Leila Abouzeid's Year of the Elephant: A Postcolonial Reading

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Postcolonial Fictions

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Michael Hall 1. Introduction

As Elizabeth Fernea observed in her introduction to Year of the Elephant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence by Leila Abouzeid, the publication of this novella in English translation in 1989 was an event in cross-cultural literary history, representing as it did the first novel by a Moroccan woman to be translated from Arabic to English.1 First published in Arabic in 1983, Year of the Elephant raises many issues of language, decolonization and European cultural hegemony that are of direct relevance to contemporary postcolonial literary theory.

Born in 1950, Leila Abouzeid was only six years old when Morocco achieved national independence. Year of the Elephant is largely an auto-biographical novel.

The novel opens with the return of Zahra, the narrator and central character, to her hometown after a divorce that has left her destitute and without realistic legal options:

> He had simply sat down and said, "Your papers will be sent to you along with whatever the law provides." My papers? How worthless a woman is if she can be returned with a paper receipt like some store-bought object! How utterly worthless!2

As the legal settlement provides her with only 100 days expenses, Zahra is forced to engage in a difficult but ultimately successful struggle against the postcolonial status quo in order to build a new life of personal and financial independence in Casablanca. Zahra recalls the major events of her life from childhood and marriage through to the subsequent eras of nationalist struggle, independence and decolonization.

2. Language

The French language came to the Maghrib (the region of North West Africa that encompasses Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) with French colonization, which began with the occupation of Algiers in 1830. The subsequent conquest of Algeria by the French was

bloody and brutal, and was described by Karl Marx in terms that betray the same eurocentric assumptions that he expressed regarding the British colonization of India:

> The struggle of the Bedouins was a hopeless one, and although the manner in which brutal soldiers like Bugeaud have carried on the war is highly blameworthy, the conquest of Algeria is an important and fortunate fact for the progress of civilisation.3

Unlike Algeria, Morocco was not colonized until 1912. The role of French as a literary language in the Maghrib was highlighted in 1987 when Moroccan novelist, Tahar Ben Jelloun, was awarded French literature's prestigious Prix Goncourt for his novel, The Sacred Night.4 The attention currently being directed towards francophone Maghribi writing by European critics suggests that such literature is a significant, if not vital, component of contemporary Maghribi literature as a whole, but this is a view dismissed by Leila Abouzeid and other Moroccan critics, who see francophone writing as largely irrelevant to Maghribi society and literature today. In a recent interview, Abouzeid pointed out that few Moroccan writers use French today, and argued that the current interest in francophone writing in the West is largely the result of various prizes, sponsorships and publication deals afforded by the French in defence of "francophonie" in their former colonies.5

Although francophone literature may have helped bring about "some awareness" of Maghribi literature in the West, Moroccan critics such as Mohammed Choukri and Abdelkebir Khatibi have suggested that some francophone Maghribi authors write to measure for a target European readership, and that Maghribi readers find their portrayal of Maghrib society shallow and superficial.6 Their texts are also criticized for perpetuating Orientalist myths and stereotypes about Arabic culture, as the authors pander to European tastes for the "exotic."

Khatibi, who writes both in Arabic and in French, dismisses texts such as those by Ben Jelloun as paraliterature - a literature of folklore, false glitter and bombast - in which characters and their problems are more grounded in psycho-analysis and semiotics than in social reality.

Leila Abouzeid chose to write in Arabic as the language of her religious faith and of her country. Her views on the use of the French language in the Moroccan context are clear:

> I loathed this language. . . . That I now know was a divine grace that has protected me from writing in a foreign language that came to me with an army behind it. It is a natural attitude toward the language of people who had usurped my country, put my father in their prisons and practised on him every means of torture.7

3. Thematic Parallels

Two major themes of postcolonial literatures, described in The Empire Writes Back as "the celebration of the struggle towards independence in community and individual" and "the dominating influence of a foreign culture on the life of contemporary postcolonial society," are prominent in Year of the Elephant.8

In Year of the Elephant, Zahra, shortly after her marriage, moves with her husband to Casablanca where for some years her life passes uneventfully. The turning point, and the event that also caused thousands of other ordinary Moroccans to join the nationalist resistance, was the 1952 Casablanca Massacre in which several hundred innocent civilians were murdered in the street by the French Foreign Legion. But Zahra's own active involvement in the resistance begins by chance one night when she and her husband hide a man fleeing from the French army. Soon, she is involved in all manner of activities, including the distribution of literature, collection of funds, organisation of strikes and the smuggling of arms. With her friends Roukia and Safia, Zahra helps organise women's groups to educate other women about the real struggle for development and independence, and together they enrol in new literacy classes for women.

As is the case in the autobiographical novels of Palestinian women such as Raymonda Hawa Tawil, Leila Khaled and Liana Badr, the participation by Zahra and her friends in active resistance against colonialist occupation and oppression is instrumental in challenging and redefining traditional gender roles.9 Tawil describes this participation as a revolutionary act in which Palestinian women were not only rebelling against Israeli occupation and oppression, but also against the restrictive attitudes of traditional Palestinian society.

> [These texts] reopen the question, both theoretical and practical, of the relationship between the status and position of women in a given society and the revolutionary program of national liberation. They suggest a redefinition of the conceptual apparatus, whether Marxism or feminism, deployed in locating and orienting the question of "women" in specific contexts. In these autobiographical texts, context assumes a vital significance.10

Elizabeth Fernea, in the introduction to her anthology Women and the Family in the Middle East states:

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> Zahra's experience clearly does not conform to that of most Western feminists. She is not a Western woman, but a Moroccan woman, a Muslim

> woman who finds comfort in her religious faith. . . . One woman's experience becomes a metaphor for society, a view that has less to do with Western ideas of individualism than it does with Middle Eastern ideas of the value of the group. The novel does not make an ideological statement, but rather presents in fictional form the real life situation of a real woman, the data that all ideologies must take into account.11

The second theme commonly found in postcolonial literature that is also present in Year of the Elephant is that of post-independence disillusionment.

Morocco finally achieved independence after 44 years of direct French colonial rule in November 1956, and Zahra describes the collective joy of the event, in which the entire nation seemed to be swept up, as an enormous celebration:

> The whole of Casablanca became one huge celebration connected by stages and loudspeakers. Songs and performances mingled with speeches, and the aroma of tea being prepared on sidewalks filled the air.12

Hugh Webb describes similar sentiments expressed by many anglophone African writers on the eve of "Uhuru" or "independence" ("istiqlal" in Arabic). But as Webb adds, this initial joy and optimism was not to last long: "The immediate Independence period, then, was a time of great jubilation. In only what seems to be a paradox, it was (almost inevitably) also the beginning of disillusionment."13

Zahra's own sense of post-independence disillusionment begins within days of the independence celebrations. While auctioning off a quantity of goods previously donated to the nationalist movement, she discovers that her former friend and colleague Safia has taken the best items for herself:

> "You look like you've come from a funeral," he said when I arrived home. I didn't keep him guessing. Safia had helped herself to some of the donations, I told him. He replied with a cryptic question . . . "Have they already started?"14

Despite these early misgivings, it is the circumstances surrounding her divorce some two decades later that bring post-independence reality into sharp focus for Zahra. In fact, the progress made in the status of women during the struggle for independence seemed to have been lost.

Her husband's reasons for seeking a divorce, exemplify for Zahra the continuing dominance of the French language and French customs and attitudes among Morocco's post-independence elite. Zahra describes how her husband has adopted the attitudes of the

former colonizers:

> These days my husband needs a wife who will offer cigarettes to his guests and help pave the road to the top for him by any means necessary. . . He once found me sitting in the sun with the servants. . . He glared with that look that said he would shoot me had he a gun in his hand.
>
> . . . He ate with a fork and I with my fingers. The sound of his fork hitting the plate stopped and I looked up . . .
>
> "You don't like me eating with my fingers? It doesn't please you that I sit with the servants? We fought colonialism in their name and now you think like the colonizers!"15

Eventually, Zahra realizes that the enormous hope and optimism that accompanied independence were unrealistic, and that her disappointment was inevitable:

> [W]e loaded Independence down with a burden it could not bear . . .16

The final bitter irony for Zahra is that the only work she can find is as a cleaner at the French Cultural Centre, where she comes "face to face with the basic fact that we can't do without the French after all."17

4. Islam

It is stated in The Empire Writes Back that postcolonial literature involves a "radical dismantling of European codes and a postcolonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses."18 In her approach to the Islamic religion in Year of the Elephant, Leila Abouzeid joins a growing number of Arab and Muslim women writers who have begun to challenge European feminist discourse on women and Islam. Academics such as Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed have reasserted what they believe is the original and universal liberatory message of Islam, and reject the notion that a theory and practice of liberation for Muslim women can only be found in European feminist models, most of which dismiss Islamic culture and values out of hand as totally incompatible with the concept of women's liberation.19 In Women and Islam for example, Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi expresses the view that Islam and liberation for women are entirely compatible:

> We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of this Muslim tradition.20

Such a position is a clear challenge to, and to an extent a rejection of, much Western feminist discourse.

In a series of dialogues between Zahra and the village "sheikh" that occur throughout Year of the Elephant, Abouzeid challenges European discourse on Islam by choosing to portray the sheikh as a warm, helpful and genuinely spiritual person rather than as a stereotypically authoritarian and misogynist figure. The sheikh, like the text of Year of the Elephant itself, stands in sharp contrast to the lurid images of "mad ayatollahs" and "fanatical fundamentalists" all too common in the Western media and Western academic discourse alike.

In many other references throughout the text, Abouzeid reinforces an essentially positive image of Islam as a force for social justice and liberation. It is of course unlikely that she set out to challenge negative Western stereotypes about Islam when she wrote Year of the Elephant, as the novel was written in Arabic for an Arab-Islamic readership who do not share Western prejudices and misconceptions regarding Islamic religion and culture. Once translated into English, however, the text presents an immediate challenge to Western discourse on Islam, opening the question of the role and value of translation within the field of postcolonial literature.

It is also highly significant that Zahra does not attribute the economic and social difficulties brought on by divorce to the Islamic religion, which many Western feminist texts would almost certainly do. At most, Zahra is critical of the way men may use an institutionalized Islamic-based legal system in their own interests, but for Zahra this is very much a temporal, human failing that does not detract in any way from the essential message of justice and equity that she finds in Islam.

5. Conclusion

Finally, is Year of the Elephant a postcolonial text? The answer to this question will of course depend entirely upon one's definition of what constitutes such a text. Studies such as The Empire Writes Back tend to suggest that the use of a European language, suitably "abrogated" and "appropriated," is an essential characteristic of postcolonial literature.21 Certainly, much postcolonial theory to date has concerned itself with the evolution of these languages of "the centre" (typically English and French) in various postcolonial environments, analysing a wide variety of linguistic features such as glossing, interlanguage, code switching, untranslatable words and syntactic innovation. With the exception of the linguistic questions raised by the use of a European language, Year of the Elephant can be considered a postcolonial text in most other senses, and stands as a clear example of the need for postcolonial theory to broaden its horizons and seriously investigate postcolonial literatures in languages other than those of Europe.

In particular, modern Arabic literature is a subject of great potential interest to researchers in this field, as it represents a unique example of postcolonial syncretism in which adopted European literary theories and genres have been combined with older Classical Arabic models to create a vigorous new literature which, despite 130 years of European colonization, has never ceased to employ the Arabic language as its medium. As Leila Abouzeid demonstrates with Year of the Elephant, the colonialist experience actually served to strengthen the position of Arabic as a literary language, as it became a central focus for resistance to imperialism on both the political and the cultural levels.

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1 Leila Abouzeid, Year of the Elepant: A Moroccan Woman's Journey Toward Independence, trans. Barbara Parmenter (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

2 Abouzeid 1.

3 Cited by Ephraim Nimni in "Marxism and Nationalism," Marxist Sociology Revisited: Critical Assessments, ed. Martin Shaw (London: Macmillan, 1985) 110.

4 Tahar Ben Jelloun, The Sacred Night, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Quartet 1989).

5 Leila Abouzeid, "An Interview with Leila Abouzeid", to be published in January 1993 in Ad-Dad: A Journal of Arabic Literature.

6 See Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Sacrilegious Discourse," in Ad-Dad 2 (1992):7.

7 Abouzeid in Ad-Dad.

8 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures (London: Routledge, 1989) 27.

9 See Raymonda Hawa Tawil, My Home My Prison (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1980); Leila Khaled, My People Shall Live: The Autobiography of a Revolutionary (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973); Liana Badr, A Compass for the Sunflower (London: Women's Press, 1989).

10 Raymonda Tawil, cited in Barbara Harlow, Resistance Literature (London: Methuen, 1987) 182.

11 Abouzeid (1989) xxv.

12 Abouzeid (1989) 49.

13 Hugh Webb, "Literary Form and Ideology: The African Counter-Attack?" in The New Literature Review, 3 (1977):16.

14 Abouzeid (1989) 52.

15 Abouzeid (1989) 54.

16 Abouzeid (1989) 67.

17 Abouzeid (1989) 67.

18 Ashcroft et al (1989) 195.

19 See Fatima Mernissi, Women and Islam (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), and Leila Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

20 Cited by Rana Kabbani in "Reclaiming the True Faith for Women," The Guardian, Manchester, 1992 (exact date unknown).

21 Ashcroft et al, 38-77.

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