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**"I AM MY LANGUAGE". ARABIC LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH WRITING
IN AHDAF SOUEIF'S WORK¹**

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In this paper the author will examine how the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, although writing in English, uses the Arabic language as a narrative tool in her novels, especially in the one entitled *In the Eye of the Sun*. Starting from the Chicano writer Gloria E. Anzaldúa's statements about the use of different languages as presented in *Borderland/La frontera*, the author will argue that Soueif's strategy is a powerful tool that challenges the British presence in Egypt at the time of colonialism and move on to analyze the influence of the English language used in the novel. Soueif's bilingual writing (English/Arabic) can be thus perceived as an instance of adaptation of one's mother tongue to the surrounding linguistic environment, as well as a tool of empowerment.

The English-writing author Soueif allows the Arabic language emerge in her narrative especially when dealing with historical issues, therefore reassessing the Arab national identity in Egypt and overcoming what seems to be linguistic "colonialism". After describing the author's cultural background, the author will propose certain examples of this kind of writing and/or transcultural translation which represents an act of resistance as opposed to the standardised trend of the English language.

Keywords: Ahdaf Soueif, Arabic Literature, Arabic Literature in English, Arabic Language

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*Never make fun of someone who speaks
 broken English.
 It means they know another language.*
 H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

*As long as I have to accommodate the
 English speakers rather than having them
 accommodate me, my tongue will be
 illegitimate.*
 Gloria E. Anzaldúa

Ahdaf Soueif (March 23, 1950) is an Arab Egyptian writer born in Cairo. When she was a child, she spent some years in England, and she returned there in 1973 to study for her PhD in Linguistics at Lancaster University. Since then, she has lived between London and Cairo, and consequently shifts between Arab and British cultures, and inhabits at least two languages. She is the author of three collections of short stories (*Aisha*, 1983,² *Sandpiper*, 1996³ and *I think of you*, 2007); two novels (*In the Eye of the Sun*, 1992 and *The Map of Love*, 1999);⁴ and essays (*Mezzaterra*, 2004; *Cairo: My City our revolution*, 2012; *Cairo: Memoir of a City Transformed*, 2014; *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*, 2014). Apart from her literary activity, she publishes articles in newspapers and journals both in English and Arabic, and she is also a political activist for women empowerment and the Palestinian cause.

In this paper, I will analyze some passages of her novels *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love* focusing on the ways Soueif uses the languages she knows. On the one hand, she inserts Arabic words, expressions, honorific titles, historical references, translations and so on, and switches between Standard Arabic and Egyptian Arabic; on the other, she uses English to retell the story of the Arab world and Egypt, particularly from the point of view of the Subaltern. In this way, she succeeds in "translating" Arabic culture into English by forcing the English-speaking reader to confront the linguistic hybridity and to reassess the stereotypes about Arabic culture in general. In this way Soueif adopts a double strategy and compels the English reader to face a counter-discourse about British colonial presence in the region.

² Finalist for the "Guardian Fiction Prize".

³ Winner of the Cairo International Book Fair Best Collection of Short Stories.

⁴ The novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and has been translated in eighteen languages.

Polyglossia⁵ is, therefore, a strategy that creates multiple identities and multiple readings, lets the Arabic culture appear and by doing so, breaks the stereotype and speaks to the Other (D'Alessandro 2007; Cariello 2012; El-Feky 2012; Brahim 2014). Multilingual writing becomes not only experimental writing, but also a form of resistance against linguistic imperialism, or against the phenomenon Jean Luis Calvet (1974) calls "glottophagy" – the idea of Imperial languages swallowing up those considered "minority"⁶ languages. This idea is extremely attractive because it affects not only writers like Soueif, but also researchers from all over the world, who are constrained to write in perfect English, otherwise their ideas will not be considered. This leads to a binary opposition between the English language/culture and the native language/culture that Soueif as a writer, and I as a researcher, both reject. To overcome this binarism, one could set her/himself at the borderline and argue, as Homi Bhabha suggests, for a hybridity through transnational literature (Bhabha 1995: 212-235). Literature, in his opinion, acts as a transnational tool, especially when written by authors like Soueif, who lives in two (or even more) cultures. However, Bhabha does not ask the fundamental question: in which language should this transnational literature be written? To answer this question, I turned to the work of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, a Chicano writer and intellectual. In her work *Borderland/La frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa claims that linguistic mixture is a mode of empowerment and rejects both sides of the hybridity proposed by Homi Bhabha; in fact, she states that they are different sides of the abovementioned binary opposition. She then turns in favor of a multiple version of the "double-voiced discourse", always slipping in and out of two or more languages, cultures, and worlds. For Anzaldúa, this switching between languages is a form of empowerment as she refuses to choose a language that is not her native. The result is a deconstructive place where everything is "mita y mita" (half and a half). In fact, in her book Anzaldúa uses at least two English varieties and six Spanish varieties all at once, partly translating, partly using the different options at the same time or sentence. This is done as an opposition to what is perceived as an attack on one's form of expression "with the intent to censor" (Anzaldúa 1987: 2947). However, as she claims, "wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut off" (Anzaldúa 1987:

⁵ Arabic is not the only language Soueif uses in her novels. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, for example, Italian too plays a significant role.

⁶ Minority here means not only inferior in number of mother tongue speaking people, but also inferior by way of the power a language exercises over other languages in the cultural field. See Jean-Louis Calvet (1974).

2947). To be a non-native English writer, then, does not mean to always cope with the binarism between correct and incorrect, but to use a "living" language and to be – for the native English speaker/writer – "your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, the subject of your *burla*" (Anzaldúa 1987: 2950).

Being Arab and writing in English means knowing that one is living in a dominant language and a dominant culture. In her works, Soueif's choice is to show how she possesses a "malleability" that makes her "unbreakable". As Anzaldúa explicitly states: "We, the mestizas and mestizos, will remain" (Anzaldúa 1987: 2995). The Mestiza language, therefore, is the only way to avoid being silenced or tamed, as domestication is the chief tool of the slave-master relationship. The importance of mother tongue is paramount here, as the risk in relinquishing it means to be silenced:

Ne pas parler sa langue maternelle. Habiter des sonorités, des logiques coupées de la mémoire nocturne du corps, du sommeil aigre-doux de l'enfance. Porter en soi comme un caveau secret, ou comme un enfant handicapé – chéri et inutile -, ce langage d'autrefois qui se fane sans jamais vous quitter. Vous vous perfectionnez dans un autre instrument, comme on s'exprime avec l'algèbre ou le violon. Vous pouvez devenir virtuose avec ce nouvel artifice qui vous procure d'ailleurs un nouveau corps, tout aussi artificiel, sublimé – certains disent sublime. Vous avez le sentiment que la nouvelle langue est votre résurrection : nouvelle peau, nouveau sexe. Mais l'illusion se déchire lorsque vous vous entendez, à l'occasion d'un enregistrement par exemple, et que la mélodie de votre voix vous revient bizarre, de nulle part, plus proche du bredouillis d'antan que du code d'aujourd'hui. Vos maladresses ont du charme, dit-on, elles sont même érotiques, surenchérisent les séducteurs. Personne ne relève vos fautes, pour ne pas vous blesser, et puis on n'en finirait plus, et à la fin on s'en fout. On ne vous signifie pas moins que c'est agaçant quand même : parfois, une levée de sourcils ou un « Pardon ? » en volute vous font comprendre que « vous ne serez jamais », que « ce n'est pas la peine », que « là au moins on n'est pas dupe ». Dupe, vous ne l'êtes pas non plus. Tout au plus êtes-vous croyant, prêt à tous les apprentissages, à tous les âges, pour atteindre – dans cette parole des autres imaginée comme parfaitement assimilée *un jour* – Dieu sait quel idéal, par-delà l'aveu implicite d'une déception due à cette origine qui n'a pas tenu sa promesse.

Ainsi, entre deux langages, votre élément est-il le silence (Kristeva 1988: 27-28).

The work of Soueif has been widely studied, especially her novel *The Map of Love* (Malak 2000; Moore 2008; El-Feky 2012; Sarnou 2014), as it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. (English speaking) scholars state that she inserts Arabic in her writing and that sometimes English "betrays" her⁷ so that she does not succeed in smoothing the text, which is sometimes a mere translation. If it is true that Soueif confirms that she translates at some points in her novels, I disagree with this

⁷ This idea returns in all the quoted references in some way or another.

reading, and I will claim hereafter that Soueif writes that way on purpose in order to deconstruct the English speaker linguistic certainty. In fact, what Soueif states is:

Because of the specific, peculiar nature of my work in that I'm me and I'm writing in English and a lot of the time I'm writing about an Arab or Egyptian experience and writing through Arab or Egyptian characters—that necessarily involves a sort of translation in the creation of the work.⁸

This is not a translation in the technical meaning, of course, but a different use of language to create an effect in the reader. "To be able to do that you have to be able to play with the language, to forge new things out of it". For Soueif, this kind of translation is made of choices and engagement with the novel and its characters.

In her book *In the Eye of the Sun* she tells the story of Asya, a young woman who gets married when she is only eighteen and then moves to England to write her PhD thesis. The main plot describes the young woman's empowerment journey, which will lead to divorcing her husband. This decision is taken during their stay in England. There, Asya lives alone most of the time as her husband is often on business trips. At some point, she invites a group of friends to a cottage she rents for holidays. Her guests are students, and they are native speakers of both English and Arabic. Among them is Deena, who came to visit her sister Asya and who is a member of a dissident movement in Egypt. She brings a music tape by Sheikh Imam,⁹ a protest singer "more or less banned by the government" (Soueif: Location 10286). Lisa and Gerald, the English students, ask for the meaning of the lyrics and, after hearing the entire song, they play it once again, pausing it after each verse, so that Asya can 'translate' it. The 'translation' turns out to be a commentary on the politics of Egypt and an introduction to some aspects of the Arabic language:

`Sharraft ya Nixon Baba,
 Ya bta' el-Watergate -'

`What's he saying?' asks Lisa, 'something about Nixon?'

⁸ This and the following quotes about translation are taken from a lecture Soueif delivered at the American University in Cairo on 2010 with the title "The Author as a Translator". The audio of the lecture is available on the youtube page of the AUC (accessed 25.08.2015).

⁹ Imām Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Aysā (1918-1995), better known as Ṣayḥ Imām was an Egyptian singer. Born in a very poor family, he was affected by blindness when he was just one year old and became a Qur'ān reciter. Then he met one of the most influent singers of the time, Ṣayḥ Darwīš al-Ḥarīrī, from whom he learned to sing and to play the lute. He began writing political songs in the Egyptian dialect and in spite of being banned from radio and television broadcasts, he was very popular. In 1962 he met the Egyptian poet Aḥmad Fu'ād Naǧm, with whom he started a partnership, singing songs written by Naǧm. These strongly criticized the Egyptian government and both artists were in prison several times between 1967 and 1979.

'Well,' says Asya, 'he says, "you've honoured us, Nixon Baba" "Baba" actually means "father" but it's used here as a title of mock respect – I can't, honestly, he's already passed the next couplet and –'

'Can't we pause it perhaps?' says Gerald.

'But it's the first time Hisham hears it –' Asya says.

Hisham presses the Pause button.

'Let's hear the song through, and then I'll rewind it and pause after every couplet. I'd really like to hear Asya's translation.'

'Sharraft ya Nixon Baba,
 Ya bta' el-Watergate –'

Hisham presses pause.

'Well,' says Asya, 'as I said he says, "You've honoured us, Nixon Baba – "Baba" means "father" but it's also used, as it is used here, as a title of mock respect – as in "Ali Baba", for example – that's probably derived from Muslim Indian use of Arabic – but the thing is you could also address a child as "Baba" as an endearment – a sort of inversion: like calling him big Chief because he's so little – and so when it's used aggressively – say in an argument between two men – it carries a diminutivising, belittling signification. So here it holds all these meanings. Anyway, "you've honoured us, Nixon Baba" – "You've honoured us" is, by the way, the traditional greeting with which you meet someone coming into your home – it's almost like "come on in" in this country. So it functions merely as a greeting and he uses it in that way but of course he activates – ironically – the meaning of having actually "honoured" us. "You've honoured us, Nixon Baba / O you of Watergate" I suppose would be the closest translation – but the structure "bita' el-whatever" (el – is just the definite article coming before any noun) posits a close but not necessarily defined relationship between the first noun (the person being described) and the second noun. So "bita' el-vegetables", for example, would be someone who sold vegetables, while "bita' el-women" would be someone who pursued women. So Nixon "bita' el-Watergate", which suggests him selling the idea of Watergate to the public – and pursuing a Watergate type of policy, but all in a very non-pompous, street vernacular,, jokingly abusive kind of way. The use of "el-" to further specify Watergate – a noun which needs no further defining – is necessary for the rhythm and adds comic effect. I'm sure you won't want me to go on like this, so let's stop –'

'Nonsense!' says Gerald.

'It's fascinating', says Lisa.

'Asya,' says Hisham, 'I swear I'm enjoying this. Come on, I'll play the next couplet.'

Amaloulak eema w seema
 Salateen el-fool wez-zeit –

'Ok, well,' Asya takes a Deep breath. "Eema" is "worth" or "value". So he says, "They made an eema for you": to make an "eema" for someone is to behave towards them as though they have value when they in fact have none. So, "They've put on a show that gives yu value" – "seema" is always used as an idiom with "eema" because of the rhyme. It means appearance. So: "the appearance of a thing of value" – the awful thing, though, is that this is taking all these sentences to translate, and it makes it seem ponderous and convoluted while in fact it's totally direct; it's language that a completely illiterate, uneducated woman would use to her child –'

'Who made him appear of value, his press office?' asks Lisa.

'This was on the occasion of Nixon's visit to the Arab world – so he's talking about the Arabs – the Arab leaders,' says Deena.

'It comes in the next line,' says Hisham. 'Asya?'

'Yes. The Sultans of "fool" and "zeit". "Fool" – this is one thing that everybody knows about Egypt – that "fool" is the basic diet of the Egyptians. Particularly those from the more traditional or poorer sectors of society – I suppose they tend to be the same. It's brown beans stewed for a long time over a very low fire. It's the cheapest food you can get, and so to be a "sultan" of "fool" argues a massive poverty and backwardness. This "fool" can be dressed in various ways. The simplest and cheapest is with oil – "zeit" – and lemon. So "fool" and "zeit" come together – but "zeit" also, like "oil" in English, means petrol oil. So if you take that meaning, then there are two categories of "Sultan" being referred to: the sultans of "fool" and poverty etc. And the sultans of wealth and oil. There is obviously a great disparity between the two categories – but there is also a similarity. Underscored by the reading of "fool and zeit" as a unit having only one sultan – a similarity in their attitudes to Nixon and the USA. And "Sultan" in itself is a disparaging title nowadays – except I suppose in folk-tales it's the Ottoman Turkish title for a king and of course these were regarded by the Egyptians and other Arabs as oppressors and parasites – besides which, of course, the other ones had a reputation for weakness and dissipation and so on. So to call a ruler now a sultan carries all these overtones. But there's another meaning for "salateen" as well – do you really want this to go on, because I would so much rather – says Asya to Hisham Badra.

'Of course we want you to go on,' Lisa says.

'It's incredible how much there is to it,' says Gerald Stone.

'I'm sure Sheikh Imam himself would be curious to hear that exposition.'

Deena laughs.

'Ok.' Asya takes a deep breath and pushes her hair back from her face.

"Salateen is also the plural of "sultaniyyah" which is a bowl, but which also has to do with madness. you know in a farce where a mad person wears a saucepan on his head. "He put on the sultaniyyah," means "he's gone mad."

'Farashoulak agda' sekka,
 Min Ras et-Tin `ala `Akka

We hnak todkhol `ala Makka
 Wiy`oulu `aleik haggeit-

"They laid out the bravest path for you: from the Palace of Ras et-Tin" (that's the palace at the western end of the sea-front in Alexandria – it's the point from which King Farouk sailed into exile) "to Akka" – that's in Palestine. It's a city that was notoriously difficult to capture in the time of the Crusades, so someone who's pleased with himself at having performed some feat is asked, mockingly, "So, you've opened Akka?" "And there you'll enter Makkah-" that's Makkah, the holy city in Saudi Arabia, of course. "And they'll say you you've performed the pilgrimage" – you are a Hajj – which of course is impossible since only a Muslim can perform the Hajj. This kind of refers back to German propaganda during the Second World War, when Hitler was said to be really the "Hajj Muhammad Hitler" to try and get support for him among the ordinary people.'

Mahou moulid
 Shobash ya's`hab el-beit.

"It's a moulid". A "moulid" is strictly a "nativity" of a saint – like Christmas only there are a lot of them. But because of how it's celebrated it also means a time of chaos where anything goes. "Shobash" is a kind of really vulgar cry used to attract people's attention: a woman will yell it out in a street fight to signal that she is going all out to destroy the enemy, that she doesn't mind causing a scandal – that in fact she *wants* people to come and watch. So it's used also to signify doing something wrong – shamelessly; not even having the decency to go and to do it in a corner but doing it in public. On the other hand, it is used by the belly-

dancer in weddings when she starts collecting gifts of money for the bride. "Ya s'hab el-beit" would be the rest of the dancer's cry. "El-beit" is the house, "As'hab el-beit" are the people of the house. So the people of the bride or groom. But the supreme "House" is the Ka'ba in Makkah. And if you ever just say "As'hab el-beit" it is taken automatically to refer to the people of *that* House, of the House of the Prophet, that is the people most honoured among Muslims – who are now being honoured by the visit of President Nixon. So – well – there's just a lot of structural irony there. And really the rest is repetition. I mean, this really gives you an idea what it's saying and everything (Soueif: Location 10286).

In the quoted passage, Soueif's goal is to present the manifoldness of Arab-Egyptian culture (and language) and to shed some more light on the multi-layered meanings the verses convey. If this is certainly a strategy to bring the non-Arabic speaking reader closer, it is also a tool to introduce political commentaries and to propose to the reader a different understanding of Egyptian politics. She does this on two separate levels. The first is a linguistic one, where, for instance, two words or expressions, one in Arabic and the other in English, are juxtaposed, as in "Nixon Baba" or "bta' el-Watergate" in the first verse. Here, in particular, an English word (Watergate) is assimilated into Arabic by the preceding definite article "el-"; this reverses the "glottophagic" movement Arabic-to-English into an English-to-Arabic. This linguistic tool, present throughout the song, is typical of the Arabic language. Contrary to other languages, where the English word remains as it is, although read in a different way, Arabic tends to swallow all foreign words and, when possible, to "Arabicize" them. Another feature is the extensive use of honorific titles and terms of respect taken from the Muslim tradition (by which I mean Arabic, Turkish and Indian) as shown by the word "Baba", usually indicating respect. On the one hand, these titles indicate the hierarchical structure of Egyptian society, and on the other, the multicultural configuration of Arab-Islamic society. At the same time, as these titles are sometimes used to indicate a non-Arab character, they are addressed especially to the Arab reader: the phrase which contains an Arabic honorific and a non-Arab person implies mockery. Although Soueif makes this intent explicit when Asya explains, for instance, the first verse, the native speaker can enjoy the multiplicity of meanings and in the cultural literary and semantic associations which Arabic words convey.

The English reader – thanks to the visual recognition of the original English word and the conceptual explanation embodied in the narrative – is forced to acknowledge that there is a language, i.e. Arabic, which behaves exactly like English; the reader is thus obliged to assume that linguistic and "cultural fluxes and

confluences" (Malak 2005: 9) work in both directions and to put Arabic on the same level as English.

Another strategy is the one embodied in the polysemy of words and expressions, which testify of an articulated language as a mirror of a dense culture. Thus, for instance, except the quoted passage, which is extremely evident in itself, Soueif makes references to customs, traditions and historical facts or periods using Arabic words (Albakry & Hancock 2008). The use of terms "recalling customs and traditions" has, on the one hand, the effect of estrangement, so that the reader is made aware of another culture's presence and on the other, it keeps the Arab-speaking reader closer to the English text:

Every year for the Festival of al-Sayyid al-Badawi they had all gone up to Tanta. They had visited the mosque of al-Sayyid and they had visited the shrine of Sheikha Sabah then had a big lunch and driven back to Cairo loaded with sweets and special festival candy. Every year during Ramadan they'd broken the fast one evening at al-Dahhan in the Azhar. They'd eaten kebab and grilled goat and Grandfather would always drink a large glassful of straight pickle juice (Soueif Kindle edition: location 5897)

In this passage, for example, the following references are made:

- To the popular cult of the Saints in Islam. Al-Sayyid al-Badawi, founder of the Ahmadiyya Sufi tariqa, and whose mausoleum is in Tanta, reminds the Arab reader of the Muslim golden age, as he lived in the 13th century; on the other hand, as-Sheikha Sabah is a pious contemporary woman from Tanta, who founded her own tariqa. This way, Soueif uses a few words to connect the past and the present, a traditional Muslim reference (al-Badawi) with an Egyptian-specific one (Sabah).

- To religious practices (Ramadan, mosque).

- To traditional places in Egypt: al-Dahhan is one of the oldest restaurants in Cairo in the al-Azhar mosque neighborhood, and it is advertised as the oldest "kababgy restaurant", making reference to its Turkish origin (kebab being a word of Turkish origin and the suffix -gi being of Indian origin).

The second level is a semantic one, this time linked with the novel's development. Different characters have different backgrounds, and regarding Asya's English friends, they have a sort of 'orientalistic' idea of the Arab world. Forcing them to confront the multiplicity of Egyptian culture along with the Arabic language, they must confront their preconceptions, they must stop and think. The Arab world is not the one the reader has in mind, even if at times it is very positive; neither the Arabic culture is so far away from the Western one. The reader has to dismantle his ideas

and to rebuild them in a different way. "Gone are the days when the representation of Muslims in English and their cultures was dominated by others, whoever they may be, and whatever sympathies they manifest" (Malak 2005: 7). This is underlined by Asya's friends' words at some point during the song explanation. After the first verse they comment: 'Nonsense!' says Gerald. 'It's fascinating', says Lisa; while the Arab friend says: 'I swear I'm enjoying this. Come on, I'll play the next couplet' (Soueif, Kindle edition: Location10304-22). The first thing we notice is a difference between the audience, the English being 'fascinated' or thinking that all what they have heard is 'nonsense'. Only the Arab listener can understand all linguistic and cultural associations and is, therefore, the only one who, at this stage, can fully understand the meaning. After a while, as Asya's explanation becomes further and deeper, the listener's attitude changes. In fact, when Asya thinks her guests are annoyed, because what was supposed to be a brief explanation turned into a multifaceted commentary, she asks if she should stop. Her friends' attitude has changed: 'Of course we want you to go on', says Lisa. 'It's incredible how much there is to say', says Gerald Stone. The ability of Soueif lies in inserting a sort of consciousness in the narrative canvas: the more Asya's friends – and the readers, too – learn, the better they understand Arab culture and they can change their attitude towards it. At the same time, the author is conscious of the complexity of this 'translation's' job. During the evening, the session is interrupted by Asya's husband Saif, who is calling from abroad. When Asya answers the phone, she says:

'You saved me. I've got some people visiting and they're making me translate one of Sheikh Imam's songs to them and it's beastly.' Asya whispers.
 'I should have thought it sounds pretty silly in English.'
 'It either sounds silly or ponderous. A page of footnotes for every line'
 (Soueif, Kindle edition: Location 10358-76).

This passage shows how difficult it is to transpose a culture into another one and confirms that, in the end, notwithstanding all the efforts we can do, the result will be 'pretty silly' or 'ponderous'. This statement is interesting because it claims that one culture cannot be assimilated into English culture and that there are concepts, feelings, and ideas that cannot be uttered in English without losing meaning. Soueif sets herself this way on the edge of the borderland, letting the reader know it is necessary to insert Arabic into English if she/he wants to fully understand the novel's meaning. Her writing carries the rhythm of Arabic which cannot be described in British English, because her goal is not to be domesticated

but, on the contrary, to domesticate the English language to her mother tongue, Arabic. As Walter Benjamin (1996: 253-263) suggests, by 'translating' she pushes the English language to its limits – its border – that is, it is still English, but it has also become something else. To recall the multiplicity of Arabic, Soueif makes wide use of etymology too, as in the following passage, when the protagonist of *The Map of Love* helps a girlfriend, who is learning Arabic:

'Listen,' I say, 'you know the alphabet and you've got a dictionary. Everything stems from a root. And the root is mostly made up of three consonants – or two. And then the word takes different forms. Look —' The old teacher in me comes to life as I hunt in my handbag for paper and a biro. 'Take the root q-l-b, qalb. You see, you can read this?'

'Yes.'

'Qalb: the heart, the heart that beats, the heart at the heart of things. Yes?'

She nods, looking intently at the marks on the paper.

'Then there's a set number of forms — a template almost — that any root can take. So in the case of "qalb" you get "qalab": to overturn, overthrow, turn upside down, make into the opposite; hence "maqlab": a dirty trick, a turning of the tables and also a rubbish dump. "Maqloub": upside-down; "mutaqallib": changeable; and "inqilab": a coup ...'

So at the heart of all things is the germ of their overthrow; the closer you are to the heart, the closer to the reversal. Nowhere to go but down. You reach the core and then you're blown away —

'Is there a book that tells you all this?' Isabel asks.

'I don't know. There must be. I kind of worked it out.'

'That's really useful.'

'I think so. It gives you a handle.'

'So every time you use a word, it brings with it all the other forms that come from the same root' (Soueif 1999: 82).

To further underline this feeling of estrangement, Soueif interweaves the text with several Arabic words, names and expressions for which she gives the reader a clue in the *Glossary* at the end of the book (Soueif Kindle edition: Location 16956-17070). Novels in English usually have no glossary, which intensifies the feeling of estrangement and highlights how the text is located at the Borderland. The presence of a glossary, in fact, gives the reader the impression of alterity of a text which cannot be encompassed in the field of 'English' literature, but which is immediately identified as other. The author uses Arabic words and expressions to introduce specific characters or to convey social and political concepts which – although not lacking – cover a totally different semantic field in English. When reading, the general meaning is clear, or at least the reader can easily understand it due to the fact that Soueif introduces them as motives in the narrative flow. Afterwards, in the glossary, she gives an accurate definition or information about the quoted politician

or the mentioned situation to broaden the reader's cultural knowledge. In this way, the occasional incoherence in her use of English gains a new meaning. It is not incoherence anymore, but a manipulation of the English language which leans towards Arab Islamic culture and produces a powerful paradox, proving that "despite all its colonial evocations and its atavistically anti-Muslim connotation [English] can be utilized as a sophisticated [Arab] and Muslim currency of credible communication" (Malak 2004: 11). If until recent times the process was one of infiltration of English terms and expressions in other languages and Arabic was no exception, in the last decades English is Arabicized and Muslimized. This has been called a "natural process of cultures interfacing" (Malak 2004: 9). What is new is the acknowledgment of the process.

Herein then lies the happy irony of Muslim writers "appropriation" a language with a perceived hostile history toward Islam and turning it into a medium of conveying inclusivist ethos, enriching understanding, and establishing bridges. An instrument for demystifying and de-alienating Islam and Muslims, muslimized English, like African or Indian English, becomes a site of encounter for cultures and peoples on equal terms, by peaceful means, and through intelligent-at times humorous, at others touchingly humane-discourses whose modes and modalities shift from antagonism to understanding, from exclusion to integration, from contest to compromise, and, more importantly, from resistance to reconciliation (Malak 2004: 11).

This use of English inserting itself in what Soren Frank names "deterritorialization of language",¹⁰ by which "forms of expression and language systems are set in motion and forced out of balance" (Frank 2008: 152). That is, the presence of "Englishes" (Kachru 1990) dismantles the idea – and the praxis – of a unitarian English binaristically opposing to all other languages. This process is interestingly set in motion from the margins, that is, from authors from former colonies or countries that were or still are subjugated to British or American cultural imperialism. As a consequence, this literature is political (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 17) and, as Salman Rushdie affirms, taming English could "complete the process of making ourselves free" (Rushdie 1991: 17). Still, Soueif, although contaminating the 'official' English, by disturbing it and showing its opacity, does not make a step further. In fact, even if the presence of the Glossary, as I showed, is functional to an estrangement effect, it also can be read as an apology or an explanation and underlines the fact that this language is not her own. As Soueif states (Ghazaleh

¹⁰ This expression is in reality taken from Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1986).

2001) she sometimes perceives her work as a translation, and she, therefore, thinks of her writings as Arabic written in English. As one of her characters says: "We speak as we always have Arabic inlaid with French and English phrases" (Soueif 1999: 200).

To conclude, it is possible to speak of a mixed language in Soueif's work, "the mixed diction which is used to mediate between local and standard language" (Trabelsi 2003: 1) that is not only a powerful linguistic tool but a strong cultural weapon to dismantle the idea of a pure English language as the only way to express oneself.

Appendix

Šayḥ Imām's song. Words by Aḥmad Fu'ād Nağm

Original text in Egyptian Arabic (the text is slightly different from the one quoted by Soueif)

صدقت ان احنا فريسه	شرفت يا نيكسون بابا
طبيت لحقوك بالزفه	يا بتاع الووترجيت
يا عريس الغفله يا خفه	عملوك قيمه وسيما
هات وشك خد لك تفه	سلاطين الفول والزيت
شوبش من صاحب البيت	فرشولك أوسع سكه
واهو مولد ساير داير	من راس التين على مكه
شي الله يا اصحاب البيت	وهناك تنغد على عكا
خد مني كلام يبقى لك	ويقولوا عليك حجيت
ولو انك مش حتعيش	ما هو مولد ساير داير
لا حقول اهلا ولا جهلا	شي الله يا اصحاب البيت
ولا تيجي ولا متجيش	جواسيسك يوم تشريفك
بيقولوا اللحم المصري	عملوك زفه وزار
مطرح ما بيسري بيهري	تتقصب فيه المومس
ودا من تأثير الكشري	والقارح والمندار
والفول والسوس أبو زيت	والشيخ شمهورش راكب
واهو مولد ساير داير	عزموك فقالوا تعالى
شي الله يا اصحاب البيت	تاكل بامبون وهريسه
	قمت انت لأنك مهيف

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