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# Ahmed's *Journey into Islam*: A Critique of Essentialization of Islam

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**Abstract:** *Islam in western literary and non-literary discourse has been represented stereotypically as a static, extremist, jihadist, fundamentalist religion of terrorism, a threat to western ideology. Akbar S. Ahmed's Journey into Islam critiques the distorted images of Muslims, Islam and its practices. This article attempts to highlight the stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims in media and academic representations. The theoretical framework for this research paper is based upon the methodological assumptions derived from Edward Said's Covering Islam (1997). It explores the true picture of Islam as a religion of peace, compassion and harmony and challenges the association of terrorism with Islam.*

**Key Words:** Islam, Jihad, Stereotypes, Media, Terrorism, Expansionism

## Introduction

In the post-9/11 era, both Islam and Muslims have been the targets of misrepresentation by western media reporters and journalists, literary and non-literary discourse, academics and politicians. The launch of 'the so-called war on terror' (Waterman, 2015, p. 1) increased Islamophobia – an "unreasonable dislike or fear of, and prejudice against Muslims or Islam" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2013). Islamophobia is in fact hostility and prejudice of the West towards Islam and Muslims infused in the brains of Westerners that they are a threat to western ideology. The 9/11 attacks – the 'unfinished business of the cold war' (Kanwal, 2010, p. 18) – gave the US an excuse for the acceleration of global political games by launching a 'war on terror' having the political and economic agenda i.e. US oil interests in the Gulf Region (p. 18).

Islamophobia and Muslim-phobia are interlinked. In the post-9/11 milieu, Islam and Muslims are the targets of the West. The practices of Islam such as *Jihad*, have been misinterpreted, ignoring the diversities within Islamic tradition due to dissimilar geographical locations. Gabriel says that western media and literary intelligentsia

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produced the sentiments of hate and prejudice against Islam and Muslims. Writers like Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, Daniel Pipes and Steven Emerson, as partners of the US government, spread Islamophobia to distort Islam's practices and misrepresent Muslims (2007, p. 82). Consequently, Muslims faced socio-political exclusion from the mainstream of the world.

Ghulam Murtaza, a Pakistani proemist, is of the view that human beings are the carriers of discourses and when they interact, they represent different discourses and civilizations (2016, p. 33). In the light of Murtaza's remarks, it can be observed in the context of post-9/11 West and Islamic world carry different civilizations and discourses, resulting in civilizational conflicts. Western discourse has perceived Islamic civilization as a threat to Western values. Such misperceptions have intensified the clashes between the West and the Islamic world. Akbar Ahmed, in *Journey into Islam* (2007), states that the West didn't look upon the true essence of Islam, and the structures of Islamic societies and labeled Muslims as 'anti-modernist', 'Islamofascist', 'Islamic extremists' and 'radical Muslims' (p. 36). This shows the ignorance of the West about Islam and its practices and the ideological differences paved the way for chaos. The US president George Bush's speech after 9/11 attacks – "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" (Naqvi, 2010, p. 97) – produced a new dichotomy of the West versus the Muslim world. Every Muslim was a terrorist unless he proved himself to be innocent. It labeled Islam as 'other' and Muslims as 'barbaric and inferior' to the West. Such binarism based upon cultural, religious and racial discrimination against Muslims propagated hostility towards Islam and Muslims. "Assurance", a proem from Murtaza's *Straggling Through Fire: An Anthology of Proemistry*, explicates:

Hello, my name is Mayssam.
I'm a Palestinian and live in Gaza
I want to tell you that
I'm still alive.
I'm not a terrorist. (2021, p. 39).

The above quoted *prines*[1] highlight the conditions of the Muslims regarded as potential terrorists supposed to prove themselves innocent. Mayssam, an eight-year-old Palestinian girl, is depicting the violence committed by the Israelite military against Palestinian Muslims and yet in Western discourse, only the Muslims are the terrorists who must provide the proof of their innocence.

## Literature Review

The global Muslim Ummah is in a critical situation as it has been portrayed as an anarchist, terrorist, fundamentalist, *jihadi* and extremist. Islam-the religion of peace and compassion, has been reported as a 'religion of terrorism' by the western media, politicians, and literary and non-literary intelligentsia. An irrational fear, prejudice and hate against Muslims and Islam have been generated and promoted through different modes of expression like media and art. Muslim states like Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Kuwait have fallen due to America's 'war on terror' and come across socio-political, economic, currency, identity, civil rights and democratic crises. The western, particularly America's imperialistic stances and media's partiality, produced anger and disappointment among Muslims. Mustafa cites Bush's speech: "Islamic fundamentalists are ideological extremists". The Holy Quran has been regarded as 'bomb making manual' and a justification for terrorism by western discourse (2015, p. 6). Following the empire's "divide and rule" principle, George Bush addressed Congress on September 21, 2001: "the people who hate our religion and freedom of speech are our enemies. They don't believe in free societies and use terror to shake the foundations of our free world. They are Islamic fundamentalists, believing in ideological extremism and want to hijack Islam" (Naqvi, 2010, p. 97).

Khalil observes that because of political crisis i.e. defeat in the Vietnam war (1975) and Oil Embargo (1973), Americans lost their confidence and Americans perceived the economic growth of Middle Eastern countries as a threat to their own set of beliefs. As a result, they stereotyped Muslims as fanatics, extremists, murderers, suppressors of women, barbaric, primitive, and aggressive (2011, p. 9), 'American good guys' are fighting for democracy and justice against evil Arabs (John,


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2006, p. 7). The West's stereotypical representations of Muslims and Islam as other, aggressive and static excluded them from the mainstream of society (Asmal, 2008, p. 7). Shaheen sees this fear of Muslims or Islamophobia as the manifestation of detest (2008, p. 10). In Richardson's remarks: the etymological roots of 'Islamophobia' can be traced to Crusade Wars (2004, p. 7). It implies that the contemporary hate and prejudice against Muslims are not new but rather from the times when the clash of civilizations actually started. Sajid calls this prejudice or Islamophobia a 'new form of racism' (2005, p. 9). In Tariq Ali's views: Islam and Christianity lived and coexisted for a long time as neighbors until Islam became a major religious and political competitor and was made a new 'other', a new 'binary' for the West (2006, p. 11), also a psychological need of the West to replace the Soviet Union with new enemies i.e. Muslims (Lewis, 2004, p. 23). Islamophobia, therefore, is a fabricated discourse against Islam and Muslims.

Western, particularly American media associated negative connotations with Islam and left no stone unturned to distort its practices. *Jihad*, an Islamic practice, has been addressed as a 'holy war' by the West. *Jihad* has been regarded as synonymous with war. West associated violence and aggression with *Jihad* (Ahmed, 2007, p. 3) on the basis of poor knowledge and misconceptions of *Jihad* as the violent killing of innocent people. Armstrong states: western academics decontextualized and misinterpreted the verses of The Quran in order to legitimize their agenda- that the Quran preaches violence, killing and bloodshed (2010, p. 10). The misinterpreted verses were utilized against Muslims. In the name of freedom of speech, cartoon competitions have been held by the western governments' officials. Such activities were based on prejudice against Islam, its founder and its followers. Video games like Counterstrikes, Eternal Forces, close Combat: First to fight, and America's Army have also been used as a medium to distort the images of Islam and Muslims. Muslims have been presented as villains, terrorists and dot heads (2007, p. 200). Hollywood movies, talk shows, academics and politicians portrayed the image of Islam that reflects racial and cultural hate' (Said, 1997, p. lvii) to dehumanize Muslims and distort Islam through media politics.

## Theoretical Framework

Edward Said's *Covering Islam* (1997) highlights Muslims as the pioneers of medical sciences, astronomy, logic and inventors of Algebra. It also explores their portrayals as 'potential terrorists' and '*Jihadists'*. In Said's view: Islam received a lot of coverage from western media over the last three decades. It has been categorized and portrayed negatively by the western media, academics, and politicians without any study and lived experience of Muslim states (p. li). Islam has been politicized and painted under the pressure of political and economic circumstances. Western racism and aggression against Muslims and Islam can be observed evidently through their art, literature and media. Writers like Kifner equated Islam with static doctrines that lead people to heresy and infidelity (p. 11), alien, primitive and opposed to western ideologies (p. 48). The representations of Muslims as terrorists, extremists, and fundamentalists dispersed among westerns resulting in the form of association of violence and terrorism with Islam (p. xii).

News is made in the context of political, cultural, religious, historical and social conditions and institutions. Newspapers seem to be fact oriented but actually follow certain political ideologies (p. 49). Journalists and reporters from CBS, Fox News and CNN reported Muslims as terrorists, fascists, suicide bombers, and a threat to western civilization. In Said's view, western media is a business that believes in economic and capitalist agendas and sponsors images under political influence. News and images about Islam such as 'hostile nature', 'opposite to modernity' and Muslims as barbaric, primitive terrorists, have been manufactured within the ideological context mentioned above (p. 49). With the emergence of a wave of Anti-Islamism, Hollywood cinema joined western media as a partner and portrayed Muslims in films as violent, barbaric, scoundrels and terrorists, demons obsessed with women and money, while Westerners as brave heroes (p. xi). Such portrayals show the hatred and prejudice of the

West against Islam and Muslims. Said avows that the concept of 'fundamentalism' is a slippery one as it lacks a proper definition and has been associated with Muslims intentionally to reduce Islam to a minority of rubrics and manufacture stereotypes about the founder of Islam, its faith and followers (p. 145) and western interests of capitalism, colonial, expansionism and subjugation (p. 139).

## Analysis

### Jihad: A Misinterpreted Islamic Practice

*Jihad,* derived from the Arabic word *Juhd*, means 'to strive'. According to *The Oxford Advanced, Learner's Dictionary (Ed.9th)*, *Jihad* is "a holy war fought by Muslims to defend Islam" (2015, p. 817). Western discourse has interchangeably used 'holy war' as 'war'. This is a misperceived and misinterpreted definition of *Jihad* in the sense of bloodshed and violence. Akbar Ahmed's *Journey into Islam* proclaims that the West has associated violence with *Jihad*. The little study and poor knowledge of Islam and its practices enabled the Westerners, particularly American academics and reporters, to distort the sacred practice *of Jihad* by manipulative interpretations of Quranic verses and legitimize the notion that *Jihad* preaches violence and killing. Said observes that the 'West associated extremism and violence with Islam and its practices in order to distort them' (1997, p. xii). Mehfooz endorses Said: in the post-9/11, the West misinterpreted the verses of the Quran and distorted Islamic practices (2014, p. 229). Such manipulated misinterpretation of the Quran aroused fear, threat and anger.

### Jihad: A Sacred Islamic Practice

*Jihad* comprises a couple of connotations: the 'greatest *jihad*' and the 'lesser *jihad*'. According to Prophet Muhammad [PBUH], as Ahmed explains: 'the greatest *Jihad* refers to one's spiritual and moral exaltation. The lesser *Jihad* denotes the defense of family and community in the circumstances of the attack. Both kinds of *Jihad* neither preach violence nor allow any kind of aggression and terror against innocent humanity (2007, p. 3). To fight against evil forces resides in oneself means *Jihad al-Akbar* (the greatest *Jihad*) and struggle to defend oneself against external hostile forces is *Jihad al-Asghar* (the lesser *Jihad*). Mehfooz cites the *hadith* of the Holy Prophet [PBU.H]: "The *Mujahid* is one who strives against his own *nafs*" (2014, p. 224). This *hadith* emphasizes the soul's purification, not violence or aggression. Mehfooz adds: 'Muhammad [PBUH] fought against enemies to promote harmony and make peace (2014, p. 223). Islam preaches *Jihad* only for the sake of Allah, to spread the message of Allah. "And fight in the way of Allah against those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Truly, Allah likes not the transgressors" (Quran, 2:190); "Those who strive for Us, We guide them in our ways" (Quran, 26:69).

*Jihad* forbids the killing of innocent people and damaging the properties. Shedding the blood of innocent children, women, and elderly, destruction of crops and beehives, and slaughtering the sheep, camels or cattle except for food all are prohibited in Islam. Islam preaches tolerance, harmony, and peace and forbids the use of violence against the innocent. Almighty Allah says in the Holy Quran: "Whoever slays a soul, unless it is for a manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men" (Surah al-Mā'ida 5:32). Furthermore, the verses of the Holy Quran explicate the punishment for those who commit violent activities and kill innocent people. "And whoever kills a believer intentionally, his punishment is Hell; he shall abide in it, and Allah will send His wrath on him and curse him and prepare for him a painful chastisement" (Surah an-Nisā' 4:93). It can be extracted from the above verses of the Quran that those who kill innocent women, men and children in the name of *Jihad* actually abuse the idea of *Jihad*.

### Self-interpretation: Emergence of Multiple Narratives

The postmodern world believes in the multiplicity of meanings. From a single text, multiple meanings can be derived. With the application of a pre-defined lens upon Islam, its practices and Muslims and manipulating, decontextualizing the verses of the Quran, the West labeled Muslims as *Jihadists,* Islamofascists, terrorists, extremists, fundamentalists

and fanatics. West studied Islam from a Western political context rather than an Islamic perspective and western discourse produced a self-definition of Islam (Ahmed, 2007, p. 11). Western discourse about Islam and Muslims has been manufactured under a political framework (Said, 1997, p. 136). The Western definition of Islam affected the political careers and intellectual endeavors of Muslims. It shows the hypocrisy of the West that associates every act of violence with Muslims and labels them as terrorists. Ahmed observes that the involvement of Jews and Christians in terrorist activities is on record but they have never been labeled as 'Judeofascists' or 'Christianofascists'. The agenda behind the 'war on terror' was to distort Islam and its practices (2007, p. 130). This can be observed through Norway Attacks (2011), Myanmar anti-Muslim Riots (2013), Christchurch Mosque Shootings (New Zealand, 2019) and many others where non-Muslim culprits have never been reported as terrorists. *The New York Times* reported the white culprit of the Christchurch Mosque Shootings (New Zealand, 2019) as 'mentally retarded' and 'psychologically sick' (May 2, 2019, p. 10). Buddhists (Rohingya genocide 2017) and Hindus (Gujrat genocide 2002 & Kashmir genocides since 1947) have also been the proprietors of terrorist activities but have not been described as terrorists, extremists, fanatics or fundamentalists. Ghulam Murtaza Aatir's proem "Complementarity" (2021) mourns:

A white man cannot be a terrorist, not even in New Zealand and Canada;
A Buddhist cannot be a terrorist, not even in Burma;
A Hindu cannot be a terrorist, not even in Indian Gujrat;
A Jew cannot be a terrorist, not even in Ghaza;
Only a Muslim can be a terrorist,
Anywhere!
Anytime!!

## Video Games: A Tool of Distortion

The propagation of prejudice against Islam and Muslims can also be observed in animated literature. Video games have also been used for the distortion of Islam, its practices and images of Muslims. Ahmed avows that video games like 'Counterstrikes', 'Eternal Forces', 'Close Combat: First to Fight', and 'America's Army' played a significant role in portraying Islam as the religion of terrorism and Muslims as terrorists, villains and dot heads (2007, p. 200). Believing in an exclusive approach, such video games presented Muslims as Anti-Christ, enemies of the West. Hollywood movies (The Kingdom 2007, Zero Dark Thirty 2012 etc.) and video games portrayed the images of Islam comprising cultural and racial hate (Said, 1997, p. lvii).

## American Expansionism

According to Ahmed, the representation of Muslims as uncivilized, uncultured, terrorists and extremists has been the top headline of CNN, Fox News, CBS and newspapers i.e. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Times*. (2007, p. 137). The Muslim political leaders and scholars who made an alliance with the West on the 'war on terror', were declared by American politicians as 'moderate Muslims' and those who resisted – Bashar-Al-Assad (Syrian President), Yasser Arafat (Former President of Palestine) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Former President of Iran) – have been labeled as villains, hostages, extremists, terrorists and enemies of the West. But their indigenous people consider them heroes and role models (2007, p. 165). Another agenda behind the war on terror was American expansionism and subjugation with an imperial mindset (Said,1997, p. 139). It can be validated through the current political and cultural scenarios of the Middle Eastern Muslim countries (i.e. Syria, Libya, Iraq) which are under the subjugation of American imperial rule. Murtaza counters Abraham Lincoln's notion of democracy in his proem "Explanation":

Did you mean the government of the American people
For the American people, by the American people?
Or did you mean governing the rest of the people?
By the American people for the American people?
(2021, p. 61)

## Islam: A Religion of Peace and Harmony

Muhammad [PBUH], Prophet of Allah and the man of the highest exaltation, set a religion of peace and

tolerance. Ahmed says: "Prophet [PBUH] embodies the divine word of God, 'the Quran' (2007, p. 217). He gave the message of love, peace, compassion, harmony and brotherhood. Various verses of the Holy Quran glorify Prophet as: 'the Messenger of Allah' and 'the Prophet of the highest esteem'. "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men; but he is the Messenger of Allah, and the seal of the prophets. Allah is Cognizant of everything" (Surah Al-Ahzab, 33: 40), "And raised for you your reputation" (Surah Al-Sharhh, 94: 4). The Prophet was very kind to all creatures of the universe. Almighty Allah says in Quran: "We did not send you except as a mercy to mankind" (Surah Al-Anbiya, 21: 107). These verses of the Holy Quran and the entire life of the Prophet [PBUH] clearly show him as a man of love, compassion and peace. He [PBUH] ensured the protection of properties and lives of Muslims as well as non-Muslims, provided social, religious and cultural liberties, emphasized peace and mutual understanding and promoted dialogue (Ahmed, 2004, p.14). Hart's *"The 100"* praised Muhammad [PBUH] as the world's greatest influential personality and ranked him (PBUH) above Jesus because of his personal inclination to develop Islam as a religion and efforts to make it the world's great religion (1978, p. 9). It is clear that whatever western discourse portrayed about Prophet [PBUH] and Islam was entirely based upon their prejudice towards and the poor knowledge of Islam.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the verses of the Quran have been misinterpreted, decontextualized and manipulated by the West and have been used against Muslims. Islam and its practices like *Jihad* have been distorted. In the name of so-called freedom of speech, the competition of cartoons has been held and supported by France, America, Norway, Holland, and Denmark against Islam and its practices. The association of terrorism, extremism and fundamentalism have been done on the basis of irrational hate and prejudice against Islam and Muslims. In the name of so-called war on terror, thousands of innocent Muslims have been killed in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Kuwait. Western media and literary intelligentsia endorsed prejudice against Islam and Muslims by portraying them as a threat to western ideology.

## Notes

In Ghulam Murtaza Aatir's politically charged proemistry, a newly developed sub-genre of poetry, proems replace poems and prines replace lines and proemist replaces poet.

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