

## 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 Abyssinia* (1759) and how Johnson portrays the Orient. By employing the narrator and other characters like Imbec, Rasselas, and Pekuah, Johnson presents a negative image of the Arabs and the Muslims, emphasizing that they are inferior, 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, monstrous, and treacherous, 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, despotically 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 Shaful and Krennigeveld (2007), 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. Shaful (1997) calls this "anti-Muslim": the hostility of the West toward Muslims presenting Islam as a religion that "uncompromising racism, xenophobia and stereotypical elements" (140). In his introduction to *Covering Islam*, Said (1981) states that the "scene of national wars 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 Montagu, H. A. R. Giles 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 Rudyard Kipling's *The Arab of the Desert*, David Pryor Jones's *The Closed Circle*, Bernard Lewis's *The Political Language of Islam*, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's *Discovering the Sources of Islamic History* "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" (200). 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, xenophobic, 'medieval' fanatic, cruel, anti-woman religion" (201).

Shaful and Krennigeveld (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).

Hopfler and Long (1997) remark that the West presents Islam with a negative image:

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

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