

CAUGHT IN AN ANGLO-EGYPTIAN CULTURAL BIND :
AHDAF SOUEIF'S *IN THE EYE OF THE SUN*.*

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As in other post-colonial literatures, where the major and common feature "is the concern with place and displacement" (Ashcroft *et.al.*, 8), in Ahdaf Soucif's *In the Eye of the Sun* "place, displacement, and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity" (Ashcroft *et.al.*, 8) are the main focus. More specifically, this novel is a *Bildungsroman* about a bi-cultural young woman who seeks to transcend the conflict between two identities, about "the ambivalence and self-questioning of the post-colonial intellectual vis-à-vis Western societies" (Mantel, 24). Although Asya El Ulama sets out with many assets, her maturation and progress towards an authentic self are a lengthy process that involves several stages.

To follow these stages, and consequently Asya's dilemma and its resolution, it would be useful to turn to Franz Fanon's essay "On National Culture". Fanon's words are meant for the "intellectual native" who is the writer of, not a character in, the novel. In the case of *In the Eye of the Sun*, however, Fanon's analysis can be equally applied to the heroine, for the novel is highly autobiographical (Salmawy, 3) and the novelist herself acknowledges, "the central consciousness in the book is mine as it was then" (Halim, 11). This paper is not concerned with the parallels between Ahdaf Soueif and

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Asya El Ulama, only with the fact that both women are intellectual natives and that, since Ahdaf Soueif draws on her own life to depict Asya, then the fictional character can be analyzed in the light of Fanon's theory, which this study relies on to a great extent.

Fanon finds that the classic question is that of "native intellectual" who is caught between two nationalities and has to sacrifice one in order to keep the other :

The intellectual native who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, when he comes up against the need to take on two nationalities, chooses, if he wants to remain true to himself, the negation of one of these determinations (Fanon, 269).

Asya El Ulama does not hold two nationalities, but her immersion in English is complete. Having spent her early childhood in London, she returns to Egypt a child that is virtually illiterate in reading and writing Arabic. Her home is "determinedly untraditional. Asya's home has modern paintings by friends of her parents... It has studies and sitting-rooms and no dining-room or drawing-room" (78), thereby indicating that hers is an untypical Egyptian upbringing. Furthermore, her father's position as Minister of Culture and her mother's as professor of English Literature, in addition to her own natural inclination in that direction, guarantee that Asya will be steeped in foreign, particularly English, culture. Nor is there a conflict between her English and Egyptian identities. She moves with ease and comfort between her westernized home and her Sa'idi grandfather's in the popular

In fact, until she graduates and marries, the need to choose between nationalities that Fanon alludes to does not apply to Asya. She fully enjoys the privileges both cultures confer upon her: from her grandfather's patriarchal home she derives the sense of continuity and security that the extended family and adherence to tradition provide, while from her parents' house she is allowed access to the European world beyond. It is evident that "on a Moslem background a European way of life has been quite successfully superimposed, creating a middle-class existence that is easy and still quite rich" (Kermode, 19). When Saif Madi, her future husband, meets her as an undergraduate and calls her "Princess", the title is not limited to her sovereignty over his heart, for she is precisely that in her own little world of family, friends and university. Mohamed Salmawy sees that the novel revolves round the various forms of oppression the heroine is subjected to in a male-dominated society (Salmawy, 3). This may be part of the authorial scheme, but the narrative itself reveals no oppression of Asya graver than her parents' refusal to allow her to get married until she graduates or to stay out of the house until after 7.30 p.m. or to keep a tube of Clearasil in the bathroom. Weighed against the love, respect and freedom of choice and movement they constantly supply her with, these mild forms of surveillance - even by western standards - cannot place this eighteen-year-old in the category of oppressed females, and cannot be considered other than trivia that any adolescent would blow out of proportion into a tragedy of parental and societal oppression.

Until this stage, then, Asya's personal life reaps the benefits of a perfectly balanced Anglo-Egyptian culture and reveals the ability to "possess more than one world" (Booth, 204). There is, as yet, no need to make choices. It is when she goes to England to do her Ph. D. that complexities arise. Severed

from the warm sheltered atmosphere of her parents' then her husband's home, faced with financial difficulties, suffering from the cold - real and emotional - that engulfs university life in the north of England, working in a research area that makes absolutely no sense to her, Asya feels for the first time in her life an alienation and loneliness that she is inadequately equipped to cope with. Her first real contact, as an adult, with England is an agony that is rendered in "a highly effective, memorable piece of writing" (Booth, 29).

Divested of all the privileges that had been her birthright in Egypt, she becomes a foreigner, a third-world woman living on a shoe-string budget, and, as such, she proves to be a person who simply cannot survive on her own. She is not rescued by her own resourcefulness or resilience, but by her doting husband. He gives up his well-paid and prestigious job to help her : he sets her up in a picturesque little cottage, relieves her of her financial difficulties, supplies her with love and introduces her to people. Asya comes into her own once these material and emotional obstacles have been removed for her. Though her source of comfort has been Egyptian, it is not to that culture that she binds herself now; rather, she makes the choice Fanon has referred to and turns confidently to claim her English identity and to conquer the English on their own soil.

At this point she conforms to Fanon's statement that the "native intellectual will try to make European culture his own. He will not be content to get to know Rabelais and Diderot, Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe, he will bind them to his intelligence as closely as possible" (Fanon, 268). In the first phase "the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power" (Fanon, 270). It is at the moment Asya has her first major quarrel with her

Egyptian husband in London, and is about to submit to an Englishman - that is, when she is about to exchange the native man for the colonizer - that she wanders off to contemplate Whitehall and

the accoutrements of Empire. Built of course on Egyptian cotton and debt, on the wealth of India, on the sugar of the West Indies, on centuries of adventure and exploitation ending in the division of the Arab world and the creation of the state of Israel, etc. etc. etc. Why then does she not find it in her heart to feel resentment or bitterness or anything but admiration for and pleasure in the beauty, the graciousness, the harmony of this scene? Is it because the action is all in the past; because this is an 'empire in decline' and all this magnificence is only a monument, rather like the great temples of Abn Simbel or Deir Bahari? Or is it because the thoughts, the words, the poetry that wound their way down the years in parallel with the fortunes of the Empire have touched her so nearly and pulled her in so close that she

feels herself a part of all this?
(511 - 12)

Yet Asya, having assimilated English culture and negotiated a reconciliation between herself and her country's colonizers, believes she is not only a passive recipient of the Empire's gifts; she too has her heritage to offer the Empire :

But I haven't come to you only
to take, I haven't come to you
empty-handed : I bring you
poetry as great as yours but in
another tongue, I bring you
black eyes and golden skin and
curly hair, I bring you Islam
and Luxor and Alexandria and
lutes and tambourines and
date-palms and silk rugs and
sunshine and incense and
voluptuous ways ... (512)

But that is not strictly true. When she enters into a sexual relationship with the blond Englishman, Gerald Stone, at her volition, she brings him no Islam and little Arabic poetry. She conquers him totally with the perfect mixture of eastern and western attributes : "voluptuous ways" and black hair (the archetypal oriental female tools), a formidable intellect (supposedly a western male monopoly) and a complete command over English ways. Once she has committed adultery with him, she does not identify with Arab heroines or fictional characters, but with European ones : she tells herself, "you've joined Anna and Emma and parted company for ever with Dorothea and Maggie" (540).

It is her Englishness that colonizes him – her pearls and cashmere, her expensive soigné image, her table manners, the classical music she listens to – all contrast with his poverty and lack of sophistication. Where Saif had called her Princess, Gerald compares her to “the bloody Queen” (554). The role she adopts in Europe is a watered-down female version of Tayeb Saleh’s narrator in *Season of Migration to the North*. Minus the florid paraphernalia of oriental exoticism Tayeb Saleh’s narrator is surrounded with and the various forms of death he causes. Asya leaves in her wake a trail of broken hearts, lives and spirits. In Italy, as an undergraduate, she reduces the young Swiss to tears of despair and love, and arouses desire in two Italian men. In England, she stirs deep emotions in her husband’s friend Mario, who eventually meets his death in a car accident. Gerald Stone, having reached dizzying heights of pleasure with her body, falls physically ill every time he feels she is about to abandon him. And it is in England that Saif will meet his psychological and emotional death. When he finds out that the wife, who for nine years had denied him entry into her body because she couldn’t tolerate the pain of the sexual act, had willingly offered herself to an Englishman, his whole life caves in: he “looks like a man in a film the moment he’s been shot before he falls to the ground” (623). Nor is Asya herself undamaged. She watches with grief as Saif recedes from her, tries to shake off a now-cumbersome, irritating Gerald, and fails to make any progress in her research. Her conquest of England has backfired; her total assimilation of all things western has only brought her defeat and despair.

In her abject condition, her father sends her a letter in Arabic, with one sentence in English: “You are making a mess of your life” (606), indicating that it is specifically by donning her English identity that Asya is losing herself. Again it is

only when her Egyptian heritage and connections come to her aid and extricate her from the "mess" that she manages to at least finish her Ph. D. There remains Gerald, the symbol of the Empire in its death throes, conquered by the Egyptian female who has mastered the tools of English imperialism - language, culture, education, wealth and power - but who no longer finds any satisfaction in them. Significantly, it is not in England - the Empire in decline - that Asya can reject him once and for all. It is in New York, the seat of the new Empire, the Empire at its mightiest, that Asya calls him to his face what he really is, "a sexual imperialist" (723). Her rejection of him marks the defeat of the western male imperialist at the hands of the post-colonial Arab female, whose decolonization and conversion from imperialized to imperialist signal also her final rejection of her immersion in the culture of the Empire.

She returns to Egypt without her westernized husband and her western lover, in order to resume her post at Cairo University. She has thus abandoned her English identity and, like the intellectual native Fanon has been analyzing and who has fled western culture owing to the void he finds there, Asya must look for her culture elsewhere, "and if [she] fails to find the substance of culture of the same grandeur and scope displayed by the ruling power, the native intellectual will very often fall back upon emotional attitudes and will develop a psychology which is dominated by exceptional sensitivity and susceptibility" (Fanon, 269).

Now that she has chosen her Egyptian identity, Asya is ready to serve her country. But she is faced with a changing society she cannot come to terms with. In Abdel Nasser's days of Pan Arabism and war against the Jews, Asya had entered into the fray wholeheartedly - not by actually serving, admittedly, but

with all the idealism of a romantic adolescent. Despite her knowledge of the oppression of the Mabahith, despite the defeat of '67, Asya, along with the rest of the Egyptian nation, mourned for Nasser at his resignation and then at his death. Now, with Sadat's open-door policy, his peace with Israel and his encouragement of fundamentalism, Asya feels alienated and, as Fanon states, resorts to "emotional sensitivity". Her experience of life now, as a maturer person who has undergone suffering and who has returned to the bosom of her motherland and family with the sense of security and continuity, rooted in times immemorial, that they offer, is rendered in a moving, truthful narrative. When she makes the ritual, annual visit to the dead with her family, her sensibility takes in much that has contributed to the perpetuation of life in Egypt against many odds. As her aunt hands out *rahma*, bounty to the poor who live in the City of the Dead, Asya conjures up the hostile image of Gerald, whom she had called ungenerous and mean (723), to contrast the eastern and western attitudes to the humane concept of mercy :

And what would Gerald Stone
have made of this little scene ?
That it was seigniorial ?
Patronizing ? Perpetuating the
evil system of privilege ? And
so they should have come
empty-handed to visit Geddu
and Mama Deela ? And the
children would have crowded
round, and they would have
said, 'Sorry, we think that the
"mercy" we bring here every
season delays the process of
your liberation; we've decided

to speed it up, to help you by increasing the pressure on you just a little bit more --' And what would the children have done? Asya can see their faces turn sullen and uncomprehending as they retreat and watch them from across the road. (746)

However, even as Asya luxuriates in the warmth she derives from the Egyptian environment, she is conscious of a jarring note that disturbs this seeming harmony. Is it that her critical faculties are more pronounced than those of others? Not necessarily, for the members of her family are intelligent, sensitive people. Once more it is useful to turn to Fanon's description of the second phase the intellectual native goes through :

In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is... But since the native is not a part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only. (270)

Although Asya has deep personal relationships with family, friends and even domestics, her sense of belonging on the public level is slightly more than superficial. She may talk politics and discuss national and international affairs at length, but these dialogues are not "slick, neat, pointed" (Mantel, 28) on the contrary, they are "inherently improbable and deeply

fatiguing" (Mantel, 29). These political discussions, as well as the documentary passages, which are equally tedious, constitute a weakening intrusion on the narrative and their imposition indicates that their integration in the novel is as forced as Asya's interest in Egypt's national affairs. Before she went to England, the need to actually mix with the masses had never really arisen, and the circles she moved in were more or less as westernized as she was: Zamalek, the club, the elite English Department. In England she had firmly avoided mixing with other Egyptians because they were "so *insistent* on their Egyptianness" (352). Back in Egypt, she does not seem to fit in the way her sister does, who tries to fight corruption in her own way yet manages to communicate with ease with the prison guards and refuses to live in a posh area in order to keep her finger on the pulse of the masses. Even Asya's inability to have proper intercourse with her husband is a denial of what he impersonates: the Egyptian force of procreation. Her sexual need for him is great, but barricading herself against his penetration is equivalent to a decree prohibiting Egyptianness to actually penetrate her. She just will not consummate her marriage with contemporary Egypt.

It is not that Asya does not *wish* to belong. Having lost the two men in her life as well as her total identification with England, she seeks an alternative anchor that is ultimately native. But Pan Arabism has disappeared with Nasser's death, and Islam too has turned into an alien concept. Gratifying though the visit to the dead had been, it drove home the fact that Islam in Sadat's time has changed. The *fekki* who comes to recite Koran in the mausoleum bears no relation to the traditional blind old *fekki* with *'imma*. He is young and plump and wears Korean clogs, a see-through "straight *gallabiyas* with cufflinks and a gold wrist watch, and his hair is slicked

back like a car mechanic's on holiday. His eyes are everywhere. He pretends to close them as he recites, but from under the lids he is examining the legs of the women" (748). Asya's students in the English Department offer another version of Islam. The girls wear the *hijab* and will not speak in class because a woman's voice is *'awra*. They want to learn English because it is the language of the enemy (754). Asya, therefore, can identify with neither the commercialized version of Islam nor with the oppressive, silencing one.

But identify with something or someone native she must. She must find a "national culture" to belong to, one that "existed before the colonial era" in order to avoid being swallowed by Western culture, and thus she behaves like Fanon's intellectual natives, who "relentlessly determine to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of their people" (Fanon, 265). Since Egypt's post-pharaonic history has been a succession of various forms of colonialism - from the Persians, Ptolemies and the Romans through to the Moslem Arabs, Ottomans and English - Asya has to travel a long way back in search of roots and national culture. She finally finds her roots and her alter ego in Akhmeem, an ancient Upper Egyptian village, and finds the "idol" - a statue of a woman from the time of Ramses the Second. Like other statues, she is beautiful, but what makes her more beautiful in Asya's eyes is that she is "not standing at the door of a temple or at the knee of the great pharaoh" (785). In other words, her real beauty derives from her independence, from her ability to be herself without any association to institutions, religions or men. She is half-buried in the sand, but unlike Ozymandias, she is not there to bear witness to the transience of man and his imperial power. This woman has been retrieved from the sand after three thousand years precisely to demonstrate that personal autonomy is the

enduring trait and that is why she has been "delivered back into the sunlight still in complete possession of herself - of her pride, and of her small, subtle smile" (785). The novel ends on this note, and Asya's admiration for the exhumed woman indicates that it is with this particular figure that Asya identifies and it is in her that she has finally found her roots: a woman whose identity is unknown (and therefore whose categorization is impossible), who owes allegiance to nothing or nobody but her own self, and whose origin is distinctly pre-colonial, and therein her strength, survival and longevity lie. Asya finally shakes off all the shackles of modern culture, whether English or Arab or Islamic or male, and adheres to the ancient, pure Egyptian culture of which she is a direct descendent through her Sa'idi grandfather. Her last visit to her deceased grandfather's house is ample testimony that the line will remain unbroken despite inevitable deaths and changes: the table on which he used to place his glass of tea has been overturned and used as a train by successive generations of children, grandchildren (including Asya) and great-grandchildren. When her uncle and aunt toast her - "to Asya" (18), they say, obviously relaying the whole message of the novel - it is this Asya they are celebrating: the one whose body and psyche have been the battleground on which the Anglo-Egyptian battle has been fought and who finally comes through "an Egyptian woman who has endured the corrosion of modernity and exile, and remained herself" (Said, 19).

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