

TEACHING RELIGIOUS MODERATION THROUGH LITERATURE A TEACHING-ORIENTED READING OF YUSUF AZEEM IS NOT A HERO

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary global context, religious moderation has become an essential educational agenda, particularly in societies marked by religious diversity and historical trauma. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Islam and Muslim communities in the United States experienced intensified suspicion, stereotyping, and discrimination, commonly conceptualized as Islamophobia. This condition presents not only a social and political problem but also an educational challenge for universities seeking to promote tolerance, empathy, and peaceful coexistence (Allen, 2010). This teaching-oriented article examines how religious moderation can be taught through literary texts by analyzing *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* (2021) by Saadia Faruqi. Employing a qualitative descriptive method and the perspective of genetic structuralism, the study explores the relationship between the author's social background as a Muslim American, the post-9/11 socio-historical context, and the novel's narrative strategies in responding to Islamophobia. The analysis reveals that the novel embodies core values of religious moderation, including moral exemplarity, courage in articulating religious identity, tolerance and interfaith interaction, and literature as a medium of peacebuilding. By reconstructing the analysis into a pedagogical framework, this article demonstrates that literature can function as an effective learning resource for teaching religious moderation in higher education. The findings contribute to literary studies, religious education, and curriculum development by positioning fiction as a transformative tool for countering religious prejudice and fostering inclusive citizenship.

Keywords: Genetic Structuralism, Higher Education, Islamophobia, Literature-Based Pedagogy, Religious Moderation

INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a significant role in shaping individual identity, social interaction, and cultural values across the world. In the twenty-first century, Islam has emerged as one of the most widely practiced religions globally, with adherents living in diverse cultural, political, and national contexts. Despite this global presence, Muslims—particularly those living as minorities in Western societies—have frequently been subjected to

misunderstanding, stereotyping, and discrimination. These conditions intensified dramatically after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when acts of violence committed by extremist groups were widely and inaccurately associated with Islam as a religion.

In the United States, the post-9/11 period was marked by the rapid growth of Islamophobic discourse in media, politics, and everyday social interaction. Muslims were often portrayed as potential threats, foreign outsiders, or ideological enemies, rather than as ordinary citizens. This climate of fear and suspicion affected Muslim adults and children alike, shaping their educational experiences, social relationships, and sense of belonging. Islamophobia thus became not only a political or security issue but also a cultural and educational phenomenon embedded in daily life. Shaheen (2009) notes that Muslims became “symbolic stand-ins for fear, insecurity, and national trauma”, a representation reinforced by media and political rhetoric. As a result, Islamophobia became embedded in everyday social life, affecting schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

From the perspective of higher education, Islamophobia presents a serious pedagogical challenge (Huntington, 1996). Universities are not merely institutions for transmitting knowledge; they are also spaces for shaping ethical awareness, critical thinking, and social responsibility. In multicultural societies, universities are expected to cultivate students who are capable of engaging constructively with religious and cultural differences. Education, as Freire (2005) emphasizes, is never neutral; it either reproduces domination or becomes “a practice of freedom”. Teaching religious moderation therefore requires pedagogical strategies that move beyond doctrinal explanation toward lived ethical engagement. This expectation aligns closely with the concept of religious moderation, which emphasizes balance, tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence among followers of different faiths.

In the Indonesian context, religious moderation has been formally promoted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs as a foundational principle for maintaining social harmony in a pluralistic nation. Religious moderation does not mean weakening religious commitment; rather, it encourages believers to practice their faith in ways that are inclusive, dialogical, and respectful of diversity (MoRA (Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia), 2019). However, teaching religious moderation effectively requires more than normative instruction or abstract moral discourse. Students need concrete examples, lived experiences, and emotional engagement to understand how moderation operates in real social situations.

One powerful medium for achieving this educational goal is literature. Literary texts provide narratives that humanize social issues, allowing readers to encounter prejudice, conflict, and reconciliation through characters and stories. Unlike theoretical texts, literature engages both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Through narrative empathy, students can experience the emotional impact of discrimination while also reflecting critically on its causes and consequences.

Literature offers a powerful pedagogical medium for this purpose. As Said (1978) argues, dominant narratives often construct the “Other” through stereotyping, while

literature has the potential to challenge such constructions by offering alternative representations. Literary narratives allow students to encounter social conflict through human experience, enabling what Todd (2003) describes as “entering the lived experience of the other” . This article argues that Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero* functions precisely in this way, making it an effective teaching text for religious moderation.

This article argues that Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero* (2021) by Saadia Faruqi is a highly effective literary text for teaching religious moderation in university classrooms. The novel tells the story of a Muslim boy growing up in post-9/11 America, facing Islamophobia while attempting to understand his identity, faith, and place in society. By examining this novel through a teaching-oriented analytical framework, this study demonstrates how literature can function as a pedagogical tool for countering Islamophobia and promoting religious moderation.

Genetic structuralism, developed by Goldmann (1980), views literary works as products of a dynamic relationship between individual creativity and collective social structures. According to this perspective, a literary text cannot be fully understood in isolation from the social conditions and historical experiences that shape both the author and the community to which the author belongs. The text reflects a “world vision” that emerges from a particular social group responding to specific historical circumstances.

In a teaching context, genetic structuralism offers significant pedagogical value. It trains students to move beyond surface-level interpretation and to analyze how narratives are shaped by social realities. When applied to Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero*, genetic structuralism enables students to examine how Faruqi (2021) experiences as a Muslim American writer influence the portrayal of Islamophobia, identity, and resistance in the novel. This approach encourages learners to see literature as a dialogue between personal experience and social history, rather than as mere fiction.

Moreover, genetic structuralism supports critical literacy by helping students understand that stereotypes and prejudices are socially constructed. Islamophobia, as represented in the novel, is not portrayed as a natural reaction but as a product of historical trauma, political discourse, and media representation. This understanding is crucial for teaching religious moderation, as it shifts the focus from blaming individuals to analyzing systemic patterns of discrimination.

Islamophobia can be defined as fear, hatred, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims, often manifested through discrimination, exclusion, and stereotyping (Allen, 2010). In post-9/11 America, Islamophobia became normalized through media narratives that consistently associated Islam with violence and terrorism. These representations influenced public perception and policy, affecting the daily lives of Muslim communities.

From an educational perspective, Islamophobia poses a dual challenge. First, it affects Muslim students directly by creating environments of exclusion and insecurity. Second, it shapes the perceptions of non-Muslim students, who may unconsciously absorb biased narratives if they are not critically examined. Addressing Islamophobia in university classrooms is therefore essential for fostering inclusive learning environments and socially responsible graduates.

Teaching Islamophobia through literature offers several advantages. Literary narratives allow students to encounter discrimination at a human scale, making abstract social issues more tangible. Through characters like Yusuf, students can observe how prejudice operates in schools, neighborhoods, and interpersonal relationships. This experiential understanding creates opportunities for critical discussion and ethical reflection.

Religious moderation emphasizes the practice of faith in ways that uphold justice, balance, and respect for others. In Indonesian discourse, religious moderation is closely associated with four core values: commitment to national harmony, tolerance, rejection of violence, and accommodation of local culture. These values are highly relevant for global contexts, particularly in societies marked by religious diversity and historical conflict.

When integrated into higher education, religious moderation should not be taught as a rigid doctrine but as a lived ethical orientation. Students need to see how moderation operates in everyday situations—how individuals respond to prejudice, how dialogue replaces hostility, and how moral integrity is maintained under pressure. Literature provides an ideal medium for illustrating these processes. Addressing Islamophobia in university classrooms is therefore essential. Banks (2016) argues that multicultural education must help students critically examine how prejudice is produced and maintained. Literature-based learning contributes to this goal by allowing students to witness discrimination through narrative rather than abstract theory

Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero* embodies the principles of religious moderation through its characters and narrative choices. The novel portrays Islam not as an antagonistic force but as a source of ethical guidance, compassion, and resilience. By engaging with this text, students can explore how religious moderation functions in a minority context, offering valuable insights for both global and Indonesian settings.

Scholarly studies on post-9/11 literature have highlighted how fiction reflects and critiques the socio-political climate following the attacks. Many researchers argue that literature serves as a counter-narrative to dominant media representations, offering alternative perspectives on Muslim identity and experience. Muslim American writers, in particular, have used fiction to challenge stereotypes and reclaim narrative agency.

Previous studies on Islamophobia in literature often focus on adult novels, memoirs, or political texts. While these works are important, fewer studies examine children's or young adult literature as tools for education and social change. Yet, narratives aimed at younger audiences play a crucial role in shaping moral imagination and intercultural understanding.

In the field of religious education, existing research frequently emphasizes doctrinal instruction or interfaith dialogue programs. Less attention has been given to literature-based approaches to teaching religious moderation. This gap is significant, as literature offers unique opportunities for emotional engagement and ethical reflection that traditional instructional methods may lack.

By focusing on *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero*, this study addresses these gaps by combining literary analysis with pedagogical application. The novel's accessibility,

narrative clarity, and ethical depth make it particularly suitable for university teaching, especially in courses on literature, religious studies, cultural studies, and education.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Descriptive Analysis as a Teaching Model

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero*. Qualitative descriptive research focuses on interpreting textual data to understand meanings, themes, and patterns. In a teaching context, this method is especially valuable because it can be easily adapted for classroom activities, such as close reading, thematic discussion, and reflective writing.

The primary data source is the novel itself, while secondary sources include scholarly works on Islamophobia, religious moderation, and genetic structuralism. Data collection involves identifying narrative episodes, character interactions, and dialogues that represent Islamophobia and responses to it. These data are then analyzed to reveal how the novel conveys values of religious moderation.

Importantly, this methodology is presented not only as a research tool but also as a pedagogical model. Students can be guided to replicate this process by selecting passages, identifying themes, and relating literary representation to social context. The analysis focuses on narrative events, character interactions, and dialogues that reflect prejudice and ethical response. This method can also be adopted in classroom settings, allowing students to engage in close reading and critical discussion. As Apple (2019) notes, curriculum is always ideological; by selecting texts and methods, educators shape students' moral and social perspectives. In this way, research and teaching become mutually reinforcing activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching Religious Moderation through Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero

This section presents the core analysis of *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* by focusing on how the novel represents Islamophobia and, more importantly, how it teaches values of religious moderation through narrative strategies, character development, and moral positioning. The discussion is explicitly framed for pedagogical use, showing how each finding can function as a learning resource in university classrooms.

Moral Exemplarity as a Foundation of Religious Moderation

One of the most prominent values conveyed in *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* is moral exemplarity. The novel consistently emphasizes ethical behavior—kindness, honesty, patience, and responsibility—as a response to prejudice and misunderstanding. Rather than presenting confrontation or retaliation as solutions to Islamophobia, the narrative highlights moral integrity as a powerful form of resistance.

Yusuf's parents, particularly his father, play a crucial role in modeling this value. They repeatedly remind Yusuf that his behavior as a Muslim matters, not because he must represent all Muslims, but because moral conduct can challenge negative stereotypes in

everyday interactions. This message is pedagogically significant. This aligns with Ahmed (2017) argument that everyday ethical actions can challenge systemic prejudice by disrupting stereotypes at the interpersonal level. In teaching religious moderation, students often struggle to understand how abstract values such as tolerance and balance operate in real life. Through Yusuf's family, the novel offers concrete examples of ethical decision-making under social pressure.

From a genetic structuralist perspective, this emphasis on moral exemplarity reflects the collective experience of Muslim minorities in post-9/11 America, who are often compelled to demonstrate "good behavior" in order to counter suspicion. While this condition can be problematic, the novel reframes it as an opportunity to assert moral agency rather than victimhood. Haidt (2012) explains that moral behavior shapes how communities perceive one another, particularly in contexts of conflict. For students, this opens critical discussion about the ethics of representation, minority burden, and the limits of moral responsibility.

In classroom settings, lecturers can use these scenes to initiate discussions on questions such as:

- Is moral exemplarity a fair expectation for marginalized groups?
- How can ethical behavior function as a form of social engagement without becoming self-erasure?
- How does Islamic moral teaching align with universal ethical values?

By engaging with these questions, students learn that religious moderation is not passive acceptance but active ethical positioning grounded in moral clarity.

Courage in Articulating Religious Identity

Another key value of religious moderation taught through the novel is courage—specifically, the courage to explain and articulate religious identity in the face of misunderstanding. Yusuf is portrayed as a character who gradually learns to speak about Islam not with anger or defensiveness, but with confidence and clarity.

Throughout the novel, Yusuf encounters peers and adults who associate Islam with terrorism. Initially, he responds with confusion and silence, reflecting the psychological impact of Islamophobia on young Muslims. However, as the narrative progresses, Yusuf begins to research the events of 9/11 and their historical context. This process of inquiry empowers him with knowledge, enabling him to respond to misinformation thoughtfully.

Pedagogically, this transformation is highly valuable. It models a learning process in which knowledge becomes a tool for ethical engagement. Yusuf does not reject dialogue; instead, he prepares himself intellectually to participate in it. This approach aligns closely with the educational goals of higher education, which emphasize critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, and respectful communication.

In teaching contexts, lecturers can highlight Yusuf's research process as an example of how students should respond to controversial or sensitive topics. Rather than relying on emotional reactions or inherited narratives, students are encouraged to seek credible information and contextual understanding. This approach reinforces the principle that

religious moderation requires intellectual effort as well as moral intention. This mirrors Freire (2005) emphasis on critical consciousness as the foundation of transformative education

Furthermore, Yusuf's courage does not manifest as confrontation but as calm explanation. This distinction is important. The novel teaches that asserting religious identity does not require hostility toward others. Instead, it involves clarity, patience, and willingness to engage in dialogue. For students in pluralistic societies, this lesson is particularly relevant, as it demonstrates how identity affirmation and social harmony can coexist.

Tolerance and Interfaith Interaction as Everyday Practice

Tolerance is one of the central pillars of religious moderation, and Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero* presents tolerance not as an abstract ideal but as an everyday social practice. The novel depicts various forms of interfaith interaction, particularly through Yusuf's friendships with non-Muslim peers.

These relationships are portrayed as imperfect yet meaningful. Yusuf's friends do not always understand Islam, and they sometimes repeat stereotypes they have absorbed from media or family. However, the narrative emphasizes that misunderstanding is not necessarily rooted in malice. Through sustained interaction, conversation, and shared experiences, fear gradually gives way to familiarity.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this portrayal is significant because it challenges simplistic notions of tolerance. Tolerance is not presented as immediate acceptance or complete understanding, but as a process that requires time, patience, and openness. This aligns with contemporary educational theories that view intercultural competence as developmental rather than instantaneous.

The novel also implicitly critiques social segregation. Islamophobia thrives in environments where communities remain isolated from one another. By showing how everyday contact can humanize religious difference, the novel reinforces the idea that social interaction is a key mechanism for reducing prejudice. This message resonates strongly with the Qur'anic principle articulated in Al-Hujurat:13, which emphasizes human diversity as a basis for mutual recognition rather than hostility.

In university classrooms, lecturers can use these scenes to encourage students to reflect on their own experiences with religious difference. Discussion activities might include reflective writing on interfaith encounters, group discussions on stereotypes, or role-playing exercises that simulate dialogue across religious boundaries. Through such activities, students learn that tolerance is not merely a value to be endorsed but a practice to be cultivated.

Love, Empathy, and Peacebuilding

Beyond tolerance, the novel promotes a deeper ethical orientation rooted in love and empathy. Yusuf Azeem *Is Not a Hero* consistently frames understanding as an act of compassion rather than obligation. Characters who attempt to understand Yusuf's

experience do so not because they are required to, but because they are emotionally engaged with his humanity.

This emphasis on empathy aligns closely with peace education principles, which view emotional connection as a prerequisite for conflict resolution. Islamophobia, as portrayed in the novel, is sustained by emotional distance and fear. By fostering empathy, the narrative disrupts this cycle and opens space for reconciliation. Todd (2003) argues that ethical learning begins when individuals accept responsibility for the Other, a principle embodied in Yusuf's interactions

For teaching religious moderation, this aspect of the novel is particularly powerful. Students often encounter discussions of tolerance in abstract moral terms, which may feel distant from their lived experiences. Empathy, however, is accessible and relational. Through Yusuf's story, students are invited to imagine how discrimination feels from the inside, encouraging emotional as well as intellectual engagement.

Importantly, the novel does not idealize empathy as a simple solution. Moments of misunderstanding and tension persist, reminding readers that peacebuilding is an ongoing process. This realism enhances the novel's pedagogical value by preventing moral oversimplification.

Lecturers can build on this dimension by integrating reflective pedagogies, such as journaling, narrative response essays, or creative writing assignments. These activities allow students to process emotional responses and connect literary experience to ethical self-reflection, reinforcing the transformative potential of literature-based learning.

Literature as a Counter-Islamophobia Praxis

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is the novel's function as a form of cultural and educational intervention. Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero does not merely depict Islamophobia; it actively counters it by offering alternative narratives of Muslim identity. Through its accessible language and child-centered perspective, the novel reaches readers at an emotional level, challenging dominant representations that associate Islam with violence. This narrative strategy aligns with the broader function of literature as a counter-discourse, capable of resisting hegemonic narratives through storytelling. As Shaheen (2009) observes, counter-stories are essential for dismantling cultural stereotypes.

From a genetic structuralist viewpoint, the novel reflects the collective aspiration of Muslim American communities to be seen as ordinary citizens rather than perpetual outsiders. This aspiration is embedded in the narrative's emphasis on normalcy—school life, family relationships, friendships—rather than exceptionalism or victimhood.

In educational settings, this finding underscores the importance of selecting texts that not only represent marginalized experiences but also empower them. Teaching religious moderation through literature requires texts that embody moderation in form as well as content. Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero achieves this by presenting Islam as a source of ethical guidance without engaging in polemics or defensiveness.

Pedagogical Implications for University Teaching

The analysis above demonstrates that Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero offers rich pedagogical potential for teaching religious moderation. This section outlines practical implications for university lecturers and curriculum designers.

First, the novel can be integrated into courses on literature, religious studies, cultural studies, and education. Its interdisciplinary relevance allows it to function as a core text or supplementary reading. Lecturers can align the novel with learning outcomes related to critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and intercultural competence.

Second, the qualitative descriptive methodology used in this study can be adapted as a classroom activity. Students can be assigned to identify themes, analyze character development, and relate narrative events to social context. This approach reinforces research skills while deepening literary understanding.

Third, discussion-based pedagogy is particularly effective when teaching this text. Open-ended questions encourage students to articulate their perspectives, listen to others, and negotiate meaning collectively. Such discussions model the dialogical spirit of religious moderation itself.

Finally, reflective and creative assignments can enhance learning outcomes. By asking students to write reflective essays, personal narratives, or short stories inspired by the novel, lecturers enable students to internalize moderation values rather than merely memorizing them.

CONCLUSION

This teaching-oriented study concludes that Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero is a highly effective literary resource for teaching religious moderation in higher education. Through its nuanced portrayal of Islamophobia and its emphasis on moral exemplarity, courage, tolerance, empathy, and peacebuilding, the novel provides concrete illustrations of how religious moderation operates in lived experience

The application of genetic structuralism reveals how the novel reflects the collective experiences of Muslim Americans in post-9/11 society, while also offering universal ethical insights relevant to diverse contexts, including Indonesia. By reconstructing the literary analysis into a pedagogical framework, this article demonstrates that literature can function not only as an object of study but also as a medium of ethical formation. education transforms into what Apple (2019) describes as a process of moral and civic development rather than simple knowledge transmission

For universities committed to fostering inclusive, tolerant, and critically engaged graduates, literature-based teaching of religious moderation offers a powerful and sustainable approach. In this sense, Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero becomes more than a novel; it becomes a classroom for cultivating humanity, empathy, and peaceful coexist.

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