

**Book Review of Abdullah Dabbagh's *Literary Orientalism, Postcolonialism, and Universalism*<sup>1</sup>**

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In the first part of the book, Dabbagh takes aim at Edward Said's *Orientalism*, stating that "the root of its [Said's thesis] falsehood is its lack of the historical dimension that is necessary for the understanding of orientalism as an extensive cultural movement" (4). Dabbagh goes on to argue that literary orientalism, especially romantic orientalism, is actually "sympathetic" to the Orient and not tied to the western imperialist project as Said would have us believe. In order to support his argument, Dabbagh provides several examples in his attempt to dismantle Said's main thesis that orientalism as a discourse was inevitably coupled with the West's (basically Great Britain, France and the United States) imperialistic designs. In his quest to discredit Said's thesis, Dabbagh piles on the "evidence," which includes the oriental origins of the western novel, especially the influence of the *Arabian Nights* and al-Hamadhani's and al-Hariri's *Maqamat* on western literature, for example.

Dabbagh also cannot fathom how Said could intentionally ignore the West's great sympathy for the Orient to be found in works such as Walter Scott's *The Talisman*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, Shakespeare's *Othello* and German orientalism, especially Goethe's *Diwan*. Dabbagh sees literary translation as "a labour of love," (29) citing not only works such as the *Arabian Nights* and *Hayy Bin Yaqdhān*, but also the *Bible*, which as an example of "oriental literature," proves "the positive receptivity of the West to the Orient" (34-35).

While it is indeed an admirable endeavor on Dabbagh's part to make a case for the western novel's oriental origins, thereby dispelling the myth of "westernness," the reader is put into a state of incredulous disbelief, especially at some of Dabbagh's assertions of orientalist sympathies, which he seems to find in very debatable literary sources and especially when the evidence extends to the Bible, and here one has to wonder how Dabbagh can ignore how the West has historically pitted the Judeo-Christian tradition against the Islamic tradition. Still, one has to be impressed by Dabbagh's argument for the radical unity of human culture, which he argues reached its climax in orientalist literary translations. In a chapter on "The Orientalist Sources of Courtly Love," Dabbagh

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again pounds home the point of unifying theories such as universalism, which he believes achieved its greatest expression in Rumi and the spirit of Sufi love, which as Dabbagh argues, influenced western love poetry.

However attractive these unifying ideas may be, Dabbagh fails to explain away Said's main thesis, which after all has been said and done, remains an indomitable thesis that is difficult to counter. Said, in fact, does not deny that some orientalism may be considered academic; however, he notes a "major shift in orientalism"... "from an academic to an instrumental attitude" (Said 246) which would make it an accomplice to the western imperialist endeavor, something that is most difficult to refute, especially when Dabbagh's proof is George Eliot's *Deronda* and Forster's *Passage*, amongst other similar examples. Eliot, as Dabbagh argues, "wants to fight anti-Jewish prejudice," (54) and this is supposedly good evidence to prove that the West does not harbor antagonistic feelings towards oriental peoples, especially the Arabs and Muslims of the Orient. But Eliot's *Deronda*, something that Dabbagh neglects to mention, represented one of the first calls for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, a glaring example of an extreme case of European imperialism and land confiscation. Sometimes Dabbagh's proof is spread so thin that it quickly disappears into thin air, especially when put to the test of reality. Realistically, it is Said's thesis that can help us understand America's wars against "terrorism," the West's stance on Iran's still non-existent nuclear weapons and so many other political and social issues.

In his chapter entitled "Going Native: Conrad and Postcolonial Discourse," Dabbagh is right to attack postcolonial multiculturalism, hybridity and fluidity as a neocolonial discourse. He makes an altogether convincing argument here, asserting that "multiculturalism serves the needs of contemporary capitalism better than the outmoded cultural Eurocentrism," (69) especially when such theories are put forward to blur identities and histories.

Dabbagh's rejection of postcolonial theory altogether based on some theorists' emphasis on hybridity, postcolonial criticism of Marxism, or because the term "postcolonial" seems to suggest that colonialism has ended, does not seem to be a fair assessment of everything that has been done in this field. Many postcolonial writers have written extensively on the extension of the colonial project in its different guises, such as globalism and other forms of neocolonialism. Dabbagh, however, more accurately suggests the terms "anti-colonial, anti-imperialist" (125) writings to replace the erroneous "postcolonial" classification. In this last chapter entitled "Colonialism, Postcolonialism and Anti-Colonialism," Dabbagh provides a thoroughly absorbing discussion on the role of the media in creating the enemy in order to keep the populace afraid of "Islamic terrorism," which has now replaced communism as an enemy.

In his chapter "Modern Universalism and the Myth of Westernness," Dabbagh provides examples of past fruitful cross cultural exchange between Europe and the Islamic world, and calls for a "new humanism and a new universalism based on understanding the ultimate unity and common destiny of humanity" (85). As attractive as this may sound, one cannot rule out historical

process and deny that Said's thesis on culture and imperialism is most readily applied to much of recent history. While Dabbagh admirably points to Islamic influence on European civilization, he does not attempt to explain the unstoppable western impulse of imperialism and the colonization of much of the world at least in modern history.

Dabbagh next tackles the idea of linguistic imperialism in his chapter "Globalism and the Universal Language," and here he makes a very convincing argument that the spread of English and French around the world is more about power than grammar; it is a tool of domination and coincides with the exact era of European imperialism. The reader here is quickly reminded of Dabbagh's earlier defense of literary orientalism as "sympathetic," and it becomes even harder to grasp the contradiction in Dabbagh's argument. If one can easily recognize the relationship of language to power, what of literature, which carries the very essence of culture within its core? After making a very detailed argument about the linguistic imperialism of English, Dabbagh ironically concludes with an affirmation of English's role as "the uncontested, international language" (108).

Dabbagh concludes his book by liberating us from some of the restrictions of postcolonial theory only to deliver us into the restrictions of a supposedly "superior" theory to be found in Marxism, an argument that seems to fall short of the goal of the unity of humanity.

## **References**

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