

Historical Roots of Contemporary Literary Islamophobia

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Abstract

In line with their ill-informed understanding of Islam and its fundamentals, Western writers and Orientalist scholars who attempt to cover or depict the prevailing and steadily exacerbating antagonism towards Islam—islamophobia, to be precise—try to explore its roots, seeds and foundations in the 20th century as an ultimate retrospect. Concentrating disproportionately on seemingly highly impactful happenings in recent past, they unduly ignore or undermine some more fundamental past events and attitudes that shaped and moulded the contemporary Islamophobia, both factual and fictional. With few exceptions, these modern Orientalists who either promote or contest Islamophobia are largely inclined to ignore or undermine the pre-world wars factors. With a focus on literary texts and critical discourses, this paper attempts to transcend the contemporary canvas of Islamophobia, tracing its roots in much earlier ideological conflicts as well as socio-political events.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Islamophobia, Crusades, Literary Depiction, Post-9/11 image

Literary Sinophobia: Context and Content

Notwithstanding the fact that Islam has been the fastest-spreading religion since the advent of the last messenger of Allah roughly fifteen centuries ago, the second half of the twentieth century can be termed as one of the golden periods of the spread of Islam. It is imperative to understand that the “spread of Islam” here and elsewhere in this paper means the conscious dissemination and informed acceptance of Islam by the populace rather than subjugation of nations and regions through military and political campaigns. As such, in the second half of the twentieth century, Islam started receiving an unprecedented degree of attention, appreciation and acceptance all over the world, particularly in Europe and America. Reliable sources (Pew Research Centre, for instance) started predicting Islam as the would-be religion of majority of human beings by the first quarter of the twenty-first century. This momentum, however, started facing unperceived resistance in the form of Islamophobia by the turn of the century which continues till today in various and more violent forms. Comparing these two contrasting as well

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as adjacent periods of opposite tendencies, a casual observer is prone to get the impression as if Islamophobia has emerged recently in retaliation to certain events like the 9/11 (2001) targeting of World Trade Centre and the 2007 blasts in London. This misconception has prompted many contemporary scholars and writers to examine and critique the menace of Islamophobia—particularly its manifestation in modern literary works—in this recent contextual frame, resulting in a defective comprehension of its nature, causes and consequences.

The literary works attempting either to stereotype or exonerate Muslims come from authors of diverse backgrounds. Some are authored by purely literary non-Muslim writers like *The Warlord's Son* (2004) by Dan Fesperman, *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006) by Richard Flanagan and *A Most Wanted Man* (2008) by John Le Carre, in which one could find traces of both approval and rejection of the prevailing Islamophobic narratives. Others include works of outrightly anti-Muslim Westerners of political, military or primarily non-literary orientation like Ralph Peters—author of the predominantly Islamophobic novels, including *The War After Armageddon* (2009). There are also noteworthy fictional responses from Muslim novelists like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, (2007) and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). This unprecedented frequency of Muslim protagonists has resulted in a widely-held belief—or assumption, at least—as if literary Islamophobia is a reaction to the above-stated recent happenings, resulting in an undue overlooking or underestimation of its earlier seeds in Western intellectual heritage.

The demonization of the Islamic East is a long and deeply rooted tradition in the West - spanning the centuries, from the early medieval period to the end of the 20th century. The Classical and Biblical stereotypes that were established in the collective consciousness of the West were further sharpened and solidified later by the historical experience of 'Holy War' that began with the rise of Islam, continued during the period of the crusades, and endured during the Spanish Reconquista and Ottoman imperialism. In Western Europe, a long history of military aggression and cultural competition (taking place primarily, but not entirely, in the Mediterranean Basin) served as the basis for the prevailing conception of the Islamic 'Orient' during the 16th and 17th centuries. (Vitkus, 1999, p.209)

It is a tragic fact that in the initial phase of dissemination of Islam, neither its Arab proponents took Europeans seriously as targeted recipients, nor did the Europeans try to develop a genuine and unbiased understanding of its meaning and message. Unlike Asia and Africa where Islam reached primarily through missionary preachers, saints and scholars,

Europe came to know of Islam as the religion of invaders of Caucuses through the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century, then of Southern Europe through Umayyad conquest of Hispania, and lastly the Turkish Conquest of Constantinople in 1453. (Notwithstanding their immense significance and enormous impact, the Crusades have not been listed here because they comprise a chain of phenomenal phases spanning across a couple of centuries, and as such could not be included among “events” in the current sense). This military or militant introduction of Islam inculcated in the minds of Europeans an image of Islam based on the contextual and contemporary actions of Muslims rather than the faith and practices ordained by Islam. “The roots of negative representations of Muslims go all the way back to the early Middle Ages and the arrival of Islam on the radar of an unsuspecting and recently consolidating Christian world in the seventh century.” (Morey and Yaqin, 2011, p.7).

Quite significantly, at the time of the advent of the last Messenger of Allah, the prevailing *jahiliyyat* (the culture of ignorance) in Hijaz and the entire Arab region was paralleled in the Western hemisphere by the infamous period of what the Europeans call “The Dark Ages”. Knowledge and wisdom were the uncontested monopoly of the clergy, and the Roman Catholic Church was the only source of guidance and information. As “Islam burst upon the Near Eastern and the World Scene” (Irving, 1988, p.102), in less than half a century, it rightly alarmed the Christian hegemons. With absolute monopoly over peoples’ beliefs and convictions, the catholic clergy felt threatened by Islam as their only spiritual and ecclesiastical rival. Hence, they considered it both contingent and convenient to defame Islam and demonize Muslims by targeting their two foundational icons i.e. Muhammad the messenger and Quran the message. As naturally expected in an age of darkness and blind belief, this heinous and poisonous propaganda against Islam was readily accepted and contagiously disseminated throughout Europe. In such a context it was almost utterly impossible to question the dominant notion—rather the public conviction—that the Quran was a forged text and that Muhammad was an imposter-prophet. The only permitted divergence of opinion was whether this imposture was advertent and planned on the part of the prophet, or the result of some Satanic temptations whereby he was hallucinated into believing that he really received the divine revelation. As such, no one was ready to consider it even a far-fetched possibility if Islam could really be a divine religion and Muhammad a true messenger of God. Unfortunately, this misconceived image of Muslims kept on developing unabated and unchallenged, experiencing significant shifts and swings with changing socio-political conditions. It is also worth mentioning that this tradition of distortion, forgery and defamation was encouraged and

advanced by some of the highest ranks in Christian Clergy. Credited by many as the first translator of the Quran into a European Language i.e Latin in collaboration with Robert of Ketton in the 12th century, Peter the Venerable's *Summary of the Entire Heresy of the Saracens* was the first systematic attempt to defame and degrade Islam by discrediting its two fundamental sources—the divine message and its recipient messenger. The highly prejudiced nature of the so-called “translation” or “exegesis” can be easily gauged by the poisoned phrasing of the work’s title. Not different is the language of the following letter in which he proudly describes this attempt to his friend Bernard of Clairvaux Abbey.

But the whole impious sect, and the life of the wicked man [Muhammad], and the law, which he called the Qur'an [i.e. collection of precepts] and persuaded the most wretched of men that it had been delivered to him by the angel Gabriel from Heaven, I have nonetheless rendered from Arabic into Latin, of course with the help of interpreters skilled in both languages. (. . .) There was in this project my intention, that I should follow that custom of the fathers, by which they have not passed over any of even the most trivial heresies (as I should thus call them) of their times in silence, without resisting them with all the strength of their faith, and showing by writings and disputations that they are to be detested and condemned. (Tamimi, 2014)

These are the words of a person not only universally acknowledged “Venerable” by the church, but also claiming to have got the most genuine and first-hand familiarity with Muslims through his links and interactions in “Islamic Hispania”. Accordingly, one can easily imagine the extent of liberty which could be taken by those who were not fettered by such protocols of ecclesiastical commitments. Hence there ensued an unleashed battery of defamation, demonization and ridicule of Islam and Muslims in almost all spheres of human perception and expression, particularly of the “symbols that signal the threatening presence of Islam” (Salaita, 2008, p.140)

As the Renaissance (14-16 century) seriously challenged the catholic myths, practices and system of hierarchy, a new culture of independent investigation based on doubting and questioning all hitherto established notions emerged throughout Europe. However, the venomous propaganda against Islam was so pervasive and intensive that even the greatest critic of catholic Christianity and champion of ecclesiastical Reformation Martin Luther couldn't be an exception. Deeply impressed by a short book entitled “The Tract on the Religious Customs of the Turks” purportedly authored by Georgius of Hungaria and published in Latin in 1481, Luther tried to attribute the superiority of Islamic faith and culture

and the rampant conversions of Christians to Islam to the defects in contemporary Christianity rather than inherent values of Islam itself.

This highly prejudiced and ill-informed projection of Islam found its way not only in social and historical documents of the post-Renaissance period, but also in literary depictions, glimpses of which can be traced in the dramas of Marlowe, Shakespeare and some of the University wits. The most offensive example of the post-Renaissance period, however, comes from none else than Voltaire whose Islamophobic rhetoric is heinously explicit as reflected in his following *Letter to Benedict XIV* written in Paris on August 17, 1745, wherein he proclaims defamation of Islam analogous to promoting the cause of Christianity.

Your holiness will pardon the liberty taken by one of the lowest of the faithful, though a zealous admirer of virtue, of submitting to the head of the true religion this performance, written in opposition to the founder of a false and barbarous sect. To whom could I with more propriety inscribe a satire on the cruelty and errors of a false prophet, than to the vicar and representative of a God of truth and mercy? Your holiness will therefore give me leave to lay at your feet both the piece and the author of it, and humbly to request your protection of the one, and your benediction upon the other; in hopes of which, with the profoundest reverence, I kiss your sacred feet. ¹

This letter describes his tragedy titled *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète*, meaning Fanaticism, or Mahomet the Prophet of which he gifted a copy to the pope with a proud hope of appreciation. Though written by such a famous literary genius, historian and philosopher and evidently a piece of literature, this work is so deficient in terms of both historical authenticity as well as literary merit that it couldn't get any noticeable appreciation or attention even among the highly biased and ill-informed public of the 18th century Europe. It is retained and remembered as a token of mean propaganda campaign against Islam and Muslims through manipulating the literary license of deviating from facts into utter distortion of historical realities.

Despite their persistent efforts to target the two pivots of Islamic faith, practice and culture—the last messenger of Allah, and the direct message of Allah revealed in the form of the Qur'an—they found it hard to find fault therein through any authentic or reliable source, which could be swallowed by the post-Renaissance readers who, unlike those of the Dark Ages, were not willing to accept every type of nonsense. Hence, notwithstanding repeated onslaught on the sanctity of these two icons, their most handy and convenient tool was to accuse Muslim conquerors, generals and soldiers as representatives of the Muslim faith, eager to humiliate Christians and their religious monuments in every possible way.

The following description of the Turks' victory parade after the conquest of Constantinople is a clear manifestation of this attitude:

Among all those outrages the profanation of Saint Sophia stood out. In the great church an immense crowd was assembled, praying despairingly. - - - Here, they said to themselves as they looked about, fortune awaits us. In an instant, all who were young, good-looking and healthy were stripped, despoiled and herded. High-born women, young and gentle girls of noble family, now naked under their long hair, fell thus into slavery. Their masters bound them with whatever was at hand: sashes, belts, kerchiefs, stoles, tent ropes, camel and horse reins. With blows and kicks they were herded outside into long columns, to be led to a shameful fate and to all the extremities of the Islamic world. (Guerdan, 1956, pp. 219-220)

The Industrial Revolution and its subsequent wave of colonialization redefined the nature of Western perception of the East, influencing the modes and modalities of Islamophobia. In the initial phase of colonialism, almost all European imperialists considered Islam and Muslims as the greatest threat to their commercial interests as well as imperialistic designs in all colonies either with Muslim majority or a significant Muslim population. In order to manage such colonies smoothly and amicably, the rulers had to avoid overt antagonism towards Muslims, without affecting their exigent agenda of rendering Muslims incapable to resurge or resist.

The most evident version of colonial Islamophobia, however, is manifested in the nineteenth century where an adverse focus on Islam and Muslims intensified not only in political, social and economic discourses, but also resulted in their more thorough and frequent depiction in literary works. Some works reflected Islam and Muslims in their very titles like the poem "Mohammed" composed jointly by Robert Southey and S.T. Coleridge and "The Revolt of Islam" by P. B. Shelley. The former depicts in a scandalous and satirizing way the refuge of Prophet Muhammad and his closest companion Abu Bakr in the cave of thour, while the latter makes allegorical references to Islam and Turks in a highly objectionable manner. In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", Byron blatantly ridicules Muslims' fasting in the month of Ramadhan and the Qur'anic concept of Hoors as a reward for the believers in Paradise. Byron's other Islamophobic poems include The "Bride of Abudose" in which he relates Islam to the sensuous lust of Turk elites, "The Giaour" depicting in a highly biased way Christian resistance to hegemonic designs of Muslims, and "The Siege of Corianth" decrying Divine promises in the Qur'an for those dying for Allah's sake. He even struggled to raise an army for

Greece's independence from Ottoman Empire during which process he died from fever.

The unprecedented and revolutionary currents of thought in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century challenged the very foundations of almost all religions, spiritual myths and ideologies. Most prominent among these are Darwin's theories of Evolution and the Survival of the Fittest, and Marx's contentions on economic and social justice. Though directed against all forms of spiritual convictions, these theories became predominantly Islamophobic because they were challenged and resisted more strongly and effectively by Muslims than any other religion or ideology. The clash of Islam and Communism in particular reached its peak point during the Afghan Jihad in the last quarter of the twentieth century, resulting in the collapse of Soviet Union and the consequent demise of Communism.

The beginning of the modern cycle of Islamophobia is often located at the time of the Iranian Revolution, which deposed the Western-backed Shah and saw the installation of an Islamic Republic in 1979. Iran's Islamic revolution stunned global leaders and became the lens through which many in the West first learnt about Islam. Governments, experts and media alike scrambled to understand how the mighty Shah of Iran could be overthrown by a mass movement whose leader was an aged Ayatollah Khomeini, living in exile in a Paris suburb. (Esposito xv)

This highly impactful event of Islamic Revolution in Iran roughly coincided with Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the subsequent decade-long Afghan Jihad, the defeat and withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in early 1990's and the disintegration of Soviet Union a few years later. These interlinked episodes brought an end to the Cold War between Capitalist and Communist ideology, or more specifically between USA and USSR, spanning over almost half a century. As such, the world became unipolar with American hegemony who now considered the emerging movements of Islamic Jihad as its new rivals.

In order to counter this real or presumed emergent threat, the Western media in general and the American propaganda channels in particular, unleashed a nefarious campaign of defamation and demonization of Muslims. Though inherently founded on the earlier and inherent roots of anti-Muslim prejudices, the unprecedented intensity of this antagonism has erroneously registered itself as a natural retaliation to the emergent security threat and its cultural or ideological connotations. Despite successive impactful changes in political, social and cultural scenarios, this misleading impression has largely remained uncontested. Among the channels used for spreading and strengthening the negative image of Islam and Muslims, literature has hardly any parallel for its

inherent susceptibility to unrestricted manipulation. Literature, novel in particular, has become the most powerful voicing tool not only for those who project Islamophobia, but also for those who repudiate and contest it—both Muslims and non-Muslims.

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