

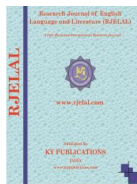


## DYNAMICS OF PERCEPTIONS: A STUDY OF ADIB KHAN'S *SPIRAL ROAD* IN POST- 9/11 CONTEXT

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### Abstract

Banal stigmatization often leads to ontological 'Otherness': morally distanced, yet politically threatening. Diaspora writer often experiences such 'neighboring alien' enigma plausibly, and Adib Khan's *Spiral Road* portrays this reality with rare visionary commitment. Standing amid the globalized cross-current of national and cultural boundaries, the protagonist of the novel finds himself in the irremediable gape of 'Ideogram', where unselfconscious coherence of community is receding in the farthest. Terrorism, which is often unscrupulously associated with Muslim and Islam, shrouded the oscillating condition of the protagonist and his nephew Omar, particularly after the tumultuous event of September 11, 2001. Objective reality sometimes gets blurred by the subjective perceptions and Khan's firsthand experiences faithfully demystify the tantalizing propaganda of Islamophobia. The present paper aims to deconstruct the generalized stigmatization against Muslims so far the issues of terrorism are concerned and unearth the hypocrisy of multicultural cosmopolitan ethos of the West.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, War on Terror, Post 9/11, Multiculturalism, Neocolonialism,

A luminous figure in South-Asian Diaspora literature in Australia, Adib Khan, like other immigrant writers, depicts the dichotomy of homeland and host land; of cultural differences; of ethnic and racial tensions. His latest novel *Spiral Road* (2007) dexterously deals these themes along with the special treatment of Post-9/11 reality. Standing amid the globalized cross-current of national and cultural boundaries, the protagonist of the novel, seems to halter after his true identity in terms of religion, culture and nationality; and substantially appears to be the direct victim of 'war on terror' in post 9/11 era of 'Green Menace'. In the continuum of multicultural dialogue, his identity as a 'lapsed- Muslim' is constantly at conflict by the Manichean worldview of the Westerners that

enhances the 'simplified complex representation' of the Muslims in the landscape of neocolonial mentality.

The entire plot of this novel revolves round the personal anguish and maladjustment of its expatriate narrator Masud Alam. Though born and brought up in colonial Bengal, his migrant life in Australia brought him on the verge of identity crisis. Taking Manikpur of Bangladesh as its locale, the novelist introduces Masud Alam, from respectable zamindar family of Bangladesh, who is now enjoying his life as a librarian in Melbourn for 30 years. During his journey to Bangladesh he comes under the scanner of intelligence agency and is subjected to a series of interrogations. But the thing gets worse when his cousin Omar is unfoundedly

suspected by the intelligence agency as terrorist on 'guilt by association principal' in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attack on the Twin Tower and Pentagon. It is indeed, a post 9/11 Islamophobia phenomena where Muslims are being targeted by the intelligence agencies as if every Muslim has inevitable terrorist affiliation.

Islamophobia – as defined by the Rannymade Report is 'an unfounded hostility toward Islam', or a 'fear or dislike of all or most Muslims'. This fear or dislike operates in two levels: on the psychological level – antagonistic feelings provoked towards the Muslim to incurred fear, anxiety, phobia, hostility, stigmatization and process of 'Othering'. Secondly, how this mental hostility metamorphosed into concrete action like – ostracization, interrogation, detention, deportation, exclusion, torture, surveillance and religious profiling. If Masud is victim of the former, Omar is direct sufferer of the later. Such anti-Muslim prejudice though come into soaring height in post 9/11 era, is not new to the West.

At the very outset of the novel Masud Alam met a Fellow passenger, Steven Mill in his flight to Bangladesh. During their conversation when Mill comes to know Masud's name and his connection to Bangladesh he becomes suspicious and enquires extensively about his whereabouts. Steven Mill, whose nexus to the secret agency yet to be clear to us, unscrupulously asks him if he has any terrorist connection: "Is there any connection" (12). Even at the immigration counter in America Masud had to face a range of questions due to his Arabic name. Amelia, his betrothed in Australia also seen to have been struck at his Muslim lineage and tries to hide her awkwardness with 'oh', but the "oh was prolonged and somehow seemed mysteriously meaningful" (19). These are just the tips of the iceberg of the hatred and enigma the European nurtured towards the Orient and particularly the Muslim in the post 9/11 period: a time when to be Muslim or non-Christian is to be interrogated and suspected. Masud beats his ineffectual frustration in the void – "terrorist to some...insurgent to others. Miscreant to the Pakistanis soldiers. I was nicknamed *explosive* and even made it to the top ten on the army's MOST WANTED LIST". (27)

Personally, Masud is leading a life whose, "current status wavers between atheism and agnosticism" (236). He is not interested anything Islamic or religious at all. He feels utter discomfort in the company of his uncle Rafiq, a zealot much interested in Muslim identity politics and worried about the vulnerable condition of the global Muslim community and particularly in Middle East and especially regarding Palestine. Unlike his elder brother Zia, who favour religiosity as bed rock of cultural identity and feels sympathy for Afghan People, Masud is cynical to spatial civilizational demarcation and its subsequent 'Clash of Civilization'. He is also rebuked by his uncle Rafiq for not supporting his scheme of things. Masud candidly disagrees with Rafiq's concept of penetrating the Christian world by any means as retaliation of injustice meted out to the Muslims. Masud question the act of terrorism vociferously – "So are you suggesting that what Mahammad Atta and other hijackers did was right?"(62). Certainly it is not right to him.

Masud is more concerned about global warming than global 'threat to Islam'. Killing innocent human being in any part of the globe is not acceptable to him. He longs "to believe in a structured universe designed purposefully for mankind" (89). When Zia asked him whether his turn towards non-religiosity is occasioned by the attack on New York, Masud circumvent the situation by taciturnity. And Zia's advocacy of "Clash of Civilization' between Christianity and Islam does not appease his attention. Zia is a stern believer in the Orientalist approach to the problem of global conflict. – 'Islam has been the only serious rival of Christianity". (96)

Masud's concerns become palpable at his vehement objection to his brother's nexus with Pakistan Army's inter service intelligent agents – Sadiq and Irfan. Zia believes that it is his religious imperative to help the Afghan people through providing them 'Bandages, medical equipment, sample medicine'. On the contrary, Masud consider it paramount to support the cause of terrorism, since it might be handed over to the terrorists. Though Zia has been trapped by the Ex. Pakistani Army's intelligence officer, he considers it to be a

service to humanity – “I know I am not supposed to sell sample medicine, but what I am supplying goes to help the injured...to me their lives are just as precious as those of westerners” (98). When Zia is reprimanded by Masud for his thoughtless contribution that substantially help the causes of terrorism he reacts vehemently—“don’t be paranoid! Stop looking at the world with western lenses” (104). Zia’s retort to his views is indicative of his stand: A fierce opponent to the European aggression to the Islamic world. Eventually Zia does not have any connection with Al-Qaeda or Taliban; he only feels sympathy for the victim of ‘war on terror’. But paradoxically his good intention is being channelized to bad ending.

In spite of Masud’s indifference toward any religious affiliation, he is destined to fall prey under the purview of ‘war on terror’. This is, indeed, a post 9/11 Islamophobia phenomenon where none can get rid of the witch hunting and systematic state sponsored segregation, and Masud is no exception. Stephen Mill and Nichols are representatives of westernized Christian allies who consider the Muslims as ‘internal threat’ for the world peace and stability. Irony is that Masud’s expatriate identity is matter of great unease to his compatriots who succinctly consider him as ‘Native Informants’ spying their activities. The mobs who are demonstrating against the invading of capitalism in Muslim world on the street of Dhaka also suspect Masud as a spy and unscrupulously question his religious affiliation. The insurmountable identity crisis is apparent when Masud was asked to prove himself as a ‘trustworthy’ by reciting surah (Qur’anic verses) from the holy text. In a very unjustifiable manner Masud gave a self declaration—“I assure them that I have not converted to Christianity” (174). He finds himself in the cultural flux of two polarized world views that substantially makes him what Homi K. Bhaba calls ‘a hybrid’ one.

Unfortunately, Masud himself is constantly spied over by the agency and held suspected for his Muslim name and connection to Bangladesh. Mill and Nichols on their “search for terrorist cell and training facilities in the country” (197) brought Masud under their constant surveillance. And unveiling of Zia’s ‘business’ with the Pakistani

military agency accelerates their suspicion over him. This act of xenophobic treatment toward Masud disillusioned him regarding multicultural ethos of European secular views – “So, I am a terrorist suspect...any male with a muslim name and you turned into a hound” (197). The west is succumbed to circumvent the people to believe that all terrorist are Muslim, if not all Muslims are terrorist. Even westernized ‘good Muslim’ suffers at their ill-designed terror –hunting ‘game’; in terms of civic loyalty; in terms of cultural participation and cosmopolitanism. Mill questions Masud – “where does your loyalty lies?”(240). This immediately unmasks the very hypocrisy of the Western value – where suspicion can be made on ethnic ground. Such curtailment of human rights of the migrants is directed to a person who is “neither a traitor nor a blind patriot” (241). Racial segregation deems paramount when Masud ruminates his changing of religion – “may be I should have changed my name to John Something and converted to Christianity. Right religion” (245). Finally, he searches his identity through the hazy lanes of his memory with a stoically resigned mood – “Who am I? Born in a Muslim family, a Bengali, a freedom fighter. A suspected terrorist sympathizer? An Australian, a librarian.....a scarred person” (245). Even, when Masud asks them whether his brother Zia is involved with any terrorist link, they frankly confess that “there is no solid evidence” (243). This lack of evidence and thoughtless suspicion turns the counter terrorism project to a greater extent a helping phenomenon to the radicals – this would be more conspicuous in the subsequent part of the novel.

The pivotal figure who is directly linked with the terrorist activities in this novel is Omar, only son of Zia. He was a brilliant student and ‘did brilliantly in IT from top flight university and enjoying a lucrative IT profession in first world country –the USA. But suddenly he had left the job as “he didn’t want to live in the states any more” (44). His activities and way of life seem to be utterly strange and his bohemian, picaresque and most importantly intriguing wilderness easily compels his father to believe that “he has changed so much” (45). Now he has recruited himself in a terrorist outfit. Interestingly Omar is not educated from any Islamic

seminaries, nor is he a practicing Muslim in private life. In the hilly track of Chittagong and Sundarban Jungle, he is conducting militant camp with Amin Haider, who is also endowed with overseas education. Such are the cases rampant in this region, as Masud is informed by Alya that “professionals and business people, educated in the west, are coming back disgruntled with their lives, especially in the USA and England. Such potential recruits ... are intelligent and resourceful”. (157)

But the question is why and how such brilliant educated youth fall prey in terrorist trap. Omar is never a devout religious from his childhood, nor does he undergo any brainwashing from extremist group. His terrorist involvement is rather a reaction against the humiliation he faced in the first world just after the event of 9/11. It was the attack of Twin Tower on 9/11 that has changed the world scenario. Owing to the rapid spread of Islamophobia, the innocent Muslims in the first world were targeted by the people of the land and the intelligence agency. Omar also had to undergo the same wretched plight and his residential place was also ransacked by the police then “they handcuff him and bundle him off to prison” (288), leading to his subsequent arrest and harsh interrogation – “does he have any connection with Middle Eastern men? Is he in contact with any Muslim in the country? Does he attend mosque meeting?”. (288)

Omar, nephew of the narrator Masud Alam is from Bangladesh, a pre dominantly Muslim majority country. His connection to Bangladesh and Muslim name caused him a great trouble in the USA after 9/11. He undergoes the practical aspect of what Nichols says to Masud earlier; in their treatment to the suspect: “we cannot afford to be negligent, even if it sometimes means questioning, even harassing, those who are not involved” (197-98). On being asked by Masud, why he has involved himself with terrorism, Omar let us know that immediately after the fall of Twin Tower, the entire USA suddenly become hostile toward him: “he has to be netted in the sweeping generalization of revenge” (287). In the days to come, when he went to the work place he become an object of nuisance for his colleagues, even his boss expresses his inability to protect him

in this regard. Consequently, he left his job in London and journeyed to the East including ‘Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, Afghanistan and of course Palestine. There he experiences firsthand knowledge of exploitation at refugee camp and this instigates him to embrace the ‘Spiral Road’. Such acts are fueled to a greater extent by the ‘professional islamphobs’; as in the case of US attorney general John Ashcroft who unscrupulously opined – “the attack of September 11 were act of terrorism against America orchestrated and carried out by individuals living within our borders... they live in on communities – plotting , planning and waiting to kill a Americans again”. (Ashcroft)

In the days, weeks, and months that follow the 9/11 incident, we see an unprecedented swift over in the world order. The USA’s response to it is global ‘war on terror’, with an heraldry proclamation of ‘with us or against us’. Immediate enactment of the USA PARTIOT act wrought havoc on the domestic front. Both the initiatives help to constructing and perpetuate an Islamophobia narrative that features a ‘larger than life Muslim enemy’ for the world order. The Cold War(1948-1989) is over and the ‘Red Scare’ began to wane its vitality and in the 1970s a new Islamist force popularly known as political Islam appeared as a ‘Green Menace’ to the West. In this historical juncture the narrative gets its impetus throughout the globe.

These counter terrorism measures along with the gimmick made by the stock holder of the ‘professional Islamophobia’ – what Nathan Lean refers to as ‘Islamophobia Industry’ or the Centre for American Progress’s labels of ‘Islamophobia network’, justifies the unscrupulous surveillance over the Muslim ‘Other’. The FBI with the help of CIA indiscriminately hacked and harassed the immigrant citizen in the USA. Victims of what Rushdie calls ‘double unbelongingness’ are made susceptible to radical Islamic recruitment. And Omar represents one of them. Surveillance, detention, deportation, profiling and hate crime against the Muslim increased rapidly at this time. Those arrested were charged with verbal abuse without any concrete evidence or any judicial probing. The detainees were denied even the basic human rights

of getting the provision of law. Actually, these laws give the state agency an unlimited right to detain for any longer time without any court order or judicial trial. According to Human Rights Watch report the real 'crime' committed by those arrested was their connection to Islam: "Being a male Muslim non – citizen from certain countries become a proxy for suspicious behavior".

Historically, both the civilizations have sustained a prolonged antagonistic relationship for a long time since medieval period through Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, up till Colonial imperialistic time. Throughout these periods, though both these great civilizations come closer contact frequently, but only to unleash a negative perspective. With only few exceptions in academic endeavor like Pierre Byle, Boulailliers, Voltaire and Thomas Carlyle (first three are from France Enlightenment) to name a few, most of the Occi-Oriental encounter help to and pave way for the colonial imperialistic project. Most of their academic pursuits belong to what Edward Said popularized as 'Orientalism': presenting the East as 'white men's burden' to be civilized and cured as per white men's standards. But it is only after 9/11 that the West and the Muslim world rejuvenated their rivalry. It ultimately leads to the mutually exclusive relationship between the two. In the after mirth of 9/11, anti Muslim hysteria only gets impetus from Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' theory, as Amin Haider's opinion makes it clear – "The prejudice burst into the open after New York was attacked. It seemed like the signal that a great many people had been waiting for" (302). Thus Islamic world appears to be complete intellectual 'Other' in the binary opposition – that substantially, leads to Islamophobia. We have learned from Steven Mill, an intelligence agency member working in Bangladesh, how they easily stigmatize the Muslims from their prejudice purview – "the majority of the population follows Islam. Isn't it conceivable that there could be a terrorist centre here?"(238).

The problem of terrorism is anything but religious. Easy generalization that the religious ideology, particularly Islam is the driving force of terrorism would simply complicate the issue. Rather,

John Esposito rightly argues that "the causes of terrorism are more often than not rooted in political and economic grievances" (Esposito). Omar and his ally Amin Haider also confess to Masud the reason for their involvement in their 'Spiral Road'. Former eyewitnesses the wretched plight of the people in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine and yearns for the justice for the victims and thereby torn up the return ticket to the USA and 'continued the journey east' (287). Later believes in egalitarian society and for that they justify their act – "Life is a price they will pay, to strike out at a world that pretend to be just and caring" (301). During their conversation Amin Haider informs him that "their primary objective is to end global dominance by white nations, especially the English speaking ones. More economic balance, worldwide justice for the Palestinians. Less exploitation of underdeveloped nations, removal of corrupt regions in the middle east" (300). Thus they appear to be savior of the wretched, who can resonate the untold pangs of 'Westoxification'. Fundamentalists, as William M. McNeill rightly puts 'are those that recruits from society at large and spread because they answer, or seem to answer, newly felt human need'. That is why Islamic movements have been stronger in seemingly more secular and more advanced society.

Being humiliated at the hand of the whites, they even recruit the humiliated tribal people in the training camp in the hilly track of Chittagong and Sundarban. They are from deprived tribal communities like Chakma and Marma or Mru, who have been neglected by the main stream society. For example, Chakma tribe supported military junta in 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, thereby not been incorporated in main stream Bangladeshi community. Even the foreman of the factory run by Omar and his allies lost his leg in the "mine laid by Myanmar's army, near the border with Rakhaine" (269). Thus victims of what Rushdie refers as 'double unbelongingness' channelized themselves to be susceptible to the terrorist teachings. To justify their sense of lose and frustration, they gradually become deadly and often if not always used religious tenets as their ladder to suit their purpose – "Victim becomes aggressor in the vengeful and ever widening cycle of a life for life"(292) . As Regis



Debray rightly puts, religion for them is not 'opium of the people, but the vitamin of the weak'.

In the multicultural world, state's responsibility in celebrating the diversity of its citizens is seminal one. State should hone the composite outlook. Unfortunately, the USA's strategies in this regard are disheartening. Bush Doctrine of 'us versus them' shuns the focal point of the problem. It only hones the neocolonial interventionism in the Muslim majority countries. When Mill opined to Masud that they could pressure the Bangladesh government to act as per their will, the neocolonial hegemony over the 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries became candid. On September 20, 2001, President Bush asked 'why do they hate us?' 'They' certainly represent Muslims. Actually it reverberates the ethos of Bernard Lewis's 'root of muslim rage'. Indeed, it is not 'rage', but their retort against exploitation and aggression throughout the Middle Eastern states. Consequently counter terrorism measures appear to be a great scourge on its mission. Todd H. Green's opinion in this regard is pertinent here: "No effective plan to diminish the long-term threat of terrorism emerged in the months and years following 9/11 because the US government refused to take seriously how its own policies in the Middle East contributed to the condition that give rise to 9/11". (116)

Accordingly, the western intervention in Middle East creates a panic among the native people : they feel intimidated by their presence and think they are again about to be re-colonized by the Christian force—as Omar justified his stand to his uncle – "we don't want a repetition of the five hundred years. An Anglicised version of the treaty of Tordesillas won't do"(268). They believe in what Samuel P. Huntington says "The west won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence" (51). Thus it provoked the innocent Muslim youth to be recruited by the evils forces as the narrator of this novel ponders – "it's given impetus by nations, people and their ambition to dominate others, enabling to meander on; as individuals we are like the wheel on which it moves" (290). These agents of terrorism sanctimoniously try to up hold the cause of humanity— "innocent

Afghanis, Palestinians and Iraqis are being damaged every day, or are their lives worthless than an Australian?".(267)

It is the point of view that matter greatly in determining the paradigm of terrorism and patriotism. The West is trying to project the cause of Palestine as terrorism while the Palestinis warriors consider themselves as freedom fighter, fighting for the causes of their motherland. Masud Alam, once the member of Bangladesh liberation army, fought against Pakistan with zeal and enthusiasm often compares himself with Philistinians and Iraqis warriors – "I wonder if the Philistinians and Iraqis think similarly today" (229). Because Omar believes "world is more important than my family" (309), he is now comparing his terrorist attachment with that of Masud's desperate involvement in the liberation war of 1971. Masud is also musing in the same vain –"it could be that Omar feels the same way as I did then". For Omar, terrorism is nothing but a formidable defense against exploitation of English speaking world. It is a platform to wage war against western hegemony. Besides, Masud's elder brother Zia nourishes a radically different world view from that of Masud. The word 'freedom fighter' and 'terrorist' connotes opposite meaning to each of them. Zia is supplying 'Bandages equipment, Sample medicine' to the war victims of Waziristan and Afghan border as an act of generosity. Huntington's opinion in this regard deserves mention: "The non-West see as Western what the West sees as universal. What Western heralded a benign global integration, non-westerners denounce as nefarious western imperialism. To the extent that non-Westerns see the world as one, they see it as a threat". (66)

*Spiral Road* has subtly dealt with the issue of terrorism with a probing commitment. Here Mr. Khan is neither blind to the origin and development of terrorism, nor is influenced by the westernized media hype to generalize everything Islamic to be ominous. He has, indeed, categorically delineated different strata of Muslim society and their views towards extremism. One thing, Khan is trying to uphold is that every dogmatic may not be a terrorist. Some dogmatic groups still hinge on the egalitarian principle of Islam and believe that it is through

democratic process that they could be able to establish Islam in Bangladesh. If we generalize them as terrorist it would be a gross mistake in dealing with the problems of terrorism. The western model of 'war on terror' suffers this drawback In delineating the different aspect of terrorism, thus Adib Khan maintains an authenticity in this novel .He has been able to make us understand that the terrorist recruitment has always been accelerated by the injustice and exploitation. To check the terror outfit in the globe we have to be more cautious and particularly world intelligentsia must have greater responsibility in using counter terrorist formula. Otherwise the culprits might get benefited from our reckless approach.

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