

Otherization in Muhsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer*

L'altérisation dans *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* de Mohsin Hamid et *Native Believer* d'Ali Eteraz

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Abstract:

Ultimate objective of this research paper is to deeply explore the notion of otherization in a diverse and multinational society like America. In my study I have opted for two important and well-read novels, which are Muhsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer*. The two literary works focalize on two multinational protagonists of Pakistani and Afghani origin. 09/11 attacks in America have been a turning point in America and in the world especially the Western world that has blamed Islam and Muslim for the tragedy of the 09/11 attacks which have triggered enormous reactions on the part of politicians and literary writers who have made the events a raw material to show how American Muslims have been victimized for being Muslims. The monolithic view of the West has made of American Muslim outsiders and intruders despite their American nationality. The characters endeavour to forge a space in their society but they have been marginalized and otherized in a society where freedom should be guaranteed for every one regardless of his origin and the color of his skin. In addition to that the study will focus on how the main characters struggle to make their voice heard and their identity asserted, which are a big challenge for Muslim Americans. It is important to highlight that the mass media have played crucial role in mobilizing the public against Islam as religion that breeds terrorism and terror in the world.

Key words: religion- terrorism - Muslim - otherization

Résumé:

L'objectif ultime de cet article de recherche est d'approfondir la notion d'"altérisation" dans une société diverse et multinationale comme celle des États-Unis. Dans mon étude, j'ai choisi deux romans importants et largement lus : *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* de Mohsin Hamid et *Native Believer* d'Ali Eteraz. Ces deux œuvres littéraires mettent en lumière deux protagonistes d'origine pakistanaise vivant dans un contexte multinational. Les attentats du 11 septembre aux États-Unis ont marqué un tournant non seulement en Amérique mais aussi dans le monde entier, en particulier dans le monde occidental, qui a largement imputé la responsabilité de cette tragédie à l'islam et aux musulmans. Ces événements ont suscité d'énormes réactions, tant de la part des hommes politiques que des écrivains, qui ont utilisé cette tragédie comme matière première pour montrer comment les musulmans américains ont été victimes de stigmatisation en raison de leur religion. La vision monolithique de l'Occident a transformé les musulmans américains en étrangers et en intrus, malgré leur nationalité américaine. Les personnages des deux romans s'efforcent de se faire une place dans la société, mais ils se retrouvent marginalisés et exclus dans un pays où la liberté devrait être garantie pour tous, indépendamment de l'origine ou de la couleur de peau. De plus, j'analyserai comment les personnages principaux luttent pour faire entendre leur voix et affirmer leur identité – un véritable défi pour les musulmans américains et les immigrants. Il est également important de souligner que les médias de masse ont joué un rôle crucial dans la mobilisation de l'opinion publique contre l'islam, en le présentant comme une religion porteuse de terrorisme et de violence dans le monde.

Mots-clés : religion- terrorisme- musulman – altérisation

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Introduction

We are often conscious of how certain lives are seen as more at risk than others. These individuals live under permanent surveillance, monitored by military checkpoints and immigration authorities. They are frequently looked at as the "other" – portrayed as treacherous, despicable enemies in opposition to the so-called moral majority. The events of 9/11 increased existing stereotypes of Muslims as uncivilized or backward. This triggered unprecedented anti-Muslim sentiment that spread all over Western nations, including Germany, Australia, Italy, and the UK. These societies further have undertaken the idea of Muslims as victims of their own religious that makes them "fanatic". In many ways Muslims in the Western diaspora were accused of attempting to Islamicize the West in general and increase the spread of Shariah laws. Muslims, in all categories: individuals, communities, or nations were increasingly regarded as terrorists, which has caused widespread psychological unease within Muslim populations. The global rise of Islamophobia, which has been reinforced by the belief that Muslims are inherently supportive of violent doctrine, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States of America, has deeply impacted Muslim identity and mental well-being. This paper attempts to show how Muslims have been otherized in the USA because of the spread of Islamophobia and how the latter has shaped Muslim consciousness in post-9/11. To do so, the study will focus on the analysis of two literary works: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Muhsin Hamid and *Native Believer* by Ali Eteraz.

Muslim ethnic groups such as Pakistani Americans often find themselves caught between two conflicting cultures, leading to a deep identity crisis. Their native identities are frequently rejected by the dominant white society, which views them as outsiders and intruders who must assimilate into white cultural norms in order to be accepted. In this context, they are labeled as "the Other". This process of "otherization" has been a persistent feature in the evolution of American society, particularly affecting communities like Afghani Americans.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) directly addresses this issue, criticizing the Orientalist discourse that defines Eastern societies as fundamentally different and inferior – portraying them as "them" or "the Other". Said's theory is relevant for understanding the mindset of white Americans and their dismissive or demeaning views toward minority groups. His theory of "otherization" explores how Western societies have long maintained a condescending perspective toward the Orient, whether during colonial rule or in diaspora contexts, where Eastern peoples are often seen as perpetual foreigners.

1-The Rise of Islamophobia after 09/11

Islamophobia refers to an ingrained negative view toward Islam and Muslims (Zafar, 2010). Throughout history, anti-Islam narratives have been utilized to impede the spread of Islam, which has often been perceived as a challenge to Western dominance. Homi Bhabha, who theorized about the relationship existing between the colonizer and the colonized,

identifies binary oppositions—like civilized vs. savage and center vs. periphery. From a Bhabhian perspective, white Americans represent the dominant and host culture, which gives them the authority and power to marginalize minority groups like Afghani Americans. This is done by assimilating these minorities into mainstream American culture and devaluing their native cultural identities, ultimately turning them into hybrid or mixed identities.

The polarized division between "us and them" has only increased racial prejudgments, which have caused discontent and the emergence of militant organizations in the Arab and Muslim world. The divide between the two communities actually grew wider as the white American majority increasingly adopted an orientalist mindset that framed Muslims as the "other" in an "us versus them" hate discourse. In this context, Maha El Said contends that the 9/11 terrorist attacks revived stereotypical Orientalist portrayals of Muslims, reinforcing binary distinctions such as "good" versus "evil," "us" versus "them," and the "Self" versus the "Other." (El Said, 03:2014)

Islamophobia mirrors not just individual partiality but a higher system of globalized hostility and psychosomatic damage. No difference is made between fanatic, radical, and moderate Muslims; instead, all are otherized and stereotyped as potential threats to Western democracy. The West often fails to identify how its own ongoing political and military actions have played a major role in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism that is a threat to both the Western World and the Muslim World. Islamophobia transgresses mere preconception; it is a systematic, prearranged battle against what is regarded as a political and religious force that stands against Western values (Zafar, 88:2010).

Significantly, Islamophobia is not the product of ideological discourse. It generates from thoughtful social and political actions conducted to serve specific agendas (Massoumi et al. 3:2017). It's important to identify the organizations and power structures that outcast and otherize people who embrace Islamic values and Islam as a religion that endorses "violence". It is worth noting that the mass media, neoconservatives, and some Zionist organizations, which promoted twisted version of Islam, contributed to the stigmatization of Muslims and Islam.

The horrendous images of the 9/11 attacks, with the dramatic collapse of New York twin towers, left deep traumatic scars on American public consciousness. Nevertheless, instead of stimulating empathy for defenseless lives across the globe, it led to violent vengeance, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. This response showed how some lives, especially Muslim ones, are worthless. After the 9/11 attacks, Muslims in the world, especially in the USA, were otherized and depicted as a monolithic and potential foes for the West and its liberal values. Despite the fact that, in the aftermath of 09/11 attacks, Muslim community was stigmatized and vilified for being Muslim, they were nonetheless compelled to reaffirm their loyalty and patriotism to the USA.

The central characters in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Native Believer* expose notable shifts following the 9/11 attacks. The two protagonists endure systematic pressure and otherization imposed on them because of their identity. The two narratives chronicle the distinct lives of the main characters. Their stories represent the livelihood of ordinary Muslim Americans and how they have suffered racism and marginalization because of their faith and original belonging. There's been a growing tendency to compel minority groups into narrow categories. Both Hamid and Eteraz resist and defy these hegemonic attempts to strip American Muslims of

their identity, instead they try to show their characters' humanity and respect for American values.

The Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid reports the experiences of Muslims both within their homeland and host country by portraying the loss, disappointment, and adversity they undergo in a country that champions freedom for every individual. Through his writing, Hamid endeavors to shed light on suffering from a deeply personal perspective by focalizing on experiences of grief faced by Muslim individuals. As someone who has lived across New York, London, and Pakistan, Hamid plays a "half-outsider" rôle, which helps him to draw a worldwide attraction to his work. His fiction foresees the creation of a worldwide community that cuddles human differences and inspires communal responsibility for a shared future. Likewise, Judith Butler's view is that Hamid makes of sorrow a political tool (Butler 30). Ali Eteraz opts for a similar approach in his literary writing. By displaying the realities of his characters, he exposes the imbalance existing between different communities and criticizes the lawfulness of sectarian politics maintained by mainstream policy. Both authors described their characters as dignified individuals struggling to make sense of their lives and resisting systematic oppression.

2-Intruder/ The Other

From a Western perspective, Eastern countries, including Islamic ones, represent "barbarism and backwardness", whereas Western countries represent the civilized world. Edward Said argues that binary oppositions create a hierarchy where one side is valued or given preference, while the other is devalued or marginalized. This concept of binarism expands to encompass contrasts like colonizer versus colonized, light versus dark, civilized versus uncivilized, and white versus black, which spread through colonial discourse.

Even though the two novels handle the same themes, they differ in how they deal with the fundamental issues. The principal idea in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is "returning home". Changez endeavours to have a better future for himself through securing a scholarship to Princeton University and gaining a respectable job at Underwood Samson, which seems a big step towards experiencing the American Dream embodied in moving from lower class to upper class. He is affected by the significance of gaining money in a society that champions capitalism and economic opportunity.

Even though he endeavours to enhance his social status, he is aware of his background and how people may look at him as an intruder and the Other. In other words, he is aware of the social mechanism governing the American society whose classification of individuals is based on race, ethnicity, and religion. He confesses that he is regarded as the Other by his friend Chuck from the Ivy League and realizes that his good behaviour and intentions stand in stark opposition to the stereotypical behaviour of the white non-Muslim Americans towards Muslim Americans, as they are often labeled "uncivilized":

"Perhaps it was my speech: like Pakistan, America is, after all, a former English colony, and it stands to reason, therefore, that an Anglicized accent may in your country continue to be associated with wealth and power, just as it is in mine. Or perhaps it was my ability to function both respectfully and with self-respect in a hierarchical environment, something American youngsters-unlike their Pakistani counterparts - rarely seem trained to do.

Whatever the reason, I was aware of an advantage conferred upon me by my foreignness, and I tried to utilize it as much as I could". (Hamid, 42:2007)

Changez has always demonstrated his love and admiration for the USA as a country of opportunities. He is a man of great talent in the financial field, as he occupied senior positions in multi-national companies. However, after 09/11 attacks, he senses an unprecedented shift in hostility towards him because of being a Muslim, which pushes him to question his belonging to America as a country where all people should be treated equally regardless of race or religion.

Likewise Changez, Ali Eteraz delves into similar difficulties experienced by Muslims as a response to 09/11. Similar to Changez, M is aware of his position within the American sociopolitical mosaic. In an attempt to avoid any confrontation with his Christian American fellows, he changed his name to hide his religious background. Even though he was born Muslim, but he is not a practical Muslim yet ; he considers himself atheist. Known only by the initial "M", his anonymity exposes his split identity and isolation from both the Muslim community and mainstream American society. His quest begins with denial and confusion but evolves into a satirical exploration of culture and faith. As M is compelled to counter the prejudices of the world around him, he immerses himself in an existential crisis that defies the boundaries of belonging and identity. Through M, Eteraz displays the cost of living with an imposed identity for the sake of assimilating within a society that denies your self-hood/.

The novel displays how the names reflect religious and cultural belonging. The narrator has never told us his full name, which symbolizes his refusal to be belittled by labels of faith or social legacy. His resistance defies the expectations laid down on him because of his background. In many occasions he has been accused of being "a residual supremacist", which aggravates his situation and interaction with ordinary white Christian Americans. "M" is recognized as a disbeliever in God , disconnected from any spiritual attachment to the Prophet or loyalty to Muslims. Instead, he seeks a middle ground where he can forge a peaceful place in American society. He is oscillating between two cultures in a country that expects him to constrain his faith. Actually he is a victim of his belonging to Muslim country despite the fact he is not a true Muslim. The fact makes him feel stifled suffering from inner torture due to the frozen relationship he experiences when dealing with his fellow Americans.

"Maybe it would have been better if there were actually walls around us. Clear demarcations between the ones free to be anything and the ones limited to being "Muslims". That way we would not have grown up thinking there were no walls. We never would have been mistaken, the way I was mistaken, and so the scar that came with getting herded wouldn't have been as bad, as ugly. Perhaps that was my role: to tell the next generation that there were walls, and for the most part they were impenetrable, and before insanity completely takes hold of you, you must find little pools of darkness around you..." (Ali, 106:2016)

It is worth noting that the characters are recognized and dignified as ordinary Americans when symbolically getting rid of their origins to hide their religious identity or ancestral belonging , which masks the problems of racism and inequality in the USA.

3-“US versus Them”

The "War on Terror" was a slogan used by the US administration to fight “radicalization”, “extremism”, and “terrorism”, terms used in everyday political discourse targeting Muslims and their sympathizers. Therefore, violence against people of Islamic faith has become common. Otherization should not be regarded as an isolated outpouring of hostility; rather, it is manifested through a couple of subtle incidents. Regarding otherization as structural racism broadens our understanding of racialization as a process by which a group of people experiences special racial harassment. This interpretation stands against the view that frames the West and Islam as unmoving blocks and different civilizations (Kundnani,38:2017). Instead, it displays the flowing nature of racial categories, which helps to clear the ongoing obscurity enshrouding Islamophobia and its connection with race (Kundnani,5:2017).

The binary of “us versus them” created with the characters an internal struggle and affected their psyches and their sense of belonging. This hostile atmosphere bred by otherization and Islamophobia drove Muslims to internalize racism as they have been under constant control. American Muslims have often felt they are pressured and feared losing their citizenship and social security.

Despite the fact that the two protagonists are originally Muslims, Changez and M differ in many ways. Changez distances himself from the nationalistic ideology of the dominant power, while M acquiesces to the demands of American society and its expectations as he denies any religious affiliation. In *Native Believer*, other characters of Islamic faith follow diverse political paths and views within American society. For example, Candace and Leila, as Muslim, diverge in their convictions and values. Candace, who has converted to Islam, endorses her Muslim identity without regret. By contrast, Leila, an Afghani American, attempts to break away from the stigmatization of being a terrorist and therefore adopts a progressive and reformist approach toward Islam. As “M” observes, she needed to believe that there were Muslim peacemakers, because to not be a reformist would mean that she would have to be terrified of being a Muslim. (Ali,189:2016). “M” becomes cautious about his social status in society after 09/11. His life with his wife

Marie Anne, who is a liberal Christian woman, gets worse, especially after the incident with the Quran. He suffers from the pressure to prove his loyalty to America and its ideal by selling surveillance drones targeting so-called “terrorist hubs” in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Similarly, characters like Leila and Mahmud present themselves as “Moderate Muslims” who present themselves as the West’s acceptable and civilized allies. They act as intermediaries between the West and the Muslim world, running cultural exchange programs that showcase America’s supposed tolerance. However, their privileged socioeconomic status blinds them to the reality of Islamophobia. The labeling of Muslims into ‘moderate’ and ‘extremist’ categories starkly reveals underlying racism. What defines one as moderate or extremist? It’s often reduced to superficial indicators like clothing, body language, and speech. As Kundnani states: “To be classed as “moderate”, Muslims must be oblivious to what they know about Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and instead align themselves with the fantasies of the War on Terror; they should not only express their religious affiliation but also speak out publicly against extremists’ misinterpretations of Islam” (Kundnani 110).

In contrast to M, Ali Ansari serves as a counterpoint. Both Ansari and Candace resist the surveillance and control mechanisms imposed by the American state. Likewise Changez, he has

developed subversive methods to confront and push back against Islamophobia. His decision to go back to Pakistan is driven by the increasing instability in his homeland. Motivated by political concerns, Ansari states:

"I made it into my mission on campus to advocate a disengagement from your country by mine. I was popular among my students – perhaps because I was young, or perhaps because they could see the practical value of my ex-janissary's skills, which I imparted to them in my courses on finance- and it was not difficult to persuade them, of the merits of participating in demonstrations for greater independence in Pakistan's domestic and international affairs, demonstrations that the foreign press would later, when our gatherings grew to newsworthy size, come to label as anti-American". (Hamid,176:2007).

The two narratives expose a couple of Muslim identities throughout the sequence of the events, individuals with different beliefs and values. However, all are linked by a shared sense of fear and anxiety, struggling for survival in a toxic environment.

Conclusion

Negative stereotypes surrounding Muslims significantly overshadow any positive representations. Personal reflections and calls to resist Islamophobia are frequently minimized or dismissed by mainstream media. As a powerful tool shaping public perception and social realities, the media's influence in America has worsened life conditions and reinforced the otherization of Muslim Americans. The exclusion of devout Muslims from public spaces and the indiscriminate violence inflicted upon innocent civilians in regions like Afghanistan, Iran, and Palestine point to a growing normalization of hate-driven rhetoric and actions.

The study has examined the complex and layered nature of otherization and Islamophobia. The firm commitment to Muslim identity shown by characters such as Ali Ansari and Changez, the ambiguity of M's mindset, and the unintentional killing of George Gabriel all unravel the unprecedented condition of marginalized minority groups. Racial bias plays a critical role in the persistent misrepresentation of Muslims, and Islamophobia is deeply entangled with a moralized binary of good versus evil and civilized versus uncivilized. The emergence of so-called "moral entrepreneurs" like George Gabriel in the West further substantiates this claim.

Gabriel's accusation—"You are all American jihadists" (Ali, 229:2016)—aimed at a group of moderate Muslims and Marie Anne, emphasizes the West's monolithic views of Muslims and shows the deep frustration and confusion within this discourse. Although he dismissed M from employment based on prejudice, his condemnation of the group for their involvement in the War on Terror reveals his distorted moral reasoning. These "moral entrepreneurs" take it upon themselves to eliminate what they perceive as threats, leaving individuals like M silenced and stripped of agency. Gabriel's eventual death can be regarded as a symbolic act of defiance by marginalized individuals who, unable to reconcile with a society unwilling to move past rigid stereotypes, take drastic and defiant action in response to their continued oppression.

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