

Performing Identities: A Study of H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*

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There's an ugly phenomenon in this country. . . The last permissible racism here — and by permissible, I mean it's okay publicly in the media and elsewhere — is to be racist against Arabs
Edward Said (2005)

This paper culls out how issues of ethnocentric dilemma, identity politics and cultural clashes that intensified after the September 11 attacks became a spectacle to mobilize nationalistic feelings of the US vs. the rest and generated a discourse of power which accelerated the xenophobia fashioned by the US hegemony. H.M.Naqvi's *Homeboy* brings to the fore how the terrorist attacks ended up in the production of colonial discourse - an exclusive American nationalistic rhetoric, which consciously excluded the Pakistani Muslim migrants who willingly subscribed to the culturally homogenous cosmopolitan society.

Immigration, Islam and the US

In the West, most of the time the terms Islam and Muslim have been taken as one and the same, but while *Muslim* refers to “a religious and cultural reality”, Islam is associated with “political intent” (Rabasa 2004). Three waves of Islamic immigration took place in the American soil, but failed to yield a ‘true Islamic identity’ (Abdo). In the 1700's, Muslims were brought as slaves from West Africa. Enslaved and converted to Christianity, the Muslim slaves had no opportunity to practise their religion and hence there was no possibility for an Islamic identity. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the second wave immigration of Muslims started around 1870's. The Arab immigrants who settled in the US were keen on preserving the religious and ethnic traditions of their homelands rather than “unifying into one Muslim American community” (Abdo). With the relaxation of American immigration laws against Muslim immigrants during 1965, there was a flow of Muslim immigrants in the

US. Interestingly the Muslim identity was embraced mainly by the African Americans to fight the racial subjugation which eventually ended up in the formation of American Society of Muslims (1975).

In the 80's, factors like the Iran revolution and the defeat of Soviet by Muslim forces prompted most of the Muslim immigrants in the US to follow their religious doctrine more sincerely. But then, simultaneously the image of "the Muslim as enemy" was also strongly typecast by U.S. foreign policy makers (Curtis). This situation worsened with the onset of terrorist attacks on 9/11. In such a state with the fear of Islamic fundamentalist terror attacks, America which had always defined itself to be a multicultural state was caught in a conundrum regarding its relationship toward Muslims and Arabs.

The terrorist and 'other'

Contemporary Pakistani novelists like Kamila Shamsie, Mohsin Hamid and H.M.Naqvi discuss the identity crisis Pakistani expatriates undergo in America. Pakistani literature produced in recent times concentrate on the shift from an American – 'hybrid' identity' to a Muslim identity and how the imaginary homeland which served as a space (both geographically and psychically) to naturalise identities before 9/11, in the aftermath eventually became a threat for their safety. Research shows that experiences of trauma/humiliation recorded after the 9/11 event focuses primarily on the experiences of Muslim women as being the subordinate, whereby Muslim men have been 'demonised' and looked as part of the 'Asian gang' (Avatar Brah 1996).

As Bhabha asserts the dispersal / 'scattering' of people in exiled spaces call for a 'gathering', and only from these gatherings 'emerge a historical fact of singular importance' (1994: 139). One such gathering of the exiles, expatriates and immigrants in the U.S. results in a close knit Pakistani Brotherhood. But interestingly, instead of adhering to their nationalist narrative the Pakistani men mimic their American counterpart which leads to an ambivalence. But this mimicry does not last long, for post 9/11 they are segregated based on their articulation of social and cultural difference. In fact the Pakistani individuals who once never wanted to be associated with Islam or Pakistan are reduced to mere Muslim stereotypes – 'the terrorists' / 'the Arab'. Among the Americans is a disavowal to recognise the 'ambivalent mode for knowledge and power' (Bhabha 1994:166) embedded in a Pakistani Muslim. Post 9/11, the west associates Muslims with evil, thereby branding them as the 'designated others' (Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine). In this process of othering, a deliberate homogenisation of the Muslims and their identity irrespective of their differences happens. Pakistan was seen as manufacturing these Islamic terrorists owing to its al-queda connection.

And ultimately all Pakistanis were brought under the terrorist scanner. In fact journalists like Ann Coulter stated that, “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity” (Rubin Derek 2009), which implies that all Muslims are barbaric and shelter fundamentalists.

The novel *Home Boy* taken for consideration shows the intensified ‘racism’ confines all the suspects under the canopy ‘Muslims’. The Pakistani Muslim is reduced to the ‘other’ who has ‘lost it’s (their) power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse’ (Bhabha1994: 37). Producing a counter discourse is not a possibility for the Pakistani, who is under constant surveillance and suspicion. Naqvi observes that the term A-rab got ‘mutated overnight’ (72).

This novel captures how pluralities – a conspicuous trait of the American melting pot gets altered for three Pakistani young men in the wake of 9/11. The President of US in his television address to the nation states that, ‘Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done’ (Naqvi 94). This novel *Homeboy* gives an account of how the proceedings of 9/11 alter/shatter the life of AC, DJ and Chuck. The three who consider themselves ‘Bonafide Americans’ include the narrator Chuck aka Shehzad, an expatriate who comes to New York to study literature, becomes an investment banker, gets fired due to economic recession and finally ends up as chauffeur, and his friends AC aka Ali Choudary – an immigrant who pursues his ‘on-and-off-again doctorate’, Jimbo aka Jamshed Khan – a Pashtun DJ born and bred in Jersey. The three men irrespective of their ethnicity and religious and cultural consider themselves American.

Spend ten months in Britain and not feel British, but after spending ten months in New York, you were a New Yorker, an original settler, and in no time you would be zipping uptown, downtown, crosstown, wherever, strutting, jaywalking, dispending directions to tourist like a mandarin. (Naqvi 14)

In fact the three men initially have a tendency of rejecting their Pakistani national identity. In the U.S by refusing to acknowledge their nationalism these ‘postcolonial intellectuals’ wilfully ‘cut themselves off from effective political action’ (During 139). The happy amigos apolitical by nature in an attempt to assimilate (become culturally Western) anglicise their names, listen to 70’s hip-hop, philander, party, and snort cocaine. In the novel Chuck is asked how come Pakistani guys have American names. Jimbo brings the house down with his Desi & Western hits and sniffs ganja. But when at home he cautiously chews cardamom pods after smoking and keeps hush-hush about his relationship with an American

woman, for the fear of offending his father old man Khan. AC, the settler is both, 'charming and roguish, thoughtful and unhinged, a man of incongruous and incommensurable qualities' (Naqvi 175). Despite trying every means to become *homeboys* they are not able to as their behaviour is 'defined by certain contexts'. In fact Jimbo's girlfriend Duck shouts at him, 'you guys are like one way here, like hardcore, homeboys, whatever, but when you guys go home, you become different, all proper conservative. You have to decide what you're about (Naqvi 71).

In the global set-up the individuals are torn between choices of. Though caught within split identities they prefer to perform their Americanness, till hell breaks loose on 9/11 and they eventually realise that they belong to 'Bumfuckistan'(Naqvi 107) and have 'got no fucking rights' (Naqvi 107) in America. As the tragedy unfolds in an attempt to defend themselves against the American establishment they cling firmly to their political, cultural and religious roots.

Post 9/11, the trio's 'Pakistani Gatsby' friend Mohamad Shaw aka Shaman goes missing, (whom we later come to know had died in the twin tower attack) and they get beaten up and are mistaken for terrorists. Chuck, AC and Jimbo in their trail to locate Shaman break into his house and though he is not at home cook pasta, drink and watch porn in his house awaiting his arrival. But instead of Shaman, it is the FBI that turns up. Breaking into Shamans apartment which used to be a usual phenomenon for them, now ends them up in the Manhattan metropolitan detention centre. Jimbo's 'American strategy' of being loud and inquisitive later lands all the three in prison. In the prison they are grilled about question regarding religious and national affinities. While Chuck and Jimbo (with Duck's influence) are released, AC is sentenced to fifteen years of imprisonment.

The characters in the novel seem to abide by Bhabha's view that the trauma following the terrorist attacks has left the Muslim youth in America 'both culturally grounded and nationally uprooted, transnational and homeless, and swirling psychologically in a contentious diaspora' (Bhabha 2005, Sirin and Fine). All Muslims are forced to equate themselves with the terrorist who blew up the twin tower. And the investigators are baffled as to why a Muslim drinks but would not eat pork.

The events that happened in the detention centre have an everlasting effect on Chuck. the young man from 'Pac land' becomes paranoid and is instructed by the authorities to go home.

I was conscious of the way I looked, behaved, the way I anxiously scratched my nose, my ear. when they announced 'Please report any suspicious activity

or behaviour' over the speakers, I closed my eyes like a child attempting to render himself invisible (Naqvi 122)

The experiences in prison instill in him a sense of reality and makes him strip the last strand of Americanness that he took pride in possessing/performing, 'In prison I finally got it. I understood that just like three black men were gangbangers, and three Jews a conspiracy, three Muslims had become a sleeper cell' (Naqvi 121). Post 9/11, America wanted an 'ethnically cleansed' nation devoid of Pakistanis. And this is enforced through 'death, literal and figurative of complex interweavings of history and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood' (Bhabha 1994:5)

The Pakistani individual after the 9/11 attacks is reduced to a colonial subject and a conscious colonial discourse which 'informs the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization' (Bhabha 1994:70) is perpetrated. The knowledge sought from this narrative only drives Chuck to seek solace in his religion. "Islam" becomes a means of resistance for the traumatised individual, "After 9/11, Muslim cabbies bore American . . . I wished I had something to hold on to then" (Naqvi 74). The novel which ends up with Shaman's obituary valourizing him as a hero, also hints us about Chuck's transformation, 'Arms folded over stomach, and positioning myself generally east, toward Mecca, recited the call to prayer' (Naqvi 214). He staunchly returns to his culture and religion for the location of cultural difference becomes 'the mere phantom of a dire disciplinary struggle in which it has no space or power' (Bhabha 1994:31).

The self tries to challenge the structure (American nation) by becoming the other – a stereotypical Pakistani, but again here we have to take into consideration that this stereotype is in itself "a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive, and demands not only that we extend our critical and political objectives but that we change the object of analysis itself" (Bhabha 1994:70). Knowing well that the stereotype may also be a 'false representation of a given reality' (1994:75) they resort to perform the traits of their culture because they are left with no other options. As Fanon adumbrates it becomes important for the minorities to 'assert their indigenous cultural traditions and retrieve their repressed histories' (Bhabha 1994:9)

Conclusion

Chuck, DJ and AC are cast as being the insider as well as the alien, the terrorist as well as the terrorized. The trio sustain, resist, and question the surveillance methods of the society they are placed. Chuck fails miserably as he tries to integrate the Muslim and

American selves in the wake of 9/11, he who thought America as the 'land of the free' (Naqvi 215) finally becomes schizophrenic.

But now I'm afraid of them. I'm afraid all the time. I feel like a marked man. I feel like an animal. It's no way to live. Maybe it's just a phase, maybe it'll pass, and things will return to normal, or maybe. I don't know, history will keep repeating itself. . . (Naqvi 206)

Initially Chuck, DJ and AC are unmindful of the hyphenated identities showered upon and are comfortable living with it. But 9/11 merely reduces the Pakistani Muslims to the position of colonial subjects. The text shows how it is not possible to resolve an on-going conflict situated at the hyphen. While denouncing the modernity in the American nation space they simultaneously consort to their tradition. In a way the young Pakistani's branded as terrorist in an alien land are ideologically and psychologically forced to fashion an indigenous national narrative based on ethnicity. As a result nation emerges as an identity factor that one cannot escape. The ideological discourses induced by American imperialism reduces the perforated identities to a monolithic Muslim 'other' which an immigrant/expatriate is not able to fight against. In fact The Pakistani individuals interestingly reclaim 'fixities' which ideologically constructs the 'other' (Bhabha 1994). In a way 9/11 has altered the existing viewpoint of the American melting point, the text staunchly suggests that, you can either be a good person or a Muslim but cannot be both at the same time.

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