The Butterfly Mosque: A Young Woman's Journey to Love and Islam

G. Willow Wilson

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Autobiography, as it relates to Muslims and to America, can be a difficult genre in which to write. There are numerous works that have appeared since 2001 that cover the spectrum from an anti-Islamic polemic to an apologia. G. Willow Wilson, author of the *Butterfly Mosque*, manages to avoid the extremes and writes a meaningful memoir that reflects the beauty and ugliness of being a Muslim and an American. The difficulty in reviewing a memoir is that a sequential summary does not do it justice. Instead, a thematic approach seems to make more sense. For example, the subtitle of the book, "An American Woman's Journey to Love and Islam," could as easily read "An American Woman's Journey to the Love of Islam." The work is highly personal, and it is an exploration of the love affair she had and was having with this phenomenon called "Islam."

She says she began to "inhabit" Islam (73), and that is a useful metaphor to understand her view of the religion. It is a space that is inhabited by theological systems, religious ritual, history, culture, and most importantly,

people. All her interactions with Islam are defined by Muslims – either the reality of them, or the image of them, as constructed by American media. Wilson is most pointed on the point of the media's construction of the Muslim "Other."

She talks about discussing Naguib Mahfouz with Omar, the Egyptian man who would eventually become her husband. He says that he cannot stand Mahfouz, because "real life is depressing enough (33)." This exchange is a subtle critique of how what "we" think "they" read or think about is not necessarily true. She continues on discussing her burgeoning feelings about Omar, and how, nevertheless, she could not separate him from "the faceless mass of Middle Eastern men [she] had been taught to fear," referencing *Not Without My Daughter* and various women's magazines as the cause of unease (35). She also fears how this stereotyping will affect her, once she makes her conversion known to her friends and family. Perhaps one of the lines that best represents Wilson's style comes in this story. She says, in discussing her conversion with her parents, that "Islam was a fourteen-hundred-year-old spiritual tradition, not a result of bad parenting (110)." Statements like this are what make the book invaluable to understanding the human element of why someone would choose to be a Muslim. As Wilson states, she found a truth that works for her, and it is not going to work for everyone (107).

However, her fear about stereotyping is realized, but not from her family and friends. Instead, it is the US government that begins investigating her. She says of the experience that she was afraid to return to her own country, because she believes that being "middle-class, educated, white," meant that the laws protected her before it protected anyone else (175). Wilson's engagements and reflections on politics are worth noting, because she does not offer bromides and is attempting to understand situations in a way that make sense to her multifaceted self. She does not deny that there is a real conflict between two entities labeled "Islam" and the "West" – but that like these names, the conflict is constructed by people, so we need to engage with the conflict at the human level (5). While self-evident to some, I am struck by how many people do not understand that this "war" is not eternal and everlasting. In trying to understand why "they hate us," she brings to bear political, economic, and social theories in a way that is easy to understand, again emphasizing the human element (135). She does not offer an apology for terrorism, but like any rational being, she condemns

it. Instead, what she offers is a way to understand why people may have a love-hate relationship with the United States.

Part of that relationship revolves around gender issues, which Wilson does not shy away from. Perhaps three of the most striking stories she tells are about gender. In one vignette, she talks about an article she wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* about the life of women in women-only train cars in Egypt. She says she wanted to present Middle-Eastern women as human beings, not "monkeys." Unfortunately, some responses to the article focused on the enforced gendered apartheid of Egyptian society, an argument that Wilson herself never suggested. (Yet, when a week later, Tokyo announced a female-only car on their commuter system, it was hailed a feminist achievement.) The next incident involves Wilson's decision to don the *hijab*, an act that is as much a political act as it is a religious one: "it was a way to say to anyone who could not see Omar as he was would not see me as I was (99)." Finally, she points out that Western notions of gender relations have actually weakened women's spiritual authority (269) – that is, there were women religious figures who tended to the needs of women, but as women could mix more freely with men, these figures began to disappear.

Where the author truly shines is in her discussion of what her Islam means to her. She walks us through her "conversions" – first of the heart, then of the mind, then of the tongue, and finally through action. She discusses her struggle against ritualized religion before she ultimately accepted it and experienced the beauty of a ritual season unanchored from a seasonal calendar. Although Sunni, she takes Shi'ism seriously – from dreams with Shi'i symbols (17), to visiting Iran (177), to visiting the Masjid of Imam Husayn (77). The strength of her language and her desire to help non-Muslims understand her faith are consistently apparent through the text.

The memoir format and breadth of content makes it well-suited for an Introduction to Islam courses, a variety of literature courses, gender studies, and anthropology courses.

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