

Impact of 9/11 Terrorist Attacks on American Narrative

Mubarak Al-Twaiji

Yemeni Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Goa University-India

GOA- 403 206

Today, bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted to them and others by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange Oriental peoples over there who have been such a terrible thorn in "our" flesh (Said's *Orientalism 25 Years Later*. Par.7).

On 9/11, 2001, the Americans are attacked for the first time, after quite long while, in the depth of their strategic territories, Washington and New York. The attacks were aggressive and brutal and caused huge physical and psychological damages. Thousands of innocents are killed and living ones get scared to fly for quite good time after the deadly attacks. Following the attacks, security is tightened and American nationalism reaches its peak to confront the attackers. According to many American sources including the Bush Administration and the CIA, the Islamic network of Al-Qaeda is behind the attacks. According to this theory, 19 Arab terrorists embarked on four passenger jets, hijacked the airplanes and intentionally crashed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and The Pentagon. Though good elaboration has been done on this theory, yet it remains vague for researchers in this area for two main reasons; firstly Osama Bin Laden never claimed responsibility and second is the impossibility of penetrating the American airports as easily as the CIA reported.

Through the many attempts to predict the impact of these events on the American novel, there seems to be a consensus feeling that all research on this area results in the formation of two camps of forecasters. The first set of forecasters, scholars who conduct research in Islamic societies, insist that representation of Islam in post 9/11 American novel is a negative one and Arab Muslims' image gets worsened after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Accordingly, first and foremost consequence of the 9/11 terrorist attacks is that the whole religion, Islam, and its more than one billion adherents are viewed as violent, aggressive and anti-America: "two aspects, violence and reciprocity, have come to characterize the dominant image of Islam in the West in recent times: violence in the widespread prevalence of targeted killings, riots, bombings, and warfare that have devastated parts of the world; reciprocity in that Islam is no longer the passive tableau on which Westerners fashion an image" (Quinn. 166). Muslims across the western societies become subject of racism and suspicion. Likewise, other brown Asians who resemble Arab Muslims particularly Indians and Sikhs share the same discrimination with their Arab counterparts.

The second camp, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who reside in the west, note that American novelists classify a majority of Arab Muslims as bad guys or terrorists and a minority as good guys or moderate Muslims. According to them, the post 9/11 division

of the Muslim Arabs into “Good Muslims” and “Bad Muslims” becomes broadly accepted in West and particularly in the United States (Chossudovsky. Par. 3). Tariq Ramadan, a Professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University and a president of the Think Tank European Muslim Network in Brussels, argues:

The dust from the collapse of the twin towers had hardly settled on 11 September 2001 when the febrile search began for "moderate Muslims", people who would provide answers, who would distance themselves from this outrage and condemn the violent acts of "Muslim extremists", "Islamic fundamentalists" and "Islamists". Two distinct categories of Muslim rapidly emerged: the "good" and the "bad"; the "moderates", "liberals" and "secularists" versus the "fundamentalists", the "extremists" and the "Islamists"(1).

American literature of this period witnesses an increase in the national awareness to the new reality imposed by 9/11 affair. Further, this awareness imposes a new direction in subject matter which can be seen in the shift from an aesthetic and pleasant literature to moral, functional, instructional and informative narratives: “Post-9/11 consumers were more concerned with the functional contents of their books than they had been before the attacks, and they judged their books accordingly” (Gustafson. 69). This shift entails modern narrative to provide a good deal of knowledge on many issues pertaining to 9/11 deadly attacks including the nature of the attacks, their perpetrators and the possible means for avenging the insult of the American territory. More geo-political issues become target of the new narrative which requires writers to overstep the national territory. Accordingly, Arabs of the Middle East, as the main suspects, and their religion become the most recurrent characters for demonstrating evil, wickedness and terrorism in modern narratives. According to Stephen Biddle “the bulk of the post-9/11 literature has simply assumed that terrorism is now the nation’s first priority” (5). It seems that feelings of fear, horror and vulnerability help extending subject matter that aims at realizing and confronting the outsider threats.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks results in a very strong curiosity and eagerness among the Americans public to know more about their assailants and the intention behind the attacks: “9/11 influenced the subject matter of the books that were bought and published. After the attacks, people showed greater interest in books which provided them with information relevant to the attacks and books which offered spiritual comfort—both functional characteristics” (Gustafson. 69). Sales of books related to Islam and Arabs reaches the highest level in the history of the United States. Emily Eakin, a reporter for the *New York Times*, wrote on September 18: “Within hours after last Tuesday's terrorist attacks, sales of books related to the disaster surged as people desperate for information and explanations rushed to purchase treatises on terrorism and the Arab world and biographies of the World Trade Center”(1). According to Islamonline.com, Quran remains the best-selling book for long time in the major states inside America. Similarly, Islamic religious figures like Muhammad, Aisha, Abi Bakr and Omar become the subject matter of many novels. Emily Eakin goes on quoting:

Our Islam section has really emptied out," said Virginia Harabin, a supervisor at Politics & Prose, a bookstore in Washington. Among the books selling well, she said, were two by Karen Armstrong — a history of Islam and a biography of Muhammad — and the works of the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said (par.3).

Terrorism, likewise, has been a motivation for many American novelists who never hesitate to make direct connection between Islam and terrorism. Novels such as *Terrorist*, *The Teeth of the Tiger*, *Khalifah*, *Big Apple 2 Bites*, *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Dawn of Saudi*, *Finding Nouf*, *The Jewel of Medina*, *The Emperor's Children*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *The Scorpion's Gate*...etc deal with either prominent Islamic figures or Muslim Arab terrorists to satisfy the reader's curiosity about the enemy. Christelle Nadia observes that the changes caused by 9/11 have painted literature with a military color: "many writers realized that literature could again change the world and that writers could do what politicians, journalists, and consultants couldn't do by imagining a world where clashes and fears aren't necessary and thus inspiring a frightened citizenry to not fear the world and the other" (6).

The major number of post 9/11 American narratives is counter-terrorist texts. This Counter-terrorism discourse tends to focus not only on the irrationality but also the efficacy of the terrorists (Mckahan. 12). It focuses on individual or group motives, prominent Islamic figures, political objectives and psychological profiling and "often expounds a dubious, xenophobic state of paranoia of the invading Other, a self-styled alarmism or patriotic realism"(Mckahan. 31). Most of the published novels pertaining to Arabs and Islam focus on dehumanizing of Muslim Arabs, defaming all the prominent Islamic figures and pitying Muslim Arab women who live under the tyranny of Islamic code of live (Ghazali. 77). An Arab becomes not welcome in the American society. He is seen as a synonymous of terrorist, barbaric and savage. Emory Elliott observes:

On September 11, 2001, the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon dramatically altered American Society and culture in ways few would have Predicted....American literature in the twenty-first century will be influenced by the events of that terrible day and by the ways that the United States government responded (qtd. Ingrida. 112).

As far as Arab Muslim image is concerned, a strong parallel between this image and American hegemony in the Middle East increases in post 9/11 American narrative. As a neo-Orientalist discourse, exposure of the dangerous image of Arab Muslims and Islam always precedes the military occupation of the demonized group of people. Neo-Orientalist narrative discourse, then, seems to be facilitating the American military and political hegemony in the Middle East, a region that has the biggest oil and gas reserves in the world. In this connection, Said observes that the west always tends to produce many images on the Orient before any military interaction. This technique helps convincing the public how dangerous the enemy is:

Whenever in modern times there has been an acutely political tension felt between the Occident and its Orient (or between the West and its Islam), there has been a tendency to resort in the West not to direct violence but first to the cool, relatively detached instruments of scientific, quasi-objective representation. In this way Islam is made more clear, the true nature of its threat appears, an implicit course of action against it is proposed (Sad. Islam Through Western Eye.7).

The terrorist attacks on the United States by a very small group of radical Muslims who claim to be true Muslims have brought the whole religion and its prominent religious figures into the literary focus. Muslims feel that stereotypes of Muslims in America today exceed the limits of freedom of opinion. Their sacred figures become targets of the worst representations ever in the history of the Islamic civilization. Said observes that Islam in

the United States occupies a good deal not only in literary textbooks but also in media, film, radio in a way that facilitates the American hegemony in the middle east (14). Islam as a whole becomes the enemy of the United States and humanity as a whole, particularly Christendom. This reminds readers of the Middle Ages enmity between Christians and the Jews in Europe when Shylock was a symbol of the Jewish hatred for the Christians. Today, Shylock and his hatred for Christians do not exist anymore while, interestingly, Bin Laden becomes the new Muslim Shylock who is taken to represent aggression of the Islamic World against the Christian peace-loving world. In An article appeared on *Policy Analysis*, Leon T. Hadar, a former bureau chief for the *Jerusalem Post*, describes Islam as “*The Green Peril*” and foresees a new cold war between Islam and the West. He quotes Amos Perlmutter; “Islamic fundamentalism is an aggressive revolutionary movement as militant and violent as the Bolshevik, Fascist, and Nazi movements of the past” (Hadar. 4).

In his book *Covering Islam*, Edward Said observes that propagating Islamic terrorism and evil in American recent publications is central to the American hegemonic policy in the Middle East region: “The recent success of books, journals, and public figures that argue for a reoccupation of the Gulf region and justify the argument by referring to Islamic barbarism is part of this phenomenon” (liii). Further, representation of the whole of Arabs and Islam as a serious foe to American civilization enhances Huntington’s prophecy of Clash of Civilizations. Said notes:

Islam has always represented a particular menace to the West, for reasons I discussed in *orientalism* and reexamine in this book. Of no other religion or cultural grouping can it be said so assertively as it is now said of Islam that it represents a threat to Western civilization. It is no accident that the turbulence and upheavals which are now taking place in the Muslim world have exposed the limitations of simple –minded Orientalist cliché about “fanatic” Muslims without at the same time generating anything to put in their place except nostalgia for the old days, when European armies ruled almost the entire Muslim world, from the Indian subcontinent right across to North Africa (lii-liii).

Said’s central thesis in *Orientalism* has a direct explanatory role to play in our understanding of the work produced in, at least, one area of scholarship about the Arab and Islamic worlds, namely Arab-Islamic philosophy from the classical or medieval period. After the death of Edward Said, *Orientalism* seems to have become limited to the treatment of Arab Muslims by the post 9/11 American experts, excluding the rest of other parts of the traditional Orient without failing to carry the spirit of traditional Orientalism. The tendency to use the military history of the Muslims becomes one of the most favorite subject matters in American narrative in the post 9/11 time. According to more than 43% of post 9/11 American narrative books provide negative stereotypes of Arab Muslims, Islam and non-Arab Muslims (Sides and Kim7-8):

Islam was unknown to many in America, but after September 11th it has suddenly become a major topic of discussion and more and more political leaders, scientists, researchers, and thinkers consider it necessary to understand Islam correctly... Everybody was saying how Islam and Muslims were terrorists, so I wanted to find out for myself (Naoual. 6-7).

In his *Orientalism*, Said observes that the essence of the Orientalist discourse is built on “distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority” (42). Further, he notes that the western scholarship is not satisfied by this general classification, rather very minute observations of the differences are encouraged to add more reduction to the Orientals. To most of the westerner historians and thinkers, this kind of distinction has created resentment and rage toward the Western culture and Christendom from the Islamic side. Bernard Lewis goes further in his study of the reason of Islamic hatred for the West and comes to a conclusion that Muslim’s awareness of their failure and the success of the western civilization increases the enmity toward the west: “At first the Muslim response to Western civilization was one of admiration and emulation -- an immense respect for the achievements of the West, and a desire to imitate and adopt them. This desire arose from a keen and growing awareness of the weakness, poverty, and backwardness of the Islamic world as compared with the advancing West” (42).

With reference to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and consequences that follow, Lewis foresees that the long struggle between the Muslims East and the Christian west is an unfinished one. The accumulated inheritance from Islamic conquests, the Crusades, the western colonization of the Islamic countries seems to undergo a clash between the two civilizations in the twenty first century. According to Lewis’ hypothesis the Muslims power ebbed from the West and the western ‘cultural memory’ continues to fuel the western hegemony on Muslim Arabs and other Islamic countries. Lewis, a committed Zionist historian and scholar in oriental studies, is the first scholar to describe the problematic relationship between Islam and the west with the concept a “Clash of Civilizations”: “This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both” (47).

Lewis’ use of the term “Judeo-Christian heritage” is not bereft of political import. The term assumes that, historically, Muslims were more hostile than were Christians toward the Jews” (Mowahid. 8). Further, Professor Lewis does not give a further explanation beyond the Muslims’ hatred toward the west other than the Muslim economic and technological failure in front of the west. Still he observes that a particular segment of the Islamic world still in alliance with the west. He divides the Islamic world into two segments. The first segment is the one which is “the most extreme in their hostility” to the west. This part of the Muslim world hates and rejects the western culture. The other part is more tolerant to the west and its ally: “There are still significant numbers, in some quarters perhaps a majority, of Muslims with whom we share certain basic cultural and moral, social and political, beliefs and aspirations; there is still an imposing Western presence—cultural, economic, diplomatic—in Muslim lands, some of which are Western allies”(The Roots.Par.5).

Yet the most explicit hypothesis of the emerging Islam as a foe comes from Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* that appears on Foreign Affairs in 1993 in which he notes that Islam has been a tough enemy for the west and Christianity since its birth. According to this hypothesis the next clash will not be “primarily ideological or primarily economic” but rather “it will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations” (Huntington. 2). He indicates that the post cold war division of the world into the first, second and third worlds is not relevant at the present time rather a new division based on civilizations takes place. These civilizations basically differ in history, culture, tradition,

religion and views on the relationship between God and man. Accordingly, Huntington places the Islamic civilization as the most rival and dangerous to the western civilization. He foresees that “This centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline. It could become more virulent”(Par. 24) . Further, he indicates that any cooperation between the Islamic and the Confucian civilizations will be worse and more dangerous to the west; “The most prominent form of this cooperation is the Confucian-Islamic connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power”(Par.57). All hypothesis of Islamic enmity to the west emanates from the idea of that Islam is a bloody religion as appears in 2006 in Pat Robertson’s words a "bloody, brutal type of religion.

In 2001 Edward Said introduces his “*The Clash of Ignorance*” as refutation of Huntington’s “*Clash of Civilizations*” and describes Huntington’s argument as “belligerent kind of thought”(Par.3). Said observes that Huntington’s hypothesis is motivated by his ideologist thoughts which is based on a similar ideological hypothesis “*The roots of Muslim Rage*” which is “a crude polemic devoid of historical truth, rational argument, or human wisdom (that) attempts to characterize Muslims as one terrifyingly collective person enraged at an outside world” (*Covering Islam*.xxxii) written by the Anglo-American Orientalist Bernard Lewis “whose ideological colors are manifest in its title”(Clash of Ignorance. Par.3). Said finds classification of civilizations to be an impossible task because drawing minute boundaries between certain civilizations may interject them into what they not. For example, he rejects the classification of Islamic and Western and the enmity of the former to the later. He states; “Think of the populations today of France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Britain, America, even Sweden, and you must concede that Islam is no longer on the fringes of the West but at its center”(Par. 8). Said observes that Huntington’s efforts in making civilizations clash only result in “a clumsy writer and inelegant thinker” (Par.4).

The image of Arab Muslims and Islam reaches its lowest level among nations and religions of the Globe after the tragedy on September 11, 2001, that caused the world to point its finger at Arab Muslims as terrorists. The atmosphere created by the 9/11 has been fueled by the media, news and literature which worsened the situation where chances of understanding and reconciliation seem to be impossible. Only rebirth of thousands of Edward Sais may introduce a better understanding and reconcile the distorted relationship between Islamic world and the United States.

Works Cited

- Biddle, Stephen. American Grand Strategy After 9/11: an Assessment. Strategic Studies Institute. 2005
- Chossudovsky, Michel. America's Holy Crusade against the Muslim World. Center for Research on Globalization, Global Research, 30Aug, 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2010
- Eakin, Emily . Suddenly, It's Nostradamus, the Best Seller. The New York Times. September 18, 2001. Web. 2 october 2010
- Ghazali, Abdus. *Islam & Muslims in the Post-9/11 America*. California, Modesto, Eagle Enterprises. 2008
- Gustafson, Melissa. The Valuation of Literature: Triangulating the Rhetorical with the Economic Metaphor. Unpub. MA.thesis, Brigham Young University.August 2004

- Hadar, Leon. The "Green Peril":Creating the Islamic Fundamentalist Threat. Cato Policy Analysis. August 27, 1992. Web. July 11, 2010
- Lewis, Bernard. "The Roots of Muslim Rage," Atlantic Monthly 266. September 1990
- Mckahan, Jason Grant. Hollywood Counterterrorism: Violence, Protest and the Middle East in U.S. Action Feature Films. phd thesis, Florida State University. UMI Number: 3399217. 2009
- Nadia, Christelle. 9/11, Literature, DeLillo, and meaning. TrackBack. 19 May 2007. Web. October 12, 2010
- Naoual, Elkoubaiti. Women and Conversion to Islam: The American Women's Experience. Oriental Women Organization. 2010
- Quinn, Frederick. The Sum of All Heresies. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Ramadan, Tariq. Good Muslim, bad Muslim. New Statesman, 12 Feb, 2010. Web. 5 Oct. 2010
- Said, Edward. Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how we see the Rest of the World. London: Vintage Books. 1997
- ,---. Islam Through Western Eyes. Nawaat. Feb 02, 2005. Web. August 11. 2010-10-14
- ,--- (1977) Orientalism. London: Penguin
- ,---. *Orientalism 25 Years Later*. Bounds Magazine. August 4, 2003. America's Best Political Newsletter. Web. 11 oct, 2010
- ,---. The Clash of Ignorance. The nation. October 4, 2001. Web. 11 Oct. 2010
- Shah, Mowahid H. The New Cold War With Islam.The Christian Science Monitor. Christian Science Monitor. July 30, 1990. Web. August11. 2010
- Sides, John and Kim Gross. Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror. Washington DC, George Washington University, School of Media and Public Affairs. 2009
- Zindiuviënë, Ingrida. The post 9/11 period in american literature: from fear and estrangement to interest and dialogue. literatura. 2008