

# **Fiction and Politics of Islamophobia: A Case Study of Greg Hrbek's *Not on Fire, but Burning***

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(Received: Jan. 18, 2019 Revised: Mar. 5, 2019 Accepted: Apr. 26, 2019)

## **Abstract**

Islamophobia is defined as a closed-minded hatred, fear or prejudice toward Islam and Muslims that result in discrimination, marginalization, and oppression. This phenomenon was strengthened after September 11 marked a watershed in the history of America. In the wake of 9/11, Islamophobia was promulgated in a plethora of textual and visual narratives, including novel. This paper studies Islamophobia in Greg Hrbek's latest novel *Not on Fire, But Burning* (2015). A close reading of the novel reveals that the novel couples Islam with terrorism and barbarity, and sets forth the Self/Other dichotomy, which is rather cherished in the discourse of Islamophobia. As observed in a long history of Islamophobic rhetoric, Hrbek's novel depicts that certain people, undoubtedly Muslims, are outside the American system of values, ready to catch America off-guard. With the images the work promotes of Islam and its followers, it is argued that *Not on Fire, But Burning* reinforces Islamophobia and biased frames of reference on Islam and Muslims.

**Keywords:** Fiction, Greg Hrbek, Islam, Islamophobia, Terrorism

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Journal of **World Sociopolitical Studies** | Vol. 3 | No. 3 | July 2019 | pp. 483-516

Web Page: <https://wsps.ut.ac.ir/> Email: [wsps@ut.ac.ir](mailto:wsps@ut.ac.ir)

eISSN: 2588-3127

PrintISSN: 2588-3119

DOI: 10.22059/WSPS.2020.286634.1113

## 1. Introduction

The twenty-first century started with the phenomenon of 9/11, which marked a watershed in the history of America. The tragic event seared the American psyche, and the whole nation went from shock to rage without allocating the event any critical reflection (Kaplan, 2006, p. 1). September 11 triggered a newborn foreign policy, which called for an all-out war on terror. Within this scenario, having tackled a Cold War not long before, Americans represented the attack as the battle between good and evil, proposing radical Islam as their most recent enemy.

Although scholars have discovered ample credible evidence demonstrating that the official account of 9/11 is ill-founded and flawed (Griffin, 2004, 2005; Hufschmid, 2002), and that the U.S. itself was involved in the event (Ahmed, 2002, pp. 82-83), Americans depicted communists with Muslims as their most significant enemy. Since that single fateful day, Muslims have been assessed more negatively than almost every other racial, religious, or ethnic group (Edgell *et al.*, 2006; Putnam & Campbell 2010).

Western cultural production since September 11 has been considerably affected by 9/11 (Awan, 2010, p. 522). Since 9/11, a shift occurred in the cultural representation of Muslims, from predominantly mysterious and atavistic to primarily threatening. Although Islam has had a long history in the U.S., and Muslims turned up in America 20 years before Martin Luther hammered his theses to door, in the wake of September 11, both Islam and Muslims were depicted as foreign and contrary to American civilization. Certain voices stressed an incompatibility between Islam and core American values (Lewis 2002; Pipes 2003; Huntington 2004; Panagopoulos 2006), and others argued that Muslims were intolerant to out-groups (Kalkan *et al.*, 2009; Kam &

Kinder 2012; Schaffner, 2013). Within this context, American Muslims were considered as disloyal to their country (Selod, 2015). They were also depicted to cherish hostile intentions (Said, 1997; Karim, 2003; Shaheen, 2009) and were assumed violent and untrustworthy (Shaheen, 2009; Sides & Gross, 2013). Muslims were reckoned as enemies, an image informed by centuries of Orientalist thinking. Not only were they disparaged as the 'out' group, Muslims were also vilified as an ideological and even physical threat. Terrorism became the most overriding theme in media stories of Islam, and this representation underpinned the link between Islam and violence (Green, 2015, p. 236). Freeze framing Islam and Muslims in such images sparked a massive wave of Islamophobia in America.

Stolz defines Islamophobia as a "rejection of Islam, Muslim groups and Muslim individuals on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes. It may have emotional, cognitive, evaluative as well as action-oriented elements (e.g. discrimination, violence)" (Stolz, 2005, p. 548). The Council on American-Islamic Relations, on the other hand, describes the term as a "closed-minded hatred, fear or prejudice toward Islam and Muslims that result in discrimination, marginalization, and oppression" (CAIR). It is clear from the mentioned definitions that the phenomenon of Islamophobia does not go without severe negative repercussions. Since 9/11, Muslims in America and many other Western countries have experienced harassment and brutality, and have been subject to hate crimes. Moreover, the initial hope that Islamophobia would disappear after a while following 9/11 proved unfounded, and a large amount of Islamophobic prejudice persists even today (Love, 2017, p. 91).

Global war on terror, heralded at the close of September 11, was fought on several fronts, including "the ideological war of words

and images that rages on the cinema screens across the globe as well as the pages of pop fiction” (Awan, 2010, p. 522). Consequently, it was not just the news outlets that were frantically busy stigmatizing Islam and Muslims: The Twin Towers have caved in repeatedly “in a plethora of textual and visual narratives like novels, short stories, films, documentaries and prose analyses” (Awan, 2010, p. 522). Islamophobia, accordingly, was sold out via various outlets and genres.

One of the prime outlets of Islamophobic industry, already mentioned above, is post-9/11 novel. Novelists sprang in the US, musing on the altered realities of the world after 9/11. Novels narrated stories, and through this process, their authors pushed towards fashioning the world as per their own frames of reference and beliefs. Novelists set their own boundaries, determined who the Others were, and how they differed from the alien Others. The exoticized Other they portrayed was completely at odds with ‘pure’ white Americans. In their white burden’s process and civilizing mission, Americans were supposed to have lost the skill for self-preservation in the wake of 9/11, and this prompted the construction of an Other as threatening and inferior, but also oddly instructive (Bell, 2017, p. 4). Americans would therefore define themselves as entities completely at odds with the Muslim Other.

The present paper applies Edward Said’s ‘contrapuntal reading’ as its method of study. Via this technique of appraising a text, Said announces that “we begin to reread it not univocally but contrapuntally, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said, 1993, p. 51). Within this operation, “hidden structures of colonialism and empire reveal themselves through the play of several oppositional themes” (Burney, 2012, p. 127). In a

contrapuntal reading, “interpreters move back and forth between an internal and external standpoint on the work’s imaginative project, with special attention to the structure of reference and attitudes it contains” (Wilson, 1994, p. 266). As Burney states, contrapuntal reading “is a form of re-reading texts from the margins to the center, from the point of view and perspective of the Other” (Burney, 2012, p. 126).

Said argues that texts “are protean things; they are tied to circumstances and politics large and small, and these require attention and criticism” (Said, 1993, p. 51). Texts, Said announces, “are never neutral activities: there are interests, powers, passions, pleasures entailed no matter how entertaining or aesthetic the work” (Said, 1993, p. 318). Edward Said believes that contrapuntal enquiry must pay heed to all aspects of a text, specifically the ideology embedded within it. Not only is this approach helpful, but it is also indispensable in making significant connections to shrouded tenets and doctrines in a novel. Consequently, the present article probes into Greg Hrbek’s *Not on Fire, But Burning* (2015) to investigate the manifest and latent ideologies ingrained in the novel. Prior to enquiring into the ideologies the novel endeavors to disseminate and reinforce, the paper uses the Riz Test as a yardstick to apprehend whether the novel reveals a biased depiction of Islam and Muslims and supports the Islamophobic metanarrative. The Riz Test was designed by Sadia Habib and Shaf Choudry to evaluate the representation of Muslims (Khosroshahi, n.d.). The test, which is itself inspired by the Bechdel test, uses five questions to measure the image of Muslims in films and TV shows, and is aimed to determine whether the work is biased or slanted. As maintained by the originators of the test, any work with at least one distinguishable Muslim character can be assessed within this system. The followings questions are the questions used in the test:

1. Is the character talking about, the victim of, or the perpetrator of terrorism?
2. Is the character presented as irrationally angry?
3. Is the character presented as superstitious, culturally backwards or anti-modern?
4. Is the character presented as a threat to a Western way of life?
5. If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? Or if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts?

If the answer to any of the above is ‘yes’, then the work fails the test and is considered to offer a blinkered and one-sided representation of Muslims. When Hrbek’s novel is put into test, it fails as it gives affirmative ‘yes’ to the first and fourth questions. The first and fourth questions pose if the work is talking about a victim or perpetrator of terrorist acts, or if the character is considered a menace for Western way of life. Greg Hrbek, on the other hand, takes the reader down the fiction lane and sets forth a network of Muslim terrorists set to lash out at America. With this general perspective on the nature of the novel, the paper will proceed to look more deeply into Hrbek’s work.

## **2. A Brief Look into the Novel**

Greg Hrbek’s latest novel, *Not on Fire, But Burning* (2015) is a *New York Times* Book Review Editor’s Choice and an NPR Best Book of 2015. When evaluated with an anti-Islamic lens, in parallel with other Islamophobic works of fiction, Hrbek’s novel carries the same rhetoric of Islam used in similar other novels and uses threatening, and summons outdated Orientalist stereotypes. Although on a surface level, *Not on Fire, But Burning* gives the impression of being detached and not mesmerized by run-of-the-mill Orientalist tropes; it seems to be an exact replica of the

fictional pieces trampling on the realm of Orientalism and Islamophobia. Islamophobia is both simulated and defined by the misrepresentation and stereotyping of Muslims. Rather than taking exception to the images of terrorist Muslims and violent Imams, Hrbek's *Not on Fire, But Burning* holds them up and confirms those hackneyed images. Hrbek's novel, in a general sense, seems to have been founded upon three premises: firstly, Islam runs counter to American merits and promotes violence and despotism; secondly, Muslims are hapless and tractable victims of the vagaries of their religion, and are exploited to wreak havoc on non-Muslims; thirdly, Muslims need to apply their free will and stop being mere slaves to the religion to break loose from the idiosyncrasies of Islam.

*Not on Fire, But Burning* couples Islam with terrorism and barbarity, and it is not an exaggerated claim to maintain that in all images of Islam circulated in the novel, none can be found that is positive. One of Hrbek's central implications is that the force is not the Muslims, but a religious dogma called Islam. The portrayals illustrated by Hrbek in the course of novel indicate that violence serves as the engine of Islam. The novel opens with a harrowing account of a 9/11-like incident when something crashes the Golden Gate Bridge. This event represents a watershed in the history of the country. Skyler witnesses the incident in the Epilogue, and as the novel reports, "What she saw down there recalled a medieval painting of hell she had studied in Art History. Innumerable scenes of crazy torture, some brightly lit by fire, others in shadow, all of them under a sky impastoed with sun and ash" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 6). The panic the Epilogue spreads is visceral and tangible to the point that the readers almost stand in the room where Skyler is writing the story and witness the assault on the Golden Gate Bridge together with her.

No one knows who preprogrammed and caused this landmark event; however, the novel does not present an intricate pattern of endless convolutions to draw a veil over the identity of the terrorists. The readers, accordingly, can easily associate the atrocious phenomenon to Muslims. There are several signifiers that bring Muslims to mind as the driving force behind the assault on San Francisco: firstly, this full-scale surprise raid on America is mounted on 8/11, a date that is rather similar to a date hauntingly familiar to the American psyche. Secondly, the novel refers to ‘planes’ several times<sup>1</sup>, even though planes are not proclaimed as the definite instrument to have launched the all-out attack. Thirdly, some have heard that the macabre event was occasioned by “a passenger plane with the words **Air Arabia** on the fuselage” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 23). Fourthly, as a result of what happens on 8/11, xenophobia takes hold in America and Muslims are restricted and hedged in the reservations in the mountainous West, Montana, the Dakotas, and Wyoming behind electrified fences. Fifthly, the novel does not bring up or even imagine any other ‘Other’ or enemy to the Americans except Islam and Muslims. *Not on Fire, But Burning* outlines the antagonism and rivalry between Muslims and Americans in a parallel universe, and furnishes assorted hints for the readers to associate the opening attack with Muslims.

Hrbek creates an eccentric alternative universe, considerably

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1. “A plane. But not a plane. It was too bright. Like something cosmic come at high speed through the atmosphere” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 3); “There’s another plane. Another plane went down in the middle of the country. It wasn’t a plane; it couldn’t have been, it was too bright. It was on fire. No, not fire, a burning light” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 15) “Because a lot of people believe it was a plane. Though others believe very different things” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 21); “every video taken from the ground that had clearly shown a passenger plane being steered into the bridge, a plane with the words Air Arabia on the fuselage crashing into the bridge and then exploding” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 29).



similar to the contemporary world, as it is devoid of clear explanations and banks significantly on stereotyping. His work simply conflates Muslims with terrorist/terrorism, and takes the Orientalist tropes for granted. It makes Islam an ever-present source of trouble, as we are to witness it as a religion, which unleashes terror on Americans even in 2038. Consequently, it is demonstrated that Islam is the religion that will sow terror in America in at least a not-too-distant future.

### **2.1. The Portrait of Islam and Muslims**

Hrbek's novel displays a Muslim terrorist cell creeping in secret to wreak havoc on America. This network is masterminded by a certain sheikh Abdul-Aziz. The very first picture that flashes into readers' mind is that Muslim religious leaders are the initiators and directors of acts of terrorism. The sheikh is characterized rather negatively; his positive characteristics, if there are any, are completely ignored. Hrbek's *Not on Fire, But Burning* provides a representation of the sheikh with typical anti-Muslim stereotypes and fixations. The readers first discern sheikh Abdul-Aziz when Karim, the Muslim leading character, is reflecting on the sheikh's postulations and preaching. Sheikh had told the boys, "you may be going your separate ways now, my sons, but very soon you will be together in the highest gardens of heaven. It is just a matter of time" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 38). The sheikh, accordingly, is depicted to indoctrinate a body of Muslim youth with a narrow set of religious beliefs to goad them into committing suicide attacks at the heart of America the very first moment he is introduced in the novel. When it comes to description, the sheikh is portrayed to have "dark beard with twisting hairs, a beard of thorns" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 43). In such way, from the beginning of the novel, the readers have a brutal bearded urban guerrilla in front of them, who has every intention to

catch America off-guard. This sets forth the concept of home-grown terrorists, which serves a substantial role in reinforcing Islamophobic tendencies in America. The idea of home-grown terrorist evokes another central argument feeding the Islamophobia discourse: the idea of ‘disloyalty’. The assumption that Muslim Americans are not loyal to the U.S. is reckoned as one of the core components of Islamophobia (Sunar, 2017, p. 44). The portrait Hrbek depicts of the sheikh, Karim, Yassim, Hazem, and Faraj illustrates them as a group of disloyal Muslims intending to betray their own country.

The sheikh is also portrayed to be a law-breaker, as the readers witness his having a cellphone in a camp where cellphones are contraband (Hrbek, 2015, p. 54). Abdul-Aziz uses his cellphone to show Karim, Yassim, and Hazem videos of a boy “prepared by men in dark hoods, as plastified explosives and tubes filled with nails and steel balls were taped to his skin and bones” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 54). Hence, He is portrayed to hammer radical and terrorist notions into the minds of the boys by exploiting religious promises of gardens of heaven, abusing their situation as orphans, and giving them hope of a reunion with their parents in the highest gardens of heaven. In the novel, the sheikh tells them, “your family is gone . . . and you have nothing left on Earth. But if you leave this Earth as a shahid, as a martyr for the sake of Allah: Boys, if you do this, you will have everything” (Hrbek, 2015, pp. 80-81). Putting the religious promises to wrong use and applying them out of context, the sheikh strives to drill terrorist impulses into the minds of Karim, Hazem and Yassim. This latest quotation of the sheikh also proposes a picture of ‘shahid,’ identical to that of a ‘jihadist’ in islamophobic discourse; it signifies that the Muslims who destroy ‘infidel’ Americans and are killed themselves, are shahids or martyrs predestined to be transferred to paradise. Karim, for

instance, calls Hazem a *shahid* after he has performed a terrorist act (Hrbek, 2015, p. 176).

With sheikh Abdul-Aziz and the boys, the novel carries the same master and slave rhetoric. Sheikh Abdul-Aziz, who plays the role of master, is evil-intentioned and threatening; Karim, Yassim, and Hazem, represented as slaves, on the other hand, are depicted as narrow-minded creatures who take orders from the master without musing on the nature of orders. Within this discourse, the slave is in no position to transgress the orders shouted out from the master. When the sheikh calls Karim after Karim does not succeed to call him before the set time, the ringtone of Karim's cellphone turns into an order, and it "[I]ike a command shouted again and again. Answer me, answer me. It is impossible to disobey" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 90).

Karim is genuinely committed to sheikh Abdul-Aziz, and "will do as he was told by the sheikh" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 53). The reason behind this fidelity and allegiance to the sheikh is that his order is "the rightful thing to do in the eyes of God" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 53). When the sheikh's orders are shown to be endorsed by God, he must always be correct, as it is corroborated by Karim when he emphatically thinks, "off course correct. As everything he has ever said to you and your friends was true. How could it be otherwise? How could a messenger of the almighty speak anything *but* the truth?" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 129). Through this characterization of Karim, Hrbek attempts to depict Muslims as fatalists who accept any doctrine without reflecting on it through their common sense.

Within this frame of reference, young boys cannot contravene the commands issued by the sheikh, as what he sets his heart on is shown to be what God pines for. This is the case even when sheikh Abdul-Aziz proposes a conspiracy to murder a great number of

innocent people in a hospital. Consequently, the sheikh becomes the primary criterion for pure belief and is, as such, the yardstick based on which people evaluate their faith. Even though Karim and Yassim sometimes doubt sheikh Abdul-Aziz's assumptions, Hazem is "the one among them who had always been a true believer, never doubting what the sheikh told them (that, for example, if you lay your life down in the path of God, you will feel nothing when your body explodes)" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 176). In this passage, Hazem is represented as a 'true believer,' since he never harbors suspicions about what sheikh Abdul-Aziz says.

Underrepresented sheikhs are often pigeonholed into the same role repeatedly in the Islamophobic discourse in literature. Sheikhs were mostly represented as oil-hungry creatures before 9/11, and since that fateful day, they are mostly depicted as masterminds and prime movers of terrorist networks. They are depicted to be hotheaded and consumed with desire to take the life of 'infidel' Americans. This violent nature of the sheikh is well illustrated after Karim and his new Muslim friends hit Dorian out in a completely brutal fashion. As a feedback for this venture, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz responds, "[y]ou struck an infidel in the face. So what. What is this supposed to prove, Karim?" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 124). Karim has given Dorian a good drubbing to gain the sheikh's satisfaction; however, this endeavor does not gratify the sheikh, and he says, "It doesn't change anything. You are no martyr. You are nothing but a boy with nothing" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 124). The sheikh yearns for something greater; just striking an 'infidel' American in the face is not what he desires. Abdul-Aziz repeatedly tells the kids in the camp that "they were nothing, but there was no shame in this. For in their nothingness was a great power" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 125). The sheikh compares the young boys to particles of matter too small to be even seen, but "when properly influenced, can produce a power

as strong as the sun” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 125). This power is assumed to be generated when the boys are martyred for their religious beliefs. The sheikh says to Karim and other boys,

when you become a martyr, the power hidden within you will be released and you will become pure energy, the energy of God, and you will travel at the speed of the angels (which is fifty-thousand years to a day) along the celestial ladders ... feeling no pain, only a sensation like being carried on a wave ... and the energy you have become will pass through the doorway held open for you and in this way, in a fraction of a second, you will find yourselves in another universe called Paradise (Hrbek, 2015, p. 125).

The sheikh misemploys and misrepresents religious promises to motivate Karim and other juvenile Muslims to make an assault on America. He is portrayed as a fully anti-American individual. For him, there is an essential difference between Americans and Muslims, as it is demonstrated in his use of the terms ‘us’ and ‘them’. When it comes to 8/11, he says, “this is what God did on 8-11. It is said by the infidels that *we* used the power of the atom against them. My sons! Do not believe that lie. There was no plane. There was no bomb. In a great explosion generated from nothingness by the will of the Almighty was that city of sin destroyed” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 125). Three major points can be apprehended through this passage: first, Americans are ‘infidels’; second, what happened on 8/11 was what God wanted; and third, the targeted city was a city of sin and hence predestined to be reduced to nothing. With these beliefs on mind, we find the sheikh as an exoticized Other, at variance with the American system of values.

Similar to Shaik Rashid in Updike's *The Terrorist*, sheikh Abdul-Aziz brings Dicken's Fagin to mind. Hrbek's sheikh, similar

to Dicken's antagonist, is rendered to gather youngsters to administer his demonic schemes. While Fagin's bag-snatching classes prepare the waifs for his plots, the type of distressing Islam the sheikh is depicted to espouse with its aspirations for the annihilation of the infidels and its promises of eternal blessing in gardens of heaven prepare Karim, Yassim and Hazem for the sheikh's diabolic purposes. Moreover, apart from the anti-American portrait of the sheikh, in tune with the representation of other sheikhs and Imams, sheikh Abdul-Aziz is presented with certain undertones of hebephilia and pedophilia. Hrbek surrounds the sheikh with several male youngsters without mentioning a wife or a preference for women, which shows him as an aberrant. Hrbek's *Not on Fire, But Burning* illustrates the sheikh touching the boys, verging on caressing them with possible pedophilic inclinations: "he touched each of them in turn, touched a finger to the breastbone of each boy" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 125).

With this representation of Muslims and their homegrown terrorist networks, Jon-David Sullivan III, a representative of the local chapter of a nonprofit organization called the American Resistance Alliance, is not wrong when he says, "Some people think the war is in the Middle East. However, the real war is right here. In America. You have to remember that" (p. 140). Jon-David tells Dorian, Dean and Keenan that a pink backpack unattended "could be some girl's schoolbooks. Or it could be a remote-control bomb laced with radioactive medical waste ... Muslims being violent. You don't just turn away from that. The other day, it was a bloody nose and a black eye. Tomorrow, a knife, a gun, or worse... Because there's an evil out there and it wants every single one of us" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 142).

Jon-David has 'Islam' in mind when he mentions the 'evil out

there'. He introduces Muslims as violent, and he is right, based on what unfolds in the course of the story. At the outset, Dorian gets a 'bloody nose and a black eye' and as Jon-David assumes, the society slides into chaos on the coming days, and both Muslims and Americans commence on acts of retaliation. Suicide attacks are spearheaded in Boise, Helena and Concord (Hrbek, 2015, p. 195), and on the other hand, mosques are "set on fire in the Republic of Texas and the Florida Territory" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 195). What Jon-David says is supported by a neighboring doctor who says to Mitch, "Where Muslims go, violence follows" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 162), and he asserts that he does not "say this in a prejudicial way" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 162). The doctor is talking to Mitchel because a supposed Muslim suicide bomber has been to the neighborhood to wreak vengeance. He says to Mitchel, "It's obvious who this man is. So, what is he doing here? Have any such people ever come to our street before? No. They're only here because that boy is here" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 162). The sheer presence of Karim in the neighborhood is the supposed source of confusion and insecurity in the area. Although the assumed Muslim suicide bomber is killed, the doctor is not content, and says to Mitchel Wakefield,

Now, this man is dead. One less ethnocidal maniac. So, one might think our neighbor has improved the state of things. But in fact he has made things much worse. Because this man has confederates who will soon be very angry. Let us not delude ourselves. The question is not if they will come back. The question is when. And when they do, we will all be in danger. (Hrbek, 2015, p. 163)

The doctor maintains that the death of the 'ethnocidal maniac' does not eliminate the problem. It is because he believes that the dead person has 'confederates' who will soon commit heinous terrorist acts to exact vengeance. The doctor assumes that Muslims'

return to cause mayhem is a certain fact, although the time for committing the retaliation act is not clear. What Hrbek presents corroborates the doctor's assumptions, as we are to witness a gruesome and harrowing world to the end of the novel. People live in fear, and a bioterrorist attack is reported to be carried out. The fictional world of Hrbek becomes dire and grisly to the point that when William Banfelder goes to police station, the officer says, "Check in tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow" (p. 216). People are not sure of being alive the next day. This is the case in another storyline where Skyler takes Dorian's hand, "thinking to herself that life can tear apart at any moment. The Caliphate could nuke the whole eastern seaboard tomorrow" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 205).

*Not on Fire, But Burning*, similar to Updike's *Terrorist*, employs adolescents for suicidal terrorist acts. The novel portrays several Muslim youths who are addicted to opium or dream while in camp. The Muslim adolescent protagonist is the twelve-year-old Karim who was born in Kerkook, Arabia (Hrbek, 2015, p. 36). He is a "kid at least ten pounds underweight, whose flesh looks mildewed" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 40). After being restricted in the camp for a while, Karim is adopted by William Benfedler and brought to New York.

Owing to the stereotypical representation of Muslims, William Benfedler is anxious about the moment when he introduces Karim to other kids in the neighborhood. He wants them to "befriend a Muslim. No, not that. Just accept him. Understand him and let him be" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 46). Dorian, however, cannot stand him. His "mind is otherwise engaged by the idea of walking right up to this kid and clocking him without saying a word. The feeling is terrible. He knows nothing about him yet. Nonetheless, Dorian's body is cramping with anger. Hating . . . not him exactly, but the idea of



him, or the idea of people like him” (Hrbek, 2015, pp. 47-48). Keenan and Zebedee harbor the same feelings about Muslims. When the idea of a pool party in William Benfedler’s house is mentioned, “the thought of being in a swimming pool with one of them [i.e. Muslims], the idea of immersion half-naked in the same water, makes his [i.e. Keenan’s] guts squirm and burn with a furious nausea” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 59). Zebedee does not hate Karim as much as he is afraid of him. He “can see through the show of rancor to the fear inside, which he guesses isn’t so different from the fear we all harbor” (Hrbek, 2015, pp. 59-60). Even Mr. N is in doubt about Karim when he says, “I met him the other day. Can’t say it was love at first sight. The kid’s kind of, I don’t know” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 83).

Jon-David also believes that Karim is “a very dangerous type. He’s got nothing to live for, but he could have plenty to die for” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 196). On this, the good Muslims of the work share the same opinion, as we find Omar saying, “what you wouldn’t get anyway is that people like him are bad for us” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 93). The novel, however, does not offer much to reject these assumptions. Karim, at times called 'son of suspected terrorists' (Hrbek, 2015, p. 114), is a would-be Muslim terrorist who is an instrument to serve the sheikh’s diabolic purposes. He is depicted to be willing to do whatever he is told by the sheikh (Hrbek, 2015, p. 53). Even though Karim befriends certain Americans, he knows that his real purpose is not to “become friends with anybody (you weren’t a friend, you were an enemy)” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 67).

After coming to his new house, Karim is supposed to call the phone number the sheikh gave him in Dakota and connect with the Muslim cell in New York. When Karim postpones calling him, however, the sheikh himself places a call to Karim and dubs him

‘disloyal’ (Hrbek, 2015, p. 90). This is because Karim has been unable to fulfil his promise to call the sheikh and connect with the cell in New York. Sheikh Abdul-Aziz does not accept Karim’s excuses and says, “you have purposefully ignored my instructions. Instead of being a warrior for God, you want to make friends on the Internet. You would rather fraternize with infidels in a swimming pool” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 91). The sheikh believes that Karim would prefer to stay with ‘worthless strangers’ (Hrbek, 2015, p. 91) than be with his mother in paradise. To work Karim towards his own goal, the sheikh also says that it is “not a matter of what you want. It’s not your choice—or mine. It’s God’s choice. God chooses his martyrs. Only God can bestow the honor of martyrdom. He alone bestows the honor or takes it away” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 92).

The sheikh tells Karim that his “commitment is uncertain and there can be no uncertainty” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 91). Karim repudiates this claim straight away; however, he needs to prove it. Karim takes up the opportunity to prove himself to the sheikh when Dorian uses a ‘racial slur’ against Muslims (Hrbek, 2015, p. 104). What Karim and other Muslim boys do to Dorian illustrates the way in which adolescents could act violently. Karim knocks and hammers Dorian in a brutal fashion to show his true mettle to the sheikh and to demonstrate that he is merciless against the enemy; Karim snaps a picture of Dorian’s face caked in blood to show how ruthless he is towards the assumed infidels. The sheikh, nevertheless, is not satisfied, as he has dreamed greater nefarious schemes.

When Karim fails to join the Muslim cell in New York, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz sends his men to take Karim to the determined location. A certain Faraj, having introduced himself as Yassim’s uncle, drops by William Benfedler’s house to pick up Karim. Faraj

sermonizes Karim and Yassim in the car while taking them to the landing place. He is disquieted and malcontent about Karim's behavior, as he had not made any contacts with him during the past three weeks. Faraj tells the kids, a "new era is about to begin. Within the week, the first lines of a new chapter are going to be written" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 188). The new chapter Faraj is referring to is definitely another assault on America. Faraj continues, "We will give you a role in this heroic epic, and the action you perform will be added to the like actions of a thousand other shahids, each one of you like unto a wave which when joined together will form an ocean, and all of you will live as heroes in Paradise" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 188). The action Faraj is prodding Karim into taking is introduced as a 'heroic epic'; and there are 'a thousand other shahids' who are ready to undertake this heroic mission. What we have here is that there are thousands of Muslims out there ready to take their own lives to strike at America. The award also comes from the religion: "all of you will live as heroes in Paradise" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 188).

At the destination, Faraj, Karim and Yassim walk "toward a building painted the color of dry blood" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 188). Here, even the color of the Muslim hideaway alludes to terror and death. When they enter the secret hideout place, Karim is supposed to demonstrate that he is a fit and merciless warrior for the Muslim cause. For this purpose, Faraj, at first "walked up to the dog, pushed the gun into the short coat shrink-wrapped around the ribcage, and then shot. The animal yelped and leaped sideways: the leash stopped it short ... Blood dripped from fur matted with blood" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 189). After Faraj shoots the dog, the second step is relegated to Karim. He must decapitate the dog with a knife. Karim obeys the command and beheads the dog.

It seems that in this scene, Hrbek is intentionally picking the 'dog' to be the victim for the hostile vagaries of Muslims. Are there any reasons behind picking a 'dog' to be decapitated by Karim to practice playing rough at the supposed infidels? To answer this question, one should bear in mind that dogs are regarded as family members and are highly cherished in the United States (Frigiola, 2009, p. 3). Hrbek, consequently, is introducing one of the most precious American pets to be slain by the assumed violent Muslims. For a society known to be loving dogs abundantly, beheading a dog for no reason can further ingrain the image of violent Muslims in the minds of American readers.

The representation of violent Muslims is also portrayed in the choice of games Karim and his friends play. Karim does not find American games interesting. Playing golf a little, he comes to know that the American games are useless, and that they are "games for spoiled and lazy apostates" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 97). While American youths are portrayed to take pleasure in pool parties, golf and social media, Muslim youth are sketched to enjoy playing games with the theme of terrorism. Karim, Hazem and Yassim once find a pair of walkie-talkies in a not entirely looted department store, and use it to play. As the novel relates, the pair of walkie-talkies "were good for playing war: two of the boys with the radios, tracking the third whose mission was to reach undetected, with a dirty bomb fashioned from the viscera of a clock radio" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 78).

With these descriptions of Muslims and their interests, one finds Muslims as having come from another planet, or at least the illustration verges upon showing them as primitive men. It brings to mind images of exotic Orientals. The food Muslims eat, the games they play, and the religion they practice are depicted as utterly different from those of Americans.

## 2.2. The Double for Tokenism

*Meriam Webster Dictionary* defines tokenism as “the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort (as to desegregate)” (Tokenism, n.d. a). *Cambridge Dictionary*, on the other hand, defines the concept as “actions that are the result of pretending to give advantage to those groups in society who are often treated unfairly, in order to give the appearance of fairness” (Tokenism, n.d. b). *Cambridge* also adds a phrase that reads, “Favoring someone unfairly”. Based on these definitions, one can infer that tokenism is the practice of undertaking a symbolic endeavor to show that one is fair and not partial in his conduct with members of minority groups. The concept has been used in the politics, in the media, in television, in the workplace and in fiction. Film producers, authors and managers need to include a token character or employee to their film, fiction, or workforce to convey the impression of social inclusiveness and diversity to rebut charges of prejudice. When an author depicts his fictional world exclusively with sketches of white culture, it is highly probable that he will be accused of discrimination, and to dismiss these accusations, authors employ a character from a minority group or a character. Accordingly, it can be affirmed that, generally speaking, tokenism “must in some sense mean actions that are designed to assuage those who protest, but at the same time minimizes any ‘real’ social change”, and hence, “insincerity must be one of the critical ingredients of tokenism” (Gerard & Miller, 1975, p. 7).

Token characters are introduced in a work to display how non-discriminatory the writers are. Novelists need to bring characters to their fictional world to dispute the charge of a racist approach to the world. Token presenting mechanism is used in a work when the majority of characters are white. In an arena with many non-white

characters, authors use another strategy to balance their essentialist portrayal of non-white characters; such is the introduction of good Muslims in the work.

Greg Hrbek has depicted a world full of sound and fury with its callous and terror-wreaking Muslim population. He might run the risk of being indicted as a racist and one-sided representation of the world, and to rebut this charge, he needs to develop certain characters with attributes conflicting with run-of-the-mill Orientalist stereotypes. These characters have no true narrative function in the plot, and are introduced in the novel to demonstrate that the authors are obeying anti-racism policies in the novel. The strategy is to bring some ‘good Muslims’ in contrast to their stereotypical ‘bad Muslims’ to balance their reality depiction. These terms were delineated by Mamdani who posed that

President Bush moved to distinguish between ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims.’ ... [B]ad Muslims were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that ‘good Muslims’... would undoubtedly support ‘us’ in a war against ‘them.’... But ... unless proved to be ‘good,’ every Muslim was presumed to be ‘bad’ (Mamdani, 2004, p. 15).

Greg Hrbek portrays a harrowing world loaded with nerve-racking Muslims who are dead set against America. With this backdrop at hand, Hrbek introduces Fawzia Mahfouz in the novel. Mrs. Mahfouz “is the leader of the youth group at Masjid al-Islam in the capital” whose mission “is to promote understanding, rather than fisticuffs among children of different backgrounds” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 126). The point is, first, that the animosity of the Muslim characters in the novel overwhelm the good intentions of Mrs. Mahfouz, and secondly, the novel does not clarify on which frame

of reference she has based her ideas. Is she a Muslim character like Khaleela who is just by name Muslim, or is she really taking her ideology from Islam? The novel does not throw light on this. Omitting Mrs. Mahfouz from the plot does not effect a change in the story. It seems that Hrbek is adding Mrs. Mahfouz to the novel, as argued formerly, to rebut the charges of his stereotypical depiction of Muslims.

### 2.3. Alternate History

Hrbek's *Not on Fire, But Burning* falls into different literary genres. It is a science fiction, a thriller, a speculative fiction, a speculative dystopia, and an alternate history (AH). In an alternate history, historical events unfold differently, as in *Not on Fire, But Burning*, where 9/11 has not happened, and yet another similar attack has been launched on 8/11. Alternate history novels encompass 'what if' and 'if only' scenarios at crucial points in the course of the story.

Hrbek's novel articulates significantly about different alternative 'pathways.' Pathways are the courses of action performed during the time, where time is constant across all pathways. Every "pathway is *created by choice*, by the energy which moves ... between two actions, either of which *may or may not* be selected; and that the grid is an open system ... which responds to every single choice being made across its infinitude of axes, and through which the energy of choices is carried along those axes" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 249). On one pathway, for instance, an all-out sneak attack is mounted on America on 8/11, while in another is not. The question is how different the world would be in the wake of these two divergent pathways. The omniscient narrator clarifies this,

So, when Dorian Wakefield, at 2:33 a.m. EST on 2 July 2038 in  $B_{39} - R^{61}$ , is asleep in the Province of New York, he is also asleep at 11:33 p.m. PST on 1 July 2038 in  $R_5 - B^{94}$  in the State of California. In  $R_5 - B^{94}$ , his family never left California. On that path, his sister is alive, because on that path nothing ever came hurtling out of the skies over San Francisco. On  $R_5 - B^{94}$ , the city is undestroyed and Skyler Wakefield is alive; and at 11:33 p.m. PST on 1 July 2038, she is on a beach on the northwest edge of the city, at the strait that links ocean and bay (Hrbek, 2015, p. 170).

In the pathway  $R_5 - B^{94}$ , no air-launched missile hits San Francisco; the city is not demolished and Skyler is alive. Most probably, Hrbek is maintaining that what proceeds this world is the way people choose to take actions. One can choose different courses of action since the “possibilities are infinite” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 190). Nevertheless, certain actions leave the world in ruins and deliver catastrophic ramifications, while others help it flourish and promote happiness. For this reason, Hrbek paints different ‘if only’ scenarios to indicate the way in which people’s lives would have been different if alternative courses of action were carried out:

The if-onlies in the situation are starting to pile up: if only you didn’t call him towelhead, if only we didn’t go to the stupid party, if only they never closed the camps in the first place. But the revisionary wish that seems most crucial at this point is: If only we didn’t give him the names. Which follows directly from: If only Keenan had kept the fuck out of it (Hrbek, 2015, p. 151).

Hrbek’s ‘if-onlies’ turn the spotlight on various pathways. Dorian Wakefield and Zebedee Hightower, here, are pondering on the ventures they undertook, and if they had not, the problems would have been sidestepped. The obstacles that the characters



experience during the course of the novel are due to certain actions they took in the past. Dorian and Zebedee believe that they should not have gone to the party, they should not have used racial slurs, and the government should not have closed the camps. If these 'if-onlies' had actualized, the complications would not have arisen in the novel.

On Karim's decapitating the dog, done on the pathway  $B_{39} - R^{61}$ , the omniscient narrator says that the "action is repeated on many other pathways, though the cutting of the dog's throat is by no means a constant" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 190). Beheading the dog is a variable and not a constant, and variables can be replaced with other variables over the time. Both 'murdering' and 'feeding' are variables, and Karim could tread another pathway by feeding the animal, not murdering it; however, it is mentioned that the cutting of the dog's throat is repeated on many other pathways. This is most probably verging upon maintaining that with a certain character like Karim, who is exposed and devoted to certain teachings, beliefs and frames of reference, the dog-beheading scenario can hardly be eliminated and another maneuver performed. The narrator, however, says that on "some many pathways, random chance has *precluded the cutting of* a dog's throat" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 190). On these pathways, it is 'random chance' that fends off the tragic episode of cutting of the dog's throat. This plausibility comes from the "antecedent events that lead Karim to a point other than the barn on the afternoon of 07.06.2038 and from that point to other points, none of which ever coincide in space-time with the barn" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 190). In other words, if only Karim does not go to the barn, the poor animal will not be slaughtered. The novel is signifying that if Karim happens to go to that barn, he is in no way to circumvent liquidating the dog. It gives the impression that as a Muslim slave,

Karim's position is that of following the orders given from the religion and the messenger of the almighty, sheikh Abdul-Aziz. Pondering on his heroic mission of suicide attack, Karim thinks,

Not your decision. None of it by your own will. Not willed by you any more than what happened in that bathroom earlier in the day: a thing your body does and cannot be stopped from doing. For it has been written. Written that you would shit your pants from fear seven to eight hours before the achievement of your goal (Hrbek, 2015, p. 210).

Just after these reflections, while Karim desires the suicide action and yet is terribly frightened of it, the way the dog was looking at him at the last moment, the novel brings a verse from Quran, "*But you must not think that those slain in the cause of Allah are dead. They are alive and well provided for by their Lord (Sura 3, verse 169)*" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 210). The religion, then, is assumed to both sanction suicide attacks and at the same time bring comfort to the Muslims with its promises of a perfect life in the next world. Just after this verse, the novel offers an alternative proposition, which comes somehow shocking to the readers. The authorial voice wants Karim to murder Faraj, but Karim does not (Hrbek, 2015, pp. 210-211). The reason behind this is obvious. Karim is portrayed to be a slave to the vagaries of his own religion and its messengers. As a slave, he performs what he is dictated and ordered to do. However, the novel does not eliminate all the ways through which the slave can break free from the shackles the master has tied around his feet. For a slave, there is only one way to yield emancipation.

While on many other pathways, free will as exercised by Karim has *deselected the option of* the cutting of the dog's throat, a choice that will lead, on some pathways (though by no means all), to future events and fates radically different from those in B39 – R61 (Hrbek, 2015, p.190).

While 'random chance' is shown to take the terrorists out of the situations, which lead to taking calamitous actions, 'free will' empowers Muslims to break free from the orders their religion issues. Even if Karim is transferred to the barn through chance, free will empowers him to deselect the option of decapitating the dog. The course of a given pathway, as mentioned somewhere else, must be "altered by a person gifted with an awareness of other pathways" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 158). It seems that before applying free will, one needs to be aware of various pathways.

While in reservation camps, Karim is not acquainted with alternative pathways, as he is restricted in a place where he is only in contact with sheikh Abdul-Aziz. In the camp, he is indoctrinated with the teachings of self-sacrifice to reach eternal paradise. Karim knows only whatever his religion and the sheikh teach him, which is the reason for which "in the camp, there had been no confusion, no paradox. It all made easy sense" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 80). Nevertheless, when he enters a new world outside the boundaries of reservation camps, Karim comes to know that the world with all it has to offer is not just what the sheikh says. Consequently, he harbors doubt about the sheikh's instructions, and in the first step postpones calling the sheikh even though he is not supposed to disobey any mere orders given by him. However, he treads the pathway where he is bound to enter "a hospital named after an infidel saint" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 209), and cry Subhan'Allah as loud as he can, and pull the cord right away. In the end, Karim comes to an awareness and goes for an alternative pathway, where the sheer presence of a baby does not allow him to pull the cord. He cannot detonate the bomb because "right now there is still time. Air to breathe; things to see; a friend to sit beside for a while longer" (Hrbek, 2015, p. 251). Karim Hassad-Banfelder is eventually shown to apply his 'free will', and sets off the suicide bomb "in a

place where a fountain streams skyward pure white water, and all is shrouded in a mist faintly falling, a rainbow in the mist made of sun and water, the colors of which are the true colors of light” (Hrbek, 2015, p. 252).

Hrbek is found sparing no effort to play the role of ‘White Man’s Burden’, in different forms and guises. One of his central arguments is that the leading force is not Muslims, but a religious dogma called Islam. Islam is presented as the agent of terror, evil, and doom. It is shown to dictate against the supposed ‘infidels’, and prod its followers into falling up on American citizens. Hrbek tries to show that a Muslim should turn loose from the commands his religion issues by using his free will, live, and let others live.

### 3. Conclusion

Stephen Sheehi contends that Islamophobia is an ideological formation “created by a culture that deploys particular tropes, analyses and beliefs, as facts upon which governmental policies and social practices are framed” (Sheehi, 2011, p. 31). Islamophobia, on the one hand, is a series of actions and opinions that target Muslims and emanate from a generic misconception about who Muslims are and what Islam is; and on the other hand, it is “an ideological phenomenon which exists to promote political and economic goals, both domestically and abroad” (Sheehi, 2011, p. 32). Hence, it is not hard to infer that the metanarrative of Islamophobia is more about politics and economics than about religion. Islamophobia, in fact, functions as a commanding ideological formation that promotes the American Empire. In addition, it is crucial to note that Islamophobia, with its economic and political countenance, does not originate from “one particular

administration, thinker, philosopher, activist, media outlet, special interest group, think tank, or even economic sector or industry” (Sheehi, 2011, pp. 31-32). Although these are the chief actors advocating and emphasizing anti-Islam sentiments in America, novelists can also join them in their virulent operation.

A close reading of *Not on Fire, But Burning* brings its author entangled in a mechanism regulated by prominent Islamophobic figures such as Bernard Lewis, Fareed Zakaria, and Fouad Ajami. Although Greg Hrbek has not had made a name for himself as an Islamophobic specialist, what he depicts of Islam and Muslims serves to corroborate what the Islamophobists seek to substantiate and disseminate. Hrbek's work presents Muslims and Islam with simplistic and reductive formulas superabundant in the Orientalist and Islamophobic modes of thought. Recurring, yet reductive images of Islam and Muslims are frequent and within easy reach in this novel. Hrbek's novel settles on a Eurocentric view that delineates Islam as a monolithic religion with unreasonable doctrines, impelling its adherents to murder innocent people with a promise of gardens of heaven. Pondering on the actions that they take or mean to take, Muslims are depicted to be disloyal citizens who join terrorist networks to betray their own country.

These conceptions, images and portraying strategies, although significant, are run-of-the-mill apparatuses in the Islamophobic metanarrative, as revealed in the realm of fiction. Hrbek's *Not on Fire, But Burning*, however, proposes new mechanisms and assumptions that are new in the repository of Islamophobic techniques of depiction. Firstly, the author puts two disparate worlds side by side: in one world, Skyler is alive, happy, and in high spirits, and life is perfect, while in the other, Skyler is dead, and the world is in total chaos and disruption. Within this scenario,

Islam is what has brought about the difference. The implication here is that the world can go back to its prosperous state if, and only if, Islam is removed from it. Secondly, the novel sees Islam as an ever-present threat, as it is depicted to engender turmoil even in 2038. While other post-9/11 American novels, such as John Updike's *Terrorist* (2005) and Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days* (2008) view Islam as a source responsible for the distraught realities of the present world, Hrbek's novel suggests Islam as a monolithic religion that will pose threat even in the future. Thirdly, while touching on the idea of how Muslims can run off from playing havoc in the world, the novel suggests two notions quite rare among the freeze framings of Islam in the discourse of Islamophobia in literature: 'free will' and 'random chance'. As discussed earlier, while 'random chance' is depicted to pull out the terrorists from the situations that lead to committing terrorist acts, 'free will' empowers Muslims to break free from the vagaries of Islam. Accordingly, 'random chance' signifies that a Muslim with Islamic teachings should not find an opportunity for playing havoc; if he is given the chance to make headway for a perilous and dire situation, he will definitely choose the worst. If 'random chance' is unable to take the Muslim out of a tragic situation, the only way out of the problem is using 'free will'. Through this assumption, Hrbek perhaps implies that a Muslim should apply his 'free will' and break free from Islam itself to be able to resign from terrorist ventures. This implies that Islam is a violent provoker religion, and unless one stops following it, he will not be able to stop destructive ventures.

It is worthy to note that Islamophobia makes headway simultaneously on two levels: "the level of thought, speech and perception; then the material level of policies, violence and action" (Sheehi, 2011, p. 32). With these two mechanisms operating,

Islamophobia turns into a powerful ideological formation that facilitates the idea of an American Empire. It is interesting that Hrbek's novel, in parallel with key political hacks, rogue academics and literary experts, strives to serve Islamophobia on the first level, and resurrects and reconstitutes the edifice of a phenomenon, which circulates to account for the U.S. global, economic and political hegemony.

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