

Review Article

Orientalism in *Moby Dick*

by *Rashā al Disūqī*

This article aims to correct some of the basic errors in Melvillian Islamic criticism. One of the classics of Western literature is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the allegorical story of one man's pursuit of a great white whale.⁴ Like all great novelists, Melville was struggling with the great moral issues that transcend individuals and even civilizations. This contrasts with most of modern literature, which exhibits journalistic habits of mind and tends to deal in superficial analysis rather than with the reflective process that gives content to meditation and thought.

Modern literary criticism exhibits the same shallowness. George Orwell explained the problem perhaps when he observed that applying the same standards to such novelists as Dickens and Dostoyevsky and to most contemporary writers is "like weighing a flea on a spring-balance intended for elephants." Critics, he added, don't do this, because it would mean having to throw out most of the books they get for review.

The value of Melville's work is that it is possessed of the moral imperative and is designed to lead the forces of wisdom and balance against the spiritual bankruptcy and anarchy of the encroaching materialism in modern Western civilization.

The tragedy of Melville's work is the superficiality of its reliance on Islamic sources, which Melville had read but only in Orientalist distortion. This tragedy has been compounded by later generations of Orientalists who have used the distortions of Melville to generate their own. Perhaps the most insidious of these latter-day Orientalists is Dorothy Finklestein, author of *Melville's Orienda*, who we shall refer to simply as "the critic."²

Her study of Melville's Islamic references devotes a complete section to "Muhammad and the Arabs" in the chapter on "Prophets and Conquerers." Following this, she presents an exhaustive analysis of "Islamic Characters and Symbols." She harshly rejects Melville's immature resort to secondary Islamic sources; namely Carlyle's *Hero*, *Heroworship*, and *Heroic History*, Goethe's

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Truth and Poetry, Bush's *Life of Muḥammad*, Ockley's *Mahomet and His Successors*, and last but not least, Humphrey Prideaux's *Life of Muḥammad: the True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet*.

Unfortunately, although the critic impresses upon us that her study will depend on the original source of Islam: The Qur'ān, she herself uses outside sources that contribute to a further distortion of Islam. Her criticism of Melville should not delude the reader into trusting her approach. She says: "While the reader gains the impression that Melville had read a 'Life' of Muḥammad, one feels certain that he did not take the trouble to read the Qur'ān."³

Ironically, the critic found innumerable opportunities to substitute her own references for the Qur'ān. Commenting on the only direct reference to the Prophet Muḥammad (SAAS) in *Moby Dick*, she relies heavily on John Leo, "The old Barbary Traveller," whom Melville mentions, and on the authority of the so-called "Arab historians" who affirm that "a Prophet who prophesied of Muḥammad came forth from a Berber temple on the North African coast, the African temple of the whale."⁴

The Qur'ān shows only one who prophesied of Muḥammad (ṢA'AS), namely, Jesus, whose words are confirmed in the present Bible:

Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away, else the *Comforter* [italics added] will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.⁵

In the *Gospel of Barnabas*, the word "Comforter" or "Advocate" is the translation of the Greek 'Proclyte' or Aḥmed which is another term for the "titles of Prophet Muḥammad."⁶

A confirmation of Jesus's prophesy is emphasized in the Qur'ān, where Allah criticizes those whose deeds are not commensurate with their words, citing Jesus's position with the Jews:

And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: O People of Israel! I am the apostle of God (sent) to you confirming the law (which came) before me and giving Glad Tidings of an Apostle to come after me whose name shall be Ahmad.⁷

There is a possibility that the critic heard of another prophesier, included in the authentic Hadith of the Prophet. During Muḥammad's time, people sought him to discuss the verses of the Qur'ān that needed detailed explanation. His answers were immediately recorded by his companions, who preserved his life history.⁸ This second prophesier of Muḥammad is Waraqah Ibn Nawfal, the cousin of Khadijah, Muḥammad's wife (may Allah be pleased with her). When Muḥammad received his message from Allah through Gabriel in the cave of Ḥirā', he returned trembling, still dazed with the "light

“we believe in some but reject others’ ... are in truth unbelievers.”¹⁵ Apparently, The German source the critic uses does not even distinguish between the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth. And, furthermore, where does Muḥammad (SAAS) mention Jonah “among the Apostles of God in Qur’ān?” Has the source included in the Qur’ān what Muḥammad (SAAS) said? Or does she mean that he has delivered God’s message, the Qur’ān itself, which has included Jonah and the other Apostles?

“Some of the Arab historians,” Melville says, “do not stand to assert that Prophet Jonah was cast forth by the whale at the Base of the Temple.”¹⁶ As the reader of the Qur’ān is definitely acquainted with the story of Jonah (Unus), I will not repeat it in detail but only mention that God “cast him forth on the naked shore in a state of sickness.”¹⁷ There is no reference in the Qur’ān to a temple on that “naked” shore.

Evidently, Melville’s spelling of Muḥammad as “Mahomet” is referable to Carlyle and similar sources, which have not used an English translation of the originally Arabic Qur’ān. Melville’s aim, obviously, was to furnish evidence that would glorify his whale and stress its eternal quality.

By mentioning Jonah and “Mahomet,” he achieves a double target: immortalizing the whale and questioning the Prophet of Islam who is forced into a false, ridiculous myth. By accepting the first, the reader admits the second. The ordinary reader will never suspect Melville, whose technique is based on the constant use of sound expressions as “Arab Historians,” “Berber travellers,” and other seemingly scientifically dependable sources. A striking example of Melville’s influence is the case of the critic herself who does not stop to evaluate his sources, but rather uses them as a source for her own analysis. The common reader, unfamiliar with the Qur’ān, has no alternative but to believe in the everlasting whale whose rib is buried in the temple from which the prophesier of Muḥammad has come. But the Qur’ānic reader detects that the novelist has been mixing fact with fiction throughout in order to establish a fearful sense of doubt. On the other hand, the whale, which functions as a symbol of “evil,” is linked to Islam in order to blemish its entire picture; evil is at the foundation of the Islamic Temple. Is this the real essence of Melville’s sarcastic remark? And if Melville has chosen to shed doubt on essentially doubtful religions, one wonders why his skepticism should necessarily include Islam?

The critic of Islamic references has overlooked Melville’s chapter on Ramaḍān, which is the most important Islamic reference. Melville has probably heard of the sacred month but has neither explored Allah’s Qur’ānic injunctions, nor practiced worshipping Him during the month. It is both ignorance and necessity that drove him to compress “the month, in which was sent the Qur’ān,”¹⁸ to one day. Since Melville persists in presenting the reader with a distorted form of worship called “Fasting and Humiliation,” he had to

of dazzling beauty,” to Khadijah who wrapped his “shivering body” which could not bear the strain of the unique experience. Khadijah “consulted her cousin, Waraqah, a devout worshipper of God in the Faith of Jesus, learned in spiritual lore.” Waraqah affirmed that “Muḥammad was God’s chosen one to renew the Faith.”⁹ His exact words were: “Holy! Holy! By Him who dominates Waraqah’s soul, if your report is true, O Khadijah, this must be the great spirit that spoke to Moses. Muḥammad must be the Prophet of this nation. Tell him that he must be firm.”¹⁰

The Melvillian falsehood that Waraqah existed in “a Berber temple on the North African coast” is easily exposed. Waraqah chose to perform his prayers in a secluded place, far from Makkah, where the Qur’ān was originally delivered. Makkah was where Muḥammad, Khadijah, the Companions, and the Prophet’s tribe existed, as is obvious from the mentioned incident. Had Waraqah been on the North African coast, Khadijah would never have been able to reach him.

Following Melville’s steps, the critic quotes Leo Africanus. And Leo, taking their path, bases his information on “Arab historiographers” who claim that “‘the same Prophet of whom their great Mahomet foretold’ would proceed from *that* [italics added] temple.”¹¹ Is it Muḥammad who foretold, or is it another prophet who “prophesy’d” of Muḥammad (SAAS)? Certainly it was not Waraqah who prayed at *that* temple. Muḥammad, however, did not foretell of another prophet since he was “the seal of the Prophets,” as the Qur’ān ascertains.¹²

Concluding her comment, the critic persists in toying with the Qur’ān. She connects the reference to the future Prophet with the story of the Prophet Jonah, which she claims is incidentally the only one of the major and minor prophets mentioned in the Qur’ān and whom Muḥammad numbers among the Apostles of God.¹³

The critic is obviously establishing a false connection, finding it easier to take Melville at his word. To justify Melville’s mention of Jonah, she resorts to the German *Koranische Untersuchungen*, which aids to her delusion. Jonah is not the only Prophet mentioned in the Qur’ān; he is one among twenty-two others whom Allah names, seventeen of which are embodied in three verses concerning Ibrāhīm (may Allah be pleased with him):

We gave him Isaac and Jacob: all (three) we guided: and before him we guided No-ah, and among his progeny David, and John, and Jesus and Elias all in the ranks of the righteous: and Isma’il and Elisha and Jonas, and Lot: and to all we gave favor above the nations.¹⁴

Allah does not rank His prophets, distinguishing between “major and minor,” as evidenced in the verses just quoted. On the contrary, Allah plainly rejects those who “wish to separate” Him “from His Apostles.” Those who say

launch it in one concentrated blow, lest the reader lose interest. One day of physical torture is hardly acceptable; a month is even less so.

By contrasting the Qur'ān with Melville's views, we may come closer to his embedded meaning. Allah (SWT) says:

Everyone of you who is present during that month, should spend it in fasting. But if anyone is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period (should be made up) by days later. God intends every facility for you; He does not want to put you to difficulties ... And perchance ye shall be grateful.¹⁹

Compare this mild tone to Ishmael's shocking exclamation on discovering Queequeg worshipping in a Melvillian Ramadān:

There, good heavens! there sat Queequeg, altogether cool on his hams, and holding yojo on top ... He looked neither one way nor the other way but sat like a carved image with scarce a sign of active life ... he had been sitting so far upwards of eight or ten hours, going too without his regular meals.²⁰

The Muslims fast more than ten hours as long as the sun is up. They eat and drink from sunset until up to twenty minutes before dawn, "until the white thread of dawn appears" to them "distinct from its black thread." No "ham squatting" in "cold," lonesome, cheerless rooms" was ever required of Muslims. It is as Ishmael truly comments, "stark," fictitious "nonsense." Queequeg, unlike the Muslims, terminates his fast "as soon as the first glimpse of the sun enter[s] the window."²¹

Ramḍān is not meant for self-torture; God "does not want to put" people "to difficulties." These are only temporary restraints calling for higher spiritual standards. Strict as it may seem, its goal is not merely abstention from food, drink and marital sex. It is a test of people's sincerity to their Creator and their honest dealings with each other for His pleasure. The Muslim worshipper is constantly linked to Allah through supplication and through complete restraint from animalistic desires. Queequeg's dumb-show and his imprisonment, are at once, a deviation from, and a ridicule of, this form of worship. Queequeg acts the living-dead; he not only refrains from "dealing well" with his fellow men, but is reluctant to establish any form of contact during his fast.

Yojo, Queequeg's God, who plays an essential role in Melville's Ramadān, has a unique historical significance. He calls to mind God's quenching of idol worship. Addressing the pagans, Allah says:

Have ye seen Lat and 'Uzza, and ... Manat? ... These are nothing but names which ye devised, ye and your forefathers, for which God has sent down no authority (whatever). They follow nothing but conjecture and what their souls desire! Even though there has already come to them guidance from their Lord!²²

The inverted picture Melville paints is a unity of irreconcilable opposites: Paganism and Islam. Queequeg, a Pagan, fasts in Ramaḍān, a Muslim month, still longing for his Pagan idol (Yojo).

This interplay of opposing principles is not totally unintentional. The crucial question which Melville seems to pose is: "Where does Queequeg belong? Is he a Pagan or a Muslim? His sense of loss and alienation, which Melville succeeds in portraying, makes the common reader doubt Islam. Queequeg, a devout Pagan, has been performing this ritual annually, and obviously with the same zeal, without even consulting the Qur'ān's injunctions. Ishmael's ironical remark, then, becomes highly significant. "Heaven have mercy on us all," he comments, "Presbyterians and Pagans alike, for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending."²³

The third Islamic reference in *Moby Dick*, "Fedallah" is purely linguistic, but definitely has its religious connotations. The word is a compound of two parts: "Fedā," or sacrifice, and "Allah" or God. Attempting a semantic analysis which supports her approach, the critic of the novel links the name to an outlandish thought of "Muslim Assassins," firmly asserting that:

The Assassins were simply smokers of hemp - a secret order of Islamic mystics pledged to commit murder in the service of Allah.²⁴

The name Fedallah, she claims, is derived from the chief of these Persian Assassins. The critic has obviously confused Islam, whose source is the Qur'ān and the Prophet's Ḥadīth, with Islamic sects. Allah has strongly rejected schisms in Islam. He says:

As for those who divide their religion and break up into sects, thou has no part in them in the least: their affair is with Allah ... He that doeth evil shall only be recompensed according to his evil.²⁵

Finally, there is no evidence that a group called Muslim Assassins ever existed in Persia.

As for "mysticism," it is rejected in any form, by Muslims as part of the "occult" since people might use the name of Allah (SWT) for secular purposes, deviating from the essence of Islam. Again, from the Muslim standpoint, mystics in the Western sense of the term are not Muslims. Warning the Muslims against such extremism, Allah says:

O people of the Book! Exceed not in your religion the bounds (of what is proper) trespassing beyond the truth, nor follow the vain desires of people who went wrong in times gone by, - who misled many and strayed (themselves) from the even Way.²⁶

The critic does not stop there, but claims that there are approximately nine

other references in *Moby Dick* related to Islamic mysticism, but none of them are, in any sense, Islamic.

As to the concept of “assassination,” which the critic attributes to Islam, Allah has set strict limits. Verses prohibiting illegal crime are numerous found throughout the Qur’ān, one example of which I cite below:

On that account: We ordained for the People of Israel that if anyone slew a person—unless it be ... for mischief in the land—it would be as if he slew the whole people: And if anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our Apostles with Clear Signs, yet even after that, many of them continued to commit excess in the land.²⁷

Instead of referring to the Qur’ān, the critic has sought foreign references to analyse Fedallah’s name and a *Literary History of Persia* to prove her relation to the “Assassins.”

The first part of the name, “Fedā,” is certainly of Islamic origin, since it relates to two unique sacrifices mentioned in the Qur’an, one belonging to Ādam’s sons, Qābīl and Hābīl [Cain and Ald], and the other to Ibrahim, whose son Isma’īl Allah has “ransomed” with a “momentous sacrifice.”²⁸ Sacrifice has, become, since then, an essential Islamic ritual. Evidently, Allah does not require sacrifice to satisfy Himself: “it is not their meat nor their blood, that reaches Him.”²⁹ The act is meant to emphasize one of the basic concepts of Islam, manifested in the sacrificial giving of large quantities of food and meat to the poor.

As for Fedallah’s character in *Moby Dick*, he is a hateful figure to both Islam and Muslims. *Ahab* unconsciously links “the infidel” to an image, apparently carved in corrupt, superstitious minds. He exclaims:

O Nature, and o soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies; not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in the mind.³⁰

The duplicate in the mind is the devil’s image. Reflecting on Ishmael’s hint at the duality of supernatural powers, the relevance of the parallelism, in Melvillian, needless to say, ridiculous terms, is explained to the reader. With Qur’ānic eyes, one can immediately recognize the distortion of the unseen realm. Allah explains the names, nature and function of Angels and Jinn in many Suras.³¹ The Melvillian statement: “the angels indeed consorted with daughters of men, the devils ... indulged in mundane amours”³² becomes ridiculously absurd. The mystery haunting Fedallah’s relation to *Ahab*, however, is never unravelled; he continues exercising his, so-called, “uncanny powers”³³ over the latter, and finally causes his destruction.

The novelist’s constant allusion to some Qur’ānic expressions does not

necessarily imply his knowledge of them. Melville's negative outlook on Islam was enhanced by Carlyle and Prideaux who were equally reluctant to comprehend its true nature. Their concepts furnished the rudiments on which Melville based his technical inversions of Islam. Critics attempting an analysis of Islamic references in Melville's works should consult the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. Melville's skepticism was originally targeted at Judaism and Christianity, which history proves are present distortions of the original application of the Tawrah and the Injil.³⁴ The warnings against corruption and evil in Melville's classic, *Moby Dick*, are no doubt pertinent to all human civilizations. To apply them, however, against the sources and teachings of Islam can only reflect the gross ignorance of the Kāfirs, that is, of those who maliciously try to hide the truth even from themselves. Melville seems to have been a dupe of Orientalists who preceded him and to have become a tool of those who followed.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1943), p. 489.
2. Dorothee Metlitsky Finklestein, *Melville's Orienda* (New York: Yale University Press, 1961). Later cited as Finklestein.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 169. The best known Sirah or 'Life of the Prophet' is Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal's *The Life of Muḥammad* translated by Ismā'il al Fārūqī (U.S.A.: American Trust, 1976). Later cited as al Fārūqī.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
5. *The New Testament*, John 16:7.
6. *The Gospel of Barnabas* (Karachi: Fazleesons, 1975), p. xxiii. See also Jamāl Badawī's *Muḥammad in the Bible* (Canada: Islamic Information Foundation, 1982).
7. Qur'ān, Sura 61:6. Translations from the Qur'ān in this article are from the Yusuf 'Alī rendition.
8. For further elaboration see the Qur'ān, comments by Yusuf 'Alī, p. xi, and "The Moment of Islam in the History of Revelation" in Ismā'il al Fārūqī et al, *The Great Asian Religions* (London: Mcmillan, 1969).
9. *Ibid.*, Section C (a running commentary in prose), p. 29-32.
10. Al Fārūqī, p. 77.
11. Finklestein, p. 168.
12. The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al Aḥzāb, 33:40.
13. Finklestein, p. 168-169.
14. The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al An'am, 6:84-86.
15. *Ibid.*, Sūrat Al Nisā', 4:150-151.
16. Melville, *op. cit.*, p. 489.
17. The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al Saffāt, 37:145.

18. *Ibid.*, Sūrat Al Baqarah, 2:185.
19. *Id.*
20. *Moby Dick*, p. 89.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
22. The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al Najm, 53:19-23.
23. *Moby Dick*, p. 87.
24. Finklestein, p. 230.
25. The Qur'ān, Surāt Al An'am, 6:159-160.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 267, 238. Sūrat Al Mā'idah, 5:77.
27. The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al Isra' [Bani Isrā'il]. For further elaboration see Sūrat 2:178.
28. The Qur'ān, Sūrat Al Saffāt, 37:107.
29. *Ibid.*, Sūrat Al Hajj, 22:37.
30. *Moby Dick*, p. 333.
31. To mention only a few Sūrat: Al Kahf, Sad, and Al Jinn, among many others.
32. *Moby Dick*, p. 247.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
34. Al Shahīd Ismā'il al Fārūqī offers a remarkably detailed account and historical backing on this point from Ibn Hazm, "The Greatest Comparativist Before Modern Times." For further elaboration see Ismā'il R. al Fārūqī and Lois Lamyā' al Fārūqī, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 97-98.

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