

**Arab Representations of the Occident:
East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction**

Rasheed El-Enany

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In his *Orientalism* (Vintage Books: 1978), literature teacher and cultural critic Edward Said claimed that the entire corpus of academic, literary, and artistic knowledge about the Orient in general and the Muslim world in particular that the West had accumulated and shaped was built up solely to serve its desire to conquer, control, and subjugate the Orient. His thesis was widely discussed and influenced the study of the Middle East and the attitudes of numerous scholars. According to Said, the West depicts the Orient as stagnant, static, exotic, submissive, and retarded, in contrast to the supposedly enlightened and superior West.

Some thirty years after the furor caused by this book, Rasheed El-Enany's *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* challenges Said's theory, at least with respect to Arabic literature. El-Enany claims that Said only presented the western perspective and ignored the Oriental resistance to it. In response, he presents the East-West encounter through his own eyes, those of an Arab intellectual who was born and raised in Cairo and moved to Great Britain in 1977 during his twenties.

His basic premise is that a culture that has produced the likes of himself or its intellectual exponents cannot possibly be anti-western. He shows that the Orient's perception of the West has not been static, but rather has undergone various changes over time. Even before Napoleon landed on Egyptian soil, Arab intellectuals realized that westerners were the bearers of a culture that differed significantly from that of their former rulers, the Ottomans. Napoleon came from a different world, a modern world of science, inventions, advanced weaponry and military tactics, human rights, and so on. The Arabs' paradoxical attitude to the West can be seen in `Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti's *`Aja'ib al-Athar* (p. 3), even though this Egyptian historian (1754-1825) never left his homeland and encountered the West only through the French invaders.

At least as far as Arabic prose literature is concerned, the author argues persuasively that the West's attitude toward the Orient cannot be treated *en bloc* and that the people of the Orient cannot be described as consistently anti-western. Demonstrating his thesis with quotes from Arabic literature, he claims that a distinction must be made between continents (Europe and the New World), periods (precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial), and the sexes.

Time is also an important dimension by which to measure differences, particularly in the Arab world that, after the period of stagnation, experienced significant political, economic, and cultural development. Over the course of time, writers emerged who often expressed the opinions of the societies in which they grew up and presented their own views on events and their causes. El-Enany stresses that every period must be evaluated in terms of its own political character, the way its people develop, and the interrelationships among its states and cultures. Thus writers are not all the same: some are quite pro-western, others are very anti-western, and still others accept the material advances that Europe has to offer but reject its morality.

The author presents a systematic, chronologically ordered account of what Arab writers had to say about their encounters with western culture. The chapters' subtitles provide us with a concise idea of what was most characteristic of each period. Thus his discussion of the precolonial period is

called “Enchanted Encounters”; to the colonial period he adds the subtitle “Encounters under Duress”; and the postcolonial period is divided into “Proud Encounters” after many Arab lands receive their independence, and “Humbled Encounters” after 1967, the Arabs’ defeat in the Six Day War. A separate chapter is devoted to the encounter with the United States, in which he presents the views of men and women who wrote about intercultural contacts in that country. The book’s last chapter deals with “The Encounter through Female Eyes.”

The book presents the views of Arab writers from various lands and periods who, over a period of some 200 years, dealt in some way with the East-West encounter. Each author is presented by name, date, connection to a foreign land, the circumstances that brought him/her there, and the content of the novel or story in which the cross-cultural encounter takes place. Interestingly enough, Arab male authors usually describe an encounter between an Arab man and a western woman (usually British or French), while female writers most often describe an Arab woman who arrives in the West for some reason and encounters a western man.

This is followed by an analysis of the story’s events, messages, and conclusions. At the end of each chapter, El-Enany provides an overview of the period and its writers and also summarizes the developments, if any, in East-West relations during the period in question. If the years in which an author wrote span two different periods, he/she is mentioned in both relevant chapters, together with an assessment as to how his/her approach evolved over time. Although much of the literature he quotes, both autobiographical and fictional, is romantic, he succeeds quite well in showing the reader how each writer reacted to the encounter with the West.

The book’s “Introduction” is preceded by a section entitled “Authors Discussed” and a list of authors with their dates in the order of appearance in the book (with no references). The notes for all chapters appear at the end, as do the references, divided into “Primary Texts” and “Secondary Sources,” followed by an index. The book is well written, and Arabic words are presented in a scientific transcription. This work, which is not for the general public, should make interesting reading for anyone familiar with Edward Said’s book, as well as for anyone with an interest in Arabic literature.

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