

“On the Coattails” of Supremacy: Neo-Orientalism in Fouad Ajami’s *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Fouad Ajami’s *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey* and touches on his *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967*. In both books, one can find many examples of Orientalist thinking, but in a new form. Using Ali Behdad and Juliet A. Williams’s discussion of neo-Orientalism and Hamid Dabashi’s post-Orientalism, we argue that the former book is a neo-Orientalist literary history that not only exemplifies neo-Orientalism but also anticipates its proliferation in the aftermath of 9/11. We further claim that it builds on the legacy of colonialism in our neoliberalized world. In it, Ajami divides the writers and the writings that he mentions into two parties: the protagonists—those who embody Western thinking—and the foils or villains—the ones who reject such thinking. We see this paper as a small gesture towards exposing Orientalist thinking in its new form and resisting it and its colonial manifestations.

Keywords: Fouad Ajami, Neo-Orientalism, Literary History, Post-Orientalism, Neoliberalism.

“We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect” (Macaulay 1935, 359)

“That there are compliant natives who play in the same orchestra belongs to the shabby history of collaboration and is not (as some would have it) a sign of new maturity in the Third World” (Said, *Covering Islam* 1997, 172)

Introduction

History repeats itself; it does, but in very subtle ways. Despite the lapse of time, British historian and statesman Thomas Babington Macaulay’s words that appear in the first epigraph above still resonate and provide a framework through which we can discuss the questions and problematics of locally produced representations of the so-called Third World. In his afterword for *Orientalism*, Edward Said once again emphasizes how the Orient still “lends itself to increasing misrepresentation and misinterpretation” (2003, xi). That is why the question of representation is still pertinent. For example, Said, according to Hamid

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Dabashi, “traced the origin of this power of representation and the normative agency that it entailed to the colonial hubris” (Dabashi 2009, xi). For Said and Dabashi, both of whose writings span the period of almost four decades, the question of representation remains integral in this “postcolonial” age. To approach this issue, we need to ask, “Who gets to represent whom and by what authority?” (Dabashi 2009, xi). Focusing on this question, this paper analyzes elements of recent mutations in questions of representations of the “Third World.” It specifically sheds light on the way Macaulay’s class of interpreters—in Dabashi’s words “native informers,” and in Said’s words “compliant natives” (the second epigraph) and “war-mongering expert[s]... [who] stir up ‘America’ against the foreign devil,” employed by the media to “validate the government’s general line” (“Orientalism Once More” 2004, 872; 876)—are brought to the West and have been transformed into regional experts who have white hearts in black/brown skin, to invoke Franz Fanon, and have been consequently tasked to perpetuate the colonial tradition.

Those so-called experts serve to endorse and legitimize the imperial project in its various manifestations. Instead of being directly responsible for spreading such discourses as backwardness and irrationality, Western powers recruit those functional collaborators to provide a narrative that suits them. As M. Shadid Alam puts it, “In the heyday of the old colonialism, the white man did not need any help from the natives in putting down their religion and culture. Indeed, he preferred to do it himself. [...] Today the West needs help in putting down the uppity natives” (qtd. in Yamaguchi 2012, 247). Such help—provided by self-proclaimed experts on their own regions—comes in the form of what we might call pragmatic and procedural knowledge so that the process of control can be more successful. The West accordingly facilitates access to typical and stereotypical Eastern figures that are palatable and predictable to Western readers. Although these figures or self-proclaimed specialists are from the East, they do not belong to it.

One of these specialists (regional experts) is Fouad Ajami. Ajami (1945-2014) was a Lebanese Shia who moved with his family to the United States. He was an Arab American intellectual who narrated and analyzed the deteriorating conditions of the Arab world. An Arab Zionist (that is, a supporter of the state of Israel as we will explain below), he was also an avid supporter of the George Bush administration and helped promote the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq. His career was a political career rather than an academic one. According to Said, “he has become influential as a ‘native informant’ – the Arab ‘expert’ is a rare species on American networks. Ten years ago, he started deploying ‘we’ as an imperial collectivity which, along with Israel, never does anything wrong. Arabs are to blame for everything and therefore deserve ‘our’ contempt and hostility” (“The Academy of Lagado” 2003).¹ He wrote many books, two of which are relevant to this paper: *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (1993) (hereafter, *Predicament*) and *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey* (1998) (hereafter, *Dream*). Highlighting Ajami’s compliance (to recall Said’s term), the present paper mainly focuses on the latter but makes reference to the former.

Ajami’s *Dream* is a cornerstone in modern Arab American writing that takes as its point of departure an Orientalist tradition, but with a twist. His work exemplifies a resurgence of Orientalist tropes seen

through the prism of an inferiority complex, a prevailing attitude especially after 9/11. This resurgence was described by Ali Behdad and Juliet A Williams as neo-Orientalism.² We argue that Ajami’s book not only exemplifies neo-Orientalism but also anticipates and shapes its resurgence. More specifically, we claim that Ajami’s narrative constitutes a neo-Orientalist literary history. This history is enabled by a neoliberal, colonial ideology that celebrates globalization and in so doing hangs “on the coattails of” supremacy, to echo Ajami’s phrase (1998, 312). Thus, we interrogate his narrative in the context of a network of ideologies.

In order to conduct this interrogation, we analyze Ajami’s writerly strategies in his *Dream* as exemplifying a neo-Orientalist literary history. In *Dream*, Ajami writes a literary history whose characters are canonically recognized, male, liberal, Western-educated/oriented representatives of minorities, and secular. Ajami moulds this history into a Greco-Roman (i.e., Western) narrative, in which the protagonist, he himself, embarks on an odyssey and *nostos*, return to a prelapsarian Western and secular origin. His objective is to brush away “the cobwebs of Arab society” (*Predicament* 6) and reinvigorate it in a way that is modeled on the West, an objective that we call into question. In the first part of the paper, we develop the term “neo-Orientalist literary history.” In the second, we exfoliate the complex layers of Ajami’s literary history.

A Neo-Orientalist Literary History?

Orientalism, “or the *cultural logic of colonial rule*” (Mufti 22), as a Western field of study and specialization has almost become extinct, but its effects are far from being over. In fact, “[w]hile literary Orientalism may have lost its ideological primacy as the instrument of colonial domination, it is needless to remind that Orientalist imagination still continues to shape much of western attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims” (Heidemann 2012, 290). How should we then study the ongoing influence of that imagination? In his 2003 preface to *Orientalism*, Edward Said makes a brief mention of neo-Orientalism. Nevertheless, his mention of it might be interpreted as dismissive (2003, xxi). More and more critics and scholars such as Hamid Dabashi, Ali Behdad, and Juliet Williams; however, are taking up the term, as they argue that its addition contributes to a more complex understanding of the uneven worldly relationships existent in our neoliberalized world.

To provide that kind of understanding, it is imperative that we pay heed to responses to Orientalism in the context of neoliberalism or—to put it less strongly—globalization. In response to the dramatic changes brought about by globalization, two academic trends have emerged in relation to Orientalism: The proponents of the first believe that “[w]e are now moving ‘beyond Orientalism’ and are in fact in the ‘post-Orientalism’ era” (Samiei 2010, 1148). The proponents of this trend use the prefix “post-” to suggest that we should go beyond Orientalism. Members of the second group think that Orientalist ideas “have been reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in a globalised framework and have shaped a new paradigm which can be called ‘neo-Orientalism’” (Samiei 2010, 1148). For Alam, a supporter of the second view, new Orientalism is essentially “a repackaging of the old Orientalism” (qtd.in Yamaguchi 2012, 242). However, “[f]ew scholars have attempted to show any features and characteristics of this new

paradigm” (Samiei 2012, 1148). Dabashi, who uses the term post-Orientalism³ but is in agreement with the second view, is one of the scholars who have embarked on this task. He writes, “[t]he gradual mutation of old-fashioned Orientalists into Area Studies specialists is now further transmuting into a class of barefaced propagandists in close collaboration with think tank strategists” (2009, 106). He further adds,

What we are witnessing here is no simple historical amnesia in which, as Said has pointed out, self-loathing Orientalists are so deeply colonized in their mind and imagination that in effect they side with their conquerors. Here, we have a historical updating of the ‘native informer’ who this time around not only ‘informs’ the colonial officer of the predicament of the colonial subject but actually presides over an interpretation of his malignancy. (2009, 263)

We believe that the phrase “historical updating” is an accurate descriptor but does not help us gain a complex understanding of neo-Orientalism.

A more helpful description of neo-Orientalism appears in the work of Behdad and Williams. In “Neo-Orientalism,” Behdad and Williams define neo-Orientalism as “a mode of representation which, while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of othering” (2010, 284). In order to clarify this definition more, they compare the new form of Orientalism to the old as follows:

Although predominantly a North American phenomenon, neo-Orientalism is not limited to the United States; nor is it merely produced by Western subjects. On the contrary, not only do Middle Eastern writers, scholars, and so-called experts participate in its production, but they play an active and significant role in propagating it. Secondly, unlike its classical counterpart, neo-Orientalism entails a popular mode of representing, a kind of *doxa* about the Middle East and Muslims that is disseminated, thanks to new technologies of communication, throughout the world. Finally, we designate this mode of representation *neo* rather than *new* in order to signal the continuity between contemporary and traditional forms of Orientalism. (2010, 284)

While neo-Orientalism seems to be different from the Orientalism that Said describes, this new form is a continuation of the old form. Behdad and Williams quip, “neo-Orientalism should be understood not as *sui generis*, but rather as a supplement to enduring modes or Orientalist representation” (2010, 284). That is, they emphasize the continuity rather than the discontinuity between the two discourses, by embedding the newer mode into the old.

Behdad and Williams observe five characteristics of neo-Orientalist texts. The first is that the majority of neo-Orientalists are not highly educated or well-versed in the world of letters. Secondly, such texts are overtly political and highly ideological so much so that they do not hide their agreement with right-wing policies. An example that they proffer is Azar Nafisi. The third characteristic has to do with their decontextualization of history, especially through avoiding any reference to U.S. involvement in the Middle East (giving credence to neocolonial policies). Neo-Orientalists also deploy a journalistic style that they claim reveals the truth. The fifth and last characteristic focuses on their investment in the veil as

an ostensible sign of oppression, claiming the liberation of Muslim women to be their main interest (2010, 284-285). While Dabashi’s analysis is akin to that of Behdad and Williams’s in that they all dwell on the use of a journalistic style, popular discourses, and the human rights paradigm, Dabashi adds two important characteristics: securitization (consolidated by the post-9/11 reaction) and external as well as internal surveillance (2009, 221). Our choice of neo-Orientalism does not privilege Behdad and Williams’s work over that of Dabashi’s. We believe that the three intellectuals’ observations are significant and are highly useful, and we combine all of their observations in our analysis of Ajami’s work. (This combination does not mean ignoring Said’s analysis of colonial discourse in the context of Orientalism. Rather, it builds on Said’s ideas, as the three scholars notice the continuities between older forms of Orientalism and more recent aspects of it). Nevertheless, the use of the prefix “post-” might indicate the end of Orientalist discourses, an end that Dabashi is not by any means adopting. As a result, we think that the word “neo-” is more effective.

One can easily find examples of the above-mentioned characteristics of neo-Orientalist texts in Ajami’s *Dream*. An effective example of the third characteristic is the way Ajami tries to dissociate U.S. presence in the Middle East from imperial projects: “There had never been an American calling for empire in the Middle East to begin with. Those vast, pristine deserts that had bewitched the likes of Sir Richard Burton, Gifford Palgrave, Charles Doughty, Gertrude Bell, and T. E. Lawrence had not ensnared Americans. That romance had cracked in Britain’s own imperial venture” (190). Here, Ajami describes the transition from Pax Britannica to Pax Americana. His tone is full of sadness and wonder about “the costs of playing international gendarme in the Gulf” (191) and echoes Rudyard Kipling’s burden. Ajami as such focuses on the failures of Arabs instead of examining the geopolitical context of such failures. This is shown in more than one place in his nostalgic narrative *Dream*, where the emphasis is on the violence and terrorism of Arabs rather than on “the violence of imperial occupation itself” (Boehmer and Morton 2010, 11).

Another characteristic is Ajami’s commentary on the veil. In his prologue to *Dream*, Ajami brings up the issue of the veil by discussing Nazira Zayn al-Din’s book *al-Sufur wa al-Hijab* (Unveiling and the Veil), in which she asks for the right to shed the veil. Then, he provides an example of another woman’s taking off her Hijab:

It was in that time, the time when Nazira wrote her controversial book, that another daring Muslim woman, Saniyya Habboub, took the cable car to Bliss Street, to the campus of the American University of Beirut – the same cable car I took all over the city almost daily – and entered the university through its main gate. There, inside the sanctuary of the university, she took off her veil and set out on her university studies. (15)

Ajami’s romanticization of unveiling is indicative of his neo-Orientalized subjectivity, especially if one pays attention to the idea that the presence of a Western campus is associated with a presumable act of liberation. It is here where Ajami very subtly weaves a narrative that is so appealing to the West: the

story of a Muslim woman taking off her veil. As part of that weaving, George Antonius's *The Arab Awakening* is mentioned on the next page. It is as if Ajami associated the Arab Awakening with the shedding of the veil.

The features of neo-Orientalism in Ajami's text make his text one of the paradigmatic texts of the neo-Orientalist trend. But the form in which he provides his presentation also contributes to its paradigmaticity, as it were. Ajami's *Dream*, we assert, constitutes more than just a memoir or personal history; it is above all a literary history. Literary histories are typically periodized, canonical, and nationalistic. In other words, they are ideologically inflected, or—to put it more mildly—are not objective carriers of “the truth.” David Perkins explains that “literary history is also literary criticism.... It seeks to explain how and why a work acquired its form and themes and, thus, to help readers orient themselves” (1992, 178). Perhaps the key emphasis on readers and the reading process through words like “orient” shows beyond doubt that literary histories are neither objective (an adjective that is undergirded by “the tyranny of the historical” [Patterson 1995, 251]) nor innocent. In fact, literary history is described by critics using these phrases: “an argument” (Blodgett 2001, 33), “[a] critical fiction” as Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury put it (quoted in Ziegler 1993, 63), and in the words of Siegfried J. Schmidt “a social and political institution” (quoted in Hume 2005, 655). Robert B. Hume succinctly writes, “No [literary] historian starts as a *tabula rasa*, and evidence cannot be assessed in purely objective/impartial ways. Some contamination of our material cannot be avoided” (2005, 660).

But what is happening in Ajami's text is not a matter of inevitable contamination (although that is not necessarily an excuse). Indeed, having established the fictionality or at least lack of objectivity in literary histories, we do not suggest that Ajami's account is only fictional by necessity. We go so far as to claim that it is strategically manufactured to serve imperialism. Ajami's work can be designated as “a monumental literary history,” to employ Perkins's terminology, which “concentrates only on the greatest authors and texts” (1992, 179) and “must ignore aspects of the past that would render a writer or work less inspirational” (1992, 180). In the words of Hume, it “turn[s] a blind eye to what is difficult or inconvenient or too large to cope with comfortably [Hume also describes such literary histories as “comforting bedtime stories” (2005, 661)]” (2005, 644), exemplifying J. H. Hexter's “tunnel history” (quoted in Hume 2005, 644). Hume more strongly suggests that “[t]o survey older literature with the bland conviction that we may read it, pigeonhole it, and judge it with the assurance of a comfortable superiority is not to write literary history but literary autopsy” (2005, 640).⁴ And “literary autopsy” is exactly what Ajami's work represents. Viewed from the context of postcolonial studies, Ajami's “literary autopsy” is⁵—as Samah Selim would put it—“an appendage of contemporary Euro-American epistemologies and intellectual histories” (2011, 735); that is, Ajami produces a narrative that “morph[s] into *world history* as tautologically plotted by certain master narratives of historiography that claim total explicatory power over the fortuities of history and historical life” (Kadir 2013, 644).

Indeed, the narrative that Ajami produces is an explicitly ideological and master-ly (in the negative sense) one, a characteristic of neo-Orientalism that we discussed above. What Ajami does not do is write “a post-romantic literary history” (Selim 2011, 735), “[a] truly worthy history, if such a thing can be

written, [that] needs to communicate the heterogeneous outlooks and experiences of writers and readers at the time” (Hume 2005, 640). It is safe to say that Ajami’s narrative does the exact opposite. He instead proffers a neo-Orientalist literary history that can be easily designated as being both romantic and homogeneous. Now, let us dig deeper into the construction of his literary history.

Ajami’s Literary and Literal Geographies: Essentialism and Imperialism

It does not take the reader a long period of time to notice Ajami’s high selectivity and the implications of that selectivity in his neo-Orientalist literary history. From the very beginning he is clearly identifying his Western parameters through two main figures: T. E. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, both of whom act as transcultural figures. The title is suggestive enough: *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey*. Ajami tells that the title is taken from T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In his preface to the book, Ajami quotes Lawrence: “I meant to make a new nation, to restore a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundations on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts” (xi). Such a promise can only be endowed by a “God,” and for sure such a dream palace is not divine but secular. Moreover, it is clear that the level of agency in which Ajami invests is akin to that of Lawrence’s. It is based on the concept of charity,⁶ and it is also based on the idea of the revival of a lost idea. But the title does not stop with Lawrence. It goes beyond Lawrence to the Western tradition by invoking the *Odyssey* (see also the reference to Sisyphus in the preface (xiv)). From the very beginning, Ajami tells us that his narrative is enveloped by Western parameters (one of which is the inclusion of such literary figures as E. M. Forster, William Faulkner, Ivan Turgenev, George Orwell, and Amos Oz).

Before the preface itself, the reader is forced to look at a map, an apparatus of control that has been consistently used by colonizing powers (see McClintock 1995). The map seems illustrative and innocuous at first sight. But a more careful look reveals that Palestine is not written on the map; another Western parameter. On the bottom left-hand corner of the map appears the following quotation by Lawrence:

The master-key of opinion lay in the common language: where also, lay the key of imagination. Moslems [sic] whose mother tongue was Arabic looked upon themselves for that reason as a chosen people. Their heritage of the Koran and classical literature held the Arabic-speaking peoples together. Patriotism, ordinarily of soil or race, was warped to a language.

There is so much to unpack in this piece. But we need to focus on the selection. The very fact that Ajami has chosen this quotation as a key to the map is indicative. Ajami’s selection seems to suggest that knowing the language would help a non-Arab understand the “mysteries” of the place and the people; that is, the language determines the people. It may even delimit their territories (the connection between the map and the language). Moreover, it seems to provide an implicit reminder of the language that the writer speaks but to whose community he does not belong.⁷

In addition to those aspects of selectivity, Ajami employs elision. A clear example of this process is the epigraph, which comes from Conrad's preface to *The Secret Agent*. It reads, "There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury... millions of lives." It is worth dwelling briefly on this quotation and noticing what Ajami elides. Ajami does not tell his readers that Conrad here discusses the inspiration for writing his novel: the mention of the attempt "to blow up the Greenwich Observatory." In this quotation, Conrad both expresses the difficulty of narrativizing such an event ("that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way") and boasts about his ability to do so (1992 xxix). Ajami's utilization of this passage similarly dramatizes his undertaking (writing a literary history) and indirectly mentions the topic of terrorism (especially to those who have read *The Secret Agent*). The epigraph then is a both word of caution, as it were, and a method of inclusion in the discourse of terrorism—the deployment of which is one of the characteristics of neo-Orientalism.

After supplying his readers with such subliminal messages that point to the tradition that he represents, Ajami goes on to establish his authorial voice. He, for instance, provides the following brief note on his sources and translated texts. He writes:

I drew on a fairly large body of Arabic material—fiction, poetry, memoirs, social and political commentaries. Except where otherwise indicated in the text or in the source notes at the end of the book, the translations are mine. It is a cliché that translation is always a betrayal, and I tried to be true to the intent and textual integrity of my sources. Whatever the defects of the Arab political experience, the Arabs are blessed with a massive body of writings, a language of stunning beauty, and authors of unusual gifts. In their fiction, in their poetry, in their social commentaries, Arabs provide penetrating insights into their own world. It has been the besetting sin—and poverty—of a good deal of writing on the Arab world that it is done by many who have no mastery of Arabic. This has always seemed odd to me: To presume so much without hearing a people through their own words. The pleasure of this endeavor was the ability to tell this story through the writings of the Arabs themselves. (xix)

Clearly subscribing to Lawrence's thinking, Ajami constantly reminds his readers that he knows the language, translating from Arabic into English. For instance, he inserts transliterated words for no obvious reason other than to reassert his linguistic expertise: *qalaq* (anxiety) (29) and *al-sulta* (authority; not an equivalent in the context in which Ajami uses it) (116). Writers resort to adding a word from a foreign language to their texts if it is a cultural word. Unlike such writers, Ajami tries to establish his authority as an authentic purveyor of experience. He gives himself a lot of credit for being an insider. In his preface to the revised Canto edition—the edition from which we cite here—of his 1981 edition of *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967*, Ajami quotes Michael Walzer's remark of the critic's obligation not to "feel kindly toward the people he criticizes" but has "to acknowledge his connection to those people," because "if he were a stranger, really disinterested, it is

hard to see why he would involve himself in their affairs” (ix). This is Ajami’s justification for his criticism of his own people which stems from “proximity and some sense of belonging.” He bluntly states in his preface that his work “is not the work of a “stranger,” highlighting the word “stranger” and then providing his facts: “I was born in Lebanon, in 1945, to a Muslim Shi’a family. The political tradition I hack away at here was, in the most intimate way, my own and my generation’s. Years in a faraway land could never sever the bonds to that older world” (*Predicament* ix).⁸

His knowledge of Arabic then enables him to show both his proximity to and distance from Arab culture. That is, knowing the language becomes an act of triumph and conquest that confirms his authorial position. Like Lawrence, who writes “the history not of the Arab movement, but of me in it” (xi), Ajami writes about the East without being of it. For him, it is important to place himself in this strategic insider-outsider position, and what is better than linguistic knowledge to help him occupy that position? For ~~him~~ Ajami to occupy this position, he distances himself from Arabs through language as well. That is why he uses the third-person point of view (similar to Conrad’s “detachment” (1992, xxviii) in the preface to *The Secret Agent* (to which we alluded above)). Notice that he uses such essentialistic phrases as “the Arabs themselves” (xix) and “the Egyptian psyche” (xiii). This simple classificatory device, which is essentially linguistic, enables him to do some detective work. In the preface, he in fact refers to himself as a detective (xiv). He explains that he “had acquired and read practically all the court proceedings and police investigations that surrounded the assassination [of Sadat]” (xiv). This detective work also intensifies the gloomy, menacing atmosphere that he establishes and the strategic distance that he creates through.

Paradoxically, despite the strategic distance that Ajami creates, he insists on benefiting from the advantages of his identitarian legacy, which he calls inheritance to emphasize its pastness. Ajami’s constructed literary history is backed up by his own “credibility,” a notion that he stresses throughout his narrative. He achieves this by describing his own odyssey (leaving for the U.S.) and by claiming his right to the inheritance, the key word in this whole narrative: “I am a stranger, but no distance could wash me clean of that inheritance” (24). Discussing his inheritance, once again he brings up his origin (his Persian roots). He has then two narratives to choose from: his private, family inheritance or public inheritance: “but Arabs are reared to tread carefully on private family matters. We are taught not to air family matters that we glimpse. And besides, the public inheritance was more important, having been played upon for the last two decades” (25). By recovering this inheritance and emphasizing it, Ajami intimates that this might bring an end to his sense of loss. By going back to his secular and Westernized inheritance, he wishes to produce an alternative to the loss, a re-romanticization of the Orient.

This secular alternative is most visible in his reference to the events that he discusses and the characters whose lives he chronicles, both of which are overshadowed by the persona he develops in his two major works. For this authorial persona, the Iranian Revolution represents a pivotal event. In response to it and its aftermath, he expresses his reservations about what he calls “nativist” and “theocratic” (xii) systems, as he is against nationalism and religion. In fact, he describes the post-Iranian Revolution change that he detects in Arabic culture as “the rupturing of the secular tradition” (xiii). So, his alternative is the return, the nostalgic return, to a secular dispensation by focusing on liberalism (xv)

and stressing Mahfouz's "more open politics" (xv). This is his syllogism, which is simultaneously the underlying argument behind his narrative. Look at the language that he uses here: the language of ownership that is coupled with the discourse of individualism, both of which suggest an ever-increasing neoliberal world: "I had no difficulty entering into his [Khalil Hawi's] world. And in some proprietary way I felt I was picking up fragments of my own life as I looked into his" (x). Ajami's intrusive strategies in his personal inquiry, as he calls it, make him a unique individual endowed with a double perspective. We claim that the *Dream's* or Ajami's, for that matter, authority on the Western reader takes its legitimacy from *Predicament*. *Predicament* anticipates and paves the way for *Dream* in the very motif of dream that permeates the whole narrative. *Dream* can be considered a prequel to *Predicament* that can only be written after "the cobwebs of Arab society" are blown away (*Predicament* 6). It is to what he blows away that we turn in the next section.

The Constructedness of Ajami's Literary History

In *Dream*, Ajami constructs a literary history that he describes as being "objective" (158). It is both "a book about public matters" and "a personal inquiry" (xi). In it, he—as we suggested—takes on different roles: "detective" (xiv), literal and metaphorical translator of Arab and Islamic cultures, traveller, political commentator, and historian. Our claim does not negate or underestimate the roles that he adopts in his narrative, but it takes as its point of departure the idea that this book is a narrative that assumes the form of the literary history, complete with all the ideological baggage that comes with literary histories. That does not mean that the other features of the book and the political lives that it narrates or rather constructs are not worthy of study, but we assert that it is the cultural and more precisely the literary aspect of the work that needs to be highlighted, as it showcases a paradigmatic case for later neo-Orientalist narratives.

What emphasizes the fictionality of this narrative and its constructedness is its use of literary language. Here is a passage in which Ajami waxes romantic:

The solitude of this 'goodly' mountain and the rhythm of its seasons—the harsh, snowy winters, the lush, sudden springs, the mist blowing into the valleys from the peaks of Mount Sannin—and the mythology of death and resurrection that sprang up in the hills shaped the people of this land and their self-image and marked their poetry and literature. (34)

The elevated literary language is strategically used but is ironically symptomatic of this manufactured narrative. This style is intended to make us remember the idea that the landscape overdetermines one's thinking in the Arab world (a position which is in line with but not identical to Lawrence's claim that Arabic overdetermines Arabs' thinking).

But what are the schematics of this story that Ajami tells? The narrative arc is simple: the reason why Arab and Muslim cultures are lagging behind is because they do not open spaces for the "revolutionary potential" of the protagonists of his story. The protagonists are Arab writers (under implicit or explicit Western patronage). These include Khalil Hawi, Naguib Mahfouz, Adonis (Ali

Ahmad Said), George Antonius, Yusuf Al-Khal, Taha Hussein, Sonaallah Ibrahim, Louis Awad, and many others. In contrast, there are other writers who are not representative of that literary history, chief among whom are Abdelrahman Munif and Nizar Qabbani. The members of the second group, whom he even calls at some point “semi-Westernized Arabs” (174), are either the villains or the foils of that literary history. Ajami’s main criteria for such differentiation include adhering to Western standards (such as secularism and neoliberalism) without being critical of Western colonialism and writers’ attitudes towards the question of Palestine. Such criteria indicate that “literature is a universal of culture which can be assimilated to the Western literary standards,” to use the words of Walter Mignolo (222). What distinguishes the first group then is its belief in the West’s literary standards and call for “literary reform and political change” (4) and support of the “liberal, progressive impulse” (224) that Ajami espouses. They also attempt to recoup what Ajami calls a “secular inheritance” (3) that is predicated on the thinking of the “elders” (9) of the Arab Renaissance, *nahda*, or “secular enlightenment” (96).⁹ These writers come from both the Romantic as well as Modernist (apparently apolitical) traditions. The general tone of this literary history is accordingly nostalgic, as it wants to go back to those earlier times (it will be recalled that the subtitle is *A Generation’s Odyssey*). In Chapter 3 “In the Shape of the Ancestors,” the main weight of Ajami’s argument is revealed. For him, the main battle in the Arab world is that between tradition and modernity (114), not between east and west or colonized and colonizer. In his account, Arabs are not ready for modernity; there is something inherent in them that prevents them from catching up with the rest of the world, especially the West. It is in this chapter that he shows why and how Arabs fail to be modern. By doing so, in his authority and capacity as an insider and Arab, he exempts the West from any responsibility and guilt.

According to Ajami, blaming Arabs comes as a “natural” result of their rejection of Arab writers’ adoption of modernity, an act that is in turn valorized by the West. He, therefore, begins his narrative with mentioning the death of Buland Haidari to frame his whole narrative which is that of *ghurba* (both as feeling of estrangement and as land of the strangers who were caught in “a deep Arab malady” (3)).¹⁰ For Haidari “belonged to a special breed of poets who took it upon themselves to revolutionize their craft and to modernize the culture of Arabic literature” (3). He belonged to a generation who were shaped “on the ideals of secular enlightenment and modernity” (3). Like Ajami, Haidari is an in-between figure. He was Kurdish. His journey of alienation and his move from Iraq to Lebanon then to Paris and London, is the journey of his generation who were rejected by their own homes and “took the memory of simpler times and places and worked over these memories in new, alien settings” (6). According to Ajami, the trajectory from which Haidari flees is that of deterioration: moving away from secularism to theocratic politics (7).

But the main story that the book starts with is Al-Hawi’s suicide. His suicide is presented as a sacrificial symbol for the loss of an older tradition and failure of Arab culture. It is also emblematic of a man whose thinking is West-oriented. We are told that he is one of the last edifices of the revolution (55). In fact, the shift in his poetry was inspired by the assassination of Anton Saadah (67). Prior to the assassination, Hawi “mastered a literary form that skipped the boundaries of the Arab states and traveled with ease” (67); the form being “the classical *Qasida*, the ode” (67). But while keeping to the classical

form, he exploited the frame to express new ideas: “an Arab renewal” (67). He thus turned to Romanticism. One of the key figures who influenced his thinking was Gibran (93). Ajami explains, “The new poets [one of whom is Hawi] were done with the classical form and its hegemony. To the old, honored medium they brought the urgency and restlessness of their time. The *Qasida*, the ode with its familiar meter, gave way to free verse” (81).¹¹ Ajami goes on to describe the sorrowful end, typical of his protagonists, and reports Hawi’s sense of frustration at the end: “The modernists, he said, had not understood the West itself, let alone laid the foundations for a viable Arab renaissance” (92). For him, “the dream” is over (92). It is in this sense of lack of hope that Ajami sees a chance to express both his nostalgia for the past and a necessary neoliberalized alternative.

We can see the same attitude when Ajami discusses the assassination attempt at Mahfouz’s life. For Ajami, Mahfouz’s fiction is a “mirror” and “an inheritance destined to endure the test of time” (211). In his account, Mahfouz’s novel *Awlad Haratina* “had been banned by the authorities of al-Azhar University for its secular tone and the liberties it took with religious symbolism” (211). What matters for Ajami is the secularism of Mahfouz. Once that secularism is discovered, the literary historian dwells on it. Underneath this logic lies the assumption of Western values as being superior ones, especially because they are confirmed by the validation that Mahfouz received from the Nobel Prize committee.¹²

In contrast to that attitude, the foils abound. Consider the case of Nizar Qabbani. Although a modernist and all for innovation, Qabbani is downgraded because of his criticism of Mahfouz’s position on the so-called peace process. It is true that Qabbani’s critique is too genre-deterministic, but that does not lead to the conclusions that Ajami makes: “The first [fiction] is deliberate; the novelist arranges all the elements of his fiction and probes the psychology of his characters without the pressure of time. But the poet works with ‘highly combustible material’” (260). Ajami quotes Qabbani as writing, “Naguib Mahfouz is a product of the Sadat school, which believed in the genius of Sadat and in his prophecies and in his vision for the future. I am a student of the school of Nasserism, with all its madness and pride and patriotic deeds and victories and defeats, with all its weddings, and sorrows” (260).¹³ Ajami wants to paint a picture of Qabbani and his works as being irrational and sentimental. In contrast, Mahfouz and his works represent a rational “mirror.” This tendentious attitude is solely based on Mahfouz’s support of the peace agreement with the state of Israel.

Another foil in Ajami’s literary history is Abdelrahman Munif. The parenthetical note that Ajami inserts in his discussion of Munif’s *Cities of Salt* is telling enough of his attitude to the writer and his works. The note reads, “The novels have been superbly translated into English by an American writer, Peter Theroux” (125). Compare that to Ajami’s perfunctory description of the novels: “a sprawling cycle of novel,” “the grand oil novel of the lands in the Gulf” (125). Munif’s literary works are thus underestimated as a product of “radical Arab nationalism,” which romanticizes the desert (125). Munif’s art is summarized this way: “The arrival of the British and the Americans into the oil lands was like the sweeping in of a yellow wind bringing ruin in its train” (125). The verdict is that Munif’s novels are ideologically oriented: “the fiction was made to carry the politics” (126). Munif is quoted as saying, “[T]he Arabs of today are searching for some liberty and security and for their right to have their say”

(126). In the paragraph that ensues, Ajami tells us that Munif is an exile in Paris (126), in which Munif is enjoying the advantages of freedom. According to Ajami, Munif’s works are one-dimensional: “Munif’s literary license dispensed with the subtlety of social and political life in the Gulf and the Peninsula” (130).

In his discussion of Munif, Ajami makes many moves. First, he depicts Munif’s work as political, rather than artistic. Still, while doing that, Ajami is the one who ignores “the subtlety of social and political life” in the novel by stressing the claim that Munif’s is a nostalgic desert narrative. For Munif’s interest in his *Cities of Salt* lies in his well-crafted laying bare of American imperialism (aka petrodollarism), especially its exploitation of the Gulf states.¹⁴ This is not to say that Munif’s work is merely ideological. On the contrary, we suggest that Munif succeeds in providing readers with an artistic work that does not deny the fact that all art is political. Moreover, Ajami wants to establish the idea that Munif is ungrateful, as he is critical of the West while the West is lending its help to him through (literary) aid. Ajami is not interested in telling us about the underlying conditions that led Munif to exile (one fixture of postcolonial realities).¹⁵

Thus, through ignoring the context and historical resonances of the events that he delineates, Ajami’s narrative fabricates a narrative in which nostalgia is unidirectional: the loss of a generation that was interested in secularization and modernization. Such issues as human rights and settler colonialism are not part of his narrative arc of nostalgia. This is especially the case in his discussion of the representation of the question of Palestine in Arabic literature and Arab writers’ attitude to the cultural boycott of Israeli institutions.

The acid test for true belongingness in Ajami’s literary history is writers’ attitude on the so-called peace process and the question of Palestine. Ajami constantly refers to Palestine and Israel throughout the narrative. In the preface, he highlights the “Arab intellectual encounter with Israel” (xvi). He refers to the “Suez War” (his name for it), Israel’s connection and similar history with the United States (see, for instance, p. 100), and the different attempts at peace. The problem with all these references is that they exonerate Israel’s culpability and lay the blame on Palestinians (a word that he avoids or uses to replace the word Palestine). Linguistically, he uses labels that undermine the significance of Palestinians. For instance, the Palestinian revolution of 1936 is referred to as “the Arab rebellion” (162). He even goes so far as to mention “[t]he burden of Palestine” (13), reminiscent of the White Man’s “burden.”

Based on this linguistic erasure, it is not surprising that Ajami extols writers who supported the peace accords or agreements that were signed by Israel and other Arab countries, agreements that were in effect acts of complete surrender and giving up of basic rights (see Rashid Khalidi’s *Brokers of Deceit: How the U.S. has Undermined Peace in the Middle East*). Writers who applauded the “peace process” are the protagonists, while the others are their foils or antagonists. We already saw this illogic at work when we mentioned Ajami’s comments on Qabbani. In the last sections of the book, he lists as advocates of “peace” Adonis, Saadallah Wannous, Louis Awad, Tawfic al-Hakim, Hussein Fawzi, Yusuf Idris, Sari Nusseibeh (a Palestinian writer whom he describes as “a younger academic and activist from Jerusalem”),¹⁶ and many others (284 and passim). Ajami provides the typical argument of this group when he cites Hani al-Rehab’s criticism of thinkers who are invested in the cultural boycott of Israeli

institutions: “He was scornful of the ignorance of Israel’s institutions and language and literature, the taboo on dealing with it, the negation of its statehood and accomplishments” (254). Al-Rehab is interested in normalization and sees nothing wrong with it. Like Ajami, he does not engage the reasons for such cultural boycott.

For Ajami, what Palestinians want does not matter. His dismissive and ahistorical attitude towards Palestinian resistance proves as much: “The pamphleteers went to work, and so did the gunmen, proclaiming an era of daring and defiance. But it was all delirium” (132). The implication is that what Palestinians call for is only commotion and sentimental bluster. Even the right of return for refugees is downplayed. By enumerating a number of exiled writers and how they are adjusting to their new circumstance, Ajami neutralizes the plight of Palestinian refugees and strategically omits the colonization of Palestine. Marked as inevitable in this neoliberalized world and in this age of globalization (that is, American imperialism), this omission of colonial realities and the needs of the colonized is in agreement with the neo-Orientalist agenda that Behdad and Williams discuss, particularly in the context of neo-Orientalists’ “agree[ing] with right-wing policies,” as we have explained earlier. With this conservative and openly racist position, Ajami caps his neo-Orientalist literary history: “the Palestinians had hitched a ride on the coattails of a successful Zionist enterprise” (312). In fact, it is Ajami who clutches “on the coattails of” supremacy.

Conclusion

In analyzing this text, we tried to show Ajami’s insidious efforts at producing a narrative of inferiority, a neo-Orientalized literary history that rejects the self. That literary history heeds the calls of Western imperialists like Macaulay, who wrote the following in 1835: “We must do our best to form a class of who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect” (359). In so doing, Ajami exemplifies the “compliant natives” to whom Said refers, although the guise is different. Through relying on Behdad and Williams’s analysis, we suggested that Ajami’s narrative is a precursor of the neo-Orientalist works that proliferated post-9/11 such as Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. By highlighting Ajami’s *Dream*, we claimed that it anticipates and helps reframe the plethora of post-9/11 publications by people of Eastern descent on the regions from which they come, publications that actively participate in imperialism.

Commenting on the fact that many Arab writers, thinkers, and journalists found the West a safe haven, Ajami ironically writes, “The great sheltering truth of Arab nationalism found refuge in the West” (297). The underlying logic of this sentence is not difficult to discern: Arabs have always been indebted to the West, and they will continue to be so. This logic conforms to Fukuyama’s thesis of the end of history and renders Arab thinkers who resist U.S. imperialism as incorrigible ingrates. The conclusion of this logic is that the self-appointed protagonist of this neo-Orientalist literary history or odyssey is Fouad Ajami, an individual jumping “on the coattails of” Western supremacy.

"على أذيل" الاستعلاء: الاستشراق الجديد في (قصر أحلام العرب: أوديسة جيل) لفؤاد عجمي

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الملخص

يركز هذا البحث على كتاب (قصر أحلام العرب: أوديسة جيل) الذي وضعه فؤاد عجمي، كما ويشير إلى كتابه الآخر (المعضلة العربية: الفكر والممارسات السياسية العربية منذ عام 1967). يجد القارئ في الكتابين أمثلة كثيرة على التفكير الاستشراقي بشكله الجديد، فنرى أن الكتاب الأول يمثل تاريخاً أدبياً بصيغة الاستشراق الجديد، إذ لا يسوق أمثلة على الاستشراق الجديد فحسب وإنما يستشرف انتشاره في أعقاب انفجارات الحادي عشر من أيلول في عالمنا الذي تسوده الليبرالية الجديدة؛ معتمدين بذلك على نقاش علي بهداد وجوليت آ. وليامز حول الاستشراق الجديد، وأفكار حميد دبشي حول ما بعد الاستشراق. وكما نرى أيضاً أن فؤاد عجمي يبنى عمله على إرث الاستعمار في عالمنا الليبرالي الجديد؛ فنراه في هذا الكتاب يقسم الكتاب وكتاباتهم إلى مجموعتين: الأبطال الذين يجسدون التفكير الغربي والأضداد أو الأشرار الرافضين لمثل هذا التفكير. ونظن أن هذا البحث ما هو إلا خطوة صغيرة في طريق كشف هذا الفكر الاستشراقي بشكله الجديد ومقاومته ومقاومة مظاهره الاستعمارية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فؤاد عجمي، الاستشراق الجديد، تاريخ أدب، ما بعد الاستشراق، الليبرالية الجديدة.

Endnotes

- ¹ According to Said, “when Vice President Cheney made his hardline speech on 26 August 2002 about the imperative to attack Iraq he quoted as his single Middle East ‘expert’ in support of military intervention against Iraq, an Arab academic” (“Orientalism Once More” 2004, 877). Of course, the Arab expert is Fouad Ajami. Cheney’s words are: “As for the reaction of the Arab ‘street,’ the Middle East expert Professor Fouad Ajami predicts that after liberation, the streets in Basra and Baghdad are ‘sure to erupt in joy in the same way the throngs in Kabul greeted the Americans.’”
- ² There are several Orientalisms. For example, in his article “Introduction: Orientalism(s) after 9/11,” Malreddy Pavan Kumar lists a number of Orientalisms that have emerged in the wake of 9/11: military, American, internal, parallel, traveling, pulp, techno, counter, and economic (2012, 235-36). There is also Greta Aiyu Niu’s techno-Orientalism, “the practice of ascribing, erasing, and/or disavowing relationships between technology and Asian peoples and subjects,” a form of Orientalism that “is intertwined with capitalism and consumption” (2008, 74).
- ³ Describing it as “a new epistemic, or counter-epistemic... juncture” (2009, 221) and “epistemic endosmosis” (2009, 222), Dabashi defines this stage of post-Orientalism as the period “when... knowledge [about the East] is no longer centered in any university or research institute and is in fact widely disseminated in varied forms of private and public forums, and as such resisting categorization and operating on a cacophonous modulation. Endosmosis here refers to the inward flow of dis/information through the permeable membrane of the mass media – a cellular labyrinth of dissemination or cavities of transmutation – toward the public domain at large and there mutated into a greater concentration: Externalization, objectivation, and internalization as [Peter] Berger and [Thomas] Luckmann would say” (2009, 222).
- ⁴ Notice that Hume repeats the word “comfort.”
- ⁵ It is worth recalling that the two books to which we refer here begin with corpses: one corpse in *Predicament*, that of Salim al-Lawzi; four in *Dream*: Buland Haidari, Khalil Hawi, Antoon Saadah, and Malcolm Kerr.
- ⁶ The title of one of Ajami’s books reinforces this concept: *The Foreigner’s Gift: The Americans, the Arabs, and the Iraqis in Iraq*.
- ⁷ In *Predicament*, Ajami’s attitude to Arabic echoes Lawrence’s words: language “intoxicated and created an impression of great power and accomplishment” (32); “Our wars have so far been verbal wars” (34); Arabic “was not so much a means of expression but an end in itself” (34); and “Unless liberated from the spell of language, the Arab would remain captive of a sterile system of thought” (34).
- ⁸ His authority, or rather mastery over the language, is further reinforced by his resorting to the exoticization of the language, an old Orientalist trope. Let us not forget his reference to the Desert (xi). The desert is also a motif he uses as a rhetorical device to justify Americans’ pragmatism. An

important critic of such an invocation of the desert is AbdelRahman Munif in his *Cities of Salt*, which we discuss below.

- ⁹ See this shocking quotation: “Ridding themselves of the debased, devotional literature their community had produced in the early and middle centuries of Islam, the Christian secular writers were to play a crucial role, in that time of change and curiosity in the middle years of the nineteenth century, in narrowing the gap between the classical Arabic of letters and the vernacular of daily life” (43).
- ¹⁰ His use of the epic tradition and the visit of the dead makes his setting more or less the unattained past and the land of the dead or *terra necro*, which reduces places in third world countries like Iraq and Palestine, just to mention a few, “to the lands of the living dead” (Kumar 2012, 269). Kumar explains, “If, for outsiders, the Oriental space represents a *terra necro*, it then follows that the people who live ‘inside’ of this space, as Mbembe puts it, are the embodiment of the ‘living dead’” (2012, 272).
- ¹¹ For a much more nuanced, albeit problematic, discussion of Neo-classical and Modernist poetry in Arabic literature, see R. C. Ostle’s “The Romantic Poets” and Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s “Modernist Poetry in Arabic.”
- ¹² See John Fowles’s preface to the English translation of Mahfouz’s *Miramar*, in which Mahfouz underestimates his own and other Arab writers’ creative output in comparison with Western writers.
- ¹³ In *Predicament*, Ajami makes Sadat’s yearning for the past similar to that of Muhammad Ali’s grandson, Ismael, “the modernizer, the cosmopolitan man” (125). Ajami states that Sadat is a descendent of Ismael whose “aspirations went beyond the desire to modernize. His aspiration was, as Nadav Safran writes, ‘no less than the transformation of Egypt into a part of Europe.’ To that end, he built ‘operas, palaces and promenades’; a drive that led his pursuit of an African empire” (126).
- ¹⁴ For more on U.S. imperial policies in the context of oil, see Douglas Little’s *American Orientalism*.
- ¹⁵ See Rob Nixon’s much more cogent reading of the novel in his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.
- ¹⁶ Ajami highly praises Nusseibah’s position for co-authoring a book with an Israeli writer, Mark Heller. Ajami writes, “He put down on paper a rudimentary outline of a Palestinian state that accepted Israel’s legitimacy in return for reciprocal recognition. He broke with the orthodoxy, but the book was written in English and, thus, was easy to ignore” (284).

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