

Challenging Absoluteness and Fixities in the Post-9/11 World

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Abstract: The attack on the world Trade Center, New York in 2001 literally shook the world. This attack brought about major changes in security laws across the globe. One major category of people affected by the new laws were the migrants. Politicians across the globe established connections between terrorism and immigration; this further alienated and marginalized the immigrants. In short one may say that the incident of 9/11 essentially altered the face of migration across the world. This paper looks at the challenges faced by the immigrants through the writings of Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* and Amitava Kumar's *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb*. Delving into concepts of identity, the paper reads how both the writers describe the manner in which concepts of absoluteness and fixity interrogate immigrant identity. Similarly, they show how governments in delegitimizing immigrant identity help to legitimize it. In its entirety, the paper delves into the idea of the challenges and the helplessness of the immigrants in the post 9/11 era.

Keywords: migration, 9/11, identity, absoluteness, fixity, necropolitics, securitization

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the cold war and the beginning of the 21st century, the USA has been given the label of 'super power'. With such a background, the attack on the World Trade Center on September, 11, 2001 (hereafter 9/11) is no less than a global attack. The U.S.A., as a repercussion, introduced huge changes in the security laws. Similar changes were brought across the world. The United Nations Security Council passed the Security Council Resolution 1373 asking the UN member states to act unanimously by providing Intel on terrorist groups and activities. The problem, however, was that the Resolution

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did not define what and who is meant by terrorism and terrorist respectively. This lack of a “restrained definition of terrorism helped states justify repressive laws” which they could use against “political opposition in the fashionable garb of antiterrorism” (Roach 2011, 2).

In the process of action against terrorists, the immigrants were the worst hit. The scenario for the immigrants was also difficult because of the migration policy failure of the governments. This further alienated the immigrants and exposed them to marginalization and often thwarted their right to live. Immigrants became the target of discourses carried on in the name of nation and nationalism because they were thought of thwarting the stable roots of the nation which is built over ages. Immigrants seem to challenge and threaten the placid division of the world into two. Furthermore, they also challenge the nationalist discourses which, in order of legitimizing the nation, cast the immigrants as illegitimate and a threat.

It is in this context that the paper looks at Tabish Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position (How to Fight hereon)* and Amitava Kumar’s *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb (A Foreigner hereon)*. Both the texts critique a nation’s approach towards the immigrants. The immigrants portrayed in the works of Khair and Kumar are separated by the difference in their outlook towards their religion and towards their native and host countries on the one hand and intertwined by the ex-colonial status of their birth country, their hybrid status, and their alienation. The narratives not only depict the cultural and political reality of the immigrants in the post-9/11 world, but also show the immigrants as shattering the First World’s belief system. This belief system, constructed through the narratives of difference, demonizes the Third World immigrants, denying them their voices and labeling them according to their manufactured knowledge; this is a process in which the governments play a crucial role. The essentiality of these texts also lies in the fact that they do not further build up the wall of differentiation, rather they show how the binaries of ‘us and them’ is enacted. Challenging the practice of categorization, the works vividly demonstrate the construction of an irregular world with non-absolute identities.

Focusing on these strands, this paper has three sections. In the first section, the paper elaborates the ideas of absoluteness and fixity to show how these concepts are challenged by the immigrants. The second section attempts to analyze the immigrants’ ambiguous position

in the post-9/11 world. This section shows how the identity of the immigrant is contested and is not a formation of their actions but that of the discourses around and about them. Focusing on the hegemonic result and impact of the manufactured knowledge on natives as well as immigrants, the paper analyses the two texts for the perception of the immigrants about themselves and of the natives about the immigrants. In the third and the last section, the paper unravels the idea of securitization, of what it is and what it means in the context of immigrants in the post-9/11 era. It also discusses the idea of necropolitics to show the governments' pivotal role in exercising power through ideological construction and laws of the land to retain power and legitimize their authority as the protectors of the masses.

ABSOLUTENESS, FIXITY, AND MIGRATION

During the era of enlightenment, the idea of Europe being the absolute, reasonable and civilized took deep roots. In his 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835), T.B. Macaulay compared a single shelf of a good European library with the entire literature of India and Arabia casting Indians as born subordinates. An administrative move to govern the Indians, Macaulay's statement also demonstrates how the Europeans, in general, believed in the absolute division of the world where they classified themselves as civilized and rational and the others as the uncivilized and barbaric *Other*. Fixity was another concept to evolve in Eurocentric views that flourished. Fixity has been asserted by Europe to prove its supremacy as well as the right to dominate. The assertion of this stability came from the idea that the European supremacy was the result of its purity of race as well its difference from all, especially the *Other*, producing discourses such as Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*.

Migration, in a world perceived as divided into binary pairs like white and black, east and west, right and wrong, has emerged as a practice of assimilation of populations that used to stand apart. Migrants, thus, appear as a challenge to the people desiring stability and certainty through the purity of race. Through their mobility "people escape the control of states and national borders and the limited linear ways of understanding themselves which states promote in their citizens" (Smith 2006, 245) The end of colonialism and the advent of globalization changed the notion of differentiating from other races and made geographical boundaries appear as mere shadow

lines. Globalization brought with it “massive international migration on a scale never seen before in history” (Saadawi 1997, 122).

In this way, as Homi Bhabha states, the migrant is the one who signifies the position of the “minority that resists totalization” (Bhabha 2005, 162). Migrants, it seems then, occupy the space where they leave behind the identity given to them by their native land and resist taking up the one provided to them by the land they take refuge in. Their identity, hence, is not a site of stability but that of constant construction.

MIGRATION AND IMMIGRANT IDENTITY POST-9/11

Immigrant identity has been studied through different theoretical approaches such as acculturation strategies which rely on the immigrant’s response towards the culture of the host land. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, the immigrant identity became much more a subject to the discourses going around, than to the immigrant’s acts. The growth in the number of immigrants and asylum seekers has also been cited as leading to the politics of unease. The politics of unease here refers to the process where the migrants are “lumped together with other more traditionally ‘scary’ trends such as international crime (people smuggling and trafficking) (Hammerstad 2011, 219). Hammerstad also points out that this unease about the immigrants intensified in the aftermath of 9/11 as it was also accompanied by discourses that were supposed to portray the immigrants as a threat to national security.

The immigrant identity, especially in the post 9/11 West, has largely been a matter of discourse. Through these discourses, the immigrants have been stereotyped and subsequently seen as unwanted. Elements like “American national creed” come up as a potential threat “not only to incomers to America but also, in its sweeping universalism, to the life of other cultures and nations” (Crockatt 2007, 114). This indicates that immigrant identity is reshaped, and, at times, thwarted by the desire for the purity of race. This desire increased in the aftermath of 9/11 turning every immigrant into a subject of suspicion and a challenge to world peace. This, however, happened not just in the U.S.A. but also in countries like Denmark which Khair’s *How to Fight* talks of. The novel vivifies how immigrant identity is stereotyped. Khair’s novel presents the narrator, an unnamed atheist Pakistani academic, and his best friend Ravi, an Indian-Hindu, renting a small apartment owned by Karim an Indian-Muslim. Though the narrator

and Ravi do not resemble each other, it was not “noticeable” “to most people in Denmark” (Khair 2016, 14-15). The knowledge of the people about the immigrants “with their large families, all of them cramped into little Denmark” is known to all (Ibid, 15). When Ravi goes to London with his beard in French-style, he realizes that “a beard on a Middle Eastern-type face impeded progress through Customs in European airports” by “an average of two minutes and seventeen seconds - calibrated against previous non-bearded notations - per airport” (Ibid, 55). However, this stereotyping becomes natural to their selves too. Ravi, while talking about one of his girlfriends, says: “She is getting too emotional, you know, yaar... A bit like one of your purdah-shrouded khatons probably got with you in Pakistan” (Ibid, 26). Similarly, Ravi does not like it when the narrator talks of his experiences in Pakistan as not being different from that of a Danish person. He doesn’t like that the narrator talks about his schooling “which is like their schooling”; he talks about his parents “who are like their parents”; he talks about his life “which is like their life”; he looks like he is different from the Danes, but then he goes ahead and disappoints them (Ibid, 72). In not catering to the exotic expectations of the West, the narrator not only disappoints the West but also Ravi who has, seemingly, become accustomed to being stereotyped.

The role of stereotyping has also been unraveled in Kumar’s *A Foreigner* which shows that both the East and the West stereotype certain groups of people. Kumar tells us about the people who were convicted because of their looks, names, eating habits, religion, or anything that made them “different” in the eyes of the government. We are told the story of Iqbal Haspatel’s trial and torture on the discovery of what looked like a missile. The turning point of the case comes when the police realized “that the ‘projectiles’ they had found were parts of textile machinery and were called ‘bobbins’ or ‘twist-blockers’” (Kumar 2015, 3).

The immigrants start internalizing this stereotype and see themselves as different and, at times, as unacceptable to their host land. Ravi once has a vision of entering a restaurant and being stopped by a waiter for being the only dark person in the hall. He feels that he stood out. However, he is not certain if it is “due to his consciousness of the difference of his skin or the difference of his activity in this place” (Khair 2016, 144). Similarly, the suspicion on Karim for his role in the “Islamist Axe Plot” is, to an extent, a result of how the Western lens makes the Third World people see themselves. It shows

how people start seeing themselves with more suspicion and less respect as compared to the First World. This feeling is not different from Sam Selvon's childhood feeling that "the Indian was just a piece of cane trash while the white man was to be honoured and respected" (Selvon 1989, 211). It is perhaps this feeling which makes the narrator and Ravi distrust Karim. The narrator, despite being a Muslim, proclaims that he "had reasons to be suspicious, cause for caution"; for if one has "a Muslim name", he has "to be wary in some contexts" (Khair 2016, 173). The suspicion is let off Karim only when the case is solved by the Danish police. The solidarity is ripped off and Karim stands as a lonesome figure for whom the West is as strange and unknown as his mates from the East. The character of Karim in *How to Fight* is analyzed not for what he is but for what he seems to be to the people around him and in the eyes of the state.

While talking about identity formation through discourse and stereotyping, the mention of hegemony becomes important. Bates (1975, 1) points out that the basic premise of hegemony is that "man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas". Gramsci's concept of hegemony underlining domination not through force but ideology, thus, is a tool in understanding the governments' exercise of the authority of the identity of the immigrants. The writings of Khair and Kumar are a mirror to the governments' building narratives of difference to make the natives and the immigrants believe in it and participate in the subordination of the latter. In the story of Khalid Awan's trial, initially on credit card fraud and subsequently on his links with the separatist group Khalistan Commando Force, readers are told that a "routine check on Muslim immigrants in the New York area" used to take place and Awan's doom began from the "law enforcement's search for bigger fish" (Kumar 2015, 230).

If hegemony is a procedure, then Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatus can henceforth be seen as a tool of maintaining control. In this regard, he says that a state's ideology is realized through various "institutions, organizations, and practices of this system" (Althusser 2014, 126). Thus, these agencies of the system help in propagating the state's ideology. Kumar talks of one of the reports published in the *Washington Post* stating that most of the people who were arrested for the crimes related to national security in the U.S.A. post-9/11 "had been "convicted of relatively minor crimes such as making false statements and violating immigration law- and had nothing to do with terrorism" (Kumar 2015, 230). Despite cleared

of connections to any extremist group, a huge number of people were “swept into U.S. counterterrorism investigation by chance through anonymous tips, suspicious circumstances or bad luck” (Ibid, 231). An ideology, thus, implanted by the government is then executed through institutions like media or security agencies who add to the narrative of difference in which people start believing. This can be understood through the concept of necropolitics and securitization which the next section deals with.

NECROPOLITICS AND SECURITIZATION

Discursive practices have been analyzed by various schools of security studies. Ole Waever from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies proposed the theory of securitization to state that speeches with a “particular rhetorical and semiotic structure” have the potential of portraying something as an “existential threat” (Buzan et al. 1998, 25). Using such discourses, the immigrants were systematically and socially constructed as enemies; they were seen as thwarting the economy, environment, identity, and even space of the natives. This stance elevated after the incident of 9/11 leading to what is known as the securitization of migration. The Copenhagen School of Security Studies views discourses as reinforcing the binary division of ‘us’ and ‘them’. An instance of this is seen through Kumar’s statement, “The war machine had the capacity to manufacture its own truths” (Kumar 2015, 9). Kumar also reminds us of General Powell’s address to the UN stating that Iraq was producing “enough dry biological agents in a single month to kill thousands and thousands of people” (Ibid.). This statement served two purposes. Firstly, it acted as the precursor to the Iraq war. Secondly, it furthered racism against Muslims in particular, and the immigrants in general. A similar incident is noticed in *How to Fight* when an attack is attempted on a Danish artist by a Somali man for having drawn a caricature of Prophet Mohammad. After this episode, the narrator tells us that Jens Hauge, a Danish academic, wrote an essay criticizing the “supposed Islamic intellectuals” for abusing “Danish hospitality” and intriguing “against its democratic principles” (Khair 2016, 170). As a result of the discourses around, the incident is named the “Islamic Axe Plot”, thereby branding an entire community as terrorists.

Achille Mbembe’s article “Necropolitics” shows how the above-mentioned discourses of separation are often carried out by the governments. “Necropolitics” puts forth the idea that “the ultimate

expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003, 11-12). Necropolitics also accounts for the ways in which weapons are used for maximum destruction. These weapons are responsible for creating “death-worlds” (Ibid, 40) which are nothing but conditions of life making living people seem dead. The most significant weapon of destruction is the state apparatus. In his account of post 9/11 incidents in the U.S.A. Kumar talks not just of the people who were suspected terrorists due to names and beards, but also the people who were made informants in the hope of being provided a better life. He presents before us the portraits of those who seem to be the victim of the state apparatus as well as those who seem to channelize the necropolitics. Thus, Kumar wonders “when those conditions are going to change that make both types of men- the informer and the one he informs on- such easy prey to narratives devised by the state” (Kumar 2015, 14). The state attempts to build narratives by culling out the weaknesses of those whom it thinks are different from its preferred types of citizens. Those weaknesses are then used against those people to brand them as a threat.

This typification of identity by the West is seen in the tales of figures like Hemant Lakhani. Lakhani’s accusation of materially aiding terrorists was built through a setup where the government’s undercover agent persuaded him to do most of his task. After being accused of having an immoral character, Lakhani’s every step, from his diet to his words, was scrutinized for a fallacy to prove “that he had the immoral nature of someone who might be a terrorist” (Kumar 2015, 43).

Khair’s work, in the aftermath of the Islamic Axe Plot, shows the administration’s callousness in suspecting and arresting Karim without proper evidence. No one articulates that the government was “mistaken” in arresting a person without any proper evidence and just based on suspicion. Kumar states that post 9/11 the American government was on the move of arresting anybody it thought to be suspicious. The same happens with Karim. If *A Foreigner* makes us aware of how the governments play a role in creating differences between people, Khair’s work shows us how the discourse, after being put into action, is participated into by the common mass including both natives and immigrants. The text shows us how the natives as well as the immigrants become a tool in the hands of the government. Furthermore, they also help the government in channeling its practice of separation by believing the discourse. This is one of the main

reasons why the narrator and Ravi start doubting Karim despite living with him and observing him and his ideology. They fail to see Karim as one of them and believe in the discourse of difference perpetuated by the state apparatus.

Though the characters in *How to Fight* are immigrants, they not only think from their own space but also the space of those whose land they occupy. It isn't strange when the narrator gets scared of the cop while sitting in a parked car. He wonders what would the cop think "when he discovered that the driver of the car was a more or less Muslim-skinned man?" (Khair 2016, 2). This feeling of strangeness in the narrator arises from the belief of being different from his surroundings and of not belonging. This discomfort penetrates the narrator and, like him, into the immigrants to the point of making them doubt themselves.

CONCLUSION

The paper elaborates upon the status of immigration and immigrants in the post- 9/11 world. On the one hand, immigrants challenge absoluteness, fixity and desire for purity, and on the other hand, the challenges put to the identity and the existences of the immigrants are also vivid. Drawing upon several theorists, the paper elucidates that everybody is under surveillance not just by the government but also by everybody else. While it can be understood that the discourse on postcolonial identity is another form of maintaining difference, it is also understandable that concepts like absoluteness and fixity are a part of maintaining control.

Similarly, it is stated that immigrants are constantly aware of their difference from the natives. This is the result of the hegemonic discourses acting from centuries. Even though the migrants find themselves as similar to the others, their sense of stereotyping each other and the natives is no less a contributor towards the division of the world. Beyond the individual identities of the immigrants, the paper, through the politics of securitization and necropolitics asserts upon the governments' active role in maintaining easy control on the citizens.

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