

Rasselas

by
Samuel Johnson

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The Image of the Orient in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759)

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Abstract: This paper aims to study Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas: Prince of Abyssina* (1759) and how Johnson portrays the Orient. By employing the narrator and other characters like Imlac, Rasselas, and Pekuah, Johnson presents a negative image of the Arabs and the Muslims, emphasizing that they are inferiors, whereas the Westerners are superior. Johnson builds his attitude upon the concepts, stereotypes and vocabulary established by the English writers in the Christian tradition. According to Johnson, the Arabs are "sons of Ishmael": they are infidels, murderous, and terrorists, waging war against the civilized nations. Moreover, the social system is patriarchal in the Muslim and Arab life and their system of governments is unstable, despotic and cruel. In fact, Johnson has never been to any Arab or Muslim country. All he knows is merely based upon his very limited knowledge about the Arabs as a second hand from Western translations.

Key Words: Johnson, *Rasselas*, Orient, Arabs, Muslims, English Novel.

1. Introduction

English writers focus on the culture of the Orient and reveal their attitudes in their works from the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century culminating in the twenty-first century. The Arabs and the Muslims, say Shadid and Konnigsveld (2002), are presented in a negative image created by the Western media (188). The Arabs and the Muslims are aware of the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim propaganda in the Western writings and media. Halliday (1995) calls this "anti-Muslim": the hostility of the West toward Muslims presenting Islam as a religion that "encompasses racist, xenophobia and stereotypical elements" (160). In his introduction to *Covering Islam*, Said (1981) states that the "norms of rational sense are suspended when discussions of Islam are carried on" (xix).

2. Orientalists and the Orient

Said (1978) explains in *Orientalism* that the Orient described by European Orientalists is nothing but an invention of their own. The Orient has always been a place of romance inhabited by exotic beings and full of remarkable experiences and haunting memories. It is one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the other." In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe or the West as its contrasting image, idea, personality's experience" (1).

In his analysis of the attitudes of a series of writers such as Ernest Renan, Benjamin Disraeli, Louis Massingnon, H. A. R. Gibb and Bernard Lewis, Said emphasizes that these writers' reporting about the Orient is racist, ethnocentric and inaccurate. Moreover, Said (1994) states that such works as Rahpael Patai's *The Arab Mind*, David Pryce Jones's *The Closed Circle*, Bernard Lewis's *The Political Language of Islam*, Patricia Crone and Michael Cooke's *Hagarism* "can be described as being free from hostility to the Arab's collective aspiration to break out of the historical determinism developed in colonial perspective" (260). Said also describes how the American media represents Arabs and Muslims: They "only understand force; brutality and violence are part of the Arab civilization; Islam is intolerant, segregationist, 'medieval' fanatic, cruel, anti-women religion" (295).

Shadid and Konnigsveld (1994) support this negative portrayal of the Arabs and Muslims as being religiously motivated by the Christian theologians in the Near East and Islamic Spain. These religious theologians concern is to raise a barrier against any attraction of Islam for their ruling elite. Besides, they attempt to deliver convincing evidence of the superiority of Christianity to Islam (18).

Hippler and Lueg (1995) remark that the West presents Islam with a negative image.

We [the West] invent an Islam that suits us, that best fulfills our politico-psychological

needs. This is exactly how we arrive at a clean separation between 'us' and 'them' [the others], between inside and outside that are never supposed to meet and we must succeed in fencing and fortifying our own Western identity. Similarities and parallels between cultures would only disturb the image, because it would mean recognizing ourselves in the Other and blur the distinction (24).

3. Johnson's portrait of the Orient

Using his imaginative narrative, Samuel Johnson presents a portrait of the Orient in his *Rasselas: Prince of Abbyssina* (1759). By employing a narrator like Imlac, Johnson's mouthpiece, and a character like Rasselas, Prince of Abbyssina, Johnson confirms what he believes as the traits of Arabs and Muslims: "sons of Ishmael," infidels, aggressors who initiate wars, untrusted, patriarchal, ignorant, and inferior to the Europeans in knowledge and system of governments. According to Johnson, the Arabs and the Muslims have nothing to contribute to civilization.

3. 1. English writers portrait of the Orient

The Western writers in general and the English ones in particular, since the Middle Ages, have believed in the superiority of their religion and culture and the inferiority of Islamic religion, Arabic culture and Arabs in general. These writers create a tradition through a distorted vision of Islam as a false religion and Arabs as "Saracens" and infidels. Jones (1942) points that "usually writers drew on obscure or second-hand sources, and the result is a combination of a little fact and much imagination of a very biased character" (202). Jones believes that "The Medieval poet's conception of Islam was based on ecclesiastical authorities, whose interest was to disfigure beliefs and customs of the infidels" (203). In the eighteenth century English fiction, this negative portrayal is depicted in the gothic novels of William Beckford's *Vathek* and a scene with a Turkish merchant in Mary Shelley's *Frankstein* and Lady Mary Worthy Montaigne's *Letters*.

3. 2. Johnson's *Rasselas*: its origin

Johnson's *Rasselas: The Prince of Abbyssina* (1759), like most oriental works by Johnson's contemporaries, includes ideas and attitudes as the belief in the superiority of the West and the inferiority of Arabic beliefs. In fact, Johnson's knowledge about Arabs and Muslims was gathered from various translations. Johnson himself acknowledges that "many things which are false are transmitted from book to book, all gain credit in the word" (Boswell, III: 55). Johnson once tells Boswell that there are "two objects of curiosity _ the Christian world and the Mohametan world" (IV:29). Johnson's attitude toward Arabs and Muslims can be understood from his stand regarding the issue of conversion: Johnson believes that the "Christian who converts to Islam is like a person who exchanges truth for error" (20).

In his publication of an unabridged translation of *Voyage to Abbyssina* by Jesuit Father Lobo, Johnson notes:

The Portuguese traveler . . . has amused his reader with no romantic absurdities or incredible fictions; whenever he relates, whether true or not, it at least probable. . . He appears . . . to have copied nature from the life, and to have consulted his senses, not his imagination. He meets with no basilisks that destroy with their eyes; his crocodiles devour their prey without deafening the neighboring inhabitants (quoted in *History of Rasselas*, edited by D. J. Enright, 10-11).⁽¹⁾

Johnson also claims that the reader will discover in Lobo's book: "What will always be discovered by a diligent and impartial inquirer, whatever human nature is to be found, there is a mixture of vice and virtue, a contest of passion and reason" (quoted in Enright,11). Johnson requires such a work should have incredible events and fantasies. These fantasies can be found in Eastern material. In a letter on 23 March 1759, Johnson mentions that his "little story book as soon to be published." (*Letters*, 122)

3.3 *Rasselas' theme*

In his *Rasselas*, Johnson traces the character's failed quest for happiness and finds out what "is" in the world is certainly not "Right". Although this is the obvious moral of the narrative, there is at the heart of Johnson's work a critique of European exploitation of other cultures, particularly Arabic one. In the eighteenth century, a portrayal of the past figures is emphasized in order to entertain the readers.

3.4 *Rasselas' setting*

Rasselas opens with a description of the customs of Abyssina emperors who confine their sons and daughters in the Happy Valley. This valley is surrounded by mountains where is only one passage that it could be entered, an cavern which passed under rock: "The outlet of the cavern was concealed by a thick wood, and the mouth which opened into the valley was closed with gates of iron, forged by the artificers of ancient days, so massy that no man could without the help of engines, open or shut them" (*Rasselas*, 39). In this seemingly earthly paradise, "All the diversities of the world were brought together, the blessings of nature were collected, and its evils extracted and excluded" (40). All the inhabitants of this valley are satisfied except *Rasselas*.

3.5 *Rasselas' philosophy:*

Rasselas, the Abyssina prince, meditates on man and the rest of the creatures in the universe: "What makes the difference between man and the rest of the animal creation?" At the beginning, he sees his life in this Valley: "I am like him", but later he realizes that man has "some desires distinct from sense which must be satisfied before he can be happy" (*Rasselas*, 42, 43). *Rasselas* admires his intellectual powers by telling his old instructor: "I have already enjoyed too much; give me something to desire." The old instructor says, "If you had seen the miseries of the world, you would know how to value your present state." The prince answers, "You have given me something to desire; I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness" (45).

4. ***Rasselas' view of Muslims and Arabs***

During their entrance to Cairo, *Rasselas* and *Nekayah* are able to come into closer contact with nations. *Rasselas* is led at first to believe that all are happy. *Imlac* explains that in reality unhappiness is universal; people appear to be happy in order to be sociable: "We are long before we are convinced that happiness is never to be found and each believes it possessed by others" (*Rasselas* 77). In examining the life of those who are in a position of power, *Rasselas* discovers that even the position of *Bassa* of Egypt is not quite secure. In his observation over the political system, *Rasselas* notes that "at the Court of *Bassa*," the governor of Egyptian Province of the Turkish empire "has the power to extend his edicts to a whole kingdom" (90). *Rasselas'* first impression is that he is pleased to find "the joy of thousands, all made happy by wise administration." Later he finds out that all members of the government hate each other and live in "a continual succession of plots and defectors, stratagems and escapes, faction and treachery." A large number of those people, discovers *Rasselas*, are spies sent by the Turkish Sultan to surround the *Bassa* and "to watch and report" the *Bassa's* conduct (90).

Eventually, when the letters arrive at the Sultan's palace, "the *Bassa* was carried in chains to Constantinople and his name was mentioned no more" (91). *Rasselas* describes the political situation whether in the Arab provinces or in the Turkish capital of Constantinople as unstable, staggering and uncertain. Moreover, the Arab and the Muslim rulers, both the Sultan and the *Bassa*, are cruel and despotic. The result is: "In a short time, the second *Bassa* was deposed" (91). The Sultan, who had advanced him, was murdered by the Janisaries [Turkish soldiers, originally Sultan's guard] and his successor had other views and different favorites" (91).

Arabs and Muslims, according to Johnson, practice oppression: "Oppression is, in the Abyssina dominions,

neither frequent nor tolerated" (92), Imlac tells Rasselas, Like Western writers; Johnson portrays the Oriental monarch as unstable and despotic governor. The English people have the advantage of constitutional monarchy whereas the Arabs have deficiency in their governmental system: therefore, they must look for a sound and rational system such as the one used by the Westerners. According to Johnson, the English people are superior whereas the Arab and Muslim systems are inferior. The Arabs and Muslims could learn from the West; at the same time, the Westerners have to teach and help the Orientals overcome their problems: "Christianity [is] the highest perfection of humanity" (Boswell, II: 27) and "the most beneficial system" which give "light and certainty" to all mankind (Boswell, I: 455). The duty of the Europeans, particularly the English, is to rescue the Orientals from the "darkness and doubt" in which they exist. Undoubtedly, this is the imperialist spirit adopted by many European nations.

4.1. Johnson's Englishness versus the Orient

Johnson holds a low regard for the "others". The issue of the "Other" is a significant one in literature. Apparently the "Other" seems to be the opposite of the oneself. Understanding how societies and groups of people exclude and include whomever they wish is the process that allows "us" to identify the "Other". Weems (2007) states that "otherness" is present within the self as well as attached to particular bodies that get labeled and marked as "the other". During the 15th and 16th centuries, English people were thinking about "international community of Christendom" (Greenblatt, 2006, 466). The person or the groups of people who don't belong to his slogan are considered as aliens even the Jews had been excluded from this attitude.

Thus the English believe that the European or the English culture is superior to the "other", specifically Oriental culture. Johnson glorifies the West through the character of Imlac when Imlac resides for three years in Palestine. He has conferred with great number of the northern and western nations of Europe: "the nations which are now in position of all power and all knowledge; whose armies are irresistible, and whose fleets command the remotest parts of the globe." This means that the Arabs as well as the Muslims neglect "all knowledge" and they are militarily weak and cannot stand the challenge of the Western nations who have all knowledge which "will predominate over ignorance as man governs the other animals" (*Rasselas*, 65, 63). This narration about the superiority of the Western nations is associated with an image of the Arabs who are always associated with having camels. Even the most successful merchants, says Imlac, talk about trading in camels. Imlac tells Rasselas about successful business life in the Orient:

We laid our money upon camels, concealed in bales of cheap goods, and travelled to the shore of the Red Sea. When I cast my eyes on the expanse of waters, my heart bounded like that of a prisoner escaped. I felt an inextinguishable curiosity kindle in my mind, and resolved to snatch this opportunity of seeing the manners of other nations, and of learning sciences unknown in Abyssina (*Rasselas*, 57).

According to Imlac, the Arabs are "pastoral and warlike; carrying on perpetual, aimless war with mankind. They are just Bedouins moving from one place to another, and whose wealth is only flocks of camels." "Through all ages," says Imlac, "they have carried an hereditary war with all mankind (119)." Johnson's narrator, Imlac, seems to have written this after Sept. 11, 2001. The Arabs and the Muslims are viewed as terrorists. They initiate war against all nations for the sake of terrorism. This biased description is embodied in the compassion between Arabia and Persia where "Persia, with its civilization and people," impress the narrator.

The Western world views the Muslims and especially the Arabs as aggressors initiating wars. Johnson refers to the Arabs as "sons of Ishmael" (*Rasselas*, 120). This reference by Johnson reiterates the Bible's concept of the Arabs.

And the Angel of the Lord said to her [Hagar]. I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered or multitude. And the Angel of the Lord said unto her. Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son and shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man,

and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.
(*The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*; International Society Bible, 1992).

This concept of the Arabs and the Muslims trying to spread terrorism among other nations makes it necessary for all these nations to be united to confront these "terrorists".⁽²⁾ In fact, Johnson has been known as a writer committed to the cause of Christian morality. In his descriptions of the Arabs and the Muslims in *Rasselas*, he follows the biblical tradition in presenting them as cruel, aggressive and murderers. Telling Pekuah, the Arab Chief says, "My occupation is war" (*Rasselas*, 122). Johnson presents the Arabs as belligerent and through all ages, they have obtained by sword and plunder all they need to make a living. Through the characters of Imlac, who knows Arabs and their behavior, Nekaya and Pekuah, Johnson gives an account of the people, their religion and culture. These accounts are limited by second hand knowledge of their creator, Johnson himself. These characters observations and comments are no independent because they are biased by their creator.

Johnson's Imlac sees that some European nations send pilgrims to Palestine although "for many numerous and learned sects in Europe, concur to censure pilgrimage as superstitious or deride it as ridiculous." (*Rasselas*, 64). In a response to Prince Rasselas question whether the European nations are "happier than we," Imlac says that "knowledge is certainly one of the means of pleasure . . . Ignorance is mere privation" (65). Imlac also begins to enumerate the many advantages that the Europeans have comparing them with "us" [the Arabs and the Muslims]. The "other" has all the advantages which the "self" lacks: curing of wounds on their side where "we" languish and perish. They use engines for their works whereas "we" perform manually; they also have easy communication means while "we" don't. Even their possessions are more secure (65). Prince Rasselas comments by saying that they are "surely happy because they have all these conveniences." Imlac reminds Rasselas that he hasn't found happiness in the Happy Valley.

4.2. *Johnson's attitude toward Arabic poetry*

Regarding art, Imlac adventures in Arabia leaves him an impression that "poetry was considered as the highest learning and regarded with a veneration somewhat approaching to that which man would pay to the Angelic Nature" (60). In his view, not only Arabic poetry but all other nations' poetry has this quality: It is everywhere he goes. Imlac confirms that he has read the poets of Persia and Arabia: "I was desirous to add my name to this illustration fraternity. I read all the poets of Persia and Arabia, and was able to repeat by memory the volumes that suspended in the mosque of Mecca" (61). Despite his prejudiced attitudes toward Arabs, Imlac assures that he has read these pre-Islamic masterpieces of poetry known as *Mu'allaqat* displayed on the walls of Mecca. Johnson exaggerates in regard to his knowledge about these poetic masterpieces. In fact, Johnson has never been to the East or to any Arab country besides he has never learnt or spoken Arabic.

4.3. *Johnson and Arab Egyptians*

During their visit to the pyramids of Egypt, Rasselas and his companions have left Pekuah outside as she is afraid of going with them; they find out that Pekuah has been abducted by a troop of Arabs. After seven months, a messenger coming from the borders of Nubia brings the news that Pekuah is in the hands of an Arab Chief who is willing to restore her, with her two attendants for two hundred ounces of gold. The narrative emphasizes that this Arab can't be trusted, as Imlac says, and the messenger gives an insight into the Arab Chief's character: a man both "money-hungry and ruthless." Moreover, the narrative notes that Imlac isn't confident and more "doubtful of the Arab's faith who might, if he were too liberally trusted, detain at once the money and the captives" (*Rasselas*, 117). Imlac also thinks that it is dangerous to put them in the power of the Arab: Muslims are not to be trusted. For Imlac, it is the "Other". Therefore, Imlac suggests that Pekuah should be "conducted by ten horsemen to the monastery of St. Anthony"⁽³⁾ where she should be met by the same number and the ransom should be paid" (117-18). However, Imlac acknowledges that the Arab observe "the laws of hospitality with great exactness to those who put themselves into his power" (118). This contradictory attitude of praising and criticizing the Arabs reveals the narrator's confusion and his biased views.

Throughout the characters and their narratives in *Rasselas*, Johnson has presented a negative image of the Orient. When Pekuah tells of her adventures, she says of the Arabs, "I was in the hands of robbers and savages, and had no reason to suppose that their pity was more than justice, or that would forbear the gratification of any ardor of desire, or experience of cruelty" (119). This description of the Arabs is much like Mary Rowlandson's who has described the Native Indians of America when she has been captured during King Philip's War in 1675.

4.4. Johnson and Arab women

In *Rasselas*, Johnson also describes Arab women. His description is influenced by the English stereotype of Arabs as lascivious people who treat women as pleasure objects. The question is to be raised, where does Johnson get this view? Has Johnson lived sometime in the East? Has Johnson read what has been written about Arab women by Arabs and Muslims? In fact, Johnson's view is merely based upon his limited knowledge of the Arabs from Western translations. Telling her brother Prince Rasselas about her observations of many families in Egypt, Nekayah finds:

their thoughts narrow, their wishes low, their merriment often artificial. . . They were always jealous of the beauty of each other . . . Many were in love with triflers like themselves, and many fancied that they were in love when in truth they were only idle. . . Their grief, however, like their joy, was transient; everything floated in their mind unconnected with the past or future (*Rasselas*, 91).

Pekuah, however, acknowledged that she has no interest in the submissive Arab women as they spend part of their time uselessly watching the progress of light bodies that floated on the river, and part in making various forms into which clouds broke into the sky. (92)

Furthermore, Pekuah describes the Arab women with so much prejudice that they are presented as knowing nothing, just imprisoned in their homes, weaving and cooking and doing all housework: "They ran from room to room as a bird hop from wire to wire in his cage. They danced for the sake of motion, as lambs frisk in a meadow" (124). She adds: "Their business was only needle work, in which I and my maids sometimes helped them" (124). The narrator concludes that Nekayah plays with the Arab girls as with "inoffensive animals" (92). Moreover, the Arab Chief finds great satisfaction in talking to Pekuah teaching her about the stars. He finds in her company the kind of intellectual, perhaps even essential gratification that the Arab women cannot give. The narrative remarks that the Arab Chief finds himself unable to share the interests with any of his women. The Arab is also presented as someone who doesn't appreciate beauty, a man of the senses. His main interest is in the material not in the esthetic or intellectual: "But to a man like the Arab such beauty was only a flower casually plucked and carelessly thrown away" (125). The Arab and the Muslim society are described as patriarchal, paying the least attention to women. This view is stated by the character of Pekuah who talks about the Arab Chief: "When they [women] were playing about him, he looked on them with inattentive superiority" (12).

5. Conclusion

Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759) presents the negative image of the Arabs and the Muslims. Johnson's view reflects the attitude of many Western writers toward the Orient. Johnson once writes: "Christianity is the highest perfection of humanity" (Boswell, vol.2, 27). In his contrast between Christianity and Islam, Johnson remarks that "only one Religion [Christianity] can be true because the Bible displays strong foundation of righteousness with more solid evidence (Boswell, vol. 1, (398). Therefore, Johnson's attitude toward Arabs should not be viewed as shocking or disappointing. Like many attitudes of the Westerners and Americans today whether they are writers, actors or scholars, it is normal. Johnson believes that the Orient, specifically the Arabs and the Muslims, have nothing to contribute to civilization. In brief, *Rasselas* gives Johnson an opportunity to exercise his hostility and prejudice upon Arabs and Muslims. For Johnson, the Orient live in "darkness and doubt" and therefore the duty of the Europeans, especially the English, is to rescue them. Johnson's concept is similar to the Western and American

nations' concept categorizing Arabs and Muslims as "terrorists" who are declaring war against civilized nations. Contemporary Western and American policy is in accord with Johnson's eighteenth century view in *Rasselas* where he calls for the Europeans, particularly the English, to teach the "infidels" wisdom and knowledge. Moreover, today's strategy of the West led by America is to spread democracy, human rights and liberation of women even though it needs raging an irrationalized war upon those peaceful nations. Although contacts and mutual knowledge between the Arabs and the Muslims on one hand and the Westerners on the other has taken place through Crusades and the Ottomans, Johnson's view of the Arabs and the Muslims is that they are a threat to Christendom. Finally, Johnson's image of the Orient is presented in stereotyped ways.

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Notes

1. Johnson's voyage is a translation of Joachim Le Grand's 1728 version of the *Voyage* which itself a French translation of Jerome Lobo's Portuguese original Logo's *Itinerario*, relating the Jesuits travels from 1621 to 1635 beginning in the West Coast of India to Goa and after several delays ending in Ethiopia on a mission to convert Abyssinia Christians from their national church to Roman Catholicism (see Douglas, 1955, 1059-67). From the beginnings of Portuguese-Abyssinia relations, tensions rising from the cultural and religious differences shaped the churches' policies towards one another. Gold points out that the Europeans were "familiar with the runners of the isolated Christian Kingdom ruled by Prester John [who] had often speculated about Abyssinia, but the country was virtually known to Western travelers before the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century" (xxvii, see Gold's Introduction to The Yale Edition of *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 1985, vol. XV: xxvii).
2. During the Jesuits missions to Abyssinia in the 17th century, Europe was expecting the religious schism of the Reformation. The missions were ostensibly in response to initiating threat of Islamic forces surrounding Abyssinia (see Samuel Johnson's *Voyage to Abyssinia*, ed. Joel Gold. Vol. XV, 1985). Europe views the Arabs and the Muslims as hostile. This hostile attitude is still now repeated particularly after Sept. 11, 2001. According to Shadid and Koningsveld (2000), the Western media contribute to the creation of a negative image of the Muslims and Islam. Hafez, et al., ed.,(2000) note that the German scientists until recently disregarded present-day developments in the Islamic world. Most specialists and scientists specialized in Oriental and Islamic studies seldom show any initiatives to improve the relationship between East and West.
3. St. Anthony, the founder of Christian Monastism, was born in Egypt C.250 and was famous for his temptations; the monastery Der Mar Antonius is near the Red Sea.

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