

Popularizing Islamophobia: Dissemination of Pakophobic Myths in *I am Malala*

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Abstract

*By admitting Islamophobia as an urgent issue, recent Western scholarship attends to the identification of causes responsible for the continuous surge in anti-Muslim sentiment since 9/11. Yet these discourses tend to be less attentive to the damaging effects of the wild proliferation of “oppressed Muslim women narratives” –which is a recognizable subgenre of first-person narratives within Western reading circles. The dominant tendency of considering these narratives as authentic ethnographic representations of the Muslim world is required to be acknowledged as a significant contributory factor to the spread of Islamophobia. As a justification, this paper points out ethnographic generalizations as testimonials to the propagation of Islamophobic myths in *I am Malala*. Utilizing Kumar’s idea of Islamophobic myths as the selective narration of traditional, incorrect and selective historical and cultural happenings of the Muslim world, this paper concludes that Malala’s narrative justifies imperial intervention in Afghanistan –Pakistan. Orientalized recounting of women’s oppression and acceptance of liberal ideals of Western modernity and femininity projected by this narrative causes Pakophobia- a new variant of Islamophobia.*

Key Words:

Islamophobia,
Pakophobia, Oppressed
Muslim Women
Narratives.

Introduction

Considering Islamophobia as an urgent issue, Nathan raises a set of related questions: “What then is the cause of a steady and persistent rise in anti-Muslim sentiment over the years? Why is it that more than 16 years after September 11, 2001, fear, mistrust, and hatred of Muslims exist at such high levels?” (2017, p.14) As a reply to these two questions, this paper claims that one child (Malala), one teacher (Lamb), one book (*I am Malala*), one pen (Malala’s? or Lamb’s?) have contributed to anti-Muslim sentiments by perpetuating Islamophobic myths in *I am Malala*. Pakistani Muslim females travelling to Britain for education purposes face such stereotypes due to their religion and ethnicity. Far from being awarded for their education and empowerment, the girls with their “passport of a country that was labeled the hub of terrorism” according to Saeed (2016), suffer a new form of Islamophobia, namely “Pakophobia, where being both Muslim and Pakistani creates a greater sense of vulnerability and insecurity” (p.118) for them. These girls fail to draw media coverage or support of international organizations unlike Malala, who is made an exception in the West by “by practices such as celebrating “Malala Day,” receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, and book deals. Even the title of her book, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, centres on her person, emphasizing her uniqueness.” (Moolji 2018, p.121) This hypocrisy of Western liberalism is systemically revealed by Moolji in a series of arguments by exposing the imperialist agenda which is served by *I am Malala* as:

Malala, the idea, tells a particular story about Islam and the people of Pakistan. She is represented as the girl who defied the cultural logics operative in Pakistan and who now embodies transnational, secular modernity exemplified by her emphasis on the autonomous self, enactment of choice, advocacy for freedom, and arguments for gender equality. Instead of being a symbol of the courage of Muslims and Pakistanis to stand up against local forms of violence, Malala is shown to be an exception... Malala’s transnational uptake, then, sustains assumptions that transform all Pakistani Muslim men into terrorists and all Muslim women into victims or potential victims. Malala is distanced from other Muslim girls. She is made to simultaneously stand-in for, represent, and symbolize the oppressed Muslim girls and positioned as the empowered girl who is not one of them. The idea of Malala denies other Muslim girls similar forms of empowered subjectivities. It sustains the façade of Islam as an oppressive religion, positioning interventions—such as universal education of girls, empowerment projects, or even drone attacks—as necessary or even ethically imperative. (2018, p.121-122)

I am Malala, published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in the UK and in the US by Little, Brown and Company. *I am Malala* is the story of a young Pakistan girl from Swat who was shot by the Taliban in 2012. Swat, a princely state during the Colonial era, became part of the country in 1969 few years after the state's independence from British rule. The valley faced an insurgency in 2007 during General Musharraf regime. It was the decade when Pakistan was "coerced into supporting the US and its allies in the global war on terrorism." (Murphy 2013, p.2). Published in 2013, in Pakistan, it received much harsh criticism. Moolji (2018), in her book, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia*, quotes the words of Kashif Mirza, head of All Pakistan Private schools federation that "that while the 152,000 private schools had supported her when she was shot, they had now decided to ban her book: she "was a role model for children, but this book has made her controversial... Through this book, she became a tool in the hands of the Western powers." (p.97). Contrary to this opposition; the book received positive reviews by the Western media at a time when Pakistan was being labelled as a 'hub of terrorism' with its "notoriety reaching new heights on the discovery and death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan." (Saeed 2016, p.118) This book entered this conversation with its selective remembrance of the crisis-oriented historical incidents in Pakistan, including reaction to the Publication of Satanic verses, Asia Bibi blasphemy case and the subsequent killing of the governor of Punjab, frequent instances of female oppression.

The present paper borrows the idea of Islamophobic myths from Kumar (2012), who claims it to be a legacy of Orientalist ideology. The concept of myth is taken as implicating multiple connotations involving the selection of traditional, incorrect or problematic narration of significant happenings to manipulate the projected social point of view. As Kumar (2012) points out, "myths about Islam in the twenty-first century are indeed historical, but they are based on a distorted or selective interpretation of the past." (p.42). This paper sets out to uncover the ways in which the text *I am Malala* (2013) reinforces the Islamophobic myths. Based on this understanding, the question this paper attempts to answer is what is taught by this book? It is concluded that the book reaffirms those Islamophobic myths of Pakistani Muslims and Islam, which are being identified as responsible for the creation of a new form of Islamophobia, Pakophobia, which is understood as a fear of Pakistani Muslims. In the words of Saeed (2016), Pakophobia is an "a type of Islamophobia, which is interspersed with both the ethnic (Pakistani) and religious aspects of the individual's identity. It is not a phenomenon that is different from Islamophobia but, rather, is situated within the same category, where the specific ethnic characteristic of a Pakistani may often be the defining feature of the discrimination experienced, rather than the religious aspect alone". (p.191)

From Islamophobia to Pakophobia: A Political Perspective

Contemporary research on Islamophobia evinces a strong interest in understanding the causes, nature, forms and consequences of Islamophobia. (Kumar 2012; Saeed 2016; Allen 2019; Lean 2019) This increased focus on Islamophobia is statistically counted by Lean (2019) as "between 1980 and 2014, the term appeared in the titles of more than 1,212 books, magazines, and newspaper articles" (p.13). While newspapers articles took the lead, 40 books exploiting Islamophobia as part of the title have also been published since 2003. Among the majorly explored issues are "Islam and Muslim history, Muslim identities, media representations, multiculturalism and social cohesion, migration, citizenship, religion and culture, racialization, secularism, gender, sexuality, nationalism, terrorism, extremism and securitization". (Mondon and Winter 2019, pp.59). These issues have been approached from various disciplines, including but not limited to psychology, sociology, criminology, print/mass media studies, religious studies and literary studies. These significantly broadened approaches to understanding Islamophobia offer theoretically divergent and competing definitions of the phenomenon. (Allen 2010) But which simultaneously points towards the "increased awareness among scholars and others" regarding "the presence of animosity or hate towards Muslims, (Lean 2019, p. 15)

Generally understood as a kind of societal prejudice that targets Muslims on the basis of their religious identity, which is "affecting ordinary people in the streets of various cities across the globe every day". (Lean 2019) More than consideration of the etymological or definitional inconsistencies prevailing around the concept, taking Islamophobia as a phenomenon with multiple and varied manifestations of hatred against Muslims need to be understood to counter the spread. Among the possible causes of this anti-Muslim hate, Allen (2010) identifies stereotypes as an important source for the spread of this phenomenon. The idea of stereotypes that this paper employs sticks to the conceptualizations which are mindful of their problematic nature by considering their "inaccuracy, negativity, and overgeneralization" (Stangor 2016, p.4) rather than its positive and negative variants. What is identified as more problematic by Stangor is the effect of creating divisions among people and the countries, so "the process of using stereotypes (overgeneralization), more than holding them" (2016, p.4) is believed to be dangerous for the world at large. This is particularly problematic in the case of the circulation of stereotypes of Muslims as violent, aggressive terrorists. (Kumar 2012) With these popular theorizations, the image of Muslims as backward, ignorant, unchanging and barbaric was popularized by Hollywood movies, books, magazines,

travelogues, TV drama serials, documentaries, photographs in the last century (Murphey 2013; Saeed 2016; Moolji 2018). Besides the propagation of these cultural images, hardly any consideration of accumulation of systematic knowledge about Muslims and Islam was done in the realm of politics.

The growing interest in Islamophobia demands an explanation for the ever-persistent automatic association of Islam with the violent activities of a few Muslims.

It is not difficult to find material that emphasizes selective analyses of Islam and events in the Muslim world, material that is crisis-oriented and headline-driven, fueling stereotypes, fears, and discrimination. Islam's portrayal as a triple threat (political, civilizational, and demographic) has been magnified by a number of journalists and scholars, who trivialize the complexity of political, social, and religious dynamics in the Muslim world." (Lean 2017, p.xv)

To debunk such sweeping generalizations about Muslims, what is required then is a political explanation rather than a religious one. This association is materialized through the continued historical propagation of stereotypical images of Islam and Muslims by Europe for political purposes. According to Kumar (2016), "this view of Islam emerges from a body of work known as Orientalism that came into being in the context of European colonization, which reached its peak in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (p.25). Thereby, Kumar's identification of Orientalist ideology comprises of following four key points :

First, it is based on a civilizational view of history—the idea that civilizations come into being, prosper and then go into decline. Second, because it emerged from philology, the historical and comparative study of language, it assumes that everything one needs to know about civilization can be found in its texts and languages. Third, Orientalism sees Islam and its classical texts as key to understanding contemporary Muslims and their societies. Fourth, it draws on theories of race and the notion that Muslims are a distinct race. (2012, p 30)

What is evident from these points is the subtle bias hidden in Imperial conceptions of the monolithic character of Islam that solely governs the lives of Muslims. However, with the weakening of older empires after World war II, the orientalist ideology of anti-Muslim stance resurfaced under the guise of "modernization theory" that rested on the polarity between modern vs traditional societies. According to Kumar (2012), theorists of modernization believed that "our" society was dynamic, scientifically oriented, rational, supportive of individual development, democratic, and egalitarian, whereas "their" societies were static, hidebound, despotic, and authoritarian. What was needed, then, was a Western intervention to "help" traditional societies make the transition to modernity. This view was not so different from earlier Orientalist notions". (p.38) Both orientalists and modernists discourses believed in the racial superiority of West over East and advocated Western intervention to enlighten and educate the people of traditional societies in particular Islamic. Through an extensive overview of the establishment of the colonial empire justified under the orientalist ideology in the last two centuries, Kumar claims for the persistence of the orientalist and modernist ideology in the present century that is being used to spread Islamophobia today. This claim resonates with Nathan's (2017) concerns regarding the rise of anti-Muslim bias in Europe and the United States as not merely "the result of a naturally evolving climate of scepticism but a product that has been carefully and methodically nurtured over the past decade and is only now in the second decade of the twenty-first century reaching its desired peak. (p.18)

'Islamophobia is about Politics rather than Religion per se':

Kumar (2012, p.7), by outlining the relationship between West and East over the centuries, stresses the need to identify Islamophobia as a political construct rather than a religious affair. Such a view then necessitates the brief overview of the significant political events in the first two decades of the twentieth century that marked the rise of Islamophobia in the wake of 9/11 incidents to the development of its particular offshoot labelled as Pakophobia. The Aftermath of 9/11 is historically marked as a period of constrained relationships between the West and the Muslim world. Hence, a rapid increase in Islamophobia was witnessed during the first decade of the present century. Islam and Muslims were majorly perceived as dangerously threatening to the Western world. Abbas (2005) reports that "within hours of the deadly September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the US administration concluded that Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda operating from Afghanistan were behind the attacks and that any successful counterstrike would not be possible without the support and assistance of Pakistan". (p.217) It was a time when Pakistan was politically pressurized by America to extend its support to US forces who were fighting against Taliban regime in the neighbouring country, Afghanistan. The Pakistani government was demanded to:

1. Stop Al-Qaeda operatives coming from Afghanistan to Pakistan, intercept arms shipments through Pakistan, and end ALL logistical support for Osama bin Laden.
2. Give blanket overflight and landing rights to VS aircraft.
3. Give the VS access to Pakistani naval and air bases and to the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
4. Turn overall intelligence and immigration information.

5. Condemn the September 11 attacks and curb all domestic expressions of support for terrorism.
6. Cut off all shipments of fuel to the Taliban, and stop Pakistani volunteers from going into Afghanistan to join the Taliban.
7. Note that should the evidence strongly implicate Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan, and should the Taliban continue to harbor him and his accomplices, Pakistan will break diplomatic relations with the Taliban regime, end support for the Taliban, and assist the VS in the aforementioned ways to destroy Osama and his network. (quoted in Abbas p.218)

The ensuing war-on-terror which Pakistan thus entered was the consequence of the Western intervention in the region rather than that of religious extremism. Murphy (2013) points out despite the active involvement of the Pakistani military in counter-terrorism programs, Pakistan was suspected of the spread of terrorism. This conflicting relationship persisted in the second decade when Osama bin Laden was found and shot in Pakistan. His death not only notoriously fumed the discourses of Islamic extremism by the influential political leaders, media and terror experts in the West. A sustained analysis of Pakistani history reveals that American intervention in tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, drone attacks, and without permission of Pakistani authorities, the secretive military operation in which Osama was killed produced internal violence between militants and military. According to Abbas (2005), the militant fanatics in Pakistan were fostered “by Zia ul-Haq, the funding of Saudi Arabia, espousal by the United States, and the venal abandon of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, the seed of religious fanaticism.”(p.201) It was violent foreign intervention rather than violent religion that “provoke militancy and violent conflict, either by destabilizing a fragile political system or by encouraging violent resistance against foreign interference”(Abbas 2005, p.x) One such important incident was the siege of Lal Masjid and formation of an Extremist group, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan who was strongly critical of Pakistani alliance with America on the issue of war and terror. In 2007, the Pakistani government confronted the members of Tehrik-e-Taliban who took control of the mosque which resulted in “approximately 154 deaths, including 19 soldiers and some young female students.”(Murphy 2013, p.148). This encounter, in particular, infuriated the Pushtun militants Of Khyber Pakhtunkhawa and FATA, who were strongly against the intervention of Americans and their allies in Afghanistan and the Pakistani military government. As a result, “in April 2009, the Pakistan Taliban took over the Swat Valley in the NWFP where they killed hundreds of security and government officials in the process.”(Murphy 2013, p.149). The sole objective of the Taliban’s rebellion in Swat was to support the Afghan Taliban’s against US forces. Stressing the political motivation of the Swat insurgency, Murphy (2013) points out that “to maintain Pashtun independence and the status, authority and power of the individual leaders of the terrorist groups” (p.150) Islam was used as a tool by the Pakistani Taliban’s to defend themselves against the military retaliation.

One Child, One Teacher, One Book, One Pen Can Cause Oppression

The myth of Islam as an essentialist and homogenous religion is the core orientalist assumption that views a Muslim mind as singular and a view that “all Muslims shared a hive mind”.(Kumar 2012, p. 42) This dominant myth further generates the preceding myths of the authoritarian, oppressive and sexist nature of Islam. Altogether five orientalist myths are identified by Kumar (2012), which are exploited by the manufacturers of anti-Muslim hatred with four secondary myths besides the above-cited dominant one. These include; Myth Two: Islam Is a Uniquely Sexist Religion; Myth Three: The “Muslim Mind” Is Incapable of Reason and Rationality; Myth Four: Islam Is an Inherently Violent Religion; Myth Five: Muslims Are Incapable of Democracy and Self-Rule. (Kumar, 2012)

However, reading *I am Malala* against the grain reveals that rich evidence related to the lives of Pakistani Muslim women imply the myth two of Islam as a uniquely sexist religion. Despite acknowledging the fact of two types of Islam – Sunni Islam and Shia Islam with their multiple strands, to the exclusion of Ahmadiis from the circle of Islam, throughout the text, negative generalizations and homogenization of Muslim women implicitly construct the myth of Islam as monolithic. This pattern can be found in particular when Pakistani Muslim women are presented as oppressed and subjugated by their fathers and husbands without considering the complexity of their experiences. Co-authored by English Journalist Christina Lamb, whose entry was twice banned in Pakistan due to her conspiratorial activities during her stay in Pakistan, Malala’s narrative thus resonates with the brown girl narratives serving the colonial powers. It should come as no surprise that the text masquerades “the logic that Muslim women are oppressed and therefore need to be rescued by the West continues to hold ground”. (Kumar 2012, p. 45)

The text discursively produces a range of stereotypical subjectivities for Pakistan Muslim Women- which are mostly marked as undesirable in contrast to her idealism of Western freedom of liberty. An example of this is to be found in a chapter named ‘The Woman and the Sea’ in the book. During her brief stay in Karachi, she managed to visit her poor aunt’s house there. Her aunt and uncle “lived in a very small house and so, at last, my father understood why they had refused to take him in when he was a student.”(p. 185) Despite having lived in Karachi

for thirty years after her marriage, she only happened to visit the beach for the first time in her life upon Malala and her family's visit to her home. Instead of acknowledging her poor financial position as the reason for missing the pleasure of her visit, Malala proclaims it to be her vulnerable position after marriage. As it is remarked in the opening section of the chapter, "her husband would not take her to the beach, and even if she had somehow slipped out of the house, she would not have been able to follow the signs of the beach as she could not read."(p.183)

Malala's fascination for the sea led her to dream that that "across the water were lands where women were free. In Pakistan, we had had a woman prime minister, and in Islamabad, I had met those impressive working women, yet the fact was that we were a country where almost all the women depend entirely on men. (p.183) The solution lied in her belief that Muslim women can fight their (perceived) oppression by living their lives like their Western counterparts. They need to be rescued and educated like women of the West to live their lives in a more meaningful way. Women's domestic life is deemed undesirable. This passage, by implication, portrays a culture of Pakistani Muslim society where women are not viewed as their full members rather as dependent on men. There circle of activity is believed to be limited only to the domestic space whereby they "want to be free to go to school or go to work".(p.183)

Further, the notion of limited choices available to a Pakistani Muslim woman is expressed in a generalized statement made in the prologue of the text. Malala says, "It's hard for girls in our society to be anything other than teachers or doctors if they can work at all. I was different – I never hid my desire when I changed from wanting to be a doctor to wanting to be an inventor or a politician".(p.4) This statement is contradicted by numerous references like when she expresses her fascination for women of Islamabad with diverse professional backgrounds or when she makes direct and indirect references to Banazir Bhutto, who was the country's first prime minister. Her portrayal of Muslim women's desire for freedom seems to justify the American agenda of the Afghan invasion that "Muslim women are oppressed and therefore need to be rescued by the West continues to hold ground".(Kumar 2012,p.45) Despite West being misogynistic in its core, having sexist and patriarchal rulers always aims to play the saviour of Muslim women from the same sexism, misogyny and patriarchy they practice in their homeland.

In the text, mostly, the veil of the Muslim women is signified as the sign of their oppression. Malala's negative stance towards the veil is evident in her statement when she says, "wearing a burqa is like walking inside big fabric shuttlecock with only a grille to see through, and on hot days it's like an oven. I had decided very early I would not be like that. My father always said, 'Malala will be free as a bird.'" (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 56). Veil and burqa are worn by Muslim women as a symbol of modesty, and they practice it through their own free will, but for the West, it's just a source of Islamic suppression that covers women as an object but let men roam free, a sexist notion. Considering examples of France and hate crimes faced by women, it's evident that the West fears veiled women. They replicate the notion of the veil being suppressive and restricting in their political discourse along with their literature. The notion of Westerners coming to the Muslim world and liberating women under the veil is not new. By constantly imitating this concept, they construct it as the fact that Afghan and Pakistan women indeed need a saviour from the West. Malala constructs the image of her father as a 'feminist' following Western ideals of feminism. Islam and the patriarchal society she is born in appears to be unable to suppress her because her father is a 'feminist'. He protects and saves her from the other male entities who want to clip her wings and take away her freedom. The idea of a liberal father is directly presented in the association of the western feminist. Hence, the western ideology as a source of liberation is clearly reconstructed by Malala. No matter what, Muslim women could only be saved, freed and liberated under the intervention of superior Western wisdom.

Conclusion

To conclude, Malala's narrative, on multiple occasions, deliberately mentions that the Pakistani government and military were unable to save her, the Pakistani girls, schools and safeguard women basic rights of freedom. Malala's pleading voice, "this is our request to the world – to save our schools, save our Pakistan, save our Swat." (Yousafzai, 2013, p.121), asking for the world, especially the Western world, to help her country perpetuate the myth of Islam as a sexist religion and that Muslim women need to be rescued from unorthodox religious patriarchy totally foreshadows the political reality of the country where the problems they face arise as a result of US and USSR's cold war. The longing for a foreign saviour when foreigners are the cause of starting it is antithetical in essence. Malala fails to admit that the rights of women got really suppressed along with their education after American intervention in the region. Such an intense portrayal of the Muslim world in this text certainly works to reinforce the imperial myth of Islam as sexist religion. Reading such a narrative strengthens Pakophobia, an extension of Islamophobia.

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