

Arabic Language and Civilization in the Eyes of the European History

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Abstract

Though the direct and indirect effects of the Arabic language in the Middle Ages on some European languages such as Spanish, French, and English, there were little discussion of this fact in their histories, especially in the history of English. The little discussion of this fact is due to many various reasons. First, consideration of the Orient by the Europeans as their ancient domain led to many cultural conflicts between the Arabs and the Europeans historically. The cultural gap between the oriental and occidental person for understanding the other. Second, many attempts to occupy the Orient give clear illustrations that the Europeans, especially the British and the French consider the Orient as a place that hold their second identity and origins of their religions, Judaism and Christianity. During the complete colonization of the Middle East in the 19th and 20th centuries make the reader figure out how important the Orient for the Europeans in general and for the British and the French in particular. Then the descriptions of the Arabs as inferior and ignorant make one understand that the practices of some Arab people for polygamy and their oppression of the Arab women are unacceptable in the European cultures and traditions. Therefore, the Arabs are classified as backward, “primitive and slave traders” (Ridouani, 2016, p.2). This paper argues and investigates the cultural reasons regarding the Occident’s ignorance of this fact in their history.

Key words: Orientalism; Occidentalism; Identity; Arabization; Primitivity; Colonialism; Middle ages

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INTRODUCTION

According to the French orientalist Joseph Ernest Renan,

One of the strangest things that have occurred in the history of humanity is spread of the Arabic language. At first, it was unknown. Suddenly, it started in full perfection, flexible, rich, and complete. It has neither childhood nor aging... [and it] exceeded its counterparts by the variety of its meanings and perfection of its structures. (qtd. in *Arabic in World Languages*, p.9)

Arabic language is one of the Semitic languages that is originated in the Middle East. It has many dialects spoken by different tribes from the Arabian Peninsula¹ to Morocco in North Africa. But, most Arab people try to speak Classical Arabic that is considered the most dominant accent spoken by Quraysh tribe² in Mecca. Consequently, the Koran is written according to this tribe’s grammatical rules and speech because they are considered the original Arabs³. During the advent of Islam by Muhammad⁴ between the period 570 AD and 632 AD, there was a

¹ Nowadays called Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman Sultanate and the United Arab Emirates.

² See <<http://khuraishi.net/about01.htm>> for more info about this tribe’s history, and where their ancestors came from. Also see Ghada Osman, “Pre- Islamic Arab Converts to Christianity in Mecca and Medina: An Investigation into the Arab Sources,” for more info about Quraysh’s religion and culture.

³ See the info in footnote (1) for more info about “Perished Arabs, Pure Arabs, and Arabized Arabs.”

⁴ Muhammad was born in Mecca in 570 AD and died in Madinah in 632 AD. According to the Islamic Doctrine, he is considered the last prophet sent by God, Allah.

great Islamic expansion from Mecca to other regions in the Middle East and North Africa. This resulted in a huge spread of the Arabic language and culture. After the death of Muhammad, the Umayyad⁵ and Abbasid⁶ Dynasty ruled and expanded the Islamic expansion to Spain. As a result, there were many Arabs from Arabia, Egypt, and Berbers who migrated to Spain for the purpose of settlement. They married “more than thirty thousand Spanish women” (Le Bon, 2012, p.281) that escalated the influence of Arabic over Spanish settlers.

When the Arabs ruled Spain, they made the Arabic language the official one for educational purposes. In Habeeb Saloum’s “The impact of Arabic Language and Culture on English and other European Languages,” he says, “From the eighth century to the twelfth century, Arabic became the scientific language of mankind. During this period anyone who desired to advance in the world and became a skilled and learned man had to study Arabic, just as in current day English opens the door to technical and scientific advancement for ambitious men and women.” Therefore, there was a great advancement in the process of education that resulted in great contact between Arabs and other European people from Spain, France, England, and Italy. In other words, many European people learned Arabic to pursue education that influenced their native languages; as a result, this process contributed to lead many Arabic words enter their languages.

Through history, one of the languages influenced by Arabic directly and indirectly is English. English descended from the Indo-European languages family. English language passed through three major periods in history. They are Old English (450-1100 AD), Middle English (1100-1500 AD), and Modern English (1500-1800 AD). During the old and medieval period, there was great contact between the European and Arab cultures in Spain and other regions, such as Sicily. For example, Smith says, “...Arabic learning was widely spread in medieval England from the 11th century to 13th century...” (qtd. in Darwish, 2016, p.107). The library, which was established in Spain by Arabs, made great influence for appearance of many works, such as Algebra and other various works in various fields including astronomy, mathematics. The influence of the Arabic language on these European languages, especially English is not widely discussed. As a consequence, I argue that in spite of Arabic language’s contributions of loanwords to some European languages, such as English, the effects of the Arabic language are

largely not discussed in their historical cultures due to various reasons.

ORIENTALISM VS THE ORIENT

Before the advent of Islam by Muhammad, some parts of the Arabian Peninsula and some coastal villages on the Red Sea⁷ were under control of the Roman Empire. As a result, some European people considered until today the orient as a European area or colony. According to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, he mentions: “The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes remarkable experience” (1979, p.1). As a result, whatever impact of Arabic language in the other European languages through history is not considered an achievement according to the Europeans’ mind because they were the Orient discoverers since ancient times. For the British and the French people, the Orient is an ancient place for their civilization and culture. Said (1979) says: “... *Orientalism* can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it, by making statements about it, authorizing it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it...” (p.3). Consequently, the Orient is an important place for the European because there were and are many historical, cultural, and social relationships that linked the European, especially the British and the French of the Orient.

Though the Arabic language contributed to the other languages of the European continent, the French and the British consider the Orient as European identity that is associated with their history and culture. Whatever happens during the old and medieval ages for the dominance of the Islamic civilization over Arabia, North Africa, and Spain, it cannot be acknowledged because the Orient for the British and the French is considered “... as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said, 1979, p.3) and identity as well. This can be supported by what happened during the medieval ages between the Arabs and the Europeans from wars that resulted in (mis)understanding the other. Through those wars, there were great shifts between the Arabs’ and the Europeans’ cultures that made each culture try to understand the other. After those great wars which lasted for 200 years, the great enthusiasm of the European to understand the Oriental person started. This kind of enthusiasm led to appearance of many research journeys for understanding the Orient. For example, Subrahmanyam’s *The Career and Legend of Vasco Da Gama* mentions that there are journeys of Vasco Da Gama, the Portuguese traveler, who was sent by the Portuguese King to the Orient to see and

⁵ Umayyad Dynasty was established in Medina and then shifted its center to Damascus. It ruled between 661-750 AD. See <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Umayyad.html>> for more information.

⁶ After the civil war between Umayyad sons and Abbasid sons, Abbasid Dynasty was established in Baghdad after Umayyad sons were defeated by them. Abbasid Dynasty ruled between 750-1250 AD. See <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Abbasid-dynasty>> for further details.

⁷ According to Wordweb Dictionary, it is “a long arm of the Indian Ocean between northeast Africa and Arabia; linked to the Mediterranean at the north end by the Suez Canal”

explore its culture and civilization (p.1) for further studies and researches.

Harold V. Livermore, a professor at the University of British Columbia, describes that the European's consideration of the Orient as a surrogate identity is the attempts of the Portuguese King Afonso de Albuquerque, Duke of Goa, to rule Yemen and the Red Sea in the 16th century ("Afonso de Albuquerque, the Great"). This great event is known, and its traces are still there in Jeddah City⁸. Though the Arabic language became widespread in North Africa with its great contributions to the other European languages, Some Europeans, in Mustafa Benkharafa's *The Present Situation of the Arabic Language and the Arab World Commitment to Arabization*, tried "to uproot the Arabs from their national identity..." (2013, p.204). Deracinating the Arabs' identity is evident that the European people consider that the Orient is a second identity for them (Said, 1979, p.3).

In Tahraoui Ramdane's and Merah Souad's "Between Orientalists and Al-Jazeera⁹: Image of Arabs in the West," they explain how the idea of Orientalists contributes to ignore the ancient and Islamic civilization during the Medieval Ages until the 20th century. Ramdane and Merah (2016, p.162) argue that, the orientalist's "... mission was primarily to belittle and reduce the contribution of Islam and the Arabs to the progress of human civilization". Some orientalist's descriptions of the Orient as barbaric and aggressive societies led to the creation many conflicts between the Arabs and the Europeans in 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. These attempts to disfigure the image of the Arab culture created many negative attitudes between the Arabs and the Europeans. Due to the European's consideration of the Orient as their oldest colony through history, it is evident that they have some negative opinions towards independence of the Orient with all its element-culture, civilization, religion, and identity. Said mentions at the beginning of his book, *Orientalism*, a famous saying of Karl Marx. Marx says regarding the Orient: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented" (p.xii). Another instance is Benjamin Disraeli's statement in his *Tancred* that "The East is a career" (qtd. in Said, 1979, p.xii). Marx's and Disraeli's statement is a supportive point about the overall idea that the Europeans try to not admit the Orient as an independent area; they would say the Orient, with all its cultural and civilizational factors and wealth, is belonging to us due to its consideration as the oldest Occidental colony for the Occident.

In the past, the intentional disregard of the Arabic language as a hegemonic one in North Africa and Andalusia¹⁰ by some European people illustrates that, "The

relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony ..." (Ibid., p.5). For example, Said explains how the Europeans treat or deal with the Oriental girls differently and they are positioned in lower places than other girls in the European cultures:

Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He [Flaubert] spoke for and represented her. He was a foreign, comparatively wealthy male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem¹¹ physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was "typically Oriental." ... Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled. (Ibid., p.6)

What happened in the situation of Kuchuk Hanem and her relationship with Flaubert is just a short, simple, and meaningful portrayal of the Oriental women as women whose their identities don't to them. The viewpoints of some British and other Europeans indicate that the Orient should be under control of them and the Orientals are weak, and they have no words to speak and represent themselves. However, the Europeans are considered and described themselves as representatives of the Orient.

Another astonishing reason why there is little discussion about the Arabic language and its contributions to the European languages, especially English is that the Arabic language is descended from Semitic languages. In other words, Arabs are belonging to the "Semitic race"¹² which are not considered a perfect race that must be acknowledged by the European orientalist. In regard to this point, Renan mentions:

One sees that in all things the Semitic race appear to us to be an incomplete race by virtue of its simplicity. This race—if I dare use the analogy—is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to paint; it [the Semitic race] lacks that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility. Like those individuals who possess so little fecundity that, after a gracious childhood, they attain only the most mediocre virility, the Semitic nations experienced their fullest flowering in their first age and have never been able to achieve true maturity. (Ibid., p.149)

For Renan's claim about the "Semitic race" and its imperfection gives many negative attitudes of the Europeans seeing or viewing the Oriental people as inferior. This inequality predicts that the Orient only reached its highest ranks during the medieval ages, therefore, there will be no renaissance for it in the future.

Some European people think that all the habits and customs of the Orient are taken from the Occident. In

⁸ According to Wordweb Dictionary: It is a "Port city in western Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea; near Mecca." See Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *Historic Cities of the Islamic World*, pp.222- 224.

⁹ Al-Jazeera is an another synonym for the word "peninsula."

¹⁰ Former name for Spain.

¹¹ Hanem is an Egyptian female name. It means a "lady."

¹² In Wordweb Dictionary, Semitic is related to smite; the word "Semite" means "a member of a group of Semitic-speaking peoples of the Middle East and northern Africa."

other words, all the civilizational elements and the cultural forms of the Arabs are originated in Europe and were transferred to the Orient. Said gives many explanations for this claim:

Many of the earliest Oriental amateurs began by welcoming the Orient as a salutary derangement of their European habits of mind and spirit. The Orient was overvalued for its pantheism, its spirituality, its stability, its longevity, its primitivity and so forth. Schelling, for example, saw the Oriental polytheism a preparation of the way for Judeo-Christian monotheism: Abraham was prefigured in Brahma.... The Orient appeared lamentably under humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric, and so forth. (Ibid., p.150)

The legacy of the Arab cultures and civilizations are claimed and argued that this legacy and heritage came from Europe. For example, verses of the Koran are said to be plagiarized from the Holy Bible because everything mentioned in the Koran mentioned in the Bible before the birth of Muhammad. What the Europeans claim and argue that the Islamic civilization is built and taken from the Bible because everything, mentioned in the Koran, was mentioned before the appearance of Islam and before birth of Muhamad in Mecca. Consequently, the cultural and religious conflicts between the Arabs and the Europeans are still present due to the considerations whether the Islamic civilizations and teachings are inherited from Europe or not.

Moreover, depiction and description of the Arabs as backward and barbaric is one of the most significant case that supports the idea that Arabs should not come or have power. As a result, Arabs are always seen as inferior and aggressive in many European societies though their dominance in the Middle Ages. For instance,

Every European traveler or resident in the Orient has had to protect himself from its unsettling influences.... The eccentricities of the oriental life, with odd calendars, its hopelessly strange languages, its seemingly perverse morality was reduced ... when they appeared as a series of detailed items presented in a normative European prose style. (Ibid., p.167)

The inferiority of the Arabs in the eyes of the European people is related to the cultural conflicts through history. Since the Arabs' occupation for Spain, the Europeans attacked the dominance of Arabic language over the Spanish, the French, and the English. The Europeans did not discuss this influence of the Arabic language because of the Arabs' occupation of Spain and Portuguese as well. According to Driss Ridouani's *The Representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western Media*, "For example, in the past Arabs and Muslims were largely recognized in the west as "erotic", "primitive", "ignorant", "slave traders" among other many derogatory terms" (2016, p.2). After the wars between the Arabs and Europeans in the Middle Ages, both became encountering the other and interested in understanding the other's culture, religion, and civilization. In the 20th century, many British and French orientalist and archaeologists came to Egypt and

the Arabian Peninsula to discover the Oriental culture for fathoming the Oriental person's simple mind. One of them was the archaeologist Thomas Edward Lawrence¹³, also known as Lawrence of the Arabia, who made great contributions for collapse of the Ottoman Empire¹⁴. After the revolt was successful against the Ottoman Empire, this illustrates the simple structure of the Arab's mind. Consequently, the simplicity of the Arab's mind symbolizes for their ignorance, their primitivity, and their quick judgements.

There is another religious reason which makes the Europeans criticize and classify the Arabs and their language as illiterate and ignorant people. In Islam, the idea of polygamy gives many bad images about the Orient and its civilizational status among other civilizations. Said explicates the feelings and emotions of some European people, especially those who live and work in the Orient about polygamy: The Oriental people are offenders of "sexual propriety. [And] everything about the Orient exuded dangerous sex, threatened hygiene and domestic seamliness with an excessive 'freedom of intercourse'..." (p.167). Though the idea of polygamy is not accepted in the European societies, this led many Occidental people to criticize the Arabs for polygamy because it creates a kind of inequality and discrimination among the oriental women in general. One of the greatest critics is Gregg Strauss. He says, in his article "Is Polygamy Inherently Unequal," that: "[The]...traditional polygamy is morally objectionable, because the spouses will always have unequal marital commitments and unequal control over their familial lives" (p.519). Therefore, the notion of polygamy in the Islamic civilization makes the world depict and describe the Arabs as women oppressors.

In Halim Barakat's *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State*, he gives many explications about why the Europeans see the Arab men as ignorant and backward. One of these reasons in addition to polygamy is the Arabs' male mistreatment of their women:

Arab society has traditionally assigned women to a subordinate status.... First, women are secluded and segregated. Veiling (a sign of separation) is still widespread in the most of the Arab world, and although an increasing number of women are being educated and filling important roles and positions in the public domain, the majority continue to occupy the private domain of the household. Second, limited roles are available to women.... Few professional careers are available to women under the existing division labor.... Third, personal status codes discriminate against women, particularly in such areas as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. (1993, p.102)

The oppression of Arab women created many critiques

¹³ For further details, see Lawrence, Thomas Edward, *Evolution of a Revolt: Early Post- War Writings of TE Lawrence*, 1968.

¹⁴ According to Wordweb Dictionary, the Ottoman Empire is "A Turkish sultanate of southwestern Asia and northeastern Africa and southeastern Europe; created by the Ottoman Turks in the 13th century and lasted until the end of World War I; although initially small it expanded until it superseded the Byzantine Empire."

against the Arab men describing their aggressive and unequal actions towards the Arab women in general. Consequently, this criticism of the Arabs by the Europeans and other countries led to describe the Arab's identity and language as uncivilized, standing against the developments and technology.

The influence of the Arabic language on Europe was only during the Middle Ages, and this influence was almost forgotten by the Occident people due to their consideration of the Orient as their oldest civilization. For example, the most events and their consequences in the 19th and 20th centuries explain how the Europeans wanted to bring back their oldest colony in the Orient. Through invasion of Napoleon and the British colonization of the Orient, there were great shifts in the oriental knowledge, culture and civilization. For example, the influence of the English language in the Middle East can signify to the loss of most Arabic grammatical rules. Moreover, if one doesn't speak English, he/she is considered as an ignorant person. For instance, the Lebanese people prefer speaking English more than Arabic due to their considerations of English as a second language. Consequently, what occurred between the British Empire and the Ottoman Empire is a good sign for the Europeans to return to their colonies in the Orient because those colonies were once belonging to the Roman Empire in the ancient times.

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