

Sultan Qaboos University
Journal of Arts & Social Sciences



جامعة السلطان قابوس
مجلة الآداب والعلوم الاجتماعية

Thomas Edward Lawrence's *Revolt in the Desert*
A Critical Review

Book Review

Jamal En-Nehas

Assistant Professor
Department of English Language and Literature
College of Arts & Social Sciences
Sultan Qaboos University

Paper received: 21/10/2012
Paper accepted: 10/01/2013

«This garden was a memory of the world before we went mad with war and drove ourselves into the desert.»

T. E. Lawrence (1888-1935)

Jamal En-Nehas

Reading *Revolt in the Desert*, the recently published abridged version of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*—T. E. Lawrence's rendition of the overt and covert journeys in the Middle East in support of the Arab rebellion against Turkish Ottoman rule—entails a journey in itself—in time, space and myth—in order to come to grips with recent history and its complex ramifications. Unlike Palgrave, Gertrude Bell and the Blunts, Lawrence knew the terrain well, had a clear agenda and was primarily interested in *Realpolitik*, political expediency and military pragmatism, and certainly not in the magnificence of the East or its cultural and mythical splendors. Given the political and military position of the author as a commanding figure in the Hejaz Expeditionary Force during World War I, it seems naïve to read the text for an exclusively aesthetic purpose that does not transcend mere «literariness» and didacticism. A deconstructionist reading of Lawrence, particularly of his politically inspired works, is expected to shun the celebratory aspect in favor of the text's hidden agendas, and to engage with the text in discursive terms, identifying its *raison d'être* and ideological assumptions beyond its generic confines, i.e. the traditional perception of *Revolt in the Desert* and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as «objective» history books. In fact, rarely has the work of a twentieth-century writer generated as much controversy as Lawrence's in an age in which readers are no longer avid for epic accounts of valor and altruism, but are increasingly interested in the hidden layers, the «unsaid», the nuances and agendas of the text. Read from a postcolonial perspective, *Revolt in the Desert* reveals «truths» worthier of investigation than its often acclaimed mythical properties. This seems yet another reason why *Revolt in the Desert* continues to inspire academics and politicians in their attempt to come to terms with the past and discern truth from myth, history from personal narrative, out of the complexly woven events that accompanied Lawrence's military expedition. One simply cannot dismiss the book's parallel narratives, which include the postwar arrangements for the «liberated» territories, drawn in London and Paris, as Lawrence was building his own narrative in «Arabia Deserta.»

Granted that glamour and valiance are quintessential elements of military heroism, any postcolonial or deconstructionist reading of *Revolt in the Desert* is likely to either relegate them or dismiss them altogether. Instead, the literary critic is curiously interested in those questions that the book intentionally leaves unanswered. Beyond the apparent acculturation that Lawrence occasionally pretends to exhibit, was he genuinely convinced of this total immersion and sudden genetic transformation? What then motivated the paradoxical treatment of his subjects, which shows a man wavering between assimilation and pretension, admiration and repugnance? Was Lawrence an «ideological operator,» to borrow Pierre Macherey's phrase in another context, within a vast imperialist apparatus, a coalition of the willing whose agendas were drawn in faraway places like London and Paris when it became certain that the Germans and their Allies were inevitably capitulating? Was he perhaps, as some of his admirers claim, truly oblivious to the ruses and behind-the-scene political machinations wielded by the imperialist powers for their own political gains? Why, upon returning from the Middle East, did he respond lukewarmly to the title «Lawrence of Arabia» while unhesitatingly accepting the title of Advisor on Arab Affairs in the Colonial Office? What was the exact nature of Lawrence's assignment and why does *Revolt in the Desert* only refer to it obliquely? Why did Lawrence accept the position of Governor of Damascus as the occupying/conquering British and Arab troops entered the city, while earlier in the book he unambiguously expressed aversion towards government and power? Was he, instead of the often celebrated iconic figure, the diehard liberator and freedom fighter, in actuality a double agent in the service of both the imperialist powers and their domestic «protégés,» who also happened to be their «informants,» such as Feisal, Hussein, and the Arab insurrectionists? How could someone who was officially declared unfit for military service during World War I later emerge as a fine war strategist, a fierce fighter and a «conquistador»? Finally, how did the intelligence Lawrence gathered as an archeologist and a scholar undertaking fieldwork in Bilad al-Sham, what is known today as Syria and Lebanon, contribute later to the war effort and to the British defeat of the Turks?

Nowhere in *Revolt in the Desert* does Lawrence specifically address these questions, not least because they are of marginal relevance to him personally or to

the overall objective of the expedition. Biographers and critics of Lawrence, however, argue that the author's attitude towards the subject matter of his works is often discursively ambivalent. It is also interesting to note that in this particular context *Revolt in the Desert* does not appear to favor any form of *a priori* reading despite the presumed, frequently obfuscating and elusive authorial intention. In fact, most critics of Lawrence, especially those hailing from the Middle East or those sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, point out to the detrimental role Lawrence played in the surreptitious Sykes-Pico Agreement which culminated in the dramatic breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the fragmentation of the Arab-Islamic world.

Though *Revolt in the Desert* gives the impression that Lawrence is exclusively devoted to his military mission and that in doing so he is inspired by the incumbent «human values» rather than ideology or any parochial political motive, the reader is constantly reminded of Lawrence's cultural baggage which indelibly shapes his perception of the other. As the tumultuous events unfold, and while the ally is easily identified, i.e. the Arab/Bedouin, and the enemy is indiscriminately the same, Turkish or German conceived of separately or as forming an allied entity, Lawrence draws a sharp contrast between the fallen Turkish foe and the German one, revealing his actual sympathies for the latter. Branding the Turks as «cowards» and praising the Germans for their bravery, he clearly invokes the old-age clichés about the Turk as Europe's cultural other. As the war drew to an end with the dramatic fall of Damascus, the last bastion of Turkish might, following a bloodbath at an unprecedented scale, Lawrence refused to take the surrendering German soldiers as prisoners of war, while participating in the ruthless extermination of the Turkish soldiers—including those who capitulated. Admiring the German detachment which fought alongside the Turks in the battle for whatever scrambles were left of the Turkish Empire, Lawrence says: «I grew proud of the enemy who had killed my brothers» (30), to the point of considering the enemy soldiers «glorious» when they were actually defeated and humiliated. In fact, Lawrence's attitude towards the Turks had been shaped long before landing in Arabia, for his declared objective was not simply to defeat Turkey but to «tear [it] into pieces.» (38)

The fact that Lawrence was fully aware of his

ideological position, in addition to the military one as an Englishman fighting the Turkish other, is clearly evident in several parts of *Revolt in the Desert*. Nostalgia for the Byzantine Empire cannot be altogether suppressed to the extent that the author consciously shuns reference to «Istanbul,» the then capital of the Ottoman Empire, preferring instead the Christian and European name: «Constantinople.» Even his Arab allies, whom he admires in many places in the book, have not been spared the epithets typically associated with Orientalist and colonialist discourse, seeing them as undeserving «Semites» and as «lamb» (256). Disenchanted after the Azrak incident, Lawrence vents his wrath on his Arab companions and eventually decides to take a retreat in an attempt to distance himself from the Arab warriors and to reflect on his relationship with them. Even in a place as remote as Ain el Essad, he is constantly reminded of his distinctly «superior» English identity. The English wind and the green trees on which it blows are metonymically linked to a mythical home, an England he proudly invokes and identifies with. It is this nostalgic feeling that informs his perception of the Arab:

It told me I was tired to death of these Arabs; petty incarnate Semites who attained heights and depths beyond our reach, though not beyond our sight. They realized our absolute in their unrestrained capacity for good and evil; and for two years I had profitably shammed to be their companion! (263)

It seems that while, on the surface, Lawrence feels intimately at home with the Arabs, adopting their dress style and some of their cultural manners, he keeps struggling to maintain his distinct British identity, refusing even the subsequently conferred title «Lawrence of Arabia.» He, undoubtedly, places his full trust in his Arab allies, praising their sense of honor and cherishing their unconditional loyalty and hospitality, yet distancing himself from them whenever he feels that a thorough cultural assimilation is underway. Even when he claims that he feels more Arab than British, this creates in him a sense of shame and resentment since Arabs appear to him in reality as «gravel-gazing men from another sphere» (310). Describing Feisal, an otherwise faithful ally and one of the masterminds of the Arab Revolt, Lawrence cannot hold back his other, repressed perception of him as a mere servant and a deluder of his own followers. Though «veiled to remain our leader,»

writes Lawrence, in theory Feisal was «nationality's best servant, its tool, not its owner» (246). Lawrence acknowledges that Feisal, deluded into believing that he was a commander running the day-to-day affairs of the Revolt, was in fact a mere pawn given free rein when unsuspected yet constantly kept under check. He could still vent his «lust for power» as long as it conformed to agreed-upon agendas set in London and Cairo. Even his followers, described as «lambs,» were allowed, under the supervision of Lawrence himself, to practice looting and to take unrelenting revenge on the captured and the surrendering Turkish soldiers. Rarely does the author-warrior show any signs of repulsion or remorse as his acolytes assault and loot, and it seems that only towards the end of the book that he shows some qualms as the Turks were brutally murdered and those who survived the battlefield were savagely tortured and left to die of their sustained injuries—atrocities committed ironically in Lawrence's presence. The author, nonetheless, seems to take the reader by surprise when he remorsefully calls the scene he has just witnessed, sanctioned as well, a «holocaust,» while cryptically blaming it on the British army.

Most critics of T. E. Lawrence, especially those hailing from the Middle East or those sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, point out to the obvious role Lawrence played in the dramatic breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the concomitant «fragmentation» of the Arab-Islamic world. Edward Said unequivocally refers to him in *Orientalism* as an imperialist visionary, an «Orientalist-as-agent» (240). Citing Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Said argues that «if the collective academic endeavor called Orientalism was a bureaucratic institution based on a certain conservative vision of the Orient, then the servants of such a vision in the Orient were imperial agents like T. E. Lawrence» (240). The drastic events which were to unfold immediately after the «liberation» of Damascus, the fall of this historic city at the doorsteps of the Empire's nerve centre—being the last nail in the Turkish coffin—lend support to Said's thesis. As Damascus was declared free of Turkish grip, and following the terms of the surreptitious Sykes-Pico Agreement, French forces commanded by Gouraud and Goybet entered the city and declared it the de facto capital of a mini-regional empire. The general assumption, however, is that whether he was acting consciously or willingly on behalf of the Empire, as he often denied, or he was simply used as an agent

in a grander process, Lawrence contributed to a large extent to the postwar chaos that reigned in the Arab world and inevitably culminated in the tragic fall of Palestine.

Although *Revolt in the Desert* lacks the depth and complexity of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, given that some of the significant historical, political, and personal highlights of the original text have been truncated, it retains much of the original text's vigor and eloquence. An aesthetic feat, the book's style elevates the narrative to the level of literary elegance that makes a taxonomically labeled «history» book transcend the classical confines of genre. Conventionally catalogued and shelved in the «history» section of libraries, *Revolt in the Desert* is a hybrid text which embraces other genres like war literature, travel literature, adventure studies, and cartography. The book also continues to inspire readers and exegetes in a variety of ways, particularly in its provision of substantial background material for postcolonial and deconstructionist readings of texts, exploring the sensitive subject matter and the hegemonic undertones of the narrative. Echoes of the events described in *Revolt in the Desert* and their political ramifications can be perceptibly felt today, especially in the Arab world, and the turmoil resulting from what is now fashionably dubbed the «Arab Spring» is a reminder of how the present state of affairs cannot be truly understood without proper historical contextualization.

References:

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