



RESEARCH PAPER

Media Trial of Muslims in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Boy*

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ABSTRACT

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Media is such an important source of information that within seconds and minutes it can make or mar anything that it wants. Its importance however increases in times of conflicts of international significance as it produces and maintains discourses. Reliance of people on media has over the years increased manifold. Electronic and print media of America is all the more important as the news come through the mouth of the powerful country. When 9/11 happened in America, its media became the firsthand source of information about acts of terrorism. Mohsin Hamid and H. M. Naqvi in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Boy* have tried to highlight the role of American media immediately after the fall of twin towers. This research too explores the role of American electronic and print media in relaying news about barbarous acts that devoured lives of thousands of people of different nationalities. The study shows that newsreels and news photos emanating from American media houses presented Muslims as enemies of their freedom. It was such a relentless and systematic campaign without verification that Muslims were portrayed as savages and war mongers. American masses too accepted the bombardment of images and unending hatred against Muslims started. Changez and Chuck, protagonists of the novels, suffer badly because of their religion, color and nationality.

Introduction

The importance of media over the years has increased manifold. This is why that Simons (2008:79) opines "The media are the deliverers of a message, and through this message the audience comprehends and forms opinions on events. This makes mass media an opportunity and a threat for the sides engaged in a conflict." However, if one of the two conflicting sides has the balance and control of power in its hands, one way or the other, the chances of the other disadvantaged side to suffer ever more thus increase manifold. This situation can best be understood in a postcolonial scenario where 'Self' behaves, as always, as if it is superior to the 'Other,' and modern media of the West over the years has proved, unluckily, a testimony to that. In the wake, therefore, of 9 / 11, highlighting the role of the media, Ruigork and Atteveldt (n.d: 1) are of the view "Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, there is an accelerating trend towards a global polarization of society into

"Western" cultures and Islam epitomized in the 'war on terror' against the "Axis of Evil". Similarly, the significance of media can further be judged from what Kamppi (2008: 295) asserts "The media contribute to the production and maintenance of discourses that affect our daily lives and create the surroundings in which our knowledge of ourselves and the world is formed."

Viewed, therefore, in this backdrop one finds that the attack on the twin towers was indeed gruesome and catastrophic but the way it was magnified systematically; relayed on air through electronic media with the powerful help of sounds and images and covered and portrayed by the print media, and quite significantly its relentless propagation worldwide twenty four hours a day gave the events an ugly turn for the immigrant characters of the novels of the study. And what added fuel to the fire were the statements of the high ranking officials of the United States and most importantly the speeches and statements of the President of America, George. W. Bush with messages both open and hidden that media covered and commented upon as a matter of faith and religion, *duty* and *honor*, and as if the whole world was about to come down to its knees in no time if some strong and appropriate action was not taken immediately against the perpetrators of the attacks. The attacks were thus considered as a war which needed a more powerful war in response. Although the military response was in the pipeline yet the media response to this war had already started immediately after the attacks and had pin pointed the enemies and side lined them wherever they were in the world irrespective of their status and whether or not they were involved in the attacks. The enemy is, however, an enemy and it does not matter whether or not he is fighting against you, was perhaps the principle that was followed and had to be followed. Huntington (2005: 25) writes "There is a need . . . "to have enemies and allies" . . . "the other group comes to be definitely viewed as the enemy" . . ."

The enemy, the 'Other' in the instant case was declared to be the Muslims and they had, therefore, to be suspected and subjected to maltreatment and hatred on false and fabricated grounds. Behind this construction and propagation of 'Othering' of the Muslims was an idea that Huntington (2005: 365) shares "Muslims increasingly see America as their enemy. If that is a fate Americans cannot avoid, their only alternative is to take the measures necessary to cope with it."

The demonization of the Muslims, hence their 'Othering,' although accelerated after 9 / 11 but it was not a sudden phenomenon as Said (1993: 36) had already pointed it out much earlier as he wrote "In the West, representation of the Arab world ever since 1967 War have been crude, reductionist, coarsely racial . . . Yet films and television shows portraying Arabs as sleazy, "camel jockeys," terrorists . . . pour forth anyway." The situation has, however, not much changed since then as according to Said (2003: 287) if the Arab occupies a space in the West for attention ". . . it is as a negative value" and all the Muslims are thought to be Arabs. This is why we see that when Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is abused in a parking lot in America as he is called "*Fucking Arab*" (TRF, 70). Similarly, in Jake's bar, immediately after 9 / 11, Chuck and his friends in *Home Boy* are humiliatingly called "*A-rabs*" (HB, 23). So, every Muslim suddenly became an Arab and a terrorist or a would-be terrorist and the empire, therefore, took upon itself the task of investigating the Muslims on one pretext or on another to the extent of pushing them behind the bar in the name of national security. Said (2003: 288) is, therefore, of the view "In newsreels or news-photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No

individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences." Such a portrayal of the Muslims in the media disturbs Said (2003: xvi) as he writes:

CNNs and FOXs . . . numbers of evangelical and right-wing radio hosts . . . tabloids . . . journalists, all of them recycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations so as to stir up "America" against the foreign evil.

Similarly, Khan (n.d: 2) describes "The media are American," and so the American media succeeds in creating a hype that all the Arabs and Muslims are terrorists and in this hue and cry the truth and the voices like that of Jensen (2004: 138) are subdued and not heard, as he emphasizes "For more than five decades throughout the Third World, the United States has deliberately targeted civilians or engaged in violence so indiscriminate that there is no other way to understand it except as terrorism."

But who cares? Who listens to the ordeals of the 'Other?' Chuck and Changez are similarly not cared and heard having an individuality of their own and are thus alienated. And so does Jensen (2004: 138) feel alienated, as on the day of 9 / 11 he finds his anger to be "directed not only at individuals who engineered the September 11 tragedy but at those who have held power in the United States and have engineered attacks on civilians every bit as tragic." Similarly, in the words of Micheal Ryan (2004) as quoted by Ruigork & Atteveldt (n.d: 4) the "war on terror frame was accepted without any counterarguments" and what is more alienating is that "the official point of views" were "reinforced through media."

### **Media and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* we see how important TV in America is when there is a conversation going on between Jim and Changez while they are in Manila and the underlying theme of their discourse is the sense of belonging in America. During their talk, Jim tells Changez that In America ". . . TV gives you a good view" (TRF, 42). Kamppi (2008: 299) opines "Muslims are depicted as a coherent group – aggressive and threatening, or with a tendency towards these attributes. Strong and charged words are used." One feels the impact of negative portrayal of Muslims on Changez when he says "Nothing troubled me . . ." but "How soon that would change! My world would be transformed" (TRF, 27). Thus the coverage of 9 / 11 by American media on an epic scale transformed the lives of the immigrants.

The immediate response of Changez, as he watches the tragedy on TV, is that as if he is watching a film but continuing to watch he realizes ". . .that it was not fiction but news" (TRF, 43). The 'Othering' of the Muslims in the Western media could be noticed when Khan (n.d: 3) writes "Western media presents Islam as a potential threat to western interests by portraying Muslims as supporters of militancy and anti-modernism."

One can, therefore, easily imagine the plight of the 'Others,' in the shape of self-alienation. How badly Muslims would have suffered when one reads the words of Chua (2007: 1) "The attacks on New York's World Trade Centre were followed and accompanied by the broadcast of images and sounds sparking emotional reactions among global audience." This broadcast of images and sounds was promptly accepted as natural and people started showing their reactions., *firstly*, by buying

what Said (1985: 90) calls "imaginative geography" of the Occident and the Orient as natural and, *secondly*, by wearing patriotic symbols on their sleeves like displaying the national flags. It appears that the American media that day and the following days had started whetting that inveterate fear in its citizens that Moore (2002: 57) talks about "We've been taught since birth that it's the people of that *other color* we need to fear. They're the ones who'll slit your throat!" The impact of the broadcast of the tragedy of the WTC was, thus, very much visible in the heart of America, i.e., New York, as it was invaded with the country's flags of every size and everywhere, and Changez narrates "They all seemed to proclaim: *We are America . . . the mightiest civilization the world has ever known; you have slighted us; beware our wrath*" (TRF, 47). Now, Changez's saying that 'beware our wrath' can't be the construction of his own imagination but the circumstances each day were a reminder of that as each new day brought in its wake new misery for the immigrants, hence, this single phrase alone is pregnant with the seeds of self-alienation. The impression of Pakistan in the American media in the words of Khan (n.d: 15) was absolutely negative as "Pakistan was framed as a "foe" before 9 / 11 and remained a foe after 9 / 11 in the editorial pages." So, the hero of the novel did not know how America was going to treat his country although "Pakistan had pledged its support to the United States" (TRF, 56). Changez then starts "avoiding the evening news . . ." (TRF, 59). He also describes "Often I would emerge into the car park to find that one of the tires of my rental car was punctured – far too often for it to be mere coincidence" (TRF, 57). Moore (2004: 51) says "Fear works . . . You can make people do anything if they're afraid" and "you make them afraid by creating an aura of endless threat." And such an aura of endless threat of fear was created by media only to frighten the 'Others' and destabilize 'them.'

In times of distress and distraught one looks towards one's own people. Changez too on one occasion "flipping through the channels, looking for a soothing sitcom" chances upon "a newscast with ghostly night-vision images of American troops dropping into Afghanistan . . ." (TRF, 59) and suddenly a feeling creeps in him "Afghanistan was a Pakistan's neighbor, our friend, and a fellow Muslim nation beside" (TRF, 60). Looking at and experiencing misrepresentation of Muslims in mainstream American media Changez tries to impress upon the American (s) that "we were not the crazed and the destitute radicals you see on your television channels" (TRF, 61). So, on and after 9 / 11 it was not just the portrayal of the Muslims as crazed and destitute radicals in the American media that could be a matter of concern for the 'Other' but there was much more to intimidate and threaten him like the consistent appearance of the American "flags and uniforms . . . generals addressing cameras in war rooms and newspaper headlines featuring such words as *duty* and *honor*" (TRF, 69). Unbelievable as it was, Changez finds himself unable to discern the causes behind all this warmongering and labeling game. The hero, therefore, talking to the American (s) says that "What your fellow countrymen longed for was unclear to me – a time of unquestioned dominance? of safety? of moral certainty? I did not know – but that they were scrambling to don the costumes of another era was apparent" (TRF, 69) and on finding no answer to such intricate questions which only add to his self-alienation, Changez, therefore, describes how it was to live in America those days "Living in New York was suddenly like living in a film about the Second World War; I, a foreigner, found myself staring out at a set that ought to be viewed not in the Technicolor but in grainy black and white" (TRF, 69). And, why all this? because, it is the "thrust of one's narrative that counts" and "not

the accuracy of one's details" (TRF, 71). There goes a saying that it never rains but it pours and we find the protagonist of the novel caught up in a similar situation. He broods:

I wondered how it was that America was able to wreak such a havoc in the world – orchestrating an entire war in Afghanistan, say, and legitimizing through its actions the invasion of weaker states by more powerful ones, which India was now proposing to do to Pakistan – with so few apparent consequences at home (HB, 78).

### **American Media and *Home Boy***

*Home Boy*, similarly, depicts a concatenation of upheavals and ordeals unleashed by the American media against the Muslim immigrants who are subjected to xenophobia, verbal abuse, physical assault, humiliating interrogation, imprisonment and intimidation of almost every kind and worst type. The only crime that the characters of the novel are charged with is that they are 'they,' so they have no rights, no recognition, no value, no culture, no identity and no humanism. The very realization and treatment of one's being 'they' creates an aura and sense of self-alienation that the whole novel is steeped in. The opening sentence of the first chapter of the novel is pregnant with the concept of self-alienation as one reads Chuck saying that "We'd become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren't before" (HB, 1). It is thus all about before and after and the line of demarcation between the two happens to be the American media in the event of 9 / 11. Before the unfortunate event the characters of the novel were just immigrants who had almost adjusted themselves to the American way of life and did not pose any threat to anyone at all, but, immediately after that, things turn topsy-turvy and we find the characters of Naqvi belonging to and standing on the other side of the world and this, as Berrington (2002: 50) puts it, "The 'other side', therefore, becomes automatically aligned with injustice, 'wrong' and 'evil'." And as ill luck would have it the words like 'wrong', 'evil', 'uncivilized', 'terrorists', 'fundamentalists', 'Muslims', 'Arabs', and many more of this kind, disseminated with a missionary zeal, identified as 'crusade' by Bush, through media into every nook and corner of America and the world at large. This missionary zeal worked and everybody from top to bottom, like the president and a lay man, internalized and naturalized these constructs with an unprecedented patriotic approach. And this surge of patriotism was visible, for instance, in the displaying of American flag. Huntington (2004: 3) points to this fact that:

Since the Civil War, Americans have been a flag-oriented people. The Stars and Stripes has the status of a religious icon and is more central symbol of national identity for Americans than their flags are for peoples of other nations. Probably never in the past, however, was the flag as omnipotent as it was after September 11.

Sudden and excessive patriotism makes one myopic, Davis (2002: 191) opines, it became "a war of the 'civilized' against the 'uncivilized'." It was thus natural, in the words of Jensen (2004: xxiii) that "The public would buy war" and the subsequent events showed that the public bought it promptly and the 'Others' started feeling the heat of the 'civilized' nation. In Jake's bar, therefore, we see that AC, Jimbo and Chuck hear abuses they had not heard before. To their self-alienation they are attacked with words like "Watchugonnafuckup . . . Misunderstood my ass . . . A-rabs" (HB, 23) and shortly to be pin pointed as "Moslems, Mo-hicans, whatever" (HB, 24) and after that there ensues a fight in which Chuck gets a bruise on his face which later on FBI at

Shaman's suspects that by not filing a police report he was trying to hide something, perhaps, sinister. Chuck is so frightened at the events' ugly turn that when Trig (FBI agent) interrogates him about his eye wound the protagonist says that "his accusatory gaze made me feel guilty, criminal . . ." (HB, 100). In this respect, Said (1985: 99) sounds reasonable "hostility to Islam in the modern Christian West has historically gone hand in hand with, has stemmed from the same source, has been nourished at the same stream as anti-Semitism." What reporting can do, Berrington (2002: 49) elucidates "in the reporting process there was sensationalism, dramatization and exaggeration of events that were in themselves so horrific that they needed no embellishment."

The imagery, tone, style, diction, catchwords, sensational pictures in the papers and on television screens all add to the miseries of Naqvi's characters. While standing at the Moroccan's newsstand waiting for Jimbo, Chuck on leafing through dailies and weeklies finds a compelling reading: a columnist for the *Post* wrote, he describes: "The response to this unimaginable 21<sup>st</sup>-century Pearl Harbor should be simple and swift – kill the bastards . . . As for the cities and countries that host these worms, bomb them to basketball courts" (HB, 41) and the *Time's* language was also disturbing as it said "What we need is a unified, unifying Pearl Harbor sort of purple American fury – a ruthless indignation that does not leak away in a week or two . . ." (HB, 42). This 'partisan and sports-event-like coverage' of the calamity is so disturbing that AC is found sick of the news and says "I'll be happy if I never watch CNN again" (HB, 89) and switches TV off. AC's getting sick of the news and switching TV off bespeaks of his acute sense of self-alienation that mass media kept generating in people like him. The mass media and the Western elites served the same purpose that day as in the words of Davis (2002: 192) "Western elites take it upon themselves to define what is 'good' and 'evil' or, as pertinently, 'force' and 'terror'."

Ac, Jimbo and Chuck did not know that soon they too are going to be suspected and arrested like Ansar Mahmood. They are going through the worst fear of their lives, and it is the fear of the unknown. We, therefore, see that on watching the tragic story of Ansar Mahmood, AC angrily yells at Chuck and says "Turn it off! . . . I told you I am sick of the fucking news!" (HB, 91). In the words of ABC's Peter Jennings that Jensen (2004: xxi) quotes "The response is going to have been massive." And the response was indeed massive both externally and internally. The worst had not yet come but when the President Bush joined the fray things took an uglier turn. Scraton (2002: 191) describes when Bush "finally appeared in public after the tragedies of 9 / 11, it was to declare a war on 'terrorism'. . . he called his war a 'crusade', codenamed 'Infinite Justice'." The biblical reference to the war had a clear message for the entire world and it bode serious repercussions for the Muslim immigrants. How could one rest in a war-slinging atmosphere and how one could remain untouched with the media when the news is not about anyone else but one's own self. This is why we see that although Chuck pays heed to AC's requests for switching off the TV yet he finds himself constrained to switch it on again. This time it is the Presidential address that goes like this "Tonight we are a country awakened to danger . . . Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done (HB, 94). Ali (2003: xx) too calls into question these American principles while throwing light on the aftermaths of 9 / 11 for the 'Others,' as he puts it "What is the balance sheet of the 'war against terror'? . . . approximately three thousand innocent Afghan men, women and children perished under the bombs."

## Exposing the Myth

America created a myth through its media. Davis (2002: 189) exposes this imperial myth as he says "Imperial systems have always generated powerful mythologies . . . Media and cultural study courses rightly assert their ubiquity . . ." Under such mythological perspective with pledges to curb violence, media instead projected violence by bombarding the masses with gory images that as a result made people violent, but as Duranti (2007: 11) quoting Fatima Mernissi records ". . . only violence is news, Bin Laden is a big news, but an Arab thinker like for example Al Jabiri . . . is not known by you. Why? Because he is not a 'big news', because he does not defend violence." Naqvi, thus, makes us look into one such representational act by the President of America who appears on the TV and directly addresses the Muslims. He says "*The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends . . . Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them (HB, 97).*" And muffled in this representation is a threat which media following the days of horror keeps emanating, implicitly and explicitly, for the poor characters of the novel. The president of the America, to the utter dismay of Naqvi's characters, pronounces on the TV screen "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (HB, 98). Abel (2003: 1241) sums up such a situation in a beautiful manner as "Speaking for others too often serves as a disguise for speaking one's own point of view, thus eradicating that which is the other." Similarly, at Shaman's FBI interrogates three friends. Trig, an FBI agent, asks them to "*sit-the-fuck-down and shut-the-fuck-up*" and they are "squeezed uncomfortably next to each other on the couch, necks stretched, knees clamped" (HB, 102) when one of them triggers the volume control of the TV and the President is heard saying "*As long as the United State of America is determined and strong . . . this will be an age of liberty (HB, 102).*"

The situation throughout the novel thus remains very tense as the misery piles upon misery by a powerful media of a powerful country and the characters are driven like dry leaves to be scattered over a land of chaos and uncertainty. The life of the characters seems to be divided into two periods and this division is produced by the mass media. The two divisions are the halcyon times and the difficult times. Chuck tells us about the difficult times that "In the latter half of 2001, however, my dreams had turned to shit. I suppose everybody's had" (HB, 143). But the self-alienation reaches at its climax when after facing the cruel buffets of the extremely untoward circumstances Chuck phones his mother and apprises her of what he and his friends has gone through. The tragedy reminds one of the famous lines from Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* like *I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed I bleed*. Chuck says to his mother:

'What do you want me to tell you, Ma? That life's changed? The city's changed? That there is sadness around every corner? There are cops everywhere? You know, there was a time when a police presence was reassuring, like at a parade or late at night, on the street, in the subway, but now I am afraid of them. I'm afraid all the time. I feel like a marked man. I feel like an animal. It's no way to live. . .' (HB, 206).

Thus, Chuck's saying that 'I feel like a marked man' is a big sign of his being marked and declared as an 'Other.' Similarly, Hamid's protagonist Changez too becomes a marked man. In this marking of the Muslim immigrants, American media plays an important role which simultaneously results in the self-alienation of both the characters of the two novels of this study. But media does not alone contribute to

the 'Othering' and self-alienation of the protagonists of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the *Home Boy*, their identity too contributes significantly to this respect.

### **Conclusion**

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Boy* provide a bleak picture of the role of American media which bruised and destroyed image of Muslims and presented them as barbarous and savages. While showing negative image of the Muslims to the world America might have pleased some sections of its society who considered Muslims as their enemies. However, Muslim community, throughout the globe, suffered badly because of criminal role of some bad Muslim guys. The negative portrayal of Muslims immediately after the catastrophic event jeopardized lives and properties of innocent Muslims worldwide. Muslims living in America were the worst sufferers and their families whether in Pakistan or other Muslim countries also had to undergo worst types of traumas. Changez and Chuck and their families and friends both in America and Pakistan are best examples of the direct victims of American media trial. At a time when Muslim nations could not voice their concerns against negative and meanest portrayal of their co-religionists, writers like Hamid and Naqvi through their powerful characters have tried to come up with a counter narrative that seems to have worked.



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