THE IMAGE OF MUSLIMS IN THE ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

Dr. Amal Kitishat
Assistant professor,
Dept. of English language and literature,
wata: world association of Arab translators and linguists
alisco: Arab association of culture and science
Jordan

Abstract

The Elizabethan theater presents a racial treatment of the Islamic character. This study aims at investigating the image of Muslims as presented in Elizabethan drama. In many of the Elizabethan plays Muslims are described as infidels, pagans, barbarians, black... etc. This attitude reveals the feeling of the increasing threat of the Islamic Ottoman Empire whose armies conquered many European isles. This view supports the crusaders’ attitude toward Muslims. The study concludes that this view is resulted from the inherited crusader thinking which is aroused by the military expansion of the Ottoman Empire which is the greatest Islamic power that time.

Key words: Islamic studies, Islamic identity, Islam and the West, racism, Orientalism
I - Introduction

The view of the West regarding Islam falls within the domain of Orientalism. This study aims at revealing some of the writers who dealt with Islam “with a prior prejudice”, even more some of these writers “have launched a critical onslaught on Islam” (Adnan, 1985, 82) indeed, the image of Muslims as presented by the western scholars falls with the negative stereotypes that go back to the era when Islamic world was encountered with the west due to the crusades (1095-1270). This conflict resulted in a wave of hatred and hostility among Europeans against Islam and the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (Adnan, 41)

II - The stereotype of the Islamic character

Taking the historical context into consideration, there was a great deal of racism toward the Islamic identity. The issue of identity in Islam is related to the Islamic culture, with reference to this fact Abu Sadat Nurallah states:

Islam as a social religion (due to its focus on group life rather than individualistic one) has shaped its own cultural identity which is meant to be upheld by Muslims. Islamic culture is characterized by a dynamic sense of moderation. It harmonizes both the material and spiritual dimensions of human personality. It is not based on mere imitations. Islamic cultural identity is value-laden. Islamic cultural identity follows a dynamic pattern, and it is not static as it is often being misunderstood by both Muslims themselves and the secular Westerners. The major difference between the secular Western and Islamic culture is faith in one God. The Islamic faith controls the lives of its members (Muslims) in all areas of life. These areas include spiritual beliefs, life style, law, and government. (Nurallah, 2008:46)

On the other hand, Islam faces many challenges resulted from globalization. A conflict between the West and the East was the expected result of such encounter. In fact, Islamic culture has come into conflict with the western culture in general and the American culture in particular. (Stone, 2006).

However, the relation between the East and the west reveals a racial attitude, this attitude can be reflected in literature from earlier periods up to now. A clear example of the earliest racist attitude could be found in Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales in the Knight’s Tale. Muslims were described as inferior to the Western warriors. This racist attitude to the Islamic identity is best seen in the representation of the great Islamic leader Saladin who was able to put an end of the Crusaders occupation of Palestine and liberate the Islamic East from them. According to critical approaches, the West identifies in a pain of binary opposition in which is summed up as “white, Christians” where as the Islamic world is described as the other part of the pair; they are non-white, non-Christians the so called “infidels” (Scolt, 1977:3). This racial treatment of the East not only stops at these markers of the identity; for instance Edward Said comments on the European treatment of the Eastern people as nothing but “imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism”. (Said, 1978:61) Moreover Said adds:

Only an Occidental could speak of Orientals, for example, just as it was the White Man who could designate and name the coloreds, or non whites. Every statement made by Orientalists
or whiten (who were usually interchangeable) conveyed a sense of irreducible distance. (Said:63)

III- The Historical context of the Elizabethan Age

Taking the historical context into consideration, the Islamic world was presented to be in conflict with the Western world. This can be seen clearly from the recurrent references to the Ottomans or the Turks. A state of war dominates the relation between the East represented by the Turks and the West. There are many examples of religious discrimination against Muslims in many of Elizabethan plays. The word Ottomans is a reference to Osman I (1258 - 1326) This leader is best described as:

Around 1300, this ruler united certain of the disparate Turkish tribes (Seljuks) who had originally settled in Anatolia from the 11th century. Osman emerged as a ruthless leader, uniting some of these tribes with force where necessary and establishing a center of power at Bursa near Constantinople. The heavily-fortified city of Constantinople was held by the Byzantines and in the 15th century the Ottomans became determined to conquer it. Murad II (1421 - 1451) tried unsuccessfully to invade the city in 1423. On May 29, 1453, the city finally fell to the Ottomans, who were led by Mehmet II (1432 - 1481). The conquest of Constantinople has been described as the event that ended the Medieval period. (http://www.westernresistance)

Though he sometimes presents a positive image of the Ottomans and the Turks, Shakespeare still reminds the reader that they are not Christians. To Shakespeare, Turks, Ottomans, Arabs or Moors are used interchangeably they all stand for the Islamic “other”. For instance, in the third he describes the Turks saying “What, think you we are Turks or infidels?” (act III,i) Also in King Richard the Second, there is another reference to the Turks which does not express anything but racism: “Streaming the ensign of the Christian cross; against black pagans, Turks and Saracens.” (Richard II, IV.i.128-29)

However in The Merchant of Venice, the prince of Morocco boasts of his bravery as a warrior in Sultan Solyman army. Of course Sultan Solyman was famous for his bravery and his region was known for its victories in conquering many countries. This fact led him to be called Solyman the magnificent. In this play the image of Muslim is seen to be positive unlike the previous image which has negative connotations. The prince boasts of his bravery saying:

By this scimitar
That slew the Sophy and a Persian prince
That won three fields of Sultan Solyman,
I would outstare the sternest eyes that look
Outbrave the heart most daring on the earth,
Pluck the young sucking cubs from the she-bear,
Yea, mock the lion when he roars for prey,
To win thee, lady. (The Merchant of Venice, act II,i)

Therefore, situation becomes more complicated when we approach the twentieth century. An era which is full of troubles between East and West. This attitude reached its climax after the disastrous event of 11th of September, when Terrorism and Islam became two faces of one coin. Such events show the “complications in the relations between East and West”. (Gabriel I, 1970, 885)
III-The Islamic character representation in literature

Cultural identity plays a direct role in the image of any nation. Bhugra defines cultural identity as something related to human’s psyche which marks his/her culture. (Bhugra, 2004). The identity of Muslims is always described as “black” or “non-white”.

A clear example of how the Western literature portrays the Muslim character is Scott’s novel *The Talisman* this work is a distortion of historical facts. Islamic world was presented as a mysterious place of magic and mythology. Thus, many Western writers show a great interest in the East. These writers reveal different attitudes to Islam. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) sheds light on this particular issue, he states:

English writers on the whole hand a more pronounced and harder sense of what Oriental pilgrims might entail than the French …Romantic writers like Byron and Scott consequently had a political vision of the Near Orient and a very combative awareness of how relations between the Orient and Europe would have to be conducted. Scott’s historical sense in *The Talisman* and *Count Robert of Paris* allowed him to set these novels in Crusader Palestine and eleventh century Byzantium respectively without at the same time retracting from his canny political appreciation of the way powers act abroad. (Said, 192)

As for Marlowe, he does not go farther than this racist treatment of the Islamic character. In his play *Tamburlaine*, his racism is clearly stated. Regarding this issue Beyazit H. Akman in “Shakespeare and the Turk/Shakespeare ve Turk” writes:

In Tamburlaine the Great, Christopher Marlowe chooses to humiliate the ‘Great Turk’ by exaggerating the story Bayezid, the Sultan of the Turks, who was defeated by a half-Mogul (yet still half-Turkish) ruler. Thomas Kyd explains the reason of conversion of renegades as sexual desire so much so that claiming the most ridiculous of all arguments saying circumcision is done for better sexual intercourse, whereas Thomas Heywood, on the contrary, is ironically focused on the images of castrated renegades and impotent eunuchs. As for Shakespeare, he champions them all by fusing all of these examples, …Eunuchs, Mutes, Blacks, Infidels, Women and Pagans: The Turk as the Ultimate Other(www.cbs: spring 2009

Morover, Shakespeare’s drama is full of such stereotypes. Actually the Oriental character is represented by the Prince of Morocco who is: scribed as a “tawny Moor”(*The Merchant of Venice*,AcII:I,p.43). Shakespeare emphasizes the color, and hints that this “brownness” is because of the sun. The prince of Morocco introduces himself saying:

Mislike me not for my complexion,
the shadowed livery of the bushed sun
To whom I am a neighbour, and near
Bring me the fairest creature northward.
(The Merchant of Venice,AcII:I,p.43)

Again the white/black contrast is asserted by taking the case of the “tawny” prince of Morocco and the fair “northward born” Portia. The characterization of prince Morocco was
also negative. He is partial in his judgment of things. Thus, he chooses the golden casket, which proved to be the wrong casket later. This choice reveals that he is misled by the appearance and lacks wisdom which is a negative feature.

Also, this negative attitude to the Eastern character is recurrent in *Othello*, in which another black character represents the Eastern man. There are many racial references to Othello, only relating to his color; for example in the encounter between Desdemona’s father and Othello, Brabantio insults Othello simply for his color. He says:

> Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,  
> So opposite to marriage that she shunned  
> The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,  
> Would ever have, to incur a general mock,  
> Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
> Of such a thing as thou, to fear, not to delight.  
> Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense  
> That thou hast practised on her with foul charms,  
> Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals  
> That weaken motion. (Othello, act I, ii)

Besides, the oriental character is described to be linked with magic. In Othello, Barbatanio claimed that his daughter was bewitched by Othello because he could not believe that the fair Desdemona loves Othello. He complains to the duke:

> Ay, to me;  
> She is abused, sto’n from me, and corrupted  
> By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;  
> For nature so preposterously to err,  
> Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,  
> Sans witchcraft could not. (Othello, I.iii.72-6)

It is not only magic that is attributed to the Eastern figure, in his description of the Moor, Iago adds other negative stereotype of the Eastern character, Iago describes the Moors saying:

> These Moors are changeable in  
> their wills: fill thy purse with money: -the food  
> that to him now is as luscious as locusts. (Othello, act I.iii)

The Moor was described as “barbarian” and naïve who “is of a free and open nature/That thinks men honest that but seem to be so”. (Othello, act I.iii)

The Eastern and Islamic characters are only evaluated by the reference to the color; “non–White” or “black” which is a clear prejudice that the Western critics claim that they avoid.
Iv- Conclusion

This treatment of the Eastern character is recurrent in many of the Western scholar studies. This view that depends on color as a factor of superiority is rejected in the Islamic religion which ignores the color or the race as a criterion to evaluate people. In Islam this view, judging people according to their colors, is rejected all Muslims are treated equally regardless of their racial, cultural background. However, Islam unifies different cultures and races under the blessings of Islam. In other words, the elements that used to divide and exclude people from belonging to any national identity such as race, color, class or even sex are all refused and considered as a sign of weakness in Islamic faith. This principal rule had been settled by prophet Mohammed since the first day he preached the Islamic religion. Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) says that there is no preference of any Arabic person over a non–Arabs, nor of any white person over a black or yellow…etc.; the only thing that gives a preference of a person over another is how much faith he has in his heart, prophet Mohammed denied that race, color could be considered as barriers that prevent any person from joining the Islamic faith.

References


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