

NEO-ORIENTALISM IN 21ST-CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION: RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF THE MUSLIM EAST IN THE POST-9/11 NOVEL

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Abstract. *This article examines how the image of the Muslim East has been reconstructed in American fiction written after the attacks of 11 September 2001. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and on the later notion of neo-Orientalism, it offers a comparative close reading of three novels: John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). The analysis is organised around four criteria: narrative voice, the source of the character's motivation, spatial imagery and binary structure. The results show that the exotic and passive Orient of the classical tradition has been replaced by a threatening and mobile one located inside the West, that religion is used as a sufficient explanation of violence, and that the Muslim character is usually spoken for rather than speaking. Hamid's novel reverses each of these features and functions as a counter-discourse. The article concludes that neo-Orientalism is not a break with the older discourse but its adaptation to new political conditions.*

Keywords: *Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, post-9/11 novel, American fiction, the Other, Muslim character, representation, counter-discourse.*

Annotatsiya. *Maqolada 2001-yil 11-sentabr voqealaridan keyin yozilgan Amerika nasrida musulmon Sharqi obrazining qayta qurilishi tahlil qilinadi. Edvard Saidning orientalizm konsepsiyasi hamda neo-orientalizm tushunchasiga tayangan holda uchta roman qiyosiy o'rganiladi: Jon Apdaykning *Terrorist* (2006), Don DeLilloning *Falling Man* (2007) va Mohsin Hamidning *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) asarlari. Tahlil to'rt mezon asosida olib boriladi: hikoya ovozi, qahramon motivatsiyasining manbai, makon obrazlari va binar qarama-qarshiliklar. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, klassik an'anadagi ekzotik va sust Sharq o'rnini G'arbning ichida joylashgan xavfli Sharq obrazi egallagan, din zo'ravonlikning yetarli izohi sifatida berilgan, musulmon qahramon esa ko'pincha o'zi gapirmaydi, uning nomidan gapiriladi. Hamid romani bu xususiyatlarning har birini teskarisiga aylantiradi va qarshi diskurs vazifasini bajaradi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *orientalizm, neo-orientalizm, 11-sentabrdan keyingi roman, Amerika nasri, O'zga, musulmon qahramon, reprezentatsiya, qarshi diskurs.*

INTRODUCTION

In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said argued that the Orient known to Europe and America was less a place than a body of statements about a place. Scholars, travellers, administrators and novelists produced an East that was sensual, irrational, unchanging and silent, and by doing so they defined the West as its rational and active opposite. For Said this body of

statements was a discourse in Michel Foucault's sense: a system in which knowledge and power support each other, and in which the Oriental is always described and never the one who describes.

Said himself noted that the centre of this discourse moved in the twentieth century from Britain and France to the United States, and in *Covering Islam* (1997) he showed how American media reduced a diverse religion and many societies to a single hostile entity. The attacks of 11 September 2001 gave this reduction new force. The thesis of a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1996) and the earlier language of "Muslim rage" (Lewis, 1990) passed from academic debate into everyday political speech, and public discussion began to divide Muslims into acceptable and dangerous kinds (Mamdani, 2004).

Critics describe the resulting mode of representation as neo-Orientalism. Behdad and Williams (2010) define it as a discourse that continues the older one but differs from it in several ways: it is openly political, it is tied to current events rather than to philology, and it often relies on the authority of "native" voices. Morey and Yaqin (2011) show how a limited frame of images, such as the bearded fanatic and the veiled woman, comes to stand for Muslims in general. The object of fear also changes place. The classical Orient was far away and available for conquest; the neo-Oriental Other lives in the Western city and threatens it from within.

Fiction took part in this process. Within a few years of the attacks several leading American novelists wrote about them, and some tried to imagine the mind of the attacker. Gray (2009) judged that much of this writing withdrew into the domestic sphere and failed to meet the strangeness of the event, and Rothberg (2009) replied that what was missing was a fiction able to look outward at America's role in the world. Versluys (2009) read the same novels mainly as responses to trauma. These debates have produced a substantial literature, yet the Muslim character is often treated in it as one topic among many, and American-authored novels are seldom read directly beside the texts that answer them.

The aim of this article is to identify how the image of the Muslim East is reconstructed in the post-9/11 novel and to determine what is inherited from classical Orientalism and what is new. Three research questions are asked. First, through which narrative means is the Muslim character constructed? Second, which features of Said's Orientalism persist, and which are transformed? Third, how does a counter-narrative written from the position of the represented subject respond to these features?

METHODS

The study is qualitative and uses comparative close reading within the framework of postcolonial discourse analysis. Its theoretical basis is Said's account of Orientalism as a discourse (1978, 1997), supplemented by the concept of neo-Orientalism (Behdad & Williams, 2010) and by the study of framing in the representation of Muslims (Morey & Yaqin, 2011).

The material consists of three novels. John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) were chosen because both are works by canonical American authors, both

were published within six years of the attacks, and both give narrative space to a Muslim character who plans or carries out an act of violence. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) was chosen as a contrasting text. Hamid is a Pakistani-born writer educated in the United States, and his novel is not American by authorship; it is included because it is set largely in the United States, was published there in the same year as DeLillo's, and addresses an American listener directly. It therefore belongs to the same literary conversation and allows the dominant mode to be compared with a reply to it.

Each novel was analysed according to four criteria derived from the theoretical sources: (1) narrative voice, that is, who speaks and whose consciousness is presented; (2) the source of the character's motivation, whether religious, psychological, political or economic; (3) spatial imagery, meaning the places with which the Muslim character is associated; and (4) binary structure, meaning the oppositions through which the character is set against the Western world. Passages relevant to each criterion were identified in the texts, described, and then compared across the three novels.

The study has limits that should be stated. Three novels cannot represent the whole of post-9/11 fiction, and the analysis is interpretive and does not rest on quantitative data. The conclusions therefore concern tendencies visible in influential texts and are not a statistical description of the field.

RESULTS

1. **Terrorist*: sympathetic neo-Orientalism*

Updike's protagonist, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, is an eighteen-year-old born and raised in New Jersey, the son of an Irish-American mother and an Egyptian father who left the family when Ahmad was a small child. He is therefore not a foreigner, and this is the first sign of the neo-Oriental shift: the threatening figure is a native of the American city. The novel is narrated in the third person and stays close to Ahmad's thoughts, so the reader is given the inner life of a believer as imagined by a non-Muslim American author.

That inner life is built almost entirely from religion. Ahmad studies the Qur'an with a Yemeni imam, Shaikh Rashid, in a small mosque above commercial premises, and Arabic verses with their translations are placed in the text as explanations of his feelings. His disgust at the bodies, food and entertainment around him is presented as the natural result of his faith. Social factors are present, such as the absent father, a poor school and a declining city, but the plot moves forward through scripture and through the influence of the imam and of his employer's family, who draw him into a plan to explode a truck in the Lincoln Tunnel.

The oppositions are clear: purity against corruption, faith against doubt, submission against freedom. They are resolved when Jack Levy, a secular Jewish school counsellor, enters the truck and persuades Ahmad not to act. The Muslim character is thus saved from Islam by a Western mentor. Updike treats Ahmad with evident sympathy, and the novel is critical of American consumer culture, yet the structure repeats a pattern Said described: the Oriental is explained by his religion and corrected by the West.

2. **Falling Man*: abstract neo-Orientalism*

DeLillo's novel is mainly about Keith Neudecker, who survives the collapse of the towers, and his estranged wife Lianne. The Muslim character, Hammad, appears only in three short sections placed at the end of each part of the book. They follow him from a flat in Hamburg to Florida and finally to the aircraft. The proportion matters: the attacker occupies the margins of a narrative whose centre is American suffering.

Hammad is given doubts and physical desires, and in this sense he is more than a stereotype. But almost nothing is said of his country, his family, or the political history that might have shaped him. He is led by Amir, a figure based on a real hijacker, who supplies him with ready-made ideas, and Hammad gradually gives up his own will to the group. Where Updike explains too much through religion, DeLillo explains too little: the terrorist becomes a figure of pure plot and discipline, an idea in human form. The Muslim world appears as a place of origin without detail, which recalls the timeless and unhistorical Orient of the earlier tradition.

The final section joins Hammad's point of view to Keith's at the moment of impact, so that the narrative passes from one body to the other. The effect is powerful, and it also confirms the hierarchy of the book. The Muslim character exists in order to deliver the event to the American character and then disappears.

3. **The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: counter-discourse*

Hamid's novel is a monologue. Changez, a Pakistani graduate of Princeton who once worked for a New York valuation firm, speaks to an unnamed American at a tea-house in Lahore. The American never speaks in the text; his words and movements are known only through Changez's reactions. The usual arrangement is reversed. The Muslim subject holds the narrative voice for the whole book, and the Westerner becomes the silent and observed figure, possibly armed and possibly dangerous.

Changez's change of heart has little to do with religion. He rarely mentions belief or practice. His motives are political and economic: his work of pricing companies for acquisition, the invasion of Afghanistan, the threat of war between India and Pakistan, and the suspicion directed at him in America after the attacks. The word "fundamentalist" in the title points first to the fundamentals of finance that his employer teaches him to pursue. Hamid thus turns a term of the neo-Oriental vocabulary back upon the society that uses it.

Space is treated in the same way. Lahore is shown as a city of hospitality, learning and long history, and Changez acts as a courteous guide. The ending is left open, and the reader does not learn which of the two men, if either, intends harm. The uncertainty requires the reader to notice the assumptions he or she brings to a bearded Pakistani man and an American stranger. Morey (2011) describes this as a deliberate unsettling of the reader's expectations about post-9/11 fiction.

4. *Comparative summary*

The findings for the three novels are brought together in Table 1.

Table 1. Construction of the Muslim character in the three novels

Criterion	<i>Terrorist</i> (Updike, 2006)	<i>Falling Man</i> (DeLillo, 2007)	<i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> (Hamid, 2007)
Narrative voice	Third-person narration focalised through Ahmad; an American author speaks for the Muslim subject	Third-person narration; Hammad appears in three short sections that close the parts of the novel	First-person dramatic monologue; the Muslim subject speaks, the American listener is silent
Source of motivation	Scripture and the imam; religion presented as the sufficient cause of violence	Group discipline and submission to a leader; history and politics largely absent	Political and economic experience: finance, war, suspicion after the attacks
Spatial imagery	Mosque above a nail salon; decaying New Jersey city; the tunnel as target	Hamburg flat, Florida, the aircraft; the Muslim world as a place of origin without detail	Lahore tea-house as a place of hospitality and intellect; New York as place of exclusion
Binary structure	Purity / corruption; faith / secular doubt; resolved by a secular Jewish mentor	Plot / counter-narrative; the terrorist body against the victim body	Binaries are quoted and then turned back upon the American listener
Relation to Orientalism	Sympathetic neo-Orientalism: humanises the character but keeps Islam as explanation	Abstract neo-Orientalism: the Muslim as a figure of an idea, not a person	Counter-discourse: exposes the gaze that produces the "fundamentalist"

DISCUSSION

The results allow the research questions to be answered. In the two American-authored novels the Muslim character is constructed through focalisation by an outside author, through religion or group obedience as the cause of action, and through oppositions that set him against Western life. These are features of the discourse Said described. The Muslim is known, explained and finally contained by a Western consciousness, and his world is given little history of its own.

What has changed is the content of the image. The classical Orient was feminised, passive and distant, an object of desire and administration. The neo-Oriental figure is male, active and close at hand, an object of fear. Ahmad is an American teenager, and Hammad lives in Germany and Florida. The border between East and West no longer runs between continents but through Western cities and, in Ahmad's case, through a single person of mixed parentage. This agrees with the account given by Behdad and Williams (2010), for whom neo-Orientalism is marked by its direct connection to present-day politics.

It would be wrong to treat Updike and DeLillo as simple propagandists. Both try to give the attacker an inner life, and both criticise American society. Their case shows something more interesting: that good intentions do not remove a writer from a discourse. Updike's sympathy still places the cause of violence in Islam, and DeLillo's restraint still leaves the Muslim without a history. This supports Rothberg's (2009) view that the weakness of the early post-9/11 novel lies in its inability to look beyond the national frame, and it qualifies Gray's (2009) emphasis on domestic retreat by showing that even novels which do imagine the Other may imagine him within old limits.

Hamid's novel answers each feature in turn. It gives voice to the represented subject, replaces religious with political motivation, shows the East as a place of culture, and leaves its binaries unresolved. Scanlan (2010) places it among postcolonial novels that move the story of terror away from the scene of the attack and towards its global setting. A caution is needed here. Behdad and Williams observe that the "native informant" can also serve neo-Orientalism, and Dabashi (2011) makes a similar criticism of writers who confirm Western expectations from inside. Origin does not guarantee a counter-discourse. What makes Hamid's text one is its form: the monologue that silences the American and the ending that refuses to confirm the reader's suspicion. Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which follows a Jordanian couple in Arizona after the attacks, suggests that such answers were also being written from within Arab American literature and deserves separate study.

For literary scholarship outside the West, including in Central Asia, these findings have practical value. Post-9/11 American novels are widely read and taught, and reading them with attention to voice, motivation, space and binary structure helps to separate their artistic achievement from the assumptions they carry.

CONCLUSION

The post-9/11 novel did not invent a new image of the Muslim East; it rebuilt an old one. From classical Orientalism it kept the silent Other, the explanatory power of religion and the opposition of two worlds. It changed the mood from fascination to fear and moved the Other from a distant land into the Western city. *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* show two versions of this reconstruction, one sympathetic and one abstract, and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* shows that the same narrative tools can be used to expose it. Neo-Orientalism is therefore best understood as the adaptation of an existing discourse to new political conditions. Further research could extend the comparison to Arab American and other Muslim American authors

and to novels published in the second decade after the attacks, in order to see whether the pattern described here has weakened.

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