

The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam's Impact on Contemporary Literature

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Identity politics has become the catch phrase of the postmodern age. With concepts such as "exile," "migrancy," and "hybridity" acquiring unprecedented cultural significance in the late twentieth century, the postcolonial age gives way to new identities, fractured modes of living, and new conditions of humanity. Literature is a powerful tool to explore such issues in an era where a great deal of the world is displaced, and the idea of a homeland becomes a disrupted, remote possibility. *The Postcolonial Crescent: Islam's Impact on Contemporary Literature*, is an attempt to discuss how Muslims negotiate identity at a time of rapid and spiritually challenging transculturation. The book uses fiction written by Muslims to critique the effects of colonialism, counteract modernity, and question the status of Islamic identity in the contemporary world. It also can be considered as the primary introduction of contemporary Islamic literature into the postcolonial genre. Muslim writers have yet to sub-

mit a unique and powerful commentary on postcolonial and cultural studies; this work at least softens that absence.

The Postcolonial Crescent was conceived as a response to *The Satanic Verses* controversy. Therefore, it is "intimately involved in the interchange between religion and the state, and demonstrates that the roles Islam is playing in postcolonial nation-building is especially contested in the absence of broadly acceptable models" (p. 4). Conflicting issues of identity are approached by interrogating the authority to define a "correct" Islamic identity, the role of individual rights, and the "variegation of Islamic expression within specific cultural settings, suggesting through the national self-definitions the many concerns that the Islamic world shares with global postcoloniality" (p. 7).

The book is organized around three principle themes: authority, gender, and pluralism. The first section discusses authority and the problematic representation of Islam. Akeel Bilgrami begins the book with a philosophical treatise, "What Is a Muslim? Fundamental Commitment and Cultural Identity." Bilgrami suggests that the very definition of the word Muslim is in a state of crisis, reflected in the reformist and Islamist movements and the inability of Muslims to understand their identity as "negotiable in [the] face of other values that they also cherish" (p. 36). As Muslims have not yet confronted the effects of modernity within their own self-definition, their capacity for self-criticism is paralyzed (p. 46). Bilgrami asserts that Muslims have failed to form a cogent discourse of agency. This failure is embedded in a third-person, as opposed to a first-person, conceptualization of identity and political praxis.

Literary expressions of Islamic identity are explored in "Artistic Creativity in Islamic Contexts" by Mohammed Arkoun. This article reviews Maghrebian literature and the Orientalist perception of Islamic art. The central theme considers the use of the colonizer's tongue (French) as a medium to convey issues of religious feelings expressed via artistic creativity. Additionally, Arkoun reflects upon the influence of Western modernity and secularism in the Muslims' views of their artistic creations:

Islam, like any other religion or dominant ideology, is at the same time a way of seeing and a projections area where the work of theologizing, sacralizing, mythologizing, and ideologizing, and even mystifying takes place according to the demands of the changing historical events in which the believers, acting at the same time as members of society, find themselves involved. (p. 69)

Rasheed El-Enany elaborates on the conflicts that emerge for authors who struggle between Islamic consciousness and Western modernity. "The Dichotomy of Islam and Modernity in the Fiction of Naquib Mahfouz" details

the author's conflicts between belief in secularized progress and humanity's metaphysical need for the divine. As Mahfouz struggles to identify a relationship between science, progress, and Islam, his novels reflect his own personal crisis in resolving moral dilemmas. The author also explains the use of sex in Mahfouz's work as a "subsidiary of his concern for politics" (p. 71).

Anouar Majid continues the investigation of authority, Westernization, and economic hegemony from a North African perspective in his "Islam and the Literature of Controversy." Majid explores how such contemporary writers as Salman Rushdie, Taha Ben Jalloun, Fatima Mernissi, and Rachid Mimouni address identity and postmodernism. While such authors claim to critique the West, Majid suggests that they rather have internalized Orientalist attitudes about Islam. While these authors claim to counteract Western hegemony, they uncritically adopt Western models of liberation, human rights, and secularized modes of expression:

The attempt to desacralize the revelation through a process of secularization is at the heart of controversy surrounding intellectuals and writers in the Islamic world today. Their uncomplicated, one-dimensional reading of the Islamic resurgence makes them, unwittingly or not, accomplices of the West and the ruling elites in almost all Arab and Islamic countries. (p. 87)

The next section is dedicated to the topic of gender. "Feminist Expression as Self-identity and Cultural Critique: The Discourse of Doria Shafik" by Cynthia Nelson attempts to understand Doria Shafik, an Egyptian Muslim feminist. Shafik is described as

a woman caught between the margins of two worlds as she attempts to change her society in order to find room for her own feminist project and the human price that is exacted when she carried the political project beyond the political tolerance of her own society. (p. 95)

The chapter considers the intellectual origins of Shafik's feminist and political philosophies and details her struggles as a negotiator between the different worlds of Western feminism, Islamic perspectives, and Egyptian society.

Miriam Cook asserts a different outlook on feminist agency in the next chapter, in which she discusses the experiences of the Egyptian prisoner Zaynab al-Ghazali in "Ayyām min Ḥayāfī: The Prison Memoirs of a Muslim Sister." The author offers a conceptual model for Muslim women aside from Western-inspired feminism (*al unthawīyah al-islāmīyah*) by focusing on the womanist (*al-niswīyah al-islāmīyah*) approach embodied by al-Ghazali (p. 123). As an early supporter of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt, she was imprisoned and tortured for her political beliefs. Unlike Doria Shafik, al-Ghazali used the traditional roles and patriarchal images of Muslim women to embody political

agency and religiosity. The author explains that al-Ghazali's use of such images function as a form of agency, for "[t]o speak and be effective, she must seem to embrace those norms all the while showing them to be contingent upon social and religious exigencies" (p. 135).

Traditional notions of female sexuality are explored in Renate Wise's essay, "Subverting Holy Scriptures: The Short Stories of Yusuf Idris." Western ideas of sexuality are interrogated "based on subversions on Qur'anic injunctions, iconoclasm, blasphemy, and reinterpretations of hadiths that serve to justify sexual illicitness" (p. 141). Wise discusses how the work of Idris explains humanity's attempt to negotiate sexual behavior by modifying religious texts.

The next chapter links sexuality and gender behavior with class and nationalism. Sabah Ghandour considers Etal Adnan's influence on Islamic literature in "Gender, Postcolonial Subject, and the Lebanese Civil War in Sitt Marie Rose." The essay explores gender construction between the contentious borders of Islam and Arab nationalism. The Lebanese civil war provides a backdrop as the author suggests that the main character, a Lebanese Christian woman named Sitt Marie Rose, "fundamentally challenges the whole misconception of the civil war as a religious-based one, and highlights instead the war's class and ideological dimensions" (p. 162). Sitt Marie Rose crosses the religious line to educate Muslim children, and is eventually killed by Christian militiamen for her "crossing-over." This act of walking across borders is symbolic for both religious and gender identity, and explores the complex ways that gender, religion, and national identity are problematized.

The final section reflects upon the concept of pluralism and discusses both the benefits and challenges that pluralism presents to Muslim cultures. Ali A. Mazrui explores Afrocentricity in "Islam and Afrocentricity: The Triple Heritage School." Mazrui's triple heritage includes "synthesizing Africanity, Islam and the influence of the West in Africa" (p. 169). For African and African-American Muslims, the rich history of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Islamism has molded Islamic identity. This chapter explores the history and contemporary issues regarding these concepts.

Debra Boyd-Buggs critiques the role of the Senegalese marabout in "Marabout Masters: Maraboutism and the Problem of Education in the Senegalese Novel." Three issues arise in the essay: a critique of maraboutism in Senegalese society; a deconstruction of the notion that society gave marabouts illegitimate authority, thus allowing them to take advantage and mistreat their students; and a presentation of the conflict between the benefits of Qur'anic (maraboutist) versus the French educational system.

The essay "Impact of Islam on Modern Bengali Poetry" by Syed Ali Ashraf stresses the influence of Islam and Bengalism on Hindu poetry and the role of

literature in creating Bengali identity. The author suggests that “[m]odern Bengali literature shows a remarkable impact on the new socio-cultural-political sensibility generated by both the actual condition of the Muslims and the spirit of revivalism on the thematic tradition and linguistic expressions in the writings by Muslim writers” (p. 225). Concepts stemming from Islam (e.g., the love of God, the just, and the noble) have entered into non-Muslim writing, and the genre of spiritual purity in conflict with evil forces has influenced various forms of literary expressions.

“The Mirage of Faith and Justice: Some Sociopolitical and Cultural Themes in Post-Colonial Urdu Short Stories” by Habibeh Rahim explores how “Urdu short stories protest and challenge the complacency of the society” (p. 231). The diaspora, the partition, and the corruption of the government are perceived through various Urdu authors. Rahim brilliantly illustrates how powerful Urdu literature can be when critiquing society and politics. The authors discussed by Rahim are important to society, as their literature serves as “a plea of the visionary to realize the potential of faith and justice” (p. 248).

One of the more informative chapters in the book links the empirical and the ideological together. In Kamran Talattof’s “The Changing Mode of Relationship between Modern Persian Literature and Islam: Karbala in Fiction,” the author reviews the symbolic uses of Karbala in different historical and political periods of Iran. During three different historical periods, Karbala carried different symbolic meaning in both official and popular literature. Karbala is used both in cultural and political contexts to “serve as a criterion by which the religiosity of a text, its author, and ultimately the community from which it arises may be examined” (p. 250).

The final chapter investigates the challenges surrounding Muslim literature written in the West. Georg Stoll in “Immigrant Muslim Writers in Germany” focuses on Turkish literature and the themes that emerge in diaspora narratives. Stoll traces literary developments in Turkish literature written to reflect the experience of Turkish workers in Germany. This chapter also discusses Germany’s response to the literature, as German national identity is challenged by the presence of minority Turkish writers who critique German society. Additionally, Turkish authors also debate how to classify their own work. For example, is Turkish literature “guest-worker literature” or “immigrant literature”? Does the literature reflect a transitional culture or hint at the permanence and hybrid realities of Turks in Germany? Issues of Islamic identity and religiosity are challenged in the literature, for “one finds that the greater challenge for Muslim immigrants in Germany is evidently not Christianity as another religion, but the modern secular society as a question to the usual forms of Islamic religious socialization” (p. 280).

This book explores provocative issues and raises important questions concerning authority, gender, and pluralism. The quality of discourse and analysis is not consistent throughout the book, as some chapters illuminate issues more clearly than others. There also is no discussion of the absence of Muslim literature in North America and other parts of the Muslim world. However, *The Postcolonial Crescent* is a timely book that explores an underdeveloped topic in Islamic cultural studies. Fiction can be a powerful tool if used to document new realities facing Muslims all over the globe. Likewise, literature can be a creative form of communicating the experiences of spiritual conflict that erupt in the chasm between Western modernity and Islam. This book is momentous as an early attempt to bridge such realities with the growing body of postcolonial studies.

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