



Reinterpreting Identity Crisis as a Postcolonial Theme in the Road to Mecca by Muhammad Asad through Content Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze identity crisis faced by Muhammad Asad in his autobiographical travelogue named "The Road to Mecca" which is one of the leading themes found in postcolonial literature. Post colonialism tends to shed light on some of the basic eccentricities found in the subaltern literature. Identity crisis is one of the canons through which we can interpret "alienation" as a major psychological mindset of the people who found themselves as "Other". The writer experienced this identity crisis as a Jew newspaper reporter among the Muslims of the Arab world. Leopold Weiss wanted to belong to some definite orbit of life. So he changed his faith from Ashkenazi Jew to a Muslim. The present study is an attempt to delineate this identity crisis through the lens of postcolonial alienation. The research design for the present study is a using content analysis, textual analysis and critical discourse analysis and discusses the due course of findings as its contributions in the literature.



Introduction

Muhammad Asad, originally born Leopold Weiss, was a prominent figure whose life and spiritual journey profoundly shaped his identity and worldview. His early days as a newspaper reporter for the Frankfurter Zeitung marked the beginning of his exploration into various religious and philosophical ideologies. Initially born into a Jewish family, Asad later identified as an atheist during his youth in Europe. However, his transformative journey through the Arabian desert and immersion in Arabian culture led him to embrace Islam, eventually adopting the name Muhammad Asad.

Asad (1954) documented his spiritual journey and experiences extensively in his autobiographical travelogue, which provides insight into his linguistic patterns and narrative style. Asad's narrative explores profound identity issues, including religious identity, cultural belonging, and intellectual curiosity. His journey from Judaism to atheism and then Islam reflects broader themes of searching for meaning and truth. He then became the advocate of Muslim unity among all the Muslim countries of the world. The present study describes the linguistic patterns used by the writer in his autobiographical travelogue. The book also influences the minds of the readers as they identify themselves with the writer, be they Muslims or non-Muslims. The research analyses the content and contextual implications used by the author to describe identity issues and their resolution through the course of his journey from and to Europe and finally his belonging to a definite orbit. The contextual implications in Asad's writings highlight the socio-political landscapes of the early 20th century, particularly in Europe and the Middle East, where shifting identities and ideologies shaped individual and collective destinies.

From the above discussed reviews, it is obvious about the writing techniques used by the writer and also about what he has written. But much research is needed on the present book as a postcolonial piece of literature as it deals with unhomeliness, alienation, hybridity, and orientalism. But identity crisis needs to be addressed delineating the writer's spiritual journey and disambiguating the writer's search for the ultimate truth. In addition, the research aims at analyzing and alienating factors which led to the identity crisis faced by Muhammad Asad in his autobiographical travelogue named "The Road to Mecca" which is one of the leading themes found in postcolonial literature.

Review of Literature

The book under discussion got instant critical appreciation from the notable and prestigious press of the New York Times where Simon and Schuster have published it. It has been widely read by many audiences ranging from the westerners to the orientals and from the non-Muslims to the Muslims (Darr, 2011; Harder, Asad, & Simon, 1998). The critics find this autobiographical travelogue as the most authentic piece of writing about the spiritual journey of a person who was searching for the ultimate truth. Not only for himself did he give words to his memories of becoming a Muslim after living with the Arabs for quite some time. During his visit to the Arabian peninsula in his youth as a newspaper correspondent, he also portrayed the identity crisis faced by many youth of his times in particular and the soul searching process of the thinking minds of the westerners in general.

The New York Post appreciates work by Asad under the critical lens of discourse analysis in these words, "a very rare and powerful book, raised completely above the ordinary by its candor and intelligence" (Fairclough, 2003). A reviewer in the Christian Science Monitor commented about this book by applying psychoanalytical theory using these words, "A book trenchant with adventure magnificently described and a commentary upon the inner meaning of Arab and Muslim life, helpful to all who would achieve more accurate understanding of the Arabs and their land (Fairclough, 2013). The psychoanalytical approach can also be seen by reviewing the review list in United Kingdom in 2007 when we read the following words, "This is a book about travel and journey of one man through the geographical roads of the material earth as well as the spiritual Odyssey he makes through the hills and plains of his own soul."

New York World-Telegram has used the lens of comparative study and described the book by comparing it with the writers of critical acclaim. These are the exact words used in the review, "As

suffused with Arab lore as Sir Richard Burton and almost as adventuresome as T.E. Lawrence, Muhammad Asad offers a similar blend of daring action and thoughtful observation. In addition, he surpasses either of these great predecessors as a prose stylist and interpreter of the Islamic faith.

The review answers both the questions about what the writer has written and how he has written it (Gropp, 2014). In *Book of the Month Club New York*, Nawwab (2002) used his personal views in describing the book by saying, "The road to Mecca combines the adventure and scenic beauty of a good travel book, unusually informed comments on near Eastern affairs, and a deeply thoughtful account of a man's finding of his own path. These words clearly describe the writer's point of view in terms of deconstruction and politico cultural depiction of the Arab world. The reviewer also describes the book using content analysis. In the next lines the reviewer uses the following words "An interesting and inspiring way to learn more about Islam in a way especially accessible to the Westerner as the author is a Westerner who chose to accept the faith of Islam. The reviewer has delineated one of the major themes of postcolonial literature, the difference between a westerner's point of view about the Orient.

The critics have used dramatic compression in the chronological sequencing of the major events in the book as well as the life of the author. "In this extraordinary and beautifully written autobiography, Asad tells of his initial rejection of all institutional religions, his entry into Taoism, his fascinating travels as a diplomat, and finally his embrace of Islam." The review gives us an overview as well as the complete autobiographical notes about the author (Kramer, 1999).

In the words of Charles Haywood, "This is a fascinating book half travelogue and half conversion memoir. His critique has used the canon of dialogism. He gives us a clear picture of how a person's relationship to the past shapes his future (Rubin, 2016).

In addition, Weiss (2022) in his review uses a conventional approach of his appreciation of this travelogue which lends authenticity to his point of view as he uses the same words of the author. He writes, "The book is not all about the travelling of a person, but it also gives the reader a clear picture of cultures of middle east also. Apart from being a travel story it is a "story of story" as the author himself has described" (Weiss, 2022). Nawwab (2002) is the next critic who gives us the idea behind the present research. He uses the following words to express the dilemma of people nowadays which lends this book universality. He recommends this book to, "anyone interested in learning more about Islam or the search for personal identity, religious-quest" (Amoussou, F. & Allagbe, A. A., 2018).

Amin (2011) has taken the help of structuralism to talk about how the book has been written. He says, "Structurally the book is written as a series of flashbacks during his last 23-day journey to Mecca." From the above discussed reviews of literature, it is obvious about the writing techniques used by the writer and about what he has written. Misch (2012) used visual interpretation of the journey undertaken by Muhammad Asad. He says, "More than 80 years ago, one man crossed the frontline between the Muslim world and the West –we retrace his journey ". This adds to the critical accolades this book received to such an extent that it triggered the imagination of not only the writers but also of the videographers. However, much research is needed on the present book as a postcolonial piece of literature as it deals with unhomeliness, alienation, hybridity, and orientalism. But Identity Crisis needs to be researched from the text using content analysis, textual analysis, and discourse analysis.

Methodology

The methodology used in this research includes content analysis, textual analysis and critical discourse analysis. It is an effort to bring to light the identity crisis faced by a westerner and his final association to a definite orbit of ideas presented by Islamic ideology. The focus is on the identity crisis faced by the author and its depiction through the words and phrases used by him.

Findings and Results

In "The Road to Mecca" by Asad (2014), the protagonist experiences an intense exploration of identity, encountering a personal and spiritual journey. The text delves into themes of cultural conflict, religious transformation, and the search for self-discovery, showcasing the inner turmoil and evolution of identity faced by the main character as he navigates the intersection of various cultures and belief systems. It's rich with elements ripe for a content analysis on the concept of identity crisis. Below are some of the referential textual contents of identity crisis faced by Asad (2012).

Table 1: Content Analysis

S. No.	Text	Source
1	My story is simply..... Muslim community	(Asad,[The story of a story],1981,p.1)
2	At first....my past experiences	(Asad,[The story of the story],1981,p.1)
3	All this pointed..... entirely different	(Asad,[The story of the story],1981,p.2)
4	The damage.... ideals of Islam	(Asad,[The story of the story],1981,p.6)
5	This is what.... die hard ghost	(Asad,[The story of the story],1981,p.7)
6	I was desperately.... utter desolation	(Asad,[The story of the story],1981,p.16)
7	I didn't..... perception created it	(Asad,[Beginning of the Road],1981,p.45)
8	Could it be.... that is I?	(Asad,[Thirst],1981,p.37)
9	I did anticipate...as well I was only man's history	(Asad,[Thirst],1981,p.37)
10	It was.... at all times	(Asad,[Winds] 1981, p.75)
11	The Arabs.... to them?	(Asad,[The Voices] 1981, p.108)
12	It seemed.... the man	(Asad,[The Voices] 1981, p.109)
13	But now.... the road	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.135)
14 for I am.... a kind of promise	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.135)
15	The people..... believe	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.136,137)
16	I believe.... for a time	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.137)
17	Owing to... Western civilization	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.140)
18to show....in Christianity...	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.140-141)
19	My instinctive.... absolute value	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.141)
20	When a European..... environment	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.144)
21	I SLEEP AND WAKE	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.145)
22	And the Lord.... Hereafter	(Asad,[Spirit and Flesh] 1981, p.146)

23	I could not.... beset me	(Asad,[Dreams] 1981, p.163)
24	when I woke.... In Rashid	(Asad,[Dreams] 1981, p.171)
25	All in all.... in itself" The hardness.... existence	(Asad,[Dreams] 1981, p.179)
26	In short.... No to asceticism	(Asad,[Midway] 1981, p.179)
27	I think to myself.... measured by him?	(Asad,[Jinns] 1981, p.218)
28	It was precisely.... with their love	(Asad,[Persian Letter] 1981, p.252)
29	"It is not.... but I know that I have to	(Asad,[Persian Letter] 1981, p.252)
30	And then I knew..... land of questions..	(Asad,[Persian Letter] 1981, p.274)
31	... but there I was..... broken	(Asad,[Persian Letter] 1981, p.276-277)
32	Whenever.... were they waiting.... for what?	(Asad,[Persian Letter] 1981, p.280)
33	In one way.... kinsfolk?	(Asad,[Dajjal] 1981, p.291)
34	I could not.... even read and write__	(Asad,[Dajjal] 1981, p.297)
35	I laughed.....as an enemy	(Asad,[Dajjal] 1981, p.298)
36	The thought..... different worlds	(Asad,[Dajjal] 1981, p.308)
37	I read....boon of life"" It was in my hand....	(Asad,[Dajjal] 1981, p.309-310)
38	Out of Koran..... Muhammad	(Asad,[Dajjal] 1981, p.309-310)
39	I can hardly....as I say	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.321)
40	It was.... January of 1931	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.322)
41	I had.... Sanusi movement, now I took..... movement	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.325)
42	Here I was.... Western Desert	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.326)
43	Why was I.... myself When I had.... centuries ago	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.327)
44	I had... feeling now	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.329)
45	I was seized.... Pharaohs	(Asad,[Jihad] 1981, p.331-332)
46	After a while..... tent opening	(Asad,[End of the Road] 1981, p.344)
47	We ride..... For good	(Asad,[End of the Road] 1981, p.346-348)
48	I have been....go away	(Asad,[End of the Road] 1981, p.350)
49	All references..... Muhammad's time	(Asad,[End of the Road] 1981, p.353)
50	I seem to.....Labbaik Allahumma Labbaik	(Asad,[End of the Road] 1981, p.356)

Source: Author's creation

Discussion

The research outlines the following findings from the analysis. First, the work helps to redress the Islamophobic views of the Westerners as a first-hand experience of a Jew among Muslims as a non-Muslim and then as a Muslim among the Muslims. Asad's unique perspective as a Jew who lived among Muslims, initially as a non-Muslim and later as a Muslim, provides a credible counter-narrative to Islamophobic views. His first-hand experiences and genuine insights help dismantle prejudices and misconceptions held by many Westerners. By sharing his journey and the warmth, hospitality, and spiritual depth he encountered in the Muslim world, Asad humanizes Muslims and counters the often negative and monolithic portrayals in Western media.

Second, the writer presents the solution to the problems posed by the non-Muslims against Muslims. Asad serves as a bridge between Western and Islamic cultures, offering solutions and perspectives that promote understanding and cooperation. His dual identity allows him to articulate the concerns and misconceptions of non-Muslims while also presenting the Islamic viewpoint with clarity and empathy. The writer provides intellectual and spiritual responses to criticisms and challenges posed by non-Muslims, demonstrating how Islamic principles can address contemporary issues and contribute positively to global discourse.

Finally, the work's authenticity as an autobiographical travelogue provides a vivid picture of a person searching for the ultimate truth. The authenticity of Asad's work as an autobiographical travelogue lends it a vivid and credible depiction of his search for ultimate truth. His detailed narrative, rich with personal anecdotes and reflections, invites readers into his profound journey of spiritual and intellectual discovery. Asad's transformation from a secular, skeptical European to a devout Muslim highlights the universal quest for meaning and truth. His candid portrayal of his doubts, struggles, and eventual conviction resonates with readers seeking their own path to understanding.

Conclusion

There are different types of travelogues which gives us a glimpse of not only the place/s visited by the writer but also the writing style. This study helps us to point out salient features of the postcolonial identity crisis faced by the writer. The present study, after applying the requisite tools of discourse analysis and narrowing it down to critical discourse analysis, has concluded that the content analysis of this work shows a positive response towards the theory applied. From analyzing the content, it is evident that the writer has been feeling alienated among his own people and went on to "search for the ultimate truth". The findings are in total synchronization with the propounded theory. Since his early youth days Leopold Weiss wanted to go beyond the comfort zone of being a reporter of *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a leading newspaper in the wake of twentieth century. Luckily, he was able to find himself as a new person in town when he entered the Arab world. His close study of the culture, habits, landscapes and habitat gave him some idea about the difference between the West and the East. The identity crisis is depicted through his discourse during the first-person narrative throughout the autobiographical travelogue under discussion.

From the title to the end of the work, the research states the fact that the writer has gone through a spiritual journey of settling among the brethren which was definitely not there at his hometown and amongst the Jews. This study not only deals with the propounded theory but also serves as a gateway for interpretation of other themes and theories in literary works of Muhammad Asad. New vistas can be explored by studying the work through the lens of postcolonial identity crisis.

Content analysis as a tool for research helped a lot in proving the point presented at the beginning of the research.

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