

THE MOTIFS OF ISLAM IN ALI ETERAZ'S "NATIVE BELIEVER".

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Annotation: The following article is about the novel "Original Believer" by Ali Eteraz and analyzes the main features of the novel. The writer's style of writing, use of words, and racism, a current world problem, are written about. In addition, several characters used in the novel are classified and described below.

Keywords: Marie Anne, Candace, physique, fantasy, immigrant, Pakistan.

Native Believer, published by Akashic Books in April 2016, is a debut novel by Ali Eteraz that explores the identity of a secular American Muslim in Philadelphia. It's no longer the "PBL" or the Pre-Bin Laden period. The going is tough for the protagonist M, a second generation immigrant poet in his thirties. M is a great host, a smooth talker and very much in love with his wife Marie Anne, a Southerner with hormonal upswings and weight issues. Her continuously changing body gives an inkling of the impending theme of change and transformation in this story. M was "a man who ate the West, breakfast, lunch, and dinner." Religion was something as foreign to him as Bollywood, but not for long. Already living an emotional divorce in consequence of the interruption of his career and the evaporation of the middle-class status where material success is the key, M cheats on Marie-Anne with Candace, his former colleague at work. Interestingly, Candace, after M was fired from Plutus, has converted to Islam. She thinks her conversion has made her more likable to M but M is drawn towards Candace because she has been the object of his wife Marie-Anne's fantasies. M is desperate for offspring, and Marie-Anne, for medical reasons, cannot conceive. She keeps the doctor's infertility verdict to herself. Readers begin the novel with Marie-Anne's physique a shadow of her former athlete's body and beauty. Indeed, she now "only had bloated elbows and folded shoulders" (Native 11). Her mechanism for curbing hormone spikes that translate to undesired levels of weight gain is M's steady supply of poems: "I was to write her a poem before every visit to the gym, because she said my poems reminded her of our first few months together, soothed her. Over the past three years I had written close to six hundred poems" (Native 10). Art as well as fantasy effectively quell Marie-Anne's bodily dysfunction. The steady supply of poems activates her sensory recall of her former athlete's body and youthful beauty. The taxonomy of affects, more precisely the one connected to body shape, triggers the regulatory process through a mood of reasoning to balance

the negativity from her present body shape with the positive one Marie-Anne used to have during her engagement. Indeed, the constant supply of poems engages the flow of memory in order to facilitate self-acceptance of her present bodily shape. Memory of negative experiences compromises the mind's chances of forming adequate judgement (Marshall 140). Therefore, decisions on how best to act become determined by influxes of memory from maternal neglect, leading to unsanctioned consumption of hormones until M's poems appear. Remarkably, the reason why babies refuse Marie-Anne's womb is the pressure from the past; memories of youth and beauty coupled with her parents' mythical constructions of southern and pre-Civil War glory exacerbate her condition. As descendants of southern aristocrats, they have always entertained the scenario of a southern and protective gentleman for their daughter; hence Marie-Anne's union with the physically frail M is seen as a disaster. M's parents (immigrants from Pakistan) also wished their son would have married better. They could not match Marie-Anne's massive gait with M's slight physique. M's parents both died wondering what they had done wrong to deserve such a humiliation. It becomes quite plain that the stakes in the cross-cultural marriage translate into competing and pernicious worldviews. Both from Marie-Anne's side and M's, readers can see how war can escalate in the sense that each enters the union with considerable baggage from the past, as parental expectations detonate the chances for its success. Now, with or without being fully aware of the stakes, the young couple adamantly strive to challenge the social and cultural constraints drawing them apart. But it seems that their initial resolve to overcome those constraints is resurfacing in their sexual life through bodily dysfunction. Marie-Anne cannot climax unless she collaborates with M in fantasizing over Candace's model body, the one MarieAnne craves for but no longer has. Instead of guilt and repression, M insists not to deprive his wife of what, under the circumstances, is her only window into happiness. That is how he keeps supplying her with rich scripts. But such happiness often comes at the expense of his own male pleasure, as traditionally understood. Since birth control pills exacerbate her weight issue, Marie-Anne forces M to abstain from penetration. Surprisingly, not only does M not object, but he actively participates in Marie-Anne's make believe. Such an innovative notion of love-making needs further examination. MarieAnne's sensory recall of her own athlete body, together with M's enriching content, destabilizes familial foundations and actively reconstructs the family of the future. The method involves the constant conjuring of a third partner in lovemaking, without which the pursuit of happiness is simply aborted. As nobody feels jealous or reduced, the method remains promising: "Marie-Anne

said that she liked how I was always willing to channel girls into our beds. She said it was my superpower” (Native 30; emphasis added). In fantasizing over Candace’s body, the couple “no longer designate persons, but singularities flocking from all sides, evanescent agents of production” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 77). Unlike identity, a singularity stays congruous with the mood of the moment intensified through the wealth of the imagination in the scripts. The work of creative intensification allows for genuine flows with the corresponding singularities. And within the flow of singularities, fishing in each other’s vulnerabilities is just not possible. Differently put, the binary division of husband and wife, the one considered constitutive in the formation of the bourgeois family, is not totally abandoned; it is rather extended to yield optimum happiness. But the traditional ways for fixing difficulties ranging from ordinary boredom to sexual dysfunction no longer apply because they are ineffective. In adding a third partner through fantasy, the couple practically save the family as an institution for the next millennium.

Readers may note the absence of guilt and shame, two cultural inhibitions in the couple’s approach to fantasy and to lovemaking. From page one, readers from both camps of the cultural divide wonder how M stays strangely supportive of his wife’s fantasies, no matter how unconventional and weird they initially look. Readers find him even ready to take the next step and report on his experience of ‘mind sex’ with the hope of one day gaining a copyright license for the method of mindintiamcy or ‘the sexing of the mind.’ The latter cannot work with a poor script in the fantasy; on the contrary, the richness of the script provides a safe outlet to help equilibrate the rising pressures from the unreasonable expectations encoded in the couple’s cultural backgrounds. The Freudian approach reads fantasies as pathologies while post Freudians insist that, given the increasingly masochist culture, fantasies are better understood as a coping mechanism that may enrich married life and maintain its balance. When engaged in fantasy, the mind does not totally shut up; it only needs to let go of the ego. The fantasy becomes a moment of deterritorialization or a “process that takes the subject back to the state it had prior to the creation of fixed associations between ideas” (Delanda 15). The process in the fantasy demonstrates how an over-coded mind often goes with a bloated ego. As such it needs to slow down momentarily before it becomes dysfunctional. The process allows the participants to re-discover the smoothness and beauty of their larval selves or mini-egos. It looks like Eteraz has just introduced readers to a wonderful display of the couple’s Conatus. Instead of regarding the husband and wife’s Conatuses as diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive for each other’s

wellbeing and happiness, through the fantasy Eteraz proposes them as complementary. M needs the attachment to the Americanness his wife encapsulates, while Marie-Anne needs the collaborative M to boost her ever decreasing self-esteem. Yet, the need does not involve an ego or the possessiveness that an ego usually entails. Therefore, fantasizing over Candace's body subscribes more to the necessary blurring of subjectivities and the dwelling on singularities "in a molecular and pure multiplicity" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 69) and less with the Freudian idea of the pathological resurfacing of unhappy experiences from the past. However, in emphasizing the Spinozan outlook, Eteraz quite pertinently points at a promising way of reconciling the diametrically-opposed worldviews. The duality merges as the net outcome of the symmetrical state of becoming of the couple. The symmetrical state could not be maintained without the couple's insistence on discarding the sources of misery squarely located in the egoistic possessiveness of the beloved, while insisting on those sources leading towards happiness. After carefully examining 'the common notions' available in their circumstances, the couple discover fantasy, replicating the original taste of their first bodily encounter ten years ago (before the weight issue). Mindintimacy opens the gates for largely untraditional happiness and what can be described as a posthuman moral code. Awareness of multiple corporal dispositions means keeping alive former beauty by borrowing the essence of a third partner. That awareness cannot be maintained under the narrow traditional, bourgeois or institutionalized religious precepts, where greedy egoism ruins the encounter with the beautiful. Without such a daring moral code which keeps shame and repression out of the way, Eteraz could not hang on to his cultural project. For "In preserving itself, it does not aim to preserve a stable, unalterable self, but to affirm itself as power capable of producing new affects over and over. To preserve oneself therefore does not mean to secure the status quo of an existing power, but rather to preserve the striving itself" (Wiesmann). In considering the Conatus as essentially a willingness to constantly renew and preserve happiness through egoless beings, that is in an ever-striving singularity, Wiesmann underlines the Spinozan idea of striving as a prerequisite in the pursuit of happiness. But under the circumstances, happiness remains a condition for an ontological state dependent on experience, not an identity conceived a priori. There are multiple instances in *Native Believer* where Eteraz sketches M as resisting easy categorization, crosses traditional boundaries, redefines manhood and even seeks alternative pathways to Muslimhood. Operating through the body mode of extension, M demonstrates how the mind does not need an ego, an identity. For

the mind is not only permanently influenced but practically determined by the body's disposition to either happiness or misery. Fantasy serves in M and Marie-Anne's case as a corrective enterprise in the face of a sick and disillusioning Cartesian world 'of clear and distinct ideas' a world that privileges the attributes of effect over cause, mind over body. The reversal of this sick order manifests as M actively collaborates with Marie-Anne's assumption of Candace's bodily shape as her own. Strictly speaking, the fantasy gives Marie-Anne, however momentarily, the freedom to discard the negative corporal imagery that enslaves her. Her Conatus feeds on positive feelings where assertiveness, facilitated through the diminishment of the ego and the replication of a model body from memory, allows the pursuit of happiness the couple collectively seeks. But we should not underestimate the couple's active efforts to let go of their feminine/masculine passions of jealousy in brining Candace's body to their most intimate life. I think it is important to underline the fact that Candace's body is recalled not through subjectivity (for that would be debauchery) but as a singularity that flows with the couple's singularities. Likewise, without M's transgression of orthodox understanding of manhood, i. e., his rich scripts that constantly rekindle the fantasy through memory, it would have been impossible to maintain the marriage for nine years, not to speak of enjoying it, given the insurmountable cultural challenges from both his parents and parents-in-law, and the sick cultural and socio-political environment of post9/11 America. The therapeutic element in their mindintimacy demands that the couple remain engaged in what Deleuze qualifies as "an emptying of subjectivity" in order to meet "the indivisible character of desire" (Deleuze, Proust 120), a dynamic that welcomes the third party into the bedchamber without jealous suspicions. As the couple is conceived in Spinozan terms and as the storyline evolves, M registers his matrimony with Marie-Anne as part of the deterministic nature of the universe. Therefore, in being assertive in recalling the positive aspects, he seeks his own Conatus through sheer acquiescence to Marie-Anne's. The climax of the novel takes place as M ditches the Koran in the river. Through the theoretically blasphemous act, undertaken in Marie-Anne's presence, M expresses his exasperation with the idolatrous interpretation of religion, the one that dwells on inflated egos, be they of prophets or saints:

Islam wasn't supposed to be about a caliph, about influence. It was a thing made up by an orphan to bring some sense to the world, to reject the greedy capitalism that he was surrounded by, to free the slaves, to focus on an invisible deity in the sky in an effort to distance himself from the crass materialism of the living, breathing idols draped in gold. At least that's what it started out as. That

was early Muhammad. But then later Muhammad, as well as his followers, all jumped the shark. They lost sight of what was beautiful about their message. They decided to become caravan raiders and invaders. And from their betrayal of themselves an entire jihad state emerged out of Arabia. It created corporations. It enslaved nations. It turned itself into an idol. It became what it wasn't supposed to be. The Golden Calf. The America of its time. (Native 242)

Plenty of socio-political studies detail the derailing of the faith soon after the death of the prophet, but in distinguishing the early Muhammad from the late one, Eteraz hits on a goldmine of ideas which again are all attributable to basing his thinking on the taxonomy of affects, not concepts. Such an original reading regarding the mutation of the message of Islam and its possible evolution is indebted, first and foremost, to Spinoza. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1677), Spinoza explains the need to break free from mythically driven readings of the scriptures and why one always needs to place one's loyalty in second and third forms of knowledge. Scriptural content, Spinoza insists, is the product of the active imagination of the prophets. As such, the prophets' pronouncements could not be thoroughly immune from egoistic pursuit, as passions taking the form of objectives can easily shift toward a totality that is a little less than primordial and blissful. Eteraz evokes Spinoza's philosophy as it clarifies how "all supernatural agency [needs to be] consciously stripped out of all forms of historical explanation" (Israel xiii). That is how Islam could have transgressed its own original message via deflecting the spiritual content it first carried towards becoming the greedy America of its own times. In the next section, Eteraz meticulously extends the idea that Islam presently, through its most obvious ideological manifestations, Islamism and Petro-Islam, collaborates intimately with consumer capitalism in an attempt to regain the mythical glory its adherents claim existed. The concentration camp arrangement is shown to be the natural result of such an unholy alliance, leaving the community of the faithful, both in the United States and elsewhere, split between reactionary and dispirited maneuvers. Before the ultimate resolution of his identity crisis through joining the State Department, M used to consistently reject the ways in which people, including his own immediate circle, insisted on approaching him as a Muslim. Given his Muslim name, which people immediately regard as short for Mohamed or Muslim, however loosely, M finds that his name provides him with a dauntingly fixed range of definitions: "The prejudice that Muslims can't be trusted. That a Muslim is sheisty, shifty, shady; undemocratic; hard to fit into the culture; a pariah" (Native 59). He is fired for a prejudiced categorization as a Muslim supremacist. Both his wife, Marie-Anne, and close friend Richard

Konigsberg refer to M as Muslim first while his Americanness often comes second. If only because M declines Richard's offer to sue Plutus (the company that fires M), M's choice deserves its antiKantian stances. Kantian stances in this context involve a trust in the categorical imperative. Suffice it to recall that Richard's last name refers to Immanuel Kant's place of birth. It becomes more sensible to read M's declining of the offer as derision at Richard's final move to Israel; the derision also encapsulates Kant's transcendental aesthetic, which posits time and space as beyond the realm of human experience, that is, a priori (158). It is no coincidence that M insists on refusing a metaphorical declaration of his Americanness as friends and family fail to recognize the depth and originality of his identity quest: "If Richard was right and George [the boss that fired M] really was motivated by religious prejudice, if all he was doing was drawing me into the old wars of dogma and bigotry, I was simply going to refuse that game" (Native 62). What he takes as a sick cultural apparatus is an apparatus engulfed/rooted in the politics of representation, of which Kant's ontology serves as the philosophical foundation.

It is remarkable how the mainstream American perspective denies or belittles the significant imprints of the formative years M lived in the United States and exaggerates instead his parents' migratory background, a perspective unappreciative of the political and economic reality behind his parents' decision to leave Pakistan in the first place. The history of pitfalls from colonial times to the experience of independence, together with the contributions migrants made to the general welfare of receptive new homes such as the United States, are deliberately ignored for the purpose of shoving aside his American identity. At first, readers may misread such insistence as coming from just another silly and superficial person who exhibits a pathological identification with his dream place, America. Attentive reading of M's passionate and intense elaborations of his rejection of his presumed Muslimhood only accentuates such an a priori versus a posteriori presupposition of knowledge. The Kantian indecision shown in the mutual insistence on the noumenal and the phenomenal leaves one with little choice other than an ethical homo duplex: "It is because we recognize ourselves as homo duplex, with one foot in the phenomenal world and the other in the noumenal, that we can evince respect for one another, regardless of cultural differences" (Connolly, *Identity/Difference* xxvi). The implications of discarding one's lived experience amounts to an artificial idealism that M is adamantly unwilling to accept. Both Richard and Marie-Anne play central roles in elucidating Eteraz's exasperation with the Kantian categorization of identity. Given his background as a lawyer and upon M's discharge from work, Richard

advises M to sue Plutus, making a case for discrimination and seeking reparations. M firmly rejects taking his case to court “I’m not about to go around claiming anti-Muslim discrimination when I’m not a Muslim” (Native 54). The resistance to easy labelling signals M’s up-to-then early and inarticulate refusal of the politics of representation, where recognition instead of cognition remains the *modus operandi*. Richard Konigsberg is an interesting character. M calls for his advice because, as a Jew who had thrived in America, Richard seemed to have “the inexorability of an eternal race” (Native 79). Now the reason why M seeks Richard’s advice is more of a misguided estimation based also on representation: “He muttered like he was counting the Omer. I was always soothed when he did that, especially when he did it in front of me. It made me feel that I was protected by some ancient brotherhood going back to that firebrand who had risen against the pharaoh” (Native 50). The soothing expected from reference to the Omer in the Jewish tradition displays the power of common sense and the seemingly universal good character of thinking, which, when closely checked, is found to be nothing but an image of thought that is dogmatic and inhibitive.

The extrapolation of M’s desire to be as successful as Richard, with Richard’s presumed enduring legacy against tyranny, finishes off thinking and leaves M with only pseudo-thinking, forcing the recognition of a ‘crucifying difference:’ “always in relation to a conceived identity, a judged analogy, an imagined opposition or a perceived similitude” (Proust). From the start, M naively associates Richard’s Jewish legacy of resistance to tyranny and hardships throughout the ages with his own present situation, hoping to strike similar luck himself. Now, in response to making a legal case against Plutus, M adamantly refuses and walks away from Richard’s suggested course of action. The prescribed course of action is motivated by the presumed justice of the categorical imperative, but M shows how and why it cannot work. It is worth recalling that M resists Kant’s transcendental aesthetic through trust in Spinoza’s *Conatus*. But the Spinozan *Conatus* is explained by Deleuze as a disjunctive synthesis that propels one to leave behind a mindset trapped in egoistic possessiveness so as to embrace the singularities that a particular background entails. The *Conatus* distinguishes the significance of the background but does not extend that significance in order to construct an identity out of the singularity because it does not recognize the need for identity. M’s singularity “does not abolish disjunction by identifying the contradictory elements by means of elaboration; instead, he affirms it through a continuous overflight spanning an indivisible distance” (Deleuze and Guattari 76-77).

In the 'concentration camp' arrangement put forth by 9/11, it becomes fair to note the irony in Richard's supposedly solid and hard-won Americanness since he eventually decides to fall back on his second or "back up" identity, Jewishness. In a few weeks, the ever enduring and self-made billionaire Richard finally moves to Israel on account of a nineteen-year-old illegitimate son who has just been killed in action in Afghanistan. The sudden and irreversible decision only proves for M how the Kantian presuppositions could easily crumble as they are set on a shaky synthesis of time and place. Derision of the a priori foundations of identity becomes evident as Richard unquestionably believes his presumed fatherhood of a dead soldier from a prostitute he saw some nineteen years ago! Being shaken to the core, and promptly moving to Israel on some presumed moral obligation to the dead kid he has never known, is an explicit expression of scorn at Kant's categorical imperative. For how could the dead boy receive his father's affections in vitro? A cruel sarcasm at the way in which Kant frames synthetic a priori as a contrived resolution of the conflict within the Duplex bargain: the noumenal versus the phenomenal. Still, the irony of the number nineteen extends to Eteraz's critique of Islamism as well. Nineteen is the number of fundamentalists from the Persian Gulf who brought down the Twin Towers, with profound effects on the fate of people like M whose experience in the United States were brought to an abrupt end. Eteraz connects them with Richard's prostitute acquaintance who, after nineteen years' silence, decided out of moral obligation to inform him, and Richard is unexpectedly shattered by the news of someone he had never actually met or known. Like the nineteen fundamentalists from the Persian Gulf, the place meanwhile keeps a steady order for excessive and meaningless consumption produced in the United States. Jihadism and consumerism go hand in hand.

Foydalanilgan adabiyotlar ro'yxati:

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