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The Predicaments of Postcolonial Thinking

Ato Quayson Interviews Aamir R. Mufti

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Ato Quayson (AQ) conducted this interview with Aamir R. Mufti (AM) via email in August 2015.

Question AQ: Aamir, thanks for agreeing to do this interview. It is a great delight to have your thoughts included in this special issue on Jewish studies and post-colonialism. I want to start off by inviting you to talk about your book *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture*. Could you tell us a little bit about what motivated you to write that book? What were the conversations you were interested in contributing to?

Answer AM: Thanks for the opportunity to participate in this very important special issue. The intersections of Jewish cultural studies and the postcolonial intervention continue to preoccupy me in my current work.

With *Enlightenment in the Colony*, I wanted to contribute toward generating a renewed discussion of the forms of social vulnerability associated with "minority" status in modern society, one that would avoid the false resolutions of liberal multiculturalism. I wanted to ask what kinds of social crisis were created by the existence of groups and social imaginaries that could not be assimilated into narratives of national life. And I wanted to pose the question across the historical divide between metropolitan and colonial societies. The most immediate influence on my way of thinking was the work of Edward Said and those European thinkers who had been most influential for him—Theodor Adorno, Erich Auerbach, but also Hannah Arendt, whose influence Said often seems to disavow in a classic "anxiety of influence" manner. But equally important were a range of South Asian thinkers and writers—such well-known figures as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Aijaz Ahmad, and Gauri Viswanathan, but also people like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and the "progressive" writers and intellectuals who did much of their work in Urdu.

Specifically, the book originated in an attempt to reopen the question of the Partition of India and to think the problem in a new way. Partition studies had been dominated either by a rational-choice type of framework looking at competing ("Hindu" and "Muslim") elites within the colonial state, or a developmentalist one that offered the social "backwardness" of Muslim elites as an explanation of Muslim political separatism.

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Although there were elements of truth in both these paradigms, neither of them, I thought, got to the crux of the matter, namely, the very production of "Hindu" and "Muslim" as global or "all-India" social, political, and cultural categories in colonial society.

It became clear to me that I would need to develop a concept of the minority in political and sociocultural terms that was both more *expansive* and more *dynamic* than the conventional one. The first of these tasks was secured by the discovery that the League of Nations framework for the "protection" of minorities was the immediately available paradigm for nationalist movements in the final decades of colonial rule for managing the internal divisions of their own emergent "nations." In India, this was concretely the case for the so-called Motilal Nehru Report in the late 1920s, an attempt by the nationalist elite to envision a constitution for an independent India of the future. It became quickly clear to me that the question of minorities in postcolonial politics could not be understood without the crisis of minority and statelessness in Europe in the interwar decades, that in fact the latter was part of the history of the former. Thus I realized that I would have to reinterpret the entire history of the so-called Jewish Question from the perspective of this postcolonial question and problematic. And this in turn was facilitated by the discovery of some of the best scholarship on the German-Jewish Question, and the help of our mutual friend Willi Goetschel was decisive here, which remains an enduring debt.

I want to be clear that this was not meant to be an argument by analogy. I was not arguing that the Indian Muslim question was *like* the European Jewish one. In fact, on the contrary, I was interested precisely in the ways in which concepts, categories, and even various formal possibilities in different literary and cultural genres that had originated in the history of the Jewish Question in post-Enlightenment Europe traveled to and remerged within the vastly *different* historical, social, and cultural contexts of the colonial world and, above all, the consequences of this dissemination for the societies in question. Hence the need I also felt for a more dynamic concept of minority, which continues to be thought of in largely static numerical terms, which is of course the case in liberal political practice itself. Critical theory has not really moved beyond the liberal concept of minority in that respect. (Deleuze and Guattari's approach in the book on Kafka is an important exception, and I rely on it myself to a certain extent, as do a range of critics today.)

To take just one concrete example of the dynamic and shifting nature of majority-minority relations, the Shia Arab population of Iraq, which is a decisive numerical majority in classic liberal terms, was treated in the Baathist state instead rather like a classic minority, as a non-national and half-alien population, alien from the perspective of the state due to its religious connection to the non-Arab Shia world. (And the Sunni-Shia logic took the inverse form in Baathist Syria.) In terms of colonial India, I was interested in thinking about the claim associated with the antinationalist segments of the Muslim elites that the Muslims of India as a whole constituted not a minority but rather another "nation" in the subcontinent—the infamous "two-nation theory." The Indian nationalists repudiated this claim by pointing out that there was no other case of a population dispersed through every city and village of a country being considered a distinct nation. But of course there was another exactly similar claim, in fact on a continental and even worldwide scale, that of Zionism—that is, European Jewish nationalism. The seeming absurdity of these two

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sets of political claims appeared to me to expose the absurdity of *all* nationalisms with regard to their claims on populations and social relations, early Zionism and the movement for an Indian Muslim nation representing *extreme* instances of the national problematic as such. And given Zionism's European and metropolitan provenance, it naturally veered toward an involvement in imperialism, that is, in the historically determined (and determinative) ability of European societies to impose their will on non-European societies. Arendt may well have lost sight of all this near the end of her life in the euphoric aftermath of the lopsided Israeli victory in the Six-Day War, as Said accused her of doing, but she seems to have understood it with stunning clarity in the 1940s.

I therefore sought to develop a concept of minority-majority relations as an arrangement of lines of force in society that *deployed* a certain numerical logic under certain historical circumstances but could not be reduced to it, a concept that would be responsive to both of the historical situations with which I was concerned. My conclusion was that, given the social structure of colonial Indian society, "Muslim" did not function within it as the name of "minority," and the repeated nationalist attempt to resolve the conflict by turning to the language of minority existence and minority rights necessarily missed the mark because it required the Muslim elites to imagine their social situation as something akin to that of Jews in the European states. In this sense, we could say that the Partition of India, which transformed roughly two-thirds of the Muslims of India into non-Indians, was in fact a necessity for nationalism itself, a necessary condition in order for it to establish its concepts and categories within political and social practices in society. It enabled the transforming of the crisis of Muslim identity in (colonial) India into an instance (in postcolonial India) of the crisis of minority. In the Indian case, therefore, it is the end of the historical process that sees the establishment of something like the ghetto as social paradigm, exactly the inverse of the European historical process, whose master narrative proceeds from the ghetto as a state of social confinement to emancipation and "protection" by the emergent liberal state. Hence the distinct forms of social vulnerability that attach themselves to the fact of being Muslim in India today. The Jewish Question of the emergent European nation-states must therefore be understood as the very first historical instance of the crisis of minority, properly speaking, whose terms and structures are disseminated to the rest of world with the dissemination of the nation-form under colonial and semicolonial conditions.

Finally, in writing this book I sought to intervene as decisively as I could in ongoing debates about the Urdu language and its literature. Criticism in Urdu was once a powerful intellectual tradition and is still so in the work of a handful of exceptional figures. But in Anglophone discussion it has been treated in a rather moribund fashion for a long time, again with some exceptions. To some extent, this has been the case with most of the so-called vernaculars of the subcontinent. I wanted to understand the many paradoxes of this linguistic and cultural formation, not the least of which is of course its relationship to the formation that is called Hindi—the two being identical at the level of spoken language but diverging sharply in writing practice and marked by conflicting religio-political identities. And what was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a largely elite culture, tied to "semifeudal" social milieus, was radicalized early in the twentieth century by two generations of

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extraordinary writers who made Urdu literature into the most expansive form of modern literary expression in the so-called North Indian heartland, even as it was increasingly being characterized in nationalist discourse as half-alien and tangential to the life of the nation.

In what ways exactly did the split language formation of North India become involved in the politics of Partition? This is the very broad question I wanted to address. My larger argument about Urdu is that it is not simply one among the many vernacular literary languages of South Asia. It is the language in which the very process of the nationalization of language and culture in the various nation-states of the region becomes exposed. Urdu is therefore *a fundamentally exilic language*, unable to pass the test of indigeneity in either India or Pakistan, too influenced by Persian and Arabic from the Indian nationalist perspective and too North Indian from the Pakistani one. But the book is a literary study not because it is concerned exclusively with literary materials and questions; rather, its literariness resides in the fact that it brings modes of reading to a range of materials—philosophical and political materials, for instance—that are literary-critical in their origin. It is a literary attempt to contribute to a wider social and political discussion.

To sum this up, then—and with apologies for the length of this first answer!—in *Enlightenment in the Colony*, I took the Partition of India, and the entire history of the so-called Hindu-Muslim conflict of colonial times that precipitated that event, as the location from which to develop a concept of what I call the crisis of minority that takes in both the whole historical sweep of this problematic from the Enlightenment to the late twentieth century as well as its geopolitical and cultural range from metropolitan to colonial and postcolonial societies. At a conceptual level, what I have tried to do is explore how the "dialectic of Enlightenment"—Enlightenment as fraught, contradictory, and contested intellectual and political formation, toward which we can only take a dialectical (that is, *difficult*) stance—must be refracted and reinflected for the historical trajectory of colonial societies.

Question AQ: In *Enlightenment in the Colony*, you make specific mention of the fact that minoritization is an inherent process of nation-state formation. Not only that, but that minoritization also implies movability. I wonder if you can expand on this comment in the light of the current humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Europe.

Answer AM: This is an extremely important (and obviously urgent) question, and I thank you for it. At one level, what we are seeing throughout the region extending from the Indian subcontinent to the westernmost countries of the European Union (EU) is an explosive eruption of the crisis of minority, the repeated question everywhere about what is a national group and what is a minority. The nation-state as a form is once again in crisis throughout this region, producing extreme forms of nationalism, religious fascism, and the scapegoating of those deemed alien, non-national, or minorities. Rohingyas in Myanmar; Chakmas, Hindus, and Biharis in Bangladesh; Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and Adivasis in India; Hindus, Christians, Ahmedis, and even Shias in Pakistan; Baluchis, Kurds, and ethnic Arabs in Iran; Alevis, Kurds, and ethnic Armenians in Turkey; every single ethnic group in Iraq and Syria, including—at different times and in different corners of these countries—Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Kurds, Chaldean Christians, Alawites, and Yazidis; Coptic

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Christians in Egypt; and, throughout the European continent, African and Asian immigrants and refugees, many escaping from one or another of the aforementioned conflicts, and even other Europeans like Roma: these are many, but by no means all, of the social groups that have experienced the blunt symbolic as well as physical force of majoritarianism in recent years. And of course you know far better than I do the contagion of such conflicts, civil wars, and partitions in recent decades in Africa. War simply provides extreme conditions for the actualization of the potential for uprooting that is inherent to certain social locations within the modern state. In Europe itself two historic attempts over the last century to settle this question once and for all—in the years following World War I through the League of Nations system and in the decades following World War II through the United Nations and the unification project—have ultimately ended in failure. One of the basic questions that the League was meant to have resolved nearly a hundred years ago is therefore back once again with a vengeance in a vast expanse of countries home to a large segment of humanity.

The shameful paralysis of the European elites in face of the expanding refugee crisis over the last couple of years appears to me to be symptomatic and not at all incidental. The postcolonial refugee trying to enter the EU embodies aspects of the European project that are kept concealed in everyday practices, both official and nonofficial, of a common European life. The official discourse typically speaks of unification in terms of the imperatives of fraternity within the continent itself. In fact, *solidarity* is the most overused word in the contemporary European lexicon. Even the left continues to replicate the terms of this discourse, with the immigrant question, for instance, typically appearing as an important but derivative issue. From outside the continent, however, the prospect has always been that of Fortress Europe, simply the latest incarnation of the repeated historical attempt to define European people and civilization as against "the rest," and especially against those who are Europe's neighbors to the east and south.

Well, if you fortify your city, sooner or later the "barbarians" will arrive at the gate. The "civilizational" effort produces its own barbarians, those who wish to tear the walls down—this is one of the brilliant insights of Constantine Cavafy's famous poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians," as I see it. But these barbarians, like the inmates of the camps that Arendt talks about in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, emerge from within modern civilization itself, and they embody Europe's own imperial history. So Arendt's concept of the *pariah* in European society has to be revised for our times: this *new pariah* carries the stain of being a former colonial subject, an *indigène de la République*, to cite the paradoxical formulation of a group of brilliant activists and intellectuals in France. The postcolonial refugee trying to enter Europe exposes the imperial origins of the European idea and various practices of Europeanness. This imperial substratum does not apply simply to the former imperial powers like France or Britain. For a society to become European by being anchored in the processes of unification is to *adopt retroactively the position of former imperial metropole*—this is an irreducible contradiction of the social imaginary of Europeanization today.

A great deal of Arendt's work of the 1940s and 1950s is still enormously important for understanding the current crisis. The letter fragment that has now been published as "The Minority Question," which was not known to me when I wrote *Enlightenment in the Colony*, offers some brilliant reflections on what a future

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European citizenship might look like. Arendt expresses the hope that the survivors and refugees might become the paradigm for a new European selfhood because precisely their stateless condition makes them the only substantial group with an inherent interest in Europe as such. In my view, precisely this possibility was not pursued in the project of unification, which substituted instead the cosmopolitanism of the elites as paradigm for the experience of European selfhood: the promise was simply that now even the masses could participate in the forms of detachment and mobility that previously only the elites could have taken for granted. Projects like Erasmus were intended to help realize this promise. So the national frameworks were left intact and were simply inserted into a European framework more formally than they had been in the past. As for the crisis now engulfing the Middle East, the rivers of humanity flowing across and out of the Arab lands, this violent reshaping of the socius in every country in the region is in a direct line of historical development from the great imperial event of the US war on Iraq, where in an earlier era the agent had been the British and French colonial remapping of the Middle East (that is, "Sykes-Picot"), implemented in the aftermath of the first great imperial war of the previous century. So far, this storm has circled around Israel-Palestine, but a renewed uprooting and expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland, a whole new *Nakba* in our times, does not appear to me to be entirely out of the question.

Europe is home again to large numbers of people desperately on the run, being herded into cages, camps, and sealed trains, being tear gassed, baton charged, pepper sprayed, and attacked with water cannons with impunity inside Europe. The inability of the political and cultural elites to offer simply a coherent response, let alone a decent one, as masses of humanity trek on foot across the continent, dozens suffocate to death in the back of sealed and abandoned trucks, thousands die routinely in the sea, and the bodies of children wash onto Mediterranean beaches is striking but hardly surprising. It is symptomatic of the lacunae of the happy talk of European unification. Refugees from a collapsing Middle Eastern order are right now taking apart the borders of Europe—literally, with their hands and bodies. At the very least, the whole set of treaties governing the movement of people across borders—the so-called Dublin agreements and even the Schengen arrangement itself—are now in threat of dissolution because that imagined universal subject of continental mobility always had hidden racial markings, that is, it was in fact "white"—"white skin, blank mask," we might say. When masses of "black" and "brown" bodies demonstrate to the world on so vast a scale the perils of their own mobility in the heart of Europe, that mask of universalism is lifted, perhaps forever. It is therefore hardly surprising that the crisis has led to overtly racial language being used by senior statesmen, not only the likes of Victor Orbán but also David Cameron, Nikolas Sarkozy, and others. On the other hand, certain types of gestures of hospitality—crowds in train stations chanting "refugees are welcome here"—while they are certainly more pleasant and preferable to the open xenophobia, sometimes appear to be motivated by a desire to restore that universalist mask rather than a desire for a fundamental rethinking. At the same time, the countries least equipped to deal with a large influx of refugees—Pakistan, Kenya, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon—have to deal with it disproportionately. One refugee camp in Kenya, Dadaab, houses roughly ten times more refugees than the entire United Kingdom. Pakistan has borne the brunt of housing the displaced—not very effectively,

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it has to be said—from two imperial wars (and an intervening civil war) in Afghanistan since the early 1980s. It was from the religious schools of this refugee population in Pakistan that the Taliban (literally, "students") emerged in the 1990s.

Question AQ: If minoritization and mobility are so closely related, do you think there might be room for a critique of global capitalism from the perspective of mobility?

Answer AM: Absolutely. This is really how I now see various aspects of my own work: criticism of the culture and social relations of globalization not from the perspective of the local or localized, which often simply translates into the fictions and fabula—the "dream," as Stathis Gourgouris has put it—of a nationalist orientation, but rather the perspectives offered by processes of uprooting and displacement, the translocal, as it were. But as with the question of European selfhood in the postwar decades, we must distinguish here between elite and subaltern possibilities. The more capital behaves as if it inhabits a borderless world, the more dangerous simple mobility becomes for ever greater numbers of people worldwide. All the talk in European and US intellectual circles about an already achieved cosmopolitanism as the actually existing condition of the world—I really don't see how it is distinct from, let alone opposed to, the neoliberal happy talk of globalization and a borderless world. To me, it is unforgivable to speak in this manner in a world where the very possibility of crossing borders is literally a matter of life or death for masses of people, and a world in which, for those visibly construed as aliens, literally every point in social space can become the possible site of a perilous border experience. Such talk makes the privileges of American or European life disappear from view and therefore normalizes and naturalizes them.

Marxist thought has traditionally had a tense relationship with minority and exile as political questions as well as modes of thinking in themselves. I've addressed this question at some length in *Enlightenment in the Colony*. The Frankfurt School thinkers, Adorno and Horkheimer in particular, are a rare instance in which the tension is actually made a productive one. Even Lukács remains evasive on this matter: his long essay on Heinrich Heine as the "national" poet of Germany, for instance, does not once mention Heine's highly problematic relation to the German national framework—that he was a Jew and the son of a Yiddish-speaking woman, that Jewish life and Jewish history provided him with the material for a great deal of his writing, or that while the Nazis could not make his poems disappear from German consciousness they often attributed them to an unknown author. We have similar conventions in India for thinking of this or that Muslim author as an irreproachable Indian nationalist. But I think it is possible to write exile and uprooting into our analysis of capital itself—this is the great lesson that I was fortunate enough to learn from the (Urdu) poetry of Faiz, whose verse foregrounds both exploitation and exclusion. After all, the very narrative of the historical birth of the industrial working class in England through a series of Enclosures Acts is a story about the uprooting of peasants formerly rooted in particular locales, social fabrics, and traditions and their transformation into a mobile and alienated laboring population. We should take the exilic element in this historical process more seriously than we have so far. Incidentally, I have recently discovered hints in some of Said's writings about such an approach to class relations in England during the long Industrial Revolution. And the migration crisis today is the

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symptom of irreducible contradictions and imbalances in the global capitalist system: consumer societies on the one hand and super-exploited ones on the other; liberal democracies on the one hand and varieties of failed states on the other.

Question AQ: I must admit to not having been entirely persuaded by your analogy of the relation between the Jewish Question and the process of secularism in Enlightenment Europe and the status of Muslims in India. The reason for my skepticism is that the tensions and contradictions between religion and secularism in Europe seem to be quite different from what we find in India. For one thing, although India has chosen a path of secularism, it still seems to be a predominantly Hindu country, with the Hindu belief system even infusing the political domain, as for example with the election and pronouncements of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Following on from this question, in what ways do you think it might be possible to read the religion/secularism debate in India for insights on the situation in places such as Indonesia, Egypt, and Nigeria, which have a similar religious topography but from an inverted position from the Indian example (i.e., with ruling Muslim populations).

Answer AM: As I stated earlier, I was not arguing simply from analogy in *Enlightenment in the Colony*, though I am willing to admit that a certain element of analogical thinking probably remains in the book, given simply the difficulty of making the historical argument that was the bulk of its burden. My aim was precisely to ask what happens when certain metropolitan forms—in the widest possible sense of this term—travel to colonized spaces of vastly different social and cultural backgrounds. This is of course an old question for colonial and postcolonial thinkers across the world, and in this great debate about the modernity (or lack thereof) of Third World societies, and their possible autonomy, I am opposed both to the developmentalist model of incremental progress toward a metropolitan norm—even Marxists can sometimes take this view—as well as the variety of nativisms that have been posited against it.

You observe correctly that in South Asian societies religiosity and the secular imagination have had a vastly different relationship to each other than was and is the case in European societies—a different relationship of *proximity* between the two. For us a religious vocabulary remains available to radical thinkers and writers, including Marxists like Faiz and Fahmida Riaz, for instance. Even the massive public crisis around Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which draws upon elements of Islamic belief and practice in order to elaborate a narrative of postcolonial migration, serves to illustrate this point. The thing about Nehruvian secularism is that, despite all its progressive accomplishments, it remained tied to ways of thinking, essentially majoritarian in nature, that normalize only certain practices and imaginaries as representative of "the people" as such. For all its talk of unity in diversity, distinctly "Muslim" modes of being thus always remained problematic for it, not quite assimilable to a nationalist genealogy. It thus shares the ground of "authenticity" with more frankly majoritarian (because religious-nationalist) projects like the one associated with Modi and his Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) cohort. The supposedly secular citizen-subject of Nehruvian politics had hidden religious markings that are now being exposed. The supposedly universalist political norms of liberalism are inherently majoritarian—this is the broader point I have tried to make. I know that this is a difficult and dangerous position to take when religious fascism—Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish—is on the rise throughout the region and posing a

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threat to all kinds of progressive institutions and groupings, but it is also unavoidable for a longer-term historical reckoning. Aziz al-Azmeh's discussion of authenticity (*aṣāla*) as the common ground between Arab nationalism and Islamism has been quite important for my thinking.

In this sense, Hindutva or political Hinduism is therefore a sort of cognate of Islamism or political Islam in Muslim-majority countries. Think about the case of Egypt for a moment. There, unlike in India, it is the social group associated with the culture of the country before the arrival of Islam that is considered half-alien, at best problematic and marginal to the life of the nation. We have two very different societies here whose "crisis of minority," furthermore, unfolds in an almost inverse manner with respect to, for instance, notions of antiquity, the history of conversion to Islam, *et cetera*— in India it is the "newcomer" religious complex that has been minoritized and in Egypt the "original" one. But what the two situations share is this entire process of minoritization, the alienization of part of the population and certain practices and social imaginaries with respect to state and society. One of the assertions of my book was simply that the mutual relationship of secularism and religiosity in any given society cannot be understood without reference to the history of majority-minority relations within it. I have therefore been skeptical of an exclusively philosophical approach to this question that does not treat the state as a theoretical problem. This perception is derived for me from Marx himself, especially the early writings, including the essay on the Jewish Question, in which he translates the (majoritarian-Christian) question about Judaism's capacity for Enlightenment and modernity into one about the liberal state and its social and political categories. One of the stupidest of the many stupid things that gets said about Marx is the characterization of this essay as anti-Semitic.

Question AQ: It is impossible to read *Enlightenment in the Colony* without thinking of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. Indeed, you touch on this contradiction in some parts of the book. My question, though, is whether Israeli policies should be regarded as the crystallization of the problematic of the relationship between nation-state and minoritization or whether the genealogy of these policies have to be traced to a different source.

Answer AM: My next book project, which is actually older in its first conception than the world literature book I have completed recently, is something like a sequel to *Enlightenment in the Colony*. It's called *Edward Said in Jerusalem*, and it brings the conceptual framework of the former book fully to the question of Palestine. I'm really asking, what is the significance of Palestine as historical experience for the practice of social, political, and cultural criticism at the present moment? I argued in *Enlightenment in the Colony* that Israel and Pakistan share the paradox that they are "secular" nation-states created in the supposed interest of "religious" minorities. Each represents an experiment in how to turn minority into majority. But in the question of historical Palestine, the minority problematic comes into contact with the colonial question, and the two are in fact fused and made one. So although I agree with a lot of the new scholarship that has been making a case for viewing Israel as a "settler-colonial" society, for me that cannot mean ignoring this other dimension, the history of the Jewish Question of post-Enlightenment European society. Said spoke of the necessity of an "ironic double vision" that would take in both these processes in a single act of thinking.

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One of the most remarkable features of the Israeli state is of course its ability to turn the victims of majoritarianism and militarism into (settler-colonial and majoritarian) militarists. Said wants to explore the possibility of interrupting this process in the case of the Palestinians themselves, this horrific dialectical reversal that can turn victims into perpetrators, or—I know this is explosive and painful for both peoples I am naming here—"Jews" into "Germans." This book-in-progress means a great deal to me, and its writing has been a slow and difficult process. The way I see it, those folks in Jewish studies who have been generously receptive to the argument presented in *Enlightenment in the Colony* concerning liberalism's historic failure with regard to Jewish emancipation have to confront the question of whether they are willing and able to extend those critical insights to Israel and the Palestinians themselves in a clear and unsentimental assessment of who are the fascists and who constitutes the vulnerable and brutalized population. I view this next book as an invitation in that regard. This idea that this militarized Spartan state, as Arendt prophetically called it, can exist forever precisely by refusing to compromise with its actual human and social environment is a dangerous illusion that can only end in catastrophe.

Question AQ: You make a passing defense of postcolonialism in your book. I now want to invite you to see if you can make a critique of postcolonialism from a Jewish studies perspective, and vice versa.

Answer AM: Until recently, Jewish cultural studies was fundamentally identitarian in nature—more or less since the Wissenschaft des Judentums in the early nineteenth century, we might say. That began to change in the last quarter century or so, at least for a select group of scholars. I am thinking, for instance, of the pioneering works of Daniel Boyarin, Jonathan Boyarin, Jacqueline Rose, Willi Goetschel, and others. It is not a coincidence that, in developing a more comparative frame, each of these critics has engaged in one way or another with postcolonial lines of thinking. For all kinds of historical reasons, both of these modes of inquiry belong together in something more than a casual conversation: each takes as its object a distinct mode of othering in European history, for instance, and both share (or ought to share) an interest in the fate of historical Palestine. So the opening of Jewish studies to post-colonial criticism has been a salutary one for its own intellectual development. I am sorry to say that I cannot discern the reverse movement—from the postcolonial to the Jewish—to any great degree, and nor has the Palestinian question played a significant role in the field. For instance, even for those modes of postcolonial theory for which Derrida has played an important role, it is mostly the earlier writings that seem important, with deconstruction as a whole reduced to the notion of *pharmakon* as an image for the practice of critical reading, with little or no interest in Derrida's later preoccupation with Jewishness as a historical condition or mode of historical being. And if my anecdotal experience of the last couple of conventions I have attended is anything to go by, the increased attention to Arabic literature and to Palestinian matters seems to be coming disproportionately (though by no means mostly) from young scholars of Jewish or Israeli-Jewish background. There is a lot of admirable solidarity with the Palestinian cause among our colleagues, but not much of an attempt to make Palestinian historical experience central to our intellectual enterprise as students of the postcolonial world in the way that the subcontinent has been in a

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range of theory and criticism. The Middle East as a whole has been disappointingly absent from our theorizations.

There are of course individuals who buck this general trend—a few of them are in fact my students—but they are exceptions. As for South Asian postcolonial criticism, which was intellectually formative for me, it has largely failed, it seems to me, to break out of an area studies mode. This will seem counter-intuitive to many, but I strongly believe it to be the case. Despite all the critique of nationalism that has been produced, the focus remains on the overbearing *presence* of the national homeland—too many texts, too much history, too much tradition, too much politics, too much memory—rather than its *absence*. It is not an unrelated problem that Indian postcolonial discussion has also not dealt seriously with the Partition of India itself, which is mostly treated as the object of a "memory and trauma" analytical framework, rather than as the very condition of possibility of knowledge of society and culture in the subcontinent—adopting "Partition as method," as I have called it. These seemingly distinct failures with respect to Partition, Jewishness and Jewish history, and Palestinian experience are in fact aspects of the same problem, the overbearing and unaltered presence of the nation in modes of supposedly critical thinking.

I don't want to exaggerate here or to be misunderstood. There are in fact extraordinary young scholars everywhere who understand what is at stake. I encounter them all the time on campuses in North America, Europe, and South Asia. But the discipline of postcolonial studies, especially of the literary variety, finds itself for the moment at an impasse that cannot be overcome without some basic rethinking of roads taken and not taken in recent years. We have to break out of this self-enclosed discourse pertaining to two dozen or so (mostly) Anglophone writers. On the other hand, as some of our colleagues in the North Atlantic countries lose interest in our questions and consider them passé—I am sure you are familiar with the glazed-eye look—we must not forget where the questions ultimately come from. Our scholarship has to be accountable to the social and political realities of the postcolonial world, not just to the intellectual agendas or trends of the North American or European academy. Although I must say that my distinct impression in recent years is that the post-colonial discussion is sometimes more alive in Europe than in the United States precisely because there it remains linked to vital social questions linked to migration, the European project, and the colonial past.

Question AQ: Let me ask you now about some of your other work. You have written eloquently about Erich Auerbach and the death and life of world literature. In your view, in what ways might we say that Erich Auerbach was an early postcolonial, not from the standpoint of his exile, which of course is the standard way in which he is conscripted into postcolonial discussions, but from the perspective of the things he chose to write about. Is there something inherently postcolonial about his magisterial *Mimesis*, for example, or was this just the product of a purely European sensibility unrelieved by any burdens of otherness?

Answer AM: The Auerbach article of mine you mention has now been expanded into a full-length chapter in the world literature book. You have put it quite admirably, I think—the possibility of considering Auerbach as "an early postcolonial." I agree with this formulation to the extent that Auerbach is among the very earliest European thinkers, including Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*, to give an account of the

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predicament of world culture in the transition to the postcolonial world—from the distinct and highly complex perspective provided by the self-destruction of European civilization. This is still a European and metropolitan perspective, certainly, but it is also that of the *victims* of the European historical process. As we now know, Auerbach was also a keen observer of the Turkish situation throughout his decade-long stay in the country and in fact a *participant* in the Kemalist project of reform and modernization of culture and society as a professor of the European humanities. The historical material that Kader Konuk has unearthed for her book, *East West Mimesis*, is enormously interesting, even though I don't always agree with every aspect of her argument. She has made the fascinating claim that the very notion of "mimesis" is infused with Auerbach's experience of Kemalist Europeanization, a kind of semicolonial "mimicry."

Of course, that is not how *Mimesis* is generally read by the Auerbach specialists in North America, whose ranks have increased in recent years. There is even a concerted effort in the United States to return him to a parochially conceived German or German-Jewish studies framework. The impetus for this is professionalism, so far as I can tell, a competition between departments over the ashes of Auerbach. To me, the work most poignantly missing from this discussion is the "autumnal synthesis," as Said called it, on the historical fate of *Weltliteratur*. Here Auerbach addresses the problem of "the world" as such—how such a singularity may have come into being and how it may be conceived of after the collapse of the Euro-centered world. And he speaks explicitly of his experience of Turkey in this regard. It is, I think, one of the great theoretical essays of the twentieth century, though perhaps not discernible as such within the current reversion of critical theory to the settled philosophical canon. For me, one of Auerbach's great accomplishments was the decoupling of philology from the "organicist" notions of language, poetry, and culture that had shaped the discipline since the late eighteenth century—since the rise of Herderian historicism and Romantic Orientalism, we might say. He introduced into philology what we can only call an exilic conception of language and literature and a concept of European civilization as split between its discontinuous—that is, nonorganic—origins in Hebraic and Hellenic cultures. It is this exilic element that drew Said to Auerbach, and he spoke of it as a "secular" approach to the world. We may think of Auerbach as the theorist of a world on fire, and he has become relevant again in our historical moment precisely because the world is once again in flames.

Question AQ: I am curious to know more about your new book *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*, which you have just mentioned. I think you give a foretaste of the book in your lengthy essay on "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures" (2010), in which you move from discussing the conditions of possibility for the inception of a world of letters during the classical phase of Orientalism to looking at the "worlding" of this gestalt in the Indian subcontinent itself. What is the significance of the first part of your title?

Answer AM: In fact, this book represents a book-length version of the argument first presented in the paper you mention. But that expansion of scope has also meant a shift of emphasis. What had been a contained argument about Global English and the languages of the Global South in one section of the article has now come to infuse the larger, framing argument of the book as a whole. Basically, the argument is as

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follows: the knowledge conditions of "world literature" came into being within, and as a result of, the rise of a modern Orientalist philological practice tied to the British colonial state, which quickly and effectively disseminated its practices to the entire European literary sphere; what we see in these developments, furthermore, is the birth of what we may call "English as cultural system," a formation with global reach in which English begins to perform a series of mediating functions between metropolitan cultural spheres and the cultural spheres of the so-called colonial peripheries, mediations that work in both directions and help transform literary cultures both in the metropolis and the periphery; and if at its very moment of origin "world literature" was implicated in the political imperatives of an Anglophone empire, its re-emergence in our own times, which has led to near-hegemony in the North Atlantic countries, is no less a political scenario and no less tied to the new global imperium of English. But if English is today a language with unprecedented global reach and the ground on which the worldliness of literature gets adjudicated, it is nevertheless constantly dogged by its various "others," above all the so-called vernacular languages of the countries of the Global South. The "Anglophone novel," for instance, which is disproportionately visible and influential in "world literature," remains preoccupied in a fundamental way with "vernacular" linguistic, cultural, and social forms, to such an extent, in fact, that the term itself ought to be viewed as marking a *comparative* linguistic and cultural field rather than as pertaining simply to English. This formal tension in the novel marks a tension in the world culture of capitalism as such. And no critique of neoliberal capitalism can be complete, and in fact it goes awry, without a critical understanding of this social and cultural logic, this dynamic of indigenizing and universalizing processes in bourgeois culture. Against the global and cosmopolitan self-conception of English—and this pertains as much to theory and criticism as to imaginative literature—we must posit the exilic condition of the languages of the South, whose very modernity is mediated through Orientalism, broadly conceived.

But I think I've already given away quite a bit. To learn more, your readers will have to read the book, which will be released by Harvard University Press in January 2016.

Question AQ: Thank you for providing such fulsome answers to the interview questions, and good luck with your future work.

Answer AM: Thank you for inviting me to address these issues. It was very useful for my own thinking process to have to connect my various projects. And I'm glad to share my sense of the present postcolonial predicament with the readers of this exciting new journal.

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