



Negotiating Cultural Vulnerabilities in Nazia Erum's *Mothering a Muslim*

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Abstract

India has always been a site of multi-cultural ethos and pluralist essences. In the light of burgeoning right-wing political influences, this study aims to investigate the literary repercussions of such circumstances in the contemporary period. For this purpose, the article focuses on a close reading of the non-fiction *Mothering a Muslim* in order to understand the sociocultural nuances of growing up as a minority kid in India. The alienation of Muslim children as 'other' and pushing them to the periphery is a subject of grave concern and must be addressed at the very onset. In order to address the issue, the public spaces such as schools must be more secular in its true sense and more accommodating in actions.

Keywords: othering; alienation; marginalisation; identity crisis

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Introduction

India has always been a home to diverse ethnic cultural, linguistic and religious population. Owing to this diversity there lies heterogeneous identities even among Muslims contrary to the generalised monolithic perception (Shaban 4). The essence of this country's egalitarianism is established by advocating 'secularism' captured in the constitution of India. The concept of secularism underscores freedom of one's religion and not preferring one religion as state religion. However, the largest religious minority of India, Muslims continue to be vilified and marginalized in a secular democracy owing to different socio-cultural habits, religious sectarianism, historical backdrops and political agendas (Kakar 23). The Indian Muslims are mostly a result of the syncretism between Hinduism and Islam. In India, mostly lower class and caste Hindus converted to Islam and even retained their surnames after conversion (Shaban 5). Like all Muslims across the globe, the two major sects of Indian Muslims are the Sunni and Shia which is again branched into several schools of thought across time. The anti-Muslim sentiment that permeates the contemporary socio-political atmosphere of India must be understood in the historical background leading up to the present (Tausch et al., 2009). The sense of being 'other' was instilled among Indians by the 'divide and rule' policy of the British. This acted as a catalyst for latent historical discontent over the Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent during the middle ages (Kakar 24). The partition of British India on the basis of the religious majority created the perception that Muslims do not belong to India. This sentiment was variously triggered by the propagation of 'single nation ideology' of right-wing politicians (Maizland 2) more so in their



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rise to power in recent years. In the present context, Muslims face segregation and othering due to issues related to identity, security and equity (Mondal online). They face discrimination on several grounds such as education, employment, housing and lack of basic amenities (Robinson 2008). Some are biased, some irrational and some due to a sense of loss (Maizland 6). They face deliberate ostracizing from both within and outside the community. Thereby arises the call to preserve collaged identities, puzzled by their priorities and muddled by the need to wear their nationalism on their sleeves. The recent surge in the Islamophobic atmosphere has compelled writers to take up pen as a necessary move to counter the anti-Muslim rhetoric led by politicians, whereby the onus is laid upon Muslims to prove their subservience to the nation (Mohammed 2020). This article specifically focuses on a recently published memoir by an Indian Muslim women author who tries to locate the vulnerabilities of Indian children growing up in this millennium.

Unlike some other books on motherhood this is not just about normal lessons on parenting, rather it looks at addressing intricately sensitive issues tender minds are exposed to. Some of the books dealing with motherhood along with other issues include, *The Mother of All Questions* by Rebecca Solnit, *Everything Here is Under Control* by Emily Adrian, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* by Anita Desai, *Three Women*, a play, 'Morning Song' and 'Barren Women Poems' by Sylvia Plath (Das, 2022 online). This autobiographical memoir at its onset tries to address the problems faced by Muslim children in schools' playgrounds as well as the society they live in. The recent rise of Hindutva forces has not just overpowered the political scenario in the country but has now reached the personal and public spaces of individuals. The Muslim children are



intimated, scarred and at times terrified by the disturbing experiences they encounter owing to their identity as Muslims (Amatullah 2). This was quite unthinkable in the context of secular India at least a few decades back. However, the current situation has changed completely and India has been badly hit by political polarization and burgeoning communal hatred. It is in this context that the author tries to posit the grievances of Muslim children facing Islamophobia along with the anxieties of parents of victimized kids.

Mothering A Muslim rightly described as 'A collective memoir of Muslim motherhood in India' is a non-fiction by debutant Nazia Erum was published in December, 2017. Divided into seven chapters along with an Author's Note and an Epilogue it recounts the concerns of Muslim parenthood in the contemporary social milieu. It is both an autobiography and a biography with the inclusion of interview excerpts as a first-hand priori information to validate the authenticity of the book. This article aims to examine how Islamophobia has been dealt with in contemporary literary discourse of India keeping children as the focus of discussion. This goes by reviewing the conditions of Muslim children in recent socio-political milieu.

Theoretical and Conceptual framework

The present article gains its theoretical dimensions from Post-colonial Anglophone non-fiction. Like other post-colonial texts, it divulges into critical questions of identity and negotiation in a multicultural society. Gaining currency from it this article looks at how Muslim children are negotiating their identities and shaping their perception of others from their experiences of Islamophobia. The very task of parenting is quite a tough one and if it is infused with added troubles it becomes more challenging (Srinivasan, et al., 2019). In the age of growing Islamophobia, rearing



of Muslim children entails a lot of challenges for parents. The children are faced with questions on their religious and cultural identities making them different from the majoritarian masses (Amatullah, Shaima. 2022). Parents often find them in a pool dilemma and uncertainties framed by the queries of children. However, despite these issues being critical some questions and doubts often go unanswered. The rising Islamophobia in the current political scenario of India has invoked awareness in various forms of writing. Some books dealing with the idea of being Muslim in India and their experiences that deserve mention here are *BORN A MUSLIM: Some Truths About Islam in India* by Ghazala Wahab, *In Good Faith: A Journey in Search of an Unknown India* by Saba Naqvi, *India's Muslim Spring: Why is Nobody Talking about It?* by Hasan Surror, *At Home in India: The Muslim Saga* by Salman Khurshid *Questioning the 'Muslim Woman': Identity and Insecurity in an Urban Indian Locality* by Nida Kirmani *Being the Other: The Muslim in India* and *The Muslim Vanishes* by Saeed Naqvi. In this sense *Mothering a Muslim* is a pioneering work as it investigates an unexplored area. This book of non-fiction looks at how Indian Muslim children of the present times have been victims of Islamophobia and what would be the probable means of overcoming this social ill.

The question here arises whether Muslim children are really victims of Islamophobia and in the course of action are they marginalized and oppressed for their religious and cultural identity? These questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no thus making the entire discourse a problematic one. Muslim children unlike other minority children experience social exclusion and othering from school curriculum and 'everyday nationalism' (Amatullah 1). The sense of alienation and othering that overcome Muslim children makes them more vulnerable. Thus, they become more



prone to victims of Islamophobia owing to their innocence and at times ignorance causing induced oppression. This process of stereotyping Muslims through the propagation of dominant discourses thus affects childhood and Muslim children internalize the act of their othering.

Review of Literature

The emerging genre of literature engages with the much-needed socio-political aspects of contemporary India. The oeuvre tackles several questions on Muslim identity and crises faced as a result of minority status. *BORN A MUSLIM: Some Truths About Islam in India* (2021) is a nonfiction by journalist Ghazal Wahab. It tackles some of the fundamental questions of being an Indian Muslim in the country. It takes a historical venture from the origin of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula to its advent in the Indian subcontinent. After elaborating upon the multiple routes in which Islam reached India, she plunges upon the contemporary socio-political conditions responsible for the stunted development and progress of Muslims in India. *In Good Faith: A Journey in Search of an Unknown India* (2012) is also a non-fiction book by another journalist Saba Naqvi. The author presents a utopian picture of a country recognized by its pluralist spirit. She undertakes a quest for her own identity amidst multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multilingual communities. She speaks about a country that has secularism as its essence and defies all forms of communal disharmony across religious fault-lines. This non-fiction also has some personal underpinnings owing to the author's own mixed family ties (Futnani 2016).

Belonging to the same genre is another non-fiction by London based journalist Hasan Suror *India's Muslim Spring: Why is Nobody Talking About It?* This book as Hasan Suror himself opines captures the mindset of contemporary Muslims in an optimistic light. He brings to the fore the supposed



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bright future of Muslims in India which has been significantly embodied by practising Muslims mostly belonging to the younger generation. They have a prospective perception quite different from the supposed fundamentalist disposition of the previous generation. Rather they are educated, politically aware and conscious of their demands concerning the basic amenities of life: 'education, jobs, housing, security' (Suroor Hassan, 2016). This new generation of Muslims are defiant when it comes to flaunting their identity as Muslims and have women in hijab as flag-bearers of change.

At Home in India: The Muslim Saga (2014) is a biography as well as autobiographical account of veteran politician as well as former Union Minister Salman Khurshid. Belonging to a Muslim elite lineage this book seems to be more exclusive similar to the above-mentioned book by Hasan Suror. (Khurshid, Salman 2014). Mr Salman Khursid delineates the concerns of Indian Muslims who have accepted India as their motherland and have remained loyal throughout. However, both the books bring up the issue of othering and marginalization of Muslims as a major socio-political concern that should not be undermined. *Questioning the 'Muslim Woman': Identity and Insecurity in an Urban Indian Locality (2013)* exclusively deals with the concerns of Indian Muslim women. The author focuses on narratives of Muslim women of Zakir Nagar which is Muslim concentrated locality of South Delhi. Taking this as the foci of study the author discusses how Muslims especially women have become vulnerable when the question arises of asserting one's Muslim identity in the public space. The situation has aggravated all the more in the recent wake of incidents of hatred and brutality meted out to Muslims.

Being the Other: The Muslim in India (2016), is a sort of memoir by a journalist of international repute Saeed Naqvi. He begins the book by invoking lines from famous Urdu poet Mohsin Kakovi



in the syncretic mood of his birthplace Awadh. The author who had once witnessed peaceful coexistence of Hindus and Muslims in India is perturbed by the rising intolerance and communal disharmony. Much in the same light his later book *The Muslim Vanishes* (2022) is a magic realistic take on the plight of Muslim. In a dystopian manner this play envisions India devoid of Muslims resulting in absolute political fiasco. The absurdity of the situation knocks the fear lurking at the back of the mind. He correlates the current political context to an imaginary situation that might occur if Muslims are completely obliterated from India.

Database and Methodology

The article focuses on contextualizing the collective memoir, *Mothering a Muslim* in the contemporary socio-political scenario of India. In the course of this the article undertakes a desk-based in-depth study of this text substantiated by reviews of the same. This study has adopted an ethnographic methodology keeping in mind the mindset of Muslim children encountering Islamophobia and coping with it. This methodology is instrumental in observing a particular community as a research area with the use of a cultural lens (Atkinson, 2007; Fetterman, 2010). Utilising this methodology this article explores the representation of Muslim childhood in India in their process of encountering Islamophobia. This issue being a serious threat to the overall development and psyche of the human mind makes the study more unique. Since this article underscores the behavioral aspects of human beings by taking into account its literary representations this article has an interdisciplinary outlook.

Unveiling the dark secrets of schools and playgrounds



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Nazia has garnered quite a critical acclaim in the wake of her first publication and is quite frequent on digital and print media delivering her voice on concerns of Muslim society. She is also the youngest Indian to represent south-east Asia at the Global Fund Board. At present she has also moved to London, United Kingdom. This book is triggered by the anxieties of being a Mother specifically a Muslim to a daughter torn between the obligations and choices.

Herself reared in a more secular environment in Assam and being a convent educated, her anxieties stem from the changing political situation in contemporary India. She claims that post 9/11, and with the rise of right-wing Hindutva politics, the situation of the Muslim minorities in India has ameliorated. Residing in one the composite societies of the capital she also marks a stark change in the concerns of parenthood in their course of rearing children. Although the sense of righteousness was also present previously there has been an emergent tendency among the parents of the present generation to teach their kids ways to combat Islamophobia. The repartee previously done at the expense of Muslims only to be similarly dismissed as petty jokes is now a waking call not to be brushed under the carpet surreptitiously (Fazila-Yacoobali, Vazira 2002). The elephant is already in the room and needs serious discussion.

The question thus arises why such hatred for fellow citizens? Historically Muslim rulers have ruled the country for several centuries before the advent of colonialism. Muslims have co-existed with non-Muslims but the sense of being an outsider was instilled by the British policy of 'divide and rule' and the demand for a separate nation resulting in the partition of India as the final stroke (Kakar 24). Thus, in spite of residing in this nation for years Muslims are often thought of as outsiders and hence a threat to the cultural harmony of India. India has also encountered violence



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and brutality during the partition and after it. Instances of bloodcurdling brutality and carnage during the Babri Mosque demolition and the Gujarat riots are not unknown (Sarkar Tanika 2002). Islamophobia is no longer a distant affair to be watched in the form of news but it has been translated in the culture by the irresponsible acts of media and journalism which are hell-bent in demonizing and stereotyping Muslims. The result has been horrifying where the kids uncensored have picked up conduits of othering and segregation (Ellwood-Lowe, et al. 2020). The author tries to examine the acts of segregation citing some examples of some reputed schools of Bhopal which created sections in classes on the basis of language namely Sanskrit and Urdu. What the author tries to delineate is that though the segregations of school kids were to assure optimum utilization of school resources such compartmentalization brings about complete othering of Muslims and the internalization of victimhood from a tender age. This has resulted in the emergence of insular communities ignorant of and indifferent to each other. The attitude is both ways something that Erum tries to capture when she says that the Muslim community did not come out loudly against the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. She tries to reason out the supposed indifference towards the Muslim community laying the onus on both the communities of not being interactive (Erum 10-11). The reasons discussed here seems that Indian Muslims especially those trying to rear their kids with a secular approach find themselves torn between rabid Islamization and the surging Islamophobia which though was dormant has been regurgitated by the various incidences of violence championed by the ISIS and other Islamist organization. As a result, India has been facing in the very recent years is a burgeoning anti-Muslim rhetoric fueled by the 2014 elections. Thus, Muslims have been put under unnecessary surveillance and children are not exempted from it.



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The book recounts the experiences of 145 Muslim families which is a result of independent research conducted by the author herself across the country in twelve metropolitan cities. What culminated into conducting such a research is quite personal finding resemblance in the general public. The author herself narrates in the author's note her apprehensions behind christening her child with a Muslim-sounding name and its possible repercussions:

“As I held my little daughter, Myra, for the first time, the fear found a place in me too. I was worried of giving her even a Muslim sounding name” (Erum 3). Her anxieties voice the typical concerns of present-day Muslim parents who are apprehensive of their identity markers and its probable religious affiliations in the course of parenthood. Erum speaks of another six-year-old girl named Azania who was appalled at the very sight of Muslims coming out of Friday Congregation. Her parents are equally disturbed about how to tackle this when the child is herself unaware of her own identity. It seems that the spite and alienation towards Muslims has been internalized since a very tender age. The most pertinent question that crops up is who is responsible for such gestures? The girl herself was unaware of her identity and her parents had not yet disclosed her religious identity to her. What is evident is the internalisation of fear towards Muslims propagated by the majoritarian discourse.

The very cover picture of the book, as well as the sub-title, is eye-ball grabbing for the readers. The cover picture shows a little boy squatting with his head hung and covered in his arms. There is an underlying ambiguity behind the intended message of this picture. It can be read as a child shying away from his own fears and anxieties faced in the forms of bullying or slurs. The inability at confessing trapping them in a whirlpool of thoughts. Another probable reading would be the child's



recalcitrance towards accepting his identity as Muslim confronting threats of ostracizing. The subtitle correlates to the rise of animosity towards Muslims manifest in the manner of violent retaliation among school kids. It makes one relate to a very popular film featuring Shahrukh Khan and Kajol named *My Name Is Khan* (2008). We find how the protagonist is constantly discriminated on the basis of his Muslim identity and the onus is laid entirely upon him to prove his allegiance to the country he is residing in order to prove his intentions noble. Though claimed to be dark secrets they are quite overt and reiterated time and again without noticeable attempts to undo the wrongs. Nazia takes this as an opportunity and uses it as a wake-up call for all mothers appalled by the strange discordance in the behavior of their kids.

Mothering A Muslim charts out the stories of intolerance, indifference, bigotry and a polemic against Muslims in eight chapters. The inclusion of the drafts of original interviews is a testimony to the authenticity of the accounts. Throughout the span of the book, we find various accounts of children even young ones as a third grader just stepping the threshold of education unnerved by the consciousness of being a Muslim. The others account for the slanders thrown in front of a child such as ‘Get away from the ball, you Paki’, ‘a Baghdadi, a Bangladeshi, a Pakistani, a terrorist (Erum 9). A heart-rending incident as a six-year-old being battered by her classmate for being a Muslim tries to show the internalization of hatred and apathy towards Muslims. Besides showing the anxieties of rearing up a child in a secular environment she also tries to give the other side of the story whereby such stories of violence are meted out with nonchalance by the parents of the tormentors as innocuous acts of juvenile innocence. Nazia rightly tries to bring out the probabilities of such negligence which needs immediate attention.



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Muslims are not just discriminated against by non-Muslims but are often confronted by their community for not being religious enough. Muslims find themselves straddled in the liminal space between a practicing and a liberal Muslim on the basis of their adherence to religious principles and practices. Erum introduces the concept of "haraam police" to explain how there is constant policing of modesty and behaviour and practices by the conservatives present within Muslim communities (44). Children are confused between what to follow and what to discard. When some Muslim children behave a particular way, they become symbolic for all Muslims and thus there is a tendency to generalise Muslims as a universal category. The "haraam police" is rather instrumental in institutionalizing the stereotypes already available in the discourse. Thus, religious sectarianism adds to the othering Muslims on the basis of purity of their faith within communities. There is hardly any attempt at abbreviating the very gaps and polarities made within the Muslim communities. Thus, Muslims are judged both by the Muslims as well as non-Muslims with the accounts of everyday experiences of people from all walks of society.

Though Nazia tries to capture the vein of struggles faced by Muslim kids in the process of their growing up there are certain ellipses on her part (Erum 5). She only concentrates on a particular segment of society, the educated middle class or affluent Muslims residing in the metropolis. Nonetheless, she has very well listed out the educational institutes whereby such acts of discrimination and segregation are rampant, and some of the steps taken up by certain schools as a means of mitigating them. Although she has mentioned the presence of Muslim kids belonging to the Economically Weaker Sections (referred to as EWS in the book) she has failed to give an account of their first-hand experiences (Erum 44). However, her intentions in recounting and



filtering them remains covert. In the act of doing so, she has somehow failed to capture the glimpse of a larger perspective on a broader canvas. According to the Sachhar committee report (2006), the majority of Muslims in India are marginalized and their socio-economic conditions have aggravated recently (Akhtar, Najma, and Manju Narula, 2010). So, their accounts can present the painstaking ground reality in a more nuanced manner. What the book obviously hints at is the fact that if the situation of secular schools is so bleak, the conditions at Madrassa would be unimaginably deplorable (Malik, Jamal 2008). This has therefore resulted in the calculated othering of Muslims and internalizing Islamophobia among kids. This is an urgent issue which has been addressed partly in the book by looking at the experiences of a particular socio-economic section of Muslim children. These children have encountered first-hand experiences of Islamophobia in school's playground and societies they live and is a pressing issue that needs attention.

Conclusion

What began as petty questions can no longer be shoved up as trivial matters. Questions like 'Are you a Muslim?', 'Do you eat beef?', 'You don't look like a Muslim' calls for serious discussion. Such thoughts coming from younger ones like a 6 or a 10-year-old hints at the internalization of othering of Muslims. Despite coexisting in this country for several years Muslim are still thought as outsiders or foreigners. Also, the onus is almost always laid upon the minorities to wear secularism on their sleeves lest they injure nationalist sentiments of the majority (Jalal, Ayesha 1997). The majority is almost always unapologetically oblivious of the cultural and religious nuances of the minorities and is normalized as a norm. Such deep-rooted indifference leads to ignorance about the religious minorities resulting in alienation. The non-Muslim children grow



up in such an environment where they inculcate the sense of difference from a very young age leading to reification of the 'other' (Amatullah, Shaima. 2022). The schools and playground which is thought to be manifesting completely secular ideologies presents a contradiction when it comes to practice. The religious and cultural practices of the majority are accepted as normative whereas those of the minority are not considered the same. Such discrimination leads a long-lasting impact on the minds of the Muslim kids and they also internalize their marginalization to the periphery.

Fear and obligation to perform according to the school protocol leads them to perform in a way they have the least scope to resist or question any imposition. Through this article I have focused on the literary representation of marginalization and othering of Muslim kid as a social ill. This leads to serious psychological disruption manifested in a child's behaviour. In the first case they become traumatic resulting in violent and aggressive repercussion. In the second case children take recourse to silence and avoidance often leading to self-doubt or low-esteem. This is a social issue that calls for discussion from both the minority and the majority groups. The problem though emanating out of socio-political and historical upheaval needs a humanitarian solution. Firstly, the perception of Muslims as the 'other' must be rejected unanimously as it leads to dehumanization of Muslims. Secondly, public places such as schools and playgrounds must adopt a more secular disposition making it more inclusive in nature. The elders, in this case parents and teachers must act more responsibly teaching the right outlook to children, respecting all religious and cultural differences by being more accommodating.



These solutions can be successfully applied by adopting more inclusive measures in the academic curriculum. The educational institutions and societies should be careful in handling sensitive issues like exclusive religious and cultural practices of all communities. Teachers and school staff must not support any activity that might lead to ‘othering’ or ‘marginalisation’ of minority kids. In case of physical or verbal bullying of minority children, both the victim and tormentor must be advised and counseled. Also, children must be made aware of the consequences of picking up politically loaded jargon leading to the othering of Muslims from the mainstream literary and media discourses. Beyond institutions, there should also be healthy and cordial dialogues between parents teachers and children of all communities. Inter-faith dialogue and discussion will eventually lead to the building of a healthy relationship between children of all faith and communities. Social gatherings intended to educate children about multicultural practices will lead to a more informed and responsible upbringing of children. This would bring about peaceful co-habitation in a multicultural space like India. Finally, more research should be encouraged investigating the cause of othering and marginalisation of Muslim children in India.

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