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Foreword

Claire Chambers

In discussions of migrant literature, questions of faith and religious identity have until recently tended to be subsumed under such categories as ethnicity, nationality, hybridity, and "race." Rae Isles, a character who lectures on Middle Eastern politics in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*, argues that "Even Fanon, who I have always admired, had no insight into the religious feelings of the North Africans he wrote about" (109). In his 1959 essay "Algeria Unveiled," discussed in Munia Bhaumik's illuminating chapter for this volume, Frantz Fanon anticipates by almost three decades Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's famous idea of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (296). Against the Algerian backdrop, as Bhaumik suggests, saving discourse (Cilano 157) allows French colonizers to dismiss Islam as "a repressive, dehumanizing religion for women" (see p. 000 of this volume). By contrast, Fanon explores the *haïk* or veil's subversive aspects of secrecy and concealment. He also debates modest Muslim dress functioning as a type of uniform (36; see also Aboulela, *Minaret* 186); what we might term, adapting Mahmoud Darwish, the "absent presence" of the covered subject; and the issue of the gaze, provocatively raised for the colonizer when confronted by the Algerian woman "who sees without being seen" (Fanon 44). Yet, as Rae states, Fanon does little to shed light on any of the reasons, other than nationalist resistance, that lead Maghrebi women to wear the *haïk*. When Islam or religion is mentioned in his essay, it is construed as the false attribution by "Islam specialists," or other colonizers, of an irrational belief system to those peoples they keep in subjection (Fanon 64; see also 41). Fanon was not Muslim, nor indeed was he religious in any orthodox sense (Settler 6). Through her character Rae, Aboulela suggests that the theorist underestimates the power of religion in his adopted home of Algeria and in Africa more broadly.

Of postcolonial theory's foundational thinkers, Edward W. Said provides by far the most substantial contribution on Muslims and religion more broadly. Said's engagement with Islam is still timely and urgent. This is because although the crisis points and key players have altered since the publication of his groundbreaking book *Covering Islam* in 1981, unfortunately little has changed in relation to negative representations

of Muslims. In his 1997 introduction to the second edition of *Covering Islam*, Said avers, "the term 'Islam' as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam" (1). This comment has been inspiring for my own work and that of the field of "Muslim writing" more broadly. In my first book *British Muslim Fictions*, I took up Said's identification of Islam as "part fiction," discussing the extent to which the terms "British Muslim" or "Muslim fiction" are illusory. Following *Covering Islam*'s lead, I also argued that many mainstream writers' and journalists' depictions of Muslims might themselves be viewed as types of fiction. Similarly, in their virtuosic cultural studies book *Framing Muslims*, Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin note the importance of Said's contribution to the field, observing that his research "allows us to think about the limited and limiting conceptual framework surrounding Islam in public discourse" (20).

Said's concept of "secular criticism" is notable for its resistance to all dogma as well as to totalizing political systems. In *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, he makes a plea for a socially engaged, "worldly" critical outlook in the face of the esotericism of early-1980s poststructuralism. Said appears particularly concerned that academics recognize the extent to which classic texts from the Western "canon" (note the Christian diction) were shaped by what in his previous book (1979) he termed Orientalism:

> The Orient and Islam [...] stood for the ultimate alienation from and opposition to Europe, the European tradition of Christian Latinity, as well as to the putative authority of ecclesia, humanistic learning, and cultural community. For centuries Turkey and Islam hung over Europe like a gigantic composite monster, seeming to threaten Europe with destruction.
>
> (Said, *World* 6)

These Others of Turkey and Islam have, he argues, been silenced, excluded, or "domesticated" by Western scholarship (12). Said famously establishes a distinction between filiation—pre-ordained relationships such as those between families and clans—as compared with affiliation, the more active creation of connections based on shared values (*World* 16–20). He seems to value affiliation above filiation but then complicates this hierarchy by arguing that apparently radical affiliation can end up being as hidebound and conservative as the filiation it seeks to replace. If "social affiliation" is viewed as a secular phenomenon and "instinctual filiation" linked with religion (24), Said is careful to delineate the ambivalence inherent in this binary opposition. Yet ultimately he positions literary criticism as a secular pursuit: it should be skeptical, self-reflexive, and self-critical, without misconstruing its own enterprise

as objective or value-neutral. The keyword he links to criticism other than "secular" is "oppositional," and he calls for a critical consciousness that is resistant and suspicious of "totalizing concepts, […] reified objects, […] guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind" (29). ~~Interestingly,~~ he recognizes the potential coerciveness of secular criticism by highlighting the possibility of its becoming just another kind of doctrine. He also examines the Qur'an sympathetically as a text believed by Muslims to be the direct and unmediated word of God and positions Islam as a religion that "gives its adherents genuine nourishment" (276). Finally, he gestures toward the durable existence of religion, notwithstanding Enlightenment and ~~Marxian~~ assumptions that it would wither away. As Gauri Viswanathan points out, Said "was often tacitly aware of, without ever quite overtly acknowledging, the densely packed meanings in the word 'religion' itself, covering over a history that included both orthodox and heterodox elements" (44).

Compared to Said, the other two members of postcolonialism's "Holy Trinity" (Young 154), Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, have less to say about this subject. Spivak makes only one direct mention of Islam in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, the last book she wrote before the World Trade Center attacks. This passing reference is a harbinger of future global geopolitics, though, for she evokes "Islamist, Hindu, or yet ethnic nationalisms that, often exacerbated by racist misapprehensions, cannot bode well" (96). However, in her subsequent work Spivak directly tackles the War on Terror and its ethical consequences. "Terror: A Speech After 9/11," published in 2004, begins with an outline of the already existing responses to the World Trade attacks and their aftermath. Spivak poses the central research question of what an ideal reaction would look like "in the face of the impossibility of response" 81). As well as dealing with the self versus the other, she employs plural pronouns to challenge George W. Bush and others, whom she characterizes as constantly "us-and-them-ing" (87). Spivak maintains that global subjects need humanities training in imagining the other's point of view. She advocates the difficult but crucial task of "listen[ing] to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit" (83). This other includes the Islamist suicide bomber, whose motivations she controversially explores but does not endorse. Spivak claims that without at least attempting to understand the other's rationale for his actions, all our juridical and political work will prove futile and impermanent.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha briefly, and seemingly reluctantly, alludes to Islam and Muslims. He does so in the chapter "How Newness Enters the World," where it is unavoidable given the topic of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. In his broader work, Bhabha's theorization of hybridity, as Spivak suggests, when celebrated unquestioningly by his followers, can "inadvertently legitimize[…] the 'pure' by reversal" (*Critique* 65). Without forestalling Esra Mirze Santesso's agenda-setting

introduction to this volume, this warning against too uncritical an acceptance of hybridity is especially salient in the context of Islam and postcoloniality. It is ~~important~~ to recognize that the distinction that many commentators assume exists between a chutnified, impure, mongrelized literature and the pure, austere religion of Islam—which Salman Rushdie and others suggest is the enemy of the imagination—is fallacious. In fact, the Muslim religion, far from being opposed to narratives (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 415–29), is in fact replete with them, whether stories that derive from the Qur'an and Sunna (life of the Prophet), or *hadiths* (sayings about the ways and deeds of Mohammed).

Despite postcolonial theory's relative neglect of Islam, during the last dozen years or so, increasing numbers of scholars are following Amin Malak's suggestion that this lacuna may be due to high theory's unwitting valorization of "a secular, Euro-American stance" (17). Muslim literary criticism constitutes a young but burgeoning field of enquiry. Perhaps the earliest work in this area was Byron Porter Smith's *Islam in English Literature* (1939). Porter Smith traced how the English literature of such authors as Shakespeare, Dryden, and Milton was affected by encounters with Islam. In recent years, however, a group of critics has emerged who train their critical gaze in the opposite direction, analyzing the impact of time spent in the diaspora on Muslim writers. Malak's *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (2005) laid the intellectual foundations for those of us working in the field of Muslim writing. His monograph incorporated a relatively broad temporal sweep and encompassed Anglophone literary production by Muslims around the globe. Working together and independently, Rehana Ahmed, Amina Yaqin, and Peter Morey have also produced important work in this area. Their *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing* was a path-breaking edited collection, while Morey and Yaqin produced the aforementioned *Framing Muslims*, and Ahmed recently published the most detailed and scholarly volume on South Asian Muslim writing in Britain to date, *Writing British Muslims*. Geoffrey P. Nash has long been working in this and related areas, and two of his books deserve special mention, *Writing Muslim Identity* ~~(2012)~~ and the co-edited collection *Postcolonialism and Islam*. It is exciting to see him publishing (with Nath Aldalala'a) a new chapter in the present collection. From the United States, Waïl Hassan's *Immigrant Narratives* and co-editor of this book Esra Mirze Santesso's *Disorientation* are incisive studies, while Alaa Alghamdi, a young scholar based in the Middle East, published *Transformations of the Liminal Self* in 2011.

Now we have this volume, *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse*, edited by Esra Mirze Santesso and James McClung. It is encouraging to see an edited collection on Muslim art now coming out of the United States, especially such a high-caliber volume. The book takes the common thread of postcolonial literary output's relationship with Islam and offers work

of a high quality and originality. There is a wide geographical spread in the book as a whole, and the inclusion of Algeria and Senegal (both Francophone former colonies) in Vincent van Bever Donker's and Munia Bhaumik's chapters is significant. Some strengths of the manuscript are its opportune and urgent nature, the broad and intelligent coverage, and the line-up of impressive scholars from around the world.

It seems to me that the book offers five significant benefits; first, the emphasis on gender is judicious and well-executed. Second, the volume considers not only the work of authors of Muslim heritage, but also of non-Muslim artists or scholars such as Amitav Ghosh, Frantz Fanon, and Hindu/Parsi cinematic auteurs. Next, the manuscript is interdisciplinary, with fascinating essays on Islamophobia, film, transnational feminism, theatre, and theory as well as straightforward literary texts. The fourth advantage of this volume is its cross-period scope, for it includes essays on medieval and Renaissance representations of Islam and Muslims. Finally, I applaud the fact that the collection is multilingual, with plenty of English-language texts discussed, but also books in translation from Arabic (Naguib Mahfouz, Nawal El Saadawi, Rajaa Alsanea), French (Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Frantz Fanon), and Hindi/Urdu (Indian cinema). The emerging field of Muslim literary studies is already producing far-sighted work on texts by authors from Muslim backgrounds. However, too often this academic oeuvre assumes that the literature is a contemporary and Anglophone phenomenon. This book does much to contest such assumptions.

To conclude, over the last two decades or so, many Muslim and non-Muslim creative artists have taken Islam as their subject. Some of them have managed to do this without shirking evaluation of the social problems the religion has accreted while simultaneously maintaining a gradated sense of the Muslim community's multi-faceted nature. Academics are also increasingly scrutinizing this body of artistic work. As part of this critical movement, *Islam and Postcolonial Discourse* is a collection to welcome onto the world stage of Muslim literary studies.

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