

# Re-envisioning the Question of Postcolonial Muslim Identity: Challenges and Opportunities

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**ABSTRACT:** *In our contemporary era of transnationalism, the issue of identity has assumed unprecedented significance and scope. In this paper, I intend to discuss the complexities and nuances of the Muslim identity in the postcolonial literary discourses. One of the basic contentions of the paper is to find some pattern in the transnational and transcultural diversity presently characterizing the Muslim identity discourses. Hence, this paper is a plea to discover some kind of literary and discursive sharedness in the contemporary postcolonial Muslim writings. It has been observed that at this point in time the Muslim identity is not only subject to myriad influences, it is also a topic of heated and passionate debates. In fiction, memoirs, travel writing, media and cultural narratives, the issue of Muslim identity is invested with all kinds of representations ranging from uncouth explosive-bearing terrorists to friendly and sociable people. It has also been shown that the Orientalist legacy, far from being dead, is being given new lease on life by the highly 'constructed' and 'worked over' images of Muslims in the Western media. The large Muslim diasporic populations settled in the European countries are specifically bearing the brunt of such stereotypical depictions built by media persons, political commentators, analysts and 'cultural experts'. Faced with this mighty discursive onslaught, the Muslim writers, novelists, poets, intellectuals have been responding variedly and with considerably mixed motives: acceptance, rejection, rectification, resistance, etc.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Muslim, diaspora, discourse, postcolonial, representation.

### 1.1. Introduction

The question of identity has always been at the heart of literary, psychological and cultural discourses. People always tend to work out some sense of belonging and attachment which not only gives meaning and substance to their endeavors but also provides them with a psychosomatic equilibrium. When deprived of identity, humans have been shown to suffer from problems ranging from social alienation and trauma to neurosis and depression. Humans are social beings and any lack of social integration is detrimental not only to their corporate existence but also to their individual well-being. Therefore, the question of identity is not a subsidiary question like any other question. Far from it. It is the most fundamental question which has far-reaching implications which are at once cultural, psychological, social, cognitive and global. In the absence of a well-defined identity, we do not know where we are heading, where we came from and why, at all, we are endeavoring in life. Bonny Norton defines identity in the following words: identity is how people of a nation appreciate their relation to the world at large, how that relation “is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (Norton 410).

Moreover, it is said humans are the only creatures which are self-conscious. The rest of the creatures, though conscious, are not self-conscious. The self-consciousness we possess makes it paramount for us to conceptualize ourselves in some viable and existentially plausible way. Viewing from this perspective, identity appears to be a kind of existentially credible self-conceptualization. But the story does not end here as a mere self-conceptualization will not suffice at all. Instead, we need that kind of self-conceptualization which is underpinned by some robust distinction i.e. a kind of self-conceptualization which sets us apart from the multitude of people around us coming from other cultures and histories.

Having laid down the preliminary significance of identity, we can come to the question of the postcolonial Muslim identity which, of late, has assumed new critical dimensions. The identity crisis has been troubling the Muslim mind since the beginning of European colonialism. It all started with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt which signaled not only the beginning of colonization of the Muslim lands but also an appropriation of the Muslim identity. Since that early beginning, colonialism kept

invading and occupying city after city, country after country, and continent after continent. A large part of the Muslim populations came under the European colonial yoke. From Morocco to Malaya, the Muslim countries fell to colonialism and for the next two hundred years they were destined to fret under the fury of the colonial taskmasters. This inevitably brought a sense of exclusion. Not just a geographical exclusion but also an ontological exclusion i.e. a relegation from thingness to nothingness. This nothingness brought in its wake a loneliness and a silence. Professor Robert J. C. Young raises this important question:

Have you ever been the only person of your own colour or ethnicity in a large group or gathering? It has been said that there are two kinds of white people: those who have never found themselves in a situation where the majority of people around them are not white, and those who have been the only white person in the room. At that moment, for the first time perhaps, they discover what it is really like for the other people in their society, and, metaphorically, for the rest of the world outside the west: to be from a minority, to live as the person who is always in the margins, to be the person who never qualifies as the norm, the person who is not authorized to speak (2).

The same happened to the Muslims of the Subcontinent and colonialism stood for trauma, deprivation, oppression and a silencing of voice. It was the most dislocational experience (detonating both a dislocation of consciousness as well as of geography) for them in their entire history. In other words, this dislocation wrought by colonialism was multilayered: emotional, physical, psychological and civilizational. Overnight, it led to a total dispossession and a loss of ownership of everything they had been cherishing for the last one thousand years or so. So dislocational and so dismantling was this colonial experience that it can be rightly called the Muslim diaspora.

## **1.2. A Brief Historic Overview**

With the arrival of colonialism in the Subcontinent, an era of cultural inversion for Muslims set in. Almost everything which Muslims cherished ranging from the dress codes and social status to cultural

norms and traditions were systematically mocked at and eventually inverted. Two examples would suffice to appreciate this wholesale cultural inversion. First, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim gentry dress code (a symbol of Islamic high culture) was relegated to such low-ranking personnel as chefs and servants by the British. Second, the designations of the lowest servants working in British imperial hierarchy were named after the elitist Muslim offices e.g. *khansama* (a cook) was originally *Khan-e-Samaan* (*quartermaster general*), one of the highest designations in the Mogul military establishment. Similarly *Jama'dar* (*sweeper*) was originally a company commander in the Mughal army. Such examples can be multiplied; however, all of them reinforce the centrality of the claim made here: a total inversion of the Muslim culture and its systematic trivialization at the hands of the British.

The loss of culture and identity proved to be all the more shocking for Muslims because their cultural identity, far from being a secular achievement, was firmly rooted in their religious convictions and a bygone civilizational glory. Religion has always been one of the most central ingredients of any cultural identity and people by and large tend to be particularly sensitive towards the religious dimension of their identity. Therefore, under the British imperial and colonial rule, Muslims found their religious identity under threat as well. The British colonial venture not only had its economic motives but also its missionary motives. The shiploads of missionaries would be transported to India under the official patronage of the Raj (Nandy 126). These missionaries were to fulfill the 'Heaven-sent Mission of the Christ' in the Subcontinent.

Therefore, the Whiteman's burden was not just to 'civilize' the Indians socioeconomically but also religiously. These missionaries would be the official guests of the Raj and all the essential arrangements were made for their proselytizing activities. They would regularly conduct *manazray* (i.e. debates on doctrinal issues) at the public places with the Muslim scholars mostly with the help of interpreters. Missionary schools and hospitals burgeoned as part of the evangelical proselytizing agenda and a full-scale invasion was launched on the religious dimension of the Muslim identity.

Lastly it was the education system which had to bear the brunt of the colonial invasion. The Raj opened schools and colleges all over India and English was declared the medium of instruction. The syllabi were revised

along the colonial lines in order to produce loyal and capable subjects who could worthily serve the Queen. Fort William College at Calcutta proved to be a flagship institute where the British officers and functionaries of the East India Company were taught native languages of India. Having gained the working knowledge of the Indian languages, these functionaries and officers were expected to rule more effectively. Fort William College was replicated in other major cities also and soon these colleges were open to the natives also but they had to comply with the official educational policy.

Besides, the British exhibited particularly derogatory attitude towards the native languages of India. To them, these languages were vulgar to the extent where they were incapable of fine literary expressions. So much so that the British would not call them languages as such; they were just called 'vernaculars'. In this way, it can be seen that the colonial invasion on the Muslim identity was social, economic, cultural, religious as well as linguistic.

Small wonder, Muslims kept reeling under the impact of this invasion and it was some time before they could regain their balance and rethink their thoughts. There we have to bear a few points in our mind to understand the immensity of the challenge Muslims were facing. First and foremost, colonialism was total and all-sided as it sought to achieve a thorough subjugation and loyalty. It was not content with imposing a mere administrative control over the colonials. That would have been too benign of it indeed and perhaps not worthy of a transoceanic imperial pursuit (Young 100). It also becomes clear that in this entire conflict of ideas and locales, the most decisive factor was West's martial ascendancy which levelled everything. In fact, it was West's martial ascendancy which took upon itself a sociocultural garb. Samuel P. Huntington admits this fact that the West emerged triumphant in colonialism not because it had a superiority of values or ideas but just because it had superiority in the application of organized violence (Nandy 208).

### **1.3. The Empire Collapses, the Quest for Identity Continues**

With the 1947 independence, the era of British Empire in the Subcontinent formally came to an end yet the Muslim quest for identity entered a new reign of complexity and challenge. One could have expected that with the Raj coming to an end, the question of the Muslim

identity should have settled amicably. But that could not happen and this quest is still going on. Today the issue of the Muslim identity is one of the most hotly contested topics in the postcolonial discourses (Lizzio 372). The largescale demographic changes, ubiquitous globalization (Americanization?), intercultural negotiations and multinational corporatism has further compounded the issue of identity for Muslims.

The 9/11 tragedy and the subsequent War on Terror coupled with the widespread Islamophobia in the West posed new challenges to the Muslim intelligentsia in the articulation of a viable identity. However, with regard to the issue of identity, there is no such a thing as a 'monolithic' Muslim response. Instead, various positions were taken by Muslim writers ranging from puritanical and highly romanticized views to thoroughly Westernized notions. These two extremes served as two opposite poles and most of the Muslim responses can be situated somewhere between them. Some of the writers, particularly the ones settled abroad, advocated a duality of identity given the diasporic nature of the postcolonial Muslim experience. Some others took this duality as a tragic yet necessary fact and yet some others got fascinated by it and found it promising for their future.

In either case a sensitivity about identity can be witnessed. For most of them, an affirmation of identity remained an affirmation of their humanity and an absolute negation of colonialism. However, it is also tragically true that at present a rampant Islamophobia is fiercely negating anything not itself and is showing counter effects of reducing the Muslim identity discourse to a raucous polemics (Chakrabarty 124). To such Islamophobes whether Muslims show a balanced respect to their traditions and at the same time accommodate modernity does not matter. To them, both of these attitudes appear to be two sterile sides of the same obsolete coin.

However, in spite of this diversity and multiplicity of responses with reference to identity, it is not hard to find certain conceptual and cultural commonalties, mutually shared patterns, and certain agreed upon notions. This is precisely the objective of the present researcher to discover these patterns and commonalties in order to theorize the discursive underpinnings of the postcolonial Muslim identity. The foremost challenge for the Muslim writers remains to break with the West's circular discourses about them. The Western cultural critics, through these circular discourses, tend to speak of such "facts" vis-à-vis

Muslim society as ‘non-being’, ‘lack’ and ‘absence’. The problem with the Western imagination is that if a people tend to differ from its mainstream tenets, they are just relegated, under a rigid classificatory system, to a category of ‘non-being’—nothingness. This is an interesting case of assigning those people who differ from the dominant global cultural patterns to a category of *unreality* and thereby to abolish and nullify their very being (Ahmed 176).

This *unreality* of Muslims has been further compounded by their postcolonial diaspora. The Muslim diaspora is a very interesting topic to study. It characterizes not only those Muslims who had to leave their homelands and get settled abroad but also those who are ‘aliens’ in their own homelands such as Palestinians and Kashmiris. Therefore, the Muslims diaspora is not horizontal, it is very much vertical as well (Fisk 88). Look at the following excerpt in which Edward Said describe the diasporic existence of Palestinian, not in some European country, but in their own ancestral homeland:

How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another, how unstable our place - and all because of the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past. There are no Palestinians. Who are the Palestinians? The inhabitants of Judea and Samaria.' Non-Jews. Terrorists. Troublemakers. DPs. Refugees. Names on a card. Numbers on a list. Praised in speeches (128).

Another case in point is that of India which has been home to Muslims for more than a thousand years. However, after the 1947 independence, the Indian Muslims faced a new era of marginalization and a loss of identity. Today the malicious promotion of Hindutva in India is a systematic sociopolitical effort to deprive Muslims of their identity and safeguard for Hindutva a semblance of nationalist legitimacy. People like Madhu Kishwar and Kuldeep Nayyar have rigorously interrogated such ideological driven Hindu campaigns (Nandy 78).

The plight of Palestinians and the Indian Muslims (particularly living in the Indian occupied Kashmir) cannot be seen in isolation from the present day Middle Eastern turmoil which constitutes another horrendous chapter in the history of Muslim diaspora. With the Arab Spring turning

into a nightmare and a burgeoning of violence and genocidal fury in the Middle East, Arab immigrants have become one of the most serious humanitarian crisis of our times. Largescale Syrian immigrants fleeing from the civil war, risking their lives and sailing across the Mediterranean to reach the safer shores have given rise to many tragedies. Everyday hundreds of Syrian immigrants dare the Mediterranean surfs while getting huddled in small fragile boats. Scores of them drown on daily basis. Of late, the heart-wrenching images of the bodies of the Syrian children swept ashore have shocked the world.

These immigrants are likely to find a loss of identity in the countries they are going to. The overall atmosphere of the European countries is not very amicable for them given the terrorist attacks in France and other European countries. They are also likely to face strong demographic resistance and opposition by the racist and extremists elements of the European countries. How do they preserve/express their identity is a question for future and it will be some time before it could be answered with any degree of certainty.

#### **1.4. Search for Signifiers Intensifies**

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim writers intensified their search for signifiers. In several respects, this search was a continuation of their previous quest, yet it was more ardent and more inclusive in its scope. They tried to work out new metaphors to represent themselves and struggled to develop a self-image which was totally different from their stereotypical depictions in the Western popular press. This self-image was then to be embedded into a set of signifiers which could thereby define the contours of their identity (Mbembe 2005). This is how the Muslim intelligentsia sought to articulate their imagination with a renewed signification.

This search for signifiers is a really uphill task. The migratory experiences of the Muslims living in Europe and America, at times, seem to reinforce the performativity theories of identity as against the fixed theories of identity. The performativity theories of identity postulate that we *become* what we constantly *perform*. Therefore we are our *performance*. However, the problem with this performatory notions of identity is twofold: first, they tend to extricate a living person from his/her past by rigorously keeping his/her focus on what is being performed *now*; second, such notions fail to bring a psychological

fulfilment to an individual. The complexity of the search for signifiers can also be appreciated by taking into account the notion of veil (*hijab*). This is how this problem can be formulated:

For Europeans, the veil used to symbolize the erotic mysteries of the east. For Muslims, it signified social status. Today, the meaning of the veil has changed dramatically. For many westerners, the veil is a symbol of patriarchal Islamic societies in which women are assumed to be oppressed [...] On the other hand, in Islamic societies, and among many Muslim women in non-Islamic societies, the veil (*hijab*) has come to symbolize a cultural and religious identity, and women have increasingly chosen to cover themselves as a matter of choice (Young 78).

In this way the real challenge for Muslims is how to make a 'neutral' reading of their identity (in this case *veil*) possible. By neutral reading, it means a reading not governed by the contemporary Euro-American cultural presuppositions. There are already people like Ziauddin Sardar, Tariq Ramdadan who are ably and actively interrogating the automated responses to the question of veil. To them, all the Muslim cultural symbols should be read, as much as possible, from a neutral and disinterested perspective. The pleas for the same kind of neutrality and disinterestedness have been previously made by people like Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmad. To such scholars, the veil could only be appreciated with regard to its indigenous connotations—the connotations constructed within its own discursive space. Any external reading will inevitably impose cultural connotations from outside. Therefore, if for Westerners, veil symbolizes oppression, it is just because of their external readings (Chakrabarty 187).

Here another important question arises and that is of the construction of signifiers. In fact, an extremely vast body of signifiers which have traditionally been employed to discuss the question of Muslim identity were Eurocentric in their origin. European scholars, writers and intellectuals constructed a vast body of knowledge about the Orient which was to govern all their understandings and appraisals (Said 187). This knowledge proved to be so authoritative that it was upheld at all cost and sometimes even in the face of strong contradictory evidence. A European scholar of the Orient was not to betray his/her vocation by

departing from the ‘certainties’ and ‘objectivities’ provided to him/her by the vast lore of knowledge which he/she inherited. This dilemma has been described by Aijaz Ahmad in the following words:

By far the greater part of the archive through which knowledge about the so-called Third World is generated in the metropolises has traditionally been, and continues to be, assembled within metropolitan institutions of research and explication...The archive itself is dispersed through myriad academic disciplines and genres of writing - from philological reconstruction of the classics to lowbrow reports by missionaries and administrators - generating all kinds of classificatory practices (157).

The ‘archive’ Aijaz Ahmad is talking about is in fact little more than a myth or a metaphor conjured up first by the colonizers and then by the neocolonizers i.e. the present-day Eurocentric commentators of Islam and Muslims. This ‘archival’ description of Muslims has been countered intellectually by dozens of Muslim writers. Here the mention must be made of Syed Hussein Alatas, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Malaysian sociologist and intellectual par excellence. In his seminal work *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), he has contested the stereotypical depictions of the Malays by the British imperial administrators.

Alatas is of the view that the myth of ‘the lazy native’ was just insultingly constructed to portray Malays as indolent and sluggish. This was done in order to strengthen the exploitative ideology of ‘colonial capitalism’. Once this myth was firmly entrenched, Westerners could reign supreme by denying the natives their identity and history. Alatas persuasively demonstrates that “the accusation of indolence was merely a veiled resentment against Malay unwillingness to become a tool for enriching colonial planters” (81). Alatas has been one of the strongest voices in the postcolonial Muslim identity discourse. His fierce questioning of the ways in which the articulations, legacies, ascendancies and structures of the Muslim colonial lands have operated has far-reaching effects (Nanda 145).

Precisely one year after Alatas wrote his influential book, Edward Said published his exceedingly influential work *Orientalism* (1978) which was to be a magnum opus of postcolonialism. In *Orientalism*, Said laid down his basic thesis that the Orient does not exist as such. Instead, what

the European scholars refer to as the Orient, was actually a site of Eurocentric projections and fantasies about an 'amorphous and distant East'. Said demonstrates a wide range of discursive constructs such as superstitions, eroticism and irrationality which were assiduously employed in the construction of the Orient (128).

Emboldened by the robust defense put up by Edward Said, Muslim writers and intellectuals worked towards a more cosmopolitan identity. They rigorously questioned the binaries and essentialist readings of their histories and geographies. Earnest attempts were made to reconcile the local and the universal. Many of them sought to go past the built-in Eurocentrism and found new modes of articulation (Ahmad 187).

Whatever the theorizations of Alatas and Said about the Muslim identity, it was left for Nuruddin Farah, the 20<sup>th</sup> century legendary Somali novelist, to articulate a Muslim identity which was truly composite and nuanced. Farah was a truly multiliterature writer who literally lived in dozens of countries over four continents. In his fiction he drew upon Islamic, Western, Arabic and American resources. All this thematic diversification is indicative of a cultural hybridity which was to be a distinctive feature of his writings (Wright 178). His writings symbolize competing narratives, multiple voices, contradictory viewpoints, military despotisms, patriarchal bigotries, bartered marriages, pastoral slaveries, stricken monologues and omniscient discourses. A hatred of dictatorship and tyranny is the hallmark of his fiction. Farah's writings aptly describe the dilemma of those Muslims who are, though no more living under colonialism, are definitely fretting under the homegrown dictatorial regimes. In one of his interviews he expressed this dilemma:

Although the former imperial powers, Britain and Italy, were responsible for sabotaging the structures of African society, and the neoimperial ones, Russia and America, helped to keep the dictator in power, the key betrayals of the ideals of independence came not from colonialism but from within the Somali nation, clan, and family (Wright 145).

Farah does not look towards religion as a source of his identity. To him, religion and Marxism have equally been complicit in the Somalian despotisms. In *A Naked Needle* (1976) he shows despotic rulers projecting oppressive family structures which, in turn, effectively

condition people to an institutionalized tyranny. To him, family and state are twin suppressive constructs complementing each other to perpetuate a reign of terror and subjugation (Nanda 37). The sense of identity which we find in Farah's novels is threatened not from without but from within. His notion of identity speaks of a claustrophobic suppression at home.

Here a mention must be made of Tahar Ben Jelloun, a contemporary of Farah and another 20<sup>th</sup> century novelist, poet and essayist who hailed from Morocco. Ben Jelloun chose French as a literary expression and wrote fantastic novels in that tongue and most famous of them was *La nuit sacrée* (1987) which was awarded the most prestigious French prize *Le Prix Goncourt*. Ben Jelloun has also dealt with the question of identity and has mostly focused on the issues which the North African people faced in France. Ben Jelloun is particularly known for his quest for the peripheries of the two worlds: one Moroccan and the other French. Between these two historically antagonistic polarities, he creates a third position—a position of mediation. It is this position of mediation from which he writes. Therefore, the brand of identity Ben Jelloun seem to advocate is also hybrid i.e. French-Moroccan (Orlando 139). However, his Moroccan moorings surge very prominently in his fiction and he appears to plead the case of the 'marginalized'. To him, the Moroccans are routinely marginalized and repudiated.

At the same time a distinct feminist streak can be seen in the brand of identity Ben Jelloun seem to portray as some of his most famous novels have women as the main narrators. Women fighting for their femininity, identity and sexuality occupy special space in his novels. Therefore, his novels look like powerful narratives of female emancipation. In this way, his identity discourse appears to have gone beyond the boundaries of gender, nation and geography.

Another writer who distinctively contributed to the articulation of the Muslim identity is Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih. Unlike Ben Jelloun, Salih preferred to write in his own language, Arabic, and produced three novels and a number of short stories. Most of his writings deal with failures, wistfulness, and disenchantment that characterize the postcolonial Sudan. Therefore, in Salih's works we find an identity which is submerged under the failures and letdowns of its own upholders—an identity which is constantly struggling to recover.

The principal concern of his works is to demonstrate the effects of colonial experiences and European modernization on rural sectors of Sudan with reference to Arab culture and identity.

To Salih, when it comes to decimate the identity of the Sudanese people, both colonial and postcolonial rulers seem to sail the same boat. In his famous story *The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid*, he shows how both colonial and postcolonial rulers are blindly enforcing modernity programs only to dislocate the villagers from their historical and cultural worlds (Hassan 148). This is aptly described by showing a holy tree which the authorities are bent upon felling in order to construct a wharf. The story registers the wistfulness and resignation of the elderly unable to safeguard their ways in the face of a fast approaching yet devastating modernity.

This is an extremely brief attempt to look at the ways in which some of the notable 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim writers have responded to the question of the postcolonial Muslim identity. This by no means is an exhaustive survey of the voices dealing with the identity issue (Nanda 123). Instead the researcher has tried to lay down a historic and discursive pattern which can show the commonalities and divergences found among the 20<sup>th</sup> century notable Muslim writers on the issue of identity.

## **1.5. Conclusion**

The researcher has tried to map out the *discursive sharedness* of the postcolonial Muslim identity. It has been seen that emotionally, socially, physically and psychologically, identity is of paramount importance for humans. A brief historic overview of the colonial appropriation of the Muslim identity has also been given. How the Muslims of the Subcontinent were stripped of their identity with the arrival of the Raj and how they were destined to reel under the impact of a civilizational invasion, has been discussed in sufficient detail. Finally, the researcher has demonstrated the literary and conceptual commonalities, shared apprehensions, collective aspirations of the Muslim writers and intellectuals regarding the question of identity. At the same time, it has also been stated that there remains considerable diversity and even disagreement among the Muslim intelligentsia on the topic identity. However, in spite of this diversity and disagreement, the desire of belonging is not difficult to detect and it is this desire which has found expression in hundreds of literary works of sublimity and excellence

produced by scores of Muslim writers scattered from Malaysia to Morocco as well as settled in Europe and Americas. Finally, the researcher has shown how the present day Muslim writers are not only willing to but also involved in working out a syncretic and hybrid identity—a point quite often glossed over by the Western commentators on Islam and Muslims. Therefore, opposed to that what some of the European and American ‘experts’ posit, Muslim identity is not only nuanced and dynamic, it is also composite and inclusive.

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