

JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION AND CULTURE (JICC)



Volume 4, Issue 1 (January-June, 2021)

ISSN (Print): 2707-689X

ISSN (Online) 2707-6903

Issue: <http://www.ahbabtrust.org/ojs/index.php/jicc/issue/view/10>

URL: <http://www.ahbabtrust.org/ojs/index.php/jicc/issue/view/10>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46896/jicc.v4i01.151>

Title Re-Orientalism, (Mis) Representation of Islam and Women Rights: Analysis of Pakistani Anglophone Cultural Production

Author (s): Inayat Ullah, Hafiz Javed ur Rehman and Amir Ullah

Received on: 29 June, 2020

Accepted on: 29 May, 2021

Published on: 25 June, 2021

Citation: Inayat Ullah, Hafiz Javed ur Rehman and Amir Ullah, "Construction: Re-Orientalism, (Mis) Representation of Islam and Women Rights: Analysis of Pakistani Anglophone Cultural Production," JICC: 4 No, 1 (2021): 30-36

Publisher: Al-Ahbab Turst Islamabad



[Click here for more](#)

Re-Orientalism, (Mis) Representation of Islam and Women Rights: Analysis of Pakistani Anglophone Cultural Production

*Inayat Ullah,

**Hafiz Javed ur Rehman

*** Amir Ullah

Abstract

This study uses Lisa Lau's concept of re-Orientalism as the theoretical underpinnings to analyze the selected South Asian Anglophone fiction. According to Lau (2009), the perpetration of Orientalism in South Asian literature in English is no longer an Orientalism propagated by the Occidentals but, ironically enough, by Orientals themselves. The colonial project of the wholesale stereotyping of the East by means of continuously repeating the negative image of its religions, people and culture did not end with the end of colonialism. The project to assign an inferior status to the people in the East and degrading their religion is still on; the only difference is that the role of the colonizers has now been taken by the comprador class, which is born and brought up here but which serves the agenda of the world powers. One of the instruments of this class is to launch a wholesale attack on Islam, and make attempts to negatively paint the whole religion by means of its widespread stereotyping. For that, cultural productions are seen as a potent tool in the great scheme of things. This is what the colonizers also did worldwide when colonialism was on its peak. This study discusses Tehmina Durrani's novel, entitled *Blasphemy* (1999), to analyze her dealing of Islam and the clergy in the literary text.

* Head of Department of English (UGS), National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Sector H-9, Islamabad

** Lecturer, Department of English, University of Agriculture

*** Associate Professor & Chairman, Department of Political Science, Islamia College, Peshawar;

1. Introduction to the Study

The “Us” versus “Them” yardstick was used as the touchstone to announce the superiority of the former, and inferiority of the latter, throughout the project of colonialism. This is exactly how the Orient was presented as the other and described in an entirely negative manner. (Said, 1979; Block, 2003; Taras, 2019; Suleiman, 1999; Meer & Modood, 2009) The event of 9/11 further increased this chasm between the East and the West, and resulted in the production of even more novels that went on stereotyping Islam and Muslims as a monolith. (Awan, 2010; 2013; Ullah & Shahzor, 2017, Ullah & Aib, 2017) As a result of all this, the narrative of the clash of civilizations and racism was further augmented. (Balogun & Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Lindemann & Stolz, 2020; Tobias et al., 2019; Ullah, 2015; Puglies, 2002) Despite the fact that most of this stereotyping is the outcome of the Western fantasy about the East (Sardar & Davies, 2010; Kaya, 2007; Ibih, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Mcleod, 2010; Hubinette, 2003), indigenous writers, at the end of colonialism, resorted to the same kind of stereotyping of the East, in a bid, perhaps, to capture the needs of the publishing market that has great scope for works of such nature (Khair, 2012). Consequently, such works were able to make inroads to the Western scholarship but at the high cost of maligning Islam and Muslims, through the exploitation of the insider details of the indigenous religion and people that a Western writer would have hardly been able to accomplish. This is what a comprador class can do to its own people. Such essentialist and exotic portrayals of the Orient further cement the stereotypes which were created and continuously propagated by the colonizers. Keeping in this premise, the study carries out an analysis of Tehmina Durrani’s novel entitled *Blasphemy* (1999) to see how the portrayal of violence against women in a feudal setup goes on to wrongly foreground, and hold, Islamic teachings responsible for such a marginalization.

2. Re-Orientalism and the Politics of Representation

According to Lisa Lau (2009), the perpetration of Orientalism in South Asian literature in English is no longer an Orientalism that was propagated by the Occidentals but, ironically enough, by Orientals themselves. Said (2003) asserts that the Orient has helped to define Europe (or West) as its contrasting image, idea and experience. In the same vein, Lau and Mendes (2012) state that re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with Eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of Western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether. The way authors from the Orient themselves practice to exoticize the Orient in a bid to turn their writings into a marketable product in the West or to further the Western agenda of othering the Orient is what Lau (2009) terms as re-Orientalism.

Similarly, since many Western cultural productions have been stereotyping Muslims and Islam (Ullah, 2020), certain writers from the Orient have also resorted to portray their own people in the same fashion. Brouillette (2013) asserts that re-Orientalist discourse is the representation of the Orient through the lens of the contemporary authors from the East in a way that the portrayals are not much different from the way the colonizers did in the past. According to Huggan (2001), the increasing self-representation is largely in the hands of selected elite class, out of whom most of the writers have a Western educational background. Keeping in view the fact that such portrayals of the Orient are coming directly from the Orient itself, this new representation has the capacity to cause more damage to the Orient. The concept of re-Orientalism comprises of the process and working of the whole paraphernalia of the othering of the Orient by writers from the Orient. According to Lau (2009), the process of Orientalism is still continued in the writing of authors from the Orient, who

claim themselves to be the representatives of South Asian literature in English.

3. Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy and the Essentialist Dealing of Islam/Muslims*

With the belief that patriarchal norms and traditions, which aim to oppress women in Pakistan, are camouflaged in Islamic teachings, Tehmina Durrani published her novel *Blasphemy* in 1998. Taking strong exceptions to the torture and abuse of women, Durrani holds in her novel that such perpetration of violence and discrimination against women is carried out by the clergy in the garb and pretext of practicing their religious teachings. As a successful but controversial novel, the text attempts to bring forth the so-called secret lives of Muslim clergy. The novelist claims that the events in the novel are factual and that only names of the characters have been changed. Set in South Pakistan, this controversial novel is the tragic and shocking story of a 15 years old girl, named Heer, who is brutalized and corrupted by Pir Sain, the so-called man of God. Despite all the sufferings that Heer has to go through in the novel, the fact remains that Islam embodies justice, tolerance and equality, and recognizes the equality of both men and women. The colonial project of stereotyping the East by means of continuously repeating the negative image of its religions, people and culture did not end with the end of colonialism. The project to assign an inferior status to the people in the East and degrading their religion is still on; the only difference now is that the role of the colonizers has now been taken by the comprador class, which is born and brought up here but which serves the agenda of the world powers. One of the instruments of this class to launch a wholesale attack on Islam, and make attempts to negatively paint the whole religion by means of widespread stereotyping. The Quran disseminates precepts of human equality by nullifying all imparities, discriminations and biases grounded in race, ethnicity, sex, social class, or color. However, in feudalistic systems, religion is often used as a weapon to misuse women, and dispossesses them of fundamental human privileges and rights to stifle any strains of opposition in them. With the prosperity of patriarchy and empowerment of men, Islam began to be exploited as a vehicle for abuse.

There is no denying the fact that discrimination on the basis of biological differences must be condemned at all levels, and Islam also calls for equal respect for men and women. The violence against women, as portrayed in Durrani's *Blasphemy* has its roots in the feudal system, not the teachings of Islam. Keeping in view the fact that the garb of religion is one of most powerful tools, used to achieve and exercise power, the same is perpetrated by Pir Sain as well, and there are examples of that in the non-literary world as well. *Blasphemy* is Tehmina Durrani's arraignment of the morally debased religious system in the feudal world. However, this does not mean that there are problems with the religion itself. Such picking and choosing in the portrayal of the religion to highlight the corrupt practices end up maligning the whole religion and its followers. This is how stereotypes were built and propagated by the colonizers as well. Heer's narrative in the novel unmasks the deceptive and debauched practices of Pir Sain, a so-called God-fearing, pious spiritual mentor who exerts influence on women by distorting the analysis of the Holy Quran to his own perverted advantage. The directives he lays out for women are tainted with his immoral plots and ploys.

Describing Pir Sain, Heer says, "Pir Sain spoke, but only of sex. Planning the next act, discussing the last one, seeking opinions on new one, comparing it to another one, until the matter took up my entire life" (p. 138). Ironically, Pir Sain is revered as a devout, righteous cleric, when, in bitter actuality, he is a killer, rapist, pedophile, a devil in the guise of a saint. "My husband was a parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer.. the rapist of orphans.. But over and above.. he was known to be the man closest to Allah.. who could reach Him and save us." (p. 143) Such corrupt people need to be brought to justice, irrespective of whatever religion they belong to;

however, presenting such people as the representatives of the whole clergy ends up stereotyping this class of people.

Heer's *Nikkah* Pir Sain is a mere contract, an opportunity for Heer's mother to secure stature and societal prominence. She says, "Your sisters will marry well.. our status will improve tremendously." (p. 25) It is pertinent to note here that Islam allows parents to merely guide and advise their sons and daughters in choosing their spouse, but cannot coerce them in matters of marriage; for, ultimately, it is the children who have to settle down, and not their parents. When the novelist exposes such practices, there could have been a portrayal of what Islam actually teaches. In the absence of such a balancing act that could have provided the real teachings of Islam, the novelist could have avoided the allegation of presenting to her readers the corruption of individuals as the teachings of Islam.

The novelist, however, pretty successfully, highlights the ills of the ultra-patriarchal system in the Pakistani feudal system. Pir Sain uses child marriage to govern Heer in totality, to compel her to comply with hierarchical masculine standards. He transforms an innocent, youthful girl's body into his personal locus for sexual exploitation and perversions. Heer's child marriage to Pir Sain does not engender any contentment or felicity for Heer, but cultivates quiet acquiescence and subservience instead. Her arrival at the haveli is marked by sexist prayers, enforcing the pressure to bear "seven" male children (p. 36), suggesting how female babies epitomize dishonor and shame in the feudal world.

Pir Sain does not permit his family to study the translation of the Holy Quran. He asserts his position as an intermediary between the masses and Allah, and disallows them from perusing it in any language other than Arabic, so that they are incapable of communicating with Allah themselves and discern the authentic, harmonious essence of Islam. Sakhi Beebi urges Heer to examine and unravel the substance of the Holy Quran herself, instead of glancing through the prejudiced, intolerant lens Pir Sain offered. When Guppi, Heer's daughter, inquires about the rationale behind reciting the Quran solely in Arabic, her grandmother threatens to notify Pir Sain about her naivety. Her eager inquisitiveness is defeated by the terror of Pir Sain's religious absolutism.

This is the reason why re-Orientalism asserts that the project to assign an inferior status to the people in the East and degrading their religion is still on; the only difference now is that the role of the colonizers has now been taken by the comprador class, which is born and brought up here but which serves the agenda of the world powers. Notably, throughout the novel, Heer refers to her husband as "Sain" and "the Master", accentuating the inequality and discrimination in her marriage to him. This is not what Islam teaches, when it comes to the life-long relationship between a husband and wife. Islam equates marriage to a cherished, blessed covenant for men and women. The Quran affirms that they must live with each other in peace and equanimity, and instill ideals of love, compassion, tolerance and goodwill in their hearts (The Quran, Ar-Rum, 30.21) The institution of marriage has been equated to a sacred pact by Allah and a means of abstention from lechery and immorality. On the contrary, Pir Sain, appears to be a manifestation both the ills. He does not represent pious Muslims or uphold the teachings of Islam.

Durrani's vivid portrayal of how ruthless Pir has been towards Heer is symbolic of the feudal system in Pakistan. Despite the fact that Islam advocates mercy for fellow beings, Pir brutally thrashes Heer on their second day of marriage. He viciously whips her for everyone to see, and confines her to a chamber for weeks. As a consequence, Heer eventually learns the craft of subserviently accepting the abuse Pir inflicts on her in creative and innovative ways. Ironically, he defiles her in the cloak of darkness,

and in the light of morning, instructs her to perform ablution to purify herself of her “deflowered” state. Sain coerces Heer to market her body. On the contrary, the Quran dictates, “Do not inherit the woman against (her) wishes” (The Quran, Al-Nisa, 4.19) Pir Sain is a personification of sexual perversions. He assaults his own daughter when she attains puberty, and repeatedly compels Heer to “prepare” adolescent girls for him like Yathimri. Heer is compelled to abort one of her pregnancies simply because the imminent bulge of her stomach was an inconvenience to Pir Sain, and stood in his way of sexual gratification. He makes her ingest deadly amounts of ineffective pills to instigate an abortion that leave her crippled and battered. On the other hand, Islam offers compassion and kindness to animals as well, and prohibits their maltreatment of any kind. The extent of patriarchy was, however, such that Pir Sain burnt a tomcat in the chimney for roaming around the arena reserved for females.

With the advent of Islam, the long history of women oppression and exploitation got a death blow. Turning the age-old anti-women tradition upside down, Islam held women in high esteem: “Heaven lies beneath the feet of mothers” (Khan, 1996). Pir Sain does not seem to be accountable to anybody, mainly because he thinks of himself as an intermediary between the masses and Allah, “he does what he likes and gives no explanation for it.” (p. 34) He molests almost every adolescent girl in the village, but hypocritically whips those who transgress even a little as a “corrective”, remedial measure. Rajaji, one of Heer’s sons, takes after his patriarchal father and believes that he has the warrant to exert control and influence over people in the twisted name of integrity. He admires Pir Sain’s prejudiced ways, for he, too, has the aptitude to doctor Islam and mold it to his own interest and use. Albeit he is conscious of the shame and degradation his mother endures, Rajaji blames Heer for disgracing their community by unmasking herself and Pir Sain’s numerous brands of oppression. Pir Sain favors Rajaji over Chote Sain, for the latter is a pure, virtuous man who cannot bring himself to manipulate Islam. When he begins to exhort his spiritual, uncorrupt brand of Islam, Pir Sain becomes anxious and threatened by him, and, as a consequence of his insecurity, gets Chote Sain killed.

4. Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that discrimination on the basis of biological differences must be condemned at all levels, and Islam also calls for equal respect for men and women. The violence against women, as portrayed in Durrani’s Blasphemy has its roots in the feudal system, not the teachings of Islam. Keeping in view the fact that the garb of religion is one of most powerful tools, used to achieve and exercise power, the same is perpetrated by Pir Sain as well, and there are examples of that in the non-literary world as well. However, it is also pertinent to mention here that such exclusive portrayals of the exploitation of Islamic teachings, without the act of counterbalancing by means of showing the real Islamic teachings as well, leaves the reader with no option but to accept such negative portrayals as the whole of the religion. This is what creates stereotypes. This is the reason why re-Orientalism asserts that the project to assign an inferior status to the people in the East and degrading their religion is still on; the only difference now is that the role of the colonizers has now been taken by the comprador class, which is born and brought up here but which serves the agenda of the world powers. It further explains that one of the instruments of this class to launch a wholesale attack on Islam, and make attempts to negatively paint the whole religion by means of widespread stereotypes. Thus, it is well in place to carry out investigations into such literary texts to break such stereotypes and bring forth a balanced and factual view of the religion.

References

1. Awan, S. M. (2010). Global Terror and the Rise of Xenophobia/Islamophobia: An Analysis of American Cultural Productions Since September 11. *Islamic Studies*, 49 (4), 521-537.
2. Balogun, B. & Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020) Black/white mixed-race experiences of race and racism in Poland. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.17293906>.
3. Block, E. (2003) Islam, Arabs, the Middle East and the Media: A Review of Recent Journalism and Broadcast Publications, 1995-2002, *Communication Book notes Quarterly*, 34:2, 78-88, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326896CBQ3402_1
4. Brouillette, S. (2012). Adiga's The White Tiger. *Re-orientalism and South Asian identity politics: The oriental other within*, 44, 40.
5. Durrani, T. (1999). *Blasphemy*. South Asia Books.
6. Hubinette, T. (2003). Orientalism past and present: An introduction to a postcolonial critique. *The Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, 13, 73-80.
7. Huggan, A. (2001) *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing The Margins*, New York: Routledge.
8. Ibih, R. (2015). Teaching About Islam and Muslims While Countering Cultural Misrepresentation, *The Social Studies*, 106:3, 112-116, DOI: [10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712](https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2015.1015712)
9. Jackson, L. (2010) Images of Islam in US Media and Their Educational Implications, *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Studies Association*, 46:1, 3-24, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013194090348021715>.
- 10.
11. McLeod, J. (2000). *Beginning postcolonialism*. Manchester, U.K: Manchester University Press.
- 12.
13. Kaya, I. (2007) Muslim American Identities and Diversity, *Journal of Geography*, 106:1, 29-35, DOI: [10.1080/00221340701286430](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221340701286430)
14. Khair, T. (2012). *Re-Orientalisms. Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within*, 44, 144.
15. Khan, M. S. (1996). *The Status of Women in Islam*. APH Publishing.
16. Lau, L. (2011). *Re-Orientalism in Contemporary Indian Writing in English (IWE). Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within*. London: Routledge.
17. Lau, L., & Mendes, A. C. (Eds.). (2012). *Re-orientalism and South Asian identity politics: The oriental other within (Vol. 44)*. Routledge.
18. Lau, L. (2009). *Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals*. *Modern Asian Studies*, 43(2), 571-590. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20488093>
19. Lindemann, A. & Stolz, J. (2020) Perceived discrimination among Muslims and its correlates. A comparative analysis, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2020.172938921](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.172938921).
20. Meer, N. & Modood, T. (2009) Refutations of racism in the „Muslim question“, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 43:3-4, 335-354, DOI: [10.1080/00313220903109250](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220903109250)
21. Michael W. Suleiman (1999) Islam, Muslims and Arabs in America: the other of the other of the other ..., *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 19:1, 33-47, DOI: [10.1080/13602009908716423](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602009908716423)
22. Pugliese, J. (2002) Migrant Heritage in an Indigenous Context: For a decolonising migrant historiography, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 23:1, 5-18, DOI: [10.1080/07256860220122368](https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860220122368)
23. Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. 1978. New York: Vintage.
24. Said, E. (2003). *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin Books Limited
25. Sardar, Z. (1999). *Orientalism*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press. Sasson, J. P. (1994). *Princess Sultana's Daughters*. New York: Doubleday.

26. Sardar, Z. & Davies, W. M. (2010). Freeze Framing Muslims: Hollywood and the Slideshow of Western Imagination, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 12:2, 239-250, DOI: 10.1080/1369801X.2010.489698
27. Taras, R. (2019) Islamophobia Never Rests in the Balkans: Muslim Communities and the Legacy of Exclusionary Nationalisms and Ethnic Expulsions, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 39:3, 282-299, DOI: 10.1080/13602004.2019.165241
28. Tobias B. Konitzer, Shanto Iyengar, Nicholas A. Valentino, Stuart Soroka & Raymond M. Duch (2019) Ethnocentrism versus group-specific stereotyping in immigration opinion: cross-national evidence on the distinctiveness of immigrant groups, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45:7, 1051-1074, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.143110939>.
29. Ullah, I. (2020). Construction: Monolithic Misrepresentation of Muslim Women and Islam: Textual Analysis of Selected American Literary Texts. *Al-Azhār*: 6, No. 2: (26-35).
30. Ullah, I. (2015). Globalization, South Asian Diaspora and Identity: Coverage of Trauma of Homelessness in Anglophone Cultural Productions. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language*, 1:2, 12-21.41.
31. Ullah, I., & Aib, I. (2017). Discursive Strategies and Politics of (Neo-) colonialism: A Textual Analysis of Saadat Hassan Manto's Letters to Uncle Sam. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 5(7), 8-18. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v7n5p842>.
32. Ullah, I., & Shahzor, K. (2017). Cultural (Mis)Appropriation, Ideological Essentialism and Language: Analysis of Stereotyping in Hollywood Movie, *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 6(7), 171-177, DOI: 10.5539/ijel.v7n6p171