

Islamophobia in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*: An Anatomy of Violence against Islam and Muslims

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Abstract

The incident of 9/11 significantly affected the west-east relations into obvious binary opposites of *us* and *them*. This situation has given rise to a new discourse called Islamophobia-causing Islam to be viewed as a source of intolerance and terrorism, one whose proponents are out to destroy Western values. The present study is aimed to trace out the impact of western Islamophobia in response to the incident of 9/11 on Islam and Muslims in Waldman's novel, *The Submission*. For the analysis of data, theoretical insights have been taken from Allen (2016). The textual analysis showed that the incident of 9/11 affected the collective unconsciousness of the Americans. They took this incident as a wound never to be recovered thus leading the American nation into the state of Islamophobia. The findings also indicate that the Muslims not only got a disadvantageous position in America as Muslim minorities-leading to the rise of Islamophobia- but suffered the processes of alienation and violence against them. America also lost her sense of civil rights against Muslims. Waldman in spite of being an American writer challenges the American stance against Muslims and asserts the re-examination of the American sense of community cohesion and integration policies for Muslims.

Keywords: Western Islamophobia, Islam, Muslim, Violence, American Collective Unconsciousness

Introduction

The movement of Islamism in the West arose in the later part of the twentieth century as an effort to generate and implement Islam as a comprehensive political, economic and social order. Such intentional upraise of Islam in the West was essentially a response in opposition to Western accelerated momentum towards secularism¹. These combating binaries resulted in conflicts and clashes between the West and the Muslims. Western intelligentsia perceived Islam as a threat against the West and visualized it as a situation of Islamophobia through dominant forms of discourse. The term Islamophobia for the first time gained importance in Britain in 1997 with the publication of a report entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*. The report was issued by the Runnymede Trust, a think tank specializing in ethnic and racial diversity issues². Islamophobia is generally presumed as a widespread fear of Islam and Muslims. As a social and political problem, Islamophobia is typically linked with constructed fear of America and Europe against Islam. However, such feelings of overwhelming fear are well developed in countries like India, China, and some African states where Muslim minorities exist, and even in Muslim-majority countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon.³ The term Islamophobia can judiciously be applied to any social and political settings where people

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¹Todd H. Green: *An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*:(2015 Fortress Press).

²Shryock, *Islam as an Object of Fear and Affection, edited Islamophobia / Islamophilia Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,2010).

³ibid

are afraid of the supremacy of Muslims, hate the Muslims and Islam.⁴The incident of 9/11 has proved itself such a great historical rupture which aggravated the sense of Islamophobia particularly in Western minds and generally in the masses across the world. This world keeps on changing daily but how it changed since 9/11 is unprecedented. This historical day wounded the American consciousness on one hand, and affected the Muslims and Islam on the other. After this incident, the Americans started suspecting the loyalties of American Muslim citizens. The worst verbal and physical atrocities have been practiced against Islam and Muslims. So, along with the existing categories of “west vs. rest”, “Us vs. them” another category of victimhood aroused. Such category is named as “Us vs Terrorist”. This category brought forth the formation and evolution of Neo Orientalism at the discourse level.⁵The Neo-orientalists are of the view that many Muslims actually are Islamic fundamentalists. Such Muslims have been named as the practicing Muslims.⁶They further argue that these Muslim fundamentalists have had conflicting ideology with modern secular Western democratic values and culture. Different novels have been written after the September 11 attacks which are related explicitly or implicitly to the effect of the incident of 9/11 on the changing view of the people toward Islam and Muslims.

According to Scanlan, after 9/11 a public terror for Muslims and Islam was created in the west by revolutionaries that involved the literary writers, press and politicians. A terrorized image of Islam was not only presented in T.V dramas and popular culture but also by the post 9/11 novels written by some well-known American authors including Don De Lillo, John Updike and Sherman Alexie. Ghazali (2008) highlighted the state of political statements given by some military and civil leaders of America after 9/11⁷. These statements enhanced the public outrage towards Muslims and Islam in American society.

In a comparative study Awan has explored the stereotyping and misrepresentation of Islam in the novels: Updike’s ‘Terrorist’ and Hamid’s ‘Reluctant Fundamentalist’. The findings indicate that in Updike’s ‘Terrorist’ Islam is portrayed as a religion promoting extremism, furthermore the excessive quotations from Holy Qur’an makes this novel a religious propaganda not a work of art. On the other hand, Hamid’s ‘Reluctant Fundamentalist’ is an attempt to reverse this negative image of Islam depicted as ‘Terrorist’⁸.

Raihanah has analyzed the works of women writers from the perspective of Islamophobia in the context of 9/11 attacks. The corpus for this study consists of ‘*Rebounding*’ by Jamilah Kolocotronis, *Memoir Love in a Headscarf* by Shelina Zahra Jan Moamed and *The Size of a Mustard Seed* by Juwayriyah. These novelists in their works highlight that Muslim men and women, particularly veiled women are the victims of double oppression in the context of 9/11 attacks. The characters in the novels suffer imprisonment, accusations, and humiliation in the backdrop of rising hostility towards

⁴ibid

⁵ *World Scientific News* 86(3) (2017), pp.226-241

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Margret Scanlan, “Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 46, no. 3-4 (2010), pp.266-278

⁸ Muhammad Safeer Awan, "Global Terror and the Rise of Xenophobia/Islamophobia: An Analysis of American Cultural Production since September 11." *Islamic Studies* (2010), pp.521-537

Islam⁹. However, these characters respond in a rational way to this difficult situation and give a message that Islam is a religion of love, peace and harmony. In all these contexts, the acts of violence against Muslims, and legislation against some traditions of Islamic practice, can be interpreted as racist, secularist, or nationalist. Such discriminatory practices result from intolerant and prejudicial attitudes. The present study is an attempt to examine how the Western Islamophobia proved anatomy of violence and discrimination against Muslims in public spheres and points of social contacts in Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission*, towards different cultures reinforcing social exclusion and alienation.

Theoretical Formulation:

Allen in his book *Islamophobia* has provided a threefold conceptualization of Islamophobia. The first one is the ideology that reports and outlines the meaning of Islam and Muslims in different social settings. The second one is the collection of different types of social processes encompassing diverse strategies through which ideological meaning is disseminated and continued. While the third one, includes a long series of socially exclusionary practices.¹⁰

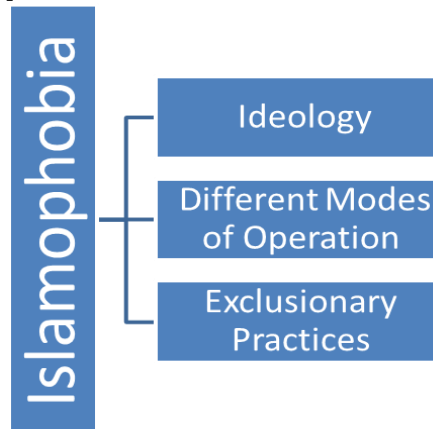


Fig 1. Adapted from Christopher Allen (2016) Conceptualization of Islamophobia.

From this conceptualization of Islamophobia, a new definition has been theorized. Islamophobia is an ideology which is similar in theory and purpose to racism and other such phenomena that supports negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting. Subsequently, it has influenced upon social action, interaction, and so on shaping and determining understanding, perceptions and attitudes in the social consensus – the shared languages and conceptual maps – that inform and construct thinking about Muslims and Islam as Other.

It is not limited to overt and direct relationships of power and domination but to the less overt and everyday relationships of power that we come across in our daily lives,

⁹ Raihanah, M. M., "Islamophobia and Muslim Minorities in post 9/11 Women's Fiction." *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1(2015), pp.108-117

¹⁰ Allan Chris, *Islamophobia*. Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited, pp.86-87

identified both in that which is real and that which is clearly not, both of which can be extremely difficult to differentiate between¹¹.

As a result of these exclusionary practices i.e. the disadvantageous position of Muslims, prejudice against Muslims and Islam in political, economic and social spheres and the Muslims as subject of violence – are quite obvious.

Through Islamophobia as an ideology, processes of essentialism, exclusion, distribution, and intentionality amongst others are essential basics to either understanding and explaining is affecting the lives and everyday experiences of Muslims in western social spheres.

Allen contends that from this new premise, Islamophobia is no longer restricted to defining it in terms of highly questionable and sometimes unreasonable and baseless hostilities and widely interpretable misconceptions, both of which remain relevant and important but not as pre-requisites for definition or identification. Islamophobia should now be conceptualized the ways in which Islam is perceived, conceived and subsequently referred as a religion of terrorist community. Islamophobia can now be concerned with every means of thought, deed and action that relates to Muslims or Islam, whether it is a fact or fiction. Islamophobia contextualizes Muslims and Islam as marginalized on the fringes of society because of a lack of understanding, whether contextualized socially, politically or economically. Islamophobia is that which contemporarily informs and provides meaning about Muslims and Islam whether through operation, dissemination, reception or perpetuation. Islamophobia therefore does not necessarily always manifest itself in high level acts of violence and retaliation but more so in the thinking and meaning that are inherent within the less explicit and everyday relationships of power that we come across in our daily lives¹². Islamophobia therefore is most definitely not a phobia, but instead a name of such social relations which perpetuate and sustain such meanings as are appropriate to the marginalized position of Muslims in the western contexts.

Analysis

I. Islamophobia: An Apparatus of Violence on Ideological Level

The Submission written by Waldman¹³ is a fictional narrative that sets out what happens when a jury in charge of selecting a 9/11 memorial for Ground Zero chooses, from among the many anonymous submissions, a design titled “The Garden” that turns out to have been made by Muhammad Khan, a Muslim-American architect. When the jury members learn that the person chosen by them is a Muslim, an endless conversation starts about Islam and Muslims. The Muslim name of Mohammad alone is the reason for the jury to make a direct link between him and the terrorists of 9/11. The prejudiced reaction of the jury soon became quite evident. Bob Wilner, the governor’s representative exclaimed, “Jesus fucking Christ! It’s a goddamn Muslim!”¹⁴ He contends, “It’s Maya Lin all over again. But worse”¹⁵. Maya Lin was a renowned Chinese-American architect who too had been drawn into controversy over her design being selected for the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, with doubts being cast over her Asian roots and the dark, “nihilistic” appearance of her memorial. When Leo, the retired University President on the jury, tries to argue that it could be a healing gesture, Wilner reminds him that the

¹¹ Ibid.p.162

¹² Ibid. p.187

¹³ Amy Waldman, *The Submission* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

¹⁴ Ibid. p.19

¹⁵ Ibid. p.20

families of the 9/11 victims would detest it and that "this is no time for multicultural pandering". Other judges supported him, "Is he even American?", or is he "one of the problematic ones"¹⁶

These ridiculous accusations and crude language clearly show the Islamophobia of the Americans. Throughout the novel, the fear of the unknown in general and of the Islam in particular, could be strongly felt. The ignorance and racism displayed by most Americans upon learning that Mohammad's identity was that of a Muslim-American is quite obvious at a number of places in the story.

When the media received the news that a Muslim had won the contest, they began creating false stories. The New York Times highlights the Islamic influences of the 'Garden' and starts to brand Mohammad's Garden as a "martyr's paradise". Soon he starts getting threats and protesters and media begin patrolling outside his apartment¹⁷. Spier writes polarizing articles about Islam, and persistently manipulates information about Mohammad to stereotype him as a dangerous Muslim, a threat to the nation. Claire's suspicions deepen too as she meets with the journalist Spier, who provides her false information that Mohammad would have made a threat against the American embassy when visiting Kabul. After that meeting, Claire cannot let go of her doubts anymore, and she starts retracting her support for Mohammad's design. The situation evolves to an impasse, where Claire wants Mohammad to reassure her that there is nothing ominous behind his design, but he refuses to answer because the only reason everyone is asking these questions and making accusations is that he is a Muslim.

II. Islamophobia: An Apparatus of Violence on Different Modes of Operation

Identifying Mohammad Khan as a "political foe," Spier places him "outside of what is properly inside America."¹⁸ However, she is unable to confirm this claim, when she visits his business partner and friend Thomas Kroll to uncover "Khan's backstabbing, his compromising of this all-American family," but finds out she only "prompts Kroll to rally to Khan's defense"¹⁹. With no material here for her story, the incident highlights her biased reporting. As a Muslim, submission clearly does not align with nationalist "woundedness". Khan is placed outside of what is considered truly American. He is excluded from this category of victims because, as a Muslim, he is "more similar to terrorists than to Americans".²⁰ Spier's allegation that Mohammad Khan "offended so many Americans" by "entering the competition and insisting on [his] right to win"²¹ exemplifies this. Khan responded, "I am an American, too...I have the same rights as every other American"²². Subsequently, the main problem Khan faces throughout the novel is not just the initial connection between himself and the terrorists, but having to "explain himself"; to overtly convince his fellow citizens of his good intentions and innocence, and being condemned by society at large at his refusal to do so. Declining to cooperate with a lawyer's strategy to "humanize [him]. No, Americanize [him]"²³. Khan

¹⁶ Ibid. p.21

¹⁷ Ibid. p.149

¹⁸ Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*, (Duke UP, 2014).

¹⁹ Amy Waldman, *The Submission* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

²⁰ Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*.

²¹ Waldman, p.334

²² Ibid. p.335

²³ Ibid. p.267

thus refuses to “explicitly profess [his] intense love of the nation, demonstrate how [he] share[s] in its woundedness,” to “repetitively engage in exaggerated performances of patriotism”.²⁴ Furthermore, Khan’s own suffering, or “the strain, which had built by the week, then the day, now seemed to intensify by the hour”²⁵, is not regarded as suffering. The pain and humiliation Khan endures as a result of his scrutiny by melodramatic political discourse, is regarded as inferior to the suffering that he, as the villain, causes the victims. This is due to a development of exclusivism in the 9/11 political discourse, in which suffering is “legible only if it is effected by the 9/11 attacks, only if one is wounded by one’s role as a victim of terrorism, only if suffering can be redressed by ‘punishment’ of the evildoers through the war on terror”. As Khan’s suffering is not directly caused by terror, he is unable to participate in the victimization “that defines nationhood”²⁶. This prejudiced attitude is prevalent throughout the novel, which thus lays bare the problematic development of exclusivism or selective inclusivism in American culture. Rubin echoes this development when he “wonders what the families would have to say about their precious democratic process now [A Muslim has won]”²⁷. In other words, democracy and equality are just delusions. If the result does not suit the families they can easily be convinced to alter the rules, and thus abandon the democratic beliefs which they uphold so ardently. This is quite evident in Sean’s understanding of democracy as Rubin points out: “you wanted a competition, a democratic exercise everyone could participate in. And so everyone did,” Sean replies: “that’s not who we meant by everyone”. The cultivation of exclusivism can also be recognized in Claire’s change of heart. As the story gradually unfolds, and the orgy of feeling accumulates, Claire’s strong support of Mohammad’s design begins to decline. Her initial reaction—“So you propose we squash it, when the majority of us believed it to be the best design? That’s a total betrayal of what this country means, what it stands for” — is in contrast with her request for withdrawal at the end of the novel: “we do not want to take anything from Mr. Khan. We simply think a memorial other than the Garden would be better for the families of the dead, for the country”.

III. Islamophobia: An Apparatus of Exclusionary Practices:

Ironically, that what the people claim they are against, which is terrorism; they act upon it towards the Muslims themselves, using violence against violence. They believe it is part of American patriotism, to protect it against the evil of Islam that wants to take over the West. It is as Claire’s former lover Jack had stated: “The attack made everyone afraid of appearing unpatriotic, of questioning government, leaders. Fear has justified war, torture, secrecy, all kinds of violations of rights and liberties.”²⁸ The problem, furthermore, lies not only with the Islamophobia groups of people, as the American Muslims themselves believe that Mohammed Khan is “an instigator of further hostility”, and that because of him, they are now being referred to as “the enemy”. Therefore, they ask him to withdraw from the competition.²⁹

²⁴ Ibid. p.58

²⁵ Ibid. p.266

²⁶ Ibid. p.26

²⁷ Ibid. p.24

²⁸ Ibid. p.121

²⁹ Amir Khadem, *Paucity of imagination: Stereotypes, public debates, and the limits of ideology in Amy Waldman’s The Submission*, in *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film and Television*, ed. Paul Petrovic, (2015), pp.67-78

"With what you've unleashed, with the position you've put us in. Before you came along, it would have been shocking, unacceptable to refer to us as the enemy. Now it's no big deal."

"That's not my fault," Mo said. "He wished his father weren't listening."

"You've made your point. You won. You can withdraw now."³⁰

Close to the end of the novel, Claire and Mohammad once again try to resolve the situation. Claire asks if the Garden is a martyr's paradise and Mo still refuses to answer. When Claire tries to explain to Mohammad that it is not about him but his religion, Mohammad has had enough and says: "How would you feel if I justified what happened to your husband by saying it wasn't about him but about his nationality—his country's policies—damn shame he got caught up in it, that's all—but you know, he got what he deserved because he paid taxes to the American government. I get what I deserve because I happen to share a religion with a few crazies?" In his comment, Mohammad brings up the problem of generalization by saying that equating him with the terrorists just because they share a religion is as absurd as saying victims bore responsibility for their fate because of their government's actions. Claire, however, hears it in a different way: Claire went out. "Damn shame". What he deserved.' The words seemed to strike the fragile bones of her ear, even as she wasn't exactly sure what he had said: she had been thinking and listening at the same time, which made it hard to hear. But this, at last, had to be what he really thought. It pained her, sickened her, to think that perhaps vile Alyssa Spier was right, that Khan did see Cal as mere collateral damage in a war America had brought on itself, that he believed Cal, generous, good-natured Cal, bore responsibility, guilt, simply because he was American."³¹ The mention of her husband upsets Claire so deeply that she does not care anymore what Mo is actually saying. The fact that Mo drops the 9/11 victims from the pedestal where they have been put, and where Claire clearly puts her husband, drives her into a blind rage. The scene reflects the conversation that has been developing throughout the novel where the families of the 9/11 victims, and the public in general, refuse to listen to rational arguments because they feel these arguments are insulting the sacred memory of the victims and the 9/11 attacks themselves.

Allen notes that Islamophobia is not a new concept which emerged since 9/11 but it has been prevailing in America prior to the incident of 9/11. However 9/11 aggravated Islamophobia and subsequently Muslims became discriminated victims of both verbal and physical attacks³². Moreover, in some cases the expressions of Islamophobia have undoubtedly been a 'cover' for general racism and xenophobia. There have also been some examples in which these expressions had been selective targets against differently perceived indexes of Islam particularly in American context. However, generally anti-Muslim sentiment has emerged from a number of sources and taken on a range of manifestations building upon premises that were already pre-existent to the events of September 11. The representation of Muslims, their 'otherization' 'racialization' and 'securitization' primarily focuses on the male; women are reduced to a physical embodiment of the quintessential 'victim'³³

³⁰ Waldman, *The Submission*, p.195

³¹ Ibid. p.348

³² Allan, *Islamophobia*, p.125

³³ Stuart Croft *Securitizing Islam Identity and the Search for Security*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

In the novel *The Submission*, Muhammad Khan is questioned at every point of social contact. He had been residing in America since his birth. What more can be the license of his citizenship? But as he had a Muslim name- Muhammad Khan- security men wish if he were not an America born. On his assurance that he was born in America and is an American citizen, they pose a question to validate his love for this country- America. When he guarantees that he loves this country as they do, they question his thoughts on jihad.

"They asked about his travels in the past few months; asked where he was born. "Virginia. Which is in America. Which means I'm a citizen."

"Didn't say you weren't." Pinball popped his gum.

"Do you love this country, Mohammad?"

"As much as you do." The answer appeared to displease them.

"What are your thoughts on jihad?"

"I don't have any."³⁴

The dominant American ideology has been formulated by media and fundamentalist racist American in response to 9/11. Islam has been considered a religion that promotes violence. Practicing Muslim has been presented as one who believes in blowing oneself is the sole gateway towards heaven. Furthermore, Americans are of the view that any Muslim, who has visited Afghanistan, is a Mujahid and practicing Muslim. The Americans' post 9/11 reaction treated the Muslim communities as those who are perceived as 'self-separated', not just by culture but by religion too, a political religion, with its own system of laws and rules of social conduct and sanctify oppressions – a fundamentalist religion of the Book – stuck in the Middle Ages, untouched by time or place – forever waging jihad against the unbelievers.³⁵

"Well, perhaps you could tell us what it means. My colleague here isn't good with the foreign languages."

"I don't know what it means. I've never had cause to use the word."

"Aren't you a practicing Muslim?"

"Practicing? No."

"No?"

"Yes."

"Yes? Yes or no? You're confusing me."

The situation of securitization against the Muslims was a direct result of the incident of 9/11. This securitization led to the increased suspicion and discrimination of the Muslim community in the form of Islamophobia, resulting in direct and indirect physical and verbal assaults, where Muslims have constantly proved their innocence, against a wider socio-political discourse that labels them as would-be terrorists.³⁶

"Know any Muslims who want to do harm to America?"

"None. I don't know any Communists, either."

"We didn't ask about Communists. Do you believe you'd go to your heaven if you blew yourself up?"

"I would never blow myself up."

³⁴ Waldman, *the Submission*. p.25

³⁵ Liz, Fekete. *A Suitable Enemy Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe*, (Pluto Press: 2009).

³⁶ Tania Saeed, *Islamophobia and Securitization Religion, Ethnicity and the Female Voice*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

"But if you did . . ."
Mo didn't answer.
"Been to Afghanistan?"
"Why would I go there?"³⁷

We see that an American considers that those who have any association with Afghanistan and are Muslims are undoubtedly terrorists. This shows the collective wounded situation of the American masses. As America is a capitalist oriented country, the worst enemy of America has been communists and socialism from Russia. We see that since the incident of 9/11 America has lost its worst enemy-Russia. Islam and Muslims have been raised to the status of worst enemy after socialism. Consequently, Islam and Muslims is the easiest social target of American racism and violence.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Waldman has suggested that it's the moment for Americans to focus on the Civil Rights rather to focus on the stupefied and intensified constructs of Islamophobia. Americans at large are still measuring the loyalties of its citizens by their names. If an American citizen is by the Muslim name, he is charged as a terrorist or a facilitator of terrorism. Consequently, such citizens are treated as enemies of America. The character of Claire in the novel *The Submission* is the mouth piece of Waldman's stance against Islamophobia. She suggests that "the names are a record, not a gesture." Furthermore, we see that American society has failed to integrate the Muslims in it as a homogenous society. So, American society in response to Islamophobia has shifted from the pluralist multicultural society to a very conservative racist monolithic one. From such form of society only the violence can be expected against targeted community. In the novel *The Submission* such targeted community is Muslim.

Muslims has been seen struggling to 'normalize' their presence in western communities to counter the hatred and insecurity that results from sensationalist accounts of their identity in media or political rhetoric. It has been shown through the character of Mohammad that Muslims are not always "passive victims of discrimination and securitization". At times they have also been resisting the dominant stereotype about their identities as potential terrorists, by simply resisting through dialogue. With regard to Islamophobia, Islam has been represented in the novel *The Submission* as monolithic and static, a religion of stranded and separated entities. Waldman through the character of Claire challenges the dominant American and western inherent ideological construction of Islam and Muslims as inferior and Western, and Christians as superior and civilized.

³⁷ Waldman, *the Submission*. pp.26-27