

Islam's Narrative in American Literature

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Abstract: *This paper examines representations of Islam and the Near East in works of American writers from the 17th- 21st centuries. It argues that American cultural views of Islam and "the East," are constructed upon fear of the "other," a desire to dominate, and popular yet uninformed ideas about Islam and Muslim peoples.*

Tobias Wolff's (2008) short story titled "White Bible" centers on Maureen Casey, who teaches at a Catholic high school in upstate NY. Maureen does not derive any satisfaction from her work as a teacher, and after drinking at a bar one evening after work she is abducted in the parking lot by the father of her student Hassan. Thinking she is the victim of a car-jacking, Maureen offers her abductor money. He refuses.

"Please," she said. "What do you want?" (292).

Abu Hassan answers,

"This is not about sex...That is what you are thinking, of course. That is the American answer to everything" (ibid.).

Abu Hassan is intent that his son becomes a doctor, but Hassan has been cheating and is failing Maureen's class. At the end of the story, Hassan's father pulls a small Bible from his jacket and asks Maureen to swear on the Bible that she will not expose Hassan's cheating. She refuses, saying, "You really thought you could save him?" (ibid.: 299).

Abu Hassan sees Maureen as dishonorable, a woman who drinks and is perhaps sexually immoral. Based upon his background he believes that since she teaches at a school that is affiliated with religion, her holy book will have meaning to her. It doesn't. In turn Abu Hassan takes her hostage, an act many Americans might associate with Arabs or Muslims due to similar characterizations in American culture and in the media.

Although fictional, the above exchange illustrates the types of cross-cultural stereotypes that continue from a long history of examples pre-existing in American literature.

The Example of John Smith and Early “American” Literature

Arab culture and Islam have been on the minds and in the works of western, and in particular authors of American literature since it began being written. Timothy Marr (2006: 2), in his book, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* notes that

“Islam has figured in the fashioning of North American cultural definitions as far back as the first years of the European settlements”

The late Edward Said (1978: 8) noted,

“The imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged.”

Wai Chee Dimock (2001: 761) adds that Said's (1978: 7) notion of an “umbrella of Western hegemony over the Orient” gives rise to an odd paradigm, oddly hierarchical and segregated: West versus East, the dominating versus the dominated” claiming that “the latter exists only as clay molded by western hands. The Orient is a fabrication, an artifact. As such, it has no agency of its own, no life apart from the ideological constructions foisted upon it.”

Indeed, many of our anthologies of American literature introduce readers to narratives by figures like Captain John Smith (16th-17th century) whose tales recount surviving and describing captivity by Native Americans, and include New World promotional materials, the earliest of the travel brochure genre, such as *The General Historie of Virginia*, and *A Description of New England*. Yet, as Marr also notes, Smith was perhaps equally well-known in the early American settlements as a crusader against the Turks in Ottoman Europe (2006: 2). Smith's accomplishments, described in *The True Travels*--one of the earliest secular autobiographies published in the West--also includes the killing of three Turkish warriors, for which he was awarded a coat of arms portraying three Turks' heads. Another of Smith's experiences with the Muslim world included being sold into slavery to a Muslim woman, who, according to Smith was enamored with him. She sent Smith to serve her brother, Bashaw, and after gaining the trust of his new master, Smith “beat of his brains with a threshing bat” (ibid.: 3). Marr suggests that

“Smith's cross-cultural experiences reveal how old world patters of disdaining “others” were imported into new world spaces as a strategy to situate the strangeness of cultural difference (ibid.: 3).

In fact, we may see the interactions between the earliest conquerors, which some more benevolently call “explorers” and “settlers,” and their native American counterparts, as a continuation of this old world pattern of disdaining others and of the current foreign policy of the United States. On Smith's coat of arms, in addition to the three turbaned heads of Turks, is the motto “Vincere est Vivere”

–“To conquer is to Live.” American historian and politician John L. O’Sullivan revised Smith’s doctrine of force against “the other” in the 19th century with his own doctrine of Manifest Destiny (1839) which justified stealing land and killing Native Americans en mass. More recently U.S. president George H.W Bush in 1991 revised this Old World view in an address to a joint session of U.S Congress and the American people entitled “Toward a New World Order”—which was meant to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Enemies of Islam

In 1785 Algiers declared war on the United States, giving rise to the earliest Muslim-spy genre in American literature (a genre that would change to non-fiction in the late 20th and early 21st century and be written by Directors of Homeland security and the FBI). The plot of *The Algerian Spy in Pennsylvania*, written by Peter Markoe and published in 1787, consists of letters or “intelligence” written by 60 year old Mehemet a resident of Pennsylvania, to an acquaintance, Suleiman, in Algiers. This situation bears striking resemblance to what we currently call a “terrorist cell.” It must be noted that the year of publication is the same as the United States’ Constitution. The theme is one echoed by prominent politicians of that period—that the new government, young and weak, must be conscious and surveillant about powers, especially Muslim powers from abroad. In fact, founding father John Jay warned citizens of New York that if they failed to ratify the Constitution, “Algerians could be on the American coast and enslave its citizens who have not a single [ship] of war” (Marr 2006: 39). At the end of the tale Mehemet turns from Islam to the “united blessings of Freedom and Christianity” (Markoe 1787: 129). The author suggests to his readers that Mehemet become accepted as a naturalized citizen, demonstrating the values of individualization and democratic acceptance to the world.

Markoe’s Mehemet is curiously duplicated almost 220 years later in John Updike’s post 9/11 novel *Terrorist*, which follows a high school-aged protagonist named Ahmed Ashmawy Mulloy, whose mother is Irish, and whose father was an “Egyptian exchange student” (2006: 13) he does not know. Raised by a single mother, Ahmed turns to the “straight path” in his teens, which the narrator suggests is a way to find his cultural roots while living in an impure land of excess. Through his desire to become a truck driver with a class C license (so he can transport hazardous material across state lines), he inadvertently becomes involved in a domestic terrorism plot. Here Updike revises the version of the plot we have seen in *The Algerian Spy*—though the United States is no longer young—it is still susceptible to the same threats from Islam broad. And we see the familiar cultural stereotypes: Ahmad’s imam, Sheikh Rashid, is described as Ahmad’s “surrogate father” whose features are “shared with generations of heavily swathed Yemeni warriors” (ibid.: 13). In his talks with Ahmad he speaks of “atheist Western scholars” (ibid.: 106). He is a rigid warrior of Islam, who “sees movies as sinful” (ibid.: 144) and “who doesn’t

wish to pollute his student's carefully acquired classical Arabic with the sounds of a modern colloquial tongue" (ibid.: 101). He also conducts the lessons in "formal English, speaking with some distaste" (ibid.).

At the beginning of the novel we learn that Ahmad sees non-Muslims as "devils" who "seek to take away his [his] God" (ibid.: 3). He describes his teachers as "weak Christians and non-observant Jews" (ibid.)—of whom Ahmad thinks: "They lack true faith; they are not on the Straight Path; they are unclean" (ibid.). Updike leaves aside his usual fictional territory of the 1960's and 70's-- of white, middle-class America to speculate about the fate of an America faced with the threat of a radical Islam which has emigrated to the States. Updike's narrative can be understood as being situated in the Old World pattern of disdain for the other. In the final scene of the novel Ahmad is driving a truck with explosives to detonate in the Lincoln tunnel, which connects Manhattan with New Jersey. With Homeland Security in pursuit, Ahmad is eventually saved, ironically, by his high school guidance counselor, a non-practicing Jew named Jack Levy. Levy happens to be in standing traffic when he sees Ahmad in the truck. He climbs in and talks him out it. As the story ends Updike writes, "Jack Levy realizes that he is in charge now" (ibid.: 308). In metaphorical language Updike continues, "Ahmad lets himself be guided, taking a left turn. The path is straight" (ibid.: 309). In the last line of the novel we are given Ahmad's thoughts: "*These devils have taken away my god*" (ibid.: 310). It is an ambiguous statement, leaving the reader to ponder whether the devils are the same "non-believers" he refers to at the beginning of the novel, or is it a reference to the terrorist cell—in which case Updike's ending recalls the "conversion" of the Algerian Spy Mehemet.

Romanticizing Islam and the East

American literature in the late 18th and early nineteenth century briefly viewed Islam and the East through a Romantic, exoticized lens. A fascination with Arab intellectualism in fields such as medicine, astronomy, architecture and poetry flourished, yet this interest was equally colored by images of genies, djinn, and magic carpets. It is well known that Thomas Jefferson owned a copy of the Quran in which he wrote extensive comments and observations. Founding Father Benjamin Franklin (1799: 193) published "An Arabian Tale" in 1779, about a retired Arab magician, "Albumazar," "who was visited nightly by genii and spirits of the first rank, who loved him, and amused him with their instructional conversation." Curiel (2008: 39) notes that roughly a half-century later, American Transcendentalist and onetime Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson

"embarked on a spiritual odyssey that would see him embrace the literary and religious traditions of the East, including Islam, and including Sufi-Muslim poetry from Persia."

In his book *Al' America*, Jonathon Curiel notes that Hafiz and Saadi, “Became Emerson’s spiritual twins” (ibid.: 39). Emerson’s protégé and contemporary Henry David Thoreau took an interest as well. Historian David Scott (2007: 22), in his article “Rewalking Thoreau and Asia: Light from the East,” writes that even though “Mohammed and the Quran were generally ignored by Thoreau” due to an ‘institutional distrust’ in religion, he related to “Sufi egalitarianism” and specifically to Saadi. Thoreau (1852: 289-290) writes in his *Journal*,

“I know...that Sadi entertained once identically the same thought that I do, and thereafter I can find no essential difference between Sadi and myself. He is not Persian, he is not ancient, he is not strange to me.”

Nineteenth century writers romanticized Islam and the East—yet these writers only delve into the Romantic stereotypes of Islam as poetry and mysticism; Islamic doctrine and practice are ignored.

Mid-19th century: “Ignorance is the parent of fear”—Ishmael, *Moby Dick*

In his introduction to *Orientalism* Said (1978: 26) notes that

“so far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the 19th century academic and imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient.’”

He says that “this is nowhere more true than in the ways by which the Near East is grasped.” In contrast to American Transcendentalists’ “standardized view” of Islam as poetry and mysticism, and ignoring the broader tradition from which these activities were rooted, writers of the mid to late 19th century turned again to Old World patterns of fear and marginalization. Islam in the 1850’s, claims Curiel (2008: 47),

“Was publicly disparaged for two main reasons: Americans knew little about the religion, which is evident by the way that Muslims were called either ‘Mahometans’ (adherents of Muhammed and not of God) or ‘mussulmen’ (which engenders the stereotype of muscle-bound brutes), and also, Islam was still viewed as a menacing threat to Christian countries (it had control still over the Holy Land—a topic later addressed by Mark Twain).

In 1850 Washington Irving published *Mahomet and His Successors*, a two volume account (spanning roughly eight hundred page) about prophet Mohammed and Islam—this was one of two books published in the United States in the 19th century that influenced the American writers’ and scholars’ perception of Islam (the other was a translation of Jalal al Din al Dawani’s *The Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People* translated to English in 1839 by W.F. Thompson). The “historical biography” was reviewed in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, in which the reviewer described it as a

“romantic story of the founders of the Muslim faith...told with a perspicuity and grace which has seldom been equaled” (ibid.: 49). The reviewer's attention and praise is focused on Irving's style; there is little on the historical accuracy of the book.

Melville and Twain

Many of the works of Herman Melville and Mark Twain are marked with references and allusions to Islam and Middle East. Herman Melville is perhaps the most problematic writer of the 19th century in terms of the situating cultural Islam in his works. Basem Ra'ad (2002) suggests that in the epic poem *Clarel* “Melville comments favorably on Bedouin life and on Islam.” Likewise, in his essay “Out of this World: Islamic Irruptions in the Literary Americas” Timothy Marr (2006: 541) comments that by choosing Ishmael, “Melville affiliated his narrator with a figure most widely known in the nineteenth century as the Abrahamic ancestor of the Arabs. The Islamicist stance of making Ishmael the only survivor empowered Melville to criticize Christian civilization from a position that, although biblical, was also one aligned with Islam.” Yet elsewhere in *Moby Dick* we see what Marr (2006: 230) refers to a Melville's “dark Islamicism.” The character Queequeg is described repeatedly as a “cannibal,” “savage” (Melville 1851: 120) and a “Pagan” (ibid.: 144). He prays to a wooden idol. Yet Melville also portrays Queequeg as having Muslim characteristics: Ishmael meets Queequeg during his “Ramadan, or fasting and Humiliation,” he performs evening “ablutions,” and “salams” during evening prayers.

Mark Twain, suggests Basem Ra'ad (2002), “cannot be confirmed in anti-Arab biases if we are to take into account his ironic style,” yet it is hard to understand the irony of his depiction of Jerusalem and the Holy Land in *Innocents Abroad*, much of which documents his 1867 trip to the Middle East. Twain describes Jerusalem as “mournful, dreary, and lifeless”—suggesting the invisibility of those living there. It is a type of victimization through refusal of acknowledgment. Of course, there is the famous scene in *Huck Finn*, when Huck tells the Duke of having to rope Jim in the wigwam on the raft to prevent others from capturing him as a runaway slave. The Duke improvises a solution: they dress Jim in an exotic theatre costume (including a turban), paint him blue (like a genie), and post a sign that reads “*Sick Arab—But Harmless When not Out of His Head.*” If anyone approaches Jim is instructed to “howl...like a wild beast” (1884: 209). This suggests two extremes of behavior, and reinforces popular cultural stereotypes about Arabs—one is either harmless and ineffective, or extremely and irrationally crazed. Disguising a slave as an Arab may also suggested to Twain's readers at the time that Arabs in America were to be viewed in society as at the same level as the African slave.

Conclusion

As Americans our negative cultural views of others (in this case of Islam) have been and are reflected in the earliest works of American literature and have been built upon and perpetuated, for the most part, in the American literary Canon suggest unchanged values based upon stereotypes, ignorance, fear, and power. No doubt there are contradictions to the views presented here that can be found in literature—especially among the works by Arab-American writers in the past decade, where perhaps exist the most authentic cultural representations of the Arab experience in America. The examples written about here raise a final question: Can American writers in the traditional American literary canon who are situated geographically, socially, and politically within American culture ever accurately depict the culture of Islam?

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