The Stratheden and the negotiation of the East-West trajectory: identity and migration in Ahdaf Soueif’s *Aisha*

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Contemporary migrations give life to cultural and social reconfigurations. Such migrations are the outcome of a globalised world economy. They are, above all, movements of subjects across different lands, subjects that change while they are on the move. As Vita Fortunati emphasizes “Trinh Minh-ha recalls how travelling can become the only way to dwell in a post-colonial age” (Fortunati et al 12). Hence, the concept of identity itself is expressed through a movement of nomadism which overcomes established boundaries. An example of cultural reconfiguration produced by the experience of displacement is Aisha, the protagonist of Soueif’s collection of short stories that was published under the same name in 1983. Aisha’s identity and cultural positioning is questioned during the Cairo-Europe trajectory chosen by her parents when they decide to move to London. It internalizes the continuous switch from Arabic culture – embodying the East, Egypt, Middle-Eastern traditional values and Islam – to English culture, the vehicle of western modernity, literature, and knowledge. Already on the Stratheden, the ship that takes her to England, it becomes apparent that her geographical positioning actually shapes her identity.

“No one today is purely one thing” Edward Said suggested in *Culture and Imperialism* (407). Today in the light of a steadily increasing globalisation Said’s quote is even more relevant than it was over a decade ago.

This paper is going to examine Ahdaf Soueif’s semi-autobiographical short story, *Aisha*. Soueif is an Anglo-Egyptian writer who emigrated to the
UK in the second half of the 20th century and now divides her time between London and Cairo. Her own experience of dislocation is reflected in her protagonist’s experience. As Abdul JanMohammed points out, there are certain writers that occupy a so-called ‘border position’ (97), located between two cultures, a position that Edward Said referred to as ‘contrapuntal’. Soueif’s story could be classified as ‘border writing’, in so far as it investigates the complexities of various people’s lives in global terrains, thereby provoking many conflicts between tradition and modernization as well as contributing to the topical cultural debate on Westernization. As Avtar Brah points out that border writing “[…] is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate […]” (631).

The experience of migration, although frequently addressed and explored by male writers, has to be re-examined in its specificity when dealt with by a woman writer since it intersects with issues such as class, gender, and sexuality. Soueif is concerned with how identity can be negotiated on a cross-cultural terrain as exemplified by the ship. She explores what happens when East and West meet, when men and women are involved in a cross-cultural relationship. As Susan Muaddi Darraj remarks: “Many of Soueif’s characters are pulled between the polar forces of East and West, but only achieve balance when they carve out a place for themselves in the midst of that cultural intersection.” (93). To illustrate this point, the late twentieth-century women protagonists in Soueif’s novel, *The Map of Love*, the cousins Isabel and Amal, are bi-cultural, global women. Isabel is an American of Egyptian descent who was brought up in America and still lives there whereas Amal is Egyptian, but used to live in England where she raised two sons before returning to Egypt. Hence, Soueif didn’t just create two ‘pure’ Egyptian protagonists, born and educated in Egypt, living the everyday lives of their Egyptian female counterparts, but created characters that open up a number of questions, as they reverse the perspective.

I am here going on to analyze the experience of Soueif’s protagonist during her trajectory from the East to the West on the Stratheden. The ship appears in literature not simply as a means of transport but as a metaphor for a living body on which a variety of migrants from various backgrounds meet and are forced to share their lives for a limited period of time. It transports not only their bodies but also their culturally determined preconcep-
tions, their beliefs and values. The ship becomes a microcosm of the global, postcolonial reality, which reflects hierarchical structures that are culturally specific, determined by class, ethnicity and race. Aisha is Souef’s first collection of short stories that already introduces the main themes and some of the characters around which her later writings will revolve. For example, in Souef’s later novel In the Eye of the Sun (1992), the character of Asya is a more developed version of Aisha. Aisha consists of a number of linked stories whose main character, a young Muslim Egyptian woman called Aisha is portrayed at different points in her life. The history of the name Aisha is significant. It originated as a girl’s name in Arab-Islamic history, containing the root ‘aish’, ‘life’ so that Souef’s short story can be considered as “a call for life, a new life” (Trabelsi 6). Prophet Muhammad’s favourite wife who was famed not only for her beauty but above all for her intelligence was also called Aisha, indicating, as Amin Malak suggests, that the reader will encounter an extraordinary Eastern woman. The character Aisha in Souef’s short story goes against the stereotypical notion of the Oriental woman as represented through the character Ayesha by Rider Haggard in his famous novel She. In spite of her high social position Ayesha was not allowed to enter the West (Di Piazza 130). The postcolonial Aisha is able to do so, thereby reconfiguring frontiers.

As mentioned earlier the short story is semi-autobiographical and Souef often refers to her childhood through the character of Aisha. In the story entitled “1964”, the double timeline that is firmly established at the beginning of the story reflects cultural as well as geographical divisions. A parallel chronology simultaneously duplicates and mirrors the protagonist’s life: first in Egypt, then in the “New Socialist” post-1952 era, and finally in England, in 1964 (24). Aisha is a teenager when she arrives in England after a long journey on the Stratheden, the elder child of a couple of Egyptian scholars that go to England for their post-doctoral research. She writes excitedly: “We had come to England by boat. My father had come first. My mother had had trouble getting her exit visa.” (24). The New Socialist Era in Egypt had made emigration difficult. The bureaucracy was slow and it took Aisha’s parents two months to deal with the necessary formalities before they could board their ship and sail to their desired destination. Aisha and her family got onto the Stratheden at Port Said (image 1). By the time the ship had reached the port of their departure, it had already completed a long journey that had started in Sydney where it
dropped off, what Aisha describes as “disappointed returning would-be Australian settlers” (24). After Sydney the journey went on to Bombay where “hopeful Indian would-be immigrants” as Aisha calls them, board (24). On the ship there is an encounter of different cultures, ethnical and social groups, of people in various states of mind, a microcosm of social structures. Life on the ship is difficult and anticipates the problems the immigrants will encounter once they reach their destination.

There is little explicit information about Aisha’s life in Egypt but plenty of implications that give the reader an insight into her character as well as into how she is educated. The story “1964” expands the possibilities of border writing, portraying Aisha’s travel from East to West as a transformative experience that enables her to express a cultural critique and prepares her for personal change. An incident on The Stratheden hints at Aisha’s romantic nature. Like the heroines of the books she reads, she herself is dreaming of adventures. Aisha states: “I loved Maggie Tulliver, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary” (23). Already on the ship problems caused by cultural crossings occur. When Aisha meets the Indian teenage boy, Christopher, her romantic “spirit of adventure” leads her to give him her address in London (24). But Aisha’s mother does not approve of their friendship. She feels racially, intellectually and socially superior to Christopher, on the grounds that he is Indian, Christian and a potential immigrant. Aisha observes: “beneath my mother’s surface friendliness there was a palpable air of superiority” (24). By priding herself on being an Egyptian academic heading for England to do post-doctoral research, Aisha’s mother manifests the prejudices of her social class and education. Aisha is fully aware of this as she writes: “We were Egyptian academics come to England on a sabbatical to do Post-Doctoral Research. I wasn’t post-doctoral but it still wasn’t quite the thing to play with the Indian teenagers” (24). The attitudes that Aisha’s parents show on the ship will remain unchanged once they reach England. In their social position as academics, Aisha’s parents fit into a similar category as writers who according to Elleke Boehmer “[...] have been much advantaged by the class, political and educational connections with Europe and America which in many cases they enjoyed. They have developed what was anyway a cosmopolitan tendency, often picked up as part of an elite upbringing in their home countries.” (238).

The ship is a very class-conscious place. In fact, when the British writer George Orwell travelled to Morocco in 1938 on the Stratheden, he
recalls that it was necessary to indicate not only his name but also his profession on the passenger list. As the layout of the Stratheden shows (image 2), first class passengers occupy different locations from second class passengers. They eat, sleep and socialize in different environments and receive a different standard of service. As a result, they will most probably experience the journey in very different ways. However, as the incident with Aisha’s mother demonstrates, there are not only boundaries of class on the ship but also of race.

Although on the surface Aisha’s mother seems quite liberal, her tolerance is only pretended. Just like her husband, she is angry with Aisha for having struck up a friendship with Christopher. When his letter arrives in England Aisha is in trouble. She says:

My parents were grave. They were disapproving. They were saddened. How had he got my address? I hung my head. Why was it wrong to give him my address? Why shouldn’t I know him? How had he got my address? I scuffed my shoes and said I didn’t know. My lie hung in the air. Why had he sent me a photograph? I really didn’t know the answer to that one and said so. They believed me. ‘You know you’re not to be in touch with him?’ ‘Yes’. There were no rows, just silent, sad disapproval. You’ve let us down. I never answered his letter and he never wrote again – or if he did I never knew of it. (24-25)

Before Aisha gets blamed in such a stern way, there is another episode that clearly reveals her parents’ traditional attitude towards their daughter’s education. Although Aisha is already a young woman, Christopher’s letter is immediately opened by her parents and read without her consent. Though Aisha is resentful that she has been deprived of her privacy, she doesn’t argue but accepts her parents’ decision. As she points out: “It never occurred to me to question that” (24). However, “he never wrote again- or if he did I never knew of it” (25) she complains to herself using a gentle tone of irony. Even her mother, in spite of her being an educated, professional woman does not seem to question the social rules that are established by Aisha’s father and that dominate their family life. Although never outspoken, occasionally she tries to act as a mediator between her husband’s stern aloofness and her daughter’s silent rebellion. When Aisha decides not to go to school any more, her mother, though highly disapproving, does not discuss her daughter’s decision openly. Instead of giving her personal opinion or advice, she addresses the issue
through the voice of her husband acting as if she was a mere spokes-
person for Aisha’s father:

What on earth will your father say?

‘...’

He’ll be angry.

[...]

She told my father. She carried back protests, even threats: ‘Daddy is terribly dis-
pleased with you,’ then, ‘Daddy won’t speak to you for weeks.’ [...] They went
against their principles: ‘You won’t get any more pocket money.’ (38-9)

The behavior displayed by Aisha’s parents demonstrates what
Hechmi Trabelsi calls the contradictions of the “Westernised intellectual
bourgeois Egyptian elite” (11). The restrictions they impose on Aisha
contradict their “[...] liberal, enlightened ideology and that of their friends
and advisers” (Soueif, Aisha 29). Aisha is not sent to a mixed school but
to a girls’ school. She can’t choose her friends, but has her parents choo-
sing them for her. ‘Suitable’ friends are the vicar’s children who invite her
to church, their friends’ son David who takes her to the theatre. She is
intrigued by the ‘bad boy’ image incorporated by the Mods and the
Rockers that openly communicates freedom, sexuality and transgression
of social boundaries. However, in spite of her fascination she doesn’t dare
to approach them but opts to admire them safely from a distance, from the
outside. As she puts it: “the Mods and Rockers zoomed through the streets
in their fancy gear; and I stood in the snow on the thirty-seven bus stop,
on the outside looking in.” (29)

Trapped between liberal (Western) facade and conservative (Eastern)
attitudes, Aisha feels more and more alienated. Aisha is in a position that
Abdul JanMohammed defines as ‘the border’. She is familiar with both,
Egyptian and English culture, but not able to settle in either one. As an
Egyptian girl transplanted into an English environment, her life is defined
by her parents’ rules and regulations. At that point she has no control over
her life. She is passive, desperate for something to happen but doesn’t
have the strength to make it happen. “[...] I waited for something to hap-
pen obligingly within the set boundaries.” (25) as she puts it. Suffocated
by the repressed atmosphere of the English all-girl school Aisha seeks
refuge in the library where she spends hours reading Wuthering Heights,
dreaming about living out her sexual fantasies. She writes: “I communed
with Catherine Earnshaw or pursued prophetic visions of myself emerging, aged thirty, a seductress complete with slinky black dress and long cigarette holder with a score of tall, square-jawed men at my feet.” (34).

Aisha is different from the other girls in her class. She is strongly aware of this as she describes herself as “Westernised bourgeois intellectual” as opposed to her classmates that come from a working class background (27). Speaking proper English in a Cockney environment, where a strong dialect is spoken, she is accepted neither by her white nor by her coloured classmates. A Muslim in a Christian school, she is the outsider, stranded between cultures. However, Aisha is not proud of her outsider status. She is longing to fit in, to be liked by the others. She writes, she desires “[…] to merge, to blend in silently and belong to the crowd” (30).

Carine Mardorossian suggests that: “Because of her displacement, the migrant’s identity undergoes radical shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in her ambivalence towards her old and new existence.” (16). This ambivalence is also pointed out by Amin Malak when he states that “The resulting mélange of diverse values causes confusion and clarity, contest and collaboration, enrichment and impoverishment” (128).

After a period of silent acceptance of her parents’ rules and regulations, Aisha finally decides to take her life into her own hands in the story “1964”. Although she knows her parents would highly disapprove, she goes to the corner café, where the music she likes is played. Music by the Beatles, the Stones, the Animals or the Dave Clark Five appeals to her and nurtures her sense of rebellion, impelling her to break the ‘set boundaries’. Playing the jukebox helps her to bear home and school, and encourages her to contest established rules. When St. Valentine’s Day comes, she is allowed to go to the school dance. She even gets, what she calls a ‘Very Special Permission’ (36) to stay out until 11 p.m. However, the dance doesn’t turn out to be what she had expected. Her classmates who prior to the dance had ridiculed her for not having had any kind of sexual experience seem to be as inexperienced as her, in fact, if not more so, as Aisha is the only girl who brings a boy with her. Aisha realizes that the world she has been so desperately wanting to be part of, doesn’t live up to her expectation. As she puts it: “[…] the evening slowly crumbled away and the stars went out one by one. I knew now there was no hidden world, or secret society from which I was barred” (38). This event becomes a turning point for her as it encourages her to radically change her behavior.
She becomes more confident and self-reliant, stops seeking friendship with her classmates and decides to drop out of school, despite her parents’ disapproval. By the time she turns fifteen, she is in charge of her education. Much to her parents’ dismay she discovers their ‘forbidden’ books and now spends her time listening to music and reading erotic literature such as the “Kama Sutra, The Perfumed Garden of Sheikh Nefzawi, Fanny Hill” (39), a mix of Eastern and English classics. By doing so Aisha emancipates herself and takes responsibility for her life in the way an independent adult woman would do. She breaks away from the boundaries imposed by her school, from her parents’ stifling views of life and starts living according to her instincts. Her thoughts, fuelled by the literature she reads, create a personal fantasy space that transcends beyond East and West and belong neither to the past nor to the future. As Caroline Mohsen suggests: Aisha “oscillates between the Eastern world and the West until she situates herself on the border, or rather establishes herself as the border, that is as the difference between both worlds, while maintaining an awareness of – and connections to – both.” (33).

Soueif’s short story forms part of the ongoing search for the possibilities of a cultural dialogue. She makes the experience of migration on the ship, the transition from past memories to a desired future, the focus of her investigation of the encounter between East and West. However, she doesn’t just analyse and investigate cross cultural relationships but goes a step further, and creates new identities that, as Hechmi Trabelsi suggests, are “neither soft-edged amalgamation nor slavish mimicry” (17).
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