Representations of Islam, Terrorism, and Religious Extremism: Cosmopolitan Identity in Muslim Anglophone Novel

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Abstract

Human history is rich in evidence of the ideological conflict that has coloured relations between Islam and the West. Since its rise in Arabia, the Judaeo-Christian tradition has regarded Islam with suspicion and has staunchly believed that the new faith was nothing more than the product of the ravings of a heretic. The ideological, religious conflict spilt over into the battlefield during the Crusades, and climaxed in the spread of sundry stereotypes and myths about Islam and Muslims. In Orientalism, Edward Said argues amply that the West has popularised a rather distorted image about Islam through a pseudo-scientific study of the East, subjecting it in the process to a discourse of power, which colours most of the perceptions that the West has had about Islam. Recently, the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York have, in their wake, revived and reinforced many extant, Orientalist myths in a new, perhaps more overwhelming, wave of misrepresentation targeting Islam. In the realm of literature, canonical writers like John Updike and Don DeLillo published works that do but reiterate the media Neo-orientalist discourse, which paints Islam as a religion mired in outmoded practices and incapable of cross-cultural dialogue in the age of Globalisation. In this thesis, however, it is argued that out of the post-9/11 frenzy emerges a counter discourse, which tries to correct these misconceptions and myths. In order to analyse this counter discourse, the three novels analysed here are therefore read through the lens of Anthony Appiah’s philosophy of Rooted Cosmopolitanism. Mohsin Hamid (The Reluctant Fundamentalist), Laila Halaby (Once in a Promised Land), and Robin Yassin-Kassab (The Road from Damascus), it is argued, have captured the symbolism associated with the collapse of the Twin Towers and applied it to their novels’ plot structures to signal the change in the world of their characters, whose personal/family relationships collapse almost in tandem with the collapse of the Twin Towers. 9/11 reveals more the Muslim characters’ ambivalence and cultural hybridity, to borrow from post-colonial parlance, a hybridity that is empowering rather than disempowering, for it eases their cross-cultural conversation, which is an essential ingredient in Appiah’s cosmopolitan model. In an age characterised by deep mistrust, the three novels promote narratives of cross-cultural dialogue in that the main Muslim characters, to evoke Appiah’s cosmopolitanism, fulfil fully their “moral oughts,” the moral obligations that bind them to fellow human-beings who do not belong to their local culture. Set in self-proclaimed cosmopolitan centres, the host cultures’ cosmopolitanism remains a sanctimonious rallying cry if it does not genuinely engage with difference. Such a cosmopolitanism crumbles in times of conflict, giving rise to intolerance and hatred, as evidenced by the characters of Changez’s unnamed, American interlocutor (The Reluctant Fundamentalist), the FBI investigators and Jassim’s colleagues (Once in a Promised Land), and Gabor Vronk (The Road from Damascus). The trend of cosmopolitanism that Appiah proposes and defends may then successfully establish cross cultural dialogue given that the Rooted Cosmopolitan understands well his “ethical oughts” and “moral oughts” and the responsibilities that arise thereof.

Key Words: Ambivalence, Anthony Appiah, Cross, Cultural dialogue, Discourse, Identity, Islam, Misrepresentation, Orientalism, Post-colonialism, Religious Extremism, Rooted Cosmopolitanism, Terrorism, 9/11
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