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## POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND MODERN ARABIC LITERATURE: HORIZONS OF APPLICATION

### I. Introduction

One of the ironies of postcolonial studies is that colonial discourse analysis began with several theorists who studied colonialism in the Arab world: Albert Memmi (in Tunisia), Frantz Fanon (in Algeria), Edward Said (in the Levant). However, the work of those critics led to the development, in the 1980's and 1990's, of a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that rarely takes Arabic literary and cultural production into account. Rather, the latter has remained largely the province of Middle Eastern Studies departments, rooted as they are in the kind of scholarship critiqued in Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the book which inaugurated the field of "postcolonial studies."<sup>1</sup> Theorists have since then paid considerable attention to South Asian, African, and Caribbean literatures, and even to the literatures of settler colonies such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, while some have argued that mainstream American literature "is paradigmatic for post-colonial literatures everywhere" (Ashcroft et al. 2).<sup>2</sup> What those widely dispersed "emergent" or "new" literatures have in common that is not shared by Arabic literature is that they are written in English and French, the languages of the former colonial powers, and are often designated in ways that reinscribe colonial relations in terms of neocolonial cultural dependency ("Commonwealth," "New Literatures in English," "Francophonie"). Symptomatic of this cooptation is the interesting fact that Arabic literature of French expression by Maghrebian and Levantine writers is routinely incorporated in Francophone studies, housed as it is on the margin of the French curriculum (and is therefore part of "postcolonialism"), rather than in Arabic or Middle Eastern Studies, where literature by their Arabophone compatriots is studied, often with little attention to colonial history.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Magda al-Nowaihi's discussion of some of the ways in which the field of Middle Eastern Studies, and even the term "Middle East" itself, replicate colonial assumptions and serve neocolonial interests (282-5). On the history of the term "Middle East," see Adelson 22-26.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Buell and Peter Hulme elaborate on Ashcroft et al.'s argument for the post-colonial status of canonical U.S. literature. The argument has been challenged by Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, Anne McClintock (293-5), Ella Shohat (102-3), Aijaz Ahmad ("The Politics" 9), and Malini Johar Schueller (214-5).

<sup>3</sup> This is partly a by-product of the structure of the area studies model of geopolitical

In other words, postcolonial studies profess to make the balance of global power relations central to its inquiry, yet seems to inscribe neocolonial hegemony by privileging the languages (and consequently the canons) of the major colonial powers, Britain and France. Even the substantial colonial and postcolonial writing in other European languages such as Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, is no less excluded from postcolonial debates than texts written in the languages of the colonies: Arabic, Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu, not to mention the oral literatures of Africa, Native Americans, and Australia's Aborigines, which pose a serious challenge to postcolonial theories based on contemporary notions of textuality.

While the term "world literature" has been used in pedagogy more or less synonymously with "Western literature" (Hassan 40-3), the rubric of "postcolonial literature" has displaced "Commonwealth literature" and "Third World literature" as the dominant critical and pedagogical paradigm by which Anglo-American literary scholarship constitutes the cultural production of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. "Postcolonial literature" is distinguished from the older categories by affiliation with a specialized set of theoretical propositions that not only recognize the limitations of Western knowledge, but make of those limitations an object of analysis. Despite the limitations astutely exposed by Ann McClintock and Ella Shohat, among others, the term "postcolonial" has the merit of prioritizing the trauma of colonial history which is covered over in the hegemonic concepts of "Commonwealth" and "Francophonie," erased in phrases like "emergent literatures" or "new literatures in English," and by-passed in the politico-economic focus of the Three Worlds Theory.<sup>4</sup> Without underestimating this distinctive merit, I shall be arguing that it does not follow that postcolonial theory as a critical and pedagogical prism enables the production of non-Eurocentric knowledge of Asian, African, and Caribbean literatures any more than the older paradigms. Indeed, in its very attempt to challenge Western epistemology, postcolonial theory sometimes homogenizes Asia and Africa in more subtle ways than the older paradigms or colonial discourse itself. In illustrating some of the conceptual limitations of postcolonial theory, especially with regard to modern Arabic literature, while attempting to resituate that tradition

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groupings directly linked to U.S. strategic and foreign policy interests, on the one hand, and the traditional national language model organizing the study of European literatures on the other. Clearly, the uneasy fit of Francophone Arabic literature challenges both models in a way that exposes the ideological assumptions of those academic structures.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, like the Three Worlds theory, the term "postcolonial" also originated in the field of political economy, as Aijaz Ahmad points out ("The Politics" 1). On the category of "Third World Literature," see Ahmad (*In Theory* 43-71, 90-122). Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Theory* provides an excellent account of the emergence of the categories of "Commonwealth Literature" and "Postcolonial Literature" (5-33).

within the colonial context, my aim is to suggest how postcolonial studies and Arabic studies can expand one another's horizons.

## II. *Postcolonial Theory*

Postcolonial theory has developed out of four European traditions of thought: Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and feminism. Early anti-colonial theorists such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon found in the model of class struggle a useful paradigm for describing the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Thus in 1950 Césaire diagnosed European civilization as “decadent,” “stricken,” and “dying” because “it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule” which rendered it “incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem” (Césaire 9). Césaire concluded that the “salvation of Europe . . . is a matter of the Revolution—the one which, until such a time as there is a classless society, will substitute for the narrow tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie the preponderance of the only class that still has a universal mission . . . the proletariat” (61).

Contra Césaire, Fanon argued that while colonialism was a necessary stage in the development of capitalism, it did not necessarily follow that the European proletariat should make common cause with the colonized, for European “workers believe . . . that they are part of the prodigious adventure of the European spirit” (Fanon, *The Wretched* 313). Without discarding Marxism, Fanon observed that the colonial system worked by conflating racial categories and their attendant structures of feeling (fear of and desire for the racial Other) with class structure: in the colony, “[t]he cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem” (40). For the trained psychiatrist, decolonization involved both a Manichean conflict between Europe and the wretched of the earth, as well as psychological liberation of the colonized from the inferiority and other complexes fostered by colonialism. It is noteworthy, however, that Fanon's critical approach to Marxism parallels his questioning of the Eurocentricity of psychoanalysis, and his sustained attempt to investigate the limits of its applicability in the colonial context (*Black Skin* 83-108, 141-209).

A more scathing critique of Marxism came in Said's account of Orientalism. Said argued that classical Marxism was inadequate because of its monolithic conception of history which imposed the European model of class struggle on the colonies. For Marx, like Hegel before him, world history was coterminous with European history, into which other cultures and civilizations were to be subsumed. Said pointed out that despite his

abhorrence of colonialism, Marx argued that “England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of the Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (qtd. in *Orientalism* 154).<sup>5</sup> According to Said, such reasoning was enabled by Marx’s “easy resource to a massed body of writing . . . that controlled any statement made about the Orient” (155). Employing Michel Foucault’s notion of “discourse,” Said undertook to analyze that “body of writing,” thereby shifting the emphasis from Césaire’s and Fanon’s critiques of the colonial *system* and its material practices to the critique of colonial *discourse*, a shift that entailed the methodological privileging of textuality.

Yet this methodological shift did not, in Said’s own writing, lead to a full appropriation of poststructuralist notions of textuality. Said’s growing dislike for poststructuralism stemmed from its perceived failure to develop the “worldly” implications of textuality, of the kind he himself delineates in books like *Covering Islam*, *The Question of Palestine*, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, and *Culture and Imperialism*. Therefore, for Said and a host of other critics—including figures as diverse as Gerald Graff (118-9), Frank Lentricchia (186), Terry Eagleton (*Walter Benjamin* 131-42), Barbara Foley (113-34), Aijaz Ahmad (*In Theory* 34-42), and Jeffrey Nealon (22-49)—poststructuralism is not only politically impotent, but it actually reinforces the dominant structures which its oppositional rhetoric professes to challenge (Said, *The World* 158-77).

Notwithstanding, postcolonial theory after *Orientalism* came to be identified with the influential critics Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, who relied much more heavily than Said on poststructuralism. Spivak offers no totalizing theory of colonial discourse, but rather an interventionist critical strategy that draws upon the discontinuous theoretical projects of feminism, Marxism, and deconstruction. This enables Spivak to carry out multiple, highly self-conscious critiques of several hegemonic structures all at once. In this way, Spivak has been able to introduce the category of gender into a field that had been dominated by male critics, and also to chart some of the horizons and limitations of feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and poststructuralism. Her interest in pedagogy and her elaboration of notions

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<sup>5</sup> Aijaz Ahmad’s strident attack on Said is motivated by what Ahmad considers to be Said’s “anti-Marxism and [his] construction of a whole critical apparatus for defining a post-modern kind of anti-colonialism” (*In Theory* 222), and for the enormous influence that Said has exerted in this regard (15). Obviously, Ahmad’s suggestion that to be “anti-Marxist” (which is not true of Said) is to be “postmodern” is, to say the least, problematic. For the most explicit statement by Said on his position toward Marxism, see “Interview with Edward Said” (Sprinker 258-63). See also Ahmad’s “Marx on India: A Clarification” (*In Theory* 221-42), which problematizes Said’s reading of Marx.

such as “epistemic violence,” “vigilance,” “responsibility,” and the like restore a sense of urgency to postcolonial theory that is lacking in poststructuralism, while her notion of “strategic essentialism” mediates between political expediency and deconstructive anti-essentialism. This foregrounding of the politics of positionality has led her to advance the embattled thesis of the “silence” or the unreadability, within Western critical discourses, of the “subaltern.”<sup>6</sup> For example, French feminism, according to Spivak, has created the stereotype of the “Third World woman” (Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts” 262; *In Other Worlds* 134-53; “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 294-306), while psychoanalysis proposes transcendental categories that do not recognize cultural, historical, or class variables (*In Other Worlds* 80-2, 143; “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 296-7; *The Postcolonial Critic* 151). Thus both French feminism and psychoanalysis perpetuate epistemic violence. This argument has invited the charge of re-enacting the epistemology it seeks to dismantle, in that, as Benita Parry has argued, “Spivak in her own writing severely restricts (eliminates?) the space in which the colonized can be written back into history” (Parry 39). Consequently, it is argued that in Spivak the subaltern is silenced both in colonial discourse and in the counter-discourse of “the postcolonial critic.”<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, in Bhabha’s theory of colonial discourse—a theory based on poststructuralism but without Said’s and Spivak’s skepticism toward the conceptual horizons and political limitations of French theory—the subaltern everywhere challenges colonial authority. But in full compliance with postmodernism’s repudiation of what Jean-François Lyotard calls “grand narratives,” Bhabha’s theory permits the subaltern no more than rhetorical acts of resistance that do not threaten colonialism’s material hold on the colonies. Like Fanon, Bhabha draws on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis (yet again without Fanon’s critical approach to the discipline) to clarify psychic operations of colonial discourse—such as anxiety, narcissism, fetishism, and so on—that betray its “ambivalence.” For Bhabha, this

<sup>6</sup> The category of the “subaltern” was borrowed from Antonio Gramsci and used by Spivak and the Subaltern Studies Group to designate people of the colonies other than the Europeanized native elite. But the term is sometimes also extended to encompass Asian and African socio-cultural phenomena that escape Western modes of representation. E. San Juan offers the clearest elucidation to date of the uses and misuses of the term “Subaltern” (San Juan 85-99).

<sup>7</sup> Spivak comments on this and similar charges by Neil Larson and Dipesh Chakrabarty as follows: “‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ is not really about colonialism at all. It is about agency: institutionally validated action. To put it as simply as possible, I will quote a recent piece . . . in *India Abroad*, a newspaper that has no intellectual pretensions: ‘Spivak . . . argued that, unless validated by dominant forms of knowledge and politics, resistance could not be recognized as such.’ What kind of politics can emerge from this, asks Neil Larson. The politics of demanding and building an infrastructure so that when subalterns speak they can be heard” (Spivak, “Foreword” xx).

ambivalence undermines the intentionality Said ascribes to colonial discourse. Bhabha has argued that forms of native resistance such as “colonial mimicry,” “sly civility,” and so forth, contaminate imperial discourse in the colonial space of its implementation and frustrate the European subject’s need for confirmation by the colonized (Bhabha 85-101). In this way, Bhabha suggests that colonial power is equally shared by colonizer and colonized. He also thereby shifts the focus of analysis from the material confrontation between colonizer and colonized, which was at the core of Césaire’s, Fanon’s, and Said’s work, to the textual ambivalences and contradictions of colonial writing; and from Fanon’s interest in the psychic disorders of the colonized (throughout *Black Skin* and in *The Wretched* 249-310) to those of the colonizer.<sup>8</sup>

Abdul JanMohamed has accused this reading of colonial discourse of “repress[ing] the political history of colonialism” (JanMohamed 79), while Robert Young and Arif Dirlik have complained that Bhabha homogenizes what emerges in his writing as an always-already postmodern “condition” of “colonial discourse” and of “the postcolonial,” a unitary category theorized

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<sup>8</sup> Bhabha’s reading of Fanon is particularly relevant here: “The representative figure of such a perversion [the “Manichean delirium” of colonial and racial identities] . . . is the image of post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being. The ambivalent identification of the racist world . . . turns on the idea of man and his alienated image; not Self and Other but the otherness of the Self” (Bhabha 44—Bhabha’s emphasis). To remember Sartre’s comment that Fanon “speaks of you [Europeans] often, never to you. . . . [He] speaks to the colonized only” (Sartre 10), is to realize that the revolutionary impulse behind Fanon’s theory of decolonization as a Manichean *confrontation* between two opposing forces is completely deflated in Bhabha’s reading of Fanon, which represents the latter’s discourse as though it were directed to the West and not to the colonized. In Bhabha’s theory, the force of the Manichean confrontation is specifically and emphatically negated. One feels that Bhabha’s answer to Fanon’s question, “What does the black man want?” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 8) would be, contra Sartre and Fanon himself: to force the post-Enlightenment white man to recognize his “ambivalent [self-] identification.” In this way, Bhabha’s theory of colonial discourse, derived from poststructuralism and driven by psychoanalysis of the colonizer, domesticates the native in a strikingly similar manner to the way Orientalism was able to domesticate, contain, and in a sense to create its Other. Moore-Gilbert argues that in privileging Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks* over *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon’s later text in which he develops the theory of decolonization as a Manichean confrontation, Bhabha is able to read Fanon not as the committed revolutionary of the Algerian War of Independence, but as a semiotician (Moore-Gilbert 138), or, in Benita Parry’s apt phrase, as “a premature poststructuralist” (Parry 31). Further, Bhabha’s avoidance of *The Wretched of the Earth* ignores Fanon’s preoccupation with cultural nationalism as a necessary phase of decolonization, a phase which is fraught with difficulties, as Fanon was well aware, but which Bhabha would dismiss altogether as yet another contradictory and universalist construct of the Enlightenment. Thus, as Bart Moore-Gilbert notes, while professing to read the postmodern from the perspective of the postcolonial, Bhabha seems effectively to subsume the postcolonial into the postmodern (Moore-Gilbert 128). See also Neil Lazarus and Cedric Robinson.

on the basis of a few examples taken from the archives of British India.<sup>9</sup> As Young points out,

Bhabha's claims to describe the conditions of colonial discourse—'mimicry is . . .,' 'hybridity is . . .,'—seem always offered as static concepts . . . with no reference to . . . the cultures to which they are addressed. On each occasion Bhabha seems to imply through this timeless characterization that the concept in question constitutes the condition of colonial discourse itself and would hold good for all historical periods and contexts. (Young, *White Mythologies* 146)

From this standpoint (and especially in the hands of the disciples of what Young calls the "Holy Trinity" of postcolonial theory, Said, Spivak, and Bhabha), postcolonial theory seems sometimes to deploy a sort of reverse-Eurocentrism. The almost complete reliance on the Western tradition of anti-humanist critique of metaphysics—from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida—has meant that the "non-Western" Other remains inaccessible and unknowable. While poststructuralism has been able to unsettle the metaphysical basis of Eurocentrism, it has not provided an epistemological alternative for the production of non-Eurocentric knowledge. In fact, this is not even part of the poststructuralist project, as Spivak herself points out in her commentary on Julia Kristeva, Derrida, Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze (we may also add Roland Barthes): "[i]n spite of their occasional interest in touching the *other* of the West, of metaphysics, of capitalism, their repeated question is obsessively self-centered: if we are not what official history and philosophy say we are, who then are we (not), how are we (not)?" (Spivak, *In Other Worlds* 137). The same can certainly be said about poststructuralist modes of postcolonial theory, in which the fetishization of colonial discourse relegates colonial history, anti-colonial discourses and practices, and

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<sup>9</sup> Arif Dirlik and Robert Young rightly complain of the "noticeable geographical and historical homogenization of the history colonialism" in postcolonial studies as a result of "the dominance in recent years of India as object of attention among those working in the field" (Young, *Colonial Desire* 164; Dirlik 329, 332-3, 339-41). Young reads this privileging of India as an ironic reinscription of colonial hierarchies:

In Britain, work on Latin America, for example, tends to function rather distinctly in isolation from much of the rest of colonial-discourse analysis, largely because it is not an area where the English have played any great historical role, and therefore tends to remain the preserve of Latin Americanists within Departments of Hispanic Studies. In comparison to the extensive work done on India, meanwhile, Africa remains comparatively neglected. In Britain the reasons for this doubtless begin with the greater number of British Asians in higher education, as well as the difference in comparable numbers of academics and graduate students from Africa and Asia. Nevertheless, the greater attention accorded to India still seems to perpetuate the differing evaluations that the British accorded to the various parts of their empire. It was always India that received the greatest economic, cultural and historical attention from the British. In the same way, today India quite clearly retains that position of pride of place, the jewel in the crown of colonial-discourse analysis. (Young, *Colonial Desire* 165-6)



neocolonial realities to the shadows of negative epistemology. If humanism furnished imperialism with the enabling figure of the transcendental (European, male) subject—the Enlightenment’s “Man”—anti-humanism, despite its deconstruction of Western metaphysics, has actually consolidated “Man’s” discursive antagonist under the mark of the singular (the Lacanian “Other” who is now no more than a psychic “splitting” function), or otherwise ignored humanism’s rendering of that Other as negative essence (the “non-West”). The project of poststructuralist strands of postcolonial theory, therefore, rests on the irreducible paradox of how to affirm the cultural and historical integrity of colonized societies from the decidedly Western-centered standpoint of anti-humanism.

Yet the difference between postcolonialism and French theory proper is that while the latter inscribes the “non-West” as unknowable, the former renames it as the “postcolonial world” and claims to speak for it. But this is a claim that faces the same charge that Said leveled against Orientalism, namely that it creates in discourse the very object it displaces materially (Said, *Orientalism* 21); “the postcolonial world” is no more “out there” than the Orient. Take for example the concepts of hybridity, migrancy, and in-betweenness, which for Bhabha are the defining features of the postcolonial. Whence, one might ask, their current valorization, given the truism that all cultures have always been hybrid, and the fact that there were decisive migrations in India three thousand years ago, as well as in other parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe over the centuries? Hybridity and transculturation as such are old news, but they play such a pivotal role in postcolonial theory because they deconstruct the essentialist discourses through which colonial Europe defined itself by constructing a myth of pure racial and civilizational origin, and by defining its colonial subjects as quintessentially different from, and inferior to, itself. In the context of Western cultural and intellectual history, therefore, the postcolonial discourse on hybridity extends the poststructuralist interrogation of Eurocentrism. It is noteworthy, however, that such interrogation has not been the preserve of poststructuralism and its literary critical appropriations, as evidenced by seminal work in the fields of anthropology, classical studies, economics, geography, and history, by figures as diverse as Samir Amin (1989), Martin Bernal (1987), J. M. Blaut (1993), Johannes Fabian (1983), and Andre Gunder Frank (1998). Yet the celebration of hybridity has often led to a “premature utopianism” (Eagleton, “Nationalism” 24) in which a postmodern sort of hybridity is superficially celebrated and commercialized without much attention given to material structures of inequality and oppression. This kind of hybridity becomes “a figure for the consecration of hegemony” (Shohat 110). If “[f]ixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability and disruption, of conflict and change” (Young, *White Mythologies* 4), we might also say that the opposite

is true, namely that the privileging of hybridity in postmodernism betokens the stability of neocolonial relations in the post-Cold War era of U.S. military dominance, and the seemingly unstoppable spread of global capitalism in the New World Order.

### III. *Colonial History in the Arab World*

When considering colonial history in the Arab world, the anti-essentialist zeal of the discourse on hybridity obscures the pivotal role of cultural memory both in colonial and anti-colonial discourses. Said has been criticized for suggesting that Homer and Dante could be read as Orientalists. No doubt, it would be theoretically inaccurate to advocate that a single, monolithic discourse on the Orient has reigned for three millennia, but by the same token it would be naïve to deny that many of the cultural representations produced throughout that long history did not, in fact, pass on from one age to another, informing, and being assimilated into, different modes of discourse, through the agency of cultural memory. Thus, for example, when the British army advanced on Palestine in October 1917, the campaign was perceived in the British and American press as the “Last Crusade,” and its leader was quite readily eulogized as “Allenby of Armageddon.”<sup>10</sup> By the same token, the scene of a victorious Allenby standing at the tomb of Saladin in Damascus to vaunt Europe’s triumphant “return” remains quite vivid in Arab

<sup>10</sup> See Raymond Savage, *Allenby of Armageddon*, which contains numerous passages animated by the romance and sentimentalism of the title. For example, the arrival of the British army at Jerusalem is described thus:

Dawn was approaching with no sound from the ancient city where Abraham made the covenant with Abimelech—the southern gateway to the Holy Land before which the silent hosts were closing in, 907 years after the destruction of Charlemagne’s Christian Protectorate first roused the Crusaders’ challenge, ‘*Deus vult . . .*’ for the Wars of the Cross. Resurgent when Saladin conquered Galilee, the Crescent had dominated the cradle of Christianity in unbroken sway for its destined span from that sanguinary October to October, 1917, exactly seven hundred and thirty years. (217)

By far less given to sentimentalism than Savage, Archibald Wavell, another biographer of Allenby, invokes the same kind of cultural memory to suggest, even more audaciously than Savage, that the defeat of “Turks” by “Englishmen” seems to be a historical destiny fulfilled over and over again: on September 18, 1918, the British army

passed over a battlefield where an English commander had won a notable victory more than seven hundred years previously. At the battle of Arsuf (September 7, 1191) Richard Cœur de Lion . . . had outmaneuvered and outfought a worthy opponent in Saladin. Saladin’s host had included a considerable force of Turkish bowmen, while Richard’s international [sic] force of Crusaders contained an English contingent of horse and foot. So that it was not the first time that the ground over which the cavalry now rode had felt the victorious rush of English cavalry in pursuit of Turks. (Wavell 274)

On the reaction of British and U.S. media to the invasion of Palestine, see Lawrence James 144.

consciousness even today (Abū Zayd, *Al-Naṣṣ* 23). We could certainly, in the interest of theoretical accuracy, speak of a medieval discourse of the Crusades as distinct from, though sharing much with, modern Orientalist discourse, but clearly in 1917 such distinctions were irrelevant, as they remain even today in the discourses of policy makers, political commentators, and media pundits.<sup>11</sup> The Marxist privileging of class struggle, post-structuralist anti-essentialism, the universalism of psychoanalysis, and feminism's critique of patriarchy all effectively foreclose any consideration of the kind of cultural memory that marks colonial history in the Arab world with a unique character, which should neither be theorized in terms of a universal postcolonial condition, nor elided in a unitary conception of "the postcolonial world."

Colonial discourses in the various contexts of Africa and Asia, especially India, which quickly became the primary focus of postcolonial studies, were less fraught with the perennial, recycled representations that Orientalism perpetuated about the Near East. In the case of Africa, for example, Patrick Brantlinger has demonstrated that "the myth of the Dark Continent developed during the transition from the main British campaign against the slave trade, which culminated in the outlawing of slavery in all British territory in 1833, to the imperialist partitioning of Africa which dominated the final quarter of the nineteenth century" (Brantlinger 185). Brantlinger points out that this development occurred in direct proportion to the changing nature of British imperialist interests. The new "myth," of course, replaced the earlier myth of the "Noble Savage," which had informed European perceptions not only of Africans (especially Ethiopians), but also of many diverse peoples from Native Americans in the New World (Montaigne's cannibals being a well-known example) to the Indians and the Chinese in Asia. In the twelfth century, for instance, India was believed to be the locus of "the legendary kingdom of Ethiopia" (Baudet 13-4). In fact, the fantasy about the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia gave rise to the belief, "until the sixteenth century, that contact with this natural ally was the key to the future triumph of Christianity over Islam" (15).<sup>12</sup> In the fourteenth-century worldview of John Mandeville, the "Saracens" had a concrete and menacing presence in European consciousness, while the rest of the world beyond Persia, India, and Tartary was populated by legendary humanoid monstrosities—sciapodes, acephali, cynocephali, and so forth—none of which represented any real threat

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis is but a recent example. See its refutation by Said (*Reflections on Exile* 567-90) and Anouar Majid (5-12, 22-3).

<sup>12</sup> See Henri Baudet's account of the medieval European myth of the noble savage, which almost always contrasted with Europe's perception of a hostile Islamic world (10-22).

to Europe.<sup>13</sup> Even with greatly improved knowledge of the world from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, European stereotypes of distant peoples in general vacillated between, on the one hand, utopian variations on the theme of the Noble Savage (as in the myth of Eldorado or the Abyssinia of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*), and on the other hand, demonizations that served to justify the colonization of the New World, the African slave trade, and nascent imperialism in Africa and Asia.<sup>14</sup> But none of those demonized peoples represented the kind of threat posed by the Arab presence in Spain until 1492, or by the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683, and which, together with geographical proximity and historic religious rivalry, explains the keen interest taken by Enlightenment writers in the "Orient."

Naturally, therefore, when colonial discourses developed in the late eighteenth century, they could not have conceivably taken a singular form, as postcolonial theory tends to construe them, because of the different cultural memories embedded in each colonial context. The situation becomes even more complex when we consider the radically different roles of religion today in western Europe and the U.S. on the one hand, and in the Arab world, on the other. Take Islamic fundamentalism. As amply documented, in Western media generally the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism is interpreted more or less as a sick manifestation of Islam's demonic essence, something that is never said about Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist fundamentalisms.<sup>15</sup> Western cultural memory here clearly deploys representations from the discourse of the Crusades. The Islamic world generally tends to be seen as medieval, caught in an epochal lag, several centuries "behind" the West. Such representations (which rely on the linear temporality at the heart of the Enlightenment doctrine of Progress) obscure the fact that Islamic fundamentalism today is a form of political resistance both to despotic Arab governments and to neocolonialism, especially as Western powers sponsor many repressive and corrupt Arab regimes. As Moore-Gilbert reminds us, "while the West rushes to condemn contemporary separatist figures like Louis Farrakhan, or the 'fundamentalism' of the Iranian clergy, it all too easily forgets its own responsibility for creating the contexts of extreme exploitation and discrimination which produce the anger and despair out of which such 'rejectionism' emerges" (Moore-Gilbert 197). This is particularly salient in the prototype of all contemporary

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare's *Othello* famously recounts his encounter with such creatures during his life as a wandering mercenary soldier (*Othello* I.iii.142-44), before rising to prominence in Venice for defeating the Muslim Turks.

<sup>14</sup> See Michael Palencia-Roth's investigations into the discourses on monstrosity and cannibalism, and the changing European perceptions of the inhabitants of the New World.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Edmund Ghareeb (1983), Michael Hudson and Ronald Wolfe (1980), Jack Shaheen (1984, 1997, 2001), Edward Said (1997), and Mohammad Siddiqi (1997).

fundamentalist movements, Sudanese Mahdism of the late nineteenth century, which was quite explicitly a nationalist anti-colonial movement as well as a religious revival. The same dual character gave impetus to the Iranian Revolution, which ousted the U.S.-sponsored dictatorship of the Shah. Contemporary fundamentalist movements in Arab countries have emerged since the 1970's to fill the ideological void created by the failure of secular official projects like socialism and the pan-Arab nationalism, or Nasserism, of the 1950's and 1960's, and the continuing political disenfranchisement of the masses in countries where participatory democracy is virtually absent. And like extremism in other religions, Islamic fundamentalist discourse is nostalgic, hegemonic, patriarchal, often misogynistic, and essentialist in its conception of Islamic identity and Islamic society as sharply distinguished from non-Moslem—particularly Western—norms. It is a reactionary discourse that reinscribes the Orientalist Us/Them divide, although “Them” extends to secular Arab governments and intellectuals.

Yet fundamentalism is only one form of resistance with which poststructuralist strands of postcolonial theory could not and would not engage; what engages fundamentalist discourse is a small group of Arab secular intellectuals and religious reformers, who offer progressive interpretations of the religious texts to challenge canonical interpretations embraced unquestioningly by traditional clerics and by fundamentalists.<sup>16</sup> Those innovative interpretations advocate reforms in the areas of women's rights, social organization, and political institutions. And those progressive intellectuals also see themselves as actively committed to resisting neocolonialism as well as political despotism at home. Events like the execution of the Sudanese theologian Mahmoud Muhammad Taha by Numeiri in 1988, the assassination of Farag Foda in 1992 by radical fundamentalists in Egypt, and the persecution of Nasr Abu Zayd in 1994 and Nawal el-Saadawi in 2001, both by the religious Right (which secular authorities feel compelled to appease from time to time) and most astonishingly by the Egyptian judiciary system in Abu Zayd's case, begin only to hint at the complexities of the cultural politics in the Arab world, and the ease with which such events are sensationalized and misappropriated in Western media, often without any serious attention to their context. In its narrativizing of the “postcolonial world,” postcolonial theory—derived as it is from Western secular anti-humanism—is in no better position to offer any deeper insights into the Arab world's “cultural wars” than the Western media, since those wars are fought over the interpretation of Islam, not its decentralization or its deconstruction.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the books by Nasr Abu Zayd, Muhammad Sa'id al-'Ashmawi, Farag Foda, and Mahmoud Muhammad Taha listed in the Works Cited. Charles Kurzman's *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* is an excellent anthology of selected texts spanning the twentieth century.

#### IV. *Arabic Literary Scholarship and Postcolonial Studies*

In the meantime, traditional literary scholarship in the field of Middle Eastern Studies, both in Euro-American universities and in the Arab world, has tended to ignore or to severely bracket the role of colonial history and anti-colonial resistance in modern Arabic literature, in spite of the fact that modern Arabic literature is conventionally said to begin in the nineteenth century in response to the colonial encounter with Europe. What is often stressed, however, is that during the preceding three centuries, Arabic literature languished in decadence and stagnation within the stifling cultural milieu of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>17</sup> Some scholars have further suggested that exposure to European, especially British and French, literature benignly, as it were, revitalized Arabic letters. One result of this narrative has been the unquestioning application of Western periodization and interpretive procedures to modern Arabic literature.

It was not simply Arab intellectuals' fascination with modern European civilization but also, and more urgently, its colonial threat that led to the movement known as *Nahda* (or "revival") in the mid-nineteenth century. In the wake of the short-lived French occupation of Egypt, Muhammad Ali's first aim was to build a modern army, and therefore the purpose of the educational missions he began sending to France in the late 1820's was to borrow European science and technology. Those missions eventually exposed Arab intellectuals to European culture, thought, and literature. The nineteenth-century disciples of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi saw their task as one of selective borrowing from Europe while at the same time preserving Arab cultural identity, and that explains the renewed interest, in the latter part of the 19th century, in classical Arabic poetry, the cultural product of the perceived Golden Age of Arabic literature (5th-11th centuries). Not surprisingly, therefore, poetry, which Arabs have always considered to be one of their greatest cultural achievements, was restored to its function as the expression of social values and aspirations, as well as an important organ of social and political mobilization. Classical Arabic poetry was a powerful form of public discourse in which the poet assumed the role of spokesman for the community. It is precisely such a role that Mahmoud Sami al-Barudi, the pioneer of what came to be described as "neo-classical" poetry, played in the 1860's, when he began to voice opposition to the policies of Egypt's Turkish ruler Khedive Isma'il, policies which led to the British occupation in 1882, after which the poet was sent into exile by the British, along with

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<sup>17</sup> Roger Allen has questioned this narrative "in view of the almost total dearth of knowledge about the literature" of what "has been dubbed 'the period of decadence'" (Allen 14). Bridget Connelly's *Arab Folk Epic and Identity* attempts to redress some of that "dearth of knowledge" in the area of vernacular narrative poetry.

the revolutionary leader Ahmad ‘Urabi. In the following decades, other “neo-classical” poets, notably the Egyptians Ahmad Shawqi (who also suffered exile) and Hafiz Ibrahim, the Iraqis Ma‘ruf al-Rusafi and Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, and the Palestinian Ibrahim Tuqan, likewise wrote “poems of occasion” which responded to political events in ways that often galvanized public opinion against colonial powers.<sup>18</sup>

Faced with the consolidation of colonial rule after WWI, many so-called Arab “Romantic” poets rejected the conventions embraced by their “neo-classical” predecessors and instead drew inspiration from European Romanticism. The Romantics nevertheless saw themselves as actively engaged in cultural resistance. In addition to writing poems of occasion, many poets now took aim at Orientalist discourse in ways that emphasized culture as the arena of contestation. Thus the Romantic poet and critic ‘Abbas Mahmoud al-‘Aqqad argued that by using the inorganic form and conventional desert imagery of the classical ode, “neo-classical” poets were simply reinforcing colonial stereotypes about the incoherence and ahistoricity of the “Oriental mind.” In this way, as Terri DeYoung argues, the shift from the neo-classical to the Romantic mode was itself motivated by the need to construct a cohesive Arab self that defied such stereotypes (DeYoung 176-81). Further, the revolutionary zeal of European Romanticism appealed to the Arab Romantics who came to see in it a reflection of their own rebelliousness against colonial domination (151-85). Likewise, argues DeYoung, despite the devalorization of narrative in classical Arabic poetry, the narrative tendency in the poetry of the pioneer of Arabic modernism Badr Shakir al-Sayyab during the 1950’s is part of this attempt to construct a poetic postcolonial narrative that challenges Orientalist discourse (221-53).<sup>19</sup> In these and other ways, Arab Romantic and modernist poets were selectively appropriating from European literary history those paradigms, forms, and styles which served their own anti-colonial ends.

In the absence of any consideration of the colonial context, critics have tended hastily and unquestioningly to use Western periodization to describe the development of modern Arabic literature, thus reducing it, in DeYoung’s words, to “an inexorable sequencing not of its own making,” as if those phases of modern Arabic literature (romanticism, realism, modernism) “were simply repetitions of their Western counterparts . . . that had to be ‘gotten through’ so that one could arrive at the teleologically determined endpoint

<sup>18</sup> The anti-colonial fervor of *Nahda* intellectuals, including al-Barudi, Ahmad Shawqi, Qasim Amin, and Muhammad ‘Abduh, is movingly captured in Ahdaf Soueif’s semi-historical novel, *The Map of Love*. See also Hussein Kadhim’s discussion of Shawqi’s anticolonial poetry.

<sup>19</sup> See also Hussein Kadhim’s work on al-Sayyab’s revision of T. S. Eliot.

of modernism" (159). Thus Western and Arab critics alike have usually been content to posit a straightforward "influence" of Wordsworth on Arab Romantic and of T. S. Eliot on modernist poetry. A similar tendency is found in the conventional division of Naguib Mahfouz's lengthy career into phases that replicate the history of the European novel: from historical to realistic, modernist, and postmodernist fiction.<sup>20</sup> Consideration of colonial history takes us beyond such reductive readings, which have tended to assume (and have, therefore, succeed only in demonstrating) unproblematic imitation of European canonical writers. Such assumptions obscure "the activity of resistance" and of "identity formation as they oscillate in a dialectic of power . . . between colonizer and colonized" (160).

### V. Conclusion

Postcolonial studies and Arabic literary studies have much to offer each other. Postcolonial studies can add valuable dimensions to Arabic literary scholarship—interdisciplinary inquiry, theoretical sophistication, and historical contextualization—that are lacking in older modes of Orientalist scholarship and the current area studies model. The enduring significance of postcolonial theory, to my mind, is that it has propelled issues of colonialism and imperialism to the forefront of critical and intellectual debates in the West, and succeeded in changing the assumptions of several fields of inquiry within the humanities and social sciences. Said's achievement in this respect was possible not so much because of the novelty of the central thesis in *Orientalism*, for Arab intellectuals since the nineteenth century have been all too aware of the tainting of Orientalist knowledge by anti-Arab racism, religious prejudice, and colonial interests.<sup>21</sup> It was Said's prominent location within the Western academic establishment and his use of French theory that forced the postcolonial perspective onto the scene, and coincidentally rescued English studies in the U.S. from its crisis of the mid 1970's (which has led one critic irreverently to suggest that English departments should erect statues to Said [Harootunian 142]). Likewise, Bhabha's and Spivak's theories drew their prestige and authority from their reliance on French theory's currency and novelty in the 1980's. Neither Césaire's condemnation of humanism three decades earlier, nor other varieties of Marxist critique (which has never been fashionable in Anglo-American universities to begin with) were effective in this regard.

<sup>20</sup> While making an argument for multiple literary "modernisms" emerging within distinct historical contexts, Stefan Meyer rejects the use of the term "postmodernism" to describe Arabic fiction of recent decades (255-79).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's responses to Ernest Renan and Qasim Amin's reply to the Duc d'Harcourt.



In that sense, postcolonial theory has been able to provide conceptual and ethical frameworks for Western readers in which to interpret European colonial literature and certain kinds of postcolonial texts that address colonial history along a number of specific trajectories charted by poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. Postcolonial theory unveils the limitations, as well as the persistence, of hegemonic discourses, and is therefore a healthy reminder of the existence of other worlds outside of Western modes of thought and representation. But this is also where postcolonial theory can be the most mystifying, for the moment it pretends to stand for or to subsume those other worlds, it begins to re-enact the limitations of Marxism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and feminism.

By the same token, the vast majority of Asian and African literary texts produced since the onset of modern European colonialism simply do not fall into any homogenous category. Even if we limit ourselves to the twentieth century, we realize that the number of works that fit within the paradigms of resistance privileged in postcolonial theory is scant. This emergent canon of postcolonial-literature-as-world-literature privileges texts written in English and French at the expense of enormously varied literatures written in other, especially non-European, languages. It also inscribes "writing back," Diaspora, migrancy, border-crossings, in-betweenness, and hybridity as the defining features of the "postcolonial condition." While such issues are important, without a doubt, they are extremely limited when we remember that the vast majority of African and Asian populations are not Diasporic, migrants, or bilingual, and may, indeed, have never even traveled beyond the borders of their native countries. The current impasse in postcolonial studies may therefore be overcome by opening the field to comparative literary studies and to comparative critical methodologies that rigorously interrogate the limits of postcolonial theory's founding discourses from the multiple perspectives of Arabic, African, and Asian philosophies, realities, cultural worldviews, and cultural memories. This would safeguard against postcolonial theory's current reinscription of the model according to which the West furnishes theoretical paradigms while the rest of the world yields the objects of analysis. Resisting that theoretical imperialism may well mean, in the final analysis, that postcolonial theory needs to theorize its own limits and its own horizons. Arabic studies in particular can play a crucial role in this regard.

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