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**The Aspects of Bilingualism in the
Literary Works of Ahdaf Soueif**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a že jsem uvedla všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

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1. Introduction

The central focus of this work is the aspects of bilingualism in the writings of the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif. Bilingualism is a very broad topic and encompasses a large scale of cultural and linguistic connotations. The combination of my two majors, English and Arabic studies, has enticed my interest in exploring bilingual features in the literary works created by authors in a language different from their mother tongue. Moreover during my university studies I have sought to interconnect my two majors. I have built up a strong relationship to both of them and I wished to make use of the acquired knowledge in a thesis which would comprise both languages, English and Arabic, and their cultures.

While studying English literature I have come across authors of predominantly Anglo-Saxon origin, which means representatives of literary and cultural life using their mother tongue for their writing. However my Arabic major has opened a new perspective to me. Just like in the case of the British and American literatures I have got to know Arab writers producing their literary works in their mother tongue, the Arabic language, but I have also discovered the realm of authors of Arab origin writing in English.

The phenomenon of non-British or non-American authors whose literary medium is English has appeared relatively recently with the rise of resistance to colonial expansion and the subsequent postcolonial condition of the numerous ex-colonies of the British Empire. It was the British Empire with its long and successful colonial history, which grounded the dominant position of English as the global language in today's world. This dominant status is often the primary motivation for Arab authors to write in the English language. Yet such a decision is not based solely on an attempt to espouse the leading language in the world, rather it is rooted in all kinds of psychological stimuli, cultural interests and intellectual views related to the search for one's own identity and for such a literary expression which best serves the authors' characters and which best reflects their inner world.

1.1. Current stage of research

Ahdaf Soueif is a contemporary author, which logically brings about a particular difficulty: as her writing is still under way, nobody has yet dedicated a monographic work to her and her narratives. From a different point of view, however, this fact turns to be an advantage and it represents at the same time a great enticement and challenge for me to enter an area which only a few have entered so far. And those who have, have done so only in a very limited measure, usually in more or less brief commentaries on Ahdaf Soueif, reviews of her books and in interviews with her. Ahdaf Soueif has her own web pages¹ with recent news about the writer, links to her articles in newspapers², links to a selection of programmes for British and American television or radio stations and to one lecture given by Soueif at the American University of Cairo.³

Despite the vast array of articles published in various newspapers all around the world and on the Internet, which all serve as a valuable source of information for this study about the novelist, it was difficult to find any serious academic studies and critical works analysing Soueif and her literary production in considerable detail.

Prior to writing this thesis, I had the unique opportunity to visit the American University in Cairo, where the works of Ahdaf Soueif are taught in several courses and two of the graduate students have written theses on her narrative works. Both of the theses⁴, although dealing with different topics concerning the same author, have offered a lot of inspiration and a diversity of themes and opinions. Even more influential has been the literary journal *Alif*, published by the Department of English and Comparative Literature at AUC, and its one issue⁵ which is entirely devoted to the phenomenon of Arab authors writing in foreign languages. It includes an article on Ahdaf Soueif and an extensive interview with her.

¹ www.ahdafsoueif.com

² Soueif writes in both English and Arabic and has written various essays and reviews published in: *Achbar al-Adab*, *al-Arabi*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Granta*, *al-Hilal*, *al-Katiba*, *The London Magazine*, *The London Review of Books*, *New Society*, *Nisf al-Dunya*, *The Observer*, *Sabah al-Cher*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Washington Post* etc.

³ Ahdaf Soueif pursued her MA studies at the AUC and graduated from the Department of English and Comparative Literature in 1973.

⁴ The first thesis was submitted to the Department of English and Comparative Literature in 1998 by Maggie M. Morgan under the title *The self and the nation: four Egyptian autobiographies: Youssef Chahine's Alexandria why?, Latifa Zayyat's The search, personal papers, Yousri Nasrallah's Summer thefts, Ahdaf Soueif's In the Eye of the Sun*, the second thesis was written in 2000 by Eman A. F. I. El-Nouhy and it was entitled *The Journey of Egyptian Woman From East to West...And „Back“: Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Ahmed*.

⁵ Ferial J. Ghazoul, ed., *The Hybrid Literary Text: Arab Creative Authors Writing in Foreign Languages*, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 20, 2000.

1.2. Objectives and approaches

Initially, it is necessary to explore the postcolonial context and Orientalist thinking in which Ahdaf Soueif is firmly integrated and which she enriches with her literary works as well as critical writing. The field of postcolonialism is extremely wide and complex and I will attempt to manifest the complexity of the phenomenon of postcolonial literature on the background of postcolonial theory and criticism. There are several issues common to the wide and heterogeneous postcolonial discourse and all of them are associated with the colonial past and the imperialist presence. A large number of these issues are present in the books by Ahdaf Soueif and the most palpable questions with which the author is preoccupied will be subjected to study in this thesis, namely the wider context of Anglo-Egyptian ties, the phenomenon of bilingualism and the problem of language and identity.

The method applied in this study is based on tracing mutual relations and causal continuities between postcolonial thinking and the narrative works of Ahdaf Soueif. While approaching the topic, I bear in mind that these two parts are indispensably intertwined and in constant interaction. It is immensely challenging to inquire about the implications of the fact that the existence of either of the two spheres is conditioned by their reciprocal influence. Just as it is impossible to imagine Ahdaf Soueif's writing without postcolonial thinking, postcolonial thinking and literature cannot be adequately characterised without the contribution of Ahdaf Soueif.

The chief frame of reference, however, must evidently be primary literature. Thorough hermeneutical analysis of Ahdaf Soueif's creative writing forms the foundation of this thesis. I seek causal context and influences of postcolonial literature in the narratives of two novels and two collections of short stories. The analysis issues from discovering particular aspects which characterise the writing of Ahdaf Soueif and which distinguish it from the literary texts of her contemporaries. These distinctive aspects are rooted in the penetration and interconnection of two perspectives or two binary reflections of the Egyptian past and present. One of them is the perspective directed inwards from the outside, i.e. observing the inner historical development of Egypt, the other is the perspective outwards from within. The binary view logically proceeds from the fact that Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian who has long lived abroad.

This thesis strives to explore the linguistic and cultural processes involved in the forging and moulding of Ahdaf Soueif's characters and stories as a result of her multicultural background and her personal experience of the encounter of two distinctive cultures. No attempt will be made to give an exhaustive study of her literary works; rather, given the limited scope of this thesis, it should provide only a certain angle of on the perception of the great number of issues Soueif touches upon in her writings. Disregarding Roland Barthes's famous proclamation about the 'death of the author', this study cannot manage without concentrating on the personality of the author, hand in hand with her writings as they mirror her own life and experience into such an extent that one can hardly understand the subtle meanings and hidden hints in her literary texts without at least basic acquaintance with her biography.

However, it is inevitable to stress one fact that not only the author herself often mentions in her lectures and interviews, but which is also self-evident from the texts of her novels. Ahdaf Soueif's writing must be perceived and explored within the scope of both the Egyptian, and therefore Arabic literature, as well as British literature.

There are several essential questions that will be examined in this thesis: how is the Egyptian, and Arab-Muslim origin respectively, of Ahdaf Soueif reflected in her literary style and literary language? Should her prose be assessed only within the perimeter of Egyptian and Arabic literature, or should she be rather considered a British author? What is the theoretical base and historical and cultural background against which Soueif's works can be judged. What do other writers and critics, both her predecessors and contemporaries, have to say on the context of the Arab-English encounter? What are the perceptions of cultural dominion and of using the language of the oppressor for literary purposes?

2. Ahdaf Soueif - the writer

Ahdaf Soueif has won international acclaim as the author of two collections of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996), and two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and the internationally acclaimed *The Map of Love*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999. The most recent book is her first volume of non-fiction. Entitled *Mezzaterra* (2004), it is a collection of political and cultural essays. She is currently working on her third novel. In the year 2000, she also translated Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*, an account of his return to the city after 30 years, and a meditation on exile. The main aim of Soueif's literary works was well characterised in the internet article, aptly entitled "Developing a Euro-Arab Literature". The purpose of her writings is to

focus on the portrayal of Arab-Muslim society and its striving for modernization in a globalized world. She formulates this objective in the context of a specific understanding of culture, cultural identity and intercultural relationship.⁶

Ahdaf Soueif was born in Cairo in 1950 into a family of intellectuals, as the eldest of three children, with both her parents being renowned professors. Her mother, Fatma Moussa,⁷ was appointed the first female teacher at the English Department of the Cairo University, and later became professor of English literature. Her father, Moustafa Soueif, is a very important psychologist who also taught at the Cairo University. Soueif's destiny seems to have been determined from the age of three; she claims she knew she would become a 'duktura' one day because "that is what you did".⁸

When she was only four years old, she travelled to England with her parents who went to London on sabbatical leave. The family stayed in Britain for three years at the end of which Fatma Moussa obtained a PhD. in English literature from London University and Moustafa Soueif finished his post-doctoral studies, obtaining a diploma in clinical psychology. This moment of Ahdaf's life appears to have been decisive in her intellectual and

⁶ Yafa Shanneik, "Ahdaf Soueif: Developing a Euro-Arab Literature", 2004, accessed 3 March 2008 . <http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-310/_nr-91/i.html?PHPSESSID=5>.

⁷ Fatma Moussa Mahmoud died on 13 October, 2007 at the age of 80. The obituary published in *The Guardian* described her as "a pioneering academic who explored and strengthened connections between the literary cultures of Egypt and Britain." Peter Clark, "An Obituary: Fatma Moussa Mahmoud" in *The Guardian*, December 21, 2007, accessed 20 April 2008 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/21/egypt.highereducation>>.

⁸ Pascale Ghazaleh, "Ahdaf Soueif: Different readings" in *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, Issue No. 559, 8 - 14 November 2001, accessed 10 February 2008 <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/559/profile.htm>>.

professional development. And the first language she learnt to read in was indeed English, not Arabic. This was most probably the crucial moment which decided her future direction as a writer and which formed her hyphenated identity.

The entire family returned to England for a year in 1964 when the mother was doing her post-doctoral research. While Ahdaf was fourteen, hungry for potential adventures, her parents made her go to a comprehensive girls' school. Based on this unpleasant experience, Soueif wrote a more or less autobiographical short story "1964", included in the first collection of stories *Aisha*. Soueif lets her readers peek into the confused and suffering soul of her protagonist, a teenage Egyptian girl with "the manners of a fledgling Westernized bourgeois intellectual and the soul [...] of a Rocker"⁹ who lives in London and is forced to attend a local girls' school.

Writing about Ahdaf Soueif, one can find a lot about her own life in her books. Especially in her first stories which were written in what she herself calls an innocent state of mind. With the term innocence she describes the state of not being conscious of any audience¹⁰ whatsoever. She has been writing stories since her childhood and she claims they would be written in the same way anywhere she would live. In this context it is necessary to mention a remarkable aspect of the life of Ahdaf Soueif. In an interview for the British newspaper *The Guardian*, Soueif admits that she has always looked at life as though it were a novel¹¹ and this permeation of real life and literature is a common characteristic of all her major female protagonists.

It is therefore not difficult to imagine young Ahdaf taking, or sometimes even stealing English novels from the library of her mother, the professor of English, and devouring them "by torchlight under bedcovers in the dead of night"¹², disregarding any imposed bans on 'inappropriate' genres of literature. She gave up her child dream to become a rock star and rather followed her as if destined path to become a writer. Soueif studied English literature at Cairo University and, although she was offered to do her PhD on comparative literature in Oxford, she chose to focus on linguistics at Lancaster University. She always seems to opt for the more painful and thorny path with great obstacles and this decision was precisely the case. In her first and into a large extent autobiographical novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, the heroine follows the footsteps of the author and through her Soueif reveals how much she was

⁹ Ahdaf Soueif, *Aisha*, London: Bloomsbury, 1983, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰ Ahdaf Soueif's lecture in AUC, 22 October 2001.

¹¹ Michael March, "I have always looked at life as though it were a novel", in *The Guardian*, April 25, 2005, accessed 10 February 2008 <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,6109,1469891,00.html>>.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

suffering during the agonising solitude of her PhD. years, and with the extremely indigestible and tedious topic of her dissertation.

Yet in 1978, Ahdaf Soueif managed to fulfil her burdensome commitment successfully because “you finish what you start,” and she took unpaid leave from her position of a teacher of English at Cairo University to go back to England for a semester. Although as a little child, creating fiction was for her an alternative to becoming a famous musician, Soueif had to will herself to embark on the career of a writer. It was at this time that she thought: “you either sit down and start to write or you just stop thinking about it. And there is absolutely no reason why you shouldn’t sit down and start now because it is five o’clock and you’ve got nothing to do with the rest of the day.”¹³

However, Ahdaf Soueif has become a true contemporary writer who reacts to a wide number of stimuli. She not only expresses her ideas and feelings in her works of fiction, she has also become an established critic, reviewer and a fervent commentator of political and cultural issues and current events. She is often invited to interviews and discussions, universities all over the world ask her to give lectures on her own literary production as well as on broader topics concerning comparative literature and hybrid identity, which is the paradigm where Soueif is undoubtedly at home. She unrelentingly challenges the conscience of the wide public and of statesmen to finally reverse the glaring injustice persistently suffered by the Palestinian nation. Besides, she is an advocate for her Arab compatriots and the Arab and Muslim culture and she does not hesitate to aim her sharp criticism at the oppressive governments of certain Arab countries, including her own native Egypt. And yet she never fails to exhibit an enormous amount of solidarity with and love for her own people and native land.

Being an Arab, a Muslim and, what is more, a Muslim woman, offers a great number of occasions and topics she can speak about. She often tries to explain the misunderstandings and rectify the misrepresentations constantly permeating the Western media. She vigorously criticises the representation of the Arab culture and traditions in the Western media as twisted and incorrect. Despite its immense diversity, the Arab world is portrayed by the biased media as one monolithic unit. Soueif warns against the widely spread discourse demonising Arabs as fanatics, Jew-haters, or suicide bombers.

¹³ Michael Silverblatt’s interview with Ahdaf Soueif, Lannan Foundation, 3 April 2003, accessed 20 December 2008 <<http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/ahdaf-soueif/>>.

She fights against the loud voices trumpeting ‘a clash of civilisations’¹⁴, so frequent and popular in the current discourse. She warns against the widespread confrontational, polarised terminology applied to the Arab-Muslim context and protests against its artificiality and, what is more, imminent danger as it breeds mutual hatred. Instead of appeasement, the only effect of such misrepresentations is the recent rise of extremism and radicalisation among frustrated young Arabs and Muslims, irrespective of where they live.

In her foreword to *Mezzaterra*, her last book of political commentaries, book reviews and reactions to various cultural events, Soueif elucidates what she means by the title. By doing so she also implicitly reveals the ultimate goal she, often probably only subconsciously, keeps in mind when writing her fiction. Accordingly, she creates her narratives and essays in order to invite her readers to enter a specific territory, open to people of all races and religions, and persuade them to stay forever.¹⁵ Somewhat idealistically, she sets up a territory, which she calls ‘mezzaterra’, and defines it as “a meeting-point of many cultures and traditions”, inhabited by people who recognize their shared humanity and unity of conscience.

It was a territory imagined, created even, by Arab thinkers and reformers starting in the middle of the nineteenth century when Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt first sent students to the West and they came back inspired by the best of what they saw on offer. Generations of Arabs protected it through the dark time of colonialism. [...] This was the world that my generation believed we had inherited: a fertile land, an area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other, where echoes and reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening, because they were foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities.¹⁶

Born in the 1950s and growing up in the 1960s, the time when Egypt was open to overwhelming changes, Ahdaf Soueif gladly accepted the identity of a ‘Mezzaterran’. But then came the bitter experience of the Six Day War in 1967. From that time, she complains,

¹⁴ “The term ‘clash of civilisations’ was first used by Bernard Lewis in an article in the September 1990 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* titled ‘The Roots of Muslim Rage’, but it was the political scientist Samuel P. Huntington who rendered the expression famous when he wrote a book of the same name. There he formulated a theory that people’s cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world.”

“Clash of Civilisations”, *Wikipedia*, accessed 10 February 2008

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clash_of_Civilizations>.

¹⁵ Soueif’s notion mezzaterra is closely associated to Homi Bhabha’s ‘third space of enunciation’. Making a direct connection between the idea of the ‘third space’ and his concept of hybridity, Bhabha contends that “for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.” ‘The Third Space: Interview with Homi K. Bhabha’, in Jonathan Rutherford, ed. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, pp. 207-21, quoted in David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 126.

¹⁶ Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, pp. 6-8.

the world took a negative political direction in the Eighties and the Nineties, which was completed by the proclaimed 'war on terror' and its offspring, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, launched under the pretext of enhancing the 'peace process'. That is why anything she has written since has become a defence of this hospitable place under attack, "an attempt to demonstrate its existence".¹⁷

She writes in order to express herself as an artist, but also to express her acute opinions. She writes to speak up for her nation against the Western attempts at its domination, to subvert the ideological clichés about Islam, to deconstruct colonial discourse and to construct alternatives to it, to save her people from succumbing to their current problems, to be proud of their own achievements, to get rid of their oppressive governments whose "only interest is to remain in power",¹⁸ to develop and to be active, to shake off the shackles of despair. As she admits her writing has become a lot more politicised in the sense of being aware of how her work would be used.

Nevertheless, to meet the due proportion of fairness, it is necessary to add that not always is Ahdaf Soueif objective and balanced when dealing with the social and, above all, political issues of today's world. While commenting upon the conflict "East versus West", she finds the flaws mostly on the part of the latter and ignores that sometimes the Arab media abound in the same misrepresentations of the West and the same outrageous propaganda against it as she criticises in their Western counterpart. Moreover she ascribes the degeneration and downfall of her visionary mezzaterran "common ground", which is obviously idealised to a great extent, to the joint rampage and atrocities performed by the USA and Israel through the post-colonial Arab world. She oversimplifies when she identifies Israel as the singular cause of discord between the entire Islamic region and the West. It is also questionable if only the aggressive foreign policy of the US and the other dominant Occidental powers could be blamed for the abject poverty of the Arab region. It is evident that Ahdaf Soueif is deeply personally involved in the entire issue, but she frankly admits her emotional prepossession. On the other hand, one can hardly reproach her for her partiality and ardour while speaking about her nation, given the great sympathy she feels with her people and given that she herself experienced the harrowing misery of the Palestinian community under occupation when she visited Palestinian settlements in 2000, and 2003 respectively. However generalised and simplistic her political analyses sometimes tend to be,

¹⁷ Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra*, *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

the more localised portrayals and essays about ‘small things’ are pure gems of subtlety, minute precision and empathy.¹⁹

In other words, Ahdaf Soueif does her best to live up to the humanistic principles she preaches. She lives with her children alternately in London and in Cairo, she married the English writer Ian Hamilton and she has brought up their two sons, Omar Robert and Ismail Richard. She adopted English as her language of creative expression, but she brings her knowledge of Arab culture, history and gender politics into her English writings. She creates her characters of both Egyptian and English origins as agents of their actions, as authentic people, and depicts their encounters with the other culture and traditions. She embraces the space in between the East and the West, feeling at home both here and there. And she keeps luring her readers to join her in tolerance, understanding and intercultural friendship in the common ground, the ‘mezzaterra’.

It is therefore not an easy task to place Ahdaf Soueif exclusively in the paradigm of either Arab/Egyptian or British/postcolonial literature. It has been a much debated issue for those who write about the author and review her books. Soueif’s intellectual growth was very much influenced by the British culture, and not only because she spent several crucial years of childhood in Great Britain with her parents. She adopted English as a means of getting access to great stories, to valuable literature and peculiar literary characters. So where do her literary roots lie and which of the two distinctive literary canons has influenced her own style more?

When inspecting Soueif’s writings, it is evident that Western texts with prominent female characters have played an essential role in Soueif’s creative development. References to novels, such as *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Middlemarch*, are a common aspect of all Soueif’s fiction. It is especially *Middlemarch* that Soueif frequently quotes and alludes to in her novels. No wonder then that she has been often hailed as Egypt’s George Eliot,²⁰ and the author herself confesses that Eliot’s novel served as a profound source of inspiration for her.²¹ However, she has been dubbed simultaneously the modern Sheherzade as well.

In response to the question of her literary identity, or in other words, which literary tradition she feels more affiliated with, Ahdaf Soueif claims that “the novel as a genre in

¹⁹ Rahma Bavelaar, “*Mezzaterra* by Ahdaf Soueif, False Universal or Common Ground?”, 4 January, 2005, accessed 12 April 2007 <<http://www.islamonline.net/English/artculture/2005/01/article01.shtml>>.

²⁰ Cf. Michael Silverblatt’s interview with Ahdaf Soueif.

²¹ Cf. e.g. Paula Burnett, “Ahdaf Soueif: Talking about *The Map of Love*”, 28 February 2000, accessed 15 April 2007 <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/4042/entertext1.3/soueif_1.pdf>.

Arabic is totally influenced by the European novel. So there is no conflict in being influenced by George Eliot and Naguib Mahfouz and Tolstoy and Yusuf Idris all at the same moment.”²² Drawing on the concept of novel as a European genre, she insists that the delimitation of the sphere of her identity is not a very complicated task. Her argument is based on the fact that her affiliation with prose writers in general is given by the unifying aspect of prose writing and by adopting European literary genres. From whence the common ground of authors from all around the world, and in the particular case of Ahdaf Soueif the common ground of Arab and European literature.

Ahdaf Soueif is one of the authors who openly professes her literary sources. While thoroughly analysing her fiction, it can be observed that her open presentation of her inspirational models situates the writer into a closely delimited cultural and literary context. Soueif has often maintained that her creative and personal identity does not pose any further questions because she is an Egyptian author who merely happens to write in English. And yet, it is not possible to agree totally with her approach for it is never a simple question of deciding about one’s sense of belonging. From the point of view of the author of this project, it is necessary to respect Ahdaf Soueif’s opinions on her own writing, especially since they are so unreserved and straightforward when discussing these matters. However, Soueif’s narrative texts serve as clear evidence that the incessant search for a place in the literary and cultural context is not a closed and resolved question for her. On the contrary, if the narrative texts of Ahdaf Soueif are confronted with her personal testimonies, it can be found out that the writer’s creative thinking is structured as a complex range of elements coming out from Arab-Egyptian as well as British reality.

Mrinalini Chakravorty brings a more nuanced opinion to the dilemma, as she has noted the remarkable epic scope and form of Soueif’s first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*. Accordingly, she recognizes parallels between this novel and

the great Nahda (Arab Renaissance) styles of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Arab *bildung* novels by the likes of Jurji Zaydan, Muhammad Muwaihili, Muhammad Haykal, Yahya Haqqi, and even the early Naguib Mahfouz and Tayeb Saleh, which were written in the genres of romantic historical novels.²³

²² See the supplement with the e-mail correspondence of the writer of this thesis with A. Soueif, 21 April 2008.

²³ Mrinalini Chakravorty, “To Undo What the North Has Done” in Nawar al-Hassan Golley (ed.), *Arab Women’s Lives Retold: Exploring Identity through Writing*, Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2007, p. 130.

Chakravorty further emphasises Arab literature as the primary influence on Soueif's writing by mapping the features unique to contemporary Arab fiction, which also resonate and recur in Soueif's oeuvre:

[D]espite its allegiance to realism, [Soueif's fiction] is also marked by a sense of “crisis”, a lens on modernity, a voice for feminism, and an unrelenting emphasis on the present [...]. Comparisons of Soueif with Dickens and George Eliot simply miss the episodic, journalistic, multiple diary forms (the many voices) that fashion her narrative and echo works of Arab “crisis” literature such as later works by Mahfouz and Saleh²⁴, as well as [Norma] Khoury, [Ghassan] Kanafani, [Abd ar-Rahman] Munif, [Nawal] el-Saadawi, [Hanan] al-Shaykh, [Fadia] Faqir, and more. Soueif, along with these authors, and especially by writing in English, creates an intertext within Arab fiction between a long tradition of past Arab literature and a more immediate one whose focus has been to represent the turmoil in the Arab world as itself productive.²⁵

Nawal as-Sa'adawi, Hanan al-Shaykh, Fadia Faqir and, to add two more names, also Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Salwa Bakr are representatives of feminist literature in Arabic. It is the first current of contemporary Arab and Muslim literature connected with Ahdaf Soueif. Her fiction thus cannot be perceived as influenced only by George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and British literature in general. Rather, Soueif forms an integral part of contemporary Arab literature and feminist writing as she focuses predominantly on female characters and formulates their concerns and aspirations, while projecting obstacles to their hopes in the form of patronising attitudes and conservative thinking.

Amin Malak distinguishes a second current forming the wider literary scope of Soueif's creative writing. It accentuates its Muslim nature and represents “Muslim women from diverse parts of the world who write in English, [...] such as Mena Abdullah from Australia, Attia Hosain from India, Zaynab Alkali from Nigeria, and Farhana Sheikh from England.”²⁶ Although these Anglophone female writers come from different environments,

²⁴ In this context, it is necessary to mention a few facts about at-Tayyib Salih (born in 1929). He is a Sudanese writer who has won international acclaim with his immensely complex and multilayered novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (*Mawsim al-Hijra 'ila al-Shimal*). Parallels have been drawn between Salih's novel and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, except that Salih's main protagonist, Mustafa Said, experiences the darkness in the heart of Europe. It unconventionally portrays the dramatic, and, ultimately, tragic encounter between the Arab/African world and the West, diagnosing the “confusing zone in which the culture of an imperial power clashes with that of its victims” (Saree S. Makdisi, “The Empire Renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the Reinvention of the Present” in Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *Identities*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 184).

The novel was translated to English and French soon after its publication in 1968. There is also a Czech translation: Svetozár Pantůček, *Cesta na sever*, Praha: Odeon, 1986. For more details about the author and his writings, see Jaroslav Oliverius, *Moderní literatury arabského východu*, Praha: Karolinum, 1995, pp. 200-203.

²⁵ Mrinalini Chakravorty, *ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

²⁶ Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 127.

what unites them is not only their creed, but also similar issues in their narratives. Their hybridised texts thematise human existence on the verge of two cultures, being torn apart between their Muslim identity and the Western domain of their lives. Although they are not blind to the problems of the contemporary Muslim society and the ambiguous status of Muslim women, rather than in Islam, they search for the roots of the tensions in larger social, political, and historical context. Therefore Ahdaf Soueif, along with other Muslim female writers whose literary language is English, strongly resents the tendency of the mainstream to write about “how miserable Arab women are, about Islam as a ghastly repressive system of thought, about the backwardness, about all that [...] tickles the Western fancy”.²⁷

The principle quality of the message of Soueif's artistic production lies in her ability to mediate values and archetypes from one culture to the other. In a number of her personal testimonies as well as in all her writings, she explores the problem of competence of an author of modern narrative texts, functioning as an efficient mediator between different cultures. The issue of authorial competence, namely the one of Ahdaf Soueif, implies the competence to comment on the novelistic writing generated in both cultural contexts. It cannot be ignored that Soueif's ideas and attitudes tend to provoke not only her readership, but also the general public, in both Egypt and Great Britain. She seems to be controversial for both cultural worlds. Her texts as well as personal opinions stir up a lot of assumptions and ungrounded suspicion concerning her entitlement to speak about issues inherent to English as well as Arab literature. The more conservative part of readers have expressed reservations and, at times, even resentment to Ahdaf Soueif's work, as her approach to the social and political development in both Middle Eastern and Western regions is, indeed, very liberal, unconventional, and open.

However, Ahdaf Soueif is actually not the most provocative author in the scope of Arab literature. Her compatriot, Nawal as-Sa'dawi, who currently resides in the United States, has eliminated from her writings all social, religious and sexual taboos.²⁸

²⁷ Michael Silverblatt's interview with Ahdaf Soueif, Lannan Foundation, 3 April 2003, accessed 20 December 2008 <<http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/ahdaf-soueif/>>.

²⁸ Nawal as-Sa'dawi, born in 1931 in a village close to Cairo, is an Egyptian writer and feminist. She was trained as a medical doctor and became famous in the 1970s for her polemical books exposing the sexual, psychological, and cultural oppression of Arab women. She is a prolific writer of short stories, novels, travel narratives, and autobiography, and her texts have been translated into many languages. Her first work on non-fiction was *Women and Sex* (1972), which was banned in Egypt for its unprecedented openness with which as-Sa'dawi articulated common problems of Arab and Egyptian women. Among her most renowned books are *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1977), *Woman at Point Zero* (1979), or the non-fictional *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* (1983), published after her imprisonment in 1980 under Sadat's regime for alleged “crimes against the state”. Amal Amireh, “Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World” in Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba, eds. *Intersections: gender, nation, and community in Arab women's novels*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002, pp. 33-4.

A comparison between the two female writers leads to an observation that it is indeed not correct to consider Ahdaf Soueif as an author whose primary target is to shock. Paradoxically, though, the reason why Soueif is perceived in this negative light is the fact that the medium of her creative expression is English. In English (rather than Arabic), she draws attention to the complexities and intricacies of cross-cultural relations. Soueif's writings often excite heated polemic among her critics just because she operates in the sensitive liminal space between the two cultures and civilisations, probing, stretching, and transgressing their borders. Conversely, most part of Nawal as-Sa'dawi's writings has focused on the Arab society, which is analysed and portrayed from within, i.e. from the inner perspective of the Arab-Egyptian community. The fundamental value of Soueif's narratives therefore lies precisely in her courage to enter the liminality²⁹ and deal with a whole labyrinth of delicate questions and problems, which such a threshold, or interstitial area generates. The liminal is defined against the non-liminal, and functions as an independent, authentic narrative space.

Liminality is closely related to postcolonial theory since, as Bill Ashcroft and his co-editors note, "post-colonial discourse itself consistently inhabits liminal space, for the polarities of imperial rhetoric on one hand, and national or racial characterization on the other, are continually questioned and problematized."³⁰ Accordingly, it can be concluded that Ahdaf Soueif can be identified as both a modern Arab-Muslim and postcolonial writer. Being an Anglophone novelist born in Egypt, which used to be a part of the former British Empire, and with her constant preoccupation with cross-cultural issues, her creative works are firmly established in the sphere of the Arab-Muslim literary canon as well as in the international scope of postcolonial literature.

Ahdaf Soueif, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, and many other postcolonial writers from all over the world inhabit a hyphenated space and they spin the thread of their cross-cultural narratives in English. It should not be forgotten, though, that Soueif's hyphenation, her in-betweenness is very specific and relatively unique in the extremely diverse and heterogeneous scope of postcolonial literature. She has not been forced to exile as e.g. Edward Said was. The English language has not been imposed on her as was the case of Rushdie and Desai (English is one of the

²⁹ The term liminality "derives from the word 'limen', meaning threshold, a word particularly used in psychology to indicate the threshold between the sensate and the sub limina, the limit below which a certain sensation ceases to be perceptible." It is used in postcolonial theory precisely "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." Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 130.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

official languages in India), or Achebe and Soyinka (the colonial regime forced English on Nigeria). Soueif's decision to live in England and work in the English language was deliberate, unlike for Ishiguro and Kureishi (Ishiguro moved from Japan to Britain with his parents, while Kureishi was born in London to a Pakistani father and an English mother, so neither of the two writers could choose where they would prefer to live).

For Ahdaf Soueif, all this was an act of free and independent will and her position among other postcolonial writers is rather specific, not to say unique. Soueif's diasporic identity is one of conscious choice, based on circumstances and, above all, on her fascination with English culture. Her privileged origin from the Egyptian middle-class intellectual elites has opened the world for her and made the choice all the more easier. Her life outside of Egypt simply enables her to enjoy unlimited freedom of speech, intellectual autonomy, self-realisation, and a wide range of creative incentives.

3. The postcolonial context

3.1. *Writing literature in English - postcolonial literature*

Ahdaf Soueif is certainly not the only Arab writer who uses a foreign language for her creative texts. While the majority of literature composed by Arab authors is obviously written in their mother tongue, Arabic, there is a considerable number of authors from the Arab world (men and women, of different religious affinities and political orientations) whose means of literary expression is one of the foreign languages: English, French, German, Dutch or Hebrew. It is a significant literary phenomenon

since it is not confined to a few scattered individuals who represent an exception to the rule of writing in one's mother tongue. This rich corpus of writing can directly speak to the (ex)colonial other, without mediation of translations. In a world claiming globalization, this kind of literature is not so much a way of entering the cultural main stream, as a way of confronting the hegemonic centres and their monologic discourse. These authors do not only write, but they often write back.³¹

And they write back to the colonial metropolis in response to and contest of the discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies of the colonial past and the post-colonial present of the entire region, even though the validity of the prefix 'post' has been a frequently debated issue as will be demonstrated below.

Accordingly, the literature they generate is referred to as 'postcolonial literature'. But the very term 'postcolonial' is a subject to fervent discussions and wide criticism. Moreover, postcolonial theorists argue which national literatures or authors can be justifiably included in the postcolonial canon. Paradoxically, however, very few of such authors actually embrace and use the term to label their own writing. *The Empire Writes Back*, viewed as a postcolonial textbook by some critics and condemned by others, explains what links all postcolonial literatures together under a single category:

What [they have] in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they have emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this which makes them distinctively post-colonial.³²

³¹ Editorial in Ferial J. Ghazoul, ed., *The Hybrid Literary Text*, *Alif*, no. 20, 2000, p. 6.

³² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

3.2. *What is the postcolonial*

To be able to grasp the intricate phenomenon of postcolonial literature or the literature written in the languages of former colonisers, it is necessary to start with a definition of the term 'postcolonial'. An extensive search for an appropriate definition in the recent flurry of articles and books on postcolonialism has indicated that such a seemingly easy task is not in the least a mere trifle. Taken literally, it denotes a period after the dissolution of colonial empires,³³ but there are many problems with this explanation. While it is undisputable that the dismantling of structures of colonial control represents an unprecedented historical moment with global consequences in the contemporary world, countless writers and critics of various nationalities have at great length meditated on the possible and impossible meanings of one single compound, the 'postcolonial', without reaching a definite and unified conclusion. Thousands and thousands of pages covered with contemplations about this topic demonstrate the extreme complexity of the notion of the postcolonial.³⁴ In the incessant debate about the appropriateness of using the term 'postcolonial', there are several most recurrent and serious problems or limitations associated with the term.

One of the central arguments against the use of this term is that it heralds the end of colonialism.³⁵ It carries a promise that the era of colonial arrangement is over for good, and a new, better, exclusively humanistic stage is beginning. Anne McClintock, however, blames the concept of postcolonialism for celebrating independence too prematurely.³⁶ While most nations involved in the traumatic experience of living under the colonial rule are nominally independent, they are in fact still under economic, political, ideological, and cultural dominance of their former European masters. The formal colonial regime was substituted by

³³ The dissolution of colonial domination and the granting of independence started in 1948 and reached its highest point in the 1960s.

³⁴ The disciplinary area in question for the purposes of this thesis is literary and cultural theory; I entertain no ambition to analyse the topic within the field of political theory.

³⁵ Colonialism is defined by Ania Loomba as "the take-over of territory, appropriation of material resources, exploitation of labour and interference with political and cultural structures of another territory or nation." (Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 2-6.)

As Loomba says, it is an ongoing process as old as the human history, widespread all over the world. The height of one of the first truly remarkable colonial expansions can be traced back to the second century AD, when the Roman Empire stretched from Armenia to the Atlantic. However, the conceptual and historical frame of postcolonial studies is usually restricted in temporal terms by the expansion of European colonial empires from the sixteenth century onwards, but especially in the nineteenth century. The spatial domain is then determined by the strategic territorial interests of the European colonial powers in the given time. In this context it is necessary to maintain a strong distinction in the nature of colonialism and postcolonialism of settler (e.g. Canada, Australia) and non-settler countries (e.g. India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Senegal, Sri Lanka).

³⁶ Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-colonialism' in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial theory: A Reader*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, p. 294.

a covert, but all the firmer imperial grip around the neck of the ex-colonised communities with a single purpose: economic exploitation.³⁷ Many opponents to this term suggest to replace the misleading notion of postcolonialism with a more proper term ‘neo-colonialism’,³⁸ which is furthermore applied interchangeably with ‘imperialism’, and yet the two terms differ. Imperialism is understood as “*the constant of world history*”, the large and “still incomplete project of globalisation of capitalism”.³⁹ Consequently colonialism and postcolonialism, and neo-colonialism respectively, are seen as particular phases in the history of imperialism.⁴⁰ In the introduction to their (post)colonial reader, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman allege that “the persistence of neo-colonialist or imperialist practices in the contemporary world is probably the most serious obstacle to any unproblematic use of the term post-colonial.”⁴¹ Others advocate postcolonialism as “an anticipatory discourse, recognizing that the condition it names does not yet exist, but working nevertheless to bring that about.”⁴²

The second question is linked to the controversy of pinning down the exact dates of the duration of colonialism and its aftermath in the shape of postcolonialism with regards to postcolonial literatures. Should the category of postcolonial literature incorporate only works created after the final toppling of the colonial empires and the proclamation of independence, or could such novels like Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, written while Nigeria was still a colony, legitimately be included? Among many others, the Canadian critic Stephen Slemon adopts the latter position as he emphasises that

[...] for me the concept proves most useful not when it is used synonymously with a post-independence historical period in once-colonised countries, but rather when it locates a specifically anti- or *post*-colonial *discursive* purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others

³⁷ There are still instances of the continuation of direct colonial control in a number of parts of today’s world. Anne McClintock names a few of them: despite international diplomatic campaigns, China keeps clasping Tibet in its colonial grip, as does Indonesia with East Timor, Israel with the Occupied Territories and the West Bank, and Britain with Northern Ireland. Turkey has so far successfully resisted the instigations of the European Union to give up their partial occupation of Cyprus (Anne McClintock, *ibid.*, p. 295). Although these are not examples of Western aggression, they bare witness to profound complicity or criminal indifference on the part of the West.

³⁸ It was the Marxists who used ‘neo-colonialism’ for the first time for the continuing Western control and influence in the previously colonised countries with over-riding economic motives. The term was taken up by “leaders of newly or soon to be independent countries.” Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial theory: A Reader*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, p. 3.

³⁹ Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997, p. 5.

⁴⁰ As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, “We live in a post-colonial neo-colonized world.” Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 166.

⁴¹ Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴² Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *ibid.*, p. 7.

and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations.⁴³

The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* share Slemon's standpoint and speak about "a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression."⁴⁴ Despite the controversy this statement has raised, it correctly underscores the significance of anticolonial cultural practices, which represent one of the crucial concerns of postcolonial theory.

The third reason why the word 'post-colonial' is under scrutiny is also connected with its chronological implications. Various commentators have condemned the Eurocentric bias of the term, as it singles out colonial experience as the most significant fact about the nations involved. Instead of marking the diversity and richness of cultures and histories of the once colonised peoples, the word 'postcolonialism' reduces them to the linear, European-centred time, which dissects their histories into 'precolonial', 'colonial' and 'postcolonial'. Although the premise of postcolonial theory claims to challenge the atrocities and inequalities of the colonial enterprise and to restore and revalue the indigenous cultures, the very term 'postcolonial' reactivates the deplorable practices of colonial empires. In other words, such an explanation of history denies the existence of any worthwhile cultural and historical heritage of the subjugated peoples and it continues in silencing their active minds and voices. The adjective 'postcolonial' creates a false presumption that, despite the indubitably deep impact of colonial past, many African, Latin American, Caribbean and Asian cultures are *primarily* preoccupied with their uninvited contact with Europe.

It further contributes to the omnipresent imperialist discourse, which used to justify the past colonial ambitions via images of the colonised as perpetually inferior people. It was the Enlightenment era which bolstered the whole idea of colonial enterprise by articulating such complacent tenets as 'the white man's burden', 'the civilising mission' or 'the rejuvenation of stagnant cultures'. In contemporary politics the ideological propaganda masks the pervasive imperialist expansion in the guise of modernisation and development and legitimises it by the hackneyed doctrines of 'war on terrorism' or the ultimate task of 'spreading the Western values of democracy and equality'.

⁴³ Stephen Slemon, "Modernism's Last Post" in Ian Adam and Helen Triffin. eds. *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Many parallels have been drawn between the two concepts of postcolonialism and postmodernisms. Postcolonialism has even been accused of being a part of some hegemonic project of postmodernism,⁴⁵ but this kind of opinion can be dismissed as paranoid. Actually, on the contrary, the postcolonial as a category subsumes the postmodern.⁴⁶ One of the constructive debates has posed a question whether the categories should be understood as historical periods or a literary/cultural style. The introduction to *Past the Last Post* contents that, just like postmodernism, postcolonialism could be perceived as embracing two 'archives':

The first archive here constructs it as writing (more usually than architecture or painting)... from countries or regions which were formerly colonies of Europe. The second archive of post-colonialism is intimately related to the first, though not co-extensive with it. Here, the post-colonial is conceived of as a set of discursive practices, prominent among which is resistance to colonialism, colonialist ideologies and their contemporary forms of subjectificatory legacies.⁴⁷

Another recurring pitfall of the understanding of the term in question is the excessive homogenisation and singularity with which it is sometimes applied. Yet it seems evident from the vast temporal and spatial area 'postcolonialism' encompasses that it retains a multiplicity of activities, manifestations and attitudes. In this respect, different types of colonialism and decolonisation must be distinguished, as they were spread in time and thus didn't represent the same historic phenomenon.

To conclude, despite the great controversy of and the various reservations to the term 'postcolonial', it has gained academic clout and widespread currency as a set of theories entailing a huge bulk of geopolitical relations of power and heterogeneous cultural legacy of colonial supremacy. The term evidently faces the same problem as all theoretical categories concerned with such an extensive and uneven field of study, constantly changing and inconsistent within itself, with a large measure of interdisciplinarity. It runs the risk of becoming void of meaning, a cliché "obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of colonial and imperial power." Nonetheless, the term postcolonial is a valid and appropriate denotation and there is none better if only judiciously employed, with the context of other terms in mind.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cp. Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, *ibid.*, p. 288.

⁴⁷ Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *ibid.*, p. xii.

⁴⁸ Anne McClintock, *ibid.*, p. 294.

3.3. Postcolonial Studies

Postcolonial Studies have been gaining prominence since the decade of the 1970s. It is the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, which is generally recognised as the very moment which triggered the massive rise of the discipline in Western scholarship. The sheer extent and duration of the European colonial rule and its disintegration after the Second World War have led to a widespread interest in postcolonial literature, theory and criticism in our own times. In the beginning the field was searching for its proper label. When the new subject appeared in the curriculum of university departments of English Literature, it was called 'Commonwealth literary studies' or 'Third World literatures', but both names were jeopardised from the start by their heavily ideological connotations.⁴⁹ Soon the designation 'Postcolonial Studies' superseded its forerunners⁵⁰ and subsumed them as its branches. As such the discipline has acquired a firm position within the rubric of English or Literature departments and among contemporary academia.⁵¹

As has been indicated, the interconnections between imperialism and culture, or more particularly literary production, symbolize the major focus of postcolonial theory. It is possible to recognise a few central issues common to the multidimensional paradigm of postcolonial literature and they constitute the subject matters of postcolonial theory and criticism, among which is the dilemma of cultural identity and the ways in which writers articulate their national consciousness after the collapse of colonial dominance. Postcolonial studies are deeply engaged with place and displacement and the tremendously complex phenomenon of culture and multiculturalism, while being inherently attached to the postcolonial crisis of identity. The discipline also addresses matters of gender, race, racism, ethnicity etc. Yet probably the most substantial point of interest is language.

The key player among the European colonial powers was undoubtedly the British Empire and, consequently, the study of English provided a base for ideological underpinning of the Empire. By result it was eventually taken from the coloniser, appropriated and transformed by the colonised into a creative medium for subversion of the coloniser's

⁴⁹ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, *ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Salman Rushdie, 'Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981 – 91*, London: Granta Books, pp. 61-70.

⁵¹ It is notable that the most prestigious and authoritative centres of English studies, the universities in Oxford and Cambridge, had long ignored the emergence of new literatures from the decolonised regions in English. Such a contemptuous approach was somewhat symptomatic of the traditional chauvinist approach and the nostalgia for the glorious past of the British Empire. Only recently have their faculties of English begun to offer a systematic analysis of postcolonial literatures in their syllabi.

authority, for carrying on a dialogue or for creating a different perspective. All these particular features are mutually intertwined, one is intrinsically bound up with the other, and they will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapters.

4. The British-Egyptian relations from the cultural and historical perspective

Egypt of the nineteenth century, officially a part of the Ottoman Empire, yet in fact relatively independent, magnetised the Western colonial powers, most importantly Britain and France. The inexpressible value of Egypt consisted, among other things, in its cotton industry and strategic geographical position, along with the Suez Canal, which would enable the British to get easy access to India, the 'Jewel of the Crown' of the Commonwealth. Both the cotton industry and the project of the Canal brought the credit system to Cairo. Europe kept enticing Mohammed 'Ali⁵² and his successors to continue borrowing at incredibly high interest rates that eventually gave France and England the excuse to seize control of the Egyptian economy and all Egyptian life. Ultimately it was Britain which had the odds of her colonial rival.

Increasing European interference and indirect control of Egypt's affairs and the deposition of Khedives⁵³ Ismail and Tawfiq forged the rise of a nationalist movement which in 1882 culminated in a revolt led by Colonel Ahmad 'Urabi. The British responded with a military intervention, professing an interim and short-term character of the intervention, which was however extended into occupation⁵⁴ of the country that lasted until 1952. Britain's imposition of imperial power over Egypt left a legacy of bitterness among Egyptians that would not be expunged until 1956 when British troops were finally removed from the country.

Khedive Tawfiq's government provided the façade of autonomy but the real power in the country lay in the hands of the British agent and consul general, backed by British troops. Egypt was never officially pronounced a British colony⁵⁵ but it was very dependant on British finance and trade and British ideas and customs shaped the character of Egyptian political and social elites. "It has often been argued that the extent of Britain's presence, influence, and intervention, while falling short of annexation, nevertheless compromised local

⁵² Muhammad 'Ali is considered the 'founder of modern Egypt' and he ruled the country from 1805 when the Ottoman sultan appointed him the viceroy of Egypt until his death in 1849. The dynasty he established in Egypt remained officially in power until the Egyptian Revolution in 1952.

⁵³ "A khedive (from Persian: "lord"; Arabic: خديوي) is a title of high, ministerial rank in the Ottoman Empire, first, and nearly exclusively, used by Muhamad 'Ali Pasha and his subsequent line of dynastic successors, who ruled Egypt and the Sudan from 1805 to 1914" <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khedive>>.

⁵⁴ It was the second occupation of Egypt by European colonial powers, the first one was carried out by the French army under the command of Napoleon. The French remained in the country from 1798 to 1801.

⁵⁵ Britain claimed that the military intervention was necessary under the serious circumstances and that they were against permanent occupation. By 1914 the British government declared the occupation as merely temporal sixty times. Cf. Eduard Gombár, *Moderní dějiny islámských zemí*, Praha: Karolinum, 1999, p. 270.

government[']s] exercise of sovereignty or independence to the extent that [Egypt has] to be regarded, perhaps for long periods, as part of a British 'informal empire'."⁵⁶

Between 1883 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914 there were three British Agents and Consuls General in Egypt: Lord Cromer (1883-1907), Sir Eldon Gorst (1907-1911) and Lord Herbert Kitchener (1911-1914). The autocratic Cromer consolidated the British absolute rule, the Egyptian financial liabilities were met and the Egyptian pound was introduced as one part of the financial reform. Cairo flourished as a centre of vibrant political and social life with growing infrastructure where tens of thousands of foreigners found their residence. The English evidently outnumbered the other nationalities. The British were not brutal colonisers, but they failed at improving the way of life for the Egyptian people and making the conditions bearable for them. Just like in India, the British dreaded advancement of the local intelligentsia, a potential threat to their colonial interests, and therefore neglected the development of industry and education. And although the budget was balanced by 1888, the Egyptian economy was typically colonial in the sense that it suffered from heavy drainage of capital and foreign investments for the benefit of the British government.⁵⁷

All the while the British kept repeating their promise to withdraw their troops as soon as possible, but their alleged intention grew less and less compatible with their determination to preserve their control over the Suez Canal and thus safeguard the vital route to India. The British government realised that the most effective way to protect its interests was from its position in Egypt. This represented a radical change in the policy that had been maintained since the time of Muhammad °Ali, when the British were committed to preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. The final blow to this policy was the fact that the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers on 29 October 1914. Martial law was declared in Egypt on 2 November and the following day the British government unilaterally declared Egypt a protectorate to sever the country from the pro-German Ottoman Empire. Khedive Abbas, who had succeeded Khedive Tawfiq upon his death in 1892, was deposed for being suspected of sympathies for Germany and the Ottoman Sultan.

⁵⁶ Andrew Porter, *The Empire and the World in The Nineteenth Century*, volume *The British Isles: 1815-1901*, ed. Colin Matthew, Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁵⁷ Eduard Gombár, *Moderní dějiny islámských zemí*, Praha: Karolinum, 1999, pp. 330-332.

Meanwhile, anti-British sentiments and opposition to imperial domination were intensifying both on the political level as well as among peasants and ordinary people.⁵⁸ The atmosphere ultimately raised Egyptian political consciousness and led to the formation of political parties demanding either gradual or immediate independence of Britain. World War I brought large numbers of British soldiers to Cairo and massive exploitation of Egyptian human and material resources for the purposes of war. Meanwhile, in the Egyptian countryside the peasants were suffering from increasing poverty and malnutrition. Accordingly, the reputation of the British further deteriorated in the eyes of Egyptian citizens. The British image was finally ruined when they reacted with brutal repercussions to Sa'ad Zaghlul's⁵⁹ demands of independence for Egypt and to the subsequent revolt in March 1919.

In 1922 the British government formally recognised Egypt's sovereignty and Fu'ad, the ambitious great-grandson of Muhammad Ali who had been appointed Sultan of Egypt in 1917, became king. Although in 1936 King Faruq succeeded his deceased father and signed the Anglo-Egyptian treaty which granted Egypt slightly more independence, the British continued with the occupation and retained major control over Egypt's economy and the Suez Canal Zone. Faruq reigned the country in the tumultuous years of World War II; he had to witness the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, which has since that time been considered an offspring of Western, specifically British imperialism and an alien entity in the Arab homeland. His administration was hampered, however, by internal rivalries and the army gave a final blow to his corrupt and pro-British regime. After the military *coup d'état* and the revolution of 1952, Egypt was transformed into a republic. A treaty with Britain was signed in 1954 for the evacuation of British troops from Egypt, which was completed in June 1956. Not for good, though. Egypt felt painfully betrayed when the British took French and Israeli sides in the Tripartite Aggression on Egypt in October 1956.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ There were several incidents which gave rise to strong nationalist feelings among the Egyptians. Probably the most famous is the Dinshawai Incident in 1906 in which a group of British officers who were shooting pigeons near the village of Dinshawai shot and wounded a local woman and damaged the property of several villagers. The enraged villagers reacted with violence and one of the wounded officers died on his way back. The accident escalated into brutal repressions against the local people. 52 peasants were arrested, four of them sentenced to death, the others to terms of imprisonment with hard labour or to public flogging. The event became a symbol of British despotism, it stirred up a wave of anti-British protests and demonstrations and as a result Lord Cromer was suspended from his office in May 1907 (Eduard Gombár, *Moderní dějiny islámských zemí*, Praha: Karolinum, 1999, pp. 336-337). Ahdaf Soueif describes the incident and the following trial in great detail in her novel *The Map of Love* and demonstrates through her characters how disastrous the impact of the British unjust repressions was on the already harsh life of peasants (Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, London: Bloomsbury, 2000, pp. 424-430).

⁵⁹ Sa'ad Zaghlul was the leader of the nationalist Wafd Party in Egypt.

⁶⁰ The need to fund the project of the Aswan Dam and the breached US and British promises to grant credit provoked President Nasser to nationalise the Suez Canal Company, whose revenues would be used for the construction. Britain and France agreed with Israel on common action and Israeli troops invaded Gaza and Sinai in October 1956. Afterwards British and French troops attacked the Suez Canal Zone. The forces of France and

While the British have traditionally perceived their presence in Egypt as an act of altruism and charity, in the Egyptians' eyes they were oppressors and exploiters, trying to wrench as much as possible out of the country's riches. The Egyptians reacted to the British economic and political domination based on no legal authority whatsoever with resentment and a wave of nationalism. British diplomacy, the press, as well as public opinion answered the Egyptian nationalistic efforts to retrieve independence and sovereignty with conscious condescension and scorn. The patronising approach survived until the 1950s and onwards as it is revealed in an essay by H. A. R. Gibb, an eminent Scottish scholar of Islam and the Middle East, who in 1951 admitted the persistent delusions in which the British side had believed:

We still look upon Egypt as a country which we, the British, rescued from bankruptcy and disruption and set on her feet, and which has repaid us by the accusation that we deliberately hindered her advance. [...] Our whole attitude is coloured by the delusion that we have been disinterested benefactors, that in our relationship to Egypt we did all the giving and Egypt all the receiving, and ungraciously at that.⁶¹

Another delusion is, according to Gibb, that “we understand the peoples and problems of the Middle East”. The result of this ungrounded and presumptuous self-conceit, which advocated the British intervention in the Middle East, “has been in some cases to create, and in others to intensify, the internal strains and tensions which every Middle Eastern people chafes against today, and which hamper and stultify their political and economic progress.”⁶² Gibb seems to have accepted the guilt of his nation for the enormous tumult in Egypt and the entire region of the Middle East, presently culminating in the notoriously tragic state of the Arab-Israeli-Western relations. And yet several of his remarks betray the British condescension such as “however good our intentions may have been” and in his final argument that Britain's real interest is to maintain political stability of the Middle East against the threat of Russian Communism, even though the outcome of the British defence is that “[i]nstead of creating a stable structure, we have sown the seed of deadly conflict.”⁶³

The era of colonialism in the Middle East is indeed still palpable today, more than fifty years after the formal end of the European imperial rule. As Larbi Sadiki noted in *The*

Britain left the country in December 1956, but the Israeli soldiers completely evacuated Sinai only as late as in March 1957 (Reinhard Schulze, *Dějiny islámského světa ve 20. století*, Brno: Atlantis, 2007, pp. 173-5).

⁶¹ H. A. R. Gibb, “Anglo-Egyptian Relations: A Revaluation in International Affairs” in *Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-*, Vol. 27, No. 4, October 1951, pp. 440-450.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

Search for Arab Democracy the contemporary problem of defining national identity in the Middle East is traceable back to imperialism and colonialism.⁶⁴ The entire region faces social fragmentation and constant tension because European colonial powers drew borders discounting peoples, ancient tribal boundaries, and local history. As Edward Said states,

[e]xcept for the Maghreb, where Arabic was banned by French colonialism, the core Arab countries have always had available to them a solid national culture based on the Arabic language, Islam, and the various historical experiences unique to places like Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and the Gulf states. Since the early nineteenth century the cultural tradition, however, has usually embodied some sort of reaction to the impinging Western powers – principally France and Britain – whose colonial policy was regarded as a threat.⁶⁵

Therefore only a few Arab countries did not have to reinvent their historical roots and national identity like the rest of the Middle Eastern region, but all of them without exception faced attempts of the colonial powers to “impose an identity from above. Whether ideological, religious, dynastical, or power-centric, these attempts have invariably failed and have often resulted in schisms and sectarian tensions.”⁶⁶ People living in the Arab world are well aware of their colonial past and the postcolonial present, they deem colonialism one of the main reasons of political, social and economic problems of the contemporary Arab region. Most Western readers do not realise this fact, let alone admit its significance.

With the gradual change of the distribution of political powers in the world after World War II, the United States took over the role of imperial leader and became a sort of cultural successor to the British Empire. Suddenly Egypt had to revalue its political stances and reassess traditional political ties. When all hopes were thwarted that the Soviet Union could develop into an adequate opponent and counterpart to the USA in the international arena, the Egyptian government realised the home truth that the Englishman is in the end far better than an ineffective search for new, doubtlessly perfidious partners. Notwithstanding the deep cultural, historical and political ties, Great Britain has maintained its influence on Egyptian society even after the evacuation of the British troops, mainly by means of programmes of cultural and student exchange, scholarships and traditional British schooling

⁶⁴ Larbi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 122.

⁶⁵ Edward W. Said, “Decolonizing the Mind” in *Peace and its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 93.

⁶⁶ P. R. Kumaraswamy, “Who am I?: The Identity Crisis in the Middle East,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 1, Volume 10, 5 March 2006, p. 63.

institutions, which have enabled some Egyptians to attain prominent education and consequently to gain a prestigious social position.

In one of her essays Ahdaf Soueif elucidates a very interesting point concerning the peculiar and ambiguous nature of Anglo-Egyptian relationship. Despite all the drawbacks of the British colonial administration and sometimes crude offences against the Egyptian people,

out of all the nationalities that flow and recede over Egypt, the closest to the heart of the ordinary man are the British. This is odd. Not too long ago the British were the tyrants, the oppressor. The generation that is now in its fifties still remembers the riots and demonstrations against the British occupation and the indignities and cruelties inflicted by that occupation on its unwilling subjects. And yet it is the Englishman who has the least prejudice to combat and who is most easily forgiven for not being Egyptian.

Perhaps the Englishman's Egypt is not too remote from the Egyptian's Egypt. He certainly seems to come closest to sensing the central, multi-layered metaphor of the country. To accepting that the white lines are only there because – well, because modern traffic systems have zebra crossings. But they have no function other than as a formal constituent of a modern traffic system.⁶⁷

Ahdaf Soueif alludes to the common colonial past as well as the postcolonial present, shared by the English and the Egyptians. She does not strive to find differences between the two countries, rather she searches for similar aspects and common things that unite the Egyptian and British societies and their cultures. During their colonial enterprise in Egypt, the British learned a lot about the Egyptian society. In spite of all the political, social and cultural difficulties stemming from the authorial colonial regime, they got familiar with the way of life of the Egyptian people, mainly of those social strata who were in close contact with the British colonial institutions. Britain has retained its cultural impact on Egypt in the postcolonial era, replacing the direct economic guidance with the above described cooperation in the educational and intellectual domain.

It seems that Britain with its traditionalism and its stubborn clinging to certain, specifically English or British icons, institutions and customs⁶⁸ has much more in common with Egypt than with the aggressive culture of progress of the USA. The American dream which offers no values except for an individual's pursuit of success, orientation at technologies and modernisation at all costs, symbolises a stark contrast to the British conservative thinking and complacent devotion to the notion of 'British greatness'.

⁶⁷ Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 184.

⁶⁸ Items like the British pound, the monarchy and the royal family, black cabs, fish and chips, 'taking tea' etc.

Analogies with British conservatism and pride in the glorious past of the nation can be also traced in the Egyptian society. The metaphor of zebra crossing discloses a fact that while the British had introduced all kinds of conventions which the Egyptian culture has implemented into everyday life, it does not necessarily mean that Egypt conforms to them and abides by their conventional instructive meanings. Despite the changes and transformations that the Egyptian culture doubtlessly undergoes, Egypt keeps following its own path and retains its own uniqueness in defiance of whoever happens to govern the country.

However, one might raise a question here whether Soueif is prone and succumbing to the kind of nostalgia with which some Egyptians, not only from the intellectual circles, recollect the colonial times. This epoch of the Egyptian history seems to be adored and recalled primarily in the context of the contemporary problems of the Egyptian society, frequently delineated in Soueif's writings.

5. Background to crucial issues of Soueif's writings

5.1. *The English language, culture and complicity*

If we scrutinise the most significant representatives of science and culture in Egypt of the second half of the twentieth century, we find out that the absolute majority had studied at British universities. However, in the context of the Anglo-Saxon cultural influence, the English civilisation must be distinguished from the American. In Egypt and the Middle East, British culture has always been considered a traditional, and, despite all the reservations, an acceptable cultural area. American culture, on the other hand, was embraced in the Middle Eastern region in the 1950s as a positive alternative to the “old British colonial civilisation”. Nevertheless, the American administration has totally discredited itself as the chief representative of neocolonial politics and thus it has become a negative element viewed by most inhabitants of the Arab-Islamic world as a mere aggressor and intruder. Therefore it is logical that in Egypt and other Arab countries the tendency gradually prevailed to seek help and support from the “good old colonial England” whose merits and disadvantages were well known.

However different and often antithetical the British and American cultures are, the fact that they both use the same language unites the two entities under the term Anglo-Saxon civilisation. Moreover, the language which defines the Anglo-Saxon cultural area happens to be the dominant language of the contemporary world. Egyptians, just like other peoples of the Arab Middle East and the entire world, encounter the English language hand in hand with its culture in their quotidian duties and activities; it virtually permeates their everyday lives. This new cultural impact has gained momentum thanks to the spread and massive development of modern technologies that have changed traditional patterns of behaviour and thinking, which grants English a significant position as the essential means of communication with the outside world. It is obvious that the dissemination of Anglo-Saxon culture and the English language would be unthinkable without British and American economic might behind it.⁶⁹ This phenomenon has been described as cultural and linguistic imperialism.

⁶⁹ Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 49.

Yet, ultimately, the promotion and export of the English language and its culture is heavily loaded with colonial ideology. Anglocentrism⁷⁰ would have never thrived if it had not been for the British Empire and its imperial politics. Edward Said made a revolutionary revelation in 1978 in his seminal book *Orientalism* where he recognised that the crucial impetus of the British Empire was cultural imperialism, through which it acquired political and economic power in the colonised territories. Based on Foucault's thesis that knowledge equates power, Said recognized that via creating and violating the *episteme*, i.e. via cumulating and manipulating knowledge about the colonised, the British could easily subjugate and dominate him. At the same time, however, the colonial system was reinforced as it silenced the colonised subjects by diffusing the English culture and language in the colonies. English cultural values were exported and promulgated as superior to the putative primitivity of the indigenous people.

Robert Phillipson identifies this complex phenomenon as English linguistic imperialism and defines it as follows: "The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages."⁷¹ In the past, when colonised nations were struggling to gain independence from their oppressors, the growing anti-colonial consciousness coincided with renouncement of the colonial inheritance. And indeed, one of the most striking gestures of abandoning the imposed dominance was and has been casting off the colonising languages. However, a lot of African and other postcolonial writers have embraced English, which proves the fact that the English language continues to be a highly valuable asset for both leading powers, the United Kingdom and the USA. The Director-General of the British Council was right to say in the 1987/88 Annual Report: "Britain's real black gold is not North Sea oil but the English language."⁷²

In this context it is true that the contemporary Egyptian and Arab writers of fiction draw inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon culture and they apply methods and procedures which have evolved from modern literary critical, philosophical and psychological schools and movements. It is hardly conceivable that a modern Egyptian writer (writing either in Arabic or in English) could succeed without thorough knowledge of English and good acquaintance

⁷⁰ Robert Phillipson explains that "the term anglocentricity has been coined by analogy with ethnocentricity, which refers to the practice of judging other cultures by the standards of one's own" (Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 47).

⁷¹ Phillipson uses the expression 'structural' in a broad sense as material properties, e.g. institutions or financial allocations, while 'cultural' refers to immaterial or ideological properties, e.g. attitudes, pedagogic principles (*ibid.*, p. 47).

⁷² Quoted in Robert Phillipson, *ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

with literature, culture, philosophy and science written in English or other foreign languages. An immensely interesting quote from at-Tayyib Salih's novel, *Season of Migration to the North*,⁷³ emphasises how ambivalent and painful it could be for people from the former colonies to acquire and use the coloniser's language: "we'll speak their language without either a sense of guilt or a sense of gratitude."⁷⁴ However, the inevitability of the interconnectedness of the global world's cultures is confirmed by philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah: "[W]e are already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous echt-African [or for the use of this study echt-Egyptian] culture awaiting salvage by our artists."⁷⁵

So why does an Arab or postcolonial writer of any other origin decide to write in English? English with its status of *lingua franca* of the contemporary world has proved that language is not a mere mode of communication, it can easily become an instrument of power.⁷⁶ However, the very fact that English is the prime "imperial" language provides the Anglophone writer with an enormous advantage: the unique opportunity to address masses of readers all around the globe. In the case of the Arab writer, it is the way to avoid the indifference and prejudice held towards anything concerning the Arabic civilisation.⁷⁷ Although English has been stigmatised as the language of the oppressor in many countries, it has been used at the same moment as a weapon against the very oppression. If applied by the postcolonial writer, English metamorphoses from the language of conquest and domination to a dynamic site of resistance to the silencing monopoly over cultural discourse. If transformed to suit the author's creative needs and his or her own native idiom, it turns into a vehicle for the transmission of alternative cultures and diverse voices. Ultimately, it becomes a vital counterlanguage, with the potential to disrupt the primacy of metropolitan discourse conducted in the standard form of the English language.

⁷³ Cf. footnote no. 24.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 8.

⁷⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. London: Methuen, 1992, p. 155.

⁷⁶ The question is raised by Edward Said in his essay "Decolonising the Mind". Edward Said, *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*, London: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 93.

⁷⁷ See Edward Said's "Embargoed Literature" in Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, eds., *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-cultural texts*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995. In the article, Said complains about the West's lack of interest in Arabic culture, and Arabic literature in particular. He criticises the tiny selection of Arabic literary writings which gets translated into European languages. The disdainful attitude of the West to anything Arabic is ascribed to "the longstanding prejudice against Arabs and Islam that remains entrenched in Western, and especially American, culture" (p. 100). Edward Said claims that "there almost seems to be a deliberate policy of maintaining a kind of monolithic reductionism where the Arabs and Islam are concerned; in this, the Orientalism that distances and dehumanizes another culture is upheld, and the xenophobic fantasy of a pure "Western" identity elevated and strengthened" (p. 99).

5.2. Bilingualism

Generally, bilingualism can be defined as the ability to speak and/or write in two languages. Bilingual individuals and communities provide a rich field for sociolinguistic study. The phenomenon of bilingualism is very interesting as the prime example of language contact, which involves a specific procedure called code switching:

Bilinguals often switch between their two languages in the middle of a conversation. These code-switches can take place between or even within sentences, involving phrases or words or even parts of words. The switching of words is the beginning of borrowing, which occurs when the new word becomes more or less integrated into the second language.⁷⁸

Incorporating the lexicon of the first language into the second of the bilingual individual is a process known as code mixing. Mixed code is furthermore one of the evident features of postcolonial literature.

In the case of the postcolonial author whose deployment of code mixing takes place on the textual level, bilingualism (or multilingualism) carries a wealth of cultural, social, and political meanings. As Ketaki Kushari Dyson, a Bengali-English female writer, appropriately observes, “[b]eing a bilingual writer is probably the most complex form of bilingualism.”⁷⁹ Her remark encapsulates the amphibious role of the bilingual author, with all the advantages, difficulties and burdens that such a role insinuates. Bilingualism may cause various psychological and emotional conflicts within the mind of the bilingual author. It may lead to a kind of schizophrenia, a split of personality and mind which forces the author to contemplate and revalue complicated questions of self-representation and self-definition.

Bilingualism in creative writing evokes questions of identity as it facilitates the authors to signal their social, national and political attitudes and to claim solidarity⁸⁰ in a more subtle way than a monolingual writer could do. Authors occupying the bilingual, i.e. bicultural space are much more aware of “the context out of which their writings were constructed, of the “world” which their discourse was projecting, more so, perhaps, than the author working within a monocultural space.”⁸¹ The hybrid character of literature encoded in

⁷⁸ Bernard Spolsky, *Sociolinguistics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 49.

⁷⁹ Ketaki Kushari Dyson, “Forging a Bilingual Identity: A Writer’s Testimony” in Pauline Burton, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Bilingual Women: Anthropological Approaches to Second-Language Use*, Oxford, Providence: Berg, 1994, p. 170.

⁸⁰ Sociolinguistics recognises this kind of shift and terms this powerful mechanism as metaphorical switching (Bernard Spolsky, *ibid.*, p. 50).

⁸¹ Geoffrey P. Nash, *The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language, 1908-1958*, Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 1998, p. 3.

the English language implies a highly political and ideological content of postcolonial discourse, and the Anglo-Arab discourse respectively. Conveying meanings and ideas that refract Arab interests and concerns, “[t]he Anglo-Arab writer could not escape a consciousness of himself as operating at the margins of two discrete cultures, which [are], however, not engaged with one another on conditions of equality.”⁸²

Composing texts in a second, acquired language for the purpose of encoding meanings to do with the author’s own native culture connotes engagement in highly conscious speech acts. The precise encoding of meanings will depend not merely on the meanings to be encoded, but on the audience addressed.⁸³

The issues of representation and reception are in this context very relevant since the postcolonial, Arab writers create their fiction in the appropriated metropolitan language and thus relate their stories based predominantly their native countries to predominantly Western readers. Such bilingual postcolonial, and specifically Anglo-Arab, authors share a mission of cultural mediation. Their literary works embody transformational intentions toward their audience: in informing they aim to enlighten, and in arguing to convince.⁸⁴

By working within codes that were, by definition, largely alien to native Arab codes, a tension was set up that can be considered symptomatic of the postcolonial text. The Arab writer in English was no different in this respect to the West Indian, African, or Australian writer in English. Each must decide whether and how far the alien metropolitan code is to be confirmed, or re-appropriated, subverted, or replaced. For example, one way of challenging the total dominance of metropolitan codes is for the writer to carry over words and expressions from his native language and embody these within the text written in the metropolitan language. The western reader is thereby forced to decode their situational if not their denotative meanings. In this way, the reader has to work at decoding cultural difference, and multicultural readings are made possible.⁸⁵

⁸² Geoffrey P. Nash, *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Rephrasing Geoffrey P. Nash, *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

W. E. B. du Bois coined a term 'double consciousness', which is used in its contemporary sense to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets.⁸⁶ Accordingly, Ahdaf Soueif and her likes are caught between two cultural worlds, which is apparent especially in their dual use of English and Arabic in their fiction. Arab authors writing in English strive to create a singular consciousness out of an identity made up of double perspectives.

⁸⁶ The term originated from an 1897 *Atlantic Monthly* article titled "Strivings of the Negro People". W. E. B. du Bois spoke of "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity", and of a two-ness, of being "an American, a Negro; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."
< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_Consciousness>

5.3. Language and identity

Language is a medium through which we perceive the world. This metaphor is loaded with meanings and questions, going back to the key philosophical problem whether we can actually see the world as it really is.⁸⁷ Is our mind, through language, capable of reproducing or accurately recording the reality? Donald Davidson interrogates the problem in his study “Seeing through Language”, where he asserts that “the world bears the tint and focus of the particular language we speak.”⁸⁸ He analyses the differences and provincialisms in our conceptual schemes, i.e. the extent into which our actual languages mould our perception of the world and whether they distort our view of the world.

Salman Rushdie, a famous British Indian writer, pondered the issue of language and identity from his own perspective, it means from the perspective of an emigrant living and writing in the country of his native land’s former oppressors. He confesses the guilt he tends to feel looking back at India, writing about India, finding inspiration in India. He does so “through guilt-tinted spectacles”⁸⁹, sometimes regretting the emigration, at other times being reproached for the move to the enemy’s territory.

Indian writers in these islands, like others who have migrated into the north from the south, are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of ‘whole sight’.⁹⁰

Although Salman Rushdie wrote about himself and other authors of Indian descent, the same holds true for any “third-world” writer living out of his or her home country, residing in the West. Homi Bhabha’s notion of the ‘Third Space of enunciation’ resounds in this context.⁹¹ Rushdie, Soueif and other postcolonial writers have settled in the ambivalent, fertile space between the East and the West where they endeavour to reflect their native culture by the medium of English. As Rushdie affirms,

⁸⁷ Empiricism is a field of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge and the formation of ideas. Many thinkers and philosophers have been sceptical in this respect, e.g. Immanuel Kant thought that we could never perceive the true reality of the world, while Henri Bergson and many others have held that every view of the world is necessarily distorted.

⁸⁸ Donald Davidson, “Seeing through Language” in John Preston, ed. *Thought and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 15.

⁸⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London, Granta Books, 1991, p.15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹¹ Bhabha’s concept is elucidated in the following chapter, “Hybridity”.

[...] we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles.⁹²

There are various, often antagonistic, views whether Indian, African, Egyptian or any other experience can be reflected appropriately in English. The controversial issue of appropriating English as the literary language by authors, whose nations have been subjugated by the British Empire and subsequently by its neo-colonial successors, has been widely debated by many African postcolonial authors. Among them, the most recounted have been the antipodal arguments of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe.

Ngũgĩ is one of the African writers who has rejected English as the tongue which continues to hold Kenya in thrall. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has harshly criticised the “acceptance of ‘the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature’, in our culture and in our politics.”⁹³ He stresses the importance to create African literature in the local and regional African languages. Ngũgĩ himself has resolved to write in his mother tongue, a Kenyan language Gĩkũjũ, because he views language as “the most important vehicle through which [the colonial] power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation.”⁹⁴

An entirely opposite opinion is held by Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian author who asks himself the question whether an African can ever “learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing.”

I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. [...] The real question is not whether Africans *could* write in English but whether they ought to. Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for somebody else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “The Language of African Literature” in Gregory Castle, ed. *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 2001, p. 436.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it.⁹⁵

Following the practice of postcolonial authors who have appropriated English as the medium of their creativity has been also explained by bell hooks: “we make English do what we want it to do. We take the oppressor’s language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counterhegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language.”⁹⁶

Salman Rushdie’s arguments for privileging English for creative purposes have been outlined above, but he also comments upon the issue of refashioning English for one’s own authorial purposes, which is immensely significant in the context of Ahdaf Soueif’s narratives and which will be dealt with in the next chapters. Moreover, another, equally relevant topic of translation is opened in the following quote:

Many have referred to the argument about the appropriateness of this language to Indian [or (for our needs) Egyptian] themes. And I hope all of us share the view that we can’t simply use the language in the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free.

[...] and in the forging of a British Indian identity the English language is of central importance. It must, in spite of everything, be embraced. (The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.)⁹⁷

Rushdie further contemplates the dialogues carried out between literary works and historical events and the writer’s individual circumstances when relating his or her stories. He highlights the notion of alienation from one’s native environment and intimates the peculiar character of narratives reflecting one’s abandoned country:

⁹⁵ Chinua Achebe, “The African Writer and the English Language” in Gregory Castle, ed. *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 2001, pp. 433-4.

⁹⁶ bell hooks, “‘this is the oppressor’s language / yet I need it to talk to you’: Language, a place of struggle” in Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier (eds.), *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-cultural texts*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995, p. 301.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.⁹⁸

The last words of the essay “Imaginary Homelands” invite us all, the writers as well as their readers, to “open the universe a little more”.⁹⁹ Rushdie perceives his condition of an emigrant writing about his homeland as a universal one, a condition which is extremely potent and rich in inspiration and meaning. It allows him to see the entire world from a broad, unbiased perspective and this is palpable also in the fiction of Ahdaf Soueif. She has access to the Egyptian and the English traditions and she makes use of both of them, despite the differences and often contradictory historical and political standpoints of the two great nations.

⁹⁸ Salman Rushdie, *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹⁹ Quoted from Saul Bellow’s novel *The Dean’s December*.

5.4. Hybridity

Hybridity is a highly complex and ambivalent phenomenon. On one hand, it involves adopting another culture and broadening the meaning of one's own identity, on the other hand it implies complicity with the dominant culture and often, in the eyes of compatriots, a betrayal of the original cultural values and legacy. Ultimately, however, it represents a step towards cross-cultural dialogue and enrichment, ideally taking the positive aspects of each of the participating cultures and bringing them together.

Originally, the term 'hybrid' has developed from biological and botanical cross-breeding of two species to produce a third, 'hybrid' species. In reference to human beings, a 'hybrid' is the offspring of parents of different races. Since the nineteenth century, hybridity has become one of the most disputed concepts. During the era of colonial enterprises, scientific discussions foregrounding the theory of racial inequality "always contained their own hidden ideological agenda." Hence racism, based on scientific theory, served to establish and justify colonial policy, including cruel and unscrupulous practices of subjugating the indigenous peoples.

Robert Young notices that while the nineteenth century emphasised a physiological aspect of hybridity, the twentieth century reactivated it to describe a cultural one. He concludes that "[w]hile cultural factors determined its physiological status, the use of hybridity today prompts questions about the ways in which contemporary thinking has broken absolutely with the racialized formulations of the past."¹⁰⁰

Postcolonial thinking has treated hybridity in the context of dislocation of peoples and cultures, which has become one of the hallmarks of the contemporary world. According to Young, migrant and diasporic condition of the lives of millions of people today is the price of globalisation and civilisation,¹⁰¹ while being deeply rooted in the colonial past and neo-colonial present. Hybridisation affects diverse domains and takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, intellectual, etc.

The linguistic aspect of hybridity was theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin who "used it to suggest the disruptive and transfiguring power of multivocal language situations and, by extension, of multivocal narratives."¹⁰² The idea of polyphony and merging of voices in

¹⁰⁰ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998, p. 118.

novelistic writing is echoed in Bakhtin's seminal essay, "Discourse in the Novel". He identifies hybridisation as

a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.¹⁰³

Bakhtin furthermore assumes that "the novelistic hybrid is an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving-out of a living image of another language."¹⁰⁴

In this context, Bakhtin has introduced an original idea of dialogism, which denotes the linguistic hybrid as illustrated in novels and which goes hand in hand with 'double-voiced discourse'. Polyphony in novelistic narrative operates as a refusal of the absolutism of a singular voice. Bakhtin's memorable phrase about such a discourse manifests that it "draws in, as it were, sucks in to itself the other's replies, intensely reworking them."¹⁰⁵

Roger Bromley explains this hypothesis in his analytical essay of the nature of diasporic narratives:

The silenced speaks, the other 'writes back' in an internal dialogisation of discourse in which the hegemonic script "loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced." Bakhtin argues that such discourse is not only double-voiced but also double-accented. One of the effects of colonialism and, subsequently, metropolitan racism is monologisation, hence transitional narratives which attempt to break with expected models of otherness have to negotiate deep silences and unspeakability as it is difficult to speak aloud, "for loud and living intonation [the available and dominant cultural resources] monologises discourse and cannot do justice to the other person's voice present in it." In transition, therefore, the traces of monological othering are present as the unuttered voice of intense dialogicality, but no longer determining or dominating in what emerges as an internally undecided, 'in-between' narrative.¹⁰⁶

Such narratives therefore contribute to the gradual process of reworking the past and reversing the historical legacy in which the other, the marginalised and the dominated liberate

¹⁰³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: four essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981 quoted in Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 132.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Bromley, "Belonging Beyond the Nation: The Role of Diasporic Narrative Communities" in Procházka, Martin, ed. *After History*. Praha: Literaria Pragensia, 2006, p. 300. Bromley quotes Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p. 197 and p. 198.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.

themselves from the ‘othering’, ‘marginalising’ and dominating discourse of metropolitan authority.

While Bakhtin’s concept of hybridity remained in the field of linguistics, Homi K. Bhabha has shifted this subversion of authority through hybridisation to the dialogical situation of colonialism. His theories have been probably the most influential and controversial within recent postcolonial thinking. Bhabha’s approach to hybridity emphasises the interdependence of the coloniser and the colonised and the mutual construction of their identities. The archaeology of identity is characterised as a constant flux and agony, a never-ending process of negotiation. Hybridity sustains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy as it amplifies “transition and, possibly, transgression, a questioning of absolute ‘otherness’.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore hybridisation is immensely potent in disturbing and transforming the prevailing relations between power and knowledge.

Bhabha suggests that cultural identity always emerges in the ‘Third Space of enunciation’. He declares that “all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation”, which for him makes “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures [...] untenable.”¹⁰⁸ This ambivalent space of cultural identity may help to promote the recognition of cultural difference:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory [...] may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Roger Bromley, *ibid.*, pp. 302.

¹⁰⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

6. Literary analysis

6.1. Translation and the significance of language

Ahdaf Soueif is considered an Egyptian novelist writing in English and her writings constantly tread the divide between the two cultures. She grew up in both Egyptian and English environments and she learned to read in English, relearning Arabic when she returned to Egypt with her parents. She has confessed many times that during her first attempts at creative expression she tried to write in Arabic, but she soon found out that English would be her literary language. It was not as much a matter of conscious choice as it was a logical outcome of Soueif's passion for English literature. Through overindulgent reading in English, the language has become a tool sufficiently sensitive to render the desired meaning for which she strives, a tool which serves best her authorial needs. What has also contributed to Ahdaf Soueif's English literary production is the diglossia in the Arabic-speaking countries,¹¹⁰ since her native tongue is colloquial Egyptian. Fiction, on the other hand, is written predominantly in the standard form of Arabic. For an author who has lived outside the Arabic-speaking zone for most of his or her life, it is very difficult to master the formal version of Arabic and employ it effectively for the extremely subtle practice of creative writing.

Arabic remains palpable especially in the dialogues, and in that sense a large part of Soueif's fiction is in fact translation. Her approach to the English language is not burdened with the past when the British were occupying Egypt. She does not perceive English as the language of her oppressor. "[T]he British occupation was out of Egypt before I was born. English was the language of my first reading and I love it."¹¹¹ English is not discredited for Soueif because of colonialism and because of being the mother tongue of the ex-colonizers of Egypt, rather English is a tool for her as a writer, a medium through which she can access large masses of readers.

¹¹⁰ There is a great difference between the written form of Arabic, the so-called modern standard Arabic, used mainly on official, formal occasions, and the colloquial version used in everyday communication. However, each region, each part of the vast Arab world is characterised by a distinct dialect with numerous variants. Egyptian colloquial Arabic is very specific, though. Despite being originally limited to the country's capital, it has become a sort of *lingua franca* among Arabs from all around the world, especially because Egyptian television, film and music production dominates the mass media markets of the Arab-speaking region. For more information, see František Ondráš, *Egyptian Colloquial Arabic*, Praha: Set Out, 2005, pp. 8-9.

¹¹¹ Cited in Pascale Ghazaleh, "Ahdaf Soueif: Different readings", *Al-Ahram Weekly* Online, Issue No. 559, 8-14 November 2001, accessed 10 February 2008 <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/559/profile.htm>>.

It is rather tricky to compare the mentality of Arab expatriates and immigrants living in the West with the mentality of the Arabs living in the Arab world, mainly because of the fact that abandoning one's homeland completely changes the perspectives and the epistemological tenets of perceiving culture and generally respected values. Not only Ahdaf Soueif but also other Arab-Muslim writers are preoccupied with the problems of identity when their literary figures leave one world (one narrative space) for a different one. Subsequently, the characters may identify with certain aspects of the new world, but they may have reservations to others. Such reservations then expose the divergence between the two cultural entities and they often serve as plot vehicles. Literary texts of the type of Soueif's short stories and novels are loaded with aspects of cultural disparity since the language, in which they are written, is not the language of the native speakers. It is the language acquired by the author creator who in turn uses it as a tool for forging a new cross-cultural identity for herself as well as for her characters.

Having read Edward Said's "The Anglo-Arab Encounter", a review of Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun*, one has to agree with his observation why English, as opposed to French, is seldom used by Arab writers in their creative writing: "English serves better when a lot of the material is, so to speak, English, about being in England, having to do intimately with English people and so on."¹¹² The first collection of stories by Ahdaf Soueif, *Aisha*, is in most part situated in Egypt and deals with everyday life of common Egyptians. As a consequence, Soueif had to face a problem well-known to all transcultural writers creating transcultural literature: to what extent should the peculiarity of the vernacular and of the setting be preserved in the language of literary expression? It is interesting how Soueif employs English in the Arabic environment and how sometimes the English language betrays her and defies her attempts to fit it into the Arabic idiomatic expression. Not always does she succeed in creating a smooth text, especially the dialogues of entirely Arab and Muslim characters slightly resist the effort and give away the fact that the text is in the end partly a translation.

The following passage is from "Her Man", a provocative and sexually frank story about cunning Zeina fighting for her husband who secretly married a second wife, a young inexperienced girl. In the dialogue, Zeina seeks advice from her friend Hekmat:

¹¹² Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 407.

‘Remember the proverb, child: the shade of a man is better than that of a wall. And he hasn’t done anything that other men don’t do. He’s still your husband. He hasn’t left you or neglected you. He still supports you and brings you meat and fruit, even though you’ve not been speaking to him. He still holds you dear. But you’re hurting his pride and manhood. Take care what you’re doing lest you drive him away.’

‘Drive him away?’ cried Zeina bitterly. ‘How can I drive him further away than he’s already gone? To marry on top of me? Why? Am I old? Or has my hair gone white? Or am I ugly? Or have my teeth fallen out? Or don’t I please him any more? Or am I not a good housewife? Haven’t I borne him a son and a daughter, may God have mercy on her? What is wrong with me that he should marry on top of me?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with you, child, and a thousand men would desire you. But these things are in the hands of God. Doesn’t the Koran say “And you may hate that very thing which is best for you?” You know Sobhi’s always been impulsive. [...]’¹¹³

The dialogue between the two women is full of references to God, Qur’anic citations and proverbs and it embodies the inherent trait of religiosity and superstitiousness of the Arabic diction. The Western reader, who is not familiar with the rhetorical style of Egyptians and Arabs in general, could find the omnipresence of God’s name in the discourse as evidence of a religiosity so excessive as to tip into the fanatical. While the Western Judeo-Christian context condemns taking the Lord’s name in vain, the colloquial speech of native Arabic speakers is permeated by invocations of God and his mercy. The possible misinterpretation on the part of an outsider lies not in the linguistic, but rather in the epistemologic nature of the Arab-Muslim mentality.

It would not be valid to claim that only poor and uneducated people tend to use words of prayer or religious chants in their speech. On the contrary, they are frequently uttered by an illiterate, traditional and superstitious *fellah* or taxi driver as well as a university professor. For people living in the Orient, such expressions are absolutely natural. Obsecration of God is a significant manifestation of communication among people anchored in an Oriental society, which is distinguished by a high level of religiosity stemming from the role of spiritual values in human life, which is to say from the discrepancy between the spirituality of the Orient and the materialism of the West.¹¹⁴ The religious disposition of Orientals does not refer merely to a certain limited part of the society, rather it is a demonstration of religious

¹¹³ Ahdaf Soueif, *Aisha*, London: Bloomsbury, 1995, p. 98.

¹¹⁴ In modern Arabic literature the issue of the relationship between the Oriental spiritual and collectivist perception of the world as opposed to the tendency of the West to rational, materialistic and rather individualistic attitude to life, and balancing between them, has been explored by numerous renowned authors. One of them is Tawfiq al-Haqim’s novel *‘Usfur min al-Sharq (Bird from the East)* or Yahya Haqqi and his novel *Qindil ‘Umm Hashim’ (Umm Hashim’s Lamp)*. For further details, see Jaroslav Oliverius, *Moderní literatury arabského východu*, Praha: Karolinum, 1995.

and cultural identity expressed both within the intimate family circle and in public. It is logical due to the fact that in the Muslim world, the culture and the entire life of an individual merges with Islam. The readers' ability to recognise and accept this phenomenon is based on their cultural-religious background from which they approach the literary work. Besides, the degree of empathy and understanding for a narrative text depends on the aptitude to interpret those manifestations of behaviour and actions of literary characters through which they seek divine assistance.

On the other hand, the way of speech of the characters, however odd and clumsy it may at times sound, mediates their mentality and way of thinking to the English-speaking readers. Soueif's story written in English retains the typical idiomatic structure of the Egyptian colloquial Arabic. Her dialogues transferred from Arabic into English abound in cultural characteristics of Egyptian people, such as Arabic names, expressions and turns of phrase, metaphors, Qur'anic verses, greetings and forms of address. This fusion of Arab thinking and English formulation confers a unique quality on her literary style, which allows her bilingual readers to hear the dialogues in Arabic in their heads.¹¹⁵

The dialogue below is taken from "The Water Heater", a short story from Soueif's third book *Sandpiper* and it is a concise illustration of a seemingly ordinary conversation between the son and his mother after her visit to relatives. The structure of the dialogue is typically Arabic as it opens with the inevitable phrases of politeness. The mother makes use of her son's enquiries about the health of the members of their family to break the news to him about her daughter Faten's arranged marriage with her cousin:

'I've been to your aunt's house today', she began.

'Yes? How is she?' he asked dutifully.

'She's well – thanks be to God. All of them are well.'

His mother paused. 'She spoke to me about something.'

'Well, Mother, may it be good?'

'You know your cousin, Isam? He's a graduated dentist now and he's starting to think of opening his own clinic. God willing, he's going to be rich and successful and, as my sister says, who deserves to share his success more than his own cousin, Faten?'¹¹⁶

A general question arises whether a wide range of such devices which characterise the Egyptian environment and a certain Arabic rhetorical style can actually convey a truthful, authentic image and understanding of the different human nature and its uniqueness to the

¹¹⁵ Yafa Shanneik, "Portrait: Ahdaf Soueif: Developing a Euro-Arab Literature", 2004, accessed 3 March 2008 <http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-310/_nr-91/i.html?PHPSESSID=5>.

¹¹⁶ Ahdaf Soueif, *Sandpiper*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 71.

English reader. This refers to the ambivalent and much debated issue of the feasibility of transferring meanings and values from one cultural environment to another, which ceases to be relevant if the literary work is written in Arabic and the subject matter is entirely Arabic. A narrative work written in English about Egypt and the Egyptian society represents a complex text which is formed as a certain form of translation literature. Writings of this kind, written in other than the native tongue of the author (regardless of the level of mastering the language of literary expression), always involve a transfer across a cultural divide. They are to a certain extent translations or transferrings of thoughts.¹¹⁷

Ahdaf Soueif has often spoken of translation in her lectures, essays and interviews, but in 2001 she dedicated an entire lecture at the American University in Cairo to this complex topic. There she wondered whether an English reader could feel pleasure in reading a translated Arabic work of fiction, whether it could afford the joy of recognition and empathy. She believes that a reader closing an Arabic novel rendered in English would probably reflect with satisfaction: “Well, I've learned something about the elusive Arab mind.”¹¹⁸ Such a conclusion drawn by a Western reader little familiar with the Egyptian society could, of course, be tricky as the ordinary people and their relative primitiveness represented in Soueif's books might only support the widespread prejudices and misconceptions in the West. The bilingual writer thus faces the complicated task to translate not only words, ideas and information, but an entire culture.

In the first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, the main protagonist Asya who writes her PhD. dissertation at a northern English university, invites a group of her friends, students of both Arab and English origin, for a party to her rented cottage. Her younger sister Deena, active in the Egyptian dissent, has come to visit her and she has brought with her a tape of Sheikh Imam, “an elderly, blind man, who is a protest singer, more or less banned by the government”. Gerald, one of the English participants in the party, makes Asya translate one of Sheikh Imam's songs. The following passage is just a short excerpt of Asya's thorough and very interesting semantic analysis of the lyrics of the song. It interrogates the possibilities of cultural translation and interpretation while doing justice to the rich, multilayered meanings, symbols and metaphors of the original text.

¹¹⁷ Transferring of thoughts is the subject matter of linguistic psychology. The transfer is influenced by the process in which a structure of thought in the text is formulated in one language and it is presented to the reader in a different one. It is a general problem which is apparent in different degrees and with different intensity, depending on the knowledge of the environment and the way of perceiving a foreign culture on the part of both the writer and the reader.

¹¹⁸ Yafa Shanneik, *ibid.*

‘Sharraft ya Nixon Baba,
Ya bta‘ el-Watergate –’

Hisham presses pause.

‘Well,’ says Asya, ‘as I said, he says, “You’ve honoured us, Nixon Baba – “Baba” means “father” but it’s also used, as it is used here, as a title of mock respect – as in “Ali Baba”, for example – that’s probably derived from Muslim Indian use of Arabic – but the thing is you could also address a child as “Baba” as an endearment – a sort of inversion: like calling him Big Chief because he’s so little – and so when it’s used aggressively – say in an argument between two men – it carries a diminutivising, belittling signification. So here it holds all these meanings. Anyway, “you’ve honoured us, Nixon Baba” – “You’ve honoured us” is, by the way, the traditional greeting with which you meet someone coming into your home – it’s almost like “come on in” in this country. So it functions merely as a greeting and he uses it in that way but of course he activates – ironically – the meaning of having actually “honoured” us. “You’ve honoured us, Nixon Baba / O you of Watergate” I suppose would be the closest translation – but the structure “bita‘ el-vegetables”, for example, would be someone who sold vegetables, while “bita‘ el-women” would be someone who pursued women. So Nixon is “bita‘ el-Watergate”, which suggests him selling the idea of Watergate to someone – selling his version of Watergate to the public – and pursuing a Watergate type of policy, but all in a very non-pompous, street vernacular, jokingly abusive kind of way. The use of “el-” to further specify Watergate – a noun which needs no further defining – is necessary for the rhythm and adds comic effect. I’m sure you won’t want me to go on like this, so let’s stop –’

[...]

‘Of course we want you to go on,’ Lisa says.

‘It’s incredible how much there is to it,’ says Gerald Stone.

‘I’m sure Sheikh Imam himself would be curious to hear this exposition.’ Deena laughs.¹¹⁹

Asya, in her search for the most fitting interpretation, ventures into the most detailed explanation of the very logic of the Arabic language and Egyptian colloquial respectively. In order to capture the tiniest nuances of her mother tongue to convey the meaning of the lyrics, she draws parallels between Arabic and English cultural habits, uses examples in different contexts and attempts to bring the semantics of Arabic closer to her non-Arab listeners.

The passage is an apt example of multicultural perception of reality, which is presented in two levels. The first level is the level of linguistic expression, in which Arabic and English terms are blended together and form compounds, e.g. ‘Nixon Baba’. This category also comprises the phrase ‘Ya bta‘ el-Watergate’. The multicultural and bilingual element is additionally highlighted by the deployment of Arabic definite article with the

¹¹⁹ Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999, pp. 496-7.

English toponym Watergate,¹²⁰ which integrates the English appellative into the system of sociocultural relations of the Arab world.

The second level is the semantic one that results from the contents of the novel, especially from the meaning of the narrative text, disclosing the relations between the characters and their sociocultural background. The readers experience with the author her concern with, and often enthusiasm for the Arab world, but at the same time they are aware of their own distance to the events taking place in the Egyptian setting. The binary concept is further manifested in the undisguised, but sympathetic view of the Arab reality from without and a searching, analytical approach to the rest of the world from within. The multicultural conception of the novel's characters and spatial and territorial circumscription enlightens the Western readers and provokes them to stop and think. It invites them to reform their own stance to the Arab world, instead of merely confirming their ready-made assumptions and prejudices.

This lengthy segment is also an explicit demonstration and simultaneously a frank confession of the immense hardship of the writer translating the Arabic world, along its complex paradigm of thinking and speaking, into English. Suddenly, Asya is interrupted by a telephone call from her husband, Saif. Answering the phone, she gives vent to her relief from this burdensome task:

[...] you've saved me. I've got some people visiting and they're making me translate one of Sheikh Imam's songs to them and it's beastly,' Asya whispers.

'I should have thought it'd sound pretty silly in English.'

'It either sounds silly or ponderous. A page of footnotes for every line'¹²¹

This quote is immensely important as it manifests for the first time that it is actually not possible to mediate one's culture. Asya's exhaustive linguistic analysis verges on a sense of absurdity and futility. Such an attempt to explain what culture means, however earnest it is, misses the desired goal. Although she tries to explain, describe and translate the words and phrases of the song, she does not succeed to convey the overall meaning of the song. The complexity and entirety of the song's message is lost in the translation as it is fragmented into unsubstantial grammatical and semantic details. Asya despairs because she feels that she has failed to transfer the Egyptian culture to her British friend, but she does not realise that it is

¹²⁰ Watergate does not refer only to the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate hotel complex in Washington, D.C., it has gained notoriety as a general term for a series of political scandals during the presidency of Richard Nixon in 1972 that finally led to Nixon's dramatic resignation in 1974. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watergate_scandal>

¹²¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999, pp. 497.

non-transferable. The absurdity of Asya's effort, which turns into a ponderous lecture, is highlighted by Deena's remark that not even Sheikh Imam himself is aware of all the connotations.

In this novel, Ahdaf Soueif seems not to be fully conscious of the extent into which language, identity, culture, knowledge and power are interconnected. There are other instances in *In the Eye of the Sun* which reveal that the author still believes that she can mediate her culture to the Western audience. Unintentionally, she commits the same error for which Edward Said condemned Orientalists, anthropologists and other scientists who collected knowledge about the Oriental world so that colonial powers could easily dominate the Orientals. Although such a practice appears to be innocent and objective, Michael Foucault exposed the mutual inherence of power and knowledge. According to Foucault, power is never neutral as it determines force relations.

Ahdaf Soueif who not only translates the dialogues or songs from Arabic in her fiction but who in 2000 translated Mourid Barghouti's novel *I Saw Ramallah* is aware of the fact that "a stylish and precise translation [is] no simple feat when working from Arabic to English." She praises Marilyn Booth, the translator of Nawal as-Sa'adawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, for exactly the qualities which she herself strives to achieve in her own writings: "She preserves the exoticism of the quotations, proverbs and idioms and retains the humour of the jokes while keeping the narrative easy and natural."¹²² This is exactly how Soueif's writing can be described. Her English carries the rhythm and discursive pattern of Arabic, it is imbued with the Egyptian atmosphere, mentality and vernacular. Soueif twists, turns and moulds standard English so that it becomes her highly authentic, individualised medium through which she expresses her transcultural message.

Ahdaf Soueif's version of the English language is endowed with a kind of documentary quality as it must bear all the peculiar things, concepts, details and specifics of their native lands which the English linguistic reality does not even recognise. So if the English terminology does not suffice it is necessary to employ a native expression, phrase or local names to convey the authentic spirit of the setting. Particularly her novels abound in factual and geographical details and descriptive passages. In order to grasp the nuanced reality in genuine terms, Soueif uses Arabic or Egyptian colloquial vocabulary,¹²³ most often referring to the specific terminology of Arabic and Muslim context, e.g. Egyptian cuisine,

¹²² Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra*, London: Bloomsbury, 2004, p. 206.

¹²³ It should be remarked that the Arabic transcription used by Ahdaf Soueif in her writing is simplified and follows the English custom and spelling. It means that it does not correspond with the transcription rules common in academic texts in the scope of Arabic Studies.

social and professional titles, greetings, the names of popular people, famous places and institutions.

They have gone round Falaki and up again through Tahrir and they are passing the Semiramis where their wedding party is even now continuing. Except that **Khalu** Hamid has probably gone home. His friend, ‘Abd el-Khaliq Mahjoub, the leader of the Sudanese Communist Party, was yesterday executed in Khartoum. Asya thinks – although nobody says so – that they’d probably been comrades long ago when Khalu had been politically active. Mahjoub had been in Cairo last summer and Khalu had seen him a few times; he’d even come to Friday lunch at Grandfather’s once. He’d been very quiet; dignified and graceful in the way the Sudanese have, and pleasant: praised Tante Soraya’s *mulukhiyya* to the skies and had second helpings and now he was dead. And when Khalu had come into Asya’s bedroom with Grandfather earlier today, and Asya had been in her dressing-gown waiting for Hassan to come and dress her hair and Monsieur Ma’moulian to bring her dress, and she had seen him look – not sad, because he would not let himself look sad on her wedding-day, and he had smiled and congratulated her – but tired and sort of older, she had felt so sorry and she had put her arms around him and said, ‘I’m so sorry about ‘Abd el-Khaliq Mahjoub, Khalu,’ and he had hugged her and said, ‘It’s all right, Asya, it’s all right. This isn’t what you should be thinking about on your wedding day. Greet your grandfather.’ And Asya had taken **Geddu**’s hand and kissed him and as he had kissed her head and said, ‘Congratulations, my daughter,’ two *zaghroudas* one after the other had rung out from behind the closed door and she had felt ashamed and glanced at Khalu, and he’d patted her shoulder and said, ‘We have come as witnesses to take your statement.’ And she had asked, ‘Is Saif outside?’

‘Yes. With his father and the *ma’toun*.’

‘Whom do you appoint as your proxy, Asya, my child?’ Geddu had asked.

And Asya had answered – as she had been taught, ‘I have appointed my father as my proxy.’¹²⁴

The Arabic words italicised by the author (the bold was added by the writer of this study) are explained in the alphabetical glossary at the end of the novel. However, Soueif requires close attention from her readers and a sort of loyalty as the Arabic glossary in her second novel, *The Map of Love*, does not repeat the same expressions and includes only new ones. Nevertheless, the glossary is another example which confirms that Soueif does not perceive yet the imminent danger of conveying knowledge via translation and description only. The glossary attempts to catalogue knowledge about the Egyptian culture in a ready-made for the use of the Western readers just like in the colonial times, when anthropologists cumulated

¹²⁴ Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, Bloomsbury: London, 1999, p. 246.

data and information about the colonised nations and linguists created dictionaries of the local vernaculars.

Geddu: endearment for *geddi*: grandfather.

Khalu: endearment form of *khali*: my mother's brother.

Ma'thoun: official who performs marriages and divorces.

Mulukhiyya: a green soup made of chopped *mulukhiyya* leaves, the perfection of which distinguishes an Egyptian housewife.

Zaghrouda: ululation – a long joy-cry uttered by women on happy occasions; plural: *zaghareed*.¹²⁵

The glossary reminds of the process of 'Anglicisation' which is the "conversion of verbal or written elements of any other language into a more comprehensible English for and English speaker."¹²⁶ However, by extension, it complements the transfer of power and perpetuates hegemony. Knowledge can be easily misused for the purpose of domination and hegemony. It is only in *The Map of Love* that Ahdaf Soueif realises more acutely these problematic implications and conceives the novel differently.

Soueif mixes Arabic words in the otherwise English text to convey certain social and political phenomena, which lack denotations in the English language. Soueif abrogates and refashions the English language to fit her own agenda. The author's strategy is to use typical Arabic (and Egyptian colloquial) expressions in the dialogues and the flow of the narrative text so that they become natural and comprehensible literary motives. Soueif directs her non-Arabic reader towards unconditional acceptance of the cultural and social functions of these terms and the glossary helps to establish them in the novel's parlance. Accordingly, the reader is supposed to appropriate the most common and quotidian Arabic vocabulary without further thinking and speculating about the meaning. Although literary critics reproach her for intermittent grammatical incoherence of her English, Soueif's books have been commended by most of them as possessing formidable narrative energy.

The English language is thus manipulated and even arabised and muslimised, which produces a highly potent paradox: it proves that English "despite all its colonial evocations and its atavistically anti-Muslim connotations, can be utilized as a sophisticated [Arab and] Muslim currency of credible communication"¹²⁷ In Amin Malak's words, "[h]erein then lies the happy irony of Muslim writers "appropriating" a language with a perceived hostile history

¹²⁵ Ahdaf Soueif, *ibid.*, "Glossary", pp. 787-791.

¹²⁶ <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglicisation>>

¹²⁷ Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 11.

toward [Arab world and] Islam and turning it into a medium conveying inclusivist ethos, enriching understanding, and establishing bridges.”¹²⁸

Nonetheless, Ahdaf Soueif does not draw the reader’s attention merely to the single perspective of an Egyptian living in England. Soueif is also concerned with the feelings of women from the other part of the world. In her writings, the author frequently creates intercultural marriages and scrutinises the phenomenon with a critical eye from various angles. Given her own unsuccessful marriage with the English writer Ian Hamilton, it is not surprising that all intercultural relationships in her stories and both novels, except for one, end up in total disillusionment. Soueif is preoccupied with female psyche in such a situation and its ability to cope with loneliness and longing for love. Her female characters react in the same way, disregarding their national or religious affiliations. The matrimonial failure makes the women suffer and long for the lost days of happiness, it robs them of ideals and innocence, but ultimately the experience renders them stronger and independent.

“Sandpiper”, the story which gave Soueif’s collection of short stories its title, analyses the frustration of an English woman with a child abandoned by her Egyptian husband, left desolate in Egypt. The following quotation identifies the crucial obstacle due to which many an intercultural marriage is eventually ruined: sooner or later the spell of exoticism wears off and the burden of everyday problems and crises becomes insurmountable also due to the vast differences in language, mentality, culture and conditions of life of the two lovers. The very basic concept of home, if perceived differently, turns to be a major barrier in an intercultural marriage.

Yes, I am sick – but not just for home. I am sick for a time, a time that was and that I can never have again. A lover I had and can never have again.

I watched him vanish – well, not vanish, slip away, recede. He did not want to go. He did not go quietly. He asked me to hold him, but he couldn’t tell me how. A fairy godmother, robbed for an instant of our belief in her magic, turns into a sad woman, her wand into a useless stick. I suppose I should have seen it coming. My foreignness, which had been so charming, began to irritate him. My inability to remember names, to follow the minutiae of politics, my struggles with his language, my need to be protected from the sun, the mosquitoes, the salads, the drinking water. He was back home, and he needed someone he could be at home with, at home. It took perhaps a year. His heart was broken in two, mine was simply broken.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²⁹ Ahdaf Soueif, *Sandpiper*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 33.

In her second novel, Ahdaf Soueif goes even further in her concern with the troubles and feelings of Western women living in the East. While *In the Eye of the Sun* tracks down a physical as well as emotional journey of the Egyptian heroine from Egypt to England and back to her homeland, *The Map of Love* introduces a reversed perspective: the perspective of Westerners of Egypt and its inhabitants. *The Map of Love* is an ultimate *mélange* of diverse cultures, and it proves once again that the question of language is of paramount interest to the author. It centres around the theme of language and translation even more than *In the Eye of the Sun*, expanding the thorough analysis of linguistic and cultural encounters.

As has been said above, *The Map of Love* presents a different set up than the first novel. Here, Soueif is aware that it is impossible to convey an entire picture of culture. Although the glossary is still there, the novel thematises the very issue of translation as a constant search for meanings. Rather than giving ready-made answers as it is common for *In the Eye of the Sun*, the latter novel raises questions and asks not what the words mean, but how they mean.

The postmodern nature of the novel is reinforced not only by its inherent hybridity, but also by disturbing the grand narratives “with a legitimating function.”¹³⁰ It skilfully blends real characters and historical events with fictitious characters and their destinies, creating ‘little’ individualised narratives, which undermine the authoritative, homogenised perception of history. The structure of the novel is profoundly complex as it presents two time schemes separated by almost a century, a number of embedded stories, intertexts, genres, and means of communication.

To understand the following quotes from the novel, it is inevitable to elucidate the basic scheme of the plot, which involves two interconnected stories: the framing story is contemporary, set in the last decade of the twentieth century, relating American Isabel Parkman's arrival in Egypt to investigate a trunk inherited from her late mother and, before her, from Isabel's great-grandmother, Lady Anna Winterbourne. She is introduced to Amal, the primary narrator of the entire novel, by Amal's brother 'Omar. Amal is an Egyptian woman who had married an Englishman and had lived in England for a long time before she returned to Cairo when her marriage had failed. Amal is supposed to read and interpret to Isabel the materials found in the trunk, as they are not only in English, but also in Arabic. This is how a hundred-year-old love story between Lady Anna and Sharif al-Baroudi, set in the occupied Egypt of the first decade of the twentieth century, is unfolded and pieced together by Amal from a series of letters and entries of Lady Anna's diary, from historical

¹³⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *O postmodernismu*, Praha: Filosofický ústav AV ČR., 1993, p. 29.

documents and newspapers cuttings, from the notes and letters of Layla, Sharif's sister and Amal's grandmother. The protagonists of the contemporary story are therefore interrelated because Amal and 'Omar's grandmother Layla was the sister of the great-grandfather of Isabel. The metaphor of the map of love is extremely intricate and complicated, but the geographical and temporal span, which crosses continental boundaries and centuries, culminates and completes with the growing love between Isabel and 'Omar and the birth of their baby. "Paralleling the two romances of Anna/Sharif and Isabel/'Omar, the novel traces the development of two sets of cross-cultural female friendships, Anna/Layla and Amal/Isabel."¹³¹

The fact that the Egyptian-born, England-resident female writer creates an English-born, Egypt-resident female protagonist renders the novel a particularly salient epitome of fluid syncretism and hybridity. *The Map of Love* juxtaposes the English and Egyptian cultures, which allows her characters and readers to move across existing frontiers and cut across fixed allegiances. The temporal and spatial setting of the novel proves immensely productive for linguistic, national, and political aspects of colonialism, displacement and migrant existence.

Soueif's polyphonic and polyglotal discourse is at its best here as it operates on double or triple layers of translation and interpretation. This type of narration is better suited to break down the hegemony of knowledge. The author attests her exceptional command of English by recreating Victorian English diction in Anna's diaries and letters. Anna is a British noblewoman of the Victorian era, married to a British soldier who takes part in Lord Kitchener's expedition of "taking the Soudan and restoring order"¹³² there. After her husband's emotional breakdown and consequent death from the shock, Anna arrives in Egypt to find out the truth about the atrocities perpetrated in the Sudan and Egypt by the British colonial troops. While discovering the harsh reality behind sham proclamations, Lady Anna's sympathy for the Egyptian people increases. She regards their unequal struggle to get rid of the yoke the British colonial control with a growing sense of embarrassment for the arrogant behaviour of her compatriots towards the Egyptian people, be they peasants or intellectuals.

Her critique of the British colonial administration is demonstrated in one of Anna's entries in her diary in which she sketches a brief portrait of Lord Cromer, the very embodiment of the tyrannical British administration in Egypt: "Lord Cromer himself speaks

¹³¹ Moore, Lindsey. "Writing across cultures", Lancaster University Conference, The Twenty-First Century Novel: Reading and Writing Contemporary Fiction, 2-3 September 2005, accessed 10 May 2007 <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/english/21st-cent/1_moore.htm>.

¹³² Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, London: Bloomsbury, 2000, p. 31.

no Arabic at all – except for ‘imshi’, which is the word everybody learns here and means ‘go away’, and of course ‘baksheesh’.”¹³³ She wonders at the utter ignorance of the British officials concerning the Egyptian way of life of the native people, their language and customs: “I feel it would be a little odd to come all the way to Egypt and learn nothing except more about your own compatriots.”¹³⁴ There are recurring voice-overs merging Anna’s accounts of the paradoxes and wrong-doings of the colonial condition at the beginning of the century with Amal’s current thoughts and observations, paralleling the past with the situation in contemporary Egypt. Although almost one hundred years have passed and the colonial system was removed long ago, nothing much has changed in the approach of the present-day political representatives of the imperial powers. Amal’s thoughts implicitly confirm the neo-colonial condition of Egypt and the Eastern part of the world in general.

It must be so hard to come to a country so different, a people so different, to take control and insist that everything be done your way. To believe that everything can only be done your way. I read Anna's description, and I read the memoirs and the accounts of these long-gone Englishmen, and I think of the officials of the American embassy and agencies today, driving through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their Marine-guarded compounds.¹³⁵

The crucial moment of the novel occurs when Lady Anna meets Sharif al-Baroudi, the Egyptian nationalist and upper-class gentleman, and they fall in love with each other. Lindsey Moore observes that their “cross-cultural love is conceived in terms of a revolutionary subtext which disrupts the metanarrative of colonialism.”¹³⁶ Right before the wedding ceremony of Anna and Sharif, Sharif’s mother, Zeina Hanim, urges her son never to forget his unconditional responsibility for his wife’s happiness. She reminds her son of Anna’s immensely vulnerable position that she accepts by marrying one of the leaders of Egyptian nationalist movement. Given Anna’s high social status and the tense political situation between Great Britain and Egypt, in the eyes of her compatriots, this act of trusting him with her entire life will be perceived as betrayal of her nation and undermining the British prestige in Egypt. The emphasis on hospitality is maintained throughout the novel as it has been considered the ultimate quality in the Arab ethic code since ancient times.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹³⁶ Lindsey Moore, “Writing across cultures”, Lancaster University Conference, The Twenty-First Century Novel: Reading and Writing Contemporary Fiction, 2-3 September 2005.
<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/english/21st-cent/l_moore.htm>

‘But the problems for her will be even more than the problems for you.’

‘Is that what you see?’

‘Yes.’ Zeinab Hanım nods. ‘For her, her whole life will change. Her people will be angry with her. And the British here will shun her. And even if they soften, it will be difficult for her, as your wife, to visit them or receive visits from them. She will be torn off from her own people. Even her language she will not be able to use - [...] If she feels for you as you feel for her, she will throw away the world and come to you. But if you take her —’ Zeinab Hanım holds her son’s hand firmly in both her own — ‘you will be everything to her. If you make her unhappy, who will she go to? No mother, no sister, no friend. Nobody. It means if she angers you, you forgive her. If she crosses you, you make it up with her. And whatever the English do, you will never burden her with the guilt of her country. She will be not only your wife and the mother of your children — insha’ Allah — but she will be your guest and a stranger under your protection and if you are unjust to her God will never forgive you.’¹³⁷

The central romance between Anna and Sharif is conducted in French, as is the friendship between Anna and Layla. None of them thus uses his or her mother tongue when speaking to each other, they all have to interpret the other one. Consequently, the text demonstrates that language can actually become “an impediment to communication, [when it is taken for granted], when we assume too much, because somebody else speaks the same language”¹³⁸ Ahdaf Soueif therefore propounds for Anna and Sharif a third language as a neutral ground, as “a means of short-circuiting the colonial power balance.”¹³⁹

‘Does it trouble you,’ she asks, ‘that we have to speak in French?’

‘I like French.’

‘But does it trouble you that you cannot speak to me in Arabic?’

‘No. It makes foreigners of us both. It’s good that I should have to come some way to meet you.’ He catches the hand playing around his mouth and puts the tips of the fingers to his lips.¹⁴⁰

The characters of Anna and Isabel, two women divided by a century, but tied together with the bond of love of two Egyptian men, are created by the author in order to represent tolerant, open-minded Westerners who take a genuine interest in the Egyptian people and their problems, beyond ready-made prejudices and misconceptions widespread among their compatriots. The novel is apparently audience-conscious. Via Anna and Isabel, Ahdaf Soueif intends to transmit to her Western readers an alternative, affectionate and empathetic

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-2.

¹³⁸ Ahdaf Soueif in Paula Burnett, “Ahdaf Soueif: Talking about *The Map of Love*”, 28 February 2000.

http://www.brunel.ac.uk/4042/entertext1.3/soueif_1.pdf

¹³⁹ Lindsey Moore, “Writing across cultures”, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, London: Bloomsbury, 2000, p. 157.

perspective of Egypt and the East. Soueif's fundamental goal to bring people from the West and the East closer and establish understanding among them is the most tangible in the episodes where Anna and Isabel learn Arabic. Anna's diary discloses her process of learning the tiny nuances of the Arabic language and her getting to know how the semantic diversity of the language mirrors the complex reality of the Arab world. It is symbolical that the process of Anna's acquisition of Arabic is illustrated on the delicate notion of love:

1 January 1902

'Hubb' is love, 'ishq' is love that entwines two people together, 'shaghaf' is love that nests in the chambers of the heart, 'hayam' is love that wanders the earth, 'teeh' is love in which you lose yourself, 'walah' is love that carries sorrow within it, 'sababah' is love that exudes from your pores, 'hawa' is love that shares its name with 'air' and with 'falling', 'gharam' is love that is willing to pay the price.

I have learned so much this past year, I could not list all the things I have learned.¹⁴¹

The Arabic language seems to be the very core of the novel as it is constantly studied, explained, questioned, and alluded to. The evidence of Soueif's fascination with language, and particularly with the intricacies and paradoxes of her mother tongue can be found in the scene where Amal teaches Isabel the way Arabic is structured and its root system, thus imparting at least general knowledge of the complicated language to the readers. Unlike the first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, which only describes and annotates Arabic, *The Map of Love* makes its characters together with the readers 'feel' the language, it allows them to discover its logic and patterns:

'Listen,' I say, 'you know the alphabet and you've got a dictionary. Everything stems from a root. And the root is mostly made up of three consonants – or two. And then the word takes different forms. Look –' The old teacher in me comes to life as I hunt in my handbag for paper and a biro. 'Take the root q-l-b, qalb. You see, you can read this?'

'Yes.'

'Qalb: the heart, the heart that beats, the heart at the heart of things. Yes?'

She nods, looking intently at the marks on the paper.

'Then there's a set number of forms – a template almost – that any root can take. So in the case of "qalb" you get "qalab": to overturn, overthrow, turn upside down, make into opposite; hence "maqlab": a dirty trick, a turning of the tables and also a rubbish dump. "Maqloub": upside-down; "mutaqallib": changeable; and "inqilab": a coup ...'

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 386-7.

So at the heart of all things is the germ of their overthrow; the closer you are to the heart, the closer to the reversal. Nowhere to go but down. You reach the core and then you're blown away -¹⁴²

Another powerful example of Soueif's constant reader-consciousness and her effort to present a positive image of the Arab civilisation as inherently tolerant, women-friendly and liberal is Isabel's surprised reflection on the nature of Arabic when she starts reading the Arabic-English dictionary. It is yet another proof of the eminent significance Soueif ascribes to language and its merging with human thinking. Hence the author overthrows the admonition for which the Arab-Muslim society is frequently castigated, namely its patriarchal nature with regards to women:

She reads: Umm: mother (also the top of the head)
Ummah: nation, hence ammama: to nationalise
Amma: to lead the prayers, hence Imam: religious leader
A blank space, and then
Abb: father

'And that's it?' Amal says, handing the paper back as she sees her way clear, shifts into second gear and overtakes.

'That's it', says Isabel, 'unless you can think of something else.'

Amal frowns, concentrating, murmuring, 'Fatherhood, fatherly. No, I can't think of anything.'

'So two incredibly important concepts,' says Isabel, 'nationhood and religious leadership, come from "mother". The word goes into politics, religion, economics and even anatomy. So how can they say Arabic is a patriarchal language?'¹⁴³

Exploring the limits and the potential of cross-cultural communication, Ahdaf Soueif analyses the possibility that translation and cross-cultural communication in general could be misused with evil intentions. In 1906 Anna confronts her husband Sharif with a letter she has received from London from her friend Barrington:

'It is a letter – a copy of a letter – that was sent to Sir Edward Grey. It is a translation. The original, in Arabic, fell into Cromer's hands here in Cairo. It describes a plan for an uprising in August.'

'Uprising? What uprising?'

[...]

'A nationalist uprising.'

'There is no such thing. Come, read me [...] Barrington's letter first.'

' "Dear Anna. I am writing in haste because you should have this immediately. This letter was forwarded to the Foreign Office in support of Lord Cromer's request for reinforcements in Egypt. It is meant to be a translation of a letter in Arabic that was given to the Oriental Secretary by one

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 81-2.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 164-5.

of his native spies. For me it does not ring true but I could be mistaken. Show it to your husband.” ’

‘Now the letter.’

‘ “To the Branch of the Fair Trade, the Light Rain of the Generous Cloud, the Son and Daughter of the Prophet - ” ’

‘The what?’

‘The Son and Daughter of the Prophet’.

‘This is nonsense.’

‘Well, if it has been translated from Arabic into English and now I am translating it into French –’

‘It is still nonsense.’

‘So there is no uprising?’

‘Anna, darling. An uprising with what? The army is scattered in the Sudan. The man in the street? The fallaheen? Where is the organisation? Our spirits have never been at lower ebb since ‘82. And the Porte has just shown it cannot support its own positions, let alone ours. Do you think we are mad?’¹⁴⁴

To Sharif and his colleagues, the ridiculous phrasing can only be “the work of an Englishman, [a]n ignorant Englishman who imagines he knows how Arabs think.”¹⁴⁵ The passage is very interesting as it operates on the level of three languages. Since French is not the means of communication between the writer and the reader, it functions here merely in the imaginative sphere of the text and the multi-layered translation of the counterfeit letter is presented to the readers in English. The humorous effect of the otherwise serious episode with the fake letter consists in the imitation of supposedly typical exotic and ornate Arabic idiomatic expression. The misshapen Arabic of the letter is, however, a caricature of the true Arabic phraseology, stemming from the lack of understanding and superficial knowledge of Egypt and its people on the part of the majority of the British colonialists.

Except for this single instance though, translation is perceived and applied in Soueif’s writings in strictly positive terms as a means of conveying one cultural scheme to another. Amal’s profession of a translator and her new friendship with Isabel make her contemplate certain linguistic concepts in Arabic and the problems of translating them into English with meticulous care. Attentive to eventual fatal consequences, Amal dreads misconstruction and misrepresentation, which is apparently also Soueif’s fundamental concern with regards to her audience. Indeed, Amal’s voice merges with the one of Ahdaf Soueif as the heroine and her creator doubt the possibility to mediate Arabic culture to the Western readers.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 414-415.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 419.

How do I translate ‘tarab’? How do I, without sounding weird or exotic, describe to Isabel that particular emotional, spiritual, even physical condition into which one enters when the soul is penetrated by good Oriental music? A condition so specific that it has a root all to itself: t/r/b. Anyone can be a singer – a ‘mughanni’ – but to be a ‘mutrib’ takes an extra quality. ‘Abdu Efendi al-Hamuli’s recognised title was ‘the Mutrib of Kings and Princes’, and that night, in the old house in Touloun, his gift kindled joy and sorrow in the hearts of his audience. What did Anna make of this strange music? My guess is that she opened her heart to it as she did to everything in her new, strange life.¹⁴⁶

The excerpt manifests the limits of knowledge and the pitfalls of verbatim translation. Once again, the author stresses that the process of creating, constructing and transferring meaning of words and cultural constructs is never a closed matter. Opening the heart of the Westerners to the Oriental world and its complexity, offering them to set out for the adventurous quest for multifaceted interpretations and substances, rather than fixed meanings, that is what a true crosscultural Arab writer and translator should heed. The following words open the final scene of the novel:

[S]he has translated novels – or done her best to translate them. It is so difficult to truly translate from one language into another, from one culture into another; almost impossible really. Take that concept ‘tarab’, for example; a paragraph of explanation for something as simple as a breath, a lifting of the heart, tarab, mutrib, shabb tereb, tarabattatta tarabattattee, Tarooob, Jamal wa Tarooob: etmanni mniyyah / I’ve wished / w’estanni ’alayyah / I’ve waited / iddili l’miyyah / I’ve counted ...¹⁴⁷

The hybrid text of *The Map of Love* furnishes yet another proof of its preoccupation with removing hindrances and creating bridges between people of different cultural and religious roots. The trunk which had initiated the entire narrative contains a tapestry, woven by Anna in Cairo, combining the Pharaonic triptych of Isis, Osiris and the infant Horus with Egyptian nationalist and Islamic imagery. The tapestry is inherited and reassembled by Anna's descendants at the end of the narrative and it reflects the several triads in the text. There are two stories, the old and the new, “in both there is a Western woman and an Egyptian man, and in both stories there is the sister of the man,” which is mirrored by the triad of the ancient Egyptian triad of the goddess Isis, her brother Osiris and the sister who helps collect the body of Osiris, and mourn him, and bring him back to life.”¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

¹⁴⁸ Paula Burnett, “Ahdaf Soueif: Talking about *The Map of Love*”, *ibid.*, p. 98.

It is therefore “not only an inventive plot device to intertwine characters, situations, and discourses but also a signifier of the novel's salient cross-cultural appeal”¹⁴⁹: reconciling political controversies, historical injustices, misunderstandings and spatial and temporal gaps, the novel advances tolerance and sympathy towards the Other, stressing the common features and respecting the distinct ones. Moreover, it avoids to pinpoint a single truthful image of the reality and privileges to assemble diverse meanings and values.

In analogy with Bhabha's ‘Third Space of enunciation’, Ahdaf Soueif works within this space as she appropriates, translates and rehistoricises fixed meanings and symbols of culture and identity. She reaffirms cultural diversity and widens its scope by creating hybridised narratives where she destroys the mirror of homogenising representation¹⁵⁰ and outlines the multilayered character of cross-cultural discourse.

¹⁴⁹ Amin Malak, “Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity: The Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif”, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 138.

¹⁵⁰ Cp. *ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

6.2. The issue of identity

One of the principal issues that recurs throughout all the books by Ahdaf Soueif is that of identity, with the corresponding insistent polarities of man/woman, Arab/Western, Egyptian/English, Muslim/Christian, self/other, marginalized/hegemonic and so on. The question of identity is discussed from all possible angles as Soueif's characters often trespass national and even continental borders and, on the crossroads, they are exposed to new cultural paradigms. The diasporic nature of Soueif's fiction and of her own life coincides with the massive phenomenon of living in exile in today's global world. Therefore the preoccupation with the ways of forming and articulating one's identity is an urgent issue for a wide range of contemporary, and not only postcolonial, writers.

Soueif is constantly preoccupied with the process of interaction with different cultures. The most significant feature of Ahdaf Soueif's female protagonists is that they cross the cultural boundaries of their native environment and find themselves confused, misunderstood and trapped in countries other than their own. The direction is either from Egypt to England or the other way around. Soueif's own life is undoubtedly a rich well of experience and inspiration for creating her female characters. She has been moving between Egypt and England incessantly in her own life and writings. Finally she has settled and found her base in London, but she has also experienced a cross-cultural love and relationship. It is therefore no wonder that one of Soueif's most recurring themes throughout her writings is the experience of crossing cultures and the theme of not belonging. It seems that the author uses her creative work as a kind of therapy, a way of coming to terms with her own anxieties, slights and spurns. Via her characters, the author examines the quests for identity and the ways to define one's own existence against the others. Therefore the scenes where an unpleasant experience of not belonging, of feeling as an alien and outcast, of the sense of loss, of longing for return back home are manifold and they are viewed and explored from various points of view.

Aisha, Soueif's first book, provides several examples. '1964', the above mentioned story with autobiographical features, offers a very poignant, but at the same time funny account from the point of view of Aisha, a teenage Muslim Egyptian girl, hungry for potential adventures, experiencing the hostility of the English surroundings and her acute sense of not belonging. The story exposes the pitfalls of a cross-cultural encounter, and as such, it supplies a great number of valuable material and citations for this study. The expectations of

the fourteen-year old rebel about the social life of English teenagers run unrealistically high and ultimately the attempt to find friends among English children turns out to be rather unfortunate:

They came to collect me. Two tall and angular girls with vanishing eyebrows and hair pulled back into pony-tails and a boy with extremely short hair and glasses and a brown check suit. My knowing heart made a little motion towards sinking, but I was resolute. I was going out with three 'young people of my age'. I did not know where we were going but the possibilities were infinite. We might go down to the café at the end of the road and play the juke box; I had looked into the window and seen it gleaming. We might go to a youth club; I had heard of those and imagined them to be like the Gezira Club at home, only much more exciting and liberated. Instead, we went to church. [...] Everybody was large and pale with straight light brown hair and tweeds. I felt excessively small and dark and was agonisingly conscious of my alien appearance, and particularly my alien hair, as I waited to be sought out and guided into the love of Jesus Christ.¹⁵¹

However the suffering continues when Aisha's parents make her attend a girls' comprehensive school, which, despite her cheerful hopes, proves to be "a vast, cold place with thousands of large girls in navy blue skirts [singing about fishermen]".¹⁵² Her already complicated position is further aggravated by her brilliance of English: "I could not have chosen an unluckier subject to excel in: English. The class would have forgiven me outstanding performance in science or sports, but English?"¹⁵³ Additionally she is torn between the two communities of the local pubescents and the black Pakistani girls, unable to relate with either group as she is "too middle of the road for them".¹⁵⁴ The following excerpt describes Aisha's ferocious determination to fit among her English peers. Soueif uses this opportunity to demonstrate the preconceived ideas of primitivism and various other prejudices about the Arab and Muslim world which are deeply rooted in the Western civilisation from very young age:

'You can be excused from Assembly on grounds of being Mohammedan,' whispered the teacher who had brought me there. No fear. I wanted nothing more than to merge, to blend in silently and belong to the crowd and I wasn't about to declare myself a Mohammedan, or even a Muslim, and sit in the passage looking bored and out of it with the Pakistani girls wearing their white trousers underneath their skirts. 'It's alright,' I said. 'I don't mind.'

¹⁵¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *Aisha*, London: Bloomsbury, 1995, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

My attempts at fading into the masses were unsuccessful. During the first break I was taken to Susan, the Third Form leader.

‘Where you from?’ She was light and pale with freckles and red hair.

‘From Egypt.’

‘That’s where they have those Pharaohs and crocodiles and things,’ she explained to others. ‘Do you go to school on a camel?’ This was accompanied by a snicker, but I answered seriously,

‘No.’

‘How do you go to school, then?’

‘Actually, my school is very near where I live. So I simply walk.’

As I said this I was conscious of ambiguity (I even knew the word for it): I had not made it clear that even if school were far away I still wouldn’t go on a camel. I started again:

‘Actually, we only see camels – ‘

‘Do you live in a tent?’

‘No, we live in a Belgian apartment block.’¹⁵⁵

The ridiculous vastness of the gap between the heroine’s real life in Egypt and the misconstrued image of the country in the minds of the English girls both creates the humorous tone of the scene and intensifies its subversive potential. After several weeks of misery in the school, Aisha proves to be extremely stubborn and unswerving in her decision never to enter the institution again after she finds out that she is ‘a misfit’, an alien, no matter who she associates with, and that her own emotional life is infinitely richer than that of the pretentious English girls.

It is especially the autobiographical narratives which proffer a close observation of the heroines’ gradual process of constructing their subjective identities. As Soueif herself has undergone a sudden rupture of her Egyptian life and relocation in the English society several times, she is able to explore a migrant condition and its possible consequences in various stages of an individual’s life. The newly acquired position of exotic strangers takes Soueif’s characters by surprise and activates their hitherto dormant self-awareness. They are thus forced to negotiate their own identities in bilingual terms.

Soueif applies terms of culture, race, creed, gender, sexuality, politics and class in considering and reconsidering of the individual identity of the protagonists. Most Arab figures in Soueif’s novels, such as Asya and all the members of her family, Saif, Chrissie, Bassam, Noora, and others in *In the Eye of the Sun* and Amal, Sharif, Layla, and Omar in *The Map of Love*, are Muslim, but their religious affiliation is usually not dwelled upon as this part of their identity is not a dominant one. As Mrinalini Chakravorty claims, “this aspect of their cultural identity [...] remains just that, one aspect of Arab culture among others for these

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

characters. [...The] novels are deliberate in portraying faith as largely disconnected from the political aspirations and actions of these characters.”¹⁵⁶

The following passage shows Asya in a great distress shortly after her arrival to the north of England where she is supposed to study for several years. Accordingly her rather secular mind takes refuge in the God common to all monotheistic religions and she undergoes a strong spiritual experience in a Christian cathedral, although her upbringing was influenced by Islam and she is without any doubt a Muslim. She is driven inside the church by the utter desperation she feels when reading the incomprehensible terminology of the articles for her dissertation. The hostility of the city and the gloomy English weather only increase her feeling of personal failure and homesickness.

She slips quietly into a pew and sits very still. She has the cathedral all to herself. Here the dimness does not oppress her and what light there is outside gently illuminates the huge stained-glass window at the bottom of the nave. [...] The stone-flagged floor too is worn and beautiful, and even the cold here is not too bad. The peace that passeth all understanding. What is she going to do? The two articles she'd looked at were full of words like 'variable', 'parameter', 'formation rules', 'singularly operator', 'n-nary operator'. If she had to sit down and tell someone what either article aimed to prove or disprove she would not be able to do it. In front of her lies the Book of Common Prayer. She opens it:

They smite down thy people, O Lord: and trouble thine heritage. They murder the widow, and the stranger: and put the fatherless to death. And yet they say, Tush, the Lord shall not see: neither shall the God of Jacob regard it. Take heed, ye unwise among people: O ye fools, when will ye understand? [...] The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man: that they are but vain.

She half smiles. Thank you. That takes care of the hangers and a lot else besides. For shame. Think of the things that people come in here to pray for. She remembers women in Egypt: [...] women hanging on the grille, kissing the cold metal, weeping, putting coins they had saved into the collection and begging, begging, for health to be given back to a bread-winning husband, for the return from the desert of a beloved son, for eyesight, for feeling in paralysed limbs, for the womb to bear once a child: once, once only God, dear God, and I will spend the rest of my life thanking you and praising you and I will never ask for anything again. Think. You feel lost because you could not understand an article in Poetics, but you are being paid eighty-four pounds a month to sit and learn to understand it; you are lonely and homesick, but you have a home and a family to long for. You are not a Palestinian woman living in a camp in south Lebanon, nor are you a Polish Jewess in 1939.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Mrinalini Chakravorty, "To Undo What the North Has Done" in Nawar al-Hassan Golley, ed., *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity through Writing*, Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2007, p. 130.

¹⁵⁷ Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999, pp. 333-4.

The sudden fit of humbleness inspired by the Christian holy script makes Asya open her eyes and she experiences a moment of epiphany. She realises how lucky she is and how petty her problems are in comparison with the world full of misery, suffering and pain. The excerpt is only one of the very sporadic instances in Soueif's writings explicitly dealing with the institutionalised religious belief. Furthermore the fact that it takes place in a Christian cathedral confirms that the writer transcends the stereotypical antagonism and simplified binarism of Christianity versus Islam. Yet again does Asya demonstrate her ability to compromise her identity between the East and the West, in this case namely her Muslim roots and the Christian cultural heritage.

Furthermore, Soueif's narratives often associate the topic of identity to imperialism and its implications in the present. It is actually the culture in connection with imperialism which conditions much of the debate. Interestingly though, the British colonial domination in the past and the imperial present do not evoke in Soueif and her alter ego, Asya, unlike in many postcolonial writers, any kind of rancour or grudge against the English civilisation. There is a crucial scene for this context in *In the Eye of the Sun* which oscillates on the sensitive ground of culture and the extremities of colonialism/imperialism. It foregrounds the fact how indivisible and inherently intertwined these two concepts are, but simultaneously it interrogates the possibility to separate one from the other. Asya is in London, torn between her Egyptian husband, Saif, and her English lover, Gerald, looking for reconciliation of her mind on the bank of the Thames. The river reminds her of the Nile and evokes the history connected with the large stream:

Asya walks slowly along the Embankment feeling the sun on her back and on her arms. [...] She looks at a slow-moving barge with one solitary man seated in the bow. If this were the Nile there would be twenty men at least clambering all over the boat, singing, throwing ropes, shouting to each other, calling out greetings to the people on the shore. Here it is still and quiet. [...] Long ago there would have been rowing-boats with canopies and musicians, carrying kings and queens from Westminster to Windsor to Greenwich [...]. She turns her back to the river and looks again at the solid, grand façades of Whitehall. The statues, the spacious greens [...], the intricate tower with the four-faced clock: 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. 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 Abu 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? Because there *is* difference between what she feels now and what she has felt when looking with awe at the great sweep of the Champs Elysées, for example – she feels almost *proud* of all this – as though she would be glad to show it all off to some visitor who was new here as she would show off the pyramids or the mosque of Sultan Hassan. It is quite ridiculous, though.

[...]

Or is not simply ridiculous? Ridiculous and naïve. Is it a sinister, insidious colonialism implanted in her very soul; a form of colonialism that no rebellion can mitigate and no treaty bring to an end? What would happen to her if – as in 1956 – the old lion shook himself awake, growled, and stretched a paw – its claw old and yellow but still sharp – towards Egypt, or Syria, or Iraq, or any other Arab country? How would she feel then standing here among his trappings?¹⁵⁸

Here, Edward Said's notion is invoked about the malign character of colonialism which preaches its cultural accomplishments in order to cheat the colonised into the chimaera of the civilising mission and almost imperceptibly subjugate them. Accordingly, Ahdaf Soueif poses an urgent question whether Asya, together with the writer herself, are not mere infatuated products of this unfair game, played by the British Empire to increase its political and economic might. And yet, Asya's attitude to the British civilisation is full of paradoxes and ambiguities as she is fascinated with it on one hand, on the other, however, she is well aware of its drawbacks and faults. Particularly, she is not blind to the blame for the unscrupulous imperial aspirations of the British Empire, with fatal, devastating effects on millions of people which last until today.

Asya's profession of love for the cultural accomplishments of the 'Empire' spins a whole range of connotations in her mind. She traces her fascination with the English culture back to the history and identifies, paradoxically, the imposition of the imperial system on her country as the very origin of her passionate affection. The narrator realises the ridiculous fortuity of her life, which might have been completely different if it were not for the coincidental events and historical circumstances, leading first her mother and then herself to her passionate affection for English literature.

It is quite ridiculous, though – as that very English gentleman walking towards her in his grey pinstripe and his hat would tell her if he knew what she was thinking: because of your Empire, sir, a middle-aged spinster from Manchester came out to Cairo in the 1930s to teach English. A small,

¹⁵⁸ Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999, pp. 511-2.

untidy twelve-year-old girl fell in love with her and lived and breathed English Literature from that day on. That girl was my mother, and here, now, am I. You cannot disclaim responsibility for my existence, not for my being here – beside your river - today. 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 ...¹⁵⁹

This segment is vital for understanding the author's concept of intercultural encounters and its enormous potential and productivity. It is in fact a celebration of multicultural cohabitation and global interrelations. Soueif underlines positive aspects of the universal phenomenon of migration and exile, among which is the propagation of syncretism, mutual influence and reciprocal enriching of different cultures. The notion of attenuating boundaries and cultural penetration has become an integral and indispensable part of the contemporary global world. Soueif accentuates above all the invaluable contribution of the great cultural (literal and musical) tradition of the Arab civilisation to the British paradigm, but, in the same line, Soueif alludes to the clichés of Oriental physical attraction and exotic seductiveness. She mentions "black eyes and golden skin and curly hair" and "voluptuous ways", which evokes one of the key motives of colonial expansion along with economic interests: it is the idea of erotic desire and sexuality. The quote is all the more interesting since the heroine is depicted in the novel as the very incarnation of Oriental beauty, with her long wavy black hair and slender body (similar to the writer herself), paying almost exaggerated attention to her looks and attire.

Robert Young explores the phenomenon in his study, *Colonial Desire*, where he labels language and sex as two models of cultural interaction. He observes that "the races and their intermixture circulate around an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion"¹⁶⁰ and infers that:

'sexuality was the spearhead of racial contact'.¹⁶¹ The historical links between language and sex were, however, fundamental. Both produced what were regarded as 'hybrid' forms (creole, pidgin and miscegenated children), which were seen to embody threatening forms of perversion and degeneration and became the basis for endless metaphoric extension in the racial discourse of social commentary.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

¹⁶⁰ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 19.

¹⁶¹ Quoted from Hyam.

¹⁶² Robert J. C. Young, *ibid.*, p. 5.

By placing sexual attraction on the same level as Arab cultural achievements in her focus on intercultural interaction and hybridisation, Soueif enters the gendered dialectics and situates the woman, or in Spivak's terms, the subaltern woman, as an agent of transnational discourse. However, unlike Spivak¹⁶³, she inscribes the female position with a powerful voice, undoing and subverting the authority of the dominant culture. Generally speaking, cultural politics has played a vital role in marginalising the colonised and privileging the dominant, hence the struggle over power and control over stories and literature. As Said has argued: "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them."¹⁶⁴

The novel *In the Eye of the Sun* further explores the parameters and limitations of a bilingual/bicultural identity on the example of people in exile who cannot or refuse to identify with the other culture. Asya, in a letter from England to her mother, draws a witty portrayal of her colleagues, the three Egyptian students pursuing their PhD. degrees at the same university. With amusement bordering with ridicule, she defines herself against their close to fanatical clinging to their Egyptianness, who are unable rather than unwilling to adapt to a different environment and lifestyle in the West. The passage points out the futility to travel and study abroad for this type of obstinately blind people. It is a sort of caricature of Arabs living abroad, defying the local traditions, customs and even cuisine, cultivating their own ignorance and intolerance.

They're a really funny lot, the Egyptians. There are three of them. All men. One of them, Hisham Badran (who is very handsome and classy and really fancies himself), is having a thing with one of the lecturers who is miles older than him. Anyone can see it's just a thing and that he's heading for some dynastic marriage at home [...]. The other two are married. One is quite old – in his late thirties maybe – and his eyes squint outward in opposite directions so you're never he's actually speaking to *you*, and he speaks very very slowly so it's totally nerve-racking having to stand there. The other is young and has a beard and does his prayers at the right times but he also seems a bit to the left so I can't make him out. Their wives are firmly set in their supportive roles and work in the sandwich bars to help out, and the only time I went to one of their meetings they spent the whole time talking about where you could get 'fool', and the exact recipe for *ta'miyya*, and what schools they were going to send their kids to when they got back home, and how you could use leftover scraps of soap to make one whole brand-new bar of soap.

¹⁶³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an Indian literary critic and theorist. She is best known for the article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Her overriding concern has been the tendency of institutional and cultural discourses/practices to exclude and marginalize the subaltern, i.e. the non-Western, especially subaltern women. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayatri_Chakravorty_Spivak>

¹⁶⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. xiii.

They've got all their radios propped up at an angle with aerials sticking out of the window (in this cold!) so they can listen to 'Voice of the Arabs' – through horrendous crackling, of course – and contrive to pass the days as though they were not really here. I mean, of course here is completely deadly, but still – they're sort of so *insistent* on their Egyptianness - ¹⁶⁵

Asya represents a stark opposition to her compatriots for she has come to study in England in order to absorb the British cultural heritage, which she loves and admires, in order to enrich her Egyptian one. She compromises her Egyptian values with the English ones and so she broadens her own horizons with both positive and negative effects. Although she misses Egypt and her family in Cairo immensely, she is eager to learn, to negotiate her identity with the new environment. She is able to retain her own roots and cultural background while accepting the new impulses and stimuli which can enrich her own life.

The very ending of the novel proffers an answer to the constant reformulating and contesting of the social and cultural identity of Asya. She had to leave her family and be confronted with loneliness and suffering, she had to venture at great blunders and pain, she had to experience a painful loss (of her husband) to be able to find her own serenity and independence. Asya, along with her creator Ahdaf Soueif, had to travel abroad and return back home to acquire, in the final words of the novel, "complete possession of herself". The scene delineates Asya after her return to Egypt. Driving in the Egyptian countryside, she comes across a newly discovered Pharaonic statue of an Egyptian princess, lying in the sand exposed to the sun. Asya is taken aback by her timeless beauty and graceful pose, juxtaposed with the gloomy, torrid surroundings. The words with which Asya reflects the princess's serenity echo her own self-hood and reclaim her for her ancient Egyptian and modern Arab-Muslim roots. ¹⁶⁶

Asya had sat down on a rock to look at her. Lying face-down in the sand, uncovered now after what? Three thousand years? Her forehead resting on three bricks – the very indignity of her posture makes the pride and grace of her expression – of her bearing – all the more remarkable. Who was she? A dancing girl whom the great Rameses took a fancy to and elevated into a Sister-Wife? But she has none of the arriviste about her. The composure, the serenity, of her smile tells of someone who had always known who she was. The mummy of Rameses the Second, which

¹⁶⁵ Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London: Bloomsbury, 1999, pp. 351-2.

¹⁶⁶ Asya's intellectual hybridity is echoed in Naguib Mahfouz's declaration in his acceptance speech of the 1988 Nobel prize for literature: "I am the son of two civilisations that at a certain age in history have formed a happy marriage. The first of these, seven thousand years old, is the Pharaonic civilization; the second, one thousand four hundred years old, is the Islamic one." quoted in footnote no. 2 in Amin Malak, "Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity: The Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif" in Ghazoul, Ferial J. *The Hybrid Literary Text: Arab Creative Authors Writing in Foreign Languages*, Alif no. 20, Cairo: The American University Press, 2000, p. 162.

they had finished delousing in Paris around the time Khalu Hamid was in London, was but a paltry, shabby thing, small and shrivelled, hardly recognisable as human. Since she had seen it Asya had looked at the pharaoh's statues with new eyes. But this woman who had in some way belonged to him, and who now lies here in the sand – she has indeed found a gentle grave; for here she is, delivered back into the sunlight still in complete possession of herself – of her pride, and of her small, subtle smile.¹⁶⁷

The final scene of the novel displays Asya's *retour aux sources* and, although it does not resolve the paradoxes of her hybridity completely, it is evident that she is finally able to reconcile her Arab-Egyptian legacy with everything she has acquired and experienced in the West. In other words, Asya manages to fuse and harmonise her Egyptian and Arab-Muslim identity with her Western stances and inclinations to secularism. The novel gradually reveals her capability of "accepting and living in both halves (Arabic and English) of her life, were it not that each of them also rejects a great deal of her."¹⁶⁸

Therefore once Asya succeeds in compromising her dual identity, the act of which is symbolised by her final refusal of both her Egyptian husband and her English lover, she can live in relatively happy life outside her country. Egypt will always represent the homeland that she will love and cherish, no matter if she lives here or elsewhere. She has acquired what Kwame Appiah calls 'rooted cosmopolitanism' which is to say that all people are rooted in a specific location and yet they can dwell in the world at large.¹⁶⁹ Simultaneously though, Asya has remained herself although, or rather because, she "has endured the corrosion of modernity and exile".¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 785.

¹⁶⁸ Edward Said, "The Anglo-Arab Encounter" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 409.

¹⁶⁹ Tim Soutphommasane, "Cosmopolitanism or Clash of Civilisations?" in *The Oxonian Review of Books*, winter 2006, volume 6, issue 1. <http://www.oxonianreview.org/issues/6-1/6-1soutphommasane.htm>

¹⁷⁰ Edward Said, "The Anglo-Arab Encounter" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 410.

7. Conclusion

Although almost always unintentionally and unconsciously, it is an undisputed fact that people tend to project their own presumptions and hopes on the subjects of their study. The more so in the process of learning which enables them to dominate the object of their study. Such a case is the case of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and together with Said, one may apply Foucault's thesis that knowledge brings power in the context of (neo)colonialism. But the same holds true in the opposite direction. It is therefore logical to assert that Ahdaf Soueif, having mastered the English language and having studied the literature written in England and the West, has acquired knowledge and hence power not only to become articulate in the language of the once colonisers of her forefathers, but also she has obtained the right to influence the West's knowledge of her own people.

This seems to be the task she has set for herself once she realised that her narratives had reached wide audiences. The motivation to activate her creative abilities and to satiate the unremitting urge to write (which is something most authors profess to have experienced and Ahdaf Soueif is not an exception) and to express herself, which was how she initiated her literary writing, without any kind of awareness of audience. Such awareness came to her at the moment when the first collection of stories, *Aisha*, was published and first responses appeared in the media. Only then did she become conscious of the impact which her writing could have on the entire East-West discourse and her narratives have become politicised into a large extent.

In this context, there is an apparent shift in Soueif's approach to the question of possibility to mediate cultural meanings through translation and explanation. In her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif does not yet realise the intertwined relations between knowledge and power and their implications for her own writings. *The Map of Love*, however, reveals that Soueif has revalued her belief in the validity of translating cultures, and, throughout the multilayered, multivocal and multilingual postmodern text, she distributes various situation, linguistic hints and other clues which should help the English and American characters living in Egypt discover the meanings and values of the Egyptian reality for themselves.

Unlike a vast array of postcolonial writers, on whom English as the colonial language had been forced, Ahdaf Soueif has made a deliberate choice and opted for English as the

means of her creative writing. She has embraced English as the language which suited her needs of literary expression more for the purpose of achieving her goals and ambitions in the realm of literature. At the same time, the universal character of English allows Soueif to reach wide audiences from the entire world. Consequently, Ahdaf Soueif does not seem to suffer from a sense of loss of her country, language, and cultural roots. Her life outside of Egypt simply enables her to enjoy unlimited freedom of speech, intellectual autonomy, self-realisation, and a wide range of incentives. England as the place of her residence serves the author as the very focal point for studying interaction across different cultures – the leitmotif of all Ahdaf Soueif's narratives. Her spontaneous, unapologetic claim to English has rendered the style of her writing a unique, vibrant, ornate and unmistakably authentic testimony of Soueif's bilingualism and dual identity.

It is true that the issue of bilingualism and dual identity would have probably never come up had Ahdaf Soueif not been a writer. If she had been a painter or any other kind of artist whose medium is other than language, the tensions and discrepancies between her Egyptian identity and English intellectual affiliations would have been much more subtle and, on the whole, much less exposed. And yet being an Anglophone writer of Egyptian and Arab-Muslim origin, she has the unique privilege to draw on two cultural legacies and two enormous civilisations. Accordingly, Ahdaf Soueif is best qualified to bring both cultures together and build a bridge of mutual tolerance and understanding between them.

Arab terms and phrases in the flow of narratives and dialogues written in English function as documents of social and semantic reality of the Arab cultural setting, which would be complicated to convey in any other way. This fact renders Soueif's English reducible only to her fiction, and her individualised version of English is far from the standard English, intended to be used for a purely English environment. The various ways of Soueif's handling of English are conditioned by her authorial intentions. Soueif has mastered the English language so well that she can let an Egyptian illiterate fellaha speak in it, although via translation from Arabic, and a few lines later Victorian English diction is recreated in the diary of her English female protagonist.

However, whether consciously or otherwise, Soueif seems to be cautious and at times self-censoring so as not to aggravate the already negative image of Islam and the oppressive practices and violence perpetrated against women in certain areas of the Muslim world. Despite her national loyalty and cultural allegiance, she does not hide the gruesome customs in the rural areas of Egypt, which are, however, related in a second-hand manner through embedded narratives of family servants. Soueif however never identifies these acts of

violence and humiliation of women with Islam and her writings suggest that, in Rana Kabbani's words, "in Islamic society as in the West, the oppression of women is usually more the result of poverty and lack of education and other opportunities than of religion."¹⁷¹

Soueif and other Arab and Muslim writers "recognize that religion and nationalism are active forces to engage with: for them, the discourse of liberation passes not through ridiculing or rejecting their Islamic heritage, but through appealing to its most enlightened and progressive tradition."¹⁷² Soueif, together with her colleagues – Arab and Muslim female authors, calls for a gradual reform via compromise, reinterpretation and revision of traditional theological and political frameworks. Her narratives advance Arab women as equal partners to men, her heroines are granted the same rights and the same level of liberty as to men. The author lets her female protagonists go through agonising doubts and struggles, but at the end their aspirations and goals are attainable only if they free themselves of male protective, but patronising power and they become independent individuals standing firmly on their own feet, their destiny solely in their own hands.

The literary texts are always hybridised into a certain extent. The hybridity is not confined only to the level of literary genres, deployed and blended in Soueif's two novels, it is also present in the linguistic, textual and discursive levels. Such a narrative device further propounds a reconciliatory liberal and universalist stance, embracing all cultures and religions. The bilingual writings, composed by an Arab-Muslim woman in English, strive to assert a positive portrayal of Arab-Muslim civilisation. Ahdaf Soueif makes different cultures meet and interact in her fiction and thus subdues and, at times, overthrows the alleged antagonism and the current political tensions and mutual suspicions between the West and the Arab-Muslim part of the world, fabricated on behalf of strategic and economic interests of world leaders. She thus appeals to the common humanistic, universalist ideas and values shared by all people around the globe.

To conclude, Ahdaf Soueif's short stories and novels, although written in English, are an integral part of Arab-Muslim contemporary writing and feminism as well as of the wider scope of postcolonial literature. She demonstrates in her writings that the interaction of the Eastern and the Western civilisations is inevitable and fruitful. Soueif's fiction also notices the immense influence of the West on the Egyptian people. She creates her own version of English, a hybridised English interlaced with Arabic expressions, an English reshaped in order to carry the specific Arabic reality and its rhetorical style. English as her literary

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 148.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, p. 149.

language enables Soueif to address English-speaking, Western readers and convey to them a positive picture of the Arab culture. The author therefore consciously undermines the prevalent negative image of the Arab culture in the Western media.

In complex narrative structures, she analyses current problems of Arab social and political life of the current period, while drawing parallels with the modern history of Egypt and cleverly fusing her fictional characters with real, historical ones. Simultaneously, she exposes her literary characters to intercultural encounters, and it is above all her liberated, privileged, cosmopolitan heroines who frequently fall in love with men from across geographical and cultural boundaries of their own upbringing. Their process of maturation and learning in the new environment involves a search for identity and one's own voice, sexual imbroglios and emotional frustrations, acquisition of new languages and compromised perceptions of the others and their world. But Soueif's characters are also acutely aware of the wider political framework, which often threatens their own lives or the lives of their families. The Egyptian protagonists are either actively or passively influenced by the Israeli military attacks, or they fight the British occupation of their country or the excesses of abusive and tyrannical government in Egypt. On the other hand, Soueif also examines the point of view of the Egyptian reality from without, through the eyes of Western female characters, through whom Soueif highlights the specificity of cultural context and allows her readers see beyond the stereotypes regarding the Other. Such characters are intended to personify the unprejudiced, open-minded readers in English and in the West in general.

Shrnutí

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá narativními díly egyptské autorky Ahdāf Suwēf (Ahdaf Soueif), jejíž literárním jazykem je angličtina. Práce se proto zaměřuje na aspekty dvojjazyčnosti a jejím cílem je zjistit, jakým způsobem se projevují nejen v autorčině výrazových prostředcích, ale rovněž jak ovlivňují obsahovou stránku jejích dvou povídkových souborů a dvou románových textů. Metoda, kterou diplomantka používá ve své literárně-kulturní analýze, je založena na zkoumání propojenosti vzájemných vztahů mezi oblastí postkoloniálního myšlení a literárními texty Ahdāf Suwēf.

Práce je rozdělena do několika kapitol, z nichž první čtyři se pokouší zasadit autorku a její dílo do obecnějšího rámce. První část analyzuje osobnost autorky s ohledem na její dílo. Ve společenském, kulturním a intelektuálním zázemí její rodiny, výchově a vzdělání se snaží vysledovat motivy, jež ji vedly k rozhodnutí, že jazykem jejího literárního výrazu se stane angličtina. Zároveň se práce zaměřuje na vymezení pozice spisovatelky v rámci arabské i postkoloniální literatury. Ahdāf Suwēf je bezpochyby v první řadě egyptskou autorkou, která obohacuje kánon současné egyptské národní i arabsko-islámské literatury. Je však pevně zakotvena také v rámci postkoloniální literární tvorby, jejíž hlavní témata a problémy řeší ve svých narativních pracích i Ahdāf Suwēf.

Další kapitola se věnuje právě problematice postkoloniálního myšlení a jeho teorií. Tato část přináší širší kontext tvorby postkoloniálních autorů, mezi nimiž zaujímá Ahdāf Suwēf nezastupitelné místo. Kapitola dále nastiňuje, jak mnohotvárná a komplexní je kategorie postkolonialismu, a zužuje s definuje jeho široký význam i časovou a geografickou dimenzi. Tento fenomén je v dnešním světě sice hojně skloňován, ovšem jeho pravý význam bývá často skryt pod nánosem zprofanovaných tezí a ne vždy přesných představ.

Třetí část přináší pohled na kulturní a historickou sféru britsko-egyptských vztahů, které ovlivnily a dodnes ovlivňují každodenní život Egyptů. Právě tyto vztahy měly přímý vliv na intelektuální vývoj a kulturně-jazykové směřování Ahdāf Suwēf a podnítily v ní nejen lásku k literatuře, ale i touhu vytvářet vlastní příběhy a literární postavy, v nichž by se zrcadlil obraz Egypta na pomezí hranic egyptsko-britských či arabsko-západních kulturních setkání.

Historie britské koloniální správy v Egyptě je důvodem jisté kontroverze v povaze dnešních vztahů mezi Egyptem a Velkou Británií. Ovšem kognitivní úroveň, která pokrývá oblast představující znalost britské kultury, dává jistotu Egyptům v tom, že daný rámeček

vztahů má pevné limity, neboť se zakládají na zkušenosti společného soužití. Na kognitivní úroveň navazuje blízkost pohledů na otázky běžného, každodenního života, které vycházejí z tradičních hodnot, jež vyznává egyptská společnost, a z britského tradicionalismu, jenž zahrnuje podobné principy. Bez ohledu na aspekty politického vývoje zůstává v povědomí Egyptanů (a obecně Arabů) svět britské civilizace bližší než americká sociopolitická entita, která je vnímána jako cizí a vzdálená. Struktura vzájemných egyptsko-britských (evropských) vztahů vychází z principu „bližší známý nepřítel než vzdálený neznámý přítel“, popřípadě neznámý hráč, na geopolitické scéně.

Dále práce nabízí obecnější rámec klíčových termínů, které se dotýkají povídkových i románových textů Ahdāf Suwēf a jsou vysoce relevantní pro její výrazové prostředky, literární styl i zpracovávaná témata. Jsou to otázky anglického jazyka a kultury a implikace jejich využití v dílech autorů z oblastí současného postkoloniálního světa. S tímto problémem úzce souvisí jev bilingvalismu a následně i problematika provázanosti jazyka a identity, kde zaznívají názory bilingvních postkoloniálních autorů na to, zda a jak využívat angličtinu k uměleckému projevu. Vychází najevo, že autoři jako Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Ahdāf Swēf a mnoho dalších uchopí anglický jazyk a ve svých literárních dílech ho přetváří ke svým vlastním potřebám a cílům. Vytvářejí tak novou podobu jazyka, v níž se promítají projevy jejich vlastní kultury a v nichž je patrný silný vliv jejich mateřského jazyka. Nová verze angličtiny nabízí alternativu k homogenizované západní či anglofonní literatuře a jejího myšlení a vyvrací autoritu a převahu západního diskursu. Kapitulu uzavírá příbuzné téma hybridity, které je platné v tomto literárně-kulturním kontextu jako platforma pro analýzu literárních textů, jež se odehrávají na pomezí dvou kultur. Fenomén hybridity je zkoumán především prostřednictvím teorií ruského literárního vědce Michaila Bachtina a jednoho z nejcitovanějších autorů postkoloniálních studií, Homi K. Bhabha.

Diplomovou práci uzavírá kapitola, která na základě úryvků autorčiných literárních textů analyzuje problematiku překladu mateřského jazyka autorky do angličtiny, která prostupuje její dílo. Tato práce dokládá silný vliv arabštiny na kompoziční výstavbu literárních děl a jejich jazykovou stránku. Je logickou otázkou, zda prvky arabské frazeologie a idiomatiky a celá řada faktografických údajů začleněných v anglickém textu, může dostatečně charakterizovat egyptskou kulturu a specifičnost egyptského prostředí. Do popředí zde vystupuje problém přenosu kulturních hodnot z jednoho kulturního prostředí do druhého. Tato studie si všímá, že Ahdāf Suwēf přistupuje ve svých dvou románech k tomuto problému naprosto odlišně. Zatímco první románové dílo, *In the Eye of the Sun* (volný překlad: *Pod egyptským sluncem*) tuto možnost připouští, využívá překlad a mediaci za pomoci názorných

příkladů a vysvětlování ke zprostředkování kulturních významů a využívá ji v kompozici celého románového díla, ve druhém románu si už Ahdāf Suwēf uvědomuje nástrahy takového počínání a nedopouští se pokusů o zprostředkování znalosti, jež vede k možnosti ovládnutí dané kultury a společnosti a implikuje hegemonii.

V narativním díle *The Map of Love (Mapa lásky)* se tedy posouvá od postupů, které zdánlivě umožňují cizí kultuře pochopit egyptský způsob myšlení. Druhý román je odlišně koncipovaný a ryze postmoderní. Nabízí intertextualitu, mnoho prostředků komunikace, dokumentárním stylem zprostředkovává historii i současnost za pomoci různých médií. Autorka si je vědoma, že není možné podat ucelený obraz kulturní reality. Neposkytuje už jasné odpovědi, nesnaží se vymezit a omezit významy kultury tak, aby byly uchopitelné pro západního čtenáře, ale naopak vybízí své postavy – představitelky západního světa (a tím i západního čtenáře), aby se samy pustily do objevování cizí kultury a snažily se pochopit její specifika v součinnosti jazykových zákonitostí a interakcí v osobních vztazích.

Druhá část této literární analýzy a zároveň závěrečná část se zabývá tím, jak se v autorčiných narativních textech projevuje problematika identity a jakým způsobem ji zachycuje. Hybridní charakter jejích povídkových i románových postav odráží autorčiny vlastní zkušenosti s mezikulturní komunikací a s jistým rozdělením identity a myslí, které přináší život mezi dvěma, do velké míry odlišnými a protikladnými kulturami. Zatímco média jak na Západě, tak na Východě vytváří představu střetu dvou antagonistických kultur, Ahdāf Suwēf se snaží nalézat to, co obě kultury spojuje, ne rozděluje, a vytvářet pozitivní obraz své rodné země a celé arabské civilizace. Její hrdinky, které často opouštějí svoji rodnou zem a prožívají určitou část svého života v oblasti odlišné kultury, jsou schopny podržet si pocit sounáležitosti ke své vlasti a zároveň přijmout to pozitivní, co nabízí druhá kultura, a obohatit tak svoji vlastní identitu.

V dnešní vypjaté geopolitické atmosféře nelze než ocenit snahu Ahdāf Suwēf dovést obě civilizace, euro-americkou a arabsko-islámskou, ke smíření. Autorka může být chápána jako vyslankyně tolerance a snášenlivosti v mezikulturní sféře. Její dílo proto představuje velký přínos pro rozvoj vzájemné úcty, respektu a pochopení mezi oběma kulturními póly.

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Supplement

E-mail correspondence with Ahdaf Soueif

21 April, 2008

Dear Alena,

here are the responses and I hope you find them useful

> 1. Dear Mrs. Soueif, I know you have probably answered all possible questions and queries at least a hundred times, but let me ask, although I am aware of the fact that it is not going to be very original. Do you feel enriched by having access to and being a part of both the English and Arab/Egyptian cultures and languages? Or with hindsight, would you have preferred to stay within one culture and one nation, i.e. Egypt, if you could have changed your life?

Definitely definitely fortunate to be within two cultures and able to pass from one to the other or to inhabit the space they share. It brings its problems and its tensions but it is very rich.

> 2. Have you ever regretted your choice (although not conscious) of English as your literary language?

No. Because it wasn't my choice, I can't regret it.

> Have you ever despaired that translating cultures, specific cultural environments and realities is an impossible (futile or absurd) thing to do?

Yes, sometimes.

> This is actually what you are trying to achieve in your fiction, so do you feel that your readers grasp what you wanted to convey to them, although most of them have never been to any Arab country and most of them do not know a single word of Arabic?

And other times it feels very rewarding. Actually, when you are writing the question becomes between you and the words: can you make the words do what you want them to? Can you find exactly the right words and the right combinations of words for what you are trying to describe? You always know when you've got right, and it gives a very good feeling.

Also, quite pragmatically, the books would not sell so many copies if people were not relating to them.

> 3. I know how you dislike being pigeon-holed, but in my thesis I somehow cannot avoid theorising and placing you to a certain context of world literatures. So I am terribly sorry, but

I have to ask this question so that I don't write any nonsense about you.

> Do you think your narratives are a part of the English literary heritage, or would you rather place yourself as a writer into the context of Egyptian literature. Or both grids are suitable for you? I am trying to analyse which of the two literatures have influenced your literary style more and I cannot say. I realise that most intertexts in your novels come from British novels and poetry, your characters are often fascinated with the English culture, but echoes of Arab issues and common literary roots are traceable in your prose as well. Is it then more correct to say that your books occupy a third space, the in-between, hybrid territory, or the so-called postcolonial literature?

Well, thank you for the intro to the question. I don't think it's very complicated: the novel as a genre in Arabic is totally influenced by the European novel. So there is no conflict in being influenced by George Eliot and Naguib Mahfouz and Tolstoy and Yusuf Idris all at the same moment.

> 4. Do you agree if I say that your identity is more cosmopolitan than simply Egyptian and English? And are you satisfied with your dual, hybrid and multilayered identity or do you sometimes feel uprooted, torn apart between the two distinct cultural spheres, belonging neither to one, nor the other?

I don't feel torn apart. Ever. Sometimes I feel that I am behaving in a cultural norm that is not completely appropriate for the culture I'm behaving in. I can choose to adjust that or not depending on the situation. Often I feel very irritated and even angry when people assume certain forms of behaviour are 'cultural' rather than personal or political choices of behaviour. So, there is a tension in being aware of - not so much two cultures, really, but one culture's view of the other and how wrong it is. I have dealt with this in detail in the preface to Mezzaterra.

> 5. I can feel, I don't know if correctly, that your mind is still much more Egyptian (and Arab) than English (British). Do you have to compromise sometimes between the two, rather distinctive aspects of your life?

No. I am whatever it is I am. But it is a whole entity. My personal belief is that I am completely Egyptian. I just happen to only be able to write fiction in English. If I were a painter or a musician that whole issue of identities would never have come up.

> 6. Would you agree that the primary goal or message of your creative work (as well as your essayistic or journalistic writing) is to enhance the intercultural dialogue between the East and the West, the Arab world and Europe?

No. The primary message of the journalism, yes, is to advocate for causes I believe in passionately, like the Palestinian cause, and in the service of that to explain one culture to the other. But when I write fiction my purpose is to explore a certain situation and certain characters and to write as good and as true a novel as I can. The fact that I write in English about Egyptian characters doesn't mean I'm trying to explain these characters to the English-speaking reader. It means that these are the characters I am interested in, and I happen to only be able to write fiction in English.

> Do you consider yourself a successful mediator?

Here I will only answer on behalf of the journalism: I think I've reached as many people as I can reasonably hope to reach. It's not bad. I can and will do more. As to whether it's done any good, well, sometimes I think I started writing political commentary at the end of 2000 and look how much worse off the world is now!! But you have to do what you have to do ...

> 7. Is your new book, on which you are working now, concerned with similar issues as your previous writings? I.e. issues of translating cultures, crossing cultural and national boundaries, international love and its pitfalls..... Is language going to play such a crucial role in your third novel as in your previous writings? Are you going to bring a completely new perspective into the complex topic of multi-cultural interaction? Could you reveal any specific details about the new novel you are creating? What is it going to be about?

All I can tell you at the moment is that the new novel takes place in Contemporary Egypt and in Ancient Egypt.

> Thank you very much and good luck with your new novel! I am looking forward to reading it soon!

Thank you, Alena. Your questions are very thoughtful. Good luck with your work and it would be great to see it when it's done.

Ahdaf