

## Confronting Islamophobia in Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from Missionary Position*

<sup>1</sup>M. Mohamed Habeeb, <sup>2</sup>Dr. M. Shajahan Sait

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Research Scholar (Part time) PG & Research Department of English Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University) Tiruchirappalli

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor & Research Supervisor PG & Research Department of English Jamal Mohamed College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University) Tiruchirappalli

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### Abstract

Tabish Khair's novel *How to Fight Islamist Terror from Missionary Position* (2012) provides a captivating investigation of the reverberation of 9/11, probing into the complexities of Islamophobia and its impact on Muslim individuals in the Western societies. The novel offers a nuanced perspective on cultural identity, religious freedom, and the challenges faced by Muslim characters in the face of widespread cultural misunderstanding. Islamophobia is the term for any indiscriminately negative attitude or feelings toward Muslims or Islam. Analyzing the facts behind the negative image is a better method to expose it. This research paper seeks to analyze the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia as depicted in the novel, exploring the portrayal of Muslim characters, the prevalence of stereotypes in the Western society, and their struggle with identity. Additionally, the study aims to evaluate the novel's commentary on post-9/11 society and the satirical elements used to address Islamophobia, contributing to a deeper understanding of the ongoing challenges in fostering religious tolerance in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Terror, Muslims, religious tolerance, cultural identity.

### Introduction

Tabish Khair's novel *How to Fight Islamist Terror from The Missionary Position* delves into the intricate identities and relationships of Muslim individuals in contemporary Danish society. Through the journey of Karim Bhai, Ravi, and the Unnamed Pakistani narrator, the novel explores the pervasive Islamophobia in the Western world. Each of these characters embodies different aspects of Muslim identity and personal experiences within the narrative.

The narrator, whose name remains undisclosed, is an English professor at a university and hails from a Pakistani Muslim background, grapples with conflicting Muslim identity, vacillating between the rejection of liberal values and leniency towards Islamic religious values. This internal struggle is evident in his explicit descriptions of his sexual activities during his MFA studies, suggesting a departure from traditional Islamic values.

Karim Bhai with a full flowing beard, is a devout Muslim taxi driver from India, represents a more traditional and unwaveringly religious Muslim character. His commitment to his faith stands in stark contrast to the narrator's uncertainty, embodying a new interpretation of "fundamentalist" that implies Magnanimous selflessness, altruistic commitment, and deep reverence for fellow individuals. The novel explores Karim Bhai's dedication to his beliefs through his organization of Quranic study sessions and his steadfast adherence to Islamic principles, challenging stereotypes and offering a more nuanced

understanding of devout Muslim characters in contemporary literature.

### **Ravi's fascination with Islam**

Ravi, a Brahmin from India with aspirations of becoming a writer, presents a unique perspective on Islam that prompts readers to reconsider their understanding of the religion. As he started to follow Karim Bhai, he said “The nammaz is the gym of Islam; That’s why they hate it so much in the West” (Khair, 2014, p. 12). Despite his Hindu background, Ravi expresses his desire to learn about Islamic prayers from Karim Bhai, who agrees to teach him. Karim, a devout Muslim, feels obligated to help Ravi as it is seen as a way for non-Muslims to attain paradise. “To convert a non-Muslim into Islam is to be shown the secret side- door to paradise” (Khair, 2014, p. 11).

Ravi demonstrates his commitment by diligently reciting the nammaz in the positions that Karim has shown him. Karim Bhai holds Friday night Quranic study sessions in his residence, drawing women in traditional attire and a predominantly young male audience with beards. Karim Bhai serves refreshments throughout the meeting, which ends on time at 9:00 p.m. Without knowing the whole story, the youthful Pakistani narrator misinterpreted and called Karim Bhai a terrorist and the primary fundraiser of Al-Qaeda. He said:

What do you think they are? The secret Aarhus cell of Al Qaeda? Who knows?

Karim Bhai, a terrorist...He let us drink in his flat and you know what Alcohol means to people like him?

Perhaps he needs the money more than he hates alcohol.

Oh yes, Perhaps he is the main funder of Al-Qaeda?

That’s why he needs the Money so badly! (p. 30, 31).

The narrator initially feels doubtful and suspicious upon meeting Karim Bhai, but Ravi eagerly participates in Quranic sessions led by him. Ravi even goes as far as wearing a beard to experience potential discrimination at European airports. This bold action challenges stereotypes and encourages a deeper exploration of religious interactions.

By delving into Ravi's journey of self-discovery and cultural immersion, the narrative emphasizes the significance of open-mindedness and empathy in connecting diverse faiths and traditions. Ravi's willingness to engage with Islam not only broadens his own horizons but also sheds light on the fluidity of cultural identities in a globalized world. His experiences serve as a testament to the transformative power of interfaith dialogue and the potential for mutual understanding.

Khair's portrayal of Ravi's interactions with Islam not only adds depth to the character but also offers a nuanced reflection on the challenges faced by individuals navigating multiple cultural and religious identities. Through Ravi's exploration of Islam, readers are invited to contemplate the complexities of religious diversity and the impact of societal perceptions on personal beliefs. Ultimately, Ravi's story serves as a compelling reminder of the importance of tolerance, respect, and dialogue in fostering harmonious relationships across diverse communities.

### **Islamophobia and Stereotyping in Western Society**

The representation of Muslims in various media forms has significantly influenced societal attitudes and has contributed to the reinforcement of stereotypes. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, there has been a notable rise in Islamophobia worldwide, which is evident in the manner in which media outlets portray and categorize Muslim communities. A dominant stereotype that has emerged is that of the radical Muslim militant, characterized by a relentless pursuit of jihad against Western societies, thereby framing violence as an inherent aspect of Muslim identity.

Prior to the arrival of Ravi and the narrator, the flat was occupied by a family of refugees who identified as die-hard atheists, despite their Muslim background. Their daughter's choice to wed a young Somalian

Muslim man was either driven by her newfound religious beliefs or her desire to embrace Islamic traditions. She entrusted her belongings to Karim's care, with the intention of retrieving them later. The narrator is taken aback when she arrives in search of Karim Bhai, introducing herself as Ajsa, Ibrahim's wife. Karim Bhai and Ajsa express a desire to discuss matters in private, which makes the narrator feel cautious. His understanding of Islam greatly shapes his behavior, leading him to ultimately report Karim Bhai to the authorities in Denmark.

Ravi's interest in experiencing Islam firsthand stems from a curiosity about how Muslims are treated in European countries, especially at customs. He adopts a Muslim identity, including growing a beard, when he moves from Aarhus to London, but quickly shaves it off upon his return. The narrator questions Ravi's dedication to his experiment, wondering if he has already abandoned his faith. Despite this, Ravi insists that his mission was a success, as he traveled from Aarhus to London, then to Amsterdam, and back to Aarhus via Copenhagen, all to observe how a Middle Eastern appearance, complete with a beard, is received at European airports. "By an average of two minutes and seventeen second- calibrated against previous non bearded notations –per airport" (Khair, 2014, p. 55).

Younger Muslims are particularly affected by internalized Islamophobia, as they are exposed to anti-Muslim narratives through popular culture, news outlets, social media, and political discourse. This exposure can negatively impact their self-esteem and mental well-being, leading to struggles with identity and belonging. The challenges of cultural adaptation can worsen feelings of isolation, contributing to social tensions and conflicts within the community.

Through humor and complex representations of Muslim characters, Khair encourages readers to recognize the dangers of 'selective blindness', which is the reluctance to accept diversity due to entrenched stereotypes. The novel enhances the discourse surrounding Islamophobia, shedding light on its complex effects on individuals and society as a whole.

### **The Narrator's Identity Crisis**

The narrator's identity crisis is a crucial aspect of this novel. This struggle is reflected in various dimensions of the narrator's character and life experiences, highlighting the complex challenges faced by Muslim individuals in Western societies. As the narrator navigates life in Denmark, his disdain for Islamic rituals and practices becomes apparent as he attempts to distance himself from strict religious adherence. This behavior reflects a state of "tragic stasis," where an individual finds themselves helplessly caught between conflicting cultural identities.

The anonymous narrator, an English professor at a university who was raised in a Pakistani Muslim household, embodies a profound internal conflict between religious and secular values. This struggle is evident in his vacillation between repudiation of liberal values and leniency toward Islamic religious values. The narrator's sexual activities during his MFA studies, described using explicit language, suggest a departure from traditional Islamic values, highlighting the tension between his religious upbringing and the demands of a secular, modern world.

The narrator, who identifies as a Muslim, expresses views on religion that may seem contradictory to traditional Islamic beliefs. This discrepancy could lead devout individuals to label him as a 'kafir.' He openly admits to abandoning his faith in God and carefully chooses his words when describing Karim Bhai's Friday Quranic session, which he views as nonsensical. The narrator views Islamic fundamentalists as embodying fascist ideals, characterized by exclusivity based on ethnicity, race, or rationalism. He criticizes the strict obedience demanded by Islamic fundamentalists, which he sees as a reflection of fascist ideology.

The narrator shares his viewpoint on Islam as a totalitarian system through a different incident. A young man from Pakistan is mistakenly recognized as a relative of an American preacher due to a translation error with their names in Urdu, which sound alike. This innocent person is wrongfully accused of

assisting the American preacher by distributing copies of the Quran, resulting in his execution by beheading following a decree from the Mullahs. When a Danish police officer inquires about Ibrahim's involvement in the incident, the unnamed narrator admits he is unsure. He also informs the officer that Ali believes those who insult the Prophet and Allah deserve to be put to death. This remark highlights a radical interpretation of Islamic teachings, underscoring the severe repercussions for acts of blasphemy.

The narrator's sense of cultural displacement is a reflection of the challenges faced by Muslims living in predominantly non-Muslim societies. This displacement is exacerbated by the constant exposure to media portrayals of Muslims, which often perpetuate stereotypes and contribute to a sense of alienation. The narrator finds it difficult to maintain a secular Muslim attitude in the face of pervasive news coverage that seems to cast suspicion on Muslim identity.

The concept of being a 'secular Muslim' itself becomes problematic for the narrator, as he grapples with the historical sedimentation of the term 'secular', which he perceives as Euro-centric and imbued with Christian values. This realization leads him to question whether the idea of a 'secular Muslim' is an oxymoron, further deepening his identity crisis.

### **Guilt and betrayal**

The narrator of the book opens by thinking back to a particular day when he was parked on a public street and tried to provide a sperm sample for a reproductive clinic. His wife is the one who wants a child, therefore he is uncomfortable about that. He is also worried about getting caught ejaculating into a plastic container inside of a vehicle. However, his worries quickly shift as he spots a police car patrolling the area and says:

My heart Sank. If this particular cop found the sight of law-abiding Japanese or Far Asian car, no matter parked where and how, suspicious, what would he think when he discovered that the driver of the car was more or less Muslim-skinned man? (p. 9)

This vividly highlights the prejudice against Muslims in Western society. Simply being 'Muslim-skinned man' is enough for individuals to attract suspicion from law enforcement, as demonstrated by the his experiences. The narrator grapples with a deep internal conflict stemming from conflicting cultural and religious identities, resulting in a strong sense of betrayal and guilt towards his family, community, and society.

On a specific occasion, the narrator, Ravi and his Danish girlfriend Lena flag down a cab driven by Karim. When they get out of the cab, Ravi says goodbye to Karim with the phrase 'Allah Hafiz'. The narrator then asks Ravi why he used 'Allah Hafiz' instead of 'Khuda Hafiz', sparking a discussion about the subtle differences between the two phrases. In the end, Ravi goes back to Karim and says goodbye with 'Khuda Hafiz'. This discussion about language highlights the narrator's perspective on Islam, despite being a Muslim.

It was always Khuda hafiz in India and Pakistan: go with God, go in the care of Khuda, the Persian word for God. Now these woolly wahabbis are trying to get all Arabic, and they insist on using Allah, the Arabic word...(p. 95)

The deliberate choice to conceal his true identity adds another layer of complexity to his emotional turmoil, reflecting the challenges of embracing a singular sense of self.

### **Satirical Elements in Addressing Islamophobia**

Tabish Khair skillfully utilizes humor as a formidable tool to confront and undermine the negative frameworks that are often applied to Muslim individuals. Through this strategy, he seeks to invert the harmful implications of stereotypes, thereby fostering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding Islamophobia. The cliched portrayal of the Asian extended family is a heartbreaking example of this; Ravi and the narrator deftly use this stereotype to get out of disappointing dates with

Danish spouses by pretending to have an urgent family problem.

Two minutes later, I excused myself, went to the dingy little poster-ridden toilet on the other side of the bar and called Ravi on his mobile. He answered with alacrity. I mumbled a 1960s Bombay film song into the receiver. He replied gobbledygook in Hindi, with a few suitably intonated English words - especially 'hospital?', 'hospital!' 'hospital' - thrown in. When I returned from the toilet, Ravi had bad news for me: our cousin had called. Another cousin had been hit by a car. Oh no, I said. We had to meet both the cousins at a hospital where the first cousin was rushing the second cousin....

.... 'Families,' said Ravi, the dramatist, unable to resist the temptation to improvise, 'that's what happens when you have large, extended families.'

The girls nodded in sympathy: they read the newspapers and knew all about immigrants with their large families, all of them cramped into little Denmark. Some other time, I am sure, I said, pulling Ravi away before he over-improvised. (p. 14, 15).

The author's skillful use of humor is further exemplified through the characters' interactions, particularly when Ravi concocts a melodramatic narrative about a cousin's accident, playing on the stereotype of a large, interconnected immigrant family. Through this satirical portrayal, Khair not only entertains the audience but also sheds light on the irrationality of such stereotypes, prompting reflection on the broader implications of prejudiced assumptions.

Karim's adherence to fundamentalist beliefs becomes evident when two Clauses visit him before the Friday session, with one expressing a desire to hold the Holy Quran. Karim politely declines, emphasizing the holiness of the book and the need for cleanliness before handling it. This act symbolically represents the practice of ablution before engaging in the reading of the Holy Quran. "It is a holy book. Claus, if I may, he said in Danish. You should be clean before you can hold it." (Khair, 2014, p. 41).

The interaction between Karim, Ajsa, and the Clauses added layers of complexity to the narrative, hinting at underlying tensions and differing interpretations of faith within the community. This approach complicates widely held beliefs about Islamophobia and deepens our comprehension of its nuanced facets. Additionally, it fosters a more knowledgeable and sympathetic viewpoint on the experiences of individuals affected by bigotry by encouraging critical engagement with preconceptions that support discrimination.

Khair's novel utilizes the literary device of irony to underscore the intricate nature of identity and cultural exchanges. By doing so, the author challenges preconceived notions and stereotypes, revealing the close relationship between reality and fiction. This serves to illustrate that identities are not fixed, but rather can be adaptable, flexible, and even artificially constructed. This is most notably illustrated through the character of Ravi, a Brahmin who actively engages in Koranic study sessions and grows a beard to test the reactions of airport customs.

Furthermore, the novel employs irony in the narrator's evolving perceptions of the characters. Initially, the narrator perceives similarities between Ravi and Lena, only to later recognize their distinct differences. This shift in viewpoint emphasizes the subjective nature of perception and the potential pitfalls of relying on initial impressions or stereotypes. This serves to further underscore the complexities of identity and cultural interactions within the narrative.

By presenting the narrator's preconceptions and misgivings about Karim—who is thought to be a fundamentalist—the author invites viewers to consider their own presumptions and convictions. The narrator, anxious about the Islamic Axe Plot and Al-Qaeda conspiracies, grapples with the negative perceptions of Muslims in his community. Although he identifies as Muslim, he struggles with his own lack of commitment to Islamic practices. He remembers the unjust arrest of an Indian doctor as a terrorist, which prompted them to seek assistance from the Danish police.

As the narrator reflects on Karim and a mysterious woman, he questions their identities and situations. Claus reveals that Karim has been exonerated of any involvement in the Axe Plot and Al-Qaeda, explaining that his actions were driven by a desire to care for his ex-wife, who has Alzheimer's. Despite their divorce, Karim continues to maintain a friendship with her, raising ethical dilemmas regarding their relationship and responsibilities.

The structure of the novel itself plays a significant role in subverting expectations. Described as both "funny and sad, satirical and humane," the story weaves together the lives of three memorable characters: the charismatic Ravi, the religious extremist Karim, and the anonymous, down-to-earth Pakistani storyteller. All three of the protagonists are embroiled in uncertainty and suspicion following a "terrorist attack" that occurs in the town, casting doubt on readers' presumptions regarding who might be responsible or complicit.

Through a thorough examination of the novel's narrative and character dynamics, Khair's work contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex nature of Islamophobia and its impact on individuals and societies. The author skillfully employs sarcasm and comedy to challenge readers' preconceptions, highlight the ironies inherent in cross-cultural relationships, and raise issues with prevalent prejudices. This method helps people understand the complicated nature of Muslim identities in Western societies on a more profound level.

#### The Novel's Commentary on Post-9/11 Society

Tabish Khair's novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), explores the intricate complexities of post-9/11 society, shedding light on the various issues that arose in the aftermath of the tragic events. Through its narrative and character interactions, the book offers readers a deep understanding of the challenges of Islamophobia and its impact on individuals and communities.

In her article *Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity*, Lori Peek (2005) comments that religion plays a crucial role in shaping personal identity, often more so than other social identities. In her study:

A small number of the interviewees reported changing their appearance following September 11, mostly against their will, as they tried to appease their parents. A few of the men shaved their beards, and five of the women stopped wearing headscarves for a short time. Still, most participants were unwilling to alter their appearance, despite possible danger. The students contended that it was more important during this time than ever before to declare their Muslim identities and faith in Islam (p. 22).

She points out the stereotype that associates Islam with terrorism, stressing that it is the most misinterpreted religion. Islam has been unjustly connected to extremism, intolerance, violence, and militarism.

In his book *No God but God*, Reza Aslan (2005) highlights the fact that, "The traditional image of Muslim horde has been more or less replaced by a new image, that Islamic terrorist strapped with explosives, ready to be martyred for Allah etc. Negative stereotyping and stigmatizing is faced by the Muslims particularly in the West" (Aslan, 2005, p. 79). Through the narrator's struggles and prejudices towards Karim, a character associated with fundamentalism, the novel encourages readers to reexamine their own assumptions and biases. By embarking on this introspective journey, the novel prompts readers to question their beliefs and engage in critical reflection on issues of identity, belonging, and societal perceptions.

While not directly addressing the decline of civil liberties, the novel subtly reflects the changing social and political landscape. It alludes to significant events like the 2005 Muhammad cartoons controversy

and the 2011 Norway attacks, which have impacted civil liberties and freedom of expression. These historical references highlight the characters' experiences in a world marked by tension and division.

The story revolves around a momentous event that took place in Denmark in 2005. The Jutland Post/Jyllands-Posten, a Danish broadsheet newspaper, published a cartoon portraying the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in 2005-2006, sparking widespread controversy and violent protests globally. One of the cartoons depicted Muhammad with a bomb, resulting in the recall of numerous ambassadors from Denmark. This incident serves as compelling evidence of the prevailing fear of Islam in the Western world.

The characters' journeys in this new reality showcase the societal struggle to balance security needs with individual rights. The narrative explores the complexities of protecting civil liberties in a climate of fear and distrust. Additionally, it delves into the effects of post-9/11 attitudes on interfaith relationships and cultural understanding. Through a story of love, betrayal, and pain, the novel captures the challenges faced by diverse communities in the aftermath of the attacks. By focusing on personal connections rather than overt political discussions, it offers a nuanced exploration of how suspicion and stereotypes impact interpersonal dynamics and cultural exchanges. The novel explores the complex challenges that Muslim Americans face in balancing their dual identities, highlighting the difficulties of reconciling their American and Muslim selves. Through the interactions of the characters, readers gain insight into the intricate dynamics of maintaining a sense of belonging in a post-9/11 world. As noted by Ali Asani, the characters' identities are continually challenged, illustrating a broader theme of the conflict between their American and Muslim identities.

Khair's narrative goes beyond simple political commentary, encouraging readers to empathize with the human impact of Islamophobia and underscoring the importance of fostering understanding across cultural and religious divides. The novel serves as a powerful reminder that such effects reach far beyond its immediate consequences, significantly influencing societal interactions and personal relationships. By examining these themes, the novel invites readers to contemplate the lasting effects of historical events on individual lives and connections.

## **Conclusion**

Islam, from the Arabic word "Sla'm," means peace and submission to God. It is not just a religion but a way of life promoting peace and tolerance. The misconception that Islam supports terrorism has led to unjust labeling of Muslims as terrorists, causing fear and alienation in immigrant communities. The false belief that Islam is a religion of violence and terror is widespread in the Western world. However, historical evidence shows that Islam has spread through principles of tolerance, peace, and equality, not force. Ravi emphasizes in the novel that Islam's influence was not established through violence, but through practices like the five daily prayers, known as nammaz.

The misrepresentation of Islam as a violent and oppressive religion stems from deep-seated prejudices and biases. 'Islamophobia' and the negative portrayal of Muslims as terrorists are not new, but rather a result of longstanding misconceptions. It is important to challenge these misconceptions and recognize Islam for its true values of peace, tolerance, and brotherhood. Khair's novel challenges readers to confront their preconceived notions and highlights the dangers of turning a blind eye to discrimination and prejudice. By promoting a more thoughtful approach to interfaith relations and cultural understanding, the novel advocates for greater empathy and tolerance in a world marked by religious tensions. It serves as a call to action for readers to reevaluate their biases and assumptions, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society that embraces diversity and mutual respect.

Ultimately, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from The Missionary Position* prompts readers to reflect on the pervasive issue of Islamophobia and the importance of combating intolerance through education and dialogue. By shedding light on the complexities of this phenomenon, the novel encourages individuals

to strive for a more harmonious coexistence and to work towards building bridges across cultural and religious divides.

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