**Reading Representations/Representing Self: The Cultural Politics of Islam**

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**Books reviewed:**

**Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representations After 9/11**

Evelyn Alsultany (New York, NY: New York University Press), xii+227 pp., ISBN 978081470732

**Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press**

Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos and Tony McEnery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xi+280 pp., ISBN 9781107008823

**Political and Cultural Representations of Muslims: Islam in the Plural**

Christopher Flood, Stephen Hutchings, Galina Miazhevich and Henri Nickels (eds.)(Leiden: Brill, 2012), ix+221 pp., ISBN 9789004231023

**Reading Representations/Representing Self: The Cultural Politics of Islam**

It has become commonplace to begin a commentary on the representation of Islam with a discussion of 9/11, and the texts under review here are no exception to this. This is hardly surprising when we consider the impact of the event on our collective psyche. Since the attacks many pages have been given over to dissecting the myriad ways in which media discourses work to fuel pre-existing western fears about Islam and Muslims. Such analyses are important because they offer a way to understand how even outwardly neutral representations come loaded with values about the ‘right’ way to live.

All three texts under review in this essay take a slightly different approach to deconstructing media accounts of Islamic/non-Islamic relations since 9/11. Using a corpus-linguistic textual analysis of the British press, in *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes*, Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos and Tony McEnery provide a detailed examination of how Muslims have been discursively constructed within an overwhelmingly negative ideological framework within an eleven year period from just before the 9/11 attacks took place (1998-2009). Moving beyond this particularised analysis of press discourses in the UK, in *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, Evelyn Alsultany refers to a broader selection of media output in the United States in order to ponder the disconnect between what she terms sympathetic representations of Muslims in television shows like *Law and Order* and *24*, and progressively punitive immigration legislation coupled with the increase in hate crimes against Muslims. Finally, the essays presented in the edited volume by Christopher Flood, Stephen Hutchings, Galina Miazhevich and Henri Nickels, interrogate the often one-dimensional socio-political accounts of ‘Muslimness’ found in media and political narratives and challenge such views by offering alternative – Muslim-centred – perspectives. Taken together these volumes provide a rich and nuanced account of the political and cultural discourses of Islam in an era defined by global uncertainty.

The socio-political context for the texts, and the thread that links them together, can be found in the homogenising narratives about Muslimness and Islam that have flourished against the context of transnational migration and global (in)security at the turn of the twenty-first century. Against this setting there has been a propagation of political and cultural constructions of ‘Islam as threat’ spreading through public sphere discourses in states purportedly secure in their ontological position. Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*(1997) thesis originally brought this argument to the fore when he spoke about the spread of local and global antagonisms after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Here, he argued that the collapse of the old political order had led to a world being redrawn along religious-cultural boundaries. At this juncture so-called Islamic states began to dominate the new socio-political scene. In one of the most canonical text on the representations of Islam, Said (1997) argued that such discursive reconstructions of Islam work to reaffirm the dominance of western hegemonic constructions of truth against any efforts to prioritise non-western systems of thought. In this regard (the universalised form of) Islam is considered a challenge to neo-liberal democracy. In the same way that an Anglo-American version of neo-liberalism has become a convenient container for western democracy, the multiple social, political and religious beliefs and practices within Islam are reconstructed as *un*-democratic. All of the books under review here suggest that this problematic system of representation continues to propagate in popular cultural and political discourse across Europe and North America, albeit hidden beneath a veneer of liberal tolerance.

Certainly the British press have already come under much academic scrutiny for taking precisely this approach to stories on Islam. From relatively early texts such as Poole’s *Reporting Islam*(2002)to more recent offerings from Petley and Richardson (2011), the focus has been on uncovering the way in which media reporting in the UK operates within a dominant discursive framework that is fundamentally Islamophobic. Such representations, authors argue, unfairly tarnish Muslims with negative associations, for example the War on Terror, misogyny and fanaticism, and in doing so, operate a homogenising discourse of Islamic otherness. In essence Baker *et al.* offer little to further this common reading, ultimately agreeing that, as a whole, the British press present a distorted view of Islam and Muslims that can work to the detriment of community relations. But what they do add to the existing literature is significant empirical evidence to substantiate such accusations of bias in the British print media. They do so by combining the aforementioned corpus-linguistic analysis with a more traditional critical discourse analysis to provide a sometimes overwhelming range of debates. Using data analysis software (Sketch Engine) in the initial stages to establish the frequency of words and phrases from over 200,000 newspaper articles across all of the newspapers that make up the British national press (a total of over 140 million words), and then again in the later stages to test hypotheses derived from the critical discourse analysis, the authors set out to ascertain the body of language relating to the topic of Muslims/Islam. Here, Baker *et al*. explain that ‘the larger and more well-balanced the corpus, the more confident the researcher can be that any findings can be extrapolated to that particular language variety as a whole’ (p. 25). In other words the more often you find that Muslims are presented within a particular discursive framework, the surer you can be that this reflects attitudes within the public sphere. This is an important point to note because it is of course true that many previous studies have been based on a privileged selection of material, for example a small range of broadsheet or tabloid newspapers and/or within a limited timeframe. While this is often a necessary evil for time and cash poor researchers, it does perhaps overlook the potential range of discourses within news organisations.

What is interesting in this analysis is that, while taken as a whole, the data shows that the press in the UK operates a familiar pattern of discursive othering, broken down it reveals a more nuanced picture. For example an analysis of the corpus reveals, unsurprisingly, that over the eleven year period in question Muslims are most often framed in terms of conflict. However, it also shows that conflict is framed differently – either sympathetically or with hostility – depending on the wider social context, the actors presented in the text, the political bias of the newspaper, and so on.

Alsultany’s work provides a similar level of refinement in that she argues, like Islam, media discourses cannot be treated as a homogenous entity. Instead of simply examining news media and political discourse as representative of the range of debates being held about Arabs and Muslims in America, she considers a broader selection of media. In doing so she recognises that discourse is not just about hard news, but is also about the multiple and complex array of voices that contribute to any given debate. This is an important turn in the scholarly material on Muslims if you consider that a popular television series will gain many more viewers than a typical current affairs news programme. To illustrate this point, at its height the popular television series *24*had between 12 and 14 million viewers per episode (not including box set, international or repeat viewings), against the most popular national cable channel, *Fox*, which has on average 1-2 million viewers for its current affairs output. Of course Alsultany does not simply state that entertainment media present a sympathetic version of Arabs and Muslims. She identifies a number of themes – or what she calls simplified complex strategies – common to her selected fictional outputs. These include: ‘inserting patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans’; ‘sympathising with the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11’; ‘challenging the Arab/Muslim conflation with diverse Muslim identities’; ‘flipping the enemy’; ‘humanising the terrorist’; ‘projecting a multicultural US society’; and ‘fictionalising the Middle Eastern or Muslim country’ (pp. 21-6). These strategies work to balance the overall picture of Arabs and Muslims in America by portraying them within a range of discourses that at once acknowledge and play out the complex power dynamics of living in a multicultural society.

But it is not just fictional narratives that reproduce these sympathetic codes. Programmes such as Oprah Winfrey’s celebrated and long-running talk show also provide a space to question black and white assumptions about Arabs and Muslims in America. Winfrey is famous for championing the underdog, or what Alsultany calls the ‘politics of pity’ (p. 92), and using her position at the top of the media hierarchy for charitable and educational means. Nevertheless, the strategies employed here and in fictional narratives continue to position Muslims within a typical patriotic discourse that pushes viewers to read the main protagonists sympathetically, whilst at the same time allowing the viewer to maintain a particularised moral code. So, while negative representations may form the headline, the wider spectrum of media output operates a subtle code that dampens accusations of prejudice. Yet, no matter how many narratives emerge to provide what one might call a sensitive treatment of the other, there remains strong evidence that America is becoming less, rather than more, tolerant toward Arabs and Muslims. Here, Alsultany highlights increasingly punitive legislation and data on rising occurrences of hate crimes since 9/11 to reveal a worrying trend toward public compassion and private retribution.

However, it becomes easier to understand this paradox if we consider the liberal narratives of tolerance that run through public sphere discourses that attempt to make sense of non-western forms of thinking. Accounts of liberal tolerance principally function to hide the racism at the centre of discursive constructions of Muslims and Islam. Derrida (2003) called this discursive turn the limit of hospitality. Derrida’s notion of a limited hospitality provides a way to think about the socio-political contexts in which Islam is boiled down to its abject form against the secularized system of western neo-liberal democracy adopted by non-Muslims states. These forms of liberalism position Muslims in terms of their willingness to adhere to the norms and values of their adopted nation states and, indeed, work to position Islamic states in terms of their abject relation to the primacy of western neo-liberalism.

This process of positioning is carefully unpacked in the essays presented in the edited text by Flood *et al.*, which test the notion of tolerance at the heart of western discursive constructions of Islam. The positive move made in this collection of essays is to observe both the constructions of Muslims and Islam that concur with those outlined above, and to move the debate forward through a consideration of Muslim-centred accounts. This dialogue between the non-Muslim and Muslim world is neatly established in the first chapter by John Turner, who argues that the philosophical roots of Islam can offer a theoretical paradigm of international relations as an alternative to secularised western discourses as a way of overcoming entrenched national/territorial divisions. This may be a difficult concept to comprehend for those who view Islam in terms of its popular discursive construction (fundamentalist, misogynistic, and so on); however, Turner suggests that ‘the difference is that Islam can potentially be a universal system of *values* and thereby form the basis for a common identity’ (p. 12, my emphasis). His suggestion centres on the principle found in *al-siyasi al-Islami* (Islamic political order), which states that ‘the world exists in a state of natural disorder that must be managed by means of a *culture of order*’ (p. 11, my emphasis). This concept prioritises what we might refer to as an organic order that evolves over time and is agreed between members of society above a prescriptive legal order that prioritises individual or state interests. While acknowledging the limitations of this approach, Turner suggests that it might nevertheless offer an alternative ethical model to the current socio-political impasse.

The debate at the core of this first chapter is pulled through the following essays that detail the diverse ways in which non-Islamic and Islamic groups are represented and in turn represent themselves. For example in chapter two Danila Genovese contends that it is often difficult to move outside homogenising discourses because many of the protagonists involved – Muslim and non-Muslim – remain entrenched in their positions. In interviews with leaders of the UK based ‘radical’ Islamist party Hizb ut-Tahrir, she finds that members regularly adopt the same dominant codes that are used to marginalise Muslims in wider discourses and thus participate in reinforcing the polarisation of public opinion. Later chapters also show how, while strategic self-representation can work as a mode of self-affirmation, it often fails against the tide of public opinion, which maintains a dominant hegemonic view of what it means to be Muslim. For example, in separate essays on aspects of female Muslim identity, both Signe Kjær Jørgensen and Chloe Patton unpack the politics of the veil in representation and self-presentation. First, Kjær Jørgensen shows how female Muslim member of Danish parliament, Asmaa Abdol-Hamid, positioned her wearing of the veil as a political statement about female-Muslim choice against the tide of public opinion that denotes female covering as an act of male-Muslim oppression. Furthering the theme of self-realisation, Patton uses participant-controlled visual methods to allow Muslim women to express how outsider views on their decision to cover can negatively influence their daily experiences and also, importantly, to communicate their positive associations of covering. Alongside a later chapter by Matteo Gianni and Gaetan Clavien about the Swiss context, these essays reveal the strength of popular opinion about a Muslim woman’s decision to cover, while at the same time positioning Muslim women at the centre of the debate, which act as counter-narratives to non-Muslim interpretations of female oppression in Islam.

The remainder of the edited collection by Flood *et al.* works to foreground the Islamophobic political and cultural narratives that continue to pervade public sphere discourses about Muslims and Islam, and at the same time examine the spaces that are opening up to oppose those narratives. What becomes clear from this and the other texts under consideration here is that, despite the overbearingly jaundiced view of Islam that saturates non-Muslim public spheres, spaces for dialogue are becoming available. The challenge in using these spaces is to dismantle prejudices based on the desire to maintain a view of the West as a liberally tolerant saviour that do little to move the debate forward. At present, however, each text shows that this remains an optimistic prophecy.

**References**

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