

*The other's transformational voyage and mature hybridity
in the Bamboo Stalk*

رحلة الآخر التحويلية والهجنة الناضجة في رواية ساق البامبو

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Abstract:

Otherness is addressed with reservation in Kuwaiti literature and the other's reality is obscured. Nevertheless, the daring nature of Saud Alsanousi's *the Bamboo Stalk* through which he condemns his society makes it atmospheric and unconventional. The article is grounded upon the close reading of this narrative that gives the marginalized other a voice to speak for himself. Our focus is laid upon the other's perception of the otherer -Kuwait. Through the grandmother Ghanima, the author underlines class-consciousness and societal complicity in othering and excluding. We conclude that the protagonist's search for identity results in his expulsion to the Philippines and sentences him to mature hybridity.

Keywords: Exclusion; identity; othering; mature hybridity; *the Bamboo Stalk*.

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ملخص:

تناول الأدب الكويتي مسألة الغيرية بنوع من التحفظ والتعتيم على واقع الآخر في الكويت، إلا أن جرأة سعود السنعوسي في طرحه مواضيع تدين مجتمعه في رواية ساق البامبو تجعلها رواية مميزة. يعتمد المقال على قراءة متأنية لهذه الرواية التي تحرر الآخر وتعطيه صوتا ليبر عن نفسه، وينصب تركيزنا على تصور الآخر للمجتمع الذي اعتبره آخرًا. من خلال شخصية غنيمة، يسلط المؤلف الضوء على الوعي الطبقي والتواطؤ المجتمعي في التهميش والإقصاء. ينهى المقال إلى أن الرحلة التحويلية لبطل الرواية خلال بحثه عن الهوية تساهم في رجوعه، أو بالأحرى إرجاعه، إلى الفلبين لينتهي به الأمر إلى التهجين الناضج. كلمات مفتاحية: الإقصاء، الهوية، التهميش، الهجنة الناضجة، ساق البامبو.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is rife with narratives on colonialism, migration, identity crisis, otherness, etc. However, marginalized individuals have not been granted the permission to tell their own stories; they have mostly been narrated on their behalf. Surprisingly, *the Bamboo Stalk* deviates from the conventional Kuwaiti novel and gives the other a voice to speak for himself. Substantially owing to its experimental approach of the other, the novel is influential and cathartic. The protagonist, José, informs us about his father's exclusionary, class-conscious society throughout his experience there. Through Ghanima, José's paternal grandmother, the author underlines an entire class-conscious society wherein materiality surpasses humanity and traditions precede all considerations.

The society in which *the Bamboo Stalk* is written offers an in-depth understanding of the characters' actions and inclinations vis-à-vis their status. Among other gulf countries, Kuwait is the destination of migrants whose socio-economic situation is, more often than not, deplorable due to the demise in their homelands. In reality, many of them are othered, maltreated and excluded by class-conscious citizens. José's mother, a Filipina maid, is one of those migrants. Her east-to-east migration is the embodiment of migrants' struggle in Kuwait. Through her experience, Alsanousi daringly condemns Kuwait and explicitly accentuates its exclusionary nature. In this article, we trace the José's transformational journey which starts with topophilia and results in topophobia. We conclude that by the end of his search for one identity, José reaches mature hybridity and accepts his duality.

2. Home, Topophilia and Topophobia

The notion of home is not easily defined. It is subject to the definer's experience, purpose and frame of reference. The question: What is home? can be the starting point for many a researcher but it does not necessarily result in the same answer. Consequently, the prospect of home is shaped and understood according to certain criteria such as who defines it, under which circumstances and for what purpose. In tandem with home, the notions of topophilia and topophobia are utilized to amalgamate both psychology and geography, and for their interrelation with one's (dis)location. The two concepts are overlooked as a focus of scrutiny in the humanities and social sciences despite their relation to placement and displacement. Incontestably, topophilia and topophobia are gaining momentum in Geography Studies, but their connectedness with one's attachment and detachment

requires their integration in postcolonial and intercultural studies. The term hybridity, for instance, is appropriated from Biology by Homi Bhabha (1994) and it is incorporated in postcolonial studies by reason of its applicability. This accounts for the import and the inevitability of interdisciplinarity. For this reason, we borrow the two terms for their pertinence to intercultural studies and to *the Bamboo Stalk*. José's bond with place and his longing for a hospitable home mark his transformational journey as will be exemplified in some details.

As regards the nomenclature of home, a throng of scholars hold disparate standpoints. Among other scholars, Mezei and Briganti state that "our consciousness needs to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, its longing for home" (2002, p839). For Etoroma, home refers to unconditional acceptance and involves individuals' identification with place, irrespective of it being physical or not (2006, p103). As accurately expounded by Mezei, Briganti and Etoroma, home is constructed within the consciousness wherein one is placed or displaced and it is interlinked with a feeling of belonging beyond the physicality of place.

Derived from the Greek words *topo* (place) and *philia* (love of), topophilia is intertwined with one's emotional attachment to a certain geography. The coinage of the term is often attributed to the British writer and poet John Betjeman in 1947. It is, however, the English-American poet Wystan Hugh Auden who first utilized it in the former's introduction of *Slick but Not Streamlined* in 1948. A decade later, precisely in 1958, the term topophilia was incorporated in the Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard. In *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental*

Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values, the Chinese-American leading figure in human geography Yi-Fu Tuan (1990) approached the prospect of Topophilia from an interactional perspective. The latter highlighted the interconnection between humans and place. Topophilia, then, entails individuals' deep attachment to and positive perception of place. This being said, place contributes to and can be associated with the construction of individuals' identity and being located within a fixed geography, as opposed to being displaced, means to have an identity.

Pertaining to the prospect of topophobia, not much has been written on it. Etymologically speaking, it is a portmanteau of *topo* (place) and *phobia* (fear of something). Fear or anxiety towards a place is contoured by individuals who happen to have negative experiences that frustrate them. There are many phobias associated with place such as claustrophobia and geophyrophobia. Once put into practice in a postcolonial context, topophobia's physical detachment embroils psychological dislocation. Unlike topophilia, topophobia connotes negative responses to a certain place. The sense of place and the attitudes converge to shape individuals' topophilia or topophobia. Indeed, one's estimation of place is of direct relation to how one connects and disconnects with it. Consequently, it is often wrought by individuality and subjectivity. What is more, the fear of place can be caused by temporary cause-and-effect situations.

The notion of topophobia is somewhat vague mostly due to the scarcity of descriptive and experimental research on it. In *Topophobia: A Phenomenology of Anxiety*, Trigg maintains that "identity is inextricably bound with the fixed locality and

familiarity of the home” (2017, p140). By this, he accounts for familiarity as an indispensable aspect contributing to the location of oneself within a specific home or place. Identity is constructed within a set place and any potential shift from what is familiar to that which is unfamiliar results in disequilibrium. In the same book, Trigg (2017) eloquently puts forward that being lost is “a radical departure from our everyday experience of being-in-the-world” (p120). Being lost is not necessarily a geographical incident; it is mostly a psychological state of being that entails temporary or permanent dislocation, as well as identity crisis. This crisis presents itself when one starts to ask existential questions such as: who am I? Where am I? Where do I belong?

Perceptibly, the notions of home, topophilia and topophobia are interconnected even if they propose different perceptions of place. While home embroils attachment, physical or otherwise, topophilia connotes the creation of home(s) based upon one’s positive responses or imagination of settings. In the latter, one’s connectedness with place, whether a homeland or not, is related to that place’s reception. Topophobia, as its name denotes, is the outcome of a negative response to a certain place which boosts displacement and detachment. Thus, being topophobic to a place that instigates alienation and evokes feelings of exile is a normal response. As will be illustrated, the protagonist of *the Bamboo Stalk* is subjected to homelessness at home, topophilia in Kuwait and topophobia after his appalling experience there.

3. *The Bamboo Stalk*: Text and Context

Saud Alsanousi’s *the Bamboo Stalk* is a page-turner novel published in 2012 in Arabic as ساق البامبو (Saq al Bambuu) and

translated into English by Jonathan Wright three years later. The narrative is divided into six parts, each of which is preceded by José Rizal's quotes. The peculiarity of Alsanousi's bestseller lies in its approach of the other's situation in Kuwait. The author offers the protagonist a voice to speak for himself and portray the country from his perspective. Ghanima, the protagonist's paternal grandmother, embodies a whole class-conscious society. There are many Josés in Kuwait and other Gulf countries. In specie, there are many Isas in the Philippines. Nonetheless, they remain in the dark for political grounds and other restrictions. The daring nature of the author is what distinguishes *the Bamboo Stalk*.

José Mendoza was born in Kuwait to a Kuwaiti bourgeois and a Filipina maid. His hybrid origin is not accepted in his father's country, and thus, he is ostracized before his birth for reasons beyond his control. His father, Rashid El-Tarouf, is willing to give José recognition as one of the family members but he fails to convince his authoritative mother, Ghanima. In this case, Rashid sends José and his mother, Joséphine, to the Philippines and promises her to bring him back to reside in paradise, referring to Kuwait. Both mother and son live in the Philippines in poverty. At the age of eighteen, José returns to Kuwait to be received with contempt, deprecation and exclusion. Only his half-sister, Khawla, seems to accept him without any reservation or question. As readers, we take her stance as the new generation's willingness to include and embrace the other. Yet, Ghanima, who is the symbol of the custom-oriented Kuwaiti society, still rejects him even after Rashid's death.

In Kuwait, José is preordained to rejection and exclusion

before his birth. Traditions, in this case, are built upon irrational principles. Ghanima's son, Rashid El-Tarouf, is secretly married to their Filipina maid Josephine who gets pregnant and delivers José in Kuwait. This marriage is regarded as an act of disgrace and shame by Ghanima. For her, society and its customs matter the most. At some point, we expect a change of heart on Ghanima's part, especially after Rashid's death. Yet, she betrays no emotion or change and the reader is shaken by her steadfast rejection throughout the narrative. The author's technique to shock readers about their own reality from the other's standpoint in order to make a change in society is efficacious. Howbeit, it can be temporary and guarantees no action as in the case of *the Bamboo Stalk*.

4. The Search for One Identity

While trolling for a hospitable home and a fixed identity, José is split between two incongruent identities. Throughout the journey from the Philippines to Kuwait, he tries to locate himself within one identity, but to no avail. The title of the narrative is indicative of identity crisis, ambivalence and rootlessness. Like the bamboo tree which is planted anywhere without roots, José does not have a sense of belonging to one identity. José's identity crisis starts with his polyonymy. In the same manner, the -figurative- crisis of the bamboo plant begins with the plurality of names. This plant is called khaizuran in Kuwait, kawayan in the Philippines and bamboo in many countries. Apart from the issue of his name, José finds himself in confrontation with two different languages, religions and nations.

The depiction of hybridity is not a new literary feature, as it

prevails particularly in Algerian literature. It frequently presents itself due to Algeria's historical past. In Ahlem Mosteghanemi's *Dhakirat al-Jassad*, for instance, the protagonist Khaled is torn between Algeria and France. He belongs to Algeria, but it no longer belongs to him when he loses his arm during the war of independence. This is how his trauma and sense of unbelonging start. In the same way, Leila Sebbar's protagonist in *Shérazade Trilogy* is grappled with identity crisis. She is half-Algerian half-French, which means she belongs to the colonized and the colonizer. In Shérazade's case, the peaceful encounter between Self and Other is ruptured for deep-rooted, historical grounds. Although José's struggle in Kuwait differs from that of Khaled's and Shérazade's, it remains frustrating as theirs. They remain torn halves.

By dint of his compelled otherness, José is embattled and sentenced to marginalization and alienation. The journey from the Philippines to Kuwait puts him in confrontation with an unfamiliar world wherein he feels lost. Noticeably, it is the lack of familiarity and the dire environment that exacerbate his sense of unbelonging. The first information that presents itself about the protagonist is the dilemma related to his name which is pronounced differently. In his mother's country, his name is "pronounced the English way, with an *h* sound at the start. In Arabic, rather like in Spanish, it begins with a *kh* sound. In Portuguese, though it's written the same way, it opens with a *j*, as in Joséph" (Alsanousi, 2015, p1). Seemingly, José's words seem sardonic when stating all these different spellings for one named who, in spite of plurality, remains a half in search of wholeness. In Kuwait, for instance, his name has nothing to do with all those

names. He is Isa. (Alsanousi, 2015, p1). Ironically, the word Isa is equivalent to the number *one* in the Philippines. Needless to say, he is somewhat discomfited to be called a number instead of a name. Indeed, he has no social belonging or individual identity in his father's country.

Having two identities that are poles apart is the culmination of estrangement. Ironically, José is recognized in an excluding and alienating manner. In Kuwait, he is known as the Filipino. In the Philippines, he is recognized as the Arab. In this regard, he maintains: "If only I could have been 'the Filipino' in the Philippines or 'the Arab' in Kuwait" (Alsanousi, 2015, p4). His wish portrays how these two societies alienate and exclude him based upon superficial grounds. Physical appearance plays a vital role in the exacerbation of his situation. Due to his Filipino looks, he is othered in Kuwait. In the Philippines, they call him Arab because of the beard. In reality, his hybridity makes its first appearance at the airport upon his arrival to Kuwait. He was reluctant to stand in either of the queues to stamp his passport (Alsanousi, 2015, p159). This indecision as regards Kuwaiti and Filipino lines underscores his in-betweenness and alienation from both origins. Hybridity, in-betweenness might be spaces for self-fulfilment or openness. But, in this case, family and public spaces do not allow any freedom, recognition or at least tolerance or acceptance.

José's Mature Hybridity

Unable to stay in Kuwait, José is compelled to return to his mother's country. By the end of the journey, he ends up "a victim for a guilt he does not commit, just a hybrid or in-between" (Al

Areqi, 2015, p84). Indeed, José is a victim of societal rigidity and parental mismatch. He did not have prior prejudice about Kuwait. For him, it was the promising paradise. Upon arrival, however, he started to see the concealed portions of Joséphine's stories and his identity crisis was invigorated. The reality of Kuwait, he realized, is far from what his mother has instilled within him as a kid. It is inevitable for him to be in a situation where his origin must present itself, but it is still impossible for him to belong to one country or culture.

The football match between Kuwait and the Philippines is enough to determine to which nation José belongs. Nonetheless, he is held in-between and this situation has only reminded him of his identity crisis. In reality, being half-Kuwaiti, half-Filipino provokes anxiety and ambivalence in situations as such. When the Filipino team scores against Kuwait in the first half, José professes "Everyone clapped for joy, except for me, who felt like I'd scored an own goal" (Alsanousi, 2015, p370). This is a disclosure of bicultural identity and hybridity. When the Kuwaiti team scores in the second half, José claims: "Here I am, scoring again in my other goal" (Alsanousi, 2015, p370). Again, this statement shows the protagonist's oscillation between two identities. Although he is not fully recognized in both countries, José displays maturity and concern. After Kuwait's goal, he maintains "I don't want one of my teams to defeat my other team" (Alsanousi, 2015, p370). Such a statement reveals that José understands or rather is aware of his own identity fragmentation because of his imposed duality by birth which is both constraining and unavoidable.

Pertaining to José's decision not to watch the whole match,

Jarrar (2015) refers to Lo's "happy hybridity" (p15) to describe José's state of being and justify his decision. For her, José has ultimately reached an identity armistice which entails "a positive side of hybridity" (Jarrar, 2015, p15). Yet, nowhere do we sense happiness. We challenge Jarrar's statement as the protagonist's decision betrays no positive emotion or happiness. Quite the contrary, it is a telling sign of his maturity and awareness of his own division into two opposite selves. That term is somewhat inappropriate in the accurate construal of the protagonist's final destination and ambivalent emotions. The latter's unwillingness to watch connotes incapacity to take sides, despite all dereliction and mistreatment. His decision to stop watching is an obligatory acceptance of two different beings, and a declaration of bilateral involvement. José is not happy or satisfied, he only surrenders to reality and embraces the two compelled identities. We propose mature hybridity to justify José's behaviour. This alternative is proposed because of the abysmal experiences in both paternal and maternal countries. Those experiences contributed colossally to José's maturity and comprehension. By mature hybridity we mean the acceptance, voluntary or otherwise, of one's irreparable fragmentation and two identities which complete each other to find some peace or simply because nothing can be done to change the reality.

4. CONCLUSION

This article brought into focus the other's perception of an exclusionary society. The close reading of Saud Alsanousi's *the Bamboo stalk* has been employed -along with the terms of home, topophilia and topophobia- to scrutinize José's search for identity in Kuwait. It also underscored the protagonist's attachment to

and detachment from place. José's futile struggle for recognition and acceptance changes his attitude about his father's country that compels him to be the other. Ghanima, who is the voice of traditional rigid society, sums up the whole system that consecrates the bourgeois and degrades the other who is doomed to be an outsider in search of a complete individual identity. Through this novel, Alsanousi himself invites the audience to rethink and change their exclusionary, class-conscious attitude, which cultivates prejudices and stereotypes blindly. Though hybridity is debateful, this literary example through the character of José claims that it can harm as well as enrich the protagonist. The article concluded that José's voyage, both psychological and geographical, brings about a prise de conscience in knowing the dire consequences of fragmented soul in a no man's land.

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