

Emerging Islamophobic Rhetoric and the Contesting Potentials of Literary Texts

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Abstract:

Though existing in various forms since the revival of Islam (mostly erroneously considered in the West as the founding of Islam) by Muhammad—the last Messenger of Allah—in the 6th century A.D, Islamophobia has taken a markedly new shape in the 21st century, triggered primarily by the so-called “9/11 terrorist attacks” and other similar events. This new shape of antagonism towards Islam and Muslims is marked by some deeply disturbing traits like stereotyping, prejudiced framing and sweeping generalization of Muslim individuals and communities as a threat—both dynamic and potential—not only for the Western Civilization, but also for peace, progress and the future of humanity at large. One of the most influential arenas where this emerging form of Islamophobia is promoted as well as countered is that of art and literature, having a deeper impact on global thought and feeling than the media channels of overt propaganda or political rhetoric across Europe and America. Taking cognizance of this fact, the paper at hand examines the distinguishing features of the still under-formation new phase of Islamophobia, subsequently focusing on the role of literature therein so far, and its potential to promote and contest the emerging Islamophobic agenda.

Keywords: Art, literature, Islamophobia, emerging global scenario, rhetoric

Introduction:

One of the most outstanding and distinguishing features of Islam is taking its name from certain qualities of fundamental significance (peace and unconditional devotion) rather than from the Messenger through whom it was revealed or from the name of the nation that became its first recipient. This shows that Islam was neither founded nor introduced by the last Messenger of Allah, Muhammad (SWS) in the 6th century AD. Rather it was the way of life revealed to all divinely inspired messengers from Adam to Jesus, with the same fundamental beliefs and ethical codes, with slight variations in rituals and systems according to the specific conditions and needs of the respective societies. As such, neither Islam was a new religion founded by Muhammad, nor did it emerge in response to specific societal conditions. It presents itself as the final version of the Divine code, with an unprecedented capacity of catering to the needs of all coming generations of humanity. As such, the prevalent Western assumption of Islam as a religion founded by Muhammad has persistently marred their grasping the true soul and spirit of Islam as an

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eternal divine code. In the sphere of literary creativity, this misconception is not limited to overtly anti-Islam writers like Luther, Voltaire, Byron, Shelley etc., but also reflected in writings appreciative of Islam, like the following passage attributed to G. B. Shaw (1936):

“I have always held the religion of Muhammad in high estimation because of its wonderful vitality. It is the only religion which appears to me to possess that assimilating capacity to the changing phase of existence which can make itself appeal to every age. I have studied him—the wonderful man—and in my opinion far from being an anti-Christ, he must be called the Saviour of Humanity”.

On the one hand, these remarks manifest the writer’s admiration for Islam by virtue of idealizing Muhammad, also rightly rejecting the notion of Islam as anti-Christ; on the other hand, however, they reflect the above-mentioned misunderstanding by calling Islam “the religion of Muhammad”. This and similar misconceptions have piled up through different phases of history to provide the base on which contemporary writers of literature have constructed their theories and strategies for projecting as well as contesting emerging Islamophobic ideologies.

Review of Literature:

Involving multiple areas of human perception and expression, this study is inherently a multi-disciplinary one. Therefore, along with canonical works of relevant interest like *Religion and Literature* by T. S. Eliot, *Covering Islam* by Edward Said and *Reconstruction of Religious Thought* by Muhammad Iqbal, and some authentic ideological writings on Islam like *Islam: its Meaning and Message* (edited by Khurshid Ahmad) and *Islam: the Misunderstood Religion* by Muhammad Qutb, it capitalizes on relevant works of literary criticism including *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation*, *Islamophobia and the Novel* and *Contesting Islamophobia*, compiled and edited by Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin and Alaya Forte. These volumes include some highly significant and relevant works of other celebrated experts on Islam and Muslims like John L Esposito, Miriam Francois and Martin Amis, who contributions therein have added substantially to the findings of this paper.

Discussion

Addressing, encompassing and deeply influencing all dimensions of human thought and action, Islam has attracted both appreciation and criticism throughout history. The Western hemisphere, however, has developed a long-standing antagonism towards Islam due to its ill-exposure to Islam and the Muslim world and consequently an ill-informed

understanding therein. This antagonism is not the result of any negative conviction arising from an objective study and examination of the basic tenets and injunctions of Islam. Rather it has emerged from two highly unreliable sources: the extremely degrading and demonizing depiction of Muhammad and his companions in medieval European history and literature, and the highly prejudiced accounts of lust, cruelty and barbarism of Muslim conquerors and rulers in different phases of their interaction with the Westerners, mostly in military arenas. Such attitude continued till roughly the middle of the 20th century when the liberation of Muslim lands from European colonization plus the emergence of Islamic revivalist movements and literature made the Europeans feel threatened by the potential power of Islam and Muslims. Edward Said was probably the first to realize and record this change in 1981: “For the general public in America and Europe today, Islam is ‘news’ of a particularly unpleasant sort. The media, the government, the geopolitical strategists, and—though they are marginal to the culture at large—the academic experts on Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to western civilization.” (Said, 1997, p.144). However, despite this sustained antagonism of the West towards Islam and Muslims, and the timely perception of the emerging momentum and aggressive shifts therein by pro-Muslim thinkers like Said, the term “Islamophobia” was almost unheard-of till roughly the beginning of the 21st century.

It took until 1997 to create a term that effectively names this phenomenon of negative responses to Islam and Muslims. In November 1997, the British Runnymede Trust’s Report *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, launched in the UK, defined Islamophobia as ‘the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetrated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims.’ (Esposito, 2019, XIV).

In the twentieth century, even notoriously infamous works like Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* were labelled as blasphemous rather than Islamophobic. Besides large-scale reversion (which the Westerners call conversion) to Islam in Europe, America and elsewhere in the world, certain events in the last quarter of the twentieth century like Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Islamic Revolution of Iran rendered Islam and Muslims both more important and more threatening for the West than ever before. Starting in Britain and quickly spreading in the rest of Europe, the threat dimension of this new Muslim identity was enormously exacerbated by the Muslim world’s reaction to Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, particularly Imam Khomeini’s Verdict:

The defining moment in a specific sense of British-Muslim identity is often taken to be the controversy over Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* in 1989, which brought Muslims onto the streets to protest the novel's alleged blasphemy. Instead of ethnicity or nationality, religion was, for the first time, being seen as a major identity marker around which to organize. (Morey and Yaqin, 2011, p.46).

As a highly offensive propaganda document of derogatory nature, *Satanic Verses* neither fulfils the essentials of a novel in terms of plot and characterization, nor does it merit to be considered even a genuine piece of literature. Still, it is widely regarded and discussed as a novel in the Western literary and academic discourse, something we take here as for-granted. As such, the foundations of a new antagonistic Western perception of Islam was laid by a purported 'work of literature' and the reaction it solicited, rather than by any political, social or military episode. Hence, irrespective of our reservations about its literary orientation and artistic worth, it does testify to the potential of a fictional work to create and promote serious doubts and debates about Islam and Muslims.

Quite significantly, the turn of the century brought Islam and Muslims into further spotlight as a consequence of terrorist attacks of 9/11 (2001) in New York and 7/7 (2005) in London. A new wave of hatred against Muslims, more aggressive as well as more tactful, emerged in media reports and analyses both in Europe and America, and didn't take long to permeate literary texts. Along with those who might have actually felt threatened or terrified, this situation was conveniently exploited by those whose antagonism towards Islam was latent and inherent. On the other hand, a good number of scholars and writers started countering this narrative of anti-Islamism, exposing its proponents as perpetrators of a prejudiced and poisoned depiction of Islam rather than genuine guardians of Western civilization. It was in the initial stage of this phase that the term "Islamophobia" got currency in all types of discourses including literary creation and criticism, intended at stamping a representational label on those who attempted to stereotype Muslims as terrorists.

"Indeed, Islamophobia—like all prejudices—actually reveals more about those holding the prejudice than it does about its objects. A demonic Islamic enemy is all the better for diverting attention from intractable economic and social problems caused by late capitalism and the socially eviscerating tendencies of neoliberalism. Islamophobia makes its claim to the ground of

common sense by providing simplistic explanations and scapegoats for society's ills." (Morey, 2018, p.14)

Instead of their earlier images as barbaric, uncultured, anti-progress and anti-Western, Muslims were now overtly depicted as "terrorists" and Islam as the preacher of war and violence. Quite significantly, however, this type of prejudiced and offensive stereotyping of Muslims and defamation of Islam was predominantly promoted by political and ideological discourses or sensational media reports, while repudiated, countered and contested by artistic and literary works—a contention providing the basic hypothesis of this paper. It means, at least as an inference, that unlike the previous ages—particularly the nineteenth century—when literature was one of the chief tools used for demonizing Islam and Muslims, the role of our contemporary literature and art has been predominantly anti-Islamophobic, notwithstanding persistent criticism by literary writers and critics of certain auxiliary traits attributed to Muslims. Of course, Islamophobic literature in English has emerged during the 21st century, but has failed to get public attention and appreciation as attracted by non-literary works like Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996). The non-conducive condition of literary arena for dissemination of religious hatred is evident from the fact that even those literary writers whose practical or non-writing professional life is marked by anti-Muslim statements and actions, could neither depict the same in their fictional works nor in their non-fictional prose writings. A case in point is Ralph Peters, the writer of modern war novels like *The War in 2020* and *The War After Armageddon*. With an active involvement as a U.S military and intelligence agent in the violence against Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, his literary identity prevented him from expressing his true anti-Muslim sentiments (as manifested in his intelligence and military roles) either in his war novels, nor in his analytical writings like the following one:

Religions change, because men change them. Fundamentalists insist upon an ahistorical stasis, but evolution in the architecture of faith has always been essential to, and reflective of, human progress. Certainty is comforting, but a religion's capacity for adaptive behavior unleashes the energies necessary to renew both the faith and the society in which it flourishes. On its frontiers, Islam remains capable of changes necessary to make it, once again, a healthy, luminous faith whose followers can compete globally on its own terms. But the hard men from that religion's ancient homelands are determined to frustrate every exploratory effort they can. The Muslim extremist diaspora from the Middle East has

one consistent message: Return to the past, for that is what God wants. Beware, no matter of his faith, of the man who presumes to tell you what God wants. (Peters, 2002, p.8)

Notwithstanding the authenticity or otherwise of the conflicting imaging of Muslims, and consequently of Islam as a matter of fact, in the post 9/11 scenario, stereotyping and sweeping generalization by themselves clash with the established standard of genuine fiction, like those of characterization presented by E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*. In other words, Islamophobia essentially involves sweeping generalization in the form of stereotyping and representation—something clashing with the genuine standards of both literary creativity and criticism.

When misguided political analysts and think-tanks associated Islam with dogmatic nationalism like Adolf Berle labelling modern Islam even in the start of the Cold War period as ‘Fanatic Mohammedan nationalism’ (Little, 2008, p.27), men of letters from the Western society countered this notion both in creative and critical texts. Quite significantly, this defense from within the Western literary circles came at a time both crucial and convenient for seeing and projecting Muslims as the “threatening others”—a perception leading to discourses on topics like “The Muslim Problem”. This “other” was created not just because the “othered ones” had unacceptable or even alien ways of thinking and acting, but because “the look of the other is needed to confirm and stabilize one’s [own] identity.” (Guignon, 2004, p. 66).

The above-mentioned combination of necessity and convenience registered a lasting impact on the image of Muslims in Western discourses of almost all types. Muslims were now overtly depicted as “terrorists” and Islam as the preacher of war and violence. This new type of focus was needed because the older ones could not be applied to the Muslim diaspora in Western countries who were brought up there, educated in the best schools and universities of developed countries and were fast integrating in the social, economic and political life of the Western countries. Earlier Muslims were seen as distant figures from an alien world who were bound to block the overall progress of human beings due to their inherent and persistent backwardness. Now they were perceived as dangerous and scary insiders equipped with modern education and updated technology, who hate the Western culture, civilization and society from the core of their hearts, anxiously awaiting any convenient opportunity to translate that hatred into action by terrorizing their unwary neighbors, friends or colleagues. Hence, the Western perception of Muslims changed from demonization to stereotyping; and, quite naturally, this change in

perception was reflected in projection and depiction as well, with literature as a pivotal medium for that purpose.

Nonetheless, literary manifestations of these emerging trends in discourses on Islam and Muslims are not essentially consequences, or aftermaths of a precedent or antecedent phenomenon. In many cases literary imagination has created notions and phrases readily borrowed and availed by informational and utilitarian channels. Such epithets include “the rage boy,” “the veiled virtue,” and “the reluctant fundamentalist” etc., which originated in literary texts or discourses and were subsequently adopted by other disciplines or subjects. However, in literary works they mostly signify the repudiation rather than promotion of Islamophobia, rejecting the sweeping tendency of stereotyping Muslim communities and populations rather than any conviction in line with the meaning of these epithets. Patrick French (2007) has effectively exposed the hollowness of ‘the Rage Boy’ image in his widely-read Daily-Mail article “The Surprising Truth About Rage Boy, America’s Hated Poster Boy of Islamic Radicalism” protesting the prevalent stereotyped representation of young Muslim male like that done by a certain Edward Rowe of Chicago: “There are millions being brainwashed, raised up to be suicide bombers, and they want to kill, kill, kill . . . I frankly don’t care what motivates them.” (French 2007). “The veiled ladies”—either in niqab or hijab— and the “zealous preachers” were similarly stereotyped in non-literary media discourses in which the growing presence of “reluctant fundamentalism” among Muslims was also attributed to their inherent inability to adapt to the essential demands and standards of Western life. Works of literature, on the other hand, place the onus of responsibility as well as liability on the West itself, primarily on the sweeping generalization and highly prejudiced treatment of Muslims in the social, cultural, political and educational spheres of life. Though Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the most widely cited example due to its reflective title, many other fictional works by both Muslim and non-Muslim authors have tried to exonerate Muslims from such degrading labels like ‘fanatic’ , ‘extremist’, ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘terrorist’—a byproduct of the above-mentioned culture of stereotyping and misdirected representation. Other anti-Islamophobic literary works include *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014) by Rabih Alameddine, *Love from A to Z* (2019) by S. K. Ali, *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* (2018) by Taherah Mufti, *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela, *Forty Rules of Love* (2009) by Elik Shafak, *Hollow Fires* (2022) and *Love, Hate and Other Filters* (2018) by Samira Ahmad and *Alif the Unseen* (2012) by G. W. Wilson. These works played an enormous role in countering the post-9/11 narratives against Muslims

contained in fiction like “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta”—a short story by Martin Amis.

Conclusion

Though always in the forefront of all types of discourses and debates, Muslims have become the center of exceptional focus and scrutiny in the contemporary world, owing to some crucially impactful happenings. In this context the nature of interest has shifted from long-standing conventional demonization and ridiculing to projection as a terrifying threat to the Western civilization and the future of humanity at large. Resultantly, there has emerged a battery of Muslim-centred writings and other media projections, both for promotion and countering of this prevalent Islamophobia. In this paper it has been contended that the role of literary works in this regard has been predominantly to reject Islamophobia, stereotyping and biased representation of Muslim individuals and communities. Literature inherently stresses exploring human individual selves, rejects sweeping generalization and didactic propagandist depictions. Hence, literary works could become effective tools in countering and contesting the menace of Islamophobia in the contemporary West or elsewhere.

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