

Image of Islam in Postcolonial Novels: *E. M. Forster's A Passage to India* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

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The paper tries to expound images of Muslims portrayed in postcolonial English novels. The texts are taken as examples of how Islam is represented in the novels which have been written by colonizer and colonized novelists. The first novel, *A Passage to India*, was written in 1924, and the latter, *The Kite Runner*, after 9/11 in 2003. The novels are purposefully selected to show how Islam and Muslims are framed and stereotyped before and after September 11 attacks, and how Muslim and non-Muslim novelists, Khaled Hosseini and E. M. Forster, construe and see the image of Islam in the western world. Applying Homi K. Bhabha's cultural theory and Edward Said's orientalism, an attempt was made to pinpoint and ascertain the narratives forming and shaping the texts. Furthermore, special attention is directed to the representations of Islam and Muslims and what stereotypical images constructed and attributed to them in both novels.

Keywords: Image, Islam, Muslim, west, religion, stereotype, representation

Introduction

The word image has several meanings and it is an elusive term used in diverse contexts and situations. According to Oxford English Dictionary (1989) an image is “a representation of external form of a person or thing in art”. However, Michael Forrester in his book *Psychology of the Image* provides three definitions of the word: the first one is mental, the second is cultural, and the third is self-constructed one which extends over the first two ones (Forrester: 3-4). On the other hand, Boulding in his book *The Image* (1956) argues that our behavior depends on the image because it construes our understanding to life and gives knowledge to the environment we are living in (Boulding: 4-7). Hence, one can argue that an image is a representation of something and it also involves knowledge about a particular object based on people’s perception involving one’s senses and understanding of something. Throughout history, the way Islam is represented and seen by the west has been changed with the various information and knowledge obtained by people in the west about the east civilization. Therefore, their perception has been changed based on the knowledge they gained about the east and Islam in particular. Edward Said writes that during the seventeenth century Vatican church considered Islam as a belief that contradicts established religious teachings and in the Renaissance period it was seen as blasphemous doctrine (Said, 1981: 5). In recent years, because of the events following 11/9, scholars, writers, and media at large in the west have created stereotypes paralleling Islam and Muslims to savages, brutalities and violence. The idea that all Muslims are fanatics and anti-democratic institutions has been permeated and infused into western canon by their writers and scholars, and what is striking, as Edward Said puts it, “these discourses are rhetorical figures one keeps encountering in their description of mysterious East” (Said, 1994: xi). They are intended to present negative images of Islam and the East, and promote the notion of Eurocentrism.

The concept of unhomeliness which is presented by Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) has been used by postcolonial writers to construe and interpret the Islamic world. Vincent J. Cornell argues that the social facts of Muslims in the world are that of unhomeliness because they cannot locate themselves in the world they live in. Cornell writes “in the global civil society dominated by the West, Muslims are unhomed wherever they may live, even in their own countries” (Cornell: xi). The lines of dissent created by the western canon between the west and the rest in general, and (or) between west and Islamic world in particular highlight and underline the differences between two norms of life and two different perceptions, in which the former is seen as rational, refined and cultured, yet the latter is seen as quite opposite: irrational, coarse and barbaric. The dislocation of Muslims in the world because of colonialism, and their longings for finding a home to feel secure in a world that has been reshaped and distorted by colonialism are other aspects the postcolonial writers from Islamic origin encounter while reading their works.

Image of Islam in *A Passage to India*

In *A Passage to India*, Forster names the first part “mosque” which symbolizes Islam as more than a religion or doctrine but rather an attitude towards life and being. For Dr. Aziz Islam “is more than Faith, more than a battle-cry”. It is “an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable” (p. 16). Dr. Aziz finds comfort in the mosque where for the first time meets Mrs. Moore; it is a home for him and a relief for him in this difficult situation that he lives in—encountering English people in his country. Conversely, Mrs. Moore feels insecure and frail. This contradiction is indicative of the role of Islam, through the mosque, as powerful and effective and the role of colonizer, through Mrs. Moore, as being demoted because of cultural shock and differences. “Forster shows natives especially the Muslims with ambivalent anti-British feelings; some Muslims are sycophants; they eulogize the British India Government and pay lip-service to the British public officers.” (Muhammad Tufail Chandio, Waseem Hassan Malik, 2015).

In the beginning of the novel, Dr. Aziz and his Muslim friends discuss the English officials who govern under the British Raj in India. Their discussions focus on their humiliation at the hands of English officials. These feelings, expressed by Indian Muslims in the novel, depict how the colonizer uses his power to subjugate the colonized, and it is also suggestive of highlighting the dualism of the “self” and the “other” promoted by English colonizers in India. In other words, this shows how Muslims are misrepresented by this narrative because they are depicted as peculiar and strange. The narrator opens the novel by a brief description of the city of Chandrapore which is “scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely” (p. 5). This delineation accentuates the peculiarity of the place as a residence of other rather than self. Yet, the narrator adds that Dr. Aziz prefers to read two kinds of books: “the decay of Islam and the brevity of love” (p.12). It seems that their indignity is because of Islam as it is declined and no longer has a power to rule. It is seen that Dr. Aziz defies the traditional norms of Islamic society because of the romanticism he finds in Islamic literature through his recitation of poems he prefers. All of these remind him of the past and the past will no longer have an effect on the society that he lives in. In Homi K. Bhabha’s words this feeling “interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity” (Bhabha:4). That is, Dr. Aziz knows how Muslims are subjugated and finds relief only in the past so that he will be able to escape from the painful present. In the end of the novel, Dr Aziz realizes that it is better to leave the past and try to find a solution in the present, so the narrator comments “vowed to see more of Indians who were not Mohammedans and never to look backward. It is the only healthy course.” (p. 252).

One thing which is also important about seeing Islam in the novel is the role of Muslim women, which is portrayed through Dr. Aziz and Hammidulla’s conversations about women. Hammidullah always tries to convince Dr. Aziz that polygamy is justifiable in Islam. Hammidullah believes that it is:

better polygamy almost, than that a woman should die without the joys God has intended her to receive. Wedlock, motherhood, power in the house for what else is she born and how can the man who has denied them to her stand up to face her creator and his own at the last day? (p. 12)

Yet, Dr. Aziz thinks that one is enough because he is influenced by colonizers although he knows that there are many women who sell themselves in brothels. Yet, he is not convinced of having more than one because he is affected by the colonizers. Aziz's identity is not purely Muslim or westerner. He is torn between the two and cannot decide which one to follow. He is in an ambivalent situation hovering between past and present.

The *purdah* reduces the division between two different norms. One is acceptable to be seen and the other is not. Dr. Aziz's display of his wife's photo to his English friend, Fielding, is indicative of his intention to build a friendly bridge between Islam and Christianity, which is also *per se* suggestive of demolishing what Islam creates between these two civilizations. This is, however, in sharp contrast with the way English people, the rulers in India, see the Indians. They always see themselves as superior and Indians as inferior, and this is indicated early in the novel through the conversations between Muslim characters. Hence, Aziz's destruction of the Islamic tradition, for example the *purdah*, can be seen as an emblem of demolishing a system, which establishes boundaries between the west and the rest.

On the other hand, the situation Aziz lives in is that of a mimic man imitating the English colonizers as he is affected by the education system English colonizers introduced to India. Yet, he cannot totally adapt to this education. He is in-between two different cultures: one is Islamic and the other is western. The narrator explains that since Aziz is "touched by western feeling, he disliked union with woman who he had never seen" (p. 5). The feeling Aziz has towards women is ambivalent as he believes in *purdah* and yet he does not agree with what his religion imposed on him. In other words, he, somehow, advocates individualism and free will, which he inherited from the west. Based on the situation Aziz lives in as a Muslim character, it is inferred that Islam is only reduced to some customs and no longer cope with the modern world.

Throughout the novel Dr. Aziz reminds the reader of the glory of the Islamic past, but he fails to conform well to the colonial present. He tries to escape from his past tradition and clings to modernity which is brought by colonization. Aziz's struggle within his social milieu is portrayed in the novel through both the mosque and the *purdah* symbols. Forster shows, through Dr. Aziz's aunt, how Muslim women are oppressed. The position of women in Islam is depicted by *purdah* symbol. They are not allowed to be seen except by their relatives and they are relegated to possessions owned by men in general. This image of Muslim women has been used by western writers as disparagement to Islam.

Dr. Aziz and his friends, reciting the poetry of Islam, think that India is one and their own. Dr. Aziz finds the home of his spirit in that faith. And these forces, which

join members of the same group, separate them from other groups. Dr. Aziz, having a Hindu friend, thinks, "I wish they did not remind me of cowdung," at the same moment that his friend is thinking, "some Moslems are very violent" (p. 267). Islam teaches the eternal oneness of God. Christianity, the religion of the English, teaches the oneness of all men in the Divine love. Therefore, he has chosen religions to represent his views, each of which gives implementation to one of these powers. In Islam, he sees a mode of expression for the emotional nature, an attitude towards life where Dr. Aziz's "body and his thoughts found their home." Islam, however, provides no sanctuary for the intellect. "'There is no God but God,' doesn't carry us far through the complexities of matter and spirit; it is only a game with words, really a religious pun, not a religious truth" (p. 276).

The novel deals with the question of faith as far as culture and conventions are concerned. Dr. Aziz's main question at the outset of the novel is whether Indians be friends with English men. His inquiry brings about misfortune on his part because he is accused of an attempt to rape an English woman. Although Dr. Aziz's main objective is to make equal relationships with the English, all of them, except Fielding, abandon and oppose him just because he is Indian. He becomes unhomely in his own country, and no one supports him, this is also "the condition of cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha: 9). The mistreatment of the natives by the colonizers is further intensified when the entrance of Indians disallowed to the English club in the city, though it is their city.

In the cave, when Dr. Aziz and Miss Adela are alone. Aziz is asked about polygamy in Islam, which actually disturbs Aziz and thus Adela leaves him alone. She thinks that Aziz has followed her into the cave to rape her. Yet, Aziz is innocent and commits to his religious teachings. This incident shows the real image of Islam as a religion of tolerance and the acceptance of the differing views of other people, unlike the colonized discourse that accuses Muslims of savagery and rapist. Edward Said puts it best in his book *Covering Islam*:

The term "Islam" as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no real significant way is there a direct correspondence between the "Islam" in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures. On the other hand, "Islam" is peculiarly traumatic news today in the West. (Said: 1)

Hence, it is seen that Forester is unbiased in his delineation of Islam, through Aziz's character, and shows the colonizers bigotry towards the colonized natives, and therefore he wants to criticize English rulers in India.

Image of Islam in *The Kite Runner*

The Kite Runner is a novel written by Khaled Hosseini, published in 2003. Khaled Hosseini was born on 4th March 1965 in Kabul, Afghanistan. His father worked for Afghan Foreign Ministry, and his mother was a teacher of Farsi and History. When Soviets occupied Afghanistan in 1978, the Hosseini family moved to the United States and sought political asylum and stayed at San Jose, California.

In the novel, Hosseini compares the kite fighting to the quarrels between Afghan government and Taliban. However, the kite flying may symbolize the differences and disputes between Amir and Hassan because Amir is Sunni and Pashtun, while Hassan is Shiite and Hazara. There are class differences between Amir and Hassan. Here, the narrator shows the historical split between two main sects in Islamic society, namely Sunnis and Shiites. The subjugation and degradation of Shiite Muslims by Sunnis are aspects which are highlighted by the narrator through Amir's relationship with Hassan. The narrator tells us that although there are ties between him (Amir) and Hassan, they will never consider him as a friend "because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing."(p. 25). The only activity which brings the two boys together is flying kites.

The writer gives a long account of Afghanistan's religion, culture and traditions. It is the story of friendship between Amir and Hassan, two boys brought up in a house together. Yet, they live in two different worlds. Amir's father is rich and powerful, while Hassan's is servant. The novel is set in Afghanistan, where the majority of the populations are Muslims. According to Baba, Amir's father, "no matter what the Mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft" (p. 106). This world view is in sharp contrast with the view of Taliban, which is represented in the novel by Assef who shows the other side of Islam—extremism. Assef as a child is an aggressive person and is a source of harassment to Hassan because he is a Hazara and Shiite. Later on, he becomes a Taliban leader and believes "every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting his sin!" (p. 270). He stones a man and a woman to death because he says that they "dishonor the sanctity of marriage" (Ibid). Taliban is represented in the novel as a negative image of Islam. For instance, Assef, the childhood bully, becomes a Taliban member. Assef claims that he is on a mission of God and Amir asks him about his mission, "What mission is that? Stoning adulterers? Raping children? Flogging women for wearing high heels? Massacring Hazaras? All in the name of Islam?" (p. 248). This delineation calls the humanity of Talibans into question, and is indicative of a negative image the west has on Muslims. These two different world views, held by two Muslim characters in the novel, shows how Islam is torn apart because of modernity on the one hand, and longings for the past glory of Islam on the other. As a result, the Islamic society is stuck in wars and violence and cannot move forward. In Bhabha's words this is "the sign of racialized violence and the symptom of social victimage." (Bhabha: 2).

Amir thinks that religion is something private because he is influenced by his father. Amir prays only when he needs it. When his father becomes sick, the narrator says that he is "bowing [his] head to the ground, [he] recited half-forgotten verses from the Koran, and asked for kindness from a God [he] wasn't sure existed"(p. 135). This uncertainty in the existence of God and in the religious practices is seen as part of the destruction of religion and culture because of colonialism, which brought secular values to the natives.

The social, religious, and ethnical split between Baba and Ali, and Amir and Hassan are highlighted in the novel. The first division is because of social status, which is related to the other aspects—religion and ethnicity. Since Ali and his son, Hassan, are Hazaras and Shiites, they are deprived of social status and despised by others. Assef's assault on Hassan is justified by Assef because Hassan is not Sunni and he is a Hazara. This sectarianism within Islam has its roots in history, yet represents a negative side of Islam and justifies the colonial discourse. These "Hazaras [are] mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys" (p. 9). This stereotypical image of Shiite Islam by a Muslim author is a fact in Afghanistan, and the narrator grabs the readers' attention to this reality. "Hosseini's novel treats ethnic and religious affiliations as the source of injustice and socio-psychological imbalance in the Afghan society." (Bloom: 74).

Throughout the novel, Amir is jealous of Hassan because he is better than him and he is also favored by Baba. Amir does not do anything when Hassan is raped by Assef, though Hassan always shows loyalty to him. In the end, when Amir discovers that Hassan is his half-brother, he regrets and wants to compensate for him by searching for Hassan's son, Sohrab, and brings him to the United States. "The recognition of kinship as a force to bring about tolerance, as exemplified in Amir's case, resonates with the way Lessing has framed religious tolerance in the Nathan the Wise." (Bloom: 74) Amir's tolerance because of kinship and blood rather than religion is worthy of note because it is suggestive of the strength of tribal relations and weakness of religious doctrines on the part of those who has been affected by modernization.

Baba's continuous allusion to the mullahs in a pejorative way is also evocative. It means, by extension, that part of the society in Afghanistan is secular and no longer follow religious practices, while at the same time, they are Muslims and seen by the West as others. This contradiction is intriguing and works as a catalyst for change in attitude and perspective in seeing all the Muslims as the same. It challenges the stereotypical images created by the west about Islamic world. Baba tells Amir "you'll never learn anything of value from those bearded idiots. . . . God help us all if Afghanistan ever falls into their hands" (p. 17). Although the Taliban are Muslims and they are also Pashtuns just like Baba, they are despised by Baba and others because they are extremists and do not pay attention to the changes society undergoes.

Hosseini's mullahs in the novel are images and representations of an Islam that is absurd and ludicrous. The narrator notes that "there wasn't an Afghan in the world who didn't know at least a few jokes about [Mullah Nasruddin]" (p. 266). The mullahs become subjects of jokes and ridiculous because they are no longer respected for their preachments. However, because of that, people are in an in-between space, hovering between what the mullahs tell them and what the world teaches them through experiences. Amir, the narrator, is actually "caught between Baba and the mullahs at school, [he] still hadn't made up [his] mind about God" (p. 62). This ambivalence, by extension, is the condition of Afghans. People are exposed to two different worldviews; one is deep-rooted in history and the other in the present colonial and imperial knowledge.

The abuse of power by Taliban, a sect in Islam, is suggestive of the cruel and uncivilized aspect emphasized in the novel by the narrator to show that the discrimination and harsh punishments imposed by this sect are the negative side of Islam. Yet, this is not natural; it has to do with the past violence and bad experiences of the people under the civil war. Rahim Khan puts it right:

When the Taliban rolled in and kicked the Alliance out of Kabul, I actually danced on that street," Rahim Khan said. "And, believe me, I wasn't alone. People were celebrating at Chaman, at Deh-Mazang, greeting the Taliban in the streets, climbing their tanks and posing for pictures with them. People were so tired of the constant fighting, tired of the rockets, the gunfire, the explosions, tired of watching Gulbuddin and his cohorts firing on anything that moved. (p. 200)

It seems that people have no option, and believe that Taliban is a rescuer. Hence, Hosseini challenges the ideologies and violent dimensions of the movements affected by the west. However, he does not justify Taliban's actions. He actually reflects on the relations of control and powerlessness, between two cultures: Hazara and Pashtun, Shiite and Sunni. These divisions, both religious and ethnical, are realities in Afghanistan and one cannot abstain or refrain his/her eyes from.

Conclusion

In *The Passage to India*, Forster shows the positive side of Islam and depicts the reality of Muslims under the British rule. While in *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini presents the negative side of Islam especially through Assef and Taliban. Both novels, in their narration, reveal the ambivalent view of Muslims as they encounter modernization, which brought by colonialism and imperialism. The stereotypical images of Islam

produced by colonial discourse have been consistent and all the Muslims are seen as strange, mysterious and exotic, which are actually misrepresentations rather than real images of Islam. Muslim women, in both novels, are subaltern and marginalized, and this is one of the criticisms to Islam by the western discourse, which in itself contradicts with the spirit of modernism and modernity. In this sense, women are bereft of humanity and reduced to possessions. Although all religions are, in one way or another, at odds with some of the concepts and ideas of modernity, Islam is, intentionally or unintentionally, highlighted when it comes to treatment and rights of women, and this is evident in both the novels. It is also interesting to mention that Islam as a religion is reduced to some cultural values in *The Passage to India*, and to mullah's preaches in *The Kite Runner*. Finally the division and split between Muslims and Islamic societies are taken as examples of disparagement and hence adds more to the discourse produced by the western canon.

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