

## POETRY

# A Religion Not Mine: Four Autoethnographic Poems about the Influence of Islam on Non-Religious Women in Muslim-Dominant Kazakhstan

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### Prays

The man—

I used to call him *Dad*, and now it's *Father*,  
and I am no more *Honeybunch*, *Sugar-plum*,  
*Pumpy-umpy-umpkin*  
but someone  
who did not turn out the way  
he wishes so much I'd be.

He used to say *my little baby-girl*  
and now it is *that dress is too short*.  
What was *you're capable of anything*  
became *the woman's born to cook*,  
*and wear hijab*.

I used to listen to the stories he told,  
Take all his advice,  
and spend evenings enjoying *toguz kumalak*,<sup>1</sup>  
But now  
He only prays.

**Yoga**

He always says *please, never interrupt me.*

So never do I interrupt.

On one, he stands upright,

on two, he makes Niyayah,<sup>2</sup>

on three, he raises hands to ears and says *Allahu Akbar.*

On four, he places right hand on his left hand, and both—on chest,

on five, looks down where he's to place his forehead,

and then recites.

And I ask him not to interrupt me, too:

*It's as important as Namaz. Worship.*

On one, I inhale slowly, gently, deeply,

expanding through the chest,

and stretching out the ribcage.

On two, I gradually exhale,

controlling breaths,

keeping the length of exhalation

equal to that of inhalation.

*Where is my phone, Darina?*

he yells at me

again.

**What Clay Are You Made Of?**

*At Allah's behest*

*the angel Azrael appeared with the clays*

*of different colors;*

*then, at the behest of the Lord,*

*Azrael kneaded clays with different waters*

*in clays He used to model people:*

*some of the color "black," some "white."*

*Us, Asians, them, Europeans,*

*all who has got the white skin—*

*are made of "white" clay.*

*And all who has got the black skin—*

*are made of "black" clay, he says.*

And I speak me:

*The concept of "race" is invented,*

*it's not about clays.  
 In people, so many features  
 follow geographic borders  
 coinciding with climatic zones.  
 And it's so little about the color of our skin  
 that "Allah decided to make us of which."  
 Nature forces have shaped  
 races.  
 It's not the clay,  
 it's genes and melanin,  
 and millions of other things,  
 and it doesn't even matter.*

*No, he insists, it's Allah.*

**A Conversation about Love (or Religion, I Can't Remember)**

We are—  
 the father and daughter.  
 Holding hands  
 on the bank of Shalkar  
 (or Imantau, I can't remember),  
 walking at the same pace  
 as the sun was going down,  
 feeling the fresh, brackish,  
 soft and cold  
 and unbothered breeze,  
 and the so untroubled us.  
 I'm ten back then,  
 (or twelve, I can't remember)  
 and you are thirty-seven  
 (or thirty-nine)  
 retelling me a story  
 of what you called the greatest love—  
 of Adam and Eve,  
 and Allah.

I'm childish,  
 I ask questions—  
 hundreds of them.

You're father-ish,  
 you try to answer  
 each:

*Why is the earth round, daddy?*

*Allah made it so, zhanym.<sup>3</sup>*

*Why is the water wet?*

*Allah made it so, botaqanym.<sup>4</sup>*

*Why is my grandma dead?*

*Did Allah make her so?*

*Why doesn't Dany have a father?*

*Did Allah make it so?*

*Is Allah bad though?*

You didn't hesitate:

*No, he is just.*

*He loves us,*

*that is why*

*he does whatever*

*he feels right.*

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We're back on the bank  
 of Shalkar (this time I remember),  
 after our biggest fight about love,  
 about Allah.

You are forty-eight (exactly),

I am twenty-one.

Most questions are unanswered,  
 and thousands are unasked.

Not holding hands today,  
 not talking face to face.

And no one ever

will find out

if you're the one

who failed to teach me faith?

Or if I am the one

who failed to learn it?

### Ethnographic Statement

These autoethnographic poems reflect how Islamic patriarchal culture influences non-religious women in a Muslim-dominant Kazakhstan. The majority of the country's population identifies itself as Muslim, and the government pursues the traditionalization of values directed at the national revival. The core of this process deals with the re-imagination of the pre-Soviet patriarchal past, with women and men having different roles and statuses. For me, as a Kazakh woman and a citizen of Kazakhstan, not following this process equals being a marginalized minority. In an attempt to address the position of these minorities, I explore Islamic patriarchy's effects on society and women.

After the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan experienced a political transition. The head of the state felt the urge to create an influential nation-state via the "Kazakhization" process. It is an unofficial term used to refer to national policy in Kazakhstan aimed at reviving "national, cultural, linguistic values," strengthening the role of the Kazakh language and Kazakh-speaking personnel in public administration, with the majority of them being Muslim males (Cummings 2004, 66). Since then, Kazakhstan has actively participated in the global modernization that successfully accompanies national revival and strengthening of patriarchal norms, including the implied rejection of liberal ideas of gender equality, to which the poems speak.

The choice of poetry comes from my research experience analyzing nationalistic policies and their repercussions on the Kazakhstani community but goes deeper than what I can write in my articles or talk about in an interview for a local news outlet. Ethnographic poetry can reflect various facets of national identity that I contest on a personal level. The poems reveal the threads of these socio-cultural tensions. The first poem encompasses two crucial topics: male superiority and religious revival. It deals with the historical change in the family discourse, contrasting the weak religious identity of Kazakhs in the 1990s and the strengthened post-nationalistic-reforms religiosity in the 2020s. The second poem speaks to the conflict of secular and spiritual values. It represents the clash of generations where the father's want of national revival and Islamization does not compromise with the daughter's liberal and secular values. The third introduces the contestation between secular and scientific discourses of religion. The fourth poem shows how that nationally promoted patriarchy and the consequential contrasts in views of religion lead to the alienation of family members.

### Notes

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1. A two-player traditional game in Central Asian countries played on a board with two rows of nine holes.
2. An Islamic concept: the intention in a person's heart to act for the sake of Allah, a true intention.
3. "My soul."
4. "Baby camel." In Kazakh, it is used like the term of endearment *honey* in English.

**Reference**

- Cummings, Sally N. 2004. "Kazakhstan: An Uneasy Relationship—Power and Authority in the Nazarbaev Regime." In *Power and Change in Central Asia*, edited by Sally N. Cummings 69–83. New York: Routledge.