
Racialising Care: Muslim Humanitarianism, Power, and Relationship-Building as Resistance
– Dr Rhea Rahman and Faiza Abdulkadir in conversation

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This piece reviews Dr Rhea Rahman's *Racializing the Ummah: Muslim Humanitarians Beyond Black, Brown, and White* (University of Minnesota Press, 2026), an ethnographic study of Islamic Relief that interrogates how racial capitalism, anti-Muslim racism, and colonial legacies shape Western humanitarianism and Muslim philanthropy. Through a conversation with Dr Rhea Rahman and Faiza Abdulkadir, this piece traces her intellectual journey from childhood experiences of diaspora and giving to over a decade of fieldwork across three continents. It examines her theorisation of an Islamic Black radical tradition as a liberatory framework for solidarity, collective consciousness, and doing good.

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Racialising Care: Muslim Humanitarianism, Power, and Relationship-Building as Resistance – Dr Rhea Rahman and Faiza Abdulkadir in conversation

Faiza Abdulkadir and Rhea Rahman

This piece opens with a commentary on *Racializing the Ummah: Muslim Humanitarians Beyond Black, Brown, and White* (University of Minnesota Press, 2026), followed by a conversation between Rhea Rahman and Faiza Abdulkadir.

Rahman's questioning about the world started on her return trips to her motherland, Bangladesh, when her parents would gather a suitcase of gifts for her family back home – a universal experience for children of the diasporas. As a child of the diaspora myself, I could relate to this as it was instilled in us that no matter what, we always had to give back. But for many of us, as we grew up and learned more, we dreamed of a better world and turned towards international development to make that happen. We quickly saw through the glossy windows the harsh realities of foreign aid in our homelands, where it served as an imperial tool. As Rahman draws on twentieth-century Islamic intellectual Sayyid Qutb, whose work emphasises how charity and justice go hand in hand, in particular, that 'under Islam, the poor have the right to a reasonable standard of living and to a share of the wealth of those who are more fortunate.'¹ In this conception, giving is not hierarchical; it is something owed and inherited. Like me, Rahman's journey of giving back began as a seed, born of cultural and religious practices, and has not stopped growing since.

For Rahman, that seed grows to become her recent book publication, *Racializing the Ummah: Muslim Humanitarians Beyond Black, Brown, and White*, a robust critical intervention exploring the architectures of power that shape Western humanitarianism and Muslim philanthropy. Drawing on Rahman's more than a decade of ethnographic research with the UK-based international NGO, Islamic Relief, across seven countries on three continents, the book takes you on a journey from the past through the present and towards the future. It examines how anti-Muslim racism, racial capitalism, and Western colonial legacies are sedimented within humanitarian governance, organisational legitimacy, and moral economies of aid, *all* of which are rooted in white supremacist frameworks. Rahman situates these dynamics within longer genealogies of Black and

¹ James Toth, *Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 184.

Asian political mobilisation in the UK, demonstrating how solidarities historically grounded in liberation struggles have been reconfigured through regulatory and philanthropic infrastructures that reproduce structural inequalities, determining whose suffering is legitimate and whose solidarity is suspect.

Central to *Racializing the Ummah* is Rahman's framing of an 'Islamic Black radical tradition' as a liberatory practice for Islamic Relief to build solidarities across racially diverse and marginalised communities to resist white supremacist frameworks that rely on separated communities. Building on George Lipsitz, Rahman frames Blackness as 'a politics rather than a pigment, a culture rather than a colour,'² rooted in Cedric Robinson's conceptualisation of the Black radical tradition as the collective development of consciousness through historical struggles for liberation.³ Into this tradition Rahman places Malcolm X, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (God rest his soul), who affirmed that all Muslims must 'actively oppose white supremacy and foster Black self-determination' and that 'true Islamic brotherhood must be expressed in the form of revolutionary praxis.'⁴ The book utilises this framework across a counter-history of Muslimness in post-war Britain and Islamic Relief's transnational activities in the UK, South Africa, and Mali, to examine how racial capitalism permeates Muslim humanitarianism. It also unpacks the pressures Islamic Relief faces to secularise and modernise Islam within a system shaped by Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. Rahman theorises the tactics of aid workers on the ground, who creatively draw on an Islamic Black radical tradition to drive real change.

This resonates with those of us who, as children of the diaspora, are drawn towards international development to do good, only to have the window glazed by design. However, that disillusionment quickly became an intellectual curiosity to disrupt oppressive systems and dominant power architectures. We do this through relationship-building as a form of resistance, whether it is in the classroom or through humanitarian work. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them.⁵ What *Racializing the Ummah* offers us is not just a critique of Islamic Relief, Western humanitarianism, the conditions of securitisation, philanthrocapitalism, and uneven moral valuation of doing good. It offers a clear, unglazed

² George Lipsitz, 'What Is This Black in the Black Radical Tradition?', in Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (eds), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 108–19.

³ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 171.

⁴ Edward E. Curtis, "'My Heart Is in Cairo': Malcolm X, the Arab Cold War, and the Making of Islamic Liberation Ethics', *The Journal of American History*, 102.3 (2015), pp. 775–98 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jav626>>.

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

window into the endless possibilities of liberatory practices within the Islamic Black radical tradition, as a foundation for collective consciousness, as Robinson described, in the Islamic ethics of liberation that Malcolm X embodied as a ground for revolutionary praxis beyond what we think of as doing good.

Faiza Abdulkadir in conversation with Dr Rhea Rahman

Faiza: Your journey into this book sounds like it comes from a personal place. Can you share a bit about that?

Rhea: My curiosity started as a child of Bangladeshi immigrants. We would go to Bangladesh, and my mom would pack suitcases of old clothes and gifts to give away. At the time, I had no understanding of the structural inequality that undergirded the difference between what I had in the US and what my cousins in Bangladesh had or did not have. After college, with a better understanding of political economy and global inequalities, I went and lived there for a year, interning at a Bangladeshi development NGO. The experience totally disillusioned me. One memory that sticks out was when I went with other interns to a big reception in a national press hall in Dhaka to celebrate the publication of a new UNICEF report, launching its campaign: The Year of the Girl. The organisers had bussed in all these young girls from orphanages around Dhaka to attend. At some point, I asked where the bathroom was and was told that there was no women's facility in the entire building. I thought: 'you bussed in all these girls, and want to draw attention to gender disparities, and you chose a building that doesn't even have facilities for women and girls to use a restroom? What are these girls here for other than a photo opportunity?' Those kinds of contradictions were an intense experience and a revelation. Ultimately, there was a band-aid approach to the problem of structural inequality, and I was curious about the broken leg. I wanted to get at the root of these issues.

Faiza: What led you to Islamic Relief specifically?

Rhea: Throughout my master's degree, I was thinking about development, but when I started my PhD, I started thinking about humanitarianism. With development, it is overtly political and economic. As opposed to humanitarianism, that positions itself as a purely ethical intervention: 'We're not political; we're just saving lives.' Which is, of course, political too, when you think about who gets saved and who does not. As a Muslim woman, I wanted to ask: how universal are so-called 'universal' humanitarian values? What do these universal values look like from an Islamic perspective? So that is what

eventually led me to Islamic Relief. By studying a British Muslim organisation specifically, it forced a confrontation with the Orientalist assumption that Islam and the West are completely incompatible. Islamic Relief is simultaneously 'Western' and 'Islamic,' yet they exist in a world that constantly assumes these identities are in tension. The founder of Islamic Relief, Dr Hany El-Banna, once said of Islamic Relief's early days that their main question was, 'How to get the West to trust you, and the Muslim to not suspect you?' Instead of assuming the 'West' and 'Islam' were inherently distinct, I was curious about how they navigated these tensions.

Faiza: The Islamic Black radical tradition is central to your book. How did you arrive at that framework?

Rhea: While drafting my dissertation, I taught a class on the politics of aid in Africa. It was the fall of 2014, and I had a student who was an activist heavily involved with the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Initially excited about the course, eventually she grew frustrated and posed a valid question: Why were we reading all these white scholars? Why weren't we reading more African or Black authors? I felt defensive at first, because this was the canon I had been taught. But given the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and being forced to confront my own internalised anti-Blackness, my student's challenge shifted me. It changed the whole direction of my project. I started to read more Black and African authors. I read Nkrumah on neocolonialism and learned about non-alignment and Black Internationalism. Through this study, I realised that I was the white-adjacent brown Muslim who was forced to reconcile my own anti-Blackness. And then I went back through all my research field notes from Islamic Relief, and it was Black Muslims in the organisation who pushed me in a different direction, showing me other ways of being and other ways of imagining good. A Black Muslim staff member in DC early in my research had said to me: 'We are an American Muslim organisation, why aren't we doing more in Black communities in the US? What did Malcolm X teach us?' And that was the beginning of learning a liberatory interpretation of Islam. From Malcolm X, and then from what I found in South Africa and Mali, liberatory practices existed amongst us already. It did not need re-inventing. For example, as I cite in my book, Malcolm X says, 'I believe in religion, but a religion that includes political, economic, and social action designed to make a paradise here on earth while we're waiting for the other.'

Faiza: What do you want readers to take from this book?

Rhea: Always inspired by Malcolm X, who was constantly learning and evolving, I think of the book as an offering. It's a snapshot of situated knowledge, produced through years

of thinking and living in this racialised, gendered body, as I moved through these places and did my best to learn with and from all those who graciously shared themselves and their time with me. I hope readers take away an impulse to question what and how they have come to learn what it means to do good; to expand the possibilities of solidarity and imagination by also expanding the sources of study of the past and present to envision new futures in which all planetary beings can thrive and flourish. I am inspired by those who are already imagining otherwise, such as the students who bravely forged Gaza solidarity encampments in the spring of 2024, when many students risked their futures in this world, in the effort to bring about a new one. I am grateful to be constantly learning with and from Muslim abolitionist, anti-colonial, queer feminist organisers and activists who are already modelling new ways of imagining and enacting what it means to do good. The book is an offering and a call for all of us to join those already doing good otherwise.

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Typesetting queries

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 - a. Ref. "Sherwood, Marika, Malcolm X: Visits Abroad, April 1964–February 1965 "