



## Mideast Culture

### [On Representation: Dr. Hamid Dabashi on the Exiled Intellectual as Cultural Artist](#)

By Mohamed Chakmachi, Aslan Media Contributing Writer

Published on Thursday, 15 November 2012 05:28



[Hamid Dabashi](#) is a formidable figure. He has carved out a unique place for himself as a writer, both in the world of cultural commentary and academia through his online presence as a columnist for [Al Jazeera](#) and Al Ahram Weekly and as the Hagop Kervorkian Professor of Comparative Literature and Iranian Studies at [Columbia University](#). Dabashi's are some of the most salient and dynamic arguments available about the current state of affairs in the Arab world and in Iran. His critical eye has led many to view him as the bearer of Edward

Said's life-long endeavor to shift the discussion about the peoples and societies of the Middle East away from the stagnant views of Orientalists like Bernard Lewis - who often times either fetishize or demonize Middle Eastern societies- and towards the evolving realities and struggles for freedom, justice and dignity within these societies. In his career, which spans decades of academic work, he has been both prolific and audacious. It's not often a professor of comparative literature is so widely read outside of his own field. And Dabashi, it seems, has his fingers in everything that is relevant in the world of social change, art, cinema, and literature in both the Arabic and Farsi speaking worlds.

Whereas many in academia shy away from commenting on current events, let alone write books on current social and political phenomena, Dabashi has not, taking on the role of critic and public intellectual with verve and spirit. Frantz Fanon, in his powerful work *Black Skin, White Masks* proclaimed, "reality requires total comprehension," and that an "answer must be found on the objective as well as the subjective level." Echoing Fanon, Dabashi, in a brief exchange with Aslan Media, revealed a similar thought, saying that we must engage in "active soul searching regarding the endemic issues in our own societies and cultures that demand and must exact auto-criticism." This he makes evident in his newest work, [The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism](#) (reviewed [here](#) by Aslan Media's Arts and Music Editor), where in his chapter "Race, Gender and Class," Dabashi relishes the role set before him to shine a light on jingoistic racial divisions and the race based atrocities that have occurred during the Arab Spring as well as the way young revolutionaries today have rejected those tropes and are now building bonds of "transnational solidarity." It must be said that as an Iranian intellectual in exile, he has stated his own special connection to the Arab world, especially Palestine, which he has described as central to his "moral and imaginative geography."

Dabashi is a restless figure. In the last month he has traveled to the UK, Turkey and Italy to give various addresses and lectures (it should be noted he is on official sabbatical for one year from his position at Columbia University). Now he comes to San Francisco to give the Keynote address at [Golden Thread's ReOrient Forum](#). The Forum is coupled with [Golden Thread's ReOrient Theatre Festival](#), which features cutting edge works by writers across the globe who, in one way or another, have found lyrical home in the countries affected by the mood and the realities of the people affected, in one form or another, by social and political realities of what we must now call the so-called Middle East. The ReOrient Forum itself has a stated goal of enabling and allowing for dialogue about current issues that revolve around Middle Eastern-American theatre. The panels themselves are represented by individuals with backgrounds in various disciplines: writers, artists, academics, activists, intellectuals, and actors. While the Forum does not serve as a place to discuss the artistic qualities of the plays presented, the plays themselves serve as a springboard for the discussions.

One of the key issues that nearly all the panels will be grappling with is representation, and not just as it pertains to theatre, but even when dealing with philanthropic and humanitarian issues. Aslan Media writer Mohamed Chakmachi recently had a chance to interview Dr. Dabashi about these themes, as well as his role as Keynote Speaker to Golden Thread's ReOrient Forum.

**Aslan Media: First, could you share with us some thoughts you have on how to remain authentic when dealing or working with issues in the Middle East?**

**Hamid Dabashi:** We need categorically to abandon the anxiety of authenticity. Any claim to authenticity is inauthentic. You know the great motto of good acting, right: "sincerity my dear, sincerity, if you can fake that you got it made." On stage and in front of camera or pondering over a canvas the only authenticity that matters is the artist's craft, and her rootedness, or her worldliness. If she is not true to that world her flawed forms will betray her. No artists represent anything, except that constellation of form and fury that make up her art. Know that art is no abstraction—even in the most abstract forms of art. That art is rooted, and if not it will wither away the instant it touches the air of reality that permeates the performing ambience of the world in which it is uttered. So if I were these artists I would not worry about authenticity for that anxiety is the clearest sign of artistic inauthenticity.

**AM: The first panel will be discussing the phenomena widely known today as the Arab Spring, the dramatic reverberations of this movement, how it has traveled and issues of revolutionary aesthetics. What do you think some of the long-term effects of these reverberations will be in representing the Middle East in theatre, in art and in the media either here in the US or in the Middle East itself?**

**HD:** The very first thing that the Arab Spring has done is dispense this horrid colonial concoction you call "the Middle East." Millions of people braving the elements against tyranny and imperialism are not in the middle of the colonial officer's east anymore. They are in the middle of history, of geography, of the world they are reimagining beyond their parental limitations. That fact and the phenomenon of the Arab Spring will generate its own artists and its own art. It is still too early to say, for art is always way ahead of political events, and thus it will not react to the Arab Spring but navigate its future. Arab Spring was dreamt by Arab artists, poets, novelists, dramatist, filmmakers, photographers, etc. for over 200 years—now that it is happening—the next phase will be dreamt by the next generation. So we should not ask what is the effect of the Arab Spring on art, but what is the next phase of the Arab Spring that this generation of artists are dreaming—as we speak.

**AM: Cultural jamming, or détournement, has been a key tool for many in turning Orientalist and simple-minded representations of the Middle East on their head. One of the panels for the ReOrient Forum is titled Comedic Counter Terrorism. Do you feel that comedy is an effective manner in dealing with static notions of the Middle East and Middle Easterners? When and how does it work best?**

**HD:** Yes of course—comedy is perhaps the best medium precisely because these latter-day Orientalist (or the recycled ones like Bernard Lewis) are quite comic. But my contention is that Orientalism is far more a vexing matter for expatriate intellectuals and artists here in North America or Western Europe than where these revolutions are happening. All we need is just to imagine the face of Bernard Lewis and we have such a visceral revulsion that we become paralyzed. But the fact is these folks are now made—by the world historic might of these revolutions—categorically redundant and useless. They were made paradoxically to have a much longer life than they deserved, precisely because of the power of criticism that was launched against them. As I have long since argued, we need to change the interlocutors. These Orientalists are no longer worth our attention. History, our people, people at large, have left them behind and so must we.

**AM: Artists are often the subjects of state tyranny. We have seen how in Syria artists and musicians who have used their talents to criticize the state have been abused and even murdered. Two groups have been invited to talk about this issue and the protocol for helping artists in danger in foreign nations. What are some of the potential issues or conflicts for a foreign group trying to avoid what some call the “white-savior syndrome” but whose interests are to help an artist under attack in the Middle East?**

**HD:** Artists are under attack everywhere—in Syria and Iran in one way and in the United States and China or Russia in some other way. In order not to fall into the “white-savior syndrome” as you rightly call it, you need to include the white artists in the project—and thus categorically to dismantle the racialized context of perilous art and artists. Here in the US artists are at the mercy of commercial capitalism when they fail and they become fetishized into the culture industry when they succeed; there they are at the whim of bloody dictators. You need to theorize both sides of the spectrum into a singular project that avoids the proposition that we are saving them.

**AM: Cultural observers and critics like Edward Said have pointed out that often times multiculturalism requires “othering” so much so that it ends up reinforcing a dominant cultures colonial role. The panel on Engaged Performance will try to investigate how artists across cultures can restore social relationships affected by political trauma. What do you see as the issues in creating “hyphenated art”?**

**HD:** I have no patience for “hyphenated art.” It cross-authenticates two fabrications at the both sides of the hyphen, as it were. When we assay “Arab-American” to accommodate that hyphen we have in effect authenticated two highly fabricated propositions—Arab and American. Two fake bookends make for a fake book—and why should we do that? Home for an artist is where s/he climbs the stage and acts and performs and laughs and cries in what ever language or medium that comes most natural to her creative demon—we have no control over these things—they have control over us.

**AM: There is a notion that the great writings of the Middle East, especially when it comes to poetry, can only be found in the works that exist within the classical canon of Middle Eastern literature. Indeed, so-called purists often deride modern representations of classical works. How do you feel about this specific phenomena? That is to say do you feel that using classical poetry in modern works is effective in creating dynamic contemporary art?**

**HD:** The classics are there to be transgressed—they are walls, and in being walls they are also ipso facto, invitations to defiance. Yes they are some mighty walls—sometimes in fragments and ruins—but we climb and transgress them at will. It is easy to say that Abu Nuwas or Hafez were great poets—of course they were, but who is the Abu Nuwas and Hafez wondering among us these days? They are there, and just like Abu Nuwas and Hafez they have no clue who they are until a generation or two later.

**AM: The last panel will be discussing the similitudes between the War on Drugs of the 1980s and the War on Terror today. What should we know about either of these phenomena in the marginalization and vilification of certain communities?**

**HD:** The key word in both cases is “war”—this empire has no other way of imagining the world except through its military and militant apparatus. Manufacturing and combating factual and fictive enemies is the only way that this empire can sustain its *raison d'être*—that is the calamity the world faces. But that militarization has now reached its point of exhaustion and the world is leaving it behind.

**AM: Finally, I would like you to send an image that you might say best exemplifies the ideas you have about this moment in history:**

**HD:** This is the image:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME-3myk5Olk>

and this why:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/12/2011125132335754716.html>

*The ReOrient Forum* will be held in San Francisco, CA on November 17th and 18th. *Golden Thread Production's ReOrient Middle Eastern Theatre Festival* is currently in production in San Francisco, CA from Nov 1st-25th.

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\*Photo Credit: [Goldbarg Bashi](#). Photo courtesy of [Hamid Dabashi](#).