
Deconstructing the Construction of the Muslim Other in Selected Modern English Poetry

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Abstract

This study investigates the construction and deconstruction of the Muslim “Other” in modern English poetry through a post-structuralism framework, focusing on the instability of binary oppositions such as self/other, West/East, civilized/barbaric, and voice/silence. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Jacques Derrida, the paper argues that representations of Muslim identity are not fixed or essential but are discursively produced, contested, and continually reshaped within poetic texts. Through close textual analysis of selected poems by Imtiaz Dharker, Carol Ann Duffy, Moniza Alvi, Sujata Bhatt, Tariq Ali, and Daljit Nagra, the study demonstrates how poetic language simultaneously invokes and destabilizes dominant ideological binaries rooted in Orientalist discourse, as articulated in *Orientalism*. The analysis reveals that these binaries are internally contradictory and interdependent, collapsing under deconstructive scrutiny and giving rise to ambivalent, hybrid, and fluid representations of identity. The findings suggest that modern English poetry functions not merely as a site of reproducing stereotypes but as a critical space where hegemonic discourses are interrogated and reconfigured. By exposing the discursive mechanisms through which the Muslim “Other” is constructed, the study contributes to ongoing debates in postcolonial and post-structuralism literary criticism. It further highlights the role of poetry in challenging essentialist narratives and fostering more nuanced understandings of cultural and religious difference in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Muslim Other, Post-Structuralism, Binary Oppositions, Deconstruction, Modern English Poetry, Representation, Discourse.

Introduction

The structures of power, ideology, and language have shaped the representation of cultural and religious difference in literary discourse from the ages. The construction of the Muslim “Other” in English literature occupies a predominantly significant position, especially within the context of modern English poetry where inherited historical narratives interconnect with existing political anxieties. This study scrutinizes how binary oppositions—such as self/other, West/East, civilized/barbaric—are constructed, continued, and ultimately undermined through a post-structuralism reading of modern poetic manuscripts. Post-structuralism, particularly as expressed by Jacques Derrida, defies the stability of meaning and interrogates the hierarchical binaries that strengthen the Western thought. Derrida’s concept of *deconstruction* discloses that such oppositions are neither natural nor predetermined but are instead linguistically produced and ideologically encumbered (Derrida, 1978). Within this framework, the “Other” is not simply an peripheral or marginal figure but a necessary erect through which the dominant identity defines itself. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, Western representations of the

East—including Islam and Muslims—have historically functioned to emphasize a sense of Western superiority by producing the Orient as exotic, backward, and threatening (Said, 1978). Modern English poetry, despite its aesthetic diversity and embryonic forms, often inherits and reconfigures these Orientalist tropes. While earlier literary traditions, particularly medieval and colonial texts, blatantly depicted Muslims as adversarial figures, modern poetry is liable to present more nuanced yet still ideologically entrenched demonstrations. These representations repeatedly maneuver through subtle linguistic and symbolic binaries that persist to pose Muslims as the “Other,” even when the discourse appears sympathetic or critical of such divisions. This critique seeks to deconstruct these binary oppositions by analyzing selected modern English poems through a post-structuralism lens. It investigates how language both constructs and destabilizes the Muslim “Other,” revealing the inherent oppositions within these representations. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Derrida and later post-structuralism critics, the study argues that binary oppositions are intrinsically unstable and that their deconstruction exposes the variability of identity and diversity. Furthermore, this research locates literary representation within broader socio-political perspectives, distinguishing that modern poetry does not subsist in seclusion but is produced by global proceedings such as colonial legacies, postcolonial resettlements, and contemporary geopolitical divergences. As Homi Bhabha proposes, cultural identities are fashioned in a “third space” of conciliation, where fixed binaries are interrupted and rearticulated (Bhabha, 1994). By engaging with these theoretical perspectives, the present study not only evaluates the determination of binary philosophy but also highlights the potential of literary texts to defy and reimaging prevailing discourses.

Eventually, this article contributes to enduring scholarly debates on representation, identity, and ideology by signifying how post-structuralism analysis can unearth the complexities rooted within poetic constructions of the Muslim “Other.” It argues that deconstruction is not just a technique of analysis but a way of opening up innovative possibilities for comprehending cultural difference beyond reductive binaries.

Background

The representation of Muslims in English literature has always been distorted by irregular political, cultural, and ideological forces. From medieval crusading accounts to colonial discourses and modern literary structures, the status of Muslims has been regularly elevated through structures of difference that reinforce Western identity. As Edward Said argues, this process is central to Orientalist discourse, where the 'Orient' is not a neutral geographical entity but a discursive construct created through Western systems of knowledge and power (Said, 1978). Such representations are primarily based on binaries of East and West, rational and irrational, civilized and barbaric, and serve to legitimize cultural hierarchies. These binaries are not just themes, they are built into the very fabric of language and thought. Poststructuralist theory, particularly the work of Jacques Derrida, questions the supposed stability of these oppositions. Derrida demonstrated that binary structures are hierarchical in nature, giving priority to one term over another while at the same time being dependent on surrounding terms for its meaning (Derrida, 1978). In the process of dissolution, these binary systems become unstable and reveal internal contradictions that undermine their authority.

The relevance of this study is even greater in the current global climate, where perceptions of Muslims are often tied to political discourse, media coverage, and issues of immigration and security. Modern English poetry, as a reflective and critical medium, absorbs and challenges these narratives. However, despite increased scholarly attention to postcolonial and orientalist discourses, there remains a relative lack of focused poststructuralist analyzes that specifically examine how binaries operate in poetic language to construct and destabilize the Muslim Other. This study therefore sits at the intersection of post-structuralism and postcolonial studies and aims to fill this gap by examining how contemporary English poetry simultaneously reproduces

and deconstructs binary structures. By highlighting the instability of these oppositions, this study aims to go beyond reductive interpretations and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of representation, identity, and difference in contemporary literary discourse.

Research Questions

- 1) How do modern English poets create and subvert binary oppositions (such as self/other, civilized/barbaric, West/East) in their representation of the Muslim “Other,”?
- 2) In what ways does a post-structuralism framework disclose the volatility, ambivalence, and ideological flux underlying poetic representations of the Muslim “Other” in modern English poetry?

Literature Review

The portrayal of the Muslim Other in English literature has been the subject of critical analysis since ancient times, and particularly postcolonial and post-structuralism perspectives. The key argument in this discussion is the groundbreaking book *Orientalism* by Edward Said, which argues that Western representations of the East are not objective ones, but are ideological constructs that are used to advance imperial interests (Said, 1978). Said demonstrates how the Orient, Muslim cultures, is discursively constructed as irrational, primitive and inferior, and therefore, as supporting a dichotomy between the civilized West and the savage East. This dualistic model is a vital starting point of understanding how these representations are either endorsed or criticized in modern English poetry. Building upon Said, other scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha make the concept of fixed identities even more complex by adding the notions of hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry in *The London of Culture*. Bhabha (1994) challenges the strictness of the duality and argues that colonial discourses are always unstable and filled with failures that destabilize the authority of such discourse. It is quite similar to poststructuralist methods that attempt to unveil internal contradictions in texts. Baba can be read in the context of Muslim expression to highlight not only domination but also resistance and negotiation in the poems.

An important methodological tool to deconstruct the binary is poststructuralist theory, specifically the writings of Jacques Derrida. Derrida (1976) presented the idea of difference in *On Grammatology* and stressed the inconstancy of meaning and the impossibility of fixing meaning. Derrida says that a binary opposition is a hierarchical arrangement that privileges one term against the other and subjugates the other. Deconstruction aims to reverse and to reposition these hierarchies and unearth the dependence and instability of the two terms. Using the theory of Derrida on the representations of the Muslim Other enables the critics to challenge how poetic language can create and disrupt ideological dualisms. Roland Barthes (1977) also makes the process of relating author, text, and meaning even more complicated by stressing the plurality of the interpretation and the death of the author. His perspectives uphold a reading of poetry which values polysemy and polysemy rather than predetermined meanings, which is directly in line with poststructuralist methodology.

On the same note, the discourse and power theory of Michel Foucault illuminates more on how the Muslim Other is created in literature. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) Foucault posits that discourse is a system of expression which dictates what is sayable, thinkable and knowable within a specific historical situation. The depiction of Muslims in English poetry can thus be interpreted within larger discursive practices which are influenced by historical occurrences like colonialism, Orientalism, and current geopolitical struggles. The concept by Foucault can be used to critically examine the ways in which poetic writings reproduce and reflect the prevailing systems of power. The current studies have applied this theoretical framework to the study of modern English poetry. It has been observed by critics that the modern poet tends to approach the persona of the Muslim Other in convoluted and

contradictory fashion, which is the result of the sociopolitical tensions of the post-9/11 period. Indicatively, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, in *The Muslim Framework*, believe that cultural texts continuously swing between orientalist stereotypes and efforts to humanize them, showing how the orientalist stereotypes and efforts to overcome them endure (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). The duality herein underscores the applicability of the poststructuralist analysis, which is especially appropriate to reveal contradictions in the representations.

Literary criticism In literary criticism, there have been studies by scholars like Claire Chambers who have explored the representations of Muslims in British literature, noting that storytelling tends to negotiate questions of identity and belonging and the otherness (Chambers, 2011). Chambers notes that literary text may serve as arenas of exclusion and inclusion, making reductive binaries more challenging. In a similar manner, John McLeod (2010) highlights the significance of reading literary expressions within their historical and cultural context, and that postcolonial texts tend not to be easily placed in any category. Regardless of such contributions, the amount of research that explicitly employs poststructuralist deconstructive methods in regard to how the Muslim Other is portrayed in modern English poetry is relatively small. Much of the available literature concentrates on prose narratives or generally adopts a postcolonial stance without necessarily adopting the rigour of methodology of deconstruction. Moreover, as much as scholars recognize that binaries exist, very little study has been done to reveal in a systematic manner how binaries break down in poetic discourse itself. The proposed research seeks to address this gap by synthesizing postcolonial and poststructuralist to find out how the Muslim Other is constructed, reinforced and destabilized by the contemporary English poetry. This work helps to develop a more subtle perception of literary expression that pays attention to the fragmentation of binary oppositions and underlines the diversity, ambiguity, and ideological complexity of texts in poetry.

Research Gap

Although the literature on Orientalism and postcolonial representation is very abundant, there are still considerable gaps in the application of poststructuralist deconstruction, especially in the coverage of the treatment of the Muslim Other in the modern English poetry. The majority of the studies are purely postcolonial or address historical texts instead of the discussion of the poetic texts of the present time. Besides, there has been inadequate consideration to the role of binaries not only constructed but also brought to destabilization in poetic language itself. This paper will attempt to address this gap by melding poststructuralist theory and close textual analysis of up-to-date English poetry with binarism dismantling and the destabilization of the representation of the Muslim Other.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks are significant in the process of conducting research and assist scientists to locate the best results of their study. The number of research projects to pursue is enormous, yet researchers prefer to use qualitative research designs to gather and examine information, depending on the nature of the study. Muzari et al (2022) argue that qualitative research is applied in the social sciences to gain in-depth understanding of lived experiences depending on social and cultural contexts. The qualitative design is designed in three theoretical frameworks: phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnography. This is defined by a humanistic, naturalistic and holistic perspective on dynamic social reality. This study applies the interpretive paradigm in the methodology through the case studies. Data are also gathered using interviews, observations and through text analysis and are analyzed using content and thematic analysis. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), in qualitative research, one needs to look at things in terms of meaning and attempt to see what things mean in their natural context. It is also evident that qualitative research techniques are highly effective when it comes to making in-depth investigations and critical analysis. Post-structuralism is a new movement

that developed in the field of linguistics in the 1960s. It was conceived in response to French structuralism. According to this philosophy, the boundaries of knowledge play an important role as its center. One of the necessary characteristics of post-structuralism is its power of resistance and struggle against the established beliefs and oppositions (Williams, 2005). The importance of post-structuralism in the field of education is inevitable. He desires to simplify complicated matters and make them comprehensible, reachable and meaningful to his audience. Thus, the use of poststructuralist theory as a method of analysis gives a dynamic outlook to the educational research sphere. (Peters and Burbuls, 2004). To critically examine the British English poetry, the researcher chose the deconstructionist theory of literature by Jacques Derrida to use in this research work. Silverman (2004) believes that deconstruction theory is part of poststructuralist theory. Deconstruction doesn't mean destruction, it means destruction. This theory contradicts the concept of structuralism in linguistics and contends that there are no fixed meanings of words. The meaning of words is constantly changing. Derrida refers to the word difference to imply the difference in meaning of words. The ultimate meaning of this word is a myth that cannot be revealed. The meaning of the word is assumed and always deferred. Second, Jacques Derrida speaks of "binary opposition." He attacks structuralism of Western philosophy, which examines all things according to binary opposition. According to Derrida, binary oppositions are founded on hierarchies and the analysis of a text involves deconstruction. To him, deconstruction does not imply a mere shift of one concept to another, but also a revolution of the conceptual order. According to Derrida, life is multidimensional, there is no single meaning of any given word and meaning is in traces. The meaning is accepted when one signifier leads to another. The discussion of cultural values, norms and attitudes shaped by Islam and the depiction of Muslims in British poetry throughout the Middle Ages and up to the current period can be also explored within this theoretical framework. Moreover, this notion highlights the social prejudices that are manifested through these notions. Since the term Islamophobia is widely used and misunderstood around the world, and Muslims are stigmatized and seen as 'other', it is necessary to explore this phenomenon through deconstruction to uncover the truth of this myth.

Discussion and Analysis

This part discusses the ways in which the contemporary English poetry creates and unstable the Muslim Other, by reversing binary oppositions. Using post-structuralism insights especially in the analysis of Jacques Derrida, we see the ways in which poetic language supports and destabilizes prevailing ideological formations.

Veil/ Voice: Imtiaz Dharker comes back to subjectivity

Imtiaz Dharker explicitly addresses the symbol of the veil, which appears in the Western portrayal of Muslim women, in such poems as *Purdah I* and *Purdah II*. The veil has traditionally acted in a dichotomy of visibility and invisibility, liberty and oppression, and Muslim women have been placed in the category of being silenced and slaves. But the poetic voice of Darker makes this dualism complicated and hence the veil is both a place of concealment and action. To illustrate, in the statement, *They once said she was old enough to learn shame*, the cultural norms are used to create the subjectivity of women by practicing internal discipline. Nevertheless, the poem slowly offers the conscience and resistance of the veiled woman, instead of presenting her as a victim. To Derrida the binary of repression and liberation is destabilized. The veil, a symbol of limitation, is another place where the subject speaks. The meanings are fragmented and reassembled, illustrating what difference is an endless play of meanings (Derrida, 1976).

Furthermore, this poetic voice is opposed to the Orientalist opinion, according to Edward Said (1978) that diminishes the Muslim women to the symbol of cultural backwardness. Rather,

Darker focuses on interiority and multiplicity, thus subverting the West/Orient dichotomy underlying such representations.

War/Terrorism: Discursive Construction of Carol Ann Duffy

In her *Terrorists at the Table*, Carol Ann Duffy confronts the somewhat racialized image of the terrorist based on Muslim identity in the post-9/11 discourse. The poem breaks the civilized/savage dichotomy by making the terrorist both intimate and unknown: He sits with his wife and children. This domestic image disrupts the dominant narrative that positions the 'other' as completely foreign. In addition, the poem is unclear and does not allow a conclusion. It is not known to the reader whether the character is really dangerous or a manifestation of fear. Such uncertainty is suggestive of the concept of deconstruction according to Derrida, in which binaries are dismantled and brought to ruin. The boundary between self and other is made porous, implying that there is no natural and stable boundary between us and them.

Faith and Doubt: Hybrid Identity in Monisa Alvi

The poems of Monisa Alvi, particularly of *The Unknown Girl*, deal with cultural exile and fragmentation as well. Though this does not explicitly mention the Muslims as a terrified other, the poem is concerned with the larger dynamics of the East/West dichotomy and the discovery of belonging. The meeting of the speaker with a henna artist in an Indian marketplace turns into a metaphor of the cultural epitaph: A strange girl put henna on my hand. Henna painting is an activity that indicates both intimacy and alienation, enabling the speaker to be both attracted to and repelled by his or her cultural heritage. The binary of self/other is therefore rendered unstable and fluid and contingent identities are exposed. The idea of hybridity by Bhabha is especially pertinent in this context because it also focuses on the third space wherein cultural meanings are discussed (Bhabha, 1994). But going by a poststructuralist approach, this hybridity also points at the inability of having a fixed identity. The poem does not allow me to define identity in any definite way, thereby challenging the essentialist logic that forms the foundation of the creation of the Muslim Other.

Silence/Speech: Witnessing the violence in Leila Abrera

In spite of the fact that Leila Abrera is mainly a novelist, her lyrical prose and her sensuality as a poet have helped to incorporate more discourses on Muslim identity in modern literature. Her writing tends to portray characters who are bargaining between faith and modernity in the Western situations, thus, subverting simplistic stereotypes. Silence in such expressions is not merely a lack, but a kind of opposition. By so doing, the voice/silence dichotomy is restructured. What seems to be mute can be simply the resistance to conformity to the mainstream discourse. This aligns itself with Foucault concept where power is not just exercised through what is said, but also what is not said.

Language/Identity: Linguistic Deconstruction in Sujata Bhatt.

In poems like *Search for My Tongue*, Sujata Bhatt considers the conflict between native and colonial languages without explicitly invoking the more general binaries of East/West, which frequently overlap with the construction of Muslim identity. The poem performs a dramatic act of the fear of the loss of language-“ I think I have lost my mother tongue ”, but it also restores the language by bringing back the Gujarati language in the poetry. To Derrida, the hegemony of the dominant (English) and marginal (native) language is thrown into disarray. The so-called mother tongue, which has been introduced as repressed, is revealed as alive, thus turning the binary order upside down. Meaning is not determined by a particular system of language, but is created by interplay of various signifiers. Such linguistic hybridity questions the homogenizing uniformity of the Western discourse that, in many cases, reduces various identities to one identity of the Muslim Other. Moreover, this poem demonstrates the textuality and fragmentation of identity itself. The fact that the voice of the speaker is split into other

languages is a weakness of the concept of the single and stable subject. This discontinuity is in line with the criticism of essentialism in post-structuralism that implies that identities are never complete, but in a state of constant development.

Conclusion

This paper was written in order to explore, using the poststructuralist approach, how the modern English poetry is making the Muslim Other, specifically the binaries. The discussion based on the theoretical concepts of Jacques Derrida revealed that the representations of Muslims in literature are not fixed and ideologically homogenous. Instead, they are influenced by discursive forces that are intrinsically unstable, contradictory, and subject to new interpretations. The research found out common trends among the chosen poets such as Imtiaz Dharker, Carol Ann Duffy, Moniza Alvi, Sujata Bhatt, Tariq Ali, and Daljit Nagra. In other words, dichotomies like self/other, West/East, civilization/barbarism, veil/voice, standard/non-standard are firstly brought up in the poetic text, but eventually, are destabilized. Such binaries are frequently based on orientalist discourses like those discussed in *Orientalism*, though they turn out to be constructed contingently as opposed to being natural or necessary distinctions. The internal contradictions in these conflicts are revealed in a poststructuralist analysis. In deconstructing Derrida, one can see that every term in the binary relies on the other terms to be defined and as such, hierarchical differences are invalidated. This study adds to the existing research because it incorporates postcolonial and poststructuralist methods in its presentation of a more nuanced way of understanding how the Muslim Other gets constructed in contemporary English poetry. Finally, this paper indicates the importance of post-structuralism in analyzing reductive and essentialist notions of identity. De-binarising and revealing their unstable nature, modern English poetry provides new avenues of re-evaluating the Muslim Other in the context of non-binary categories. This kind of reinvention is not only a literary challenge but also a cultural and political necessity in an ever more interconnected but polarized world.

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