

East is East? Where Does the East Begin for Egyptian Liberal Intellectuals?

The year 1938 saw the publication of Taha Husayn's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. Penned by one of Egypt's most significant 'liberal age' intellectuals, this work was written at a time when the Anglo-Egyptian treaty officially ended the occupation.* It marked a new epoch in national life and many nationalists voiced their hopes for a changing world. The opening chapters start with an intriguing question, namely: Does Egypt belong to the East (*al-sharq*) or West (*al-gharb*)? Indeed, is the Egyptian mind 'Oriental' in its perception and judgement of matters?

Research >
Central Asia

By Mona Abaza

Husayn did not believe that the relationship that ancient Egyptians had with the Oriental lands (*al-bilad al-sharqiyya*) ever surpassed the so-called Near East (*al-sharq al-qarib*), which we call Palestine, Greater Syria (*al-Sham*), and Iraq. Husayn's vision of Asia or the Asian realm commences, like the Greek idea, with the Persians, who are perceived as invaders and conquerors to which Egypt unwillingly submitted and therefore sought aid from the Greeks. It is tedious, according to him, to think of the Far East or to relate to it while ignoring the Mediterranean world.

In raising such questions, Husayn wanted to convey the message that Egypt at that time in fact belonged to the Western rather than the Eastern world, upholding the culture and civilization of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean world. For Husayn, there were two fundamentally different civilizations: one was based on Greek philosophy and art, Roman law, and the morals of Christianity; the other derived from India. Egypt, according to Husayn, belonged to the Greco-Roman civilization (Hourani 1962:330–1).

For Husayn, then, the 'Egyptian mind' could not be Oriental if one understands the 'Orient' as consisting of China, Japan, and India, and that which is related to these regions. For Husayn, the confines of 'near' Asia are Palestine, Greater Syria, and Mesopotamia. On the other hand, (non-Semitic) Persia is described as an Oriental nation located in farther away lands. Husayn laments that he never understood the aims of the Society of the Oriental League in Egypt, which sought solidarity with the Far East instead of the near West.

Fawzi's India

Within a year of the publication of Taha Husayn's book, Husayn Fawzi, a French-trained medical doctor, who would later become one of the most significant historians of Egypt and a pioneer in the genre of the modern travel account, published *A Modern Sindbad: A Tour of the Indian Ocean* (Fawzi 1938) on his voyage to the Indian Ocean. In 1933, Fawzi had sailed on a collaborative mission, consisting of forty British and Egyptian sailors and scientists. Fawzi's nine-month voyage departed from Alexandria, passing Aden, the Hadramaut, and Sri Lanka on route to the subcontinent.

Fawzi describes at length the temples he visits in India and he shares with the reader his thoughts on an ancient and great civilization. Fawzi is indeed fascinated by its aesthetics and

'I was raised to love the West and to admire its civilization I have spent my most significant formative years in Europe which reinforced my love and the pillars of my admiration.

When I went to the East and returned back to my country, my love and admiration of the West was transformed into a certitude' (Fawzi 1938)

statues. However, his narrative of India and Hinduism is paradoxical because it simultaneously reflects fascination and distaste. He conveys images of an oppressive Orient, dwelling on such local horrors as widow burning. To Fawzi, Malabar's temples evoked only nightmares, the fear of death. Having thus been led to ponder where the 'East' begins and where Egyptian civilization should be located *vis-à-vis* the East, he concludes that Egypt, its civilization, and even he himself, all belong to the Western European world.

Like Husayn, Fawzi was a firm believer in Western enlightenment and progress. Both believed that Western civilization represented the highest level of independent thinking and self-critique. Fawzi concludes his account by contrasting Western civilization with Hinduism as representing an Oriental and above all alien despotic culture. His chapter entitled 'The East and the West' (*al-sharq wa al-gharb*) epitomizes the core of this argument. Like Husayn, Fawzi wanted to distance himself from the 'East' by belonging to the Mediterranean basin. Still, Fawzi was certainly fascinated by Ghandi's peaceful resistance to British colonialism. He reminds us that Ghandi's spiritualism was important in pointing to the injustice of the Brahman caste system. However, Fawzi insists that the British were not entirely harmful in advancing their civilizing mission ideology. Their doctors, in fact, introduced vaccination, their engineers the irrigation system,

and their politicians put in order the political life of New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. Their social reformers opposed the burning of widows. Thus, if Ghandi's spiritualism was to fight the dark forces of this world, one could not condemn overall British politics as being merely evil deeds. If forced to choose between the two worlds Fawzi 'would rather prefer without hesitation, Greek civilization or the neighbouring European civilization once it had dispensed with the oppression of the Middle Ages.... It is a civilization that advocates the freedom of reason' (Fawzi 1938:175).

Four decades later

Fawzi's position changes, however, with his second trip to India (Fawzi 1978). In this account Fawzi re-thinks many of the assumptions and biases that he had expressed against Hinduism in his earlier work. In his introduction, he apologizes for his previous intransigent attitude, which he says stemmed from his youthful ignorance. India for Fawzi was now a dear neighbour to Egypt. India had now been independent for some time, and Fawzi had read many of the works of Indian intellectuals, philosophers, and post-colonial politicians – in addition to the works of many Orientalists on India's heritage. This time, too, Fawzi had been invited to participate in a UNESCO conference and many events in the world had shaped the post-colonial discourse. His return to India 37 years later is again interesting in that he asks the same question: Is Egypt located in the

Orient? His answer this time is different. Egypt is located at the crossroads of East and West, North and South. In the geography and the history, and into its future, Egypt is to remain open to the four directions; it is simultaneously African, Asiatic, and Mediterranean (Fawzi 1978:10).

The respective stances of these two 'liberal intellectuals' tell us a lot about the perceptions of Egyptians towards the vague notion of the 'Orient' and their even more vague self-reflexive positions. Asia was used for identity construction, which naturally kept on changing. They unconsciously reproduced inherited notions of the despotic Orient, as part and parcel of adopting a naive attitude towards enlightenment and rationalism. Again this is not a novel argument.

To conclude, the writings of both Husayn and Fawzi are extremely inspiring when it concerns issues of self-perceptions and the Other on the level of South-South intellectualism. These two intellectuals constructed a vision of an Orient that was much tainted by the spirit of the time. Taha Husayn and Husayn Fawzi were both fervent advocates of Egypt's belonging to the Greco-Roman Mediterranean culture. By doing so, they perpetuated a Western Orientalist perception of an antithetical Orient. Both Husayn and Fawzi adopted an uncritical enlightened position with respect to the West. But, it would be unfair to reproach them for such a stance as some Islamists are doing today when they attack the advocates of 'Mediterraneanism' as 'unauthentic' and westernized intellectuals. That Husayn and Fawzi were naive believers in enlightenment is evident, but perhaps also inevitable, given that many anti-colonial thinkers took this stance as the only path available for generating social criticism within the confines of a reformist framework. <

References

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* The occupation of Egypt was officially ended in 1936, yet the British did not depart until the Free Officers Revolution in 1952.