Interrogating The Narrative Of Terrorism And Islamophobia: A Study Of Leila Aboulela's The Kindness Of Enemies

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Abstract

The paper aims to study and analyse how jihad is systematically assimilated with terror and how the misrepresentation and stereotyping affects Muslims and Arabs, specifically after the 9/11 attacks. In today's globalized world, it becomes crucial to deal with religious and cultural differences and accept these differences to eradicate hate, fear, and racism and live in harmony. Recently, we have seen a rise in acts of terror in the name of jihad, and Muslims worldwide face backlash as the world is becoming more islamophobic than ever before. Hence, it is imperative to highlight and address the difficulties encountered by Muslims and migrants in the western world because of their origins or religion. The novel in question switches between contemporary and historical subplots and is examined by giving prominence to the historical and contextual frame presented. The tale of Imam Shamil helps the reader understand the significance of beliefs in warfare and takes the reader to the times when jihad advocated glory, prestige, and faith. Through this research, an endeavour is made to search into the fundamental beliefs of jihad at that time. However, the contemporary plot sheds light on the contrast between the two periods of time and foreshadows the similarities and differences between the two periods. The research work aims to compare and contrast the ideological stance jihad conveys in a post 9/11 world with its historical meaning as portrayed by Leila Aboulela in the novel The Kindness of Enemies.

Keywords: Alienation, Terrorism, Jihad, Migration, Islamophobia, War, stereotyping.

Introduction

The terms, Jihadism, Islamism, and Terrorism are used interchangeably by many people, and for such people, Islam connotes very negative or horrific things that show a significant issue of how Islam is viewed by the world today. The systematic association of Jihad and Terrorism clubs Muslims and Terrorists together, which leaves the Muslim community frustrated(Ourid & Wissem, 2020). Broadly speaking Terrorism is the deliberate use of violence to obtain political aims(Fortna, 2015). It is:

> the calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective. Terrorism has been practiced by political organizations with both rightist and leftist objectives, by nationalist and religious groups, revolutionaries, and state institutions such as armies, intelligence services, and police. Definitions of Terrorism are usually complex and controversial, and because of the inherent ferocity and violence of Terrorism, the term in its widespread usage has developed an intense stigma. It was first coined in the 1790s to refer to the terror used during the French Revolution by the revolutionaries against their opponent(Jenkings, n.d.)

Contemporary international relations are beset with the phenomenon of "international terrorism," popularly believed to be connected

closely with the Islamic idea of jihad – holy war(Booth & Dunne, 2002). International and state security are globally concerned with this phenomenon which has led to a reshaping and reframing of relations on a global, regional as well as inter-state level surrounding policies regarding international Terrorism. As a result of the manifold terror activities carried out worldwide allegedly in the name of jihad during the past few years by civilian Islamic groups such as Al-Qaeda, the concept has intensely acquired a particularistic identity with Islam. A common belief, at least in the West was procreated because of the identical connection between international Terrorism and Islam, that anything Islamic deems to have a terrorist or violent connection. These groups often authenticate their acts of terror by the Islamic concept of jihad which aggravates the situation even more. As such, the concept of jihad, commonly misunderstood, is now directly equated with Terrorism(Bostom, 2008; Cook, 2015 ; Gerges, 2005; Phares, 2006). The western media has played a significant role in reinforcing this misconception or view that Muslims and Terrorism are linked. Allie Kirchner points out that "By focusing on the narrow concept of jihad used by terrorists, the U.S. media has inadvertently reinforced the link between terrorism and Islam within the American consciousness"(Kirchner, 2010).

Entertainment media consistently represents Arabs as a brutal enemy. Arabs are portrayed as repressive, corrupt, violent, and extreme in entertainment media. Arabs are mostly shown as enemies of the West, intending to destroy the American way of life. Shaheen finds Arabs are frequently portrayed as "bad guys" and rarely shown as heroes(Shaheen, 2003). Christensen (2006) opines that at least partly, the distorted and imbalanced media coverage has resulted in the spread of Islamophobia in the West. He argues that because the minds of the public associate journalism with fairness and objectivity, news is mostly seen as "serious" and "truthful". He says that irrespective of the nature of the story, the western media has a tendency to show a minaret, a mosque or a woman in veil, in spite of the fact that the story is about Terrorism. "The combination of stereotypical images adds up to a whole that is, in many ways, greater than the sum of its parts"(Christensen, 2006). Said (2008) argues that latent interests and a support structure of politics has always been influential to Islam's image in the U.S. media and is consequently heavy "not only with patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility". The image he says is typical of engaging "highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility". Being a Christian American scholar himself, Said (2008) remarks that, "Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot be said in a mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians". The state of affairs before 9/11 was this and after the criminal attacks things turned really worse. In spite of the fact that the attacks drew condemnation from all Arab countries, by and large, voices in the media nonetheless were unsuccessful to make a distinction between the Muslims and the Arabs on one side and the terrorists on the other. As reported by Pintak (2006), Eric Rouleau picks on this tendency to portray pictures of "Muslims praying, mosques or women in chadors to illustrate stories about extremism and terror". Further, after 9/11 according to Pintak, "the U.S. media immediately fell back on the prevailing—and stereotyped—narrative about Arabs and Muslims and reverted to its historical tendency to present the world, in Henry Kissinger's words, as a morality play between good and evil". According to Chomsky (2001), the U.S. mainstream media should not be underestimated as it has the capacity "to drive people to irrational, murderous and Suicidal behaviour" through its "well-run propaganda systems". He impelled the citizens to refrain from reacting to the crimes of terror with directing more terror

against innocent Muslims but said it was not all unexpected to see the media's attitude "hysterical" in such circumstances.

The stereotype of the religion of Islam as extreme, that necessitates Terrorism and jihad is one of the most discussed topics. Muslims living overseas are mainly affected by this one-sided and faulty opinion of the religion of Islam, and some Diasporic Muslim writers took a self-protective stance to present the actual picture of Islam's significance of jihad. In a podcast with the Arab Weekly Leila Aboulela, said, "I was interested in him (Shamil) fighting jihad from a Sufi aspect. This kind of jihad is different from what we see practiced by ISIS and al-Qaeda"(El-Zobaidi, 2016).

In the history of Islam, the practice as well as the notion of jihad have been extremely important. The word jihad is etymologically derived from the Arabic, 'Jaahada'; furnished an effort, which literally means worked passionately. "Jihad is an Arabic word that means striving or struggling, especially with a praiseworthy aim" (Mohammad, 1985). Jihad is at times called as the Sixth Pillar of Islam. Jihad has held a pivotal function in Islam from the very beginning of Islam and the birth and expansion of the Muslim community. Religious texts across history, as in other faiths has been interpreted and misinterpreted, used and abused, to justify extremism and terrorism, holy and unholy wars, liberation and resistance struggles. Islam has a primary argument which is the Qur'an, in which the values of peace, compassion, and dignity are taught. Jihad is understood today by the Westerners as having a single meaning; however, in Islamic teaching, it conveys pacifist principles. The war which the terrorists present as jihad in the name of Allah does not fit today's historical context. The notion of jihad can be seen from the linguistic and theological point of view, as the denotation of jihad in sharia is based on the Qur'an. The significance of jihad stems from the Quran's directive to strive in the way of God, following in the steps of the last Prophet and his early Companions. In its most general meaning,

"jihad refers to the obligation incumbent on all Muslims, individuals and the community, to follow and realize God's will: to lead a virtuous life and to extend the Islamic community through preaching, education, example, writing, etc. Jihad also includes the right, indeed the obligation, to defend Islam and the community from aggression"(Esposito, 2002). A renowned Prophetic saying differentiates between the non-violent and violent meanings of jihad. It is reported that, Muhammad told his followers after returning from a battle that, "We return from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad." The fight against one's self, selfishness, desire, evil, greed and wickedness is more hard and more significant and is therefore called as the greater Jihad. Muslims all through the history have gathered in order to defend Islam by the call to jihad.

In the novel, The Kindness of Enemies, the author introduces historicity to highlight the current circumstances and distinguish between today's Islamist extremist organizations and the peaceful spiritual significance of jihad. She praises Jihadism as an inner quest, exemplified by the protagonist Sheikh Shamil, a respectable icon who contended the opponent's attacks in the Caucasian War in the 19th century and used jihad as a means to defend his homeland. Therefore, Imam, as a jihadist, engaged only for reasons of defence so that his people could live peacefully and practice their religion freely without being oppressed. According to Bastianello (2013), Shamil was a prodigious combatant who fought Russian forces in the region. The Imam was popular in Britain, mainly in the Eastern War (Crimean) as he opposed the Russian invasion in the Middle East. "If it is true that Sheik Mansour and his inheritor, Sheikh Shamil, were religious frontrunners, it is also true that they understood the political significance of Islam, which established a social parity base and unity of purpose; surpassing ethnic particularism, class differences, and the characteristic tribalism. Moreover, the Russian conquest not only had

no adverse effect on the expansion and influence of Islam, but it made it a form of passive resistance"(Henze, 1995).

We see the characters in the novel, The Kindness of Enemies, discussing the meaning of jihad. Malak stresses on the royal backing that Queen Victoria had attributed to Shamil. Imam Shamil and his supporters' opinions, religiousness, and Sufism founded political Islam, which was traditional and passive. Malak says that "Al-Qaeda is a modern phenomenon, with no patience for Shamil's traditional spirituality and utter contempt for the choices he made at the end of his career"(Aboulela, 2015, p. 23). Furthermore, Malak is convinced that Jihadism is an inner quest that needs a spiritual master such as Imam Shamil, who fought to secure his homeland, family, and people from the rough Russians. She tells her son, "the door to true jihad has been closed for a long time". As "Jihad needs an Imam and there is no Imam now" Later on, clarifying she says: "Jihad is not for land or wealth, not for power and political matters, but it is to follow the values of Allah and the rules of Sharia." The fact that Malak wants to emphasize on is that "not all Muslim wars are Jihad". Had Shamil been alive today, "He would have seen through these militants – that they fulfil neither a contract nor a covenant, that they call to the truth, but they are not its people. He would have gone after the hate preachers who say to the young men of this day and age, 'go out and make jihad'", according to Malak. According to Aboulela, the political actions of Imam Shamil were based on and controlled by spirituality which led to the politics of determination and discipline. The novel appears to carry this important message uniformly to the jihadists of the current period, whose struggle is depicted as nothing other than terrorism and to the solely spiritual endeavour of modern Sufis. The spiritual aspect of Shamil's military struggle that he drew from his belief in Sufism is underlined by his capability to confront the Russians with the meagre resources he had at his disposal.

Through Natasha, Aboulela stresses on the unfairness and the judgments towards the immigrants, the process of acculturation, and hybridity. According to Pauly (2004, p.119), "the inaccurate perception of Islam as a radical religion has consistently fostered deep divisions between the majority and Muslim minorities in the United Kingdom". Natasha's choice to research the history of Oz's Jihadist ancestry leaves her life disrupted. The growing affinity between Natasha and Oz and his enticing actress mother impels Natasha to deal with issues she had tried to avoid from a very long time; her Muslim Identity. Natasha understands that everything she idealizes stands in jeopardy. The abrupt arrest of Oz at his home one morning on suspicion of radicalization gives us an insight into what it is like to assume a religious identity. Similarly, Osama provides a realistic illustration of the issues a Muslim faces in the Western World and the systematic association of the word Jihadism with Al Qaeda and Terrorism. In the novel, Aboulela depicts how under the premise of fighting terrorism, Muslims in Britain face prejudice and discrimination in their daily life, which leaves them frustrated and alienated. It is because of this linking of Islam with terror which has forced Natasha to hide her true identity, it is because of the discrimination faced by Muslims that she tries to not look like a Muslim. This systematic linking of terror with Islam and Muslims is the reason behind the arrest of Osama, the reason behind the suffering of her mother as well as Natasha and it widens the gap between different communities. Muslims are stereotyped and the whole community is made to face the consequences of the actions of people who use Islam to justify terror and the same is reinforced by the media. The Holy Quran's interpretation of jihad is very different from that of the media. The media interprets Jihad as outright terrorism: suicide bombings, killing of innocent people etc. which is wrong because it stigmatizes the whole community and leads to distrust between different communities and sadly these media discourses prevail over the truth.

Conclusion

Much of the Muslim world is struggling today for the essence of Islam, as on one side they are concerned about the security and stability of Muslim societies and on other side they are faced with religious extremism to the faith of Islam. International community is simultaneously faced with the challenge of differentiating between the acts of religious extremism and the acts of religious traditions. Jihad means to strive and face complexities hardships and of living a good life: to fight the evil within– to be righteous and virtuous, put efforts into doing good work and to be helpful to the society. If the situation demands, it can also mean "fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam and creating a just society through preaching, teaching and, if necessary, armed struggle or holy war" but Islam by no means advocates or jihad in no way means killing innocent civilians and terrorizing people just because they don't belong to your religion or they do not agree to your worldview. Ignorance of Islam in the west about the values, teachings and beliefs of Islam on one side and the faulty media representation of Islam on the other side provides fertile ground

for anti-Islamic propaganda. The media portrays Islam as inimical to civilized values and is therefore seen as threat to the West.

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