

Silent Stares: Albert Camus' Representation of Arabs in *Exile and the Kingdom*

The stories of Albert Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom* which deal with relations between the French and native Algerians contain strikingly repetitive motifs (that can also be found in *The Stranger*, *The First Man*, *The Plague*, and other Camus works) used to depict Arabs in Algeria. Their radical Otherness from Europeans, as portrayed in Camus' oeuvre, has often been noted. Edward Said points out in *Culture and Imperialism* that, according to the philosophy of French Imperialism, "Natives and their lands were not to be treated as entities that could be made French, but as possessions the immutable characteristics of which required separation and subservience (170)." The author insists repeatedly on using the dehumanizing device of referring to such characters not by their names, but by labels like "the Arab," "an elderly Arab," and "the tall Arab," often reflecting not his own attitude, but that of the characters through whose eyes the Arabs are seen. Arabs are also repeatedly depicted as thin; in contrast to European flabbiness; dark-skinned, in contrast to European pallor; and slow and patient, in contrast to European irritability and hyperconsciousness. Each of these contrasts seems intended to acknowledge the adaptedness of the Arab physiognomy and temperament to the hostile desert landscape and the visceral revulsion of the European metabolism against it. Although Camus' politics, as analyzed by Said and others, were far removed from such an unproblematic acceptance of the genetic rightness of Arabs as belonging to Algeria and Europeans as inevitably out of place there, this motif deepens with the two main attributes Camus relentlessly uses to characterize Arabs throughout *Exile and the*

Kingdom: their silence and their tendency to stare. While the silence could indicate an inability to communicate in French or even a courteous attitude toward their colonizers, in fact, especially when combined with a blank stare, it always bespeaks a strangely unsettling defiance and pride that erases the dehumanizing gesture of being labeled “the Arab” by fixing the French-Algerian protagonists (“pieds noirs”) in an objectifying gaze reminiscent of Sartre’s “regard de l’Autre” in *Being and Nothingness*.

In post-colonial critiques of Camus’ writing, much has been made of how the namelessness of his Arab characters marginalizes them in his work. Just as Chinua Achebe asserted in his famous essay “An Image of Africa” that Africa is reduced to a merely arbitrary geographic backdrop for the universal human drama of Marlow’s journey of self-discovery and that the African characters in “Heart of Darkness” therefore are merely part of the local color or at best stimuli for Marlow’s intellectual, moral, and emotional development, Said claims that for French writers, “Algeria is an exotic locale in which their own spiritual problems...can be addressed and therapeutically treated (183).” Ena Vulor, in *Colonial and Anti-Colonial Discourses*, criticizes the “narrative downplay of the victim of the killing, the Arab, who becomes clearly peripheral to the central issue [of *The Stranger*]...the irrationality of the judicial system.” Said further elaborates on how this marginalization relates to the namelessness of the Arab characters: “True, Meursault kills an Arab, but this Arab is not named and seems to be without a history, let alone a mother and father; true also, Arabs die of plague in Oran, but they are not named either (175).” To have a name is to have an identity. To possess a proper name is to differentiate one’s unique individuality from that mass of others who may also be alluded to merely as “the Arab.” To “make a name for oneself” means to distinguish

oneself from the masses of humanity, as Camus' undoubtedly did, and to assert one's worldview, even to impose it on others, as authors can do.

Yet naming is also a kind of oppressive taxonomy that strips the individual of the freedom of anonymity. When Baudelaire moves among the street crowds of Paris, like an "incognito prince," his anonymity is empowering in that it allows him to play the role of the observer, the artist, the author of the scene, just as it resists his being appropriated by the subjectivity of others who might impose their authorship or authority over him once he is noticed and objectified as part of the spectacle that is the crowd and loses his privileged status as spectator only. When one asks a captured prisoner for his "name, rank, and serial number," this act of naming processes and dehumanizes the heretofore free agent eluding capture and categorization. Michel Foucault has observed, in *The History of Sexuality*, that the clinicalization and rationalization imposed on human nature by the social sciences takes away the furtive freedom of the id by an act of naming. Instead of being forced to hide the instincts of our once repressed libidos, we are now forced to identify them, name them, talk about them in the post-modern society, perhaps on *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil*. This forced speaking and naming and identifying of oneself, according to Foucault, is not liberating, but tyrannical. It is akin to being asked on the street for one's identification papers by a night patrol during, say, the Nazi Occupation of France or being forced to wear a name tag at the MLA convention so that attendees can instantly pigeonhole one another according to status within the academic world. Surnames likewise, far from individuating, often provide a group identity by revealing ethnic group membership or pegging someone as either a Montague or a Capulet.

Although Gayatri Spivak explains in her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that she is referring specifically to the question of a collective “permission to narrate” one’s own historiography, as Said had earlier conceptualized the question of post-colonial empowerment in a 1984 essay, the question of voice, of speaking, has in recent years been conflated with the question of agency. Extending his argument about the marginalization of Arabs in Camus’ work, Said remarks that in *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, “the deaths of Arabs...silently inform the French characters’ difficulties of conscience and reflection.”

However, a refusal to speak can also be equated with a refusal of compliance with, or subordination to, a colonizing power, as when Spanish-speaking immigrants in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas refuse to speak English and instead create their own Spanish-speaking enclave. The silence of the subaltern may provide a sanctuary within colonial Algeria not unlike Baudelaire’s anonymity in a crowd. The silent Arabs in Camus’ works can thus be reinterpreted as “incognito princes” possessing a hidden plenitude of subjectivity, rather than being merely reduced to objectified status as part of the exotic landscape, as some readers would have it. Said hints at this privileged status when he acknowledges that “if you belong in a place, you do not have to keep saying and showing it; you just are, like the silent Arabs in *L’Etranger* (160).” Susan Tarrow advances this argument even further in her book *Exile from the Kingdom* by noting that in “The Adulterous Woman,” the first story from Camus’ *Exile and the Kingdom*, “The Arab has the upper hand because of his linguistic fluency [in Arabic].” This speaking of Arabic still represents a silence in Camus’ work since it is portrayed as mere undifferentiated sounds, as processed, or rather not processed intelligibly by the

Francophone protagonists or narrative voice. But it is not the silence of a “pacified...Muslim population (181)” which Said claims is the theme of Camus’ fiction, as history has proven. It is, if anything, closer to the silence James Joyce, himself a colonized subaltern, famously included in his strategy of “silence, exile, and cunning.” For the Arabs in colonial Algeria, it was an internal exile, but only a historically temporary one, and it can be shown through a sensitive reading of Camus’ work that this Arab silence, whether it manifests itself as a refusal to speak, or even learn, French, as a dignified reticence reminiscent of “strong, silent types” like Gary Cooper, John Wayne, and Clint Eastwood, or as a surly deafness to the demands of the colonizer, empowers the Arabs in Algeria and even weakens the “pieds noirs.”

Said has referred to Camus’ “belated,...incapacitated colonial sensibility (176),” and this incapacitation should be understood as emanating from the rising ambitions toward Arab sovereignty that became increasingly apparent when the French North African empire was in its last throes. The mutinous silence of the workers in “The Silent Men” undermines the authority of their French boss while it empowers them. It is as if the “pieds noirs” were being reduced to a silence that really was a stifling of their world view, not least by Sartre and other Parisian supporters of the Algerian Revolution who reduced Camus himself to a near-silence. The cutting out of the French missionary’s tongue by Arabs in “The Renegade” seems to symbolize this simultaneous loss of both voice and power on the part of the one-time colonizers. Critics like Said and Tarrow rightly point out the French-Algerian protagonist’s emasculation by this situation in “The Adulterous Woman,” in which the loss of voice accompanies an increasing diminution of patriarchal power.

Certainly in “The Adulterous Woman,” the “silence and impassivity (5)” Janine observes is part of a larger pattern of signifiers that bespeak freedom and a comfortable insouciance that Janine envies. Significantly, the Arabs on the bus have “no luggage,” a fact which pointedly suggests a lack of what we call “baggage,” they ignore the French in a way which lends them an aura of “dignity (16),” and they are described as “free lords (24)” of “their kingdom,” which will never be hers. They are described as “swaying (12)” rhythmically with each jolt of the bus, and their children are freely “whirling” like tops. This bodily ease is accompanied by an “unhurried slowness (15),” which indicates not a Gunga Din-like eagerness to please the colonial masters, but a mastery of the desert environment, to which the Arabs’ “thin hands and burnt faces (7)” are biologically adapted.

These “mute” figures are either “veiled” or “staring (11).” The veils add a visual dimension to the sanctuary of silence that resists colonial rationalization and co-optation. That the Arab women can see through the veils without really being seen suggests that they are the spectators with the power of the gaze and the unveiled Frenchwoman, Janine, is the objectified spectacle whose visible eyes reveal all that one might care to know about the state of her soul. Likewise, the silent staring of the Arab males fixes the “pieds noirs” in the petrifying gaze of their subjective and objectifying purview.

The silent stares of Arabs are even more unsettling and belittling in “The Renegade,” in which the “metallic eyes without expression” on the impassive “brown horse faces” of the Arab captors oppress the missionary with their unconquerable mystery. Daru, the “pieds noirs” schoolteacher in “The Guest,” also chafes under the silent relentless gaze of the Arab’s “blank stares” and “vacant and listless expression.”

Although in this story Daru is nominally the captor and the Arab the captive, the power situation resembles more that of “The Renegade,” a fact which becomes painfully clear to Daru by the end of the story when he realizes that it is he who is a prisoner in his little schoolroom, surrounded by Arabs who ultimately have the upper hand, if only due to strength in numbers.

The Muslim antipathy to representations of Mohammed and, historically, to literary representation in general can in this light be seen as a strategy of empowerment, in that cultural inscrutability, as opposed to Western transparency, can be seen as a survival tactic for Muslims in colonized countries and as a resistance to Western hegemony.

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