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Review

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Arab Orientalism: Images of America in the Middle East

Eid Mohamed

London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2015. 170 pages.

Scholarship on orientalism has richly dissected the essence of politicization in Western forms of knowledge about Arabs and Muslims. Since the publishing of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979), the field of postcolonial studies has encapsulated not only critiques of Western imperialism and its utility of knowledge as a powerful tool for controlling others, but also captured emerging critiques of the subaltern and subjugated populations in their search for decolonialization and postcolonial agency. In the Arab world, three meta-narratives have espoused competing, often overlapping, resistance narratives of the West, i.e., Arab nationalism, Islamism, and state nationalism. Critiques emerging from such narratives, although they vary in their motifs and motives, contribute to the overall discursive platform of orientalism. Eid Mohamed's *Arab Orientalism* offers a timely exposure to this discourse with particular attention to Egyptian cultural and literary productions in the post-9/11 context.

While Rasheed El-Enany's *Arab Representations of the Occident* (2006) surveys representations of Europe and the United States in Arabic fiction during the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras, Mohamed's book offers a specific case study of Egyptian engagement with the U.S. through readings of literature, media, and film. Mohamed is in conversation with El-Enany's work and further contributes to research on orientalism as an anti-imperial counter-discursive response that empowers Arabs to voice their grievances towards American presence in the region. The significance of this work lies in its interrogation of Arab-based literary, cultural, and intellectual contemporary repertoire around the U.S., which echoes critiques that preserve the particularity of the Egyptian state nationalist paradoxical consumption of U.S. cultural and political influence in the country.

One distinguishing element of *Arab Occidentalism* is its construction of the U.S. in a broader framework that forges a space for Arab writers to interact with various aspects of American culture and politics. The first chapter of the book illustrates this framework through reflections on two novels: Alaa al-Aswany's *Chicago* and Amani Abu Fadl's *Birth of the South*. The author acknowledges the prevalence of Arab sensational imagery drawn from East-West divisions in these works, which project the U.S. as a theater staging the identity struggle of Arab and Muslim immigrants. The selection of such novels speaks to Mohamed's interest in unveiling a growing recognition in Egypt of the Arab diaspora in the U.S. and the impact of 9/11 on their lives. The Arab immigrant characters in the novels fall victim to East-West sensational constructions of identities, which the author characterizes as an Egyptian literary response to the articulations of post-9/11 paranoia.

Parallel to its treatment of diaspora, *Arab Occidentalism* pays close attention to the popularized Arab reaction to two moments that symbolized both hope and despair in Arab engagement with U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The second chapter navigates the media reaction to the Iraqi journalist's act of shoe-throwing at President Bush, which represented the pinnacle of rejection of U.S. power and deployment in the region. The invasion of Iraq rallied the Arab street around the rhetoric of the war on terror, and enabled them to express a rising sense of disillusionment with the U.S.-based narratives of democracy and freedom. The chapter also surveys the Arab fascination with the ascendance of the first African American to the American presidency - a moment that necessitated serious reflections on issues of power transition and social mobility in the Middle East. Mohamed offers a reading of various Egyptian and Arabic newspaper columns and cartoons in *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, and *Al Jazeera* in order to unveil the varied ways through which Arabs and Muslims spell out their responses to the U.S.'s role in the Middle East during the war on terror. Mohamed emphasizes the dynamism of the Arab street, and documents a cultural response to Western scholarship of the Arab world as homogenous and static by choosing to highlight the transition in media coverage of the two moments.

The third chapter provides an account of the Egyptian cinematic critique of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. It offers a reading of Youssef Chahine's *Alexandria-New York*, Mohamed Amin's *The Night Baghdad Fell*, and Adel Adeeb's *The Baby Doll Night*. The analysis demands an exploration of the Arab collective memory of a nostalgic past, a threatened reality, and an uncertain future. It renders naked the damaging effects of the U.S. exercise of power through Egyptian codes of imperialism and indigeneity during the age of globalization. The films present popular critiques of the U.S. as an interventionist and disruptive power

in the continuation of a systematic Western colonial project that continues to deny Arabs access to their unrealized sovereignty and self-determination. Such critiques, Mohamed argues, invest in imagining an alternative route to a post-colonial conception of identity informed by a traumatized, but consolidated, Arab collective consciousness.

Resistance, in this context, offers a viable space for the development of an authentic Arab agency. This emphasis is on an Arab agency which develops at the crossroads of the national and the diasporic. For this reason, the fourth chapter re-visits the issue of the Arab diaspora in search of critical works that propose nuanced critique of identity at the intersection of U.S.-Arab geopolitics. It offers a survey of Arab American literature that invites readers to consider 9/11 as a uniting front for Arab and Arab American activism. Mohamed offers insights into novels such as Mohja Kahf's *Emails from Scheherazad* and Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* in a way that renders the role of Arab Americans in enunciating a critique of the U.S. ever more visible. The focus on diaspora sets this book apart from other works interested in capturing the Arab imagination of the West.

Arab Occidentalism is a short volume: 170 pages excluding notes, bibliography, and index. The length presents a challenge for the author to develop a thorough framework that accounts for the divergence and convergence of multiple narratives circulating the Arab world, namely: Arab nationalism, Islamism, and state nationalism. The framework could have also benefited from a more explicit examination of the intersectionality of nation, class, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, the book is not limited in its scope of analysis to a specific cultural or literary medium, which could have added more insights, especially in relation to medium-specific technicalities and audience reception. Nonetheless, the book presents a necessary conceptual framework of Arab cultural production (national and diasporic) that calls for further development.

Arab Occidentalism has received endorsements from recognized scholars in the fields of American studies, Middle Eastern studies, and cultural studies. The list includes Melani McAlister, Brian Edwards, Rasheed El-Enany, Lawrence Pintak, and Jack Shaheen. This work contributes to the respective fields through its inter-textual methodology and transnational framework. It could serve as an important resource for educators and students interested in learning more about the contemporary U.S.-Arab and Muslim tension that is unraveling. The nature of the book's arguments and its jargon-free language make it accessible for a non-academic audience as well. Overall, the book demands attention for its exhibition of Arab and Arab American construction of post-9/11 America in an inviting prose.

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