

Conflicting Images of Muslims in Post-9/11 American Literature

• Prof. Dr. Abdus Salam Khalis

ABSTRACT:

Since the advent of Islam, Muslims have never ceased to be important for the West and have been variously depicted in English literature from time to time. However, after the tragic incidents of 11th September, 2001, there has been a dramatic change in the world's focus on them, both in nature and in magnitude. Both as Ummah—the formal Arabic word for the global community of Muslims—and as individuals, they have suddenly found themselves among the protagonists of English literature in general, and that produced in the North American Continent in particular.

This paper aims at discussing the different images of Muslims and Islam in the English literature of North America, focusing on their nature, types, causes, consequences and the way they differ from the depiction of Muslims and Islam before the drastic disaster of nine-eleven. It also intends to contrast the literature authored by Muslim Americans about themselves with that written by non-Muslim Americans about them during the period in focus.

The literature of a people validly reflects the way they look at the world and the manner in which they use their language. It also signifies the endeavours of enlightened individuals to mould the hearts and minds of the multitudes in line with their own convictions. Even in today's age

• Dean, English Department, Islamia College University, Peshawar.

of media, the above-mentioned role of literature remains unaffected because, unlike media channels which prompt reflexive responses to reported events, literature generates deeper and more stable impacts in the form of lasting impressions. 'The literary works we read carefully will become a meaningful part of our lives, absorbed into our storehouse of knowledge and experience to become part of who we are, how we know and what we feel' (Yanni 1661). Hence, the vital role of literature in creating harmony and understanding, and likewise disharmony and misunderstanding as well, can never be over-emphasized.

Though the topic is quite encompassing and broad in range, we will rely on certain reflective instances of crucial significance as case studies for the comparative evaluation. *Moth Smoke* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, two popular novels by Mohsin Hamid, an American Muslim of Pakistani origin, published in 2001 and 2007 respectively, may be taken as an instance of the sharp change in the works of the same Muslim-American novelist before and after 2001. Similarly, Ralph Peter's two masterpieces, *The War in 2020*, published in 1991, and *The War After Armageddon*, published as late as 2009, both depicting Muslims as protagonists, may be discussed for contrast and comparison. Other significant works like the much debated novel by Mohja Kahf, an Arab American writer, *The Girl in Tangerine Scarf* (2006) depicting the dilemma of a settling young Muslim immigrant girl in Indiana (USA), and her satirical *She Carries Weapons; They are Called Words*, published in 2007—highlighting the lines of demarcation between contemporary Muslim women in the West and their non-Muslim counterparts—may also be occasionally referred to.

Both Mohsin Hamid and Ralph Peters present valid cases: both of them have authored significant and celebrated literary works before and after the collapse of New York's twin towers; they unequivocally represent the two cultures involved and both of them clearly register marked changes in their depiction of Muslims in the two phases of their literary career.

Hamid, an American citizen of Pakistani origin, is one of the most influential English novelists of the twenty-first century. His very first novel, *Moth Smoke*, proved an immediate success: a Billy Trask Award Winner, a PEN Hemingway Award Finalist, and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. We'll be frequently referring to it in our current discussion as a perspective, or for comparison and contrast; but it is Hamid's second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, on which we are going to focus. Prior to substantiating our arguments with instances from its text, let us mention a few facts highlighting the vital significance of the work for our current discussion.

- a. The author is a well established business executive, educated at Princeton and Harvard, trained and settled in the USA, but of purely Pakistani origin. Hence, he has acquired a first-hand knowledge of, and the requisite familiarity with, both the cultures in question, or at clash.
- b. He, like Changez, his spokesman protagonist in the novel, is a Muslim with highly liberal, rather libertine views about religion and most of the ethical norms and values which are generally identified and associated inherently with Islam, Muslims and the conservative East in general.

- c. He has, or at least once had, succeeded in making his entry into the American Elite class both as a business executive and a man of letters.
- d. Both his works, *Moth Smoke* in the background and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in focus, clearly reflect the immense change brought about by the events of 9/11 in his ways of perception, impression and expression.
- e. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has got an exceptional significance because it does not just discuss our point of discussion, but has rather got the tragic episode of 9/11 as its very central theme.

In *Moth Smoke*, the global clash of interests does play an instrumental role. Published in 2000 and set in 1998, the year Pakistan became a declared nuclear power, it impressively portrays the mental, psychological and emotional stresses among the Pakistani youth caused and generated by financial sanctions, economic instability and social and political chaos. But here we hardly find any conflict of cultures, ideologies and religions, either in the form of a West-East antagonism or as the oft-trumpeted clash of civilizations. Shezad, the hero, frustrated, wearied and disillusioned, turns to narcotics and pursuit of physical pleasures not primarily for satiating his urge and lust, but for escaping harsh social realities. In this novel, Hamid openly criticizes the Muslim dynasties of the sub-continent prior to the British occupation and satirizes the inherent shortcomings of his own society. The focal points are not even social conflicts, but rather the intra-human elements of conflicts within an individual.

But *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* of the same author speaks in a different tone, published in 2007 and set in the same year in a Pakistan hit to the full by the dire consequences of 9/11 and its aftermath.

“At a café table in Lahore, a bearded Pakistani man converses with an uneasy American stranger. As dusk deepens to night, he begins the tale that has brought them to this fateful encounter. Changez, is living an immigrant’s dream of America. At the top of his class at Princeton, he is snapped up by the elite valuation firm of Underwood Samson. He thrives on the energy of New York, and his budding romance with elegant, beautiful Erica promises entry into Manhattan society at the same exalted level once occupied by his own family back in Lahore.

But in the wake of September 11, Changez finds his position in his adopted city suddenly overturned and his relationship with Erica eclipsed by the reawakened ghosts of her past. And Changez’s own identity, is in seismic shift as well, unearthing allegiances more fundamental than money, power, and maybe even love.”¹

Changez, the narrator protagonist, is undoubtedly the author’s autobiographical spokesman and has striking similarities with Hamid’s own background, experiences and observations. Here are evidences from the text of how easily he ascended unabated in the ranks of competitive American society before 11th September 2001, by sheer virtue of his talent and diligence. We can see in the extract below how frankly he expressed himself in his ideal company of Americans:

“Later that evening, when we went out for dinner with the group, Erica chose the seat opposite mine. Chuck made all of us laugh

with a series of uncanny impersonations—my mannerisms were, in my opinion, somewhat exaggerated, but the others were spot on—and then he went round the table and asked each of us to reveal our dream for what we would most like to be. When my turn came, I said I hoped one day to be the dictator of an Islamic republic with nuclear capability; the others appeared shocked, and I was forced to explain that I had been joking. Erica alone smiled; she seemed to understand my sense of humour.” (RF, 2,29)

Similarly, he cordially rejoiced in the feeling of being venerated and appreciated on merit without any barriers or prejudices:

“My high estimation of Wainwright and my performance was confirmed when we trainees were divided into two groups of three for our drive to the annual summer party. One group, including Wainwright and me, rode in a limousine with Jim, the managing director who had hired us; the other group rode with Sherman, who, as a vice president, was more junior in the Underwood Samson pantheon. Since nothing at our firm happened by chance, we all knew this was a sign.” (RF 42)

And then, suddenly, occurred the mysterious and tragic happening which momentarily startled and thrilled the narrator, and then caused the inevitable change in the lives of American Muslims in general and those of Pakistani origin in particular. following extracts from different parts of the text show the tremendous upheaval, brought about by the tragedy of New York in his highly prospective state.

“The following evening was supposed to be our last in Manila. I was in my room, packing my things. I turned on the television

and saw what at first looked to be a film. But as I continued to watch, I realized that it was not fiction but news. I stared as one—and then the other—of the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Centre collapsed. And then I *smiled*. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased.” (RF 72)

The narrator might not have been aware at the time of unconscious rejoicing in Manila of how seriously and subjectively the Americans would interpret the event. But the years since then had taught him a lot. He had witnessed the crazy over-reaction and the preemptive aggression of the professed champions of human rights. Hence he could rightly predict what the obviously apolitical American felt in his heart, partly manifested in his forcibly controlled bodily impulses.

“Your disgust is evident; indeed, your large hand has, perhaps without your noticing, clenched into a fist. But please believe me when I tell you that I am no sociopath; I am not indifferent to the suffering of others. When I hear of an acquaintance who has been diagnosed with a serious illness, I feel—almost without fail—a sympathetic pain—a twinge in my kidneys strong enough to elicit a wince. . . . So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity.” (RF 72)

Then the narrator also shows his meticulous reading of the typical American mentality in justifying multiple standards. He affirms that it was natural in his listener to get feelings of embarrassment, displeasure and disgust because “It is hateful to hear another person gloat over one’s country’s misfortune” (Ibid 73). But then he reminds the American that

his nation has been more frequently the cause rather than the sufferer of such feelings and it is none else but the Americans who have been subjecting others to the pain of suffering and frustration by crushing their national integrity, individual self respect, and ruthlessly obliterating their invaluable assets. Then, without listening to his listener's unlikely response, he falsifies the stereotypical justification an American is generally expected to afford:

“But you are at war, you say? Yes, you have a point. I was not at war with America. Far from it: I was the product of an American university; I was earning a lucrative American salary; I was infatuated with an American woman. So why did part of me desire to see America harmed?” (RF 72-73)

The most pathetic part of the anticlimax is the difference he found on his arrival back in the land of his dreams. Though he couldn't believe it in the beginning and tried to blow the effect of the insulting interrogation in a casual smile, he had to ultimately realize that the world, at least America, was not as it was a few weeks back when he left for the Philippines

‘When we arrived, I was separated from my team at immigration. They joined the queue for American citizens; I joined the one for foreigners. The officer who inspected my passport was a solidly built woman with a pistol at her hip and a mastery of English inferior to mine; I attempted to disarm her with a smile. “What is the purpose of your trip to the United States?” she asked me. “I live here,” I replied. “That is not what I asked you, sir,” she said. “What is the *purpose* of your trip to the United States?” Our exchange continued in much this fashion for several minutes. In

the end I was dispatched for a secondary inspection in a room where I sat on a metal bench next to a tattooed man in handcuffs. My team did not wait for me; by the time I entered the customs hall they had already collected their suitcases and left. As a consequence, I rode to Manhattan that evening very much alone.’ (RF 74)

Ralph Peters can be taken as a valid and vital instance on the other side. As a retired high-ranking intelligence officer of U.S. armed forces and a thoroughly American gentleman, he stands not only for the American masses, but for those involved in making and executing strategic decisions. Though having war and military adventures as his seemingly all pervading themes, the underlying subject of almost all his fictional works is the global conflict between religions, cultures, civilizations and social set-ups in the modern world. Like those of Hamid, we have two contrasting texts in his case as well. These are his two futuristic novels: one, *The War in 2020*, published in 1991, just after the collapse of Soviet Union and the end of bipolar world and its cold war, while the other, *The War After Armageddon* published as late as 2009. Both of them present Muslims—at least their overwhelming majority—as military adventurers and a potential threat to the assumed world peace and order. But, notwithstanding this feeble thread of affinity, the diversity between the two, of course caused by the happenings of 9/11/ 2010, is more striking and substantive. In the first one he decries the so-called prospective fundamentalism in Islamic Orient, but primarily looks at things in a regional perspective. It won’t be pragmatic to expect artistic objectivity from a man like Peters, who ardently supported the US invasion of Iraq in 2003; the subjective tone,

however, is more impassive and less charged with prejudices. His depicted aggressors are not only non-Christian war mongers having imposed a War on the pre-dominantly Christian Europe; they comprise a regional alliance of followers of diverse religions, the Japanese and the Muslim armed forces.

The following summarizing comment from a Review of *The War in 2020* taken from *Publishers Weekly*² manifest the essence of the work.

America's Seventh Cavalry, armed with a surprise electronic weapon, rushes to the aid of the Soviet Union, overrun by a Japanese-supported Islamic army. "Although Peters risks offense with his portrayal of Muslims as bloodthirsty savages . . . his understated style effectively conveys the grim nature of soldiering in 'twilight wars,' "

Peters's latest futuristic war novel eerily has some of the same circumstances and certainly some similar "characters" as the war in the Persian Gulf, even though it is fiction. The war in this novel is being fought by an Islamic-Japanese axis, which has attacked a post-Gorbachev Soviet Union weakened by a devastating civil war. The fear of an Islam-dominated Oriental spirit has been haunting the American intelligentsia since long, moulding their biased Orientalism in peculiar ways, markedly different from the more tacitly tilted European Orientalism.

'Americans will not feel quite the same [as Europeans do] about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the far East (China and Japan mainly). Unlike the Americans, the French and the British—less so the

Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians and Swiss—have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. . . the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. . . . In contrast, the American understanding of the Orient will seem considerably less dense, although our recent Japanese, Korean and Indochinese adventures ought now to be creating a more sober, more realistic "Oriental" awareness. Moreover, the vastly expanded American political and economic role in the Near East (the Middle East) makes great claims on our understanding of that Orient." (Said p.1991)

The way Peters set the scene of his imagined war steadily affirms the above-mentioned notion: 'Enter the Americans on the side of the Soviets; enter, too, the larger-than-life heroic figure of Colonel George Taylor, who commands a computerized aerial strike force called the U.S. 7th Cavalry. It should be noted that by 2020 the "final" Mideast War has been fought and surviving Israelis have been resettled in "homelands located in the least promising area of the Far West."³ Though the destruction by Muslims of the presumably vulnerable and defenseless Israel and their partial rehabilitation by the humane West vividly manifest Peters's ideological and ecclesiastical biases, he has mostly succeeded in projecting the conflict to be predominantly political and military.

But when we come to Peter's latest novel, *The War After Armageddon*, his tone changes as remarkably as Hamid's, in the opposite direction. Here he not only finds Muslims capable and qualified alone to take the world to the verge of utter destruction, but also impatient to do so at the earliest. He also tries to segregate European Muslims from their Asian bulk among whom he doesn't see any section averse to bloodshed.

"It had been all madness. The Islamists hadn't had the numbers. The majority of their fellow Muslims in Europe wanted no part of the violence. But enough rose up to seal the fate of the rest. The Muslim rioting had been severe, with atrocities committed in the streets against any ethnic European on whom the radicals laid hands." "NATO dissolved amid the threats aimed at ending the butchery. Infected by the continental hysteria, the European Union— whose Islamic delegates had gone into hiding—voted overwhelmingly to expel Muslims from the continent. The United States demanded a monitoring role to ensure that the refugees were treated humanely. Of course, that was more than a year before the nuclear destruction of Israel and the terror attacks on Los Angeles and Las Vegas." (WAA: Part 1)

"It seemed to him (Harris) the world was going mad. His intel officer had just briefed a report that concluded that the top Islamist extremists in Europe had never expected their uprising to succeed. The whole purpose had been provocation, to deepen the split between Islam and the West, to make coexistence intolerable. They wanted all this to come to pass. Even Iraq and all that had come after had not prepared him for the irradiation of cities, the rabid slaughter of the innocent, and Europe's reverting to the continent's age-old habits— such as the German tendency to stuff unwanted minorities into boxcars. Of course,

the French were behaving worse, according to the daily updates. And of all people, the Italians had gone maddest. Maybe it was the destruction of the Sistine Chapel, but the dolce vita Italians had turned out to be militant Catholics, after all. They put down their espressos and killed with gusto.” (ibid)

Peter, though adding factual authenticity to fiction due to his personal military and intelligence background, is not an isolated voice. A particular class of American literary genius has since long been dreaming of the Middle East as the home for a decisive conflict between the Muslims who are projected as inherent aggressors, and the jointly offended ranks of Jews and Christians, essentially the poor victims of aggression, or the well-meaning rescuers of the oppressed.

“From a different perspective, the Middle East embodied a set of alluring economic and political meanings....These ideas of the Orient thus suggested narratives of conquest, empire building, and the heroic work of the civilizing mission. And in the wake of the panhellenism and anti-Ottoman feeling that swept Europe following Lord Byron’s martyrdom (1824) for Greek emancipation, the themes of liberation and restoration could also be folded into such narratives of heroic exertion.” (Bowers 120)

To wind up, gaps are immense and bridges are to be created. There is a wide discrepancy between the way Muslims in America find themselves and the community of Muslims worldwide and how other Americans perceive and project them. Even as members of the same larger nation and citizens of the same state, perceptions are so uncompromisingly diverse. Muslims see and depict themselves as misconceived, misunderstood, mistrusted and mistreated. On the other

hand, they are portrayed by others as inherently inclined to threaten, offend and aggress. Though this clashing segregation of opinion is harmful for the overall harmony and mutual understanding on global level, it is a more potential threat to the integration of a multiculturalist society. In bridges these gaps of understanding and bringing diverse communities together, literature can play more pivotal role than propaganda media or political debates. Literary authors may not be supposed to be impassively objective; they, however, need to be unprejudiced and capable of looking at humanity as a single entity.

(This paper was presented at International Conference on Multiculturalism and Diversity held at Halifax Canada 13-16 October 2010).

Notes:

A. RF stands for *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and WAA stands for *The War After Armageddon*

1. Publisher's introductory note on the inner cover of the novel.
2. An online review periodical accessible at www.publisherweekly.com
3. Note taken from Library Journal via www.Amazon.com
4. (WAA: Chapter One entitled OFF THE COAST OF THE FORMER STATE OF ISRAEL, NOW THE EMIRATE OF AL-QUDS AND DAMASKUS)