



## POLITICAL ISLAM/OPHOBIA IN THE KINDNESS OF ENEMIES

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**Abstract-** Although Islamophobia is an ancient phenomenon, it has come to the fore, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and Islam has been put forward as the new enemy of the West. The fear of Islam, whose existence is generally scrutinized in Western society, is not created by Western societies alone. Political Islam doctrine placed the religion based on political ambitions and advanced in line with the understanding of radical Islam and fuelled the phenomenon of Islamophobia among Muslim communities. The basis where these effects can be examined most clearly is the Muslim immigrant communities living in the West.

Leila Aboulela observes these damages of political Islam, reflects it in her works, and compares the 19th and 21st-century understandings of Islamophobia through two parallel stories narrated in her novel *The Kindness of Enemies*. She explains how political and radical Islam differentiates Islamophobia and unfolds how the Muslim immigrants were affected with vivid examples. In this context, this article aims to embody the relationship between Islamophobia and political Islam, to discuss the effect of Islamophobia in Western Muslim immigrant communities with quotations exemplifying the discussion in the novel.

**Keywords-** Political Islam, Islamophobia, Immigrant Literature, Racism, Radical Islam.

## DÜŞMANLARIN NEZAKETİ ROMANINDA SİYASAL İSLAM/OFOBİ

**Öz-**İslamofobi kökü eskilere dayanan bir olgu olsa da özellikle 11 Eylül terör saldırılarından sonra yoğun bir şekilde gündeme gelmiş ve Batı'nın yeni düşmanı olarak İslam akıllara kazınmıştır. Batı toplumunda varlığı genel olarak titizlikle incelenen İslam korkusu sadece Batı toplumları tarafından yaratılmamıştır. Siyasal İslam doktrini dini siyasi emellerin temeline oturtmuş ve radikal İslam anlayışı doğrultusunda ilerlemiş, Müslüman topluluklar arasında da İslamofobi olgusunu körüklemiştir. Bu etkilerin en net şekilde incelenebildiği temel, Batı'da yaşayan Müslüman göçmen topluluklarıdır.

Leila Aboulela siyasal İslam'ın bu zararlarını gözlemler ve eserlerine yansıtır ve 19. ve 21. yüzyıl İslamofobi anlayışlarını *Düşmanların Nezaketi* adlı romanında anlatılan iki paralel öykü üzerinden karşılaştırır. Siyasal ve radikal İslam'ın İslamofobi'yi nasıl farklı kaldığını aktarır ve Müslüman göçmenlerin bundan nasıl etkilendiğini canlı örneklerle ortaya ortaya koyar. Bu bağlamda, bu makalenin amacı İslamofobi ile siyasal İslam arasındaki ilişkiyi somutlaştırmak, İslamofobinin Batı Müslüman göçmen topluluklarındaki etkilerini romandaki tartışmayı örnekleyen alıntılarla tartışmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler-** Siyasal İslam, İslamofobi, Göçmen Edebiyatı, ırkçılık, Radikal İslam.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA AND POLITICAL ISLAM

The concept of Islamophobia, which has come to the fore more frequently since the beginning of the 21st century, is not a new term. The negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims, which emerged as a product of the orientalist perspective with the emergence of colonialism in the East, has evolved into the Islamophobia we perceive today. The superiority and racist behaviours of the colonizer towards the peoples and cultures of the East are also valid for the religion of Islam. For this reason, it can be stated that the origin of Islamophobia is colonial racism, and “this racism is grounded in the fears of social and economic deprivation elicited in the complex relationship of Islam to the West, including the history of European sectarian wars, the Crusades, and the Inquisition” (Rana, 2007: 149).

Similar to other examples of racism seen in society, Islamophobia results from an effort to categorize. Therefore, “Islamophobia connotes a broader set of negative attitudes or emotions directed at individuals or groups because of their perceived membership in a defined category” (Bleich, 2012: 182). At this point, it becomes important for what purpose the term Islamophobia is intended to be used. The concept of Islamophobia, which is mostly perceived as hatred against the religion of Islam, finds its response in society as negative stereotypes and categorization efforts against Muslim individuals. In other words, it can be asserted that in daily life, the concept targets Muslim individuals rather than the religion of Islam.

Of course, the situation mentioned above is a more real problem for Muslim immigrants living in Western societies. It can be argued that Islamophobia is a serious obstacle faced by immigrants who try to adapt to the local society and culture with their Muslim identity since “in the workplace, schools, and housing, it takes the form of suspicion, staring, hazing, mockery, rejection, stigmatizing and outright discrimination” (Kalm, 2011: 51). It becomes almost impossible for Muslim immigrants exposed to such racist behaviours to adapt to society and have a healthy integration process. The problems experienced in integration are much more noticeable, especially on the second and third-generation young Muslim immigrants. Young immigrants, who are much more willing to adapt to the host culture than previous generations, tend to see Islamophobia and, therefore, Islam as the biggest obstacle in front of them. These individuals, who seek the reason for the racist attitudes they experience in their cultural and religious identities, inevitably both have problems adapting to the host culture and have to distance themselves from themselves. The tendency to move away from their own identities brings a problem that has not been examined much but is also very serious. Such experiences of young Muslim immigrants greatly serve the perception of Islamophobia.

The fear of Islam and Muslims, which stems from the conflicting relationship between Islam and the West, can be defined as racism. Still, the Islamophobia experienced today has become much more complex. Today, the orientalist perspective of the West and racism cannot be shown as the sole responsible for Islamophobia. Radical Islam, which has rarely fallen off the agenda, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, is one of the significant causes of Islamophobia observed in Western societies since after September 11, 2001, “Islam is increasingly viewed as a violent religion, endorsing suicide bombing and terrorism” (Rehman, 2003: 218). It may be stated that Radical Islamic terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have put Islam and Muslims. They have been exposed to racism for a long time, into a much more difficult situation. The problem of associating the religion of Islam with terrorism seriously affects every individual belonging to this religion. It is an observable fact that one of the biggest reasons for this association is the politicization of the religion of Islam.

A significant point to focus on in the period after the 9/11 attacks is the politicization of Islam rather than the rise of Islamophobia. “Spanning across political party lines, the association of ‘fear’ with ‘Muslim’ in American political rhetoric, has been a key tool to reinforce Islamophobia” (Dubosh et al., 2015: 140). The politicization of Islam is notable for a better analysis of the concept of Islamophobia because political Islam adds a second dimension in which Islamophobia has become a serious problem in societies where the Muslim population is not a minority but a majority. The fact that the religion of Islam was stripped of its spiritual nature and pushed into politics in Muslim communities inevitably made it a party and created a serious obstacle in front of its discourse that appeals to humanity in general. Therefore, “in both Western and Muslim countries, Islamophobia arises when conservative Muslims become more visible in different aspects of social life such as in education, employment and politics, thus challenging the establishment either through civic movements or political parties” (Bayraklı et al., 2019: 16). As noted above, besides the politicization defining the religion of Islam as a party, Muslim individuals—particularly conservatives—stand out as radicalized individuals in both Western and Muslim societies. To put it more clearly, the distinction between extremist individuals who have embraced radical Islam and conservative Muslim individuals who live by their religion has almost disappeared. This situation is quite dangerous because the categorization that started with extremist individuals with politicization spreads over time to Muslim individuals and the whole religion. This situation, in which the difference between Muslim individuals and individuals radicalized by the understanding of Islam that has become politicized has disappeared, is the main source of serious social problems that endanger the entire religion.

As discussed above, the politicization of Islam today is a much bigger problem than the racist Islamophobia of Western and orientalist origins. It contributes much more to the increase of prejudice and hatred against Islam and Muslims. It is quite easy to look for the source of the islamophobia problem outside, and it may seem like the problem has been diagnosed by accusing the other party of racism. It can also be disturbing to think that Islamophobia feeds and also originates within Muslim societies. However, it is now clear that this perspective is also needed to understand Islamophobia in depth and propose solutions. For this reason, what political Islamism is and how it contributes to Islamophobia is a phenomenon worth examining.

Briefly and concisely, political Islamism can be defined as “a radical political ideology that is explicitly based upon an unusually strict, puritanical interpretation of Islamic doctrine” (Bale, 2009: 77). Although political Islam started to be talked about a lot after the 9/11 attacks, “Islamist thought and organizations today can be traced to the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, created by the schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928” (Roy, 1994: 35). According to the Islamist ideology, Islam should be regarded as the sole source for regulating religion and state affairs. However, in today's world, where technology and constantly changing dynamics are inevitable, managing a society entirely through religious doctrines brings many different challenges. It seems very difficult to keep up with the international community on which democracy is based- or at least it should be- from the perspective of radical Islam since “it impedes peace between Muslims and non-Muslims and also disrupts inner-Islamic relations” (Tibi, 2009: 101). It is important to remind again that the politicization of Islam feeds the phenomenon of Islamophobia not only in the international community but also within Muslim societies. As a result, the politicization of the religion of Islam, as in every religion, damages the spiritual dimension of religion and causes the exclusion of religious individuals in the international arena.

As in every society deprived of secular values, Islamophobia appears as an inevitable reality among members of the Islamic religion who are oppressed under the pressure of radical Islam. In this context, 21st-century immigrant literature can be seen as a valuable resource to understand the current impact of political Islam on Muslim individuals and the point that radical Islam has brought to religion. In particular, the works of contemporary postcolonial writers focusing on immigrants and their experiences stand out as important resources for a deeper understanding of the place and psychology of these individuals in society. One of the prominent names among these writers recently is Leila Aboulela.

## LEILA ABOULELA AND *THE KINDNESS OF ENEMIES*

Born in 1964, Aboulela is a British-Arab novelist who “draws the attention of critics and researchers from different parts of the world who showed a keen interest in her works, which focuses on a variety of socio-political issues like identity, immigration, racism, Islamophobia, Islam, and assimilation” (Alkodimi, 2021: 145). Aboulela's plot and characters are very good at reflecting reality because, as with contemporary immigrant writers like Tabish Khair, she draws inspiration from her own experiences and observations. The fact that she refers to her places and identities in her novels and makes fiction on this plane increases the reality of her characters and stories. For this reason, Aboulela's works have attracted serious academic attention in recent years, and “this interest has come from perspectives of migration and religion in particular, and the themes and topics her works cover participate in debates surrounding such issues” (Englund, 2020: 2).

Aboulela's 2015 novel *The Kindness of Enemies* has also been one of her remarkable works in this context. Inspired by real historical events, the novel consists of two parallel stories and conveys the political and social developments of the 19th century and today with the author's unique narrative. On the modern side of the narrative, Natasha Hussein, the daughter of a Sudanese father and a Russian mother, is a scholar specializing in Dagestan's 19th Century Russian invasion at a Scottish University. Natasha, who studies Imam Shamil and his resistance, learns that one of her students, Oz (Osama), is a descendant of Imam Shamil and has his sword. Natasha visits Osama and her mother's house to learn more about Imam Shamil and his sword, and the visit takes longer than planned due to the snowstorm. Both Natasha's and Oz's lives begin to change drastically after the police detain Oz for researching jihad on the Internet. Due to her Sudanese origin and her academic studies on jihad, Natasha also falls suspicious and enters a psychological impasse. Natasha's story becomes even more difficult with her visit to Sudan due to her father's death. In the 19th century Dagestan part of the story, Imam Shamil tries to save his son, Jamalleldin, detained by the Russians. To use it for prisoner exchange, Shamil takes the Georgian princess Anna and her children captive. Aboulela conveys the political and social structure of the period from her perspective through the characters in this part. Looking at the novel in general, Aboulela can reflect with extraordinary clarity how the perspective on Islam and Muslims changed in the Post 9/11 period, how the understanding of political Islam created by radical Islam contributed to Islamophobia, and the experiences of Muslim immigrants in the West within the dilemmas mentioned above. Aboulela, who closely observes the second and third generation of young Muslim immigrants, has examined the integration problem in depth with the characters she creates as a writer of Sudanese origin.

## IMMIGRANT MUSLIMS AND POLITICAL ISLAM(OPHOBIA)

At the very beginning of the novel, Aboulela reveals the origin of the problem of today's Islamophobia through Oz by stating that “ever since 9/11, jihad has become synonymous with terrorism” (Aboulela, 2015: 8). Aboulela argues that the term jihad is essentially a ‘spiritual struggle’ and does not coincide with the concept of violence. As it is stated below

A modern-day definition accepted by many jurists and Muslims is “to struggle/strive” because this is the linguistic connotation of the word. “Holy war” is not a popular definition because the concept of “war” in Arabic is referred to as qital, and it is a bit strange to define jihad as “holy war” since “holy war” is used to describe the Crusades against Muslims during the late Middle Ages (Karipek, 2020: 212).

However, radical Islam, which is frequently mentioned after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, used jihad as an instrument of invasion and tried to legalize the violence it resorted to in this way. How the concept of jihad has changed over time from Aboulela's point of view is demonstrated in Oz and his mother Malak's discussion on jihad in Imam Shamil's period. Malak states

Every fight Shamil fought was on the defense. He was protecting his villages against Russian attacks. And surrender to the Russians would have meant the end of their traditional way of life, the end of Islam in Dagestan. The Russians were so brutal they often didn't take prisoners of war. By comparison, Shamil's generals were scholarly and disciplined. This type of jihad is different from the horrible crimes of al-Qaeda (Aboulela, 2015: 9).

The concept of jihad, which is the most important ideological weapon used by Islam to go from defense to attack, has completely lost its real meaning in the hands of radical Islamic organizations such as Al-Qaeda and has ceased to be a spiritual value and has begun to serve an imperialist purpose. The politicization of jihad, and therefore of Islam, as stated above, is shown in the novel as the most important reason for leaving the religion of Islam out of its framework and associating it with terrorism. The author used the concept of jihad as a symbol and wanted to show how the politicization of religious concepts affects the whole religion and its members.

However, as frequently revealed by Aboulela in the novel, the Islamophobia that resurfaces today as a result of the politicization of religion and its concepts is more than just an outside fear of Islam. The tendency of politicization and radicalization has created a great discomfort in the Islamic community as well. Many people who define themselves as Muslims – especially Muslim immigrants in the West – also suffer from the politicization of the

religion of Islam because Islamophobia does more harm to the members of religion than to the religion. Remarkably, individuals who have been harmed due to politicization have a negative attitude towards the whole politicized religion as a natural reaction.

Aboulela exemplifies this discontent many times in the novel. She reflected with very real examples how Islamophobia, which is seriously influential in the West, affects Muslim immigrants and how immigrants are included in Islamophobia. In the first pages of the novel, Natasha states that she does not use her Sudanese father's surname but instead prefers the surname of her mother's second husband. She says it's better that way than being called Dr. Hussein. She explains the reason for her preference as follows

Many Muslims in Britain wished that no one knew they were Muslim. They would change their names if they could and dissolve into the mainstream, for it was not enough for them to openly condemn 9/11 and 7/7, not enough to walk against the wall, to raise a glass of champagne, to eat in the light of Ramadan and never step into a mosque or say the shahada or touch the Qur'an (Aboulela, 2015: 6).

The phenomenon of denying identity, which is one of the significant ways to escape from the image of Muslims that political Islam has destroyed, has turned into another dimension of Islamophobia in Muslim communities. Immigrant Muslims' fear of being associated with terrorism because of their beliefs and their reflexes to prove their innocence are important factors in feeding Islamophobia within the community. One of the reasons why Islamophobia is more prominent among young immigrants, who are more inclined to integrate into Western society as a generation, is this need for justification. By referring to young Muslim students in her faculty, Natasha states that “many of the Muslims I thought throughout the years couldn't wait to bury their dark, badly dressed immigrant parents who never understood what was happening around them [...]” (Aboulela, 2015: 6). Here, the main thing that young people who need to hide their parents are trying to get rid of, of course, is their cultural identity. The fear that a single Islamic symbol or trace of immigrants will be enough to declare them terrorists is manifested in these young immigrants as a fear of their own identity.

Aboulela embodies the identity confusion experienced by young immigrants by featuring a dream of Natasha. After Oz is detained by the police, Natasha goes to Oz's room and falls asleep in his bed. In her sleep, she sees herself as a half-human, half-reptile creature. She states that even a mythological character is more natural when compared to her own transformation and that she describes herself as ‘completely different’ is very valuable in understanding immigrant psychology. The emotional trauma of not being accepted by both the host and their original culture

is revealed in the novel with Natasha's dream. It is no accident, of course, that she had this dream in Oz's bed. The common subconsciousness of these two immigrant characters was masterfully embodied in this way by the author. The author narrates the dream with the narration of Natasha as follows

From the top of my head, all the way down in one straight swoop, I split in two, half-human and half-reptile. In the logic of dreams it made sense that my left side was human because that was where my heart was. In the logic of dreams I was not embarrassed that I was naked, nor that a part of me was inhuman. With my left hand I ran my fingers over a pattern of scales on my right shoulder, ridges of shell, leathery grooves. In the logic of dreams what perplexed me the most that I had split vertically rather than horizontally. It was natural to be like a centaur or a sphinx; it was usual to have a full human head. But I had failed; I had morphed into something completely different (Aboulela, 2015: 76).

Natasha's confusion about positioning her identity is also evident in her relationship with her mother. The fact that she could not get her mother's white skin, which she thought would make it easier for her to adapt to Western society and hide her immigrant identity, turns into a phenomenon that Natasha blames her mother. Her mother deprived her of her white skin, where she could more easily integrate into Western culture, which she describes as the 'privileged world', and withholding this 'gift' from her perfectly sums up Natasha's identity dilemma.

For the first time since her death, I cried. I cried over the wasted time, conversations in which all I did was mock her accent and taste; time wasted in aching to be white like her and blaming her for the failure as if she were the one barring me from entry into a privileged world, as if she were begrudging me a gift she could give (Aboulela, 2015: 170).

The challenges faced by second-generation immigrant Muslims, who have come to the point of giving up their identity to adapt to the host culture in which they were born and raised, are quite diverse. Still, most importantly, "they face these challenges within a social and political context characterized by terrorist events and growing religious discrimination" (Giuliani, Tagliabue, & Regalia, 2018: 67). The difficulty of adapting to the specified atmosphere becomes so complex that Muslim individuals living in the West tend to be suspicious even when they do not directly encounter a racist attitude. In the novel, Oz refers to Natasha's attitudes towards Muslim students by saying that

You are different from the other lecturers. A Muslim talks to them, and they put on that wide-eyed tolerant look, quick little nods, and inside they're congratulating themselves thinking, 'Look at me, I'm truly broad-minded, listening to all this shit and not battling an eyelid' (Aboulela, 2015: 13).

This skepticism is two-sided. The source of Muslim individuals' distrust of intimacy towards the host culture and the radical Islamist suspicions of local people towards Muslims converge on a single point. The politicization of Islam has led to irreparable divisions both within Muslim communities and in the Western wing. Integration in such an atmosphere is a serious problem.

The reason why Aboulela narrates two parallel stories in her novel becomes clear at this point. The author named spiritual Islam, which is not exposed to the effects of political Islam, like Sufism, wanted to reveal the gap between Political Islam and Sufism through two different stories in her novel. She argues that the Sufis, who are allegedly living Islam as it is, are despised by political Islam because they do not serve political Islam's imperialist and expansionist aims. The understanding of political Islam, which perceives religion's existence as strange and betrayal, also harbors hostility towards all kinds of religious rituals that are not corrupted. Through Malak in the novel, Aboulela states that "in modern times as Political Islam embraced transnationalism and activism, the Sufis were perceived to be not only passive and traditional but often, also, reactionary and neo-cons" (Aboulela, 2015: 208). Then, it is not surprising that Aboulela brings together Imam Shamil, a prominent figure in Eastern culture and a staunch Sufi, and contemporary political Islam in the same novel. According to Aboulela, today's understanding of political Islam, which has adopted a strategy of attack and is built on imperial values, stands quite far from traditional Islamic teachings. Since it is an imperialist ideology, it is noteworthy that political Islam perceives any naive religious teaching or symbol as a sign of weakness. The author has analyzed this point very well and has referred to the conflict between Islam and political Islam many times in the novel. The effort to draw attention to the essence of the concept by embellishing Imam Shamil and his understanding of jihad is particularly evident. She states that "no wonder that the founders of Political Islam, those revolutionary elites who turned their backs on tradition and worked towards a perfect society, never took Shamil as a role model" (Aboulela, 2015: 215).

## CONCLUSION

As discussed in detail above, Islamophobia is seen as a very comprehensive and historically rooted concept. One of the historical reasons for the phenomenon of Islamophobia, which can be said to have started with the emergence of the religion of Islam, can, of course, be accepted as the imperialist and colonialist understanding of the West. From an orientalist point of view, hatred and skepticism towards all cultures other than Western culture is an inevitable product of the colonial mentality. However, dealing with Islamophobia -especially in the 21st century- in such a narrow way cannot go beyond ignoring the issue. The fact that Islamophobia is also popular in Muslim societies is undeniable, and the fact

that radical ideologies take place in religion further strengthens this tragic situation.

As stated many times above, Islamophobia is not just a type of racism experienced outside of Muslim cultures today. The politicization of Islam and radical Islam's conversion of basic concepts of religion such as jihad into an instrument of violence has also created a phobia within Islamic societies. This phobia cannot be separated from the Islamophobia experienced in the West. Political Islam rejects the secular structure and manifests itself in all areas of life. Transforming the concept of jihad into an aggressive instrument with an expansionist policy has further deepened the perception of Islamophobia in the West. It has not been accepted by the immigrant Muslim communities, especially those exposed to marginalization. Especially the second-generation Muslim immigrants had great difficulties adapting to the host culture due to the radicalized perception of Islam, and they tried to hide or even reject their religious identities. This situation manifests itself in the society of the 21st century as another dimension of Islamophobia. The perception of Islamophobia in Muslim societies is one of the most significant harms of political Islam to today's multicultural society. It would not be wrong to say that the most reliable basis for the diagnosis of Islamophobia in Islam and the experiences and psychological traumas of immigrant Muslims on this issue are the works of immigrant Muslim writers. Leila Aboulela has recently come to the fore as a writer who extensively deals with Islamophobia and the perception of Islam in the West.

Radical Islam and its native political Islam are quite remarkable in terms of being the source of religious-based conflicts today, and *The Kindness of Enemies* is one of the novels that stand out as a guide in terms of handling the problem in this context and making a distinction between Islam and political Islam. Leila Aboulela argues in her novel that the concepts of Islam such as jihad change meaning with political Islam, contributing to the radicalization of religion. Towards the end of the story, the biggest guide for Natasha, who is trying to find her own identity, has been Sufism. This, of course, should be perceived as a skillfully placed message by the author. Natasha's skepticism and escape from radical Islam against her own identity lost its effect, albeit slightly, with the spiritual dimension of religion and gave Natasha a chance to reconstruct her identity.

Looking at the characters other than Natasha, the situation is not so heart-warming. Oz got lost in the radicalization dilemma he developed with his inability to adapt to society and became a remarkable example for young Muslim immigrants. Through the character of Oz, Aboulela successfully exemplifies the sense of loss and identity confusion experienced by second and third-generation Muslim immigrants. Malak also sets a remarkable example of reflecting the negativities experienced by both herself and the generations that come

after her in terms of integration. As a first-generation Muslim immigrant, Malak's trauma and responsibilities are greater. Besides herself, she has to bear the burden of her son Oz's traumas caused by integration. Throughout the novel, Aboulela masterfully dealt with the damage done by political and radical Islam to religion, stated that the first respondent of these damages was Muslim immigrants living in the West, and claimed that normalization is possible thanks to the fact that religion remains in a spiritual medium and is not politicized.

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