

# Crisis at Columbia: Columbia's Hysterical Arabist, Zainab Bahrani

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Crisis at Columbia: Columbia's Hysterical Arabist, Zainab Bahrani  
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The Edith Porada Associate Professor of Archeology, Zainab Bahrani is the author of two books, *Women of Babylon* (a feminist interpretation of Near Eastern art), and a second work, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria on Mesopotamian art*. With Mark van de Mieroop (the former chair of MEALAC), with whom she has a close association, she has translated a book on Mesopotamian history by the French scholar Jean Bottero called *Mesopotamia, Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*.

Van de Mieroop, incidentally, shares Bahrani's distaste for Israel (he has signed the same petitions on divestment from Israel), and is apparently convinced that a reasonable facsimile of the Gestapo is abroad in the land: "I know that my phone is tapped, that e-mails are read, that mail is opened. I have the sense of unease, the loss of privacy, and also the fear to speak out, to write – will what I say tonight be held against me when I have to appear in court."

Bahrani has been much in the news, having written a number of anguished, and furious accounts of what she takes to have been gross negligence by the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Despite her bitterness, in May 2004 the State Department appointed Bahrani as a "Senior Consultant for Culture" to the Coalition Provisional Authority, so as to help in the reconstruction of the National Museum. She attended to this but for a few months before returning to academia.

This study by necessity must quote Bahrani at great length, for it is otherwise not possible to appreciate the repetitious, banal, suffocating quality of her prose, the running-on of non-thought. *The Graven Image* goes for more than 200 pages. Virtually every page overflows with "discourse" and "colonial" and "postcolonial" as all-purpose lexical fillers. Her meaning is so diffuse and obscure, and at the same time so obviously modish, that to read her is an experience

that cannot be conveyed by mere summary.

Early in *The Graven Image* Bahrani announces:

Although I often make use of the language of European criticism and philosophy, it is important to stress that the theoretical base for this study is neither simply Eastern nor Western, being dependent on the writings of both Euro–American and Third World scholars. I would also argue that a labeling of all postmodern theories in the academy as "Western" is misleading and might even be defined as intellectual imperialism, considering the groundbreaking work of numerous non–European contemporary theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Jacques Derrida. (p. 10)

Having established postmodern theory as an authentic Third World product, and defined any criticism as – shudder – imperialism. But then in distinction to her previous statement, Bahrani appears to state that she has gained access to ancient mysteries denied to others:

While I discuss the problematic of narrating the past and interpreting the ancient texts and images, for me, the ancient record itself remains the place to which I return for knowledge of the past. This return to the ancient texts and images is important because in arguing against the Western traditions' representations of Mesopotamia, I base my theory on the Assyrio–Babylonian textual and archeological record. (p. 10)

What is it to be? "Non–European contemporary theorists" or the "Assyrio–Babylonian textual and archeological record?" Both, of course, since her project has higher goals:

Ancient history and archeology continue to be areas of scholarship that are inseparable from geopolitical issues, even if these issues are not the same as the ones that had been of foremost concern to Fanon. Numerous preconceptions regarding the Middle East and Middle Eastern antiquity have gone into the construction of Mesopotamia, and Orientalism continues to operate with its stereotypes of violence, fanaticism, despotism, sloth, and hypersexuality. (p. 11)

Her mission is nothing less than to undo this terribly travesty:

I do hope to dismantle a fabricated conception of this Mesopotamia. ....mine is a reclaiming of that past, not in the sense of nationalist historical identity, however, but as a discursive territory. There are no studies of Near Eastern antiquity written from a position outside the European tradition. Those written in the Middle East, for the most part, repeat Western paradigms because the field of Near Eastern archeology is a European field of knowledge, instituted into the Middle East and North Africa under colonial rule. (p. 14):

Thus situated, she will liberate Mesopotamia past and present, and the

discipline of art history. The heroes and villain are plain to see:

A main thesis of this book is that since the discipline of art history developed during the period of European expansion, it came to rely upon, as well as be utilized by, the imperialist endeavor. Consequently aesthetic discourse today continues to be a site for the play of alterity. In other words, I maintain that the epistemology of separation and difference of Western/non-Western art and aesthetics was originally necessary for the functioning of the discipline, for a notion of a telos in the civilized West, and for building the borders of Western self against barbaric other. I would like to point out here that in using the term West I mean to refer to a Eurocentric identity created by late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Western European discourse. (p. 16)

And of course, imperialist art history played a key role in the imperial subjugation of the world:

A fundamental concept of colonial discourse analysis is that the business of "knowing" other people was a major tool in underpinning imperial domination (Said 1978: 22). Knowing subordinate cultures and representing them through that knowledge, and subsequent exporting to them that knowledge about their subordinate position, was the civilizing mission of imperialism (p. 20)

Alas, without the imperialism and art history Bahrani so palpably abhors, her own mission would be impossible. The recovery of the art, and the civilizations, of the ancient Near East, is the story of Europeans. It was they who came, dug, discovered, carefully retrieved, catalogued, and studied these artifacts. It was not the local Muslims, but Europeans, who appreciated the civilization of Assyria and Babylon. Sir Austen Henry Layard and Sir Leonard Woolley, Howard Carter, at Nineveh, and at Ur, respectively, come immediately to mind. Egyptology was a product not of Egyptians but of Europeans: the Frenchman Champollion, the German Lepsius, hundreds of others. The meticulous study of the civilizations of Mesopotamia by such scholars as Henri Frankfort, Sabatino Moscati, and A. Leo Oppenheim who produced indispensable scholarly works, or those who studied Cuneiform, or those who gathered and preserved smaller artifacts, were Europeans or Americans.

Perhaps Bahrani, like Said before her, simply cannot believe that there is such a thing as disinterested scholarship prompted by curiosity. If Layard and Woolley and Champollion and Lepsius, are not examples of disinterested study of the past, it is hard to know what would so qualify. They were not part of any "colonial" or "postcolonial" venture. They were not promoting imperialism. They were simply studying the past — because it interested them, and because they could. Others studied Stonehenge, or collected arrowheads, or sat as students of the stars, and for the same reasons.

Again and again, Bahrani gives us the Saidian line:

In the first part of this book, I argued that an awareness of the cultural project of imperialism is vital for writing a post-Orientalist history of Mesopotamia or of the Near Eastern world. I further insisted that a post-colonial historiography can be politically meaningful only if it considers the discourse of the present in light of the modes of knowing or structures of reference established in the period of colonialism. (p. 208)

This is nonsense on stilts. What "colonialist" presence was there in Iraq when Layard first began his Assyriological spadework, and Iraq was still part of the Ottoman Empire? Mesopotamia was ruled by the Ottoman Turks. The British drove out the Turks and liberated the Arabs, and remained in Iraq for precisely 12 years – from 1920 to 1932. Then they left. During World War II, as part of the theatre of war, a small British contingent returned to deprive the Nazis – who had many admirers in Iraq – of Iraqi oil. Was that the "colonialism" that so disturbingly informs so much of *The Graven Image*?

Actually, this book does what it set out to, for it does manage to break away from all Eurocentric approaches to discourses of subalternity, or even of meta-alterity, and comes so subversively close in its disjunctive interrogation of the counter or anti-mimesis which is inherently essential to Mesopotamian thought, for as a native of Baghdad and hence a non-European, Bahrani is certainly perfectly placed to perform such a mission of interrogating all postcolonialist as well as narrativised specificity, but obviously not, at the same time, either poststructuralist or post-postmodern universalism, with its customary relativised discourse analysis which seldom lends itself to anticipatory prolepsis, but on the other hand her critique is obviously deeply rooted in Western thought with its alien constructions of identity that give rise to post-essentialism which, in a larger sense, serve merely to violate all the strategic critiques of hegemonic historiographical constructions of essences, whether of the Orient or of scholars who deny the self-referentiality of all postcolonialist essentializing.

I hope that is clear.

Hugh Fitzgerald wrote this piece for Campus Watch, a project of the Middle East Forum, which is designed to critique and improve Middle East Studies at North American colleges and universities. It is part of a series of analysis addressing Columbia University's Middle East Studies faculty. We invite you to read Fitzgerald's introductory essay, and the entries in alphabetical order.

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