

THE ARAB SPRING: THE END OF POSTCOLONIALISM

Hamid Dabashi, (London & New York: Zed Books, 2012), 272 p.
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The events of the last 3 years in the Middle East, which is commonly referred as the “Arab Spring” have been momentous not only for the politics of the region and the world in general, but also for the academic studies of the Middle East region. Countries from Morocco to Yemen have experienced a wave of demonstrations with broad participation of different segments of their societies which resulted in the ouster of the leaders in some cases. One of the central questions of the last 3 years has been how to frame these events. Professor Hamid Dabashi, a well-known scholar of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, engages in a theoretical discussion on the “Arab Spring” throughout his latest book *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. Hamid Dabashi states that he had two aims in writing this book. First of all, he attempted to build a theoretical perspective to assess the revolts in the region. Secondly, as the events were still unfolding during the writing and publishing process of this book; Dabashi considers his book as

his way of showing solidarity with the “Arab Spring” (p. 235). In both ways, Dabashi’s book is a highly critical work. He does not aim to grasp the entire relevant theoretical discussion, but to engage with a new way of interpreting world politics in which the developments in the Middle East lie at the center. Thus, this book is recommended to anyone who is interested either in politics of the Middle East, or contemporary world politics on a theoretical basis.

The book is composed of ten chapters each of which poses different but inter-related and equally-important arguments. Instead of a country-by-country discussion of the “Arab Spring”, Dabashi prefers to deal with the cases within the framework of a theoretical debate. Only in the first chapter he gives a chronology of the events in each country in the region that has been influenced from the wave of protests. This chronology is also accompanied by a brief discussion of the possible reasons of the unrests in each case. In the rest of the book, Dabashi mainly provides his

analysis of the “Arab Spring”, and its effects on world politics. The “Arab Spring”, for Dabashi, is not only revolutionary for the region, but it has also changed the course of international politics in general.

One of the main arguments of the book which is also the basis of all other discussions is Dabashi’s claim that, all of our terminology needs to be rethought. The meanings that are attributed to them no longer correspond to reality. He argues that we need a new mode of knowledge production in order to grasp the changes that are brought by the “Arab Spring” (p. 2). Furthermore, he argues that the “Arab Spring” and the Green Movement signal such a mode of knowledge production that transcends colonial and postcolonial boundaries (p. 164). Dabashi argues that postcoloniality created an illusion of emancipation for the formerly colonized countries, however it only fixated the existing relations of domination (p. xvii). The “Arab Spring” signals the end of postcoloniality in two terms. First of all, it will bring an end to the “colonial oppression” which was only preserved by postcoloniality. The old binaries such as “West and the Rest”, “East and West” or concepts such as “oriental”, “colonial”, or “postcolonial” which only contribute to the reproduction of the colonial domination will cease with the “Arab Spring”. It will bring about a cosmopolitan culture in which other worlds that are suppressed by the false binary of “West and the Rest” come to the forefront (p. 159). Secondly, the “Arab Spring” necessitates and produces a new ideological formation and mode

of knowledge production (p. 119) since the old one represents the domination within coloniality and postcoloniality. These two processes constitute the end of postcoloniality.

In another book named *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest*, Dabashi discusses the term ‘delayed and deferred defiance’ in the history of Shi’ism which he also adapts to the context of the “Arab Spring”¹. By “delayed defiance” he means that a new understanding of liberation movement emerges which is not within the realm of postcoloniality, and thus creates a different revolutionary geography which he designates as the “liberation geography” (p. 44). Benefiting from the thoughts of Bakhtin, Dabashi argues that the revolutions of this era resemble not an epic, but a novel (p. 232). Thus, he offers the concept of “open-ended revolutions” which are slower but more permanent than total revolutions. This kind of a revolution is able to break both the political and ideological domination of colonialism. For Dabashi, the “Arab Spring” symbolizes such a revolution that holds the potential to create an “open-ended dynamic” (p. 97), which would translate into not only politics but also art through the “cosmopolitan culture” it generates (p. 73). Dabashi considers the “Arab Spring” in general and Tahrir in particular as the nucleus of this comprehensive revolution (p. 2). Dabashi also points to the relationship between the Green Movement and the

¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 67.

Arab Spring which he also highlighted in his earlier writings. According to Dabashi, all these movements signal a new world in which different worlds live together in a cosmopolitan worldliness in which former modes of domination and knowledge production do not exist anymore. This will be an era when the world will transcend postcoloniality by actually realizing the features that are attributed to it.

In *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* Dabashi furthers his arguments that he discusses in his other works such as *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (Transaction Publishers, 2008), *Iran, The Green Movement and the USA: The Fox and the Paradox* (Zed Books, 2010), *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Harvard, 2011), *The Green Movement in Iran* (Transaction Publishers, 2011). In other words, this book is in a theoretical harmony with Dabashi's line of thought. The reader engages in a multi-dimensional discussion with reference to several influential thinkers and scholars of the last 200 years. Karl Marx, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, Edward Said, Hardt & Negri, Mikhail Bakhtin, Talal Asad, Asef Bayat, and Bernard Yack are only some of these theorists that have a central place in the book. Although I do not have enough space to discuss Dabashi's reflections on all these thinkers, it suffices here to say that the reader finds a fruitful and a profound theoretical discussion not only on the "Arab Spring" and the latest social movements in the region, but also on postcolonial politics, ori-

entalism and postcolonial knowledge production.

Dabashi's literary writing style and theoretical depth makes our reading a delightful journey. There are valuable discussions in the book which will probably occupy the scholarly agenda in terms of the debates on postcoloniality and its interaction with the recent social movements around the globe. However, when we try to see the analysis behind the text, Dabashi does not provide satisfactory answers to the questions that may come to minds while reading the book. Dabashi is highly optimistic about the radical changes that the "Arab Spring" will lead to in national, regional and international domination. However, it is unclear whether this optimism is merely "wishful thinking" or a result that is reached through an analytical inference. He prefers to use the term "Arab Spring" not because of a theoretical positioning, but because he argues that it symbolizes "hope" (p. xviii). In another part of the book, he argues that the terms "Arab" and "Muslim" can only be used as proverbial since it is only a part within the entire transformative geography which experiences not only a regional, but also a "global reconfiguration". On the other side, he attributes the "Arab Spring" such a power as a trigger of the liberation geography that it is able to destroy the dominant political discourse on a global scale. For Dabashi, the "Arab Spring" can shatter all the discursive binaries and the unequal power structure in the world. In this way, postcoloniality will also be transcended. Howev-

er, he does not explain why it is only the “Arab Spring”, and the Tahrir in particular that holds such a potential, and not the other movements in the world. He does not explain in which part of the movements he sees the symbols of such a potential: in the techniques, in the discourse, or in the aims? Secondly, even if the “Arab Spring” would eventually topple the postcolonial regimes, why does it necessarily mean the end of postcoloniality itself?

One of the main arguments of the book was the need for a reconsideration of our terminology while understanding social movements and politics in general. He argues that even the word revolution is needed to be rethought in order to be used in the discussions on the “Arab Spring” and the course of politics after that. However, he does not present a theoretical basis for the relationship between this need and the “Arab Spring”. In other words, why does Arab Spring in particular necessitate such a reconsideration? He himself rightfully criticizes the scholars who try to see the “Arab Spring” as only a youth movement by saying that “thus the class composition of dissent has been cloaked by a new imaginary homogenous construct called ‘youth’” (p. 66). However, he keeps referring to the “people” as the actors of the “Arab Spring” without discussing the composition of the participants. In the end, all these points raises the doubt that Dabashi cannot provide an analytical ground for his arguments.

In the conclusion section, Dabashi objects the binary between interpretation and change that Marx had put in his work “Thesis on Feuerbach”. Yet accepting the responsibility of both interpreting and changing the world, Dabashi argues that we change the world by the act of interpreting it. The optimism of the book may have a relationship with Dabashi’s interpretation of Marx’s thesis. Maybe for Dabashi, by way of interpreting the Arab Spring in a certain way, we may have the potential to change it in that direction. In any case, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* presents a very different and radical reading of the developments in the Middle East and the world in general which students of the region do not encounter occasionally. In that sense, it is certain that Dabashi’s book will open new windows to the people interested not only in Middle East politics but also in revolution theories, world politics and the theory of postcolonialism.

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