Introduction: Political Islam in Context

I

A cursory reading of contemporary discourse on Islam would suggest that Islam is not a monolithic category, that Muslim identity is not a fixed one and that there is no definitive Islamic opinion on international relations. The lives of Muslims spread across the world are marked by great cultural and ideological diversity. However, in the Western writings on Islam there has emerged a certain vocabulary, often very imprecise, to describe Muslims of various persuasions. The indiscriminate use of words like fundamentalist, militant and terrorist often reveals the bias of the commentators. Other terms like Jihadi Islam, radical Islam, Islamism and political Islam have also gained currency in recent writing on Islam. It is to be borne in mind that all these terms are used not by the practitioners themselves but by others describing their approach. The term Jihadi Islam explains itself. Radical Islamism seeks to impose a ‘tyranny’ of a minority over the majority and is unconcerned about trespassing on the rights of others. Still it will be wrong to dismiss it as essentially an evil force. In this regard Greg Barton suggests “adopting a radical Islamist position by no means determines support for the use of violence and terrorism” (Islam and the West 119). Islamism on the other hand is a response to modernity which covers a broad spectrum of convictions. It is a belief that Islam can and should form the basis of political ideology. Above all, political Islam which is the main concern of this
chapter is almost synonymous with Islamism. It also believes that Islam without power is incomplete. Political Islam follows a systemic approach and considers Islam as a complete way of life. It speaks against the Western exploitation of the Muslim world and is as such a response to what it considers many dangerous aspects of Westernization. It is as much a response to modernity as to Western imperialism. As against the methods used by the militant Islamists, political Islamists are inclined to pursue more constructive and social supportive strategies. However, some commentators are disturbed to discover synergies between political Islam and other militant forms of Islam.

II

Political Islam with its radical approach has become the most discussed political ideology and the most powerful movement for change in certain parts of the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Terrorism, theology and various other factors are linked to this subject. “But political Islam must be seen first and foremost as a revolutionary movement seeking to transform existing systems. Far from being something to be mystified or seen in strict isolation, political Islam is parallel to many previous movements both elsewhere and in Middle East history, including communism, fascism, nationalism, socialism, and liberalism” (Rubin 1).

Conservative traditionalist mainstream Islam essentially sought its distance from political governance and governed social behaviour and gave legality to governments in many cases. Modern political Islamism differs from it:

Political Islam and militant Islamists both believe that the West is a major threat to Muslim societies ... Islamists see their primary task as resisting growing Western influences on the
institutions, policies and, more importantly, the identity of Muslim societies. They vow to eradicate Western secularism in the Muslim world, and to confront policies aimed at bringing about Arab and Muslim recognition of Israel. (Karawan 52)

The present interpretation of political Islam considers it a modern ideology which attempts to include both nationalism and class. Barry Rubin aptly says in this regard that:

Regarding the former, Muslims have long seen themselves as a community (umma) of believers. Islamism says that this should be the primary identity of its members, the “nation” to which they adhere that transcends the existing state boundaries … As for class and socialist/communist approaches, Islamists have presented Muslims as an oppressed group, the new proletariat, the mechanism of global revolutionary change. There are parallels here, though distorted ones, to Vladimir Lenin’s view of imperialism, which later leftists read as meaning that the key divisions were now among nations rather than among classes within states. In the Islamist concept, imperialism means that Muslims are oppressed by both external attack and internal backwardness which results from foreign machinations. (2)

The relevant terms like secularism, colonialism, imperialism, postmodernism and ideology are needed to be defined to better understand political Islam as a challenge to these ideologies.
*American Heritage Dictionary* defines “secularism” as: “Religious skepticism or indifference” or “the view that religious considerations should be excluded from civil affairs or public education.”

The above definitions of secularism clearly emphasize the separation of religious law and dictates and the government of the state. It affirms the right to free will from any religious obligation by the government upon the citizens within a state that is unbiased so far as faith is concerned. It is arguably a ‘movement towards modernization’ away from established spiritual significances. The importance of this concept in the present study lies in the assessment of Pamuk’s effective handling of the clash between Islamism and secularism in *Snow*.

*Collins English Dictionary* defines “imperialism” as “the policy or practice of extending a state's rule over other territories” (“Imperialism,” def.).

According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia*, “Imperialism, broadly, the extension of rule or influence by one government, nation, or society over another” (“Imperialism,” def.).

Here, the definitions of “imperialism” are essential in order to argue how the concerned authors have explored its clash with the ideology of political Islam in their selected texts. However, imperialism though it shares a lot of ground with colonialism, is not synonymous with colonialism. Edward Said puts forward rightly that imperialism held “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory”, whereas colonialism refers to the “implanting of settlements on distant territory.” (*Culture and Imperialism* 9)
Edward Said has connected empire to secular interpretation in *Culture and Imperialism*. He writes:

Western cultural forms can be taken out of the autonomous enclosures in which they have been protected, and placed instead in the dynamitic global environment created by imperialism, itself revised as an ongoing contest between north and south, metropolis and periphery, white and native. We may thus consider imperialism as a process occurring as part of the metropolitan culture, which at times acknowledges, at other times obscures the sustained business of the empire itself. (51)

Arkady Plotnitsky puts forward the idea that “the idea of the ‘postmodern’ designates a different way of living in, perceiving, and understanding the world, or different ways of doing so” (263). In his book entitled *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (originally published in French in 1979 and in English in 1984), Jean-Francois Lyotard, one of the most significant philosophers of postmodernism and postmodernity makes the point that:

The postmodern would be that which, *in the modern*, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentation, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (81)
So far as the present study is concerned Louis Althusser must be dealt with. The standards of Althusser's theory are mapped out in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”. In this essay, Althusser makes an effort to put his theory of ideology in such a manner so as to uphold the concept that ideology is not, a depiction of people’s actual states of survival but of their relations to the circumstances of existence. In “A Letter on Art in Reply to Andre Daspre”; Althusser writes: “I do not rank real art among the ideologies, although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology” (151).

The above concepts provide a kind of intellectual framework for understanding the works of the four novelists. 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.

III

Political Islam which is hotly discussed today has its origin in the past. With the establishment of Islam by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the seventh century, a significant expansion took place. Islam was never devoid of politics, and its political aspects are derived from the Qur’ān and the Hadith. The Islamists claim that the roots of Islam as a political movement can be traced back to 622 CE when Muhammad (pbuh) ruled the city of Medina, after his recognition as prophet and later on by the Caliphs (the successors to the Prophet). According to Bassam Tibi the “history begins with the Islamic hijra, which is the migration of the Prophet and his supporters to Medina in 622” and “there he [the Prophet] established the first Islamic political community (umma), which was not a state, as contemporary Islamists wrongly read Islamic history” (44). The Prophet stuck to the Islamic law or Shari’ah during the time
of his reign from 622 till his death in 632. He expanded his rule to Mecca and then through the Arabian Peninsula. Afterwards, the Caliphs followed the same path effectively and the outcome was the foundation of the Ottoman Empire in 1308. But the arrival of European colonialism and the end of the Ottoman Caliphate after the First World War became an obstacle to continue with the same approach as before that is the strategies of succeeding Caliphs. Gradually, the feeling of inferiority developed in the minds of Muslims as the culture and military power of their medieval Caliphate had been “eclipsed” by “the West” (Silverberg). It leads them to hate the West. Moreover, the discriminatory policies of the West against the Islamic countries in particular and Muslims in general are also the cause behind the alleged tension in the minds of Muslims with regard to the West. Samuel P. Huntington though representing a particular point of view wrote the reasons of the unfinished clash between the Christian dominated West and the Islam:

Conflict was, on the one hand, a product of difference, particularly the Muslim concept of Islam as a way of life transcending and uniting religion and politics versus the Western Christian concept of the separate realms of God and Caesar. The conflict also stemmed, however, from their similarities. Both are monotheistic religions, which, unlike polytheistic ones, cannot easily assimilate additional deities, and which see the world in dualistic, us-and-them terms. Both are universalistic, claiming to be the one true faith to which all humans can adhere. (210-11)

In addition to the above mentioned causes there are several other factors behind the increase of the conflict between the West and Islam towards the end of the twentieth century, which are summed up by Samuel P. Huntington in *The Clash of
Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order: “First Muslim population growth has generated large numbers of unemployed and disaffected young people who become recruits to Islamist causes, exert pressure on neighboring societies, and migrate to the West. Second ... Third ... Fourth ... Fifth, the increasing contact between and intermingling of Muslims and Westerners in each a new sense of their own identity and how it differs from that of the other” (211). He concludes, “The causes of the renewed conflict between Islam and the West thus lie in fundamental questions of power and culture. Kto? Kovo? Who is to rule? Who is to be ruled?” (212)

Akbar S. Ahmed points out that the clash is “a straight fight between two approaches to the world, two opposed philosophies” which he defines as one philosophy that “is based in secular materialism, the other in faith” (264). Moreover, according to Eqbal Ahmad an insignificant developmental differences between the Muslim world and Christian Europe widened because of the sudden shift in the economy of the West that is from agrarian to industrial about two centuries ago (“Islam and Politics,” Islamic).

Subsequently, the change in the economy of the West gave birth to imperialism. It has emerged as a great threat especially to the underdeveloped Third World countries which comprise the important Islamic countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey. The constant attempt of the West, especially America to modernize the Third World countries is not welcomed by those countries as Edward W. Said has aptly pointed out in Covering Islam:

The history of United States efforts on behalf of modernization and development in the Third World can never be completely
understood unless it is also noted how the policy itself produced a style of thought and a habit of seeing the Third World which increased the political, emotional, and strategic investment in the very idea of modernization. (29)

In the analysis of the clash of culture, Edward Said argues that “it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” (Culture and Imperialism 52). It will be argued how Hanif Kureishi has represented cultural imperialism in the selected texts through the characters having Pakistani origin, who have felt the influence of the dominant country that is England. In this context, Edward Said has also suggested that: “All cultures tend to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way control them. Yet not all cultures make representations of foreign cultures and in fact master or control them” (Culture and Imperialism 100). As the readers shall see, many characters especially the youths in Kureishi’s The Black Album, My Beautiful Laundrette and “My Son the Fanatic” appear to share Edward W. Said’s view, as they have come under the influence of the “foreign” music in particular and the pop culture in general.

The constant dominance of the West over the Third World countries led to the East-West encounter, more precisely between Islam and the West. To resist Western imperialism, political Islam has come into existence and plays a vital role in influencing the Muslim world. However, Bassam Taibi “rebukes the rhetoric of a clash of civilizations” and says that: “To be sure, Europeans realities of other-ing Muslims and marginalizing them are not in line with the idea of Europe. Both Europeans and Muslims need to change, to avert an unfolding of the announced clash of civilizations in a self-fulfilled prophecy” (1-2).
Political Islam, as the term is used in the present context, owes its origin and development in response to the ideologies of imperialism and colonialism. Different political movements in Islam in Muslim countries have responded to the direct or indirect impact of West on their lives. Political Islam is a strategy of resistance in most cases. Different political movements like Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Islamic Revolution in Iran, or even the notorious al-Qaeda and myriad militant organizations in Muslim countries respond to imperialist ideology in one way or the other.

To know exactly how and when the political Islam has come into existence as a separate identity, it is necessary to mention the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. According to Greg Barton Muslim Brotherhood was “a profoundly radical movement whose ultimate goal was not so much political, or even social, as spiritual in nature” (Indonesia’s Struggle 38). But it is Sayyid Qutb who became the ‘key figure’ after the assassination of Hassan al-Banna in 1949. Based on Sayyid al-Banna’s ideology, Qutb tried to strengthen the organisation and successfully increased its magnitude through his vision of jihad in order to assess Islam during the twentieth century. Greg Barton rightly says that: “Qutb’s abiding concern was the liberation of Muslims from jahiliyah, the state of spiritual ignorance and depravity that caused God to send the Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] to Mecca thirteen centuries ago” (Indonesia’s Struggle 39). The assassination of Qutb in 1966 in Cairo prison did not make much difference as his brother Muhammad Qutb took the responsibility of the organisation and led the ‘radical movement’ (Muslim Brotherhood) from the forefront during the seventies and eighties.

The establishment of the theocratic Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979 and the fatwa declared by the Iranian dictator Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie
with death penalty for writing allegedly objectionable contents about the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his wives in the novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) a decade later. It reflects the power of political Islam. It indicates that by extension the East does not want to allow the West to dominate over the former any more. In the long run the Islamists prepared the blueprint under the banner of political Islam to bring an end of the Western imperialism in order to establish Islamic rule in the whole world. Ultimately, the latent fury and grievances deeply rooted in the minds of the radical Islamists resulted in the terrible and unfortunate attack on the WTC on September 11, 2001 under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Since, then the people of other faiths look at Islam suspiciously and the term ‘political Islam’ has generated a kind of terror in the minds of the people of the West in particular and the people of the whole world in general. Consequently many misconceptions about Islam also spread thick and fast and Islam’s representation in popular media, not to say serious discourse, raises more questions than answers them. For example fatwa is a very feared and controversial word but, as Bassam Tibi says it is “not a death sentence, just as jihad is not terrorism” (41).

IV

Though the relationship between various aspects of Islam and literature has not been explored fully, it has become the subject of great interest of the novelists and poets in recent times. It is only after the incident of 9/11 that majority of the writers of the world have shifted their attention to the new found issue. As Islam has been on the centre stage in the last few years, for right or wrong reasons, many writers from different countries have tried to fictionalize the life of Muslims. John Hoyer Updike (1932-2009), Orhan Pamuk (1952- ), Hanif Kureishi (1954- ), and Khaled Hosseini (1965- ) who were born in United States of America, Turkey, Britain (to a Pakistani
father and English mother) and Afghanistan respectively are some prime examples whose selected works are the major concern in this study. Updike has shown the involvement of a radical Islamist teenager in terrorism in his novel *Terrorist*. In chapter two an attempt has been made to explore the motivation of religious fundamentalists as depicted in *Terrorist*. It emphasizes on the outlook of the followers of radical Islam towards the imperialist West and their growing tendency/readiness to strike whenever required especially after the 9/11 incident. The conflict-ridden relationship between the two cultures – the culture of America and Arabs is shown as depicted in the novel. Third chapter comprises Pamuk’s *Snow*, which deals with the concepts of “veil” and “suicide”. In this chapter the conflict between Islamism and secularism is shown in the light of Edward Said’s concept of cultural clash between the secular West and the Islamic world (as mentioned in *Culture and Imperialism*).

The discussion of Orhan Pamuk’s *Snow* in this chapter is also an attempt to look at how Atatürk’s secular outlook and quest of becoming a member of the European Union is depicted through Sunay Zaim, one of the major characters in *Snow* who tries to wipe out the religious fundamentalists from Turkey. The subsequent clash between the two opposed groups (secularist and fundamentalist) will also be discussed in this chapter. In the first half of chapter four the clash between Islamic fundamentalism and liberalism will be shown as depicted in Kureishi’s *The Black Album*. The second half of the chapter, focusing on the author’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and “My Son the Fanatic” from the collection of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time* (1997), too deal with the same aspect. Kureishi has explored the clash between Islamic fundamentalism and liberalism in *The Black Album* with an emphasis on the issue of Muslim fundamentalism in what turns out to be a pseudo progressive multicultural London. The whole argument will focus on how Shahid Hasan, the protagonist in the
novel, is initially drawn towards the radical Islamist Riaz, and how uncomfortable he has felt with the intolerance of Riaz’s group as the latter’s piety and clear-headedness distinguish him from an average white product of pop culture. In the same manner, despite his physical attraction for Deedee, his white lecturer, and his brush with British pop culture, Shahid is not able to accept her dismissal of Riaz’s group in black and white terms. To better understand such clash of Islamic fundamentalism with that of postmodern, the postmodern literary approach is used. The choice of the various characters in *The Black Album*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and “My Son the Fanatic”, who opt for one of the two options – postmodernism or fundamentalism is discussed.

Chapter five includes the representation of the Taliban in Khalid Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). In *The Kite Runner* Hosseini sets the story against the backdrop of tumultuous events in Afghanistan: fall of the monarchy, the Soviet invasion, the mass exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the life during the Taliban regime. The argument in this chapter is based on how Hosseini has depicted this extreme version of Sunni Islam and the troubled recent past of Afghanistan in his novels with special emphasis on their policies on education, the restrictions they imposed on women and the damage they have done to the large Buddha figures. It also discusses about the radical change that the Taliban brought about in the law and order of the country during that period and its impact on the common people. More precisely, an emphasis has been given on the repression of the women and the suppression of the religious minorities, who had been deprived of their freedom by the Taliban. Similarly, the clash between the different ethnic groups such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and Pashtuns is also focussed. This chapter also points out how the Taliban laid special emphasis on the compulsion of headscarves and *burqa* for women, for men to grow beards, compulsion of prayer
five times a day for all citizens, singing and gambling being forbidden for all and stoning to death as the punishment for the adulterers. The discussion in chapter five will also show the dominance of the Islamic Shari’ah of Afghanistan over the postmodern culture.

The recent fictional works which touch the subject of Islam and Muslims other than the selected novels under discussion include Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), Naugi Wa Thiong’s *Petals of Blood* (1977), Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Tariq Ali’s *Islam Quintet* (1992). 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 “radical Islam”, “jihad”, “suicide”, and “veil” in their novels. All those issues that political Islam talks about are also tackled by these novelists in one way or the other. For instance, “In *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, Rushdie employs metaphor and association rather than allegory, thus taking his study of Islam in a more interesting and useful direction and breaking the simple equivalence between Islam and fundamentalism” (Ahmad “This Fundo Stuff” 1). In his novel *Petals of Blood*, the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has shown the involvement of four major characters namely Munira, Abdullah, Wanja, and Karega, in the murder of the three directors of Theng’eta Breweries and Enterprises— Chui, Kimeria, and Mzigo. The victims have been burned to death. The British author Zadie Smith has focused on the two friends—Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones, belonging to Bangladesh and Britain respectively and their families in London in the *White Teeth*. Samad who had immigrated to England after the Second World War, got married with Alsana. The influence of the British culture is too much for Samad to maintain his moral character. As a result he has sent ten years old Magid, one of his twin boys, (the other
one is Millat) to Bangladesh with a hope that he would get proper Islamic environment there and grow up properly. But it is in vain. This decision of Samad has shown the two varied paths to his two sons. While Magid becomes an atheist and dedicates his life to science, Millat in due course becomes a fundamentalist and enlists his name to a Muslim brotherhood known as the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation. More recently Mohsin Hamid has raised a few questions in his *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and Tariq Ali has talked about the entire Muslim history in his *Islam Quintet* (1992).

V

The whole argument is situated within the study of some contemporary theorists particularly Louis Althusser, Terry Eagleton and Edward Said in explaining the representation of political Islam in the fictional works under discussion. Louis Althusser’s *Essays on Ideology* (1984) was of great significance in this regard. Louis Althusser viewed literary works primarily in terms of their relationship to ideology, the function of which, he argued, is to reproduce the existing relations of production in a given society and hence, to ensure that the proletariat remains subordinate to the dominant class. Terry Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology* (1976) asserts that a literary text is the production of an ideology but not an expression of it and in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), Eagleton pointed out that literary theory is a very rough mix of philosophical, political, sociological and anthropological and many other modes of enquiry and practice. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is the first book in a trilogy which is devoted to an exploration of the historically imbalanced relationship between the world of Islam, the Middle East and the Orient on the one hand and that of European and American imperialism on the other. This aspect is further focussed in his other work *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). These critical
approaches supply us also with the hypothetical plot to represent political Islam and the radical attitude of the Islamists towards the West in fiction.

Moreover, Terry Eagleton’s *The Idea of Culture* (2000) and *After Theory* (2003), Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1997), Akbar S. Ahmed’s *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (1992) and, above all certain verses from the *Holy Qur’ān* were of great significance in evaluating the fictional works of the writers under discussion.


