

Islamic Postcolonialism: Islam and Muslim Identities in Four Contemporary British Novels

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Believing and Belonging: Critical Essays on British Muslim Fiction

Abdur Raheem Kidwai and Mohammad Asim Siddiqui (eds)

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In the light of the crisis in international relations precipitated by the events of 9/11, the representation of Islam and Muslims in literature is a topic where there is much at stake, whether in works written by British Muslims or by Arab Muslims. These two new books are lively contributions to this debate.

Majed's monograph analyses four novels in depth: Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* (1995), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007) and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). The study focuses on postcolonial theory as a platform for investigating his chosen texts from the other side of the microscope: 'The Emir Writes Back' we might say. His introduction discusses Islam and postcolonialism in relation to Salman Rushdie and the *Satanic Verses* rumpus. The Rushdie affair looms like a Vesuvius over the British literary landscape of the last few decades. Other aspects of the terrain are touched upon, however, including the context behind the emergence of multicultural fictions as second- and third-generation immigrants found their voice.

Chapter 1 pivots around Kureishi's statement that writing can sometimes aid the search to find an identity. It demonstrates how, in *The Black Album*, the author 'proves' his Britishness. Kureishi's own identity (like that of many of his protagonists, including Shahid) hovers between the two poles of his Pakistani background and British upbringing, with a marked swing towards

the latter. The novel, it is argued, presents Islam as a backward religion and depicts Muslims negatively. The group of students who cluster around Riaz are easily led, do not like to study, are oppressive towards women and participate in the mindless burning of books in an episode that has clear parallels with the incineration of *The Satanic Verses* in Bradford in January 1989. These points are well made and supported by multiple references to incidents from the novel. The chapter concludes with the following bold and contentious statement: 'In the last analysis, Kureishi's imagining of Muslims and Islam is both derivative and self-serving' (p.74).

The second chapter, 'Islam and Muslim Identities in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*,' follows the template established by the previous chapter. Ali's own hybrid background (Bangladeshi and British) is explored and again it is indicated that she wrote the novel to help in the search for her own identity. Majed concedes that there are a few positive images of Muslims in the novel, but that mostly it offers negative stereotypes, especially in its depictions of the imam, the mosque and the three central characters (Nazneen, Chanu and Karim). A complicating factor, though, is that the narrative charts the struggle of a woman to escape from the limitations placed upon her by her religious and cultural background and her present marginalised position within London society. Her partial success in this entails that, from a feminist perspective, the novel delivers positive images of its main protagonist. The chapter grapples with these opposing tensions (as does the next) without fully resolving them.

In Chapter 3, 'Islam and Muslim Identities in Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*', the focus shifts to Anglo-Arab writing, though many of the same themes recur: mixed identity of author (Jordanian/British) and characters, the tension between positive feminist images of women and negative images of Islam, colonial discourse masquerading as the postcolonial and so on. There is some interesting material on how matters concerning the perceived oppression of women in Islamic societies were often used in the past as a colonial weapon for attacking Muslim societies. The discussion is animated by references to how Faqir (and her character) symbolically refused to wear the veil. Honour killings, a theme of the novel *My Name Is Salma*, are also broached and the relation between tribal traditions and Islam called into question. Faqir's representativeness (or lack of same) is also investigated. The conclusion is that 'The novel is full of stereotypical images about Islam and Muslims in the Arab and Muslim world' (p.130).

The fourth chapter, 'Islam and Muslim Identities in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*', breaks the mould as it focuses upon an author whose fiction represents 'a turning point in relation to the

depiction of Islam and Muslims in contemporary British fiction' (p.131) as it challenges both eastern and western stereotypes. Aboulela, like the other writers, has a mixed background: although born in Egypt, she was brought up in Sudan, spent ten years in Scotland and currently lives in Qatar. Unlike Kureishi, Ali and Faqir, the chapter argues, she writes sympathetically about people who uphold Islamic values, a faith that can provide liberation through spirituality. The two short stories and three novels dealt with show Muslims as individuals who make positive choices about matters such as the wearing of the hijab. These characters are not types, but rounded figures with both good and bad attributes. Her fiction therefore, in the words quoted from Wail S. Hassan, 'adds nuance and complexity to the representation of Islam and Muslims' (p.146).

The four novelists who are analysed by Majed are divided into three groups depending on their representation of Muslims and Islam: those that (a) show mainly stereotypes/negative images (Kureishi and Ali); (b) show a mixture of negative and positive images (Faqir); and (c) show mainly positive images (Aboulela). There is a seductive, but ultimately misleading, proportioned design in the argument of the monograph that is achieved by concentrating upon a small number of texts and by a strategic blindness to some of their narrative complexities. The conclusion echoes the proposition that opens the study, that postcolonial theory is limited with regard to Islamic nations and western Muslim communities and perpetuates colonial stereotypes. It therefore should be expanded to include Islamic voices and perspectives as '[s]uch involvement of Muslims in postcolonial analysis should lead to more realistic and authentic readings and analysis of the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in fiction' (p.159). It is a valid conclusion, but only if realism and authenticity are the sole gauges by which literary production is to be evaluated.

The collection *Believing and Belonging*, edited by A.R. Kidwai and M.A. Siddiqui, contains eleven essays by scholars from several Indian universities with an emphasis upon Arab Muslim writers. Two of these essays overlap with Majed's book, with a couple of pieces on Aboulela and one on Ali. Other writers are discussed: there are four essays on the British Syrian Robin Yassin-Kassab and his novel *The Road from Damascus* (2008); two on the British-Pakistani female novelist Qaisra Shahraz and her novels *The Holy Woman* (2002) and *Revolt* (2013); and one on Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Memoirs by Safraz Manzoor and Rania Al-Baz are also considered. As with Majed's book, many of the essays engage with the issue of

the stereotyping of Muslim identities in their primary texts, and address indirectly the rising Islamophobia that seems to be sweeping across the Europe and the United States at present. As such, these two studies are important academic correctives to prevailing dangerous trends.

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