



# Representation of Muslim Characters in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*

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## Abstract:

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, many influences, including media, politics, and literary texts, contributed to molding discourse. As a result, topics like religion, particularly Islam, and Muslims as terrorists have become serious threats to those in power and the general public. Several authors attempt to portray the event's impact on the country and its people. However, whatever the objective, every subject is a result or rather a synthesis of several criteria that stimulate its various points and blend them into one channel. This paper does not indeed diverge away from the aforementioned framework. By selecting the post 9/11 novel, Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011), a novel published on the tenth anniversary of the attacks, this study examines how Muslim characters were portrayed. The novel introduces many Muslim characters such as Mohammad Khan, Asma Anwar, Laila Fathi, Zahira, and Ansar. The main focus will be analyzing the fabricated views, the distorted image, and overgeneralization that frequently characterize American representations of Muslims. This article attempts to answer the following question: Has there been a change in the portrayal of Muslims in American novels after ten years since 9/11?

**Keywords:** Representation, Muslim characters, Amy Waldman, *The Submission*

## Introduction

The Western portrayal of Muslims is not a recent fabrication; it has been operative and deeply embedded in Western conceptualization since the earliest encounters with Muslims: “The genesis, history, and the main contours of Literary Orientalism hinge on the encounter between the West/Europe/Christendom and Islam/Arabs/Muslims in the military, religious, diplomatic, political, and socio-cultural domains from the seventh century to this day” (Kidwai 2009 1-2). The West has promoted nearly the same stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims from the Middle Ages, especially during the Crusades and during the Arab expansion in Europe until the early days of the Third Millennium: “In the Middle Ages, many studies were produced on Islam and Muslims, designed to distort the image of Islam, The Prophet, and Muslims” (Kidwai 1797, 2). Whether the contact occurred centuries ago or lately, the West maintains a persistent conceptualization of Arabs and Muslims as an alien Other or rather enemy: “this negative image is reflected in the polemical writings and literary texts of the day” (Kidwai 2016-3). Edward Said once noted that the West promotes a deep-rooted hatred for Islam: “The term Islam as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing, but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. Today Islam is peculiarly traumatic news in the West” (Agha 2).

Muslims were once widely regarded in the West as "erotic," "primitive," "ignorant," and "slave dealers," among other pejorative labels. Recently, labels like "terrorist," "fundamentalist," and "bloodthirsty" have been applied to Muslims in an overly broad sense (Ridouani 2). Islam is often equated with holy wars, hostility, fanaticism, brutality, intolerance, and women's oppression. The early Americans' view of Islam and Muslims was not much different from the European Orientalist vision. It revolves around the following; Islam is accused of being an oppressive, anti-Christian religion that favors erotic porn and oppresses women. What is new here is the American context in which these old, renewed charges were placed. Islam poses a threat to the West. In this regard, the West has the right to self-defense against such a “threat” (Esposito 180).

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, many influences, including media, politics, and literary texts, contributed to molding discourse. As a result, topics like religion, particularly Islam, and Muslims as terrorists have become serious threats to those in power and the general public. (Abderrazag et al 101). Even though the destruction of buildings on September 11 is not a literary issue, it has made its way into the literary sphere. As a result, several writers have written about the incident: “Although the destruction of buildings on September 11 is not a literary problem, it has been portrayed or indicated in countless literary texts published after 9/11. Literary texts produced in the wake of 9/11 raise constant questions regarding how the 9/11 event is represented and interpreted in the United States and outside the country's borders” (Zabihzadeh et al. 50). As a result, most post 9/11 fiction focuses on the representation of Muslims as a real threat to the United States. They portray Muslims as terrorists and extremists.

Arabs and Muslims have appeared in American writings on a regular basis, whether fictional or factual. The depictions are virtually usually representative of the Orientalist tradition, with its propensity to subordinate and belittle. Ideologically, the denigration of other races was and possibly still is a celebrated tradition. The Post 9/11 writers believe in one version of reality and one 'truth': Muslims as bad, terrorists, and violent. Muslim characters are not to be trusted, and that if non-Muslim characters do not keep their "eyes open" (Eikonsalo 84), they can be deceived. They are dehumanized, as James Ryan calls them: "as a homogeneous, zombielike body, incapable of independent thought and liable to be whipped into a frenzy at the least disturbance to their unchanging backward worldview" (Peter 1). Said points out in his book *Orientalism* (1978), Muslim characters are provided with "no individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational...gestures" (287). Many other negative stereotypes have been attributed to Muslims as "Scary Brown People" (Sarah 168). These characteristics are claimed to be a result of their religion and the "Bedouin land" in which they live, or rather the "desert land," and the fighting mood is a chronic mental condition (Philip 25). All of these stereotyped images are frequently depicted in the post-9/11 American novels through Muslim characters.

The Arab Muslim figures are drawn with either a sinister or benign personality in mind. In other words, there are two types: bad Muslims and good Muslims. In Neo-Orientalist literature, the "bad Muslim" is a popular figure. The Muslim character is immature, violent, and subservient to his pleasures. He lusts after white women. At the same time, he is deeply religious with fundamentalist ideas. This character is popular among Western and American authors (Miller 19). The "bad Muslim" is a clearly problematic figure. It invites scorn to be heaped openly on these sinister figures. They appear to be dangerous. The "good Muslim," on the other hand, gives a different background. This figure has some characteristics in common with the "evil Muslim." He is childish and naive practically all the time. He is also still hardened to violence, even though he is not a violent person. This remains a barrier between the Western and Muslim characters. As a result of this bias, all Western characters have been portrayed positively as opposite to Muslim characters. By selecting the post 9/11 novel, this paper, Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) attempts to examine how the novel has portrayed Muslim characters post 9/11 attack. The novels depict strange partnerships with terrible memories and damaged language for these Muslim characters.

### **About the Novel:**

Amy Waldman's *The Submission* (2011) is one of many novels dealing with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Waldman examined the intense feelings that dominated the still-raw years following the attacks by imagining what might have happened if a Muslim American had been selected to build a memorial in New York. It opens with a portrayal of trauma and grief in the aftermath of a massive attack, and it gradually shifts the attention to a jury of New Yorkers. They are assigned to select a memorial for the victims of the attack. The novel invokes a fictional

narrative that defines what happens when a jury selects a 9/11 memorial for Ground Zero. There were several anonymous submissions, but a design was selected from them, which finally turned out to be created by an American Muslim architect. This decision transforms post-9/11 America into a cauldron of unrest and controversy, with characters from varied shades of the socio-political spectrum pitching in with contrary views on various issues from nationalism, liberalism, secularism, and identity to immigration, assimilation, and multiculturalism, to stir it further. Even though the jury's selection task was not straightforward, the situation became even more complicated with the declaration of Mohammad Khan (Mo) as the winner of the blind competition.

When it is discovered that the anonymous submission titled "The Garden," which was chosen by a jury of eminent designers, professors, and art critics as the winning design for the 9/11 memorial, was designed by a "Mohammad Khan", the jury begins to second-guess its decision. For Paul Rubin a chairman of the jury, "reading the name brought no pleasure, only a painful tightening in his jaw. A dark horse indeed" (Waldman 18). When the name passes on the jury, it rises to some whispering and deliberations. In addition to that, the resentment of this name appeared on their faces, since he is a Muslim: "The piece of paper containing the winner's name was passed from palm to palm like a fragile folio. There were a few gasps and "hmmms," an "interesting," an "oh my." Then: "Jesus fucking Christ! It's a goddamn Muslim!" The paper had reached the governor's man" (Waldman 20). Some on the jury argued that this might work. The retired university in the jury, Leo, attempts to clarify that it may be a healing gesture, but Wilner wryly points out that the 9/11 victims' families will despise it. "That is not the gesture that comes to mind," Wilner said: "The families will feel very offended. This is no time for multicultural pandering" (Waldman 21). Claire said: "Please do not forget you have a family member right here," and Leo replies, "Fine, Claire, I apologize. Many of them will feel offended" (Waldman 21). The announcement significantly raises the tension within the jury, and the novel's key point of debate is whether or not the committee should publicly declare that the Muslim architect's design has been selected.

### **New wave of representation of Muslims post 9/11**

Waldman's novel turns many of the earlier novels' tropes, themes, and traditions and thus epitomizes a new age in 9/11 literature. When comparing Amy Waldman's novel to John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), we find that this novel epitomizes a new age of 9/11 literature. *The Submission* addresses discrimination against Muslims in the post-9/11 United States, as it moves the reader's sympathies away from the traumatized victims towards new targets. So, it follows the memorial war from various perspectives, including "a real panorama of American society," as Keeble puts it (171). The early novels ignored, in turn, the panoramic and public: "These early novels narrow the scope to the psychic, individual trauma that the attacks produced without questioning its political and ideological origins" ( Baelo-Allué 167). Since it is focused on the national, political, and cultural articulation of the trauma rather than the immediate aftermath of 9/11, *The Submission* focuses more on opposing classes, alienation, and social estrangement. Baelo-Allué sees "*The Submission* as a cultural trauma

novel compared to the earlier, psychic trauma novels” (165–172). For Witt, *The Submission* is “more a synthesis of her firsthand experience as a reporter than an examination of collective memory”.

The novel is regarded as a guide to understanding the events of 9/11 and the aftermath. It shows this event as a global event that destroyed people from different nationalities. It is not directly dealing with the events as Waldman says: “I do not really feel like it is about 9/11 per se; it is about the aftermath, about a lot of questions we, as a country, faced” (2012). Having published the novel on the tenth anniversary of the attacks and compared it with the novels written earlier than hers, Waldman says she has taken “a longer view, sort of stepping back and looking at what has happened to the country in the coming years” (2012). The reference to the event can be shown in the questions by Amy Waldman, such as “You all keep talking about the long view, but the long view includes us. My children, my grandchildren, people with a direct connection to this attack are going to be around for the next hundred years.... ‘in the wake of the attack....What are your thoughts on jihad?...., a year after the attack” (Waldman 5,7, 8).

The novel portrays different people's lives from different religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, both American and non-American, to remind the reader that what happened was universal events (Koçak 201-202). Within this depiction, there are different emotions and different perspectives. Another significant point is that Amy Waldman's ancestors depicted Muslims as the main enemy for the West and the United States. The novel deals with other significant themes such as the importance of nationalism, religion, and otherness. It supports the idea of Islamophobia and portrays Muslims as terrorists and Islam as the religion of terrorism. It shows the differences between Muslim and non-Muslim characters, between evil and good. Many Muslim people have lost relatives in such horrible events, but their deceased ones will not be included in a memorial list.

### **Muslim characters**

Waldman's novel *The Submission* introduces many Muslim characters such as Mohammad Khan, Asma Anwar, Laila Fathi, Zahira, and Ansar. Through these characters, the novel depicts the cases of Muslims in the new phase, ten years after the events of 9/11 in the United States. Previous novels focused on the trauma and the impact of the event on the characters, but this novel deals with the political, economic or historical context resulting from these events. Muhammad Khan was portrayed as a righteous person and law-abiding character, but when he is found to be the owner of the winning design, the jury began questioning him: “Mo's answers emphasize the insanity of the questions and guide the reader to consider the whole interrogation as futile and insulting” (Eikonsalo 82). Suspicion began with Muhammad Khan simply when the jury come to know his religion:

They asked about his travels in the past few months; asked where he was born.

“Virginia. Which is in America. Which means I’m a citizen.”

“Didn’t say you weren’t.” Pinball popped his gum.

“Do you love this country, Mohammad?”

“As much as you do.” The answer appeared to displease them.

“What are your thoughts on jihad?”

“I don’t have any.”

“Well, perhaps you could tell us what it means. My colleague here isn’t good with the foreign languages.”

“I don’t know what it means. I’ve never had cause to use the word.”

“Aren’t you a practicing Muslim?”

“Practicing? No.”

“No?”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Yes or no? You’re confusing me.”

Abbott and Costello in suits. “No. I said no.”

“Know any Muslims who want to do harm to America?” (Waldman 31)

Muhammad Khan's social status as an educated and wealthy man, he is treated on the basis of his ethnic and religious background. On the other hand, the white, rich man, jury chief Paul Rubin is the only person whose voice and standing in society cannot be questioned. *The Submission* illustrates how ethnic and religious aspects affect people. Muslims have become a victim of a stereotype that has marked all Muslims as terrorists. Thus, the person's identity has become just a set of characteristics based on which he/she is dealt with. Many common stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are reflected in the character of Mohammad Khan. He is portrayed as an “innocent victim” at the beginning of the novel. Some see him as dangerous fanatic and murderer: “A memorial only to America’s diminished greatness, its new vulnerability to attack by a fanatic band, mediocrities in all but murder” (Waldman 9). However, Mohammad Khan is neither of these. When he encounters discrimination, he does not give up and accept the victim role; instead, he begins to fight. People's suspicions about him being dangerous are disproved, proving that this stereotype is flawed as well (Eikonsalo 90).

When American Muslim architect Mohammad Khan is questioned at airport security, another scene in the novel openly informs the reader about the extensive repercussions of that day. Although the architect does not express his feelings to the officers, Waldman explains that they are not different from the other characters' deep emotions during the tragedy. The following is Waldman's interpretation of Mo's conversation with the officers, with her impressionistic but objective commentary providing sympathetic insight into the Muslim's mind and actions during the attack:

Where were you during the attack? Here. Los Angeles.” Naked beneath the sheets in his hotel room, the attack a collage of sound – panicky sirens, fissuring broadcasters’ voices, rescue helicopters pureeing the air, the muffle and crush of implosion from his hotel clock radio. Only when the buildings were gone did he think to turn on the television. Here, he said again. [...] Working and longing for New York ( Waldman 73).

Waldman has brought different characters from different religions and different backgrounds. For example, Muhammad Khan is from India, and Asma is of Bangladeshi origin. Asma is considered uneducated and poor. Characters from different backgrounds have been used to stir up inequality in the victims of 9/11. Asma's husband, who used to work as a cleaner at the World Trade Center, has not been recognized as one of the 9/11 victims. “Asma Anwar’s husband was not among them. The undocumented also had to be uncounted, officials insisted. They were very sorry about Inam, “if indeed he had existed, rolling off their tongues as *Insh’Allah*, but they could do nothing about repatriating the body, if it were found, or helping with funds for the widow” (Waldman 88). Asma wonders how her husband is not recognized as a 9/11 victim because he is an undocumented immigrant. She sees on TV one day how a well-known right-wing talk show host reacts to the topic: “Asma ground her fists into the sofa cushions, furious that there was no one to speak for her husband, for the army of workers who cleaned and cooked and bowed and scraped and when the day came died as if it were just another way to please” (Waldman 97). Wiping Asma's husband out of history provoked criticism of the treatment of Muslim immigrants and indicated that working-class were considered less important.

The novel focuses on the question: are all the victims of the September 11 attacks equally important? Asma said in a loud voice in her speech about the memorial: “Does my husband matter less than all of your relatives?” (Waldman 296). This question illustrates the inequality in American society in general. Asma is treated as getting “dealt the worst hand since, in addition to her religious and ethnic background, she is a poor, uneducated woman” (Eikonsalo 89).

The stereotype of a Muslim woman being a persecuted woman is common in modern American literature (Ahmad 105). Asma represents the persecuted Muslim woman in the novel who is “in need of rescue from an enlightened West” (Ahmad 106). The novel highlights that Asma has found her freedom in the West. Keeble notes that Asma is mixing up the stereotype of an oppressed Muslim woman by finding her voice and independence by speaking her opinion in the memorial session (172) Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin point out that this trope also has been proliferating in the post-9/11 period in the media, entertainment, and politics (172). Yet, in Waldman’s novel, the pattern is not that simple. While Asma does find her voice in the United States, she uses it to express her disappointment to the country. In her speech at the memorial hearing, she tells the American public what she thinks of the discrimination and animosity towards Muslims and immigrants in the country she had thought to be a liberal, tolerant utopia by saying: “You should be ashamed!” (Waldman 297). Asma is a Muslim victim who was reviled due to the stereotype of Muslims in the United States of America.

Another Muslim character who suffers at the hand of from intolerance is Laila Fathi. Some Americans consider her less American: “the message is that we’re lesser Americans” (Waldman 61). Looking at the Muslim characters in the novel, we see that a number of Muslim characters are rejected for various reasons. The stereotype about Muslims as terrorists and Other is still depicted in the novel by Amy Waldman. Another Muslim character is Zahira, the well-educated Muslim woman character of the novel. A Jewish character, Sean Gallagher tugged her scarf because he hates Muslims, and he does not want a Muslim to design a memorial for the victim of 9/11. She supports Muslim women’s right to choose whether or not to wear the hijab. Sean is impressed by her intelligence and apologizes to her in the novel, leading him to wonder if he was wrong. In addition, Ansar, a Muslim man who runs a foreign-policy lobby and is a member of The Muslim American Coordinating Council, condemns Americans’ stereotypical perception of Muslim people acting out as Waldman’s mouthpiece when he says: “when you watch the movies, you root for the cowboys, but when you read the history, you root for the Indians” (Waldman 80). He likens Americans’ perception of people to those who are “locked in a movie theater” (80). Ansar’s criticism directed at American society refutes the claim of many Americans that 9/11 changed everything (Legatt 218)



## Conclusion

After analyzing the portrayal of Muslims in Waldman's novel, one can conclude that the Muslim characters in the novel face intolerance and identity crisis. Their names measure them. Even if they were born in the United States with American parents and were not devout Muslims. Anyone with a Muslim name is misperceived as an enemy of America. The novel misrepresented Muslim characters by portraying Mohammad Khan, Asma Anwar, Laila Fathi, Zahira, and Ansar with barbaric and terrorist traits and neglecting any positive aspects. By portraying all Muslim characters as such, the novel provides readers with a distorted image of all Muslims as barbarians and terrorists. On the other hand, Muslims have been attempting to normalize their presence in western societies to counter the hatred that resulted from negative stereotypes by resistance through dialogue, as shown in the character of Mohammad Khan. Waldman's novel turns many of the earlier novels' tropes, themes, and traditions and thus epitomizes a new age in 9/11 literature. *The Submission* addresses discrimination against Muslims in the post-9/11 United States, as it moves the reader's sympathies away from the traumatized victims towards the political and ideological origins of the attack. So, it follows the memorial war from various perspectives, including a real panorama of American society.

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