

The Politics of Post-Essential Islamic Liberation Theology: The Difference and Intersection between Farid Esack and Hamid Dabashi

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Abstract

Farid Esack and Hamid Dabashi are two critical Islamic liberation theology scholars who redefined the discourse on ‘self’ and ‘other’ in contemporary Islamic thought. These two scholars engage with the self and other category of pluralism and the employment of theodicy in Islamic liberation theology. Using pluralism to clear the space for a liberating praxis is the task of Esack, while Dabashi uses the idea of theodicy to challenge the existing consensus on and reconfigure the liberation in Islamic liberation theology. Moving from the otherness of Muslims to the multiplicity of otherness – the various manifestations of self and other – in a pluriversal horizon of liberation, this article deploys both Esack’s and Dabashi’s notions of self and other towards building a new politics of Islamic liberation theology.

Keywords: Islamic liberation theology, pluralism, liberation theodicy, otherness, post-essentialism

Introduction

Farid Esack and Hamid Dabashi are two critical Islamic liberation theology scholar-activists who revolutionized the debates on self and other in contem-

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porary Islamic thought² (Kersten 2019:163). Esack writes in the context of South Africa and its transition from Apartheid to Post-Apartheid (Lamptey 2014:74). Meanwhile, Dabashi speaks about the global proliferation of the Empire that is stateless, borderless, and marked by the immense power of fluidity of capital and the relentless continuation of war (Kersten 2016).

The concept of Islamic liberation theology has been defined by several scholars other than Esack and Dabashi, including Asghar Ali Engineer and Shabbir Akhtar³. These definitions share some commonalities, such as the focus on the liberation of the oppressed and marginalized, the critique of oppressive systems, and the importance of praxis. However, there are also differences in their definitions. Engineer's definition emphasizes the need to balance temporal and metaphysical destiny and the importance of empowering the oppressed through an ideological framework (Engineer 1990:1). Akhtar's definition emphasizes the grassroots generation of theology and the preferential option for the poor, while addressing various forms of oppression (Akhtar 1991:10-11). Esack's definition emphasizes freeing religion from structures that promote uncritical obedience to worldly authority and the need for a participatory and liberating process (Esack 1997:83). The definition of

² There are two ways in which contemporary debates on self and other are formulated: One is a philosophical and conceptual position, and the other is a position that starts from the experience of the margin, such as sexuality, gender, religion, race, illness, criminality, terrorism, etc. The new Islamic liberation theology originates from this second position on self and other, and is aligned with the marginalized within the process of liberation.

³ In the context of the present discussion, it is essential to recognize that the aforementioned four Muslim scholars, namely Engineer, Akhtar, Esack, and Dabashi, are exclusively male. Nonetheless, it should be noted that there are Islamic feminist scholars, including Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, who adopt methodologies akin to those employed in Islamic liberation theology (Rahemtulla 2017). However, their works lack an emphasis on the concept of Islamic liberation theology, resulting in an absence of a comprehensive definition of the Islamic liberation theology when compared to the works of the aforementioned male scholars. All four scholars whose writings are classified as Islamic liberation theology can be differentiated from other tangential and intersectional approaches. With the exception of Akhtar, the remaining three scholars – Engineer, Esack, and Dabashi – espouse an Islamic feminist perspective in relation to Islamic liberation theology.

Dabashi emphasizes the importance of a global conversation, the need to embrace ideological rivals and theological alternatives, and the role of Islam in a world at mimetic odds with itself (Dabashi 2008:15).

While exhibiting divergent interpretations, the viewpoints espoused by Engineer, Akhtar, Esack, and Dabashi converge towards a cohesive consensus for the development of an Islamic liberation theology. The nuanced differences in their perspectives contribute to a multifaceted and dynamic understanding of this theological-political approach. Islamic liberation theology prioritizes the tangible aspects of human life over the metaphysical considerations of the afterlife and opposes systems that favor only the privileged while discriminating against the underprivileged (Engineer 1990:1). It empowers the oppressed and marginalized and advocates for the development of praxis through harmoniously blending the balance between human freedom and metaphysical destiny (Engineer 1990:1). Liberation theologians emphasize the importance of freeing oneself and others from various forms of oppression, including personal sins, as well as political, economic, racial, sexual, environmental, and religious oppressions (Akhtar 1991:10-11). Islamic liberation theology takes inspiration from the Quran and the struggles of all prophets, and engages in continuous and collective theological reflections to further develop a liberative praxis (Esack 1997:83). It must learn from Christian and other liberation theologies and come into coalition and conversation with alternative ideologies of resistance to create a cross-cultural and global liberation movement against the terror of a globalizing Empire (Dabashi 2008:21). This movement must safeguard theological monotheism within a heterogeneous, multifaceted, and syncretic theodicy that embraces ideological rivals and theological alternatives (Dabashi 2008:168). Overall, Islamic liberation theology is concerned with the liberation of individuals and communities from various forms of oppression, taking inspiration from the Quran and the struggles of the prophets. Its praxis involves a participatory and liberating process that empowers the oppressed and marginalized and engages in continuous and collective theological reflection and political praxis. To be effective, Islamic liberation theology needs to be part of a global conversation and coalition, embracing alternative ideologies of resistance.

This article argues that the politics of other and its complex relationship to self comes from the central issues of oppression, injustice, and political and social freedom. The question of the other, or as Enrique Dussel (2003:79) states, *el otro*, is part of a larger tradition of liberation theology in

general and decolonial liberation theology in particular (cf. Vuola 2000:149-180). In his philosophical work, Dussel delves into the concept of *totality*, which he believes surpasses the traditional definition of an ordered whole or the ultimate horizon of meaning for objects (Dussel 2003:22). He argues that modern thinking has made true alterity impossible by introducing the other into the *totality* (Vuola 2000:151). Dussel's methodology for liberation theology endeavors to transcend the dominant *totality*, emanating particularly from Europe and North America, which underpins the political and spiritual rationale of modern colonialism. He identifies three levels to the question of otherness in the contemporary world system (Dussel 2003:22-24): The political, sexual, and educational levels. These aspects have existed throughout the world system for at least the past 500 years. Dussel argues that the everyday 'I conquer' mentality, which originates from the oppressor male, has led to political and sexual domination, completed through educational conquest (Dussel 2003:22-24). The other as exteriority manifests itself as a face beyond the established and institutionalized *totality*, which is a condition for the metaphysical possibility of an authentic, creative, new future (Vuola 2000:152). However, Islamic liberation theology adopts a unique stance on the concept of self and other, distinguishing it from other branches of liberation theology, such as Dussel's, and does not directly address Dussel's position.

In comparison to the works of Engineer and Akhtar, those of Esack and Dabashi display a greater level of engagement and lucidity in addressing the matter of self and other within the context of Islamic liberation theology. As a result, this article utilizes the insights of Esack and Dabashi to investigate the question of self and other in Islamic liberation theology. The two scholars engage with the self and other through the category of pluralism and the employment of theodicy respectively. The larger aim of this article is to trace, discuss, and locate these positions developed by Esack and Dabashi in order to reformulate the narrative of self and other in contemporary Islamic liberation theology. The aim is *not* to give a conclusive definition, but to point towards the potentialities of the existing project of self and other in Islamic liberation theology by underscoring the differences (concepts present in only one of the positions) and intersections (concepts common to both positions). An Islamic liberation theology, as explored in this article, places less emphasis on the individual 'self' and more on the collective 'other'.

There are four sections in this article. The first two sections introduce the major themes of self and other and underscore the peculiar features in the works of Esack and Dabashi. The third section identifies four ways in which Esack and Dabashi differ in their approach to the strategies of conceptualizing self and other. The final section offers an intersectional reading of the two scholars to arrive at a new position of self and other in Islamic liberation theology.

To facilitate comprehension, this article begins by distinguishing three distinct meanings of the term ‘other’. This clarification necessarily gives the divergent positions presented by Esack and Dabashi and proves instrumental in analyzing the conceptual implications of these varying usages. The (lowercase) *other* or ‘small other’ points to the inter-subjective notion of the other. The (uppercase) *Other* or ‘big other’ refers to the systemic position of the other. However, when both these notions come together, the article maintains it as ‘other’ (lowercase).

Self and Other in the Work of Esack: Margin and Pluralism

Esack presents the interrelationship between self and other in two ways. The first is his implicit theoretical position on self and other based on the authorship and ownership of his experience (Esack 1997:2-3). Second is his explicit theoretical position of privileging the other to develop a unique notion of pluralism using quranic hermeneutics and socio-political analyses. These two are not mutually exclusive positions, but a symbiosis of action and reflection in the process of praxis, acknowledging pluralism as a prerequisite for liberation.

The Other in the Margin and Self-Narration

Esack⁴ explores self and other within the margin from his immediate personal context: ‘My early life as a victim of apartheid and poverty, seeing my moth-

⁴ Esack’s analysis of the personal contexts of the other and self extends beyond the specific passages examined in this article. In his work entitled *On being a Muslim: Finding a religious path in the world today* (Esack 1999), Esack offers a personal reflection on Islamic liberation theology. However, this article concentrates primarily on his theoretically oriented text on Islamic liberation theology, which

er finally succumb under the burden of economic exploitation and patriarchy, filled me with an abiding commitment to a comprehensive sense of justice' (Esack 1997:2). The triple structure of class, race, and gender informs the social position of the self for Esack. The other in Esack's experience is summarized as follows:

I was raised in Bonteheuwel, coloured township on the Cape Flats to which our family forcibly moved under Group Area Act...The fact that our oppression was made bearable by the solidarity, humanity and laughter of our Christian neighbours made me suspicious of all religious ideas that claimed salvation only for their own and imbued me with a deep awareness of the intrinsic worth of the religious Other (Esack 1997:2-3).

Esack wrote to put himself and others in constant conversation by traveling between his experience of anti-apartheid activism in South Africa and his present position at the university as a researcher, writer, and teacher with firm activist commitments. However, this theoretical experience is bridged in the form of self-writing to give his subjective experience more weight in the political narrative. The self of Esack is constantly in conversation with his experience of being his own other in the margin. This can be conceptualized as a liberation theology method because it often works as a way of telling stories of oneself and others because of its unique position in the life of marginalized communities in the world (Phan 2000:49). Esack's consideration of the relation between self and other exists in the form of an abstract theoretical reconstruction and at the juncture of personal experience and praxis.

Esack's method of positioning the other is also located within the process of writing about Islamic liberation theology itself. Rather than creating abstract concepts and ideas to understand the self and the other, Esack writes to affirm a position of immanence to the vulnerabilities, dependencies, contradictions, incompleteness, instability, and violence that characterize the mutual imbrication of self and other. Rather than solving the persistence of the other in self or giving it a better narrative, writing as a praxis in Islamic liberation theology narrates the irreducibility of the problem of the margin at

he presents in his book, *Qur'an, liberation and pluralism: An Islamic perspective of interreligious solidarity against oppression* (Esack 1997).

the base of the experiences within the margin. Esack attempts to bridge the gap between ‘authorship’ and ‘ownership’ of experience⁵ in the margin, where the latter always transcends the former. The fundamental problem that concerns Esack is the experiential dimension of self, which is fundamentally linked to its other, and this social link, in turn, makes the self itself possible. As Jerusha Lamptey (2014:73-74) points out, the stable and essential self in contemporary reformist Islamic thought is challenged by Esack’s intervention (Esack 2003:171).

Identity and Pluralism

Esack provides a unique reading of identity and pluralism through quranic hermeneutics. The liberatory quranic hermeneutics of Esack developed out of a critical engagement with the legacy of modern quranic hermeneutics. Fazlur Rahman, a prominent Pakistani Islamic scholar, has revolutionized quranic hermeneutics by introducing the concept of historical context. His innovative ‘double movement theory’ entails a comprehensive historical criticism of the quranic text. The first movement mandates an exhaustive analysis of the immediate environment in which the revelation occurred – the 7th-century Arabian society (Esack 1997:65). This requires a meticulous study of the political, cultural, economic, and social fabric of Meccan life. The second movement involves extracting broader socio-moral objectives from this classical context and applying them to the contemporary context (Esack 1997:65).

In stark contrast, Esack’s hermeneutic approach is firmly rooted in the present rather than the classical context (Esack 1997:77). Therefore, his primary focus is on the contemporary context of the reader while acknowledging the societal conditions of 7th-century Arabian life. Although the Quran and its interpretation are inherently linked to the historical moment of its revelation, Esack deliberately prioritizes the present moment over late antiquity. Notably, Esack’s interpretation of the Quran through a contemporary lens aims to foreground the marginalized and oppressed perspectives. Given the focus of the article, this section relies less on the techniques of quranic hermeneutics, but looks only at its theoretical implication for the definition of identity and pluralism in Islamic liberation theology.

⁵ For a detailed reading on the difference between authorship and ownership of experience, inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, please refer to Hacker (2013:68).

The position of an Islamic identity for Esack is constituted through the interaction of self and other (Esack 1988:493-495). The Islamic identity is not only about identity, but also about what the identity excludes and includes in the context of oppression and liberation. In other words, for Esack, an Islamic identity presupposes the other as understood from their own lived experience at the margin. Esack's early years in apartheid South Africa when he lived near a Black Christian, and his experiences with religious and secular activists, made him conclude that the actual other is at once the closest of all possible neighbors and yet separated from you by religion, race, and class (Esack 1997:2). The other is often incredibly close, yet unbearably remote. Furthermore, a revolutionary Islamic identity is formed through the irreducibility of the other – within the 'self' (Esack 1997:144).

Thus, the category of *muslim* (lowercase) is not a closed identity, but a name of praxis against social segmentation that bases itself on a radical egalitarianism ordained by the divine. Moreover, the *kafir*, in turn, is the one who rejects the divine imperative of egalitarianism for the defence of social systems: 'Thus, *muslim*, and all its positive connotations, for this world and the hereafter, cannot merely refer to the biological accident of being born in a Muslim family. Similarly, *kafir* cannot refer to the accident of being born outside such a family' (Esack 1997:115-116). Esack argues that the Quran's response to both self and other is gradual and historical, evolving with time and space (Lamprey 2014:156). He states that the 'Muslim reluctance to deal with the question of contextualization beyond the search for an isolated occasion of revelation has led to generalized denunciation of Other, irrespective of the socio-historical context of the texts used in support of such rejection and damnation' (Esack 1997:146-147).

The ideological Muslim community espoused in Quran breaks from the existing idea of a community that is determined on essentialist and identitarian bases. The critique aimed at other monotheistic religions in the Quran, according to Esack, is not intended as a total exclusion, but rather as a critique of their exclusiveness and monopolization of the divine. Historically, technical terms such as *Islam*, *iman* (*faith*, *belief*), and *kufr* (literally *ingratitude*, usually *unbelief*) were reified to control the discussion on self and other in Islam (Esack 1997:114). He argues: 'In other words, these words are no longer seen as qualities that individuals may have – qualities that are dynamic and vary in intensity in different stages of an individual's life. Instead, these terms are now regarded as the entrenched qualities of groups, bordering on

ethnic characteristics' (Esack 1997:115). After a detailed examination of *Islam*, *iman* and *kufr*, Esack states:

The fact of group identity should not be allowed to subvert a principle of personal accountability that the Qur'an explicitly and repeatedly affirms. If individuals are held accountable for deeds that are going to be weighed, then one is left with no alternative but to affirm the dynamic nature of *Islam*, *iman* and *kufr* (Esack 1997:144).

Esack concludes: 'Individuals are ever-changing entities. Every new encounter with ourselves and others, every deed that we do or refuse to do, is a step in our perpetual transformation' (Esack 1997:144). In other words, the very notion of the self arises only because the subject responds to the other. Since much of the experience of other is also ours, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw the lines that supposedly constitute our identity (Esack 2007:125-126). In addition, the power relations between self and other are not neutral. The questions of hierarchy between the other and the self are set in a political context. For example, in order to understand the Muslim identity, there is a need to position the Muslim identity through its articulation of being a minority. Lamptey (2014:81) argues that

in outlining his hermeneutical approach, Farid Esack argues that it is imperative to 'centre' Muslim minorities in contemporary Islamic discourse. Referring primarily to Muslims who do not live under Muslim rule, he states that minority perspectives are uniquely equipped to offer significant contributions to the discourse on pluralism and diversity. Minority perspectives, however, have been largely marginalized and ignored in efforts to articulate the relevance of Islam to contemporary challenges, such as religious diversity.

The purpose of the quranic injunction of gradual response to other is not to shun away from the issues of power, but to speak about power from the perspective of the oppressed in changing contexts (Esack 1997:148). The self and other in the Quran are constantly making and unmaking justice and power in the context of liberation and oppression, which in itself endorses the praxis of pluralism from the margins (Esack 1997:49). On the other hand, the problem with liberal notions of equality of all human beings or pluralism is

its lack of encounter with the power relations and challenges of justice that pervade the very category of 'human' (Esack 1997:174). Thus, liberals often denounce quranic positions on self and other while ignoring the historic context of its genesis and its engagement with power and injustice. In this sense, the liberal reading, as well as a variety of politically active and quietist readings⁶, converge and agree on the ahistorical, ossified, and institutionalized categories of self and other in the historical constructions of Islam, in contrast to Esack's liberatory, pluralist, reading of self and other.

Esack's conception of pluralism can be traced through his reading of the Other. In a later article, he categorizes six types of practical experience of other to understand the contemporary Muslim position (Esack 2000:532-541). Various forms of otherness include enemy, potential self, unavoidable neighbor, self and intellectual-theological sparring partner, self and spiritual partner, as well as self and comrade. Compared to his 1997 work, his article published in 2000, offers a global orientation and practical awareness, arguing that it gives a more detailed discussion of his earlier approach (cf. Esack 1997) towards the question of other. For Esack (1997:179-180), three types of construction of the Other need to be considered for a conceptual position (discussed below). I will consider the latter position, given the focus of this article on the conceptual position of Esack.

The first is the construction of the Other at the level of humanity that promotes the idea that all humans are equal in order to cover up oppression and injustice. The second is the historical reification of religious categories and its construction of otherness to create an exclusive religious community. The third is the challenge of the Other at the level of liberatory politics and its distinction between friends and enemies (Esack 1993:7). The first two must be rejected for their rootedness in injustice or a lack of firm conviction about injustice in developing the praxis of pluralism, while the final one is an important problem that must be maintained in actual revolutionary political practice: 'The embrace of Otherness was thus a qualified one of the Other as a comrade in arms' (Esack 1997:180).

In short, one can derive two positions on the other within the South African anti-apartheid Muslim activism, as espoused by Esack. The first posi-

⁶ Esack (2000:532-540) engages with a variety of Muslim positions on the other, including fundamentalist, liberal, apolitical, interfaith dialogue, and traditionalists, in opposition to and at times in conjunction with each other.

tion is that Muslims should join with the oppressed other from a position of knowledge and representation, to form a counter-hegemonic Muslim subject position⁷. The second position, as practiced by Esack, argues that the black Other of Apartheid is already a part of the muslim subject position in apartheid South Africa. This is not another essentialist Muslim subject, representing the poor and marginalized from a position of knowledge, but a transformed muslim subject with an imperative of solidarity with the oppressed black population within the apartheid regime.

Shortly, Esack argues that the politics of a muslim subject is formed through its prior encounter with the other. The muslim politics is thus formed through the experience of other in the muslim self. The experience of the black other in apartheid South Africa forms the liberatory muslim subject position in Esack's Islamic liberation theology. It is not another dominating Muslim subject, but a transformed muslim subject through its encounter with the other.

Self and Other in the Work of Dabashi: Hermeneutics of Alterity and Theodicy

Whereas Esack regards the construction of self and other in Islam, both on an individual and collective level, as a hermeneutical problem that is connected with theology and the socio-political context, Dabashi focuses on the Muslim collective and the political interpretation of the self and other⁸. While Esack employs the lens of pluralism to think through the challenge of self and other in Islamic liberation theology, Dabashi mobilizes the category of theodicy. Dabashi (2008:14-15) proposes an Islamic liberation theology based not on the authenticity of the self, but on the precariousness of the other. The au-

⁷ Esack has developed the notion of solidarity to speak about the counter-hegemonic position of coming together of the oppressed subjectivities to form a coalition against oppression (Palombo 2014:45). He prefers solidarity over dialogue, even in the coming together of faith communities. This is one of the key commitments of Islamic liberation theology (Palombo 2014:45).

⁸ Dabashi's formulation focuses on the collective, and completely lacks an engagement from an individual perspective. Hence, I use the self and other in the following section without making any qualifications as discussed in the section about Esack.

thetic revolutionary subject of Islamic liberation theology is replaced with an inter-subjective position, based on the ethics of otherness rooted in the hermeneutics of alterity⁹. The politics of identity, in turn, can enact violence against its own others, especially in the context of power. The hermeneutics of alterity denies the privileging of a particular experience or category, but makes it imperative to understand ourselves within a composition of otherness – in a cosmopolitan multitude¹⁰.

As Dabashi (2008:72) cites Emmanuel Levinas as the philosophical basis of his ethics of otherness, his position on self and other is based on the Levinasian, not the Husserlian notion of other. The Husserlian understanding of the other is connected to Immanuel Kant's position on experience and

⁹ The later work of Dabashi (2013:15) puts forth the argument that the Islamic tradition should be examined through an alterity-based lens instead of identity politics. According to him, the Islamic tradition has always been defined by a hermeneutics of alterity, but this concept has been overshadowed by the imposition of colonial identity politics on the Muslim community. Dabashi notes that, even in this context of colonial duress, Muslims have contributed to the erosion of their collective integrity. He underscores that Islam cannot be reduced to any one sect or perspective, but rather encompasses a diverse array of perspectives that have been synthesized into a gestalt view of Muslims. To properly understand the Islamic tradition in the contemporary era, Dabashi asserts that it is crucial to revive this gestalt view, which is rooted in a hermeneutics of alterity.

¹⁰ Dabashi's work tackles the challenging task of conceptualizing and putting into practice alternatives that enable diversity and challenge hierarchical structures and binary thinking. This is a critical issue in the current discourse, and it is an area where the nomadic thoughts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari offer a unique perspective and approach, albeit in different circumstances and for different reasons. Nomadic thinking does not simply inhabit spaces, but actively creates its own habitats and expands in all directions (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:5). They combine different spaces to create a deterritorialized space, which they navigate through nomadic movement. Nomadic thinking is a mode of creative thinking that resists the boundaries and limitations of institutionalized thought. In contrast, the state apparatus establishes borders and boundaries to create a sense of order and sovereignty (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:24). The nomadic thinking, characterized by movement and becoming, collides with the state apparatus and is perceived as a threat. Overall, the nomadic thinker struggles for creative freedom and integrity. This struggle is not just an intellectual exercise, but a fight for the very existence of the free space of thinking and acting.

cognitive structure (Taylor 1992:86). The world as an experience triggers the human mind to construct the world in its image. There is no subjective understanding of the world by the human mind. The Kantian position assumes that the world is a projection of the universal human mind, but the world can exist without this projection (Maldonado-Torres 2008:38-39). Edmund Husserl argues that the experience of the world shapes and constructs the human mind (cf. Maldonado-Torres 2008:39). However, the self and other are not part of this distinction between world and self in the writings of Kant and Husserl. The subject's complete subsumption of the other and the world is a feature of Husserlian phenomenology. On the other hand, the Levinasian other is a pre-cognitive other that cannot be subsumed or rationalized through our experience in the world (Maldonado-Torres 2008:39). Of course, beyond his invocation of the Levinasian other, Dabashi does not spell out his theoretical affinity towards Levinas in a succinct manner.

However, the invocation of other by Dabashi needs to be remarked on and situated differently from views like the philosophical context of a Levinasian self-other dialectic. Dabashi's book, *Islamic liberation theology: Resisting the empire* (Dabashi 2008) sets the path for liberation by destroying the old certainties of anti-colonial Islamic liberation theology. However, his book, *Being a Muslim in the world* (Dabashi 2013) clears the path of liberation by conceptually elaborating the basic premises of Islamic liberation theology through a new lexicon of liberation. It is a project of 'breaking the binary' between Islam and the West, religion and secular, and Muslims and non-Muslims, to envision hermeneutics of alterity (Dabashi 2013:127). Both these works mutually reinforce the project of Islamic liberation theology by breaking the established binaries of earlier Islamic liberation theology.

From Politics of Identity to Hermeneutics of Alterity

Dabashi develops his conceptualization of self and other through his position on alterity. In his scheme, the hermeneutics of alterity is an alternative to the politics of identity (Dabashi 2013:25). The politics of identity is based on the idea that self and other are fixed, oppositional, and fortified categories (Dabashi 2013:25). On the contrary, a hermeneutics of alterity is about breaking the binary, hierarchy, and stability of these categories (Kersten 2017:81-

96)¹¹. This breakdown can be in many forms: Either as a new hybrid, formed from the fusion of self and other, or as the negation of the fixed domains of self and other (Dabashi 2013:25). The breaking of the binary opposition between self and other remakes Islamic liberation theology as Islamic liberation theodicy. Put differently, the politics of an identity-based distinction between self and other is replaced with a position based on the hermeneutics of alterity in Islamic liberation theology to envision a new Islamic liberation theodicy.

Dabashi (2008:197) argues that the politics of the Muslim collective as the anti-colonial other – in opposition to the oppressive Western self – implodes in the face of the new incarnation of global capital and the global rise of the Empire. The analysis of the Empire was popularized through the works of Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri. There is a difference between the resistance to the Empire as presented by Hardt and Negri and the one proposed by Dabashi. The Empire does not confine itself to controlling the production of the good, as the Empire controls the production of life itself (Hardt & Negri 2009:x). The biopolitical production of life and subjectivity – from material labor to immaterial feeling – is the core of the Empire. It does not confine itself to the domination of one state over another or of a few corporations in the advanced capitalist Western states. Although agreeing much with this, Hardt, Negri, and Dabashi differ on the mode of resistance to the Empire. The question of Islamic resistance was erased to make space for the emerging logic of the multitude as an immanent but dispersed force of resistance against the Empire by Hardt and Negri (2009:45).

On the other hand, Dabashi retains the Islamic mode of resistance as a serious site of resistance in the context of the Empire by reworking the colonial grammar of the Islamic identity. The collective notion of self and other in relation to Muslims demands a self-revaluation in the formulation of the

¹¹ Carol Kersten (2017:81-96) argues that Dabashi's critique centers on the autonormativity of Western thought, which he regards as arising from its self-perception as the dominant intellectual framework. Despite this criticism, however, Dabashi utilizes the intellectual legacy of the West to construct a counter-discourse. This endeavor is informed by his own introspection and self-reflection. Through an analysis of the Iranian revolution and its religious origins in Shi'a Islam, Dabashi ultimately contends that the revolution's success can be viewed as a rejection of the West and its dominant other – political Islam. The convergence of the binaries of Islam and the West ultimately resulted in the self-destruction of the Islamic revolution at its culmination.

new Islamic liberation theology as a hermeneutics of alterity. According to Dabashi,

[w]ith ‘the West’ having now finally exhausted its historical calamities and conceptually imploded, and with the rise of a mode of globalized Empire with no particular center to any presumed periphery, the emerging cartography of global resistance to US-led military adventurism, and the calamities that it causes, requires a radically different mode of participation by Muslims in planetary resistance to this predatory empire (Dabashi 2008:197).

Dabashi redefines the history of Islamic liberation theology in the context of events after 9/11 through the lens of the hermeneutics of alterity, to develop a new Islamic liberation theology. His historiography shows that the exhaustion of anti-colonial Islamism reached a tipping point after the emergence of militant Islamism at the end of the ‘Western cold war’. It proved that militant Islamic mutation of anti-colonial Islamism has reached a dead end without offering a positive project for Muslims. The only solution it has offered, is reactionary violence to the critical nodes of the global Empire. Thus, the place of resistance has been emptied for the emergence of a new Islamic liberation theology, capable of resisting the global Empire and the predatory logic of global capitalism (Dabashi 2008:187).

By employing the category of the hermeneutics of alterity, Dabashi proposes that Islamic liberation theology should resist the racist, colonialist, and statist structure of the Empire, especially by taking Palestine as its paradigm and point of departure. However, this should come from a position of multiplicity, which includes all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of their religious and political affiliation (Dabashi 2008:198): ‘This objective, the ultimate aspiration of any liberation theodicy one might propose, is the only legitimate solution to the most enduring sore at the heart of the regional politics over which presides the predatory US imperialism’.

When Liberation Theology Becomes Liberation Theodicy

For Dabashi, an Islamic liberation theology has thus become a liberation theodicy, based on his proposed position in the form of the hermeneutics of alterity. The Islamic liberation theodicy refers to a liberation movement shaped by its rival theologies and ideologies in praxis, by constantly reinventing and

reshaping each other in the path of liberation. Dabashi states that '[t]he difference between a liberation theology and a liberation theodicy is, very simply put, the difference between an emancipatory movement in categorical isolation from the rest of the world and one integral to the global collapse of all binary oppositions' (Dabashi 2008:216). In other words, the politics of an essentialized identity is replaced by the hermeneutics of alterity to become an Islamic liberation theodicy (Dabashi 2008:215-217). Theodicy as a term does not simply refer to the classical discussion of why evil exists, but also extends to the redemption of the world as a site of potentialities being developed in theodicy, thereby moving away from theology's disavowal of the worldliness of experience¹² (Mavelli 2016). Islamic liberation theodicy is therefore the reimagination of the diversity and alterity in the world after the collapse of the binary of 'Islam and the West' (Dabashi 2008:22).

The overarching theodicy of Dabashi posits that a framework for Islamic liberation theology pertinent to the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the termination of the cold war needs to be constructed. The conventional ideological and political binary between Islam and the West has become obsolete due to the emergence of a new global Empire, characterized by a distinctive regime of power and resistance spanning the world. The US-led Empire's war on terror has generated widespread warfare, torture, and impoverishment, necessitating a novel approach to theodicy to address issues of good, evil, salvation, and liberation, particularly for those who have suffered under the Empire. It is imperative to shift away from the ideological framework of anti-colonial Islamism and its binary opposition of Islam versus the West towards a new analysis of power and resistance that encompasses multiple worlds of power and resistance without clear demarcation between the inside and outside of the Empire's realm.

The immediate context of the hermeneutics of alterity to the formation of Islamic liberation theodicy is the global political landscape itself.

¹² Theodicy does not confine itself to the pre-modern religious past where the transcendent Other in God's design exists for the world to explain suffering, torture, and pain (Mavelli 2016:123). However, it continues to haunt the modern secular present in the form of secular immanent rationality as the new discourse of torture, pain, and suffering that is inflicted on the subjects of the terrorist, fundamentalist, poor, evil races and barbarians to rescue the life of the wealthy, healthy, and civilized sections of the population (Mavelli 2016:123).

The reconfiguration of the world in terms of the management of goods and people after globalization, changed the world's political landscape considerably (Dabashi 2008:215). Historically, the globalization of the elite was constructed as a flow of goods and commodities with no respect for the borders of the nations, while simultaneously constraining the flow of people (Mouffe 2009:119-120). However, the flow of capital across state borders ironically necessitates the flow of people from one place to another, which in turn forms the basis of globalization from below or the politics of the multitude. It is a change unanticipated by the global elites that has redrawn the issues of power and subjectivity across the planet through the proliferation of nationalism at the center, with war and armed violence in the periphery (Han 2018:13). It is in this context that Dabashi (2008:215; original emphasis) argues:

What this geographical re-imagining of Muslims occasions is a re-emergence of Islam in correspondence with seismic changes and epistemic ruptures marking global transformations in the historical circumstances under which from early in the nineteenth century forward Islamic Ideology emerged as a site of political resistance to colonialism. That Islamic Ideology was territorially exclusive to what was categorically called *Islamic societies* or *Dar al-Islam*. That territorial designation is no longer valid; this emerging conception of Islam-in-the-world can no longer thus geographically delineate itself.

The globalization from below or the emergence of the multitude is a powerful subaltern mode of resistance that requires a fresh interrogation from Islamic liberation theology. Dabashi adds that '[t]he categorical assumption of so-called Islamic societies can no longer conceal the globalizing formation of international civil societies and the dominant force of the constitutionally cosmopolitan middle class in much of the so-called Islamic world' (Dabashi 2008:215). He has dedicated a comprehensive volume to the topic of the new geography of liberation theology in the aftermath of the decline of Islamism (Dabashi 2009). In this volume, he formulates 'liberation geography' as a critical response to the spatial understanding of power and resistance with respect to the issue of Islamism (Dabashi 2009:xii). The dichotomous worldview of the house of Islam, which was fundamental to the ideological horizon of Islamism, has become obsolete. The concept of liberation geography ex-

tends beyond the conventional geography of the house of Islam and introduces a novel form of networked geography of liberation theology.

Dabashi reevaluates the self and other in Islamic liberation theology because the world is no longer divided between Islam and the West. It has transmuted to global contradictions between the elites and the subaltern without borders on the one side, and the state on the other¹³. The organic emergence of Islamic liberation theodicy is happening at this critical juncture of globalization of people and capital. According to Dabashi (2008:216), we are currently observing the termination of not only Islamic ideology, but also all liberation theologies that were created as opposition to traditional European colonialism. In its place, Islamic liberation theodicy is emerging, engaging in an innovative discourse with other liberation movements that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. The notable feature of an Islamic liberation theodicy for Dabashi is the ‘rise of a critical and creative consciousness in hermeneutic conversation with its presence in a polyvocal context and multicultural world; however, it is not another global project but a “polylocality” of people and things’ (Dabashi 2008:216). In other words, it is not the universalism of one culture over another, but the plurality of many voices and cultures emerging within multiple local contexts. Dabashi highlights the notable feature of Islamic liberation theodicy as the emergence of a critical and creative consciousness in a polyvocal and multicultural world, rather than being just another global project based on war and domination (Dabashi 2008:215).

This new Islamic liberation theology employs an embodied world of Islam through the twinning of theodicy and hermeneutics of alterity, where ‘real Islam’ exists within and encounters the world (Dabashi 2008:217):

¹³ One of the symptoms of the global political landscape after globalization is that the power of the nation-states has been eroded by the free circulation of capital, but this has eventually transformed into a renewed anxiety about the sovereignty of the nation and its people. For instance, in the logic of Wendy Brown (2010: 133), the building of border walls by India and the USA – the so-called largest and greatest democracies – is a symbolic attempt to speak about the anxiety of sovereignty in the face of the crisis of the nation-state at the time of globalization. The ethno-nationalist politics in various democracies of the world shows the new structure of politics after globalization. In addition, the new politics of sovereignty also found its meaning in the current global religious resurgence among the poor.

In other words, Islamic liberation theodicy replaces Islam where it was, in the world, cognizant and conversant with the world: Islam-in-the-world...The real world, and not the fabricated binary between 'Islam and the West', will now again become the home of a cosmopolitan and worldly Islam, with its other-worldly claims on its adherents' matters of private piety and public tolerance.

The 'real' Islam, as promised by the proponents of Islamic ideology, was masking the worldliness of experience in Islam, using the device of 'real' to give an authentic revolutionary zeal (Dabashi 2008:217). As such, Dabashi suggests that Islamic liberation theology as theodicy should move to a position that takes the question of 'real' or 'authentic' as a production of the world of multitudes, where the authenticity of real Islam can be constructed and practiced within a pluriversal world. Thus, an Islamic liberation theodicy narrates the Muslim self as a component of the multitude from an Islam-in-the-world perspective, beyond the isolationist promise of 'real' Islam.

The Islamic liberation theodicy, as proposed by Dabashi, is a new revolutionary movement, not for the sake of power, but for constantly pushing the established binary of power in terms of oppression and resistance. In short, the violent exclusion of alterity in the formation of militant Islamism was replaced by a cosmopolitan pluriversal Islam of the oppressed that can learn from multiple sources, including rival religious, agnostic, secular, and atheistic communities. The suspicion of power is connected to both the other and the self, thus making Islamic liberation theodicy an open rebellion in the world. Moreover, Islamic liberation theology as theodicy is not aimed at getting greater Islamic power, but at exercising constant vigilance against the technologies of domination that work in the life of Muslims and others in the name of both oppression and liberation (Dabashi 2008:235).

The Difference between Esack and Dabashi

Esack and Dabashi display both crucial differences and intersections in the engagement with self and other. Some of the points on which they diverge, have to do with the differentiation of the political position of other, the practice and theory of otherness, and the practical consequence of their approach in understanding oppression and liberation. However, these differences are

not pronounced to show that there is a great divide in Islamic liberation theology, but to show that the discourse of Islamic liberation theology has different implications for the two scholars. These differences can be viewed as a series of resistance strategies in the field of Islamic liberation theology to problematize the essentialist understanding of self and other.

Privileging the Other or Breaking the Binary

While both Esack and Dabashi argue that there is no essential self or essential other, they nevertheless work with the available articulatory method and practice of self and other in the context of Islamic liberation theology, to develop a strategy for engaging with self and other. Esack theorizes the relationship of self and other by privileging the other – in relation to the self – in such a way that it is not essentialized or fixed, but strategically essential to the operation of power (Esack 1997:116). Dabashi's strategy, on the other hand, is to break the binary of self and other without privileging either, thereby making the multiplicity of self and other possible through fusion or negation (Dabashi 2008:16).

Action and Reflection

The notion of self and other by Esack is formed through his praxis, i.e., through a cycle of actions and reflections. In contrast, Dabashi relies less on praxis and more on the conceptual and abstract. There is a consequence to this position on theory and praxis. Dabashi's theoretical scheme offers a new political collective with considerably less articulation of personal position. On the other hand, Esack (1997:144) develops his idea and practice of self and other as the interaction of the individual self with the political collective. He moves from a personal position to develop a collective position of liberation, and is more open to the dynamism of the individual and social self. In his turn, Dabashi develops from a collective position by extrapolating the inherent fluidity of the self and other in a post-colonial Empire and the contradictions of capital in it (Dabashi 2007:190).

Beyond Liberation and Oppression versus the Power of Oppression

Dabashi's rethinking of self and other involves complicating the established notion of the liberation of the oppressed (Dabashi 2005:95-96). The binary of oppression and liberation is not central to Dabashi's analytical scheme. He questions the very category of liberation, but does not chart a clear path for it.

Esack (1997:202-203), on the other hand, relates more powerfully to the challenge of oppression and how to envision the horizon of liberation. In Esack's analytical scheme, the context of oppression looms large, while the category of liberation is a promise based on praxis. In other words, Esack's liberation theology is in constant opposition, envisioned as a direct action-based practice, with the distinction between enemy and comrade marked. The privileging of otherness is important to distinguish between comrades and enemies. Alternatively, Dabashi (2005) comes from the position of the theatre of protest, as he articulates the performative dimension of the self in relation to other, where the breakdown of self and other becomes central to the performance of a protesting subject (Dabashi 2008:187).

The Intersections between Esack and Dabashi

This section proposes the intersections between Esack and Dabashi to develop a post-essential Islamic liberation theology. There are three parts to this section. The first part discusses the similarities between the articulations of the self and other as a consequence of the convergence between these two approaches. The second and third parts propose the possibilities of post-essential Islamic liberation theology as the result of a creative synthesis between the approaches of Esack and Dabashi.

The aim of this discourse is to present a new definition of post-essential Islamic liberation theology, drawing from the perspectives of both Esack and Dabashi. The concept of self and other forms the basis of the post-essentialist politics of Islamic liberation theology. It comprises two main aspects, namely the issue of a preferential option for the poor and the changing social analysis that adapts to the historical context. As a consequence of the dynamic nature of the social analysis, Islamic liberation theology undergoes continuous evolution to reflect the shifting historical circumstances, leading to a corresponding transformation in the question of preferential options for the poor. Furthermore, parameters such as class, caste, gender, race, nation, religion, and other relevant vectors of power also shift in meaning, in response to changing historical contexts. Therefore, the fundamental elements of Islamic liberation theology are constantly in flux and subject to change due to the praxis of Islamic liberation theology.

It is worth emphasizing that the core of Islamic liberation theology is closely linked to its articulatory praxis within a specific historical context. The existence of Islamic liberation theology in different historical contexts creates instability in its essence, which is directly proportional to its articulatory praxis. Hence, the essential nature of Islamic liberation theology cannot be separated from its context-specific praxis. This insight is critical in defining a post-essential Islamic liberation theology, using the perspectives of Esack and Dabashi. It is not argued that Islamic liberation theology lacks an essence altogether, but rather that the essence is fluid, unstable, and partial, contingent upon the praxis of Islamic liberation theology within a particular context, which emanates from the complex dynamics of self and other.

Dominant Other and Unconditional Other

There are two visions of other, as proposed by Esack and Dabashi. One is the dominant and hegemonic other, which the self wants to dissociate and liberate itself from (Dabashi 2008:117), while the second is the unconditional other with whom the self requires an ethical encounter without condition (Esack 1997:3).

Dabashi (2008:2) dissociates himself from the hegemonic and dominant other, but finds that the very act of dissociation can sometimes mean a lack of ethics in the form of a temptation for domination through other means, especially in the form of militant Islamism or the metaphysics of identity in the name of Muslim politics. In order to avoid this problem, Dabashi argues for an ethical relationship with other. Similarly, Esack (1997: 123) also dissociates himself from the dominant other because it is regressive, oppressive, and complicit in oppression. However, the political project of Esack and Dabashi is not confined to giving primacy to the other in the formation of the self, as they reconfigure both self and other to envision a liberating praxis for a liberated world. This means that the self-other relationship is also transformed in the process of liberation.

Big Other and Small Other

There can be two levels of the other¹⁴ in Islamic liberation theology at the intersection of the approaches of Esack and Dabashi. One is a small other,

¹⁴ I am indebted to the differentiation of 'big other' and 'small other' for its descriptive purpose, although its broader application can be traced to Lacanian psycho-

which can be perceived as other individuals or even our internal self-narration as our counterparts. It is the mirror of both our self (the inter-subjective self) and other relationships in everyday social and political relations. The accentuation of the big other constitutes the secondary tier of the other that arranges social connections and molds individual subjectivity.

The self, in terms of the individual and the collective, is constantly shaped by both the small other and the big other to form a dual split. That is, when we speak to the small other, the common language we use is the symbolic order provided by the big other, though it is a source outside both of us. The conversation between the self and other – for instance, both in me and a friend – exceeds the intention of my language and always refers to something outside it. The lesson is that the self is not transparent to others, and at the same time, it is not self-sufficient. Any claims to gain complete control of the big other, form the basis of a totalitarian self. A totalitarian self suppresses the reservoir of shared encounters between small others through the total control of the big other. The task of Islamic liberation theology is to build an account of the inter-subjective other – from small to other to big other – to form an ever-expanding understanding of otherness.

Thus, for both Esack and Dabashi, the general form of Islamic liberation theology can be advanced with a far more radical conception of otherness and alterity that situates the small other and big other in a pluriversal and shared horizon of global resistance through solidarity¹⁵ (Esack 1997:202; Dabashi 2008:235). Liberation theology, therefore, is not an expression of the superior ethics of the Muslim self, but the potentiality of the Muslim other as a deracinated and excluded subject from the dominant world to articulate the possibility of a new liberated social being. The Muslim other of both Esack and Dabashi is not self-sufficient to fully articulate a liberatory social being; it must converge with other experiences of alterity or otherness in the world through solidarity and a liberatory praxis.

analysis. It is important to clarify that the employment of this distinction in the context of this article is solely for descriptive purposes.

¹⁵ Esack quotes Gustavo Gutierrez: ‘[T]he poor represents solidarity with humanity in the historical project of the quest for new ways of becoming human. To be in solidarity with the poor is not an option to be particular, but an option to be universal’ (Esack 1997:202).

Post-Essential Self

Another possibility arising through the convergence of the thoughts of Esack and Dabashi is a post-essential Muslim position on other and self. The post-essential self, not the essential self, results from the encounter with the other. The post-essential self is the prerequisite for an action-based reflection in communities of liberation. Every encounter with the other transforms the self individually and collectively to reflect and push the limits of oppression and liberation by reimagining the position of self and other in relation to each other. It does not invalidate the essence of the Muslim self, but actively destabilizes itself in an encounter with other. The hypothetical opposite of the post-essential Muslim self is that questioning the self through encounters with the other is *not* liberatory. For the self to always be determined by the other is the self-inflicted unfreedom of the self. However, the essence of self-preservation that runs through encounters with the other, results in a transformed self.

The Muslim hence always becomes ‘muslim’, a work in progress, in the ever-widening state of oppression and liberation. More precisely, Islamic liberation theology works in every political order as a reminder of the ever-expanding encounter with the other, and challenges the established self-claims of the political order. For this reason, in a world, saturated with the Islamophobic practices of the Empire, it is insufficient to articulate only the otherness in the political constitution of the Muslim self, without interrogating the self-constitution of the political Muslim self in its encounter with the other.

Conclusion

The experience of otherness constitutes a foundational feature of Islamic liberation theology. Esack and Dabashi have both explored this experience of otherness, grappling with its theological and political implications and examining how it shapes the very concepts of ‘Muslim’ and ‘other’. Their works extend beyond the otherness of Muslims to embrace the plurality of otherness, encompassing various forms of self and other within a pluriversal framework of liberation. Through this approach, they construct a new politics of Islamic liberation theology.

The encounter with the other necessitates a continual reimagining of the Muslim self, as it is constantly constructed in response to the changing dynamics of power and resistance within an ever-expanding context of praxis. This conception of the Muslim self points towards a new horizon of liberation, with its potential consequences for transmutation and transformation. It highlights the importance of context-specific praxis in developing Islamic liberation theology, which should remain fluid and subject to change as it responds to shifting historical circumstances.

Overall, the works of Esack and Dabashi offer valuable conceptual insights for scholars and practitioners of Islamic liberation theology, who want to navigate the complexities of otherness and build a more inclusive and dynamic framework for liberation. They highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of the role of otherness in shaping liberation theology and emphasize the importance of an ongoing engagement with the dynamics of power and resistance to achieve greater liberation.

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