

Islamophobia in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

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abstract

Islamophobia is a phenomenon that has arisen more prominently in the past decade due to the terrorist attacks that have taken place, but also due to the media and its negative depiction of the Muslims. Amy Waldman wrote the novel *The Submission* to portray this changed Western view onto the Islamic religion, and the ensuing consequences that have not only affected the Muslims themselves, but also caused Americans to be defensive against anything that is unknown. Through her novel, Waldman illustrated the consequences of such fear, and how this still is evident in the Western society.

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Introduction

The term 'islamophobia' was, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, first used in 1991 in the American periodical *Insight*. Although the term was earlier used in 1925 by Etienne Dinet and Slima Ben Ibrahim as they stated: "accès de délire islamophobe", the meaning differed from the contemporary usage and thus could not be seen as such. The French authors Fiammetta Venner and Caroline Forest believed the term to go back to the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979), but again, the meaning differs from the way it is used

nowadays. (Allen, 2010:5) What is considered to be as the first usage of the term in contemporary discourses is the Runnymede Trust publication *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997). It clarifies the prejudice, fear, and hatred towards the Muslims causing them to be excluded from many political and social matters, as well as provides possible solutions. (Fawzi, 2015:229) In this report, the word 'islamophobia' has been defined as an unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such

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hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. (Conway, 1997:4)

This fear and/or hatred is, however, not something new as it had existed since the very origins of Islam, yet with the increasing terrorist attacks such as 9/11 and the London bombings on 7/7/2005, as well as the role of the media, this resulted into a greater discrimination against the religion than ever before. Muslims have strongly been affected by many accusations and abuse. (Zempi, 2016:4) It was directly after the attacks of 9/11 that Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda were accused of being accountable for the attacks, and American Muslims in general started to be perpetuated as the reason behind terror, followed by hate crimes against them, including insults, assaults, and even going as far as committing homicide. (Love, 2017:89-90)

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said stated that there are three main reasons which have ultimately resulted into a greater hatred and/or fear towards Islam. The first reason he mentions is the classic prejudice of the West towards Arabs and Islam. The second reason is the Arab-Israeli Zionism conflict that plays a major role onto the perception of the American Jews and the liberal society on the whole. The third reason is the scarce opportunities there are available to feel acquainted with, or debate with Arabs, and to understand the religion of Islam. Said adds that "because the Middle East is now so identified with Great Power politics, oil economics, and the simple-minded dichotomy of freedom-loving, democratic Israel and evil, totalitarian, and terroristic

Arabs", it becomes hardly possible to discharge the accusations and remove the prejudices. (Said, 1979:26-27)

1. The Novel

The Submission is one of the novels that depict the events occurring after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Although the book is from the year 2011, its story is set in 2003, two years after the attacks. (Golimowska, 2016:98) This novel depicts the themes of trauma and mourning, entangled with politics, in order to portray the prejudices that have come forth because of it. (Keeble, 2014:166) It was a period in which no Muslim could escape the strong prejudice against them, mosques were attacked, and even those who looked like Muslims were often in danger. It was an "us versus them" ideology that pervaded. (Pope, 2016:31)

The story revolves around a Muslim man named Mohammed Khan who happened to win the anonymous competition to design the 9/11 memorial for the victims. Even before this character appears in the story, and only his name became known, there is already a great confusion and prejudice against him. The question remains whether a competition fairly won by the architect Mohammed, could actually be accepted by the jury and by the society, since after all, the Muslims are believed to have been the cause of the same terrorist attacks. (Keeble, 2014:165) The writer Karolina Golimowska stated that the events portrayed in the novel, in fact, reflect the commotion and disturbance in the American society right after the terrorist attacks:

The prejudice-driven conflicts around the future of this new space within the city and the media discourse of paranoia, fear and smear campaigns reflected in the novel symbolically stand for the condition and general confusion of the American society at the time. (Golimowska, 2016: 98)

Khan's design '*The Garden*' creates a national outrage, even though everyone seemed to agree that he is the righteous winner. Although he identifies himself as a "secular, ambitious American", he is unable to deny his religious background. (Boxall, 2013:137) This results into an inner conflict within himself, as well as an outer conflict that arises between the Muslims and the West.

2. The Analysis

3.1 The Design

The novel looks into fictional events occurring after the 9/11 attacks, in which thousands of submissions have been sent by anonymous individuals for a competition. The winning design should serve to be a memorial for the World Trade Centre. After a long deliberation amongst the jury, which consists of architects, politicians, art critics, as well as individuals that represent the victims' families, a winner has to be chosen. (Araújo, 2015: 32)

The submissions have finally been narrowed down to two, one called 'the Void' and the other 'the Garden'. A debate arises between Ariana Montagu, who is a known sculptor, and Claire Burwell, a 9/11 widow. The former believed 'the Void' should win, which is a "modernist design of black rectangular granite, towering twelve stories high over an oval pool that would reflect the names of the dead carved

into the granite above." Claire, on the other hand, believed this design to be too dark for the victims' families, as it is not only a place to mourn and remember the dead, but to heal as well. Therefore she voted for 'the Garden'. (Morley, 2016:185) She was able to convince most of the jury members of this design, causing it to win.

The concept was simple: a walled, rectangular garden guided by rigorous geometry. At the center would be a raised pavilion meant for contemplation. Two broad, perpendicular canals quartered the six-acres space. Pathways within each quadrant imposed a grid on the trees, both living and steel, that were studded in orchard-like rows. A white perimeter wall, twenty-seven feet high, enclosed the entire space. The victims would be listed on the wall's interior, their names patterned to mimic the geometric cladding of the destroyed buildings. (Waldman, 2011:4)

Khan himself also explained about his design and what his purpose was behind creating it. In defending himself after many accusations, he decided to give a public statement in a hearing:

"I'd like to talk about the design a little. To me, the wall framing the garden, the wall with the names, is an allegory for the way grief frames the aftermath of this tragedy. Life goes on, the spirit rejuvenates-this is what the garden represents. But whereas the garden grows, and evolves, and changes with the seasons, the wall around it changes not at all. It is as eternal, as unalterable, as our mourning-" (Waldman, 2011:216-217)

Nearing the end of the novel, the story is set twenty years into the future in Mumbai, where the design has become reality. It has been built for a rich Muslim sultan or emir. The difference however, is that instead of the victims' names; Arabic passages from the Quran are scripted into it. (Morley, 2016:191)

3.2 Stereotypes and Prejudices

Accusations on Muslims stem from a deep Islamophobia that developed over time, and did not happen out of the blue. Its consequences, however, took its form rapidly after the terrorist attack of 9/11, in which the media played a significant role in bashing the Islamic religion. Many perspectives have changed, and many started to doubt the reality of the Islamic faith and its followers, clearly portrayed in the following excerpt as the governor himself stated his hesitation when the name of the winner appeared to be Mohammed Khan:

"I'm not sure I want it with the name Mohammed attached to it. It doesn't matter who he is. They'll feel like they've won. All over the Muslim world they'll be jumping up and down at our stupidity, our stupid tolerance." (Waldman, 2011:18)

It is only Claire Burwell, considered to be the American representative of the aftermath of this tragedy as she herself is a 9/11 widow, who stands up for Mohammed's design, before and after his name was revealed. Her vote is seen as significant, due to her grief for her husband, a privilege that Muslim widows do not have. (Pope, 2016:31) She is well educated, wealthy, and always believed in the American dream. Her husband Cal inherited

his wealth, and in his lifetime tried to incorporate it into good deeds to live as a respectable American citizen, until he died in the attacks of 2001, leaving Claire as a widow with two children, who then became the spokesperson for the grieving families. (Bell, 2017:39-40)

In Khan's defense, Claire spoke out that "(t)olerance isn't stupid," ... "Prejudice is." (Waldman, 2011:18) The writer Ingrida Žindžiuvienė stated that these spoken words portray exactly the "impact of the 9/11 on American's attitudes toward the Muslim and immigrant communities all over the United States of America". Waldman was not after following the reader's demands, but she wanted to depict the "emotional upheaval" that exists even today. (Rudaitytė, 2012:153) Thus, the terrorist attacks not only changed the perception of America towards Muslims, but also that of immigrants in general. The borderline between tolerance and prejudice has come so close; it resulted into a fear of the unknown.

Although Claire firstly supported the design firmly, later on she started to doubt Khan and his design due to the fact that he never explicitly clarified his intention behind the design, or where it originates from. Moreover, she begins to resent him for not thanking her for her open support. (Bell, 2017:42) Yet, he believed otherwise, as "to thank her would suggest, somehow, that she was doing something extraordinary. He wouldn't congratulate her for being decent. Her expectation made him want to refuse." (Waldman, 2011:111) It is as if her support and white American power is "conditional and

dependent on recognition and gratitude.” Her unsatisfied need for gratitude finally leads her to suspect his motives as well, along with the rest of the jury. Moreover, because he never openly denounces terrorism, it seems to her that he then sides along with them. (Bell, 2017:42)

"Followers of your religion have caused enormous pain. Caused me enormous pain. And for all of us, it's very difficult to sort out what Islam actually means or encourages. What Muslims believe. A lot of Muslims who would never commit terrorism still support it, for political reasons if not religious ones. Or they pretend it wasn't Muslims at all who did this. So it's not unreasonable for me to ask where on that continuum you sit. To learn at the hearing that you've never denounced the attack-I'll be honest, that was upsetting. Why haven't you?" (Waldman, 2011:270)

Mohammed Khan is held responsible for an attack he never committed nor ever supported, and yet this is what is being implied by the one American person who stood up for him. Although Claire is highly educated, she was unable to fight off the stereotypes and accusations against the Muslims and, strongly influenced by the media and her surroundings, started to believe in them as well.

3.3 Islam and Terrorism

The first direct association between Islam and terrorism appears very early in the novel, in the second chapter, spoken by the mayor's aide named Violet:

"This – this Mohammed hasn't technically won the competition yet. I mean, there are safeguards built in, right, against criminals. Or

terrorists...if he were, we wouldn't let him build the memorial, would we?" (Waldman, 2011:19)

This sentence clearly shows the reluctance and fear of Violet, that a person named Mohammed could pose a serious threat. Her final question shows that she is quite uncertain of what the right action should be, and whether they should be appointing a different name as the winner of this competition, since, after all, the winner might be a criminal or a terrorist himself.

Although previous terrorist attacks caused the Arabs and Muslims to be seen as a threat to the American society, it would be temporary as after a while they would only be considered to belong to the 'other' 1.3 billion Muslims, different from the rest of the people. Arab Americans were assumed to be Muslims, regardless of their true religion. Later on, this included even the Sikhs, labelling all identities as one due to either cultural ignorance caused by the media or a certain bias on what Arabs would look like. Following the 9/11 attacks, their loyalty towards America began to be questioned even more. (Kabir, 2013:116)

Two years after the terrorist attacks, as the storyline plays in 2003, the consequences have not faded away, and the prejudices and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims remained, if not became worse. The writer herself doubted a situation could occur similarly to the novel, until the controversy of the Ground Zero Mosque became a national debate and Waldman realized she was right after all. This controversy surrounded the project of building a mosque very near to the

place where the World Trade Center was. The idea occurred that the mosque could represent a resting place for the nineteen terrorists, just as the way Waldman depicted how Khan's memorial could be "a tribute to the martyrdom of the attackers rather than a memorial to the victims." Despite the similarities in the ensuing debates, the novel was written long before these events occurred, and was able to portray the very tensions and problems inherent in today's society. (Gauthier, 2015:199)

The fifth chapter opens up about the indifference Khan started to feel towards the attacks on Muslims: "A year after the attack, news about Muslims arrested or suspected, the constant parsing of Islam's "true" nature, had become background noise for Mo." (Waldman, 2011:38) Thus, the attacks on Muslims became something natural in Mohammed's perception, due to the frequency of such occurrences. Rather than defense, he chose to ignore these events, accepting the situation as it is.

3.4 Influence of the Media

The importance of the media is clearly being depicted in this novel, taking the journalist Alyssa Spier as an example. She is a reporter from *The Daily News*, who plays a significant role in the novel as she represents the way mainstream media portrayed the Islam in the past years. Waldman presents this journalist who creates a "spectacle of the news". The writer Heather E. Pope mentions that "Spier is also a parody; she is an extreme version of what happens when the desire to report the news is twisted up with personal ambition." Spier believes that her directness allows her reporting to be "honest and

unbiased", yet the truth of the matter is that "there is no such thing as unbiased reporting". After all, for popular news to reach the audience, complete objectivity is far sought, even if the reporter claims otherwise. In the following excerpt Allyssa is thinking of how to phrase her column. After some contemplation, she ends up with the one sentence that sums up what she believes to be the truth. (Pope, 2016:29)

Islam was violent. It believed killing innocent people was acceptable. It didn't like women. It didn't like other religions. It was as hateful as her nausea. She was going to puke again.

"The problem with Islam is Islam."

She had one sentence. (Waldman, 2011:106)

The impact of the media is so strong, that without it, Khan would not have been rejected to build his memorial. In the following extract from the novel, words have been carefully selected by a journalist for *The New York Times*:

"One does not know, of course, if these parallels are exact, or even intentional-only Mr. Khan can answer that, and perhaps even he was unaware of the influences that acted upon him. But the possible allusions may be controversial. Some might say the designer is mocking us, or playing with his religious heritage. Yet could he be trying to say something larger about the relationship between the Islam and the West? Would these questions, this possible influence, even be raised if he were not a Muslim?" (Waldman, 2011:115)

Here, the journalist is indirectly criticizing Khan's motives in order to raise questions about his Islamic background and to stress how different he is from other people. Phrases like "one does not know", "only Mr. Khan can answer that" and "some might say", are chosen to insinuate that Khan is hiding something, and that he must have an ulterior motive for designing the garden that is yet to be discovered. Such phrases have been followed one after another "each one more incrementally damning than the last". (Lee-Potter, 2017:201-202)

What was first an indirect insinuation soon became a direct accusation spoken by several presenters on the television: "He's made a tomb, a graveyard, for them, not the victims. He would know that the Arabic word for tomb and garden are the same", as well as "(h)e's trying to encourage new martyrs-see, here's a taste of where you'll get if you blow yourself up". (Waldman, 2011:116) These are not questions anymore, but statements; affirmations that what they fear seems to be the truth after all. The idea that this memorial is a tomb for the terrorists remains vivid throughout the novel, even though information regarding the Arabic words is clearly false.

Soon after his name reached the headlines of all news reports as the possible winner of this competition, these accusations have led to direct threats and violent acts against Mohammed.

"The threats began soon after Mo's official anointment. By phone, by letter, by e-mail, his countrymen promised to burn him as the terrorists had incinerated their victims, to stab

him in the heart as he was stabbing America." (Waldman, 2011:123)

Ironically, that what the people claim they are against, which is terrorism; they act upon it towards the Muslims themselves, using violence against violence. They believe it is part of American patriotism, to protect it against the evil of Islam that wants to take over the West. It is as Claire's former lover Jack had stated: "The attack made everyone afraid of appearing unpatriotic, of questioning government, leaders. Fear has justified war, torture, secrecy, all kinds of violations of rights and liberties." (Waldman, 2011:201) The problem, furthermore, lies not only with the Islamophobic groups of people, as the American Muslims themselves believe that Mohammed Khan is "an instigator of further hostility", and that because of him, they are now being referred to as "the enemy". Therefore, they ask him to withdraw from the competition. (Khadem, 2015:71)

"With what you've unleashed, with the position you've put us in. Before you came along, it would have been shocking, unacceptable to refer to us as the enemy. Now it's no big deal."

"That's not my fault," Mo said. He wished his father weren't listening.

"You've made your point. You won. You can withdraw now." (Waldman, 2011:195)

2.4 Identity Crisis

In the midst of such debates, and in the heat of direct and indirect attacks, Khan faces a great difficulty identifying who he really is. Throughout the novel, ever since his name was made public, he is in "a personal quest"

figuring whether he always belonged to the Islamic or to the Western society. (Khadem, 2015:71)

At some point, Khan decided to grow a beard, since after all; he is seen as a Muslim by all outsiders so he might as well act like one. "He had grown the beard to play with perceptions and assumptions, to argue against the attempt to define him. If he shaved, would he be losing the argument or ending it? Was he betraying his religion?" (Waldman, 2011:213) His decision to grow a beard indicated he wanted to become a practicing Muslim, and not just one by name, yet soon he decided again to shave it, leaving his girlfriend Laila displeased that he is trying to hide "his growing Muslim convictions". The fact of the matter is that Khan is at loss which identity he should live with. Is it the one portrayed by the media and the people, or the one he has grown up with and raised by his parents, or was he wrong all his life and was he never truly a practicing Muslim? His decision to shave his beard indicated him losing the battle, and that if he stays in America, he would have to "submit, accommodate, and assimilate". Therefore, he decides to withdraw from the competition, and once again attempt to allow his design to be made into reality in a place elsewhere that does accept his name. (Pope, 2016:35)

Having to defend his design repeatedly, and proving himself over and over again that he is, in fact, a good human being, a good Muslim, and a good American, Khan finally decides to live in Mumbai, working for the Middle East, India, or China. As the novel portrays an image of twenty years later in the story, it

shows that, despite his previous idea of being an American, his "sense of national identity is clearly, permanently, altered." (Keeble, 2014:175)

Conclusion

Although fear of the Islam has existed ever since it came into existence, the past years has witnessed an enormous change into the way Muslims are perceived in the West. Rather than only stereotypes, there is now also a prevalent movement against the Islam. Criminals that are Muslims are called out terrorists by the media much more often than someone from a different religious background. Moreover, Muslims are frequently not accepted when they apply for a certain job, particularly women who wear headscarves. Despite the fact that this by itself is considered to be forms of discrimination, it has been happening for so many years that oftentimes it is overlooked by others.

Waldman chose to write on this controversial topic from the perspective of a Muslim, the Muslim community, as well as that of the mainstream American society. She hereby uses several characters that each stands for a particular group of people. Mohammed Khan, the main character, represents the Muslim in a Western society, who later on suffers from a loss of identity unable to define himself as a progressive American, a pious Muslim, or an American Muslim who integrated into society. Claire Burwell represents the open-minded woman who at first does not have any objections against Khan as a winner, but later on became influenced by the media and her environment. She also stands for the American grieving widow, a

victim of 9/11, and therefore a powerful judge in the jury. Alyssa Spier is the typical media-reporter who does everything to reach the headlines, whether through manipulation or spreading lies, even though she believes herself to be an objective and honest reporter.

Finally, Waldman depicted not only a tragic event from the past, but it is one that has strongly affected the present as well. Clearly, history is repeating itself, and what happened many years ago, is still visible today. The writer depicted also the emotional impact after such attacks and though most of the story regards Khan, the reader could still understand the point of view of any other character and relate to it. And all throughout the novel, the fear of the unknown in general and of the Islam in particular, could be strongly felt.

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المستخلص:

تعد ظاهرة الخوف من الاسلام من ابرز الظواهر التي وقعت في العقد الماضي بسبب الهجمات الإرهابية بالإضافة الى وسائل الاعلام وتصويرها السلبي للمسلمين. كتبت ايمي وولدمان روايتها "الخضوع" في تصوير للرأي الغربي المتغير تجاه الدين الاسلامي وما يترتب على ذلك من نتائج لم تؤثر فقط على المسلمين انفسهم فحسب، بل تسببت ايضا في كون الامريكيين دفاعيين ضد اي شيء غير مألوف. فمن خلال روايتها وضحت وولدمان عواقب هذا الخوف وكيف لا تزال هذه الظاهرة واضحة في المجتمع الغربي.