

Faith-Based Storytelling as Bibliotherapy for Muslim Youth: A Case Study of Ayat Hati – Homecoming of the Soul

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ABSTRACT

Young adults today increasingly face emotional struggles such as grief, heartbreak, trauma, and spiritual emptiness. Conventional coping strategies, including social media overuse, substance use, and casual relationships, often provide only temporary relief and may exacerbate psychological distress. This study explores the potential of *Ayat Hati: Homecoming of the Soul*, an anthology of ten short stories integrating Qur'anic reflection and Islamic English, as a bibliotherapeutic intervention for Muslim youth. Using an exploratory case study approach, reader responses (n = 10) were collected via an online survey with Likert-scale and open-ended items. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis. Results showed that most of the respondents strongly resonated with the struggles depicted. They also reported receiving comfort from the Qur'anic verses, and appreciated the use of Islamic English as enriching and authentic. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: validation of struggles, comfort from the Qur'an, and authenticity of Islamic English. These findings suggest that faith-based storytelling can function as a meaningful coping resource, providing validation, guidance, and cultural authenticity. Implications for bibliotherapy, youth counseling, and Islamic pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, Islamic English, Qur'anic reflection, Muslim youth, emotional healing, spiritual coping

INTRODUCTION

The period from the late teens through the twenties, which Arnett (2000) terms "emerging adulthood," is a critical developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and instability. For many, this is a time of immense inner turmoil. According to Erikson's (1968) seminal theory, this stage presents a central conflict between establishing a coherent identity and succumbing to role confusion. When the internal struggles of this period are met with societal dismissal, it fosters what Linehan (1993) termed an "invalidating environment," teaching young people to mistrust their own feelings.

This issue is a pressing global concern, with tangible local impacts. In Malaysia, the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2022 reported that one in four adolescents experienced symptoms of depression, while one in six experienced anxiety (Institute for Public Health, 2022). These statistics align with findings from UNICEF (2022), which highlight that Malaysian youth are increasingly vulnerable to psychosocial challenges, often with limited access to culturally competent mental health services.

When left unaddressed, such struggles often lead to maladaptive coping strategies, which are learned behaviors that can become entrenched over time (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Folker et al. (2024) noted that adolescents with high negative affect are more likely to engage in substance use, while other studies identify excessive social media use as a common unhealthy response (Harun et al., 2025). For Muslim youth, these challenges are often compounded by the complexities of navigating a "hyphenated identity" in a globalized world (Sirin & Fine, 2008).

To address these challenges, innovative and accessible interventions are needed. Bibliotherapy, the use of literature for psychological support, has been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety among adolescents (Yuan et al., 2018; Shechtman, 2019). The book *Ayat Hati: Homecoming of the Soul*, is an anthology of ten short stories that was written and published as part of a final year project for an undergraduate English Diploma. The title *Ayat Hati* is derivative from the Malay and Arabic word ‘*ayat*’ which means verse or sentence, while ‘*hati*’ is a reference to heart. Together, they form a meaningful reference to ‘verses of the heart’. Each story in the anthology is accompanied by its own Quranic verse that guides the story telling element as well as for spiritual reflection. Islamic English terms and terminologies embedded in the stories provided a platform for introduction and understanding of how these words should be correctly used. This study investigates *Ayat Hati: Homecoming of the Soul*, a short story anthology that integrates relatable narratives, Qur’anic verses, and Islamic English. It aims to explore how such literature may function as a form of bibliotherapy for Muslim youth through the following research questions:

1. How do young readers relate to the emotional struggles depicted in the anthology?
2. In what ways are the integrated Qur’anic verses perceived as sources of comfort and healing?
3. How does the use of Islamic English contribute to the readers’ literary and spiritual experience?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bibliotherapy and Healing Narratives

Bibliotherapy involves the structured use of reading to promote emotional support and personal growth (Shechtman, 2019). Its efficacy hinges on three key psychological processes: identification with a character, emotional catharsis, and cognitive insight (Shechtman, 2009). A meta-analysis by Yuan et al. (2018) confirmed that bibliotherapy significantly reduces depression and anxiety among youth, particularly when readers see themselves reflected in the narratives. Narrative therapy approaches also highlight how storytelling helps young people to externalize their problems and build resilience by constructing more empowering personal stories (Ramamurthy et al., 2024).

Faith and Spirituality in Coping

Pargament’s (2011) theory of religious coping explains how individuals utilize faith to find meaning and manage stress. From an Islamic psychological perspective, well-being involves a balance of the soul’s faculties, including the heart (*qalb*) and the self (*nafs*) (Rothman & Coyle, 2018). The Qur’an has been consistently identified as a source of emotional healing. A systematic review by Owens et al. (2023) found that Qur’an-based interventions improved emotional wellbeing, while another by Moulaei et al. (2023) confirmed its role in reducing stress and anxiety. For Muslim youth, contextualizing Qur’anic verses within relatable stories may provide a compassionate form of spiritual guidance.

Islamic English and Cultural Authenticity

Ismail al-Faruqi (1986) proposed "Islamic English" to preserve the rich theological meanings of Arabic-Islamic terms in English texts. Hasan (2014) argues that this prevents semantic dilution; for example, *salah* conveys a system of ritual and spiritual connection beyond the word “prayer.” Embedding Islamic English in youth literature can thus enhance authenticity and respect for Islamic traditions.

The Need for Culturally Competent Interventions

The emotional struggles of youth are exacerbated when their experiences are invalidated (Krause et al., 2003). For youth from minority backgrounds, generic interventions may fail to resonate with their specific worldview. Foundational texts in multicultural counseling stress that therapeutic tools are most effective when they are culturally congruent (Sue & Sue, 2016). This highlights the need for resources, such as faith-based literature, that validate emotions *and* cultural identity simultaneously, offering healthier coping mechanisms than those prevalent in contemporary society, like excessive social media use (Sala, Bianchi, & Marino, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory case study design in order to conduct an in-depth examination of how readers engaged with the text of *Ayat Hati: Homecoming of the Soul*. This approach is ideal for understanding a complex social phenomenon within its real-life context and allows for a rich analysis of the reader experience (Yin, 2018).

A purposive sample of young adult readers (aged 18–25) was recruited from a university in Melaka, Malaysia. Respondents were identified and contacted via email and text messages. They were invited to read the anthology before submitting their responses. Out of an initial 15 invites, only ten respondents who wholeheartedly agreed to provide their response. All of the respondents were students, with two respondents aged were between 18 to 20 years old and eight respondents were between 21 to 25 years old.

Data were collected using a Google Forms survey which was provided upon receiving approval from the respondents. The respondents were first required to read the book before answering the survey. The online survey consisted of items on demographics, eleven Likert-scale questions and an open-ended question to capture reflections on the book's emotional and spiritual impact.

Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively and presented in the mean score for each item. Qualitative responses were coded inductively and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns. The thematic findings were then used to supplement the results of the survey items. The results and findings of both datasets are presented according to the research questions that they correspond to in the next section.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

Table 1: Young Readers' Ability to Relate to Emotional Struggles Depicted in the Anthology.

Statement	Mean
I felt the stories' connection to myself.	4.6
The stories made me feel seen, understood, and less alone.	4.7
The book helped me to reflect more on my personal struggles and emotions.	4.4
I believe this book can help young people who are struggling with emotions.	4.6
I believe this book can help young people who are struggling with identity.	4.2

The results of the survey items related to the first research question is presented in Table 1. Quantitative results showed that respondents found the stories in the anthology as highly relatable in depicting the emotional struggles of adolescents. The highest mean scores were recorded for the statement 'the stories made me feel seen, understood, and less alone' (4.7) and 'I felt the stories' connection to myself' (4.6).

The results above were strongly supported by the qualitative findings from the open-ended question. Analysis of the responses coalesced around a theme of validation of struggles.

“Reading *Ayat Hati* felt like reading my own journal. I finally saw my feelings reflected in a story, not dismissed as being too sensitive.” (R7, Female, 21)

“In my family, we don't talk about heartbreak or loneliness. The book gave me the words I never had.” (R3, Male, 20)

These findings show that the readers felt their emotions and struggles were mirrored in the stories. This connection that the readers had with the stories may also impact in reducing emotional isolation.

Research Question 2

Table 2: Perceived Affect of Integrated Qur'anic Verses as Sources of Comfort and Healing.

Statement	Mean
The Quranic verses felt comforting, reflective, and provided a sense of healing.	5
The book changed the way I see the Quran as a source of guidance and emotional comfort.	4.8
I believe this book can help young people who are struggling with faith.	4.4

Table 2 presents the results of survey items related to the incorporation of Quranic verses in the anthology. All respondents affirmed that the integrated Qur'anic verses provided comfort and 'a sense of healing' (5). They also believed that by integrating relevant Quranic verses had changed the way they 'see the Quran as a source of guidance and emotional comfort' (4.8).

The thematic analysis of the open-ended responses identified the key theme of comfort from the Qur'an, where verses were perceived as compassionate reflections instead of rigid instructions.

"Usually when people quote Qur'an, it feels like a lecture. But here, after the story, it felt like Allah was answering me directly." (R5, Female, 22)

"The verses didn't preach. They comforted. It was like a gentle reminder that I wasn't alone in my struggles." (R10, Male, 19)

Research Question 3

Table 3: Islamic English and its Contribution to Readers' Literary and Spiritual Experience.

Statement	Mean
The use of Islamic English (e.g., "dua", "sujud", "zina") was clear and easy to understand.	4.7
The introduction of Islamic English words (e.g., dua, sujud, zina) provided new knowledge on their correct use and spelling.	4.5

The results related to the use of Islamic English in the anthology is presented in Table 3. The two statements recorded high mean values of 4.7 for 'the use of Islamic English (e.g., "dua", "sujud", "zina") was clear and easy to understand' and 4.5 for 'the introduction of Islamic English words (e.g., dua, sujud, zina) provided new knowledge on their correct use and spelling'. These showed that majority of the respondents found the use of Islamic English in the anthology to be enriching.

These results were supported through the findings of the thematic analysis of the open-ended question which found the Islamic terms and words employed in the stories taught them the correct usage as well as maintaining the enhanced depth of the Arabic terms.

"When I read salah instead of just 'prayer,' it reminded me of the real act, not just the word. It felt authentic." (R8, Female, 23)

"I didn't know the proper spellings of words like sujud or tawbah before. Now I know." (R2, Male, 21)

Not only were the integration of Islamic English terms and words enriching, but they were also found to provide authenticity on how these terms and words should be used.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that *Ayat Hati* functioned as an effective bibliotherapeutic resource. The theme of validation of struggles aligns directly with research demonstrating that relatable literature helps youth feel less isolated (Yuan et al., 2018). By reflecting the unspoken pains of its readers, the anthology provides the emotional validation often missing in their environment, a crucial antidote to the "invalidating environment" described by Linehan (1993).

The theme of comfort from the Qur'an reflects Pargament's (2011) theory of positive religious coping. The positive reception supports systematic reviews confirming Qur'anic interventions as effective tools for reducing stress (Moulaei et al., 2023; Owens et al., 2023). This suggests the book successfully frames scripture as a compassionate companion.

The theme of authenticity of Islamic English supports Al-Faruqi's (1986) vision. Respondents' appreciation aligns with Hasan's (2014) argument that Islamic English maintains theological depth. Importantly, this literary choice positions the work as a culturally competent tool, meeting the criteria for effective multicultural interventions outlined by Sue & Sue (2016).

CONCLUSION

This case study demonstrates that *Ayat Hati* resonated deeply with young Muslim readers. The findings highlight the potential of faith-based literature as a form of culturally attuned bibliotherapy. While this study is small-scale, its findings support the vast body of evidence on the positive link between religion, spirituality, and health (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). This study has reinforced the positive impact that bibliotherapy can have on youths. In the case of *Ayat Hati: Homecoming of the Soul*, it has the potential to provide a viable mental health intervention for Muslim youth. Such anthologies should be incorporated into school libraries and counseling contexts as accessible, culturally competent mental health resources. Furthermore, the positive reception of Islamic English supports its promotion in creative writing to preserve cultural integrity. The primary limitation of this study is its small sample size (n=10). The reliance on a convenient sampling method meant the findings are not generalizable but rather indicative of potential (Thabane, 2010). As the quantitative survey might limit the depth of the findings, qualitative methods such as interviews would be invaluable for exploring the nuances of the reader experience, and a methodology like thematic analysis could be used to identify deeper patterns in their responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Future research should therefore employ mixed method designs and involve larger and possibly cross-cultural samples.

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