

RECONCEPTUALIZING MUSLIM IDENTITY: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to explore the need of portraying Islam as non-violent religious culture in contemporary fiction as a result of the image drawn of them in journalist media as terrorists. It establishes the authors as voicing an identity of Muslims that is different from the one assigned to them by journalist media. This study of the texts will consider the media as a catalyst for tarnishing the image of Muslims to the extent that they, themselves, are reluctant to call themselves practicing Muslims in fear of being mistaken as terrorists. It uses Foucauldian discourse analysis and attempts deconstruction using Jacques Derrida's model. As this paper will show, these texts not only attempt to discard the general title of Muslims as terrorists, but also discuss stereotypes regarding Islam and the practices of clothing, and beard. Then, the paper will juxtapose the manner in which they are generally perceived to the way they are presented in the novels. This paper discusses Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2006), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008), and Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* (2004). This choice broadens the scope of this paper because it takes writers from three different parts of the world – Aboulela being a Sudanese, Hamid a Pakistani, and Pamuk a Turk. Moreover, the three novels were written in the 21st century, making this study a discussion of contemporary Muslims.*

Keywords: Islamophobia, Literature, Media, Islam, Muslims.

Introduction

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* deal with religion from three different perspectives. Aboulela discusses Islam from a personal perspective, Orhan from a political perspective, and Hamid from a personal made political perspective. These three novels give insights into lives of Muslims and readers get a view of Islam that can be compared with the image that is presented to them through news channels and news print. The three novels not only show their characters as practicing Muslims, but also show their journeys that led them to practice Islam in their individual manners.

In *Minaret*, Aboulela writes about Najwa who has to flee from Sudan because of political assassination of her father. Before she starts living in London, Najwa never practiced Islam as a religion. It was more of a cultural thing for her to fast during Ramzan and to pray during her exams. In fact, devotion to religion was considered conservative by her and she related prayers and recitation of the *Quran* with servants and those with whom she did not share her social circles. For Najwa her secular Western lifestyle is a source of pride. When she moves to London she continues her way of life until she is separated from every member of her family. She clings to Anwar, who uses her. In her misery and restlessness Najwa begins to pray as a means of reaching out to God rather than as result of her short-term pangs of seeing prayer as a means of good luck. As a result, she meets Tamer with whom she falls in love, but leaves in the end.

Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a monologue of a Pakistani Muslim with an American who is hinted as a member of the army or secret services. In it Changez narrates the story of his life and relationship with America. Changez was in

America during the 9/11 and it was then that he became aware of his identity as a Muslim. He talks about his reaction to anti-Muslim attitude of people around him, and how it led him to grow a beard and what it signified to him.

Through Orhan Pamuk's *Snow* the reader becomes aware of the controversy behind the headscarf in Turkey. Ka, a Turkish exile, comes back to his country after twelve years and is stuck amongst the political tug of war between the religious and the non-religious. He witnesses the terrorism and trouble caused by the debate about freedom to wear a headscarf.

The three novels deal with religion, and through them readers come to visualize a Muslim's life from a personal perspective. Otherwise, what the readers hear and perceive about Islam is mainly through the journalist media. Journalists play a vital role in forming paradigms and perspectives in societies. People rely on this source to gain knowledge about instances and events that occur in far off places. They are completely dependent upon this source and they can hardly judge whether the information provided to them is pure fact or whether it is tempered with. Thus, they believe in the world that is shown to them through journalism. Journalist media can not only temper facts, but they can also manipulate the manner in which pure facts are presented to the audience. News articles may be presented in a biased manner thus pursuing the audience to be for or against an opinion. Through examples, this paper demonstrates how journalist media has formed stereotypes against Muslims wearing hijabs, or veils, and having beards. Then it discusses how the three novels deal with these issues.

The veil and the headscarves are presented as a public enemy. All around the world these items of clothing are being banned either because they pose a threat to national security or to cultural security. In 2009 the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, though did not officially ban the veil, but declared it unwelcomed in France. The threat was not on the country itself but the "Islamic dress" is a "sign of women's debasement and 'not welcome' on French soil" says Mr. Sarkozy, and that it could "Contravene French ideas on gender equality. [...] The problem of burqa is not a religious problem, it's a problem of liberty and women's dignity. [...] That's not our idea of freedom" (Chrisafis). Here, the "Islamic dress" is established as a threat to the French ideals. It is an idea that completely violates the ideals that the French associate their nationality with. The use of 'equality' and 'liberty' that were slogans during the French Revolution provokes an emotional reaction on part of the listeners because they were the guidelines that provoked the masses to overturn the hierarchy. So, this item of clothing is a sign of the threat that that the Muslims present to the French ideals of freedom that brought democracy in the country and is the foundation of its current structure. Therefore, even when Mr. Sarkozy doesn't take a political stance, his speech and the media's coverage is an allusion to the political foundation of France. While France stands for liberty the veil promotes oppression and confinement.

A 2013 article by Ellen Barry in the *International New York Times* discusses the mayhem caused in a family due to hijab ban in Russia. The article is designed to give an image of a religious family that is Muslim, poor, obsessed with boundaries, and increasingly depressed at the news of hijab ban in the country. It shows that their world is turned upside down due to this single change in dress attire. The article starts with a dismal description of the family that is to represent the state of all Muslims of Russia:

The girls of Salikov family live in frontier country. Their road is dirt, punctuated by puddles and sheep, and their house does not have plumbing or running water. They had been hoping this would be the year the local authorities got around to hooking up natural gas.

Instead, they found themselves at the center of an emerging debate over religion in Russia.

These people are miserable, backward, and devoid of basic necessities. Moreover, even in this depressing state they forget about all these troubles when their 15-year-old daughter is not allowed to wear a hijab in school. They change her school against her will. While her niece is made to cut all social contact and be home tutored; and the idea of boundaries is being instilled in the mind of a 5-year-old Aisha as she “practiced coloring inside the lines.” All these images highlight the backwardness and obsession with religion which leads to a desire to create boundaries for the weak and naïve.

Moreover, in the same article, Murad Musayer describes the general view about Muslims as: ““When we discussed the social aspect of the problem with hijabs, one of our opponents said, ‘Let these people go back to their historical homeland, to their hijab homeland, and let them wear hijab there.’”” (Barry). People who stand up to the hijab are hailed as a “hero” as Stravropol schoolmistress who refused to “admit girls in hijabs”. This idea of the Muslims as being ‘historical’ is supported by the miserable condition of Salikov family portrayed in the beginning of the article. It reinforces the image of Muslims as lacking progress and willing to remain in a ‘homeland’ that is against modernity. The Salikov family is shown as ignoring their basic physical needs of plumbing or natural gas and exerting all their energy and focus on religion instead of dealing with the two problems simultaneously. Thus, the condition of the road that is “dirt, punctuated by puddles and sheep” becomes a reflection of their minds which is shown as negatively affected by spring which turns it into an “un navigable mess.” (Barry). Here too, the idea of Muslim women who wear hijab is shown as being oppressed not just by their condition, but also by excluding opinion of any female member of the household. Moreover, the hijab being a foreign item, and thus Muslims as foreigners is reinforced not only by quoting opponents who wish to send the hijab wearing women to their “historical homeland, their hijab homeland,” but also by the specific mention of the schoolmistress being Russian. Australia appears uneasy about the veil in a *News.com.au* article by Shorten Kristen (2014). According to the article regarding “the controversial Muslim garment” Australia sees it as “a threat to national security” and backs this view up with briefings on bans imposed by other countries, using words like “obscuring [...] identity”, “security”, “Islamic extremism” and “religious symbolism” etc. throughout the article. It instills the idea of “the Muslim garment” being an attire of trouble makers. It becomes a dress chosen by those who do not wish to integrate with the society.

A 2015 news article in *Reuters* announcing the lifting of ban on teachers wearing headscarves in Germany instills the idea of the headscarf being an item that may cause “disruption” in places as apolitical as schools. When the German ban on headscarves of 2003 was lifted recently it was made clear that it still carried an ever-present danger of “caus[ing] disruption in school[s].” This fact was highlighted by stating it twice in the first 3 sentences of the short article by Stephen Brown, thus instilling the idea of the headscarf being a controversial item of clothing whose mere use can create chaos in a peaceful environment that caters the innocent youth of the nation. Repeated use of this word in the article dealing with information regarding schools automatically juxtaposes innocence of the harmless with adverse effects of the headscarf, which highlights the ‘evil’ behind it.

Moreover, this item of clothing is referred to as an imposition on the Muslim women and is never considered as a choice. Women wearing this attire are kept out of this debate and it is the men’s stance that is usually brought forth. In a recent article (2015) in *BBC Magazine*, under the section “BBC Trending” a debate is covered under the title “The Battle between the Veil and Miniskirt”. Those defending the veil are all men while there is

an interview of a single woman who is in favor of the miniskirt. The enormity of the situation is brought to the readers by beginning the article with the question “What makes a man?” Thus, the women’s attire is shown as a debate not over women’s choice, but is a question of masculinity of Muslim men. It is shown as being backed up by the Quran, while the picture of those wearing scarves are four little girls with the eldest being around 10 years old sitting with a man with a beard. This man is shown demonstrating the use of hijab in his household. On the other hand, the picture of those who are supporting the miniskirt are 10 middle aged women. Moreover, those behind the veil campaign are wimps who “didn’t respond to repeated requests for comment” (Doyle). The visual juxtaposition of the four little girls with the 10 middle aged women instills the idea of the scarf being an imposition and that the women who wear the hijab are brainwashed and are incapable of independent decision making; while those who escape such mind-mapping are likely to support the miniskirt movement. The pictures translate bearded man as the cause of this dismal position of women who impose the headscarf on little girls who cannot think for themselves. He has made it a matter of his pride to cover up his daughters in layers of clothing.

When the Twin Towers collapsed, the blame came upon Osama Bin Laden of the Al- Qaida and every minor thing associated with him became a mark of terrorism. The most prominent were his religion and his appearance, thus linking Islam and beards with terrorism. Soon it became a scale on which people readily judged natures of people. The idea of America as the hero who must overcome the attack to force it into “chaos and retreat”. The sentence that set the foundation for this discrimination was the vow by President Bush to “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” (“White House: ‘War on Terrorism’ is Over” 2006). Thus, he vowed to punish those having ill feelings against America. There was no criterion to judge one’s thoughts about the issue. The only scale that remained was one’s likeness to the terrorists – their beliefs, their thoughts, their background. Amongst these only one’s background can be found on record. The rest cannot be collected with credibility. So, the search began and thus, with the intelligence forces the public became wary of distrustfulness among their acquaintances. With this, America declared war with Afghanistan and attacked it in the coming four days.

In April 2007, *Time* published an issue with “Talibanistan” as the cover story. Whereas the article itself talks about the power of the Taliban the photos accompanying them are of those fighting against the Talibanization of their clans. However, the controversy arises where these photos focus not on the faces but on the beards. The issue cover has a photo of a man whose face is mostly under the shadow of his turban and the only distinguishable features about him are his nose and his beard. The article photo on page 19 is even more controversial as it means to show two heads of villages who had resisted against foreign invasion but had given in to Taliban. The photo does not show their faces. The focus lies on the beard of the chief in the front, while, although, the face of the second chief is visible, it is blurred and the only distinguishable features about him are his beard and his turban. It gives it a view of the beard as common feature of those against the West, who had tried to control the area, but having an understanding with groups like the Taliban.

The article itself discusses how most of the tribes have given in to pressure against Taliban and those who haven't are in a continued war. There are no formal measures for protection for these people, like a national army, or a judicial system. Thus, such people come from a land where the Darwinian Theory of “Survival of the

Fittest” rules. It associates them with primitiveness, lack of civil necessities as of a government and a proper army.

The beard becomes a stimulator of oppression, conservatism, and terrorism. As a result, there are people who are fired due to their beards (Sleigh 2012), and nationwide shavings of beards in Tajikistan. While those who wear scarves are those resisting social integration and are controlled by an ideology that is thrust upon them and which they must follow to assure the support of the male members of their family. Thus, the scarf becomes a symbol of oppression and backwardness and results in a prejudice that cannot be wiped out even by the laws that stop religious and ethnic discrimination. An 11-year-old girl was suspended from school for wearing a hijab in Washington (Frieden 2004). A woman in Cardiff is forced to change her route to avoid verbal abuse attacks (James, et al. 2016). To change these stereotypes about Muslims the three authors – Aboulela, Hamid, and Pamuk – present Muslims from personal and political perspectives. They try to make their readers see Muslims from a Muslim’s point of view rather than the image that generally prevails due to inefficient or propagandist journalist media coverage.

Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* tells the story of Najwa who decides to become a practicing Muslim after she has to migrate to London, her parents die, her brother, Omar, is arrested for drug dealing, and she is sexually exploited by her boyfriend, Anwar. However, neither is her conversion sudden or epiphanic nor is it easy for her to adopt different customs of Islam. Her main motivation to adapt Islam was to get over the guilt of having sex with Anwar without being married to him. She needed a guidance that could protect her and link her to her deceased parents and Sudan. Even after deciding to practice her religion she had considered giving it up if there was a choice between Islam and marriage with Anwar: “If he had proposed marriage there and then I would have accepted and gone back to him.” (Aboulela 2006, 244). Her motivation to pray in the mosque was that “In the mosque [she] feel[s] like [she] is in Khartoum again.” (Aboulela 2006, 244). It was nostalgia for her homeland, her parents, her friends, her former routine of going to the university and having innocent relationships there, even with Anwar, that made her crave for a distance from Anwar. She was not moved by the religious implications of having sex with someone outside of marriage; rather it was the cultural importance that virginity was given and the care that young brides experienced that made her uneasy. Sociocultural issues are a complex yet integral part of human life (Akram & Abdelrady, 2025, 2023; Ramzan et al., 2023). They can range from challenges related to cultural integration (Akram & Yang, 2021; Javaid et al., 2023), social inequality, and systemic discrimination to issues surrounding gender norms, identity, and generational conflicts (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024), trauma, or personality disorders (Javaid et al., 2024).

Najwa’s Islam is not political. She has no agenda of reforming the society or spreading her religion. Her purpose is simply of reconnecting to her past, and it is because she lived in an Islamic country that she chose to move to religion. This is the most comforting feature of it for her. She was drawn to the simplicity of the lectures and the people in the mosque rather than the grand narratives about paradise and hell. She needed to feel close to someone who understood her and gave her the liberty of starting a new life without continuously contradicting and ridiculing her. She found such companionship in the mosque where people were friendly but did not force her to talk about her past. With Wafaa she felt closer to being a part of a family at a time when she had lost all of her own. The comfort around her is evident in the simple way she describes Wafaa guiding her in her choice of scarves.

The novel’s episode of Najwa’s decision of wearing a scarf is such that readers can

easily relate to whether they are Muslims or otherwise. Najwa doesn't like the scarf at first. She didn't feel glamorous, young or beautiful in it. Being unsatisfied with her appearance she "threw it on the bed. [She] was not ready yet; [she] was not ready for this step." (Aboulela 2006, 245). The general impression of the scarf being an imposition upon women is discarded in this scene. She is alone in her flat at the time and there is no one to force this decision upon her. It is when she relates the scarf to her mother and how she had considered her beautiful when she covered her hair made her try it on the second time. The scarf made her feel connected to her mother and instead of comparing her image to her own past image, she compared herself to her mother. Now she saw the beauty of it. Thus, the scarf which is a symbol of religious extremism, and oppression does not hold the same importance for her. She was always conscious about her beauty and it is only when she is satisfied with her physical appearance with it that she starts to feel comfortable in it. "I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not bad, not so bad'. Around me was a new gentleness." (Aboulela 2006, 247). After being continuously insulted by Anwar and losing control over her choices to him Aboulela shows the scarf as a tool that gives her a control over her visibility. This is not just physical visibility, rather it is also of the information that she wishes to offer or to hide – the information about her past that she does not want to give out to anyone. Through the scarf she wishes to dissolve into the scenery without having to interact unnecessarily. This she achieves, as her walk down a lane while wearing a scarf is compared with while she was not wearing it. In the latter incident, the labor workers had whistled, laughed, and had called out to her, and though the words weren't clear, she had understood the tone (Aboulela 2006, 130). When she walked by with herself covered "The builders who had leered down at [her] from the scaffolding above couldn't see [her] anymore. [She] was invisible and they were all quiet." (Aboulela 2006, 247). Thus, she does not have to deal with unwanted attention. This is true even for her company with Anwar.

Their final meeting is when he finally visits her and she goes down to see him in her covered self. Through this she achieves the distance from him that she desired.

However, her scarf is not always a blessing for her as Aboulela describes a scene where she is insulted by three young men because of her dress. While taking a bus ride at night to go back home from work she has something thrown at her by them, though they missed. After that one of them steps up to her pours a liquid on her head which she identifies as Tizier, says "You Muslim scum" and rejoins his friends at the back of the bus where they all laugh (Aboulela 2006, 81). Aboulela shows how scared and disturbed Najwa is at this treatment. She had not done anything to deserve it. She was a victim of mistaken stereotypes about Islam that label people with certain outlooks with extremist identities.

While walking with Tamer in a park they have people eyeing them suspiciously. Najwa narrates: "I sense the slight unease he inspires in the people around us. I turn and look at him through their eyes. Tall, young, Arab-looking, dark eyes and the beard, just like a terrorist" (Aboulela 2006, 100). However, Tamer has not faced abuse like Najwa. He complains of not having any friends at the university, however, Aboulela leaves this case open to the speculation of the reader that whether it was because of his appearance or because of his lack of interest in his studies. Najwa ponders "There are other places in London that aren't safe, where our very presence irks people. Maybe his university is such a place and that is why he is lonely." (Aboulela 2006, 111). Tamer is the character which gives readers an insight on a Muslim with a beard. Although he is particular about following Islam, he does not participate in politics. He even complains of the stereotype that links religion with politics: "What bugs me [...] is that unless you're political, people think you're not a strong Muslim" (Aboulela 2006, 117). Through her characters Aboulela

separates Islam from politics. Both of these characters despise politics for different reasons: Najwa because it killed her father and Tamer because he simply isn't interested in it. Tamer tries to make his sister and mother observe Islam however, he does not overstep boundaries and force Islam upon them. His sister is the exact opposite of what Tamer wants her to be but even though he had talked to her about changing her ways he realizes that he cannot make his sister act according to his will. His answer to the *haram* food in the house is that despite protesting he simply does not eat it. Even so, Najwa hints twice that he will be exposed to danger if he goes to certain parts of the city at the wrong times. At one instance, she thinks: "he might not know it but it is safe for us in playgrounds, safe among children. There are other places in London that aren't safe, where our very presence irks people." (Aboulela 2006, 111). Again, when he talks of taking up the job of delivering pizzas she replies: "It won't be safe for you at night. There are people who might hurt you." (Aboulela 2006, 253).

Aboulela shows a side of Muslims that is different from that presented in journalist media. She presents a personal perspective of the hijab and the beard. Although *Minaret* is largely a non-political text and focuses on the personal rather than the global perspectives, nevertheless, the reader comes across instances where the personal is affected by the political. The characters come across people whose only interaction to Muslims is through journalist media and thus their vision of their lives is blinded by the generalized perspective that journalism presents to them. Through her writings Aboulela counters this generalization and encourages the reader to open up to a different view about Muslims that is based on personal encounter.

Mohsin Hamid discusses this issue in a completely different manner. He takes on the issue of beard in an overtly political way. He discusses the 9/11 and the impact it had on his character. The novel is a monologue in which the Pakistani protagonist narrates his story of how he came to grow a beard. The third sentence of the novel is a declaration of the presence of the stereotype that relates beards to terrorism – particularly terrorism directed towards America.

Changez says: "Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America." (Hamid 2008, 1). At the same time, it announces the presence of the paradigm and declares it to be false. Hamid presents the story through a man who sees America as a means to prosperity, betterment, and modernity. He tells of his difficult times being a descendant of a family that was formerly rich but has lost its resources and is now struggling. Thus, there is the desire to reestablish his family name. He sees his admission in Princeton as a guarantee to a better future. But soon he rids himself of this fallacy and returns to Pakistan for a peace that he could not find in America. During his internship at Underwood Samson he encounters the reaction of Americans to the attack on the Twin Towers. His response was to ignore the rumors about the atrocities of American public and authority towards Muslims. He reasoned himself to be detached from these events because "such things invariably happened, in America as in all countries, to the hapless poor, not to Princeton graduates earning eighty thousand dollars a year." (Hamid 2008, 113). He even tries to avoid the news so he could live in a careless world of denial. However, he comes across a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan for what was described as a daring raid on a Taliban command post. My reaction caught me by surprise [...] and the sight of what I took to be the beginning of its invasion by [American] countrymen caused me to tremble with fury. (Hamid 2008, 113-114).

He reasons himself even out of this and tells himself that he had overreacted.

This story tells the reader about the feelings that a person working in America might have for the events going on there. This counters the rumors that says that Muslims were actually celebrating the attack on the Towers (Trotta 2007). Changez deliberately tries to keep himself ignorant of the politics that is going on around him. He reads his parents' worries and his brother's emotions but does not heed to them because he does not want to let go of the privileges that America is offering him. He deems himself removed from all this if he decides not to participate in it. It is also a matter of loyalty for Changez to think of America as being unjust because she has provided him with a job and has enabled him to regain the luxury that his family had lost with time. When finally confronting the political happenings, he makes his observation that America had a "determination to look back [...] that [she] was scrambling to don to the costumes of another era" (Hamid 2008, 131). However, he "felt treacherous for wondering whether that era was fictitious, and whether [...] it contained a part written for [him]" (Hamid 2008, 131). Thus, Changez does not think of contradicting America. He considers it disloyal to doubt her policies or her ability to provide for him. He feels himself a part of it and hopes for the security that America has always promised to its citizens.

He is so influenced by that country that he begins to feel ashamed of his own house "I was shamed. *This* was where I came from, this was my provenance, and it smacked of lowliness." (Hamid 2008, 141). His shame in his own house begins his transformation. This is where he feels that he must connect himself to his country. Thus, he begins to grow his beard. Hamid shows the beard as an outcome of Changez' anger towards himself for not being loyal to his own country and staying and providing for his family; it was also directed against America for abandoning Pakistan against India despite Pakistan's help to America against Afghanistan. "It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, [...] I know only that I did not wish to blend in [...] I was deeply angry" (Hamid 2008, 148).

Hamid shows how journalist media had impacted citizens. People had taken the beard as a sign of treason to America, and had begun to relate it to terrorism. Changez was now seen as one of the terrorists despite the fact that he was immensely popular in this workplace. He also becomes a victim of verbal abuse:

It is remarkable given its physical insignificance – it is only a hairstyle after all—the impact a beard worn by a man of my complexion has on your fellow countrymen.

More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares. (Hamid 2008, 148).

When finally deciding on focusing his loyalties on Pakistan, his only resolution is to leave America. He does not conspire against her or even condemn her for all that was going on: he simply leaves. However, his colleagues had formed an impression of him that was ill-founded:

I realized how deep was the suspicion I had engendered in my colleagues in the past few—bearded and resentful—weeks; only Wainwright came over to shake my hand and say farewell; the others, if they bothered to look at me at all, did so with evident unease and, in some cases, a fear which would not have been inappropriate had I been convicted of plotting to kill them rather than of abandoning my post in mid-assignment. The guard did not leave me until I was outside the building (Hamid 2008, 181-182).

As the novel is a monologue of a man, there is no mention of a scarf or a hijab. Although Changez' mother comes in for a minor role, he does not describe her appearance, nor her manner of dress. This signifies that dress is not a matter of importance for Changez. He neither wishes to clad the women of his house in hijab, nor takes unnecessary pride in their wearing it – if they do. It is simply a dress for him.

Hamid discusses the matter of identity that the journalist media has created for the Muslims in a direct and overt manner. There are references to the problems that Muslims face due to the stereotypes that is created about them in the media. He also discusses how the masses expected Muslims to be necessarily political, while Changez is the embodiment of a person who consciously tries to avoid them. Orhan Pamuk also discusses the politics of scarf, beard, and identity. These are explicitly the main topics of his novel *Snow*. However, he does not side with any party. He merely ridicules all the parties involved in this debate. There is no pure or innocent side; everyone is misunderstood when opposing the other. The main debate that goes on in Kars, the city in which the story of the novel takes place, is whether girls be allowed to wear scarves in public places or not. This question is not just related to the current politics of the world it is also a question of historical significance for the Turks. The hijab was banned in Turkey by Mustafa Kamal, when Turkey was made a republic, with the notion that it was against modernization and prevented women to participate fully in national activities. Thus, the scarf is taken as a sign of treachery and the government takes measures to stop women from wearing it. However, those in favor of the hijab stand up against the government and thus religion becomes tangled in politics.

The protagonist, Ka, is neither shown as a Turk in the novel, nor as a German. He is not a Turk because he spent ten years in Germany without visiting Turkey once. He is not German because he spent his childhood in Turkey and has too many memories of this land to be an outsider. Thus, he is a neutral observer of the happenings in this country. When Ka comes to Kars he comes to know about the political debate on the headscarf and how there are several cases of girls committing suicide because of the ban.

While wearing a headscarf implies being religious, anti-modern and thus treacherous, not wearing a headscarf is seen as being Western and thus anti-Islamic. The West is considered as an enemy of Islam by Blue, who is the most popular and most controversial Sheikh in Kars. His popularity implies the unity of belief in majority of the population of Kars. However, Pamuk shows the folly in his views about the world and his biasness against the West. While discussing religion with Ka Blue says: “there is, after all, only one West and only one Western view. And we take the opposite point of view.” (Pamuk 2004, 233). This shows the naivety of Blue who considers the West as an entity rather than a composition of various minds who might have a similar outlook on life to his. He considers the west to be composed of non-Muslims and does not consider that Muslims are also living in that land as well. The West is considered as an enemy by the Muslims of Kars. They consider the government anti-Islamic because it bans the scarf.

Those who do not support the scarf consider the Muslims as their enemy. This cycle is shown destructive for the city and ends in an attempt of a coup which results in mass killing of citizens. There is an ambiguity to the reason behind the suicides of girls happening in the city.

There are rumors that they committed suicide because of the headscarf ban; some say that they committed suicide because they were not allowed to marry the persons they loved; about some it was said that their parents killed them for honor. Towards the end of the novel Kadife, who is the political spokesperson and leader of the headscarf girls, says “A woman doesn't commit suicide because she's lost her pride; she does it to *show* her pride.”

(emphasis in original) (Pamuk 2004, 405). She does not verify the reason for pride of all of these girls, however, she refers to the independence of their thinking. This quote can be further explained by her dialogue with Sunay Bay: “‘It’s not my intelligence that frightens you. You fear me because I’m my own person,’ said Kadife. Because, here in our city, men don’t fear their women’s intelligence; they fear their independence.’” (Pamuk 2004, 409). Thus, wearing the scarf is a matter of independence for them. They do not want to be politicized for their choice of covering their heads.

Pamuk shows two sisters in the novel: Ipek and Kadife. Ipek is the sister who does not wear a scarf, and Kadife is the one who wears it. Pamuk does not differentiate between the two. They are both beautiful, although Ipek is more beautiful than Kadife though this beauty has nothing to do with the scarf, both are intelligent, and both are active. Kadife’s choice of wearing a scarf does not sever her relationship with her sister or with her father and she does not try to persuade Ipek to wear it. The novel shows that there is no change in Kadife’s personality because of the scarf. However, Kadife herself admits how her views about it changed when she started wearing it. She had worn it the first time to make fun of it, “The first time I went to see the headscarf girls, I did go to make of them.” (Pamuk 2004, 115) but her interaction with them made her change her views about them. It was not just the murder threats that made her adopt the scarf, she had come to respect the custom and had decided to adopt it.

Similarly, although Blue is taken as a religious personality by the political forces of the novel, Pamuk shows the inexperience in his views. He shows how Blue lacks an understanding of the other side. He shows his dislike of Ka simply because he has lived in Germany for the past 10 years. He does not consider the fact that it was because Ka was in danger of being attacked because of his political views. He says to Ka: “You don’t belong to this country; you’re not even a Turk anymore. First try to be like everyone else, then try to believe in God.” (Pamuk 2004, 334). Even Ka is selfish and it is him who gives out information about Blue’s hideout that results in his death. Pamuk reveals his perspective on all the chaos that goes on in the city through Fazil near the end of the novel: “If you write a book set in Kars and put me in it, I’d like to tell your readers not to believe anything you say about me, anything you say about any of us. None could understand us from far away.” (Pamuk 2004, 435).

Pamuk ridicules people for believing in stereotypes without having a firsthand experience of them. Throughout the novel there is chaos, macabre, and destruction because there is lack of a will to communicate. Nobody wants to hear the other party out. They are stubborn in believing that they are right and thus the other is wrong. The three novels counter stereotypes about the scarf and the beard in different manners, albeit they all talk of a need to communicate and to question the paradigm of Muslims that is being set about them through journalist media (Ramzan & Khan, 2019; Nawaz et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2017). Aboulela, Hamid, and Pamuk show the beard and the scarf as a personal choice that does not have political implications (Ramzan & Javaid, 2023; Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021). They show the damage it can do if these simple attires are given political meaning. It is only through personal contact that one can judge the meaning of a beard, or of a scarf for a particular person. One should not generalize an image and create it as a representative of the whole community; one must realize that a community is formed by individuals.

The three novels discussed in the paper therefore present the counter-narrative for the Islamophobic representation of the religion and its followers by the Western journalism. While the anti-Islamic image presented by the media especially that of France, Denmark and USA propels the general Muslim population from denouncing or at least hiding their identity

of being devout or practicing Muslims, the narrative presented by Aboulela, Hamid and Pamuk provides a rebuttal through their portrayal of the “personal”, “political” and the “personal made political” perspectives and presents a balanced image of the Muslims for the benefit of the readers. In that, the selected fiction provides a safe haven per se for the Muslims to refer to and feel safe in their identities while the common narrative seeks to be partial against them. The fictional narratives are therefore not only important from a literary or academic perspective but also provide a broader context to the debate through their venture into the political and religious domains along with the mundane (Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021). This paper has analyzed how the counter-narrative is constructed through the themes and structure and its effects on the story line along with its importance with respect to the journalistic narrative. The debate however, warrants much study into the subject and further study may be carried out on the effects of this counter-narrative in the broader spectrum of the daily life in the non-fictional domain.

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