

A POSTCOLONIAL INQUIRY OF ISLAMOPHOBIA FROM PASHTUN BELT TO AMERICAN METROPOLIS IN TAMIM ANSARY'S WEST OF KABUL, EAST OF NEW YORK

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Abstract

This paper explores the portrayal of postcolonial dynamics of Islamophobia and identity crisis in Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York*, focusing on the representation of Pashtun identity in the outcome of the 9/11 attacks. By using textual analysis method, research examines how Pashtuns particularly those in diaspora are misunderstood and stigmatized as extremists due to their strong adherence to Islamic traditions like *Pakhtunwali*. The paper focuses on post-colonial theory, drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and third space, to analyse how Ansary's tries to balance his Afghan background and American upbringing which leaves him stuck in two opposite cultures. Ultimately, showing the struggles to be fully accepted by either side and always feel like he's in between. The paper uses theoretical comparisons to show that how experiencing being insider and outsider within in a country mirrors with the Gayatri Spivak concept of native informants. Similarly, it highlights that how Islamophobia was spread indirectly after 9/11 through colonizers who stigmatized the Eastern traditions as uncivilized and threat to the modernity in the whole globe. Through the postcolonial lens the paper argues that Tamim Ansary's memoir is a counter-narrative to the Western stereotypical representation of Islam and reveal that how Western media and politics were used to labeled Muslims as extremist and terrorists.

INTRODUCTION

Tamim Ansary is an Afghan-American writer, commentator and a public speaker. He is best known for his works exploring diaspora, cultural identity and the clash of cultures. He was born in Kabul; his father was Afghan and his mother was American. Ansary moved to the US in his teenage and lived there at the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures. His memoir *West of Kabul, East of New York* shows his own

personal journey of having bicultural identity when he revisits to Afghanistan, while dealing his American upbringing. Ansary's novel is a reflective criticism on widespread misunderstanding of Islam and Muslim in the West and his memoir serves as both personal testimony and broader cultural critique (2002, Ansary). Similarly, *West of Kabul, East of New York* is written especially in the aftermath of 9/11 through which a postcolonial identity is

explored as ongoing internal conflict over belonging—his Afghan heritage, shaped by colonial history and conventional norms, constantly clashes with his American upbringing, revealing the fractured identity of a diasporic person. Cultural hybridity emerges as a central theme as Ansary moves through multiple countries and civilizations, never quite fitting in anywhere while displaying aspects of both the East and the West (2002, Ansary). The author's journey initiates from Pashtun belt to America, with his American mother and his selection for a scholarship that allowed him to move abroad. The story is a depiction of how Westerners are reshaped by colonizers, especially before and after the wars of 9/11. He refused to return to Afghanistan, though, in spite of this, formed committees to send funds to refugees in Afghanistan. The email response to Post 9/11 wars sent by Tamim Ansary to a few people in Afghanistan became popular as it portrayed his inner lamenting pain of rejecting terrorism and the misunderstanding of Afghans as extremists. This email was written in the context of post-9/11 wars, highlighting how Americans redefined identity, culture, and the extremist nature of Pashtunwali for their global politics. Orientalism plays a vital role in spoiling and distortion of image of Pashtuns, who follow strict rules and regulations of Islam. They are labelled as extremists and considered responsible for terrorism across the world. Tamim Ansary challenges these prevailing images of Pashtuns by recounting his personal story, his struggle of being stuck between Eastern and Western culture, identity, and hybridity (2002, Ansary). Dawar, Asif Iqbal (2019) in this research paper highlights that Pashtun borderland play a vital role in emergence of 9/11 war. However, this borderland becomes a significant focal point in the wake of 9/11 war, the inhabitants of this Pashtun borderlands highly suffered due to on-going conflict with USA. While many scholars wrote about this ongoing socio dynamics of the conflict and depicted regarding the impacts of conflict on Pashtun social identity of 'Pashtunwali' which remained scarce. The aim of the study to examine how this violent conflict play a vital role in changing of 'Pashtunwali' socio_ cultural system which include values like Jirga, Melmastia and Hujra. However, sociocultural system in the past was a

leading factor for conflict resolution and maintaining peace in the Pashtun society. Thus, secular religion of 'Pashtunwali' highly impacted the socio-cultural life of tribal people (Dawar & Asif 2019)

Shams-ur-Rehman (2015) argues about the conflict in history about Phustoons in tribal society. He explores the relationship of Phustun and Islam in traditional phustun society highlighting that Pashtunwali is the social code of conduct. For Phustoons the idea of Islam is embedded in their Social Code of Conduct which is heterogeneous further explores that Phustoons' perception of Islam is different from neighboring regions as they have autonomy and are away from any community authority. Unlike others their socio-political system functions through Phustoonwali which is deeply rooted in their culture through which Phustoons manifest religious ideology. Religious rituals and daily beliefs are part of their cultural norms. Phustoons were practicing Muslims but did not exercised Islam on Judicial systems (Shams-ur-Rehman, 2015).

Allen (2004) argues that 9/11 has made Islamophobia acceptable which has enabled its manifestations to locate newer and more dominant tone and societal acceptability. UN recognized Islamophobia as being equally revolting and rejected as anti-Semitism and other global discriminatory phenomena, however, 9/11 tragedy overshadowed this recognition. She studied that how British and European societies have considered Islamophobia to be justified and rightful after 9/11. Also the paper shows how visual identifiers have changed the attitude and reactions to Muslims across the Fifteen European Union members at pan-European level.

Begum (2025) in her paper argues the role of US media after Taliban's return to Afghanistan. She argues that how US media used political agenda against Taliban based on western-centric notions of progress, women's freedom, Hijab and Islamophobia. US media's coverage focused on religious complexities and US geopolitical interests rather than highlighting the real understandings of Afghan women's voices and their multiple experiences (Allen, 2004).

Reyaz and Laskar (2025) highlights those Pashtun who were living to the east of Durand line part of

undivided India during the British rule. Hindi films are popular among those Afghans but there is misrepresentation of those Pashtuns in Bollywood films. They are presented brutal violent and benevolent. This paper concludes that discourse of Islamophobia assigned by Anti-Muslims play a vital role in verification of Afghans in screens even Muslims and Hindus have cordial political relations (Reyaz & Laskar 2025).

Ishtiaq, Asghar, Raza, and Achakzai (2024) studies the ethnic divides and Afghanistan's political instability. They argue that ethnic difference and tribal complexities fuel the inner terrorism which are further made worsen by external agendas and exploitation. International communities play pivotal role in stabilizing and destabilizing of the politics of Afghanistan. In the same manner, this memoir also focuses on the western involvement in Afghanistan affairs. After 9/11 war, Ansary was completely discriminated from Americans, as he was treated before 9/11 in America. He was labeled as extremist, terrorist and violent by Americans and foreigner by Afghanistan. He was stucked between two cultures, identities and countries. This shows his dual nature of facing life due to his Pashtun identity in the whole memoir (Ishtiaq etal, 2024)

Bayer (2024) in his research depicts that while Muslims faced a new version of intense form of government in aftermath of 9/11 till yet. After that the representation of Muslims and Islam was frequently polarized and racially charged. This representation occurs across different media sites and American Catholic discourses. Through this spectrum, Muslims and Islam was misinterpreted in form of multiple narratives. In the same way, memoir of Ansry also shows a picture how Ansry not only play role of translator of these misinterpretations as well as in dismantling the extremist label of Muslims (Bayer, 2024).

The novel builds the narrative by projecting Ansary's Afghan based ancestry and his life spend in American culture for understanding the Islamophobia, post-colonial identity and hybridity. According to Said (1978) reductive stereotypes in a negative sense depicts the identities of Muslims. This negative trend grew more prominently after 9/11. According to Ansary's assessment, Western views of Islam as aggressive and monolithic distorted

the Pashtun identity, which is based on indigenous traditions like Pashtunwali.

I felt a need to explain that Islam is not monolithic; it is a vast, diverse civilization stretching from Morocco to Indonesia, and within it are thousand different cultures." (Ansary 2002 p.5). It critiques the Western way of painting Islam; with negative brush and ignoring the diversity among the religion.

Ansary's whole journey of life is labeled and stigmatized under colonial lens of constructing and shaping his hybrid identity by colonizers. Pashtunwali is often misinterpreted, Ansary's story highlights how these misunderstandings affect identity of Pashtuns. The memoir is highly focused through post-colonial lens of Edward Said's Orientalism, how Muslims and Pashtun are othered in America but also in other powerful countries globally. In the same way, this autobiography is analysed through Homi K Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry for being stuck between East and West.

Research Objectives

1. To examine, how Tamim Ansary's personal memoir illustrates the difficulties faced by Pashtun Muslims in Western culture, particularly after 9/11 attacks.
2. To investigate how Islamophobia and other stereotypes are used by western societies and media to stigmatized Pashtun identities.

Research Questions

1. How does the Tamim Ansary describes the experience of being a Muslim Pashtun in post-9/11 America, and what does it reveal about growing Islamophobia in the West?
2. What does Ansary's journey tell us about the wider impact of postcolonial power structures on identity, belonging and cultural perception.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in postcolonial literary analysis to examine Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York*. Using close textual reading technique, the research explores key themes such as Islamophobia, cultural hybridity, racialization and othering of phustun identity in both Eastern and Western Context

Through an interpretative lens, the research will highly focus on post-colonial lens of Edward Said's Orientalism that how Muslims and Pashtun are othered in America but also in other powerful countries globally. In the same way, this autobiography will be analysed through Homi K Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry for being stuck between East and West. The paper also uses theoretical comparisons to show that how western media and societies use stereotypical representations to make Phustun extremists.

Data Collection

The current research study analyses Tamim Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York* by employing the method of textual analysis through close reading of the text. Data is collected through qualitative method, where the text of the novel *West of Kabul, East of New York* is the primary data source itself. Various passages and quotes are taken from the novel for the purpose of analysis that are relevant to the research study. Through post-colonial lens of Edward Said's Orientalism that how Muslims and Pashtun are 'othered' in America but also in other powerful countries globally along with Homi K Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry and relevant information from various sources, such as books, essays, research papers, articles, and websites will serve as the secondary data source.

ANALYSIS

In *West of Kabul, East of New York* Tamim Ansary argues that *Islam* is prominently portrayed and framed by the West, and it constructs the identity of people who are strong believers of Islam. Ansary himself undergoes through this journey of personal experiences, pulling apart himself from stereotypes and going against the reflection of his own identity in the narratives of Islamophobia constructed under post-colonialism.

It is portrayed in the novel of the text,

"When your mother and father live on opposite sides of the globe, you have to choose one or the other." (Ansary, 2002, p.163).

Eastern individuals who migrate abroad are not only bound to the strict rules of Islam; they are also held responsible for answering all political questions

regarding their reshaped identity, culture, and beliefs.

Islamophobia is one of the oldest phenomena, utilized in Orientalism and deeply rooted in the colonial legacy of imperialism. This can be applied through Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, which explains how West fixes Eastern identities. This is unfolded through the autobiographical story after the 9/11 wars, in the figure of Ansary.

"Americans seem to think of Afghans as bearded gunmen who live for war, but actually, for Afghans, generosity far outweighs military prowess." (Ansary, 2002, p.179).

At that time, Muslims were central in Western political discourse and Orientalist.

"When you're in two worlds so different, your mind is forced to say that one is legitimate and the other is a crock." (Ansary, 2002, p.63).

Ansary's identity is Pashtun, and he migrated to America, where he changed himself according to American culture. However, he was still facing an identity crisis, being considered the "other" and a tribal extremist, while his own identity was fragmented. By deconstructing the text, it is full of binaries in which the Westerners are rational and civilized, while the Easterners are irrational and uncivilized—like how they were investigated and watched at airports after the 9/11 wars. In a same way, when Ansary returns to Afghanistan, he realizes the gap between realities and the Western narratives that label them as terrorists. In this way, he goes against all the narratives created by the West for their global politics, which they apply on the Eastern world through the perspective of Orientalism.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity refers to the mixing of different cultures and identities due to imperialism and the migration of colonized people. He introduces the idea of the "third space," also called a "liminal space," where one can neither considers himself completely Eastern nor completely Western.

"Growing up bicultural is like straddling a crack in the earth. If the cultures are far apart—like those of Afghanistan and America—one feels an urge to get entirely over to one side or the other." (Ansary, 2002, p.188).

This is the case with Ansary, he exists in that "liminal space" where he cannot consider himself a native Afghan nor culturally an American. This hybridity is seen in the character of Tamim Ansary,

as he was neither totally accepted by Muslims nor by Americans. He resists the orientalist concept of hybridity based on Islamophobia, which contrasts with true hybridity—instead of cultural blending, people from Afghanistan are labelled as terrorists.

A glimpse of hybridity can be seen in the multicultural society of America, where individuals try to remain intact with the strict rules of Islam from Afghanistan. In this way, they are neither accepted as people of America nor of Afghanistan. They are never truly able to own private homes in their motherland as well as in the places they migrate to.

With Reference to text of memoir by Ansary

“The Afghan government didn’t consider us to be Americans...Soon I would be relieved of the discomfort of a divided self, free to roam the world as just one person: Tamim Ansary, American guy.” (Ansary, 2002, p.67).

Colonizers impose their culture, which deeply affects their identities and constructs a new cultural space through hybridity for them. The struggle to prove one’s “Americanness” and denying of being a terrorist damages one’s own identity, because the West considers Eastern men as terrorists and Eastern women as victims suppressed by those men, labelling the men as oppressors.

It is very hard to live with hybridity. Being bound to the norms of Afghanistan and at the same time adapting culture of America requires boldness. However, the hybridity experienced by Pashtuns which they make their strength becomes a weakness, as they are suspected and stigmatized as peak areas of terrorism and extremism after the 9/11 wars. Ansary reflects that

“I was the Incredible Two-Headed Transplant and had an extra head sprouting out of my turtleneck.” (Ansary, 2002, p.75).

Thus, Pashtuns—who are traditionally strong and brave, empowered by their culture, have had their strength turned into weakness by colonizers, who stigmatize them as Taliban and extremists.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

From the text foreigners telling to Afghan, *“We are going to develop you primitive animals.”* (Ansary, 2002, p.132). Islamophobia spread indirectly through colonizers who labeled Eastern traditions and customs as uncivilized and threats to modernity and

this is consciously spread in the whole globe. Through this they are paving ways of confronting contemporary fears of “informant”. This was observed by Ansary in his own self, as he was in constant struggle of resisting Islamophobic discourses by humanizing himself as a Muslim, however, also acted as a translator for western audience.

Islamophobia was reshaped after 9/11 and affected the identities.

“Growing up Bicultural is like a straddling crack in the earth.” (Ansary, 2002 p.187).

In the context of novel Ansary himself pass through this phenomenon by observing Afghan traditions in Afghanistan. This Islamophobia was reshaped after 9/11 in the west by shaping them as extremists. Ansary himself pass from this dual phase of life in which he is considered as American in Afghanistan and extremist in America. His hybridity lacks the binding of two cultures and he is stucked between these two cultures of neither considering himself as American nor as Afghani.

By applying the phrase used by Gayathri Spivak “Native informant” on the character of Ansary, we can say that he is in struggle of isolating himself from extremist by showing the picture of psychological pressure of globally shaped Islamophobia. He frames the real identity of Islamic people to Americans against the Islamophobic discourses designed by colonizers. This dual representation highlights his contradiction with other traditional postcolonial memoirs. Islamophobia spread indirectly through colonizers who labeled Eastern traditions and customs as uncivilized and threats to modernity and this is consciously spread in the whole globe. Through this they are paving ways of confronting contemporary fears.

“The Taliban were these boys grown to manhood. Expecting them to restore the lost world was like hoping for Charles Manson to resurrect the Summer of Love.” (Ansary, 2002 p.182)

The study of Dawar, Asif Iqbal (2019) goes in same order to the findings in this research in which Ansary himself passes through these pandemic situations. He was in constant struggle to reveal himself as anti-terrorist, anti-extremist. However, he also characterized weak points of Pashtun system when he came back, he was not considering as

inhabitant of Afghanistan. This was due to outcomes of 9/11 war, after which inhabitants of Afghan bordland were highly criticized. As a result of which, Afghanistan does not remain in actual codes of 'Pashtunwali'. This ongoing conflict highly destroyed the social _cultural life of tribes living in Afghanistan. The objectives of Dawar, Asif Iqbal (2019) resembles to this memoir as Ansary in the text isolates himself from extremist due to social, global, psychological pressure of Islamophobia. His memoir is against other traditional, postcolonial memoirs and Islamophobic discourses designed by colonizers. Moreover, the discourse labeled Eastern traditions and customs uncivilized throughout the whole globe. The study of Allen (2004) is similar to findings of this research, by in depth analysis of circumstances of justified Islamophobia recognition after 9/11. Ansary himself pass through this situation of facing changing attitude of Americans to Muslims in New York. It highlights how Islamophobia was changed in discourse of colonizers deliberately by creating horrific circumstances for Muslims after 9/11.

By comparing Begum (2025) findings to Ansary's life, like he himself was caught between western misunderstanding and Eastern stereotyping. He was neither accepted by Afghans in his motherland nor by Americans due to his Pashtun identity.

Ansary himself says that "I WAS BORN into that world when it was virtually untouched by the West." (Ansary, 2022, p.31).

Media of US play a vital role of erasing Talibans from Afghanistan for their political interests and highlight Islam as a symbol of terrorism and extremism. In this way, all meta narratives are also responsible of snatching real identities of Pashtuns in western world.

CONCLUSION

Tamim Ansary, in his novel *West of Kabul, East of New York* explores that how the post-Colonial legacies effect the Pashtuns identity and builds Islamophobic attitudes of the West with the Edwards Said's theory of Orientalism and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and third space. Autobiography of Ansary shows that it is difficult to live between two cultures, as it effects Ansary's identity as Muslim and then as phustun in the post 9/11 world. Ansary's memoir argues that due to colonial effect

the West frequently stigmatize the individuals like him as terrorists. They are often pressurized to demonstrate their identity. This bicultural identity though Ansary's life highlights the painful truth that they come to home with neither culture. His novel exposes the need of realization and understanding in dismissing the damage that still exists and influence the Muslims and Phastun identities in the world. Thus, it can also be concluded that Islamophobia was changed in discourse of colonizers deliberately by creating horrific circumstances for Muslims after 9/11, the discourses labeled Eastern traditions and customs uncivilized throughout the whole globe. This was observed by Ansary in his own self, as he was in constant struggle of resisting Islamophobic discourses by humanizing himself as a Muslim, however, also acted as a translator for western audience

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