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Monolithic Misrepresentation of Muslim Women and Islam: Textual Analysis of Selected American Literary Texts

*Inayat Ullah

Abstract

Notwithstanding the fact that American novelists had to cope with the challenge of the inherent un-representability of the 9/11 trauma, they made the efforts to write the counter-narrative against the perpetrators of the attacks, but ended up stereotyping Islam and Muslims as a monolith. With such an essentialist outlook towards Islam as a religion of violence and Muslims as fundamentalists to the core and ones who lack the ability to peacefully co-exist, the narrators of the event targeted all Muslims with a such a blurred lens. There is no denying the fact that if the 9/11 attacks had not happened, most of the 9/11 American fictional portrayals would been able to get much praise from readers; however, such was the magnitude of the calamity that none of the literary texts could depict the event in its essence. This was impossible to achieve. The un-representability of the event lies in the core of such traumatic episodes. With all these limitations of representability, there was a burden on the writers to write. What happened at as result was a wholesale stereotyping of Islam and Muslims, as this could have easily get the approval of the Islamophobic and xenophobic West. This article highlights the stereotyping and misrepresentation of Muslim women in the selected literary texts.

Keywords: Muslim Women, 9/11 Literature, Falling Man, Terrorist, Un-Representability of Trauma

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1.   Background to the Study

The fall of the Twin Towers, as a result of the 9/11 attacks, created a crisis that, due to the inherent un-representability of this traumatic event, led to the misrepresentation of the details. In a bid to write the counter-narrative against the perpetrators of the event, most of the novelists ended up stereotyping the Islam and Muslims as a monolith. (Awan, 2010; 2013; Ullah & Shahzor, 2017, Ullah & Aib, 2017) With such an essentialist outlook towards Islam as a religion of violence and Muslims as fundamentalists to the core and ones who lack the ability to peacefully co-exist, the narrators of the event targeted all Muslims with a such a blurred lens. (Baker, Canarte & Day, 2018; Jolly & DiGiusto, 2014; Smith, 2011; Crush & Ramachandran, 2010) Had the event not happened, most of the American fictional portrayals of the event would been able to get a lot of praise from readers; however, such is the magnitude of the calamity that none of the literary texts could depict the event in its essence. This was impossible to achieve. The un-representability of the event lies in the core of such traumatic episodes. With all these limitations of representability, there was a burden on the writers to write. What happened at as result was a wholesale stereotyping of Islam and Muslims, as this could have easily get the approval of the Islamophobic and xenophobic West. Thus the narrative of the clash of civilization and racism was further augmented. (Balogun & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Lindemann & Stolz, 2020; Tobias et al., 2019; Ullah, 2015; Puglies, 2002) The 'Us' versus 'Them' narrative was taken to new heights. This is exactly how 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) The discourse of the Crusades was reinvigorated. Just like the core of orientalism, most of this stereotyping is the outcome of the Western fantasy about the East. (Sardar & Davies, 2010; Kaya, 2007; Elbih, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Mcleod, 2010) No exceptions were made in this regard, so much so that women were also dragged in this whole clash of civilizations. Fiction writers enjoyed all the liberty in the world to present a horrible image of Islam and Muslims in their texts. This works investigates the Don DeLillo's Falling Man and John Updike's Terrorist to see how Muslim women are presented in these two novels. The selection of the texts is crucial as both the novels were hailed throughout American and made part of 9/11 literature in academia inside America as beyond.

2.   Selection of the Literary Texts

Falling Man by Don Delillo is a post 9/11 text that was published in 2007. It presents a group of people surviving the 9/11 attack. They are shocked and terrified in the aftermath of 9/11. The narrative shift in the novel enables the readers to peep into the mind of Hammad who happens to be among one of those 9/11 Muslim hijackers. The readers develop familiarity in understanding the intentions of an allegedly authentic Muslim who carries terrorist traits.

Terrorist by John Updike is his 22nd novel. It has been fictionalized in Paterson, Northern New Jersey. Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy is a Muslim boy of eighteen. He is

an American born Muslim having an Irish American mother. His Egyptian father was studying there when he met his mother. His father disappeared when Ahmed was three years of the age. Ahmad's Imam, Shaikh Rashid(A fervent Muslim) and Jack Levy (Ahmad's high school advisor) play an important role to shape the story of the novel. The story carries internal conflict of Ahmad where he is unable to relate to American life style and his efforts to walk on the right path. The story reveals his desire to achieve paradise when he suppresses his feeling for Joryleen. Finally, he transforms into a Jihadist bomber.

3.   Stereotyping of Muslims and Islam in Western Cultural Productions

The kind of perception that has been developed by several Western writers regarding Islam and Muslims is quite often visible in the media, too. (Meer & Modood, 2009) Thus, the stereotypical portrayal of east, more specifically Muslims and Arabs, in films, cartoons, television shows etc plays a vital role in shaping the image of east in the minds of those individuals who has never been on these lands (Awan, 2013; Ullah & Shahzor, 2017; Ullah & Aib, 2017). Muslims, in general, within the media, are often depicted as the "alien other." The idea to refuse the presence of in-build stereotypes and prejudices in American media against Muslims is an unintelligent one. (Sardar & Davies, 2010) Moreover, when terrorism is covered by US media, it fails to focus on what 'we' do puts all its attention on what 'they' do.

As it is observed that the images of Arabs and Muslims are portrayed in a negative way by the Hollywood media, (Ullah & Shahzor 2017) as it has been pointed out by van der Veer (2004) that Muslims and Arabs instead of being recognized and identified through some point of view of Islam, are historicized in essentialist ways. Nonetheless, it should be observed that the clash, between East (specifically Muslims) and West, is not a novel or a contemporary issue. If one looks at the history of Muslims and Islam he/she would note that Islamic world is considered inferior and looked down upon from early times. The incident of 9/11 has been the most significant point in the history of media's negative depiction and representation of Islam and Muslims. It is from this point onwards; media openly and overtly associated terrorism with Islam and classified Muslims as terrorists. In many movies, TV series, animation and cartoons, news, talk shows etc, the typical images usually assigned to Muslims are those of barbaric, fundamentalist, radicals, terrorists, militants, anti-democratic, uncivilized, anti-western, anti-modern etc. hence, any incident of violence or terrorism in any Islamic country is linked with Islam by media.

The Princess trilogy was published with mass public appeal. The Princess is written by an American author with fictional names to respect the privacy of individuals. The novel was the New York best seller with the elements of fantasy and reality. Sultana is presented as a supposedly Saudi Princess. In the beginning of the story the author uses this princess to help him in dispersing many negative and unjustified prevalent

stereotypes associated to Arabs and her sincere efforts in serving the West. She helps to learn the customs of Arabs which deserve respect and they should be admired by west. The novel attaches negative stereotypes to all Arabs in specific and all Muslims in general. The readers can find the traces of male chauvinism, brutality, sexism and polygamy on almost every page of the novel.

4. Quoting Quranic Verses Out of Context

The authors of the selected literary texts have tried to insinuate the readers that the Holy Quran advises men for their ill treatment towards women. They have projected that the source for Muslims' wrongdoings is also the teaching of the Holy Quran. Updike, in Terrorist, picks verses from the Holy Book and uses them for his denigrating purposes. (Awan, 2010) He interprets them without contextualizing them to willfully ignore the facts to interpret the Quran incorrectly. He completely denies the fact that the interpretation of Holy Quran requires the faithful and true knowledge of the circumstance and the specific time period when these verses were revealed to the prophet Mohammad. Updike willfully tries to reinforce that the fundamental teaching of the Holy Book and Islam is to suppress women and the religion works on the principle of women's oppression.

The novel depicts that Ahmed consults Quran to take an advice for a physical relationship and he discovers that Quran has associated filthiness only with women. Uncleanliness of women is discussed in relation to their menstruation and feeding of their young babies. Updike's projection of Quran is unjustified as the verse has been taken out of context and it does not satisfy Ahmad's query. Immediately after this verse the author mentions another verse calling women to be "pollution". The truth of the matter is that Holy Quran does not call women as polluted or unclean. Such kind of displacement of the verses and the use of verses out of the contexts are primary reasons in creating problems for a non-believer to deduce that the selected verse refers to only the time period of women's menstruation. The original source for this concept has roots in the Old Testament but Updike has willfully associated it to the Holy Quran. The following verse has been taken from the Old Testament highlighting the same subject. The Old Testament explains the subject in the following lines. If a woman has a discharge of blood from her body she should be separated from the people for seven days as in case of someone holds her that person becomes unclean until the evening and he should wash himself with water to get rid of the impurity. Everything she touches becomes unclean when she is impure. If a man lies down with her during the period of her impurity he gets the same impurity from her for seven days. Everything he touches become unclean.

Different pre-Islamic religions had extreme views towards menstruating women. People were not allowed to sit, eat, drink with these women. These religions insisted isolation of these women during their period. They used to live in a separate place in complete isolation. After the spread of Islam People consulted prophet Muhammad on the Islamic rules on the same issue. Islamic rules were altogether different from

former extremities of different religions. Quran only orders sexual abstinence during the period, unlike other religions.

Updike also pays a considerate attention to Arabic transliteration of Holy Quran and uses the verses throughout his text. By doing so, the novelist gives the readers an impression of his authority about Holy Quran. He tries to create an aura of authenticity when he discusses different transliterations of Holy Quran to establish that he has gone too far to master the subject. With this manipulation, he intensifies the distorted representation of Quranic verses. These verses and different transliterations make no sense to the western readers and the author has fed their minds with deliberate intensity. This is ironical that the Western reader, who cannot understand the transliterations creates the fabricated background for the misrepresentation of the author and misinterpretation of the reader.

As an example, the Arabic transliteration of a verse is presented to the reader: "ta'fu wa tasfahu wa taghfiru- afa and safaha"; the text continues with saying that: "abstain and run away! Do without women of non-Heavenly flesh, this earthly baggage, these unclean hostages to fortune! Travel light, straight into paradise!" (Updike, 2006, p. 106). The author does not give any clue that the verse is advising to "forgive and overlook, and cover up their faults." Updike establishes that Islamic perception of women makes them wicked but in fact, in the Old Testament a woman is presented to be wicked and inferior being who is essentially different from men on earth. It asserts that the wickedness comes from women. It was only woman who committed the very first sin. She is the one who is responsible for mortality of human beings (Ecclesiastes 25,19, 24) Contrary to the other religions, in Islam, women have been presented respectable and they have not been considered inferior than men. The Holy Quran declares them equal with the knowledge that men and women are created with one soul, "O humanity, be reverent to your Lord who created you from one soul and created its mate from it, and from these two disseminated many men and women." (Quran 4,1)

5.   Stereotypical Portrayal of Muslim Women in the Selected Texts

There is a stereotypical image of Easterners being oversexed as it is said that they fight in wars with a motive to get virgins as a reward of sacrificing their lives. The promise of virgins for martyrs promotes that the Muslims fight for a sacred cause but at that time, too, there is sensuality is the driving force to keep them fighting in a battlefield. Sensuality has become the most recurrent image of Muslim representation. The verse of the Holy Book that promises reward for the martyrs as "best rewards" without any specific mention of the reward (3,169–170). Updike has discussed the virgins to be reward for the martyrs on different occasions in the text. He asserts that the motivation for Muslim men to fight for their religion is of sensual nature. Updike conveys the same through sheikh's character when he perceives that the absence of virgins from the Paradise will make the place less appealing and tempting for the young Oriental men (Updike, 2006, pp.104, 69, 105, 167). It reinforces the Orientalist

cliché of sensuality associated with Muslims. The Westerns have propagated against the popular image of Muslim Paradise. They have promoted the paradise to be merely a place for sensual pleasure that is contrary to the actual picture of paradise as described by the Holy Quran. Man-made books of Hadiths and Sunna are also among those sources for the origination of these fabricated images about Islam and paradise. There is no consensus on these books among Muslim scholars. It is pertinent to note that the most "authentic authors" consult the most outdated and obsolete sources which are more like popular clichés. Wikipedia is among those sources which lack profound research and Muslim scholars have rejected its credibility.

The most prominent feature of the discourse on Orientalism is that the Orientalist believes that he is the one who can truly represent the Orient. This Oriental is considered to be incompetent for self-representation. Karl Marx asserts that "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (Hartley, 2003, p. 248). Since the Oriental is unable to express his feelings and thoughts, they need the Orientalists to peep into their minds and hearts to expose their thoughts and intentions

Taking the same essentialist approach, Don DeLillo speaks authoritatively with the intent to misrepresent the Orient. He portrays Hammad and his friends as if he recognizes their impulses and motives being Muslim terrorists. He also considers himself to be a Muslim Oriental woman. .He takes the advantage to represent Muslims, their behavior towards others, their ideological stances, beliefs and values. As a result of the dominant discourse, the narrative of the story does not exhibit truth of character's lives and their circumstances but it ends up in constructing the imaginary details that support author's preferences.

The novel also reveals Orientalist assumption about gender. Edward Said narrates the incident of the encounter of Flaubert with an Egyptian courtesan in *Orientalism* where he produces a persuasive and well-known model of the Oriental woman. Being an Oriental woman she is not supposed to represent herself and that is the reason she needs a man to speak on her behalf in order to represent her. The same approach is evident in *Terrorist*. The author has not discussed Muslim women . The author writes that Ahmad's Christian mother wears a scarf on the insistence her son to save her from "looking like a whore" (Updike, 2006,p. 114). According to Jack Levy, head scarf is something of exotic nature. He takes scarf as a provocative thing indicating a stunning and utter nakedness. The head scarf also symbolizes submission of the Oriental woman that stirs men. All the terms which have been used in the above sentence like nakedness, provocative and submission are considered to be conventional attributes of an Oriental woman who is known as a seductive and submissive object. As Sardar asserts that Western legitimized narrative on Oriental discourse makes the Orient sinfully exotic providing sexual pleasure covered in mystical, mysterious and ancient tradition. (Said, 1978, p. 6).

Orientalism demonstrates a continual and indivisible connection between the Orient

and his sensuality. As the Orient is always taken as a sensual being. Edward Said asserts that female Orientals are the product of male power-fantasy. Said proclaims that the Orientals women display excessive sensuality. They are unwise and extremely submissive (Said, 1978, p. 207). Don DeLillo also depicts Oriental woman the way Said has discussed in his Orientalism being a sexual and sensual object. He states that she has dusky eyes and flexible body and she enjoyed the contact (2007, p. 81). Then there is another remark on her being sensual that she had the desire for him to know her entire presence (ibid, p. 82). She decisively tries to make Hammad feel more intelligent and smart by asking him different questions (ibid). He behavior in Hammad's presence show that she is naturally stupid as she cannot think about possible answers of her questions the way she deals him makes him feel wise and smart.

The Oriental man is also presented to be sensual who demonstrates a strong sexual appeal. The author highlights Hammad's fleshly aspirations for women (ibid, p. 78 & 176),), a saleswoman in a supermarket (ibid, p. 171) and for her girlfriend's roommate (ibid, p. 82) besides herself. Sardar expresses his understanding of an Oriental man and woman of the Western perception as Barbaric Muslim and a sensual and passive female. Westerns believe that these two Orientals combine together to create a tangible portrayal of sensuality and inferiority (1999, p. 48).

Falling Man depicts the life of a Muslim man and woman. The author presents their relationship in the novel. The association between Lianne and Keith and Keith's affair with Florence is parallel to Hammad's physical association with women.Hammad has a relationship with a woman of Syrian and German descend. She has no identity other than sexual gratification of Hammad.

Jack Levy has been compared with Ahmad's father, Omer in *Terrorist.* The character of Ahmed's father has been presented through the opinion Teresa. As she remarks that he is an opportunist, irresponsible, and a naïve loser (Updike, 2006, p. 87). The concept of an ideal woman for Omer is the one who attends a man. She makes no effort to win him (ibid, p. 84). Teresa's is attracted towards Ahmad's father primarily with an Orientalist approach when she decides to marry him. She states the logic behind choosing him as her partner as he looks exotic third world man who can be easily exploited (ibid, p. 86).

Conclusion

DeLillo's imaginary and authoritative narrative and Updike's fictional portrayal of Islamic principles are merely fabrications which has nothing to do with Islam and such constructions have replaced the reality with fantasy. To sum up, the selected texts function within the superfluous orientalist discourse that denies real teachings of Islam. The study of selected texts establishes that the narratives both texts lack profundity of research on real teachings of Islam, the Holy Quran, Jihad, the prophet and Muslim men and women. The study reveals that there is amalgamation of

fabrication, half-truths, racism and immense distortion of reality that results in injustice and stereotyping of Muslims.

Terrorist and *Falling Man* portray representation of women through the lens of Orientalists that has roots in middle ages. It is true that the novels belong to twenty first century and the world has a lot of sources to get the information about Muslims and Arabs but the authors chose to use the same clichés and stereotypes from Middle Ages. Sardar expresses the same in the following lines. Orientalism works on the principles of well-informed ignorance and deliberate misrepresentation. The discourse of Orientalism is all about the desire of the West in picking what it wants to know about the East instead of what actually can be discovered and known about these Orientals.

The stereotypical image of Muslim women is the product of representational politics that is aligned with ideological setting of imperialist approach. The representation the Oriental women projects them to be oppressed and victims of strict Islamic rules. It has a long history that has roots in medieval times and one can find its traces in present as well. Such policies of representations work on the principles of manipulation to justify economic, cultural and political hegemony to provide a moral justification to expand imperialism. In the selected texts, the Oriental women are portrayed to be the products of male contemplation in different contexts of hegemony and power relationships. These ideological formations overlook the miscellaneous social reality and experiences of Muslim women on a universal level.

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