

# Deconstructing Muslim Identity: Rewriting Racialized Narratives in Post-9/11 American Fiction

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## Abstract

This article examines the notion of redefining national identity in post-9/11 American fiction. In a society in which appears a predominant racializing sensibility, especially after a horrific event like the September 11 attacks, the Muslims in America have often been constructed as people of fear and suspicion. However, contemporary Muslim-American writers have chosen to fight back. Writing is their weapon to fight back against those stereotypes and try to give the full three-dimensional Muslim life. Through the analysis of Mohsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014), as well as Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2012), this paper uncovers how these writers skillfully implement the notion of cultural hybridity, belongingness and faith, and end up changing the way Muslims are viewed in the society at large. Through the use of complex plots and characterization, these writers allow for breakdown of monolithic images that are often held of Muslims, creating room for compassion, consideration, and exploration of varying experiences within the Muslim community. While some studies have argued that fiction is just as much in a critique of racialized perceptions as anything else, this research has found that fiction becomes a catalyst for social change when considering the issues of identity, culture, and integration in today's post-9/11 America.

**Keywords:** Muslim identity, the racialized narratives, post-9/11, American fiction, stereotypes, cultural hybridity, Muslim-American voices

## 1. Introduction

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks marked an epochal moment in terms of how Muslims are imagined and pictured in the United States. The terrorist attacks and the subsequent mass homicide did not only come with a sense of immediate apprehension and horror of the unfolding events, but also spurred within the American public a rise of racialization, stereotyping, and marginalization of Muslims. This tendency has sunk firmly into many of the cracks and crevices, particularly in the media and in the public discourse. In the years following 9/11, Muslim individuals were increasingly associated with terrorism, extremism and cultural otherness, beneath which they were cast in the broader context of American culture (Nacos, 2007). In turn, the reaction of the climate of suspicion and fear is neither just reactive towards these attacks nor is it simply a consequence of the attacks, but results from the larger, longer historical phenomena of both racialization and xenophobia (Selod 2018). In this respect, Muslims were often reduced to the reductive and monolithic tropes of terrorism and religious extremism, which served to completely erase the diversity and complexity of what it means for Muslims in America.

As a response to these reductive images, American fiction also became an important platform from which to challenge such racialized images of Muslims and provide new ones, ones which did not rely on such a singularizing view of the life and experience of Muslims. The interpretative and reflective nature of fiction has the potential to transcend stereotypical boundaries and provide powerful access to what it is like to be members of an often-stereotyped group (Vidgen, & Yasseri, 2018). Fiction is one of the mediums through which fiction writers have probably escaped the pitfalls of this one-sided narrative created by mainstream media about Muslims. Many people may have created characters who weren't victims or bad guys, but fully realized, complicated people with many different motivations, ideas, and identities. Specifically, post-9/11 American fiction has become an important site of redefining the experience of Muslims, filled, in turn, with fiction that proves the heterogeneous scope of Muslim voices and identities in America (Maghbouleh, 2020). It was a needed change towards non-reductionist depictions due to the fact that the cultural-political environment after 9/11 lent credence to stereotypes that were not only too simplistic to reflect reality but were also too convenient to be remotely accurate in the context of Muslim-American lives (Hartnell, 2010).

This is one of the main objectives of the article that seeks to discuss, how post-9/11 fiction in America that has explored the area of Muslim identity, offers a chance to challenge the mainstream media that has served to racialize Muslim Americans. The images of the Muslims in post 9/11 literature were not traditional, and sometimes were destructive, and these had controlled the majority of the discussions around this aspect. Having created Muslim- American characters struggling with the questions of identity, belonging, faith, cultural dichotomy and hybridization in a dynamic, constantly changing world, the writers such as Laila Lalami, Mohsin Hamid, and

Ayad Akhtar have employed their fiction as the one giving voice and personality to the subjects of affiliation and identity in a multicultural, diverse settings. The works of the literature presented by these authors are not mere fictional bouts; they act as vehicles of social criticism and culture shock through which they give a representation to redefine the identity of Muslim-Americans in the larger cultural package.

Indeed, Muslim-Americans emerge in the literature of the post-9/11 world as characters in various ways constructed discursively for the purpose of challenging stereotypes and building a pluralistic image of Muslim life. Other scholars, such as Hamid (2007) and Akhtar (2012) have highlighted the array of the characters who are not marked by their religious or ethnic affiliation but by the struggles they have fought for, the dreams they have nourished and the psychological strengths they possess. Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is a critical study of personal and external influences upon the lead character's identity. The protagonist of the novel Changez, challenges the stereotypical Muslim character as he tries to fit in while blending his background as a Pakistani, Muslim, immigrant, in post 9/11 America. In its multi-dimensionality, this representation challenges the singular discourses of the Muslim victims and highlights the complex aspects that constitute the Muslim-American identity (Hartnell, 2010).

A new history of Muslim identity in America, finds reflection in *The Moor's Account* by Laila Lalami (2014). Lalami's novel provides a counter argument to the colonizing and racial stereotyping as it speaks through the voice of a slave who is born in America and originates from the Islamic world opens a subtle vision of the Muslim existence in America's early past. The novel highlights the fact that mainstream history of Muslim experiences remains silenced, providing a criticism of Eurocentric views of American-centered historical discussions (Lalami, 2014). Such redrawing of the past not only makes it difficult to understand the Muslim identity in America but also references long-existing yet largely ignored contributions Muslims have made to American history.

Furthermore, Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2012) explores the identity crisis faced by a young Muslim hero in America, who struggles to balance his own religious values with the secular influences of his immediate community. Just as the characters in the works of Hamid, and Lalami, Akhtar's are not simply persons with faith, they are the ones struggling with themselves and fighting their own conflicts in life. In *American Dervish*, Akhtar provides an introspective look at the inner and family processes that shape the identity of Muslims in American-Muslim communities (Akhtar, 2012). By means of these works, Akhtar questions and breaks down the idea that the Muslim is an unchanging entity, and instead, he presents the idea that the reader should look at the Muslim as a person who is involved in a continuous process of identity construction.

The significance of fiction in remaking the racialized discourses, which define Muslim identity, is beyond doubt. The literary accounts can thus constitute an avenue whereby, within the binary world of the growing polarities of Muslims as either good or bad, one would be allowed to express his or her various multiple identities that do not readily fit into a genial image. Literary fiction represents an excellent chance to study the real-life stories of the Muslim-Americans that have to both acknowledge the difficulties of being Muslim-American and deal with the social pressure to either assimilate into the mainstream American culture, or to live in the rigid notions of ethnic and religious diversity. By illustrating the richness and diversity of native characters, these authors break down the stereotype and invite a reader to explore the inner-life of 21st century Muslim-ness.

Leveraging contemporary Pakistani-American and Moroccan-American authors, this paper highlights their pivotal role in displacing the racialized Muslim (as well as the racialized post-Muslim) subject and how they have helped advance Muslim subjectivities and voices into the American vernacular culture. The changes in literary representations that have occurred since 9/11 have not only altered our view of the predominant way in which Muslims have been represented in the literature, but also helped to establish an over-arching cultural discourse of identity, belonging, and integration in American society. By demonstrating Muslim figures who are well characterized, and presented as layered personalities, these authors help their readers get to know the Muslims they may have heard about, in person or on the news, as whole.

### **Significance and Rationale of the Study**

September 11, 2001, impacted the Muslim identity as presented to the world and the tendency to racialize Muslims and or to situate them as extremists or victims. This paper dealing with the post 9/11 American fiction attempts to do a critical analysis of the method through which the writers from the Muslim-American community are trying to subjugate these stereotypes by producing alternative readings of the Muslim identities.

This is an important study because it will add to whatever discourse is occurring on a global level regarding the identity of Muslims. With references to the post-9/11 literature, this paper is intended to shed some light on the possible ways in which the portrayals of Muslim identities in Western literature may contribute or affect how people in other countries, view them. The data of the research will be helpful in changing the negative way of looking at Muslims in the world, to counter the stereotypes, and help to create a more tolerant approach to the Muslim identity.

This research can contribute to the postcolonial work since it considers the questions of identity, race, and representation in modern writing. It offers a model on how scholars as well as institutions can operate and become critical of these themes as they solidify the academic knowledge on how Muslim identity is formed within globalized societies. The study ultimately increases scholars efforts in international cultural discourses to foster unity, diversity, and proper portrayal with regard to Islam and Muslims in the world.

## 2. Literature Review

The terrorist disaster of September 11, 2001 proved, on many levels, to be a watershed not only for American politics but for the way the Muslim identity would be treated within the literary canon. After these events, the racialization of Muslims had achieved a new peak and this reality changed the ways in which Muslim-Americans were presented in all kinds of media and in writing. As scholars have noted, such representations tended to draw from a belatedly discovered "World of Tootsies" that was presented in the reflected light of alterity and violence that covered what they described as a stratification of Muslim identities (Hamid 2007). The role of the media, and especially their attention to Muslims and topic of terrorism, enhanced the exotic otherness of Muslims as an outer threat to the West and, in turn, led to the marginalization of those communities. Another issue, as shown by Evelyn Alsultany (2012) in *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* is the post-9/11 American media producing simplified complex representations, which seem heterogeneous but reinforce the racialized tropes (p. 15). An image that has been devastating to their social status and even their personal rights, that has created, in all places, a climate of suspicion and discrimination.

American fiction, and post-9/11 fiction in particular, has become an important field for challenging such racialized descriptions. Fiction has been used by authors, especially Muslim-American writers, to create counter-stories to the monolithic and reductive depictions of Muslims framed by the media and popular culture (Gonzalez-Dogan, 2021). As further evidence of more interesting expressions of Muslim identities, one finds that the characters in these literatures are multi-dimensional embodiments of their cultural, religious, and individual lives, countering any negative stereotypical portrayals of Muslims as one-dimensional caricatures. The Muslim subjectivities came right into perspective after the 9th of September attack (Hamid 2007), however, the life prism under which the attack occurred was most often violent, terrorist and culturally alienated. Second, however, such literary texts have also provided a forum for subversive interventions into such reductive stereotypes through the offer of alternative readings and interpretations.

For example, Mohsin Hamid's novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) begins with a story about a Pakistani in his early thirties, Changez, who is seeking his origins in post9/11 America. The novel explores the tension that he felt when his Muslim identity was exploited in both the inner and outer world, while facing discrimination and alienation in racial terms as a result of growing fears of Muslims on the part of a society he lived in. The protagonist then places a complex issue of how Muslims are treated as radical extremists or simply as a victim of the system, is far-reaching portrait as vast as the true reality of what Muslim-Americans are facing today. At this time, the significance of Hamid's work, according to Ramadan (2009), is exposing the plurality of Muslims and eventually calling into question the homogenization of Muslims that we see in the mainstream media. Changez's relationship with the American Dream can, therefore, be seen as a sardonic condemnation of broader social shifts in the wake of 9/11, and of a love story between an ostensive identity and national identity.

Moreover, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is one of the literary works that demonstrate how literature can provide a critical insight into the racialization of Muslim similarities. Setting forth a victim-actor character, Hamid challenges the premises of the narrative of good Muslims as violent or exotic, creating otherness. This literary approach is compatible with the postcolonial theories of representation along with Edward Said (1978) and Homi K. Bhabha (1994). Said reminds us that the Orientalism, with which he deals is particularly relevant to any discourse about the history of constructions of Muslim identity in the West. Orientalism, according to Said, is the west's propensity to position the east (or the Muslim communities) as: backward, exotic, and fundamentally different. This theoretical construct has been pivotal in constructing racialized representations of Muslims in Western literature and in the media industry (Haider 2020). Said's problem of binary opposition between West and Orient remains salient to American literature post-9/11, and particularly to representations of the Muslim Other as formed in light of Western norms and value systems.

One of the best ways to augment the conversation about Muslim-American literature is to draw on Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines hybridity as a continuum along which people try to negotiate their cultural identities within the spaces of the colonial or postcolonial encounter. Hybridity is a useful framework within which to interpret Muslim characters because it accounts for the tension between the characters' cultural background and their sense of being American in the postwar novels of the Muslim-American fiction that followed 9/11. Bhabha's hybridity is the fluidity and complexity of the construction of an identity in a globalized world where people's negotiation of multiple cultural forces is ongoing. As an example, works like *The Moor's Account* (2014) by Laila Lalami and *American Dervish* (2012) by Ayad Akhtar can be cited, where the issue of hybridity is at the center of the portrayal of the lives of Muslim-American characters faced with the need to balance their religious and cultural heritage with the requirements of the American society (Selod, & Embrick, 2013).

The example of the way in which Muslim identities are not just constructed in the modern fiction but also recreated via historical perspectives may be taken in Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*. The novel is an adaptation of the story of the first Muslim in the history of the Americas, Estebanico, a Moroccan slave, who once accompanied Spanish explorers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this context of history, Lalami upsets colonial and racial stereotypes by providing a subtle picture of Muslim identity. The novel breaks the myth about Muslim identity being coeval with modernity and, on the contrary, demonstrates its historicity and applicability in terms of defining the American environment. Re-imagining the times of early American history through the lens of a Muslim hero, Lalami overcomes Eurocentric historical accounts that encompass the history to the exclusion of other people and draws a more diverse picture of the American past.

Similarly, Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* addresses the issues of Muslim identity in the framework of the coming-of-age story. The main character of the story, Hayat, is in psychological conflict because he is trying to juxtapose his Islamic worldviews with the more

secular demands of the American world. Akhtar has written a literary piece that brings out the plight of Muslim-Americans and how they negotiate their cultural and religious conditions in the post-9/11 world, where their religion has become suspicious. The novel takes a psychological and emotional aspect of growing up in a world where an identity is questioned and stereotyped every time. The representation of Muslim characters by Akhtar does not reduplicate the common modes regarding the construction of the victimhood or an extreme libertarian voice; instead, it focuses on a more intricate account of humanizing Muslim-American life.

The ambiguity of the narrative and the geopolitical criticism in Mohsin Hamid *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* have been the subject of scholarship. Morey (2011) reads the novel as a sort of stereotyping text which not only employs but also subverts the paranoia of post-9/11, whereas Ahmed, (2021) sees the confession of Changez as a kind of narrative desire that cannot be resolved. In the case of *The Moor's Account*, Sensri, and Masri (2019) places the protagonist, Estebanico, in a category of property and labor in which his Muslim identity upset the settler's colonial discourses. *American Dervish* by Akhtar has received less critical criticism, yet Ismail, (2017) discusses how the book portrays conflict among Muslims, and looks at intergenerational trauma. When these readings are synthesized using Said and Bhabha, one may find that each of these texts undertakes a different kind of resistance: the critique of surveillance by Hamid and the historiographic recovery by Lalami and the psychic interiority by Akhtar.

Contemporary Islamic-American writers have, therefore, made post 9/11 literature an indispensable space of de-racializing the image of Muslim identity, especially with the power of autobiography. These writers defy the unified images of Muslims as either radical extremists or docile victims in greater intervals, coming up with different descriptions of Muslim-Americans, on what it is like to be a Muslim-American (Rana, 2015). The literary works by Hamid, Lalami, and Akhtar are some examples of how fiction is so needed to redefine the popular representations of what it would mean to be a Muslim in America today.

#### Theoretical Framework

This study uses a postcolonial theory, where the writings of Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha are mostly underutilized in the discussion of the same, according to how Muslims are represented in post-9/11 American fiction. Both theorists give invaluable instruments in understanding the notion of racialization and stereotyping of Muslims, especially in the light of the Western literature and media.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is a critical text that can be used to grasp the opposition and simultaneity against Muslims as another 'other' from the viewpoint of the West. According to Edward Said, the West has attempted to create and perpetuate an exotic, backward, and threatening Orient to maintain a binary opposition between Western civilization and Eastern cultures or traditions (el-Malik 2014). While there is a clear Cordoban legacy in the stereotyping of Muslims as docile, aggressive, and culturally radically different, in the contemporary media and literature there are still clear marks of the racialization of cultural identities sweeping throughout Muslim America.

Besides Said, Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity affords a supplementary approach to the study of the complexity of the Muslim-American identity. Hybridity, as explained by Bhabha, in this perspective, highlights the instability and character of cultural identity, especially for those existing in-between any two distinct cultural worlds. Bhabha, in his work, *The Location of Culture*, brings to the fore the concept of third space, the liminal space where people can strike a deal between their various identities and fight situations of definite cultural identity. The concept is especially applicable to the character of Muslim-Americans who have to live in the tension between their Islamic background and the requirements of American society (Vidgen & Yasseri, 2018). Through the exploration of the way in which Muslim-American writers depict this negotiation, the research focuses on how these characters set up a novel, hybrid identity, transforming the conventional stereotypes.

The theories of both Said and Bhabha play a fundamental role in looking at the post-9/11 literature of Muslim Americans. Although Said in *Orientalism* has given an idea of how in the Western media and in literatures the Muslim identities have been racialized, Bhabha in his concept of hybridity has been able to give a perspective through which the writers have been able to break the mould that has come up through the representation of the Muslim-American characters that break their identity when they negotiate with the same. The synergy between these two frameworks can allow further investigation of how the post-9/11 literature helps offer an alternative account of the narration, in which the Muslim-American identities are versatile, multi-faceted, and unsuitable to reductionist representation.

These frameworks are not contextual but methodological in what follows. Said's *Orientalism* opens our eyes to the way Changez is interpellated as a Muslim menace, and Bhabha's hybridity is the way of how Estebanico survives due to the process of cultural negotiation. Akhtar's *Hayat*, meanwhile, embodies the "third space" where religious and secular identifications collide. Each novel, read through these lenses, transforms abstract theory into lived critique.

### 3. Methodology

This research is qualitative and interpretive in nature and based on the analysis of three selected novels (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), *The Moor's Account* (2014), and *The American Dervish* (2012)) of post-9/11 Muslim-American writers. Such works have been selected because they critically portray Muslim characters as individuals who are trying to ascertain the socio-political processes of post-9/11 America and present the plural values of the Muslim community.

The approach to close reading has been used, which provided the opportunity to analyze certain literary devices in detail, characterization, narrative voice, symbolism, and thematic issues. Such an approach as close reading helped reveal the hidden meaning and social commentary in the texts (Tyson, 2014). Specifically, the work has compared the ways the authors formulate the protagonists, as these

characters break the stereotypes of Muslims as flat, single-dimensional beings, instead of providing the rich, multifaceted ones (Gkoutzioulis, 2024).

Thematic analysis has been used to determine the similar motives on the subject of alienation, hybridity, cultural conflict, and religious identity. These novels have wider socio-political associations, one of which is focusing on the theme of racialization and identity negotiation in post-9/11 metropolis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through these themes, the paper has discussed how marginalization, which is experienced by the characters and the efforts they make towards achieving reconciliation over various identities, undermines stories that promote dominant views about Muslims in America.

Although the research examines the three novels, one needs to note that Muslim-American lives are versatile and may not be described using only three pieces of writing. The results of the study reflect a specific literary response to racialization only, not a comprehensive study of all possible experiences of Muslims-American.

#### 4. Discussion and Analysis

The post 9/11 Muslim-American novel marks a radical transition of fiction towards the Muslim subjects, providing a layered and multi-dimensional representation of the Muslim-American reality. Unlike the poor stereotypical images that degrade and misrepresent the image of Muslims in the mass media, fiction representations present an effective way to counteract these negative stereotypes as depicted by modern Muslim-American writers. In their works, Mohsin Hamid, Laila Lalami, and Ayad Akhtar discuss the complex issues of Muslim identity. These novels emphasize the role of religion in relation to race and national identity and even deconstruct the racialized stories related to Muslims (d'Urso, A. S., & Bonilla, T. 2023).

##### ***The Reluctant Fundamentalist: Racialization and a Critique of the American Dream***

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2007) is an indictment of the racialization of the Muslim-American identity in a post-9/11 context as part of the American Dream. The hero of the novel Changez is a Pakistani born and raised in a country that had been a victim of American exploitation, gets educated in the American Princeton University, and works in a top American firm, over which he becomes more and more estranged from the values of the American way.

In his narrative, Changez's sense of disillusionment crystallizes when he recounts the alienation he experienced after 9/11: "I felt for the first time that I was a distinct entity, a 'Muslim' above all else" (Hamid, 2007, p. 109). This episode of extreme-conscious racialization is a perfect example of Orientalist logic Said (1978), in which the body of the Muslim is narrowed down to one, defining identity. The italics Hamid has used to highlight the word Muslim highlights how external control, which has been imposed on Hamid through airport search and suspicion at work, is what can be used to impose a fluid identity into monolithic thought. This change, as Morey (2011) points out, is a significant change in the protagonist, who has gone to be a model minority and a suspect subject (p. 166).

Hamid criticizes the American Dream, as it turns out to be a mechanism of exclusion and disappointment on the part of Muslim-Americans in the post-9/11 era (Morey, 2011). The rejection of the American Dream by Changez is based on the occurrence of the events surrounding 9/11 that bring with them a racialized identity on his character, with the issue being viewed in a reactive light due to the fact that Changez is now considered a suspect within American society.

Hamid employs the internal struggle and the opposition to the mainstream understanding of Muslim identity in Changez that enables transgression of the outright view of Muslims as Islamic extremists and terrorists. Instead of being a faceless terrorist or an obedient victim, Changez is introduced as a complex character struggling with the issues of belonging and loyalty as well as self-identity (Peek, 2011). By using the story of Changez, Hamid criticizes the racialization of Muslim identities, implying that the simplistic identification of people, along with the accompanying simplistic labeling, does not show the full extent of individual perception. This corresponds to the postcolonial theory, and specifically to that created by Edward Said (1978) in his *Orientalism*, the process of Othering and alienation of the East, in this case, Muslims. The story of Hamid is almost a resistance to this reductionist account, the essence of which lies in individual experience rather than stereotypical identity appellations (Hamid, 2007).

##### ***The Moor's Account: Reclaiming History and Challenging Colonial Stereotypes***

Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014) is a fascinating experiment in historical fiction as it asks us to bear in mind the life of that first Muslim to set foot in America, a man known in history as Estebanico, a Moorish slave accompanying the explorers a millennium ago. In giving voice to a figure from the distant past, much of whose life has been crossed out of the broad accounts of American history, Lalami undercuts colonial and racial stereotypes with which the memory of that history has been assaulted. A return to Muslims is the central concerns of the novel, the Eurocentric portrayal of which began to reduce it to the margins of history; where Muslim voices, once non-Christian non-European voices, are no longer silent in the American imagination, and America no longer means only what a white man thinks.

Lalami is a historical revisionist in her narrative approach as a key to her denunciation of colonialism and the racialization process. The readers are provided with the eye of Estebanico, which helps to complicate the conventional concept of American history that mostly overlooks the journeys of discovery of the Muslims and people of other marginalized identities. Estebanico's narrative voice directly challenges colonial erasure: "We were nothing to them, and they were everything to us" (Lalami, 2014, p. 124). This lack of acknowledgment is what Bhabha (1994) refers to the so-called colonial stereotype, in which the colonized would be made visible as labor and invisible as humanity at the same time. The acknowledgment of the first-person plural 'we' by Lalami, where Muslims and

Indigenous people are united and placed together historically, forms a hybrid historiography which Said's *Orientalism* cannot hold.

The fact that Estebanico is a slave and a Muslim simultaneously shows that the colonial racialization is pre- and post-9/11 Islamophobic. The hybrid subjectivity echoes the long *durée* of racial formation (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006) and the modern equivalents reinforce the idea of the enduring nature of the subject (Ghufran, 2020).

The story of Estebanico as a Muslim in a European country reveals the activities of colonialism that employed the subordination of the other and the racialized thinking that the colonizers held in their worldview. The work done by Lalami can be considered literary resistance against the oblivion of the Muslim cultures that seems to be happening in the awesome memory of the American culture by offering a more accurate, inclusive history of the country. It is in line with the reasoning by the other scholars, like Bhabha (1994), who insists that hybridity is the revolt against the legacy of colonialism that leads to the creation of the newest cultural discourses and reconstruction of identities that were constrained by the historical oppression.

Lalami speaks out the voice of a Muslim character in early America and thus breaks the monolithic representation of Muslims, only as current entities entangled in post-9/11 racialization. Rather, she highlights the long history of Muslim identities in America, resisting colonial and racial stereotyping that has long been used to define the Western perceptions of Muslims and their right to reside in the world.

### ***The American Dervish: Keys to navigate between Internal and External***

In *The American Dervish* (2012), Ayad Akhtar attempts to deliver the story of coming-of-age around the figure of Hayat, a young boy of Muslim faith who lives in suburban America. The novel presents a conflict, where in Hayat thinks, as to whether he was a good Muslim. The story of Hayat allows Akhtar not only to comment on the external racialization of Muslims in a post-9/11 America but also on the inner conflicts of the Muslim communities in terms of religion, identity, and cultural integration. The narrative of Hayat follows through with the problems of having a religious and cultural identity that does not relate to the prevailing secular culture in the world he occupies.

Akhtar documents another and a far more complex picture of assimilation and belonging: The novel captures the tension between American individualism and piety, and the conflicting loyalties Muslims-Americans feel between their culture and religion and the dominant American culture. That is, *American Dervish* may be seen as a rebuke of both the external racialization of Muslims and the internal split among that group based upon perceived religious and faith differences. Hayat's internalization of religious authority proves to be a source of significant discomfort when he concedes: "I had begun to think of myself as a kind of God, a judge of who was a good Muslim and who was not" (Akhtar, 2012, p. 247). This adolescent hubris introduces an idea of mimicry of Bhabha (1994) that has gone wrong: Hayat imitates the piety of Mina but gives birth to the excess of blasphemy that ultimately estranges him among the members of his community. Unlike the external racialization that Changez faces, the crisis that Hayat faces is internal and shows how the Muslim-American identity is both policed internally and externally. Akhtar thereby outlines the psychic traumas being applied on a community that has to carry out its Americanness yet retain its Islamic legitimacy at the same time.

In fact, it is an interesting observation that the Muslims from America have clearly realized that identity has been produced by an outside community pressure, thus making the concept of assimilation and belongingness complex and multi-faceted (Cobb, 2017).

Hayat's struggle within and his search for his way in the secular world acts as a reflection of the larger struggle Muslim-American youth are facing to define a way for themselves. The novel shows that being raised as a Muslim in America is not only about external expressions of discrimination, but an inward, religious negotiation. It is giving more perspective to the nature of Muslim Identity which is impervious to any appreciation on the common mindset. Through his analysis of the complexities of religious and cultural identity among Muslim communities Akhtar reveals the contours of the experiences of Muslim-Americans, bringing a deeper understanding and a more compassionate visualization of those who must struggle to stand firm in their faith even within a secular society.

The post-9/11 novels of American Muslims have become a medium for confronting, questioning and countering the production of racialized and stereotyped Muslim identity that has pervaded the media and popular culture. In producing these types of works, these authors aim to challenge this type of singular, homogenized portrayal of Muslims with each attempting to share the alternative story in which it becomes evident that Muslims are not that or this along any of the mate lines of discourse (Peek 2011). Their engraving, their fine handwriting, their Muslim stereotypes: a novel that holds out to reveal what has already been, letting the reader see Muslims as people with agency, culturally hybrid, as engaged in a complex negotiation of identity in a multicultural society. By doing so, they contribute to the broader project of redefining the ways in which Muslim-Americans are seen by the wider community, as well as the struggle to emerge from a state of racialization and marginalization that still holds sway over their lives.

## **5. Findings**

Analysis of post-9/11 Muslim-American fiction has raised two important critical questions that show the radicalizing nature of literature as we proceed with the re-working of Muslim-American symbolic iconography. The scrutiny of Mohsin Hamid's, Laila Lalami's and Ayad Akhtar's work provides ample evidence of this:

### **1. Narrative Diversification:**

The big shifts in post 9/11 Muslim-American fiction is the desertion of the stereotypical ways in which Muslims feature in most of these narratives-as terrorists, or victims. Moreover, prior to 9/11, the caricature of Muslim characters tended toward the binary or singular

narrative that denied the fault line of the Muslim story and its individuals and their correlating experiences. The development of literature after 9/11 has, however, taken a more subtle approach. The characters of these novels, although fighting against the social biases, also have to suffer their internal crisis of beliefs, customs, and belonging. As an example, in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid introduces Changez as a hero whose internal struggle has to do not with his innate motives of rejecting or questioning the West, but rather with his increasing disappointment with the American Dream, as well as his racialization. In a similar way, Lalami, in *The Moor's Account*, reveals the internal depth of personality of Estebanico, and thus readers get to read about a character in history that is not a colonial stereotype but an oratorical representation of the marginalized, the Muslims in American history. This diversification of the stories is a great transformation from the past depictions, as the characters are now featured in their hardships, and their victories mirror the complexity of the Muslim-American experience.

## 2. Subversion as an essential part of Monolithic Representations:

An important insight gained through this analysis is the active deconstruction of post-9/11 literature's monolithic representation of the Muslim identity. In history, there was this tendency to portray Muslim characters in one specific prism, be it influenced by the geopolitical environment of the era, and it was in the definition of either the victim or the aggressor. Nevertheless, this simplified description can currently be disputed by Muslim-American writers whose stories reflect the range Muslims life and their contradictions. The multiplicity of experiences of Muslim communities is expressed through Changez, Estebanico, and Hayat, demonstrating their diversity, as well as stories based on the experiences of alienation and collision of cultures, personal development, and self-discovery. Focusing on the fact that their characters are unique, authors such as Hamid, Lalami, and Akhtar combat the homogenization of Muslims in popular culture and position them as complex and more than mere religion and ethnicity. The protagonists of the novels are complex characters whose distinctive mattering centred on the lines of non-religion and non-ethnicity. The variety of representation not only permeates the story, but leads the reader to experience the reality of Muslim-Americans and call upon their people to emerge from the percepts that have long been dominated the conversation.

## 3. Hybrid Identities:

The third major result of this analysis is that what we may call hybrid identities are dominant in the post-9/11 fiction about Muslims, about Americans, and about Muslims in America. The characters of Muslim-Americans are depicted as overwhelmed by the tensions between their history and their effort to make a place in the American world. The key connection that this theme of hybridity has to the deconstruction of racially orientated stories revolves around the importance of focusing on the fact that identity is complex and constantly in flux due to the nature of globalization. The protagonists of these novels are always on the cusp, not only in geographical location, but also because of the temporal disorientation they must confront (they had to live in America in a different culture and religion). For example, in *American Dervish*, Hayat is struggling within himself over his religious values from his upbringing versus his secular values in an American society, struggling to make sense out of himself in a matrix of cultures and religions. Likewise, in *The Moor's Account*, the construction of Muslim identities is demonstrated by the fact that Estebanico is a Muslim slave in early America, which is the result of not only the colonial interactions but also his own survival in a new place as well. Such images of the hybrid identities are critical to the concept of singular, unchangeable Muslim identity and rather highlight the complex work of how people struggle in negotiating their identity in a multicultural society.

The synthesis of these analyses shows that the post-9/11 Muslim-American fiction can be viewed as a decolonial praxis. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the confession of Changez who, in response to the question about his recent actions, admits that he was a modern-day janissary (Hamid, 2007, p. 116) reveals the complicity of the elite Muslims in the American empire, which Said can only capture with Orientalism. The hybridity of Bhabha is also essential, in this case: Changez is not just Orientalized but has to negotiate his identity agonistically between Princeton and Lahore. Similarly, the history of colonialism revisited by the Estebanico by Lalami, called by the author twice born (p. 3), is reconstituted through the third space of existence, namely that of survival, a project, called by Sensri, and Masri (2019) a counter-archival one. Lastly, when Akhtar's Hayat, who believes that he is a sort of God (p. 247), it proves that the process of racialization is internalized before it is imposed outward. In combination, these writings testify that fiction is a way to unravel stereotypes not through providing positive representations of the same but through anticipating in advance the violence and complexity of the identity construction process itself.

## 6. Conclusion

American fiction written after 9/11 has been central to the deconstruction of the racialized discourse of Muslims as people. These works of literature represent a possible departure from the stereotypical Muslims of being either radical or a victim by giving alternative accounts of how Muslims are portrayed through the contribution of authors such as Hamid, Lalami, and Akhtar. As such these novels (Mohsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account* (2014), and Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2012)) provide an opportunity to confront the lived experience of the Muslim-American community in a form that enables its readers to learn more about them, understand and empathize with them because of the multi-dimensionality and complexity of their characters. By the same token, they disrupt the prevalent patterns that have traditionally defined the attitude towards Muslims and create a chance in which each person can be accepted and understood in the United States.

With the ongoing development of American fiction, the voices of Muslim-American writers are still necessary to reform the ways people discuss the issues, subvert the notion of racialized portrayal, and develop an inclusive vision of the American identity. Relating their

experiences, these authors do not only offer a diverse angle on the phenomenon of enslavement of the Muslim, experienced in the process of acculturation and integration in a multicultural society; they also contribute towards a greater cultural discourse of identity, belonging and integration in relation to a multicultural society. Thus, the form of post-9/11 American fiction can be considered an act of resistance and social activism in which a more realistic, plural, and human representation of the Muslim subject in the new millennium is proposed by American fiction.

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### **Authors' contributions**

Dr. Akhter Habib Shah was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, theoretical framework, and critical analysis of the primary texts. Dr. Faroze Ahmad Chopan contributed to the literature review, textual analysis, and drafting of the manuscript. Both authors jointly participated in refining the arguments, revising the manuscript, and interpreting the findings. The authors contributed equally to this study and have read and approved the final manuscript.

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