

Fundamental Commitments of Muslim Identity: A Study of Tabish Khair's How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position

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Received: 10 July 2022, Available Online: 28 September 2022

Abstract

This paper focuses on the Muslim identity of the narrator of Tabish Khair's novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror* from *The Missionary Position*, the conflict that he confronts due to his being in an alien culture, and the subsequent resolution of this conflict. The research, first, postulates Bilgrami's argument of fundamental commitments in connection with cultural identity based on Bernard Williams' interpretation of the ethical theory. Then it presents Bilgrami's position about how fundamental commitments cause a serious conflict in Muslim individuals on account of the reformation deficit in the Islamic world, leading those individuals of the minority Muslims to have compromised Islamic/Muslim identity in alien cultures. The argument rests on the claim that this conflict never resolves but stays in the individual as Tabish Khair's first-person narrator shows it during his treatment toward Karim Bhai until he discloses him to the Danish police and differentiates between Karim's identity and his own identity, feeling remorse over his betrayal. The narrator demonstrates wavering in his thoughts about his Muslim and otherwise-supposed-liberal identity by the end of the novel, showing his lack of fundamental commitments and Karim Bhai's staunch commitments to his belief.

Keywords

How to Fight Islamist Terror, Muslim Identity, Muslim Culture, Cultural Identity, Islamic Identity, Fundamental Commitments, Tabish Khair

DOI Number: [10.47067/jlcc.v4i3.114](https://doi.org/10.47067/jlcc.v4i3.114)

Introduction:

A highly controversial and ambiguous term as declared by David Buckingham, identity has diverse meanings and nuances, ranging from social to psychological and national to global. He clarifies multiple identities, showing having identifications of an individual based on social, cultural, and biological aspects including personal values, histories, interests, and growth (Buckingham, 2008, p. 2). Its flexibility, fluidity, construction, conflicts, constraints, individuality, and collectivity have been a topic of hot discussions in social, cultural, psychological, and even organizational epistemic drives (Huddy, 2001, p. 128-129). When an individual is placed in a specific cultural context, a complex negotiation occurs between his/her “personal objectives and contextual cultural constraints” where the context influences the personal values and objectives, leaving him/her to adopt the contextual values and mores, disregarding its psychological impacts (Schachter, 2004, p. 195-196). Amid this uncertainty, Muslim identity even gets muddier when its location, within the Muslim narratives specifically written in some other culture, is pinpointed at the time when negotiations between a person and his/her contextual culture recurrently happen on multiple fronts. Tabish Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from The Missionary Position* presents an anonymous narrator undergoing a profound transformation in his identity, identification, subsequent realization, and implicit reactions to it.

Review of Literature

To pinpoint the identity of Khair’s narrator in *How to Fight Islamist Terror from The Missionary Position*, it is imperative to have a precise and brief review of Muslim identity in a foreign cultural context and Bilgrami’s interpretations and position about the firsthand experience of being a Muslim.

Regarding identity, Bilgram relates his personal experience that among people of other religions, his theological upbringing and patriotism stand with him (p. 823), but this is based on his cultural context. A la Buckingham, Bilgrami, too, agrees that this concept “hangs loosely and precariously in the domain of culture and politics” (1992, p. 821), adding that it “impinges on the question of religious identity” and more so in the case of a Muslim. He questions the lack of criteria in the abstraction of identity (Quine, 2013, p. xvii, xxiii), arguing that even if its Muslimness is tied to Indianness in his case, it must have some place in “a more or less systematic theory” (p. 823) following which he places it in another context to prove that it is negotiable in other cultures (p. 823). Bilgrami’s point is that Islamic absolutists come into conflict with the moderates when they face the question of the negotiation of identity and argues that if placed in Ethical Theory and its critique by Bernard Williams and J. J. C Smart (1973, 82, 87), it becomes non-negotiable. Thus, several such non-negotiable identities of a person conflict with each other in such cases (Bilgrami, p. 827).

Although Bilgrami discusses the thick values or a wide range of specific values, he borrows a Kierkegaardian phrase, fundamental commitments, to apply it to Muslims and their Islamic

identity, arguing that it is something “distinctive about a devout person’s commitment to Islam, over and above its particularity” (p. 827). The most important thing he mentions about the conflict that creeps into one’s mind about these commitments is the effect of “relinquishing of a commitment” that is akin to betrayal (p. 828). Yet, a space for negotiation exists when a person finds himself “helplessly in a conflict” and experiences a “tragic stasis” or “intellectual laziness” (p. 828). Although Bilgrami delves deep into “unsettleability” (p. 835) in conflict and place of commitments in the historical and social context, the argument goes too far.

Regarding Khair’s Muslim identity shown through his narrator in *How to Fight Islamist Terror*, some critics critique it through different theoretical perspectives. For example, Afrin Zeenat couches his narrator’s identity in Anderson’s theoretical position of nation states having “separate identity based on vague notions of community” (Khair, 2014, p. 118) to pinpoint his Muslim identity accentuated by his friend Ravi (p. 126) vis-à-vis another of their Muslim comrade, Karim Bhai. Yet she does not highlight his lack of fundamental commitments and Karim Bhai’s compliance with them. Esterino Adami’s position, on the other hand, revolves around transformed identity under skepticism (02, 8) but in “postmodern society” (p. 08) with some color of having assessed its validity in the given value system (p. 09) but without the prefix of Muslim or Islam. Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk, too, highlights the narrator’s efforts of preserving Muslim identity against heavy challenges (2006, p. 493) with some references to the civilizational clash of Huntington and their impacts on this identity crisis (p. 439) due to which the Muslims faced media backlashes in the West (498). He calls these challenges triggers “for the revival of Islamic identity” (p. 501) without going into the fundamental commitments a Muslim experiences in an entirely alien social fabric as Khair’s narrator in *How to Fight Islamist Terror* does. Dolores Herrero also highlights this religiosity in identity in the foreign setting (2019, p. 03) but his perspective is in the post-terror world observed through postcolonial cosmopolitanism (p. 15) and without any mention of fundamental commitments and their unsettleability in a foreign land. A Pakistani critic, Muneeza Shamsie also highlights this Muslimness of Khair’s fiction through mention of his essay but with reference to Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert, *Imagining Muslims in South Asia*, (2015, p. 551). She leaves the rest up to others to unearth this identity recognition through different perspectives of religious and cultural values. And Tabish himself is aware that entering a big city means losing one’s identity in a foreign setting when he talks about his themes of identity with Dharker (2014, p. 35) that Muslims in such settings have to construct their identities to survive (35), sometimes expressing and sometimes suppressing it in this effort (p. 36). And this expression and suppression demonstrate these intellectual efforts of the first-person narrator of Khair.

Cutting down its length makes it easy to argue the case of Tabish Khair, the fundamental commitments of his first-person narrator, the conflict that he goes through when relinquishing them in Denmark’s national and social setting, and the sense of tragic loss and intellectual laziness that creep into his literary mindset.

Textual Analysis

When it comes to the textual analysis of *How to Fight Islamist Terror* on these lines, the very title of the novel underscores the writer’s conflictual state of mind supplemented by its structural postmodernity in the first chapter’s heading “Prolegomenon to a Plot” (Khair, p. 07) and authorial intervention in the middle of the novel where the narrator calls Khair as a “chap”

having lived some years in Denmark (p. 118). This is an uncanny similarity to Khair's own life history. To assume that he himself is at the missionary position under the garb of the first-person narrator of *How to Fight Islamist Terror* is not a far-fetched idea. Rather, it is ethos as well as logos of *How to Fight Islamist Terror*, providing legitimacy to his argument of conflictual identity devoid of fundamental commitments and ensuing intellectual laziness coupled with the tragic loss.

Narrator's Muslim Identity

Whereas the narrator's Muslim identity is concerned, it is apparent from two aspects: his repudiation of the liberal values and his leniency toward Islamic or religious values.

In terms of his repudiation of liberal values, he confirms his Muslim identity due to his implicit support to fundamental commitments (Bilgrami, p. 827). In the very first chapter his narrator narrates his sexual activity during his MFA when he has "fucked" his classmate. The use of such a word should have been avoided had Tabish any repudiation against western values and freedom. The rest of the narrative also points it out that he has not merged himself in the western value system as per the standards of Ethical Theory (William and Smart, p. 82, 87).

Whereas his leniency toward the violation of Islamic religious values is concerned, it, too, is obvious from this simple fact that he repudiates liberal values and adjusts to them as well. For example, the very title suggests his condescending attitude toward his religion as he is going to suggest the panacea of the terror, a western-touted theological disease, and that too from a missionary point of view. Then he turns to Karim Bhai, where it is, again, suggestive, that Karim Bhai is a Muslim like the narrator, but he "believed in God, and his prophets, especially the very last one" to which the narrator confirms that he does not do so. (Khair, p. 09). Yet he makes the readers not trust him as he says, "let me now jump the gun" (p. 09). This is a vacillation of attitude in which he has lost his strict and stable identity and is trying to adjust himself as well his opinion to his next context. It also shows that the narrator's identity is facing a crisis; a crisis of readjustment or better to say an act of "relinquishing of a commitment" and negotiation to resolve this conflict (Bilgrami, p. 828). This conflict shows itself through this vacillation of the first-person narrator and his determination to stick to his Islamic identity. It is because he feels that he has betrayed his religion as well as his fellow Muslims. It resurfaces when he sees Karim Bhai entertaining Ravi's request to teach him rituals and the narrator looks at him thinking "he could not refuse such a request" as Muslims must teach and preach to others (Khair, p. 14) on which he does not believe as his disdain toward this act of Karim show when he terms him "a good trainer" (p. 15). These acts also prove that he is trying to negotiate his identity or is looking condescendingly at his Muslim identity from some other standpoint in the midst of his efforts of acculturation in the Danish context. It also shows his half-hearted compliance with some fundamental commitments of Islam. How he relinquishes some of them is apparent from his implicit and well as explicit disdain of these acts as well as from his final betrayal toward Karim Bhai whom he virtually hands over to the police as a terrorist.

Narrator's Fundamental Commitment in Denmark and Act of Relinquishment

Although the narrator's repudiation of his own identity becomes clear when he is involved in a sexual activity with his MFA mate, it becomes more apparent over time when he goes to the Arhus University in Denmark and meets Ravi, a Hindu, while he is a Pakistani Muslim. Although

Ravi is also not a staunch Hindu and demonstrates his interest in Islam, the narrator just waves him off, handing him over to Karim Bhai and repudiating the Islamic rituals openly despite knowing that these are fundamental commitments that shape his identity. Even Ravi is fed up with his disdainful comments about his learning of Islam and against Islam itself. The narrator also knows that Ravi “did not want me around because he claimed that my smirk disturbed his concentration” (p. 15) and this smirk continues staying with him. He again shows this disdain when he states that these are painful practices in worship, “for some of the postures are remarkably hard to maintain for more than a few seconds” (p. 15). This is not just a violation of the fundamental commitments, but also disrespect of the rituals that shape an individual’s identity. In this connection, he commits two serious violations. The first one is not acting upon these rituals and the second one is showing hatred toward his religious identity.

Whereas his non-commitment toward Islamic ritual is concerned, the narrator has shown it in the very beginning when he states that he has “fucked” a girl (p. 07). This is against the Islamic teachings to involve oneself in a sexual activity without contracting marriage. He clearly states that he just follows the people around him even during Eid prayers (p. 14) and the interesting thing he states is that almost all the people copy each other and correct their mistakes to be committed in performing externalities (p. 14). Therefore, to him, it does not matter whether he follows these rituals and religious externalities or not. This, however, is a fundamental commitment to Islam that is “over and above its particularity” (Bilgrami, p. 827). Yet the narrator easily evades these commitments. When Ravi tries to tell him about *namaaz*, he states that it is a gym of Islam and that the West hates it due to competition that it has with their health business (p. 15). He again reverts to the same non-compliance saying that even Ravi did not respect it when he is with him (p. 15). This is an interesting fact that he admits that he is not committed to his religion. Even Ravi had to tell him later about the Quranic sessions of Karim Bhai when Ravi joins that “You underestimated them, bastard” as these sessions discuss “how to make sense of the world” (p. 30) which the narrator does not understand despite his being a Muslim having Islamic background. He himself confesses it at one place that “Ravi was a Hindu and I was a ham-eating wine-drinking Muslim” (p. 37). That is why Ravi does not like to communicate with him through Islamic greetings and reserved them only for Karim Bhai (p. 37). The narrator also shows himself hating his own religion and religious rituals before others to show that he is not a strict Muslim and that he has a missionary zeal to reform other Muslims, too, like Karim Bhai. He clarifies it further at one point saying;

It was then that I realized, for the first time, that Karim had never let me or Ravi touch his Quran either. Ravi because he was, despite his interest in the religion, not a Muslim and me because, in Karim Bhai’s eyes, I had sullied myself with alcohol, non-halal food and probably—he was right in suspecting—I did not perform the ritual *stinja* cleansing every time I pissed (p. 39).

In this passage, he is engaged in self-rumination over the Quranic sessions conducted by Karim Bhai. He is clear about his own identity as his roommate, Karim Bhai, does not let him touch the holy Quran, a simple act a Muslim does out of reverence. He knows that Karim Bhai is right in suspecting him that he does not cleanse himself properly to be able to touch the holy book. However, it does not show his hatred toward his religious identity nor clarify whether he feels repudiation toward his Muslim identity, but he confirms the suspicions of Karim Bhai that he

does not follow the fundamental commitments (Bilgrami, p. 827) of his religion. In a way, it is a confession about his non-compliance attitude or better to say his contempt for religious rituals, though, not for religious people.

The narrator, again, mentions it with reference to 9/11 when he refers to tying a turban (Khair, p. 104) and when Karim Bhai stays stubborn about fundamental commitments (Bilgrami, p. 827). His contention shows his clear hatred toward the non-argumentative nature of the rituals as Karim Bhai, in his view, demonstrates “a stubbornness that denies all evidence to the contrary” (Khair, p. 105). This hatred surfaces time and again when he argues his case about the history of revelation and the Arabic dialect in which the Quran was revealed (p. 106). This argument rests on the rationality that understanding a dialect after so many years does not show the same semantic sides of theological teachings. It seems either he is demonstrating his English literature background through his critical thinking skills or just demonstrating his contempt for his own religious background in the case of which it seems that the first postulation is correct.

It happens again when he is debating the idea of heaven and hell. He clarifies it saying, “I scoffed” at the idea of hell, adding that he believes in heaven which, too, is his distorted concept and not a theological one (p. 106). Citing an incident of Lahore’s blasphemous act and mob charging the Christian man involved in it, he demonstrates this contempt again by putting Muslim societies and Western societies in dichotomic relations by calling Muslims societies inclining toward fascism (p. 112). Interestingly, he does not demonstrate any emotions when debating with Karim Bhai about the cartoon issues (p. 113) saying about Ali “I was lost in my own thoughts” and continued ruminating over it indifferently (p. 114). This contempt shows how he holds the Islamic rituals in contempt or ambivalence when it suits him. This is also clear from his non-compliance and anti-Islamic acts of dating, fucking girls and drinking wine or eating ham.

The very first anti-Islamic act is fucking a girl without contracting marriage with her (p. 07) and then placing himself over and above Karim Bhai when he is trying to teach prayers (15, 145) or when he is engaged in the Quranic sessions (p. 106, 110, 112). The second one is continuous dating without proper relations with the girls or ladies in question. He is also involved in sexual relationships with the explicit narration of that act (p. 75-76). This is not just the violation of fundamental commitments on the part of the narrator, but also utter disdain for his own religious values. Perhaps, it was an effort on his part to merge in the alien culture where having a Muslim identity was an anathema for others and stigma for the individual. Also, at almost every other occasion, he shows complete indifference or contempt for his religious background. This is a conflict of identity that makes him feel betrayal to Karim Bhai when he expresses his thoughts about his arrest at the end of the novel.

Narrator’s Feeling of Tragic Loss

The tragic loss is quite acute, though, in the initial pages of the novel, it is just a cursory feeling when he scoffs at the idea of following Islam in letter and spirit. Bilgrami calls it “tragic stasis” that happens when a person finds himself helpless in identifying himself with a specific group he is living with (Bilgrami, p. 828). He also equates it with intellectual laziness that creeps into an individual’s mentality when he is unable to resolve the conflict of identity in some foreign

land where he is a migrant (p. 828). Khair's narrator experiences this tragic stasis or loss several times and expresses it openly in his narrative.

Specifically, he shows it on two occasions that he is either indifferent or does not want to take care of such matters. The first one is when Asja, the Somali girl, comes to them with Ali and they mention the insults hurled by a cartoonist and others at Islam and the Holy Prophet (Peace be Upon Him). The narrator is too busy in his lecture to pay heed to this incident and when he does he states "I did not really pay them too much attention" (Khair, p. 55). This shows his indifference toward his religion and insults hurled by others at his collective identity. This also means that he is ignoring the very identity that makes up his entire life. Second, he has had suspicions that Ravi might have been right when he asserts that Islam is not a fascist religion and that it is not an ideology that could be fascist (p. 111). It shows that he is almost going to accept Ravi's contention. Yet, he chooses to go against it. He argues against his logic and objects to "absolute obedience" (p. 111), forgetting that it is a commitment to fundamentals that constitute one's fundamental identity. However, when he comes to know later that Karim Bhai has been released after his "disclosures" about him seriously jeopardized his life (p. 145), he does not seem to come to terms with his theological background and consequential identity. He comes to know later that Karim Bhai has won his release with all charges "against him dropped" which seemed to him dramatic (p. 150). Despite feeling tragic over handing over his co-religionist to the Danish police, he perhaps condones himself by saying;

But guilt is not what I felt, or not mainly. After all, I had not turned Karim over for interrogation by the Pakistani or Indian police, or sent him to Abu Ghraib! All I had condemned him to was relentless questioning, over cups of coffee perhaps, by orderly Danish investigators, no matter how prejudiced—questioning that, I am sure, would have come his way in any case, given his name and location (p. 155).

His argument is that he has handed him over to the orderly Danish investigators who must have treated Karim with respect and honor and let him go after questioning. He is sure about it, the reason that he stays calm and narrates that he does not feel any guilt and not mainly because he has disclosed about him wrong information merely because he does not know much about him. Yet he clearly mentions that he could not face Karim, and it is his conscious decision not to face him due to the lingering "suspicion and prejudice" (156) between them. This tragic feeling continues to haunt him until he ends the story with his departure to Mumbai. However, mid-between, he also demonstrates some intellectual laziness with his rhetorical questions about his position toward Islam with reference to terror and fascism which shows his identity in conflict.

Narrator's Intellectual Laziness toward his Religion

Although the arguments the narrator puts forward in the support of his evasion of fundamental commitments (Bilgrami, p. 827) toward Islam seem rational and liberal, he, in fact, tries to find refuge in his intellectual laziness (p. 828). It is almost the same as tragic stasis (828) when a person finding himself in different culture tries to negotiate his identity but finds himself "helplessly in a conflict" with himself (p. 828). This conflict of Tabish Khair's narrator is apparent at various places when he uses words having negative connotations such as fucking (Khair, p. 07), fascism (p. 111), terror, conspiracy (p. 143) and several other adjectives for Islam

and Muslims. He thinks that Karim Bhai is too stubborn as “[he] denies all evidence to the contrary” (p. 105). This negativity does not let him do what he tries to cover up in the end when he does not want to face Karim Bhai who has won his admiration and respect due to his fundamental commitments, and he has lost because of the failure of his negotiating ploys to adjust himself to the western values and western culture. This intellectual laziness peeps through his question “Why is it that Karim never mentioned to us that he still called on and took care of his ex-wife?” (p. 152). It means he thinks Karim’s suspicions about him were right as he was not a true Muslim, and this led him to experience conflict in identity and resultant intellectual laziness in accepting it.

Narrator’s Identity Conflict

Although this conflict is obvious, it reaches the peak when two major incidents happen. The first one is the Quranic session of Karim Bhai with others and the arrival of Asja, the Bosnian lady (p. 33). The second occasion is when he testifies in the police station against Karim Bhai and it is announced that Karim Bhai has gone scot-free from the police station (p. 150).

The first one happens when both Clauses are invited to the Quranic session being held in Urdu, English, and Arabic but the narrator does not participate in them. This sharp difference contrasts with his context as he suspects that Karim Bhai is right about him in his suspicion that he is not a true Muslim (p. 39). This confession leads him to speak against Karim Bhai when the police are on the hunt for the man attacking the cartoonist.

The second time it happens when he comes to know that although they have coaxed the police into arresting Karim Bhai with their information and a pre-planned visit to the local police station, God has some other plans for him. He goes scot-free, though, with sensational news reports in tabloids and newspapers. At that time, the narrator feels ashamed that he has betrayed his co-religionist and finally announces that there are many questions with no answers but only guesses. Interestingly, the Clauses knew about Karim Bhai that he did not (p. 153). Finally, this comes haunting him when he confesses that “I was ashamed of facing him and not being able to apologize fully. I felt we had done him an injury by preferring our suspicions—and I was more responsible for this than Ravi” (p. 155). The reason is that the narrator has become too acculturated to differentiate between people having different faiths after losing his interest in his own fundamental commitments. That is why he faces identity conflict.

Resolution of Conflict

Interestingly, this identity conflict is quite confused even about Karim Bhai. Despite incriminating him in the police station, the narrator confesses that “I did not find anything incriminating” when he enters his room (p. 143). He found some odd books and commentaries on the holy Quran (p. 143). Despite this, he claims that he is not influenced by the anti-Islamic media campaign and consequently charged atmosphere (p. 144). Thus his confusion about Karim lingers and he avoids meeting him which means that he is confused about his Islamic identity and in this environment he thinks that no “honest conversation” is feasible or possible (p. 155). His prolonged rumination over this affair clearly shows his sense of guilt and betrayal though words do not support it. However, the confusion and the ensuing word-jumbling show that “guilt is too glib a word” (p. 155). And he repeats it at the end of this rumination. Finding

no justification, he comes to the point that at least he has not handed him over to the cruel police of Pakistan or India or has not arranged his detention in Abu Ghuraib. This, in a way, show his despair over his own culture as well as of imperial culture which he could not name here. Yet, this conflict continues and finally comes to the resolution at this very point that there is a lot of confusion, prejudice, and brashness between him and Karim Bhai. It also means that Karim Bhai is clear about his Islamic background contrary to the narrator who has resolved this conflict by saying that he has betrayed his brother in belief.

Conclusion

Concluding the argument of the conflict of identity due to the act of relinquishing fundamental commitments as stipulated by Bilgrami about his logical reasoning regarding Islamic identity, it could be stated that the narrator feels wavering not only in his acts and commitments, but also in his very thinking and liberal argumentation. He continues with it when fucking girls, dating ladies, and debating with Ravi about Islam. He even continues with this intellectual strain when he comes face to face with the strict religious adherence of Karim Bhai and the purity of his behavior, thoughts, and actions. Yet he does not budge from his stand which amounts to his tragic stasis and intellectual laziness which he unsuccessfully tries to hide behind literary words. Also, this effort fails and he finally concludes that he has betrayed Karim Bhai and that he has no courage to face him or initiate a healthy and friendly conversation with him. He has only one justification that he has handed him over to the civilized police unlike that of the Indian, Pakistani or American police (Abu Ghuraib) where Karim Bhai could have been treated worse. He also tries to clarify his positions based on his rational and unprejudicial thinking without having been influenced by an anti-Islamic media campaign. Despite all these justifications, his confession about his identity conflict, his disregard of the fundamental commitments, his own laziness due to his excessively thinking mind, and his tragic stasis are too obvious to be ignored lightly. However, this short treatise falls short of reaching a conclusive resolution. Instead, it opens new avenues for research about such diasporic intellectuals who experience identity crises due to their Muslim background and become apologists just to confirm and justify their acculturation.

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