The Persistence of Certain Stereotypes of the Islamic East in Modern English Literature
(A Study of Four Contemporary English Novels)

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Abstract
The Christians' animosity towards Islam and the Muslims began with the mission of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). However, things became worse after the Crusades of 1000-1216 when negative images of the Muslims and their religion started to circulate and consequently to prevail in English Literature. From early English writings of the Anglo-Saxon period, through the Medieval literature, up to the twentieth century, literature in Christian countries reflected Western fear and contempt of the Islamic East. The twenty first century witnessed an increase of the Western interest in the Islamic Orient but many genres of English literature continued to use stereotypes to portray certain elements of the Muslim East such as Eastern events, settings, characters, customs, costumes, diction and especially religion.
This paper is a study of four modern novels portraying certain aspects of the Islamic East. These novels are Virgins of Paradise 1993 by Barbara Wood, Hideous Kinky 1992 by Esther Freud, I Know Many Songs But I Can not Sing 1998 by Brian Kiteley, and The Empty Quarter 1995 by David Wilkinson. The paper is divided into four parts: the first part shows how early English literature as well as the four modern novels portray Islam as an unconvincing faith with hollow and isolating rites, and full of support for violence and ignorance. The second part discusses the image of Muslims in both early literature and the novels as backward Bedouins, lazy, hypocrite, immoral, sexually obsessed and cruel to their women. The third part shows how Muslim women are persistently portrayed as being suppressed by the dictates of their religion and laws of their society; they react against that oppression by turning lascivious and immodest. The last part shows how Arab countries are viewed as unattractive poor places run by tyrant governments and as being politically censored. The numerous examples of early English literature followed by examples from these four contemporary novels illustrate how the writers of the four novels, instead of forming their own view of Islamic East, drew upon the Western heritage of structured stereotyping of Islam and the Muslims.
ملخص البحث

بدأ عداء المسيحيين للإسلام و المسلمين مع بعثة الرسول محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم. وقد ساءت الأمور بعد الحروب الصليبية 1000م - 1216م حيث بدأت الصراعات السلبية عن الإسلام والمسلمين بالانتشار وبالتالي سيادة الأدب الإنجليزي. شهدت البداية للمؤلفات الإنجليزية في العصر الأنجلو-ساكسوني، مرورا بأدب العصور الوسطى، ووصولا إلى أدب القرن العشرين، ازداداً مضطرداً في شعور البلاد المسيحية بالكراهية والخوف اتجاه الشرق المسلم. لقد شهد القرن الحادي والعشرين اهتماماً متزايداً من قبل العرب بالشرق المسلم، ولكن العديد من أنواع الأدب الإنجليزي استمرت في استخدام القوالب النمطية في تصويرها لجوائب معينة من الشرق.

المسلم كالأحداث التاريخية والأماكن والشخصيات والملابس والأعياد والتقاليد، وبخاصة الدين.

هذا البحث هو دراسة لأربع روايات حديثة تصوير جوانب معينة من الشرق المسلم. هذه الروايات هي عبْاري الجنة 1993م بقلم باربرا وود، غريب كريغ 1992م بقلم استير فرويد، أَّذِ انزٔاٚبد انحذٚثخ قبيذ ثزصٕٚز الأل ٚظٓز كٛف أَّ الأدة الاَجهٛش٘ انقذٚى ْٔذِ انزٔاٚبد انحذٚثخ قبيذ ثزصٕٚز الأل ٚظٓز كٛف أَّ ٚشجح ثقٕح ػهٗ انؼُف ٔانجٓم ُٚبقش انقسى انثبَٙ كٛفٛخ رصٕٚز انًسهًبد ثشكم يزكزر ػهٗ أٍَٓ ضحبٚب نقًغ رؼبنٛى دٍُٚٓ ٔقٕاٍَٛ يجزًؼٍٓ، ٔكٛف أٍَٓ ٚصجحٍ ٔقحبد ٔجزٚئبد كزد فؼم ػهٗ ْذا انقًغ.

ٚظٓز انقسى انزاثغ كٛف ٚزى رصٕٚز انجهذاٌ انؼزثٛخ ػهٗ أَٓب أيبكٍ فقٛزح ٔغٛز جًٛهخ رقٕو ثزصزٚف أٌٌٌٍ حكٕيبد طبغٛخ رشذد انزقبثخ انسٛبسٛخ ػهٛٓب. رظٓز الأيثهخ انؼذٚذح انزٙ رى اسزقبئٓب فٙ ْذا انجحش يٍ الأدة الاَجهٛش٘ انقذٚى يزجؼخ ثأيثهخ يٍ انزٔاٚبد الأرثؼخ انحذٚثخ أٌ يؤنفٙ ْذِ انزٔاٚبد، ثذلا يٍ ركٍٕٚ آرائٓى

على أنهن ضحايا لقمع تعاليم دينهن وقوانين مجتمعهن، وكيف أنهن يصبحن وحات وجرينات كرد فعل على هذا القمع. يظهر القسم الرابع كيف يتم تصوير البلدان العربية على أنها أماكن فقيرة وغير جميلة تقوم بتصريف أَّمَرُها حكومات طاغية تشيد الرقابة السياسية عليها. تظهر الأمثلة المتعددة التي تم استنادها في هذا البحث من الأدب الإنجليزي القديم متينة بأمتلاك روائع الأدب الحديثة أن مؤلفي هذه الروايات، بدلاً من تكوين آرائهم الخاصة والمستقلة عن الشرق المسلم، قاموا باستقاء آرائهم من المنظومة العربية القائمة على النمطية المتكررة في تصويرها للإسلام والمسلمين.
Introduction

Before the appearance of Islam, the Christian West showed no interest in the Arab world. Only when Christians needed Arabs as allies against the Persians, they came in contact with them. They were mentioned in the early writings in the West as good fighters who fought for a noble cause defending Christianity against its enemies. In his essay “Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century” Irfan Shahid says:

The priesthood and the episcopate … induced in the Christian Arabs a new sense of loyalty which was supra-tribal, related not to tribal chauvinism but to the Christian ecclesia. This new loyalty was to find expression on the battlefield. The federate troops under their believing phylarchs fought the fire-worshiping Persians and the pagan Lakhmids with a crusading zeal, and they probably considered those who fell in such battles martyrs of the Christian faith. (qtd. in The Moor Next Door)

Accordingly, even the heroism of the Arab fighters was attributed to the influence of the new Christian faith over their souls. It far surpassed their conventional tribal bigotry as a compelling motivation for being ferocious fighters in the battle field.

But, at the same time, the West viewed Arabs as barbarians who ransacked each other’s homelands for ransoms. They were condemned for being heathens and were even accused of offering human sacrifices for their false gods. Their traditions and costumes were considered primitive and their morals especially those concerning sexual conduct were viewed as being tainted. E. A. Belyaev says in his book Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages: “Drunkenness was a common vice among the Arabs. With drunkenness went their gambling. They were compulsive drinkers and compulsive gamblers. The relations of the sexes were extremely loose” (qtd. in Arabia Before Islam 28).

After the appearance of Islam and the expansion of the Islamic empire, other pictures were added to the Western view of the Islamic East. It is when the situation between the Christians and the
Muslims turned from peace to war during 1000-1216 that dark images of the Muslims and their prophet started to emerge and consequently to prevail. Although there were moments of contact, mutual knowledge, and constructive exchange, the large Islamic expansion into Europe, ranging from the Arab conquests through the crusades and the Ottoman empire, produced alienation and distrust of Islam, which was primarily viewed as a threat to Christendom. (Suleiman 22-32)

The interest of the English writers in the Islamic East reaches as far back as the Anglo-Saxon period. Most of the early Western travelers who ventured abroad, like the Irish pilgrims and scholars early in the fifth century and the crusaders during the medieval period returned home to tell or write accounts that had little facts but much imagination about the Eastern people and their religion. An example of such travelers was Riccoldo da Montecroce, who traveled from Florence to Baghdad in 1291 and gave a false description of the predicament of the Christians by the Muslims there. “… I began, stupefied, to ponder God’s judgment concerning the government of the world, especially concerning the Saracens and the Christians. What could be the cause of such massacre and such degradation of the Christian people [by the Saracens]?” (qtd. in Levin 6). Another traveler was Isaac Barrow, who after spending a year in Constantinople 1657-58 attacked Mohammad peace be upon him and Islam in his sermon entitled “Of the Impiety and Imposture of Paganism and Mahometanism”. Barrow claims that “we shall not find stamped on it the genuine characters of a divine original and authority, but have great reason to deem it a brood of most lewd and impudent cozenage” (qtd. in Smith 25). Alexander Ross in his book IIANZEBEIA; or, a View of all the Religions in the World (1653) includes curious mixtures of information and misinformation about Islam. For example about the pilgrimage to Makkah he states, “He who doth not once in his life go this Pilgrimage, shall be assuredly damned” (Smith 28).
Indeed, it is difficult to read extensively in the works of such early writers without coming away with the feeling that those travelers were motivated by political and/or religious propaganda and prejudice.

Most literary figures who did not themselves venture outside the European continent used the highly imaginative and inaccurate works written by such early travelers as sources for their own works, which in turn consciously and some times unconsciously helped popularize false images of the Islamic East. Not only did these writers lack first hand experience, but also they mainly cared about fascinating their audience with strange and exotic scenes to capture their attention; they did not try to inform them with reality. This was the reason for the appearance of countless literary works which used stereotypes to portray certain elements of the Muslim East such as Eastern events, settings, characters, customs, costumes, diction and especially religion.

As early as 1100, the Christian versus the Muslim was the theme of the “Spanish poem of the Cid” (1140) trans. Rita Hamilton and Janet Perry. We are introduced to Yusuf, King of Morocco, leading an army of “infidel hordes” (ii, 89). Unlike Roland the Christian, Cid—a corruption of the Arabic Sayyid, or Master_ fights other Christians as well as Moors: “Both Moors and Christians go in fear of me” (iii, 122). Cid’s sons— in—law “plotted an act of treachery” (iii, 126) in abandoning Cid’s daughter and plotting the death of Abengalbon, a close Moorish friend of the Cid and governor of Molina, to get hold of his wealth. “The Spanish poem of the Cid” presents Islam as an enemy and shows Muslims as cruel creatures who are obsessed with power and wealth.

(Obeidat and Mumayiz 33)

In Lodovico Ariosto’s epic “Orlando Furioso” 1474-1553, the Islamic infidel more or less recedes into the background, and hardly appears except as a shadowy pagan. In Torquato Tasso’s “Gerusalemme Liberata” 1544-95, Muslims are depicted as wily pagan sorcerers and enchanters. Rinaldo, a Crusader knight is captivated by Armida, a pagan (Muslim) enchantress who exercises her
charms on him in a pleasure garden which she creates through her magic. (Obeidat and Mumayiz 34)

The Medieval literature produces Dante’s Inferno “The Divine Comedy”, in which the Prophet peace be upon him and Ali, the Prophet’s cousin, are sent off to the eighth circle of Hell along with the Schismatics:

While my gaze was on him occupied, he looked at me, and with hands laid bare his breast.

“Behold how I am rent,” he cried. “Yea, mark how is Mohammad mangled. There in front of me doth Ali weeping go. Ripped through the face even from chin to hair. And all the rest thou seest with us below were sowers of schism and dissension, too. During their lives and hence are cloven so. (qtd in. Obeidat and Mumayiz 31)

In the fifteenth century, John Lydgate 1370-1451 repeats the more offensive of Western polemics against Islam. Lydgate’s “off Machomet the false prophet and howe he beying dronke was deououred among swyn” is one of the earliest polemical treatments of the prophet in the English literary tradition. Lydgate collects a number of contemporary myths and legends of a highly polemical nature, about the Prophet. He depicts Muhammad as a magician of low birth who studied the Bible in Egypt and claimed that he was the “Messie” (Messiah, 1, 75), and as an epileptic who believed that “Gabriel was sent to him from the heauenlie mansion be the Hooli Goost to his instructiyn”. Lydgate repeats the fable of a dove picking grain from the Prophet’s ear and a bull carrying the Koran on its horns. Finally, Muhammad peace be upon him is said to have deied in dronkenesse Bi excesse of Mykil drynkyng wyn Fill in a podel, deououred among swyn (ii, 152–4).

(Obeidat and Mumayiz 37)

Elizabethan and early seventeenth century English literature, using or misusing Islamic material, utilizes legends about Islam that had already accumulated in the European tradition. Christopher Marlowe wrote his Tamburlaine, in which the Elizabethan theatre–goers watched with
satisfaction “a triumph over a Turkish emperor, an augury, perhaps, of Christian conquests”. Marlowe was obviously working on public feelings: His hero, Tamburlaine, (Taymur Lenk) not only humiliated the Turkish Emperor Bajazeth (Bayazid) but also sought to relieve the conquered Christians in Constantinople who had long been under siege. (Obeidat and Mumayiz 42-43)

Spenser, in the Faerie Queene, draws on the more traditional Saracen to represent the Islamic adversary. In the Faerie Queene Spenser envisages a war with the Muslims where Gloriana, the Faerie Queene will help the Britons confront the Saracen (FQ, I, xi, 7). Spenser’s view of Islam is concisely encapsulated in the names of the three Saracen brothers: Sansfoy (without faith), Sansloy (without law) and Sansjoi (without joy) “caring not for God or Man a point” (FQ, V, ii, 12).

(Obeidat and Mumayiz 47)

For the Romantics, Islam offered a convenient symbol of the tyranny and evil they all sought to overcome. Edward Young wrote a tragedy titled The Revenge (1721), modeled largely on Shakespear’s Othello. His villain is a captive Moor who revenges himself on his captor, a noble Spaniard newly married, by sowing the seeds of jealousy in his bosom. In the play Zanga, the villain, addresses his prayers to Mahomet as a deity.

Be propitious,

O Mahomet, on this important hour.

Look down, O holy prophet! see me torture

This Christian dog, this infidel, which dares

To smite thy votaries and spurn thy law. (Smith 93)

The Mussulman (1830) by Richard Robert Madden, is a story of a Greek with the Turkish name of Mourad who is brought up in the household of a Turkish pasha, whose cruelty had sent Mourad’s father to the galleys and had driven his mother insane. The wearisome details and the
villainous character of Mourad leave the reader with no regret when Mourad dies of a plague in a Constantinople prison. (Smith 164)

The Barbary Wars 1785–1815 provided ample literary material for works as Susanna Rowson’s *Slaves in Algiers* (1794), Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive* (1797), John Howard Payne’s *Fall of Algiers* (1826) and Richard Penn Smith’s *The Bombardment of Algiers* (1829). These works generally presented a polemical image of North African pirating and a horrific image of “The Barbary” exaggerated and enlarged. Prominent among these works is *The Algerine Captive*. The travel narrative of the principle character Uptake Underhill reflects a genre of travel–writing that reported what readers wanted to read, not what was actually observed. *The Algerine Captive* is a specimen of fictitious travel–writing about the Orient in which a vast gap exists between what is seen of the subject and what is said about it. Underhill defends the verity of the Christian creed against “So detestably ridiculous a system as the Mohammedan imposture” (Obeidat and Mumayiz 59). A dialogue takes place between Underhill and a Muslim Mullah on the Prophet and the Koran at the end of which Underhill is “disgusted with the Mullah’s fables” (Obeidat and Mumayiz 60).

The negative image of the East and the Muslims explicit and implicit in the religious, historical and literary works of some Western writers of the early periods of history reaching to the nineteenth century was obviously the result of fear and contempt, united with ethnocentrisrn. This ignorance reflected not only lack of knowledge but also the all too-common human tendency among educated and uneducated alike to denigrate and dehumanize the enemy, deepest beliefs or assume a superior posture and dismiss that which challenges and threatens one's interests by labeling it inferior, heretical, fanatical, or irrational. Distorted portraits or caricatures fabricated--with little concern for of Muhammad and Islam were created--more accurately, accuracy.

(Esposito 43).
The twentieth century witnessed an increase of the Western interest in the Islamic Orient due to the huge expansion of European colonialism and other forms of its domination over Asia and Africa. In modern literary writings, the early images of Islam and the Muslims are conveyed with similar connotations, because the writers who write about the Middle East often rely on their imagination as well as the writings of the earlier scholars and travelers, as Kabbani implies: “We have remarked how travelers depended on each other's testimony in forging their narrative; the place became the place they had read about, the natives functioned as the traveler imagined they would do” (qtd. in Aydin 15).

The impact of this ongoing historical process of stereotyping can be perceived in different forms in twentieth century fiction. The images are reproduced either through direct reference to particular oriental locations and events, or through the creation of fictitious oriental characters, usually villains, supposedly counterparts of historical figures in terms of savagery, eccentricity and sensuality. In texts such as John Buchan’s *Greenmantle* (1916), Dennis Wheatley’s *The Eunuch of Stamboul* (1935), Rose Macaulay’s *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956) and Billy Hayes and William Hoffer’s *Midnight Express* (1977) the historical image of Muslims as brutal, violent and sensual is emphasized. (Aydin)

John Buchan’s *Greenmantle* (1916) deals with the theme of the Islamic threat. The novel narrates the pursuit of an elusive master terrorist, 'the Prophet', whose activities in the Middle East threaten to trigger Jihad or Holy war. It describes Muslims as outrageous villains, ugly, oily, deformed, sweaty, sadistic, etc. (Aydin 3)

Dennis Wheatley’s *The Eunuch of Stamboul* (1935) is a typical example of the novel that relies on images of Turkish brutality as it narrates an adventurous coup attempt by KAKA—an illegal pro-Ottoman organization in Turkey which is aborted by the help of a highly skilful British intelligence officer Swithin Destime. It is based on a number of religious, political and cultural
negative images ranging from a misinterpretation of Islam and haunting stories about the exotic harem and other historical sites of Istanbul to distorted and abusive accounts of significant Turkish figures of history. (Aydin 12)

Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956) is a typical example of the kind of comparison in which one culture and belief (the Christian West) is represented with exaltation, whereas the other one (the Islamic East) is dramatically humiliated. In this comparison, mainly based on religious criteria, Macaulay tends to present Islam as the fundamental obstacle to the actual emancipation of Muslim women in the Black Sea region. (Aydin 13)

Billy Hayes and William Hoffer’s *Midnight Express* (1977) is another crucial text in which Billy Hayes, an American tourist who has been charged with drug-smuggling represents (in addition to various negative accounts of the East such as brutality, drug-smuggling and addiction, corruption and filthiness) homosexuality or sodomy with Muslims. (Aydin 15)

Several intellectual writings discuss how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in various genres in the English literature. Whether old or modern, certain literary works participate powerfully in perpetuating certain images of the Islamic East and its people. These scholarly writings focus on the process of stereotyping in these literary works and its impact on the Western attitude towards the East. The following writings represent some of the recent efforts in this field.

Byron Porter Smith’s book *Islam in English Literature* (1939) examines works in English literature dealing with Islam from the medieval period till the nineteenth century. It gives a brief summary of the political history of the Muslim countries during the period under discussion, followed by a study of the records of travelers, the writings of historians and theologians on Islamic subjects, miscellaneous prose works, fiction, poetry and the drama. In addition to the works of English authors, it includes English translations from Latin and from living European languages.
Edward W. Said’s book *Orientalism (1979)* discusses the way in which intellectual traditions are created and transmitted. Orientalism is the example Mr. Said uses, and by it he means something precise. The scholar who studies the Orient (and specifically the Muslim Orient), the imaginative writer who takes it as his subject, and the institutions which have been concerned with teaching it, settling it, ruling it, all have a certain representation or idea of the Orient defined as being other than the Occident, mysterious, unchanging and ultimately inferior. (Vintage 1979).