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American Systematic Violence as an Imputes of Muslim Oppression in *Home Boy* by H.M. Naqvi

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Abstract. The contemporary British-born Pakistani author H.M. Naqvi (b. 1973) has written two novels. His first novel, *Home Boy* (2009), narrates the socio-cultural dilemma of the Muslim character Chuck and how the American society scents him as a lower individual in post-9/11 attacks. This study focuses on the oppression of Muslim minority characters in American society, as I assume that America is reflective of the violent society, which is an essential problem to the oppression of Muslims in the selected novel. Using textual analysis methodology, I examine the depictions of Muslim minority characters by applying the concept of violence and its related critical insights of oppression by the American socio-feminist philosopher, Iris Marion Young. The objective of this study, thus, is to examine the author's depictions of the American society as the violent society that oppresses the Muslim minority characters in the selected novel. The findings lie in demonstrating the Muslim characters' oppressed state as a signifying factor of their vulnerable position amidst the violent American society.

Keywords: novel, violence, society, character, Muslim identity, oppression

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Систематическое насилие со стороны американцев как признак угнетения мусульман в романе Х.М. Накви «Домашний мальчик»

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Аннотация. Цель настоящего исследования – раскрыть художественное своеобразие и острый социальный смысл творчества современного пакистанского писателя британского происхождения Х.М. Накви (род. 1973). Х.М. Накви написал два романа. Его первое произведение «Домашний мальчик» (2009) рассказывает о социокультурной дилемме, с которой сталкивается мусульманин Чака, о том, что американское общество воспринимает его как неполноценного человека после терактов 11 сентября. В статье показано, как в американском обществе подвергаются преследованию и дискриминации представители мусульманских меньшинств. Вопрос об угнетении мусульман в романе является центральным. Америка в целом представлена как общество насилия. Использование социологического метода, а также работ феминистского социального философа Айрис Мэрион Янг позволило представить в исследовании картину тотального насилия в романе по отношению к мусульманским меньшинствам. В заключение предложен вывод о том, что роман писателя является ярким острым социальным произведением, в котором на примере главного героя Чака раскрыты методы и инструменты расового насилия и способы противостояния ему, а американское общество представлено как система тотального насилия.

Ключевые слова: роман, насилие, общество, персонаж, мусульманская идентичность, угнетение

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, precisely on September 11, 2001, four American passenger planes were hijacked by suicide terrorists who crashed them into three vivid areas in America, leaving more than 2000 people dead. The tragic event of the 9/11 attacks was a watershed moment in the lives of all Americans. Muslims have not been an exception, as the tragic event has touched them just as much as any other Americans. They have been concerned in various ways as the incident undermined their social standing and called their place on the American demographic map into doubt. The shocking events of this tragedy have been echoed

by many media outlets that have tackled Muslims from different standpoints. As for the American media, it has conveyed negative stereotypical images of Muslims, considering them as “aggressive people” who are ignorant of humanity (Samaie, Malmir, 2017, p. 12). However, the ensuing War on Terror “<...> rendered Muslim people more visible as a uniquely threatening ‘enemy other’, further fomenting their racialisation” (Jardina, Stephens-Dougan, 2021, p. 2). This stereotype has been used continuously from the past till nowadays, with the othering of Muslims, setting them as enemies, which further enlarges their dilemma in America.

This feeling of irreparable split has been felt deeply by the Muslim diaspora, who are seen as a source of threat as belonging to the same Others as the terrorists. Indicting Muslims with terrorism generates intimidation towards Islam, which further results in the exclusion and discrimination of Muslims in the social, cultural and civic life in the West: “negative stereotypes about Muslims as terrorists have always contributed to an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility towards Islam and resulted in discrimination and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life in some Western societies” (Haider, Al-Salman, Al-Abbas, 2021, p. 7). In fact, ‘stereotypes’, ‘exclusion’, ‘discrimination’, ‘hatred’ and ‘hostility’ provoke violence against the Muslim minority groups in the Western host societies, including Muslims inside the multicultural American society. In *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11* (2011), the American sociologist Lori Peek emphasises the increase of violence towards Muslims by highlighting the “verbal harassment; violent threats and intimidation; physical assault; religious profiling; and employment, educational, and housing discrimination that Muslims faced following 9/11” (Peek, 2011, p. 16). In this sense, Muslims in America have to face not only negative stereotypes but also systematic violence that results in their oppression, as violence is one face of oppression of any minority group in the American host society.

However, reactions toward all the forms of oppression against Muslims have made their way into the development of ideas. As a result, Muslim authors, through their literary works, have been open to the collective demands of their group as they seem apprehensive about how to establish their identities and place themselves amid the oppressive culture of the American society: “the hostility and prejudice towards Arabs in general and Muslims in particular based on various political events, particularly after the 9/11 tragedy, attracted attention to the meaning of citizenship and maintaining identity found in such works” (Abdelsalam, 2023, p. 197). Muslim authors have also been compelled to express their community’s reactions to the increased sense of violence and oppression against them (Bujupaj, 2016; Khalid, 2023; Majaj, 2008). Therefore, their literary works concentrated mostly on these issues affecting the Muslim minority in America’s multicultural society.

The contemporary British-born Pakistani author H.M. Naqvi, through his novel *Home Boy* (2009), portrays the lives of three young Muslim characters in America. The first one, Chuck, a Pakistani immigrant residing in New York City, narrates the tale under his true name, Shehzad. Chuck is part of a group of Pakistani companions including Jimbo (Jamshed) and Ali Chaudhry (AC). As a team, they live bright, joyful lives amid the city’s global tapestry, frequenting bars, exchanging clever

conversation, and fitting in with the cosmopolitan throng. They are urban men who identify as more American than Pakistani and are deeply established in their urban lifestyle.

However, the tragic events of the 9/11 attacks have disrupted this feeling of assimilation. After the incident, the sociopolitical scene shifts radically, with a wave of Islamophobia and discrimination spreading throughout America. Consequently, Chuck and his companions, formerly unnoticed in New York City, are being noticed because of their South Asian look and Muslim background. As a Muslim minority, they started being treated with discrimination and exclusion by the Americans, while also being set up as a part of the terrorist group inside America.

The novel has been examined by numerous literary studies that dealt with different thematic issues concerning Muslims, such as alienation and Othering (Pathan, Ahmed, 2019), terrorism (Rashid, Jabeen, Shahbaz, 2020), psychological borders (Ullah, Ahmad, Qazi, Rehman, 2021), Islamophobia (Hai, 2022), resisting neoliberalism (Shah, Sheeraz, 2022), marginalisation and resistance (Zaib, 2023), and disruption and multiculturalism (Aziz, Nadeem, 2024). This study, however, aims to explore the state of oppression experienced by the Muslim minority characters due to the American violence that had played a pivotal role in oppressing Muslims in post-9/11 attacks, as depicted in the selected novel. In the course of the analysis, this study applies the concept of violence and its related critical insights of oppression by the American political theorist Iris Marion Young (1949–2006). By using this concept, this study underscores the issue of the oppression of the identity of Muslim minority characters under the violence of the American society in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, as the issue of Muslim identity in post-9/11 literature has been a subject of many scholars who have explored different angles of this subject matter (Arslan, Yasin, 2021; Fakhrulddin, 2024; Hauso, 2020; Imtiaz, Azam, 2022; Wolfson, 2023), except the issue of oppressed Muslim identity who live under the violence of the American society. The scope of the present study is limited to Naqvi's depictions of the American violence and the oppression of Muslim minority characters in the selected novel and to the conceptual framework of violence and its related critical insights of oppression. The focus of the study is on how Naqvi depicts the oppressed state of Muslim minority characters amidst the violent American society.

Methodology

The concepts of oppression and violence are apparent in different literary works. Examples of oppression and violence exemplify many themes and techniques used by authors to unravel the lurking meaning of these concepts and how they influence the lives of minority groups in the host society. In literary studies, scholars identify the shape of oppression and violence in relation to the physical and mental aspects of the minority groups (Bashir, Aurangzeb, Bibi, 2022; Egya, 2020; Kuortti, Ruokkeinen, 2020; Manikome, Rombepajung, Lolowang, 2021; Nisa, 2023; Umeh, 2024). In both cases, oppression and violence cause dangerous

treatment of the minority groups and place them in vulnerable conditions. This study investigates the imagology, representation and cross-cultural encounters that stand for the impotent depiction of Muslim minority identity in Naqvi's novel *Home Boy*. This study attempts an in-depth analysis of the selected work, which includes a textual analysis methodology of the novel. The novel will be examined in light of the social approach by applying the concept of violence and its related critical insights of oppression by Young (1990). This study intends to focus on the analysis of the Muslim minority characters, which in turn helps in a better understanding of the state of Muslims' oppression that they face under the violence of the American society. A careful analysis of the selected work will establish the fact that the American society has developed an oppressive and violent power in controlling, humiliating and torturing the Muslim minority group and curbing their presence in the post-9/11 epoch. The analysis will also bring to light the fact of the vulnerable state of the Muslim minority group in America.

Analysis and Discussion

American Systematic Violence as an Imputes of Muslim Oppression

In her notable book, *Justice and the Politics of the Differences* (1990), Young connects violence to oppression, where she defines violence as a powerful means harnessed by the dominant group to impose their oppression on specific minorities who belong to specific groups in the society. This typical form of oppression uses physical attack or torture to persecute the minority groups in America: "<...> many groups suffer the oppression of systematic violence. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person. In American society women, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, gay men, and lesbians live under such threats of violence, and in at least some regions Jews, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and other Spanish-speaking Americans must fear such violence as well. Physical violence against these groups is shockingly frequent" (Young, 1990, p. 61).

Similarly, in Naqvi's *Home Boy*, the Muslim minority characters are being oppressed through acts of physical violence exerted upon them by American society after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, September 2001. This can be seen clearly through the situation of the Muslim protagonist Chuck facing a group of gangsters at one of the bars in New York City who insulted and beat him for no reason: "then there was a flash, like a lightbulb shattering, a ringing in my ears, the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I didn't quite see the fist that knocked me flat on my back" (Naqvi, 2010, p. 24). Though Chuck is a Muslim, he enjoys his time at the bar like any other American. The act of physical violence by a group of American gangsters upon Chuck is an obvious example of the violence of the dominant group in the American society. The physical violence exerted by American society against Chuck is massive, as it leads to the complete obliteration of Chuck. That is, Chuck becomes devoid of his rights and social practices, and he cannot cope with the whole

oppressive society. As a rule of thumb, violence is a direct, vital tool to exert oppression against the Muslim minority group in all cases.

Young asserts that “the oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimisation, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are liable to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy” (1990, p. 62). Similarly, in the novel, the Muslim characters face the same situation. In the following textual evidence, Chuck expresses his fears over the endless violations and threats by the police officers who used to ‘target’ and check him ‘everywhere’ and ‘every corner’: “<...> there’s sadness around every corner? There are cops everywhere? You know, there was a time when a police presence was reassuring, <...> but now I’m afraid of the, 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, <...> history will keep repeating itself” (Naqvi, 2010, p. 206).

In the above textual evidence, Chuck’s fears of the police officers’ threats and violations are indications of the violence of the American society that results in his oppression amidst the prevailing tyrannical culture of the Americans. The oppression that emerges against Chuck is due to his identity as a Muslim who belongs to a Muslim minority group. This is the severest form of oppression since it deprives the Muslim minority group of their rights, freedom and dignity.

Young argues that the concept of violence overlaps with the concept of cultural imperialism, which results in irrational violence between the minority group and the dominant group: “Cultural imperialism, moreover, itself intersects with violence. The culturally imperialised may reject the dominant meanings and attempt to assert their own subjectivity, or the fact of their cultural difference may put the lie to the dominant culture’s implicit claim to universality. The dissonance generated by such a challenge to the hegemonic cultural meanings can also be a source of irrational violence” (Young, 1990, p. 63).

To further connect Young’s view with our subject, once the Muslim minority group disagrees with the American dominant group, they become opposing and do not show any form of acceptance of the dominant American culture. Accordingly, the Muslim minority group becomes adverse towards any form of American imperialism and its dominant culture. In the long run, such adversity formulates violence between the Muslim minority group and the dominant American group, which ends up ultimately in the oppression of the Muslims. In the following textual evidence from the novel, Chuck comments on the violence of the American society at the time when he prepares reactionary acts against the Americans, as he no longer accepts the dominant culture of the American society by any means, saying that “when somebody hits you, you hit back” (Naqvi, 2010, p. 40). Here, the reactionary acts that Chuck prepares for show the violence of the dominant American culture, as his statement above reveals how he lives under the threats of the American society that inflicts violence upon him at any time. Chuck’s situation demonstrates

how the Muslim minority group lives in worse conditions under the dominance of the American society that inflicts violence on them. It further unveils their oppression as they are persistently inspected and controlled by a higher and mightier dominance called American imperialism that incarnates the concept of cultural imperialism and its oppression (Fakhrulddin, Bahar, 2022, p. 9; Fakhrulddin, Bahar, Zainal, Awang, 2023, p. 373). This can be seen in the following evidence spoken by Chuck: “you could feel it walking down some streets: people didn’t avert their eyes or nod when you walked past but often stared, either tacitly claiming you as their own or dismissing you as the Other” (Naqvi, 2010, p. 45). In this sense, the Muslim minority group faces violence and oppression by the dominant American imperialism.

Young furthermore debates violence in terms of injustice that can be induced through stereotypical images of minority groups (Young, 2010, p. 63). The Muslim minority group, of course, can be linked to Young’s discussion of the stereotypical images of these minorities. To explain, once the Muslim minority is portrayed in stereotypical ways by the Americans, unjust violence occurs against them. That is, they become vulnerable to several attacks just because the Americans see them as outsiders or terrorists. As such, stereotypes motivate American society to commit violence against the Muslim minority. In the following textual evidence from the novel, Chuck’s interrogation by a police officer, Grizzly, reveals such a situation:

Grizzly: You are a terrorist?

Chuck: No, sir.

Grizzly: You a Moslem?

Chuck: Yes, sir.

Grizzly: So you read the Ko-Ran?

Chuck: I’ve read it.

Grizzly: And pray five times a day to Al-La?

Chuck: No, sir. I pray several times a year, on special occasions like Eid (Naqvi, 2010, p. 113).

In the above textual evidence, the concept of violence lies in Grizzly’s depiction of Chuck in a stereotypical way as a ‘terrorist’. Here, violence can be begotten as a consequence of stigmatisation towards the religion of Islam and their followers, the Muslim minority, who are perceived as terrorists. The tendency of American society to create stereotypical images lies behind the rationalisation given to violence and deliberate injustice of the Muslim minority group. As a matter of fact, violence and injustice toward the oppressed Muslim minority group cannot be eliminated unless there is a “change in cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversion in the gestures of everyday life” (Young, 2010, p. 63).

Conclusion

Through the textual analysis methodology and applying the selected conceptual framework to Naqvi’s novel *Home Boy*, this study has explored the issues of oppression that the Muslim minority group characters face by examining the

author's depictions of both violence and American society. Violence has been explored through the physical attacks and stereotypes that the Muslim character Chuck has experienced from the American society, which tortured and described him as a terrorist. Violence has also been explored through the dominance of American imperialism, which has played a crucial role in violating, subjugating and depriving Chuck of maintaining any form of power and sociocultural stability in the society. The acts of violence practised toward Chuck highlighted his vulnerable position and further revealed his oppression amidst the dominant American society. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that this study has demonstrated the systematic violence of American society as a motivation for the oppression of the Muslim minority group in the post-9/11 epoch. Future research can be done on the selected novel by applying the theory of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), which highlights the issue of Muslim characters' trauma related to violence.

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