ABSTRACT

Globalization and Arab Culture: A Study of Select Works of a Few Arab Novelists

This study seeks to examine the way globalization has impacted the Arab way of life especially cultural life. It also examines, albeit briefly, the impact of globalization in the economic and political spheres. This study was born out of the researcher’s felt need to get a balanced view of the impact of globalization on the Arab world. Globalization is a phenomenon that influences both the inner and outer life of people. This study is directly concerned with the latter. The effects of globalization are examined mainly through an analysis of the phenomenon of globalization as represented in select novels of a few Arab novelists.

A complex contemporary phenomenon like globalization, a phenomenon that shapes the material existence of the people of diverse cultures can only be grasped in its totality when its literary representations are taken up for analysis in conjunction with the studies of globalization that deal with it as a trend in the social, and economic life of contemporary societies. This is the founding assumption of this study. I attempt to analyze globalization in some works of a few Arab novelists, both the ones that oppose it and those that defend it, with the aim to identify the larger issues and concerns that govern the attitude of these writers towards globalization. To understand the process of globalization, I approach it through six central questions posed in this study: How do we define and conceptualize the term “globalization”? Who does this process really benefit? (Chapter one). What are the dominant attitudes of Arabs towards this phenomenon? What are the reasons for each of the stakeholders’ attitude? ). What effects does this process have on Arab nations, on their cultural landscape in particular? (Chapter two). And
lastly, how do novelists from the Arab world represent ‘globalization’? (Chapters three and four).

Chapter one: “Introduction: Conceptualizing the Issue,” attempts to conceptualize the issue of globalization. My main concern in this chapter is defining and theorizing the phenomenon called globalization. Since artistic representations of socio-cultural phenomena are analysis mixed inseparably with lived experience, the first section of this chapter attempts to provide a general introduction to the topic by compiling a list of definitions of globalization in order to provide a survey of what some academics, theorists, sociologists, politicians, and leaders claim globalization actually is. The attempt here is to facilitate an understanding of the creative writer’s response to the experience of living in a globalized world. Such an understanding, it is assumed, will help arrive at a more comprehensive definition of the concept.

The second point dealt with in this chapter is the academic debate on globalization. The discussion is limited to the three broad schools of thought—hyperglobalizers, sceptics and transformationalists. For the hyperglobalists, globalization does exist and is the main reason and cause for the changes the world is experiencing to date. Globalization is slowly aiding in diminishing the role and character of the nation-State. The sceptics, on the other hand, contend that globalization does not exist and has not influenced or weakened the nation-State. Between the two incongruent groups is the transformationalists who contend that globalization does exist and influences all areas of the world. Globalization, however, does not influence all these areas in a uniform manner. This section will attempt a critical summary of these three well-established positions.

The last point to be addressed in this first chapter is the dimensions of globalization
economic, political, and cultural). Under economic dimension, I have discussed the economic drivers of globalization among which the multinational corporations play a major role. I have attempted to discuss the impact of the Western transnational corporations on the developing world. In addition to this, the pros and cons of economic globalization in the contexts of developing nations is briefly touched upon. In the realm of politics, I present the relation between globalization and violence especially after 11/9, and argue that 11/9 is the result of the American foreign policy. Another equally important point to discuss here is the relation between globalization and democracy. I present the Iraq war as a case study to prove that the American 'war on terror' is nothing more than a veil for acquiring Third World's cheap oil to run the US economy. This argument which might appear trite or banal, when presented in the context of globalization as an important development in the political economy of countries, acquires a new edge. I end this chapter with a discussion of the cultural dimension of globalization in which I present the three scenarios of interaction between globalization and cultures: homogenization, heterogenization, and hybridization.

The second chapter, "Globalization and Arab Culture," discusses the nature of the struggle between Arab cultural-identity and cultural globalization. My argument here is to critique an overly Western approach and advocate cultural globalization that allows for cultural diversity and the right of every nation for cultural self-determination. This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I present a survey of contemporary Arab views on globalization. Arab thinkers are divided into three groups—the first is that of the conservative Arab intellectuals (Anti-Globalization Views) who argue that their culture cannot adhere to many globalized notions. In opposition, its cheerleaders (Pro-Globalization Views) who see the process as a substantial sign of development. A third group (Moderate Views) is pragmatic in their thinking,
neither refusing globalization nor accepting it totally. In this part, I also present the Arab fears of globalization and the way they negotiate with these fears.

The second part of this chapter deals with economy, politics, and culture. I begin with economic globalization and its impact on the Arab world generally and the Arab Gulf States (AGSs) in particular. I show how the AGSs successfully reap the benefits of globalization and become a region of great interests for businessmen. Yet another point to be illustrated here is the bane of economic globalization on the AGSs. Next, I discuss political globalization and its impact on the Arab world with special emphasis on the recent Arab uprisings or revolutions (Arab Spring). The last and main section is devoted to cultural globalization and its impact on the Arab world’s culture and identity. I discuss the consequences globalization brings in the Arab world. Here, two basic views are addressed: the first perceives cultural globalization as harmful for the Arabs since it results in the weakening and degradation of their culture and identity. Globalization eventually threatens Arabs’ ethnic identity, traditions, and values, and puts the cultural sovereignty at risk; the second avers that cultural globalization is beneficial to cultures as it leads to dialogue and a healthy cultural exchange. I go on to explain the possible negotiation strategies and the ways in which the Arab world can compete with the Western world and evolve from a state of backwardness and weakness to that of development and powerfulness. I end this chapter with a question that does not conclude but continues the dialogue relating to the key argument: Will Arabs accept or reject cultural globalization? My argument in this chapter is that it is not in the Arabs’ best interest to close their doors to cultural globalization as the world enters the third millennium. Arabs need to be able to synthesize their Islamic heritage with modernization and be able to choose what suits their traditions, heritage, and values and reject what is totally incompatible with them. A balanced response to cultural hegemony has to be
founded on a good understanding of socio-cultural phenomena like globalization.

Chapter three attempts to study a few works of two Arab novelists who have successfully presented the disadvantages of globalization. I present how Sunallah Ibrahim and Subhi Fahmawi depict the negative effects of globalization on the Arab citizen and society. The novels to be discussed in this chapter convincingly argue that globalization is the main reason of growing corruption, unemployment, poverty, increasing population, the scarcity of natural resources, the spread of slums, illegal acquisition of land by the capitalists, the dislodging of farmers from their land, terrorism, and immigration to name just a few of the long list of ills. The Committee (2001), and Zaat (2001) by the Egyptian novelist Sunallah Ibrahim and Love in the Time of Globalization (2006) by the Gordian novelist Subhi Fahmawi are thus rhetoric against globalization. I intend to show how these three texts have both a sober and purposeful language that transmutes the violence of reality into fiction. These novels are probably the best novels that directly expose the role of the multinational corporations and the effects of open-door economic policies on the Arab society. Corruption, exploitation, and ever-increasing American influence are vividly depicted in these works. The novels are a scathing, witty attack on contemporary consumer culture. Ibrahim and Fahmawi skillfully explore the destructive impact of globalization on Third World nations. My discussion of these texts highlights the hegemonic and exploitative nature of the capitalist system on Third World countries through multinational corporations as presented in the novels.

While the novelists’ intention is to reveal the domination of Western capitalists over Third World countries, they at the same time ridicule the Arab leaders who bow down to the Western capital to facilitate the influx of Western companies and products into the country through the country’s open-door policy. They allegorically mock the foolishness of poor nations
who believe in the promises made by their capitalist ‘benefactors’. The texts reveal the impact of globalization on Arab society politically, economically, culturally, and socially.

Chapter four addresses the issues of a cross-cultural nature, humanitarian reconciliation, and understanding between cultures. It prepares the ground for an understanding of the complex relationship between the West and the Arab world through contemporary Arab writers. In this chapter, I analyze globalization in some novels that defend the process of globalization: Girls of Riyadh (2007) by the Saudi novelist Rajaa Al-Sanea, Only in London (2002) by the Lebanese-English novelist Hanan Al-Shaykh, and Habibi (1997) by the Palestinian-American novelist Naomi Shihab Nye. The texts illuminate globalization’s crucial role in cementing the gap between different cultures. These writers aim to establish a conversation between two different cultures, and to look beyond cultural divisions and political conflicts. They advocate the concept of a ‘universal culture’ and seek to combine Arab cultural values with core global values that promote social advancement and democracy. They believe that globalization facilitates interaction and encourages dialogue between cultures. This global interaction forms the basis of reconciliation and universalism.

Rajaa Al-Sanea attempts to educate Westerners on the positive aspects of Saudi Arabia. She writes back to the West about the Saudi girls, who in this revisionary account are not illiterate, passive, and veiled constituents of harem as they tend to believe. Arab women are intelligent and they are not very different from girls elsewhere. They are tech-savvy, know how to use the latest innovations of this globalized age, i.e. computer, the Internet, and so on. Hanan Al-Shaykh and Naomi Nye use their novels to present the ‘other’ as familiar to the ‘self’. They believe that there are people in this world who believe, truly believe, in connections. They make use of the boons created by globalization to create channels of communication between the East
and the West. For them, this age is the time of world shrinkage, of distances getting shorter, things moving closer. In the literary texts analyzed in this chapter, the writers draw attention to the universality of themes and their global connections. They invite the reader to intercultural relations where differences are celebrated. They aim to create a transnational culture: where all the boundaries of race, gender, class, nation, or religion melt.

The fifth chapter is the conclusion. It summarizes the main arguments and presents the implications of these arguments. It also suggests areas within the field that could be profitably dealt with by scholars interested in studying globalization and its impact on non-Western societies.