

Title—Muslims in the Western Imagination

Author—Sophia Rose Arjana

Year—2014

Categories: Islam, The West, Orientalism, Politics, Culture

Place: The World (Focus on The West)

Time: 700-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Arjana's book aims to explain the current moment, in terms of increased media attention to the 'Muslim problem,' through an exploration of the place of Islam in Western culture in the past 1,300 years or since the advent of Islam. She argues that the current concerns represent old anxieties, and what is common across these various cultural productions is the figure of the 'Muslim monster.' Her goal is to shift the framing from 'why do they hate us?' to instead 'why do we fear them?' In particular she is concerned with the Western imagination of Islam; the idea of Muslims as a frightening adversary, an outside enemy that doesn't belong in modernity, and must be excluded from the West. Essentially, Arjana probes the construction of Muslims as **uncivilized, hyper-violent, permanent foreigners** and attempts to provide the historical context of these constructions. While acknowledging that the form of the Muslim monster has taken many forms across history, she focuses on Muslim characters that are male, non-human/hybrid, and racialized.

The book is organized essentially chronologically, beginning around 700 shortly after the creation and spread of Islam as a religion. She begins by outlining the way in which the category of monsters provides an important tool for understanding the history of Christian-Muslim relations. Arjana argues that the commonality across all 1,300 years of Muslim monsters is that they disturb the calm of white Christianity. Muslim monsters are created in cultural contexts that view Christianity as determinative of normative humanity and everything else as strange, foreign, and monstrous. The early construction of Muslims as creatures demonstrates the way that fears create **imaginative bodies**. As Arjana transitions to the Elizabethan era, she finds that the majority of Muslim characters become Turkish, evidencing European anxieties surrounding Ottoman power. The monsters following the Elizabethan period often appeared in lands European wished to colonize.

Arjana spends considerable time exploring the role of Gothic horror in the creation and perpetuation of Muslim monsters, especially influencing European and American cultural production. As she moves closer to the present, she argues that science fiction took up the mantle of Gothic horror and highlights the presence of orientalism in science fiction, specifically on Dracula's Muslim attributes. Arjana illuminates potential objections to her central argument and responds to them. One potential objection to her argument would be the presence of non-monstrous Muslim characters and the existence of a few positive Muslim representations in European history. She argues that these representations are trivial when seen alongside the grand narrative of Islam as a dangerous alien force.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Imaginary Muslim monsters have determined the construction of the Muslim in Western thought
- The imaginary violence perpetrated by Muslim monsters affects real Muslim bodies and thus must be studied and understood
- The role Christianity has played in the West in determining what is normative humanity and what is monstrous, alien, and foreign