COMMUNITY, IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN SELECT CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MUSLIM FICTION

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Sk Sagir Ali

Department of English

Jadavpur University

Supervisor: **Dr. Rafat Ali**

Associate Professor, Department of English,

Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur University

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The idea of culture, as perceived within common parlance, and the realm of the Muslim subject are often seen as oppositional and contradictory to each other. To articulate "culture" in connection to Muslims is to invoke their silent but nonetheless defining Others, the non-Muslims. The notion of a "Muslim culture" unsettles the internal orderliness of an equally monolithic "West", something which is nothing more than ahistorical wish-fulfilment on the part of ideologues on both sides leading to the epistemic danger of understanding culture as something static and fixed. Notions of Islamic civilisation and culture since 9/11 has been stripped of their complexities, with debates surrounding them from foreign policy to the politics of dress. In the wake of 9/11, Muslims across the globe are increasingly finding ways of empowering themselves through a reaffirmation of their religious faith, particularly in the realm of the public sphere. They are being led to choose between the sacred and secular components of their identity. These separate mechanisms of faith and secularism which, as Judith Butler observes, may well be 'a fugitive way' for certain kinds of 'religion to survive', are meshed together with the politics of representation and counter-representation of Islam in the framing of identities

Research Problem:

Timothy Fitzgerald in Discourse of Civility and Barbarity opines that 'religion is a modern invention which authorises and naturalises a form of Euro-American secular nationality. In turn, this supposed position of secular rationality constructs and authorizes its "other", religion and religions'. Borrowing Robert Gleave's words in "Should we Teach Islam as a Religion or as a Civilisation?", it can be said that in these days we can see a movement 'from

an uncritical acceptance of the category of "religion", to-wards a critical interrogation of "religion" as a category'. From the post-Rushdie affair to the wake of 9/11 and the 'war on terror', religion, culture, race, representation run the risk of being employed in dis-loyalty or threat or something which is artistically compromised. In Europe, in spite of the state-sponsored approach of multiculturalism, Muslims are the 'enemy within' as *Kulturkampf* runs as a presence of the binary of ourselves and the Other, proclaiming the pre-eminence of a secular self that is culturally hegemonic. Since 1960 Christian fundamentalism surfaced as a challenge to secularism and later revivalist Islam percolating a presence in the public space only to assert the construction of what it takes to be Muslims. The complexity of the conflation between ethnic and religious identifications can be understood by means of the way identity is itself subject to stereotyping and monolithic representation. In his writing, "Religion in the Public Sphere" on the post-secular sphere, Jürgen Habermas mapped the European instance of the secular public sphere as a departure from the normal course than as the standard in its habitual revolt against public religion. This aberration, according to Habermas, is evident in the case of America, where political religion has a long pattern of actively being a part of the public sphere without being seen as a threat to democracy. Habermas opines that there are possibilities of religion entering into the public sphere of the secular state. In the public sphere, the articulation of religious rhetoric shouldn't find a split without a secularizing translation of religious overtones. Habermas finds that the religious citizen is differentiated by modern reflexivity through discursive nature of the secular public sphere in a heterogeneous society.

In this context I look at texts produced before and after 9/11 by novelists with Muslim backgrounds who are living in Britain. Some of them are less keen to identify as Muslim like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi , Ahdaf Soueif, Nadeem Aslam and Zia Haider Rahman, and

some of them are practising Muslims and publicly identify themselves as Muslims like Leila Aboulela. Novelists under discussion with a particular focus on the overlapping parameters of religion, representation, recognition and secularism distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture. Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008), Hanif Kureishi in *The Black Album* (1995), Nadeem Aslam in *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), Qaisra Shahraz's novel, *The Holy Woman* (2001), its sequel, *Typhoon* (2003), Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies* (2015), Zia Haider Rahman's 2014 novel *In the Light of What We Know* and Ahdaf Soueif's 1999 novel *The Map of Love* explore some of the consequences of splitting Muslim culture and thinking from what is perceived as an always-secular modernity and pick up on the monolithic and static depiction of almost all Muslim political organizations as a threat to secular western societies.

Research Questions:

Some of the questions which the research work will address include the following:

I. How do the tensions between an individual subjectivity and a communitarian adherence to culture and faith manifest themselves in these coming-of-age narratives, as they negotiate between the pull of a liberal individualist lifestyle and that of family, community and mosque, between speaking as an 'I' and on behalf of a collective?

II. How has the politics of representation affected the way in which Muslim fiction is received?

III. To what extent have the questions of faith and religious identity been addressed in these novels?

Argument

I argue that British Muslim identity is not necessarily the clash of cultural values; rather, it negotiates the capacious dwelling of "being" British in accommodating differences within. British Muslims'' sense of belonging and communitarian adherence is often central to the framings of culture and identity; the dynamic interplay of differences and similarities exhibit the holistic nature of the revealed *din* within the dissonant realities of everyday religion. "Living Islam" is evinced through the ontological premise of *tawhid*, personal piety and public practice of religious faith. The increasing religiosity among British Muslim young people post-9/11 foregrounds how religious faith is understood and practiced in reproducing interfaith communication as a marker of integration in a multicultural society. The shared sense of belonging, culture, and differences encompasses the frontiers between belief and doubt by navigating the fascinating detours of religious faith and loyalty to Britishness. Caught in the conundrums of a cultural divide, generalizations of being a Muslim, and attenuated respective faiths, the "felt awareness" of British Muslims incur the otherwise subversive signification of the dominant metaphors of Islamic reality. A renewed understanding of the site of the post-secular beyond the reified signposts of European Enlightenment could also offer us newer ways to understand how the public sphere and its space of policymaking need not divorce itself from the realm of faith and religion but must make inroads into that interstitial space that connects the community with the more inclusive elements of collective faith vis-à-vis ideas of the *umma* in Islam. The thesis has attempted to show how the stereotyping of the resurgence of faith as a counter to progressive modernity needs to be rethought in order to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of what it means to gesture towards the ethical futurity or the democracy-to-come that would entail the sense of

an unconditional hospitality (or an unconditional welcome) beyond the finitude offered by the binaries of the personal and the public, the secular and the religious, the one and the many.

Chapter 1 investigates the notions of religion, secularism, majoritarian politics, and communitarian adherence in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* and Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*. Both authors have openly acknowledged their ties to the Muslim faith, though they differ, of course, conceptually, in their views and reading of religious faiths and secular attitudes in delving deep into how world communities under the aegis of global capitalism lived in a relatively snug ambit of cosmopolitanism till it was disrupted by a series of events that changed the global world order and the idea of liberal democratic systems as the last bastions of peace and inclusivity. The exploration of both *The Enchantress of Florence* and *The Road from Damascus* interrogates cross-cultural relations through the theoretical lens of community in history with secularism.

Chapter 2 reads and situates fundamentalism, history, and terrorism to show how they function among people, as portrayed by Hanif Kureishi in *The Black Album* and Nadeem Aslam in *The Wasted Vigil* in both the pre- and post-9/11 geopolitical milieu. Though both Kureishi and Aslam belong to a Muslim heritage, they are not practising Muslims per se. Kureishi's *The Black Album* is important in terms of its representation of Islamism against a neo-Thatcherite background in the context of the problematic onslaught of neoliberalism and secularism as an alternative form of religious and socio-political identity. I have tried to look at the links between religion and violence in the pre-9/11 socio-political climate and the rise of fundamentalism during and after the Rushdie Affair in 1989. In the second part, I have explored the historical association between war and fanaticism and how neoliberal capitalism is always in denial of its complicity in the very formation of fundamentalist religious movements and its different affective fields. In these novels, the memory of traumatic

histories exemplifies the scale of human catastrophe in the time of widespread global Islamophobia. Through Aslam's Afghanistan, I look into the material sedimentations of war and terrorism that surpass the lived experiences of the human and the non-human in that geopolitically precarious area. The chapter shall also attempt to understand and locate how different transnational acts of terror form the resonances of a counter-hegemony in Western liberal democracy.

Chapter 3 discusses Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman*, and its sequel *Typhoon*, along with Leila Aboulela's *The Kindness of Enemies*, to further look into problematics and polemics that surround the post-9/11 scenario and the peculiar sense of precarity and ambivalence that was experienced by different sections of the Muslim immigrant population in Britain. Both Shahraz and Aboulela are British Muslim women writing their fiction by depicting Muslim women especially, their society, and religious faiths in a post-9/11 scenario. Though Shahraz explores aspects of race, gender, and cultural divides in her select novels to bring out the politico-cultural connotations and problematics associated with clothing, female modesty, and multiple identities, Aboulela is different in depicting her protagonist, who keeps or finds religious faith spiritually in strengthening the sense of piety, and in building an interconnectedness between the performance of religious actions and the creation of a self. The problem of clothing in association with female subjectivity is highlighted in the novel, *The Holy Woman*, whereas issues of gender, society, and religion are problematized in Shahraz's other novel, *Typhoon*.

The questioning of agency, religiosity, and gender are different in both. The novels of Shahraz and Aboulela have been selected and explored by keeping in mind that they are quite different in attitudes towards their representations of women and men and social adherence through piety and God-consciousness. In doing so, I have also thoroughly discussed the Sufi

aspect of *The Kindness of Enemies* through history in diagnosing the Sufi faith that Aboulela discusses in her novel, which highlights spirituality and materialistic modernity, and faith and present-day substantiality. The historical, socio-religious and materialist aspects of Sufi spirituality have been explored through a critical and historical method that, unlike modern historiography, attempts to understand its etymology and progress through cultural and temporal fields that move beyond the usual chronological historical templates. Aboulela, in structuring the religious narrative with a meaningful polyphony, which powers more of a Sufi voice and historical rationale in alternative perspectives with dissenting views, destabilizes the prevailing prejudices in the framing of discourses about religious faith and the secular narrative. The exploration of the feminist face of religion in intertwining the stereotypes of gender and religion delves into the misinterpretations, the division of reason versus religious faith, the semantic tools in penetrating the mysteries of Muslim women with concern for the realization of cultural otherness, racism, and cultural myopia. Aboulela has been emollient enough in claiming the embattled Sufi modernity with a pervasive production of stereotypes, obscurantism, and spiritual anomie. The devotional and religious aspects of history, historical estrangement, and alienation of Sufi spirituality, unlike modern historiography, in building the past and the present have been explored extensively to contemplate the issues through a trans-materialist historiography and a differential critical lens.

Shahraz's literary sensitivity is structured within the social, and an absolute focus on the woman question and customs like forced marriage, celibacy, hijab, brutality in female sexuality, divorce, inheritance, and childbearing in the postcolonial milieu of rural Pakistan. Shahraz's work showcases the position of Pakistani women in the postcolonial rural context. It also brings to the fore the narrative of the feudal master working as a surrogate to the deceased colonizer and eventually evolving into the indigenous colonial bourgeois. She

brings out the tensions between a liberal idea of individual subjectivity and devotional attachment to community, culture, and faith, and how the autobiographical form shapes and is reshaped by these tensions. Whilst the select novels of Shahraz form a subversive critical enquiry from within the limits of the patriarchal discursive framework that shapes a potential feminist agency, Aboulela builds a genuine attempt to narrate a particular mode of spiritual subjectivity with a certain degree of faith in the post-9/11 fictional world.

Chapter 4 examines Zia Haider Rahman's 2014 novel *In the Light of What We Know* and Ahdaf Soueif's 1999 novel *The Map of Love* to unearth the relationship between finance, identity, transnationalism, and history. Soueif hinges between the present and the past with an attestation of imperial power. To her, the past highly dominates and shapes the present with a shifting approach to history, as she finds no escape from history. Rahman writes his novel much after 9/11 to showcase the symbiotic relationship between the financing of war and life, with the contours of biopolitical life by understanding how the modern nation-state invests in a certain kind of political subject hood. Soueif, on the other hand, engages directly in the act of writing back against the hegemony of cross-cultural relationships through a focus on intimate and familial relationships; she looks to the past through the lens of imperial historiography and transnational cartography in order to make sense of the present. Both novelists are placed in parallel to each other to bring out the distinctive differences in their attitudes towards the economic manoeuvrings of war, borders, and cultures, before and after the war on terror. Rahman and Soueif do not negotiate public manifestations of Islamic piety; instead, they dissect shared tropes and concerns in relation to the broader contours of geopolitical conditioning and the mechanism that contribute to there cultural fetishization of Islam.

Rahman offers an evocative and problematic enquiry into the relationship between finance and knowledge. He reflects on the obliteration of the political crisis at the centre of post-Fordist capitalism, which is defined by growing economic fetishism, inequality, and a pervasive sense of political intemperance over the accumulation process. In his novel, he makes us see the genealogy of economics and knowledge, whereas Soueif examines the ontology of nationalism with reference to the preoccupations of empire and conflict in historical consciousness.

In retrospect, the thesis shall also attempt to debunk the secularist thesis that essentializes the inherent syncretic alterity of Islam, and show how these specific novels work to demystify the "clash of culture" theory and relocate the oppositional realms of the *umma* in Islam and the forces of Western modernity in terms of an ethical opening wherein an unimagined futurity of unconditional onto-political hospitality and being could be gestured towards. What is significant about this research on the British Muslim narrative concerning the post-9/11 war on terror relates to the various conflicts over identity formations and the formation of Islam as a religious faith and cultural offshoot. The research continues to promulgate a vision of identities of the "self" and the "other" in navigating questions of being and believing through the dynamics of an overwhelming religious resurgence post-9/11. Democratic nation state's interplay of faith, loyalty, and scrutiny under the alleged potential risks and moral panics in aligning the landscape about Islam redefine the notions of the community of believers. In this context of religious resurgence and community adherence, the separate mechanisms of faith and secularism locate the registers as "Muslim" rather than "Islamic". The projection of the global community as a supra-national organizing principle through the ontology of nationalism constructs a more capacious mode of being in the world that disturbs the ubiquitous desire for homogeneity in the wider episteme of European

modernity. Community consciousness and citizenry in the British Muslim narratives in an evolving global multicultural context are rooted in modernity governed by their religious faith. They are "modern" by their faith that constitutes their "modernity", and the palpable shift towards regarding Muslims as the "enemy within"—a mass of jihadists is defined by what American investigative journalist Robert Dreyfuss finds as ill-conceived foreign policies of paramount neoliberal capitalist nations in the pre- and post-9/11 era.[1]

The research seeks to disassociate the notion of *umma* between the differential epistemology of "Islamic threat",[2] "moral panics",[3] and the spatial alternative to secular neoliberal democracy. The evolving practices and separatist phenomenon of exclusionary practices based on religious and cultural differences stigmatize the gaze of a "culturally dominant"[4] other. It also brings out the structural fissures affecting Muslims, in particular in attaining equal Britishness where a "common sense of belonging"[5] and a willingness to "respect and cherish deep cultural differences"[6] remain oxymoronic. The lack of mutual recognition and religious understanding generated by neoliberal practices of segregation, "differential inclusion",[7] and moral panic witness a uniform shift in the assertion of Muslim

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[1] Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game: How the United States Helped Unleash Fundamentalist Islam* (New York: Metropolitan, 2005).

[2] Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 107.

[3] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972).

[4] Talal Asad, "Religion, Nation-state, Secularism," in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, ed. P. van der Veer and H. Lehman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 178–196.

[5] Bhikhu Parekh, "The Future of Multiculturalism", inaugural address at the launch of the Centre for Research on *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism*, University of Surrey, 9 June 2004.

[6]Parekh, "The Future of Multiculturalism".

[7] Gaia Giuliani, *Monsters, Catastrophes and the Anthropocene: A Postcolonial Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 8.

subjectivity. It travels from the landscape of liberal multiculturalism to the marginalization and Othering of British Muslims by a dominant assertion of porous Muslim citizenship.

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Rafat Ali
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Associate Professor
DEPT. OF ENGLISH, JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY