# Rendering Muslims as Terrorists in the English Comic Books: Analysis of Liberty for All and Holly Terror

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## Abstract

Comic books are not only designed to entertain the readers but they also become a medium to communicate something between the lines. Comic books are a popular medium in western countries. This paper investigated the depiction of terrorist incidents allegedly involving Muslims in English comic books. The study aimed to analyze the treatment that was given to the Muslim and non-Muslim characters especially as a part of terrorist organizations while showing real-life terrorism based incidents. It was also intended to explore how they induced fear appeal in their stories regarding particular characters. Through purposive sampling, two comic books have been selected to know how the Muslim characters in the comic book were portrayed in a derogatory manner and to know how they have recaptured the incident of September 11, 2001. Liberality for All and Holy Terror are the two books that were selected and analyzed by using the method of content analysis. Drawing upon the theoretical perspective of Agenda Setting (and Framing), it is assumed that the comic books were prepared deliberately to depict Muslims in a deprecating approach. The results ask the orientalist scholars to raise their eyebrows toward the depiction of Muslims in comic books whose audience is relatively younger and the particular portrayal in such manner can have a profound and longer effect on the young minds regarding Muslims.

**Keywords:** Comic books; Terrorists groups; Muslim and non-Muslim representation; 9/11; Agenda setting; Orientalism.

## 1. Introduction

"Everybody is worried about growing incidents of terrorism around the world. Stopping terrorism is the top priority of many governments (if not of all). Well, there is a really easy way which is "stop participating in it" (Chomsky, 2002). Media and terrorism are two different words that are perceived connected frequently. Media channels across the globe highlight the incidents of terrorism whether the incident is national or international immediately and stop all their programs to give proper coverage to the incident related to terrorism. Sometimes the media work as the promoter of terrorism through its dramatic contents and sometimes work as the biggest stumbling block in the way of terrorists but in the recent incident of terrorism, we see the negative role of media more than the other. Media's role in broadcasting and discussing it becomes the worry in the current wave of terrorism. Terrorism cannot be spread without the use of communication (Soriano, 2008). The following statement makes a strong relation to terrorism with media.

Every form of communication has been under consideration by the scholars to measure inputs in terrorism. But the current research practices reflected the role of comic books in using terrorist incidents. The word comic book can be understood as a book or magazine that is consisted of stories accompanied by colorful pictures and dialogues in word balloons. The 1895's yellow kid, which was written by Richard Felton Outcault's and published in Joseph Pulitzer's The New York World, was generally acknowledged as being the first comic piece in the history of journalism. In the early era of 20th century, the comic genre was considered as the humorous genre and mostly available in newspapers but the golden age of comics as a distinct industry started from the 1930s with the introduction of the first and foremost make of a character especially associated to the comic books called as first superhero "superman" which created by Jerome Siegal and Joseph Shuster ("A history of the comic book", 2008).

The portrayal of terrorist groups in comic books is not a common topic of research because only a few studies were found on comic books. Hydra and Al-Qaeda's depiction of comic books is an example of it. That study aimed to check how the comic book used the terrorist groups in their storyline and how their depiction had changed after 9/11. The study found a lot of negative changes in the treatment of terrorist groups after the World Trade Centre incident (Scott, 2011b). There are a few studies found that posed questions about the coverage of terrorism. Martin

(2012), conducted a study on the relationship of graphic novels and terrorism to check the role of media in terrorism by looking into the graphical representation of the Holocaust and the 9/11 incident.

Although terrorist depiction is not a common research topic but the input of comic books in creating fear among its relatively younger readers which makes it one of the important research topics in the genre of comic books. Kirsh and Olczak (2000), conducted a study on violent comic books to check the effects of reading highly violent and slightly violent comic books. They applied experiment method on 119 introductory psychology students and came up with the fact that more exposure to violent comic books was inducing more fear among people. Another paper discussed the role of superhero comic books in creating trauma among its readers after the 9/11 incident from a clinical psychology point of view and identified that comic books were causing a disturbance in people (Smith and Goodrum, 2012).

Worcester (2011), revealed the connection between shock tempted by the 9/11 incident and its impact on artists' work. He discussed the incident as a greater amount of fear-induced event and shocked the public which came out in their work like graphic commentary, memoir fictions, comics, cartoons, and films. Sometimes comic books highlight those issues that may cause fear among its readers. A study on 20 bestselling comic books found that comic books were giving too much coverage to street crimes (Phillips and Strobl, 2006). Comic books are also used as a tool for imposing a political agenda among its readers. It has been proved through the research and analysis of Watchmen and captain America which concluded that comic books were used to promote specific discourses by geopolitical actors (Dittmer, 2007). Another study on the Hong Kong famous long-running comic strip "the world of lily Wong" helps to understand the role of this strip in political propaganda. That article explained the ways through which political myths were communicated in comics with the use of images (Kluver, 2005).

Comic books' impact is not restricted to the political agenda. Sometimes it also deals with the national ideology of the country. As Steinmetz (2008) explored the Captain America's role in manufacturing national ideology. According to him, not only heroes play a strong role but also villains play the equally strong roles in making and changing of national ideology. Another research on Morrison's "The Invisibles" identified the impact of comic books on the ideology alteration regarding anarchism. This article tried to find out the development of anarchism from orthodox anarchism to ontological terrorism within science fiction comic books (James, 2007).

The superheroes and villains are an essential part of comic books. From Nazis to Al-Qaida, comic books depicted terrorist groups and published violent pictures on their covers (Scott, 2011b). Comic books readership is not restricted to children's only as New York comic book museum claimed that the average reader of comic books is of twenty-four years of age (Scott, 2011a).

Pakistan children as well as youth are also seen interested in reading DC and Marvel comic books as they are purchased in a great amount of numbers in the Lahore international book fair (Babar, 2016). The comic book industry is in the developing phase in Pakistan. Kachee Golyian is the first comic brand in Pakistan that was established in 2011 and produced English and Urdu comic books. The basic aim to establish this organization was to promote education which later converted into a fight against terrorism after the APS attack (Salam, 2013).

The growing comic industry of Pakistan and its terrorism incident-based topics raised the need to study the previous comic books on the same topic. And because of foreign comic book readership in Pakistan, it is important to study the content of comic books related to Muslim representation. To know how the content of such topics may leave an impact on Pakistani society, there is a need to understand the treatment of such topics in international comic books.

## 1.1. Objectives of the Study

The basic aim of this study is to analyze the portrayal of terrorist groups in the Holy Terror and Liberality for All. The study also examined the treatment of comic books regarding terrorism incidents and to compare the representation of Muslim and non-Muslim characters in these comic books. For the fulfillment of the above objectives, comic books based on propaganda against the faith of Muslims "Holy terror" (Brothers, 2011) and comic book with the aim of kid's brainwashing "Liberality for All" are selected. They are analyzed because both the comic books are related to the 9/11 incident and presented a negative image of the Muslims (Ramakrishna, 2009). From the analysis of these two books, the research sought answers to the following questions.

## 1.2. Research Questions

1. Whether or not the Holy Terror and Liberality for All negatively portrayed Muslim characters by overstating the terrorism incidents?
2. Are anti-Muslim sentiments are added in comics by allocating colors and graphics nominated for terrorist repercussions?
3. Whether Muslims are shown more violent and brutal characters or Non-Muslims?
4. Are Holy Terror and Liberality for All only presenting a one-sided point of view about the depiction of Muslim characters in terrorism incidents?

## 1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study found its conceptual roots from Orientalism and Framing theory that drew from the Agenda Setting. The framing technique was developed by Erving Goffman in 1974 which explains how media construct the message by encircling poignant strategies to influence the audience (Goffman, 1974). This study is also based on the notion that comic book messages are framed according to the specific interest. They are framing Muslims as villains and non-Muslims as heroes. On the other hand, it also comes under the umbrella of Edward Said's concept

"Orientalism". According to Said, Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe or West, US) and the strange (the Orient or the East, THEM) (Said, 1985). The latter conceptual foundation helps to understand how Muslim characters belong to the east are created and presented to the world by the West.

# 2. Methodology

The study used the technique of both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The universe of the study includes Comic Books while the population consists of terrorism-based comic books. Keeping in view the purposive sampling, Liberality for All and Holly Terror are selected as sample. The unit of analysis contains all the content of these two comic books about the presentation of Muslims in terrorist incidents. The study has two variables: comic books as independent variables and depiction of Muslim characters in terrorist incidents as the dependent variable. For the analysis, the coding sheet is designed with both deductive and an inductive approach.

## 2.1. Operationalization and Conceptualization of Categories

The Conceptualization and Operationalization of these categories are as follows.

## 2.2. Total Characters

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, total means complete while the word characters refer to the set of individuality that makes someone different from others. In the current study 'total characters' word is taken in the context of a complete number of characters illustrated in the Holy Terror and Liberality for All. The coding sheet is further divided into two subcategories and they are heroes and villains. The characters with a positive image (representation) are considered heroes and people are shown with negative intentions that are included in the villain category.

### 2.2.1. Brutal Characters

Keeping in view the dictionary definition, the term a brutal character means that character is portrayed as extremely cruel. In this study, this term refers to the extremely cruel or harsh characters in the Holy Terror as well as in Liberality for All. To understand the representation of Muslims, this category is further divided into two subcategories: Muslim and non-Muslim brutal characters.

### 2.2.2. Muslim Representation

Dictionary distinct the followers of Islam as Muslims while representation is defined in terms of image or icon that stands for something else. In this paper, Muslim representation means the image of Muslim illustrated in Liberality for All and Holy Terror. To examine the representation of Muslims, three subcategories are designed, Favorable (+), Unfavorable (-), and Neutral (o). Favorable means comic books are portraying them in a positive sense; unfavorable refers to the negative representation of Muslims while neutral stands for the impartial reporting of the Muslim characters in terrorist incidents.

### 2.2.3. Non-Muslim Representation

The basic meaning of non-Muslim representation is the image portrayal of those persons who do not follow Islam. This category is developed in this research to comprehend the image of other religions' followers in the selected comic books. This category is further divided into favorable which indicates the positive image, unfavorable which shows the negative portrayal and neutral which refers to the unbiased representation of the non-Muslim.

### 2.2.4. Incident Representation

This term defined as the image construction of horrible happenings. According to the study, incident representation means the image building in the analyzed comic books about the unpleasant happening of the September 11, 2001 incident. In this respective category, favorable means that the incident is represented fairly, according to the facts; unfavorable means incident is presented in a biased way; while the neutral means, the comic books are representing the issue as it happened.

### 2.2.5. Dress

The dress is defined by the dictionary as something to be dressed in a sort of fashion. In this study, the term dress refers to the clothes shown in these two books. The clothes without referring to any religion come under the favorable category, the unfavorable category includes the dresses that are indicating specific religious groups while neutral means the dress is showing no known religious affiliation.

### 2.2.6. Pictures

Dictionary defined the term pictures as photographs of a person or any other thing. The current study uses this term to locate the pictures illustrated in comic books and to see their relationship with fear. The pictures that do not arouse fear are coded in a favorable category; the pictures with the elements of fear fit in the category of unfavorable, and the pictures not cultivating fear is coded in the neutral category.

### 2.2.7. Text

The dictionary meaning of a text is the innovative words of a piece of writing. In this respective study, a text meant the words written in the balloon illustrate in the analyzed books. The category of text is further divided into +, - and o. Favorable (+) means the text is positively presenting Muslims, unfavorable shows the negative representation of Muslims and neutral indicate the Muslim representation without any bias.

### 2.2.8. Color

In the words of Merriam Webster dictionary, the term color is defined as" A quality of sight of a thing such as red, blue, and green, etc. that you see when you look at something". This term is used in this research to indicate whether the colors used in the Holy terror and liberality for all are creating fear or not. The red and black is known for creating fear, so the comic book that used these colors will go into the unfavorable category, the book without these colors will fit in favorable and color book having no apparent association will go into the neutral category.

## 3. Findings and Analysis

**Table-1.** Depiction of Muslim Characters during Terrorist Incidents

| Categories | | Liberality for all | Holy terror |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total Characters | Heroes | 18 | 29 |
| | Villains | 8 | 12 |
| Brutal Characters | Muslim | 3 | 7 |
| | Non-Muslim | 1 | 1 |
| Muslim Representation | + | 0 | 2 |
| | - | 8 | 12 |
| | o | 0 | 4 |
| Non-Muslim Representation | + | 13 | 18 |
| | - | 1 | 1 |
| | o | 4 | 4 |

Table 1 depicted the representation of Muslim characters in two globally famous comic books Liberty for All and Holly Terror. To evaluate their behavior, in-depth content analysis has been conducted which showed that comic books Liberty of All and Holly Terror have more heroes than villains i.e. 18 and 20 positive characters' (heroes) and eight and 12 negative characters' (villains) respectively. At a second stage, out of all the characters, those having brutal images were associated with Muslims i.e. three and seven respectively; and only one non-Muslim brutal character is presented in both the books. Liberty for All gave negative coverage to Muslim characters with all 8 villains were associated with them. The same happened for Holly Terror with all 12 villains were shown as Muslims but except a mere positive sight with 2 Muslim heroes and a little neutral touch by treating 4 Muslim characters' neutrally. For non-Muslim characters, both books are tilted towards a more positive image with Liberty for All (having + 13, – 1 & o 4) and Holly Terror (having + 18, - 1 & 4). A clear tilt could be seen for non-Muslim representation in these books.

### 3.1. Incident Representation

**Fig-1.** Depiction of 9/11 Incident in Liberality for All



Fig 1 showed the destruction caused by the 9/11 incident including burning and demolishing buildings, leaders address the situation, painting public interactions, and the reaction of common men as it can be seen as a man sitting all gloomy with rescue uniform. All these things are an indication of the horrible happening that affected the whole nation. This incident representation in Liberty for All gives a horrifying look of damage with the contradiction of opinion between public and rulers with an esthetic touch of misery. According to the coders of the study, the incident representation in Liberality for All is unfavorable as it is also observed from the above figure.

**Fig-2.** Depiction of 9/11 Incident in Holly Terror

Fig 2 showed the statue of liberty which symbolized as the United States of America surrounded by air jets which are seemed to attack the statue (with military jets by shape and style) which is indecently presenting 9/11 World Trade Centre incident with the attached meaning of direct attack on the sovereignty of the state and as the nation being harmed. In short, the Holy Terror also portrayed the 9/ 11 incident unfavorably.

## 3.2. Dress

**Fig-3.** Depiction of Dress in Liberality for All



Fig 3 held Osama-bin-laden addressing to UNO (symbolic logo) but if someone doesn't know the identity of the character, he can easily guess it's a Muslim character from the dress. Not only this but also from pictures throughout the comic book, it's easy to identify the Muslims and non-Muslims based on the dress so it fitted in the unfavorable category.

**Fig-4.** Depiction of Dress in Holy Terror



Fig 4 looked like hideous warrior which discussed to be mostly cited in ancient history books to represent Arabian natives with head and face completely covered in Arabian style turban. This picture and all the pictures that are illustrated in holy terror proved the symbolically attaching negative image with Muslim characters and fitted in the unfavorable category.

## 3.3. Pictures

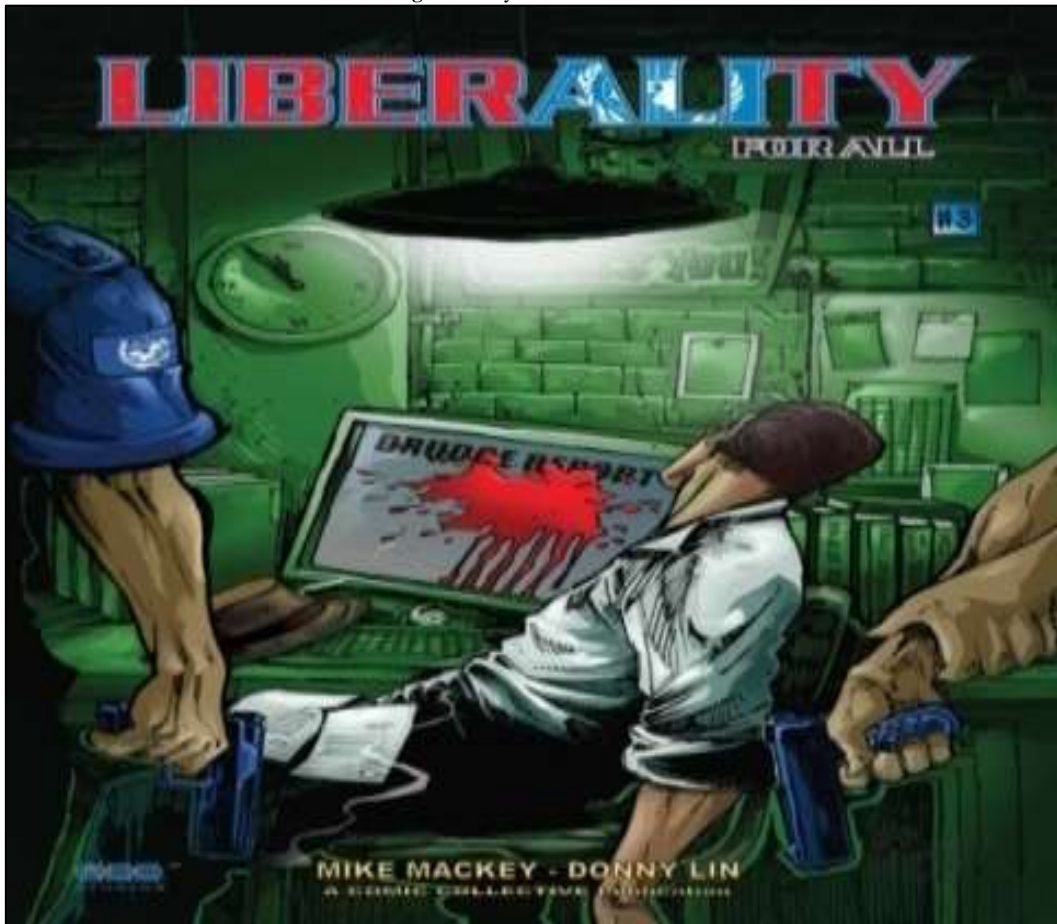**Fig-5.** Liberty for All 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition



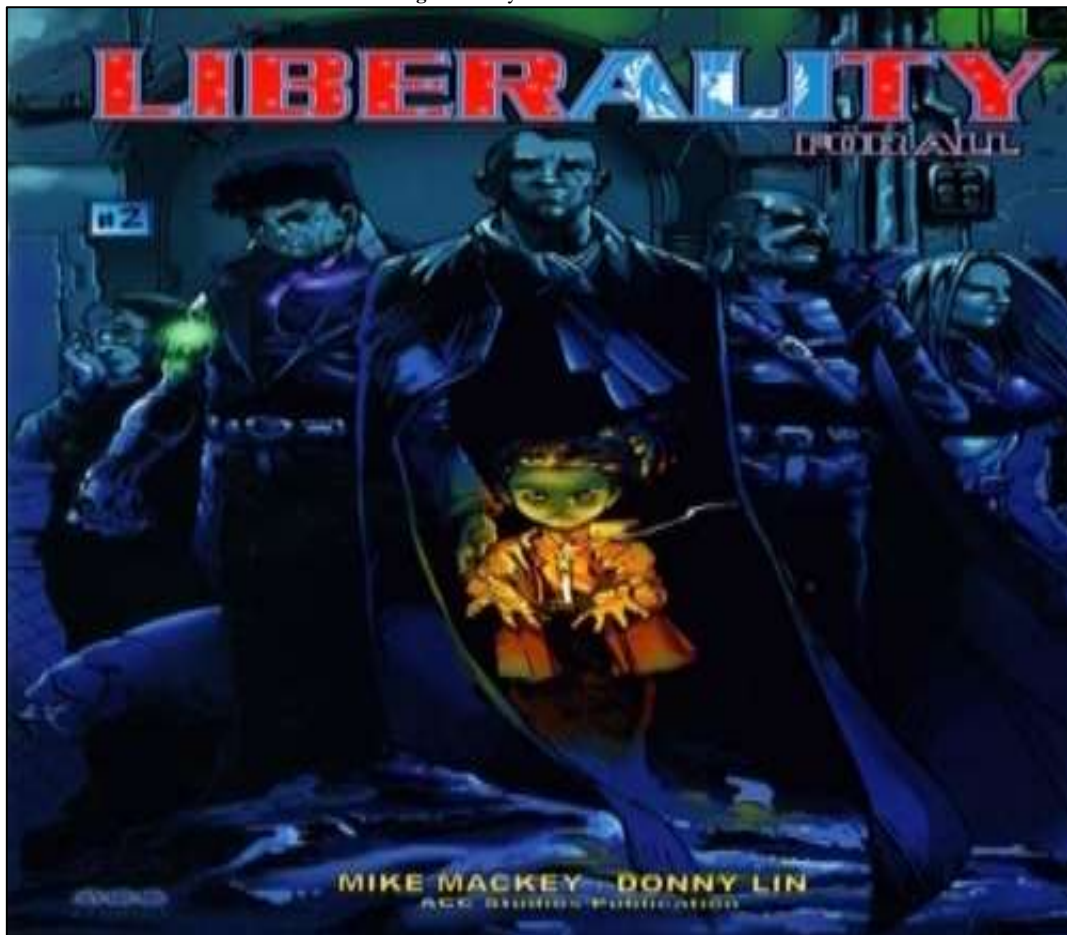**Fig-6.** Liberty for All 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

Figure 5 and 6 are used as title pages for liberty for all. The first picture symbolized the contents of a story with the representation of a crime raid scene, with police and intelligence officers symbolized with uniform and the culprit being down. While the 2<sup>nd</sup> picture gave an insight of saviors on standby and sufferings of the nation, respectively. These pictures are just giving a glimpse of the type of images used in the comic book. As the greatest number of pictures in this comic book are inducing fear and terror, this has also been fitted in the unfavorable category.
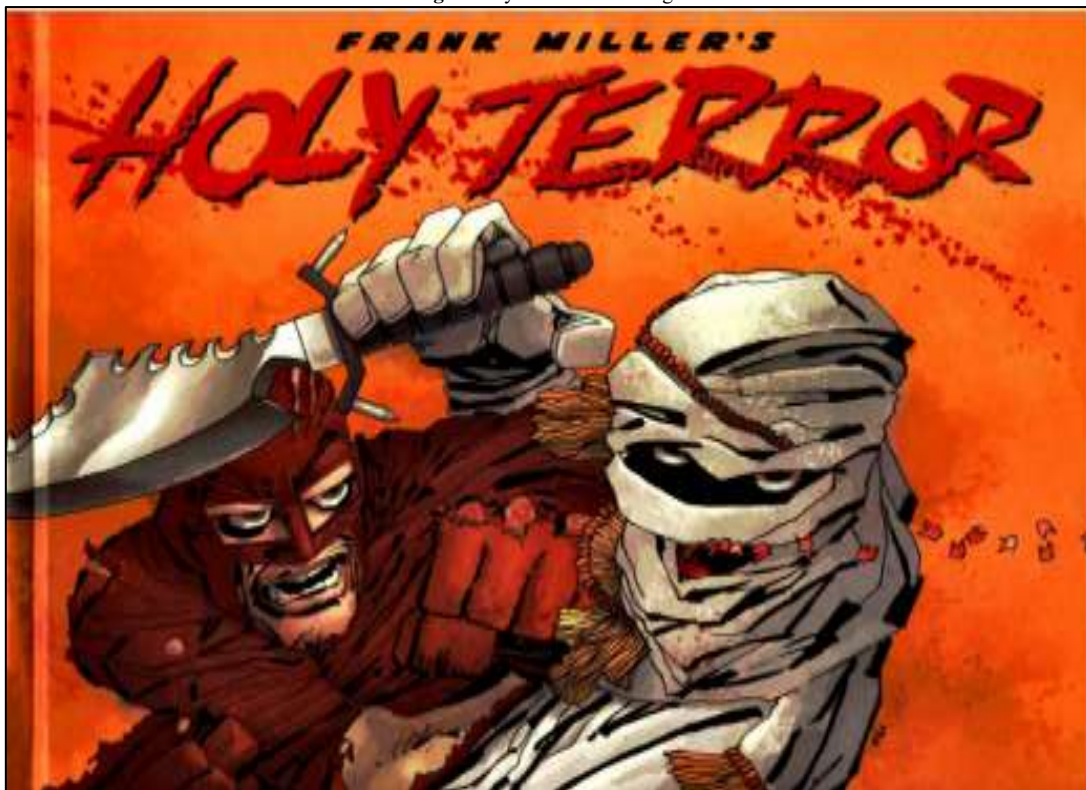
**Fig-7.** Holy Terror's Title Page



**Fig-8.** A Picture Depicted in the Holy Terror



Figures 7 and 8 from Holly Terror gave a clear vibe of the clash of different parties. 1<sup>st</sup> one showed an attacker with the aim of fierce fight but symbolically showed the identity of him as Muslim with the style of turban and mask. The picture also used as the title so it depicting a clear clash of two parties being used in the storyline while 2<sup>nd</sup> one presented tension of nations with nails used and destruction has shown out of door giving an insight of the story. As both the pictures having the fear elements, so the pictures depicted in this book are fitted in the unfavorable category.

## 3.4. Text

**Fig-9.** Sample of Text in Liberality for All



**Fig-10.** Sample of Text in Holy Terror



Figure 9 and 10 depicted the use of text in both comic books. The speech used in these comics was abusive towards Islam. Sometimes it attacked indirectly like in fig 9 but sometimes with clear statements used to destroy the image of Islam (fig 10). The coders coded the text of both the comic books in the unfavorable category because the text used in these books was destroying the image of the Muslims.

## 3.5. Color

**Fig-11.** A Title Page of Liberality for All



**Fig-12.** Holly Terror's Second Last Page



Fig 11 and 12 are used to explain the usage of colors in the two books. In color's category, Liberality for All is included in the neutral category as there were other than black and red colors used in the book. Liberty for All has used mostly shades of brown and gray with red and black sometimes which gave of a gloomy look with a certain feeling of misery and demise. So, Holy Terror fitted in the unfavorable category because the whole book used only three colors; white, red, and black which induced fear. The book is filled with the use of red and black which gave away a look of horror and tension building with fear and threat.

The above findings answered all the entire research questions. As from the incident representation category (Fig 1and 2), it can be judged that comic books are highly exaggerating the 9/11 incident and relating it with the attack on the whole nation. Also, it is observed that Muslims are being portrayed negatively in both books as all the villains of

the comic books belonged to the Muslim community. Even Muslim women were also portrayed as villains while non-Muslims are presented as superheroes (Table 1). Another question on the brutal character is answered from the research and found that out of eight brutal characters, seven are Muslims in Holy Terror while out of a total of four brutal characters, three are Muslims in Liberality for All (Table 1). So, the Muslims are portrayed as brutal in both the comic books.

Both the books included the anti-Muslim attitude by dressing villains in turbans and their faces covered with a veil that represented Muslims (Fig 3 and 4). Even both the books included the women covered in "Burqa" with guns in their hands that are damaging the image of Muslims. All the pictures depicted in these two books are filled with fear elements and presented Muslims as the symbol of terror and the American nation is shown as a savior of the world (Fig 5, 6, 7 and 8).

The text written in Holy terror and Liberality for all is highly sensationalized and hurting the sentiments of Muslims especially Holly Terror when it used the quotation of Hazrat Muhammad (SAW) in a negative manner (Fig 9 and 10). Even the colors used in both the comic books are creating fear and encouraging the negative image of Muslims (Fig 11 and 12). All the above findings and discussion answered the last research question by concluding that both the books are presenting west perspective and ignore the input of the east. So, it endorses the Orientalism concept as well as Framing theory because the book constructed the messages according to a specific mindset to frame Muslims as negative.

## 4. Conclusion

The study explored the relatively soft genre of comic book input in the serious global issue of terrorism. From the content analysis of Holy Terror and Liberality for All, research endeavored to explain how the usage of superheroes and villains in a story can make an impact on the image of Muslims in the eyes of the west. Based on findings, it is concluded that both the books are one-sided, only represent the western point of view and their thoughts about 9/ 11 and its reflection in the coverage of the event even in comic books confirmed the Said's concept of Orientalism. The books framed Muslims as villains, brutal and they intend to destroy the world. On the other hand, non-Muslims are shown as superheroes, fighting with Muslims, and saving the world from them. So, from this point of view, it also substantiated the Framing theory.

This paper may prove beneficial for Pakistan as it is about the comic books published in the well-developed industry of west, which is a role model of developing comic industry of Pakistan and making an impact on Pakistan's newly born industry, as it is learning topic handling, treatment of the subject, graphical inputs from the west. At last, it is concluded that the Pakistani industry can learn the techniques of the western industry but should handle the topic by keeping in view how the West portrayed Muslim characters. Western comic books should also need to be carefully taken regarding the portrayal of real-life terrorism incidents because of the emotional attachment of the affected family to the incident.

## 5. The Implication of the Study

This study may prove significant for the research students and comic book producers in Pakistan as well as in other countries. Students will get an idea to research the same genre and its impact on its readers' thinking. They can research the role of superheroes in the promotion of an ideology. Comic book producers can get the idea from this research that how their content could cultivate fear distort image of a community. It will also suggest Pakistani comic producers about the topic handling of terrorism incident-based comic books. The international comic industry can get the idea that how their way of portraying Muslims can create differences among the Muslim world and their respective countries.

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## Annexure
### Coding Sheet

**Title:** Rendering Muslims as Terrorists in the English Comic Books: Analysis of Liberty for All and Holly Terror.

**Tenure of study**: All the published addition of Holy terror and liberality for all

| Depiction of terrorist group in comic books | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Liberality for all | Holly terror |
| Total Characters | Heroes | | |
| | Villains | | |
| Brutal Characters | Muslim | | |
| | Non-Muslim | | |
| Muslim representation | + | | |
| | - | | |
| | O | | |
| Non-Muslim representation | + | | |
| | - | | |
| | O | | |
| Incident representation | + | | |
| | _ | | |
| | O | | |
| Dress | + | | |
| | - | | |
| | O | | |
| Pictures | + | | |
| | - | | |
| | O | | |
| Text | + | | |
| | - | | |
| | O | | |
| Color | + | | |
| | - | | |
| | O | | |