

Confrontation between Liberals and Radicals in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

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Abstract

*The paper explores the repercussions of 9/11 in the diversity of the United States of America as portrayed in Amy Waldman's *The Submission* published in the aftermath of 9/11 based on the cultural conflicts inherent in American culture. I unfold the problems the minority Muslims experience because of the 9/11 attacks on the US. The implications of the attacks on the intercultural relations of the minorities with the majority community reveal that the prevailing biases against Muslims and Islam as depicted in the text become obstacles to cultural harmony and integrity in American culture. The setbacks Muslims face in the aftermath of 9/11 make the principle of multiculturalism questionable. The paper has investigated into the cultural variables including traditions, behaviors, beliefs and practices of the respective ethnicities particularly American and Muslim in the United States. Such factors have influenced the opinions of both common Americans and the authorities to deal with the people having differences in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Consequently, the liberals including Mo Khan and Claire from both American culture and Muslim minority are forced to suffer the backlash.*

Keywords: Confrontation, 9/11, liberalism, repercussion, radicalism, integrity, diversity

Introduction

This paper analyzes Waldman's *The Submission*, widely known as a post 9/11 novel that reflects the repercussions of the terrorist attack centralized on the financial and military power insignias respectively represented by The World Trade Center and Pentagon. The victimization of the innocent in the disasters caused by the idiosyncratic people termed as terrorists does not end there. Rather the heinous incident resulted into many other disasters in the course of the counterattacks, which unfortunately clutched the necks of the innocent again. The implication of the counterterrorism is problematic in the sense that it has encompassed injustices instead of fair judgment.

The conflict between the Muslim minority and the Americans who look dominating the other ethnicities than the European Americans prevails in the portrayal as created by Amy Waldman in *the Submission*. In this line of presentation, Saif Raed Nafia Fakhruddin

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et al state, “the oppressed minority’s identity changes with regard to the dominant cultural identity in several ways, such as language, behavior, beliefs and cultural traditions among others. Another distinctive feature of oppression is the cultural restriction in which the oppressors restrain the oppressed minority’s ability to prosper and thrive” (362). The identity as expressed through language, behavior, beliefs and traditions matters to both minority ethnicity and dominant one. However, the Americans as represented in the novel behave as if only their identity counts rather than that of the Muslims. Therefore, they impose their values and beliefs on the minorities including Muslims. This is the reason, Muslims had to suffer the backlash in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Discussion

This paper critiques the unfair treatment with the Muslim minority in the United States of America in the aftermath of the 9/11. *The Submission* is a classical literary text which builds a foundation of how Muslims are treated in the biggest democratic nation after the 9/11 attack. The novel truly reveals the poor plight of the defenseless people whose religious and ethnic identity is questioned unconditionally. The impact of American imperialism that “refers to the American hegemonic power to subjugate or dominate other ethnicities or minority groups that live within in the wide American socio-cultural demarcations” (Fakhrulddin et al 363) pervades in the minority ethnicities especially in the Muslim community across the United States of America. Due to this illogical cultural disruption in the USA, the protagonist, Mo Khan has to succumb to the hegemonic power of the Americans as expressed in his preparedness to adapt to the cultural behaviors and practices. He is forced to justify his identity as a liberal American. The novel reads:

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.” Abbott and Costello in suits. “No. I said no.”

“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?”(26)

Paul asks Mo Khan, the protagonist a number of questions and even when Khan responds to these interrogations honestly, the interlocutor does not show the positive acceptance.

Not accepting what the respondent says is the prejudice reflected in the stubborn nature of the interrogator. Khan does not seem to have any privilege to choose whether he stays as a believer or nonbeliever in the aftermath of the 9/11. When an individual is not allowed to practice what s/he believes in, the norms of democracy mean to be violated. Paul keeps questioning Khan and former's responses increase atrocities the latter faces. Paul defines Khan's identity and explains why Khan is under suspicion, "You have not just the wrong man but the wrong kind of man. The wrong kind of Muslim: he'd barely been to a mosque in his life" (28). Khan is termed as a wrong kind of man that shows the extreme level of domination and discrimination imposed upon an innocent individual who do not hold any clues of committing any social crimes. In this regard, Fakhruddin et al assert:

Oppressing Muslims in America has been a subject of cultural and social debates since the early years of the 21st century. As recalled, the 9/11 attacks of 2001 in New York, America, sparked the beginning of serious and critical studies on Muslims began to be connected with abusive, stereotypical terms, such as "extremism:", "fanaticism" and "terrorism" among others. (363)

The allegations against Muslims in general just because of the cultural homogeneity of the attackers of 9/11 speak the unvoiced injustices against minority ethnicities caused by the dominant cultural group in the United States of America. The common logic in this regard is that anyone closely related to the religious ideologies can become fanatical. Taking Muslims as the opponents blindly is the expression of extremism as well. For the adaptation to the dominant culture, Mo Khan has changed his cultural behavior and belief. Although his cultural background is Muslim, he does not practice it so that he can be accepted in the wide cultural spectrum of the United States of America. When Khan's background is undertaken, things become clear that he cannot have been a religious person:

His parents, immigrants to America in the 1960s, made modernity their religion, became almost puritanical in their secularism. As a boy, he had no religious education. He ate pork, although he hadn't grown up doing so. He dated Jews, not to mention Catholics and atheists. He was, if not an atheist himself, certainly agnostic, which perhaps made him not a Muslim at all. When the agents came back in the room he would tell them this. (28)

To fit oneself in the predominantly Christian society, Khan has done all those things that a typical Muslim is not supposed to do. However, the implications of his deeds and sacrifices do not seem favorable in the sense that he is still suspected of being fanatic Muslim who may be harmful to the Christian world. Khan is upset and tired of the efforts he has made to prove him an atheist across his bringing up. Eventually his conscience does not allow him to speak more for justification. In this regard, the novelist asserts, "But when they returned, dragging their heels and cracking their jokes, he told them nothing. His boast of irreligion stayed on his tongue, for what reasons he couldn't say, any more than he could say why

words long unuttered floated unbidden into his mind, "La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasulullah" (28). The innermost feeling to chant the line from the holy Quran comes from Khan's mouth that surprises him as consciously he has striven to repress the utterance, La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasulullah.

The Muslims in America undergo torture and sufferings and are forced to pay the price for the crime the idiosyncratically and impulsively driven people committed by attacking the financial and military emblems of the United States of America. Uzma, Jamil in "Reading Power: Muslims in the War on Terror Discourse" argues:

The 'war on terror' discourse emerging from the 9/11 attacks ties together terrorism, national security, war and Muslims, reinforcing Orientalist narratives about Muslims as 'inherently' violent, threatening and as potential terrorists. This contemporary discourse has both political and epistemological dimensions: the politics of how Muslims are situated in the war on terror in relation to the west is linked to the construction of knowledge about Muslims and the possibilities for how they are and can be known in the west. (30)

'War on terror' discourse is a counterterrorist act targeted to demoralize the people having faith in Islam rather than discouraging terrorism itself. Jamil makes it sure that the contemporary government of the United States intentionally ignites the flame of hatred toward Muslims in general and Muslim Americans in particular which is a shame to a democratic government is supposed to respect the multicultural diversity. The narrativizing Muslims and associating them with terrorism is the endeavor of perpetuating the Orientalism. Jamil further opines, "The subject positions available to Muslims in this hegemonic discourse are linked to the way in which terrorism is defined as an "Islamic" problem because Muslims carried out the 9/11 attacks. Terrorism is explained as a religious problem, rather than as a political issue, by linking it to the religion of the attackers" (33). The intention of the Americans engaged in promoting the discourse, war on terror is infectious in the sense that they haphazardly associates terrorism with Islam, while the Islamic ideology does not have any concern with terrorist acts. Islam principally advocates peace, solidarity, and progress. The misconceptions and overgeneralization heightens the sense of hatred towards believers of Islam in general.

The novel is rich in political references that inform the plight of America's oppressed Muslim minority. When the terrorist attacks of September 11 occurred, the intellectual dichotomy between the Muslim minority and American society created a major rift in American society. Because of this, America's national unity has been divided between its American identity and its Muslim identity. The attacks led to increased repression of Muslims, as reflected in the case of architect Mo Khan.

Terrorism must not be associated with any religion whatsoever. Theoretically, every religion stands on the ground of peace, unity, cooperation, tolerance, and common progress. Terrorists do not have any religious faith and they do not have any religious

orientations as well. Were they guided by religious paths would they not involve in killing, bombing, and terrorizing activities. In the introduction to their anthology, *Beyond 9/11: Transdisciplinary Perspectives on Twenty-First Century U.S. American Culture*, Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz, and Sabine Sielke claim that this phrase has in fact become a “misleading assumption”, “commentators and scholars have critically interrogated this view for a long time and shown that the world post- 9/11 is characterized as much by cohesion as by transformation. Thus even if the aftermath of September 11, 2001, initially fostered our sense of having witnessed a radical break with the past, this binary perspective has been proved deceptive” (13). The break between the binary opposition is through disruption of normalcy of the situation. The novel refers to a situation in which Muslims are randomly detained and interrogated unnecessarily:

A year after the attack, news about Muslims arrested or suspected, the constant parsing of Islam’s “true” nature, had become background noise for Mo. Foreground was work, behind which geopolitics, serious romance, even a second chair and a bed frame for his echoing loft receded. All of it could wait until he “made it,” although he was well aware that such success, if it came at all for an architect, came late. (38)

The innocent Muslims are arrested and tortured by the federal police in the United States because they are Muslims. Human decency and a rift between right and wrong needs drawing, otherwise humanity would suffer crisis all over the world. The penetration of geopolitics in the defining religions and associating them with good and evils is itself problematic. Khan is denied human rights in the most democratic nation, America acclaimed so far. His plight depicts the desperate conditions of thousands of Muslims living in America in the post 9/11 situation. According to Zabihzadeh et al, *The Submission* “deals with the trauma of 9/11 and PTSD that the characters suffered from over the years after the occurrence of the event” (51). These characters that have lost their relatives recall the memories and become aggressive against the attackers along with the radical ideology of those perpetrators. Zabihzadeh et al focus on Waldman’s solutions to traumas fictional characters suffer in the aftermath of the attacks. The portrayal embodies the practical solutions to the sufferings of the victims and their relatives. This is the reason for the severity of conflict between the liberals who seek changes in the cultural set-up of the American society and those who are rigid and do not move ahead for accommodating differences in terms of cultural traditions and beliefs. The very conflict gets politicized gradually. The impact of geopolitics is massive upon Mo Khan’s life, as he is forced to do many things which his conscience and culture do not allow him to. Just for adjustment in a society that demands an individual to be liberal. Khan does everything. However, he is not accepted which justifies he has been deceived in a cultural deal. The text reads:

From London, Mo was to go on to Kabul, where ROI was competing to design a new American embassy. Over beers, Mo and Thomas had dissected Roi’s decision

to dispatch Mo, but they arrived at no conclusion, only a drunkenness harmful to Thomas's marital harmony. Their theories included the following: Roi was compensating for not promoting Mo by sending him on an international junket that included a free trip to London, where the counterterrorism seminar was meant to buff the firm's credentials; Roi was punishing Mo by sending him to Kabul; Roi was trying to enhance the firm's odds of getting to design an embassy in a Muslim country by sending a Muslim, or trying to ensure they wouldn't get the commission by sending a Muslim. (44)

Sending Muslims back to their homeland is another part of geopolitics. In this context, there is dualism in the American policy that advocates multiculturalism on the one hand and violates the spirit of globalization diplomatically on the other. This contradiction retains at step of Khan's movement in the novel. There is no logic when Mo Khan is asked what sect of Muslim he is. It is ruthless to interrogate a designer as Khan is questioned in the text:

Sunni or Shia? Self-described moderate? Jewish girlfriend? If they had to present a Muslim as the designer, it was critical to probe what kind of Muslim he was.

"Your background . . . it seems fairly secular," Paul said. "Is that correct?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Just exploring things. If not secular, I'm sure you would describe yourself as moderate?" The fan overhead twirled in miniature in the bowl of Paul's spoon.

"I don't traffic in labels," Mo said.

"Moderate's not really a label," Paul said. "More of an outlook. I'm a moderate myself."

"Congratulations," Mo said. His tone had soured. Then he seemed to reconsider. "I'm a Shia Wahhabi, if you must know," he said.

"I see," Paul said, taking out a pen. "Do you mind if I write that-" (64)

What role the Shia or Sunni in his performance of a designer plays is an irrational query. To probing Khan crossing the limit of tolerance does not put a solution to the problem. Rather it may help ignite the flame of hatred that may seek a means of terrorist attack for expression.

There is no relationship between Islam and terrorists. Islam discards any place of terror from the world of humanity. Harun Yahya in *Islam Denounces Terrorism* quotes:

Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, warned his companions to avoid extremes—which he explained was the cause of the destruction of earlier

communities. Terrorists it appears, feel that this injunction does not apply to them. Terrorism is an act against God. Anyone who tries to justify such atrocities ultimately fails, since both the Sacred Law and theology abhor such acts as moral sins that run contrary to the essence of Islam. The Qur'an instructs Muslims in times of adversity to act with justice, perseverance and patience. (10)

The prophet, Muhammad stands against extremism and wants every follower to despise terrorism as it is against the almighty. To hurt someone physically or psychologically is a sort of denial to the supremacy and commandments of God. Yahya's explanation is evidence that Islam advocates justice, tolerance and human decency. Marvin Perry and Howard E. Negrin in their edited book *The Theory and Practice of Islamic Terrorism: An Anthology* argue:

However, it must be emphasized that the West is not engaged in a war against Islam, but against radical Islamism. Because jihadists also threaten to overthrow existing Muslim governments and to establish a repressive fundamentalist regime, which the majority of Muslims worldwide oppose, many analysts urge policy makers to woo Muslim moderates; to encourage religious scholars to denounce al Qaeda's indiscriminate murder of civilians as a desecration of true Islam; to strengthen ties with moderate Arab governments; and patiently to promote liberal-democratic attitudes and reforms in the Middle East. (5)

Perry and Negrin evoke a sense of hope for the innocent and liberal Muslims who want to remain unaffected from the implications of overgeneralization of Muslims in the western world. At the policy level, the West may stand against radical Islamism, but in practice, thousands of Muslims are victimized at the cruel hands of overgeneralization in the western countries. There are illogical situations that Mo Khan faces. Sini Eiknonsalo in her article, "[S]ometimes America Needs to Be Pushed: Amy Waldman's *The Submission*" states:

We meet Mo in a flashback scene where he is returning in New York from Los Angeles a week after the 9/11 attacks. While trying to board the plane, he gets pulled over for an interrogation. At the beginning of the interrogation, Mo had started to behave more docile just because he had been afraid how the terrorist attacks would influence people's opinion of Muslims. (82)

The extract reveals that Muslims are treated as if they belong to nowhere and their existence does not matter to the American nation. They are suspected, irritated, and intimidated for no logical causes in the aftermath of the attacks as exemplified in the case of Mo Khan. This extremism of the dominant ethnicity in the USA demonstrates the stark side of the so-called liberal and democratic nation that has ever claimed to be the model of civilization and modernity.

Conclusion

Despite being the citizens, Muslims are discriminated against in almost all domains of their life because they believe in Islam and practice what Muslims are supposed to do in Islam. Orthodoxy is perilous as it creates troubles and demarcations among human beings. Fanaticism blinds people and cripples their judgmental faculty that eventually forces them to commit crimes against humanity in general. Khan in *The Submission* is a victim of the implication of radical Islamism. Meanwhile, Mo Khan, as an alleged representative of Muslims experiences cultural setbacks of the United States of America that has ever claimed to be the protector of human rights. Due to the conflict between state-owned extremism and religious fanaticism, the liberals including Mo Khan and Claire suffer the backlash of the 9/11 attacks as portrayed in Waldman's *The Submission*.

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