

Who speaks for the Arab world?

Nabil Echchaibi

When Edward Said died in 2003, his fervent Arab supporters grieved the loss of an irreplaceable Arab celebrity intellectual who audaciously exposed the tyranny of the orientalist gaze and its imperialist paranoia. His searing description of how a dominating and effectively silencing Western discourse on the Middle East has ennobled the civilizing mission of Western empire has made him a resounding voice of resistance and a true spokesperson for the Arab cause. As a politically-bereft Palestinian, his trenchant advocacy for the rights of the powerless Arab has spawned an unprecedented celebration of Arab voices, most of whom share Said's experience of physical and intellectual exile at one point or another.

Almost thirty years after the publication of Said's most influential book, *Orientalism*, Arabs speak for themselves today. In fact, there was a considerable input about the Middle East by Arabs even before the charge of orientalism became a flagship of intellectual resistance, but as Said made clear, the discursive machine of the 18th and 19th century orientalist kept much of this input at bay and consequently irrelevant.

Today, the new orientalists, Said and his followers would say, have an even more direct alliance with the political world, and their Middle East "expertise" is seldom questioned in Western public discourse. So Bernard Lewis' treatises on what is wrong with the Muslim world, Daniel Pipes' reeling criticism of Arabs, and even Fouad Ajami's purportedly self-critical propaganda from an Arab perspective, have been closely heeded by the architects of Middle Eastern policy in the U.S. Congress and the White House in a post 9/11 political world.

But in an age of satellite media and political blogs, dominant voices may still be powerful, but they are not completely unchallenged. So, who speaks for Arabs today and what control does the West still exert on this discourse?

Let me first prelude this discussion with a caveat that not all accounts of the Middle East by the West are bound to replicate the same power relations of self-serving orientalism. As Said himself later acknowledged, some Western intellectuals have been and continue to be genuinely interested in understanding the Arab world "for purposes of co-existence and enlargement of horizons." Their valuable perspective, however, rarely infiltrates public discussions and the policies on the Middle East.

Perhaps, orientalism's most enduring damage is its unrelenting assumption that the "West" and the "Orient" exist only as cultural counterpoints with distinct systems of morality, traditions, values, religion, and science. Said's detractors have often attacked the project of orientalism on the basis that the "West" is often presented as the monolithic Orient that Said criticized. An inevitable consequence of this binary logic is that any contact between the two is likely to be confrontational. Even Said himself toned down this separation in subsequent work, acknowledging the hybrid possibilities of positive encounters, albeit always embedded in an imperial discourse.

A number of Arab intellectuals and artists have privileged a dual consciousness in their work that recognizes, even embraces, the impact of Western thought on Arab history and culture. This is what French-speaking-Moroccan novelist, Abdelkébir Khatibi, calls double critique in the context of the French colonial presence in North Africa. Khatibi, a prominent anti-orientalist himself, believes no such thing as a return to a pure or untainted Arab or Islamic heritage free of outside influence because such a cultural purity never existed. He urges anyone studying North Africa to look at the region as a topographic site between the orient, the West and Africa and not an invariant historical essence.

Naguib Mahfouz, the only Arab to win the Nobel prize for literature and the father of the Arab novel, has also spun a rich prose about the interconnections between his Egypt and Western cultures. His *Cairo Trilogy*, to cite only his most famous novel, is an eloquent history of Egypt and

the impact of Western influence on the maturity of Egyptian culture. There are countless examples of untranslated Arab novelists who plumb the depths of their societies and creatively reconcile the East and West.

Other intellectuals have undertaken this task a long time ago. Moroccan sociologist, Fatema Mernissi, has for years challenged the simplistic orientalist view of oppressed Arab women living in the confines of Aladdin-like harems. In *Dreams of Trespass and Scheherazade Goes West*, Mernissi describes an Arab Scheherazade who "strings words into stories" for her own salvation. Unlike the imagined Scheherazade in Western art and tales who was reduced to a sexual body, the Arab one uses her cerebral prowess and that is "the essence of her sexual attraction".

Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, known as the ultimate lyricist of the Palestinian cause, helps many Arabs find strength in words that replace the remarkable disappointment with inconclusive political action in his native land. Syrian poet and essayist Adonis has been calling for a new Arab culture that is self-critical and capable of engaging universal human concerns. He is well known amongst Arabs for his poem collections but also for his outspoken provocations which remind Arabs that "our Achilles' heel is not outside us as much as it is within us." The list of voices can be quite rich and diverse, but their ideas, pleas, and rage often fall on deaf ears in the West.

Cultural double consciousness

Many of the Arab voices we can hear today speak from a position of cultural double consciousness, which apparently bestows on them an incredible insight into both cultures. Much like Said, some of these live in the West and their work is more likely to be read by the Western audiences they address. Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss-born philosopher of Egyptian origin, is a good example. He advocates a new Islam that engages and incorporates aspects of Western values of democracy and reflects the living realities of Western societies. He calls for Muslims living in the West to cease forming parallel societies and become actively engaged in the civic life of their societies.

Ramadan's prolific publication record and well-attended lectures both in Europe and in the Arab world offer a fresh perspective on emerging Arab/Muslim identities fully immersed in the Western social and cultural fabric. Much like Said, Ramadan has understood the importance to engage the West in a constructive dialogue of mutual understanding. His website/blog offers in addition to his articles in French and English interesting commentaries on topical concerns regarding Islam in the West.

Perhaps the Internet is the quickest and most visible site where Arab voices have converged in droves to stand up to the tyranny of their undemocratic political regimes, correct the perceived biases against them in mainstream Western media, or simply tell their stories from their vantage points. From personal websites of celebrity intellectuals like Tariq Ramadan and Mahmoud Darwish to the popular blogs of the Angry Arab or Moorish Girl, the "other" side is well represented Online and it is all in English.

In her work on the digital revolution in the Arab world, Fatema Mernissi refers to these bloggers as modern day "Sinbads", not the rascal thief of Disney's imagination, but the real one, the traveler who gathered valuable wealth in his encounter with friendly and fierce strangers. As a film critic once said, "the real Sinbad from the Arabian Nights was a wealthy adventurer from Baghdad, but nobody wants to see a movie about a Donald Trump type in a vest and fez." Arab bloggers today write tirelessly and fearlessly so that the real Sinbad has a voice too.

The Angry Arab News Service is a popular blog of As'ad AbuKhalil, a Lebanese political science professor at California State University at Stanislaus and former Middle East consultant for NBC and ABC who was often invited on television stations to share the "angry Arab" perspective, hence the name of the blog. With 35,000 hits a month both in America and the Middle East, the Angry Arab is read for its sarcastic take on US Middle East policy, Lebanese politics, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the war in Iraq.

Another informative and popular blog is Arabisto, an Arab American news service with daily breaking news coverage from the Middle East and within the Arab American community. Their blog offers original commentary on Arab political and cultural affairs and an index of the most popular Arab blogs in Arabic and English.

Another well-visited blog is Laila Lalami's, formerly known as Moorish Girl. Lalami, a Moroccan-born novelist and essayist based in Portland, Oregon, keeps a well-updated blog in English documenting the rich Arab literary scene and introducing readers to Arab writers not known in the West.

Inside or outside?

Many of the popular Arab voices I list here share a common feature: they live outside their original home. Here the experience of exile, whether forced or voluntary, can be an asset, but it also exposes the validity of these voices in their claims to represent the Arab world. If these voices speak from the edges of Arab culture, how can they be an accurate barometer of what goes on in the Arab world? My intention here is not to readily discredit their opinions on Arab societies, but rather to problematize their claim that they can speak for both worlds and their cultures with equal authority.

This conflict of legitimacy is often played out on Arab satellite channels like Al-Jazeera, which often invites these voices from the Arab diaspora to comment on various political and cultural topics. Less than two years ago, one of Al-Jazeera's most watched programs, the channel's version of a CNN Crossfire, pitted an Egyptian Islamic cleric against an atheist Syrian-born psychologist from Los Angeles to talk about secularism and Islam.

The shocking comments of the diasporan and atheist Arab, who compared the state of Muslims today to that of Europe's Middle Ages, were used by many listeners of the channel as an argument against the value of inviting estranged Arabs who live abroad and eventually have lost all socio-cultural relations with their societies of origin. In fact, the recent conference on secular Islam in Florida, which the organizers labelled as the beginning of "the next Islamic enlightenment", was minimally covered in Arab media, perhaps because many of the participants of the conference, many of whom are expatriates, represented a view of Islam that is still far removed from the cultural and religious realities of the Middle East.

Despite the arguable discrepancy of views in Arab voices from within and abroad, these voices are worth listening to if we are serious in our quest to understand the Arab world. Unfortunately, many of these voices and the impact of what they say remain rather peripheral in public discourse about the Middle East. People like Adonis, Ramadan, Mernissi, Lalami, AbuKhalil, and many others in and out of the region should be frequent sources for the media if we are to counter the facile and ahistorical representation of Arab cultures.

Other voices are demonized because they apparently complicate the flow of politics and seem threatening to Western interests. Take the Al-Jazeera example. Here is a good and rare source of information about what Arabs think and think about, but an aggressive campaign against this so-called "channel of terror" has kept it out of the airwaves in the United States. When Al-Jazeera launched its English news service, many cable and satellite companies around the world rushed to add it to their channel line-up, except in the United States where the channel is still looking for a carrier.

Al Jazeera is certainly not a perfect news channel, but it has reshaped public discourse in the region and convinced many Arabs that anyone is entitled to an opinion. This is where Arabs can hear a variety of opinions about taboo topics like recognizing Israel, secularism, human rights abuses, free speech, poverty, poor schooling, domestic violence, or Islamic fundamentalism.

Many Arabs believe their political and cultural autonomy is threatened by a powerful Israel and an aggressive American foreign policy which rewards dictatorships like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi

Arabia and destabilizes unfriendly states like Iraq. We've seen the violent strand of Arabs reacting to this perception, but the majority is still confused about where the blame lies.

The new voices like Al-Jazeera and the Arabs who unravel their societies are engaged in a loud, almost existential debate on what it means to be Arab and how Arabs can benefit not only themselves, but humanity one more time. Let's listen in.

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