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DIALOGUE AND EXCHANGE:

**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE IN THE
HUMANITIES**

24-26 OCTOBER 2020

CAIRO/ EGYPT

TJHSS



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The Subaltern Resurrected: A Study of Bahaa Taher's *The Sunset Oasis* (2007) and *Love in Exile* (1995)

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Abstract

Sexuality has always been a vital tool employed by the colonial powers. For example, European painters during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used to highlight the exotic charms of the colonized East through portrayals of harems replete with exceptionally beautiful and seductive women. In a point of fact the colonialist discourse have always promoted assumptions where the West is the superior, dominant, male and the East is the inferior, submissive female. With the demise of colonialism across the second half of the past century, formerly colonized voices tended to subvert these dichotomies. Hence, literary representations of the sexual encounters between the colonized men and the European women become one vehicle for resistance against colonialism. Baha'a Taher, the prominent Egyptian novelist, has amply voiced such encounters in his novels *Love in Exile* (1995) and *The Sunset Oasis* (2007). The following paper explores the concept of subaltern and how it is embodied by Taher's male protagonists. It further highlights how both attempt to overcome their national and personal dilemmas through reversing the power relations embedded in colonial discourse.

Key words: Colonialism – Exile- European Women– Sexuality- Subaltern

Introduction

“My bedroom became a theatre of war; my bed a patch of hell...it was like bedding a shooting-star, like mounting the back of a Prussian military march. The bitter smile was continually on her mouth...I had lost the combat” (Salih 33- 34).

Sex and colour have always been key factors perpetually defining and reshaping postcolonial dialectics. Intimate connections between white European women and coloured men from the colonies have particularly been an indispensable question to postcolonial studies. The colonialist discourse marks the colonisers' assumption of their own superiority which is contrasted against the alleged inferiority of the indigenous cultures.(Tyson 425-26) Whereas the West is the civilized, rational, superior, masculine and advanced “self”, the East is the savage, irrational, inferior, feminine and backward “other.” One tool for repudiating this Eurocentric worldview was subverting these

dichotomies. Henceforth, the encounter between white European women and colonised men becomes a vital means of resistance where the subaltern becomes the conqueror.

This paper investigates how the Eurocentric roles of masculine colonizer and feminine subaltern are reversed in the literary output by formerly colonized voices with particular focus on Bahaa Taher's *The Sunset Oasis* (2007) and *Love in Exile* (1995). It attempts to explore how the love/sexual encounters between colonized men and Western women constitute a vehicle for resistance either implicitly or explicitly. Moreover, it highlights to what extent those portrayals contrast with the conforming Western female stereotype.

Though set almost a century apart, Mahmoud Abdel Zaher in *The Sunset Oasis* and the unnamed narrator in *Love in Exile* seek to retrieve parts of their fragmented selves through their love/ sexual encounters with white European women. *The Sunset Oasis* is set in the

earliest days of the British military occupation of Egypt in the late 1800s. Therefore, Abdel Zaher's marriage to Catherine and his attempts to subjugate her can be an outcry against the hideous assault launched by the English against his national and personal identities. *Love in Exile*, on the other hand depicts the dilemma of a defeated, middle-aged Egyptian journalist. The unnamed narrator forces himself into exile to escape the sense of futility he experiences following the collapse of his filial life and his disillusionment with political and nationalist ideologies. His unexpected love affair with the Austrian fellow journalist Brigitte serves to cocoon him from the excruciating feeling of loss. Both protagonists seem to have used their encounters with European women to achieve victories over the Western usurper that have been otherwise out of reach.

1. Who is the Subaltern?

The term subaltern is defined in the *Merriam Webster Online Dictionary* as an adjective synonymous to "subordinate." The term can be traced back to Marxist ideology. It was first coined by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) during the first half of the twentieth century. Being a political detainee, Gramsci used the term to indicate the "subjected underclass in a society on whom the dominant power exerts its hegemonic influence" (*Oxford Reference*). It was almost six decades later when the term evolved into the critical discipline currently known as "Subaltern Studies".

The year 1982 witnessed the birth of "Subaltern Studies" through the publication of a series of articles by eight Indian scholars led by the historian Ranajit Guha. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, those articles tackled modern Indian history. Being trained and educated in the West, the scholars seemed to embark on a quest to reclaim their long disfigured history. (10-11) Their major critique of Indian history was that it had been so far told from the perspective of the British oppressor. Their nation's rich and ancient heritage was reduced to a mere colony within the

British Empire. They focused the subaltern in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, language and culture. Eventually, subaltern studies extended beyond the Indian history to encompass interest in the cultural heritage of former colonies across the globe. Henceforth, subaltern studies can be considered a culminating phase to a variety of cultural reactions towards the colonial enterprise.

2. European Women as the Subaltern:

The geopolitical situation across the past century has rendered literary representation of women in colonial/ postcolonial contexts a fertile arena for scholarly research. The position of white European women, in particular, is quite intriguing. As members of a strictly patriarchal society, European women during the nineteenth century up to the early twentieth century would be regarded as the "subaltern" in their own communities. Felicia Appell describes this marginalized status of women in her article: "Victorian Ideals: The Influence of Society's Ideals on Victorian Relationships". She argues that "Patriarchal society did not allow women to have the same privileges as men. Consequently, women were ascribed the more feminine duties of caring for the home and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity." This view is further consolidated by Richard D. Altick states, "a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most [to a man]: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs" (54). However, once they are in contact with colonial subjects they become the privileged "Self." Despite their long relegation within their own communities, European women had always played an influential role in colonies. In her article "Beyond Complicity: Questions and Issues for White Women in Aboriginal History", Victoria Haskins explores the controversial position of white women within colonies. Digging through her great grandmother's history, Haskins highlights the dual role of white women in colonies as both mistresses of the natives and

advocates of their plight: “[a] privileged woman, [she] was indeed both complicit and resistant...through her individual story, I could undertake a broader analysis of white women's involvement in colonial conquest as 'mistresses' to Indigenous servants, and of white women's problematic histories of speaking out on a range of issues around indigenous people and experiences.” Such a vital role has inspired prolific literary output. The Western literary canon is, indeed, replete with Western female representations within colonial territories. Yet, many of these representations offer neither a vivid nor a realistic reflection of European women back then. Regan Reeves argues that Western writers tend to offer a lifeless model of white women; one that is more of an idol than a human:

This superficiality is not limited to their portrayal of the native women only but to European women as well, despite their best efforts to convey the ultimate virtuosity and character possessed by the European ladies present. While they appear to demonize the native women through sexualization and embellished savagery, they are simultaneously highlighting the shallowness surrounding the European ideal of a proper woman which bears no distinguishing traits beyond plainness, submissiveness and moral fastidiousness. The concept of the “Angel in the House” is nearly as damaging a stereotype as that of the sensual and exotic indigenous female.

The heroines in *Love in Exile* and *The Sunset Oasis* are worlds apart from the notion of the “Angel in the House”. Both Brigitte and Catherine break away from the norms imposed by their societies. Brigitte in *Love in Exile* is an offbeat model of European women. She challenges the colonial and racist attitudes still interred within the European mentality even after the heyday of imperialism is long gone. Her marriage to her African colleague, Albert renders

her an outcast within her own community. An expat himself, Albert could not tolerate the miseries inflicted upon him by his status as a “subaltern”. He soon succumbs to the temptations of having a secure and stable life leaving Brigitte behind. The excruciating experience ignites more rebellion within her. She continues to support refugees from Third World countries, who are for most of her fellow citizens constitute a hideous threat. Similarly, Catherine in *The Sunset Oasis* is offers an unorthodox representation of Victorian women. She is the dashing widow who goes unchaperoned on excursions that are considered utterly fatal by her peers. She is not intimidated by the perilous journey to Siwa. Instead, she is adamant to accompany her husband; not only for the sake of love but also to fulfill her ambition of unveiling the tomb of Alexander the Great.

Though in their connection with Mahmoud Abdul Zahir and the unnamed narrator, Catherine and Brigitte are intended to be the submissive party, both women are indeed initiators. Each takes the first step; which is, nevertheless, against the eastern concept of manhood. This is clearly stated by Catherine as she reflects on her earliest encounters with Mahmoud:

For a long time he was hesitant in his approaches to me and I was the one who did most of the talking. I think the turning point came when he found out I was Irish and I hated the British for occupying my country, as they had occupied his, and felt shame at bearing their nationality, which I would get rid of the day Ireland gained its independence. After this the barriers between us collapsed. His resistance, which I could see in his eyes just as I could the love, came to an end. (24)

The previous quote is quite significant in many ways. Not only does it highlight Catherine as an initiator; but also it reveals that Mahmoud's love for her is strongly linked to the colonial situation. Mahmoud is reluctant to

become involved with Catherine because he believes she is British; that is she is his enemy. It is her being part of a rebellious nation who fights against the British oppressor. Such a leading spirit is true of Brigitte as it is of Catherine. It is Brigitte who invites the unnamed protagonist to her house and subtly allows him to be part of her life as she tells him bits and pieces of her past. She is the one who seduces him into having sex while he remains dysfunctional. The protagonist's impotence is perhaps suggestive of his inability to get over his personal and national defeats. For him, Brigitte remains the far-fetched territory whom he still cannot conquer.

In spite of their dashing characters, both Brigitte and Catherine can still fall into the realm of the subaltern. In terms of identity, both of them belong to the less privileged parts of Europe. Whereas Catherine belongs to a nation that has been at odds with the world's greatest imperial power, Brigitte is an Austrian; a citizen of a country that has been long living in the shadow of other greater neighbouring territories. Their connection to colonial subjects further contributes to their status as subaltern. Their colour, race and gender within a foreign render them less powerful entity.

3. Fiction or an Autobiography

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2007), C.L.Innes argues that the autobiographical tone is integral to postcolonial writing.

Another strategy frequently found in postcolonial writing sidesteps entering into dialogue on the colonizer's terms by grounding the text in autobiography, starting from the self as the central point of reference... [M]any postcolonial writers have drawn on their [past]experience sometimes as a means of conveying precolonial culture, a relatively innocent world preceding the impact of foreign educational

systems...[P]ostcolonial autobiographies are often written to portray the author as a representative of his cultural group...or as the embodiment of a new nation's struggle to come into being and its establishment of a cultural and ideological identity. (56)

The features of postcolonial autobiography as elaborated in the above-mentioned quote can be applicable to *Love in Exile* and *The Sunset Oasis*. Both novels can be referred to as autobiographical fiction since they echo significant phases of the author's life. Baha'a Taher is a renowned Egyptian author who is acclaimed worldwide. Born in Cairo in 1935, Baha'a Taher graduated with a degree in literature from the University of Cairo. After attending Cairo University, he helped found Cairo Radio's cultural programme in 1957, among other writers. Under Anwar Al Sadat's rule in the 1970s, Taher's writings were censored and he was eventually dismissed from his job owing to his Nasserite inclinations and involvement in left-wing causes. Upon being banned from writing in 1975, he left Egypt and travelled widely in Africa and Asia seeking work as a translator. During the 1980s and 1990s he lived in Switzerland, where he worked as a translator for the United Nations. Afterwards he returned to Egypt, where he continues to reside.

The autobiographical element can highly be reflected in the chosen setting for both texts. Both the temporal and spatial setting amply conveys the sense of exile in both narratives. Exile has been a dominant feature of Taher's life. Both Siwa Oasis and the unnamed European country are relegated territories. They are at the outskirts of the world where nothing of importance really happens. As for the time frame, *Love in Exile* depicts the era of Egyptian/ Arab disillusionment in the aftermath of Sadat's normalization policies and the Israeli expansion in Lebanon. Meanwhile *The Sunset Oasis* chronicles the sense of futility and loss that pervaded the Egyptian society following the

bombardment of Alexandria in 1882. Whereas, the spatial setting reinforces the idea of physical exile, the temporal setting reinforces the idea of psychological banishment and self-alienation. *Love in Exile*, can arguably be considered a personal and national autobiography. The unnamed protagonist's journey echoes Taher's banishment owing to his Nasserite inclinations. It also offers a paradigm of the disillusioned generation in the post nationalist era. It parallels the journey of those who grew in the heyday of nationalistic movements but soon witnessed its demise and futility.

The image of the defeated men can arguably constitute another autobiographical trace in both narratives. In his critique of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Waïl Hassan explores the emergence of troubled gender roles as a consequence of colonialism. He argues that:

[t]he convergence of colonial and racial stereotypes...produces a troubled gender configuration in which an African man occupies masculine and feminine subject positions and in which, conversely, a European woman occupies the equally uncertain positions of masculinity and femininity. In other words, the category of race often destabilizes gendered colonial identities. (309)

Unlike Mustapha Sa'eed, Tayeb Salih's protagonist, none of the male figures portrayed in the selected texts conform to the notion of the alpha male. The opening quotes in both *Love in Exile* and *The Sunset Oasis* introduces the male protagonist as the less privileged party compared to his female partner. *Love in Exile* opens with the protagonist acknowledgement of his utter helplessness before Brigitte:

I burnt with lust for her; lust that I would never be able to quench...She was young and pretty. I was an old divorced father. Love never crossed my mind, nor have I expressed my lust by any means. I was a

Cairene expelled from the city to alienation in the far north. She too was a foreigner. But she was European and her passport makes every corner of Europe her homeland. (1)¹

Likewise, in *The Sunset Oasis*, Mahmoud's cowardice is implicitly juxtaposed against Catherine's courage as Mr. Harvey states "Your wife is a brave woman" (13). Thus; the opening lines in both texts establish the male protagonists as weak. Both Mahmoud and the exiled journalist are unfulfilled nationally, professionally, emotionally and filially. It can be argued that the exiled journalist is an extension of the character of Mahmoud Abdul Zahir. He is rather a milder version of the former. Drained by the successive disappointments and disillusionments passed from one generation to another, he is unwilling to fight. Hence, he "would never be able to quench" his lust for Brigitte nor does he show any sign of it.

Another example of the defeated men is Albert, Brigitte's former husband, who is in a state of a limbo. Though he shows excessive pride in his African identity and openly despises what he calls the European limited mindedness, his connection to Brigitte failed the test of life. In Taher's narrative, Albert changes for the worse after his marriage to Brigitte, though the latter spares no effort to make him happy. This might be suggestive of the idea of the contaminating Europe. He's almost successful in his attempt to conquer her. She is willing, for example, to settle down with him in his own African country once he is permitted to get back there. She is also willing to bear him ten boys because his culture does not welcome girls. Yet, tormented by his own alienation and inability to stand the racist attitude he gives her up and eventually becomes compliant with his national leader whom he detested in the past.

5. Conclusion

¹ The excerpt is translated into English by the researcher herself.

Both Abdel Zaher and the unnamed narrator are models of unfulfilled eastern men. Their connection with European women is part and parcel of their quest for identity. They both seek through this connection to resuscitate their fragmented selves; but each in his own way. However, the futility of their attempts may voice Taher's belief in the impotency of the East in the face of the West. As long as a genuine nationalistic triumph is not fulfilled, the East cannot erase the defeats inflicted upon it by the West.

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