

Displacement and Identity in Ahdaf Soueif's *Sandpiper* and *Melody***Mira Hafsi**Department of English Language and Literature
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Algeria**Abstract**

This paper presents a literary study that is concerned with the experience of crossing cultures and theme of not belonging. It examines the condition of displacement and its effects on the identity of the female protagonists in two short stories written by Ahdaf Soueif: *Sandpiper* and *Melody*. The researcher's investigation relies on recent postcolonial criticism provided by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. As such, this paper explores: the representation of the Arab culture in the the Western thought; the way linguistic hegemony is subverted through the use of a hybridized version of English; and the agency of the subaltern through using the English language as a vehicle for the transmission of Diasporic Arab female voices and concerns. This paper concludes that Ahdaf Soueif succeeds in painting an original view of the effect of the state of displacement on the psyche of her female subjects, highlighting the semi-autobiographical aspect which is used as a means to express a quest for identity. The writer also succeeds in writing back to the colonial metropolis against the hegemonic imperialist discourse. Moreover, the writer goes beyond postcolonial writing in her literary endeavor as an appeal towards developing approaches for the modern-day challenges of globalization.

Keywords: Arab women writing, diaspora, postcolonial, identity, representation

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Introduction

Sandpiper and *Melody* are two short stories written by the renowned Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif (1950-). They are published in a collection of short stories which bears the title *Sandpiper* in 1996. The stories reflect some autobiographical elements of the author's life which is characterized by an early exposure and upbringing into both the English and Egyptian culture. This aspect appears to have been decisive in her intellectual development and literary writings. Moreover, the experience of crossing cultures also becomes a major theme in her fiction in which she explores the effect of displacement on the life of middle/upper class women from different cultural backgrounds. At the same time, she has tried to shed light on the Arab culture and history in order to straighten out images cultivated by the Western discourse and media. As such, she performs the role of a mediator between the East and West ; namely between the Middle East, America and Europe. Her countless contributions to various newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Observer* testify to her mission of raising awareness for Arab countries and politics in the West. The uniqueness of her writing lies in the fact that she writes both about Middle Eastern and Western female experiences of displacement.

Given the fact that Ahdaf Soueif's peripatetic life between England and Egypt and her intercultural love and marriage serve as a rich well of inspiration for her writings. It is, therefore, expected that one of her most recurring themes is displacement and its relation to the dilemma of identity. Through her characters, the author examines the quest for identity in a culturally different world. Therefore, the unpleasant experience of not belonging and sense of loss, of feeling as an alien and longing for the return back home are explored from different viewpoints.

This collection of short stories provides insight into the Arab and Western culture. It voices perspectives of Western and Arab women as they meet each other and engage with the other culture. Issues such as intercultural encounters, assimilation and poor adjustments which are common experiences among immigrants are highlighted. The readers experience the female characters' struggle through their loneliness, love and loss in these absorbing tales.

As a matter of fact, a detailed investigation of all the short stories and female subjects in this collection is far beyond the scope of a single paper. Therefore, the researcher needed to be selective and, thus, focused on stories whose main plot is more directly revolved around the *identity-crisis* of the Western female subjects : The stories which deal with the pressure that ends with failure or success at adaptation of the female character in reconstructing her identity. The present paper, hence, aims at providing a more nuanced interpretation directed at highlighting the identity-crisis of these often unvoiced diasporic female subjects as portrayed by Ahdaf Soueif in two short stories : *Sandpiper* and *Melody*.

The stories are concerned with place and displacement, and of the search and expression of identity within a culturally oppressive society. The diasporic nature of Ahdaf Soueif's fiction and the preoccupation with the ways of forming and articulating one's identity is an imminent issue that is explored through these narratives.

Ahdaf Soueif's creative and critical aspect of her writing is obvious ; she uses her pen in order to speak up for the diasporic female struggles and concerns in a postcolonial world; to

deconstruct colonial discourse and to reconstruct alternatives to it; and to provide a common ground where different cultures can meet.

Theoretical Background

Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian writer who produced fiction, non-fiction books and essays both in English and Arabic. However, her main means of literary expression is English ; it seems that this orientation towards using English is to reach a more Western readership in addition to the Arab one. In this regard, she acts as a mediator between the Arab and the Western culture by giving an authentic image in order to understand the reasons behind the portrayal of Arab women by the Western discourse as passive, tyrannized, and silenced.

As a matter of fact, 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 resistance. Although English has been stigmatized as the language of the oppressor by many critics, it has been used at the same time as a weapon against that very oppression. When applied by the postcolonial writer, English metamorphoses from the language of domination to a dynamic site of resistance to the silencing monopoly over cultural discourse. If transformed to suit the author's creative needs, it turns into a vehicle for the transmission of alternative cultures and diverse voices. Ultimately, it becomes a vital language for a counter discourse, with the potential to disrupt the primacy of metropolitan discourse conducted in the standard form of the English language.

Ahdaf Soueif decentralizes the colonial metropolis by writing back to the empire in contest of the colonial discourse and power structures. In doing so, she reconstructs an identity that has been distorted in the Orientalist discourse about Middle Eastern Arab women as subordinate. Accordingly, the literature she generates belongs to what is referred to as *postcolonial Arab women's literature*, and it belongs to the *subaltern narratives* because the degree of subalternity extends from postcolonial, to women and then to Arab writing.

To grasp the full meaning of postcolonial Arab women's literature, it is important to first define postcolonialism and then relate it to Arab women writing. Postcolonialism is a school of critical thought that has gained acknowledgement in critical academic circles. It primarily deals with peoples who have been colonized, and now face the question of identity which can be labeled as "identity-crisis". The reason behind this crisis is the confusion that results from the distortion that colonialism inflicted upon the indigenous cultural identity of its colonies. 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 by their former European colonizers. Thus, implying the neocoloniality of our present times.

It is the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, which is generally recognized as the very moment which triggered the massive rise of the discipline of postcolonial studies. It is the anti-colonial movements, however, which form the fountainhead of post-colonialism with their outlined campaigns for freedom. Postcolonial theory draws upon concepts developed by the anti-colonial struggles such as Négritude and Indigénisme. Edward Said's *Orientalism* reveals the distorted knowledge and the stereotypical misrepresentations that the Western discourse

generated on the non-Western Other. This knowledge contributed to maintaining cultural hegemony as well as colonialism. Edward Said criticizes this knowledge that helped in the construction of negative clichés about the Orient. This construction is designated to differentiate and dominate the Middle Eastern and Arab cultures.

Together with Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak form what Robert Young (1995) describes as “The Holy Trinity” of postcolonial criticism. Both Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak develop substantially the work initiated by Edward Said. Gayatri Spivak directs this imbalance by her consistent attention towards the colonized people in her works, and to their successors in the neo-colonial era. To describe this social formations, she adapts the term *subaltern* from Gramsci, which signifies subordinate or marginalized social groups in European (more specifically, Italian) society. Spivak (1988) adapts the term *subaltern* to the analysis of the Third World and more particularly, to India. Later on, the term has extended to encompass postcolonial women as a whole and the migrants, among others.

Gayatri Spivak's main concern is the degree to which the postcolonial subaltern, in particular, enjoys agency. Notably, whether the subalterns can speak for themselves, or whether they are condemned only to be spoken for by the others i.e the Western discourse about the subaltern. The conclusion that she reached in her essay is obvious ; there is “no space” (1988: 313) from which subalterns can speak and, thus, make their interests and experience known to others on their own terms. She (1988) calls for active participation of third-world writers and researchers to represent their concerns in order to reflect and convey an authentic representation and agency to the world.

Gayatri Spivak's affiliations to feminist politics are clear; she is more interested in the female subaltern because it represents a subject greater in degrees of economic, cultural and political marginalization than the male counterpart. As a recommendation to the issue of misrepresentation and subalternity, Gayatri Spivak (1988) emphasizes the need for postcolonial women intellectuals and writers to reclaim their lost voices. She argues that the female intellectual sympathetic to the plight of the subaltern are representing them. Spivak thinks that the subaltern is able to develop a political consciousness and to express it, that this representation is the best option available.

Like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha acknowledges the vital importance of Edward Said in initiating his own project to extend aspects of *Orientalism*. Homi Bhabha is famous for his analysis of the distortion of the representation of the native subject. His ideas of *mimicry*, *ambivalence* and *hybridity*, radically interrogate the effectiveness of colonialism pointing to its fractures.

Bhabha (1984) proposes the idea of *mimicry* which is the incomplete imitation of the white man by the native: An imitation with a difference. The native subject has been taught consistently that he needs to ape the white man and his culture, this results in a counter strategy that subverts and resists the colonialist efforts to suppress the native culture and identity. This subversion appears through the techniques of mockery and camouflage by the native to the European subject. Bhabha introduces his new concept of *hybridity*. He (2004) uses the term to

stress the interdependence of the colonizer and the colonized and, therefore, to argue that one cannot claim a purity of racial or national identity. He maintains that identity is produced in a kind of a third space which is “in-between” the subject and the idealized other. It is an identity which foregrounds differences, resistant to all the imposition of fixed and unitary identification. Bhabha (2004) is also famous for his concept of *ambivalence* : Literally it means the coexistence of contradictory feelings or impulses toward the same object. Bhabha uses the term to account for the difficult situation of the subaltern subject torn between, for instance, the material or personal advantages that displacement sometimes brings and the crushing weight of alienation and estrangement. 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.

Melody : The Ambivalent State of Rejection and Acceptance

The short story *Melody* is about the oppression and abuse women experience by patriarchy, the double standards system, and the positioning of Muslim women in their conservative societies. Ahdaf Soueif uses flashbacks to enable the reader to relate current events to the past ones rather than producing the story in a linear order. The story is set in a Gulf Arab country and it is narrated through a participating character: A middle class Canadian wife and mother of a little boy “Wayne”. The narrator follows the story of Ingie : A Turkish woman who lost her baby daughter “Melody” in a car accident.

It is worth noting that Ahdaf Soueif uses a rich multicultural setting for her characters who come from different countries so that they can learn from each other and connect to other cultures and perspectives. The narrator is Canadian and the protagonist, Ingie, is Turkish. There are also Scots, Lebanese, Egyptians, Filipinos, and Germans who live in the compound. Thus, multiculturalism is a theme that indicates the richness of this compound.

The short story opens with a description of the jasmine-smelling air in the compound: The “scent of jasmine fills the air” (p. 3). Soueif associates this scent to the child character Melody who dies in a car accident. Significantly, this association indicates peace and relief contrary to the tragic tune of the story. The beautiful scent of jasmine carries memories of the innocent baby girl Melody who dies very early and who is buried near the compound. The story ends with the description of a stronger jasmine-smelling air, “The air seemed fresher and the scent of jasmine was even stronger” (p.19). This indicates that Melody’s soul and memories are more present in the hearts and minds of the compound’s inhabitants.

The story depicts the frustration the narrator feels due to the hot weather and the inability of women to use the swimming pool. She asserts, “We’re not allowed to use the pool; us women. I mean. It’s only for the kids - and the men of course. They can use anything. And they do. Use anything I mean.” (p. 3) This quote indicates the double standards society and value system of the Arab world. The narrator emphasizes that males can do anything contrary to the women who have restrictions related to their behavior and conduct.

The narrator is attracted to the story of Ingie, who is a neighboring Turkish woman living with her husband and their children Murat and Melody. Ingie does not conform to many regular

habits and customs of the place she resides in; she does not wear modest clothing such as the “abaya” that every woman wears in that compound; she does not allow her children Melody and Murat to go to the local school and educates them herself; and is mainly interested in cooking and keeping herself beautiful and attractive for her husband who is older than her and married before, and it is not mentioned whether he divorced his first Western wife or whether he practices polygamy.

The issue of conformity to the Muslim norms of clothing in this short story reveals the stand of the Canadian narrator in respecting these norms. She is bound to the traditions of the situational context in a foreign Muslim country despite the fact that she is not Muslim. However, the Turkish protagonist is Muslim yet refuses the traditional clothing and dresses attractively ; she has “quite a bit of eye makeup and her skirt was shorter than you normally see around here” (p. 4) Ingie’s look confuses the narrator about her identity.

In postcolonial and feminist studies, modest clothing and veiling have been thrust into the forefront of arguments about identity, colonialism and patriarchy. Mohanty (1995) provides an analysis of reductive Western representations of veiling and argues that the current mode of discourse :

It produces the image of the ‘average third-world woman’ [as being] ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound [...] domesticated [...] victimized. This [...] is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions. (p. 261)

Ahdaf Soueif portrays Ingie who occupies an ambivalent state as she refuses to look like the typical image of a traditional modest-looking Muslim woman and yet conforms to the image of the stereotyped Muslim woman as a sex-subject, submissive, and domestic character.

The narrator is perplexed by the way the family of Ingie lived. She compares her situation with that of Ingie : “The way these Muslim women treat their husbands just makes me ill. They actually want to be slaves” (p. 6) indicating her discomfort with the way Ingie treats her husband as a master. The narrator is a Western lady who is quite different from Ingie : She prefers reading a book rather than spending all the time with the housework. Her interest in Ingie stems from their similar familial situation. She declares, “in point of fact, we too are a second family” (p. 8). Moreover, Ingie's husband wants her to bear more children ; she pretends to agree but surreptitiously takes contraceptive pills. The Canadian, on the other hand, wants more children, but her husband had a vasectomy to make sure she does not deceive him.

What is fascinating about this narrative is how the Canadian wife is constantly criticizing her Turkish neighbor who is abused by her husband while she is blind to see her own sexual oppression with a husband who does not want her to have any more children. This criticism originates from Ingie’s supposed racial/cultural superiority. Similarly, both the narrator and her neighbour Ingie have abandoned their comfort in their native countries by following their husbands for a better financial income in a foreign country with a foreign culture.

The story also shows the stand of the author towards the way some Muslim women who live just to please their husbands. The author depicts Ingie as being joyful, dressing attractively, putting makeup, dancing, and preparing different kinds of meals. This behavior reinforces the Orientalist exaggerated representation of the stereotypes of Muslim women as exoticized and eroticized for solely male service and pleasure. Even Melody imitates her mother when she plays with Wayne. The narrator states, "one of Melody's favourite games is to sit Wayne down...and start dancing for him...and Wayne who normally can't sit still for a minute, sits transfixed" (p. 7). This quote shows how Melody has learned to imitate her mother and practice her charming dance with Wayne, indicating that the conception of being a woman is cultural and passed from one generation to the other.

The main action that takes place in the story is the terrific death of Melody, and the inability of her mother Ingie to believe that she passed away. The father's weirdness is revealed when he filmed the scene of the way his daughter died and shows the video to his wife Ingie. This is backed up with: "he was a bit weird but I never knew how weird until I heard all that stuff about the camera". (P. 10) Ingie is emotionally and verbally abused by her husband who, for instance, blames her for the death of Melody and accuses her for being less than a good mother. He even does not allow Ingie to take their son Murat out because he does not trust her anymore. Yet, while Ingie accepts his abuse and the constant demand for more children, she resists his demand silently by taking contraceptive pills. The reason behind her refusal to have more children is because she believes in the speculation of a fortune teller who has once warned her. The narrator says, "some fortune teller back home said that she would have three children and one would break her heart." (p.9) indicating that Ingie believes firmly in the speculation of the fortune teller and acts according to it.

At the end of the story, we are told of the family decision of Ingie to stay in that compound for her husband's job qualification whereas all of her neighbors thought that it would be appropriate and healthy for them to depart. The narrator argues : "But we don't understand her. How can she ever cross that road without thinking of Melody ?" (P. 18). This statement implies that Ingie is forced by her selfish husband to stay and continuously feel the painful remorse of losing her daughter. Moreover, the submissive Ingie who is always an obeying wife sacrifices her ease to maintain peace at her home at any price. This narrative shows the multifaceted oppression of Ingie by her husband and both her submission and silent resistance. The story shows the narrator's empathy with Ingie as a mother who lost her child and their mingling together as women who belong to different parts of the world, yet similar circumstances unite them.

On a linguistic level, Arab terms and phrases in the flow of this narrative are written in English, such as « abaya » (p.4). Even the French word « retroussé » (p.5) is mentioned by the Canadian narrator in her description of Ingie's nose. Moreover, the presence of the Arabic language is visible when reading the English text of this short story in the form of word-to-word translation of Arabic expressions into English. As in the passage where Ingie and the Egyptian woman have a conversation about Melody's death :

Ingie : « He (God) gave her to me. Why he take her away from me ? Why ? »

The Egyptian woman : « You are a Muslim »
 Ingie : « I am a Muslim. But she was my daughter » (p. 12)

The use of such language functions as a document of the social and semantic reality of the Arab cultural setting and the multicultural compound some characters live in. Henceforth, Ahdaf Soueif's writing may rightly bear the epithet of a "hybrid literature" which bears the marks of both the writer's country of origin and her host country. It is also a space where both home and host cultures converge, intersect, and even sometimes clash. This fact makes Ahdaf Soueif's English reducible only to her fiction and her individualized version of English is far from the Standard English intended to be used for a purely English readership. The various ways of Ahdaf Soueif's handling of English are conditioned by her authorial intentions.

***Sandpiper* « The Liminal Self : A Failed Integration »**

The short story *Sandpiper* features the physical and emotional journey of the female protagonist who crosses the cultural boundaries of her imperial home with her husband to the colonial margin, and finds herself confused, misunderstood and trapped in a foreign country. Ahdaf Soueif introduces a reversed perspective : The perspective of a displaced Western female subject towards Egypt, its inhabitants and its culture.

Ahdaf Soueif is concerned with the feelings of women from the other part of the world. In this short story, the author scrutinizes an intercultural marriage with a critical eye. Given Ahdaf Soueif's unsuccessful marriage with the English writer *Ian Hamilton*, it is not surprising that the intercultural relationship in this story ends up in total disillusionment. Ahdaf Soueif is preoccupied with female psyche and its ability to cope with alienation, loneliness and longing for love. The matrimonial failure makes this female character suffer and long for the lost days of happiness, but ultimately the experience makes her stronger and independent.

This story is set in Alexandria, taking place in the beach and a house close to it during a couple of hours in a summer afternoon. The portrayal of the beach sets the opening scene of the narrative:

White sands drift across the path. From my window I used to see patterns in their drift [...] I did not want one grain of sand, blown by a breeze I could not feel, to change its course because of me.
 (Soueif, 1996: 23)

In fact, the setting of this story on the shore of Alexandria symbolizes the positioning of life for this family, they are hovering between two cultures, in an "in between" space, a place where they are neither in real Egypt, nor in England. It is a trans-cultural place where two cultures converge without merging.

The protagonist is caught between two cultures. Coming from a Western world to an Arabic one ; she becomes gradually aware of her foreignness and inability to integrate herself to the new culture in order to meet the demands and expectations of her husband. She says, "My husband translated all this for me and said things to her which I have come to understand meant

that tomorrow I would get used to their ways.” (P. 27) This passage pinpoints the idea that her husband expected her gradual adaptation to his societal and cultural norms.

The narrator's attempts at adaptation are faced with objection from the society. She notices, “If I tried to do the shopping the prices trebled.” (P. 28) This indicates that the local merchants tried to take advantage of her “foreignness”. It further suggests how ineffectual her efforts are at integration.

Apparently, the portrayal of the effect of the setting on the protagonist is the “fading love” or estrangement (both emotional and physical) from her husband, as well as from the foreign setting she lives in. Ahdaf Soueif employs a flashback technique through the protagonist's memories about her marriage and relates them with the present reality. Although her husband has drifted away from her, she is passive and does not take an action to real separation. There is a hint of the husband straying, she confesses, “On that swirl of amazed and wounded anger when, knowing him as I did, I first sensed that he was pulling away from me, I should have gone” (p. 27). The flashbacks continue to flow in the story : “My second summer here was the sixth of our love - and the last of our happiness” (p. 25). This quote alludes to the vast differences in their relationship at various times. We can sense an imminent doom to their relationship through her feelings of regret.

The following quotation identifies the crucial obstacle due to which many intercultural marriages are eventually ruined due to the differences in language, mentality, culture and conditions of life of the couple. The very basic concept of home, if perceived differently, turns to be a major barrier in an intercultural marriage. The narrator states :

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. (Soueif, 1996, p. 33)

The narrator is from Europe and her marriage to an Egyptian man has its implications. One would assume that her supposedly cultural/ethnocentric superiority is evident when assuming that her marriage would be more like a Western one. In their male/female relationship, the vicissitudes of power relations displace the arrangement of binary opposition man/woman; dominant/subordinate. The protagonist declares :

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. (Soueif, 1996, p. 33)

This passage indicates her disappointment when she expected that she would be domineering with her exoticism and ethnocentric superiority. But once they had returned home, the protagonist is unable to be adapted into her husband's original home ; this new place affected their relationship. This is backed up with “He was back home, and he needed someone he could

be at home with, at home.” (p. 33) This points out that the narrator herself is aware of her inability to conform to the implication of their intercultural relationship. Moreover, the differences in language, mentality, culture and conditions of life of the two lovers become insurmountable.

The couple has a daughter, Lucy, whom the protagonist refers to her as “his daughter” (p.24) indicating that even though they are both her parents; the narrator identifies Lucy as belonging more to her father since she was born in Egypt and spends most of her time with him. Moreover, the narrator points out that Lucy is “My treasure, my trap” (p. 36) which allows the reader to notice that she wants to escape, to leave. However, she is held back by the maternal love she has for her daughter. She is now waiting only for her daughter Lucy to “grow away from me” (p. 36). Lucy was born in Egypt and is at home there. The narrator is aware that Lucy’s need for her is lessening and soon she will be able to make a break. Her awareness is much more about her personal predicament, what she is going to do with her life.

More precisely, the protagonist’s journey to construct an identity with substance is a process of self-othering. She recognizes her otherness and inability to conform to the Egyptian norms, and is aware of the two composites of her own liminal state ; the two sides that are slammed together against their will, that refuse to mix. As a consequence, the narrator decides to stay temporarily with her daughter in the place where she is more at ease with her father and paternal family.

The protagonist’s inability to cope with her husband’s expectations in his homeland is apparent; even though she has been married for eight years and has come to Alexandria for that many years, she has not learned the language and feels ill at ease. Her stay in Alexandria would last only for the summers and they spend the rest of the year in her Northern land. To be sure there is much conflict in the two vastly differing cultures : Women in upper class families did not work in Egypt but the narrator is used to being independent and responsible in her Western country.

Additionally, the customs of Egyptians are foreign to her, such as the mirrors in the house being covered to prevent a baby from looking into their reflection. The old nanny of her husband explains, “They say if a baby looks in the mirror she will see her own grave”. (p. 34) The protagonist is clearly not convinced by such a superstition but she accepts the nanny’s beliefs and does not oppose covering the mirrors of the house until the baby grows up enough. She declares, “we laughed, but we did not remove the covers; they stayed in place till she was one. ” (p.34) The parents’ conformity to the old nanny’s belief in covering the mirrors for the baby shows their respect and tolerance to these cultural practices that are, in fact, widespread in many parts of the world.

Significantly, the way the protagonist walks on the path trying not to disturb a grain of sand symbolizes her desire to be conformable and to maintain peace in her marriage, at least for the time being. She chooses being invisible, because she is aware of her foreign identity and has her own goals of staying with her daughter and prioritizing the unity of her family over the alienation and estrangement she feels. The protagonist’s mind is like a deep ocean that contains

startling depths and mysterious thoughts about her future life decisions. Moreover, there is another important symbolization in this story. The way the author contrasts the sea and the sand implies that the cold sea represents the female protagonist, her thoughts and her country; whereas the hot sand epitomizes her husband and Egypt. The sea waves nibbling at the sand signifies her intercultural marriage. In the end, the narrator implies that the sea and sand have limited knowledge about each other : “And what does the beach know of the depths [...]” (p.36). In other words, the couple had a false assumption that love can cover the vast differences between them.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that in these short stories, Ahdaf Soueif explores the psyche of displaced Western female characters instead of Arab ones and aims at their understanding. In doing so, the author consciously examines the Egyptian/oriental reality through the eyes of displaced Western female characters, highlighting the specificity of the cultural context and allowing her readers to see beyond the stereotypes regarding the “Other”. She provides an unexpected narrative which may seem to reinforce the Orientalist discourse about the Arabs and their culture. Having been living for a considerable amount of time in England gives the author the opportunity of self-criticizing particular cultural practices in the Middle East and the attitudes that sustain the Western Orientalist stereotypes.

The purpose behind such self-criticism is twofold. On the one hand, Ahdaf Soueif urges the Arabs to reevaluate particular social and cultural practices and attitudes such as the conception of being a woman/wife/mother in the Arab culture, the double standards Arab society and the misunderstanding of Islam in specific areas such as gender roles, death and mourning. Moreover, she calls Arab women to be more than the doll or maid, and to invest in their intellectual potentials. As such, these narratives are addressed to these women to free themselves from the limiting cultural practices and attitudes that have no or false hermeneutic relationship to Quran. On the other hand, Ahdaf Soueif aims to transport the sad reality of the helplessness of some Arab women towards their oppression as they have been raised to cherish these values, accept patriarchy and embrace their powerlessness. Furthermore, by contrasting the attitudes of the Western/Arab women towards their estrangement, parenting, and oppression, the author sheds light on the perspective towards marriage and family unity in their respective culture. Henceforth, liberation from a failed or abusive marriage is considered differently for both cultures.

These short stories are about women finding or not finding themselves. They are about the quest of identity, intercultural relationships, romance, and love. It is about the relationship between the East and the West, of men and women in an intercultural context. This aspect of her writing takes further living in a postcolonial era to living in a globalized intercultural world that takes into consideration different aspects such as gender, class, race, and culture. She transports Middle Eastern and Western women to and from the colonial empire, and succeeds in engaging the readers about their situation through empathy.

Through these immigrant narratives, hybridity is explored on a linguistic level. Ahdaf Soueif uses the English language with different cultural, rhetorical, and literary norms. Her mastery of the English language lies in her creation of her own version of it ; a hybridized

English interlaced with Arabic expressions and turns of phrase, an English reshaped in order to carry the specific Arabic reality and its rhetorical style.

English as her literary language enables Soueif to provide an authentic representation of the Arab culture and diasporic female experiences to the postcolonial travel narrative and canon. She uses it as a tool for forging a new transcultural identity for herself as well as for her female characters. The author therefore consciously undermines the prevalent false image of the Arab woman in the Western literary canon and media by condemning the traditional value system as backward, violent, and extra-religious.

By exploring the diasporic experiences of Western females in the Arab Gulf, Ahdaf Soueif produces a post-postcolonial writing in the way that she moves from writing a post-colonial travel narrative to writing about the diasporic experience at the global level, making it plural rather than singular. With the feeling of homesickness that pervades these short stories, her female characters long for a highly intimate construction of home. Through their notions of family and home, her characters practice their liberating forces, finding their strength in maintaining their family union that constructs and maintains their displaced state.

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