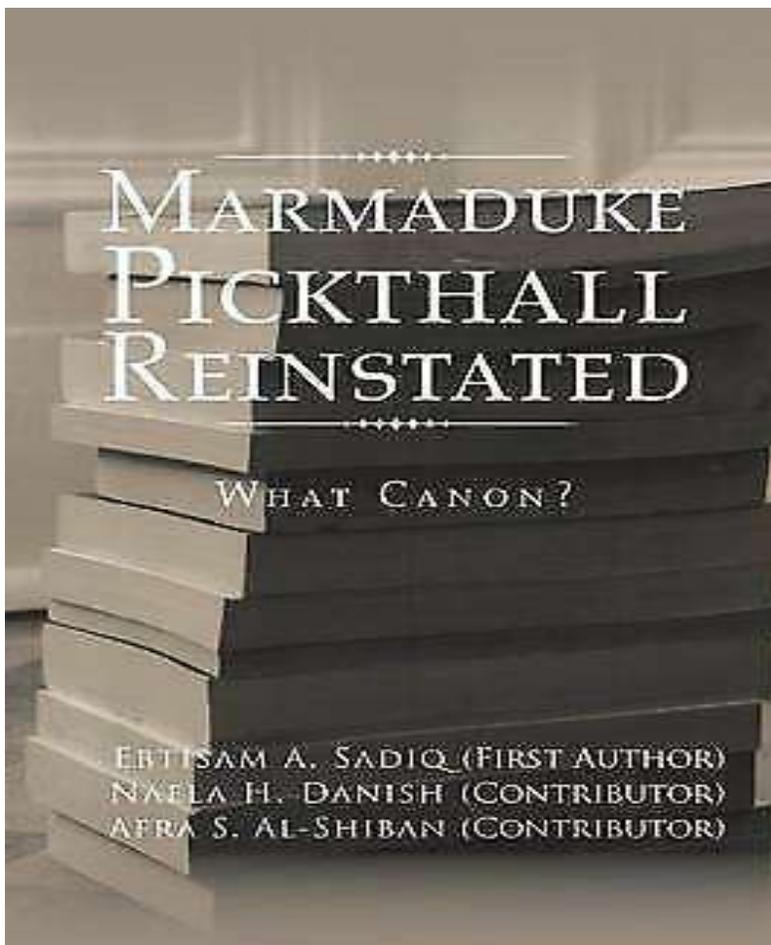


Book Review

Marmaduke Pickthall reinstated: What canon?



Title of book: **Marmaduke Pickthall Reinstated: What Canon?**

Author: **Ebtisam A. Sadiq**

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Reviewer: **Dr. Shadi S. Neimneh** is associate professor of English (Literary and Cultural Studies) at Hashemite University, Jordan.

This book on the British writer Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) consists of an introduction, three main chapters, and a short conclusion. The first chapter is entitled “From Victorianism to Postcolonialism” by Ebtisam A. Sadiq. The second chapter is entitled “Pickthall: The Precursor of Modern Realism” by Naela H. Danish. The third chapter is entitled “From the ‘Prude’ to the ‘Wanton’: Marmaduke Pickthall’s Gallery of Women” by Afra S. Alshiban.

The main argument comes in the introduction and in the core, most elaborate chapter which is chapter one by the primary author Ebtisam A. Sadiq. All chapter writers agree that Pickthall’s reputation was in eclipse for many decades, but they attempt to reinstate him in the British canon of the twentieth century. The writers assert Pickthall’s universal significance by addressing his relevance to feminist and post-colonial debates and by presenting him as a precursor of modern realism. In addition, Pickthall is presented as an early voice in contemporary and late twentieth century cultural studies, in particular the feminist and postcolonial turns. In a nutshell, the book seeks to claim “a canonical place for Marmaduke Pickthall in literary history” (88) as a writer who “was not given his due merit in the literary tenet” (89).

The reasons offered for Pickthall’s problematic reputation include his embracing Islam at one point in his life, his Turkish sympathies, and his translation work on the Holy Koran. Hence, the book writers tackle Pickthall’s numerous Eastern and Western novels as well as his short story collections to prove that he is not simply a late Victorian or an early modernist but an innovator in thought and literary subject matter, and thus a significant figure to consider within realist, feminist, and postcolonial paradigms. Throughout the three main chapters, Pickthall consistently emerges as a literary figure worthy of serious study and critical engagement. On the other hand, the presentation of his novels and short story collections implicitly invites readers to attend to such literary works from the perspective of late twentieth century and contemporary theoretical debates. Pickthall, as the book writers present him, evades easy categorization yet retains essential depth and complexity. Scholars of Orientalism and Eastern studies should find in Pickthall’s works legitimate targets. Feminists, postfeminists, and gender critics should equally find value in his works. And readers trained in European models of realism should also find appealing works in Pickthall’s oeuvre.

In the first chapter, “From Victorianism to Postcolonialism,” Ebtisam A. Sadiq reacts to Edward Said’s dismissal of Pickthall in *Orientalism* as a minor writer of “exotic fiction” depicting “picturesque characters” (p. 5). Sadiq significantly engages Pickthall’s Eastern novels to prove his innocence from charges of prejudiced orientalism. In her reading, Pickthall wrote anti-racial, anti-imperial, and humanist fiction. Moreover, Sadiq contends that faithful and tolerant representation of Eastern characters in Pickthall’s fiction endows them with a voice against hegemonic discourses that oppress subaltern groups. As a result, he employed Victorian realist ideals to serve humanist and postcolonial ends. Implicitly, Sadiq contends that Pickthall deserves more recognition and readership among literary scholars, and particularly in this Eastern part of the world. Reading this chapter on Pickthall’s Eastern novels like *The House of Islam*, *Said the Fisherman*, *Children of the Nile*, *Veiled Women*, among others, one feels the larger project he was working on: building bridges between the two cultures of the East and the West.

What E. M. Forster’s attempt to explore in novels like *A Passage to India* (1924) finds more elaborate and consistent examination in Pickthall’s novels. In addition, Forster’s relative pessimism on the

impossibility of true friendship between Indians and the English colonizers yields to Pickthall's overall optimism and spirit of tolerance. Moreover, Pickthall's Eastern fiction would serve as an interesting counterpoint against the imperial poetry of English writers like Rudyard Kipling whose "The White Man's Burden" (1899) voiced colonial sympathies against the postcolonial ones, whereas Pickthall's Eastern novels gave the Arabs a strong voice. Although some critics view Pickthall as complicit in the colonial project, Sadiq perceives his serious attempts at cultural conciliation, his negotiation of "cultural diversity" and tolerant coexistence. For future research an engagement of Pickthall's works with the postcolonial, poststructuralist theories of Homi Bhabha on cultural encounters and hybridity is worth considering as well.

The second chapter introduces Pickthall as a precursor of modern realism in literature. In the words of Naela H. Danish, "His Western novels, in particular, represent a judicious synthesis of the blatant realism of France and the British sense of decorum, and by achieving this synthesis, he has enriched the realistic tradition" (99). By advocating the case that Pickthall is the precursor of modern realism in British literature (position often granted to Bennett), the book, once again, tries to establish him as a canonical writer. The third chapter by Afra S. Alshiban seeks to canonize Pickthall by looking at his interesting gallery of women depicted in his short story collections. In the words of the chapter writer, "How Pickthall constructs the female and the feminine deserves recognition" (128). His fiction challenges stereotypes, prejudice, and narrow vision. Instead, Pickthall depicts many female characters who are defiant and strong, thus securing sympathy and admiration for his female protagonists. His work is worth studying by multicultural and minority feminists due to his attention to indigenous and "Third World" women.

What this book achieves is making us remember Pickthall not as commonly thought of (i.e. a translator of the Koran or a Muslim convert) but as an erudite novelist whose social, intellectual, and philosophical thought has adequate vision and complexity and should thus be hailed and appreciated. The first chapter was stunningly patient in its explication of Pickthall's novels, and the remaining two chapters never lacked focus or precision. Ultimately, *Marmaduke Pickthall Reinstated: What Canon?* achieved its primary goal: reinstating Pickthall as a canonical writer of merit (away from his status as a Muslim scholar or an eminent translator of the Koran). This book is a good read, one written by ardent female scholars whose harmonious approach and honest passion to reclaim Pickthall to the English canon are never missed. Absolutely, the rich cultural backgrounds of the writers and their ethnic affiliations served their postcolonial feminist project as well as the nexus between feminism and postcolonialism that the writers successfully interrogate. Students of literature, literary theory, Oriental studies, and British Muslim relations should find this book a worthy read.

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