

## **Britishness through an Arab eye: Arab Travel Accounts in Victorian England and the definition of Britishness in contrast with the other**

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***Abstract:** This article will explore two sources of Arabic travel accounts, untranslated, on Victorian England from two very influential Arab intellectuals of the time: Kashf almukhabba ‘an funūn Ūrubbā, (Unveiling the Veiled from the Arts of Europe) for Ahmed Faris Al-Shidiāq (1804-1887), a Lebanese intellectual, lexicographer, philologist, essayist, poet, and a very influential scholar of Arabic language and literature. The second account is As-Safar ‘ila Al-Mu’tamar (Travelling to the Conference) for Ahmed Zaki Pacha (1867-1934), an Egyptian philologist, scholar, and politician who visited England in 1892. The two accounts show an interesting contrast between their societies and the British society involving awe and critique. They share their respective authors’ admiration of the British advancement and investigation of its foundations. The accumulated progress in Britain was attributed to qualities of the British people as well as more subtle natural conditions. Yet, the later work of Zaki was written ten years after the British conquest of Egypt in 1882 and was influenced by the expanded role England was playing in politics at home. Zaki was more patriotic in his description of British society and a stronger advocative of resurgence.*

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Throughout the nineteenth century, the affluent or sponsored Englishmen, especially those seeking an Oxbridge post, embarked on ‘The Grand Tour’ in France and Italy in search of the cultural roots of Western Civilisation. As part of their attempt to be better educated and socially polished, they expanded their route to include parts of the Ottoman Empire like Istanbul, Egypt, and the Holy Land. They wrote travel accounts, reports, articles, and produced paintings that all helped formulate the public imagination about this part of the world with which the last important European contact was the Crusades. There has been an opposite, but much less frequented, route of Arab travelers

and intellectuals who travelled to Europe either on state-sponsored educational trips, conference attendance, missionary Christian education, diplomatic assignments, or for touristic and medical trips. The travel accounts written in Arabic for Arab readership at the time were widely read, creating tension within the Arab and Muslim communities between tradition and modernity, strongly impacting redefinition of the self, and inspiring a roadmap for renaissance. Scholars like Timothy Mitchell argued that Western modernity was shaped as an interaction between the West and the non-West.<sup>1</sup> It is also plausible, in the same way, to argue that the Eastern encounter with the West, starting from the French expedition to Egypt in 1798 onwards, was a main motivator to the reform movements and the re-envisioning of the self that developed within the Eastern societies.

In this light, one can read the travel accounts of Arab travelers to Europe including Al-Shidiāq, who was the editor-in-chief of one of the most widely read newspapers of the nineteenth century Arab world and is considered by some scholars to be the writer of the first modern Arabic novel.<sup>2</sup> He had a rich intellectual and religious journey, including conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism and then to Islam. He lived in Beirut, Cairo, Malta, and England, married a British wife, and spoke Arabic, English, French, and Turkish. Al-Shidiāq's remarks on British culture are profound and his account is detailed and statistical. His multifaceted intellectually plural nature made him a good candidate to introduce Arab culture to the English and English culture to the Arabs. After an assignment with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Malta, he moved to England and lived there between 1848 and 1855 to work on a missionary project of translation of the Old Testament<sup>3</sup> to Arabic with a British counterpart in Barley, a small village in Hertfordshire.<sup>4</sup> The book highlighted many aspects of British modernity, stressing the impact of weather and natural conditions on the endeavor of the people, the great division between the elite and the working class in England rule of

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<sup>1</sup> *Questions of Modernity*, ed. by Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Esmat Nassr, Ahmed Faris Al-Shidiāq, *Kashf almukhabba 'an funūn Ūrubbā* (Alexandria: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Misry Al-Lubnani, 2011), 34; 'Āshūr, Radwa, 'Al-Ḥadāṭha al-Mumkina: Ash-shidyāq Wa-'s-sāq 'ala 's-sāq ; Ar-riwāya Al-ūlā Fil adab Al-'arabī Al-ḥadīṭ (Cairo: Dar Al-Shrūq, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Agius Dionisius, 'Arabic Under Shidyāq in Malta 1833-1848,' *Journal of Maltese Studies*, pp.19-20, 52-57.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed F Al-Shidiāq, *Kashf almukhabba 'an funūn Ūrubbā* (Cairo: Hindawi Publishing Cooperation, 2014), <[www.hindawi.com](http://www.hindawi.com)> [access date], p. 17.

law, and division of labour. Al-Shidiāq was very critical of the social division in England, the lack of seriousness and the self-absorption of the students of Oxford and Cambridge, the proficiency of Orientalists and foreign language and culture tutors in Britain.

Al-Shidiāq admired the *Laissez-faire* culture in England and the focus of every individual on his own affairs. The specialisation of every government official and being bound by the roles and responsibilities of his duty is something he missed greatly in the East. ‘I admire in the English their lack of intrusion and burden they exercise on foreigners [...] that if they see someone lying down in the street they will not ask him why is he doing what he is doing’.<sup>5</sup> He also admired the specialisation and the rule of law in England. Government officials were bound to their respective authority, leaving no room for an ambassador to mingle in matters of homeland, or for a member of parliament to regulate the market and instruct sellers. ‘In the East, however, every official is exceeding his authority that a tanneries regulator can control the skins of people, the judge or the bishop may forfeit the right of the rightful person for a letter he dropped in speech, ... the policeman may arrest any person, and the military officer may draw his sword on any neck he wants’.<sup>6</sup>

He also highlights that there is more to their relationship with strangers and foreigners than meets the eye. ‘The first trait that a stranger sees in them is their indifference to him, and their aversion to him, so they do not rejoice at his joy, nor grieve for his sadness’.<sup>7</sup> However, he attributes this impression not to racist or arrogant attitudes of the British, but rather as part of a bigger framework of minding one’s own business. Every British person, he remarks, is concerned only with his own affairs. The farmer only knows about ploughing and planting, and the blacksmith follows no news except the price of iron and the demands of metal products. This influences domestic political stability as well.

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 60.



Figure 1. Colorized photograph of Ahmad Zaki Pasha (1867-1934), wikimedia, (online), <https://bit.ly/3JfDA6F>, (accessed 22 March 2022).

It is for that reason that the subjects do not object much to their rulers, and do not seek to know what their leaders inquire. Therefore, riots rarely occur between them, unlike the people of France, for each one of them intrudes much on the affairs of their rulers. This is the reason for the large number of soldiers needed there [in France] and the small number here [in England]. The soldiers in England do not exceed twenty-five thousand, which is like a drop in the ocean if compared to the seventeen million Englishmen.<sup>8</sup>

The checks and balances of English authorities were a subject of continuous admiration. The rule of law, equality before the law, and lack of abuse of power, according to Al-Shidiāq, rendered

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 60.

every Englishman 'not afraid that someone higher than him might forfeit his rights, for everyone is equal before the law, and that the judge and the general have power over the rich and the poor, and the smart and the dull'.<sup>9</sup> He gave an example of how a small wine trader's case against the Duke of Cambridge, also the Queen's cousin, could not escape being brought before a judge. Al-Shidiāq portrayed the British as generally inclined to specialisation, preferring not to make a fuss in all their affairs, and concerned mainly with their national peace. On the domestic level, he praised British wives for their contentment, gratefulness, and concord with their husbands. He described England as the land of good women and the mine of wives. 'Whoever marries from them is lucky for good living and will please his eye of what he sees of the cleanliness of his house, the economy of sustenance, and the peace of mind from excessive jealousy'.<sup>10</sup> This sole interest in their interests, focus only on their concerns, and lack of appetite for disputes is a foundation of peace that jumpstarted British wealth and development despite the great social division that will be discussed later.

However, impressed by the fruits of civilisation in England, Al-Shidiāq was keen to put the English advancement in perspective. In numerous occasions of his book, he toned down the sense of awe resulting from seeing the riches and advancements in London by stressing the massive difference between the English capital and the countryside. He said:

Whoever comes to London and glimpses those great shops, great jobs, riches and wealth, might think that all the Englishmen are rich and happy. That is far from truth. The people of the villages here are like the people of the villages in the Levant, or even more austere. You often come across tales that indicate the misery and austerity of their livelihood, which does not happen as such in other countries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Shidiāq, pp. 54, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Shidiāq, pp. 20-21.

He refers to the land ownership structure in England that vested ownership in around 60,000 families of landlords, rendering masses of peasants too poor to afford milk and meat, lacking basic hygiene, and evading some religious obligations like baptism to save its fees. ‘It is common to read in the newspapers about people who fled their children because of destitution, or died of hunger, or of cold when sleeping on filthy wet places’.<sup>12</sup>

This class division resonated in Oxford and Cambridge, the two capitals of knowledge. Al-Shidiāq stayed in both cities and engaged in discussions with professors, especially those teaching Eastern Languages and theology.

‘It is not possible to learn there except with massive fees. No one is admitted there except the sons of the elite and the rich, especially in Oxford. In there you see the student with his nose held high and his cheek turned away [in arrogance] as if he is the King of China and India. While in fact most of them spend their time riding horses and chasing pleasures turning a blind eye to the inquiry of knowledge until just before the exam, he prepares the answers to some few possible exam questions, he memorise them, narrates it to his teacher, and then earn a deed authorising him to the rank of teachers’.<sup>13</sup>

He also accounts for horrible cases of murder reported in the English newspapers: ‘Wives poisoning their husbands, parents killing their children, or vice versa, and people committing suicide, that are far higher than other countries, with the greatest causes being love and deprivation’.<sup>14</sup> He sees it as a contradiction that selling poison is permitted and getting it is accessible while harming animals is strongly and seriously punished. He attributes this contradiction between measures taken to protect humans and measures taken to protect animals to the ‘corrupt principle of free trade’<sup>15</sup>. While selling poison is prohibited in France and Malta except with the permission of a

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<sup>12</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 83.

doctor, he criticizes its allowance in England [But in England] it is as if that the beasts are more beneficial to the state than the children of Adam. This occurs based on the corrupt principle of “free trade”. He said:

Selling poison is needed for farmers to kill predators of their cattle. However, evading the bigger harm [of using it to murder human beings] is more worthy to follow. It is this principle of free trade that has made it easier for people to cheat in everything: from food and drink to everything that is buyable and sellable. A person with good taste would prefer to live among the savages and eat what the earth grows in its original condition than living with people who know the number of stars in the sky and the sand in the desert and yet they eat what would harm the beasts, not to mention humans. Everything that exceeds its limit is harmful.<sup>16</sup>

Echoing what later would be the focus of the *Annales* (The prominent French school of history and historiography), Al-Shidiāq always maintained that events are less fundamental to the creation of history and advancement in England if compared to the collective power of mentalities that shaped them, along with subtle but influential natural conditions that acted slowly to shape the British modernity. Although his main objective is to invoke an Oriental resurgence by displaying his admiration to the British qualities and advancements, he was keen to put that in perspective and show that the Orient, too, has the conditions that if capitalised upon would produce its own version of modernity. He highlighted the role of weather as an important influencer of the English advancement.

It is no secret that the people of hot countries are smarter in mind and quicker in understanding than the people of cold countries; except that they do not have the patience for hard work and are predominantly sagging. For there is no great deter-

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p. 83

mination to embark on dangerous endeavors, they cannot catch up with the people of cold countries in glory and wealth, unless they have a special advantage in the presence of minerals and natural resources such as India, for example. Therefore, most of the conquerors and invaders came from the north, the Arab peninsula is an exception in that. Their days in the winter are very short, so they are forced to work at night, and their hands might be paralysed because of the severe cold.<sup>17</sup>

Moving to the second work, the first major difference between the travel of Zaki and that of Al-Shidiāq is in timing. Zaki Pacha embarked his trip one decade after the soldiers of Britain had set foot on the Egyptian soil, occupying Egypt in 1882. He was a renowned Egyptian philologist, linguist, politician, and secretary of the Egyptian cabinet. Zaki spoke fluent Italian, French, and fair English and Spanish, published numerous books, and edited various manuscripts. He is known to have introduced punctuation marks to the Arabic language. His intellectual influence on Arabic language and pan-Arabism granted him the title of “*Shaykh Al-urūba*” (Dean of Arabism) and his house the title of “*Bayt Al-urūba*” (House of Arabism)<sup>18</sup>. He travelled to England in 1892 in a state-sponsored trip to attend ‘The International Congress of Orientalists’ in London, and wrote a book titled “*As-Safar ila Al-Mutamarr*” (The travel to the Conference)<sup>19</sup>. He later represented Egypt in the subsequent congresses held in Geneva 1894, Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, and travelling again for the Orientalist’s congress in Hamburg in 1902 and Athens in 1912.<sup>20</sup>

Written mainly for Egyptian and Arab readership, Zaki wanted to invoke the patriotic sentiments of the Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim people and was keen to show how the social solidarity and patriotism is very strong in England and one of the reasons they dominated the world at that time. In counting the attributes that put them where they are, Zaki described the British that ‘their love

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Shidiāq, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> Anwar Al-Jindi, *Ahmed Zaki* (Cairo: The Egyptian Institute for Writing, Translation, Printing, and Publishing, 1963), p. 4

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed Zaki, *As-Safar `ila Al-Mu` tamar* (Cairo: Hindawi Publishing Cooperation, 2013) <www.hindawi.com>.

<sup>20</sup> Nazik Saba Yared, *Arab Travellers and Western Civilization* (Beirut: Noufal Publishing, 1992), p.146.

for their country, for themselves, and for their fellow men is unconditional'<sup>21</sup>. He gives examples how Englishmen prefer to speak in their own language to foreigners even if there is a different language they share with that foreigner. They only use their own currency, and they use their own units of length and mass even though they might believe in the superiority of the metric system. 'If you go to a store', he said, 'to request a product that some other nation is famous for, the salesman will confirm he has it, but will strongly advise you to take the English alternative that, he claims, is better in all aspects'.<sup>22</sup>

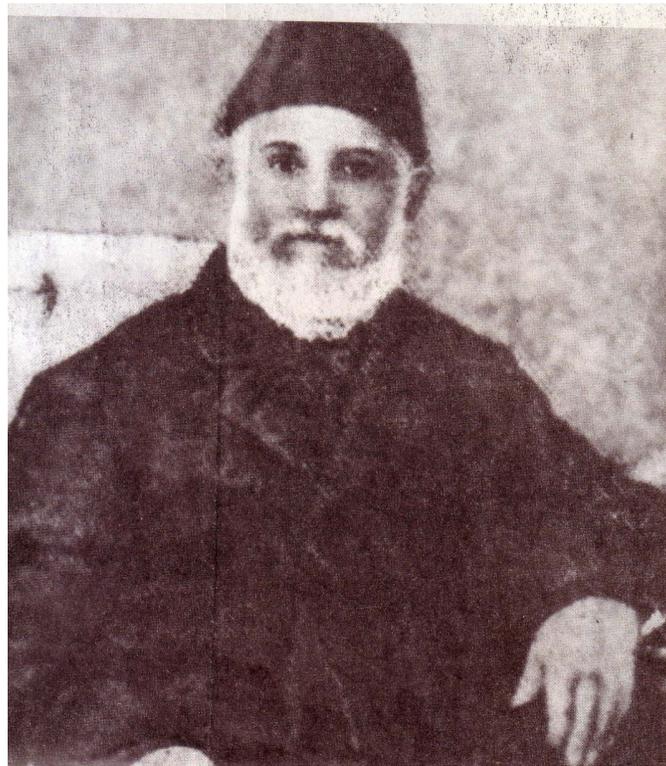


Figure 2. Ahmed Faris Al-Shidyaq, Tareekhcom, (online), <https://bit.ly/3tDqoEZ>, (accessed 22 March 2022).

This patriotism manifests itself also in the statues of people who did great services for the nation that one finds in every square, garden, and street of England so that time cannot erase their memory.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Zaki, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Zaki, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Zaki, p. 37.

Is it necessary to remind my dear countrymen', Zaki said, 'that perpetuating the memories of the eminent glories of those who served the country is the greatest motivator that uplifts souls, stirs determination, limits strife, and necessitates action, so that the nation seizes the greatest results ... without being always in need of the foreigner and the intruder. Can't we walk except by the lantern of their light?!'<sup>24</sup>

This love for themselves and their nation is coupled with seriousness, hard work, and admiration of independence. He describes young ladies of England saying:

The people of the British nation believe they were only created to work and gain, and the love of independence in them has reached a level almost unimaginable to the mind. Some girls in noble families go to work in painting, drawing, embroidery, and teaching to make a living on their own and do not depend on their families despite their wealth and luxury. Among those girls are those who prefer estrangement away from home in countries like India, Australia, and Canada over remaining at home unemployed and immersed in idleness and laziness. This is also the case of young men.<sup>25</sup>

In that, he from one side attributes the British impressive advancement of the time to some qualities of the people, but from the other side calls upon people of his own to seek ways for their own independence and work hard to earn their own living and create their own produce. He refers to the British by comparison when he said that 'unlike every other nation, they consider poverty a defect.' He clearly admired their work ethic, comparing them to bees, and the fact that even the sons of an affluent man would prefer to earn, to use his metaphor, 'out of their own sweat'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Zaki, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Zaki, p. 86.

<sup>26</sup> Zaki p. 86.

He attributed British advancements also to some structural and systematic reasons not only to social attributes. The system of free trade, partially criticised by Al-Shidiāq, and the competition among corporations was for him one of the main motivators of British advancement.

Corporations and societies being in an admirable competition is the foundation of this movement and the main reason of this progress. Whenever one looks to any field of activity, he will see it handled by one of those corporations. The government does not interfere except by high-level regulation and surveillance to protect people from the transgression of those companies. Other than that, people in their own right are active and diligent in getting results and gaining profits in a way that promotes their nation without being dependent on the help of the government (...) Even the invasion of India was carried out by a company, and the examples are countless.<sup>27</sup>

The British Empire had an unprecedented expansion in the middle of the century with increased influence in Egypt and the Levant. This increasing influence and military involvement had an imprint on how the Arab travelers' accounts imagined and portrayed England. Some other travel accounts not considered in this paper, like the writings of Muhammad Farid and Muhammad Ibrahim Al-Muwailhi had even stronger critique of Britain and enmity against it. The changing power dynamics were influential on the discourse of the writers. Sharing the admiration of the quantum leaps of legal, bureaucratic, scientific, and technological progress in England, the writers also shared the common attribution of the grounds of this progress not to events or abundance of resources but to the collective rational and social qualities common between the people of the Island. The subtle and slow factors of climate and location did play a role, but it was what the British hands reaped that they admired and called upon their peoples at home to learn from; a call not uncommon almost two centuries later.

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<sup>27</sup> Zaki, p. 86.

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