

4-20-2021

Arab Authors' Responses to Cross-Cultural Experiences with Europe: The Contrasting Perspectives of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Rifa'a al-Tahtawi

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Recommended Citation

Keuss, Clara R. (2021) "Arab Authors' Responses to Cross-Cultural Experiences with Europe: The Contrasting Perspectives of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Rifa'a al-Tahtawi," *Global Tides*: Vol. 15 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol15/iss1/1>

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Introduction

The initiation of the literary *Nahda* (Ar. “renaissance,” “awakening”) in the Middle East has in part been attributed to the French invasion of Egypt under Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. The decision of the French to colonize Egypt was, as Donald M. Reid indicates, “carrying out a colonial project....The French expedition seized Egypt to attack British interests in the Mediterranean and in India...” and was intended to bring prosperity to France as they were becoming overshadowed by the British empire.¹ The lasting effects of France’s colonial pursuits in the Middle East and North Africa are still apparent today, evident in the assimilation to European culture that colonized areas such as Algeria underwent during French rule, and in contemporary French attitudes towards immigrant Arabs. Perhaps a more illuminating perspective on French political involvement in the Middle East would draw a comparison between the invasions and the subsequent Arab renaissance. That “renaissance” was the *Nahda*, or awakening period initiated by Arabs. It was characterized by the revitalization of Middle Eastern culture in terms of a proliferation of literature, art, and international presence as a reaction to European political involvement. In fact, the comparison of two early authors of the period, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti and Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, underscores the impact of the French on the early *Nahda*. Although both authors view the impact of direct European contact as it relates to Middle Eastern culture differently, the sentiment expressed through their writing is one of pride for the Arab culture, and desire for the full realization of their culture to be expressed—even under the onslaught of European political control.

Jabarti’s Account and Criticism

The late 18th century was a period of political turmoil in Europe as America established itself as an independent nation and Britain looked elsewhere to continue imperial expansion. France also continued to search for ways to expand its territory and influence, and the Anglo-Franco rivalry produced by the competition between the two imperialist powers manifested particularly clearly in the Mediterranean. France identified Egypt as a feasible colonial objective and sent Napoleon’s army to invade in 7th Thermidor year VI (24 July 1798). The invasion was posed to the Egyptians as a means to liberate them from the oppressive Mamluk governors and their Ottoman overlords, and Napoleon expected acquiescence to the occupation in return.² Instead, his army was met with resistance from the reigning Ottoman Sultan and the Egyptian subjects, the full impact of which was ultimately expressed through an uprising by Egyptian civilians in October 1798. A combination of insurrections and the deteriorating state of France’s political system complicated the situation for the French, but ultimately they were forced out of Egypt by an Anglo-Ottoman invasion in 1801. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753-1822), who

¹ William H. Peck, review of *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, by Donald M. Reid, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122.4 (2002): 21-62.

² Jackson Sigler, “Engaging the Middle East: Napoleon’s Invasion of Egypt,” *History: Reviews of New Books* 38.2 (July 2010): 40-44.

lived in Egypt at this time, wrote *Tarikh muddat al-faransis bi-misr (The History of the Period of the French Occupation in Egypt)*, a historical account of the French occupation. This account was significant in the literary world, as it was among the first accounts of an Arab analyzing the West, as opposed to the conventional Western study of the East. In his review of Jabarti's account, Jason Thompson observes that "at a time when Western scholars were beginning to study Eastern lands systematically, al-Jabarti produced something that was exceedingly rare."³ Thompson is referring to al-Jabarti's desire to explain Western culture (specifically that of the French) to Middle Easterners so they could both view their own culture in contrast and navigate Western involvement in world politics better. Powerful in its effects, Jabarti's writings created a new lens through which Arabs could view Europeans and exposed brutal elements of the French occupation. Ultimately, it stood as an example of an Arab scholarly luminary who could criticize Western culture just as Westerners had criticized the East's.

Jabarti came from a traditional Islamic academic background and studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo before devoting the rest of his life to learning. He became an integral part of Egypt's ulama ([religious] "scholars"), and he proved himself to be an influential Muslim scholar devoted to the preservation of the faith and patriotism for his country.⁴ His traditional upbringing and fierce patriotism fueled his reaction to French occupation, which he perceived to be a disaster on multiple fronts. Jabarti was interested in closely scrutinizing the details of relationships and human behavior—almost to scientific precision. The French, on entering Cairo, attempted to gain support from the Muslim population by propagandizing the French defeat of the Mamluks at the Battle of the Pyramids and promising good intentions and respect for Islam. Napoleon specifically targeted the ulama of Al-Azhar to diminish their authority and pressed urban administrators for policy reforms in sanitation and taxation. The fact that Napoleon immediately and strategically targeted members of the Egyptian elite was likely one of the most flagrant signs of disrespect towards the Egyptian population in Jabarti's eyes. Not only was Napoleon embarking on a mission of thinly-veiled colonization, but the subtlety of Napoleon's strategy and professed respect for Egyptian culture would be destroyed by his ardent goal to infiltrate the elite. In fact, Jabarti knew the bureaucratic system of Egypt well; he was intensely interested in analyzing those in society who were charged with enforcing justice. In the first volume of his *Marvelous Compositions of Biographies and Events*, or '*Aja'ib al-athar fi'l-tarajim wa'l-akhbar*, Jabarti breaks down members of society into four categories, in an almost caste-like rigidity. In this context, Jabarti's first three categories are most significant. First are the *al-anbiya'* or prophets, second are the *ulama* or learned, and third are *al-muluk* or the local kings or regents. Jabarti, in stratifying different subsets of Egyptian civilians, supported a more traditional vision of classifying the order of society. He viewed the different vocations of his peers as indicative of their professional identity as well as their responsibility as people of faith.

³ Jason Thompson, review of *Napoleon in Egypt: Al-Jabarti's Chronicle of the French Occupation, 1798* by Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, edited by Shmuel Moreh, *Journal of World History*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1995): 144-147.

⁴ Evgeniya Prusskaya, "Arab Chronicles as a Source for Studying Bonaparte's Expedition to Egypt," *Napoleonica La Revue* 24.3 (2015): 48.

In *Marvelous Compositions*, Jabarti maintains that these elite members of society must do everything according to the precepts of the Qur'an since it impacts the dominion of God.⁵ It follows that by specifically targeting these members of the elite, Napoleon, whether he knew it or not, was targeting the members that made up the fabric of both legislative and religious culture of Egypt. Jabarti recognized and lamented this.

Despite Napoleon's efforts, the French desire to win the Ottoman Sultan's acquiescence to the occupation was immediately unsuccessful. Furthermore, the Egyptians—especially the educated elite such as Jabarti—perceived France's professed respect for native traditions as a manifestly complete disregard for those traditions in practice. The clash of cultures became an issue for Jabarti; he found particular fault in the adoption of French tradition by Egyptian women and described Westernizing Egyptian women to be licentious, as “most of them abandoned modesty and decency.”⁶ For many of the Egyptian Muslims, an imposition of new Western policies and traditions did not represent progress or an opportunity for Arabic culture to flourish, but instead an oppressive system that was directly antithetical to the morals and customs of the Middle East. The façade of Napoleon's extended diplomatic hand was exposed for what it was towards the end of his stay in Egypt. Entering the 19th century, in the third volume of his *History*, Jabarti continued to record exactly what he observed in Egypt. This included an account of the French, who upon observing the Egyptian grandees fleeing to the countryside away from Napoleon's reign, ordered their return, and threatened razing their houses for lack of compliance.⁷ This legislative example points to the slow unmasking of Napoleon's regime, moving from overtures of understanding and cooperation with the Egyptian elite to a strict rule of law that restricted freedom of even the most distinguished members of society.

Regarding France's military prowess, Jabarti identified the lack of continuity between France's proclamations of respect for Islam and their enacted brutality: “The French acted as if they were following the tradition of the community (of Muhammad) in early Islam and saw themselves as fighters of a holy war. They never considered the number of their army too high, nor did they care who was killed.”⁸ It was this direct and atrocious behavior that overshadowed any prospect of gaining scientific or military knowledge from the West, as Tahtawi later suggested. Al-Jabarti critiqued both the French preoccupation with Egypt and the Mediterranean, and also the resulting European “Orientalism” that proved to be exploitative in nature. It is important to note, however, that Jabarti faulted the Mamluk regime for Egypt's political disorder as he faulted the French. He attributed the French success in defeating the Mamluks to disorganization and vanity: “they [Mamluks] were bent on their life of confident luxury, proud of their appearance [...] they were all deluded.”⁹

⁵ Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *'Aja'ib al-athar fi'l-tarajim wa'l-akhbar* (Cairo: National Library Press, 1997), 13.

⁶ Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, Alexandre Cardin, and Mou'Allem Nakoula, *Journal D'Abdurrahman Gabarti, Pendant L'occupation Française En Égypte: Suivi D'un Précis De La Même Campagne*, (Paris: Dondey-Dupré, 1838), 252.

⁷ Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *'Aja'ib al-athar fi'l-tarajim wa'l-akhbar*, ([Cairo]: al-Matba'a al-'Amira, 1904), 3: 140.

⁸ Prusskaya, “Arab Chronicles,” 48.

⁹ Prusskaya, “Arab Chronicles,” 48.

Ultimately, Jabarti's reaction to the clash of European and Middle Eastern culture, and the fears and anger he portrayed in his chronicles, reflected the sentiments among many Middle Eastern scholars at the time. Niqula al-Turk, an Arabic language scholar who wrote *Memories of the French domination in Egypt and countries of Sham* from his Christian perspective, perceived European political aggression as detrimental to Egypt's progress. Al-Turk also noted the sly ways in which the French attempted to exert complete imperial control over Egypt: "The French have used a variety of tricks and followed different strategies to stay in power....They pretended to have the best intentions and sincere feelings toward the Muslims, to respect their religion and to want nothing but good for them."¹⁰ Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion set a precedent for how the West viewed the East, through a lens both curious and desirous of the riches that lay in the land and among the people. The exoticization of the term "Oriental" that resulted from Europe's colonial investment in the Middle East at once stripped Arab culture of its authenticity in the eyes of the West and offered a way for the West to adapt pieces of Arabic culture they deemed interesting. This disregard for genuine cultural understanding was reified by the practice of forced assimilation tactics on Europe's colonized Middle East territories. Algeria stands as an example of this exploitative behavior, where nationality and citizenship were separated based on religion, and thus retaining full citizenship rights required renouncing one's religion publicly.¹¹

Tahtawi's Counter-Narrative

From the perspective of those under French rule in Egypt, the West categorically presented itself as an overwhelming, culture-consuming force. For those Arabs able to travel to Europe, however, the West offered strategies to help pull Middle East culture back into the glory many Arabs thought was stifled by Mamluk rule. Egyptian scholar and writer Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) also reflected this opinion in his *Takhlīs al ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* (Ar. "Purification of the Precious in the Epitome of Paris"), *aw, al Diwān al nafīs bi iwān Bārīs* (Ar. "or, the Precious Compendium from Palatine Paris"), which covered his time in France, and *The methodology of Egyptians minds with regard to the marvels of modern literature*, which crystallized his opinion on the benefit of modern research. Like al-Jabarti, Tahtawi received an education from the esteemed Al-Azhar university in Cairo. Unlike al-Jabarti however, he evaded much of the political turmoil of the French invasion of Egypt by fleeing to upper Egypt during the occupation.¹² Rather than seeing evidence of the incompatibility of Eastern and Western cultures, al-Tahtawi presented the claim that the Middle East should adopt some of the advancements in 19th century Western medicine and science to help invigorate Arab culture following Mamluk rule. In *Takhlīs*, al-Tahtawi wrestled with the particular verbiage he could employ in Arabic to translate the "secrets" of Paris, the "bride of all countries" to his Arabic

¹⁰ Naquila Al-Turk, *Histoire De l'expédition française En Egypte* (N.p.: Nabu Press, 2012), 49.

¹¹ Tarek Ladjal and Benouda Bensaid, "The French Colonial Occupation and the Algerian National Identity: Alienation or Assimilation?" *International Journal of Arab Culture, Management and Sustainable Development* 2.2 (2012): 142.

¹² "Reefa Eltahtawi", *منتدى الكتاب العربي*, Arab World Books. Accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.arabworldbooks.com/authors/refaa-eltahtawi>

peers.¹³ *Takhlīs* also contained summaries of some of the Aristotelian arts and sciences Tahtawi had learned in France, such as geography, astronomy and history, as well as writing, rhetoric and logic. This work, along with many of his later translated academic findings, was published and disseminated through the esteemed Bulaq Printing Press in Cairo.

While Tahtawi appreciated the progress of western science, it would be a stretch to consider him a “westernizer.” Tahtawi maintained a strong belief in the cultural values and traditions of his Islamic background and saw the study of European science as a way to benefit and re-invigorate the already rich, deeply knowledgeable Arabic academic culture. In fact, in his celebratory chronicles of his time in Paris, al-Tahtawi also engaged in criticism of French culture rather harshly, elucidating that: “This city [Paris], like all the great cities of France and Europe, is filled with a great deal of immorality, heresies, and human error, despite the fact that Paris is one of the intellectual capitals of the entire world, and a center for foreign sciences.”¹⁴ Tahtawi understood the power of rhetoric and, through his analysis of the French and Arabic languages, became incredibly familiar with the science of perfecting expression and speech. In Tahtawi’s eyes, language was one of the most powerful tools one could possess for purposes of communication as well as coercion, for expressions of beauty as well as betrayal. In his *Takhlīs*, Tahtawi examines this idea of the power of language to capture truth.¹⁵ In *Takhlīs*, Tahtawi explains that humans attempt to express their thoughts coherently to others, and one way to communicate complex thoughts is through eloquent speech.¹⁶ Eloquence and the art of speech, evident in any language, do not necessarily translate the same way in every language, however. This concept is illustrated throughout *Takhlīs* in the comparison of figures of speech, metaphors and similes. In French, for example, the opening and closing of a flower is appropriately, and frequently, used as a metaphor for the bloom of virginity; in Arabic, however, the same metaphor is inappropriate and does not possess the same poetic influence it would in French.

Shaden Tageldin traces this concept of intralingual rhetorical discrepancies to Napoleon’s first proclamation to the people of Egypt. Tageldin’s analysis, however, uncovers a more sinister motive than Tahtawi’s theme of mere communication error: Tageldin argues instead that Napoleon was immediately aware of the way his proclamation would be translated and interpreted and adopted a scheme of recognition and mimicry to stabilize his dominion over Egypt.¹⁷ Originally, Napoleon’s overture stated “Nous sommes amis des vrais musulmans”, (we are friends of the true Muslims). After what Tageldin terms a “brilliant stroke of (mis)translation,” however, the resulting phrase is “The French also are sincere Muslims,” a

¹³ Mohammed Sawaie, “Rifa a Rafi Al-Tahtawi and His Contribution to the Lexical Development of Modern Literary Arabic,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32.3 (2000): 397.

¹⁴ Daniel L. Newman, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric* (London: Saqi, 2002), 2: 5.

¹⁶ Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, *Takhlīs al ibrīz fī talkhīs Bārīz* (Cairo: Bulaq Press, 1255 [1839]), 197.

¹⁷ Shaden Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2011), 34.

grandiose statement betraying fundamental sameness.¹⁸ The exploitative aims of Napoleon's mission, now masked with odes to equivalence, became increasingly apparent as the French army continued to disregard traditional Egyptian and Islamic culture. Thus the benefit of cross-cultural relations in Tahtawi's eyes drew solely from adapting European science to further Arab culture, not assimilating to European culture.

In his goal to accurately translate the learnings from French to Arabic, Tahtawi embarked on a deep lexicographical, comparative study of the two languages. In order to express the nuances of the scientific academia he desired to introduce to the Arab world, he used several strategies; as Mohammad Sawaie notes in his description of Tahtawi's translation process, "he [al-Tahtawi] imported European words, [...] infused classical and colloquial usages with new meanings; and coined neologisms."¹⁹ Tahtawi approached cross-cultural relations in a different way than Jabarti; for Tahtawi, the Arab and French cultures were not incompatible, and careful integration of some French literature and science to Arab academia could be beneficial. Tahtawi's ultimate vision included an education that would combine local Muslim tradition and progressive European science. This vision was reified in part through the Language School in Cairo, predecessor of the modern Faculty of Languages of the University of 'Ayn Shams in Cairo. The curriculum of the school included a broad language teaching, ranging from French to English, Turkish, Italian, and Arabic. It also included subjects such as geography, history, and mathematics, as well as French and Islamic law.²⁰ The result was a tangible expression of Tahtawi's vision: a broad education for the Egyptian public that combined Islamic culture with European studies.

Conclusion

Tahtawi understood the power of language to change perspectives but was not present in Egypt to witness firsthand Napoleon's mimicry. Jabarti, although less acquainted with the specifics of grammar and rhetorical appeal than Tahtawi, witnessed Napoleon's failed attempts at peaceful subjugation of the Egyptian people, and immediately criticized what he recognized to be imperial suffocation and mockery of his people and culture. Essentially, the introduction of French culture into the Arab world, forced and sudden as it was during Napoleon's invasion, prompted different reactions and protocols from Arab scholars and public alike. Some, like Jabarti, viewed the introduction of European customs to Egypt as degrading and stifling true Arab culture. Others, like Tahtawi, saw the culture clash as an opportunity to adopt some Western academic progress, while retaining traditional Arabic culture.

For both authors, the preservation of Islamic practice was fundamental and shaped how they responded to the religiously premised practices of the French; neither author condoned the French disregard for Islamic practice. And, although they drew different conclusions as to the

¹⁸ Tageldin, *Disarming*, 34. If translating from French to English, Tageldin's interpretation could be accomplished merely by misspelling amis and aussi; however, the true confusion in translation is between Arabic and French.

¹⁹ Sawaie, "Lexical Development," 405.

²⁰ Newman, *Imam*, 2: 5.

degree of cultural confluence that would be beneficial to Arabs, both Jabarti and Tahtawi published chronicles of their experiences that became instrumental in the lead-up to the *Nahda* period in the Middle East. The introduction of the West in the Middle East provided an opportunity for the Arab peoples to reflect upon their own culture and contribution to the renaissance of research and art that defined the 19th century. As Tarek el-Ariss indicates in his anthology of the *Nahda*, “the perception of the violent encounter with Europe as the *Nahda*’s starting point or moment of origin has been complemented with other encounters through travel and cultural exchange known as the “Arab rediscovery of Europe.”²¹ Thus as the Europeans were ‘rediscovering’ the Middle East and North Africa region as areas of possible colonization and great cultural wealth, the East in turn gained a new perspective of the West in light of their own traditions.

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²¹ Tarek El-Ariss, *The Arab Renaissance: a Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda* (The Modern Language Association of America, 2018): xix.

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