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# Reclaiming Ishbal: Opposing European Dominance in Hiromu Arakawa's *Fullmetal Alchemist*

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## Abstract

This talk explores Europe's portrayal as a violent, militaristic, colonizing force from the perspective of a Japanese manga. Hiromu Arakawa's manga series *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2001-2010) is set in Amestris, a fictional country where alchemy has become one of the most advanced sciences. Throughout the series, Arakawa establishes an analogy between Amestris and an early twentieth-century European country by portraying street signs and official documents in English, using German, Dutch or English names for main characters, and drawing similarities between the militaristic regime of Fuhrer President King Bradley and Nazi Germany. The latter example is complicated with the introduction of the Ishbal Civil War between the westernized Amestrian Army and the religious people of Ishbal. By exploring the Amestris-Ishbal relationship as part of an East-West dichotomy, this talk exposes the text's challenge to European Orientalist portrayals of the East. In doing so, I trace the development of "Scar"—an Ishbalan refugee who survives the war and goes out on a journey of vengeance against the Amestrian Army. Scar functions as a threat to Amestrian—or European—political control due to his autonomous and active portrayal, which undermines Orientalist depictions of the East as uniform and primitive. This phenomenon, I argue, reclaims an authentic Ishbalan identity that is not filtered through a European Orientalist perspective. Finally, by looking at Scar's decision towards the end of the series to cooperate with the Amestrian Army's new leadership, I explore Scar's deconstruction of his complex Amestrian-Ishbalan identity.

## Keywords

*Fullmetal Alchemist*, Europe, Orientalism, Identity, Transcultural

## Introduction

Manga—or Japanese comics—has become increasingly popular in Western societies in the last few decades, reaching vast audiences all over the world (Levi 2013, 3-5, 9). As Japanese culture became part of a global market and Western cartoons have influenced Japanese art and literature, the manga has surfaced as a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures (Goldstein-Gidoni 2005, 156-157; Levi 2013, 4-5). Hiromu Arakawa's *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2001-2010), one of the most internationally popular manga, has sold over 70 million copies worldwide, and continues to inspire various adaptations, from animation through film and novels to video games (Square Enix, n.d.).

*Fullmetal Alchemist* is set in Amestris, a fictional country where alchemy has become one of the most advanced sciences. Throughout the series, Arakawa establishes a clear analogy between Amestris and an early twentieth-century European country by portraying street signs and official documents in English, by using German, Dutch, or English names for main characters—such as Van Hohenheim, or Alex Armstrong—and by drawing similarities between the militaristic regime of Fuhrer President King Bradley and Nazi Germany. These analogies are accompanied by numerous references to European literary traditions, like mentions of the Icarian Myth, allusions to the seven deadly sins, or depictions of Faustian figures. The similarities between Amestris and Europe are further developed by the "Ishbal Civil War" between the westernized Amestrian Army and the religious people of Ishbal, which simultaneously employs and undermines Orientalist discourse.

By exploring the Ishbal-Amestris conflict in the context of East-West relations, I argue that *Fullmetal Alchemist* challenges Orientalist conceptualizations of the East. To do so, I will explore textual and visual representations of Ishbalan people as Oriental, and examine the portrayal of the European Amestris as a violent, militaristic, colonizing force. It is important to note here that the series never explicitly mentions Europe, Asia, or the Middle East, but rather depicts Amestris and Ishbal as metaphorical representations of West and East, respectively. I will continue my analysis by focusing on "Scar," an Ishbalan refugee whose development from villain to anti-hero critiques European imperialism, Orientalism, and the criminalization of native resistance. Finally, I will examine the deconstruction of Scar's complex Amestrian-Ishbalan identity as a symbolic act that signifies the formation of non-nationalistic identity.

## Ishbal as Orient and Euro-Amestrian Violence

My approach to the Ishbal-Amestris conflict in *Fullmetal Alchemist* is structured by Edward Said's Orientalism. In 1978 Said defined "Orientalism" as a patronizing discourse that produces and maintains the West's authority and dominance over the East (Said 1978, 3-5). His work analyzes the cultural and political division of the world into West—representing Europe and the United States—and East—referring to the Euro-American experience of the Arab world and "the Far East" (Said 1978, 17). According to Said, Orientalism is constructed upon "a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans," with this dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'

maintaining a "relationship of power" between the West and the East (Said 1978, 7). He argues that "Europe (or the west)" is often portrayed as the Orient's "contrasting image, idea, personality, [or] experience" (Said 1978, 1-2). The West is often represented in Western literature as "rational, developed, [and] humane," with the European identity being "a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said 1978, 7, 300). In contrast, the Orient is represented as "underdeveloped, inferior ... uniform, and incapable of defining itself," it is "something either to be feared ... or to be controlled," and it is "always shown in large numbers," exhibiting "no individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences" (Said 1978, 287, 300-1).

These representations of Europe and the Orient are reflected in depictions of Amestris and Ishbal. First, Amestris' central position in *Fullmetal Alchemist's* fictional world aligns not only with Europe's centrality on world maps, but also with the Eurocentric mindset that guides Orientalist discourse. Ishbal's geographical position in the desert to the East of Amestris raises clearer connections to Orientalism, with volume 15 of the manga describing the land as follows: "Ishbal is a harsh country filled with nothing but rocks and sand. It's not surprising that an environment like that gave birth to a religion with such a severe code of conduct—or that their people became so resilient" (Arakawa 2016b, 22). This description echoes Said's criticism of Western representations of Jews and Muslims, who "as subjects of Orientalist study, were readily understandable in view of their primitive origins" (Said 1978, 234). "[No] Semite," Said contends, "could ever shake loose the pastoral, desert environment of his tent and tribe" (Said 1978, 234). Similarly, Ishbalans, too, cannot avoid the desert environment that frames the Amestrian narration's implicit European gaze on their culture and reduces it to an exoticized geographical location.

*Fullmetal Alchemist's* fifteenth volume also features a historical review of the military occupation of Ishbal and the Ishbal Civil War. The narrative opens a few years after Amestris' annexation of Ishbal, during which an Amestrian soldier shoots and kills an Ishbalan child, prompting riots that escalate into a civil war. Volume 15 recounts the Ishbal Civil War from this point in the Amestris-Ishbal conflict, parts of which are related through the perspective of Ishbalan resistance, and parts follow the Amestrian soldiers' experiences on the battlefield.

Throughout the volume, Amestrian characters maintain an Orientalist distinction between 'us' and 'them.' Amestrian soldiers often refer to the resisting Ishbalans as "those terrorists," "those damn Ishbalans," "Ishbalan dogs," "those animals," or "those Ishbalan fools" (Arakawa 2016b, 35, 63, 108, 132). Aside from the dehumanizing Orientalist language portraying Ishbalan natives as irrational savages, the repetition of the pronoun "those" in the English translation emphasizes a distinction between the two identities: Ishbalan and Amestrian. Much like the Orientalist differentiation between European and non-European identities, Amestrian discourse relies on "a collective notion identifying 'us' [Amestrians] as against all 'those' non-[Amestrians]" (Said 1978, 7). Amestris thus becomes a metaphorical representation of Europe in the text, while Ishbal functions as an Orientalized East.

This distinction is also emphasized visually. While all Ishbalans have dark skin, red eyes, and white hair, Amestrians are depicted as either blond or dark-haired and oftentimes as blue-eyed. These visual distinctions create a homogenized portrayal of Ishbalans that undermines Ishbalan individuality. In an episode of the animated *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* (2009-2010), this visual distinction becomes explicit when the Amestrian soldier shoots and kills an Ishbalan child (*Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*). While the colors in this scene are mostly shades of gray, as if to frame it as a flashback, the soldier's and the child's eyes are distinctively colored blue and red, respectively. The Amestrian soldier's stance of power, physically looking down on an "underdeveloped" Ishbalan child, emphasizes the West's patronization over the East, and portrays the European Amestris as a superior adult in comparison to the "non-European," inferior Ishbal (Said 1978, 7, 300).

Depictions of Amestrian dominance are also expressed in the country's portrayal as Imperialist power. In "Antimodernism as the Rhetoric of Steampunk Anime," Elizabeth Birmingham relates Amestris' militarism to an "imperialist and colonialist teleology that includes genocidal wars of conquest" (Birmingham 2014, 75). This teleology is made explicit in a conversation between two Amestrian soldiers who wonder why the war continues if "Ishbal has no significant natural resources, [and] little usable land" (Arakawa 2016b, 67). To them it makes no sense to conquer and colonize these lands, unless there is "something valuable here that [they] don't know about" (Arakawa 2016b, 67).

Imperialist expectations of financial gain from political conquest are coupled in the series with graphic representations of Amestrian violence. Volume 15 first prophesizes the Ishbal genocide in images of human experimentation, perhaps referencing the war crimes committed during the Holocaust by Nazi physicians, like Josef Mengele (Arakawa 2016b, 44-47, 79-80). Other visual allusions to ethnic cleansings include mountains of dead bodies, burnt members of the resistance, and refugees with severed limbs (Arakawa 2016b, 51-2, 61, 69-70, 141, 151). These violent images culminate in an extreme example of violence in the character of Solf J. Kimblee, a soldier skilled with destructive alchemy, who is more concerned with the aesthetics of his murders than with human life (Arakawa 2016b, 132-3).

This is not to say that violence in the text originates exclusively from Amestrian soldiers; *Fullmetal Alchemist* depicts graphic violence on both sides. However, while Ishbalan violence is criminalized as acts of terror, Amestrian violence is often rationalized as 'necessary evil' for protecting Amestrian life. When an Amestrian soldier, for example, questions the war's legitimacy, his commander rebukes him by asserting that "if you don't fight, your comrades will die!" (Arakawa 2016b, 96). Despite being unsettling at times, Amestrian violence—unlike Ishbalan violence—is thus framed in the text as a means of protecting life rather than taking it. This phenomenon echoes Said's review of Orientalism: not only is Amestrian violence rationalized to portray conquest as humane or reasonable, a contrasting effect dominates representations of Ishbalan resistance as sadistic terrorism.

## Reclaiming Ishbal: Resisting Orientalist Discourse, Opposing European Dominance

*Fullmetal Alchemist* explains this criminalization of Ishbalan violence through its portrayal of Scar—an Ishbalan refugee who survives the Ishbal Civil War—as a threat to Amestrian dominance. Following the civil war, Scar goes out on a journey of vengeance against State Alchemists working for the military. He is introduced in the second volume of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, thirteen volumes prior to the historical context regarding Ishbal provided by volume 15. Chronologically, volume 2 is set several years following the civil war. Scar's mysterious character is thus constructed upon Amestrian perception of his appearance and actions, rather than on the tragic history of his people. This construction reproduces the Orientalist European gaze representing the East in Western literature.

It is no surprise, then, that Scar's first appearance is associated with violence. In volume 2, the series' protagonists, Edward and Alphonse, meet the alchemist Shou Tucker and his daughter, Nina. Tucker is an expert creator of chimeras, "artificial fusion[s] created by alchemically 'marrying' two genetically dissimilar life forms" (Arakawa 2016a, 10). When Edward and Alphonse visit Nina, they discover that Tucker has irreversibly turned her into a chimera by fusing her with the family dog. After expressing rage and mourning over the violation of Nina's body, they report Tucker to the Military Police, which places him under house arrest until his trial. At this point, Scar first appears in the manga. He forces his way into Tucker's house, kills the soldiers guarding the area, and murders Tucker (Arakawa 2016a, 45). He then kills Nina, and prays as he exits the house: "Lord God, who created everything in this world ... two souls have now returned to your side. Please take pity on them ... and grant them forgiveness and peace in your loving embrace" (Arakawa 2016a, 49).

These pages visually portray Scar as a threat to Amestrian dominance. The text's concealment of Scar's eyes with shadows or the glare of his sunglasses and the depiction of sweat on Tucker's frightened face associate Scar's character with a sense of danger (Arakawa 2016a, 45-47). Scar's posture in killing Tucker and Nina significantly mirrors the aforementioned murder of an Ishbalan child by an Amestrian soldier. Here, the roles are reversed: Scar is active and powerful, superior to the passive, crouched Amestrian alchemist and his daughter. The graphic depiction of these murders and the reversal of power in Scar's interaction with Tucker and Nina portray him as a threat to Occidental Amestrian political dominance, as "something either to be feared ... or to be controlled" (Said 1978, 287).

Furthermore, the association of Nina's murder with Scar's piety exemplifies post-9/11 Orientalist perceptions of the threatening Middle East. According to Bruce Duncan's "Islam, Peacemaking and Terrorism," the "widespread alarm about Islamist terrorism is forcing the world ... to consider ... the relation between Islam as a faith and the terrorist activity of Muslim extremists" (Duncan 2015, 206). Scar's obsession with his faith seems derivative of the same notion, as the text frames his threat to Amestris within the context of religion. The text even seems to draw on modern representations of Islam as "a religion of the sword" that "resonate very well with the neo-orientalist trend in American academe" by having Scar refer to himself as "an instrument of divine judgment" (Tuastad 2003, 594; Arakawa 2016a, 105).

Perhaps the greatest textual representation of Scar's challenge to Amestrian authority and Orientalism is his name. Volume 2 of the series reveals that "Scar" is not his real name, but rather a moniker attached to him by the Amestrian military based on a "large x-shaped scar on his forehead" (Arakawa 2016a, 73). Since the Amestrian authorities are unaware of Scar's real name, race, or nationality, they impose a fictive identity on him by naming him "Scar." This imposition is complicated in volume 15, which reveals that the x-shaped scar was caused by Kimblee, the same State Alchemist who used destructive alchemy to murder Ishbalans in the Ishbal Civil War (Arakawa 2016b, 141-4).

The name "Scar," then, references two forms of political oppression. First, the scar is a constant physical reminder of the Amestrian conquest that resulted in the genocide of the Ishbalan people. Second, it is an Amestrian creation, a product of Amestrian violence and imperialism that is imposed onto the Ishbalan man by his very oppressors. The fact that Scar comes to be known in the series by this name alone—since his original Ishbalan name is never revealed—is a strong example of Amestrian dominance, as he is bound to the identity manufactured and physically inscribed on him by imperialist conquest.

Yet, the name "Scar" also provides the character with individuality that diverges from Orientalist portrayals of Ishbalan identity. While the Ishbal Civil War occasionally depicts Amestrians on the battlefield acting as individuals, Ishbalans are "shown in large numbers" (Said 1978, 287). Yet, after the war, Scar functions as an individual. As "Scar" he acts independently, and with his sunglasses covering his red eyes, he is also able to conceal his racial identity as an Ishbalan. This concealment functions as an act of liberation that enables Scar to reclaim an authentic complex Ishbalan identity without having it filtered through an implicit European Orientalist gaze that mistreats him as a part of a passive collective Orient.

At the same time, Scar's complex identity shatters the Orientalist division of identities to 'us' and 'them.' Scar's cultural heritage and his traumatic past as an Ishbalan are marked on his body in the form of his dark skin, white hair, red eyes and the scar on his forehead. And yet, his name is an Amestrian creation imposed on him by Amestrian authority. Scar thus threatens Amestrian political control, not only by his autonomous and active portrayal that undermines Orientalist representations of the East as primitive or uniform, but also—and perhaps more importantly—by inhabiting both identities: Ishbalan and Amestrian. This transgression results in an incongruous composition of Scar's Amestrian-Ishbalan self; an idea that echoes *Fullmetal Alchemist's* exploration of the chimera.

In fact, volume 2 implies this analogy by drawing visual similarities between Scar and the chimera Nina. In the scenes where Scar kills Tucker and Nina, the text occasionally portrays Scar's eyes as two white, empty circles, juxtaposing them with Nina's lifeless round eyes, and perhaps suggesting that like her, he too is a result of a fusion of two "genetically dissimilar life forms" (Arakawa 2016a, 44, 47-9, 10). While Nina is the product of the biological fusion of a human being and a dog, Scar functions as a fusion of two distinct socio-national categories—Ishbalan and Amestrian. Like Nina, whom he deems "unnatural," Scar too is a transgression against European nature, as he breaks the cultural barriers enforced by Orientalist discourse between Amestrian and Ishbalan identities (Arakawa 2016a, 105).

My analysis of *Fullmetal Alchemist's* English translation is another reproduction of the chimera. My work on this series analyzes the particular combination of the original Japanese art and the translated English prose—in and of itself a chimeric creation that functions as a transgression of East-West cultural barriers. Moreover, the manga form—a marriage of text and images—is also a transgression of barriers; this time of the literary kind. In exploring this transgression, Lesley-Anne Gallacher, for example, even goes as far as to refer to this 'image/text' form as "monstrous" and comparing its monstrosity with Nina's (Gallacher 2011, 457). And, of course, as I mentioned earlier, the increasing popularity of manga in the West has led to Antonia Levi's definition of it as a "multicultural creation," in which "Japanese elements ... are already fused with Western traditions" (Levi 2013, 4).

## Deconstructing the European Gaze and the Transcultural Hero

A reading of Scar himself as a "multicultural creation" is potentially fascinating, but it is only a first step toward unpacking his character development. After working with the Amestrian characters to defeat the series' main antagonist in the final volume of the series, Scar is rescued by an Amestrian General. The General proposes to Scar that he should collaborate with the new Amestrian leaders in hopes of rebuilding Ishbal (Arakawa 2014, 157). Scar accepts her offer, and as the Amestrian General leaves, she asks for his "real name" (Arakawa 2014, 158). He then responds: "I've died twice already. I don't exist in this world. I don't need a name. Call me whatever you like" (Arakawa 2014, 158).

The question posed to Scar by the General signifies a critical moment in his challenge to Amestrian imperialism and Orientalism. While the name "Scar" is a fiction that signifies the character's identity as a product of Amestrian conquest, Scar's never-revealed Ishbalan name may signify his authentic Ishbalan identity. By reclaiming it, Scar may potentially unburden himself of the weight of Amestrian dominance that has been imposed on him with the moniker "Scar."

However, his response to the General challenges much more than Amestrian dominance or European perceptions of the Orient's presumed inability to define itself; it deconstructs the very notion of national identity. Scar's claim that he has "died twice already [and therefore does not] need a name" implies that with each near-death experience, one of his identities dies as well. While his Ishbalan name is lost with his first near-death experience in the Ishbal Civil War, his second near-death experience following the defeat of the series' main antagonist signifies the death of his chimeric Amestrian-Ishbalan self. By refusing to name himself, then, Scar liberates himself from the confines of national identity.

In forming this non-nationalistic identity, Scar not only transgresses Orientalist distinctions between peoples and cultures, but also prevents the construction of such dichotomies. His assertion that he does not "exist in this world" can be read as a challenge to a world influenced by European Orientalism, Imperialism, and Colonialism, but I suggest that it should also be read as a refusal to uphold national and cultural barriers (Arakawa 2014, 158). Scar, therefore, functions not as a "multicultural creation," as he is no longer identified by multiple national identities, but rather as a transcultural idea that transcends nations and cultures completely. The text's resolution of the thematic tensions between Amestris and Ishbal, Europe and Asia, thus results in more than the deconstruction of the European Orientalizing gaze over Asia and the restoration of an authentic native identity. Through metaphorical representations of West and East, *Fullmetal Alchemist* transcends the concepts of culture, nation and literature altogether, and offers instead a transcultural narrative with a transcultural hero.

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## Biographical Note

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