



Cognitive Penetration and Monstrification: Legal Encounters and Implicit Fears in Conservative Muslim Immigrant Life in Sweden

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Abstract

Research on monstrification has broadly examined how Western rhetoric targets marginalized groups, including Muslim immigrants. Much less attention has focused on how religiously conservative Muslim immigrants, especially those affected by war, displacement, and trauma, may develop their own forms of counter-monstrification in response to exclusion in the host society. Drawing on Sweden as a case study, this conceptual article calls for a bilateral approach to monstrification. It employs the cognitive penetration framework, which holds that prior beliefs, fears, and cultural worldviews shape social perception. Because many religious communities accept the existence of supernatural beings, monstrification in such contexts cannot be understood solely as a rhetorical process. To explore this dynamic, the article turns to historical periods in which belief in supernatural beings was widespread. Two Swedish court cases from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries involving alleged encounters with the folk monsters Näck and the Skogsrå illustrate how Christian legal authorities used such beliefs to reinforce institutional power and collective identity. The article proposes that analogous perceptual dynamics may arise within some Muslim subgroups in Sweden and argues that unaddressed fears of otherness may heighten vulnerability to extremist actors seeking to position themselves as alternative authorities. Finally, it suggests that drawing on the complexity of historical folkloric monsters in contemporary monster-film genres may allow cinema to mediate implicit fears within marginalized communities.

Keywords: monstrification; cognitive penetration; Muslim immigrants; implicit fear; folklore and law



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Introduction

The portrayal of monsters in fiction has been suggested to play a significant role in implicitly shaping public perceptions of outsiders and minorities (Erle and Hendry 2020), as well as in evoking potential political and societal threats (Gilmore 2009; Scott 2007). Such representations have been used throughout history by politicians and policymakers to reinforce societal fears and legitimize aggressive countermeasures, contributing to atrocities such as witch-hunting, the Holocaust, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. Historically, monsters have functioned as metaphors for social anxieties, embodying fears of aberration, moral transgression, and instability, traits projected onto real-world figures. This metaphorical use of monstrosity has also been evident in media narratives in more recent times, following 9/11. Interestingly, terrorists are frequently portrayed as monstrous, animalistic, or pathological. Within the legal-emergency framing of the “War on Terror,” such depictions not only monsterise but also facilitate narratives that justify surveillance, violence, and systemic oppression of innocent minorities (Steuter and Wills 2010).

Taking Sweden as an example, the politicization of Muslim identity, especially in debates on gender equality, religious dress, and crime, demonstrates these theoretical dynamics in practice. Despite Sweden’s official post-racial discourse, which removed explicit references to race from legislation, structural racism arguably persists through practices such as racial profiling and discriminatory policing. These practices produce racially coded outcomes without explicit racial language (Nafstad and Parsa 2025). Studies show that non-white individuals, including Muslims, frequently experience disproportionate police attention, harassment, and suspicion based on visible markers such as skin color and religious attire (Wigerfelt et al. 2014). This form of racialization is deeply embedded in political and legal institutions, which often frame immigrants as threats to a homogeneous Swedish identity (Khayati 2017). The rise of ultranationalist movements and Islamophobic rhetoric—reflected in both the increase in hate crimes and the electoral success of anti-Muslim parties—has further entrenched this marginalization (Gardell 2015). Law enforcement practices justified in the name of national security or migration control often target Muslim communities disproportionately, creating a cycle of mistrust and alienation. Furthermore, a recent study shows that Swedish political and media discourse increasingly constructs Muslims as the undesirable “Other,” with Diversity Barometer data indicating that such narratives reinforce structural Islamophobia and hinder social cohesion (Groglopo et al. 2025).

Given their minority status, Muslim immigrants may feel especially exposed to threat. They may perceive the homogenizing pressures of Swedish secular society as more dangerous than any threat they are believed to pose. This perception of a *juridical monster* becomes visible in events such as public Quran burnings in Muslim

neighborhoods (figure 1). These acts, carried out by anti-Muslim movements under heavy legal protection and framed as exercises of constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression, can reinforce a sense of vulnerability and state-sanctioned hostility. It is therefore plausible that Muslim minorities in Sweden experience a *dual monstrification*: they are portrayed as societal threats while simultaneously perceiving the legal order of their new country as itself threatening or monstrous.

Most studies of monstrification, whether rhetorical or symbolic, have examined how marginal groups are framed as threatening monsters. Much less attention has been paid to how these same groups may, in turn, perceive dominant, culturally homogeneous majorities as monstrous. This conceptual article calls for a **bilateral approach to monstrification**, as constructions of otherness can emerge on both sides of a social divide.

2. Theoretical Framework

Monstrification refers to the discursive and symbolic process through which individuals or groups are framed as threatening, deviant, or morally corrupt. In the context of Europe's intensifying debates around immigration and secularism, Arab—particularly Muslim—immigrants increasingly occupy a precarious position. As religious and cultural “Others” within an ostensibly secular European order, they often become frequent targets of public suspicion and institutional scrutiny. Girard's theory of the scapegoat explains how societies under stress project collective anxieties onto a sacrificial figure or group, whose exclusion restores a sense of cohesion (Girard and Freccero 1986). Bauman's concept of the stranger offers a complementary frame, describing individuals who exist in a liminal state—neither fully inside nor outside the social body—whose indeterminacy challenges the modern drive for order and classification (Bauman 1990). Foucault's (2003)



Fig.1 Images from a Quran burning as an act of freedom of expression taking place in the Skärholmen neighborhood in Stockholm on 26.4.2024 following Friday prayers. On the left side, the anti-Muslimism activist is burning the Quran, holding a cross, and doing an act of exorcism of “the devil's book” in front of a police car that escorted her. On the right side, police officers are holding back Muslim residents at a distance.

concept of the monster adds a juridico-political dimension: monsters are legal anomalies—figures that violate societal norms and thus require regulation. In this context, Muslim immigrants may be seen as a slowly growing “juridical monster”—legal subjects whose presence is perceived as a challenge to the moral logic of secular law and values. Interestingly, this framing echoes with older colonial discourses used to discipline racial and sexual deviance (Rai 2004). In other words, Muslim minorities may be constructed as deviant in relation to mainstream Western liberal norms, including secular and heteronormative ideals. Such framing can portray cultural difference as incompatible with a “healthy” social order and can, in turn, be used to imply an inherent tendency towards violence.

Interestingly, these theoretical propositions on monstrosity rhetoric have parallels with the representational model and the psychological explanatory model (Eriksson 2021; Mittman and Hensel 2018). These models focus on what monsters can be said to signify and visualize in film, literature, art, mass culture, and folklore. Monsters can embody a wide range of social issues and aspects of human life, including gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, politics, economics, and disease, to name a few. They have served to personify perceived threats and to express cultural anxieties around specific themes and pressing societal concerns. In this sense, monsters always reflect the problems and fears of their own time by representing something other than what they seem. Interestingly, several Nordic folkloric nature spirits, together with witches, were subject to legal scrutiny in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These should be understood as historical representations of problems and perceived threats that the legal system sought to control (Eriksson 2021; Mittman and Hensel 2018).

The effectiveness of monstrification rests on implicit social biases that predispose individuals to view outsiders as inferior or threatening, referred to as ingroup–outgroup bias. Ingroup–outgroup bias, defined as the tendency to favor one’s own group over others, plays a central role in this process. It shapes perceptions and evaluations based on group membership (Hewstone et al. 2002). Such bias facilitates the symbolic construction of “others” as less human, less moral, or less trustworthy, thereby reinforcing exclusion and boundary-making. These distorted perceptions particularly affect ethnic and religious minorities, as stereotypes amplify mistrust and impede meaningful social interaction. In multicultural societies, these dynamics hinder integration and can undermine the psychological well-being and social participation of immigrant communities.

Importantly, such biases are not confined to dominant or majority populations; they are a universal feature of human social cognition. All social groups—whether powerful or marginalized—are susceptible to ingroup–outgroup bias,

particularly under conditions of uncertainty, perceived threat, or social distress. This universality means that monstrification is not a unidirectional process imposed solely by dominant groups onto minorities. Rather, any community that experiences vulnerability, cultural pressure, or existential anxiety may construct its own symbolic “monsters” in response. Monstrification, therefore, represents a flexible socio-psychological mechanism through which groups navigate fear, assert moral boundaries, and make sense of hostile or unfamiliar environments, regardless of their relative social status.

2.1 Cognitive Penetration as a Theoretical Basis for Bilateral Monstrification

Addressing implicit fears within religious Muslim immigrant minorities remains deeply challenging. These anxieties are often reinforced by ongoing discrimination and exacerbated by misunderstandings surrounding the cause of distrust in legal authorities. For many, and particularly refugees, this mistrust stems from traumatic experiences of war, oppression, political instability, and persecution by legal institutions in their countries of origin, where systems of governance were often associated with violence and injustice (Hall and Kahn 2020; Molla 2024). Such traumatic experiences can amplify biased social perceptions that exist among groups within any society. The link between ingroup–outgroup bias and **cognitive penetration** is crucial for understanding how such distortions persist. Cognitive penetration refers to the way prior beliefs, emotions, and expectations unconsciously shape perceptual experience (see Block 2023). When filtered through ingroup–outgroup bias, this mechanism can cause individuals to misinterpret neutral behaviors of outgroup members as threatening or deviant. Such perceptual distortions extend beyond personal interactions to institutional trust, where minorities may view legal authorities as hostile, while majorities may perceive minority groups as inherently suspicious. Evidence of such experiences among Muslim minorities in their encounters with Swedish social workers has been discussed in Eliassi’s study, *Orientalist Social Work: Cultural Otherization of Muslim Immigrants in Sweden* (Eliassi 2013).

The mistrust of social workers reported by some Muslim minorities in Sweden is rooted in the ways social-work institutions may pathologize and stigmatize their families through Orientalist and culturalist frameworks. Social workers tended to interpret issues such as gender inequality, parenting, or family conflict as products of a “backward” Muslim culture, contrasting it with an idealized Swedish model of modernity and equality (Schlytter and Linell 2010). Consequently, Muslim families were disproportionately subjected to punitive practices, surveillance, and normalization projects aimed at assimilating them into Swedish cultural norms. Such practices reinforce structural inequalities and exclusion, while denying

Muslim families the same trust and legitimacy afforded to white Swedish families. For example, Muslim households are rarely considered suitable foster homes for Swedish children (Eliassi 2010). It is important to note that these studies and related efforts have shed valuable light on this issue and may have contributed to more reflexive practices within social work agencies. However, much work remains, as additional factors are likely at play. Indeed, counter-terrorism policies in Sweden and the UK increasingly require social workers to participate in anti-radicalization efforts—a development that risks transforming social work into a policing profession and undermining its human-rights mandate (Finch et al. 2022).

This systemic otherization explains why many Muslim families perceive social workers not as allies, but as agents of cultural domination and control, thereby eroding trust in welfare institutions. This reality reinforces biased perceptions, facilitated by cognitive penetration, that frame social workers and welfare agencies as discriminatory bodies disguised as benevolent saviors—echoing the dual nature of the Swedish folklore beings *Näcken* and the *Skogsrå* (see the following section for further elaboration). Such imagery may also shed light on why false claims and viral clips alleging that Swedish social workers “kidnap immigrant children from their families to indoctrinate them” gained traction. Interestingly, the folkloric motifs of children being lured by malevolent monsters further parallel the implicit anxieties of religious Muslim immigrants in this context.

3. Historical Perspective

Historical analyses of monstrification in media and legal systems have illuminated the explicit strategies used to shape public opinion, yet far less is known about how monstrification operates implicitly within communities that accept the existence of supernatural beings. Drawing on the principle of cognitive penetration, it becomes analytically meaningful to investigate monstrification within religious rather than solely political contexts, particularly in historical periods when supernatural monsters were widely taken as real.

Although Nordic folklore contains numerous supernatural entities, this study focuses on *Näcken* and the *Skogsrå* for three primary reasons. First, both figures are closely linked to the rise of Christianity in Sweden and appeared most prominently as dangerous or morally corrupting during periods when the Church held strong legal and doctrinal authority. Second, each was framed as an agent of sin, sexual transgression, or diabolical influence, making them valuable for understanding how religious institutions construed and disciplined moral threat. Third, their liminal behavior and shapeshifting capacities parallel attributes ascribed to jinn in Islamic cosmology, allowing for a structurally meaningful comparison across religious traditions.

Moreover, sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Christian court records provide rare documentary evidence of how religious authorities interpreted alleged encounters with these beings. Näcken and the Skogsrå therefore serve as historically grounded examples of monsters embedded within a religious worldview. Against this background, the following section examines two early modern Swedish legal cases involving Näcken and the Skogsrå, illustrating how religious and judicial authorities interpreted such encounters and used them to regulate behavior and reinforce moral boundaries.

3.1 Näcken

Näcken is one of the most significant supernatural monsters in Nordic folklore, appearing not only in legends and art but also in early Swedish legal records. The earliest known description occurs in the *Erikskrönikan* (fourteenth century) and later in Olaus Magnus's *Historia om de nordiska folken* (1555/2001), where Näcken is depicted as a liminal water spirit whose music lures humans toward danger (figure 2). Across regional variations, water remains his defining element—whether he appears at mills, jetties, or streams—and many of his recorded names, such as *kvarngubben* (“the mill old man”) or *bäckamannen*, reflect this association (Schön 2010; Stattin 2008).

Näcken's primary folkloric function was to act as a dangerous boundary guardian. He was believed to seduce or deceive people into the water, often through shapeshifting into alluring or innocuous forms such as a log, silver bowl, or horse (Häll, 2013). These transformations underscored his role as a morally ambiguous being capable of tempting humans toward physical and spiritual peril. During the

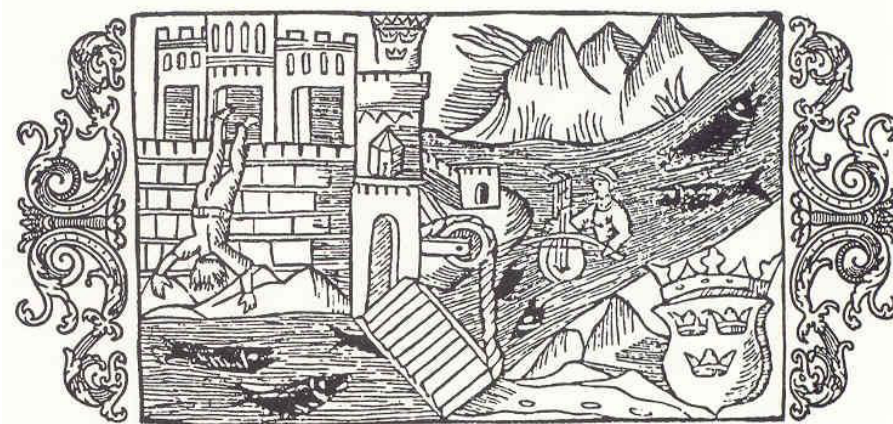


Fig.2 Painting by Olaus Magnus (circa 1510-1555) depicting a man leaping from a tower into a stream while *Näcken* plays his musical instrument.

early modern period, religious authorities increasingly interpreted Näcken through a Christian moral framework, casting him as a diabolical agent and integrating him into broader concerns about sin, sexuality, and disorder (Häll 2013; Schön 2010). Such interpretations shaped how alleged encounters with Näcken were addressed in legal contexts, illustrating how supernatural beings mediated fear, morality, and juridical control in Swedish society.

3.1.1 Näcken's case

Anna Larsdotter appeared before an extraordinary session of the district court (häradsrätt) in Jönåker, Södermanland, in April 1629. An unmarried maidservant from Näs in Bärbo parish, she was charged with having given birth to a frog-like fetus and with having become pregnant without any involvement of a man. She swore before the court that she remained a virgin. When asked how she had become pregnant, Anna explained that it must have been caused by water she had drunk from a forest brook, which had somehow brought “something evil inside her,” after which she became swollen and pregnant.

The trial resumed in November, when she was summoned for further interrogation. The court now suspected that she had, in fact, had sexual intercourse with someone and demanded the father's identity. Anna eventually admitted that a man had been involved, describing him as a “black man” (“en svart man”) who had approached her one evening while she was driving cattle home from the forest. She stated that he had raped her. Faced with this ambiguous account, the court struggled to determine whether the matter concerned a natural crime or a supernatural encounter and therefore referred the case to the recently established Svea Court of Appeal (1614). Although the original appellate records have not survived, later sources discuss the court's conclusions.

The Court of Appeal determined that Anna had “given birth to a monstrem and confessed that Satan or Näcken had violated her and had unlawful intercourse with her.” The “black man” was thus reinterpreted as a shape-shifting Näcken—a clear demonization of the case. Whether this reframing originated with Anna or, more plausibly, with the judges remains uncertain. The latter is the more likely explanation, as the higher court situated the event within a theological framework familiar to them, at a time when anxieties about witchcraft and sorcery were increasing. By recasting the assailant as a folkloric being with diabolical associations, the court aligned the case with broader concerns. The case became about the perceived moral dangers posed by contact with supernatural forces. As Häll (2013) notes, both frogs and sexual encounters with the Näcken frequently appeared in witchcraft narratives of the period, although the major Swedish witch trials occurred somewhat later.

Anna's final sentence is unknown, but it was likely mitigated because she was

ultimately deemed insane. Had the case been treated explicitly as witchcraft, the outcome would probably have been execution (Häll 2013, 417–424).

3.2 *Skogsrå*

The *Skogsrå* occupies a similarly prominent place in early modern Swedish folklore and appears not only in oral tradition but also in religious and legal texts. One of the earliest formal discussions is found in Archbishop Olof Svebilius's widely used commentary on Luther's catechism, in which the *Skogsrå* is listed among the supernatural beings that Christians were expected to reject (Svebilius 1714). Her description varies across regions, but she is most often portrayed as a beautiful woman whose true nature is revealed by an animal tail—often that of a cow or horse—or, in some areas, a hollowed wooden back resembling a decayed tree trunk (Häll 2013). Like *Näcken*, she is a liminal being capable of altering her appearance and misleading those who encounter her.

In many accounts, the *Skogsrå* does not appear directly but distorts the wanderer's perception, leading him astray or inducing dreamlike encounters that dissolve upon invocation of God's name. Such narratives reflect both her erotic appeal and her capacity to threaten moral order (Figure 3). These attributes made the *Skogsrå* the subject of legal concern. Early modern records demonstrate that alleged sexual relations with her could be prosecuted as serious crimes, sometimes carrying the threat of execution (Häll 2013; Granberg 1935). Her presence in court cases reveals that religious and judicial authorities regarded her not merely as a folkloric curiosity but as a potentially destabilizing force requiring moral and legal intervention.

3.2.1 *Skogsrå's case*

A second case illustrating the legal significance of alleged encounters with folkloric beings dates to 1708, when the soldier Sven Jönsson was brought before a military court for desertion during a march. This was not his first offense; he had previously been flogged for deserting, making his defense all the more consequential. Sven claimed that he had been lured into the forest by the *skogsrå*. Unlike conventional depictions of the being as a beautiful woman with an animal tail, he described her as half human and half horse—a highly unusual variant.

Colonel Sparfeldt, one of the officers involved, speculated extensively about the creature's nature, even suggesting that she might have originated from an act of bestiality between a farmhand and a horse. On this basis, he concluded that the *skogsrå* was a monster. Yet because Swedish law did not explicitly regulate sexual relations with monsters, he forwarded the matter to the *hovkonsistorium* in Stockholm, the ecclesiastical high court. The question before the court was not



Fig. 3 Skogsrå as depicted in a drawing held in the Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet), produced according to the soldier's description during the 1708 case.

the existence of the skogsrå but whether Sven was telling the truth and how his case should be judged.

The ecclesiastical authorities interrogated Sven, who initially maintained his story. However, a letter from his parish priest described him as habitually untruthful. Lying was treated as a grave sin and could be regarded as more serious than desertion itself. Confronted with moral and institutional pressure, Sven eventually confessed that he had fabricated the story to avoid severe military punishment.

When summoned for his final hearing, Sven claimed that the priest had pressured him to retract his account. The prison officials had warned him of a previous case involving relations with a “Sjörå” (sea spirit) who had been executed. Fearing a similar fate, he denied everything.

3.3 Interpretation of the Legal Cases

Why did Swedish courts devote attention to cases involving alleged encounters with beings such as Näcken and the Skogsrå? The answer lies in the seventeenth-century judicial revolution, during which Sweden shifted from a locally administered legal system to a centralized and professionalized one closely tied to the consolidation of state power. Law became a tool not only for governance but for enforcing Lutheran orthodoxy. In this context, sexual transgressions and breaches of religious norms were understood as threats to the spiritual and moral welfare of the entire realm, capable of provoking divine punishment. This heightened moral vigilance helps explain why even seemingly folkloric encounters demanded judicial intervention.

As the legal order became increasingly rigid, folkloric beings acquired new ideological significance. Their liminal status—neither fully human nor fully supernatural, neither within nor outside society—posed symbolic challenges to a system striving for categorical clarity. Courts did not attempt to try these beings themselves; rather, they prosecuted individuals who claimed to have interacted with them, thereby reasserting the boundaries that such encounters were perceived to blur. Sexual elements in these cases drew particular scrutiny, aligning with broader efforts to regulate morality during the great power era.

It is important to recall that Näcken and the Skogsrå were not singular characters but categories of beings with multiple regional variations. To illuminate how religious authorities interpreted such encounters, this article temporarily treats them as if they constituted distinct social groups whose perceived practices and worldviews diverged from dominant Christian norms. Folklore supports this, as not all encounters were harmful, and some folk stories describe them as beneficent. Yet courts consistently construed them as sources of moral danger, allies to the devil himself. Framing them as out-groups clarifies how theories discussed earlier, such as Girard’s scapegoat mechanism, Bauman’s notion of the stranger, and Foucault’s conceptualization of the monster as a juridical anomaly, become applicable. Seen through this lens, ecclesiastical authorities can be understood as reinforcing their moral authority by regulating behaviour and suppressing contact with symbolically “deviant” groups.

The broader witchcraft crisis further intensified judicial sensitivity to such cases. During the seventeenth century, charges of harmful magic (*förgörning*) became fused with allegations of heresy and pacts with the devil (Bergenheim 2020; Oja 1997). Sexual relations with supernatural beings were therefore interpreted

not only as moral violations but as potential indicators of demonic influence. As a result, encounters involving Näcken or the Skogsrå were incorporated into a broader framework of spiritual threat.

Taken together, these cases reveal how the justice system approached liminal figures as symbolic disruptions to social order. Individuals associated with such beings were treated as existing at the edge of the moral community—dangerous not only because of what they claimed to have done but because their narratives destabilized accepted boundaries. Cognitive penetration provides a useful explanatory framework here: beliefs and fears shaped both the accused's perceptions and the authorities' interpretations. Judicial punishment thus served a dual function, simultaneously restoring legal order and symbolically purging the threat these encounters were thought to represent.

4. Contemporary Parallels

Adopting cognitive penetration as a bilateral framework for understanding monstrification allows for meaningful comparison between early modern cases involving Näcken and the Skogsrå and contemporary social dynamics. On one level, it highlights how Swedish society continues to construct symbolic boundaries: whereas seventeenth-century Sweden, guided by Christianity, framed dissenting practices as influenced by literal monsters, today's predominantly secular society may frame conservative Muslim viewpoints as a cultural threat requiring political or legal regulation. However, the present discussion focuses on the less examined direction of monstrification: how some religious Muslim communities may, in turn, perceive the secular Swedish majority as threatening. Because this dimension remains understudied, a bilateral approach is crucial for addressing the complexity of these multifaceted social dynamics. Applying cognitive penetration here helps illuminate how prior beliefs, existential concerns, and religious worldviews may shape perceptions of the secular environment as morally dangerous or corrosive, and how these perceptions may contribute to implicit forms of monstrification.

Recent research shows that discrimination and social hostility toward Muslim refugees and immigrants can seriously undermine their trust in legal and institutional systems. Alim, Due, and Strelan (2021) demonstrate that refugees who have fled war and hardship are especially affected. When they encounter subtle or overt discrimination in Europe, many develop strong feelings of mistrust, frustration, and fear, which can also lead them to avoid public services and view state authorities with suspicion. In such contexts, religiosity often becomes a source of stability and emotional protection. Garcia-Muñoz and Neuman (2013) argue that, in Europe, religious commitment among immigrants functions less as a bridge

to the majority society and more as a buffer—a way of preserving identity and cohesion when facing exclusion. This buffering role can heighten the relevance of supernatural beliefs. Indeed, many Muslims view jinn, black magic, and the evil eye as real forces capable of influencing physical and mental well-being, and regard both medical and religious interventions as appropriate responses (Khalifa et al. 2011). Together, these studies suggest that discrimination in a secular and often homogenizing environment may be interpreted through cultural and religious frameworks that give meaning to experiences of hostility. For some, the dominant society may come to feel metaphorically “possessed,” its actions shaped by forces that seem opaque and threatening. These beliefs can therefore become part of how marginalized groups make sense of exclusion and navigate life in their new home country.

4.1 Parallels in Implicit Fears among Muslim Immigrant Communities

Based on the evidence and arguments presented thus far, it is reasonable to hypothesize that religiously conservative minority groups—such as some segments of Sweden’s Muslim immigrant population—may experience dynamics similar to those observed among Christian communities in earlier Swedish history. This is particularly relevant for immigrant groups that continue to rely on Islamic law as a core moral and legal framework. The Islamic legal system was developed between the seventh and ninth centuries CE, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This system was built by Muslim scholars as a response to emerging social challenges during the expansion of Islam to new regions. For many Muslim immigrants in Sweden today, these laws continue to regulate essential aspects of family life—including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and conflict resolution. As such, they play a significant role in shaping both personal identity and collective belonging within religious Muslim communities, navigating the Swedish secular legal environment.

The historical parallel lies in the role of institutional authority. Just as the Swedish Church once operated as a dominant legal and moral institution—defining norms, regulating conduct, and shaping everyday life—Sharia-based frameworks can function as alternative systems of guidance and arbitration within some Muslim communities. In both contexts, religious authority extends beyond individual belief to influence legal practices, social expectations, and family structures. Unlike the Church’s former monopoly, however, Sharia-inspired norms in contemporary Sweden exist within a secular legal environment. Arguably, this can produce friction between state legislation and religious prescriptions. These tensions indicate that negotiations between religious authority, personal identity, and societal integration remain ongoing. These negotiations echo earlier Swedish experiences while exposing the complexities of multicultural modernity.

For certain conservative Muslim groups, the secular Swedish mainstream can be experienced metaphorically as a “forest”—a disorienting space in which one risks losing moral direction, encountering temptations, and facing symbolic “monsters.” Here, figures such as the Skogsrå or Näcken serve as useful metaphors for perceived threats to identity, continuity, and moral order.

4.2 Näcken and the Skogsrå as Analogues to Jinn

In Islamic thought, jinn are understood as supernatural beings with agency, capable of shapeshifting, inhabiting liminal spaces, and exerting influence over human affairs. Their association with seduction, deception, and ambiguous morality strongly echoes the traits attributed to the Skogsrå and Näcken in Swedish folklore. These parallels matter not because the beings themselves are equivalent, but because both function as culturally available templates for interpreting threat, uncertainty, and moral disorder.

From the perspective of cognitive penetration, such ontological commitments can shape perception at both implicit and explicit levels. For Muslims who carry a vivid cosmology of jinn, experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or cultural estrangement in Sweden may be unconsciously filtered through frameworks that already accept unseen or morally ambiguous forces. Just as early modern Swedes interpreted misfortune, seduction, or juridical transgression through the lens of folkloric monsters, contemporary religious minorities may interpret them similarly through a cultural lens that includes the jinn. The perceptual field is therefore not neutral: it is structured by pre-existing beliefs, emotional dispositions, and inherited categories of fear.

This does not suggest that religious Muslim immigrants literally perceive folkloric beings in Swedish landscapes. Rather, cognitive penetration makes it possible for folkloric narratives and Islamic cosmologies to overlap, producing hybrid interpretive frameworks. Within such frameworks, the secular Swedish state can appear symbolically “possessed” by Näcken- or Skogsrå-like attributes—powerful, unpredictable, and morally alien. Such metaphors arise not only from discriminatory encounters but also from the asymmetry of power between minority communities and state institutions. In this way, cultural memory, religious ontology, and lived experience converge to shape implicit fears and perceptions of authority.

The question of whether beings like the Skogsrå or Näcken “really existed” thus becomes analytically secondary. Although there is no evidence that these figures inhabited the material world, they were experientially real to those who claimed to encounter them. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century testimonies reveal accounts delivered with conviction and sincerity, often under oath. Dismissing such testimonies as mere superstition obscures the psychological and cultural conditions that made these experiences meaningful.

A useful comparison is sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is a cross-cultural phenomenon in which individuals are temporarily unable to move while falling asleep or waking. It is widely documented that in sleep paralysis, many perceive vivid and often terrifying figures. Such visions typically align with culturally available images of fear: demonic beings in Christian contexts, witches in early modern Europe, and jinn in Muslim groups (Jalal 2021). Under conditions of stress, shame, or altered consciousness, early modern Swedes may likewise have experienced visions of Näcken or the Skogsrå. The expanding power of the Church as a legal authority—capable of defining norms and enforcing them through trials and punishments, including capital sentences—likely intensified these experiences. From a Jungian perspective, such pressures may have activated suppressed emotions, prompting the projection of folkloric figures as a psychological mechanism for managing tensions between imposed order and inner worldviews (Jung 1981). In light of this, it is reasonable to consider whether comparable dynamics may emerge among religious Muslim immigrants who face social pressure, discrimination, and the constraints of conservative community norms.

5. From Cognitive Penetration to a Monster-Film Strategy

Everyone likely recognizes a monster when they see one; the challenge emerges when we attempt to define what actually constitutes a monster, what distinguishes it beyond its capacity to frighten. Monsters raise questions of form and function, of cultural meaning and symbolic content. Etymologically, the word *monster* derives from the Latin *monstrare* (“to show”) and *monere* (“to warn” or “to remind”), reflecting its origins in Roman antiquity. Related Latin terms such as *prodigium* and *portentum* similarly convey notions of foretelling or prophecy. In ancient Greek, the cognate concept was *teras*, referring to an apparition or a bodily anomaly, with a semantic range overlapping the Latin forms. The modern term *teratology*, the study of malformations, derives from this Greek root. Across these traditions, monsters—*monstrum* in Latin and *teras* in Greek—were understood not merely as aberrations but as signs or omens, embodied in unnatural forms that carried a message or warning to humankind (Asma 2009; Atherton 1998; Eriksson J. 2010).

Monsters appear in virtually all historical periods and across all known civilizations. Every society has generated its own monstrous figures and conceptual vocabulary for describing them. Within monster studies, therefore, the term *monster* is best understood as a broad, cross-cultural category that encompasses diverse local expressions, names, and mythologies—each shaped by its historical moment and continually transformed over time (Eriksson 2021; Mittman and Dendle, 2012; Mittman and Hensel 2018).

Drawing on the bilateral approach to monstrification proposed in this article,

we have argued that cognitive penetration is central to understanding the symbolic construction of monstrous “others”. Whether in the form of the Swedish Näckén and Skogsrå or their contemporary analogues, jinn in Islamic thought, these figures endure, and new ones continue to emerge. Various scholars have shed light on how monstrous imagery and rhetoric have been utilized by political actors, media institutions, and legal authorities to advance specific agendas. This has significantly contributed to making the public more resilient to explicit manipulation. However, the interaction between such figures and the implicit fears that circulate within social groups—and the question of how these feedback loops might be disrupted—remains insufficiently understood. This gap points to the need for tools capable of making implicit fears visible and open to reflection. In the following section, we turn to cinema, and particularly the monster-film genre, to examine its dual role as a medium that can both perpetuate implicit biases and, when used differently, help reduce implicit fear and foster tolerance toward outgroups.

5.1 Monster Filmmaking for Social Tolerance

Cognitive penetration helps illuminate monstrification dynamics but also introduces complexity. A religious authority figure who sincerely believes in malevolent supernatural beings, and a secular authority that uses monsters metaphorically to portray certain social groups as dangerous, cannot be treated as equivalent cases. Each requires different analytical approaches and different strategies for mitigation. Yet both share a common foundation: fear and the instinctive drive for survival. Fear provides a productive lens for examining how fictional narratives—across both film and folklore—have historically dealt with monsters.

Scholars have long argued that monster films implicitly reinforce fears of otherness and perceived threats to social order. But can an imagined creature on screen genuinely influence real-world perception? Cognitive neuroscience suggests that it can. While the rational mind dismisses cinematic monsters as fictional, the implicit brain does not reliably distinguish between imagined and real events. It responds to both in ways that affect perception, emotion, and memory. This insight underpins a growing branch of social neuroscience that uses film as a naturalistic stimulus to study shared cognitive and affective processes (see Jääskeläinen et al. 2021).

These studies highlight cognitive penetration in action. Moral commitments shape responses to on-screen dilemmas (Bacha-Trams et al. 2017); group identity alters perception in competitive scenes (Nummenmaa et al. 2014); professional background modifies interpretation of identical situations (Lahnakoski et al. 2014). Viewers’ prior beliefs also influence narrative comprehension (Yeshurun et al. 2017) and implicit biases toward outgroups (Afdile et al. 2019; Afdile and Jääskeläinen 2020). Taken together, this evidence indicates that even when reason

distances itself from myth—our embodied cognitive systems continue to process fictional narratives as socially meaningful and emotionally real.

Fear elicited by a cinematic monster can engage affective and cognitive processes that overlap with those triggered by real environmental threats. This supports the proposition that folkloric beings such as the Skogsrå and Näcken could have been experienced as genuine during altered states of consciousness. This has significant implications for the cultural transmission of fear. If films are processed as simulations of lived experience, cinema becomes a powerful medium for taking part in shaping, negotiating, and reinforcing collective beliefs.

When minority groups are misrepresented or subtly associated with monstrosity, film may reinforce biased perceptions of the social world, contributing to exclusion and mistrust. Yet cinema also holds transformative potential. Films can provide a platform for representing the implicit fears of minority communities, validating these emotions as part of the human experience rather than dismissing them as irrational. In doing so, cinema can convert monstrosity into a space for dialogue, recognition, and mutual understanding.

There is value in revisiting folkloric monster narratives to reimagine the contemporary monster-film genre in more nuanced ways. In original folk accounts, encounters with Näcken or the Skogsrå were not uniformly malevolent; despite ecclesiastical condemnations, these beings could also be helpful or protective. This ambivalence is echoed in broader folklore traditions, such as the benevolent jinn in stories like *Aladdin* or in other tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Such narratives remind us that monsters need not be framed exclusively as embodiments of evil.

Delegitimizing monsters, whether as elements of the imagination or as metaphors for social groups, is fundamental to the process of monstrification. Mainstream monster films, often shaped by genre conventions and audience expectations, tend to reproduce a binary of good versus evil. If monsters remain culturally imaginable only as threats, then the capacity to tolerate symbolic or social “others” may also be constrained. Put differently, intolerance of monsters at the narrative level may mirror difficulties in tolerating real-world outgroups.

Alternative cinematic models already exist. *The Shape of Water* (2017) and, more recently, *Frankenstein* (2025) by Guillermo del Toro present forms of romantic or familial relationships with a monstrous figure, while Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook* (2014) reframes the monster as something to be acknowledged and domesticated rather than destroyed. Such films demonstrate how the monster can function not only as an object of fear but also as a catalyst for empathy, negotiation, and emotional growth. Such approaches offer a productive path forward: by treating monstrosity as something that can be lived with rather than eradicated, cinema may contribute to broader cultural practices of tolerance and, ultimately, to the slow and fragile work of rebuilding trust across divergent worldviews.

This trajectory also underscores the need for filmmakers from diverse cultural and social backgrounds—particularly those whose communities have been the subjects of monstrification—to be given opportunities and institutional support to tell monster stories from their own perspectives. When production companies rely primarily on formulaic, thrill-driven uses of the monster genre, they risk reinforcing reductive stereotypes and narrowing the imaginative possibilities of the form. By contrast, enabling a wider range of storytellers to reshape what the monster can mean invites more complex, authentic, and culturally grounded narratives—ones capable of illuminating the world's ambiguities rather than exploiting its fears.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has proposed a bilateral approach to monstrification, arguing that cognitive penetration offers a productive framework for understanding how both majority and minority groups construct representations of threatening “others.” The historical cases of Näcken and the Skogsrå demonstrate how religious authorities in early modern Sweden mobilized supernatural categories to regulate behavior, reinforce institutional authority, and manage anxieties surrounding sexuality, morality, and social order. These cases highlight that monsters need not exist materially to have real social effects; they work as culturally mediated figures that shape perception, motivate legal action, and structure communal fears.

Drawing a parallel to contemporary Sweden, the analysis suggests that similar cognitive mechanisms may operate among religiously conservative Muslim minority groups who interpret experiences of discrimination or exclusion through ontologies that include the jinn. Such perceptual schemas may contribute to an implicit monstrification of the secular state, complicating efforts to build trust between minority communities and public institutions. This does not imply a direct equivalence between historical and contemporary contexts, but it underscores how deeply embedded beliefs, when combined with social stressors, can shape perceptions of threat in ways that exceed rational awareness.

This conceptual proposal is particularly relevant for conservative Muslim immigrants who have experienced war, displacement, or state violence. Research shows that refugees facing discrimination in Europe often develop heightened mistrust toward legal and institutional authorities, especially when past trauma already undermines their sense of safety (Alim et al. 2021). In such contexts, religiosity can function as a psychological buffer rather than a bridge to integration (García-Muñoz and Neuman 2013). For some, this strengthened reliance on religious worldviews may also involve a greater role for supernatural beliefs, including jinn, as part of their interpretive framework (Khalifa et al. 2011). These beliefs may shape how individuals make sense of ongoing hostility or exclusion

in their new home country, allowing them to process structural discrimination through culturally familiar categories. From a cognitive-penetration perspective, this suggests that encounters with a secular and perceived hostile majority may be unconsciously filtered through a supernatural ontology, in which the dominant society can appear metaphorically “possessed” or driven by malevolent forces.

These dynamics are unlikely to be uniform across all Muslim groups in Sweden. Individuals who have lived in Sweden for multiple generations may experience state institutions as more predictable and less threatening. This remains an empirical question, however, and invites further investigation. Intergroup relations within immigrant communities add further complexity. The “black sheep effect,” whereby in-group norm violators are sanctioned more harshly than outsiders, provides an additional layer for understanding internal regulatory practices (Marques and Paez 1994). Among Muslim immigrant groups, conservative subgroups may engage in social policing aimed at discouraging assimilation, implicitly framing those who adopt secular norms as threats to collective identity. Future research on how such internal sanctions interact with implicit monstrous metaphors could significantly advance understanding of minority experiences of fear, cohesion, and resistance.

This study is limited by its reliance on historical analogies and conceptual reasoning rather than empirical data. While cognitive penetration provides a plausible explanatory framework, contemporary Muslim perceptions of legal authority require systematic ethnographic, psychological, and interdisciplinary investigation. Nonetheless, the conceptual contribution offered here is significant: by foregrounding the role of implicit fears and supernatural ontologies in shaping minority perceptions of state authority, the article identifies a critical but understudied dimension of social integration. Understanding how fears are formed, reinforced, and potentially manipulated is essential for mitigating vulnerability to extremist narratives that capitalise on distrust and marginalisation.

Finally, the article underscores the potential of cinema as a medium for mediating implicit fears. If the brain processes fictional monsters as emotionally real, films can either reinforce harmful stereotypes or open space for dialogue, empathy, and recognition. By moving beyond rigid good-versus-evil frameworks and drawing on the complexity and ambiguity of historical folkloric monsters, contemporary monster films may offer a cultural pathway toward tolerance. When minority fears are expressed and acknowledged rather than dismissed, filmmakers from diverse cultural backgrounds can help reimagine the genre as a platform for nuanced and authentic social reflection. However, without systematic efforts from legal and governmental authorities in the host country to address structural discrimination and bilateral monstrification, the contribution of cinema to any broader healing process will remain limited.

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