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The Triumphant Cleopatra: Locating the Voices of Resistance in the Select Works of Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir

Debabrata Das

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

Abstract

Women's writing often involves a kind of fighting in so far as it constitutes an act of assertion on the part of the gender subalterns who do thereby cross the bar of constrictions and constructions. The height of the bar is raised to almost an unassailable extent for women of the East, especially for women coming from the Islamic world. Besides voicing against religious fundamentalism, being practiced within their homelands for generations, they have to perform the role of cultural crusader against Western misrepresentation, in order to form an independent individual and communal identity. For Arab women, caught in the throes of a conservative patriarchy, this act of defiance is very difficult. It becomes doubly difficult for those who are forced to live their life away from home. They are subject to multiple forms of violence and subjugation, including cultural and linguistic ones, in the host land. The Western perception and treatment of these women is largely influenced by some preconceived notions and myths. Even the greatest of writers from the Western world, including William Shakespeare, are not free from the charge of deliberately misrepresenting the women of the East as mere objects of sexuality for obvious political reasons. So, when writers like Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir write, become internationally acclaimed writers, and dare to deal with prickly issues such as gender, ethnic and cultural stereotyping, it becomes imperative on the part of the researcher to locate the link between cultural misrepresentation and imperialism, and also to identify the voices of resistance coming from within. The proposed article intends to touch upon all those issues which impact the process of individuation in a post-global world.

Keywords: Representation, Resistance, Gender, Culture and Identity.

Introduction

Presenting the *Other* as cultural inferior in both literary texts and popular culture forms an inseparable part of Western imperialism. A successful strategy adopted by the European writers in promoting Western cultural superiority through literary texts is the portrayal of non-European lands as culturally infertile and, at times, as nations of necromancy; therefore, they are in dire need of colonial intervention to improve its cultural landscape and individual identity. This racialised as well as sexualised depiction of the “foreign” land has often been done by presenting grossly distorted images of the women of these ‘dark’ continents as idols of sexuality, incapable of having an agency of their own. The presentation of the character of Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen of Grecian descent, who, in multiple ways, represents her native land of Egypt, may be examined critically to evaluate as well as expose the Orientalist ideology of the West. Medium of presentation varies from literature to Hollywood films, to popular video games, to popular media but the Western discourse remains constant. In all such mediums, the image of the queen has been portrayed negatively. She is always a cunning, manipulative seductress whose identity is incomplete without her connection with/ relation to a man, a white European man.

Thus, the position of sexed subalternity informs the identity of the female *Other*, in a more general sense, the *Other* as a category. Against this motivated (mis)representation of the female *Other*, a group of Arab women writers in diaspora have been protesting through their writings since the latter half of the last century. Ahdaf Soueif, the British-Egyptian Anglophone writer, and Fadia Faqir, the British-Jordanian writer and activist, are two of the prominent faces of protest against this misrepresentation of female voice, especially voice of Muslim women from the East, in western literature. These two writers go far beyond the traditional dynamics of Islamic nationalism and/or Islamic feminism in countering the western representation of Muslim women and respond through their counter-narratives of sexual freedom, linguistic resistance and women empowerment in the Arab world and beyond. The chief objective of the present study would be to analyse the gender-identity interface as presented in the select novels of Soueif and Faqir. Role of culture in shaping female identity would also constitute the central

problematique of the current study. Herein, culture is perceived to be a framework of rules, norms and expectations, conformity to which may ensure acceptance and/or tolerance towards individuals or communities within the social space. At the same time, history and ethnicity inform the struggling women characters constantly, which impact their understanding of the society and people around them, both within their homeland and away from home.

Revisiting the Western Myth

Cleopatra, as stated earlier too, has been equated with her place of origin by William Shakespeare in his play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, with a definite motif in mind. By equating Cleopatra with Egypt, Shakespeare has added an element of exoticism to the character of Cleopatra. Egypt, or for that matter the entire East, has historically been represented as the land of sensuality and black magic. This part of the world has also been portrayed as the land of ancient myths and pagan gods. One such instance of equating woman with her land can be found in one of the speeches of Alexas in which she replaces Cleopatra with Egypt:

Say the firm Roman to great Egypt sends
This treasure of an oyster; at whose foot,
To mend the petty present, I will piece
Her opulent throne with kingdoms. All the East,
Say thou, shall call her mistress. (Shakespeare 1993)

In this speech, Cleopatra's Egyptian identity has been foregrounded more than once and, at the same time, this identity has been placed vis-à-vis the West in order to establish the cultural superiority of the West, and also to highlight the exotic character of the East. This oriental touch is quite explicit in the use of the phrase "mistress of the East". The use of "opulent" in describing Cleopatra's "throne" is equally problematic. Her oriental origin is once again emphasised through the use of the phrase "treasure of an oyster". That Cleopatra has been referred to as a *slave*, and even a *whore*, shows the attitude of the white male author towards women of the so-called exotic land. More shockingly, she has been made to call herself the "serpent of old Nile"! Thus, the land of Egypt and its women have been reduced to mere signs of evil which pose a serious threat to the civilised West, represented by Rome in this case. John

Gillies provides a postcolonial interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of the two 'worlds'. He writes, "the 'orientalism' of Cleopatra's court – with its luxury, decadence, splendour, sensuality, appetite, effeminacy and eunuchs – seems a systematic inversion of the legendary Roman values of temperance, manliness, courage and pietas" (Gillies 1994). This trend of creating binaries with the motif of *Otherising* the East and its people had been continuing since the time of Shakespeare and even beyond. Since most of the Western authors have used the women of the East to foreground their theory of cultural superiority and also to establish the inferiority of the Eastern continents and communities, the resistance against such motivated representations had to come primarily from the women writers of these continents and communities. Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir are two such writers from the Arab world who have successfully countered these Western discourses and provided the readers with an authentic account of the life and struggle of the *Otherised* women of the East.

The literary genius of these women authors chiefly lies in the fact that they reject this conventional Western strategy of misrepresenting a land through the portrayal of its women in such a way that both of them strengthen the cultural and historical stereotypes, and they present women characters as human individuals more than anything else. Their literature marks a paradigm shift both in terms of selection of theme and the human treatment of the characters, especially women characters. Women in the works of Arab female writers are distinguished by their ability to speak loud against patriarchal violence as well as cultural stereotypes. These new Cleopatras have their own agency, which empower them to fight their battle for a dignified life within their respective countries and also in the land of diaspora. Both Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name Is Salma* foreground this exceptional qualities of Arab women who finally succeed in rewriting history by dismantling popular Western stereotypes about Arab Muslim women as docile bodies to be controlled by their male counterparts by way of imposing religious and sexual codes on them, and also by exerting their individual identities through their courageous acts of defying those traditional codes and taboos.

Locating the Voices of Resistance

Egyptian or for that matter Arab female identities are generally shaped by the narrative acts that reflect cultural hybridity. This cultural hybridity is a key factor in forming independent identity, more especially when the Arab woman immigrates into a Western country and is being forced to negotiate with multiple layers of marginalisation in the new land of domicile. It naturally creates some sort of a cultural ambivalence in the woman in exile. This cultural ambivalence serves as the first step towards making postcolonial identity. Therefore, narrative acts become more important than the preconceived notions. Soueif, in *The Map of Love*, emphasises the theme of women's sexual silence and makes her female protagonist Ana and Isabel speak against this enforced silence. By exerting their freedom of choice in selecting life partners, these women defy both patriarchal codes of marriage and sexuality. This act of defiance on the part of her heroines generates a third space. Homi Bhabha calls this third space the 'liminal signifying space' (Bhabha 2004). He explains: "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (2004). Ashcroft et al. provide a detailed analysis of liminality in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*: "The importance of the liminal for postcolonial theory is precisely its usefulness for describing an 'in-between' space in which cultural change may occur: the transcultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states" (Ashcroft 2000). This liminal space has been created within the text in order to signal a shift towards transcendence through the performance of sexuality by the leading female characters.

Interestingly, in *The Map of Love*, Anna's love affair is mediated through encounters with a number of women. The female author creates a gendered network of power within the text by giving sexual as well as cultural autonomy to women belonging to different generations. It creates a sisterly bond among the characters that are somehow entangled with one *Other* in a number of ways. Here one woman lends voice to an *Other*, thereby creating a house of one's own where patriarchy becomes almost redundant. Even religious

strictures cannot influence their decisions; rather, those strictures have been turned into liberating ideals by these women. In the novel, Anna Winterborne's life constitutes a discursive borderline space and this discursive space ultimately leads to expression of independent identity. Amal and Isabel, two *Other* important female characters in the text, rediscover the suppressed voice of resistance raised by Anna almost a century ago. In fact, the narrative of Anna is incomplete without the narratives of Amal, Isabel and Layla. By clubbing these different narratives together, the author has worked out a complete Arab female consciousness which is fundamentally transgressive. Through this collective endeavour, the modern Cleopatras find true expression of freedom. This is perhaps possible only when the true Arab female experience is documented by a woman writer from inside. The added advantage of a writer like Soueif is she could see the Arab Muslim world both from inside and from outside the country. This also liberates the feminist discourse from the clutches of the white upper- and middle-class writers. It is a universal truism that the Western feminism have contributed to the subjugation of the colonised women of the East, by way of representing them from a Eurocentric point of view. Thus, they undermined the key issues of race, caste and religion which play a massive role in shaping the identity of the women of the East. Soueif takes special care of these crucial issues while presenting the women of the East in her works. This is exactly the reason why she has been able to provide an authentic and objective image of the land of Egypt and its women.

The historic encounter between Islam and the West has always been one of domination of the East on political, cultural, and religious grounds (Said 1978). Said criticises the West's representation of the culture and history of the East. According to him, the Western discourses promote the cultural superiority of the West and present the people of the East and their history as inferior. They have systematically targeted the women of the East to establish the uncivil and barbaric nature of the men of the East. They have also portrayed the Eastern women as symbols of sexuality and unbridled passion. Many Arab writers, especially women writers, have countered this Western narrative of cultural inferiority through the portrayal of women who do not hesitate to exercise their sexual right, with a view to rewriting the Western narrative of silenced Muslim women who

need Western intervention in order to be saved from Muslim men and also to be able to speak against oppression. Thus, their works constitute a strong response to the stereotypical and orientalist portrayal of the Muslim world and its women. Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* is one such example in which an Arab Bedouin girl Salma fights almost a lone battle against both Western prejudices and indigenous cultural peculiarities to liberate herself completely from the labyrinth of patriarchy. In this novel too, the central protagonist creates an ambivalent space which initiates her journey towards making an independent identity in a globalised world.

R.H. Latha emphasises the role of hybridity in the making of female identity in a postcolonial context. She writes: "Women's identities in postcolonial societies are characterised by hybridity" (Latha 2001). Salma's identity needs to be understood vis-à-vis the cultural hybridity that marks her postcolonial diasporic existence. As a woman of the Middle East, she is subject to cultural *Otherisation* and psychological marginalisation in Britain. This state of marginalisation creates a sense of ambivalence in Salma which leads to the formation of her postcolonial identity. The author has shown this cultural ambivalence through the use of a unique linguistic strategy. Salma speaks in a hybridised language which mixes Arabic with English in such a manner that none of the two languages loses its linguistic integrity and power of communication. Even though she uses English expressions to communicate her present state of mind to English-speaking individuals around her, the language retains the syntax of Arabic. Fatima Felemban has emphasised this use of the technique of interlanguage by Faqir in *My Name Is Salma* to construct an independent Arab identity (Felemban 2012). Faqir has used this special vocabulary in order to help Salma create an ethnic space within Britain, which allows her to retain the Arabic self even when she interacts with the Europeans. The following conversation between Salma and her doctor shows how Salma exerts her Arab identity through the use of this special vocabulary:

'What can I do for you, Miss Asher?' ...
 I ill, doctor. My heart beat, No sleep,' ...
 'Any physical symptoms?'
 'Sick yes. Arms and legs see.' ...
 'It is psoriasis, that's all. A skin condition. Nothing serious,'

'Sweat, heartbeat, cannot sleep,' ...

'If your heart is beating then it must be in good condition. That's what hearts are supposed to do.'

'What can I do for you, Miss Asher?' ...

'But I ill. Please. Today alive, tomorrow dead me,' (Faqr 2007).

Though the medium of communication is English here, the style and syntax carry typical Arabic linguistic essence. Notably, the two most prominent verbs – 'to be' and 'to have'-- are missing in Salma's speeches. This has happened due to the fact that in her native language, i.e. Arabic, these two verbs are not in use at all. This linguistic liminality helps Salma exert her Arab identity in the foreign land. This is a courageous act of negating the British identity on the part of Salma. This process of negation can also be located in her refusal of the rigid Islamic code of sexuality, which was imposed on her by her Bedouin community. In selecting partners, both in Jordan and in Britain, she defies patriarchal codes of 'virtue' and 'purity' which puts her in immense trouble later on. However, she remains adamant in the face of tremendous torture and attempted 'honour killing'. This indomitable spirit and uncompromising ability to defy all traditional norms define the character of Faqr's female protagonists who are ready to fight the battle against all forms of marginalisation till the end of their life. She could have lived the rest of her life as Sally, the British wife, but she prefers to leave this foreign identity behind and die as Salma at the end of the novel which clearly shows that the West with all its hegemonic strategies and networks has failed miserably in its attempt to assimilate her into Western culture and identity. This act of upholding Arab identity, even in death, makes her the winner at the end. Her life bears clear testimony to the fact that the Arab Muslim women are capable of fighting their battle for justice and are in perfect position to shape their own identities independent of any whatsoever influence/s.

Conclusion: "History has been written without us. The imperative is clear: either we will make history or remain the victims of it" says Michele Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Wallace 1979). Writers like Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqr chose to play the agents of change. They have rewritten the popular Western discourses from an indigenous point of view which has dismantled the Western myths about the women of the East. That the

Cleopatras of the Arab world have their own agencies and they can speak against all forms of violence and marginalisation on their own is established quite successfully in the novels of these women writers. But this struggle for making independent Arab identity by its women does not end with these novels. The process continues in their *Other* works too. In fact, as Stuart Hall emphasises in his *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, this process can never be complete as the quest never ends. He argues, “The subject previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities” (Hall 1996). The primary objectives of further studies in this area must include the analysis of the various dynamics and positionalities that remain active in constructing these “unresolved identities”.

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