

## Book review:

### The West's Eternal Muslim Monsters

Review of Sophia Rose Arjana's *Muslims in the Western Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

by Imad Youssefi <sup>1</sup> & Larbi Touaf

The publication of Said's groundbreaking book *Orientalism* in 1978 traced an intellectual path for literary, cultural and media studies researchers into Western imagination and representation of the East or the Orient. Sophia Rose Arjana's *Muslims in Western Imagination* can be situated within this ongoing debate over the representation and construction of the "others" of Western civilization throughout history. As Assistant Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Western Kentucky University, Arjana considers her book "in Islamic language," as "a jihad – an effort– to reveal Muslims as human beings instead of the phantasms they are often presented as" (p.16). And as representation is fundamental to all kinds of cultural productions, the book explores a wide range of what human imagination can manufacture (literatures, artworks, and television and cinematic productions) over an extended period starting from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to the modern times. Arjana's main thrust is "that imaginary Muslim monsters have determined the construction of the Muslim in Western thought" (p.1). Her objective, then, is to attempt to prove "that the imaginary violence perpetrated by Muslim monsters, as well as the figurative harm inflicted on these villainous characters affects real Muslim bodies" (p.3). To this end, Arjana structures a great many sources chronologically and manages to establish a smooth link between Western stereotypical images of the present with Western Muslim monsters of the medieval ages. She, for instance, traces the ancestry of modern werewolves, vampires and zombies back to Othello, the black Moor, and the Turkish-Jewish Dracula.

The book adopts a historical analytical approach based on the Foucauldian notion of discourse along with Bourdieu's understanding of the notions *habitus*

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and *doxa* to reveal “an archive of Muslim monsters,” and account for the power of the western imaginaire in generating and perpetuating monstrosity discourse (pp. 16–17) that culminates in casting the Muslims as archetypal monsters through themes of cannibalism, blackness, evil, exoticism, violence and terror(ism) which recur in American and European mass cultural productions. “Saracens,” for instance, “are often described in medieval texts as cannibalistic giants” (p. 46), and even when these characters are not dehumanized, “their darkness indicates that they are evil” (p. 49). Working with the flawed binary oppositions of the western mind, the author provides numerous examples that consolidate the binary logic of West versus East, placing the latter as utterly savage and in direct and plain opposition to a more civilized West.

Fantasies of brutality and bestiality persist into the Renaissance as “the black Muslim continued to occupy a place in the Christian imaginary as a nefarious figure and enemy of Christendom” (p.67). More images are invoked by Romanticism and the Gothic and, then, by Orientalism to nurture the overall picture of Muslim monsters. Spanning time and space, these images cross the European borders to reach the Americas where they will be appropriated to legitimize the extermination of the new monsters; for “conquerors and settlers thought of Indians as monsters, as seen in the genocidal campaigns launched against them, which included rape, torture, dismemberment, and murder” (p. 133). The captivity discourse and tales of rescue devoted to Indians “are later applied to Africans, Muslims, and African-Americans” (p. 134).

For Arjana, the Jew and the Muslim endure a similar denigrating position in the Western imaginary, as the two “appeared as dog-headed men in a number of medieval texts and paintings that identified them as monsters associated with the devil” (p. 56). Dracula represents “many monsters—a Jew, a Muslim, a dracul, the devil” (p. 129). The Jew and the Muslim continue to haunt Western imagination into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the Muslim has to take the road all alone to the contemporary. She suggests that werewolves, vampires, mummies, zombies and the rest of aliens shown on American movies after September 11 represent Muslims: “The standard zombie narrative introduces a monster, or monsters, who steal life from the innocents, much like the Muslim terrorist” (p. 171). The problem here is if it were only for such images to determine present and future acts exerted on real people, how could the Jews counter these tropes to gain the West’s sympathy and reparation while Muslims did not? Do not Muslims or at least some of them have their share of responsibility in what was and is happening to them?

Toward the end, Arjana returns to the question posed in the opening lines of her book, regarding the despicable acts by and against the United States of

America, relating to the terrorist attack of 9/11, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and so on. “How did we get here?” is a question she answers by referring to the central character in this book, which is nothing more than the historical Muslim monster of Western imagination, whose perpetual presence in popular culture, political discourse, the media, and the cinema continue to feed often undeclared animosities towards and fears of the Muslims. This becomes atrocious when it goes beyond representation to actually trigger and justify the torture, the killing and the dehumanization not just of individual but an entire civilization. The impact can be observed “in the heinous and inhumane atrocities on Muslim bodies at Abu Ghraib, GTMO, and other sites we have not thus far been able to witness” (p.178). Being aware of the predicament of disconnecting such deeds from their real political context, Arjana thus states that “[t]he existence of the Muslim monsters in this study only partially explains Abu Ghraib,” since “the United States of America has a long history of brutality and violence toward its enemies” (p. 181).

Surveying an extraordinary number of documents (images, paintings, narratives, TV shows, films …etc. the author arrives at this disturbing but sound observation that what lies behind these crimes, a question rarely asked in the West, or at least not receiving enough attention, is “the belief that Muslims are less-than-zero—post-human.” (p.183) “Muslims” the author adds “are so dehumanized in public discourse that treating them as just bodies, Agamben’s “bare life,” has become, in fact, acceptable. Muslims are not just represented as monsters—they are monsters.” (183)

The post-human condition of Muslims is something that has yet to be undone. At the writing of this book, GTMO was still open; and lest we forget, the commander who came to “Gitmo-ize” Abu Ghraib, Major General Geoffrey Miller, was transferred from Guantanamo Bay, suggesting that what we know of Abu Ghraib has happened before and will happen again. Abu Ghraib and GTMO are but two cogs in the large and complex machinery of hate and dehumanization. In these spaces, the obliteration of Muslim humanity is complete.