

**“Narrative Transculturation in the novels of Ahdaf Soueif”**

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**Abstract:**

In this essay, we are interested in the production of contemporary women writers who, somehow, are on the margins of their societies, or rather of the global community, and make of literature a (trans)cultural writing. We use the trans prefix not only to denote the transient, multi-territorial experiences of the writer as a citizen conscious of the uniform and concomitant misshapen movements that travel the globe, but also to refer to the possible identifications of this production. What motivates us is related to a question that, although it seems simplistic, is of great complexity and involves the way in which we see our globalized world culturally: it is a question of the way in which the individuals organize their own lives in view of the increasing geographical extension of economic activities across national and international borders and the impact of internationalization in these societies. Or the fallacious conception that, in the East, there is no room for discoveries of science, elaborations of theories. We will speak on the assumption that, as a consequence of their dual experience in the two geographical divisions we call the West and the East, the Egyptian-American woman writer Ahdaf Soueif emphasizes the impact of the story on the lives of the characters, helping them to view the world critically and build their own perceptions of reality.

**Keywords:** Ahdaf Soueif, Arab American, Map of Love, Orientalism, Ortiz, transculturation

**1. Introduction: the birth of a concept**

In the prologue he wrote in 1940 for Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Bronislaw Malinowski recounts his first personal meeting with the Cuban scholar: it took place in November 1929 in Havana. And he specifies:

“Dr. Ortiz told me at the time that in his next book he was planning to introduce a new technical word, the term *transculturation*, to replace various expressions in use such as ‘cultural exchange,’ ‘acculturation,’ ‘diffusion,’ ‘migration or osmosis of culture,’ and similar ones that he considered

inadequate. My instant response was the enthusiastic acceptance of this neologism”. (1)

Malinowski said he received the neologism with enthusiasm, and that he intended to use it constantly, without failing to always specify its authorship. Malinowski’s laudable attitude was unfortunately not that of many authors who either used the word *transculturation*, leaving Ortiz’s name in the shade, or gave it a meaning at their convenience, thus betraying without shames his creator, or even wanted to let him fall into the mists of oblivion. At a time when the notion of *transculturation* takes on more importance every day, it is useful to recall its genesis, in a word to give back to Ortiz what belongs to Ortiz. According to Malinowski, Ortiz demonstrates that the Spanish Cuban settlers went through a process of *transculturation*, being shaped by the new environment and “the old traits of both cultures, the interplay of economic factors peculiar to the New World as well as a new social organization of labor, capital, and enterprise” (2).

Ortiz saw the history of Cuba as “the history of its intermeshed *transculturations*” and he identified at least four streams of this process: (i) “the *transculturation* of the paleolithic Indian to the neolithic, and the disappearance of the latter because of his inability to adjust himself to the culture brought in by the Spaniards”; (ii) “the *transculturation* of an unbroken stream of white immigrants”; (iii) “the *transculturation* of a steady human stream of African Negroes”; (iv) the *transculturation* of “other immigrant cultures of the most varying origins” [...] each of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of *disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation—in a word, of transculturation*” (3). This assumption of *transculturation* as a process consisting of *disadjustments* and *readjustments*, of *deculturation* and *acculturation* has an universal value and may be successfully applied to the analysis of other ethnic communities in North America, in our case the Arab American.

## 2. (Re)defining the concepts.

In his *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said claims that,

“Transmitted from one generation to another, it [Orientalism] was a part of the culture, as much a language about a part of reality as geometry or physics. Orientalism slaked its existence, not upon its openness, its receptivity to the Orient, but rather on

its internal, repetitious consistency about its constitutive will-to-power over the Orient. In such a way Orientalism was able to survive revolutions, world wars, and the literal dismemberment of empires” (4).

By focusing on a narrative and publishing it, the writer demonstrates the realization of this “will-to-power”: the power of enunciation, the act of speech and meaning. Writing thus constitutes the birth of a new meaning, different from the metaphysics shaped by the area of the author’s knowledge, in this case, the Humanities. We understand metaphysics, at that moment, as the “Cartesian image of the world,” the “excessive value” added to phenomena of transcendent meaning, the preconceived “interpretation” of the world. To concretize a concomitant writing to the canon means to produce a new presence and a new reality on the shelves for the reader, not thinking about metaphysics, but experiencing it, writing. Writing predisposes an opinion about the world, about causes and effects.

Is metaphysics, as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) asserts, a proper way of the Western geographical part of visualizing the world? Arts, science, and language are cultural expressions worshiped by metaphysical dualism (facts and ideas, the sensible and the intelligible, the finite and the infinite). It remains to be seen whether this view of Western reality, which disturbs the critic of the East, leads him, in writing, to seek to weaken holistic approaches or, unexpectedly, to reinforce the desire of the region as something global, one, one cultural whole.

Revealing itself as the embodiment of events in certain spaces, the term presence is used in the perspective of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004), according to which the production of presence points to the processes in which there is initiation or intensification of the spatial relationship of the subjects with the world and its objects (“the things of the world”). Therefore, in bringing Western culture through the ideology of the liberal feminine being, independent in the spaces and especially in the way of thinking, the writer Soueif is part of the other individuals of her own nation, producing the presence of the West in the East.

In order to present the concept of presence, Gumbrecht (2004) contradicts the metaphysics of the Humanities. The intellectual makes a historical note of the academic meaning of metaphysics and the sign, emphasizing its peculiarity in each culture, since its understanding acts

directly in the aspects of the culture of presence. The sign in the culture of meaning can be well represented by the metaphysical structure defended by Ferdinand de Saussure, who innovated the way of doing linguistics, evidencing its complexity, in affirming the non-existence of linguistic entities outside the idea, that is, every linguistic entity requires a sign and a signification.

Analyzing language as code, as a system of signs, according to the Saussurean structuralism, in its synchronic cut, we are interested in the system and form, not the aspect of its realization in speech or its functioning in texts. In his *Course of General Linguistics* (2011), the French linguist and semioticians demonstrates a positive point of view regarding language as discourse, therefore, in relation to the analysis of the language in use. These writings re-establish the conception of language hitherto understood and postulated by Saussurean studies: language (langue) has a social plan that influences and transforms society and history. Before the *Course of General Linguistics*, the Saussurean sign was the language only as form, abstraction and system, relegating to the margin of the linguistic perspectives the language like social and historical activity, production and textual understanding.

We are then asking ourselves why Gumbrecht associates metaphysics with the sign. The author of *Production of Presence* reports that after 1979, although several colloquiums and meetings in Europe emerged in order to reformulate the Humanities, the non-hermeneutic alternative to the perpetuality of interpretation and the narrative always different from the past has generated resistance to the formulation of a conventional concept of sign and meaningful structures:

“If *production* means, literally, “to bring forth,” “to pull forth,” then the phrase “production of presence” would emphasize that the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication is also an effect in constant movement. In other words, to speak of “production of presence” implies that the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movements of greater or lesser proximity, and of greater or lesser intensity. That any form of communication implies such a production of presence, through its material elements, will “touch” the bodies of the persons

who are communicating in specific and varying ways may be a relatively trivial observation – but it is true nevertheless that this fact has been bracketed (if not – progressively – forgotten) by Western theory building ever since the Cartesian *cogito* made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of the human mind” (5).

### 3. A different view of Orientalism

All of Soueif’s novels were written in English rather than in Arabic, probably because she was motivated by her parents to use their English-language library. In fact the writer persisted in Arabic, but the words did not arise, they flourished in the English language; it was not a matter of choice, but of writing (Massad, 1999). The writer’s choice will be discussed in conjunction with postcolonial theories, considering the postcolonial in terms of Homi K. Bhabha (2010): as a consciousness that emerges from the colonial testimony, from the discourses of the “subaltern” who lives in the clash of geopolitical divisions (the West and the East). We will see in Soueif historical fictionalized facts that unleashed the presence of the British and European empire in Egypt, that is, how political hegemony and imperial supremacy guarantee the coloniality of power and demonstrate the paths of the world order, resulting in the internationality of the English language.

What interests us in Soueif’s writing debate in English is that this choice not only ensures the translation of the author’s works into other languages (*The Map of Love*, for example, has already been translated into five languages), but also represents a bilingualism, according to Walter Mignolo (2003). Soueif’s bilingualism consists in thinking not only of the Arabic and English language, but also of the French language as cultural practices, as a dialogue between cultures and interaction between individuals.

Referring to the form of knowledge that questions the world system (colonial, global and modern), Mignolo uses the term “gnosis liminal” to later use the expression “liminal thinking”, which reflects critically on the production of knowledge generally. It is this thought that, in English, Soueif develops to debate the colonial, therefore, postcolonial difference that allows to act, to think and to fight by the political power of the knowledge. This liminal thinking contributes to the re-analysis of Orientalism – a solid discourse produced by the West over the East.

In addition to preliminary thinking, the preference for writing in the English language alerts us to the hypothesis that the author feels free and comforted by this option. In this sense, we can think that the literary and professional well-being of the author is in a foreign language, this being its production of presence, since the relations are shaped by a sense and by a presence produced by our relation body with the objects, that is, things that occupy a space. We defend this presence as a political place, covered by its position as intellectual oriental woman. We can, however, contradict it, since, as a subject belonging to an Eastern nation and existence, such a choice leads us, on the one hand, to question the dimensions of this place and to locate it as a present place that characterizes, in truth, the author's self and the West as her presence, which is understood as the extension of its origin and the place where the subject meets and self-recognizes.

On the other hand, we identify the binomial West and East and place the writer's presence as the West, that is, the relation of the author to the objects (the "things of the world"). This problem also arises in the female characters constructed by the author in both *The Map of Love* and *In the Eye of the Sun*. This place shared by the author's self and her characters is not restricted exclusively to the nation in which herself is found, but to the original ideological form of Western thought. The term ideology here is understood as the artificers used by the West as ways to legitimize the domination of the ruling class, the bourgeois idea of progress, and imperialism.

This sharing of the Western ideological discourse, however, can also be understood as a political tool of the author, which proposes not only the "development" of the East as a product-producing region of territorial disruptions that breaks with the constructions pre-established by the Orientalists and dialogues with the global, but above all a political practice born of the exploited that aims to fill the gaps and show what the imagined stories of the domineering stopped saying. This search for progress, however, resembles the sense produced by the Orientalists, who built the idea that in the East, knowledge and culture are restricted and / or absent.

To discuss this issue, we refer to the criticism developed by the Palestinian Edward Said in *Orientalism* (2010); and to understand the spatiality embodied in the presence of the multiple objects (the "things of the world") that surround us through the region as a political tool, will be

used the work *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004), of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Does Ahdaf Soueif compare with the set of discursive constructions defended by Edward Said? Or does she fight against the prejudiced and biased view of the Orientalists who described the ‘reduced’ eastern society and the Arabs? Do the characters of her novels intend to contribute to an “evolution” of the thinking of the inhabitant and original subject of Egypt? A few more questions arise: would Ahdaf Soueif and her characters be “Westernized”? Or would Ahdaf Soeuf be a modern contemporary Orientalist? Or would she be a sceptical writer, as Edward Said? Our task is to discuss and identify such positions, noting, above all, the link between what is historically understood on the one hand as Eastern (which comes from the East) and, on the other, as Western (which comes from the West).

#### **4. Ahdaf Soueif and the voices of the “minority”**

The Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, born in Cairo and living in the two geographical and metaphysical divisions of the globe – East and West – starts from a place that is conscious of a questioning view of the “unitary web” of the Orient as a dominated and outsourced region (i.e. the Third World). This postcolonial consciousness emerges “from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South” (6) – in our view, a reality of the subaltern, in the terms of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). Commenting on the Indian reality in the nineteenth century, Spivak demonstrates that colonialism, along with patriarchy, greatly hampers the subaltern’s attempt to speak and be heard. The author suggests the impossibility of recovering the voice of the subaltern or the oppressed colonial subject, since, in the representation of the subaltern in the elitist discourse, there is always a gap.

According to Spivak, the “colonial witness” of Ahdaf Soueif as a “minority” does not therefore reveal the voice of Spivak’s subordinate, since Soueif is part of an elite, capable of passing through multiple territorialities and would position herself as the subject of enunciation, and not as an object of colonial-based discourse and Western Eurocentric domination. It is possible, however, to recognize in the writer and in her writing the perception that the oppressed has of the domination, that is, of the subject as object of the colonial narrative; or rather, of the subject as subject of the

colonial narrative, based on the Gumbrechtian conception that avoids the interpretation (hermeneutics) of the rigid paradigm between subject and object. Soueif, in fact, reveals the various faces of a game of regional and global oppressive order: from the West to the East, from the East to the East, from the East to the West. We will see that the oppressive dynamics are exerted by the same individuals in contexts in which they are oppressed (Third World, underprivileged economic class) and oppressors, as in gender relations, for example.

In her works, Soueif does not intend to feed the stereotyped belief that is spread globally about Eastern subjects: irrational, sensual, backward beings, terrorists or debaucheries who ride camels and use their wealth to insult their equals. The writer may even leave that gap stated by Spivak, but we do not see her as a postcolonial intellectual who strives to rewrite the past and keep her events (the civilizational and imperial mission) in mind for the reader. On the contrary, the author proposes a method of fighting a vision, in her view, misrepresented by an unknown East. According to Ahdaf Soueif, in her book *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (2004), a collection of essays, almost every book, film, magazine, television program and even article whose subject matter is linked to the part of the world where it comes, it could never be recognized:

“I might hold about Thatcher or Europe or the NHS, I was bound to find it expressed somewhere in the common discourse of the mainstream media. Where I felt myself out of step was when this discourse had anything to do with Egypt, the Arabs or Islam. I had become used to what was at the time an unequivocal support for Israel in the British media, but it troubled me that in almost every book, article, film TV or radio programme that claimed to be about the part of the world that I came from I could never recognize myself or anyone I knew. I was constantly coming face to face with distortions of my reality” (7).

On the basis of these considerations, it can be said that the West is the sense and produces a presence, meaning, therefore, that the West has a culture of meaning in which, according to Gumbrecht, “humans tend to see the transformation (of the improvement, of the embellishment) of the world as their main vocation.” The West acts, as a culture of meaning, in a culture

of presence (the Orient) to make “things that are absent present and things that are present absent” (Gumbrecht, 2004: 82). For this to happen, the influence of imperialism becomes essential. In *The Map of the Love* (1999), Soueif lists the two factors that most attract the Europeans to the East:

“Put simply, the East holds two attractions for Europe:

1. An Economic attraction: Europe needs materials for its industries, markets for its products and jobs for its men. In the Arab lands it has found three.
2. A Religious, Historical, Romantic attraction to the land of the Scriptures, of the Ancients, and of Fable. This attraction is born in the European while he is still *in his home country*. When he comes here, he finds that the land is inhabited by people he does not understand and possibly does not much like. What options are open to him? He may stay and try to ignore them. He may try to change them. He may leave. Or he may try to understand them” (8).

The Western subject’s first interest in the East, therefore, would be merely material. Even after Egypt’s independence, as it went down the streets of Cairo, it is impossible not to notice the huge amount of expensive imported products from the West. As a consequence, the greater the exploitation of the Arab peoples, the greater the extraction of oil and other natural wealth; the higher are the profits pocketed by national and multinational capitals; the poorer sectors of society become more miserable, and the more acute the economic crisis becomes. Therefore, the options of the colonialist, to face up to the dominated territory, is to demonstrate how unstable the Arab, the Eastern, and the African are, as well as the Western. There is no decisive action on the effectiveness of colonialism and imperialism, but local, regional and spatial factors of the environment that influence the direction of the political theories that will govern the “dominated”.

In *The Map of Love*, Soueif uses mockery in portraying the power of the harem, in addition to laughing at the stereotypical view of the Arab woman whose sculptural body dances, “with the flowing hair, long eyelashes and an appealing fullness of the lips and breasts” (9) emphasize the feminine as the sexual object of desire:

“You more or less ordered me to saddle your horse. It never even crossed your mind to be afraid.”

“What was there to be afraid of?”

“Me. Weren’t you afraid of me? The wicked Pasha who would lock you up in his harem and do terrible things to you?”

“What terrible things?”

“You should know. They’re in your English stories. Calling in my black eunuchs to tie you up.” (10)

The imprisonment of knowledge, the exaltation of certain ideologies and the maintenance of tradition, however, are also ways of discarding this truth, since, with time and with changes, new truths can arise. The truth that Soueif offers in her narrative, that is, the values that he defends appear ambiguous and discontinuous in this geographical division. In a few moments, the writer proves to be the existence of the Oriental subject, similar in many respects to Western “reality” (truth); in others, Soueif seems to ignore the truth of the Eastern subject. The non-recognition of the author in the works of Western intellectuals sometimes seems contradictory if we consider her synopsis as the representation of the Orient.

The character Asya al-Ulama, of *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), has a privileged social reality, incomparable to the lives of most Egyptians. The young woman, who moves to England to study her doctorate in poetry, shows that the freedom of the West is not intrinsically linked to education and knowledge. The young, immature and rebellious Asya exhibits infantile behaviour that, at first, distanced her from the objective of demonstrating the value of the literature produced by the oriental. The observations of the character Lateefa, mother of Asya, make us think that the matriarch expected her daughter to be like the women of Balzac, astonishingly perfect, beautiful, aristocrats and servants to the spouses, like Clementina, of *The Imaginary Mistress* (1945). In fact, everything Asya was not. The character returned to the parents’ house, after difficulties in the marriage, desirous of divorce:

“Lateefa frowns at the dark television screen: what more can you do for your children? You give them love, you give them confidence, you give them – against all the pressures of the society they were brought up in – the opportunity to think for themselves, to make their own decisions, you give them

education and culture – we took her to Luxor, to the Uffizi and the Louvre and the British Museum before she was seven – you give them everything a parent can give and then you give them independence – and they go and mess up their lives” (11).

In fact, this distortion of what is expected in the literature produced by Soueif raises the question of Western values. The immaturity of Asya represents the path of a thought, an awareness of itself, of its role as a citizen in the world. In addition, it is possible to note in the speech of Lateefa, the effort to grant to the daughter what the Egyptian society denies to the young people and, mainly, to the woman: the knowledge, the critical thinking. Modernity allows the mother to offer a new reality to her daughter: “My darling, I think the world was different in our day,” Lateefa says. “Our circumstances certainly were different – [...] We had less – money, less freedom, we were never separated for as long as you were, and we took certain things as given [...]” (12).

The discontinuity and transformation of values is even clearer in *The Map of Love*. In the confrontation between generations, while the character Mabrouka symbolizes the Orient, its regionalism and tradition, Layla and Anna represent the modern, literate woman. Mabrouka’s repulsion reveals to us how much the East has made a sense: that woman could not self-perfect herself in knowledge since Allah had already provided mankind with her guide and protector: man. This meaning, however, is a social construct of the Eastern society, since the denial of knowledge to women does not appear in the Qur’an:

“As Anna lifts her eyes from the letter, I see Mabrouka come into the haramlek. ‘You will make yourself blind with all this writing,’ Mabrouka scolds. ‘Blind,’ she repeats, shaking and admonishing finger. ‘May evil stay outside and far away. What’s all this learning useful for? You and Sett Layla, Always writing, writing. Does anyone eat this writing or drink it? Does it bring up the children or plant joy in any heart?’” (13).

In the character Anna Winterbourne we can see the affection of a native and a foreigner for Egypt. Anna Winterbourne shows an English side that disparages British imperialism, and Amal, in her “Westernized” quest, only aims to share information, fighting for equality and for better living conditions for her people. In the character Asya, from *In the Eye of the Sun*

(1992), the revolutionary character of literature in the life of a young university professor who, when living in different territories, uses literary criticism to debate the mentality of her students and question the legitimacy both Eastern and Western values.

### 5. Conclusions

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Ahdaf Soueif says in *Mezzaterra: fragments of a common ground* (2004) that she experiences the distortions of the reality of the East she knows. This demonstrates the tension between the production of meaning (the metaphysics promulgated about the East by the West) and presence (what the East actually represents). The plot of *The Map of Love* (1999) still permeates the humor in the romance between the English Anna Winterbourne and the Egyptian Sharif al-Baroudi. This character appropriates the Western woman’s experience to make her aware of the legitimacy of an imperialist discourse. The confrontation between West and East has political and social situations that have contributed to the Arab nationalist sentiment as a reaction to European colonialism.

Ahdaf Soueif presents us with a different Orient from the Orientalist intelligible object. The stereotyped language of desert Arab, far from modernity, from the peaceful and fleeting woman. Soueif does not eliminate interpretations related to Egypt from the literature, but problematizes through the historical context and literary prose how these meanings are confronted with the search for modernity: the struggle for the creation of universities, the guarantee of education and economic well-being and social. Upon leaving the time circle in which they live, the English character Anna Winterbourne from *The Map of Love* (1999) experiences the British impact on the colony (Egypt), while the Egyptian character Asya al 'Ulama from *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) aims at cultural exchange and awareness of

preliminary thinking. Thus, the sense is mixed with the presence. Anna and Asya return to their homelands not because they reject the culture of the other, East and West, respectively, but because they believe that over time transculturation can take place in the encounter of bodies in a production of disinterested and affectionate presence, in another level of bond, whose time, perhaps, will be spent.

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