
Liberal Articulation of Islamophobia: Politics of Multicultural Recognition in Pearl Abraham's *American Taliban*

Amal Sayyid¹

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received:
May 10, 2022
Accepted:
June 30, 2022

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

This article seeks to examine academic scholarship on Islamophobia in the West that attributes anti-Muslim racism to a crisis of multiculturalism and proposes the recuperation of the liberal multicultural ethos as a countermeasure to redress Islamophobia without investigating its complicity with racism. Through an analysis of Pearl Abraham's novel *American Taliban* (2010), I probe an ambivalence at the heart of the liberal multicultural project of recognition (for the other) and argue that despite its claims of libertarian principles of justice and equality, multicultural recognition becomes the ideological backdrop against which changing contours of Islamophobia are articulated. This is unpacked through a fissure in Abraham's narrative which, on the surface, draws upon the Hegelian principle of intersubjective recognition in order to critique the illiberal paradigm of Islamophobia and its concomitant framework of the clash of civilizations. Yet, it remains complicit with anti-Muslim racism through the generation of another Manichean frame that shifts reductive constructs of dangerous alterity to the Muslims who follow the normative tradition of Islam. At the same time, it offers positive recognition to Sufi Muslims who are aligned with secular liberalism. With a critical focus on Abraham's novel, this paper deploys G.W. F. Hegel's concept of 'becoming' with Gregory Lipton's 'critique of the secular reconstruction of Sufism in order to explore the complicity of multicultural recognition with Islamophobia, and, thus, it nuances the existing Western scholarship.

Keywords: Liberalism, multiculturalism, intersubjective recognition, Islamophobia, anti-Muslim racism, secular Sufism, Muslim identities, Pearl Abraham

¹Amal Sayyid is Assistant Professor in Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad.



This essay explores how multiculturalism, despite its claims of egalitarian intersubjective recognition (for the other), becomes the ideological backdrop against which a liberal articulation of Islamophobia is shaped. With critical focus on Pearl Abraham's novel *American Taliban* (2010), this paper deploys G.W. F. Hegel's concept of 'becoming' with Gregory Lipton's 'critique of secular reconstruction of Sufism' in order to explore the complicity of multicultural recognition with Islamophobia, and, thus, it nuances the existing Western scholarship. I concur with the insight of theorists such as Aurelian Mondon and Aaron Winter (2019), Hamid Dabashi (2017), and Khaled Beydoun (2018) who contend that, in the current historical moment, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are not limited to easily recognizable forms of racism in the West. Leftist liberals, who espouse progressive principles of multiculturalism, freedom, rights and egalitarianism, also iterate racist conceptions of Muslim culture. According to these theorists, liberal Islamophobia disguises its racist underpinnings by drawing a distinction between 'bad' fundamentalist Muslims and 'good' moderate Muslims. They offer positive recognition to the good Muslim and frame their opposition to bad Muslims in the form of a progressive narrative of defending liberties and rule of law (Mondon and Winter, 2019, p. 63). I deploy the insights offered by these theorists to contest academic debates that propose the recuperation of the liberal multicultural ethos of recognition as a means of countering Islamophobia. This can be seen in the arguments of theorists such as Chris Allen (2013, pp. 214-216, 227) and Scott Poynting and Victoria Mason (2008, pp. 234, 237, 243-244) who critique racist attacks on multiculturalism after 9/11 and 7/7 for becoming complicit with Islamophobia and suggest the restoration of the liberal ethos of intercultural recognition as a mean of redressing anti-Muslim racism. Based on a close reading of Abraham's novel *American Taliban* (2010), I argue that such studies do not carry out an incisive interrogation of the collusion of structures of multicultural recognition with covert forms of anti-Muslim racism.

This essay traces the contours of liberal articulation of Islamophobia in Abraham's novel in which the writer camouflages racial exclusions with claims of multiculturalism and liberal tolerance. This may be seen in the frequent allusions to Hegel's philosophical principle of intersubjective recognition as a means of rising above prejudice and achieving an expanded consciousness characterized by egalitarianism and freedom (pp. 11, 20, 187-189, 227, 242, 255).¹ The first section elucidates Abraham's characterization of multicultural recognition as an egalitarian, post-racial frame that can guard against Islamophobia through an investigation of her portrayal of the novel's protagonist's embrace of Islam. In particular, he is interested in its Sufi manifestation because of the inspiration he has got from the Hegelian vision of attaining *becoming* through openness towards the other. The second and third sections seek to uncover the complicity of liberal

structures of multicultural recognition with Islamophobia and its changing contours. It is done through a critical analysis of Abraham's vacillation between an interrogation of Islamophobic paradigms of civilizational clash and subtle reiteration of racist stereotypes of the illiberalism of Muslims who assert their religiosity. For this purpose, my analysis focuses on investigating the assimilationist tendency underpinning Abraham's narrative that negates the specificity of the Muslim *other* through a governmental project of secular reform of the religious subjectivities of Muslims. Through my analysis, I aim to outline how a contemporary fictional work, despite its pretensions to develop a counter-Orientalist ethos, remains complicit with Orientalist characterizations of Islam in covert ways.

Liberal critique of Islamophobia

On the surface, in *American Taliban* (2010), Pearl Abraham's sympathetic portrayal of Islam functions as a critique of what Mondon and Winter term as illiberal articulations of Islamophobia (2017, p. 2154). Mehdi Semati (2010) characterizes Islamophobia as a form of cultural racism that conflates Islam with terror and threat and presents it as "alterity to Euro-Americanness." He notes that Islamophobia functions through a reiteration of the cultural paradigm of clash of civilizations that asserts the "the irreducibility" of the "absolute Otherness of the Muslim Other" (pp. 257-258). Mondon and Winter also echo this definition of Islamophobia when they define illiberal Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism that draws upon cultural tropes and presents "Islam as monolithic and innately threatening and inferior" to the West (2019, p. 62).² In addition, Mondon and Winter note that this anti-Muslim racism generates "essentialised constructions of cultural difference" to "represent a homogenous Muslim culture" as one "that is indiscriminately and innately backward [sic] and illiberal towards women, homosexuality, free speech and democracy" (Mondon and Winter, 2019, p. 62). Illiberal articulations of Islamophobia thus shape a racist typology that stigmatizes Muslims through a dual strategy of essentializing Muslims and imposing alterity on them.

Abraham challenges this Manichean framework of cultural and civilizational clash generated by Islamophobes. In contrast to illiberal Islamophobia's tendency to reductively stereotype all Muslims without drawing distinctions, Abraham attempts to develop a more multifaceted portrayal that highlights how Muslim subjects embody Islamic beliefs and teachings in diverse ways. The representation of Islam, which emerges from the characters' lived experiences in Abraham's text, is not reducible to a monolithic image of totalitarianism, fundamentalism, misogyny and homophobia that threaten liberal

values. Instead, Islam is shown as compatible with a liberal vision of self-realization, freedom and universal humanism.

Abraham resists racialized characterizations of Islam and attempts to provide a sympathetic and multifaceted understanding of Muslims through her espousal of the liberal multicultural framework of recognition for the other. Abraham's text seems to iterate the insights of Charles Taylor who calls for a multicultural politics of recognition in place of traditional liberal politics of equal respect that postulates uniformity that is "inhospitable to difference" (pp. 60-61). Taylor calls for an embrace of ontological holism which recognizes that human identities are defined not in isolation from others, but rather in dialogue with others. Abraham ostensibly follows Taylor that a multicultural politics of recognition must function as a "regime of reciprocal recognition among equals" (50) in which the "integrity of cultures" is preserved (p. 61).³ This can be seen in her portrayal of John Judas who embarks on a project of Hegelian *becoming* that necessitates the embrace of difference in order to achieve an expanded self-consciousness characterized by freedom.

In *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1977), Hegel contends that identity subsists in connection with difference, and self-consciousness cannot be thought of apart from an alterity and diversity that is external to it. Hegel notes that "[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for an other" (p. 111). Hegel contends that without the other, 'I' cannot exist as an independent unified self and that the other, then, is part of the self's essence (p. 115). In Abraham's novel (2010), John's mother, Barbara, seems to vicariously highlight that his "self-seeking journey" and progression towards freedom follow this Hegelian principle of dialogical interrelation when she observes that her son is characterized by "an ability to immerse himself in the new and the other and become, a selfless ability to *other* himself [. . .]" (p. 251). John's adoption of a multicultural ethos rooted in the Hegelian imperative of intersubjective recognition is the basis of Abraham's departure from illiberal Islamophobic narratives that reify Muslims.

John's desire to achieve "eternal" becoming leads him to embark on a formative quest of immersion in the culture of Islam (p. 188). In particular, John is attracted to Sufi Islam that he characterizes as offering "full self-knowledge" and the attainment of "individual excellence" (p. 100, 116). Abraham highlights that Sufi Islam aligns with the Hegelian imperative according to which progress towards self-realization is catalyzed when one sees the self and the world as standing in a necessary connection and unity. This leads to a broadening of perspective and the recognition of universal dimensions of existence (Hegel 1977; Hegel 2007). While engaged in meditative prayer, John experiences the Sufi vision of "Hurqalya", a

realm of “imagination” that enables the individual to achieve one’s highest capacity through a recognition of the essential unity of the divine and the human and, by extension, the universal harmony of all existence (pp. 132-133). This expanded consciousness can also be seen when, on the recitation of the shahada,⁴ John enters a state of mystical transport in which he feels that he is able to transcend divisions of time and space, and race and ethnicity to join Ibn ‘Arabi in Mecca circling the Ka’aba (pp. 124-125).

The Sufi doctrine of universal love spurs John’s expansion of self-consciousness by providing a vision of communal concord that enables him to overcome his atomistic existence and view all humanity as part of an egalitarian community. This echoes Kain’s observation that, according to the Hegelian ethos of recognition, becoming is achieved when the “I and the other . . . are not related heteronomously but are essentially related as members of a single community” (p. 109). In the text, John develops a transcendental awareness whereby he embraces the Sufi ethos that every human being is a creation of God that has to be loved. He declares that “[l]ove is my religion and my faith” (p. 70) and notes that “[pr]ayer . . . made all love possible. . . . He loved the world. And he loved himself, too. He was an individual within a larger community [. . .]” (p. 154). In this mystical plane of expanded consciousness, John embraces the continuity of being and recognizes his interdependence on fellow humans.

This portrayal of the affinity of Sufi Islam with a Hegelian vision of becoming through universal interrelation iterates a multicultural ethos of recognition and disrupts monolithic racist Islamophobic discourses that characterize Islam as a dangerous threat to the existence of non-Muslim cultures and peoples. Instead, the Sufi ethos of universal love is presented by Abraham as enabling the realization of the Hegelian principle of determinate negation. A truly independent consciousness emerges when one negates what is material and contingent in both the self and the other and recognizes those universal aspects that integrate the other within the self (Habib, 2017, p. 28). Within Sufi Islam and its practices of meditative prayer and universal love, John finds a new self-liberated from apparatuses of domination, stemming from contingent particularities of religion, ethnicity, and class, and their ideological narratives that limit human existence through conflicts and suspicion.

Through this positive portrayal of the cosmopolitan and humanist nature of Sufi Islam, Abraham articulates the vision of a post-racial liberal multicultural ethos of recognition that transcends the rhetoric of civilizational clash and embodies what Morsi characterizes as “a humanist optimism” that emphasizes the “boundlessness of . . . Enlightenment values” (2017, pp. 6-7). Yet, as it will be

illustrated in the remainder of the analysis, this liberal characterization of Sufi Islam as universal love remains complicit with an exclusionary Islamophobic racist paradigm that continues to construct the otherness of Islam.⁵

Racism in post-racial liberalism

In *American Taliban* (2010), Pearl Abraham's critique of Islamophobia is juxtaposed with a lamentation over the decline of liberalism and multiculturalism in America. She identifies this as the main cause of anti-Muslim racism and its exclusionary tendencies. This is brought out through the character of Barbara⁶ who rues how, in the wake of 9/11, America has lost the liberal humanist ethos of recognition, tolerance, empathy, curiosity, and openness towards the other, which was the source of the creative genius of great writers, explorers, and adventurers (p. 251). Barbara laments that what was previously regarded as an adventure of becoming through an immersion in the culture of the other, and the widening of one's epistemic horizons leading to an expanded "I", has now become an act of betrayal whereby one is condemned as a traitor. Consequently, in this age of paranoia and resurgence of reactionary nationalist sentiments, empathy for the other is criminalized (p. 251).

Abraham illustrates that the weakening of liberal sentiment and the concomitant rise of anti-Muslim racism has generated a project of domination in America that is manifested through the proliferation of extralegal policing practices and hate-crimes targeting the Muslim community. She echoes the insights of Arun Kundnani (2014), Ayhan Kaya (2011) and Erik Love (2017) who contend that Islamophobia and its concomitant racial significations of Muslims as terrorists function to consolidate illiberal regimes of governance that securitize Muslims and construct them as a suspect community and as potential criminals. Consequently, Islamophobia is manifested where Muslims become the target of domestic counterterrorism policies of surveillance, policing, and detention as well as global projects of imperial expansion such as the war on terror that undermine the civil liberties and political rights of Muslims (Kaya, 2011; Kundnani, 2014; Love, 2017).

In the text, Abraham critiques the American government for its employment of Islamophobic racist frames to construct Muslims as violent extremists who are a threat to the security of the nation. This provides the justification for the institution of extralegal measures against Muslims in the form of war on terror and domestic counterterrorism measures (pp. 230, 235). The erosion of civil liberties and political rights for Muslims can be seen in the case of American judiciary overturning challenges to the Guantanamo detentions (p. 240).

Barbara attributes the absence of legal safeguards and civil rights for Muslims to this weakening of liberal cultural values and political expression in post-

9/11 America. She compares her fellow Americans to the Germans who became unwitting abettors of the totalitarian Nazi regime because they “were weak in character”, “unwilling to do what is right” and “afraid to pursue justice” (p. 242). She notes that the indecisiveness and silence of liberals have contributed to a civil rights crisis for Muslims in America.

Abraham’s textual portrayal casts liberalism with its multicultural ethos of recognition as a bulwark against racism in general and Islamophobia in particular. However, I contend that Abraham’s liberalism does not function as a defense against anti-Muslim racism. Rather Abraham’s apparently post-racial liberalism, with its universalist pretensions of recognition, remains complicit with a covert form of racism against Muslims that feeds into Islamophobia. Intersubjective recognition, in this case, involves an inescapable element of domination and reification of the other. This can be seen in Abraham’s reiteration of the racialization of Islam through the deployment of what Gregory Lipton terms as a framework of “secular Sufism” that aligns it with philosophical Protestantism and the Kantian notion of universal rational faith (2011, pp. 427, 429). This construction of secular Sufism functions as the backdrop against which a reductive Manichean hierarchy of the good, secular Muslim versus the bad, fundamentalist Muslim, who follows the normative tradition of Islam, is developed.

I suggest that Abraham’s portrayal of the Sufi as a moderate, secular, liberal good Muslim has racist ramifications. It functions as the setting against which racial anxieties about the affinity of normative Islam,⁷ are iterated. Thus, while Abraham does not replicate illiberal Islamophobia’s explicitly Orientalist frame of the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West, she does not succeed in breaking free from racializing generalities that conflate Islam with dangerous alterity. Abraham’s liberal characterization merely displaces the stereotypes of threat onto a particular articulation of Islam that fails to conform to hegemonic liberal secular assumptions. This generates what Arun Kundnani (2014) identifies as an alternative racist imaginary that replaces the notion of a clash of civilizations with that of a clash “within Islamic civilization itself” between “extremists and moderates”. This continues to reify Islam and consolidate assumptions about Islam’s threat to secular liberal values (p. 67). I propose that Abraham’s liberal multicultural ethos of recognition of the other does not mark the end of Islamophobia. Rather it merely represents a transformation in the mode of discursive articulation of Islamophobia.

In *American Taliban* (2010), John Judas’s Hegelian quest for a universal self-consciousness through intersubjective recognition of the Muslim other, functions as the overarching framework through which Abraham reifies Sufism as moderate Islam in the light of a secular philosophical Protestantism. Gregory Lipton (2011)

characterizes the discourse of “secular Sufism” as an Orientalist project that operates by “locating Sufism within the religious ethos of Christianity.” He reconstructs Sufism in the light of the framework of Kantian universal faith in order to make it compatible with liberal values of autonomous spirituality, contemplative piety, morality, and rational thinking (pp. 427-429, 431). Abraham reproduces this racial framing when she writes that John is attracted to Sufi Islam because of its emphasis on personal striving, individual autonomy, freedom of thought and conscience, and its resistance against structures of authority and ritual formalism (pp. 116-117). John associates Sufism with prophecy which is “a personal, self-generated calling, independent of the church, community, and group thinking” which, with its emphasis on “individual excellence”, is compatible with American liberalism where “personal achievement” is highly valued (pp. 115-116).

I argue that Pearl Abraham’s Kantian articulation of Sufism develops a discursive strategy that generates the racialization of Islam. Her version of Sufism generates a progressive Muslim who is skeptical about normative Islamic practice and the Shariah⁸ and rejects the authority of religious tradition in order to emerge as an autonomous critical thinker. This liberal re-articulation of Sufism, based on what Lipton (2011) terms a “Kantian aversion to ritual formalism”, stereotypes and stigmatizes Muslims who follow the formal tradition of Islam (p. 440). Such Muslims are presented as intellectually enslaved, intolerant, and as having a dangerous affinity for radicalism and terrorism (Lipton, 2011, p. 440). This Muslim, who embraces Islamic normativity, materializes as an intolerant fundamentalist who resorts to violence in order to impose a restrictive theocracy on others.

While Abraham’s creation of a distinction between Sufism and normative Islam is an attempt to distance herself from the essentialist illiberal frame of the clash of civilizations, Islamophobia, nevertheless, continues to be reproduced. In contrast to illiberal Islamophobia that consigns all Muslims to the category of otherness, Abraham’s liberal articulation of Islamophobia, under the guise of an empathetic outlook on Sufi Islam, offers token recognition to certain kinds of good Muslims that are aligned with liberal values and stigmatizes normative Islam that does not fit in the secular mold. In this case, anti-Muslim racism is generated through the framework of a clash within Islam with normative Muslims functioning as the site for the articulation of racial anxieties about Islam. Racist generalities about Islam are thus consolidated through the construction of otherness within the other.

In Abraham’s Manichean racial framework, the progressive liberal ethos of Sufi Muslims is contrasted negatively with normative Muslims whose literal reading of religious scriptures imbues them with an exclusionary mindset that translates into hostility towards other faiths and cultures. In Abraham’s text, Muslims such as

Naim and al-Haq, who assert belief in the literal truth and fixity of the Quran and tie Islam to political goals, are shown as fundamentalists who recycle the-clash-of-civilizations imaginary and assert the difference and inferiority of non-Muslim religious traditions and cultures (pp. 51, 156). Abraham's text, in particular, reinforces the alterity of Muslims who embrace the ritual formalism of Islam by highlighting how those with an orthodox bent of mind have a dangerous affinity with fundamentalism and terrorism. Abraham implies that such Muslims are easily seduced by the fundamentalist ideology of Jihadism according to which the path to self-realization is made possible through martyrdom. Abraham shows that a Muslim who follows the normative framework of Islam such as Jalal, despite his eclectic taste in reading and his familiarity with multiple traditions such as Buddhism, Arab mysticism, Taoism, and Greek epistemology, nevertheless retains a literal and fundamentalist bent of a mind obsessed with Jihad.

Abraham, in particular, seems to be alerting her readers to the ideological distortion of Hegelian philosophy at the hands of Jihadists who sublimate martyrdom as an encounter with death that enables *becoming* and freedom. In his discussion of lordship and bondage in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel contends that the risking of one's life and the confrontation with death functions as a "pure universal moment" that is characterized by "the absolute melting away of everything stable". This unveils "the essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, [and] pure being-for-itself" (1977, p. 117). While commenting on Hegel, Kojeve notes that, for the German philosopher, facing the fear of death liberates "pure self-consciousness from the ego", frees the individual "from his unreflective immersion in the banalities of daily life", and enables him to experience the "transvaluation of values" that leads to the acquisition of the idea of freedom (1969, p. 50).

In Abraham's novel, Jalal deploys this Hegelian conceptualization when he characterizes Jihad and martyrdom as giving "the greatest freedom, the only freedom available to man" (p. 184), enabling one to submerge "the individual self for the greater good" and "become immortal" (pp. 183, 186). Seduced by this seemingly rational and persuasive indoctrination by a fundamentalist Jihadist, John decides to achieve a higher consciousness by becoming "a Muslim foot soldier" who seeks to attain eternal life in heaven (p. 188). John's embrace of the Hegelian ethos of intersubjective recognition via Jihad does not, however, lead to emancipation and self-realization. Rather it becomes a source of estrangement and loss of self for the liberal, post-racial American. Through the character of Barbara, Abraham foregrounds how fundamentalist Jihad is manifestation of the Freudian principle of Thanatos or destructive death drive that leads to "annihilation" of the self (pp. 238, 242).

Abraham further reinforces the threat of fundamentalist Islam, which embraces Islamic normativity, to Hegel's liberal vision by highlighting that the political ideology of Jihad is, in fact, rooted in a notion of "submission" (p. 161). But, unlike the Hegelian slave, who creatively appropriates bondage to develop a disciplined self-consciousness that is liberated from material desires⁹, the submission demanded by fundamentalist Muslims ties John to limiting, particularistic goals of acquisition of political power. Abraham foregrounds the ironic inconsistency underlying the Taliban's jihad, which is framed as "a holy war", aimed at attaining universal justice and freedom by putting "an end to corruption and bribery and usury [and] . . . the rape and murder of women and children" (p. 143) but is, in fact, aimed at consolidating political power (p. 144).

In Abraham's portrayal, Islamic normativity, which is given the form of fundamentalist Islam, is characterized by illiberal tendencies that makes it incompatible with Hegel's vision of a secular liberal multicultural polity characterized by freedom, equality and rights. Traditional Muslim society is presented as following a tribal ethos of revenge and violence that is antithetical to basic human rights and dignity (p. 137). This can be seen in the case of a young Afghan boy whose life is to be forfeited as "badal" when he grows up to obtain revenge (p. 196). Furthermore, the incompatibility of Muslim society with the liberal principle of gender equality is illustrated when John mentions time and again that misogyny is rampant in Muslim societies (pp. 206, 164).

Abraham seems to be framing her critique of normative Islam as a call for the defense of progressive values of human rights, gender equality, and free speech that are essential for the existence of a liberal community. She seeks to legitimize her critique as a progressive discourse that seeks to balance the provision of multicultural recognition for the other with the safeguarding of the liberties essential for a secular multicultural polity. In this way, she consciously distances herself from openly illiberal Islamophobic racist characterizations that generate a condemnation of Islam in its entirety. Abraham, instead, seems to be merely cautioning against the illiberal tendencies within a particular fundamentalist interpretation and practice of the Muslim faith in terms of the threat they pose to the realization of a liberal society. She even shows how Islam, in its Sufi manifestation, contains within itself the resources for the achievement of the autonomous liberal self and progressive polity. The problem with Abraham's portrayal is not her diagnosis of the social and political ills marring the proponents of a violent or illiberal interpretation of Islam. Rather, what is problematic is her reductive conflation of Islamic normativity with the misogyny and radical violence of fundamentalists.

The analysis in the foregoing paragraphs is an attempt to illustrate that Abraham's claims of liberal tolerance and the rhetoric of defense of freedoms and rights is merely a façade and does not represent the end of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism. I want to emphasize that this is merely a more nuanced discursive strategy that seeks to camouflage racial prejudice and to make liberalist racist exclusions less visible. It may be noted that Abraham deploys what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva characterizes as a post-racial frame of color-blindness that avoids overt racist terminology of biological or moral inferiority. Instead, she generates a more covert and apparently non-racial racism that rationalizes inequality by framing race related issues in the language of liberalism and by drawing on cultural frames that focus on the deficiencies in the culture of racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, pp. 74, 303). Abraham's espousal of the political language of liberalism, seen in her use of the concepts of freedom, recognition, universalism and egalitarianism, in fact, becomes the racial frame through which the author's reifying portrayal of Muslims is made to appear reasonable and even moral. In addition, the monolithic conflation of normative Islam with fundamentalism may be noticed as an instance of the deployment of a racist cultural frame through which Islamophobia and the dangerous alterity and inferiority of the Muslim can be consolidated while evading charges of racism.

This liberal paradigm of Islamophobia reiterates what Goldberg (2002) terms as a racial historicism that is structured by a narrative of non-European people as historically immature and less developed beings who can be civilized through exposure to the more advanced Western liberal culture (pp. 236, 239). Abraham consolidates this historicist racism and continues to affirm the superiority of the liberal progressive Western civilization even when this supremacy is constructed in opposition not to Islam in its entirety, but to a particular articulation of Islam characterized by literalism and fundamentalism. The Muslim is viewed as a *cultural other* that is an immature product of a less evolved historical process.

In his analysis of historicist racism, David Theo Goldberg characterizes it as a form of governance. In the remainder of the analysis, I want to explore how liberal recognition, which takes the form of historicist racism, functions to generate structures of disciplinary assimilation that seek to reconstruct Muslim subjectivities. Consequently, the liberal articulation of Islamophobia can be characterized as a mode of governmentality.

Liberal Islamophobia as imperial governmentality

Hegel envisioned intersubjective recognition as an egalitarian enterprise that involved an acknowledgment of the autonomous subjectivity of another who is not negated or dominated (1977, pp. 109-112). In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel

Levinas (1969) disagrees with Hegel's characterization of recognition. He observes instead that relations of intersubjective recognition do not lead to a condition of freedom. Rather they are shaped by an ontological imperialism in which the self is characterized by a metaphysical desire to possess the other. Consequently, the subject engages in a violent negation of the alterity, particularity, and heterogeneity of the other. Levinas characterizes recognition as an asymmetrical structure in which the subject seeks to assimilate the other within itself by reducing the other to its own experience or representation of them (1969, pp. 33, 36-37). In *American Taliban* (2010), Abraham is critical of fundamentalist Muslims who, in their dialectical interrelation with the empathetic liberal other, John, do not offer him recognition in a democratic mode and engage with him in a hegemonic manner as identified by Levinas.

Abraham underlines that John is objectified as a tool to carry out the repressive political agenda of fundamentalist militants. In their mutual interactions, John is expected to act as a passive receptacle that simply accommodates the demands that are placed on him by fundamentalist Muslims who reify and dehumanize him as a marker of American imperial excesses in the Muslim world (p. 147). This is symbolically portrayed by Abraham through John's sexual encounters with Yussef and Jalal in which he is the passive entity being "vanquished" by an aggressive fundamentalist Muslim male (pp. 163, 184).

My contention is that Abraham's ostensible liberal multicultural project of openness towards the Muslim other ironically mirrors this failure of her fundamentalist Muslim characters to offer intersubjective recognition that is emancipatory. I argue that Abraham's secular reconstruction of Sufi Islam functions as a mode of imperial governmentality. In Abraham's text, liberal articulation of Islamophobia supports a project of disciplinary normalization that generates a modality of correction, intervention, and transformation aimed at the production of docile subjects who conform to a narrowly defined range of practices characterized as normal by a set of norms defined by discourses of power (Foucault, 2003, p. 50, 2006, pp. 55-57). Abraham's project of disciplinary normalization echoes Levinas's characterization of recognition as generating a hegemonic assimilation of the other within the self and attempts to strip Islam of its specificity. She seeks to subsume Islam's otherness within hegemonic liberalism through her secular re-articulation of Sufi Islam as a spiritual, privatized, and apolitical universal Kantian faith. This is presented as the norm that Muslims must emulate.

It needs to be clarified over here that the aim of this analysis is not to generate a blanket condemnation of the Sufi doctrine, which would undermine the researcher's manifest aim of interrogating reductive constructs of Islam and Muslims. Rather, the critique is directed towards a western hegemonic secular

articulation of Sufi Islam that becomes complicit with structures of imperial governmentality. The aim is to unpack how this project of secular Sufi Islam seeks to construct more “authentic” and “credible” moderate Muslims who assimilate within a Western discourse of individual liberation and exit their own tradition (Morsi, 2017, pp. 67, 69-70). Consequently, Muslims are called upon to reform their identities (Morsi, 2017, p. 88) in order to demonstrate their moderation and to prove that their religious subjectivities are compatible with American democratic capitalism and liberal secular rule (Corbett, 2017, p. 139).

I suggest that in Abraham’s text (2010), the Hegelian dialectic of recognition crumbles and is overtaken by a hegemonic dialectic of appropriation in which liberal self-identity is achieved through subjugation of what is outside of oneself and through its assimilation to the standards of the self. Here Abraham’s portrayal undermines Taylor’s characterization of multiculturalism “as an act of resistance to the suppression of particularity by Enlightenment universalism”, which culminates in a politics of difference that recognizes the distinctiveness of minority cultures (Anderson, 2017, p. 770). Instead, it seems to reinforce Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2002) critical insight that the liberal multicultural ethos of recognition functions as a form of dominance that calls for “a domesticated non conflictual [sic] ‘traditional’ form of sociality and (inter)subjectivity” (p. 6). She observes that subaltern subjects “are called on to perform an authentic difference in exchange for the good feelings of the nation and the reparative legislation of the state” (p. 6).

One of the ways in which secular reconstruction and disciplinary normalization of Muslim identities take place in Abraham’s text is through the call on Muslims to adopt an attitude of skepticism towards normative Islamic tradition and its mode of literal interpretation. Saba Mahmood notes that secular reformation of scriptural hermeneutics can make Muslim subjects more amenable to the sovereign rule of a liberal polity characterized by secular reason by undermining their connection with traditional structures of religious normativity (2006, pp. 340, 346). Accordingly, Abraham seems to be interpellating Muslims to adopt the disciplinary subjectivity of the moderate Muslim characterized by a reformist hermeneutical approach that offers a seemingly more rational interpretation of the scriptures in the light of the liberal attitude of interrogating authority.

In *American Taliban* (2010), Noor is presented as the quintessential moderate Muslim who is an autonomous critical thinker that argues against the literal interpretation of the Quran. She advocates the need for reading religious scriptures as myths with symbolic significance that can help us to shed light on the particular historical contexts in which these scriptures emerged. This can be seen

when Noor calls for a feminist interpretation of “Hagar’s quest for water” seeing it as a celebration of “Islamic motherhood” rather than a conflict between the patriarchs of different monotheistic faiths (p. 36).

This liberal production of the moderate Muslim through the secularization of Sufism ironically reveals liberalism’s intolerance towards a critique of its own political and economic forms. The imperatives of imperial governmentality underlying secular reform of Muslim subjectivities can be seen in the effort to present apolitical Muslims (as the norm) who remain tied to cultural frames of an identity conflict within Islam between fanaticism and moderation. Researchers have noted that this erasure of political consciousness is aimed at ensuring that Muslims remain incapable of analyzing and questioning economic disparities, histories of political and social marginalization, and institutional racism (Corbett, 2017; Morsi, 2017). For Abraham, the quintessential moderate Muslim is the apolitical Sufi who avoids dissident speech and action. In the text, even when John refers to the violent excesses of American imperialism in the Muslim world, it is a cursory acknowledgment that does not give a sustained analysis of how imperialism impacts the lives of natives.

Abraham’s moderate Sufi Muslim is, in fact, a pacifist who is instinctively opposed to violence and characterizes militant struggle as misguided. Thus, as long as John remains under the influence of Sufis, he questions the utility of violent struggle and advocates a peaceful mode of resistance rooted in humanist love as espoused by Ibn Arabi and Rabia Basri (p. 186). I argue that the presentation of Sufi vision of universal love, with its emphasis on commonalities between different religions, works as a disciplinary construct that disconnects the Muslim believer from Islamic normativity and the possibility of any politics of transformation and resistance shaped by that tradition.

Liberal Islamophobia’s manifestation as secular governmentality, aimed at generating the moderate Muslims, reveals a fissure at the heart of liberalism and its ethos of tolerance and recognition of difference. It uncovers that despite the universalist post-racial pretensions of liberalism, its recognition of the other is conditional and is extended only to a specific, desirable form of otherness which is stripped of its specificity and is reshaped in the image of hegemonic liberal values. In Abraham’s text, recognition thus functions as a tool of liberal imperialism that regulates racialised non-liberal Muslim subjects through a demand for cultural and political transformation of their difference. Behind the facade of inclusiveness, Abraham’s liberal project of multicultural recognition remains complicit with racist structures of Islamophobic governmentality.

On the surface, Abraham’s liberal multicultural project, based on the Hegelian principle of intersubjective recognition, represents a break from and a

critique of illiberal articulations of Islamophobia that are rooted in a racist paradigm of the clash of civilizations. Abraham departs from a reductive characterization of all Muslims as fundamentalists and seeks to portray the possibility of reconciliation between the liberal West and the Muslim world by highlighting the affinity of Sufi Islam with the Hegelian endeavor of acquisition of a universal consciousness characterized by freedom. However, Abraham does not succeed in breaking free from Islamophobia, which the present study characterizes as a form of anti-Muslim racism that generates modes of imperial governance. Abraham generates a more nuanced Islamophobic framework that racializes Muslims through a disciplinary framework of secularization of Sufism that creates a Manichean hierarchy between the good Muslim and the bad Muslim. In this framework, mainstream Muslims who follow the normative framework of Islam continue to be stigmatized as dangerous fundamentalists and potential terrorists. Liberal recognition is afforded only to those good Muslims who disconnect themselves from their religious tradition and are amenable to hegemonic secular liberalism. These racial underpinnings are masked behind an urgent political endeavor of protecting liberal freedom, rights, and secular polities that are threatened by fundamentalist Muslims. Abraham's fictional narrative, with its apparently post-racial character, can be potentially more dangerous than openly Islamophobic accounts that are easily recognized and condemned as overt forms of racism. This requires readers to exercise vigilance to uncover the subtle strategies of exclusion in this seemingly progressive text.

I conclude with the observation that the liberal project of multicultural recognition can transcend Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism only when it is disconnected from hegemonic frameworks in which the subject seeks self-affirmation by negating the specificity of the other and assimilating it to the self. Offering unconditional intersubjective recognition that rejects hegemonic frames of assimilation is necessary to disconnect liberal multiculturalism from imperialism. Only then can the liberal author offer meaningful recognition to Muslim others and acknowledge their specificity in order to generate a vision of a truly pluri-versal world.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and publication of this article.

Notes

¹ The idea of analyzing Abraham's novel through the theoretical lens of Hegelian philosophy came from the novel's overt and covert allusions to Hegel. The central characters of the novel, John and Barbara, as well as the narrator of the novel, refer explicitly to Hegelian philosophy. John employs the terms freedom and becoming, which are integral concepts of Hegel's philosophical framework, to characterize his quest of growth through immersion in the culture of Muslims (pp. 7, 11, 187, 189-190). Both John and Barbara quote Hegel when they allude to true freedom as being made possible through a transcendence of fear of death (pp. 7, p. 227). The narrator also refers to Hegelian theory of history and the Hegelian belief that history evolves in a progressive strain with each age being an improvement on the earlier one (p. 249). The ways in which the narrative aligns with Hegel's philosophical tenets covertly is highlighted in the subsequent analysis of the text.

² There is disagreement over whether Islamophobia can be regarded as a form of racism since it is overtly manifested as religion-based prejudice. Meer and Modood (2009) note that critics argue that Islamophobia cannot be regarded as a form of anti-Muslim racism since Muslim identities are religious identities that are voluntarily chosen unlike racial categories that are ascribed at birth and are involuntary (p. 345). They argue for a broader definition of racism that is not restricted to biological characteristics but also encompasses cultural markers of identity including those related to religion. They highlight that certain ethnic and cultural signifiers have been consolidated as essential attributes of Muslimness and attract prejudice, a phenomenon which is beyond the control of the individuals who are targeted (pp. 343-344).

³ Sybol Cook Anderson notes that "Taylor cites as justification for extending recognition to cultural minorities the Hegelian thesis that 'our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence' such that 'due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people ... [but] a vital human need'" (2017, p. 770).

⁴ Muhammad 'Abdul Haq (1984) notes that Shahadah (a variation in the spelling of the term *shahada* used by Abraham) means, "bearing witness to faith" (p. 171). In fact, Islam starts with the Shahadah (p. 171) and through it the Muslim states his conviction through a witness in public (p. 172).

⁵ My claim that the author perpetuates a covert form of Islamophobic racism in the guise of protection of liberalism is supported by the novel's use of internal narrative focalization where the events and people are seen through the perspective of various character-focalizers. In the first three sections of the novel, the action is focalized predominantly through the character of John and the readers' perspective of other characters, including his parents, friends and acquaintances (both non-Muslim and Muslim), and is shaped through his point of view. This choice of focalization subtly inflects the readers' perception of Muslim characters. The Muslim characters acquire positive or negative connotations based on John's evaluation that draws on secular, liberal, and Sufi values. Noor, who views the Quran "as an evolved variation," appears to John as "exquisitely sensitive, lonely, sublime" (42). While characters such as Naim, that present a literalist bent of mind, are implied to be rigid and close-minded when perceived through John's consciousness. The final two sections of the novel are focalized mainly through the characters of Barbara and Bill where anxieties

regarding radical Islam are echoed more openly and John's quest for becoming through immersion in the culture of Islam is framed as a misadventure.

⁶ Interpreting Barbara's character as a spokesperson for Abraham is supported by the alignment between the stance of a first person narrator-focalizer/implicit author and the character-focalizer, Barbara, in the final section of the novel. Both denounce the authoritarian American state, war, capitalism, corporate greed and the deterioration of civil liberties as well as terrorism and radical ideology of Jihadism and martyrdom. Based on this argument, it may be claimed that Barbara's perception is, in fact, the author's ideological position. While both denounce the unraveling of liberalism and the rise of racism, and advocate openness towards the other, they iterate racist anxieties about the affinity of normative Islam with radicalism. This becomes obvious when the narrator follows up the image of John Walker Lindh praying in prison with the sinister suggestion that the year of his release "might be the Muslim era: M.E. 2019" (249).

⁷ Sher Ali Tareen characterizes Islamic normativity as "the set of ethical norms, theological commitments and patterns of embodied practices that are demanded from a particular community by a group of religious experts." He prefers the term "normativity" to "orthodoxy" attributing his choice to "the absence of a dominant ecclesiastical authority in Islam" (as cited in Lipton, 2011, p. 428). I follow Lipton in his use of the term 'normative Islam'.

⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* defines Shariah as "God's eternal and immutable will for humanity, as expressed in the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad's example, considered binding for all believers" and as "ideal Islamic law". Muthuswamy (2014) notes that a strand within contemporary research outlines how fundamentalists draw upon the interpretation of Islamic scriptures and Shariah, in particular the doctrine of jihad, to justify violence against Muslim as well as non-Muslim individuals and governments (p. 349). In this regard, Shariah is regarded as a distortion of rational thinking associated with modernity (p. 357).

⁹ See Kohn, 2005, p. 507.

References

- Abdul Haq, M. (1984). The meaning and significance of the shahadah. *Islamic Studies*, 23(3), 171-187. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20847269>
- Abraham, P. (2010). *American Taliban*. Random House.
- Allen, Chris. (2013). Islamophobia and the crisis of Europe's multiculturalism. In E. Toguslu, J. Leman & I. M. Sezgin, (Eds.), *New multicultural identities in Europe: Religion and ethnicities in secular societies*. (pp. 213-230). Leuven University Press.
- Anderson, S. C. (2017). Liberalism and recognition. In D. Moyar (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Hegel*. (pp. 767-786). Oxford University Press.

- Beydoun, K. (2018, May 26). US liberal Islamophobia is rising and more insidious than rightwing bigotry. *theguardian.com*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/us-liberal-islamophobia-rising-more-insidious>. Accessed 27 May 2020.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America*. (4th ed.). Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Corbett, R. (2017). *Making moderate Islam: Sufism, service, and the “Ground Zero mosque” controversy*. Stanford University Press.
- Dabashi, H. (2017, March 3). The liberal roots of Islamophobia. *Aljazeera*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/liberal-roots-islamophobia-170302152226572.html>.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975*. (G. Burchell, Trans.). Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2006). *Psychiatric power: Lectures at the College de France 1973-1974*. (G. Burchell, Trans.). Palgrave.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2002). Racial states. In D. T. Goldberg, & J. Solomos (Eds.), *A companion to racial and ethnic studies*. (pp. 233-258). Blackwell Publishers.
- Habib, M.A.R. (2017). *Hegel and empire: From postcolonialism to globalism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of the spirit*. (A.V. Miller, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2007). *Philosophy of mind*. (W. Wallace & A.V. Miller, Trans.). Clarendon Press.
- Kain, P. J. (1998). Self-Consciousness, the other and Hegel’s dialectic of recognition: Alternative to a postmodern subterfuge. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 24(5), 105-126.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/019145379802400505>
- Kaya, A. (2011). Islamophobia as a form of governmentality: Unbearable weightiness of the politics of fear. *Malmo University Electronic Publishing*, 1-57. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from muep.mau.se/handle/2043/12704
- Kohn, M. (2005). Frederick Douglass’s master-slave dialectic. *The Journal of Politics*, 67(2), 497-514. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.00326.x>.
- Kojeve, A. (1969). *Introduction to the reading of Hegel: Lectures on the phenomenology of spirit*. (J. H. Nichols, Jr., Trans.). Cornell University Press.
- Kundnani, A. (2014). *The Muslims are coming: Islamophobia, extremism and the domestic war on terror*. Verso.
- Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Duquesne.
- Lipton, G. (2011). Secular sufism: Neoliberalism, ethnoracism, and the reformation of the Muslim other. *The Muslim World*, 101, 427-440.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2011.01389.x>.

- Love, E. (2017). *Islamophobia and racism in America*. New York University Press.
- Mahmood, S. (2006). Secularism, hermeneutics, empire: The politics of Islamic reformation. *Public Culture*, 18(2), 323-347.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-006>.
- Meer, N., & Modood, T. (2009). Refutations of racism in the 'Muslim question'. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43(3-4), 335-354.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220903109250>.
- Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2017). Articulations of Islamophobia: from the extreme to the mainstream? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(13), 2151-2179.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1312008>.
- Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2019). Mapping and mainstreaming Islamophobia: Between the illiberal and liberal. In I. Zempi, & I. Awan (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of Islamophobia* (pp. 58-70). Routledge.
- Morsi, Y. (2017). *Radical skin, moderate masks: De-radicalising the Muslim and racism in post-racial societies*. Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Muthuswamy, M. S. (2014). Sharia as a platform for espousing violence and as a cause for waging armed jihad. *Albany Government Law Review*, 7(2), 347-378, Retrieved May 1, 2021, from
http://www.albanygovernmentlawreview.org/Articles/Volo7_2/7.2.347-Muthuswamy.pdf.
- Povinelli, E. A. (2002). *The cunning of recognition: Indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism*. Duke University Press.
- Poynting, S., & Mason, V. (2008). The new integrationism, the state and Islamophobia: Retreat from multiculturalism in Australia. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 36, 230-246.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcrj.2008.08.001>.
- Semati, M. (2010). Islamophobia, culture and race in the age of empire. *Cultural Studies*, 24(2), 256-275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380903541696>.
- Oxford Islamic Studies Online. (n.d.). Shariah. In *The Oxford dictionary of Islam*. Retrieved May 18, 2021, from
www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2168.
- Taylor, C. (1994). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. (pp. 25-73). Princeton University Press.