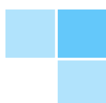
Orientalist Revulsion: A Joycean Tryst with Modernity in *Ulysses*

Sk Sagir Ali

Abstract

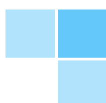
In *Ulysses,* published in1922, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom have shared a dream of the Middle East in establishing a mysterious psychological negotiations between them. Bloom's continuous references to Mrs. Moll with red slippers from 'Turkey trunks', 'white yashmak', 'toerings', 'fetterchain', and Prophet Muhammed with Stephen's recalling of 'street of harlots', and 'Haroun al Raschid', the Caliph of Baghdad a principal character in many of Scheherezade's tales of the *Thousand and One Nights* are the purported tool of the instrumentalisation of the Other for maintaining the hegemony of the Self with a tendency to insulate Islam as a convenient Other. The collective fantasy of the two characters Bloom and his father are engaged in this Orientalist project that Otherizes the Arabic Islamist of the Middle East. The Twentieth Century European modernity in the same way posed a permanent challenge by castigating the views of Islam's defective relation to modernity with the form of essentialism deeply rooted in the general conception of 'religion'. This paper aims to look at how James Joyce's project of modernism in *Ulysses* is enmeshed within a Orientalist fantasy of the Middle East that essentializes the Islamic Other of Turkey and elsewhere with Christian European and Islamic Middle Eastern thought in a more mystical orientation. Joyce's representation of the Jew in *Ulysses* is implicated in the anti-Islamic and Arabophobic proclivities of European neo-imperialism and its aesthetic registers in the high modernist milieu of 1922. The pro-Jewish nationalist project in this geo-political schemata bears a hatred towards the Arabic Islamists of the Middle East, and posits Islam's confrontation with modernity (Islam's alleged insufficient capacity to supersede traditions) which set the genesis of European pattern of modernity apart from alleged 'alternative modernity'. Islamic modernism comes to be viewed as *sui generis* rather than associated to a Western centred category. The paper explores specific insights into recurring patterns of Western appraisal of Islam vis-à-vis modernity that were cumulatively built over time across various disciplines, even more importantly, the focus will be on the understanding of Joycean critique of Orientalist genesis of modernity in the Muslim world with allusions to *The Arabian Nights* in *Ulysses.* Joyce showcases how he and his countrymen were awfully vulnerable to the Orientalist images picturing the customs of strange lands that were alluring in their utter deviation from Dublin's paralyzing and stifling social codes.

Keywords: Modernity, Joyce**,** Orientalism, Islamic, Middle Eastern



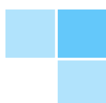
James Joyce in *Ulysses,* through the literary evocation of the Orient, simulates the Orientalist received notion as used by European imperialists. Ezra Pound also speaks of Joyce who "writes as a European, not as a provincial" (*Pound/Joyce* 32-33) as Joyce transcends the loop of nationalism with a cultural revolution that mutates political and modern social life with an aim to foster cosmopolitanism and transcendence of his own nationalism. Joyce's association with the experimental spirit of modernism through a number of stylistic frameworks finds a reverberation in a letter written by Joyce himself to Harriet Shaw Weaver in 1928. He writes: "the more I hear of the political, philosophical, ethical zeal and labours of the brilliant members of Pound's big brass band the more I wonder why I was ever let into it with my magic flute" (*Letters I* 277). He mourns his involvement with the avant-garde movement and sets himself apart from Pound, Eliot and the other writers of modernism. In *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1979), Colin MacCabe demonstrates Joyce's art to his politics and contends that the experimental approach in Joyce's work are themselves subversive and political as Joyce takes a shift from the disposition of linguistic and stylistic narrative tradition which he finds as "the revolution of the word" are by themselves as political acts. Whereas, Vincent Cheng in *Joyce, Race and Empire* (1995) elucidates Joycean delineations and representations of race and imperialism from the vantage point of a colonial subject of a repressive empire as his "works house a carefully constructed, highly textured representation of the various ideological positions on issues of race and empire in turn-of-century Ireland"(290). By taking a cue from Edward Said's vindication in *Orientalism* (1978), Cheng finds Joyce's *Ulysses, Dubliners*, and *Finnegans Wake* as "both a trenchant analysis and a potent critique of certain such ideological discourses (in the racialization and colonization of the Irish) and of the resultant colonial pathologies," (9) by focusing on the colonial order of binary opposition programmed by the colonizer to seal the cultural hegemony. It is important to note that Cheng's work dissects the racist accepted notions as constructed by the British colonial "Self" during its sovereignty of the colonized Irish "Other". Enda Duffy's *The Subaltern Ulysses* (1994) holds *Ulysses*, a founding text of an anticolonial struggle—the "guerrilla Text" which has "all the time been covertly operating as a postcolonial novel" (5). James Joyce's examination of Orientalist fantasy of the Middle East in *Ulysses* interrogates not only Ireland's conflicted relationship with the Orient but also articulates the evocation of oppositions of tradition, history and modernity, as a plethora of Oriental elements of Ulysses is of Jewish tradition and history.

The dream of the East as showcased by Stephen and Bloom in *Ulysses* unlocks a mysterious psychological incipient correspondence between them—as Bloom has a vision of his "dame Mrs. Moll with red slippers on in a pair of Turkey trunks," (519) and at "Circe" she is seen with a "white yashmak," "fetter chain," and "toerings" (570), and also travels with a camel. Whereas, Stephen alludes to "Open hallway. Street of harlots. Remember. Haroun al Rashid. I am almost ing it. That man led me, spoke. I was not afraid. The melon he had he held against my face. Smiled: creamfruit smell. That was the rule, said. In. Come. Red carpet spread" (59). These accepted images of camel, slippers, slave-girl, melon, and red carpet of the Orient emanate from the *Arabian Nights* with a resonance to the narratives of Robert Southey, Lord Byron, Thomas Moore, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe with some travel writings of Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam* (1859) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights* (1878) and vice-versa (the western myth of the Orient). Mass-produced texts of Oriental promise with some references to the scent of Jaffa oranges crossed with thoughts of various women, the Night-



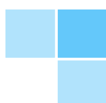
town scene, the strolling through the red-light district with the drunken Stephen near the end of the novel are implied through an Oriental souk of licentious wares. The Orientalist unconscious was embedded in textual unconscious, the whole period of 1880 to 1930 (British Orientalism) marked by its slow shift from text and textuality to the image and the movie screen, especially the photography of the Orient and Oriental filiation with a cultural residue of convergence of popular and elite culture in novels, newspapers, ephemera, postcards—the stereotype. Homi Bhabha in "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism" provides some important discernment into the persistence of Orientalism with discursive pleasures of vulgarity— the stereotype. Bhabha's contention of the stereotype involves in the "subjectification" of the colonial subject as he takes a cue from Edward Said's advocacy for a semiotics of Orientalism, that he finds is rooted in the latter's leaning to Freud and to Foucault's power/knowledge paradigm. To Bhabha, Said's theory is "underdeveloped" in considering the "question of power and desire" (75). Therefore, he adheres to Freud's theory of fetishism which holds some understanding—the way the stereotype operates and survives. Bhabha makes an interconnectedness of perseverance, fetishism with the anxiety of castration and the requisite disavowals that comprise the formation of the subject. He holds that "the scene of fetishism is also the scene of the reactivation and repetition of primal fantasy—the subject's desire for a pure origin that is always threatened by its division, for the subject must be gendered to be engendered, to be spoken" (75) Here, in *Ulysses*, Joyce's attraction towards the imagined East consummates the European fantasies of the Orient as exotic and voluptuous—is an "impossible object" that is "imbricated" with a desire for a "pure, undifferentiated origin"(81). In this schemata, the cultural "other" (Islam in the Middle East) remains a point of psychological projection wherein its actual lived reality is subsumed and appropriated under the symptomatic aegis of some psycho-social pathological machinery. As Gayatri Spivak notes, an extended realm of the thematic realm of the darstellung becomes discernible in all such re-presentations of the East—a politico-aesthetic register that Maurice Blanchot referred to as the vanishing point of Orpheus' gaze in *The Writing of the Disaster*. While Joyce unearths the Oriental roots of the Celts which seem to register an admiration of Eastern culture, Edward Said navigates the European practice of shaping "its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (*Orientalism* 3). *Ulysses* lays bare the romanticized essence of the topography of Moore's fictional East, a locale where cities lie "in luxury" and "a fountain murmurs among damask roses" (600) and Joyce carves out numerous Orientalist theories about Irish history of the Moore's.

Almost all the characters in *Ulysses* are obsessed with the thoughts of "black and brown and yellow men" (285), but their preferred alternatives seem to give prominence to Arabic motifs, as Stephen, Bloom, and even Molly all dream about Arabia. Bloom's vision of the Mirus bazaar (Oriental bazaar) in order to raise money for Mercer's hospital also foregrounds the correspondence between the power of empire and a bazaar. Bloom in Night town takes himself through exorcized images of the East: "Gazelles are leaping, feeding on the mountains. Near are lakes. Round their shores file shadows black of cedar groves. Aroma rises, a strong hair growth of resin. It burns, the orient, a sky of sapphire, cleft by the bronze flight of eagles" (600). Bloom's essential nature of the mysterious East underscores his vision as pictured by Thomas Moore with the magical Indian landscape in *Lalla Rookh* (1817) as an intertextual text and in *The Arabian Nights.* Importantly, the imposition of the Islamic Orient with its symbols, motifs, alterity and anachronisms under its



colour and shape as a potential allurement and threat succor an attempted critique of Western modernity. When Frantz Fanon proclaims that "the European game has finally ended" (*Heine und der Islamische Orient* 6), he probably reckons of modernity as a cluster of cultural contingencies, but it still remains a European projection, as Ian Almond contends that "European game has not ended, it has simply moved into a second phase" (*The new Orientalists* 4). It is noteworthy to mention that thinkers and activists like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Islamic reformer (1817–1898), Ibrahim Sinasi, a pioneering Ottoman intellectual (1826–1871), Ziya Pasha, an Ottoman writer (1829–1880), Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani, a political activist and Islamic ideologist who travelled throughout the Muslim world during the late 19th century (1838–1897), Namik Kemal, an Ottoman intellectual (1840–1888), Abdallah al-Nadim, a significant Egyptian writer (1845–1896), Muhammad Abduh, an Egyptian Islamic scholar and jurist (1849–1905), Qasim Amin, Egyptian Islamic Modernist (1865–1908) and Rashid Rida, an Islamic reformer (1865–1935) faced with the task of raising a shared cultural perspective and of fostering a self-sustaining political persistence which was sufficient to question the Western colonialist counterparts with institutional legacies and intellectual traditions across the globe, especially in the Middle-East. They profitably framed the emergence of a "public Islam" as a measure of public communication which assimilates a disciplining programme for the welfare of the Muslim citizen/subject. And according to Talal Asad, while it is erroneous to surmise "that modernity introduced subjective interiority into Islam, something that was previously absent" (*Formations of the Secular* 225), the conceptual arsenal of reformers could construct upon ethical notions of the responsible individual to establish the norms for disciplining and schooling the modern citizen. The individual responsibility towards the fundamental differences and the public Islam of the reformers that resembles the European public spheres are not structured in terms of the irreducible freedom of the agent and moral autonomy, contemplated by the Habermasian blueprint of the public sphere and importantly by the normative programmes of Western modernity. The public Islam which gained momentum in the colonial era bespeaks modern structure of institutionalization of social governance ambivalently paired by improved ideas drawn from Islamic traditions. Such forms were reinforced by the print media through the apparatus of communication similar within Western social theory as the "public sphere", a construct purely associated to the rise of the modern state. From the eighteenth century, the cultivation of such tradition (tradition central to Islamdom) became distinct in the Ottoman Empire at the passage to the modern era as the well-rooted culture of *adab* (civility) allowed a formula for raising moral subjectivities among the different echelons of the Ottoman Empire, including Moorish Spain.

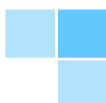
The cultural implications of exploration and colonization by the time of the Renaissance, inflamed a more adorned mythic status for the Middle East, the Orient—an Old World and a virginal territory for exploration and missionary activity. Joyce in *Ulysses,* momentarily, consider the connection between the typewriter and the printed word of modernity to the fantasy of the Orient as a consequences for the unconscious Oriental travesty and delight. Jingle-besotted adman Bloom is mediated by the printed word, that he finds around him on packaged meat and biscuit tins, while his fantasies are intertwined with illicit and fragmentary missives, such as postcards and brief letters sent to other women. These images tie the everyday routine of the kind of Orientalist popular-consumer culture stretching back to the years of the Anglo-Egyptian war in the Sudan, and the then ads and newspapers that proclaimed all sorts of Oriental travesty and delight. Malek Alloula's brilliant book, *The Colonial Harem* (1986), and Lisa Sigel's *Governing Pleasures* (2002)



bring to the fore the culture of postcards and the photography of the Orient and especially Oriental women —probably recognized this period for what it was about mass-produced texts under the garb of Oriental promise. As Joyce records the damaging reverberations of Orientalism in his work, his numerous allusions to "Haroun Al Rashid", the Caliph of Baghdad a principal character in many of Scheherezade's tales of the *Thousand and One Nights,* demonstrates his liberating pledge of the East in *Ulysses.* The centuries-old image of the Orient as a fantastic non-place of enchantment and illusion lends a problematic dimension and inevitably bring to the fore some certain imperialist echoes. Jean Baudrillard in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995) reiterate a familiar critique of Western ontology and representation by saying that "Since this war was won in advance, we will never know what it would have been like had it existed" (61) that addresses the 1991 Gulf War was a purely a media development rather than a military conflict, a visual phenomenon, a mushrooming of signs rather than a somatic attack. The impressionistic sequence of images find Saddam on television, Paris demonstrations, and the messages from French generals shape the foundation for Baudrillard's discussion that no "war" has taken place, but rather a mass of information as he tells us "when it [war] has been turned into information, ceases to be a realistic war and becomes a virtual war, in some way symptomatic" (41). What concerns Baudrillard is the precedence of the semiotic with an overwhelming obsession with the image, versions of meanings under an infatuation with the icon that bounds on the ludicrous: "In fact, the only impressive images of missiles, rockets or satellites are those of the launch... Consider the Scuds: their strategic effectiveness is nil and their only (psychological) effect lies in the fact that Saddam succeeded in launching them" (42). Hence, Edward Said's worthy protest against Orientalists – that Orientalism was always a project that builds discourse about Orientals that does not allow them to speak – gets a pertinent display in Baudrillard's text. In the Saidian worldview, the proposal that culture mattered most and that the "Other" was different to some extent, was disqualified as politically unacceptable and incorrect. To say that, the Middle Eastern "Otherness" was "Orientalist," "essentialist," or even "racist."

In the "Calypso" episode that marks the beginning of Bloom's day in the kitchen as he is found worried about food while preparing his wife's breakfast, as the speaker says "Kidneys were in his mind as he moved about the kitchen" (65) throws some light on Bloom's family and their dilemma. The middle-aged advertisement canvasser Bloom and his wife, a concert soprano, Molly lost their baby after his birth. At the close of the episode, Bloom meditates on the midwife who delivered Rudy and how "she knew from the first poor little Rudy wouldn't live" (80). After that, the sexual life of Bloom has come to suspension: "Could never like it again after Rudy" (213). Bloom, in the novel, preoccupies with Mollys imminent adultery, and is constantly experimenting with different methods to cope with his cuckolding wife as his own impotence is conjured through the East and simultaneously with Bloom's "Jewishness". Bloom after leaving his house to buy the pork kidney, starts thinking of the sun as he expects the day to be warm, and his thoughts turns eastwards. The following description is worth quoting from the text

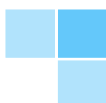
> Somewhere in the east: early morning: set off at dawn, travel round in front of the sun steal a day's march on him. Keep it up forever never grow a day older technically. Walk along a strand, strange land, come to a city gate, sentry there, old ranker too, old Tweedy's big moustaches leaning on a long kind of a spear. Wander through awned streets. Turbaned faces going by. Dark caves of carpet shops, big man, Turko the terrible, seated cross legged smoking a coiled pipe. Cries of



> sellers in the streets. Drink water scented with fennel, sherbet. Wander along all day. Might meet a robber or two. Well, meet him. Getting on to sundown. The shadows of the mosques along the pillars: priest with a scroll rolled up. A shiver of the trees, signal, the evening wind. I pass on. Fading gold sky. A mother watches from her doorway. She calls her children home in their dark language. High wall: beyond strings twanged. Night sky moon, violet, colour of Molly's new garters. Strings. Listen. A girl playing one of those instruments what do you call them: dulcimers. I pass. (68)

The one facet of this desire for escape to the fanciful Orient is associated to his mystified relationship with Molly. Here, the Joycean suggestions (“Turbaned faces”, “carpet shops”, “sherbet”, “mosques”, “dark language”) rooted in the passage directs vividly that the city described is located in the Muslim world. Joycean depiction of Bloom’s reverie with Oriental images from one of the travelogues he owns entitled, *In the Track of the Sun* (1893) by Frederic Diodati Thompson focuses on its author’s wandering in the Orient under the image of the Orient in Western consciousness. Joycean protagonists transcends the cultural relocation of the Orient in the sense that these fantasies are linked with the Orient as a concept, not as a place. Said argues that, the place of Orient in western mind’s eye is “less a place than a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics” (177). When Bloom leaves his house for the breakfast, he finds that the latchkey is in the other trousers in his bedroom. But, he does not wish to “disturb” his wife, and this incident bears a close parallel to Bloom’s recollection of a conventional story of the Prophet’s kindness to animals, as the narrator says “Mohammed cut a piece out of his mantle not to wake her” (94). Aida Yared maintains that, Joyce’s knowledge of the Prophet Mohammed (SWAS) and of Islam came from two sources—J. C. Mardrus ’French translation of the *Qur’an*, and Edith Holland’s biography of the Prophet, *The Story of Mohammed* (1914), as Joyce procured them. Islam for Bloom is a kind of secondhand experience, a scattered illumination derived from travelogues and from many secondary scrambling works that made his signature (“In the Name of Annah” 401-38).

Every society is modern in its own way. We are in the habit of referring to Europe as a centre. The idea of modernity should be a composite one. James Joyce’s project of modernism in *Ulysses* within a Orientalist fantasy of the Middle East that essentializes the Islamic Other is reproduced and premised on a trajectory of modernity that observed the reinscription of the classical Arabic-Islamic concept of “*adab*” in terms of the European and modern concept of literature. Here, Fredric Jameson in his 2002 book of the same title speaks about the notion of “a singular modernity” by aiming at the resurgence of the discourse of modernity with some identifications of its “ideologues”: postcolonialist and postmodernist intellectuals who insist upon the formula of “alternate” or “alternative’ modernities.” His suggestion is that “there can be a modernity for everybody which is different from the standard or hegemonic Anglo-Saxon model “and that “you can fashion your own modernity differently” as, for example, “a Latin-American kind, or an Indian kind or an African kind, and so forth” (12) that eliminate the univocal and ubiquitous logic of global capitalism by which all such modernities are ushered in the first place. Some of the Modernist writers forged up the mantle of highbrow avant-gardism with their astute demands of a culture in a flux under the substitute to alternative practices—a more extensive and all pervasive category than merely the *avant-garde*. The alternative unsettling voice of Joyce with a modernity in restoration clubs the unusual and unsettling presences which expand the purview of peripheral phenomena as the flipside to the Modernist *zeitgeist* in a



whirling phantasmagoric taxonomies free from the Modernist obsession with provincial engagements. Joyce's fractured relationship with the institution of high Modernism finds a non-fetishised narratives which culminates in the valorisation of re-envisioned Middle-Eastern literary and cultural sphere in *Ulysses* under the historiographical scholarship of Edward Said, Albert Hourani, and Eugene Rogan and the literary historical work of Roger Allen, M. M. Badawi, Muhsin al-Musawi, Jeffrey Sacks, Nuha Alshaar, Stephen Sheehi, Tarek El-Ariss, Kamran Rastegar, and Abdelfattah Kilito. On the event of cultural renaissance, *Nahda* of the Arab world in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the originary blueprint of cultural and literary modernity in the Middle East instigated the colonial/imperial dynamics with the increased institutional legitimation and recognition of the postcolonial, multicultural, and the third world in general that foregrounds the spectrality and critical worlding of novels with Middle Eastern modernity as a constitutive multiple modalities.

The transmodern spaces of literary and politico-aesthetic revolution(s) are located beyond the constatives of canonical western literary historiography. Their contrapuntal reading and aesthetic registers remain palpable, yet structurally invisible in the different epochs of western literary historiography. Although 1922 remains a major point of departure for literary scholars and writers, the chronological markers that situate this period often conceal the hidden ideological and counterintuitive forces that render visible and legitimate certain registers of modernity over others. A transmodernist reading of the chapter of 1922 in a counterintuitive historiography of English literature would thereby open up the hidden aporias, parochial constatives and blind ideological and cultural alleys that are often glossed over in our normative cultures of reading and literary dissemination. Both modernism and the concomitant postmodernist ethos remain implicated with the extended logic of late capitalism and an Eurocentric vision of the world enmeshed by a self-serving geopolitical determinism. The "war of civilization" thesis propounded by later thinkers like Samuel P. Huntington extend the thematic status quo of literary and cultural modernism by defining the "other" (Islamic Middle-East) in terms of a passive point for self-projection and an oppositional realm for retroactive self-fashioning. As such, the watershed chronological marker of 1922 becomes a mere symptom of a point of reiteration and revival of the linear hegemonic historiography of Western modernism that remains to be punctuated and displaced by transmodern cultural and historical epochs that were far more radical and disruptive than the utopias ever imagined by Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. Read in such a critical light, texts like *Ulysses* become both a marker of canonical modernism, as well as a literary space that resists the pre-determined reading tropes of the same by gesturing towards "other" affective realms and aesthetic registers that the historical and teleological marker of 1922 seem to overlook and render as silent.

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