REPRESENTATION OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN RECENT FICTION
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO JOHN UPDIKE’S TERRORIST,
PAMUK’S SNOW, HANIF KUREISHI’S THE BLACK ALBUM
AND KHALED HOSSEINI’S THE KITE RUNNER

ABSTRACT
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a large number of writers have shown keen interest in exploring the relationship between various aspects of Islam and literature. In critical writing this has not been explored fully till now. However, during the last three decades from the 1980s till date a flood of literature representing political Islam appeared. Most of the works representing political Islam that emerged after the 9/11 incident received extensive critical acclaim and reached a broad audience in varied strata of society. This study examines the representation of political Islam in recent fiction with particular emphasis on the selected fictional works – *Terrorist* (2006), *Snow* (2002; translated in 2004), *The Black Album* (1995) and *The Kite Runner* (2003) by John Hoyer Updike (1932-2009), Orhan Pamuk (1952- ), Hanif Kureishi (1954- ), and Khaled Hosseini (1965- ) respectively. All these authors have treated radical Islamists in their selected works, which had a major impact on the postmodern British and American literary scenes either a little before or after the 9/11 attacks. Their works have pointed out the different issues which made both their appearance and accomplishment possible. These writers have tried to deal with issues of Islamic identity and political control through the appropriation of a certain kind of interpretation of Islam. They have chosen to talk about some key Islamic concepts such as “faith”, “salaah”, “jihad”, “suicide”, “scarf”, “pardha”, “Jannah”/ “Paradise”, “houris”, “infidel”, “kafir”, and “hellfire” in their novels under discussion. They have also focussed on certain aspects which are prohibited in Islam like hoarding of wealth, licentious relationship, adultery, wine, drugs, and homosexuality. All those issues that political Islam talks about are also tackled by these novelists in one way or the other. However, the most important argument centres on two aspects: representation of
political Islam in recent fiction, and the relationship between political Islam and the current literary tradition and leading ideologies.

A large number of postmodern writers have dealt with the theme of political Islam and its involvement in the militant activities. It has got its momentum after the establishment of the theocratic Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979. However, it has drawn the attention of the writers after Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa against Salman Rushdie in 1989. It becomes the major concern only after the September 11 attacks and thus a flood of literature is produced. The representation of the life of the militants having roots in political Islam in the fiction of the period resulted from too much interest of the novelists in it. The writings of most of these writers deal with the fanatics and their participation in several radical organizations from the spectator’s point of view. The novelists have depicted the factor of alienation in the life of the fanatics and their incapability to become part of the world they longed for in their works under discussion. These fanatics try to accomplish some kind of spiritual identification. An ideal example of this kind is obvious in Updike’s *Terrorist*.

The 9/11 incident had a considerable impact on the mind of the authors which is reflected through the representation of their imaginary characters and their backgrounds. The protagonists of Updike, Pamuk and Hosseini are some of the major examples in this regard. Besides, most of the protagonists portrayed in the fiction representing political Islam pursue a mission that without doubt takes them away from their social order and customs.

A plethora of novels representing political Islam published in the last three decades have met with great success. The novels, like Kureishi’s *The Black Album*, Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) got recognition
immediately after their publication. *The Kite Runner* was made into highly successful, commercial film. The other novels like Updike’s *Terrorist* and Pamuk’s *Snow* which also concern us in this thesis, though, were not made into commercial films but they drew great public attention. This was how the fiction representing political Islam enjoyed such wide critical and public acclaim throughout the world for the first time in the history of English Literature.

In fact, literary tradition involving political Islam started flourishing a couple of decades before the ending of the twentieth century. However, it has reached its climax only after the September 11 event. A number of examples of the elements of this impact can be cited. A realistic documentation of the life style of the radical Islamists and presentation of the grievances of the followers of political Islam against the Western imperialism are obvious. The common aspects that seem to be truly cut in the fiction of the period are those associated with the spheres of struggle of the Islamists, and collective political action.

All the writers under discussion in this study have effectively dealt with the fundamentalism factor in their selected fictional works. Updike’s effective use of a couple of verses from the Qur’an in *Terrorist* proves that the decision of Ahmad, the protagonist of the novel with an aim to achieve his mission is contrary to the Shari’ah of Islam. Moreover, Ahmad’s preparation to commit suicide with a hope to enter into the Paradise is simply the result of the misguidance by his Arabic teacher Shaikh Rashid. Hanif Kureishi had vague notions about the Shari’ah of Islam, and it was out of curiosity that he individually visited the mosques and had conversation with some of the religious preachers. He met with the followers of radical Islam to have firsthand knowledge about their psyche. His firsthand impression of the people enabled him to
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represent the clash of two ideologies – Islamic and the postmodern in his novel *The Black Album*, in his screen play *My Beautiful Laundrette* and in one of his short story “My Son the Fanatic” realistically. Kureishi’s keen observation of the religion in general and Islam in particular provides him with such a strong hold on his subject.

Literary works which talked about political Islam were in great demand for the publishers around the world, who became ready to accept those works for publication. So far as the readers are concerned, there were a large number of them from different strata of life who showed great interest in it. Expectedly, the writers in general were confident of achieving a large number of readers without endangering the possibilities of publication and fame. John Updike, Orhan Pamuk, Hanif Kureishi and Khaled Hosseini too got great responses from the readers so far as their fictional works under discussion are concerned. One of the distinguishing characteristics of their fiction is that all of them have depicted the Islamists in particular and the characters in general based on present scenario itself. These writers have presented the life of the Islamists as they had known it through various incidents. Militant Islamists worldwide turned into literary material for fiction. There is an almost general consensus that such political novels, no matter what their political perspective maybe, have a great value in the mere fact that they put the life of the Islamists at the centre of their interest. This cultural involvement is natural in the material of such novels; life of the Islamists, language, society, and regionality. One key purpose of these novels which needs emphasis, however, is their indirect remarks on the clash of fundamentalisms in the case of pre and post-9/11 fiction representing political Islam.

As political Islam is at the centre of discussion, the selected novels explore the distinctiveness of this version of Islam and by doing so unmask its ideology. Despite
the fact that the majority of the period’s novelists did not mean to misrepresent Muslim identity, for it was not a subject for most of them, their representation of the lives of Muslims has left many questions unanswered. Some novelists had to express the fact that their work was not written to criticize or attack or misrepresent.

Secular content is also obvious in the novels under discussion. Apart from the treatment of questions of Islamic identity and politics, love stories and sexual affairs are also considered as the important traits of the selected fiction of Updike and Kureishi, which are to some extent accountable for the achievement and recognition of their novels. In the novels, love and sex become the hero’s primary source of contentment and self-realization. Ahmad, the protagonist of Updike’s *Terrorist* is involved with his schoolmate Joryleen. Shahid’s relationship with his middle-aged teacher Deedee Osgood forms the basis of the plot of Kureishi’s novel *The Black Album*. Most of his adventures are based on this relationship. However, the treatment/depiction of the tangible reality of contemporary Turkey and Afghanistan in Pamuk’s *Snow* and Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* respectively are sufficient for the success and popularity of these novels. The only notable romantic feature in *Snow* is the protagonist Ka’s romantic aspiration as reflected through his yearning for the company of Ipek with whom he has aspired to live merrily in Frankfurt. Hosseini becomes so occupied in dealing with the theme of Afghanistan’s anarchy in his novels that he left little scope for romance except Amir-Soraya plot in *The Kite Runner* who got married shortly after their meeting with each other in San Francisco, America.

The quest for self-realization is considered as one of the most prominent features in the narratives of the novels under discussion. Most of these novels trace
the lucks of a single, young man in his journey towards self-realization. It is obvious in the cases of the protagonists Ahmad and Shahid of Updike’s *Terrorist* and Kureishi’s *The Black Album* respectively. Finally, both of them have redeemed themselves through their self realization. Updike and Kureishi have maintained the inner-strength and integrity of the characters in unfriendly surroundings through their skilful presentation. In John Updike, fury against imperialism and the Western culture is a means to become part of them. And once the significance of the Islamic Shari’ah comes under threat due to the influence of the Western entertainment, the protagonist is trapped in them from where they hardly can come out.

Chapter one is basically meant as introduction. This chapter deals with political Islam in context. To better understand the concept of political Islam, the term has been defined. Emphasis is also given on the origin of political Islam with its brief history. This chapter also gives an outline of a certain vocabulary, often very imprecise, to describe Muslims of various persuasions as it emerged in the Western writings on Islam. Such terms include fundamentalist, militant, terrorist, Jihadi Islam, radical Islam, Islamism and political Islam. The other relevant terms like secularism, colonialism, imperialism and postmodernism have also been defined to better understand political Islam as a challenge to these ideologies. Moreover, this chapter dealt with some contemporary theorists particularly Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton and Edward Said as the study of these theorists is of great help in explaining the representation of political Islam in the fictional works under discussion. Their concepts (as discussed in *Essays on Ideology* (1984), *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* published in 1993) provide a kind of intellectual framework for understanding the works of Updike, Pamuk, Kureishi and
Hosseini. They may not have been discussed explicitly in the text, but their ideas were found useful in seeing the representation of political Islam in the works of the four novelists. Furthermore, this chapter also discusses the relevant ideas as found in Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1997), and Akbar S. Ahmed’s *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (1992), which were of great significance in evaluating the fictional works of the writers under discussion.

The second chapter discusses how Updike has been successful in his attempt to look into the driving force of the terrorists. His narration of the subject matter related to the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre from the standpoint of the survivors is very effective. The protagonist of Updike’s *Terrorist* is found in a state of confusion. The dilemma of Ahmad, the would-be terrorist, is due to the fact that he doesn’t really want to go to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel, but his consciousness about the responsibility to play the assigned role is the motivating force behind such decision. However, the weakness of the protagonist lies in his inability to take firm decision. Updike, thus, successfully explores the motivation of the religious fundamentalists and depicts the conflict-ridden relationship between the two cultures – the culture of America and that of Arabs. The author has proved that Ahmad’s jihad against the ‘infidels’ in the said context is not according to the dictate of the *Qur’ān*. His suicidal attempt in this context is also not permitted according to the Shari’ah of Islam.

Pamuk’s *Snow*, which constitutes the third chapter, shows that the conflicts are envisaged in terms of ideological differences and a crystal-clear confrontation between the ideology of political Islam and the ideology of the secular government of
Turkey. The author has portrayed the political and social events of Turkey and the subsequent conflict between Islamism and secularism with great success. He illustrates both the inadequacies and enabling factors that constitute Islam and the secular government of Turkey. Pamuk’s depiction of the character like that of the radical Islamist Blue draws great attention of the readers. Blue adores Ayatollah Khomeini and is keen to protect ‘Islamic faith’ to represent the demands of the Islamists in a secular country. Side by side, the writer has portrayed the character like Sunay Zaim who considers himself to be like Atatürk. This character is greatly influenced by the ideology of Hegel which states that ‘history and theatre are made of the same materials’, to show the dominance of the secular government of Turkey over fundamentalism. Pamuk’s human liberalism is reflected through his inclusion of two Kemelisit plays in the novel with a purpose to liberate women from burqa. It has drawn much attention of the people of the West, but it is discouraging to the Muslims because veil is obligatory in Islam. Most of all, the writer has handled the big themes such as identity crisis, cultural change, tradition and modernity, and East-West clash with an appropriate representation of the various ethnic groups of Turkey.

In chapter four, an attempt has been made to show how Hanif Kureishi is committed in his work to explore the clash of fundamentalisms. *The Black Album*, in addition to his screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* and the short story “My Son the Fanatic”, explore this theme. The dominant clash in this novel is between the ideology of Islam and postmodernism. Kureishi has represented very effectively the extreme end of the ideology of political Islam through various characters of his works. Riaz Al-Hassan, Chad and Hat in *The Black Album* are notable in this regard. The protagonists Omar in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and Ali in “My Son the Fanatic” also
come under this category. Like Ahmad, the protagonist of Updike’s *Terrorist*, Shahid, the main character of Kureishi’s *The Black Album* too is incapable of taking firm decision.

Chapter five focuses on the representation of the Taliban in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. In *The Kite Runner*, the author has presented the picture of the contrast between the Islamic Shari’ah based Taliban government and the liberal government that ruled Afghanistan before the Taliban rein. Hosseini’s portrayal of the major events that took place in the history of Afghanistan during the three decades, from the communist turmoil to the Soviet attack to the Bush-led American war against the Taliban, is well-knit and admirable. The writer’s personal experience leads authenticity to his treatment of the Afghan political scene before the freedom of the country from the Taliban. It is significant to mention Hosseini’s vivid depiction of the Taliban government that has made new laws based on the Shari’ah replacing the laws made by the liberal government. His skilful portrayal of the Taliban’s interference in the educational right of the girls who have been debarred from going to schools is also notable. Hossaini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* also dealt with these issues with a greater emphasis on the fate of women in Afghanistan who have been victimized and for whom higher education and freedom were dreams. It shows the writer’s extreme concern about the fate of the Afghan victims and thus, his fiction is characterized by sympathy. He has also shown very clearly the contrast between the ‘modern’ women from the urban areas and the rural women, one a figure of modernity, the other hidden behind veils. The comparison and contrast between the two governments that is the Northern Alliance and the Taliban as depicted by Hosseini is noteworthy.
The sixth and concluding chapter consolidates the main arguments presented in the preceding chapters. More precisely, what Updike, Kureishi, Pamuk, and Hosseini attempt to focus in their works under discussion is the idea of clash of fundamentalisms and secularism. In spite of their limitations as mentioned above, these writers have succeeded in creating fiction that represents political Islam in their selected novels, short stories and plays.