

Muslims in the western imagination. By Sophia Rose Arjana. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp 261, ISBN: 978-0-19-932492-7.

Reviewer: Nazar Ul Islam Wani, Shah I Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir. Email: waninazar13@gmail.com.

Sophia Rose Arjana's *Muslims in the Western Imagination* is an exclusive study of Muslim monsters which exist in the Western imagination. It is an attempt to interpret the Western phobia, bias and hatred towards Muslims (juxtaposed at times with Jews), as documented in the genres and sub-genres of Western art and literature. This exposition takes her to sail comprehensively through the stages of history; Medieval to Renaissance to Modern literature, art and cinema. This book speaks about the teratology of Islam, artistic sarcasm and development of Muslims as subjects (Orientalism) "transmogrified" on the walls and paintings of Western art, the result of which are expressed in the Abu Ghraib and GTMO torture cells engineered by the haunted ghost of the West. When placed against the backdrop of the long standing controversy between Islam and the West, the book is not the first of its kind. However, as a genealogical and anthropological study of the dehumanisation of Muslims, Arjana's exploration through the lenses of art, literature and film offers us a fresh perspective about how Muslims and their identities have been discursively constructed within the Western imagination.

Muslims in the Western Imagination begins with the study of Muslim monsters in medieval art, literature and paintings. The study of the archive of Muslim monsters begins from the Middle Ages, the era in which anti-Muslim rhetoric is found, by dehumanising the first Muslim "Prophet Muhammad as the progenitor of a Muslim monstrous race by the Christian polemics" (p. 19). The Church in the Middle Ages, according to the author, created an, "episteme in which people were led to believe in an imaginary Islam (phantasm)" (p. 23). The interesting argument of "ethno-genesis" is a very good indicator of understanding the author's medieval Muslim monsters. Such "imagination" dominates the source of knowledge in every period of history, like Islamic teratology, Jewish and Muslim demonology, Saracen doxology, Muslim and Jewish cannibalism, biased Egyptology

and dangerous Turkish Physiognomy. The worst of this imagination about Muslims oozes with those subjects, and each subject is dominated by horrifying characters dedicated to Muslims. The author's analysis of characters like Dracula, Vathek, Croco-Sapien, Zofloya, Cynocephali, hydra-monster Tamburlaine and most importantly Frankenstein's monster to show how they reflect Muslim characteristics, evokes in us a sorry feeling of such imagination. Throughout the book, the author has attempted to mull over the Western imagination and brilliantly discover depictions of Muslims as sexually perverted, paedophilic, necrophiliac, inhumane, barbaric, misogynist, rapist, man-eater, terrorist, and hence a monster.

The study of monsters proceeds genealogically through Renaissance, Enlightenment Gothic literature and post 9/11 literature, art and cinema. The author has dedicated a lot of time to surveying the literature and semiology of monsters. Going through the author's gripping and fascinating account feels like watching a never ending horror movie. The subjective correlative of Western emotions inscribed on the food items and paintings about the Jewish and Muslim monsters is extracted with distressing meanings by the author. The book is a challenge to the Western scholarship because the literary works from Marlowe to Shakespeare to Shelly and to Bram Stoker reflect prejudice against Muslims, with them being compared with dogs and other monstrous creatures with black and dark skin. This symbolism is extracted from the literary works about Turks, Saracens, Jews, and Africans.

The book identifies the sorrowful picture of Muslim-Christian relations from the Middle Ages to the post 9/11 age. It explains the war the West had launched against the Muslims through literary works, art, drama and cinema. Arjana exposes the xenophobia of the West, i.e., the fear of the Muslim other. This is the wound that needs to be healed to create a better understanding in the future, and this should come through a shift in the way Western art, literature and cinema construct Muslims and their identities. Arjana provides us further ample examples. For instance, she invites us to revisit the creation of zombie lands by Hollywood directors in their movies, with dreadful characters spoiling and massacring the white race, represented by movies such as *300*, where "the battle is transformed into a civilisational war" (p. 159) between Islam and the West. The

picture this book creates on that larger global canvas is the lack of trust in a world where vampires and werewolves, symbolised as the “other”, dominate the script of Western literature, art and movies. The book sends a message that the Western imagination has exhausted a lot of time in creating those monsters, which is unbecoming for a civilisation which advocates dialogue and which is committed to spreading universal values.

The book can be a disappointment for some Western readers, because in that well predicted theory of “clash of civilisations” by Samuel P. Huntington, Muslims are equally responsible for creating a distorted image in the Western imagination. The missing link in this book are the sources or factors that could help explain this jaundiced, negative Western view of Islam and Muslims, which are obviously many. Furthermore, while the common Muslim charge of Western “pride and prejudice” against Islam and Muslims is valid, the picture looks incomplete if we were to ignore another equally important source of the problem – the Muslims themselves. The book is inattentive towards the Muslim imagination of the West but extremely focused on the methodology and techniques involved in studying the subject of Muslim monsters. The author has extensively reviewed Orientalist and Gothic literature and critiques both the Orientalist and Gothic literary construction of Muslims. Arjana’s whole argument revolves round the premise set by the discourse of orientalising the Muslims. One could easily place the book as a very good response to the process of “Orientalism”, which Edward Said and other scholars have immensely strived. The book, through the scope of its study, defines to the reader the somewhat odd history of the relations between Muslims, the West and Christianity. The book is a must read for the students of religion and inter-faith relations. *Muslims in Western Imagination* is a pioneering work at a time Islam and the West are seen as each other’s “other” more than ever. It is an excellent display of powerful representation of Muslims through Western art, literature and cinema.
