



ETHNOCENTRISM IN THINNER THAN SKIN BY UZMA ASLAM KHAN: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Ethnocentrism plays a pernicious role in the world and it propagates a bias, unfair prejudice and marginalization. The Westerners define themselves superior as well as a civilized nation. The current study aims to draw attention to the Westerners biased and limited mind set which affiliates characteristics with the people of the East like uncivilized, inferior, barbarians, alien and a threat for the West. This biased attitude has fabricated a line of demarcation between the East and the West. This study explores the ethnocentric approach of the West towards the East. It exposes how the West underestimates and misrepresents the Eastern countries. It also approaches how the West is still controlling the lives of the people of the East by language, culture and power. The present study is a textual analysis and has adopted Kinder and Kam's theoretical framework of Ethnocentrism to investigate the text *Thinner than Skin* by Uzma Aslam Khan. This research paper concludes that the Westerners biased mindset and their unfair prejudice is still shaping and controlling the lives of the people of the East particularly the Muslim world negatively.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, prejudice, East, West, misrepresentation

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Introduction

Ethnocentrism disturbs the people severely and circulates favoritism, unfair prejudice and relegation. It distributes the world into in-group and out-group. Ethnocentric attitude upsets and shapes the lives of the people negatively. William Graham Sumner is assumed the originator of the term “Ethnocentrism” (Kinder and Kam, 2009). William Graham Sumner defines Ethnocentrism as under:

Ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it... Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways are the only right ones...which differentiate them from others (*Folkways*, 1906, p. 13).

Ethnocentrism is actually a cultural narrowness and an unusual high regard for one’s own ethnic, religious or cultural group. It supports an in-group to accept only its own values and customs to vindicate superiority over an out-group. It does not permit the member of an in-group to assent the member of an out-group. As a result, it upsurges the distance amid the in-group and the out-group and makes the situation worse. It creates a gulf which blocks the communication amongst the in-group and the out-group.

The Westerners delineate themselves as a superior race as well as a cultured nation. While, on the other hand, the people of the East are assumed uncivilized, inferior, barbarians, alien and a threat for the West. The West is dominating the East. The false descriptions about the East and its people have been fabricated to prompt Western dominance over the East. Said enlightens that the boundary between the West and the East is synthetic and man-made (John McLeod, 2000). The Westerners provide no importance to the Eastern even as a human being. The false images have been offered in such a way to give certainty and legitimacy to Westerners hegemony and supremacy over the East.

Uzma Aslam Khan, through her characters, illustrates in *Thinner Than Skin* that how the Westerners prejudiced and narrow mind set disturbs and shapes the lives of the people. It does not matter for the Europeans that how much a person is educated or likes the West. They are



just engrossed in to get a control over the lives of the people of the East. They are absorbed to generate false images and to distort the Eastern countries particularly Muslim countries like Pakistan.

Stereotypes are conventional or formulaic conceptions or images or, in other words, ‘generalized beliefs about a particular group or a culture. Stereotypes are declared as “fixed ideas” which are mostly unfavorable. Negative stereotypes prompt an unfair prejudice and inequality. Uzma Aslam Khan’s points out that the Eastern [Muslim] or Pakistanis are negatively stereotyped and they face an unfair prejudice because of just being Muslims. Uzma Aslam Khan’s character Nadir Sheikh in *Thinner than Skin* has to face a lot of complications due to ethnocentric approach of the West towards the Muslim world. He belongs to a Muslim country that is why he is marginalized. He is stereotyped and becomes the victim of unfair prejudice, hostility and discrimination because he is a Muslim and a Pakistani as well.

Literature Review

Ethnocentrism is an essential topic of discussion because it propagates hatred among different strata of the societies which upshots destructive effects and demolition. It lessens the world into contrasting groups i.e. in-group and out-group. These opposing groups discard each other which create a gap. It blocks the communication and ideas among these opposite groups.

Andrew Tolle (2013) states that, in *Thinner Than Skin*, by describing the beauties of the glaciers in Northern areas of Pakistan, Uzma Aslam Khan has narrated a love affair between Nadir and Farhana. Nadir Sheikh is living in San Francisco and struggling as a photographer. Thematically, she also highlights the political issues, identities and the tensions on the Northern border of Pakistan including the impact of colonial powers. She also explores the religious, gender issues and ethnic concerns and the how the environment affects the lives of the people. She claims that actually every character in *Thinner than Skin* is representing a sense of dissatisfaction. Nadir is struggling as Americans say him to capture the misery of Pakistan, they do not accept the landscapes of his beloved California.



Further, some ethnic and religious stereotypes have also been pointed out in the novel. Here the author of *Thinner than Skin* represents the Islam positively as declared by a shopkeeper that Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized the importance of “*ghuraba*” and translated it as “strangers” (Andrew Tolle, 2013, p. 133). Andrew Tolle explains the situation:

Nadir cannot sell his beloved California landscapes because, as one agent explains, Americans expect Pakistani photographer to show the ‘misery of their war-torn country’. Because his American landscapes somehow lack ‘authenticity’, Nadir must exploit his access to Pakistan to capture its horror (Andrew Tolle, 2013, p. 132).

Ammara Khan (2013) suggests that *Thinner than Skin* throws light on the indigenous cultures of Northern Pakistan and the uncertain situations prevailing in the lives of the common people including the issues and effects of war and terrorism. She describes also that Nadir has a great love for natural beauty but he is directed to capture the worst condition of Pakistan. He is said, “Show us the dirt, the misery” (p. 2).

Razeshta Sethna (2013) states that it is a story of love and identity. It is a depiction of the beauties of the glaciers, rivers and valleys in the northern areas of Pakistan and the Gujjar tribes who are very hospitable. She comments that He [Nadir] tries to sell the landscapes of the desert of California but he is told to go Pakistan and shot its worse condition, “We might be interested in you not in your landscapes” (p. 1).

Americans interference in Pakistan has made the situation worse. Khan’s description of the drones in the novel, *Thinner than Skin*, creates a sense of doubt because sometimes people think that the drone has been fired by America and sometimes from the military bases of Pakistan. Khan’s characters face this situation during their visit to Pakistan.

Jessica L. Radin (2015) states that America has put the Pakistan in an uncertain situation where Pakistan remains always in the news. It is a worst situation for a country where the lives of the people are uncertain and always feel insecurity. Through the character of Nadir, Khan presents the situation as Nadir replies:

If he only knew how rapidly the glamour of chaos recedes the closer you come to it... On any given day, the target would be a mosque and a hotel; on another, a bus and a train. The



next, Chinese officials in Baluchistan and Pakistani generals in Punjab...the army on the ground, and the drones in the air, because you can't kill a drone, it's a drone. And you can't kill an army, it's an army (2015, p. 1).

Research Methodology

The present study explores the text *Thinner Than Skin* by Uzma Aslam Khan with regard to ethnocentrism. It is a qualitative research and the mode of enquiry is textual analysis. The excerpts preferred from *Thinner Than Skin* are related to the issue of ethnocentrism. These excerpts have been selected to expose the Western ethnocentric approach towards the East. The study adopts Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam's (2009) theoretical framework to investigate the ethnocentric attitude in *Thinner Than Skin* which disturbs the lives of the people of the East particularly the Muslims and the Pakistanis. According to Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam (2009), there are two tools available and through which ethnocentrism is expressed/ measured. These tools are:

- i. Stereotypes
- ii. Sentiments

Stereotypes are taken as a primary source to analyze the ethnocentric approach while, on the other hand, sentiments as a secondary source. Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam (2009) claim, "Stereotypes tend to portray the members of out-groups as though they are all the same: individual variation is flattened, anomalous cases are set aside" (p. 45). In such a case, all the Muslims are assumed same. All the Muslims and the Muslim countries are represented as alien, irrational, uncivilized and a threat for the West. As a result of it, the Muslims are marginalized in the Western countries.

Whereas the secondary tool is concerned, sentiments are referred to the emotions and feelings or a way of thinking towards a particular situation. According to Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam (2009), feelings [sentiments] are something else again-something more elemental- and they give direct expression to the elemental predisposition of ethnocentrism" (p. 68). They



further claim that, “in-group favoritism is stronger for sentiment than it is for stereotype” (2009, p. 68). They expose that the war on terror is also the result of American’s ethnocentric attitude towards the Muslims.

Data Analysis

The analysis is mainly based on the stereotypes about the Muslims and the Western sentiments towards the Muslims. It is discussed that how the Western biased and limited mind set is shaping and controlling the people of the East particularly the Muslims and the Pakistanis.

Ethnocentrism Through Stereotypes

In *Thinner Than Skin*, Uzma Aslam Khan puts pen to paper about Nadir’s [protagonist] stay in America as a photographer where he faces Western prejudice. He is very close to a female character Farhana with whom he actually loves. Later, both Nadir and Farhana visit Pakistan. Uzma Aslam Khan narrates a love story between Nadir and Farhana. Nadir loves Farhana “Nice little Pakistani girl” (Khan, 2012, p. 15). Nadir is basically a Pakistani and residing in America. In America, he attempts to make progress as a photographer where he scuffles and becomes the victim of ethnocentric behavior of the Americans towards the Muslims.

Nadir Sheikh struggles in America. He is marginalized due to ethnocentric approaches and behaviors of the Americans. Nadir is portrayed as he is not stable financially in America. Khan describes that Nadir thinks of his honeymoon with Farhana “Nice little Pakistani girl” (Khan, 2012, p. 15) after marriage. But money is a problem for him. “I [Nadir] thought, I might also suggest a honeymoon...though not immediately after the wedding; I still wasn’t earning enough” (Khan, 2012, p. 8). He is trying to improve his position financially in America but circumstances there are not in favor of him. He is looking for a good career as a photographer but still suffers because of money as he [Nadir] himself explains in *Thinner Than Skin*, “All the time in San Francisco [America], when I [Nadir] couldn’t pay my rent? Irfan had shared my burden...” (Khan, 2012, p. 66).



He tries to sell the photographs of beautiful landscapes. For this, he makes contact with the stock-photo agency in America and finally gets an appointment for interview. But when he goes there, he is rejected because being a Pakistani and a Muslim. According to Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam (2009), the in-group favoritism and out-group hostility makes a gap among the in-group and the out-group. So, Americans give no importance to Nadir and he becomes the victim of out-group hostility. He is unable to get a favor for himself because he is an out-sider there in America. He is not one of them; an alien. During his [Nadir] interview, an American explains and says,

This is a stock-photo agency. We sell photographs to magazines and sometimes directly to the customers and sometimes for a lot of money. We might be interested in you, but not in your landscapes...next time you go home [Pakistan], take some photographs (Khan, 2012, p. 11). They do not assent his photographs and cast off him because he is from Pakistan. And, according to Stereotypes about the Muslim world, he can be a source to justify their dominance and superiority through the negative description of the Muslim. Although, some conflicts are prevailing in Pakistan but it does not mean that there is nothing which can be inspiring. Americans focus is just to highlight those conflicts. They just want to highlight the dark side of the Pakistan to justify their claim of being superior and civilized. Therefore, Nadir is directed to go Pakistan and take photographs according to their taste. Similar kind of ethnocentric behavior, he has to face when he made a second attempt to sell the photographs. This time he is told, “Your photographs lack authenticities...Where are the beggars and bazars or anything that resembles your culture?” (Khan, 2012, p. 12). It means that he belongs to such a country where the people are of low status and inferior. This displays a clear reflection of ethnocentric approach of the West towards the Muslims and the Muslims countries. For Americans ‘beggars’ and ‘bazars’ are important and considered authentic because Americans want to justify their superiority over the Muslims countries. They want to misrepresent the Eastern countries. As ethnocentrism refers to superiority over out-groups or others and stereotypes make the sense of the world, this interview becomes a source to understand that how the Western world misrepresents the Muslims.



Further, their knowledge is not based on logic and reason but dependent upon stereotypes. While the mistreatment with Nadir and his rejection by Americans explores that he becomes the victim of an unfair prejudice and discrimination.

The depiction of Pakistan is also stereotypically represented. Nadir sheikh is a lover of the beauty of nature. Nadir explains his taste for flowers as mentioned in the novel, “I knew the flower shops with the widest varieties” (Khan, 2012, p. 17). He likes to take photographs of the natural world more than anything else. He does not care of anything while photographing. Khan narrates his passion for photography as “While photographing the owl, I [Nadir] hadn’t thought of Farhana even once” (2012, p. 9).

He even does not miss Farhana, his beloved, when he is busy in photographing. This shows his interest and passion for his profession as a photographer on the one side and on the other side it reveals that he is true to his profession. He goes to an office in America to sell the photographs of beautiful landscapes but there an American agent asks him to go Pakistan and shoot its miserable condition. He says that you are a Pakistani so “use your advantage” (Khan, 2012, p. 11) because, according to him [an American agent], “I [Nadir] was lucky to come from a place always in the news” (Khan, 2012, p. 27).

This is an ethnocentric and stereotypical approach of the Western world to see the dark side of Pakistan. Zia Mian & Sharon K. Weiner (2012) argue that the image of Pakistan is reflected negatively. It is a country which is backward, corrupt and a land of danger in terms of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. Nadir is surprised to hear this that they have no concern with the beautiful landscapes or natural beauty as an American agent argues, “Americans already know their trees” (Khan, 2012, p. 11). Their limited mindset does not allow them to give space to Nadir Sheikh. They want to underestimate Nadir because he is a Pakistani. They are interested in to highlight the Pakistan as ‘a place of horror’. This is an unfair prejudice based on ethnocentrism which reveals the ethnocentric approach of the West towards the Eastern countries and particularly the Muslims countries like Pakistan.

The boundary is man-made and artificial between the East and the West. The knowledge about the East is based on false images constructed by the West as Edward Said points out. Nadir is



a brilliant photographer and takes pictures very sincerely but, instead of an appreciation, he is directed to go Pakistan, his homeland, and take pictures which describe its horrible condition. He is unable to understand this prejudice and stereotypical behavior from the Western world. Khan illustrates in *Thinner Than Skin* as “A Waidhofer can be a nature photographer of the Wild West but a Sheikh must be a war photographer of the Wild East!” (2012, p. 13). It also reveals as how the Western world is still controlling and shaping the lives of the people of the East particularly the Muslims. He is not free there in America to make progress as a photographer and he is marginalized because he is a Pakistani and a Muslim. Similarly, Maryam whose daughter has been drowned in the lake, knows that she is not strong but weak. Ghafoor her husband asks her who the murderer is. But she is very disappointed and she says, “We cannot touch her. She is with the American” (Khan, 2012, p. 223).

When Nadir, in America, goes for an interview for the first time in office where he meets an American. He wants a space for himself there to make progress as a photographer in America but an American who suggests him, “Why are you, Nadir Sheikh”-he said Nadir Shake- “wasting your time taking photographs of American landscapes when you have material at your own door step?” (Khan, 2012, p. 11). It clearly shows that the how the Americans, being ethnocentric, representing the Muslims countries like Pakistan falsely. They are trying to create such images and stereotypes through which they can make a sense of the Muslim world as backward, uncivilized, and inferior and a threat for the West. Nadir, in *Thinner Than Skin*, is surprised to see the behavior of an American. When an American meets Nadir, he asks, “So, you [Nadir] Moozlim or what?” and Nadir replies, “or what?” (Khan, 2012, p. 10). Nadir is not in a position to resist against the ethnocentric sentiments of American agent who directs him to “Show us the dirt. The misery” (Khan, 2012, p. 11).

American interest only lies in to degrade Pakistan as a backward, uncivilized and an inferior country as compared to European countries like America. But Khan narrates the beauty and peace of the land of Pakistan by adding the story of Mughal Queen Noor Jehan. Nadir Sheikh says,



I heard a story once...the Mughal Queen Noor Jehan paused on her way to Kashmir. She was suffering from an eye infection and decided to dip her hands in the river to wash her face. The water was so cool and pure her eyes were cured. Ever since, the river has been called *nain sukh*, that which soothes eye (2012, p. 11).

Khan, by highlighting the beauty of the Northern areas of Pakistan, actually gives a message that Pakistan is a very beautiful country. So it must be kept in mind that though there are some conflicts in the country, we should not neglect the beauty of the region. The world needs to minimize the ethnocentric attitudes and approach towards the Muslim countries and also must see the positive things in the Muslim countries like Pakistan. Khan explores, though the horrible happenings are greater in numbers in Pakistan, but the bad thing can happen anywhere in the world. It is not a universal thing that Pakistan is the only country which is considered not safe but the violation can also be observed in other countries as well. In this context, Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam (2009) claim that according to ethnocentric and stereotypical approach, the act of one person is attached to the whole group that becomes one's identity. The members of the in-group support their own members while, on the other hand, they show hostility, unfair prejudice and discrimination when they come in to contact with the members of out-group. The Pakistanis belong to out-group in the eyes of Americans. So, they behave negatively as the in-group demands but their behavior is not based on logic but based on ethnocentrism. As when Nadir is stabbed in America, no one said that America is not a safe country or the Americans are not civilized. But it was just a bad accident. While, when such kind of accidents happen in Pakistan then it is assumed that it is a country of the savages, terrorists and extremists. But Khan conveys a message that such kind of violation can happen anywhere in the world.

Ethnocentrism Through Sentiments:



Ethnocentrism “divide [s] the world into two opposing camps” (Donald R. Kinder & Cindy D. Kam, 2009, p. 42). It leads towards in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. Donald R. Kinder & Cindy D. Kam analyze the survey conducted by National Election Study (NES) 2000 and 2002 before and after 9/11 and claim that mostly Americans support the war on terror and their support is based on ethnocentrism. According to Donald R. Kinder & Cindy D. Kam (2009), the war which is imposed on Afghanistan is based on the ethnocentric approach of the West. Their sentiments are based on ethnocentrism which lead them to support the war on terror.

In *Thinner Than Skin*, Americans sentiments display an unfavorable attitude towards Nadir Sheikh because of ethnocentrism on the one side and, on the other side, Americans support for war on terror has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and shaped the lives of the people negatively. The war on terror has crushed the lives of the people of the Muslim world particularly those who are living in Afghanistan and in the Northern areas of Pakistan like Waziristan and some other parts.

Donald R. Kinder & Cindy D. Kam (2009) claim, “Americans who believe their own group to be superior are also inclined to say that we should be spending more on the war” (p. 83). Particularly after the tragedy of 9/11, the Americans and their supporters have changed the map of the world which affected not only the lives of the people of Pakistan but also, to some extent, America. The war, which is imposed by Americans on Afghanistan and then on the other Muslim countries, is the result of American ethnocentrism and their sentiments towards the Muslim world (Donald R. Kinder & Cindy D. Kam, 2009). Further, sentiments play an important role in shaping the American public opinion than stereotypes because sentiments are more elemental than stereotypes (Donald R. Kinder & Cindy D. Kam, 2009).

Ethnocentrism is such a force which intensifies the situation. It does not allow the people to minimize the gap between different people but it enables the people to intensify the differences which upset the lives of the people destructively. Those people who become the victims of Americans war are against America “...the cells with no name, where he would be end up, eventually, in the hands of Americans” (Khan, 2012, p. 238) and further they try to de-stable



America and its friends who are in favor of America like Pakistan. It can be seen that “The death of seven Pakistanis and one Chinese man was the revenge for the missile strikes in the killer’s village” (Khan, 2012, p. 159). Another reaction in which further deaths can be traced. Khan narrates, “A bomber had blown himself up in the Balakot police station, they said, killing four policeman, putting four others in hospital, and leaving the rest in rage” (Khan, 2012, p. 210). The lives of the people are not secure. They can be targeted at any time at any place. It has made the situation worse.

The lives of many Pakistani men, women and even children have been targeted and finally their lives come to an end as Khan narrates, “In Pakistan, it was hard to know which tragedy to dwell on the most” (2012, p. 267). Many assets of Pakistan have been destroyed in the same way. We can trace another happening in the novel as “A bomb exploded in a hotel this morning, killing one foreigner and seven Pakistanis” (2012, p. 26). Not only Pakistanis are killed but also foreigners become the target.

Muhammad Saleem Mazhar & Naheed S. Goraya (2011) claim that the reasons of suicide attacks in Pakistan are US drones. Definitely, the killer belongs to an out-group who is anti-America. A missile attack becomes the reason of these deaths because the attack is a part of the war which is imposed by America.

Findings

According to the findings of the present study, Nadir Sheikh goes to a photo agency where he is directed to capture the horror and miserable condition of Pakistan instead of beauty of the nature. Through the descriptions in the novel, it is tried to highlight the stereotypical images of the Islamic world as inferior, uncivilized and a threat for the West. The Western false superiority over the East has also been portrayed. We have also seen how the West actually tries to justify their ways of dominance as Americans direct Nadir to take pictures of Pakistan in its worse condition. They expect him to highlight only the dark side of the country in which they have interest. They are not interested in the beautiful Northern areas of Pakistan as depicted by Khan in *Thinner Than Skin*. And America uses drone strikes to target their enemies but we see as a result of these drone attacks many innocent people are killed in these drone



attacks with no reason. The consequences of this war, we have traced in *Thinner Than Skin* in the form of deaths caused by drone attacks on the one hand and killings as the reaction of these attacks on the other hand. It also has challenged the sovereignty of Pakistan and pushed the country into security issues. It has not only created a gulf between the East and the West but also propagated hatred among the Muslim world and the West.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Ethnocentrism influences the lives of the people negatively. It provides space to create distance and blockage of communication between in-group and out-group. It leads the members of in-group to express unfair prejudice, discrimination and hatred towards those who are not like them. It also provides opportunity to marginalize the member of out-group like Nadir who faces unfair prejudice and marginalized. They also create such false images which allow them to stereotype the Muslim countries as inferior, uncivilized and a threat for the West. They also try to misrepresent the Muslim world to justify their ways superiority and dominance.

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AL-ADWĀ الأضواء

ISSN 2415-0444 ;E 1995-7904

Volume 34, Issue, 52, 2019

Published by Sheikh Zayed Islamic Centre,
University of the Punjab, Lahore, 54590 Pakistan