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Marginalization and Victimization in Omair Ahmad's novel *Jimmy the Terrorist: An Appraisal*

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Abstract

Persecution of Muslims in India is widespread and can be located within the daily microaggressions that this population faces as well as in more deliberate political ideologies. Muslims are targeted, rounded up, brutalized and killed. Vast numbers of Muslims are today faced with the painful dilemmas in the wake of mounting Islamophobia and increasing anti-Muslim prejudice, on the one hand, and radicalism and hatred in the name of Islam, on the other. Till about a couple of decades ago, Indian fiction in English carefully avoided the more unpleasant socio-political realities of the day. Many writers have either given a cursory look at this issue or the depiction of Muslim marginalization and victimization has been contracted to a single page in the literary narratives. An attempt has been made in this paper to show how Omair Ahmad in his novel has portrayed the plight of the Muslim community in Indian society in a realistic way which make him stand out from the rest of the Indian novelists writing in English.

Key Words- *Persecution, Muslims, Brutalized, Victimization, Marginalization, Radicalism.*

Omair Ahmad's *Jimmy the Terrorist*, was short listed for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize and is the winner of Vodafone Crossword Book Award 2010. Omair Ahmad, who grew up in Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh before he moved to Saudi Arabia, as he himself says that

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"The only uniqueness for me about the Indian experience is that it is mine." (In interview with Sandhya Iyer: 2010) He provides Muslim narrative of the recent Indian history, pockmarked by grievances, riots and pogroms. The novel which takes the reader back to the '70s is set in Moazzamabad, a decaying north Indian town, established centuries ago by a scion of the Mughal family. It tells the story of Jimmy, originally named Jamaal, son of Rafiq Ansari of Rasoolpur Mohalla, a Muslim neighbourhood in a Hindu town. His story goes back a long way to the time when Moazzamabad was named, after Aurangzeb's son. Rafiq, a Muslim man from a modest background, is married into what was once the leading Muslim feudal family of this town. Part of the dowry he receives is a low-paid job in a Muslim-run college. Constantly reminded of his lowly status by the men into whose family he is married, and unable to take their insults any longer, he increasingly finds solace in religion. He begins to frequent the mosque, much to the chagrin of his wife's relatives, who find this yet another reason to mock him. He sprouts a beard and begins to regularly pray, spending his time with the imam of the mosque and the rest of the congregation. He advises patience in the face of growing anti-Muslim prejudice, but many younger members of the mosque congregation are increasingly driven to despair as they see right-wing Hindu politicians, even in their own town that has had a history of communal camaraderie, deliberately stoking violence against Muslims simply in order to grab power. His Muslim brothers advise him to talk about "...the grand tragedies, about oppression, *zulm*, riots and murder. Grow your beard a little longer and miss no opportunity to raise your voice against the sufferings of Muslims" (p-108)

Undoubtedly, "Their shared perception of victimhood, of their community and its religion and culture being under menacing threat from viscerally anti-Muslim right-wing Hindu forces, is real and palpable." (Yoginder Sikand: 2011). The novel portrays a change in the family's circumstances, from being privileged and protected, to ending up being marginalised and struggling to find their place in the world. Though the novel is concerned with a particular Muslim locality, it holds true, not just for the marginalised Muslims in U. P. or any other state, but any minority community in India or in any other part of the world.

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Discussion

Since *Jimmy The Terrorist*, depicts the marginalisation of the Muslim community in India, their victimisation and all the issues that come with it, the book follows closely the life of a few of its denizens, against the changing socio-political atmosphere in the country. It describes the life of an ordinary Muslim youth, Rafiq who aspires to be a well-educated elite. The old ShabbirManzil, which houses affluent Muslim families and is the intellectual hub for poets, is where Rafiq aspires to be. He finally becomes privy to this much envied circle by way of his marriage to Shiasta. The Rafiq-Shiasta union produces a son, Jamal aka Jimmy, and it is in his young life that the reader sees the undercurrents of religious intolerance taking its ugliest turn.

The novel undoubtedly points at the vulnerable, fragile situation of Muslims in India. Rafiq has trouble getting a job, as employers are increasingly reluctant to hire people with Muslim names and “the conversion of Jimmy into a terrorist is inextricably connected with the sorry plight of his father, Rafiq, who, despite his intellectual superiority, could never excel in any examination or achieve general success in life, simply because he belonged to minority group, and ascribed to a minority religion and culture” (B.Meenakashi:2016) as his friend Ahmad Syed provides Rafiq the reason that “ They must have realised that you are a Muslim” (p-17) which proved to be true.

It is in this surcharged communal atmosphere of a decaying north Indian town that Rafiq rears his son Jamal, nicknamed Jimmy, struggling to provide him with a decent education in a Christian school, which is the only passport out of their miserable morass that those Muslims of the town who can afford it, possess. As a Muslim, and also as the son of a man of modest means, Jimmy is a pathetic victim of double-discrimination. School life, for him, is a daily torment. We are told in great detail of the teasing that young Jimmy suffered in the missionary school he went to, on account of his relative poverty and his father's religiosity. Jamaal's classmate Saurav Mukherjee in St. Jude's school promptly blames the lonely Muslim boy Jamaal for his missing pocket money. Shunned by his classmates, on

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account of being Muslim and poor, he becomes a sullen recluse, although he is brilliant in his studies. Jimmy had already explained his position so truthfully as, “I didn’t steal his money, sir...I didn’t know he had hundred rupees, sir. I didn’t take it. I’ve never held a hundred rupee note in my life!” (p.137)

But he is still wrongly accused of being a thief and shamed in front of the entire school. Saurav blamed “he stole my money!” (p.137) and demanded to “Search him, his bag, his desk. I want him standing in his underpants so people can see what a thief he is” (p.138). Similarly, accused of a major theft, Khalid is nabbed by the police, who, on discovering that he is a Muslim, subject him to brutal torture. At the mere mention of being a Muslim one is bound to suffer in Indian society as Khalid himself tells to Inspector Rawat about his being innocent but wrongly charged and forced to accept the crime which the former had not committed:

Why don’t you just admit that you beat me because I’m a Muslim?

Inspector Rawat pointed the shiny end of his baton at him and said, ‘Why you lying thief...?’

‘What thief? Khalid asked. ‘What proof do you have except a confession that you beat out of me?’(p.156).

Muslims are beaten like animals and treated with utmost hatred. There are numberless incidents where Muslims are targeted and brutalized without any justification. In Indian society the marginalized Muslims face a tough life only because of their religion. They are, often forced to confess the guilts which they never commit. The following passage in which Khalid describes how he was tortured, sends shivers down the spine:

And they started beating me, and abusing, me telling me that I was a bastard, a thief, a motherfucking Muslim, and on and on, for hours. When I passed out, they threw water on me, and then started beating me again .They tied me down to a table and beat the soles of my feet. They wouldn’t even let me go to the toilet, just made me piss on myself, and then continued to beat me until I said

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I'd say whatever they wanted me to say, do whatever they wanted me to do, just so that they'd stop. They made me write a confession. (p.158-159)

Following Khalid's arrest, the situation in Moazammabad "half-blighted place" (p-1) rapidly deteriorates. Soon, the town is rocked with violence, triggered off by an ambitious politician who thrives on stirring up anti-Muslim hatred. The gentle imam of the mosque which Rafiq frequents, sometimes along with Jimmy, is burnt to death, and the town is placed under curfew. The Muslim ghetto bears the brunt of the curfew, being the target of police brutality and Hindu mobs, who work in tandem. And it is in this situation, finding himself and his fellow Muslims completely beleaguered and driven to the wall, with no hope for any succour, that the docile Jimmy is driven to become a terrorist. "A radical change comes over him: he starts carrying a knife, hidden in his sleeve. The novel describes the build-up change by purposive historical contextualization in the segregation and marginalization to which the Muslims have been consigned for years" (B.Meenakishi:2016). Ahmad powerfully brings out what is now a pervasive phenomenon: the frightening communalization and deep-seated anti-Muslim prejudice of large sections of the agencies of the state, including, and especially, the police, resulting in extra-judicial arrests of Muslims on a vast scale across India, who continue to languish and tortured in jail for years on end with little hope for justice. He also sensitively describes, in a manner that cannot leave any reader unmoved, the painful anguish and sheer desperation of Muslims faced with menacing dangers to their very existence and to their sense of self-respect, being treated less than criminals, even worse than second-class citizens in the land of their birth.

The novel describes beautifully "the havoc that politicized religion and narrow communalism continue to play in the lives of innocent millions—not just in obscure Moazzamadabad, and not just all over India, but all across the globe as well." (Yoginder Sikand:2011) The Hindu right-wing, fomented by politicians both local and national, is a "maddened hundred-armed creature carrying axes, iron rods, tridents and kerosene cans"; torture a Muslim boy, burn to death the MaulanaQayoom; mount a fearsome campaign of

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intimidation against the Muslim community. At the end when the police picks on Jimmy outside the cinema and the corrupt Hindu inspector asks him to identify himself, he plunges the knife in the latter's belly shouting defiantly, My name is Jimmy the terrorist. (p-193) is announced as: "In Mozzamabad, UP, too large to be a town and too backward to be a city, a young man stabs a police inspector and is beaten to death" (*Jimmy the Terrorist*-Jacket inner blurb)

Journalists from Delhi and Bombay descend on the town, "like kites upon a fresh kill." (p-1) is the reflection of the hollowness of Indian society and exposes their religious intolerance.

The novel evokes the year 1992, when a right wing Hindu fundamentalist rally attempted to tear down the Babri mosque which they claimed was the birthplace of Hindu god and mythological character Rama. The rally progressively turned into an angry mob of over a hundred thousand people, and the violence that erupted here echoed all over the country. Peter Van der Veer says that "For both Hindus and Muslims the issue has become loaded, first of all mosque is a sacred place it can't simply be demolished or removed. The very idea that a mosque should make a room for a temple, in which images are worshipped, sounds like an utter defeat of Islam and is therefore highly repugnant to Muslims. Second there is the history according to which Babar was involved in the building of the mosque. This provides even more reason for at least some Muslims to demand its preservation" (P. Van:1996). Therefore the retaliatory violence from the Muslim communities further exacerbated the situation. Police and political parties took sides and the country plunged into lawlessness for a few days. Curfews became the norm.

It seems that Omair's idea for the novel began with one thought - what would be a Muslim youth's mind-set amidst events of religious intolerance and unrest? The story based in a small town in UP easily translates into being a microcosm for Indian religious conflicts and further a microcosm for Muslim victimisation. It is Muslim homes that were dynamited, Muslim businesses and livelihoods that were destroyed during the riots of the 1960s, and it

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was Muslims and the poor who, during the Emergency of 1975-77 became part of the target of a forced sterilization campaign. The plight and miserable conditions of Muslims is described by Qamruddin as thus, “It is the poor that are being targeted, the poor and the Muslims... we had a surplus of poor people and Muslims in India. This would take care of poverty and Muslims in one go” (p-63)

Since Ahmad ends his novel by saying that “No one asked who Jamaal had been, where he was born, or what he did, but Jimmy the terrorist was listed, his death reported, and may be that is the important thing.” (p-194), he seems to suggest that Jimmy was forced to act the way he did. He is the product of the violence, and his actions are the result of the victimization and marginalization which he himself was the victim of along with his own religious community.

Conclusion

The events in *Jimmy the Terrorist* depicts in detail the problems faced by the Muslims in India. It does not conceal anything but rather masterfully shows what happens to Muslims in Northern India is happening all over the country. The novel largely deals with the victimisation of Muslims by Hindus. The story is applicable in any place where the communal interests of any privileged or powerful groups edge out the interests of others, pushing the latter to the margins of power or influence. In this sense, *Jimmy the Terrorist* is a very human and very global story. Omair Ahmad has been very realistic while presenting the sufferings of Muslims minutely, thus giving a voice to the unvoiced predicament of the marginalized Muslims.

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