



Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks*, Pluto, London 2011, 165 p, L 14.99; \$ 24,95.

Almost 60 years ago, Frantz Fanon published his groundbreaking book “Black Skin, White Masks”, in which he explored the traumatic consequences of an inferiority complex that colonized people felt, and how that led them to identify with the ideology of the colonizer. This book together with “The Wretched of the Earth”, published in 1961, became “the Bibles” of the anti-colonial movement throughout the world. His writings inspired the protest movement that swept across not only the colonized third world countries, but also through the Northern colonial metropolis. In the light of the new US-led policies of neo-colonialism and imperialism, Fanon is more topical than ever.

In the cause of the collapse of the Soviet Union the world situation worsened dramatically. Without adversary, the US “hyperpower” is embarking on a new neo-colonial spree, by attacking one Muslim country after another, i. e. Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia. Other countries, such as Iran and Syria, are meanwhile threatened with invasions. Without the support of “native informers” and “comprador intellectuals” the US Empire could not achieve its expansive goals so easily.

Hamid Dabashi focuses especially on the role of the immigrant “comprador intellectuals” and the “native informers” in the United States and their “contribution” in facilitating and rationalizing the attacks on the Muslim world. The author is Iranian-American, who teaches Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York City and is a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies at the same university.

The author’s main argument is that in present-day North-America and Western Europe “brown has become the new black and Muslims the new Jews”. A re-codification of racist power relations is the modus operandi of an ever-changing condition of domination in which capital creates its own elusive culture. Dabashi’s goal is to highlight an ongoing discrepancy between fact and fantasy that dehistoricizes the criminal events of 9/11 or the attacks in London, Madrid or Mumbai, into political events (which blatant racist implications against Islam in general and Muslims in particular), while at the same time sanitizing the US’ imperial adventurism in Afghanistan and Iraq and “the armed robbery of the Palestinians’ homeland by a band of European colonialists that calls itself Israel”. Through this process, Western imperialists have to come to appear as innocent bystanders, and even, victims of a global barbarism targeting their own civilization. This delusional inversion of facts, and of truth by politics, is of central importance to the author.

Dabashi shows how intellectuals who migrate to the West are often used by the imperial power to inform on their home countries. These “comprador intellectuals”, as designated by the author, are viewed by as “native informers”, designations that have a clearly negative connotation. They are said serving the U.S. Empire on its home front. Many Iraqi exiles prostituted themselves to the U.S. power elite in order to justify the invasion of their home country. Dabshi demonstrates that such a service to the U.S. Empire is a common phenomenon, and examines why and how so many immigrant intellectuals help to sustain imperialism. Their intellectual contributions serve imperialism and their knowledge is according to Dabashi “disposable”. A general knowledge about countries picked out for attacks is mainly produced by think tanks. When the US decided to invade Afghanistan, think tanks and government agencies produced intelligence about the country and used some Afghan informers to back it up. These “native

informers” are invited into talk shows as experts and provided with a national platform in order to explain to their audiences how bad the situation in their country is, especially the situation of women. Before the U.S. attacked Iraq, the Chalabis and their ilk were recruited to play the role of the “native informers”. Fouad Ajami and Kanan Makiya, two prominent “native informers”, assured their U.S. hosts that the U.S. occupiers would be greeted with flowers and sweets, and their neoconservative masters told the public that the invasion of Iraq would be a cakewalk. This supposed cakewalk has lasted already more than eight years, with no end in sight.

The author shows how the mindset of the “native informer” works. For example, Ajami does not serve the U.S. Empire from Southern Lebanon but from Washington D.C. He identifies completely with his host state that threatens the entire Arab world. “We Americans ought to understand how the mind of these Arabs works”, said Ajami! The Iranian writer Azar Nafisi who wrote “Reading Lolita in Teheran” and the commentator Ibn Warraq are severely criticized by Dabashi. Nafisi’s book served as a justification, not only for the attack against Iraq but also to corrupt a culture of revolutionary resistance to colonialism.

“Reading Lolita in Teheran” has a simple plot. The narrator, a female professor of English literature at an Iranian university, born into a wealthy family and educated in Europe and the US, grows weary with the limitations of life in the Islamic Republic. She quits her job, gathers seven among the brightest women at home for a joint reading of several masterpieces of “Western literature”. She connects the characters and the incidents in the novels to their daily difficulties she and her friends experience in Iran. This plot, factual, manufactured or something of both provides the occasion for a sweeping condemnation of not only the Islamic revolution but also the nation that gave rise to it.

This transmutation of Nafisi from a legitimate critic of the Islamic Republic into an ideologue for George W. Bush’s empire-building project, provides a crucial lesson about the way “comprador intellectuals” and “native informers” are being recruited and put to use in the ideological build-up of an otherwise precarious claim to imperial hegemony, so the author. Dabashi names a whole crowd of Muslims who provide their services for the U.S. expansionism by disparaging their own country and culture. “What they are selling their white audiences has little to do with the realities of Muslim societies. They are creating a Muslim enemy.” Dabashi presents a perfect example of this brand of “native informers” in the figure of “Ibn Warraq”. This person seems to be a creature of a self-loathing Muslim who self-flagellates himself pitilessly. “He is the Muslim he abhors, the object of his own hatred.” He justifies his anonymity saying that if he would reveal his identity his life would be endangered.

At several locations in his book, Dabashi takes strong sides with the oppressed Palestinian people who belong to the “Wretched of the Earth”. He simultaneously criticizes US double standards when it comes to Israel’s atrocities, such as the Gaza massacre in 2008/09. The author rightly criticizes Western media, policymakers and scholars of merely talking about “Islamic terrorism”, but never of “Jewish terrorism” or “Christian terrorism”. Dabashi holds the “native informers” responsible for “authenticating and corroborating this demonization of Islam and dehumanization of Muslims”.

At the end of his book he quotes from an article by “New York Times” columnist Thomas Friedman, where Friedman refers to Israel’s brutal massacre in Gaza as an effort to “eradicate” or “educate” Hamas. “If it is out to destroy Hamas, casualties will be horrific and the aftermath could be Somalia-like chaos. If it is out to educate Hamas, Israel may have achieved its aim.” Despite all horrors inflicted by the U.S. military upon Muslim countries in the Middle East, Israel’s atrocities against the colonized

Palestinians and the Islamophobic sentiments encountered the U.S., the author regards the US his home. He does not feel alienated from his home country and from his host country, as an “intellectual exile” (Edward Said) because he has four children who are Americans and he can confront the destructive work of the native informers head-on. “I live in an country where I dare not send a few hundred dollars to a charitable organization in Gaza to help care for people slaughtered by Israel for fear of being accused of aiding and abetting terrorism; yet in this country billions of dollars of the tax money collected from citizens like me are sent on a regular basis to the supreme terrorist organization on the planet, which goes by the name ‘Israel’, to maim and murder my brothers and sisters in Palestine.”

The great value of Dabashi’s book rests in unmasking the dubious role “native informers” play in U.S. society. Their advice may be regarded like a double-edged sword because they tell the American public and their masters what they want to hear and not what they ought to know. The author also sensitizes readers about the new form of colonialism, racism, and demonization of “brown people” by the political and media elites in the Western world. In this devil’s game the “native informers” play an infamous role. They should not be welcomed but marginalized by any open and democratic society. Dabashi’s book will hopefully have a similar revolutionizing impact like Fanon’s famous “Black Skin, White Masks”.

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