



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



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## ISLAMOPHOBIA: AN OVERVIEW OF ORIENTALISM OF MUSLIMS FOR AMERICAN EMPIRE

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### ABSTRACT



With political leaders like Donald Trump fanning the flames of racism in America, the recent attacks on Muslims in the West (Such as New Zealand mosque attacks) paid credence to America's rapidly growing White supremacy and Islamophobia especially with the new wave of orientalism and racism. This study is an overview of the intersection between Orientalism and Islamophobia in the administration and maintenance of the galvanization of the American empire. The study argues that misrepresentation or Orientalism of Muslims in various forms foregrounds Islamophobia which affects the American claim of pluralism and at the same time benefits the American political expansion considering her position as the twenty-first century's empire. Much emphasis is placed on the unfortunate incidences of 9/11 and the impacts they have had and are still having on the image of Muslims. The research wishes to tackle the problem of misrepresentation, falsity, and stereotyping of the model of Muslims while exposing the real intent of the West (U.S.) in propagating such propaganda to satisfy their own quest for more power and domination. The research highlights how media, cinema, political discourse or literature portrays Muslims and Islam in a negative light by dwelling on the crimes of only a few Muslims, which in turn creates a stereotype for the Muslims. It argues that Orientalism and Islamophobia are rooted in the development of the American empire

**Keywords:** *Islamophobia, Orientalism, American empire, Muslims, Neo-Orientalism.*



## INTRODUCTION

In China, Islam is considered as a mental illness that needs to be cured immediately. This belief has subjected the Muslims in China to undergo inhuman treatments in concentration camps (Hughes; Dudar; Beydoun, "China Holds One Million Uighur Muslims in Concentration Camps"). Similar to Chinese rejection of the Islamic faith is the Myanmar persecution of Muslims which took the form of ethno-religious cleansing that caused a mass migration of the Muslims from their homes in Burma to neighbouring countries (Wongcha-um; Editorial Board; Hitchens). India is not left out of the oppression of Muslim minorities bearing in mind the revocation of article 370 that guaranteed Kashmir's independence and exclusive rights and also the statelessness of the Muslim-majority Bengali community in Assam following the foreigners' declaration by Indian Government (Karat, 2017; Kirmani, 2016; Ayyub, 2018; Safi, 2017) these trends are similarly found in other Christian majority countries, considering policies made against Muslims in France, Germany, Russia and other Western countries. The world has been made to believe that Muslims are the problem of the world today, that they are raised terrorists by default, misogynist, violent and bloodthirsty through the commendable efforts of the international media as well as literature. Muslim women have as well been represented as oppressed and completely voiceless and powerless to the oppressive patriarchy and its structures in Islam. These overbearing representations (which are mostly economic and political) systematically paved the way for the continuous imperialism of America in Muslim majority countries which is disguised as 'War on Terror', and has provoked series of wars in Middle-East countries; Syria, Palestine, Iraq etc. (Kumar, 2012) The misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in media, cinema and literature are arguably oriental considering the rejection of the peaceful nature of most Muslims around the world and the deliberate reiteration of the abnormality of Muslims, this propaganda has been condemned and criticized by various Muslim and non-Muslims but yet, it still

reproduces. (E. W. Said; M.D.; E. Said; Pavan Kumar; Morton; Nayak) This study intends to emphasize that Oriental representation of Islam and Muslims in media, political discourse or literature have the tendencies to inflate stereotypes against Muslims which then propagate Islamophobia, especially in America. In the above regard, the oriental outlook of the phenomena of misrepresentation of Islam is based on the idea that Islam has been reduced to the position of the colonized as seen in the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western writings which points towards the colonial positioning of Islam by the American writers.

## EMPIRE

The history of empire can be traced all the way back to the ancient time, down before the Middle Ages. As long as the history of man can be remembered, empire existed in one form or another. As hegemonic domination of one group of people or nation over a few others for social, political, economic or religious reasons, more than thirty empires have existed in human history with the most populous one like the Roman Empire, which was considered 'the superpower of middle ages'. It was the most significant and longest-lasting among others lasting beyond two thousand two hundred years, evidence of its success is the prevailing widespread of Catholicism till today. Ottoman Empire is regarded as the most daring among all, Mongolian Empire of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries is the most contiguous among them all. The British Empire is one of the modern age European empires which is historically the largest of all empires, spreading across almost all continents of the globe, owning twenty-five percent of the world's population and stretching its coverage to twenty-two percent of the earth's landmass. The phrase 'the empire on which the sun never sets' is used to imply its multiplicity of colonies across the globe, i.e. at every point in time the sun shines on at least one of the many British empires. This is where the postcolonial spirit emerged from, more precisely from the colonized Blacks who suffered colonial torture and oppression more than any other colonized race. After freeing the Americas, British Empire began to weaken in



strength, it continued to decline strategically as it witnessed a financial challenge after funding the two world wars and its complete fall occurred when India and other significant African countries like Nigeria and Ghana gained independence from its colonial domination in the mid-twentieth century. One is to pause here and ask, was that the end of empire? Are all former British colonies free from her in all senses of the word free? Well, these have been the subject of various debates and postcolonial discourses. The answer is evidently no, and this is where neo-colonialism comes into play. After the cold war, America emerged as the world's superpower and thereafter claimed to be the mother of all. In this twenty-first century, America continues to strive to maintain its position as the controller of all, despite threats to its superiority from China and Russia. While Britain is tacitly manipulating its colonies and undertaking an indirect form of colonization, America is considered as the empire of this century which evidently occupies almost all parts of the world, especially the Middle East and other oil-rich countries. Looking at her military presence in different countries and tactical expansion of her empire, Artyom Lukin concurs that:

Babones draws parallels between the contemporary American empire and the late Roman republic. Rome's internal regime was also a kind of democracy. Rome had a circle of close and privileged Latin allies, which resembles the relationship the U.S. maintains with four other Anglo-Saxon countries — Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Rome's non-Latin allies can be compared with the U.S. partners in Europe and Asia. All of them closely collaborate with America in order to keep in subjugation those nations who are outside the elite circle.

### AN OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN IMPERIALISM

American imperialism is pejoratively seen as the United States' policies aimed at extending her socio-economic, political or cultural control over places beyond her boundaries. may include military conquest, intervention or regime change, economic

penetration, gunboat diplomacy, unequal treaties, or by subsidization of preferred factions. (Field; Zevin; Immerman)

Starting from the ethnic cleansing of the native Indians of America and then to conquering European colonies in the Pacific in the 1820s, Imperial America gained the dominance of most Spanish territories after the Spanish American war (Bailey). So towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> c, it owned countries like: Philippines, Hawaii and Latin America. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. obtained the Panama Canal Zone and occupied Haiti and the Dominican Republic. After fighting World War II, it administered many Pacific islands captured during the fight against Japan. (Saull; Immerman) It acquired military bases in Germany and Japan as a result of NATO formation, but The Cold War reoriented American foreign policy to focus on opposing Soviet communism, while prevailing U.S. foreign policy embraced its role as a nuclear-armed global superpower. (Kirkpatrick; Kramer) America still claims a full-fledged dominance of Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the United States Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands. Meanwhile, her involvement in regime change included overthrowing the democratically elected government of Iran, the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, occupation of Grenada, and interference in various foreign elections. (Field; Immerman) successful disposal of Iraq and Libya's dictators and the Gulf War that occurred in the late 20<sup>th</sup> c is believed to take heed in America's economic Imperialism which have been motivated by her interest in the Middle-east oil. After the September 11 attacks, her imperial ambitions became obvious through her manifest invasion of Afghanistan which supposedly harbored the attackers and Iraq (which the U.S. mostly claimed had weapons of mass destruction that necessitates disarmaments). (O'Meara; Fouskas and Gökay; Juhasz; Jhaveri). Today, America's Imperial actions and foreign policies are debated whether as neo-colonial (Gratale) or "petroimperialism" (Jhaveri), where petroimperialism is a modern form of hegemony that uses economic rather than military power, and is sometimes used as a synonym for contemporary imperialism.



## ORIENTALISM AND AMERICAN IMPERIALISM

While the issue of misrepresentation, misperception and mistreatment of Muslims continue to gain attention worldwide, it still remains a complex area of study. Muslims in America are increasingly discriminated (Hauslohner) and victimized for hate crimes (Kaplan; Underwood) which have been on the rise since 9/11, all of which points towards the Islamophobic racialization of Muslims in America (Pew Research Center; Ernst; E. Green; Beydoun, "Rethinking Islamophobia"). This demonization and dehumanization of the "other" is what Edward Said's *Orientalism* explicates, the "other" becomes Orientalized by the west as a savage, uncivilized and barbaric set of people that needs Western intervention to educate, civilize and save them from doom. This orientalism whether in media, cinema or literature contributes to the growth of Islamophobia and islamophobia in-turn, serves as a tool for Muslim colonial domination by America. So, the history of orientalism in America can be put that the language of orientalism was inherited from the Europeans by the Americans as Professor Deepa Kumar opines that Orientalists like Bernad Lewis migrated from England to America – to spread the knowledge of orientals – because they see a shift of power from Europe to America after the cold war. (2015)

The emergence of the United States as the strongest power in the West after the Second World War, gave rise to its establishment of imperial power in the Middle East which was then dominated by Britain and France. (Kumar 2012) America's interest in oil kept her in the Middle-East and used the oriental language and attitude on them as a means of establishing control over them. Like with all empires, America greatly relies on demonizing the Muslim "other", to justify her hegemony. These ideas of the Muslim other do not just exist in the media, cinema or novels for no reason, "they are systematically being reproduced" in the academy, in think-tanks, used by political figures and continuously reproduced by the media simply as a means of justifying US policies in the Muslim world. (Empire Files).

Said examined Western scholarship of what he calls the "Orient," specifically of the Arab Islamic world, even though he was an Arab Christian, he argued that early scholarship; literary and historical documentation of the Arabs by Westerners was prejudiced and biased and had always projected a false and stereotyped vision of "otherness" of the Islamic world. Such Orientalism, seen as Western fantasy only facilitated and justified Western colonial policy.

For Said, this long tradition of romanticized descriptions of Asia and the Middle East in the Western culture had served and still serves as an inherent justification for European and American imperial and colonial ambitions. He, however, highlights how the colonized 'other' is by default, placed at the periphery because of the difference in race, religion and region, this exactly is what Said has criticized. (Abubakar)

## ISLAMOPHOBIA

With political leaders like Donald Trump fanning the flames of racism in America, the recent attacks on Muslims in the West (Such as New Zealand mosque attacks) paid credence to America's rapidly growing White supremacy and Islamophobia especially with the new wave of orientalism and racism.

Islamophobia designates the irrational fear of Islam that drives people to make blanket judgments accusing all Muslims (over a billion people) of harboring the same murderous fantasies that Muslim extremists express and act upon ("Islamophobia and Criticism of Islam | Augean Stables"). Although the term Islamophobia first occurred by its appearance in an essay by the Orientalist Etienne Dinet in *L'Orient vu de l'Occident* (1922), the term only in the 1990s that became common parlance in defining the discrimination faced by Muslims in Western Europe. Negative perceptions of Islam can be traced back through multiple confrontations between the Muslim world and Europe from the Crusades to colonialism.<sup>1</sup> However, Islamophobia is a modern and secular anti-Islamic discourse and practice appearing in the public



sphere with the integration of Muslim immigrant communities and intensifying after 9/11. The term has been used increasingly amongst political circles and the media, and even Muslim organizations, especially since the 1997 Runnymede Report (Islamophobia: A Challenge for All). However, academics are still debating the legitimacy of the term (Werbner 2005, Modood 2002, Vertovec 2002, Halliday 1999) and questioning how it differs from other terms such as racism, anti-Islamism, anti-Muslimness, and anti-Semitism. (Cesari, 2006)

In this study, Islamophobia is regarded as the fear or hatred of Islam and/or Muslims as the consequence of the misrepresentations; oriental stereotyping and vilification of Islam and Muslims in media, cinema, literature or political discourses. It argues that, the persistence of orientalism indicates the continuance of America's quest for imperial expansion.

The idea of focusing on the American empire emanates from the concurrent imperial dominations that plagues the Muslim world today. Having it that islamophobia is at its rise in America and Muslims have always been the victims of such hate attacks, this study seeks to delve into modern postcolonial and oriental discourse around the globe with a specific focus on American imperial expansion; considering the contemporariness of the issue. Professor Bobby Sayyid<sup>1</sup> observes that:

The launching of the 'war on terror' has since transformed this postcolonial gunboat diplomacy into full-scale colonial-style campaigns, including the US-led military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, while operations against or in the territories of Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, Libya, Iran and Syria have resulted in the virtual re-colonisation of parts of Muslimistan. It is in this 'new imperial' context that the articulation of Islam and empire is currently disclosed (2013, 13)

<sup>1</sup>Bobby Sayyid Salim is the director of Muslim and non-Muslim Centre at the University of South Australia

Prof. Deepa Kumar observes that orientalism identifies Muslims as a distinct race whose whole lives are governed by the Qur'an. According to them, the Muslims' misogyny, barbarism, savagery, lack of entrepreneurial spirit or scientific advancement, rejection of the Western modernization are all blamed on the Qur'an or associated with Islamic traditions which according to her, necessitated the imperialism of the Muslim world. (30).

Similar to Deepa Kumar's assertion, Todd Green believes that among the significant drives for Islamophobia in the West today, Imperialism is the most notable. Having it that Islamophobia is the consequence of the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims, he associates the implication of modern imperialism to the problems Muslims are facing in the West today. According to Todd Green:

The West's investment in the colonial enterprise coloured the ways that Westerners imagined and understood Muslims and Islam. Scholars and politicians frequently depicted a superior and civilized West over an inferior and uncivilized Muslim world. These representations not only dominated the colonial era but ... set the stage for much of the Islamophobia that has arisen since 9/11. (T. H. Green)

In addition to Salman Rushdie's affair in proliferating fear and in the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in the West, the 9/11 event is another major factor. There was a massive increase in Islamophobia in America after the September 11 tragic event; this is because, Muslims in their entirety, and Islam as a religion were (and are still) considered to be responsible for the saddening events. Cesari agrees that "Islamophobia is a modern and secular anti-Islamic discourse and practice appearing in the public sphere with the integration of Muslim immigrant communities and intensifying after 9/11" (Cesari). This research views the intensification of Islamophobia further than a normal reaction to the unfortunate events of 9/11, but rather as a vital instrument for American imperialism. Evidence for this assertion can be found in the presence of





Islamophobia in America, even before the events of 9/11. At the time, Islamophobia was practised for no tentative reasons. Further justification is evident in her (America's) manipulations of foreign policies to match her growing interest in occupying and dominating the Middle East regions, according to Todd Green, one significant factor that drives the fear of Islam in the West is imperialism, he affirms that:

In the sixteenth century, the European Nations clashed with the Ottoman Empire, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European nations expand its empires to much of the Muslim majority world. With the cold war, the US becomes the significant Imperial power focusing its economic and political control over various Middle Eastern countries. In most of the cases with imperial projects, there must be some 'other', and this 'other' must be *demonized and dehumanized* in order for the imperial nation to galvanize popular support for the project back home. (T. Green) emphasis is mine.

### ORIENTALISM

This book is precisely a critique of the Western cultural representations of the Muslim Arabs, Said sees Orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient". (Said 1978, 3). It should be minded that the concept of Orientalism has so many sub-concepts and theories embedded within it; the historical and current interaction between the East and the West, which are too numerous to cover within this study. Said's key ideas concerning 'secular criticism', the concept of 'exile', 'worldliness', 'the text and the critic in the world' and 'identity', 'humanism', have much been over-emphasized. The major aspects of this theory to be utilized in this study are, 'Muslims as orients'. The stereotypical representations of Arabs (and now Muslims in general) are often manifested through literature, theatre, media, and other means of creative expressions. These representations often involve themes associated with

violence and barbarism; the oriental myth. A Muslim woman is usually represented as a submissive sex object, belly dancer (in the case of the Arabs), or wholly subservient and imprisoned victim behind a veil of powerlessness. While the Muslim men are projected as oppressive, misogynistic, terrorist or always thirsty for blood. These stereotypes damage the religious and cultural image of the Muslims and the religion of Islam through these dehumanizing and demonizing acts. (Andrea, 2007; Gray and Finley-Hervey, 2005; A. M. Hashmi, 2016; Kalin, 2004; McCloud et al., 2013).

Because of oriental representation, this study hypothesizes the ongoing Islamophobia in America as the result of misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in English writings which serves as an instrument for imperialism. Professor Deepa Kumar argues in a YouTube documentary on Islamophobia in America that Islamophobia is rooted in the structure of the empire, she says: "Islamophobia is an ideology that is tied to a set of practices that sustain and reproduce empire". This is because, in her view, all empires rely on some form of "othering" in order to justify tax, wars and other imperial benefits. In the same vein, American empire got established with the demonization of the Arabs (which later turned to demonization of the Muslims in entirety) to justify US policies that helped strengthen their hegemony. (Empire Files).

This study goes with the above argument of islamophobia being a tool in America's imperial domination, having it that islamophobia is the consequence of the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in the Western media, political discourse, cinema and literature. Similar to Deepa Kumar's assertion, Todd Green believes that among the major drives for Islamophobia in the West today, Imperialism is the most notable. Having it that Islamophobia is the consequence of the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims, he associates the implication of modern imperialism to the problems Muslims are facing in the West today. According to Todd Green:



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This, however, adds to the basis for the postcolonial outlook of Islam and Muslims' misrepresentation in media, politics and literature. This study emphasizes that oriental representation of Islam and Muslims – as demonstrated in the above discussion – have the tendencies to inflate stereotypes against Muslims and then propagate Islamophobia, especially in the Western world. In the above regard, the postcolonial viewpoint of the phenomena of misrepresentation of Islam is based on the idea that Islam has been reduced to the position of the colonized as seen in the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western writings (as discussed earlier) which points towards the colonial positioning of Islam by the American writers.

It is needless to say that literature serves as a tool for colonial dominations. Since literature (fiction/non-fiction) has long been used as a means of transmitting knowledge and information from one period to another, oriental writers at the time of renaissance played a role in triggering and justifying European colonialism. Prof. Deepa, in her book *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (2012), opines that "whether consciously or not, Orientalists produced a body of work that aided the project of imperialism." (29) This is to justify the assertion of this study that literary writers contributed to perpetuating colonialism through orientalism. Even though Deepa's position is referring to the European colonialism, this study agrees with her assertion but, intends to focus on the American empire instead.

Using literature as a tool to facilitate American imperialism, Manqoush et al. argue in their article on "Islamophobic Irony in American Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Lorraine Adams' Harbor and John

Updike's Terrorist" that, "the two writers exaggerate the portrayal of Islamic fundamentalism to justify the US war on terror" (Manqoush et al.). War on terror is, however, inferred by this study as another US tactic of invading the affected Muslim countries. This is to show that, John Updike and Lorraine Adams also fall in the realm of American authors whom this study believe are using orientalism of Islam and Muslims in empowering American imperialism. According to Esmaeil et al., orientalism of Muslims accelerated in America shortly after the 9/11 event and through mediums that include literature. He says:

Immediately after the tragic event of 9/11, the American media became fraught with different kinds of discourses portraying atrocities and hardships of the Middle Easterners in Islamic societies. As one of these media venues, the American literary markets witnessed a mass production of works engendered by Muslim women. Many of these works are memoirs and revolve around women, Islam, a patriarchal society, and the state's oppression. (Zeiny et al.).

The above arguments further validate the hypothesis of this study that orientalism of Islam and Muslims in literary works contributes to the development of islamophobia which is devised as a justification for American imperialism.

### **ORIENTALISM, ISLAMOPHOBIA, AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE**

This study focuses on the most recent fashion of colonialism of Muslims and Islam by the West, specifically, the American empire. Although America doesn't fully pronounce her colonial intent, she practically engages partly in what colonists do and say in colonial discourse. An example of American hegemony in Muslim worlds is the subjection of Muslims to America's Imperial rule, shortly after the end of the second world war.



Deepa Kumar's<sup>2</sup> chapter on "Colonialism and Orientalism" in her book *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (2012) examines the image of the "Muslim world" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as has been mirrored through the language of Orientalism, and also the ways in which Orientalism served as the instrument of colonialism. She began by thoroughly looking at its emergence in Europe (France and Britain), and then in the United States. In this in-depth examination, she observes that orientalism identifies Muslims as a distinct race whose whole lives are governed by the Quran. Their misogyny, barbarism, savagery, lack of entrepreneurial spirit or scientific advancement, rejection of the Western modernization are all blamed on the Quran or associated with Islamic traditions which according to her, necessitated the imperialism of the Muslim world. (30). She further extends this explanation to the American empire that:

These [orientalists] ideas may have served to justify French and English conquest of the Middle East and North Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it was the United States that breathed new life into them after World War II. Even today, variations of these ideas can be found in American society. (Kumar)

Similar to the above assertion of using misrepresentation as a tool for colonialism, Amina et al. confirm in their book, *An Introduction to Islam in the 21st Century* (2013) that the image of Islam today (especially in the West) is entirely different from the existing reality of over a billion adherents around the globe, this misinformation and misrepresentation is what they characterize as colonial hostility between the West and the Muslim world. In their words:

The origins of the modern Western critique of Islam go back to the 19th century. At that time, orientalist claims of "backwardness" and "barbarity" contributed to justifying the atrocities of colonialism

<sup>2</sup> A professor at the department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rutgers University. She is the author of *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (2012)

and were a precursor to the biases toward Islam that are evident in contemporary politics. It was also during this period of European colonial rule that Western scholars (and rulers) started to consider the absence of economic and political development to be a byproduct of religion. (McCloud et al.)

Amina et al. affirm that the roots of the misconception of Islam today can also be traced down to the colonial era where the existing culture or religion of a colony has to be demonized and misrepresented to achieve the imperial goal. This prejudiced representation of Islam remains intact in the writings of the empires which suggests that the orientalism of Islam and Muslims is an imperial agenda. This, therefore, is the motivation why this study relies on postcolonial anticolonial resistance measures - such as Edward Said's *Contrapuntal reading and Orientalism* - for basing the argument of the colonial nature of the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in English literature.

## CONCLUSION

"Despite people's general familiarity with the concept of Orientalism, Edward W. Said's book is often not applied in a detailed and direct manner to contemporary issues of Islamophobia." (Johnson)

The review of pertinent literature shows that American imperial dominations are done not only through physical combat and conquest as done in the previous centuries, but through economic, political and social controls. Although Islamophobia has been in the West for decades, this study finds that the new wave of hate crimes against Muslims surged right after 9/11 and is utilized in the American power structure. After 9/11, anti-Muslim rhetoric increased and many other forms of discrimination, hate crimes and condemnation of the religion. (Love) The principal subject of discrimination in America today is the Muslims; therefore, it concludes that Islamophobia is the newest and ongoing form of racism in America. The study recommends the effects of Islamophobia on non-Muslim Americans for further studies.



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