

Portrayal of Religious Identities in the contemporary Pakistani Fiction

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Abstract

Religion plays an important role in both individual and collective lives of people. However, the religious people can be divided into two major categories, i.e. people who practice a religion for making their lives as well as those of others peaceful; and those who use religion to materialize their vested interests. This article will briefly discuss the role of religious identities and the way religious identity has been portrayed in the contemporary Pakistani fiction. Omar Shahid Hamid's novel titled as "The Spinner's Tale" (2015) has been selected as a representative text of Pakistani fiction. It portrays different religious identities and the way they affect the society at large when a religious individual or group uses religious identity not to make peace with the inner-self or the universe, but to bring chaos (either knowingly or otherwise) by trying to gain benefits of trivial nature. With an aim of bringing one of the reasons behind the failure of an already falling apart world, this article is an effort to point out the way religious identity has been [mis-]represented in the selected contemporary work of fiction and to offer a practically possible solution to bring a halt to the way a religious identity is misused or misrepresented.

Keywords: Religion, fiction, society, identity, Islam, representation

Introduction

Religion plays a great role in human life. It is important in both collective and individual lives of people. Misrepresentation of religion cannot be denied as people have been practicing religion to achieve their ulterior motives. The current research article briefly discusses the role of religious identities and the way these identities have been portrayed in the selected contemporary Pakistani fiction. The selected work of fiction portrays different religious identities and some of the ways they affect the society at large. The overall aim of this article is to highlight that religious identities can be misused for the sake of the vested interest of an individual. The miniature world of the

selected fiction provides us with such examples to come forth with a realization as to how to bring a halt to the abuses/misuses of religious identities. To begin with, let's see how different people define religion in their own ways.

Few Definitions of Religion

A definition of the religion is as follows:

Religion may be defined as a cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements.¹

Clifford Geertz, a renowned anthropologist, defined religion as:

A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.²

Another definition of religion is:

Religions are shared collections of transcendental beliefs that have been passed on from believers to converts, that are held by adherents to be actively meaningful and serious and either based on (1) formally documented doctrine (organized religion) or (2) established cultural practices (folk religion).³

Keeping in view these definitions, one can presume that religion is a human phenomenon having several things to consider and, thus, making it difficult for researchers to come up with its hard and fast or 'agreed upon' definition. It becomes even difficult in the presence of a number of religions being practiced throughout the world. Nonetheless, it is vital in human culture and life that a great majority of human beings believe in various religions. Because of its utmost importance in human life, people tend to develop religious identities and try to shape not only their individual lives in accordance with religious norms, but also try to attract others to become part of the former's religious identities. As far as inviting people to a religion by trying to impress them by leading an exemplary life and, thus, giving them a free choice to choose a religion for themselves is concerned, there is no harm in it. But the problem arises when one tries to impose things on others and forces them to act the way one wants them to act. Therefore, from this very point of view religious identities are quite important in human life. The actual problems arise not from religion itself, as no religion teaches immoral practices or something that is against the Nature, but from the religious identities that people develop. These identities that create positive or negative impact on people and the way they act/ behave in the society. Here, it seems pertinent to ascertain as to what makes an identity a 'religious' one.

Meaning and role of Identity

Religious Identity Islam wants to give to people

Being a religion of peace and order in life, Islam encourages and maintains a unique religious identity. In order to get a clear idea of the kind of identity and identification it wants to give to its followers, it would be necessary to know some core teachings of Islam about it.

In a tradition of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), he defines a Muslim as the one from whom other fellows feel safe. It is not a trait of a Muslim to harm others in any form or by any means. So, this is the base of the Muslim religious Identity. The tradition of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) states that:

عن عبد الله بن عمرو بن العاص رضي الله عنهما عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: "المسلم من سلم المسلمون من لسانه، ويده، والمهاجر من هجر ما نهى الله عنه" ((متفق عليه))⁴

In another tradition the Holy Prophet (PBUH) said that:

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ يَقُولُ فِي خُطْبَتِهِ: أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، إِنَّ الْعَبْدَ لَا يَكْتَسِبُ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ حَتَّى يَسْلَمَ النَّاسُ مِنْ يَدِهِ وَ لِسَانِهِ، وَ لَا يَتَأَلَّ دَرَجَةَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ حَتَّى يَأْمَنَ أَحْوَهُ بِوَأْتِقَهُ وَ جَارُهُ بِوَادِرَهُ، وَ لَا يُعَدُّ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ حَتَّى يَدَعَّ مَالاً بَأْسَ بِهِ جَدَاراً عَمَّا بِهِ الْبَأْسُ. إِنَّهُ مَنْ خَافَ الْبَيَّاتُ أَذْلَجَ⁵...

The Messenger of Allah (S) said in one of his speeches: "O' People! Surely a servant will not be counted as one of the Muslims until other people are protected from his hand and his tongue; and he will never reach the stage of a true believer until his brother (in faith) is safe from his evil and annoyance, and his neighbour is protected and safe from his harshness and anger; and he will never reach the stage of being one with Taqwa (Allah conscious) until he keeps away from those erroneous actions which cause him to spiritually pollute himself. Surely the person who fears that he will remain asleep, keeps active and moves at night..."

Similarly, the five objectives of Islamic Shari'a are very important instructions to establish a Muslim's identity. They are as follows:

There are following five objectives and goals of Islamic shari'a.

مقاصد الشارع أو مقاصد الشريعة والمقاصد الشرعية كلها عبارات تستعمل بمعنى واحد، ويمكن حصر المراد منها بالآتي

- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|------------|----|
| 1. | To preserve religion | حفظ الدين | .1 |
| 2. | To preserve self | حفظ النفس | .2 |
| 3. | To preserve mind | حفظ العقل | .3 |
| 4. | To preserve race | حفظ النسل | .4 |
| 5. | To preserve wealth | وحفظ المال | .5 |

So, the above-quoted lines make it clear that Islamic Shari'a nothing but peace and only peace. This discussion can be extended to a great detail but has been kept brief and concise because of the limitation of the space.

Portrayal of Religious Identities in *The Spinner's Tale*

The Spinner's Tale (2015) is a novel written by Omar Shahid Hamid. It is the story of Sheikh Ahmed Uzair, a religious personality. The Sheikh belongs to a middle-class family and is the son of a CSP Officer. During the course of the novel, he is shown to study in The School, one of the country's the most prestigious schools. During his time at school in 1994, he had no religious affiliation. He is depicted as a cricketer who is badly in love with spin bowling. This makes him a buddy of another leg-spinner and classmate, Eddy Shah who becomes a source to develop his relationship with Sana, another of their classmates and one of the most spoken about girl at school.

After they graduate from the school, Eddy and Sana pursue their higher studies in America, but Ausi, who is latter known as Shiekh Uzair, fails to continue his study abroad. He gets admission in a medical college and there he joins a political party to finally end up as a dropout from the medical college. This becomes a turning point in his life and from political affiliation he develops religious affiliations. From the very beginning, the entire plot of the novel revolves around the religious identity of the Shiekh, his adventurous nature and the way his religious identity has been [mis-]used as a tool of exploitation and manipulation in the name of religion.

In the novel under discussion the religious identity of a Muslim has been presented in the following way.

On page 5 of the novel when a prisoner is being shifted to a police station at a lonely district, the policemen are given the impression that they are going to guard a "living ghost"⁶ The very first introduction of the religious Sheikh Uzair is given as "He is the one who tried to kill the president Twice". The next sentence of the novel gives an an even bleak description of the religious identity of the Sheikh: "Didn't he also murder that gori journalist a couple of years ago? The one who was pregnant? But I heard he had been killed in the Sher Maskid siege?"

Right from the outset, the religious people are portrayed as terrorists, savages, and ghosts. The between-the-lines message is that it is the religious people from whom we must parts our ways to safeguard ourselves. The word "ghost" itself is a negatively charged word that is used by the author in order to describe and portray the identity of a religious individual. It is in fact a matter of being on one side of the story, being a supporter or opponent of a particular ideology. The introduction of the Sheikh gives an impression as if all religious people are criminals, who do not believe in any kind of civility, morality, and code of conduct. They are shown as barbarians who never hesitate to kill even a pregnant woman. However, the novelist badly fails to tell what this pregnant white woman was doing in Waziristan and other tribal areas of Pakistan. He also fails to justify how come a pregnant woman enter Pakistan through the most difficult mountainous area of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and how can she carry her baby in her bally through the mountains of Waziristan where there are no smooth road to

travel nor any other life luxuries and facilities available to a foreign spy. So, all this seems to be part of fabricated truths being woven by the modern day media and it clearly gives the impression that the strategy of the modern media is to tell lies and to repeat them to an extent that they are accepted as truth.

The Sheikh in the novel is of very strong ranks among the Jihadees and he is considered to be "Second or third in importance after Osama"⁷. But, very sadly, the portrayal of his character is extremely negative and he is shown to be involved in the most hideous acts of barbarism in the name of Jihad and is shown to be part of activities which are strictly forbidden in Islam itself. There are Islamic teachings regarding Jihad/war, and no one is permitted to violate these rules under any circumstances whatsoever. For example, there are very clear teachings of Islam about not to harm trees, greenery, animals, children, women, and old people. So much so that Islam does not permit killing of non-violent subjects who are not participating in the war. Rather, Islam strictly orders to protect their lives and wealth. As a religion of peace, how can Islam permit the gruesome act of killing and beheading of a pregnant woman? But the second or third to Osama in importance is shown to commit the brutal killing and beheading of a pregnant woman. On page 11 of the novel it is stated that:

While the speaker raised his tone to an ever passionate crescendo as he exhorted true believers to join the Jihad the Crusader, the Sheikh raised his blade high above the woman's head, and as soon as the recital ended, he brought it down onto her neck in one smooth motion, severing the head cleanly from the body. Even his preaching colleague seemed to stumble from his text as the blood splattered onto his pristine white.....⁸

The charismatic personality of the Sheikh is described in the following words:

You see the Sheikh is a particularly charming fellow. He started preaching to his guards about how meaning less the comforts of this world were, and that their true calling was to work for God. He brainwashed them completely in a matter of weeks. It started with them growing their beards.....

This is very important portrayal of the identity of the Sheikh who is the symbol of religious identity in the novel. He is being shown as having supernatural capacity and charm to attract people towards his dogmas and teachings. People are depicted as to have no chance to stand his charms and being influenced and mesmerized. Furthermore, the novelist develops the point that people are innocent enough to fall a pray to his dark designs. On the one hand people are portrayed as mere simpletons; and on the other, because he is having an extraordinarily charismatic personality, the Sheikh has his spell spread all over the people around him. He is so strong and overwhelming in the implementation of his plans that it has become difficult,

rather impossible, for the governmental authorities to contain him within the limits. He has brainwashed the minds of simpleton security guards and policemen to an extent that they have now refused wearing their uniforms. These so-called no-thinking and non-intelligent security guards are so innocent to get convinced that the uniform they wear is a non-Islamic dress and, hence, not allowed to be used in Islam.

There are few things to note here. Firstly, the novelist is representing a picture of religious identity which, in its entirety, against the normal or true Muslim identity. It is to be noted that if an individual or group of people are doing something against the spirit of Islam and call themselves as Muslims (even Jihadees) are not true Muslims and have nothing to do with Islam. Secondly, if people get impressed and influenced by a prisoner and even the security guards and professional policemen have started following him, it is not told anywhere in the novel that the Sheikh is preaching some kind of truth which has its powers to attract people. He is rather portrayed as a person having a capability to brainwash others to make them act in certain ways. This has nothing to do with Islam, or any religion. More surprisingly, the next page of the novel explains this very point when inspector Shahab shares the information with ASP Abbasi about the prison guards. He tells him that "The prison guards weren't some green youths on their first job. They were men with fifteen or twenty years' experience, and they had been used to guarding high profile, gangrenous prisoner."⁹

The situation becomes even interesting when the religious identity of the Sheikh is further highlighted as "This man has no value for human life." This is in fact the biggest religious identity being portrayed in the novel. Religious people are portrayed as the ones who have no value for human life. It is something most terrible and lethal, in fact. On one hand, the hero is being portrayed as having a strong religious affiliation and having command on his group that acts upon his will and whims; on the other, his character is such that he has no value at all for human life. While a few pages back, his childhood is portrayed as having full charm of life and having high class values injected into him during his stay at The School. Even his old school teachers are shown to express their surprise over the way he has turned into a Jihadee and utterly barbaric. They also mention that this had happened only once in the history of The School and that The School was not a place responsible for such people.

Religious studies have been taken and treated so lightly that Mrs. Almeida told Mr. Abbasi that she had studied Islam and taught it for several years. This is even though she is member of a minority sect, but somehow someone came up with the idea that students will be better served if some bearded oaf taught the subject of Islamic studies to them. This indicates that the type of religious identity was being created and imparted by the upper class people and the authorities of The School. The proper person to teach the subject of religious studies is described as the 'bearded oaf'.

On page 117, Mustajab has been described as proper Mullah because he is a practical Muslim and is trying to follow teachings of Islam. Look at the word Mullah, the negative connotations attached with it clearly depict the impartial approach on part of the novelist. Instead of using positive words like practical Muslim or scholar of religious studies or any other appropriate word for that matter, the novelist chose to use a negatively charged language. Especially, when the Islamic literature and pamphlets are being distributed by the members of Islamic society is very negatively described as “garbage”. When the novelist’s approach is entirely one-sided, it becomes extremely difficult for him to portray original and true picture of the situation in spite of becoming part of a propaganda mission. This kind of description is exactly what propagandists do. There are several models of propaganda developed by a number of people. Among them Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman are the most widely read critics. According to their philosophy, there are several models of propaganda, e.g. ownership and money, sponsorship and advertisement, sourcing of information and expertise, the covering fire of flake and anti-communism and fear.

They opine that under the model of anti-communism and fear they initially created fear among the masses against the demon of communism taking roots in the United States of America. The assumption of getting taken over by the communism led them to control media, increase security and support military industries. After the fall of USSR, the next demon they found for them was first in Iraq and then in Afghanistan which they further expanded to the whole world. The demon they created this time was in shape of Islamist terrorism.^{10,11,12} A male dominated society is yet another form of representation of religious identity and is part of the big game against Islam. However, mistakes committed by present day Muslims at individual as well as group level cannot be denied. Yet, the way they are represented in literature and media reports is far from justice and reality. This is termed as ‘media bias’ by Noam Chomsky.

On page 262, the novelist has given a very ridiculous description of the religious fanatics and kidnappers. The writer satirizes Jihadees by calling them incapable of speaking English and declaring English as sign of progress, modernity, civilization as opposed to religious identity. This is very clear from the very line “As if being able to recite a few lines from Shakespeare is a character certificate on its own.”¹³ The religious people and the main character of the novel who are described to be able to kidnap people considering it as a religious activity/duty are, to the surprise of the person kidnapped and the reader, could speak perfect English and that too in the perfect pronunciation.

Impacts of the particular religious identities on the society

The religious identities portrayed in the novel affect the miniature society/world of the selected fiction. The way religious identity is depicted to be responsible of perpetrating uncountable crimes even for the sake of self-pleasure has terrorized even the closest blood relations of the Jihadee

characters. In the beginning of the novel, inspector Shahab warns ASP Abbasi against this and tell him that for the Sheikh everything is just a game. Acts of brutality and killing are not more than a game which he likes to play. On page 201 of the novel, father of the Sheikh, Mr. Uzair, advises ASP Abbasi to keep out of touch with him and to safeguard himself against the danger of being in contact with his son. He tells him that

*You have seen the condition of my family. My son has destroyed our past, our present and our future. I have nothing to say to him. I would warn you not to get too close to him either. He destroys everything he touches.*¹⁴

We can very clearly see the extremely negative effects of the religious identity of the Sheikh Uzair, as portrayed by the novelist, have had on the society. What else can be more devastating than a father loathing his own son and to such an extent that he advises a police officer not to be in any kind of contact with his son; otherwise, he could potentially destroy him too? And this destruction is evident from the ending of the novel when we see that SP Abbasi was killed by the same Sheikh and his followers. This gives a message to the reader that the Jihadees do not have any interest whatsoever in life and the only thing they care for is to destroy the world around them only for their personal satisfaction and enjoyment.

Any individual having a sound knowledge of religion and literature would disagree with the [mis-]representation of religious identities as portrayed in the novel. One cannot deny the fact that there are certain shortcomings among these people but portraying them in so negative a manner is also not just. One can disagree with their aim of life, their point of view, their strategies but Islam does not at all teach such brutality and barbaism. Fabrication of stories and [mis-]representing identities is, in fact, a crime and part of media war being launched against the religious people, especially Muslims. A difference of opinion and ways of thinking with them cannot be denied, however. But the way they have been projected does not justify the stance of their opponents either. The story of the news reporter and journalist Yvonne Ridley, who spent time in captivity of Taliban, can be quoted as an example in this regard. She tells the world about her experience in her book *In the Hands of the Taliban* that

*. . . while she was in captivity, she was treated with respect by the men of the Taliban and was, subsequently, amazed by their courtesy. All men that she came in contact with lowered their gazes (to her), which left her stunned. This code of conduct caused her to convert to Islam. She said that "the Quran makes it clear that women are equal in spirituality, worth, and education. What everyone forgets is that Islam is perfect; people are not."*¹⁵

Conclusion

Every religion has its own peculiar teachings and characteristics. Similarly, every religion has its own ideas about the individual and societies it

aims at developing. As a whole, religion has its influences upon its followers which are really strong in many ways. These influences cannot be denied and, as members of a society, we all notice the presence of these influences. However, despite these influences, we cannot limit a religion and its teachings to actions and performances of its followers. Sometimes, the followers act upon the religion in its true spirit, but consciously or otherwise violate its true spirit. It is perhaps the biggest, if not the only, cause of making us blame the religion instead of blaming the individual who commits any wrong.

To conclude, we find out that the novelist, in this case, has misrepresented religious identity of Muslims. The identities of certain characters presented in the selected fiction do not match with the true identity of Muslims as set by Islam. The individual acts of a few people must not be considered as those of Islam. We should make a clear demarcation between the true spirit of religion, in this case Islam, and the acts of the so-called Muslims, as these do not represent the true Islamic perspective. We must turn towards the core religious teachings in order to establish religious identity of people and must not look at what people are doing in their lives. This is because if they are acting upon the true teachings of a religion, their actions do establish a base for assertion of a particular religious identity. But, in many cases people act against the teachings of religion by under the banner of religion. One must be able to differentiate between things as they stand. There is no Christian or Muslim terrorism. Terrorism is terrorism, irrespective of who commits it, and no religion appreciates or promotes it.



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