
Universal Issues in Samira Ahmeds' *Internment*

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Abstract

The issues of Islamophobia and social segregation are common in today's modern world, where Muslims are treated unfairly and segregated from their social lives. This research aims to provide an overview of the issue of Islamophobia and social segregation in Samira Ahmed's *Internment*. This research was conducted by analyzing the text using a qualitative descriptive method. The universal issues contained in this novel give readers an idea of how the characters experience discrimination and unfair behavior by the authorities in their country. The results of this study can be seen through the *Internment* novel, which shows that Islamophobia is characterized by racist behavior towards Muslims followed by blatant segregation of Islamic groups.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, we can see issues not only in social media or directly in the environment but we can see through literary works such as novels. "Reading a variety of novels and literature ... may encourage people to begin to understand some of the increasingly complex issues that surround global injustices and the denial of human rights such as poverty, inequality, prejudice, racism, etc." (Pyke, 2017). Usually, issues are always toward bad things. "Social issues that negatively affect the personal or social lives of individuals ... or larger groups within a society and about which there is usually public disagreement as to its nature, causes, or solution" (Kulik, 2023). In the *Internment* novel, the writer tries to reveal the issues that can be seen, such as islamophobia and social segregation. As we know, islamophobia always refers to hatred and prejudice against Muslims. "Islamophobia is an extreme fear of and hostility toward Islam and Muslims which often leads to hate speech, hate crimes, as well as social and political discrimination" (University, n.d.). People who have an Islamophobic attitude will always think that Muslims are a threat to them. Schmuck et al. (2018) mention that this perception is reinforced by news coverage, where unidentified terrorist suspects are often automatically assumed to be Muslim. They always think that their existence will be unsafe if they are close to or socialize with Muslim groups. Likewise, with this *Internment* novel. This novel will talk about Islamophobic views in a country. Apart from that, this novel will highlight how social segregation can relate to the topic of Islamophobia.

Discusses social segregation, it means that a person or group is separated from their social environment based on ethnicity, religion or tribe. "Segregation, separation of groups of people with differing characteristics, often taken to connote a condition of inequality" (Browne, 2023). In this way, people who are included in or who experience social segregation only have a small opportunity to communicate or meet people who are different from them. In fact, "More than 80% of America's large metropolitan areas were more racially segregated in 2019 ... even though explicit racial discrimination in housing has been outlawed for half a century" (Beckett, 2021). If we take a look at the novel, the officials in America on purpose to do segregation to Muslims group. They are afraid that there will be threats to harass them from Muslim groups, which is totally wrong.

Internment is a young adult literary work by Samira Ahmed that raises the issue of Islamophobia and social segregation faced by the main character named Layla, a Muslim living in America. In short, Layla and her family are relocated to a camp on the grounds

that officials in her country want to see whether Muslims are a threat to them or not. Layla does everything she can to get her rights back as a citizen without any special treatment for her religion. Through this, the novel has issues that point to Islam, such as Islamophobia and social segregation.

As a comparison with this study, the researcher would like to present previous studies that discuss issues of islamophobia and social segregation and as the object of research. Firstly, “Discourse and Power: A Foucauldian Analysis of Samira Ahmed’s *Internment*” (Saeed et al., 2021). Department of English, NUML, Islamabad. This research uses the same novel subject, *Internment*, but with a different purpose. This research examines discourse and power using Foucault's theory. From this study, it was found that by using Foucault's theory, the researcher used discourse to exploit Muslims and how Muslims used discourse to resist and fight back in the novel *Internment*. In this study, the researcher found some gaps in the research conducted. This study focuses more on analyzing discourse and power by using Foucault’s theory in the *Internment* novel. Although researching the same novel, the researcher does not discuss issues such as islamophobia and segregation mentioned by Samira Ahmed in her book.

Secondly, related research was also done by Nalini Iyer, “Digital Subaltern Counterpublics and Muslim Women’s Resistance in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* and Samira Ahmed’s *Internment*.” The University of Tulsa. In this study, although the researcher uses the same novel, the researcher only focuses on how the role of women in the novel to resist the state controlled by an authoritarian government. The researcher has not discussed in detail how the situation with more detail about the issues that occur. Even so, the results of this study underscore the agency of young women in overcoming barriers to mobility and freedom of speech to claim their rights as citizens and engage in public spaces of opposition against their exclusion.

Lastly, related research had also been done by Saba and Mehvish “A Political Discourse Analysis of Islamophobia through the novel *Home Boy*” (2018). Also “Countering Islamophobia to Live in a Harmony in America After the 9/11 Attacks: A Religious Moderation Reflected in the Novel Yusuf Azeem is not a Hero (2021)” done by Dahlan. The two examples above analyze Islamophobia through novels. Even so, there is no research that analyzes the depiction of Islamophobia using Grosfoguel’s theory (2012).

From the explanation of the previous study above, the urgency in this research can be underlined that Samira Ahmed portrays a Muslim community that has received a very

negative view in America. After 9/11, the American society's view of Muslims has changed significantly. Even today, Muslims still face discrimination and hatred everywhere. Apart from being bullied, Muslims also often have to comply with American government policies that may not make sense.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically, islamophobia is a bad perspective that arises in someone who hates the religion of Islam. “Since 9/11, concerns have grown among some Americans that Islam is incompatible with the American way of life, fueled in part by elements of the far-right and evangelical Christians” (Johnston, 2016). These thoughts will continue to arise whenever they meet or see random Muslims. Not only hate speech, usually people who are Islamophobic will commit unfair behavior towards Muslims, such as sexual violence, physical violence, or in the scope of work. Erentzen et al. (2021) in his article mentioned that Islamophobic attitudes can lead to unfair treatment of Muslims, including increased victim-blaming in hate crime scenarios, especially when victims deviate from the expected passive behavior. Basically, people act as they wish without thinking about the feelings of others, even in public places. If someone has the courage to speak hate against Muslims, then this can be referred to as Islamophobia.

Ramon Grosfoguel (2012) reveals several forms of Islamophobia, firstly, Islamophobia is a form of racism in the world. Secondly, Islamophobia is orientalism. One form of racism against Muslims is the issue of patriarchal and sexist abuse of women. In relation to the West, the argument that is still maintained is when how Muslims are considered uncivilized and cruel in issues against women in the hands of men. Thirdly, Islamophobia is epistemic racism. In this case, Western identity considers their knowledge superior to Muslim thought. Lastly, Islamophobia is a Eurocentric social science. In this case, Muslims are considered lacking in knowledge, identity, and rationality.

Islamophobia issues are interpreted directly from the novel without any reduction in meaning. Similarly, with social segregation, the researcher will analyze by giving an understanding of what is meant in the quote. Regarding social segregation, this refers to the interaction between two different groups. In this case, the two groups will have a high social distance, which causes no interaction with each other. Basically, segregation does not only exist in religion, but also ethnicity, settlement, class, and race.

This research aims to know and understand the meaning of issues expressed in the novel *Internment*. Based on the issues seen in the novel *Internment*, it is found that there is Islamophobia, social segregation. The researcher uses the book *Internment* in analyzing the issues and topics that occur. Related to the issues that will be discussed, the researcher will develop into a meaning that can be understood by the readers. Therefore, this research needs to be conducted and analyzed in order to get the desired results.

RESEARCH METHODS

Related to the issues in the *Internment* novel, this research was conducted by using descriptive qualitative analysis by using the concept Grosfoguel (2012). This research focuses on the characters, and the events where the data in this research comes from utterances from the novel *Internment* which can be in the form of words, phrases, or sentences in the novel. This novel is good to discuss because Samira Ahmed tries to convey a message to young people to fight against silence. Young people should dare to speak as long as they are innocent, and fight for their rights.

The instrument in this research involves the researcher herself in collecting valid data that is appropriate in the *Internment* novel. The researcher chooses, collects, and analyzed the data herself as the main instrument. The researcher collects the data by reading the novel thoroughly and understanding every meaning in it. This is because the research analyzes textually as evidenced by the main characters, events, and other supporting characters. This research aims to see how foreign Muslims in America are supported by related issues. The results of this study are expected to have a positive impact on readers, but also expected responses from readers to criticize this research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the analyzed data, this research found two issues through the novel, islamophobia and social segregation. The researcher will analyze by giving an understanding of what is meant in the quote.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is views and attitudes that contain prejudice, fear, and hatred towards Islam and Muslim people. “Islamophobia ... refers to the fear of and hostility toward Muslims and Islam, as well as the discriminatory, exclusionary, and violent practices arising from these attitudes that target Muslims and those perceived as Muslim” (Green, 2019). In the novel *Internment*, the American government clearly shows a discriminatory

attitude towards all Muslim citizens in America. Besides that, Samari (2016) mention that Islamophobia in America has become increasingly prevalent, with negative impacts on Muslim Americans' health and well-being.

“Muslim are a threat to America.” (Samira, 2019, Chapter 1). The quote shows the discriminatory treatment by the American president. Moreover, the quote shows that being a Muslim is a bad situation where the Muslim community gets a negative view from its own president in America. The president thinks that Muslims are a threat to America. In relation to Grosfoguel’s theory, the behavior of the American president who thinks that Muslims are a threat to them is a form of racism against Muslims. There is a reason why American presidents call Muslims a threat. One of them is that they believe that Muslims are a terrorist community that will destroy their country. The reality is, before this president took office, freedom of speech and religion was a right of every American. However, two months after the new president was inaugurated, this situation has changed. In fact, an American minister is Islamophobic “Two months since a virulent Islamophobe was sworn in as secretary of war” (Samira, 2019). The issue of Islamophobia has greatly impacted Muslims in America, limiting their activities, imposing curfews, and mass firings of Muslim jobs. This dismissal was also experienced by Layla's father, who was previously a teacher. In addition, non-Muslim citizens also provide unpleasant behavior as written in the novel *Internment*, when a man who openly voices his hatred for Muslims every day. In addition, there are incidents where women wearing hijab have their hijab ripped off, as well as the vandalization of Muslim mosques.

“But right now, it’s my religion in the crosshairs.” (chapter 1, pg. 17). The above sentence spoken by Layla shows that the country where she lives does have a clear Islamophobia because the word religion that Layla is referring to is Islam. In this novel, it is explained that the president and the government at that time were Islamophobes who were very anti-Islam. This quote shows that the presence of Muslims in America is intimidating which can cause people to live under surveillance. Relatedly, the American government will do everything it can to keep an eye on Muslims so that other communities do not feel threatened.

“Only me and my parents were called to give a lecture about how should I know my place at school.” (chapter 1, pg. 16). It is said that Layla and David, her boyfriend, were caught kissing in the school hall. Because of this, both of them were suspended for two days. Even though David was also at fault, what was surprising was that only Layla and

her family were called to school to be lectured by the principal. Layla was reprimanded about how she had to know her position at school. The principal shows that his attitude is one of discrimination against Muslims. He acts arbitrarily and points to Layla as if she is the only one at fault. The principal can be said to be Islamophobic because what he did was unfair to Muslims. The quote also shows that someone who has an Islamophobic attitude, will treat someone at will which causes harm to one of the parties. If David is not to blame for what he has done with his girlfriend, Layla, then Layla should not have received this treatment either. Due to the unfair treatment by the president, Layla's parents expelled her from school because they were afraid of what would happen to Layla in the future. They were afraid that after the suspension incident it would be much worse like a fight or something else.

“Curfew starts in thirty minutes.” (chapter 1, pg. 15). The above sentence is spoken by Layla at night when she is going to meet her boyfriend, David. Layla tries to sneak around so as not to be noticed by the officers because soon the clock will show curfew surveillance, which shows the issues that always supervising a Muslim community within a certain time limit. The quote shows that Islamophobes implement surveillance and restriction policies against Muslims.

“The bigwigs need to see you’re not a threat.” (chapter 5, pg. 40). After Layla and her family complied with the officials' request to be relocated, they immediately got into the car. In the car, the police chief apologized to Layla and said that his superiors needed to see that they were not a threat that needed to be watched out for. But still, even though the police chief apologized, Layla thought it only made things worse which made her feel even more afraid. Obviously, this is still related to the behavior of the American president who thinks that Muslims are a threat that is stalking them. With this, the quote above illustrates that Muslims will be relocated because the government considers that Islam is a threat that will cause riots in other communities. As a result, this government treatment will harm the Muslim community who will lose their human rights.

Social segregation

Segregation is the idea of separating certain social groups in a social space. Segregation can be defined as the act of separating or removing one item or group from another. “Social segregation refers to the separation of groups based on various markers of difference, such as race, ethnicity, gender, or social class” (Wolff, 2007). Varady (2008) mentioned that Muslim segregation in America and Europe remains a complex issue, high

levels of segregation persist in many cities, often due to voluntary clustering reflecting strong ties to Islam. In the novel *Internment*, social Samira shows readers how the authoritarian American government forcibly segregates Muslims. Again, this treatment is carried out because they assume that Muslims are terrorists. The government also thinks that Muslims should be distinguished from non-Muslims.

“Under order of the exclusion authority and by the powers vested in the secretary of war under the presidential order 1945, we are here to serve notice and carry out your relocation.” (chapter 3, pg. 32). The sentence was uttered by a group of men in suits who came to Layla's house at night. At that time, Layla and her family were very surprised by the words of the man who told Layla and her family to be relocated. Shortly after, the man asked Layla's father about the revolutionary poem he had written. Layla wondered if they were relocated because of the revolutionary poem. However, if you think about it, the poem is just about people and polishing a bit of the truth. But basically, the sentence above shows that this Islamophobic president ordered that all Muslims in America be relocated in one place. This shows that the government segregates Muslims to avoid a threat that is only seen in a negative light. Muslims are labeled as threats or terrorists which results in them being alienated from society. This segregation is done because of their different religions. This order was given directly by the American president who did not want other communities to live under the threat of Muslims. In fact, Muslims and non-Muslims in the novel *Internment* are the same. There is no significant difference between them despite their different religions. Muslims will be separated from the rest of society just because they are considered a threat.

“I realized we’ve been segregated by ethnic group.” (chapter 6, pg.67). This data was said by Layla when she got to know Soheil (whom she met on Mobius). At first, Layla wondered why she and her family were moved to a camp. However, after being separated from non-Muslim Americans and relocating to Manzanar, where the Muslims camped, it turned out that these were the Muslims who were placed again according to their ethnicity. Such as Indian-American, Arab-American, and African-American descent. This shows discrimination against seasonal residents in the treatment of residential segregation.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, *Internment* tells the life of a Muslim teenager in America who has to face the fact that Layla, her family, and other Muslim citizens have to receive special treatment

and relocation for their religion, Islam. There are two issues found in this novel, namely Islamophobia and social segregation. In addition, the topic of dystopia in this novel is also discussed, where their lives are organized under the president and government. Through this, 17-year-old Layla has to face a very complicated situation, starting from rebellion and voicing her rights as an American citizen. Regarding further analysis, the researcher suggests further research on other issues that exist in the *Internment* novel.

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