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# THE PARADOX OF INTERSECTIONALITY: HOW A CONTEMPORARY NOVEL BRINGS TO LIGHT RACIAL TENSIONS IN POST 9/11 AMERICA

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**The Paradox of Intersectionality: How a Contemporary Novel Brings To Light Racial Tensions in Post 9/11 America**

This paper explores racial tensions and racial identity in a post 9/11 world by looking at a contemporary novel.

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Tensions in Post 9/11 America**

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Post 9/11 America also means post 9/11 literature. The tragedy ushered in a new kind of novel, a novel in which characters are blinded and influenced by race. One can argue that race has always been a topic in American literature, yet there is a new kind of identity crisis, spurred by intersectionality. This identity crisis of literature and culture in American society is poignantly written about in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*. The protagonist is an American man who also happens to be Muslim. He has never really given his Muslim identity much of a thought when the reader is introduced to him, yet after a series of xenophobic and eye opening events, Mohammad, Waldman's protagonist, is forced to admit to himself and the accusing society that intersectionality is not possible. On closer examination, Waldman's novel is a testament to the changing racial tensions in a post 9/11 world. Yes there have always been racial tensions, yet *The Submission* marks a new era in American literature that speaks to the culture of fear; one in which persons would like to think he/she is living in a post racial society, yet when confronted with examining a person's racial and religious background, he/she realizes that there is still misunderstanding and fear. Waldman's novel starts the conversation that Americans need

to have and reveals the tensions that Americans need to face; that there is a paradox of intersectionality and that a post 9/11 America has revealed, if not created, a new racial and religious tension and divide, for it is not just one's race that is being discriminated against, but one's religion as well.

“If the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is a negative value” (Said 65).

Edward Said's statement could not summarize the events of Amy Waldman's *The Submission* any better. Mohammad Khan is thrust into the spotlight, because his design for the 9/11 Memorial has won. Outrage is immediately voiced within the privacy of the jury, yet the media soon exposes it is Khan who won and the fear and hatemongering begin, with outrage spreading across the general population. Even though Mohammad is not Arabic, he is Muslim, and those who have voices in the novel could not care less what the difference is, if there is a difference, etc. Mohammad may not be Arabic, but Said's statement rings true. If someone from the Eastern, Muslim world occupies enough space for attention, it is a negative value. In Mohammad's case, it is such a negative value that his submission is denied, and he moves out of the United States and back to where his ancestors were from, India. One of the most important aspects of the novel is Mo figuring out his identity, not as it is framed by the media and/or the fearful public, but as it is framed by him. This is important because Muslim identity and the fear of the “other” are not just subjects in fiction. Therefore, it is important to understand Mo's struggle with intersectionality and the American public's role in accepting, or in the case of the novel, not accepting, a person for who they are as a whole. Intersectionality is the idea that one cannot separate aspects of identity. Intersectionality helps the reader understand what happens to Mo. As hard as he tries Mo cannot separate himself from his whole being (male, Muslim, etc.). This makes Mo's situation even more interesting, because he is an American yet the public is

able to succeed in teasing that part out of him in order to make him the face of what Americans fear. The conflict and struggle of intersectionality in the life of Mo and how he is framed by the dominant voices of American fear is important in showing how Mo eventually learns that he cannot separate parts of himself, which leads to his exile from the United States.

One of the ways the reader understands Mo's coming to terms with all of who he is, what makes him who he is, etc. is the evolution of Mo and his identity. At the beginning of the novel, Mo tries to separate himself with his Muslim identity as much as he can. The most obvious way he does this is by shortening his name Mohammad to Mo. It is important to note that the reader is to assume that Mo has always shortened his name, that he did not stop going by Mohammad after the attacks of 9/11. However, the importance of his name is more significant than ever after the attacks, which is something Mo's father brings up a little more than half way through the book:

“Your mother and I were talking about your name the other day,” he said. “Why Mohammad, of all names? The most obviously Muslim name you could have. It was your grandfather's name, of course, and he embodied what we wanted you to be...But also your name was a statement of faith in this country. We could have given you some solid American name. But as much as we turned our backs on religion, we never shied from being Muslim. We believed so strongly in America that we never thought for a moment that your name would hold you back in any way...it is my own son who has brought about...my doubt for the first time about whether this country has a place for us”. (Waldman 219)

This scene brings poignancy to Mo's father's struggles. His father was once hopeful about the inclusive country that is the United States, yet he is now discouraged. This evolution is important to the novel and in understanding Mo's evolution. Mo is trying so hard to separate pieces of him, but that is impossible, for he was given the name Mohammad for a reason. Mohammad carries a certain cultural and familial weight, one in which Mo cannot hide from whether or not he goes by Mo or Mohammad. The second important aspect is Mo's father's discouragement. Even though Mo is going by Mo, he cannot hide from his given name, Mohammad. This is seized on in the press and in the media and serves as more ammo in the fight against Mohammad building the Garden. Mo's father becomes discouraged because he does not see a way his family, and people like his family-Muslims-can be accepted in a post 9/11 culture of fear.

The poignancy of this scene is important in situating the fear in the book with the fear in real life. Unfortunately, Waldman's work of fiction is based in reality. The fear of the "other" is not just something that is talked about in novels. The fear in the novel is a reflection of the fear the public has in real life. One of the biggest drivers of fear, as discussed by Mo's father, is Mohammad's name and the hate and ignorance it breeds. Nadine Naber writes in her essay "Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!: Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11" that in the public sphere particular names such as Mohammed or Osama operate as signifiers of an "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" identity. She goes on to tell the story of a man who was concerned about naming his son Mohammad:

"After September 11 no one would have thought about naming their son Mohammed in this country if they wanted him to be treated like a normal person. We thought about

what would happen to our son in school, and how he would be discriminated against growing up. But we felt that this is our religion and our culture, and long before September 11 we decided that if we had a second son, we should name him Mohammed. We decided not to change what we stood for, but imagine what happens when your neighbor says, ‘what is that cute little boy’s name?’ You say ‘Mohammed’ and they say, ‘Oh...’ This is how September 11 impacted even the relationship between you and your neighbor”. (Naber 290-91)

The fact that two of the most common Muslim names, with Mohammed being the most common name in the world, would signify “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” identity is not surprising and is not cause for alarm. However, what happens as a result of those signifiers is important, because it is clear from Naber’s story that those signifiers have become a signifier of fear and discrimination. What is even more alarming is the fact that this man spoke about his neighbors being uncomfortable with, theoretically, what him and his wife name their child. A neighbor is someone who is familiar. If a neighbor is, once again, theoretically, uncomfortable and hesitant with a name, why wouldn’t a complete stranger be uncomfortable? This man’s story resonates with the culture of fear and ignorance that has reverberated throughout communities post 9/11. No matter how unfounded this fear is, real people are being affected by the stigma of what certain names signify. This man is grappling with intersectionality—he notes how Mohammed is an important name in his religion and culture, and he cannot separate that from himself—yet the fearing public seems to be making a decision for him—that he has to separate his religion and identity from himself if he wants to be accepted as “normal”. This is what the fearful public tries to do with Mo in *The Submission*, and, like the man in Naber’s story, Mo decides to be fully who he is, and faces consequences for that decision.

Yet before Mo makes his decision, he still needs to evolve from the person he is at the beginning of the book, someone who tries to separate certain aspects of himself out of his identity. Despite the symbolism of his name, Mo does not seem to be a practicing Muslim. However, when he is detained in an airport a certain religious phrase comes to his mind: “His boast of irreligion stayed on his tongue, for what reasons he couldn’t say, any more than he could say why words long unuttered floated unbidden into his mind: *La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasulullah*. The Kalima, the Word of Purity, the declaration of faith. It almost made him laugh: at the moment he planned to disavow his Muslim identity, his subconscious had unearthed its kernel” (Waldman 30-31). Mo was trying to distance himself as much as possible from the reasons he was detained—he fits the profile of a Muslim, a terrorist, etc. However, he begins to realize that his identity is rooted in his religion, whether or not he is a practicing Muslim. The words are described as being “floated into his mind” and “unbidden”. This suggests that this religious phrase has always been a part of his identity and always will be, because he is a Muslim.

The religious aspect of Mo’s identity continues to evolve when he encounters a fellow Muslim, a Pakistani newspaper vendor. However, in this encounter, a few things are different. Instead of being detained and thinking religious thoughts as either a rebellion, an affirmation or both, Mo is greeted by a friendly man, a man similar to him in faith from what the reader can insinuate about the passage: “His heart began hammering so audibly, or so he imagined, that he put his hand on his chest to muffle it. The vendor, thinking it a greeting, put his hand on his chest in return and said, ‘*Asalamu alaikum*.’ ‘*Alaikum Asalam*,’ Mo replied, the words foreign and rubbery on his lips” (Waldman 57-58). Although the vendor mistakes Mo’s nervous gesture for a religious greeting, Mo does not correct him and actually replies. The reader knows Mo has

either never spoken these words before, or that it has been a very long time because of the adjectives “foreign” and “rubbery”. However, Mo does speak the words, instead of just thinking them, which is a progression from the scene in the airport. Although Mo is far from familiar with this part of himself, and does not seem to be completely comfortable with the religious and/or Islamic influence in his life, he is becoming more aware that he cannot hide or deny the Islamic part of himself.

The evolution of Mo subconsciously thinking religious, Muslim words and uttering them is quite an affirmation. Language conveys a great deal about an individual. In the case of Mo, the reader is learning that he has not completely disregarded, or at least succeeded in disregarding, his race and religion. Saussure’s “Course in General Linguistics”, in which he writes about language and the act of speaking, helps explain the importance of Mo evolving from thinking phrases to actually speaking them: “Speaking...is an individual act. It is willful and intellectual. Within the act, we should distinguish between: (1) the combinations by which the speaker uses the language code for expressing his own thought; and (2) the psychophysical mechanism that allows him to exteriorize those combinations” (Saussure 59). Saussure’s definition and framing of language emphasizes Mo’s evolution from thinking to speaking. As reluctant as Mo tries to appear, Mo does speak, which, according to Saussure, affirms Mo’s connection to the religious and racial part of his identity. In accordance with Saussure, speaking is individual, which means Mo did not have to reply to the man the way he did, and speaking is willful as well as intellectual, which means Mo is consciously deciding what to say and is aware of what he is saying, what it means, etc.

Yet while Mo is starting to come to terms with his identity as a whole, his identity is being threatened. The jury has just found out that the winning design for the 9/11 Memorial was submitted by Mohammad Khan. Although they do not know anything about Mo, the jury immediately makes assumptions, not only about Mo but about Muslims as a whole: “people are afraid. Two years on we still don’t know whether we’re up against a handful of zealots who got lucky, or a global conspiracy of a billion Muslims who hate the West, even if they live in it” (Waldman 22). There is quite a paradox going on here. As Mo is starting to embrace more of what makes up his identity, his identity is being threatened. Saussure’s statement about speaking is applicable in this scene as well. The reader is learning about these characters through their words and use of language, and in the case of Mo, languages, employed. Adding to the paradox is Paul’s false intersectionality. Although intersectionality means one cannot separate a single aspect of their identity from their whole identity, it does not mean that everyone who associates one way is the same. While Mo is becoming more aware and accepting of his Muslim identity, Paul, the man voicing the jury and the American people’s fears, is making a scary and damaging, not to mention untrue, assumption about identity and intersectionality. Although Paul is using the pronoun “we”, by speaking Paul expresses his own thoughts. However, Paul’s concern, or, more accurately, ignorant assumption, becomes the dialogue that is dispersed throughout the media and eventually ruins Mo’s future in the United States.

The media, both in the novel and in real life, is also framing a false intersectionality. The way in which persons of the Islamic world are treated in the media fuels the false intersectionality. For in the media, there is not a difference between one who practices radical Islam and one who does not, one who was born in the United States, one who was not, and so on and so forth. The book *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, And Public Opinion*

*of Muslim Americans* addresses the role of the media and the false framing of a diverse group of people and how said false framing contributes to an inaccurate intersectionality: “domestic coverage may have two dimensions as well: one that concentrates on ethnic and religious minorities in America (i.e., Muslim and Arab Americans) and another that concentrates on their ties to their regions of origin (i.e., the Middle East)” (3-4). This passage describes the connection (no matter how forced or inaccurate) commonly made in the media between Muslim and Arab Americans in the United States to their native homeland, even if they are many generations removed. Of course the extent to which the connections are made, and how Muslim and Arab Americans are framed in the coverage is not given, yet in the context of *The Submission* and the climate of fear that has led to some Muslim Americans questioning their acceptance in the United States (i.e. the man who was afraid to name his son Mohammad) leads the reader to assume that the concentrations on minority groups and their ties to their origin, is not always a learning mechanism, but a way to expose a group of people that one can scapegoat and fear.

Mo becomes a scapegoat and a representation of fear through the way he is portrayed in the media in the novel. The erroneous identity of Mo by the media is juxtaposed with Mo’s struggle with intersectionality. Mo tries to find his own identity that is not created by the culture of fear. He sees a picture of himself on the front page of a newspaper and struggles to find himself in that picture: “He taped the *Post* cover to his bathroom mirror that night, only to find the man in the balaclava looking back at him with cold, hard eyes. Executioner’s eyes. Mo couldn’t find himself in that picture, which was the point. The next day he enlarged his submission photo and pasted it on top of the *Post* picture. With the ugliness covered he could pretend it was gone” (Waldman 58). The fact that Mo even struggles to find himself within the

picture, to identify himself within the picture, is quite telling of the fear the media is trying, and seemingly succeeding, to convey. If Mo struggles to see his true self somewhere in the picture in which he is dressed in traditional Islamic clothing, or, considering what the newspaper is trying to achieve, the stereotypical dress of the “other”, and in which he describes himself as having “executioner’s eyes”, how are people who do not know him, who have already developed prejudice towards him and people like him, supposed to see him as separate than the men who blew up the World Trade Center? After all, that is what the newspaper is conveying through that picture. Mo has to put up a different picture of himself, one that is not so outlandish, so he can “pretend it was gone”. Once again, if Mo cannot even look at that picture of himself, how can the general public find a friendly, non-terrorist, non-threatening person in that picture? In addition to the egregious picture, the adjectives Mo uses to describe the picture are also a reflection of the culture of fear that drives such a response to a Muslim winning the contest.

Mo finally confronts his accusers, and the image of himself as reflected in the newspaper, at a public hearing. The public hearing scene is a culmination of Mo’s battle with intersectionality, as well as the public’s fear of the “other.” Mo is speaking about what influenced his Garden and is still not getting the respect he deserves. He is trying to quell the public’s fear, yet they are unwavering with their racist stance. As a result, Mo tells the truth about the Garden’s influence, which, in turn, is telling the truth about himself: “He had intended to emphasize all the non-Islamic influences on the Garden, to show that if critics were evaluating the same design by anyone not named Mohammad, they would have seen its ranging roots. But the heckling suckled his rage, and he decided, in that moment, that to downplay any Islamic influence was to concede the stigma attached to it... ‘My point...is that the Garden, with all of these influences-this mix of influences is what makes it American’” (Waldman 245-46). It is

interesting that Mo was not going to bring up the Islamic influences and that he was intentionally not bringing them up to show that the public was judging the design differently because of the name attached. Yet he changes his mind when he realizes that no matter what, he is not going to change the position of the hateful public. He realizes that if his garden, and, by extension, he as an individual, are going to be judged, he might as well accept all of the influences on his garden, as well as all of the influences on his identity. Mo makes peace with the fact that his garden and his self are products of a lot of different influences, some of them accepted and some of them not. The fact that Mo sees denying that part of the Garden, and denying that part of himself, as “conceding to the stigma” is also important in Mo coming to terms with his identity. He realizes that if he gives in to the negative view of Muslims and Muslim Americans that he will be feeding the xenophobia. Mo’s evolution is again juxtaposed with the regression of the anxious public. He is admitting that of course there are Islamic influences, in part because he is Muslim and in part because it is hard to live in a globalized world and not be influenced by other cultures. He goes on to say that the mixture of influences is what makes the Garden uniquely American. However, he is rejected in the end, along with his design.

By Mo voicing his goal of what he wants the Garden to represent, and the fact that this is rejected, is an ugly reflection of the American public within the context of the novel. Mo says that his design, being a mixture of influences, is what makes it American. This is an accurate metaphor. However, the events that transpire throughout the novel because of fear of the “other” are a reflection of the United States. Edward Said writes about how the West and the East are connected, which is an uncomfortable reality for those who reject Mo and his design: “Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two

geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (Said 71). Said writes that the Eastern world has its own identity, which has helped garner attention and a presence in the Western world. As a result, these two ideas, Western and Eastern, support and reflect one another. This is an uncomfortable assertion for those who view the East as “other.” If these two entities are a reflection of one another, how are terrorists and radical Islamics a reflection of the United States? Perhaps, and maybe giving too much credit to the fearing public, this is what drives the rejection of Mo’s garden, Mo himself, and Muslim Americans in general. Mo asserts the Islamic influence in his design. As a result, Mo is asserting what Said writes, that the West and the East, although unique, do reflect one another. This idea is just too much for those who are afraid. After all, what is easier, admitting that this different person and different culture is a part of the American community or that Mo and everything he stands for is different? The Garden is a signifier for Said’s idea about the West and the East supporting and reflecting one another. All of the influences come together to create a beautiful place which everyone is invited to enjoy. Yet the anxious public rejects this, and, as a result, rejects themselves. For if the two halves of the world do reflect one another, what does it say when the general public rejects half?

Even though Mo finally embraces his whole identity, he is rejected for parts of it, namely his race and religion. Mo describes the picture in the newspaper as “ugly”, which is a reflection of the public perception of Muslims as “other.” It can even be argued that Mo is describing the fact that a newspaper would even instigate such a malicious, fallacious, and inaccurate an image as ugly. What happens to Mo, and how he is perceived, is ugly. The public can only see what they want to see, which is in part framed by the media. Islam is the “other” and nothing can be said to change that idea within the context of the novel. A false intersectionality is presented in the novel, as well as a true intersectionality. This juxtaposition is what drives the false narrative

of Islam as “other”, which is fed, in large part by the media. However, it is also seen in this novel that people have their own views constructed well before the media takes part in the narrative of fear. This is seen through Paul and his fear that the Muslim community throughout the world may be one big conspiracy. Overall, the novel asserts that one cannot define themselves by picking and choosing what they want their identity to be. However, the different views of intersectionality are what make the difference in whether or not Mo would have been accepted. There is the true intersectionality, which Mo eventually embraces during the public hearing scene in which he realizes that to ignore the false intersectionality would be to accept the false view of himself and his design. The false intersectionality is how Mo is portrayed in the media, and how in real life Muslim and Arab Americans are portrayed as well—the idea that they are all connected in some way or other with their country of origin which means all of “them” are alike, which links “them” to radical Islam. Finally there is the intersectionality that Said writes about, the intersectionality of the Western world and the Eastern world, that neither one can fully exist without the other. This is the most distressing intersectionality, not only given the events that transpire in the novel, but within the false narrative that is shaped in real world events. If these two parts of the world are reflections of one another, then trying to separate one from another leads to a dangerous identity. This false intersectionality contributes to the “othering” of the Eastern world, which is reflected in the novel. Fear and hatemongering lead to a misunderstanding that harms both parties involved, which is reflected through Claire and Mo at the end of the novel. Claire is dying and is still fearful of Mo, while Mo, in all of his success, was still shunned by his native country. This intersectionality is a harsh reflection of the American public in relation to the self.

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