

THE POSTMODERN NARRATIVE OF THE PREMODERN RIFA'A AL-TAHTAWI

Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte's inquisition in Egypt marked the Arabs' initial contact with the "other" who was stronger and far more resourceful in mastery of the natural sciences and development of spectacular machinery and inventions. The earliest comprehensive account of this other was developed by the acclaimed Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, an Azharite imam who led a delegation from Egypt to France between 1826 and 1830. Since that moment onward, a debate persisted between the advocates of *modernity* and the guardians of *traditionalism*. The former faction appears to have heedlessly embraced the views of medieval and modern Arab history developed by colonialist orientalists claiming an age of "decadence" and promoting a sense of "crisis" that overcame the Arab world and which intellectuals have tirelessly analyzed and devised solutions for. This historiographic narrative of decadence dominated academic and intellectual circles in the East and West until the late Edward Said whose monumental work *Orientalism* bred an entire generation that is revisiting and scrutinizing the dominant narratives depicting the Arab East.

For long decades, debaters of *modernity* and *traditionalism* have viewed the two notions as conflicting and dichotomous. Joseph Massad (2007) advocates a view of *turath* (the body of Arabs' cultural and scholarly heritage) and *modernity* that steps out of this duality and Samah Selim (2004) similarly promotes a historiography – that counters the dominant narrative – in which the "rupture" in history that claims a rebirth of the Arab world with the French inquisition and ignores its centuries-old history of culture, science, and scholarship is abandoned in favor of a narrative of "continuity".

Having reported on the "other" before any of these debates began, and having been a well-versed *'alim* of the *turath*, I posit Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, despite his young age during authorship of his most important work, as a model of the narrative suggested by the post-Edward Said scholars. Al-Tahtawi was aware of his critical role as a "translator" who

reported to his countrymen the details of customs, people, governance, and language of a vastly different nation. He was heedful of the national project for which he was laying the foundations and was well-aware of his historic moment of transition. Although the explicit concepts of "modernity," "traditionalism," and "progress" did not exist at the time, al-Tahtawi was, indeed, negotiating and mediating between modernity and *turath/traditionalism*. Unlike his successors of the following generations, al-Tahtawi scarcely displays signs of either heedless fascination by the overwhelming *other* - that breeds a narrative advocating unwavering imitation, nor of fearfulness that his own tradition is coming under threat.

Al-Tahtawi's text, *Takhliis al-Ibriiz fi Talkhiis Bariiz*, is prolific in its discourse "moves" of mediating, legitimizing, translating (figuratively), and criticizing the *other* as well as subtly advocating the causes of prosperity (to use a term that is safely different from the Eurocentric terms of *modernity* and *progress*) in order to incite a national project that would pursue prosperity at home. In addition, al-Tahtawi's versatility and ease in translating and negotiating the *other* is displayed several times through his language use. His groundedness in tradition is represented by his dominant and proficient use of classical Arabic while his willingness and capacity to embrace modernity and the *other* are represented by his use of colloquial terms where needed as well as applying Arabic's derivational system to French words and using them verbatim in other instances.

Nonetheless, the text is not free from instances where tension or slight conflict can be sensed. There are brief moments where one is led to suspect if al-Tahtawi is being transparent or if he is personally struggling to hide his excessive admiration of the French.

I will present examples from the text that illustrate the discourse moves mentioned above and, in the end, I will pose a question. Since al-Tahtawi has for long been hailed by the advocates of modernity as the "father of Arab renaissance" and since these fans mostly advocate modernity *a la* Europe and perceive the *turath* as a counterproductive force: Could it precisely be al-Tahtawi's foundation in *turath* that allowed him to accept, receive, negotiate, and mediate the *other* seamlessly without perceiving a duality between them that deems the prosperity of one the demise of the other?