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A Postcolonial Reading of two Arabic Novels Translated into English: Abdel Rahman Al-Sharqawi's *Egyptian Earth* and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship*

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Abstract

The paper examines the politics and strategies of decolonization in Abdel Rahman Al-Sharqawi's *Egyptian Earth* (1954) and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship* (1973). In *Egyptian Earth*, the village's struggle against unpopular government which is aligned with the former British colonizers of Egypt provides the dramatic backbone of the action. The peasants' developed sense of nationalism manifests itself in their attachment to the land as a part of the decolonizational process at work in the novel. Obsession with land is presented as an overarching theme in *The Ship*, especially in the life of Wadi Assaf one of the central characters in the novel. Assaf, I would argue, is cast as a Palestinian Ulysses whose homecoming sentiment is the main driving force in his life. On a particular occasion in the novel Assaf, identifying himself with Ulysses, says: "There has to be a return." The mode of representation used by Jabra in this novel is realism, but through the Homeric parallel mythical realism, in the terminology of Declan Kiberd, combines with realism in the presentation of action, thus giving the Palestinians' struggle against the Israeli occupation of their land a universal epical dimension. From a decolonizational perspective, intertextuality seems to enable Assaf to hold on to his poetic homecoming sentiment in the face of the bleakness of the prosaic world of reality in which he is barred from returning home as a result of the Jews' occupation of the country.

Keywords: decolonizaion, land, postcolonial, politics, strategy

A Postcolonial Reading of two Arabic Novels Translated into English: Abdel Rahman Al-Sharqawi's *Egyptian Earth* and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's *The Ship*

In his book *Marxism and Literature(1977)* Raymond Williams writes:

> If generally there is always a link(of influence or determination) between any literary text and the context from which it emerges, and if the particular text under discussion comes from a period of colonialism or decolonization, then it follows that the particular text must be marked in some way by colonialism or decolonization. The task is to find that marking.(Williams,1977,pp.192-3)

In light of the hypothesis set out in this quotation, the first chapter of *Egyptian Earth*(1954) provides an unequivocal 'marking' which supports examining the basic tension in the novel in a colonial/postcolonial context. Here is how the young narrator of the novel describes the state of affairs in Cairo during the period in which the plot of the novel is set – the 1930s:

> For at that time Cairo was in a state of continual unrest. From what my brothers said amongst themselves, as well as from the newspaper, I knew that a man called Sidky ruled Egypt with fire and iron, having first suspended the Constitution in the interests of the English. And I had seen him unleash English soldiers with red faces on the streets of Cairo, to bolster up his authority. At that time I was in the Muhammadiyah Primary School, and every day I heard machine-gun fire. On my way home after school, the whole city would vibrate with firing, and nevertheless every morning the workers were on strike once more, and the students were demonstrating. The Khedivial Secondary School used to pour on to the streets every morning, shouting: Long Live The Constitution! Freedom! Independence! Down with Sidky and his English masters. (Al-Sharqawi,1990, P11)

Instead of using a broad canvas to dramatize the basic tension in his novel, al- Sharqawi sets the action in a small village at which the private lives of the peasants are tremendously impacted by the turn of events on the public scene in a transitional historical period in Egypt characterized with political upheavals and social instability . Al Sahrawi's attempt to give marginalized Egyptian peasants ample opportunity to express their voice in a transitional period in the history of modern Egypt fits in with the colonial/postcolonial discourse at work in the novel.

The most important political event presented in the early part of the novel which has immediate impact on the fortunes of ordinary people is the suspension of the 1923 Constitution, one of the great achievements of the 1919 revolution (against the British occupation of Egypt and Sudan),which led to Britain's recognition of Egyptian independence in 1922 and the implementation of a new Constitution in 1923 by the national Wafd Party under the leadership of the famous national hero Zaad Zaghlool. This Constitution was replaced by a new one imposed, we are told during the period in which the action of the novel is set, by the reactionary People's

Party led by Ismail Sidky the newly appointed prime minister who is frequently referred to as the lackey of the British.

Mohammad Abu Suweilim, the chief guard, was dismissed from his job for supporting the old Constitution; Sheikh Hassouna, the headmaster of the village school and a highly respected political activist, was transferred to a more remote part of Egypt as a result of his protest against the new Constitution; Sheikh Yusif, the grocer, is another casualty of the protest against the change of the Constitution, the price he has paid is the loss of the half acre of land he owns at the village.

These three victims of the tyranny of the government play a major role in stirring up public protest against the rigging of elections which brought the so called The People's Party to power and consequently the appointment of Sidky as a prime minister. The implementation of a new Constitution generates a great deal of feuds and conflict between the supporters and protestors to the change. The unnamed Pasha, the Omda, and Mahmud Bey, the chief of police, figure as the main supporters of the corrupt government.

Sheikh Hassouna provides instructive insights into the corruption and malpractices of the Government. Addressing himself to his nephew the school teacher Muhammad Effendi, Hassouna says:

> 'Strange! You beware of the rope and take no heed of the snake? What Is the difference between the Omda, or the Pasha, or Mahmoud Bey?
>
> Then he raised his voice as his words jumped out, one after the other. 'The English, what are they? The Government, what are they? They're all one … one chain, one filthy chain.'
>
> Muhammad Effendi tried to say something to save himself from his embarrassment. 'You are enough blessing for all of us, Headmaster, you are enough!'
>
> 'But you, too, in this village can play your part. This land belongs to all of us. If only you have courage, you too can defy the oppressor. After all, who are the people fighting our corrupt regime and their foreign supporters? The students and the railway workers, people like that. Don't you read the newspaper, don't you know what's going in Egypt?'(Al-Sharqawi,1990,PP.159-160)

Sheikh Hassouna's self-imposed mission of raising awareness about the urgency and necessity of standing against despotic Government and exposing its corruption highlights the decolonizational aspect which informs the narrative in *Egyptian Earth*. Amilcar Cabral's views on the basic requirements of "National Liberation" may illustrate the point I am trying to make:

> For all that has just been said, it can be concluded that in the framework of the conquest of national independence and in the perspective of developing the economic and social

> progress of the people, the objectives must be at least the following: development of a popular culture and of all positive indigenous cultural values; development of a national culture based upon the history and the achievements of the struggle itself; constant promotion of the political and moral awareness of the people (of all social groups) as well as patriotism, of the spirit of sacrifice and devotion to the cause of independence, of justice, and of progress. (Amilcar,1994,P.164)

One of the main incidents in the novel which reflects blatant rampant corruption among government agents is the government's order to cut irrigation of land period to five days instead of ten. This provokes a harsh condemnation of the government by Abdul Hadi, a well respected quintessential peasant:

> You call this a Government? A Government which steals half our water- and for whose benefit, Alwani? You know, as well as I do, … for the Pasha , the Pasha who's recently bought a stretch of new land, land not fit for dogs to eat off, and he wants to improve it by taking our water … Wonderful, wonderful, this Government of ours! Stop the wheels, shut the canals. … I can see blood will be flowing before water. (Al-Sharqawi,1990,p.48)

In protest against this unjust measure by the Government, the peasants decide to write a petition to the Minister of Public Works to cancel the new irrigation measures. Writing the petition becomes a rallying point for the solidarity and the resistance of the peasants against a government supported by the former colonizers of the country. It is in terms of the colonial/ postcolonial contex of the narrativet that the act of writing a petition receives special emphasis throughout the novel. Through the manipulations of the Omda and Mahmud Bey, the corrupt chief of police, the peasants' attempts to cancel the unjust irrigation measures were thwarted by changing the petition in the interest of the Pasha:

> That's child's play,' said Abu Suweilim violently. 'As for you, Diab, run off and greet your brother.' In delight Diab ran off. The two others walked together, Abu Suweilim beating one fist against the other. Suddenly he stopped, and taking Abdul Hadi by the arm, explained the situation which made him so anxious. The new Petition, which Muhammad Effendi and Mahmoud Bey had taken to Cairo, had nothing to do with irrigation. The Omda had tricked the village, and in collaboration with Mahmoud Bey had forced the villagers to sign a document requesting the construction of a highway, to run cross their land, linking the Pasha's new Palace with the main road to Cairo. (Al-Sharqawi,1990,p.128)

In remarks which seem to be particularly applicable to the turn of events in *Egyptian Earth*, Fanon says:

> The peasantry is systematically disregarded for the most part by the propaganda put out by the nationalist parties. And it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants

> alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. (Fanon,1963,p.47)

The role played by the peasants in their struggle against unjust and oppressive practices of the imperialism agent Egyptian government is reminiscent of the active role of the villagers, who were at the forefront of the non-violent resistance against the British role of India in Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*, one of the most outstanding postcolonial Indian novels.

Indeed, the peasants in al-Sharqawi's novel seem to be unable to compromise, especially in their attachment to the land, attachment which figures as an integral part of the decolonization process which runs throughout the novel. The celebration of land as a symbol of honour, identity, dignity and independence in a colonial/postcolonial context is well described in a passage in which al-Sharqawi bestows a romantic halo on Abdul Hadi, the most devoted peasant to land cultivation and ownership:

> The earth itself seemed to him a symbol of strength, of that which will endure forever, and of honour! In all the night there was nothing to see. And yet he knew it all, he knew every inch of it, every detail. This land was his own life and his own history. When a boy Abdul Hadi had been given a little hoe, the same tool that his father had carried before him. And when he had grown up, and his history of this land, of its crops, of its beats, since the time he had first tethered a buffalo … that had been when he was eight. .. he remembered hammering the wedge into the earth. Not one detail connected with this land would he ever forget, and after him his son would inherit his memories with the land itself. … the land never let you down. (Al-Sharqawi,1990,p.40)

Again here we are strongly reminded of Fanon's general remarks on the significance of land in the postcolonial context: "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity"(Fanon,1963,p.47).

The confrontation between the peasants and the government escalates when they violate the curfew imposed upon the village by the government to prevent the peasants from obstructing its implementation of building the new highway which would unjustly swallow some of the villagers' land. The peasants' violation of the government's unpopular measures and regulations culminates in their destruction of the banks of the river to irrigate their land outside the new regulations period. This brave stand on the part of the peasants led to the arrest of three leading figures by the police: Abdul Hadi, Abu Suweilim, and his brother Diab.

The main source of inspiration for the peasants' resistance and anti-government sentiment in the novel is the 1919 Revolution which led to the expulsion of the British from Egypt in 1922. When the deputy of the People's Party paid a visit to the village, Sheikh Hassouna, the most distinguished political activist, refused to receive him at his school, he even incites the peasants to revolt and protest against the visit invoking the spirit of Saad Zaghloul:

> 'So the headmaster was sent, as a simple teacher, to a remote village near the Barrage, the one means of access to which was by river-streamer. Sheikh Hassouna vainly tried to incite the village to revolt, as they had done when the English exiled the national leader, 'So he's Saad Zaghlou*l, is he?' (*Al-Sharqawi,1990,p.*133*)

The novel abounds in references to the glorious days of the 1919 Revolution, that is as a political strategy to stir up protest , thus accelerating the process of decolonization and national independence. Ironically enough, even the agents of the Government try to benefit from the practices of the proponents of the 1919 Revolution to promote the political standing and fortunes of the People's Party. I am referring here to the attempts of the Magistrate, a notorious agent of the government to instruct the peasants how to cheer Sidky and the Ministers on the occasion of their visit to the village:

> He returned to the villagers. They must shout: Long Live His Glorious Majesty! Long Live the People's Party! And above all, Long Live Sidky! And this last shout must be intoned rhythmically, many times.
>
> You must shout in rhythm. .. You know what rhythm is? … You have your beledi drums. .. You must shout rhythmically, as to a drum! Just as you used to do, in 1919. Didn't you shout, Long Live Egypt … very musically? Long Live Egypt! And in the elections, you used to shout Long Live The Wafd! Didn't it go like that? Now you must shout Long Live Sidky in the same rhythm. Just the same. (Al-Sharqawi,1990,pp.178-179)

This cutting irony leveled against the native agents of colonialism reflects al-Sharqawi's deep commitment to promote the cause of decolonization and the liberation of Egypt from the British colonial legacy. Al-Sharqawi's celebration of the peasants' sense of nationalism, patriotism, and their attachment to their land look forward to the remarkable attention given to the peasants in 1952 Revolution.

Obsession with land figures as an overarching theme in Jabra's novel *The Ship (1995)*. Most of the events in this novel take place during a cruise at sea, yet preoccupation with land is presented as the overriding issue which highlights the personal yearnings of the main characters in *The Ship*, especially the Palestinian passenger Wadi Assaf. Frequently throughout the novel Assaf indulges in lengthy reflections on his passionate attachment to his homeland. On a particular occasion, the cruise triggers off Assaf's deep contemplation of his experience in comparison with archetypal adventurers and travelers especially Sindbad, concluding that while he shares with Sindbad his lust for travel , unlike him he is deprived of the luxury of returning home in occupied Palestine:

> In spite of everything," I said, "these adventures of yours remain runaways, or as you said, escapists. They're in search of something more difficult, intractable, worthwhile; fair enough. But they're "escaping" nevertheless. They're strangers in their own countries and in other countries as well. They discover the unknown in distant places in order to forget their own alienation, to put an end to it, and to return victorious to a world that they dearly wish would embrace and accept them. Like all adventures, however, like every Sindbad, they can never remain among people for long. This feeling of alienation and this lust for escape soon takes hold of them again
>
> "But don't you see?" Wadi interjected, "they have a place to go back to and be measured by. Henry Layard goes back to the British Museum with winged bulls, and Sindbad returns to Baghdad laden with jewels. Real alienation is alienation from a place, from roots. This is the crux. Land, Land, that's everything. We return to it bringing our discoveries, but as long as we hang on to the racing clouds, we remain in this fools' paradise. We are continually escaping, but now we must go back to the land, even if we are forced later to start off again. We must have terra firma under our feet, a land that we love and quarrel with, a land that we leave because of the intensity of our love and our quarrel and return to once more. (Jabra,1995,pp.74-75*)*

Jabra employs this archetypical pattern of departure and homecoming to highlight in a postcolonial context the plight of the Palestinians who are of course barred from returning home by Israel. To develop the process of decolonization, Jabra uses another myth of departure and homecoming, namely the story of Ulysses. Towards the end of the second section of the novel entitled 'Wadi Assaf', we get the impression that Assaf is inclined to identity himself with the Homeric hero: 'The Corinth Canal is behind us now. The Greek Sea now envelops us in its moonlight, a night full of tales of love and murder. The smell of the earth attracts Ulysses as he roams amid the perils of the sea. There has to be a return'. (Jabra,1995,p.64)

In a more straightforward manner in the final section of the novel, Assaf reveals his unequivocal self-styled identification with Ulysses:

> The few occasions when Maha and I quarreled were all false starts, just like this one. Each time we had to start again, to go back to the rock. The sea is foreign to me, however much I love it. However much I enjoy wandering among islands, I can find no haven there. I have to go back to the land. Ulysses was a much better sailor and voyager than any of us. Yet even he, like us,, would escape so that he could eventually reach somewhere where he could plant his feet firmly on land and say, "This is my soil." And, when he most needed rest after the toils and travails of his voyage, did not Calypso the enchantress give him the choice of remaining with her on the island forever as a deity or returning to his homeland as a mortal man? Yet he refused immortality and chose to return home. (Jabra,1995,p.188)

Thus while the juxtaposition or contrast with Sindbad provokes Assaf's lamentation over his less fortunate status as Palestinian who is destined to live perpetually in exile, the comparison with Ulysses provides him with mythical solace, so to speak, that he would one day return to his home land. The mode of representation used by Jabra in this novel is realism, but through the Homeric parallel mythical realism, in the terminology of Declan Kiberd, combines with realism in the presentation of action, thus giving the Palestinians' struggle against the Israeli occupation of their land a universal epical dimension. From a decolonizational perspective, intertextuality seems to enable Assaf to hold on to his poetic homecoming sentiment in the face of the bleakness of the prosaic world of reality in which he is barred from returning home as a result of the Jews' occupation of the country. The point is, it might be argued, the Ulysses- inspired illusion in Assaf's life seems to be used as in figurative decolonization strategy which helps him to maintain his resistance to occupation and its attendant issues of rootlessness and loss of identity brought about by his forced exile from the homeland. Interestingly, Assaf, in what seems to be an echo of Ibsen's often quoted remark (Rob the overage man of his life-illusion and you rob him also of his happiness says: " Take away illusion, and darkness will prevail." Isam Salman, an Iraqi close friend of Assaf confirms Assaf's conviction when he tells him: "What I mean is that, however pretentions a man may be, illusion is something that he cannot avoid … so let man sing as long as he wants. Singing is all illusion. Illusion is all the sweet things in life"(Jabra,1995,p72-73). Interestingly, in his book *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said argues that the occupied land by colonialism is "recoverable at first only through imagination" (Said,1994,pp.271).

To push the Homeric analogy further, I would argue that just as the Sirens failed to prevent Ulysses from carrying on his journey toward Ithaca, so Assaf manages to resist all forms of seduction by female characters (Maha,Jacquline and Emilia the sirens,as it were, of his odyssey) to make him give up his strongly cherished dream of returning to Jerusalem. Interestingly, he eventually succeeds in persuading Maha,his Lebanese beloved , to live with him in Jerusalem.

Arabic literary tradition provides Assaf with another poetic device to maintain his passionate attachment to the land and to cope with the consequences of colonialism against all the odds. Talking to Fernando an Italian passenger, Assaf says:

> Do you know that the ancient Arab poets used to fall in love with place-names, and that they repeated them in their poems as frequently as they repeated the names of women they loved?
> " ' Halt, my two friends, and let us weep for memory of lover and abode/ in the sand dunes between Dakhul and Hawmal,' says Imru al-Qays. And don't you remember these lines by Abeed Ibn al-Abras, of whom we know nothing except that King al-Mundhir killed him because he met him on one of his unlucky days:
> Malhub is desolate, all its people gone,
> And Qutabiyyat, and Dhanub
> And Rakis and Thuaylibat

> And Dhatu Firqayn and Qalib
> And Arda, and Qafa Hibirrin.(Jabra,1995,p.26)

Against this background Assaf gets into the habit of identifying the girls he falls in love with (Maha) with Jerusalem his home town. Inspired by this Arab literary tradition, Assaf tells Isam Salman who, in turn, suffers from alienation and was forced to escape from his country.

> And to utter the words 'Luma and Baghdad' is to trigger in our imagination the most fantastic poems. Isn't it so, Isam? Are you really innocent of all this, or are you simply an architect who cannot be stirred by place-names or the names of women like Luma?(Jabra,1995,p.26)

In a more poetic manner Assaf combines flirtation with women with his love of the rocks of Palestine:

> Some time later, when my father bought a piece of land in Upper Baqaa, I used to flirt with the rocks-as I always did when Fayiz and I were together. We built a house on one part of the property while I flirted with the rocks. I ran after beautiful girls because they seemed like rocks, like the earth from whose firm surface we extracted our gorgeous vegetables and sweet-smelling fruit.(Jabra,1995,p.55)

According to Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi ,it is not uncommon in Arabic postcolonial novels to find legends and folklore used as figurative tools to highlight postcolonial and decolonization issues ,such as resistance to occupation and the defence of the land :

> The love for land is not necessarily limited to proplems of exploitation ,as the subject has its many sides and attractions .The postcolonial novel takes the land as trope and subject because the whole scope of the stuggle revolves around the human and the land.Such is the case with the Saudi-born novelist "Abd al-Rahman Munif's
> *Al Nihayat* (1978; English translation:*Endings* ,1989),and the Palestinian Ghassan Kanafani's (assassinated in 1972).*Rijal fi alshams* (*Men in the sun ,1963*).In these ,as in a number of the other novels dealing –allegorically or otherwise –with the plight of the Arab in his own land ,the agonized tone as well as the prophetic note of fertility and future growth link the genre with legendary lore and ritualistic tradtions , being the writer 's defence mechanism against up rootedness and cruel annihilation (Al-Musawi,2003,pp.122-123).

Like Assaf, Isam Salman, Maha and Emilia express their nostalgia for their own countries, but they are not as passionate as Assaf about their yearnings. Assaf's passionate attachment to Palestine acquires its force by virtue of the postcolonial dimension of the narrative, dimension which receives more emphasis in highlighting Assaf's sense of guilt as a result of not staying in his homeland:

> "Deep inside, we're all alone. Our life resembles Chinese boxes, one box inside another, each getting smaller and smaller until we come to the smallest one in the heart of them all. And what do we find there? Not one of the precious rings of the Sultan's daughter, but a secret which is even more precious marvelous: loneliness. Why was I uprooted and cast about under hoofs and fangs, driven into flaming deserts and screaming oil-producing cities? I know why; too well, I think. The canvas is huge; black is everywhere, and the spots of color are few and far between. The young student who stole away from her father's house in order to meet her lover for two awesome minutes among the graves has lit a spot in the heart of the black canvas. Then I revert to an agony, an agony of the cross, the tragedy that renews itself. And people talk about me. 'He's a decadent, cunning fellow,' they say, 'who contradicts himself. He worships money, and his land no longer means anything to him.'(Jabra,1995,p.25)

Sense of guilt on account of the departure from Palestine in the aftermath of 1948 debacle figures as a recurring theme in Palestinian postcolonial literature. When they first returned to Haifa after twenty years have elapsed since they have left Palestine, Said and Safiya, in Ghassan Kanafani's novella *Return to Haifa* (1984) face embarrassing questioning by their own child Khaldoun whom they left in Palestine to be adopted by a Jewish family when they fled the country in 1948.

In so far as it perpetuates passionate preoccupation with the land, sense of guilt in Palestinian resistance literature serves the same function as memory, especially in Mahmud Darwish's poetry. In Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*, memory is presented as a tool of resistance and protection against forgetfulness of the land (Darwish,1982,p.70).

To conclude, the discussion of the two novels has revealed that each of the two novelists *Al-Sharqawi* and Jabra employs specific decolonization strategies and postcolonial discourse determined and shaped by their distinct idiosyncratic modes of regard, political conditions, and socio-historical circumstances which frame the basic tension in the two novels under consideration. In comparison with highlighting the role of land occupation as the major factor in weaving the texture of the main conflict in *The Ship*, the *Egyptian Earth* places more emphasis on politics as the main source of struggle in the lives of main characters. Yet, in both of the two novels land is used as a metaphor for resistance, perpetual striving for liberation, and the formation of anti colonial structure of feelings.

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