When the Theory Travels: Modernity in the Arab Thought

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ABSTRACT The Arab modernity enterprise has never thrived because it only embraced the ostensible manifestations and the technical aspects of the concept, which in the first place demands a process of a long-term, thoughtful rationalization. Although one form of modernized thought took shape in the Arab Region, it was only a pseudo-modernity– an exact reproduction of the Western version. In addition, it was confined to an intellectual elite that failed to have an effective impact on the Arab reality. Modernity in literature, on the other hand, flourished. Modernist writers rely on the power of creativity to bring about change; they play a revolutionary role by changing language and style; and they destruct and reconstruct to produce an alternative that is cleaner, fairer and more beautiful.

How do Arab intellectuals see modernity?

Although one form of modernized thought took shape in the Arab Region, it was only a pseudo-modernity– an exact reproduction of the Western version, so to speak. As a matter of fact, it was confined to an intellectual elite that failed to have an effective impact on the Arab reality. Perhaps the elite's modernity was just a positive response to external influences- a mere replica of a foreign thought in a quite different world. In doing so, the intellectual elite were defying the conditions under which they live. Taking over modernity in the Arab region was a deliberate transition from a long-established conventional thought into a far advanced tradition without a process of natural progression. The discourse of Arab modernists is only a blind imitation of the Western one. It has failed to provide a rationale, thus overlooking the Western modern advances in economics, social life and mental structures– holding on instead to absurdity and a solicitous, restless soul that longs for and dreams in Western modernity (Al-alem, 1992 12; Darraj, 1997 65; Eid,1991 303).

It is true that the political, economic, social and cultural life in the Arab world has seen some change (with manifestations of enlightenment and modernization as well as advances in literature and arts), yet this was in fact, in the words of Mahmoud Amin Al-alem, odd, elitist and unfamiliar– one that is still peripheral and incapable of coming close enough to the deep structures of our Arab societies. We still suffer social backwardness; our social nationalism is disintegrated with further domino-effect splits; illiteracy is still rampant; our economies are fragile and dependent on other nations; and the communities are underdeveloped (Al-alem, 1996 19). Mohammed Badawi wonders if we are aware of these setbacks and whether we have ever had realism, rationalism, industrial revolution and modern technology (Badawi , 1984 105).

The bottom line for now is that modernity in the Arab Region has never been identical to that found in the West, where it was woven in the resulting constructs, social movements, schools of thought and creativity (Barrada ,1984 16).

Nevertheless, Arab scholars and critics still believe that a modern Arab enlightenment had begun to materialize in the early Renaissance epoch. Hijazi believes that such enlightenment had started at the moment when Sheikh Hassan Al-Attar said that our societies must change their conditions and transfer knowledge from other nations (Hijazi, 1992 5). He continues to say that traces of enlightenment started back when intellectual Rifa'a wrote "Let the motherland be the site of our common happiness, which we shall build by freedom, thought and the factory" (Al-alem, 1992 12).

Yet, this early recognition of modernity and modernization had not been brought to fruition. That aborted enterprise was initially promising, as it was able to maintain its cultural identity and peculiarity. It interacted positively with Western modernity, thus capturing the rational, revolutionary movement– a dynamic force that lent the Western world its superiority (Eid , 1990 296).

Has the Arab modernity enterprise gone awry?

The attempts by Arab intellectuals and reformers to embrace modernity lost momentum. The most prominent features of that modernity were technical in nature- ones that are easily advocated. The project did not support a long-term systematic rationalization process that is necessary for transition. One cannot be sure of whether the Arab societies were already prepared for the values of modernity while they were hardly recovering from colonialism. We might, therefore, need to ask whether the traditional tribal structure was ready to accept the change.

The post-independence Arab intellectuals were then suffering unrest; they were in constant search for grand themes. The surrounding forces were so powerful and the nationalist movements failed to make their future plans work in line with the requirements of real development in the Arab countries. The leftists, on the other hand, failed to introduce a realizable enterprise in light of the political and social turmoil in the region. Meanwhile, the liberal thought was by no means tenable given the large historical divergence between the Arabs and Europe. After all, it was the controversial liberalism that brought the Arab region under Western colonialism. For Arabs, it meant the im-

possibility of integrating into a liberal-led global system.

As a result, these intellectual foundations were eventually failed and vanished, giving way for the traditional thought, particularly religious, as a dominant alternative. The 1967 setback, and the resulting defeats, largely contributed to the collapse of those intellectual currents and enlightenment seeds (Sharaf Al-deen, 1993 193-195).

As such, the fragile ostensible modernity, as well as underdevelopment and dependency in the Arab Region, compromised the modernization efforts in politics, economics and culture. Mahmoud Amin Al-alem argues that the ideology prevailing in the Arab countries is a combination of superficial religious thought, ostensible pro-Arabism, procedural secularism and a sectarian, tribal thought. This bizarre synthesis takes extremely diversified, vague and double-dealing faces that lurk behind phony manifestations of modernity only to conceal backwardness, intolerance, pragmatic, unreal piousness authoritarianism and irrationality (Al-alem, 1996 68). In fact, the Arab states – with their inherent authoritarianism and bumptious behavior, as well as the tight control on the media and public education, are responsible for the deterioration of the Arab thought (Ibid, 69).

As a way out of the dilemma, some Arab intellectual voices have called for desisting from reclusion under the guise of modernity and leaving off imitation as a precondition for defeating passivity and awkwardness (Laroui, 1970 296). In his reflection on this departure from imitation, Laroui argues that for four centuries, Europe has adopted thoughts and behaviors that were then imposed on other nations which had the option either to take these thoughts and behaviors in toto, and thus survive, or reject them, and thus die (Laroui, 1973 20). In other words, Arabs, Laroui implies, need to be fully dependent on the West if they want to survive.

On the other end of the spectrum, Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri believes that modernity does not mean dispensing with heritage or breaking with the past as much as it suggests keeping pace with the progress made at the global level while holding on to the cultural traditions. Al-Jabri contends that when people cling to their heritage, the discourse of modernity should be directed at that heritage so as to produce a modern vision of it (Al-Jabri,1991 17).

Burhan Ghalyoon, on the other hand, disapproves of the claims that tradition and cultural identity are responsible for the intellectual decadence in the Arab world. In so far as modernity negates tradition and cultural identity- believing that progress can only be made when tradition is compromised- cultures can only be built through cultural identities. In an authentic process of transformation, a traditionalist approves of modernity and a modernist appreciates tradition and cultural heritage, Ghalyoon concludes (Ghalioun, 1992 322).

Indeed, the Arab crisis is closely linked to the contemporary Arab thought. The crisis lies in the failure to fathom the ambiguous relationship between the Arab-Islamic identity and the European culture. According to Al-alem, this confusion cannot be explained in terms of backwardness vs. accomplishment. Rather, it is a binary assumption in the mind of the European 'the other'. On the one hand, the Europeans believe in their scientific and economic achievements in the face of the inferiority of the Arab World. On the other hand, 'we' always tend to smell colonialism from anything coming from the West, while we are still suffering the traumatic inferiority even after Arab countries won their political independence. Out of this confusion, and the resulting feeling of inferiority, emerged a double crisis in the Arab thought as well as the Arab reality, with such a thought still failing to provide definitive answers on this reality (Al-alem, 1996 30-31) .

The foregoing discussion suggests that most Arab intellectuals believe that modernity in the Arab world is far different from that in the West. Once these intellectuals admit the existence of such a gap, they should work in accordance– thus drawing boundaries between Western modernity and Arab reality. This recognition of the inherent differences is the first step to forge an Arab-bound modernity thought. This creative modernism would redefine the universal ideas in accordance with the Arab cultural particularity, with a discourse embedded with the history of the Arabs. This creative modernity requires universal knowledge as well as evoking the historical events, recollecting the few victories and critically mulling over the many failures (Darraj, 1997 89).

Though the deplorable reality in the Arab Region precludes embracing the European modernism, the Arab societies are invited to improve the way they perceive things, so that their identity is not wiped off by the absence of modernity. The envisioned refinements should be based on reason and democracy– the foundation stones of the Western prosperity. Reason and democracy together can bring about an awareness state that can, in turn, force a way into the well-entrenched traditions (Eid, 1990 304). Such a breakthrough is only possible through a large-scale national development enterprise that addresses the social, educational, ethical and cultural hindrances in the Arab Region. To flourish, the development project should be two-fold: rationally and critically accommodating the Arab-Islamic heritage; and fathoming, and even adding to, the intellectual accomplishments of contemporary life (Al-alem,1996 49-50).

Modernity realized through literary creativity

Contemporary Arab criticism addressing literary modernism is based on two key approaches. The first approach assumes that the process of modernizing the literary genres is closely linked to an all-out framework of a revolutionary change that requires, in the first place, a comprehensive analysis in the communities. Literary modernization is embedded in that analysis, and is linked to the tendency to bring about the required change. Through a critical, ideological analysis of the contemporary crises, modernity can unveil the themes of literary forms, thus enabling change in both literature and societies (Laroui, 1970 4).

The second approach believes that in the Arab Region, there has never been any form of modernity in sciences, economics, social life or politics, largely because of the inherent obstacles. The change in arts, on the other hand, is easier as it is not directly related to other fields (Said,1980 321). This approach does not assume a linkage between the progress made in literature and the accomplishments in other spheres of life (e.g. great poetry is not necessarily linked to development in technology or other industries) (Said, 1978 244). Proponents of this approach reckon that modernist intellectuals rely on the power of creativity to bring about change; they play a revolutionary role by changing language and style. Adonis writes: poems, novels, plays and paintings do not directly contribute to changing history. How-

ever, they all can bring change by presenting a brighter view– recreating and, thus, changing reality (Khaleda Said,1984 31)· Kharrat identifies with the same notion when he admits that when he writes, he is driven by the willingness to rebel, realize his deepest desires and re-consider things– as such re-shaping the world and seek-ing to change it for the better (Al-Kharrat ,1995 36-37).

This particular attitude was previously advocated by the Syrian poet Adonis (Thamer, 1986 90-95; Barat,1990 250-271). In his book The start of the 20th century close, he tries to identify the outlines and the foundations of mo-dernity, focusing on the fantasies of poets and critics and their failure to understand modernity. Adonis believes that modernism is a new vision of raising questions on the pos-sible and protesting against the dominant tradition (Said, 1980 321)· For him, modernization entails breaking with traditionalism, on the one hand, and giving credence to the cultural heritage of another nation, on the other. He continues to say that a nation can't build its own culture without mingling with other cultures, creating reciprocal relations and engaging in cooperative interchange. This reciprocation will necessarily serve as a cornerstone for an independent culture that gives and takes, provided that it maintains both originality and creativity, Adonis concludes (Ibid, 325)·

Kamal Abu Deeb, another critic and cofounder of Shi'r Journal, identifies himself with Adonis' perspective– believ-ing that literature can play a leading role in bringing about the desired change. Abu Deeb argues that the impressive strides made in literature and the conceptual revolution are unparalleled and never existed in other fields in the Arab Region. While Arab literary creativity was making a quan-tum leap, achievements in economic, social and cultural structures were dwindling. On that account, creative mo-dernity is a cognitive divorce from the past for the sake of the present, on the one hand, and a rush toward the fu-ture– a move that seeks to transcend the present– on the other hand. For modernists, the present incorporates the well-entrenched authoritative regimes. Now because mo-dernity is a sworn enemy to dictatorship, the regimes will always seek to perpetuate the present and restrain free-doms. Perhaps this is the rationale behind the Arab mo-dernity crisis– a counter movement to reality and a depar-ture from the established traditions.

Apart from its concern about and response to the totalitar-ian model, and its struggle to rid of it, Arab modernity still needs to worry about the West's hubris, with a more supe-rior model that Arab modernity tries to assimilate or even transcend in order to maintain its originality. Arab moder-nity is, thus, struggling with two equally unpleasant alter-natives: an internal inferiority and an external superiority. This uncertainty has some implications on literary creativ-ity, which, in turn, becomes uncertain, with paradoxes and self-contradictory texts (Abu Deeb, 1984 35-41).

Conclusion

Arab modernity has its own theoretical peculiarity, which is a result of an idiosyncratic history. However, literary works by Arab modernists tend to use the same techniques and styles found in Western modern literature. In nonfiction, for example, Arab modernist writers, just like their Western counterparts, have deliberately broken with the traditional trends of chronological sequence in the text by using the past, the present and the future tenses. Meanwhile, they avoid realistic description and refrain from making direct references, thus doing away with the traditional meth-ods. Their works rely heavily on monologues, unfinished dialogues, flashbacks, foreshadowing, introspection of the character's own conscious and subconscious thoughts and feelings (and developing linguistic structures in accord-ance) and external narratives. They have tried to reproduce the Western tools of expanding the scope of symbolic rep-resentations through anecdotes, allegories, poetry, irony and schizophrenic characters.

Arab novelists have availed themselves of the Western lit-erary achievements in structure and style (Al-Kharrat, 1993 25)· Because these novelists have different perspectives and driving forces, their rationale for using various styles is also different. According to Kharrat, the absurd narrative trends in the West incorporate the philosophical argument that the human existence is meaningless. One stream in the Arab Region, on the other end of the spectrum, as-sumes a sense of purpose in our existence, but it is always abused- with justice and love often compromised. This be-lief is also found among other exponents of modernism in the Arab Region, Kharrat concludes (Ibid, 26).

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