

American Violence as a Catalyst for the Oppression of Muslim Identity in Post-9/11 Attacks: A Study of H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*

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Abstract

The contemporary British-born Pakistani novelist, Naqvi, has written two novels. His first novel, *Home Boy* (2009), narrates the sociocultural dilemma of the Muslim character Chuck, who faces stereotyping, insult, and torture from his American counterparts, just because he is a Muslim. This study, accordingly, focuses on the oppression of Muslim minority characters in America, positing that the American society represents a violent society, which is central to the oppression of Muslims in the selected novel. The objective of this study, thus, is to examine the author's depiction of the American society as a violent society that oppresses the Muslim minority characters in the selected novel. To achieve this objective, the author's depiction will be examined using a textual analysis methodology and applying Young's concept of violence and its related critical insights on oppression to selected textual evidence from the novel. The findings will demonstrate the Muslim minority characters' oppressed state as a signifying factor of their vulnerable position amidst the violence of the American society.

Keywords: American violence, H.M. Naqvi, *Home Boy*, Muslim identity, oppression, post-9/11 attacks

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, precisely on September 11, 2001, four American passenger planes were hijacked by suicide terrorists who crashed them into three vivid areas in America, leaving more than 2000 people dead. The tragic events of the 9/11 attacks were a watershed moment in the lives of all Americans. Muslims have not been an exception, as these events have touched them just as much as any other Americans. They have been concerned in various ways as the incident undermined their social standing and called their place on the American demographic map into doubt. The shocking events of this tragedy have been echoed by various Western media outlets that have tackled Muslims from an erroneous standpoint. As for the

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American media, it has conveyed negative stereotypical images of Muslims, considering them as “aggressive people” who are ignorant of humanity (Samaie and Malmir 12). The ensuing War on Terror, nevertheless, “[...] rendered Muslim people more visible as a uniquely threatening “enemy other,” further fomenting their racialisation” (Jardina and Stephens-Dougan 2). In fact, such stereotypical images have been used continuously, from the past till nowadays, with the Othering of Muslims, setting them as enemies or terrorists, which further enlarged their dilemma in America.

Muslims have felt the feeling of irreparable split, in which they are seen as a source of threat, as belonging to the same category as the terrorists. Indicting Muslims with terrorism generates intimidation towards Islam, which further discriminates and excludes Muslims from social, cultural and civic life in the West: “negative stereotypes about Muslims as terrorists have always contributed to an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility towards Islam and resulted in discrimination and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life in some Western societies” (Haider et al. 7). In fact, ‘negative stereotypes’, ‘exclusion’, ‘discrimination’, ‘hatred’ and ‘hostility’ provoke violence against the Muslims in the Western societies, including Muslims within the multicultural American society. In *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/1* (2011), the American sociologist Lori Peek emphasises the increase of violence towards Muslims by highlighting the “verbal harassment; violent threats and intimidation; physical assault; religious profiling; and employment, educational, and housing discrimination that Muslims faced following 9/11” (16). In this sense, Muslims in America have to face not only negative stereotypes, but also systematic violence that reinforces their oppression, as violence is one face of the oppression of any minority group in the American society.

Considerable reactions toward all the forms of oppression against Muslims, however, have made their way into the development of ideas. Consequently, many Muslim authors, from various religious and cultural backgrounds, have been open to the collective demands of the Muslim minority groups in America, as these minorities seem apprehensive in establishing their identities and placing themselves in-between their own Muslim culture and the American culture: “the hostility and prejudice towards Arabs in general and Muslims in particular based on various political events, particularly after the 9/11 tragedy, attracted attention to the meaning of citizenship and maintaining identity found in such works” (Abdelsalam 197). Muslim authors have also been compelled to express the increased sense of violence and oppression

against the Muslim minority groups. Therefore, most of their literary works concentrated on these issues affecting the Muslim minority groups in the multicultural society of America.

The contemporary British-born Pakistani novelist H.M. Naqvi (b. 1973), through his novel *Home Boy* (2009), portrays the lives of three young Muslim characters in America. The first one, Chuck, a Pakistani immigrant residing in New York City, narrates the tale under his true name, Shehzad. Chuck is part of a group of Pakistani companions, including Jimbo (Jamshed) and Ali Chaudhry (AC). As a team, they live bright, joyful lives amid the city's global tapestry, frequenting bars, exchanging clever conversation, and fitting in with the cosmopolitan throng. They are urban men who identify as more American than Pakistani and are deeply established in their urban lifestyle.

The tragic events of the 9/11 attacks, however, have disrupted this feeling of assimilation. After the incident, the sociopolitical scene shifts radically, with a wave of Islamophobia and discrimination spreading throughout America. Consequently, Chuck and his companions, formerly unnoticed in New York City, are being noticed because of their South Asian look and Muslim background. As a Muslim minority group, they started being treated with discrimination and exclusion, while also being set up as a part of a terrorist group inside America.

The novel has been examined by numerous literary studies that employed various conceptual and theoretical frameworks to explore different thematic issues concerning Muslims, such as alienation and Othering (Pathan and Ahmed 2019), terrorism (Rashid et al. 2020), physical and psychological borders (Ullah et al. 2021), assimilation and alterity (Iqbal et al. 2021), identity crisis and transformation (Ashfaq and Naeem 2022), Islamophobia (Hai 2022), resisting neoliberalism (Shah and Sheeraz 2022), marginalisation and resistance (Zaib 2023), disruption and multiculturalism (Aziz and Nadeem 2024), language and identity (Mushtaq et al. 2025), and trauma (Safdar 2025). However, using the concept of violence and its related critical insights on oppression by the American theorist Iris Marion Young (1949-2006), this study aims to explore the state of oppression experienced by the Muslim minority amid the violence of the American society, as it has been believed that America played a pivotal role in violating, torturing, and oppressing the Muslim minority in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. This study also aims to underscore the issue of oppressed Muslim identity amidst the violence of the American society, as the issue of Muslim identity represents an essential subject for many

scholars who have explored different issues of this subject matter in post-9/11 literature (Hauso 2020; Arslan and Yasin 2021; Alosman et al. 2021; Imtiaz and Azam 2022; Wolfson 2023; Fakhrulddin 2024), except the issue of the subject matter of this study. Therefore, the focus of this study is on how Naqvi depicts the oppressed state of the identity of the Muslim minority characters under the violence of the American society that has arisen in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The scope of this study is limited to Naqvi's depictions of the American violence and the oppression of Muslim minority characters in his novel *Home Boy* and to Young's conceptual framework of both violence and oppression.

Methodology

The concepts of oppression and violence are apparent in various literary works. Examples of oppression and violence exemplify many themes and techniques used by authors to unravel the lurking meaning of these concepts and how they influence the lives of minority groups in the host society. In literary scholarship, diverse studies have examined the forms of oppression and violence concerning the “physical” and “mental” aspects of the minority groups (Bujupaj 2016; Egya 2020; Kuortti and Ruokkeinen 2020; Bilal and Ashfaq 2021; Manikome et al. 2021; Bashir et al. 2022; Khalid 2023; Nisa 2023; Umeh 2024). These studies have found that all forms of oppression and violence cause dangerous treatment for the minority groups and place them in vulnerable conditions. This study, likewise, investigates the representation and cross-cultural encounters that stand for the powerless, oppressed depiction of the Muslim minority group in Naqvi's novel *Home Boy*. This study attempts an in-depth analysis of the selected work, which includes a textual analysis methodology of the novel. The novel will be examined in light of the sociocultural approach by applying the concept of violence and its related critical insights on oppression by Young (1990). This study intends to focus on the analysis of the Muslim minority characters, which, in turn, helps in a better understanding of the state of Muslims' oppression encountered amidst the violence of the American society. A careful analysis of the selected novel will establish the fact that the American society has developed an oppressive and violent power in controlling, humiliating and torturing the Muslim minority group to curb their presence in the post-9/11 epoch. The analysis will also shed light on the weak position of the Muslim minority group in America, underscoring the social and cultural dilemma they encounter, as well as the systematic bigotry and prejudice that contribute significantly to their vulnerability in diverse domains of public life.

Analysis and Discussion

American Violence as a Catalyst for the Oppression of Muslim Identity in Post-9/11 Attacks

In her notable book, *Justice and the Politics of the Differences* (1990), Young connects violence to oppression, where she defines it as a powerful means harnessed by the dominant group to impose their oppression on minorities who belong to specific groups in the society. This typical form of oppression uses physical attack or torture to persecute the minority groups in America:

[...] many groups suffer the oppression of systematic violence. Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person. In American society women, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, gay men, and lesbians live under such threats of violence, and in at least some regions Jews, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and other Spanish-speaking Americans must fear such violence as well. Physical violence against these groups is shockingly frequent. (Young 61)

Similarly, in Naqvi's *Home Boy*, the Muslim minority characters are being oppressed through 'unprovoked attacks' exerted upon them by American society after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, September 2001. This can be seen clearly through the situation of the Muslim protagonist Chuck confronting a group of gangsters at one of the bars in New York City, who insulted and beat him: "then there was a flash, like a lightbulb shattering, a ringing in my ears, the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I didn't quite see the fist that knocked me flat on my back" (Naqvi 24). Although Chuck is Muslim, he enjoys his time at the bars like any other American. The attack exerted by a group of American gangsters upon him is an obvious example of the violence of the American society. Besides that, this attack is massive, as it leads to the complete obliteration of Chuck. That is, he becomes devoid of his rights and social practices, and he cannot cope with the whole oppressive society. As a general principle, violence is a direct, vital tool to exert oppression against the Muslim minority group in all cases.

Young asserts that "the oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimisation, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are liable to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy" (62). Similarly, in the novel, the Muslim characters face the same situation. In the following textual evidence, Chuck expresses his fears over the endless violations and threats by the police officers who used to 'target' and check him 'everywhere' and 'every corner':

[...] there's sadness around every corner? There are cops everywhere? You know, there was a time when a police presence was reassuring, [...] but now I'm afraid of the, I'm afraid all the time. I feel like a marked man. I feel like an animal. It's no way to live. Maybe it's just a phase, maybe it'll pass, and things will return to normal, or maybe, [...] history will keep repeating itself. (Naqvi 206)

In the above textual evidence, Chuck's fears of the police officers' threats and violations are indications of the violence of the American society that results in his oppression amidst the prevailing tyrannical culture of the Americans. The oppression that emerges against him is due to his identity as a Muslim who belongs to a Muslim minority group. This is the severest form of oppression since it deprives the Muslim minority group of their rights, freedom and dignity.

Young argues that the concept of violence overlaps with the concept of cultural imperialism, which results in irrational violence between the minority group and the dominant group:

Cultural imperialism, moreover, itself intersects with violence. The culturally imperialised may reject the dominant meanings and attempt to assert their own subjectivity, or the fact of their cultural difference may put the lie to the dominant culture's implicit claim to universality. The dissonance generated by such a challenge to the hegemonic cultural meanings can also be a source of irrational violence. (63)

To further connect Young's view with our subject, once the Muslim minority group disagrees with the American dominant group, they become opposing and do not show any form of acceptance of the dominant American culture. Accordingly, the Muslim minority group becomes adverse towards any form of American imperialism and its dominant culture. In the long run, such adversity fosters violence between the Muslim minority group and the dominant American group, which ends up, ultimately, in oppressing Muslims. In the following textual evidence from the novel, Chuck comments on the violence of the American society at the time he prepares reactionary acts against the Americans, as he no longer accepts the dominant culture of the American society by any means, saying that "when somebody hits you, you hit back" (Naqvi 40). Here, the reactionary acts that Chuck prepares for show the violence of the dominant American culture, as his statement above reveals how he lives under the threats of the American society that inflicts violence upon him at any time. Chuck's situation demonstrates how the Muslim minority group lives in worse conditions under the dominance of the American society that inflicts violence upon them at any time. It further unveils their oppression, as they are persistently inspected and controlled by a higher and mightier dominance called American imperialism, which incarnates the concept of cultural imperialism and its oppression (Fakhrulddin and Bahar 9; Fakhrulddin et al. 373). This can be seen in the following evidence spoken by Chuck: "you could feel it walking down some streets: people didn't avert their eyes or nod when you walked past but often stared, either tacitly claiming

you as their own or dismissing you as the Other” (Naqvi 45). In this sense, the Muslim minority group faces violence and oppression by the dominant American imperialism.

Young furthermore debates violence in terms of injustice, which can be induced through setting several negative stereotypical images against the minority groups (63). The Muslim minority group, of course, can be linked to Young’s discussion of the stereotypical images of minority groups. To explain, once the Muslim minority group is portrayed negatively, in stereotypical ways by the Americans, unjust violence occurs against them. That is, it becomes vulnerable to several attacks just because the Americans deem them to be, e.g., outsiders or terrorists. Such negative stereotypes motivate American society to commit violence against the Muslim minority group. In the following textual evidence from the novel, Chuck’s interrogation by a police officer, Grizzly, reveals such a situation:

Grizzly: You are a terrorist?
Chuck: No, sir.
Grizzly: You a Moslem?
Chuck: Yes, sir.
Grizzly: So you read the Ko-Ran?
Chuck: I’ve read it.
Grizzly: And pray five times a day to Al-La?
Chuck: No, sir. I pray several times a year, on special occasions like Eid. (Naqvi 113)

In the above textual evidence, Chuck can experience violence from the police officer, Grizzly, who has negative thoughts that Chuck might be a ‘terrorist’ as long as he is a Muslim. Violence lies in Grizzly’s depiction of Chuck as a terrorist in such a negative, stereotypical way. It also lies in his negative depiction of Chuck’s religion, Islam, as a religion that supports terrorism. Here, violence can be begotten as a consequence of stigmatisation towards the religion of Islam and their followers, the Muslims, who are perceived as terrorists. The tendency of American society to create negative stereotypical images lies behind the rationalisation given to violence and deliberate injustice against the Muslim minority group. According to Young, violence and injustice toward the oppressed Muslim minority group cannot be eliminated unless there is a “[...] change in cultural images, stereotypes, and the mundane reproduction of relations of dominance and aversion in the gestures of everyday life” (63).

Conclusion

By employing a textual analysis methodology and applying the selected conceptual framework to Naqvi's novel *Home Boy*, this study has examined the oppression of the Muslim minority group characters through the author's depiction of the violence of American society. This violence has been illustrated through both the physical attacks and stereotypes experienced by Chuck, who is labelled a terrorist and subjected to torture. It has also been illustrated through the dominance of American imperialism, which contributes essentially to violating, subjugating, and depriving Chuck of maintaining any form of power and sociocultural stability in the society. These acts of violence underscore Chuck's vulnerable position and reveal his oppression amidst the dominant American society. Therefore, this study concludes that the violence of American society plays a catalytic role in the oppression of Muslim identity in the aftermath of the post-9/11 attacks. Future research can be done by applying the theory of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), which explores the issue of Muslim characters' traumatic violence in the novel.

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