

## REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIMS IMAGES IN FILMS AND LITERATURE IN POST 9/11 ERA AND ITS EFFECT ON MUSLIMS

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### ABSTRACT

*“In different countries of the world there are different terrorist organizations, like IRA, LTTE, PWG, Red Army, PLO, and so on. Majority of the members of the IRA are Christians. They are not referred to as Christian terrorists. The majority of members of the LTTE are Hindus. They are not called Hindu terrorists. The members of PLO are Muslims. And they are invariably referred to as Muslim terrorists or Arab guerrillas.”*

Media is a very important social role in creating and changing the people's perceptions and views about anything as it is the main social agent. Even media can influence and affect a minority community badly by depicting them with negative stereotyped signs and symbols. After 9/11 Americans continued their harsh views and opinions about any person who resembled the images that they media portrayed as the enemy. Within days of the attacks every news channel was flashing up images of what the hijackers looked like. From these images Americans turned their fear and hatred on to anyone who closely resembled these faces. Can the values of Islam ever be brought into accord with the individual freedoms central to the civic identity? Not if you believe what you see on TV. Whether the bearded fanatic, the veiled, oppressed female, or the shadowy terrorist plotting our destruction, crude stereotypes permeate public representations of Muslims globally.

This paper is critical analyses of the films *Babel* and *Vishwaroopam* along with the novels *Vanity Bagh* and *Tales from a Vending Machine* written by Anees Salim. The novels highlight the biased role of media in society. It shows how newspapers build news on Muslim community and how news is being written on Muslim related issues while the films *Babel* and *Vishwaroopam* distort the Muslim images.

Through this paper I focus on how Muslims are portrayed through the films and literature in post 9/11 era and its effects on Muslim community globally, especially on Indian Muslims. My objective is to find out the outcome of the negative stereotyped representation of one particular community.

**KEYWORDS:** Films, Literature, Post 9/11, Stereotypes, Terrorism, Indian Muslims, Media

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of stereotype was introduced into English only in the 20th century and it is now extensively used in ordinary parlance. Usually, to call something a 'stereotype', or to say that someone is engaging in 'stereotyping', is to condemn what is so characterized. Stereotype normally has a negative valence. While all stereotypes are generalizations, not all generalizations are stereotypes. Stereotypes are oversimplifications of people groups widely circulated in certain societies. After 9/11 there is constant attempt in making negative stereotypes on Muslim community. This stereotyping and

negative portrayal after 9/11 in arts and literary Oriental discourses have caused to create strong anti-Islamic wave and needless phobias in society. Historical and contemporary depictions of Muslims in both the entertainment and news media have emphasized their hostile intentions (Karim 2003; Said 1997; Shaheen 2009). For example, Sheikh, Price, and Oshagan (1995) find that news stories about Muslims often involved crises, war, and conflict.

Although the wave of negative representation of Muslims in Media after 9/11 has affected Muslims globally, it has a special effect on American Muslims and Arabs. Torres-Reyna (2007) find that, in the year prior to September 11, voices alleging American Muslim and Arab support for terrorism were twice as common as those rejecting this allegation. In this period, 31 percent of textual depictions of American Muslims and Arabs were negative and 44 percent were neutral or ambiguous.

Religion always plays a significant part in film, but does film play a significant part in religion? Possibly the better question is, “Does film play a significant part in the way people comprehend religious concepts and beliefs? Often people go to watch films to be entertained in holidays, while away the time and eat popcorn but along with that understanding a film is actually quite involved. Movies, TV shows, documentaries and other mass media not only reflect life, and they also have the competence of shaping our norms, morals, principles, attitudes, and perception of life. One can find stories of practically anything imaginable and some things unimaginable through the media of film. The moviemakers can use their art to entertain, to promote political agendas, to educate, and to present life as it is, was, or could be. They can present truth, truth as they interpret it, or simply ignore truth altogether. A movie can be a work of fiction, non-fiction, or anything in-between. A film is an artist’s interpretation. What one takes away from a film depends upon how one interprets what has been seen and heard. This understanding and absorbing the ideas from film will be different up to the mentality of observer. Always to understand a film in its full essence with the agenda behind it is indeed complex.

Most films are secular and not connected with themes of religion although there are films that deal specifically with religious themes, culture and ideologies. They are not projected to present a religious interpretation of life and no one does expect them to do that. Nevertheless, religion is an essential part of the lives of most people in the world; subsequently it is realistic to assume that religious references will be in attendance in film. At what time film and religion interconnect, viewers are given a hint of their culture, a visual picture of the role of religion in society. The inquiry imploring an answer is whether or not the portrayal of religion viewers are given through film is intended only to entertain, or is it intended to be an actual representation of what people believe and practice?

Image theory generates expectations about how international actors will be perceived and suggests dimensions similar to warmth and competence (Alexander, Brewer, and Herrmann 1999). The first component of image formation is “goal compatibility.” The compatibility of actors’ goals speaks to the dimension of warmth: an actor whose goals differ from yours is perceived as more dangerous. The second component of image formation is the relative status and power of actors. Status and power speak to the abilities of the actor—that is, to how able they are to get what they want in the international arena. It is analogous to the dimension of competence.

*Babel* and *Vishwaroopam* are two films which released after 9/11 and both carry a lot of negative stereotypes on Muslims. The movie *Babel* is a 2006 American-Mexican-French drama film directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu and written by Guillermo Arriaga, starring an ensemble cast while *Vishwaroopam* is a 2013 Indian Tamil spy thriller film written, directed and co-produced by Kamal Haasan who also enacts the lead role. Both films carry many negative

stereotypes on Muslims.

In *Babel*, the first scene itself is dealing of an air gun. That is dealt by a Muslim with turban and long beard in a Moroccan dessert. One old man sells an air gun to another man; the customer's main aim of purchasing the gun is to protect his sheep from the attacks of dogs and wolfs. The man who purchases the gun leaves it in the hands of small children who are probably fourteen and ten years old. The man who bought the gun and the man who sold it teach shooting the children for 10 minutes. So the children use the gun to play while they go feed the sheep. They aimlessly shoots and once accidentally the shot an English girl who travels in a tourist bus. This incident is the breakthrough of the film.

The careless father, uncivilized depiction of Muslim family, especially the scene of the masturbation of the small Muslim boy, and incest in the Muslim family are the extreme negative stereotypes in the film *Babel*. People who watch the film may be easily misguided that Muslims generally are uncivilized and uneducated. Depiction of a small Muslim boy in a much distorted manner cannot be promoted at any cost and it questions the innocence of all Muslim boys.

*Vishwaroopam* is the story of a Muslim RAW agent, who was once a covert operative in the al Qaeda and later saves New York City from a possible terror attack. The story is quite clear that the villainous Muslims are those who are in the al Qaeda, while the Indian Muslim (played by Kamal) is the hero of the film. The entire film is set in Afghanistan and New York. Muslim groups, however, feel that the al Qaeda terrorists shown reading the Holy Quran would make people at large believe that all Muslims are terrorists.

The scene of giving reference to the Quran, and growing a small Muslim boy with poisonous religious hatred in the heart, and terrorist meetings in Mosque give negative messages. People who don't know about the Islam will be misled and misunderstood. The making and portraying the pray hall or mosques of Muslim as a place for the meetings of terrorists are very serious and at most negative depiction of Islam.

In a period when the main political parties are debating about Hindu terrorism, Muslim terrorism, Saffron extremism etc, the plot of *Vishwaroopam* seems to be adding fuel to the fire. Anti-Muslims feelings are being sow through these kinds of very negative depiction. In a further twist to the religious angle, the Muslim leaders have quoted Periyar E.V.Ramasamy cautioning that forward-looking Brahmin is dangerous than vedic Brahmin. Since Kamal Hassan belongs to Brahmin community and shows himself as an anti-caste activist, it should be indigestible to him now. It can perceive clearly while watching critically one movie with religious theme that how movies, accurately or inaccurately, portray religious beliefs, themes, and images. It will be available to find out that viewers are being given factual information about religion, stereotypes, fantasy, or merely film glitter.

Indians and religion is always connected with each other. As there are many religions and religious culture, Indian literature is overflowed by religious themes in it. It was ancient mythologies of India had been using in Indian literature in previous days. But now, according to the trend of the current Indian society the themes and representation of religions in Indian novels are being changed. Following the involvement and mixing of religion with politics, the face of India and according to that situation the face of literature are also being altered.

In the era of globalization, issues in America or in any western country are being the topic of hot debates and discussions in Indian media. Then it spreads to the arena of literature, films and so on. Undoubtedly, the destruction of World Trade Centre in Washington, America is one the serious issues and tragic incidents ever America faced. Following

the attack of 9/11 in Washington, America announced in public about the 'war on terrorists'. This war on terror paved and still paves ways for hot debates in public domain. As the accused culprit of the 9/11 was Osama Bin Laden, a man with long beard and turban, always the people who use turban and keep beard became suspects. This negative type of branding a certain community as terrorist and making the suspects become themes in Indian Literature. Anees Salim is such a writer who explores the negative stereotypes on Muslim community, especially describing the involvement of media in it.

Anees Salim is an emerging Indian writer who bagged The Hindu Literary Fiction Award in 2013. He wrote four novels and all novels deal with the issues and culture of Muslims. His The Hindu Literary Fiction Award winning novel mainly discusses about the stereotypes on Muslim community along with the communal issues in India. The same author has compiled another novel Tales from a Vending Machine which gives reference to the global issues of Muslim. Anees clearly depicts the negative stereotypes on Muslim in current situation of the world.

*Vanity Bagh* tells the story of a young man named Imran Jabbari. He was born and grown up in a small *mohalla* called Vanity Bagh. This *mohalla* is located in the older part of city of Mangobagh, a predominantly Muslim inhabited area mostly by poor people. Once, Imran and his other five friends form a gang giving a name like Five and Half Men. As all the six members except Navas Sharif are jobless youth, their main intention is to make money, gain fame and become famous like Abu Hathim Sahib, an old don of Vanity Bagh. All people of the *mohalla* except Kareem Jabbari and Wasim Jabbari admire the activities of Abu Hathim Sahib without seeing the negative and positive sides of it. When Imran and other members of the Five and Half Men complete the first operation of finding out a black Toyota Corolla from Mehendi, the near street which is fully inhabited by Hindus, they get another illegal job offer to dispense a batch of stolen scooters into the different corners of the city, especially in the street of Mehendi. The main mediator of this job offer has told them that it is an illegal gold business and they can escape leaving the scooter if they see anybody follows them. They complete that job also, but soon they realize their involvement in terrorist activity while the city rocks with scooter bombs. It was a month of November in 2011. So, the bomb blast is named 11/11 and it gives a direct reference to the 9/11 bomb blast. Following the bomb blast in *mohalla* Imran and Zia, the accused culprits are sent into jail for fourteen years of captivity. And the story is narrated by the protagonist, Imran Jabbari in stream of consciousness style from prison. It is the memories of Imran Jabbari from prison and he recollects his past life in Vanity Bagh as well as the present life in prison.

As Anees Salim had lived near to a prison in his childhood, he well described in the novel *Vanity Bagh* about the interior of the prison, prisoners and employees. Anees Salim's uncle was an employee in a prison and usually Anees got chances to go inside the prison and he interacted with prisoners. This interaction with prisoners made him feel that there are many prisoners who became victims for others' deeds. This experience of interaction with jailers while visiting the prison was the basic source of the novel *Vanity Bagh*. In the novel *Vanity Bagh*, members of Five and Half Men are exploited by one politician named Qadir and the reason behind the cheating remains in mystery as the government got two culprits from very poor background, especially they don't have any political hold.

Media is a very important social agent in creating and changing the people's perceptions and views about anything. Even media can influence and affect a minority community badly by depicting them with a negative stereotyped signs and symbols. After 9/11 onwards Muslim community have been facing suspicion and constructed blames from non-Muslims globally. Because, media conveyed very biased messages and news which can easily make a common man think and construct a view against Islam and Muslims. Even Muslim names, dress code, beard and so on observed as a symbol of

terrorists or terrorism. Following that Muslim community have considered as an 'Other' in the eyes of non-Muslims and they have been experiencing very bad treatment from official and security system in the name suspicions. They have been treated as a suspect or suspicious community everywhere, especially in the places like Airport, streets, big malls and so on. In the novel *Vanity Bagh*, Anees Salim gives a direct hint through the humorous thoughts of his main character Imran the effect of global treatment towards Muslim community after 9/11. The major character of the novel, Imran was thinking about the interest of his younger brother Wasim to work in America. Then his thoughts move to the insulting experience which Abdul Kalam and Shah Rukh Khan faced in American airports in the name of security checking.

“A good cinematographer can make anything look inviting; that is why all the young people who grow up watching noon shows a Kemps, Zeenat's and Central Plaza want to dump their parents and go to America. In his heart of hearts Wasim wants to do that too, though he knows his chances are grim. First, refrigeration is not a much-in-demand-profession in a cold place like America. Second, after 9/11 Muslims are not welcome in America even if you are the best computer expert or physiotherapist in town. If they could strip people like Abdul Kalam and Shah Rukh Khan at airports, what chances does Wasim stand? They would happily send a spear up his rectum and plant him inside a police museum. A suspect from India. Stuffed for you. (57-58)”

The thoughts of Imran actually direct light to multidimensional societal issues. It reveals the images of Muslim community in the eyes of society after 9/11. As famous people like Abdul Kalam and Shah Rukh Khan have experience of public insulting approach in the name of security checking just because of their Muslim names, the fear of a common Muslim man who comes from a place nicknamed Mini Pakistan is not negotiable at any cost. What kind of message is being conveyed through this kind of security checking on Muslim people in the name of suspicion? It clearly passes a message to the Muslim community that they are simply a kind of secluded community or 'Other'. And they are suspected everywhere in the society, even if they belong to high class or high status. So through the thoughts of Imran, Anees Salim paves a way to highlight the effect of 9/11's effect on a common young man who lives thousands of miles away from America, in an Indian *mohalla*. It shows that the 9/11 has clearly affected globally and even in the thoughts of common people. This effect itself causes for an intuition in the minds of common people from Muslim community and they themselves consider as an 'Other' mainly because of the treatment which they get from society. Dr. Nazrul Islam writes about the doubts and suspicions which Muslim community faces after 9/11 in his book *Islam 9/11 and Global Terrorism*. He says: “The attacks on World Trade Centre and Pentagon made the Muslims, especially the developed countries like the USA, those in Western Europe and even elsewhere, suspects. A Muslim name is sufficient to invite discriminatory checking, inquiry and interrogation in any airport and also at other places.

The bomb blast in mohalla is dated as 11/11 and it has a direct reference into 9/11 bomb blast. So the author depicts the picture of Muslim images in the eyes of others after 9/11. They construct an identity or image about Muslims and their various activities. The major character of the novel *Vanity Bagh*, Imran Jabbari is being questioned and teased from court during the trial and jail about the lessons and studies in madrasa in which he studied religious related knowledge. Imran explains his experiences of suspicion about his madrasa education. He faced the same question - 'what do they teach you at the madrasa?' - with various tones and rhythms from different section of the society like court, police, researcher and the other inhabits of jail. From their way of questioning the hero, Imran Jabbari, author gives the images of Muslims in the perception of others, especially in the view of authorities like court, police and so on. We get the solid or well-constructed images of madrasa and Muslims in the minds of other community people from their way of reactions

while Imran gives the only reply which he knows—‘Madrasas teach you what they are supposed to: Holy Quran’. Often, hearing the reply of Imran they all smiled- ‘They all smiled in a bad way like I had told them a joke they had already heard.’ When people smile or laugh at someone or something in the form of rejection? Often, it will be while we hear a lie or contradictory things which are very clear to us. So this smiling rejection or reaction of the people while they hear the answer of Imran shows that they have a solid or clear picture about madrassa and the lessons which are being taught in it. It is not only the images of madrassa but its clear images about Muslim community. The researcher’s all questions are giving a clear image of his mind. What kind of images he has about Imran, madrassa, Imran’s father-Kareem Jabbari and so on should be analyzed.

Imran, the main character’s thoughts, activities, experiences and imaginations have great role in exhibiting the social treatment on his community. The questions which he receives from the researcher who come to meet him in jail along with ridicules and insulting approaches of police men from jail clearly depicts the social attitude towards Muslim community. The higher officials in police and judiciary simply laugh at the Imran’s answer about the lessons in madrassa. They all keep a kind of negative stereotyped answer in mind and eagerly wait to get it from Imran’s mouth while he jailed for 11/11 bomb blast in street of Mehandi. The negative stereotyped constructions in the minds of non-Muslims come in light through the conversation of a researcher who comes to interview Imran in jail. The researcher’s way of interviewing Imran and his lack of satisfaction from the answers of Imran, clearly show that the researcher has some expected answers in his mind and he just wants to hear it from Imran. This intention of the researcher comes out during his interview.

“Abruptly, he stopped and, just as I was expecting him to heave a sigh and let go of me, he asked, ‘What do they teach you at the madrasa’? Since 11/11, I had been asked this question more often than I had been asked my name. during the interrogation and the trial and even during my first weeks here I heard this question asked...and I had only one answer no matter what tone of voice my interrogators chose to employ: Madrasas teach you what they are supposed to: Holy Quran. And they all smiled in a bad way like I had told them a joke they had already heard. ‘I am just being curious Imran bhai,’... ‘How do you remember the madrassa you studied at?’ (40)”

This question which researcher asks to Imran is already asked to him in many places. But Imran received the same question in various tones from different places and Imran had the same answer with him to give to all. This incident of receiving same question from many places in different tones discloses the attention or doubt of various classes from a society on a particular community. Imran get the question from the people who construct a negative image on Muslim community. Their questions prove that the image they have given to the Muslim community is like a ‘religion which threatens the world’. The question is not limited about the teachings and lessons in madrassa, but it extended to the family members. If the family member is an *imam* or religious priest or a teacher in madrassa, the doubts and questions will be doubled and the culprit with the Muslim name will be compelled to find out answers for all those questions and doubts. As the main accused culprit of 11/11 bomb blast in Mehandi is Imran, he faces the same doubts and questions from officials and others. There are two reasons to scrutinize Imran severely. First one, Imran is from Vanity Bagh, a mohalla which is fully inhabited by Muslims and second one, Imran’s father is a priest in the local mosque of Vanity Bagh. As Imran’s father is an *imam*, the researcher questions even his identity. The researcher’s interview is like questioning the identities of all the Muslim religious priests in mosques.

The researcher who comes to conduct an interview with Imran makes all *imams* suspects in society through his

questions. Or he considers all the *imams* as religious fundamentalists who tempt the people from their community for violence and attacks. The researcher asks to Imran:

“11/11, he sighed. Such a coincidence that all tragic days have an 11 to it, isn't?”

I don't know about the other 11s. But 11/11 was no coincidence; it was how they wanted it, so that history would be easy to remember in numbers as simple as the multiplication table of one. No one goes wrong with the multiplication table one... 'Your father is a priest,' he read out from the file, as if I didn't know yet. I nodded and he appeared relieved: I was finally responding to his research. 'Was he the type...' he stopped, hesitating over the next word, and then started drawing medium-sized breasts in the air with his forefinger. 'Was he the type of person who...who...let me put in this way... a person who would appreciate what the Al-Qaeda, Taliban and people like that do?' (36-37)”

The question of researcher- “Such a coincidence that all tragic days have an 11 to it, isn't?”- is like an attempt to connect the bomb blast in Mehandi to the 9/11 bomb blast in America. The researcher is curious to know about Kareem Jabbari, the father of Imran, as he is working as the imam of the local masjid of the mohalla Vanity Bagh. He asks –“Was he the type of person who...who...let me put in this way... a person who would appreciate what the Al-Qaeda, Taliban and people like that does?”-expecting to get some answers to connect with his images or ideas about Muslim priests in his mind. The main reason to arouse such a negative image in the researcher's mind may be 9/11 bomb blast in America. But the way one whole particular community suffers because of the terrorist act of one minor section or group of the same community is unbearable. It is not fair to stamp a label on the whole community seeing the acts of a small number or minor group. Another thing is that there are many terrorist groups in different countries of the world but they are not at all being referred to any religion except the terrorist groups which bear Muslim or Arabic names. Dr. Nazrul Islam says in his book *Islam 9/11 and Global Terrorism*:

In different countries of the world there are different terrorist organizations, like IRA, LTTE, PWG, Red Army, PLO, and so on. Majority of the members of the IRA are Christians. They are not referred to as Christian terrorists. The majority of members of the LTTE are Hindus. They are not called Hindu terrorists. The members of PLO are Muslims. And they are invariably referred to as Muslim terrorists or Arab guerrillas. (3)

Anees Salim used fifteen chapters with different titles in his novel *Tales from A vending Machine*. All titles of these chapters are connected with airport. The opening chapter is named Terminal One and the last chapter is named Emergency Exit. Though the titles of chapters are connected with airport, the incidents are not fully limited to airport. The novel *Tales from A Vending Machine* is full of black humor like his second novel *Vanity Bagh*. Anees Salim depicts the hardships of a young girl who sacrifices her education for helping her family and to take care of sister's education who is of her same age. Hasina Mansoor plays different role in her life: devoted daughter and sister, blushing lover and ambitious young woman and she becomes like a vending machine working at airport for years. Hasina is not getting any positive any solace or positive treatment from shop owner and even from her own family. She is a receiving end of problems both in her work place and home. The writer fills the story with full of jokes and his humorous narration makes readers read without any tension, though they are reading the bitter incidents in the life of the heroine. Through this novel *Tales from A Vending Machine*, Anees Salim highlights many international issues and problems apart from women's hardships. Hasina's thoughts directly give reference to the post 9/11 operations of America in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the mock

drill at airport about the terrorist attack, Hasina committed a mistake with horror. While the actor in the mock drill pointed the gun between her eyebrows and shrieked ‘Allahu Akbar’, Hasina also screamed Allahu Akbar. Then she was thinking about the situation of Muslims who suffer in Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia. “I felt my blood boil, remembering how Americans and Juice had dropped naphthalene bombs on Muslims houses, pumped bullets into Muslims chests, killed my brothers in Iraq and Afghanistan, raped my sisters in Bosnia-Hetza as well as in Bosnia. The pain and pride of being Muslim made me puff up my chest and raise a clenched fist in the air.” (89)

## CONCLUSIONS

In the light Anees Salim’s novels *Vanity Bagh* and *Tales from a Vending Machin*, and the hit films *Babel* and *Vishwaroopam*, I observe how Muslims are portrayed through the films and literature in post 9/11 era and its effects on Muslim community globally, especially on Indian Muslims. The negative stereotypes in the films *Babel* and *Vishwaroopam*, and in the novels *Vanity Bagh* and *Tales from a Vending Machine* have affected and distorted the images of Muslims globally.

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