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ISLAMOPHOBIA AND MUSLIM MINORITIES IN POST 9/11 WOMEN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The bombings of the world trade towers in New York on the 11th of September 2001 dramatically changed the landscape of the west-east relations into blatant binary opposites of us and them. Within the western hemisphere, the repercussions of 9/11 continue to be felt by minority Muslim communities living within the larger non-Muslim mainstream society such as America and Britain. The heightened tension has escalated into a new discourse termed Islamophobia causing Islam to be regarded as "a source of intolerance, extremism, and terrorism, one whose adherents are out to destroy Western values." Muslims living in the west, especially those who overtly exercise their religious sensibilities, be that in the form of the hijab for women or beard for men, bear the brunt of xenophobia exhibited by the mainstream society. This paper sets out to address the issue of Islamophobia in fiction. The main premise of the discussion is to problematise the experience of being a Muslim minority as narrated in post 9/11 fiction by women. How did the 9/11 bombings affect the Muslim's sense of reality as a member of religious and cultural minority? What multifaceted realities are Muslims in the west, be that born Muslims or reverts, exposed to? These issues will be examined based on the selected fiction by Muslim women writers in America and Britain.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Muslim Women Writers, Muslim Minority, 9/11

INTRODUCTION

The bombings of the World Trade Towers in New York on the 11th of September 2001 dramatically changed the landscape of the west-east relations into blatant binary opposites of us and them causing the ancient resentment between Islam and Christianity to come to the fore. Within the western hemisphere, the repercussions of 9/11 continue to be felt by minority Muslim communities living within the larger

non-Muslim mainstream society such as America and Britain. The heightened tension has escalated into a new discourse termed Islamophobia causing Islam to be regarded as "a source of intolerance, extremism and terrorism, one whose adherents are out to destroy Western values" (Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, 2011: vii). Riyad Manqoush, Noraini Md Yusof & Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2011) claim that the repercussions are not merely socio-political but also economic as well as literary. Similarly, Lindsey Moore (2009: 1) argues that Nadeem Aslam's narrative, a Muslim Pakistani, in his novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), "participates in the construction of British Muslim identities in the aftermath of 9/11." Moore (2009: 9) goes on to claim that with a special emphasis on Pakistan, Aslam shows a "relentless coupling of intolerance and violence with Islamic institutions and politics."

In their preface to their book, *Muslim Women in America The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I Smith, and Kathleen M Moore (2006: v) address the repercussions of the acts of violence on that fateful day: In the aftermath of the 9/11 terror strikes on the Twin Towers of New York City and the Pentagon, the presence of Muslims in the United States has increasingly raised apprehensions among the American public. From several vantage points, concerns about the threat of terrorism have overshadowed many other priorities and sometimes caused judgements to be clouded. Tempers have flared, resentments have been aroused, and hate crimes have been perpetrated against individuals suspected of being linked — sometimes in the most tenuous of ways — to terrorism. Often women have been the victims of prejudice and hostility. Some Americans are deeply persuaded that Muslims are guilty not only of violent behaviour but also of treating women as inferior to men.

Muslims living in the west, especially those who overtly exercise their religious sensibilities, be that in the form of the hijab for women or beard for men, bear the brunt of xenophobia exhibited by the mainstream society. In this paper, we address the issue of Islamophobia in fiction. The main premise of our argument is to problematise the experience of being a Muslim minority as narrated in post 9/11 fiction by women. How did the 9/11 bombings affect the Muslim's sense of reality as a member of a religious and cultural minority? What multifaceted realities are Muslims in the west, be that born Muslims or reverts, exposed to? These issues will be discussed based on the selected fiction by Muslim women writers in America and Britain.

CONTEXT

Upon further scrutiny, the aftershock of 9/11 is not the beginning of the Western misconception of Islam and its believers. In her book entitled *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*, Mohja Kahf (1999) describes the lengthy history of Eurocentric discourse on Muslim women. Kahf (1999) highlights the mutable albeit formulaic depictions of Muslim women

by scrutinizing historical periods from medieval times to the period of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. Portrayals of Muslim women as queens or noblewomen "wielding power of harm or succor over the hero" (Kahf, 1999: 4) were prevalent in Medieval English literature. In the seventeenth century, the veil and the harem enter into Western representations of the Muslim woman. In the eighteenth century, the Muslim woman has turned into an odalisque or a concubine, where she is depicted as abject, angry, virginal and victimized, and always oppressed. In the nineteenth century, corresponding with the European colonial agenda, the Muslim woman has transformed into "a negative female ideal" (Kahf, 1999: 7). By tracing canonical European works written by male writers, Kahf shows systematically the ways in which Muslim women underwent drastic transformations in the Western imagination of them ranging from being bold to being restrained; from a person who had liberty to a person who has become oppressed with little or no rights as a human being. These images culminate in exoticizing Muslim women and exaggerating the assumption that Islam debases women. As Saleemah Abdul-Ghafur (2005: 3) says, "various interpretations of the role of Muslim women in sacred Islamic texts and in contemporary society give rise to the biggest misconceptions of all – that we are oppressed, relegated to secondary status, and often placed on a pedestal similar to the suppressed women of the Victorian era." This orientalist view of Muslim women is difficult to thrust aside; works by Muslim writers such as Azar Nafisi, Khalid Hosseini, and Mukhtar Mai who confirm Western prejudices of the East about the conditions of Muslim women in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, respectively, facilitate the perpetuation of such misconceptions.

THE CORPUS

The three novels chosen for this discussion are set in two different social, cultural contexts within the Northern Hemisphere – the United States of America and Britain. The first novel is by the Greek Muslim American Jamilah Kolocotronis, whose second book *Rebounding* portrays the lives of a revert Joshua Adam who experience the repercussion of being Muslims in post 9/11 America. In the course of the narration, the reader is drawn into the complexity of being a Muslim American whose lives can easily be torn asunder due largely to the associations one forms. Much like the current state of affairs in the highly Islamophobic American social landscape with cries for Quran burning and bomb threats targeted at mosques, *Rebounding* echoes the fears that Muslims are experiencing in living a public life of faith and family. Can American Muslims truly be free to choose their path in life or is 'Big Brother' always keeping a watchful eye to curb that freedom?

The second novel is the memoir *Love in a Headscarf* by British Pakistani Muslim Shelina Zahra Janmohamed. It is a story of a Muslim woman who negotiates the complex world of being Muslim in Britain while finding a life partner. With the backdrop of September 11 hovering as an ominous reminder of Islam as the new

demon to be exorcised, Janmohamed, in the words of Jamillah Karim (2009: 130) "move[s] in, out, and between their notions and others' notions" of being American/British. The writer goes beyond stereotypical depictions of being Muslim and problematises the multifaceted realities rendered through the religion she professes and cultural practices which hold sway. The ways in which she engages with the religion and its practices, sometimes supportive, at other times challenging its interpretations, exhibit the difficult realities, given the manifold locations, loyalties, and deliberations that make up her sense of being.

The third novel, by Umm Juwayriyah, *The Size of a Mustard Seed* (2009), is resonant of the ancient resentment between Islam and Christianity that comes to the fore as a consequence of 9/11. The mustard seed in the title, nonetheless, alludes to similarities rather than differences between Christian and Muslim traditions. Jameelah's story is of one woman's need to confront the changing attitudes towards Self and the Other. The prejudice she faces from outside, unfortunately, recurs in the home space due to her single status. Can marriage then solve her predicament?

DISCUSSION

1. Rebounding

In *Rebounding*, Kolocotronis appears to echo the discourse of Islamophobia seen today in American society by narrating the story of Caucasian-born revert Joshua Adams, whose Muslim identity creates a conflict with his life as an American. Joshua suffers incarceration for his alleged involvement with a suspected terrorist group "Al-Jahidia". In Kolocotronis' narration of Joshua's journey into Islam, the readers are exposed to the possible effects of xenophobia as experienced by Muslim reverts. When his father, Sam, returns to visit the family after over 30 years of estrangement, his immediate comments towards Joshua's reversion was: "Just as long as you don't blow up any buildings" (*Rebounding*, 16). At this juncture, Joshua has truly become the "inappropriate Other" within his immediate family, who by choice of faith has become "not quite the same, not quite the other" (Trinh Minh-ha, 1995: 218). In addition, the association of Muslim with terrorism is a racial profiling that continues to create "misrecognition" about their identity that discriminates them for their chosen faith. Akin to the misrecognition of Islam through the heretical depiction of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as shown in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten, the continued "alarmism and simplification" (Halliday, 1999: 892) of Islam and Muslims as the axis of evil has become a discourse termed Islamophobia.

Furthermore, in Kolocotronis' *Rebounding*, the polemic of "splitting" (Hall, 2002:258) is seen from Joshua's perspective as he experiences firsthand the true repercussions of being a revert in post 9/11 America. The following dialogue between Joshua and Homeland Security officers signals the start of the splitting:

"Take it easy. You don't need those. You said you had some questions. You didn't say anything about arresting me. I didn't do anything wrong. Don't you at least have to read me my rights?" [Joshua]

"Not anymore. Not for terrorists." [Man from Homeland Security]
(*Rebounding*, 83)

The labelling of Joshua as a terrorist creates a split in his rights as a free citizen of the land allowing the authority complete autonomy over his possession and person. He loses his freedom and he is publicly denounced as a terrorist in the local media. Later on, when he is imprisoned awaiting trial for "fraud, money laundering, providing material assistance to terrorists and promoting terrorism" (*Rebounding*, 119), Joshua again faces splitting when fellow inmates physically brutalise him merely by association:

"You know the guys who killed my brother?" [Spider, a fellow inmate]

"No, I don't know anything about your brother." [Joshua]

"Sure you do. You know them. One of them terrorist snipers picked off my brother in Syria." [Spider]

"I'm sorry. I've never been to Syria."

"It doesn't matter. All you Moslems, you're all the same. Turn your countries into shit and then pick off the soldiers who come to help you. You're just another goddamned terrorist." [Spider]

"I'm an American."

"Don't give me that shit. If you're one of them, you're a terrorist."

The politics of association, although allowing for camaraderie between members of a community, has unwanted repercussions for Muslims in the 21st century. As Muzaffar Iqmal (2008: 105) states, "In a world that has been left with no choice but 'to be with us or against us', the onus of proving that they are 'with us' has been put on the shoulders of Muslims." As seen in Joshua's case, the profiling he receives from the moment he is accused of terrorist acts continues to colour his public identity and any social engagement, even among fellow inmates.

The profiling and misrecognition suffered by Joshua does not end when the charges against him are eventually dropped nearly a year later. He is later periodically harassed by two men "in black suits" (*Rebounding*, 270). The continued emotional and psychological harassment is tantamount to acts that terrorize the individual into believing that he has done a crime. It is a constant reminder to Joshua that while he is free to live as a Muslim with his wife and children, the State will maintain their role as the invisible "Big Brother" who is ever present and ever watchful of the Muslim's every move.

2. Love in a headscarf

In the second novel, *Love in a headscarf*, Janmohamed (2010) responds to issues of misconceptions about Islam by choosing a theme that is "the essence of the human condition" (*Love*, ix). By focusing on the subject of love, Janmohamed asks her readers to "reclaim love" because love "takes patience, dedication, and selflessness," (*Love*, ix) and connects us to the Creator. It is this sense of love that will halt hatred amongst different communities. Central to this emphasis on love, the novelist seeks to debunk myths about Muslim women and how they find love. As we have shown earlier, Muslim women are often perceived as being oppressed and abused with little rights to exercise their agency. However, Janmohamed appears to resist this stereotypical image of women when she says: "Stories like mine have remained unheard, as they do not fit neatly with prevailing stereotypes that tell tales of Islam's oppression or of those rejecting Islam." As she asserts, the protagonist of the narrative is not a "one-dimensional" creature "hidden behind a black veil" (*Love,* x). Like many other Muslim women, she "finds Islam to be positive, liberating, and uplifting" (x). By making public her own story of finding love, Janmohamed presents another face of Islam, that it is a religion where humour, hope, and humanity flourish. Her novel therefore expresses that Islam is a religion that rejoices and honours love, not terror.

Shelina, the protagonist in the novel, is matched with various men in order for her to find the one whom she "clicks" with (*Love*, 26), an expression that the family uses to show that the man whom she finally married is "the One" (*Love,* 27). While matchmaking may be seen by an outsider as an exercise that belittles a woman's agency in finding her partner, Shelina is shown to be a woman who happily rejects many men who do not quite fit in with the characteristics of her choice. Despite impeccable academic qualification from Oxford University and informed of the British way of life, she remains firm about her family's conventional practices and pious upbringing although she makes certain adaptations which do not compromise Islam. Therefore, her story details the way in which a Muslim community is concerned about the well-being of Muslim daughters and their search for suitable partners. As Shelina says:

My marriage, as with the marriage of any child in the family, was a collective endeavour, and I was the centre of attention. It was taken for granted that everyone would participate in the venture. My eventual husband would be selected from a pool of contacts collected by family, friends, and matchmakers. The more people we all met, the wider our pool of prospects. Statistically, this would give me the greatest number of choices and the highest likelihood of Finding the One (*Love,* 63).

To show her agency, Shelina details the men whom she meets and ponders on their flaws as well as her own weaknesses in not being able to reconcile her wants with the suitor's wishes.

In *Love in a Headscarf,* the question of hijab is important. The question of hijab becomes highly significant soon after the 9/11 event. In chapter six of her novel entitled the "Semiotic Headscarf," JanMohamed endeavours to answer questions related to the headscarf. Non-Muslims find the headwear shrouded in mystery. Questions posed include "What is it like under there" (*Love,* 149), "What is your hair like?" (150), "Does your husband make you wear a headscarf" (151), "Is it hot" (153), "Why don't men have to wear a headscarf?" (154), "Do you sleep in your headscarf?" (155)" and "Are you a terrorist?" (156). In her chapter entitled "E-veil-uation", JanMohamed aligns herself with Western feminists who rejected corsets, bras and revolutionised the mini-skirts. Wearing the hijab, to the protagonist, is not a sign of oppression; contrarily, it is an affirmation of her agency.

3. The size of a mustard seed

The events surrounding September 11th, 2001 is also the focus of Jameelah, the 27-year-old American Muslim narrator of Umm Juwayriyah's novel, *The Size of a Mustard Seed* (2009). Her narrative trails the negotiations of what it means to be Muslim in the American context. The ancient resentment between Islam and Christianity comes to the fore as a consequence of 9/11. In her own words, she claims that the change is not just hers alone:

Believe it or not, there was a time when I wasn't so uptight and angry. I felt good, and people enjoyed my company. Then life changed. Actually, the whole world around me changed. New York City wasn't the only city affected by 9-11. My city and every other city on earth changed. People changed. I changed too. I had to if I was going to stay sane. (*Seed,* 12)

The suspicion between Non-Muslims and Muslims is reflective of the deep-seated prejudice between two different groups. Regarding the resentment and suspicion between the Muslim and Western worlds, Esposito and Kalin (2011: v) claims that:

"Islamophobia and the Challenges of Pluralism in the 21st Century" is a timely topic in a world in which the relationship between Islam and the West matters more than ever before. The increasing interdependence and coexistence among dissimilar peoples make mutual acceptance and respect requisites for social harmony in our interconnected world; thus the need for the Muslim and the Western worlds to accommodate each other is especially important given the central role these two large communities have been playing in global relations for the last fourteen centuries.

While the antagonism between Islam and Christianity is one of the causes of tension, the mustard seed in the title, nonetheless, alludes to similarities rather than differences between Christian and Muslim traditions. Jameelah's story is of one

woman's need to confront the changing attitudes towards Self and the Other. The prejudice she faces from outside, unfortunately, recurs in the home space due to her unmarried status. Can marriage then solve her predicament? By examining Jameelah's conflicts, one unveils the clash of different cultures and religions in contemporary America. As a member of the Muslim *ummah*, Jameelah is deeply implicated in changing the face of Islam as it is perceived within the Muslim communities in the United States as well as by non-Muslims who might alternatively persist in relying on conservative assumptions.

The accusations which were made against Muslims for the aeroplanes flying into the World Trade Centers were immediate, even as the towers burn:

"...The news reporters say planes flew into them, and they're saying they were Muslims, girl! Turn off everything and lock my shop up…"
I stood in disbelief and looked up at the screen, dazed. Could Muslims have done that? (*Seed*, 15)

Jameelah's distress mirrors those of the Muslim community; the question – Could Muslims have done that? – reverberates in many minds. Contrastively, many non-Muslims believed that Muslims are capable of those acts. One man's tirade against Jameelah reflects the resentment against Muslims post-9/11 and subsequently, the polemic of being a Muslim minority: "You don't even belong here…take your rag heads and go back to your own country!"

CONCLUSION

The three novels show the anger of Muslims against the perpetrators of 9/11. The novelists also highlight the backlash against Muslims and how the characters respond to the American and British hostility in rational ways. In many instances, the women writers show that Muslim men and women are doubly affected by the tragic events following the burning of the Twin Towers. Veiled women, particularly, are singled out because they are visible and their affiliation to Islam is made overt through their headwear. By focusing on Muslim men and women and the ways in which Islam engages their sense of identity, the writers discussed in this paper dismantle myths about the one-dimensional perspective of Islam and Muslims. The circumstances of Muslims in the United States and Britain, hence, make up the central concerns of these new women writers who respond to the 9/11 events in constructive ways. Their works will foster tolerance and provide a more accurate

understanding of Islam and Muslims in the West. Through their literary productions, Islamophobic discourses can be mitigated in a more rational way.

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