



Neo-liberal Narratives or Neo-orientalism: Reflections from Post-9/11 American Novel on Arab Woman

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Abstract

This study argues for an articulation of 'neo-orientalism' in order to situate neoliberal agendas (ideology) as an expression of neo-orientalist discourse in a globalized world. Analysis explores these attitudes on the status of Arab Muslim woman by referring to *The Dawn* by Homa Pourasgari (2009), which extensively elaborates on the dichotomous comparison between the oppressive East and the neoliberal West and how that is reflected in the life of Arab woman. This study on the status of Arab woman in Islam reflects on narrative writers' attitudes related to neoliberal ideology, religion, and geo-politics and to prove the necessity for an analysis based on conventional selection of subject matter. Focusing on neoliberal thought, the study details how neoliberal ideology operates from above, akin to a form of military intervention, and below, attracting minds and hearts, through a full-blown cultural program to exercise neoliberal influence, while penalizing societies that refuse to participate. Therefore, neo-orientalist discourse is governed by the brutal instrumentalist tools of liberalization, democratization, and modernity. Neo-orientalist discourse implements these terms through the terminology of neoliberal logic; it is a form of convergent rhetoric that holds practices and discourses of both to establish a ground for geo-political and cultural dominance.

Keywords: Post-9/11 American narratives, Muslim woman, America, the Middle East

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استشراق جديد أو سرد نيوليبرالي؟ المرأة العربية في الرواية الأمريكية الحديثة

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الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوع "الاستشراق الجديد" وآلية عمله من أجل معرفة النظرية النيوليبرالية التي تعمل مع الاستشراق الجديد تحت مظلة واحدة. وتقدم تصور الرواية الأمريكية عن وضع المرأة العربية المسلمة من خلال الإشارة إلى رواية (2009) The Dawn للكاتبة هوما بورسغاري، وتم تقسيمه إلى: مقدمة تتناول التعريف بقضية البحث وتقديم فكرة البحث من خلال الإشارة إلى العديد من الدراسات الحديثة في مجال الاستشراق الحديث، ودراسة تحليلية مستندة على نظرية الاستشراق الحديثة لرواية The Dawn (2009) وخاتمة تتضمن أهم نتائج الدراسة وهي أن الأيديولوجية النيوليبرالية وعلاقة المرأة بالمجتمع تعتبر أهم ركائز الرواية الأمريكية التي تخص العالم العربي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الرواية الأمريكية الحديثة، المرأة المسلمة، أمريكا، الشرق الأوسط.

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© نُشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو إضافته إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أجريت عليه.



Introduction

Critics argue that the political constructions have motivated neoliberalism, as both an ideology, and as a mature historical era, to justify cultural response (neo-orientalist discourse) and validate other possible responses in the form of political economy and regional construction in the light of global capitalism. This argument offers what Michel Foucault (1984) refers to as the “effective history” that “shortens its vision to those things nearest to it – the body, nervous system, nutrition, digestion, and energies” (Foucault 1984, p. 89). The 9/11 terrorist attack was a mega-cultural event in which politicians asserted the birth of new historical credentials described by George W. Bush as a “night fell on a different world” (Holland and Jarvis 2014, p. 194) and by Dick Cheney as “a day like no other we have ever experienced” (Jarvis 2008, p. 246). These descriptions are a call upon the American public to mark the day as a new (fundamental) break in history called by James Der Derian as the ‘*exceptional ahistoricity*’ (2002, p. 102). Thus, at this cultural level, aligned with the political and military repercussions, 9/11 was the day that established an ideological perspective of superiority in neo-orientalist discourse and facilitated the entanglement of ideology and literature.

The neoliberal agendas in post-9/11 novel provide us with a thought form/neo-orientalist frame that helps us unmask the perception of full political approaches and security immediacy under the process of neoliberalization as a recognition, one that is based on accepting the influence of post-9/11 politics toward Greater Middle East ‘GME’ and neoliberalism’s self-imposed horizons. Post-9/11 neo-orientalist narratives are located in relation to the epistemological context of neoliberalism, but they also allow us to make the basic distinction between two types of neoliberal narratives: those that replicate the classic orientalist symptoms (mostly historical narratives) and those that engage with neoliberalism as bound up with counter-terrorism in which novel works through a new epistemological approach that lies at the heart of neoliberalism. This study of the Arab woman in contemporary American novel uses the analytical approach to discuss various cultural issues related to the topic as well as issues related to writers.

Many scholars in the field of 9/11 cultural aftermath have argued that neoliberal narratives have advanced considerations of many perspectives on dealing with American imperial agendas in the Middle East and its system of dominance (Gilbert 2005; Carty & Onyett 2006; Robertson 2014; Altwaiji 2023). Most of the existing scholarly debate on the significance of the concept of ‘neoliberalism’ focuses on the economic liberalization of women by offering a “degree of unrestricted free trade and open markets and the free flow of capital, while insisting on the most minimal government spending, regulation, taxation, and interference in the



economy" (Goldstein 2007, p. 30). This study looks at the issue of neo-liberalizing Arab woman in the contemporary American novel as a version of imperialist and neo-orientalist discourse that is encouraged by imperial ambitions and the current public debates on aggression against woman in Islam and Islamic backwardness.

Neo-liberalization and Neo-orientalism

Since 2001, there has been a notable focus on the need for a major change in the cultural discourse to facilitate the American hegemony in the region. Therefore, the neo-liberal and the neo-oriental agendas have been the declared focus of American foreign policy in the Middle East. In 2002, President George W. Bush made democracy the main pillar of his policy in Iraq, however, that turned to be a minor goal: "You see, a free, democratic, peaceful Iraq will not threaten America...A free Iraq will not be a training ground for terrorists or funnel money to terrorists or provide weapons to terrorists...A free Iraq will not destabilize the Middle East" (Stout 2003). What this suggests, in short, is that neoliberalizing the Middle East moves too quickly; in neglecting the major causes of poverty and social backwardness as such, it overlooks the ways in which neoliberalization may contradict the neoliberal moments in many parts of the world.

The primacy of neoliberalizing the Middle East and its political consequences indeed appear to be a security-based policy. Consequently, the Middle East is facing a political endgame of sorts, since neoliberalization mainly focuses on encountering terrorism and neglects the focus on neoliberal capitalism and free-market ideology; thus, neoliberalization appears unable to access the free market due to the hegemony of security and political agendas. The Bush's neoliberalization of the Middle East is solely a change in security structure and a change in the sociopolitical history that both acted for decades till 9/11 terrorist attacks when fighting terrorism constitutively needed a change in the nature of political regimes. Bush believed that "as long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export" (Pipes 2003). Therefore, taking seriously the opinion that neoliberalizing the Middle East aims at changing 'the nature of society' and fostering economic plans has far-reaching possibilities:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe - because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty... The United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before. And it will yield the same results...Historians will note that in many nations, the advance of markets and free



enterprise helped to create a middle class that was confident enough to demand their own rights. (The Globalist 2003)

Though the term, 'neoliberalism,' in its original sense denotes an economic policy known as 'liberalization of the economy' that adopts "the greatest degree of unrestricted free trade and open markets and the free flow of capital" and insists on "the most minimal government spending, regulation, taxation, and interference in the economy" (Goldstein 2007, p. 30), neoliberalism gets an association with the American imperial policies in the Middle East and rests on two basic tenets: 'war on terror as Klein states that the region would be "cleaned out of terrorists and a giant free- trade zone would be created" (2007, p. 328). The idea of neoliberalizing the Middle East designates a new security and geopolitical situation in which peace, politics, structure, and society have embraced the American beliefs and the concepts of peace and freedom as an ethic and as a universal determinant of co-existence and human activity:

By Staying on the offensive against terrorism, we are spreading freedom and security. Because America acted, 50 million people in Iraq and Afghanistan now live in freedom - and millions across the broader Middle East are claiming their liberty as well. By spreading freedom in a troubled region, we are making America more secure - and laying the foundation of peace for people around the world. (Bush 2005)

Therefore, the idea of Islamizing a state or a region, which is not even easy for all Muslims to believe in, aims to replace one dictatorship/authoritarian regime with another. Islamist thought is not a liberal theology, but a totalitarian set of beliefs which is perceived by Muslims and non-Muslims as a real threat: "Much of the contemporary return to Islam is driven by the perception of Muslims as a community...having a mission to fulfill...In encounters between the West and Islam, the struggle is over who will provide the primary definition to world order" (Kelsay 1993, p. 115). One can continue criticizing the instrumental use of democracy and human rights in imperial Western policy toward the non-Western world without thinking of Islamism as a suitable system for establishing alternative rights. The possibility of Islamizing a state or a region is narrower: ruling or steering seeks guidance from sophisticated means and harsh rules which lacks the mechanisms of action-coordination to provide the necessary capacities to regulate/organize, including co- and self-organization. Moreover, instead of searching for solutions, Islamist leaders look for a scapegoat – the Judeo-Christian rival – to be the source of all existing world disorder, evil, and also a threat to world peace.

Arab Woman and the Neo-liberal Need

The Dawn (2009) is a fictional novel about woman rights, oppression, and abuse of woman in modern Middle East Arabia. It explores the suffering many Arab women endure in Arab societies. The novel



provides many aspects of Arab woman's life such as dress, status in society, marriage, guardianship, employment, and responsibility. *The Dawn* by Homa Pourasgari tells the lives of two different young girls, Dawn Parnell, an American girl born and grew up in the Christian American society and Sahar Al-Hijazi, an Arab girl woman born and raised in a Muslim society. The two girls, who made an excellent relationship while studying at a university in Spain, are the main characters. Dawn and Sahar have a miserable life in a Muslim society after they graduate from Spain and reach different ends. As a post-9/11 author, Pourasgari introduces Arab societies to the readers as conservative with no freedom where women strive to get a few rights. Sahar represents the suffering of women living in the Muslim societies of the Middle East. Her marriage to an old businessman, Husam who aged 68, represents one of the oppressive practices of Muslim societies: "Husam, was also a well-recognized multibillionaire...Husam's company was supposed to merge with Kadar's. If the companies didn't merge, then Kadar would have to file for bankruptcy and sell his businesses and share in Crawford Enterprise to cover his debts" (3). Her marriage to an old rich man aims at saving her billionaire grandfather from bankruptcy by merging the two businesses. However, when Sahar gets to know about her grandfather's plan, she fakes her sickness and gets admitted to a hospital where her uncle helps her escape to the United States. Sahar is now an independent and activist young woman who joined an organization that cares for woman's rights in many parts of the world.

The Dawn introduces the reader to a harsh patriarchal culture of the Arab world as a region with no freedom and compares it with the Western society that strives to provide equality for everyone. Further, the author establishes a fact that all women in the Muslim societies of the Middle East, whether they are wealthy or poor, share the same treatment under Islamic culture: "The fate of all women, royalty or otherwise, was same. The only difference between the rich and the poor was that the former lived in a golden cage and the latter in a metal one...A woman was always considered the property of her husband or male guardian, and that male was allowed to treat her any way he wanted, even kill her without being prosecuted" (50). Sahar is an example of a woman who is a victim of the Islamic culture. She is forced to marry an old businessman to save her billionaire grandfather from bankruptcy. She is a victim of male greed, dominance, and sexuality and she must please the male members. The author informs the reader that one can buy a wife. Sahar narrates: "I was part of the deal, you see. I was given to him as a bonus in order to merge with Husam's company" (210). Pourasgari also informs the reader that Sahar is not a submissive girl, however, she is an emancipated feminist and a bold activist who is influenced by the Western values where she attended her college:

I will not marry your brother," Sahar replied with conviction. "Oh, yes you will. Your grandfather has already drawn up a business contract with him. And after your marriage to my brother, the paper will be signed. So, you see, it's a done deal. Husam's company will merge with your grandfather's, so you



have no choice but to marry him." "I will make his life hell. Why would you want your brother to marry someone as obstinate as me? (21)

Pourasgari's monolithic draw of the Muslim culture establishes binarism and dichotomous oppositions between the way life in Muslim societies and that of America, to reflect upon the Muslim woman. *The Dawn* establishes the comparison between the "good" and "evil" aspects of the Muslim woman fully externalized into two types of women: the westernized and the non-westernized. Sahar belongs to the westernized group of Muslim women because she got her education in Spain and always tries to live a Western lifestyle. She disagrees with the submission of the female in Muslim societies: "I'm still young. Women in America don't get married until they're into their 30s. I cannot, and I will not be treated like an object. Didn't you even hear what he said? Obey him. As if I would. I would die before I obey anyone...Doesn't anybody care about how I feel?...men have been coming here and staring at me as though they were purchasing meat" (150). Further, she succeeded in influencing her mother who never disagrees with Sahar's comments: "I don't like it either, but we have no choice. We live in a culture where women don't have rights...The sooner you accept this [marriage], the sooner you will get on with your life" (146).

Neo-liberal narrative on Arab woman focuses on the use of us/another dichotomy which always compares the victims to the victimizers. Cultural dichotomies between the Muslim East and the America west are based on the view that Muslims are fanatics, anti-woman and backward. In *The Dawn* Pourasgari introduces such a comparison to give an attitude towards Muslim societies. She establishes the Christian point of view as a basis for her approach: "Christian's life is worth 50 percent of a Muslim man's life, all others including Hindus are worth 1/16. An atheist's life is worth 0 percent and a woman's life is worth 50 percent of the males in each of these categories" (212). An Arab woman, in *The Dawn*, has an unequal life to that of the male counterpart. The novel establishes such a dichotomy between Sahar, an Arab girl, and Dawn, Sahar's American friend, in order to stand on a solid ground in the representation of the Muslim woman. Sahar's friend, Dawn, fails to believe Sahar and goes ahead in getting married to an Arab man: "Can't you be happy for me? I am marrying someone I love...My boyfriend loves me. He said we would live in a Western compound and travel all the time" (190). Once in the Middle East, Dawn's realizes that all the promises given by her husband are false and the lifestyle is different from what he described. She also realizes the result of her trust in an Arab man: "The man she had married lied to her about his liberal ways in order to manipulate her into marriage" (20).

Pourasgari's narration about life in Arab societies is given only by female characters. The main theme in the novel is that Arab Muslim society is oppressive and anti-woman: "Which god created such inequality



among men and women? After all, weren't all humans supposed to be equal? How much of this inequality was religion and how much was it the interpretation of men of her culture? She hadn't an answer but could no longer accept the life she was born into" (161). Dawn felt that she made a fatal mistake when she didn't listen to Sahar's advice on how lifestyles matter:

In America, you are free to do as you wish even when your religion dictates otherwise... [*In a Muslim country*] You will not be able to drink sangrias. You will not be allowed to leave the house without a *mahram*-a Guardian...You will not even be allowed to drive or ride a bicycle. (90)

Further, Poursagari introduces an Arab man, uncle Nadim, who studied in the United States, as a westernized figure who believes in equal rights for men and women "He often wished that the laws of his country were based on civil laws instead of Sharia- a code of law derived from the Koran and teachings of Mohammad" (30). Uncle Nadim represents the liberal and westernized voice among Arab male characters: "women in America don't get married until they're into their 30s" (31). Like her uncle, Sahar believes that her marriage will lead to a miserable life:

I can't, and I will not be treated like an object. Didn't you even hear what he said? Obey him. As if I would. I would die before I obey anyone...If the child is a boy, he can leave after age of 18, but if it's a girl, she may never be allowed to leave by the father, can be forced into marriage and be oppressed like an Arab woman for the rest of her life. (165)

Sahar and Dawn have different ends. Sahar is helped by her uncle and escaped to the US while Dawn is stuck in the Middle East society. The dark aspect of Arab patriarchy is the climax of the narration when Dawn becomes a victim in a society where "woman is obliged to satisfy her husband whenever he asks...She had tried several times to go to the courts to complain to officials" (220). However, the heroism is seen in Sahar who took bold steps and reflects a personality of emancipated and westernized girl who started to fight for the rights of the Muslim woman in the Middle East. The binarism between the conservative East and the liberal West including comparisons between terminologies of advanced/backward, good/evil, and human/subhuman is the main theme in neo-liberal narratives. Therefore, it would be misleading to assume neo-liberal narratives would exclude issues related to woman oppression, patriarchy, and social injustices while introducing the Middle East society, its culture, its people, its lifestyle, and its religion to a western reader.

Conclusion

In this article, discussions have considered the big picture of neoliberal ideology in narrative. Analysis has considered the main dominant ideas of neoliberalism such as democracy, human rights and empowerment of woman as a hegemonic project, always in progress, rather than understanding them as social superstructure or



ideological values, as obfuscating intentions of neoliberalizing the Middle East society. The study finds that the dominant ideas of democracy, woman's rights, and equality in neoliberal narratives converge: in valorizing the female inclusion in playing an economic role equal to that performed by male; in demonizing the role of religion in social and political life; in valorizing social equality; in condemning the radical thought that has a negative effect on local and global peace and in cultivating a limited form of liberal thinking and westernized lifestyle as elite women in Arab society reflect in everyday life. Where post-9/11 American narratives seem to break most clearly with classic/orientalist literature and converge in their approach, is in the realm of neoliberal approach that puts much emphasis on the role of neoliberalizing the state in establishing gender equality. The study finds how dominant ideas of neoliberalism are always similar despite the complexity of their approach to social issues.

The combination of neo-liberal agendas in literature, neo-orientalist discourse, aims at establishing an automated system of cultural domination through the increased focus on Islamism, human rights, and neo-liberalizing/reshaping the Muslim societies without physical existence on the ground. This cultural policy helps us understand the new imagined geography, its future, and the new discourse on that part of the world. Changing the imperial agendas of the United States in the Middle East from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism is based on changing many political and imperial phenomena such as colonialism to neo-colonialism, racism to neo-racism, and orientalism to neo-orientalism. Therefore, all studies on the Middle East which will deal with US/Middle East relationship should be based on understanding this reality. The study argues that the quest for understanding the ideologies of neo-orientalism and Islamism will not produce meaning if they are isolated from the political ideologies such as neo-liberalism. Moreover, an adequate analysis of literary texts requires scholars to situate texts in the sociopolitical context in which they are written and to reflect the impact of political ideology from which these texts originated.

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