BOOK REVIEW

Orientalism in English Literature: Perception of Islam and Muslims. By A.R. Kidwai, New Delhi, Viva Books, 2016. ISBN: 978-81-309-2692-6. Pp. xxi + 282. INR 1395.

In *Covering Islam* (1981), Edward Said, in his characteristic display of intellectual courage and honesty, had emphasized the Orientalist conceit of the dominant, western-based global media and its tendency to reproduce damaging verbal and visual image of the Muslim world in the following words:

> 'For the general public in America and Europe today, Islam is "news" of a particularly unpleasant sort. The media, the government, the geo-political strategists and – although they are marginal to the culture at large – the academic experts on Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to Western civilization. Now this is by no means the same as saying that only derogatory or racist caricatures are to be found in the West. I do not say that, nor would I agree with anyone who did. What I am saying is that negative images of Islam continue to be very much more prevalent than others, and that such images correspond not to what Islam "is" … but to what prominent sectors of a particular society take it to be. These sectors have the power and the will to propagate that particular image of Islam, and this image, therefore, becomes more prevalent, more present than others'.

More than three decades on, and in the post 9/11 era, and the ongoing 'global war on terror', Said's words remain prescient as tropes and narratives of militant Islam are not only being continuously used but have also intensified in media discourses and literary texts to produce, to quote Stephen Morton, 'new regimes of knowledge that survey, regulate

and criminalize particular Muslim populations and Islam more generally'. The challenges faced by contemporary Muslim intellectuals under such circumstances in contesting these neo-orientalist narratives are rather daunting. They have to chart a distinctive path away from not only the confrontational radicalism of fundamentalist groups but also the distorted liberalism of several modernists who, in the name of representing Muslim beliefs and attitudes from the inside, actually promote a Western secular agenda. Above all they also have to avoid the nervous rhetoric of apologetic Muslim and Western leaders who only keep repeating that all aberrant extremism has nothing to do with Islam but selectively fail, to quote Shahāb Ahmed,'to understand the fullness of the reality of what has actually been going on in the historical societies of Muslims living as Muslims'.

Orientalism in English Literature: Perceptions of Islam and Muslims joins recent scholarly writings that negotiate with such challenges. The modesty of its intended aim is quite clear, as stated in the 'Preface' – to bridge the regrettable divide between the West and Islam/Muslims by way of tracking down the misrepresentation of history as well as the history of misrepresentation. In doing so it avoids any specific form of defensive or polemical or even neutral grounds but acknowledging the globalized, multi-faith condition of the world today, seeks to contribute towards opening up strong, vibrant channels of cross-cultural communication and understanding.

The book brings together, under the rubric of a common theme – images of Islam and Muslims in English and European literature – articles, notes, book reviews and review articles by Abdur Raheem Kidwai, an eminent professor of English at Aligarh Muslim University, India, written over the last twenty seven years. Besides being a testimony to the dedication towards one's object of study, the book is a valuable addition to the subfield of literary orientalism. This subfield within English literary studies, which was relatively unknown in the past, has assumed greater importance in the post 9/11 scenario of the 'resurgence of Islam' and its repercussions on global politics. Not that literary orientalism is an altogether new phenomena, for there have been pioneering works like Byron Porter Smith's *Islam in English Literature* (1939), Samuel Chew's *The Crescent and the Rose* (1937), which have defined the parameters of the debates in the subject. The groundbreaking work, however, after which the subject,

as it were, took off, was Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Ever since then, and in larger numbers of late, substantial studies have emerged. The present volume joins scholarship of these works in identifying the forms as well as the contexts of the negative portrayal of Islam/Muslims in several canonical and popular cultural texts of the west while also taking care to appreciate the occasional positive depictions.

Norman Daniels's pioneering and definitive work on the construction of anti-Islamic polemics in Western literature and culture, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (1962) had confirmed the role of 'misapprehension' and 'misrepresentation' of ideas and beliefs of one society in becoming, in a distorted way, the accepted myths of another society, so much so, that its relation to the original facts were barely discernible. Kidwai's work reiterates this view emphasizing on the role of literary writings as a 'rich source material' and 'mirror to popular perceptions and misrepresentations ' which 'reflect', 'reinforce' as well as 'rectify' the image of the 'Islamic other'.

The first essay titled 'Perceptions of Islam and Muslims in English Literature: A Historical Survey' sets the style and structure of the entire volume. In our own times, the notion of a 'medieval' regressive and backward looking Islam in perpetual conflict with a 'developed and civilized' West has its roots in Christendom's historic confrontation with the Arabs and Ottomans, as a result of which the 'Muslim world' has become synonymous with that monolithic entity. It is an association that has been invested with a strong discourse of European cultural superiority over other cultures. Kidwai appropriately begins with the West's encounter with Islam in the medieval period, dominated by the Crusades, but balances it well with the spirit of *convivencia* or co-existence, particularly in Andalusian Spain, that prevailed over hostilities fuelled by negative and polemical depictions. The essay is a comprehensive survey of both positive and polemical portrayals in canonical and popular texts spanning through the early modern period of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment upto the Romantic period. The sheer range and number of texts in their varying degrees of hostility to Islam and their tolerant treatment by the author is not specific to this work alone and Kidwai's writings have been praised for this attitude by many established scholars in the West.

The next chapter on William Wordsworth carries forward this binary pattern, of depicting polemics and balancing it with positive portrayals,

with an analysis of a lesser known poem titled 'Armenian Lady's Love' (1830) which conspicuously retains the conventions of medieval orientalism characterized by the oppressed princess waiting for the virtuous Christian knight to liberate her from a tyrannical father. However, the tolerance of the author again gets foregrounded in the discussion of the famous 'Arab's Dream' in *The Prelude* where Wordsworth acknowledges the role of Muslims in preserving the cultures of Greek Antiquity which would later be passed on to the European civilization.

Having been a past contributor to the esteemed *The Byron Journal* and a specialist in literature of the Romantic period it is expected that many of the subsequent articles which comprise this book will deal with English and European Romanticism dominated by the towering figure of Lord Byron. Here one cannot resist quoting at length the famous letter written by Byron to Thomas Moore in May 1813:

> 'Stick to the East; – the oracle Stael told me, it was the only poetic policy. The North, South, and West have all been exhausted; but from the East, we have nothing but Southey's unsaleables – and these he has contrived to spoil, by adopting only their outrageous fictions'.

Byron, who was Europe's 'leading consultant in cultural capital' had a flair for predicting the literary market and was responsible for not only encouraging the younger poet's phenomenally successful *Lalla Rookh* but also the elder Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'. The role of oriental poetry in regenerating European aesthetics in the first few decades of the nineteenth century has even been described as 'Oriental Renaissance'. However, Romanticism's participation in the dark legacies of Western imperialism heavily overshadows this cross-cultural aspect of European literature and any discussion of the Romantic poets' engagement with the East has to struggle with these problems. Byron's complicity in the imperialist project of the 'civilizing mission' too has been debated at length. But Kidwai, along with Mohammad Sharafuddin and Naji B. Oueijan, has been cited by scholars like Peter J. Kitson as absolving Byron and stressing on his sympathetic treatment of the Muslim world.

The unsaleabilty of the poet laureate Robert Southey, as described

by Byron in the letter above, has been confirmed by scholars like Nigel Leask and Javed Majeed. In Kidwai it gets a fresh lease of life through the contrasting approaches of Byron and Southey towards Islam and Muslims. The presentation of Muslim characters in Southey is a continuation of the crusading mentality where, in the battle between good and evil, Christians always prevail. The Muslim solidarity is held together only by their motive of plunder which their faith permits. In fact Shelley's orientalism too has been described as being akin to Southey in his endorsement of colonial and evangelical incursions in the Islamic lands. Even though he used the Islamic orient as a means of airing his radical views on the issues of political tyranny and religious obscurantism, his cultural narcissism prevailed over sympathetic and positive views.

Byron, however, is always described by Kidwai as 'true to life, reflective of his cross-cultural sympathies'. In Byron's works Islam is not responsible for creating tyrants and oriental despots. Rather, he avoids anti-Islamic polemics by making his heroes anti-authoritarian and not simply anti-orientals. In the clash between Muslims and Christians, both groups are indistinguishable in their bigotry and pursuit of violence and unlike the poetry of the medievalist Southey, Byron portrayed both as flawed and liable to perish. Byron never invents Muslim characters to discredit Islam and this according to Kidwai is a significant departure from a centuries old tradition of demonizing Islam in Western literature.

Kidwai covers the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to include women poets as well in a separate chapter. After lauding the unconventional and flamboyant Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who also broke many of the stereotypes about the 'harem' of Muslim rulers, Kidwai discusses at length the works of Emma Roberts, Maria Jones, Anne Candler, Felicia Hemans and Mary Robinson. What is noteworthy about the orientalism of these women writers is the way they strive to convey an authenticity when writing about India and the orient and how this effort comes under strain when having to negotiate the conventions of literary orientalism. Beneath the 'gorgeous fabric' of authentic reflection lies the yearning for home back in England. This ambivalent attitude of authentic representation and yet the inability to integrate is quite remarkable in these writers.

The only time when the author's tolerance is tested and set aside is while dealing with the neo-orientalism and wilful misperception of

Muslims, in certain contemporary fiction. One chapter on Balwant Gargi's *Purple Moonlight* (1993) and another on Jean P. Sasson's *Princess* (1993) and *Princess Sultana's Daughters* (1994) convincingly bring out the regrettable retention of the crusading mentality of these contemporary hate literatures. More subtle, however, is the poise with which Kidwai commends the 'ingenuous' anthology titled *Image and Representation: Stories of Muslim Lives* (2000) which bring into sharp relief the 'religio-historical and socio-cultural milieu, misery and plight of Indian Muslims'.

A note of hope, however, emerges again in the two chapters which discuss the novels of Qaisra Shahraz. Her debut novel *The Holy Woman* (2001) has been described as elucidating the 'Islamic faith and practices as the natural way, perfectly consonant with an essential human nature and with late modernity'. Shahraz also has the daunting task of distinguishing the core Islamic teachings on various issues and their corrupted practices prevalent in many Muslim societies which she carries out in her later novels – *Typhoon* (2003) and *Revolt* (2013) – as well in a sensitive and sensible way. Her enigmatic protagonists stand out as typical Muslim characters whose reverence for Islam is undoubtable but who manage to cope with the challenges of both tradition and modernity.

Besides these searching articles on various aspects of literary orientalism, the volume also contains notes and book reviews which have been published in highly reputed journals known for promoting high quality and committed research. The notes which comprise bibliographies of oriental reading of canonical Romantic poets like Southey, Byron, Wordsworth, Moore as well as verification of sources used by recent editors (including Leslie March and, Andrew Nicholson and Jerome McGann) of these poets' complete works are indispensable for future researchers on the subject. The assurance and confidence with which the author treats these materials is remarkable. The twenty six book reviews which comprise the rest of the volume are also a rich source of information on the subject. Most of the titles covered in that section are cutting edge research works by leading scholars which have defined as well as intervened significantly in the existing forms of knowledge in this field.

To what extent it would be correct to see a seeping of medieval ideas into the modern consciousness involves debates on Western historiographical methods but the general agreement remains that if the

medieval attitudes of anti–Islamic hostilities were rooted in a sense of Western inferiority, the modern attitudes were constructed through a gradual rise of the European sense of cultural and political superiority. In this context, the concluding words of the first essay by the author sounds a note of immense hope at a time when the past keeps returning to feed on the fears and anxieties of the present – 'In a multi-faith, pluralist world of ours, we stand in need of better understanding, fostered by knowledge and nurtured by the spirit of tolerance, which can put an end to misperceptions about one another.'

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