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Building Bridges, Not Walls

Arab Anglophone Diasporic Writers as Cultural Mediators

“Every culture is a mixture” Jean-Luc Nancy

‘No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive’ Mahatma Gandhi

Humanities as a scholarly field have constantly been criticized for not being entirely practical or utilitarian when it comes to advancing society and finding solutions to contemporary problems. Much of the theorization and findings remain inherently theoretical and descriptive in nature. However, humanities nowadays stand out not only as a fundamental key player in the struggle for meaning and quest for cultural diversity/difference, but more importantly as an ethicopolitical exigency in search for communal modes of existence and coexistence especially amid the culturally and religiously motivated violence, and the *Zeitgeist* of cultural paranoia that we are witnessing today. In this framework, literature as an artistic, historical and discursive document and as a creative transformative space provides the means for re-imagining and transforming communities and therefore the world. It is not so much the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of literary texts that matter nowadays but rather their politics. So, the question that poses itself nowadays is what kind of ethics we can build now and what kind of *world*, literature forces us to foresee.

It is accurate to contend that literature has often been conceived in nationalistic terms, yet there is now more than ever a burgeoning propensity among writers to consciously transcend the nation state's poetics by declining to parrot the retold clichés of their cultural frame of reference and adopting a cosmopolitan and worldwide imaginary. In his article *The Trend of Modern Literature*, John Bell Henneman rightly states,

At the beginning of the new century, the conspicuous characteristic of literature is its striving to break down all barriers of speech and race and become world

literature...The cosmopolitan is at home everywhere...Not that literature may not be located anywhere and derive from any source; however seemingly local in origin and provincial in outward aspect, its ultimate appeal must be the wider reaches of common humanity and that of truth itself. 11

In this juncture, Arab Anglophone Literature of migration stands out as a promising corpus of literature that is transformative and transcendental in nature. Historically speaking, the upsurge of this literature stemmed from the desire to know about the Other as a sort of reactionary enterprise among Arab writers to write back to the center/ metropolis and demystify the relationship between the East and the West, along with topoi of nostalgia, hybridity and identity crisis. Nevertheless, most of the critical corpus about this literature capitalized on viewing writers and their narratives via dichotomous discourse and dialectical polarities and therefore has been trapped within the lenses of the 'Either-Or' paradigm. This reductive and archetypal practice of reading and rendition, despite its appealing critical lure, precludes and overlooks the transcendental ethos of Arab Anglophone Literature as an expression and artistic mirroring up of a more intricate experience of hyphenated subjects and immigrants and as a counter-discourse to sweeping dogmatism and all sorts of ideological fundamentalism pushing in so doing the boundaries of Arab Anglophone literature beyond anti-western sentiments, Eurocentric hegemony, parochial engagements, and orientalist legacies. That said, Arab Anglophone writers, writing from the margins and situating themselves at the edge of many cultures, compellingly voice and uncover in their radically transgressive and revolutionary aesthetics a relentless preoccupation with the universal, the cosmopolitan, and ultimately the human.

Arab Anglophone diasporic literature or Arab literature produced beyond the home is a miscellaneous corpus for it is made up of writings from authors who belong to different Arab countries namely Lebanon and Palestine. All of them hold dual citizenship, some live in Britain, a few live in Australia and most of them live in America. Among the prominent Arab diasporic writers we can cite Diana Abu jabber, Susan Muaddi Darraj, Rawi Hage, Jarrar Randa, Rabih Alameddin, Laila Halaby, Joe Geha, Toni Hanania, Mona Simpson In North America. Leila Aboulela, Toni Hanania, Fadia Faqir, Ahdaf Soueif, Jamal Mahjoub, Robin Yassin Kassab in Britain, Abbas El-Zein, and El Hage, Jad in Australia to name but a few.

By writing about cultural translation, hybridity, and blurring binary oppositions say West / East, civilized/ primitive, rational irrational.... These writers have enunciated their position as cultural mediators and translators. The common denominator between their narratives is the effort to open up a third space where cosmopolitanism and cultural pluralism seem to be the only eccentric weapons to negotiate and interrogate totalitarian authorities, common-sense conceptions of identities, and communities as well as taken for granted cultural practices.

In fact, by acting as cultural mediators, Arab Anglophone writers living in the diaspora propose nothing short of a reconsideration of notions of identity and culture. Remarkably enough, the same way postmodernism was decisive in shaping postcolonial studies as a process of questioning power relations and Western ascendancy, it is also very significant in its articulation of a new theory of identity that is destabilized by processes of postmodernity, globalization, and migration. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's substantial theorizations about identity and becoming are of paramount importance. Their popular line of reasoning revolves around their aggregate denial of frozen and fixated identities and their celebration, on the other hand, of 'nomadic' and flexible identities that "take flight" and that is more like 'rhizomes' "always folding, unfolding, refolding" (*A Thousand Plateau*, 20). For Deleuze and Guattari, identity "is always in motion, it is always a coming- into - being, a never-ending project of becoming that includes being what we are already and becoming what we might be in the future" (Qtd. in Sutton and Jones 46).

Postmodernism is well-known for the idea of the fragmentation of the self, anxiety and they are potentially allied with hybridity and cultural translation. "[O]ur identity" asserts Rushdie, "is at once plural and partial and sometimes we feel that we straddle two culturesit is not an infertile territory for the writers to occupy." (15) Therefore, Arab Anglophone writers writing about hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and humanism as processes of transformation is a response to Rushdie's invitation to explore the problematics of identity in the postmodern landscape and mindscape wherein the lack of stability, fixity and displacement are increasingly gaining ground, and where subjects are becoming translatable entities, continually liable to change; wavering between being and *becoming*. It is from this ambivalent context of uncertainty and multiplicity of identities as well as the transnational character of contemporary culture that Arab Anglophone diasporic writers have drawn inspiration to tell stories of characters who play the role of cultural mediators and who dwell in cosmopolitan and transnational spaces.

A last significant point to make is that these writers are themselves, hybrid writers. Being American/Jordanian, Australian/Lebanese, British /Syrian. These writers have certainly grasped the sensation of what it means to have a bi-cultural identity and to have one's selfhood fashioned by two dissimilar cultures with all the impediments and contradictions that ensue. Furthermore, with the hope of dramatizing such issues and envisaging another possible community and identity, these authors add their voices to the mounting yet significant corpus of minority discourse. This latter is defined by Jan Mohammed and Lloyd as a theoretical articulation of the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture. (1990 ix). Indeed, as minor literature, Anglophone Arab diasporic literature, despite its marginality, is highly political, communal, and enunciative.

Finally, even though most of human history has been stained by violence, colonialism, civil wars, imperialism there is now a global propensity towards a celebration of intercultural dialogue and recognition of cultural differences. In his interesting article *Is the Notion of Intercultural Dialogue a western concept?* Henk Griffioen maintains that the west has witnessed a shift in its perception of the Other. While in the past the Other was a mere dialectical construction to understand the self, now there is a shift towards a more dialogical understanding of the other and towards accepting cultural differences which are essentially irreducible (1). Griffioen goes on to argue that this new form of dialogical dialogue seeks fundamentally common horizons and imagines a new mode of human possibility and coexistence (3). Arab Anglophone literature in the diaspora is framed within this line of thought as it attempts to transcend nationalism and bridge cultural differences while envisaging what Edward Glissant calls a 'poetic of relation' and '*Tout monde*' paradigm, meant to transcend the facile assumptions of difference, multiculturalism, and fossilized categories.

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