

The Victors and the Vanquished: Recovering the History of Al-Andalus

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Abstract

Cultural encounters between Spain and Morocco have been marked by hatred, friendship and hostile contempt throughout various historical junctures. The Muslim presence in modern Spain has shaped cultural representations between Self and Other, West and East, Europe and its Otherness. This historically imagined hostility and the everlasting tension created between East and West could be traced back as early as Medieval ages when Muslims conquered Southern Europe. This episode of history gave rise to frequently manipulated and constructed misrepresentations which served in the production of distorted and often disfigured discourses about the Muslim Other in the western popular imagination. This article looks at this historical event and attempts to shed light on the historical circumstances surrounding the Moorish presence in medieval Spain. It also tries to look at one of plays that enhance the existence of the cultural Other within a white territory of disapproval, annihilation and subordination of otherness.

Keywords: *Moorish Spain, Reconquista, the Moors, History, Cultural representation.*

Historical Background

By the late seventh century, Arab forces coming from the Middle East had reached the far west (Maghrib al-Aqsa) of North Africa. In 711, these forces, joined by tribes of Berbers, crossed over into the Iberian Peninsula and reigned over the territory for almost eight centuries. They lived together with Christians and Jews within a complex mosaic of various cultural, religious, and political forms; leaving tremendous civilizational imprints and formidable models of human coexistence and tolerance. The historical reality of the medieval Muslims' arrival in Spain could be best captured in the words of the Spanish Monarch Alphonso X, "the wise": "All the Moorish soldiers were

dressed with silk and black wool that had been forcibly acquired... their black faces were like pitch and the most handsome of them was like (as black as) a cooking pan.”¹ This revulsive attitude leveled against the racially, culturally and religiously Other ignited stereotypical reactions and became the target of Western rage which mobilized such a potent arsenal of exaggerated misrepresentations to systematically suppress and annihilate Muslim erudition and culture. Jan Carew assumes that:

*With the end of the Moorish power, the Spanish not only went on a book-burning spree, they also tried to erase every vestige of Moorish cultural influence from their consciousness. The holy inquisition with its [...] cleansing of the Spanish blood, its zealotry, and all its encompassing and repressive tentacles reaching in the lives of the highest and lowliest in the land, set about de-civilizing the Iberian Peninsula.*²

Elsewhere, Jan Carew argues that this extensive and complicated widespread of racial and cultural eradication of the Other is almost consistently inspected through a Eurocentric tunneled vision of history which has created an image of the Muslim as infidel and a permanent enemy for the committed Christian. The increase of religious hatred paved the way later on in history to colonialism and perpetuated viciously wrong and permanently damaging imageries which served in the reinforcement and construction of colonial ideologies of racial hierarchies, which are, nonetheless, still noticeably pervading the postmodern era, and which are “most obviously apparent in the contemporary West’s continuation of the social, political and economic structures (and ideological forms of Othering) which characterized the colonial history accompanying modernity.”³

Cultural encounters between Spain and Morocco have witnessed conflicting moments of hatred, friendship and hostility throughout various historical junctures. The historically imagined tension between East and West could be traced back as early as Medieval ages when Muslims conquered Southern Europe. This episode of history gave rise to constructed misrepresentations which served in the production of disfigured discourses

¹ Jose V. Pimienta-Bey, “Moorish Spain: Academic source and foundation for the rise and success of Western European universities in the middle ages,” *Golden Age of the Moor Light of Europe’s Dark Age - African Civilizations*, 11 (1991), 184. The article focuses on the various aspects of the influence of the Moors in Spain on the rise and success of Western European Universities in the middle ages, highlighting European scholars who were in constant interactions with the Moors. It also tracks the origins of the Moor.

² Jan Carew, “Moorish Culture bringers: Bearers of Enlightenment,” *Golden Age of the Moor Light of Europe’s Dark Age - African Civilizations*, 11 (1991), 250.

³ Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), 122.

about the Muslim Other in Western popular imagination. The history of *Al-andalus* is a neglected story that needs to be rethought within the current dynamics of postcolonial theory and rewritten from the perspective of the suppressed cultural Other. Moorish presence in Christian Spain is not only a mere narrative about how the Arabo-Islamic culture and history contributed to the rise of Europe into power and to the shaping of discourses about European cultural imagination, but it is also a story about the development of a Euro-centric vision and movement, which emerged with the cultural extermination of the Muslim Other in Spain. Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula has “penetrated medieval Christian consciousness with a violent trauma, leaving far-reaching wounds in the psyche of”⁴ European communities up to the present time. Muslims, accordingly, conjured up “an image of barbarous and fanatical people who threatened Christianity and even ‘civilization’ itself.”⁵

Studies by Western scholars and historians have hardly reflected on the Moor’s civilization in Spain with much critical importance. They often fail to appreciate the cultural ramifications the other silenced histories and suppressed voices had on the rise of the Renaissance Europe. For them, history is constructed from a racially tunnelled perspective as essentially white and primarily Euro-Christian; a deliberate and systematic tradition wherein Self and Other are defined in processes of inclusion and exclusion and on the basis of cultural discrepancies. This process already draws lines of demarcation between the victors and the vanquished, between the victorious Self and its defeated Otherness. Such systematic legacy based on the annihilation of cultural difference makes the historical experience of the Moors of Spain worth rediscovering while taking into account the experience of subordination itself as an act of memory about forgotten voices.⁶

The determination of the etymological meanings of the word “Moor” along history and across cultures has been debated among scholars and historians. For Phillip K. Hitti, “the term Moor has a geographic designation meaning Western,”⁷ that is to say the North Western African dweller. Other sources associate the term Moor with blackness.⁸ With the rise of Muslims to power in Andalusia, the term Moor, as Brunson and Rachidi maintain,

⁴ Khalid Bekkaoui, *Sings of Spectacular Resistance: the Spanish Moor and British Orientalism* (Casablanca: Najah El-Jadida, 1998), 1.

⁵ Jose V. Pimienta-Bey, “Moorish Spain,” 182

⁶ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 35.

⁷ James E. Brunson and Rashidi Runoko, “The Moors in Antiquity,” *Golden Age of the Moor Light of Europe’s Dark Age - African Civilizations*, 11 (1991), 27.

⁸ Brunson and Runoko, “The Moors in Antiquity,” 27.

“Disappears for a time from the historical records. It re-emerges, however, in medieval literature.”⁹ This re-emergence reinforced the European tradition of colour as criteria of difference. Accordingly, the description of the Moors varied from black, brown into “blue” men. Yet, it is noticeable that the Almoravids’ invasions of Spain during the eleventh century undermined this tradition. The Moor started to be redefined in terms of class. The Moors “are shown as foot soldiers, bowmen, and lancers on horseback, as well as high ranking offices.”¹⁰

During the Almoravid conquests, the Moor enjoyed a higher social status associated with nobleness, glory, intelligence and self-assertion. That class-based view emanated mainly from the Moors’ assertion of their talents in all aspects of life, namely the military one. Hence, Western definition of the Moor underwent a radically major shift. The Moor’s social position and economic status undermined the notion of blackness as an index about “racial inferiority.” The Western image of the Moor continuously deteriorated during medieval times. The gradual triumph of Christians over Muslims during the whole process of the Reconquista was the major denominator upon which such deterioration was based. As Brunson and Rachidi contend “because of his dark complexion and Islamic faith, the Moor became in Europe a symbol of guile, evil, and hate”¹¹ The new position towards the Moor was activated mainly by a Christian religious zeal, the outcome of which was a total racial rejection. When Christian rulers started a xenophobic assault on Andalusian overlords to systematically suppress and “erase every vestige of Moorish cultural influence from their consciousness”,²⁷ the Moor, according to Anouar Majid, stood both as a “scapegoat against whom Castile tried [...] to create the sense of national identity crucial to empire building and to the conquest of the newly discovered continent,”²⁹ and, by extension, as “a foil for an emerging European consciousness.”³⁰ The attempt to bring the independent kingdoms of Spain under religious and political unification started a process of ethnic cleansing on the basis of racial rejection and religious affiliation.

The Moors discussed here refer to the Berbers, the native inhabitants of North Africa, and the Arabs, both of whom were Muslims, who invaded the Iberian Peninsula in the eighth century. These Islamic Moors reigned over what are called now Spain and Portugal for almost eight centuries and left

⁹ *Ibidem*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

tremendous cultural imprints on Europe. Indeed, their scientific Renaissance and cultural power played a vital role in the rise of Christian Europe during the Renaissance times. Their story and history are systematically suppressed and consistently undermined by the official histories of Europe. Their cultural contributions are totally eradicated, implicitly plagiarized or wilfully put aside. Against that intentional fallacy and forced amnesia, it is extremely important to bring into the fore their story and history, their influences and contributions.

Among the Moroccan Arabo-Berber and Islamic leaders who led the Moorish troupes during conquest of Spain was Tarik Ibn-Zyad. Tarik had already been appointed governor of Tangier and other Moroccan territories including all except

*Tangiers, which was ruled by Count Julian. Julian had been allied with Spain which was then under the rule of the Visigoth king Roderick, until Julian accused king Roderick of raping his daughter. To avenge this act, Julian encouraged Tarik to invade Spain. After having received permission from Musa in 711 A.D, Tarik took a scouting force to Spain to assess the prospects of an invasion.*¹²

Ibn Zayad led his military troupes from the Senhaja tribes, and crossed the present Straits of Gibraltar to conquer Spain. What made that military triumph easier and more successful was that “the Moors were not only welcomed by the slaves in Spain, but also by the lower and middle classes, and the Jews, all of whom were severely persecuted by the Christian Visigoths.”¹³ The Arabo-Islamic presence with its cultural influences was at the heart of European Renaissance. Looking at the Western world today and its massive accumulation of knowledge, it becomes

*difficult to visualize and accept the historical facts that chronicle the Muslim’s ascendancy to a high level of knowledge in almost every sphere between the eighth and the fourteenth centuries. The intellectual thrust and openness to learn, translate, absorb and synthesize as much knowledge as possible left an unsurpassed legacy that was to be the precursor and the base of the European Renaissance.*¹⁴

It is this Muslim legacy, which has been systematically suppressed and consistently denied by Western historiography ever since the Renaissance times, which led to the “flowering of science and culture” in Europe. It is hardly recognized that the Arabo-Islamic advancement in knowledge was at the genesis of the European Renaissance. That western-based amnesia is to be

¹² Mamadou Chinyelu, “Africans in the Birth and Spread of Islam,” *Golden Age of the Moor Light of Europe’s Dark Age*, 11 (1991), 371.

¹³ Chinyelu, “Africans in the Birth and Spread of Islam,” 372.

¹⁴ Fatima Agha Al-Hayani, “Islam and Science: Contradiction or concordance,” *Zygon* 40, 3 (September 2005), 567.

resisted, twisted, and undone. Indeed, while Medieval Europe was far behind, Muslim pre-eminence in various fields of knowledge was remarkably powerful and prominently spectacular. Such pre-eminence emanated mainly from the Cairo Academy, which put Egypt and North Africa at leadership in science and mathematics during the Middle Ages.

The great contributions of Arab and Muslim scientists of North of Africa during the Middle Ages were at the genesis of the rise of Christian Europe, which started by the 15th century. The link was the Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula. "In Cordoba, the Caliph Al-Hakam II appropriated money to collect a library of 400,000 volumes of the finest works in the Islamic world. The catalogue of these books alone took up 44 volumes."¹⁵ That is just one instance. Many other Arab libraries, full of books about science, philosophy, mathematics and religion, were appropriated translated and used by Europeans later. It was that legacy that made Andalusia the major power of the Mediterranean in the tenth century in terms of science, culture, politics and economy.

Yet, what still needs to be reflected upon and investigated is Moorish cultural imprints left across European spaces. During the middle ages, masqueraders used to taint their faces in black so they can easily be recognized as Moors and they would dance such dances as "Moresca", apparently named after the Moors. Another type of dance that is still of major popularity in Spain is known as "Flamenco Moro", currently known as Flamenco. The Moors have also introduced several musical instruments including the lute, the guitar and the flute. Moorish music is still reminiscent of the traditional tunes heard in Spain and Portugal, and along the Mediterranean basin. Modern blues in the States has also benefited a lot from the rhythms and melodies of the Andalusian Moors. The Moors also built numerous cities on the Iberian Peninsula and all over North African countries. The remnants of their castles and architectural designs can still be felt in Spain as in Northern Africa and across the neighbouring countries.

The Andalusian philosophers such as Ibn Rochd, Ibn Tofail and Ibn Bajja had a tremendous influence over European thought. Ibn Rochd, as Ismail Ahmed Yaghi contends, was one of the greatest Muslim philosophers to explain Aristotle's work and refine its implications in the light of its articulations by

¹⁵ Al-Hayani, "Islam and Science: Contradiction or concordance," 391.

Muslim predecessors in the Islamic East like Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi.”¹⁶ His privilege of reason was viewed by religious authorities in the West as against the teachings of the church. Accordingly, both his and Aristotle’s opinions were legally prohibited. Still, such prohibition created a lot of resistance. Many Western thinkers would background Ibn Rochd’s philosophy to reject the authority of the church over people’s thought in the eighteenth century; the age of what is known as enlightenment. That Western legacy of instrumental rationalism that prevailed in the eighteenth was founded on Ibn Rochd’s paradigm. Such Western scientists as Albert the Great of Scebria and Styazhkim took Ibn Rochd’s mathematical logic seriously.¹⁷

Not only in philosophy, but also in biology and botany, the Arab and Muslim scientists in the Andalus had a lot to say. They studied plants and herbs to define their importance for eating and medicine purposes. As Yagi confirms, that was part of an Arab tradition that started in the Islamic East. Dwelling on the accumulated findings of the Arab biologist, Ibn Al-Baitar in Egypt, such scientists as Ibn Alawam in the Andalus excelled in the study of soil, the manufacturing of fertilizers and the improvement of the irrigation systems.¹⁸ The conclusion to be drawn from these examples is that the power of the Arab tradition in scientific inquiry moved from the Islamic East into the Christian West through the experience of the Moors. Such a power was accompanied by the rise of the status of Arabic as the language of science in Europe. That fact urged European universities to change their systems following the Arabo-Islamic model.¹⁹

The Arabo-Islamic political, cultural and ethical system in the Iberian Peninsula represented and epitomized a peculiar experience in human history. Shaped up by an Islamic religious perspective whereby the notion of the Other was structurally undermined, though not totally effaced, that system offered a formidable model of human interaction. Under Islamic rule, Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived together, to a large extent and for centuries, in Spain. As Yaghi forcefully argues, the others were allowed to practice their religious beliefs freely and maintained their churches and cathedrals though they had to pay

¹⁶ Ismail Ahmed Yaghi, *al-Hadara al-Islamiya wa atharoha fi al-Gharb* (Riyad: Maktabat al-Abikat, 2001), 132.

¹⁷ Beatrice Lumpkin and Siham Zitzler, “Cairo: Science Academy of the Middle Ages,” *Journal of African Civilization* 4, 1 (1982), 393.

¹⁸ Yaghi, *al-Hadara al-Islamiya wa atharoha fi al-Gharb*, 137.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 138.

some insignificant taxes, neither all of them nor all the times.²⁰ Religious differences between Islam and Christianity, for example, did not prevent Muslim rulers from appointing some Christians as statesmen and officials. Despite such a cultural vision that was mainly based on the coexistence and tolerance legacies of convivencia, and though the Moors, the Muslims of al-Andalus, brought culture and civilisation to Europe, they had to meet their tragic lot of oppression, extermination and expulsion.

Eleazar the Prince of Fez: Moorish Figure in Theatrical Representation

In theatrical representations, Elizabethan Drama has managed to shed light on the figure of the Moor as the Other of Whiteness. For dramatic purposes, Moors are fictionalized for their visual presence and for their dark complexion, as exotic others bearing brutal and dehumanizing behavior towards the community of the White. Such is the case with *Lust's Dominion or the Lascivious Queen*. This play, attributed to Thomas Dekker, was first published in 1657 and focuses on Eleazar, the prince of Fez. It portrays Muslim presence in a Spanish context. Several years before the opening of the play, King Philip has conquered Barbary, has killed King Abdela and captured his young son, Eleazar. The orphaned prince is brought up in the Spanish court, and is eventually converted to Christianity, marries the daughter of a Spanish nobleman and turns into a crusader against the Muslim Turks. Nonetheless, the alien warrior is constantly exposed to the hostility and racial hatred of the white community, which stigmatizes him for his color and denounces his amorous relationship with the Queen of Spain.²¹ Khalid Bekkaoui, in a reading of the play, has suggested that Eleazar self-consciously performs what Homi Bhabha calls a “strategic reversal of domination,” whereby the subaltern enters the official discourse and disrupts its authority.²² The outcome is an effective displacement of racial discourse, which is emptied of meaning.

“Lust’s Dominion” is undoubtedly not about a wicked, diabolical and villainous Moor who contaminates virtuous Spaniards; so much as it is about the deeply rooted intolerance of a Spanish community, laid bare through a Moor. Significantly, then, instead of operating as a mere tool that serves to trigger racial prejudices of a Christian audience, Eleazar disfigures the whole

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 139.

²¹ Khalid Bekkaoui, *Lust's Dominion or the Lascivious Queen* (Fez: Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, 1999), x.

²² Khalid Bekkaoui, *Signs of Spectacular Resistance: the Spanish Moor and British Orientalism* (Casablanca: Najah El-Jadida, 1998), 57.

process by subversively turning the spectator's "gaze onto the Christian actors". The Moor is quite familiar with the Spanish setting; his vigilance and his control of action have allowed him access into the darkest side of their inner souls.

Unlike the Prince of Fez in "The Merchant of Venice", who refers to his blackness apologetically; unlike Othello who conceives of his dark colour as an emblem of evil; and unlike the Ethiopian women who got rid of their blackness and left in a quest to receive the true beauty, in "The Masques of Blackness" by Ben Johnson, Eleazar is aggressively determined to celebrate his complexion and his majestic countenance which have once served perfectly to enchant the Spanish queen. He remains totally self-conscious and definitely in control of the demonic forces that articulate his self-imposed villainy to take revenge and resist racial prejudices at the same time.

Although Eleazar is controlled and intensely exposed to colonial domination (brought up in a Spanish court, Latinized, Christianized and converted into a faithful warrior of the Cross), he actively succeeds in challenging and resisting the Western hegemony by wresting himself from submissiveness, domestication and assimilation. He, instead, asserts his Moorish dignity, power and pride. This is one of the moments of instability where Orientalist discourse becomes vulnerable to challenge. More significant also is how Eleazar manages to create a thwarting ironic game with Blackness. The racial prejudice is immediately re-appropriated and instead of being offended by the friars' statement, Eleazar defensively rearticulates the racial stereotype against its source; strategically reversing the dominant discourse and problematizing its authority". However, if the natives discussed by Homi Bhabha remain unaware of the slippages produced by political and discursive insurrection against racial prejudices, Bekkaoui argues that Moors approach resistance in a self-conscious way. They imaginatively articulate and subvert the potentialities of the dominant discourse by controlling both the prejudiced community and the plot as well. With respect to "Lust's Dominion", Eleazar's displacement of the racial discourse has allowed him effective appropriation and manipulation of the stereotype. He succeeds in dislocating surveillance through the use of racial prejudice as a "subtle weapon" and harshly turns it against its source.

The ability of Eleazar to break through the stereotypical discourse finds its most powerful enactment in the final act where the Spanish prisoners launched provocative racial attacks; yet, all what they got from the Moor is a

teasingly cheerful playfulness which subverts the injurious defamation into “sweet air”, causing the Spaniards to vanish in complete silence for the whole scene. Hence, it is extremely spectacular to see how the Moor has reduced his adversaries into speechless subjection by peacefully absorbing and dispersing the racial curses through twisting colonial stereotype into a delightful joke. “The black prince of devils” and “the diabolically wicked alien” believes that the colonial prejudice can be counter-acted only if it is reinvented into a joke. In fact, Eleazar mobilizes a conscious strategy, a counter stereotypical discourse, to defy and resist the Orientalist representation, penetrate the white discourse and subvert it from within by “challenging, interrupting and muting its authors”; reducing them into absurd figures (these birds). Nevertheless, the tragic defeat of the Moor and the final denouement would occur only when the white characters put on black masks; a significant disguise that brings a happy ending for Spain.

Equally significant in the play as well is that when Zarack starts to undergo a regeneration process. While moving gradually towards a virtuous life, Isabella, the late king’s daughter and emblem of Christian faith, entangles Eleazar’s henchman in a plot to betray his master, slay Baltazar and free the Spanish prisoners. In a certain sense, she adheres to the mask of villainy whereby she spoils her innocence and virtue and “turns Moor”, a fact that renders the representation of the Moor more complex. Significantly enough, we perceive how Eleazar, combating the racial stereotype whereas the Spaniards taint themselves black, reverses the conventional rhetoric of black and white. Moors are literally black but Spanish characters become metaphorically black, but their deeds are truly satanic. Hence, even the violence enacted by Moors on stage is generated by the tragic plot Isabella has planned, rather than by Moorish villainy.

Eleazar’s careful subversion of the racial discourse is ultimately expressed through strategically devised theatrical imageries. The aim, as Dr Bekkaoui points out, is “to present representation as fiction rather than historical truth”; Moorish villainy as mere role playing not as a mere picture of real life, and stereotypes as mere fabrications. So, the association between blackness and evil is a simple theatrical convention rather than a historical fact. Turning everything into mere skilful play, Eleazar distances himself from the evils performed on the stage and thereby appropriating “the Orientalized rendition of Otherness”.

Eleazar’s rebellious speech as he is dying in the final act is very

significant. His bitter defiant voice emerges from the text and carefully aims at shifting the blame to the Spanish villains who are mercilessly and brutally watching him. Yet, what is worth stressing is that Eleazar to dispossess of and prevent his persecutors from accomplishing “the gazing gaze”. He, instead, shifts it onto the enemies; turning them into an object of scrutiny and inciting the audience to try the Spaniards through his point of view.

Eleazar’s spectacular resistance operates more emphatically at the level of form. The Moor is massively visible and verbally present and governs the entire space of the play. He powerfully dominates the stage and his opportunities to talk exceed much more those given to other characters. It’s, indeed, structurally ironical to see that the frequency of his occurrence on stage happens in a setting meant primarily to annihilate and silence the Moors. On the contrary, it’s the Moor who mesmerizes his white opponents and brings them under complete silence.

Arguing against Said’s notion of Oriental powerlessness, Khalid Bekkaoui has proved that Eleazar reverses the configuration of the West as actor and the Oriental as a passive reactor. Eleazar’s valour and verbal presence overrun his opponents throughout the whole play. The other irony which fissures the discursive formations of the play is that the Moors are deported from Spain with no indication that the evil is actually eradicated. The White’s villainy is still hovering; King Philip begins his rule with a Moorish mask and though his identity is revealed, his black paint is not removed. The “Oil of Hell”, as an emblem of sin, still perplexingly darkens the complexion of the white king and his fellows. Hence, the audience must have been left with a disturbing feeling because the white face of virtue continues to be sallied by the Moorish blackness. One is ultimately incited to believe that the White characters are literally what they are supposed to be. Therefore, as the curtain falls, the notion of whiteness and blackness, virtue and villainy are problematized. The Black Moor is definitely there to destabilize the white representation of difference and the entire Orientalist discourse.

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