Community, Faith, and Resistance: Writing Religious Resurgence in Select British Muslim Fiction
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Amin Malak's *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005) was an important marker for the emergence of a distinctive category of postcolonial literature. Published a generation later, Sk Sagir Ali's *Community, Faith, and Resistance: Writing Religious Resurgence in Select British Muslim Fiction* absorbs the critical moment begun by Malak and probes novels by Salman Rushdie and Ahdaf Soueif as key writers from his pantheon. We may argue that Ali's book brings a more integrated and coherent response to the field of Muslim literature than Malak's pathfinding work by employing a theoretical frame that benefits from both later criticism as well as the theoretical valence brought by Muslim thinkers such as Talal Asad, Tariq Ramadan and Hamid Dabashi. Integral to the frame adopted is the concept of community which translates as Umma. An array of critical sources supports the view that the Umma refuses to accommodate western secularism. Defined as the "transreligious and trans-identitarian kernel of the Islamic faith" (1), Umma furnishes the agency needed to resist "the pervasive onslaught of European colonial modernity during the Enlightenment" which "dismantled the Islamic cosmopolitanism that Muslims had enunciated and practised over many centuries." The study examines various environments within the texts under scrutiny in which "Islamic reality transmutes itself from the organicity of historical cosmopolitan disposition with a polyfocal and syncretic temper to what Hamid Dabashi argues is the 'singular and exclusive site of ideological resistance to colonialism'" (2). Otherwise the author conducts readings of the novels through a familiar thematic prism highlighting "the conflicts that arise in … coming-of-age narratives between the demands of a liberal individualist lifestyle and those of community, family, and faith," discussing "how these authors distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture and negotiate complex themes of religion, representation, recognition, and secularism in their works" (front matter; see also 17-18).

Chapter 1, "Religion, Community, Secularism …", grapples with "the issues of secularism and fundamentalism" by drawing on the thesis widely disseminated by Huntington (35). Often interrogated within the context of the supposed clash between secularism and Islam in the public realm, where the former functions as the antithesis of the latter, the fiction of Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi (discussed in Chapter 2) fulfils a familiar role within the early chapters. However, Rushdie's cerebral historical novel *The Enchantress of Florence* (2015), carefully avoiding the "troubled structures" in terms of "the emergence of the Rushdie Affair, 7/7, and the War on Terror" (41), is a somewhat questionable text from which to argue that Islamic culture is not a

monolith. Critical consensus would suggest that Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road From Damascus* (the second novel discussed in Chapter 1) is a better bet. The main focalizer is the novel's hero, Sami, who discovers through domicile in London and later a visit to the Syria of the Asads the superficiality and deceit behind his father's vaunted icons of secular Arabic literature and culture. Overturning Rashid Iqbal's militant "caricature" of anti-Islamic Arabism, Sami arrives at an understanding that (in the post-modern metropolis) the versions of Islam practised by his mother and wife Muntaha can be configured together with other orientations both past and contemporary.

Chapter 2, "Remapping Fundamentalism, History and Terrorism …," presents readings of Kureishi's *The Black Album* and Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*. Kureishi's much critiqued novel is used to "look at the links between religion and violence in the pre-9/11 socio-political climate and the rise of fundamentalism during and after the Rushdie Affair in 1989" (18). A more intensive engagement with these themes is achieved by confronting reductive fundamentalism at its most extreme form during the recent Afghan wars. Ali's exploration of Aslam's novel marshals a range of effective sources, none more insightful than Alla Ivanchikova's *Imagining Afghanistan: Global Fiction and Film of the 9/11 Wars,* which describes Aslam's text as "a novelistic enactment of a nonidentitarian memory ecosystem - a form of memory that cuts across multiple social groups as well as across time periods, rendering simultaneous the present and the recent past" (86-7). He acknowledges that although both Kureishi and Aslam "belong to a Muslim heritage, they are not practising Muslims per se" (18). Instead of stressing the antagonism toward Islam with which their writing is often associated, Ali employs them to "critique the binarized, saturating categories that Badiou refers to as symptomatic of the political and ontological stranglehold that plagues the current geopolitical order and its self-fashioning as either/or in terms of identity realms" (89).

In Chapter 4, "History, Economics and … Transnational Imaginings …," Afghanistan again provides scope for exploration of an Islamic corner of the current West-produced world order. Covering "the colonial projects of post-9/11 America, the financial crisis, and the war in Afghanistan" (138), Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* is less frequently analyzed as belonging to the category of British Muslim writing. By this stage the scope of the project has acquired momentum and intensification, and Ali's heuristic skills are clearly on display. These can best be seen in his reading of the character of Zafar, the novel's main protagonist and postcolonial Muslim *déraciné* who "demonstrates his support for the residents of Kabul, while his increasing animosity towards Western individuals in Afghanistan becomes evident through his active involvement and collaboration with Pakistani agents, aligning with the planned sequence of events" (144).

Hybrid associations of personal belonging and engagement in intercultural critique lie behind most of these writers' works. If locations and identity can be complex for Rahman's characters, Leila

Aboulela and Qaisra Shahraz, who feature in Chapter 3, "Gender, Religion and Religious Faith …," have produced fiction where "questioning of agency, religiosity, and gender are different in both" (19). Shahraz, who mainly writes about South Asian society, showcases in *The Holy Woman* and *Typhoon* the predicament of Pakistani women in a still strongly patriarchal society and argues that women's lack of freedom does not stem from Islam itself but rather from self-serving male interpretation and instrumentalization of religion. In *The Kindness of Enemies*, Aboulela extends a faith-geography previously limited to Britain and North Africa to the Caucasus under nineteenth-century Czarist imperialism, building "a genuine attempt to narrate a particular mode of spiritual subjectivity with a certain degree of faith in the post-9/11 fictional world" (20). Here, as in several other recent studies, her writing is discussed in terms of a Sufi element in her representation of Islam. Ahdaf Soueif, the most secular of the trio of women writers presented here, is discussed though her Booker-listed novel *The Map of Love*. In a way similar to Malak's celebration of the same text, Ali makes claims for it as "'a tour de force of revisionist meta-history of Egypt in the twentieth century', [that] hinges between the present and the past with an attestation of imperial power; the past highly dominates and shapes the present with a shifting approach to history, since 'there can be no escapes from history'" (146).

Though it follows well-trodden critical paths for most of the authors it discusses, this is a critically well-underpinned and discursively assured study. I agree that a recent shift has occurred "in addressing the gaps in postcolonial discussions of identity by acknowledging religion as a valid and significant subject of inquiry" (169). One of the significant achievements of this book is how it situates a body of writing firmly within the domains of both Islam and postcolonialism.