

A tale of a Somali girl

Na'ima B Robert, author of 'From my sisters' lips' launched her new book 'From Somalia, with love' last Friday at the Brady Arts Centre in Whitechapel.

The launch showcased and celebrated the Somali cultural tradition ranging from dramatic presentations by the Somali Integration Team (SIT), poetry recital to cultural dances, fashion fair and food tasting. The presentations brought to life Ms Robert's own objective behind basing the book on a Somali family.

"I wanted to share a culture that is not known" said Ms Robert after reading excerpts from the book. Disappointed with the representation of the Somali community in the media- or the lack thereof -Ms Robert believed there to be "more to Somalia than war". The book chronicling the trails of Safia, the Somali inner-city girl in London was received by an enthusiastic audience. The launch saw a lively ensemble of some of the lesser known though more culturally rich aspects of the Somali heritage.

Ms Robert explores some of these themes in 'From Somalia with love'. Paying homage to Somalia's ancient oral tradition, and its muted significance amongst modern understanding; the main character is portrayed as poetically creative without awareness of the wealth of Somali poetry

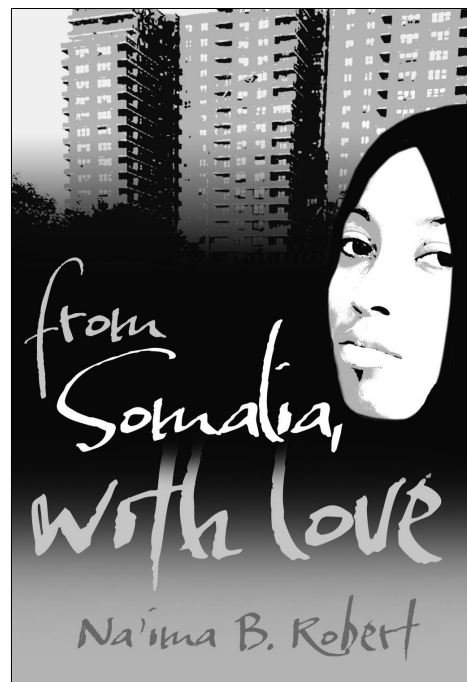
BY LOTHIFA CHOWDHURY

Author
NA'IMA B ROBERT

Book
FROM SOMALIA WITH LOVE

that her artistic preoccupation is descended from. The maturation of Safia's religious identity is another premise tackled in the book and makes for an interesting examination of religious re-evaluation. When asked whether it reflected contemporary attitudes of Muslim women, Na'ima Robert felt it can be related to by Muslim women reconciling their religion into an identity and not just those from a Somali background. "For me it's a very loving portrayal of a complex culture that cannot be encompassed in one story but offers strands to it". The relationship between Safia who does not remember Somalia and Abo her

long-absent father arriving from a life wholly spent in Africa poses an interesting



dilemma for the young protagonist. Whilst rehabilitating an inherited ethnic identity to a western sensibility adds to the growing spectrum of artistic opinion - that can be seen caricatured in films like 'East is East' and 'Bend it like Beckham'. Nonetheless it makes a valid and cross-cultural observation

of the inter-generational tension felt amongst many migrant parents and their second-generation children.

The story being as much coming-of-faith as it was coming-of-age, was

well received by the predominantly female Somali teenagers in the audience. With questions from the audience reflecting the promising growth of an intellectually articulate British-Somali female it was almost a disappointment to find out Na'ima Robert herself was not Somali. Coming from a South African descent Ms Robert has however received praise from readers of her first novel 'From my Sisters lips' for her accurate portrayal of a cultural and emotional psyche that is not native to her. "It came to me in a Somali context" she explained "and it couldn't be told from any other context" and hopes that it encourages understanding from its non-Muslim, non-Somali readership. Speaking to a young student from the John Kelly Girls' School, Ifra Hashi an aspiring journalist found in Na'ima Robert a worthy example. "It is inspiring because she is a Muslim and a woman and she's doing something with her life" said Ifra who still felt there should be more Somali writers. "They are a minority" she said and wanted to see more similar Somali cultural events in the future.

keeping it real The challenge of writing for the youth

I cringed slightly while reading the final hard copy of my latest book 'From Somalia, with love', a novel for teenagers set in a Somali family in the East End. But I didn't cringe because of the storyline, the characters or the dialogue. I still love the story of a 14 year old Somali girl whose father comes over from Somalia and turns her world upside down. And the characters have become part of my life, in that curious way that fictional characters sometimes can. I still believe in the message: that no matter what happens, you can always return to Allah and find the strength to do what you know to be right.

We are not often honest with young people. We don't want to 'give them ideas', corrupt their innocence, let them think we condone negative behaviours, the list goes on. So our attempts to communicate with them are stilted at best, non-existent at worst. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the arena of Muslim children's literature. Have you noticed how the book shelves are full of titles that cater to younger Muslims; preschoolers and primary readers? Masha Allah, Qur'anic stories, picture books, even lift-the-flap and cloth books fill the shelves with colour illustrations, friendly stories and bite-sized portions of Islamic teachings. But a curious thing happens after reading age 10: the

books disappear. On UK Islamic bookshop shelves, you can count the number of titles aimed at over 10s on one hand.

It seems ludicrous that, at a time when young people are probably reading more than ever, confidently and independently, there are no Islamic alternatives to the plethora of mainstream titles that seek to instruct our youth in the arts of dates, mates and graduating from Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

But writing for young people, especially in today's fast-paced society, where children grow up before their time and seem to exude an air of knowingness quite unlike previous generations, is challenging, to say the least.

Young people are different to children: they will not be preached to, and they see through oversimplified or contrived characters. They read critically, using their own experiences and beliefs to shape their understanding of the story and the characters and, if it doesn't ring true, they reject it, no matter how much of a 'good example' it may be. I believe that it is this that stops Islamic publishers attempting to produce book for this age group. It is too frightening.

The Muslim Youth Helpline have a telling FAQ section. One of the questions they are asked is this: By discussing sensitive issues, aren't you encouraging unIslamic

behaviour? Their answer: The absence of support services which target marginalized Muslim youth, has left young people with no where to turn to for guidance on a range of social problems.

I feel the same way about reading material for Muslim youth. Although some may be taken aback by the honesty in 'From Somalia, with love', I stand by it. Just like 'From my sisters' lips' was an honest portrayal of becoming Muslim and dealing with life as a Muslim, I have tried to be honest to the experiences of young Muslim girls in 'From Somalia, with love'.

'From Somalia, with love' is a book that touches on many different issues, most if not all of them familiar to Muslim youth around the world: struggles with identity, family tensions, hijab, relations with the opposite sex, and the trial of trying to practise Islam when everything around you is calling you away.

It can be hard as an adult to acknowledge that this is the reality our children are living. But as an author and an 'older sister', the only thing I can promise my readers is this: I will always write stories that try to help you find the strength to live your iman through whatever life throws at you - and I will always try to keep it real.

I feel I owe my readers that, at the very least. And Allah ta'ala knows best.

REVIEW

"I think that this book is full of truths about teenage girls and how they want to do things, propelled by friends and other people, but are stopped by their culture and religion. I really enjoyed reading this book as it applies to all Muslim girls around the world and the consequences of going against your family. Over all I thoroughly enjoyed this book and I would recommend this book to all the Muslim girls out there."

Hizra Mahmood, age 16, London.

More than a teen book

BY SAFA SULING TAN

I was thoroughly immersed in the life and thoughts of 14 year old East Londoner, Safia Dirie. The author has managed to portray the complexity a Muslim teen experiences quite wonderfully by combining Safia's emotional conundrums and identity struggles amidst family dynamics, parental expectations and religious consciousness.

The book is littered with many expected stereotypes - the loving mother and blushing bride, the

cool, wayward older brother, the boring and serious eldest brother, the charming husband but unfathomable father, the wise and kind young aunt who we all love and look up to, the jahiliyyah (ignorant) cousin who tempts Safia into experiencing the other side...But instead of being tired, the characters serve to provide the reader with a world that we can recognise and appreciate. Safia's experiences are those that any Muslim female, young or old would be able to relate to. Maybe it was because her experiences were mine or because it would have been a fellow sister's or sisters', whatever it was, I cared every bit of the way, not just the ending. And the ending did not disappoint. I am slightly shy to confess that despite being a grown up, a teen book left me with a wet face and a big fat smile on my face.