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LONGING AND BELONGING: AN EGYPTIAN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF MEDITERRANEANISM

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ABSTRACT

The "longing" and "belonging" features of Taha Hussein's cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism is revisited. Taha Hussein (1889-1973) plays a great role in the Egyptian cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism. The concept of Mediterraneanism was a recurrent one in his thought. Taha Hussein well expressed his point of view in his most famous book *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, which was first published in Cairo, 1938. In analyzing the Egyptian cultural identity, Taha Hussein became the strictest advocate of Graeco-Roman studies in Egypt. There is an underlying relationship between teaching Greek and Latin and the Egyptian cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism as held by Taha Hussein. He judged Greek and Latin in terms of their contribution to the Egyptian cultural identity.

The implications of Taha Hussein's cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism have been vigorously explored up till now in the Egyptian academia. It has something to contribute to the Egyptian literary discourse as well. My study provides the occasion for some future new light to be shed on the Egyptian cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean has engaged the interests of many scholars over the years, whether they are Mediterraneans by origin, or non-Mediterraneans. The picture I sketch out in my present paper for the Egyptian cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism needs a very brief overview of the context of Mediterraneanism in some modern world- studies. Out of so many studies, I mention here only some of the key works on the Mediterranean (Fig.1).

For many years the Mediterranean meant for some scholars "Greek and Roman" [1]. In the words of Harris (2005: 2): "Mediterranean has often been a synonym for Greek and Roman, plus such other an-

cient cultures as I may happen to pay attention to". For some other scholars, the Mediterranean represents some sort of "distinctive unity". One of the landmark studies in this direction is the well-known book written by the famous French historian, Fernand Braudel (1972). Although Braudel focused on the Mediterranean in the second half of the sixteenth century, with a flashback to ancient history, he suggested that the Mediterranean constituted a "distinct unity" in centuries earlier than the sixteenth. Braudel based his arguments for the unity of the Mediterranean on geographical facts, besides the sixteenth-century documents.

Figure 1 The Mediterranean region

In more recent years the debate about Mediterraneanism has largely been re-opened. With reconsidering the Mediterranean on many levels, it has even become an open-ended topic [2].

In 2000, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell developed a perception of the Mediterranean with a common background with Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean. Horden and Purcell (2000: 1-5), as they proclaimed in the introduction to their study, intended to establish how far, and in what respects, this area had indeed possessed unity and distinctiveness in ages earlier than that treated by Braudel. Their period covers Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Horden and Purcell treated the "unity" and "continuity" of the Mediterranean history through the relationship of "man and environment". They announced the subject of their work to be: "the human history of the Mediterranean Sea and its

coastlands over some three millennia. Its immediate contention is that this history can be profitably treated as material for a unified and distinct discipline. Its purpose is to discover, first, how far the region so treated has displayed over this long period any unity and distinctiveness of its own, and second, what kinds of continuity could have been involved: these two questions form the backbone of our work", (2000: 9).

In 2005, Oxford University Press published a contributed book entitled: *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edited by William V. Harris, the Director of the Columbia University's Center for the Ancient Mediterranean, which was founded in 2000. Harris", (2005: 1 and 38) [3] defined Mediterraneanism "as the doctrine that there are distinctive characteristics, which the cultures of the Mediterranean have, or have had, in common".

I would not intend by any means to underestimate the impact of all the above mentioned definitions, or to question their validity. The issues of the "unity" and "distinctiveness" of the Mediterranean are not to be addressed per se in my present study, though important as they are. But my aim is to cast light on the "longing" and "belonging" features of Taha Hussein's cultural perspective of Egyptian Mediterraneanism [4]. This perspective engages in a network of connections between multi-culturalism and cultural identity [5]. The Mediterranean by its very nature is multicultural. In the words of Gruen (1993: 2):

"Few societies have ever been more multicultural than those clustered about the Mediterranean. The worlds of ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome encompassed a bewildering range and diversity of peoples, races, colors, languages, attitudes, conventions, and beliefs."[6]

2. TAHA HUSSEIN AND MEDITERRANEANISM

Taha Hussein deserves mention in the consideration of the Egyptian cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism for two reasons:

1- The first reason is the place Taha Hussein has held in modern Egypt as one of the most eminent men of letters and pioneers of thought and intellect in the Egyptian Renaissance and Enlightenment [7]. He is an acknowledged master of modern Arabic literature.

2- The second reason is his conception and perception of the Mediterranean cultural identity of Egypt, which will be discussed below.

Mediterraneanism played a more visible role in Taha Hussein's style of thought to the point that he spoke in terms of "Housing" Egypt in the Mediterranean more than anything else. He well-expressed his point of view in his most famous book: *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (first published in Cairo, 1938)[8]. The date of publishing the book says much about the perspective Taha Hussein presented, when Egypt was still under the British occupation, in spite of the Independence Treaty of 1936.

Although Taha Hussein believed that "the Egyptian mind, since its earliest ages, if ever influenced by anything, it has been influenced by the Mediterranean, and the exchange of benefits of all sorts has been achieved with the Mediterranean peoples"[9], yet Taha Hussein did not think of the Mediterranean in terms of unity, in the sense that he did not dwell on the commonality of the cultural identity of this part of the world, but rather on the Egyptian cultural identity as part of it. He created a sense of "longing" and "belonging" to the Mediterranean, integrated with the sense of self-identity.

Though Egypt belongs by location to Africa, Taha Hussein established the "Egyptian mind" in the "family of the Mediterranean" [10]. This implies stressing a Mediterranean identity for Egypt. Taha Hussein argued that "If we have to seek a family to establish the Egyptian mind in, it is the family of the peoples who were living around the Mediterranean. The Egyptian mind was the oldest and most influential among those living in this zone" [11].

With an eye fixed on the other coast of the Mediterranean, on Greece and Rome as particulars [12], Taha Hussein became the strictest advocate of Graeco-Roman studies in Egypt [13]. He was rigorous on the issue of teaching Greek and Latin languages as a must, with all what this entailed regarding cultural issues and literary approaches.

Taha Hussein insisted on having Greek and Latin introduced in the curricular forms of the university, and even at all levels of education [14]. He pleaded his case with two main lines of argument:

Firstly, Egypt remained for centuries under the rule of the Greeks and Romans. And even in the Islamic ages, she had strong interconnections with the Byzantines. The sources for studying the history of all these periods were written in Greek and Latin. Taha Hussein believed that if the Egyptians were to remain ignorant of these two languages, this would mean that their history had to be written by non-Egyptians. This, in his way of thinking, would entail Eurocentric cultural imperialism, which he counted a considerable risk to Egypt. So, the Egyptian national identity is indirectly stressed through a Mediterranean perspective.

The second basis in Taha Hussein's argument is that Europeans held crucial and important posts in many Egyptian institutions and in many fields at the time, such as the field of archaeology and antiquities. He argued that if the Egyptians were to learn Greek and Latin, they would be able to extend their control over their own affairs. Taha Hussein planned to establish an Egyptian network of competing graduates, well educated in Greek and Latin. So upon the shoulders of capable home-grown talents, that the entire load of the work of Egyptian administrative structures could be assumed. In such a way Egyptian autonomy is achieved through a Mediterranean perspective.

Thus, the discourse of colonialism inevitably affected Taha Hussein's concepts of the Egyptian cultural identity. His strategy aimed to counter the dangers of cultural imperialism. It was a complex cultural politics in the face of the discourse of colonialist cultural expansion. Taha Hussein did his best to ensure that his view-point could reach the ears of the Administrative Board of the Egyptian University at the time.

In this context, a battle was started over the place of Graeco-Roman classics in the Egyptian academia. Taha Hussein's views then raised a great deal of hostile comments in Egypt [15]. To identify the challenge, he discussed the Egyptian responses to his influential "theory", which came from a particular background. For this reason, we must not see his "theory" in isolation, but rather focus on the moment of particular political significance, when Egypt was still under the British occupation. Hence, the relationship between politics and "theory" was emphasized in Taha Hussein's cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism.

The cultural perspective of Taha Hussein still affects the present concepts inside the academia. His perspective still helps shape the nature of many academic disciplines in Egypt. Ever since, his insights have been integrated with the study of literature. Accordingly, an extensive adaptation of classical (Greek and Roman) material has been ac-complished [16]. Taha Hussein must take the main credit for this.

3. CONCLUSION

Taha Hussein employed Mediterraneanism to encounter imperialism. Greek and Latin were key elements in his cultural perspective of Mediterraneanism. Taha Hussein judged Greek and Latin in terms of their contribution to the Mediterranean cultural identity of Egypt, Egypt's national identity, and Egypt's autonomy.

Thanks to the respect accorded to his view of the role of Greek and Latin, that there have been Classics Departments, teaching Greek and Latin, nearly in all the governmental universities in Egypt. Due to Taha Hussein's view, the issue of Greek and Latin has no longer been under attack in the Egyptian academia. The two languages even continue to hold a respected place in Egyptian governmental Universities.

NOTES

[1] - See, for example, Starr (1989). Cf. Bagnall (2005: 345).

[2] - There are even Mediterraneans pursued in other parts of the world. See Abulafia (2005: 64ff.).

[3] - Harris proclaimed the questions which he planned to discuss in his chapter as follows (2005: 2): "How should the history of the ancient Mediterranean be written – if it should be written at all? And is Mediterraneanism of much use to ancient historians, or is it alternatively something of a danger (and in effect a cousin of Orientalism)?".

[4] - It is worth noting that Bagnall (2005: 339ff.), points out to the marginal role Egypt plays in Horden and Purcell's book. Cf. Horden and Purcell's response to criticism (2005: 348ff.).

[5] - For the interconnections between multiculturalism, Mediterraneanism and the Classics, see: Levine, (1992: 215ff.); Gruen (1993: 1ff.).

[6] - Cf. Hexter's Response to G. W. Most, in the Panel Discussion (1997: 163).

[7] - For the role of the intellect, see Said (1986: 210ff.).

[8] - The edition used in the present paper is that of 1993. All translations of the quotations from this book are mine.

[9] - Taha Hussein (1993: 15).

[10]- Egypt belongs as well to the Arab World, hence there is more than one cultural identity that she is entitled to have. For a discussion of the multitude of identities in general, see:
Haussler (2013: 35f.).

[11] - Taha Hussein (1993: 17).

[12] - Taha Hussein (1993: 14f.) stressed the specialty of Greece in connection with Egypt. Yet it goes without saying to give details about the connections between Egypt and the ancient Aegean civilization, the ancient Greek Civilization in its earlier ages, and the Greek civilization in its flourishing period since the sixth Century BC to the age of Alexander.

[13] - See Etman (1989: 241ff.); Ibrahim (2002: 245ff.).

[14] - See Taha Hussein (1993: 202f.). But up till now, Greek and Latin have never been included in the curriculum of the Egyptian schools.
Cf. Lawall and Barthelmess (1980: 330ff.).

[15] - See Taha Hussein (1993: 205ff.).

[16] - For some major accomplishments of Egyptian classical studies, see El-Nowieemy (2009: 277ff.).

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