Eric Balderas

Ali S. Asani

Aesthetic and Interpretive Understanding 54

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Introductory Essay

Defining Islam and what it means to be a Muslim is more elusive than what it might seem. For one thing, a variety of denominations of Islam exist, the most prominent being Sunni and Shia Islam. Significant ideological differences exist between denominations and sects, yet a common set of beliefs, customs, and identities are similar enough for external and internal observers to categorize them under a single, monolithic term: Islam. Do the similarities shared by different denominations and sects constitute the meaning of Islam? One could say that a Muslim is an adherent of Islam based on the Quran, but this declaration barely scratches the surface of the meaning of Islam, as it does not tell us about how different Muslims interpret the Quran, or how Islam has changed over time. This paper is an introductory essay for a set of six blogs that I have created as a mode of experiential learning to explore major themes discussed in the A&IU 54 class on Islam. By using Ali S. Asani’s cultural studies approach as a lens to interpret the works, I identify three themes, namely the theme of *otherness*, extra-religious identities, and ‘universalist’ features of Islam, that have been prominent throughout the course. I begin by outlining Ali’s cultural studies approach as a slight deviation from universalist-oriented concepts of Islam. Then, I discuss each of the themes, as they are found in the blogs, in order to illuminate some of the more salient features of the entries.

2. The Theory of Cultural Approach Studies

In *Infidel of Love: Exploring Muslim understandings of Islam*, Ali S. Asani writes:

The story of Islam is not one story but many stories involving peoples of many different races, ethnicities, and cultures, professing conflicting interpretations. To acquire a correctly nuanced understanding of Islam and its role in Muslim societies, crucial questions one should ask include: Which Islam? Whose Islam? In which context? (15)

Asani’s cultural approach recognizes the diversity inherent in Islam itself with respect to interpretation of the Quran and context. This approach is distinct from a more universalist approach to Islam and the Quran that tends to treat Islam as a monolithic, all-encompassing idea. For example, in *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims*, John Renard argues that spirituality is a uniting factor among the artwork made by various Muslim communities. Without intentionally disregarding the diversity of Muslim practices and faith, he argues that there is a unifying factor in things such as mosque design that is attributed to the Islamic faith. “On the other hand,” he writes, “ the universal and fundamental meaning are centered on the mosque itself, the northern court symbolizing active life, the mosque's interior symbolizing the spiritual realm” (Renard 148).

His argument nonetheless, lacks a sufficient amount of empirical evidence and appears to draw from a more mystical interpretation of the artwork. Asani’s cultural studies approach is not without some attempt to define Islam more generally and there is an empirical basis when he identifies “four ideals that Muslims in far-ranging temporal and geographic contexts have considered to be at the core of their faith: peace and compassion, social justice, selfless love of God, and jihad” (58). By recognizing the “temporal” and “geographic contexts” in the same breadth, Asani shows that there are almost necessarily inconsistencies that arise by bringing every person and organization under the term Islam. While some may call these “contradictions”, as different people who claim to be Muslims have opposing interpretations of the Quran and expressions for their beliefs, these differences are directed and/or rooted in the same belief system.

3. The Other

In “The Spectacle of the Other,” Stuart Hall explains that “’difference’ matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist” (234). Four of my blog posts rely heavily, either explicitly or implicitly, on the concept of the ‘Other,’ as it is essential to derive cultural meaning. In the blog post titled “The Ending…” I reimagine the ending to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid where the ‘Other’ is the American given that we are oriented in Changez’s point of view. The narrator, marking an explicit difference between them, implicitly calls the anonymous man an American and the man is never given a voice in the narration. As an artwork, the post and the novel itself give us a glimpse of the biasness that arises due to Changez’s and, hence, our perception of the ‘Other’. It shows that biasness inherent in every form of identity, be it religious or cultural, can lend meaning to the identity.

“Spiritual Reflection” and “A Comic Experience” similarly express the idea of the ‘Other.’ The Bible-holding American man and the Muslim woman wearing a burqa in “Spiritual Reflection” visually show cultural, religious, national, and gender differences between them. Their clothing, juxtaposition, and tense postures serve to dichotomize the pair in order to create meaning for the observer on the dimensions previously described. Meanwhile, “A Comic Experience,” a short snippet of an autobiographical graphic novel, creates a sense of the ‘Other’ through dialogue. As the main character, Eric does not visually appear to be different from his classmates. His otherness comes across in his conversation with the teacher, who says that he is Mexican, yet he is obliged to recite the Pledge of Allegiance every morning with the other students at school, thereby creating a tension on the extent of his otherness since the differences between him and his classmates are blurred.

4. Extra-Religious Identities

In “European Colonialism and the Emergence of Modern Muslim States,” Nasr writes that there are over 50 Muslim states in the world today. As such, Islam has not only been a source of faith, he says, but also a source of identity with social and political relevance (549). My blog post “Islamic Expansion,” visually shows the expansion of Islam in the Eastern Hemisphere and how this identification has taken meaning beyond the religious context. The nation-state boundaries imply the idea of a religious political identity.

“The Ending…” also shows how Changez’s identity is composed of multiple dimensions. His religion is intertwined with his Pakistani cultural identity and his political identity as an activist who generally opposes U.S. foreign policies towards Pakistan. Similarly, “A Comic Experience” shows the interplay of various identities as Eric is divided between to poles of national and cultural identity. This theme is connected to the novel that the blog post is based on, in which the main character, Marji, is obligated to wear a veil in school after Iran’s Islamic Revolution. The veil acquires mixed meanings as Marji grows comfortable wearing the veil, but opposes other forms of state restrictions on self-expression.

5. Universal Principles of Islam

The first theme that I discussed focused on the differences apparent in my blog posts that engaged with the concept of the ‘Other.’ However, my blog posts also express themes that focus on the universality of certain themes, oftentimes in the same context as the theme of the ‘Other.’ Take, for example, “Spiritual Reflection” that I previously described. The man and the woman seem to be far apart from each other in terms of cultural, political, national, and religious identities. Yet, the mirror next to the Bible-carrying American man reflects his image as a woman wearing a burqa. The picture seems to imply that the man and woman are as similar to each other as they are different. The emphasis is unity. Moreover, the mirror is a religious symbol in Islam, as objects in nature can be interpreted as mirrors of the “invisible world.”

“Varieties of Islam” is another post that dichotomizes unity and disunity in the same breadth. The poem is titled “Islam” and its verses are in praise of Muhammad, inspired by Sindhi and Urdu poems. The structure consists of four stanzas, which can be seen as four different poems, set horizontally to emphasize their juxtaposition to one another. Each stanza is structurally similar to the other stanzas, but uses different words. Nevertheless, the meanings of the verses set horizontally to one another convey essentially the same idea. For example, “The beloved Prophet,” “Our blessed Messenger,” and “Greatest of Prophets” convey the same idea, but the idea is conveyed with different words.

Lastly, my first blog post “Zakat” conveys an idea central to the Islamic faith. As one of the Five Pillars of Islam, Zakat is a universal concept for Muslims, although it may be interpreted in different ways by different peoples. The animation itself is an interpretation of Zakat, which transforms the concept into a different form that may not be recognizable to other Muslims. Nevertheless, the idea remains universal.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to highlight some important themes to serve as a guide as you read through the blogs. The central theme of the blog as a whole is more-or-less this idea of *dichotomies*. Like the concept of yin-yang, two or more opposing forces are, nonetheless interconnected in some manner. “One of the characteristics of the enlightened mystic is the ability to hear all of God’s creatures—from the trees and flowers to the birds and the fish—praising Him”, states Ali S. Asani in *Infidel of Love: Exploring Muslim understandings of Islam*. This idea of God echoed in nature is the most direct way that I can link my concept as a whole to that of the Islamic tradition.

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