

The Portrayal of Muslim Characters in Post 9/11 Fiction: Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) as a Case Study

تصوير الشخصيات الإسلامية في روايات ما بعد 11 سبتمبر : التسليم لأمي
والدمان (2011) كدراسة حالة

La représentation des personnages musulmans dans la fiction de l'après-11 septembre : *The Submission* (2011) d'Amy Waldman comme étude de cas

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Introduction

The struggle between Muslims and the West has an old history that started long before the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. This event reinforced prejudice and hate towards Muslims all over the world which resulted in the establishment of a binary opposition between non-Muslim and Muslim groups. Further, the latter started to be perceived as the ultimate enemy and hence, a serious threat to the United States, in particular. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the association of Muslims with terrorism was due to several factors including politics, media, and even literature. As far as the literary sphere is concerned, several writers contributed through painting the negative image that has been associated with Muslims and the latter's attempt to highlight their innocence and challenge the established discourse. The non-Muslim American novelist Amy Waldman is no exception for she uses her *The Submission* (2011) to sympathize with Muslims and highlight the other face of the coin.

Waldman's *The Submission* revolves around the struggles of a Muslim American whose name is Mohammad Khan. The latter has been selected, anonymously, as the one who will design the World Trade Center memorial after 9/11 attacks. This novelist, then, depicts the reactions of the American citizens soon after their realization that the winner is a Muslim.

The scholarship on the novel has tackled it from a variety of perspectives, focusing mainly on the post 9/11 aspect, including the writer's focus on the conflict between Muslims and the West, trauma caused by the attacks, and

the novel's focus on the ideologies that exist in America. Thus, observing that there is a need for detailed studies on the representation of Muslim American characters in the wake of 9/11 attacks in this novel, this analytical study aims at taking up the lacuna by investigating the power of discourse in defining Muslim Americans, their misperception by non-Muslims, and their perseverance to correct the image they have been associated with. Thus, the ultimate purpose of this research is to come up with meaningful interpretations of these aspects and hence, prove that this work is a counter-narrative. To reach the aforementioned objective, the researcher will adopt Foucault's concepts of discourse and resistance.

1. The Discourse of Islam in the World of the Novel

Michel Foucault defines discourse as "speech or writing" which represents certain ideas and attitudes. The latter form one's "way of looking at the world" (Mills 1997 :5). That is, discourse is affected by certain thoughts that influence one's way of thinking. In Waldman's *The Submission*, the reader notices that the discourse of Islam as a religion of terror is pervading the mood of the novel. Non-Muslim American characters' perception of Muslims is profoundly shaped by discourse, leading to a serious and clear split between the two groups in addition to targeting Muslims through several manners. For instance, when Mohammad Khan's responsible assigns him a task, he thinks deeply and then, he decides to do it. Such a decision is intended because "he wanted to see, up close, the kind of Muslim he had been treated as ... : the pious, primitive, violent kind. In asking, 'Been to Afghanistan?' those agents has foretold his future" (Waldman 2011 :44). Thus, it is clear that Khan's responsible is affected by discourse which leads him to treat Khan in a racist manner. Additionally, Khan's inference shows that Muslims are aware of their perception as a threat to the country.

These characters' rude reaction to Muslims in America is the result of the effect of discourse because the latter "generates the world of our everyday life" (Whisnant n.d. : 6). That is, it plays a key role in shaping people's way of thinking and looking at the world around them. Debbie is another character who embodies the impact of discourse on individuals telling Sean : "You think the violent Muslims are dangerous ? Wait until you see what the nonviolent ones do ! What's next ? The crescent over the Capitol ? They're trying to make this piece of land Dar al-Islam !" (Waldman 2011 :132). Hence, this illustrates non-Muslim characters' perception and generalization of certain negative ideas over all Muslims.

Differently stated, the “truth” of Islam as a religion of terror becomes the “norm” and Foucault believes that the “tool [of power relations] is not prohibition through law, but normalization through the norm” (Sørensen 2014 : n.p.). In the world of the novel, one notices that the negative image associated with Islam and Muslims becomes the “norm” acted upon by the majority of the characters. To illustrate, one can refer to the character Sarge who angrily reacts : “We know who the enemy is !” Sarge was saying, or rather exclaiming. ‘Let’s stop walking around like the emperor has clothes ! He’s naked ! Radical Islam--naked radical Islam--is the enemy” (Waldman 2011 :41). Sarge is strongly attacking Islam as a religion and generalizing all Muslims as “the enemy” which proves, again, the power of discourse in normalizing certain truths in order to create “power relations” among individuals and make the system works in a certain way.

These characters, then, in addition to many others are merely a product of discourse because as previously stated, “[c]ertain discourses ... have the power to convince people to accept statements as true. This power can have no relation to any objective correctness of the statement” (Whisnant n.d. : 6). This shows that when a certain truth is believed and followed as the norm, this does not prove its “objective correctness” (Whisnant n.d. : 6). Rather, it is simply empowered and naturalized. For example, when Asma, a Muslim and a wife of one of the attacks’ victims, attends the public hearing, she notices that

[t] hose who spoke in defense of the design were outnumbered by those against it. Some of them said anything associated with Islam was “painful” to them, that the Garden was a paradise for the killers, that the name Mohammad was connected to a religion of violence, of the sword. The chairman allowed all of these comments, as if Muslims were second-class citizens--or worse, as if they deserved no respect” (Waldman 2011 :229).

After listening to them for two hours, she goes mad for she realizes that these families’ members are misled while she cannot convince them. This exemplifies the aforementioned idea by highlighting the fact that non-Muslim characters are merely accepting “statements as true” while truth is subjective.

Muslim characters, actually, fall victims of such accusations and therefore are re-created by the mainstream view. For instance, Khan “had found himself reinvented by others, so distorted he couldn’t recognize himself. His imagination was made suspect” (Waldman 2011 :293). Thus, although his intention is to help the families’ members remember the victims through a significant memorial, he

falls victim himself of “the social construction of reality” (Whisnant n.d. : 6) created and strengthened by discourse.

In addition to what have been mentioned, it is crucial to mention that non-Muslim characters develop a racist way of thinking towards the Muslim ones. For example, while discussing the issue of the memorial selection, Edith comments : “A Muslim country would never let a Jew build its memorial,’... ‘Why should we act differently?’” (Waldman 2011 :66). That is, she is clearly resisting the memorial by a Muslim, though he is a Muslim American. He is part of her country and society but still she is unable to sympathize with him. Furthermore, Sarge, a radio talk-show host, offensively shows his racist attitudes towards Khan and his memorial saying :

Respect for the law is what makes America, America,’ Sarge roared. “If we put illegals on the memorial, we will be spitting in the face of the law-abiding Americans, including legal immigrants, who died. The illegal immigrants who died came here seeking opportunity, but if they had stayed home they would still be alive. Isn’t that the greatest opportunity of all ? (Waldman 2011 :77).

Hence, though American, Khan is described as ‘illegal’ whose selection will be considered as breaking the American law and betraying Americans.

The reader infers that the majority of these non-Muslim characters are deeply affected and seem not to take any exception into consideration. They speak and behave in a way that indicates they are racist to the extreme, refusing any possibility of change. For instance, Ariana revolts by emphasizing the fact “that gardens aren’t our vernacular. We have parks. Formal gardens aren’t our lineage.” “Experiences matter more than lineages,” Claire said. “No, lineages are experiences. We are coded to have certain emotions in certain kinds of places” (Waldman 2011 :5). As if she finds another reason for refusing a Muslim memorial as she symbolizes the Americans’ rejection of any foreign cultures, especially the Muslim one.

According to Michel Foucault, discourse is a set of “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (qtd. in Mills 1997 :15). This clarifies the power of discourse to define certain individuals and classify them. In the novel under scrutiny, Muslim characters’ image is formed by discourse and non-Muslim characters are deeply affected. Sean is another embodiment of disoriented individuals as the following example indicates : “A Muslim gaining control of the memorial was the worst possible thing that could happen” (Waldman 2011 :56).

As a result of negatively perceiving Muslims in America, the latter start to feel threatened and worried about their future in this country. Though they know they are innocent and Khan has no bad intentions, some of them see that it's better to withdraw so that they can live peacefully with the non-Muslim majority. For instance, Salman tells Khan : "You are drawing attention to yourself, to us---all of us, all Muslims in America---in a way that could be dangerous" (Waldman 2011 :194). This proves that such Muslim characters are the victims of what Foucault calls "a grouping" (Mills 2003 :53). That is, he believes that different discourses generate different groups of people and after the 9/11 attacks, as it is mirrored in the novel, the discourse of Islam forms "a grouping" (Mills 2003 :53) to which Muslims act as targeted victims.

2. Muslim Characters' resistance to Misconceptions

Foucault, later on, strongly emphasizes the close connection between discourse and power for not any discourse can be accepted as the norm. Rather, it is a result of certain powerful practices. Further, he argues : "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1978 :95), which opens the door in the face of the victims of discourse to challenge the constructed reality. In the novel, to counter American characters' misconception and misrepresentation, Muslim characters (though badly treated) choose to resist following several strategies that negate and remove the negative image they have been associated with. Muslim characters are not depicted as violent or aggressive in their reactions which prove their innocence and willingness to live peacefully in America. The following conversation between Khan and Yuki well demonstrates this point. While broadcasting news on Khan's memorial on TV, he comments :

"We can't pretend that everyone's equally dangerous."
 "I can't believe you are saying that!" Yuki sputtered.
 "That means you'd be one of those singled out"
 "So be it---I have nothing to hide. I'm not going to pretend that all Muslims can be trusted. If Muslims are the reason they're doing searches in the first place, why shouldn't Muslims be searched?"
 (Waldman 2011 :41).

This example highlights Khan as a resistant Muslim who is pointing to the fact that not all Muslims are equal which symbolizes his rejection of generalizations. Additionally, he seems confident about the fact of being suspicious while Yuki seems influenced by the power of discourse to the extent that his opinion leads her to classify him.

According to Sara Mills, discourse is responsible of creating “subjects” seeing that these “subjects” who are “individuals” play a role in this practice. She believes their role is meant to be “both challenging and rewriting some of the positions within discourse” (Mills 1991 :68). That is, as previously stated, discourse is powerful enough to make certain realities function as true but this may result in the formation of resistant “subjects” who can contest the mainstream view. For example, when Khan is asked to withdraw, he strongly reacts :

I have been asked to withdraw from the competition, or to remain anonymous rather than have my name associated with the design, or to partner with someone else who could submit under their name. But I will not withdraw, and I will not make any of these accommodations. To do so would be to betray not only myself but this country's credo that merit matters, not name or religion or origins (Waldman 2011 :92).

This illustrates his powerful resistant position through acting as a “subject” who is trying to highlight his unshaken principles. Without being violent, he tends to emphasize his personality and fidelity to America. His confident behavior indicates that he is innocent and can face any challenges that act as a stumbling block in the face of his career as a Muslim.

In another attempt to resist the majority's misconception of Islam, Muslims, following peaceful ways, try to deliver their message through an ad as indicated in the following instance : “The tagline on the ad read, in bold type meant to be eye-catching, ‘An Architect, Not a Terrorist.’ In smaller print beneath it said : ‘Muslims like Mohammad Khan are proud to be American. Let's earn their pride. Brought to you by the Muslim American Coordinating Council’” (Waldman 2011 :172). This shows Muslim characters' way of resisting, which is done in a polite manner unlike non-Muslims who use offensive terms and manners to define Islam and Muslims. Their polite oppositional acts can be interpreted as a form of saying *no* to “these abstractions” (Foucault 2004 :781) as they try to answer questions related to who they really are. Further, as Foucault clarifies, these individuals are not attacking a specific group. Instead they are against “a technique, a form of power” (Foucault 2004 :781). That is, Muslim characters' target is not non-Muslims. Rather, they reject being classified and judged as such.

However, Muslim characters' insistence on polite and respectful resistant acts in the novel is purposeful as the following instance demonstrates :

Each day brought more proof that the attackers were Muslims... A few days later, ... [Khan] realized that the difference wasn't in how he was being treated but in how he was behaving. Customarily brusque on work sites, he had become gingerly, polite, careful to give no cause for alarm or criticism. He didn't like this new, more cautious avatar, whose efforts at accommodation hinted at some feeling of guilt, yet he couldn't quite him (Waldman 2011 :25).

Thus, non-Muslims' mistreatment does not make a difference for Khan while Muslims' behavior is what makes it. This proves that he is very cautious in his response to such hate and racism in order to challenge the constructed image and bring to the front the good and peaceful principles of Islam and Muslims. By doing so, Muslim characters illustrate Foucault's perspective on resistant groups especially when he argues : "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are" (Foucault 2004 :785). This idea can be closely connected to the novel for Muslim characters are not depicted as passive and submissive. Rather, their challenge can be interpreted as a refusal of such categorization.

Focusing on resistance again, Foucault argues that one must avoid thinking of "power" only negatively. Rather, this can also be "productive, causing new behaviours to emerge" (Bällan 2010 : n.p.). This is actually the case of Muslim characters in the novel. They try to find a way in order not to be consumed by the fact that their religion is one of terrorism and hence, they try to resist these misconceptions. For example, "[c]loistered at the airport, [Khan] struggled to maintain his self-respect even as the avatar encouraged obsequiousness. The agents' questions were broad, trifling, and insinuating; his replies laconic" (Waldman 2011 :25). Khan, then, starts to pay a special attention to his behavior in order not to pave the way for any excuses or to be perceived as a threat. So, as a resistant "subject", he is the product of power and discourse who is hampering the functioning of the system simply because of his oppositional stance.

Conclusion

To wrap it up, one can consider Waldman's *The Submission* as a counter-narrative because it positively presents Muslim characters, showing their good principles and bringing their innocent intentions to light. As counter-discourse, Waldman's work emphasizes the power of discourse to define Muslims as it challenges the established norm and reality of Muslims, picturing the latter as resistant characters who aim at re-constructing certain misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. However, though provoked and misperceived by non-

Muslims, Muslim characters do not show any signs of impolite or disrespectful behavior. Thus, though discourse proves to be very powerful to affect non-Muslims' way of thinking, Muslim characters do not react passively. Rather, they try to resist in an attempt to remove such a created image.

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Abstract

In the wake of September 11th attacks, the discourse of Islam as a religion of terror and violence becomes dominant in the West, leading to several negative effects on Muslims. This discourse is reinforced through several means including literary production for writers tend to portray Muslims as guilty and Islam as a religion of violence that encourages such criminal acts. However, other literary voices appeared later to challenge such generalizations by giving a voice to the "enemy" and positively depict Islam and Muslims. The purpose of this study, then, is to provide evidence that Amy Waldman, in her *The Submission* (2011), mirrors the power of discourse to define Muslims as a threat to the American society, generating this reality as a norm. Furthermore, it aims at highlighting Waldman's portrayal of Muslim characters' efforts to resist the distorted image they are associated with. The present study, then, found out that Waldman has successfully crafted a narrative that re-constructed certain misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, she paints the image of Muslim characters positively by depicting them as innocent, having good principles, and resistant to such a created discourse.

Keywords

discourse, resistance, Foucault, Muslim characters, Waldman, *The Submission*

مستخلص

في أعقاب هجمات 11 سبتمبر، أصبح خطاب الإسلام كدين إرهاب وعنفي سائدًا في الغرب، مما أدى إلى العديد من الآثار السلبية على المسلمين. هذا الخطاب تعزز من خلال عدة وسائل بما في ذلك الإنتاج الأدبي للكتاب الذين يميلون إلى تصوير المسلمين على أنهم مذنبون والإسلام كدين للعنف يشجع مثل هذه الأعمال الإجرامية. ومع ذلك، ظهرت أصوات أدبية أخرى فيما بعد لتتحدى مثل هذه التعميمات بإعطاء صوت لـ "العدو" وتصوير الإسلام والمسلمين بشكل إيجابي. تهدف هذه الدراسة لتقديم الأدلة على أن أمي والدمان، في روايتها التسليم (2011)، صورت قوة الخطاب في تعريف المسلمين كتهديد للمجتمع الأمريكي، وتوليد هذا الواقع كقاعدة. علاوة على ذلك، ستعتمد هذه الدراسة على تسليط الضوء على تصوير والدمان لجهود الشخصيات المسلمة لمقاومة الصورة المشوهة المرتبطة بها. توصلت الدراسة الحالية إلى أن والدمان نجحت في كتابة رواية أعادت صياغة بعض المفاهيم الخاطئة عن الإسلام والمسلمين. علاوة على ذلك، فهي ترسم صورة الشخصيات الإسلامية بشكل إيجابي من خلال تصويرهم على أنهم أبرياء، لديهم مبادئ جيدة، ومقاومون لمثل هذا الخطاب المبتكر.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الخطاب، المقاومة، فوكو، الشخصيات المسلمة، والدمان، التسليم

Résumé

Après les attaques du 11 septembre, le discours de l'islam en tant que religion de terreur et de violence devient dominant en Occident, entraînant plusieurs effets négatifs sur les musulmans. Ce discours est renforcé par plusieurs moyens comprenant la production littéraire car les écrivains ont tendance à présenter les musulmans comme coupables et l'islam comme une religion de violence qui encourage de tels actes criminels. Cependant, d'autres voix littéraires sont apparues plus tard pour contester ces généralisations en donnant une voix à « l'ennemi » et en dépeignant de manière positive l'islam et les musulmans. Le but de cette étude est de présenter les preuves qu'Amy Waldman, dans sa *The Submission* (2011), reflète le pouvoir du discours de définir les musulmans comme une menace pour la société américaine, générant cette réalité comme une norme. En outre, il vise à mettre en évidence la représentation par Waldman des efforts des personnages musulmans pour résister à l'image déformée à laquelle ils sont associés. La présente étude a donc découvert que Waldman a réussi à élaborer un récit qui a reconstruit certaines idées fausses sur l'islam et les musulmans. De plus, elle peint positivement l'image des personnages musulmans en les dépeignant comme innocents, ayant de bons principes et résistants à un tel discours créé.

Mots-clés

Discours, résistance, Foucault, personnages musulmans, Waldman, *The Submission*.