

Conflicts between Past and Present Identity in Yahya Haqqi's *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*: The Post Colonized in a Dark Passage to the Future

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Abstract--This research aims to discuss mainly the changes of the main character (Ismail) in *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*, a novel published in 1944 by Yahya Haqqi an Egyptian writer. Ismail, who finds himself at the crossroad of civilizations, undergoes a lot of changes due to post colonialism and being exposed to more than one culture. The discussion will involve the relationship between education, science and faith, and societal belief in superstitions. This novel was one of the first fictional works in Arabic to deal with psychological difficulties that were faced by students returning home after being sent to Europe to complete their studies. *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* exposes the cultural shock that can be viewed as a post-colonial effect after being educated in Europe. The difference between East and the West is explained by Dr. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, showing the clash between the cultures. This research shows the crises that face the main character while being in the center, concentrating on how Ismail deals with the changes in his self-image while he struggles with trying to belong to his Egyptian heritage.

Keywords--Post colonialism, Orientalism, Ismail, superstitions, Encounter between East and West.

I. INTRODUCTION

Yahya Haqqi was born in 1905 in Sayyida Zeinab district of Cairo. He started life as a lawyer and then served in different parts of the world as a diplomat. After resigning from the Diplomatic Service, he devoted himself wholly to writing and became one of a small group of exceptionally talented men who laid the foundations for the literary renaissance in Egypt. Haqqi is a famous Egyptian writer of the 20th century. He has experimented with the various literary norms: the short story, the novel, literary criticism, essays, meditations, and literary translation. He has written in a new way about the Arab society, culture, and customs in the 20th century. Haqqi is one of the founders of the genre of a novella in the Egyptian prose. He published four collections of short stories, one novel, a novella, and many articles some of which involved literary criticism of writers' works.

His novel *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* is a collection of four short stories, presented in order of size. These stories are all rich in culture and sociological significance. The most interesting story perhaps is the novella *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*, which gives the collection its name, and occupies half the volume. The novella delves in detail into the life of the protagonist's, Ismail, as a young man early background in traditional Cairo. Then, it talks in a brief manner about his experience in Europe. Finally, it continues to view his decidedly changed character and thus new decisions after becoming an ophthalmologist returning to his native country. Therefore, it traces the spiritual development of this young man and the change in his social, moral, and mental attitudes. Ismail finds

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himself at the crossroads of civilization. He is at the center of the clash between the cultures of East and the West. He was brought up on traditional Muslim cultural beliefs, but as a young man, he was heavily subjected to the influence of modern culture, spending many years in England studying medicine.

The Lamp of Umm Hashim is one of the literary works shows the post-colonial theory. Post-colonialism is "a study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies" (DostcoDes). Post-colonialism has been going through three broad stages. First, an initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority are enforced by being in a colonized state. The second stage is the struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy. The third stage is the growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity (PostcoDes). This issue is also touched by Dr. Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. Dr. Said is the Palestinian American, and the notable academic and lecturer. He is considered to be the father of post-colonial theory. He had been the professor of comparative literature at Columbia University for a long time until his death of leukemia in 2003. Said's name came to light when his book *Orientalism* was published in 1978 and laid the ground for the theory of postcolonialism. Said directly challenged what Euro-American scholars traditionally referred to as "Orientalism".

Dr. Edward Said--"Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."

"Orientalism is an entrenched structure of thought, a pattern of making certain generalizations about the part of the world known as the East" (Singh).Dr. Lutfi Hamadi explains Said's theory of postcolonialism in his article "Edward Said: The Postcolonial Theory and the Literature of Decolonization" as:

Said's theory of postcolonialism is mainly based on what he considers the false image of the Orient or the East that has been fabricated by western explorers, poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators since Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798. According to Said, these have always shown the Orient as the primitive, uncivilized "other", in an attempt to create it as the contrast to the advanced and civilized West. In his highly influential work, *Orientalism*, Said considers that Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident"(40).

Therefore,*The Lamp of Umm Hashim* is an example of the conflict between the East and the West and how the West is represented as the inferior. The main character, Ismail, finds himself that he has to make the choice between eastern and western values as well as between religion and science in many stages in his life. Approximately, the western thoughts are so clear during the change of Ismail's character. In other words, he has been influenced by western completely. He becomes to oppose everything, that lacks scientific evidence, and he starts to look to the Arabic world from a racist point of view.

The Lamp of Umm Hashim: The Arabian Character between East and West

To prepare the ground for the discussion of East and West it is necessary to follow the crises which Ismail faces. At the beginning, we are given the background in which Ismail is brought up. He is brought up in a traditional Muslim family that moves to Cairo from Egyptian countryside. They live in the neighborhood of the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque where religious feasts, superstitions, and folk traditions become part of his life. In the

mosque square, he sees the crowds of worshippers who come to seek the blessing of Zaynab or Umm Hashim, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad. Also, the mosque attendant, Shaykh Dardiri, tells him tales about the mysterious and miraculous powers of this saint. Men and women flock to ask Shaykh Dardiri for a drop of the oil from Umm Hashim's lamp to treat their eyes or the eyes of some loved one. Ismail is told, "The holy oil would cure those whose perception shone brightly with faith, for there was no restoration of sight without such inner perception" (Haqqi 54). Ismail's whole life is encompassed by the district and the Square of Sayyida Zaynab. He is familiar with every nook and with all the people there.

Unlike his two elder brothers who receive the traditional religious education, Ismail is sent to the modern public schools. Before being sent there, Ismail is made to memorize the Holy Qur'an by his father. This is because his father wants to make sure that Ismail has received a solid religious grounding. Ismail becomes the center of his family's hope to gain social and financial success. Therefore, all of his family provide him with a suitable environment to study well. Unexpectedly; when he finishes high school, his grade average at the public examination is low. He fails to obtain a good enough result to enable him to enter the school of medicine on which he and the whole of his family have set their hearts.

With a piece of advice from his friend, his father Rajab decides to send his son Ismail to study medicine abroad. He makes a great sacrifice to send him aboard. He collects together all the money he can and the mother sells her jewelry to buy the tickets and his needs of thick clothes. The family members react differently to the idea of Ismail's departure for Europe. The mother, for instance, imagines aboard as " being at the end of a tall stairway that ended at a land covered in snow and inhabited by peoples who possessed the wiles and tricks of the djinn" (Haqqi 57). She is afraid that he could not deal with people there because they have a different religion. Fatima, his orphaned cousin who lives with them, has heard that women there are half naked, and they are highly skilled in the ways of enticement and seduction. This part of the novella shows how people think about Europe at that time. Before Ismail's departure, the family gathers in silent with tearful eyes. The father advises his son to observe strictly his religious and warns him especially against the dangers of associating with European women. He also makes Ismail engage to Fatima. The author describes Ismail in the novel "going up the gangway as a young man but with the gravity of a sheikh, slow-moving, staid, a little naïve, everything about him giving the impression of a lonesome villager in the city" (61). This quote shows how simple is Ismail's personality before going to Europe. The first part in the novel shows the first stage in Ismail's life.

After seven years studying ophthalmology with great success, he comes completely changed. A great transformation has taken place in his character and outlook. Even his physical appearance has changed. He is described as "who was that smart, tall, upstanding young man with radiant face and head held high" (Haqqi 62). Now Ismail is qualified ophthalmology and much has happened to him in the meantime. Much of the change that he has occurred in his character is due to the influence of Mary, who is the European colleague. Mary is obviously a symbol of western civilization. Mary represents freedom from tradition, individuality, complete self-confidence, science and humanism, and realistic thinking about concrete problems. She represents the complete opposite of the values that Ismail has. He is dull and inactive. He respects tradition and believes completely in religion. However, Mary liberates him from traditionalism and gives him confidence in himself and in science. However, this change in Ismail attitudes does not occur easily. In the beginning, he winces at Mary's sharp words. In the end, he loses his religious faith that is closely linked with his cultural values. All these lead to cause Ismail's first spiritual crisis. He

could not stand the shock of finding himself alone and lost. He feels ill and stops attending college. But it is Mary who saves him. She takes him on a holiday to Scotland. His lost religious faith is now replaced by a stronger faith in science. He starts to think about the beauty of nature and of its secrets. Ismail is full of idealism and enthusiasm.

Ismail love for his country has grown during his absence. His professor says to him, "Your country in need of you, for it is the land of the blind" (Haqqi 62). Ismail finds out what "the land of the blind" means when he returns to Egypt. Ismail's second crisis starts after returning to his homeland. The education ophthalmologist faces people's faith and traditions. He feels they are victims of ignorance, poverty, disease and age-long oppression. He vows to try to remove the wrongs, and he is determined to fight. Ismail's does not have to wait long for the first battle.

People believe that the oil from the lamp of Umm Hashim cures eyesight. Ismail sees how his mother pours the drops of the lamp in the eyes of Fatima, who suffers from trachoma. He believes that if she was given the right kind of treatment her eyes would be cured, and this hot burning oil is sure to make them worse. Therefore, he becomes outraged. He speaks disrespectfully of the saint. Silence falls on the house at once. His father comes out of his room to find out the cause of the shouting and hears Ismail word. He simply says to Ismail, "What are you saying? Is this what you learned abroad? Is all we have gained to have you return to us an infidel" (Haqqi 74)? Ismail could not stand much more. Picking up his father's stick, he runs out of the house. He is determined to deal with ignorance and superstition, even it would cost him his life, He crosses the Square passing the crowd, and runs into the mosque. He sees many people gathering around the saint. Unable to bear it much longer, he stands up on his toes, aiming the stick at the lamp. With one blow, he breaks it to pieces. The crowd rushes at him, and he is beaten and trodden on. Ismail is carried to his house. The family gathers around him. In a night of joy at his return, they sweep for the loss of his reason. They say, "God curse the day on which you voyaged away to Europe, Ismail! If only you had stayed among us and Europe had not corrupted you so that you lost your reason and insulted your people, your country, and your religion" (Haqqi 78).

Ismail spends a number of days in his bed, talking to nobody. When he recovers a little from his injuries, he thinks about going back to England and settling there. But one day he wakes up feeling imbued with extraordinary energy and decides to treat his fiancée himself. He has treated successfully many similar cases in Europe before, and never failed. He applies medicine to Fatima's eyes for some time without seeing any improvement. "The days passed by, then a week and another week, with no change in Fatima's eyes, then suddenly they grew wore and became inflamed, and the white began to flow over into the black of the eye". (Haqqi 80). Ismail's doubles his care and takes her consultation to his colleagues at the school of medicine, whom all agree with his method and advise him to continue with it. But Fatima's eyes become worse, and finally one day she wakes up to find herself completely blind. "Her last comforting glimmer of light had been extinguished" (Haqqi 80).

As a result, Ismail runs away from home. He cannot stay there facing Fatima whose blindness, as the author states, is proof of his own blindness. Ismail third crisis starts by losing confidence in science. He sells his books and some of the equipment he has brought with him from England. He rents a room in a boarding house, run by a Greek woman. She only cares about money. He even thinks that Europeans in Egypt are different from those he has encountered in Europe. She exploits him and makes his life generally so difficult. He thinks many times to go back to Europe, but he still finds himself in the evenings gravitating towards the Mosque Square near his parents' house.

Ismail begins to feel some sympathy for people in the Square. When the holy month of Ramadan comes, he feels an unusual atmosphere in the Square. He thinks about the cause of his failing, but cannot find an answer that would satisfy his intellect. However, he finds himself spending more of his time in the Square, gradually accepting its people. He thinks that there are no separate individuals, but whole people united by a common faith. He finds in his people peace which he misses in Europe where "activity was undertaken in a state of anxiety and agitation, with the sword ever drawn". (Haqqi 84). He reaches a stage in his acceptance in which comparison with the west is unnecessary and meaningless. He thinks "But why should one compare" (Haqqi 84)?

The moment of revelation comes. It occurs on the night of power (the night on which, according to Muslim belief, the Koran was sent down). As Ismail is loitering in the Square, he hears the sound of breathing echoing in the air. As a child, he was told that only those with a clear conscience could hear that sound. He sees the dome of the mosque flooded with the bright light of the saint's lamp and it is also the night of visitation. Now, he realizes why he has failed. He has nursed his pride and rebelled. Now, he knows that, "there is no knowledge 'of science' without faith" (Haqqi 84). Fatima has never really believed in him but in the power of the Saint.

Ismail enters to the shrine with bowed head. He asks Shaykh Dardiri for some oil from the lamp, and he takes it to Fatima. He tells her never to despair of being cured since he has brought the blessing of Umm Hashim. Once more, he applies his science of medicine, but this time it is fortified by faith. He perseveres in spite of little process until he finally cures her.

Ismail does not feel any more that he is uprooted in his own society. He sets up a clinic in a poor district and treats the eyes of his patients for very little money, relying first on God and then on his science. He also marries Fatima, whom he teaches to dress, eat and behave generally like a civilized woman. She bears him five sons and six daughters. In the end of the novella, he is described as greedy eater and full of laughter and joking. His clothes are untidy, with cigarette ash scattered all over his sleeves and trousers. Now he looks more like Egyptian. However, people still remember him with kindness and love.

Yahya Haqqi has succeeded to present a character in which there is a synthesis of East and West. As we see Ismail passes through three major crises. The first is in England when Mary influences in his own culture and believes. The second one is when he returns to Egypt and breaks the saint's lamp. The third crisis is when he fails to cure Fatima's eyes. Ismail tries to find his own identity in each stage. In the end, he finds a reconciliation between the East and West, and science and faith within himself.

In the research "The Theme of Encounter between East and West in the 20th Century Arabic literature (1935-1966)", the researcher Nino Surmava compares four Arabic novels. These novels are *Adib* by Taha Hussein (1935), the *Latin Quarter* by Suhail Idris (1953), *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayrb Salih (1966) and *the Lamp of Umm Hashim* by Yahya Haqqi (1944). He highlights several specific features that prose on the theme of east-west relationships. The first one is that "eastern and western cultural spaces are strictly separated in the mentioned novels. Eventually, the change of cultural mentality 'I' is made more tolerant to 'the other' and acquires a certain hybrid identity that harmonizes eastern and western values " (8). In addition, the main character is linked with the past, with his own heritage, and the crises begin while breaking this link. Also, all four characters encounter completely different cultures.

Therefore, *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* perfectly presents the theme of encounter between East and West. "Haqqi emphasizes the spiritual side of the confrontation as experienced in the crisis of Ismail which is resolved by a happy synthesis of religion and science whereby Islamic values are retained along with western scientific principles" (Boullata 61). Ismail realizes that he cannot deny his own heritage, and science does nothing without Faith. Everything happens according to God's will. Haqqi uses the oil of the saint as a symbol for faith. One of the questions can be asked is whether faith can work alone. In the novel, Ismail's mother only uses the oil to cure Fatima's eyes. But there is no noticeable progress.

One of the results of postcolonialism nowadays is that people believe more in science. With the scientific progress, they almost find a cause for every result. And a solution for every problem. In addition, the colonizer tries to divorce Muslims from their religion. In fact, Islam encourages scientific research because understanding nature enables people to further appreciate their Creator and the extent of His power and wisdom. Thus, science needs the support of religion. Ismail is fortunate for having the strong faith in his childhood. This helps him, in the end, to find a reconciliation between them within himself.

Another question can be asked is why the author has chosen to make Ismail study medicine in particular. The tradition of sending Egyptians to Europe to study medicine is an old one. Unlike other technical studies, the study of medicine had an unbroken history. However, Ismail's values surpass the materialism of the West. This is presented in many parts of the novella. He wants to repay the debt for his father and provides him with a suitable life. Another indication is the quote "He had no wish to amass wealth, to put up blocks of flats, or to buy land. His sole aim was that poor patients should find health at his hands" (Haqqi 87). This is because of the solid moral and religious education he has received at home. Therefore, Ismail becomes famous not only in the rich residential districts of Cairo but in the neighboring villages.

Orientalism can be seen in many parts in *The Lamp of Umm Hashim*. For example, Although Ismail's mother and Fatima have a bad image of Europe which is against their religion, it has been the best solution to let Ismail study medicine. In addition to that, Ismail follows Mary, who indicates the West. She manages to change his thoughts and beliefs. Dr. Edward Said states in his book *Orientalism* that, "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). At that stage, Ismail believes that Mary's thoughts are correct even they are the opposite of his. However, Ismail is not either surprised or extremely pained when he sees Mary turn from him to another fellow student, one of her own race and color. He maybe thinks she will not accept him because he is from the East. Furthermore, when he returns to Egypt, he is described as a European person. He is "smart, tall, upstanding young man with a radiant face and head held high"(Haqqi 62). He is described in the opposite way before traveling to Europe. Moreover, his professor described Egypt as "the land of the blind". He believes that people in Egypt are inferior to Europe and ignorant.

At the end of the novel, we are informed that Ismail teaches Fatima how to dress, eat, and behave like a more civilized woman, like a European woman. In my opinion, there is a point in this. After colonialism, the country is left destroyed suffering from many problems, such as weakness and backwardness. Thus, we need to develop ourselves to become more civilized but in our way by applying religion correctly. In addition, it indicates that not everything in West should be rejected. We can accept the things that agree our religion.

II. CONCLUSION

The Lamp of Umm Hashim is one of the Arabic work that shows an Arabian character who finds himself at the center of the clash between the cultures of the East and West. Ismail goes through many crises until he finds a reconciliation between faith and science. He is brought up in traditional Muslim family in Cairo. Then, he experiences the life in Europe during his study, effected by the West beliefs. His religious faith has been replaced by a stronger faith in science. He returns to Egypt, trying to change their life there. However, he is shocked when he fails to treat his cousin by using science. In the end, he realizes that he cannot deny his heritage and he power lay in faith.

In my opinion, we nowadays live the effect of colonialism and orientalism. The colonizer tries to divorce us as Muslims from our religion. It tries to depict Islam full of deficiencies, and cannot cope with the demands of the modern age. *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* proves that we have something superior to West, which is Faith. This work indicates that we are only late. We have the secret of civilization. We only need to apply it correctly. Science with the support of faith can build a perfect civilization.

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