

## Neo-orientalist Tropes and Essentialist Othering of Muslims in Masood’s The Bad Muslim Discount

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### *Abstract*

This research explores the current trends in the representation of Muslims in contemporary Pakistani fiction by tracing out neo-orientalist elements in *The Bad Muslim Discount* (2021). While it is observed that orientalism reconfigured into new modes in the aftermath of the massive events including 9/11, the war on terror and rising Islamophobia; the role that literature coming from Muslim natives played in the perpetuation of aversion towards Muslims is an ongoing debate. Therefore, it requires a critical analysis of contemporary Pakistani fiction to identify the influence of this prevalent narrative in the portrayal of Pakistani people and their culture. The present research, through Behdad and Williams’ concept of neo-orientalism (2010), endeavours to understand to what extent Pakistani fiction is contributing to circulate a reductive image of Islam. The analysis reveals that it has become a crucial site for reinforcing neo-oriental themes as it encapsulates exoticization, self-othering, and essentialist representation of Pakistani Muslims. Furthermore, it unveils the employment of Oriental gender stereotypes to strengthen the representation of men as fanatical and immune to change while there is a persistent image of victimized veiled women.

Keywords: Neo-Orientalism, Othering, Islamophobia, Orientalism, Muslim representation, Pakistani fiction

### **1. Introduction**

Neo-orientalism is a contemporary shift in the manifestation of the Orientalist mindset. It is concerned with the representation of the Orient having the lens placed on Muslims in particular. For centuries, the Orient had been an object of fascination and fetishization for Western intellectuals and excursionists who contrived the self-serving image of the Orient. The construction of the Orient included “making statements about it, authorizing views about it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said, 1978, p.03). It is the main concern of Said’s Orientalism which delineates the process of Western discourse construction and its binary mode of representation of “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or

the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said, 1978, p.01). It was based on the speculation that “the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself” (Said, 1978, p.283).

The oriental discourse metamorphosized after 9/11 into an extreme form. “The old Orientalist image of a distant despotic, primitive and static religion was imperceptibly recoded into a new technologically produced image of a violent, oppressive and fanatic religion dangerously too close to the West” (Mutman, 2019, p.256). Behdad and Williams (2010) refer to it as neo rather than new to indicate its link with old orientalism as well as the emergence of new trends in oriental representation. Representation can be understood as a significant process in which “meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (Hall, 2020, p.74). Neo-orientalism is “a mode of representation that, while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of othering” which is perspicuous in its assumption of the veil as a symbol of gender oppression. Its portrayal of Muslims is “monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other” (Behdad and Williams, 2010, p.293). It is reflected in its essentialist depiction of Muslims which is dehumanizing. It results in the othering of Muslims as regressive, fanatic, and nefarious in contrast to everything that the West stands for. As stereotyping of gender is foundational to orientalist strategy, Muslim women are put forward as victims of their male counterparts and religious precepts.

While European men were behind classic orientalism chiefly, neo-orientalists are usually native so-called intellectuals who, based on self-proclaimed authenticity, write flawed narratives about their communities. These narratives gather more readership as they “feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge” (Dabashi, 2006). They commoditize their own ethnicities and indigenous heritage for capitalistic gains. By depicting “Islam as a source of oppression”, their writings marginalize the Muslim community “as inherently different and threatening” which leads to the amplification of currently rising Islamophobia which is the “dominant mode of prejudice” against Muslims (Morey, 2018, p.97). Amidst this, the emergence of oriental themes in fiction coming from Muslim writers “serves to further marginalize, silence, and oppress women by demonizing Muslim women, erasing significant historical-political contexts, misrepresenting and oversimplifying the question of the veil” (Nazari, 2022, p.01).

Pakistani fiction in English constitutes similar orientalist themes and images which must be interpreted in its socio-historical context. As a product of post-colonial heritage, the voices that emerged from it embodied the themes of nationalism, cultural identity, and resistance. However, the critical analysis of contemporary Pakistani literature uncovers a completely different scenario. Instead of reclaiming the

power and debunking old oriental stereotypes, Pakistani fiction produced by “authentic natives” seems to reinforce the essentialist image of the Pakistani community under the pretence of indigenous representation (Mutman, 2019, p.258). The exotic flavour in these narratives “renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery” (Huggan, 2001, p.13). Through this double marginalization by Western and native writers, the Orient is silenced again which substantiates the concern as Spivak (1995) exclaims; Can the Subaltern speak?

This research critically analyzes a Pakistani novel; *The Bad Muslim Discount* (2021) by Masood to explore the themes of Muslim representation and othering through orientalist stereotypes. *The Bad Muslim Discount* is a story about Pakistani and Iraqi Immigrants residing in America. Muslims who practice religion are portrayed as violent, hypocritical and fanatic and Islamic teachings as suffocating and conservative. Fundamentalist ideals are shown as infused into the native regions of these immigrants. The veil is ridiculed as a sign of female subjugation. The theme of terrorism is revoked by showing the character’s inclinations towards it. Western agencies are there to rescue people from their malicious nature.

#### 1.1. Thesis Statement

The selected text *The Bad Muslim Discount* displays the propensity for Orientalizing Muslims by contextualization the narrative in a familiar discourse of extremism. Masood’s *The Bad Muslim Discount* (2021) presents the lives of Pakistani and Iraqi immigrants living in America. The practising Muslim men are presented as violent, and extremists in the texts. The claim of women’s oppression centres upon the enforcement of the veil. Muslims are essentialized through stereotyping of men and women. Therefore, this research attempts to unmask the orientalist strategies underlying the representation of Muslims in these texts. The identification of novel modes of othering is substantial in laying the ground for its counter-discourse.

#### 1.2. Research Objectives

1. To explore the presence of neo-oriental elements in *The Bad Muslim Discount*.
2. To analyze the othering of Muslims in the selected text.

#### 1.3. Research Questions

1. What elements of neo-orientalism are present in *The Bad Muslim Discount*?
2. How are Muslims represented as “others” in the selected texts?

## 2. Orientalist discourse and emerging trends

Post-colonialism chiefly addresses issues related to formerly colonized nations such as “Orientalist discourse, loss of culture, identity, ethnicity, oppression and their portrayal in the modern era” (Shafak, 2014, p.355). Apart from inquiring into the challenges of representation, it endeavours to understand the nexus of “imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices” as well as its impact on discourse construction (Ashcroft et al., 1995, p.01; Ivison, 2022). However, it is not without its challenges as it struggles to encapsulate the complexity of indigenous culture, ambiguities in colonial legacy and heterogeneity of identities. The colonial domination persisted in a dangerous form, “neo-colonialism”, which is exercised “through economic and monetary means” (Kwamah, 1965, p.ix). Moreover, Post-colonial literature can turn marginality into a “valuable intellectual commodity” in the context of today’s “globalized commodity culture” (Huggan, 2001, p.viii). It functions as a “site of cultural control” which marginalizes the “native” by placing him “under the sign of the Other” (Ashcroft, 1995, p.07). English Department has long served as an instrument which established the “hegemony of English culture worldwide” (Klages, 2017, p.132) based on binary logic. As Western discourse is Eurocentric, English as a language imported the same worldview with it which is problematic. It is reflected in the writings of postcolonial writers who in the process of cultural translation, they mediate “the international trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (Appiah, 1992, p.149).

Said (1978) delineates how “representations and modes of perception” can be used as colonial powers’ tools to keep colonized subservient (McLeod, 2000). Orientalism, as a discursive strategy, was used by European cultures to construct the Orient. “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” (Orientalism, 1978, p.01). By association with essentialist stereotypes, the Orient was othered as “a place of mystery and exoticism”; based on the sense of superiority it curates Europe as the self, the familiar one while ostracizing the East as exotic, bizarre (Klages, 2017, p.132). Instead of dismantling this essentialist view about the East, postcolonial literature can fall prey to this tradition and go on to produce new modes of othering. Behdad and Williams (2010) point out the Muslim writers’ contribution to the dissemination of “distorted knowledge” about Muslims (Kerboua, 2016, p.22). Speaking with “the voice of authenticity, nativity, orientalized oddity”, these intellectuals take it upon themselves “to package the atrocities taking place in their countries of origin” and partake in a craftier manner to strengthen Western ideals under the pretence of putting up resistance against “localized tyranny” (Dabashi, 2006). Regardless of their ethnicity or religious associations, they are “English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay, 1835, p.430). Meticulously assembled, their

narratives display a “clear preference for a western cultural and political takeover” (Keshavarz, 2007, p.03). The paradox lies in their dependence on orient for identity and ancestry while seizing the voice and platform as they go on to take full advantage of their position in terms of image construction and literary representation (Lau, 2009).

Consequently, the dispersal of this generalized image gave rise to Islamophobia which is the assumption that “something within Islam” invokes such unrefined behaviour as “cultural Muslimness produces a disposition to terrorism, extremism, oppression, subversion and sexual dysfunction” (Kundnani, 2019, p.15). The old image of Islam was reconfigured into a violent, misogynist, monolithic, frantic and despicable form of paganism (Mutman, 2019; Kumar 2012; Kidwai, 2001). Women’s representation in it is based on the dichotomy of passive victimhood or a femme fatale; they are either presented as seductresses or veiled victims in need of Western liberation (Mehdid, 1993; Kahf, 1999). It is reflected in these writings as there is an evident preference for topics such as sensational abuse, honour killings and violence. The image of oppressed veiled women is a recurrent trope which substantially justifies foreign intervention in the Muslim world (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (2003) is significant for its fixation on the veil which is the predominant theme of neo-orientalist discourse. The text inculcates it as a signifier which recapitulates the oppression, submissiveness, docility, and backwardness of Muslim women altogether. It is a blend of specific cliches associated with Muslim women including underage marriage, sexual abuse, virginity, and polygamy (Nazari, 2022). Fitzpatrick (2010) opines that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2010) and *In the Rose Garden of Martyrs* (2005) reaffirm the images of the Orient as timeless, irrational, and inferior through simplifying complex historical processes and constructing ahistorical narratives. *Islam’s Maps for lost lovers* construct an extreme and reductive image of Islam. Islam is blamed for restricting Muslim women’s freedom. Muslim men are presented as fundamentalists and sadists who use religion to their benefit in keeping women subservient. Muslim representation is accomplished through generalizations, typecasting and painting Islam as isolationist religion that discourages congenial ties with people from other communities (Sarfraz, 2013).

### **3. Research Methodology**

This is qualitative research which probes into the representation of Muslims in a Pakistani novel, *The Bad Muslim Discount*, through the perspective of Behdad and Williams’ theory of Neo-orientalism (2010). The selected text is critically analyzed through McKee’s textual analysis (2003) in which he describes the text as “something we can make

meaning from” (p.04). “When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (p.05). The interpretation depends on the contextual cues including socio-historical nuances.

#### **4. Neo-orientalism in The Bad Muslim Discount.**

The textual analysis of the selected text reveals that neo-orientalist thought has seeped into Pakistani fiction. Although old oriental stereotypes are all-pervasive, new stereotypes are also discernable. Muslims are highlighted as regressive, unchanging, and vicious which is similar to the picture drawn in old oriental texts. But few things have taken on novel form such as the meaning of the veil, the distinction between good Muslims and Bad Muslims and the association of Islam with Terrorism and crimes specific to women. The stronghold of Orientalism is not over but it has transformed itself into novel strains. Although new themes and tropes have emerged in Muslim representation, the old oriental stereotypes have not loosened their grip. Religious people are portrayed as conservatives who relish violence. Gender-related stereotypes about Muslim men as oppressors, violent, fanatic, intolerant, sex maniacs and Muslim women as oppressed, uneducated, and passive and their objectification as sex objects stand at the core of the text. Neo-orientalism and gender have a deep connection as the essentialization of Muslim women as oppressed by their men is used as a justification by the West to initiate neo-imperial activities in Muslim countries and the selected text contributes to it just like any other neo-orientalist text.

##### **4.1. Reconfiguration of the Trope of the Veil as a Sign of Oppression.**

The bad Muslim discount redeploys the stereotypical image of the veil. In the eye of classic orientalists, it meant the mystery of female life in Muslim Oriental regions. It signified Harem and the concealed enigmatic parts of the Muslim lifestyle and female sexuality. Orientalists’ attempt to unveil the Muslim women symbolized his desire to see what is hidden behind the fabric that covers Muslim Women. But neo-orientalism signals a shift in what the veil means to a Western voyager. Over the course of years, the veil has come to emblemize all that is wrong with Muslim Orient. Veil’s representation operates as a signifier which partakes in the construction of concepts such as masculinity, femininity, and sexuality in the Muslim world. The veil is extensively used as a metaphor for the social barrier, invisibility, and powerlessness of women from Muslim regions. It is perceived to be the failure to modernize and lack of female agency which is misleading. Its representation is based on a binary logic that heightens the orientalist distinction between Western freedom and Muslim oppression. There is an endorsement of the idea that Muslim women opt for hijab/veil under religious or family pressure

against their will. Hijab is presented as synonymous with women's subjugation, nullification of basic rights, and patriarchal violence.

In *The Bad Muslim Discount*, Masood exhibits this proclivity through the character of Azza/Safwa. She is a stand-in for Muslim women, who are veiled victims, in need of Western liberation. Through her character, the text exemplifies neo-orientalism's fixation on the veil. "Once Azza ran out of the house without her niqab for some reason. I can't even remember why she did it. He locked her in a room and didn't feed her for three days. (Masood, 2021, p.259)" She is controlled by her father and compelled to take on hijab which limits her agency. Here veiling is not a willful choice but a violent implementation. Failure to observe this practice can evoke physical assault from male family members. As "Orientalism makes assumptions about gender" (McLeod, 2000, p.45), Muslim men are portrayed as violent and oppressors while Muslim women are deprived of their freedom as a result of oppression. Safwa's notion of freedom complies with neo-orientalist claims that the Western world offers women independence and freedom that the Islamic community has failed to offer. Stifled by oppressive restrictions imposed by her father and religio-cultural practices, she aspires to break free. Her journey to gain that freedom begins with casting away her veil. This gesture insinuates that the attainment of freedom requires the ostracization of the veil. The veil is shown to have a connection with the loss of freedom, a hindrance to liberation and the assertion of autonomy over her life. It is important to consider how the niqab has been mentioned in connection to multiple things simultaneously. It is implied to be responsible for the absence of choice for Muslim women so they could live their lives how they deem fit for themselves. Not only that her father is snatching her freedom away by imposing a veil on her but the whole society is responsible for it. As literature is a sociocultural construct and reflects the reality of society of which it is a product, the character of Safwa does not stand isolated either. It has broad socio-cultural implications as it is meant to represent the lives of all those Muslim Women for whom freedom is forbidden altogether.

Although hijab is a symbol of modesty and chastity, in the description of Safwa it is suggested otherwise. From the perspective of Anvar, one of the two main protagonists, she is portrayed as promiscuous. "She entered the prayer hall wearing a full niqab, a black, flowing garment with a veil that covered everything but her pale green eyes. It was meant to protect her modesty. Her exposed eyes, however, were not modest" (Masood, 2021, p.184). The text encapsulates the paradox of Muslim women's representation. Safwa is represented as an oppressed, docile woman and at the same time, as a seductress whose eyes are reviling her immodesty. The text adapts a scornful tone in her representation as the veil is a symbol of modesty, but Safwa's hijab has failed to conceal her immodesty. This also infers the hypocritical aspect of the situation as it creates the conflict between the modesty of the veil

and the immodesty of the woman wearing it. In the end, Safwa liberates herself from the strict reigns of oppression by casting Hijab aside when she moves to another place. “She was going to leave her phone behind, ditch the niqab and abandon her email accounts” (Masood, 2021,p.326). The veil is contextualized in such a way that enhances the stereotypical image of Islam as it is depicted to be enforced on Muslim women against their will.

#### 4.2. Association of Fanaticism and Violence with Muslimhood.

The Bad Muslim Discount brandishes Muslims as conservatives, with an inherent tendency to fanatic conduct. “The Orient is not just different; it is oddly different-unusual, fantastic, bizarre” (Mcleod, 2000, p.44). The cultivation of mindsets that are prone to violence is associated with religious teachings. It promotes the belief that violence is an inseparable part of the local culture of peripheral areas. Muslims’ depiction in this particular manner imparts the neo-orientalist belief that they are a community that favours violence and narrow-mindedness over concord and progressive thinking. It is accomplished through the character of Qais whom the narrator introduces as a zealot backed up by his behaviour in certain situations. “Qais’s behavior was strange, but not entirely bizarre by the standards of his community. If there is another group of people that sweats the small stuff as profusely as Muslims do, I have not come across them” (Masood, 2021, p. 216). He indulges in an argument with Anvar and speculates whether the meat is halal or haram during his distribution of flyers for a food truck. This is used to support the claim of Muslims’ eccentricity which further stigmatizes the whole community.

Most of the religious characters are presented as fanatics in In the Company of Strangers. They go to extreme lengths to implement their personal ideology. This narrative is construed through the inculcation of a terrorist group. The leader is an encapsulation of a culture of intolerance and bigotry. Mir Rabiullah is accountable for the targeted assassination and ceaseless suicide bombings which is a daily ritual for him. There is an instance of his impulse to exterminate Ali when he resisted partaking in the sinister plan.

His fingers itched to grasp the dagger sheathed around his waist. He yearned to behead this man, to sit on his chest, and bring his dagger down on his throat again and again until he felt the delicate tendons of the neck slicing, and finally the clunky sound of the vertebrae snapping (Khan, 2019, p.224).

This demonic portrayal extends over to marginalize the essence of a whole population which is reductionist in nature. Killing people is rendered to be his primal instinct. Unable to curb his rage, he relishes violence. The image created through this description depicts a fanatic man who is on the verge of madness. As the world is taken over by a



storm of Islamophobia, embedding terrorism as the key ingredient of Pakistani society is substantial in misconstruing a narrative about Muslims.

#### 4.3. Primitive and Regressive Nature of the Orient (Timeless Orient).

The text falls prey to the stereotype of the Orient as an entity trapped in ancient times. “The Orient exists as a timeless place, changeless and static, cut off from the progress of Western history” (McLeod, 2000, p. 44). It regards Islam as a backward religion which is unsuitable for a modern progressive world. The protagonist of *The Bad Muslim* ponders over the old Islamic tradition negatively. He mocks the return of Muslims to the old ways of living to achieve the grandeur of their earlier times.

In order to improve their fortunes, Muslims needed to regain God’s favor, and they could do that only by practicing the faith as it had been practiced by the Prophet and his Companions in medieval times. A return to the way things were done before would surely bring a return to the glory that had come before (Masood, 2021, p.20).

The text elucidates the practice of Islam in medieval times to assert that it belongs to the Past. Backsliding to the earliest customs would bring back the long-lost splendour of Islamic rulers and preachers who promised it in their long sermons on religion and politics.

The use of miswak is also derided as a practice specific to primordial times which makes it absurd to return to it when the methods of hygiene have been updated.

What chemical formula could compete with such a divine endorsement? When my mother tried to get us to use miswak sticks, my father asked her if she wanted to sell our car and buy a camel instead. After all, he said, a camel was what the Prophet used to get around. (Masood, 2021, p.20)

The miswak is used as a symbol of the primitive practices of Islam. By calling the usage of miswak as regressive as the use of camel for transportation, it is declared that Islamic traditions are prehistoric and it is nonsensical to bring them back. Its usage is associated with regression and deterrent to progress.

#### 4.4. Honor crimes, A Muslim problem.

The orientalist saviour complex has succeeded in securing its place in the neo-oriental discourse. The issue of women's emancipation substantially constitutes labelling Islam as a root cause of Honor crimes. It is a form of violence that predates Islam but the cultural and Historical factors lying at the foundation of its genesis are completely disregarded. By accrediting Muslims as its harbingers, Islamophobic discourse brandishes Muslims as ruthless beings, indifferent to the value of life. By

presuming the dominance of animalistic instinct in Muslims, neo-orientalists take it upon themselves to unfetter the victims from the presumed shackles of Islam. Honor crimes are portrayed as behaviour that emerges from the tradition or culture of a specific community. Although it has multiple implications, this crime is linked to Muslims' regressive nature. Abu Fahd coerces his daughter to marry Qais because of the word he gave him. Not fulfilling this promise could taint his honour and he is willing to sacrifice his daughter's life for the sake of it. There is an instance of him giving verbal threats to Safwa to take her life.

I should've thrown you out when you were born. I should have killed your mother when I found out the truth," he said. "But I just pretended not to know. I loved her too much. This is the result. Only dishonor and misery comes from weakness." (Masood, 2021, p.256).

Safwa's existence is the reminder of her mother's extramarital affair and Abu Fahd resents her for that. He regrets not killing his wife when he found out that the newborn child was not his. The fact that he associates sparing his wife's life with his weak side is problematic as he assumes that killing her would make him a brave man. On another occasion, he mentions a woman who was killed to save the family's honour. "There was a man in Afghanistan I knew who found out his daughter was sleeping with a boy in the neighborhood; he shot them both in the head and then he shot himself as well" (Masood, 2021, p.307). Another image related to domestic violence can be seen in the text. Safwa's father mentions this instance as exemplary behaviour in order to justify his murderous intent. He links this incident to the bravery of a father who murdered his offspring to rescue the family honor.

The bad Muslim discount reinforces the same stereotype when Abu Fahd, an Iraqi immigrant living in San Francisco attacks Anvar, whom he considers to be in an affair with his daughter. The police investigating the incident classify it to be an essential part of the Muslim world. "they're saying it is an attempted honor killing. The kind of thing that goes on in your part of the world." (Masood, 2021, p.362). Instead of debunking it, Anvar laughs it off by emphasizing his association with the West. This stereotyping reaffirms that the perception of Muslims is predominantly centred upon the oriental binary that links tribalism with Islam and civilization with the West. This liaison fortifies the marginalization of a whole community.

#### 4.5. Exotic Representation of Pakistani Culture and Food.

The Bad Muslim Discount exoticizes Pakistani food through the inculcation of strong smells and flavours. "The thing that surprises you when you enter a Pakistani home after a long absence is the smell" (p.231). This smell is a symbol of Pakistani people's obsession with food. The text points it out as something problematic and reprehensible. It insinuates that the whole life of Pakistani people revolves around food.

“The aroma of desi food is a problem...They sit beside innocent civilians on subways and buses and assault their noses with memories of old curry” (Masood, 2021, p.231). Through the depiction of food that has oppressive smells, Pakistani food is marginalized. For Western people, this smell is brutal. Its portrayal as suffocating supports the idea that anything associated with Pakistani people is stifling for cultured inhabitants of the West. “My parents’ house always smells of saffron and lemons” (Masood, 2021, p.231). The description invokes an image which exoticizes Pakistani culture. Furthermore, there is an incessant reference to other things such as Paan, “the thick wad of spices, wrapped in a betel nut leaf that was held together with slaked lime” (Masood, 2021, p.260).

In addition to this, the text mentions regional music to create a mesmerizing aura. “A ghazal was playing when I got home. Haunting notes of an old song filtered out from an open window into the night’s pleasantly perfumed air, scented by Ma’s precious jasmynes” (Masood, 2021, p.67). A Ghazal is a poem about love and loss which epitomizes nostalgic gloom. “The haunting notes” implies that Eastern music contains some kind of supernatural or bewitching inclination. It insinuates that something eerie, like entrapped ghosts of memory, is overpowering the listener’s mind. Jasmine symbolizes oriental feminine beauty and chastity. The text mentions multiple objects to exoticize Pakistani culture including, “takht— a large, low wood bench covered with a bedsheet.” (Masood, 2021, p.34) and how house was adorned with “black painting with silver Arabic calligraphy” (Masood, 2021, p.60). Another instance is the mention of “agarwood”, which is “smoldered on the windowsill, the musky, sweet fragrance of their smoke making it a little hard to breathe” (Masood, 2021, p.69). As a region-specific fragrance, agarwood is described as stifling which supports the idea that anything that is associated with Muslims has a smothering effect on normal people. There is another glimpse into the domestic life of Muslim women which heightens the notion that women are homebound and completely immersed in domestic life as they are “knitting away furiously” (Masood, 2021, p.164) various gender-neutral clothes for the babies such as sweaters, socks and hats.

#### 4.6. Othering Pakistani Urban Spaces.

Even the cities of Pakistan are subjected to this process of othering. The Bad Muslim Discount describes Karachi as a place that is “under siege by its own climate” (Masood, 2021, p.10). This image highlights the oppressive aspect of nature reflected by the orientalist tone of the text. Even the natural phenomenon in the region is associated with a menacing aura. The marginalization of nature along with Muslims stands tall at the heart of the text. It does not fail to mention the smog that overtakes the city. With its inherently destructive nature, the city connives to throttle people living in it. The climate is hard on the senses

due to the “indifferent sun” (Masood, 2021, p.11). It is a symbol of ruthlessness and apathy of nature towards the suffering of human beings akin to its citizens who are inflicting it. Just like any other postcolonial community, Karachi is fighting the battle between its “inglorious past” and “modernity” (Masood, 2021, p.11). It is threatened by the invasion of the sea and incoming floods. “So, every year, the city drowns a little. The streets, lacking proper drainage, flood. Cars float along roads like rudderless boats, carried off the ground by the irresistible force of accumulating water” (Masood, 2021, p.14). Apart from being poorly constructed, it bears excessive traffic jams and ear-splitting horns. Everything related to it is presented as overwhelming, including human and non-human. “Karachi was screaming at its inhabitants and they were screaming right back” (Masood, 2021, p.11). It yields an image of the extreme anguish of people crushed under daunting pain. Karachi is personified as a person who is cruel and undaunting. Screaming is a symbol of pain and anxiety. It leads to their overbearing temperament, impatience, constant yelling, and honking. In the text, Karachi represents violence and extremist sentiments of people. It is described as “a casualty of the Kalashnikov effect” (Masood, 2021, p.19). It is a symbol of local violence and Pakistan’s role in the cold war and its effects that were destructive for future generations. The text invokes an image which represents the idea that terrorist activities and the use of weapons are a norm in Pakistan which is a threat to the world. It is responsible for harbouring terrorism in the world. The text taps into another negative image of Pakistan by referring towards its crumbling political structure as it describes that in Karachi, “politics had been unpredictable and volatile” (Masood, 2021, p.249).

#### 4.7. Othering through Gender Stereotypes (Assumptions about Gender).

The text is deluged with gendered stereotypes which is the classic instrument of essentialization of Muslims. The character of Qais reflects the decadency associated with the Orient. He beguiles Safwa to satiate his lust by tapping into her desire for freedom. Throughout the text, he is illustrated as a manipulator who cajoles her to have sexual relationships with him in exchange for a chance to flee the country. “I’m making a trade, Safwa. Stay trapped here, with your legs closed, if you want. Or you can be a little more flexible and you’ll have a chance to live the life you want. Up to you” (Masood, 2021, p.146). To persuade her, he tries to brandish the act as preordained by Allah. Another problematic thing is the portrayal of the main female protagonist, Safwa, as a sex object. At first, she accepts submission to secure a better future for herself but then this transgression sparks a sense of freedom which she could not have before. Her depiction aligns with the oriental paradox of women as sexually promiscuous or veiled victims. Whereas Qais is a sexual perpetrator, Safwa emblemizes the victimized female Orient as well as the immodesty associated with her.

Furthermore, Gender stereotypes are significant in the portrayal of Domestic violence which is a predominant theme in the text. The idea of Muslim women as abused and Muslim men as abusers is manifested through characters and several images of assault. Safwa is the victim who is continuously abused by her father, Abu Fahd. He is a ruthless man who uses violence as a means to control his daughter's behaviour. The horrors of war and his son's death made him full of rage. The accumulated resentment inside him is directed at Safwa who is the only member left of his family after the war. To exert his will upon her, he beats her at any given opportunity. "Abu struck my right cheek with the back of his hand, and my head twisted sharply" (Masood, 2021, p.128). This image of violence contributes to the victimization of Safwa. Her abuser, Abu Fahd, represents violent Muslim men which is a familiar motif in the orientalist narrative. After the first time he beat her, he did not stop there. It was the outset of a series of assaults. He started hitting her for trivial reasons and no one held him accountable for this. The abuse started to silence her voice and when she became silent, he hit her to speak again. He showed her no mercy even after she became unconscious whenever she could not bear it anymore. He never repented his actions as he did not consider them wrong and even blamed Safwa for inviting it all upon herself. He takes pleasure in her pain which is evident through his "horrible smile" witnessed by Safwa after being beaten by him (Masood, 2021, p.128). The assault is an instrument for instilling fear in her by silencing the voice of resistance. "Abu would hit me for any reason at all, for things I did, for things I failed to do, until I stopped speaking when he was home, until I was afraid to move at all around him. And then he hit me for my silence, screaming at me to speak" (Masood, 2021, p.128). Abusing Safwa became a habitual act for his father and he took out his frustration on her by inflicting her with pain and injuries. The abusive environment at home made Safwa yearn for freedom and she tasted it in many ways such as by abandoning her Hijab and indulging in an illicit physical affair with Anvar who had liberal views as compared to the conventional mindset of men like Abu Fahd and did not abide by religious rules either. "Just because he'd gone for Hajj, just because God had forgiven him all of his sins, didn't mean that I would" (Masood, 2021, p.135). One of the prevalent neo-oriental beliefs is that Muslims seek all their fulfilment in the divine and do not have practical ways to progress in the real world. They adhere to the tradition with their ultimate purpose to achieve gratification in the divine even if it means violating the rights of humans and then seeking forgiveness from God. After treating her with cruelty, Safwa's father went on to perform Hajj and came back with the firm belief that it removed all of his sins and he did not need forgiveness from his daughter. This thinking strengthened Safwa's resentment towards him because of the everlasting impact it imparted on her. After putting up with this endless cycle of abuse, she planned to run away from home. She imagined a life, free from the violence she was exposed to, the veil

that was imposed on her against her will and the horrible life that she was living. But her attempt at escaping brought no fruitful result and she fell right back to the atrocity she was dreaming of getting an escape from.

All I could think about was the certainty that Abu was going to hurt me... I saw the burning certainty in the hardening of his gaze, like lava becoming rock... He shook his head. "Safwa, my child, do you not know that in order to run, you have to be able to walk? (Masood, 2021, p.331).

The image of animalistic desire and destructive fire can be seen in the usage of 'burning certainty' and 'hardening' of Abu Fahd's gaze. As a habitual abuser, Abu-Fahd resorted to violence again after becoming aware of Safwa's plan to escape. The whole text is laden with the illustration of abuse that Muslim women are assumed to go through in the private spheres of their homes. Although domestic violence is a world problem and women are facing this all around the world despite the region they reside in, neo-orientalists orchestrate this situation by branding it as a Muslim problem by disregarding its universality. The violence against women has multiple factors such as the socio-cultural impacts of patriarchy but to prove that Muslim communities are the nightmares of freedom-seeking women, these incidents are depicted partially. The Bad Muslim Discount promotes this idea strongly and it can intensify Islamophobia which is continually on the rise in today's age. The fear and prejudice against Muslims are based on these misconceptions promoted by native writers who portray the situation as if the world is a secure place for women except where Muslims reside.

The usage of violence to persuade Safwa to marry is another instance that highlights how Muslim women are forced into marriage against their will. Forced marriage is a perennial theme in the neo-orientalist discourse which is used to prove how Muslim women need to be saved from vicious Muslim men around them. As she was betrothed to Qais, her father turns to violence to fulfil that promise, which indicates his tendency to sacrifice his daughter for the sake of his social image. "Don't make me do this, Safwa. Say you will marry Qais and I'll forgive you. Please. I'll be able to pretend again" (Masood, 2021, p.257). Safwa's marriage is situated in the context of violence which suggests that in Muslim societies, women's integrity and well-being are threatened until they consent for forced marriages. She is held responsible for assault inflicted upon her for resisting marriage. This retaliation is deprecated as a conduct threatening the family honor which is linked with Muslims in popular rhetoric as argued earlier. The concept of honour is attached to marriages which brings complexity into the whole scenario as it makes coercion into marriage easier because rejecting the wishes of the family can bring down the honour of the family. Safwa's father also associates her rejection of marriage with his so-called honour. As he says, "If you do not understand honor, you are no child of mine." (Masood, 2021,

p.256). The text suggests that honour is a symbol of traditional and backward societies that are non-progressive.

#### 4.8. New Tropes of Self-Othering

Behdad and Williams (2010) explain that the process of neo-orientalism involves the new tropes of othering. Classical Orientalism othered the Orient by the production of stereotypical images about it and by the construction of binaries between East and West. Neo-orientalism involves othering of the Muslim Orient by themselves. They describe their native lands always in stark contrast to the West and new binaries are created between freedom and oppression, secularism vs religion, modernity and tradition, democracy, and tyranny. West is described as a land of civilization and Muslim oriental regions as tribal with no link to advancement. If the West proposes complete freedom to all men, then Islam snatches it away from its adherents, especially women. The image of a Muslim woman that has been circulated is of an oppressed and marginalized creature who is put in comparison with her Western counterpart enjoying it with all its aspects. So, the idealized version of a free woman is someone from the West and all of the Muslim women are generalized and labelled as being oppressed and subjugated by religion, men and socio-cultural institutions as well. As the Orient has always been presented as having more spiritual inclinations, it is the one with more irrationality and absurdity. The Bad Muslim Discount exhibits this new type of self-othering in many aspects. Pakistan, Iran and Iraq are depicted as a land of religious fanatics while San Francisco is depicted as more secular. The talks, western people are engaged in, are based on rationality and logical argument while people born in Muslim lands prefer violence over it and exert their ideas by utilizing irrational tools. Safwa is depicted as the embodiment of a Muslim woman who is being oppressed and stripped of basic rights. She seeks this lost freedom in Western lands and puts in efforts to get rid of religious sanctions imposed on her against her will.

As neo-Orientalism flourishes on binary logic, the most important one is its exhibition of freedom in the West as compared to the tyranny of oppression in the East. The Freedom that Safwa seeks in the West is through the abandonment of what is imposed on her by religion and her father. She associates Hijab with the suppression of freedom.

I hadn't been permitted to leave home in Baghdad without my niqab. Nothing had changed. It shouldn't have mattered to me that I was being commanded to wear it not by Abu but by strangers. Except, for reasons I cannot explain to myself, it mattered a great deal. Maybe I'd just gotten too used to doing what I wanted, being who I wanted, in my aunt's garden in Basra. Maybe freedom is addictive, like the fruit of a poppy (Masood, 2021, p. 131).

The theme of freedom is an essential part of the text and it is associated with the unveiling and discarding of Muslim traditions and values. It shows as though taking on Niqab was equivalent to being stripped of one's freedom and the othering of Muslims is done by using this neo-orientalist strategy throughout the novel. To specify that women are being oppressed through religion, not taking the veil is associated with the anticipation of a violent attitude towards women.

Another new trope of othering emerged after 9/11 of Good Muslims and Bad Muslims. This idea is highlighted in popular media to promote the belief that not all Muslims are bad and even if there is something wrong with Islam, it can be softened for the modern world. Islam can be detoxified of its violent and extremist traits to make it best suited for the progressive society. The emergence of the image of Moderate Muslims strengthens the belief that Islam must be modified to make it suitable for the modern world. It arose to save the positive image, but it does not change the negative stereotyping associated with Muslims. The sub-typing of Muslims leads to a hostile attitude towards Muslims because it results from accepting the fact that an extremist tendency in Muslims really exists. This trope can be seen in *The Bad Muslim Discount* through multiple characters. Although the story revolves around Muslims, some of them are represented as fanatics and extremes. Then there are some Muslims who favour Western ideals and condemn the disintegration of their communities and they are portrayed as open-minded and non-conventional. The characters of Anvar and Safwa are depicted as liberal Muslims who wish to adapt to Western ways of life with an ultimate rejection of Islamic traditional norms because they view them as a hindrance to progress. Anvar is a liberal man who finds fault among his fellow Muslims and differentiates himself from conventional Muslims from time to time. He mocks Islamic rituals such as the sacrifice of animals on Eid-UI-Azha by saying, "The name of the celebration translates to "the Festival of Sacrifice." Yes, Islam has a marketing problem." (Masood, 2021, p.8). The goat is used as a symbol of the cruel traditions of Islam throughout the text. His attitude towards Islamic institutions and norms is derogatory and he distinguishes himself from them by outright rejection of them. He also degrades Muslim Student Federation and thinks of himself as a better human being and more evolved as Zuha points out; "You think you're better than them. More evolved. I don't think that's true (Masood, 2021, p. 116). It reaffirms the fact that there are moderate Muslims who can be beneficial to the West if their sharp edges can be softened. The presence of these progressive Muslims does not nullify the broader misconceptions about Muslims but ultimately strengthens them.

The presence of instability and political upheaval further marginalizes the Muslim world. Behdad and Williams (2010), while explaining the new trends in neo-orientalism, stated that "neo-Orientalism is marked by an unapologetic investment in and engagement with the politics of



the Middle East” (p.285). This element of neo-orientalism is apparent in how the novel represents the native regions of the main characters who are Muslims. The Lands with Muslim inhabitants are stereotyped as bearing the effects of political turmoil. These are the regions with persisting turbulence and no stability. In *The Bad Muslim Discount*, the same clichés are corroborated. Safwa, who is an Iraqi immigrant, describes her homeland in a way that promotes such stereotypes. As a mouthpiece for Muslims, she resorts to complaining about being Iraqi which is evidently a bad option for being a woman in. The negative depiction is followed by a verbal protest as she says, “What had I done wrong before I’d even drawn breath, to be sent from heaven to Iraq, in this time, to Abu’s house?” (Masood, 2021, p. 279). She is left with no hope for things to change their course over time. “The weather can change quickly, Safwa.” I wanted to tell him that wasn’t really true, not in Baghdad, where the heat could seem unending, but I knew what a metaphor was, even if it was a bad one” (Masood, 2021, p.41). On another occasion, while talking about a neighbour’s goat who got scared of the noises of bombings, she states, “It was the only resident of Baghdad not used to bombs going off.” (Masood, 2021, p.84). Facts are represented in a certain manner throughout the novel through the characters’ reminiscence of the places of their birth to reinstate the belief that the situation in Muslim countries is hopeless and they are beyond saving hereafter.

## 5. Conclusion

The selected texts paint an extreme picture of Islam through the redeployment of oriental stereotypes, overgeneralization, and essentialist representation which includes the association of violence and fanaticism with religion, Muslims’ portrayal as unchanging despots, specifying domestic violence and honor killings to Muslim communities. Moreover, to provide an exotic favour, the Pakistani region, along with its culture-specific traditions and food, is othered. The Muslim representation centres upon gender stereotypes that depict Muslim men as oppressors, barbaric and decadent followed by women’s portrayal as veiled victims tormented by cultural and religious institutions in addition to their male counterparts.

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