Review Essay


Tyranny and Responsibility: Makiya Against Arab Intellectuals

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This book is divided into two parts. The first, titled “cruelty”, is accounts of interviews with several Iraqis and one Kuwaiti who are victims and witnesses to the atrocities of Saddam’s regime before and during the Gulf War. Makiya provides a vivid account of monstrosities which took place during three sets of events: the occupation of Kuwait, the Shia uprising in southern Iraq in 1991, and the 1988 Anfal Operation by which Saddam destroyed Kurdish villages and killed thousands of innocent Kurds. These plunders, tortures, rapes, and murders are presented as cruelties to which Iraqi people are subjected under Saddam Husain’s regime. The stories of these individuals are appalling and unbearable. Their cumulative effect, as Makiya mentions, is a threat to anyone’s sanity.

The second part, titled “silence,” is about what the author calls the “moral collapse” of the Arab world and the role of Arab intellectuals in this malaise. In this part Makiya criticizes the ideas of Arab intellectuals, both inside and outside of the Arab world. He exposes what he regards to be biases of some of the Arab intellectuals towards the Gulf Arabs—biases which contributed to the silence about the violence against Kuwaitis during the Iraqi invasion. He bitterly attacks the Arab intellectuals who supported and justified Saddam Husain’s invasion of Kuwait as a heroic act against the Western imperialism. Such a support, according to Makiya, represented a “moral failure of historic proportion.”

Makiya believes that ideas generated by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and other Arab nationalist intellectuals have incapacitated young Arabs so much so that they are unable to comprehend the extent and the depth of horrors to which their fellow Arabs are subjected. Anti-Westernism and Anti-Zionism have come to
constitute a disease making the Arab intellectuals blind to the violence perpetrated by Saddam Husain’s regime. The intellectuals, according to Makiya, have become so obsessed with Western conspiracies that they can no longer see the realities of abuse and cruelties around them. The West and its allies in the Middle East, Israel, are targeted as the source of all problems in the Arab mind.

Makiya believes that the Arab intellectual’s obsession with the Palestinian issue also has been hypocritical. While these intellectuals have concerned themselves with the rights of Palestinians in abstraction, they have done nothing concrete either about the cruelties inflicted upon Arabs by Arabs or about the plight of other stateless people, such as Kurds, in the area. Palestinian issue has become a front hiding the true silence of the Arab intellectuals about the violation of human rights in the Arab world.

The appearance of *Cruelty and Silence* has created a great deal of controversy about the Arab intellectuals and the Arab culture. It also generated a great deal of support for Makiya’s views in the Western world. The book has been widely received and reviewed in the English-speaking world, especially by the conservative magazines and journals (Shadroui 1993; Kramer 1993; Rosenthal 1993, Brooks 1993; Mylroie 1993). To Makiya’s distaste, and even objection, conservatives have used his argument as a justification for Israeli refusal for granting autonomy to Palestinians (Rosenthal 1993). Critics have argued that Makiya is loose with his facts and silent about his own biases (Ahmad 1993).

*Cruelty and Silence* is a controversial book, but a very important one. The book’s first hand accounts of atrocities committed by Saddam Husain clearly demonstrates the extent of cruelties inflicted on Iraqi people, be they Arab, Kurd, or Shia. Makiya makes the case for viewing the human rights issue independently of political, religious, and ethnic ideologies. For him, the primacy of individual rights and dignities overrides any ideological and primordial characterization imposed on the situations within which these individuals are found.

Since cruelty is a violation of individual’s basic dignity, the silence about such cruelty itself takes a cruel character. The prevailing silence about the repression, argues Makiya, is unjustified. Intellectuals’ silence about oppressive regimes in the Middle East, like that of Saddam Husain, has serious effects on the human rights of people living under these regimes. In showing the depth of these cruelties and various ethnic and religious means used by Saddam Husain to justify them, Makiya shows us the complexities and pathological nature of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships in the Middle East. These accounts may serve as a clue to the difficulties in the removal of Saddam Hussain from power and the eventual development of a democratic Iraq.

Makiya is also successful in listing some of the major problems of Arab
political culture, especially showing how obsession with the Palestinian issue and Arab nationalism has blinded Arabs to the realities of their own situation. He correctly points out “the glaring collective failure” of Arab intelligentsia in producing “a language of rights and democracy to supplement the language of nationalism”:316. Undoubtedly, an overemphasis on the external forces of exploitation has made many Third World intellectuals oblivious of the internal sources of exploitation and repression. Indignities and cruelties generated by the indigenous leaders are often harder to recognize and deal with, especially when they are coated with numerous layers of religious, ethnic, and nationalistic justifications. The importance Makiya attaches to the consequences of such a blindness should not be underestimated.

Finally, Makiya should be congratulated for his courage to speak about both these cruelties and the blanket of silence covering them and for his call for the revival of Arab thinking. He urges Arab intellectuals to reconsider their strident views about the Arab nationalism and the West. The new realities of post Cold War era require a fresher approach to some of the oldest problems in the region. For Makiya, neither Pan Arabism of the past nor the illusionary Islamic fundamentalism of today can be a solution to the reality of oppression in the Middle East. The latter seems to be no less capable of producing the same cruelties, if not more.

Having discussed the positive contributions of the book, its problems should also be mentioned. The first and foremost problem with the book is Makiya’s approach to the issues of “human rights” and “intellectual responsibility.” At the beginning of his book, Makiya states that he has no interest in an scholarly approach to this issue. But throughout the book, he attacks scholars and scholarly works of intellectuals without showing an adequate empathy for their theoretical framework and empirical documentation. For instance, he attacks Edward Said for his critique of European biases against Islam and the Middle East and relates such critique to the support for Saddam Husain during the Gulf War. In Cruelty and Silence, arguments against Western manipulation of the Arab culture, imperialism, and colonialism are decontextualized, polemicized, and vulgarized by being mixed with political positioning of individuals during the very volatile and confusing events of war, invasion, liberation, and hypertension of advanced technologies of image distortion and censorship.

Likewise, Makiya’s conception of the intellectual is problematic. Makiya uses this term very broadly and indiscriminately. He lines up a whole array of Arab intellectuals and literati whose only commonality is the opposition to the intervention of Allied Forces in the liberation of Kuwait. Reading seven pages of the section entitled “Who is an Arab intellectual?” one finds no clue to what Makiya’s definition of an intellectual is. He makes no distinction between academic vs. non-academic, organic vs. non-organic, official vs. non-official, those living at home vs. those living abroad, and state-supported vs. oppositional
intellectuals. Such distinctions are very important for understanding intellectuals in non-democratic Middle Eastern societies whose people identify “true” intellectuals as those who are in opposition to the government. Intellectuals working with the state, or receiving support from the state, are often considered as “state functionaries.” Lacking a clear concept of “intellectual” and its various types, Makiya makes “intellectuals” responsible for the actions and inactions of the centralized modern state in Iraq. He shows no understanding of the class affiliation of the intellectuals he names and of how such affiliation influences their views of the politics of human rights and intellectual responsibility. Reading him, one comes out with a feeling that events in the Middle East are all products of ideas of intellectuals and not a modern nation state well incorporated in a global structure of political and economic interactions. The fact that Saddam Husain is in power is the result of the existence of intellectuals who are willing to justify his regime and be silent about his cruelties. What about outside forces who armed his military, trained his generals, and remained silent about his ruthlessness? Makiya remains silent about these.

Makiya’s approach to “Arab intellectuals” is totalizing and his attack on them is disproportionate and unfair. It is disproportionate because while he spends half of his book attacking them and demonstrating their role in perpetuation of the culture of cruelty in the Arab world, he spares only few words, half-hazardly here and there, about the foreign manipulations of the internal politics of the Arab world and about the foreign sponsorship of the regimes of cruelty. He is very clear in delineating cruelties of Saddam Husain’s regime but vague when it comes to human rights violations by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, and their foreign allies who have stood by these regimes. He is unfair because he compares the politics of individuals who have diverse motivations, strategies, goals, and intellectual orientations. Reading through the second part of the book, one finds Makiya engaged bitterly in a vendetta against his critics. With so much of the book dedicated to clearing himself of what his critics have accused him of, it is hard not ask the question Makiya wants us to avoid: “Who do you write for?”(238).

Makiya suggests that we should approach the issue of the human rights as the question of conscience. This is an ideal position, only if it is contextualized. Such can be the case only in a world in which the conscience rules. Our world is dominated by politics and ideologies. In this world, human rights itself has become an ideological issue, used as a weapon for achieving political objectives. Makiya is either oblivious to these facts or naïve about them. Another example of Makiya’s naïveté is his request for the removal of Saddam Husain by the United States, hoping that after removing him from power Iraq will be allowed to develop her own democratic government. In doing so, he shows little understanding of the international political economy, the nature of Western
capitalist system, U.S. foreign policy, and international politics. Does he really not know why the United States and her Western allies became concerned about the liberation of Kuwait? Does he not know anything about the politics of oil, superpower psychology, alliances, and hegemonic domination? If his plea for Western involvement in Iraqi politics is not naive, then he should deny that Western countries operate on self-interest and that they have had any role in the creation of political realities of the modern Middle East. For Makiya, the Western reluctance in overthrowing Saddam Husain demonstrates the absence of compassion. Again, he naively assumes that the Western foreign policies are based on "compassion." Foreign policies are mostly designed on the basis of "national interest." Although these "interests" are often covered up in a cloth of humanitarianism, advancement of democracy, enhancement of human rights, and so on, they remain the main reasons for political action or inaction in current international politics.

Finally, emphasizing Arab obsession with the West and Arab prejudices about rich Gulf Arabs, Makiya becomes blind to the Anti-Arab sentiments in the West which led the mood against Saddam Husain during the buildup of the machinery of the Gulf War. His generalizations about Arab stereotypes and prejudices have already begun to contribute to the Western stereotypes about the Arab culture in the West. Hear Rosenthal:

Democracy, a protection against programs, never rose among Arabs, he [Makiya] says. He blames not the West nor Israel, not even primarily Saddam Hussain, King Fahd, Yasir Arafat or Hafez al-Assad. He says they are products of a "modern Arab culture" that has failed to produce anything better (1993: A 21)

Does this speak well for all those Arabs who choose to risk their lives for fighting dictatorships and oppression, only to be arrested, tortured, and killed by the state machineries often more loyal to their ideological and/or foreign sponsors than to the Arab people? How does this reflect the struggle of generations of democratic Arabs who fought Saddam Husain and his likes? How do stereotypical generalizations like this help the Arab cause for democracy and human rights? Self-criticism is a necessary medicine for a sick person. But like any medicine, it works only if it is prescribed by an honest and competent doctor and taken in the right amount!

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References

Errata
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No matter how much we try to catch typographical and other errors, there is always a possibility for oversight. We apologize to our readers and contributors, and appreciate your bringing to our attention any errors that need to be corrected.

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Table of Content, Rozbeh Parvin  Rozbeh Parvin
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66, line 24  and wears  and to wear
68, line 38  although unconsciously  although not unconsciously