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Voices of an anguished scream
Edited by Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Netton

The Arab Diaspora

Voices of an anguished scream

Edited by
Zahia Smail Salhi and
Ian Richard Netton

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Contents

List of contributors vii

Introduction: defining the Arab Diaspora 1
ZAHIA SMAIL SALHI

1 The betweenness of identity: language in trans-national literature 11
YASIR SULEIMAN

2 Gendering the imperial city: London in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* 26
ZAHIA SMAIL SALHI

3 Voices of exiles and the fictional works of Tayeb Salih 41
AMI ELAD-BOUSKILA

4 Voicing a culture "dispersed by time": metropolitan location and identity in the literature and art of Sabiha al Khemir 53
MOHAMED-SALAH OMRI

5 Hédi Bouraoui: cross-cultural writing 76
NAJIB REDOUANE

6 "When dwelling becomes impossible": Arab-Jews in America and in Israel in the writings of Ahmad Susa and Shimon Ballas 83
ORIT BASHKIN

in the early 1990s in Jerusalem. This statement is possibly connected to other considerations. See also M. M. Badawi (1992) 'Two Novelists from Iraq: Jabrā and Munīf', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, XXIII(2): pp. 140–154. Although Jabrā is Palestinian, his literary works belong to Iraqi as well as Palestinian literature. This is the opinion of the Iraqi literary critic Najm 'Abdallāh Kāzim (1987) *al-Riwāya fī al-'Irāq 1965–1980 wa Ta'thīr al-Riwāya al-Amrīkiyya fīhā*, Baghdad: Dār al-Shu'ūn al-Thaqāfiyya al-'Āmma, pp. 8–9. For a similar opinion see *Mu'jam al-Bābatīn li al-Shu'arā' al-'Arab al-Mu'āsirīn*, Kuwait: Mu'assasat Jā'izat 'Abd al-'Azīz Sa'ūd al-Bābatīn li al-Ibdā' al-Shi'rī, 1995, vol. 1, p. 642.

18 Ami Elad-Bouskila (1999c) 'The Other Face, the Language Choice of Arab Writers in Israel', in Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature and Culture*, pp. 32–62.

19 Some literary critics regard Salih as a *Mahjarī* writer, especially because of his erudition in the Arabic language and its heritage. See Mahmūd Ahmad Haykal (February 1976) 'Bandar Shāh', *al-Dōha*, 2: 131.

20 Ami Elad-Bouskila (22 August 2000) 'The Path and its Stations: An Interview with al-Tayyib Sālih in London', in Ami Elad-Bouskila, *Voices of Exiles: Studies in the Works of al-Tayyib Sālih*, Appendix H (Forthcoming).

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4 Voicing a culture "dispersed by time"

Metropolitan location and identity in the literature and art of Sabiha al Khemir

Mohamed-Salah Omri

Introduction: metropolitan location and Diaspora culture

In light of the present state of the Arab peoples, any Arab writer who engages Arab history or collective historical memory is almost destined to nostalgia. The desire which drives the gesture is akin to what Fanon has described as "the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation, and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others" (Williams and Chrisman 1993: 393). This was, of course, true and poignant during the colonial period where the assault on memory reached every aspect of colonized cultures. It remains relevant for Arab Diaspora today. One of the strongest impulses of the diasporic way of being is resistance to the assault on one's culture of origin. For the writer in Diaspora, correction often drives creation. Such resistance and corrective acts are, however, never free from their tie to the Diaspora's specific location. Resistance is relative to the assault: and in the range of assaults on cultures of origin, Islam bears a heavy blow indeed. The reasons are too complex to treat here; but the suggestion would be difficult to dismiss as exaggerated reaction, imagined phobia, or pathetic victimization, in light of the current state of Muslim – Western relations.[1] The implications of this on representation (writing and art) are significant and, at times, disorienting. Writing is imbued with value for the culture of origin.

In addition to this, there is another dynamic, which may be called the politics of position, whereby the Diaspora subject is necessarily implicated in the politics of representation, whether this takes place at the stage of reception (Diaspora culture has a dual audience) or at the level of production (the Diaspora writer and their hybrid identity).

With regard to the metropolitan audience, it is worth noting that the Arab Diaspora writer addresses a reader imbued with well-entrenched Orientalism and accustomed to media images and perceptions. It becomes, therefore, difficult to avoid exoticizing or simplifying the home culture. Mattawa warns that postcolonial writers are at best "forming new mutations of negritude"

(Mattawa 2000: 272). How can a writer guard against this? Mattawa recommends vigilance: "Writing from a postcolonial perspective I think no agency can be shaped without keeping a cold eye fixed on one's marginalization" (Ibid.). There is need for self-conscious positioning.

As far as the home audience is concerned, a writer from an Islamic background might find himself/herself wondering why Islam is more present in his/her Diaspora than it had ever been in the home country. The impulse to critique, which in many cases is at the origin of exile in the first place, may be inhibited or toned down. Between the pressure to simplify and explain to the metropolitan audience, and the desire to critique the culture of origin as well as the host culture, occurs the ambivalence of the Diaspora.[2] Dispersal and fragmentation are at the genesis of Diaspora. At the heart of Diasporic creation is a healing, a desire to reunite, a longing for wholeness; and in the bid for wholeness, the past plays a significant, but problematic role. Stuart Hall suggests that identity is not to be found in archeological rediscovery but in "the re-telling of the past" (Williams and Chrisman 1993: 393). He proposes to look at the nature of the search for identity. Identity is produced during the act of visual or textual representation. Hall notes,

> Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental "law of origin."
>
> (Ibid.: 395)

What goes into Diaspora literature? Beyond the pressures of conflict and polarization, is there specificity to the literature and art of Arab Diaspora?

There are of course shared features, which define Diaspora cultural production. One of the key components is bilingualism or the presence of the native language and culture in the Diaspora text. Khalid Mattawa, the Libyan poet of English expression notes,

> Postcolonial writing in English generally assumes the existence of another language whether the author makes the presence of that ghost language felt or not. When the postcolonial writer uses English or French, he or she is not writing from point zero. Rather he or she is inscribing on a palimpsest of his native language.
>
> (Mattawa 2000: 276)

The Francophone Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb suggests that this presence amounts to a poetics;

> When I write in one language, the other language is hidden in the first; it is at work somewhere, deliberately and in spite of me. The pressure of the absent language in the language in which I write can, in the end, make up a poetics.[3]
>
> (Cited in Ollier and Roche 1993: 36)

This palimpsest gains added complexity when the absent language is Arabic because this native culture has traces in the English or French languages themselves. Meddeb observes that the Arab writer who uses a European language is bound to meet, and has to contend with, the Arabic reference, which penetrated European languages and cultures in the medieval period. He says:

> The Arab writer who writes in French, like myself, may encounter during his journey that excluded and past history. This writer can take a detour in his journey to fill up from that old source a second time. He can, while being at the top of modernity, pass via the medieval path in order to find out if that history contains material worth recalling. He would refer to past texts, escaping, secretly, discretely away from his linguistic bilingualism, French–Arab, to the issue which feeds it; the issue from which there is no escape, namely, the problematic of Islam–Christianity in its European formulation.[4]
>
> (Meddeb 2000: 147)

The relationship with the European language of writing becomes, for the Arab postcolonial writer, aware of issues of representation, a form of archeology, or even a search for genealogy.

The hybridity of postcolonial writing/culture challenges the analyst. It is often studied as bilingual or bicultural text, such as Francophone literature of French Africa or Anglophone writing from the Indian subcontinent. We are yet to think appropriately multiple identities and voices, particularly when more than one colonial language is involved. The present paper argues that Maghrebi literature in English stretches this assumption considerably. In addition to the issues involving the bilingual and bicultural or the relationship between mother tongue and the language of the former empire, it introduces a new dimension. Writing in English breaks a link to a language tainted with the colonial experience of the Maghreb.

The meaning of writing in French is perhaps best described by Meddeb:

> On one level, French is a functional language in the Maghreb; on another level, I write in a language that neither my father nor my mother can read. This provides perhaps more freedom to be in excess, immoderation, transgression, violence, blasphemy, eroticism.
>
> (Cited in Ollier and Roche 1993: 20)

French introduces a distance and creates space for freedom to express what may be called repressed or silenced impulses at the personal level. At the level of the culture as a whole, the stakes are even more poignant. We read in Meddeb's narrative, *Phantasia*,

> To enjoy a communal Islam, which you recognize in the benefits of a language which is to you dead; Arabic, a liturgical and instinctive language, which sustains, by its absence, the creative imagination which you transmit in the French language of the time.
>
> (Meddeb 1986: 66–67)

Arabic language is tied to Islam and is therefore denied its status as language, carrier of secular culture. The writer's task is to extricate one from the other. Meddeb again: "I wanted to disentangle Islam and the Arabic reference in a manner that brings the Arabic letter to its historical reference, next to the Greek, Latin and Hebrew letters" (cited in Ollier and Roche 1993: 21).

North African writing in English may serve the same goals; but it also adds a further distance between text and culture of origin. It poses new problems of reading and interpretation. More poignantly, it raises new questions: Where does the "intermediate" colonial language go? How does it leave its mark on the text? And what are the consequences of this in terms of style? How does this choice of language affect identity politics? What are the traces of classical Arabic and how is the dialect present in the text? The present paper engages some of these issues through a study of the work of the London-based Tunisian writer and artist, Sabiha al Khemir. First, however, a word on the state of English in the Maghreb as a whole and in the writer's native Tunisia in particular, is in order.

In Tunisia, English was initially taught as a third language at a late age in secondary education and at the university level. It was taught as a language of culture, with focus on American and British history and literatures. The purpose was to produce graduates who will be able to teach English as a foreign language in the country. Al Khemir followed this course. Changes occurred in Tunisia recently, reflecting local and global developments. Linking the teaching of English to the needs of the country and moving away form the curriculum outlined earlier has become policy (Jabeur *et al.* 1999: 24). English is called upon to serve a "functional rather than cultural" aim (Ibid.: 9). At the level of cultural content, there is a growing tendency to emulate French departments by giving room to postcolonial, including North African, texts in English.[5] This adjustment occurs within recognition that a wider range of English literatures perhaps closer to students' interests from outside Britain and the United States has become widely available. In recent years, English has been making serious headway at the expense of French at the secondary and primary levels of education. The second language in Tunisia remains, however, French. It still wields power and influence in business and politics and in cultural output.[6] Yet, English is now firmly a voice in the polyphony of languages in the Maghreb.

Al Khemir is a Tunisian in London, a Francophone writing in English.[7] Between the mother and the narrator in her first novel, *Waiting in the Future for the Past to come*, stand four linguistic stations, with corresponding states of consciousness, narrative possibilities, and articulations of meaning. There are four stages of intertextual engagement; four distancing devices; four spaces of rupture; four broken bridges. The mother speaks only the Tunisian dialect, the daughter thinks through classical Arabic and French, and writes in English. It is for this reason that it is imperative to study the text as the site where these languages lead a collective existence. They mix, separate, cross, complement each other in order to make up a multilingual text in the deep sense of the term. That is, a text which is fully decipherable only by reference to all its languages, not only to each one separately but to their interaction also, and perhaps primarily. In addition, language should be seen in a specific way: as a site where the linguistic, historical, and personal histories intersect. It is for this reason that one must ask: In what English does al Khemir write? As a Tunisian with access to and training in Arabic, French, and English, and as a woman born during the postcolonial era, al Khemir was faced with choices and destinies, as a citizen and as a woman. Her fiction explores these choices and destinies. As an exile her work engages issues of belonging to a culture with a weighty past, the fragmentation of the self and longing for wholeness. I will explore first her fiction, then her art.

Al Khemir is an artist, art historian, and archeologist. Her drawings are, for the most part, executed in black ink by reed pen. Among several works, mention may be made of her acclaimed illustration of the English translation of *The Island of Animals* by Ikhwān al-Safā'. She has written a book on Islamic sculpture, a PhD dissertation on Fatimid art and architecture, essays on Andalusian manuscripts, and presented television programs on Islamic art. Her novel, *Waiting in the Future for the Past to Come*, in part tells the story of Amina, a Tunisian young woman who leaves her home town to study in Britain and returns after a long absence and success in education. It is composed of stories, mostly by and about women, narrated from the point of view of a child, and explores the relationship between mother and daughter, exile and home country. The second novel, *The Blue Manuscript*, is a fictional tracing of the genesis of the famous Blue Qur'an penned in al-Qayrawān in the tenth century.[8] It follows excavations for it near a fictional Egyptian village, Wādi Hassoun, by an international team of archeologists, art historians, and dealers. In the course of the trip, Zohra, the half-English half-Tunisian team translator, witnesses the excavations, rediscovers her connections to the culture of her father, and mediates between the villagers and the foreign crew. In the village, 'Amm Gāber, the blind storyteller, the village beauty Zeineb who desires Zohra, and the boy Mahmoud who helps and entertains the crew, play significant roles. The narrative weaves in accounts of the founding of Cairo and the vision and art of the calligrapher Ibn al-Warrāq who created the blue Qur'ān by drawing loosely on historical sources.

Three forks in the road and the "one less taken"

In the title, *Waiting in the Future for the Past to Come*, there is a memory, a promise, and an absence. A return from England to a street named after her father should cause Amina, the narrator, to feel at home. But is she, was she, has she ever been at home? The story, framed by this opening (akin to classical returns home from exile, such as Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* or Emile Césaire's *Retour au pays natal*), traces the feeling of internal exile. Changes are marked in subtle brush strokes and allusions but, most crucially, the past and the present are questioned. The past is recalled through stories and images, mostly of women. Amina is between two visions of herself. For the village she was the home girl who did well in the world of men and was, therefore, no longer a woman; "Everyone congratulated my mother before they left. 'Your daughter, *til'at rajil*, turned out to be a man'" (Al Khemir 1993: 19). Her own stance is different: "I was a woman. I wanted to be a woman and I did not want to be there" (Ibid.: 19). Between the two stands a void, an absence. The present and the future separate the two.

The daughter makes a promise to give a voice to her mother's pain and, along the way, she tells of her own:

> I had told my mother. "I will tell your story to the world, your story, Yasmina's and others" [...]
> "What language does the world speak?" she asked.
> "Oh, it doesn't matter," I replied. "A scream is a scream is a scream."[9]
> (Ibid.: 22)

To the mother's pain at the loss of her husband, Amina's father, the latter feels helpless:

> There was nothing I could do. I lay there and absorbed my mother's suffering like a sponge. I grew soggy and rotten and all my life I wished to grow hands strong enough to squeeze it out of me. I wished that from the sponge the pain would flow through the pen and write the story, my mother's story....
> (Ibid.: 22)

Amina's own story unfolds between spaces of birth (womb) and death (tomb). The two often merge, creating a continuum, a w/tomb. The birth, or leaving "the warm, eventless abstract darkness," is recalled and recreated many times in the narrative. Amina's room at the university dormitory was "so small that it was referred to as the 'tomb' by one of my friends.... There was no windows and, once inside, I had the strange feeling, again, of going back into the womb" (Ibid.: 158). The desire to inhabit someone else's body persists, "I crept into the central room, not under the bed, not into the cupboard, but into Yasmina's body" (Ibid.: 204). In the *hammam*, Amina looks at women's bodies with curiosity and envy: "Examining some of the extraordinary architecture of these women's bodies, I stood there wondering what it feels like to live in one of them" (Ibid.: 188). The women appeared at one with their bodies. Their bodies expressed themselves in ways alien to Amina who could only understand the body as language; "Women teased each other and told stories. Words were moist and hot and steamed up until they were dripping. A screen of vapour made them opaque concealing their meaning to the inexperienced" (Ibid.: 188).

Amina's body is alien and alienated throughout the narrative; "I always felt strange living in this body of mine, anyway. In fact, the real me was not living, it was most of the time over my left shoulder, watching closely" (Ibid.: 269). She feels trapped inside "this prison" and often wishes to "sneak out" (Ibid.: 269). The story of Sayyida recalls and echoes this feeling. Sayyida was the best masseuse in the local *hammam* for sixteen years until it was discovered that she was a man. Sayyida was a man who inhabited the intimate space of women while Amina was perceived as a man because of her success in their world. Both transgress socially determined spaces, the private space of woman and the public space of men, but only in disguise. They are trapped in social perceptions of gender. And even when her body is represented in photographs or reflected in a mirror, Amina can still see through the reflection: "There, I saw myself as ugly as I always saw myself" (Ibid.: 231). For a moment, a significant one as I show below, body and "real self" unite. Under Antoine's touch, alone in his car, she felt whole. But the unity was brutally severed by a flashlight and a policeman asking for identity cards. He was trying to identify a crime against social norm and dogma: the unity of body and "real self." Amina runs away as fast as she could (she always does so as a child). "I run with the motto of the time resounding from all directions: 'Behind every citizen there is a policeman... behind every citizen there is a policeman.... behind'" (Ibid.: 253). The social/police order at home does not sanction wholeness. It was a must that another order be sought, and exile from home was Amina's salvation. Auntie Houria's story sheds some light on this. The story, because of its recurrence in the novel, creates rhythm and organic unity in the narrative as a whole.

Three sisters set out in search of their destiny. First, they all marry Selim, who is reputed to be possessed by a female spirit (*jinniyya*). But only the youngest one was destined for him. The other two had to search for their appointed fate. One was to reach "the dog with seven chains" and free him from his animal form by feeding him warm home-baked bread. The other sister had to find "the tomb of the exiled" and "cry him up" into life. They disguise themselves as knights and ride until the "road forked into three." Decisions have to be made and they follow their instincts, part ways, and eventually reach their destinations and meet their destinies. What about the third fork in the road? "At the beginning of the third road, lay a jet black feather, on which was written in Arabic calligraphy, with silver ink, 'Take me, you regret, leave me, you regret'" (Ibid.: 100).[10] Auntie Houria's story is picked up at a crucial moment in Amina's journey. The choices were repeated almost *verbatim* toward the end of the narrative, except for one addition. The third road is now described as "the untraveled road" (Ibid.: 258). Amina makes her choice:

> Up the third road I went, in my lifetime disguise. I went looking for my destiny, for the real self. I rode fast. I rode slowly. I rode through forests. I rode through deserts. I rode through mountains. I rode and rode and rode. I rode so fast and so long, making no distinction between the night and the day . . .
>
> (Ibid.: 258)

Amina leaves a Tunisian university for Britain where, except for scanty information about her degrees, very little is given. She leaves in order to transcend the fragmentation, which divided her into a body and a "real self." Exile, paradoxical as it may seem, becomes a site for unity of the self.

I now return to Antoine's story, mentioned earlier. I suggest that Amina's story with Antoine, while it reveals wholeness, hides exile. Fragmentation is embedded in the relationship. The moment of wholeness is experienced in Tunis, a home which Amina finds alien, with a Frenchman, who is in turn away from home. The two exiles meet at a tenuous point, outside – even against – the social order. It is fitting that their meeting place is a car, a mobile home. Antoine, however, offers only a second road, which appears more like an impasse.

Allegorically, the third road refers to choice of language, English over French and Arabic. The choice is also a parallel to Zohra in *The Blue Manuscript*, who is neither English nor Tunisian. Diaspora, it has been stressed earlier, is a third space, where both home and host cultures converge, intersect, and even clash.

When Amina returns to the village, it becomes apparent that between her and her mother stand two irreconcilable conceptions of home and Diaspora. The mother is proud that her daughter "turned out to be a man," at once the husband she lost to politics and the son she lost to premature death. She now wants a full return home, a reconciliation with the homeland. She evokes the ephemeral and hopeless nature of exile expressed in a refrain: "Oh, you the one who builds in a country other than your own, it's neither for you nor for your children" (Ibid.: 262). The eloquent articulation of the desire to return home as well as the desire itself find echoes deep inside Amina. But deep down her destiny remains unfulfilled. She wonders,

> Now you will have to tell her, tell her that you have not come back, that you never came back, that this was an image of you, a dead image of the past which was temporarily revived for the celebration, just for her, that it was not possible to revive it again, that the dummy feeds off your own blood, that for it to live, you would have to die.
>
> (Ibid.: 268)

On a first impression, Amina's road appears to be a journey forward.

> On the far horizon of the third road, the sun rose. I slid over the side of the horse to pick up a leaf that lay at the beginning of the road. A line was transcribed in gold ink: "How to learn not to regret."
>
> (Ibid.: 272)

The inscription in Auntie Houria's story has been transformed in colour, in tone, and in texture. It is now in gold, not in silver; it is written on a leaf, not on a feather, and it no longer reads: "Take me, you regret, leave me, you regret" (Ibid.: 100). The feather in the story is now a leaf on the ground, an abandoned sign on a road not taken. Here, Amina picks up the leaf and takes the road. She assumes the symbol and initiates the journey.

No longer a feather at the mercy of winds she cannot control, she is now a subject, in control of her destiny: "The horse neighed and stretched its long neck, the leaf trembled against the rays of the luminous sun and the Arabic letters shone" (Ibid.: 272). The mother who waited for the past to come will have to wait still. Personal history is now a story told to fulfill a promise. A new past emerges from the calligraphy, a past illuminated by a new vision.

Al Khemir's second novel, *The Blue Manuscript*, attempts to uncover this shared communal past. The social transformation, the pain of Diaspora in its social and psychological sense, will now be explored through Islamic art. The personal history gives way, or leads to the "far-reaching memory." The title of the first novel is in fact recalled in the second one: "Al-Muizz was carrying the past into the future" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 25). He was carrying a dream and the sepulchers of his ancestors. Like al-Muizz, the past needs to be carried forward, made part of the future. But what past is this? And how does it affect the present?

Knitting/unknitting

If the first novel is a script of the blues of leaving the habitations of the self: home, body, mother, village and country, the second is the inscription of a relationship to the past of a community. If *Waiting* is the story of separation and exile, *The Blue Manuscript* is the story of connecting and homecoming. It establishes genealogies and begettings. The future of the past seems to have come. *The Blue Manuscript* is about roots: setting them, recovering them, cutting them off. A number of connections will be traced here. They fall within the overall themes of voicing/re-telling a past, dispersal, fragmentation, and unity.

Like the tent-maker in the novel, who connects colorful patches day and night, leaning against the shrine or the village store, the narrator weaves links between stories and people in a tapestry that does not take its final shape until the very end of the book. Knitting is a motif in both books and a method of composition: in *Waiting*, the mother knits constantly while the daughter, who usually holds the thread, is overcome by the desire to "unknit everything" (Ibid.: 268). The narrator knits together numerous stories and threads.[11] In *The Blue Manuscript*, 'Amm Gāber pulls together threads of myth and history in his stories and songs while the narrator weaves threads of Fatimid history into present-day Egypt. There seems to be a paradoxical metaphor: the rebellion against a woman's expected role as weaver, expressed in *Waiting*, is the very basis of narrative poetics in both novels. Between the two texts run several threads of significant effect on the theme of dispersal and fragmentation. But I will limit myself to only some instances.

Zohra and Amina relate to the language and "Arab culture" in similar ways. "The café swarmed with words. Words mingled in a shower of chatter that bathed them warmly. Shards of conversations surfaced but only Zohra, the translator, caught them" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 1).

In the public bath in the first novel, "Words were moist and hot and steamed up until they were dripping. A screen of vapor made them opaque concealing their meaning to the inexperienced" (Ibid.: 188). The shape and feel of language is explicit. In both cases, these are Arabic words spoken in "Arab" space. There is an intimate relationship between space and expression here. While Zohra catches fragments of meaning,[12] Amina feels the texture of women's sexualized speech but understands it only in part. Both have limited access to meaning.

They are both uncertain about their desires and both long for a voice of their own. In *Waiting* Amina is desired only by Antoine, an outsider. She also hates her body. In *The Blue Manuscript*, Zohra is uncertain about her sexual orientation or desire: there are references to her "bland face," flat chest, to the fact that she is desired by women but not men (*The Blue Manuscript*: 153, 155, 232). Like Amina, she "longed for a voice of her own" and had to leave home to find it. When Zohra was about to find her voice, she was unable to use it; "And tonight she has an important story to tell the world" (Ibid.: 267). Zohra will not tell the story in the novel. She carries the responsibility of representing, of being a witness, not just to Mustapha's confession that he forged the blue Qur'ān found in the dig, but as the guardian of what she had come to see (Ibid.: 270). She questions her role but never really fulfills it.

The past dismembered and re/membered

Any evocation of the past emanates from a cultural history and inevitably constitutes cultural politics. In *The Blue Manuscript*, there is a discernable apology or even embarrassment that Arabs have fallen short of their past. This is expressed across the narrative through oppositions that appear at times binary. Modern-day Cairo, the inhabitants of Wādi Hassoun, Zohra's father, and the Cairene calligrapher stand on one side while Fatimid Cairo, the Green pavilion, Zohra's desire to connect with the father's heritage, Ibn al-Warrāq, and 'Amm Gāber all stand on the other side. Between the two there is a gap, perhaps even a gaping abyss.[13] There may be even a hint that the legendary Banī Hilāl tribes who devastated Ifrīqiyyā during the Fatimid period have lineage in the inhabitants of the Wādi. The Banī Hilāl's story (Ibid.: 216–217) prepares and overshadows the mob scene (Ibid.: 218–221). If the Banī Hilāl were described as a "plague of locusts" by the historian Ibn Khaldoun (Ibid.: 217), the mob of villagers is portrayed in the novel as "a mighty swarm of locusts" (Ibid.: 219). Modern culture is characterized by noise, the old one by silence. "In the turmoil of the city [Cairo], the world of the pyramids seemed unimaginable" (Ibid.: 9). About this Cairo we read: "The past was present everywhere. Timeless devotion had once transformed hard materials into beautiful lace. Now, time was making it crumble into dust" (Ibid.: 18). Zohra falls in love with the Cairo of the past: "The city was a remnant of a civilization that had been exhausted. And her being was starved of what this city used to be" (Ibid.: 24).[14] The excavations unearth deep anguish in the translator:

> For Zohra, these old objects were carriers of history and her ancestors kept her awake at night. The present mediocrity of her father's reality juxtaposed the sophistication of his culture's past. She felt him unworthy of his heritage. She lay awake, thinking. As the dig went on, Zohra felt that they were digging deep within her as much as in the earth.
>
> (Ibid.: 192)

Zohra reflects on the break with the past: "Such sophisticated artistic production revealed an extraordinary vision and refined lifestyle with no trace connecting it to the present" (Ibid.: 101).

There is, however, fragility about this past. One is even led to wonder whether Fatimid culture was doomed from its very genesis. General Jawhar reports a sign that Cairo was doomed; when he gathered astrologers to choose a fortuitous star, a crow landed on the wires and mislead them (Ibid.: 40). "'It is a bad omen', he thought" (Ibid.: 49). The Arabic letters carefully carved onto the horses' shoes in order to leave the inscription on the ground appear ephemeral. "Before his memory's eye, al-Muizz saw his caravan march into Egypt… the horses impressing the principles of the dynasty into the new earth. Then he watched the letters disintegrate and dissolve, erased by the wind before his very eyes" (Ibid.: 40): an empire of signs, and signs that the empire is coming to an end.

When it is revealed that the manuscript was forged, planted, and discovered, the reader is not surprised. One has the feeling all along that the manuscript could only be fake. The account of the genesis of the manuscript makes it inimitable, perhaps even unreal. And even if the original were discovered, it is no longer authentic. It is de-originated, alienated from the spirit of its creation. Between Ibn al-Warrāq, the dream of al-Muizz's mother and the "value" given by collectors, dealers, opaque art historians, and ignorant villagers, stands an unbridgeable gulf.[15] Transfer is impossible, and here perhaps is where the homage resides. Ibn al-Warrāq, the calligrapher trusted with creating the manuscript, muses:

> This is how my letters must look, just like the moon and the stars in the deep indigo sky with all the mysteries of the night's silent velvet. Golden letters on deep night blue will be my search light in darkness.
>
> (Ibid.: 112)

Is the manuscript returned to its spirit? Will the page of the manuscript ever look the same after reading al Khemir's book?[16] Here is, I think, the major achievement, the attempt to affect the recalling of the past, and the desire to give it a voice different from academic discourse on it.

Zohra the bearer of truth, being the only one who heard Mustapha's confession, is unable to communicate it. Upon return from Egypt, she connects with her father's culture by studying it. "One half of her wanted to tell the other half that she carried the ancestor's history, their culture, not just their genes" (Ibid.: 266). The excavations allowed her to connect with the manuscript. But she can also speak English [Western language]. "She felt she had bridged the gap between the two [East and West]" (Ibid.: 266). "Her father was not really aware of his cultural heritage himself because a breach in history had interrupted life's continuum" (Ibid.: 266). The act of speaking would distinguish Zohra from her father. "Unlike her father, she would be worthy of her cultural heritage" (Ibid.: 270). But, when she meets her excavation mates, her "anger melted in an instant and everything was lost in her confusion" (Ibid.: 270). "And the words of protest about the fake which the translator had been intending to declare never emerged. Contrary to her habit, she did not ask which part of herself, the Arab or the English, had let her down" (Ibid.: 271), and then she began to doubt the whole thing.

Is Zohra a weak go-between rather than a mediator, a translator in the cultural sense? She struggles with voice throughout: getting it, loosing it, wanting to have it, being the voice of others. Zohra has an inherent memory. She connects with 'Amm Gāber only by hearing his voice as he sings or tells stories; by an instinctive feeling of closeness, by a longing she cannot define. But she is also inherently unable to express her connectedness: she will remain a translator, not the voice of the past. Is it because of her hybridity, being half English half Arab? And, beyond her, is English capable of voicing this past? And even more fundamentally, is this past voiceable at all?

At the end 'Amm Gāber gets the last laugh; " 'Amm Gāber wiped a drop that had run down his face. And suddenly, for no apparent reason, he burst out laughing, exposing his charcoal teeth which contrasted with the glistening whiteness of his eyes" (Ibid.: 278). He reveals his genealogy, the hiding place of the manuscript,' and perhaps the point. The ancestor says that the manuscript was near the water wheel in Jamal Pasha's orchard, buried with Ibn al-Warrāq (Ibid.: 277). History is transformed into story, surviving the rupture. But it is a story without listeners (or with uninterested listeners). 'Amm Gāber distances himself from al-Muizz's storyteller who said, "Without his listeners, a storyteller is nothing" (Ibid.: 277).[17] He declares: "My faithfulness is to my stories." Faithfulness is to stories rather than to listeners. The language does not matter: a scream is a scream. The important thing is that the stories of the women in the village (in *Waiting*) and the ancestral stories (in Ibid.) are told. The voiceless must be given a voice.

Between 'Amm Gāber and Zohra connections are significant.[18] But it is 'Amm Gāber who embodies the past:

> 'Amm Gāber came from that world which has encompassed a civilization that was doomed. It was the first time that Zohra was able to formulate that untranslatable emotion which had inhabited her since Wādi Hassoun. But even now, as she looked at the shape of the feeling she was not sure she understood its meaning.
>
> (Ibid.: 262–263)

Zohra is able to feel the connection but not to grasp its sense. Her dual makeup prevents identification with one or the other of the selves that make her. The voice of the past has reached her, but she is not positioned to express it. Most crucial for the issue of voicing is the role of the West in mutilating the past. The novel creates a fictional context in which the original manuscript, and behind it Islamic vision of art, particularly calligraphy, are celebrated. In addition to bad art history and unworthy ancestors, Islamic art has been disfigured by the West. In the novel, the integrity of Ibn al-Warrāq's art and its wholeness has been violated at the hands of dealers. The Englishman Mr Winston, who tore the pages of the blue *Qur'ān* apart and sold them around the world, is guilty of nothing short of dismembering a whole and dispersing it across the world as commodity (Ibid.: 104).[19] Unlike Mr Winston, al Khemir attempts an act of re-membering classical Islamic art in her novel. Her drawings establish a similar connection with Arabic calligraphy and Islamic icons.

Iconography of identity

Etel Adnan, the Lebanese novelist who writes in French and English and is also an artist, suggests that the problem of language choice in her case was solved by art. Painting somehow circumvents the issue by adopting a non-linguistic medium. Yet the connection with and need for the native culture remain. Adnan observes that the presence of Arabic calligraphy in her paintings, mostly in the form of words or letters, is a parallel to the lines which constitute the "canvas" of her life. Calligraphy connects her "directly with the cultural destiny of the Arabs" (Adnan 2000: 142).

What are the genealogy and the meaning of using the Arabic word or the letter in art? Is it part of revival of Islamic art in modern Arabic painting? Does it, together with the use of miniature and other decorative styles, convey an "arabization" of Western art? Does it simply mean a trace or a traceable tie to Arabic language?

There are dangers and problems specific to the Islamic context of this art. Arabic letters carry meaning even, and perhaps particularly, when they stand alone. The reason for this has to do with the *Qur'ān* and its interpretations. A number of Qur'anic chapters start with letters, "Yā Sīn" being the best known but also "The Cow," which begins with the letters *alif, lām, mīm* and "Mary" which starts with *kāf, hā, 'ayn, sād*. These letters, referred to as "*futūhāt*" (openings) needed interpretation and have gained sacred, even liturgical significance particularly in the work of Sufis. Most significant here is the work of Abu Mansour al-Hallāj called *al-Tawāsin* (plural of the letters *Ta Sin*) and Ibn 'Arabī's meditations on letters of the alphabet. Occult sciences and divination (*hurūfiyya, jafr, firāsa*) rely heavily on the use of letters.[20] Using Arabic letters in modern art, particularly the ones singled out in the *Qur'ān* inevitably engages this history.

Because Arabic is the liturgical language of Islam, writing became in itself an act of worship in Islamic culture. Beautiful script was believed to add clarity to truth. The Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn took special interest in writing: "If the pride of other nations is their sayings, our pride is the variety of script because of its nobility. It is read in every place, translated in every tongue and exists in every time" (Al-Banhasi 1980: 92). In theories and manuals of calligraphy, the dot is the origin of all Arabic scripts. The number of dots, which make up a particular letter determines the type of script.[21] The artist using Arabic in a "secular" context is always mindful of the dangers of the choice and the limitations imposed by the tradition. This explains why modern Arab artists have attempted to develop a different relationship with the letter. The Iraqi painter, Hassan Fa'id, argues that he uses the letter as a "dimension not as symbol," for purposes of movement and rhythm. On the artistic level, the modern artist has to contend with a tradition which has reached intimidating heights in the past. In fact, at the level of artistic achievement, the legacy of calligraphy in Arab culture is matched perhaps, only by poetry. The anxiety felt by the modern calligrapher must be quite strong.

Engagement with this tradition has been, however, significant. Mention may be made of the Iraqi Dhia al-Azzawī and his abstract style, the Algerian Rasheed al-Qurayshī's elaborate designs and the Tunisian Naja al-Mahdāwī's calligraphy. It is within this tradition and in dialogue with it that the drawings of Sabiha al Khemir must be seen. I have selected, for in-depth analysis, three drawings from *The Island of Animals*.

The Island of Animals is an abridged and adapted version of the epistle "*Risālat tadā'ī al-hayawān 'ala al-insān*" (The Dispute between Animals and Man), written by the group of philosophers, Ikhwān al-Safā, who were active in Basra in the tenth century.[22] While the English translation of the text is recent and made to suit a modern public, the dialogue between the original text and the drawings is almost synchronic. The art is clearly an illustration of the Arabic rather than the English text. The imaginative recalling of the tradition in the illustration recreates the time of the epistle in two significant ways. These are the calligraphic nature of the drawings and the understanding of the spirit from which the book emerged.

The first of the figures to be analyzed is the scene where the peacock, the minister to the king, gives council to his sovereign, the Simurgh, about the best suited representative of the birds in the court of the king of the jinn (Figure 1). The peacock, one of the most depicted birds in Islamic art does not really pose a problem. The artist gave it a fine human face to reflect its exhibitionist attitude. The depiction of the Simurgh is a different story altogether. The text describes it as "that large fabulous winged creature who was king of birds" (Johnson-Davies 1994: 28). The Simurgh is completely imagined. Farīduddīn al-'Attār, the twelfth/thirteenth-century Persian poet, made this creature both famous and decidedly fictional.

In his *Conference of the Birds*, the hoopoe points the way to its fellow birds:

> We have a king; beyond Kaf's mountain peak
> The Simurgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,
> And He is always near to us, though we
> Live far from His transcendent majesty.
> (Attar 1984: 33)

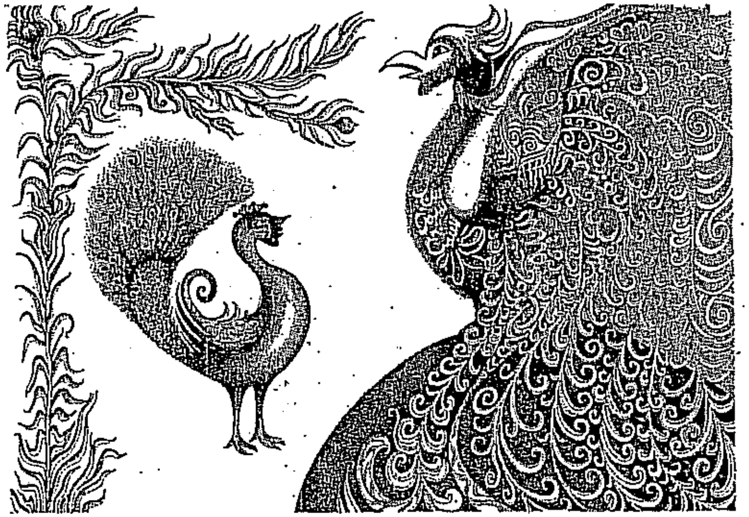

Figure 1 The Simurgh.

There is a tantalizing reference to what the Simurgh might look like:

> It was in China, late one moonless night,
> The Simurgh first appeared to mortal sight –
> He let a feather float down through the air,
> And rumours of its fame spread everywhere;
> Throughout the world men separately conceived
> An image of its shape, and all believed
> Their private fantasies uniquely true.
> (Ibid.: 34–35)

Al Khemir walks in the footsteps of those who conceived the Simurgh and gives us her "private" fantasy of the bird. The illustrator draws a striking creature in a way that accentuates representation rather than recalls existing renderings of the Simurgh, of which there are several.[23] But since the Simurgh is, in 'Attar's poem at least, a pun on words, a creature of language, al Khemir uses the Arabic for Simurgh to represent the bird.[24] She decorates its feathers and neck with the Arabic word "Simurgh." Since the Simurgh pertains, essentially, to literary device and mythical origin, only the arbitrary sign can point to this most unstable and uncertain of references. In the illustration, calligraphy and knowledge of Islamic history combine to create an image embedded in Islamic spiritual literature and link up with its tradition. The rendering of the bird goes beyond the English text and connects with what al Khemir has called the "far-reaching memory." The Arabic in it may seem ornamental but it is also referential.

A similar process is at work in the drawing of the King of Jinn (Figure 2). Here again the reference is elusive; for no one really knows what a Jinn looks like. The king's throne is decorated in elaborate patterns reminiscent of Islamic or Indian woodwork. His crown and body are decorated with the Arabic words *Malik al-Jinn* (the King of Jinn) repeated and reshaped to fit the outline of the crown, the upper body and the stretched arms. The face, including two pointy ears and the eyes, appears like a mask, something familiar in performances of devils and jinn. Two piercing beady eyes seem to look through viewers and draw them in at the same time, in a hypnotic gesture: Jinn can see but are not seen. They take hold of us, seduce us, and leave us under their control.

The third drawing is the face-off between the animals and the humans (Johnson-Davies 1994: 69) (Figure 3). It is a playful illustration with a hint of the feminist point of the view. The men have a dazzling variety of headgear and beard styles but the same look. They seem puzzled, perhaps by the eloquence of the animals, bemused that their position as masters of the world is challenged by beasts. These, in turn, show a triumphant attitude, and even an occasional smirk. The tension of the story is at its climax here and the men

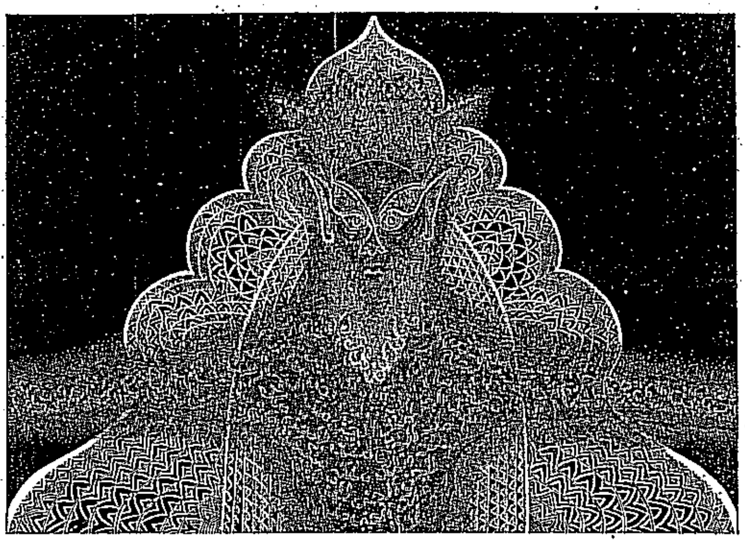

Figure 2 Malik al-Jinn.

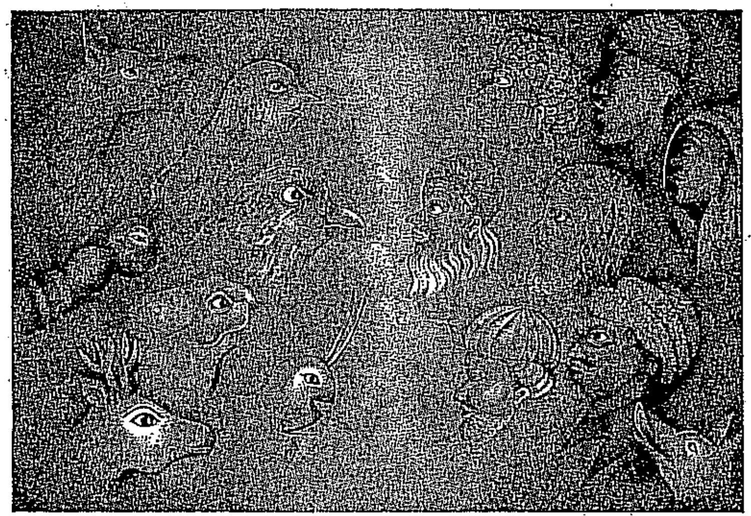

Figure 3 Face-off.

are anxious about the verdict. A woman lurks slightly behind, her face revealed to us, but hidden from the men, and observes the scene with a watchful eye. The text itself refers explicitly to men only; "No less than seventy men decided to stay on the island" (Ibid.: 5). The Arabic original does not exclude women from the community that landed on the island; but specifically states that the delegation which met the king of the Jinn was made up of "about seventy men from various countries" (Sa'd 1997: 147). The possibility that women were present on the boat exists in the original. The illustration of the storm (Figure 4) includes two women clearly visible in the far right of the scene. This picture foreshadows the appearance of the woman in the face-off discussed earlier. In both, the female presence comes through, subtle but unmistakable.[25]

Al Khemir explains her style: "Not unlike photography, the style of drawing itself, based mainly on the dot, is interesting for me in its relation to the particle, the basic component of the universe, and to dust which is the ultimate destiny of everything" (Lloyd 2001: 195).[26] Essentially, there is no difference between the words "dispersed by time" made out of grains of sand in al Khemir's Channel Four documentary and the drawings of *The Island of Animals*. Both reveal the desire for wholeness and betray the conviction of dispersion, painstaking efforts to hold dots together, and painful realisation, as one does this, that the whole is dispersible – an apt metaphor for communal existence of Diaspora. The visibility of the dot on the page betrays fragility. It also makes visible the process of drawing. It lays bare to the naked eye the artist's work: there is no attempt at mimesis or at conveying a reality effect. All the illustrations and book covers made by al Khemir emanate from this principle. They do not illustrate but graphically represent a reading of the text they illustrate. This is perhaps the deep link and reference to the Islamic art of calligraphy. Composing the shape of a bird, for instance, using the words *bismi Allah al-Rahmān al-Rahīm* draws attention not to the imitation of the bird, but rather to the capacity of the letter (and of the calligrapher, of course) to represent. The awe is not at the accuracy of representation but at the act (and art) of representation. The point is not the bird, rather the calligraphed bird, the letters or words which make up the picture.

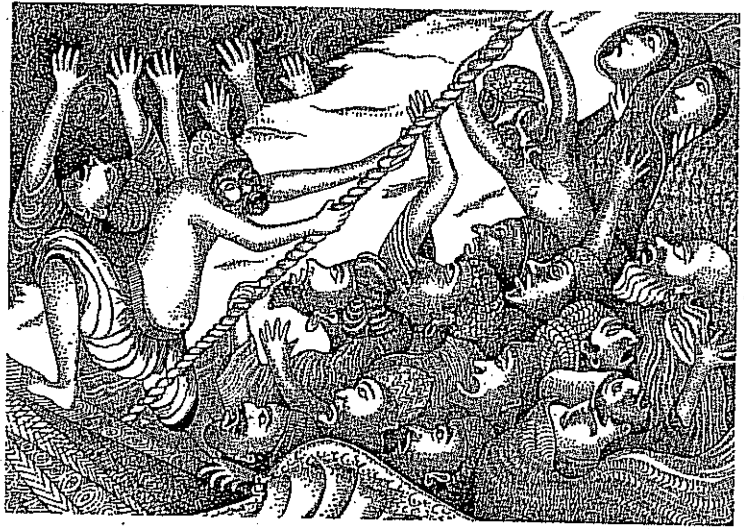

Figure 4 Shipwreck.

Conclusion: voice and silence

Diaspora presents us with the process of representation and construction of identity at the complex juncture where the categories and impulses of empire, nation, religion, gender, and metropolitan location converge. Unlike nationalism, where territory is the ultimate aim and battleground, Diaspora is territory-less. It is a point of tenuous balance. Diaspora implies negotiation of borders and frontiers, exile and alienation, ambivalence, duality, and even duplicity.[27] Based in a "host" space, Diaspora is often defined by outside danger and as dangerous to the outside. (Al Khemir's text and art reflect that fragility and complexity, or rather, that complex fragility.) But beyond its attractiveness to the analyst, Diaspora culture raises serious questions: Is the location of Diaspora a privileged vantage point where speaking out is possible, where double critique, of the home and of the host, is feasible? What relationship does Diaspora entertain with the empire? Does the location create intimacy or opposition? And is there a risk of over-valorizing Diaspora? Is there a danger of privileging the metropolitan position?

For the Arab writer or artist, al Khemir is an example of this Diaspora as a space of freedom that comes with a predicament. Since it is not separable from the situation of tension and even hostility, which dominates much of Arab–Western relations and from the ensuing assault on memory, the relationship of the writer/artist with the cultural past becomes significant even as an utopian vision of an new Andalus becomes more needed.[28] Al Khemir suggests:

> With my far-reaching memory, I am constantly aware of the possibility of al-Andalus (especially between the eighth and the eleventh centuries), where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in peace and where the arts and sciences thrived. Al-Andalus, not as a dream or nostalgia, simply a proof, a promising token of the possibility of positive coexistence and interaction between diverse ethnic groups, religions, and a proof of the enriching civilisational outcome of its happening.[29]
>
> (Lloyd 2001: 48)

Voicing the past, and uncovering traces of common ground gain new urgency. Bridging the gap between past and present becomes a metaphor for bridging today's rift between West and East. For, there seems to be a paradox in the rapport today. The presence of the East, particularly Muslims, in the West is unprecedented but the polarization is at its highest. In the opening scene of al Khemir's documentary on Islamic art, "Dispersed by Time," the Arabic version of the title, *wa shattatahā al-zamān*, is written with sand grains in a Maghrebi script. After a brief appearance, wind blows the sand away, erasing the inscription and returning the line to its basic component: grains of sand. (Al Khemir's drawings, we recall, are made up of dots of ink). In her novel, *The Blue Manuscript*, the horses of the Fatimid Emir, al-Mu'izz, set on his epic journey to found Cairo, lift their feet to leave behind inscriptions on the sand, most likely in a Maghrebi script: a signature of presence in the world, "a scar on the map" as André Malraux would say.[30] The voices in Diaspora are multiple. For al Khemir, art and fiction in English are two of these; academic writing is another. But acquiring an individual voice comes with a silence. Amina, in *Waiting*, is able to tell her fragmentation only in a language most Tunisians cannot read; Zohra, in *The Blue Manuscript*, feels the connection to 'Amm Gāber but is unable to articulate its meaning. Can the bilingual speak? "I wonder," says the half-English half-Egyptian Iman, "if what I say is silence because it is English, and some Arabic?"[31] True to its ambivalent nature, Diaspora empowers voice and imposes silence.

Notes

1 Ahdaf Soueif observes, "If the Arab at home is in a state of anger and a permanent form of anguish; the Arab abroad is in a continuous state of defense, justification, protest" (*Alif* 20, 2000: 183).

2 The term "Diaspora" in language refers to "a dispersion," as of any originally homogeneous people (from Greek: dispersion or diaspeirein. dia: apart or through; and espeirein, to scatter). The term was closely linked to religious communities:

  1 The aggregate of Jews and Jewish communities outside of Palestine.
  2 The body of Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after the Babylonian captivity.
  3 In the New Testament, the body of Christians living outside of Palestine.

The term has had some history, moving from reference to faith communities to identifying political entities and cultural groups.

3 All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

4 The original text is "Le Palimpseste du bilingue: Ibn 'Arabi/Dante."

5 Paul Dambovic, who taught literary theory and criticism in Tunisian universities, notes that "Tunisian students are extraordinarily interested in reading North African texts and exploring literary connections with North Africa." ("Theory in North Africa and North Africa in Theory" in *English in North Africa*: 157.)

6 See, for example, Jean Fontaine (1993) *Tārīkh al-adab al-Tūnusī al-hadīth wa al-mu'āsir* (History of modern and contemporary Tunisian literature), Tunis: Bayt al-Hikma.

7 Metropolitan location does also affect Diaspora in unpredictable ways. London, for example, has become a site of the interaction and cross-fertilization among Diasporas, something we have yet to think about properly.

8 *The Blue Manuscript* is forthcoming. Page numbers are as they appear in the original typescript before publication.

9 The mother's pain is closely tied to the politics of nationalism in Tunisia, which consumes the father, then paralyzes him, and finally kills him.

10 Amina's mother saw her road to education blocked by her two brothers because she was a girl: "She had two brothers and there were only two roads to school. Unluckily for her, there was no third road." Amina would not settle for the same fate.

11 The inevitable, and rather overused, connection to Scheherazade has been evoked in a review of the novel by the *Irish Times*. 25.09.2003.

12 "Shards" is the word used, foreshadowing excavated pottery pieces later in the narrative.

13 The character, Glasses, who is the art restoration specialist, remarks: "A gap separates the village from the glorious past crumbling nearby. How had the link between the past and the present been severed?" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 60).

14 In the novel Professor O'brian betrays knowledge of Fatimid Cairo that, in turn, points to the writer's expertise in the area. Al Khemir is author of the PhD thesis, "The Palace of Sitt al-Mulk and Fatimid Imagery."

15 "For some, it [the manuscript] was a copy of the sacred Qur'ān. For others it was treasure, a useful item to realize a career promotion, or a valuable piece of historical evidence" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 247).

Islamic art history does not fare very well in this novel. There is an attempt at wrestling Islamic art out of the discipline of Art History by creating a context for it, even a polemic (describing Art History as verbosity and sententious mask of art history (*The Blue Manuscript*: 105).

The existence, even prominence of figurative art in Islam is emphasized here (*The Blue Manuscript*: 158, 189) as it is in al Khemir's television documentary, to which I will return.

16 The famous blue Qur'ān is written in gold Kufic style on blue vellum.

> The blue and gold color scheme is apparently unique, and though the Arabic script moves from right to left, the pages of this Qur'ān – unlike almost all others – were turned from left to right, the left hand page preceding the right.

Pages from the manuscript are scattered between The Museum of Islamic Art in Tunis; Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA; The Museum of Fine Art, Boston, MA; The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, and several private collections. The origin is most likely the city of al-Qayrawān in the ninth or early tenth centuries (size; H. 28.6 cm., W. 35 cm.) (Welch 1982: 21).

Al Khemir's disclaimer reads: "This novel does not tell its [the blue Qur'ān's] story but hopes to pay homage to it."

17 Similarities between the two are striking: the pronounced nose of the storyteller resembles 'Amm Gāber's; the boy, Mahmoud, like al-Muizz's niece, is mesmerized by 'Amm Gāber's nose (*The Blue Manuscript*: 49); 'Amm Gāber's ancestor was a storyteller sentenced to death by the ruler and had to go into exile out of Egypt (*The Blue Manuscript*: 68).

18 'Amm Gāber has an uncertain gender: "'Amm Gāber looked sometimes a child, sometimes an adult, an old man and even a woman" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 52). This ambiguity makes the connection possible, and perhaps allows the transfer of his stories, from him to Zohra, to occur.

19 Mr Winston, the collector, who bought and dispersed the blue manuscript in the 1920s will see his true nature unmasked by a crow: "The crow gave a high-pitched, resonant 'cruck-cruck,' and descended on the collector's palm with its sharp beak" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 82). Mr Winston is denounced as a crook-crook.

20 Khatibi says about *jafr* and the sacred cosmology associated with it:

> This sort of theory (beyond the reach, perhaps, of archaeology), has pervaded the metaphysic of symbol from East to West, in every sense, and still survives in certain simple stories used by the *fuqahā'* in popular medicine (organic and psychosomatic).
>
> (Khatibi and Sijilmassi 1976: 202)

21 A personal stamp was highly encouraged, but Arabic calligraphy as an art was transferable from master to disciple. Echoes of this are found in meditations about the manuscript in the description of the blue Qur'ān and in the training of the calligrapher Ibn al-Warrāq in *The Blue Manuscript*.

22 *The Case of the Animals versus Man before the King of the Jinn: a Tenth Century Ecological Tale of the Pure Brethren of Basra*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman. Boston, MA: Twayne, 1978.

All references to the Arabic original are to: *Risālat Tadā'ī al-hayawān 'ala al-Insān* (The Epistle of the Dispute between Animals and Man). Introduction. Fārūq Sa'd. Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1997. All references are to the abridged translation: *The Island of Animals*, trans. Johnson-Davies, London: Quartet Book, 1994.

23 Examples include fifteenth-century illustration of Firdawsi's *Shahnama* and a sixteenth-century illustration of Indian stories, to name just two. See *Arts of the Islamic Book* (59; 168).

24. Attar writes:

> There in the Simurgh's radiant face they saw
> Themselves as the Simurgh of the world – with awe
> They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
> They were the Simurgh and the journey's end.
>
> (Attar 1984: 219)

The thirty birds discover in the end of the journey that the Simurgh is themselves. The pun is: "si" means thirty, and "murgh" means bird. See (Schimmel 1975: 307).

25 Al Khemir notes: "When there is a conflict between the cultural identity and the individual identity which has often been the case for Arab women, the journey takes a route of metamorphosis and transcendence." For this, one has to reconcile two different memories, a close memory and a "far-reaching" one. "I would link a 'far-reaching memory' to a cultural heritage" (Lloyd 2001: 46).

26 The dot is also associated with a conception of identity. The letter H in the artist's name is rendered with a dot under the H in transliteration.

> That dot is not visible when one speaks English. I strive to communicate the invisible and the untranslatable in my cultural identity. I have to keep track of that dot from which everything departed in the Arabic language and script.
>
> (Lloyd 2001: 49)

Francophone writers had to face the same issues. One can think of *La blessure du nom propre* by Khatibi and meditations about the proper name by Meddeb.

27 In the Islamic context, Shi'a Muslims in Diaspora were permitted to confess the opposite of what they believed when they find themselves in the minority: Diaspora is called *Dār al-taqiyya*, the land of veiling, secrecy, dissimulation.

28 I use "utopian" in the sense of what Fredric Jameson calls, the "capacity to imagine change" (Jameson 1991: xvi).

29 It is perhaps within this vision that Glasses, a character in *The Blue Manuscript*, rediscovers his Jewishness through Arabic language and Islamic art.

30 "Arabic letters were pressed into the sand as the caravan advanced. The horses' shoes had been made by a dexterous blacksmith under instruction of the court calligrapher" (*The Blue Manuscript*: 26). Ibn Khaldun mentions in his history that the phrase, al-Mulk li Allah, was written on the foreheads of horses during the campaign by Abu Abd al-Allah al-Shi'i, the missionary of the first Fatimid ruler in North Africa (*al-'Ibar*, iv, 75).

31 "It is an awkward contradiction, to live in a country that respects my talent and rejects my wounds, to belong to a country that respects my wounds but refuses myself, says Khalid in *Memory in the Flesh* (Mosteghanemi 2000: 49). This essay is dedicated to Daniel Mosquera, in diasporic friendship, spoken and unspoken.