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Essentialist Stereotyping of Muslims/Islam, Self-Othering and Neo-Orientalism: Selected Cultural Production in Focus

Inayat Ullah, *

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Abstract

The xenophobic and Islamophobic maligning of Islam, Muslims, and Islamic values has been done not only by authors in the Global North but also by several indigenous writers, as Ali Behdad and William term this phenomenon as Neo-Orientalism. Since these writers, including those who are well-established in the Western academia as well as the ones in the capacity of the indigenous comprador intellectuals, claim to have the profound knowledge and complete understanding of Islamic teaching and the related values, their misrepresentation and/or stereotypical portrayal of certain contours of Islamic values further advance these xenophobic and Islamophobic feelings among the Western readers. Keeping in view this issue, this study uses the neo-orientalist theoretical underpinnings to carry out a textual analysis of Sara Suleri's Meatless Days. It scrutinizes how Suleri, utilizing her constricted empirical knowledge of Islam, endeavours to criticize not only Islamic festivals, but also the two-nation theory, nationalism, and the establishment of the Islamic Government.

Key Words: Neo-orientalism, Behdad, William, Sara Suleri's, Meatless Days, Two-Nation theory.

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The study aims to analyze the Neo-orientalist discourse in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days.* As a matter of fact, Neo-Orientalism is the continuation of Orientalism that transformed into Neo-Orientalism during late 20th century. (Karboua, 2016; Boehmer, 1998; Yu, 2010; Bhattacharya, 2019, Samiei, 2010)   Neo-Orientalism disseminates stereotyped image of Islam and the Muslsm around the world. (Mirza, 2019; Meer, 2014; Najib & Hopkins, 2019; Karbuoua, 2016) According to Behdad and Williams (2019), neo-orientalists comprise native scholars and writers, who in order to attain fame, perpetuates Western stereotypes of Islam and the Muslim world. Since the misrepresentation and negatively stereotypical portrayal of certain contours of Islamic values has been pivotal in creating and furthering xenophobic as well as Islamophobic feelings among the Western readers, (Mohiuddin, 2019; Kalmar & Shoshan, 2020; Ahmed, 2020; Mohiuddin, 2020) the role of the indigenous comprador intellectuals increases manifold.

Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* has been critically acclaimed for its style and themes. (Shamsie, 2010) Ostensibly, she, in the aforementioned memoir, walks down the memory lane, reminiscing about her friends, and family. The recollections reveal that she esteems her Welsh mother and her sister; nevertheless, she considers her Pakistani father dominating and nationalistic. She frequently collides with her father over the issues of history, Islam, and nationalism which she considers overwhelming. Ostensibly, Suleri divulges her Welsh mother's minority status in Pakistan and her consequential acceptance of minority status in America; nevertheless, in her memoir, she reinforces certain Western stereotypes regarding Islam and the Muslim countries.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Orientalism was a colonial project in order to produce and disseminate stereotypes regarding the colonized. America, during the 19th century, emerged as the successor of the British imperialism and process of stereotyping continued; nevertheless, this process of stereotyping focused on Islam and the Muslim world. (Marusek, 2018; Monica et al. 2020; Ezzani & King, 2018) William and Behdad (2010) entitle this transition as Neo-Orientalism. According to them, the Western readers are fed with wrong information by the comprador intellectuals in order to further their agenda of maligning Islam and the Muslim countries. Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days,* under the façade of memoir, perpetuate certain stereotypes. This study explores Neo-Orientalism in Suleri's *Meatless Days.*

1.2 Research Objectives

The study attempts to achieve the following objectioves:
- To analyze how Suleri's personal observation converges with political statement in her memoir *Meatless Days*
- To analyze how Suleri's *Meatless Days* perpetuates Western stereotypes of Islam and the Muslim world

1.3 Research Questions

The current research project endeavors to answer the following research questions:
- How does Suleri's personal observation converge with political statement in her memoir *Meatless Days*?
- How does Suleri's *Meatless Days* perpetuate Western stereotypes of Islam and the Muslim world?

1.4 Delimitation of the Study

The study is delimited to the analysis of Neo-Orientalist discourse in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days.*

1.5 Significance of the study

The study is significant owing to its focus on Neo-Orientalist discourse, through which the maligning of Islamic rituals as well as Muslims in general has been carried out. The aforementioned discourse is formulated and disseminated by certain self-proclaimed native scholars and writers. The study exposes how Neo-Orientalists misrepresent Islam and the local culture, in this case Pakistan, which emerged on the map of the world owing to the two-nation theory. Therefore, the study endeavors to contest the misrepresentation of Islam and Islamic Republic of Pakistan in the memoir that is under the current investigation.

2. Literature Review

Keeping in view the divisive role of xenophobia and islamophobia, many studies have been carried out by researchers to unearth the factors responsible for these trends in the Global North (Baker, Canarte & Day, 2018; Jolly & DiGiusto, 2014; Smith, 2011; Crush & Ramachandran, 2010) The resultant racist attitudes towards migrant communities have further polarized the already charged world (Balogun & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Lindemann & Stolz, 2020; Tobias et al., 2019; Ullah, 2015; Puglies, 2002) In terms of the stereotyping and racial profiling of Muslims, Said (1979), in his book *Orientalism,* maintains that the notion of the Orient is the European creation in order to dehumanize the colonized. Orientalism is a discourse and a project which commenced in late 18th century in order to strengthen the stature of European colonizers and legitimize their hegemonic designs. (Marino, 2013; Heidemann, 2012; Said, 1979) The Orient is presented as the other and is described in entirely negative manner. (Said, 1979; Block, 2003; Taras, 2019; Suleiman, 1999; Meer & Modood, 2009) Firstly, the colonial discourse constructs the binary oppositions, in which the colonizer occupies the dominant position and the colonized occupies the subservient status. Secondly, the negative views about the Orient are not based on factual and verifiable information rather, these are the product of the Western fantasy. (Sardar & Davies, 2010; Kaya, 2007; Elbih, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Mcleod, 2010) These fantasies formulate the knowledge regarding the orient and the oriental lands, leading to their negative stereotyping. (Sardar & Davies, 2010; Andrea et al., 2013; Ullah & Shahzor, 2017) In the same vein, Said (1979) argues that Orientalism is fundamentally based on images produced by the colonizers; nonetheless, they are represented as concrete reality. Thirdly, orientalism is institutionalized in order to establish the objectivity of the essentialist oriental knowledge and therefore, legitimize the project of colonization. The entire academia dedicates itself to create the negative images of the colonized. In addition to the academia, literary scholars also draw on these images in their works (Said, 1979). This demonstrates that Orientalism is literary and creative. (Sardar & Davies, 2010; Galetti, 2015; Mcleod, 2010) Hence, Orientalism is used by the colonizers to further strengthen their power and position. European settlers created the binary of us versus them. Such crossing the borders and perpetuating towards the migrant community by the host societies also gives rise to questions pertaining the identity (crisis) of migrant individuals (Nasser, 2019; Rembold & Carrier, 2011; Haselsberger, 2014) However, in this case, the colonizers placed themselves at the centre and the colonized (host) people at the periphery and declared that they are the centre of universe and thus the standard. Therefore, the 'other' must endeavour to emulate them. (Khalid, 2011) The other was created for political and ideological purpose. Said (1979), basically, draws on Foucault's notion of discourse in order to delineate that the project of Orientalism is a convoluted process which entails the fabrication of certain fantasies and distribution of those fantasies as reality. In addition to that, Said has employed the terms "latent" and "manifest" Orientalism in order to demonstrate the imaginative assumption of Orientalism and its specific examples and effects. The latent oreintalism comprises

stereotypes of the orient and the orientals and the manifest orientalism refers to the application of those fantasies to the page. Said has elaborated six stereotypes in his book *Orientalism.* Firstly, the orient will remain constant. The orients are remote from process of evolution and they will never change. In other words, they will remain enshrouded in antiquity. This means that if a westerner visits oriental land he/she will go back to medieval age. Secondly, the orients are oddly different-unusual, fantastic, bizarre. This strangeness of the orient, which is perpetuated through the project of Orientalism, attracts western writers and scholars towards them. Thirdly, the orients are violent, lazy, and inferior. Fourthly, the colonized females are represented as exotic beings. Fifthly, the orient land is considered to be feminine, weak, and submissive. Lastly, the orients are uncivilized and barbaric people. They are considered as savages who require the light of the Western civilization.

Orientalism metamorphosed into Neo-Orientalism during late 20th century. (Battacharya, 2019)After World War II, the USA replaced the Great Britain as the imperial power and started to be led to the belief that it must possess the comprehension of the orient Islam and the Muslim world (Karboua, 2010; Behdad & Williams, 2019). Gradually, the study of Islam and the Muslims became the duty of the American scholars and they shared a policy-oriented interest in the Middle East and beyond, which appeared in the form of the American Neo-Colonialism. (Ullah & Aib, 2017) He is of opinion that Neo-Orientalism, unlike the British Orientalism, focuses on facts rather than arts and literature of the orients. Nevertheless, Neo-Orientalism, like its predecessors, constructs negative images of Islam and the Muslim World. In the aftermath of 9/11, the project of Neo-orientalism reinvigorated and consequently the Muslims and the Muslim world were labeled as terrorists and extremists. The western countries constructed discourses which shrewdly connected extremism to Islam and the Muslims and hence, the notion of Islamophobia emerged. (Awan, 2010; 2013) Consequently, the Muslims were entirely othered. In addition to Western scholars and intellectuals, native writers also constructed libelous statements against Islam and the Muslim world. They furthered the agenda of the Western imperialists and thus attained authenticity. Behdad and Williams (2019) maintain that these self-proclaimed native scholars made maligning statements against Islam and the Muslims in order to attain fame in the Western academia. This demonstrates that the purpose of the Neo-Orientalist project is to other Muslims and the Muslim world.

2.3 Sara Suleri Goodyear

Sara Suleri, born to a Pakistani father and Welsh mother, is an author and professor emeritus of English at Yale University. She teaches romantic and Victorian poetry, postcolonial literature and theory at the university. Her father Z.A Suleri was a political journalist who wrote extensively on history of the sub-continent and Islam. She attained eminence after the publication of *Meatless Days.*

2.4 *Meatless Days*

Suleri's creative memoir *Meatless Days* was published in 1989. Upon its publication, it received international critical acclaim. Los Angeles Times acclaims it as "a jewel of insight and beauty." In addition to that, the reviewer suggests that Suleri has profound knowledge of Pakistani politics.

Suleri says "*Meatless Days* is structured like a *ghazal* because each chapter can be read individually as a '*sher'* [couplet] even though the whole holds together. You can easily read each chapter separately just as in a *ghazal* you can read eavh sher. I wasn't conscious of it at the time, but in retrospect you can see it." Each chapter delineates her memories of father, mother, siblings, and friends. However, her sister and mother are central characters. According to Shamsie (2010), the political events and personal

history are parallel; for instance, her mother dies during Zia's regime. Rahman (2004) argues that she deconstructs the Western categories of gender and nationalism.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is concentrated in the Neo-Orientalist theoretical underpinnings for the analysis of the selected literary text. Since Neo-Orientalist discourse produces and distributes libelous stereotypes regarding Islam and the Muslim world, the Neo-Orientalists are basically indigenous writers who claim to be experts in the political, social and cultural aspects of their country. (Behdad & Williams, 2019) Neo-Orientalists comprise not only native writers and intellectuals but also indigenous men and women who employ their native subjectivity in their writings with the aid of Western academia in order to further their agenda. (Mirza, 2019; Meer, 2014; Behdad & Williams, 2019) "Neo-Orientalism is monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other. To put the point more aphoristically, neo-Orientalism should be understood not as sui generis, but rather as a supplement to enduring modes or Orientalist representation". (Behdad & Williams, 2019, p. 2) In addition to that, neo-orientalists are connected with the Western neo-orientalist institutions, which assist them in order to unremorsefully inquire into the politics of their native country. In this manner, Westerners have found a way to establish these stereotypes as objective knowledge. Furthermore, neo-orientalists' assumptions are based on mere observations and consequently, generalized. In addition to that, women's head scarf and veil are considered to be the demonstration of their oppression and subjugation. William and Behdad (2019), after scrutinizing the memoirs of Iranian women, concludes that their knowledge although empirical is premised on utter lack of profound perception and thus, is a lie. They also infer that neo-orientalists utilize their personal experiences to construct erroneous political statements which ostensibly aim at emancipating the people from the oppression of Islamic government. In a nutshell, personal observations are utilized in order to present them as objective and dispassionate. Historical events are misconstrued by entirely neglecting its complexities and presented as truth about a society. Moreover, Islamic society is portrayed as primitive. In sum, journalistic empiricism allows the neo-Orientalist to get to the heart of Middle Eastern societies, grasp their essential characteristics, and finally produce a generalized and generalizable cultural theory.

3.1 Research Method

The researcher has selected the qualitative method in order to conduct the research. The name of this method is textual analysis. This is a qualitative method delineated by Alan McKee (2003), in his book *A beginners Guide to Textual Analysis.* This method allows the researcher to collect data regarding how other human beings make sense of the world. Textual analysis signifies that one establishes a well-informed and sophisticated conjecture regarding meaning of a particular text. In order to apply method of textual analysis, one is required to comprehend the meaning of 'text'; a text comprises everything from which one extracts meaning. (McKee, 2003) In other words, one reads and interprets a text. Nevertheless, a text can be interpreted from various perspectives; hence, one can have myriads of interpretation of a text. This leads to a question: How can one identify single correct interpretation of a text. The answer to this question is that one is required to discover the context in order identify the interpretation correctly. Therefore, context is taken into consideration in order to conduct textual analysis. As mentioned earlier, textual analysis is a qualitative method; hence, this method does not generate outcomes in the form of numbers.

McKee (2003) has identified following steps in order to conduct textual analysis:

- Select the topic.

- Select theoretical framework.
- Formulate specific research questions.
- Select text.
- Read the text.
- Analyze other texts connected with the selected topic in order to comprehend how other people make sense of the topic in a particular context.
- Reread the text and analyze the text in order to formulate a particular a particular interpretation.
- Pen down interpretation after conducting analysis.

4. Analysis and Discussion

As mentioned earlier, Sara Suleri is associated with the Yale University where she is the professor of English. Her memoir was published by The University of Chicago Press in 1989. She belongs to an affluent family of Pakistan. She acquired early education in England and received PhD degree from Indiana University. In the memoir under study, she tells the reader that she does not understand religion; nevertheless, she continues to present Islamic festivals as primitive and savage. She discusses Eid-ul-Azha in her novel by saying that it celebrates the "seductions" of the Abraham story in a literal way" (*Meatless Days,* p. 4). She further elaborates that people purchase animals and fatten them up for large amount of meat. On the day of Eid, these animals are "Chopped" and "killed". (*Meatless Days*, p. 4) Suleri has completely evacuated the festival of its sanctity. She completely lacks the profound understanding of the significance of Abraham's sacrifice. According to the belief of all Muslims, Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son in order to prove his loyalty to God. Similarly, Ismail, the son of Abraham was ready to sacrifice himself in the way of God. Fundamentally, the sacrifice was to prove their loyalty to God. This act was liked by God and he made it mandatory for every affluent Muslim to sacrifice an animal on Eid-ul-Azha. However, the word loyalty is oppressive for Suleri for she declares in her memoir when she reveals her departure from Pakistan. (*Meatless Days*, p. 134) She has used her native subjectivity to form her uninformed perceptions regarding Islamic festival. She appears to be unaware of the spiritual significance of the incident as William and Behdad (2019) conclude in their article *On Neo-Orientalism Today.* Suleri manifestly considers Islam as a primitive and ritualistic religion as it is implicated in her memoir. For instance, when her father commences going to mosque, she calls it "masjid syndrome". (*Meatless Days*, p. 87) Moreover, she considers the meeting of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and angel Gabriel an old story and a myth. When her sister Ifat reminds her of the encounter of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and Gabriel, Suleri replies "Yes, I remembered that old story". (*Meatless Days*, p. 202) This demonstrates that she conveniently dismisses the significance of the incident in the history of Islam and education. Lastly, she names Azan "some shrill Quranic cry". (*Meatless Days*, p. 200) According to William and Behdad (2019), comprador Intellectuals, supported by Western academia, represent the negative image of Islam and the Muslim world. They utilize their perception in order to present something, which is beyond their perception. Sara Suleri, as mentioned earlier, completely evacuates the sacred Islamic festivals and incidents of their spiritual consequence. These descriptions not only hurt Muslims' sentiments but also reinforce the Western stereotypes regarding Islam. The employment of the words "chopped" and "killed" reinforce the image of Islam as a barbaric and savage religion.

In fact, Islam is a religion, which instructs us in every walk of life. Allah has endowed the Muslims with Sharia law. Nevertheless, the Sharia law has been misrepresented as

primitive, savage and constricting by the Western academia. In addition to that, Sharia law has been considered as a black law. In the present era, this misinformed perception is propagated by comprador intellectuals in their writings. In Pakistan it has been termed as "Islamization". Suleri, in her memoir equates Islamization with the reign of General Zia ul Haq. She is of view that previously Pakistan was a liberal state; however during the reign of General Zia ul Haq, oppressive Islamic laws were introduced, as she says, "General Zulu was presiding over the Islamization of Pakistan" (*Meatless Days*, p. 18) "I trounced the Islamization of Pakistan to him". (*Meatless Days*, p. 139) Suleri writes that religion, during the reign of General Zia-ul-Haq, was dragged out of home.

She fails to realize that Islamic laws are not oppressive; rather, Zia utilized them for his own advantage. The Two-Nation theory is the foundation of Pakistan which states that Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations in the Indian subcontinent, and Muslims therefore, require a separate country to practice their religion. This demonstrates that religion is the foundation upon which the edifice of Pakistan is built. Despite this, religion was utilized by Zia in order to consolidate his reign. Therefore, Islamization is the basis of this country; nonetheless, Zia, in the name of religion, strengthened his government, which has been criticized by many. This leads to the notion of Muslim nationhood (Ummah). Al-Nu'man ibn Bashir has reported, "The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever."(Elias, 2019, p. 7) During the war of 1971, Z. A Suleri laments the evaporation of Muslim nationhood; Suleri fails to comprehend this notion which is beyond her perception and grieves over the death of people. She fails to understand that the 1971 war was the demise of the Muslim nationhood upon which the Holy Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) has placed tremendous emphasis. This corroborates the statement of Behdad and Williams (2019) that comprador intellectuals are unfamiliar with the subtle complexities of the Muslim countries and their history.

According to Rahman (2004), Suleri has completely dismantled the fixed category of nationalism and history by choosing to live as a minority. Firstly, it is evident in her writings that she does not hold her father in high regard. She considers her father an upholder of patriarchy. She, in her memoir, says that her father dominated the entire household. He used to be immersed in his work. He wrote about the history of Pakistan which was the history of majority. The Muslims were in minority in Indian Subcontinent. They were persecuted by the Hindus and the British. Therefore, it became imperative for the Muslims to establish their separate country. Quaid-e-Azam said that the Muslims are a nation and therefore, deserve a separate land. (*Meatless Days*, p. 125) In addition to that, Jinnah ensured the religious freedom of minorities in the constitution of Pakistan. All of this has been recorded in the history of Pakistan. History is the important part of cultural heritage. All nations record their history as their cultural heritage. Numerous studies have been conducted to preserve cultural heritage; for instance, *The significance of Cultural Heritage for state stability and its protection by Public International Law* by Kerstin Odendahl and Mayte Peters. Suleri, due to resentment towards her dominating father, neglects this subtle intricacy. By preferring to become a minority owing to her limited personal observation of condition of her mother, Suleri has endeavoured to abate the argument of Quaid-e-Azam. This demonstrates, as Behdad and Williams (2019) state in their aforementioned article, that Suleri has employed her personal experiences in order to formulate erroneous political statements. Z.A Suleri has recorded the struggle of the Muslims of the subcontinent towards the attainment of their separate nation. The

condition of the Muslims in present India demonstrates that the struggle of the Muslims were not in vain. Secondly, Suleri chooses to live as a minority in America for her Welsh mother Mair chooses to live as a minority in Pakistan. In the aforementioned memoir, the portrayal of her mother is in contrast with the portrayal of her father. Her mother is depicted as subversive, smart and caring. Suleri says that the people of Pakistan never accepted her mother and owing to this she chose to live as a minority. Suleri did not witness the struggle of the Muslims in order to gain separate and independent state. She saw her subversive Welsh mother who was dominated by her Pakistani father and this leads her to conclude that history is dominating and nationalism is detrimental. Nationalism is a term of consequence in postcolonial studies. Hans (2019) asserets that nationalism has been defined as an ideology that is based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests. This demonstrates that nationalism is the protection of interest of one's country. Nationalism is about giving importance to national interest than one's own interest. Z. A Suleri devoted his entire life to the cause of independence of the Muslims of the subcontinent. His devotion was not celebrated by his family members as demonstrated by Suleri's portrayal of her father. Nationalism gave impetus to the freedom movement of many previously colonized countries. They were able to attain emancipation owing to the notion of nationalism. Suleri, in her memoir under scrutiny, has endeavour to problematize the term nationalism by implying that it is harmful. Loyalty to one's country is not detrimental. Suleri, as declared by Behdad and Williams (2019), uses her perception based on restricted experience and status as a professor at Yale University to project her ideology of anti-nationalism in her memoir *Meatless Days.*

5 Conclusion

In a nutshell, *Meatless Days* has been hailed as the first creative memoir of Pakistani Literature in English. Suleri has received critical acclaim and adulations for intertwining public and private history. She enumerates her recollections about her mother, friends, father, siblings, mother, Pakistan, England, and America. The above discussion demonstrates that Suleri, in her memoir, utilizes her native subjectivity in order to formulate political statements against Pakistan, Islam, and her Pakistani father. Behdad and Williams (2019), in *On Neo-Orientalism Today,* scrutinize memoirs written by Iranian comprador intellectuals. They conclude that these comprador intellectuals have used their limited empirical knowledge in order to malign Islam and Iran. Similarly, Suleri's personal observation converges with political statements. She recounts limited personal perceptions about Islam, Islamization, Pakistani father, and Two-nation theory in order to make political statements. In this manner, she propagates the Western stereotypes regarding Islam and the Muslim world. She has presented Islam as savage and primitive. She has endeavoured to dismantle the Two-nation theory by invoking the sacrifices of people during partition and the argument of her father's dominated history. In a nutshell, Western critics and many indigenous critics have adulated the memoir due to its creativity. Nevertheless, they have failed to highlight the stereotypes that the memoir propagates by convergence of restricted personal perception and political statements.

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