Chapter 2
ORIENTALISM IN BRITISH FICTION

Edward Said says: - "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction between Orient and Occident".

The interaction between East and West took place by way of trade, travel or diplomatic relations and also through historical information. Thus in British literature we find Oriental elements. We can trace the image of Islam and Muslims appearing first in writings of John Bunyan's (1628-1688) *Pilgrim's Progress* which culminated for our purpose in E.M. Forster's (1879-1970) *A Passage to India*.

The Orient influenced England from an early period; as in eleventh century, we find the description of marvels of India in Anglo-Saxon translations of legends about Alexander the Great. Many Eastern stories reached Europe through Syria, Italy and Byzantium. Merchants and travellers also aided the transmission of this knowledge. Scholars gave to Europe translation of four great Oriental tales. Sindbad, Kalila and Dimna or the Fables of Bidpai; *Disciplina Clericalis*; and *Barlaam and Josaphat*.

Also the fall of Constantinople (1453) made the Turks appear as an increasing menace to Europe. The
Koran and the Arabian Nights both played important role in defining cultural and religious relations between the East and West. One of the earliest translation of the Koran into English was carried out by Alexander Ross (1590-1654). But the best, scholarly translation was done by George Sale (1697-1736) in 1734 and prefaced it with ‘Preliminary Discourse on the Koran’. His vast knowledge of Islam and his positive views of the Koran led him to be called ‘half-Mussulman’ in some conservative circles.

The translation of Arabian Nights in 1706, a book so different in character from any Oriental fiction then known in England and this had far-reaching influence. Since the publication of English translation of Arabian Nights English authors identified Islam with magic, fairies and jinn etc. As Hawthorne says:- “To Persia and Arabia and all the gorgeous East I owed a pilgrimage for the sake of their magic tales”.  

The magical atmosphere, rich variety of incidents, adventure, brilliant background of the Arabian Nights fascinated British writers. Also translations from the Oriental languages influenced later the poetry of Southey, Moore, Byron and others. The works of Sir William Jones had increased knowledge of the Orient. By travel and
residing in East, also by contact with Eastern people, literature and philosophy, Englishmen had came to know more of the 'inscrutable Orient'.

In British fiction, Orientalism appears at first in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). It shows his positive approach towards Islam and Muslims. *Pilgrim's Progress* centres around a dream allegory. This dream is related to the Christian way of life. It guides the reader how God's blessings could be obtained. The author with the help of many allegories, tries to present both good and bad aspects of human traits as repentance of their sins and hope of God's forgiveness in Christian value system. He has positive attitude towards Islam and appreciates the Muslims on the ground that they look upon Mohammad as their saviour. He says:

> How can you tell, but that the Turks have as good scriptures to prove their Mahomet the Saviour, as we have to prove our Jesus?, And could I think that so many ten thousands, in so many countries and kingdoms should be without the knowledge of the right way to the heaven......and that we only, who live in a corner of the earth, should alone be blessed therewith.³
Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) the great novelist is the author of *Robinson Crusoe* which was brought out in 1719. The influence of *Arabian Nights* and *Hay Bin Yakzan* (translated from Arabic by Simon Ockley) on his novel is pronounced as the Adventures of Robinson Crusoe is the subject of the novel. It shows that Crusoe, the hero of the novel while travelling to Eastern lands, is held captive by ‘Turk of Morocco’. During this captivity he suffers torture. The aim of the author is to throw light on the lack of freedom and absence of civil liberties in the Muslim society. Later a Muslim character Xury helps Crusoe in escaping from the bondage. How ironical! Crusoe’s own intolerance is however proved when Xury is deprived of reward simply because he was a non-Christian.

In his short story *In Defence of His Right*, the son of a rich person is shown to have run away from home. His parents fail to recover him and are under the impression that he was abducted by Turks. This shows that Muslims were considered heartless, devoid of all human feelings.

Eighteenth century was a golden era in the history of English literature which was greatly enriched by famous novelists. Travel became a common feature and a source
of widening the horizon of English literature. The poor image of the Muslims hitherto depicted in the English Literature began to vanish and a new realistic approach was manifested in writings. During this period, the world started coming closer thanks to rapid development in means of communication. This can be called the period of travels, voyages and wide commercial activity.

Dr. Johnson (1709-84), an outstanding figure in the field of criticism and poetry, appeared on the horizon of English literature in early eighteenth century. He is famous for narrating a large number of Oriental tales in a bewitching style. To name a few of them “Seged, Emperor of Ethiopia (Rambler 204 and 205) and History of Nouradin, son of Almamoulin”. Though pompous in diction and artificial in manner, these tales do not lack simplicity of plan, character and Oriental colouring in presenting various aspects of Johnson’s philosophy of life.

His well known work Irene (1736) reflects hostility towards Islam and Muslims. What surprises his critics most is the fact that he had before him such authentic sources as Richard Knolles’s The Turkish History (1687-1700), George Sale’s The Koran to which is prefixed a
Preliminary Discourse (1734) and Barthelemi D’Herbelot’s Bibliotheque Orientale (1776). The charge of inaccuracies against him can not be refuted. He betrays many misconceptions about Muslim beliefs and society. A glaring example of his inaccurate knowledge is that he places the Prophet’s tomb in Makka whereas it is situated in Madina.

Rasselas (1759) is another notable work of Johnson. It is a serious English Oriental tale. The tale revolves round Prince Rasselas, the fourth son of King of Abyssinia who revolts against his father as he is unable to attain his wish to govern Abysinia. He was put behind the bars in the Happy Valley but he soon realizes that the gratification of desires does not confer lasting happiness and along with his sister, he escapes to discover unhappiness. The tale is about the vanity of Human Wishes. Rasselas in Egypt found Muslims as barbaric and uncivilized and he holds Islam, their religion, responsible for it. At last, he discovers that there is no happiness in the world either. The language Johnson used is simple, clear and dignified, though sometimes pompous and the imagery reflects Johnson’s serious thoughts and views. His emphasis is on
philosophy rather on narrative, pointing to Johnson's mature and serious outlook.

Tabias Smollet (1721-71) does not hold a favourable view about Muslims and that is reflected in his *The Adventure of Ferdinand Count Fattron*, in which he portrays an evil-minded Jewish character who is outwardly kind to others. It appears that here the novelist aims at attacking Muslims and the Muslim culture. In his another work *The expedition of Humphrey Clinker*, he compares the sublimity and grandeur of London to the enchantments of Oriental places.

William Beckford's (1759-1844) *History of Caliph Vathek* holds a unique place amid Oriental tales. It is about the conflict of opinion between two Muslim groups—Sunnis and Mutizilites on the origin of the Quran. Caliph Vathek was on the side of Mutizilites. Vathek indirectly attacks Islam on the ground that different sects of Islam are fighting against each other. The controversy among Muslims is an irrefutable proof that Islam preaches falsehood. *Vathek* is a story 'of a journey of Caliph Vathek to the Hall of Eblis or Hell spurred on by his unquenchable thirst to discover the unknown'.
Vathek's ambition to discover the unknown and his lust for its fulfillment leads him to the path of evil being led by Giaour, an agent of evil. He finally takes him to his doom i.e. hell. Vathek is entitled to live for one remarkable scene – Hall of Eblis. Beckford’s conception of Hell and Satan shows a Western mind bearing no resemblance to Islamic description of Hell in the Koran with its halls and galleries, ‘long curtains brocaded with crimson and gold’, ‘choirs and dances’, ‘gleam brightening through the drapery, and ‘chambers’.6

Also his portrait of Eblis (Satan) is similar to Milton’s Satan in grandeur and sublimity and is contrary to Islamic texts, where he is shown as man’s inveterate enemy, personification of evil, showing evil paths to follow, a pathetic tragic figure who arouses a feeling of terror and pity. His Eblis is a faint replica of Milton’s Satan-‘the fallen Archangel enthroned upon the globe of fire’, in his large eyes appeared both pride and despair, his flowing hair retained to some resemblance that of an angel of light and on his hand he held iron scepter, power to tremble7.

Beckford correctly places Oriental characters in accurate Oriental surroundings. We find his main characters drawn from the Orient and his use of Oriental names shows that the story is about the Orient, its culture,
customs and way of life. Also he presents an image of Oriental beauty ‘Nourunihar’ who provided companionship in Vathek’s journey to the Hall of Eblis.

The author has used in abundance Oriental allusions, names, imagery with a clear and striking style, which is lucid, crisp and witty. His description of sensuous beauty-colour, form, melody along with repulsive mockery but one defect is that of the lack of characterization. The hero of the novel is a cruel, ambitious individual who fails to arouse tragic pity or terror. Nonetheless Vathek is fantastic in plot and brilliant in colouring, witty and satirical marked with a moralizing spirit.

The popularity of Oriental fiction lies in its romantic character. Against pseudo-classicism, these Oriental tales brought into grey and colourless life of Augustan England, marvels of Oriental legend, something of magical atmosphere and glamour of East, which show love of adventure and mystery, the desire to escape to the mysterious East, longing for the picturesque colouring, magical atmosphere and strangeness. The movement known in literary history as the Romantic Movement or Romantic Revival in England shows that Orientalism and
pseudo-Orientalism of Eighteenth century precluded
Oriental material that had been used by writers.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) is a novelist of the
Romantic age. His work shows the influence of Maria
Edgeworth (1786-1800). He felt drawn towards the Orient.
In his four novels, we find him talking about Islam- The
Surgeon's Daughter 1827, Ivanho 1819, the Betrothed
1824 and the Talisman or the Tales of the Crusades 1825
Ivanhoe's, and the theme is the conflict between Saxons
and Normans as well as the Christian prejudice against
Jews. The Betrothed defines the role of Church in
persuading Christians to fight their enemies ie Muslims.
The author harbours great enmity towards the Muslims
and brands them as outcasts devoid of any virtue. The
Talisman deals mainly with Islam and Muslims. Salauddin
Ayubi (c 1138-93) founder of Ayubite dynasty being the
central character is an embodiment of malice and
haughtiness. Islam is blamed for all his weaknesses and
he is shown instructing his followers in violence. Towards
the end he is shown repenting his misdeeds. He begs King
Richard to convert him to Christianity and his behaviour
led the whole Muslim community to denounce Islam. For
Scott the teachings and beliefs of Islam are false. There are some errors in the novel regarding Prophet's tomb in Makkah and Prophet is referred to with his misnomer as Mahoud. In *The Surgeons Daughter*, he talks about Muslims customary salutation not offered to Christians. "And if non-muslims offer them Salaam to greet, they should respond 'Wa alaykum or And Upon thee! According to Ayesha once a group of Jews visited the Prophet and greeted Prophet as "Samu Alay ka" ie Death be upon you, instead of "Salam Allay ka" ie (Peace be upon you). The Prophet could easily see through what they had said and replied 'Wa Allay Kum' ie And Upon you. Scott is biased towards Christianity and fails to appreciate the Muslim custom of greeting. One serious mistake of Scott is to speak of Fatima, daughter of Prophet as his wife in the novel under discussion.

Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). The well-known politician was a novelist too. His Jewish beliefs are reflected in *Tancard*. His views of imperialist policy of British power as ruling race was supported by Kinglake, Burton, Warburton, Doughty and Palgrave. In *Tancard* or *The New Crusade* (1847) we come across a Protestant
Tancard who visits to Jerusalem to ponder over religious and social matters. In *The Wonderous Tales of Alvoy*, he attacks Islam claiming that its teachings are false. Mary Lamb’s *The Young Mahometan*, included in Mrs. Leicester school (1809), we meet an ailing girl who is physically cured by the doctor and comforted by his wife who explains her that Muslims are ignorant people who believe in an impostor. This relieves the girl of illness and anxiety. Here also we find a negative picture of Muslims.

Thomas Hope – (1820) *Anastasius* is one of the great novels dealing with the subject of Orientalism. The hero is captured and forced to embrace Islam and made to serve in a harem. James Morier- (1824) *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* and *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan in England* (1828) presents Islam as full of deceit and falsehood, the Prophet as impostor and Muslims as hypocrites. His other novels as *Zohrab the hostage* 1832 and *Ayesha, the Maid of Kars* 1834 show Oriental colouring with pictures of battle, harem, conspiracies and moral degradation of Muslim life and culture. Morrier was hostile towards Islam and in his novels we get Muslim characters devoid of nobility. He observes:-
It has been remarked that the principles which
curate
them are not likely to be produced by the doctrines
Of the Koran but there is often an excellence in the
human nature which supersedes false religion, and
acts as if were guided by the true one.\(^8\)

Victorian period marked an increase in the Oriental
movement owing to travels to the East. In this age novel
acquired its modified form, which may be seen in the
novels of Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray, Butler and Meredith.

William Mackepeace Thackeray (1811-63) Though he
wrote number of novels, yet his comments on Islam and
Muslims are few as in Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to
Grand Cairo (1846),\(^9\) he comments on Islam ‘as it is
associated with the end of Ottoman rule.’ About Crusades
he says that Islam will last only as long as the Ottoman
empire is not dismembered. His Vanity Fair testifies to his
fondness for Oriental tales. As in chapter III of this novel
he says:-

She (Becky) had a vivid imagination, she had,
besides, read the Arabian Nights and Guthrie’s
Geography.
Charles Kingsley (1819-75) compares Islam with communism and is prejudiced against Islam. His preference for communism is evident in his novel, *Yeast* 1848. George Meredith (1828-1909) was highly influenced by the *Arabian Nights*. That is why in his novel *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856) we note the Oriental atmosphere of magic and comments on the deception of Islam and Muslims.

Thomas Hood’s *A tale of the Harem* (1828) depicts Islam and the Muslims in negative light. He is specifically critical of the harem life. This is the story of an Italian lady held captive in the harem. The Italian singer making use of his musical talent rescue the lady from the captivity. This novel therefore points to such evil aspect of Muslim life as sexual licentiousness in exploiting their helpless fellow beings especially women.

Wilfred Scarven Blunt (1840-1922) in *The Future of Islam*, shows as it a positive force capable of making valuable contributions to human knowledge. He wanted West to help Arab Nationalist movement against the Ottomans. ‘The Caliphate no longer an Empire’ but an independent sovereign and must be under the British
control guaranteeing its political existence, undisturbed by aggression of Europe.\textsuperscript{10}

R.L. Stevenson's (1850-1894) interest in the Orient developed after reading \textit{Arabian Nights} and this attraction and influence urged him to produce \textit{The New Arabian Nights}, being the continuation of \textit{Arabian Nights}. In his description of Islam and Muslims, his mind is free from prejudice. George Gissing's (1857-1903) writings indicate that he was influenced by European thought on Islam and Muslims. In one of his letters\textsuperscript{11}, we find him criticizing Muslims as uncivilized people, lacking in manners and morals. That is why he wanted that Muslim land should be occupied by Europeans. In another letter, he expresses the hope that Muslim rule in Constantinople would be replaced by Europeans. Samuel Butler's (1853-1902) \textit{Ere-Whon} 1872 and \textit{The Way of All Flesh} 1903 are his famous works. Generally his novels do not deal with Islam or Muslims yet in one of his note books, he speaks about Muslims and remarks that they are uncivilized, unwise and ill-mannered. He also attacks polygamy among Muslims.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) is one of the well known novelists. His main drawback is that he had no authentic
knowledge either of Islam or of Muslims. He had access only to secondary sources. In his novel *An Outcast of the Island* 1896, he portrays a Muslim character, Omar as inflexible and deceitful, devoid of any noble virtues. Though physically blind, he is depicted as a thief. Another Muslim character is shown in indulging in idolatry. On the whole his portrayal of Muslims is not positive because according to him the reason for the failure of Islam lies that it is based on the concepts of hypocrisy, falsehood and bigotry. In another novel *Lord Jim* (1900) he presents the character of Ali as narrow-minded and violent. He also describes the pilgrims going to perform Haj ceremony with the help of Europeans. This been done to show the supremacy of Europeans over Muslims. It was according to him an irony of fate that the group of pilgrims is led by those whom the Muslims call atheists or disbelievers. In *Almayer Folly* (1895) the character of Abdullah is projected as totally worthless. He prefers the life to come to the present life but he is so heartless that he, inspite of being affluent does not help even his needy servants. Actually charity is a word not to be found in his dictionary. Thus we note a negative picture of Islam in Conrad’s novels.
John Buchan (1875-1940) in his novels presents some Oriental material. He says in his novel *Green Mantle* that fate should not be relied upon, efforts should be made instead. But according to Islamic faith, one should believe in fate and Allah tells the disbelievers that “then it is only a part of the Book that ye believe in and do ye reject the rest. No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a book before we bring it into existence.”^{12} What is emphasized is that everything has its own time, place and occasion. His novel *Green Mantle* is set in an Orient land i.e. Ottoman Turkey during World War II. The title of the novel itself indicates the reference to Islam because according to Muslim belief green colour is predominant in Paradise. In *A Prince of Captivity*^{13}, he advises people not to develop friendship with Muslims, for friendship with them ends in shame and frustration.

The continuity of British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century is reflected in the writings of Hardy. The empire became a principal subject of attention in writers like Haggard, Kipling and Conrad.

Kipling’s novel *Kim* is a major contribution to the Orientalized India. He carefully differentiates the religion and background of Muslims and Hindus. His India has a
quality of permanence and inevitability with its history, administrators and the process of imperialism. Published in 1901, this novel occupies a special place in the development of English novel and Victorian society. The division between the whites and the non-whites in India and elsewhere is analysed throughout the novel. Kipling’s view rejects the notion of Orientalists in India, who were of the opinion that India should be ruled according to the Oriental Indian modes.

Carlyle and Ruskin smack of racial prejudice in the nineteenth century in speaking of the superiority of the white race to rule the world, as England was ‘The King of the globe’.

This brief account may be concluded with reference to E.M. Forster (1879-1970), famous modern critic and novelist of the twentieth century. Amongst his novels, the most popular and widely read is A Passage to India (1924) set in the early twentieth century British India, this novel deals with a wide range of issues of the day, including the plight of Muslims and Hindu-Muslim conflict along with the depiction of Indian society. Forster intended to bridge the gulf- between India and Britain.
The crux of the novel is the encounter between English colonials and Indians. Forster is nearer to Islam than Hinduism in describing the Muslim character of Dr. Aziz, one of the major and important characters in the novel, as sentimental, especially in view of his inability to engage in social relations and his yearning for the past glory of Muslims. Forster divides the structure of the novel in three sections—Mosque, Cave and Temple. It deals with cross-cultural conflicts of the day concerning the relationship and gaps which existed between East and West. He also uses the religion of India as well as geography of the country to structure the novel. In the 'Mosque' section, he uses Islam to suggest that successful bridges can be achieved for Islam provides an apparent sense of social order and stability. It means peace and sublime simplicity. He was moved by the Islamic tenet that "there is no God but God and that Mohammad is the Prophet of God". This is the message that Forster found enshrined within the mosque. His interpretation of Islam is selective, gleaned not from the Quran but from the evocation of spiritual feeling by the mosque architecture. His understanding of Islam is derived in part from the structural features of the mosque, because its structure suggests the omniscience of God. Muslims are depicted as
possessing the values of activity, masculinity and forcefulness; they appear as capable and full of resources.

Edward Thompson in *The Other Side of the Medal* says that Indians see British through the experience of British brutality during the mutiny of 1857. Hence he asks for a new Orientation in the histories of India. He admires the paramount importance of culture in consolidating imperial feeling, Edward Thompson's *Indian Day* (1927) portrays Indian predicament and is critical of British Imperialism.

The British narrative figures several persistent tropes through which Indians are figured. Two examples from the twentieth century illustrate how the configuration serve a Orientalist function of constructing culturally different to signify British culture as central and stable. Sir Andrew H. L. Fraser in *Among Rajah and Ryots*, writes of his acquaintance with Indian people praising them for their simple, trusting behaviour whether India is figured as a primitive culture to be civilized or as inferior culture to be protected; both representations of India refer to and signify necessary roles of the British as the saviour and guardian. He writes:

> The simplicity of the country people, their
confidence in the officers whom they learned to trust, their patient endurance of the severest trials, and their deep gratitude for all that was done for them, made an impression on our minds which will never be effaced.\textsuperscript{15}

The British presence in India produced over a century and a half of the Orientalist literature including journals, letters, novels, stories. This literature arose from the circumstances of British rule and administration which had placed British soldiers, missionaries and civil service officers in India representing and developing British – India relations. From Lady Mary Wortley, Montagu’s \textit{Turkish Embassy Letters} to Forster’s \textit{A Passage to India} there are expressions of this complex plurality.

Much of the British literature about India documents the experiences of authors who lived as Anglo-Indians and portrays situations of authors’ lifetimes. As \textit{A Real Life City} (1888) of Rudyard Kipling represents British imperial position with regard to India.

British power came to India in the eighteenth century by defeating Mughals, their economic control over people through rigorous anglicization of Indian landlords and merchant classes with administration and educational
system imposed by the British. After 1857 mutiny, British redirected these efforts and paid attention to the traditional Indian system of caste and privilege. There arose what Francis Hutchins called “attempted Orientalization of British rule Presuming” that Indians could not be changed and the superiority of British character presented no obstacles to understanding of Indians”. This policy advocated separation and hierarchization of Indians and Britishers. It was through a British notion of Indianization that the British hegemony was maintained during later half of the century. In twentieth century it was Indian identification of ‘Indian’ and power to unify diverse Indians that enabled them to achieve independence as a nation.

As twentieth century moves to a close, there has been a gathering awareness of the lines between cultures, the divisions and differences that allow us to distinguish one culture from another.
REFERENCES


2. G.E. Woodbery, Nathiel Hawthorne in the American Men of Letters Series (Boston and New York, 1902), p.54


6. Ibid., pp.110 and 115.

7. Ibid., p.92.


16. Ibid., p.117