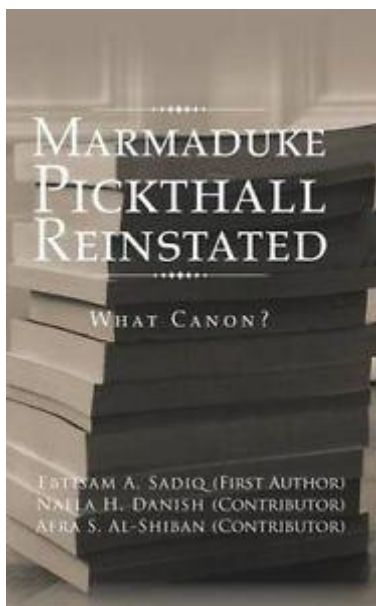


Book Review

Marmaduke Pickthall Reinstated: What Canon?



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In *Marmaduke Pickthall Reinstated: What Canon?* Ebtisam Ali Sadiq and co-authors Naela H. Danish and Afra Alshiban re-establish Pickthall's position in the literary canon as they highlight the pioneering nature of his work, reminding contemporary scholars of his significant contributions to Victorian literature. Through the systematic analysis of his Eastern novels, Western tales, and short story collections, the authors reveal Pickthall's vanguard postcolonial perception, his contribution to modern realism and his enthusiastic feminism. Each chapter in the book examines a powerful aspect of Pickthall's literary production and complements the others to produce a thorough assessment of Pickthall's viewpoints and clarify many Arab cultural and religious customs to the contemporary reader.

In the first chapter Sadiq observes that Pickthall's Eastern engagement liberates him from the nationalist and racist tendencies in the Victorian novel tradition, while his commitment to the Victorian realist strain enables him to do justice to the positive aspects of Eastern life and culture

and to simultaneously guard him against prejudice that overlooks imperfections and weaknesses of the depicted culture. The book rightly introduces Pickthall as the unrevealed face of the Victorian literary culture that transcends racism through the realistic observation of inadequacies in both cultures. It draws attention to the existence of a Victorian voice that ridiculed and devalued Western arrogance instead of the collective glorification of the time.

Sadiq's thorough examination of Pickthall's Eastern novels, reveals that his realistic and positive reflections counteracted the racist tendencies in the Victorian literary tradition and succeeded in documenting Oriental life.

Although his novels mostly focus on Arabs of the Muslim faith, he also and recognizes that Arab Christians share the same culture, history and language with Muslims. Thus he gives voice not only to Muslims of the land but to the local Christians too as a cultural and religious component of the region. The portrayal of British missionaries and tourists as less understanding of the local Christians, despite their joint faith, emphasizes that cultural ties are more binding than religion (44).

By tracing Pickthall's attempt to bring about change from as early as his first Eastern novel *Said the Fisherman* (1903) Sadiq highlights that Pickthall acknowledged that the West's 'meddling in the internal, political, and economic affairs of the East' (p.15) has aggravated 'the latent tension in the religiously and racially diverse community of the local inhabitants' (p15). Although this is an 'innovative break with the racist proclivities of the Victorian novel', Pickthall could not but show that 'the two cultures are not ready to coexist'. Sadiq also draws attention to the chronic issues that continue to impact the rational representation of the Arab Muslim world and accurately hints that Pickthall's sympathies may have been behind his non-inclusion in the literary canon.

The author successfully argues that Pickthall's writing as an insider in the East ranks him the earliest postcolonial writer. Unlike the majority of Victorian men of letters, travellers and officials serving in the Middle East, Pickthall does not mock or devalue Arab life but grants Arab men and women voice within a postcolonial context and highlights Islam as an ideology of tolerance, and a way of life, accurately noting that intolerance is either caused by ignorance or political ambitions.

Sadiq's stresses that Pickthall's objectivity and omniscience and his use of multiple sources reveal his high concern for realism and accuracy. This, she explains is reflected in his accurate representation of Arab life and his depiction of a realistic picture even if this reinforced the negative image the West has of the East. Sadiq also draws attention to the fact that Pickthall's realism challenges Edward Said's views of the West as desiring 'to control, dominate, and exploit the Orient', stressing that Eastern figures in Pickthall's novels are not silenced, dominated or controlled but, 'rather, elaborately speak and powerfully protest' (p.6). This she confirms transforms 'hegemony into a sincere wish for self-integration into the Eastern culture and its dominant faith, Islam'.

In Chapter two Naela H. Danish examines Pickthall's realism and traces the four stages of his life which influenced the growth of his realism and aesthetic skill as a modern realist. Danish also attributes the expansion of Pickthall's realism to his journalism and to his contact

with eminent writers during his visits and stay in Geneva and to the prevailing, contemporary trends of modern realism in the works of French novelists. She also perceives that his later travels in the Near East influenced his literary product. In her intensive analysis of Pickthall's novels and the tenets he adhered to, Danish examines in detail the elements of realism in *Enid*, *The Myopes*, and *Brendle*, and interprets his philosophy of life in relation to his characters, concluding that Pickthall was neither pragmatic nor a mere reviver of the realistic tenets, but a writer whose Western novels 'infused modern realism with the throbbing reality of human experience and made it more tenacious' (p.124).

In chapter three Afra Alshiban focuses on Pickthall's feminist sympathies and his understanding of women. She highlights his efforts to draw attention to the fact that under Islam, Arab and Turkish women, in other words 'third world', had more rights than the women of what was presumed the 'superior race'. Pickthall's calls would understandably be overlooked at a time the 'plight of the oriental female' was employed to highlight that women could play a distinguished role in the 'civilising mission' of the British Empire. The mission that reached its zenith in the suffragette movement of the early twentieth century attempted to extend the civilising influence of women within the highest echelons of society – the workings of parliamentary government. Although the term 'third world' was not coined till 1952, its use in this particular place serves to clarify a chronic Western view of the Orient.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Pickthall did not dread a future of female equality and rejected the notion that women were either saints or sinners. Accordingly, he presented vibrant female characters that are not marginalised by the masculine world or regarded as sexual and domestic objects.

Pickthall's efforts to paint a realistic picture may have not made a lasting impact on his readers because the majority were content with the long-held views even if they themselves witnessed otherwise. It is worth noting that stereotyping may have not been purposefully arranged, but was part of the general atmosphere and had inspired British animosity towards the Ottoman Empire. It was, for example, emphasised that the concubines were Christian women taken as slaves while Christian men were forcibly converted to Islam.

Pickthall loved Turkey and wrote in its favour in the *New Age*. He 'fell in love' with the Arabs and wished to find common ground between the East and the West which, Sadiq rightly notes is the basis of postcolonial discourse much later in history. The author also draws attention to the elements Pickthall shares with postcolonial writers such as the role played by the British and the French presence in stirring up conflict among the inhabitants of diverse faiths. Although Pickthall separates the British individual from his government in his attempt to 'build bridges' between the two worlds, his realistic approach prevents him from overlooking how racial tension between the various people in the region is utilised by the British forces of occupation. (p.28)

Pickthall was appreciated by some of his contemporary reviewers yet his strife to objectively present people of the East to his Western readers may well have been ineffective. He and very few other writers recognised the positive aspects of Arab life but their views were not widely encouraged. In a similar context Harriet Martineau 'warned against criticising another culture without first having studied it' (p214).¹ Like Pickthall she perceived that the Eastern

culture did not fail to make people happy. To the contrary she observed that Egyptians are more content than many people in England; in *Eastern Life: Present and Past*, Martineau remarks that during all her travels in Egypt she had not seen people as ‘emaciated, stunted and depressed’ as she would see in a single walk in England (p.20).ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately Pickthall’s views of the East, Islam and women contradicted the policies of the British Empire and the patriarchal institution. This recalls to mind Mathew Arnold’s argument that intellectuals are society’s ‘best selves’ (Arnold, 1996, pp.82-97) who should make ‘the best thoughts’ prevail. According to Edward Said this argument reflects the British government’s fear of granting further freedoms to people to maintain its grip over society (Said, 1994, p.22). Thus intellectuals were encouraged to indirectly steer the people’s views to secure the State’s interests. With this in mind it becomes feasible to assume that Pickthall’s viewpoints were behind his non-inclusion in the literary canon. However *Marmaduke Pickthall Reinstated: What Canon?* justly restores Pickthall’s position among his contemporaries. The book is a valuable contribution to the field and contains very useful material for students of both English and postcolonial Literature. The argument is very well presented and the detailed discussion revives interest in a novelist and a writer unreasonably overlooked.

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ⁱ Logan, D. (2016). *Harriet Martineau: Victorian Imperialism, and the Civilizing Mission*.

London: Routledge.

ⁱⁱ Martineau, H. (1848). *Eastern Life: Present and Past*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard.

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