

Re-reading the Place in Hugh Miles' *Playing Cards in Cairo: A Geocritical Approach*

By

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Introduction: Geocriticism and the Humanities

The field of human and cultural geography has witnessed a wide variety of research and study over the past decades to mark what Robert Tally calls “a post-contemporary intervention” (*Geocriticism in the Middle of Things* 6). Near the end of the of the 20th century Edward Soja introduced the phenomenon of “Spatial Turn” (1989), in an attempt to explain the ever growing interest in and concern with space. The concept of spatiality was later on developed by many other critics and theoreticians.¹ The

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¹ It is worth mentioning here that Yi-Fu Tuan has previously examined the concepts of space and place in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1970). However, in this book he distinguishes between the meanings of space and place, giving defining elements of what turns a space into a place. His work has ever since encouraged many critics, geographers and researchers to apply interdisciplinary approaches to literature. Tuan has also discussed the concepts of space and place in his comprehensive work *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (1990), a book that examines the environment and the effect of external factors on the way we handle and evaluate it. He also has other important

appearance of various and diverse array of geocritical and spatial approaches to literature seems suitable to the present era where space and place occupy a significantly important position in the literary oeuvre due to the perpetual change in the world map. Of the most organized and significantly important studies stand Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), which was then developed into *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (1990), and Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (1990); translated by Robert Tally (2011). While Tuan's theoretical framework focuses on the relationship between space, place and culture with aesthetics, Westphal's work concentrates on the different elements and characteristics of geography and the representation of any topography in literature that would eventually lead to the geocritical approach to literature.

contributions that illustrate his awareness and interest in the relationship between culture and geography.

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Geocriticism is an approach to literature that focuses on place as the center of debate. In this way it can be considered an advanced approach to literary works since it gives special prominence to place and spatiality which Tally believes “have become more prominent in social, cultural, and literary criticism in the last 50 years” (Tally Interviewed, 2015). It dismisses the argument that literature can play the role of an overseer of the real, but it rather “reports reality ... [and] exert(s) influence over reality, or, more precisely, over the representation of reality” (*Geocriticism* 116). Focus in this approach is geocentered, it moves from the author to the place depending on diverse and multiple points of view since the different representations of a place lead to re-centering this place, and changing the way it is perceived. Geocriticism as an approach does not concentrate on examining any place as the different *other*, and does not attempt othering different cultures. Consequently, “the bipolar relationship between otherness and identity” (*Geocriticism* 113) disperses. In order to avoid otherness,

geocriticism depends on polyphonic and multiple perspectives in examining the representation of a place. This multiplicity of points of view diminishes otherness and seeks to contribute to the process of determining an identity of a place/ a common space objectively.

Geocriticism approaches the place in one of two ways: first, a geocritic can examine several forms of mimetic art in a single study of spatial representation, e.g. cinematic representations of a given space, photography, painting, etc. In this approach “geocriticism augments (in part) and structures (a bit) the intersection between different arts and forms of representation that evoke material reality and the spatiotemporal coordinates used in creating an aesthetic representation” (*Geocriticism* 120). Second, a geocritic can reflect on the meaning, identity or depiction of a place based on comparison or comparative literature. Here, the analysis is simply a representation of a range of individual representations, and the main goal would be “depicting an artistic referent” (*Geocriticism* 121), referent in this context

being the *place* under inspection. Thus, if we apply the geocritical approach we choose diversity, plurality and variation of perspectives to objectively contribute in defining the ‘referent’s’ representations. In addition, it provides three characterizing principles in the study of any place: spatiotemporality, referentiality and Transgressivity, which will be elucidated later on.

In addition to these characterizing principles, Bertrand Westphal provides very specific guiding elements for the application of geocriticism on any literary work. These elements pay great attention to the representation of the place ignoring the author’s individual point of view which, in his point of view, definitely spurs from his/her identity. Instead, he promotes for “a multiplicity of heterogeneous points of view, which all converge in a place” (*Geocriticism* 122). This leads to the methodological discussion of geocriticism, which, according to Westphal, has four elements: first multifocalization, a concept that invites for multiple points of view to establish the meaning of the

literary space. Second, polysensoriality, that invites for the use of the different sense in identifying any space; third, stratographic vision, in which the *topos* is understood to encompass several layers of meaning that are deterritorialized and reterritorialized; and fourth, intertextuality, in that all textual spaces inevitably include, “interface” with, or relate to other spaces in literature and in reality.

Multifocalization is the first and perhaps the most important defining element of Geocriticism. The multiple points of view through which a specific place is represented distinguish this theory from all the other theories applied on travel literature that generally provides an image of the place through the traveler’s eye. For Westphal, any attempt to present a subjective point of view of a place, or to relate to a specific nation or ethnicity would definitely result in stereotyping that place. Subjectivity, regardless to the intention of the viewer, produces the individual’s contentions, beliefs and culture. In addition, reducing a

place or a particular territory to the subjective point of view of one viewer means limiting its meaning to that socio-political entity to which he/she belongs, as well as approving of the “*logic of belonging* that paradoxically legitimizes exclusion” (*Geocriticism* 144). Therefore, multifocalization would be the best alternative to avoid stereotyping.

The multiplicity of points of view delivers a deeper and more comprehensive survey of how this place is perceived and conceived. In this regard Westphal refers to the concept of the ‘gaze’, previously examined by Pierre Ouellet², and maintains that this *gaze* directs our relationship not only to the place but to the world since it is always subjective. Therefore, Westphal maintains that the gaze “reinforces the traditional bipolarity” (*Geocriticism* 123). The viewer or ‘the subject’, with certain preconceived knowledge, looks at an object, that is already loaded with

² Ouellet, as quoted in Westphal, believes that the gaze is “the implementation of spatializing and temporalizing imaginative activity”. This is significant here since the gaze always falls on the other, and the perceived awareness or knowledge that we acquire from this gaze occupies a wide spectrum that ranges from indifference to this other to perplexity that would lead to re-creation and re-presentation.

previous personal representations and will therefore remain ‘the other’, and the binary opposition of the one and the other goes on forever. One place/culture/history is gazed upon as inferior by the other who assumes self–superiority. Hence the importance of the multiple points of view in decentralizing the center and dismantling binaries. By applying multifocalization “the border (becomes) a juncture, not the edge, and monoculturism (is) expelled to the margins” (*Geocriticism* 124). The subjective singular point of view on the other hand reduces the experience and the perception of a place to that of the viewer who also understands it through his personal experience and knowledge of the world. Therefore, a comprehensively objective representation of the place is unattainable through a singular individual perspective. However, sometimes the desperate attempt for objectivity would result in stereotyping in another form. Therefore, the geocritic should try include multiple representations that translate the apparent features of a place. Westphal introduces three variations for

multifocalization: endogenous (a viewer with an internal cause or who is of the same origin of the place), exogenous (an exterior viewer/foreigner), and allogenuous (a viewer who stands in between, like a foreigner who has settled in a place for a time long enough to be familiar with all its cultural characteristics). All three perspectives should be taken into consideration if we intend a geocritical approach to a literary text, in an attempt to depict the representation of that place. Multifocalization, in this sense, frees the space of all the crippling factors of the monologic, ego-centered perception of the singular narrator or viewer.

In addition, the multiplicity of points of view supports the principle of referentiality: the geocritical approach examines the author's point of view in connection with his cultural ideologies and concepts, as well as the referent's characteristics. In this process, according to Westphal, one must "question the link between authorial perception on the one hand, and artistic representation (of the referent) on the other" (*Geocriticism* 127). *Referentiality* is another method

through which geocriticism avoids subjectivity in the representation of a place. It does not only encourage multiple points of view, but a comparison between the *representation* and the *reality* of the place.

The second element of geocriticism is polysensoriality. While multifocalization invites for multiplicity of perspective, polysensoriality denotes the multiplicity of the senses used to perceive, identify, and represent a place. Generally speaking, sensoriality and the use of the senses allow us to recognize and therefore adapt to the world. An author constructs his awareness of the place through the different senses. According to Westphal, senses, other than the ‘gaze’, play important roles in constituting our experience of a place: “Smell, touch and taste would be intimate, passive, bodily senses, while sight and hearing more remote and mental” (*Geocriticism* 133). This classification relates to Yi-Fu Tuan’s reason as provided in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), where he classified the nature, modes and role of

the senses maintaining that some senses play more active roles than the others in “Experiential Perspective” (8). In this way the viewer might use some or all of the senses to understand, and consequently establish an image or a point of view of the place. Consequently, the way the author/viewer uses the different senses in constructing his experience “influences (his) representation of the place” according to Westphal (*Geocriticism* 134). It is also worth noting here that our sensory perception of a place depends on the perspective through which we see that place. The resulting representation would again be subjective unless it is accompanied by multifocalization.

Third, Westphal discusses stratigraphy as a characterizing principle of Geocriticism by tracing it back to critics like Lefebvre, Deleuze and Guattari and many others. In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari maintain that any place should be seen and examined as consisting of different strata. Each stratum is distinguished by ‘unity of composition’ and the different

strata are organized to face and support one another. Likewise, Westphal thinks of the representation of place not only as a separate unit or entity, but rather as part of a greater whole located at the intersection of a certain moment and a specific duration. So, in order to discover the essence of a place, the geocritic should dig deep into those strata diachronically “in an effort to present an authentic stratigraphy” (*Geocriticism* 139). Since the place is never the same one that existed at a different time, we cannot examine any place synchronically only; each stratum as it appears at a certain point of time is a result of the varied elements and the relationship with the different other strata that make up its bulk; The apparent then would never be a true reflection of the essence. Thus, any place can only be understood in relation to the different multilayered spatiotemporal relations between the different strata. It cannot be studied alone since it cannot be seen as a one dimensional whole, it has to be studied in relationship to other strata. For example, we can never compare the Cairo

of the 30s with present day Cairo. They are not the same place. We need to study the different strata diachronically in order to understand current representation of the city.

The Place and its representation:

The study at hand aims at discerning the perception, representation and reaction to place based on the viewer's experience of the surroundings and the very specific cultural elements in Cairo. Hugh Miles' *Playing Cards in Cairo* (2011)³ stands as a clear example of the representation of place from a multifocal and polysensorial perspective that observes spatiotemporality and the effect of transgressivity. There is a direct relation between the architecture, the landscape and urban design, and the way people perceive this place, in addition to how they use this place and what they make of it to fulfill their everyday needs. In this sense, a place gains value according to several elements such as location, relation to the overall surrounding culture, as well as functionality and the people who inhabit this place.

³ Will be referred to as (PCIC) in the in-text citation.

Though the title “Playing Cards in Cairo” denotes the actual physical practice of the game, it has many other meaningful connotations. Cairo’s feverish pace and deteriorating social, political and economic conditions need a good gamer and dealer, someone who can guess the right *card* and knows when to play it. Miles provides a separate section at the beginning of the novel for “The Rules of *Tarneeb*”, a card game similar to bridge. Short as it is, this part directs the readers’ attention to the symbolic meaning of the title. The game is all about bidding, tricks and the choices of the dealer that later on decide his/her win or loss. This is an indicative guiding glimpse of the game that each and everyone plays in the age-old city, Cairo/Al-kahira. The game does not usually target ‘winning’ all the moves and tricks, but “hindering others from doing so” (PCIC 1). The text is more of a diary of a freelancing British journalist who, having fell in love with an Egyptian lady, prefers life in Cairo with all its hectic temperament to that of

his homeland. The prologue sets the scene for the exploring reader by presenting the narrator's experience of the place. Cairo has a well-established charm and attraction for many people all over the world. The history of the second biggest capital in Africa⁴ dates back to the 969 AD (the Fatimid dynasty). Cairo still carries the Fatimids' fingerprint in the finest constructions: Al Azhar Mosque and university that is still Egypt's main center of Islamic study, and the splendid Cairo gates of Bab An Nasr, Bab Al Futuh and Bab Zuweila, in addition to countless other mosques and historical buildings. The city acquired its present name in the age of Al-Mouez Li-Deen Allah, who named it Al-Kahira (the vanquishing, overwhelming city that defeats and surmises all). Cairo eventually expanded in space spreading west and south. The place has witnessed a great change when Khedive Ismail, grandson of Mohammed Ali, decided it was time for change. During his reign (1863-79), Ismail had immensely contributed to modify the city's appearance.

⁴ *The World Atlas* refers to Cairo as the second largest capital after Lagos, with population 20.4 million, and a population growth rate of 2.6% annually.

Therefore, he invited architects from Belgium, France and Italy to design and build a new European-style Cairo, which earned the nickname 'Paris on the Nile'⁵. However, with the remarkable increase in the population since the 1950s new suburbs were constructed to increase the span of the city and change its map, as much as change its architectural and cultural aesthetics. The long history of the city and the large number of literary works that have tackled the place one way or another invite a thorough examination of the representation of Cairo in literature in a time when new conceptions of space have gradually pervaded thanks to Geocriticism.

Multifocalization (Exogenous)

Since the city is located in the Orient and is seen through a British writer's perspective, it is crucial for the analysis to concentrate on the element of multifocalization which promotes for three types of points of view to avoid the

⁵ *The World Atlas* <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-the-capital-city-of-egypt.html>

egocentered representation of the place. Geocriticism, according to Westphal, is never satisfied with a singular perspective or point of view in the representation of a place. Alternatively, Westphal provides three models: the endogenous, the exogenous, and the allogenuous points of views of a place in any literary work as explained above. The narrator's experience of the city is primarily conveyed in the first person's point of view. However, the narration constantly shifts to other characters and to dialogue to produce a polyphonic, dramatized representation of the place with all its complexities and its political, economic and social misfortunes. The events and details of the narrative in addition to the acknowledgement Miles provides at the beginning to the women who "know who they are ..[and] do not want their names listed" make it more realistic.

The narrator, whose name is never mentioned, but whom the readers assume is Miles himself, has visited Cairo three times. In his first visit at a very young age, he stayed with an Egyptian family "as an au pair", an

experience which he considers “formative but alien” (PCIC 3), and that has exposed him to certain cultural aspects like family relationships in the authoritarian patriarchal society. Born in Saudi Arabia and educated in Yemen, the narrator did not face the usual cultural shock any foreigner would undergo. Here, the ‘exogenous’ viewer, to use Westphal’s term, gives a generalized, sometimes condescending, opinion of the place and the people he encounters. The rich upper middle–class family with four children, one of whom is a girl, is presented as an example of social Egyptian life. The “heavily bejeweled” submissive, oppressed wife who knows nothing better than cooking, gossiping or plucking her eyebrows, does not only stand helpless against her son’s aggressive, authoritative patriarchal attitude with his elder sister, but also sees that as “perfectly normal or even quite affectionate” (PCIC 5). The same goes for the young girl who is overwhelmed by her brother’s over protection to the extent of “planning ahead for trouble, gossiping with her

mother in the kitchen about what she was going to tell her brother when he returns home” (PCIC 5).

This exogenous perspective allows for generalizations in the prologue that, as the readers will realize, will fade out to be less subjective when the narrator’s perception of the place develops and when he, having lived in the place and mingled with its people long enough, turns into an ‘*allogenous*’ viewer. These generalizations in the narrator’s first visit would sometimes surpass Cairo, or even Egypt to include the whole region:

“family relationships in the Middle East , as I was learning, are different from those in the West. In Arab families a girl cannot up and leave home when she is still a teenager; women are not autonomous individuals who can run their own lives independently of the rest of their family, when the father is absent, a boy must be responsible for his sister. She can be flirtatious and feminine, but it’s his duty to play the stern loving protector, because if she erred the blemish

would stain the whole family. Honour is too fragile for a daughter to be left to handle alone”(PCIC 5).

The generic comparison here between the self and the other, or the traditional binary opposition between the West and the East, which obviously privileges the first to the second, is one characterizing feature of the exogenous viewer. This viewer is usually ignorant of the specificity not only of each and every woman, family or even social class constructs, but that of each country in the Middle East. The exogenous narrator generalizes about a whole region which extends over a very wide space to include sixteen Arab countries ranging from the very conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, where he was born, to the very liberal ones like Lebanon, to which he escapes later on as a lover seeking privacy and more freedom. Though these generalizations fade out later on, they continue to overshadow many parts at the first half of the narrative.

Spatiotemporality

The narrative examines place in two manners according to the characterizing principle of spatiotemporality: diachronically and synchronically. In the diachronic representation Miles traces the changes that overcame Cairo's architectural, social, political and economic life. While in the synchronic representation he probes deep into one specific 'stratum' examining all its challenges and misfortunes. Representation of specific places like Zamalek, Old Cairo, or even the newly constructed suburbs in Cairo, traces the history, the architecture, landscaping, facilities, as well as the different social classes with all the fashions and constructs that accompany them.

The Zamalek suburb, which was an 'uninhabited' island till the Khedive decided to build a big palace with a massive garden on it, occupies the first part of the narrative and stands as a reflective mirror of all the political, social and economic changes that overcame Egypt across the years. The 19th century compact space of the island was

“partitioned and sold off for development into Parisian–Style suburb houses in the 20th century” (PCIC 7). Miles diachronically traces the changes that overcame the place; from the hands of the Ottoman Royalty to the wealthiest aristocratic Cairene families. Later on, Zamalek moved into the hands of many diplomates and politicians and then into the hands of the Nasser’s government when all the historical buildings were sold to companies and to whoever could afford the price, regardless to social class. The topography of Zamalek has changed over the time. From being the most distinguished residential area of the Royalty and the elite, to hosting *shisha* cafés, and being a gathering spot of all who wanted to escape the squeezing daily pressures. The place, as presented in the book, has changed from its old self of the *Belle Epoch*, to the current hosting of embassies and multi–national companies. However, although the present–day Zamalek as seen through the exogenous’ eye hosts *shisha* cafes, and bustles with noisy life, it still retains a trace of beauty that endows

the place with a distinguished arresting taste. The place retains some of its “continental European architecture” that has struggled against all attempts of “modernization”, and therefore remains an attraction for expats and foreigners, offering a glimpse of the Western life style that cannot be found elsewhere.

Miles’ topographical survey of the place is affected by the observant eye of a journalist in search for headline news. In his daily journey to the *shisha* café he chronicles the architecture of the buildings, the land marks and the houses, dating them back to their historical background and origin, and remarking all the changes that overcame the place since the 19th century. The turning point for him is always Nasser’s time, and the revengeful actions of “destroying” and “reshaping” everything that belonged to the Royalty while at the same time replacing the value of aristocracy with that of high priced buildings and houses in Zamalek, even the annual membership of Gezira club, to “retain its air of colonial exclusivity” (PCIC 11). From

Zamalek to Garden City, and then to the bigger Cairo scenery, the ‘gaze’ of the exogenous narrator continues to provide a spatiotemporal analysis of the place.

This topographical analysis of the place is interwoven with the discussion of socio-political issues. Political exploitation of the history and the wealth of the place is a recurring theme in the narrative. More than one example is provided to show how the authority hinders and obstructs the place. This is quite clear on the tangible physical level by the frequent street-cordoning and traffic cordoning for the sake of a passing member of the government. Therefore, space obstruction is just another example of the manifestation of authority. The way the “tough-nut interior minister would have two dozen of his security detail cordon off the Gezira race track for his aerobics and jogging routine” (PCIC 11) is echoed by the road block and the resulting traffic jam because “the prime minister ‘Mr. Clean’ [Nazeef] is passing by (PCIC 262), and emphasized by the memory of Hanafy the driver who once “slept seven hours in

a bus because Mubarak was passing” (PCIC 262). On the socio-economic level, all chances of a good life, education, health care, or housing are hindered in Egypt. The governmental procedures as shown in the narrative result in lack of proper life for all Egyptians.

Polysensoriality

Nevertheless, much as the eye could perceive the detailed features of any place, Geocriticism celebrates and promotes the importance and significance of all the other human senses in identifying a place. Yi-Fu Tuan maintains that “experience is a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs reality” (Space and Place 8). In this regard, the diversity and multiplicity of the senses through which the narrator perceives Cairo provides a more accurate, culture specific representation of the city. Modes here include the ‘sensations’ which affect one’s perception of the place and the way this place is eventually conceived. In his second visit to Cairo, which is longer, more professional and

therefore presented in a more detailed manner, the narrator smells, listens to, and touches the exhaustively specific nature of the place. He comments that “there (he) would quietly read a book to the dulcet slurps and gurgles of men drinking coffee and smoking *shishas* over copies of morning papers ... the sound of the Koran playing on the radio and the sound of the morning rush hours ... or the twittering and bleeping of the mobile phones” (PCIC 11). The sounds vary; from the monotonous, peaceful sound of the Koran playing all day long on the radio, either in the vehicles, the streets or the *shisha* café, to the sound of the backgammon players throwing the dice and hitting the checkers while boasting about their move or fighting over it or even discussing personal problems or the political situation. And from the disco music in the parties, the bars or the night clubs, to the deafening sound of the car horns objecting to the traffic jam and road obstruction, or that rhythmic noise of “the gasman... banging a hammer against the heavy blue metal canisters”(PCIC 154) to announce his arrival, the

reader can hear the sounds of the city, and are able to draw a mental image of the identity of the place to discover the bigger multi-dimensional image. The olfactory sense identifies “plumes of sweetly scented smoke (that) would drift out into the street” (PCIC 11). Such smells and sounds give the place its specific character, and instantly allow the perceived mental image before the eye of the mind whenever the name of the place is mentioned.

The narrator’s senses and sensations of the place get more acute and more accurate in his third and yet longer and more affectionate visit to Cairo. During this visit he develops a better ability to identify very peculiar, culture-specific sounds, like that of the creepy footsteps of the spying land lady ‘Tant Enayat’ who was “clumping slowly up the stairs with an awkward lopsided gait. It sounded like they were lugging something heavy, and every few steps they paused to wheeze like a pirate captain with emphysema. Silently I stirred my tea, straining to recognize who it was. A hacking cough gave her away: Tant Enayat”

(PCIC 205). This habit of lurking around the block's corridors in search for some news, a scandal, or even a reason to kick a tenant off the place is very specific to Cairene land lords who have "strong vested interest in seeing the leaseholders move out because of Egypt's antiquated socialist housing laws" (PCIC 148). Thus, the culture specific poly-sensorial elements and images deliver a more accurate representation of the place and its social, economic and political problems, adding a lot to the 'gaze' and making the experience more concrete and vivid.

The narrative enjoys this hybridization of perspective as the events unfold. In addition to the voices of the other *endogenous* viewers who augment the readers knowledge of the place, the perspective of the narrator himself changes from the *exogenous* viewer of the place and the related spatiotemporal elements in the first and his second visits to Cairo to an *allogenous* viewer for the readers and the other expats since "most of the foreigners who live in Zamalek do not speak Arabic" (PCIC 12). A privilege that Miles enjoys

thanks to his education in Yemen and his continuous communication with the Egyptians. For those expats, and for other foreign freelance or formal members of the press, Miles is an insider guide when he “helped out by scouring the morning newspapers ... (or) search(ing) the press for a story to reproduce from a British perspective for the papers back home” (PCIC 107). Too much taken in his role as a cultural interpreter and a guide to the specificities of the place, Miles started feeling alienated among his fellow Brats, and “more at home around the Card table with Roda and her friends than [he] did with other British journalists” (PCIC 108). This ‘feeling’ is what Paul Ricoeur identifies as “without doubt intentional” (*Fallible Man* 127). This intentionality defines, guides and constructs our knowledge of the world since it “reveals the way in which the self is inwardly affected ... [because] an intention and an affection coincide in the same experience” (*Fallible Man* 127). This ‘feeling’, added to the cultural specificities of a space, is what turns it into a place for Miles, which highlights Tuan’s

idea that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (*Space and Place* 6).

Transgressivity

Concerned with the malleable definition of borders in the age of globalization, geocriticism highlights the concept of *Transgressivity* which was first mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Geocriticism focuses on the global spatial meaning and representation of the place rather than on the individual’s perception of it. Transgressivity leads to ‘deterritorialization’ and consequently to globalization, which is becoming a dominant concept in the literary representation of the place where the globe is minimized to one big space. The effect of an incident happening on one territory would eventually lead to a turmoil in another, thanks to the immense transmission of information and the continuous evolution in satellite image transfer. In this era of globalization, the imaginary map borders have become more fluid to the

extent that they sometimes vanish and “permanent fluidity (becomes) the characteristic of representation (of any place)” as Westphal maintains (*Geocritical Explorations* xv). In his representation of Cairo, Miles introduces many transgressive global incidents that directly affect Egypt’s and other countries’ territories. Miles notes that “the partnership between the CIA and the Egyptian Security Services became so close” (PCIC 104), giving these authorities a greater opportunity to take all the required as “counter terrorism attack”. More importantly, the 9/11 even has drastically changed the map of other countries in the region, turning their systems upside down, “Collin Powell laid America’s case for war against Iraq before the UN in 2003, [and] his ‘proof’ was based on the confessions of an Al-Qaeda leader” (PCIC 104). Thus a terroristic incident in one place affects war against another country with all its social, political and later on topographical changes.

Terrorism, in itself an action of transgressivity, has a great impact on changing the topography of any place. The

best example in the novel is provided in the Sharm el-Sheikh bombing in July 2005. ‘The city of Peace’ on the coast of Sinai was shuttered down by a series of suicidal bombing which was later on claimed by Al-Qaeda. The attack is recorded as “ripping through shoppers and spraying debris and body parts over a wide area ... [the] suicide driver ploughing into the front on the Ghazala Hotel delivered the most destructive bomb ... causing parts of the hotel to collapse in on itself” (PCIC 115).

A similar effect of transgressivity is presented in the consequences of the London 2005 suicidal bombing. The FBI inspectors, journalists and international press “began poring over al-Nashar’s life” (PCIC 97) only because he was suspected of complacency with the bombers, leading to extensive study and analysis of the topography the Basateen, a very poor sporadic residential area in Cairo, as well as of the suspect’s personal and social life. The concept of deterritorialization, where incidents in the peripheral affect the center of the territory, and the incidents

and events affecting one territory would inevitably lead to similar changes in another territory is quite clear in the above example. Miles notes that “Arab governments feed into (the) stereotype (that) Suicide bombers are often exceptional in some way, insane killers without conscience or reason ... painting Islamic extremists as illiterate fanatics drawn from the working class. But the reality is quite different: the shocking truth is that they are actually quite ordinary people” (PCIC 110–11). However, it is the frustration and anger for the injustice taking place in different parts of the world against Muslims that urge Yosra’s comment that “most people say (that the London attacks) never happened. It was just a trick by Tony Blair to make an excuse to declare war against Muslims” (PCIC 105). The conspiracy theory and the vicious circle never end: frustration leads to terroristic attacks on civilians, and that latter affects war and destruction everywhere. Transgressivity of ideology leads to transgressive

movements and attacks and that causes topographical changes.

Multifocalization and the Rhizomatic Canvas (endogenous)

In their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari used the notion of “lines of flight” to discuss and explain many other concepts like deterritorialization, stratification and segmentarity, relating these lines of flight to “the rigid molar aggregates (which) ensure and control the identity of each agency, including personal identity” (*Thousand Plateaus* 195). Deleuze and Guattari maintain that these ‘lines of flight’ are not only means to escape; they are political and philosophical, as they move on from specific details of a *whole* made up of diverse parts to more dynamic philosophical possibilities. *Playing Cards in Cairo* is an “*assemblage*”, to use Deleuze’s term, of a number of short, seemingly disconnected episodes that stand as examples of the city’s different strata, discussing issues like late marriage, unemployment, daunting social constructs and

ecopolitical challenges in Cairo. In order to recognize and appreciate the different lines of flight in the narrative, it is imperative to recognize the ‘rhizomatic canvas’ of stories since each and every story re-produces the image of the city from an endogenous perspective, and together all the stories provide a ‘total whole’ representation of the place. The rhizome as defined by Deleuze and Guattari describes a number of seemingly dissimilar relationships that, together, stand as an ‘assemblage’ and organize themselves in a non-hierarchical manner. The multiplicity and discrepancies of these relations, and the subsequent consequences generate a multi-dimensional representation of the place. The text, accordingly, touches upon diverse topics to portray a model of cultural and social changes since it “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social structures” (*Thousand Plateaus* 7). The different stories that constitute the body of the canvas are those of Egyptian women, partners in the *Tarneeb* game

who, more significantly, stand as *endogenous* viewers. As the narrative evolves, we realize that they are all very well-educated women from different social background, though belonging to the same social class. Being unmarried, they all suffer the same patriarchal constrains, though in different degrees. Yosra suffers the most strict family pressures since her older, conformist brother believes that she would stain the family honour with her ‘free’ attitude. At the other end of the spectrum stands the “open minded” Roda, one of three sisters who do not have any male brothers and whose father is working in one of the Gulf countries, hence the ample space and freedom that allows her to host the Tarneeb gamers in her house. In the middle, the spectrum hosts Nadia, Amira, Reem and other girls, each of whom has her detailed personal story but whose problems are mainly with the everyday social challenges in the streets, at work, in their relationships with others, or in the fact that they are unmarried. However, they all share one common trait: lying, affected by the “family pressures to conform to

impossible rules (which) have turned all the women into polished liars years ago ... It was the only way to cope with massive gulf between their private lives and the face they were obliged to show their families and the rest of the society” (PCIC 82).

The issue of marriage as a social status, is a challenge on its own if we consider all the economic situation and the unemployment conditions in Egypt. More complicated still would be marrying someone from a different religion, a greater challenge in a society where “religion supplies the framework by which most people make their important decisions in life” (PCIC 80). Marriage is every Egyptian household’s major concern, given the fact that “there are seven million women over the age of twenty in Egypt who have never been married, half of whom are over the age of thirty–five. There are also eleven million unmarried men” (PCIC 92). More than one marriage story is related that all mount down to one of the following conditions: first, Yosra, an oppressed drug addict in

constant search for a suiter. Second, Reem, who resorts to plastic surgery and “manage[s] to bring her mother around, explaining that if she only looked a little thinner she would be more likely to find a husband and that was all she needed to be happy” (PCIC 66). Reem’s dilemma is of the disastrous type since she decides to marry a Christian who intends to convert to Islam and then immigrate to Sweden since he has a Swedish passport. As the events unfold we know that she faces death threats from this man’s friends. Third, Nadia, Roda’s elder sister, a physician who is married with a child, and who endures an insecure life with a dogmatic abusive husband who beats her often, simply because a divorced woman faces greater problems in the Egyptian society. All women

“know that if Nadia wanted a divorced she was faced with an unappetizing choice. Under Egyptian law there are two types of divorce a woman can seek. Either she can ask for one based on her husband’s faults which if successful means she stands to win full financial rights. Or, under a

law introduced in 2000 a woman can divorce unilaterally. To prove her husband at fault, a woman must produce substantial evidence of harm, evidence that usually needs to be supported by eyewitness testimony. The unilateral method is faster but incurs a financial penalty that lasts for life. If she successfully divorces this way, she must return her dowry and surrender all financial claims including alimony” (PCIC 122).

There are of course other issues of child custody and, in case of lost divorce cases, complying to the Obedience Law. The details would go on forever to record divorced women’s struggle and challenges. From the above analysis, we realize that each of the characters’ lives in a specific segment in the city. Yet, keep on moving from one segment to another: from work to family segments for example. The action of telling their stories at the card table remains their only line of flight from the challenges they encounters in these segments. It is an action of challenging the traditional segments and the accompanying constraints.

While some lines of flight are invented to help the characters cope with the conflict between the different segments, like Roda's house (which will be discussed in details later on) in the above case, others are imposed from outside. The narrative introduces Dwayne, a young unemployed Egyptian who, frustrated by the economic condition and his financial status especially that he refuses his father's filthy money, could not marry Layla, the girl he loves "because her father and brothers did not approve the relationship ... (and asked him to) 'come back later in five years'" (PCIC 85). Later on in the events Dwayne is reported to have travelled to the war- struck Iraq "without second doubt. Although they had not even discussed pay, Dwayne was ready to leave at once" (PCIC 180). The young man did not have any other choices. The only remaining solution for him was to take the risk. Other young people who due to "the country's depressed economic situation, (where marriage costs) is "little more than a fantasy" could not afford the too costly requirements of

marriage in Egypt, they choose the *Urffi* marriage “a contentious but legally and religiously recognized institution that opens the door for sexual relations” (PCIC 92). Nevertheless, some of the *Urffi* cases ended in moral and tragic scandals to render “fourteen thousand paternity cases handled in the Egyptian courts ... mostly resulting from *Urffi* marriages” (PCIC 96). All the above stories, and much more in the novel highlight the realistic representation of the city which is provided from the exogenous, allogeous and endogenous perspectives. Though the city is presented in a specific moment, it occupies a stratum that extends over centuries. This rhizomatic pattern establishes the fact that the place exists and that it is objectively represented. Hence, the economic conditions ‘imposed’ another line of flight for the characters away from the ‘molar rigid system’ in Cairo, be this travelling outside Egypt in an action of deterritorialization, or *Urffi* marriages which stands as an example of challenging the rigid social constructs and the economic conditions.

Roda's House the 'other' third place?

The stratigraphic representation of the city is focused in the microcosmic house where all the friends meet. This group of youth gather from different social backgrounds with all the accompanying complications. The reason behind their secretive meeting at Roda's house can be explained through Michel Foucault's article "Of Other Spaces" (1986)⁶ which discusses the concept of the heterotopia or the 'other space', underlining its importance for alienating the self from the "determined inhabitants"(22). In this article Foucault defines different types of spaces which he frames in juxtapositions: "Sacred places and profane places; protected places and open, exposed places; urban places and rural places" (22). Yet, he maintains that despite the existence of all these places, there is always a desperate need for an 'other' space where humans can feel 'free' of

⁶ The article was translated and published in 1986, yet it is originally a lecture "to the circle of Architecture Studies in 1967, as mentioned in Dehaen and Cauter (2007), in their translation of the article. The reason behind the late translation is not mentioned in any of the references on Foucault, though some critics suggest that it must have been forgotten!

all socially dogmatic thinking, and all the restricting instructions imposed by social laws. Such a place, according to Foucault, can be defined “via the cluster of relations” (24) that characterize them, and that make them absolutely different from all the other sites. Roda’s house, in *Playing Cards in Cairo*, can justifiably be defined as a “heterotopia of deviation “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed (or locate themselves by choice?)” (“Of Other Spaces” 25). Roda’s house is a place that complies with the principle of ‘juxtaposing’ different other spaces outside of it, different other cultural backgrounds, different variations of Egypt’s social problems. It is a place that can be considered as a ‘microcosm’ of life in the big city of Cairo in its totality, with all its different devastating challenges, all being put on the ‘card table’ waiting for a good gamer to deal. It is a heterotopia for the desperate young women and their foreign freelancing journalist, perfect for the ‘slice’ of time in the narrative where all roads are blocked (literally

and metaphorically), making the majority, if not all the Egyptian youth, “arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (“Of Other Spaces” 26). The house plays a fundamental role in creating a different area, a real one – though temporary– that perfectly suits their needs for compensation, each according to their needs, but all marked by freedom of expression, of behavior, of movement, and above all, freedom of thought. It is in this place that Yosra, to mention one, can freely talk about her physical need to get married or even smoke a cigarette unjudged, or where Reem can announce her future plans with her Christian fiancée, or even where Roda herself can meet the man she loves with no social censures. It is in this house that they can dance to the music playing on the TV, or discuss some political issues announced in the news. It is also a place where they can laugh or cry.

Thus described, Roda's house can also be another of Oldenburg's 'third places'⁷. It reflects the individuals' need to meet up with others from diverse backgrounds for a different kind of communication that would expand their knowledge and enhance their performance in life. The most important characteristic for a place to be considered a *third place* according to Oldenburg is 'conversation' which "holds the attention of everyone in the circle" (10) not because the speaker is a more eloquent or capable of self-expression, but because "first, there is a broad latitude for members to introduce almost any subject and to change subjects often. Second, as those present come from different backgrounds, they are more interesting than those the individual lives or works with day in and day out. Third, ... one must both wait to talk and to judge one's words carefully when gaining the floor" (*The Great Place* 10); Hence Roda's apartment which

⁷ Based on his 1982 study with Brissett which promoted for better social interaction in the USA, Oldenburg introduced his 1999 book on *The Great Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, in which he focuses on the importance of the "third places", defined as being different from homes (first place) and work (second place).

turns into a refuge for the abandoned Yosra, or the frustrated Dwayne. It is completely different from Yosra's house with her authoritative brother, ill useless father and submissive mother at home (the first place), or from her devastating workplace (second place) where she mainly sleeps to pass the time. The Apartment turns into a "mutual aid society" to use Oldenburg's term, where all the young women adopt each other's problems, and plan to solve them. Yosra's blind dates with possible suitors are planned there, and lies concerning her late returns to her house are forged there. Nadia's problems with her abusive husband are discussed in this apartment, so are her virtual friendships with other men. The list of examples is endless! Therefore, we can never consider Roda's apartment just another place for 'playing cards', it is a third place *par excellence*, where all the characters fulfill their needs, a "place that hosts the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gathering of individuals" (*The Great Place* 16) as Oldenburg defines the third place. The microcosmic place

inside the big city helps the Egyptian young ladies discuss their problems, think aloud, speak their thought, or even dream and plan for the future. It is more of a ‘free land’ in an oppressive community. Those meetings might also produce the initial steps for a revolution which Miles foreshadowed would happen “for the slightest reason” (PCIC 70)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tuan, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari as well as Westphal’s and Tally’s literature on the different approaches to space/place collaborate to emphasize the importance of the imagined and the real places as mirror to each other. Refrentiality, a key concept in Westphal’s geocritical approach, is always accompanied with spatiotemporality, and both are affected by transgressivity that results from the uncontrollably malleable nature of all borders. The simultaneous, two way effect of transgressivity, together with the above characterizing principles invite for a

multifocal and multisensorial approach and analysis of the representation of place in literary works.

The present paper attempted to present a geocritical approach that “explores, seeks, surveys, reads, and writes a place; (an approach that) looks at, listens to, touches, smells, and tastes spaces” as Tally maintains (*Geocritical Explorations* 3). The paper presented an analysis of the relationship between place and literature, by scrutinizing the image of the city through the multifocal perspectives: the endogenous, allogenuous and exogenous as explained by Westphal and exemplified for in *Playing Cards in Cairo*. The paper also attempts to highlight the ‘lines of flight’ that challenge all the rigid systems, and epitomize the characters’ technique to escape them, and to move through the different strata. In his re–presentation of the city, Miles has allowed each of his characters their own line of flight, their own attempt to deterritorialized “the massive powerful social systems” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 217). The intentional action of discussing the different problems they face in the

outside world stands as the characters' defense mechanism against the powerful "molar aggregates" (which) ensue and control the identity of each agency, including (the) personal identity" (*Thousand Plateaus* 195). It is through the lines of flight that both the author and the characters are capable of moving between the different segments of the society. Miles has used his own line of flight to move from the micro representation of the card game and Roda's house to the macro perception of the whole city to the extent of predicting a social revolution (ironically enough, the year 2011 marks the date of the 25th of January Egyptian revolution as well as the publication of the novel). On the other hand, he also uses the line of flight to escape subjectivity and the 'egocentered' representation of the city by giving the floor for the endogenous viewer to speak about it.

The paper has also examined the transgressive effect of globalization on Cairo by examining the varied references to the spatial changes that came over the place, the culture, and the people's ideology from the author and

the different characters' point of view. The social problems discussed in *Playing Cards in Cairo*, in addition to many other problems illuminate our understanding of the place with its crowded and noisy street, people's hostile attitudes and their interference in each other's life details, as well as their indifference to much of the terroristic events happening all over the world.

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