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Speaking in Tongues: Arab Autobiographical Discourses of Americanization

The article discusses narrative and ideological conceptualizations of Arab-American authors-immigrants who wrote their autobiographies in English, the primary case studies being Edward Said's *Out of Place*, Ihab Hassan's *Out of Egypt*, and Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*. The main focus is on the language aspect – namely, Bakhtinian polyphony and hybridity – which exposes the unavoidable plurality of immigrant selfhood.

Physical and psychological relocations between different cultural zones, languages, landscapes, social infrastructures, and political climates expose the identity-making mechanisms in the increasingly transcultural and multilingual realities of our world. How do we construct our personal and collective identities when crossing over from one culture to another? How do multilingual immigrants choose a language to articulate their selfhood most accurately? By looking at three autobiographical works by immigrant Arab authors composed in English – Edward Said's *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999), Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – A Woman's Journey* (1999), and Ihab Hassan's *Out of Egypt: Scenes and Fragments of an Autobiography* (1986), I argue that a complete cultural and linguistic crossover is, in fact, impossible, but one always keeps looking back, never able to fully settle down on the other side.

In his *Letters of Transit*, André Aciman delineates the nature of exile, based on his own experiences as an Alexandrian in exile via Europe and then the United States:

With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they're also seeing – or looking for – another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty, because everything is mobile, the point being that exile, like love, is not just a condition of pain, it's a condition of deceit. (13)

Indeed, the state of exile, of immigration and of displacement configures the subject's experience as un-singular – and these are not just doubles, but rather a melting pot of numerous competing identities. In my discussion of Said's, Ahmed's and Hassan's narratives I am particularly interested in the language aspect – namely, its polyphony and hybridity – which exposes the multiplicity of immigrant selfhood with particular clarity.

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of hybridity, I propose to approach the phenomenon of multilingualism as signifying the presence of multiple selves. Bakhtinian hybridization is "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (*Dialogic Imagination* 358). These social languages can be situated within the framework of the author's identity that operates in multiple languages and in multiple cultural contexts; separated linguistic consciousnesses articulate different cultural selves that constitute immigrant subjectivity, and the autobiographical text offers an encounter between these selves. Bakhtin's Dostoyevsky polyphonic model, too, offers a helpful approach to immigrant multicultural configurations of identity:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoyevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works

is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather *a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world*, combined but not at all merged in the unity of the event. (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 6)

An immigrant's identity is by definition polyphonic. The voices of past and present, first and second language, homeland and new land, are indeed a plurality of consciousnesses that fight to take over the process of autobiographical storytelling.

The texts selected for my inquiry register their authors' spatial, linguistic, and cultural crossovers from Arab to American realities. The crossover is the defining element in these works – starting from their titles, each emphasizing a physical relocation, an uprooting: *out of Egypt*, *out of place*, border *passage*. All three authors were born into wealthy families, raised in the Arab world, have received Western education, and have relocated to the United States during their adulthood and by choice (none of them is a refugee in a traditional meaning of the word). Each of them represents a success story of immigration. Not only were they able to effectively assimilate into American society, but they have been recognized as leaders in their respective fields of postcolonialism, women's studies and postmodernism. While Said, Ahmed and Hassan do have similar backgrounds, it is the Bakhtinian hybridity that draws the most striking parallels between these texts. Writing in English was not really a choice for these writers: all three have been educated in English and, despite fluency in spoken Arabic, had limited ability of composing in *fusha*.¹ However, this does not mean that Arabic is completely absent from these texts. On the contrary, it often interferes with the English text and contributes to the immigrant narrative's polyphonic texture.

Edward Said's *Out of Place*: The Agony of Multilingualism For a Transcultural Person in Flux

Edward Said, born in 1935 to a Palestinian father and a Palestinian-Lebanese mother in Jerusalem, is a definition of a transcultural subject. The well-off family lived between Palestine and Egypt for years, before finally settling down in Cairo where Said's father opened his highly successful stationary business. Edward Said and his siblings always had an American passport – the U.S. granted their father American citizenship due to his military service during WWI. *Out of Place* covers Said's childhood, adolescence and early adult years – up to the mid 1960s – and the many places where he lived yet never completely belonged to: Jerusalem, Cairo, summer house in Dhour (Lebanese countryside), Victoria College in Alexandria, and the United States. The circumstances of his life and the rupturing historical events that he and his family lived through – Israel's occupation of Palestine, the Egyptian revolution, Nasserism, the Lebanese Civil War – did not allow Said to grow solid roots anywhere he lived. He was always out of place: “as a Palestinian in Egypt (and in Lebanon, where the family had a summerhouse), as a Christian in a Muslim world, and as an Arab, holding an American passport, in a colonial world” (Confino 183).

On the surface, *Out of Place* is a conventional *Bildungsroman*-style autobiography, where the linear narration of the book appears to be in contrast with Said's highly

1. *Fusha* is a formal, written register of Arabic. Ihab Hassan is the only one of these three authors who received part of his higher education in Arabic (at Cairo University).

fragmented sense of self which defined him both as a multicultural subject and as an intellectual. But as I will illustrate, Bakhtinian social languages permeate Said's narrative and create textual hybridity that resonates with the author's highly complex subjectivity. Said's range of social languages include different narrative voices (Said as an academic inquirer or Said as a tormented son of his authoritarian father) and multilingual encounters, such as bursts of Arabic and French within the predominantly English text.

The voice of Said-the intellectual dominates the narrative. This social language is clearly the author's "comfort zone" and highlights the importance of the intellectual self to his self-representation. Said himself emphasized this aspect of his identity on numerous occasions: "I have always felt the priority of intellectual, rather than national or tribal, consciousness, no matter how solitary that made one" (190). Indeed, the language of *Out of Place* is very similar to Said's academic writing: "Said represents his childhood in the same metaphors with which he represents the intellectual" (Confino 23). For example, *Out of Place* offers a detailed account of Said's neighborhoods in Jerusalem and Cairo, but although meticulous, these depictions show a noticeable emotional distance. Said looks at the places of his childhood from the perspective of a scholar. The act of remembrance often focuses on an overview of social and political conditions or a demographic analysis – and these generally lack warmth or emotional attachment that one expects of a childhood home description. This is how he talks about their neighborhood in Cairo:

Unlike Talbiyah, whose residents were mainly a homogeneous group of well-to-do merchants and professionals, Zamalek was not a real community but a sort of colonial outpost whose tone was set by Europeans with whom we had little or no contact; we built our own world within it. (22)

It is as if the description ("colonial outpost," "homogeneous group") were taken from a textbook, rather than evoking a feeling of nostalgia and emotional connection that one expects from a displaced immigrant.

Despite the dominance of the "intellectual" social language, the glimpses of Said's other selves are certainly present in the text. For instance, the frequently intense encounters with his father and their tumultuous relationship expose a different Said – vulnerable and emotionally open. These are the episodes where transliterated Arabic is often integrated into the text. In this particular case, Arabisms are utilized to juxtapose the father's limited knowledge of English with Said's fluency. This is how he describes his father's struggle with English words: "My father's chronic – and by now legendary – difficulty with unfamiliar words ('feeta beta' for Phi Beta Kappa, 'Rutgers' for Rutgers, *etc.*) foundered spectacularly on the word 'psychiatrist,' which emerged as 'psypsy' or 'pssps' or 'qiatrist' or 'something-trist'" (214). Said uses linguistic subversion to deconstruct the traditional familial hierarchy and rebel against his father's despotism. Furthermore, by mocking the father's lack of bilingualism, the author differentiates his own hybridity from the implied monolithic identity of a "traditional" Arab man. In contrast, when talking about his mother, Said's outbursts of Arabic – more precisely its Levantine dialect, her first language – are emotionally charged and emphasize the importance of his Arab Shami² self. Perhaps the most important and stable relationship in his life, his

2. *Shami* means "Levantine," referring both to the geographical/cultural area and the regional dialect.

mother is an embodiment of the Arab culture and serves as a symbolic anchor to his displaced self:

Certain spoken phrases of hers like *tislamli* or *mish 'arfa shu biddi 'ama?* or *rou'ba*—dozens of them—were Arabic, and I was never conscious of having to translate them or, even in cases like *tislamli*, knowing exactly what they meant. They were a part of her infinitely maternal atmosphere, which in moments of great stress I found myself yearning for in the softly uttered phrase “*ya mama*,” an atmosphere dreamily seductive then suddenly snatched away, promising something in the end never given. (19)

While trying to reconcile with his own hybridity, Said populates *Out of Place* with an array of colorful characters who are, too, linguistically and culturally hybrid. Among those characters are his classmates: “the half-American Ali Halim, whose father was of Albanian stock and was King Farouk’s cousin; Bulent Mardin, a Turkish boy from Maadi; Arthur Davidson, who had a Canadian father and an Egyptian mother; Samir Yousef, with a Coptic father and Dutch mother” (205); his cosmopolitan relatives: “Renée Dirlik [...] was the daughter of a Lebanese-Egyptian father and an Armenian mother; Loris was Armenian and Turkish; both were cosmopolitan – fluent in French and English, less so in Arabic” (217); and his uncle David, in whom Said saw a fellow out-of-place soul: “He spoke a bizarre combination of windswept and tattered old Arabic, with a few dozen American phrases (‘Gee Bill, you should see how much money I made one evening in Bahia’) and some incomprehensible Portuguese” (231). The plethora of hybrid characters and the apparent ease with which they treat their hybridity help Said to come to terms with the complexity of his selfhood. Yet, there is no one that Said feels he can completely relate to. He talks about the strong sense of estrangement which he carried throughout his life as a defense mechanism, in order to protect his private self – selves – from a communal identity which he calls “Edward self” and which was shaped by numerous contrasting influences from his colorful environment: “I connected this sense of distance, apartness in myself with the need to erect a kind of defense of that other non-Edward self. For most of my life I have in an ambivalent way cherished and disparaged this core of icy detachment” (165-6).

The agonizing negotiations between his three languages, where one constantly negates the other, mirror the clashing pieces of his fragmented identity: “While speaking English, I hear and often articulate the Arabic or French equivalent, and while speaking Arabic I reach out for French and English analogues, strapping them onto my words like luggage on an overhead rack, there but somehow inert and encumbering” (198). *Out of Place* offers many examples on this linguistic hybridity, such as the following description of a train journey, where an English text is punctuated with both Arabic and French words: “I used to look forward to going to the resplendently gaudy dining car, with its table silver and beady lampshades tinkling as the train lurched from side to side, making the white-robed *suffragis* and the tuxedo-clad Italian or Armenian maître d’hôtel do the same” (149).

Edward Said’s painful relationship with multilingualism, rooted in the impossibility to reconcile multiple linguistic selves, is not an unusual aspect in immigrant writing. As such, *Out of Place* bears more than a few similarities to Vladimir Vladimirovitch Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1951). Nabokov’s and Said’s life stories have many commonalities – a wealthy family, a multilingual Western education, and major historical

events that led to a permanent displacement.³ Like *Out of Place*, Nabokov's autobiography focuses on the burden of being a displaced, multilingual immigrant subject – all despite his incredible success as an American writer. Two years after publishing *Speak, Memory* in English, Nabokov took on a difficult task of translating his work into Russian and it was published in 1954 under the title *Drugie Berega* (*Other Shores*). In an introductory letter dedicated to the Russian reader, he talks about the agony of abandoning his native language (Russian) for the language of his education (English):

Having transitioned into a different language, I therefore rejected not just the language of Avvakum, Pushkin, Tolstoy or Ivanov, my nanny's language, or the language of Russian journalism [...] but my individual, intimate dialect [...] The terrible pains of the upcoming metamorphosis and the terror of separation [...] have put me in an indescribable mental state. (7-8)

This sentiment closely resonates with Said's expressed difficulty of choosing one language to tell the life lived in another, which he mentions in the introduction:

The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education and subsequent expression as a scholar and teacher, and so trying to produce a narrative of one in the language of the other – to say nothing of the numerous ways in which the languages were mixed up for me and crossed over from one realm to the other – has been a complicated task. (viii)

Perhaps it is this irreconcilable conflict between linguistic consciousnesses that forced both Said and Nabokov to look for other outlets of artistic expression, other languages that do not carry the weight of cultural belonging and national affiliation: for Said it was music and, for Nabokov, chess.

Only towards the end of his life was Edward Said able to accept his multilingualism and to “feel more comfortable, not translating but speaking or writing directly in those languages, almost but never quite with the fluency of a native” (198). One aspect of Said's linguistic hybridity that he embraces with positive rigor is its political dimension. When in Victoria College, where speaking any language other than English was severely punished, Said and other boys utilize Arabic – “a criminalized discourse” – as an act of rebellion: “Because of Rule 1 we spoke more, rather than less, Arabic, as an act of defiance” (184). They also employ Arabic to subvert their teachers' colonial authority – and the corresponding linguistic authority of the English language – by mercilessly mocking them in class:

In answer to one of his [the teacher's] questions, a student would begin by suavely mouthing an Arabic imprecation (“*koss omak, sir*”) immediately followed by a “loose” translation (“in other words, sir”) that had nothing to do with the foul phrase (“your mother's c___t”). As the class roared their appreciation, Mr. Maundrell would jerk backward in fear and astonishment. (184)

In a similarly acerbic manner, Said uses his bilingualism to expose the pretentiousness of expat Arabs who betray their culture in order to completely assimilate in the English-speaking environment. For example, during his encounter with Alexander – a fellow Egyptian who poses as an American – Said meticulously deconstructs the latter's Arabicized English:

3. In Nabokov's case, the major event was the Russian Revolution of 1917.

[...] I switched into Arabic, thinking that his and my native language might open up a more generous avenue of interaction. It had exactly the opposite effect. Stopping me in midsentence, Alexander held up his right hand, “No brother” – a very Arab locution, I thought, even uttered in English – “no Arabic here. I left of that behind. Here we are Americans” – another Arabic turn of phrase, instead of “We’re in America now” “and we should talk and act like Americans.” (228)

By effortlessly moving between Arabic and English linguistic and cultural discourses, Said shows complete authority over both languages. Thus, his bilingualism is not only an instrument of rebellion, but a means to reverse the power relationship between a colonizer and a colonial subject.

Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*: Connecting the Dots

Leila Ahmed, born in Cairo in 1940 into a Muslim upper-class family, grew up in a post-revolutionary Egypt. Having been schooled exclusively in English in Cairo, in the late 1950s Ahmed moved to England to attend Girton College in Cambridge where she earned a degree in English. Despite their privileged status, after the revolution Ahmed’s family became political pariahs after her father, a prominent civil engineer, opposed the Aswan High Dam project. The government continued to harass Ahmed’s family for years, including a refusal to issue a travel passport to Leila Ahmed who wanted to return to England for graduate studies. Eventually Ahmed was able to travel and received her doctorate degree from Cambridge in 1981, after which she moved to Abu Dhabi to work for a commission on women’s education. Finally, she came to the U.S. for a professorship at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. She taught there up until 1999 when she became the first professor in Women’s Studies in Religion at Harvard Divinity School. Ahmed has established herself as a leading scholar in Islamic studies and gender studies. Her seminal work *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992) remains one of the core texts in Islamic feminist theory.

Edward Said’s and Leila Ahmed’s autobiographical storytelling offer a number of interesting parallels. Certainly, both *Out of Place* and *A Border Passage* belong to the genre of academic memoirs, but they are also stories of immigration, similar in their complexity. Like Said’s, Ahmed’s narration often resembles scholarly inquiry more than intimate storytelling: “As the autobiography of an academic scholar, *A Border Passage* is [...] both an extension of Ahmed’s academic work and an exposition of its prehistory” (Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives* 146-7). Ahmed’s recollections of Egypt, too, include meticulous sociopolitical analysis, but at the same time, her Cairo is a more nostalgic place than Said’s. Full of sounds, colors, and smells, the narrative recreates a vibrant picture of her childhood city:

I remember it as a time, that era of my childhood, when existence itself seemed to have its own music – a lilt and music that made up the ordinary fabric of living. There was the breath of the wind always, and the perpetual murmur of trees; the call of the *karaman* that came in the dusk, dying with the dying light the reed-piper playing his pipe in the dawn and, throughout the day, the music of living; street-vendors’ calls; people passing in the street, talking; the clip-clop of a donkey; the sound of a motor car; dogs barking; the cooing of pigeons in the siesta hour. (*A Border Passage* 47)

If Said sees hybridity and displacement through the lens of his own unique background and as a prerogative of his life story specifically, Leila Ahmed approaches those identity markers in more general terms – as an essential condition of human experience: “I

think that we are always plural. Not either this or that, but this and that. And we always embody in our multiple shifting consciousnesses a convergence of traditions, cultures, histories coming together in this time and this place and moving like rivers through us” (25). Ahmed’s view of human plurality also lacks Said’s sense of pain when meditating over his self-fragmentation. As Wail Hassan pointed out, “*A Border Passage* presents itself as a narrative of connectedness rather than polarity” (147). Indeed, Ahmed’s autobiographical project sets to reconcile her British-English-speaking American-living self with the lack of a clearly delineated “Arab identity.” She occasionally regrets not having any knowledge of the written register of Arabic, *fusha* – which prevents her from appreciating the depths of Arab literary heritage. Thus, she speaks of her feelings of void and her desire to belong at Hanan al-Sheikh’s⁴ lecture in Cambridge:

How lovely is our literature. What a fine thing, whatever it is people say of us what a fine thing it is in spite of them all, to be Arab; what a wonderful heritage we have [...] What wouldn’t I give, I sat there thinking, listening to her [al-Sheikh] quote Arab poets, to have had that in my past, all that wealth of Arabic literature that nurtured her as a writer; what wouldn’t I give now to have all those poets and writers to remember and write about and remind people of? (253)

At the same time, Ahmed uncompromisingly rejects any *institutional* configurations of Arabness – be it Nasser’s Pan Arabism or the Orientalist constructs imposed on her by the American academia: “two notions of Arab that I am trapped in – both false, both heavily weighted and cargoed with another silent freight. Both imputing to me feelings and beliefs that aren’t mine” (256). But while feeling completely detached from the Nasserist Arab identity, Ahmed cherishes her Egyptian self. Moreover, for her – in contrast with Said’s clashing linguistic consciousnesses – there is no conflict between English and the Egyptian dialect of Arabic. In fact, she identifies some important similarities between the two languages:

I had always felt that English was somehow closer and more kin to Egyptian Arabic than was standard Arabic [...] Now I realized that in fact English *felt* more like Egyptian Arabic because it *was* more like it: both are living languages and both have that quickness and pliancy and vitality that living spoken languages have and that the written Arabic of our day does not. (283)

A Border Passage is not only a story of cultural and linguistic (dis)placement, but it is also a story of Leila Ahmed’s feminism – where her immigrant and feminist identities are intricately linked. Initially, Ahmed rejects her Egyptian womanhood – “I knew that I had to become either a man or a Westerner” (194). But having gone through several experiences of immigration – her studies at Cambridge, her work in Abu Dhabi, a brief return to Egypt, and final immigration to the US – Ahmed develops a nuanced understanding and appreciation of her feminist identity that incorporates her numerous selves – Muslim and secular academic, Egyptian and American, English-speaking and Arabic-dialect-speaking.

The linguistic hybridity in *A Border Passage* echoes Leila Ahmed’s identity quest. Despite the prevalence of an academic-style English narration, her distinct social languages distort the seeming linguistic uniformity of the text. It is also important to note that Ahmed’s polyphony is much more harmonious than Said’s: though diverse, her narra-

4. Hanan al-Sheikh is a highly regarded Lebanese novelist who writes in Arabic.

tive voices complement and build on each other to highlight not the contractions but the internal connectedness of her feminist Egyptian-American immigrant identity.

Inclusions of transliterated Arabic play an important role and point to the presence of several social languages. One may certainly observe the effect of the strict English-language schooling where “English was valued above Arabic in ways that would have marked it, in a child’s mind at least, as being somehow innately a ‘superior’ language,” whereas Arabic – in any of its forms – would be relegated to a lowbrow discourse (23). For instance, in Ahmed’s childhood perception, the popular *baladi* music is representative of “the unsophisticated folk regions of town” – here the very choice of an anthropologist terminology indicates the author’s emotional disconnect from this culture (24). Yet, this is also the language of the mother, the grandmother and the Egyptian womanhood in general, which for Ahmed is a symbol of female strength and perseverance under the harshest circumstances. The use of occasional Egyptian colloquialisms imitates the women’s speech: “[she] told to come back *bokra* – tomorrow – or next week” (27). They delineate the feminine space of the harem: “*al-makana*, the machine that the pumped the water in the house;” “*salamlek*, an apartment set aside exclusively for male guests (50, 102). They offer precise descriptions of women’s appearances, especially when there are no direct equivalences with English: “her [Ahmed’s grandmother] eyes, a kind of green-gold that we call ‘*asali*, honey-colored, looked down from under wide, unplucked eyebrows with love and without artifice” (106). When talking about the women of her family, the author’s voice switches from an emotionally removed scholarly analysis to a warm intimate storytelling. The linguistic spurts of Egyptian colloquial create a sense of belonging to her community and erase the separating lines between Ahmed the academic and Ahmed the Egyptian Muslim woman.

Given Ahmed’s argument that Islam was first and foremost an orally transmitted culture where women played an essential role, the Egyptian colloquial is utilized to subvert the male authority (articulated through *fusha*) over the most conservatively regulated of all Arab cultural discourses. For example, occasionally a verse from the Quran would be quoted with Egyptian accent: “‘*man qatala nafsan qatala al-nas gami’an, wa man ahliya nafsan ahiya al-nas gami’an*.’ ‘He who kills one being kills all of the humanity, and he who revives, or gives life to, one being revives all of the humanity’” (75). The word *gami’an*⁵ is written with a “g” – the most telling sign of an Egyptian speaker – instead of the formal *jami’an*. In another instance, Ahmed recalls how her grandmother had taught her the opening verse of the Quran – *fat-ha* – which is also spelled in imitation of the Egyptian dialect, as opposed to the formal spelling of *fatiha* (68).

In addition to its Egyptian colloquial polyphony, *A Border Passage* also shows some interesting examples of intertextuality in English, most prominently with Virginia Woolf, who was a big influence in Leila Ahmed’s work. Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), which is considered one of the most important pieces of feminist literature, made a particularly strong impression on the young Ahmed. The chapter describing Ahmed’s life in Girton, where Woolf had given many lectures, alludes to *A Room of One’s Own* in both language and content. For instance, Woolf’s highly provocative idea of “women and fiction” – a thorough analysis of socioeconomic conditions that would allow women to write literature – is matched by Ahmed’s own provocation when

5. “All, entirely.”

she suggests that “Girton represented the harem perfected” (183). And although she clarifies that this is “not the harem of Western male sexual fantasy [...] but the harem of older women presiding over the young,” such a bold attempt to connect the traditional culture of Arab women and the “modern” education of Western women is as provocative as it gets. Among the most obvious intertextual references to *A Room of One’s Own* is the symbolism of closed/opened doors, where the wording of Ahmed’s own experiences – “arriving at the door, opening the outer door, knocking on the inner one” (183) – echoes Woolf’s famous quote “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind” (76). Thus, drawing inspiration from Woolf’s pioneering work both linguistically and thematically, Ahmad utilizes a social language that shows the reader the beginnings of her own unique stance on feminism.

In sum, *A Border Passage* is indeed a hybrid text where all its social languages – a scholarly language of women’s studies, a spoken Arabic of Egyptian women and its subversion of the “male” formal Arabic, Ahmed’s intertextual references to Virginia Woolf’s seminal essay – work in unison to construct a transcultural feminist identity.

Ihab Hassan’s *Out of Egypt: Living in Denial*

Hassan, a well-known theorist in literary and cultural studies (most prominently, in the area of postmodernism), comes from a family of Egyptian aristocrats. He was born in 1925 in Cairo and received his early education in French and English schools. Having graduated with high honors from the University of Cairo in 1946, Hassan came to the United States on a prestigious fellowship to study chemical engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. He later changed his field and began studying literature, and received his PhD in English in 1953. Hassan is considered one of the first theorists who have conceptualized postmodernism. He is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships and the author of fifteen books and over three hundred articles and essays.

Unlike Edward Said and Leila Ahmed, Hassan is known for downplaying his Arab Egyptian background. He sets off to convince the reader (and himself) that his autobiographical subject is completely void of multiculturalism, claiming that he has *always* been American and his Egyptian origins are irrelevant: “Roots, everyone speaks of roots. I have cared for none” (*Out of Egypt* 4). In one of his other autobiographical essays, “Beyond Exile: A Postcolonial Intellectual Abroad,” he goes as far as completely dismissing the concept of an Arab American: “I am not a tribal man; I believe in free affiliations. That is why I came to America in the first place, and reject for myself hyphenation. Arab-American is to me redundancy, pleonasm” (460). From the linguistic point of view, Hassan asserts his identity as essentially American and claims English as the chosen language of living experience:

Born in Egypt I have lived all my life – so it seems – in America. I babbled first in Arabic and French; now I speak, write, think, dream in English. How many thousands, how many millions, share some similar displacement – I will not call it exile – in space, in time, in language? I regard my birth in Cairo as fortuitous, an accident, not a destiny. (453)

Ihab Hassan’s portrayals of Egypt are formulated almost entirely within the Orientalist discourse. A native Egyptian, he quotes directly from Gustav Flaubert’s *A Sensibility on Tour* to talk about the Great Pyramids (2-3). He uses a *New York Times* article as a source

of news about his city of birth: "I perceive the changes from afar, in the tales of travelers, in news reports [...] Cairo itself has become a place of unspeakable pollution and occlusions, 'crumbling under the weight of its people,' the *New York Times* reports" (13, 24). Wail Hassan highlighted those peculiar contradictions of a self-orientalizing immigrant:

It would be warranted to dwell on ironies involved in the fact that Orientalist stereotypes are recycled by one who fled Egypt because he could not liberate it from the colonizers, or that Manichean metaphysics is trumpeted by one of the prophets of postmodernism (*Immigrant Narratives* 15).

Alas, Hassan's complete and uncompromising rejection of his Egyptian self is in vain. *Out of Egypt* exposes the telltale signs of cultural hybridity, such as distinct social languages (for instance, his two autobiographical narrators) and linguistic consciousnesses (Hassan's occasional use of Egyptian colloquialisms), thus illustrating the impossibility of a complete assimilation into a chosen host culture. Hassan acknowledges the fragmented nature of memory and warns the reader that his remembrance of past events is "like the scattered bones of Osiris" (ix). Moreover, he recognizes the presence of multiple voices: "The reader may encounter here other distractions: quotations, brief interludes. In this time of immanent media, minds blend into minds, voices into voices" (x). Most prominently, the narrative structure of *Out of Egypt* is highly fragmented, in contrast with a traditionally linear flow of Said's and Ahmed's autobiographies. There is also an evident split of the autobiographical subject into two selves, who carry different names – "I. H." (the initialized name he assigns to the Egyptian self) and "autobiographer" (the American self) – while the two engage in a dialog. It is as if the underlying objective of the autobiographical act in *Out of Egypt* was an attempt to reconcile the tension between the two consciousnesses.

In spite of Hassan's obvious preference for English, Egyptian colloquialisms continue to undermine the narrative stability. Many transliterated Egyptian words and expressions are followed by English equivalents in parentheses, but a sizable amount of words are left untranslated – *sakiah*, *baksheesh*, *baladi*, *shadouf*, *ezbah* – hence, concealing certain images and meanings from an English-speaking reader. These colloquialisms illustrate the impossibility of a complete obliteration of the Egyptian linguistic consciousness.

Conclusion: Pillars of Salt

While representing only a segment of the vast body of Arab immigrant literature in English, these three works illustrate several issues worthy of further exploration. Each of these narratives offers a different take on the linguistic aspect of immigrant identity, including Said's tumultuous relationship with his multilingualism, Ahmed's attempt to reconcile her English with Egyptian colloquial, and Hassan's failure to become a fully assimilated English-speaking American. These autobiographical works also demonstrate a number of features that are unique to Arab immigrant writing, such as the power discourses of Arabic and English, stemming from the colonial past and other historically complex relationships between the English-speaking and the Arabic-speaking worlds. At the same time, these works offer some important commonalities: the complicated relationship with one's bilingualism, the inescapably hybrid nature of immigrant identity, the inability to completely cross over – or to go back.

Whatever the exact circumstances of the border crossing might be, however much time passes by, and no matter how successfully one assimilated into the new society, an immigrant can never completely shake off the omnipresent image of homeland which plays an integral part in their identity building process. Salman Rushdie, reflecting on his own negotiations of immigrant identity, described the construct of imaginary homeland best: "It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (*Imaginary Homelands* 10). The hybrid autobiographical identities of *Out of Place*, *Out of Egypt* and *A Border Passage* show that this sense of loss can also be an inspiring beginning of one's identity quest.

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