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Orientalism and Occidentalism in Tariq Ali's *Islam Quartet*

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Abstract

This thesis aims at studying Tariq Ali's *Islam Quartet* as an example of a counter discourse to that of Orientalism. The researcher will determine whether Ali succeeded in subverting the Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as he claimed, and whether he has become an Occidentalist. If not, the thesis will examine the reasons why he endorsed the negative stereotypes of Orientalism.

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Preface

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* came as a response to the writings of various Orientalists, some of whom were prejudiced in their presentation of Arab society. Records by these Orientalists stressed cultural gaps and inconsistencies between the "Orient" and the "Occident". Moreover, because Islam is the main religion of the Orient, Orientalists have mistakenly seen it as "the latent danger" coming from the East. Therefore, travel books, anthologies, literature and paintings were a way of knowing this East and exercising power over it.

After the events of September 11th, Western media presented and still present Arabs and Muslims as fundamentalists and bearded terrorists. These misconceptions are based on previous Orientalist stereotypes of the East who accused Arabs of violence, barbarity, ignorance and immorality. The East was always seen as inferior to the West, and this was a way of justifying Western imperialism.

In opposition to such Orientalist discourse, and to the "covering" of true Islam¹, several writers attempted to present "a counter discourse." This thesis aims to

study Tariq Ali's fiction as an example of these texts. Tariq Ali is a writer and filmmaker who has written more than two dozen books on world history and politics. Ali is the author of seven novels, which were translated into several languages, as well as scripts for the stage and screen. He is the editor of *The New Left Review* and currently lives in London.

In an interview with Talat Ahmed in *The Socialist Review* published in 2006, Ali said, “the history of the development of Islamic civilization is one of adaption (sic) and intermingling. It is one of both influencing the non-Islamic world and being influenced by it” (Online). Ali also asserted that the media has created a false image of Muslims as bearded terrorists and fundamentalists.

Ali sought to expose the prejudice against Islamic and Arab culture in his *Islam Quartet*. The novels of this *Quartet* are set in Europe and the East and cover Islamic civilizations in different periods of contact between European and Islamic civilizations. Talat Ahmed says that as we read these novels the Muslim world appears as “a world of plurality, cosmopolitanism, tolerance and the quest for knowledge” (Online). Ali argued that the

Muslim domination of Europe was the highest point of Islamic cultural development without which Europe would not have developed the way it did.

When asked by Harry Kreisler why Islam had not undergone a reformation, Ali's response was that there were two regions which would have caused this reformation: One was Andalusia, where Muslim thinkers intermingled with Christian and Jewish philosophers and men of learning, and this led them to engage in all sorts of intellectual activities. "If this continued, it would have caused a reformation of some sort which would have changed the way Islam is viewed or views itself" (Kreisler, 2003). The second one was Turkey during the Ottoman Empire, with its numerous relations with European countries, but "[d]omination of the state by monarchy and the centralized character of the state prevented any independent initiatives. The clerics² also played a role in determining ideology and innovation" (Kreisler, 2003).

At the end Ali commented that "One was a blow inflicted from the outside; the other was self inflicted" (Kreisler, 2003). According to Ali, that was what

motivated him to read Islamic history in an attempt to depict the false image created by Orientalists.

Taking into consideration that Ali is writing with a background of two cultures, the Pakistani and the British, a history of colonization, and an ongoing struggle against cultural annihilation, concepts of transculturation, hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry can be very applicable in the study of his fiction. According to Mary Louise Pratt, transculturation is a result of the contact zone due to the reciprocal influences of colonizer and colonized. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin wrote that this term is used to “describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 233). Pratt says that within these contact zones there are always clashes for dominance and subordination.

Homi K. Bhabha has examined the colonial discourse found in these contact zones. Unlike Said, he refused to give complete power to the colonizer because the relationship of colonizer/colonized is interdependent.

He explained this through his widely known terms “Hybridity”, “Ambivalence” and “Mimicry”. For him, hybridity subverts the narratives of colonial power and thus can be considered as a counter discourse. Due to this hybridity, Bhabha explained the relationship in the contact zone or the colony as that of ambivalence because it is a mix of attraction to and repulsion from the colonizer. The ambivalent subjects attempt to mimic the colonizer and this can jeopardize the colonizer’s existence because, Bhabha believed, mimicry is never far from mockery since the dominant culture is contaminated by elements from the subordinate subject.

Bhabha’s theories can be applied to the novels of the *Quartet* since in every novel Ali is dealing with a different contact zone. In Spain, Sicily, Damascus or Turkey, there was a constant contact between two cultures, often resulting in transculturated hybrid subjects. With the fall and rise of empires, some subjects of these contact zones had ambivalent attitudes towards the dominant culture. Others emulated and mimicked the colonizer. Examples of this relation will be examined in the novels.

Keeping in mind that Ali is a British-Pakistani writer, who has experienced a hybrid life, the aim of this study is to examine his novels to see how far they are actually challenging the Orientalist outlook, as he claims. Though Ali attempts to present a counter discourse which challenges and destroys the dominant or established discourse on the Orient and Islam; two trends of writing might be present in his work: one which endorses Orientalist discourse; and another which challenges it.

This assumption is based on Said's theory that manifest and latent Orientalism overlap, with latent Orientalism providing concrete research material for manifest Orientalists. By latent Orientalism Said means that archive which was built throughout numerous studies of the Orient on "the prestigious authority of the pioneering scholars, travelers, and poets" (Said, *Orientalism* 221). Manifest Orientalism is what is spoken and acted upon. It includes information about the Orient and is the expression in words and actions of Latent Orientalism.

The first novel, *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* is set in Spain or Andalusia after Granada was restored from Muslim control. At that time, both Muslims and Jews were expelled from the city. Whole collections of books authored and translated by Muslims on mathematics, science, astronomy, philosophy, medicine and different copies of the Quran were burnt. The novel symbolizes the massive contribution of Arabs in enlightening Europe, and the barbaric destruction of all their achievements at the hands of the “civilized” Europeans.

The Book of Saladin, the second novel, is set during the reign of the Muslim leader Saladin who succeeded in uniting the Arabs against the attacks of the Crusaders. The story is told by the court scribe Ibn Yakub, a Jew who escaped from Jerusalem after its fall to the Crusaders, and sought refuge in Egypt. Ali made the chronicler a Jew in order to show that there was no basic hostility between Arabs and Jews, thus refuting claims of an intrinsic clash of civilizations and religions.

The third novel, *The Stone Woman*, is set at the end of the 19th century during the decay of the Ottoman

Empire, which was characterized by corrupt officials and courts. The family of Iskandar Pasha symbolizes the fall of the ruling dynasty and mirrors the disintegration of the empire. Ali depicts in this novel why the Ottoman Empire did not assist any other Islamic country against European countries.

The last novel in the *Quartet* is *A Sultan in Palermo*. It looks at the life of Muhammad Al-Idrissi, who was the court geographer and a man of medicine and learning during the reign of king Roger II of Sicily. The prejudice against him arises from the fact that he is a Muslim scholar in a Christian court. Here, Ali portrays the envious Catholic priests who are mistrustful of Muslims and who are worried about their own positions in the court.

Critics and readers differed in their reception of the *Quartet*. Some praised Ali for writing the novels and appreciated his endeavour to expose the Orientalist stereotypes. Edward Said comment on *Saladin* was that it was “grippingly told, brilliantly paced, remarkably convincing in its historical depiction of a fateful relationship . . .” (Said, Online). Hugh S. Galford

praised the novels because they provide “a genuine look at the interaction of Christendom and Islam.” For him “Ali’s style is clear . . . and draws the reader into the work, leaving him or her wanting more” (Galford, Online). Other writers recommended that the novels be taught at schools because “they are an enjoyable history lesson” (Ahmed, Online).

Other readers appreciated the novels because they are an “imaginative reconstruction, fictionalised history and Arabian Nights-style erotic fantasy” (*The Independent*, Online). Charles Foran attributed the pleasure of reading the *Quartet* to Ali’s “detailing of daily appetities, including sexual and culinary appetites and lives that have been too long hidden” (*Marxism Mailing List Archive*, Online). Saladin’s life was a very attractive element to one of the reviewers who advised others “to read the book and find out what exactly Saladin does with Halima” (Vinod Joseph, Online).

However, other writers and critics criticised Ali for taking fiction too far and showing incidents which do not have any historical reference. Vinod Joseph said that the episode of Reynald desecrating the mosque in