



The Impact of Islam on Identity as Mirrored in Pakistani Novel: A Critical Analysis of Umera Ahmed's *the Perfect Monitor*

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Abstract: This research paper investigates the impact of Islam on identity and people's behaviour after converting to Islam as reflected in Umera Ahmed's *The Perfect Monitor* (2018). The study uses the concept of identity and postmodernism to frame the analysis. Based on the discussions and analysis, the research concludes that Islamic identity has been portrayed clearly in *The Perfect Monitor*, which reflected how Islamic identity affected the main characters. The narrative echoed the people's fragmented identity before converting to Islam. The paper ends up with recommendations for future studies, encouraging researchers to examine Islamic identity in depth, especially as echoed in literature. In addition to that, the same issue — Islamic identity — can be studied from different theories' points of view such as the psychological theory, anthropological theory or hermeneutics.

Keywords: Islamic identity; postmodernism; Umera Ahmed; *The Perfect Monitor*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature was one of the platforms that reflected that search and the struggle for the identity of the self and society. During the twenty century the question of the self and identity has been raised loudly in literature, especially in novels. Umera Ahmed's *The Perfect Monitor* (2018) has discussed Islamic identity, which has struggled to face the distortion and influence of Western colonial ideology and the fragmentation that happened due to the wars, events and changes that happen in the world. This research investigates the impact of Islam on identity and people's behaviour after converting Islam as reflected in *The Perfect Monitor*.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Since the separation of Pakistan and India, the Pakistani novel has developed to include the reality of people suffering in Pakistan. Depression, suffering, Pakistani's revolution and its results, the effects of English on Muslim lives, and other topics and issues that were represented in the Urdu novel, especially between 1947 and 1964 produced the Golden Age for that novel. According to Maria Rifhat (2017), one of the most important causes of the Urdu novel's development was "the mass exodus that lasted for many years and during which major and painful accidents occurred, and Muslims went through a long series of tragedies and pains in the hope of reaching the new land free from injustice and oppression" (p. 80), as it was represented in Naseem Hijazi's novels. These situations represented the suffering of identity in the early stages of Pakistani fiction, especially the Islamic identity, which was the major reason for their hardship that has been fighting against by Indians and English and fought for by the Pakistani people to prove others. Therefore, Islamic Identity has a great existence in Pakistani writers' works, such as Nather Ahmed who is considered one of the pioneers of the Pakistani novel, and Umera Ahmed who is regarded as one of the contemporary Pakistani Writers who speak and express Islamic identity and Islamic values through her characters. She started writing stories for Urdu Magazine in 1998 at the early age of 21, and her first story was *Zindagi Gulzar*. She wrote stories along with novels that encircle men-women's relationships, especially depicting women as the central theme, social problems and pressure. Furthermore, she also wrote religion and spirituality novels such as *Peer-e-Kamil* (2004), *Shehr-e-Zaat* (2012) and *Alif* (2019).

The novel *The Perfect Mentor* which highlighted Ahmad's name, tells the story of how true Islam can change a human. It starts by describing Salar's life. He was a good boy in his childhood, coming from a rich family, and he was the favourite student of his teachers. He was an immensely talented man, over time, he lived with the belief that life is about joy and relaxation and nothing else. Therefore, he started to try everything to taste new feelings to amuse himself, even he tried to commit suicide many times, but he failed every time. His life was full of chaos. However, he did not realize that. One of these times he tried to kill himself, his neighbour Imama was there to rescue him. She is the other main character. She was studying medicine. Her family belongs to a sect called "Qadiyani" which was far from true Islam. Imama started to negotiate with her friends about religion until her mind and heart finally found true Islam. She was hiding her Islam from her family. When her family knew, they arranged her wedding with her cousin who is a non-Muslim man, and she wanted to marry a Muslim man. When she knew she tried to escape, her father prevented her and prisoned her in her room. Salar heard that and suggested marrying her only because it seemed an interesting situation for him, he was searching for enjoyment no matter what happen, while Imama refused this suggestion at first because she did not want to marry a non-Muslim man, how about a person like Salar! But they married in the end with the divorce agreement when Imama wants that. She got out of her family's house with the help of Salar to go back to Islamabad. On the way, they spoke about why Imama wanted to go through all those difficulties. She said all of this was for Allah and to keep her true Islam. At that moment, Salar was surprised to hear such a reason. But after years, when he was completing his study in the USA, he was still thinking about Imama and her braveness and her words. However, he is still the same until one night when he had an accident in Margalla Hills. He started to think and ask Allah for help and made a promise that he will never get back to this chaotic life. Finally, he was saved, and he started a new life, knowing Allah and the prophet (peace be upon him) very well.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTMODERNISM AND IDENTITY

The postmodernism movement appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in thoughts and writings of philosophers as De Onis and Fitch. Those writings of postmodernism shared the lack of emotionality and linguistic decorations which dominated the modern literature in the late 19th century. However, Culler stated that the movement did not start until the seventies of the last century (Ragheb, 2003, p. 534). One of the first theorists who wrote and defined this term is the Egyptian-American Ihab Hassan in the 1970s. Hassan characterized the movement of postmodernism as a movement covered with ambiguity, generalization and the impossibility of identification. The same idea was held by Jean-François Lyotard who noted that the concept of postmodernism can accommodate anything and everything (Ragheb, 2003, p. 521). This is because it seems to be difficult to determine, as it is a loose and overly concept that expand into different dimensions. Similarly, Deck Hebdige argues that postmodernism raised against the previous theories and the philosophy of enlightenment, and attacked them, and then attacked itself (Ragheb, 2003, p. 521).

Arts and literary works of postmodernism period focus on reflecting the reality of the wars, the fragment self. They also emphasize on the speech which contains dichotomous ideologies, irony and parody, black comedy, globalization and deconstruction as expressed by Hassan's writings (Ragheb, 2003, p. 537). While the writings of postmodernism contain different meanings and themes, identity was one of their most important topics. They display the identity as fragmented pieces that resulted from "interaction with different people in different social situations" (Hooti and Arjmand, 2013, p. 40). This could change due to situations, events, feelings and emotions that "lead to inevitable undergoing of identity changes every now and then." (Hooti and Arjmand, 2013, p. 41). This image was expressed in the literary works that covered many aspects of identity, loaded with social, political and historical changes. In fact, the twentieth century forced this change in the writings of the authors, who viewed cultural, ethnic, gender, racial, religious, or social identity and the turns that happened to these identities in a social context.

The issue of identity becomes one of the powerful issues in the twentieth century, particularly after War World One and War World Two. The question of "Who am I?" has emerged together with materialism in the west and the colonization in the east. People began to fill in the hole of globalisation and cultural conflicts where they have not recognized themselves anymore. However, the question of identity has been asked for a long time age before the twenties. It was the issue

considered among other conflicts of civilisations and cultures (Sofe & Farahat, 2019). In addition to that, literature contained that question as it “is the space in which questions about the nature of personal identity are most provocatively articulated” (Bennett and Royle, 2009, p.130; cited in Barstad et al., 2019, p. 4). This space has witnessed the search, definitions and analysis of the identity question by the philosophers, researchers and writers over time as Barstad et al. stated that “The question of personal identity has engaged philosophers for centuries” (Bennett and Royle, 2009, p.130; cited in Barstad et al., 2019, p. 3).

Identity was present in different shapes and defined from different angles, where it distinguished people from each other according to the differences in themselves and their identities. Linguistically, identity “refers to the unity of self, that is self-matching. Privacy means uniqueness and difference from others, it also means the essence, origin and reference of things, and has the meaning of similarity and homogeneity” (Soufi and Farahat, 2019, p.7). Abu al-Baqa al-Kafawi (1992, p.961) illustrated the identity in his definition in the dictionary of colleges (in Arabic, *Al-Kulliyat* dictionary) that identity (alhawyyah) is the privilege of others. These differences could vary regarded different dimensions that the individual could be defined based on what it is explained in the definition of the psychologist and narratologist Michael Bamberg, who “designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory” (Bamberg, 2013; cited in Barstad et al., 2019, p. 1).

The previous dimensions contain many factors to form identity. This is because it is not a “personal phenomenon” as what Mark D. Kelland (2022) said that “identity formation begins at birth and continues throughout the lifespan” (p.82). According to Burke and Stryker, it is a mix of strong relationships and interactions seem to be different but organized, established in groups, organizations, communities and institutions and a crossing the limits of these dimensions (Stryker and Burke, 2000, p.4). This idea coincides with Richard Jenkins (2008) who pointed out that identity “is a process – identification- not a ‘thing’. It is not something that one can have, or not; it is something that one does.” (p.5). The individual has been engaging through a process where he influences the other by his identity, and he is influenced by the others and the environment surrounding him as a reflection in the interaction process. Regarding Goffman, this called “the presentation of self” during interaction, which caused a developmental process. For certain reasons and goals, people develop their behaviours which caused the development of their identities, and that according to Jenkins human can control their identities through their behaviours, not the opposite. He also stated that this developmental process combining several factors such as “planning, improvisation and habit, influenced by emotional responses, health and well-being, access to resources, knowledge and world view, the impact of the behaviour of the others, and other factors too” (Jenkins, 2008, p.9).

The dynamic feature in identity can be seen clearly in literature. The description of the characters portrayed extensively in different contexts of literature, where identity defined in it as:

A distinctive feature of the writer, and is imprinted by his character, and determines his work course and the personalities of his production, and the writer is known by his identity, and literature is known by the characteristics of writers and their identities. (Dawood, p.38; cited in Soufi and Farahat, 2019, p.8).

The topic of identity has been shown deeply especially after the World War One and World War Two in novels. The struggle of finding the self and understand it has been illustrated in many works. Moreover, the colonial and after colonial identities works has great important in literature and research, and works of migration where they describe the dilemma of identity as the works of the Arabic diaspora writings.

Nowadays, many novels shed light on different sides of identity. One of the identity dimensions which will be focused on in this paper is *religion*. Religion plays a significant role in human life, where it works as a ‘value system’, containing norms. Individuals behave according to those norms which ‘used as a frame of reference’ to match their religious beliefs. Those values formed with the developmental process of individuals and become a system in a person's identity formation as shown below:

Religion forms a value system within the individual, all forms of religious symbols and ritual ceremonies play a very important role in the formation of a value system in the individual. Once formed, individuals will be able to use the value system in understanding, evaluating and interpreting situations and experiences (Rakhmat, 2007; cited in Fadhilatunnisaet. el., 2022, p. 65).

While religion does not mean to worship God only, it needs to accomplish several requirements like improving the whole life, being suitable for all mankind, transacting with problems in different situations and with various ideas and beliefs. It determines and identifies the differences between individual identities, as Al-Samaluti pointed out that religion is:

A social phenomenon that includes customs, traditions, rituals, temples, aphorisms, beliefs, and principles to which a nation, people, or society is religious. The teaching of religion extends to include various areas of life, they are the regulation of man's relationship with a man and the connecting of man's relationship with life as well as his relationship the vast universe (Al-Samaluti, 1981, pp. 45-46; cited in Marhj, 2021, p. 141).

According to Alija Izetbegović, Islam is "the principle of organizing the universe." (Izetbegović, 2015, p. 61), which means that Islam works as a system for the whole life, not only for human beings. Islam is not only a religion that builds on some beliefs and practices, Islam is a way of life, it influences human lives and organises their actions and behaviours as stated by converts to Islam which "enable converts to deal with disorientations and to gain structure in their lives. Emotional of peace, claim and clarity" (Jindra, 2011, p. 290-291; cited in Kok, 2016, p. 17). Badawi clarified this impact (1993, p. 62), when he mentioned the functions of Islam in humans' levies, ideologically, where is passed on the Islamic perspective in a living manner. Politically, by supporting the idea of the unity of Islam and the Muslim society's interests. Sociologically, keeps degeneration, fragmentation and decay away from Muslim societies. Psychological, by helping individuals in treating their stress and tough situations through what is called 'Islamic catharsis', which differs from the Aristotelian catharsis in acknowledging the role a providential God plays in a person's life and does not encourage excessive happiness or sadness. Educationally, it encourages self-discipline and improves morals and aesthetic values (Badawi, 1993, p. 62).

Islamic identity places an important position on literature in general and novels in particular. *The Perfect Monitor* is one of the novels that discussed identity through Islam, where it shows the magnificent role of Islam in human lives through its characters in the novel. This paper attempts to analyse the topic of finding identity through Islam, focusing on the main characters Salar and Imama to display the struggle of identity in the novels and the importance of Islam in the characters' lives.

4. DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

The Perfect Mentor displays the theme of fragmented identity in their usual life system and the changes that happened to its characters through the novels. Islamic identity and the faith of Allah take a great position in changing their lifestyle and causing the emergence of new stable self in them. For instance, Salar and Imama are classified as belonging to the upper class, where everything is available to them. However, they have gone through a chaos in their thoughts and identities. Imama started to live a conflict to take a decision about her life after she knew the true Islam. She also "had to distance herself from her family, sooner or later, as she could not live in an environment where the truths and principles of Islam were being blatantly distorted" (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p.108). Eventually, she made her decision and escaped from her family, who wanted her to marry a non-Muslim man. Despite the fact that she was living in a confront lifestyle, she left all of that for Allah, as she said to Salar: "you know why I put myself through all this Salar. Do you believe that I will agree to spend my life with a man who has indulged in all the cardinal sins our dear Prophet (PBUH) has condemned?" (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p.235).

In Salar's case, the situation was worse. He was not interested in religions. He was living in a chaos, practicing bad habits since he was a child, without religious practices. Furthermore, he tried different kinds of good and bad pleasures. Unlike from his friend teenagers, he committed drinking alcohol and drugs, as can be seen in the novel: "this was the third time in the last two months that the boys had gathered here for an adventure of this kind. So far they had experimented with four different drugs..."

Every time they combined drugs with alcohol” (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p.26). Salar continued to live with a meaningless, irresponsible lifestyle that could not be done by a true Muslim, as shown in the excerpt below:

After class, he would often spend, rather squandered, time aimlessly, especially on the weekends. His life was divided, it seemed, between clubs, discotheques, cinema, and theatre. He missed no new film, play, concert or instrumental performance, and he had all the details about every new restaurant –big or small, pricey or cheap (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p. 241).

When he has helped Imama, she told him that he should leave this lifestyle, as it is the wrong way to live. Her conversation when Salar asked her about pain last years in his mind and became the turning point in his thoughts and changed his life later, which is stated below:

‘What is next to ecstasy?’ he asked Imama.

She looked at him for a while, then said, ‘Pain.’

‘And what is next to pain?’ he shot another question at her.

‘Nothingness.’

‘What is next to nothingness?’ he asked in his typical style.

‘Hell,’ she replied.

‘What is next to hell?’ Imama watched him in silence. ‘What is next to hell?’ he repeated.

‘Aren’t you afraid?’ He heard her query in an unfamiliar tone.

‘Afraid of what?’ he was surprised.

‘Of hell –the place which has nothing ahead... everything is left behind.

(*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p.190)

Although he was not directly affected by Imama’s words at that moment., Imama’s words turned his life upside down, as the narrator exposes in this excerpt: “The memory of Imama’s conversations would drive his sleep and peace of mind: he had been engulfed by strange desperation. All he had scoffed at now hunted him.” (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p. 279). Salar lost meaning and goals and questioned everything, even himself. He was asking: “who was I? What was I and why? Where was I and why was I there? Such questions had begun to bother him all the time.” (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p. 279).

At this time, Imama’s words became clear to him. She told him that he would understand at the right time: “you are unable to make any sense of anything right now –and you won’t be able to, either. There will come a time when everything will be clear to you will understand it all” (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p.272).

In addition, she told him about the feelings he would feel, as she felt them–loneliness, nothingness and emptiness- as expressed in the text:

In life, at some time or another, we come to the point where all relationships cease –where only we and Allah. There are no parents, brothers or sisters, or any friends. Then we realise that there is no earth under us nor is the sky above us, but Allah who supports us in this emptiness. Then we realise our worth –it is not more than a grain of sand or the leaf of a plant. Then we realise our existence is only confined to our being. Our demise makes not a whit of difference to the world around us, nor to the scheme of things(*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p.273).

Salar was unable to focus on his study, enjoy his life or feel peace as he was suffering, as shown in the text below:

He continued to be a complete victim of his mental turmoil. Also, for the first time, he was losing interest in his studies: everything appeared artificial to him. For the first time in his life, he had gone into deep depression. Studies, university, friends, clubs, parties, restaurants, outings and the like had become meaningless for him (*The Perfect Mentor*, 2018, p. 278).

Salar has struggled to find out who he is. And why is he there? He was struggling to find meaning for his life. Until the Margalla Hills incident, where he has felt that he is between 'Nothingness' and 'Hell' was enough to motivate him to see the truth, as shown below:

Imama had said that after ecstasy comes pain: death was pain. She said that after pain was nothingness: the grave was nothingness. She said that after nothingness would come hell. He did not want to reach that stage. He wanted to be saved from that ecstasy that would lead him from pain to hell (The Perfect Mentor, 2018, p. 324).

Salar was not ready to understand until he passed through the terrifying incident in Margalla Hills, which made him think about his life in depth. While searching in his memory for good deeds he did, he found that he did not do anything. From here, at the age of 22 old, Salar begins to change, and the impact of Islamic identity is obvious on him.

Starting with his appearance, where he changes his style, as illustrated in the novel that: "now he had started buttoning up and keeping his gaze lowered" (The Perfect Mentor, 2018, p. 325). In his journey, he cut his old relationships to not go back to that road again, started to pray, memorized Qur'an and went for Haj. Through Haj, he got rid of all his suspicious, prideful and selfish feelings, as the excerpt shows:

In that horde of thousands, all clad in two simple white sheets, ... He became acutely aware of his insignificance, and if even a shred of doubt had remained it was dispelled. Every remaining bit of pride, ego, self-importance, and envy had been shot out of his system. He had gone there to have these very pollutants removed (The Perfect Mentor, 2018, p. 339).

Moreover, he became a grateful person for what he has and regretted what all he did, as seen below:

He was feeling afraid of God, terribly afraid. He was Omnipotent. What could He not do? How Merciful He was, what blessings did he withhold? He knew how to keep man human –sometimes through retribution, sometimes through benevolence. He knew how to keep him confined to his humanness. Salar, never before had felt as remorseful, as regretful, as he was feeling now about this dark chapter of his life (The Perfect Mentor, 2018, p. 392).

Salar's family kept commenting on his lifestyle as a bad thing for him, yet he ignored these comments and tried to explain that this is the suitable path for him. He Salar knew the meaning of the ultimate love of Allah, and that the perfect Mentor was Mohammad (peace upon him). Therefore, he tried to follow that path and become a better version of himself, and Islam was the way to walk through to be a good Muslim man.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussions and analysis, we can conclude that Islamic identity has been portrayed clearly in *The Perfect Mentor*. The novel reflected Islamic identity, which affected the main characters. The narrative reflected people's fragmented identity before converting to Islam, with no clear meaning in their lives or goals to live for! And with an unstable character or identity that showed in their actions and decisions. Salar who reorganised his life and his relationships to suit the new system based on Islam, obligated himself and learned how to deal with his family's rejection of this system. In fact, Islamic identity is important for a person to give his life purpose to live and identify his goals and himself among family, friends and society. Committing Islamic identity and its worships and practices is not easy and needs to learn many things like how to pray, fast, recite the Qur'an and behave, yet it affects the individual to take major decisions that change his values, behaviours, ways of thinking and the whole system of life to fix his relation with Allah and to be better with himself, others and the whole universe. This does not mean that life becomes perfect and without problems or difficulties. However, Islam teaches people how to deal with these difficulties and live with satisfaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study is useful for the future studies of Islamic identity. Researchers may study Islamic identity in depth in novels regarding different topics, such as embracing Islam in other societies and environments and how it could be treated in those societies. Furthermore, Islamic identity may be studied through different theories, for instance, the psychological theory, anthropological theory or hermeneutics theory.

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