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MUSLIM ENGLISH LITERATURE
VOL. 4, Number 1, 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Muslim English Literature

Fakultas Adab dan Humaniora
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Muslim English Literature
Muslim English Literature

Volume 4 Number 1 June 2025
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Binary Oppositions in Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*

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Abstract

This research explores the binary opposition between the East and the West in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* and analyzes how these oppositions reinforce Edward W. Said's Orientalism. The method of the research is using a qualitative descriptive method by identifying, interpreting, and describing specific passages from the novel to examine the depiction of Muslim identity in the limited frame of Western perceptions. Said's theory serves as the theoretical framework for this research. The findings reveal that the binary opposition between the East and the West creates stereotypes in which the East, often associated with Islam, is portrayed as inferior, while the West is depicted as superior to maintain white supremacy. This aligns with Said's argument that Orientalist discourse creates a biased understanding of the East, positioning the West as the standard against which the East and, by extension, Islam are measured in old-fashioned ways. As a result, the narrator appears to adopt an Orientalist viewpoint, representing Islamic traditions as backward while portraying the West as a symbol of rationality and progress to maintain colonial manners. Such representations lead to a perception in which the Islamic world is seen as falling behind the West in terms of both culture and civilization. These stereotypes, rooted in Orientalism, also affect how Muslims view themselves in Western society.

Keywords: *A land of Permanent Goodbyes, Binary Opposition, East and West, Interpretation of Islam, Muslim Identity, Orientalist Studies.*

Introduction

Throughout history, the West and the East have been juxtaposed, resulting in positions of superiority for the West and inferiority for the East. This opposition is rooted in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which explores the relationship between the Western powers—such as France, Britain, and America—and the Orient, a term often associated with the Islamic world. Said argues that the Orient was historically constructed as the "Other," a concept heavily shaped by the Western colonial and imperialist gaze. From the early nineteenth century until World War II, Western powers dominated the East, especially the Middle East, which is home to many Muslim nations (Said, 1995:4). Orientalism is not merely a historical reflection of European colonialism in the Middle East but also a mechanism through which the West sought to define itself by positioning the East—and Islam—against its own image of progress, rationality, and civilization (Gonçalves, 2015:1).

According to Orientalist studies, this Western dominance fostered a situation where the East was perpetually contrasted with the West, often depicted as its inferior

counterpart. The term "Orientalist" refers to scholars and writers who engaged with the Orient, shaping their perceptions of Islam and Eastern societies through a lens of superiority and othering (Said, 1995:2). In this framework, the West's intellectual, cultural, and political authority over the East allowed them to construct the Orient as a space of disorder, backwardness, and weakness. Orientalism was not merely a passive form of study, but an active discourse that reinforced the power dynamics between the two regions. Through this lens, Islamic culture was often reduced to stereotypes of violence, irrationality, and religious extremism, while the West was portrayed as a symbol of modernity and reason (Isa, Yaapar, and Haji Muhammad, 2019:241). These binaries support what Said (1991) called an "excessive and under-subordination relationship" between 'Us,' the West, and 'Them,' the East (Wolf 2015:3). These ideas are not limited to academic theory but are reflected in literary texts, films, and media, where the East is portrayed as dangerous or pitiful and the West as safe and desirable.

In contemporary literature, these portrayals have evolved—not just in terms of the West dominating the East, but also through narratives in which Eastern characters yearn for Western stability and freedom. The West is no longer simply the colonizer; it is portrayed as the savior or redeemer. The Orient, in turn, does not only signify geography but extends to cultural products, values, governance, and especially religion, including Islam (Silalahi 2017:91). A significant element of the Orientalist discourse is its treatment of Muslim identity. Islam is often reduced to a symbol of backwardness, extremism, or victimhood in Orientalist texts. Muslim characters are commonly portrayed as oppressed, violent, or culturally rigid, while secular Western characters are framed as enlightened, free-thinking, and moral. In this binary, Islam is not merely a faith but becomes a marker of the "other"—a religious identity that must be either reformed or rescued. This depiction contributes to the stereotype that Muslim societies are incompatible with modernity or democratic values, reinforcing the East/West divide through a religious lens.

This dynamic is evident in Atia Abawi's novel *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, published in 2018 by Philomel Books. The novel—recognized as one of the most anticipated books of the year by The Huffington Post, BN Teen Blog, and *Kirkus Reviews*—follows the story of Tareq, a Syrian teenager forced to flee his country after a bombing in 2015. Along with his father and sister, Tareq embarks on a journey across several countries in search of a better life, reflecting not only the geopolitical struggles of refugees but also the constructed inferiority of the Muslim-majority East.

Though the narrator herself is the daughter of Afghan refugees and was born in West Germany and raised in the United States, the narration leans heavily toward Western ideals. Tareq's migration is narrated in five stages—Syria (inferior), Raqqa (precarious), Turkey (unsettled), Greece (reliable), and Germany (superior)—each reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes about both place and people. The East is consistently portrayed as unsafe, inhumane, and culturally stagnant, while the West is shown as organized, compassionate, and morally elevated. Muslim identity, while central to the characters, is often framed through the lens of suffering or extremism rather than as a complex, diverse lived reality.

Although it has been several years since the novel's publication, there is limited academic discussion of this particular text. However, this research builds upon earlier

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

studies of Orientalism. Fatima (2016) examined postcolonial life in India and the impact of British dominance. Al-Hafizh et al. (2016) analyzed how language perpetuates racism through binary oppositions such as black/white. A 2017 study explored Said's concept of Western hegemony over the East. While these studies provide essential context, the current research focuses specifically on the binary opposition that constructs stereotypes of East and West and the role of Muslim identity within that discourse.

Binary opposition describes how texts structure meaning through contrasting ideas, often privileging one side over the other (Aprilia & Arianto 2021:68). This study, therefore, analyzes how Tareq's narrative journey—from Syria to Germany—illustrates a consistent opposition between East and West, one that conforms to the grand narrative of Orientalism. The study provides how the novel depicts East and West, and how it conforms to the grand narrative of Orientalism, particularly in its portrayal of Muslim identity. It aims to analyze how inferiority is attached to Middle Eastern and Muslim characters, while superiority is attributed to Western settings and actors. Using Said's theory of Orientalism as the primary framework, and drawing on supporting scholarly articles, this study investigates how *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* reflects and reinforces Orientalist discourse, especially through the lens of identity, geography, and religion.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi, focusing on the binary opposition between the East and the West and how this reflects Edward W. Said's concept of Orientalism. According to Cibangu (2012), qualitative research includes methods such as ethnography, discourse analysis, case studies, open-ended interviews, and literary criticism, all aimed at gaining a deep understanding of cultural phenomena. Similarly, Nassaji (2015:120) notes that qualitative research is inherently comprehensive, drawing from rich data to explore individuals' perspectives, attitudes, and experiences, thereby offering a fuller understanding of the subject matter.

In this study, the researchers identify and analyze passages that reflect Orientalist discourse, particularly those that illustrate the binary opposition between the East—often associated with Islamic culture—and the West. The analysis follows a three-stage process: (1) identifying Orientalist themes in the text, (2) collecting narrative and dialogic evidence that highlights these themes, and (3) connecting this textual evidence to Said's theoretical framework to demonstrate how the text reinforces Western stereotypes of the East.

In addition, this study follows a structured research design that directly addresses the central research questions. As Hakim (2000) emphasizes—cited in Asenahabi (2019:77)—research design involves operationalizing the study's goals while considering constraints such as time, location, and resources. This framework guides the analysis toward uncovering how the novel portrays the East and West and how such portrayals align with the broader narrative of Orientalism.

The analysis traces five stages of migration—Syria, Raqqa, Turkey, Greece, and Germany—each reflecting varying degrees of the East-West binary. Syria is depicted as inferior, Raqqa as dangerous and unstable, Turkey as transitional and unsettled, Greece

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

as relatively dependable, and Germany as modern and superior. These geographic transitions mirror cultural hierarchies, portraying Islamic societies in the East as chaotic, violent, and regressive, in contrast to the West's stability, security, and advancement. The movement from East to West in the novel is framed not only as a physical journey but as a symbolic passage from backwardness to progress.

Furthermore, the narrative presents this transition as a journey toward safety and modernity, reinforcing the stereotype of the East as "Other"—a core concept in Orientalism. Islamic culture is often represented as deficient or in need of reform, while Western society is idealized as a model of rationality and civilization. This dichotomy sustains the Orientalist notion that the West is the rightful leader of global progress, both culturally and morally.

Ultimately, the study will demonstrate how the novel's depiction of East-West opposition contributes to the broader cultural narrative surrounding Muslim identity. By reinforcing stereotypes of Islamic societies as inferior and the West as superior, the text aligns with Orientalist discourse and perpetuates the marginalization of Eastern, particularly Islamic, perspectives. The results and discussion will explore how these representations affect not only Western perceptions of Islam but also how Muslims perceive themselves in relation to Western ideals.

Results and Discussions

Portrayal of East and West

According to Ullah et al. (2021:623), the West, or Occident, is often portrayed in a glorified and positive light, while the East, or Orient, is depicted negatively, reflecting underlying notions of superiority and prejudice. This study examines the portrayal of the East and West in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, focusing on how these depictions emerge through the experiences and conditions encountered in various locations throughout the narrative. The analysis is centered on the narrator's perspective, which reflects an Orientalist viewpoint. As Edward Said explains, an Orientalist is someone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—whether they are anthropologists, sociologists, historians, or philologists (1995:2). Within the novel, the narrator's portrayal reinforces a binary opposition between East and West, aligning with the Orientalist discourse in which Western values, ideologies, and practices are placed at the center. This perspective perpetuates a belief in Western superiority and presents it as an objective, scientific truth (Said 1995:46), contributing to a broader narrative that marginalizes Eastern, particularly Muslim identities.

Portrayal of the East

The Portrayal of Syria: Inferior

This section focuses on the portrayal of the East, specifically Syria, and the construction of Muslim identity as depicted in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* by Atia Abawi. The narrative follows Tareq, the protagonist, who is forced to flee his homeland with his father and sister after a devastating bomb attack. His journey as a refugee, moving from Syria toward Germany, reflects a broader depiction of the East as impoverished, unstable, and inferior—a portrayal that aligns with the binary opposition between East and West, as well as with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. According to Ullah et al.

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

(2021:623), the West is often portrayed in a glorified light, while the East is depicted in negative terms, reinforcing enduring prejudices and notions of superiority. This binary is central to the novel, where the narrator consistently casts Eastern people and their environment in a state of devastation, poverty, and disempowerment. Such depictions also shape how Muslim identity is constructed—often aligning it with weakness, suffering, and cultural deficiency.

The portrayal of Tareq's family reinforces this narrative. They are introduced as living in modest conditions that symbolize economic hardship: "The family's small apartment never seemed to have much, but it was bursting at the seams with love" (Abawi 14). While this sentence humanizes the family emotionally, it subtly reinforces a stereotype of Eastern and Muslim families as materially lacking. According to Singh and Gautam (2020:378), the Orient is often viewed as irrational, inferior, and a mere shadow of the West. The depiction of Tareq's humble home aligns with this view, implying that Muslim life in the East is defined by scarcity, even when counterbalanced by emotional richness.

The trauma of war further shapes the narrative of Muslim identity. After the bombing, Syria is described as a site of ruin:

> He still wasn't used to the mountain of broken concrete and twisted iron... The building's skeletal remains gave a glimpse into the apartments of neighbors who no longer lived there and some who no longer lived at all (Abawi 18).

This imagery not only conveys physical destruction but also a sense of cultural and social collapse. The Muslim-majority society of Syria is portrayed as disordered and unsafe—a stark contrast to the implied rationality and stability of the West. Said (1995:108) argues that Orientalism dehumanizes non-Western cultures by reducing them to sites of dysfunction and despair. Through this lens, Muslim identity in the novel is depicted not as self-defined but as a casualty of its environment—framed by suffering and destruction.

This narrative continues in Tareq's description of his own trauma: "His blacked-out vision slowly transitioned to a blurry haze of grayish mist. He watched as black snowflakes floated down from the sky" (Abawi 15). This haunting imagery contributes to a perception of the East—and by association, its Muslim inhabitants—as victims of chaos and violence. The repeated portrayal of Muslims as helpless and caught in endless cycles of suffering reinforces Western narratives of Islamic societies as needing rescue or reform.

Economically, the portrayal of Syria as impoverished further contributes to the image of Muslim identity as lacking in progress. As Hamati (2018:2) notes, the prolonged conflict in Syria has left the majority of the population impoverished and the national economy reduced by more than half. In the novel, this socio-economic collapse becomes synonymous with the Muslim experience in the East. Rather than offering a nuanced or diverse representation of Muslim identity, the novel largely frames it within the context of displacement, poverty, and dependency.

These depictions contribute to what Said describes as the Orientalist construction of the "Other." Muslim characters like Tareq are framed as passive subjects within a narrative shaped by Western ideologies—victims of their culture, in need of salvation,

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

and contrasted against the West's supposed superiority. As the novel progresses and the characters journey westward, this binary becomes even clearer. The West is associated with safety, order, and modernity, while the East remains tied to instability, violence, and cultural inferiority.

In conclusion, *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* constructs the East—and by extension, Muslim identity—through a lens that aligns with Orientalist discourse. Syria is portrayed as devastated and impoverished, its people as victims shaped by war, and its Islamic culture as emblematic of the East's perceived backwardness. The narrator plays a critical role in reinforcing this binary opposition, shaping reader perception in a way that sustains stereotypes about Muslim societies. Ultimately, the novel contributes to the broader discourse that frames Muslim identity as inferior within a global narrative dominated by Western values and perspectives.

The Portrayal of Raqqa: Precarious Peace and Fundamentalist Fear

While Syria is depicted in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* as devastated by bombings and marked by poverty and fear, the narrative slightly shifts when the characters arrive in Raqqa. Although Raqqa is not under immediate threat of aerial attacks, the narrator introduces a new form of instability—one rooted not in physical destruction, but in the dehumanizing rule of a religious fundamentalist group, Daesh (ISIS). This shift in focus from war-torn chaos to ideological extremism continues the Orientalist framing of the East as inferior, irrational, and in need of rescue, with particular implications for how Muslim identity is portrayed.

In contrast to Syria, where destruction and trauma dominate the narrative, Raqqa initially appears more stable. For example, in one scene, Tareq is permitted to leave the house, a moment of relative freedom:

> "Actually, Ammo, I was hoping that Tareq could go for a shop with me. If that's okay?" asked Musa. "I don't think I feel comfortable with that," Fayed responded. "Let him go!" Tareq's uncle chimed in. "He'll be fine. With the proper clothes, no one will bother him. Besides, the boy is invincible, Fayed. A building fell on him, and he barely has a scratch to show for it." (Abawi 43).

This moment highlights a temporary easing of tension. Unlike Syria, Raqqa is not under aerial bombardment, and day-to-day life includes moments of normalcy, such as shopping. However, this sense of safety is quickly undermined by the ideological oppression imposed by Daesh. While there are no bombs, the threat of violence remains ever-present through religious policing and theocratic control.

The narrator quickly reveals that Raqqa has become the de facto capital of Daesh:

> The city had become the de facto capital for Daesh, al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham—or, as the world started to call it, ISIS. Since forcefully taking the city, the fundamentalist organization had created their own laws, calling them religious but not caring whether they contradicted Islam and humanity. (Abawi 29).

This depiction reinforces a critical Orientalist stereotype: that Islam, when left to its own devices in the East, becomes distorted, militant, and inhumane. The narrator presents Daesh as an embodiment of religious extremism—operating under the name of Islam

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

but violating its ethical core. As Fatima (2016:12) notes, the West often constructs the Orient as a land of militant, fanatical, and barbaric figures, which is precisely the image reinforced through the portrayal of Raqqa's rulers.

Further evidence of this fundamentalist rule is reflected in the strict enforcement of religious appearance and behavior:

> "Why is your beard so short?" The fighter spat on the ground. "You are an old man, it should be this long." He pointed to his chest. "I haven't been blessed with beautiful hair." His father cracked a joke in hopes of easing the tension. It didn't work. "You are a kafer, shame on you!" The other boys came closer to the car, holding their weapons tight. (Abawi 36).

This interaction illustrates how Muslim identity, particularly in the East, is portrayed as rigidly policed and dictated by an extremist interpretation of Islam. The use of the term *kafer* (infidel) further emphasizes how Muslim identity becomes fragmented and weaponized, with Muslims themselves being judged and targeted by other Muslims under authoritarian rule. The portrayal aligns with Alghamdi's (2020:60) observation that Orientalist discourse often casts Arabs—and, by extension, Muslims—as evil, mystical, immoral, and uncivilized.

This authoritarian rule reaches a horrifying climax in a brutal execution scene:

> A battery of bullets ripped through the young man, whose body convulsed. His mother collapsed; his father too shocked to try to lift her back up... He grabbed the limp head by its mane, lifting it from the puddle of blood it had rested in, and ran a sharp blade back and forth across the neck, slashing the flesh. (Abawi 52–53).

Here, the narrator depicts the East not just as fundamentalist, but as barbaric and devoid of humanity. The graphic detail, while aiming to portray the horrors of life under Daesh, also reinforces a long-standing Orientalist trope: that the East is inherently violent and incapable of compassion. This portrayal contributes to a generalized view of Muslim identity in the East as aligned with cruelty and extremism, overshadowing the broader diversity and humanity of Muslim societies.

Although Raqqa's depiction initially seems more stable than Syria's—due to the absence of bombings—the underlying theme of the East as inferior persists. Raqqa becomes a symbol of ideological instability and cultural regression. Liu (2022:70) asserts that the Orient is often seen as backward, barbarian, and uncivilized in the Western imagination, due to an ingrained sense of Western superiority. This notion is evident in how the narrator contrasts the destruction of Syria with the ideological suffocation of Raqqa, both contributing to the larger Orientalist narrative of the East as unfit for modern governance or moral self-direction.

Thus, while Raqqa is portrayed as marginally safer than Syria, it remains precarious. The absence of physical violence is overshadowed by systemic ideological violence. Through the lens of Orientalism, Muslim identity is again distorted—either as victim (as in Syria) or as perpetrator (as in Raqqa). The narrator continues to construct the East as lacking the values of humanity, modernity, and rational governance that the West is later depicted as offering. This sets the stage for further migration, where the

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

gradual movement toward the West is shown as a journey toward order, freedom, and civilization—thus reinforcing the binary opposition central to Orientalist discourse.

The Portrayal of Turkey: Unsettled East

As the narrative progresses from Syria and Raqqa to Turkey in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*, the depiction of the East begins to shift toward a more stable environment. Turkey, in contrast to Syria's bomb-ravaged ruins and Raqqa's ideological extremism, is portrayed as a relatively safer and more livable place. There are no bombings, and the physical and social atmosphere seems less hostile. Nevertheless, the Orientalist depiction of the East as inferior persists, albeit in more subtle and insidious forms.

One indication of Turkey's relative safety is illustrated in the simple act of visiting a mosque:

> When he didn't find work, Tareq visited the Sultanahmet Mosque, or the Blue Mosque—as it was known to tourists. (Abawi 66)

This moment is significant in the narrator's development of the refugee journey. The reference to "tourists" suggests a functioning civil society, where people—including visitors—can move freely. This contrasts sharply with earlier depictions of Syria, where bombing made basic mobility dangerous, and Raqqa, where ideological repression restricted freedom. The mention of a well-known Islamic landmark such as the Blue Mosque also brings attention to the cultural and religious continuity of the Muslim identity in Turkey, albeit framed in a way that exoticizes the East for Western consumption—through the tourist gaze.

Despite this portrayal of relative safety, the narrator's Orientalist lens remains evident in Turkey's characterization. The East continues to be portrayed as backward and morally deficient—especially in its treatment of vulnerable groups such as women. The narrative transitions from depictions of overt violence in Syria and Raqqa to more social and moral critique in Turkey:

> Although, outside the walls of his sanctuary, there were days when Tareq almost felt grateful his mother was not there with them as he witnessed how poor Syrian women were being treated by men who exploited their desperation, poverty, and beauty... The men's eyes were soulless and could turn a body into ice with just a glare. (Abawi 66)

In this scene, the East is represented not as barbaric in the militaristic sense, but as morally and socially corrupt. The women—primarily Syrian Muslim refugees—are shown as victims of sexual exploitation, while the men are portrayed as predatory, soulless figures lurking in the shadows. This depiction reinforces Orientalist stereotypes of Eastern men as lascivious and incapable of ethical restraint, aligning with what Shabanirad and Marandi (2015:24) argue is a self-confirming stereotype by Western observers that the East is "jealous, illogical, harsh, sluggish, and lascivious."

This moment also has significant implications for how Muslim identity is portrayed. While the Blue Mosque initially evokes a sense of cultural pride and religious tradition, it is juxtaposed with an image of moral failure within Muslim societies—specifically, the exploitation of Muslim women by Muslim men. This internal

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

contradiction presents a version of Islam and Muslim identity that is culturally rich but morally compromised in the absence of Western values or intervention.

Furthermore, Tareq's reflections indicate a psychological distancing from the East. He feels "almost grateful his mother was not there" to witness such treatment—an internalized judgment that reflects how Orientalist portrayals not only influence readers but also shape the self-perception of characters who are themselves part of the East. This underscores Said's (1995:21) observation that the Orient is rendered in writing as something fixed, inferior, and incapable of self-representation, with the text leading the reader to conclusions predetermined by the narrator's ideological framework.

Although Turkey is depicted as safer and more open compared to previous locations, the narrator continues to highlight the cultural and moral failings of the East. This steady narrative of inferiority creates a gradient of perceived progress that mirrors the refugees' westward journey—each destination seemingly more advanced and humane than the last. Such a portrayal conforms to the Orientalist binary in which the East remains a region of stagnation and suffering, while the West represents the culmination of modernity, moral order, and civilization.

In conclusion, while Turkey offers a more stable environment, the narrator's portrayal continues to be shaped by Orientalist assumptions. Muslim identity in Turkey is fractured between cultural richness and social regression. The East remains unsettled—not through physical warfare, but through moral and social critique—thus reinforcing the underlying narrative that the East, even when peaceful, is still in need of reform, progress, and ultimately, the West. This portrayal sets the stage for the idealization of Europe in the next phase of the narrative.

Portrayal of the West

The Portrayal of Greece: Reliable West

In contrast to the East, which is described as inferior, it turns out that when the East characters visit the West, they feel much more helped. Thus, whereas in Turkey the East is described as unsettled due to a lack of concern, Greece's situation is exactly the opposite. They work together as volunteers to help refugees, referring to themselves as 'the helper' in the novel's narrative, and are very dependable for them. That is why the narrator portrays the West as more positive, better, and civilized than the East. The narration is also improving in comparison to what they had in the East.

> As Tareq's life came crashing down by a missile in Syria, Alexia's was changing as well. She had come to Greece on vacation, dreaming of ouzo-filled nights on the island of Mykonos. But as she visited family in Athens, she caught a glimpse of the suffering and changed her ferry ticket to land on a different island where she could be of help (Abawi 85).

This study indicates how the character of Alexia is portrayed as willing to change their vacation plans to assist the refugees. When the narrator switched to portraying the West, it seemed that the narration was much more positive, despite all of the inferior things that the narrator had portrayed in the East. According to Hocine et al, Said's claim that orientalists contribute to the creation of stereotypical images in which the West is the'self,' rational, developed, superior, active, and masculine, and the Orient is the 'Other,' irrational, inferior, inauthentic, and feminine (2019:12). Even Alexia is depicted

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

as foregoing her vacation to help the refugees, which her character gradually became reliable and trustworthy for the East. Based on Said as stated in Svendsen, the West was 'always in a position of strength,' which was justified by the Orientals being perceived as 'irrational, depraved (fallen), childish, "strange,"' as opposed to the 'rational, moral, mature, "normal"' Europeans (2018:62). Meanwhile, the previous data describes the East as barbaric, with one of them humiliating people.

The data below show that Alexia, the West's character, is described as more civilized and caring, as evidenced by the description of Alexia. The evidence below shows that Alexia, who is portrayed as a character from the West with an educational background, is more civilized and compassionate than is suggested by this description.

> She'd hugged them, she'd cried with them, she'd sat in silence holding their hands (Abawi 165).

The narrator depicts how the West is portrayed as being concerned about the refugees in Greece. One thing this portrayal does is give the impression that Westerners are good people who always look out for one another. According to Said, the first is the clear-cut division between the West, which is rational, developed, and superior in terms of humanity, and the Orient, which is irrational, undeveloped, and inferior (1995:300).

A very decent place to meet their needs in these community projects for locals and volunteers, supports the West's concern for the East. In the end, it reduced to a binary opposition between livable neighborhoods in Raqqa and Syria. The depictions below explain the history of Greek buildings.

> Less than a kilometer from the beach, more volunteers were on shift at the Athena Hotel, including the young man who would soon save the lives of those on Tareq's boat just by using his eyes. It's not always brawn and muscles that save ships and, in turn, the people on them. The building they were staying in offered the perfect vantage point. And it was definitely more comfortable than the other lookout points on top of dirt hills, with only cars and earth to rest on (Abawi 141).

The buildings in Greece appear to be significantly more modern, whereas the building in the East is portrayed as being either destroyed or uninhabitable, particularly in Syria and Raqqa. Once, it is clear how the narrator builds a stark contrast between the circumstances in the East and the West to revive the binary opposition. The binary opposition between Westerners and the Orient served as both an expansion of a fundamental geographical distinction and a distribution of geopolitical awareness into texts on aesthetics, scholarship, economics, sociology, history, and philology (the world is divided into two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) (Said 1995:12).

Importantly, this positive depiction of the West also affects the construction of Muslim identity. While in the East, Muslims—especially those living under Daesh in Raqqa—are portrayed as fundamentalist, cruel, or morally compromised, in Greece, the Muslim refugees are finally treated with empathy and dignity. However, this also implies that Muslim identity must be validated or redeemed through Western frameworks of care and civility. Said (1995:12) emphasizes that the West's dominance is not merely material but epistemological; it defines how the Orient is seen and understood. In this sense, Muslim identity is filtered through a Western lens that determines when and how

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

Muslims are humanized—often only when they are in proximity to or dependent on the West.

Thus, the binary opposition continues to be reinforced: the East is depicted as dangerous, regressive, and emotionally volatile, while the West is portrayed as progressive, compassionate, and rational. As Said writes, this division is not just geographic but also ideological—a distribution of geopolitical awareness that privileges the West as the cultural and moral standard (1995:12). The narrative's transition into Greece is not just a shift in location, but a reinforcement of Western superiority and Orientalist assumptions about the East and Islam.

In conclusion, the depiction of Greece in *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* serves as a narrative turning point where the West is idealized and the East is further marginalized. Through characters like Alexia and vivid portrayals of Western infrastructure and humanitarianism, the novel reproduces Orientalist binaries that equate the West with progress and the East with decline. Muslim identity, within this framework, becomes legible and sympathetic only when mediated by Western compassion—thus revealing the subtle mechanisms through which Orientalist discourse continues to shape global narratives of identity, belonging, and worth.

The Portrayal of Superior West in Germany

Although the East receives the West's people with trust in Greece, they required more. Thus, narration eventually reaches a better state in Germany, where everything in the narration of the West is far superior to the narration of the East. Before arriving at a positive portrayal of the West, which is narrated in German, it is revealed that the narrator still portrayed Tareq and other refugees as inferior because they were perceived as foreigners migrating to their country, as shown in the data below.

> When Tareq finally reached Germany, no one was clapping, there were no welcome signs at the train station, and no teddy bears were being distributed to small children. Those news clips were from a different time— even if that was just several months before they had arrived. Smiles were replaced with suspicion (Abawi 199).

East is regarded as inferior because Tareq, as the East, expected to be welcomed and accepted right away in Germany. However, it appears that people in Germany are still unable to accept their own and other refugees' existence. Nonetheless, the West's mild reaction to the refugees proved that the West is superior to the East because Tareq and other refugees are not native to their country. The narrator's narrative eventually creates another binary opposition. According to Said (1995), as stated in Ranji, a binary typology of 'rational, developed, humane, superior' (the West) and 'abnormal, undeveloped, inferior' (the East) is constructed (Ranji 2021:1139).

Despite the German people's mistrust of the refugees, the German government directly assisted and facilitated the East characters. In short, the narrator describes how eager the German government is to assist them, implying that the West is superior in this case. The following data indicate this.

> Instead, he spent his days at the facility where the German government had placed him, trying to relax in the absence of soldiers, rebels, Daesh, bullets, shells and missiles. He was

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

> grateful for the many helpers he met there. One even helped him submit an application to reunite them with his father and Salim—the brother God had given back to him (Abawi 199).

The narrator of this data describes how the German government is very responsive in assisting these refugees. When compared to their journey thus far, especially in Syria, Raqqa, and Turkey, they were described in poor condition, making them appear inferior. Meanwhile in Germany, their lives abruptly improved, and they were even assisted by the local government. Furthermore, as stated by Valoojerdi, Said explained that Europeans are attempting to shape their identities in opposition to the inferior other by scrutinizing the hierarchical system in which the West has the upper hand (2020:42). Then the next data described the details of the West's portrayal as a helper for refugees.

> Tareq kept in touch with Jamila, who lived with Najiba and their aunt in Frankfurt as they waited to see whether their asylum application would go through. Muzhgan was sent to a facility for minors—she never received counseling and was terrified every day (Abawi 200).

This demonstrates how the narrator depicts the West in Germany as making it easier for refugees to live there. Meanwhile, in contrast to how the East is portrayed, Tareq and the refugees previously struggled to find a decent place to live. It can be concluded that the West is portrayed as genuinely caring about one of the refugees who is still underage. In the previous depiction, the East is portrayed as cruel and barbaric to anyone, regardless of age. By constructing this binary opposition, the West is attempting to strengthen its position as an advanced and dominant civilization (Aprianti 2022:8).

In fact, even at the end of the German portrayal of the West, the narrator still sees them as superior because of their kindness. The novel clearly contrasts the portrayal of the East in terms of its government, which appears uncaring, with the German government, which is described as very responsive and caring for these refugees. Hence, this portrayal creates a dichotomy between the portrayal of East and West based on how the government handles refugees. According to Said (1995), as stated in Ranji, a binary typology of "rational, developed, humane, superior" (the West) and "abnormal, undeveloped, inferior" (the East) is constructed (2021:1139).

This contrast also ties into the construction of Muslim identity within the novel. While Muslim characters like Tareq, Jamila, and Muzhgan are humanized, their vulnerability and marginalization are only fully recognized and addressed once they enter the Western space. This implies that their dignity and safety are contingent upon Western systems. Said's critique of Orientalism emphasizes that such depictions strip the Orient—and by extension Muslim identity—of agency, reinforcing a worldview in which Muslims are dependent upon Western intervention to achieve safety or legitimacy.

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Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

While Muzhgan's trauma is acknowledged, it also illustrates the limits of Western support. Although placed in a facility for minors, her psychological needs are unmet. Still, the narrator's emphasis remains on the West's institutional effort to help—despite occasional shortcomings. The contrast here isn't one of perfection versus failure, but rather structure versus collapse. The East is characterized by violence and abandonment; the West, by procedure, law, and order—even if it sometimes falters emotionally.

Ultimately, the portrayal of Germany serves as the culmination of the West's civilizational arc in the novel. From the chaos of Syria to the tyranny in Raqqa, the exploitation in Turkey, and the voluntarism in Greece, the refugees' arrival in Germany marks the pinnacle of order, support, and progress. This reinforces the Orientalist framework that depicts the East as a site of crisis and the West as the savior space. As Aprianti (2022:8) explains, the construction of such binary oppositions strengthens the West's position as an "advanced and dominant civilization."

Even when skepticism exists in Germany, it is framed as institutional caution rather than cruelty. The government's interventions and structural compassion further reinforce the narrative of Western superiority. In comparison, the governments of Syria, Raqqa, and Turkey are either absent or oppressive—allowing the West to emerge as both a physical and moral refuge.

The Conformity towards the Grand Narrative of Orientalism

All depictions and portrayals in the previous explanation regarding the binary opposition of East and West were included to some factors that made the characters' narrations, particularly Tareq's, lean toward the West. In the following explanation, the way the West views the East will be depicted through the West characters, which will conform to the grand narrative of Orientalism. Hence, the following data will elaborate on how other narratives conform to the grand narrative of Orientalism, which is a way of thinking based on an ontological and epistemological dichotomy created between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident" (1995:24).

> Tareq reverted his attention to a city he no longer recognized. The streets looked lifeless compared to what he remembered from his last trip to visit his uncle. He saw two men and noticed their long beards and the Kalashnikov rifles hanging off their shoulders. Members of Daesh, the reason the streets were void of color and life. They don't look Syrian, he thought (Abawi 39).

One of the reasons why the narrated character Tareq cannot live there is that the East is portrayed as cruel by the narrator. This is where the narrator's role leaned toward the Orientalist in terms of portraying the East. The narrator's intention is to depict Tareq's main character's perception of the East. According to Said, the Orientalist portrays the Orient in his own society in ways that explicitly challenge someone else's perception of the Orient (1995:273). Hence, the narrator used Tareq as the main character to portray the East as inferior.

Even when the narration is depicting Tareq when he was in Turkey, the character Tareq is narrated as being very determined to leave Turkey, which Turkey itself is included as the East.

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

> "I mean, if we get this payment, with what we have saved. Do you think it's enough to get us to Europe?" He wanted to make his way to Greece sooner rather than later. Things have to be better there, he thought (Abawi 76).

Despite the difficulty of finding extra money to move to Greece, Tareq is said to be even more eager to leave right away because he is concerned about the amount of money required. The narrator has clearly narrated Tareq to make this character appear as if the West is full of hope rather than living in the East. According to Said, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its opposing image, idea, personality, and experience (Said 1995:1–2). Hence of Tareq's character viewing the East as inferior and the West as superior, the narrator used Tareq's character to define the East and the West. All narrations led to the West's view towards the East which then conform the grand narrative of Orientalism. The data is depicted below.

> "We did see the Turkish Coast Guard roaming around. They're likely sending many boats back." "Heartless bastards," Dave, one of the lifeguards, scoffed (Abawi 137).

As previously explained in relation to the East's portrayal in Turkey as wicked and humiliated, the narrator also depicts the West's view of the East. The character Dave represents the West, and he tells the Turkish Coast Guard, "Heartless bastards." Orientalists elevated the East to the center of the binary opposition to the West because of the West's perception of the East. As a result, the narrator's portrayals all contribute to three factors that ensure the narratives in this novel conform to the grand narrative of Orientalism. The first factor is that the narrator describes Tareq's life in the East as difficult, and how the East was eventually portrayed as inferior due to his presence from Syria to Turkey. The second factor is Tareq's reaction to experiencing hardships while living in the East, which eventually leads him to see a much better life in the West, resulting in his determination to make the West his destination country. The final factor is how the West's perspective on the East frequently appears when both interact.

Conclusion

The novel's portrayal of the East and the West results in a binary opposition that reinforces enduring stereotypes: the East as inferior and the West as superior. These portrayals align with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which critiques how the West, through its academic and cultural productions, constructs the East as its opposite—irrational, traditional, impoverished, and even barbaric—while positioning the West as rational, modern, moral, and advanced to maintain white supremacy. Said argues that this framework emerges from Orientalist scholarship that claims the authority to define and study the East through a Western lens, inherently producing a hierarchy of power and knowledge.

An important dimension of this binary opposition is the depiction of Muslim identity, which is deeply entangled with representations of the East. The novel often frames Islam through extremes—either as a source of strict fundamentalism (as seen under Daesh in Raqqa) or as a marker of cultural vulnerability and victimhood (as with the Syrian refugees). Muslim characters are frequently portrayed as either victims of religious extremism or as refugees struggling to reconcile their identity within a secular

Vol.4 No. 1, June 2025 DOI: https://10.15408/mel.v4i1.47202

and supposedly more 'tolerant' Western context. While the novel does not overtly criticize Islam, it often associates Islamic spaces and appearances (e.g., beards, modest dress, mosques) with oppression or suspicion, reflecting the Orientalist tendency to reduce Islam to a symbol of backwardness or danger. This framing contributes to the broader Orientalist stereotype of the Muslim East as being in need of Western rescue—culturally, politically, and spiritually. It fails to offer a nuanced portrayal of Muslim identity as diverse, resilient, and dynamic. Instead, Islam is largely presented as either a threat (when associated with militancy) or a silent background to suffering (when associated with refugees), without much space for Muslim agency or positive representation.

Ultimately, this study confirms that the binary oppositions presented in the novel conform to the grand narrative of Orientalism. The narrator constructs the East as the primary subject of suffering and regression, using the West as a point of comparison to highlight what is lacking. In doing so, the text reaffirms Orientalist discourse, not only by depicting the West as the savior of Eastern refugees but also by framing both Muslim and Eastern identities as inherently dependent, vulnerable, and underdeveloped. From the outset in Syria to the conclusion in Germany, the narrative trajectory illustrates a clear ideological alignment with the Orientalist framework coined by Said—one that deeply intersects with the religious and cultural portrayal of Muslim identity.

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