BOOK REVIEW

Sophia Rose Arjana - Muslims in the Western Imagination

by Mohammad Hossain

Edward Said, with his magnum opus Orientalism (1978), paved the way for the scholarly critique of the cultural representation of the East (or the Orient) by Western scholars. Though facing heavy criticism for his work, his ideas strongly influenced an upcoming generation of scholars, spawning a whole new branch of literature in the process. The book Muslims in the Western Imagination by Sophia Rose Arjana, published in 2015 by Oxford University Press, is the latest in a long line of such endeavours. A well researched academic initiative, the book is well sourced with notes and an extensive bibliography; about one third of this 280-page book consists of copious endnotes and references.

The “Muslim problem” in the West today is deep rooted, representing old anxieties that lie within a multiplicity of times and spaces in Western literature, art and popular culture (p.1). Arjana’s study is a teratology of Islam – a study of Muslim ‘monsters’ (p.12) – and stems from her desire to change the question from “Why do they (Muslims) hate us (the West)?” to “Why do we (the West) fear them (Muslims)?” (p.7). The author is concerned with the West’s imaginaire of Islam: the idea of the Muslim as a frightening adversary, an outside enemy that doesn’t belong in modernity, whose intrinsic alterity means he must be excluded from the American and European landscapes (p.2). It is noteworthy that this study of the history of Muslim monsters, rooted in the conceptual framework of Orientalism, is distinguished from both Islamophobia and polemical anti-Muslim discourse (p.8). Rather, it stems from repositories of Western desires and fantasies, ranging from bestiality, homoeroticism and necrophilia, to gay tourism in the modern age (p.12). Although there are alternatives to the negative Western imaginaire on Islam, including positive and romantic treatments of Muslims, such characterisations are trivial (p.7). Likewise, the argument that these disturbing images mischaracterising Muslims are seen by only a few, and thereby cannot exist as a powerful force in the construction of Western knowledge of Islam, is also easy to debunk; cultural representations of Muslims

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as monsters are so widespread in the West that this argument bears little weight (p.7). With a few exceptions involving “sexually toxic” Muslim female monsters (p.15), most of these representations are linked to the rape fantasies of colonizing men (p.11) or the overwhelming portrayal of “toxically masculine” Muslim men (p.11).

The underlying message of this book is that the negative characterisation of Muslims in Western literature and art has been a continuous process since the beginning of Islam. Keeping this in mind, the book is divided into six chapters, five of which focus on exploring Muslim monsters by means of a historical approach based upon Foucault’s episteme (p.17). Overall, the study looks at the propagation of Muslim monsters as part of the discourse of Orientalism, which substantiated the Western imaginaire about Islam through the establishment of the Muslim “as a subject, rather than as an individual, formulating a character stuck in arrested development and incapable, unlike the white man, of adapting to modernity” (p.9). The importance of this can be realised in the fact that such largely fictional characterisations as “Homo Islamicus” (the ‘Islamic man’) or the idea that “all Muslim men are violent as part of an innate Islamic impulse” would be considered obscene if applied to other social groups, but are validated through Orientalism (p.11).

The medieval period heralded the arrival of Muslim monsters in the Western imaginaire, where they functioned as part of the eight to ninth-century Christian reaction to Islam, itself originating in polemical characterisations of the Prophet Muhammad. The main basis for formulating Muslim monsters during this period rested with the factors of religion and geographical location, both shaped by ethno-genesis and the medieval Christian belief that monsters, demons and all manner of fantastic creatures occupied the same world as humans (p.25). The Muslim monster was a result of Medieval Christian anxieties surrounding ethnicity and bodily differences. Muslims were represented as dark skinned (either black or purple), sexually deviant, dog-headed men, and at times even cannibalistic (see characterisations like the Black Saracen). The anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Middle Ages was later resurrected by the nineteenth Gothic movement and sustained and legitimised by Orientalism (p.21).

The rise of Ottoman power, perceived by Europeans as a new threat, led to the emergence of “Turkish monsters” alongside the previous Saracen and African Muslim monsters. This trend is exemplified by the appearance of the Black Turk in Renaissance depictions of Christian martyrs, alongside negative literary depictions, such as in Elizabethan dramas like Tamburlaine and Othello (pp.69-76). Such negative depictions also featured in eponymous daily life portrayals, such as the ‘Turk’s Head’ signs of inns and coffee shops (p.77) or the heavily symbolic Turk’s Head pie (p.79).
Europe’s transition towards the eras of Enlightenment and Romanticism (in addition to the latter’s rich offshoot, the Gothic revival), although based upon scientific enquiry and rationalism, did not lessen or eradicate Muslim monsters; it only inspired new legions of monsters in both domestic and foreign spaces (p.84). With the establishment of Orientalism as the dominant colonial and scholarly discourse, the fantastic monsters of the previous ages were replaced by depictions of Muslims as morally depraved and hyper-violent villains (p.92). Arjana discusses in detail these new Muslim monsters as depicted in Gothic horrors, including Zofloya the Moor and Dracula. The prevalent notion was that the Orient was trapped in time and constituted an extreme, dangerous and stagnant region, as popularised through the “Arab of the Desert” genre of fiction (p.99). Over time, the desire to possess the Orient spawned a pervasive intellectual movement in Europe and America, influencing fashion, advertising, architecture, literature, art and eventually film (p.103). Coupled with the growth of consumerism, this movement fueled the phenomenon known as “Consumer Orientalism.”

Muslim monsters in the Americas were originally depicted by Spanish conquistadors amidst complex narratives, where American Indians were identified with Muslims through claims of being “devil worshippers” and the “New Moors” (p.138). At present, the dominant depiction of Muslim monsters in the Americas is in film, revealing both a fascination with the exotic and a repulsion towards Muslims. Arjana therefore includes an extensive treatment of the negative depictions of Muslim characters in popular Hollywood films, beginning in the 1920s with the Valentino films The Sheikh and The Son of the Sheikh, before proceeding to the Indiana Jones films and, more recently, movies on the monsters of modernity (zombies, vampires, werewolves, etc.), such as Dracula (1992) and 300 (2007).

The book’s final section explores the Muslim monster post-9/11, bringing forth disturbing evidence demonstrating how films with negative depictions of Muslims simply reflect the contemporary political discourse surrounding Islam – that the ‘horror’ lurks everywhere. In this context, Arjana addresses the issues of the inhumane treatment of Muslims at Abu Ghraib and GITMO (p.179), which she believes showcases how powerful the discourse of Muslim monsters is; she believes these crimes were based on a whole-hearted belief in the inhumanity of Muslims and a consequent apathy towards the dehumanisation of Muslim bodies. This perception is based on the belief that Muslims are not just represented as monsters; they are monsters (p.183).

Arjana deserves applause for having the academic courage to explore a timely topic such as Muslim monsters in the Western imagination. Her book is undoubtedly a valuable contribution by an expert in the field. Having said that,
the vast scope of 1300 years of negative Muslim characterisation in the form of teratology in the Western *imaginaire* necessitates a much more comprehensive study than this work offers. The work’s sometimes cursory treatment, especially in terms of discussion, belies the need for further extensive scholarship on the separate fields covered, such as literature, drama and the arts. Nonetheless, Arjana, through her nevertheless valuable contribution, has reiterated both the need and importance of further scholarly contribution in this field.