

BEYOND ANTIPATHY: A DIALOGIC APPROACH TO CONFLICT BETWEEN ARAB AND WESTERN CULTURES

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Introduction

Navigating the cultural conflicts between the Arab world and Western culture is not a trivial challenge given their sharply contrasting worldviews and deep divisions over political, social and religious issues. In this confrontation, the mass media have become the arena in which Arabs and Muslims face the dilemma in finding their authentic voice. Media distortions create, as described by Yvonne Haddad, deep feelings of “frustration and dismay as [Arabs] continue to experience prejudice, intimidation, discrimination, misunderstanding, and even hatred” (3).

It is not just a lack of information about the Middle East and its people in the Western media that precipitates these complaints; portrayals of Middle-eastern peoples often highlight offensive themes and images. Arabs and Muslims find particularly objectionable a compendium of images—among them violence, primitiveness, atavism and other threatening characteristics (Hamada).

Edward Said’s landmark work, including Orientalism (1978) and Covering Islam (1981), introduced the problem with Western conceptions of the Middle East. Edmund Ghareeb compiled a comprehensive portrayal of media exaggerations in Split Vision (1983). Subsequent works, have included Mistaken Identity (1985) by Janice Terry; TV Arab (1984) and Reel Bad Arabs (2001) both by Jack G. Shaheen; U.S. Media and the Middle East (1997) by Yahya Kamalipour, among other recent scholarly works.

The tumultuous events of September 11, 2001, while clearly a landmark date in terms of Islamic and Arabic images in the Western media, opened new relationships between West and East in terms of media coverage. Some images, to be certain, were drawn from old colonial caricatures, but more intense media coverage on the religious identities and motives of the actors has opened a window on some of the complexity and many dimensions of Islam and Middle-eastern societies. For example, the New York Times noted: “A coalition of Muslim advocacy groups...exhorted Muslims doctors to aid victims and urged Muslim-Americans to donate blood” (Sept. 13, 2001, A-24).

Cognitive representations are complex adaptations of knowledge of a world beyond reach held by individuals (D’Andrade). World citizens cannot escape such knowledge, because the media has spread it everywhere through a kind of technological hypnotic state, which inspired Akbar S. Ahmed to describe “demon images”:

You cannot escape the media...they are a demon...because they are almost like a demon lover: you’re seduced by them, can’t get away from them. I know that in Muslim homes...people are like anywhere else in the world. I mean there are people who are couch potatoes who see six, seven hours of television and if they had access to it, or had the times and the means, they would certainly sit through even more. This directly clashes with the broadest notion of Muslim culture because people are sitting in the living room, seven or eight people, focusing on one set in the corner, and

elders may come and elders may go...but with the television set on...all the traditional values are being challenged and new values are being transmitted through the box itself (Schlesinger 33).

Such representations must move past mere complaints about media images to a broader dialogue of the understanding of the complexities of cultural change and influence.

The Seattle Times published post-Sept. 11 an extensive explanation “Behind the Veil,” exploring the differing customs and practices about why Muslim women wear coverings, such as hijab, burka, burka, and nikab, as well as men’s headgear, such as the turban, and kalansua. “The fundamentalist wave is about identity,” wrote sociologist Fatima Mernissi. “[Muslim women] call for the veil...has to be looked at in light of the painful but necessary and prodigious reshuffling of identity that Muslims are going through” (Salt Lake Tribune, Oct. 27, 2001, C-3).

How can we clarify these intricate and complex cultural relationships without unrealistic and unfair simplifications? Arab/Muslim representations can exemplify the social evil of ethnic and racial reductionism, but leads to an analytical stalemate beyond which there is no path of resolution. Simplifying images, including those rejected as ethnic and racial stereotypes, cannot adequately answer the complaints of those wounded by Western antipathy (Palmer). Stuart Hall has pointed out how such stereotypes “get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them and fix them with change or development to eternity” (258). These simplified images exclude or expel everything that does not fit through closure and exclusion, revealing gross inequities of power.

Dialogue as an Alternative to Stereotyping

Using cultural dialogue as an alternative model suggests a broad range of assumptions about the social foundation of communication. First, meanings are conceived as open and fluid, rather than closed and fixed. Second, identities are simultaneously and continuously constructed. In this approach, there are no marginalized meanings or identities in the communicative exchange between parties.

Drawing from insights of such writers, among others, as Martin Heidegger, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky and Martin Buber, the dialogue paradigm has evolved around communicative interaction that promises a reconstruction of the philosophy of human exchange (Anderson, Cissna & Arnett). Russian linguist and philosopher Mikhail M. Bakhtin argued that culture, and all other aspects of identity, are contextual and relational, continually redefined in the contingent exchange of social meanings. Among those looking to these writings are some who sketch a powerful theory of cultural and ethnic interchange as it draws on dialogism to explain and clarify social relations.

The consequences of using the processes of dialogue as an analytical paradigm are glimpsed in the words of Bakhtin:

Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already man-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that

which he is—and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end (233)

In Bakhtin's conception of dialogics, there are powerful forces at work in every utterance. In The Dialogic Imagination (1988) Bakhtin wrote: "Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, or unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (272). Every language statement is always a response to things that have been said before, and every utterance also anticipates the responses its speaker expects.

From the dialogic perspective, reading a book, delivering a speech, or other apparent monologue, is actually part of a cultural dialogue in which we can hear the faint echoes of the voices of previous writers or speakers. Bakhtin used the word "heteroglossia" (many different tongues) to describe these endless echoes in an extended or prolonged conversation.

To extend these ideas to the problem of Arab/Muslim representation in Western and global media, we can say we engage in dialogue when reading a newspaper article, or when listening to radio or television, because what is read or heard provokes the listener to formulate a responsive point of view. As Bakhtin reasoned, we do not learn words from dictionaries, we take them from other people's mouths. Or, in other words, every utterance in an exchange is part of a grander dialogue, with the echoes created by earlier speakers shaping the ways in which words are used by some and both anticipated and resisted by others.

Dru Gladney sought to use the dialogic framework to account for the relatively stable social and cultural position of the Hui, a religious-ethnic group of Muslim Chinese who represent the second largest of 55 minority nationalities in the People's Republic of China (PRC). He argued that ethnic identity in such contexts is best understood as self-perceived notions of cultural identity in specific situations: "[A] dialogical interaction of shared traditions of descent with sociopolitical contexts, constantly negotiated" in each different settings (109).

For Gladney, the dialogic approach gives rise to new views of interrelations in the collision between cultures as "an internal dialogue" between social actors over their interpretations, no matter how they are defined, and "an external dialogue" with those to whom the group is in opposition. As the dialogue at each level changes, so does their self- and other-defined identities.

Shifting Focus of Stereotypes

In challenging the concept of stereotypes and other message-based social theories in mass media, we argue that the concept itself has exhausted its usefulness as a heuristic and analytical tool to understand international conflict as process. and, second, by reinventing a "dialogic" approach to the cultural conflicts of east vs. west in media discourse.

Stereotyping has gone through three historical phases of conceptualization in social science. In the first phase, it was introduced and defended as a useful and necessary tool in public discourse as early as the 1920s by political journalist and public philosopher Walter Lippman in Public Opinion

(1933). He drew from newspaper page imprinting the metaphor of page impressions to describe the “pictures in our heads”. Yet, many social psychologists eventually came to regard stereotypes as “incorrect generalizations that are rigid, oversimplified and biased” (Stroebe & Insko 4).

In the second phase, the concept of social stereotypes returned to analytical use in social psychology in the 1950s when they came to be seen by some social scientists as unfairly relegated “to achieve a moral purpose” (Brown 366). Stereotyping eventually was redeployed to shed light on both social prejudice and racial discrimination (Allport, 1954).

The third phase of stereotyping in the gradual but significant reduction in approaches to stereotyping by social scientists over the last few decades, Instead of using multiple theoretical perspectives (i.e. psychoanalytic, sociological, developmental and personality-oriented), research employed a distinctively cognitive approach. Other approaches and theories of stereotyping were not necessarily falsified, Stroebe and Insko reasoned, they simply "went out of fashion" (2). The cognitive approach became the dominant perspective because, as Stephan avowed: “[T]his area is the one in which the greatest advances in our knowledge have occurred” (600).

Most theories of stereotyping can be divided between two broad levels of analysis, involving either individual cognitive processes, or socio-cultural causes (Mackie & Hamilton; Macrae, Stangor & Hewstone). Individual theories of stereotyping can be based on the particular motives and personality traits that contribute to prejudiced actions. These approaches have contributed to an array of studies of authoritarian personality, scapegoat theory, and information processing. For their part, socio-cultural approaches draw upon conflict theories and social learning models to explain stereotyping.

In general, stereotypes have been cast as an epiphenomenon, assuming derogatory motives contributing to group and social differentiation, as well as ethnocentrism (Bar-Tal). Cognitive approaches to stereotyping and prejudice have successfully limited the conceptual agenda, but still have failed to answer the broader problems of reductionism. As a reviewer recently concluded: “Stereotypes are not objectionable because they are generalizations about categories...it is their ethnocentrism and the implication that important traits are inborn for large groups” (Brown 181).

Such a complaint about stereotyping was most apparent in critics' rejection of Raphael Patai's The Arab Mind, a work that has been sharply criticized for being:

[I]nsulting to millions of Arabs and to all those who believe in human equality. Not all is well in the Arab world, of course, but to hold an entire people responsible (in their genetic and mental makeup) for the misguided and evil policies of political leaders and external powers is outright prejudice (Abukhalil).

The failure of stereotyping to adequately address the problems of antipathy between cultures reinforces a need for alternative conceptual approaches, including those that fit the broad multi-domain contours of globalization.

From Clashing Civilizations to Discursive Differences

Samuel P. Huntington placed culture as the central problematic to international communication when he foresaw the fault lines of future conflicts between the incompatibility of seven or eight major civilizations in the world:

The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations... [they will be] the battle lines of the future ().

Huntington argued that Islamic and Confucian cultures were fundamentally different from each other and posed the greatest threat to the West. Those who disagreed with the inevitability of conflict between Islam and the West focused attention on such core concepts as community, nationalism and identity. The multidisciplinary study of identity has shown it to be subjective, unstable and reciprocal.

Islam has a long communicative tradition in older media (Mowlana). To the degree that new global technologies favor the open democracies of Western nations, Arab people will be at a disadvantage as they participate in the global marketplace (Ghaffari-Farhangi). The broad cultural currents that created national identities, or what Benedict Anderson called "imagined communities," arose from massive structural changes affecting national consciousness, involving significantly diminished role of religion, dynasty and temporality. In this view, the transformation of national identity at the feet of mass media, early on the print media, because they created unified fields of communicative exchange on a world stage.

Identity construction is more clearly seen as the negotiated product of strategies at several different social levels--symbolic, structural and interpersonal. When seen as negotiated, cultural conflict isn't necessarily condemned as dysfunctional. "Growth comes from having something to argue about" (Nash 116).

The challenge in a global environment is to move across collapsing physical boundaries of economies and nation-states, from the static beliefs of identity politics, to a level of tolerance and consensual pluralism where cultural differences of ethnic and religious identity are valued positively, in global discourse.

Globalization has created the condition of unprecedented contact between different cultural groups, producing multiple conflicts in media because such channels represent most of the opportunities for intercultural interaction. Such interactions often draw upon identities of ethnicity because they provide a sense of both self and place in society. Thus, ethnicity acquires a new kind of significance as global symbolic power, or "cultural capital" (Bourdieu).

Using the older critical strategies of protest and resistance, Arabs have had less success as a group compared to other religious or ethnic minorities, like the Jews or African Americans, in opening "a window on the multidimensionality of what can be called cultural ecology" (Mowlana 178). The

boundaries of the Arab diaspora are changing rapidly, primarily due to improving transportation and technological innovations of the information age. The causes and consequences of diaspora in the world are among the most daunting challenges facing social science today (Chow). No longer do geographical boundaries separate cultures; the “geography of space” has been replaced by the geography of experience (Wark).

The diaspora moves both directions: Western values are propagated by TV programs projected via satellite into the Arab nations of the Middle East and North Africa, and the wider Islamic world in south Asia and the Southeast Pacific; at the same moment Arab and Islamic peoples are creating religious and cultural enclaves throughout the world using such media channels as Arabsat and the Internet, as well as more traditional modes of interchange. Isolation, whether cultural or theological, is no longer a viable economic, political or cultural strategy.

There are pragmatic reasons to seek a new paradigm in the conflict between Arabs and the West. To document yet again how Arabs are unfairly portrayed in the Western media; or even that Westerners are either misguided or misanthropic, does little to advance cultural relations. In either case, the negative stereotype western image-makers have of Arabs is a barrier to effective international communication and understanding.

Instead of drawing these battle lines between cultures, we should recognize how globalization opens new opportunities for understanding. In spite of the distinct differences between these cultures, an alternative approach might open new theoretical and instrumental perspectives to help us move beyond the static confrontation of differences in order to understand processes of communication as dynamic, open and fluid.

Opportunities for Dialogue

The development in communication and information technology, especially the rapid growth and exploitation of satellite and computer-mediated systems, has created opportunity for the kinds of cultural dialogue that will promote understanding. Far beyond mere images, these profound changes affect both the perception and articulation of the social, political and religious discourse which emerging now within the ongoing globalization process (Palmer and Gallab).

Many so-called technicians of practical knowledge, among different generations of Arab immigrants, have been working to humanize and harmonize contending people. Some among them try to bridge the two cultures and bring to an end the hostile Arab images in Western media, and to encourage tolerance of the Middle East in the West without compromising its deeply held religious traditions and ethnic cultures.

Many leading Arab thinkers and writers, as well as others identified as political and religious leaders, have tried since the 19th Century to negotiate and reconcile the difficult terrain between their authentic cultural heritage (*asalah*) and modernity or (*hadathah*) in its ongoing forms (*mu'asarah*). Within this long uneasy communion, Islamic cultures have also been subject to strong ideological processes, leading to far-reaching changes in understanding of Islam itself (Schulze). Some Arab and Muslim intellectuals and political activists see Islam is no longer in competition with other religions but with socio-political ideologies, as for example what has been depicted as the imported ideologies

(*afkar musturadah*) of secularism, liberalism and Communism. We will describe these conflicts in mass media in this essay by extending the arena metaphor to encompass those experiences—including the tragedies of Sept. 11, 2001--and the people who work to “bridge” cultural conflicts, among the other complex developments in global communication that belie the errors of simpler, single-dimension theories of cultural conflict (e.g. stereotyping).

Among the many statements on the relation between the Orient and Occident is to be found the idea that the conflict between Muslim culture and the west is unbridgeable (Geertz). Now, given their contrasting worldviews: the two opposing cultures might look poorly matched in many dimensions. However, it is important for these cultures to reach out to each other so as to coexist. With the help of Middle Eastern Christian and Jewish translators and scholars (Kappert 1995) Arabs and Muslims have had a lasting influence on Western Europe between the 10th and 14th centuries. The paradoxical relationship of the Occident with the 'land of the East' since the 18th Century was marked by the projection of their own European spiritual and political processes of developments (be it in a positive or negative sense) on the "counter-world" of the Orient, which was fascinating, but remained foreign and strange. With increased contact, those worlds will appear less so.

Bridging the East-West Divide

For some, Arabic and Islamic worldviews offer a totalized vision encompassing all spheres of social intercourse: political, economic, religious, social, etc. The West divides and isolates the spheres of knowledge and action and enshrines individual identity and action. Within that context, despite overtones of "civic religion," many aspects of the West are perceived extrinsically secular; whereas traditional Islam is overtly committed to the sacred as the cornerstone of community and family life.

Some individuals individually and collectively have humanized in one way or another the Arab image by their social, political and intellectual contributions. Among them are, first, prominent academicians such as Albert Hourani and Zaki Badwi of Oxford University in Britain, Mohammed Arkon and Anwar Abdel Malek of the Sorbonne in France, Ibrahim Abu Lugod, Leila Ahmed, Farouk el-Baz, Fouad Ajami and Nobel Prize winners Ahmed H. Zewail of CIT and Elias Corey of Harvard among hundreds of Arab scholars who have been teaching at American Universities. Other scholars and writers like Smir Amin, Nawal Sadawi, Najeeb Mahfouz, Eltyb Salih, and Fatima Mernissi are among growing numbers of Arab writers who translated works find their way into western classroom.

Arab American politicians and activists who include Ralph Nader, Spencer Abraham, Jeane Shaheen, Donna Shalala, John Sununu, George Mitchell, Philip Habib, civil rights organizations and activists as James Abourezk, Hala Maksoud of Arab Anti-discrimination Committee (ADC), Ismael Ahmed Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, James J. Zogby of The Arab American Institute, National Association of Arab American, the Association of American Universities Graduates, Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).

Other personalities who have become visible in media are Queen Noor, and Hanan Ashrawi, as well as journalist Helen Thomas of AP, Lucie Salhany of Fox News, and Asaad Kelad of "Family Ties", "Facts of Life" and "Whose the Boss?" and Tony Thomas of the TV series "The Golden Girls".

On the business side Jacques Nasser, President and CEO of Ford Company, John Mack President of Morgan Stanley Group, pollster John Zogby, Waleed and Malik Ali of MPI. Others who contribute to the dialogue include such sports and entertainment personalities Mustafa Akkad producer of "The Message," "Lion of the Desert" and "Halloween Chillers."

These people, although they might look sharply different from each other, contribute to the interchange of the complicated system of push and pull from different directions that characterize the dynamics, mechanisms and complexity of east-west relationships.

Summary: Dialogue's Contributions to Communicative Understanding

In arguing for a reconceptualization of negative Arab/Muslim media images as part of the intercultural dialogue, we seek to broaden the possibilities of understanding. Growing numbers of Arabs and non-Arabs alike are seriously alarmed to see a cover-up of the real socio-political and economic hegemony through which divisions in the Arab/Muslim world are accentuated, exposed in the mass media and even encouraged by those who gain from the conflicts (Hanafi).

Even so, the emergence of a global dialogue is a virtual "whirlpool" of cultural meanings and requires cultural confrontations as it draws its new boundaries. We do not minimize the importance those confrontations, but we hope to move past the cycle of complaints that do not contribute to amelioration of relations. As outlined by Akbar S. Ahmed: "[U]nderstanding between Islam and the West—if not being recognized to the differences within the camps—is crucial. The need for understanding is imperative at this moment in history. I think it is crucial, we cannot live in isolation" (Schlesinger 32).

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