

Identity and Imperialism:

T.E. Lawrence and the Bigger Picture

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Art, Religion, Identity: Christians, Muslims, Jews and Arts of Medieval Spain

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There is an often disregarded connection between the ideas of imperialism and identity. On a macro level, the two seem almost at odds because of an inherent binary created by the idea of imperialism. Edward Said writes, “In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices.”¹ Said describes that while the Imperialist powers at the time of his writing have mostly left or been overthrown by their colonies, the remnants of the power struggle remain, and this is where we find the tension of identity. While T.E. Lawrence came during the time of direct colonialism and long before the time of Said’s writing, he embodies the idea that Said is getting at. He, a born Englishman, struggled with his own identity due much in part to his involvement with Imperialism.

The journey of *Lawrence of Arabia* as depicted in David Lean’s film, based on Lawrence’s own memoir, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, tells the story of one man’s grapple with identity, but shows much larger complications with the personal side-effects of imperialism. It is easy to look at imperialism and colonialism and consider two sides of the issues as separate and conflicting. However, there is a larger issue in play because it can never be that simple, and this binary, though insistent on the scenario, does not speak for the whole of the experience of imperialism. Though of course, Lawrence’s experience does not speak for the whole world, or even most of the world. But his experience does provide insight and understanding of what imperialism truly meant, and perhaps what it still means today.

¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, Vintage Books, 1993), 9.

Edward Said writes,

“...‘imperialism’ means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism,’ which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory.”

He goes on then to quote Michael Doyle saying,

“Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire.”²

Imperialism is rooted in a binary. East and West, Us and Them, Over There and Over Here. The binary complex is seen heavily throughout *Lawrence of Arabia*, and trickles all the way down to the simplest of interactions. Lawrence himself is filled with this dichotomy. Not only does he fail at serving two masters, it becomes ambiguous which master he truly desires. Additionally, Lawrence’s journey presents a number of contradicting dualities that reflect his role in Imperialism. Stubbs writes, “*Lawrence of Arabia* incorporates both Thomas’s adventure story

² Said, 9.

with Lawrence's own psychological account into the same narrative frame, establishing a creative tension between these two trajectories."³ The binary Stubbs references here is that between mind and body. The West and Britain are represented by the mind because they are allegedly the more civilized, more intellectual party. The East, and here the Arabs, are represented by the physical "adventure," because that is all they have—their primitive and untrained physicalities and an endless desert to survive. This theme is present throughout the whole film as Lawrence tries to conquer both the desert and his own psychological dilemmas. The desert plays a huge role in this because it seems to be one of the entities that Lawrence himself cannot conquer and he must rely on the lead of the Arabs to figure it out. Stubbs continues and reflects on the scene when Lawrence first receives his commission, and thinks it will be fun.

“‘Only two kinds of creatures get fun out of the desert,’ Dryden replies, ‘Bedouins and gods, and you are neither.’ In fact, Lawrence seems determined that the desert will make him into both.”⁴

Lawrence's desire to become an Arab is not one that comes out of reverence or respect, but one that comes out of a desire to discover a true identity, which would prove to be a major factor in the overall conflict of Lawrence's biography.

³ Jonathan Stubbs, “‘A Sword With Two Edges’: *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and the End of Empire, *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, 37 (2013): 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

T.E. Lawrence is a bit of an enigma when it comes to identity, or at least he might have described himself as such. Though it is tempting for on to focus on Lawrence's life as it unfolded during the war and throughout his escapades in the desert, to do so neglects a major aspect of his life which was the simple fact of his birth. Lawrence was one of five illegitimate sons his father had with their family governess.⁵ To say Lawrence grappled with this fact would be an understatement. This fact alone began to build the man's identity from the day he was born, no matter how hard he tried to deny it. Of course, one cannot make the claim that Lawrence did everything that he did because his parents were unmarried. But of course, the natural dilemma that arises from that kind of familial situation is undeniable, and would prove especially prevalent in Lawrence's life. One of his biographers writes,

“Lawrence's offhand, sometimes humorous dismissals of the matter not only show his attempt to reject its importance, but reflect also a kind of enlightened social viewpoint, above the battle. A more tolerant social climate might have eased somewhat the burden of Lawrence's conflict over his illegitimacy, but it could not have relieved him completely of the deeper psychological problems it occasioned.”⁶

Mack goes on to describe the conditions under which it was possible that Lawrence discovered his status of illegitimacy, and points out that his parents may have never outright told him, which adds to the sort of trauma that would shape the man. From the beginning of his life, Lawrence

⁵ "Lawrence Of Arabia: T.E. Lawrence." PBS, 2017.

⁶ John E. Mack, *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence* (Little, Brown & Company, 1976), 26.

was unable to have a full-fledged idea of who he was. While of course, his parents were his biological parents, and they carried their lives for the most part the way any married couple would, the secrets of other families and social burden of being a child out of wedlock contributed to the idea that Lawrence was a man without a true identity. Mack continues,

“A person’s inner sense of worth derives from an identification with valued parents, but Lawrence’s parents were on the one hand persons of high ideals and standards while at the same time their actual lives violated fundamentally what they purported to represent. His identification with them includes both elements. He is identified with their ideals, which he accepts, but also with their failure to live up to them. They are, furthermore, deceivers, and he has been made part of the deception.”⁷

Lawrence in his later years would realize not only that his parents were liars, but they made him a part of the lie without his consent. Fast forward to the war era, and the part of his life when Lawrence becomes the man, the myth, and the legend—the repercussions of his birth did not fade.

An inherent dilemma that arises from Lawrence’s identity struggle is his quarrels over his agenda. Lawrence had his own agenda in mind, but struggles to fully understand it based on his identity struggles coinciding with his obligation to carry out the agenda of the British Empire.

⁷ Mack., 28.

Summarily, the Arabs were a pawn for the British to be able to move in order to serve their larger goals. Lawrence infiltrated the Arabs with this goal in mind, but found it much more difficult in practice to think of the Arabs as such. His growing affection for the people mixed with his desire to identify with some group, made it impossible for him to use the Arabs as impersonally as the British would have wanted. The question arises of whether or not Lawrence was an imperialist himself. While it would appear obvious—he is a white man, in a British uniform, sometimes taking orders from the British Empire—that he is. But his situation is much more convoluted. The fact that he was not always taking orders, and was often acting on his own accord would lead to the conclusion that he was anti-imperialist, but working from within the system to complete his own agenda, more in line with an Arab one. Mack writes,

“This dual purpose—of motivating and guiding the Arab Revolt, while at the same time, as a British officer, serving his country’s military and political policies—was inescapable, having been built into his situation from the outset. It renders to a large degree futile the arguments, however carefully based on his own dispatches to higher British authorities, that he was really serving British imperial policy rather than the cause of the Arab independence. He was, by the very definition of his situation—he played, to be sure, a major part in *choosing* to enact his special role among the Arabs—attempting to do both.”⁸

⁸ Mack, 113.

Lawrence himself would likely have agreed. He was struggling to find himself and complete any mission with the best outcome for the Arabs, but that was much easier said than done. He writes,

“In my case, the effort for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith.”⁹

Lawrence describes quite eloquently the dilemma and confusion he went through in the desert. He speaks about how he understood the motives of the British and did not agree with them. In fewer words, he wanted to identify with the Arab peoples, but he knew he could not for that act in and of itself was imperialist. He continues,

“Sometimes these selves would converse in the void; and then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments.”¹⁰

Describing the agony the conflict caused him, he speaks about how he was unable to be grounded in either identity and the dichotomy of the two drove him mad. How this conflict is portrayed in the film is quite interesting. The film is rather orientalist in that it is a British film

⁹ T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: a Triumph* (New York, Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1935), 31-2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

about Arabs, and while the Arabs are portrayed in the most positive light to date, they are not given much agency, and Lawrence is the white savior they apparently need.

While the film itself is wrought with different examples of the orientalism it inherently promotes, Lawrence's character does complicate the situation through Lean's portrayal of him as someone in between the two opposing sides. Stubbs quotes Michael Wilson who wrote an early adaptation of the film before eventually leaving the project.

“A man attempts to shed one identity (English) and to assume another (Arab). He cannot achieve the latter goal; neither can he turn back his previous identity and earlier values. In trying to serve two masters, Lawrence betrayed them both.”¹¹

While this specific theme does not necessarily get carried to the final screenplay, it inevitably works its way into the subtext and overall message of the film. The transformation of Lawrence from someone who calls the Arabs uncivilized barbarians into someone fighting for their independence is the whole of the film. It seems cliché and very Orientalist at first glance: white man thinks that the brown desert people are less than him, until he spends some time in the desert with them and realizes their excellence. But the true message is within the personal conflict of Lawrence. In joining the Arab Revolt, he reflects on his lack of an identity and attempts to accept a new one among his new associates. Stubbs goes on to write,

¹¹ Stubbs, 17.

“The film’s ambivalence towards imperialism and colonial nationalism is no better embodied than by Lawrence himself. Neither colonial nationalist nor European imperialist, Lawrence mediated between these two positions, initially with great success.”¹²

While this is important to note Lawrence’s alleged ambivalence, it is arguable that this message is not as obvious as Stubbs implies. The issue is that while it addresses Lawrence’s pseudo-involvement with the colonization of Arabia—Stubbs references the scene when Lawrence learns of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and Allenby says, “You may not have known but you certainly had suspicions”—the film’s focus is not on the issue of colonialism, but rather the magical adventure of it. That adventure is plainly the romanticization of imperialism. The idea that European folks—military personnel like T.E. Lawrence, or regular civilians—went to Arabia, Africa, India, and Asia to have some exotic and fantastical journey. For Lawrence, that journey was a military operation which he tried to use for his own agenda, for others, as evident in works like Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, it was like a visit to the zoo.

The main issue with these works, beyond the often glossed-over horrific actions of Imperialist nations, is that they silence the “other.” As previously stated, *Lawrence of Arabia* is full of Arab people, of course, but they are often portrayed as tools for Lawrence, rather than as people dealing with something as life-changing as a revolt. They do not have an autonomous

¹² Stubbs, 25.

experience as much as they stand in the background of Lawrence's experience. Said writes about this idea through the lens of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

“For if we cannot truly understand someone else's experience and if we must therefore depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle or that Marlow, another white man, wields as a narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable. The circularity, the perfect closure of the whole thing is not only aesthetically but also mentally unassailable.”¹³

Replace the objects in the quote with Lawrence's narrative, and it still applies. We cannot understand the Arab's experience with Lawrence because we do not have their truth. Lawrence attempts to be the voice for them, but that idea in and of itself is imperialist. He imposes himself on the Arabs, and while he does share an experience with them, his interpretation of that does not account for their missing narrative. But none of that matters when the audience is focused on the spectacle. It's not about white vs. red or east vs. west when they are focused on one man's journey through the desert. In this regard, T.E. Lawrence is the Carrie Bradshaw of Imperialism. Sure, there are all these huge things happening in the world that are important and dire, but the audience begs to know how Lawrence is going to turn out. Is he going to remain friends with the Arabs? Will he *find* himself on this grand adventure? Said speaks directly about T.E. Lawrence,

¹³ Said, 24.

while grouping his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and others he calls the "great imperial narratives." He writes,

"The images of Western imperial authority remain—haunting, strangely attractive, compelling:... Lawrence of Arabia, at the head of his Arab warriors, living the romance of the desert, inventing guerilla warfare, hobnobbing with princes and statesmen, translating Homer, and trying to hold onto Britain's 'Brown Dominion...'"¹⁴

There is little conflict in this summary. It highlights the exciting and impressive aspects of Lawrence's journey rather than his psychological dilemmas or difficulties in battle. Of course, this is not intended to be a comprehensive summary, but it is alluding to the aspects of the story to which the general public would attach their attention. Here lies the problem of the film. It is a distraction from the the problems of Imperialism and the Arab people. The filmmakers spoke mainly truth in regards to Lawrence's narrative, but they make it too easy for the viewer to latch onto Lawrence's life and his dilemmas rather than the people who will be ultimately affected—the Arabs.

The film and Lawrence's life do allude to the idea that he is a mediating figure, and that is a difficult concept to reconcile. As stated, it is too easy from a modern perspective to dismiss Lawrence's whole character based on his physical identity—he looked like an Imperialist, acted in Imperialist favor, so he must be an imperialist. However, the fact of Lawrence's deception

¹⁴ Said, 110.

regarding the colonization of Syria coupled with his preexisting identity issues based in deception make him a difficult figure to sweep into one category. Like Dryden expresses in the film, it is difficult to believe that Lawrence had no idea what was going to happen to the Arab state after the revolt. But taking Lawrence's word for it, and assuming he did not know Britain's plans changes the dialogue and does make it easier to sympathize for him. In watching the fate of the Arabs unfold, Lawrence reflected upon his role and upon himself and wrote about a craving to be respected by his peers. He writes,

“This craving made me profoundly suspect my truthfulness to myself. Only too good an actor could so impress his favourable opinion. Here were the Arabs believing me, Allenby and Clayton trusting me, my bodyguard dying for me: and I began to wonder if all established reputations were founded, like mine, on fraud.”¹⁵

Lawrence's reflections call back to his parents original deception about his identity, and he feels he similarly deceived the Arabs in helping them believe and fight for their independence which was unbeknownst to them, already defeated. At the climax of his story, Lawrence feels though he accomplished so much and perhaps saved the Arabs from the Turks. Although in removing one master, Lawrence indirectly gave them another, he did try to fight in their best interests protesting for their self-governance. By telling the Arabs' story through his memoir and through his actions after the fall of Damascus, it would appear that Lawrence was not a classical

¹⁵ Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, 562.

imperialist. He shared imperialist views at the beginning, but did come around to understanding the plight of what would become a colonized nation.

Contrary to the cliché, there are much more than two sides to every story. In the case of the Imperialism story, there are thousands of sides, and even in the case of Lawrence of Arabia, there are many facets that contribute to an understanding of the man and his history. Imperialism in itself is a multi-faceted issue that while based in a binary, runs much deeper than two opposing entities. Identity is an issue inherent though not always fully examined when discussing imperialism, but it is just as important as the larger affairs. Through T.E. Lawrence's story, we are able to get a sense of what it was like to be both an imperialist and imperialized in a sense. His identity was manipulated and confused by the imperialist complex, and thus he represents the kind of chaos that comes with empire. To trace the origins of this complex would be near impossible as all the ideas and arguments are tangled almost beyond comprehension. But the important take away is that issues like imperialism cannot be understood if taken at face value. There is always more just beneath the surface.

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