

Haidar Eid: “‘Worlding’ (Post) Modernism: Interpretative Possibilities of Critical Theory”

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Book Reviewed

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Haidar Eid is an independent political commentator and a professor of comparative and postcolonial literature at Al-Aqsa University in Gaza. He holds a PhD in literature and philosophy from Johannesburg University and has published on neo-colonialism in V. S. Naipaul's novel *A Bend in the River*, on social justice and resistance to Israeli occupation, as well as on the BDS movement. Among his latest public interventions is *Gaza Blues: Hymns of Love, Death and Resistance*, a collection of poems and songs written after the Israeli airstrikes on Gaza in 2014. Independently of whether one agrees with his political involvement or not, it expresses Eid's view of art as a possibility to resist the very same reality it is part of.

This review of Eid's *'Worlding' (Post)Modernism* aims to explore the book's contribution to critical approaches in post-colonial theorization. *'Worlding' (Post)Modernism* was first published in 2014 by Roman Books, an independent publisher based in Kolkata and London; it was printed and bound in India. Eid's book is based on his PhD thesis. He develops an argument for a reconstruction of critical literary theory that preserves an anti-authoritarian character against the logic of post-al theories, that is, theories like post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-pragmatism (18). The study aims at under-

standing the totality of the world, while keeping and perhaps making gaps for resisting that totality. In doing so, it not only contributes to literary criticism but also to critical theory.

The book is dedicated to Edward Said, for whom scholarship had to be political if it was to be meaningful. This sheds light on Eid's own understanding of the intellectual as being in the world, or *worlded*, alluding to the title of his book. The first part of the study is an extensive critical reading of (post)modern theory, drawing on a wide range of literature on realism, postmodernism, (neo-)Marxist approaches, and post-structuralism, such as approaches outlined by Jameson, Zavarzadeh, Lyotard, Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer. Eid's discussion assumes a reader already well versed in postmodern, literary and critical thought.

The main body of the book analyzes two very different novels, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), demonstrating that both novels, one realist and one postmodern, are products of their time and that both reflect a continuation of capitalist modes of production. By contrasting the two novels, Eid argues that postmodernism is a continuation of modernism rather than a definite break. Hence Eid's use of the term (post)modern,

emphasizing that continuation. Both novels represent within themselves different forms of the same political economy. As Eid uses the realities of the novels' protagonists to explain and analyze Marxist theory and the effects of capitalism, the study can give insight into Marxism in an accessible way. However, it would have been helpful to have more references to primary sources.

Eid assumes a dialectical interplay between political content, context, and aesthetic qualities in literature, so he sees the novel as a mirror to the external world from which it emerged (124). Accordingly, he interprets the novels' styles of writing and the issues the protagonists face as embedded in, and at the same time as reflecting on, their respective phase of capitalist development. Eid relies on a reading and conscious misreading of both novels (120), emphasizing a historic continuation between them. By doing so, he highlights that despite a temporal gap of seventy years between their publications, both novels narrate stories in which the goal of the capitalist market is to create consumers who perpetuate the existing system, mainly by not opposing it. This brings Eid to Gramsci's notion of hegemony, or to put it differently, co-optation of the people. Thus the modes of production and capitalism's progress (or decline)

become clearly visible in everyday life. Likewise, the discourse of modernism, used by Joyce, is part of the contestation concerning the hegemony of either capitalist or socialist relations of production (199). With this in mind, Eid addresses the changeability of the concept of the family, and how shifts in its significance and function correspond with the production relations of different eras (152).

Further elaborating on continuities, by drawing on Jameson and Eagleton, the change from realism and modernism to postmodernism appears as a transformation from monopoly capitalism and imperialism to late/multinational consumer capitalism. For Eid, (post)modernism continues the proceedings of colonialism and modernity, pushing the project to "civilize" and "humanize" towards its (post)modern endgame: to absorb and consume the "other" (63). "What globalization produces," according to Eid, "is a deepening of the gap between those who have and those who do not have" (87). From the author's perspective, globalization produces the unification of capital on a world scale, but it leads to the fragmentation and the division of workers and other subordinate groups. Wealth is created at the cost of diminishing human potential and dehumanizing lower classes and nations, which Eid sees represented in the gloomy and

backward Iron City, the "unconscious" or "other" in *White Noise*. Reconfirming the idea of the novel as a mirror to the external world, Eid sees in *White Noise* a microcosm of "America," by which he means only the United States. From an author grounded in postcolonial theory, an explanation or reflection on this terminology would seem possible. While throughout his study, Eid points to the entanglement of capitalism with structures of oppression, such as racism or patriarchy, it remains unclear if the economic condition is the main force shaping people's reality, or rather how exactly it relates to other oppressive structures.

Eid states that he pursues a "dialectical, and historical materialist understanding of history in general, and the twentieth century in particular" (153). With Althusser he maintains that the structure of our thinking about the social world, about ourselves, and about our role within that world is related to ideology and ultimately to the socio-economic condition. Here the question arises of how those deprived can represent themselves on their own terms. Eid regards Habermas' project of modernity, his theory of communicative rationality, as one option. But he acknowledges that it is not the only alternative, and that there are other constructive, democratic ways forward. Eid's deliberations are comprehen-

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sible and make sense. However, he does not make clear on what basis he chose these two novels and not other novels representing modernism and postmodernism, respectively.

Concerned with patriarchy as an oppressive structure related to other forms of oppression, such as racism (72), Eid makes a point through the style of his writing by referring to “(wo)men,” instead of just “men.” However, this use of language is not consistent and it remains vague whether Eid follows a particular logic or not. Some sentences only mention men: “in the industrial society, money mediates between man’s needs and commodities” (158). However, do we really live in a bisexual/bigendered world; is reality not slightly more complex than that? Moreover, what does this phrasing really do? Apart from acknowledging, that yes, women do exist, does the author convey

any additional meaning by saying “(wo)men” that could not have been conveyed by writing “people”? Beyond a change in vocabulary, how would the analysis change if it included a feminist approach towards how men and women are actually affected differently by capitalism and patriarchy, and how that simultaneously ties into racist structures?

This study, just as the novels Eid is analyzing to make his argument, is a product of its time. It reflects on it, and cannot be separated from it. That intertwinement is, then, exactly what opens up the potential for protest. Critical theory always looks for ruptures within the system, marking a starting point for resisting it. It also emphasizes the importance of ethical values in literature, especially the novel. For Eid the fundamental purpose for the existence of a critical theory that is multidimensional and multiperspectival, is not only to

describe and comprehend the world, but also to offer alternative worlds (89). Through a critical reading his objective is to make an alternative meaning visible, from which the potential for resistance arises (121).

Understanding Eid's writing on his own terms might also require the reader to understand this work in the context of the author's other interventions. Eid's reading opens connections to critical and postcolonial theorizations and debates. However, the explicit inclusion of a feminist reading, or works of fiction in languages other than English, might take his project a step further and place it more firmly in today's world of alternatives. Finally, Eid's study confirms what scholars like Said or Horkheimer and Adorno assessed: That power structures cannot be bypassed but that literary theory can be a tool to make them visible.

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