

## AISHA'S ENCOUNTERS WITH THE OTHER AS A CONFINED/LIBERATED WOMAN

### CASE STUDY: SOUEIF'S AISHA IN THE RETURNING

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#### ABSTRACT

Throughout *Aisha*, her first collection of short stories, Ahdaf Soueif represented Aisha, the protagonist, as conforming to the portrait of the stereotyped Arab Muslim woman as a sex-subject, submissive, and maudlin character, confining her vision to the boundaries of her cocooned self-epitomizing a self-centered vision of the world. The main queries that were probed within the following investigation are: How did Aisha's encounters with the other incarnated mainly in her male counterpart, time and space impede her ability to understand the other, herself and the world around? How did these very encounters allow her an enlightened vision of the set forth elements to forge a new start? The current investigation attempted answers to the set forth queries throughout *The Returning*, the first narrative in the collection.

**KEYWORDS:** Man, Other, Time, Space, Woman

#### INTRODUCTION

The representations of 'Arab' and 'Muslim' women in the West, tightly linked to those characterizing women in general, particularly in feminist writings, crystalize in the representations of an other as an inferior entity; the weak entity dependent on their male counterparts and unable to take decisions. "According to popular belief, all Arab women can be divided into two categories. Either they are shadowy nonentities, swathed in black from head to foot, or they are belly dancers—seductive, provocative, and privy to exotic secrets of love-making. The two images, of course, are finally identical, adding up to a statement that all Arab women are, in one sense or another, men's instruments or slaves." (Shakir 1988, p.39).

They bear labels such as 'pawns of Arab men', 'exotic', 'sexual objects', and 'secluded creatures' in the Harem to conform to the stereotypical portrait residing in a Western orientalist imagination discussed loosely mainly in postcolonial writings' "For too long, women in the third world have been considered not agents of their own destiny, but victims. A potent image has been constructed, even in feminist scholarship, of 'an average third world woman' who leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender", sexually constrained. She is 'third world'; "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic, family oriented, [and] victimized..." (Taplade 1984, p. 47-56). Woman is misrepresented by her own peers. Lazreg discussed the significance of the misrepresentation of so-called first world women of 'third world women': "first world women and third world women are complicit in contributing to the continued 'degradation' of third world women whose 'micrology' they interpret without having access to it". (Lazreg, 1988, p. 89).

The Other has been variously understood as pointing to a difference or opposition to the same. It is often capitalized to indicate its difference (Van Pelt, 2000). One should also point to the perception the element of the other is

offered. When persons 'define' the other, it depends mainly on their conception of it with reference to themselves (Charnay, 1980, p. 14, 15). The same concern was voiced by E. Said (1978) pointing at the traditional opposing stand categorising an 'Us', the self, and a 'Them', the other. This very representation of the self/other relation aims at dividing people into two groups: the first constitutes the norm that is valued, and the latter is known by its flaws and is therefore devalued and prone to domination and discrimination (Said, 1978). These concerns Said voiced particularly when he discussed the West/Orient binary.

This very investigation offers two portraits of Aisha. The first portrait conforms to the diehard stereotype of Arab Muslim women set forth. The alternative new portrait of Aisha draws her as a liberated woman demystifying her image as a stereotype. Aisha discovers new visions and perceptions of herself and the other. This investigation will highlight Aisha's encounter with pertinent elements in the narrative respectively character, mainly male, time past and time present, besides space. These encounters will first confirm Aisha's old portrait and then allow the sketching of a brand new one.

### **AISHA IN THE RETURNING**

In the investigation of *The Returning*, an attempt at answering the following questions is the main aim. How does Aisha's encounter with the other, as human and non-human, both hinder and enlighten her perception of herself, this very other, and the outside world? Is Aisha to dwell as a submissive, oppressed and men's sex-object, confirming the stereotyped image of the Arab-Muslim woman? What could the implications of such journeys and encounters be vis-à-vis the possible perspectives set by the author for her work?

Throughout this investigation, the main character is linked to time and space as 'non-human' other besides the 'human other' entity. Following this line of thought D.H. Lawrence and Martin Buber had their say on the notion of the non-human other. They both argue that the dialogic relation between human beings could extend to the non-human. D.H Lawrence contends that this very relation is born "between the self and the whole circumambient universe" "between me and the animals, me and the trees or flowers, me and the earth, me and the skies and sun and stars, me and the moon, me and the timber I am sawing...me and the dough I knead for bread" (Morality and the Novel, 1925 p. 172). Expressing his view on otherness in general, Lawrence contended: "we have thought and spoken till now in terms of likeness and oneness. Now, we must learn to think in terms of difference and otherness" (The Symbolic Meaning, 1964, p. 17). His standing with another man entails his being very aware of his being different from him, and he feels he is truly himself. "... then I am only aware of a presence and of the strange reality of otherness. There is me, and there is another being. That is the first part of the reality. There is no comparing or estimating. There is only this strange recognition of present otherness" (1919, p. 80)

For Buber the other does not have to be human. He gives importance to such things as trees which, as he understands, "can face me", as a person, "speak to me and elicit a response" (Levinas, 1996, p. 30). Buber (1957) insists on the inter-human relations in which people are confronted by the other. He designates this pattern of relations by being dialogical. 'According to him, it is human's responsibility to make the other present to us (p. 75). This, Buber claims, is everyone's capacity to imagine the "real". It entails "not a looking at the other, but a bold swinging. An energetic swinging of one's being into the life of the other". (1957, p 67-8)

Besides the element of the non-human other the main character is linked to the other characters in the stories as human Other in each narrative. Time, space and character are to be considered, following Bakhtin's understanding of the chronotope. It designates the amalgamation of time and space governing the preliminary condition of all narratives and other linguistic acts (Bakhtin, 2002, p.134)

Aisha returns home to Egypt from England within the introductory narrative: *The Returning*. Soueif allows her protagonist such a journey applying the stream of consciousness technique. Aisha is to be described in relation to the 'strange setting' and 'absent time' she encounters when coming back besides the objects in her flat and her husband. One meets Aisha with her "little red car", returning to Egypt. "I need those books", Aisha insists on her way to her long deserted flat. She has come back to Egypt from England after a six years absence. "She did not recognise this square" (Soueif, 1983, p.12-11) Recognition seems impossible right from the start. Then Aisha starts comparing a setting that used to be with the one in front of her. "She remembered a green garden with spreading trees and flower beds and paths of red sand. She saw instead a construction site". The intrusion of constructions into nature displays what used to be in an old time and what is really there for Aisha. The few trees spared there are "dusty and yellow" "the whole place was strewn with bricks". Again, the old familiar green setting has been conjured up into an arid garden of "cement" "steel rods", "mounds of sand", "a demolition". Such a "drastically reduced space" seems to stifle in Aisha's eyes. Aisha is to remember again eyeing the road, "bumpy and dotted with potholes." She arrives to "their house". It used to be "pretty, reddish brown and beige". Now, it is "flunked by tall apartment blocks", diminished, "looking bleaky" (ibid.12). So, the main character remembers and imagines to compare old and new, familiar and unfamiliar, and an imagined past with an inescapably ubiquitous present as it really is.

Paving her way to her flat, Aisha is not to give up. May be she would catch a familiar scene and jump on it. So, she turns to the door man. Yet it is not Abdu the old one. It was "a strange man with a stripped galabiya". Abdu and his wife Amna, left long ago. Aisha is to remember again. Abdu and Amna "were incorporated into her dream of coming home" (Soueif, 1983, p. 13) and also was Saif, her husband. Aisha is immersed in a stream of consciousness web trying to flee such an 'alien world'. Yet, there is no Abdu and Amna to greet her on her coming home. No Saif as well, as she has expected. The Other as she imagined it, everything outside herself, turns to be a stranger.

Now Aisha is to enter her apartment. Is she to encounter the same strangeness? The passage is dark. She finds "a worn-out key". Her hand remembers as she comes back home like Ulysses at the end of his journey, returning home as a complete stranger under his disguise. The writer uses collocations such as "forgotten smell", "familiar smell" and "ghost smell" to put more flesh on the main character's 'vain' and repeated efforts to come to grips with a familiar world and reality like the smell of fresh paint. "*It's not really here but I'm smelling it*" (ibid.14-15). So far Aisha's encounter with the Other, that which is not she, includes the unfamiliar time and space; opposing the past to the present, and a fading green space to grey shabby constructions as she tries constantly to relate everything to her own self and to what she already knows. Besides, an investigation of Aisha's meeting with the objects in her apartment is part and parcel of the 'non-human' other ambivalent embrace that is supposed to hinder her reunion with herself at a first 'reading glance'. The most important one is an old Victorian mirror which was "*declared hideous*" by her husband Saif (ibid.16) "*Her reflection staring back at her was not the one she was used to seeing there. It was a different person: one strange to this mirror.*" The changes move into focus. "*A slimmer face framed by shorter, more curly, though still black hair*" (ibid. 16). The changes on Aisha's face displayed by her reflection in the mirror appear to her gradually. Her own face in the mirror seems to conjure into a strange

other that she is not to recognise. *“Her expression too was different. The wide-eyed, open, expectant look was gone. Instead there was — what? Repose? Something that people took for serenity. But she knew. She knew it was frail as an egg-shell”*. (ibid. 17).

The old familiar expression is no longer there. Aisha has struggled to resurrect it back. Yet, she meets a stranger in her mirror. The stranger no one but her own self – whom she has tried to feel alive putting her fingers on the mirror. *“The mirror was a wall between herself and the warm flesh behind it .... It was cold”*. Aisha seems not to be able to grant any reality for her reflection in the mirror. It is cold as ice, beyond reach as a ghost, as unreal as a dead face reminisced anew. Is this ghostly setting to stand as a *“metaphor for her relationship with him?”* [Saif]. She could see him, sense his contours and his warmth but whenever she made a move to touch him there would be a smooth, consistent surface. It was transparent, but it was unbreakable. At times she had felt he put it there on purpose and she had been furiously resentful. At others it had seemed that he was trapped behind it and was looking to her to set him free. (ibid. 18).

Aisha’s reflection in the mirror depicted an alien face to her, ‘unreal’, ghost-like unidentifiable; an opposite strange other. She has tried a recollection, an imagining of her husband’s face; may be to cast more life into her own. The relation of self/other in its oscillation between sameness and difference has often been kindled to the metaphor of the mirror in the sense that they, self and other, are mirror images of each other, each different yet somehow the same and, henceforth, linked by their reflection. The “labyrinth of looking-glasses” is the image that describes this relationship (Kearney, 1998, p. 17).

However, the boundary between the expected, old familiar warmth and life proves unbreakable. It hints at Aisha’s cold relation with her husband, a ghost-like figure in a mirror. He seems out of reach, making the distance between them feel eternal. Yet he is no freer than she is. He seems trapped in this confined ‘glass-space’, hoping she can set him free, as trapped and flanked as she makes him appear. Saif seems to clutch to the rags of Aisha’s memory, her past and a world she used to know but knows no more. A world she can ‘live’ and ‘be in’ through reminiscences. It is a world she has longed to remember, to imagine yet it turned clad in fictional dress. Aisha reconsiders her relation with her husband, how cold he was, careless of her “crying till she could not breathe”. He prefers smoking, reading and listening to music instead; totally indifferent to her, “she slept alone, unknowing, in large double beds that mocked her.”

The tapestry in her room portrays “the Arab Knight and poet Antar on horseback and his beloved cousin Abla in a litter on a camel’s back”. Aisha remembers telling her husband that Antar “thought a lot of himself like you” (ibid.19). She refers to a world of imagination and the ‘unreal’ to imagine her husband as an ‘Arab or Frinji’ knight, “he would have gone out and slain dragons and ghouls”. He has learned to do things without her, like travelling, making adventurous trips to the desert. He has learnt to be alone without her. Aisha’s memories of herself are not to compete with her memories of her husband. She feels she has not got a past.

Besides, “it had seemed to her that ‘her past was devouring her present (ibid. 22). She seems to have tried to belong to the same world as he did, but in vain. This could entail he is the self and she is the Other; the female inferior stranger. Her attempts at rapprochement seem to widen the gap between her world and his. He wanted to be alone without her. He seems alone as she does. Only memories of him are available now; memories of his childhood with her, and memories of her estranged marital life. Her present is overwhelmed by his past and memories of him.

The last object Aisha recovers from her past she is to find in the cupboard. "Her veil and small pearl embroidered Juliet's cap nestled in tissue paper. They were covered with black moths". She wants to get rid of it. She carries the white card box where the veil is, "she put it in the sink, searched for the matches and set fire to it". Is it desire to finally break up with her past and memories? Aisha feels dizzy, crying again... "this too was familiar". Her answer was always "I don't know" when people enquired about her "Recurring illnesses", which they said, were "hysterical" (ibid. 22). She just sleeps, finally tired of her sobs. When Aisha awakens she realised that "she did not have an instant doubt about where she was. She knew. What she did not know was when she was".

She seems to be out of time. Yet this time "she knew". She asks: "what happened?", "where is he?" [Saif] "What did I dream?" she seems to compare what has happened to her to a dream. Her memories in her apartment has it been all a dream? A dream of a past that now has been converted by her to a mere imaginary world she has resurrected to try a merge with her own self, familiarity, and the reality of 'when she was'. She returns again to the mirror, she has not seen a round-faced girl with long, straight black hair. Instead she has seen a woman with the curly hair and the pearl necklace. "She looked at the mirror with recognition, relief and sorrow." Now she sees clear what she really is with recognition. She is retired and sad. She seems to compromise with what is really there.

So, she decides to leave the room. She scanned the literature shelves and picked out five books on seventeenth century poetry, in the living-room. She leaves the flat, "switched off the light and pulled the door too. Then she put her key in the lock and turned it finally, twice" (ibid. 23-24). She drives her red car again and goes away. Do her blossoming recognition and her awakening of what she has called a dream prompt her to feel what she strived to make real but in vain? Her recollected past woven into an imaginary world, has she decided to break up with it, finding Aisha again, to part with the old it in search of a new world?

## CONCLUSIONS

So far, the other has been stigmatized as the weak female dependent on her strong male counterpart. Ahdaf Soueif, an Egyptian novelist, portrayed her protagonist Aisha in Aisha, her first collection of eight short stories, particularly in *The Returning*, as an other. Aisha is displayed as an other in her relation to the other characters in the stories, particularly her husband Saif and time and space as a kind of non-human other. This very relation Soueif characterizes by being self-centred conjuring up a maudlin protagonist, striving to resurrect a fading past at the expense of the present. Aisha also features as confronting a double absence; that of her struggling to encompass an old past. Thus, Soueif has allowed the other myriad forms instead of being confined in one stifling bubble: woman vs. man, time past vs. time present. The protagonist's voice was also highlighted. Aisha is allowed by the author an opportunity to a returning and a knowing as she decided to lock the door and quit her past.

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