Role of Western Academia in Victimization of Muslims Post 9/11 Scenario

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Abstract: *This paper tries to examine the Muslim experience of social violence and the role of Western academia in perpetuating it, after the event of 9/11. The paper is divided into three parts. First it explores social violence on Muslims, followed by a section on how representations of Muslims are possible causes of it. Lastly the paper discusses how academia reduces the understanding of Islam and Muslims to extremism through the use of non-contextual reductionist discourse, biased pairing of terms and subordination to the ultimate attribution error.*

Key Words: *Muslims, Reductionism, Subordination*

Social violence on Muslims

According to Kleinman, Social suffering is the "result of the devastating injuries that social force inflicts on human experience" (Kleinman, n.d.). Suffering is normally seen as a result of an authoritative institution or the local, national or global social orders that are brought upon people. Poverty serves as a prime example of structural violence that leads people to suffer. However, social institutions that in principle were established to overcome social suffering can also inflict social violence and suffering. In this paper I hope to inspect whether the institution of academics plays a role of curbing the Muslim social suffering or paving way for it in light of Kleinman's idea of social suffering.

Immediately after 9-11 attacks, Muslims in general became targets of increased surveillance, hate crimes and racial profiling incidents across America (Chandrasekhar, 2003). Besides the overtly inflicted violence, Muslims to this day also suffer covertly because of their race or religion. For instance, the sudden dichotomy between being either an American or Muslim has led American Muslims to adopt compromising ways in order to fit in society or otherwise be labelled as an outsider with "loud identities" (Mir, 2011). Western countries pass laws that force practicing Muslims to choose either between obeying their God or the Western State. For instance, on 4th June 2020, the Belgian Court authorized the banning of Islamic headscarves in higher education. This decision was met with plenty of resistance from not just Belgian women, but also KU Leuven (Affairs, 2021). Therefore, the violence against

Muslims is evident on multiple levels.

One reason for such growing conceptualizations about Muslims is how they have been represented in popular Media and discourse.

Representation of Muslims:

Media & Politics

The way Muslims and Islam have been represented in popular media and politics after 9-11 has played an important role in contributing towards the selected discrimination and targeting of Muslims. These representations are not only claimed as distorted but also as completely false by most Muslims. Statements like "they (Taliban) have no concern with Islam. So, they can never be the representative of Islam." (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020) are not uncommon in Muslim discourse towards the questioning non-Muslims. In this section I will present how Media and politics have acted as tools for stirring social violence against muslims. Then I will dwelve into how educational institutions, although designed to overcome such attitudes, could have also played their part in alleviating the sufferings of Muslims.

Muslims have been increasingly portrayed as violent in the western media and socio-political context. For instance, any terrorist attack that links itself to an Islamic ideology is given 357 % more media coverage than an attack claimed by a non-Muslim (Kearns, Betus & Lemieux in Matthes et al., 2020). Furthermore, any attack by a self identified Muslim is more likely to be labelled as a terrorist attack where as a similar attack by a non-Muslim is more likely to be explained in terms of an act committed by the mentally ill (Matthes et al., 2020). Such biased representations can instil a fear against the Muslim identity on uninformed individuals.

Rashid argues that the misleading representation of Muslims as "the other" is an intentional tactic, which emerges from a orientalist mind-set of the West. He notices a conflicted dichotomy in the Western discourse against terrorism and Islam. For instance, statements like "Islam vs. West" signal islam to be a geographical entity when in reality it's a divinity based religion free of any geographical

boundaries. Further, the definition of terrorism constitutes the basic criteria of involving a 1) deliberate intent of exploitation, 2) use of violence and fear, 3) in order to obtain a political aim (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020; Matthes et al., 2020) . Thus, terrorism, by definition, does not entail achieving religious outcomes yet the West has increasingly linked it with Islam in particular. In order to resist these misrepresentations "the Muslims had to redefine their religious ideologies i.e. Jihad and the concept of practicing Muslims" to minimize their social sufferings on account of their misrepresented identity" (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020, p. 69)

Alongside media, politics has played a pivotal role as well in shaping such views on Muslims. A recent study concluded that Donald Trump had leaned towards an islamophobic stance as president and his discursive techniques constantly targeted Islam and Muslims as negative (Khan et al., 2018).

Academics

The field of academia, unlike media and political discourse, has received relatively less attention for its role in framing a negative Muslim identity. Therefore, in this paper I hope to examine the role of academic world in perpetuating a distorted Muslim identity. Viewing the literature from Kleiman's lens of social violence, it is safe to state that even though most academics and researchers have attempted to protect and defend the Muslim identity, they unintendedly have also kept the negative image alive. One major reason for this is the simple rule of classical conditioning. This theory was first proposed by Ivan Pavlov, who states that after constant pairing of two stimuli, eventually just the presence of one stimulus leads to the presence or expectation of the other. Therefore, by constantly pairing Muslims and Islam with terms like terror or violence, the field of academics may have wired the audience with an unconscious but inseperable relationship between the two. Any associations formed through classical conditioning tend to be strong and difficult to overcome. This asserts that by publishing articles labelled as "Why Muslims are not terrorists" can also lead to an unconscious association of muslims with terrorists. According to my own research via limo, I could not locate much articles that actively used positive terminology when explaining Muslim related phenomenon. This realization is similar to what I encountered in my course experience; an imbalance of the kind of words that have been comfortably

paired with Muslim identity. Where a plethora of negative terms (e.g. terror, attack, oppression) are linked to Muslim identity, an equal if not more amount of positive and truthful terms (peace, equality, submission) are considerably lacking when it comes to being paired with Muslim related topics.

Furthermore, primary students have also been taught negative attitudes towards muslims via their textbooks, which makes it difficult to challenge them in adulthood. A recent study conducted in Ontario analysed 58 English Language text books (for grade 1 and 2) in order to see how they represented the fictitious characters portrayed as Muslims. All textbooks depicted a despicable image of Muslims portraying them as inferior, dumb or oppressive. Along with this there was also a dominant orientalist perspective, for instance, coming to a western country was seen as a happy ending for the poor refugee Muslims. Author further argues how prominent Muslim figures are omitted and that "a fuller and more accurate representation of Muslims should also include characters who command our respect and admiration, and could serve as role models." (Ali, 2013, p. 426). She argues that a constant inferior representation of Muslims is surely to form negative views about them. Schools maybe explicitly trying to help the Muslim experience however, they counter-intuitively add to their social suffering by portraying them as people who require to be tolerated.

"Teachers may try to use the texts to promote tolerance and empathy for Muslim characters, as advised, but that still frames them as a people needing tolerance or empathy." (Ali, 2013).

Besides unequal association of terms with Islam and Muslims, misrepresentation of Muslim characters in childrens books, the educational field also plays a discursive role in adding to the social suffering of Muslims. This is discussed next.

Role of discourse and importance of psychosocial context.

"Muslims in the western discourse has been represented as a nation that loves violence instead of peace" (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020, p. 68)

Recently there has been a focus on researching trauma discourse on refugee studies. Researchers argue against the reductionist approach of evaluating refugee experiences only in the light of medical lens. This practice is although designed to help victims overcome past trauma and its effects, however it adds more to the refugees suffering than mitigate it. by merely labelling their experiencing under Post Traumatic Stress Order (PTSD), clinicians ignore the social nature of the refugees' condition. Moreover, medical terminology tends to reduce a multi-layered experience of the refugee to a merely pathological one, which also ignores other important variables such as their feelings of guilt, fear of the future, lack of social community or change in social status etc. (Mir, 2011).

Similarly, most studies have attempted to capture the experience of Muslim refugees and migrants residing in western countries with hopes of accurately voicing their concerns and experiences (Brough et al., 2013; Kevers et al., 2016; Mir, 2011; Montgomery, 2008). As a Muslim, reading about other fellow Muslims created a feeling of gratitude in me towards the researchers, who despite being outgroup members cared for my Muslim brothers and sisters. One thing that piqued my interest was the question that despite such attempts to portray Muslims in a positive light, what still maintains a reservation in the West towards Muslims. By thinking along the lines of reductionist discourse in refugee studies with respect to trauma, I could not help but think the case was same when it came to representation of Muslims. Most researches have tried to understand the Muslims either as refugees, immigrants or attackers. There is a strong disconnect between what Muslims believe and what people think they do. However, most studies aim at understanding Muslims without applying weight to the fundamental lens that defines a Muslim; belief. By ignoring the basic source of all Muslims belief and action, and relying on a humanistic approach of understanding a belief system, most researchers are reducing the understanding of Muslims only to actions and devouring them of everything else. For example, "Muslims do not drink" is a reality based on what they believe. It comes from the book, Quran, which they all consider the Divine Word of Allah.

"O believers! Intoxicants, gambling, idols, and drawing lots for decisions are all evil of Satan's handiwork. So shun them so you may be successful. Satan's plan is to stir up hostility and hatred

between you with intoxicants and gambling and to prevent you from remembering Allah and praying. Will you not then abstain?" (Quran, ch.5 v:90-91).

How Muslims claim to not drink, whether loudly or silently, does not change the underlying belief that it's a divine order to be followed. Neither does it (de)legitimize their religious identity. When asked about why alcohol is forbidden, the Quran also advices a possible response for that,

"They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, "In them is great sin and some benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit." (Quran, ch.2 v: 219).

By detaching the Muslim identity from Islam and trying to only explain it from other perspectives is not only reductionist but also adds to the existing misrepresentation of Muslims. Unfortunately, most articles have attempted to understand a Muslim's experience by keeping its fundamental source aside; which is Quran and Sunnah[1]. A Muslim by definition is one who submits his will to Allah and Islam means peace acquired by submitting your will to Allah, however this is not evident when researching Muslims. Terms like submission and peace are not sincerely depicted as everyday discourse in a Muslims life.

According to Rashid, an orientalist mind-set automatically attempts to define Muslims as not just "the other" and separate from their nationalities but also normalises the practice of trying to raise them up to better levels than they are currently. I would further argue the attempt to explain Muslims from other perspectives (i.e. Christianity, western political etc) mirrors the orientalist mind-set Rashid writes about. This practice, unlike Rashids opinion, could be unintentional, however does contribute towards the social suffering for Muslims. Although the West has progressed amazingly in its liberal acceptance of "the others", but the fact that even an American suddenly becomes an "other" based on his religious affiliation is questionable.

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[1] (life and sayings of prophet Muhammad pbuh).

Behaviours of self-acclaimed extremist are understood in light of their beliefs, which tend to go completely against what the Quran ascribes, but somehow "a terrorist" words are explicitly taken as truthful. On the contrary, behaviours of prominent Muslims are only interpreted in light of their external factors.

"When (a negative) salience is given primarily to the religious/cultural identity of Muslims, their narratives become associated with only this aspect of their identity" (Ali, 2013).

Since Islam is an action based religion based on a belief system, it requires to be objectively understood on its foundations of Quran and Sunnah. The behaviour of extremists is actively studied as beliefs, where as the behaviour of "peaceful" Muslims is interpreted as actions according to multiple lens that exclude Islamic belief. Such a tendency is normally explained in humans as the ultimate attribution error, in which humans tend to attribute "others" negative behaviours as disposition and positive acts as situational (Hewstone, 1990).

Upon request Mary[2], a practicing Muslim student in Belgium, reported that she discovered after one year that her good Russian friend always assumed that she supported terrorism and violence as part of her belief.

"I was shocked when I later thought about it. I mean there should be a limit to being liberal about others' beliefs. How can someone be okay with a person who believes that innocent people should be killed? After this encounter I'm not sure who else also secretly believes this... I appreciate freedom of speech here but accepting such violent mind-sets in the name of freedom seems too much of tolerance I think." (Mary, personal interview, 2021)

Mary's concern here unmasks how such attitudes can translate into covert social suffering for Muslims even if the inflictor tries to be accepting of Muslim beliefs, which are entirely false to begin with.

Conclusion

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[2] Pseudo name is used here for anonymity.

In conclusion, this misbalanced view in academia and imposition of Western discourse on Muslims has managed to not only reduce everyday Muslims to simply those who follow Islam unknowingly but also elevated extremists as radical followers of Islam. This in turn has lead to legitimize social violence towards Muslims even if unintended. If you ask an informed Muslim, being radical would be their desire. This is because by following Islam radically one tends to become a human filled with compassion and humility just as a devout Christian would see himself. Great Muslim poets and scientists are what an educated Muslim would label as radical such as Mevlana Rumi, Allama Iqbal, Avicenna or Al-khwarizmi to name a few. This is because they believed more than ordinary muslims and strived more than ordinary Muslims in serving the world. This striving for good, against evil, is what Jihad literally means in Arabic. The biggest Jihad according to traditions of Prophet Muhammad pbuh[3] is the one that a believer fights against his own desires. Websites like Merriam Webster define Jihad as "a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty", where as in the Quran, the Arabic word for holy war does not exist. Such interpretations raise questions regarding whether western literature is trying to understand Islam from a Christian perspective or maybe even imposing their own subjectivities of religion on Islam?

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[3] Peace be upon him (pbuh)

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