

## RELIGION AS POLITICS AND POLITICS AS RELIGION: A TOUR THROUGH VIOLENT CARTOGRAPHY

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### Abstract

*Religion and politics share a very dynamic and complex relationship. In a world wherein one's identity is supposedly circumscribed within the ambit of religion or political affiliation, it becomes imperative to understand the complexities that both these otherwise abstractions present when they collide, mingle and distance themselves from each other. The paper looks into this dynamical relationship between the two through two literary texts, namely, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Jasmine Days* by Benyamin. Through instances from these texts, the paper shall understand the consequences that certain historical events have on a whole community and how religious and political identities become one. It shall also argue through the instances from the two novels using the concept of 'Miri' and 'Piri' from Sikhism how simply adhering to either 'Miri' or 'Piri' created a conflict in the harmonious self.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, 9/11, 'Miri', 'Piri'.

The world today is a testimony to the entanglement of religion and politics in such a way that it has become almost impossible to distinguish the two strands from each other. If for some people, religion has become an instrument of political power and assertion, politics has become a religion in itself for others. Though it might seem as if there is nothing wrong with both these aspects and parameters interacting with each other, the reality of this mixture speaks a different story. History and sociology study these developments from one 'blinkered' perspective of the author; thereby the narratives that come out are circumscribed within the ambit of the ideological framework of the author and thus are like that unidimensional white light that comes out of a prism, which entered it as a rainbow. Literary narratives, on the other hand, engage with various flesh and blood realities, which though are caught, in this struggle of religion and politics, do not find their voice echoed in other historical and sociological narratives. These narratives, therefore only speak of the 'why' and 'what' of historical narratives but also 'how' it affected these living, breathing stories.

The paper will look into this dynamic and complex relationship between politics and religion as part of a larger social framework, through the literary narratives of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid and *The Jasmine Days* by Benyamin. Both these narratives will explore through a myriad of characters how religion is used as a political tool in a larger, global context and how politics adorns the cloak of religion and thus suppress the masses.

Religion becomes an entry point to understand the complex interaction of power and politics in Changez's world. Right from the beginning of the novel, he is seen indulging and trying to convince an unknown American of him being harmless, when he says, "don't be alarmed by my beard, I am a lover of America" (Hamid, 1). Narrating his journey of getting disillusioned by the Great American dream, Changez invariably lets the reader know how his religion became the sole parameter of his identity. What is identity? Who decides one's identity and is there even a definable one. These are some of the questions, which his experience of living in America raises. He is looked at through a homogenous lens as somebody who is a threat to American peace and prosperity. He is seen in the image of the terrorists only because he coincidentally prays to the same god as they do. Post 9/11, the very fact that he is a Muslim becomes the only dimension to his identity. It does not matter whether he is a summa cum laude from Princeton or the fact that he is a 'lover' of America, his religion becomes the only thing that matters to the people of America. As soon as the attacks happen, he is treated differently from his other counterparts when he returns back to America from Philippines,

"at the airport, I was escorted by armed guards into a room where I was made to strip down to my boxer shorts... and I was, as a consequence, the last person to board our aircraft.... I was aware of being under suspicion; I felt guilty" (74).

Mohsin Hamid highlights through this novel, how just one small part of one's choice defines his whole self. Changez's decision to keep a beard, which though personal becomes a matter of concern for not just his family in Pakistan, but his colleagues in Underwood Samson as well. All his colleagues that up until the attacks on the twin tower were his friends, started to keep their distance from him. The American state as represented by the silent American agent constantly tries to assert Changez's religious identity as a political one. Right after the attacks, with Islamophobia rising on one side, patriotism rose on the other side. It seemed as if, one could not be a Muslim and a patriot in America any more. Where Changez was assaulted and harassed by strangers on one side, the whole city of New York wore its pride in its nationalism on its sleeves on the other; The American flag could be seen everywhere, on the shrines, on the windshields of cars, buildings. It seemed as if they, "all proclaimed: we are America and not New York. We are the mightiest civilisation the world has ever known; you have slighted us, beware our wrath" (79). However, this stereotyping of religious identity by the Americans in the novel could also be seen as their attempts to understand and come to terms with the event that triggered the response. Humans always departmentalise different aspects of society and go on about their lives. Whatever appears to be different, they try to

unravel it, understand it and failing to do so, fear it. The very act of attacking the twin towers by a Muslim organisation is seen as an attack on Western Civilisation and culture and thus the hatred for a few is projected onto the whole community.

Changez, disillusioned with his life in America, turns his faith, which was until the attacks a matter of his personal space into a matter of the public sphere. His decision to grow his beard becomes a symbol of his resistance, his silent protest as if he is proclaiming that though he is a Muslim, he is not a terrorist. He had seen how America created a divide in the whole world community into the innocent and the guilty, where all the Muslims of the world regardless of their beliefs and joys and sorrows became guilty. The very act of joining and sharing someone's sorrow and the bond that is created in this most human of experiences was ignored and instead, religion became the sole bond that connected humans. Changez tells the American visitor that how America retreated into the myths of his own difference, assumptions of his own superiority(78). He tells the visitor that they, the Americans acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world so that the entire planet was rocked by the repercussions.

In the novel *Jasmine Days*, on the other hand, the crisis does not arise because of the clash of different religions and civilisation but arise because of one community standing up for its rights and dignity of life. Based in the Middle East, *Jasmine Days* explore the conflict and confrontation of the Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims wherein the Shias being in majority are ruled over and treated as 'second class' and 'Kafirs' by the Sunni minority. Religious beliefs become an excuse for the State to rule over and subjugate the masses. As Ali Fardan tells Sameera,

“many of us are not counted as citizens and do not have even basic fundamental rights because we are Shias. We are not allowed to leave the country. There are professions that are completely closed to us. There are defined limits to what a Shia can achieve in this country. However smart he is, he will not be allowed to go beyond those limits.” (Benyamin, 90)

In order to rule over the majority of the masses, a rhetoric is thus created by His Majesty or the State, which tries to establish, why the majority of people who simply follow a different line of leaders, a different path to the same God, are not worthy enough to be treated with respect and given the dignity of being. Sameera questions this line of thought when she decides to forgive Ali for her father's murder or when she secretly root for the Shias to emerge victorious in their revolution. Hailing from Pakistan she tells her colleague that she never thought about her religion in terms of Shias and Sunnis and that she did not even know that they were Muslims. Her friendship with Ali, who was a Shia was not based on their beliefs but was connected by chords of music which sang for both of them the same song.

To remain in power, rhetoric is given by the State through the voice of Taya. To ensure that His Majesty's claim of being the ruler as his birthright goes undisputed, a series of tales are created and are propagated throughout the land. He is moulded into a revered being whose tales are treated as articles of faith. These stories make him not a human but instead make

him appear as a superhuman. They make people believe that he belonged to the Prophet's lineage and cannot be killed. This image gets broken when Sameera sees him with his entourage and finds him picking his nose or when she decides to stay in the City and forgive Ali, Taya shows her a video in which His Majesty is seen beating up a hapless woman who dared to challenge his authority. Thus the readers through the eyes of Sameera are able to see beyond the façade of the State being a Holy arrangement which is created to cater to needs of the people and instead see how it caters to its own need through its religious politics.

The only religion that His Majesty and thus the State believed in was to remain in power and rule over the masses without looking after their needs. For him, his politics was the ambrosia which granted him immortality. As Ali points out,

“which country is His Majesty defending himself from? His own country. The rented soldiers [which were the immigrants from all over the world who were a part of the State Machinery], are here to defeat his own people. It doesn't matter how well we behave, how much we express our patriotism, how much we declare our love for His Majesty- we could never join the army or the police.” (91)

For the State, the easiest way to control the masses was to divide them along the sectarian lines. The revolution that began as a protest against the injustice meted out to the majority of the population soon turned into a war between the Sunnis and the Shias. Not only the State but also the so-called religious leaders grasped the opportunity to exploit the emotional fervour and vulnerability of the people.

The sixth Sikh Guru Hargobind understood this duality of religion. He thus introduced the concept of 'Miri' and 'Piri', wherein both were represented by two different swords which met at one point which for him represented religion and harmony. 'Miri' stood for the worldly, political dominance and 'Piri' represented the spiritual being. As long as both 'Miri' and 'Piri' went together alongside each other, the harmony of the self and within religion could be experienced. However, when 'Miri' is turned into rhetoric as seen in the case of mass Islamophobia in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or in the case of Ali in *Jasmine Days*, violence both physical and emotional take place. This is done through modules of stories and tales of historical injustices, which latch onto the vulnerability of the masses and thus force them to blindly follow whatever they are told. When the 9/11 attacks take place, Changez is seen as a terrorist himself by the people around him simply because that is the narrative that goes around at the time. Because the terrorists who attacked were from Arab, every dark man with a beard is automatically seen as one and thus humiliated. This sense of perplexity is not only experienced by the Americans but also Changez himself, when he feels a sense of exhilaration when he first sees the news of the attack,

“I stared as one and then the other of the twin towers collapsed. And then I smiled. Yes, as despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased....I was caught up in the symbolism of it all.” (Hamid, 86)

Being brought up in a developing nation with the belief that America was a Promised Land which would solve all the problems, seeing it as vulnerable a place as any other, brought in Changez a change. Finally, when he decides to move back to his home in Pakistan leaving behind his American Dream, he goes as a warrior getting ready for a battle. Having seen through the mechanical robot that worked and focused only on the “fundamentals”, Changez decides to shed his robe of being a ‘Janissary’ for America and instead go back to his homeland.

In case of Ali, seeing the atrocities meted out to the men in his family during his childhood forced him to forego his connection with his spiritual faith, his belief in love, pain and humanity, leaving behind a shell full of resentment, frustration and anger, which only resulted in him becoming a monster that he detested all his life. Fighting against the tyranny and injustice of the State, Ali, ended up doing exactly what he accused the Government of doing—killing innocents without giving it a thought.

In the end, Ali turned out to be a victim of the politics and rhetoric of a powerful few who used religion as a basis of suppressing and subjugating the masses. The State and the religious leaders turned a peaceful revolution against the despotism of a fanatic ruler; into one of the senseless killings and destroyed hundreds of Alis and Hasans in their own struggle for power.

‘Piri’, or the awakened self, that emphasises upon the bond between the collective, shares not just happiness, but dares to feel pain at other’s pain to share the love in form of ‘dua’ is what ensures the survival of self through the continuity of the collective in this war of rhetoric. Only when one realises this eternal bond, does he become one with that supreme self which he always aspired to. And, it is in this shared love for the collective, that man realises being vulnerable and giving is far more liberating than being cast into the mould of being ‘true’ and omnipotent. It is this realisation that makes Sameera forgive even the one who killed her father.

In order to rule, rhetoric is always needed to appeal to the sensibility of the masses. Religion is one such rhetoric, that has from the moment it was created, been used to subjugate and suppress freedom and dignity of life. The very idea of there being a higher, superior being created a hierarchy in which man could never think of becoming that superior being himself. The concept of religion ensured that there would always be a different superior being which would cater to a new set of people looking to prove themselves as better, happier beings, but which could never replace the older Gods. Thus the birth of different religions and set of beliefs provided Man with ample opportunities to grasp those threads of beliefs and weave them with rhetoric in order to become a ‘true’ and ‘faithful’ version of that supreme being. Religion, therefore, is a crisis wherein one group of people theorise their beliefs, their God as better than somebody else’s beliefs, somebody else’s God resulting in the creation of a being which goes out of their reach, their control; thus making each one of us our own Frankensteins. As portrayed in both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Jasmine Days*, one

group of people's beliefs, one group of people's identity had to be proven wrong for the other group's beliefs and identity to be held right, to be held true; the cost of which is always innocent human life.

Ultimately, Sameera, Changez and Ali, all represent man in his most vulnerable, innocent self, wherein he is constantly striving to find himself. It is in this struggle that he realises that he is a nomad who belongs to nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It is the bond of empathy that is realised through both 'peera' and 'Piri' that makes him who he is. Thus it befalls each one of us to decide whether to go on believing in the fake, artificial, deceiving being or to place our trust in that system of beliefs which though makes one vulnerable but ensures the survival of the collective. As Lennon himself said,

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky...  
No need for greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man...Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world... (Lennon, lyrics.com)

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