

## Shifting Perceptions of Orient and Occident in Nineteenth-Century Arabic Travel Writing

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between the Eastern Self and the Western Other by focusing on the influence of the French Other on the ideology of the Arab Self in modern Arabic travel literature. As a case study, the analysis has been conducted on *Takhṭīṣ al-Ibriz fī Talkhīṣ Paris* [‘The extraction of pure gold in the abridgement of Paris’]. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, from which this source originates, is considered to be significant in terms of distinguishing modern travelogue literature from that of the medieval period, where the image of the Western Other in Arabs’ imagination dramatically changed due to colonialism. As one of the richest and most open approaches in textual analysis, the study adopts the thematic approach to shed light on the extent to which the ideological impact of the Other on the political, religious, civil and social domains of the Self can be seen in this wide-ranging travel source. The study infers that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was greatly ideologically impacted by West in all of the allocated domains, as can be seen clearly in his comprehensive comparisons, descriptions and explanations. This influence is indeed what distinguishes this modern travelogue literature from the medieval ones.

‘... Islam and the Arabs have their own representations, too, and we shall treat them here as they occur in that fragmentary-yet powerfully and ideologically coherent-persistence’  
(Said, 1979, p. 285).

### INTRODUCTION

The dual discourse of the Eastern Self and the Western Other is one of the most significant discourses in medieval, modern and postcolonial Arabic literature. Relating to modern Arabic travel texts it is a central discourse, and the motivations behind its existence are wide-ranging. However, Western colonialism in the East has largely contributed to making Arab travellers formulate a new concept and image of the West and alter the general conventional imagination that was dominant about the West before Western imperialism, which was mostly related to the religious factor. Arab travellers before the nineteenth century, before the first source of modern Arabic travel literature appeared, had a generalized and shared impression of the West, as the connection was limited to poetical and commercial fields. This general impression did not include the ideology of the perception of inferiority,

as Western colonialism or imperialism had not yet spread in the East. Therefore, the nineteenth century was the era when ‘the two worlds’ met ideologically, in the sense that ideology is understood as a comprehensive concept including all political, cultural and philosophical thought and discourse (Cuddon, 2013, p. 353). The West gained political dominance in all scientific, cultural, civil, and economic aspects, and profoundly changed Eastern view of the Other, and indeed affected the relationships between them at all levels. ‘[T]he relationship between Occident and Orient becomes ‘a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony’ (Said, 1979, p.5). Thus, this concern has shaped different, radical and ideological views of the West in the mind of the Eastern Self (Said, 1979, p. 43 & Labīb, 1999, p. 25). However, surprisingly, the view of the West has been reflected differently in the writings of those who have travelled to the Other, as seen in the travel writings of the nineteenth century, not only in the focus of this study, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, but also in al-Shidyāq, Georgie Zeidan, and others which call into question the assertion in Rudyard Kipling’s poem, ‘The Ballad of East and West’, that ‘East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet’ (Kingsley, 1975, p. 54).

## 1. THE CASE OF AL-ṬAḤṬĀWĪ

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was educated by many of the scholars of al-Azhar in Egypt. His education at al-Azhar was traditional, limited to Islamic culture, reciting and memorizing the Qur'an, Arabic phonology and syntax. In addition, he was taught by Sheikh al-'Aṭṭar Ḥassan in 1835, who had a strong relationship with both traditional and Western types of knowledge, gained from his time teaching Arabic to those involved in Napoleon's military mission in Egypt. Thus, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī received and was influenced by Western ideas and concepts (Abū-Ḥamdān, 1992, p. 34.). Accordingly, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was conscious of the depth of the problematic relationship between the dualism of the Self and the West even before he travelled there; once he arrived, he had the opportunity to look more closely at Western scientific sources. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī is considered to be the first Arab Muslim traveller to identify with the West, France particularly, in the course of his scientific inquiry and who consequently invited all Arabs and Muslims to recognize the West and benefit from its culture and scientific developments. In addition, his travel is considered as the first fruitful relationship between the East and the West in the modern time ('Amārah, 2007, pp. 141-42 & Labīb, 1999, p. 189). Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's indeed also intellectual, cultural, and civil critique of the Other is regarded as the most important factor that distinguishes him from previous Arab travellers who had promoted particular ideas of Muslims and non-Muslims that aimed to reject all non-Muslim knowledge, whatever its advantages. Therefore, his views can be seen as evidence of his depth of understanding of the Other.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no published source in the particular subject area of this paper. However, there are a few relevant sources who have explored *Takhlīs al-Ibriz fī Talkhīs Paris* while focusing on other research areas, such as Ḥijāzī (1974) in *Uṣūl Al-Fikr Al-'Arabī Al-Ḥadīth 'Inda Al-Taḥṭāwī, Ma'a Al-Nnaṣ Al-Kāmil Li-Kitābihi "Takhlīs al-ibriz*, and Abū-Ḥamdān (1992) in *Rifā'ah Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī: Rā'id Al-Taḥṭāwī Al-Ūrūbbī fī Miṣr*. Both scholars touch on the issue of the ideological influence of the Western Other on the Eastern Self in *Takhlīs* in the course of discussing the formative influences on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's writings.

They investigate this aspect of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in his travelogue and his subsequent publications which discussed the issues of human rights, Muslim women's liberation, political laws, education, etc., written by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī after his return from France. Both authors concentrated on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's role in the intellectual evolution in Egypt and how he applied his acquisition of Western knowledge to his homeland. Furthermore, the issue only tends to be mentioned in introductions, such as the English translation of *Takhlīs* by Newman (2004): *An Imam In Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*. In this source, Newman briefly referred to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's description of the Other in the introduction, particularly in the context of criticizing its format and style. In (2007), 'Amārah published

*Rifā'ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī Rā'd al-tanwīr Fī al-'aṣr al-Ḥadīth* [Rifā'ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī the Pioneer of the Enlightenment in the Modern Era]. In this source he cites the image of the Other in *Takhlīs* in the context of discussing al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's views on Western political, religious, national, cultural, and social ideas. It is also seen in the context of comparing al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's thoughts with his contemporaries' conventional Islamic notions and in the analysis of how al-Ṭaḥṭāwī deals with the intellectual differences between the two cultures. However, 'Amārah (2007) does not consider the ideological influence of the Western Other on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in the aforementioned domains. In addition to these relevant sources, in (2012) al-Sayyid published *Rifā'ah Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī Bayna al-'almāniyah Wa-Al-Islām: Dirāsah Taḥlīliyah Muqāranah*. As is clear from the title, al-Sayyid looked at the source from different perspectives. He discussed some Western aspects that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī admired and acknowledged in his travelogue, such as political laws, education, women's liberation, national and religious identities, etc. The main purpose, to al-Sayyid, was to argue that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's primary aim was not to spread secularism in Egypt, as many Muslim researchers have claimed. Rather, the aim was to strengthen Islamic culture. As evidence for his claim, he quoted statements related to those points in the travelogue and also duly acknowledged his criticisms, which contained the image of the Other. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was indeed fascinated by the political, civil, cultural, and social development of the Other, and its magical and unmatched nature. Such an impression positively influenced his thinking about the image of the West that had been imprinted in his mind, due to the East's general inherited impression of the West, as discussed in the first section. This culture shock also compelled him to be wide open to the Western cultural and scientific fields of knowledge. The Western ideological influence on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's thoughts in *Takhlīs* was spread over all civil, social, historical, economic, and political domains. However, the discussion in this paper is restricted to the political, religious, civil and social domains.

## 3. THE POLITICAL DOMAIN

In this field, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī provided a comprehensive description and explanation of the Other's policies and laws that were correlated with justice, governmental laws, and human rights. These, according to him, are supposed to be in the homeland of the Islamic and prophetic law, as mentioned in the preface of *Takhlīs* (Ḥijāzī, 1974, p. 165). He also outlined and discussed at length the French civil constitution's articles associated with justice, the judiciary, political, domestic, and governmental affairs, the French president's secret Diwāns (Chamber), and human rights. He translated seventy-four articles of law in the third part of his book's second essay, of which most are neither in the holy Qur'an nor in the prophetic literature, as he acknowledged (Newman, 2004, pp. 188-190). His explanation and comparison of the legal system and political and governmental affairs of/between the Self and the Other indicate the Western influence on the thoughts of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, as he had never compared or criticized the Self's political conditions before. This is simply because this idea had not existed in the old dual

discourse between the Self and the Other in Arabic travel literature prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, this is because of the perceived dogmatic radical and ideological views of the West by the East in the wake of oppressive colonial conditions that had been in place since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first article of law is a suitable example for his description of the Other's political condition, which shows the ideological influence on his thinking. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī observed that all classes of French people are equal before the law (Sharī'a), and in the conduct of the provisions contained in the law they do not differentiate between anyone on the grounds of status; even if a lawsuit were held against the King, the judgment would be served on him like any other person. Accordingly, this article is the overarching factor in the administration of justice, enabling assistance for the oppressed, who can yet achieve judgments on members of the elite. Further, he wished that Arabs would return to the justice and equity systems which they had lost, which the Other adopted and applied in society, where what they called freedom is basically justice and equity in Islam (Al-Sayyid, 2012, pp. 106, 108). These descriptions of those articles of law and the comparison between the Self and the Other in these cases indicate the ideological influence on his thinking as he became more aware of the Self's political condition. Notwithstanding this, his translation of a number of the Other's articles of law was not to invite Arabs and Muslims to apply them in their homelands, as many Arab and Muslim religious scholars claimed during and after the nineteenth century. Rather, it was solely to familiarize Arabs with the Other's principles and rules of which the Arabs had no experience (Newman, 2004, p. 86). Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was restricted in his admiration to the legal laws that are not derived from holy books but have been taken from secular sources, of which the majority are political. His limited acceptance of French articles of law in his comments on them proves his conscious awareness in this domain. Thus, the ideological influence of the Other is noted through comprehensive description and explanation of the Other's political domain and the evocation of the comparison between the Self and the Other in each condition.

#### 4. RELIGIOUS DOMAIN

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, in the twelfth section of the third essay of his travel source, presented a full description of the Other's religious credo, where he stated that the main religion of France is Roman Catholic Christianity, and that there were Jewish but no Muslim settlers. This reference to Jews is rooted in ancient Arab culture and history concerning their coexistence with Jews and Christians; Arabs were more familiar with Christians than Jews, as seen for instance in al-Jāḥiḍ's letters (Al-Jāḥiḍ, 1991, V:3, pp. 308-312). Therefore, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī depicted solely the pastors and Christians' habits, the traditions of the churches, and their religious celebrations. At the beginning of his introduction, particularly in the context of addressing the reasons for his travel to the West, he remarked that France was a land of disbelief and stubbornness. Also, he noted that most people in European states were Christians, which indicates the prevailing dual

discourse between the Self and the Other in Arabic travel literature that was dominant before and during his century. This dual discourse was mainly based on dividing the world into believers, who were Muslims, and non-believers, who were non-Muslims. Indeed, orientalist for a long time have customarily drawn comparisons between Islam and the Other, particularly in Europe, in which the former is represented in Islam while the latter is enacted in the religious, social and political domains (Labīb, 1999, pp. 196-97). This is clearly seen in his comparisons in the other domains discussed in this paper. Although the traveler had a strict religious background and concomitant culture shock in Paris, he fairly described the Other's religion and their treatments of other religions. For instance, he acknowledged Paris's religious tolerance and respect for holy religions. Indeed, in France, according to him, it was permissible to worship and follow religions other than Christianity, and French people did not prevent Muslims from establishing a mosque. The role of the Other in changing the old concepts in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's thinking that was based on the religious factor is apparent in his description. Thus, for him, the Other had successfully changed the traditional dual discourse of dividing the world into believers and non-believers in order to structure a new connection between the two worlds, based on cultural criticism alone. In addition, the Other's influence on the Self extended to the inclusion of Islamic organizations. In the context of discussing the second article of French law, which was about the organization of the exchequer's transactions, he observed that the processes of the Islamic exchequer were not organizationally similar to the Other's. Also, in the context of describing the Other's impression of cultural and scientific knowledge, he indicated that al-Azhar, Zaytuna Mosque, Umayyad Mosque, etc. excelled in all mental and religious sciences, while Christians in the West realized all cultural and scientific domains of knowledge (Ḥijāzī, 1974, p. 299). Therefore, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī suggested changing the curriculum and instruction of al-Azhar. Indeed, the Other had ideologically influenced the Eastern Self to bring its real evolved condition to fruition. It is noteworthy to state here that although al-Ṭaḥṭāwī specifically allocated religion in a specific section in his travelogue, it affected all social, political, civil and cultural domains throughout.

#### 5. CIVIL DOMAIN

The Other's civilization is one of the significant domains that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī impressively described in *Takhlīs*. According to Ḥanaftī, although al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's absolute ideal description of the Other in his source is greatly impressions of (an Azharī) a traditional scholar who was culturally shocked by the West, it is however considered as a reading of the Self in the mirror of the Other (Quoted in Labīb, 1999, pp. 189-90). Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī thus viewed Paris as the greatest city in its structure, prosperity, and culture, because the French nation was excellent in its relationship with the arts and knowledge. He was impressed by the civilization of Paris, which he considered unmatched in the East. In addition, he presented much data about recreation, real estate, cooking utensils, fashion, casinos, etc. that distinguished Paris from other European cities and made

it the brightest and finest city in the West. Similar to the political and religious domains, the ideological influence of the Other seems obvious in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's description of Paris's civilization, which led him to take into consideration the massive variations between his homeland and Paris, and also in the comparison between the Self and the Other. In the sense of economic and industrial comparisons, for instance, at the beginning of the fourth section of the third essay, he compared Paris to other Western cities, and not with the East. His admiration for the professionalism of French architecture, to be inferred from his descriptions of the nation's buildings, their materials, immaculate cleanliness, and luxury furniture, led him to suggest that there was much the Self could learn from the Other. One of the clear examples given is his description of the enviable cleanliness of the Christian French and their houses, compared to the ancient Egyptian people of antiquity, who were the greatest people on earth in terms of cleanliness, a tradition which Egyptian Copts, a faction of Christianity, did not follow in Egypt. In addition, when he was describing the prosperity and structure of Paris, he declared that if Egypt were provided with similar constitutional materials, it would have been the center of the world. These statements demonstrate the impact of Western ideology on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī. One significant point should be highlighted here, which can demonstrate the Western impact on al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's thinking. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī did not mention the Self because he recognized the delayed progress of the Self in his lifetime. Therefore, in the context of economic and industrial comparisons, he compared Paris with other Western cities and not with the East. Furthermore, as discussed in the second section of this study, the core factor in al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's presence on the Egyptian scientific mission to France was religious, in that he was a religious leader (Imam) for its students. However, due to the golden opportunity given by his teacher al-'Aṭṭar to look at Western knowledge in Egypt and due to his passion to learn more about Western science in France, he joined the Egyptian scientific mission as both religious leader and student. It seems very natural, thus, that he divulged many details of cultural and scientific knowledge, education, and scientific scholarship in France, and Paris in particular, in his travelogue source because this travel interests were largely in these areas. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī comprehensively described the cultural and scientific knowledge of the Other in the first and second sections of his introduction, the second section, and also discussed it in detail in the ninth and thirteenth sections of the third essay, and in the whole of the sixth essay. He also indicated the advantage of the sciences and the helpfulness of the Other's scientific scholars in the fourth, fifth, and the sixth essays of *Takhlīs*. In the context of discussing the scientific knowledge of the Other, he declared that most of the relevant sciences were realized perfectly by French people and not completely known by the Self, which led him to assert that Paris was the greatest European city to which people gravitated from all over the world in order to learn sciences, especially medical science (Ḥijāzī, 1974, p. 152).

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's attention to sciences and the place of honour of the Other's scientific scholars also appears in detail in *Takhlīs*. He mentioned correspondence between French scientific scholars and himself besides his academic mentor

Edme-François Jomard, in the fourth section of the fourth essay. He then described the sciences and their advantages and described how Prof. Jomard directed him to obtain success in his studies (Ḥijāzī, 1974, pp. 332-342). In *Takhlīs*, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī comprehensively depicted all evolving sciences, the Other's considerable attention to all areas of science, and the positive roles of French scientific scholars in the academic life of foreign students. In addition, he realized, for instance, in one of the previous statements that the Other had recognized and developed many sciences that were partly known to Arabs, which reflects his breadth of awareness and fair-mindedness. In other words, he acknowledged that Arabs were the first to recognize the majority of fields of scientific knowledge; however he argued that, the Other had successfully achieved several advancements and created new fields in the process. Thus, the Other is characterized by excellence in the development of the sciences, whereas the Self is stigmatized by its lack of progress. The conceptualization of the role of the Other enabled him to recognize his native land's evolved cultural condition. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī noted that the Other acknowledged that the Eastern Self was its teacher in all sciences and the first to recognize them many centuries earlier. Indeed, the Eastern Self was creative in the religious and intellectual sciences but totally ignorant of the science of medicine before and during the nineteenth century. Therefore, it needed the Other to evolve in its culture and science and adopt the new fields of knowledge (Ḥijāzī, 1974, pp. 325, 147). Hence, this study infers that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was ideologically impacted by Western civilization, as can be seen clearly in his comparisons, descriptions and explanations. Here, too, is clear evidence of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's awareness of the huge variations between his homeland and Paris.

## 6. SOCIAL DOMAIN

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, during his stay in Paris, presented a detailed and rich description of the social life of the Other and noted several social variations between East and West, which generated the idea of the necessity for social change in his homeland society. According to Lūqā, the comparisons between Self and Other were uninterrupted in this domain (Lūqā, 1997, p. 130). Further, at the beginning of the fifth section, which focuses on the People of Paris, he remarked that French people were characterized among other Christians by their intelligence and acute perception, unlike the Egyptian Coptic Christians who tended to be illiterate. In addition, Western Christians were not captive to traditional knowledge; rather, they liked to learn the origin of each thing and try to improve on it. They also knew how to read and write, unlike the majority of Eastern peoples. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī also described Western Christians' passion for looking forward to new models in all fields of life, especially in fashion because they liked to renew their clothes in order present themselves at their best at all times. French society was characterized as being friendly towards strangers and passionate about the welfare of all people. In addition, he described the voluntary work of the French. According to him, French people liked to gather money in order to help those who had lost their money to survive. Therefore, they are characterized by their fulfilment

of promises, lack of treachery and treason, and honesty and humanity. Therefore, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī emphasized that the Other contributed to motivating the Self to become more aware of its condition, as is apparent, for instance, in his comparison of French Christians and Egyptian Coptic Christians. He also emphasized that the culture shock he experienced did not influence his description of the Other, presenting both positive and negative images. For instance, he criticized the French for their neglect of saying grace, which according to him was obligatory in other cultures. In addition, he was not impressed by certain French social habits, such as the high social status of French women and the extreme treatment of men by women. Indeed, he deemed that French men were slaves to their wives, whether or not they were beautiful, and chastised their lack of jealousy of their wives. Therefore, he saw that although this was the greatest city in the world, the city of knowledge he admired also contained much immorality and was as prone to fads as other French and European cities (Ḥijāzī, 1974, pp. 210-213).

## CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the ideological influence of the West on the political, religious, civil and social domains as seen through the thoughts of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī as depicted in his travelogue, *Takhḥīṣ al-Ibriz fī Talkhīṣ Paris*. The study has revealed the impact of the ideological influence of the Western Other on the thinking of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī in the domains examined as it challenged the existing image of the West in Arabic travel literature. The paper has itemized the ideological influence of the Other in the political, religious, civil and social domains, as seen in his comprehensive explanation and description of the Other, and the evocation of the comparisons between the Self and the Other in each domain. The paper has also determined the Other's contribution in changing the then-prevalent dual discourse between the Self and the Other which existed in medieval Arabic travel literature, which had been based on the religious factor solely, to be broadened into the field of cultural criticism. In corroboration, this study has inferred that al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was ideologically impacted by Western social life and civilization, as seen clearly in the examples above. It has also determined al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's awareness of the huge disparities between his homeland and Paris. Hence, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī with *Takhḥīṣ* is con-

sidered to be the first modern Arab Egyptian scholar in this field, a pioneer who successfully brought together the two different and at times conflicting cultures, alongside his later work in Egypt.

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