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VIOLENCE, EXTREMISM, AND TERRORISM: A CRITIQUE ON OMER SHAHID HAMID'S THE SPINNER'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

This paper informed by the theories on extremism, violence, terrorism, mapping of terrorism and evolution of terrorist organizations by Martha Crenshaw, Bruce Hoffman and John Horgan; explores the life of Sheikh Ahmed Uzair Sufi, the protagonist in Omer Shahid Hamid's *The Spinner's Tale* (2015). Through an in depth study of this fictional character, the story of the young innocent boy, who is a cricket lover, is put before us who turned in to a jihadi after joining the student-wing of an ethnic party. In doing so, the researchers attempt to identify patterns in the evolution of terrorism; to specify its causes and consequences and to analyze its development, particularly in Pakistan. Therefore, this study probes into the fact that how small groups are multiplied to make larger terrorist's groups. In the light of the given theory, Sheikh Ahmed Uzair Sufi's character provides us with an ample source to study;

those circumstances and conditions due to which many young educated Pakistani men belonging to middle-class families turn to violence and militancy. Alluding the text, the authoritarian governments/factions, and the corrupt political system and/or political exploitation play a vital role in creating monsters out of young educated Pakistani men. Having established that, a critique is presented on the space created by such systems that breed and safeguard offenders and militants.

INTRODUCTION

Omar Shahid Hamid's fiction *The Spinner's Tale* is a story about Sheikh Ahmad Uzair Sufi known as 'Ausi' in his childhood. He was born into a middle class family of Karachi. He is sent to a prestigious school in Karachi mentioned in the novel as 'The School' where he befriends Sana Safdar and Adnan Shah (Eddy). Ausi passionately loves Cricket. He gets admission in a medical college but as circumstances will have it, he is compelled to join a students' union of a political party. Thus he turns into the most feared terrorist and jihadi militant of his time. Though they pursue different lives but the two friends always keep their friendship and stay in touch. Their passion for Cricket and school days nostalgia binds them together forever. This paper probes into questions like: How does terrorism evolve and what are its causes and consequences? and How does terrorism evolve and what are its causes and consequences? and What are the circumstances and conditions due to which many educated young Pakistani men from middle-class families turn to militancy? By doing so this paper aims: to identify patterns in the evolution of terrorism as represented in the selected novel, to specify the causes and consequences of terrorism and to analyze its development, particularly in Pakistan as shown in the novel, and to see how small groups are multiplied to make larger terrorist's groups. Essentially qualitative in nature, this study involves inductive research. A detailed textual analysis of the primary text, that is, *The Spinner's Tale* (2015) by Omar Shahid Hamid is carried out to complete this research study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been considerable research on the novel under discussion from variety of perspectives; some of which are briefly discussed here.

To begin with, Hina Iqbal and Muhammad Asif in their study "Subjectivity and Ideological Interpellation: An Investigation of Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Spinner's Tale*" discuss the novel through Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation. This study examines how the characters of Shahid's novel inhale ideology and become its subjects. This research also brings to light the alarming effects of cultural hegemony that create cultural infidelity and hierarchies between the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes (p. 01).

In this regard Farheen Shakir in her review of the novel, "Tracing Ausi's Right to Miam in Omar Shahid Hamid's *The Spinner's Tale*" discusses the novel as crime fiction. She mentions Ausi as the terrorist and according to her, Ausi's decision and free will causes him his life. Although he transgresses the prescribed boundaries to achieve his standard of morality so as to make sense of his revenge, his super-humanness as antihuman and disabled otherness are challenged by the state (p. 2-4).

Similarly in “Strategizing Violence: An Anarchist Perspective On Omar Shahid Hamid’s *The Prisoner And The Spinner’s Tale*” by Momina Hafeez, the possible nexus between centralized state authority and violence by non-state players is portrayed. Hafeez describes the portrayal of recurring antagonism between multiple forms of authority (such as state, ideology, and capitalism) and the individual and political agency of the citizens of Pakistan.

“The Ideological Ranting in the Debut Novels of the Contemporary Pakistani Writers” by Marriam Nadeem and Sohail Ahmad Saeed is a study on the contemporary novels *The Spinner’s Tale* and *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. The study states that there is a general belief amongst the people that ideologies are always for the betterment of the people and that they always lead to prosperity. However, what they fail to understand and realize are the consequences that are associated and attached to these ideologies and the subsequent blind following. This study demonstrates that how the religion and politics are manipulated to take control of the people. (p. 4).

There are a few other studies as well which discuss the novel subject to research, but the current study focuses on the perspective of the evolution of terrorism in Pakistan, its causes and the consequences.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

According to Merari and Friedland, Terrorism has always been there even before the records of any human history are found (1985). Over the decades, the threat of terrorism has been increasing and the rate has even gone beyond management with the globalization of information technology, travelling and commerce. This, on one hand puts a relief to the economic disparities but on the other develops a competition. It also attracts the aggravated and angry people who turn into competitors. It helps bring the likeminded people nearer and hence develops the conspiracies (racial, regional, national and religious). Hamid also portrays an educated middle class man who is manipulated and turned into a psychotic-religious fanatic. His idea of heaven and hell depends on the number of people he kills in the name of religion. He thinks and has this urge/need to kill everyone. His transformation affects almost everyone around him who include his family (parents, wife and his son) and friends (Sana and Adnan). In third world countries such as Pakistan, politics is a deep-rooted phenomenon in the everyday lives of its citizens who cannot escape from it. It even affects the young girls and boys of schools and colleges. There are unions and agencies allied with different political parties which control them according to their conveniences. Hence the terrorism in Pakistan is not only caused by RAW funded agencies or the conspiracies of the Jews; but also by the huge system working within the country that continues to brain wash the youth and delude Muslims in believing that killing the non-believers (Kuffaar) is a way to please their Allah Almighty and a path that leads them straight to the Heaven. Thus in this way, by entering the agency, Sheikh Ahmad Uzair is psychologically deluded and he becomes a mindless jihadi. External circumstances and psychological problems both contribute to make his life as it stands today.

Crenshaw believes that terrorism is derived not only from economics but also from the never ending ‘game’ between the rulers (government) and the

terrorists. These policies are a way to change the attitudes of the terrorists. Bruce Hoffman also believes that the fundamental aim of the terrorist's violence is ultimately to change 'the system' and that the terrorist's goal is again ineluctably *political* (to change or fundamentally alter a political system through his violent act). Unlike an ordinary criminal, the terrorist's goals are not egocentric altogether. He is not obsessed by the wish of making money or to satisfy some other personal need. His cause is bigger usually devised by an organization. The terrorist is basically an "altruist"; he is made to believe that he is serving for a better and greater cause which will achieve greater benefits for a wider community (p. 57). This is seen very clearly in Sheikh Ahmad Uzair's character when he makes fun of police force and tells Omar Abbasi,

Again Superintendent, you completely miss the point, like all other police buffoons . . . You ascribe all these motives to me, as if I was some kind of common criminal, because as policewallahs, your minds cannot comprehend ideals that are beyond your limited intellect (p. 293-4).

Uzair laughs at their thinking by telling him that people are not always motivated or encouraged by money to break the laws. There may be other bigger and more serious reasons to do such an act. Just like himself, he mentions that he is not a common criminal who least cares about the rules and laws. "I am driven by a higher calling" he says (294).

On another instance in the novel, when Sheikh is taken by emotions for a moment he says, "It's not as simple as having lost your family in a drone attack. Some things trigger the dark reaches of the soul (p. 145)". A good and common person having as normal a life as everyone has, becomes evil and an extremist murderer, and starts believing that he is right in doing so. Hamid opines in an interview, "No one starts out as a monster". But then some people having positive traits turn into the most negative. This is the reality and it's something that happens every day! "

The most important fact in Sheikh Ahmad Uzair's case is that his story has almost nothing to do with the religion. Being a student of an elite school, Hamid focuses on the protagonist's psychological developments, matters of his personal life, his entry into political sphere, and tries to give psychological reasons to his altered behaviour. According to Hamid religion can never be the sole cause that pushed Sheikh into this violent path. "[t]his tallies with much that he observed as an anti-terrorism police officer: "Oftentimes, ideology plays a very minor role. It becomes a vehicle... a lot of people have very different personal reasons which they then cover in the garb of ideology or religious motivation." (Hamid, 2016) To the character of Sheikh, there are some psychological aspects associated, such as Sana, his childhood love marries his best friend Eddy which he refers to throughout the novel but never admits. Similarly his friend Eddy is a Shi'a Muslim while he belongs to a Sunni group of Muslims.

Hoffman, in his book *Inside Terrorism* also explains the terrorists and their purpose by saying that they are different from the ordinary criminals because terrorism is basically political in its aims and objectives, it is violent in vaster

degrees, it's immediate target or victim is not the real goal but rather its purpose is to have far reaching psychological consequences and it is perpetrated by a non-state group or entity:

We may therefore now attempt to define terrorism as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change. All terrorist acts involve violence or the threat of violence. Terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack (p. 395-60).

This instills fear in people, and thus terrorize, a wider 'target audience' that might consist of an opponent ethnic or religious group, a whole country, a national government or political party, or public opinion in general. Terrorism is intended to generate power where there is none or to strengthen power where there is very little. Through the hype generated by their violence, terrorists seek to get hold of the influence, power and control they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale (p. 396). This is evidently portrayed in Sheikh's character when he says that his purpose is far greater than capturing one person and killing him.

The close relationship of Ausi with his school mate Eddi is the of central focus in the novel, a relationship about which the policeman Omar Abbasi comes to know from the letters the two have always written to each other throughout their lives. As Omar Abbasi tells Sheikh towards the end of the novel; "Why does it hurt your sense of self-worth for someone to actually say out loud what you are? Well, imagine what will happen to your precious standing in jihadi community when the insanity of your letters comes out (p. 294)". He says people will think Sheikh as a mad dog. How will he justify the murder of his friend to his thousands of Kashmiri followers? What will he do about his pious image? (p. 294) He attempts to untangle Sheikh's mystery through his intimate correspondence with Eddy. He even quotes Sheikh's father who is sick of the unlimited scrutiny of the policemen time and again, he says to him your father is right in pointing out that you "destroy everybody you touch" (p. 293).

There are other factors which may also be responsible of why and how people get so motivated religiously or politically that they reach to a point of no return. Their capabilities and potential energies are thus converted into violence and aggression. As John Chowing Davies observes, "violence is always a response to frustration" (p.251). However, there are many people who live in frustrated environments and situations but they never think of turning into a terrorist. This frustration in Pakistan is represented by Hamid in the novel through the portrayal of social injustice and inequality in making both the major characters come from relatively humble backgrounds. Both Sheikh and ASP Omar Abbasi are outsiders, both have come to receive education in elite institutions on the basis of scholarship, both are natural hard workers, skilful in their respective fields and both want to make it out of the safe boundaries of their humble origins. Right from the beginning, Sheikh Ahmad Uzair and Omar Abbasi are well aware of the fact that they are unequal in social and economical background with their peers. They are also always made aware of this fact by their society.

But both try to deal differently with their situations. Abbasi comes to be a police officer and attempts to maintain “a laser-like focus on the work in front of him”, whereas Sheikh decides to test his skills of oratory and manipulation in his life. The insensitive society of Pakistan is reflected through the characters in the novel. Hamid makes the Pakistani reader realize that we live in a heartless and cruel society where class prejudice and economic disparity is at its peak. Hence the society is equally to be blamed along with the brutal and violent jihadi movements or organizations. This social split is seen in the novel by providing it a temporal background of the month of Ramadan where many elite characters do not observe the month’s sanctity. They are insensitive and disrespectful towards this month. Neither Eddy, nor Sana, nor the DIG observe or appreciate the sanctity. They are the typical typecast of elite society in Pakistan. None of these characters is able to redeem them in any case.

Even the language reflects the phenomenon of power. The jihadis are always found against the foreign language English. In *The Spinner’s Tale*, Sheikh, while in a conversation with ASP, makes fun of his use of English language and humiliates the police officer on the basis of better pronunciation and command of the language. Moreover, while executing the foreign hostage in front of the camera, Sheikh Ahmad Uzair speaks scornfully that it has become a conviction of all the foreigners that “they are safe with an English speaking gentleman . . . as if being able to recite a few lines from Shakespeare is a character of certificate on its own.” (p. 295).

Many jihadis find an excuse of their actions in the secular trends of their system and they claim that they want to change the prevailing system. Secular Trends of Modernity and the development of mass destruction weapons also facilitate the aggression across the world and thus the conspirators and religious fanatics and fundamentalists are brought nearer, “putting the potential of macro terrorist acts into the hands of small groups or even individuals” (Hoffman 1998; Laqueur 1999; Enders and Sandler 2000). The tragic event of 9/11 is the result of such conspiracy. According to Stern, these modern and secular trends are very threatening and dangerous for the security and prosperity of human civilization as the “one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter” problem (Jenkins 1982; Hoffman 1998). To save the youth from the so called secular trends, jihadis give didactic teachings and preaching to them as opposed to the secularism and modernity. Didactic teaching brain washes and alters the minds of people especially young people. It emphasizes the importance of Jihad. It has become the charter of many Islamic movements now as is the example in the charter (article 15) of Islamic Resistance Movement (Harakat Al-Muqawama Al-Islamiya); “We must imprint on the minds of generations of Muslims that the Palestinian problem is a religious one... I indeed wish to go to war for the sake of Allah! I will assault and kill, assault and kill, assault and kill” (Alexander 2002, p. 57).

Hence it shows that such didactic teachings also influence the youth. The easiest way to aggravate the youth is through religious fanaticism. People can be convinced in the name of religion. But very few, actually a very small number of those millions of students of jihad in several madrassas around the world or those millions exposed to the extremist situations become terrorists. According

to Taylor and Quayle "not everyone from those communities, although subject to those same or similar influences, becomes a terrorist" (p. 32).

Sheikh Ahmad Uzair also starts as a descent person who is willing to learn and educate himself, to come out of the middle class label and to go beyond the horizons. Very early in the novel we come across the first letter written by Ausi to Eddy recalling the glorious past of their strong bond of friendship: "The fact that we both loved spin bowling really cemented our friendship. . . . The spinner's art is the hardest in cricket. It requires patience, perseverance and a maturity beyond your years. . . . I have always marveled how you had those qualities even back then (p. 32)". He is a good student who comes out of esteemed institutions and a keen cricketer who wants to have a future in the international team. But unfortunately things fall apart soon and he joins a political camp, only to join the militant camps in Afghanistan later on. He gets trained as a militant and plans the kidnapping of the foreigner tourist, plans the murder of the president, sends suicide bombers for it, abducts and slain the British journalist in Pakistan. Moreover, he proudly and calmly accepts all his actions.

CONCLUSION

Hence there are two common elements that we often come across when we attempt to define the terrorists; one that "terrorism involves aggression against noncombatants" and the other that "the terrorist action in itself is not expected by its perpetrator to accomplish a political goal but instead to influence a target audience and change that audience's behavior in a way that will serve the interests of the terrorist (Badey 1998; Laqueur 1999)". Martha Crenshaw opines that sometimes the terrorist's goals are not achieved even by their professed actions; hence their behavior cannot be understood. Whatsoever, she says that any individual who attacks innocent humanity and civilians can never be termed as a rational being. Likewise Sheikh Ahmad Uzair can by no means be considered a rational being because he murders his own friend, leaves his family for the sake of the terrorism, thinks that his son would soon forget him as he is young and even at the end of the novel, plans for another murder of Shahab, a police officer 'who must die' according to him. Though he cuts himself off from his immediate world (family and friends) but still is afraid of dying alone as he reflects his thoughts, "I don't think I'm scared of dying. After all, a man like me who has cheated death so many times has no excuse to fear it. It's dying alone that frightens me (p. 214)".

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