



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Countering Islamophobia and Muslim Stereotypes in Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer*

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to delineate the strategies adopted by American Muslims to counter Islamophobia and Muslim Stereotypes in Ali Eteraz's novel *Native Believer* (2016). Employing Sherene Razack's theoretical perspectives from her book: *Nothing has to Make Sense: Upholding White Supremacy through anti-Muslim Racism* (2022), the paper focuses on post-9/11 Muslim lives in America and the worldwide. The paper charts M's journey from being a secular Muslim toward a reckless tramp and then an American civilian completely assimilated into the American society. The colonial encounter between Western powers and Muslim-majority regions, spanning centuries of conquest, colonization and cultural imposition has left indelible marks on both the colonizer and the colonized. As the securitization of Islam, War on Terror, and proliferation of surveillance measures serve to perpetuate a cycle of suspicion and discrimination and affect Muslim communities living at diaporic spaces, the paper shows that generally a Muslim has to devise an assimilative approach to survive in such a society.

**KEYWORDS** | Ali Eteraz, Islamophobia, Native Believer, Post-9/11 America, Sherene Razack, Stereotypes, War on Terror

## Introduction

This research paper explores the element of countering Islamophobia and stereotyping of Muslims in Eteraz's novel *Native Believer* (2016). The term 'Islamophobia' was first used by Runnymede Trust when it established a commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia under the chairmanship of Professor Gordon Conway. This Commission produced a consultation paper on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1997 and the Western media labeled it mockingly as to be "Islamically correct" (Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 4). Abduljalil Sajid (2005) is of the view that hatred towards Muslims is not a new concept rather it dates back to the era of Muslim Spain. After the decline of Muslim Spain, it took the form of the Crusades (p. 2). Elizabeth Poole (2011) is of the view that there was a shift in Western view towards Muslims of the world that was marked by "War on Terror". Derek Hook (2005) by comparing fetishism and stereotyping says that both these phenomena operate in an analogous relation with each other in which a stereotype is constructed which is truer than the objective reality itself (pp. 9-30). Basem Al Atom (2014) has recognized two factors which are responsible for such trends, the first one being the distinct clothing of Muslims that distinguishes them from other people of the world, the other factor is the negative public opinion collected from the recent sources (p. 83). Sadiya Abubakar and Suzana Muhammad (2019) delve deep into the reasons and causes that have led to wide spread Islamophobia, i.e. Salman Rushdie's affair and the 9/11 event (pp. 87-96). In the same

manner, Shaheen and Jajja (2019) are of the view that the time is apt for Pakistani-Americans to rethink their identities in the context of rising problem of Islamophobia in the US (p. 176). The Islamophobic hatred seeped out of America post-9/11 to global outreaches. Shaheen (2022), elsewhere talks about the hatred against Indian Muslims by presenting the state of affairs of Muslims as a minority in India after the Al-Qaeda attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001 (p. 30).

### Literature Review

Anglophone Pakistani literature, generally, is replete with the dilemma of identity crisis and prejudice against Muslims as a minority in the Western countries. Shaheen (2020) discusses the problems faced by Pakistani diaspora as portrayed in Pakistani Anglophone fiction through different novels and characters in them. He describes the American social phenomenon as a melting pot affected by xenophobia and racism, and that the “socio-cultural configurations” of American society are being disintegrated because of these problems. He discusses Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H. M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* whose protagonists are Pakistani expatriates facing the dilemma of identity crisis when they are homogenized into “terrorists.” This section refers to the reviews as well as the articles by different authors who have presented their views on the fiction, *Native Believer*, since its publication.

Toutonghi (2016) finds Eteraz’ novel as one of its kind, and puts forward the view that the character of M being a “Secular Muslim American rejects the burden of Labels”. Elgarby (2016) compares the predicament of Muslims in America with those of Blacks in the United States. He says that there was a time when Muslims were a subject of curiosity in America but in the aftermath of 9/11, to be a Muslim in America became something to be questionable and objectionable. Elgarby uses the term “non-white” for M as his being Muslim was just a hereditary thing and nothing to do with his own beliefs. Aroon (2016) highlights alienation of M from both of his identities of a Muslim and an American. Since his Muslim identity was just hereditary in character but he has been alienated from his American identity as well after he invites George Gabriel to his home and his resultant dismissal from Plutus Communications. There is an idea by Eteraz that Muslims in America can’t be recognized by their own rules rather they have to get themselves defined by the rules of American white majority. The socio-political impacts of Islamophobia have been discussed by Marcus (2016) when he calls *Native Believer* as “digging the dirt”. He is of the view that Eteraz has brought forward the burning issue of hatred and prejudice against Muslims in American society. Marcus presents a proposition that the name of protagonist of *Native Believer* has similarities with Joseph K which has been referred to be as K from Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*. Thus, M is caught up in a hell in which he passes through different mazes whether those are Gay Commie Muzzies, inner parts of Philadelphia or the battle of a Muslim wrestler who is destined to lose. Marcus discerns that M is depicting the contradiction in actions and words of the white American authorities.

Fouad Mami (2018) says that approach of M towards his fluid identity is subscribed to ontological representation. He resembles the presence of Muslims in America with a concentration camp which could not be considered one’s own land irrespective of the fact that how much time had one spent on that land (p. 86). Fatima Kut (2019) gives a true picture of Western society in her analysis of *Native Believer* by describing that the hatred for Muslims in American society has gone to such an extent that it is impossible for them to accept that a Muslim can perform an extraordinary task in any field of life. She gives a comparative view of Ali Eteraz’s *Native Believer* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. She proposes that Muslims had come to America much earlier than it is thought that they did. Since they had come as slaves from West Africa, there is no

documental proof of their presence in American life. Both the characters of M and Changez had faced stereotyping in America in one way or the other (p. 42 & 56).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1979) delineates the ways in which the Occident (West) sees the Orient or rather it defines it in its own terms. In other words, the Orient is dependent upon the Occident for its definition. Said says that the relationships between the Occident and the Orient have seen many ups and downs or even the line between the East and the West has its own impact upon Europe (p. 73). The relationship between Islam and Europe has also been elaborated by Said in the said work. He is of the view that Islam was a code of conduct that challenged the hegemony of the West in its dominated or colonized areas and it did so in every respect. That's why, Orientalism has a history of a very complex attitude towards Islam (p. 74).

Homi K. Bhabha describes the relationship between stereotypes and colonial discourse by relating it with the idea of "fixity." He is of the view that in colonial discourse, it is a paradoxical mode of representation. Therefore, in colonial discourse, stereotype is something that needs to be defined by a fixed phenomenon and that fixed phenomenon names itself as colonized power which is dominant over a stereotypical society which is not a minority in number but governed by a minority with a specific discourse. The power that drives the stereotype is the ambivalence which exists between the colonizer and the colonized. It is the power that makes stereotyping repeat itself time and again, and also provides its strategies regarding marginalization of the colonized (Bhabha in Derrida, 1983, p. 18). He is of the view that images in a discourse, especially the postcolonial discourse, should not be conceived as positive or negative rather as a process of "subjectification" (p. 24).

The evolution of stereotypes and Islamophobia has been discussed above, and so has been the current predicament of these phenomena in today's world. To highlight the contemporary state of affairs and for analysis of *Native Believer*, Sherene Razack's *Nothing Has to Make Sense: Upholding White Supremacy through Anti-Muslim Racism* (2022) has been referred to as the theoretical framework. She delineates different ways the Western world sought and succeeded in establishing its supremacy throughout the world by undermining Muslim population and their racial and religious practices. Following are the highlights of the practice of stigmatizing the Muslim population according to Razack.

### **The Continuation of the Crusades**

Razack (2022) exerts that the hatred and prejudice in the West against Muslims is the continuation of the Crusades that characterized strife between Muslims and Christians from 11th to 13th century. She is of the view that Crusades is an increasingly circulated shorthand for a long-standing contestation between Christian Europe and Islamic world (p. 51). To achieve the end of shunning the spread of Islam in the world and especially in the Europe, the Christian world along with Jews are ready to go to every extent.

### **Hostility of the Christians and the Zionist settlers against the Muslims**

Razack establishes that the Christians and the Zionist settlers are on the same page regarding their hostility against Muslims (the current ongoing massacre of Gaza stands a testimony to the fact). Christianity as a religious doctrine is at the base of every settler scheme in America as they deem themselves to be chosen people and their attitude towards the acquisition of land is to think land to be — as a God-given right (p. 55).

### **Restricting Islamic Presence in School Curriculum**

Razack says that from the perspective of a Christian, Muslims are the people who “activate colonial and imperial feelings when they threaten white entitlement.” Although at present times Islam, falling in the category of non-Christian religions, only constitutes 5% of the study of world religions, including critiques of Islam as well (p. 60): “Muslims cannot remain in the curriculum, for instance, if they are represented as the colonized population of Israel, a limit made manifest when Palestinian struggles are excised from the school and university curriculum on the basis that a settler-colonial narrative of Israel is anti-Semitic and anti-Israel” (p. 61).

### **White Aggressive Fathers and Violent Mothers**

Razack further records that to counter the effect of Islam in American schools; there is “an aggressive white masculinity [...] at the forefront”. The parents who defend bullying of Muslim children in schools have an agenda of white supremacy under the slogan of freedom of speech and secular education. There is a very little if any protection for the Muslim children in this regard (p. 71). Same is the case of Christian mothers who feel Islamic education included in the curricula of their children to be a threat to their God (p. 74). As for Muslim women and ban on Hijab, when a Muslim woman wears hijab, it challenges the gaze of white man and he thinks that she needs disciplining by him, i.e. “she refuses to meet him on his terms, and this rejection of his power invites sanction” (p. 87).

### **Biological and Scientific Racism, and Stereotyping**

Razack is of the view that the Western world constructed the logic that they had capacity for ultimate rationality while the Muslims had deformities in their genes that shunned them from getting the enough wisdom (p. 117). There was a time when terrorism was considered to be done by “rational actors” but since the incident of 9/11, it is considered to be the act of “pathological evildoers,” although the Zionist discourses believe they had incarnations at earlier times as well. Therefore, it is ironic that a white man who presents an evildoer in the court has the “knowledge about the habits and biological nature of that culprit.” There is another belief that Muslims have the “seeds of fanaticism and irrationality” (p. 122) in them that help construct stereotypes regarding their retarded mentality and barbarism.

### **Inhuman Treatment with Muslim Prisoners**

Razack observes that the Muslim prisoners at Abu Ghraib received an inhuman treatment which is presented to be a traumatic memory not for Iraqis but for the Americans because the Americans deemed themselves to be “innocent” as they were more affected by dangerous victims and not vice versa: “Memory transforms a tremendous violence into a lucrative innocence.” It seemed to be a proper strategy for American torturers to leave the memories of horrible prisoners behind and start their life in a new way. Therefore, this narrative has been constructed to prove American innocence (p. 146).

Razack’s acute observations as reviewed above help tailor the theoretic framework for the paper at hand to highlight the stereotypes of Muslims and Islamophobia presented through different characters in Eteraz’ novel also shedding light on how these stereotypes are constructed and how they affect the lives of people living in the United States of America.

## Results and Discussion

As Razack is of the view that the schism of present world between Muslims and the West is the continuation of an old discord that dates itself back to the Crusades from 11<sup>th</sup> century onward, so she delineates the contemporary state of this struggle by providing details of blogs from Christian right on a social media platform about siege of Vienna by the Ottoman ruler and consequent battle in 1683 (Razack, 2022, p. 51). The white world requires a Muslim enemy to construct its whiteness making a binary opposition of Christian/Muslim that oppose each other and work antagonistically. The events in Eteraz' novel also present the same predicament of contemporary events going on between the Muslim and Christian world. *Native Believer* is the study of the struggles of its central character M who is not a practicing Muslim but is fired by his Jewish boss named George Gabriel from his job at a firm named Plutus Communications on the pretext that he was a Muslim and, therefore, a terrorist. M had arranged a party on Friday at his home and his boss saw the painting of a Jewish painter Chagall who had explicitly used his name. About this, George Gabriel asks him "which side do you fall on? Hide or express?" (Eteraz, 2016, p. 20). George Gabriel says: "I see you like your Goethe and your Nietzsche" (p. 22). Since he is a Jew and likes such infidels like M, so M also agrees with his boss by saying about both Goethe and Nietzsche as: "Gods among men" (p. 22). However, the boss became aggressive on knowing that M had placed the Holy Quran above the Nietzsche and Goethe books. He asks M: "You're putting something higher than Nietzsche?" (p. 25) and uses the term "residual supremacism" for the act of placing the Holy Quran above the European Masters' works.

### Islamophobia and Social Exclusion: M's Struggle after Expulsion from Plutus

Muslims are such a specie as instils fear and stimulates anger in the white subject with their presence: "Although the racial aspect of the violence and terror directed at Muslims has always been clear – Muslims are evicted from political community and humanity and understood as deserving of considerable violence" (Razack, 2022, p. 4). The same is inflicted on M in *Native Believer* by the people living in the US on the pretext that he was a Muslim. Though he explains many times throughout the fiction that he is not a practicing Muslim but his Muslim name becomes the reason of his exclusion from Plutus and from American society. M reiterates, "I'm not a fucking Muslim" (Eteraz, 2016, p. 54).

### Migrant's Intergenerational Trauma and the Myth of American Meritocracy

When Marie-Anne had left for Virginia and M had made himself drunk, he delved into his own past by looking on the pictures of his parents with him. Surprisingly, all their pictures were indoors in contrast with the pictures of Marie-Anne's parents which were all outdoors. M thinks that his parents had most pictures indoor because they were the people "who paid rent" whereas the pictures of Marie-Anne's parents were all outdoors because they "were people of land, people of substance, owners of legacy" (p. 63). M's father was a person who had a firm belief in American dream. He believed in the myth that if M worked hard, he could move upward in American society and stand hand in hand with the whites. In short, M's father was a staunch believer of "the myth of American meritocracy" (p. 63).

Although at the dinner Mr. and Mrs. Quinn (M's parents-in-law) feigned politeness but the next few months of their interactions with M were not very pleasant. Apparently, they had no prejudice against the people of color. But M's rejection was "far more ephemeral." M feels relaxed that his parents were no more in American society because M was their investment for future to make their roots strong in America: "I was glad they

were gone. If they were still alive, they wouldn't have been able to handle seeing my American life decapitated by their inadvertent hand. It would've killed them" (p. 64).

### **M's desire to have Babies and Richard Konigsberg's Predicament**

M wants to have children with Marie-Anne because "Progeny was how a debtor became a creditor" (p. 119). He had planned it with Marie-Anne before their marriage. He wanted to have a daughter and two sons: "I need to feel like a part of this land. For. Ever. But suddenly, Marie-Anne started gaining weight because of the 'stress hormone.' She started doing workout to reduce her weight. Marie-Anne had not always been afraid of getting pregnant. Babies were how we had bonded" (p. 70).

The same is the struggle of M's former boss Richard Konigsberg at Plutus. First he didn't want to have babies because he wanted to remain free. He knew that if he had children, he would have to go to Israel which he didn't like because he thought that Israel was a "narrow little place." He didn't want to be associated with a "We" because it would have been burdensome. But he had a "jolt" when he heard that his twenty years old son was killed in Afghanistan while serving America. He felt that he had been betrayed by America. He gave his twenty years to America but in return, she had snatched his son from him.

### **Mushtaq Hakim and Farkhunda's Dilemma**

There is another instance of the struggle of generations to live in America before and after 9/11. Mushtaq Hakim was a "physician-turned-philanthropist" (139). He had founded a charity organization named "Crescent Compassion Charities after the genocide in Bosnia." He had been incriminated by the federal government with the blame that he had provided 'material support' to a family who "had produced a suicide bomber" (p. 139). He settles in Saudi Arabia after being evicted from America and his mansion is given to his daughters and his wife. His two daughters, sister Saba and Farkhunda (a minor at the time of her father's eviction from America) reacted in opposite ways to separation of their father. Saba had become a religious person and was working for Muslim Students Association as a secretary. They have different slogans like 'Terrorism has No Religion,' 'Hug a Muslim' and 'Pig Protection Program.' Such slogans were to bring forward a positive image of Islam before American people by telling them that Muslims don't kill pigs and that they are not terrorists: "To make people aware that Islam is about piety, and safety and patience and peace" (p. 109).

### **School Curriculum Politics: Effect of Upbringing on Identity Construction**

Razack highlights the strategies and conspiracies through which Islam is barred from schools so that a white child does not get to know anything about Islam in his childhood nor do his parents like so. While those who believe in dogmatism of America and Israel they think that it is "God's foreign policy statement" that there must be an effort on the part of the followers of Christianity and Judaism to make every possible effort for the protection of Israel. They believe that Israel has been bestowed by God to Jews to facilitate the "Second Coming" (Razack, 2022, p. 59).

Since M had to hide his Muslim identity from fellow Americans, he had devised different strategies to hide his weak points. He devised the strategy keeping far from his parents so that people could not know about the accent of his parents. To camouflage his skin color, he used to stay close to Marie-Anne because she was his white American wife whom he had granted all rights over him. To Anglicize his Muslim name, he changed the

stress pattern of the syllables of his name. He was so much drenched in his American identity that he didn't want to be friend with Muslim girls or boys. He didn't date a Muslim girl rather he chose Marie-Anne who was the daughter of Southern elites and her mother was a staunch Anglican woman. Once a group of Muslim students tried to reach out to him but they discontinued their pursuit when they saw him drinking.

### **Stereotypes Attached with Muslim Characters**

Referring to 9/11, M describes the situation in these words: "Twenty years ago, if you said you were a Muslim, people thought that was some kind of Latino. They used to think of us as lovable sea urchins hanging with fat blue genies. But now they see us as sons of a serpentine vizier attempting to poison the jasmines. Trying to hide who we are doesn't work, because nowadays everything is about identity and we have been identified" (Eteraz, 2016, p. 109). Similarly, the guy Ali Ansari who introduced M to Gay Commie Muzzies, also had same inclinations. This group of young Muslims had made themselves into a gay group so that no one could doubt their identity. On being asked by M that why they were hiding, he told M: "Same thing that makes you and me hide [...] From being distrusted [...] These guys think they just need to show how naked and cool they are. Sucking cock is the best way to prove to the government that you aren't a radical" (p. 143).

### **Atrocities at Abu Ghraib and Hunter Two-One**

As the torture at Abu Ghraib prison reveals, establishing innocence is a collective project that requires the assistance of lawmakers and cultural producers alike. Few can walk the path alone—a reminder that we are all implicated in racial violence (Razack, 2022, p. 145). This racial violence is not only about the Abu Ghraib or Iraq rather it is a story of atrocities and oppressions committed by America as well as European powers. There is more about it which includes supporting Baathist regime of Saddam Hussain during Iran-Iraq war, the bombing campaign led by the US and backed by the UN, the First Gulf War, the sanctions on Iraq that lasted many decades and thousands of Iraqi children died each month, then Saddam Hussain was deposed and Iraq was invaded in 2003: "Indeed, most (Americans) understood the invasion of Iraq as a necessary confrontation with an Islamic enemy who had bombed the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon" (p. 152).

Above is the account of invasion of Iraq by America, the same scene resembling with illegal invasion on other Muslim countries has been presented by Eteraz in *Native Believer* but not directly rather indirectly with the symbol of a video game that was being played by Ali Ansari and M. The name of M in the game was Hunter Two-One and he was bombing hosts of villages with hundreds of kills. It symbolizes the drone attacks that were carried out by America in Pakistan's Tribal areas. It shows that earlier in the game, the power of Hunter Two-One was deteriorating, but later he got a green brief case and from its inner side, he got a stick and buttons. He started killing the turbaned men and his life line was retrieved. It symbolizes the privileges and honors that were bestowed upon some traitors of Insanistan (Pakistan). It shows the native informants of Pakistan who had sold their own country for a temporary benefit, to fill their own bank accounts by receiving some dollars bestowed upon them by American authorities (Eteraz, 2016, p. 150).

### **Conclusion**

Ali Eteraz' novel *Native Believer* has been analyzed by contextualizing Razack's perspectives as advanced in *Nothing Has to Make Sense: Upholding white Supremacy Through anti-Muslim Racism* which focuses on the ways in which Muslim Stereotypes are built. Moving forward from the pioneering work of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha on

colonization, orientalism and stereotypes, the paper culminates to the recent state of affairs through Razack's work. With the depictions of fictive characters of M, Ali Ansari, Farkhunda, and sister Saba (displaying myriad survivalist strategies of assimilation into American culture), Ali Eteraz's *Native Believer* problematizes the Pakistani-American identity in the wake of post-9/11 Islamophobia and stereotyping of Muslims among the white Americans.



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