

Islamophobia and Occidentalism in A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds

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Abstract

This article will shed light on the concepts of islamophobia and occidentalism in Safi Abdi's novel A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds (2002). The novel revolves around a cross-cultural marriage between a Muslim girl, Anisa, from Rako Island and Mike, an American man. Anisa suffered a lot in this marriage due to the rejection of the Western culture, including Mike's family and friends, of this relationship. She was seen as inferior, backward, aggressive and threatening for being black and Muslim. The portrayal of the female protagonist as such will be studied from the notion of islamophobia, a term that became common in the West, after it was introduced in a report that was published by the British Runnymede Foundation in 1997. Moreover, the depiction of the Western protagonist, Mike, as superior, drunk, and an atheist would be analyzed from the concept of Occidentalism; a term that refers to how non-Westerners perceive and present the West. Thus, the image of the Western culture in the novel will be studied also.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Occidentalism, A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds, Safi Abdi.

المستخلص

هذه المقالة تلقي الضوء على مفاهيم "الاسلام فوبيا والاستغراب" في رواية الكاتبة صافي عبيدي "اصطدام جبار بين عالمين" التي نشرت سنة 2002. تدور احداث الرواية حول زواج عبر الثقافات بين أنيسة، بنت مسلمة من جزيرة راکو، ومايك الاميركي. لقد عانت أنيسة بسبب هذا الزواج من رفض المجتمع الغربي لها وخصوصا عائلة زوجها وأصدقائه. كانوا ينظرون اليها كهابطة، ومتخلفة، وعدائية وتشكل تهديدا كونها مسلمة وذو بشرة داكنة. سيتم دراسة كيفية نقل شخصية أنيسة بهذا الشكل من وجهة نظر "الاسلام فوبيا"، المصطلح الذي انتشر في الغرب بعد تعريفه في تقرير نشرته مؤسسة "رانيميد" البريطانية سنة 1997. بالاضافة الى ذلك، سيتم دراسة وصف شخصية الاميركي مايك كشخص أسمى، ثمل، وملحد من وجهة نظر "الاستغراب"، مصطلح ينقل صورة الغرب من قبل الشرقيين. لذلك سيتم دراسة كيفية نقل المجتمع الغربي في الرواية أيضا.

كلمات المفتاحية: اسلام فوبيا، الاستغراب، اصطدام جبار بين عالمين، صافي عبيدي.

Introduction

The relationship between the East and the West, particularly between Muslims and Americans, has always been under study; but it came to the fore after the "terrorists" attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. A wave of islamophobia exploded across the West charging all Muslims

to be terrorists, violent, and aggressive. They were harassed, marginalized, and discriminated against all over the world. This profound issue has been tackled in various areas and in literature where writers discussed it in their writings. The Somalian writer Safi Abdi shed light on this topic through her novel *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* (2002), where the relationship between Muslims and Americans is exemplified by the cross-cultural marriage between Anisa, a Muslim girl from Rako Island (somewhere in the East) and Mike, an atheist American. Anisa travels to the United States as an exchange student. When she arrives there, she tries to maintain her Islamic faith and to practice Islamic teachings. However, she soon abandons all that when she meets Mike and falls in love with him. They get married, but their marriage was rejected by their surroundings. Mike's family and friends showed hatred towards Anisa and called her "alien creature," "submissive creature," "black alien," and "primitive soul" (169-170). Hatred towards Muslims is not only expressed by Mike's family, but also by the Christian missionaries at schools in Rako Island where Muslim students are discriminated against. On the other hand, images of the West are depicted in the novel by describing the life style of Anisa's American flatmate, Mike's family, and Mike himself. This depiction as portrayed through the eyes of Anisa will also be analyzed.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to shed light on islamophobia by analyzing how the Western culture exemplified by Mike and his surrounding treat Anisa and discriminate against her for being black and Muslim. In addition, the portrayal of the Westerners in the novel will be focused on too.

Literature Review

Not many studies have been found on the novel *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds*. One of the major works that analyzed it is "Cross-cultural Marriage and Hybrid Identities in Three Anglophone Novels" by Abir Tahsildar (2013), where the focus was on the identity of the Muslim female protagonist and how it developed when she married someone from another culture and religion. Tahsildar concluded that Anisa's identity went through different phases when she traveled to the United States. First, she experienced adaptation to the host culture, and then she felt remorse and lived a struggle for abandoning her Islamic teachings and marrying someone from a different culture and religion that oppose her own.

Another major article that deals with the novel under study is "Postcolonial Migration and Strategies of Resistance in Safi Abdi's *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* and *Offspring of Paradise*" by Andrew Nyongesa (2016). The focus of this article is on the acts of resistance experienced by Anisa and the protagonist of *Offspring of Paradise* who are considered as migrant characters living overseas. It evaluates fixity and hybridity as modes of resistance. Moreover, an additional article written by the same author, entitled "Diverse Possibilities at the In-Between Space: Postcolonial Critique of Safi Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise* and *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds*" (2017), examines how migrant characters use the in-between space to survive in a polarized cosmopolitan society.

The importance of this paper lies in the contribution it offers to the field of literature by examining the concept of Islamophobia in the novel embodied by the Western characters' rejection of Anisa and by treating her as an inferior and an "other" for being Muslim and black. In addition, the portrayal of the Western lifestyle which is manifested by the behavior and conduct of Anisa's flatmate, Mike's actions, and his family's way of living will be focused on too.

Thus, this research aims at investigating and answering the following research questions:

1. How is Islamophobia presented in the novel?
2. How is the image of the West depicted in the novel?

Methodology

The notion "Islamophobia" was first introduced in 1997 in a report entitled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" by the British Runnymede Foundation as a sequel to another report by the same Foundation on anti-semitism. The report did not settle on a clear and unified definition of the term, but it included eight characteristics that seem sufficient to clarify this phenomenon as stated by Frans Groenendijk in his article "Islamophobia: Defying the Battle Cry" :

1. Islam is seen as a single monolithic bloc, static, and unresponsive to new realities.
2. Islam is seen as separate and other- (a) not having any aims or values in common with other cultures, (b) not affected by them, (c) not influencing them.
3. Islam is seen as inferior to the West- barbaric, irrational, primitive, sexist.
4. Islam is seen as violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in a clash of civilizations.
5. Islam is seen as a political ideology, used for political or military advantage.
6. Criticisms made by Islam of the West are rejected out of hand.
7. Hostility towards Islam is used to justify discriminatory practices towards Muslims and exclusion of Muslims from mainstream society.
8. Anti-Muslim hostility is accepted as natural and normal. (p.4)

Another author Ramon Grosfoguel defined Islamophobia in his article "The Multiple Faces of Islamophobia" (2012) as "the subalternization and inferiorization of Islam produced by the Christian-centric religious hierarchy of the world-system since the end of the 15 century" (p. 11).

These above mentioned definitions have been shared across the literature in Islamophobia studies until today. Islamophobia is a prejudice against all Muslims due to their religious belonging despite the fact that not all Muslims are terrorists and enemies of the West. Islamophobia is the unfortunate degrading of Muslims' ethics and discrimination against them.

On the other hand, according to Rasheed El-Enany (2006), the West is viewed as “an object of love and hate, a shelter and a threat, a usurper and a giver, an enemy to be feared and a friend whose help is to be sought” (p.2). However, he adds that as the United States became a super power at the end of World War Two with growing interests in the Middle East, its image in Arab literary works began to change radically to the negative (p.154). Moreover, Buruma and Margalit (2004) believe that the Japanese view America as “a rootless, cosmopolitan, superficial, trivial, materialistic, racially-mixed, fashion-addicted civilization” (p.8).

All of the above mentioned images whether of Muslims or of Westerners will be examined in the novel by applying a qualitative content analysis in order to analyze the textual data which are derived from the utterances of the main characters in the novel.

Analysis and Findings

Textual data in the novel including the narrator’s sentences and the characters’ utterances reflect the notion of islamophobia. Starting with the atmosphere in Rako Island where Anisa comes from, it is found that there are two different religions in the area: one Muslim and the other Christian. Anisa is attending a Christian school, and it seems that Muslims face discrimination at this school as the narrator states: “it had never been a school policy to include Muslim girls in the school exchange program” (p.13). The principal of the school thinks that “education’s a waste on these people” (p.14); thus, Muslims are considered as primitive and backward. The Christian missionaries at school are trying to convert Muslim kids into Christianity because they believe that Muslims are an impediment to their success in the Island: “The only weapon we have is to see to it that they remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy until they come to their senses” (p.16).

Anisa continues to face discrimination and prejudice for being a Muslim when she moves to the United States. She falls in love with an American, but his family rejects her. Mike’s mother thinks that her son is “messing around with people given to terrorism” (p. 67), and she calls her names like “the black alien” (p. 169). In addition, his sister stated that she expected her to be a “submissive creature” (p. 170), and blames her brother for “importing some alien creature from some island down the lower hemisphere” (p. 170-171). Anisa suffered a lot because of the cultural and religious differences between her and Mike especially after their marriage. She tells Khadija, the wife of the responsible for an Islamic center in America, that Mike possessed a bad image about Islam:

The affluent Muslims who won’t help their own and squander their money on nonsense; the easily corrupted Muslims; the so-called Muslim governments; the desperate, violent Muslims. (p.200)

Reflecting on what Groenendijk said about islamophobia, all of the above utterances said by Western characters assert his viewpoint of Islam and Muslims being primitive, aggressive, and supportive of terrorism.

Looking at the other periphery, specifically on the image of the West as depicted in the novel; it is noticed that this image is also prejudiced by the Muslim characters in the novel. First of all, the non-Muslim population in Rako Island is tourists who the government consider as good to the economy of the Island. However, they are portrayed as drunk and crazy with revealing clothing: “the skimpy clothing in which they came was skinned away, and the flesh fully exposed to the sweltering rays of the sun....they whirled crazily, drank themselves silly and mingled until dawn” (p. 7). Moreover, Anisa’s mother warns her daughter not to mingle with Rebecca because she’s not Muslim: “your promise to stay away from that girl....she’s no good. Her father’s a drunkard, and her mother’s never home” (p.11). She adds that they never had the need to mingle with the “kafir population” (p.11). Thus, Muslims at Rako Island consider the non-Muslims as “kafir” and avoid mixing with them.

Second of all, the image of the Westerners in the novel as drunk and cheaters is depicted through describing the way of life of Floor, Anisa’s roommate in America. She smokes and drinks alcohol. Her father cheated on her mother and he’s living with another woman with no official marriage. This makes Anisa shocked and surprised of the differences between the cultures. She considers marriage according to Islamic teachings as superior to the illegitimate relationships that occur in the West (p. 61). Anisa describes Americans as atheists who never cared about Isa the Messenger of Allah: “I haven’t met a single Christian in this country” (p. 51). In addition, the word drunk is repeated to emphasize that this is normal to people in the U.S.: “The one who truly stuck only to the occasional social drink deserved a medal” (p. 137). Not only that, but also Yusuf’s questions to Anisa about her husband conveyed what Americans might be like. He asked her whether he is a drug addict, a gambler, a criminal, a nudist, an incest person, a parent hater (p. 138).

Considering what was mentioned in the theoretical part about Rasheed El-Enany who said that the West is viewed as an object of love and hate, shelter and threat; this is noticed in Anisa’s reaction when she first arrived in the United States. She integrated into the culture at first and stopped practicing her religious teachings. However, after she married an American, she hated living with an atheist and felt guilty for abandoning her religion’s practices. Moreover, Buruma and Margalit mentioned that America is viewed as rootless, superficial, and materialistic and this is how Anisa views Mike who represents Americans. He pays attention to materialistic things and does not care about spiritual or religious matters which constituted the main conflict between the couple.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the issue of Islamophobia and the image of the West in Safi Abdi’s novel *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* (2002). The aim has been to shed light on

how the female Muslim protagonist in the novel has been discriminated and rejected by the Western characters. On the other hand, Western characters were depicted and prejudiced in a certain way that reflects a negative image by the author. Few studies have been done on the novel, and none has focused on the notion of Islamophobia and the image of the West in it. Thus, this research sought to fill a gap in existing literature by examining the mentioned issues. Additional research could be done on the novel by studying it from different approaches such as feminism and post colonialism.

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