

Alterity in Moroccan Francophone Literature: Rethinking Postcolonial Reading in Light of an Aesthetics of the Text

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Abstract

The paper deals with the identity problematic and the self/other binary, in particular. It aims at avoiding the risk of mummifying such concepts within the postcolonial discourse taking into consideration that they carry far more significance than what a postcolonial reading would offer. So the adapted strategy is shifting the perspective from a postcolonial treatment of the problematic to an aesthetic one through setting in opposition the postcolonial and aesthetic undertaking of these concepts. The study is carried out at a textual level as it focuses on the aesthetics of the text itself away from any theoretical framework. Two Moroccan Francophone literary texts are subjects to this study: Tahar Benjelloun's *L'Auberge des Pauvres* (1999) and Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé Simple* (1954). The study of these two works stimulates the reader to reconsider and rethink what have been taken for granted as postcolonial theory has flooded works of the same kind.

Keywords: aesthetic, alterity, Francophone, Other, postcolonial, text

The self/other binary constitutes a significant problematic in Moroccan Francophone literature. The main question here relates to the way this binary is processed from a postcolonial perspective and the extent to which it can be broadened within an aesthetic framework. So the aim is twofold: display the postcolonial practice in tackling the self/other binary and ,then, reconsider this binary from a different perspective through analyzing the notion of the Self and the Other in Tahar Benjelloun's *L'Auberge des Pauvres* (1999) and Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé Simple* (1954) .

Inquiring into the postcolonial configuration of the Self and the Other is to be performed at cultural, social and gender levels. It is obvious that no interpretation other than the one related to the center/periphery can be introduced at the cultural level. Since postcolonialism, as a discourse and critical practice, has emerged as a reaction to colonialism, it has developed a certain allergy to Othering. Consequently, it has directed its efforts towards carving out the acts of injustice and the discursive statements and practices considered to be residuals of colonialism. As a counter discourse, postcolonialism takes colonialism as a point of departure and this is the very reason why it cannot move beyond its label as a reaction. This is not to minimize the efforts of postcolonial critics in exposing the errors, arranging discourses into galleries, and parodying the practices belonging to colonialism, but this has proved to be reductive in the sense that it lacks astuteness. Regarding otherness or alterity, it seems that what postcolonial critics have been trying to do is to define and describe the Other and attribute qualities to it: "But, again and again, post-colonialism runs into the problem of narrating Otherness" (Khair, 2009, p.147). Nonetheless, terminology is very critical in this matter:

In post-colonial theory, the term has often been used interchangeably with otherness and difference. However, the distinction that initially held between otherness and alterity that between otherness as a philosophic problem and otherness as a feature of a material and discursive location is peculiarly applicable to post-colonial discourse. The self-identity of the colonizing subject, indeed the identity of imperial culture, is inextricable from the alterity of colonized others, an alterity determined, according to Spivak, by a process of othering. The possibility for potential dialogue between racial and cultural others has also remained an important aspect of the use of the word, which distinguishes it from its synonyms (Ashcroft, 2000, p. 10).

Alterity refers to cultural alienation and is thus viewed as a postcolonial notion par excellence. However, the "Other" as it is used in this paper can be interpreted differently from any cultural connotation. The problem lies in treating notions in terms of a discourse and a whole culture or a society. It is true that the issue of the Other has been also formulated to fit in gender studies, but it has clung to its colonial gene and postcolonial origin. The problem of cultural and sexual identity has been regarded as *topoi* in Moroccan Francophone texts and postcolonial literature in general: "S'il est un thème sur lequel l'attention doit être portée et qui mérite une véritable réflexion, c'est celui de l'identité culturelle telle qu'elle se manifeste dans les romans de la littérature maghrébine de langue française» (Varga, n.d, p1).

However, it has always been about subordinating one culture to the other, one race to the other and one sex to the other. The postcolonial Other is by definition a reference to collective identity that leaves no room for the individual who exists only as a subject within an unbelievably immense set of cultural and social discourses and codes of practice. The hybrid self constitutes an important rubric of the identity problem. The Hybrid, the “Mimic Man” (Bhabha, 1994), the “Becoming” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 262) and the “Black man with a white mask” (Fanon, 1967) are all descriptions that have been attributed to the postcolonial subject:

The third trend in maghrebine fiction involves the problems of identification, the search for identity, for one's roots and ancient heritage. The search for a father and for an identity, both individual and collective, was one of the main themes in the books of the Generation of 1952; but now that independence has been won, one finds analogous questions and approaches (Dejeux, 1983, p.401).

The postcolonial subject can only exist in opposition to the discursive other. And they are both molded collectively in a manner that leaves out the individual. This is what justifies the reading and construction of identities in literary texts as fragmented, hybrid, and always in resistance to the colonial Other. Taking a narrative identity and analyzing it outside the literary milieu entity is but a clear potential to caricature the character not as literary but as a replica of a real identity. This is an extension of the realist reading dealt with in the previous part of the paper. It is true that the share of critical importance granted to sexual identity is a plausible one, but still it derives its motif from the postcolonial reading. It is no more about political or cultural minorities but also about sexual minorities, i.e. females and homosexuals. Inquiring into sexual identity in literary texts from a postcolonial stand may not serve a critical purpose:

L'Enfant de sable formulates the proposition that gender is a colonization of the body by melding together the troubled gender identity of its main character with the (de)colonization of Morocco and a reticulate narrative architecture of multiple and feuding storytellers, enigmatic journals, and mysterious letters... The conclusions to Ahmed's tale allegorize possible scenarios for decolonization: a violent, suicidal struggle against a rapacious aggressor; a slowly decaying, nostalgic isolation; or the piecing together of an eclectic collage from the fragments of past and present, self and other, here and elsewhere (Dejeux. 1983, pp. 136-137).

This passage is taken from a study of Benjelloun's *L'Enfant de Sable* (Benjelloun, 1985). The study examines the gender identity of the main character, Ahmed or Zahra, and reveals the process of moving from one sexual identity to another while drawing a parallelism with decolonization. The primary premise here is to discuss the sexual ambivalence and transformation of the character in a specific context which is that of the Moroccan decolonization process. The validity of the study can be easily refuted on the basis that it has realist echoes while the novel carries far more significance. The allegory cannot be drawn between reality and what occurs in a literary work. There is the assumption that such an identity issue is specific to the Moroccan context.

In retrospect and at a deeper level of analysis, apart from specificities, there is no difference between The rebel in Herman Melville's *Bartelby* (Melville, 1970) and Driss Chraïbi's *Driss*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Roderick Usher* and Tahar Benjelloun's *Anna Maria Arabella*, Bahaa Trabelsi's *Adam* and James Baldwin's *Giovanni* (Baldwin, 1957), and James Joyce's *Leopold Bloom* (Joyce, 1946) Benjelloun's *Laarbi Bennaya*, and the list can indefinitely be extended. Though this is not a comparative study, a close examination of the characters mentioned shows the overlap with respect to the way a character exists narratively. The construction and formation of narrative identity within a literary text does not have an extension or reference in reality, thus the postcolonial reading cannot be imposed in a manner that makes characters in Moroccan Francophone texts fall back on one possibility of existence. It is up to the writer and reader to create, formulate and visualize the character and these operations can be performed outside a postcolonial framework. These characters cannot be subjected exclusively to a postcolonial treatment because they exist only in the text and nowhere else.

Besides *L'Auberge des Pauvres*, the rationale behind selecting of *Le Passé Simple* is that the novel has been viewed as an autobiographical work in that the main character refers to the writer. In doing so, the autobiographical reading, which is similar to a realist one, does not allow the reader to configure possibilities for reading Driss's identity and his relation to the other. Concerning *L'Auberge des Pauvres*, the stories of the characters intersect at a point which is that of conflict with the other. In this sense, the mission is to take the issue of identity away from the prevailing orthodoxy of treating it within a specific tempo-spatial context.

In Chraïbi's *Le Passé Simple*, the other bears no resemblance to that in postcolonial studies in the sense that the other transcends its cultural and colonial character. In addition to the conventional appropriation of the term, the analysis provided here tends to probe the perception of othering. In doing so, it would be appropriate to take a stand on the process of identification and the cultural perspective of othering before yielding a fresh insight into one of the most salient dimensions to be attained in the novel, which is self-othering.

Othering in *Le Passé Simple* is a process of identification through which the individual develops a sense of independence from the outside world. This process starts with the observation phase. When Driss questions the given and taken-for-granted in a hermitically closed and determined set of values, he examines the cultural and religious malaise as it evolves to shape the human condition. It is through observation and examination that he becomes conscious of the other as an alien entity: ".....La présence du Seigneur assis buste droit et regard droit, si peu statue qu'il est dogme et si peu dogme que, sitôt devant lui, toute autre vie que la sienne, même le brouhaha de la rue vagi par la fenêtre ouverte, tout est annihilé» (Chraïbi, 1954, p. 17). Driss shuns the possibility of dissolving in a 'mêlée' of enslaved beings. He detaches himself to take on the role of an observer. Examination and self-detachment are pre-requisites for the process of othering. The act of calling his father "Le Seigneur" signifies an intense sense of estrangement. The latter boils over the limits when Driss transcends othering to annihilation: " J'appelle point mort tout ce qui définit, comme ce derb que je traverse et cette maison vers laquelle je me rends" (Chraïbi, 1954, p.14).

In breaking the spell of the classical Other, Driss does not escape Moroccan cultural miasma to find refuge in the French one. His opposition to both cultures is the result of his conviction that they are a mere incarnation of the other as a discursive presence that binds and jails human existence:

Le tableau noir est un assemblage de planches, somme toute, les bottillons, si je les chaussais, les ferais sonner bien autrement, avec application et méthode, piétinant mes dernières excroissances mais qui donc m'a parlé de symbiose? « Symbiose de génie oriental, des traditions musulmanes et de la civilisation européenne... » Vague, très vague, c'est-à-dire : brisons-en là, étouffons amiablement l'affaire, au fond du pot de miel il peut y avoir de la merde. Symbiose oui, mais : symbiose de mon rejet de l'Orient et de du scepticisme que fait naître en moi l'Occident. Cela s'appelle un poème, père. Je trempai ma plume dans l'encrier et me mis à écrire (Chraïbi, 1954, p.205).

The claim that Driss is a hybrid or a prodigal son is shortsighted and can be easily challenged by the idea that othering covers far more terrain than what one might be inclined to consider culturally visible and tangible. The threat of being a subject to the Other's power reaches the physical surface. Driss's intellect is immune to the injections of the practices embodied in religious, cultural and institutional practices in general. Intellectual freedom rises above the mire of constraints and restrictions. It cannot be violated simply because he is entirely conscious of the underlying inconsistencies and contradictions of traditions and beliefs. When he voices out his attitudes, he faces hostile and violent reactions. The concept of the "Other" ought to be enlarged to include Driss othering himself or, more precisely, his cultural being per se. When he withdraws into himself and embarks in his Odyssey inside the underground trajectories of his being, estrangement turns inward. Being self-conscious, he struggles against being contained within what is broadly cultural and what is narrowly individual. Such analysis finds echoes in Johnson's *The Body in the Mind* (Johnson, 1987). Johnson argues that we are situated into containers that appear to be physical at the beginning but later become cognitive. The forces residing in those containers determine one's choices in life. In this respect, through his self-estrangement, Driss consciously emancipates himself from the cultural container. Catherine Belsey's definition of culture as being the element we inhabit as subjects is relevant here (Belsey, 2002, p.49). Such a definition catches the very essence of the term and allows for reconceptualizing what seems to be institutionalized. After escaping the cultural sphere, Driss goes on to get away from all identification or entanglement that would lead to pinning his being to an already established framework. He cannot even be absorbed or swallowed into his own experience which is rebellion:

Plus qu'il ne le croit. A l'école coranique, si j'avais des réflexes, sensations, sentiments, idées, ils n'étaient les uns et les autres que premiers. Victor Hugo, Kant, et les faux-monnayeurs les ont dérivés bien dérivés qu'ils m'ont aidé, moi qui m'étais révolté et candidement considérais ma révolte comme une délivrance à me délivrer de cette révolte (Chraïbi, 1954, p. 202).

The point that emerges from all that has been mentioned above is that there is a need to interrogate the illusionary state of being. The array of roles and seemingly solid identities makes the individual wander in a fog of fabricated social roles and functions. On the basis of the aforementioned arguments, the other is an extension of the alien that haunts the self. As these two entities are in conflict, there exists no clear cut in that it is difficult to say where the self ends and the other begins.

In *L'Auberge des Pauvres*, the reason behind the narrator leaving Marrakesh for Naples is the threat of dissolving into the 'mêlée' around him: "J'étais devenu une impression, une illusion d'optique une respiration qui produit de la buée sur la vitre, qui halète et se perd dans le bruit du robinet qui fuit goutte à goutte» (Benjelloun, 1999, p.17). The danger of the Other, who is not necessarily a colonizer, occupying his space and violating his privacy, negates his independence. His space as a writer is an abode and a refuge for him to keep away from the chaos of his everyday life, though he pushes himself to the extreme to experience another mode of existence. At this point, it is clear that "le Je collectif" (Varga, n.d, p.1) as a marker of Moroccan Literature has no relevance or significance in this work. The narrator alienates himself within his environment in the sense that he cannot co-exist with others impinging on his freedom. He can only survive through his work and his dream to have his own Ulysses. The husband, father, and professor are but social roles and his function is to fulfill them as a member of a certain society, but the status of the writer does not fit in the social configuration:

J'imagine que tu as du mal à accepter de ne plus me voir à la maison, de ne plus m'avoir sous la main, prêt à te servir, à jouer le rôle du mari qui ne dit rien. Il faut t'avouer que ce départ ressemble à une fuite. J'étais arrivé à un tel état d'exaspération que j'étais prêt à tout. Tu ne te rendais même pas compte de ce que j'endurais. Pour toi, tout était normal : les enfants faisaient leurs études, moi j'enseignais comme toi, certes j'étais à l'université, toi au lycée, je gagnais plus que toi. Tu ne savais pas que j'écrivais, je me cachais comme un enfant timide pour écrire. Je ne publiais rien. Donc je n'existais pas comme écrivain, ni pour toi ni pour les autres (Benjelloun, 1999, p.57).

As soon as he turns his back on all those functions, Naples offers him the space to live his true identity through the seclusion of the auberge and the characters inhabiting it. In that space, identity is not a social formation with a pre-determined molding or a fixed status with no possibility of changing. The narrator has the ability to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct identity all along the narrative. Relevantly, his identity along with other characters' identities are narrated as they undergo the process of creation. It is not to be viewed as an alternative to his social "identity" since, as mentioned earlier, it is merely a set of roles rather than an identity:

The characters' self-perception relies on their concept of their narratives. Characters in a literary text exist through narration, but in postmodern literature, mimesis is toned down, and their narratives are often fragmented, contradictory and challenge the readers' ability to perceive the characters as personae (Berge, n.d, p.1).

This self-creation ability is demonstrated throughout the old woman's narrative accounts. It is interestingly noticeable how she creates her character differently in the two accounts she narrates. First, there is the character that the main narrator constructs in his account a part of the auberge. Second, the character of a beautiful woman who loses her fortune because of Marco to end up in the auberge and a third character which is that of Anna Maria Arabella, a Jew married to a Nazis who resorts to the auberge after being destroyed by her husband. It is not only the case of the old woman, but also of other characters, the narrator, Gino, and Momo:

The other aspect of narrative selfhood is correlative: I am not only accountable, I am one who can always ask others for an account, who can put others to the question. I am part of their story, as they are part of mine. The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives. Moreover this asking for and giving of accounts itself plays an important part in constituting narratives (Alasdair, 1982, p.11).

As their narratives overlap with one another, their lives and choices are intertwined. This overlapping does not evolve from a common fate of being abandoned or ruined by society, but from conscious or unconscious choice of a trajectory over another, of a person over another and mode of life over the other. A careful examination of the characters' narrative accounts leads to the conclusion that Laarbi, Anna Maria, and Gino are damaged by their relationship with the other. Laarbi's wife (Fatouma), Anna's husband (Piero) and Gino's lover (Idé) are all embodiments of one concept, "The other's inferno": « le mal ce n'est pas vous. Ce sont les autres. » (Benjelloun, 1999, p. 224).

As the main narrator keeps fluctuating between narratives, he loses control over the narrative orchestration of the events. He is not the only one who has access to the lives of the other characters; the other characters have access to his story as well. The narrator is not detached from the narrative; nor does he stand as an outer observer or have the power to shape the narrative in a way that subjugates the reader along with the characters. In this case, the question of the other centers around the relation between the individual and his environment away from any cultural specification: « C'est reposant d'être comme les autres, c'est rassurant, c'est surtout triste » (Benjelloun, 1999, p. 14).

The narrator cannot accept the normal state of being like the others, of existing according to an already established pattern of stimulus and response, action and reaction. For him the state of comfort, reassurance, and stagnation is abnormal. Through reflecting on his life, he realizes that as time goes by, he loses his independence and sense of individuality, which leads him into a state of annihilation. The state of alienation is the most suitable one for Laarbi Bennaya, the writer or Gino, the composer

:

Moi, l'artiste, je déguste ma Décadence heure par heure. Pas le droit de chialer. Rien à foutre d'être présentable. J'aime bien l'Auberge parce que plus personne veut être présentable. Idé est là, dans ma tête. Je marche dans la rue et j'arrive à mettre son image sur d'autres femmes. C'est bien comme ça. Je sens revenir l'envie de composer. Le boulot chez le forgeron me fait du bien. Mes mains travaillent. Ça me libère. J'aurais

préfére un menuisier. Mais j'ai pas eu le choix ; ça se trouve pas à l'Auberge. Et quoi encore ? Moi, j'aimerais être boulanger à L'Auberge. J'adore l'odeur du pain chaud (Benjelloun 1999, p.203).

For his family and society by large, Gino is a fool who cannot fulfill his duty as a father or husband. He is left only with an idea in his mind, solitude and his musical compositions. He can live as one of the auberge inhabitants who are refuted by society as well and find their places among the archives in the auberge. When the narrator leaves Naples back to Marrakesh after five years, he finds himself into an alien and hostile environment in which he is not recognizable. Most importantly, the idea that identity as a construct is narratable establishes the validity of viewing identity from a textual perspective while it cancels out that of incorporating a realist-based conception of the matter.

The contrast set between the postcolonial undertaking of the identity issue and the aesthetic dimension in *Le Passé Simple* and *L'Auberge des Pauvres* brought into sharper focus the idea that narrative identity as a construct has no extension outside its narrative texture. Since the dichotomization of the self/other is based on accusation and victimization, the application of such a binary on a literary text is irrelevant. The problem of identity in these works exceeds postcolonial expectations in the sense that it emerges as a rich and abstruse problematic rather than a monolithic idea.

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