

# Orientalism and Refashioning of Muslim Selves

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The book under review tries to answer a contemporary paradox which many in South Asia are grappling with. Despite the progress of education, the larger society operates on ideas and idioms derived from their respective religious world views. In India, the mythical construction of “Ram Rajya” has moved the Hindu society and polity towards overt majoritarianism, while in Pakistan the call for return to the Prophetic model of the seventh-century Arabia has never left the popular imagination since its inception. Maryam Wasif Khan, in her fascinating book, *Who Is a Muslim? Orientalism and Literary Populisms*, seeks to answer this paradox by understanding the imaginaries (symbolic resources through which a people imagine themselves) of the Muslims and Islam in the popular Urdu fiction. She states categorically that the secular possibilities within the Muslim society, engendered by the writings of Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Saadat Hasan Manto, are largely confined to academia and the cognoscenti. As compared to this “high-brow” literature, the “popular” Urdu fiction is infused with Islamic and Islamist imagery. Produced by writers such as Naseem Hijazi, Razia Butt, and Umera Ahmad, the popular Urdu fiction resonate with the Muslim masses much more. Despite the secular romance with Faiz, his symbolic invocation of removing the “idols from Kaaba” remains marginal to the “religio-popular” novels which appeal for creating a “real Mecca” in Pakistan.

## The Non-native Mahometan

In *Who Is a Muslim? Orientalism and Literary Populisms*, the unravelling of this narrative is done through five main interwoven chapters, tracing the emergence of Urdu as an inclusive language and how it eventually becomes a language

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**Who Is a Muslim? Orientalism and Literary Populisms** by Maryam Wasif Khan, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021; pp x + 257, ₹995 (hardcover).

of othering. The story of Urdu, however, is also simultaneously the story of how the Muslim self has been imagined in these novels. Chapter 1 (“Mahometan/Muslim: The Chronotope of the Oriental Tale”), tells us how the Muslim was imagined in Oriental literatures like the *Arabian Nights* and *Persian Tales*. Certainly, these Oriental imaginaries did constitute the selves of the Orient and the Occident through different modes of intercultural communication.

But what the author is interested in the book is how this Oriental imaginary framed the Muslim conception of the self in South Asia. Khan argues that the Muslim or the “Mahometan chronotope” materialise in the English oriental tale as a non-national, shifting space whose inhabitants themselves are fluid and unattached beings (p 52). The Muslim does not belong to any territory, neither does he have any claims to civilisation and therefore the characters in the Oriental novels float anywhere between Egypt and Indonesia.

The Mahometan is used in a pejorative sense: they are followers of Muhammad, the “false prophet” who imitated Christianity and hence lacking any original covenant with God. Interestingly, in the English narrative, India was a geographically distinct orient from that which was imagined as Mahometan. Thus, despite the fact that much of the East India Company’s (hereafter the Company) negotiations and battles during the 17th and 18th centuries were with the Mughal rulers, Company officials continued to refer to them as “Moors,” designating them as foreign and temporary invaders of India (p 42).

Chapter 2 (“Hindustani/Urdu: The Oriental Tale in the Colony”) tells us how the Oriental tale travels from the English metropolis to the Indian colony, thereby heralding the birth of the domestic novel. After the British victory at Plassey (1757), orientalism’s interest in language, law, literature, and religion was central to the expansion of colonial rule in India. In the process, the British not just defined what constituted Urdu and Hindi but also formulated what it meant to be a Muslim or a Hindu. The author talks at length about the central role of William Jones and the Fort William College who created a genre (Hindustani/Urdu) that overwrote the historical lived realities of Muslims in India. It was through fictions such as Mir Amman’s *Bagh o Bahar*, that the “invention” of Muslim happened in India, the underlying narrative already informed by the Oriental imaginations of Muslims. This imagination posited the Muslim as distinct from the Hindu; the Muslim remained the perennial foreigner without any civilisational or cultural stake in India despite centuries of existence. However, this new Muslim imagination, Khan tells us, could not penetrate the cultural spheres like courts of the various nawabs who closed themselves to this colonial project (p 86). The story of this hegemonic expansion is elaborated in the subsequent chapter.

## Islam’s Others

It was left to the writers such as Nazir Ahmad, Altaf Hussain Hali, and Abdal Halim Sharar to transform the “opulent yet decadent” Muslim of the oriental tale into a modern Muslim, a bourgeois subject whose historical origins lie in Islam’s glorious past (Chapter 3: “Nation/Qaum”). The groundwork for such apologetics had already been laid by Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh College. These three writers, according to the author, hardly display any interest in Indian civilisation, tracing Muslim origins to the founding moments of Islam, thus imagining a modern nation entirely in religious terms (p 92). Rather than being a home for centuries, India is understood as a geographic site in which

Islam gets corrupted. The effort in all such writings, therefore, is to make a Muslim home in which chaste and pure Islam could be practised. For example, in Nazir Ahmad's novels, the "successful" Muslim housewife is not just characterised by her diligence towards housework but also by the fact that she imposes what she considers "true Islam," an Islam which is anti-syncretic and desirous to purge itself from Hindu influences. This reformism also informs the works of Hali where the origins of Muslim *qaum* (community) lie in the Hijaz (where Islam originated) and its essence can only be "recovered once Muslims leave the foreign empire in favour of the Islamic caliphate" (p 117). Urdu literature, post 1857, therefore imagines the Muslim community as essentially foreign to India, very much in line with the thought process of British orientalists like Jones and John Gilchrist.

It was natural, therefore, that Muslims, "whose religion has been corrupted by living with the Hindus," would want to proclaim a homeland of their own. Following the orientalist discourse, Muslims had come to believe in their essential foreignness in India. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to precisely such an explication. In Chapter 4 ("Martyr/Mujahid"), Khan examines the writings of three "prolific, ubiquitous, and best-selling" authors: Rashid ul Khairi, Hijazi, and Butt. These writers inhabit the late colonial period and the newly created state of Pakistan, also the period in which the All India Progressive Writers' Association was making its mark. Khan makes it clear that she is not interested in the progressives (Sajjad Zahir, Ahmed Ali, and Faiz) which constitute a "break" in the Muslim imagination.

Her interest lies in the likes of Hijazi, because instead of rupture, their writings are continuous with the reformists such as Nazir Ahmad and Hali. It is important to note that Hijazi was very closely associated with Abul A'la Maududi, the founder and ideologue of political Islam in the subcontinent. In his novel *Muhammad bin Qasim*, Hijazi sets up the Islamic victory (*fatah* literature, opening up the land for Islam) of Sindh against the brutal and lecherous rule of its Hindu King Dahir. The foundational moment of Islam,

therefore, not just becomes anti-Hindu but also gets divorced from any civilisational or cultural roots. It is not surprising, then, that history lessons in Pakistan starts with the arrival of Muhammad bin Qasim. Similarly, in Butt's novels, the Muslim can only find safety and stability in his own *vatan* (homeland), in this case, Pakistan. But at the same time, this homeland should be safeguarded from "bad Muslims" who are, regularly, identified as lax in religious matters. Calling for the establishment of an Islamic society, therefore, becomes imperative for all Muslims.

The story of the making of this Islamic society in Pakistan is narrated in Chapter 5 ("Modern Mecca") of the book where Khan interrogates the writings of popular writers like Ahmad and Nimra Ahmed. Excluded from the domain of literature by elite artists, these writers are immensely popular in Pakistan and their novels and stories are frequently serialised on television. In these novels, women appear closer to the Wahabi/Salafi Islam, rather than rooted in the nation's cultural matrix. Women characters overthrow the "secular" atmosphere in favour of the veil and despite being educated, are subservient to the husband and consider this subservience as the will of Allah.

What is more worrying, Khan informs us, is that in order to define what constitutes true Islam, these novels end up otherising the Hindu minority and even the non-conformist Muslims like Ahmadis (p 194). It is no coincidence that the violent targeting of non-Muslims and Ahmadis is almost routine in Pakistan. Khan argues that, among other things, this is also the result of how Islam is being imagined and practised; an exclusionary doctrine alienated from its immediate cultural context, always rooting to bring back the "golden age" of seventh-century Arabia. In other words, this is the Salafi/Wahabi Islam and its vision—to reorganise the society as exclusionary, violent, and radical.

### Embedded Critique

There are two interrelated theoretical registers within which Khan situates her work: Orientalism and post-secularism. Through the literary tropes and Muslim imaginary employed in Urdu novels,

Khan has been able to show that understanding Orientalism as a thing of the past is fallacious. The Muslim anxiety to separate its existence from anything "non-Islamic," so evident in various revival movements, is informed by European orientalism which privileged "pure scriptural Islam" over the lived realities of Muslims. For someone like Wajid Ali Shah, for example, the Nawab of Awadh, dance and music were an inalienable part of being a Muslim. But he gets attacked not just by the British but also Muslims for not being true to "real Islam," which supposedly abhors such cultural expressions. In trying to explicate the many meanings of being a Muslim, Khan largely relies on the magisterial work of Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam*, wherein the premodern Muslim past was not necessarily imagined as based solely on religious scriptures.

More importantly, Khan critiques the post-secularists like Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood who have argued the need to look at Muslim societies from within a "discursive and practical condition" that may lie outside the world view of western liberal secularism. Since Muslim women are central to the Islamic reformist project in the novels that Khan interrogates, it is worth recalling Mahmood's influential work *The Politics of Piety* which argued that feminine acts of religious submission can and should, in fact, be considered as acts of agency and self-determination. Khan shows that such an understanding not just ignores the political and social implications of such an analysis (p 173), but also fails to consider how such notions of Islam are in themselves the product of internalising Colonial-Oriental typologies of Islam (p 16).

Unlike the post-secularist gazing of the Orient by academics situated in the West, Khan's engagement with the subject comes from her situatedness within the Pakistani society. When religion-inspired lynching becomes commonplace, aided by a government that wants to create a "state of Medina," the task of the critical scholar must become the excavation of the genealogy of this discourse of violence and otherness. The author of this book has been able to do just that and, in the process, ensured that her book will

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have a long shelf life. The book will not just be of interest to academics but also to the policymakers and activists in the field who are grappling to make sense of the multiple mutations within Islam.

Khan points out that some of these novels like Farhat Ishtiaq's *Humsafar* and Ahmad's *Shehr-e-Zaat*, have been serialised on television and transmitted to record-breaking audiences. However, images are different from words in the ways in which these novels are processed and consumed. It would have

been better if Khan would have devoted more attention to how these televised images of the new-found piety affect the consumption and eventual enactment of Muslim religiosity. But the larger problem/limitation of the book seems to be one of method rather than substance. Khan informs us at the beginning that she is not interested in pursuing the progressive stream within Urdu literature. The writings of Faiz, Manto, and Zaheer are not important to her as they do not resonate with the masses. But in the

epilogue of the book, Khan falls back on the writings of one such progressive—Fahmida Riaz—to recover a “secular subjectivity” in Urdu literature (p 209). Are we to understand, then, that the political project of recovering a non-binary, non-othering, inclusivist Islamic piety, that the author is engaged in, must necessarily be constructed from outside the religious world view of Islam?

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