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### PalArch' Self- Orientalization or Revival of Faith: The Politics of Sacred and Secular in Aslam's Fiction

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#### ABSTRACT

Muslim identities have shown a greater degree of flexibility over the last few decades due to increasing attacks on Muslims' religious and cultural identity and subsequent changed societal perceptions about them against the backdrop of 9/11. As a result, recent artistic representations of Islam and Muslim identity have also become increasingly polarized. Writers of Muslim origin, caught in the process of redefining what it means to be a Muslim, have tried to shift the focus away from radicals preaching hard-line Islam. This means that literary and cultural representations have tendency to "provide a place in which appropriate and adequate humane responses [can] be articulated, and new modes of conceiving an altered reality [can] take shape" (Berendse and Williams, 2002:10). Contrary to this, writers such as Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali, Tasleema Nasreen, Hanif Kureishi and Nadeem Aslam have provoked religious or cultural sensitivities which contributed to the Islamophobia that swept through North America and Europe following the events of 9/11. Through reductive representations of Islam employing "recycled Orientalist tropes cast in the insider's voice" (Nash, 2012:27), they have utterly failed to effectively bring secular and non-secular experiences into a productive *mélange*. Given this context, for this paper, We focus on Rushdie's and Aslam's fiction that are replete with references to Islamic laws which provoke debates among Western scholars with regard to the propaganda that Islam is a religion of violence. We argue that Rushdie's and Aslam's eclectic approaches towards Islamic shariah laws not only challenge their own opposition to Islamic absolutism, which they foreground in their novels, but also question their claims to have rewritten Islam in good faith.

## INTRODUCTION

Saba Mahmood in “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” flags up what she calls “an impasse” between a religious taboo and the liberal notion of freedom of speech: “Public reaction on the part of both Muslims and non-Muslims to the publication of Danish cartoons of Muhammad (Initially in 2005 and Republished in 2008) is exemplary of the standoff between religious and secular worldviews today—particularly in liberal democratic societies” (2009:836). A similar controversy was provoked in France concerning the headscarf issue and by the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 in the wake of the *fatwa* issued to address the novel’s offensiveness. Consequently, the novel was banned in many countries, including India, Bangladesh, Kenya, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and Sudan, to name but a few. Since then, artistic and cultural representations of Islam and Muslim identity have also become increasingly polarized. Writers of Muslim origin, caught up in identity politics (secular versus Islamic), have tried to shift the focus away from radicals preaching hard-line Islam. This means that literary and cultural representations have a tendency to “provide a place in which appropriate and adequate humane responses [can] be articulated, and new modes of conceiving an altered reality [can] take shape” (Berendse and Williams, 2002:10). However, contrary to this, writers such as Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali, Tasleema Nasreen, Hanif Kureishi and Nadeem Aslam have provoked religious or cultural sensitivities which contributed to the Islamophobia that swept through North America and Europe following the events of 9/11. And thus, as Claire Chambers observes, the “sacralisation of freedom of expression since the Rushdie affair, and its post-9/11 resurgence led by New Atheists such as Martin Amis and the late Christopher Hitchens, has entrenched both liberal and conservative perceptions of religions, particularly Islam, as repressive, dogmatic and violent” (2012: n.p.). It would not be wrong to say that the Rushdie Affair has continued to play a central role in the process of conceiving an altered reality in our changing post-Cold War political order, through reductive representations of Islam by employing “recycled Orientalist tropes cast in the insider’s voice” (Nash, 2012:27), these writers have utterly failed to effectively bring ‘secular’ and ‘non-secular experiences’ into a productive *mélange*.

Against this backdrop, for this paper, I focus on Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* and Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* which are replete with references to Islamic figures and *Hudood* laws, which provoke debates among Western scholars with regard to the propaganda that Islam is a religion of violence. We argue that Rushdie’s and Aslam’s eclectic approaches towards Islamic laws not only challenge their own opposition to Islamic absolutism, which they foreground in their novels, but also question their claims to have rewritten Islam in good faith to explore “the relative value of the sacred and the profane” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 1995:395). Mahmood suggests that:

“to rethink the religious is also to rethink the secular and its truth-claims, its promise of internal and external goods” (2009:837); our observation is emblematic of the legitimacy of literary and cultural representations that have continued to play a central role in the construction of a political landscape riven by inter-religious hatred. In this context, as I mentioned earlier, *The Satanic Verses* is not considered to be the only creative work to have provoked dissent; Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and its filming in 2006, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* in 2004, Sherry Jones' *The Jewel of Medina* and Taslima Nasreen's *Lajja* have triggered hostile responses in Britain, Europe and beyond. Such literary controversies raise important questions: Whether or not the ethical validity of secular criticism of religious discourses should be questioned? How does writers' 'hard secularist position', which also has an inherently 'fundamentalist' tendency, perpetuate the assumed split between a "censorious religion and freedom of speech?" (Chambers, 2012:n.p.). Do these literary representations offer a greater understanding of worldviews shaped by religion? While attempting to answer these questions in this paper, We show the way literary controversies, aroused as a result of reductive representations of Islam, illustrate the potential for misunderstandings between West and the Muslim world because these have not only continued to shape, inform and trigger public Islamophobic discourses in the US and the UK after September 11, but also influenced community relations in the UK, Europe and the US.

In his memoir *Joseph Anton*, based on his life in hiding for more than a decade, Rushdie claims that *The Satanic Verses* was his "least political book" (2013:74). It was "an artistic engagement with the phenomenon of revelation", albeit from the perspective of an "unbeliever", but "a proper one nonetheless" (Rushdie, 2013:74). How could that be thought offensive? Moreover, responding to the Valentine's Day *fatwa* pronounced on him by Iran's Ayatullah Khomeini in 1989, Rushdie, "In Good Faith", contends that, contrary to popular opinion, *The Satanic Verses* is not a book which condemns religion, but a book which explores "the relative value of the sacred and the profane" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1995:395), and therefore his novel is "a secular man's reckoning with the religious spirit", written "in good faith" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1995:371). However, Muslims have by and large serious reservations about Rushdie's claim to have written the *The Satanic Verses* in good faith. Whatever his intentions, Rushdie's act of naming figures from Islamic history, his rewriting of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Mahound in the novel) and his most controversial juxta position of the Prophet's wives and twelve whores in a chapter entitled "Return to Jahilia" have indubitably offended the sentiments of Muslims who, broadly speaking, frame their identities on the basis of their faith rather than Islamic culture or civilization alone. Even if the book is read for its aesthetic excellence, the allusion to Muslim historical contexts, in particular the references to the Prophet's wives, are so striking that rather than interpreting the episode as an allegory of "a migrant's eye-view of the world" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1995:394), a Muslim reader considers it a direct assault on Islam and an insult to the Prophet's

wives. In other words, the whole idea of Rushdie's embracing of phantasmagorical magic realism to narrate the "story of two painfully divided selves" and "a secular man's reckoning with the religious spirit" is lost on a Muslim reader (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1995:397,396).

Rushdie's own defiant assertions and doubts about divinity and the authenticity of the Qur'an are another factor that caused agitation among Muslim communities, given that Rushdie is no authority on the Islamic faith. This is particularly significant when literary critics such as Sara Suleri and Feroza Jussawalla defend Rushdie's novel, identifying a "reformist agenda" (Jussawalla, 1996:50). Jussawalla argues that *The Satanic Verses* was written by Rushdie "out of love for his religion", with the intention to "reinstil faith in the practitioners" by making Islam less "hate-filled and less practice-oriented ... Rushdie undertakes the rewriting of a sacred book [the Qur'an] ... to correct a wrong out of the love for his religion and his forefathers" (1996:63). According to this logic, by embarking upon a reformist retelling of the history of Islam, Rushdie is simply challenging a "particular strain" of Islam, such as Khomeini's (Jussawalla, 1996:50-73). Contrary to what Jussawalla claims, Rushdie's overtly blasphemous interpretations and sweeping generalisations about the Qur'anic message as primitive and unprogressive, as well as his description of Arabs as 'the people of bazaar', demonstrate his own ignorance about Islam and Arab society. Rushdie's critique of Arabs as 'backward-looking' and having an 'old nomadic system' implicitly aligns the message of the Qur'an (Muhammad's words) with pre-Islamic Arab society, evoking Orientalist notions of Islam being incompatible with modernity and secularism. Nevertheless, as Kanwal argues, what Rushdie fails to highlight to his "non-Muslim readers is the fact that the Prophet Muhammad's message made a strong impact on Arabs because they were a most eloquent and articulate people with a remarkable tradition of poetic language and oral literature and hence the linguistic eloquence of the Qur'an communicated by the Prophet impressed and overwhelmed them" (2015:33). Likewise, other significant details in Rushdie's narrative can hardly be referred to as an affirmation or reformation of faith, as I will discuss.

Emphasising the cultural reality of religion and taking a postmodernist stance on *The Satanic Verses*, Suleri proposes a rereading of Rushdie's text as a "gesture of recuperative devotion toward the idea of belief rather than as the insult", but it also gestures towards its devotion to a "cultural system that it must both desecrate and renew" (1992:191). We would contend that instead of foregrounding the cultural reality of religion and criticising the history of Muslim culture on the sub-continent or the homogeneity of Islamic culture as Suleri suggests, Rushdie questions the very source of Islamic faith, the validity of the sacred divine book of Muslims. The specific critique that Rushdie makes in the novel with regard to the word of God is equally provocative; he claims that the Qur'an is not the word of God but a collage of apocryphal Satanic Verses scribed by a poet in the novel who was "polluting the word of God",

unnoticed by the Prophet (Satanic Verses, 367-68). In so doing, it seems as if Rushdie is proposing *The Satanic Verses* as “secular reclamations of the grand narrative of the Qur’an itself” (Parreiras-Horta, 1992:9). Here, Suleri too fails to engage with the question of “religious pain”, as Mahmood points out in the context of the Danish cartoon controversy: “Little attention has been paid to how one might reflect on the kind of offence the cartoons caused and what ethical, communicative, and political practices are necessary to make this kind of injury intelligible” (2009:71). Similarly, Rushdie’s references to Islamic penalties for prostitution, the prohibition of homosexuality, Islamic laws of inheritance and evidence (*Imaginary Homeland*, 1995:400) need proper contextualisation which he fails to engage with, as is evident from Aslam’s fictional representations.

Here, it is equally important to discuss what Madeline Clements terms Aslam’s “Mausoleum fiction” (2016:88), because he is one of a number of high-profile authors who have used Islam rather reductively, given the fact that he claims to bear the ‘burden of representation’. After a post-9/11 discovery of his identity as a cultural Muslim, Aslam admits that “It is time that moderate Muslims like myself stand up and say we are all not fundamentalists or Islamists” (Gill n.p). Given this, Aslam’s resentment towards Islamic jurisprudence and consequently his discussions about marriage and divorce, honour-killing and fornication have arguably contributed to the Islamophobic climate because, like Rushdie, Aslam tends to make over simplified assertions regarding hadith, fiqh and Islamic jurisprudence in his novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*. In this respect, Kanwal raises a pertinent issue: “the question of whether Aslam is writing primarily for informed Muslim readers or for non-Muslim/Western readers – who are not familiar with Islamic jurisprudence – becomes really crucial” (2015:178). For example, *Maps for Lost Lovers* features a claustrophobic, abuse-ridden British-Pakistani community at a crossroads of orthodoxy and liberalism. They are not only shown to be “victims of migration to strange lands, but also of self-imposed exile due to their unbearable confinement within the fixed chrysalises of race, class, religion, sect and caste” (Kanwal, 2015:159). In the novel, Aslam draws upon stereotypes of Pakistani Muslim women who are shown to be the victims of strict Islamic punishments (*hudoos*) and honour-based violence, particularly those related to rape and adultery, often perpetrated in the name of and confused with honour-killing. Abu-Lughod has rightly pointed out the problematics associated with the representation of honour-killing: “Human rights activism, the judicial and legal system, media representation, fiction and fantasy and anthropological study all conspire to fix and solidify honour crimes as timeless cultural practices affiliated to a particular kind of community at odds with Western society” (2011:32). These claustrophobic patriarchal tendencies have been the subject of hostility from the West since the early 1980s and have undoubtedly contributed to stereotypical representations of Muslims in the West. Crucially, such patriarchal tendencies informed the US slogan ‘save the women’ in the aftermath of 9/11, and the US manipulated such issues to declare war on

Afghanistan and justify drone attacks in Pakistan since 2004. This has continued to inform contemporary tensions between Islam and secular democracy in the West.

It is precisely in these contexts that punishments related to adultery need to be distinguished from punishments for honour-killing. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam conflates the two in the story of Chanda and Jugnu, who were killed by Chanda's brothers, using honour-killing as an excuse, because they were living a life of sin according to Islamic Law. The police suspect that this is a case of honour-killing and arrest Chanda's brothers. The narrative then reveals what happens in the next twelve months. By putting honour-killing centre stage, Aslam's narrative univocally gives this impression that we are reading about a country where honour-killing and wife-beating are the norm. What we find problematic with regard to Aslam's representation of honour-killing is the way he obscures the hudood punishments related to rape and adultery with acultural norm, honour-killing, as he suggests:

...under Pakistan's Islamic law, rape had to have male witnesses who confirmed that it was indeed rape and not consensual intercourse; the girl did not have witnesses and therefore would be found guilty of sex outside marriage, sentenced to flogging, and sent to prison, marked an abominable sinner from then on, a fallen woman and a prostitute for the rest of her life (Aslam, *Maps*: 157).

The novel *fails* to capture the dynamics of honour-killing; instead of foregrounding it as a social phenomenon, the narrative represents it as a religious norm and an Islamic punishment. I would like to emphasise here that I neither intend to claim that there are no honour-killings in Pakistan, nor that Aslam's critique of such brutal tribal customs (such as the tradition of *karis*- the tradition of honour-killing in Sindh) is unjustified. We would contend, however, that Aslam's conflatory representation of ignominious tribal customs and hudood laws does not contribute to a better understanding of these in an Islamic context, especially for a non-Muslim reader.

The problematics associated with the conflatory rhetoric surrounding controversial hudood punishments becomes far more serious when Aslam substantiates his statements with Qur'anic verses, as it is vocalised through the character of Suraya, Shamas' lover. Suraya epitomises the violence unleashed on Muslim women in patriarchal societies such as Pakistan. The novel portrays Suraya as a vulnerable woman, despite the fact that she is raised and educated in England, as she grumbles: "Allah is not being equally compassionate towards the poor woman ... It's as though Allah forgot there were women in the world when he made some of his laws, thinking only of men" (150). This gives the impression that the Islamic system and laws directly lay the ground work for justifying crimes such as honour-killing against all Muslim women. As Nesrin Koc observes:

Indeed, quite the opposite, her self-esteem, reminiscent of her upbringing in England, becomes the very reason of her mal treatment by her husband, whom she married through an arranged marriage. In addition to receiving beatings from her drunken husband, she has to go through an extremely harsh ordeal. Her husband divorces her in a state of drunken fury and Islamic laws, Maps tells, state that a woman needs to marry somebody else before she can remarry her ex-husband (2014:70).

Failure to do so will incur harsh Islamic punishment. In the novel, Pakistan's Islamic law promises only flogging and imprisonment, and Suraya, who seduces Shamas for the purpose of *halala*, is considered to be an abominable sinner, a fallen woman and a prostitute for the rest of her life (157). Therefore, she is shown to be a victim of shariah laws. Berivan Saltik's observations in relation to literary and cultural representations of issues such as honour-killings are important: "As literature narrates social group and individual behaviours from multiple points-of-view, it is an important tool in terms of understanding the dynamics of honour killings" (2016:1). Like Rushdie, Aslam too fails to highlight the rationale behind such strict punishments, as well as misinterpretation of the said law, and blames everything on the Qur'an. Amina Yaqin flags up similar concerns with reference to the representation of honour-killings in *Maps for Lost Lovers*:

A number of readers have commented on the slightly disorienting experience of reading a novel that seems in many ways to reiterate populist clichés in its story of a pair of ill-fated lovers whose transgression is punished with death, and a closed community who shield and support the murderers. They have expressed uncertainty about whether, in the end, Aslam is challenging or confirming popular images of backward and atavistic Pakistani immigrant behavior... *Maps for Lost Lovers* offers an uneven and contradictory engagement with honour crimes (2012: 101-102).

Given the state of the judicial and legal system in Pakistan, it is not difficult for lawyers and families to make false accusations against a woman's character due to the major "failings of the Protection of Women's Rights Bill". Contrary to this, Islam protects women by imposing strict punishment on the slanderer if he fails to provide evidence to support his accusations. This means that a woman cannot be sentenced to flogging unless four witnesses prove an allegation against the woman, as is clear from a Qur'anic verse: "And those who launch a charge against chaste women and produce not four witnesses (to support their allegations) flog them with eighty stripes and reject their testimony forever" (24:4). Since it is almost impossible, in practice, to find four witnesses, it is not easy to enforce this punishment. By situating his characters within UK society, Aslam has made honour crimes and violence in the name of religion a public worry for the British community, without realising that "[i]n order to explore this trajectory and understand the implications of the novel's

key theme it is important to establish a broader political sense of how honour killings and honour crimes are recognized and discussed in Britain” (Yaqin, 2012: 101–102).

Similarly, Aslam's engagement with the theme of the testimony of female witnesses in Islam also remains disputed, when Ujala says to Kaukab: “Their [women's] testimony in a court of law is worth half of a man” (321). Similar confusion is evident in *The Wasted Vigil* with reference to the rape of a girl: “She told them it was rape but no one believed her. The cleric at the mosque demanding she produce – as Islamic law required of a violated woman – four witnesses who must be male and must be Muslim to confirm that she had not consented. This was Allah's commandment and could not be questioned” (300). Surprisingly, every Pakistani woman or girl in the text is subjected to some kind of abuse and violence, ranging from rape and forced marriage to honour crimes. Aslam repeatedly brings these issues into his oeuvre, which serves to replicate his own misconceptions about Islamic laws. Nowhere in the Qur'an do we find that a woman's testimony is worth half of that of a man except in business matters (Surah al Baqarah, verse 282). The Qur'anic verse referred to in Aslam's text does not differentiate between male or female witnesses, meaning that a female can also be a witness in adultery cases without discrimination. It would not be wrong to say that by confusing “quotidian forms of terrors” (Moore, 2009:3) with religion, Aslam's depictions contribute towards an Islamophobic climate rather than an attempt to reconfigure the position of Muslims in the post-9/11 world.

Edward Said points out the same conflationary discourse of Islam/Islamic culture/Muslim practices when he argues that Islam “defines a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in Islamic world, which numbers a billion people, and includes dozens of countries, societies, traditions, languages and, of course, an infinite number of different experiences. It is simply false to try to trace all this back to something called ‘Islam’” (1997:16). This is the problem that Malak highlights when he emphasises that Muslims who belong to different regions and societies uphold contrasting or divergent views about dogmas of faith. “When applied indiscriminately, clichés such as ‘moderate’, ‘liberal’ and ‘fundamentalist’ are often more confusing than clarifying, because these are subjective, value-laden, context-specific terms that are conditioned by cultural norms and individual predilections” (Malak, 2005:152). A depiction that blames everything bad on religion and tradition inevitably involves a degree of one-sidedness, as is evident from Rushdie's and Aslam's fictional work. My reading of Rushdie's and Aslam's work corroborates what Amin Malak says: “the production of any literary work is culturally conditioned; subsequently the responses to the literary work are likewise culturally conditioned” (“Reading the Crisis”, 1989:183). What is expected from these writers is a moment of good will and to act in good faith. They must tread a careful middle-ground in depicting diverse and often clashing views on Islam. This is only possible if their work can be called ‘genuinely contrapuntal texts’



that effectively bring-secular and non-secular experiences into a productive *mélange*.

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