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## PRESENTATION DE LA REVUE AKIRI

Dans un environnement marqué par la croissance, sans cesse, des productions scientifiques, la diffusion et la promotion des acquis de la recherche deviennent un impératif pour les acteurs du monde scientifique. Perçues comme un patrimoine, un héritage à léguer aux générations futures, les productions scientifiques doivent briser les barrières et les frontières afin d'être facilement accessibles à tous.

Ainsi, s'inscrivant dans la dynamique du temps et de l'espace, la revue « *AKIRI* » se présente comme un outil de promotion et de diffusion des résultats des recherches des enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs des universités et de centres de recherches de Côte d'Ivoire et d'ailleurs. Ce faisant, elle permettra aux enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs de s'ouvrir davantage sur le monde extérieur à travers la diffusion de leurs productions intellectuelles et scientifiques.

*AKIRI* est une revue à parution trimestrielle de l'Unité de Formation et de Recherches (UFR) : Communication, Milieu et Société (CMS) de l'Université Alassane Ouattara. Elle publie les articles dans le domaine des Sciences humaines et sociales, Lettres, Langues et Civilisations. Sans toutefois être fermée, cette revue privilégie les contributions originales et pertinentes. Les textes doivent tenir compte de l'évolution des disciplines couvertes et respecter la ligne éditoriale de la revue. Ils doivent en outre être originaux et n'avoir pas fait l'objet d'une acceptation pour publication dans une autre revue à comité de lecture.

## **PROTOCOLE DE REDACTION DE LA REVUE AKIRI**

La revue *AKIRI* n'accepte que des articles inédits et originaux dans diverses langues notamment en allemand, en anglais, en espagnol et en Français. Le manuscrit est remis à deux instructeurs, choisis en fonction de leurs compétences dans la discipline. Le secrétariat de la rédaction communique aux auteurs les observations formulées par le comité de lecture ainsi qu'une copie du rapport, si cela est nécessaire. Dans le cas où la publication de l'article est acceptée avec révisions, l'auteur dispose alors d'un délai raisonnable pour remettre la version définitive de son texte au secrétariat de la revue

### **Structure générale de l'article :**

Le projet d'article doit être envoyé sous la forme d'un document Word, police Times New Roman, taille 12 et interligne 1,5 pour le corps de texte (sauf les notes de bas de page qui ont la taille 10 et les citations en retrait de 2 cm à gauche et à droite qui sont présentées en taille 11 avec interligne 1 ou simple). Le texte doit être justifié et ne doit pas excéder 18 pages. Le manuscrit doit comporter une introduction, un développement articulé, une conclusion et une bibliographie.

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Les références des sources d'archives, des sources orales et les notes explicatives sont numérotées en série continue et présentées en bas de page.

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## **Islamophobia and the Search for a British Muslim Identity in *The Road from Damascus***

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### **Abstract**

Muslim immigrants, in Western countries like Britain, are confronted with the issue of islamophobia. Faced with this adversity, many migrants are compelled to forge an identity that protects them against the challenges of the host society. This article analyses how Robin Yassin Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008) explores the impact of Islamophobia on the identity-building process of British Muslims. Using a "close reading" method and the postcolonial theory through Homi Bhabha's concepts of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' beside Edward Said's 'Orientalism', this study shows how islamophobia challenges the protagonists, Sami Traifi's stable identity. This challenge leads him to reconcile with his Muslim identity on his own terms. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that Islamophobia in Britain is a catalyst that leads Muslim immigrants to reshape their identity by the integration of Islamic landmarks as Sami Traifi and Muntaz did.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, British Muslims, Identity, Hybridity, Orientalism

## **L'islamophobie et la recherche d'une identité musulmane britannique dans *The Road from Damascus***

### **Résumé**

Les immigrants Musulmans en Grande Bretagne sont confrontés au problème de l'islamophobie. Face à cette adversité, beaucoup d'entre eux sont contraints de se forger une identité qui les protège contre les défis de leur société d'accueil. Cet article propose d'analyser comment *The Road from Damascus* (2008) de Robin Yassin Kassab explore l'impact de l'islamophobie sur le processus de construction identitaire des Musulmans de Grande Bretagne. En utilisant la méthode du « Close Reading » et la théorie postcoloniale à travers les concepts 'd'hybridité' et 'd'imitation' d'Homi Bhabha jumelés à 'l'orientalisme' d'Edward Saïd, cette étude montre comment l'islamophobie remet en question l'identité de Sami Traifi. Ce défi le conduit à se réconcilier avec son identité Musulmane qu'il a personnalisée. L'analyse révèle que l'islamophobie en Grande-Bretagne est un catalyseur qui pousse les immigrants Musulmans à reformer leur identité en y intégrant des références islamiques à l'instar de Sami Traifi et Muntaz.

**Mots clés :** Islamophobie, Musulmans Britanniques, Identité, Hybridité, Orientalisme



## Introduction

In modern human societies, identity is a guiding concept that shapes human interaction. Thus, for immigrants seeking better living conditions, holding on to their identity can be a challenge due to hostility from native populations. While many immigrants face stigmatisation, current geopolitical and cultural tensions have created a particularly difficult situation for Muslim immigrants in Western countries like France, Germany, the United States and Britain. In these nations, Muslim immigrants often face significant challenges because of their identity and perceived political stances towards the Western world.

This situation leaves many of them at a crossroads: they must choose between preserving their identity and assimilating into the host culture. This identity crisis is a common theme explored by many writers of Muslim descent in the West. Among these writers such as Moshin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), Hanif Kureishi (*My Son the Fanatic*), and Nadeem Aslam (*Maps for Lost Lovers*), Robin Yassin Kassab's novel, *The Road from Damascus*, is the main focus of this article entitled: Islamophobia and the Search for a British Muslim identity in *The Road from Damascus*.

To clarify the topic, Islamophobia is a term combining the prefix 'Islam', defined by Julia Creswell (2021:298) as " 'to submit, surrender' or 'to submit to Allah'" and the Greek suffix 'Phobia' meaning "fear" (J. Creswell, 2021:770). Therefore, literally, Islamophobia means the "fear of those who submit to Allah". In this article, however, Islamophobia goes beyond a simple fear; it is a social phenomenon that leads Westerners, particularly the British, to unfairly stereotype and discriminate against Muslims. As John Esposito (2011:43) states, Islamophobia "has come to denote acts of intolerance, discrimination, unfounded fear, and racism against Islam and Muslims". The phrase "British Muslim identity" is used to describe how Muslims in Britain define themselves in response to the harshness of British society in order to survive its brutality. As Ansari Humayun (2018: 47) notes, "Muslim identity in Britain is being constructed very much against a background of negative perceptions about who and what Muslims are". The quotation shows that a 'Muslim identity' in Britain is often a reaction to how their community is viewed by others.

This leads to the central question of this article: How does the portrayal of Islamophobia in *The Road from Damascus* function as a catalyst for the protagonists' transformation into radical or modern Muslims? Consequently, this article aims to analyse how the external pressures of Islamophobia, in the novel, drives the protagonists' journey toward defining their religious and cultural identity. The protagonist of *The Road from Damascus* known as Sami Traifi has a hazy



identity and a decaying life in Britain. Although he tries to embrace British identity by avoiding other Arabs and Muslims in London, he eventually realises he has never truly belonged to that society. As a result, he returns to the Muslim community he used to look down on. In doing so, he endorses a new identity that secures his sense of belonging. Sami's story shows how it is difficult for Muslim immigrants to form their identity in Britain.

Few articles have been written on *The Road from Damascus* (2008). Mustafa Büyükgebiz (2023:1238) notes that: "The novel highlights the ways in which Arab immigrants lives are shaped by issues of identity, masculinity, and belonging". Then, Choudhury Enayet Rashid (2012: 103) posits that: "The novel challenges the binary between Muslim and non-Muslim, secular and sacred, the imagination and religious structure". Finally, Tassim Qutait (2018: 73) argues that: "The novel unfolds as a series of ideological disillusionments that chart the protagonist's confrontation with the failure of national politics". These articles do not fully address the social discomfort that leads Muslim immigrants in Britain to reshape their identity as a protective shell. Hence, this article posits that Islamophobia, far from being a barrier, is a crucial force that triggers the re-evaluation of faith and belonging in order to forge a resilient and self-defined Muslim identity as does Sami Traifi and the other characters of the novel.

This study will draw on postcolonial theory, including Homi Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry and Edward Said's concept of orientalism. Bhabha's theory will help shed light on the characters' inability to merge their foreignness with the host culture, leading them to navigate both cultures until they find their true selves. Said's orientalism will highlight the harsh way British people treat immigrants in order to make it clear that they don't belong Britain.

The study falls into three sections. The first section, "Sami's rejection of his original culture and identity", expounds on the protagonist's conflicting relationship with his cultural roots. The second section, "Islamophobia as a catalyst for Muslim immigrants' identity re-evaluation", shows how Islamophobia acts as a driving force that threatens the protagonist into searching for and shaping his identity. Finally, the third section "Muslim immigrants' Redefinition of their Identity" sheds light on the multifarious identities at play in the Muslim community as a response to the identity conundrum imposed upon them by the host society.

### **1. Sami's Rejection of his Original Culture and Identity**

Many Muslim immigrants who live in Britain, especially those from the second generation, want to cut ties with their parents' homeland. To reach their purpose, those immigrants reject any connection with the culture and identity symbols from countries like Pakistan, Iran or Syria. In so doing, the renegades take shelter under British culture and behave conspicuously so that



White people and the other immigrants can know how far they are assimilated. Then, they keep belittling their fellow immigrants to show their superiority.

### **1.1. Sami's Cultural Assimilation**

Young immigrants who were born in Britain are often torn between the choice to stay loyal to their parents' culture or live under the rules of the host culture. For some of them, the choice is clear. As sticking to their parents' cultural heritage will endanger their survival in the host country, the renegade immigrants opt for a cultural assimilation that can secure them comfort and confidence in a country like Britain.

In the *Road from Damascus*, the protagonist is drenched in British customs. One of those manners is alcoholism. While one might assume that Sami, as an immigrant of Muslim descent, would avoid alcohol, his rejection of his community and his embrace of British culture lead him to engage in practices that honour Britain. As a result, the narrator maintains that in London, he "avoided Arabs [...] he smoked, he drank, he avoided things" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 27) by "steering clear from Muslims" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008:105). This behaviour shows that Sami has traded his original identity for the British one. He considers that while living in Britain, it is not worthwhile to keep the cultural and religious practices from his home country. Hence, he cuts ties with his background and openly endorses the host society's culture and secularity.

Sami's rejection of his Arab and Muslim background leads him to a secular life. Indeed, as Muslim immigrants in Britain are guided by their home culture, namely their religion which they are deeply attached to, Sami sets himself apart from this belief. For him, there is no rationality in religion and no development can be achieved from it. That is why, like his father Mustapha who used to believe that religion is "an immigrant thing. It can't survive the cosmopolitan city" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 38), Sami tells his wife that: "I'm not sectarian. I don't think much of the whole religion thing" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 17). This quotation clearly reveals Sami's mind-set about religion. For him, religion is useless for his survival in Britain. What he needs is a set of knowledge and behaviour that can testify to his British identity and allow him to follow in his father's steps. In this respect, his limited understanding of Muslim immigrants is tinged with Eurocentric stereotypes, which he uses against those who stick to their home culture.



## 1.2. Sami's biased view of Islam and Muslims

For many immigrants who choose cultural assimilation, the debasement of their original culture and identity sounds as the opportunity to convince the host population that they have really sloughed to change their culture and identity. In this respect, in *The Road from Damascus*, Sami reviles Islam and his fellow Arabs.

Sami, the protagonist of the novel, is full with prejudices against the other Arabs and Muslims in Britain. Indeed, as Sami is convinced that Muslims' behaviour is backward, he uses this idea to despise them. Even his wife, Muntaha, who has decided to dress like a Muslim woman does not escape his judging gaze. Sami considers his wife's endorsement of Muslimhood as betrayal. He objects to her decision by complaining as follows: "You don't need to look like a Muslim woman. You don't need any symbol like that. We've progressed beyond the hijab, women should wear what they like" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 62). Sami's reaction to his wife's sartorial transformation expresses his negative opinion about Islamic traditions and Muslims. For him, anything related to religion, especially Islam, is backward and fails to fit the modern lifestyle of a city like London. He also worries that in his quality as a modern British man, the hijab his wife wears will make people believe he is as backward as other Arab men who impose a dress like this on their wives. He buys into the orientalist stereotype which portrays the hijab as a symbol of the denial of Muslim women's agency.

By acting this way, Sami shows that he is "more British than her (his wife) without trying. He seemed to fit. He took the place for granted" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 54). Sami's opinion about Muslim women and the dress they wear reflects the view of White people. Indeed, as an assimilated immigrant, he adopts the western view of Muslims as his own. To confirm his sense of belonging to Britishness, Sami feels he has to hate and despise the things White people too hold in contempt. He uses the same weapon White people use against Muslim immigrants in general, that is to say stereotyping. He takes pleasure in misrepresenting the real purpose behind Muslim women's behaviour. He represents piety as a symbol of their lack of agency and freedom. This method clearly aligns with the definition Homi Bhabha (1994:75) gives to 'stereotype' in *The Location of Culture*. For him, stereotypes is not just "a false representation of a given reality". It is also "an arrested and fixated form of representation". In other words, in the relationships between the West and the East, stereotypes are inherently negative. They are meant to tarnish the image of the people or objects they describe. That is the reason why Sami uses it against his fellow Arabs and Muslim women.



However, Sami's sense of belonging is not meant to last. He soon realises that despite his assimilation to British culture, he lacks some key elements needed to be considered truly British. In fact, he is eventually described as a "failed Syrian, fake Englishman" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 70), which means that he does not belong in the British society. As a failed immigrant and fake British citizen, Sami is soon hit by the pressure of Islamophobia when British people show their distrust, hatred and contempt for those like him. For British people, Sami and the other immigrants who claim for Britishness are not British. They are just 'monkeying' Britishness. In this respect, Bhabha's work explains that Sami and immigrants like him have just learnt some codes of Britishness, which does not turn them into true British people. Muslim immigrants should know that there is a difference between "being English and being Anglicized" (H. Bhabha, 1994: 90). Indeed, as some immigrants, like Sami, try to behave like White people, the latter are worried about the stability of their cultural hegemony in Britain. Hence, they do whatever they can to avoid the trap of 'mimicry', which according to Homi Bhabha "is at once resemblance and menace" (1994: 87). The weapon Whites choose to reach their purpose is Islamophobia.

## **2. Islamophobia as catalyst for Muslim Immigrants' Identity Re-evaluation**

The struggle for cultural hegemony in Britain is a priority for White people. Indeed, British people consider Muslim immigrants as a threat for the stability and thriving of their local values. To remedy this situation, many White supremacists go to great length to show how backward and dangerous Muslims and their tentacular culture are for Britain. This dark description of Muslims and Islam is known as islamophobia. According to Tahir Abbas (2009: 98), Islamophobia is the "normalisation of the anti-Muslim hatred". This concept helps British people to express their resent against Muslim immigrants in Britain through racist practice such as stereotyping.

### **2.1. Stereotyping of Muslim Immigrants in Britain**

According to Charlotte Seymour-Smith (1986:274), stereotype is "An image of or attitude towards persons or groups which is based not on observation and experience but on preconceived ideas". The falseness and the depersonalising character of stereotypes is what helps British people to place Muslim immigrants in a position of otherness in order to dehumanise them.

Muslim immigrants in *The Road from Damascus* are all taken for the enemies of the West. This labelling begins with their physical appearance. As a matter of fact, since the terror attacks on the United States in 2001, many Muslims in the West have been tagged as terrorists. From that



point on, displaying any symbol of their Islamic identity amounts to dragging the wrath of White people on themselves. In this respect, Sami Traifi is mistaken for a terrorist in Britain after the United States was attacked. Thus, the police justify his arrest by telling him, “You were standing there, outside the mosque, in a suspicious manner. [...] You have grown a rather thick beard” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 196). Sami’s new bearded appearance automatically turns him into a potential terrorist in Britain. That is the reason why, when he asks for a lawyer, the police respond, “You still get your lawyer, but it isn’t going to be nice. Thousands of people have been killed” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 195). Sami’s physical traits have labelled him a murderer. For White people, the beard means that he is a Muslim who will never scruple to kill people if he has the possibility to do so. The police behaviour reveals the biased opinion of British people towards Muslim immigrants: They are considered a danger to the country’s security and development, and as a result, they are denied British identity.

The fact that the Metropolitan police depersonalises Sami’s beard is a sign that stereotypes about Muslims are common in Britain. His new look automatically links him to the terrorists who have carried out the attacks on the United States. This way of treating Sami confirms Edwards Said’s stance, in *Covering Islam* (1997: 171), when he affirms that in “orientalism, Islam has always been looked at first of all as if it were one monolithic thing, and then with a very special hostility and fear”. For Westerners, Islam is seen as the opposite of Western civilisation, a less civilised and barbaric culture. Therefore, White people have to do whatever they can to beat back Islam and send it back to the Orient. In this respect, any Muslim on the Western soil must be fought like a terrible disease.

## **2.2. Muslims in Britain: The Stateless**

Culture is one of the most obvious signs of identity in a nation. Therefore, to many British people, no other culture should feature in their national identity. For that reason, some White people take a jaundiced view of some Muslim immigrants’ effort to enter Britishness. For those nationalists, it is out of the question to let Muslims or people of Muslim descent to pretend to be British.

Muslim immigrants in Britain are prevented from feeling a sense of belonging to the country. Actually, in the mind of British people, the physical appearance and the behavioural traits displayed by Muslims does not fit any paradigm of Britishness. White people feel they have nothing to gain from Muslims and their culture, viewing them as murderers from a backward culture, a culture that only brings death, disorder to British civilisation. The narrator describes Muslims’ bleak image in Britain as follows: “There was fascination between the Whites and



the Blacks, watching and imitating each other, fighting and fucking each other, [...] the Muslims got in the way. They ruined the Whiteness of the city, and the Blackness too” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 40). This sad reality highlights the presence of Muslims in Britain as a disturbance. For White people, any other groups can be accepted in Britain except for Muslims. They believe Muslims do not fit the nation’s cultural narrative and disrupt the unity and cohesion of British cities.

The cultural singularity of Muslims is so striking that when they tell White people that they are from Britain, the latter never accept it. Sami Traifi, a second-generation Arab-Muslim from Syria, experiences this rejection of his British identity. Indeed, when he is taken to the police for his suspicious appearance, the identity Sami claims for is denied by the metropolitan police. The conversation goes as follows:

“Country of origin”

“Britain”

“Country of origin”

“England”

“We mean originally”

“Syria. If you mean where my parents come from”

“Syria isn’t a Muslim country?”

“Yes, it is” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 195)

This exchange reveals Muslim’s exclusion from the ideal of Britishness. In Britain, Muslim immigrants are the dregs of society who must be removed by all means. This is why they are called “Pakis” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 130) , a term meant to remind them that they are from another continent, another country and Britain will never accept them. When immigrants are perpetually labelled as foreigners, they can be mistreated by White people.

When the police question Sami’s origins, and insist that Syria is a Muslim country, they are telling him that they know Syria better than he does, even though it just through books and the media. For them, since Syria is a Muslim country, Syrians are all dangerous and potentially terrorists. Therefore, as Sami’s parents are from there, he is likely to be a terrorist as well. The method used by the police is what Edwards Saïd describes as Orientalism. He clarifies this term as “a Western style for dominating restructuring and having authority over the orient” (1977: 20). By hearing this kind of depersonalised description of Syria, which a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, any Syrian can be intimidated and will ultimately fear the judgement a White man can have about him. Yet, once they fear Whites, they are weakened while White people gain power.



### 2.3. The Dehumanisation of Muslims

Muslim immigrants' rejection from the British nation exposes them to many dangers. As a matter of fact, when the immigrants are treated as misfits, it means that they have nothing good to bring to the country. Thus, as useless people, they must be humiliated and belittled so that they feel like leaving Britain for another country.

Muslim immigrants are mugged and humiliated by White people in Britain in order to show that they are second zone citizens. As a matter of fact, when White people are convinced that Muslims are sub-humans who come from poor and needy countries, they treat them rudely in order to highlight British people's superiority. This strategy is deployed through physical and psychological violence. As a character named Mujahid explains, "Brothers have been punched. They spit on us from upstairs when we are coming in. They throw beer can at us sometimes" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 136). The aggression undergone by Muslims is the deterrence found by White people to make them feel unsettled, unwelcome in Britain. For British, if they let Muslim immigrants live as they please, the latter might believe that they are truly British. Hence, they have to be treated as aliens, bad people, who are yet to learn from human civilisation. This situation worsens Muslims' living conditions in Britain.

The act of assaulting Muslim immigrants with anything considered dirty by Muslims, spittle, beer, is not fortuitous. Indeed, beyond the conception of Islam as a violent and barbaric religion, White people consider it as the sign of a Muslim attempt to colonise British territory. Thus, spilling beer on them is a way for White people to emphasise that Britain is their land and no other culture can prevail. Once more, in *Covering Islam*, Edwards Said (1997: 171) notes that: "For the West, Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a late coming challenge to Christianity". The aggression of White people against Muslims is the sign of a battle for cultural hegemony in Britain. They want immigrants to know that Britain, though a multicultural land, its own culture is superior to all others. The rejection of Muslims contribution to the development of British society yields the expected result: their social and economic impoverishment.

In *The road from Damascus*, Muslim immigrants are described as poor people with low quality jobs. Because they are scorned and excluded from mainstream society, the immigrants are forced to band together around their own traditions. Most of their jobs are ones that help their community function. In this regard, the narrator states that:

In Britain, Muslims meant Pakis, which meant crumbling mills, corner shops. Which meant anoraks and miserable accent and curry houses. [...] They had proletarian role in the economy, and a bourgeois conservatism. Neither sexy

nor strong. Badly dressed and poorly educated. Islam's cobwebs in their eyelashes, and its mould on their tongues. (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 40)

The impoverishment of Muslim immigrants is intended to belittle them in Britain. Without money or proper education to contribute ably to the cultural and economic development of the country, the immigrants can be easily rejected from the nation. As a result, even when they claim for their belonging to the British nation, the immigrants are reminded that none of their features aligns with Britishness. Hence, they cannot be treated as British. The harsh living conditions imposed on Muslims cause them to feel unsettled. Thus, they begin to feel insecure in their choice to assimilate. Many, including Sami Traifi, begin to think about an identity that could provide them more security and greater belonging in Britain.

### **3. British Muslim Immigrant's Redefinition of their Identity**

Muslim immigrants' attempt to belong Britain ended up by their rejection and humiliation by White people. To compensate for the void created by their denied assimilation, some immigrants return to their original culture and identity in order to secure a sense of belonging. To reach their purpose, the converted immigrants take distance from British culture and some of them even start reviling and slandering it.

#### **3.1. The Debasing of Whites' Culture**

Muslim immigrants' will to be effective in their estrangement from Britain and its culture leads them to throw dirt on the image of White people. This strategy purports to highlight the alleged superiority of immigrants' culture over Britain's.

Muslim immigrants begin to understand that they have a lot to gain from their return to their ancestral cultural values. As a matter of fact, when they leave the frustration from assimilation, the immigrants look for the pride of true belonging. Therefore, they have to uplift the Islamic culture, as they used to do for British culture. This situation leads the narrator to state that for Sami, Ammar is "a convert, an ideologically displaced person, a challenging" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 130). By describing Ammar as a convert, Sami indicates that he has moved to another cultural typology, a change confirmed by his new opinion about White people and their culture. As white people have refused to accept immigrants in the building of the British nation, the latter are looking for another anchor to belong to. They opt for an emotional estrangement from Britain and its culture they used to enjoy and claim as their own.

The growing distance between immigrants and the host society is expressed through their ability to revile the local culture and its people. Indeed, as he talks about British women and their moral credential, Ammar states that: "A woman of religion. A very rare thing. These Englishmen



don't care if their women walk around topless, these women anyone can have them" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 72). For Ammar, it is no doubt that White people have no ethics. Their society is collapsing, as there is no discipline. Women do whatever they feel like, while the men keep watching carelessly. In making this comparison, Ammar wants to state that Muslim women are better than White women. The reason for their virtue is that they are carefully supervised by their husbands within a community that promotes discipline and moral values. Once the characters in the novel begin to devalue British culture and its people as Ammar does, it means that they are simply attracted to a new cultural paradigm: Islam.

The behaviour of immigrants like Ammar is the testimony that some Muslim communities in the West, particularly in Britain, have decided to disengage from British society. They refuse any contact and even wish for the destruction of the host society. Hence, their British citizenship has no more value. For them, it is no longer worth it to battle for their place in Britain. They are in Britain but their heart beats for Muslims around the world. The detachment of Muslims immigrants from the host society leads Shahram Akbarzadeh et al (2007:13) to state that: "Fundamental questions are now being asked about the capacity of Muslims to live as active citizens in Western democracies". These questions are justified insofar as Muslim immigrants like Ammar are convinced that there is a rivalry between Muslims and White people. They consider that they are at war and must do their utmost to win that war against White people and their culture. The weapon they chose to wage their war is religious, specifically fundamental Islam which is a fertile ground for their pan-Islamic identity.

### **3.2. Pan-Islamism: Migrants' Withdrawal from Mainstream Society**

In their quest for a new identity, Muslims adopt a pan-Islamic identity, which consists for them in identifying with the worldwide Muslim community known as the 'ummah'. In so doing, they withdraw from mainstream British society and they consider it as their new enemy.

In *The Road from Damascus*, the first way of being a Muslim in Britain, is to become a fundamentalist. As a matter of fact, the harshness of the immigrants' rejection from Britishness and the campaign of disrespect that follows convince some Muslims that they have to become hardliners. This is a way to show White people that they are now tethered to a new cultural paradigm: Muslimhood. However, their Muslimhood is connected to political stances related to the Whole Muslim world. In this regard, the narrator notes that Sami "knew that the converts [...] were projecting their dreams on to countries they were ignorant of" (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 130). This kind of identity displaces Muslim immigrants emotionally from Britain and leads them to identify with the other Muslims around the world. The withdrawal turns the



immigrants like Ammar into the enemies of Britain. Obviously, when New York is attacked, Ammar joyfully states that: “This is the heart of America, this is the belly of the beast. And it looks like Gaza, man. It looks like Baghdad. And that is something to restore a man’s pride” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 186). The pride Ammar takes in the attack on America is evidence that he no longer sees himself as a British citizen. The citizenship he has is devoid of all emotional connection. Any misfortune that befalls Britain right now is a blessing for him. Thus, he feels for the Muslims in Baghdad, Gaza than the White people who live in the city of London with him. That is why he proudly states that: “Muslim with Muslim, that’s all” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 136), and they must “keep away from [...] kuffars” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 135).

Ammar extracts Muslims from the British society and put them on the fringes. To his mind, it is out of the question for Muslims to mix with White people. He considers that they have nothing good to offer to Muslims and, besides that, he sees British people as enemies who have to be fought and defeated. He is now a Muslim warrior who fights for Muslims wherever they are. The way Ammar identifies with the wider Muslim community and only wants to associate with them is evidence that many Muslim immigrants are today swallowed by the politicisation of Islamic identity. This situation leads Oliver Roy (2017: 46) to maintain that: “The umma has gained some social weight as an alternative form of affiliation”. The propensity some Muslim immigrants have to withdraw from the host society to identify with the worldwide Muslim community is a way for them to support and share in the sorrow of Muslims in the Middle-east and the East. Nevertheless, this identity, characterised by religious fundamentalism and the individual’s withdrawal from mainstream British society is countered by more accommodating and moderate types of Muslim identity.

### **3.3. Muslimhood: A Solution against Marginalisation**

Many Muslim immigrants in *The Road from Damascus* refrain from using their Islamic identity as a weapon against British society. They rather use it as a personal tool to deaden the shock from Islamophobia so that they can keep on engaging with mainstream British society.

Some Muslim immigrants in Britain have decided to swim against the fundamentalist grain. Despite their will to integrate the Islamic identity paradigm, immigrants like Sami and Muntaz choose to be moderate Muslims who do not withdraw from mainstream society as Sami did. They join the Muslim community to fill the gap created by their rejection from Britishness. Therefore, unlike Ammar who identifies with the worldwide Muslim community, the moderate Muslims just look for a community within Britain where they can belong. Their identity has



nothing to do with political stances. That is why as he looks for this community where he can belong, the narrator reveals that, “Sami envied his brother-in-law’s capacity for self-definition” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 129). Obviously, after his rejection from Britishness, Sami feels rootless. He has no cultural anchor to grab and the identity he used to rely on has betrayed him. Therefore, he craves for an identity that compensate for the loss. Hence, he begins to abandon some of the behaviours he would use to highlight his cultural assimilation.

People’s identity has many aspects. It can be sartorial, culinary or behavioural. For Sami, the most striking part of his identity which needs changing is his Western manners. Therefore, the narrator states that: “Sami began to renounce his pleasures. Lager and Whiskey had been the first to go” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 150). Sami’s resolution to be sober is evidence that he is changing his identity and he has decided to join the community he used to ridicule. The narrator points out that: “He fasted Muslim-style, dawn to dusk, no liquids or solid” (R. Yassin-Kassab 2008: 151). Sami has now integrated into the Muslim community of London. The stereotypes he used to develop about them have disappeared and he practices the codes that underlie the Muslim identity. In so doing, Sami joins the community and he has a family to support him. However, Sami’s Islamic identity has some boundaries. These boundaries set a clear dividing line between him and the likes of Ammar.

By becoming a Muslim, Sami belongs to the community. But as belonging was the only motive for his conversion, once it is secured, he makes it clear that: “There were times when, because of his name, because of the expectations of neighbours and acquaintances, it became necessary to visit mosques” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 38). It means that Sami’s adhesion to the Islamic religion and identity has nothing serious. He does it out of formality and for show. He just wants to show the community that he belongs to them. Therefore, even though Sami has stopped his un-Islamic ways, it does not mean that he hates them. His identity is a compromise. He downplays his cultural assimilation and the Islamic community accepts him so that he can be safe in Britain. As a result to this compromise, the narrator claims that: “Strangely now, the Hijab didn’t bother him” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 120). This quotation corroborates that Sami has reset his mind in order to accept what he used to refuse in his wife. The objective is to curry favour with the community and avoid loneliness.

The vision adopted by Sami Traifi comes around Shahram Akbarzadeh et al’s (2007: 20-21). Actually, for them, it is paradoxical to live in a land and hates its culture and people. The fact of immigrating to the West should be a motive for Muslims to accept the cultural difference of the host society. They assert that: “The classical division of the world between the land of Islam



(dar ul-Islam) and the land of disbelief and war (dar ul harb) has become irrelevant as Muslims have made the West their home”. Sami’s behaviour in Britain is the normal one. It bears testimony to his commitment to contribute to the development of the identities that now define him. For this reason, he can neither attack the West from an Islamic stance nor attack Muslims from a Western position. He chooses fairness by standing at the crossroads of Western and Eastern cultures. The same behaviour appears in his Wife, Muntaz, who chooses to become a Muslim woman in order to belong to the Muslim community.

Like her husband, rather than going into politics and flirt with the path of radicalisation, Muntaz opts for an Islam which does not create a fence between her and the society she lives in. The first element that testifies to Muntaz’s identity change is her dressing code. As a matter of fact, in a London Muslim community where most of the women are under their men’s authority, Muntaz shows an agency that paradoxically leads her to adopt the ‘controversial’ hijab as her favourite accessory. She makes the decision to wear the hijab despite her husband’s disapproval. Once again, the narrator maintains that: “Back in London, Sami’s own wife was threatening to wear the hijab” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 9). This decision comes from Muntaz’s will to be part of the Muslim community. By wearing the Hijab, she will no longer be isolated in her sorrows and distresses. She will have a community to rely on in moments of harshness. For the narrator, “She had become more religious. She realized she fitted a community, she wanted to belong to this community” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 57). Muntaz, going Muslim, has secured her place within the Muslim community of London. Without being guided or commanded to do so, she wilfully chooses to be a Muslim woman. A woman with agency, pride and power over her own body.

Muntaz’s decision to integrate into the community of Muslim immigrants in Britain is the evidence that the guarantee for immigrants’ safety resides in their gathering. As they gather and support each other, immigrants are somewhat protected against the torments of stigmatisation. In this respect, Zygmunt Bauman (2001: 4) posits that: “Community is a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in heavy rain”. The community within which Muslim immigrants are gathered acts as a cocoon, a protective bubble which keeps them safe from racial stereotypes and stigmatisation. However, in the community, the mentalities and visions are not uniform. Some members manage their own life according to their convictions and existential desires. Their life reflects the level of strength of their religious commitment. That is why, as a moderate and modern Muslim woman, Muntaz’s marriage procedure does not follow the Islamic course of things.



Muntaz has sex with Sami out of wedlock. She has sex before her marriage. This behaviour would have been an abomination in a traditional Muslim community. Yet, in Britain, without considering the moral duty imposed on Muslim women, Muntaz sleeps with Sami without fearing any punishment. As the narrator reveals, “It was one of those mornings they first had sex, before they married, and she’s not in the least ashamed of it. She chose it. She chose him. She knew what she was doing” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 57). Muntaz’s behaviour is atypical of a Muslim woman. Normally, she would have refused to sleep with Sami because of the community’s blaming eyes and rules. However, she is open-minded. She is a Muslim woman who is aware of her decision and endorses them. Muntaz’s boldness shows that for a Muslim woman who lives in a secular country like Britain, religion has to be personal, private. It should not be used as a political instrument to destroy the social fabric of the country. Thus, she has a vision of religion which differs from her brother’s.

Unlike her brother Ammar who claims that: “Muslim with Muslim” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 136), Muntaz opens herself to British society. She goes beyond her community and strike up acquaintances with people, from other cultural sphere, like ‘Gabor’. This openness to the world around her shows that Muntaz is not a radical Muslim. For Muntaz, religion is a personal, an individual commitment that aims at the well-being of believers. Therefore, rather than using religion as a weapon against the Western world, she uses it as a medicine for her own therapy. Hence, she states that: “I have been praying for a while now. And I fasted last Ramadan. These are things I used to think were silly, or I didn’t pay any attention to them, but once I try them I find they help me” (R. Yassin-Kassab: 2008: 60). Religion is a guide for Muntaz. In her daily practice, she not only finds the peace of mind she needs, but she also finds solutions to her personal torments. That is why the narrator claims that: “When she prays, her heart is a shining mirror reflecting the light of God” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 138). The behaviour of Muntaz and Sami is evidence that being a British Muslim is not about politics or hatred. It is also the redefinition of the individual’s relationship with religion.

Muntaz and Sami have a moderate and modern Islamic identity, because their faith is influenced by their contact with White people. This situation turns them into immigrants who move “back and forth” (H. Bhabha, 1994: 3) between two cultures. Even though they pretend to leave British culture for the Islamic one, they still have vestiges of Britishness that allow them to haunt White people. Therefore, Sami and Muntaz are two-sided immigrants who are in a situation of doublemindedness. They are in-between two cultural streams. The position of the two characters highlights Homi Bhabha’s point of view about hybridity. For Bhabha (1994: 4),



“This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity”. This quotation suggests that Sami and Muntaz are hybrid characters. The tepidity of their religious commitment is owed to the fact that they are still under the influence of Western values that turn them away from the cancer of religious fundamentalism. In this respect, Sami boldly states that: “I’m British anyway. I’m a British Muslim” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 61). By proclaiming that he is a British Muslim, Sami makes it clear that the Islam he practices is a fusion of both Western and Islamic values. This mixture leads him to reject any violence against their fellow British. Their peaceful attitude can be seen through Muntaz’s objection to her brother Ammar’s celebration of the Attack on America. When Ammar joyfully says: “It serves them right. It’s payback time”, Muntaz answers that: “What about ‘my mercy is greater than my wrath?’” (R. Yassin-Kassab, 2008: 186). Muntaz’s answer shows that she shares in her husband’s mind-set. She is a British Muslim and she has nothing to do with Pan-Islamism, which is a political vision of Islam and Islamic identity. She is rather for a neutral Islam. An Islam which is informed by the British social and cultural realities.

Muslim immigrants like Sami and Muntaz are referred to by Oliver Roy (2017:32) as “nominal Muslims”. Indeed, he considers that in the West, some Muslims can be labelled as counterfeited. It means that from their exterior aspect, one can say that they are devotees, hardliners, religious sticklers, who live up to the fundamental Islamic dogmas. However, in the practice, their adherence to the Islamic religion is mild, lukewarm. They are just Muslims by name and they have joined the group to avoid stigmatisation and rejection. Most of the time, the immigrants like Sami and Muntaz refrain from mixing religion with politics in order to avoid radicalisation.

### **Conclusion**

This article has consisted in analysing the impact of islamophobia on the redefinition of Muslim immigrants’ identity in Britain. Through an analysis carried out through the lens of postcolonial theory, it comes out that the persecutions undergone by Muslim immigrants in Britain leads the latter to search for an identity that can help them get over their marginalisation. Thus, the study unveils an array of identities that come under the influence of fundamental and radical Islam to moderate Islam. In this respect, in the *Road from Damascus*, British Muslims’ identity has two aspects.

The first one is the transnational Islamic identity or pan-Islamism. In this identity, impersonated by the character of Ammar, the immigrant withdraws from the mainstream British society and displays his connection to the worldwide Muslim community. In so doing, he hates Western culture in general and the host society in particular. The second type of identity is an identity



that involves hybridity. This type of British Muslim identity involves characters like Sami and Muntaz. For those characters, being a Muslim in Britain has to take the host society into account. Their identity favours the emotional autonomy of immigrants and they develop a neutral consciousness that allows them to practice tolerance in British society.

As a piece of literary work, *The Road from Damascus* advocates for the second type of identity endorsed by Muslims like Sami and Muntaz in Britain. It is an identity which can ensure peace and harmony in the British society, insofar as the immigrants who have this identity do not withdraw from the British society nor search for a revenge opportunity. Despite their frustrations, they still keep in touch with other groups and navigate between the home and host culture.

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