

Brown Skin, White Masks Hamid Dabashi (2011). London: Pluto. 224 Pages. ISBN: 0745328741

“This empire thrives on the stories it tells itself about liberty and democracy, or about ‘the end of history’ or ‘the clash of civilizations’. These stories need exotic seasonings, and the native informants provide them. They are the byproduct of an international intellectual free trade, in which intellectual carpetbaggers offer their services to the highest bidder, for the lowest risk.” (Dabashi, 2011, 128)

Fifty years after Martinican revolutionary and anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon’s untimely death, Hamid Dabashi’s *Brown Skin White Masks* aims to pick up from where the former’s *Black Skin White Masks* (Fanon, 1967) left off. Dabashi, a professor in Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia University is the author of numerous books and articles. *Brown Skin White Masks* offers itself as an analytical antidote to a string of often highly-feted writers who present themselves and/or are marketed in the West as authentic and courageous voices of dissent from within the Muslim world – for Dabashi, they are guns for hire in the service of imperialism and Western cultural superiority. In the decade following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the USA, such literature which purportedly explains Islam, and the ‘Muslim World’ to Western audiences have been used to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and the demonization and dehumanization of Arab and Muslim peoples around the world.. Their output, according to the author, also provides fuel for racist indignation and legalized prejudice against Muslim immigrant communities in Western Europe. He argues that contemporary forms of imperialist domination or advanced strains of colonialism, require renewed ideological language. These books and their authors are often taken up as authoritative accounts of societies, cultures and peoples which are the objects of renewed fascination, fear and often hostility and contempt. Dabashi suggests that the ascendance of these writers and their literature coincides with a period of profound anti-intellectualism in the USA and a re-codification of North American and Western European racism (“The Arab and the Muslim have replaced the black and the Jew as the demonic “other” of the white Christian self” (35)). The subjects of his book, he argues, are subservient byproducts of colonialism; self-loathing individuals who identify with the white colonizer, having digested and internalized the ideology and language of Orientalism, writing accounts of Islam and Muslim-majority societies in ways which tally with US propaganda needs, thereby justifying the country’s post-9/11 imperial projects.

So rather than an analysis of the self-alienated, colonized psyche of peoples in former (nominally, at least) colonies, Dabashi’s book is aimed at illustrating the current roles which “comprador intellectuals” play in legitimating imperialism through their writings. These writers have moved to North America and Western Europe and serve as native informers in the manufacturing of a sort of “useful knowledge” that facilitates the imperial domination of their countries of origin. As he argues, there is a long history of literature being employed in support of imperialism and colonialism. Drawing from both Malcolm X and Edward Said’s thinking to theorize these comprador intellectuals, Dabashi suggests that “Malcolm X’s house negro and Said’s exilic intellectual are two sides of the same analytical coin, one serving the white master and the other revolting against him”. (42)

In making his argument, Dabashi draws on the late Berkeley sociologist William Kornhauser's notion of unattached "free-lance" intellectuals whose role is to facilitate "a frenzied atmosphere of fear and domination that is conducive to atomization of individuals" (60). For Dabashi, scholars who could not establish reputable academic credentials are much more likely to become "mercenary intellectuals at the whim of the politics and commerce of the free-market economy." (62). Dabashi takes on a number of such native informers – Irshad Manji, Salman Rushdie, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Fouad Ajami, for example – but directs particular criticism at Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and 'Ibn Warraq', the author of *Why I am not a Muslim* and various other tirades against Islam, who choose to be known only by a pseudonym. For Dabashi, Nafisi's book, which he notes was strongly endorsed by arch-Orientalist Bernard Lewis, is "the most cogent contemporary case of positing English literature as a means of manufacturing trans-regional consent to Euro-American domination." (71). He charges that Nafisi abuses legitimate causes – namely the repression of women – for illegitimate purposes like US global domination. Dabashi sees *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as "a parable of a Snow White and her Seven Dwarves getting together to save a nation from its own evil – left to its own devices, it is understood, Iran cannot save itself" (76). These writers, he contends, act to deny and conceal centuries of debates and opposition within Muslim societies and the many thinkers and movements which have strongly challenged societies, traditions and faith.

Brown Skin White Masks begins with a substantive introduction entitled "Informing Empires" which lays the ground for the rest of the book. Subsequent chapters deal with Dabashi's thesis about the re-codification of racism, and the concept and practice of "comprador intellectuals". This is followed by discussions and analysis of Nafisi and Ibn Warraq (whom Dabashi dubs 'the house Muslim') and their respective service to contemporary Western imperialism. The conclusion revisits the major arguments in the book, framed around the concept of "confusing the color line", and seeks to overturn commonly-held notions of exile and diaspora which Dabashi sees as key to being able to effectively challenge "the position of power in which the fictive white man has posited himself as the defining center and cast humanity at large as his periphery" (130).

While I largely enjoyed Dabashi's passion and pugnacious tenor, the book has a number of shortcomings. Although there is some careful attention to detail in some of his analysis, at times Dabashi tends to use overly broad brush strokes and rhetorical flourishes in his discussion which skip over explaining some of his claims and references which deserve more detailed attention. We can see this for example in relation to some of the trans-racial comparisons made, and his argument about the re-codification of racism, which he returns to at the end of the book with a discussion about claims made by Obama's political opponents that he was Muslim. After all, notwithstanding racism against Arabs and Muslims (and the election of Obama), racism against black people has hardly evaporated in North America, which Dabashi's "brown is the new black" formula sometimes seems to suggest. These qualities of the book can make it difficult for a reader to fully understand the points he makes, and leads to a lack of clarity in places. At times Dabashi also tends to unnecessarily repeat the same points and arguments. This sometimes makes for a disjointed read, with ideas and arguments meandering down different roads, if not different directions altogether. By way of comparison, I am reminded of Nosheen Ali's (2010) excellent critique of Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea*, and its role in legitimating US imperialism and the "war on terror", an analysis which very clearly and carefully builds an argument for readers who may not be familiar with the political, social, cultural and economic context of the book.

One essential quality of Fanon's writing is its dialectical and materialist underpinnings, and Fanon's own commitment to extending Marxist analysis. Dabashi's book tends to lack the same sense of materiality in which Fanon's work is steeped. For example, I would have appreciated a clearer exposition of what Dabashi understands as "empire" as there is a sense in which the book seems to point to Hardt and Negri's thesis, but does not spell out in adequate depth how the author conceives of this notion. In sum, *Brown Skin White Masks* does not convey the sense of rootedness and urgency in concrete struggles for liberation which shaped Fanon's work and thinking. Perhaps some of this is related to the respective differences in the geo-historical contexts (and their writers), written as they are in different times and different contexts.

That said, Dabashi's book will be of interest to a readership from across a range of disciplines and deserves to be read widely as a useful contribution to thinking through the manufacturing of consent for current forms of western imperialism and colonial power. In a year marked by ongoing mass mobilizations and uprisings in the Maghreb and across the Arab world, and whatever the final outcome of these struggles, we might do well to concur with him that the peoples of these regions are not idly waiting for saviors from the West to inspire or bring about progressive social change.

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References

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