

Geopolitics of Hope, Despair and the Arab Spring

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Hamid Dabashi. *The Arab Spring: the End of Postcolonialism*. Zed Books, 2012. 272 pp.

In *The Arab Spring: the End of Postcolonialism*, Hamid Dabashi provides a compelling study of the global geopolitical implications of the Arab Spring. The string of uprisings known as the Arab Spring is commonly marked as beginning on December 17, 2010, when a Tunisian man, Mohamed Bouazizi, self-immolated to protest the seizure of his produce cart. This incident sparked widespread dissent in Tunisia, and culminated in President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fleeing the country within the span of a month. The Tunisian protests launched a chain of momentous events in the Middle East and North Africa, leading to a series of uprisings in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Sudan, and Morocco. Writing in response, Hamid Dabashi characterizes the Arab Spring in terms of an affective shift, arguing that the uprisings signal a move away from a politics of despair in the region toward a politics of hope. Written as these events unfold, Dabashi's *The Arab Spring: the End of Postcolonialism* is a timely response to a significant historical moment of the twenty-first century, hopeful in its vision, and theoretically nuanced in its approach.

Dabashi does the important work of historically contextualizing the Arab Spring in a postcolonial trajectory, suggesting that the uprisings contest the postcolonial aftermath of despair that gripped many Middle Eastern and North African countries following colonialism. As he points out, "colonialism begat postcolonial ideological formations: socialism, nationalism, nativism (Islamism); one metanarrative after another" (xxi). Understood in this way, postcolonialism is simply a reinvention of colonialism, writ in other terms. In contrast, Dabashi identifies the Arab Spring as a beginning point for imagining alternatives to the protracted effects of colonialism. This, in fact, is a decisive aspect of Dabashi's analysis: that the Arab Spring signals the "end of postcolonialism." Explaining further in a key chapter of the text, Dabashi argues for the end of postcoloniality as an ideology formation (155). He notes that the beginning of the postcolonial period—presumably marking the end of European colonialism—witnessed the birth of postcolonial conceptions of political sovereignty and nationality. In other words, the postcolonial gave rise to ideologies such as anti-colonial nationalism, Third World socialism, and militant Islamism (159). And these,

according to Dabashi, are merely by-products of the same colonial modernity that produced the postcolonial moment in the first place (159). The Arab Spring, however, highlights the epistemic limits of postcoloniality—its self-exhaustion—while the uprisings’ open-ended potential offers the possibility of imagining alternatives to postcoloniality.

Dabashi asks us to juxtapose the end of postcolonialism with the movements’ open-ended potential, not simply as a theoretical exercise, but to make space for an interpretive and critical vocabulary for responding to the uprisings, and to avoid the tired clichés typically associated with Middle Eastern geographies. Indeed, even as Dabashi asks us to rethink our understanding of the term “postcolonial,” he also outlines how the Arab Spring calls on us to re-evaluate our conception of “revolution.” Situating “revolution” in its historical context, Dabashi notes that the uprisings in the Arab Spring fail to conform to the typical understanding of revolution inherited as a legacy of the French and American cases (59): “‘Revolution’ in the sense of a radical and sudden shift of political power with an accompanying social and economic restructuring of society—one defiant class violently and conclusively overcoming another—is not what we are witnessing here” (5). Key to Dabashi’s argument here is the notion of “an ‘open-ended’ revolt,” which he argues, helps us to “read [the uprisings] in the language that they exude and not in the vocabularies we have inherited” (63). By being attentive to the new language of revolt, Dabashi asserts, we will avoid “assimilating” the Arab Spring into the known tropes of nationalism, socialism, Islamism and Orientalism (63).

Dabashi’s vision is hopeful, seeing in the Arab Spring the possibility of countering hegemonic, “Western” narratives about the Middle East, and opening a space for the historically rich and culturally complex experiences that have always been present in these societies. This is what Dabashi understands as cosmopolitan worldliness, the “actual worldly experiences that have historically existed but that have been overridden and camouflaged” in Western discourses about Middle Eastern geographies (115). The Arab Springs’s terms are at once “inconclusive and open-ended,” he writes, and these terms pose a challenge to both militant Islamism as “domestic tyranny” as well as “globalized imperialism” (11-12). Central to the process of retrieving cosmopolitan worldliness is the concept of delayed defiance that Dabashi sees at work in the uprisings. Delayed defiance for Dabashi signals the measured emergence of a new geography of “freedom, social justice, and human dignity,” imaginative forms that are already cultivated, he contends, in literary and artistic forms of creative expression (226). This process is a gradual one that Dabashi thinks will be cultivated over time, and thus part of a lasting set of political transformations in the region.

Other sections of the text are dedicated to deconstructing the regime of knowledge

that sustains the West's ideological construction of the rest of the world. Understanding geography as a socio-political, imaginative, and deeply fraught category of power, Dabashi argues that the Arab Spring represents a transformative geography, one that challenges what the West presumes to know about the "Middle East," or "the Arab and Muslim World" (45). But the transnational proliferation of the protests—taking place in locations from African to non-Arabic to non-Muslim countries—also challenges the very term, "Arab Spring" (46); the uprisings both exceed and transform the term's meaning. In contesting assumptions about the Middle East, democracy, and racialized subjects' ability/inability to govern themselves, the Arab Spring is "the inaugural moment of . . . a new historical [and] . . . emancipatory geographical imagination" (55). Addressing a wide range of topics and texts through the disruptive conceptual and political force-field convoked by this event, Dabashi develops novel ways of deconstructing the Western epistemic project, and its construction of the Middle East as an object of knowledge:

What we are witnessing unfold in the Arab Spring is an epistemic emancipation from an old, domineering, dehumanizing, and subjugating geography—the geography that anthropologists have mapped out for colonialists to rule. By reclaiming a global public sphere and restoring historical agency, the world is finally discovered to be a planet (54).

The Arab Spring is a thoughtful and incisive analysis of forms of political dissent and activism across the Middle East and Northern Africa. Focusing on different nations in his chapters, Dabashi attempts to chart out the broader implications of the uprisings. In one of his final chapters, for instance, Dabashi offers a wide-ranging study of issues of race, class, gender, and labour migration in the region (175). Dabashi draws attention to the active role that women played in the uprisings, challenging dominant stereotypes of silenced and repressed Arabic and Muslim women (182). He points out that women have been at the forefront of the protests, as agents in the public domain, even as they became targets of gender-based violence by various state-based and nationalist actors. As key agents in labour migration, women also have a role to play in defining a public space that is situated between "the contradictory forces of labor and capital" (202). Although Dabashi's analysis of labour migration further nuances his study of the socio-political and economic forces at work in the region, he perhaps overstates the Arab Spring's potential to contest "the globalized perception of Arab and Muslim women" (182). For even as women and girls created—and continue to create—new forms and figures of agency within the Arab Spring, a globalized politics of representation continues to misrepresent women in the Middle East.

In sum, Dabashi's *The Arab Spring: the End of Postcolonialism* offers a probing reflection on the transformative potential of the Arab Spring. For Dabashi, its unfolding

geography carries immense potential; and yet, as the Arab Spring and its aftermath continues to unfold, ongoing conditions of political, social and economic unrest, extreme violence, and displacement in countries such as Syria and Egypt, have led to the Arab Spring showing signs of becoming an Arab Winter. Acute conditions of violence and loss in the region reflect how hope folds into despair, prompting the question that a reading of Dabashi's book today in turn continually provokes: how might a geopolitics of hope renew itself?