Occidentalism / Orientalism in Reverse:
The West in the Eyes of Modern Arab Intellectuals

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The Occidental Studies Unit at the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies, Saudi Arabia is an indication of the interest of the Arab-Islamic World in "Occidentalism". But what is Occidentalism? Does it really exist (as a phenomenon that is opposed to Orientalism)? And how do Arab literary and non-literary writers view the West? In this article, I begin by exploring different views of Arab and western thinkers towards the existence of the phenomenon of "Occidentalism" or "orientalism in reverse" (the dehumanized representation of the west), in an attempt to find a partial answer to the question some American intellectuals have been asking since 11 September 2001: why do they hate us?

I examine in detail two types of Arab Occidentalism: literary and non-literary. I analyze selected modern Arabic novels that have adopted three Fanonian ways in dealing with the Arab self and the western Other: unqualified assimilation, return to indigenous values, and the fighting phase. The novelist Taha Husain heartily welcomes thorough assimilation as he believes that Egypt belongs not to the Arab world but to the West. Seven Arab social critics are also discussed (Qutb, Al-Jabiri, Arkon, Al-Azm, Amin, Afghani, and Kawakibi). The first four writers have responded to the project of modernity (which is inaccurately associated with the west) in different ways: Qutbs sees western modernity as enslaving and dehumanizing, Al-Jabiri and Arkon equate it with cautious reform, while Al-Azm sees it as universal and enabling. The thoughts of Azm are extremely secular, Arkoun's moderately secular, Qutb extremely Salafi, and al-Jabiri's reconciliatory. Amin, Afghani, and Kawakibi tend to use three different techniques to manipulate the information they have about the West in order to achieve their reform agendas (2). Amin uses "double discourse," Kawakibi "selectivity," and Afghani "exaggeration."

My argument is that Arab intellectuals (literary and non-literary) view the west ambivalently. Few of them see it in a totally negative or positive way. Yet many others see the West simultaneously as an obstacle against and a model for reform. They appreciate some aspects of Western civilization and criticize others. None of the three writers believed in the presence of a religious war between the Muslim world and the West. They hoped for more opportunities to engage in dialogue with Westerners. And this dialogue, I strongly believe, can hardly be achieved without the establishment of more centers for the academic unbiased study of the West.

Does Occidentalism exist?

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said believes that "to speak of scholarly specialization as a geographical field is, in the case of Orientalism, fairly revealing since no one is likely to imagine a field symmetrical to it called Occidentalism" (382). He concludes the book with the statement: "I hope to have shown my reader that the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism" (382). Akeel Bilgrami, too, argues in his review of Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit's book, *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (which inspires the title of my paper) that "it is hard to find anything like *the same* interest [of Orientalism] in Buruma and Margalit's claims for Occidentalist ideas." (388, emphasis added) Occidentalist ideas (hostile to the west), Bilgrami notes, emerge in Muslim populations out of a sense of material inferiority and humiliation rather than economic superiority (381). He adds that Orientalism reduced the orient to an exotic wondrous object, and this is something he finds missing in the case of Occidentalism.

However there are a number of intellectuals (Western as well as non-Western) who believe that there exists a domain of knowledge called Occidentalism, though each one of them has more than one understanding of it. In their *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, Buruma and Margalit use the term "Occidentalism" to describe the "dehumanizing picture of the west painted by its enemies" (5). It is an image of "the west as something less than human, [something] to be destroyed, as though it were a cancer" (42). For Buruma, the Occidentalist view holds that the West is a bourgeois society, addicted to creature comforts and self-interest, a society of cowards who prize life above death. As a Taliban fighter

once put it during the war in Afghanistan, the Americans would never win, because they love Pepsi-Cola, whereas the holy warriors love death (Buruma 49). Occidentalism also includes "hostility to the City, with its image of rootless, arrogant, greedy, decadent frivolous cosmopolitanism; to the mind of the west manifested in science and reason; to the settled bourgeois, whose existence is the antithesis of the self-sacrificing hero; and to the infidel, who must be crushed to make way for a world of pure faith" (Buruma 11). For Buruma, Islamists conceive the west as worshiping the false gods of money, sex, and other animal lusts. In this barbarous world, the laws and desires of humankind have replaced the kingdom of God. The Arabic word for this state of affairs is *jahiliyya,* a word used by the Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb to describe "modernity" and which can mean idolatry, religious ignorance, or barbarism. Buruma argues that Islamists believe that the West is full of infidels who are nothing but whores and pimps needing to be vanquished in a holy war. Wahhabi believers, such as Osama bin Laden, view the presence of American female soldiers in Arabia as an act of defilement.

The Occidentalist image of the city is particularly powerful and helps to explain why the World Trade Center was a target of the September 11 terrorists – the modern City of Man is hateful to the Holy Warrior, who sees it as sinful, a soulless whore (in which sex and the city are inextricably intertwined). To the Occidentalist, the city is "an inhuman zoo of depraved animals consumed by lust" (Buruma 45). Another form of Occidentalism is the opposition to modernity as associated with the West. A conference was held in Japan in 1942 with the topic of discussion: "how to overcome the modern". Westernization, many participants believed, resembled a disease that had infected the Japanese spirit, and Japan should make common cause with the Germans to defend their civilizations against the New World. There was much talk about "unhealthy" specialization in knowledge, which had fragmented the wholeness of Oriental spiritual cultures. Western science was to blame; likewise capitalism, the absorption into Japanese society of modern technology, and notions of individual freedom and democracy. All the participants agreed that traditional Japanese cultures were spiritual and profound, whereas modern Western civilization was shallow, rootless, and inimical to the development of creative power. The West, particularly the United States, was coldly mechanical, a machine civilization without spirit or soul.

Wang Ning believes that Occidentalism predominates among countries in the Arab World, and has entered contemporary discourses of culture, literature and criticism (57). Occidentalism manifests itself in different forms in different places: in the Middle East and the Arab countries where Islamic cultures are dominant, Occidentalism is an antagonistic form that strongly opposes Western hegemony symbolized by the United States. Ning contends that while Occidentalism, as opposed to Orientalism, has been regarded as a "decolonizing" anti-colonialist strategy in Oriental and Third World countries, we should not simply prioritize one concept at the expense of another. Rather we should confront the fact that, in the current age characterized by cultural pluralism and different forces coexisting with each other, cultural relativism has attracted people's attention. No culture can supersede another; hence any move to emphasize the superiority of a national or regional culture might well result in new cultural oppositions or clashes.

In the Arab world, the originator of the concept of Occidentalism is Hassan Hanafi (1935-), the director of the Institute of Philosophy of the University of Cairo and a former researcher at the United Nations University in Tokyo. In 1992 he published a book in Arabic of 881 pages entitled *Muquaddima fi ilm al-Istighrab* (*Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism*). Hanafi's project consists of objectifying the Occident in the same way that westerners used to do it with the Orient, with the purpose of recreating an independent Arabic intellectual tradition. It also aims to desanctify in the eyes of the Arabs such figures as Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Marx. It was Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm (1934-), a Syrian intellectual who used the term "Orientalism in reverse" to refer to Occidentalism. Al-Azm is a severe critic of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. He claims that Said essentializes the West through the same strategies that the West uses to essentialize the Orient.

In his dissertation "Orientalism in Reverse: Iranian Intellectuals and the West, 1960-1990" (1990), Mehrzad Boroujerdi argues that Orientalism in reverse is an attempt on the part of Oriental intellectuals to articulate a counter-discourse to Europe's Oriental narrative in relation to the native, the barbarian, and the underdeveloped. The "other" always functions for both sides as a hypothetical viewer or what Derrida has referred to as a "culture of reference" (282). For Al-Azm, Orientalism in reverse, like Orientalism, is a historical phenomenon of the post-World War II period. It is rooted in the twentieth-century tradition of anti-colonial and anti-

imperialist struggles; a reaction to the colonialist strategy of mimicry, that "authorized version of otherness" (58). He explains that psychologists and political scientists agree that at times of crisis, the quest for "identity" becomes a self-conscious problematic. This "crisis" emerged in the aftermath of World War II when the old colonial empires were superseded by a new hegemonic geometry of power, producing a crisis of identity that was common to all non-Western countries. The former colonies became new nation-states. Third World nationalist thinkers, artists, leaders, and movements came to dominate the terms of discourse, narrative, imagery, and rhetoric, as well as the aspirations of millions of their own people. In response to their previous condition of subalternity, they embarked on a practice of othering the self.

Orientalism in reverse is a prime example of this process. The essentializing categories of Orient and Occident allowed for imaginative geography to operate in reverse; the Orient is envisioned as an intimate and well-defined totality, while the Occident and Westerners denote the absolute others. The West has been viewed as the other or more narrowly (but inappropriately) as the enemy. Such perspectives have been appropriated from the West: even in his newly acquired capacity as the speaker, author, and actor, the Oriental continues to be over-determined by the Occidental listener, text, and audience. To borrow Gramsci's terminology, the beleaguered Oriental comes to wage his "war of position" within the territory of the contestant (192): the marginalized intellectual of the Orient borrows a Western doctrine (i.e., nationalism) to challenge the latter's imperialism.

Frantz Fanon can be seen as an inaugurator of the counter-discourse, Orientalism in reverse. His *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967) changed the terms of discourse; the West, and not the native, was constructed as the other. As Suha Sabbagh has put it in her book, *Going against the West from Within*: "This is "a resolution to the colonial problem on the level of the text" (3). Fanon criticizes the colonized for having internalized the others' depiction of them as "inferiors." For him, the colonized could never be away from the dominating "they." He called for the abandonment of this internalized inferiority complex for the sake of liberation. A counter-narrative (in addition to political resistance) has to redefine the boundaries of the colonized self and the colonialist other. The colonized or "the wretched of the earth" would be intellectually free the moment they

abandon Western definitions, descriptions, and vocabularies. Perhaps this is why Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a critique of the social consciousness of the natives.

In this sense, Orientalism in reverse is not the opposite of Orientalism, as the former is primarily concerned with how to escape the sense of inferiority to the west. Acquiring the right of narrative is one way of speaking out. Furthermore, Orientalism in reverse differs from Orientalism in terms of its knowledge/power configuration. It does not match Orientalism's grounding in academic and institutional support. It is more dispersed, elusive, disarticulated, and fragmented than Orientalism. Orientalism in reverse does not follow Orientalism's dependence on such sciences as biology and anthropology. Instead, it bases its claims to truth on such normative fields as theology, mythology, mysticism, ethics, and poetry.

Fanon argues that there are three evolutionary phases through which native intellectuals must pass in order to develop a positive attitude toward the self and its other. The first phase occurs during the period of "unqualified assimilation," during which time "the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power" (222). The second has been characterized by a return to indigenous cultural values; this serves as an alternative to the Western value system that usually fails to satisfy the native intellectual's quest for recognition and acceptance. In this phase, Fanon remarks that: "past happenings of the his native childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory; old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies." (222). The final phase is what Fanon calls "the fighting phase," during which native intellectuals, after having tried to lose themselves in and with the people, will on the contrary shake people's hands.

In his book, *Orientalism and the Arab Literary Responses* Mohammed Nasser Shoukany traces the three levels of intellectual response to Western cultural hegemony in modern Arabic fictional discourse, from the beginning of the colonial experience to the post-colonial era. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Arabic novel entered into a cultural dialogue with the English Orientalist tradition, an intercultural and intertextual

confrontation between the West and the Arab World as reflected in their narratives. Taha Husain's *Adib* (*A Man of Letters*) (1935) exemplifies the first phase of assimilation and disappointment. The romantic phase or return to nativism and rejection of Western values can be seen in Tawfiq al-Hakim's *Usfurmin al-Sharq* (*Bird from the East*) (1938), and Yahya Haqqi's *Qindil Umm Hashim* (*The Lamp of Umm Hashim*) (1944). The third phase can be manifested through the fictional narratives of Yusuf al-Qu'ayd's *Yahduth fi MisrAlan* (*Occurring in Egypt*) (1977), and Muhammad Mustjab's *Min al-Tarikh al-Sery li-Nu'aman Abdel Hafiz* (*From the Private History of Nu'aman Abdel Hafiz*) (1986).

In *Adib* Taha Husain writes about an Oriental intellectual who remains fascinated by the West ever since he was a student in the Egyptian University. He determines to journey to France as a student, but before leaving his native country, he divorces his wife and cuts off any connection with his native people. In Paris, he embraces Western values, and he goes through a period of what Fanon calls "unqualified assimilation". Even during the difficult years of World War I and the Anglo-French occupation of the East, he does not feel any sympathy for his native land. Paris for him is the place where he finds knowledge and peace of mind and, even more importantly, the physical love from a French woman called Hélène. In his *Mustakbal Al-thaqafa fi Misr* (*The Future of Culture in Egypt*), Husain believes that

> Egypt does not belong to the East, but to Europe and the West. In order to become equal partners in civilization with the Europeans, we must literally do everything that they do; who wants the end must want the means. […] Desiring intellectual and psychological independence, we naturally must want the means, namely, studying, feeling, judging, working, and organizing our lives the way they do. (1)

During his final days in Paris, the Egyptian intellectual experiences a mental disorder when he imagines that the French media and the people are conspiring against him. He adores the West, but believes that Paris in particular does not appreciate him. Eventually he dies of insanity, failing to understand why he had become an outcast of both Europe and the East.

Bird from the East depicts a quest of an Egyptian student who fails to reconcile his Oriental spiritual yearning for the absolute with the western materialistic spirit. In the opening scenes of the novel, he stands in the rain contemplating the statue of the French poet Alfred De Musset at the corner of a Parisian major square. His French friend André, the son of the working class family hosting Muhsin, awakens him from his confused dream about the French poet and the haunting memory of his childhood and family in Egypt. André reminds the Oriental romantic dreamer of the rain, and invites him to attend the funeral procession of a friend of his host family. Following the funeral ritual, Muhsin and André meet some French intellectuals and enter into a dialogue with them about religion and the mystical Orient. The idealistic Muhsin, however, never feels comfortable in Paris except in music halls and the theater where he finds escape from reality and the daily struggle for survival in a materialistic world. Surprisingly, Muhsin falls hopelessly in love with a French girl named Suzy, who works as a ticket-seller in the theater he frequents; but he cannot speak to her and ask her out. After watching her for months and following her from place to place, he decides to move to the hotel where she lives. Eventually he meets her, and as a token of his love, he buys her a parrot, a symbol of his romanticism. Suzy, however, does not believe in romantic love as much as he does. One day, Muhsin finds out that she is having an affair with the theater manager, a discovery that shatters his illusions about her. While trying to overcome his disappointment in love, Muhsin meets his double image, Ivanovitch, a dying Russian intellectual living in exile who persuades Muhsin to go back to the Orient where man can find spiritual fulfillment and eternal salvation from Western materialism.

In looking at Arabic non-literary Occidentialism, I begin with the theological perspective of Sayyed Qutb, which conceptualizes modernity as a human device that stands at sharp odd with the human nature (12). He regards modernity as a social pathology that leads to the enslavement of people not only to each other but also to their lower physical instincts. Modernity dehumanizes people, transforming them into machines of material production and neglects completely the spiritual side of human nature. Individuals are deceived by the material production of modernity because they are convinced that ultimate good and happiness are attained by the possession of more and more of material things. Modernity tends to sever any link between religion and the more mundane aspects of life:

religion is nothing more than part of the narrow, private, and domestic spheres. Hence people are alienated from their innate human qualities. Qutb conceptualizes modernity as a catastrophic condition of life that inevitably leads to the extinction of the human race. Qutb's ideas here remind one of the critique of Occidentalism.

Mohammed Abid Al-Jabiri, however, conceptualizes European modernity through analyzing its negative effects on the Arab World. He believes that colonization and the endless interests of the west in the Arab World are the most crucial factors that led to backwardness (3). Al-Jabiri sees that while modernity has its positive sides, it has also equal negative aspects of colonization and exploitation of other nations in the world. He concludes that the devastating effects of colonization are difficult to cure. Even though al-Jabiri sees this dark side of European modernity, he is optimistic about the future of the Arab World. He sees the future of the Arab World as dependent on the fruits of European modernity, which has to be synthesized with Arabic/Islamic traditions and identities. Mohammed Arkoun has a similar perspective on modernity. He believes in the devastating effects of globalization and the colonization of the economy and the indigenous cultures of the Arabic/Islamic world. He also attacks the ideological deviation of modernity in the West, which seeks more domination and subjugation of Third World countries.

Whereas Qutb, Arkoun, and al-Jabiri are all aware of the dark side of modernity more than its bright side, Sadik Jalal al-Azm has a different perspective; he believes that there are no political, cultural, or even historical differences between the Arab World and Europe. He considers the Arab World as a natural extension of Europe, and he believes in the absolute universality of the European experience. Al-Azm assumes that the only obstacle that prevents the Arab World from embracing full modernity is religion and its irrational thought. Modernity, for him, is a universal experience that could be successfully replicated every time and any place.

In *Occidentalism in Late Nineteenth Century Egypt* Alaa Bayoumi highlights some of the main characteristics of the Occidental discourses used by three Egyptian writers (Amin, Kawakibi and Afghani) to shape the Arab readers' views of America and the west at the end of the nineteenth century. The Occidentalist views of the three writers show that modern Arab Occidentalism should be approached as part of a discourse on Arab

reform and awakening. Such discourse has dominated Arab thinking since the beginning of the nineteenth century when Arabs and Muslims confronted the weakness of their civilization in comparison to the west. Bayoumi argues that these Arab and Muslim intellectuals tended to use three different techniques to manipulate the information they had about the west in order to achieve their reform agendas. (2) Amin used double discourse, Kawakibi selectivity, and Afghani exaggeration. Both Afghani and Amin, when addressing Egyptians, emphasized certain information they had about the West that could serve their agendas and downplayed other images that could hurt their goals.

The second manipulative technique was selectivity, which was repeatedly used by Kawakibi, who praised some aspects of Western civilization and criticized others. For instance, he praised Western political thinking but criticized Western foreign policies. Qasim Amin too chose to neglect certain issues that heavily hindered the progress of the Muslim world but did not fit his interests. For instance, he considered authoritarianism to be the main source of Muslims' problems, but he chose not to address it. Similarly, Amin encouraged Muslims to imitate Europe's cultural and social habits.

The third manipulative technique was exaggeration. Afghani exaggerated the weakness of British soldiers and the willingness of Egyptians to revolt against them in order to encourage Muslims to revolt against the British. Kawakibi exaggerated the ability of Islam to spread in the west and the ability of Western Muslims to gain power and reform the East.

Many Arab writers used binary opposition systems to describe the relationship between the East and the West. Qutb portrayed the Western individual as materialistic, selfish, tough; in contrast, Easterners were kinder, emotional, yet unwilling to defend their rights or their opinions even if they felt that they were right. Qasim Amin was the only writer among them who encouraged his readers to learn more about the West and discouraged them from rushing to making broad generalizations. Very few of the writers surveyed in this article believed in the presence of a religious war between the Muslim world and the West (as Samuel Huntington argues in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*). Even Afghani, who used religion to motivate Muslims against the British, was willing to talk to Westerners and used a more open discourse when addressing them.

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