

# Limitations of Postcolonial Theory and the Exclusion of Arabic Literature

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the relationship between postcolonial studies and Arabic literature, arguing that despite the foundational role of Arabic literary and cultural production in colonial discourse analysis, postcolonial studies has largely ignored it in favor of English and French literatures from former colonial powers. This exclusion of Arabic literature is criticized for reinforcing neocolonial hegemony and prioritizing the canons of major colonial powers while excluding texts written in the languages of the colonies.*

*The paper also examines the intellectual traditions from which postcolonial theory has arisen, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and feminism. The paper argues that the exclusion of Arabic literature from postcolonial studies is a missed opportunity to expand the field's conceptual and methodological frameworks, and those postcolonial studies and Arabic studies can mutually benefit from a more inclusive approach.*

*The paper suggests that by situating the tradition of modern Arabic literature within the colonial context and examining the conceptual limitations of postcolonial theory, postcolonial studies and Arabic studies can mutually expand each other. Scholars can challenge neocolonial cultural dependency and Eurocentric knowledge production by incorporating Arabic literature into postcolonial debates.*

*The paper concludes by highlighting the need for postcolonial studies to move beyond the canon of major colonial powers and to include texts written in the languages of the colonies, as well as oral literatures of Africa, Native Americans, and Australia's Aborigines, in order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the colonial experience and its ongoing legacies. This paper argues for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to postcolonial studies that incorporates Arabic literature and other non-Western literatures and oral traditions. Doing so will expand the field's conceptual and methodological frameworks and produce a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of global power relations.*

## **Introduction:**

The genesis of postcolonial studies can be traced back to the noteworthy contributions of luminaries such as Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, who examined colonialism in the Arab world. Regrettably, the theoretical development of postcolonial studies in the 1980s and 1990s overlooked Arabic literary and cultural production, relegating it to the confines of Middle Eastern Studies departments. These departments have been critiqued for perpetuating the Orientalist scholarship that Said so eloquently denounced in his seminal work.

In stark contrast, postcolonial studies has bestowed considerable attention on literatures penned in English and French, the languages of erstwhile colonial powers, in regions such as South Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, these literatures are often classified in ways that reinforce neocolonial cultural dependency, as evidenced by terms such as "Commonwealth," "New Literatures in English," and "Francophonie."

Although Arabic literature that expresses itself in French through bilingual writers from the Maghreb and Levant region is typically included in Francophone studies, which is part of the "postcolonial" discourse, Arabophone literature is often studied in Arabic or Middle Eastern Studies with minimal focus on its colonial history. This neglect of Arabic literature in postcolonial studies is perplexing, given its fundamental role in colonial discourse analysis.

To remedy this situation, it is imperative that postcolonial studies embrace Arabic literature and transcend the canons of major colonial powers. This approach will enable scholars to challenge neocolonial cultural dependency and Eurocentric knowledge production, and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the colonial experience and its enduring legacies. Such inclusivity can expand the field's conceptual and methodological frameworks, thus leading to a more nuanced understanding of the intricate complexities of global power relations.

The stated goal of postcolonial studies is to scrutinize and understand the distribution of power on a global scale. However, it has been observed that this field of study risks perpetuating neocolonial hegemony by according undue importance to the literary works of major colonial powers like Britain and France. Moreover, postcolonial discourse frequently fails to engage with the significant body of colonial and postcolonial writing produced in other European languages. The inclusion of texts written in the languages of the colonized, such as Arabic Australia's Aborigines, Native American, South Asian languages, as well as oral literatures of Africa, poses a significant challenge to postcolonial theories, which are often rooted in contemporary notions of textuality. While the rubric of "postcolonial literature" has displaced older categories like "Commonwealth literature" and "Third World literature," it prioritizes the trauma of colonial history and recognizes the limitations of Western knowledge. However, it does not necessarily enable the production of non-Eurocentric knowledge of Asian, African, and Caribbean literatures any more than the older paradigms. Postcolonial theory can sometimes homogenize Asia and Africa and obscure nuances in colonial histories. By examining the conceptual limitations of postcolonial theory and situating the tradition of modern Arabic literature within the colonial context, postcolonial studies and Arabic studies can mutually expand each other.

Postcolonial theory has its roots in various European intellectual traditions, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and feminism. Early anti-colonial theorists such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon applied the model of class struggle to explain the complex relationship between colonizers and colonized peoples. Césaire, in particular, was highly critical of European civilization, which he saw as "decadent," "stricken," and "dying" due to two centuries of bourgeois rule that left 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, 1955, p. 9). In his view, a revolution was necessary to replace the tyranny of the dehumanized bourgeoisie with the preponderance of the proletariat, thus saving Europe from collapse.

On the other hand, Fanon disagreed with the idea that the European proletariat should ally with the

colonized, as he believed that the colonial system conflated racial categories and their attendant structures of feeling with class structure. Instead, he saw decolonization as involving a Manichean conflict between Europe and the wretched of the earth, as well as the psychological liberation of the colonized from the inferiority complexes engendered by colonialism. Of note, Fanon was highly critical of Marxism, as he perceived it as being Eurocentric, and he also questioned the applicability of psychoanalysis in the colonial context, given its inherent limitations.

In *Orientalism*, Said launched a scathing critique of Marxism, arguing that classical Marxism was woefully inadequate in its imposition of the European model of class struggle on the colonies due to its monolithic conception of history. Marx believed that world history was synonymous with European history, into which other cultures and civilizations were to be assimilated. Despite his condemnation of colonialism, Marx suggested 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" (Marx, 1853/1994, p. 154). For Said, such reasoning was facilitated by Marx's "easy resource to a massed body of writing... that controlled any statement made about the Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 155).

To analyze this "body of writing," Said employed Michel Foucault's concept of "discourse," which shifted the focus from critiques of the colonial system and its material practices to the critique of colonial discourse and elevated textuality as a methodological approach.

Said did not completely endorse poststructuralism despite his shift towards privileging textuality as a methodological approach. He believed that poststructuralism failed to develop the practical implications of textuality, which he had done in his books such as *Covering Islam*, *The Question of Palestine*, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, and *Culture and Imperialism*. This led to his growing dissatisfaction with the approach. Along with other critics such as Gerald Graff, Frank Lentricchia, Terry Eagleton, Barbara Foley, Aijaz Ahmad, and Jeffrey Nealon, Said viewed poststructuralism as politically impotent. They argued that the approach actually reinforced the dominant structures it aimed to challenge (Said, 1994, pp. 158-177).

Despite Said's reservations about poststructuralism, postcolonial theory after *Orientalism* became associated with the work of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, who drew heavily on poststructuralism. Spivak's critical strategy was informed by feminism, Marxism, and deconstruction, which enabled her to carry out multiple critiques of hegemonic structures simultaneously. Her focus on positionality led her to advance the thesis of the "silence" or unreadability of the subaltern within Western critical discourse. Spivak argued that French feminism and psychoanalysis perpetuate epistemic violence by creating stereotypes of the "Third World woman" and proposing transcendental categories that do not recognize cultural, historical, or class variables (Spivak, 1988, pp. 262, 134-153, 294-306).

However, some critics, such as Benita Parry, have argued that Spivak's own writing restricts the space in which the colonized can be written back into history. As a result, the subaltern remains silenced in the counter-discourse of "the postcolonial critic" (Parry, 1994, p. 39).

Bhabha's poststructuralist-based theory of colonial discourse takes a different approach to the subaltern's challenge to colonial authority in comparison to Said and Spivak. Unlike them, Bhabha does not view the subaltern as entirely silenced, but rather permits them rhetorical acts of resistance that do not threaten colonialism's material hold on the colonies. Bhabha's approach draws on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to identify the psychic operations of colonial discourse that betray its "ambivalence," such as anxiety, narcissism, and fetishism. Bhabha argues that this ambivalence undermines the intentionality Said ascribes to colonial discourse and that it is shared equally by colonizer and colonized. He also shifts the focus of analysis from the material confrontation between colonizer and colonized to the textual ambivalences and contradictions of colonial writing and the psychic disorders of the colonizer (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 85-101).

It has been argued by some scholars, including Abdul JanMohamed, that Homi Bhabha's

interpretation of colonial discourse neglects the political history of colonialism. Additionally, Robert Young and Arif Dirlik have criticized Bhabha's treatment of colonial discourse and the postcolonial as a single, homogeneous category. Young asserts that Bhabha's characterization of colonial discourse as a static concept fails to acknowledge the cultural context in which it is applied (Young, 1990, p. 146).

Postcolonial theory, as exemplified in the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, has at times adopted a reverse-Eurocentric approach that draws heavily on the Western tradition of anti-humanist critique of metaphysics, from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida.

However, this approach can unintentionally render the non-Western Other as inaccessible and unknowable. While poststructuralism has challenged the metaphysical underpinnings of Eurocentrism, it has not offered an epistemological alternative to the production of non-Eurocentric knowledge. Spivak argues that the poststructuralist project is overly self-centered, as evidenced by her critique of Kristeva, Derrida, Lyotard, and Deleuze. She contends that the preoccupation with colonial discourse fetishizes the subject, leaving colonial history, anti-colonial discourses and practices, and neocolonial realities to the margins of negative epistemology (Spivak, 1988, p. 137).

Anti-humanism has deconstructed Western metaphysics, but it has also consolidated the discursive antagonist of "Man" under the mark of the singular, the Lacanian "Other," who is now reduced to a mere psychic "splitting" function. Moreover, anti-humanism has ignored humanism's depiction of the Other as a negative essence, the "non-West." Therefore, the project of poststructuralist strands of postcolonial theory rests on the paradox of affirming the cultural and historical integrity of colonized societies from the decidedly Western-centered standpoint of anti-humanism (Young, 1990, pp. 146-148).

Postcolonialism differs from French theory in that while the latter renders the "non-West" as unknowable, the former renames it as the "postcolonial world" and claims to speak for it. However, this claim creates in discourse the very object it displaces materially, similar to Said's critique of Orientalism. The concept of hybridity, migrancy, and in-betweenness, which Homi Bhabha views as defining features of the postcolonial, is not a new phenomenon, and their valorization in postcolonial theory is due to their ability to deconstruct the essentialist discourses through which colonial Europe defined itself. However, this celebration of hybridity has led to a premature utopianism that superficially commercializes it without addressing the material structures of inequality and oppression. Hybridity has become a figure for the consecration of hegemony. The privileging of hybridity in postmodernism stabilizes neocolonial relations in the post-Cold War era of U.S. military dominance and the spread of global capitalism in the New World Order (Young, 1990, p. 4; Shohat, 1992, p. 110).

The critique of Eurocentrism has not been limited to poststructuralism and its literary critical applications, as it has also been present in various fields such as anthropology, classical studies, economics, geography, and history. Notable figures including Amin, Bernal, Blaut, Fabian, and Frank have contributed to this critique. The emphasis on hybridity is particularly noteworthy within the context of Western cultural and intellectual history, as it extends the poststructuralist critique of Eurocentrism (Young, 1990, pp. 146-148).

### **Cultural Memory and Colonial Discourses:**

The discussion of hybridity in postcolonial theory overlooks the crucial role of cultural memory in colonial and anti-colonial discourses in the Arab world. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that a single, monolithic discourse on the Orient has dominated for three millennia, it would be misguided to deny that many of the cultural representations produced throughout that long history have been passed on from one era to the next, informing and being assimilated into different modes of discourse through the agency of cultural memory. 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 celebrated as "Allenby of Armageddon." The image of a victorious Allenby



standing at the tomb of Saladin in Damascus to boast of Europe's triumphant "return" remains ingrained in Arab consciousness even today. The Marxist emphasis on class struggle, post-structuralist rejection of essentialism, psychoanalysis's universalism, and feminism's critique of patriarchy all preclude consideration of the unique cultural memory that characterizes colonial history in the Arab world. This memory should neither be theorized in terms of a universal postcolonial condition nor ignored in a unitary conception of "the postcolonial world" (Abfu Zayd, 1998, p. 23).

Colonial discourses in Africa and Asia, particularly India, did not experience the same level of recycled representations that Orientalism perpetuated about the Near East. The myth of the Dark Continent, for example, emerged during the transition from the British campaign against the slave trade, which culminated in the outlawing of slavery in British territory in 1833, to the imperialist partitioning of Africa that dominated the final quarter of the 19th century. This new myth replaced the earlier myth of the Noble Savage, which had informed European views of Africans, Native Americans, Indians, and Chinese. European stereotypes of distant peoples oscillated between utopian variations on the theme of the Noble Savage and demonizations that justified the colonization of the New World, the African slave trade, and early imperialism in Africa and Asia. However, none of these demonized peoples represented the type of threat posed by the Arab presence in Spain until 1492 or the Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683. The Enlightenment writers' keen interest in the Orient can be attributed to geographical proximity, historic religious rivalry, and these threats (Brantlinger, 1988, p. 185; Baudet, 1970, pp. 13-15; Mandeville, 1983).

The concept of colonial discourse is not a uniform entity, as different colonial contexts involve various cultural memories. Western media tends to portray Islamic fundamentalism as an aberrant reflection of Islam's demonic essence, disregarding its role as a form of political opposition against oppressive Arab governments and neocolonialism. Sudanese Mahdism and the Iranian Revolution exemplify the dual character of religious revival and nationalist anti-colonial movements. Arab fundamentalist movements arose to fill the ideological vacuum left by the failure of official secular projects, and their discourse is often essentialist, patriarchal, and reinforces the Orientalist Us/Them divide. Nevertheless, some Arab secular intellectuals and religious reformers offer progressive interpretations of religious texts to challenge canonical interpretations and advocate for reforms in women's rights, social organization, and political institutions. The intricate cultural politics in the Arab world cannot be reduced to a postcolonial condition and necessitate a more profound understanding of the interpretation of Islam (Said, 1979; Ahmad, 1992; Haddad, 2006).

### **Colonial History and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Modern Arabic Literature:**

The conventional literary scholarship in Middle Eastern Studies has often overlooked or marginalized the role of colonial history and anti-colonial resistance in modern Arabic literature, despite the fact that modern Arabic literature emerged in response to the colonial encounter with Europe in the 19th century (Salama, 2013). Although some scholars have argued that exposure to European literature played a beneficial role in revitalizing Arabic literature, the impact of colonialism and the subsequent Nahda movement cannot be disregarded. Arab intellectuals' fascination with modern European civilization was not solely due to cultural exchange but was also a response to the colonial threat they confronted (Salama, 2013). Muhammad Ali's educational missions, dispatched to France in the late 1820s with the aim of borrowing European science and technology to establish a modern army, exposed Arab intellectuals to European culture, thought, and literature, resulting in a renewed interest in classical Arabic poetry in the latter part of the 19th century (Abdel-Malek, 1994).

In the 19th century, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi's followers viewed their mission as one of discerning selection from Europe while retaining Arab cultural identity, which accounts for the renewed interest in classical Arabic poetry, the cultural output of the so-called Golden Age of Arabic literature (5th-11th centuries) (Salama, 2013). Classical Arabic poetry became a potent form of public discourse in which the poet assumed the role of spokesperson for the community, restoring poetry to its function as an expression of social values and aspirations, as well as an important instrument of social and political

mobilization. Mahmoud Sami al-Barudi, the originator of "neo-classical" poetry, played a critical role in the mid-19th century when he began to voice opposition to the policies of Egypt's Turkish ruler Khedive Isma'il, which eventually led to the British occupation in 1882 (Salama, 2013). Consequently, al-Barudi and the revolutionary leader Ahmad 'Urabi were exiled by the British. Other "neo-classical" poets, including Ahmad Shawqi, Hafiz Ibrahim, Ma'ruf al-Rusafi, Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri, and Ibrahim Tuqan, also composed "poems of occasion" that reacted to political events and rallied public opinion against colonial powers (Salama, 2013).

Following World War I, many so-called Arab "Romantic" poets rejected the conventions embraced by their "neo-classical" predecessors and found inspiration in European Romanticism. Nevertheless, they still regarded themselves as actively involved in cultural resistance (Salama, 2013). They challenged Orientalist discourse by emphasizing culture as the arena of contestation. 'Abbas Mahmud al-'Aqqad argued that the conventional desert imagery of the classical ode reinforced colonial stereotypes about the "Oriental mind," and hence the shift to the Romantic mode was motivated by the need to construct a cohesive Arab self that defied such stereotypes (DeYoung, 2004). Despite the devaluation of narrative in classical Arabic poetry, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's narrative inclination during the 1950s is part of the endeavor to create a poetic postcolonial narrative that contests Orientalist discourse (DeYoung, 2004). In these and other ways, Arab Romantic and modernist poets selectively adopted from European literary history those paradigms, forms, and styles that served their own anti-colonial purposes (Salama, 2013).

Critics have frequently employed Western periodization to describe the evolution of modern Arabic literature, disregarding the colonial context. This approach reduces the literature to "an inexorable sequencing not of its own making" and treats the phases of Arabic literature as mere replicas of their Western counterparts (DeYoung, 2004, p. 159). Such a method has resulted in the positing of a simplistic "influence" of Western writers on Arabic literature, such as the influence of Wordsworth on Arab Romantic and T. S. Eliot on modernist poetry. The conventional division of Naguib Mahfouz's career into phases that mirror the history of the European novel shows a similar tendency (Salama, 2013).

However, taking colonial history into account takes us beyond such simplistic readings, which assume unproblematic imitation of European canonical writers and obscure "the activity of resistance" and "identity formation as they oscillate in a dialectic of power...between colonizer and colonized" (DeYoung, 2004, p. 160). It is crucial to acknowledge the role of resistance and identity formation in the development of modern Arabic literature.

## **Conclusion:**

The fields of postcolonial studies and Arabic literary studies can mutually benefit from each other. Postcolonial studies can provide interdisciplinary inquiry, theoretical sophistication, and historical contextualization to Arabic literary scholarship, which is deficient in older Orientalist scholarship and the current area studies model. The lasting significance of postcolonial theory is that it has brought issues of colonialism and imperialism to the forefront of critical and intellectual debates in the West while successfully challenging the assumptions of several fields of inquiry within the humanities and social sciences (Salama, 2013).

Arab intellectuals had been aware of the contamination of Orientalist knowledge by anti-Arab racism, religious prejudice, and colonial interests since the 19th century, rendering Edward Said's Orientalism's central thesis unoriginal (Salama, 2013). Nonetheless, Said's position within the Western academic establishment and his utilization of French theory brought the postcolonial perspective into the limelight, inadvertently rescuing English studies in the US from its mid-1970s crisis (Harootunian, 2003). Similarly, Homi Bhabha's and Gayatri Spivak's theories gained their prestige and authority from their reliance on French theory's currency and novelty in the 1980s (Salama, 2013).

In contrast, earlier forms of Marxist critique, such as Cesaire's denunciation of humanism, struggled

to gain attention in Anglo-American universities (Salama, 2013). Postcolonial theory has supplied Western readers with conceptual and ethical frameworks to interpret European colonial literature and certain types of postcolonial texts that deal with colonial history. It exposes the limitations and persistence of hegemonic discourses and reminds us of the existence of other worlds beyond Western modes of thought and representation. However, when postcolonial theory endeavors to represent or subsume those other worlds, it reproduces the limitations of Marxism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and feminism.

Furthermore, the vast majority of Asian and African literary texts produced since the advent of modern European colonialism cannot be categorically grouped together. Even within the paradigm of resistance privileged in postcolonial theory, the number of works from the 20th century is limited. The canon of postcolonial literature as world literature privileges texts written in English and French at the expense of other diverse literatures written in non-European languages. It also inscribes "writing back," diaspora, migrancy, border-crossings, in-betweenness, and hybridity as the defining features of the "postcolonial condition." However, such issues are limited when considering that most African and Asian populations are not diasporic, migrants, or bilingual and may have never left their home countries' borders (Salama, 2013).

To surmount this impasse in postcolonial studies, the field must be receptive to comparative literary studies and critical methodologies that question the boundaries of postcolonial theory's founding discourses from various perspectives of Arabic, African, and Asian philosophies, realities, cultural worldviews, and cultural memories. This would prevent postcolonial theory from re-inscribing the model where the West offers theoretical paradigms while the rest of the world serves as the subjects of analysis (Salama, 2013).

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