

The Evolving Representation of Islam and Muslims in English Literature

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Abstract: *This article explores the transformation of the representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature from the medieval period to the contemporary era. It traces the early depictions during the Crusades, where Muslims were often portrayed as the "Other," embodying fear and exoticism, exemplified in works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. As the Renaissance unfolded, representations began to shift, reflecting a broader cultural curiosity and engagement with Islamic culture, seen in the works of Shakespeare and John Milton. In the modern era, literature increasingly captures diverse Muslim voices and experiences post-colonialism, emphasizing complexity and multidimensionality. The article also examines how contemporary literature responds to current geopolitical issues and the impact of Islamophobia, reflecting societal attitudes and cultural narratives. By analyzing these evolving portrayals, this study aims to illuminate the intersection of literature and cultural identity, showcasing how English literature not only mirrors historical perceptions but also contributes to ongoing dialogues about faith, culture, and belonging in a rapidly changing world. Ultimately, the article highlights the importance of literary representations in shaping public understanding of Islam and Muslims across different historical contexts. The representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has undergone significant transformation, reflecting broader cultural, social, and political changes. Historically, English literature often depicted Islam through a lens of Orientalism, with portrayals steeped in exoticism and stereotypes. However, contemporary literature has shifted towards more nuanced and multifaceted representations. In summary, the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature reflects broader cultural shifts and a growing recognition of the need for diverse and nuanced portrayals. From early Orientalist depictions to contemporary narratives that challenge stereotypes and foster dialogue, English literature continues to play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Islam and Muslims.*

Keywords: evolving representation, stereotypes, Transformation, Islamophobia, orientalism, Cultural Displacement, Western Perceptions, Translation of Islamic Texts, Quran in English, Rumi's Poetry

Introduction: The representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has undergone significant transformations from the medieval period to the present day, reflecting broader historical, cultural, and political dynamics. Initially characterized by a mix of fear, curiosity, and misunderstanding, early depictions of Muslims frequently drew upon stereotypes and exoticism, often portraying them as the "Other." (Zaman, M. Q. 2018) These early portrayals served as a backdrop for the complex interplay of cultural interactions, particularly during the Crusades, when contact between Christians and Muslims was framed through a lens of conflict and rivalry. (Malak, A. 2004)

As the Renaissance emerged, a shift began to take place. While many writers still relied on entrenched stereotypes, a burgeoning interest in the intellectual and cultural contributions of the Islamic world sparked a desire for a more nuanced understanding. (Malik, J. 2008) Works by playwrights such as William Shakespeare and poets like John Milton began to reflect this dual nature of representation, engaging with themes of love, betrayal, and power while still grappling with the prevailing prejudices of their time. (Zaidi, S. A. 2021) This marked the beginning of a more intricate dialogue between the East and the West, influencing literary depictions of Muslim characters and narratives. The modern era heralded a further evolution in representation, particularly in the wake of colonialism and globalization. (Islam, N. 1981) With the emergence of postcolonial literature, authors of Muslim heritage began to reclaim their narratives, offering perspectives that challenge monolithic portrayals and address the complexities of identity, migration, and the impact of historical trauma. Authors such as Salman Rushdie, Ahdaf Soueif, and Kamila Shamsie have explored the rich tapestry of Muslim life, presenting characters who navigate their cultural identities against the backdrop of contemporary socio-political issues. (Malcolm, D., Bairner, A., & Curry, G. 2010) In recent years, the rise of Islamophobia and geopolitical tensions has prompted a renewed examination of how Muslims are portrayed in literature. (Contemporary authors continue to confront and deconstruct stereotypes, emphasizing the diversity and richness of Islamic experiences. (Ahmed, S., & Matthes, J. 2017) By doing so, they not only provide insight into their characters' lives but also contribute to broader discussions about faith, belonging, and cultural identity in a globalized world. This article aims to elucidate the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature, examining key texts and authors across different historical periods. By analyzing these portrayals, we can better understand the cultural narratives that shape public perceptions of Islam and Muslims, highlighting the role of literature as a powerful medium for fostering empathy, understanding, and dialogue in an increasingly interconnected society. (Metcalf, B. D. 2014)

The representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has undergone a profound evolution, reflecting broader socio-political shifts and changes in cultural perspectives. Historically, English literary depictions of Islam and its adherents were deeply influenced by colonial and Orientalist frameworks, which often presented Muslims as exotic, mysterious, and fundamentally "other." These early portrayals were characterized by a lack of nuanced understanding, with Muslim characters frequently serving as mere backdrops to Western-centric narratives. (Mufti, A. R. 2010) During the colonial period, English literature often depicted Islam and Muslims through a lens of exoticism and Orientalism, perpetuating stereotypes that reinforced colonial ideologies. For example, William Shakespeare's "Othello" and the various adaptations of "The Arabian

Nights" highlighted Muslim characters and settings but often portrayed them in ways that underscored their perceived otherness and exotic nature. (Robinson, F. 1983) The translation of classical Islamic texts into English marked a significant turning point. Works such as the Quran and the poetry of Rumi became accessible to English-speaking audiences, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of Islamic culture and philosophy. These translations played a crucial role in bridging cultural gaps and challenging monolithic perceptions of Islam. The post-colonial era brought a significant shift in the literary landscape. Writers from former colonies, such as Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith, began to explore the complexities of Muslim identity, migration, and cultural hybridity. (Langah, N. T. (Ed.). 2019) Their works highlighted the intricate interplay between personal and communal identities in a globalized world, often challenging simplistic and stereotypical representations of Muslims. These narratives provided a more nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of Muslim experiences, reflecting the diversity and richness of Muslim cultures. (Lall, M. 2008) In contemporary English literature, authors like Mohsin Hamid and Leila Aboulela continue to delve into themes of cultural displacement, identity, and the Western perception of Islam. Their works contribute significantly to cross-cultural dialogues, offering empathetic and diverse representations of Muslim lives. (Aftab, A. 2019) These modern narratives emphasize the importance of understanding and empathy in a world marked by cultural and religious plurality . Moreover, contemporary English literature often addresses pressing social and political issues, such as the challenges faced by Muslim diaspora communities, interfaith relations, and the impact of global events on Muslim identities. (Sevea, I. S. 2012) By incorporating Islamic themes and characters into their stories, contemporary authors are not only challenging stereotypes but also fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of Islamic culture and history. (Zaman, M. Q. 1999) In summary, the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature reflects broader cultural shifts and a growing recognition of the need for diverse and accurate portrayals. From early Orientalist depictions to contemporary narratives that challenge misconceptions and promote dialogue, English literature continues to play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of Islam and Muslims. (Qadeer, M. 2006)

2- Literature Review:

The representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has been the subject of extensive scholarly discourse, reflecting the shifting attitudes and perceptions over time. This literature review synthesizes key themes and findings from notable works that explore the evolving narrative surrounding Islam and its adherents. (Alavi, H. 1988)

Historically, the earliest representations of Muslims in English literature can be traced back to the medieval period, particularly during the Crusades. Scholars such as Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) articulate how Western literature constructed an image of the "Orient" as exotic, barbaric, and fundamentally different from the West. Texts such as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* illustrate these themes of the "Other," showcasing Muslims through lenses of antagonism and fascination. These works often reflect the anxieties of the time and serve to reinforce Christian identities in opposition to the Islamic. (Majeed, J. 2020)

As the Renaissance unfolded, literary representations began to reflect a more nuanced engagement with Islamic culture. The writings of Shakespeare, particularly in *Othello*, highlight a complex interplay between admiration and prejudice. Critics like Ania Loomba in *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (2002) explore how Shakespeare navigates themes of race and cultural difference, revealing tensions around identity and belonging. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* also engages with Islamic ideas, albeit through an often Eurocentric lens, indicating a growing curiosity about the richness of Islamic philosophy and theology. (Hoodbhoy, P. A., & Nayyar, A. H. 1985)

The postcolonial period marks a significant shift in representation, with Muslim authors seeking to reclaim their narratives from the dominant Western discourse. The works of Salman Rushdie, especially *The Satanic Verses*, confront stereotypes and provide a critique of both cultural imperialism and Islamophobia. Critics like Homi K. Bhabha emphasize the importance of hybrid identities in postcolonial literature, showcasing how Muslim characters navigate complex cultural landscapes. Similarly, Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* intertwines personal and political narratives, exploring themes of love, cultural exchange, and the impact of colonial history on contemporary relationships. (Anas, O. 2021)

In recent years, contemporary authors have responded to the challenges posed by global events and the rise of Islamophobia. Works by authors such as Kamila Shamsie, in *Home Fire*, and Mohsin Hamid, in *Exit West*, reflect the tensions between personal identity and broader geopolitical forces. Scholars like Leila Ahmed discuss how these narratives underscore the resilience and diversity of Muslim experiences, challenging monolithic portrayals. The focus on individual stories and the exploration of shared humanity serve to humanize Muslim characters and expand the understanding of their lives in multifaceted ways. (Gilmartin, D. 1998)

Recent scholarship has increasingly adopted interdisciplinary approaches, integrating literary theory with cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and sociology to illuminate the complexities of representation. Works like *The*

Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy illustrate how philosophical perspectives can enhance literary analysis, providing deeper insights into character motivations and thematic explorations. This intersectional approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how literature shapes and is shaped by cultural discourses. (Ahmed, A. S., & Donnan, H. (Eds.). 1994)

In conclusion, the representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has evolved significantly across different historical contexts, reflecting changing societal attitudes and cultural dynamics. As literary scholarship continues to engage with these themes, it underscores the importance of diverse narratives in fostering understanding and empathy in an increasingly interconnected world. This literature review sets the stage for a deeper exploration of key texts and authors, highlighting the significant role of literature in shaping perceptions of Islam and its followers. (Chawla, M. I., & Yasmeen, R. 2019)

The representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has evolved significantly, reflecting broader socio-political changes and shifts in cultural attitudes. This literature review explores various stages of this evolution, highlighting key themes and influential works that have shaped contemporary understandings. (Saikia, Y. 2016)

Early English literature often portrayed Muslims through an Orientalist lens, emphasizing exoticism and otherness. Edward Said's seminal work "Orientalism" (1978) critically examines how Western literature and scholarship constructed the Orient as the exotic 'Other' to reinforce colonial dominance. Shakespeare's "Othello" is a notable example, where the titular character, a Moor, is depicted in a manner that underscores his foreignness and reinforces stereotypes of the mysterious and dangerous Muslim.

The translation of classical Islamic texts into English marked a crucial turning point in the representation of Islam. Texts such as the Quran and Rumi's poetry were translated and made accessible to English-speaking audiences, facilitating a deeper understanding of Islamic culture and spirituality. These translations played a pivotal role in bridging cultural gaps and challenging monolithic perceptions of Islam.

The post-colonial era brought a significant shift, with writers from former colonies exploring themes of identity, migration, and cultural hybridity. Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" and Zadie Smith's "White Teeth" are key examples that delve into the complexities of Muslim identity in a globalized world. These works challenge simplistic and stereotypical portrayals, offering more nuanced and multifaceted depictions of Muslim experiences.

Rushdie's narratives often blend magical realism with historical and contemporary issues, reflecting the hybrid nature of post-colonial identity. Smith's "White Teeth" explores the lives of British Muslim immigrants, highlighting the intergenerational conflicts and cultural negotiations faced by diaspora communities. These works emphasize the fluidity of identity and the ongoing process of cultural integration.

In recent years, contemporary authors such as Mohsin Hamid and Leila Aboulela have continued to evolve the representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature. Hamid's "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" and Aboulela's "Minaret" address themes of cultural displacement, identity, and the Western perception of Islam. These narratives contribute significantly to cross-cultural dialogues, fostering a more empathetic and diverse understanding of Muslim lives.

Hamid's "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is particularly notable for its exploration of post-9/11 identity and the challenges faced by Muslims in the West. The novel's protagonist grapples with his identity amidst rising Islamophobia, reflecting broader societal tensions. Aboulela's "Minaret" delves into the spiritual and personal journey of a Sudanese Muslim woman in London, highlighting the intersection of faith and cultural adaptation.

Modern English literature often addresses pressing social and political issues, such as the experiences of Muslim diaspora communities, interfaith relations, and the impact of global events on Muslim identities. Authors are increasingly incorporating Islamic themes and characters into their stories, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive portrayal of Islamic culture.

For instance, post-colonial and diaspora literature frequently explores themes of migration, identity, and belonging. These narratives reflect the complexities of living as a Muslim in Western societies and the ongoing negotiation of cultural and religious identities. Works by authors like Zadie Smith, Mohsin Hamid, and Leila Aboulela continue to enrich English literature with their diverse and empathetic portrayals of Muslim characters and experiences.

The representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has evolved from early Orientalist depictions to contemporary narratives that challenge stereotypes and foster cross-cultural understanding. This transformation reflects broader cultural shifts and a growing recognition of the need for diverse and nuanced portrayals. Contemporary authors play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of Islam and Muslims, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic literary landscape.

3- Research Questions:

1. How have historical contexts influenced the representation of Muslims in English literature from the medieval period to the present?
2. What role do hybrid identities play in shaping the narratives of Muslim characters in postcolonial literature?
3. What themes of belonging and alienation are prevalent in modern novels featuring Muslim protagonists, and how do these themes reflect broader societal issues?

4- Gap of Study:

Identifying gaps in the study of the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature can help to frame new research opportunities and contribute to the field. Here are some potential gaps for consideration. There is a gap in research focusing on humor and satire in representations of Islam and Muslims. Analyzing how these genres challenge stereotypes or address prejudices could reveal insights into the complexities of Muslim identities in contemporary literature. Anthologies often shape the way we understand diversity within Muslim literary representation. There is a need to study how various anthologies curate voices, selection biases, and the impact they have on the discourse surrounding Islam in literature. By addressing these gaps, future research could significantly enhance the understanding of the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature, fostering greater intercultural dialogue and awareness.

5- Purpose of Study:

The purpose of a study examining the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature can be multi-faceted, addressing various academic, social, and cultural objectives. Here are some key purposes for such a study. The study aims to analyze how the representation of Islam and Muslims has changed over time in English literature, identifying key shifts in themes, characterizations, and narrative styles. This analysis can help contextualize literature within broader historical and socio-political movements. Another purpose is to explore how significant historical events have influenced literary portrayals of Islam and Muslims. Understanding this relationship can provide insights into how societal attitudes are reflected in literary works. Through these objectives, the study of the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature aims to foster a deeper understanding of how literature reflects and shapes societal attitudes, with the potential to influence both academic discourse and public perception.

6- Research Methodology:

When conducting a study on the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature, a comprehensive and multi-method research methodology can be employed to ensure a nuanced understanding of the topic. Here's a detailed outline of potential research methodologies: To establish a theoretical framework and context for the study. Review existing literature on the representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature, including critical essays, historical analyses, and relevant sociopolitical commentaries. This will help identify existing themes and gaps in research. To gather insights on reader reception and interpretation of literary representations of Muslims. Conduct semi-structured interviews or focus groups with diverse participants (e.g., students, educators, community members). Formulate questions that explore participants' perceptions, reactions, and the influence of literature on their understanding of Islam and Muslim identities. Analyze interview transcripts to identify common themes and divergences in interpretations. This multi-faceted methodology will provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature, allowing for rich qualitative insights alongside quantitative data. The integration of various methods will ensure a robust analysis that respects and highlights the complexity of the subject matter.

7- Data Analysis:

Data analysis for a study on the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature can be approached through various methods, reflecting the diversity of the data collected. Below are some key techniques and strategies for analyzing qualitative and quantitative data resulting from the aforementioned research methodologies:

Quantify the occurrence of specific themes, character types, and narrative roles over time across a corpus of texts. Create a coding scheme that categorizes representations (e.g., positive, negative, neutral; stereotype vs. nuanced portrayal). Calculate frequencies and percentages to determine how often certain representations appear and how they evolve over different literary periods. Consider intersections with race, gender, and class in the representation of Muslims in literature. Highlight how literature serves as a tool for empathy, understanding, and challenging stereotypes. Acknowledge limitations in data collection methods, sample sizes, and potential biases in interpretation.

Suggest areas for future research, such as further exploration of specific genres, the impact of digital literature, or the representation of Muslim women in contemporary narratives. The analysis of data in this study will provide a rich, multi-dimensional understanding of how the representation of Islam and Muslims has evolved in English literature. By employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research will contribute valuable insights into the complexities of identity, narrative, and societal perception, ultimately enhancing dialogue and understanding in a multicultural world.

Creating detailed character maps to analyze the characteristics, roles, and development of Muslim characters in the texts. This will help identify patterns in how Muslim characters are portrayed over different time periods. Identifying and categorizing common stereotypes and tropes used in the depiction of Muslim characters. This includes examining whether these portrayals reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes. Using digital humanities tools (e.g., Voyant Tools) to conduct a frequency analysis of specific terms and themes related to Islam and Muslims across a large corpus of texts. This will help quantify the prevalence of certain themes and their changes over time. Conducting sentiment analysis to assess the tone and emotional content of the texts. This can provide insights into the overall sentiment towards Muslim characters and themes in different literary periods.

Analyzing survey data collected from readers to understand their perceptions of Muslim representation in literature. This includes statistical analysis of survey responses to identify common trends and attitudes. Examining responses from literary critics and scholars to gather expert opinions on the representation of Islam and Muslims. This data will be used to complement the textual analysis and provide a more informed perspective. Contextualizing the texts within their historical periods to understand the socio-political influences on their representation of Islam and Muslims. This includes examining historical events and cultural shifts that may have impacted literary portrayals. Tracing the evolution of these representations over different time periods, from early Orientalist depictions to contemporary narratives. This can provide insights into the changing perceptions and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in English literature.

Integrating insights from cultural studies to understand the broader cultural dynamics influencing literary representations. This includes examining how cultural narratives and discourses shape the portrayal of Muslims. Applying sociological theories to analyze the social and cultural contexts of the texts. This can provide a deeper understanding of the societal factors influencing literary depictions of Islam and Muslims. Integrating the findings from the qualitative and quantitative analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the

evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature. Interpreting the results to draw conclusions about the trends, challenges, and progress in the portrayal of Muslims in literature. This will involve linking the findings to the broader research questions and objectives of the study. By employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the data analysis aims to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of how the representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature has evolved over time. This comprehensive approach will help address the identified gaps in the research and contribute to a deeper understanding of the subject.

Research Conclusion:

The evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. Through critical analysis of diverse texts and contemporary narratives, this research highlights shifting stereotypes and emerging themes that challenge misconceptions while offering nuanced portrayals. Literature has the power to foster empathy and understanding, allowing diverse voices to reshape perceptions of identity and community. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of literature as a medium that not only reflects societal attitudes but also contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding Islam and Muslims in a globalized world.

Futuristic Approach:

A futuristic approach to the representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature anticipates a landscape enriched by diverse voices and innovative storytelling techniques. As global interconnectedness increases, literature will likely amplify authentic narratives that challenge stereotypes and promote intercultural dialogue. Digital platforms and multimedia storytelling will enable a broader range of experiences to be shared, making space for underrepresented perspectives. Emerging authors will draw on intersectionality, exploring how issues of race, gender, and class intersect with faith. This evolution will not only reshape cultural perceptions but also inspire empathy, understanding, and solidarity in an increasingly multicultural society. In conclusion, the evolving representation of Islam and Muslims in English literature reflects broader cultural shifts and a growing recognition of the need for diverse and nuanced portrayals. Addressing the identified gaps and challenges can contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic literary landscape that accurately reflects the multifaceted experiences of Muslims around the world.

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