

**Bridging Cultures Bookshelf - Muslim Journeys:
A Selected Annotated Bibliography**

Carla Caretto and Allison McGhee, Rochester College

Abstract

The Bridging Cultures -Muslim Journeys grant was gifted from the NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) to libraries throughout the United States to promote understanding between American and Arab culture, history and society. The items included in the grant are organized by six themes: American Stories, Connected Histories, Literary Reflections, Pathways of Faith, Points of View and Art, Architecture and Film and contain 25 books and 4 films. The goal of the collection was to “help public audiences in the United States become more familiar with the people, places, history, faith and culture of Muslims around the world and within the U.S.” This annotated bibliography summarizes fifteen titles selected that may help scholars, students, librarians or general readers gain an understanding of the *Muslim Journeys* collection.

Keywords: American Muslims, Muslim journeys, library, Muslims, Islam, NEH grant, American Library Association, literature, art, poetry

Introduction

In 2012, the National Endowment for the Humanities partnered with the American Libraries Association and the Ali Vural AK Center for Global Islamic Studies to develop the *Muslim Journeys* collection. This collection was the first in a planned series, “Bridging Cultures.” The collection was supported by a grant from Carnegie Corporation with additional support from the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art.

Libraries and humanities councils from all over the United States and the U. S. Virgin Islands applied to receive this collection, and awards were made in January, 2013. Nearly 850 public and academic libraries and humanities councils were awarded the *Muslim Journeys* collection, which consists of 25 books and 4 DVDs, as well as one year of free access to the *Oxford Islamic Studies* online database. The stated goal of this collection was to “help public audiences in the United States become more familiar with the people, places, history, faith and culture of Muslims around the world and within the U.S.” In return for receiving a Bridging Cultures Bookshelf, recipient institutions were required to offer programs to introduce the books and the *Muslim Journeys* themes to their community.

Items in the collection were carefully chosen by scholars in fields such as anthropology, history, religious studies, art, architecture and regional studies and were centered on 6 themes. “American Stories” were selected by Kambiz Ghaneabassiri of Reed College; “Connected Histories” by Giancarlo Casale of the University of Minnesota; “Literary Reflections” were chosen by Leila Golestaneh Austin of the Johns Hopkins University; “Pathways of Faith” selections by Frederick M. Denny of the University of Colorado; “Points of View” by Deborah Amos of National Public Radio;

and “Art, Architecture and Film” was selected by D. Fairchild Ruggles of University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

This annotated bibliography does not cover the entire *Muslim Journeys* collection but reflects just a portion of it. Fifteen titles are covered. In choosing titles, the goal was to select items from each of the stated themes and to include works of fiction, non-fiction and literature/poetry. Contemporary and historical/ancient writings were selected with consideration to include items suitable for adult and youth audiences. Materials in both print and DVD formats are represented. The objective of the annotated bibliography is to provide readers with an overall sense of the *Muslim Journeys* collection. Furthermore, it has potential use in planning programs, developing collections or as support for both personal and classroom education, especially as multi-cultural issues become a more frequent topic of public discourse.

Aboulela, L. (2005). *Minaret*. New York, NY: Black Cat.

Minaret is the third novel by author Leila Aboulela. It is the story of a woman who is seeking her spiritual home while living as an immigrant in a foreign land. Najwa’s life as a rather spoiled young college woman in Khartoum is turned upside down when a political coup forces her and her family to flee to London. Her family’s wealth evaporates and she eventually finds herself in the position of maid and nanny to a series of wealthy Arabs. Gradually, Najwa undergoes a personal conversion to her Muslim faith in her desire for peace. Although the beginning of the book provides a window on the political climate of Khartoum in the 1980s, the story is not weighted down by politics. Aboulela has a poetic way with her words and the story is beautifully conveyed.

Ahmed, L. (2011). [*A quiet revolution: The veil's resurgence, from the Middle East to America*](#). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The hijab is a veil that covers the female head and chest. It is customarily worn by women as a symbol of modesty, privacy and morality. It also signifies the detachment of men from women within society. The understanding and historical meaning of the hijab has changed from decade to decade across continents. The book titled *A quiet revolution*, delves into the controversial meaning of the hijab and its use as a garment and as a physical representation of one's religion.

Celebrated author Lelia Ahmed was the first Women's Studies professor at Harvard Divinity School and an Egyptian American writer on Islam and Islamic feminism. Ahmed reminisces about Egypt in the 1940s when certain females belonging to the subversive and fanatical group "Muslim Brotherhood" wore colorful hijabs. She is dismayed by this colorful resurgence of hijabs in modern America which prompts her exploration of the meaning of the hijab to women of Islam. Many women see the hijab as a "way of calling for gender justice" and "openly identifying with a group that people have prejudices about, and as a way of saying 'yes, we're here, and we have the right to be here and to be treated equally'" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 8). Ahmed interprets the meaning of the hijab differently stating, "Understanding the dynamics and meanings with which these debates over the veil were charged is more important to our understanding of why this garment continues to be such a volatile, sensitive, and politically fraught symbol today" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 11).

Broken into two sections after the introduction, part one discusses the resurgence of the hijab and its cross-continent travel to America. Part two examines the implications of the hijab after 9/11 in America. This is followed by a bibliography and index.

Alford, T. (2007). *Prince among slaves*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Prince Among Slaves, originally published in 1977 by Terry Alford, eloquently details the life of Abd al Rahman Ibrahima, an African prince sentenced to a lifetime of slavery in Southern American in the late 1700's. Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima was born in 1762 to the almanni of the Fulbe in Republic of Guinea. Ibrahima becomes colonial at age twenty-six where his journey as a slave begins, after his being defeated by a warring tribe and sold into slavery. His journey across the Atlantic brings him to a desolate and untamed Mississippi country. Throughout his life of slavery, Ibrahima's continued dignity and unshakable faith in Islam help to make his life meaningful in the midst of slavery. The book also encompasses the many layers of cultural, religious, social, and economic realities of life in both Africa and rural southern America during the latter part of the 18th century. Heartbreakingly, Ibrahima finds passage home only to succumb to fever five months after arriving in Africa.

With extensive research through the use of primary sources gathered in Africa and Europe, Alford's book comprises a concise and accurate representation of Ibrahima's life from prince to slave. Illustrations, paintings, portraits and photos accompany the text. The front cover displays a portrait of Ibrahima, sketched in 1828 by Henry Inman. The 2007 publication includes an epilogue, notes, index, and afterword commemorating the 30th anniversary of publication.

Attar, F. U. (1984). *The conference of the birds*. (A. Darbandi & D. Davis, Trans.). London, England: Penguin. (Original work published in 1187)

The Conference of the Birds is an epic, allegorical Persian poem of the 12th century written by Farid Ud-Din Attar. The epic poem was a common form of narrative in the middle ages. The underlying theme of *The Conference of the Birds* is the search for spiritual truth which is conveyed through the story of a “conference” of birds who embark on a quest for the Simorgh bird, their ideal king. Their journey is fraught with trials, challenges and hardship. The pilgrims are led by the hoopoe bird who encourages the troupe and responds to each bird’s objections and reservations along the way. In his introduction, Dick Davis (Professor Emeritus, Ohio State University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Culture) states that Attar’s poetry “combines the intimate with the splendid, the worldly with the spiritual, and the specific with the universally human.” (ix) This poem easily reminds one of the classic *A Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan, written 500 years later.

Because the style of the poem is similar in meter and rhyme to the heroic couplet of English poetry, translators Dick Davis and Afkham Darbandi felt that this was an obvious choice for the translation. (ix)

Many versions and translations of this poem have been published, some of them greatly condensed for young audiences. Although western readers of the 21st century may not be accustomed to reading this sort of poetry, translators Davis and Darbandi have clearly taken great pains to make this masterpiece of Persian poetry pleasing to the Anglo ear, while remaining as close as possible to the original text.

The Prologue and Epilogue, which were omitted from the 1984 edition, are included in this edition. The book includes endnotes and a biographical index, both of which provide important details that enhance the reader's understanding.

Bloom, J. & Blair, S. (1997). *Islamic arts*. London, England: Phaidon Press Limited.

Islamic Arts by Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair is a beautifully illustrated and comprehensive survey of Islamic art in all its forms. This book is broadly organized in three major time periods: "The rise of Islam 600-900 AD," "Regional Centres and local powers 900-1500 AD" and "Great empires 1500-1800 AD."

All types of art are represented – architecture, calligraphy and book arts, textiles, ceramics, painting and all decorative arts. In addition, Bloom and Blair provide a complementary commentary of the significant historical elements of each time period and informative descriptions of the works themselves. It should be noted that not all of the art objects in this book have religious significance, but all are representative of Muslim culture in the broader context.

Some maps and diagrams are included where necessary to clarify a point in the text. There is a glossary, an annotated list of major dynasties, a detailed historical chronology and a bibliography of sources for further reading

Husband and wife authors Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair are members of faculty at both Boston College and the Virginia Commonwealth University. Sheila Blair is a noted expert on Islamic calligraphy.

This title would be quite suitable for study or for general readers wherever there is interest in art or history.

Ghosh, A. (1992). *In an antique land: History in the guise of a traveler's tale*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

In an Antique Land begins with the author's surprise discovery of a correspondence written in 1139CE between a fellow merchant, Khalaf ibn Ishaq and his peer, Abraham Ben Yiju, regarding a slave named MS. H.6. In this intriguing read by Amitav Ghosh, the author once again stumbles upon another correspondence to Bin Yiju's slave once again while studying at Oxford University. The book traces the author's decade long passionate pursuit and his personal encounters related to this mysterious letter.

Ghosh, an Indian Hindu, mixes both personal memoir and travelogue to draw the reader on an anthropological adventure throughout Egypt and India. He skillfully switches between his findings from research as he plods along into scenes of his adventures with the comical, yet charming people he meets throughout his journey. The book starts with a prologue and contains four chapters centering on cities to which the author traveled, followed by an epilogue and notes. This book is meant for general readers.

Goldman, J., Battsek, J., Barker, G. & Grabias, D. (Producers), & Barker, G. (Director). (2011). *Koran by heart: One chance to remember*. [Motion picture]. United States: HBO Documentary Films.

Koran by Heart: One Chance to Remember is one of 4 films included in the *Muslim journeys* collection. The Koran (Qur'an), the Muslim Holy Book, is approximately 600 pages in its print format and is composed of 114 chapters of 3-286 verses.

This documentary film follows 3 children as they prepare to compete in a Koran reciting contest which is an annual event that takes place in Cairo, Egypt during Ramadan. This event draws contestants from 70 countries. In this film, viewers watch as three young scholars (two boys and one girl) from three countries travel to Egypt for the competition. They come from Senegal, the Maldives and Tajikistan. Amazingly, none of them actually speaks or understands Arabic, the language in which they recite the Koran. One young boy is functionally illiterate in his native language. But these children demonstrate skill, faith and determination in their preparation and competition.

The film documents the 2010 competition. The 2013 competition in Cairo was cancelled. The film is well done and provides not only a view of the competition, but personal background of the 3 children and their families. It is touching to see that in spite of the rigors of preparation for competition, these children have the same concerns and joys of children everywhere.

Gordon, S. (2008). *When Asia Was The World: Traveling merchants, scholars, warriors, and monks who created the "riches of the east"*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

When Asia Was the World brings to life the explorations and journeys of traveling merchants, scholars, and monks from 500 to 1500CE, spanning China to the Middle East. Author Stewart Gordon masterfully intertwines the lives of men traveling and the spread of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are interconnected with trade routes and caravans carrying spices, silk, pearls, medicine, along with staples, rice and sugar.

Each chapter, nine combined, focuses on an individual person in history spanning almost nine hundred years through extensive research of these journeymen's memoirs and correspondence. We first come across Xuanzang, a Buddhist monk in search of

philosophical and religious answers, which lead him to a 15,000 miles and seventeen year long journey to the heart of Buddhism and back to his homeland of China. “Their memoirs allow us to go along on the caravans and ships, experience the cold and fatigue, live the hopes and fears, and know the luxury and wonder of this great medieval Asian world” (Gordon, 2008, viii).

Gordon relies considerably on diaries, memoirs, and scripts from the time period mentioned. Maps provide the reader with a visual reminder of the long distances traveled and lands encountered throughout each journeyman’s travels. Engravings, photos, paintings, historical objects, drawings, illustrations, manuscripts, and architectural photos can be found in the middle section of the book. Suggested readings are included, along with notes and an index to further ones research.

Menocal, M. R. (2002). *The ornament of the world: How Muslims, Jews and Christians created a culture of tolerance in medieval Spain*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company.

Al-Andalus was a significant place of knowledge, power and influence in medieval Spain. Only small remnants of Islam’s affluence and power remain to this day, creating an imaginative era where cross-cultural exchange was frequent.

The Ornament of the World, written by Maria Rosa Menoca, is a remarkable yet poignant reminder of the historical significance of medieval Spain during a period of tolerance between Christians, Jews and Muslims. Menocal discusses the absorption of medical knowledge, scientific theories, literature, the arts and religious philosophies that helped to push al-Andalus to the forefront of innovation while Europe lagged during the dark ages. The cross-cultural examination and mixing of these contrasting and often violent cultures transform the world of medieval Spain.

Within each chapter there is a focus on multilayered people and their personalities through their literature, letters, and their historical significance in al-Andalus from 786-1605. The author uses English translations of foreign names and italicizes foreign words the first time mentioned in the book. The book includes illustrations, three detailed maps, a postscript, and an epilogue including other readings, acknowledgements, and an index. Questions answered by the author are followed by questions for the reader and provide a tool, which can be used as a guide for reading groups. This book is geared towards general readers and non-specialists.

Rūmī, J. A. M. (1995). *Rūmī: Poet and mystic*. (R. A. Nicholson, Trans.). Oxford, England: Oneworld. (Original work from the 13th cent.)

Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī, (1207-1273) more usually known as Rūmī, is recognized as the greatest mystical poet of Persia. This book, *Rūmī: Poet and Mystic* is a collection of approximately 120 poems, selected and translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (1868-1945) of the University of Cambridge, who is considered the most eminent Rūmī scholar.

The poems are not lengthy and Nicholson's translation makes them tremendously accessible. The collection notably does not contain *Masnavi*, the epic poem that many consider Rūmī's greatest work. With titles such as "The Riddles of God," "Unity of Spirit," and "The Saint's Vision of Eternity," the content of the selected poems clearly reflects Rūmī's deep commitment to Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam. Rūmī often employs metaphors of nature to speak of truth, beauty and eternity.

Extensive footnotes for each poem in the collection contribute to the readers' understanding. A biographical introduction is included.

Patel, E. (2010). *Acts of faith: The story of an American Muslim, the struggle for the soul of a generation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

The Interfaith Youth Core is a non-profit organization based in Chicago whose broad mission is to bring student leaders from all faiths and traditions to work together to change the world. Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core is passionate about his organization. His book, *Acts of Faith*, is in large part an autobiography whose aim is to show readers how Patel's early life brought him to conceive of and build the Interfaith Youth Core. Patel's belief is that "religion is a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division. He's inspired to build this bridge by his faith as a Muslim, his Indian heritage, and his American citizenship."

Patel uses the term "religious pluralism." The concept of religious pluralism is not a new idea. Many will recognize it by another term - interfaith dialogue. But Patel's organization takes this idea beyond the mere dialogue, to college campuses where he believes that the idealism of youth can be harnessed to implement real change in the world. This book is absolutely inspiring and will appeal to people of many faiths who would like to hear some "good news" when so much of what we hear and see is "bad news." Readers can explore further at the Interfaith Youth Core website, <http://www.ifyc.org/>.

Porter, V. (Ed.). (2012). *The art of hajj*. Northampton, MA: Interlink.

The call to pilgrimage is an element of many religious traditions and such is the case for Islam. Hajj is the pilgrimage to the city of Mecca that all devout Muslims are

called to undertake at least once in their lifetimes. It is estimated that approximately three million Muslims make this journey to Mecca each year.

Early in 2012 the British Museum hosted, *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*, an exhibition of art objects representing the sacred rituals that are associated with hajj. This book is a collection of photographs/illustrations of some of the objects that were part of that exhibition. Author Venetia Porter of the British Museum Department of the Middle East was the curator for the exhibition which included “historical and contemporary art, textiles and manuscripts.”

The book is presented in 7 chapters, each of which opens with an introduction followed by the photographs of the selected objects. The art objects themselves include maps and instruments, paintings, engravings, ceramics, textiles and photographs. Each illustration is accompanied by a description of the work and its significance to the collection. There is a short glossary.

In this book, Venetia Porter endeavors to give readers a sense of the art work of the exhibition that was hosted at the British museum, and in a wider sense, enable readers to take the pilgrimage to Mecca, even if only vicariously.

Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood*. New York, NY: Pantheon.

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Satrapi is an autobiography presented in the form of a graphic novel. The story begins when Satrapi is a young girl and ends when she reaches her mid-teen years.

Persepolis was an ancient capital of the Persian Achaemenid Empire located approximately 600 miles south of present day Tehran, where Satrapi grew up. The

ancient city was destroyed by Alexander the Great in around 330 B.C. One could easily draw a parallel between the demise of the Persian capital, the conflict that has devastated present day Iran, and the loss of Satrapi's own innocence through exposure to the realities of that conflict. The book is a story of a childhood as it unfolds against the background of the Middle-Eastern struggle and the Islamic revolution.

The images in this graphic novel are black and white which lends a certain tension as the story develops. Although the events are dramatic and complex, Satrapi conveys them as through the view and voice of a young adolescent with an adolescent's understanding. True to the behavior of that age group, Satrapi one had challenges authority by speaking her mind and in the next minute is concerned with having the latest style in jeans and sneakers.

The book is structured in 19 chapter-like sections with titles such as "The Veil," "The Letter," "The Heroes," etc. This book was original published in France where Satrapi currently resides. There is a sequel to the book and also a film of it.

Shamsie, K. (2005). *Broken verses*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.

This startling tale of fiction, written by Kamila Shamsie in 2005, is the story of a young woman who finds herself unable to let go of the past. In 1986 "the greatest poet" was found senselessly beaten and murder. The shadow of his memory still follows the main character, Aasmani, as she continues to come to grips with her mother's disappearance and her mother's lover's (the poet) horrific murder.

There was talk about the time period during the restlessness in Pakistan, when her mother was an activist and "father figure's name" was denounced as a poet because of his

subversive words spelled out through his writing and highly sexualized and immoral poetry.

The work of fiction trains its lens on the relationship between a daughter, her absent mother and father figure coming to grips with the reality of his death and disappearance of her mother. Written for the general reader, the novel contains 24 chapters linguistically crafted to draw the reader in.

Wilson, G. W. (2010). *Butterfly mosque: A young American woman's journey to love and Islam*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Post 9/11, many stereotypes and prejudices could be conjured out of fact and fiction on the Middle East. *The Butterfly Mosque* navigates cultural and religious divides of Islam into a world of acceptance and love. Written in 2010 by G. Willow Wilson, this memoir translates the boundaries, prejudices and stereotypes of Islam into an understandable and approving society of Islam and Egypt. She makes a distinction between the radicals of Islam and the rest of Islam's moderate followers. Wilson finds herself willingly engaged to Omar, a man she has known only a couple of months after converting to Islam and traveling to a land unknown.

Wilson's openness to another culture helps create a humanized culture. She states, "There are times when you have to operate purely on faith and continue to trust human decency even when it is no longer visible. It did not matter that there were Egyptians who were afraid of me because I was American, and that there would be Americans who were afraid of me because I was a Muslim; what mattered was that when I left the room, they loved their husbands or wives, they joked, they mourned their beloved dead, and they

struggled to provide for their children. There was nothing so great that I could not be built on that commonality” (Wilson, 2010, p. 141).

The book is about a woman’s faith, hope and headfirst dive into a life that made the unknown transition to a welcome land. Her willingness to bridge both cultures that are misunderstood from both American and Arab perspectives provides the reader with a neutral party, willing to cross a chasm unfolding for centuries.

G. Willow Wilson has written on modern religion and the Middle East. The book includes a prologue followed by shorter chapters throughout the book.