

Fear Racism: An Analysis of the Varying Phases of Sinophobia and the Anti-Asian Hate Crimes in America

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This paper seeks to introduce a trend of racism, fear racism, that has gained prominence post 1990s. The basis for fear racism is the dread that certain individuals are potential agents of nations or races that conspire to threaten global stability and peace. Talibanism and Sinophobia are examined in this study as illustrations of fear racism. The Neo-Orientalist critic Derek Gregory's views of American War on Terror are borrowed to interrogate Talibanism as an indicator of fear racism. Since Talibanism is a widely studied topic, more focus is laid on exploring Sinophobia as a manifestation of fear racism. Sinophobia, which commences with the negative Chinese stereotypes perpetrated by the Western colonial discourses, is metamorphosing into a global stigma with American neo-colonial propaganda and rumours alleging the Chinese origin of the Corona virus. These surging rumours of terror have paved the way for increasing hate-crimes against the Asian Americans in general.

Keywords: Eugenics, Fear Racism, Immigration, Neo-Orientalism, Sinophobia

Introduction

Fear is emerging as the catchword of the twenty-first century. The element of fear occupies a significant place in the contemporary debates on environment, medicine, humanity and security with the surging global concerns revolving around climate risks, Covid-19 pandemic, international terrorism, and the impending threat of a Third World War. This study traces the racial overtones that the emotion of fear has acquired in the present-day world. Sieving through the historical interpretations of racism such as biological racism and cultural racism, the study introduces a novel trend of racism known as fear racism, that has affected the global perception of races post 1990s by generating a widespread phobia against selective races on the international platform.

History of Racism

Racism as a term has evolved over the ages with multiple connotations. The conventional understandings of racism primarily derive from European colonial discourses and revolve around the exclusion of races based on skin colour and biological features. This type of racism known as biological racism was backed by the pseudo-science of Eugenics founded on the propositions of human physical typology, chiefly on Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's idealistic representation of the Caucasian race and Charles Darwin's evolutionary principle of the 'survival of the fittest'. Biological racism formed the basis for the rising cases of Anti-Semitism worldwide and the increased aversion towards the non-white races in the European colonies. In the Western nations, the racist stereotypes propounded by Eugenics play a major role in promoting hate-crimes against the non-white races and in the formation of policies restricting immigrants hailing from these races. In 1907, the American Commissioner General of Immigration reported that the principal object of the exclusion laws was to restrict the entry of "the morally, mentally and physically deficient" from the mediocre races into America (Brignell, 2010, n.p).

Over the course of time, the colonial constructs about the superiority of White cultures over the non-White attained racial overtones. As a consequence, culture also became the basis for

segregating races, leading to cultural racism. The seeds of this thought can be traced to Immanuel Kant's propaganda that the Western nations, specifically England and France, are to be revered as the first national characters who can set a role model to the non-Western countries. This conception extends into the neo-colonial era where cultural racism endorses the non-West to mimic Western cultures to achieve progress and modernity, thereby offering the West an effective discourse to exert its hegemony over the non-West.

The origins of Sinophobia lay in the biological and the cultural racist discourses that have stated and reinstated the secondary status of the Chinese races within the American mainstream. The mainstream dominated by the White Americans discriminated against the Chinese immigrants on account of their non-white skin, earmarked them as carriers of strange oriental diseases and inexplicable genetic deficits and disseminated false rumours about the Chinese being heathen and crafty. These stereotypes belittled the image of the Chinese immigrants in the eyes of the American public to a point that the California Supreme Court in 1854 denied the Chinese Americans their right to give testimony against a white person in court (Lee, 2016, p. 92). This racist typecasts and subtle rumours on the notoriety of non-white races eventually paved the way for a new kind of racism centred on 'fear' operational against the Asian immigrants within the mainstream, which this study terms as fear racism.

Fear Racism

Fear racism denotes a branch of racism that is attaining prominence in the global scenario post 1990s and operates through the association of rumours of terror with people belonging to certain nations or races. "Racial inequality", according to the critical race theorist Tommy J Curry, can emerge "from the social, economic, and legal differences Whites create between 'races' to maintain elite White interest in labor markets and politics, and as such create the circumstances that give rise to poverty and criminality in many minority communities" (Curry, 2009, p. 166). Fear racism is an exemplification of such a socio-racial inequality arising from the White need to uphold their hegemony over global politics. Fear racism functions by

highlighting some act of terror that has been performed by a few members of a non-White nation or race and advocating the need to exclude all people belonging to that nation or race for the sake of world peace and global sustainability. The widespread access to television, internet and social media in the present day also eases this process of propagating rumours of terror.

From time immemorial, associating rumours of terror with certain groups of people have been practised along with discriminating races based on their physical typology and culture. But these rumours of terror have not gained much popularity until recently. Fear racism is a kind of racism because like biological racism which differentiates people based on physical typology and cultural racism which discriminates against people based on their cultures, fear racism victimizes people voicing their potential to perform acts of terror that may turn out to be detrimental to the world stability, security and peace.

This study posits the rumours of terror associated with the Islamic race from the historical period until the contemporary times as an illustration of fear racism. The anti-Muslim attitude can be traced back to the Middle Ages when religious wars were fought between the Christians and the Muslims. Edward Said records in *Orientalism* how disparaging Islamic stereotypes promoted by the Middle Ages church crusaders tarnished the face of Islam in the West (Said, 1979, p. 59). The 9/11 incident and the consequent War on Terror resulted in further distorting the imagery of Islam in the West and in the global space. The Neo-Orientalist critic Derek Gregory relates to the endowment of a renewed perspective of terror upon the Islamic countries post 9/11 through promoting a fear of Talibanism globally. He examines the American justification of the War on Terror as “a war to save civilization” (Gregory, 2004, p. 47) from a Neo-Orientalist perspective, speculating on the intensified efforts to target the Islamic race in the digital age through “*technocultural*” stereotypes disseminated through “[a]dvanced systems of intelligence, interception, and surveillance” (Gregory, 2004, p. 52). In *And the Mountains Echoed*, the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini hints at the operation of fear racism against the Afghan immigrants in America. He illustrates how following the 9/11 incident, the Afghan immigrants

were forced to conceal their Afghan identity in America. In the novel, a reference is made to how the Afghan immigrant character Timur changes his name to conceal his identity: “In the States, Timur goes by ‘Tim’. He changed his name after 9/11 and claims that he has nearly doubled his business since. Losing those two letters, he has said to Idris, has already done more for his career than a college degree would have” (Hosseini, 2014, pp. 153-154).

While the Islamic race has been associated with differing rumours of terror from the Middle Ages, the recent trend of racism is to oppress the common Chinese. The common Chinese as victims of fear racism is the primary interest of this paper. Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilizations* refers to China and the Muslim nations as challenger civilisations. Analysing the present scenario from a Neo-Orientalist perspective, the association of rumours of terror with the Chinese in the recent decades can be interpreted as an outcome of the American fear that the Chinese nations may topple the American hegemony over the world nations. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the focus shifted to China as the new rival of the United States. Erika Lee comments on the American fears about China in her work, “Sensational bestsellers with titles such as *China Rules the World* and *Death by China* feed a fear that China will topple American hegemony, and some even go so far as to describe China’s ascent as an all-out assault on the United States from both within and without” (Lee, 2016, p. 384). The beginnings of this fear can be deciphered upon analysis of the American approach towards the Chinese immigrants who excel in scientific and technological fields. In America, there have been numerous recorded cases where the “Chinese American scientists have been accused of spying for the People’s Republic of China. Aerospace engineers, computer scientists, and others were targeted by FBI officers and unjustifiably accused of passing information to the Chinese” (Lee, 2016, p. 384).

The case against the Chinese-American physicist Wen Ho Lee in 1999 is an example of the effect of fear racism upon the Chinese immigrants in America. Wen Ho Lee was accused of being responsible for leaking the nuclear warhead technology developed by the Los Alamos National Laboratory to the Chinese officials. He was detained

and subjected to intense interrogation for many years despite the absence of any solid evidence and later released. Lowen Liu comments of how the “prosecutors told the court that the knowledge Lee possessed threatened the safety of every single American” (Liu, 2016, n.p).

The case of Wen Ho Lee is not an isolated incident. Many Chinese immigrants were detained and interrogated for years based on suspicion and in the absence of proper evidence. In 2018, Ji Chaoqun, a student of electrical engineering at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago was arrested accusing him of being an illegal agent of the People’s Republic of China. In 2010, the FBI issued an arrest warrant for Yanqing Ye, the student at Boston University’s Department of Physics, Chemistry and Biomedical Engineering. She was accused of working as the Lieutenant of People’s Liberation Army of China, staying in the United States and encouraging researchers working in the United States to share their research with the Chinese officials. In 2021, Gang Chen, the Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was accused of using the federal grants to enhance the research on nanotechnology in China. The open letter and social media posts of the MIT staff voicing the work ethics and respectable demeanour of Professor Gang Chen points to the falsity of the claim of the American officials (“MIT Professor”, 2021, n.p).

Fear racism affected the lives of not only the Chinese immigrants employed in research and teaching professions. Upon analysis of the immigrant experiences narrated by the Chinese diasporic writers, it is revealed how the rumours of terror also formed a part of the lives of the common Chinese immigrants in America. Amy Tan, the Chinese-American writer, depicts the subtle aspects of fear racism experienced by the Chinese immigrants in America through her novels. In Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the Chinese-American Simon describes the Chinese native Du Lili’s act of killing a chicken as “barbaric” (Tan, 2010, p. 239). As a response, Simon’s Chinese-American wife Olivia replies, “Stop being so ethnocentric. You think killing chickens in the States is more humane?” (Tan, 2010, p. 239). Olivia’s response to Simon who naturalises the American act of killing

the chicken but categorises the Chinese slaughtering the chicken as inhumane is to be interpreted as a critique of the tendency to legitimise the American acts of violence but magnify every vicious action undertaken by many non-American nations.

Amy Tan discusses a rumour of terror, the Chinese torture, that the West associates with the Chinese immigrants in *The Joy Luck Club*. The Chinese-American immigrant child Waverley Jong asks her mother Lindo Jong what Chinese torture is. She says, “Some boy in my class said Chinese people do Chinese torture” (Tan, 1998, p. 91). As a response, Lindo Jong says, “Chinese people do many things,” . . . “Chinese people do business, do medicine, do painting. Not lazy like American people” (Tan, 1998, p. 91). This response is an interrogation of America which propagates rumours of terror about the Chinese immigrants rather than recognize the skills that they possess and their contribution to the development of America.

The culmination of fear racism is witnessed in the recent rumours of terror about the Chinese origin of Corona virus and the consequent hate-crimes committed against the Asian immigrants in general claiming they are potential carriers of this virus from China. The former American President Donald Trump described Covid-19 as the China virus. President Trump’s comment becomes a source of concern as the Office of US National Intelligence had reported that “Covid-19 was not manmade or genetically modified” (“Coronavirus”, 2020, n.p). Nina Strohlic, in her article titled “America’s long history of scapegoating its Asian citizens” published in the *National Geographic* comments, “When leaders call COVID-19 the ‘China virus,’ it harkens back to decades of state sanctioned discrimination against Asian-Americans” (Strohlic, 2020, n.p). In the article titled “Prejudice Toward Asian Americans in the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Effects of Social Media Use in the United States” a reference is made to how “Since January 2020, many Asian Americans have reported suffering racial slurs, wrongful workplace termination, being spat on, physical violence, extreme physical distancing, etc., as media and government officials increasingly stigmatize and blame Asians for the spread of Covid-19” (Croucher, Nguyen & Rahmani, 2020, n.p).

The Asian history of immigration shows that in the previous decades too, hate crimes have been committed against the Asian immigrants, stigmatising them as the carriers of Oriental diseases and the perpetrators of racial pollution. But the difference between then and now is that, while in the prior decades, the Oriental diseases which afflict the Asian immigrants were regarded as a mark of their racial inferiority, in the recent times, the Chinese immigrants are falsely rumoured to be agents of a potential biowarfare. The present-day approach towards Covid-19 must be regarded as fear racism and not biological racism because now, the Oriental diseases is not presented as a mark of racial deficit but as part of a conspiracy that originates from the Orient. The conspiracy theory associated with the Chinese receives further impetus when one considers the fact that an American author Dean Koontz published a book titled *The Eyes of Darkness* in 1981 which makes a reference to the creation of a virus named Wuhan-400 as a biological weapon in a laboratory (“*Novel predicted Wuhan Virus*”, 2020, n.p).

Conclusion

The existence of these conspiracy theories reveals that despite globalisation and the transnational status of many countries in the contemporary world, nations have transcended national boundaries only on a superficial level. Despite voicing concern in matters of global importance, most nations appropriate the international platform as a medium to express their own national interests. This transnational status of countries bears similarities with the idea of cosmopolitan realism that Ulrich Beck discusses in *The Metamorphosis of the World*. According to Beck, “If you want to be successful you need to discover yourself as an actor in cosmopoliticised space of action” (Beck, 2016, p.11). Most nations in today’s world work towards obtaining the transnational status as a means of discovering themselves as global actors.

Fear racism is an outcome of this nation-centric attitude to become a global player. Fear racism operates on a global level, promoting the interests of dominant nations by discriminating against people from certain nations claiming that they are a threat to world

peace, security and progress. This type of racism functions by propagating rumours of terror about an entire nation or race as a result of isolated acts of terror committed by a few individuals belonging to that nation or race. The victims of this fear racism are not the real perpetrators of terror but the common people who belong to that nation or race. Fear racism which perpetuates stereotypical notions about certain nations for the sake of promoting the dominant interests of hegemonic nations is an illustration of the workings of Neo-Orientalism in the neo-colonial era and offers extensive possibilities for research in the field of racial and Neo-Oriental studies.

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