



Exploring the Themes of Cross-cultural Conflicts, Inter-cultural Dialogue, Acculturation, and Identity Crisis in Lahsen Benaziza's *The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller*

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Abstract— This piece of work first sheds light on the narrative frame that is used by the writer; then it explains how the combination of the third-person perspective with the stream-of-consciousness technique downplays the effect of subjectivity in a semi-autobiographical novel to allow for a balanced depiction of colonial, post-colonial, and modern Moroccan society. It also points out the fact that writing in the English language enables the author to avoid the pitfalls of post-colonial Moroccan literature that was written in French. Unfortunately, such literature would often emphasize the sentimental, superstitious, and occult aspect of indigenous culture. On the other hand, the essay discusses in detail themes such as cross-cultural conflicts, inter-cultural dialogue, acculturation, and identity crisis, with particular reference to excerpts from the novel and to works of literature, publications and essays that deal with these themes.



Keywords- acculturation, semi-autobiographical, cross-cultural, identity crisis, narrative, postcolonial, stream-of-consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

Lahsen Benaziza's *The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller* is a semi-autobiographical novel that captivates the reader by the smoothness of its writing style, which makes the most complicated details and intricacies of the protagonist's life story easily graspable. This writing style, which can be described as 'the challenging easy', allows the author to break free from the constraints of place and time, travel to the past, return to the present and keep moving forward and backward in time, while constantly providing landmarks and milestones in order to make sure that the reader does not go astray.

The narrative frame combines the third-person perspective with the stream-of-consciousness technique. As a narrative mode that was developed by modernist writers such as

Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf; the stream-of-consciousness technique is characterized by the use of disjointed interior monologues, with little regard to punctuation. However, in the case of Benaziza's work, the mechanics and punctuation are carefully heeded and are used with a remarkable precision. Moreover, for the depiction of cross-cultural encounters in colonial, postcolonial and Modern Morocco, all the culturally-translated idioms, proverbs and sayings are framed with an outstanding accuracy. Likewise, relevant figures of speech and metaphors are used to give full life to the intended meanings and concepts, and judging by the standards of George Orwell¹, they are anything but stale.

In sum, the novel is laden with themes such as cross-cultural conflicts, acculturation, immigration, identity crisis,

¹ See Orwell, George (April 1946). "Politics and the English Language". *Horizon*. 13 (76): 252–265.

to name but a few. This critical essay begins with a brief account of the main events in the novel. It then provides a full-fledged description of the narrative technique that is employed by the novelist. After that comes a thorough discussion of some of the above mentioned themes, with particular reference to passages from the book and citations from other literary works that deal with the same themes.

II. PLOT SUMMARY

The story focuses on Ayoub Benaissa, a former English literature professor who is now a poor and voiceless man leading a secluded life in a typical Moroccan town (Benslimane). Ayoub, who suffered a serious limp in a tragic accident a few years earlier, is portrayed through the third-person perspective with details about his past that remain mysterious until the end of the novel. Despite his financial struggles, Ayoub has an obsession with travelling every Saturday. His severe limp causes him to face a series of humiliations during his challenging journeys to the airport. Throughout these frustrations, he often retreats into his memories, recalling significant moments from his past in a stream-of-consciousness style. Although his physical condition has declined, his mind remains sharp, allowing him to offer insightful reflections on himself, others, his country and the world around him.

III. NARRATIVE

The narrative combines the third-person perspective with the stream-of-consciousness technique throughout the novel. On occasion, internal monologues and soliloquies are expressed in the first-person narrative to highlight moments when Moussa (the father) or Ayoub (the main character) give full vent to their inner feelings and emotions; that is, their dreams, aspirations or frustrations as they take one blow after another and struggle to stand tall, striving to secure a decent life for themselves and for their loved ones amidst the surrounding chaos, and the hardships and challenges imposed by the bitter reality of life in their native town and country.

This well-elaborated narrative scheme downplays the effect of subjectivity in a semi-autobiographical novel to allow for a balanced depiction of colonial, post-colonial, and modern Moroccan society. Writing in the English language is also a blessing as it enables the writer to avoid the pitfalls of post-colonial Moroccan literature that was written in French. Unfortunately, such literature would often emphasize the sentimental, superstitious, and occult aspect of indigenous culture. Throughout the novel (*The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller*), we see that both native culture and Western culture are open to scrutiny and objective criticism, showing the upside and downside of each culture.

Ayoub is a frequent traveller to Europe and North America. He has been so ever since he first set foot on American soil when he successfully applied for a cultural exchange programme and was hosted by an American family. As such, the author keeps oscillating back and forth in time to pick up significant recollections from Ayoub's life as a frequent flyer, starting from his childhood and early school days, moving to boyhood, adolescence and early adulthood, and culminating in the turning point in his life, when he decides to immigrate to Canada in search for a better academic career and better living conditions. The series of ups and downs in Ayoub's life play an important role in shaping his personality and life vision as a whole. Each time the narrative diverts from the present time to describe moments when Ayoub retreats into his memories, seeking comfort in past recollections, the airport as a setting plays the role of a 'bring-the-reader-back-on-track' device. The journeys from Benslimane to Mohammedia by public transportation and the shuttle train rides to Mohammed V airport are recurrent throughout the story. So are the journeys back home, which follow the same path reversely. As a frequent traveller, Ayoub experiences these recurrent journeys each time differently.

We can draw an analogy between Ayoub's repeated trips from his native town to the airport and his lifelong journey at large. Travelling from a Third World country to the West is reminiscent of Ayoub's lifetime struggle to pluck himself out of the quagmire of poverty and to seek self-fulfillment as a renowned professor in his native country and overseas. However, when Ayoub Benaissa returns to Benslimane after the tragic accident, he realizes that his whole life has been a roundtrip, just like the multiple roundtrips to Europe and North America, which are recurrent throughout this semi-autobiography. Ayoub concludes, "It's funny how life comes full circle! You struggle all your life to escape from your destiny only to find yourself in the end stumbling into it!" (310). Here we feel the role of the stream-of-consciousness technique in voicing out Ayoub's inner thoughts and feelings as he is about to undergo a tragic ending of his academic career, and to face dire financial conditions as well as post-traumatic shock.

IV. CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS, INTER-CULTURAL DIALOGUE AND ACCULTURATION

It is worthwhile mentioning that, for Ayoub, travelling to the West is a journey both in space and time because of the obvious differences between Morocco – a Third World country – and Western countries at the economic, cultural, social, and political levels. That's why we feel the impact of the cultural shock that Ayoub endures each time he visits Europe or North America, and we see that he is in his

constant strife to seek inter-cultural understanding and cultural integration. However, as his academic career gets bigger and bigger, he smoothly gets rid of the complex of inferiority towards those egocentric Westerners who think too high of themselves. He becomes convinced that, no matter how intellectually refined Westerners are, they often fail to realize that Europe and North America are not the centre of the universe, and that they are not the only source of enlightenment for the rest of humanity, either. Ayoub concludes that the illusion of inter-cultural understanding is a Utopian world-view, that people of different cultures judge one another by stereotypes and pre-conceived ideas, and that "easy stereotyping spares you the intellectual effort of probing beneath the surface..."(250).

With regard to clichés, stereotypes and pre-conceived judgments that spoil cross-cultural communication, we notice that, throughout the novel, the author is very cautious about the language used to depict Moroccan culture or to convey meanings that are culture-bound in the English language. This is obviously due to an awareness on his part that clichés and stereotypes can be emphasized in case matters such as culturally-translated idioms, sayings and proverbs and the appropriate use of figures of speech are not heeded. A case in point is the declaration "I want the type of education that Nsara give their children. Mother, I want to take my wife and my children and go live in al-Qashla"(15). This excerpt from a long conversation between Moussa – a former Goumier who was forced to fight for the liberation of the very country that colonized and subjugated his native country – and his mother is a perfect example of the author's caution about cross-cultural translation.

The use of "Nsara" instead of "Christians" and "al-Qashla" instead of "army barracks" is very significant. The author opts for the transliteration of words from colloquial Moroccan Arabic instead of using the equivalent of the words he wants to translate in the target language, which is English in this case. He probably does so to emphasize the fact that the speaker is an indigenous person who is talking about the French colonizer. Transliterating Moroccan colloquial Arabic words reminds the reader of the inter-cultural context of the dialogue or conversation that is taking place. It also shows that the author and his characters (Moussa, Ayoub...) are not fully assimilated in Western culture and that they keep a distance from it. They try their best to maintain a sense of national and cultural pride, while embracing aspects of the foreign culture that are a model to follow (rigour- punctuality- seeking knowledge and good education, etc.).

When referring to historical events and their relationship with Moroccan popular culture, the author of the novel uses the transliterated colloquial Moroccan Arabic term which

determines the particular historical moment that is being chronicled, while immediately providing translations and explanations that authentically and faithfully reflect the intended meanings. For example, when relating the story of *Kharboucha* and Caid Aissa Ben Omar in the region of Abda during the late 19th century and the turn of the 20th century, the writer refers to the unruly "bled es-Siba", and he immediately explains that "bled es-Siba" means 'the land of lawlessness', where dissidents sought refuge from the persecution of Caid Aissa, who stole their land and livestock, and imposed heavy taxes on them(52). The same remark can be made about the chronicling of "the ignominious Rafsa", which the author explains as "a general pandemonium and a bloody stampede" (53).

Later in the novel, when Ayoub recalls the days when he was struggling as a foreign student to accommodate himself to academic life in North America, he mentions, among other things, the challenge of typing a term paper. Here, the author uses the expression "écrivain public" to refer to public writers who usually operate in the vicinity of Moroccan tribunals (231). The French expression, "écrivain public", puts the reader in the whole context of Ayoub's educational and cultural background, which is multilingual. Indeed, French is a second language in Morocco, and it has been spoken by the elite ever since the French Protectorate era and even after Morocco got its independence in 1956. Ayoub, like the majority of Moroccans belonging to his generation, benefitted from a form of education that was based on the French system, and with French teachers. So he first learnt and mastered the French language before learning to speak English. Therefore, the use of French words and expressions by the author every now and then is a reminder of this multicultural dimension in Ayoub's educational and professional life.

Speaking of Moroccan folklore and popular culture, the writer refers to genies, ifrits and mythologized figures from Moroccan history such as "Aisha Kandesha"(241-242). Once again, he insists on the transliteration of words from colloquial Moroccan Arabic("Ifrit") instead of using potential equivalents in the English language (ghost- elf-goblin-sprite...etc.). This insistence on transliteration presumably stems from the author's conviction that seeking equivalents in the target language will produce some sort of translation that may sound beautiful but, at the same time, may fail to convey the real meaning of the intended concept or idea. After all, every concept is deeply-rooted in the culture in which it first appeared. That's why the author transliterates expressions such as "A'oudhou bi Allahi mena Shaitani a-rajeem" and "Soubhan moughayir al ahwal!" and then provides their explanation in plain English in the footnotes.

One important point that should be raised here is that while superstitious or occult elements of local culture and folklore are depicted in the novel, the author skillfully insinuates the existence of similar cultural practices and beliefs in Western and foreign cultures. This insinuation is manifested through Ayoub's conviction of the existence of a parallel world and supernatural powers that control the material world that we perceive with our senses (241). Although Ayoub has always been influenced by the Western mode of thinking, which is based on logical deduction, syllogism and cause-effect relationships; he has always kept a balance between rational thinking and spirituality. Presenting the protagonist as someone whose fascination with Western values has never led him to look down on his native culture is a clever and wise move on the part of the writer of the novel. By so doing, the author acquits Moroccan culture of the stigma of sentimentality, superstition and attachment to the occult instead of embracing a rational and Cartesian mindset, a mindset that has always been allegedly deemed a Western privilege. A well-read intellectual would soon find out from the literature that the belief in supernatural powers and the existence of parallel worlds does not only pertain to Third World countries. Many Westerners, too, believe in saints, mysticism, and even reincarnation.

We have now come to the last and most important element in the cross-cultural conflicts that pervade throughout this semi-autobiographical work, which is religion. As far as Islamic tradition is concerned, Ayoub resents the hypocrisy of his native culture, and the "filth hidden under the garb of tradition and morality" (84). However, a show of respect for his late father's devotion to Islamic rituals- mainly prayer- is clearly felt through his stream-of-consciousness flow of ideas. Generally speaking, Ayoub holds a humanistic and universalist view of all religions, including Islam, his own community's faith. We often see him questioning the taken-for-granted and calling into question the value system of all three monotheistic religions. Notions of selected people and chosen ones have always left a bitter taste in his mouth. He has always considered sectarian divisions that place certain religions above the other creeds as being racist drives that lead to armed conflicts, bloody wars and human suffering.

With respect to the Judeo-Christian value system, Ayoub firmly denounces what he deems as a form of intellectual arrogance on the part of a number of Western intellectuals that he happens to meet in his academic adventure overseas. He condemns the fact that they consider Judeo-Christianity as the only way to seek absolute truth. Doctor Hubbard,

notwithstanding his academic maturity, adheres to such Judeo-Christian conservatism and believes in the inherent supremacy of Western civilization. When he makes that infamous statement ("Well I guess that people in Morocco are not to be held accountable to the same moral standards by which we live in the west"), Ayoub ceases to be grateful to the first man "in a position of power to have ever offered him coffee in his office until then, when he had received mostly dry orders and snarls from the pettiest of paper-pushing bureaucrats in his country" (234-235).

This new episode of cultural shock is a perfect manifestation of notions such as power and discourse, Western hegemony, and stereotypes that Ayoub learnt from his readings of Michel Foucault² and Edward Said³. Ayoub recalls these notions amidst the feeling of disillusionment he experiences and his awakening to the fact that Dr. Hubbard's intellectual maturity did not prevent him from embracing a form of discourse that is laden with stereotypes about Non-Westerners.

All in all, Ayoub is always disturbed by the fact that the three monotheistic religions share in common that trait of having adherents who are unwaveringly convinced that members of their creed are the selected ones, detainers of absolute truth, and that they are the only ones who will escape divine chastisement in the hereafter, while the unbelieving others will eternally rot in hellfire. Speaking of the idea of selected ones or chosen ones brings to the fore the Jewish question.

In this regard, Ayoub's childhood souvenirs of Moroccan Jews, and how they used to live peacefully side by side with their Muslim neighbours before the mass emigration to Israel, have always been engraved in his memory. For him such memories constitute a glimpse of hope for inter-cultural understanding and tolerance, and provide a picture in his mind of cross-cultural dialogue that is in total contrast with the frustrating incidents he experienced in North America. Unfortunately, the turn of events later on and the political conflicts between Arabs and Jews will spoil such rosy dream of a peaceful world.

The fact remains, however, that in Moroccan culture, Judaism is an important component. It is true that we Moroccans are people of Arabic and Amazigh descent whose religion is Islam. But the Jewish minority, which has lived for centuries in our land, has had an undeniable impact on our history, culture and society. This impact of Jewish culture on our history is reflected in the author's choice of names for his characters. Most likely, the choice of names such as Ayoub and Moussa is not arbitrary and is meant to

² See Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the birth of a prison*. London, Penguin, 1991.

³ See Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

send a message to the reader, based on a mixture of Biblical and Quranic references.

For example, the father's name is Moussa and the cart driver's name is Haroun. This is an implicit reference to the story of Moses, which is related both in the Bible and the Holy Quran. This is meant to draw an analogy between Moses' role as saviour of the Jews from slavery and the father's role as saviour of his fellow countrymen from poverty. The protagonist in the novel, on his part, is given the name Ayoub. This is another Quranic/Biblical reference to the prophet Ayoub (Job), who is as an emblem of patience and endurance of life's hardships. The main character, too, shows a great deal of patience and a capacity to stand tall and firm despite "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..."⁴

On the other hand we can venture to say that evoking references which are both Quranic and Biblical is an attempt to reconcile Jews with Muslims, and to remind everyone that the same God who revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses sent down the Holy Quran to our Prophet (PBUH). The author most likely sees in that an impetus for the Children of Abraham – to quote from the late Moroccan king Hassan II – to seek common grounds for tolerance, coexistence, mutual understanding, and lasting peace. Such impetus may be further buttressed by the historical facts that are laid out in the early chapters of the novel about how Andalusian Jews fled the Catholic courts of inquisition and found a safe haven in Morocco, and how the late Moroccan King, Mohammed the Fifth, protected the Jews from the Nazi- puppet Vichy government.

V. IDENTITY CRISIS

The question of identity is of paramount importance in this semi-autobiography. In the early chapters of the novel, it is a bit latent and barely touched upon in the course of evoking other issues which are related to inter-cultural dialogue and conflicts. A recollection of that notorious incident during Ayoub's life on campus in Canada, when he suffered from racial prejudice as a xenophobe threw racist insults at him during a bus ride, brings the question of identity into the spotlight.

Here we see Ayoub's meditation and self-introspection about his real identity. Ayoub sees the whole incident as a moment of sudden revelation. He was addressed by the losing white racist as a Black man, a nigger. Ayoub has always thought of himself as a Maghrebi from North Africa,

in the cross-roads between Europe, Africa and Asia. He has always considered his country, Morocco, a "cultural palimpsest and an ethnic and civilizational melting pot"(226). The incident is some sort of awakening to the fact that white supremacists lump Arabs, North Africans and Sub-Saharan Africans together, and throw them in the same basket of the "backward other".

Ayoub suddenly begins to re-discover or discover – it's hard to say which is the right verb to use – the latent fact that he is African, belonging to the African continent, and that Morocco is located in Africa, as simple as that. Ayoub mulls over the horrific history of the subjugation, persecution, and exploitation of the African continent by the West, especially during the Transatlantic slave trade times. He feels like "embracing all Africans, African American Slaves, Civil Rights Activists, African and African-American writers" (227). The weird "thank you" reaction to the racist insult, which appears to be some sort of bowing down to the offender instead of fighting back, is deep in meaning. The white loser, along with the other bus riders, can't understand what goes on in Ayoub's mind. For Ayoub, the insult has done him more good than harm. It has opened his eyes to a blunt truth: the separation between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa – be it geographical, ethnic, racial or cultural – is only valid in the South of the Strait of Gibraltar. The moment one crosses the Mediterranean Sea and reaches the European shores, this separation has no meaning. For Westerners, people who cross the Mediterranean Sea seeking a foothold in Europe are all alike, immigrants coming from the backward black continent.

Meanwhile, the frictions between Ayoub and Dr. Faber emphasize Ayoub's identity as a post-colonial subject from North Africa, "a bookish and oversensitive myopic postcolonial subject feeling about his way in a culture he knew mainly through books...a lascivious Moor attempting to steal Desdemona from her White world" (254-256). Shakespeare's Othello⁵ stands out here as an important cross-reference. Portraying Ayoub as a 20th century Othello perfectly reflects his identity crisis during his stay in Canada. Just like Othello, Ayoub is seeking acceptance in his host country, but can't help being treated as a cultural "other". Trying constantly to adjust to Western culture is like drawing water from a mirage. Ayoub's failed attempts to pass for a real insider and a genuine North American are similar to Othello's attempts to assimilate into Venetian culture. The racist Westerners who cross Ayoub's path are just like the racist characters of Shakespeare's play, who

⁴ See Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 author. *The tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. [London]: The Folio Society, 1954.

⁵ See Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Champaign, Ill. :Project Gutenberg, 1993.

believe that Othello is a black Moor who does not belong in Venice.

VI. CONCLUSION

To put it in a nutshell, Benaziza's work follows the same pattern as post-colonial novels such as Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, which convey semi-autobiographical recollections of immigrants from the South of the Mediterranean who pursued an academic or professional career in the West. Such novels attempt to reveal the reality of colonialism and its far-reaching impact on the political, cultural and social landscape in Third World countries. They generally deal with themes and issues such as cross-cultural encounters, inter-cultural conflicts and identity crisis. Many Postcolonial Afro-Arab works of literature subversively deconstruct the colonial discourse that permeates across Western literature, with the ultimate goal of challenging the stereotypical, degrading and biased depiction of the "other" in colonial and postcolonial Western literary discourse.

Elements of intertextuality between Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Benaziza's *The Splendid life of a Frequent Traveller* are conspicuous. Tayeb Salih's work, which is acclaimed by most critics as a parody of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is based on a narrative that shifts from an egocentric world-view to a multi-faceted one, transitioning from the dominance of a monolithic culture to the integration of diverse and conversing cultures, before heading back to the starting point in the Sudan.

Similarly, Benaziza's narrative revolves around Ayoub Benaissa's ascension from the status of a low-life and ambitious native son of Benslimane who constantly seeks social promotion and academic success in his native country, up to the moment when he decides to immigrate to Canada, where he struggles to assimilate into Western culture and faces inter-cultural conflicts, before he finally returns to the homeland, the starting point of his lifetime journey.

On the whole, we can assert that both Salih's novel and Benaziza's semi-autobiography share a common objective, which is to dispel the myth of the inherent superiority of Western culture over the other cultures and civilizations. They provide solid evidence that all the stereotypical devices that are prevalent in colonial and postcolonial Western literature are purely subjective and culturally-biased. After all, no matter how non-biased and objective the rational and allegedly cultured mind might think of himself, "a human being is subjectivity walking on two feet"(234).

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