

## Exposing Feminist, Orientalist Western Literary Portrayals of Islam and Muslims: From the Monstrous 'Saracens' to the Oppressed Muslim Women

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### INTRODUCTION

Burning the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims, attacking the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims with Muslim background any time it is convenient for political ends (Presidents E. Macron and D. Trump as examples) and the question of the oppression of the Muslim women are among the heated debates and issues about what is commonly called the 'Muslim question' in the West. Hence, there is no man on earth who has been 'fabricated,' demonized, used, misused and dehumanized as Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). His life and biography were deployed by Christian and Western polemicists and authors for centuries to attack him as the central figure in Islam. He was used theologically to discredit him and 'his false religion.' He was equally used to denote allegedly 'political despotism' and concurrently criticise Western practices and ruling elites for their 'potential tyranny.' He was also employed to depict social tyranny and 'show' how he 'managed' to *seduce* 'easily-deceived Arabs' to believe in his new 'founded' religion without providing sound miracles. He was depicted as suffering from epileptic seizures and sexual potency by medieval authors and monks. He succeeded, according to many accounts, to preach 'his religion' by treachery, violence and the sword. This was done to 'demonstrate' his supposed despotism and pervert sexuality. 'Muhamadan paradise' or 'Muslim paradise' was also a preoccupation for some theologians and authors. These (mis)conceptions were born in theological treatises and polemical writings and then found shelter in other means of expression like poetry, drama and novels. The road map here is to trace how Muhammad was portrayed in theological and literary productions. This permits the argument that these portrayals are still prevalent and enduring in some Western narratives.

In Islamic tradition, however, Muhammad is the seal of the Prophets sent by Allah to preach His Religion. The Religion in Islamic tradition is but Islam from Adam to Muhammad. He is the beloved Prophet and Messenger of Allah praised and followed by billions of Muslims throughout the ages and in different corners of the globe. He came with the last message of mercy and ethics to deliver to humankind. He is the model for all Muslims wherever and whenever they might be. He is much admired and followed. His name is always mentioned in sermons where prayers go after his mention. In Muslim communities and families, it is quite common to find boys and men named Muhammad or its derivations (Muhamadayn, Muhammadi or even Ahmed). Muhammad's role, as John Tolan (2019) observes, is viewed as essential to this "self-definition : the *shahada*, or Muslim credo, first attested during the Umayyad period, affirms "there is no God but God, and Muhammad is the prophet of God." The belief in Muhammad's stature as prophet became the essential element that distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims" (8). One wonders why it remained till the later 'Umayyad period'

since it had been present in the early days of the Prophet's message. However, since the task here is to uncover Western conceptions of Islam and Muslims (Muhammad included) the Islamic tradition is less discussed for this study does not discuss how the two traditions vary or contradict. It does not equally intend to challenge those conceptions. The study uncovers the earlier mythologies since the Medieval Ages that initiate and distort the legacy of the Prophet (PBUH).

### MEDIEVAL DISTORTING MYTHOLOGIES

One of the reiterated themes and images concerning the portrayal of Prophet Muhammad revolves around 'sexual' images and 'debauchery.' Sexual imagery has been constructed around Prophet Muhammad's sexual energies that are incomparable. The latter was associated with tales on Turkish soldiers having sex with killed Christians after the fall of Constantinople (Arjana 69). The genealogy of this imagery is to be found in the early medieval ages, from the eighth and ninth centuries when 'Muslim monsters' appeared in the Christian imagination. "Christian polemics, which often focused on Prophet Muhammad as the progenitor of a monstrous race of Saracens, among other things," notes Arjana, are a significant initial basis for later "Muslim monsters" (19). Muhammad was depicted as seducing and seduced Prophet suffering occasional epileptic seizures by Guibert of Nogent. In the latter's account, Muhammad is devoured by hogs for his wicked deeds and perfidious manners (Arjana 27-28). The bases of Muslim monsters are positioned in "these fantasies of early Muslims, specifically in the mythologies surrounding an Arab merchant named Muhammad" (32). To belittle the Prophet and reduce the perplexing success and expansion of Islam, some earlier authors attacked Muhammad. These medieval authors rendered "Mahomet" as a wholly human founder of a new, deviant version of Christianity, a heresy. Through preaching, magic tricks, and false miracles, this charlatan hoodwinked the naive and lustful Arabs into taking him for a prophet and making him their leader," states Tolan in his *Faces of Muhammad* (10). They equally wanted to reassure their audience that "Christians were nevertheless favored by God, and that Mahomet had proffered nothing more than a crude caricature of true religion, which appealed to the Saracens because it gave them license to indulge in violent conquest and sexual debauchery" (Tolan 10). These early writings concentrate on Muhammad who was variously depicted as "a heretic, a schismatic, Satan, and a monster" and was "cast as a demonic force, a human-animal hybrid, and a sexual monster with unending supplies of semen who harbored plans to rape the Virgin Mary in heaven" (Arjana 32). According to this narrative, he was "the first Muslim individual cast as a monster, influencing many of the characters that followed him, especially the ones who exhibit hyper-sexuality and violent behaviors" (32). This was later addressed to the 'cruel,' 'violent' (Ottoman) Turks and the 'Moors.' In the text *Newes from Vienna the 5 Day of August*, one finds a significant "narrative of torture, sexual deviancy and barbarity to the growing body of material that surrounded the 'turke' in early modern thought," asserts Dimmock in his *New Turkes* (72). Irrational cruelty, violence and barbarity as conceptions and images are transferred from the Prophet in the early Medieval Ages to the 'terrible Turks', the 'Moors' and the 'Berbers' as constructed 'people'/characters in the sixteenth century up to the nineteenth. They are also encountered in Elizabethan drama. In Elizabethan era, depictions of Muhammad built on previous medieval writings and images "resulting in characterizations as a heretic and sexual pervert" (Arjana 69). It is here that the Prophet took the following form of a monster, a dreaded beast, or as a "Mungrell born" creature with a scalded head ...by Shakespeare's time, the Turk had replaced the Arab as the dominant symbol of Islam, a shift that impacted representations of Muslim characters, whether of a

human or monstrous nature" (Arjana 69). Moreover, in William Painter's poem, *The Palace of Pleasure*, the Turk is presented as "'wicked' and 'cruel,' with beastly attributes : the sultan's 'madness' is more terrifying than 'a wild lioness,' and his 'beastliness' far exceeded [that of] beasts" (qtd. In Arjana 69). In Elizabethan drama, there are other countless negative portrayals of Oriental Muslims-Arabs such as Othello and Tamburlaine.

Some of these images are also abundant in the nascent American narratives and imagination during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. These images are still encountered today. Shakespeare's *Othello* also reflects the European anxieties, concerns, some of which signal that "the sexual union of different races and even distinct religions [can create] horrible monsters" (Arjana 74). It is claimed that Leo Africanus's text *Geographical Historie of Africa*, which discusses how Muhammad claimed conversing with angel Gabriel to explain his epilepsy, was in circulation and that Shakespeare might have read it. Epilepsy is another theme much discussed by earlier Christian polemicists to discredit Muhammad. Daniel Vitkus notes in his *Turning Turk* (2003) how "Othello's epilepsy" evokes that of the "ur-Moor, Muhammed. Christian polemics against Islam, printed in Shakespeare's time, frequently allege that Muhammed was an epileptic who falsely maintained that his seizures were ecstasies brought on by divine possession" (85-86). This myth, or what literary critics call trope, is also employed to target and discredit Muhammad, to prove he is no Prophet.

Both Suzanne Akbari and Janice Hawes discuss the 'Saracen body' and its depictions and transformations that it was subject to in earlier narratives such as the *Chansons de geste*, in *Fierabras*, *King Horn*, *The Song of Roland*, *The Siege of Milan* and other Middle English romances and poems. These works feature Muslims ('Saracens' then) as giants, fearsome and monstrous creatures. They are dehumanized and demonized, which permits either their conversion or extermination. That earlier discourse is crucial in this regard since it can be read as a pre-Orientalist scholarship. In *Fierabras*, the king/emir Laban is the father to both Fierabras (son) and Floripas (daughter). The story can be summarized as follows: the emir Laban (in other texts called Balan) of Spain returns home with his son Fierabras after looting the Church of Saint Peter's in Rome bringing the relics of the passion with them. To recover the relics, Charlemagne attacks Spain and deploys his companion knight Oliver to fight Fierabras. The latter is defeated and successfully converts to Christianity as does Floripas who falls in love with another known knight of Charlemagne's, Guy of Boulogne (Akbari 158). Laban the emir/king, however, proves resistant to assimilation and conversion. Laban stands for the elder generation of resisting figures in face of the power of conversion and assimilation. As for the siblings, it signals the "transformative power of the Christian community" (158). The theme of conversion was widespread in medieval writings and literature. Those who converted to Christianity underwent sometimes both physical and personal transformation. Dark skin and bodily deformation would 'miraculously' turn into lovely whiteness and good shape. This proved the healing power of Christianity and the wishful thinking of those earlier Christian authors.

During the fourteenth century, argues Akbari, "the opposition of northern and southern bodies had come to be associated with a different binary opposition, that of East and West...the Orient came to be characterized as a place of torrid heat and irascible, lascivious inhabitants, while the West came to be seen as a place of temperate climate and rational souls" (156). One should bear in mind that binary opposition is a cornerstone of the orientalist scholarship. Therefore, in accordance with what the Greeks thought of the Orientals as cruel, despotic and undemocratic,

in the medieval poems and romances the 'Saracens' are portrayed as irritable and irrational while Christian counterparts are depicted as rational and well-tempered due to the cold. It is not a surprise therefore that the 'scientific' discourse rampant then in the Medieval Ages nurtures other domains and discourses including poems, romances and encyclopedias. In the encyclopedic works of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* and the *Imago mundi* of Honorius of Autun, for example, written before the thirteenth century growing of scholasticism, "the heterogeneous range of mankind was already coming to be ordered within a system of knowledge" (Akbari 164). Thus, in contrast to the alluring princess Floripas, especially after conversion to Christianity, Barac the female Saracen is portrayed as a hideous giantess and monstrous in her sexuality. The poem, therefore, does not only reflect politically the looting of Rome (Europe) by Arab armies and how they represented a threat, but also depicts religiously and bodily different 'Others.' Christian-Muslim confrontations are reflected in literary works. Through narration, the Saracens are defeated militarily, rendered more *human* and peaceful via assimilation and/or conversion belonging in this way to normative humanity in contrast to those monstrous 'Saracens' who are either to be defeated, exterminated or converted. Accordingly, in "popular medieval literature," including the "*Chansons de geste*" and the Middle English romances stimulated by them, "regularly features attractive, European-looking Saracens side by side with dark-skinned, grotesque Saracens having the bodies of giants and the bodily features of animals" (Akbari 156). Akbari provides one of the famous examples of this first category ('European- looking Saracens') epitomized by the Saracen emir Baligant in the *Chanson de Roland* with the wish to be 'Christianised.' This facet of transformation of the 'Saracen' body in popular medieval literature is more explicit in the *Chanson de geste* of *Fierabras* (twelfth to fourteenth century) to the Middle English romance of the *King of Tars* and Wolfram of Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Hence, in both these latter works, "the Saracen body is the site of transformation not only of soul but of body, the place where the discourse of religious alterity and the discourse of ethnic alterity are aligned with one another" (Akbari 157). Both of the Sultan's offspring share his petulant nature. "Fierabras is, precisely, 'fier,' distinguished by the ferocity with which he wages war. Though Floripas is outwardly a model of feminine beauty and graceful deportment, consistently identified as "Floripas la Curteis"...her outer beauty covers a nature as fiery and irascible as that of her father" (Akbari 165). They are all irascible and violent; all these latter attributes can be handled and transformed when converted. It is evident in this background that one can efficiently construe the portrayal of 'Saracens' in this medieval popular literature like in the *Chansons de geste*, romances, and drama. "The wild impetuosity and fury of the followers of "Mahon," or Muhammad, must be understood as the product of not only religious deviance, but also bodily diversity," argues Akbari (163). It was also believed that "the land also dictates their behavior...because of climate" (162). Therefore, violence and impetuous conduct demonstrated by Floripas in the poem are an expression of her "Saracen identity, the irascibility natural to Saracen bodies" (Akbari 168). Violence, barbarity and irascibility are images attributed to Saracens (Arab Muslims) in medieval works after Muhammad and his religion.

Muslims and, later on, Turks are portrayed as sexually pervert, monsters and animalistic in medieval theology, in romances of the Middle Ages and Renaissance paintings. They are depicted as turbaned killers and criminals with Jews (Arjana; Amy Burge). They are conceived as "New Jews" and Jewish 'Sarrazins' in both medieval and Renaissance imagination (Arjana 64). They were also exposed as sexually pervert and lustful. Polygamy and sometimes 'sodomy' were connected to Muslims. Evil and the devil incarnated, for some medieval and later authors,

in the Muslim character and body. The 'Black Saracen' denoted, in their view, the devil and Satan. Othello's blackness, in Shakespeare's *Othello*, represents his difference, destiny to destruction, his sexuality and his monstrosity (Arjana 73).

In the Middle English romances and poems discussed below, some themes and issues are given attention, including the Orient as a luxurious space full of riches and monsters, threatening 'Saracens' looking for both secular ends exemplified in conquering the lands and religious motivations as reflected in the aim to convert the religious 'Others' or 'infidels.' Janice Hawes examine earlier Middle English romances and poems to expose their portrayals of Islam and Muslims as they are perceived by Christian authors and authorities then. These works consist of *King Horn*, *The Siege of Milan*, *The Sultan of Babylon* and *Richard the Lion-Hearted*. Hawes, in her chapter in *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse* (2017), puts it clearly:

Many stereotypes that Muslims face today have origins in earlier periods. Middle English romances ... often depict Muslim (Saracen) figures who are villainous in their chaotic personalities, love of luxury, and "incorrect" worldview. Muslims become the Other against which medieval Christian European identity... is defined ... romances often highlight the heroism of Christian knights by depicting them as saint-like beings fighting Muslim villains for heavenly justice on earth (15).

To portray Muslims as different, threatening, enjoying unjustifiable luxury, 'barbaric' and violent is not a product of the seventeenth or the eighteenth centuries; that is they are not the product of the age of Orientalism. They are misconceived and depicted negatively in medieval texts as well. The famous dictum then was that Christians are right and 'Saracens' are wrong—that justifies any sort of mistreatment and misunderstanding. Hence, "stereotype(s) of Muslims" in these works disclose "attitudes in medieval popular culture, suggesting that these works reflected and possibly influenced attitudes in larger audience circles than we associate with the court circles of more famous authors" (Hawes 16). The 'protagonist' of *King Horn*, who is the young boy, encounters many 'Saracens' in his journeys. These encounters, says Hawes, imply that "even in the earliest Middle English romance where Saracens appear, the image of the bloodthirsty anti-Christian villain existed" (16). Stories and fantasies are always fabricated about distant and different peoples to amuse, to unite people and establish an identity and an ideology of one's own. This image of the 'blood-thirsty' would also be reproduced when portraying the 'Turks' as a growing threat to European sovereigns and their interests.

These earlier romances emphasize the "luxuries of Oriental life" and the richness of its lands (16). In *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, Anglo-Saxon monk the Venerable Bede articulates his anxiety about Muslim raiders of the Iberian Peninsula in 729, positing "the dangers of the Saracens who are later punished for their *perfidiae* [faithlessness]" (qtd. in Hawes 17). Within the same line of argument, Jonathan Lyons in his *Islam through Western Eyes* (2014) writes how humankind for Bede was "menaced by evils" (qtd. in Lyons 51). "These evils were," Bede suggests, "the arrival of the Arabs and unexplained troubles in his native Northumbria" (Lyons 51). Therefore, scores of the "stereotypes of Muslim culture" that materialize in later medieval European manuscripts may have had their roots in these contacts and scripts (Hawes 17). This aspect reflects how monks and other 'authorities' participate in 'knowledge' production about distant Arabs and Berbers in Muslim Spain. The likes of Bede, deeply religious-driven, are also confident that the 'Saracens' would get punished by a just God

in heaven for their wicked deeds. The tales of pilgrims also play a greater role in the manufacture of such earlier narratives about Islam and Muslims (Lyons; Hawes).

The works reflective of the 'wars' of the Iberian Peninsula, *The Siege of Milan* and *The Sultan of Babylon*, are considered romances that illustrate "Charlemagne's struggle against Muslim invaders on which the earlier *chansons de geste* also focus" and that they stand for "a fossilization of Muslims as violent aggressors against European Christianity" (Hawes 18). In the romance of *The Siege*, 'Saracens' are depicted as 'heathen' and 'pagan' that "destroy all pleasures" and "do wrong." In *King Horn*, one finds conceptions of 'Saracens' as 'heathen hounds' and 'Crusader Saracens' (Hawes 19). One of the most warning concerns and images conveyed by these romances above is the depiction of "Muslims as the dangerous enemy to be destroyed ... if the community is threatened, that threat must be neutralized rather than incorporated" (Hawes 20). Unfortunately, that narrative thrives today, although with some alteration.

Still, while *Othello* is a work on the mingling of races via "the sexual union" of Othello and Desdemona that is carried on the stage, such monstrous creatures "were thought to exist. According to European sources from the era, the sexual union of different races and even distinct religions created horrible monsters" (Arjana 74). This, in part, explains Othello's final destruction and doom. Othello is black, devilish and different. Miscegenation is another basic topic in *Othello* articulated "in both the act of mixed-race sex and the horrors it could create" and "the image of Othello and Desdemona having sex is described" in animalistic vocabulary (Arjana 75). Moreover, Arjana notes that the revulsion concerning the association of Othello and Desdemona is connected to the "Moor's identity as an African ... Othello's race identifies him as a monster. Even though he tries to act human, he meets an inescapable fate" (Arjana 75). Othello is considered a monster and he is not going to escape his fate because it is believed to be in his nature (because of his ancestry and religion). When Iago calls Othello "the old black ram," the "lascivious Moor," and claims that Moors "are changeable in their wills," writes Frederick Quinn (2008), Iago does reflect "a sentiment held not only in the play but in society as well" (79). Also, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, one encounters labels such as cruel, magical island, exotic and deformed shapes attributed to the non-European deformed Caliban and Prospero. Besides, Othello, says Arjana, "is a pseudo-Mahomet, recycling an old trope about the Muslim prophet—that he was an epileptic. Christian writers often accused Muhammad of being epileptic (considered a mental illness), as in the story...of his consumption by pigs after a seizure" (76). The same idea is expressed in Vitkus's *Turning Turk* (85). This reflects not only how previous, medieval conceptions and images of the Prophet were prevalent but also how monstrous races and threatening 'beasts' were common knowledge, available to readers and audiences.

Later on, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, considered the heyday of Orientalism, Arjana notes that there existed the making of "fantastic Muslim characters, including monsters" (84). Nascent movements and philosophies like "the Enlightenment, Orientalism, and Romanticism" and the "Gothic" literature and art gave birth to "an episteme of continued anti-Muslim rhetoric" that was extremely located in "fantasies that first emerged in the Middle Ages" (84). This does not mean, however, that the category of monstrosity was mainly launched in the face of Muslims; other minorities, groups, women and threatening men/women were also described through that lens. Nevertheless, this category which one can say has become a strong

narrative was and is activated every time natives, bad guys and other threatening groups are encountered during European discoveries of other spaces, and when colonial expansion requires dealing with the natives, either in Latin America, Australia or Africa. Orientalism's impact on Gothic fiction, argues Arjana, depends on a restoration of medieval imagery together with "its Muslim horrors." Therefore, in Gothic literature, one finds a "number of frightening Muslim monsters, from a Muslim demon called Zofloya to a blood-sucking vampire named Dracula. These monsters stand for "new anxieties and reflect old phantasms about race, foreign bodies, miscegenation, and even cannibalism" (87). This facet also impacts later American and European outlooks toward the Orient, Islam and Muslims.

The Muslim Turks, for Abbé Constantin Volney, were "apathetic," "submissive," "passive" and "lethargic," writes Robert Allison (48-49). Not only Volney, but also writers such as Trenchard and Gordon, Penelope Aubin, the Irish-born American publisher and economist Matthew Carey, the Swiss historian and essayist Simonde de Sismondi amongst others wrote in similar styles and provided related labels. Put in a telling passage, Allison notes how Western authors achieved the conclusion about "why the Muslim world remained backward. A wicked religion had fostered bad government, and bad government thwarted social progress. Instead of encouraging industry and enterprise, these governments fostered ignorance, which bred indolence" (53). Indolence, insolence, ignorance and arrogance are 'truthful' descriptions attached to Muslims by different authors in variegated centuries and contexts. Either in Algiers, Morocco, Tunis or Tripoli, Muslims are portrayed as tyrants, ignorant, backward, and cruel; these aspects represent their defining features for European and American writers, travellers, consuls and historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Muhammad, for these authors, stood for Muslims as their model and teacher. 'Barbary' and the 'Orient' are spaces where irrationality and injustice thrive; only force prevails. Muhammad is depicted as a 'bigot' and 'pervert' (Allison 54). Accordingly, these conceptions and labels are attributed to his followers.

Orientalism is a huge library, a repertoire of depictions of the Orientals and all things considered Oriental. From missionaries to consuls, writers to travellers, and authors, who had never set foot on the Orient, presented the crude portrayals of the Orient and Oriental tyrants, bigots, perverts, and ignorant, in a place where force, indolence and insolence are dominant. William Eaton, American consul to Tunis, states that although the country is "naturally luxuriant and beautiful beyond description" it would have been glamorous and thriving if managed by "an enlightened and enterprising people" unlike these passive people (qtd. in Allison 54). These Tunisians, for him, are slaves "to their despotic government" who have no desire for property and have "no ambition to cultivate" the affluent land (qtd. in Allison 54). The portrayals of North Africa and Africans, for which Said was challenged, are not better than their Oriental others. Mordecai Manuel Noah, about a decade after William Eaton, another American consul, viewed Tunis in analogous manner (54). In addition to writers, novelists and consuls, American newspapers and magazines represent a distinctive feature of the American Orientalism in its dealing with the Orient. The newspapers (like the *Massachusetts Magazine* in 1789) describe how Turkish sultans, pashas and deys of Algiers are cruel, tyrant and slaves to sexual and political desires (Allison 55-56). Robert Allison writes that Westerners in the eighteenth century perceived the "Muslim world as a wicked mix of political tyranny and wild sex. The lustful appetites of Muslim rulers for political or sexual power were not restrained by either social or moral codes" (61). Thus, sexual tyranny goes hand in hand with political tyranny

as reflected in the narratives and magazines of the era. For Allison as delivered by their authors, these texts cope with the uninhibited “sexual conquests of Muslim rulers, who supposedly kept large harems or seraglios filled with beautiful women, all slaves to the tyrant’s lust” (61) whose only purpose was to satisfy his desires. The same is expressed in American historian Justin McCarthy’s *The Turk* (42-43).

The Muslims, therefore, be they North Africans (‘Barbary pirates’ or ‘Moors’) or ‘Turks’ are portrayed as politically tyrants and sexually perverts. They are slaves both to their libidinous desires and political despotism. They are represented as different and they also do what Americans need not do. They are perceived in this demonizing way not only in newspapers and magazines, but also in plays, novels, travelers’ accounts and consuls’ journals. In a telling concluding paragraph to chapter two, Allison puts it clearly thus:

The historical truth of this image is not the issue. Americans who used the Muslim world as a reference point for their own society were not concerned with historical truth or with an accurate description of Islam, but rather with this description’s political convenience. The Muslim world was a remarkably useful rhetorical device that could be used by libertarians like Mathew Lyon and Thomas Paine and by conservatives like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. With a popular image of Muhammad and the Muslim world firmly established in the public mind, it was enough to mention either one as a starting point for a political argument. Under this definition, Muslims submitted to religious despotism and were taught to accept political despotism (59).

Accusations, images and misconceptions like these are abundant in the literature and are still widely discussed by prominent contemporary scholars (Curtis; Lyons; Lean). The ‘Orientals,’ Muslims included, have been variously conceived by western literary authors during the ages; they were presented as politically cunning, sexually virile and lustful, cruel and irrational and socially oppressive to women. As succinctly encapsulated in Khalid Bekkaoui’s chapter and argument, in *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context*, when discussing the impact of the discourses of some significant novels of the eighteenth century, the Orient “is conjured up as a luxurious world, stuffed with appealing cultural practices: extraordinarily pretty girls, wonderful music, exquisite garments and rich jewellery, lofty gardens ... Persian carpets, obedient eunuchs, delicious food and drink, and virile masters. This array of exotic paraphernalia is often gleaned from *The Arabian Nights*” (154). These fantastic and constructed aspects and cultural practices are still present and echoed in novels that appear after 9/11 events in America. These stories in the *Arabian Nights*, much loved Orientalist text *par excellence*, have gendered new European texts with some Muslim females and males (mainly wealthy and powerful widowed females and polygamous males) perceived less predatory and more civilized than their European counterparts. These stories include the images of virile caliphs and sultans and “Oriental sexual jealousy” (155). This assumption about the harem is reflected in Samuel Johnson’s definition of the seraglio in his Dictionary as “A house of women kept for debauchery” (qtd. in Bekkaoui 156). In this context, white female disruptiveness and “libidinousness constitute a perilous threat to faith and race” (Bekkaoui 159). After discussing a significant sample of eighteenth-century novels, including Bickerstaff’s *The Sultan*, Haywood’s *Fruitless Enquiry* and *Idalia*, and Elizabeth Marsh’s *The Female Captive*, Bekkaoui asserts that the reiterated “trope of Oriental cruelty and sexual depravity is here transferred onto the European subject” (165). Although it is true that the ‘Orient’ in these texts, cited by Bekkaoui,

remains a land of legendary wealth, exotic beauty and a source for social prosperity and promotion, it has not been considered a space of extreme cruelty, uncivilised people and oppressed female subjects. In Isaac Bickerstaff's *The Sultan* one reads how Roxalana teaches other women and slaves to be free and ask for their equality with society (Allison 70). That engraved assumption on the despotism of its rulers, depravity of its subjects and confinement of its women is challenged in other contemporary narratives. This assumption can be said to be a later development.

### **THE GROWING (IN)VISIBILITY OF THE MUSLIM WOMAN IN WESTERN DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES: FROM POWERFUL QUEEN/PRINCESS TO OPPRESSED FEMALE**

The Muslim woman occupies a smaller space in the Middle Ages than the 'Saracen' Men. The aim in some medieval narratives is to subdue the Muslim woman instead of liberating her. Converting the Muslims, be they men or women, is one of the basic themes in medieval canonical literature. Sweeping generalizations and resilient (mis)conceptions about Muslims and Muslim women in this regard hinder potential attempts at understanding Islam and Muslims. The theme of the conversion of the Muslim/Arab woman (queen, princess or any powerful female figure) is one of the prevalent themes in early modern English drama. Scholars in this regard cite some of the seventeenth century English plays such as Phillip Massinger's *The Renegado* and John Fletcher's *The Island Princess*. Despite the attempts of the female protagonists in both plays—Donusa in the former and Quisara in the latter—to "turn Turk" (convert to Islam) their European suitors, they failed by the end and converted themselves into Christianity.

It is common sense that portrayals of Muslim women in Western writings have their long history. However, the images of Muslim women have witnessed a transformation of that image over time. That image is not only influenced by the axis of power relations, but also by the narrative of progress as these two processes prove paramount and formative of Europe and European identity (Mohja Kahf; Gerard Delanty). Kahf writes that "there is nothing essential or timeless behind Western representations of the Muslim woman; they are products of specific moments and developments in culture" (2). She studies Western representations of the Muslim woman from the second half of the eleventh century to the middle of the nineteenth century. Particular times and developments in Western culture and Western encounters with the Islamic Orient give birth to such portrayals. Hence, for the Syrian poet, Kahf stresses that "the image of the Muslim woman in Western culture has been a changing, evolving phenomenon" (4). The veil and the harem, as two of the most explored themes surrounding Muslim women, "do not exist in medieval representations of the Muslim woman and are barely present in the Renaissance" (6). However, it is unthinkable not to connect the representation of the Muslim woman with the harem and the veil during the modern era. Kahf cites a passage from Leila Ahmed which reads that "the issue of women only emerged as the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam... as Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries" (Ahmed 150; qtd. in Kahf 6). This does not imply that Christian and Western narratives on Muslim women are absent prior to that era but that literature focuses more on Muslim women in the colonial period as an oppressed subject. Kahf also adds that some of the fundamental constituents of the image(s) of Muslim women "congealed even before there were any real Muslim women, because the representation builds on conventions of representing alien women (pagans, foreigners, Old Testament figures) already formed in Western texts

before the advent of Islam” (4). Subsequently, the importance attached to the figure of the female in Western texts on Islam witnesses changes as that discourse transforms. As a matter of fact, what drives some early Christian authors is what they perceive as threatening or unimaginable phenomena like paganism, heresy, cannibalism and monsters, as argued above.

One should also remember that the early period is an era of doubt, uncertainty and fear of the surrounding environment. This explains in part why some resort to the Scriptures to seek information, guidance and interpretation. “Since the eighteenth century,” writes Kahf, the western narrative on the oppressed Muslim woman has been gaining momentum (1). Despite variations in this narrative, notes Kahf, the theme of “the Muslim woman being victimized” is the prevalent account concerning Western portrayals (1). This depiction might even be employed in advertisement where, for instance, ‘free’ American women use perfumes of Vogue in contrast to ‘submissive’ Muslim women (181). The influence and prevalence of this narrative is that it is operative at all dimensions of culture “from high to low” (1). This account is omnipresent. Basing her arguments on Foucault’s genealogy and the importance of history, Kahf argues that these depictions of Muslim women are not natural phenomena but discursive practices. Before the seventeenth century, Muslim women exemplify power and talkative characters and even at times being giantesses. Kahf notes that:

There is no veil and no seclusion in her medieval representations. There is often an attempt to recuperate her as a Christian or a European, rather than an emphasis on her irreducible alienness. The notion that a (formerly) Muslim woman could enter Europe as an equal—and even more than equal— character in a story, and the desirability of her doing so, is a characteristic of medieval literature; it could never happen so easily in nineteenth-century literature (5).

One might argue that the desirability of turning a Muslim woman European/American also appears in the twenty-first century although she is not displaced geographically and physically; she is turned literarily. In early medieval ages, power relations between Christian powers and Empires of Islam were in favor of the latter. The Ottomans’ presence in Eastern Europe for centuries and the case of the Muslims in ‘Muslim Spain’ (Al-Andalus) are cases in point. Moreover, the Muslim woman inhabits “a much smaller and less central place in that narrative in medieval texts than she does in the texts of the nineteenth century. Her nature, too, is different” (Kahf 4). There is a reason behind that smaller presence in medieval literature which lies in the fact that Western preoccupations about Islam in medieval texts “cluster around concerns other than women... The Muslim woman typically appears as a queen or noblewoman wielding power of harm or succor over the hero, reflecting in this the earthly might of Islamic civilization” (4). The civilizational and military might of the Islamic world then was reflected in Western narratives so that women were represented as powerful queens, princesses or noblewomen. Muslim men (variously called ‘Ishmaelites’ or ‘Hagarenes,’ ‘Saracens,’ and ‘Turks,’) were represented as noble kings, sultans, chivalrous knights and princes. However, these women characters and “figures are loquacious and transgress the bounds of traditional femininity, reflecting the failure of their parent religion to inculcate proper gender roles,” writes Kahf, and “the rhetorical move of many medieval literary texts involving a Muslim woman is to subdue her, not to liberate her” (4). Later developments in these early narratives turn the Muslim woman into a silenced figure when she is ‘converted’ to the ‘true’ religion of the Christian knights.

Muslim women then enjoyed high social ranks and more freedom. They were in positions to be envied rather than denounced, and sought unlike, or in contradistinction to, what is nowadays the norm according to some Western scholars of Islam and Muslim women. To provide another illustration of the noted images about Muslim women, Wijdan Ali argues that "clichés about the Orient and its women have imposed themselves with considerable force on the popular imagination of the west and have been perpetuated in Europe since the Middle Ages" (29). As a consequence, the Middle Ages is crucial an era when uncovering images not only of Islam and Muslims, but also of Muslim women. Medieval Christian writers, theologians and missionaries were more concerned about understanding this 'new faith' rather than exploring the status of Muslim women (and men), the understanding of which, they believed, would pave the way for discrediting Muslims' claims and hence converting them to the 'true religion.' Converting the 'pagans,' the 'idolaters' and 'Others' of Christian Europeans was, then, a basic theme in (the canonical) literary narratives<sup>1</sup>. Christians were more concerned with understanding emerging Islam and its power.

Moreover, and within the same scope, Lila Abu-Lughod states in her book that because she knows women via her many "years doing ethnographic research, I am often bewildered by what I read or hear about "the Muslim woman""(4). It is quite tough, argues Abu-Lughod, "to reconcile my experiences with the women I have met in rural Egypt with what the American media present, or with what people say to me casually at dinner parties, in doctors' offices ... when they learn that I write about the Middle East" (4). The media also play a big role in disseminating images of Muslim women. Hence, when they are, generally speaking, portrayed as veiled, either under 'burqa' or veils and headscarves, there runs the assumption that they are less free, secluded under such codes of dressing. Abu-Lughod then adds that she is "surprised" by how people assume that Muslim women do not enjoy rights (4). Stereotypes surrounding the veiled, oppressed Muslim women are enormously prevalent and trenchant. In this way, Abu-Lughod points out that her book is the outcome of her intellectual journey to make sense of the disjuncture between her experiences and those prevailing public attitudes. Accordingly, during the time she heard about "defending the rights of Muslim women was offered as part of the justification for U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001," she pointed out that she "had already spent twenty years writing about women's lives in various communities in Egypt" (4). Abu-Lughod then argued that "by presenting women's dreams, desires, anger, and disappointments—in their own words—[she] hoped to lay to rest some stereotypes" (5). However, these stereotypes are so engraved. Through her work as ethnographer spending some considerable time in rural areas in Egypt, she hopes that the narratives she collects from the lived experiences of women there "would persuade [feminists] that it is not so easy to talk about 'patriarchy' or to put one's finger on how power works. I wanted my years of research to offer something unusual to a public that had little understanding of, but strong views about women in the Middle East" (5). This again highlights the power of the narrative of the oppressed Muslim (and Oriental) woman by large.

She calls the work she is doing "writing against culture" (6). This is so because she is persuaded that sweeping generalizations about cultures "[prevent] us from appreciating or even accounting for people's experiences and the contingencies with which we all live" (6). This

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<sup>1</sup> This goes hand in hand with what I stressed in another study on historical and theological conceptions of Islam and Muslims.

attests to the impact of Orientalist scholarship and far-reaching generalizations that thwart understanding the reality of other peoples, societies and lives. Therefore, it becomes crystal clear to her that “the idea of culture increasingly has become a core component of international politics and common sense” (6). Moreover, she points out in reference to the theses of a clash of civilizations and the troubling difference and strangeness of others that “pundits tell us that there is a clash of civilizations or cultures in our world. They tell us there is an unbridgeable chasm between the West and the ‘Rest’” (6). Still, Muslims are portrayed “as a special and threatening culture—the most homogenized and the most troubling of the Rest. Muslim women, in this new common sense, symbolize just how alien this culture is” (6). The image of Muslims, male and female, as threatening and different, is still working and utilized to differentiate between world cultures and peoples. These women, according to these narratives, are different, less free and locked within constraining conditions. Hence, Islam, Muslim men and women and their status and position under Islamic jurisprudence become heated debates and distinctive features upon which Muslim women are categorized as other, different, and in need of some (feminist or Western) ‘rescue.’ Besides, the critical tenor of the late Edward Said is not hard to discern in her work.

One of the paradoxes emanating from these few passages is that Islam and Muslims still engender portrayals, conceptions and reactions and that while that encounter was only ‘imagined’ it is today ‘real.’ Although this encounter is now real and direct it does not reduce that huge corpus of (mis)conceptions. Of course, many factors lead to the increasing visibility of Islam and Muslims in Western societies. However, chief among them is the public appearance of veiled Muslim women and bearded men inhabiting the public sphere in secular Western societies and culture. These factors include the growing numbers of Muslim immigrants to Western capitals and metropolitan cities. Then the fall of the Soviet Union and the Communist threat lead to a focus on the Middle East and its complex cultures, histories and strategic resources. Newspapers’ reports from Iran and the Middle East in general and some memoirs written by Muslim and non-Muslim writers feed the curiosity of a growing audience. This justifies and explains why they become bestsellers in the North American context. September 11th events, too, ignite that interest and help reproduce stereotypical images of the Muslim others, as threatening and extremists which is characteristic of the Orientalist outlook. Some scholars in this way stress the stigmatization of Muslim women.

Once again, Abu-Lughod stresses that after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the images of the segregated Muslim women are linked to a ‘mission to rescue them from their cultures’ (7). This feminist mission, or as scholars call it feminist Orientalism, marks the contemporary discourses on the narrative of rescuing Muslim women from the cruelty, barbarity and confining Arab/Islamic culture. However, unlike in Abu-Lughod’s work, many feminists and scholars overlook the role of American imperialism in propagating such discourses since 9/11. In her work, Abu-Lughod endeavors to voice and discuss the reasons why “the emerging Western common sense about the plight of Muslim women did not capture what [she] knew from [her] experience and from reading history” (8). This explains why her book is an attempt to find out how to address the question of the Muslim women and their rights. Therefore, it can be argued that she is writing to expose the familiar Western narrative of the wretched Muslim woman subjugated by her culture. When (Muslim) women choose to veil or cover parts of their bodies it is thought of as a sign of oppression that necessitates intervention and calls for human rights and respect of individual freedoms and freedom of conscience. Consequently, veiling or

covering entails oppression of the women. All types of covering be they burqa, hijab, scarf or any other items of veiling, are signs of repression. Furthermore, Abu-Lughod is not alone in "raising doubts about the images of Muslim women [which] are offered in the West," nor is she the only one to explore the relationship between these images and the "prevailing politics of violence" (9). Abu-Lughod stresses that the dissimilarity between "the free and unfree is at the core of contemporary American feminism, drawing on a powerful national ideology and political philosophy" (20). One of the most poetic and familiar evocations is the title of Maya Angelou's classic memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (20). In this book, there is a tale of liberation from both racism and sexual mistreatment that revolves around a contrast between the enslaved bird and the free one. However, this issue of the free and the unfree is based on secular and liberal notions of progress and the 'Self.' Still, no further inquiry about the factors that restrict and hinder women's emancipation is undertaken; less is researched nowadays concerning the impact of empire in deteriorating the situation of women in invaded countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Portrayals of "the unfreedom of others that blame the chains of culture incite rescue missions by outsiders. Such representations mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation," notes Abu-Lughod (20). She also adds that these representations "deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live" (20). Partially, the answer consists in how the reality of the 'Orient' is less considered than how the 'West' should be; it is hence not far from the feminist Orientalist writings of the British feminists of the 18th century<sup>2</sup>: it is more about how the 'westerner' should be and behave than the complex and multi-dimensional reality of the Orient.

Yet, in her article, Jasmin Zine states that exploring the creation of "knowledge related to Muslim women in historical and contemporary texts allows for an understanding of the sociopolitical mediations that historically have informed these discursive practices" (1). This has become chiefly significant with the restoration of Orientalist preoccupations and constructions of Islam as one of the consequences of the 9/11 events. The revival of Orientalist tropes that brand Islam and Muslims as "barbaric and uncivilized terrorists have gained alarming currency" (1). Therefore, Muslim women are chiefly discerned "as media images of *burqah*-clad women [has] become the trademark of Islam's repression. These images serve to justify all forms of military action under the trope of "liberation," as was the 'earlier formula for colonial intervention and control in the Muslim world" (Zine 2). She moreover observes that the bodies of Muslim women are stages on the geopolitical scene "as foils for modernity, civilization, and freedom" (2). Basing her main arguments on the work of both Edward Said and Mohja Kahf, amongst others, she points out that, the politics of representing Muslim women has been tied to the material and ideological conditions characterizing the relationship between "the West" and Islamic societies. Historically, these relations were marked by shifts in the balance of power between these two societies. These shifts, in turn, engendered corresponding shifts within the archetypal paradigm of the "Muslim woman" as a literary invention and later as an object of the western feminist gaze (2).

Zine goes further to stress that the narratives that portray Muslim women are mainly "products of the male gaze" (3). In the Western male literary texts, the Muslim woman prototype witnesses transformations "during these historical periods, ranging from powerful and heroic

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<sup>2</sup> This aspect is discussed in another study to be published soon.

early medieval queens to the slightly more wanton and sexually transgressive images of Muslim women during the late Middle Ages” (3). As stated above by Kahf and Abu-Lughod, this image of the Muslim woman has enormously transformed. In the colonial period, there appear the images of the harem naked bodies and concubines, sexualized and victimized bodies. The images of the eroticized Muslim women reflect the growing interest of colonial powers and Orientalist painters to unveil these covered bodies. It also reflects the balance of power in favour of the growing West.

### **CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is targeted and discredited by calling him a ‘tyrant,’ ‘false prophet,’ and ‘ambitious schemer’, and suffering from epileptic seizures and sexual potency by medieval monks and contemporary authors. Medieval authors and scientists participate in some of the enduring images and misconceptions. The Arabs/Muslims are depicted as barbarious, violent and has propensity to destruction, terror and killing. The impact of medieval Orientalism, or knowledge production, on later developments is so grave that in some cases it dictates what should (not) be said about the Muslim ‘Orient.’