CHAPTER SIX

Edward Said’s Presence and Absence in Contemporary Arab Thought

This chapter is a reflection on Said’s lasting legacy and contribution to contemporary Arab thought. Said’s critical insights and cultural speculations cannot be overlooked, for he has cultivated a form of social and intellectual awareness and political consciousness in Arab critical mind that resists hegemony and injustice. Had he lived to see the latest Arab Spring and other socio-political and intellectual events, he would have seen his thoughts in action. It is no exaggeration to say that his thoughts and ideas that generated much debate in both the academic and non-academic world are still considered as one of the most sustained deconstructive and critical concepts in today’s cultural sphere so much so that choosing to ignore it, will be doing so “at your own peril” (AbuKhalil 100).

It is undoubtedly a fact that after the publication of Edward Said’s influential book *Orientalism* Arab critical thought has come to occupy an important position in Middle Eastern studies. Although the Arab critical thought began as a responsive attempt to the Western thought and theory, it begins to gain the attention through the exploitation of new terms related to the Occident/Orient dichotomy, cultural contact and dialogue, the importance of cultural critique as a way of redeeming human value of coexistence and interlocution, following the steps of Said. Said’s intellectual legacy can be felt through the massive impact he had on the postcolonial studies and emerging cultures.
Said belongs to a new Arab school of thought that celebrates critical reasoning and secular interpretation of culture and cultural forms that break with dogmas of religious discourse and orthodoxy. This includes, but not exclusive to, prominent Arab intellectuals and thinkers such as Anouar Abdal Malek, Moustapha Marrouchi, Samir Amin, Talal Asad, George Trabishi, Ibrahim Abu Lughod, Mohammed ‘Abid al-jabiri, Albert Hourani, Hisham Sharabi, Abdallah Laroui, Aziz al- Azm, Hassan Hanafi, Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi and Wail S. Hassan. These intellectual thinkers and scholars based their critical endeavors primarily on secular humanistic reading and democratic criticism of cultural and literary forms. Their critical ideas have added to the traditionally unmitigated and intellectually conservative Arab thought a new cultural and intellectual trajectory that is critically open, prolifically multifaceted and secularly liberating.

One of the major imprints of Said in the contemporary Arab critical thought is his injection of a new critical method that involves a historical sense and polemical vision based on an unresolved, unstable, dynamic, contrapuntal and secular interpretation of culture. By doing this, he was able to understand and dissect the structures upon which Western imperialist culture was entrenched and disseminated. Against the prevailing religious approach of the Arab Islamic traditionalist thinkers and the radical trajectory of the Arab nationalists, Said has historically invigorated and methodologically connected the Arab–Islamic critical thought that was intellectually influential in medieval period to his discussion of the present Arab politico-cultural prospect. His revisit to Ibn Khuldun’s socio-cultural and historical theories of civilizational production and Ibn Hazm’s critical approach substantiates his constitutive contribution to Arab thought, in general, and contemporary Arab critical thought, in particular.

Said’s contribution can be understood against the backdrop of the modernity/tradition conflict in the Arab thought after the French invasion of Egypt and its
subsequent intellectual and political impact on the Middle East. With the introduction of modernity to the Arab world during the colonial era as a way and mode of life, two conflicting attitudes have come to the fore: resistance and welcome. On the one hand, there was a group of thinkers who found in the modern and secular Europe a source of religious freedom and empirical, scientific life wherein “the forces of modernity, using mostly external ideas and models for change, are oriented towards the future . . . Opposing them,” on the other hand, there were “the forces of tradition, using mostly internal ideas and models for change, are oriented towards the past, which they see as an ideal to be repeated because they perceive it as having the promise of certainty and the surety of proven success” (Boullata 6). This fundamentalist thought pressed towards conservatism and resistance, saying that modernity is just a form of colonization and cultural harassment.

Said has faulted the two modes of thinking, distinguishing between modernity as an extension of colonization and modernity as a form of cultural contact. Whereas he welcomes the latter as a healthy cultural exercise, he castigates the former as a means of hegemonic cultural force backed up by Orientalist discourse and got materialized in the imperial project. He argues that when culture is a check point at the door of identity, it becomes a gate to the exclusionist system. His critical approach has changed the way of studying the Arabs, and the Arabs’ studying themselves. His critical ideas helped outlining the contemporary Arab thought and formulated its relation and interlocution with the West. Accordingly, the contemporary Arab thought struggles to move from engaging with tradition/modernity duality to creating a new vista of critical thinking based on cultural negotiation and reciprocity with the “Other” in terms of interface rather than dichotomy.
Said’s writings on Arabic issues and topics lay out a compelling vision for a secular, democratic future in the Middle East and the world. He insists that the best way to resist hegemonic cultures is self-representation, avoiding the “rhetoric of blame” which reflects the domination of imperial cultures. Arabs, he affirms, should move forward from the simple position of reactive imitation to produce a genuine initiation and proactive interpretation of the issues at hand. They should work on building the methodology which can be applied to the study of the West and global issues from the standpoint of an Arab critical approach. He encourages Arab scholars to represent themselves and write their own histories instead of turning westward looking for their histories. They should play their role to expose the fallacies and defective scholarship of the Orientalists. His concern is in the cultural form, not the religious doctrine. Therefore, his critical approach adds to the dynamism of Arab critical movement that started about the last decades of the twentieth century.

In the light of this, it is commonly argued that all Arab critical endeavors have been formulated by the concept of the cultural dichotomy between “Islam” and the “West”. Equally, it can be argued that no other Arab intellectual has ever aptly handled this concept as has been done by Said. However, his cultural project and critical endeavor have inevitably incited various responses and ignited different reactions from inside Arab intellectual sphere and academia. These reactions range from disagreements and critiques to attributes and salutations.

**Major Trends in the Contemporary Arab Thought**

Broadly speaking, Arab thought can be described as “the product of Arab thinkers who live both in the Arab world and overseas” (Abu Rabi’, *Contemporary Arab Thought* 64). In effect, it is indebted to two particular types of work. The first is the intellectual
production of a vast array of Arab intellectuals who lived mainly in the Arab world. The second is the writing on the Arab world in different fields of specialization by professional Arab intellectuals and scholars who do not make a living in the Arab world, but develop their research interests in the Arab world from their academic purpose in the West. Besides Said, one can add prominent intellectuals such as Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Samir Amin, Naseer Aruri, Hisham Sharabi, Aziz Azmeh, Abdel Latif al-Tibawi, Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, Mohammed Arkoun, Afaf Marsot, Ghada Talhami, Leila Ahmad, and Halim Barakat, to mention but a few.

In the main, Arab thought is “historical, interchangeable, and reflective of the deep social, political, and religious questions from which it was born . . . it is impossible to define the intellectual content of Arab thought in its generality without considering its underlying preoccupation with colonialism and the problematic of the West”. The focus of all major Arab thinkers, from Left and Right, was mainly on these issues. Perspectively, colonialism as an historical process was a chiefly turning point in their thought and trajectory. To this effect, the modern process of Arab thought and the debates of modern and contemporary Arab intelligentsia about this issue “reflects both a diagnosis and solution that imply, in turn, a certain direction for Arab societies, be it Islamic or Marxist or liberal” (64).

Nevertheless, one can discern four major intellectual currents in Modern Arab thought: the Islamic, the nationalist, the liberal, and the Marxist/Leftist. In addition, one may add “regionalism” as a current in contemporary Arab thought, and has been a dominant force in the Arab world since 1967 (al-Dajani 62). In “The Critique of Arab Thought: Mohammed Arkoun’s Deconstruction Method,” Siti Rohmah Soekarba points out three dominant typologies in the discourse of modern Arab thought:
First, the transformative typology represents Arab thinkers who’s radically offer the transformation processes for the Arab-Muslim society from the traditional patriarchy culture into a rational and scientific society. Second, the reformist thinking typology, using the deconstructive method. Third, the ideal totalistic thinking typology, with the main characteristic as idealistic attitude and view towards totalistic Islamic teachings. (79)

In *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*, the British-Lebanese historian, Albert Hourani classifies modern and contemporary Arab thought into four main periods. The first stretches roughly from 1830 to 1870 and is characterized by a westernized tendency in which Europe was seen not as a menace so much as offering a path to be followed. The second period or generation stretches roughly from 1870 to 1900 in which Europe had become the adversary as well as a model. The third phase, stretching roughly from 1900 to 1939, witnessed two strands of thought that were initiated earlier by Mohammed Abduh. On the one hand were those who hold fast on Islamic bases of society. On the other were those who accept Islam as a body of principles, but hold that society should be regulated by secular norms. This period witnessed a sway between religious nationalism and secular patriotic nationalism. The fourth period -- roughly opens with Second World War and continues to the present -- is characterized by two main trends: the revival of Islamic tradition with the appearance of political Islam represented by Muslim Brethren, whose contention was that social reform is part of religious and political reform, and the re-invocation of the secular and neoliberal ideals of the West (vi-vii).

The contemporary Arab thought has been relegated into two main lines of thought: the Islamist and the liberal. In his book, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ provides a sketch of the
general intellectual sphere of modern and contemporary Arabic thought. Though Abu-Rabi’s concern is the resurgence of Islamism and globalization as major challenges and strands that dominate contemporary Arab intellectual sphere, his chief concern is to expose the Arab intellectual dilemma after the catastrophe of 1967. Torn between Islamic and secular criticism of the Arab response to the event, Abu-Rabi observes that the Arab thought was imprisoned by the ideologically impotent method of interpretation. While the Islamic response to the event was premised on a revisionist method to Islamic thought and tradition as a better way to the future, the liberal school of thought rejected this vision as intellectually backward and practically invalid in the world of capitalist market and modern life. It is hard to escape the conclusion drawn by Edward Said over two decades ago that there is an “Arab Right Wing,” which lacks a mass base and which has “a state of mind, and, alas, a very large appetite” (“The Arab Right Wing” 224). Besides being schizophrenic, undemocratic, and brutal, he adds, the Arab Right Wing represents the new rich classes that are “totally dependent on the Western market economy” (227).

As an intellectual continuum, Modern and Contemporary Arab thought can be described as a “complex term that encompasses a constellation of social/political/religious/ideological ideas that have evolved, more or less, over the past 200 years and that represent the leading positions of the social classes in Arab societies” (Abu Rabi’, Contemporary Arab Thought xv). It can be studied against two major historical backgrounds: “first is the historical setting of the Arab world, which began with the rise of Islam and which has gone through many profound changes in its long history, and the second is the Western setting, which became an integral part of the modern history of the Arab world after the immense expansion of capitalism”. On the whole, critical Arab thought can be analyzed in the light of four premises:
First, it became more entangled with the capitalist system than ever before. Second, in the wake of the collapse of the Arab nationalist project in the 1970s and in the absence of any organized political effort, the Arab world became more dependent on the West, especially on the United States. . . [third], with the gradual capitulation of the Arab state system to American hegemony, the Zionist/Israeli project achieved another breakthrough in terms of official Arab recognition of the state of Israel . . . [fourth] the actual process of decolonization was derailed by a practical dilemma after the invasion of Iraq. (4)

Notably, one cannot ignore the fact that “a great number of epistemological formations have taken place in the Arab thought that cannot be understood apart from their historical and social meanings” (8). The modern Arab thought “as a philosophical outlook and historical process” cannot be studied away from the probing into the European colonial intervention in the Arab world. The modern Arab thought was no longer an unmitigated “self-contained” and “autonomous ideological and religious system”. The grips of modernism, “the problematic of Westernization and the economic and political weight of Western colonization” cast their heavy intellectual and socio-political travails on the Arab intellectual scene. In other words, “Western modernity, translated into modernization at the economic and political levels, and into modernism at the level of consciousness and general education, could not escape its colonialist essence”. Historically, the colonial project has drastically animated a sorting of thought in the Arab intellectual sphere that has been internally speculative and culturally operative at level of Arab-Islamic thought and tradition. On the other hand, it has generated a contested vision of theorization that, at its best, baffling and unstable, and created a politically discontented relationship between “[t]he colonized Arabs and their intellectual elite” between “the progress of their colonizers” and “their own outdated modes of
structure and thought.” “This dialectical situation,” therefore, “created many interesting Arab reactions, whose common denominator was dualism in thought and in solution to the problems facing Arab societies” (11).

This dualistic frame of the Arab intelligentsia, one modern and the other traditional continues to be the genuinely problematic intellectual arena in the contemporary Arab thought. “This deep-seated polarization”, Abu Rabi’ argues, “meant on the one hand a movement toward modernization initiated by colonialism and encouraged by the nascent nation-state . . . , and, on the other, the rediscovery of tradition, the collective self and authenticity as a means to both protect and preserve” (12). In his essay “‘Postcolonial’ Literature in a Neocolonial World: Modern Arabic Culture and the End of Modernity,” Saree Makdisi chooses “the eerie hush” in the closing moments of the Sudanese novelist al-Tayyeb Saleh’s *Season of Migration to the North* to describe the intellectual crisis of postcolonial Arabic thought. He compares the dilemma of the Modern Arab writer and intellectual to the narrator’s turning point in the Nile: “a bend in the river, where the current’s usual northerly flow is disrupted and cut off by a sudden swerve from west to east . . . in which the narrator is left screaming for help in the darkness and immensity of the Nile”. Thus, like the postcolonial Arab intellectual, the narrator is unable to situate himself in terms of a directional flow: “he is unable either to continue his ‘migration’ to the north or to return to his point of departure . . . a great darkness closes in on both the narrator and the narrative” (86). This figurative depiction of the intellectual sphere of modern and even contemporary Arab thought reflects to some extent the disruptions in its formal construction as “an unstable mixture of modern European and traditional Arabic styles and forms” and “the inability of the traditional to ‘become’ modern” (87).
In fact, the main challenge that faces Arab intellectuals today is how to come out from the polarization of “our tradition” and “their modernity.” According to Makdisi, “Arab ‘modernism’ emerges from the current crisis in the Arab world -- the crisis of a modernity apprehended as an immediate present experience rather than as a utopian (or dystopian) future condition”. However, Makdisi views the disruption experienced by Arab thought as the result of “the violent dialogical process of imperialism itself.” He proposes that “Arab ‘modernism’ needs to be understood in part as a counter-narrative of those projects as well as their aftereffects” (105). In other words, the crisis of modernity in the Arab world is not only the product of the Arab experience of colonialism in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth but also of the neocolonial conditions that exist in the Arab world today. Hence, the Arab confrontation with Israel and with the neocolonial policies of the West has supplanted the older confrontation with nineteenth-century colonialism as one of the catalysts for the contemporary cultural and political crisis. Therefore, it is no surprise to note that “a great deal of contemporary Arabic literary or critical production has as its major concern not only the broad and global neocolonial relations of power . . . but also the specifically colonial situation that lies at the heart of the question of Palestine” (106, italics in origin).

Consequently, it can be argued that Arab intellectuals, coming as they have from various intellectual and cultural backgrounds and formations, still consider the West to be a major problematic. The June 1967 event initiated a drastically turning point in the Arab-West relationship and rekindled the dichotomy between them. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict casts its shadow on the intellectual, literary and cultural sphere. This has gone beyond the political to the epistemological line that has become the most irksome question that the Arab intelligentsia has faced, and is still facing, since Nakbah. The Arab
critical and cultural scene that the 1967 Arab defeat has produced is detailed by Issa J. Boullata in the following lines:

The 1967 Arab defeat . . . occasioned a great amount of Arab self-examination and self-criticism, and encouraged the development of new ideas on understanding the Arab past and envisioning the Arab future. Intellectuals from various parts of the Arab world are analyzed for their thoughts . . . Arab thought is seen to be in crisis, not so much because of differences among Arab intellectuals as because of a perverse system of societal control in the Arab world insidiously tied to a global system of hegemony which perpetuates present conditions. (x)

The new realities have necessitated a re-vision of the matrix of their thinking accompanied with self-rehearsal critical method. As a result, some have concluded that religion and the attachment to the past is one of the principal reasons behind Arab defeat and their historical, cultural, and intellectual stagnation. Others have postulated that the reason for defeat was the absence of religious spirit. The collective burden of defeat transforms itself into a “collective critique” of society, individual and tradition. Generally, the 1967 Arab defeat ushered in a series of important political, social, ideological, and intellectual transformations that are still evolving. The writings of Egyptian Islamist scholar ‘Abd al-Wahab al-Masiri and, definitely, the writings of Edward Said became an example of this Arab reawakening as a leading authority, particularly on matters of Zionism and Israel-Palestine and Arab-West relationships.

Significantly, the main source of ambivalence in Arab critical stand in relation to the West and consequently the Middle East crisis is due more to methodological treatment. While the Islamists follow an uncompromised religious approach against the idea of the existence of Israel on Arab-Islamic territories, some other liberal and secular
thinkers take cultural critical strand as an approach to their though and ideas about the issue. As Abu-Rabi’ argues, “it is only by seeking a rapprochement between the critical Islamic perspective and Western critical theory that the Muslim intelligentsia can reassert itself in its role of thorough consciousness and radical critique”. Some Arab thinkers argue that accepting any form of Western knowledge is antithetical to Arab or Muslim cultural identity. Therefore, it becomes “inconceivable to articulate a credible Islamic/Arab/Third World critique of contemporary thought and life without having a background in the central arguments of Western critical theory” (Contemporary Arab Thought xiv). This is actually what Said examines throughout his critical writings. He urges Arab intellectuals to take critical theory to their grasp as an enabling tool to address the crises at hand.

The Arab response to the modernity/tradition, Arab-West or Israel-Palestine intellectual crisis differs according to the different critical strands of the Arab intelligentsia. For the Arab Left thinkers, the crisis of culture in the contemporary Arab world is not so much due to the “loss of religious values” or a “doctrinal conflict between Islam and the West” or “cultural invasion” as much as it is due to the structural economic and, to a certain extent, political hegemony of the Arab world by the Western world. According to this view, “the Arab ruling classes have not as of yet figured out how to remove their economies from this dependency” (xvi). However, it is inaccurate to assume that modern political or social phenomena in the Arab world are carbon copies of those in the West. What is important to underline is that “neither the intellectual nor social nor economic history of the modern Arab world can be understood in isolation from the totality of world processes in the economic, political, and intellectual fields” (3).

The Islamic reformists and advocates of rational interpretation of Arab-Islamic tradition, such as the contemporary Moroccan critic and professor, Muhammad `Abid Al-
Jabiri, have anchored their thought in the urgent concerns of re-interpreting Arab-Islamic turath (heritage) rationally as a form of Arab interpretive method counter to Western modernism. Al-Jabiri’s definition of rationalism as the organized habit of critical reconstruction allows him to examine the rationalist undercurrents of the Arab and Muslim past for the purpose of reconstructing the rational foundations of modern and contemporary Arab culture. For him, the past poses many problems and its legacy has entangled the modern Arab world in parochialism, and anti-rationalism. Therefore, the past should be reconstructed in an enlightened and rational manner to pave the way for the contemporary Arab world to turn modernity into a creative process (54). Because part of his quest is to bring turath into contemporary Arab intellectual discourse, Al-Jabiri focuses his efforts on the deconstruction and critique of Arab Reason (al-‘aql al-‘arabî).

In the Formation of the Arab Reason, he states:

> When Arab reason (al-‘aql al-‘arabî), in the sense which we intend here, is the reason which was formed and shaped within Arab culture, . . . then the requisite critique . . . demands liberation from the imprisonment of prevailing readings and considering the givens of Arab-Islamic culture in its various branches without being bound by the pervading points of view. (viii)

Following the logic of Edward Said in his appraisal of Orientalism, Al-Jabiri elicits what he considers to be the underlying and essential religious, linguistic, philosophical, and political components and epistemological underpinnings of Arab and Islamic thought. For this, he consecrates a trilogy that centers on criticism, namely, Takwin al-‘aql al-‘arabi (Genesis of Arab Reason) (1984), Bunyat al-‘aql al-‘arabî (Structure of Arab Reason) (1986), al-‘Aql al-siyasi al-‘arabî (Arab Political Reason), (1991).
The Arab nationalist thinkers like Costantine Zurayk, a prominent and influential Syrian Arab intellectual and advocate of national philosophy, sought to redefine Arab understanding of both rationalism and progress in terms of cultural solidarity and unique identity. They believed that the Arab world must create a new identity based on an ideologically national and collective spirit.

From what has been stated above, it is observed that the concept of “Other” in Arab critical thought has been subjected to the intellectual trend of Arab reason that produces its cultural and circumstantial world. In “The concept of the ‘Other’ in modern Arab thought: From Muhammad Abdu to Abdallah Laroui,” Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ argues that the concept of the “Other” in modern Arab thought “means different things to different thinkers,” referring to four main trends and attitudes toward the “other”: Islamic, liberal, nationalist, and leftist (85). Accordingly, these four areas of thought convey four different philosophical outlooks, social and historical perspectives, religious (or anti-religious) positions, and ideological and political articulations. Each one forms its own collective identity against the “other”, which can be either the Islamic past or Christianity or the West. Interestingly, Said’s critique of the misrepresented, disfigured and misconceived position of the “Other” in the Orientalist thought has incited a self-critical approach of Arab intellectuals who started to re-examine their relation to the “Other” inside and outside the geographical arena and intellectual jargon.

Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that the colonial legacy in the Arab world has been traumatic and devastating to its geographical, cultural and political mapping. Said’s critique of cultural imperialism and Western Orientalist/colonialist policies has a reverberating presence in the Third World countries, in general, and Arab world, in particular. His critical method and approach have immensely contributed to shaping the
contemporary Arab thought, its cultural intensity, political image, and intellectual weightiness.

**Said’s Intellectual Legacy**

In order to understand Said’s intellectual legacy, his cultural project, and its impact on the Arab intellectual sphere, it is essential to “be keenly aware of the ‘quite complicated mix’” that went into the making of his life and career. As an Arab-Western intellectual, he “was heir to, or a product of, the complex and often painful process of the Arab’s interaction” with the West (Hafez 170). It is this quite complex mix that directed his intellectual production and shaped his critical approach.

Said’s unfailing presence in today’s Arab critical circle cannot be denied. The intellectual inheritance of Foucault, Vico, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Gramsci, Williams, Adorno, Lukács, and several others that went into the making of his work, has rewardingly been backed up by his recurrent reference to Al-Hallaj, Ibn Hazm, Ibn Khaldun, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, George Antonius, Jurji Zaydan. This cultural and intellectual mix explains that his aim was to “remind the West of its indebtedness to earlier Arabic culture and to disseminate some of its modern achievements” (171).

Substantially, Arab thought was historically matured against two significant events: the first is the advent of Islam, and, second, European colonialism. In both cases, Arab thought was in the process of reproduction of its shape. The former, fundamentally productive, recorded the early Islamic encounter and interaction with the West which began in the seventh century and reached its peak in the ninth and tenth centuries. This was a period of expansion of the Islamic world, with acquisition of knowledge regardless of origin, followed by the Europeans’ adoption and translation of Arabic knowledge and works after the Crusades, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The interaction in
these two phases was marked by peaceful interchange, where the self was dealing with the knowledge of an absent other. By contrast, the latter, being culturally imitative and receptive, was a passive Arab interaction with the West, which began in the nineteenth century and marked by tension, conflict, and power politics. The modern period, of which Said was a product, went back to the French expedition to Egypt in 1798. The modern encounter with the West engraved its seismic cultural impact on the Arab thinking and the way they look at the West.

The European colonizers have brought with them the Western educational system, cultural values, and lifestyle that were alien to the Arab indigenous culture. In addition, the early years of the twentieth century were marked by the emigration of large numbers of Arabs, especially Levantines, from Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine to the Americas. This cultural encounter had definitely affected their cultural sphere, resulting in the genesis of modern Arabic narrative genres such as the novel, the short story, and drama, adding a new dimension to their critical thought. Therefore, in 1920, *al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyyah* (The Pen Association), headed by Jibran Khalil Jibrān was launched in New York by a group of Arab intellectuals as an influential, innovative literary movements in modern Arab intellectual history. That same year, in a separate but homologous development, the *Diwan* group was established in Cairo. Significantly, these critical and intellectual events promoted similar ideas on innovations in literary and cultural styles.

Moreover, the publication in 1983 of Said’s *The World, the Text and the Critic*, which contains some of his most astute theoretical essays, coincided with the launch in Cairo of *Fusul*, the first journal in Arabic dedicated to literary criticism and literary theory. *Fusul* soon became a pan-Arab cultural forum for theory and critical debates, and within a few years it had energized the Arab critical scene and invigorated its quest for theoretical investigation. It changed the nature of Arab critical discourse and conducted a
far-reaching dialogue with many strands of modern critical theory, particularly structuralism, Russian formalism, Marxism, deconstruction, reception theory, and the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature. This was followed by the re-launch in Ramallah in the early 1990s of the Palestinian quarterly, *Al-Karmil*, which translated a number of Said’s important critical essays. Against this socio-cultural and intellectual atmosphere, Said has developed his intellectual career as an outstanding Arab critic living in exile (Hafez 177-78). After 1967, Said’s involvement in Arab political and intellectual affairs increased remarkably, and his ideas gained more currency.

In this respect, *Out of Place* records, in an emphatic tone, his Arabic consciousness, and testifies on his experience as an Arab intellectual who struggles to find voice for his people in the globalized and homogenized world. Born in preoccupied Jerusalem, and brought up primarily in the colonial Egypt of the 1930s and 1940s, he lived the experience of colonialism and was exposed to its hegemony early in his life. The first shock to his identity came in the mid 1940s when the British secretary of the Gezira Club, a Mr. Pilley, told him, “Arabs aren’t allowed here, and you’re an Arab” (44). Retrospectively, Said recalled what he later called “a fatalistic compact between my father and myself about our necessarily inferior status. He knew about it, I discovered it publicly for the first time face to face with Pilley, yet neither of us saw it as worth a struggle of any kind, and that realization shames me still” (44-5). The nagging sense of being “out of place” continued to haunt him, and the accumulation of “hurt” and “injustice” ultimately drove him back to the culture of his origins.

In fact, it is *Orientalism* that introduced Said to the Arab world. Unfortunately, it was badly translated (the book was translated into Arabic by Kamal Abu-Deeb as *Al-Istishraq: al-Ma’rifah, al-Sultah, al-Insha’* and published in Beirut in 1981). Rawda ‘Ashour, a professor of English literature and an accomplished novelist and critic, writes
in her able study of Said’s work, “The Arabic translation of Orientalism is confused, ambiguous and suffers from many problems, the most obvious of which is the transformation of a lucid and enjoyable book into a difficult text laden with incomprehensible terminology” (“Hikayat Edward” 14). Aside from obfuscating his brilliant argument, the translation had an enormous negative impact on his legacy and the perception of his work among Arab intellectuals.

Accordingly, many of the ardent opponents of modernity and Westernization in the Arab world, Islamists and traditionalists by virtue of their ideology exuberantly embraced the book. They perceived it as a new rendering of their traditional attack on the Orientalists, articulating, in the language of their adversaries, their grievance and sense of injustice vis-a-vis the West. Their approach to, and attack on, the work of the Orientalists had been historically motivated by religious convictions and a belief that the Orientalists’ aim had been to undermine Islam and distort its image. They considered it the latest in a series of diatribes against the misrepresentation of Islam in European discourse.

Though the message of Said’s Orientalism was distorted in Arab intellectual circles -- and indeed among the wider public through the traditionalists’ widely disseminated misrepresentation of his main thesis as a kind of identity politics -- the book did spark wide debate on the issues it addressed. A meaningful discussion of its insights had been conducted by those who had read the book in its original English or in French translation, and their numbers grew with time. They had seen this seminal work as exposing and undermining the basis and motivation of the Orientalist discourse. They were immensely affected by the crux of the argument -- concerning the dialectics of knowledge and power, the complicity of discourse in the dynamics of hegemony and imperialism, and the fabrication of an inferior “Orient” as justification for its subjugation and conquest.
Further, *Orientalism* was one of the most widely-read yet misunderstood and misappropriated work on postcolonial studies. One aspect of such misappropriation is on the reversal of role in gazing other cultures. Said was careful enough not to commit the same mistake as the Orientalists did. While Orientalism accepted uncritically a set of assumptions that are reductionist and essentialist in its view of the “Other”, Said reiterated at the end of his book that “the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism” (328).

Unfortunately, Said’s depiction of Orientalism was taken in the Arab world as depiction of the West as a whole. Said points to this in the afterword to *Orientalism*: “Since this is so, the argument continues, therefore the entire West is an enemy of the Arab and Islamic or for that matter the Iranian, Chinese, Indian, and many other non-European peoples who suffered Western colonialism and prejudice” (331). Such misrepresentations of Said’s work could be due to the attitude towards what Said himself termed as “predatory West” and violation towards Arabs and Islam. When this attitude exists, an opportunity arises to seize Orientalism for the promotion of certain ideological goals (331). Yet, in criticizing the Orientalists (or more generally lumped as “the West”), the Islamists adopted the very same style of thinking as the Orientalists. This is acknowledged by Said and he termed it as “Orientalized Orientals” -- that is, the former colonized people who parroted and adopted the same style of thinking and assumptions about their own race or religion.

However, the misappropriation of Said’s Orientalism and the unconscious adoption of Orientalists’ flawed methodology were in fact found in some Arab-Muslim writings. They “treat the production of Orientalism as a solid monolithic inspired by deep-seated religious hatred of Islam” (AbuKhalil 112). Often, Orientalism was traced by these writers to the Crusades and the accounts were often “confused, mixing Zionism,
communism, and Christian proselytization.” So, Orientalist works were criticized on the basis of them being written by non-Muslims or on the basis of them being non-Arab or rather, “Western” (113). Some others argued that Orientalism should be explained in terms of the Jewish plan to control the affairs of the world, or as a new façade for the Crusaders’ wars against Islam. Thus, Said’s own message and conclusions were ignored. Rather, these writers were consumed with sectarian and religious advocacy and propaganda. Indeed, it can be seen that the general consensus amongst them is that the study of Islam can only be done fairly at the hands of Muslims. However, such move can only serve to detach Islamic studies from any critical standards of scholarship.

From the discussions above, it is clear that Arabs need to reevaluate their discourse on East-West relationship in the light of Said’s critical insights. If “Islam” in the West (or the media) means a lot of unpleasant things, then the same is true in our use of “the West”. Said curtly points out: “How many people who use the labels [be it “Islam” or “the West”] angrily or assertively have a solid grip on all aspects of the Western traditions, or on Islamic jurisprudence, or on the actual languages of the Islamic world? Very few, obviously” (Covering Islam 10).

On another strand, the publication of Said’s famous articles “Traveling Theory” and “Traveling Theory Reconsidered” contribute well to the prevailing mode of Arab critics, who had long contented themselves with simply replicating Western theory, or, at best, applying its tenets to Arabic texts. The encounter with Said’s “traveling theory” encouraged many to shake off their dependency on these theories. In these two articles, Said argues against turning literary theory into a cultural dogma which, appropriated by schools or institutions, acquires the status of authority to become the closed domain of specialists and acolytes. He argues instead for a theory of permanent dissonance, of deconsecration, decentralization, and demystification, a counter hegemony that rejects
enslavement to dominant systems. According to Said, any study of the way in which theories travel reveals the inevitability of change and transformation at every junction of the journey and with regard to every aspect of the theory or techniques of dissemination, communication, and interpretation. Theory, he states, “is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile . . . [in] a geographical dispersion of which the theoretical motor is capable . . . [to suggest] the possibility of different locales, sites, situations for theory without facile universalism or over-general totalizing” (“Traveling Theory Reconsidered” 451-52).

Just as he calls upon the “Orient” to represent itself and to speak out, here he is arguing for the critic’s liberation from the dogma of theory. He observes that in “the Arab world there is this tendentious reliance on and even blind replication of unitary theories without a clear effort to change these theories to something relevant to the Arab culture” (Hadidi 142). Many Arab critics, such as Jabir Asfur (Egypt), Muhammad Barrada (Morocco), Yumna al-’Id (Lebanon), Subhi Hadidi (Syria), and Fakhri Salih (Jordan), to mention but a few, embraced his call and spoke out for the need to liberate Arab critical discourse from the grip of Western theory and the drudgery of imitations. They realized that it is no longer viable to import Western literary theory or to apply it blindly to Arab literary phenomena or text. Nonetheless, it is easier to reject the tyranny of universalism, as Said has shown us the way, than actually to make a lasting contribution to its modification and change.

Many Arab critics have benefited from Said’s aversion to linear subsuming histories and the unitary sense of identity, as well as his preference for a contrapuntal approach capable of dealing with the complexity of historical experience. “All cultures,” he argues, “are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic. This, I believe, is as true
of the contemporary United States as it is of the modern Arab world” (Culture and Imperialism xxv). As a result, his next major work, Culture and Imperialism, which saw the culmination of his critical project of deconstructing the Western narrative, was celebrated as a significant theoretical and critical contribution to the contemporary Arab thought. Actually, it received considerable attention in Arab intellectual circles long before it was translated into Arabic. It was extensively reviewed in the Arab press, quoted in academic papers, and inspired a number of academic studies. In her paper submitted to a conference on “History and the Text” organized by the Faculty of Letters and Humanities of Kairoun University, Tunisia, 2003, Radwa ‘Ashur enumerates the projects inspired by Said’s approach undertaken by young researchers in Egyptian universities. A recent example of Said’s impact was the fact that the January 2004 conference organized by the Egyptian Society of Literary Criticism took as its main theme “cultural criticism,” or al-Naqd al-Tbaqafi, the term increasingly used for the critical approach associated with the work of Said. Interestingly, Arab intellectuals have shown a marked preference for Said’s cultural criticism over the postcolonial strand (Naqd ma Ba’d al-Isti’mar) of his work preferred in the West.

It has been observed that Arab critics felt that “the absence of an all-encompassing theory of Arab culture” is responsible for the “adoption of imported theories, making their own methodologies derivative and ultimately trapping them in a methodological nexus against which they rebelled”. In this case, Said’s contribution becomes significant not only for its “perceptive critical insights but also for its effort to liberate Arab criticism from the drudgery of subsisting on the crumbs of Western theory”. His work marked a shift to a creative dialogue and his cultural criticism was embraced by the Arab intelligentsia as a more comprehensive approach to culture and criticism insofar as it brings together history, geography, the notion of knowledge and power, and critical
insight. His theories, which they saw as a genuine Arab contribution launched into a world of creativity and equality, therefore have been seen as offering a way out of the methodological dependency on the West. Though well aware that Said’s contribution is deeply rooted in Western thought and methodology, they put the emphasis on the subversive power of its rebellion against the reigning orthodoxies and methods in the field. Because of his towering accomplishments, the trajectory of his intellectual output, and his increasing involvement in Arab cultural and political affairs, Said served as a role model for many Arab intellectuals for the last decade of his life. He was often treated as a paragon of wisdom whose words were taken as inspired revelation, something he disliked.

As an ardent intellectual, his ability to speak truth to power is his most appealing intellectual legacy in the Arabic public intellectual life. He was well aware that most Arab intellectuals were stuck in the habit of what he calls “avoidance,” that is, “turning away from difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure” (Representations of the Intellectual 100). Therefore, his lasting contribution to the Arab intellectual terrain lies not only in his distinguished intellectual project that probed the crucial relationships between history, narrative, and politics, but also in his persistence on the active role of the intellectual and involvement in the social settings. The intellectual, for him, “cannot be reduced simply to being faceless professional, a competent member of a class just going about her/his business.” Rather, he is “someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d’être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (11, italics in origin). This is, indeed, the role played by him through his active involvement in the struggle for the
Palestinian right and justice. He was without doubt playing the role that the Arab public demanded. In other words, he felt strongly about the need to re-educate the public in order to bring it along. His message is being filtered through the writing of many Arab intellectuals. In his books such as *Nazariyyat Mu’asirah* [Contemporary Theories] (1998) and *Afaq al-Asr* [Horizons of our Time] (1997), the Egyptian critic Jabir ‘Asfur, for example, develops a new language and critical idiom drawn from Said. In addition, two major Arabic periodicals dedicated recent issues to his work. For instance, the December 2003 issue of *Al-Adab* monthly was dedicated to “Edward Said: His Impact on the World and on the U.S.” Although Said’s project is passionately persuasive, it defies closure and certainty. The fact that his work is purely secular increases its appeal both to Arab intellectuals and a wider public. What enlarges his constituency even more is the trajectory of his intellectual orientation which gives his work a legitimacy and authenticity that enhances its relevance for the contemporary Arab scene.

Said is probably the most influential contemporary Arab academic who is widely identified with his passionate commitment to, and championing of cultural critical approach to the issue of Arab-West encounter. Within the academy, he was

an eloquent, ubiquitous commentator on the crisis in the Middle East and an advocate for the cause of the Palestinians. This moral and political engagement was not really a displacement of [his] intellectual attention --his critique of the West’s failure to understand Palestinian humiliation closely echoes, after all, his reading of nineteenth-century scholarship and fiction in *Orientalism* and subsequent books. (Judt vii)

His contribution to Arab critical thought is deeply rooted in his theory of knowledge as a powerful tool of colonial and hegemonic system. In this way, he views
the clash between modernity and tradition as a socio-cultural variation, not a historical conflict. Modernism, as he conceived it, is different from modernity in the sense that modernism is a political as well as literary movement that served the colonial and capitalist imperial powers. Therefore, historicity and presentism were two major characteristic features of modernism and these elements provided the strategic coverings for the supremacy of the European culture and philosophy; a mission that has been carried out and accompanied by the Orientalist discourse which started in the eighteenth century, flourished in the nineteenth century through twentieth and twenty-first centuries. On the other hand, modernity is a mode of life and style of living that is based on making use of the modern technologies. Therefore, it is an optional, individualistic idea rather than an ideological political strategy. According to this conception, he seems divergent from some other Arab intellectuals and critics who rendered the discourse of post-1967 defeat “as relevant as it widened and began to deal with Arab culture as a whole, its impact on the relation between tradition and modernity, and the results of all that on the effectiveness of the Arabs in the world community” (Boullata 2).

When Orientalism burst upon the scene in 1978, some inside and outside the Arab world mistakenly began to view Said as an advocate of Arab nationalism. But Said himself never mistook his own condemnation of the representational regimes which had not only succumbed to authoritarian political tendencies but had resolutely prevented the creation of a climate of feeling and thought which would make possible intellectual work and critical inquiry. In his 1998 article to Le Monde Diplomatique, he found that the political failures and sheer lapse into intellectual obscurity of the Arab world were not only a hindrance to and drawback of the Arabs, but also detected among far too many Arabs an alarming adherence to “out-moded and discredited ideas”. The stamp that he has passionately left on the Arab public and intelligentsia is the effort with which his seminal
work prodigiously helped them to define themselves as a people with a history and culture.

To his political engagement in Arab issues, which is nevertheless a perilous option for him as an exile, “the experience of 1967, the re-emergence of the Palestinian people as a political force, and [his] own engagement with that movement” has taken him to another turn, and directed him toward “a wholly different set of concerns” -- telling the story of his people to the world -- “despite the frequent death threats, acts of vandalism, and abusive behavior directed at me and my family” (*Reflections on Exile* xiii-xiv). His engagement with the Palestinian issue, however, does not hold him from criticizing the sociopolitical situation of Arab states. “Democracy in any real sense of the word,” he maintains, “is nowhere to be found in the still ‘nationalistic’ Middle East: there are either privileged oligarchies or privileged ethnic groups. The large mass of people is crushed beneath dictatorship or unyielding, unresponsive, unpopular government” (*Culture and Imperialism* 300).

By speaking for the Arab world and its impoverished intelligentsia, Said’s critical project takes up the question of Palestine as a vector for Arab intellectual and politico-cultural reality and its relationship with the West. He elaborately talks about this issue in his article entitled “An Unacceptable Helplessness” written to *Al-Ahram Weekly* (January 2003). Substantially, his intellectual impact on Arab thinkers, artists, and activists has been most prominently intensive in the debates about cultural identity, cultural decline, and cultural renewal. He argues that the intellectual crisis in the Arab World is a result of a long history of political and cultural upheavals. He deplores:

It is hard for any Arab not to feel that his or her generation has not made an all around mess of things. Ours was the generation that supported and lived through the first decade of post-World War II independence which brought to power the
very regimes . . . that run things today: . . . the almost total absence of a thriving civil society, the sinking rate of nearly all forms of productivity. (“The Next Generation” 173)

Over the last two centuries, questions of the cultural self have been the thematic points of discussions that dominated Arab conferences, publications, and political gatherings. These debates revolved around these questions: How are we to define ourselves? Are we Arabs or Muslims in the first place? What does Arabhood mean? How is Islam to be understood? Why have we lagged behind while others in the world have progressed? How can we change and modernize without becoming westernized and losing our souls? How can we recuperate our past glory, our dignity, our pride, and our previous political, military, scientific, economic, and cultural might? Is religion the cause of our decline? Should it be the source of our renaissance? Is secularism what we need? What kind of secularism? Has political oppression been the cause of our cultural crisis, or has our culture produced consecutive despotic regimes? Why haven’t we been able to establish Arab unity? Why have we been incapable of instituting democracy? Why haven’t we been able to vindicate our cause in Palestine?

These questions have been constant preoccupations of Arab debates on culture and politics, and have capsulated the major issues and questions that occupied the Arab intelligentsia and the cultural anguish that dominated their debates. They have gained immediate urgency and great currency in the modern and contemporary Arab cultural formula, and could easily be incorporated in Said’s critical and cultural thought and theory. As noted by Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab in her Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective (2010), the 1967 Arab defeat or nakbah had a formulating impact on the Arab thought as it incited different opinions, trends and approaches in Arab intellectual circles:
It was a political and intellectual crisis that called for a reassessment and a revisiting of the modes of thinking that had prevailed as well as of the political and intellectual struggles that had hitherto been adopted . . . It led to the radicalization and polarization of two major trends: on the one hand, the search for totalizing doctrines, . . . and, on the other hand, the radicalization of critique. (2)

It is against this sociopolitical and historical background that critical Arab thinkers have been reflecting on their societies’ major concerns. Equally, it is against this critical trajectory that Said has been viewed as a major intellectual force in the shaping of the contemporary Arab thought. These concerns, therefore, have become prominent at particular historical junctures and have embodied a whole array of moral, political, and epistemological concerns.

Among this cultural transformational shift, Said’s critical thought has been vitally formulative, especially, in the context of Arab-Israeli conflict. The question of Palestine is central in the Arab critical trends, and Said’s contribution in this regard is immensely influential. What characterizes his critical thought is its thesis and orientation. Unlike most of other nationalist and traditionalist Arab political thinkers, whose approach to the question of Palestine is incuriously theoretical and furiously rejectionist, Said’s intellectual undertaking has followed a negotiated and polemical method. His critical scrutiny appeals to both Arab and Western audience. Palestine at his hands is an “idea” and “experience,” a “cause” and “effect” that goes beyond the discourse of locality. He presents Palestinian issue at a wider level of investigation and critique. He always asserts, “To say that 1948 made and extraordinary cultural and historical demand on the Arab is to be guilty of the crassest understatement . . . [It represents] an explosion whose effects continue to fall unrelentingly into the present . . . [it marks] a monumental enigma, an existential mutation for which Arab history was unprepared” (“Arabic Prose” 46). He
also suggests that “[f]or the Arabs to act knowingly, was to create the present and this was a battle of restoring historical continuity, healing a rupture, and – most important – forging a historic possibility . . . Unless Arab culture . . . could participate freely in its own self-making, it would be as if it did not exist” (47-8, italic in origin). The essence of Said’s intellectual project, therefore, involves deconstructing power and repressive phenomena by the use of highly advanced intellectual tools. This process of deconstruction follows a general view that does not break away from its epistemological position, a position which uncovers the most developed, rich, and human in the intellectual and spiritual experiments of people, contingent with their existence.

In an interview with Nouri Jarah, reprinted in his collection of interviews, *Power, Politics and Culture*, Said reflects on the Arab intellectual response to his work and views on the Palestinian issue. He tells Jarah:

I find my opinions misinterpreted, especially where they include substantial criticism of Islamist movements . . . It is very possible to read a given author according to a certain interpretation, and this happens often, resulting in misunderstanding . . . In *Orientalism* I do not talk about Islam, but rather the portrayal of Islam in the West, offering a critique of the foundations and the goals upon which the coverage is based. (437-38)

In this context, he disagrees with the Islamic interpretation of his writings, especially those about *Orientalism*, as an interpretation contrary to the text. The Arab interpretation of “Orientalism” has often been distorted, for it has made the term “Orientalist” an insult. According to Said, “The reason is that *Orientalism* was basically used by Arab readers as a means for conflict and not for developing an analytical thought based on ideas. This factor made the term “Orientalism” an insult . . . This is one of the
negative consequences of the caricatural reading of my book, because I do not say or imply anything like this”. “The most important thing about the book” he continues, “is the method of analysis, the theoretical framework according to which results are organized -- and not the negative consequences themselves”. He comments on this shallow reading of the text as saying: “as an Arab society we remain prisoners of these modes, for we have not been able to develop something that allows us to be emancipated from the dark past” (438-39).

Said is vehemently bound by the cult of criticism and intellectual vector. Therefore, to the question whether he belongs to or supported any school of thought in the Arab world, he strongly assures, “I am not concerned with schools of thought if the issue is membership. What I see is completely different. As a free and independent intellectual, I give little importance to the slogans, whether it is Marxist or non-Marxist”. For this reason, he rejects the mythical account of the question of Palestine and debunks the holistic answers to its conflict, reinforcing that our critical and theoretical approach should be based not on myths or mysteries but on understanding of the situated and circumstantial realities. He insists to “avoid myths,” because “we as intellectuals must focus on the historical and concrete facts and refuse to utilize mythological dimensions” (441).

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that, most prominently, the inimical relationship between the Arab-Islamic world and the West has its root in the religious factor. Therefore, Arab reading of Said’s book, and work in general, was appropriated to fit its paradigmic trajectory towards the West. One can also see how representations connected to the topos of the Crusades have great potential to mobilize political and cultural resources that are still a central point of reference in people’s perception of the “Christian Occident” and the “Islamic Orient”. The Crusades were perceived as a
paradigmatic event in which the encounter between Christians and Muslims, between “Europe” and “the Other”, was conceived in largely conflicting terms. The Crusades were often conceived from a European point of view as the embodiment of Western heroism and as the origin of joint European political and cultural endeavor. With the emergence of modernism and its imperial aftermath, the Occident-Orient dichotomy, which was conceived in terms of Christian West and Islamic East, has taken a secular Crusader mode in conjunction with the colonialist reasoning to which they were inextricably linked. In other words, there was a shift from the struggle over religious identity into the struggle for cultural identity. In this respect, Said’s critical interventions are particularly significant and have to be read in this paradigmic perspective. His analysis of the epistemological structure of the Orientalist and imperial narratives has been encoded and incorporated in the Arab intellectual and political themes and agendas.

Said’s legacy in the Arab World is comparable in many aspects to that of the great Muslim thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Khaldun. Like the three of them, he should be remembered for his profound and significant contribution to the history of thought. Farabi and Ibn Rushd introduced and commented on Plato and Aristotle, Said, too, introduced to the Arab readers the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, and engaged an outstanding dialogue with Foucault’s work, namely on the archeology of knowledge. And while the Muqadimat of Ibn Khaldun is considered the founding book of the new science of sociology in the fourteenth century, Said’s seminal book Orientalism is an outstanding work of scholarship, undeniably foundational in the fields of comparative literature and postcolonial studies. His active re-vitalization of Ibn Khaldun’s thoughts of interpretation of historical realities and his injection of secular reading of literary and cultural texts put him among the immanent intellectual precursors of contemporary Arab thought.
This is not only meant to mystify Said’s works and thought, but also to challenge the general expectations with regard to Said’s legacy. His legacy goes far beyond the reductive role of the politicized postcolonial intellectual whom many have chosen to convey a narrow message, regularly and repeatedly, while criticizing, commenting or using his works. In his books as well as in his social and political activism there was no separation between political positionality and philosophical thinking, except in terms of intensity and negotiation of meaning. Both the political and the philosophical should be viewed, in Said’s terminology, as discrepant and overlapping experiences of knowledge.

In his essay “Is There an Arab (Yet) in This Field? Postcolonialism, Comparative Literature, and the Middle Eastern Horizon of Said’s Discourse Analysis,” Aboul-Ela Hosam argues that Said’s *Orientalism* has become influential among the most innovative, perceptive, and engaged scholars of Arab cultural production. This is because it “involves scholarship contending with a contradiction between the Arab as an object of discourse . . . and the Arab as a creator of discourse in cultural studies-oriented Arab scholarship” (729). Although his career-long focus on the culture of the West and its Orientalizing gaze toward the Arabs, “Said’s deep engagement with Arab politics and society throughout the post-**Orientalism** period stands as a clear marker of his increasing engagement with discourses and agencies of Arabs” (733). Consequently, if Arabs have any presence in comparative literature, this can be attributed primarily to Said’s substantial influence whose paradigm of colonial discourse analysis is belatedly embraced and adapted.

However, some Arab intellectuals argue that no Arabic novel receives the careful, detailed attention in either of his writings as that accorded, for instance, to Austen’s *Mansfield Park* or Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Kipling’s *Kim*. If it happens, they argue, it is only “through passing reference to reverberations of the classical tradition in
modern Arabic literature.” Even then, his primary focus is “on the effects on Arabic writing of crushing historical defeats suffered by Arabs in 1948 and 1967,” which pointedly suggests a direct relationship between historical events and the very form that contemporary Arab fiction had taken (732). It is interesting to note that despite his advocacy of the Third World issues and postcolonial problems of which freedom, liberation and justice are central to his critical and theoretical project, unfortunately, Arab and Islamic studies marked as a third site from which Said is read. Perhaps, this is because they do not take seriously the religious-secular thematic in Said’s work, as they give it passing attention, a fleeting reference here or there.

**Said’s Reception in the Arab World**

For Western academics, Said’s work, especially his seminal book *Orientalism* emerged as the manifesto of theoretical decolonisation – but how was his intellectual oeuvre received in the Arab world? With numerous introductions, special editions with which Arab readers and critics outline his significance in various fields and his politically engaged public persona, Arab reception of Said’s work is still short of expectation. This is a surprising paradox, as Said was a prominent party in local debates in Cairo, Beirut or Ramallah from the early 1990s on.

Said’s significance in the Arab world was initially restricted to a group of literary theorists, most of whom had studied in Europe or the USA. It was only with *Orientalism* that he reached a larger audience. At the beginning, this key text of colonial discourse analysis did not elicit purely positive reactions from intellectuals in the Middle East. In addition, many overlook the fact that Said’s decentering of European avant-garde theory does not only reveals colonialism and racism as constitutive correlates of Western truth discourses, but also calls for the formation of a self-critical Arab discourse. However, it
was the local debates of the 1990s that led to serious resurgence and growing interest in his work. Having been active on Palestinian issues since the late 1960s, his political writings composed primarily for Arab readers in the 1990s are among those fragments of his work in which the tension between national solidarity and critical insistence emerges openly. With an oppositional critical stance, and angry protest against the modalities of the “peace process”, he accepted the role of spokesperson for the disillusioned Palestinians and Arab masses. Thus, he gradually took on the role of a high-profile intellectual in the Middle East and laid the ground for his theoretical writing, which was now translated into Arabic.

Arab critical reception of Said should be understood in the light of the prevalent trends of thought and reaction to the modernity and colonialism. Actually, Said’s treatment of the concept of Orientalism has incurred amusing responses from Arab-Muslim thinkers and writers. This is because he deals with this disquieting issue from a secularly critical and cultural perspective after it was traditionally part of religious discourse. It is significant to note that the Orientalist attack on the Arab-Islamic peoples and cultures has been challenged by many Arab intellectuals and scholars over periods of history. Among the famous Arab thinkers who writes on the concept are the Syrian Islamist thinker and politician, Mustafa Al-Siba’, Egyptian thinker and political activist, Mohammed Al-Ghazali, veteran of the Egyptian communist movement, Anouar Abdel-Malek, Palestinian historian and educationalist, A. L. Tibawi, and Moroccan historian and writer, Abdallah Laroui, to mention just a sample.

Yet, Said’s methodology and scholarship has critically brought the concept to academia and to the scrutiny of cultural analysis, transforming its critique into a theory of liberation and emancipation. He has redirected Arab thought from the religious paradigm
to cultural paradigm. This paradigmic shift entails transformation of polemical parameters such as cultural identity, political presence, epistemological change, theoretical space and redefinition of geography, etc. This in turn entails secular interpretation of truth and human experience that is free from the effect of religion, politics and ideology.

In his critique of Orientalists and their writing on Islam, Mohammed Al-Ghazali wrote in 1963: “Orientalists’ distortion of Islamic history, their deformation of the principles of Islam and its culture, and their mistaken information about it and about the people who believe in it go beyond any logical limit. They also make every effort to minimize the role of Islam in the history of human civilization” (qtd. in Raz 1). This quotation contains a typical Arab response to Orientalists’ scholarship which is accused of distorting and misrepresenting the image of Arab and Islam and essentially harboring to inimically treat them all along. It is viewed as part of the Christian missionary and “intellectual war” waged by the West against the Arab-Muslim World before the coming of colonial and imperial project which exploited it economically “just as tanks open the way to the infantry in warfare” (2). As a result, the term “Orientalism” (Arabic: istishraq) has become a derogatory term in the Arab world, connoting bias against and hostility towards Islam and Arabs, and accordingly is looked upon with much suspicion and contempt.

In his essay entitled, “Orientalism in Crisis,” Anouar Abdel-Malek, calls for an urgent need to undertake a revision, a critical reevaluation of the general conception, the methods, and implements for the understanding of the “Orient” that have been used by the West, notably those “postulates, methodological habits and historico-philosophical concepts”. To remedy this situation, Abdel-Malek proposes a thorough and rigorous
critique of “europeocentrism” whose “fundamental error” was to assume that “everything that is European is equally universal” (49).

The Egyptian Marxian economist, Samir Amin, formulated a theoretical framework for understanding global development and underdevelopment that challenged the core assumptions of modernization theory, which forms the gist of the Eurocentric and Orientalist project. The Moroccan Abdallah Laroui, who was grappling with questions of tradition, modernity and cultural change has later dedicated many essays and important critiques on Orientalism and contemporary Arab culture. In *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, he denounces the tradition/modernity dichotomy that is central to modernization theory which is still widely deployed in many scholarly analyses of the contemporary Arab world. Laroui criticizes the Austrian-born Orientalist scholar Gustave von Grunebaum’s depiction of Islam as a unitary culture, a closed system whose “essential pattern . . . must be reproduced in space by the city, in words by the written work, in time by politics, and in eternity by theology” (52).

These initiatory attempts made by Arab scholars on the concept of Orientalism and Western cultural hegemony in the Arab World have been lacking in critical depth and intellectual rigor. They based their argument on either religious discourse or ideological contention. Said’s critical interventions, in contrast, have followed a secular interpretation and scholarly analysis that placed texts to its worldly context, thus, separating the religious from the cultural, and the sacred from the profane. He emphasizes the human agency as the focal point of critical investigation and evaluation. To this end, he differentiates between human knowledge as a way of human welfare, and human knowledge as an act of power. Therefore, his critique of the Orientalist/colonialist discourse is related to his concept of criticism as an emancipator, liberationist vehicle. In her essay, “Humanizing the Oriental: Edward Said and Western Scholarly Discourse,”
Yasmeen Abu-Laban argues that “[o]ne major contribution made by the cross-disciplinary reverberations of [Said’s] work is to humanize groups that have been dehumanized as a result of historic and contemporary asymmetric relations of power” (74). In her assessment of Said’s work, Abu-Laban identifies three distinct, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, features of his work:

“His work challenges the Western scholarship [and assumptions] regarding the East, . . . His work provides a critical alternative to the mainstream Western scholarship on the East [and] . . . encourages us to listen to the voice of “the Other” and to take responsibility and action in our social and political world . . . His work . . . can expand our understanding regarding the nature of power by exposing the interconnections between the powerful and the less powerful . . . (74).

Significantly, Said’s presence was influential in his skepticism towards objectivity which “opened to us the possibility of revisiting and rethinking our heritage. His Orientalism has been treated not only as a book about ‘Orientalists’ but also a work laying bare the mechanism of elite and institutional knowledge” (Ghazoul “Orientalism: Clearing the Way” 126). Thanks to Said, Arab literature and culture has been brought to the mainstream cultures and literatures. Literary criticism and critical theory used to depend on mainstream European literatures, but more and more critics and theoreticians are referring to cases in non-European literatures to elucidate an issue. In her essay, “Orientalism: Clearing the Way for Cultural Dialogue,” Ferial J. Ghazoul explains:

By displacing the glory of Orientalists, Said created a space where indigenous scholars -- the voices of the Other -- can be heard. Said allowed a different configuration of voices to emerge and opened up the confined space to broader
horizons. Arab and Islamic scholars are no longer mere informants for specialised Westerners but are themselves spokespersons able to express views and work out facts in theoretical frameworks. (125)

Inspired by Said’s critical perspective, Arab intellectuals began to highlight the importance of the culture dialogue and its contributions to the global transformation and cultural changes. In “The Arab Culture and Other Cultures,” Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri remarks that one of the characteristic of the Arab-Islamic culture is its openness on cultures of the East and the West: “The Arab-Islamic culture is the culture of dialogue, mutual understanding and communication. Never did it keep aloof from mutual enrichment, intermixing and interacting with other cultures” (21-2). Expressing his dissatisfaction with “the market culture and the culture of consumption,” which becomes so predominant, Altwaijri resonates Said’s thought that “the international community must free itself from the shackles of cultural imperialism which is imposed by the New World Order led by one world power” (32). Moreover, in “Comments on Orientalism: Two Views Representation and Aggression,” Amal Rassam argues that being a “study of the genesis, evolution, and reproduction of a specific Western tradition of knowledge concerned with the Mashreq, or the eastern part of the Arabo-Islamic world, . . . Said’s book is about aggression both symbolic and real; it is about the politics of knowledge, or rather about knowledge as a form of politics” (505).

Situated in the center but with roots on the periphery, Said finds himself betwixt two civilizational modes, viewed as mutually exclusive, presented in terms of “Self” versus “Other.” This endows him with the privilege of expanding the cultural space of the “Other” in the dominant Eurocentric discourse. This also adds to his contribution to, and unmatchable effort in bringing the question of Palestine into an international arena, especially in the West in which it was not appropriately heard or examined. Besides, his
attempt to link Arab-Islamic and Western cultures remains a highly contributive and relevant model for breaking down the normative and artificial barriers between the marginalized and the canonical without intellectual reductiveness or ideological polarization.

Above all, Said’s approach starts by dismantling accepted fallacies and entrenched views concerning Arab-Islamic culture in Western discourse by critiquing its scholarship in Orientalism, its media in Covering Islam, and its political myths in The Question of Palestine. This trilogy, supported by a number of other essays and articles, deconstructs the tainted image of everything Arab-Islamic. Moving from unmasking partiality, one-sidedness and prejudice to constructing a more viable discourse is the other meticulous aim of Said. By doing this, he goes beyond simply pointing out the mechanisms of hegemony and the interrelationships between power and knowledge to actively engaging in the act of production of non-coercive knowledge and sketching alternatives. Thus, he does not only unveils hegemony but also takes the first step towards the construction of alternative modes.

Said’s thought then is a twofold strategy. On one hand, it links text to its circumstantial reality in order to locate its meaning to the historical contextualization of the given facts. This helps him, on the other hand, to introduce Arab-Islamic image in his writing as a parallel textuality to the given historical experience, such as colonialism, Orientalism and global media marketing. Accordingly, he is “clearly feeling his way towards rushing in a more global comparative approach that goes beyond the cosmopolitan, essentially European approach” (Ghazoul, “The Resonance of the Arab-Islamic Heritage” 160-61). His critical project then helps to liberate Arab-Islamic culture from the view that “is fixed and threatening, demonstrating its dynamism and humanism . . . he wants the Arab-Islamic culture re-admitted to the discourse of nations . . . by
introducing and establishing hitherto unnoticed parallels and affinities to its Western counterparts” (161). More than once, he brings forth Ibn Khaldun’s sociological and historical analysis of knowledge and power in his discussion of Foucault. In his essay “Foucault and the Imagination of Power,” he writes: “the difference between Ibn Khaldun and Foucault is no less instructive. Both men -- Ibn Khaldun more -- are worldly historians who understand, and perhaps even appreciate, the dynamics of secular events” (240). His evocation of Ibn Khaldun is not a passing reference, rather, it marks, a method and submerged trope to reformulate ideas. This is clear in his emphasis on the human agency in searching for truth secularly and “worldly.” According to Ghazoul, “this centrality of the metaphor of the text . . . is basic to Ibn Khaldun’s historical research, and is also typical of Arab-Islamic culture as a whole” (“The Resonance of the Arab-Islamic Heritage” 163). Since text is central to the Arab-Islamic discourse, Said observes, “textual traditions are essentially supportive, nor restorative” (“The Text as Practice and as Idea” 1072-3). In the course of this, he opts to align himself with the Zahirites -- a group of intellectuals and philosophers who emphasized the event and context in medieval Islamic scholarship. This reinforces his belief in the anchored reality of the text. This alignment with Zahirites is more evident in his advocacy of their views that “each utterance is its own occasion and as such is anchored in the worldly context in which it is applied” (The Word, the Text and the Critic 38-9). In this context, he effectively relates the notions of filiation and affiliation to their rooted Arabic meanings respectively: “kinship” [A’eliyah] and “solidarity” ['asabiyah], using both to explain the two modes of belonging and identity formation.

Despite his influential role in shaping the contemporary Arab thought, some Arab thinkers and critics have shown their dissatisfaction with Said’s thought either because of his secular position and interpretation or because of his intellectual orientation as dissent
intellectual. For instance, his theses on Orientalism and Orientalist discourse have not wholly been welcomed without critique and reservation. Muhammed A. Al-Da’mi in his “Orientalism and Arab-Islamic History: An Inquiry into the Orientalists’ Motives and Compulsions,” maintains that “in spite of their conscious/unconscious prejudice, Orientalists have offered us foreign perspectives and coercive challenges which have enriched our approaches to our culture and history” (2). Moreover, in his article to Fekr wa naqd (Dec., 1999), Isma’il Al-Othmani writes that Said’s secular critical approach totally rejects the presence of religious element in the critic’s views. According to Al-Othmani, this places Said in the field of dogmatic secularism as opposed to religious fundamentalism. He disagrees with Said’s critical position and emphasizes that

We agree with Said that criticism . . . should be humane and humanist, and perhaps he may agree with us that religion is the one that embodies in practice the humanist values *par excellence*. He may also agree with us that only religion can offer a balance view of material and the spiritual needs . . . a balance which constitutes the principal bias of human society.

Al-Othmani further opines that Said lacks the balanced relationship that would amalgamate secular vision and religious thought in the critical work. This is because, he argues, “the critic cannot be separated from the effect of his belief, cultural context and the other social phenomenon that enter into his making, and at the end, his critical product is a result of the interaction of all these element and his understanding of them.” However, he acknowledges Said’s contribution to Arab critical thought by paying attention to his methodological approach and analysis of cultural texts that “is based on a historical (most accurately on a new historicist) and humane look to the world, and
rational and analytical view of human experience. He searches for the truth and rejects fundamentalism and rigidity.”

In his 2011 article to Jadaliyya, Fawwaz Traboulsi defends Said against three strands of thought that determine Arab intellectual response to his critical interventions. The first was the dominant study of postcolonialism that flourished in European academic circles. The second is ethnic, national, Arabic, and Islamic fundamentalism that finds in Said’s critique of Orientalism a promising need to return to the “authenticity,” which has been either abandoned or hybridized, as a defense of the identity of an “East” fundamentally distinct from “the West”. The third stream comprises a group of Arab and Muslim Westernized intellectual elite who reduced Said’s critique of Orientalism to the Western distortion of the “image” of Arabs and Muslims in the West. According to Taraboulsi, the “deeper analysis of its structure, unfolds a great work of analytical talent, literary taste and cultural richness” that goes beyond the narrow stock of binary histories.

It can be argued that Arab critical reception of Said’s thought and theory is as ambivalent and diverse as current trends and attitudes in Arab thought itself. While the Islamist thinkers find in his critique of Orientalism an intellectual and scholarly support for their argument, the Marxist and Leftists criticize his alignment with the Arab bourgeoisie elite. Besides, the Arab secular and liberal thinkers, infatuated by the Western ideals, redefine the notions of the “West” and “Islam” in the light of the scientific and intellectual progress which located the West on an unarguably leading position. Hence, they untenably acknowledge the incompatible relationship between modern West and Islam. Furthermore, some Arab nationalists would disagree with Said’s approach to the Palestinian issue and find it too submissive and “un-Arabic” in terms of pan Arab national philosophy. Between these polarizations and two extremes of thought and response to
Said’s ideas, there is a group of intellectuals who adopted Said’s critical vision which takes up a dialectical method based on reciprocity and dialogue, negation and interlocution. This contemporary trend emerged as a consequential secular urgency that separates religion as a “belief” and religion as a “way of life”. It breaks with the past and catches with the present in a worldly base.

Nevertheless, Said has been celebrated by contemporary Arab intellectuals and critics as an intellectual authority as well as a leading figure in dissent criticism. This is mainly because of his fierce challenge of the authority of state and of his writings in defense of the public issues. He has paved the way for an oppositional criticism among Arab critical circles and established a dissent theory and praxis among intellectual and general public. This critical trajectory has contributed actively to the cultural and intellectual move that crowned with Arab Spring Revolt against the hegemony of the state and the domination of orthodoxies. In short, he came constantly to be presented as the pre-eminent intellectual representative of the Arab viewpoint. Said is certainly the best-known Arab intellectual of his and perhaps of any time, on a worldwide scale. It is partly his sheer range and mixture of roles – leading scholar among scholars, ubiquitous critic of imperialism, Zionism and hegemony that has accounted for the extent as well as the bitterly contested nature of Said’s reputation in the Arab World.
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