

CLAIMING THE ‘OTHER’ THROUGH FICTION: TRAVERSING THE FANATIC-LIBERAL BINARY IN THE DISCURSIVITY OF THE MUSLIM AS THE ‘OTHER’

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Introduction

Compelling literature blurs the line between fiction and reality for the reader. It has the ability to construct a ‘truth’ that is indispensable: creating a historical, political and social imagination more legitimate than truth alone. This narrative is a quest for ‘meaning’ and the various forms it takes, beginning from words such as ‘fanatic’, ‘fundamentalist’, ‘liberal’, ‘progressive’, ‘Muslim’ etc. The paper explores the dichotomies between ‘fanatics’ and ‘liberals’ in relation to the Muslim in literature and film.

The notion of a ‘fanatic’/‘fundamentalist’ and a ‘liberal’/‘progressive’ announces itself in the post 9/11 context, fertilized through popular fiction which breeds a discourse encompassing every day conversation and print and social media; the “*inner dialectic quality* of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises” (Volosinov 23). Works of fiction that have flooded the creative world following the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers are integrated into popular fiction and thereby into popular discourse, and assist in carrying forward and maintaining a particular kind of political hegemony.

Methodology

Sivamohan Valluvan says that the “new nationalist movement where political discourse” is concerned, is positioned around “supposed problems posed by those who” do “not to belong to the normative ethno-national community – be it via concerns about immigration or about already established minority communities”¹. Valluvan states that such issues can only be then handled at the “international level”. This is why I would like to deliberate upon two texts from this post 9/11 discourse

¹ The quotes used above are taken from Valluvan Sivamohan’s notes for the lecture.

that depict the global overrunning of being Muslim or the ‘Global Other of America’ – *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid.

Results and Discussion

While accentuating the Muslim, 9/11 also gave America a prospect of unravelling the Other through writing. Fiction generates an opportunity to ‘claim ownership of the Other’ and sets up a dialogue between the Self and the dissociated Other; a dialogue created by the Self to keep the Other in place. Claiming the Other occurs so that the Other can be nurtured in accordance with the Self’s wishes. Thus, ‘claiming’ and comprehending the Other here, transpires through apportioning the Muslim into two distinct groups in terms of ‘visible signs’: the ‘fundamentalist’ who characterizes ‘fanatical’ tendencies magnifying religiosity and the ‘progressive’ who reflects ‘liberal’ tendencies by compressing religiosity. ‘Owning’ the Other occurs through this ‘fanatic’-‘liberal’ division and consequently through the ‘sign’ transforming itself into a “verbal sign” (Volosinov 3) and thereby announcing itself, again conspicuously at a time of crisis.

‘My Son the Fanatic’ and the Theoretical Terrain

My Son the Fanatic by Hanif Kureishi is significant to this discussion as it raises political questions interrogating such terms as the ‘fanatic’ and the ‘liberal’ and subverting the dichotomy within a domestic sphere, years before 9/11. It is in this deconstructive stance that Hanif Kureishi gives a theoretical frame of reference to begin and examine the two selected texts. Kureishi’s story is a precursor in many ways as “‘texts’ are not ‘finished’ as forms of action, as what they ‘do’ depend on how they are ‘taken up’” (Ahmed 106). The final lines of the short story, “So who is the fanatic now?” posed at a theoretical level, deconstructs and challenges the post 9/11 ‘conventional wisdom’ of the ‘fanatic’ and the ‘liberal’ being boxed within a specific frame. I focus on the strain between the father-son duo in the story as it reflects that the binary is complex within the space of the home alone, going on to illustrate the vagaries of the tempestuous clash between the East and the West. Here lies the fragility of the issue; who is the ‘fanatic’ and who is *not*? Is there such a thing as a fanatic or a non-fanatic?

The ‘Global Other’ of America: Afghanistan and Pakistan

Fiction also claims the space of the Other or the disempowered territory. *The Kite Runner* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are both set in America and the narrators’ respective country, Afghanistan and Pakistan – two countries directly impacted by the ‘war on terror’. The analysis highlights the fanatic-liberal binary through the depiction of the two countries and in how they are then transferred onto the self-other dichotomy through the narratives, the narrators, the reader/s and so on.

The Question of Class: Taxi Drivers and Domestic Workers

The paper also looks at the selected texts through a frame of class. The taxi driver who forms the comforting background in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is the focus in *My Son the Fanatic*. The short story is then able to bring those from the peripheries into the frame. In contrast, the narrators in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and in *The Kite Runner* come from privileged backgrounds and thus their accounts are coloured by class, calling for a delving into in this study.

Uncovering the Dichotomy: The Woman

In the scuffle between the father and son in *My Son the Fanatic*, is trapped *another* Other, who does not fall into the roles of ‘fanatic’ or ‘liberal’ but throws the already troubled father-son duo into further crisis. The silent wife and the maligned sex worker Bettina bring up the rear in *My Son the Fanatic*, uncovering and forcing us to confront gender as a crisis within the disempowered; “women’s entry in revolutionary and decolonization movements has been essential in *unsettling* gender construction” (qtd. in Moallem 226). This statement is analysed through the women in *The Kite Runner* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Homecoming and ‘sing mother sing’

In order to substantiate my discussion and bring it close to home, I look at Sivamohan Sumathy’s film *sing mother sing*, which illustrates how people respond to the violence around them. It consists of various narratives and I focus on two in particular; a woman who recounts her feelings on a recent riot and a bystander to the narratives unfolding around her. At the cusp of home, land, homeland and motherhood are the women, occupying the inside and the outside of it waiting and ‘watching’. I believe this film opens up spaces for voices, marginal and

feminine –the Other *of* the Other- that cannot be encapsulated by the hegemonic progressive/liberal, fundamentalist/fanatic dichotomies and throws into crisis the very notion of such terms, corresponding with the questions posed by *My Son the Fanatic*.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study is an attempt to show that fiction does not end with the closing of the book, nor does discourse. Merged together, fiction and discourse have the ability to come into our lives and hold power over how we see, read, respond and give meaning and attributes to things.

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