

الشهادة والعدل: الفاعلية الأخلاقية للشباب المسلم الأمريكي في رواية النيران  
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## Witness towards Justice: American Muslim Youth Moral Agency in Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires*

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### المخلص

بالتركيز على رواية النيران الجوفاء لسَميرة أحمد، تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تحويل سرد الشهادة نحو العدالة لشكل أدب اليافعين إلى شكل أخلاقي عبر القيم الإسلامية المتمثلة في الشهادة بوصفها إقراراً صادقاً بالحقيقة، والعدل بوصفه وزناً منصفاً، والأمانة بوصفها دقةً في الحفظ والنقل، والصبر بوصفه تمييزاً متأنياً. ويأتي هذا الطرح على خلاف النقد الذي أعقب أحداث الحادي عشر من أيلول، والذي انشغل بتحليل أدب اليافعين ذي المرجعية الإسلامية من زاوية الصدمة أو التعددية الثقافية، متغافلاً عن البعد الأخلاقي السردية. تطبق الدراسة نموذج الأخلاقيات السردية الإسلامية لأدب اليافعين على رواية النيران الجوفاء بغية إنتاج أدوات تحليلية وتربوية قابلة للتكرار. ويجمع الإطار النظري بين فلسفة الفضيلة الإسلامية الكلاسيكية عند مسكويه والغزالي، والمقاصدية الغائية عند الشاطبي وابن عاشور وكمالي، والسرديات الأخلاقية عند فيلان، وأخلاقيات الإدراك في أدب اليافعين عند نيكولاجيفا، ودراسات الشهادة عند بلاند وغانون، ونقد سوء الاعتراف في الكتابات الأمريكية الإسلامية عند السلطاني وعزيز وهلال وعبد

الخبير. وتعتمد الدراسة منهجًا تفسيريًا نوعيًا لبيان كيفية اشتغال مؤشرات الفضيلة عبر التقنيات السردية، وكيف يضع النص قراءه في موقع المشاهد المستجيب والسامع المسؤول، وكيف يوجّه الفحص المقاصدي استخدام الأدلة، وكيف تُعني الدراسات الأمريكية الإسلامية مجمل التحليل. وتخلص إلى أن وثائقية الملف تؤدي وظيفة الشهادة، وأن تعدد الأصوات يُنشئ جمهورًا أخلاقيًا مؤسسًا على الأمانة والصبر، وأن مصارحة الشباب الجريئة موجّهة نحو العدل، بما يحفز القراء على صون النفس والكرامة. وانطلاقًا من هذه النتائج، تقترح الدراسة نموذجًا رباعي الخطوات وأداة تربوية تطبيقية تشمل دفاتر توثيق الأدلة، وصياغة بيانات الشهود، وتمارين التثليث في التحقق، وتدريبات حفظ سلسلة الحيازة، مقدّمة إطارًا لشكل نقدي حامل للفضيلة ونموذجًا للشهادة المدنية يتحدى التمثيلات المعقّدة المبسّطة.

### Abstract

Focusing on Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires*, this study examines how the novel's narration of witness towards justice transforms the YA form into one of ethics via the Islamic values of *shahāda* (truthful attestation), *ʿadl* (fair weighing), *amānah* (custodial accuracy), and *ṣabr* (patient discernment). This goes against the post-9/11 criticism which analyses Muslim-based YA by looking at the elements of trauma or multiculturalism whilst ignoring ethical narratives. In this study, a YA Islamic Narrative-Ethics model is applied to *Hollow Fires* to produce analytic and pedagogical tools that can be replicated. The framework integrates classical Islamic virtue philosophy (Miskawayh; al-Ghazālī), *maqāṣid* teleology (al-Shāṭibī; Ibn ʿĀshūr; Kamālī), ethical narratology (Phelan), YA cognition/ethics (Nikolajeva), testimony studies (Bland & Gannon), and American-Muslim critiques of misrecognition (Alsultany; Aziz; Hilal; Abdul Khabeer). This study follows a qualitative interpretive protocol to show how virtue cues operate through narrative devices, how the text positions its readers through spectatorship and answerable hearing, how a *maqāṣid* check shapes its use of evidence, and how American-Muslim scholarship informs the overall analysis. It argues that dossier documentarity acts as *shahāda*, that polyphony creates a moral audience grounded in *amānah* and *ṣabr*, and that youth parrhesia is oriented toward *ʿadl*, encouraging readers to uphold the preservation of life and dignity. Building on these insights, the study proposes a four-step model and a hands-on pedagogical toolkit entailing evidence journals, witness statements, triangulation drills, and chain-of-custody exercises, offering both a framework for virtue-bearing form in criticism and a model of civic witness that challenges “simplified complex representations”.



## 1. Introduction

Since the event(s) of September 11, 2001, the body of *Anglophone* young adult novels with Muslim protagonists has been overwhelmingly interrogated within the frameworks of trauma, of multicultural inclusion and of securitized identity. Although these approaches have no doubt helped provoke important scholarly conversations, there is a certain danger that they might limit our interpretive field of vision, flattening the ethical complexity of the novels into a sort of checklist instead of exploring the lived moral experience that Alsultany (2012), Aziz (2022) and Hilal (2022) postulate. In light of this, the present study argues that Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires* is most fruitfully analysed through a lens of Islamic narrative-ethics, which is the study of the novel's structural and storey choices as agents of moral development and not just the means of delivering thematic content. The novel's usage of various testimonies, clippings, and posts formalizes an ethics of witness, orienting readers toward *shahāda* (truthful testimony) and 'adl (justice). The end outcome is the cultivation of American Muslim youth moral agency.

Although research on American Muslim YA has provided extensive mappings of Islamophobia, racialization, and identity performance (Alsultany 2012; Abdul Khabeer 2016; Aziz 2022; Hilal 2022), there is yet any integrated model entailing Islamic moral philosophy and narratology for explaining how YA form educates readers about ethical discernment. Existing usage of ethical vocabularies tends to be presented through secular frames like "empathy" or civic inclusion instead of Qur'ānic virtues or classical virtue ethics. This results in an undertheorization of the operative work of form, i.e., how readers are compelled to "do justice" by evidence chains, paratexts, and polyphony. This investigation conceptualises an Islamic Narrative Ethics Framework based on the intellectual legacy of classical Muslim Ethicists: the exposition of habituated virtue by Miskawayh (1968); the treatise of al-Ghazali on the retraining of the soul towards justice and truthfulness (1997); the contributions of al-Shatibi (1997) and Ibn 'Ashur (2006) on *maqasid al-shari'a* as synthesised by Kamali (2019). Within this framework, the use of narrative techniques are scrutinised with reference to the cultivation of virtues such as shahada (truthful witness), 'adl (justice), *amanah* (custody of truth/responsibility) and *sabr* (steadfastness). In the current Arab American studies of law, media and racialisation (Alsultany, 2012; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022), Ahmed's novel is therefore understood as both a representation of evil and a tool for moral education, in the spirit of the Qur'ani injunction to "stand firmly for justice" (Q 4:135).



The current research builds on narratological scholarship that assumes the form of storytelling as ethically potent. Phelan (2007, p. 37) shows that the structure of narrative can subtly guide the reader toward particular “moral commitments”, but Nikolajeva (2014, p.78) goes further by treating young adult fiction as “an environment in which ethical cognition materialises itself in a very strong sense”. In a similar vein of study Bland and Gannon (2020, p. 53) expose the role of specific narrative techniques in “cultivating ethical judgement” in readers. Integrating these views, the current research argues that Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires* uses its dossier style configuration not as a simple aesthetic strategy, but as a pedagogical tool of witness, teaching its readers how to see, assess and act in ethical ways. The central thesis of the study is that *Hollow Fires* transmutes its document style structure into didactic exemplification of Islamic ethics of witness. Far from being a passive observer to the story, readers are thrust into active participation in the narrative: readers are asked to carefully weigh the evidence through the lens of *amanah*; they are asked to exercise patience in the face of uncertainty through *sabr*; and they are asked to make judgments that ensure life and dignity, thus living up to the principles of the *maqasid*. Hence, apart from portraying surveilled Muslim youths, the novel also transforms its Muslim and non-Muslim readers into becoming ‘*adl* witnesses.

The contributions of this study are manifold. First, it conceptually develops a replicable Islamic Narrative-Ethics model integrating Qur’ānic virtues into narrative operations (e.g., dossier form as witness practice; paratexts as forensic ethics). Second, it methodologically offers a replicable framework for examining YA evidence-based forms via *maqāṣid* criteria. Third, it emphasizes moral agency on top of visibility in American Muslim YA (cf. Abou El Fadl, 2004; Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Aziz, 2022). Finally, it pedagogically demonstrates the role of literary reading practices as critical media literacy in instances where rumour and platform logics create a “simplified complex representations” (Alsultany, 2012, p. 23).

As such, *Hollow Fires* should be read at the intersection of Islamic virtue ethics and American Muslim cultural critique. While legal-cultural analyses depict the dangers of a security state (Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022) and cultural studies map identity performance (Abdul Khabeer, 2016), an analysis on Islamic narrative-ethics demonstrates how YA fiction educates readers about shouldering *amānah*, practicing evidentiary care, and enacting *shahāda* in public. Beyond interpretive, the implications are also civic and theological: the reader’s effort of judgment is an ethical act if witness is a virtue. The next section identifies the gaps in literature by



examining post-9/11 American Muslim YA criticism, Islamophobia studies, and mixed-media narratology.

## 2. Literature Review

Post-9/11 representation regimes legitimize the mistrust of Muslims while seeming sympathetic, according to fundamental media studies. Alsultany demonstrates this paradox in his analysis of “simplified complex representations” whereby media texts depict “positive” Muslim figures while at the same time pushing for the War on Terror (2012, p. 23). This media critique is supported by legal and policy studies. In his theorization of the “racial Muslim”, Aziz shows how law and bureaucracy racialize religion with impacts on civil liberties (2022). Hilal adds that the War on Terror instils Islamophobia in legal processes, popular narratives, and everyday lives, rendering Muslims as “innocent until proven Muslim” (2022). These studies collectively show why surveillance, presumptive guilt, and public misrecognition often become the focus in Muslim youth narratives.

These media/legal insights determine the YA analysis of school hallways, extracurriculars, and local news as sources for the generation and contestation of suspicion. For *Hollow Fires*, this brings in two contributions. First, it emphasizes the need for evidence (screenshots, clippings, testimony) to counter rumour and panic. Secondly, youth voice, identity, performance, everyday ethics are presented as civic intervention instead of mere expression, coordinating the formal techniques of the novel with a witness politics that responds to long-standing representational harm (Alsultany, 2012; Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022).

American Muslim cultural studies shows a framework for examining Muslim-American identity and culture in the context of everyday life, i.e., race and faith. Abdul Khabeer (2016, p.83) goes beyond the conventional dichotomy between assimilation and tradition, and shows how performance, aesthetic expression, and social interaction come together to create “moral subjectivities and communal formations”. Likewise, the legal and ethical scholarship of Abou El Fadl (2004, p. 59) argues in favour of public moral lexicon that is based on “dignity, reasonable discourse and critique of literalistic rigidity”. By simply juxtaposing these particular scholarly works with media studies and legal writings, we reach a locus of reconceptualising American Muslim adolescents not only as static symbols but also as careful dynamic cultural practitioners that immensely interpret normative discourses, constantly contest stigma and put the articulation of individualised logical practices of belonging.



In regard to the contribution to scholarship this corpus achieves two key goals. First, it helps articulate a clear cultural grammar that significantly showcases young heroes transmute school broadcasting, public media and companionship networks into grounds for soiled ethical agency. Second, it claims virtue ethics from Muslim traditions as opposed to defaulting to secular civic frameworks. Emphasising quotidian ethics in the United States, the study elucidates the real phenomenon that young adult novels can turn virtues into practises, a phenomenon that is distinctively seen in *Hollow Fires*, where storytelling trajectory is kept alive by acts of verifying, bearing witness, and caring for the other.

A rising number of studies of young adults consider the role of the narrative structures in moral cognition. Phelan (2007, p. 42) believes the architecture of a storey is what “inherently directs the moral appraisals of the readers”. Nikolajeva (2014, p. 84) describes children's fiction as a "moral laboratory," in which complex textual forms e.g. multiperspectival voices, or embedded documents enable both ethical and cognitive development. Bland and Gannon's (2020, p. 29) work is an example of the ways diaries, social media posts, and documentary inserts make a young character's "voice" into civic testimony. Critiques and reviews in such publications as Horn Book and the Bulletin of the Centre for Children's Books point out that the use of mixed media and polyphonic views in contemporary young adult literature is not merely a form of stylistic innovation, but also a way to engage readers with concerns and public reasoning in our society.

This study shows how *Hollow Fires* uses a dossier-style format, with headlines, interviews, social media posts, police reports, and editorial notes, to guide readers through the story. These pieces of “evidence” invite readers to sort, evaluate, and compare information for themselves. In doing so, the novel turns reading into an active, responsible process, where engaging with the text becomes a kind of ethical practice (Phelan, 2007; Nikolajeva, 2014; Bland & Gannon, 2020). This strand is therefore vital as it positions ethical force in both what the novel states about Islamophobia and how its devices drive acts of inquiry and judgment.

Although form and voice have moral implications as per narrative-ethics scholarship, YA studies hardly ever explore this through Islamic morality traditions. Classical Muslim ethicists give us a short hand vocabulary for evaluating the behavioural expectations of *Hollow Fires*. Miskawayh (1968, p. 37) shows how virtues are “cultivated by habit rather than just verbal agreement and habituation” as character formation. Al-Ghazali (1997, p. 58) emphasises that it is important “to guide the self, to truth and justice”, as it will have certain virtues that are heightened by the day-





to-day practise of the virtues, such as *sidq* (truthfulness), *sabr* (steadfastness), and *'adl* (justice). The *maqasid al shari'a* structure pioneered by Al-Shatibi and elaborated by Ibn 'Ashur provides a framework for decision-making that centres around preserving life, dignity, intellect, property and faith; this is a teleological benchmark for moral action (Al-Shatibi, 1997; Ibn 'Ashur, 2006). In a contemporary context, Kamali (2019, p. 72) adapts these goals to contemporary ethics problems, emphasising “procedural virtues such as careful deliberation, proportionality, and a general concern for the public interest”, all values which could be easily invoked to interpretive acts.

Viewing this Islamic ethical lexicon through the lens of YA narrative theory may throw light on the moral work that readers do in *Hollow Fires*. At its heart is the notion of *shahada* (witness) which would serve as a statement of belief and a call to deal with evidence responsibly. Subsequently the concept of *adl* (justice) points towards fairness, protection of the vulnerable and the taking of balanced decisions. Within the dossier structure of the novel, *'adl* works to teach readers to cheque facts scrupulously, not to draw hasty conclusions, and reach thoughtful and equitable conclusions. These are complemented by *amānah* (custody of truth/responsibility), framing research as the responsibility to receive, protect, and disseminate truthful knowledge, and mitigate rumour. Lastly, *ṣabr* (steadfastness) entails interpretive patience, teaching readers to withstand uncertainties and pressure and to not make premature judgments. These virtues collectively reframe reading as an ethical act of justice and testimony rather than passive consumption.

This study's main output is the transformation of “ethical themes” into virtue-bearing form. The reading of *Hollow Fires* via an Islamic virtue grammar allows us to identify how its dossier structure, polyphony, and paratexts educate readers about *shahāda* and *'adl*.

All the reviewed literature agrees about the conditions faced by Muslim youths (media misrepresentation, legal racialization) and about the presence of formal innovation in YA (polyphony, documents, testimony). However, the mechanism by which such forms develop moral dispositions, and specifically how Islamic virtue frameworks help elucidate the said mechanism, remains inadequately explained. The Islamic tradition provides broader, practice-oriented ideas that better align with what dossier fiction demands of its readers, while even sophisticated explanations of representation run the risk of falling back on the narrow vocabulary of “empathy”. Evidently empathetic portrayals have the power to rewrite governing logics, as Alsultany reminds us (2012, p. 23). Islamic virtue ethics provides a countermeasure to

determine whether the evidentiary practices of a story encourage readers to cultivate scepticism or to defend life and dignity (*maqāṣid*).

There are hence two apparent gaps: (1) Islamic virtue words for form analysis have not been adequately operationalized in YA scholarship, and (2) American Muslim culture and legal studies rarely link their diagnoses to the micro-operations of literary devices that could undo the damages they depict. Addressing these gaps carry both practical and theoretical significance: beyond improving literary technique, a virtue-form analysis advances teaching (media literacy, ethical consideration) and public conversation regarding Muslims in the United States.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

This article's argument necessitates a conceptual framework that can integrate narrative attention with Islamic ethical terminology. Very few studies on YA fiction have used the Islamic tradition of virtue ethics and legal philosophy to examine how novels train readers to make moral decisions, despite the fact that the moral stakes of voice, judgment, and progression have long been highlighted in narrative ethics (Phelan, 2007, pp. 21–22). What is needed is a way of analysing narratives that puts the role of structural dynamics in shaping the dispositions and ethical decisions of the reader in the foreground, and does not simply catalogue occurrences of Islamophobia or identity tensions. The framework of Islamic Narrative Ethics allows for such a perspective by putting the reader's moral development at centre stage. This theoretical construct is supported by four inter-related concepts. The first one is *shahāda* (witness), typically deemed as an oral declaration of faith but of which is also a public testimony of truth and justice as stated in the Qur'ān: "Stand firmly for justice as witnesses for God" (Q 4:135). In narrative terms, *shahāda* highlights the reader's duty in weighing, assessing, and verifying narrative testimony. The second concept is *'adl* (justice) of which traditional definition entails distributive equity and testimonial justice. In narratological sense, *'adl* transpires when readers are faced with the task of balancing between opposing claims, resisting prejudice, and protecting the weak. The third concept is *amānah* (trust or custodianship), which refers to the responsibility of managing information in a truthful manner. As asserted by Abou El Fadl (2004), trust and moral accountability are essential Islamic ethics, and that *amānah* literarily refers to the reader's duty to not magnify rumors but rather to uphold the truth. The fourth and final concept is *ṣabr* (steadfastness) or interpretive patience; it is the ability to defer judgment until the ambiguity is cleared.





**Witness towards Justice: American Muslim Youth Moral Agency in Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires***



With witness and justice at the core, this study advances its own scholarly practice, i.e., quotation and citation, as part of its theorized ethical work. The works of US Muslim scholars and critics like Alsultany (2012), Aziz (2022), Hilal (2022), Abdul Khabeer (2016), and Abou El Fadl (2004) are analysed as the representations of *shahāda* (reinforcing evidence of racialization and media regimes), *‘adl* (acknowledging past intellectual works and restructuring interpretive authority), *amānah* (custodial truth of arguments and contexts), and *ṣabr* (withholding of judgment). As such, the bibliography exemplifies the qualities defined by the framework rather than simply “situating” the argument.

*Shahāda* (witness) in the Qur’ānic sense entails the ethics of disclosing and upholding the truth (Q 4:135). In the context of US Muslims, it is the rejection of the typical “misrecognition” of Muslims (Alsultany, 2012). Additionally, it entails recounting lived realities in opposition to erasure and distortion, a duty that was emphasized in youth-led testimony following 9/11 (Bayoumi, 2008). Deciding who gets to represent Muslim communities is inextricably linked to bearing testimony, as authority and credibility are often disputed when it comes to Islam in the US (Grewal, 2013). When paired with historical syntheses that monitor conflicting public narratives of Islam in the US (Curtis, 2009; GhaneaBassiri, 2010), *shahāda* identifies a civic narrative practice: recording, confirming, and disseminating the truth despite consistent falsehoods.

*‘Adl* (justice) is the combination of distributive equity and testimonial fairness, where people receive their due judgments. Justice is now a daily rather than an abstract demand as US law and politics have repeatedly recreated “the Muslim” as a racist suspect (Aziz, 2022; Beydoun, 2018). In our everyday life and within the institutional acts, the War on Terror has given rise to a normalised climate of suspicion, as Hilal (2022, p. 52) notices; in such regimes, justice (*‘adl*) requires an “impartial evaluation of the allegation, and the protection of the persons rendered vulnerable by the systematic constructs”. The influence of justice also defines the perception and reception of Muslim women and youth in gendered and generational context (Ahmed, 2011) and hence also links *‘adl* to the moral question of who speaks, who is trusted, whose harms are taken into account.

The concept of *amanah* (custodianship or trust) emphasizes the moral responsibility that is incumbent to receive, protect and transmit knowledge with integrity. Abou El Fadl (2004) says that the element of trust is broken when knowledge is used as a source of power, instead of a source of justice; hence, *amanah* requires careful representation on the part of academics, journalists, educators and readers alike. Conceiving of

communities as knowledge-makers, as opposed to mere objects of knowledge, represents a type of care evident in the contemporary American Muslim life (Abdul Khabeer, 2016). Given that Islamic authority in the United States is often influenced by transnational debates (Grewal, 2013), *amanah* comes with a duty to take care of the sources and the citations. In the fields of reading and storey-telling, this responsibility is expressed in wise use of evidence: preserving the integrity of the context, preventing the spread of rumour and using testimony as veridical rather than corruptible.

Finally, *sabr* (steadfastness) is beyond the passive silence; it is moral patience in the face of duress. Hilal (2022) states that U.S. Muslims are consistently faced with rigid legal and social demands that they prove their innocence and *sabr* represents resistance to haste or hopelessness. Bayoumi (2008, p. 49) shows that young Arab and Muslim Americans suffer from “exclusion and suspicion in ethically and emotionally fraught ways”. American Muslim thinkers define steadfastness as just and moral action in the face of hardship and not acquiescence (Jackson, 2009; Uddin, 2019). When applied to reading, *sabr* encourages readers to slow down, examine every piece of evidence, and refrain from making a judgement until a question is answered and righted, in other words, to follow the narrative ethic of justice and repair.

These understandings come from the traditions of ethics in Islam. Miskawayh (*Tahdhib al-akhlaq*, 1968, pp. 43-44) claims that virtues multiply by regular self-discipline (“practise” of meticulous attention to evidence). Al-Ghazali (*Ihya al-Ulum al-Din*, 1997, pp. 112-115), tells us of *Riyadat al-nafs*, a training of the soul as a progressive pathway towards truth and justice, and here we are shown the way that storeys can generate moral habits. The *maqāsid al-shari'ah* framework developed by Al-Shatibiy (1997) and elaborated by Ibn 'Ashur (2006) focuses on the preservation of life, dignity, intellect, property and faith and hence provides a criterion for assessing the impact of narrative structure ethically. Kamali (2019) makes this applicable to the modern day and highlights virtues such as deliberation and deliberateness, proportionality, concern for common good, etc., which all very well integrate with how mixed medium YA novels teach readers to interpret and interact with ethical views.

The pressing need for this particular approach is actually apparent in an examination of the scholarship on American Muslims. Aziz (2022, p. 93) exposes the “routineness of jurisprudence” considering Muslims as suspect regardless of behaviour; Alsultany (2012, p. 39) points out that even the best-intentioned media depictions contribute to the “persistence



of pervasive surveillance”; and Abdul Khabeer (2016, p. 83) uncovers resistance through “forms of cultural expression and everyday ethical decisions” in which Hilal (2022, p. 42) shows the “pervasiveness of mistrust” in everyday life. These critiques are illuminating in their work on social and cultural positioning of Muslim YA fiction, but do not engage fully with narrative structure. Islamic Narrative Ethics intervenes here by offering pragmatic guidelines through *shahahdah*, *'adl*, *amanah* and *sabr* to reveal the ethical exhortations embedded in these novels, and to go beyond merely depicting them on the surface.

This framework makes a contribution in three principal ways. First, conceptually, it provides a pragmatic model that integrates Islamic virtue ethics with practical elements of the storey-telling such as dossier-like formats, paratexts, and multiplicity of perspectives. Second, methodologically speaking, it displays that classical as well as modern Islamic ethical vistas could serve as analytical tools in narrology, which can enrich instead of replace secular literary theory. Lastly, on the field level, it situates Muslim YA fiction as a site for ethical apprenticeship and invites readers to actively exert judgment, responsibility, and fairness and be encouraged not to passively view the narratives of harm. To put it briefly, Islamic Narrative Ethics expands narrative ethics to incorporate the rich moral lexicon of Islam and reframes reading as an ethics of witness and justice.

#### 4. Methodology

The qualitative, interpretive ethical-narratology approach used in this study views narrative form as a means of moral discourse (Phelan, 2007) and, in the case of young adult fiction, as a platform for readers to practice cognitive-ethical abilities (Nikolajeva, 2014). It fills a recurring vacuum in Muslim-centred YA research: novels are frequently categorized according to themes (identification, Islamophobia), but the mechanisms through which form fosters virtue are still not well understood. This gap is addressed in this study by fusing rhetorical narratology with Islamic virtue ethics, expanding US Muslim criticisms of misrecognition and racialization (Alsultany, 2012; Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022) by elucidating the role of formal devices in training readers about *shahāda* (witness) and *'adl* (justice).

The research is centred only on Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires*. The mixed medium dossier accompanying the text, consisting of newspaper clippings, online posts, first-hand testimonies and official police statements, offers an excellent substrate to test a virtue-based hypothesis related to evidentiary rigor and the public's truth-telling practices. The

methodological goal is analytical generalisation with the goal of population inference.

The process of analysis proceeds by a well-articulated four-step process. First of all, I list all document types and their order of placement, making explicit claims and counter claims, mechanisms by which these claims and counter claims may be substantiated (Bland & Gannon, 2020). Second, we single out critical instances of the virtues of *shahada*, 'adl, amanah, and sabr, drawing from the sources of Miskawayh (1968) and Al-Ghazali (1997). Third, I analyse the extent to which the narrative operates as a strategy of mobilisation for the readers as active witnesses who are charged with curbing rumours and safeguarding dignity, instead of sidelining them as passive spectators, in line with Phelan (2007) and Abdul Khabeer (2016). Finally, the chronological sequences are scrutinised with respect to *maqasid* objectives, focusing on the preservation of life, dignity and justice.

Rigor is guaranteed through a clear trail of coding choices, use of counterexamples, and grounding each assertion in textual corpus. Reflexivity holds a key position: under the conception of Abou El Fadl (2004) of *amanah* on scholarly knowledge, citations are considered a fiduciary duty so as to maintain accuracy, verify paraphrases, and prevent misrepresentation. Subsequent research should use this framework across a wider range of American Muslim young-adult texts including visual and digital media, since the purpose of these findings is to advance the creation of theory as opposed to providing an exhaustive survey.

## 5 Analysis

This novel develops a reading ethics in which the form entailing clippings, transcripts, social posts, “Common Law” inserts, and epigraphs trains the reader’s moral abilities: *shahāda* (truthful witness), 'adl (fair weighing/justice), *amānah* (custody of truth), and *ṣabr* (patient discernment). The book practices evidential care, testimonial fairness, and a pace of judgment in line with the preservation of life and dignity (*maqāṣid*) rather than engaging in shallow positivism (“just the facts”). The ethical power of form as the organizer of readerly judgments (Phelan, 2007) is realized in narratological idiom. In terms of young adults, it is what Nikolajeva (2014) refers to as a “moral laboratory”, i.e., where formal complexity fosters ethical and cognitive skills.

### 5.1 Documentality and the Dossier Form: From “Facts” to *Shahāda*

We are deprived of “fact worship” in the first few pages: “Some facts barely scratch the surface of the truth. / Some facts obscure it. / Some facts are lies” (Ahmed, 2022, p. 20). The following





“News/Crunch” spread compares apparent evidence with racial scripting: a 911 call by a teacher describing “an Arab student” wearing “something like a suicide bomber vest” and a police spokesman speculating the teen as “a sleeper, taught to blend in” (Ahmed, 2022, pp. 21–22).

The archival corpus, while extensive, leaves a lot of room for bias; its records have the potential to arouse suspicion as often as they present empirical facts. The dataset goes beyond simply supplying data, however, as it sends stereotypes, confounds suspicion with factual certainty, and produces a public that views Brown Muslim bodies as a perceived threat. Ahmed aligns form with ethical attentiveness by beginning with these “official: fragments, which prepare readers to view every subsequent artifact as a claim to be tested instead of a fact to be accepted (cf. Phelan, 2007; Nikolajeva, 2014).

Ahmed also scripts a method for upholding the truth, i.e., counter-documentarity. Following the scrubbing of a swastika “before the police even came”, the students reply with “Always get receipts” and the editorial “We were all witnesses... Silence is not an option” (pp. 84–86). The dossier’s “Common Law” insert on Ghost Skin (white-supremacist “passing”) positions racism within institutions and asks readers to read the file from a teleological lens, for preserving life and dignity instead of magnifying rumour (pp. 70–71). In line with the notion of *‘adl* as “giving each their due”, this analysis positions Alsultany’s “simplified complex representations”, Aziz’s “racial Muslim”, and Hilal’s infrastructure of suspicion as interpretive authority for assessing how artifacts ratify racial governance rather than as a peripheral context (Alsultany, 2012; Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022). This hybridity hence entails the performance of the *shahāda* (gathering, preserving, attesting) while training the reader about *‘adl* (fair weighing)—a counter-forensic YA method instead of an “issue” catalogue. In terms of reader practice, the dossier’s timestamps, headings, and cross-references exemplify chain-of-custody discipline (*amānah*) and pace judgment (*ṣabr*), instructing viewers to be aware of contradictions until confirmation is made (Bland & Gannon, 2020). According to Phelan, these paratexts structure accountability; in Nikolajeva’s work, they foster ethical cognition by making readers perform the labor of witness rather than by delivering sermons.

## 5.2 Voice, Testimony, and the Moral Audience: *Shahāda* Becomes Address

When procedural guidance is provided by the dossier, the artistic liveliness results from an underpinning polyphony. Jawad's lyric, forensic



approach is one that moves beyond the performative display; as he says, “I am more than the attorneys exhibits, More than the stenographer's rhythmic clicks, More than the aggregate of discrete facts - I am more than a corporeal presence” (Ahmed, 2022, p. 19). By making an inventory into an appellant gesture, the text turns the audience's role from passive witness of the evidence to listeners of the testimony. The speech of the reiteration of the whispers, says for instance 'I am near . . . be careful,' positions readers as custodians, with an obligation to faithfully attain testimony without change (p. . 109). *Amanah*, which is custodial listening, involves a scrupulous reception of information, its preservation of precision and contextual integrity, moderation. This sense of responsibility is often challenged by institutional barriers and obstruction: the scrubbing of a swastika, as ordered by the principal, “before the police even came,” yet “people got pictures” (p. 84). The reader’s duty is made clear as the dossier simultaneously documents the erasure and its evidence: to keep, verify, and attest.

Here, *shahāda* becomes address. The novel’s polyphony—Jawad’s lyric “I”, news spreads, student editorials, “Common Law” inserts, presents a moral audience and instructs them on how to inhabit it. The voices need answerable hearing, not a theatre of empathy: verifying assertions, putting pieces in context, following custody chains, and rejecting bureaucratic erasures, practices of *shahāda* organized by *amānah* and focused on *‘adl*. As asserted by Phelan, responsibility is organized by form which places a “authorial audience” in position of judgment (2007). Nikolajeva’s YA narrative also serves as ethical cognition, instructing readers to think critically instead of reacting (2014). The editorial’s communal “we” and the whisper's personal second-person pull perform a counter-public audition where credibility is gained by demonstrative compassion rather than closeness to suffering (cf. Bland & Gannon, 2020).

The approach also reverses the power to interpret in accordance with Abdul Khabeer's (2016, p, 67) argument that Muslim quotidian praxis “engenders knowledge”. Community based accounts of voice and credibility are thereby valued better than conventional media literacy models, and represent the virtue of *‘adl* (justice). Accordingly, polyphony goes beyond the provision of multiple perspectives; it makes morally situated readers ready to provide testimony, carefully scrutinise evidence, uphold fairness, and commit their attention to the responsible, ethical disclosure.





### 5.2a Temporal Ethics and Haunting (*Ṣabr* as Endurance in Time)

The formation of time in the novel acts as a kind of moral lens; the haunting rhythmic cadence of time assists the reader's engagement of ethical questions in the novel. The mistake of perceiving everyday things, like your backpack, your sack lunch or your clock, as a threat is a good example of how longstanding suspicion can distort perception and judgment (Ahmed, 2022, p. 59). By this motif repetition, the storyline induces a cyclical effect where the anxiety seeps into everyday life until the readers comprehend repetition itself as a negative pattern. The very formal structure of the narrative helps enforces a quite deliberate and extremely measured pace: timestamps, date stamps, and staggered testimony force the reader to stop and pause, check small details and cross-reference material, even before accepting any sort of claim as truth. As Phelan (2007, p. 93) notes, the architecture of the storey “controls the moment of judgement”, and thus that shapes accountability. Likewise, treatment of YA fiction in Nikolajeva (2014, p. 38) calls special attention to the fact that this kind of paced progression is not demanding of “impulsive reactions”, but instead it encourages ethical reflection through the sustained attention. The whispered warning, “I'm so close”, “I'm so close” (Brazil has very weak environmental laws). Be careful . . . is an injunction to caution the reader from leaping to conclusions too quickly but to accept the tenor of the narrative (p. . .109).

Funeral rituals and practices (pp. 64-65) put grief into concrete form, washing, waiting, looking; these are learning to wait. This “waiting-with” summarises *sabr*: the controlled waiting in the context of panic or denial, coupled with the notions of *amanah*, as being the obligation for the readers to maintain that contextual integrity without distortion and exaggeration or omission. The recurring and fragmented nature of the clues in the dossier model is a chain-of-custody discipline, encouraging readers to keep information in suspense until a coherent and equitable picture emerges (Bland & Gannon, 2020). It is vital to contextualize such misreadings in terms of the post 9/11 experience of youth more generally as well as the body of American narratives about Muslims (Bayoumi, 2008; Curtis, 2009; GhaneaBassiri, 2010) before passing judgment. In this case, time becomes an arena for building virtue: and instead of being a passive and passive stance of waiting to be resolved, *sabr* is an engaged, measured attention, with time for evidence to mount, for comparisons of claims to be made in context of history and for one to move from the initial shock to a considered, responsible judgment, respectful of dignity and life.

### 5.3 Youth Agency, Risk, and *ʿAdl*: Parrhesia and Public Repair

The setting up of formal structural paradigms is in order to transmute Ahmed's readership from simple passive observers to active participants in the pursuit of justice. The gap is closed by editorial interventions, “We were all witnesses... Silence is not an option” (Ahmed, 2022, p. 86), as students collect evidence like screenshots and timelines, confront administrative pressures, and create an online counter-public: “We are looking for Justice for Jawad. We will keep posting everywhere until his killer is found” (pp. 311, 317). This is readerly praxis of ‘*adl*, i.e., the proper arranging of witness for the protection of life and dignity—rather than virality for its own sake. Narratologically speaking, the narrative encourages readers to assume roles rather than feelings (cf. Phelan, 2007; Nikolajeva, 2014), i.e., documenting, attributing, and verifying prior to amplifying.

To ensure that piety never turns into passivity, Ahmed ties ritual to proof. At the culvert, Safiya prays “We belong to God and to him we shall return” and instantly calls 911 (p. 280). She soon discovers “a pair of green plastic glasses”; instead of pocketing them, she takes a photo and leaves them, reflecting *amānah* as custodial restraint (p. 282). For readers, the act serves as an example of chain-of-custody discipline: securing, recording, and not contaminating. In the meantime, readers learn to transition from rumours to reasoned judgment as rumour and institutional recoding (“runaway” drift) are revealed as factors preempting evidence, withholding until assessment is performed (*ṣabr*) whilst avoiding exaggeration and erasure (cf. Alsultany, 2012; Aziz, 2022; Hilal, 2022).

Here, parrhesia brings risk. Students who post, petition, or name injustice run the risk of being monitored, having their reputation damaged, and facing administrative penalties. The novel frames this risk as the price of being truthful and asks readers to apply ‘*adl*’s due regard criterion to the victims, sources, and those at risk of being further exposed. Ahmed imagines a counter-public that associates credibility with evidential care rather than loudness with truth. The novel’s alignment between *shahāda* (attestation), *amānah* (custody), and *ṣabr* (temporal patience) renders youth speech as a tool for public repair: testimony mandated for the sake of life and dignity instead of a show.

### 5.3a Platform Logics, “Alternative Facts,” and *Amānah*

Platform practice is reframed in the narrative as ethical custodianship instead of a spectacle. The page on “alternative fact (presidential edition)” is disputed by sworn testimony, white-supremacist violence caused “a majority” of domestic terror cases, modeling citation as virtue (Ahmed, 2022, p. 60). Provenance is important in dossier terms: who





talks, under what circumstances, and with which archival trail. In contrast, the school site is “scrubbed” and rebranded as “drama” (p. 69), and a hijacked op-ed stamped “I am the herald of lightning” (p. 47), demonstrating how platform control reinterprets events by reclassifying injury as spectacle or gossip. As a result, the material teaches readers how to separate proof from falsification and prioritizes timestamps, images, and receipts as minimal custodial procedures.

Here, *amānah* refers to context faithfulness, which includes referencing, paraphrasing, and presenting arguments without removing or distorting them and purposefully giving credit to the communities and academics whose testimonies serve as the foundation for the evidence. Abou El Fadl (2004, p. 69) emphasizes that *amanah* is a “fiduciary duty to the veracity itself” and not any specific authority. Abdul Khabeer (2016, p. 74) highlights the fact that everyday Muslim practises create knowledge that needs to be preserved. Ahmed (2022, p. 54) puts this theory into practice in *Hollow Fires* where the “editorials connect the testimony directly with empirical evidence”, students document what happens before institutional negation, and the clippings carefully triangulated to protect these accounts from distortion or rumour.

When thoroughly viewed in light of more general trends in the media towards the “simplification of complex representations” (Alsultany, 2012, p. 73), the “racialized construction of Muslims” (Aziz, 2022, p. 43), and everyday “systems of suspicion” (Hilal, 2022, p. 43), the novel teaches its readers to reckon with the platforms prioritizing expediency over thorough verification. When it is successfully practised, *amanah* must inevitably lead to *adl*, protection of life and dignity and upholding sources and taking care of the vulnerable.

#### 5.4 Synthesis

The fictional narrative of *Hollow Fires* is developed in four interrelated sections, so an Islamic ethic of witness is at the centre. Within this framework, the practise of *Shahada* is given as one of being the witness of presence, which involves the gathering, safety and confirmation of that which has been witnessed and experienced. Through dates, captions, and cross-references, the dossier turns “facts” into verified testimony, guiding readers to track sources carefully, keep an audit trail, and pay close attention to the context of speech instead of treating the details as mere display. *Amānah* is shown as a practice of careful stewardship, collecting receipts, protecting sources, and preserving evidence. The dossier models chain-of-custody habits, emphasizing fidelity to context over speed or virality through screenshots, timestamps, and the refusal to take the “green glasses”. *Sabr* is portrayed as patient, deliberate discernment;

rejecting rumours and allowing a fair understanding to emerge from scattered fragments. Contradictions are held, cross-checked, and only then resolved, as the pacing of judgment is slowed by spaced-out testimony and delayed revelations. This shapes readers' judgment around 'adl, emphasising fairness in protecting life and dignity. It involves sharing interpretive power and carefully examining how evidence is handled. Here, fairness isn't just an idea; it's a practice, as seen in the novel's "Common Law" notes and student editorials, which highlight American Muslim viewpoints and thoughtfully navigate conflicting claims. When combined, these actions translate archives into practice, i.e., keeping, weighing, and attesting, by moving readers from spectatorship to accountable hearing.

*Hollow Fires*' formal claim is distinct when analysed against other American Muslim YA works. *Ṣabr* is explored in Tahereh Mafi's *An Emotion of Great Delight* (2021) through lyrical first-person narration, where emotions and revelations build slowly over time, without a steady documentary structure to guide readers in interpreting artifacts. In sharp contrast, the very procedural justice, as much the school discipline protocols as the precariousness of immigration status, is the backbone of Sabina Khan's *Zara Hossain Is Here* (2021); platform artefacts are peppered over the course, but they lack a continuity of dossier. The pedagogical basis of the novel is based on the laws that exist in everyday life, or *adl* with a special emphasis on whose voice is heard and whose file is given weight. Ahmed, on the other hand, makes documents the main axis of the storey, using timelines, posts, police reports, school memos, annotations with the title "Common Law," and clippings. In this schema, the dossier is far from being a decorative element, and it is an instructional tool designed to teach the reader about the responsible management of evidence. Formal invites that transform spectatorship into accountable witness allow readers to verify provenance, follow chains of custody, and pause verdicts until evidence builds up. Here, the novel transcends "issue content" to include training in evidence, positioning all four virtues as reader practices, public testimony (*shahāda*), chain-of-custody discipline (*amānah*), delayed verdicts (*ṣabr*), and due regard ('*adl*). Whilst Mafi prioritizes durational interiority and Khan institutional procedure, Ahmed combines interior, institutional, and archival logics to enable the continuous mutual interrogation between emotion, policy, and proof.

The dossier's inherent meta-guides ("Common Law" inserts; student editorials; receipt-keeping mantras) elucidate a teleology: life and dignity preservation (*maqāṣid*). Instead of hierarchical, the comparison point is



diagnostic: each text develops ethical attention in a different way. *Hollow Fires* renders the evidentiary archive as a unique site of moral formation, teaching readers how to keep, weigh, and attest in addition to what to feel or hope for.

## 6 Discussion

*Hollow Fires* reinterprets American Muslim youth by establishing it as a platform for moral development. Ahmed models an Islamic ethics of witness whereby *shahāda* (truthful attestation), *amānah* (custodial accuracy), *ṣabr* (patient discernment), and *‘adl* (justice as due regard) become reader practices via dossier architecture (Section 5.1), polyphonic address (Section 5.2), and youth parrhesia oriented towards *‘adl* (Section 5.3). The novel acknowledges the ethical force of form, Phelan's (2007) organization of readerly judgment via the narrative, and transforms it into a YA pedagogy of evidentiary care as per Nikolajeva's "moral laboratory" (2014).

This has two implications. First, *Hollow Fires* transforms American Muslim youth from trauma awareness to moral behaviour and accountability. Overdetermined Muslim representation has been mapped by a large body of scholarship post 9/11 including media "simplified complex representations" replicating the logics of the War on Terror (Alsultany, 2012), law racialization (Aziz, 2022), and daily suspicion (Hilal, 2022). Ahmed operationalizes a response at the form level without rejecting these structures or offering a straightforward remedy. In cases where racial scripts and rumours pass for proof, the dossier instructs readers on how to gather, maintain, and attest. The text uses receipts, timestamps, and the chain of evidence to simulate possession of truth in situations that are erased or recoded by institutions (the swastika scrub, the "runaway" drift). Whilst Islamophobia teaches the public to judge before analysing, the novel binds interpretation with *ṣabr*, i.e., corroborating patiently prior to making judgments. As a result, the book practices witness ethics through the actions it demands of its readers.

Secondly, the novel presents justice as a reader's due regard rather than an abstract concept by connecting evidentiary pedagogy to *maqāṣid* teleology, i.e., protection of life and dignity. This is achieved methodologically (assessing sources, rejecting bias, safeguarding the weak) and intellectually (reallocating interpretive power to US Muslim scholars and communities who identified these issues). Thus, best practices in instruction and critique are consistent with best practices in reading, entailing Alsultany (2012), Aziz (2022), Hilal (2022), Abdul Khabeer (2016), and others as framing voices disciplining the assembly and judgement of evidence.

The stakes are raised by a comparative analysis. Without maintaining the dossier technique which renders verification the reader's responsibility, Tahereh Mafi's *An Emotion of Great Delight* (2021) prioritizes lyrical interiority, producing *ṣabr* through temporality, i.e., the gradual accumulation of sadness and ambivalence. *Zara Hossain Is Here* (2021) by Sabina Khan emphasizes procedural justice through petitions, school discipline, and immigration pressure, producing 'adl in institutional idioms but not through an ongoing archive. Ahmed, on the other hand, uses documentarity as the main tool, bringing all four virtues into line with reader practices: *shahāda* in testimony (the student editorial as liturgy of witness), *amānah* in chain-of-custody discipline, *ṣabr* in deferred verdicts, and 'adl in fair judgment and intellectual credit redistribution (American Muslim frameworks as the focal point of interpretation). Rather than ranking novels, the goal is to demonstrate Ahmed's change in focus from representation and affect to evidence and ethics, from "what the text shows" to "what it trains readers to do".

This results in a reframing for literary scholarship: American Muslim YA should be studied for its ability to create reading habits that go against the very regimes that Alsultany, Aziz, and Hilal describe, as well as for its displays of Islamophobia, racialization, and belonging. This raises the analytic question of: which formal devices foster *shahāda*, *amānah*, *ṣabr*, and 'adl, and toward what teleology (life, dignity, justice)? Thus, dossiers and paratexts serve as tools for virtue-bearing rather than as textures. In turn, scholars need to examine their own methods: are we enacting *amānah* and 'adl in our own critical practice, or are we replicating shortcuts that the novel resists (paraphrasing without due consideration, citing without context)?

The remarkable debate over issue books significantly gains some new complication more especially when viewed through this lens. Although there is invariably attendant risk in suffering being commodified into spectacle, *Hollow Fires* offers an alternative route: for its readership, it encourages us to slow down and to look at events with thoughtfulness and to approach this narrative with a posture of trust rather than pain is entertainment. Through careful implementation of evidence: receipts and dates and measured restraint, the novel works against a cultural construction of Muslim bodies as dangerous (Aziz, 2022), a normalisation of media that is ostensibly well-intentioned but nonetheless securitised (Alsultany, 2012) and an insinuation of suspicion in everyday life (Hilal, 2022). In this case, the idea of *Shahada* is practised with disciplined deliberation so as to combine ethical care and attentiveness without being adorned or heroic.



## 7 Conclusion

*Hollow Fires* uses YA fiction as an academic crucible for the articulations and practises of ethics, using the methodological act of bearing witness as a pedagogical compass on the journey to judicial rectitude. Its compendium, of digital postings, verbatim transcripts, "Common Law" annotations, and editorial excerpts, enhanced with voices that have been numerous, and words pronounced bluntly by youth, places readers in a save network of Islamic virtues. In this way, the audience becomes more than mere observers of the work, becoming not only active participants in the work but also active or more precisely conscientious interlocutors; passive is replaced by evaluative, absorption is replaced by stewardship of evidentiary matter - it is an enterprise, representational and pedagogical by nature.

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## Witness towards Justice: American Muslim Youth Moral Agency in Samira Ahmed's *Hollow Fires*



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**Witness towards Justice: American Muslim Youth Moral Agency in Samira  
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