

Ahdaf Soueif's Reconsiderations of Arab Women Identities in Postcolonial Intersections

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Abstract:

The present research aims at assessing the narrative strategies that Ahdaf Soueif utilizes in order to establish reinvigorated taxonomy through a tentative relocation of residual colonial paradigm. As a postcolonial writer, Soueif has generously mingled personal and political spheres of her characters that will be in return marked by different forms of hybrid identities. This being the case, this paper intends to discuss the different manners that the writer enrolls while she intersects colonial history with the personal journey of Asya and other characters as well. This paper is set to inform how much hybridity alongside colonial desire continues to be a central space of paradoxical interpretations and perplexed ambivalence among characters.

Key Words: Postcolonial, Hybridity, Ambivalence, colonial Desire, Transcultural.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discourses on Arab women have been taking a primordial focus for investigation in the world of literature. In the light of postcolonial theory, Arab women and issues of identity even become a sight of excitement for Arab-Anglophone writers. Interestingly, postcolonial Arab-Anglophone women writers were provided by more political and social opportunities to voice their needs and desires throughout writings and; therefore, squeeze a distinct need to pass beyond the traditional feminist themes of opposing patriarchy. In fact, these women sought to strike artistic works which go a step further away from hegemonic standards of taste and style towards a new literary future. This advance is traced in the manner the writers deepen the historical and political heritage of their literary productions by incepting new themes and approaches. Different historical and political events are intentionally reflected in the works of this generation. As far as this research paper is concerned, Ahdaf Soueif exclusively in her widely acclaimed novel;

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In the Eye of the Sun, attempt to explore more nuanced themes encompassing discourses of modernity and Western cultural influence.

As a transcultural writer, Soueif tends to articulate different discourses that all culminate in her protagonist's daily life routines; especially when the private is tangled with colonial history and nationalist confrontations. Postcolonial theories of transculturation offer the writer with thematic materials that allow her to both support and transgress colonial boundaries, and she executed that through the invention of juxtaposed characters in her narrative. Put it in that way, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Soueif manipulates different discourses on hybridity in her novel *In the Eye of the Sun* and the resulting tensions that mark Arab female identities in the postcolonial context. In doing so, we try to explore how Soueif's manifests negotiations of cultural identities for her Westernized Arab/Muslim characters. In many instances Soueif reversed the gaze between the East and West, colonizer and colonized, male and female. She takes advantages from colonial history and settles herself for both sides in order to facilitate a debate that had no precedent.

2. Soueif's National Paradigm

The notion of nationalism enters a constant debate of existence and decline. The postcolonial era is one of the puzzled reasons of leading perplexed discussions about national paradigms in the Arab world. From a literary perspective, contemporary Arab women's writings show different rationales that might be said to reverse the concept of nationalism. Such brand of narratives, therefore; do not consider nation as a limited and fixed construction. Benedict Anderson is among the theorists who comments on "both inherently limited and sovereign" conceptualizations of the nation (2016, p 15). Postcolonial Arab women's writings, in return, posit an ongoing reconstruction of the nation through their depiction of more dynamic and unfixed identities.

Partha Chatterjee (1990) in *Nationalist and the Colonial World*, suggests that nationalism is a cultural phenomenon that challenges the coloniser's interference and helps the colonised to claim their distinctiveness and autonomy. As a reaction against the western classification of superiority and backwardness, Eastern nationalism adopted social and political manners to subvert the colonial construct. Thus, Eastern nationalism helps the colonised to "re-equip the nation culturally" together by "retaining its distinctiveness" (Chatterjee, 1990, p. 1), and the adaptation of the western parameters of progress. By the same token, anti-colonial nationalism, Chatterjee claims; tends to vindicate "its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society" (1990, p. 1). This trend of Eastern nationalism is mainly built upon the inner spiritual sphere of culture that encompasses religion, family, and traditions; even those might differ between Easterners themselves. Beyond that spirituality the East looked after adopting western modernity; this in itself is contradictory to nationalist thought.

Chatterjee (1990) also comments that Eastern nationalism reveals certain complicity with the legacies of Orientalism. As nationalism seeks to approximate modern qualities, it then again claims the autonomy of its

identity referring to authenticity and purity of origins. In oscillating between subvert and subjugate the West, Yegenoglu suggests; the grand nationalist endeavour looks like a return to orientalist epistemology whose fundamental policy is based on the unavoidable divide between East and West. In the postcolonial era, women have become the signifier of national symbols, customs, traditions and religious meaning. Contemporary postcolonial literature tends to figure out women along with a highly spirit of nationalism, a prerequisite in the process of building up a woman identity that would be equipped with different forms of resistance. As women were double colonised, both by the locale man and the ex-coloniser, they represent the dynamic fields of struggle in East/West relations during national efforts at constructing waves of national liberation. In long wide range pretext of liberating Arab women from the 'uncivilised' forces of the locale, colonial discourse adopted a set of hidden strategies to change the signified of that national signifier. Al-Mahadin shares this perspective to even touch the sexual desire when he claims:

Paradigms of regulatory power between East and West, thus, converged upon the docile body of the female. In other words, the female metamorphosed into a field of struggle between a local man who was intent on guarding his national identity and foreigner/coloniser conspiring to conquer and divest him off such identity by 'emancipating' the female body and 'redeeming' her status. (2004, p. 25)

In framing the discussion of the selected novel in this manner, *In the Eye of the Sun* then can be one of the best examples that; among others, attempts to summarise Al-Mahadin's claims about the status of women vis-à-vis East/West struggles in the post/colonial context. While reading *In the Eye of the Sun*, there is much to consider apropos the different manners that Ahdaf Soueif articulates in order to exclusively intersect some post/colonial accounts with female daily private episodes. The novel is a cross-cultural narrative between Egypt and Britain revolving around the period of 1967 and 1980. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, female personal daily practices are tangled by colonial history and the nationalist struggles at the turn of the twentieth century. Soueif as a cosmopolitan writer makes several discourses function in her novel. One of the novel's chief profiles is that of personal emotions and political life in the Arab world and Egypt in particular, and this suggests the existence of the nation "through sentiments of national character or national identity" (Jonathan Rée, 1998, p 87) along with postcolonial hybridity. Soueif joins the female national identity of her character and transports her to ambivalence where Asya settles in the in-between space and she privileges secular fundamentalism for re-constructing her identity.

Throughout *In the Eye of the Sun* the writer relates a social and historical tapestry of Egypt from 1967 until 1980 and demonstrates Arab women's awareness of the political changes witnessed in their regions. Soueif writes her fiction during the period when Hosni Mubarak became the president of Egypt reflecting on the remarkable historical event that of the Arab's defeat and the occupation of Sinai in 1967; a war that socially and

economically transformed conditions of life among Egyptians and Arabs as well. The novel's main focus plays on the grounds of the impacts left by the collapse of the national dream Asya has and her generation as well. The latter caused despair and bewilderment for common Egyptians who believed that their country was about to win the war during the era of Nasser, but they were later informed that they were defeated immensely. Throughout the female protagonist who is raised during the early beginning of the revolution, Soueif narrates some eminent national history partaking its modern period from 1967 onwards.

The 1967 defeat is coincided with Asya's university career and her meeting with her husband Saif. Indeed, the story of Asya begins in London in 1979 where she set herself for looking after her uncle, Hamid who suffers from cancer; she remembers some of her childhood episodes and the events of 1967 in particular. Soueif as a writer adopts some troops of the nationalist-feminist literary paradigm in order to create an in-between space comprising politics, gender issues and female sexualities. *In the Eye of the Sun* then exposes both emotional and political lives of Arab women; especially those who navigate between two worlds, East and West, as an attempt to imply a link between the personal and the political narrative elements though the combination seems difficult to exist.

As the main character in the novel, Asya is historically subscribed to witness the different phases of the national spirit Egypt passed through, the initial period of the war, its decline, and the transitive period between the later period of Sadat and the era of Mubarak as a new president. Within this content, the socio-political era that Soueif writes about in *In the Eye of the Sun* casts a real challenge to the sacred national paradigm and its subsequent collapse of pride during the six day war against Israel. Thus, one of the political perspectives that Soueif demonstrates in her narrative mainly revolves around the Egyptians' disappointment about the national dream.

At this level Soueif casts her new paradigm of national discourse where she creates a narrative that presents political events not merely to take the role of a historical informant, but rather to create new dichotomies which reveal power relations between nations and the private lives in the novel; that in return give birth to different power relations that exist in class divisions and gender relations in the era of the protagonist's generation. Focusing together on state, public life, and private life, Soueif is writing after 1967 to echo a defeated nation and portray the pessimistic vision Arabs and Egyptians had towards the future. Contrary to other Arab women writers who wrote at the height of the national project; the period known as the *nahda* (1954-1960), Soueif wrote *In the Eye of the Sun* was written during the *naksa* (1967). Soueif parallels Asya's private life with the events overlapping Egypt at that time, and she contrasts the protagonist's personal life with the public in order to demonstrate the critical situation after being depressed from national promise.

3. Hybridity Crisis and Colonial Desire in *In the Eye of the Sun*

Ahdaf Soueif is a female writer of both history and cross-cultural journeys who genuinely produced Anglophone narratives that are culturally

infused by her Arabic/Muslim heritage. Many scholars tend to describe her as a “hybrid” writer for a set of different reasons. She manipulates the postcolonial literary terrain by exploring complex and polemical issues such as gender politics, nationalism, migration and exile, linguistic matters and female sexual desire. As a postcolonial writer “Ahdaf Soueif has a talent for blending the personal and political and getting under the skin of each one of her characters.” (The Independent, London, 2004), the reason that lead Amin Malak (2005) to consider different forms of hybridity in her narratives which in return marked an inescapable post-coloniality for her. Throughout the selected novel *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif narrates the rise or the coming-of-age of Asya al-Alama, Asya, the main character in the novel. *In the Eye of the Sun* is to a considerable degree designed to be seen as historical or political novel (as it was discussed so far); Soueif however intersects the history of Egypt with the personal journey of the protagonist Asya and other character from her family. Put it in that way, the concept of hybridity is problematized as it not only can be found everywhere, but it also takes numerous shapes and forms, private and public, urban and rural, East and West, traditional and modern (Malak, 2005). Hybridity alongside colonialism overlaps any discussion about the novel of *In the Eye of the Sun*, and Soueif herself noticed that hybridity is among the unavoidable burdens that continue to be a central space of paradoxical interpretations.

Along *In the Eye of the Sun*, the female writer Ahdaf Soueif adopted the language of the coloniser as a means of communication. In doing so, Soueif decided to position herself to the culture of the ex-coloniser mainly through the linguistic signs where the signifier is the coloniser, whereas the signified is that of the colonised. The signified; as in many narratives produced by female Arab writers in the postcolonial era; is ambivalent and unstable embracing the in-between zone. When history is intertwined with the characters’ private life ambivalence is ready to take the narratives to other more complex dimensions rather to be only a historical informant. Valassopoulos embraces that idea and comments that “political contexts disappear in the face of internal psychological struggles” (2007, p. 124). In this vein, Soueif relocates women’s sexual life in the third space that Bhabha conceives as a ‘liminal signifying space’; an in-between ambivalent sphere that is subject to a performative re-signification (1994). Soueif’s representations of the theme of Arab female sexuality articulate as a re-signification of the postcolonial subject. Such bold representation of Arab women sexual bodies expounds both corporeal and discursive borderline female characters; meanwhile to expose the repressive power of men domination.

Arab women’s oppression is, on the one hand, caused by the colonised who served as the dynamo of an inherited patriarchal domination, on the other hand, by the coloniser who used his male superiority in his colonial discourse. Massad (1999) explains how Anglophone novels can invest in colonial history in order to articulate issues Arab female sexuality and desire, and he even accounts Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* as follows:

The novel then diagnoses both the possibilities and limits of a cultural dialogue between the signifier and the signified. Such kind

of cultural reconciliation is presented in the form of sexual desire as the discourse of sexual politics along with stereotypes about Arab women is one of the prevailing literary investments in the West. Ahdaf Soueif establishes the protagonist's desire around the settings of geography and culture, which are historically and politically connected to each other (p. 74).

Asya's daily life is a site that can reverse cultural boundaries and her sexual desire is sometimes casted as a strong medium to articulate postcolonial agency. In keeping with this point, Robert Young suggests that the relationship between the colonizer (male) and the colonized (female) is considered to be based on radicalised sexual hierarchy, violence and power; he continues by arguing that colonial discourse is soaked in sexuality (1995). Soueif's narrative on sexuality exposes an anti-colonial nationalist and patriarchal paradigm. Soueif maps two instances of sexual transgression that culminate in Asya's private affairs with two male characters; the Orient Saif and the Western Gerald. With Saif Asya is unable to undergo the romantic feelings present in colonial literature and with Gerald; however, she experienced a kind of colonial sexual domination. Although Asya was the one who initiate her sexual intercourse with Gerald and invited him to spend the night; he quickly takes the role of manipulating her feelings and desires.

One instance can summarize Gerald's sexual manipulation when he overtly forces Asya to at herself in the mirror while she is nude. Gerald even presents himself as the Occidental male knower over the passive Oriental female; in one episode he declares to Asya that he owns her and tells her "You're mine; You'll always *be* mine" (Soueif, 1999, p 657). On the contrary, her husband Saif is sexually paralysed to satisfy Asya's desire who is sometimes presented as still being more or less virgin although it is married. Her marriage is full of psychological troubles as Asya is obsessively in having the kind of sex and romance found in the imperial literature she reads. Herein, colonial desire of the postcolonial subject makes the concept of hybridity more complex and the feeling of ambivalence becomes then inescapable. Desire becomes controversial to Asya when Gerald didn't allow her to switch off the light and tells her that he prefers to see her naked wearing her jewellery only. Desire between Asya and Gerald has transformed to an act of colonial domination and violence that is indeed executed the male colonizer (Young, 1995).

With these in mind, *In the Eye of the Sun* contests and problematizes cultural, linguistic and racial hybridity alongside colonial desire. Although hybridity is intensely discussed in Soueif's novel, in fact it accumulates miscellaneous questions and interpretations among writers and literary critics. Sometimes hybridity is celebrated as a bilingual and intercultural process of imparting knowledge; in other places it is deemed to be considered as the violent colonial ritual for the postcolonial subject. For example, when hybridity is discussed in relation to impact of the Western education consumed by the ex-colonized, themes like exile and isolation are inevitable to be addressed (Nash, 2009). As Asya is obsessed and fascinated by Western literature, she becomes an ambivalent character that is

constantly haunted by “dislocation between the realm of Western literature and the reality of the middle Eastern world” and this “constitutes a leitmotif that runs through Soueif’s fiction” (Malak, 2005, p. 134). Prior to this point, while Asya continues to experience a sort of self-discover she finds herself dwelling on the past and comparing her life to what she reads in English novels, the fact that makes her bear hybridity crisis. In the middle of the destroying war, Asya secretly prefers to read *Robinson Crusoe* instead of studying history for exams (Soueif, 1992). Many episodes in the novel illustrate how much Soueif’s characters are full of contradictions due to the inherited ambivalence that prevent them to consider themselves as “integrated subjects” (D’Alessandro, 2011, p 44). Even her fond love for English literature, at many instances, seems like a burden to her. After several attempts to join the English Literature Department in Cairo University, Asya never feels satisfied to consider herself as a professor of English literature.

The postcolonial subject is then in a continuous oscillation between colonial history of imperial legacies and the culture of his/her origins where the colonized is supposed to imitate the colonizer and bear what such imitation and mimicry can generate. Bhabha even consider the act of imitating the colonizer as “a blurred copy, or mimicry that can be threatening for the colonizer” because “mimicry repeats other than represents” (1984, p. 126-127). Although Asya is an Arabic and Muslim woman she always prefers to identify herself with Victorian female characters and she speaks English as if “she’d just come from Oxford” (Soueif, 1999, p. 97). Asya is doubtful about her identify because she lives in the luminal space which signifies an in-between space between cultures. This interaction between the two leads to cultural change that is created in a third space known as the *transcultural*.

4. Soueif’s Transcultural Space

Despite the fact that the history is based on the exploitation of Egypt, Soueif does not focus on the negative aspects of the past. Alternatively, she recognizes that this shared history is part of her cultural identity; especially her fond love of English literature. As a young Egyptian woman, Asya was born in 1950 to a Westernized family. In this novel the author is drawing back to her personal experience in order to show how the Egyptian upper middle class has incorporated Western cultures (especially that of the ex-colonizer) with the local Arab and Muslim way of life, customs and traditions. In Egypt, the encounter with Europe particularly that with the British colonization marked social and cultural change in many aspects of life which later on introduced the concept of *modernization* in the Arab world. Different policies of modernization have been encouraged by noticeable elites who were educated on the basis of Western standards, and this lead to the emergence of a new social class known as secular urban class. The elites enhanced the internalization of the Western culture together in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world. Indeed, this knowledge of both West and East (Egypt in particular) provide this new class of elites with equipments to develop Arab and Egyptian nationalisms; which helped to challenge the colonizer’s domination and control.

In similar circumstances, Soueif is the result of different *transcultural* transactions. As a transcultural piece of writing about women, the novel demonstrates characters from different social cultural contexts of the postcolonial Egypt; liberal, conservative and Westernized they all contribute to promote social and political change. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, the author like the main character Asya, is an educated woman from the upper-class of Egypt. Therefore, Soueif shows several auto-biographical stanzas while she is retracting her personal transcultural experience with the Western culture.

As her fictional female character in the selected novel, Soueif was born in 1950 in Cairo. Like the author, Asya enrolled Western schools as they both spent part of their childhood in England, and both of them work as professors. Throughout the novel, Asya and her family then function as a representative illustration of the process of transculturation which was the result of the British colonization in Egypt. At an early age, Asya's grandfather, Ismail Mursi, left his *Saidi* village (someone from the peasant background) and moved to the capital of Cairo; an urban world where two merging distinct cultures do exist. In the city of Cairo, all Asya's relatives joined a Westernized education that would help them to get adapted to new hybrid Cairo. Effectively, Asya's Westernized socio-cultural milieu that provided her with exceptional educational and travel scopes that would otherwise be hard to access for other girls, and even boys, from less privileged social class in Egypt. Through the invention of juxtaposed characters in her narrative, Soueif highlights the issue of class divisions and social arrangement in the Egyptian society. Accordingly, the urban/rural divide is quite evident in *In the Eye of the Sun* along the two characters: Asya and Mahrous. As a character from the lower-class, Mahrous experienced intricate instances that would keep him feeling perplexed with his English class and later as a student while attending the same English university with Asya.

In the case of Ahdaf Soueif and other Arab-Anglophone women writers, cultural hybridity may better be addressed in relation to the concept of transculturation; which is the outcome of the cultural mixture of colonialism and then becomes the spirit for many of those writers. Theorizing the cultural exchange in the postcolonial arenas requires a great emphasis on the different contexts those cultures belong to. The slight nuance between hybridity and transculturation resembles in the fact that transculturation as a theory emphasises that the process of cultural mixture often ends by creating a new culture; Bhabha's hybridity however; relies on the failure of colonial attempts to "whitewash" the colonized together by syncretism and transculturation and the emergence of a "third space" through mimicry of Western culture. Beyond this inability of the colonized to become truly Western, his mimicry of Western culture in return add new spirit to it in relation to his own culture. In return, there is the production of "ambivalence", or what theorists of transculturation would call a new third culture, since it becomes neither the culture of the colonizer nor the original culture of the colonized. Taylor further explains the transcultural model as the one that "simultaneously notes the co-existence of elements, but just as

importantly, underlines the elements of loss of two systems in the creation of a third.” (1991, P. 91-92). Soueif may be set among the outstanding female writers who aim at introducing the possibility to move on from the trauma of colonization.

Transculturation as a theory of cultural circulation rather than that of emancipation refuses to embrace a traumatic identity for the hybrid. This view takes a step forward if compared to the hybrid that is set to challenge the colonizer's power because his mimicry subverts the colonizer's hegemony by appropriating the culture of the colonizer then transforming it; the fact that keeps this hybrid locked into a continuous resistance of the colonizer. In such a paradigm, the hybrid is condemned to dwell on the trauma of colonization. In her novel, Soueif prefers not to be locked in such box but instead she transcends it in the different postcolonial contexts in order to access opportunities in terms of education, politics and professional career.

6. CONCLUSION

Anglophone narratives written by Arab women construe a postcolonial space that seeks to explore a variety of discourse on Arab women which attempt to reconsider identities in the middle of colonial legacies, religion, traditions and patriarchy. These discourses reveal, through an analysis of Soueif's novel different forms of Hybridity, both conformity and opposition of Western and imperial paradigm all through embracing contradictory results of transculturation. To do this Soueif creates a postcolonial hybrid female protagonist Asya, who dwells with her daily life's struggles of her polarized affinities between Arab Egyptian and Western culture. This research paper is a worthwhile attempt to present Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* as a polemical *hybrid* narrative that is, while critical to colonial legacy, still shares several passionate affiliations with the colonizer's culture and modernity. Our analysis is framed in relation to diverse postcolonial theoretical and thematic perspectives including, among others, female national spirit, hybridity, transculturation, colonial desire and the resulting tensions that overlap identity's construction and reconfigurations among characters.

Prior to that, we intend to demonstrate the manners that Soueif employs in order to combine Asya's national identity through the hacking back to the colonial past and transports her to ambivalence where Asya settles in the in-between space and she privileges Western modes for reconstructing her identity. And since history is intertwined with the characters' private life Soueif casts Arab female sexuality as a theme that is articulated in the “luminal signifying space” that creates a process of engagement, transgression and appropriation for the postcolonial subject. This complex interaction culminates with Asya when she commits adultery with Gerald and dares to ask him to spend the night as an attempt to reverse the Western gaze. At this stage Soueif questions colonial domination through the means of female sexuality however Gerald immediately reverses the gaze again when he sexually manipulates Asya. Overall, sex and romance marked the perplexed hybrid life of Asya and along many instances of hybridity crisis Soueif mints new avenues in postcolonial

narrative produced by Arab Anglophone women writers.

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