

Kersten, Carool. *Islam and Contemporary European Literature*. Edinburgh University Press, 2025.

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Islam and Contemporary European Literature written by Carool Kersten and published by Edinburgh University Press in 2025 features through five chapter, an introduction and a final thought the main crossroads that demarcate, yet complicate, intricate relationships between Islam, as a religion and ideology, and European literature. “A Note on Translation and Transliteration” reflects an academic mindset that prefers to resort to already acknowledged information instead of using a scrutinizing lens, with a better claim, of course, viz., that this point is out of focus.

In the introduction “Studying Islam through Literature” Kersten points out the purpose of the book, “is to suggest literary writings as an alternative way of formulating counter-narratives to the strong identity politics dominated by such reductive interpretations” (2). Texts presented in this book are personal experiences by Muslim and non-Muslim authors that see Islam as a religion in relation to other religious and secular traditions. The book, as the author sees it, is a lens on references to religion, to Islam and Muslims at large, in literary texts. These references, for the author, are interpreted in order to produce religious knowledge, not to be considered religious knowledge itself.

The book gives a panoramic view of Islam by various writers. The first chapter, “West-Eastern Affinities” is on Navid Kermani’s works, a German writer with Iranian roots. Cultural belongings are current references in the second chapter, “Double Genealogies”, which discusses works by Abdelwahab Meddeb who enjoys Tunisian lineage of religious scholars. The third chapter “Andalusian Islamic Footprints” revolves around the deep impact Islam had left on this part of the world. Chapter four, “Europe’s Ottoman Past” features reactions against Islam on the south-eastern edge of Europe. Chapter five “New Humanism” focuses on Mathias Énard’s and Michel Houellebecq’s concerns with Islam and Muslims, though different in approach, yet sometimes similar in thematic concerns.

The introduction discusses concepts such as hybridity, liminality and cosmopolitanism, concepts the author relates to the encounter between Islam and contemporary literatures. The author favors “rooted” cosmopolitanism putting it in comparison with what he sees as “the confined sphere of a particular community”. Some Islamic (Persian) writers show cosmopolitan elements that can be construed as hermeneutics of alterity which stands against identity politics. The author discusses Siad’s *Orientalism* highlighting “blind spots”, as he calls them, and pinpointing criticism of the book.

Chapter one “West-Eastern Affinities” starts defending Navid Kermani, an Iranian German writer, who claims that he learned from one of the founders of the Frankfurt School more than he did from Prophet Muhammad. Being an academic Orientalist is Kermani’s excuse. The author gives a blind eye to Kermani’s being one of the Shiite, a sect that devalues Prophet Muhammad, his household and companions. Kermani’s identification with Kafka, “most prophetic” as Kermani sees him, does not justify his downplaying of the grandeur of the Quran categorizing it with

Kafka's works. In his book *God is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, Kermani dogs footsteps of the detractors of Islam misguidedly. The different natures of Quran and the Bible makes it easy for anyone to understand why each book is hermeneutically received. Kermani's *The Terror of God* is, as its subtitles suggests, a metaphysical revolt, through which Kermani manifests his deep love for God as Kermani's account of Attar and Job claims. The author shows that in Kermani's literary writings the line between autobiography and fiction is blurred. Kermani, for the author, better fits with cultural hybridity than reflects a binary opposite of dichotomous worldview.

Chapter two "Double Genaeologies" features Abdelwahab Meddeb's thoughts on Islam and Muslims. Meddeb, a Tunisian residing in France for the rest of his life, declares himself atheist, something that can easily pave the way for interpreters of religious references in his works such as *Talismano* and *Phantasia*. His doctoral thesis "*Écriture et double généalogie*" endorses his simultaneous belonging to the Francophone and Islamic cultural worlds, thus establishing him academically and opening doors for him. His anti-Islamic thoughts permeate his writings on Sufism and political Islam.

Chapter three, "Andalusian-Islamic Footprints" discusses works by Juan Goytisolo, a Spanish author. He established himself as an expatriate writer who chose to move to Paris and remain there even after political conditions had been improved in Spain. At the late 1990s he moved to Morocco and stayed there for the rest of his life. The chapter sheds light on the impact of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, on the one hand, and of Daryush Shayegan, on the other, on Goytisolo. *Mudejarismo*, or the Islamic-Occidental crossbreeding, is discussed as instances of *Mudejarism* permeates Goytisolo's writings such as *Marks of Identity* (1966), *Count Julian* (1970) and *Juan the Landless* (1975). However, it is difficult, contrary to the author's viewpoint, to put Goytisolo on the same footing with Kermani and Meddeb concerning their relationship to Islam, though his novels *Quarantine* and *Makbara* are Mudéjar texts and have Islamic referents. Epistemic aspects of Goytisolo's creative work such as *Juan the Landless* and *Landscapes after the Battle* are discussed.

Chapter four. "Europe's Ottoman Past", discusses the political history of South-Eastern Europe and Ottoman's expansion into Europe. Representative works such as *The General of the Dead Army*, *The Siege* (1970), *The Three-Arched Bridge*, *Three Elegies for Kosovo* (1997), *The Traitor's Niche* (1978), *The Blinding Order* (1991) *The Palace of Dreams* (1981) by Ismail Kadare (1935–2024), The Bosnian Trilogy: *The Bridge on the Drina*, *Bosnian Chronicle* and *The Woman from Sarajevo* by Ivo Andrić (1892–1975) and *Death and the Dervish* and *The Fortress* by Meša Selimović (1910–82) are discussed, shedding light on, specially Ismail Kadare and Ivo Andrić novels *The Three Arched Bridge* and *The Bridge on the Drina*, cultural hybridity of the eventual Ottomanisation and Islamisation of Albania and Bosnia, including manifestations of religious syncretism and the phenomenon of crypto-Christianity.

Chapter five, "New Humanism", features viewpoints of two French novelists, Mathias Énard and his polar opposite Michel Houellebecq, recipients of the literary prize Prix Goncourt, on political Islam as exemplified by Énard's *Zone* (2008), *Tell Them of Battles, Kings and Elephants* (2010); *The Street of Thieves* (2012) and *Compass* (2015); and Houellebecq's *Platform* (2001), *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) and *Submission* (2015). The author sheds light on the writings of writers such as Muhammad Asad, born Leopold Weiss (1900–92), which influence the different viewpoints held by Muslim and non-Muslim westerners on Islam.

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When all is said, the author, through intertextual webs, (mis)/represents Islam through the eyes of Muslims and non-Muslims. Shedding different lights on Sufism and juxtaposing Islam and Muslims with Christianity crystallize a jeopardized attempt for creating an image of Euro-Islam. A common feature among all writers in this book is emphasizing their own individuality and expressing their own personal interpretation of religious traditions.