understand why we do what we do so we can prepare ourselves in the future.

As for my process of thinking about the hypothetical, in some ways, I approach it like writing fantasy. I truly imagine myself a new character, very much like in the “If My Parents Hadn’t Converted” poems. I fleshed out my character and gave setting, actions, voice, and internal conflict. I wanted to present a different self, almost an alternative self, to show how significant parental choices can be in crafting a life for their kids and, moreover, how conversion can dramatically affect the life one has led.

GD: Your poems have, despite the ways in which they tackle serious topics, a sense of humor to them. I’m thinking of “When You’re a Hijabi Going to the Club...” among others. It must be a balancing act, in some ways, to effectively maintain both a sense of seriousness and a sense of humor as you do. Do you ever find this balancing act difficult? And do you feel that this balance translates into other aspects of your life, perhaps socially or politically?

AS: Having a sense of humor can save one's life. As necessary as discussing the intersectionality of my identities is, it can be mentally and emotionally intense. Writing poems that have a sense of humor is important not only to break up the serious mood of book's content, but also to show how laughter can be healing and allow you to get through rough times. But most importantly, having poems laced with humor is just fun! I love jokes and making

fun of myself; it eases me and gets rid of worry. So, to include poems that venture into the hypothetical or positions a hijabi in a club ordering a Sprite at a bar is fundamentally natural to me, being someone who loves the hypothetical and laughing, and also an intentional device to reflect the need for levity in the reading process.

GD: Last but certainly not least, what are you working on now?

AS: I am currently working on a collection of poems about Michael Jackson. I find him very intriguing. He inhabited this weird divide between public and private that I would like to explore. He is, on one hand, very talented and captivating and yet, on the other, extremely problematic and tortured. I am developing poems that tap into our intrigue with him and reveal his subconscious desires and our own; I even play around with envisioning his jinn!