

Challenging Neo-Orientalism: Muslim Identity and the Israel-Palestine Conflict in Teju Cole's *Open City*

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Abstract

This article explores Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) as a profound critique of neo-Orientalist discourses in the post-9/11 era, focusing on Farouq, an Arab-Muslim intellectual in Brussels. Grounded in Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Hamid Dabashi's *neo-Orientalism*, the analysis reveals how Farouq resists Western pressures to assimilate or enact commodified versions of his identity, challenging the persistent demand for "oriental fantasy" narratives. The novel situates Farouq's personal struggles within geopolitical tensions, notably the Israel-Palestine conflict, which characters frame as a defining contemporary issue. This perspective counters *neo-Orientalist* assertions that attribute Middle Eastern instability to inherent cultural flaws, instead critiquing Western imperialism and media distortions. The study contrasts Farouq's revolutionary consciousness with Dr. Maillotte's liberal dismissal of his grievances, exposing subtle neo-Orientalist mechanisms that mask structural inequities under a veneer of openness. Through its dialogic structure and reflective narrator, Julius, *Open City* fosters authentic intercultural exchange, disrupting monolithic portrayals of Muslim identities. The article argues that Cole's narrative not only contests reductive stereotypes but also positions literature as a vital medium for advocating equitable identity representations in a globalized world. By centering Farouq's intellectual agency and experiences, the study contributes significantly to understanding identity politics and representation in postcolonial literature, underscoring the enduring relevance of Said's critique in contemporary global discourses.

Keywords: Neo-Orientalism, Muslim identity, Edward Said, *Open City*, 9/11

Neo-Oryantalizme Meydan Okumak: Teju Cole'un *Open City* Eserinde Müslüman Kimliği ve İsrail-Filistin Çatışması

Öz

Bu makale, Teju Cole'un *Open City* (2011) romanını, Brüksel'de yaşayan Arap-Müslüman bir entelektüel olan Farouq karakteri üzerinden, 11 Eylül sonrası dönemde *neo-Oryantalist* söylemlerin derin bir eleştirisi olarak incelemektedir. Edward Said'in *Oryantalizm*'i ve Hamid Dabashi'nin *neo-Oryantalizm*'i üzerine temellendirilen analiz, Farouq'un asimile olma ya da kimliğinin metalaştırılmış versiyonlarını hayata geçirme yönündeki Batılı baskılara nasıl direndiğini ve "oryantal fantezi" anlatılarına yönelik ısrarlı talebe nasıl meydan okuduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Roman, Farouq'un kişisel mücadelesini jeopolitik gerilimlerin, özellikle de karakterlerin günümüzün belirleyici bir sorunu olarak çerçevelediği İsrail-Filistin çatışmasının içine

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yerleştirmektedir. Bu bakış açısı, Orta Doğu'daki istikrarsızlığı içsel kültürel kusurlara bağlayan neo-Oryantalist iddialara karşı çıkmakta, bunun yerine Batı emperyalizmini ve medyanın çarpıtmalarını eleştirmektedir. Bu çalışma, Farouq'un devrimci bilinci ile Dr. Maillotte'un, onun şikâyetlerini liberal bir şekilde görmezden gelmesini karşılaştırarak, yapısal eşitsizlikleri açıklık görüntüsü altında maskeleyen gizli *neo-Oryantalist* mekanizmaları açığa çıkarıyor. Diyaloğa dayalı yapısı ve düşüncelerini yansıtan anlatıcısı Julius aracılığıyla *Open City*, Müslüman kimliklerin yekpare tasvirlerini bozarak özgün bir kültürlerarası alışverişi teşvik etmektedir. Makalede Cole'un anlatisının sadece basmakalıp yargılara karşı çıkmakla kalmadığı, aynı zamanda edebiyatı küreselleşmiş bir dünyada eşitlikçi kimlik temsillerini savunmak için hayati bir araç olarak konumlandığı belirtilmektedir. Farouq'un entelektüel etkinliğini ve deneyimlerini merkeze alan bu çalışma, postkolonyal edebiyatta kimlik politikalarının ve temsilin anlaşılmasına önemli bir katkıda bulunmakta ve Said'in eleştirisinin çağdaş küresel söylemlerdeki geçerliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Neo-Oryantalizm, Müslüman kimliği, Edward Said, *Open City*, 9/11

INTRODUCTION

The post-9/11 period has seen an increasing focus on identity, migration, and cultural representation, especially concerning the role of Muslim groups in Western public discourse. Neo-Orientalism has become a particularly important analytical lens through which to see these changing dynamics. The book *Open City*, written in 2011 by Teju Cole, engages directly with this issue through its portrayal of Farouq, a young Arab-Muslim intellectual navigating his existence in Brussels. In Farouq's story, Cole reveals the process under which Western societies attempt to force immigrant subjects, through both overt and covert means, either full assimilation or the rendering of reduced, recognizably 'Eastern' identity that validates historical stereotypes. This dynamic recalls Edward Said's (1979) critique of Orientalism, arguing that Western hegemony works by perpetually building and regulating Eastern identities through static cultural representations. Farouq's conscious resistance to either prescribed role exemplifies his own refusal to be reduced to a symbolic token or dispenser of "exotic" narratives. His position is a direct challenge to the ongoing Western desire for simplified, consumable representations of Muslim experience and identity.

This resistance is also closely related to what Hamid Dabashi (2011) calls neo-Orientalism, a contemporary phenomenon in which Western ideological frameworks co-opt seemingly authentic voices from within the Middle Eastern and Muslim communities to perpetuate traditional Orientalist narratives. Neo-Orientalism, however, Dabashi argues, lies in its ability to cloak itself in authenticity, leveraging native informers who reinforce rather than disrupt Western stereotypes. In Cole's narrative, Farouq explicitly critiques celebrated writers who conform to Orientalist expectations to gain Western approval, while Julius, the novel's reflective narrator, underscores the persistent Western desire for "oriental fantasy" narratives from non-Western authors (Cole, 2024).

The novel places Farouq's personal struggles within a larger geopolitical landscape, notably the Israel-Palestine conflict, which the characters frame as the main question of our time (Cole, 2024,

p. 121). In doing so it also questions neo-Orientalist claims that Middle Eastern instability is inextricably linked to cultural deficiencies, turning instead to critiques of Western imperialism and media productions that create and reproduce racialized fear and suspicion of Muslims. Building on postcolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon into this analysis, it identifies Farouq's evolution as a colonized intellectual: his first path being characterized by compliance, in his eyes, with Western academic standards, then a revolutionary self-awareness triggered by institutional rejection and prejudice.

The theoretical coordinates of Orientalism and its contemporary manifestations need to be grounded to make sense of how Cole's novel approaches these dynamics. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said insists that the Western scholarly narrative of the Middle East has historically produced an inaccurate stereotype of the Eastern dimension, which he defines as an inferior "other," justifying, in his view, imperial domination. Orientalism is described as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," in which Western societies generate knowledge about Eastern cultures chiefly as an instrument to establish and preserve authority (Said, 1979, p. 3). The formal end of colonialism did not erase Orientalist attitudes, however. With the twenty-first century, particularly after 9/11, scholars described a "neo-Orientalism," which maintains this basic binary logic Said defined but includes new ones: native voices emerging as "insider" experts and politically outspoken interests in Middle Eastern affairs (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 284).

By examining Farouq's character and his interaction with Julius, this article situates *Open City* at the intersection of postcolonial literature and neo-Orientalist critique. The analysis is anchored in Said's *Orientalism* and its later extensions by scholars like Dabashi, and others. Through this theoretical lens, Farouq's appearance in the novel can be seen as more than just a plot element: it is a vehicle for interrogating how the post-9/11 world frames the Muslim Other. By closely analyzing Farouq's interactions and experiences in Brussels, this study elucidates how neo-Orientalist paradigms continue to structure and constrain the possibilities for genuine intercultural dialogue and equitable representation in a globalized, post-9/11 world.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Said's *Orientalism* borrows substantially from Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Michel Foucault's articulation of power relations, suggesting that the relationship between the West (Occident) and the East (Orient) is inherently characterized by domination and hegemonic complexity. According to Said, Western societies produce knowledge about Eastern cultures and peoples primarily as a means to assert and maintain their authority. The process of "othering" that Said describes creates a dichotomy in which Eastern identities are constructed as irrational, morally deficient, and fundamentally flawed, contrasted with Western self-perceptions of rationality, ethical superiority, and humanitarianism (1979, p. 40). This construction of the Orient therefore serves conveniently as ideological justification for Western endeavors such as military, economic, and colonial expansion into Eastern territories and societies (Said, 1979, p. 12). Historical Orientalism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, largely shaped by travelers, historians,

anthropologists, and colonial administrators, oversimplified and distorted diverse Islamic societies, portraying them as monolithic and unchanging (Said, 1979, p. 22). Such narratives are convincingly countered in Said's critique, which highlights how such knowledge production was always ideologically consistent with the political ambitions of a Western-dominant hegemony.

The end of formal colonialism did not eliminate Orientalist attitudes; rather, classic Orientalist tropes were reconfigured for the contemporary era. As Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams observe in their 2010 article "Neo-Orientalism," neo-Orientalist narratives remain "monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other," much like their classical predecessors (2010, p. 284). Neo-Orientalism inherits the essentializing tendencies of classic Orientalism, depicting Muslim and Eastern societies as a homogenous Other defined by static traits, in opposition to a superior Western Self. The old repertoire of tropes, the irrational fanatic, the oppressed veiled woman, the despotic patriarchal culture, persists, repackaged for contemporary audiences (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 287). Yet, neo-Orientalism also diverges from classical Orientalism in crucial ways. The profile of the Orientalist proponent has broadened considerably. Whereas colonial-era purveyors were typically European men, the neo-Orientalist epoch features a new cadre of voices, often of Middle Eastern or South Asian origin, who present themselves as authentic "insider" experts (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 297). These contemporary neo-Orientalists are frequently "ordinary Middle Eastern subjects whose self-proclaimed authenticity sanctions and authorizes their discourses" (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 284). Writers and commentators with origins in the Muslim world now actively participate in producing the same stereotypes that once were imposed from without, using their cultural background as a credential that makes their often biased accounts appear more objective and credible (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 285). This phenomenon intersects with what Lisa Lau terms "re-Orientalism," referring to how Eastern diaspora authors themselves perpetuate Orientalist portrayals, effectively reproducing totalizing stereotypes from within rather than relying solely on Western outsiders (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 3). Furthermore, neo-Orientalist discourse is explicitly ideological and political in its orientation. Classical Orientalism often posed as detached philological or cultural inquiry even as it carried imperialist motives beneath the surface. By contrast, neo-Orientalism is marked by "an unapologetic investment in and engagement with the politics of the Middle East" (Behdad & Williams, 2010, p. 285). Hamid Dabashi's condemnation of "native informants" holds particular relevance here: Dabashi criticizes the "comprador intellectuals" from the Middle East who, in the wake of 9/11, have established careers in the West by denigrating Islam and the Orient in palatable terms to Western audiences (2011, p. 11). These people, Dabashi's analysis argues, essentially barter their cultural identity to be part of imperial narratives; they are native informants who convince the West of its prejudices under the guise of insider authority.

The historical moment of 9/11 accelerated and crystallized these neo-Orientalist trends (Keskin, 2018, p. 9). After the terrorist attacks of 2001, Orientalist tropes experienced a powerful resurgence in popular media, policy circles, and scholarly works, now reframed within the narrative of the "War on Terror" (Dabashi, 2011, p. 20). Dabashi argues that "Though many of his insights still remain valid and operative, Said's observations will have to be updated and mapped out for the

iconic events that have led to the post-9/11 syndrome” (2009, p. xi). Recognizing that contemporary Orientalism no longer primarily depicts Muslims as merely exotic or primitive but instead as inherently dangerous to Western civilization, Dabashi calls this period after 9/11 “post-Orientalism” (2009, p. xiv). The very focus of Orientalist representation narrowed predominantly to Islam and the Arab-Muslim world in this period. Unlike Said’s Orientalism, which spanned a broad Orient encompassing the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, and North Africa, neo-Orientalism’s “present dialogue” centers almost exclusively on Muslim-majority societies, particularly the Middle East and North Africa (Dabashi, 2011, pp. 11-12). Islam became the central Other in Western discourse, cast monolithically as a civilization in opposition to modern liberal values. Salim Kerboua observes that Orientalism has “metamorphosed” in the contemporary era to construct new images of Islam that dominate Western public space, carrying a “new ideologically motivated agenda” and feeding into the social phenomenon of Islamophobia (2016, p. 7). One striking manifestation of neo-Orientalist reasoning in the post-9/11 context is what Dag Tuastad terms the “new barbarism thesis.” In analyzing Western explanations for conflicts in the Middle East, Tuastad notes a tendency to omit political and economic causes and instead ascribe violence to the supposedly intrinsic barbarity of local cultures (2003, p. 591). This neo-Orientalist imaginary portrays terrorism or civil unrest in Arab countries as the natural outgrowth of an immutable “Arab mind” or Islamic propensity for violence, rather than as reactions to concrete historical grievances (Tuastad, 2003, p. 591). By framing Middle Eastern peoples as irrationally violent and incapable of self-government, such discourse justifies Western military and political interventions as necessary and even altruistic, representing continuity with the colonial-era claim that “Orientals” only understand force, now repurposed to rationalize modern imperial ventures and security regimes (Tuastad, 2003, p. 594).

2. INTELLECTUAL RESISTANCE AND MUSLIM IDENTITY IN *OPEN CITY*

Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011) is notable for its literary ambition and intricate exploration of themes such as cultural diversity, remembrance and cosmopolitan identity following 9/11. The story closely follows Julius, a Nigerian-German psychiatrist residing in New York intertwining what Pieter Vermeulen characterizes as “a commitment, to cultural difference accompanied by a distinctly melancholic tone” (2013, p. 40). Cole’s storytelling approach revolves around two structural methods. First one is Julius’s compulsive practice of wandering through the streets and using the public transit networks in New York and Brussels which produces vivid aesthetic moments and a chain of meetings with various narrators; and secondly Julius’s recollections, which link the ongoing narrative, to his family’s Nigerian and German histories (Vermeulen, 2013 p. 40). As Vermeulen notes, *Open City* “may readily be interpreted as a commanding demonstration of literature’s empowering function in promoting sentiment and comprehension” (2013, p. 41). Nevertheless, these cosmopolitan interpretations risk neglecting the novel’s unsettling aspects, especially its portrayal of Farouq, the Arab-Muslim thinker whose time in Brussels reveals the restrictions and exclusions inherent, in European cosmopolitanism. While Julius embodies the privileged mobility and aesthetic detachment associated with cosmopolitan subjectivity, Farouq’s trajectory reveals how post-9/11 Europe systematically denies such privileges to racialized Muslim subjects.

The encounter between Julius and Farouq in Brussels becomes crucial precisely because it stages a confrontation between these divergent positions within the contemporary global order. Julius's cosmopolitan wandering through European cities contrasts sharply with Farouq's experience of surveillance, suspicion, and institutional rejection. As Seydou Ba and Isabel Soto observe in their article, the exchanges between Farouq and Julius, turning on major writers of world fiction (Tahar Ben Jelloun), European thinkers (Walter Benjamin), and prominent international political topics (the Palestine-Israel question), evoke "a paradigm inherent to the notion of globalization, that is, 'a vision of total unfettered mobility; of free unbounded space' accompanied by unencumbered cultural and intellectual engagement" (2021, p. 299). Farouq's easy interlingual navigation between Arabic and French with his local customers and his fluent English conversations with Julius initially suggest the cosmopolitan ideal in practice. However, as Ba and Soto emphasize, "the specifics of these encounters [...] should not distract from the context—historical, ethnic, geopolitical—from which they emerge" (2021, p. 299). The novel prompts critical questions about how multicultural urban spaces like Brussels, "with historic claims to openness and cosmopolitan discourses," actually fulfill ethical requirements toward global community, particularly when migrants face hostility (Ba & Soto, 2021, p. 298).

Brussels, being the administrative capital of the European Union and a city that proclaims itself a model of European multiculturalism, is cosmopolitan and open to diversity. However, this self-image conceals Belgium's brutal colonial legacy in the Congo as well as the persistent structural inequalities that push North African and Muslim immigrants to the margins of modern-day Belgian society. Belgium's colonial project in the Congo, one of the most violent episodes of European imperialism, was justified through precisely the Orientalist logic Said critiques. While Belgium formally decolonized in 1960, it is the legacy of this colonial relationship that underlies contemporary Belgian views toward non-European immigrants. Brussels's multicultural rhetoric, which celebrates diversity through visible markers like international cuisine and cultural festivals, often masks the social and economic marginalization of Muslim communities.

It is against this troubling backdrop that Cole locates Farouq, using his experiences as an example to reveal how historical and structural tensions are reshaping the everyday lives of racialized Muslim subjects in post-9/11 Europe. Cole's portrayal of Farouq's encounters in Brussels provides a living example of what Hamid Dabashi refers to as the changing political and cultural environment in the aftermath of the attacks. Julius's observation clearly conveys the racialized fear Farouq encounters every day: "What Farouq got on the trams wasn't a quick suspicious glance. It was a simmering, barely contained fear. The classic anti-immigrant view, which saw them as enemies[...]converging with a renewed fear of Islam" (Cole, 2024, p. 106). In this instance Farouq represents the "threatening Other," whose very presence produces fear and anxiety in the local population, and which fits neatly in Said's account of Islam as being "historically presented as a threatening Other – with Muslims depicted as fanatical, violent, lustful, irrational," a portrayal deeply embedded in colonial Orientalism (Barsamian, 2001, p. 8). Anthropologist Talal Asad, in *On Suicide Bombing*, describes an "official hermeneutics" of suspicion that has thrived since September 11 especially with the interrogation of Muslim detainees (Asad, 2007, p. 31). Asad states that: "fear,

uncertainty, and the ambiguity of signs are part of the space of violence [...] More than that, they are its precondition, for they allow state power to penetrate the density of ordinary life" (2007, p. 31). In other words, by cultivating a diffuse anxiety that any Muslim might harbor hidden intentions, security agencies create public consent for extraordinary measures, extensive surveillance, profiling, detention, that would otherwise be intolerable.

This climate of fear and suspicion is in direct alignment with Dabashi's insight that post-9/11 America suffered a kind of collective amnesia and trauma in which "the seemingly invulnerable was revealed as vulnerable," resulting in the hurried fabrication of foes, first Bin Laden, then Afghanistan, then Saddam Hussein and Iraq, then Ahmadinejad and Iran, in rapid succession (Dabashi, 2011, p. 68). This is what Dabashi refers to as "fabricating successive enemies," a technique that made certain the "historical memory necessary to sustain the delusion" was relentlessly trimmed (Dabashi, 2011, p. 68). This intentional deletion and alteration of memory entailed recasting Muslims as a unified group of threatening outsiders. As Dabashi observes, "Islam is the new Judaism, Muslims the new Jews, Islamophobia the new anti-Semitism, and brown the new black—all in the racialized imagination of a white-identified supremacy that must first alienate (both in itself and of itself) in order to rule" (2011, p. 128). Likewise, Mahmood Mamdani depicts such a discursive architecture when he concludes that in the wake of 9/11, "unless proved to be 'good,' every Muslim was presumed to be 'bad,'" thus obligating all Muslims to constantly demonstrate their loyalty and moderation, lest they be labeled as potential terrorists (2004, p. 15).

Farouq's educational path exemplifies this racialized reasoning of assumed guilt and the necessity to demonstrate innocence. Frantz Fanon's examination of the evolution of the colonized intellectual offers a framework, for interpreting Farouq's experiences in this context. Fanon outlines three phases experienced by the colonized intellectual: initially a stage of assimilation in which the intellectual validates himself within the colonizer's culture; next a stage of rupture when the intellectual becomes aware that true acceptance is unattainable; and finally, a revolutionary stage where the intellectual turns back, to his own community and dedicates himself to their liberation (1963, pp. 222-223). Farouq's experiences in Brussels, shaped by the city's particular colonial legacy and contemporary multicultural tensions, dramatize this transformation from aspiring Western academic to disillusioned critic of European intellectual institutions.

Farouq's initial scholarly journey exemplifies Fanon's first stage, which includes the colonized intellectual being unapologetically loyal to European culture, striving toward perfection measured by the standards set through the prism of colonial discourse. Fanon characterises this phase as one where the native intellectual "has thrown himself greedily upon Western culture" and "has made himself its champion," in a desperate search to attain legitimacy with the language, literature, and intellectual traditions of the colonizers (1963, p. 218). As an exceptional student who completed his undergraduate studies in Rabat by age twenty-one, Farouq set ambitious academic goals aligned explicitly with the ideals of Western academia, aspiring to achieve a doctorate at twenty-five (Cole, 2024, p. 128). His decision to seek out graduate degrees in Belgium, as opposed to staying in Morocco, heralds his initial acceptance of the assumed cultural and intellectual superiority of Europe. His ambition to become "the next Edward Said" emphasizes his commitment to gaining

recognition within Western academic hierarchies (Cole, 2024, p. 128). Farouq's selection of Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* as his thesis topic demonstrates sophisticated engagement with French phenomenological philosophy, a deliberate choice to prove his intellectual prowess in one of Europe's most prestigious intellectual traditions.

Farouq's intellectual journey is deeply ruptured when he confronts the structural racism of European institutions, and this marks his entry into Fanon's second stage. The allegation of plagiarism essentially negates Farouq's independence and creativity: "The only possibilities" he recalls bitterly "are that they refused to believe my command of English and theory" (Cole, 2024 p. 128). This assumption resonates with Said's critique of Orientalism by which the East is represented as intellectually inferior, and unable to contribute equally to Western sophisticated discourses (1979, pp. 71-72). In accusing Farouq of plagiarism, the Belgian university implies that his work is derivative and that an Arab Muslim could not create an original philosophical interpretation. The university's verdict transforms Farouq's years of dedicated scholarship into evidence of his fundamental unsuitability for Western academia.

This allegation represents what Fanon characterizes as the externally assigned "curse, a kind of sword of Damocles" that constantly looms over the colonized intellectual: regardless of his intellectual excellence he is under a persistent cloud of suspicion because of his status as a racialized man (1963, p. 53). That is, the accusation of plagiarism works as what Fanon calls "collective auto-damnation," when the colonized person realizes that his perceived "guilt" is irrevocable and external, and does not bear any significance to his real behaviour or skills (1963, p. 53). Despite fulfilling every criterion set by the Western academic establishment such as mastering European languages, engaging sophisticated French theory, completing rigorous research, Farouq confronts the grim reality that these achievements cannot overcome the racialized assumptions that mark him as perpetually other and suspect.

Martin Kramer's critique of Middle Eastern studies following the 9/11 attacks sheds light on the scholarly backdrop to Farouq's dismissal. In *Ivory Towers on Sand*, Kramer claimed that scholars "consistently overlooked the significant changes in the region" particularly the rise of radical Islamism implying that the dominant academic environment was overly sympathetic, toward the Arab/Muslim "Other" (2001, p. 954). Essentially Kramer advocated for a revival of a mode of analysis that views Islamic cultures as naturally inclined towards extremism a position widely recognized as a resurgence of neo-Orientalist thinking (2001, p. 954). Farouq's rejection by his Belgian university can be read within this charged academic climate: his sophisticated engagement with Western theory is deemed implausible precisely because post-9/11 discourse increasingly positioned Muslim intellectuals as either security threats or objects of suspicion rather than legitimate scholarly voices. The accusation of plagiarism is, accordingly, an institutional device designed to bar the kind of subtle Arab intellectual voice that so many people like Kramer considered to be contradictory to Western security logic. His critique highlighted the politicized terrain of that post-9/11 scholarly politics, where "Orient" itself was no longer a domain for genuine scholarly examination but a question of national security debates (Kramer, 2001, p. 954).

It is this realization, as Fanon argues in the third stage wherein the intellectual becomes “the awakener of the people” recognizes the necessity to challenge and reject the colonizer’s evaluative standards rather than striving fruitlessly for acceptance within them (1963, p. 223). Farouq’s subsequent intellectual stance, as dramatized in his conversations with Julius, reflects precisely this transformation. Rather than continuing to seek validation from European institutions that have definitively rejected him, Farouq turns toward asserting the intrinsic value and legitimacy of Arab-Muslim intellectual traditions and political perspectives. His insistence that “Not all Western thought comes from white men alone” and his explicit critique of writers who pander to Western Orientalist expectations all signal his movement away from seeking European approval toward championing alternative frameworks of knowledge and political legitimacy (Cole, 2024, pp. 114-120). Fanon describes this revolutionary stage as one in which the native intellectual “decides to go back to his own side,” renouncing his former aspirations to assimilate and instead committing himself to articulating the experiences and struggles of the colonized (1963, p. 221).

Although Farouq continues to be located in Brussels, his intellectual and political stance has undergone a profound change. His criticism of Tahar Ben Jelloun for including “oriental elements” that cater to Western audiences alongside his praise for Mohamed Choukri who “stayed in Morocco, he lived with his people,” signals this reorientation (Cole, 2024, pp. 103-104). Farouq no longer evaluates value through a European lens; rather he honors genuineness and opposition to Western demands. His statement that “Difference as orientalist entertainment is allowed, but difference with its own intrinsic value, no” encapsulates his revolutionary consciousness (Cole, 2024, p. 104). He now recognizes that European liberalism permits cultural difference only when it remains decorative and non-threatening, while genuine political and intellectual autonomy is systematically denied.

Rather than play the role of what Dabashi calls the “native informer,” the compliant postcolonial subject who entertains the West by affirming its prejudices Farouq mounts an intellectual resistance (2011, pp. 13-15). Julius sharply summarizes Farouq’s stance with an ironic rhetorical question: “Which Western publisher wants a Moroccan or Indian writer who isn’t into oriental fantasy [...]? That’s what Morocco and India are there for, after all, to be oriental” (Cole, 2024, p. 104). Julius’s sardonic comment captures how Western cultural gatekeepers implicitly mandate that Eastern narratives conform to exotic stereotypes such as spice markets, veiled women, sufis, snake charmers, or oppression, to satisfy Western aesthetic expectations.

This dynamic is echoed by Dabashi, who argues that Orientalism now extends beyond Western producers of stereotypes, increasingly using voices from within the Middle Eastern or Muslim communities themselves. According to Dabashi, “Orientalism has become stronger in American universities” precisely through “people who originally come from Middle Eastern or Muslim backgrounds” (Dabashi, 2011, p. 20). These seemingly authentic voices actively reinforce Western colonial narratives, thus making America’s colonial actions appear acceptable and justified (Dabashi, 2011, pp. 72-73). What this suggests is that, contemporary Orientalism operates not merely by Western outsiders imposing stereotypes, but by recruiting voices that look authentic yet ultimately perpetuate traditional Orientalist images that serve Western ideological agendas

(Dabashi, 2011, p. 28). Thus, Farouq's and Julius's dialogue about Moroccan literature concretely exemplifies the fact that Orientalism is no longer a European/North American project forced onto the world but has now co-opted seemingly authentic voices that repeat and reinforce these older paradigms (Scheiwiller, 2018, p. 198).

Such attitudes illustrate what Dabashi critiques as neo-Orientalism, a mindset that welcomes the "exotic seasonings" such as food, music, colorful traditions, accents performed by "native informer" but not its political or ethical agency: "The black man who dares to speak—as did Fanon, Said, Malcolm X, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Aime Cesaire—is called anything from passionate to angry, but never "reasonable" [...] Reason and composure, of course, are white." (2011, pp. 128-129). In other words, the "Orient" can be consumed as cuisine, tourism, or belly-dance, an exotic spectacle, but when real Eastern voices clamor for political agency or equal respect, they are silenced or ignored. This logic finds its liberal European articulation in the character of Dr. Maillotte.

The novel also furnishes an illuminating foil in the character of Dr. Maillotte, the Belgian woman that Julius befriends, whose perspective stands in stark contrast to Farouq's. Dr. Maillotte's response is critical when Julius tells her Farouq's story, noting that Farouq probably had his thesis rejected because of its uncomfortable subject matter and his identity. She calls young immigrant men like Farouq "the type [...] who go around as if the world is an offense to them," referring to such resentment as "dangerous" (Cole, 2024, p. 143). Belgian society, in her opinion, "has made itself open" to immigrants, and she has "little patience" for people who arrive only in order to criticize or proclaim how different they are (Cole, 2024, p. 143). Farouq's claims of racism or Orientalism, for Maillotte, are extreme, even self-inflicted. She wonders "why would you go somewhere only to prove how different you are?" (Cole, 2024, p. 143). She espouses a kind of color-blindness that does not accept Farouq's difference as something in society that is treated differently. Because liberal Belgium so often has given him a hand in its promises, when he is betrayed or turned off, it is surely his own chip on the shoulder that has failed. This question is subtly requiring assimilation and simultaneously pretending that such demands do not exist. As Dabashi argues, "The world has changed from the time of Fanon, and the condition variously code-named neoliberal, neoconservative, or even multicultural globalization has posited a planetary condition with new modes of domination" (2011, p. 23). Her seemingly benign liberal critique ultimately reaffirms Orientalist dichotomies of rational Western acceptance versus irrational Eastern resistance. Thus, even though Maillotte does not explicitly invoke racist language, her words embody precisely the logic of neo-Orientalism: difference is acceptable only so long as it remains unspoken and unthreatening, confined within parameters established by the dominant society.

2.1. ISRAEL AND PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Farouq, Khalil, and Julius's café conversation operates as one of *Open City's* most narratologically complex moments, in which Cole creates what seems to be a direct ideological debate while simultaneously undermining its transparency through Julius's unreliable mediation. When the characters explicitly frame the Israel-Palestine conflict as "the central question of our time," readers encounter this assertion not as authorial proclamation but filtered through Julius's

first-person narration (Cole, 2024, p. 121). This narrative framing becomes crucial because Julius records Farouq's passionate arguments yet never fully endorses or refutes them, creating a space where character speech and narrator perspective blur, leaving ideological positions suspended rather than resolved.

When Farouq declares, "The Iraqis can never be happy with foreign rule" and makes the analogy, "Even if Egypt invaded Palestine to save them from Israel, the Palestinians cannot accept this," his rhetorical organization provides universal standards of sovereignty (Cole, 2024, p. 114). But Julius's silence after these assertions becomes all the more important in language. The narrator interrupts nothing, there is no challenge, but no agreement, and there are gaps in the narrative that invite readers to engage with differing frameworks on their own terms. This is a method which contests neo-Orientalist discourse through active critique of authoritative perspective, not through polemic in the immediate sense of polemic but even its form of destabilizing authoritative perspective. The beliefs Farouq competes against have a tangible presence in modern political speech. Daniel Pipes argues that "Muslim countries have the most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world" and Patricia Crone's claims to sharia law as creating "profound hostility to settled states" exemplify exactly the neo-Orientalist constructs confronted in Farouq's discourse (qtd. in Tuastad, 2003, p. 594). These views suggest that the causes of Middle Eastern conflicts are internal cultural or religious defects and neglect the place of imperialism and of the global power politics. Farouq's dialogue with Julius stands in direct opposition to such stereotypes, in their challenge to the West's simplistic definitions of Arab and Muslim identities. Farouq explicitly declares that "I want them to know that they can assess their own situations and come to their own conclusions," highlighting an active challenge to reductive, monolithic representations of Arab identities in a way that speaks to the neo-Orientalist claim (Cole, 2024, p. 125). This view runs counter directly to neo-Orientalist discourses that frequently attribute Middle Eastern instability to cultural faults endemic to the region itself, rather than the disruptive legacy of colonialism.

The pacing of the conversation shows Cole orchestrating competing ideological framings. Farouq's argumentation is punctuated by longer passages of reported speech that sit in startling contrast to Julius's standard structure of fragmented observations and aesthetic meditative engagement such as when he quotes Malcolm X and Averroës, and declares, "Islam is not a religion; it is a way of life that has something to offer to our political system" (Cole, 2024, p. 114). This tonal shift signals that readers have entered contested political territory, yet Cole maintains narrative control by having Julius relay these arguments without the heated interjections or immediate rebuttals typical of conventional political fiction. This restraint proves especially pronounced in the exchange about armed resistance. When Farouq declares, "I support Hamas. I think they are doing the work of resistance," and responds just as firmly that Hezbollah is "[...] the same thing. It is resistance, simple" the dialogue is rendered with a striking economy (Cole, 2024, p. 120). There is little descriptive framing, no internal commentary from Julius, and scant emotional colouring. This stylistic spareness intensifies the utterances, but it also foregrounds Julius's silence. The narrator poses the question, "And Hezbollah [...] you support them, too?" and then retreats, allowing Farouq's answer to stand starkly on the page (Cole, 2024, p.120). That recession of the narrating voice

forces the reader to inhabit the discomfort of hearing positions that directly counter dominant Western discourses. In this way, the text dramatizes the ideological confluences described by Kerboua, who notes how neo-Orientalist narratives systematically merge “Islam,” “terrorism,” and the “War on Terror,” upheld by a coalition of pundits, intellectuals, and politicians allied with “the Zionist cause” (Kerboua, 2016, p. 22). Cole’s scene does not merely reference this discursive field; it formally enacts a moment in which those hegemonic definitions are suspended, and alternative naming, “resistance” rather than “terrorism,” is briefly allowed to speak, even if only within the circumscribed space of Julius’s remembered conversation.

A central tension in the conversation is the redefinition of “terrorism” versus “resistance”. Khalil and Farouq fervently assert that movements like Hamas and Hezbollah are not wanton terrorists but legitimate resistance fighters against occupation (Cole, 2024, p. 120). This reclamation of violent actors as “resisters” exemplifies a classic reversal of Western discourse. The dialogue intersects significantly with Salim Kerboua’s analysis which discusses how, during the twenty-first century, Western perceptions of Islam have increasingly conflated Islamic identities with terrorism, largely due to ideologically driven narratives. Kerboua emphasizes that a critical feature of contemporary neo-Orientalist discourse involves “ideological re-conceptualisations of Islam and the Muslim world,” particularly cultivated by “right-wing circles within Western societies, mainly belonging to the neoconservative school of thought” (Kerboua, 2016, p. 22). These constructions are bolstered by “a loose coalition of intellectuals, pundits, opinion makers, and [...] political figures of Western public life that enjoy a special and affective relationship with Israel and the Zionist cause” (Kerboua, 2016, p. 22).

The exchange about the Holocaust shifts the narrative distance in a different way, revealing the limits of Julius’s liberal cosmopolitanism. Khalil’s complaint that “If you say anything about Israel, you have your mouth plugged with the six million” elicits from Julius an uncharacteristically anxious interruption: “You’re not denying it[...] you’re not actually questioning the figure, are you?” (Cole, 2024, p. 122). Here Julius ceases to be the quiet listener and instead breaks into the dialogue to police its boundaries. The narratological effect is notable since the rhythm of reported speech is suddenly punctured by the narrator’s own defensive voice, making his internalized Western Holocaust taboo visible. Khalil’s irritation, “That’s not the point [...] the point is that it is against the law to deny it,” reorients the discussion away from historical denial toward the question of how one catastrophe can be used to foreclose speech about another (Cole, 2024, p. 122). Julius’s reaction thus offers a localized, dramatized instance of what Tuastad describes on the level of symbolic politics: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as “a symbolic war” in which the memory of genocide is mobilised to defend Israel as a “fortress amid a vast and volatile realm of Islam” (2003, p. 596). The scene’s tension arises less from factual disagreement than from Julius’s reflexive defence of established Western discursive limits, which Cole exposes by making his interjection slightly hasty, even clumsy.

Tuastad’s analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “symbolic war” illuminates how Julius functions within the text as embodiment of precisely the Western subject position that neutralizes political urgency through aesthetic distance (2003, p. 596). When Khalil challenges the rhetorical deployment of Holocaust memory, “Did the Palestinians build the concentration camps?” the

question hangs in the text without Julius providing recorded response (Cole, 2024, p. 122). This narrative silence becomes itself a form of characterization. That is, Julius, trained in psychiatry and steeped in European intellectual culture, cannot or will not engage at the level of moral immediacy that Farouq and Khalil demand.

This argument aligns closely with Tuastad's analysis of the symbolic dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tuastad cites Kaplan's depiction of Israel as "a fortress amid a vast and volatile realm of Islam," which portrays Israel as a necessary Western bulwark against purported Islamic barbarism (qtd. in Tuastad, 2003, p. 596). Kaplan explicitly suggests that "Pessimism can be a more efficient line of defense against genocide than any human rights policy—as many Israelis, for example, intuitively grasp" (qtd. in Tuastad, 2003, p. 596). Thus, Israel is symbolically constructed as a site defending Judeo-Christian values against a threatening Islamic world.

Furthermore, Cole destabilizes authoritative perspective through the seemingly lighter exchange about stereotypes. Khalil, with a mischievous smile, asks Julius if "American blacks [...] are really as they are shown on MTV – the rapping, the hip-hop dance, the women?" (Cole, 2024, p. 119). It is a slightly ironic question, given that Khalil is worldly and educated; one senses he is prompting Julius to reflect on media caricatures. Julius responds in kind by flipping the perspective. He notes that many Americans have similarly crude notions about European Muslims: "Many Americans assume that European Muslims are covered from head to toe if they are women, or wear a full beard if they are men, and that they are only interested in protesting perceived insults to Islam," Julius says, explaining that "the ordinary American probably does not imagine that Muslims in Europe sit in cafés drinking beer, smoking Marlboros, and discussing political philosophy" (Cole, 2024, p. 119). This conversation aligns closely with Said's conceptualization of Orientalism as a dominant Western framework, in which "the 'Orient' is represented, in contrast to the 'Occident,' as monolithic, backward, and despotic" (1979, p. 7). Said specifically critiques how Orientalist discourse achieves a nearly unquestionable authority, acquiring "an epistemological status equal to that of historical chronology or geographical location" (1979, p. 205).

The conversation's most theoretically dense moment occurs when Julius summarizes: "that's how power is, the one who has the power controls the portrayal" (Cole, 2024, p. 119). This statement echoes Said's assertion that Occident-Orient relations constitute fundamentally "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (1979, p. 5). However, Cole's narrative irony becomes apparent when we recognize that Julius himself exercises precisely this power of portrayal within the novel's diegetic structure. As first-person narrator, Julius controls how Farouq and Khalil appear on the page, that is, what they say, how they say it, what contextual details readers receive. Cole's formal choices such as extended quotation, strategic silence, abrupt interjection, and tonal modulation, stage the clash between neo-Orientalist discourse and its critique as a matter of narrative design as much as of ideological content.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Teju Cole's *Open City* offers a detailed interrogation of neo-Orientalist discourses through its complex representation of Farouq, whose lived experiences as an Arab-Muslim intellectual in Brussels encapsulate broader tensions between Western hegemonic narratives and Muslim identity in a post-9/11 context. Farouq's narrative trajectory exemplifies Said's foundational critique of Orientalism by exposing how persistent stereotypes underpin Western cultural dominance, systematically delegitimizing non-Western identities through demands for assimilation or exoticized performances. Farouq's rejection of commodified representations aligns with Hamid Dabashi's neo-Orientalist critique, foregrounding resistance against the subtle yet pervasive mechanisms by which Western media and intellectual institutions co-opt authentic Middle Eastern voices, thus perpetuating entrenched Orientalist paradigms.

The article has further illuminated how *Open City* complicates neo-Orientalist narratives through its dialogic structure and the contrasting perspectives of Farouq and Dr. Maillotte. While Farouq articulates a revolutionary consciousness, echoing Frantz Fanon's trajectory of the colonized intellectual (1963), Dr. Maillotte's liberal dismissal of his grievances as resentment reflects a subtler, yet equally pernicious, form of neo-Orientalism, one that cloaks itself in openness while denying the structural realities of difference. This juxtaposition not only highlights the novel's critique but also situates it at the intersection of postcolonial theory and literary praxis. Moreover, Farouq's discussions of the Israel-Palestine conflict, framed as "the central question of our time," dismantle the neo-Orientalist tendency to attribute Middle Eastern instability to cultural deficiencies, redirecting attention to the legacies of Western imperialism and media distortions (Cole, 2024, p. 121).

Ultimately, *Open City* transcends mere narrative to become a site of resistance against the reductive frameworks that Said, Dabashi, and others have critiqued. Through its reflective narrator, Julius, and the emphasis on dialogue as a mode of exploration, the novel fosters a space for genuine intercultural Exchange, one that eschews the exoticizing gaze and demands a reckoning with the power dynamics of representation. By centering Farouq's agency and intellectual depth, Cole not only contests the monolithic portrayals of Muslim identities but also exemplifies literature's capacity to disrupt dominant cultural narratives. This analysis thus positions *Open City* as a vital contribution to postcolonial literature, offering a trenchant critique of neo-Orientalism while advocating for more equitable and authentic understandings of identity in an increasingly globalized world. In doing so, it reaffirms the enduring relevance of Said's legacy and the urgent need to interrogate the discourses that continue to frame the Muslim Other in the twenty-first century.

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