Keynote Speech: Postcolonial/World/Transcultural Writing – Postgraduate Study Day


Preliminary Thoughts on the Structure:

- Travel Writing: Worldwide tradition
- Orientalist writing: from travel writing to fantasy: the long 19th century and high Orientalism (Said’s idea about the dramatic increase in Orientalist literature)
- The Nahda movement: writing about Europe and writing back to Europe
- Burton
- Lawrence
- Gibran
- Culture is not monolithic; to write about the other is to engage with the Other: transcultural writing is not merely representative; it is also performative: It’s not a representation: it is a mediation; therefore, it’s a creole creation (Edward Said’s Culture and Imperialism: imperialism increased worldwide cultural connections; all cultures are engaged with one another).

Lecture Structure:

In this lecture, I am going to talk about transcultural writing as universal phenomenon that traverses time and space; more specifically, I am going to focus on the 19th century proliferation of Orientalist writing about the Ottoman Arab East as well as the responses that came out from the Arab world in the wake of the Nahda (renaissance) and the rise in anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism. The focus will be on fascination with cultural otherness. As we will see, sexuality and gender relations, feature prominently in transcultural oeuvres of Sir Richard Burton and T.E. Lawrence. We will then move to look at Kahlil Gibran’s own manipulation of Orientalist discourse and the way in which he staged himself differently to his different audiences in his bilingual (English and Arabic) oeuvre: Gibran introduced literary Romanticism to Arabic literature and capitalised on Orientalist tropes as he presented himself as an Oriental sage to his English-speaking readers. Finally, we will see how ‘culture’ is a collective human enterprise.

- Travel Writing: A Worldwide Tradition
- Orientalism: curiosity, fantasy and imperialism
- The Arab Nahda (Renaissance/Revival): Writing back
- Transcultural Writers: Sir Richard Burton, T.E. Lawrence and Khalil Gibran
- Culture: a universal, human enterprise
Travel Writing:

To travel is to write and to write is to travel: Travellers have tales to tell; they narrate anecdotes and they document these in travelogues, which indeed become evidence of and incentive for travel. Travel narratives can be textual, oral and pictorial.

- Travel writing is a universal phenomenon: to travel is to write
- To travel is to transgress political, geographical and cultural boundaries; thus to write (and to consume writing) is also an act of transgression by proxy.
- To write about the ‘Other’ is to compare: it is to write about the Self vis-à-vis the Other
- Transcultural writing is not just an act of representation (as subjective as that can be); it is an act of mediation: you write about an ‘Other’ to an audience of the cultural ‘Self’: you mediate between ‘Otherness’ and ‘familiarity’ and you attempt to interpret it
- A transcultural writer is a cultural mediator and interpreter

Worldwide Tradition:

It is difficult not to think of Orientalism as we think of travel and transcultural writing; as a discourse of documenting ‘Otherness’, Orientalism jumps to mind as we think of the topic. However, travel writing is a worldwide phenomenon; all cultures are involved in the practice. For the purpose of this talk, I am going to focus on transcultural writing across the Euro-Arab geopolitical space and focus more specifically on the 19th and early 20th centuries. Travel writing was a popular genre in medieval Arabic literature. What is interesting is that Arab travel writers were also attracted to the ‘exotic’ – whatever they viewed as ‘Other’, or ‘alien – even if that ‘Otherness’ was to be found in fellow Muslim societies.

- Orientalist literature features as a prominent example of travel writing
- However, travel writing is a worldwide tradition that traverses time and space, well beyond the period of high imperial Orientalism in the long 19th century
- Ibn Jubayr (1145-1214) and Ibn Battuta (1304-1377) are two medieval Arab travel writers
- Like their Orientalist counterparts, they were attracted to the ‘exotic’ and the ‘strange and wonderful’
- Ibn Battuta’s al-Rihla (The Journey) documents his 30 years of extensive travel; his accounts were comparative and not judgement-free: Ibn Battuta remarked disapprovingly on the relative freedom of women among the Turks and Mongols in his travel. To write, albeit interpretively, is to judge in relation to a set of criteria – us vs. them.

Orientalism (slide with pictures):

Now I’d like to talk briefly about Orientalism as all-encompassing Eurocentric discourse of othering and classification; more specifically, I’m concerned with Orientalist writing about the Arab world in the 19th and early 20th century, which coincided with European imperial encroachment into the region.
Orientalism: curiosity, fantasy and imperialism

I’d like to draw briefly on Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, bearing in mind that I’ll be specifically talking about Orientalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Of course, as Edward Said tells us, an Orientalist is anyone working, studying and codifying the East (the non-European world), which at times included the vast space from Morocco in North-West Africa to China and Japan in East Asia. Said’s study is mainly concerned with Arab world, however. One thing that unified all Orientalists, despite the differences in their approaches and what they studied, is their fascination with ‘cultural difference’ (admired or otherwise). Orientalism (categorising the non-European as Oriental) is, however, a multidisciplinary tradition: it includes various disciplines (philology, literature, sociology, anthropology, etc.) as well as various themes (gender relations, sexuality, etc.). Orientalism is also an evolving discourse; it means different things in different contexts and it changes with the Orientalist’s approach. It would, therefore, be more accurate to talk about Orientalisms in the plural. Indeed, each Orientalist creates his/her own Orient, which becomes a platform upon which they can fulfil their wishes. As Said puts it, the ‘Orient’ is a malleable space; we will see examples of this shortly.

- ‘Cultural difference’ (admired or otherwise) and the attraction towards the ‘Other’: Indeed, this is true of all travel writing: the attraction to the novel and the exotic.
- Orientalism: a discourse that encompassed the non-European (regardless of the differences between them): Said shows how that view is reductive; there is no logical rationale behind classifying all non-Europeans under one umbrella term.
- Orientalism: a multidisciplinary tradition (thematic and generic: translation, philology, anthropology, etc.).
- Orientalism: a multi-faceted tradition (means different things in different contexts); Orientalisms in the plural – again this seems rather paradoxical for a discourse, whose bases of Othering are the racial, cultural and geographical boundaries of the non-European world
- Each Orientalist invents and narrates his/her own Orient; the Orient is a platform of sorts for Orientalist wish-fulfilment

Orientalism and the Ottoman Empire in 19th Century

My main concern for this lecture is Orientalist writing and responses to this writing (writing back) in the Euro-Arab context in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This period witnessed the modern Euro-Arab cultural encounter, which coincided with the encroachment of European imperialism in the region, the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism.

- Decline of the Ottoman Empire and European imperial encroachment in the region
- Proliferation of Orientalist writing: more Europeans travelled to and wrote about the Arab East
**Euro-Arab Cultural Encounter (summary detailed below):**

- Napoleon’s Invasion of Egypt (1798-1801)
- Anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism
- Nahda (renaissance/revival) discourse
- Transcultural Scholarship: Writing and Writing back

**Napoleon’s Occupation of Egypt (1798-1801):**

Despite its relatively short period, Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt is major milestone in modern Euro-Arab relations:

- This short encounter triggered Arab awareness of **European cultural and scientific achievements**; it also set in motion Arab intellectual curiosity westwards.
- Politically, this was the **first European invasion of central Muslim lands since the Crusades**.
- Militarily, It demonstrated the **weakness and decay of the Mamluk-Ottoman system** and the once-invincible Muslim armies.
- Culturally, it put an end to Egypt’s long isolation from the European world and instigated the **Nahda** (renaissance/revival) movement in the 19th century.

**The Euro-Arab Cultural Encounter and the Nahda Movement:**

The **Nahda** (renaissance/revival) movement started in Egypt and the Levant around the mid 19th century: it coincided with the rise of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism and aimed at reviving and restoring the ‘glorious past of the Arabs’ (hence the names); the Abbasid period was singled out as the ‘golden age’ of Arab civilisation; its antithesis ‘the age of degeneration’ was regarded mainly as the Ottoman period (1500-1800); indeed these terms were coined during the **Nahda**. Indeed, the term itself suggests the need to ‘rise’ from decline. **Nahda** scholars also looked out to Europe for inspirational modern ideas.

- Attitudes towards Europe’s cultural and scientific achievement started to change – previously, Europeans were seen in the shadow of the Crusades (barbaric, uncivilised, etc). Abu-Lughod shows how Ottoman rule meant that the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire had become insular and isolated from political life, which meant lack of contact with modern developments across Europe (the Enlightenment, etc).
- Arab scholars ‘rediscovered’ Europe and its cultural worth and aspired to emulate scholarly European achievement – thanks to Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt.
- Translations of European works aroused Arab scholars’ interest in **modern European ideas** (democracy, nationalism, science, philosophy, literature).
- ‘[…] the works of western orientalists began to be translated into Arabic. […] Thus Arabs not only viewed the West through western eyes but also began to view themselves through those same eyes.’ (Abu-Lughod, p. 76)
Orientalism and Sexuality: art and literature (3 slides)

A collection of Orientalist paintings (Delacroix and Gerôme):

- **Oriental sexual otherness**: a space to explore and fantasise about the forbidden
- **Orientalism as a discourse**: writing and narration happen within a pre-set framework: the more you depict the Orient as sexually other (lewd, licentious, unrestrained), the more you cement this image.
- Yet, these representations are valorised against a pre-set of cultural norms (our norms vs. theirs) that change in time and space: sexual morality
- **Sexuality** as a marker of ‘cultural difference’
- **Edward Said quotes**: examples of works: William Beckford’s *Vathek*; *The Lustful Turk* (anonymous), E.M. Hull’s *The Sheikh* (1919) + plus many others, including translations of Oriental works.

**Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarati and French Morals:**

Interestingly, however, Arab scholars were equally fascinated by European sexuality and gender relations; this is a quote from Egyptian historian and chronicler, Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarati, who recorded Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt. Although he had great respect for French scholarship, he disapproved of certain aspects of French and European social behaviour (gender relations and sexuality): QUOTE.

Similar views are echoed in Rifa‘ah al-Tahtawi’s account of his sojourn in France in 1826 while being sponsored by Muhammad Ali. Like al-Jabarati, al-Tahtawi’s views on French manners and sexual morals were quite demeaning; in fact, he blames that on Frenchmen’s lack of jealousy and imbalance in gender relations (women had too much power!). This is so despite the fact that he was very much pro European modernity and had great respect for French and European scholarship.

**A Different Type of Sexuality:**

Nonetheless, as Said shows the Orient’s sexuality meant the forbidden and the illicit; it became synonymous with all of these taboo practices in Christian Europe (incest, homosexuality, bestiality, etc.). This view became cemented through annotated translations of Oriental works – the most famous of which was the Arabian Nights. But even then, this was a gradual process.

**The Arabian Nights:**

- A collection of medieval folkloric tales from the Middle East, North Africa, Persia, India and China
The Arabian Nights in European Translations:

- The first European translation of the book was Antoine Galland’s French translation (1704-1717)
- The tales proved sensational and inspirational in Europe
- Some tales were ‘added’ to the original manuscript by European writers
- Other translations were to follow suit soon.
- European translators practised self-censorship and edited out the ‘explicitly sexual’ tales
- The Oriental classic influenced European literature and ignited Orientalist fantasies (Beckford’s Vathek)
- In effect, the tales became synonymous with the ‘charm and magic of the East’ in European consciousness

Burton and the Arabian Nights (3 slides)
The Arab Nahda’s Response: al-Tahtawi/al-Jabarati on European gender relations (2 slides)
T.E. Lawrence: another Orientalist with a subjective vision (2 slides)
Kahlil Gibran: synthesising Orientalism with Romanticism in his bilingual oeuvre (2 slides)
Culture: a collective human heritage

Burton (short bio):

- Victorian polymath (linguist, translator, anthropologist, diplomat, soldier, spy, explorer and impersonator): he spoke a combination of 40 languages and dialects; he was the epitome of Victorian inquisition
- Dressed up as an Oriental (half-Arab, half Iranian), Abdullah of Bushire – first in India (Sind) in 1845; then on his hajj trip to Mecca in 1852-1853
- Famous for his work on Oriental erotica (The Kama Sutra and the Perfumed Garden); he challenged Victorian norms

Sir Richard Burton’s ‘Plain and Literal Translation’ of the Arabian Nights:

- The first to include the entire collection of tales, including the ‘sexually’ explicit ones
- The translation was supplemented by footnotes on ‘Oriental manners’ using the fictional text to support ‘anthropological’ observations i.e. conflating ‘fiction’ with ‘sociology’ and ‘anthropology’
- Burton concluded his translation with the ‘Terminal Essay’, in which he developed his theory on the ‘Sotadic Zone’, which links the spread of ‘homosexuality’ to a geographically-determined area, including much of the Arab-Islamic world
- Burton’s translation cemented the connection between the Muslim Orient and ‘Other’ illicit forms of sexuality and ‘vice’
Khalil Sarki’s Version of The Arabian Nights:

• While Burton was working on his translation of *The Arabian Nights*, a new edition of the text in the original Arabic was being produced and published by the Lebanese intellectual, Khalil Sarkis, in 1881-83. In fact, Burton references the new edition disapprovingly in his Foreword to his own edition of *The Nights*.

• Khalil Sarkis was a Nahda scholar and representative of the class of Levantine intelligentsia. Sarkis had his own publishing house; he printed lots of books (Arab and Western, contemporary and classical) at affordable prices.

• He also established a newspaper, Lisan al-Haal, which stayed in print until the Lebanese Civil War (mid 1970s).

• Sarkis’s version was the **first expurgated account of the Arabic classic in the original Arabic**.

The Book as a Metaphor:

• When the book was **growing ‘thicker’ in Europe** (Burton’s complete translation), it was **paradoxically shrinking** (i.e. being expurgated) in the original Arabic.

• Sexually explicit tales were **being edited out** as they came to be regarded as ‘improper’ and ‘morally corrupt’ i.e. not in line with European ‘cultivated’ literary taste and manners – thanks to the Euro-Arab cultural encounter’s impact on Arabic literature’s conceptualisation of sexual morality.

• This episode shows how Burton was, nonetheless, able to rely on the perceived image of Arab-Oriental sexual otherness to narrate and propagate his own discourse on sexuality sexual morality: in other words, he was able to discuss such taboo topics under the guise of Orientalist scholarship – studying the manners of Orientals.

Lawrence (short bio):

T.E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, was another Orientalist who takes us into the early twentieth century. It is interesting to think of him as Burton’s successor, although his agenda – his ‘Orient’ – was rather different. Nonetheless, like Burton, he used the Orient and Orientalist discourse to approach and fulfil certain wishes:

• He was a medievalist, who was also interested in antiquity, medieval history and the history of the Crusades: he write his undergraduate dissertation on the architecture of the Crusaders’ citadels in the Levant (Syria and Lebanon)

• He then joined the Arab Revolt (1916-1918) and was Britain’s agent in Arabia

• Like Burton, he dressed up as an Arab (Lawrence of Arabia) – although his masquerade was different: it was not much of a camouflage as he stood out in every way.
His book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, is his personal narrative of the events of the Arab Revolt; it is an amalgamation of historical, personal, fictional narratives: the author becomes the hero of the book.

The book gives an insight into Lawrence’s fantasies (chivalric, sexual and otherwise); it narrates the way in which he experienced and fulfilled his dream of becoming an Arabian knight!

A Romantic in the age of modernism: wanted to run away from European modernity

British agent in WWII: he co-led the Arab revolt with Prince Feisal of Mecca, whom he admired: certain passages in *Seven Pillars* suggest a homoerotic connection

Fantasised about leading a people in their nationalist struggle

But wanted it to be a Romantic episode, involving chivalry

The Arab East became the platform on which he fulfilled his dream

**Chivalry, Fantasy and the Homoerotic:**

That dream also involved Lawrence’s evident attraction to the homoerotic and male-to-male relations

There is a strong homoerotic narrative in Lawrence’s book (his description of male-to-male relations, boy-to-boy love, obsession with gender segregation in traditional Arabian society as well as certain overtly sexual scenes such as his alleged rape at Der’a in Syria).

One of the most remarkable examples is his attraction to Prince Feisal; whose wedding garment he ended up wearing:

‘I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek – the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory. Feisal looked very tall and pillar-like, very slender, in his long white silk robes and his brown head-cloth bound with a brilliant scarlet and gold cord. His eyelids were dropped, and his black beard and colourless face were like a mask against the strange, still watchfulness of his body. His hands were crossed in front of him on his dagger’ (Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, Loc. 1038-41).

Lawrence’s chivalric, nationalist and psychosexual fantasies and dreams were indeed fulfilled in the Arab Orient – his Orient, although different from Burton’s, did indeed enable him to enact certain visions.

**Gibran (short bio):**

All of these magical powers attributed to the Orient seem to have seduced an Oriental from Lebanon to play along and orchestrate his self-fashioning and position himself as a two-way literary conduit that can interpret East to West and West to East.

- Born to a Maronite-Catholic family in the village of Bsharri in northern Lebanon in 1883
- Emigrated with his mother to Boston, USA, in 1895
- Studied art in Paris in 1908
- Settled in New York in 1911
• One of the most famous **Mahjar** (Arab diaspora in the US) writers; he cofounded the Pen League Literary Society with Amin Rihani and other Levantine-American writers

• Gibran **died in New York in 1931**, but his body was transferred back to his village in Lebanon.

• Gibran was a **rebel**; he was ex-communicated by the Church for his anti-clerical views

• Gibran’s views on **nationalism** were ambiguous: although he supported autonomy from the Ottomans and championed a Lebanese and a pan-Syrian sense of belonging, his vision remained defiantly **inclusive, humanistic and universal**

**Gibran’s Bilingual Oeuvre:**

• Gibran produced a combination of **16 works; 8 in English and 8 in Arabic**; the most famous of which is **The Prophet (1923)**

• He is often compared to **William Blake and other European Romantics**:
  - He capitalised on Orientalist tropes and presented himself as an authentic Oriental
  - He experimented with literary genres and style in Arabic and **introduced Romanticism into Arabic literature (free verse)**
  - Gibran was a two-way literary conduit; he synthesised Romanticism with Orientalism and styled them differently to his audiences

• But we also ought to consider the relationship between Romanticism and Orientalism: how early European Romantics drew on themes from the Orient:
  - ‘[Sir William] Jones […] regarded the East as a new source of imaginative and creative renewal, and his writings and translations profoundly **influenced** Romantic writers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and P. B. Shelley’ (p. 168) as well as Wordsworth’s Dream of the Arab.

• In his Arabic oeuvre, Gibran is admired for **revolutionising and liberating** Arabic poetry from its traditional form and metre through introducing free verse; however, some critics are cautious about praising his radical ideals (rejecting organised religion and focusing on spirituality); his book, **Spirit Rebellious**, was banned in Beirut.

**Conclusion: Culture as a collective human enterprise**

• Culture can become a ‘**theatre**’ where various political and **ideological phases engage with one another**

• Culture can become a **battleground**: students are expected to study their own **literature first** and be **automatically loyal to it**, while somehow denigrating others

• **National history: selective representation**

• **Valorisation** plays an important role – it is what defines ‘us’ from ‘them’

• In time, **certain cultures become associated with certain values** – usually ‘Other’ values to our ‘own’

• **Values are fickle**; they change in time
• ‘[…] culture is not monolithic […], and is not the exclusive property of East or West, nor of small groups of men or women’ (p. xxvii).
• Culture is not a monopoly: from ‘fusion food’ and ‘fashion’ to literature, art and music: it’s a human enterprise.
• ‘[...] all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic’ (p. xxix).
• ‘Western imperialism and Third World [postcolonial] nationalism feed off each other[...]’: the relationship between colonialism and postcolonial nationalism: how they use ‘culture’ to justify ‘difference’
• ‘Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic’ (p. xxix).
• ‘Western imperialism and Third World nationalism feed off each other, but even at their worse they are neither monolithic nor deterministic. Besides, culture is not monolithic either, and is not the exclusive property of East or West, nor of small groups of men or women’ (p. xxvii).
• ‘Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise’ (p. xxviii). Culture is not a monopoly: from fusion food to literature, art and music: it’s a human enterprise:

The Arabian Nights as an Example:

*The Arabian Nights and its history of translations*: the additions of certain tales, including Ali Baba and the Forty thieves by Anotine Galland and Hanna Diab in Paris: it’s a collaborative project: it’s not even ‘Arab’ as such, the tales extend from Arabic speaking territories to Persia, India and China. It’s a human heritage the way Beethoven is to the Germans, the Western World and anybody who enjoys the consumption of his musical cultural production.

Transcultural Writers: a Melange

The relationship between attire, self-fashioning and transcultural writing