

Abdelwahab Elmessiri's theoretical abrogation and appropriation of Western and Zionist terminology

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Abstract: While Elmessiri's (the Egyptian scholar) means of expression is principally Arabic, his writings on modernism, Judaism, and Zionist thought could be considered as writing back to the centre of empire as far as the Jewish question in the West is concerned. Within this perspective, Elmessiri resolves to cater for the theoretical void that arises out of his partial dismissal of Western critical models after he underscores their problematic aspects. In view of that, the issue has grown in importance for him to erect a paradigm that best accounts for these concerns based on an Arab-Islamic worldview without entirely rejecting Western research tools and terminology. Although Elmessiri primarily puts Western thought and its categories at the vanguard of his *critique*, he devotes a considerable part of it to mainstream Arab thought as far as Jewish phenomena are concerned. His reproach points to Arab intellectuals' uncritical accumulation of information, facts, ideas, and statements made by the West regardless of their relevance, centrality, or explanatory ability as this essay endeavours to demonstrate. Actually, Elmessiri's proposed paradigm puts forward an alternative approach that goes beyond the passivity of mainstream Arab thought and the Western Eurocentric stance regarding these phenomena.

Keywords: Jewish studies, Arab-Islamic worldview, western modernity, El-Messiri.

Introduction

Abdelwahab el-Messiri (1938-2008), the famous Egyptian scholar, earned his Ph.D. from Rutgers University in 1969. He served as a professor in universities in Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. He is very well known as a thinker among scholars in the Middle East. El-Messiri focused his research on Jews,

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Zionism, secularism, modernism and literary theory and comparative literature. He is the author of many articles and books. His major contribution, however, is his eight-volume Encyclopaedia of "Jews, Judaism and Zionism," written in Arabic, which provides an in-depth analysis of Zionism, its Ideology and history.

Through his writings, Elmessiri endeavoured to demonstrate that the affiliation of the language of the former imperial powers with cultural and ideological forces does not reflect what the non-Western writers wish to say. One should guard against a deep-seated complicity on the level of terminology and concepts that stamped the accumulation of knowledge and shaped the cultural practices of thought in Western humanities. Within this perspective, Elmessiri expresses his deep doubts in regard to the premises of that biased ideological posture in Western academic disciplines while raising some controversial questions about its accuracy in an Arab academic context. Yet, he also dismisses Arab thought's approach to these phenomena that he qualifies as the sterile and the inadvertent site of complicity.

Demonstrably, though Elmessiri primarily puts Western thought and its categories at the vanguard of his *critique*, he devotes a considerable part of it to mainstream Arab thought. His approach points to its mindless accumulation of information, facts, ideas, and statements regardless of their relevance, centrality, or explanatory ability. According to Elmessiri, Arab intellectuals lost the ability to advance an identifiably idiosyncratic vision pertaining to the phenomena of Judaism and Zionist thought that goes beyond Western intellectual self-centrism. Elmessiri is convinced that all these approaches stifle any creativity and limit critical scrutiny as far as Jewish phenomena are concerned. Thus, Arab Humanities, in his view, have become passive, documentary, and recipient and, therefore, Arabs lost the mastery of reality because they do not own its tools. Ironically, Elmessiri demonstrates that Arab brainpower becomes ingrained in its auditory capacity espousing the latest findings with an utmost but ridiculous objectivity, without pertinent critical scrutiny or much questioning. Thence, "that who could not label things loses the ability to master reality and to deal with it proficiently" (2003a: 24). Having proven the inability of Arab thought to construct a comprehensive and authentic model on those issues, Elmessiri distances himself from any identification with its reductive and biased discourse on Jews and Judaism. This study surveys those Western discursive critical orientations that plagued Arab thought for decades and that Elmessiri qualifies as unproductive and

without any critical avail. The aim is to demonstrate their flaws and contradictions in tackling one of the most significant ordeals that weighed down the modern Arab world that is the question of Palestine. This study hints at Elmessiri's proposed alternative paradigm that would cater for the dismissal of both Arab and Western models pertaining to Jewish studies.

Elmessiri's critique of Arab discourses

Elmessiri declares his reservations with regard to all discourses that shape attitudes, behaviour, and power relations in approaching the intricate issues of Judaism and Zionist thought. He draws a line between the analytic-critical discourse that he adopts and a multitude of other discourses that seek either to denounce, stigmatize, or militantly flock sympathizers against Jews not only in Western but also in the mainstream Arab thought (2003a: 7). In fact, Elmessiri is aware that most discourses on Judaic phenomena are inherently practical and propagandist since they aim at practical objectives such as the mobilization of the masses or public opinion, and do not care much about the issue of critical interpretation of its subject matter. Actually, the pragmatic discourse covers a host of other discourses each with its own vision and objectives but also its defects that Elmessiri discusses in some depth.

One of these practical discourses is the conspiracy discourse/theory which seeks to mobilize the masses against Jews and their alleged ongoing plan to dominate the world. The vision that frames such discourse is reductionist for it confuses the Israelite, the Zionist, and the Jew as one entity by way of preconceived notions. Thus, Jews become antitheses to anything noble and good and are to hold responsible for all vice and malevolence facing humanity (2003a: 7). This discourse manifests itself plainly when such books of the magnitude of *The Tenach*, *The Talmud*, *The Zohar* and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are cross-examined (2003a: 8). Usually such discourse accentuates scriptural literalism or textualism whereby either *The Old Testament* or other Judaic texts are reviewed to look for an authentic Jewish essence as if modern Jews are no different from their Hebrew ancestors (2003a: 15). It goes without saying that such rhetoric does not help much in understanding the Jewish personality for it ascribes supernatural powers to the Jew which impedes any true account of reality (2003a: 8-9).

Another discourse that Elmessiri interrogates is what he calls the pseudo-religious discourse which represents Jews as redoubtable enemies of God and prophets' killers and consequently war against them is eternal till the end of days. Elmessiri qualifies this discourse as "pseudo" because it defines Jewry on a racial foundation and not on the basis of religious dogma, yet it sets up that new identity on religious apologetics. One of Elmessiri's reproaches to this discourse is the universal perspective it assigns to the Israeli-Arab conflict as historically timeless (2003a: 9). Also, it postulates that the conflict is exclusively with Jews while in fact it was against all those who tried to lay a hand on Palestine during a long history of invasions chiefly by the Romans, Crusaders, and the British armies to cite just these. This discourse considers Jewish history as constant as is Jewish conflict with Arabs which is not the case. What Elmessiri reproaches the pseudo-religious discourse with is its use and abuse of Biblical preludes and moral apologetics that hide the true motives of the conflict (2003a: 10).

An additional manifestation of the practical discourse is pure propaganda that targets world public opinion. It tends to divulge the nature of Jews as aggressors; that Palestinian refugees are an affront to humanity; that Zionist settlers seized Palestinian land without any right; that Jews are racists, torturers of women and children and so on (2003a: 10). Elmessiri claims that this discourse is a vocal phenomenon that should learn to reconsider its tactics in order to be more credible. Any similar discourse which is not backed up by military power is ineffectual and therefore lacks any analytical and interpretive credibility (2003a:11).

One more identified discourse is the legal discourse that advances juridical arguments to back up Arab rights in Palestine. It accumulates resolutions of the United Nations, one after the other, in large volumes printed with great care and distributed to all countries and the concerned international organizations. There is no doubt that knowledge of the legal framework of the conflict is very important but quite different from the process of interpretation which involves a more complex intellectual effort. Such rhetoric does not explain much the causes, the structure, or even the methods of dissolution of the conflict. In truth, it has a role to play in refuting Zionist allegations but it remains a discourse that is not of great help in the critical understanding of the conflict (2003a: 11).

Elmessiri dismisses a myriad of other discourses, underscoring their failure to account for Judaic phenomena. One of these is the moral discourse that

articulates humanitarian and ethical concerns in its approach to the Judeo-Arab conflict. Elmessiri argues that morality discourse interrogates issues such as moderation, tolerance, fairness which are not good analytical or explanatory concepts. They are rather expressions of a mental, emotional and ethical site that goes beyond a true critical interpretation of a far more complex reality (2003a:12). A further instance is the pragmatic discourse whose point of departure is the acknowledgment of the *status quo* without much questioning. This is a discourse that pretends to be less idealistic and more reasonable especially when it admits that the Jewish state is there to stay while it is useless to deny its existence. Such discourse is based on the false premise that durable peace is better than successive defeats. Elmessiri totally rejects such posture arguing that the unfavourable balance of power on the side of Israel is not a reason for accepting that state of being. There is room for all forms of resistance to it which advocates of this discourse, intentionally or unintentionally, overlook. Based on the Arab delusional aspiration that one day Palestine will be back, Elmessiri identifies another discourse inured to of wishful thinking whose calling does not go beyond emotional provocation to stir the general public (2003a: 13).

In short, Elmessiri rejects these discourses in their totality simply because they give up critical analysis and interpretation for the sake of mobilization and mass provocation. It is true that mobilization is needed but only when it is preceded by a thorough understanding of the conflict based on facts and a clear vision away from the illusion of knowledge that such discourses propagate (2003a:14). By demonstrating the sterility of these biased discourses that still plague Arab thought, Elmessiri expresses his adamant rejection of their different critical orientations, while he comes up with his own vision in what he labels his epistemological paradigm.

Elmessiri's epistemological paradigm

In view of the above, Elmessiri stands as a proponent of a new discourse that critiques Western imperial, cultural, and epistemological legacy with view to advance his alternative vision in the form of an epistemological paradigm. He qualifies it as a comparatively more detached model by highlighting its theoretical fundamentals, the dimensions of its practical implementation, the comprehensiveness in its approach, as well as the perspectives for future research it promotes compared to other conventional paradigms. Elmessiri is fully aware that -

[e]very human behavior has cultural significance and represents some epistemological paradigm and perspective. A paradigm is a mental abstract picture, an imaginary construct, and a symbolic representation of reality that results from a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. The mind assembles some features from reality, rejecting some and keeping others, rearranging them in an order of priority to make them correspond to reality. According to the nature of the paradigm, it can exaggerate those elements which it deems essential and underplay all other elements (2006: 4).

Actually, in his article "Parables of Freedom and Necessity," Elmessiri points out to the fact that any critical endeavour calls for a set of assumptions, norms, criteria, and biases in treating the factual (1996: 42). This entails that both the critical choice and the reading of any text involve some unambiguous elements of subjectivity which raises doubts about the validity of the whole enterprise. The term paradigm, which has originally been associated with the historian of science Thomas Kuhn, is appropriated by Elmessiri as an abstract mental construct that stands for the fundamental relationships that obtain in what Elmessiri considers to be reality. Comparing it to empirical reality, he deduces that they are not one and the same thing since the factual is far more complex than our mental conception of it. Yet reality outside a paradigm would look as mere fragments or meaningless autonomous icons or atoms projected on our consciousness. On this basis, Elmessiri recognizes the importance of paradigm –the site of objective and subjective magnetism– as the frame within which the comparatist observes and interacts with the text under investigation. Yet, nothing is taken for granted, for the relationships established are to be tested against that text. Once the critical reading that the proposed paradigm presents outperforms the latent paradigms operative in the text under study, only then the paradigm gains the stamp of adequacy and explanatory validity (1996: 43).

Elmessiri does not claim utter objectivity in his treatment of the factual. He is in no doubt that any critical investigation calls for some degree of bias too which could be conscious or unconscious. It is -

the totality of latent values underlying the paradigm, and the procedures and methodologies which guide researchers without their being necessarily aware of them. If they do become aware of them, they discover that such values are inextricably tied up with their research

methodologies and that it is extremely difficult to separate the one from the other (Elmessiri 2006: xii).

Recognizing the inevitability of bias, Elmessiri voices his leaning for the use of alternative terms such as “more explanatory and more interpretive” instead of the trendy mythicized objective/subjective polarity that any analytical model may pretend to claim or deny. The alternative that Elmessiri proposes goes beyond both objectivity in its detached accumulation of precise solid facts and subjectivity, immersed in self-imposed seclusion and not much concerned with reality. Elmessiri was looking for an analytical model with an overall vision of its subject matter; one that has room for creativity and the ability to generate categories emanating from its own conceptualization of the factual (2003a: 18). The researcher’s task operating within Elmessiri’s analytical interpretive model is to know how to discriminate what is fundamental from what is marginal and to observe phenomena not in their constancy but in their interplay as irregular elements operating within a whole (2003a: 19). Depending on these aspects we could qualify the model either as more explanatory and more interpretive or less so (2003a: 18).

Away from Arab discourses on Jews and Judaism that Elmessiri considers as counterproductive, he expresses his determination to settle the issue of terminology as a crucial building block in the edifice of historical truthfulness and intellectual detachment he proclaims. He is convinced that the fine-tuning of concepts and terminology is essential to produce a comprehensive reflection of truth through the control of the cognitive, analytical, and interpretive processes involved. The challenge is huge if we consider the authority that these concepts gained as conventionally fixed entities or end products of a civilizational residue epistemologically codified in the West (2003a: 23). Here, Elmessiri establishes the connection between biased Western categories and power relationships that shape Western epistemological views of the world. Thus, by considering those views as the only acceptable point of reference, the transcendence of truth is overthrown and epistemological hegemony dominates. For Elmessiri, the frame that generated this Western orientation *via* the process of what he calls the “imperialization of concepts” echoes historical and analytical models that materialized within the self-centered Western thought (2007: 7). Elmessiri sums up the whole point asserting that:

the terminology used in Western human sciences in general and that used to describe Judaic and Zionist phenomena in particular pose a real problematic for the researcher because of its affiliatory character. It has been minted very carefully in the West, in a way that echoes specific historical experiences, analytical models, and epistemological visions that reflect self-centered Western and Zionist perspectives. It encloses evangelical, imperialistic, and racial biases that we utterly reject. These preconceptions compel Western and Zionist scholars to stress some aspects of the phenomena under investigation and neglect others; assume the existence of unity where there is discord; fail to notice relationships between phenomena that we consider relevant; exhibit a deficiency (from our point of view) in the conception of what is specific and what is general; and marginalize what is fundamental and ascribe centrality to what is minor (2003a: 26).

It is noticeable that Elmessiri essentially declares his resolute rejection of such conventional analytic methods that he qualifies as biased, reductive, and self-centric. His quest is the edification of a more explanatory model that puts forward alternative ways of looking at Judaic phenomena far beyond Western narrow perspectives. But, before going through the vicissitudes of Elmessiri's Jewish functional groups paradigm, I will first review his critique of Western discourse of modernity in order to discern its biased categories, its theoretical contradictions, and negative repercussions on the fate of Europe's internal *other* that Jewish minorities stand for.

Since terminology is a significant constituent in Elmessiri's project, its primacy drives him to further dig in its multiple manifestations in Western discourse on Judaic issues. In practice, Elmessiri has undertaken the double burden of generating new terms that best describe basic phenomena or rename them and that of translating sometimes questioning the significance of terms with all their underlying philosophical and cognitive nuances or their cultural dimensions. Actually, in his work entitled *The Problem of Bias: An Epistemological Vision and an Invitation for Ijtihād* (2006), Elmessiri sets up a

new critical line that acknowledges the impossibility of complete certainty and calls for continuous *Ijtihād* instead.¹ Thus, his suggested alternative model:

operates within a flexible, open-ended paradigm whose aim is not to develop hard laws, final, objective answers, or simple algebraic formulas that explain it all (leading humankind to the end of history). It neither attempts to reach full objectivity and neutrality nor sinks into complete subjectivity. Objectivity means an object observed without an observing self. It presupposes a mind that is able to know everything and a simple reality that can be fully comprehended. By contrast, subjectivity means a subject that is completely absorbed in itself to the exclusion of external, "objective" reality. It presupposes a mind that cannot know reality and a reality that cannot be comprehended in any aspect. The concept of *Ijtihād* is thus being proposed as a middle point between the two impossible poles of complete objectivity and equally complete subjectivity. *Ijtihād* presupposes that the human mind cannot explain everything and that the attempt to reach complete knowledge is both diabolic and doomed to failure; it likewise implies the impossibility of full objectivity and neutrality or of arriving at general, all-encompassing laws, since the human mind is both limited and creative: limited in that it cannot explain everything, and creative in that it cannot slavishly reproduce everything (2006: 72).

It is quite obvious that Elmessiri questions the credibility of such myths as objectivity and subjectivity and substitutes them with the more rational concept of *Ijtihād* with view to the problematic accuracy of the first two and the resourcefulness of the latter. Since the model he puts forward is a conceptual construct, he proposes to put it to rigorous test to determine its analytical and systematic efficiency. And if it proves that it comprehensively accounts for

¹ *Ijtihād* is a jurisprudence concept taken from *Sharia* or Islamic law. Hadden and Shupe observe that "the call for historical interpretation of texts and adapting Islam to the new requirements of the modern age needed an institution for its fulfillment. It is the rational deduction of new decrees in accordance with the spirit of Islam and the precepts of reason. *Mujtahid* is the Muslim learned scholar who is supposed to be knowledgeable enough to engage in the act of *ijtihad*" (Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, eds., *Prophetic Religions and Politics: Religion and the Political Order*, vol. 1 (New York: Paragon House, 1984: 180). Usually *Ijtihād* is opposed to *taqlīd* which means copying the holy writ or obeying it without much questioning.

reality more than other models, only then can we say that it has the quality of being a more explanatory or more interpretive model (2002a: 218).

Another crucial theoretical dimension of Elmessiri's paradigm is what he calls the science of understanding bias. He admits that the researcher, in his intellectual venture, cannot avoid being eclectic and this uncovers some degree of alignment with or inclination towards a concept at the expense of another especially in the human sciences (2003a: 24). Elmessiri notices that:

each paradigm has an epistemological dimension. In other words, behind each paradigm – the process of inclusion, exclusion, reconstruction and exaggeration – there are intrinsic criteria, a set of beliefs, hypotheses, presuppositions, axioms and answers to the total and ultimate questions that make up its deeply-rooted fundamentals (2006: 4).

For Elmessiri, bias manifests itself in two ways: first, if the concept echoes the civilizational context that gives it meaning — worse if the concept is of a theological nature — and if it reflects the posture of its user (2003a: 25). The problematic lies in Western academic research orientations that discredit any other critical version based on different criteria other than its own. Within this perspective, Elmessiri questions the validity of Western research methodology, its tools, terminology, and conceptual principles in their attempt to impose themselves as the ultimate point of reference, while it is possible to come up with more independent and more neutral alternatives.

What Elmessiri rejects is not bias as an epistemological phenomenon but the fixity/liquidity of significance that marks out the relationship of the signified and signifier and presents it as the ultimate point of referentiality as conceived of in Western thought. Elmessiri even goes as far as to claim that bias and by extension biased language are inevitable and required in a growingly inhuman world where signifiers could not catch up with continuously changing signifieds; a world that lost the sense of communication and mutual understanding, idolizing “one humanity” instead of a “common humanity” (2006: 6). On balance, Elmessiri claims that bias in general is not a defect for it allows for individuality, uniqueness, and the possibility of freedom of choice as far as it does not promote falsehood (2006: 5-6). Demonstrably, Elmessiri advocates bias as a symptom of the human *donnée* but not bias in favour of falsehood especially when it seeks to laud the *Self* as possessing the ultimate truth while the other does not. Accordingly,

when people make themselves the only acceptable point of reference, the idea of the transcendental truth is dropped, and they cannot be judged from any point external to them. This form of bias is associated with bias for power, which means that when one is victorious, one enforces one's own will; if one is defeated, one becomes a pragmatist who accepts the rules of the victorious Other, without necessarily accepting the truthfulness of the other's statements or judgments. Power is the only arbiter, and therefore such defeated pragmatist impatiently awaits a change in the balance of power in his/ her favour. Therefore pragmatic accommodations, far from bringing about peace and harmony, result in endless conflicts (2006: 7).

Elmessiri's advocacy of a transcended truth that goes beyond a biased discourse of power, poses a real challenge to Western established concepts and notions. To illustrate, Elmessiri resorts to widely propagated examples that corroborate this Western tendency especially its Eurocentric views of history in such appellation like "the age of discovery" and the European "pioneering explorer." These two biased appellations turn parts of Africa, the Americas, Asia and Oceania into a condition of nonbeing until the coming of the white man with his civilizing mission to the less civilized natives (2003a: 26-7). On their coming, history was standstill and geography was borderless like nature that does not recognize limits (2002b: 103). It is only after the white man's foray that the history of those *terrae nullis* started to be recorded within human history by the will of that who owns tools of representation, linguistic competence, and the ability to speak. Emptying those lands of the category of the *other*, makes them possessions of the first who discover them while the other is rendered to an empty sign or a cipher (Greenblatt 1991: 60). It means that a people discovered a land and then Christened it as a "new world," for the land is not important in itself but the experience of the pioneering explorer which is so. In contrast, in the natives' point of view, there is no newness in that discovery since their history and civilization started long before the Western man set foot therein. This makes "the Age of Discovery" the age of Western colonialism that reached its apex with imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century (Elmessiri 2002a: 202).

Such imperialistic rhetoric is totally rejected by Elmessiri because it obscures historical truthfulness through the propagation of false statements as the one and only ultimate truth. He is sure that bias, as an aspect of the cultural

dimension of knowledge, is inevitable but by no means the ultimate point of reference; rather what is at stake are the moral values that have the priority over any form of difference or bias (2006: 7). Yet, Elmessiri is positive about a possible overcoming of bias and building a fair epistemological paradigm despite the limits of human language to articulate truthfulness and cultivate civilizational communication (2006: 6-7).

Overcoming western epistemological bias

On a theoretical basis, Elmessiri deems it absolutely necessary to develop an awareness of the inevitability of bias as a first step to surmount it. Within this perspective, facts are not accepted passively out of blind trust in absolutist objectivism (2006: b48). In contrast, Elmessiri attributes to the human mind qualities of creativity and resourcefulness in the reception of reality. More than that, he recognizes that no two individuals have the same perception of reality because other variables interfere mainly those of individual experiences, cultural heritage, historical memories, symbolic and semiotic systems, aesthetic and moral values, etc (2006: 49). In addition, Elmessiri points to the fact that bias could be better dealt with in a comprehensive way which is not the case in the practice of some Arab thinkers who adopt Western concepts resorting to slight modifications or embellishment to prove that the borrowed concepts have parallels in the target culture and to justify their adoption. The premises on which such practices are based give credit to the Western outlook as universal and ultimate denying other historical or cultural frameworks a place amongst the dominating cultural formations (2006: 50-1). These theoretical guidelines, if adopted as a general framework for generating new terms and concepts, would enrich the alternative epistemological project that Elmessiri tries to put at the forefront of a pluralist universal theory of knowledge.

Central to Elmessiri's appropriation/abrogation venture is what he refers to as "the missing term." He rejects the moment we resort to translating existing words while failing to notice that there are no signifiers for already existing but obscured signifieds. There are phenomena that have not been highlighted by sociologists and historians for a myriad of reasons. They were veiled out of fear of embarrassment; or because of an epistemological narrow-mindedness at a particular historical juncture; sometimes owing to prioritizing economic interests; or may be out of a humane deficiency to recognize the *other*. Elmessiri reproves the act of translating signifiers without being aware that we are translating a

consolidated and sealed epistemological paradigm, where everything is seen through biased signifiers while “the missing terms” are veiled and even if they are observed they are immediately marginalized, or considered as of little critical significance (2002a: 211). For instance, the epithet “the sick man of Europe” that refers to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire by the Imperialistic supremacies has been a controversial and a much disputed designation. This metaphor depicts an agonizing man that calls for pity in the eyes of Western powers failing to notice that this portrayal emanates from a biased perception of the imperial gusto for Europe’s peripheral territories that was going on. An issue that was not addressed in this process was the fact that the epithet hides another “insatiable white man of Europe” ready to annihilate whole populations to acquire more territories in the name of a contended civilizing mission. Elmessiri claims that the former appellation drew more attention than the latter because of a will from the part of the West to delineate the space where his signifiers play in accordance with his hegemonic historical vision (2003a: 25-6). Practically, to overcome bias as far as terminology and concepts are concerned, Elmessiri raises attention to some useful practices that would render his abrogation/appropriation of Western categories a productive enterprise.

First, instead of translating the signifier, why not critically scrutinize the signified in its original context with a view to work out all its denotations then generate another signifier from the Arab lexicon. The new generated term would reflect our own conceptualization of the phenomenon thrusting aside the *other’s* terms, his contentions and illusions, his narrow perspective, and his hegemonic undertaking to assign false significance to these terms (2002a: 212). By way of illustration, Elmessiri traces the etymology of the controversial term “anti-Semitism” back to its first coinage by Judeo-German journalist Wilhelm Marr in the nineteenth century. It was first used to highlight the alleged threat that Jews posed to Germany and German culture. Taken literally, anti-Semitism would refer not only to a multifaceted prejudice towards Jews alone but to other Semitic peoples of which Arabs are the biggest faction. According to Elmessiri, this would be a historically false thesis knowing that Arabs’ presence in Europe in the nineteenth century was negligible (2003b:109). If seen from a different angle, Elmessiri attributes the polemic over anti-Semitism to nineteenth century Western tendency to categorize people on linguistic bases mainly in the studies of Ernest Renan on Semitic philology then on the basis of the Aryan/Semite ethnic discrimination fashionable at that time. This Semitism controversy just shows how

vicious it is to implicate linguistic distinctiveness in the anthropological divisions of human categories. In view of the above, it is “generally accepted that the Semites are all those peoples whose speech is Semitic, but that anthropologically they belong to different and differing groups” as accurately defined by sociologist Verner Sombart (1913: 198). To overcome such biased epithet, Elmessiri proposes “anti-Judaism” as a more precise and more neutral substitute term that is free from any racial classification or racist connotations (2003b: 110). Yet, some Western studies may claim that anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are two totally different concepts because the former refers to a prejudiced attitude towards Judaism as dogma, while the latter refers to animosity towards Jews as a race especially after their integration in European societies. Again, Elmessiri’s quest for precision and neutrality drives him to substitute the label “anti-semitism” by the designation anti-Judaism “on a doctrinal basis” and anti-Judaism “on a racial basis” as more explanatory and more interpretive alternatives (2003b: 111). This way, Elmessiri concludes, accuracy is accomplished without acquiescing to Western false and racist discourse on Jews and Judaism (2002a: 213).

To surmount the bias of Western terminology, Elmessiri, also advocates opting for more comprehensive terms than those proposed by Western terminology wherein the existing terms attest to a narrowness in their account of human phenomena. In consequence, the Western biased term loses its centrality compared to the comprehensiveness of the newly coined term. For instance, instead of talking about “democracy,” which is just one form of government and that could degenerate into pressure groups democracy more than one that depends on free election as is the case with the American model (1997b: 48), we could use an all-inclusive description: the ‘political systems where citizens participate in decision-making.’ According to this new definition, other forms could be added to it mainly those of say Islamic consultative assembly ‘*shura*’, or tribal elders’ congregations as is the case in most tribal-based political systems. Elmessiri argues that such endeavour is vital as it frees terminology from the grip of western monist exclusivism towards an all-inclusive universalized language (2002a: 215).

To further overcome such a tendency, Elmessiri also raises attention to some concepts of a religious, sectarian, or secular character that are used and abused of. Elmessiri argues that these terms underlie a biased doctrinal component to be marked off by way of inverted commas. In this way, the writer distances

himself from the term in question indicating that the concept behind it presupposes a questionable ideological stance that sacrifices neutral distancing in its critical approach to the phenomena (2002a: 215). By way of illustration, terms like, "Diaspora," "exile," "the promised land," or "land of the patriarchs" are better accounted for by adding the label from "a Judaic/Zionist perspective." Or else, terms in the vein of the second world war, the renaissance, the middle ages become "the Western second world war," "the Western renaissance," or "middle ages in the West" (2002a: 215-16).

In like manner, Elmessiri raises questions about the accuracy of accounting for reality by way of reductive and solid dualities that may be applicable in natural and physical sciences but not in a complex multifaceted human context. Elmessiri stresses the fact that a synthetic model may account for reality as a far more complex context by way of a number of overlapping categories that are not necessarily polarized. Elmessiri equates it to a spectrum where colours intermingle while they conserve each its independence and where there is no clear cut beginning or end and no absolute middle (2003a: 60). His adoption of what he refers to as intermediate concepts may prove more interpretive and more explanatory than the proposed dualsolid dichotomous terms. Accordingly, instead of polarized terms like modernization and the failure to modernize there is the intermediate term slow or stumbling modernization. Likewise, beside anti-Judaism or Judeophilia, there is outmaneuvering Jews or indifference towards them (2003a: 61). Doing it the way Elmessiri proposes would make any critical model effective in its account of reality unlike most western models that he qualifies as reductive.

Within this broader power bound Western civilizational context, Elmessiri brings the idea of biased terminology in handling Judaic concepts to more specification. Since the West is essentially self-centred, it generated and diffused terminology that reflects an Evangelical conceptualization of Judaic phenomena even after the secularization processes that it had gone through (2003a: 27). Zionism which germinated within a Western *milieu* adopted that legacy and added to it its own self-centric vision (2003a: 28). Within this perspective, Elmessiri talks about the normalization of terminology which is the process of altering an anomalous phenomenon in a way to make it look "normal," "natural," and "familiar" (2003a: 31). He notices that anomaly is an integral part of the basic structure of Judaic categories that were minted within the Western paradigm. The

propagation that it underwent ended up establishing it as a truth despite the false premises on which it was based. Elmessiri, for instance, cross-examines two different conceptualizations of the Zionist project. He notices that, on the one hand, those who are anti-Zionist tend to depict Jews as the root of all evil while, on the other hand, there are those who resort to collapse all specificities by looking at Israel as a democratic state, like any other, to be treated as such in a detached way. In the first case, oversimplification to the point of error results in the iconization of Jewry as instigators of a universal conspiracy to subjugate the world, while in the second, sweeping assumptions dominate the phenomenon and secures its normalization as such (2003a: 51). Such discourse counterfeits the indelible fact that despite its uniqueness, the Zionist project remains quintessentially a Western colonialist project despite all secular or theological apologetics.

Related to the normalization process of terminology is Elmessiri's epithets "Judaization" and "Ghetto-ization" of concepts and terms (2003a: 28-29). Elmessiri points to the fact that such practices of generating terminology accentuate the eccentricity of Judaic phenomena and assign them significance only within their own sacred historical context. In this way, Palestine becomes the holy land, the "Promised Land" or simply Israel and the Jewish settlers are Hebrews who left the land of the pharaohs in exodus to the land of Canaan. All this becomes the recurrent pattern that frames Jewish world experience time and again (2003a: 44). In like manner, these Biblical preludes are also current in Western colonial discourse. Within the framework of the colonial quest for more territories in Africa, Asia, or America, the white man usually refers to the appropriated land as Zion, while natives become Canaanites that should be exterminated altogether (2003a: 45).

It tends to be the case that the "Judaization" of concepts and terms results in their "Ghetto-ization" in the sense that they become self-referential terms that no other language could describe but Hebrew (2003a: 28). Elmessiri also notices that some of these terms undergo another process that he labels "iconization". Accordingly, this biased process turns the term into an icon whose symbolic representation imposes an aura of holiness on it to the extent that putting it through discussion, reviewing, or questioning becomes a blasphemy (2003a: 51). Also, some of these originally Hebrew terms and concepts are kept uncontaminated by translation but essentialized through transliteration. Therefore,

they conserve their peculiarity and independence within their own historical Judaic context. Ultimately, they are adopted without much questioning while they keep their Biblical referential authenticity observed (2003a: 30).

Conclusion

Elmessiri is an Arab literary critic who has questioned the uncritical adoption of the Western and Zionist/Judaic discourses, narratives, terms, paradigms and interpretations of history and worldviews by the Arab intelligentsia. He has proposed an alternative paradigm of presenting the fact through more neutral terms and concepts applying the concept of *ijtehad*. No doubt, Elmessiri's taxonomy bears out some novelty compared to other patterns of intellectualism as far as Judaic and Zionist phenomena in Western civilizational discourse are concerned. He invested a tremendous intellectual effort to edify his own epistemological paradigm that can be adopted as the discourse of the Arab-Islamic thought in any of its dialogues with its Western counterpart. His proposed paradigm for understanding Jews, Judaism, and Zionism falls within the emerging dissent critical scholarships that came out of the controversies of Western secularist modernist discourse as well as a correctional endeavor of Arabic thought's inadequacies. It is not a deconstructive critical stance *vis à vis* Jewish phenomena but it goes beyond all that to the reconstruction of an alternative model that treats these issues and comes up with a new terminology to explain them. Elmessiri's aim is to underscore the materialist, monist, and absolutist assumptions underlying the Western secularist modernist discourse, its theoretical contradictions, its biased categories, and most importantly the repercussions that it had on the experience of the millennial Jew in Europe and its Arab victims in the holy places. Within this perspective, Elmessiri stands as an advocate of a new discourse that believes in the plurality of voices hence his contribution to the universal epistemological edifice that would dethrone Western scholarly supremacy and intellectual authority especially in the area of Jewish studies.

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