

The Orient, the Other and the Novel *

Abdulla Al-Dabbagh
United Arab Emirates University

In the "Introduction" to her study of literary orientalism, E.S. Shaffer (1975:14) says that

Orientalism in European poetry is very much more than a fanciful and ignorant borrowing from the translations of the *Arabian Nights* that began to appear early in the eighteenth century, or from the tall stories of the travelers, or a taste for Chinese gardens or bric-a-brac,

and continues to argue that this orientalism

can be seen in conjunction with first-rate literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Coleridge, Holderlin, Browning, George Eliot - and Blake, Novalis, Hugo, Tennyson, Arnold, among others - with literature often not considered under this rubric at all, not merely with the second-rate and third-rate Collins, Landor, Southey, Moore, Ruckert. (ibid)

Her conclusion has deep implications not only for historical studies of the various epochs of European literary orientalism, but also for contemporary perspectives in comparative literary studies:

A European criticism can still approach the literature of other societies from the vantage point attained by these first-rate writers, aware that their own civilization rested upon myth as fully as non-Christian societies (often the same myths), and by this very awareness maintaining the centrality and efficaciousness of their own myths. It may be that today we do not wish to maintain the centrality or efficaciousness of our own myths, except through criticism itself (and this 'crisis' is only a logical development from the view of myth examined in this book); but if so, it is all the more imperative to have a criticism capable of expressing not a nerveless and unconvinced repetition of out-moded values, but a new and systematic will to equality of our own with other mythologies. (14-15)

The record of the variety of the reflections of the East in the English novel reveals the literary orientalism connected with this particular genre to be far from a uniform and unchanging receptacle of distortion and hostility (Al-Dabbagh, 1997). Indeed, together with nineteenth century poetry, aspects of which come under focus in Shaffer's study, and Elizabethan drama (Wann, 1914), it is one of the richest and, to use Shaffer's term, first-rate, areas in this field. The history of the image of the East and of easterners in such works as Beckford's *Vathek*, Johnson's *Rasselas*, Scott's *The Talisman*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Kipling's *Kim* and Forster's *A Passage to India*, to mention some of the major works, is also an almost exemplary record

of the history of the English novel in general. Such a history might well begin from the semi-gothic, oriental tale of *Vathek* (an example of the more primitive, more embryonic fictional genres of the eighteenth century) and go on to one of the best examples of the mature, historical novel created almost single-handedly by Scott to serve as the bridge to the fully-fledged realistic novel of the nineteenth and, later, the twentieth centuries.

The key question regarding *Vathek* revolves perhaps around the significance of the gothic nature of the form that this first example of the oriental novel in English takes. In other words, the form, and the extremely unusual, almost deviant, nature of the material chosen for this book are not merely reflections of Beckford's own psychological make-up; they go beyond that to reveal the elements of morbid fascination, and perhaps fear and ignorance, that still lingered in the literary treatment of the Orient at this stage, in spite of the very clear advances of first-rate scholarship and the undoubted personal sympathy with the East on the part of Beckford himself. Just as importantly, it is essential to see that a book like *Vathek* is still based neither on ignorance¹ nor fear², nor can it be regarded as anti-Orient or anti-Islam.

The true spirit of Enlightenment orientalism in the English novel, however, is manifested in Johnson's *Rasselas*, where recent studies of that work have clearly underlined and clarified Johnson's universalist perspective in his treatment of Islam and of the East/West dichotomy generally (Fleck, 1993; Hawes, 1997).

Just as it was Sir Walter Scott who first transcended the various rudimentary forms of the eighteenth century novel³ to advance, through creating the historical novel, toward the mature realism of the nineteenth century, so did he create, principally through his historical novel of the Crusades, *The Talisman*, the first major novel, and not a mere pseudo-oriental or gothic tale, of the Orient. *The Talisman* records the first objective, sympathetic and positive portrayal of the Orient in a well-developed fictional form in English. Historical objectivity, initial personal sympathy and literary artistry are the three key factors that lay behind the achievement of this seminal work of fictional orientalism.

The key to Kipling's *Kim* is the fact that the central identification with the Orient that was the essence of the advance of positive literary orientalism⁴ is here stripped of its deeper philosophic and literary implications and reduced to a mere mechanism for creating a colonial novel of espionage -- albeit the first of its kind and the ancestor to a whole line of spy thrillers in colonial settings, all the way from Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene to Ian Fleming and John Le Carre. Kipling's *Kim* is the precise *locus* and the exemplary product that best reveals the reversal of literary orientalism, as understood by someone like Shaffer, for example; it is the point at which literary orientalism turns from positive understanding into colonialist hostility and alienation. Significantly, this dramatic transformation revolves precisely around the devaluation of the

sympathetic identification that was so crucial for the rise and development of literary orientalism.

If Kipling's *Kim* signified a retreat from the mature realism of the nineteenth century, it was also a break with the previous, sympathetic attitude toward the East and an exemplary adoption of a colonialist and antagonistic position. Almost as a conscious correction to Kipling⁴, Forster's *A Passage to India* is a successful re-creation of mature realism within the framework of a modern, political novel of the highest order. Conrad, appropriately, fills a position somewhere between Kipling and Forster in his attitude toward colonialism and the colonial Other, although in terms of narrative experimentalism he was in advance of both.

The two works of English fiction that seem to me to stand explicitly and consciously within this tradition of literary orientalism that we have been describing are George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*. Both works owe their generating, and all-pervading, creative urge to a similar sort of sympathetic defense of the East, against distorting and hostile attitudes, that lay behind the works of Shakespeare and Scott.

In a letter addressed, significantly, to Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a similar novel in the American context, George Eliot defends her works in words that demand a lengthy quotation because they so appropriately and so eloquently explain precisely the impulse and the program inherent in the whole tradition of literary orientalism:

As to the Jewish element in *Deronda*, I expected from first to last in writing it that it would create much stronger resistance and even repulsion than it has actually met with. But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians towards Jews is -- I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who had been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religion and moral sentiment (Cross, 1815).

Here no doubt is left that *Daniel Deronda* is a novel written with and for a purpose. It is explicitly a *tendenz* - roman of the best sort⁵. George Eliot wants to fight anti-Jewish hostility and to correct anti-Jewish prejudice through, note her exact words, 'sympathy and understanding'. This anti-Jewish prejudice (anti-semitism, if you like) is not confined, she continues, to Jews, but extends, again mark her exact words, to 'all oriental peoples'. There is a latent racial or cultural prejudice that makes the English arrogant, contemptuous and domineering

towards all orientals to the extent, again mark George Eliot's words, that 'has become a national disgrace'. And she concludes in words that seem almost designed to contain a definition of the creative writer's urge to produce what we have called works of literary orientalism:

There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs (ibid).

Clearly then, what these novels reflect is a tradition of literary orientalism that, confronting a conventionally antagonistic Other in the form of oriental culture, had actually ended in presenting a largely sympathetic portrait of the East. This had helped, at crucial junctures, in advancing western understanding of the Orient and combating common prejudices against it. Furthermore, literary orientalism, and more widely, this positive portrayal of the Other, in English literature, had deep roots in the great European movements of the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Realism. The origins and manifestations of this literary trend can be seen in the writings of key continental Enlightenment figures like Lessing, Goethe and Voltaire, key figures of Romanticism like Pushkin and Hugo and key realists like Gogol, Tolstoy and Flaubert.

The first work in the history of the English novel, however, that stands out as truly exemplary of this tradition is Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). Here is a novel whose author identifies totally with its hero, Oroonoko, the royal African slave, in his confrontation with the author's own English, Christian, White civilization. Indirectly, the novel undercuts the claims of the author's "own" culture and society to the civilized values it advocates, in the light of its fully condemned actual barbaric behaviour. By contrast, Oroonoko's values, and indirectly those of the society he represents, come out generally in a much more favourable light. As a person, Oroonoko is drawn in the proportions of a true epic hero, supplemented here with the qualities of a noble savage and a romantic lover. The work contains elements of an adventure story, an exotic travel tale, a romance as well as a rudimentary historical novel.

Furthermore, what distinguishes *Oroonoko* from the other works in this tradition is the author's claims to the veracity of the tale and to her own participation in some of its events. This greatly enhances her involvement in its theme and her open identification with its hero and with his culture, in open defiance and condemnation of the hypocrisy and cruelty of her own. Behn's conception of the Noble Savage, long before Rousseau, is also meant to clarify an objective state of affairs and to defend a just cause against an oppressive and false, but powerful, external force:

And these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before man knew how to sin. And 'tis most evident and plain that simple Nature is the most harmless, inoffensive, and virtuous mistress. 'Tis she alone, if she were permitted, that better instructs the world than all the inventions of man. Religion would here but destroy the tranquility they possess

by ignorance, and laws would but teach 'em to know offense, of which they have no notion (Behn, 1993).

A very similar literary tradition may be observed in the nineteenth century American novel, with the image of the Other here being represented not by the oriental, but by the native-American and the Afro-American. Very clear features of this tendency in American literature appear, for example, in the major texts of Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. These three novels, rightly regarded as major classics of nineteenth century American fiction, have never been extensively discussed in the light of this key tradition that binds them together, at the same time that it ties them to a central trend in western literature. All these works, which are indeed milestones in the development of the nineteenth century American novel, contain an implicit, but very powerful, critique of American society principally through giving a voice and a representation to what is directly antithetical (and antagonistic) to that society -- the native-Americans in the case of Cooper, the Afro-American slaves in Stowe and adolescent innocence opposed to adult corruption and allied to the slave in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which often strikes us as a parody of the previous two works, but in essence continues, in its own way, the same project.

Understanding and reflecting the Other as a means of establishing a critique of American society becomes the chief feature of the American novel in the nineteenth century. This crucial point, that seems to set the framework for any full comprehension of critical realism in the American context, is largely neglected and unappreciated by the critics and scholars of this field who have tended to discuss it in unduly abstract, whether mythological or psychological, terms (Lawrence, 1923; Chase, 1957; Fiedler, 1966).

The variety of fictional genres, from Cooper's historical romances to Stowe's classical realist frame to Twain's picaresque narrative, that express this feature is an added evidence of its significance. In fact, even such naturalistic, allegorical or quasi-modernistic works as Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and James's *The Ambassadors*, have, at their center, similar confrontations with unique "other" experiences - that of the alienated soldier at war, the outcast woman and the American Yankee in Paris. At the heart of each of these novels is a figure who, in one way or another, is or becomes something of an outsider to American society - Natty Bumppo, Uncle Tom and Huck all too obviously, but also and as clearly Hester Prynne, Henry Fleming and Strether.

It is fitting to end these remarks with a discussion of what is undoubtedly one of the greatest masterpieces of this trend in western fiction - Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*. It is also quite appropriate that Tolstoy, one of the undisputed summits of the world novel, should have been the creator of this, perhaps most mature, example in this specific field. The first and most obvious point to be made here is that Tolstoy fully absorbs and fully transcends the merely romantic, and subjective, sympathy and identification with the Orient that we may find in the

works of Scott and Stowe and even of Eliot and Forster. In other words, Tolstoy's proverbial, epic objectivity serves here to produce an artistically more convincing, and -- as significantly -- an intellectually more persuasive depiction of the confrontation with the Other represented here by the oriental, Muslim peoples of the Caucasus.

Tolstoy's supreme artistic achievement in this particular work has generally been recognized by nearly all his critics, although none of them has approached it from our vantage point of literary orientalism, or has been able to fully appreciate the work as the great example that it is of Tolstoy's portrayal of the oriental Other. Ernest Simmons, for example, has described Hadji Murat as "perhaps the most perfect example of that 'good universal art' which Tolstoy, in *What is Art?* had acclaimed as the highest form of fiction next to 'good universal religious' literature" (1968). Several years later, in another study of Tolstoy, Simmons re-affirmed this view in saying, "as sheer exciting narrative perfectly paced and told with studied simplicity and a minimum of literary adornment in style, Tolstoy never surpassed *Hadji Murat*" (1973). In one of the few extended essays devoted to this work, A.D.P. Briggs makes a critical survey of the work and concludes that, "when critics have mentioned the work they have usually done so in terms of highest praise" (109), listing the names of such well-known critics and scholars as Prince Mirsky, John Bayley, E.J. Simmons, Phillip Rahv and Marc Slonim. Finally, Martin Green, in his extremely interesting study of the adventure novel, *Dreams of Adventure: Deeds of Empire* (1980), describes *Hadji Murat* as "one of his [Tolstoy's] finest adventure tales" and points to Tolstoy's "passionate empathy... a faculty which Tolstoy possessed in an unusual degree" (185).

The great triumph of realism in *Hadji Murat* is its historical truthfulness⁶. This, needless to say, does not mean merely the accuracy of historical fact and detail, although that is there too, but the rare talent to uncover the true movement of history in a fictional genre, to uncover, so to speak, the soul of history, to persuade us simply to agree that that was how it happened. We do not find here the mythical aspects of the hero of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, for example, or the romantic veil that somehow inescapably envelops Scott's Crusader novels, or the Christian framework of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the didactic purposefulness of *Daniel Deronda*. These particular features, although instrumental and essential, it must be recognized, to the achievement of these great works, contained in them also the seeds of their weaknesses. It is certainly one of the signs of Tolstoy's artistic maturity that while romantic heroism, Christianity and purposeful didacticism were certainly as much a part of his nature, and perhaps in some ways even more so, as they were of the writers mentioned above, he fully succeeded in preventing their intrusion into *Hadji Murat*. In fact, this particular accomplishment is perhaps unparalleled even in comparison to Tolstoy's own greatest works, when we may recall, for example, the external imposition of theoretical historicism in *War and Peace* or Christian conscience in *Resurrection*.

Notes

¹ Beckford was very knowledgeable.

² Beckford totally identified with his subject.

³ The gothic tale being one of them.

⁴ All the way from *Othello* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* through Scott and down to such works as *A Passage to India*. The following words from Forster's correspondence seem to me to be quite revealing in this context: "I have been reading Kipling's child's history of England with mingled joy and disgust. It's a fine conception, but oh is it necessary to build character on a psychological untruth? In other words, to teach the young citizen that he is absolutely unlike the young German or the young Bashahri -- that foreigners are envious and treacherous Englishmen, through some freak of God, never -- ? Kipling and all that school know it's an untruth at the bottom of their hearts -- as untrue as it is unlovable. But, for the sake of patriotism, they lie. It is despairing. How slowly righteousness works up against the tide". E.M. Forster, letter to Malcolm Darling, 29 July 1911, in *Selected Letters of E.M. Forster*, vol.1, 1879 - 1892, ed. Mary Lago and P.N. Furbank (Collins - London, 1983), p.123.

⁵ Best defined by George Eliot herself: "I think aesthetic teaching is the highest form of all teaching, because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic -- if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram -- it becomes the most offensive of all teaching." *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 441.

⁶ I have, since completing this paper, had the opportunity to read, with great delight, Harold Bloom's remarks on both *Hadji Murat* and its hero, which I find appropriate to be quoted here: "It [*Hadji Murat*] is my personal touchstone for the sublime in prose fiction, to me the best story in the world, or at least the best that I have ever read ...No other central figure in Tolstoy receives so loving and full an accounting as Hadji Murad, and I am not persuaded that there is an equivalent to the Tartar chief anywhere else in Western literature. Who else has given us the natural man as triumphant protagonist, rich in courage and guile alike? Conrad's Nostrome, man of the people, is a grand figure, but far less imaginatively conceived than Hadji Murad. Tolstoy's daredevil is as cunning as Tolstoy himself and dies a worthy death, as gorgeously heroic as Nostromo's death is ironic ... No other hero or epic or saga, ancient or modern, is quite equal to him, or nearly as likable." (336, 338-9, 349)

(*) This paper was delivered at the 15th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association at Leiden University, 1997.

References

- Al-dabbagh, Abdulla. (1997).** "Orientalism, Literary Orientalism and Romanticism", *New Comparison*, 22: 139 -155.
- Behn, Afra. (1993).** *Oroonoko*, in M.H.Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 1, 6th ed., New York, Norton.
- Bloom, Harold. (1994).** *The Western Canon*, New York, Harcourt Brace.
- Briggs, A.D.P. (1978).** "*Hadji Murat: The Power of Understatement*" in Malcolm Jones, ed., *New Essays on Tolstoy*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.
- Chase, Richard. (1957).** *The American Novel and its Tradition*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980 edition.
- Clingham, Greg. ed. (1997).** *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

- Cross, J.W. (1815).** *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, arranged and edited by her husband, J.W. Cross, vol. 6, London.
- Fiedler, Leslie. (1966).** *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York, Dalkey Archive Press, issue of 1998.
- Fleck, Richard F. (1993).** "Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*: A Perspective on Islam", *Weber Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1: 50 - 57.
- Forster, E.M. (1983).** *Selected Letters of E.M. Forster*, vol.1, 1879 - 1892, ed. Mary Lago and P.N. Furbank, London, Collins.
- Green, Martin. (1980).** *Dreams of Adventure: Deeds of Empire*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hawes, Clement. (1997).** "Johnson and Imperialism", in Greg Clingham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 114 -126.
- Lawrence, D.H. (1923).** *Studies in Classic American Literature*. London, Penguin reissue of 1990.
- Shaffer, E.S. (1975).** *'Kubla Khan' and The Fall of Jerusalem*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.
- Simmons, Ernest J. (1968).** *Introduction to Tolstoy's Writings*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. (1973). *Tolstoy*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wann, Louis. (1914).** "The Oriental in Elizabethan Drama", *Modern Philology*, Vol. 12, No. 6: 423 - 447.