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'Orientalism', Arabs and Hollywood Movies: The Cradle for Islamophobia or Muslimophobia?

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Abstract

Much of the critical discussion about the emerging genre of 9/11 fiction has been centred on the trauma of 9/11 and on novels by the Euro-American writers. The book "Post-9/11 South Asian Diasporic Fiction : Uncanny Terror" by Pei-Chen Liao draws attention to the diversity of what might be meant by post-9/11 by exploring the themes of uncanny terror through a close reading of post-9/11 South Asian Diasporic Fictions. The novels include Salman Rushdie, Hari Kunzru, Monica Ali, and Mohsin Hamid. These and other post-9/11 writers represent the return of the repressed and the unhomey migrant experience. From the perspective of these novels, if 9/11 did indeed change everything then it did so in the lives of their Pakistani-American protagonists in the ways that are often overlooked in the mainstream American public discourse. In his renowned book, 'Orientalism', Edward Saïd has few and dismissive words to say about the issue of honor and shame in the Arabic

culture. He aims his clearest barbs at Harold Glidden. It uncovers “the inner workings of Arab behavior,” which from our point of view is “aberrant” but for the Arabs it “is normal.” The Arabs have been consistently misrepresented by Hollywood with the plenty of proofs. Reel Bad Arabs, both film and book, are the result of nearly 20 years’ work, during which Shaheen viewed and analysed 950 films. Of those, only 5 percent showed the Arabs of Muslims in a positive – or at least benign – light.

Keywords

Orientalism, the Arab Muslims, Hollywood movies, Islamophobia, Muslimophobia, South Asian Diasporic Fiction, western view to the Arabs.



Introduction to Post 9/11 South Asian Diasporic Fiction

Much of the critical discussion about the emerging genre of 9/11 fiction has centred on the trauma of 9/11 and on novels by Euro American writers. The book "Post-9/11 South Asian Diasporic Fiction : Uncanny Terror" by Pei-Chen Liao draws attention to the diversity of what might be meant by "post"--9/11 by exploring the themes of uncanny terror through a close reading of "post" -9/11

South Asian Diasporic Fictions. The novels include Salman Rushdie, Hari Kunzru, Monica Ali, Mohsin Hamid. These and other Post 9/11 writers represent the return of the repressed and the unhomely migrant experience. 9/11 is not only an American national trauma or a terrorist attack on the West, but its aftermath also manifests the transnational and transcultural emotional transmission of terror and fear. Moreover, it should be noted that the diversity of the post-9/11 condition in terms of the ways that the writers think beyond 9/11 and treat the terrorist moment on 11 September as an exemplary incident allows different temporalities and a range of personal, political, cultural, racial and gender issues to appear. (Pei-Chen Liao, 2012) The events of 9/11 have been discussed in a plethora of different discourses as varied as the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, the films of Oliver Stone, the novels of Don DeLillo, and the political speeches of George Bush. To this list we can also add two recent novels by H.M Naqvi and Moshin Hamid that examine the effects of 9/11 from a Pakistani, "Muslim" perspective. Both novels complicate the singularity of the idea frequently advanced in the media that "September 11 changed everything." From the perspective of these novels, if 9/11 did indeed change everything then it did so in the lives of their Pakistani-American protagonists in ways that are often overlooked in mainstream American public discourse. At the same time, the experiences of 9/11 represented in these novels problematize certain models of postcolonial hybridism and US multiculturalism that are widely used to read contemporary South Asian Diasporic Fiction in America. Traditionally, communities have been based on markers such as ethnicity and religion which proffer recognizable homogeneity. But in today's rapidly changing world hybrid identities such as the ethnically South Asian American citizens who are the protagonists of the novels like 'Hindi-Bindi Club', 'Queen of Dreams' and 'Desirable Daughters' -are increasingly common. At first sight, these novels appear to celebrate the kind of chaotic plurality that is the much eulogized face of the modern world, or in the case of the particular inquiry, of changing America.

Traditionally, communities have been based on markers such as ethnicity and religion— which proffer recognizable homogeneity. However, the common question that each of the characters in these novels – the creations of authors who have themselves charted versions of the same trajectory – faces routinely, is “*Where are you from?*” They are still ‘visible’ - potentially ‘*out of place*’, suggesting links between place and identity that the discourse of ‘*routes not roots*’ has failed to erase. This disconnection between claiming belonging, and external acceptance of that affiliation in that space takes on literally life-threatening dimensions at moments of crisis. Madhubanti Bhattacharyya (2010) Hussain Abdulwahab in his paper ‘Martin Amis’s *The Second Plane*: Darwin, Nietzsche and Neo-Orientalist Anxieties’ explores that the novel’s preoccupation with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has been widely debated to the extent that critics such as Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate have suggested this cataclysmic event helped usher in a new genre: the New Atheist Novel. He feels that in this area, no one has caused more controversy than the novelist Martin Amis, especially in his anthological work, ‘*The Second Plane*’. This collection of essays has been rigorously critiqued, including accusations that Amis harbours neo-orientalist tendencies and even suggestions that he exhibits implicit ‘Islamophobia’. However, the two short stories in the collection, ‘*In the Palace of the End*’ and ‘*The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*’, have remarkably received very little attention. In conclusion, by shedding some light on this rarely acknowledged aspect of ‘*The Second Plane*’, attempts are made to understand the intricate ways in which the attacks of 9/11 have featured in and changed the contemporary scene of British fiction through the prism of Martin Amis’s writing Hussain Abdulwahab (2014). Ana María Sánchez-Arce in the paper ‘Performing innocence: Narrative and Normative Communities in McEwan’s ‘*Saturday*’, Reed’s ‘*The Grid*’, and Sahota’s ‘*Ours Are the Streets*’” considers the events of 9/11 not just as a historical turning-point but as a turn in our imagination of Britain as a nation. It will analyze how in Ian McEwan’s, Jeremy Reed’s and Sunjeev Sahota’s works the

recurrence of violence, either imagined or real, highlights social rupture and the demonization of difference within the nation. Disobedience or dissent from the normative morality of the nation has been equated with terrorism and unlawfulness. Ana María Sánchez-Arce (2014)

Lorraine Adam's 'Harbor' (2005), John Updike's 'Terrorist' (2006) Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), H.M. Naqvi's '*Home Boy*' (2010) are some of the prominent novels of the genre.



A Review of these Prominent Novels

A brief panoramic view of some of these novels and the novelist can certainly lend an insight into the genre of Post 9/11 Diasporic Fiction. H.M. Naqvi was born in London in 1973 and grew up in Karachi, Pakistan. H. M. Naqvi's debut novel *Home Boy* is about three young Pakistani men in New York City at the turn of the millennium: AC, a gangsta-rap-spouting academic; Jimbo, a hulking Pushtun DJ from the streets of Jersey City; and Chuck, a wide-eyed kid, fresh off the boat from the homeland, just trying to get by. Things start coming together for Chuck when he unexpectedly secures a Wall Street gig and begins rolling with socialites and scenesters flanked by his pals, who routinely bring down the house

at hush-hush downtown haunts. In a city where origins matter less than the talent for self-invention, the three Metrostanis have the guts to claim the place as their own. But when they embark on a road trip to the Hinterland weeks after 9/11 in search of the Shaman, a Gatsbyesque compatriot who seemingly disappears into thin air, things go horribly wrong. Suddenly, they find themselves in a changed, charged America. www.bookbrowse.com 2016 Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is a novel by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, published in 2007. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is an example of a dramatic monologue. The novel uses the technique of a frame story, which takes place during the course of a single evening in an outdoor Lahore cafe, where a bearded Pakistani man called Changez (the Urdu name for Genghis) tells a nervous American stranger about his love affair with an American woman, and his eventual abandonment of America. Changez's firm is prompted to send him to offshore assignments in the Philippines and Valparaíso, Chile. In Chile, he is very distracted due to developments in the world and, responding to the parabolic suggestion of the publisher his company is there to assess, he comes to see himself as a servant of the American empire that has constantly interfered with and manipulated his homeland. Politically, Changez is surprised by his own reaction to the September 11th attacks. "Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased", he tells the American. He observes the air of suspicion towards Pakistanis. Changez, due to his privileged position in society, is not among those detained or otherwise abused, but he notices a change in his treatment in public. To express solidarity with his countrymen after his trip to Chile, he starts to grow a beard. After returning to Lahore, he becomes a professor of finance at the local university. Changez advocates nonviolence, but a relatively unknown student gets apprehended for an assassination attempt on an American representative, which brings the spotlight on Changez.

Lorraine Adam's 'Harbor' (2005) A tremendously acclaimed and exquisitely realized novel of literary suspense, it recounts the adventures of Aziz Arkoun who, at twenty-four, makes his way to America via the hold of an Algerian tanker and the icy waters of Boston harbor. When Aziz discovers that he and his circle are most likely under surveillance, all assumptions, his and ours, dissolve in urgent, mesmerizing complexity. John Updike's 'Terrorist' centers on an American-born Muslim teenager named Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, although Ahmad's high school life guidance counselor, Jack Levy, also plays a central role. The novel seeks to explore the worldview and motivations of religious fundamentalists (specifically within Islam), while at the same time dissecting the morals and lifeways of residents of the fictional decaying New Jersey. The novel begins with a brief monologue by Ahmad on the condition of American youth as represented by the student body mingling in the corridors of his high school. He gets into a fight with an older boy named Tylenol who thinks Ahmad is flirting with his girlfriend Joryleen. While Ahmad has sexual impulses toward the girl, he represses them, as God instructs. Ahmad finds solace at his mosque (located in an abandoned dance studio above a bail bonds office) and in the study of the Qur'an under the guidance of his imam, Shaikh Rashid. He believes his conviction to be stronger than that of his teacher because of the Shaikh's tendency to interpret the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths figuratively and to display traces of a skeptical mind-set. Supporting Ahmad at home is his rather negligent mother, Teresa Mulloy, a third-generation Irish American who, while raised as a Catholic, has abandoned her religious beliefs. Because of her religious infidelity and comparative openness toward sexuality and relationships with men, she has become one of the many objects of Ahmad's hatred — although in her case she is accorded a dutiful love as well. On the other hand Ahmad idolizes his absent father, an Egyptian immigrant who abandoned him and his mother when Ahmad was three years old. For his part, Ahmad desires to become a truck driver on the advice of his Shaikh because driving is a practical skill of good merit whereas academic studies

serve only to advance (American) secular beliefs. He is also afraid that academic studies will strengthen his occasional religious doubt. Trucking is also the path that leads Ahmad toward involvement in a terrorist plot directed against the American "infidels" (non-Muslims) — an attempt to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River. Ahmad agrees to drive the truck into the tunnel and blow himself up. While approaching the planned location of the bombing, Ahmad reconsiders his interpretation of Islam deciding that God does not want him to kill anyone and aborts his terrorist mission.



Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (2005) complicates the nature of the "Muslim" identity of many of the immigrants. The novel revolves round a group of young Moroccan immigrants seeking a better life in Spain cross the Strait of Gibraltar on a lifeboat. When it capsizes near shore, it is everyone for themselves. The book then chronicles the lives of four of the passengers, Murad, Halima, Aziz and Faten, exploring their lives before the trip and what motivated their attempt at immigration.

Edward Said's Orientalism- In his renown book, '**Orientalism**', **Edward Said** has few and dismissive words to say about the issue of honor and shame in Arabic culture. He aims his clearest barbs at **Harold Glidden**. It uncover "**the inner workings of Arab behavior,**" which from **our** point of view is "**aberrant**" but for **Arabs** "**is normal.**" After this auspicious start, we are told that

Arabs stress conformity; that Arabs inhabit a shame culture whose “**prestige system**” involves the ability to attract followers and clients ...; that Arabs can function only in conflict situations; that prestige is based solely on the ability to dominate others; that a shame culture – and therefore Islam itself – makes a virtue of revenge...; that if, from a Western point of view “*the only rational thing for the Arabs to do is make peace... for the Arabs the situation is not governed by this kind of logic, for objectivity is not a native value in the Arab system.*” This, for those who have not savored it recently, is vintage Saïd. Sneering summaries of another man’s thoughts, presented to an audience of bien-pensants who know how much nonsense this all is. Anyone with the temerity to suggest that either Glidden’s observations, while perhaps expressed too categorically, may have some grains of truth... or even that Glidden’s work may express these observations with considerably more subtlety, sympathy, and empirical base than Saïd’s dismissive asides might suggest, can only belong to the bigoted, the racist, the imperialistic Western voice whose discourse inscribes and controls subaltern culture with its authorial voice. Who would dare try and stand up to the hue and cry of the critical audience, whose progressive sensibilities had been offended by the mere suggestion that “they” are not like “us,” and worse still, that they are less evolved, less morally developed than we are. There is a widespread belief that Saïd’s book criticizes Western Orientalists for their inability to understand their subjects, for their projection of their own problems onto this strange culture, which they therefore cannot understand... that Westerners are incapable of understanding so foreign a culture. Actually, the thrust of the argument is quite different. Saïd’s underlying point is that all cultures are essentially the same, and if anyone presents the Arabs (his major concern) as significantly different (even in a positive [e.g. Romantic] light), then that is a form of racism. Hence his particular disdain for discussions of honor and shame culture applied to the Arab world. One of the many resulting consequences of the victory of post-colonial studies is the stunting of the field of honor-shame studies. Further Saïd feels

that despite the widespread acknowledgment of the importance of honor and shame, especially in Arab culture, that topic has largely been confined gender studies. Its use to understand political culture, despite the obvious connections, remains largely untouched by Middle East specialists, political scientists and International Relations scholars to this day. Quite the contrary, nothing but scorn accompanies the very mention of the current neo-conservatives' attraction to so "essentialist" a book as Raphael Patai's *The Arab Mind*. Such scorn is not accompanied by alternative approaches to the phenomena studied by the "honor-shame" paradigm. Liberal cognitive egocentrism would sooner ignore the topic (honor killings), or explain it in "our terms" – suicide terrorism is a weapon of the despair at hopelessness and poverty, a predictable act of resistance to occupation). Such an approach has clear policy implications: give them hope and they'll stop these terrible deeds; give them economic well-being and they will accept peace. One of the unusual characteristics of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the refusal of the Arab states to recognize the state of Israel. No other dispute in the world has so profound a refusal to acknowledge the very existence of the other side, and those sensitive to the problem of accepting the "other" would normally consider this one of the most profound reasons for the persistence of the conflict. And, from the point of view of honor and shame, it is: to cede Israel's right to live without concessions (including some that may imperil Israel's ability to survive), would strike most Arabs as an unbearable loss of face.

Misrepresentation in Hollywood- While it's a pretty sweeping judgment to make – there are plenty of racial, religious or political groups that would argue they've been consistently misrepresented by Hollywood with plenty of proof. *Reel Bad Arabs*, both film and book, are the result of nearly 20 years work, during which Shaheen viewed and analysed 950 films. Of those, only 5 percent showed Arabs of Muslims in a positive – or at least benign – light. "*No one*

group has ever been, one, vilified in that many films, and two, vilified for more than a century," he explains.



The Media Education Foundation documentary, which premiered last November to a sold out audience at the Dubai International Film Festival, features the affable Shaheen presenting his findings between clips of everything from Hollywood blockbusters like Rules of Engagement to little known b-movies like Hell Squad (where Las Vegas show girls are trained as commandos to stop nuclear bomb wielding Arabs). This formula for a film – talking head plus clips – could be boring, but the presence of extracts from popular films, an intriguing topic, and the personable Shaheen himself make the film an easy watch. Most people will catch themselves re-thinking films they grew up loving, and questioning just how easy it is to buy into Hollywood’s story-telling and ignore the underlying racism. Even Shaheen admits that one of his favourite movies, the brilliant 1970 Network, falls prey to using the “Arab bogeyman.” Tim Mcsorley 2007

Although most observers instinctively sense how great such a demand would be, few appreciate the role of honor and shame in that remarkably long-lived and near unanimous position taken by the other Arab nations. (Even countries which do recognize Israel – Egypt, Jordan – keep relations cold, distant.) The best explanation

for this unprecedented diplomatic behavior comes from an understanding of the dynamics of tribal warrior honor-shame cultures. Instead of considering these issues, Saïd and his anti-Orientalist disciples insist on seeing rational secular behavior and attitudes at work. *“Do cultural, religious and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones?”* asks Saïd in what is clearly intended as a rhetorical question meant to be answered with a resounding “No!” And yet the very opposition set up, lumping of religious and cultural with racist as opposed to the secular issues of economics and politics, as if religion and culture had no influence on how various collectivities experience and interpret socio-economic and political issues, betrays the simplistic terms in which Saïd deals with religio-cultural issues.

The ironic result of this determination to see the Arabs, in this case the Palestinians, through liberal cognitive egocentrism is that, given the staggering hatred and violence this conflict has produced, one must end up demonizing the Israelis. When one rules out a priori, as Saïd would have us do, any role of a frustrated culture of vengeance, religious fanaticism, and humiliated honor in generating these hatreds, then one must find an explanation in their liberal world of experience. The obvious conclusion: the Israelis must have done terrible things to the Palestinians in order to provoke such violence. The “understanding” that Western culture has tragically extended to suicide terrorists – and now when they are the target of that violence, many continue to extend to suicide terrorism – expresses precisely this cognitive irony. *“It is their desperation and hopelessness that drives them to it.” “What choice do they have?”*

Perhaps the best example of this attitude came in June of 2002 (after the Jenin “massacre”) when Cherie Blair, wife of the prime minister of Great Britain remarked at a charity event: *“As long as young people feel they have got no hope but to blow themselves up you are never going to make progress.”* Embodied in this response we find all the assumptions and implications that fuel liberal cognitive egocentrism:

that Palestinians, and therefore their leaders, want what we want, hope for what we hope for, namely independence and freedom. (Some Palestinians may, but they don't decide policy, nor dominate their media.)

that, given this natural desire, the only obstacle to their self-determination is the Israelis, who alone rob them of their hope

that when you can't get what you want, it is natural to get pathologically violent (i.e., blow yourself up amidst women and children).

that if their enemies, the Israelis, would only stop taking away their hope, they would be less angry and violent.

To Martians observing the events and reactions to events in the aftermath of the collapse of the Oslo “peace process,” these Western responses to the outbreak of Palestinian violence in reaction to an Israeli offer unprecedented in the history of recorded warfare for its generosity of a victor to a loser, could only make them shake their heads in disbelief. What irrational bug might drive civically minded people to so misread a conflict that they would demonize the negotiators and lionize the violent, all in the name of peace? Why wouldn't they immediately focus on the Palestinian and Arab positions, on all those “irrational” zero-sum, violent passions that the West had renounced precisely in order to create a culture dedicated to peace? Why would they blame the people who were trying hard and sacrificing to resolve it and then make excuses – worse, lionize – the people with the most regressive attitudes?

In a piece Saïd wrote in early 2003, shortly before his death, expressing his disgust with the pathetically weak Arab response to American plans to invade Iraq, he lashed out at the “assimilated” Arabs in the West who criticize their own culture:

“The only “good” Arabs are those who appear in the media decrying modern Arab culture and society without reservation [sic]. I recall the lifeless cadences of their sentences for, with nothing positive to say about themselves or their people and language, they simply

regurgitate the tired American formulas already flooding the airwaves and pages of print. We lack democracy they say, we haven't challenged Islam enough, we need to do more about driving away the specter of Arab nationalism and the credo of Arab unity. That is all discredited ideological rubbish. Only what we, and our American instructors say about the Arabs and Islam – vague recycled Orientalist clichés of the kind repeated by a tireless mediocrity like Bernard Lewis – is true. The rest isn't realistic enough..." More likely, the Palestinian people here constitute a construct whereby Saïd can regain his own honor. "They don't want their leaders to compromise with the Israelis... God help us, to negotiate with them. They are the last bastion of his Oriental notion of Arab honor."



When all is said and done, Saïd's position comes down to something like "*anything but the West.*" He is too proud to admit what he knows is true: that the Arabs may have a great deal to learn from the West (including allowing dissidents as critical of them as he is of the West to speak); too proud to engage in real self-criticism. So instead, his criticism of the Arabs in 2003 resembles that of Palestinians critical of the Arab League and Haj Amin al Husseini in 1948: their failure is not that they should have accepted the offer made by the UN and built a strong and proud Palestinian nation alongside Israel, but that they failed to wipe Israel out.

Saïd speaks from his tenured position at Columbia, where he can say anything he wants and not only not get “disappeared,” but rather get lionized by the culture he assaults. And yet his point is not that the Arabs are “*too tribal, too insular, too unself-critical, too stuck on models of honor that demand dominion and do not work in the modern world.*” All that is too subservient to the West, even if Saïd himself thrives on that Western ethos. No, his “self”-criticism complains that Arabs aren’t proud enough to resist this western onslaught, aren’t courageous enough to fight back, aren’t suicidal enough to turn their back on everything that might lead to the reform he himself (in a parenthetical clause) admits they need. Pointing out, for instance that this “justice” considers it a courageous call to conscience to teach one’s own children such hate that they want to blow themselves up in the midst of enemy children, will have little effect. Similarly, appeals to conscience, arguments that accepting so black and white a picture is unfair to the Jews, the Israelis, the Zionists, will not make much of a dent. All those arguments will just register as propaganda designed to distract from the “true” struggle for Palestinian dignity. When it leads the Western Left to demonstrations in favor of Palestinian suicide terrorists as it did in the early years of the Intifada 2000-2002, when it leads policy planners to lay out “road maps” that depend on rational attitudes prevailing on both sides, when it leads the media to under-report the virulent hatreds of Muslims and over-report every flaw in Israeli (and Western) society, then such attitudes may indeed represent self-destructive misjudgments so great, especially under current conditions, as to constitute a suicidal paradigm. Richard Landes, 2007

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'Orientalism', Arabs and Hollywood Movies: The Cradle for Islamophobia or Muslimophobia? | Prof. Sulok B. Raghuvanshi

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