Soueif's Melody: An Other Female Symphony of Eastern and Western Ruptures and Fusions

Melody de Soueif : une autre symphonie féminine de ruptures et de fusions orientales et occidentales

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Date of receipt:18/09/2024	Date of revision:28/11/2024	Date of acceptation:15/12/2024

Abstract

East and West encounters have often echoed oriental fantasies of the exotic and the strange besides binary labels such us 'us' and 'them', 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' widely discussed within postcolonial theory. Besides, the representations of 'Arab' and 'Muslim' women in the West have been caricatured to represent an Other as an inferior entity; the weak entity dependent on their male counterparts and unable to take decisions. They bear labels such as 'exotic', 'sexual objects', and 'secluded creatures in the Harem'. This image conforms to the stereotypical portrait residing in a Western orientalist imagination. This paper explores how Ahdaf Soueif's short story *Melody*, chosen from her second collection The Sandpiper (1996), pictures the afore mentioned misrepresentations of Eastern women by their Western counter-parts. The Western female narrator in *Melody* describes her Eastern counter-part and her young daughter as sexual-objects ignorant and submissive slaves and victims of patriarchal authority. This setting seems to make

such cultural encounters appear barren and exclusionary. However, these very encounters also liberated an intellectual space of convergences besides that of ruptures. The author grants a space for her Western character to empathise with her Eastern one being a mother herself and a victim of confinement and patriarchal authority.

Keywords:
Eastern/Western; female; fusions/ruptures; Other; representations.

Resumé

Les rencontres entre l'Orient et l'Occident ont souvent fait écho aux fantasmes orientaux d'exotisme et d'étrangeté, en plus des étiquettes binaires telles que "nous" et "eux", "civilisés" et "non civilisés", largement discutées dans le cadre de la théorie postcoloniale. En outre, les représentations des femmes "arabes" et "musulmanes" en Occident ont été caricaturées pour représenter l'Autre comme une entité inférieure, une entité faible dépendant de ses homologues masculins et incapable de prendre des décisions. Elles portent des étiquettes telles que "exotiques", "objets sexuels" et "créatures recluses dans le harem". Cette image est conforme au portrait stéréotypé qui réside dans l'imaginaire orientaliste occidental. Cet article explore la manière dont la nouvelle Melody d'Ahdaf Soueif, tirée de son deuxième recueil The Sandpiper (1996), illustre les représentations erronées des femmes orientales par leurs homologues occidentales mentionnées plus haut. La narratrice occidentale décrit son homologue orientale et sa jeune fille comme des objets sexuels, des esclaves ignorants et soumis, et des victimes de l'autorité patriarcale. Ce cadre semble faire apparaître ces rencontres culturelles comme stériles et excluantes. Cependant, ces mêmes rencontres ont également libéré un espace intellectuel de

convergences à côté de celui des ruptures. L'auteur offre à son personnage occidentale un espace d'empathie avec son personnage orientale, elle-même mère et victime de l'enfermement et de l'autorité patriarcale.

Mots clés

Est/Ouest ; femelle ; fusions/ruptures ; Autre ; Représentations

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1. INTRODUCTION:

This paper explores the controversial relation between Western and Eastern female characters in Ahdaf Soueif's short story *Melody* chosen from her second collection The Sandpiper (1996). The author draws portraits of Eastern female characters represented by their Western counterpart as victimized, devalued and sexual objects. The female Western narrator describes her Eastern counter-part and her young daughter as sexual-objects, ignorant, submissive slaves and victims of patriarchal authority. This setting seems to make these cultural encounters appear barren and exclusionary. However, these very encounters also liberated an intellectual space of convergences besides that of ruptures. The author grants a space for her Western character to empathise with her Eastern one being a mother herself and a victim of confinement and patriarchal authority. As a recipient of two different cultures Eastern and Western, Soueif is engaged in making different

cultural grounds meet throughout her writings such as *Melody* that is the story of innocence, death, strangeness, hope and despair.

The set forth misrepresentations draw their origins from postcolonial theory whereby Western authors conjured up stereotypes of their Eastern counterparts bearing labels such as the Other, strangers and devalued entities trapped in orientalists' fantasies. To explore Soueif's short story *Melody* as a meeting ground of Eastern and Western fusions and ruptures, this paper starts with defining concepts and key words such as orientalism, stereotypes, representations and the Other that are rooted in postcolonial theory. These very concepts and key words are relevant to the analysis of Soueif's short story that reflects the same biased representations. Soueif's short story also writes back to the hegemonic West unveiling her text as a meeting ground for female cultural fusions. This paper also sheds light on the representations of Eastern women in Western literature to highlight the set forth concepts and key words. Finally, an analysis of Melody takes place to unveil female Western representations of her Eastern counterparts scrutinising her picturing of the setting besides physical and mental descriptions of the characters. This analysis also portraits intertwining stories from different cultures.

2. Literature Review

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin perceive postcolonialism as covering "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (1989, 2). Gugelberger pointed that, postcolonial theory covers "the texts that participate in hegemonizing other cultures and the study of texts that write back to correct and undo Western hegemony" (1994, 582). Henceforth, the 'devalued'/colonised people convert into an Other that is inferior and estranged. The representation of the Other as stranger was referred to by E. Said (1978) within a postcolonial framework pointing at the traditional opposing view categorising an 'Us', the self, and a 'Them'; the Other. This perception of the self/Other relation targets the division of people into two groups: the first constitutes the norm that is valued, and the latter is known by its flaws and is therefore devalued and prone to domination and discrimination (Said, 1978). These concerns Said uttered particularly when he discussed the West/Orient binary commenting on what he termed Orientalism. Orientalism is essentially a critique of Eurocentric representations and the manufacture of the Other as a category which is inferior, uncivilized, ignorant, and hence, unable to rule itself by itself.

The West's stigmatisation of Eastern people and those in the developing world in general as stereotypes is referred to as "a frequently repeated picture, more or less rigid, of a group of people". Stereotypes are connected to cultural assumptions on the part of the observer. They "mean a group image of a vocational, racial, cultural, or national group" (Heaton, 1946, 328). They are possibly obtained in whatever given environment and are the result of an unconscious learning. They condense people's experience in that they are glued to their minds as static "pictures- in the-head" (329). For Saville-Troike, stereotyping is related to disaffiliation or rejection

and rationalizing prejudice. "It involves an exaggerated belief associated with category. Its function is to justify our conduct in relation to that category" (2003, 193-4). This limitation of the Other as stereotype is also a result of representation as a restructuration of reality which is endorsed, "first in the language and then in the culture, institutions and political ambiance of the presenter" (Said, 1995, 129). Ahdaf Soueif, an Egyptian writer and activist living in Britain, expressed the same concerns stating: "...but it troubled me that in almost every book, article, film, TV, or radio programme that claimed to be about the part of the world that I came from I could never recognize myself or anyone I knew. I was constantly coming face to face with a distortion of my reality (2004, 2). As a consequence of such distortions, Soueif strived to create a space that she labelled a "ground valued precisely for being a meeting point for many cultures and traditions" that can be called a "mezzaterra", a space where cultures influence each other. Soueif allows her readers "to approach her texts contrapuntally and understand it in a better way. It is only by such a strategy that co-existence or contrapuntal humanism is lived". She decomposes the hierarchal constructions that imposing narratives endorse by means of this "prism" (Jassam, Jassam & Ibrahim, 2023, 8) and demonstrates how important for meaning-making throughout lived experiences.

2.1 Western Literary Representations of Muslim and Arab Women:

The representations of Arab Muslim women in Western texts are also part of the framework designed for their male counterparts in the West as estranged devalued entities unveiled in postcolonial writings. They are prone to submission, weakness, dependence and sin. Mohja Kahf thinks that "The dominant narrative of the Muslim women in Western discourse from about the eighteenth century to the present

basically states, often in quite sophisticated ways, that the Muslim woman is innately oppressed" (1999, 177).

Western representations of the Muslim woman: from termagant to odalisque (1999) is a book written by Mohja Kahf whereby she has presented a survey of literary representations of Muslim women in Western discourses from medieval times up to eighteenth century. What makes Kahf's book pertinent is that those representations have not always been homogeneous throughout history. In addition, the ubiquitous conception that Orientalists trace of Muslim and Arab women as victims has been subject to change. Basing her enquiry on a number of texts, particularly literary and travel books written originally in English, French, Italian and Spanish, from medieval to Romantic periods in the history of Europe, Kahf certified that before the eighteenth century the aforementioned representations had not been the same. She believed that the main cause of negative influence done to the representations of Muslim and Arab women, besides the shaping of knowledge about them, have been:

> the geographical origins of the representing texts, the preoccupations of the time, the material or ideological conditions affecting the relationship between the West and Islamic societies, and the shift in the balance of power relations between the West and the Muslim world (1999, 3-9).

Another relevant account of the Arab Muslim women in the West is that of Sophia Poole. Sophia Poole is the sister of the Arabist William Lane. *The English Woman in Egypt* (1842) was the title of her celebrated work. Commenting on the

book and the fame it bought Sophia Poole, Jane Robinson author of the anthology of women travellers *Wayward Women* (1994) admired Poole's contribution. Robinson could not imagine an *English Woman* immersing herself "in the exotic culture of the East" as she would normally have tolerated it from her brother with all the atrocities related to it as haunted houses, barbarous murderers, and stupendous harem's life in Egypt (Sobhi, 2002, 107).

Although white women were oppressed by their male counterparts, female writers like Poole felt proud of competing with male writers. Yet, such efforts by a courageous female writer as Poole, though admired by Victorian male reviewers, were praised "because coming from an inferior gender, a mere woman" (Sobhi, 108-109). Poole trusted her brother's account of the Egyptian women's life. Lane labelled Egyptian women as uncontrollable, lascivious and licentious. Even virtuous women and educated ones permitted themselves to speak about any subject they desired oblivious of men's presence and no matter how impolite the language they used was. He considered Egyptian men as unable to limit the freedom of act and speech of their women. Female writers like Poole, who were able to infiltrate within Egyptian harem, represented white patriarchal and colonial eye there (Sobhi, 2002). Poole pointed to Egyptian women as a cheap and enigmatic commodity accessible to curious public, to decipher and reconstitute. She wrote under the authority of her brother (Sobhi, 2002). She dressed as an Egyptian and had to live as one in order to report what she saw in the harem world. Poole had to apologise to her British readers for adopting the natives' manners of eating for they were *"disgusting"* (Sobhi, 2002, 112). Her staying in Egypt was haunted by her involuntary surrender to Egypt that she constantly tried to fight.

Another vital symbol designating Muslim women as stereotypes in the West is belly dancing. Belly dancing has become since 2001 a fashionable phenomenon through which American women strive to prove their "whiteness" and "Americaness" vis-à-vis "Muslim feminities and masculinities" (Sunaina, 2008, 318). What attraction does belly dancing have that calls the attention of American women to such an 'exotic art'? Priya Srinivasan perceives that it is the lure of oriental spectacle and the ability of the body to express itself freely. The dance tends to reveal a sort of "glamorous" self or stardom (Srinivasan, 2007).

Another significant element personalising Arab Muslim women has been the veil. Leila Ahmed believes that a main part of colonial discourse on Islam has been "that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies" (Ahmed, 1992, 52). The existence of Arab Muslim women in the private and public space transforms her into a diverse being. This situation is categorised as a "non-identity" area (Derrida, 1978, 49). In *Algeria Unveiled*, Fanon offers a similar picture of this situation. He says:

> Without the veil she has an impression of her body being cut into bits, put adrift; the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely...The unveiled body seems to escape, to dissolve. She has an impression of being improperly dressed, even of being naked. She experiences a sense of incompleteness with great intensity. She has an anxious

> feeling that something is unfinished, and along with this a frightful of disintegrating. (Fanon, 1965, 59)

These concerns remain just echoes of a truth seen from partial lenses devoid of the real significance of the veil for Muslim women that is part of their identity, private sphere and self-recognition.

3. Melody: A Childish Symphony Crooning Hope and Despair

Melody is told by a first person female narrator departing from the present time. She inaugurates her speech talking about the human element in this place as *"we" "us women".* The narrator speaks about herself and other women who are not permitted to use the pool in such a hot country. Right from the outset, one hears the echo of confinement crooned in *Melody*. Only kids are allowed to use the pool and "the men of course" (Soueif, 1996, 3). Therefore, *Melody* is a story voiced by a woman that Soueif elected to tell the story of other "*us women*" in a hot country where only men and kids have access to the pool.

The narrator recounts the story from the present describing its setting, and then she starts narrating from the past. She tells readers that she came to this place six months ago with her son Wayne and her husband Rich. Her child went to school every day and has to wake up at seven each morning and sleep early whereas the "[other] child was never sent to school". The narrator recalls this child thinking about her own. She mentions a *"*She", the other child's mother, keeping the child who "was never sent to school" with her all the time (4).

She then moves to tell readers about her family's dissatisfaction with the setting. Even if the grocer's, hospital, flower shop, and newsagent are at hand: "not

that any of them looked like they were up to much but still they'd have to be better than nothing".

Then she shifts to speak about the same woman and her child that she met at the pool. She labels the woman as tacky with dyed hair and make-up, helping readers to see dark roots on the woman's hair where the dark hair was growing on the bronze one. The woman had "quite a bit of eye make-up and her skirt was shorter than you normally see around here". The narrator was used to see 'such women' covered with dark veils.

The narrator is shocked seeing the woman not wearing an abaya, which "is normally ok on a compound" not a short skirt. The woman, according to the narrator, has probably smashed certain local laws around. Then "the kid" appears. She was very beautiful. It was a little girl whom her son Wayne had fallen for and who did not seem as fake as her mother was. "She was a true blonde with natural fabulous curls" (5). With such an account of naturalness and authenticity, the narrator unveils a painting of a Dorian Gray beauty with a reverberating sweet music of its own. The kid's portrait was painted in yellow on her hair and blue on her eyes. Accordingly, nature, music and colours could tell the story too.

The narrator turns to describe the child's mother character. The woman called Ingie chatted all the time and her English was terrible. Unlike the narrator who chose a school for her son, Ingie kept the girl, Melody, with her and taught her to read and write.

Narration continues as the narrator moves to discuss the scenes of attraction and bewitchment in the story. It is a love story that began between her son Wayne and Melody. The narrator did not comprehend the causes of the attraction. Beauty

in the story could be touched emanating from children whose innocence is the real melody. The narrator then mentions that Ingie and her child Melody were Turkish for Melody spoke only Turkish and her mom spoke it too besides awful English. The Turkish woman admits to the narrator that her daughter Melody did not go to school. She says that she taught her how to read and write. She says that she did not want her girl to go to school. "I like her with me", she confirms. The narrator insists that such an attitude is wrong. Ingie is described by the narrator involving colours and sounds (6) as Ingie's "main thing is laughing. Laughing and clothes and make-up and dancing "and of course "cooking". This is also be mentioned to insist on the difference between her, the Western, and Ingie, the Eastern. The narrator expresses her astonishment at this Turkish woman cooking for her husband all day long. This is the way Muslim women are, which she were not. The narrator warns readers using a *"mind you":* this is how Muslim women held their men by becoming slaves. The Western preferred reading a book rather than wasting time cooking. These women, like Ingie, do not care if they are second wives. Besides, her husband is a lot older than she is (6).

Then the narrator presents Elaine as another woman who knows much of this family. Elaine is the narrator's Scottish friend. She has lived in the same place for almost four years and "she knows everything". The narrator is sure and wants to ensure readers that what Elaine says and knows is true. Elaine told the narrator that Ingie's husband was married to an American woman, and lived with her for twenty years with his two boys. The narrator thinks Ingie's husband divorced his American wife and chose Ingie, the Turkish so "that he could lock her up while he made lots of

money". Ingie confessed to her that her husband was a genius and that he loved his work. Besides, "his wife is very bad girl" (7).

Ingie's husband appears as dancing happily in Melody's third birthday. The music of the story appears again to draw the picture of a "joyful" family (7). "Ingie too is a very joyful person. When you visit her she always has some tape on—loud. Disco, rock, oriental music, whatever". Music draws up narration to spread joy within the family. Melody likes music too:

> And one of Melody's favourite games is to sit Wayne down, help her mother to put on the same of that wailing, banging staff, grab a scarf and start dancing for him. And she can dance. Arms and legs twirling. Neck side to side leaning backwards. The lot. And Wayne, who normally can't sit still for a minute, sits transfixed, watching a little blonde who cannot speak a word that means anything to him, strutting and flirting about with a veil. (7)

It is the music and dance that keeps Melody alive. Soueif paints a canvas of an oriental setting screening a woman—a belly dancer—dance for a king or prince. Moreover, the narrator is a Westerner describing an exotic setting of an oriental little girl bewitching a Western little boy. The narrator still does not think this friendship fits her child. However, she is bound to bring him to Melody's house because he insisted on going there weeping and shouting. Still, Melody did not care as much as he did.

The narrator moves to speak of being: *"In point of fact"* a second family too and that Rich, her husband, has three sons back in Vancouver. She made a deal with her

husband to live in a place she loathes. The place she is living in now, which she believes strange and hostile. To conceive a child is what *she* wanted. Her husband signed this contract and on the other hand, she accepted, like a few women, "to be buried alive in a place like this". Rich agreed on such a deal, he got himself vasectomised for he did not want any more children (9). Readers are granted a summary of the narrator's family life in order to compare what happened with Ingie as far as child conceiving is concerned. Ingie's Eastern husband, unlike the narrator's Western husband, ordered his wife to become pregnant with a third child. Yet, as Elaine said, Ingie was on the pill, which her husband ignored. Ingie believed in fortune-tellers, and because of one of their prophesies, she did not want to have a third child for the latter "would break her heart". She also believes that Ingie's husband everlasting insistence on having children stems from his being Muslim. Muslim men "can never have enough children". Mostly though, they want boys. However, Ingie's husband ruined the rule, hoping for another girl. He thought girls were tender and loving (10).

Ingie is described as a woman of no importance, nosy, talkative and meddling into her neighbours' private lives. Besides, *"For all her tartiness, though, she* [Ingie] *was a good mum"* (10).

Then readers are carried back to the present to be informed that "Now of course, you don't see them anymore", meaning the Turkish family who played Western for a day or a month, were nowhere to be seen. The narrator does not justify this absence, yet goes on to acknowledge, "...nobody wants to see much of them to tell the truth". Elaine always reiterated that Ingie's husband was weird. Yet, the narrator never knew to what extent until she heard that stuff about the camera. The

accident of the camera, the narrator heard of later when Ingie and Melody could not be seen anywhere.

Narration travels back to the past when one night the narrator went to see what uncanny news surrounded this strange family. The scent of jasmine was there to fill the air. "...the air in the compound was, as I said, not just full of the scent of jasmine, but literally heavy with it". Now, the strong scent of jasmine is back again to remind readers of how the story started and that this smell is to accompany narration further. The narrator knew there was a funeral in Ingie's house and that many people went there the night before. Yet, she waits until the next day to go there in order to be considered friendly. When she reaches the house, she heard the Quran being chanted, which (11) contributed to the musical element fostering narration.

A description of Ingie's house includes plenty of women veiled in black and babies inside in this Muslim house where a funeral is taking place. Men are gathering outside and women are preparing food and serving black coffee for them. Ingie converted into an aging woman plain without any make up and wearing a long skirt. She has no tears to drop and no voice to speak although she tries hard to. She just mentions to the narrator "people live fifty years. Seventy years, even. She lived fifty months" (12)

Then Ingie is allowed to tell the story of her daughter's disappearance starting from a yesterday. Ingie recounts that on her way to the shop with Melody and Murat her son, Melody had a car accident. Ingie left Melody with a friend for she did not want to take her to the shop in order not to "nag her" on buying sweets which Ingie thought were bad for her daughter's teeth. Melody wanted to follow her mother and a car brutally hit her rolling her repeatedly as she crossed the road alone. *"Mama"*

was the last word Melody uttered. The jasmine flower-shop man carried Melody as she fell with her blood oozing on the road.

Melody dies while she was taken to hospital. Ingie's disbelief of her daughter's death bound her beg for truth in the narrator's eyes and those of the women there. "Her eyes", [Ingie's], the narrator resumes, "have a questioning, doubting look in them as though one of us might tell her she is wrong and Melody is "not die" (15)

The flower man could tell about the accident of the camera mentioned earlier. Melody's father took a camera and filmed the blood scene on the road and his daughter in the morgue. He recorded each detail of Melody's death interviewing the flower-man. When the narrator goes to meet her friend Elaine, the latter narrates the story of Melody's father showing his wounded wife the films in his camera: one film of Melody's third birthday, another of the detailed death scene, and another of Melody in the morgue (17). Elaine also informs the narrator that Ingie's husband held her responsible for his daughter's death. People gossiped about Melody's father obliging his wife to have another child—another daughter.

Melody was buried in Turkey where snow covered the place and air. Nobody in the compound wanted to see the couple. The narrator wondered how Ingie could cross the same road as her late daughter did: "How can she ever cross that road without thinking of Melody?" How can she walk in the gardens or live in the same apartment? The narrator mentions going to visit Ingie again (17). The mother's mind was haunted by memories of her late daughter believing she was a good child not a selfish one and that emptiness haunted the house after her sudden death.

Melody's story ends with the narrator leaving Ingie's house and walking home with the smell of jasmine filling her nose and the sad melody of Melody's death

reverberating in her ears. Melody ceased crooning and laughing, yet children are still playing on the street and jasmine is still smelled there.

Conclusion

Melody is the story of blended innocence, death, strangeness, hope and despair. Soueif fused odours and colours again to tell a tale of sameness and differences blending her Oriental and Western women together in one single story. The Western narrator resonated pompous and strives to look different. Nevertheless, her being a woman destined her not to use the pool whenever she could and not even to smell jasmine flowers at any time she desired. Being a mother prompted her to sympathise with a grieving mother for the loss of her baby. Throughout *Melody*, Soueif granted Western and Eastern female characters to listen to the same symphony of hope and death that reminded both to sympathise with one another as women.

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