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ARAB NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH LANGUAGE IN *DHAKIRAT AL-JASAD* AND *THE MAP OF LOVE*

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ABSTRACT. ***Arab National Identity through Language in* Dhakirat al-Jasad *and* The Map of Love.** In their novels, the Algerian Ahlam Mosteghanemi and the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif adopt specific linguistic approaches that render their imaginary of Arab national identities. Drawing upon the theories of Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha's Hybridity, this paper argues that through their unique employment of language, Mosteghanemi and Soueif project two different visions of Arab national identity. In using Arabic to write her fiction, Mosteghanemi enacts a rupture with *francophonie* in order to sustain the purity of Arabic as a strong emblem of Arab national unity and identity. Conversely, by creating a hybridised language, Soueif seems to showcase that the creation of a new language might lead to the creation of new heterogeneous national identities.

Keywords: *Arab national identity, homogenous pure identities, heterogeneous hybrid identities, linguistic approaches, contemporary Arab women's writings, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Ahdaf Soueif, Homi Bhabha.*

ABSTRACT. ***Identitatea națională arabă prin limbă în* Dhakirat al-Jasad *și* Harta iubirii.** În romanele lor, algerianul Ahlam Mosteghanemi și egipteanul Ahdaf Soueif adoptă abordări lingvistice specifice care redau imaginarul identităților naționale arabe. Bazându-se pe teoriile despre hibriditatea lui Homi Bhabha și Benedict Anderson, această lucrare susține că prin angajarea lor unică în limbă, Mosteghanemi și Soueif proiectează două viziuni diferite ale identității naționale arabe. Folosind araba pentru a-și scrie ficțiunea, Mosteghanemi adoptă o ruptură cu francofonia pentru a susține puritatea arabei ca o emblemă puternică a unității și identității naționale arabe. În schimb, prin crearea unui limbaj hibridizat, Soueif pare să arate că crearea unui nou limbaj ar putea duce la crearea de noi identități naționale eterogene.

Cuvinte cheie: *identitate națională arabă, identități pure omogene, identități hibride eterogene, abordări lingvistice, scrieri contemporane ale femeilor arabe, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Ahdaf Soueif, Homi Bhabha.*

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1. Introduction

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson describes "official nationalism" as characterised by linguistic nationalism (109). According to him, state's language(s), the originators of linguistic nationalism, began to grow in Europe during the seventeenth century (42). The fear of elimination and marginalisation that spread rapidly in mid-nineteenth century Europe by smaller imagined communities within nations (Anderson 109-110), exhorted a number of European governments to propagandise to the concept of "official nationalisms" by enforcing linguistic nationalisms on their populations (Anderson 42). Thus, during the nineteenth century, citizens from different European nations asserted their allegiance and ownership of a single official language and began to promote its authority within their nation-states as a means of maintaining linguistic cohesion and hence national unification. Anderson points to the magnitude of "two forms of imagining which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century: the novel and the newspaper" (24-25). These new cultural forms provided the technical means for "re-presenting the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 25). Anderson stresses the substantiality of mass-produced books and newspapers in everyday languages, what he terms as print capitalism, in the production of the national imagined collectivity. According to him, printed cultural output contributes to frame the community's national identity. Anderson contends that it is only through reading in a common language that the cohesion of the nation is imagined, and thus guaranteed (145). More explicitly, the daily practice of reading a newspaper or a novel in a shared language triggers a sense of common experiences within the public which in turn leads to fostering the cohesive identity of the community, "there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests. The image: unisonance" (Anderson 145).

Anderson's credence postulates that the fiction of a single national language contributes a great deal to creating and unifying the nation (84). In other words, it is through novels that the national community is imagined and the nation-state is made present to its members. This underscores the central role the language of the fiction of a particular nation performs in fostering feelings of nationalism and belongingness to that community among the daily speakers and readers of that specific language. Readers come to develop an awareness of a common people who share their similar identity. This leads to the conviction that this shared language is the property of the members of that specific community who come to feel entitled to it and to their position as equals within their imagined community (Anderson 84).

Anderson's theory is applicable to the fiction of the contemporary Arab women novelists, the Algerian Ahlam Mosteghanemi and the Egyptian Ahdaf

Soueif. Both Mosteghanemi and Soueif are intent to adopt a certain approach to language, in their respective novels *Dhakirat al-Jasad*[2] (1993) and *The Map of Love* (1999), which would reflect their national imaginary. They enact linguistic approaches in order to mirror their national vision of the Arab "imagined communities" each in her own unique way. Mosteghanemi projects her vision of a homogenous Algerian Arab national identity through her investment in the Arabic language. She announces a total break with the former coloniser's language and culture, both through her narrative discourse and the linguistic composition of her texts. Conversely, Soueif imagines a potential alternative to the homogenous pure national community for which Mosteghanemi calls. This is mostly apparent through her translational use of language where Egyptian dialects and cultural traditions merge in total harmony with the imperial English, she consciously chooses to craft her fiction. This gives rise to a third in-between language that reflects Soueif's heterogeneous hybrid vision of an Arab national identity.

2. Mosteghanemi's Investment in Arabic Language

Standard Arabic language comes to serve as one of the pillars of modern Arab nationalism around which people could rally, and through which they could communicate and come to identify with one another as members of one larger nation. In using Arabic to write her fiction, Mosteghanemi enacts a rupture with *francophonie* on two levels both thematically and linguistically in order to preserve the purity of the Arabic language as a strong emblem of Algerian national unity and identity.

2.1. Thematic Rupture with francophonie

In *Dhakirat al-Jasad*, Khaled, much like Malek Haddad, is left with a sole French prosthesis writing pen. Taking the coloniser's pen implies a sort of betrayal to the very noble national principles, for which he has vehemently fought. Therefore, instead of immersing into silence like Haddad, Khaled takes a healing brush to paint his native land and along with it his traumatic painful memories. In fact, Khaled's choice of painting over writing cuts short the coloniser's expectations for him to become a distinguished francophone writer: "my teachers had always predicted a glowing literary future for me – in French. Maybe that was why I answered without thinking or, as I discovered later, with the response that was already deep inside me, 'I prefer painting'" (Mosteghanemi,

[2] The included quotations however are taken from the English translation *The Bridges of Constantine* (2013).

Bridges 34). Not only does such an act rebut colonialism's "prophecy" for Khaled but it also rebuts its prophecy for a postcolonial "francophone" Algeria as argued by the critic Shaden M. Tageldin in his article "Which Qalam for Algeria?" (486). Ostensibly, through Khaled, Mosteghanemi heightens the tragedy of post-independent Algerian intelligentsia who, like the protagonist, lost their writing arm for *francophonie*; yet who are still keen on retaining their national language and keeping their identity away from colonial infiltrations, each in his/her unique way. Tageldin points out: "Having lost not just his left arm to anti-colonial battle but also, figuratively speaking, his right arm 'ostensibly his writing arm' to the silencing effect of French, Khalid has suffered in effect a double amputation" ("Which Qalam" 486).

Khaled attends secondary school and studies French language and literature; yet his heart is fully determined by Constantine's native language and culture. Constantine, Khaled confirms, is "a city where it was impossible to ignore the authority of Arabic and its esteemed place in people's hearts and memories" (Mosteghanemi, *Bridges* 21). Arabic infiltrates Khaled's mind and heart, in one scene and while observing his canvases, Ahlam tells him that his art "speaks" Arabic: "I think if I were an artist, I'd paint like you. I feel that we both share the same sensibility" (Mosteghanemi, *Bridges* 49), suggesting that both her pen and Khaled's brush speak Arabic. Such an assumption makes his paintings and her Arabic novels seem to her "translations" of one another for both of them view things with the same Arabic heart. Like her creator Mosteghanemi, Ahlam masters French but decides to write her fiction in Arabic arguing: "'What matters is the language we speak to ourselves, not the one we use with others!'" (Mosteghanemi, *Bridges* 50). Even when she speaks French, Ahlam "intends" Arabic. For the heroine, speaking French is a mere habit while Arabic is the language that flawlessly renders her love, feelings and creativity: "'I could have written in French, but Arabic is the language of my heart. I can write in nothing else. We write in the language we feel with'" (Mosteghanemi, *Bridges* 50).

The ultimate decision of the two protagonists to cease using French in their conversations for Arabic constitutes the turning point in the narrative in that resolves a linguistic tension felt by the reader and engendered by the flow of the colonial language on the tongues of a former *mujahid* and a daughter of a *shahid*. Mosteghanemi intentionally enacts such a tension to further stress the rupture between the ex-coloniser and colonised. From this point forward, Elizabeth Holt holds, "speaking in French, becomes a sort of betrayal of a linguistic contract or a measure of distance from the contemporary situation of the majority of Algerians" (135).

Another break with the former coloniser is epitomised in Khaled's willingness, in his "one-way ticket" back to his hometown, to abandon his canvases of the bridges of Constantine, to his French lover Catherine as a sign of cutting off all bridges that may connect the nascent nation with its past torturer (E. Holt 133). Only then, will he be able to recover his Algerian soul and memory. More explicitly, Khaled's rejection of French writing and then the paintings produced on the ex-coloniser's land "destroys all the bridges of communication, of influence, and of transport that French colonial infrastructure implanted in Algerian minds and on Algerian soil" (Tageldin, "Which Qalam" 488). Only when leaving painting for writing in Arabic, does Khaled at last free himself from the "complex" of Algerian reliance on French culture (Tageldin, "Which Qalam" 495). By rehabilitating Khaled's writing arm, Mosteghanemi recovers Arabic and assassinates French. The novelist stresses an arrival to "a time when martyrs were still being buried on the pages of newspapers and between the covers of books" (Mosteghanemi, "Writing" 82). If the new struggle for Algerian liberation is about language, Mosteghanemi maintains, "let it unfold 'lovingly,' in language. Let the assault on the ideological temptations of *francophonie* be a 'character assassination' waged through characters like Khaled and Ahlam, on the pages of novels, by the pen and not by the gun" (Tageldin, "Which Qalam" 496). Through her fictional characters, Khaled and Ahlam, Mosteghanemi seems to take part in the Arabisation process of her nascent nation as an effective instrument to obliterate colonial linguistic and cultural residues. This new linguistic struggle for the nation's liberation will be waged by the pen on the pages of books and not by guns in warring terrains.

2.2. Linguistic Rupture with francophonie

At the linguistic level, Mosteghanemi does include French lines in her novel *Dhakirat al-Jasad* only to manifest the shift and the discrepancy which exist between the two languages. No simple reader can fail in figuring out the linguistic breach Mosteghanemi is intent to maintain between the two languages in her texts. While the coalescence of Algerian dialect and cultural expressions within the narrative discourse flow spontaneously and naturally, the inclusion of occasional lines of French surfaces as eccentric and intrusive to the overall narrative. In other words, Mosteghanemi could have used Arabic Alphabet to write the included French expressions, but she intentionally writes them in their original form to accentuate the rupture between the two languages. In so doing, Mosteghanemi is in a way of protecting the purity of her peculiar Arabic language from the clutches of the coloniser's tongue as well as of restoring in her linguistic text the homogeneity of an Algerian national linguistic and cultural identity. Not only does the novelist announce a rupture with *francophonie*

through her characters' determination to write and live in Arabic, but she also enacts this break at the level of the written word.

Furthermore, as Holt notes in her article "'In a Language That Was Not His Own'", despite her excellent command of this language, Mosteghanemi is nowhere noticed as taking part in the French translation of her novel (133). In this French translation, the intrusive francophone lines which clearly mark the linguistic and cultural bridge between the two languages and cultures fade away. For instance, in the Arabic original, Khaled asks in French written in Latin letters: "Mais comment allez-vous Mademoiselle?" The following line is written in Arabic: "فترديـن علي بنفس المسافة اللغوية" pursued by Aḥlam's answer in French: "Bien…Je vous remercie" (Mosteghanemi, *Dhakirat* 59). In this conversation, Mosteghanemi lays bare her intent to enact a linguistic distance in her text. For instance, instead of writing: "Bien…Je vous remercie" in Latin letters, the novelist could have written "بيان…جو فو غوماغسي"; however such a transliteration might threaten the linguistic split she intends to enact in her text. This linguistic distance which takes place between the French and Arabic lines in the Arabic text *Dhakirat al-Jasad* vanishes in the French version. In this regard, Holt notes:

> What *Mémoires de la chair* cannot translate is precisely this linguistic distance, for it is orthographically, historically, dramatically *not the same*. The French translation can only point its readers to a vague linguistic distance that its readers must imagine. The Arabic original, on the other hand, orthographically shows the distance, and it is one that can be apprehended by Arabic readers whether or not they speak French: the very jarringness of two Algerians speaking *in French* in the middle of an Arabic novel marks the distance. (134-135)

Holt explains that the linguistic distance Mosteghanemi is willing to maintain in her Arabic text, and which is effortlessly perceived by any Arabic reader, disappears in the French translation due to the sole use of Latin alphabet.

Therefore, Mosteghanemi imagines a homogenous exclusionary Arab Algerian national identity through her linguistic feat. By making the two major players in the novel move to the use of their mother tongue, and by creating a certain linguistic detachment between Arabic and the incorporated French expressions, Mosteghanemi endeavours to preserve the homogeneity of Arabic while excluding the colonial tongue (the Other).

3. Soueif's Hybridised Language

3.1. Arabised Muslimised English

Though she chooses to write in English, Soueif advertently deploys Arabic in her fiction to project the Egyptian colonial and postcolonial experiences by

reworking the language of the former coloniser. By infusing the two languages together, the novelist in a way creates in Susan Darraj's view her "own particular, postcolonial brand of English" ("Narrating England and Egypt"). In so doing, Soueif attempts to refute the notion of a single national tongue as a signifier and unifier of national community. Arabic language which is applauded by Arab nationalists as a robust marker of the very existence of an Arab nation and its distinctiveness within other "imagined communities" is deconstructed in Soueif's textual narratives, alluding that there is no such thing as a pure Arabic outside Western cultural influences.

Soueif's linguistic feat in her novel *The Map of Love* exhibits her own stance against the consigned modes of authenticity, purity and fixity of Arab national identity. Her unique use of language which is a blend of different aspects of the linguistic and cultural norms of Egyptian culture with English language gives birth to a third in-between tongue. As such, the linguistic design of Soueif's texts is first and foremost targeted to facilitate the integration of both cultures and languages by creating a linguistic middle ground between Arabic and English.

Soueif twists, abrogates and refashions Standard English to fit her own linguistic and national agenda. She makes use of a strategy grounded on the incorporation of typical Arabic and Egyptian colloquial expressions in the dialogues in a natural flow with the overall English narrative text. Her English is thus arabised and even muslimised, in a way that generates a compelling paradox which evidences that English "despite all its colonial evocations and its atavistically anti-Muslim connotations, can be utilised as a sophisticated [Arab and] Muslim currency of credible communication" (Malak, *Muslim Narratives* **7**). In his book, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*, Amin Malak states that, in spite of the sensational stereotypes connected with each of them, words like *fatwa*, *hajj*, *hijab*, *halal*, *inshallah*, *imam*, *intifadha*, *jihad*, *mecca*, *shari'a*, and *ummah* have already ascertained themselves in contemporary phraseology (7). According to Malak, Muslim authors of narratives in English, have functionally muslimised the language without looking for permission from any authority, be it literary, religious, or institutional (*Muslim Narratives* 7).

Soueif's English texts are imbued with the Egyptian atmosphere as well as the cadence and discursive pattern of Arabic. They abound with heavy socio-cultural characteristics of Egyptian people, to mention a few: Arabic names, expressions and phrases, metaphors, greetings and forms of address in addition to Quranic verses. In this light, Malak puts forward, "[h]erein then lies the happy irony of Muslim writers 'appropriating' a language with a perceived hostile history toward [Arab world and] Islam and turning it into a medium conveying inclusivist ethos, enriching understanding, and establishing bridges" (*Muslim*

Narratives 11). The irony is in using a language with colonial connotation to write about the very cultural and linguistic aspects of the people of an Arab Muslim nation.

Mohammed Albakry and Patsy Hunter Hancock study the role of code switching between Arabic and English in *The Map of Love* and contend that the novel's interplay between the two languages is an exemplary characteristic of postcolonial literature. Using Bhabha's definition of hybridity, Albakry and Hancock maintain that Soueif employs a hybrid English and in so doing pushes the "frontiers of the English language… as a way of finding a 'new English' a language between two languages" (233). They consider this linguistic *mélange* as a process of code switching that enables the writer to play a part in both worlds.

Bhabha states that cultural identity always surfaces in the "Third Space of enunciation" (*Location* 54-55), which according to him "erases any essentialist claims to the inherent originality or purity of cultures" (*Location* 83*).* Bhabha defines cultural difference as challenging "our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" ("Cultural Diversity" 156). Instead, cultural difference is a Third Space "though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" ("Cultural Diversity" 157). It is "the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *inter*national culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity"* ("Cultural Diversity" 157)*.* Soueif functions within Bhabha's "Third Space of enunciation", as she reworks, appropriates and translates fixed implications and emblems of cultural identities. In so doing, she reaffirms the principle of cultural difference and impurity by crafting hybridised narratives where she deconstructs the concept of homogenising cultural representation.

In his article "Agency and Translational Literature", Wail Hassan introduces the concept of translational novel which is a form of postcolonial literature that involves more than simply mixing two languages. Translational literature is described by Hassan as "a product of cultural translation and transculturation, a cultural hybrid that foregrounds the question of agency and undercuts the myth of autonomous cultural and civilisational identities" ("Agency" 756). Translational literary texts are thus to "participate in the construction of cultural identities from that in-between space" (Hassan, "Agency" 754). The postcolonial fictional genre chosen by Soueif is thus for Hassan a quintessence of translational literature. Hassan scrutinises the different linguistic registers at

work in *The Map of Love* and holds that the stylistic element of translation functions "at once to maintain the theme of translation consistently before the readers, who are never allowed to forget the complexity of cultural and linguistic mediation, and to offer insights into the workings of the Arabic language" ("Agency" 758).

In his examination of Soueif's novels, Joseph Massad observes Soueif's fascinating experiments with translation. He pinpoints how Soueif "transforms English into Arabic and Arabic into English in revolutionary ways" by rendering "Arabic phrases into English without any syntactic compromises" and "in the very narrative structure of the novel" (75) as well as in her "creative use of etymology in explaining Arabic words" (80). The novelist herself divulges her intention in an interview: "In *The Map of Love*, there is a constant attempt to render Arabic into English, not just to translate phrases, but to render something of the dynamic of Arabic, how it works, into English. So, there is this question of how to open a window into another culture" (Soueif and Massad 85). Soueif thus takes the burden of translating not only words, ideas and information, but an entire culture. Her novel juxtaposes the English and Egyptian cultures and tongues, enabling her characters and readers alike to transcend fixed frontiers and cut across allegiances.

Translation, transliteration and transculturation are manifested in Soueif's intermingling of Arabic and English. The novelist blurs all existing cultural and linguistic boundaries between the coloniser and the colonised, creating in the process a language between two languages: a third language, and along with it a third culture, community and national identity.

3.2. Arabic's Etymology and Substance Rendered through English

In contrast to Mosteghanemi who celebrates the purity of Arabic language and works throughout her texts to accentuate the linguistic discrepancy between it as a national tongue and French as a colonial language, Soueif seems to tear down the legendary status of Arabic as a defining and unifying power of the Arab national identity. She accomplishes so not only by using English to write about the very etymology of Arabic, but also by merging the colonial language with (Arabic) idiomatic expressions and culture. In an examination of the novel, Radwa Ashour comments on Soueif's linguistic experimentations as follows: "Vocabulary, proverbs, wise sayings and linguistic devises are disseminated into the foreign language, bringing with them something of the soul of the nation and the culture" ("In the Eye" 265).

Unlike Mosteghanemi, who shows reluctance in transliterating French expressions by using Arabic letters, in order to cut the bridge and underscore the linguistic breach, Soueif deliberately builds this linguistic bridge through the use of transliteration. Indeed, the novelist uses the English alphabet to write

Egyptian or Arabic words such as *marhab* (welcome), *khalas yakhti* (enough my sister), *alfa mabrouk* (a thousand congratulations). Such transliteration of Arabic words in addition to translating colloquial Arabic/ Egyptian expressions into English, like "May your bounty have increased," "May your hands be saved," "May the name live long," "God will compensate your patience," load the Soueifian English with an Arab character. Hassan asserts that "translational texts may Arabize, Africanize, or Indianize English, sometimes by transliterating words and expressions for which there is no English equivalent, then explaining them in the text or in a glossary or not all" ("Agency" 754).

Not only does Soueif use English to write and translate Arabic words and cultural expressions, but she also uses the imperial language to explain Arabic's very basics. This is perceived in the scene when Amal attempts to explain to Isabel the way Arabic language is structured and its root system:

> Everything stems from a root. And the root is mostly made up of three consonants or two. And then the word takes different forms ... Take the root q-l-b, qalb. *Qalb:* the heart, the heart that beats the heart at the heart of things.... 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, and 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.... Every time you use a word, it brings with it all the other forms that come from the same root. (Soueif, *Map* 81-82)

Soueif intrudes the "static" discursive realm of Arabic by upsetting its very construction. In her explanation and deconstruction of the term "qalb", Amal calls for an intersection between the former coloniser's language and her native tongue.

In one of her letters, the British heroine Anna describes her impressions of Cairo using a number of Arabic terms and expressions, "*Dear Sir Charles, It feels very strange these days not to be in England* [. . .] *We sat under a tree which they say sheltered Our Lady in her flight to Egypt with the infant Jesus, and I am myself touched by the simple faith with which our guide spoke of Settena Maryam and her son Yasu al-Masih*" (Soueif, *Map* 86-88). Such a merger between Arabic and English signals the close relationship between the two languages, but also carries a wider more symbolic dimension in relation to a possible merging between the two opposing nations. Soueif's use of English letters to transliterate Arabic words related to Christian religion "*Settena Maryam", "Yasu al-Masih"* breaks the sacred link which associates Arabic to Islam. While Mosteghanemi makes her characters announce their break with French for Arabic; Soueif

readily involves her English heroine in the Egyptian "Other's" linguistic and cultural sphere by making her endeavour to learn Arabic.

Therefore, through her investment in language: her use of translation, transliteration and transculturation, Soueif creates a new hybrid language. This in-between language reflects the novelist's heterogeneous hybrid vision of Arab "imagined communities".

4. Conclusion

It has become clear that the two contemporary Arab novelists are intent to employ the language in a way that renders unambiguously their visions of Arab national identity and community. Mosteghanemi and Soueif hold two different imaginations of the nation through their investment in language. Mosteghanemi insists on maintaining Arabic linguistic homogeneity and thus a homogenous exclusionary national identity which excludes the Other's tongue and culture, while Soueif's hybridised language conceives a hybrid inclusionary national identity. Mosteghanemi's homogenous national imaginary surfaces through her choice and use of Arabic as a strong marker of an Algerian national identity. The author proclaims a total break with the former coloniser through her linguistic feat. She makes her protagonists shift to the use of their mother tongue through the narration. In addition, she creates a certain linguistic distance between Arabic and the included French lines in her texts in an attempt to maintain the purity of the former and exterminate the latter. Conversely, Soueif switches between the two languages to demonstrate how language could be used to erase antagonistic borders between Egypt and Britain, the colonised and the coloniser, the "Self" and the "Other", as well as how it is able to contribute in redefining cultural identity and by extension national identity. In creating a hybridised in-between language through her fiction, Soueif seems to argue that the dissolution of the Self into the "Other" is possible and that the creation of a new language might possibly lead to the making of new "inauthentic", impure heterogeneous national identities and communities.

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