

## QUESTIONING THE MYTH OF MULTICULTURALISM IN TABISH KHAIR'S HOW TO FIGHT ISLAMIST TERROR FROM THE MISSIONARY POSITION

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### ABSTRACT

*Multiculturalism is used as a descriptive term that emphasizes the fact that a society is diverse and should be seen in terms of how it responds to the challenges associated with cultural and religious diversity. But in some of the so called multicultural and liberal societies of the West there are evidential contrariety between the claims and the ground realities. Cultural intolerance, baseless xenophobic narratives have made the lives of diasporic communities of coloured (non western) people complicated. The lives and experiences of immigrants from South East Asia, Africa and the Middle East are different in terms of the consideration of their rights against those of the natives. There are many (including the author) who are not comfortable in their religious and national identities beyond the boundaries of their native lands. This leaves us with a legitimate question which this article seeks to answer and the question is -Is multiculturalism a myth and cosmopolitanism just an outward show in the context of the Western societies, particularly Scandinavian and precisely Danish?*

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, myth, diaspora, contrariety, stereotypes, compatibility, immigrants

### INTRODUCTION

“Celebrate differences, don’t eliminate them”. Carrying the rich legacy of centuries of celebrated social diversity and amalgamation of cultural hues, Khair immigrated to the multicultural Denmark which, he claims, was necessitated by ‘certain trajectories’. Of course,

in terms of his achievement it can be said that the path he traversed from Gaya, an Indian hinterland, to Copenhagen, the capital of Denmark, often called the Paris of the North did lead him to financial prosperity and international recognition as an author. But this article explores whether the social, cultural and even psychological aspects associated with 'diaspora' and 'immigration' experiences were equally fulfilling.

Khair himself, as supposed to be the unnamed narrator of his novel *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, given his academic position, religious identity and immigrant status all akin to those of the novel's narrator, expresses his anxiety about his identity, religion and the over exaggerated and apprehended issue of 'incompatibility' between 'us' the Dane and 'them' the Other. The narrator, a secular Pakistani academic and Ravi, an Indian research scholar both reflecting broad intellectual and cosmopolitan attitudes choose Denmark owing to its multiculturalism. But their experiences tell a different story. The diasporic minorities of Muslim immigrants not necessarily from the disturbed Middle East countries but also from the secular Hindu majority country like India have become wary of the identity formation, stereotypes and sweeping generalization with regard to 'terrorism'.

### **Review of Literature**

Khair tends to scrutinize the concept of multiculturalism, the management of diversity and the handling of minority issues in the Western countries. As per the novel's setting, the focus is on the Scandinavian countries with Denmark in the center where the linchpin of multiculturalism has never been strategically assimilative or inclusive. Though being home of people belonging to different cultural and ethnic backgrounds Denmark is generally conceded as a multicultural country. Is this a 'reality' or a 'myth'? The dictionary defines multiculturalism as 'the presence of or support for the presence of several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society'. Thus we can see multiculturalism in terms of how it responds to the challenges which cultural and religious diversity entails. But in the so called liberal, democratic, Western societies, multiculturalism is more prescriptive than practical. Among the Scandinavian countries Denmark's policies have been more rigid. When Sweden adopted multiculturalism in the 1970s Denmark did not rush into doing the same but decided to observe it. Yet Denmark has been generally conjectured as a multicultural state. Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* attempts to bust this myth. So far multiculturalism and an accommodative approach to immigrants from other ethnic communities are concerned, Denmark shows an obvious reluctance. The main characteristics of the Danish cultural policy are giving preference to the majority culture, allowing immigrants to practice their culture but only in private spheres and enjoining the natives, to some extent, from intimidating the cultural others. But the exponents of multiculturalism maintain that multiculturalism demands integration of immigrants into society and that cultural policies must be made on fairer terms. Ironically, in Denmark, when it comes to integrating Muslims it becomes more complex. Patti Lenard argues that the 'alleged'

complexity arises when the entire Muslims are viewed as fundamentalists and culturally rigid and incompatible while there is a vast majority of Muslim minorities in Europe which desires integration on fairer terms. Khair, whose journey so far, both as an Indian Muslim and as a literary scholar has been that of a secular, progressive, cosmopolitan and broadly socialist (in political context), believes, "The moment we try to erase differences instead of accepting them, it creates problem. This is because human beings are programmed to differ and no two persons can be the same."

As a South East Asian immigrant in Denmark Tabish Khair is very well aware of the social and political situations there which have been rather conducive to exclusionary discourses. These discourses have become more vehement after the infamous Cartoon Controversy resulting in the cultural alienation of the diasporic communities. Their experiences of racism, largely influenced by negative stereotypes, deny them the space and importance that multiculturalism tends to promise. To the question, whether he himself faced any discrimination due to his skin colour or Muslim name, Khair replies:

"Well, I did face some discrimination but it is not something major or worth mentioning. Why I am largely insulated is perhaps because I come from the so called privileged background in the way that I am educated and my circle largely consists of educated and well informed people."

But however insulated Khair may be, his diasporic consciousness became so intense in the atmosphere of doubts and prejudices that he came up with his book *The New Xenophobia* justifying which he says, "Part of the reason I came up with this study is that being an immigrant myself in Denmark, I am concerned about my children's future." Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* captures, in a subtle but highly suggestive way, the atmosphere of doubts and prejudices in which the diasporic communities live in some of the so called and so claimed multicultural and cosmopolitan societies of the West.

An assumed and baselessly apprehended terror breeding out of distrust and misconceptions and the formation of preconceptions and stereotypes based on them have, in fact, complicated the lives of the immigrants. Khair tries to remove the haze that conceals this reality. Khair does so in order that the scales might fall from the reader's eyes. In an interview given to Sravasti Dutta, Khair speaks about this novel, "In my new novel with its tongue-in-cheek title, I try to provide a funny, suspense-filled narrative that finally makes the reader confront his own preconceptions and, perhaps, prejudices." With his fictional brilliancy, irreverent but humorous sarcasm, Khair counters these preconceptions with a hint of natural bitterness owing to his own position both as an immigrant and as a Muslim. Khair stands firm against generalization and stereotypes and boldly scoffs at baseless assumptions, "You can say I laugh at both- so-called Islamist terror and the so-called 'war against terror' from a largely third world-ist position."

Studies of literature concerning South Asian diaspora in Scandinavia have found, more in case of Denmark than Sweden or Norway that a non native young man has to define himself, for example, as a Muslim, a Pakistani and Danish- all at the same time. This, in fact, illustrates the 'diasporic complex' which surrounds his identity. The natives will not accept him as a Dane unless he uses a Danish façade that must conceal his ethnic identity. This implies that because of his skin colour or other somatic features or traditional appearance he may have to experience exclusion and alienation. Rashmi Singla who is a specialist in psychotherapy and an associate professor in Roskilde University of Denmark refers to a Danish researcher R. Andreassen in her article 'Movement Across Borders: South Asian/Indian Diaspora Youth in Scandinavia presents 'the dominant stereotypical pictures of visible minority youth as criminal and violent'. Khair conveys this through the portrayal of Karim as a highly religious Muslim man who lives in Denmark and abides the rules and regulations but cannot hide his strict adherence to his religious practices. Through Karim Khair questions the stereotypes that stigmatize the practicing Muslims on the basis of their physical features and faith. Khair wittingly remarks while referring to Karim's beard, "His beard fooled Ravi into thinking that Karim was from Pakistan, like me, or Afghanistan, like the Italians in our favourite Italian Pizzeria, Milano, on Borgmester Erik Skous Alle`." (HTFIT 5)

Khair uses humour as a double-edged sword in *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*. On the one hand he tries to urge his readers to hold on to their liberal views in the face of considerably rigid, conventional images concerning identities of the non western in the western spaces and on the other he purposely simplifies the irony embedded in his humour so that the seriousness of the situation can be understood, countered and thwarted unflinchingly. Khair's portrayal of Ravi as an intelligent, open minded and courageous young man who refuses to cling to clichés and platitudes without understanding them and his attending Karim Bhai's Quranic sessions despite the narrators disparaging remarks, is part of Khair's subtle use of irony by which he invites the follower of other faiths to take the challenge of defending their assumptions or changing their mentality after personal experience and not under the sway of biased generalizations. Ravi, an astute scholar, firm and reasonable critic exposes Danish mentality and protects his and his friends' position and integrity as law abiding and well meaning immigrants from South East Asia by refusing to yield to their demands of the 'others'. His crisp and pinching sarcastic utterances about the Danes not only expose their misconceptions about the racial others but also reveals to the readers the pressure sustained by the immigrants of performing the part of 'dumb' characters who have been assimilated for sheer political reasons and not as an act of upholding the essential human dignity irrespective of cultural, national or somatic dissimilarities. Such levels of doubts and distrust of the 'outsiders' even when they hold fast to their cosmopolitan outlook, questions the myth of multiculturalism.



In the entire story Karim remains an image of ‘otherness’- suspicious and mysterious other. Khair also observes that any demonstration of equality and liberality is merely cosmetic. Immigrants, in particular Muslims from the Middle East, East Africa and South East Asia, however liberal, unorthodox and cosmopolitan they may be, are subjected to serious generalization and are labeled as fundamentalists. And this situation is a result of, in Deborah Tannin’s words ‘argument culture’ in which the purpose is not to understand the truth but to distort it. The Danes do not shy away from their common notion that the idea of multiculturalism demands compatibility and that the Danes cannot envisage it beyond their own cultural boundaries. Ravi was so piqued by their rigid notions of ‘compatibility’ or ‘incompatibility’ that he curtly advises his friend (the narrator) to present himself either as a man without faith or a believer (as he has a Muslim name) who has begun to lose his faith if he wishes to intrigue a Danish damsel, else there is little possibility for a man of faith to find his ‘affinity’. Ravi says, “Look at yourself you sad unpackaged commodity! You talk about your schooling which is like their; you talk about your parents who are like their parents; you talk about your life which is like their life. They look at you and expect something else. You look like you are something else. And then you go ahead and disappoint them.”(HTFIT-72)

With his witty remarks and his intriguing sarcasm Ravi brackets the Danish society and its unease and incompatibility with the cultural and religious others. To them diversity is a problem rather than a beauty. Khair has reiterated on various occasions in his interviews and his articles that publish in leading Western and Indian newspapers that ‘differences of colour, culture, faith etc. are universal truths and part of human history and movement (here migration) is a condition of human existence. Quoting Salman Rushdie’s ‘trees have roots while human beings have legs’ Khair stresses the importance of movement not only as an essential trait but as a necessary activity so that man does not become rigid, single minded and territorial in his consideration about others. Khair says, “As human beings we need to be able to see not just our horizon but also learn to see other people’s horizons to the extent possible. And if you move, well, then your horizon also changes a bit too. It helps.”

The fear of others which is more ‘imagined’ than ‘experienced’ certainly mars the intercultural relationships leading to the isolation and alienation of the immigrants, expatriates and refugees. Another ‘myth’ which is largely the creation of the Western propagandist media is the ‘link’ between crime and immigrants which also cannot be supported statistically and substantially. But ironically, in Denmark, immigrants are overrepresented in crime. Not only this, studies also suggest that the rate of conviction of non- Western immigrants is much higher than the Western immigrants, their descendents and their Danish peers. After the impetus in the inflow of immigrants into European countries at the turn of the century (in 2000s) a study was conducted in 2015 which rejected the immigrant and crime myth and claimed that the increase in immigration “did not affect crime victimization but it is associated with an increase in the fear of crime, the latter being consistently and positively correlated with the natives’ unfavorable attitude toward

immigrants.” Only one word that needs contemplation in this context is the word ‘fear’. The study referred to, here, does indicate a ‘created fear’ of the outsiders and a fear that is irrational or due to aversion to something is called ‘phobia’. Here ‘something’ refers to the immigrants who are mostly from Asia or other population of ‘coloured’ people. Despite an image of being freethinking, culturally tolerant and liberal the Scandinavian countries, particularly Denmark (where Khair lives and works) does not have multiculturalism anywhere in the core. On the contrary, much of the political debates and public discourses are focused on immigration and the issue of integration.

Karim’s alienation, arrest and long interrogation was maliciously based on his conducting Friday sessions, his mystery disappearances and his apparent disapproval of some aspects of modernity which his religion does not permit such as drinking, womanizing or dating and make him appear to the Danish police not only an Islamic fundamentalist but ‘a suspicious character on some secret mission’. Due to this sudden rush to a conclusion on account of a person’s name, appearance and religiosity that were different from the light-eyed, blond haired Danes Ravi is reminded of the Black Plague years and the preposterous killing of the Jews and the strangers. Ravi could not resist a disdainful murmur, “.....it all had started resembling the Black Plague years of European history when the inability to find a reason for sickness and suffering had led to widespread burning of Jews and strangers. Except that the invisible epidemic, this time is capitalism, he grumbled, complicated by the fact that Europeans are accustomed to simply enjoying its advantages.” (HTFIT 175-176)

When Karim was released and all charges against him were quashed as the police rejected his implication in the so called ‘Islamic Axe Plot’ the narrator observes the reactions in the media in these words, “The tabloid reported it with barely concealed suspicion. A politician from the Danish People’s Party ranted about how weak Danish legislation was, how it allowed terrorist to walk away scot free.”(HTFIT 181) Khair tries to point out that a major portion of Western media is controlled by the extreme right-wing political ideologues, capitalists or their supporters. One of the various ways in which the media extends its support includes strong opposition of the immigrants of different ethnicity as a part of the narrative that ‘immigrants are a threat to the native population and their national identity since they bring with them distinct tradition, culture and languages. The narrator being ashamed of his own doubts on Karim and wishes to apologize as Karim’s innocence was now unquestionable. He wanted to contact him but, he says, even honest conversation was impossible now in that atmosphere of doubt, suspicion and fear “It was not that we did not wish to talk. But the Niagara of suspicion and prejudice and brashness cascading around us made honest conversation impossible between the two of us.” (HTFIT 188)

Such sense of alienation and diasporic consciousness, such fear of prejudice and injustice in the hearts of the immigrants who have no truck with crime of any kind is a cause of concern

for Tabish Khair who himself is no less conscious of this diasporic complex which he expresses thus:

“Not that the question got better. I was, after all, again part of a minority- minority of coloured people in Denmark, the minority of Indians, of Muslims [.....]. And again and again I had to- I have to read largely ignorant articles and letters in Denmark newspapers denigrating Asians or Coloured immigrants or Muslims. That is the curse of being part of a minority.”

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