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

By Mona Abaza

Husayn did not believe that the relationship that ancient Egyptians had with the Oriental lands (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 conformed, like the Greek idea, with the Persians, who were 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 1962:350–1).

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-Semites as described as an Oriental nation located 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 Near East instead of the far 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 suburbs of New Delhi, passing Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. Their social reformers opposed the burning of widows. Thus, if Ghandi’s spiritualism was to fight the dark forces of Orientalism, 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, Ghandi’s spiritual 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 introspective attitude, which he says stemmed from his youthful ignorance. India for Fawzi was now a dear neighbour to Egypt. India had now been converted; independent for some time 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 that 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, not only for the questions of geography and the history, and into its future, Egypt is to remain open to the four directions; it is simultaneously African, Asian, and Mediterranean (Fawzi 1978:10).

The respective stances of these two ‘liberal intellectuals’ tell us a lot about the perceptions of Egyptian to the vague notion of the ‘Orient’ and their even more vague self-reflexive positions. Asia was used for identity construction, which naturally kept changing. They unconsciously repro-duced 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 anachronistic 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-colo- nial 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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