

## THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER IN THE ARAB CULTURAL HERITAGE

İbrahim ALŞİBLİ

### ABSTRACT

Imagology is a branch of comparative literature, especially concerned with cross-national perceptions and images as conveyed in literary discourse. The Arabic culture has undergone significant historical transformations, resulting in profound changes in perceptions of the “other.” Various factors, including language, religion, and ethnicity, have contributed to the formation of diverse images of the “other” within Arab culture. The examination of the portrayal of other societies by a given culture falls within the domain of comparative literature, with imagology representing one of its branches. This research endeavors to investigate the image of the “other” in Arab culture. The significance of this research lies in its pursuit of analyzing the various manifestations of the “other” within the context of Arab culture. By adopting a comparative literature approach, it aims to explore the trajectories of interaction with the “other” and the evolution of their representation within Arab culture. By employing the methodological framework of comparative literature, this research seeks to shed light on the complex dynamics involved in the depiction of the “other” and its development in the Arab cultural milieu.

**Keywords:** Language, Arab culture, comparative literature, image of the other

### İbrahim ALŞİBLİ,

Gaziantep Bilim Ve Teknoloji Üniversitesi,  
Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, ibrahimshibli82@  
gmail.com, Orcid: 0000-0002-3869-5122

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## Arap kültürel mirasında ötekinin imajı

### ÖZ

İmgebilim, karşılaştırmalı edebiyatın bir dalıdır. Edebi söylemde aktarıldığı şekliyle özellikle uluslararası algılar ve imgelerle ilgilenir. Arap kültürü, “öteki” algısında derin değişikliklerle sonuçlanan önemli tarihsel dönüşümler geçirdi. Dil, din ve etnisite dahil olmak üzere çeşitli faktörler, Arap kültürü içinde “öteki”nin çeşitli imajlarının oluşmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Belirli bir kültür tarafından diğer toplumların tasvirinin incelenmesi karşılaştırmalı edebiyatın alanına girer, burada imgebilim alanı temsil eder. Karşılaştırmalı edebiyat araştırmalarının dallarından biridir. Bu makale, Arap kültüründeki “öteki” imajını incelemeye çalışmaktadır. Bu makalenin önemi, Arap kültürü bağlamında “öteki”nin çeşitli dışavurumlarını analiz etme arayışında yatmaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı bir edebiyat yaklaşımını benimseyerek, “öteki” ile etkileşimin yörüngelerini ve Arap kültürü içindeki temsillerinin evrimini keşfetmeyi amaçlar. Bu araştırma, karşılaştırmalı edebiyatın metodolojik çerçevesini kullanarak, “öteki”nin tasvirindeki karmaşık dinamiklere ve bunun Arap kültürel ortamındaki gelişimine ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dil. Arap kültürü, karşılaştırmalı edebiyat, ötekinin imajı.

### Introduction

Philosophical inquiry into the concepts of image and imagination has been a subject of discussion since the time of Plato and Aristotle and has been further explored through various philosophical movements such as Neo-Platonism, Empiricism, Idealism, and Phenomenology. The definition of German philosophical, literary, and social culture by Madame de Staël marks a significant shift from the humanist and Enlightenment views of national character to politically motivated nationalism, influenced by the French Revolution and Napoleon’s wars. From this point on, the depiction of other countries and peoples became a crucial aspect not only in political discussions between nations but also in poetic representations. This research on imagology aims to explore the textual representation of these images in literature.

These images can be categorized into five semantic categories: graphic (pictures, statues, designs), optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, appearances), mental (dreams, memories, ideas, phantasmas), and verbal (metaphors, descriptions). While images of other peoples can be found in visual art forms such as paintings and caricatures, projected optically, perceived in their outward appearance, and metaphorically defined, the most significant source of national and typological fictions lies in mental imaginations, ideas, and representations (Mitchell 1986: 4).

Drawing from Aristotelian pictorial theory, one analysis of philosophical theories on imagological representation describes these mental images as inner pictures or pictures in the mind or soul. In cognitive sciences (Block 1983: 501), they are referred to as mental pictorial representations, where interpretations of images influence value judgments rather than objective experiences. Literary analysis focuses on verbally and textually encoded images and is distinct from philosophical, psychological, and neurophysiological theories and research on “internal pictures.” The term “image” refers to the mental silhouette of the Other, shaped by the characteristics associated with family, group, tribe, people, or race. Such images influence our opinions and behavior toward others. Cultural differences resulting from language, mentality, daily habits, and religions trigger positive or negative judgments and images (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 4).

Hugo Dyserinck had been developing imagology studies in the Netherlands and Germany since the 1960s based on the French comparatist school. In contrast to Mellek’s contemptuous stance, Dyserinck

proved in his Aachen program of comparatism both the fundamental literary function and the wider ideological relevance of national imagery. Pageaux's transdisciplinary position was rejected by his pupil Manfred S. Fischer because it reduced the subject of literary pictures to mere documentation in a complex cultural anthropology. Fischer's additional proposal to replace the sociologically constructed term of stereotype with the distinctively literary notion of imagotype and imagotype system has only been adopted in a handful of studies by individual authors and in Siebenmann's theoretical articles on the image of Hispanics (Beller and Leerssen 2007: 9).

Archaeology leads us to early modern European cultural criticism, which began in the tradition of Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558), by dividing European cultural and social patterns into national categories, thus formalizing an older, informal tradition of attributing essential characteristics to particular national or ethnic groups. This classificatory impulse to reconcile cultural differences with ethnic stereotypes would lead to the systematization of early modern ethnography and anthropology, as the Austrian Roelkertafel shows: This national-character systematization of ethnic stereotypes and anecdotal knowledge about "customs and traditions" had to be intellectually preserved (Beller and Leerssen, 2007: 9).

Pastoral, anti-Enlightenment cultural relativism established an ethnic taxonomy that saw "land" and "culture" as inseparable and fundamental elements of humanity. This led to the development of the comparative method in the humanities. Its influence can be seen in anthropology, for example in Humboldt's "Comparative Anthropology" (replacing the older model which assumed, in undifferentiated universalist terms, that "the real study of mankind is man") and in language, where linguistic differences were discussed by Humboldt, Schlegel, and Grimm, who saw each language as the breath of a nation's soul, a distinctive identity and individuality. Jacob Grimm's philology extended this ethnolinguistic identitarianism to literary history, which was to contain a trace of the history of the nation (Beller and Leerssen, 2007: 18).

By the late twentieth century, the long tradition of imagology had been all but abandoned within Comparative Literature (a discipline in crisis, outflanked on all sides by new and old sister disciplines), while its insights and concerns were being reinvented in disciplines all around it. The issue of national stereotyping and identity building was being addressed everywhere but frequently in a monodisciplinary isolationist manner with ad hoc theorizing and conflicting nomenclature. A significant realignment in literary studies has occurred in the last twenty years. In general, the ancient philologies saw a separation of linguistics and literary studies, as well as the older assumption that historical-comparative literary research was to support generalizing (Beller and Leerssen, 2007: 24).

Analyzing the forms of the "Other's" presence in literary writings and historical documents concerning other peoples can be used to investigate the image of the "Other" in the cultures of nations and peoples. The representation of the foreign other in a culture is at the heart of imagology.

#### **Research Importance:**

Examining the depiction of the "other" within Arab culture from historical and religious viewpoints is a prominent field of scholarly inquiry. This involves the examination of representations and images of individuals or groups viewed as distinct or foreign in historical books and religious scriptures from Arab culture. The research aims to study the image of the "other" within Arab cultural contexts by delving into these sources.

### **Research questions**

1. What was the image of the “other” in Arab culture?
2. What are the most important factors affecting the formation of the image of “others” in Arab culture?
3. How did military conflicts and religious thinking influence the entrenchment of stereotypes about the “other”?

### **Research Methodology**

The research draws upon the concept of imageology in comparative literary studies and employs cultural analysis tools to trace the image of the “other” in Arab culture.

#### **1. The image of the other in the political perspective**

Prior to the emergence of Islam, the Arab population lacked a unified nation or a cohesive state, instead existing within a tribal system where tribal allegiance held paramount importance. This tribal-centric organizational structure prevailed both within the confines of the Arabian Peninsula and in urban settlements. While certain Arab kingdoms were subordinate entities within larger imperial frameworks, the Arabs harbored feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability in the face of formidable empires such as the Persians, Byzantines, and Abyssinians. Despite enduring inter-tribal rivalries, they held a deep admiration for the strength and prowess exhibited by these influential empires. Social dynamics within tribes and cities exhibited notable similarities, with variations observed primarily in degree rather than in essence. The prevailing social systems of Arab Bedouins and settled Arabs exerted a substantial influence on the Arab collective mindset and their perception of both proximate entities characterized by religious and tribal distinctions, as well as distant entities comprising foreign empires. Consequently, this prevailing mindset played a pivotal role in shaping their attitudes towards such entities (AlAudat, 2010: 5).

The Arabs’ perception of each other was primarily based on tribal traditions. Arabs had a fear of the Persians and Byzantines and felt inferior to them. This was due to the absence of a strong Arab state that could confront the Persian and Byzantine empires, while they felt superior to other tribes based on lineage and ancestral pride. However, this perception changed after the advent of Islam, especially with the expansion of Islamic conquests. There was a significant revolution in concepts, visions, and means that made the Arabs bearers of a message and had a great ambition to achieve a comprehensive renaissance in order to form a unified nation with a cohesive social fabric. They were on the threshold of an intellectual, economic, and social breakthrough that would overthrow the empires that once ruled the world before Islam, such as the Roman, Byzantine, Persian, and Abyssinian empires (Ali 2001: 6/230).

This historical transformation brought about a change in the political, military, and cultural position of the Arabs on the one hand and a change in their perception and attitude towards each other on the other. The Arabs began to feel powerful and superior to the Persians and Byzantines, especially after the expansion of their conquests and their rapid spread. The Arab-Islamic empire reached regions like Persia, Central Asia, Andalusia, and parts of the Iberian Peninsula (Europe), and it became diverse, with various peoples and cultures living under its umbrella. The Arabs opened up to the world and became acquainted with numerous cultures and peoples. It became necessary for them to define each other and form an image of them in order to choose how to interact with them. Prior to Islam, the “other” was limited to Persian, Byzantine, and Abyssinian individuals or the Jewish, Christian, and Sabian religious groups. However, after the expansion of Islamic conquests, the concept of the “other” became more diverse.

This new historical and political framework led to the Arabs coming into contact with new cultures that they had not experienced before Islam. They also became familiar with different political systems and social traditions that differed from their own. The Arabs transitioned from the tribal system to the state, from tribal bias and defense of its values and traditions to following the teachings of the Islamic religion and sacrificing for its cause. Additionally, the decisive factor of history played a role, as the Arabs were outside the historical sphere before Islam. However, after Islam, they became central to history and possessed the ability and sufficient awareness to spread Islam across the world. This led to an understanding of various cultures, peoples, and religions. The significant expansion of the Islamic empire further developed the Arabs' collective identity. They had a universal reference point that extended beyond the confines of the tribe and its narrow boundaries.

The image of the “other” in Arab consciousness was not formed randomly but through the efforts of explorers, traders, and historians. It is a social construct influenced by historical, cultural, political, and economic interactions. Before Islam, Arabs regarded Persians and Byzantines as superior due to the absence of a strong Arab state. However, with the expansion of Islamic conquests, the Arab perception of the “other” changed, and they began to feel powerful and superior to the Persian and Byzantine “other.” The Arabs encountered diverse peoples and cultures, leading them to define and portray the “other” to determine how to interact with them. After Islam, the Arabs transitioned from a tribal society to a state and became central to history, spreading Islam throughout the world. This expansion exposed them to various cultures, peoples, and religions. Historical conditions have deeply influenced the values, ideas, and emotions of all peoples, shaping the Arab worldview and popular imagination, although they are filled with contradictions.

The historical context serves as a pivotal and influential factor in shaping civilizational relations. The military conflicts between the Arab nations and other states have evolved into religiously motivated confrontations, leading to significant historical milestones that have contributed to the formation of stereotypical perceptions held by each party towards the other. Notably, the Arab conquest of Andalusia in 1492, the fall of Constantinople—the Christian capital—to Muslim hands, and the Western colonial expansion in Arab territories have exerted a substantial impact on the expansion of the Islamic-Crusader conflict. In response, mobilization efforts against the Arab world adopted a proselytizing rhetoric, aiming to reclaim the lost territories of the Roman and Byzantine empires. Furthermore, missionary activities, Orientalist studies, and literary voyages have played a significant role in cementing distorted and stereotypical depictions of Muslims within the Western consciousness, persisting to this day (Alaudat, 2014: 213).

The realm of politics and military engagements has inevitably influenced the perception and portrayal of the “other.” Consequently, these circumstances have laid fertile ground for the propagation of distortion. For instance, one can observe the misrepresentation of Arabs in European literature during the medieval ages, as well as the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in Western media following the tragic events of September 11th. Various media outlets deliberately distorted these images before the Western public eye, strategically seeking to garner support for the invasion of Arab nations. To comprehensively analyze the representation of the “other” within the domain of literature, it becomes imperative to undertake a contextual examination of the targeted historical period. Such an investigation not only involves tracing literary developments but also encompasses the transformation of cultural ideas into imaginative constructs. In essence, the study of the portrayal of the “other” extends beyond mere mythical elements, images, or symbols; it serves as a reflective mirror that unveils the intricate history of social and psychological standards governing the perception of self and the “other” within Western consciousness.

Throughout the 20th century, the Western depiction of the “other” remained characterized by contrasting attitudes. On one hand, moments of awe and admiration were experienced in the face of the Arab world’s advancements in civilization and technology. On the other hand, oppositional positions emerged, urging resistance against the perceived threat. At times, these forms of resistance assumed diverse manifestations, aiming to undermine the “other” through multifaceted means. Historical conditions, particularly those prevalent in the 20th century, played a significant role in the expansion of the Arab-West

## 2. The image of the other in the religious perspective

Before the emergence of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula was home to several Jewish communities, notably in cities such as Yathrib (later known as Medina), Khaybar, and Tayma. Some Jews had migrated from Yemen after its conquest by the Abyssinians, following persecution by the Jewish ruler Dhu Nuwas. Others arrived in the region after the Babylonian exile in 570 BCE, settling there until the advent of Islam (Ali, 2001: 6/518).

Prominent Jewish tribes, including the Banu Nadir, Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Qurayzah, Banu Zayd, and Banu Tha’labah, coexisted with Arab tribes like Aws and Khazraj. Jews were known for their contributions to agriculture, weapon manufacturing, and the teachings of the Torah, which garnered interest from Arab tribes (Nicholson, 2014: 137). They often engaged in diplomacy, sometimes paying tribute to Arab tribal leaders and at other times sowing discord among tribes. The Jews’ strategy of division persisted throughout their history in various regions, aiming to ensure their security. Their teachings about monotheism played a significant role in facilitating the acceptance of Islam among the Arabs when the Prophet Muhammad began his mission.

Initially, Arabs maintained natural relations with Jews. However, due to perceived Jewish arrogance, superiority, and a sense of self-importance, Arab attitudes towards Jews became cautious and wary. Arabs began to view Jews as deceitful, self-centered, greedy, and divisive, leading to a paradoxical perception of admiration for Jewish culture and religious beliefs alongside disdain for their behavior. The Arab societal transformation after Islamic conquests led to a unified social fabric and vision. They were not mere opportunistic conquerors but bearers of a message adaptable to new circumstances (Ibn Elatheer, 1997).

Jewish proselytization efforts changed after the advent of Islam, focusing more on preserving commercial interests rather than spreading their religion. This shift deepened Jewish antipathy towards Islam and Muslims. Arabs began to associate Jews with negative traits such as greed, deception, hypocrisy, treachery, and cowardice. However, this perception changed as Jews moved to southern Syria and Iraq, and Muslims no longer viewed them as cautiously. Arabs began criticizing Jewish distortions of the Torah. While taxes and regulations still applied, the Arab perception of Jews shifted towards greater equality, except in matters related to customs, rituals, and attire.

Jews formed a part of the Arabian Peninsula’s population, particularly in the Hijaz and Yemen, where they held political and historical significance. However, they maintained their isolation from other social groups and resisted integration into tribal and urban systems prevalent in the Peninsula. This refusal to convert to Islam stemmed from their belief that their religion was exclusively revealed to them. This sense of superiority, arrogance, isolation, and the preservation of distinctive values, customs, and traditions contributed to the stereotypical image of Jews in the collective imagination of nations and peoples, portraying them as arrogant, superior, individualistic, and disdainful of others.

Christianity had already spread in Arabia, Iraq, and the Levant before the advent of Islam. Many Arabs, including the Ghassanids in Syria and the Muharizah in Iraq, embraced Christianity. The faith spread through migration, particularly from the Levant, as well as through the slave trade, which

brought Christian slaves from Africa and Abyssinia, contributing to the dissemination of Christian ideas and teachings. Trade interactions facilitated direct contact between Arabs and Christians, resulting in a substantial Christian presence within Arab society. Christians became integral members of tribes, and their positive portrayal in the Quran reinforced favorable perceptions among Arabs. Jesus, as a messenger of God and His Word, affirmed equality among the followers of Abrahamic religions and Muslims, abolishing preferential treatment based on color or ethnicity (Alfayumi, 1994: 230).

As the Islamic conquests expanded during the Umayyad period, encompassing regions as far away as Persia, India, and North Africa, new peoples embraced Islam. Arabic became the official language for communication and commercial transactions, while other languages and religions also became part of Arab culture. The Islamic empire encompassed diverse populations, including Arabs, Persians, Indians, Armenians, Syriacs, Berbers, and others. The empire witnessed a variety of religions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Brahmanism, and others. Economic systems diversified, incorporating trade, pastoralism, and agriculture, with the state assuming the role of a tribe in societal administration.

As Islamic conquests expanded during the Umayyad period, new peoples embraced Islam, leading to a diverse Islamic empire that included Arabs, Persians, Indians, Armenians, Syriacs, Berbers, and others, practicing various religions. However, this diversity created tensions between Muslims and followers of other religions, and tribalism resurfaced among the Arabs. The Mu'tazilites engaged in debates with Christians, contributing to the evolution of Arab perspectives towards Christians, focusing on theological differences (Al-Jahiz, 1964: 309). It shifted from a religious standpoint to criticizing Christian theology, such as the concept of incarnation, the trinity, and the crucifixion. Consequently, Christians were no longer merely regarded as "People of the Book," as their Gospel was considered a distorted version of divine revelation, according to some views. The Arab perception of Christians changed due to their alleged exploitation of religious tolerance and their influence and proximity to decision-makers. Therefore, Christians exerted an impact on numerous decisions made by caliphs. This perception persisted within Arab consciousness until Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, which contributed to a new perception of the Western "other." Since the fall of Al-Andalus, negative stereotypical images have become ingrained in both Arab and European perceptions up to the present time.

Over time, Christians were no longer regarded merely as "People of the Book," as some viewed their Gospel as a distorted version of divine revelation. Arabs began to criticize Christian theology, including concepts like incarnation, the trinity, and the crucifixion. Christians were seen as exploiting religious tolerance and influencing decision-makers, leading to a new perception of the Western "other." Negative stereotypes about Christians persisted in Arab and European perceptions.

Zoroastrianism and Sabianism were also present in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. The Arabs regarded Zoroastrians as polytheists due to their belief in two gods and held negative views towards them, stemming from political and social conflicts with the Persians (Alcabiri, 2009: 137).

Sabians were considered distinct from other religious groups in the region, with their origins traced to captives transported from Jerusalem to Babylon by Bukhtanassar. Their belief system combined elements of Judaism and Zoroastrianism (Alshahrastany, 195). Arabs initially recognized Sabians as a distinct religious sect alongside Jews and Christians. While some Arabs adhered to Sabianism, it shaped the Arab perception of them in two ways: they were viewed with benevolence as adherents of a distinct creed, but also seen as deviating from prevailing social norms.

Manichaeism, which contradicted Islamic principles, was opposed by the Abbasids. Their doctrine posited that the world originated from the eternal mixture of light and darkness, which challenged the unity of the Creator and the creation from nothingness in Islam. This led to strong opposition from the Abbasids, with efforts to eliminate Manichaeism (Alaudat, 2010: 96).

In the early stages of Islam, the “other” primarily referred to non-Muslims such as Jews, Christians, Magians, and Sabians. However, the concept of the “other” shifted over time to include intra-Islamic divisions, particularly after the war between Ali and Muawiyah. Various sects emerged, intensifying conflicts within Islam and shaping the perception of different “others” within the Muslim community.

The Khawarij developed into a political movement with distinct ideas and beliefs, establishing autonomous regions within the Islamic Empire. Their rigidity and extremism led to divisions within the Muslim community, contributing..... etc..

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be observed that The introduction of philosophy into the realm of Islamic faith aided in consolidating the split and division among Muslims

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Political ambitions were the first engine for the emergence of religious currents within Islam, and their relationship was based on action and reaction, on the one hand, and on the political situation and the nature of the relationship with the authorities, on the other.

Religious and political factors were the most important factors in creating a negative image of each other, and colonialism contributed to the Arabs having a hostile image of the colonial (Crusader) side.

Stereotypes contribute to the perpetuation of distorted or unfair images of others

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