

Power and the Radical Arab Intellectual: Three Case Studies (*)

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to analyze the complexities of the relationship between the radical Arab intellectual and political power in modern times through the examination of three cases—those of Taha Hussain, Al-Jawahiry, and Edward Said. Spanning the course of the whole of the twentieth-century, the careers of these three key, radical Arab intellectuals offer illustrative and illuminating examples of the relationship between political power and intellectuals in the Arab world generally. Although there are important differences between the three key figures—with Taha Hussain being the major example of the pioneering Arab intellectual of the early decades of the twentieth-century, the period of the Arab intellectual awakening, Al-Jawahiry, the exemplary political poet and intellectual and key leader in a mass political movement, and Edward Said, the exemplary Arab radical intellectual in exile who achieved international prestige and prominence—they share particularly illuminating similarities in the way they dealt or had to deal with political authority. While they largely reflect the changing historical conditions of early, middle, and late twentieth-century Arab socio-political and cultural conditions, the careers of these three figures also express, most deeply and extensively, themes that are common to generations of Arab intellectuals. In addition to the issue of coming to terms with political power, these themes include harmonizing local culture with international culture, the homeland and the attachment to place, and the issue of exile and identity. The paper will attempt, finally, to draw from the examination of these three cases, conclusions that may be of relevance to the study of the relationship between intellectuals and authority in Arab society generally, and perhaps even to the theoretical framework within which such relationships are usually studied. It is hoped that the deeper scrutiny of the specificity of the Arab situation may also help to expand the frontiers of theory.*

The intellectual development of each of the three figures to be discussed in this paper led them into a sharp opposition to authority. This opposition, however, was simultaneous with an imposed and unavoidable co-existence with authority. Having said that, distinctions or distinguishing features of time, place, and

thrust of work of each of the three figures must be taken fully into account. The nature of the radicalism of each of the three figures may be distinguished as follows: Taha Hussain (1880-1973), a cultural rebel or radical, Al-Jawahiry (1899-1997), a social rebel and radical, and Edward Said (1935-2003), a nationalist radical. The path of all three figures inevitably involved compromises with dominant conservative culture (Taha Hussain), with dictatorship and the powers that be (Al-Jawahiry), and with political power (Edward Said).

The question of identity, or the question of the global and the local in contemporary parlance, is also very relevant to the discussion at hand. More specifically, one has to deal with the Europeaness of Taha Hussain, the Americanness of Edward Said, and the internationalness of Al-Jawahiry. The initial uniqueness of each of the three figures is an amazing dimension that must also not be forgotten. The question of super-achievement, genius if you like, embodied in a) the blindness of Taha Hussain, b) the poetic gift of Al-Jawahiry, and c) the scholarship of Edward Said, must remain central.

The full analysis of these issues (identity, opposition, authority, achievement or genius) will require the deeper scrutiny of the three terms of the title of the paper: Radical, Arab, and Intellectual. It should also lead to the more general issue of the role and place of the intellectual in society. Aside from the specific limitations and gaps in the thought of each of the three figures, one may keep in mind the ultimate limitation imposed by their social and historical conditions and related to the wider issues of internationalism and global cultural currents and transformations.

The specificity of the Arab situation, marked by despotism and near total absence of democracy necessitating those compromises, must be taken into account. The other feature of the Arab situation is that this extreme despotism leads paradoxically to the ultimate *weakness* of the despot. The free, radical intellectual wins an easy victory through his outstanding intellectual achievements, and *rises above the limits of the power of the despot* who can hardly touch him any longer.

One aspect of the internal contradiction in Said's thought, skillfully identified by Aijaz Ahmad, involves the obvious disharmony between his Auerbachian humanism and his

Foucauldian anti-humanism, Benda's anti-socialism and Gramsci's Marxism, as well as in his political positions (e.g. with Arafat and against Arafat, with peace with Israel and against peace with Israel, and so on). Similar contradictions can be detected in Taha Hussain and Al-Jawahiry—in being against tyrannical authority and compromising (necessarily) with it. Said's anti-Marxism, as discussed by Aijaz Ahmad (1992:177-9, 193, 195, 198-203) and as revealed earlier in his own *Orientalism* (1978), as well as in conversation with Michael Sprinker (1992: 94-5, 259-62), should also be compared with Taha Hussain's position (as ally?) and Al-Jawahiry's (as advocate).

The question of identity (and the duality and, indeed, multi-facetedness of identity) is brought up at several crucial places in Said's autobiography *Out of Place* (2000), which, for a full presentation of the case, requires some lengthy quotations. In the very opening pages of the book, we come across such statements as:

The travails of bearing such a name [i.e. the Arabic Said coupled with the English Edward] were compounded by an equally unsettling quandary when it came to language. I have never known what language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt. What I do know, however, is that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commenting on, the other. Each *can* seem like my absolutely first language, but neither is (2000:4).

A little further on, Said adds:

I have retained this unsettled sense of many identities—mostly in conflict with each other—all my life, together with an acute memory of the despairing feeling that I wish we could have been all-Arab, or all-European or American, or all-Orthodox Christian, or all-Muslim, or all-Egyptian, and so on (2000:5).

Even as a family in Cairo, in his early years, Said had felt this phenomenon:

We were all Shawam, amphibious Levantine creatures whose essential lostness was momentarily stayed by a kind of forgetfulness, a kind of daydream, that included elaborate catered dinner parties, outings to fashionable restaurants, the opera, ballet, and concerts. By the end of the forties, we were no longer Shawam but *khawagat*, the designated and respectful

title for foreigners which, as used by Muslim Egyptians, has always carried a tinge of hostility. Despite the fact that I spoke—and I thought looked—like a native Egyptian, something seemed to give me away. I resented the implication that I was somehow a foreigner, even though deep down I knew that to them I was, despite being an Arab (2000:195).

Said further on does add that:

My growing sense of Palestinian identity (thanks to Aunt Nabila) refused the demeaning label, partly because my emerging consciousness of myself as something altogether more complex and authentic than a colonial mimic simply refused it (2000:195).

The new consciousness of identity was not to develop fully, however, until decades later: “I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it had all started, the struggle over Palestine” (2000:293).

What needs to be mentioned here is that this consciousness of identity accompanied Edward Said’s general intellectual development, from the publication of his *Orientalism* in 1978 until his death in 2003. The best proof of that is his last book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, published after his death in 2004, which contains a positive, intellectual refutation of Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Harold Bloom. In addition, it also contains a new realization of the intellectual errors of his *Orientalism*, and an enjoyable commentary on the relationship between culture and civilization, on the one hand, and barbarism and decadence, on the other. Such a positive evaluation of this book remains accurate, in spite of its tendency sometimes to oversimplify, as, for example, in his affirmation, in its very opening pages that he is an American, that the United States is the world’s only superpower, that he grew up in a non-western tradition, and that the events of September 11 have changed the US and the world as a whole. Said writes as if these four items were great truths and not just words, which may not, in fact, transmit any important concepts at all, a procedure, which indeed reminds us of the kind of erroneous and “orientalist” remarks found in his first published work, *Beginnings*(1975).¹

A similar question of identity, though in somewhat of a reverse direction, will fruitfully be discussed in relation to how

Taha Hussain's European (or better, Mediterranean) identity, as idea and as practice, grew out of his Arab-Islamic and specifically Egyptian identity (and indeed co-existed with it). In a previous study, I reached the conclusion that:

It is perhaps Taha Hussain's radical, humanist secularism, more than anything else, that lies behind his Mediterraneanism and his call for the Europeanization of Egyptian culture. At its heart lies the key element of progressivism that charts for the Egyptian cultural project the almost inevitable European, i.e. modern and scientific, road for advance, rejecting the cobwebs of reaction embedded in both the backward Islamism straitjacket and the chauvinistic, and often equally backward, Pan-Arabist rhetoric. In the field of literature, Taha Hussain's principal domain, he courageously and unflinchingly advocated the transfer of modern, western approaches to the study of literature in Egypt. For Taha Hussain, ancient Egyptian culture, the heritage of Arab/Islamic culture, and, finally, modern European culture could and should co-exist harmoniously, in order to advance along the one and the same road of universal human progress (Al-Dabbagh 2006:360-1).

Al-Jawahiry's internationalist identity, again both in theory and in practice, also grew out of his Arab-Islamic and uniquely Iraqi identity but also co-existed with it. Al-Jawahiry, like the whole Iraqi school of modern poetry, which included poets like Al-Sayyab, Al-Bayaty, and Al-Haydary, played a vital role in the formation and rejuvenation of Arabic poetry in the twentieth century. Like the other poets of this Iraqi school, while formed by the experience of exile that helped to bring him closer to world literary heritage, Al-Jawahiry remained intimately bound both to the rich, cultural heritage of his country and to the social and political circumstances that affected the lives of his people.

In a previous study, I explained that while the spaces of the Iraqi poets' exile extend from the neighbouring Arab countries (the Kuwait of Al-Sayyab, the Syria of Al-Jawahiry, the Cairo and Amman of Al-Bayaty, and so on) to European countries (the Prague of Al-Jawahiry, the Moscow and Madrid of Al-Bayaty, the London of Al-Haydary, and of others), the inner spaces from which the elements of the new poetics of exile and identity are formed, however, are no less important. These cover geography (Tigris and the Euphrates, palm trees, and other distinctive Iraqi features), cultural history and Arab/Islamic heritage (the classical

poets in the case of Al-Jawahiry and the heritage of Sufism in the case of Al-Bayaty stand out as two prominent examples), ancient mythology (particularly Mesopotamian mythology), modernity (largely through English literature, as in Al-Sayyab, Al-Bayaty, and Al-Haydary), and internationalism (largely through world literature, as in Al-Jawahiry and Al-Bayaty), giving rise to a distinctive poetic voice that can be characterized by the following features:

It is a populist voice, in the sense that it is first and foremost the voice of the people of Iraq against their oppressors, in the various epochs and eras. At the same time, it is not a narrowly nationalist, and certainly not a chauvinist, or racist, voice. It is also definitely not fundamentalist; indeed, not even religious in the strict sense of the word, although it can be quite spiritual in the broadest way. It is a basically progressive and democratic voice that can be described as leftist, and indeed even Marxist at times, in its general tendency. It is a voice that represents the two major nations of Iraq, the Arabs and the Kurds, and successfully embodies the unifying elements of modern Iraqi culture as well as ancient Mesopotamian civilization. Above all, it is a radical and revolutionary voice, one that contains the vision of a new identity and a new, more just and more happy, society. Lastly, it is a voice that echoes the old cultural and mythological resources of Iraq and, at the same time, also blends very successfully into the rich heritage of the world at large (Al-Dabbagh 2005:6-7).

On the complex and contradictory nature of Said's relationship with authority, one should consult Nubar Hovsepian's excellent article, 'Connections with Palestine', printed in Michael Sprinker's *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (1992), to trace the development of that relationship. Hovsepian explains that in spite of Said's scathing critique of Zionism, *The Question of Palestine* could also be interpreted as 'An Essay of Reconciliation'. Written in 1979, it would have been safe to say that most Palestinians did not concede that Jews had legitimate historical claims to Palestine, Hovsepian rightly claims, while Said did not dispute the Zionist claim outright, but wished only to remind Zionists that they are encumbered with Palestinians and Palestinian history, a fact entailed by what they have done and are doing to historical Palestine. In this context, Said, then a member of the Palestine National Council, "recognized that the desired solution for the

conflict must provide for the inclusion of both the Jews of Israel and the Palestinians” (1992:11). In fact, Hovsepien continues:

Said’s essay in reconciliation is viewed by some radical Palestinians as having gone too far. He is accused of frittering away Palestinian national rights by making “unwarranted concessions to Zionism”. Accordingly, Said’s key failure is in defining the conflict as one “between two peoples,” instead of a class struggle against Zionism and Imperialism. Said’s failings are a function of his “bourgeois humanistic approach”, which makes him distrustful of the power of “armed struggle”, hence, he is seen as favoring a political solution (1992:12).

Indeed, Hovsepien argues that:

Over time, armed struggle had to give way to politics and diplomacy. Already, in the seventies President Sadat was suggesting that the Palestinians form a government in exile. Indeed, both Sadat and Arafat suggested that Edward Said could be a member of such a government (1992.:13).

Iqbal Ahmad, the Pakistani radical and Said’s friend, also confirms that Said was one of the early supporters of peace with Israel, and if Yaser Arafat had responded to that suggestion that Said carried to Beirut in the autumn of 1978 and once again in March, 1979, it would have been possible to “reach a sensible Palestinian-Israeli settlement” (Said 2004a:11). The fact that Said later grew, after the Oslo agreements, to become the foremost critic of the Palestinian political authority does not erase his initial position, nor does it remove the key internal contradiction of being opposed to authority and representing it at the same time.

The dualistic and divided nature of Al-Jawahiry's attitude towards power and authority appears in the very early stages of his public life and continues, as a key feature, until his death. This can be seen from the early establishment of his special relationship with King Faisal I and later with the ruling Hashemite family, in the 1920s, which continued, despite his growing rebelliousness and populism, in his maintenance of a close relationship with King Ghazi, and later with Prince Abdul-Ilah and Nuri Al-Said, in the 30s and early 40s (Al-Attiya 1998:63-4; Jabran 2003: 40), and down to his poem on the coronation of Faisal II in 1953 (Jabran 2003:56), and his poem celebrating King Hussain's 40th anniversary of his coronation in 1993, actually a re-doing of a poem written originally to Abdul-

Ilah. Intermittent with this relationship was the same divided and dualistic nature of Al-Jawahiry's support, and later denunciation, of Bakr Sidqi's 1936 coup (Al-Attiya 1998:63-4), his special relationship, turned later into antagonism and confrontation, with Abdul-Karim Qasim (Al-Attiya 1998:69-76; Jabran 2003:59-60), and his complex relationship with the Baath regime in Iraq (Al-Attiya 1998:127-40).

In tracing the life and works of Al-Jawahiry, one may well detect echoes of the traditional role of the poet in classical Arab society and his reliance on patronage. Here it will be important to remember the specificity of the Arab nature of this relationship as well as the specific nature of Al-Jawahiry's embodiment of it—his embarrassment by it together with his continuation of it. (Alawy 1999: 109-11). The co-existence of this dependency with his almost total rebelliousness and rejection of political authority is also a feature of Al-Jawahiry's career. (Al-Radhy 1999: 128-50, and Baghdadi 1999: 157-63). It is also important to remember that in the later stages of his life, the poet may well have come to regard himself, like Al-Mutanabby, as rising way above the politicians he praised and, therefore, as untouched by any compromises such praise may have entailed. (See Munif 1999: 228-9).

Perhaps the best summing up of Taha Hussain as the eternal transformer and compromiser is still Fathy Ghanim's 1954 article in *Akher Sa'aa* (quoted in Al-Jundy 1984: 87-93). Ghanim used the expression *Bayna Bayn* (i.e. uncommitted hedger and conciliator) to describe not only Taha Hussain's oscillations between faith and non-faith, liberalism and conservatism, *Wafd* and anti-*Wafd*, the Left and the Right, Royalism and Republicanism, but also his language and literary style,. The latter, famously, was a combination of the old, classical, and new, modern styles, that was used to cover his oscillation between contradictory ideas and his refusal to commit to either side of the duality. It is almost as if he were saying, in a mode reminiscent of Al-Jawahiry, that he, as Taha Hussain, was more important than those contradictions. Significantly, one of the best book-length studies of Taha Hussain is aptly named *The Transformations of Taha Hussain* written by Mustafa Abdul-Ghany in 1990

In conclusion, it is important to be aware of the evolution of the thought and outlook of each of these three figures. This

awareness is crucial for understanding not only the development of their identity (or identities) referred to earlier, but also their *intellectual* development. Interestingly, all three died at the summit of their achievement. This is especially true of Edward Said, who died at the age of sixty-eight. Taha Hussain and Al-Jawahiry had already reached a height from which they did not decline or relapse. Although compromises with authority and the internal contradictions mentioned earlier continued, perhaps indicating an eradicable feature of their careers and situation imposed by the times, all three departed on a radical and rebellious note that best sums up their lives and works.

(*) This paper was delivered, in a shorter version, at the Eighth International Symposium on Comparative Literature, on "Power and the Role of the Intellectual" held at the English Department, Cairo University, 22-24 November, 2005.

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1 See, for example, these two passages from *Beginnings*:

It is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition of the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view. The Prophet is he who has completed a world-view; thus the word heresy in Arabic is synonymous with the verb "to innovate" or "to begin". Islam views the world as a plenum, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification. Consequently, stories like those in *The Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completion of it; neither are they lessons, structures, extensions, or totalities designed to illustrate either the author's prowess in representation, the education of a character, or ways in which the world can be viewed and changed.

Thus even autobiography as a genre scarcely exists in Arabic literature. When it is to be found, the result is wholly special (1975:81-2).

Outside the Judeo-Christian textual tradition—in the Arab-Islamic, for instance—rather different conditions prevail. One of them is 'idjaz', a concept which describes the uniqueness of the Koran as rendering all other texts impotent by comparison. Thus since the central text is in Arabic, and since, unlike the Gospels or even the Torah, it is given as unitary and complete, textual traditions are essentially supportive, not restorative. All texts are secondary to the Koran, which is inimitable (1975:199).