

Allusions to Islamophobia: Evidence from Herman Melville's Redburn, Mardi, and White Jacket

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Abstract

This paper explores the Islamophobia expressed in some of the works of Herman Melville. The novels Redburn, Mardi, and White Jacket are examined to see how allusions to Islam are made with characters, settings, and situations. It was found that Melville used references to Islam and Muslims in a derogatory manner to warn his American audience of their bad behavior. Muslims were likened to lazy, lethargic, and despot characters who are quite objectionable. Class systems were also alluded to as an example of how unjust and classist the Muslim system can be.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Millville, Mardi, White Jacket, Orientalism

1. Introduction

In the late 18th and early 19th century American literature viewed Islam and the East with a romantic and exotic lens. At that time there was an interest in Arab intellectuals in fields such as medicine, astronomy, architecture and poetry. Timothy Marr (2006: 2) wrote in *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* that "Islam has figured in the fashioning of North American cultural definitions as far back as the first years of the European settlements." Thomas Jefferson possessed a copy of the Quran in which he made general remarks and explanations. In addition, Benjamin Franklin (1799: 193) the American founding father produced "An Arabian Tale" in 1779, about a retired Arab magician, Albumazar, "who was visited every night by genii and spirits of the first rank, who loved him, and amused him with their instructional conversation." Curiel (2008: 39) notes that approximately 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."

Nineteenth century writers further romanticized Islam and the East—but they only delved into the Romantic stereotypes of Islam, ignoring or misrepresenting Islamic doctrine and practice. What this did, according to Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978:26) was increase the demonology of the Orient – paving the way for imperialists to step in and rule. Kabani (1994:5) suggests that in European narration the aspects that made the East different from the West were stressed – "exiled it into an irretrievable state of 'otherness'" and further goes on to say that "if it could be suggested that Eastern peoples were slothful, preoccupied with sex, violent, and incapable of self-government, then the imperialist would feel himself justified in stepping in and ruling." Curiel (2008:47) believed that in the 1850's Islam was belittled for two reasons – Americans did not know a lot about the religion and people still saw it as a threat to Christian countries.

Mark Twain (1884:209) in *Huckleberry Finn* perpetuates the stereotype of Arabs as being either ineffective or crazed. When Huck has to hide Jim while on the raft so as not to be captured as a runaway slave, the Duke suggests they dress Jim in a turban, paint him blue like a genie, and write up a sign reading "Sick Arab – But Harmless When not Out of His Head." Jim was instructed to "howl...like a wild beast" if anyone should come close. McDonald (2010) suggests disguising a slave as an Arab could mean that at the time Arabs in America were to be viewed in society as being at the same level as slaves.

Herman Melville wrote in an era that witnessed colonial empires expanding at an alarming rate. France had established colonies in the Caribbean, India, Spain and Portugal, while Britain had Malaya, Ceylon, Malta, Australia, New Zealand, and Yemen among other places. These adventures gave birth to an avid interest in travel and other,

foreign cultures. However, the Americans who had only recently gained their independence from Britain in 1776 had not yet developed into a colonial power. Instead, they waited eagerly to hear news of conquests and exotic and strange cultures from across the Atlantic. They were particularly fascinated by the Middle East. This made books like the H. and P. Rice edition of *The Arabian Nights* and Thomas Moore's Oriental book *Lalla Rookh* best sellers in the United States before the turn of the 19th century.

Herman Melville was one of the literary artists of the 19th century who were deeply affected by the Middle East and its predominant religion. In fact, Melville's use of Islamic imagery is core to his literature. While he does attribute some positive Islamic imagery to his characters, this paper aims to show that he uses Islam as an allegory to criticize American society. Marr (1997) writes in his dissertation, "Imagining Ishmael: Studies of Islamic Orientalism in America from the Puritans to Melville" that Melville's injection of Islamic Orientalist discourse into his writings formed a horizon that he laid out a romantic imagination, philosophical commentary, and cultural critique. The novels that will be explored are *Redburn: His First Voyage*, *Mardi and A Voyage Thither*, and *White Jacket or The World in a Man-of-War*.

In order to understand why Melville chose to allude so frequently to a religion that had such few followers in the West, a glance at how other writers were affected by Islam may help. Thomas Carlyle for instance in 1841 wrote a series of lectures entitled "Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History," dedicating his second lecture to "The Hero as Prophet. Mahomet: Islam." His lecture is generally sympathetic and understanding of Islam and the Muslims. Carlyle begins the lecture with, "From the first rude times of Paganism among the Scandinavians in the North, we advance to a very different epoch of religion, among a very different people: Mahometanism among the Arabs. A great change; what a change and progress is indicated here, in the universal condition and thoughts of men!"

With the Ottoman Empire being a serious contender to the other Western Empires, and Islam being such a fast-spreading religion due to this, Carlyle's choice of prophet was relevant. However, in order not to alienate his audience with his sympathetic discourse for Christianity's long-term foes, he reassures his audience's insecurities and allows himself free reign to speak by saying, "as there is no danger of our becoming, any of us, Mahometans, I mean to say all the good of him I justly can." Knowing his audience, he proceeded to present them with the prevailing ideas the majority have taken about this prophet. He addresses the misconception prevalent among them that Mohammed was a fraud who elevated himself to prophethood, strongly denying that this is even a possibility.

Our current hypothesis about Mahomet, that he was a scheming Impostor, a Falsehood incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to any one...The word this man spoke has been the life-guidance now of a hundred and eighty millions of men these twelve hundred years. These hundred and eighty millions were made by God as well as we. A greater number of God's creatures believe in Mahomet's word at this hour, than in any other word whatever. Are we to suppose that it was a miserable piece of spiritual legerdemain, this which so many creatures of the Almighty have lived by and died by?...A false man found a religion? Why, a false man cannot build a brick house!...It will not stand for twelve centuries, to lodge a hundred-and-eighty million (*Heroes* ch.2).

Carlyle not only believes that the Prophet Mohammed was not an impostor, but also that his word and message should not be discarded or marginalized. He is "an original man; he comes to us at first-hand. A messenger he, sent from the Infinite Unknown with tidings to us. We may call him Poet, Prophet, God; - in one way or other, we all feel that the words he utters are as no other man's words" (*Heroes*, ch.2).

It is interesting that Carlyle held these beliefs and spoke of them with such conviction, since people had theophobia when it came to Islam and anything that resembled it. There was a belief that Islam was an imitation of Christianity. Macdonald (1965.14) claims that the Muslim mind (comparable to the Oriental mind) is inferior and susceptible to superstition, and their prophet "was not of the goodly fellowship of the Hebrew prophets." Said (1978. 59) says that attitudes such as this further the opinion of Islam as a "fraudulent new version" of Christianity which is followed by a lesser race of people. In America a newly-founded Mormon religion had started attracting a following. Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism) in 1830 and while the Mormons never claimed to be anything but Christian, to inexperienced eyes, they looked terrifyingly similar to Muslims. It was as though the "barbaric" and strange religion of Islam was no longer a distant threat that existed on the other side of the world, but was right there in their back yard.

The Mormon prophet said that he had received revelation from God, first through an angel, and then through a book inscribed on golden plates that he was instructed to dig out from under the earth. The Muslim prophet had also said he had received revelation from God through an angel, and then had the contents of the Quran dictated to him by

way of God. Both religions also permitted polygamy in a society that shunned such a principle since pleasures of the flesh were sinful. It was difficult to see beyond these similarities and view the religions as different, thereby making Islam and Mormonism a threat.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had read Carlyle's "Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History," and was inevitably affected by it but it was not the first time that he had been exposed to Islam. In *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* there is an entry from October 1819 where he began his entry with the quote "In aforesaid I created *Jan* from out of a scorching fire"(Journals, 1:171) taken from George Sale's translation of the Quran. Like Carlyle he rejected the idea that Islam might be a false religion or a debased form of Christianity. "It is idle to represent the historical glories of Christianity as we do. The heart of Christianity is the heart of all philosophy. It is the sentiment of piety which Stoic & Chinese, Mahometan & Hindoo labor to awaken" (Journals, 5:478). This entry was a reflection of his skepticism of a religion that allowed a historical reconstruction of the bible. He was however particularly interested in Sufism through the Persian poets and was drawn to the idea of man being divine and perfect, and this reflected in much of his writing.

Washington Irving also had something to say on Islam and the Muslims. In 1850 he published *Mahomet and His Successors*, where his intention was to trace the progress of Islam after the death of the Prophet. His work reflected his awe and fascination with a religion that was able to extend across:

the wide regions of Asia and Africa, subverting the empire of the Khosrus; subjugating great territories in India; establishing a splendid seat of power in Syria; dictating to the conquered kingdom of the Pharaohs; overrunning the whole northern coast of Africa; scouring the Mediterranean with their ships; carrying their conquests in one direction to the very walls of Constantinople, and in another to the extreme limits of Mauritania; in a word, trampling down all the old dynasties which once held haughty and magnificent sway in the East (*Mahomet*, 2:IX).

Melville was no exception when it came to being influenced by the East. Marr (1997) recounts that in August 1850 Melville dressed up as a Turk for a masquerade party, but this was not a one-time occurrence. On his journey to the eastern Mediterranean in 1857 he bought a pair of Turkish slippers which, judging by the flat heels, he often wore. His grandmother also remembers him wearing loose "Constantinople" pajamas around the house, even when the family was receiving company. This evidence from his own life shows what was clear in his literature. Melville was invested in Islamic Orientalism and used its rhetoric and symbolism heavily in his literary work. However, being more interested in the cultural critique of America than portraying Islam and its followers in a positive light, he permits negative imagery to predominate.

Berbar (2016) argues that Herman Melville is a romantic radical. He portrays Islam, its prophet and its followers in a rather sympathetic glow than his contemporaries such as Washington Irving. Melville introduces an alternative Western and Oriental view about the relationship between Islam and the West through tropes of acceptance and understanding, which result from a better knowledge of the other.

2. Discussion

Miller (2013) believes that Muslim characters are three 'types' – the "bad Muslim," "the good Muslim," and the "white Muslim". The bad Muslim is gluttonous, sensuous, lazy, and violent. The good Muslim is simple, kind, and doesn't question authority, and the white Muslim is often cruel, but an effective leader, intelligent, and power thirsty. These types can be found in Herman Melville's works.

In *Redburn* Melville illustrates the deceptiveness and underhandedness of the American politicians through Captain Riga of the Highlander, likening him to a Sultan. The acquisition of some territory from Mexico after the treaty that ended the Mexican-American war in 1848 re-sparked the debate of whether slavery would be extended to the newly acquired territories. This caused further rift between the Southern and Northern party politics within the Democratic Party, each side doing whatever was in their power to sway matters in their favor. Captain Riga was a two-faced, unethical, lazy leader who only wore his polite face on shore – a "bad Muslim". When Wellingborough Redburn first met Captain Riga he is the epitome of civilization. "As soon as I clapped my eye on the captain, I thought to myself he was just the captain to suit me. He was a fine looking man, about forty, splendidly dressed, with very black whiskers, and very white teeth, and what I took to be a free, frank look out of a large hazel eye" (*Redburn*, p.15). He was so polite with Redburn and his companion, Mr. Jones that they were quite taken aback by his civility, and the young Redburn boards the ship in high spirits with the confidence that he will be under a "fine, funny gentleman, full of mirth and good humor, and good will to seamen" (p.67) and who would take him under his protection.

However, as soon as they have left port, Riga is anything but a gentleman. He treats the young sailor in a rude and ungentlemanly manner, throwing his hat at him, and allows the untamed, wild seas to reflect on his personality. "The captain rushed out of the cabin in his nightcap, and nothing else but his shirt on; and leaping up on the poop, began to jump up and down, and curse and swear, and call the men aloft all manner of hard names, just like a common loafer in the street" (p.71).

The captain of the Highlander not only lost his mind and all façade of civilization, but he was also underhandedly mean – something that someone from a Puritanic upbringing should never be. Though he had not been outright mean, he was guilty of "a thousand small meannesses – such as indirectly causing their allowance of bread and beef to be diminished, without betraying any appearance of having any inclination that way" (p.308).

Most offensive to Redburn seems to be the captain's slacking of his personal hygiene. While at sea, "he wore nothing but old shabby clothes, very different from the glossy suit I had seen him in at our first interview, and after that on the steps of the City Hotel...Now, he wore nothing but old-fashioned snuff-colored coats, with high collars and short waists; and faded, short-legged pantaloons...vests, that did not conceal his waistbands...just like a little boy's. And his hats were all caved in, and battered...and his boots were sadly patched. Indeed, I began to think that he was but a shabby fellow after all; particularly as his whiskers lost their gloss, and he went days together without shaving" (p.71). Redburn was finally disillusioned by this seemingly law-abiding, jovial man, who in appearance upheld the principles of an American as someone who was "a sort of impostor; and while ashore, a gentleman on false pretenses" (p.71).

In chapter 23, Melville contrasts Captain Riga to the gallant Sir Walter Raleigh when he is left with a charming young girl in his ward. Unlike Raleigh who placed his coat over a puddle so his companion would not get her feet wet, Riga does not alter his form of attire out of reverence for the presence of a lady. Instead, he is likened to a Muslim who is "extravagant in his personal expenses...indulging in luxurious habits, costly as Oriental dissipation" (p.219). The reference to an immoral Orientalist is further extended towards the end of the novel when the sailors receive their pay from the captain and salaam as they withdraw, further stressing the stereotype of "bad Muslim". Nowhere else in Redburn is a character so darkly portrayed in deceptiveness, supposedly only achievable by a Muslim. There are cruel sailors who torture the narrator to no end, Jackson being one of them, but unlike Riga, they do not attempt to mislead with two different personalities.

Herman Melville's 1849 "monster of a novel" *Mardi* also employed Islamic references and imagery as a means of cultural critique. This time the target was the Puritanical work ethic of the Americans. The oppressive priest with the Arabic name "knowledgeable," and the decadent King Media are polar opposites, yet both are portrayed with Islamic characteristics. What Melville appears to have attempted to do with this imagery is strike a balance between the Puritan belief that pleasure is sin and the relaxed, lazy-like manner of the Orientalist.

Aleema had imprisoned a beautiful maiden in more ways than one. Like a Muslim woman she was obligated to hide herself from the eyes of strange men. "They pointed toward the tent, as if it contained their Eleusinian mysteries. And the old priest gave us to know, that it would be profanation to enter it" (*Mardi*, p.131). The allegory to a Muslim woman's veil where only her eyes show is further developed when the tent Yillah is kept in is described. "By means of thin spaces between the braids of matting, the place was open to the air, but not to view. There was also a round opening on one side, only large enough, however, to admit the arm; but this aperture was partially closed from within" (p.136). Not only is Aleema forcing this woman to hide herself from the world, marginalizing her as an object, but he is further villainized as the heartless Orientalist by taking her to be sacrificed. "In pursuance of a barbarous custom, by Aleema, the priest, she was being borne an offering from the island of Amma to the gods of Tedaidee" (p.131). To make the priest's intended plan of action even more horrifying, the captive is a white woman with "snow-white skin; blue, firmament eyes: Golconda locks" (p.136). It is this fear and horror that the White world have dreaded ever since they came into contact with subjugated people. A white woman is the captive of a man who worships differently, and thereby wrongly. The American world's breath is abated as they wait for Taji to gallantly slay the enemy and save their freedom.

While Aleema is the ruthless jailer of goodness, purity, and pleasure. King Media is a despot who at times rules with an iron fist, but mostly drifts idly with no intent or purpose. Exertion of effort on his part meant sitting at high noon on his judgment divan or throne in his turban, very god-like and trying cases that came before. The Islamic imagery is consistent throughout. After ordering that a man be decapitated, his head "was doffed like a turban before a Dey, and brought back on the instant" (p.138). Other petitioners seeking the king's audience were commanded to kneel on their arthritic knees after salaaming him.

The remainder of the novel witnesses King Media drifting lethargically and aimlessly from one form of

entertainment to another. He commands his men to entertain him with philosophy and poetry while he sits with his pipe where "among those calumets, my Lord Media's showed like the turbaned Grand Turk among his Bashaws"(p.372).

Employing Orientalist discourse in *Mardi* Melville is advising his American audience to not allow their work ethic to reach either extreme represented by Aleema or Media. They need not grip to the principles of Puritanism when it comes to pleasure, nor allow leisure to overcome their work ethic completely, causing them to be like the Muslim kings whose harems and servants revolved around their lethargic bodies as the earth revolves around the sun.

Islamic imagery is also central in Melville's attempt at criticizing the American naval authority presented in *White Jacket*. Differing in style from all of his other novels, *White Jacket* concentrates on the injustices and abuse suffered by sailors on an American Man-of-War. The narrator, White-Jacket, is meticulous in his description of a Man-of-War, beginning with the divisions the ship's crew is divided into. He alludes to the development of a class-system previously unheard of in America forced on them by the Islamic-like authorities. Fussell writes that when Frances Trollope toured America in 1832 she labeled the unofficially recognized social class system a "fable of equality." While class division did exist, people did not, and are still not comfortable, recognizing it as playing a role in American society. The fact that the naval commanders created social classes meant that they were trying to alter society so it would resemble an Islamic regime.

Further descriptions of cruelty and tyranny are indulged by the narrator. He recounts how the slightest infraction can cause a humiliating flogging in front of an assembled audience. The sailors would be called with, "All hands witness punishment, ahoy!" (*White Jacket*, p.135) and then the accused confronted with their offence, would be asked to strip to the waist, have his feet tied to the grating, and then be flogged. The conditions the sailors are expected to live with are harsh and unimaginable. Rather than directly accuse the American naval authorities of being tyrannical, Melville chooses to further feed on the American audience's fear of being likened to Muslims.

The drum-beat used to call sailors to quarters was not a drum-beat but the sound "to which each good Mussulman at sunset drops to the grounds whatsoever his hands might have found to do, and, throughout all Turkey, the people in concert kneel toward their holy Mecca" (p.287). Nor were the articles of war drafted by an American. Rather, the American navy was in fact ruled by a Turkish code "whose every section almost, like each of the tubes of a revolving pistol, fires nothing short of death into the heart of an offender" (p.297).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Melville feeds on the theophobia of the Americans by choosing to make Islamic references central to *Redburn*, *Mardi*, and *White Jacket*. Berbar (2016) states that Melville's stereotyped representation of Islam is done to "curry the favor of nineteenth-century American public." He used his knowledge and experience of the Middle East and the Islamic world to further fuel the stereotypes the Americans have. It seems that much like a misled mother who tries to steer her child away from indulging in something dangerous by threatening that the "boogeyman will come out and get you," Melville threatens with Islam.

Moreover, Melville's bad view on Islam used to be bolstered with the aid of Carlyle and Prideaux who were equally disinclined to be acquainted with its spirit. Their concept supplied the naked bones which Melville used to carry his technical inversions of Islam. According to Disuqi (1987) critics who attempt to analyze the Islamic references in Melville's works need to seek advice from the Qur'an and Hadith. In her view Melville's suspicion used to be previously focused on Judaism and Christianity, which history states are seen as deformations of the primary appliance of the ancient and new testaments. The warning against vice and wickedness in Melville's literary works are without a doubt relevant to all human civilizations. To follow them, however, in opposition to the sources and teachings of Islam can solely imitate the Islamophobic stance that was prevalent at that time.

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