

Review Essay

Reflections (on the World)

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Hard Choices

New York, NY etc.: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014

Edward W. Said

Orientalism

New York, NY: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1976, 1984, 1999

Naguib Mahfouz

The Thief and the Dogs

Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 1961 in Arabic, 1984 in English

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

Hilary Rodham Clinton's book is an account of U.S. foreign policy while she was Secretary of State of the U.S. government, from 2009 to 2013, presented as a series of crisis events that she had to address, with an emphasis on the Middle East. Because the U.S. role in the Middle East has been so controversial, I followed reading it by reading two books with different perspectives, especially on the Middle East. The Said book is a criticism of the dominant method of studying "the Orient" for three hundred years, especially during the British and French colonial and what Said calls the U.S. imperial period. Said examines the western intellectual perspective on "the Orient", described as the geography from the Middle East to the Far East. Mahfouz, a famous Egyptian fiction writer, sets his a novel by set in Cairo. I chose to read and review a novel as well as the two non-fictional accounts in keeping with Said's argument that a culture cannot be understood solely from its non-fiction writing, without studying its poetry and novels. All three books are about understanding, and in the Clinton case, interacting with and trying to influence country behaviour world-wide and especially in the Middle East. While the Said book is somewhat about studying the whole Orient, his focus is the Middle East. The Clinton and Said books are both written from western perspectives. The third is a first-person stream-of-consciousness account of the day(s) after the release of a prisoner from jail and is written from an individual Egyptian perspective. I say an Egyptian perspective because Egyptian institutions creep into the story, for example, policemen, courts, prison and men owning their children.

Hillary Rodham Clinton is a leader. She was U.S. Secretary of State for four years under the presidency of Barak Obama. She also was a candidate for the U.S. presidency twice, First Lady of the U.S.A, during which she lead development of a proposal for a national health care plan for the USA (the U.S.A. was then and may be again the only developed country without a

national health care insurance plan), U.S. Senator, political activist and advocate for women and children. Clinton's role as Secretary of State was to promote and secure compliance from other countries with American policy. She does not criticize it, although she does sometimes admit to her concerns that she may not be able to successfully implement it. For the most part, she succeeds. She describes the inside workings of successful and unsuccessful attempts to prevent, minimize or contain international crises. While the USA since the Second World War and until the Donald Trump presidency saw its role as leader of what was once called "the Free World", and is now more commonly referred to as the "West", many countries continue to turn to the U.S. to resolve international problems. While American leadership has had benefits in preventing or minimizing wars and other international crises, it has also led to problems. Clinton does not examine the content of U.S. foreign policies, however. She does not defend them either except to the extent they support general principles such as democracy and liberty, which are outlined in the U.S. Constitution. The book does not examine what U.S. foreign policy should be but rather how best to carry it out, about implementation and process. She has interesting things to say about them. Controversy about her tenure tends to focus on political divisions rather than the content of her work (e.g. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/28/opinions/clinton-secretary-of-state-opinion-hurlburt/index.html>).

Because Clinton's book is not reflective about foreign policy, which is controversial in many places, including the Middle East, I chose to read it in combination with a book that is critical of US foreign policy, and chose Said's *Orientalism* as that book. It focuses on western and especially European intellectual perspectives on "the Orient", the foundation of policy. Said is a renowned public intellectual, whose reputation was substantially built on this book. It presents Western study of and writing about "the Orient". He focuses, however, on the Islamic world, and especially the Middle East, from which he originated. His background is Palestinian and Egyptian but he received a Western education. His is a ferocious and unending criticism of what he calls "Orientalism" and the impact he believes it has had on Western perceptions of the Orient. He describes Orientalism as racist and contributing substantially to the sense of a right to dominate that he perceives the West believes it has or should have in the Orient. He sees this as originating in the western Enlightenment and that there has been little change from colonial to present times. His argument is absolute.

I found these two books disturbing, for the same reason: They both present only one perspective, without taking into account other perspectives or describing other possible ways of looking at the issues. Clinton's book presents the American issues, perspectives, goals and efforts in the international arena during Hilary Clinton's time as the American Secretary of State. For the most part, the book reads as if she kept and referred to the press releases issued during her tenure. When she steps outside this framework, it is to describe efforts she made that were especially important to her, such as meeting with non-government organizations and the situation of women and children. She accepts unequivocally that the USA has the right to try to get other governments to adopt the same policies or policies compliant with those of the USA. I suppose that is what departments of foreign affairs do. Representing the largest economy, most powerful military and, I should think, best resourced external affairs department in the world, she had influence. She never presents her efforts to get other governments to adopt these policies as a matter of power, however. Said focuses on power and the way the Orientalists were integrated into the work of their governments.

Mahfouz presents his novel as the reflections of an individual on the actions taking place in his story.. He presents two perspectives, the present as experienced by the criminal through conversations, and his inner comments to himself. To my amazement, Mahfouz uses many of the same words describing his consciousness and others that Said criticizes western Orientalists for using, such as: types, freedom, lazy, miseries, filth, vermin, infidelity, gloomy, criminals, confusion, temptation, dark memories, misled by appearing friendly and conciliatory, damaged buildings, peeking through the shutters, hiding like a woman, being robbed of child, wife, riches, bureaucrat. He says in his defense, “At least a lazy man is better than a traitor” (page 56).

As a Canadian, I cannot help, however, contrasting the American approach with the Canadian. Canada summarizes its foreign policy on its website as “our action to promote human dignity and a more just, inclusive, sustainable, and safe world.” The US secretary of state website does not speak to American foreign policy, but instead focuses on roles: “The Secretary of State, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, is the President's chief foreign affairs adviser. The Secretary carries out the President's foreign policies through the State Department,” This is how Clinton spoke of her role as well. While the Canadian foreign minister is appointed by the Prime Minister and ultimately accountable to him or her, this is not mentioned.

Said’s argument about the West’s perspective on the East is heated, seems extreme, always highly critical, but with no discussion of what a better perspective might be. He hints at this a little in his Conclusion and Afterward, written after the book. He describes the West as failing to experience and understand the Middle East and instead creating an artificial Orient that it then claims the right to dominate first as colonizer then as imperialist and leader but also as creator and keeper of the Orient as concept and culture. He does not describe a better approach to understanding the Orient nor does he outline his sense of the Orient. Rather, he criticizes what he sees as an unrelenting misunderstanding that permits and encourages domination of the Orient by the Occident, and that despite the enormous interest in the Orient in European culture.

Said discusses a wide range of issues relevant to the Orient: philology, the branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of a language or languages (Dictionary.com), non-fiction, fiction, but only from perspectives that support his argument. I cannot tell from his book whether there were over time also documents that did not support his argument, nor can I tell what portion, for example, of the hundreds of books written on this subject, were written from the racist, biased perspectives he describes.

While Clinton does not reflect upon U.S. foreign policy, on how it could be better, neither does Said describe a better approach. An absolute promoter is contrasted here with an absolute critic. Said indicates that western governments, including the U.S., still take this perspective. I find this disturbing. While it was Clinton’s job to promote U.S. policy, not to criticize it, as an intellectual Said’s job should be to reflect, including pondering more than one perspective. Said suggests that while Orientalism suggests this should be the intellectual perspective, that in fact it has not been, that instead it has been (from what is presented), wholly biased and in the pocket of British and French colonialism and then U.S. imperialism. Although Said’s perspective might perhaps help a westerner better understand why so many Middle Easterners are hostile to the USA, I do not think it does. I am not convinced that the Occident’s intellectual position toward the Orient is actually at the basis of this hostility. I think it is more

likely caused by the U.S.'s regular military and political interventions, side-taking and active support of the oil industry, dictatorships and Zionism that have created this hostility toward the former colonizers, Britain and France, and the country that has assumed their mantle, the U.S.

I, too, come from a former colony, in my case Canada. Colonialism has left a strong mark on Canada, on its people, expectations and accomplishments. As in many colonies, its indigenous peoples and immigrants have been exploited and in many cases marginalized. Like so many colonized peoples, Canadians try to hitch their harness to former colony's economies instead of creating an independent economy based on its riches of resources and people. When it has tried to do so, its former colonial masters and its current imperial one have strongly and ruthlessly resisted. Only recently, with the creation of the international free trade agreements, has Canada somewhat more successfully created international markets (other than the U.S.) for its rich natural resources. In doing so, its industry has declined substantially and it has given up a good deal of its sovereignty to corporations. Canadians, however, are not consciously aware of this situation and do not bear a grudge. We are rich, but much more financially unequal now, and also more socially unequal.

Reading a novel by an Egyptian in conjunction with two books with isolated perspectives was interesting. Because the novel is written from the character's perspective, it is also isolated, although the character brings two perspectives together in the two aspects of his personality that he presents. He uses three voices, alternately, his interior conversation with himself, his external representation (are they his id and his ego, as described by Freud?) and an outside observer speaking to him. The former is angry, yearning for reprisal against those he feels have violated his rights; the latter is compliant, trying to please and willing to or pretending to seek compromise. Even if he presents these perspectives, however, he presents only one personality. In many ways I am reviewing only the perspectives of three people, the three authors (although Clinton had help with her book). Said and Mahfouz do not indicate they did.

Mahfouz writes his novel in such a way that both his criminal's experience and that of his lover can be read as the experience of his nation and those who seek to see it survive. He uses political words and many expressions of both hope and (mainly) hopelessness and very effectively creates an atmosphere of fear.

The similarity of style and word usage between Said and Mahfouz is striking. Mahfouz describes his characters in the same way that Said describes the character of Arabs as described by Orientalists. Why should this be? A similar education? A similar teacher? A cultural way of telling stories? No connection? I don't know. Regardless, all three authors feel deeply the right to power and the extremities of the worlds they or their characters inhabit on one hand and the ways in which they are victims on the other. I have visited the Middle East twice, once Abu Dhabi, the other time Egypt, in both cases for too short a time to have come away with little more than questions. I gave a presentation to an international conference in Cairo: The attendee from the United Nations told me that my style of presentation was too flat and scholarly for a Middle East audience. Perhaps we are talking in part about culture.

About the Author:

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