My researcher’s self keeps pondering

Nahid Afroze Kabir

In October 2011 I was delighted to join the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia, as a senior research fellow. Within a month I am feeling settled at the MnM Centre because I am enjoying the work environment as well as feeling privileged to have friendly colleagues around me.

On 3 November, Thursday evening, I felt happy not only because the weekend was near but because I was looking forward to my trip to Perth the next day. Muslim-Australians will celebrate their second Eid, Eid-ul-Adha on Sunday 6 November, and I was keen to join my family in Perth for that occasion. This year Muslims in Australia celebrated their first Eid, Eid-ul-Fitr, in August and I was then able to be in Perth with my family.

Every year when I have attended the Eid congregation either in Brisbane where we lived for nine years or in Perth where my family has been living for the last seven years, I am amazed when I see an increase in the Muslim population. Yes, the congregation is becoming larger every year. My researcher’s ‘self’ then takes me back to my doctoral period when I learnt

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2 Muslims have two important festivals each year: Eid-ul-Fitr, which is celebrated immediately after the month of fasting, Ramadan, and Eid-ul-Adha, the feast celebrated after hajj on the tenth day of Zil Hajj. To mark the pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims all over the world celebrate the Feast of Sacrifice in Eid-ul-Adha. Sheep are ritually slaughtered to commemorate Prophet Ibrahim’s (Peace Be Upon Him) willingness to sacrifice his son. This meat is partly for one’s own consumption and the rest is given to friends and distributed among the poor and needy.

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about the Afghans who were the founders of Islam in Australia. Of course, Muslim contact with Australia existed before European settlement but Afghans (with other Muslims) were the people who built the first mosques in Adelaide (1890), Broken Hill (1891), Perth (1905) and Brisbane (1907). During the ‘White Australia Policy’ period (1901–1973) many ‘coloured’ immigrants (including Muslims) left Australia, yet in 1947 the total Muslim population in Australia was 0.04 per cent of Australia’s population (mostly European Muslims, e.g. Albanians). This has now increased to almost 2 per cent of the total national population.

As I have always discussed in my writing, the relationship between Australia and its new immigrants has been a two-way street. People choose to migrate to Australia for a better life and opportunities, and in return migrants offer their skills to the economic development of their new ‘home’. There is, of course, a controversial side to Australian immigration policy, namely refugee/asylum seeker policy, which I am keen to hear discussed at the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre on 16 November 2011. The speaker will be the national human rights advocate Julian Burnside QC. Burnside says:

Lest we forget is one of the most resonant phrases in our national mythology. We say it … on 11th November each year and on Anzac day … We forget that boat people who come here to ask for protection are not illegal in any sense … we forget that the number

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3 The Afghans were people who migrated from Afghanistan. The archival records show that a few people who migrated from India to Australia identified themselves as ‘Afghans’, but official records classified them as ‘Indians’ who were also known as ‘British subjects’. See Nahid A Kabir, Muslims in Australia: immigration, race relations and cultural history, Routledge, London, 2005, pp 74–78.
4 The first Muslim contact with the continent of Australia took place in the seventeenth century when the Macassarese people of Indonesia visited the north coast on fishing expeditions and interacted with Indigenous Australians.
5 Kabir, Muslims in Australia, p 70.
6 In 1947, the total Muslim population in Australia was 2704. See Wafia Omar and Allen Kristy, The Muslims in Australia: religious community profile, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1996. In 2006 there were 340,393 Muslims in Australia, constituting about 1.7 per cent of the national population of 19,855,287. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Population of Census and Housing, 2006. The unpublished data was purchased by the author from the office of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
7 Flyer, ‘Lest we forget’, commemorative address to be delivered by Julian Burnside QC at the Hawke Centre, Wednesday, 16 November 2011. Jointly presented by Amnesty International and the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre at the University of South Australia.
of boat people who get here is very small by any measure. Worst of all: we forget that boat people are human beings.\textsuperscript{8}

Getting back to my discussion of my feelings on 3 November, how happy I was on that evening and counting the hours before I would be with my family in Perth for Eid. After dinner, I turned on the television to watch some of my favourite drama series on Channel Nine. First I watched \textit{The Mentalist}. It is an American police investigation series where Patrick Jane, a paid consultant, uses psychic methods in his investigations. Here I go again with my admiration for the Australian actor Simon Baker, who has received a few awards for his outstanding performance.\textsuperscript{9}

I ended the evening by watching a police investigation drama series, \textit{CSI Miami} (‘Dishonor’, season 8, episode 18).\textsuperscript{10} When I finished watching it, I wondered why my evening had to end with an orientalist discourse.\textsuperscript{11}

The \textit{CSI Miami} ‘Dishonor’ drama involved a murder-solving episode concerning an ‘honour killing’. In a nutshell, it was a story about an Iranian immigrant family living in the United States. This couple had promised their daughter in marriage to a man of their choice. But their daughter fell in love with another young man and her father refused to accept her choice. Her father was so furious with his daughter that the mother of the girl thought that he would kill her because she brought ‘shame’ to the ‘izzat’ (honour) of their family. So her mother murdered her husband. The show not only made ‘honour killing’ an Iranian issue but also a Muslim issue. The reference to Muslims in the show occurred when a neighbour expressed his anger against this family as a ‘Muslim’ family.

Of course, the issues of arranged marriages and honour killings do need to be addressed. Some arranged marriages fare well, while some end in divorce.\textsuperscript{12} But is it an Iranian issue or a

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
Muslim issue? Unfortunately, there also have been cases of honour killings in non-Muslim families, for example, in India.\textsuperscript{13} I wondered whether the Iranian family had been portrayed in the CSI show because Iran is now the ‘other’.

The parallel theme followed in this particular episode was that the CSI Chief Horatio’s son, Kyle, had enlisted to go to Afghanistan. This initially worried Horatio as it is still a war zone. But the show ended on a positive note as Horatio wished his son well as he was getting on the plane to serve in Afghanistan. Horatio believed his son was going to Afghanistan to fight for a good cause. I agree that the coalition forces (USA, UK, Australia, Germany, Turkey and other NATO nations) are operating as a defence force in Afghanistan and also helping the Afghans in the reconstruction of their country (which I will discuss on another occasion), but I wondered whether the ‘us’ and ‘them’ rhetoric was necessary in the CSI ‘Dishonor’ episode.

So what exactly is orientalist discourse? It is essentially a power relationship through which the West tries to control the East: according to orientalism the West will always remain ‘superior’ to the ‘inferior’ East. The discourse on the Orient has now been shifted to Islam/Muslims. The rhetoric of ‘us’ and ‘them’ continues. The CSI ‘Dishonor’ episode showed that Muslims (also the Iranian people) are the ‘other’, and ‘we’ (Americans, the saviours) are helping Afghans (the East/Orient).

Edward Said pointed out that ‘the emergence of “Islam” \textsuperscript{[is]} a topic of alarmed, if not always precise and informed, journalism and scholarship’.\textsuperscript{14} He noted that the misconceptions about Islam are historical: ‘From the end of the seventh century until the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, Islam in either its Arab, Ottoman, or North African and Spanish form dominated or effectively threatened European Christianity’.\textsuperscript{15} So the Islamic threat led ‘orientalists’ to construct (or


\textsuperscript{14} Said, \textit{Orientalism}, p 335.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, p 74.
orientalise) Muslims as the ‘other’. In the contemporary period, where a conflict lies between the West (and its allies) and the Muslim world then the divide is still presented as one between ‘Westerners’ and ‘Easterners’.16

The next morning, Friday 4 November 2011, I woke up with a fresh mind, wrote this piece and left for Perth for the Eid celebration! While I appreciate the West for allowing me to exercise my freedom of speech, my researcher’s ‘self’ keeps on pondering: when will the world be more accepting of the people they construct as the ‘other’?