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Transculturation in the Writings of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Ahmed

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Introduction

All theories concerned with the cultural encounter between colonized and colonizer tend to conceive such a relation as one of assimilation or acculturation; always assuming that one culture dominates the other. This had been the case until Fernando Ortiz introduced the term "transculturación" to describe such cultural encounter. That term has become a theory that is mainly concerned with studying the relationship between colonized and colonizer as one of mutual influence—not equal influences though. As Silvia Spitta notices: "in his concern to counter the image of colonized people as passive recipients of a dominant culture, Ortiz repeatedly tends to overlook imbalances of power" (6). If there are two cultures conflicting, one trying to dominate and the other resisting all the time, one powerful and controlling, the other weak and marginalized, the result would definitely be on the powerful side. What actually happens is that the two cultures influence each other but not equally. It is usually the weak one that is ready to receive and transculturate more than the dominating colonizer's culture.

When writers of the colonizing country write or give their account of the colonized culture, there is always that sense of "superiority of their own culture and [they] do not hesitate to insist on the necessity of imposing it" (Spitta 32) on the colonized culture. Even when there is a kind of conflict regarding "the political methods of subordination and exploitation" there is always that conviction that their culture and civilization represent the only standards against which other cultures should be measured (Spitta 32). This has always been the case with any imperial project; colonizers taking it upon themselves to civilize less fortunate people—colonizers attempting all the time to

set their own paradigms and their own concepts on the colonized. What happens is that they close their eyes to any unfamiliar life they might get in contact with, they search for what they already know and are familiar with, and when they fail to identify any element of such familiar life to them, they get to form a firm belief that these people are miserable and primitive and hence in bad need of help which of course will be offered by the colonizer's superior and civilized culture. Such a view is a very narrow one and very limited in the choices it offers; it, implicitly, refers the problem to the colonized people. It is their fault that they are primitive, so they have to learn how to be more civilized in order to survive and that would be the mission of *white man*.

This leads to a very important issue: who is more open and more willing to change—the colonized or the colonizer? Since colonizers see no wrong with their culture and consider it the norm according to which other cultures should be measured and the right model that other peoples should follow, they are very unlikely to change their culture. Any attempt to understand or even examine the colonized culture is totally unacceptable. Those who have to adapt to and at the same time adopt the more civilized traditions and culture are the subject people. In any of the countries that experienced colonization, be it in Africa, Asia or Latin America, whether the colonizers are British, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Italian, it has always been the same; more powerful, civilized, modernized, industrialized, literate party trying to impose their cultural paradigms on the less powerful subjugated party. In the course of this mission, "the civilizing mission" as Mary Louis Pratt calls it in *Imperial Eyes*, "the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery [and] blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis" (6). The result is that both cultures have

to undergo some changes, yet not in the same way, not at the same rate, and in many cases this might happen unconsciously. "The experience of discovery and colonization will change not only the colonized, but the colonizer as well." (Spitta 51).

The theory of transculturation has been introduced and developed by Latin American writers to describe an experience of their own. Thus, Spitta believes that when Ortiz proposed such a theory, he did so while having Latin America in mind as the colonization experience there is a unique one. The Cuban experience is unique in the sense that most of the indigenous inhabitants "were completely wiped out in the early years of the Conquest". The current inhabitants are a mixture of different origins; Africans, Asians, Europeans, and North Americans. That is why though the theory of transculturation can be used to describe the cultural encounter between two conflicting and opposing cultures, "it must continually be redefined for specific contexts" (6). Narratives of transculturation are usually characterized by some features that make them different from other writings whose authors might have also been exposed to similar experiences. One of these characteristics is that of indeterminacy and ambivalence. Spitta believes that, "[t]his indeterminate space, the space of the hyphen...is the trademark of all narratives of transculturation situated as they are between two cultures" (41). It is always there since the writers would always borrow from other cultures and assimilate these borrowings with their own culture in order to come up at the end with a new culture. This new culture is always in the process of being formed and shaped since cultures are always in flux. So, that state of ambivalence would always be there.

To understand transculturation, one has to acknowledge the fact that "cultures [are] always in flux". Therefore,

a rigid imperial power, a power unwilling or unable to absorb foreign elements, is not viable. Vital cultures invariably and necessarily transform themselves over time and under the impact of foreign influences...since cultures are not static, subjectivity and identity...must be understood as historical and cultural constructs that are always in flux, split between two or more worlds, cultures, and languages (Spitta 8).

This sounds normal and may even become inevitable with countries that underwent colonization and experienced the necessity of being closely in contact with the dominant culture of the colonizer. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley states that “[i]t has never been more difficult to define the notion of culture than at the present time. Peoples, societies, and cultures have integrated, mixed, and interchanged more than in any previous period in history” (6). Thus, to speak about a distinct culture or a pure culture that has never been influenced by some elements from another culture seems to be some sort of a myth.

Being exposed to at least two cultures entails another characteristic of transculturation, that is to be situated "at a cultural intersection: between different ethnicities and linguistic traditions...between different geographic areas...different literary movements...and between different conceptions of the literary (written and oral)" (Spitta 9). Normally, that split would create confusion and tension on the colonized side; being in a less powerful position forced them to receive and react rather than impose and pro-act. That cultural attack was so fast that it left them no enough time to examine, grasp or evaluate what is going on. This has thus become the mission of transcultural authors; "take on the task of mediating between the different fields of tension created by the diverse cultures, languages, and worlds that coexist in different relations of power in their countries" (Spitta 9). What urged Latin American writers to adopt the concept of transculturation was the critical situation they had found themselves in between the two world wars; either to be totally left behind with an obsolete and primitive culture, unable

to adapt to quick and rapid changes of the time, or to absolutely throw off that culture and adopt the new culture—to acculturate. Thus the choice was to transculturate, "to take what they can use from Western literary forms in order to save what they can from the traditional, rural and oral cultures of their countries. That is, they produce an engaged literature, one that opts for the poor and that attempts to mediate between the "first" and the "third" worlds—globally as well as within their own countries" (Spitta 9).

That new type of literature would differ in content as well as in form from the former one produced by non indigenous writers; written mainly by and for foreign readers. Such literature would always present an idealized picture of Latin America, *Paradise Found*; this was the usual picture Europeans would like to have in mind about Latin America. However, Latin American transcultural writers replace the idealized picture of the Indians, produced by non-native writers to present life in the Andes as paradise, with another picture that depicts the actual and real misery of people living there. They thus replace "literature about the Indians with a literature by and for the Indians" (Spitta 10). The first one was produced for readers other than indigenous people; the latter is for indigenous as well as Western readers. That kind of literature requires different types of readers who can decipher both cultures since "the signifier is split between two or more cultures and becomes unstable" (Spitta 11).

This new type of literature is what Pratt names "autoethnographic expression". As the term suggests, these texts would refer to "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (7). Thus, instead of being depicted by "the other", this type of literature is distinguished

in the sense that it is narrated by the subjugated and the subordinate. Therefore, such texts are:

those the others construct in response to or in a dialogue with those metropolitan representations.... Autoethnographic texts are not ... "authentic" or autochthonous forms of self representation ... Rather autoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror....the idioms appropriated and transformed are those of [colonizer]... merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous modes....they are bilingual and dialogic (7).

Since writers of transculturation are always exposed to two cultures from two different countries, Pratt coined the term "contact zone" to refer to "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (4). This asymmetrical relation, however, does not necessarily have to be on the side of the colonizer as it could alter depending on the situation and who is in power and control. If, for instance, the colonizer does not have an access to the language of the colonized and the only help is offered by the colonized, the latter will then have the upper hand. Indeed "transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone" which acts as the stimulant that produces transcultural communication processes. It is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (6).

These works of the contact zone that result from asymmetrical relations would entail what Pratt calls reciprocity. This means "mutual appropriation"; one party appropriates and is appropriated by the other, "the two sides determine each other's

actions and desires. It is the dynamic that above all organizes [the] human-centred, interactive narrative. It is present sometimes as a reality achieved, but always as a goal of desire, a value" (80). Usually such narrative involves a "necessary relationship" between colonizer and colonized, this is what creates tension "the desire to achieve reciprocity, to establish equilibrium through exchange" (80). Reciprocity could be "determined by...great sentimental obsession, transracial erotics [love]" (82). "The imperative of reciprocity extends to knowledge and culture as well" (83).

As mentioned earlier, transcultural writers are always situated "at a cultural intersection", this means that writing about their transcultural experiences from Cuba and to do so from the U.S are totally two different experiences. "Where is the "here" for a displaced Cuban in the United States?" (Spitta 21). Transcultural writers think in "hyphens" since they are situated in that space of "*in between*". To think in hyphens for a Cuban American is to be situated "in a here and there that informs [the writer's] interpretation of Cuba and that is informed by a reaction to a certain North American stereotyping or tropicalization of Latin men that circumscribes the possibility of Latino self-definition and self-representation in this country" (Spitta 22). This would also be the case with writers other than Cuban writers taking into consideration the different context from which they write and the necessary adaptations they have to carry out. Finally, it is important to note that transculturation as shown above is an ongoing and never ending process. It should be viewed not as a single process, "but rather as many different processes of assimilation, adaptation, rejection, parody, resistance, loss, and ultimately transformation of [colonizer's] and indigenous cultures" (Spitta 24). As such, the

reciprocal cultural contact acquires a multipurpose function; "individuals are changed, change themselves as well as the surrounding world" (Spitta 24).

As Egypt was one of the countries occupied by Britain, it was normal for some families to send their children to English schools and hence be exposed to English culture before and with more frequency than their native Egyptian culture. Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Ahmed are an example of those people who were influenced by the British culture and civilization yet in different ways but they both came from families that cherished Western culture and viewed it as the standard against which other developing nations should measure their success and progress.

Leila Ahmed was born in 1940 to an Egyptian father and an Egyptian Turkish mother. She came from an upper middle class family that viewed education, Western education in particular, as the most valuable thing. She went to an English school and then moved to England for her university education. She finally moved to the U.S to establish an academic career as a university professor on women studies. She spent her childhood and adolescent years in Egypt during King Farouk rule, witnessed July 23rd revolution and spent a few years under Nasser's rule. However, those few years were enough for her to decide to leave Egypt after she had seen how the new political regime ruined her father's career because of his disapproval of Nasser's High Dam. She literally lived between two worlds in Egypt on the one hand and between Egypt and the West on the other hand. She wrote her memoir *A Border Passage* to re-explore her past and re-examine her identity.

Ahdaf Soueif was born in 1950 to Egyptian parents, both working as University professors. She learned to read and write in English before Arabic when she was with her

parents in England while they were doing their PhD. She came back to Egypt to join school, and then went once more to England when her parents were engaged in some post-Doctoral studies. She was a teenager then, and could not cope with her schoolmates, so she decided to leave school and study from home. She, also, like her parents received her post graduate education there and got her PhD from Lancaster University. She got married to an English poet and writer and ever since she has been living between England and Egypt.

This thesis aims to explore the writings of both Egyptian writers Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Ahmed in the light of transculturation theory. Both Ahmed and Soueif write in English, occupy the indeterminate space which would allow them to play the role of insider/outsider and hence develop a more informed and more reliable view on historical, political and social events in Egypt in the 1950s through 1970s. Ahmed and Soueif selected from representational modes previously offered by the West what would serve their purpose. In so doing, they call into question such Western stereotypes and reinvent the image of the Arab woman and thus present a transcultural narrative. This thesis will explore how far Ahmed and Soueif moved between cultures as they were exposed to English culture before their native one, and even with much higher frequency than the Arabic culture. The first chapter is concerned with language and whether Soueif's text *In the Eye of the Sun*, as written in English, could be classified as English or Arabic text. It also examines if writing in a language other than the writer's native one could contribute in bridging cultural gaps between Egypt and England. The second chapter focuses on self-narrating and the autobiographical elements in Ahmed's memoir, *A Border Passage*, and Soueif's *Aisha* and *In the Eye of the Sun*. Since theories of autobiography and

transculturation overlap in more than one point, this chapter explores how the female autobiographer can re-inscribe her story. It also draws upon the fact that when female Arab autobiographer is exposed to two cultures, she can produce a somehow problematic text, yet a more authentic and self-liberating text. The final chapter makes use of the historical and political context of the 1940s through early 1960s to excavate the pivotal moments in Egypt's history, yet from the point of view of Leila Ahmed who attempts to reevaluate her past in order to know where she stands and how she became defined as "Arab".

Chapter II

Bridging the Cultural Gap through Language

Language is a fundamental site of struggle for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre...remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be 'known'. Its system of values—its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction—becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourses are grounded (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin)283).

As the previous words illustrate, language has always been the fundamental tool used by colonization to ensure its control over subjugated people. Once the language of the colonizer is set as the main means of communication, this entails the shift from one culture to another; transfer of knowledge, values, way of thinking and ultimately identity of the colonizer. This chapter aims to further explore the identity of the text examined – *In the Eye of the Sun*; whether it is an English novel, being written in English, or an Arabic Egyptian novel since it tells the story of an Egyptian young lady and her coming of age, taking into consideration the historical context of that period.

Writing in a language that is not one's native language and in particular the language of the colonizer always arouses questions about "language", "identity" "territory", and notions of power as Anne Armitage states in her article "The Debate over Literary Writing in a Foreign Language: An Overview of *Francophonie* in the Maghreb"

(39). In Ahdaf Soueif's case this seems to have always been the first question she is asked in any interview: "why do you write in English?"; whether by Egyptians or Europeans. She always gives the same answer that it was never meant to be so but as Aida Edemariam writes in *Mapping the Divide* in The Guardian:

it surprised her that she was unable to write fiction in Arabic, although she thinks and dreams in Arabic, and is most comfortable using Arabic and English simultaneously. But at the very point of setting words on paper she discovered that learning English in England, studying English literature in English, had come to mean that English was her literary language (20).

Using foreign language, English in particular as the medium of writing, was not yet that widespread by the time Soueif started doing this. The case of the Egyptian writer is different from other African writers or even North African writers or what is known as Francophone literature.

Ahdaf Soueif was born in Egypt in 1950; only two years before on the revolution of July in 1952. Therefore, Soueif did not live in the time of occupation and was not forced to use English as the only means of communication as what happened with other countries occupied by Britain. It is noteworthy to mention that the British policy conducted in Egypt differed from that conducted in other countries occupied by Britain like Kenya for instance where English "became the language of...formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference" as stated by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (Thiong'o, *The Language of African Literature*) in his article "The Language of African Literature" (288). Egypt, on the other hand, was a British protectorate not a colony and hence the British policy conducted there entailed not imposing their language as the official language of the country. "The language of instruction was at all times Arabic, except for teaching the