Locating Occidentalism

Arab Spring and Subversive Representations of the Other

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This chapter addresses Occidentalism, not only as a means of deconstructing Orientalist misconceptions about the East or even of writing back to the empire, but also within the process of regaining self-validation and self-assertion or retrieving an autonomous agency that allows for proper and independent construction and development of Eastern, Arab identity. No wonder there are multiple threads or undertones within the current of Occidentalism, or rather Occidentalisms.[1] The chapter thus addresses the subversive tone in selected Arabic literary material that, enlightened by the disillusionary moment of the Arab Spring, reworks the narrative of identity construction, free from any sense of inferiority or impotence that might have been instilled through the common thread of the Orientalist discourse. In its quest for conscious self-representation, this native and – indirectly – Occidentalist narrative both decentralizes and/or displaces the largely hegemonic West as a mere variable in the process of local identity construction and underscores a subversive sense of agency, where the West is at times ignored and at others appropriated, or even misconceived and/or misrepresented. As Eid Mohamed put it in his *Arab Occidentalism*:

> »Arab Occidentalism lives in a paradoxical relationship to the discursive practices of Orientalism with which it shares methods and strategies. If Orientalism, according to Said, is a Western way of destroying the ›other‹ and achieving domination, Arab Occidentalism is a discourse of oppression and a form of resistance.« (Mohamed 2017: 1)

1 Just as there are different Orientalisms or different versions of Orientalism, foremost of which are the one in which the Orient is identified with Islam, and which is based on Western fantasies about an exotic East, and the other launched with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt that is based on firsthand scholarship and that resulted in the foundational book *La Description de l'Égypte* (*Description of Egypt*), there are different versions of Occidentalism. These different versions find echo in the different definitions of the term »Occidentalism« itself, as indicated in Metin 2020.

This Occidentalist approach is imbued with a definitively emancipatory spirit that deconstructs the centralized colonial site of the West and that posits the indigenous self as a determinative agent whose halo of independence resounded in the postcolonial/postmodern Arab Spring slogan, »The People Want the Toppling of the Regime«. This slogan, however, transcends the socio-political into the epistemological sphere, where the self is the key player in the process of knowledge production. Hamid Dabashi describes this in his *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*:

> »The regime of knowledge production that is […] in the absence of conspiracy, in the business of distorting reality by way of making it understandable in the form of tired and old clichés – a mode of knowledge that is conducive to domination, namely ›the West over the East,‹ the ruling regime over the defiant population.« (Dabashi 2012: 44)

Here, the Occident is presented as a silenced/(mis)represented variable over which the East's cultural and aesthetic power is projected. Here, the East is a knowledge producer while the West is to a certain extent an imitator or follower. In this sense, Zuccotti Park and the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests drew inspiration from the Tahrir Square protests as an ideal countercolonial/counterhegemonic site or »discursive space« that witnessed a dense process of identity formation. It is where local space turns into an independent creative referent or a central inspirational site of multiple significances, creating and enjoying its own sense of legitimacy or self-validation. That said, the local square as a real/virtual public sphere, extended and appropriated in a nearly Habermasian sense, becomes a main locus for identity negotiation, witnessing a concerted effort towards sustaining polyvocality within its very celebrated collectivity. It is in such an appropriated/reclaimed public sphere that art becomes a tool/weapon for defiance in the face of autocracy and hegemonic colonialism, culturally and otherwise. It is indeed in art that revolutionary and literary/cultural aesthetics fused. There, the socio-political and the cultural meld into the stretched sphere of the (re)imagination, producing novel and multilayered modes of expression. Such expressive modes inscribed the new revolutionary aesthetic and the unrestricted language of the revolution. As stated in *Arab Occidentalism*:

> »[t]his is evident in the way many Egyptian/Arab novels and films convey the details of Arabs' daily lives, not only exposing superficial differences between ›us‹ and ›them‹ in the US–Arab encounter but also exposing profound similarities«. (Mohamed 2017: 2)

From this perspective, certain literary and journalistic Egyptian materials address the process of (re)presenting an Arab identity, being invested with an independent sense of agency and, by corollary, deconstructing the age-old stereotyped image of a passivist, fatalist, and inferiority-ridden Arab self. These works also embody new modes of expression developed in a creative moment of emancipation among a peo-

ple who triumphantly celebrated their ability to make history through shaking the then solid grounds of dictatorships across the Arab world. The immense digital corpus produced by Middle Eastern populations around the world allows us not only to expose critical fault lines in Western-centric disciplinary boundaries – especially in ethnic, religious and socio-political studies – but also to probe the roots of Islamophobia and global inequity. The recent political upheaval thus coincided with and induced a creative artistic influx that explored new themes and revisited »hidden aspects of Arab societies […] Arab history – in the past decades« (Mohamed 2021: 11).

A key aspiration of this chapter is to offer an analysis of representation policies by investigating a variety of Egyptian literary works that have been produced in a public sphere fraught with critical transitional crises. Our aim is to present, from the perspective of Arab/Egyptian cultural and socio-political studies, a framework that encompasses both traditional and modern modes of representation. We are considering the ways in which Middle Eastern and Arab peoples produce the West, probing the processes by which they constantly remake the Middle East.

The term *Istighrab* (›Occidentalism‹) is highly contestable in the Arab world. With its manifest fluidity, broad denotations, and open-endedness, it invokes a remarkable range of stances and reactions and encompasses interpretations that are nearly antithetical. Arab intellectuals, like Hassan Hanafi in his *Muqaddimah* (Hanafi 1991) embrace the term as marking an anti-Orientalist discourse against a reductivist Orientalism, which largely confines the Arabs as passive, while conceptualizing an active and self-representing East set against a stereotypical, dehumanizing image imposed on it by Western colonialists. The literal denotation of the term is sometimes taken to mean »blind infatuation with Western epistemologies and cultures, and sentimental embrace of its values that are almost contradictory to Eastern values« (ibid.: 15).

Hanafi makes a distinction between Occidentalism or the study of the Occident as a subject matter and as a mere variable, lacking any sense of centrism, aiming to deconstruct Western exceptionalism or centralism, and Westernization which is Eastern blind imitation or adoption of Western heritage at the expense of Eastern or indigenous heritage (ibid.: 22). For him, westernized countries end up with a people's revolution for identity confirmation and validation against subservience to Western powers (ibid.: 24). He argues that mental colonization has persisted in Arab countries despite the end of military colonization. The biggest challenge was how to sustain identity without slipping into the pits of purist exclusiveness and rejection of the other. So, Occidentalism involves a process of role reversal, with the Eastern self subjecting the Western other to study and analysis. In this sense, Egyptian travel narratives about the West in general, and America in particular, do not in themselves represent an attempt to either apologize for the non-primacy of the East or sentimentally react to Western hegemony, but rather mean – in their totality

– to open a windowpane to an Otherworld that can at times be »emulated«, hated or satirized, but that is always »different«.

Self-Validating Occidentalism

It remains necessary to sustain a balanced critical reading of these diverse manifestations of Arab Occidentalism while exploring the complex conceptualizations and representations of the Western other in the Arab world, especially from within the Egyptian scene. This approach draws on both Edwards Said's criticism of Orientalism and Hassan Hanafi's *Muqaddimah* to indicate the need for Arab researchers to actively engage in objective studies about the East in order to counter prejudiced Orientalist knowledge grounded in Western hubris. In this sense, Occidentalism can be conceived of as an epistemic mode that aims to overcome the inferiority-ridden perspective from which Arab peoples view the West (recognized by Hanafi as a longstanding dilemma in the East-West encounters) and to counter Western-centrism, a posture that is epistemologically dominant, even among the Arabs. The present study thus represents a shift in perspective, approaching the West/US not as a subject but as an object and seeking to restore an Arab voice to represent Arab identity. In so doing, we articulate an Arab view of the Western other in a balanced cultural negotiation marked by inclusive multivocality, consciously and objectively critiquing both the self and the other alike and transcending stereotypical images built on a monovocality that is steeped in exclusionary purism or assimilation.

From this springs the validity of attempts to re-present post-Arab Spring politico-cultural changes and the subsequent East-West encounter as they are reflected in the conceptions and representations of Arab Spring values – exemplified in the Arab Squares – in Arab (especially Egyptian) media, cinema and literary fiction that were invoked as a reflection of a change and an impetus for repositioning the Arab role in the international system. The 9/11 attacks constituted a climactic moment of cultural and identitarian Arab/Muslim struggle for recognition in the Western community, pushing to the fore a legacy of conceptual differences and social and cultural disparities, all of which emerged from Orientalist literature. The attacks also brought up several issues inside the American community, among which were the relationship between Arab/Muslim Americans and non-Arab/Muslim Americans and the formers' need to interrogate and destabilize dominant stereotypical narratives about themselves and to struggle for their right of self-representation. In this chapter, we analyze a range of cultural texts, including novels, poems and journalistic columns that dramatize a similar struggle in the Arab world, and the absence of these East-West tensions in these, examining them within their historical context: the post-Arab Spring world shaped by ending the US

War on Terror, the Arab Spring Iraq, and, more broadly, by a new, leaderless Arab youth hegemony in general.

By including samples of Arab cultural productions, the chapter develops a comparative outlook, highlighting politically tinged works to question cultural stereotypes that entrench self/other binarism. It builds on a reading of Arabic cinematic, intellectual, and literary works that introduces a new Arab narrative about the East and a sophisticated understanding of Arab-other encounters. The chapter investigates some Egyptian literary works that address the Arab Spring and their bearing on the Arab-West relationship in a way that both conveys superficial differences and exposes profound similarities. Here we analyze US/Western narratives that represent Arab responses to Western modernism and that motivate Arabs to adopt Western cultural values, including the Arabs' use of new-media platforms to foster cross-cultural and intercultural communication.

An integral element to this approach is to probe the interplay of religion, politics and popular culture in formulating the complex relationship between the West and the peoples of the Arab Middle East. This is meant to lay a theoretical framework that incorporates the Arab representational vision of the West, the reception of American policy in the Middle East and the formation of a new Arab perception of America, both socially and politically. The chapter thus aims to register conceptual transformations relating to the changing position of Arabs on the map of political power following the Arab Spring and to investigate Arab self-assertion in terms of political power and authority.

There is also a need to focus on the new Arab voice by showcasing how the state, among other entities, made sense of certain literary characters and how these characters themselves narrate their own lives. Here, we think through Arab populations to better understand and trouble whiteness, to consider the historical constitution of »communities of color« and to avoid reiterating the Arab world as fundamentally foreign/other, the assumption that underwrites the Clash of Civilizations thesis. It is essential to foreground Arab voices making sense of their own political realities rather than presuming, yet again, to represent them from abroad.

Although people in the United States constantly read and assess race, their attempts to relate in a meaningful way to the Arab region are hindered by the dearth of categories by which race in America is defined. We see this dynamic in all areas of race and ethnic studies in the United States: area studies treats Arabs as categorically foreign; ethnic studies (cf. Abdulrahim 2008; Bayoumi 2008; Naber 2008; Maira 2009) tends to privilege those minority subjects who emerged from civil rights era interventions, in effect establishing a mismatch between American racial typology and Arab peoples; and whiteness studies often effaces Arab persons through an absorptive sleight of hand that considers the assimilation of Arab citizens to have been long-realized – even though phenotypic diversity, transnational intimacies, Islamophobia, discrimination and self-identification continue to hinder their full expres-

sion of privilege. These structural boundaries often shoehorn Arabs into a »people of color« paradigm without taking into account their aspiration to full citizenship and their right to self-represent themselves away from the clichés of Orientalists. The Arab Spring provides an especially potent moment from which to tackle such issues and to explore the effect of self-made change happening in the Arab region.

The remarkable interplay between the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement in the West, seen in their distinctive local expressions and their common global implications, provides a potent inflection point from which to explore many of these issues. In their common embodiment of a peak of collective action marking social, cultural and political transformation in the present era, Tahrir Square in Egypt, Zuccotti Park in the US, the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in the US, and the 2012 Quebec student protests in Canada join the ranks of historical venues for peaceful resistance that can be traced back to the 1950s American civil rights movement, adding now a new sense of transnational affinity among actors in both spaces in their quest for a more egalitarian world in the face of increasingly neoliberal politics. This interweaving of the domestic and the international emerges from a shared flexibility of scope, infusing civic engagement and mobilization with a sense of unfettered possibility for change.

Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park represent Habermasian »discursive spaces« (Salama 2012: 79) that are redefined and appropriated by protesters in defiance of hegemonic economic/political structures. These arenas hosted intensive sociocultural negotiations between traditional and innovative socio-political discourses, and the potency and physical power of the spaces themselves were embodied in the commitment and engagement that emerged from them. Focusing on the formation process of such a space and the impact of social networking in communicating the revolution despite its »weak ties«, Camilla Stivers refers to both Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park as examples of »physical public spaces« where the hegemonic authority of the state can be debated and contested, though their impact was – for her – »ephemeral« (Stivers 2013: 605–613).

After the Arab Spring, Tahrir Square in Egypt emerged as a source of inspiration for the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, a point that was symbolically sustained when Zuccotti Park in New York City was »rechristened« as »Liberty Plaza in honor of Cairo's Tahrir (Liberation) Square« (Socialist Worker 2011: n.p.). Some argue that this proclamation of inspiration from Tahrir was made by OWS solely to gain an authentic representation of itself (Kerton 2012: 302–308). In this view, OWS neither risked the repression suffered by their Egyptian counterparts (cf. Zahriyeh 2011) nor challenged the state through simple and clear demands (as was the calling for Mubarak's ouster) that defined the Egyptian movement, instead sustaining their protest only through the tactics of occupation. It is interesting how the Arab cultural and literary scenes:

> »attempted to keep pace with the process of socio-political and cultural change. Those lively attempts reflected the revolutionary movement and demonstrated the ways in which literary and cultural productions visualized and examined the significance of this upheaval.« (Mohamed 2020: 152)

Notably, public spaces became the site of diverse artistic manifestations, such as photography exhibitions, graffiti, and street theater.

But regardless of OWS's true impetus or ultimate expression of struggle and the inherent differences between these movements, similarities abound: feeling part of a global phenomenon of pro-change protests; demanding democratic accountability; rejecting global capitalism, austerity measures and neoliberal inequalities; caring about urban renewal; and being willing to appear leaderless. For the Arab people, being taken as an inspiration seems to have been a source of pride and an opportunity to positively rebalance their presence in the world after 9/11. As Ahmed Tharwat noted, Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring in general represented a »huge inspiration for the American protesters in the People's Plaza, Minneapolis« (Tharwat 2011).

Occidentalism Revisited

The inspirational encounter, however, is only a sequel in a series of earlier encounters in which mutual views were marred by stereotypical binarism and rivalry. This largely stereotypical conception of America, for instance, is manifested in the writings of several Egyptian litterateurs who visited the country and immortalized their journey in writing. These views ranged between infatuation and denigration, including even the earliest traces of encounter that date back to the nineteenth-century modern Arab-West cultural interaction – or interaction between what are referred to by Rifāʿah Rāfiʿ al-Tahtawi himself in his *Takhlis* (Tahtawi 1834: 139) as Western and Islamic countries – apart from the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt (1798). It can also be traced back to Muhammad Ali Pasha's dispatching of student missions to Europe and recruitment of European scientists. Then, Egypt played a significant role in increasing Arab awareness of Europe or the West in general, being the epicenter of translation at that moment (Abu-Lughod 1963: 160). Though this interaction was marred by an attempt at Westernization, at least at the scientific and industrial levels, Arab cultural reaction was almost critical of Western materialism, spiritual emptiness and lack of moral values, something similar to T.S. Eliot's perspective in his famous poem *The Waste Land* from 1922. With some exceptions where Egyptian writers were infatuated by the West, many Egyptian writers could identify the merits and the demerits of America and American culture, distinguishing between scientific development and moral decline.

This largely stereotypical conception of America, for instance, is manifested in the writings of several Egyptian litterateurs who visited the country and registered their impressions of it. Among those writers are Yusuf Idris, in his *As-Sayyida Vienna* (*Madame Vienna* and later retitled *Vienna 60)* and *New York 80* (Idris 2018). The two novellas fictionalize the author's encounter with Europeans and Americans, through encounters with two European and American women respectively. The sexualized relationship between the Arab protagonist and the two Western women stereotypically represents the West (Europe and America respectively) in the image of a licentious woman or a prostitute that seeks to lure him through her unparalleled beauty. Such representation seems to counter or answer back to the equally stereotypical Orientalist conception of the East (Abdel Malek/El Kahla 2000: 38–41). Even before Idris, Sayyid Qutb also assumed a reductionist attitude in describing America in a way that seems almost vengeful or retaliatory for the long history of Western fantasized narratives about the Orient. He dismissed them as spiritually primitive and their women as inherently lustful, poking fun at their »naiveté and primitiveness« (ibid.: 26). Mahmud Taymur is also an Egyptian short story writer who was less impressed by the awe-inspiring massiveness of American skyscrapers – that for him were compared to the Egyptian pyramids in that both bespeak a grand culture – than by their eloquence:

> »In expressing the inherent inferiority complex in the American psyche, which prompts this young rising nation that has been blessed with resources, knowledge, and an undisputed position among nations, to cry out to the world: ›Look at me, I am the greatest one of all!‹« (cit. in ibid.: 62)

The same image largely recurs in Zaki Naguib Mahmoud's article *My Days in America* (1955), as he criticizes the American priest's »ignorance of Egypt«. Yet, he turns his gaze inward, considering the wide gap between the »Us« (Egyptians or Easterners in general) and Americans (or the Westerners), dismissing the Egyptian's mimicking approach, comparing himself to Columbus, except that the latter is »a daring adventurer, a creative and shrewd pioneer«, while the writer himself follows the path of Columbus with »no adventure, no daring, no creativity, and no thought« (ibid.: 69–70). This self-conscious and self-critical tone is largely reflected in Nizar Qabbani's poem titled *Abu Jahl Yashtari Fleet Street [Abu Jahl is Buying Fleet Street]* in which he lashed England for giving in or – in Faustian sense – selling its soul out to the petrodollar devil and dwelling – like earlier Arab Bedouins – on encampment vestiges in pensive reminiscence of happy old days (Qabbani 1980: 71–85). For Qabbani, the roles are reversed and the Arabs are questing for the founts of civilization and fresh air of freedom and planting trees in the garden of conscience, and moving away from the scourge of tyranny and oppression in England, and the Bedouins are sleeping in the Queen's bed and, in their Dishdasha hems, dancing to jazz in Soho and Victoria (Abdel Malek/El Kahla 2000: 71f.).

In the above examples, there is an attempt to deconstruct the West or to reorient/reverse the colonial gaze by turning the colonizer into a subject of study or a mere variable within a multicultural context, as manifested in the travel narratives recorded by Arab intellectuals upon their visits to America:

> »With this diverse body of Arab travelogues about America, can we really talk about an Arab Occidentalism, a systematic literature of cultural stereotyping? Is this a counter-Orientalism, an Arab response to centuries of Western stereotypical writings about them? An Arab way of saying: we too can subjugate you, Westerners, to our tourist, voyeuristic gaze; we too can produce a discourse that describes, analyzes, categorizes, stereotypes, and even satirizes your manners, customs, and outlooks on life?« (ibid.: xii)

For most of the Arab Occidentalists, Westernization is just the other side of the coin of blind subservience to the West, while the first side is Orientalism. They severely criticize Arab Westernizers' self-depreciation and blind imitation of the West. That is why such an Occidentalist perspective inclines more towards the »post-Orientalist«, rather than a real Occidentalist, with the »post« indicating the »anti« or »counter-Orientalist«. Rather than building on scholarly discourse on the West in producing an Eastern imag(e/i)nation of the West, this recent trend of Occidentalism draws on both Western and Eastern knowledge, not to know or imagine – let alone ideologically control or guide – the West, but to gain a sense of self-confirmation and autonomy away from that West. It is an attempt to know or imagine or appropriate the West enough to be able to displace or at least marginalize it. The problem with this discourse is that the West – through its epistemic presence – remains an inevitable variable in the equation, something quite understandable. Another problem is that the West can never be totalized or lumped together under a single appellation, given that the term now largely refers to America as the main actor on the international stage, especially in the Middle East.

One of these self-validating attempts in literature is introduced by Rasheed El-Enany in *Arab Representations of the Occident*, as he sought to offer a counter-Orientalist perspective, reversing the gaze by investigating Eastern (Arab) representations of the West in a way different from the Western romanticized, exoticized and at times demonized version of the East. For him, the Arab intellectual's perception of the West was marked by ambivalence, with the Westerner »being simultaneously an object of love and hate, a shelter and a threat, an usurper and a giver, an enemy to be feared and a friend whose help is to be sought« (El-Enany 2006: 20). Here, Egyptian intellectuals were able to distinguish between the two faces of colonial powers, first France and then Britain, or between their »ugly colonial face« of military and economic exploitation, and their »radiant civilized face« represented in Western culture. El-Enany believes that the self and other equation is inevitable, given that self-assertion is a process in which the other is an indispensable element,

noting that Tawfiq Al-Hakim for instance was using European literary genres (cf. his novels, *Return of the Spirit* (1933/2012) and *Bird of the East* (1938)) in denouncing the vicious and ruthless materialism of the West (ibid.: 4). So did other writers like Ameen Al-Rihani and Naguib Mahfouz. It was all part of the binarist game, or the tension-ridden nexus between tradition and modernity or self and other.

The works of Naguib Mahfouz themselves involve an Occidentalist vision in the sense of rebelling against Eurocentric conventions of the novel, while also abandoning locally imposed traditional forms. Interestingly enough, Mahfouz believed that both imposed forms, Western and Eastern, can only be overcome through an initial (and temporary) sense of triumphalism, then imparted by the 1919 Revolution. His uniquely traditional or locally embedded works, like *Tales of Our Alley*, manifesting as it does his nostalgic feeling for the alley, were a reflection of his nostalgia for traditional authenticity or *Asalah* (Al-Gitani 1980: 70). He, who once thought that the European form of the novel was »sacred«, ended up disillusioned with the constrains of form, gaining greater confidence in himself and revolting against both the European and the traditional. He believed that imitation, be it of European or traditional forms, is a type of captivity that should be shaken off. In his *Al-Harafeesh*, he was able to use the traditional tale of *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah [One Thousand and One Nights]*. For Mahfouz, a proper novel is that which echoes the tune of the inner self, not that which imitates or echoes the *Maqamat* of Al-Hamadhani or of the novels of James Joyce (ibid.: 70f.). A true writer is one that is true to themselves, and the works should be local both in form and content. No wonder, the perfect learner, for Mahfouz – as expressed in his novel *Al-Maraya [Mirrors]* – is one who »acquires knowledge and rebels against the tyrants« (ibid.: 74). So, the balanced Occidentalist vision is clear in Mahfouz's investment of both Arabic and English literatures in his novel, unapologetically drawing on the Arabic *Maqamah*[2] and the European novel form.

Just as Hanafi believes, if we are to countermand Orientalist misrepresentation of the East, there is a need first to be well-informed about our Oriental (Arab) heritage and to pave the way for better, rather real, representation(s) of that Orient (Hanafi 1991: xx). The fertile soil for such endeavor is literature that maps out imaginary vistas that over time help in shaping future realities. When Ahdaf Soueif, for instance, writes in English, she – building on her own experience – extends a bridge between the two cultures and even brings that East (Egypt) to the fore, taking her semi-fictional characters to that Eastern spot not to colonize or educate (as in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*), but rather to learn and to defend it, especially through her Anna in *The Map of Love* (Soueif 2000). In this novel, as in her other works, Soueif

2 The *Maqamah* (pl. *Maqamat*; literally meaning »narrative recounted by a standing reciter«) is a classical literary genre introduced by Ahmad ibn Al-Husayn Al-Hamadhani (Aka Badi' Az-Zaman Al-Hamadhani, 969–1007) and Abu Muhammad Al-Hariri (1054–1122). It is largely a picaresque narrative rendered in rhymed and rhythmic prose.

manages to entwine the Oriental and the Occidental on a literary canvas, though coloring it in her own way, and far from traditional Orientalist exoticism. On her novelistic canvas, there is something in Cairo that eludes and thus deconstructs the established Orientalist grasp or perspectives inspired by, say, the paintings of Frederick Lewis or the portrayals of Edward Lane (ibid.: 102, 137). Scathingly enough, Soueif – through her Anna – reverses the Orientalist gaze by viewing the British themselves as »exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them« (ibid.: 292). Now, the colonizing Britons are relatively pushed back to the background and almost silenced in favor of a pro-Oriental voice. Still, and in Mahfouz's way, Soueif's novel denounces all forms of tyranny, local and global, whether British in Egypt and Sudan, Belgian in Congo, American in the Philippines, Afghanistan and Iraq, or Israeli, or even Egyptian at home. She tirades against the very spirit of the Empire (ibid.: 61).

The marital relationships (between Anna and Sharif and Isabel and Omar) in Soueif's self-representational novel, which are employed as an umbilical link between the East and the West, find echoes in other works by Egyptian writers, such as Alaa Al-Aswani in his *Nadi As-Sayyarat* [*Automobile Club*] (Al-Aswani 2013), in which the Egyptian revolutionary activist marries the pro-Oriental daughter of the English club director. Soueif and Al-Aswani seem to be probing the records of history, entwining the literary and the historical, to revisit the course of modernization in Egypt and reconsider the relation between the self and the (European or Western) other in an anxious attempt to conceptualize a new national imaginary where the other is merely integral to the self and where all forms of tyranny, local or global, are deconstructed. In these revisionary narratives both the corruption of the king (local form of oppression) and exploitative British colonization are exposed and opposed by freedom and dignity-loving rebels, Egyptian and English alike. This hybridist approach involves a reconsideration of both national heritage or tradition and European modernity, where the intricacies and ambivalences of the encounter are (re)engaged.

These »transnational« marital relationships, or »Orient-Occident hybridizations«, have morphed in Ezzedine Choukri Fishere's novel *'Inaq 'inda Jisr Brooklyn [Embrace on the Brooklyn Bridge]* from 2011 into a familial relationship between Darwish and his granddaughter and the rest of the family. This metaphorical bridge is further extended by Fishere as he takes his Egyptian characters to the modern hub of the Occidental Empire, America, just as Al-Aswani does in his novel *Chicago* (Al-Aswani 2007), where the author experimentally investigates the interplay of traditional religious, cultural and political imaginaries on an American soil, giving room for an ambivalent encounter with that other culture. In this imagined encounter, Fishere – not unlike Al-Aswani – plays out various aspects of a psychological conflict within his Egyptian characters in their questioning journey of their own socio-political, cultural and religious traditions. Besides, the main question in Fishere's story-

within-story novel is that there are multiple layers of reality which transcend the perspective of his aging persona, Darwish. Yet, unlike Radwa Ashour's protagonist in her *Qit'ah min Uruppa [Part of Europe]* (Ashour 2003), who is just as omniscient as Eliot's Tiresias (without being blind, though crippled), Fishere's aged protagonist is largely alienated and shortsighted. And while Ashour's witness (or beholder) can hint at a distant link between the burning of the World Trade Center in 2001 and the burning of Cairo or the 1952 Cairo Fire (ibid.: 196) through a globalist perspective, Fishere's protagonist is filled with frustration, alienation and disappointment, though not without showing an ultimate sense of content.

Ashour's panoramic recollection of past and present narratives or the act of writing itself is compared, in its sensed futility, to a »howl« (ibid.: 198) that bears echoes of Allan Ginsberg's angry poem *Howl* from 1956. This very sense of latent frustration recurs in Al-Aswani's *Nadi As-Sayyarat* and Fishere's *'Inaq*. This is perhaps a literary projection of the three writers' anxiety at the recent nipping of the revolutionary dreams through successive blows to the nascent democratic process in post-2011 revolution and the Egyptians' quest for freedom, dignity and social justice.

Despite the latent sense of frustration at the thwarted revolution, manifested as it is through sporadic and at times indirect comparisons between the earlier Egyptian uprisings against the colonizer and its hireling despots in Egypt (1919 and 1952), there is also an invitation to rebellion. An example of this invitation is when Fishere insists that Darwish's subservience to the forces of law and customs only ended in his loss as an immigrant. This sense of insecurity charges the scene on the bridge in Fishere's novel. The bridge, in all its symbolic significances, is the point of embrace or encounter that abounds with ambivalence and anxiety, triggering a wave of questions; a flood of »shall I?«s. These questions, with the bridge hanging like an exclamation mark, open up a sea of unanswered inquiries that are rather rhetorical in reflecting a sense of anxiety and tension hovering over all Egyptian characters in America, starting with Darwish (the grandfather) and ending with Salma (the granddaughter). Even Darwish, whose name is tinged with a mystic hue, keeps wondering about his books and whether they – being close to his heart – would all fit in the new place to which he is relocating (ibid.: 10). This physical arrangement reflects a deeper need for sifting through heritage by the Egyptian migrant if he is to fit in with the foreign culture at all. Fishere highlights the need for Arabs to know who they are and to revisit their own culture, a point that is intensified through the symbolic mention of Albert Hourani, whose book *A History of the Arab Peoples* surveys the history of the Arabs from the emergence of Islam and up to the modern age (ibid.: 18).

The novel addresses the Orient-Occident dialectic, though without forgetting the internal Oriental tradition-modernity dialectic, in an environment of alienation and foiled expectations. The Egyptian characters in the novel are brought far from home/culture, knowing that such migratory distance could help them revisit their relationship with that home/culture and weigh it against a different culture that

promises them freedom, equality and dignity. There, they only discover that their alienation is even intensified in a country that is not quite welcoming despite the rosy promises of integration.

What is interesting about these novels is that they largely focus on Arab identity as a central issue, while the relationship between Arabs and Americans or Britons is just a substory that serves the main plot. And while Ashour and Al-Aswani recall America's colonial and imperial injustices, referring for example to the European settlers' genocide against native Americans (Ashour 2003: 205f.; Al-Aswani 2007: 7f.), with a hint that Easterners or Orientals themselves, and in their own homelands, are not quite different from those oppressed native Americans, as both are victims to vicious colonialism.

Throughout the novel, the inescapable sense of identity is the cause of nostalgic pain and rending alienation, and yet this sense of identity is the only thing that keeps the characters going and that imparts a sense of meaning and belonging to their lives. The answer to Fishere's implicit quest for home is perhaps indicated in Miral Al-Tahawi:

> »I always say that […] even if we carry our luggage and migrate from this home[land], we will find nothing on Brooklyn Bridge but a bridge of broken identities and that all that we would have carried in our bags would remain heavy, constantly pulling us back to where we have been.« (Al-Tahawi 2010: 12)

Like Walt Whitman, Fishere's protagonist feels the »curious abrupt questionings stir within« him about how his encounter/embrace with his old-time lover would go (Whitman 2004: 186). The metaphorical significance of the bridge adds a mystical tenor, in both Fishere's and Al-Tahawi's novels, to the Egyptian migrant's in-betweenness and sense of being torn between native homeland, crystallizing in a cluster of reminisced memories, and a new migratory home that does not seem quite welcoming and where one does not feel totally belonging, be it Al-Tahawi's Hend or Fishere's Darwish. Yet, unlike earlier Egyptian works engaging the West as a foil against which the Arab self is positively constructed, Al-Tahawi and Fishere – under the sweeping avalanche of the Arab Spring and its aftermath – seem to be destabilizing both the »here« and »there« in extended expression of identitarian ambivalence that intensifies their nearly autobiographical protagonists' sense of alienation and displacement.

This sense of displacement and alienation largely bears on Arab citizens, not only those living in diaspora but also those living at home, where the West still exercises its hegemony in diverse forms. Just as Michelle Hartman notes in her article, Egyptian litterateurs used to scathingly criticize America as synonymous with capitalist greed and cultural hegemony (Hartman 2002: 233), and the Egyptian poet Mustafa Ibrahim does the same in his (post-Arab Spring) *The Banknote*, a poem about the common Egyptian citizen, the »ordinary hero« trodden by corporate capitalism,

»stacked like a pound in a rubber band« and sold a vain »dream in ads« (Ibrahim 2020: 38f.). Ibrahim realizes that globalist capitalism as a representative of the »first world« sells his »third world« citizens a failed American dream, in the sense similar to that represented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, with the »Capitalist Octopus unleashed against the wretched« citizens, who are killed by the World Order »with no bullets« and for whom »pluralism means multicorporates« and »freedom means the right to open the cage« for the caged to only temporarily breathe. The blood of wretched citizens or unsung heroes »burns in [car fuel] tank«, and the poet wonders, »do you smell them as you fill [the tank]?/the West shall fund/construction of oil wells […] to ensure your remaining a begging slave/you, fellow of the distressed planet« (ibid.: 40). For the poet, the West and the US are interchangeable, or a two-faced Janus that sucks the wealth of the neocolonized world through a neocolonial corporatism or economic imperialism that has commodified the colonized human, after a long span of Orientalist dehumanization. So, when a vehicle was needed for the developed world civilization, that vehicle was nothing other than the neocolonized, »barbaric third world slave«, who is simply a »burning candle/for the WTC to illume« (ibid.: 40f.). In this »happy democratic capitalist world«, a »corporate is more powerful than homelands« and »America has made an unwalled prison/tying people together« (ibid.: 43). This America that »loves humans a lot« and »does them favors« protects our »fear-ridden« people and »feeds the hungry among them« (ibid.: 44). It is an America that »robes refugees with her right hand« but only »after disrobing them with her left«. Through American corporations, »third-world countries are destructed and reconstructed« and the ordinary citizens there are »free/as long as [they] do not harm/America« (ibid.: 44).

This recurrent image of an imperialist America that, through the ghoul of globalist capitalism, exploits an immiserated but wealthy East is steeped in a long Orientalist tradition. Yet, what is new here in Ibrahim's poetry is that it celebrates the ordinary citizen, who – in an Audenian sense – is the »unknown«, and who »has done nothing worth mentioning/other than his still standing on his feet« (Ibrahim 2020: 67). The sheer standing remains an act of resistance to the vicious hegemonic powers, both at home and abroad. Now the aspiration of this Egyptian poet/persona – who could not stand the immigration experience to America, rejecting the onerous burden of materialism – is not to pursue an »American dream« but to effect a little change in »Us« or in »the people« (ibid.: 27). This young Egyptian poet, who witnessed the January 25 Revolution in 2011 is conscious of the long history of American imperialism and of internal despotism, and yet he never loses hope in the power of the Egyptian people to impose their will and to keep pursuing the dream of »freedom, dignity and equality« – an embodiment of the 25 Revolution's Motto, no matter the defeats, as long as they can keep standing on their feet. This unknown citizen is a replica of an unsung Arabo-Islamic hero Al-Husain ibn 'Ali who, is »us/no matter how many times he gets killed, still lives« (Ibrahim 2013: 138).

Here, the image of an America as an exceptional superpower, though it persists at a liminal level, undergoes a relative change in those Egyptian artists themselves, especially in the post-Arab Spring era. In the newly developed sense of self-consciousness, the image of America is relegated to the background while the voice of the ordinary Egyptian citizen is brought to the fore as the unsung hero who can bring about change even if through sheer subsistence.

For a long time, the West has succeeded in dominating the Arab and Muslim World through European colonialism and its extended shadow of post-colonial aftermath. In *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012), Hamid Dabashi states that:

> »The Arab and Muslim World, and precisely ›the Arab and Muslim‹ World, has been termed […] into the most potent component of ›the West versus the Rest‹ bipolarity of global domination.« He adds that the »Orientalists […] link British and American imperialism together via a singularly successful Orientalist career: manufacturing an Orient that must, by virtue of its flawed DNA, serve ›The West‹ for its own good.« (Dabashi 2012: 60)

Accordingly, Dabashi confirmed that »the world we have hitherto known as ›the Middle East‹ or ›North Africa,‹ or ›the Arab and Muslim world‹,« was »all part and parcel of a colonial geography we had inherited« (ibid.: 16).

The Arab and Muslim World was never emancipated from Western authority because the West had not given it a chance to be a free world. At the time when the colonial world began lowering European flags, the post-colonial world was raising new ones. For more than two hundred years, claimed Dabashi,

> »colonialism begat postcolonial ideological formations: socialism, nationalism, nativism (Islamism); one narrative after another, ostensibly to combat, but effectively to embrace and exacerbate, its consequences.« (ibid.: 21)

It was not enough for the West to spread its own ideologies in the Arab and Muslim World; it also spared no effort to tighten its grip on the whole region through assigning tyrannical regimes and corrupt leaders to rule the region.

At the moment when the West thought that its alleged primacy had become an irrefutable fact and its supporting regimes, in the Middle East, presumed that they could silence their people forever and remain safe as loyal followers of the West, a young peddler from Tunisia, named Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire out of injustice and economic desperation. On the very same day, protests began, locally in Sidi Bouzid, but then spread across the country. The scale of those protests was so massive and surprising that it forced President Zine El Abidin Ben Ali, in office since 1987, to resign and flee from his country to Saudi Arabia.

Soon after, the burning body of Mohamed Bouazizi was the candle that illuminated the darkness of injustice and showed the way of revolt to the angry oppressed

masses across the Arab world. The fall of the authoritarian regime in Tunisia gave hope to the oppressed people in other regions and caused a series of protests and demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa, protests that have come to be known later as the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring marked a new era in the Middle East. Those protests, which were surprising to both the West and the East, marked a new pact with history. The people who found themselves at the threshold of a new world where they would no longer be followers to any supreme power, and where they could be their own leaders, were determined to free themselves from any kind of authoritarian regimes, whether internal or external.

The Arab Spring has an evident impact on the post-Arab Spring Arabic literary production in general, and on Egyptian literary production in particular. These uprisings give Arab voices an opportunity to make sense of their own political realities rather than presuming, yet again, to represent them from abroad. These uprisings have also caused an outstanding shift in the contemporary Arabic novel, as the latter has shifted from following the tradition of the Western novels to exploring Arab realities from a specific regional and cultural context that explores social reality not through Arab/Islamic triumphal historical evocations, but rather through penetrating the current problematic Arab realities.

In *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, Asef Bayat states that »the outbreak of a revolution has little to do with any idea, and even less with a ›theory‹ of revolution. Revolutions ›simply‹ happen« (Bayat 2017: xi). This idea is exactly what Soueif discusses in the early pages of her exceptional memoir *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*. The author discusses how the revolutionary uprisings in Egypt ironically burst onto the political stage at a time when the very idea of revolution has been dispelled. She recounts:

> »A month before, a week before, three days before, we could not have told you it was going to happen. Yes, there had been calls to use National Police Day on 25 January as an occasion for protests, but there had been so many protests and calls for protests over the years that it hadn't seemed special. Those of us who were in Egypt intended to join, for form's sake and to keep up the spirit of opposition. Those of us who weren't – well, weren't.« (Soueif 2013: 10)

The reason why Soueif sees the very idea that the revolution has been unexpected is the intervention of the West, particularly the USA, in internal Egyptian affairs, and its strong support for President Mubarak's regime. She recalls the moment when she declares the following in an interview with Tehelka TV:

> »For a very long time now, our perception is that [Egypt] is not being run in the interests of the Egyptian people. And the primary motivation of the people who are governing us is that they should remain in power in order to continue

> ransacking and looting the country. Now, the main support that they have to remain in power is of course the Western powers – particularly the United States. And the price that they pay in order to be supported is to run policies that favor Israel.« (ibid.: 10)

The support of the Western powers that Soueif talks about in the above quote makes it impossible, in the eyes of most of the Egyptians, for demonstrations to be confined to Tunisia. Therefore, the Egyptians look at the Tunisian uprisings baffled, with a single question in their heads: could this be possible in Egypt? The Egyptians wonder if the government would allow a peaceful and democratic change if the people erupted in Egypt just as the Tunisians did. The Egyptians, according to Soueif, have many doubts about the possibility of a revolution taking place in Egypt because the situation seemed unstable and dangerous. The situation in Egypt seems so because »all the activism that happens is in specific areas. And it's all young people and it's all really without a leadership« (ibid.). However, all these doubts vanish on Friday, after Muslim prayer, when a young man raises his arm in the air, »his hand is reaching to the sky and there comes the loud, carrying voice: »Al-sha3b yureed isqat alnizam! [People Demand the Overthrow of the Regime]« (ibid.: 13). Although there is no lead-up, no half-measures, the friends of that young man carry him on their shoulders and start to walk towards Tahrir Square. This is how the Egyptian revolution starts. It is spontaneous, leaderless, and unexpected for both the West and the Egyptian regime.

Later in the memoir, Soueif talks about the ongoing efforts on the part of the regime to thwart the revolution. She recounts the opinions of the revolutionaries on these efforts and the role of the USA in them. At the field hospital near Tahrir Square, she records the testimonies of the injured who want her to take their urgent message. They declare:

> »They're [the Dakhleyya] using live ammunition. They're using shotguns. Look: empty cartridges. Made in the USA, look. Look: his legs aren't working. Two have died. No one wants to go to hospital because they report them and they get taken away. Eye injuries. Head injuries. They're shooting to kill.« (ibid.: 25)

Soueif continues to record the resentment that the young revolutionaries feel towards the officers who are shooting them with American shotguns. They are angry with America's support for the tyrannical ruling regime against the will of the people. She recounts:

> »Young men try to carry the wounded out into the air through the back. Someone gives me a gas mask. Someone else gives me two empty cartridges. They'll sit on my mantelpiece. This is what we get from US AID. This is the ›aid‹ they hold over us.« (ibid.: 18).

Neither the American weapons nor the escalating level of violence, maintains Soueif, succeed in stopping the young people who have decided to reclaim their stolen country. The *shabab* (›youth‹), according to her, decide that they will no longer allow their lives to be stolen. They march for bread, and they march for freedom, for social justice, and for human dignity. Tahrir Square, the Midan, is teeming with hundreds of thousands of people and more and more are coming in (ibid.: 36).

In Tahrir, the demonstrators declare their rejection of everyone assigned by the ruling regime. When Mubarak announces a Cabinet reshuffle with General Ahmad Shafiq as Prime Minister, they chant »People Demand the Overthrow of the Regime«, and when he appoints Omar Suleiman as his Vice-President, they roar: »No Mubarak/No Suleiman/No more umala amrikan [agents for America]« (ibid.: 36).

By doing so, the Egyptians declare that they reject all forms of foreign intervention, especially American intervention in internal Egyptian affairs. The Midan, proclaims Soueif, knows everything. The people there receive a biography of their new Vice-President and long-time Head of Intelligence, Omar Suleiman. It »details his extensive, personal involvement in rendition and torture« (ibid.: 95). With all of their wishes, fears, anger, and ambitions, the Egyptians want Egypt to be an independent country where they take responsibility for themselves and work to make sure everybody can have bread, freedom, and social justice. They would rather not »see Egypt on its knees and would rather not to be America and Israel's scabby mongrel allowed to shelter and feed as long as it knows its place« (ibid.: 39).

Returning to Dabashi's book, he indicates that the revolutionary spirit that resonates through the key slogan »People Demand the Overthrow of the Regime« means more than a mere demand for the dominant »regime« to be brought down, but rather seeks to dismantle the:

> »mode of knowledge production about ›the Middle East,‹ ›North Africa,‹ ›the Arab and Muslim World,‹ ›The West and the Rest,‹ or any other categorical remnant of a colonial imagination (Orientalism) that still pre-empts the liberation of these societies in an open-ended dynamic.« (Dabashi 2012: 15)

In her memoir, Soueif reflects Dabashi's above-mentioned point of view. She notes that the Egyptians now know their real enemy. They know that the regime lies as naturally as it breathes, so they decide not to trust it anymore. Moreover, they come to know that their enemy is not merely the ruling regime, but the third parties that fund and support it. She states:

> »We [the Egyptian demonstrators] know that the army collects a ton of US AID. We know it represents about a third of the GDP of our country – that it is a massive business interest. We know that in the army, as in the government and the state and also outside our country, there are massive – fine, the biggest

> possible – interests that do not wish us to do what we wish to do, that do not want for us the lives we want for ourselves. But right now we have to take the chance that the balances within the army will keep it from harming us. Right now we need to deal with the other forces ranged against us, inside and outside Egypt.« (Soueif 2013: 39)

For the Egyptian demonstrators, avers Soueif, the old order is over. Now they recognize the forces that want their land and their location, their resources and their position and their history and their quiescence and that want them out of a number of equations in their region and the world. To regain their stolen country, the Egyptians fight a life-or-death battle against both the tyrannical regime that rules them and the forces that sap away at their brains, their health, and their will. It is a life-or-death battle for the Egyptians because they know, for sure, that if they do not fight their enemies off, they shall not even die the death that is merciful release but the death that is death-in-life.

Through his self-immolation, Mohammed Bouazizi let people – across the Arab and Muslim World – know that they are not born to be followers. He let them know that freedom is a thing worth sacrificing lives for and that they could be their own leaders and decision-makers. Finally, the Egyptians came to know that their country deserves its place in the sun, out of the shadow of the brutal regimes that had run it for decades.

Conclusion

Though the Occidentalist discourse is gaining grounds in the Arab world, partially as a response to or countermove against Orientalism, it is still anchored in the very Orientalist discourse being subverted. In essence, Occidentalism as a relatively nascent philosophical and cultural trope embodies an attempt firstly to transcend the Western hegemonic imaginary and recreate a hybridized discursive pattern (*metisage*) where the other, just like the self, is subjected to scrutiny as a sheer variable, and secondly to probe new imaginary vistas or epistemic configurations for a more democratic reality where freedom and dignity are not just celebrated but also exercised in the Arab world (so far metonymous with the East or the Orient). Modern Egyptian intellectuals, like – say – Mahmoud Amin Al-Alim (1922–2009), Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010) and Hassan Hanafi (born 1935), have been working on reconceptualizing an Arab imaginary where the West is no longer the center through a revisiting of both inherited Arab tradition and imported or superimposed Western culture. The aim of this challenging revision was to consciously subvert sweeping Orientalist assumptions and to draw on domestic cultural raw material to displace the Western

colonial culture that is either subverted or adapted in the process of articulating a self-validated Arab subjectivity and in shaping the country's future.

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