2

Islamic Fundamentalism vis-à-vis Jihadi Women: Tabish Khair's *Jihadi Jane*

ARNAB KUMAR SINHA

ABSTRACT

Tabish Khair's recent novel, *Jihadi Jane* (2016) provides an interesting perspective on the issue of Islamic fundamentalism. Instead of simply criticising the worldview of the Jihadis, Khair presents the world of the Jihadis through the eyes of two Jihadi women. *Jihadi Jane* is a kind of travel narrative that captures the psychological journey of two Muslim women, who migrate from London to Syria for accomplishing their mission to become pious and good Muslims. This mission, which initially drives Ameena and Jamilla to the training institution of the Jihadis, turn out to be a disastrous experience for both of them. In the training institution run by the Jihadis for grooming the minds of young women, the Jihadis preach a fundamentalist perspective of Islam that appears to be dangerous to both Ameena and Jamilla. They find it difficult to negotiate their secular view of Islam with the religio-political view of the Islamic fundamentalists. Instead of preaching the actual message of the Quran, the Jihadis, as Ameena and Jamilla discover, selectively use certain messages in the Quran to imbibe in the minds of young women a wrong idea about Islam. Thus, through the structure of a dystopic travel narrative, Khair shows the world of terrorism. In fact, the narrative can be read from the perspective of the conflict between secular and non-secular Islam. This paper will therefore make an attempt to address this conflict through the point of view of the Jihadi women. Khair's fiction, as my paper will argue, appeals for a secular view of Islam that seeks to be inclusive and apolitical.

Keywords: Islamic fundamentalism, Secular Islam, Jihadi.

Islamic fundamentalism has emerged as a distinct aspect of study for the critics of the contemporary times especially after 9/11. This has, in a quite significant manner, drawn the attention of the politicians, sociologists, anthropologists and creative writers to the diverse implications of being religiously committed. Though religious fundamentalist groups around the world are becoming more assertive in our times, one finds that Islamic fundamentalism is an important subject of discussion for many critics. The reason behind this is obviously the American perspective that equates terror with Islam. That Islam has been responsible for generation of terror attacks around the world is a thesis that invites debates and counter arguments. However, the study of religious fundamentalism and particularly Islamic fundamentalism becomes interesting when we try to interpret it through the lens of patriarchy. This aspect is well defined by Stefanie Elies in the Preface section of the book, *Religious Fundamentalism and Their Gendered Impacts in Asia* (2010) edited by Claudia Derichs and Andrea Fleschenberg. Elies states that the basic premise of "fundamentalism is often one-dimensional" and "dominated by the figure of a male Muslim." (Derichs & Fleschenberg, 5). Elies further argues that religious fundamentalism sustains "patriarchal structures" and "prescribe codes of behavior" for women by "either restricting or exaggerating the role of women" (Derichs & Fleschenberg, 5). Derichs and Fleschenberg draw our attention to the "anti-women" outlook of the religious fundamentalists and this is quite obviously a fact in Islamic fundamentalism (Derichs & Fleschenberg, 8). Muslim women, as my paper argues, usually negotiate with the "anti-women" perspective of the Islamic fundamentalists, but this negotiation is not always a happy one, particularly for those who are educated, as they often tacitly interrogate the preaching's of the fundamentalist movement. In fact, Islamic fundamentalism is a very complex sort of idea and Khair's recent novel, *Jihadi Jane* (2016) attempts to read Islamic fundamentalism from the perspective of the oppressed Jihadi women.

This novel places at the centre of narrative two Muslim women of London who are ardent followers of Islam. Jamilla and Ameena are close friends, and though they belong to two different families, they are guided by the idea of proving themselves as good Muslims. Jamilla belongs to a Muslim middle class family, whereas Ameena is an elite Muslim. As close friends studying in the same school, they are proud of the fact that their parents have been able to establish themselves as respectable Muslims in London. The desire to become a good Muslim, initially, is very strong in Jamilla as she joins the mosque group and decides to spread the good messages of Islamic scriptures. Later, Ameena, seeing Jamilla's devotion, also joins the mosque group. However, after Ameena joins the mosque, she undergoes a radical transformation. Religious books, incidents occurring in Palestine and Kashmir, and the Western interpretation of the Jihadis, all such subjects assume greater significance for Ameena, and this slowly drifts her away from the course texts in school. Jamilla describes this transformation in Ameena by claiming the fact that this tendency in Ameena 'radicalised her': "the books on Palestine and Kashmir, the commentaries on the Quran, the translations of the Hadith. These were the books that completely dwarfed Ameena's collection of course texts. I had a Quran and a couple of commentaries, but nothing close to what Ameena had accumulated – and read, from the look of it" (*Jihadi Jane* Kindle Locations 573-575). This tendency to configure a radical Islamic self takes a new turn when she establishes connection with a Jihadi woman in Syria through Twitter. This woman named Hejjiye narrates the experiences of the Jihadis and their fight against the West. Hejjiye also convinces Ameena to join the Jihadis and support their faith. When Ameena discusses this issue of joining the Jihadis with Jamilla, she becomes excited, "We were fascinated by such women – and men, for we occasionally corresponded with some male Islamists too, and followed the postings of at least a couple of male jihadists"

(*Jihadi Jane* Kindle Locations 714-715). This fascination ultimately leads them to the land of Jihadis, as they leave London and reach Syria to become a part of the support group of women assisting the Jihadis. This decision to join the Jihadis is considered by them as a strong act of proving themselves as devout Muslims: "You opt out of the glitter of the West because of your belief. It takes strength to do so. More strength than Muslim men realise: I wonder if imams would insist on the hijab as much as they do if they had to put it on themselves and cope with the consequences in ordinary life. It takes strength and character" (*Jihadi Jane* Kindle Locations 1000-1002). When Jamilla and Ameena reach Syria, they find that Hejjiye runs an organisation for women who are ready to fight with the Jihadis. The place where Hejiyye lives with these women is an institution where they are trained to assimilate the ideological beliefs of the Jihadis. This place is an enclosed area with high walls, where the entries and the exits of women are continuously supervised by Hejjiye. After Jamilla and Ameena reach this place, initially they are elated and they obey the orders of Hejjiye without any hesitation, but very soon they realise that this place is a virtual prison. In fact, it is from this point in the narrative that the politics of marginalisation becomes apparent. In the name of Jihad, and also by convincing the women that if they sacrifice their lives while fighting for the Jihadis they would be granted Heaven in their afterlife, Hejjiye creates an ideological discourse that establishes the supremacy of Jihadi men. Jamilla and Ameena's experience in this organisation of Hejjiye is shocking as they very soon realise that they cannot escape from this organisation which is responsible for preaching wrong Islam. If the American Western rhetoric of Islam is wrong, then the version of Islam that the Jihadis are preaching is also not trustworthy. This is very well understood by Jamilla: "It was difficult to distinguish between truth and propaganda before I joined the Jihadis, and it became – as I realised later – even more difficult to do so when I was with them. I cannot say that the

difficulty has disappeared; I fear that there are too many official liars on all sides. (*Jihadi Jane* Kindle Locations 1301-1303).

Being at margin of this Jihadi organisation, Jamilla and Ameena understand the fundamentalist discourse of the Jihadis that not only seeks to oppress women, but also control their body. In this institution of Hejjiye, young women are either trained to sacrifice their lives by becoming suicide bombers or they are convinced to marry the Jihadis. This institutional control of the body of women elucidates the operation of patriarchal discourse under the guise of Islamic fundamentalism. In this context, I would like to refer to Sylvia Estrada Claudio's essay titled, "Sanctifying Moral Tyranny: Religious Fundamentalisms and the Political Disempowerment of Women." Claudio elaborates the issue of marginal position of women within fundamentalist discourse by stating, "Control of women's identity and roles, rights and protections, sexuality and bodies remain central to religious fundamentalisms" (Derichs & Fleschen erg, 13). Also notable is the fact that the fundamentalist discourse operational in the institution of Hejjiye is heteronormative. It does not recognise the possible existence of lesbian relationship between women, which proves that such fundamentalist structures are evidently endorsing heteronormative patriarchy. This is the reason which worries Hejjiye when she finds that Jamilla is not willing to marry any Jihadi. Though Ameena, after joining this organisation marries Hassan, a Jihadi who became her Facebook friend, Jamilla covertly resists marrying any Jihadi. Hejjiye persuades Jamilla to marry and play the role of a good wife:

> 'You know, Jamilla,' Hejjiye said suddenly, laying a hand over mine, 'you know that women have a role to play in our struggle.' I nodded. 'Our role is as wives, mothers, daughters. You know I keep urging you to marry; for example, marry like your friend Ameena did. Marry a jihadi.'
>
> (*Jihadi Jane* Kindle Locations 1597-1600)

Ameena's relationship with Hassan is also an interesting point of discussion in the light of this fundamentalist discourse that seeks to control the body of women. Hassan, who is a Jihadi hero, after marrying Ameena fulfills his sexual lust and then starts oppressing her. On one occasion she protests the killing of an innocent boy who belongs to a tribe that does not support the Jihadis: "Ameena was not willing to give up that easily. She had read her Islamic texts with great diligence. 'But that is not what *my Islam* says,' she protested. 'We cannot kill any innocent person and that too one who claims to be a Muslim.'" (Jihadi Jane Kindle Locations 2129-2131). This protest along with an emphasis on the female perspective of Islam, makes Hassan furious and he lashes Ameena for arguing with him. The manner in which Hassan tortures Ameena by giving her pain and wounds her body elucidates the existence of masculinist discourse within the structure of fundamentalism. That a hero like him can never be emotionally affected by either killing an innocent boy or torturing a woman's body, is a clear indication of masculinist outlook of Hassan. In fact, the Jihadi figure of a male hero is based on this masculinist ideological framework.

Islamic fundamentalism as it appears in Khair's narrative is a hegemonic discourse that suppresses the freedom and liberty of the women. At this juncture, it is necessary to refer to an important article of Douglas Pratt, in which, he theorises Islamic fundamentalism by citing numerous references to critical views and opinions. In his article, "Terrorism and Religious Fundamentalism: Prospects for a Predictive Paradigm," Pratt cites the views of Bassam Tibi (an eminent critic of contemporary Islam), who claims, "Islam as a religion is definitely not a threat, but Islamic fundamentalism is" (qtd. in Pratt, 4). Based on the observations of Tibi, Pratt argues that Islamic fundamentalism discourages "religious pluralism" to establish a "divine order" that make Muslim men and women suffer because of the intolerance and aggression of the Islamists (Pratt, 3-4). Pratt's argument amplifies the inflexible worldview of the Jihadis, who

profess a version Islam that seeks to politicise religion (Pratt, 4). In this context, Tibi offers a wonderful analysis of the ideological standpoint of the Islamic fundamentalists: "… this ideology is exclusive, in the sense that it attacks opposing options, primarily those secular outlooks that resist the linking of religion to politics" (qtd. in Pratt, 4). The conflict in Khair's fiction is primarily based on this opposition; on one hand, the Jihadis train women in their institution to accept their ideology, and on the other, Ameena and Jamilla, seek to adopt a secular outlook. Khair's narrative is therefore not about the portrayal of the suffering of the Jihadi women living in the Jihadi camps. At the surface level, the text obviously foregrounds the pain and suffering of women like Jamilla and Ameena, but there are multiple modes of protest and subversion that originate from the margin. At the end of the narrative, Ameena explodes the institution of Hejjiye by becoming a suicide bomber. This act of Ameena, which upsets the plan of Hassan and destroys the domain of patriarchy, is a symbol of protest and subversion. The body of Ameena, which is once abused and tortured by Hassan, becomes a site for challenging the hegemony of the patriarchs like Hassan. Though the death of Ameena may seem quite tragic to many readers, but I would like to read it from the perspective of challenge. This challenge is not only against patriarchy but also against the religious ideology of the Jihadis. The destruction of the Jihadi institution at the end of the fiction denotes an appeal for secular ideology of Islam. In fact, through the fictional representation of the Jihadi women, Khair satirises the dominant ideology of the Jihadis, and appeals for a pluralistic viewpoint of Islam that would be secular and inclusive.

WORKS CITED

Claudio, Sylvia Estrada. (2010). *Sanctifying Moral Tyranny: Religious Fundamentalisms and the Political Disempowerment of Women.* In Claudia Derichs & Andrea Fleschenberg (Eds.), *Religious Fundamentalisms and their Gendered Impacts in Asia* (pp. 13-26). Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Derichs, Claudia, & Andrea Fleschenberg. (2010). Religious Fundamentalisms and their Gendered Impacts in Asia. In Claudia Derichs & Andrea Fleschenberg (Eds.), *Religious Fundamentalisms and their Gendered Impacts in Asia* (pp. 7-12). Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Elies, Stefanie. (2010). Preface. In Claudia Derichs & Andrea Fleschenberg (Eds.), *Religious Fundamentalisms and their Gendered Impacts in Asia* (pp. 5-6). Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Khair, Tabish. (2016). *Jihadi Jane*. India: Penguin. Kindle Edition.

Pratt, Douglas. (2006). Terrorism and Religious Fundamentalism: Prospects for a Predictive Paradigm. *Marburg Journal of Religion*, *11*(1), 1-15.