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ENGL 5390

12-14-2009

Final Essay

**Hyper-Awareness and the Colonial Creep**

The colonial enterprise, particularly the European imperialist projects in the east, has forever changed concepts of identity, otherness, and power in both the Occident and the Orient. Both sides were indisputably and irrevocably altered; however, the effect upon native cultures (the colonized) was far greater than the effect on the imperial cultures (the colonizers). European colonizers were able to cherry-pick the greatest parts of “new” culture—their art, their music, their architecture, or their cuisine—and adopt or adapt it to modern imperial life. In many ways, the cultural practices and artifacts of a newly colonized civilization were treated like the natural resources (oil, silk, spice) the Europeans were there to gather: they mattered only in their usefulness to the empire. Unlike their imperial counterparts, however, the native peoples had no choice which customs and practices to adopt, and which to discard. The sheer military might and nature of the colonial enterprise demanded that the colonized completely adapt to the social and cultural norms of the empire. In essence, then, the colonized were forced to lead a life of double consciousness, wherein they participated in customs and practices and obeyed laws and regulations in which they did not believe. The sense of double consciousness is difficult to imagine; most Americans believe that laws and rules exist for a reason: because they make sense. How would the average American react, then, if forced to obey laws and rules that did not “make sense” to his or her consciousness? Colonization most assuredly produced altered states of consciousness, in which the fundamental sense of “rightness” was understood to be subjective and culturally constructed, rather than naturally true. In conjunction with this realization came the idea that identity is not something personally owned, but rather, something inscribed upon a body or culture by an agent of power. In this case, identities were projected onto the natives by the imperialists.

Edward Said’s text *Orientalism* focuses heavily on this identity projection. For Said, the ways in which Europeans constructed an entire mythos about the Orient was illustrative not of what was *actually there*, but rather the idea that *there* represented a foil against which *here* could be (favorably) compared. Because Europe (and later, America) controlled the discourse—whether through academic or social monopolies—it also controlled the power of identification. If it served European interests for Orientals to be (for example) highly sexual—whether to illustrate the need for morality, or to relieve repressed inner sexuality, or both—then that is what they became, regardless of “factual” truths. The West’s absolute economic, academic, military, and political dominance forced those from the Far and Middle East to live within these externally crafted bodies, places, and cultures. This complete separation from a sense of self-identification and control, coupled with the disorienting reality of colonial life and rules, completely removed any sense of agency and selfhood from colonized peoples. The dissolving of the imperial enterprise over the last 200 years has left the oppressed in a state of detachment: they do not identify with their oppressors, but their consciousness has been changed so radically that they can never return to their roots. How people make sense of their country, community, and themselves in a post-colonial civilization is based strongly around an awareness of the West’s power to influence and corrupt, and just as strongly around an attempt to capture their lost culture.

Two texts from the Middle East are prime examples of such struggles: Israeli Etgar Keret’s *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God*, and Iranian Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. Keret’s light-hearted text captures the humor of Jewish culture, while Satrapi’s graphic novel illustrates the revolutionary power of the Iranian spirit. Both texts also, however, evidence a sense of awareness about Western influences, particularly in the ways in which they illuminate cultural values of togetherness, community, and family. Both Keret’s and Satrapi’s texts illustrate the differences in Israeli and Iranian cultures: where *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God* champions community and socialism, *Persepolis* focuses on the value of family. Both texts, however, ultimately must deal with the colonialist creep of Western thought, symbolized in both cases as the individualist experience. How each author deals with this imposition reflects the character of the society, but *that* each author deals with Western values illuminates the hyper-awareness postcolonial thinkers experience.

In order to understand how these texts evidence the values of their culture, it is first necessary to understand what these values are, and how they function. Israel, because of its connection to the West, and large European Jewish population, is often conceived of as separate from the Middle East, despite its geographical location in the heart of the region. Despite its Western influences, Israel was once a colony itself—subjected to British mandates throughout the early half of the 20th century—and the Jews of both Europe and the Middle East have experienced oppression on par with any other colonial victims. Despite the cultural oppression and religious persecution its people have endured, Israel has received significant aide from the West—particularly the United States—in constructing and developing its land and resources. This assistance, however, did not come without a price. In his article chronicling the Israeli frontier expansion project, “Frontier Myths and Their Applications in America and Israel: A Transnational Perspective,” S. Ilan Troen identifies key conceptual differences between America and Israel, how those differences effected expansion policies and procedures, and ultimately, how the West attempted to alter and manipulate Israel’s cultural policy. Troen identifies the similarities in both the American and the Israeli frontier experience as stemming from a personal identification with the expansion process. He writes: “the experience of settling America’s frontiers came to be viewed as a formative influence in shaping the nature of American society,” (Troen 2) and that “Israelis are constantly invited to and even obliged to compare themselves with Americans and to consider what may be learned from the American experience” (Troen 3). For Americans, the frontier expansion was wrapped up in the ideas of Manifest Destiny, and the obligation and right of Europeans to move westward; for Zionists, the American religious and social justifications were uniquely applicable. The interest was not one-sided either, as Troen writes, “Even before [World War II], American experts in social development attempted to export concepts and practices rooted in the special circumstances of the American frontier to the growing Jewish community in Palestine” (Troen 4). This desire to export American values is common in imperial societies, and it indicates not only an identification with the Israeli experience, but a recognition that Americans could benefit from an ally in the region.

In essence, both countries were engaged in a similar expansion project: “In both the American and the Zionist frontier experiences ex-Europeans intended to create societies designed to serve primarily the interests and needs of the settler populations rather than those of the inhabitants they encountered” (Troen 6). Israel, then, was a former colony engaging in a colonization of its own; the expansion of the Zionist settlement resembled colonial practices exhibited by European powers, and specifically by Americans, over the previous hundreds of years—with one major exception. When regarding the differences between American expansion and Zionist expansion in Israel, “the crucial distinction,” Troen states, “is that Zionist colonization was a highly centralized and directed experience that often supported socialist and communist forms of settlement. It encouraged individual and collective self-sacrific rather than ‘individual self-betterment,’ which was the guiding ethos and purpose of the American pattern” (Troen 6). To understand how different these policies were, it is important to understand just how significantly the American expansion project focused on the individual.

Troen sets up a binary dialectical relationship, with Israel’s communal socialism on one hand, and the United States’ yeoman individualism on the other. These divergent viewpoints represented not just a minor quibble between the nations and their policies, but rather, a massive ideological difference between a world power and a nascent nation. The United States, Troen argues, “became a continental nation committed to individualism and to the furtherance and protection of personal rights” (Troen 6). This vision of the rugged individual braving the wilds of nature became more than an image, but a directive fantasy which shaped the entirety of American policy, even laws. As Troen summarizes: “The American legal tradition typically favored agrarian yeomen, even in urban settings, and has encourage speculation in the name of individualism” (Troen 15). The American expansion mythos is heavily indebted to ideas of private ownership, individualism, isolation, and solitude—ideas which contradict with the ideals of the Zionist settlements.

While “pioneers and pioneering in the United States have been traditionally viewed as sources of a form of individualism that is rooted in the realization of self-interest,” (Troen 11) “the equivalent of ‘pioneer’ in Hebrew is derived from the biblical *halutz*, one who went before the people and was in their service” (Troen 9). The Zionist focus on communality and social service comes from their Jewish roots: because they were enacting their expansion project in the name in Jews, rather than in the name of personal freedom or gain, the impetus was on how to best serve the community, and not on how to best make a personal gain. Troen asserts the same principle: “What is common to all Zionist pioneering is that it is never done on behalf of oneself” (Troen 11). This ideological principle has had physical implications as well. While American pioneering manifested itself in the homestead, or personal ranch, Jewish pioneering in Israel has manifested itself in communal villages, called either the *moshav* or the *kibbutz*. There is, then, a physical proximity among Jewish settlers that contrasted the isolation of American pioneers. This physical proximity and community setting has lead to an increased focus on self-sacrifice, a stronger sense of nationalism, and an ideal of unity and togetherness that does not exist in America.

As Israel continued to develop, America’s interest in the progress of the expansion grew. Initially, Israelis were interested in American methods of irrigation, farming, and other settling activities, given the similarities between the American west and Israel. As Israel’s power and wealth grew, so did the American interests. Therefore, despite the initially benevolent goals of the American assistance, interactions between the two nations quickly took on imperialist terms, according to Troen, “[American] experts were attempting to export not only settlement technologies but also the social and economic values underlying America’s development of its own frontiers” (Troen 17). America quickly saw that Israel could be a beacon of Western thought in the Middle East, and jumped at the opportunity to sway Israeli policy toward individualistic values. The reports offered by American experts, then, turned into policy statements designed to sway the Israelis away from their communal socialist structure and toward a homesteading society. Troen asserts: “Beyond the technical aspects of the report, the most important item on the agenda is rebutting the collectivist and socialist alternatives to an individualistic and capitalist agriculture” (Troen 24). Essentially, the Americans did not believe that a socialist country in the Middle East would represent Western thought appropriately enough, nor was it believed that communist ideology was compatible with American values.

Ultimately, the American project was partially successful. Israel became, and still is, a strong beacon of Western thought in the heart of the Middle East, and a strong ally for American policy in the region. The Americans, however, were not completely successful in swaying the Israelis against their belief in community and social welfare; in fact, Israel still has a strong identity as a communal Jewish state, despite its conversion to capitalism.

In much the same way as the Jewish state of Israel, it is possible to see the West’s individualistic influence working against communal or group ideologies in literature and cultural studies of more traditionally Arabic states. While Israeli pioneers focused on community, however, the Arab unit is much smaller: the family. In their study on post-civil-war refugees in Lebanon, “Displaced Arab Families: Mothers’ Voices on Living and Coping in Postwar Beirut,” Jihad Makhoul and Mary Ghanem identify the strong role the family plays within Arab culture, specifically in the lives of women. The authors particularly focus on the ways in which refugees are particularly segmented and insular, and the ways in which the household is an even more important sanctuary for internal refugees. Makhoul and Ghanem identify these refugees as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and categorize them as “people who have been forced to leave their homes to flee persecution, violence, armed conflict, violations of human rights, or natural disasters, but who have no crossed internationally recognized borders” (Ghanem and Makhoul 56). Because these refugees are not protected by international law, but are rather governed by the laws of their own country—a country which is likely involved in their persecution—Makhoul and Ghanem state that “IDPs are seen as the most vulnerable [types of refugees]” (Ghanem and Makhou 56). The study, which focused on women in two areas of Beirut—a Christian Arab ghetto and a Muslim Arab ghetto—attempts to address how women cope with the extreme stress associated with displaced living in a culture so focused on the family and household. The displacement is even more stressful for the women, as the study notes: “The role of bread-winner is associated with the father,” and, “the majority of the women… interviewed are housewives” (Ghanem and Makhoul 61). Essentially, the women in these households are without agency, and they have been forced outside their only area of power and belonging: the household. During stressful times, such as war or revolution, the family unit—an already important structure in Arab society—becomes even more necessary. Relating their study to others done in the past, the authors asserted that “the family was the primary source of security for its members in the context of volatile political conditions and an unstable economy” (Ghanem and Makhoul 63). Indeed, when asked to identify the non-material necessity they most needed during these troubling times, nearly every woman referred to a strong family unity.

What is unique about this study is not in its identification of the family unit as important to Arab families; rather, Ghanem and Makhoul’s investigation of what happens to the family unit when placed in a difficult, outsider community situation. The most important of these observations is that a strong inside-outside dichotomy develops. In regards to their community, the authors found that “more than half of the women… interviewed in Naba’a had no relations with their neighbors and described them as uncaring” (Ghanem and Makhoul 68). These women feel detached from their community in such a way that the household becomes the only place for human contact. This, in turn, elevates a sense of difference—or otherness—to everything outside the domestic sphere. The authors illustrate this feeling with their analysis of the balcony. For the women in the study, the balconies of their apartments represented space outside of the apartment, and were therefore avoided at all costs. Stepping out on the balcony would be akin to leaving the safety of the home—an outside exposure that caused great anxiety among the women. The strife they have experienced within their own country has caused them to distrust even their neighbors, and feel apprehension any time they are exposed to the outside world. The result is an increased focus on the family unit and the domestic sphere. Essentially, the war and conflict in Lebanon has caused an escalation of what was already present; the importance of the family in Arab culture becomes exaggerated during times of conflict and tension, and the world outside of the domestic sphere becomes dangerous and foreign.

Although her text takes place in post-revolution Iran, Satrapi’s *Persepolis* features many of the same themes and issues as Ghanem and Makhoul’s study on Lebanon post-civil-war. Satrapi’s text focuses on her experiences in Iran in two parts: first, as a young girl, around the time leading up to and immediately following the Islamic revolution; second, as an adult, after returning from her education abroad. The first section of the text, in which readers meet Satrapi, her mother and father, and various relatives (including Grandma and revolutionary uncle Anoosh), illustrates connections to the fundamental assertions of Ghanem and Makhoul’s study—particularly the focus on the family and the domestic sphere. For most of the first section, readers rarely see Satrapi outside of her home, and many of those rare occasions are when she is at school. Her time is spent mostly with her mother and father, who are her only outlet to the outside world. Although the text presents Satrapi at school frequently, the only times readers see her actually reading or leaning anything valuable (not transparent propaganda) are when she reads revolutionary books provided by her mother and father, or when she is lectured by close family members such as Grandma or uncle Anoosh. Young Marjane’s world consists of the stories and lives of her family, and this becomes most apparent as she grows into an educated young girl—her sense of personal self-worth is directly tied into how fantastic and revolutionary her family’s stories are. In one particular scene, she attempts to claim a false identity by fabricating stories of her father’s torture to a classmate, only to later relate a true recounting of the heroic deeds of her uncles and grandfather which is much more fantastic and interesting. Essentially, she discovers that her family *is* her identity. For Marjane, the restriction of the domestic sphere does not set in until the Islamic revolution. From this point on in her young life, home is a place of relative security, while the outside world is dangerous and scary. Marjane’s first encounter with violence occurs while attending a protest against forced veiling with her mother and father, a protest that “got nasty,” (Satrapi 76) and ending with people being stabbed and beaten. It isn’t long before the oppression and violence hits even closer to home. Marjane’s mother is accosted and spit upon while running errands; Marjane’s father is nearly shot by a 16-year-old officer with a rifle, for the crime of being suspected of owning liquor; and finally, Marjane herself is verbally and physically assaulted by two women “Guardians of the Revolution” who do not appreciate her “punk” style of dress. These incidents mimic the sense of fear and anxiety felt by the women of Beirut during their time of crisis—community dissolves and outside spaces become dangerous, while the home because the last safe refuge and the family the last relatable individuals. Marjane’s family becomes like the IDPs in Lebanon as well: they are all alienated from a government that oppresses them, and they detach from any social experiences. Finally, the pressure becomes too much, and Marjane is sent off to school in Vienna. She is able to escape the oppression and persecution only through escaping the community itself. What follows is her individualist experience with the West; an experience in which she becomes alienated from her own heritage and people, and exhibits the Imperial ideological creep so prevalent in colonial cultures.

According to Said, one of the most effective ways the imperial power controls the colony is through education; the West’s efficient and effective education system became the gold standard across the world. In *Persepolis*, the only places outside of her own home that Marjane receives an education are in the West; specifically, in her time in Vienna. During this time, her education consists of famous European theorists like Bhaktin, DeBeauvoir, and Marx; in essence, Marjane is becoming a Westernized thinker, her views and beliefs are being altered by the imperial educational system.

Along with her educational progression, Marjane also loses her ties to home and family while in Europe. During this period of her life, she is often frustrated at “home,” and attempts to do whatever she can to get outside and meet new people. Although all of her attempts to realize herself sexually as a woman end in failure in Europe, there is no sense of danger in her encounters outside the domestic sphere—in fact, she seems more comfortable outside than in. This feeling is obviously a result of the horrid living conditions she is forced to endure, but is also the result of a more individualized focus toward personhood and adulthood; Marjane’s attempts to understand herself as an adult are undertaken as an individualist exercise, not a familial or communal exercise, which is reflective of the values of Western society, not Marjane’s home.

Marjane’s return home at the end of the novel is rife with postcolonial tropes of hybridity and identity confusion. She feels like an outsider, and is often confused by the workings of her home culture. She also feels more modern, and more Westernized than she felt in Europe. Her attempts to re-assimilate into Iranian culture are somewhat successful at first: she works, makes friends, goes back to school, even marries; however, in the end, she finds that she does not belong in Iran any more. Her experiences are reflective of the postcolonial predicament of attempting to return to the roots: once one’s culture and country have been colonized, there can be no going back, there can be no reclamation of the original identity. In this sense, Marjane’s journey is that of the colonized peoples—a journey through murky notions of identity and self, of power and otherness, of nationhood and culture. That she loses her connection with her family, and leaves the country illustrates that the postcolonial attempt to reclaim what was lost is often fruitless and heartbreaking.

Like Satrapi’s text, Keret’s *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God* evidences an awareness of the imperial individualist creep against a native sense of unity; however, unlike Satrapi’s text, Keret’s collection of vignettes ultimately posits the possibility of rejection of the colonial value system. Many of Keret’s stories are short, comical romps through a magically realistic world, but nearly all are biting in their social commentary, and sharp in their political satire. The very first chapter, “The Story About a Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God,” introduces readers to the Jewish sense of communality and socialism described by Troen. The bus driver in this tale will never stop to wait for someone, even if they are mere seconds late for the bus. His reason, however, has nothing to do with misanthropy, as Keret writes:

It wasn’t because he was mean that he didn’t open the door, because this driver didn’t have a mean bone in his body; it was a matter of ideology. The driver’s ideology said that if, say, the delay that was caused by opening the door for someone who came late was just under thirty seconds, and if not opening the door meant that this person would wind up losing fifteen minutes of his life, it would still be more fair to society to not open the door, because the thirty seconds would be lost by every single passenger on the bus… when it came to choosing between smiles and thanks on the one hand, and the good of society on the other, this driver knew what it had to be (Keret 1-2).

Readers are meant to see the driver’s notions as altruistic and noble, if a little misguided, and at the very least sympathize with the driver’s motivations. Keret presents ideas of Jewish communality and self-sacrifice from the very onset of his text, and the driver’s choice of martyrdom, in the form of hatred from the passengers, reflects ideas of the good of the whole. Just as quickly as he introduces readers to these traditional Israeli values, however, Keret also illuminates the creeping influence of individualism, illustrating how vulnerable all Israelis are to the influences of Western society. At the end of the first story, the bus driver has a change of heart. During a normal day, the bus driver is confronted by the young (and chronically late) Eddie, on his way to a date with a beautiful girl. Eddie’s pathetic desperation triggers within the driver an impulse toward compassion, and the driver finally stops and lets Eddie on the bus. It turns out Eddie’s state of being reminded the bus driver of a time when he had dreamed of being God, and when he remembered this feeling, he remembered that “he’d once promised himself that if he became God in the end, He’d be merciful and kind and would listen to all His creatures. So when he saw Eddie… he simply couldn’t go through with it, and in spite of all his ideology and his simple arithmetic he opened the door” (Keret 5). Ultimately, Keret calls into question which ideology was self-serving and which was altruistic—are readers to believe that the bus driver was truly serving the public by leaving riders in the dust, or is Keret surmising that the truly self-sacrificing act is to put aside one’s ideology and just help others in need? Regardless of how readers answer this question, Keret has posited the main dichotomy of Israeli existence: the tension between a self-sacrificing Jewish state, and an individualistic Western ideology.

As his satirical journey through Israeli culture continues, Keret becomes more critical of the Israeli focus on communality and sacrifice. In a chapter entitled “Jetlag,” readers are introduced to an airline passenger who is convinced that a stewardess fell in love with him on a flight home from New York. During his romantic encounter with the stewardess, Shelly, he discovers that the government has secretly been ordering airplanes to crash into the Atlantic Ocean for years, in order to scare people into obeying safety rules. Shelly tells the narrator that: “Once every year or two we crash a plane in mid-ocean, as gently as possible, and a child or two may get killed, so people start taking the whole flight safety business more seriously” (Keret 108-109). Here, Keret presents sacrifice and the greater good as absurd concepts: the government is willing to kill a few children so that people will follow the rules. He also presents readers with the idea that the leaders of the government are not the ones making the sacrifice—the people are. Suddenly, the idea of the greater good must be met with the question: “good” for whom? What readers are left with is the understanding that Israelis are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of their country, but that the sacrifice itself needs to be questioned. The transatlantic flight from New York to Israel is indicative of the direction colonialist ideologies travel—West to East—and Shelly’s decision to spare the narrator mirrors the bus driver’s decision to stop for Eddie. Keret is therefore neither condemning nor promoting Jewish ideologies of communality, but rather, he is deconstructing them.

In his final chapter, the much longer “Kneller’s Happy Campers,” Keret offers a look at communality, individualism, and his insight into what is possible for the future. The story revolves around the protagonist, Mordy, who has recently committed suicide, and, instead of finding himself in heaven (or hell), finds himself in a world almost every way similar to his previous one, except that it is populated solely by people who committed suicide in their previous lives. Keret weaves the competing ideologies of suicide and community together through this creation of a new community of the recently “offed.” In the text, suicide is portrayed as a means to escape a world of detachment and isolation. It can therefore be seen as simultaneously selfish, in that the offer takes his own life and leaves his loved ones, and communal, in that the pain of isolationism is too much for these people to bear.

Although Keret is intentionally ambiguous through his entire collection of stories as to which side he believes in—individualist or socialist—two scenes from “Kneller’s Happy Campers” point toward his belief in the importance of community in the face of Western individualist pressure. The first scene is during “Chapter Four,” in which Mordy eats dinner with his friend Uzi Gelfand’s family. Keret chooses to show an entire family of offers in order to display the sad beauty of togetherness and community. None of the Gelfands could make it in the world as individuals, so they offed themselves. However, once dead, they were able to come together and live happily together as a family unit. Here, Keret is illustrating that the individual experience is not enough to pull a person through his or her life, that everyone needs a group for support. The second scene which points toward Keret’s belief in community is the climax of the story, in which a prophet named J (suspiciously resembling Jesus) attempts to find out what happens when someone who has already committed suicide once does it again. It is only after J stabs himself in the heart that Mordy learns that double-suicides simply go to a realm with other double-suicides—but there are not too many of those. This illustrates Keret’s socialism in two ways: first, he posits that would eventually be a way to escape the community, but it would involve so much self-inflicted pain as to never be worth it; second, he shows that community is the natural state of life, such that very few people were every really set on escaping human contact altogether.

Through his portrayals, Keret acknowledges the shortcomings of a society based on communality and self-sacrifice; he also, however, showcases the pain and isolation that come from a society based completely on the individual and self-interest. In this way, he combats the individualist creep of Western ideology, and posits a postcolonial Israeli identity as communal people. Neither Keret nor Satrapi are able to completely escape the pull of Western Orientalism, and both authors acknowledge the presence of American and European values in their society. What each text does do, however, is attempt to claim identity *in the face of* Orientalist power structures, and as postcolonial thinkers. Although this oppositional relationship indicates that the former colony states are forever scarred by their experiences with Western ideology, Etgar Keret and Marjane Satrapi offers methods for claiming identity that do not revolve around blind attempts to return to cultural roots.

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