Interrogating Encounters: Reconstructing Power in the Chaos of Cairo

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Introduction

Egypt and the U.S. encounters have been discussed and reflected upon in literature many times, especially in works by Egyptians who traveled and lived in the States to study or to work. Prominent Egyptian writers like Radwa Ashour's *al-Riḥla: Ayyām Ṭāliba Miṣriyya fī Amrīkā* [The Journey: Memoirs of an Egyptian Woman Student in America] (1983), Sonallah Ibrahim's *Amrīkanlī* (2003), Alaa El Aswany 's *Chicago* (2007), and Miral El Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* (2010), to mention a few, have explored the complexity of the cultural encounter between Egyptians and Americans. Written in the time frame when the American Dream and the American Empire were alluring to many and American Imperialism was at its peak, these works, all in Arabic, reflected the continuous love-hate relationship between Egypt and the U.S.[1]

Decades later, and at a different time frame, two very significant works of art by Egyptian American writers appeared: Noor Naga's novel, *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* (2022), and Yussef El Guindi's play, *Hotter than Egypt* (2022). Both texts delve into the complexities of relationships and power dynamics, set against the backdrop of post-Arab Spring Egypt, reversing the perspective where the Egyptian is at home referencing a particular historical point of pride and power, the 25th of January Revolution, while the American is the foreigner. Whereas in Naga's novel the 'American' is really an Arab-American coming home to discover her roots, in El Guindy's the Americans are White American tourists, nonetheless their encounter with chaotic Cairo is similar, both come to Egypt with their preset conceptions of Egypt and Egyptians to only encounter the realities of the Egyptians' "lived experience" (Bhambra 2015). Instead of the typical stereotypes of the wealthy American and the American Dream-aspiring Egyptian, we see shifting power dynamics that go beyond attempting to come to terms with each other despite cultural differences; we get to see the articulation of the differences, the misunderstandings, and cultural collision. Both texts illustrate the disparities

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Cairo Studies in English – 2024(2): 61–78. https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/
DOI: 10.21608/cse.2024.321161.1190

in cross-cultural communication and deconstruct the colonial assumption of "universal values" and white supremacy. Using Aníbal Quijano's words, these texts accomplish "epistemological decolonization," where the "inter-cultural communication is an exchange of experiences and meanings" based on "another rationality that can legitimately claim some universality" (quoted in Mignolo 2018, 116).

As Edward Said has noted, we cannot approach a literary text without delving into "the connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies and events. The realities of power and authority as well as the resistances" (1983, 5). Accordingly, using the theory of connected sociologies that focuses on the "lived experience" as a foundation for the reading of these texts, avails a decolonial reading that interrogates the Orient/Occident divide to unsettle the concept of the 'universal' and deconstruct the complacent rendering of the 'native' as passive and docile.

This paper will show how the two works are "an argument for the reconstruction of concepts and the reinterpretation of histories in the light of that reconstruction." It analyzes the power dynamics between Egypt and the U.S. as exemplified by the characters in the two texts as well as the shifting shapes of power, to provide an understanding that is "less interpretive, but more adequate in explaining the conditions of events in their own terms and in relation to wider interconnections. … of human beings and human experience in global context" (Bhambra 2014, 121–122).

Connected Sociologies

As articulated by Gurminder K. Bhambra connected sociologies as an approach calls for "the reconceptualization of social interaction as models for transnational understanding of disparate cultural systems whose analysis requires the retrieval of forgotten histories to create the imagination of new geographies" (2014, x). Attempting to overcome the 'Eurocentric' constructions of modernity and pushing forward Anibal Quijano's concept of "the re-construction and the restitution of silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternized knowledges and languages" (Mignolo 2007, 451), and rejection of the (self-proclaimed) epistemic superiority of the West, Bhambra proposes 'connected sociologies.' This approach is "built on postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Eurocentrism as a better way of understanding" and argues for "the necessity of rearticulating understandings of modernity from other geographical locations" connecting to "a location in the world . . . starting from a history that enabled that location to be part of the world; identifying and explicating the connections that enable understandings always to be more expansive than the identities or events they are seeking to explain" (Bhambra 2015).

Connected sociologies is skeptical and critical of Western claims to knowledge and understanding, and "challenges the separation of areas of consciousness from real human activities and power relations." It is an approach that recognizes the plurality of possible interpretations and understanding/misunderstandings, "whereby understandings are reconstructed as a consequence of the significant new connections identified" (Bhambra 2014, 5).

The Egyptian Revolution

The Egyptian revolution of January 25, 2011, was a transformative moment in the history of Egypt and its relations with the U.S. It was a moment that announced the birth of the new Egyptian. It was a moment when, not only did Egyptians claim their supremacy, but also the whole world acknowledged it. As Hamid Dabashi puts it, it was the end of postcolonialism as it was a means to "recovering … the cosmopolitan worldliness in which alternative notions and practices of civil liberties and economic justice can and ought to be produced" (2012, 41). It brought with it a renewed sense of interest in Egypt and fervent nationalism. As Bhambra puts it, it was a moment in "history that enabled" Egypt "to be part of the world" (2014, 156).

However, the short-lived euphoria of the Arab Spring has metamorphosed into the harsh reality of the "Arab Winter." Although these uprisings were once seen as a global emblem for justice and change, political changes that occurred failed to respond to the aspirations of the people who had protested against their leaders. The initial waves have mostly been crushed, leaving behind a prevailing sense of disillusionment.

This is significant not only because the two texts reference the 25th of January Revolution and are set in the post revolution disillusionment moment, but also because to my mind this also reflects the power dynamic between Egypt and the U.S. The "love-hate" aspect of the relationship between Egypt and the U.S. which captures the nuanced nature of the interactions between the characters in both texts.

If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English

Noor Naga's novel *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English* (2022) is about an unnamed Egyptian American woman "the American" who goes to Egypt in search of her roots and meets an unnamed poor Egyptian man "the boy from Shobrakheit" who leaves his small village and escapes from his distressing past to Cairo. They get entangled in an abusive relationship that ends with the poor boy's death.

Though this is the basic storyline, the novel examines the complexities of power dynamics within interpersonal relationships, that are influenced by cultural, economic, and gender disparities. The relationship between the

characters is marked by power imbalances that manifest in various forms of desire, violence, and manipulation.

Noor Naga presents her two characters by juxtaposing them to one another with short excerpts that illuminate the characters' positionality and, hence, control and power. Starting with each character's journey to Cairo, the contrast between the two characters is established. The extreme poverty sets the boy from Shobrakheit[2] in contrast to the American girl who comes from an aristocratic Cairene family. Not only that they belong to different cultures and social classes, but even their physicality is different: while she is "the girl with the shaved head," he has long hair. The contrast is enforced by the fact that he is doubly removed from privilege, being a poor, unemployed rural boy, as opposed to the privileged American girl.

> You live in America? Have American passport? Do you know what people here would give for an American passport? We are all trying to leave and you have the option to be there but instead—why are you here? (Naga 2022,15)

The simple fact that she "has an American passport" sets her off as privileged. To many, as expressed several times in the text, she is the embodiment of the American Dream which many Egyptians aspire for. So, if we consider the two on the continuum of power and privilege, the American will outdo the boy from Shobrakheit. Nonetheless, this powerless Egyptian is what the girl yearns for. That is, whereas the American girl was yearning to be part of the making of history, the boy from Shobrakheit is the representation of history.

Like many Egyptians in the diaspora who returned to Egypt after the revolution, the "American" went to Egypt aspiring to find her roots and be part of the new history that is being created. Several studies have shown how motivated by the great hope of a new Egypt many migrants left their lives abroad in order to participate in the revolution and be part of the country's reconstruction (Premazzi et al. 2013). Delphine Pagès-El Karoui argues that "during an initial period, the revolutionary process intensified emigrants' transnational practices and perhaps briefly initiated a process of 'diasporization,'" however, this feeling disappeared quickly due to the post-revolution political conditions in Egypt (2015).

To the American, Egypt was a homecoming, even though her shaved head and broken Arabic set her out as a foreigner when the passport control officer asked her "How long you stay? I tried to tell him I was staying for good. Six months, okay? he asked, and I nodded because his English was poor but my Arabic was poorer" (Naga 2022, 10). So, with a six-month tourist visa on her American passport, she steps into her "imagined" Egypt, ignoring all the signs

of her alienation, though the difference of her context and people's reactions towards her start off the novel:

> If I was a white girl with a shaved head, they probably wouldn't have cared. But because I was an Egyptian girl with a shaved head, they wouldn't let me forget it. (Naga 2022, 9)

According to Saroja Mandal "The notion of 'home' in the Diasporic imagination is ambiguous. It is a subjective imagination of the displaced individual. Home in the diasporic study raises the question of identity and belongingness of the displaced self, [which] triggers the 'homing desire' and an urge to return" (2021, 155).

It is worthy to note that Shobrakheit is a pharaonic name meaning "the northern fields." That is, the boy from Shobrakheit carries the glorious pharaonic past. He is "the old fashioned and proud and poor Egyptian," that participated in the Egyptian Revolution, from which he gains power over the American. He states,

> It had never happened before that the global epicentre tipped in our direction. Suddenly America was watching us. In its gaze we became a collective: demonstrative, intentional. We wanted to show them who we were. (Naga 2022)

Though the need for validation from America and the American is evident in the above quote, his deliberation on the Revolution and his involvement in it were his manifestation of power A power that arises from his local personal history "explaining the conditions of events in [his] own terms and in relation to wider interconnections" (Bhambra 2014, 121). Or as the American describes:

> He points out scenes from the revolution as if proving his machismo to me, threading pearls around my neck... Aren't you lucky to be here with me? Who else could tell you these things? No one else will tell you these things. He was right. Who else could get me up to speed? After so many lifetimes of peaceful eating, a nation overturns the dinner table; there is the darling outrage, a newfound entitlement, hope, yes, hope—and then betrayal. (Naga 2022, 76)

On the other hand, the American has "missed it all":

> I missed it entirely. Watched the revolution on television from the comfort of my home on the Upper West Side, a French bulldog on

> my lap. How convenient, then, when all is said and done, to arrive in the riskless aftermath, claiming, Me too, I'm one of you. (Naga 2022, 77)

The question here is, is she really one of us? And another very important question is who are we? Are we the hegemonized people all the same? The romanticized image of home from the diaspora is shattered as the cultural gap between the two leads to the disaster of the boy's death. Nonetheless, the Eurocentric epistemology is replaced by the local knowledge that reconfigures and reconstructs an understanding based on the realities of the local.

The American and the boy from Shobrakheit first encounter at Café Riche[4] in downtown Cairo was the beginning of their tumulus relationship. The power imbalance was obvious he was the misfit in Café Riche, with Reem and Sami her upper-class westernized friends dominating the scene. Yet his weakness stirred sexual fantasies in her mind. The choice of Café Riche is very significant as it frames the American and the people she associates with as a different category from that of the boy from Shobrakheit. The café has a fabled reputation as an enduring landmark of downtown for over an entire century, and a witness to the country's many political upheavals, accommodating the intellectual activity that accompanied all of Egypt's recent historical transformations, making Café Riche the symbol or rather the place of societal, cultural, and political elites. As Osman El Sharnoubi notes,

> Riche doesn't offer a warm welcome to just anyone. It is mainly its regulars, who chiefly belong to Egypt's cultural and intellectual circles, who are offered greetings and possibly even a seat at the shop's rarely occupied inner area, and with no conditions. Others are often told to either order a main course or leave. (Sharnoubi 2015)

However, the fact that Egypt is a classist society is a fact that does not resonate with the American. That is why when Sami turns away four veiled girls wearing "The kinds of clothes worn by the kinds of people who would not be called clean by either Sami or Reem," she misinterprets it as Copts hating Muslims (a common misunderstanding about Egyptian society propagated in the West). This ignorance gives the boy from Shobrakheit power, and he finds it "Adorable" then he explains that, "They don't hate Muslims, they hate the poor" (Naga 2022, 35). An injustice that the American couldn't assent, bringing her closer to the poor boy from Shobrakheit.

> She was from America, rich, obviously, but it seemed she could still be horrified by the wanton exercise of power, and this singled

> her out from the others. I felt somehow that she was on my side. (Naga 2022, 36)

The American's ignorance gives the boy from Shobrakheit a sense of accomplishment as he associates with her and her privilege. In a context that is chaotic and completely different from where she comes from, she needs to feel a sense of belonging, yet not only does her shaved head expose her foreignness but her ignorance of the ways of life.

The power dynamics in the novel are constantly shifting, with no clear answer as to who holds more power at any given moment, exploring how power can shift and evolve between individuals. She feels disempowered by her lack of knowledge of the subtleties of the Egyptian culture. "I'm caught between my desire to understand and my desire to appear as though I already understand" (Naga 2022, 25). Even with Sami and Reem the westernized Egyptians that she can identify with, she remains the stranger, as her ignorance of common Egyptian pop culture gives her away. This maybe the first incident that really a shift of power happens:

> I asked. Reem's and Sami's faces sprang open simultaneously. They blinked. It was the nicest gift I could have given them. I'd never seen two people so horrified with joy. Oh honey, said Reem, as though seeing me properly for the first time. (Naga 2022, 20)

Although she is described as "clean" that is cool and is acknowledged as one of them (Reem and Sami) she loses more power as she is striped of her agency:

> I am outside of my context, confused about where the margins and the pressure points are. Who has the power? Where is the center? . . . I'm confused about my right to offense, just as I'm confused about drinking as an act of resistance. (Naga 2022, 43)

Set in her Western misconceptions, she loses power and becomes the vulnerable rather than the privileged American.

The boy from Shobrakheit, while assuming power over her, becomes her source of power as he educates her about the culture and the socio-political status of Egypt. However, her association with the boy from Shobrakheit widens the cultural gap and increases the intensity of her conflict.

> She was Egyptian enough to wax her arms but American enough to shave her head. She was Egyptian enough to sit at the ahwa under the bridge but American enough to think a silk nightie was appropriate wear at the ahwa under the bridge. She uncrossed her legs when she heard the athan, but then kept them wide at the knees like a truck driver. (Naga 2022, 49)

The American keeps comparing everything in Egypt to things back home asserting the irony of feeling more Egyptian in New York than she does in Egypt. In New York, she "could say Back home, we do it like this, pat our bread flat and round never having patted bread flat or otherwise." Nonetheless, she continues being trapped in a toxic and abusive relationship just to prove to herself that she is indeed Egyptian.

> I puttered about making dinner while he watched YouTube videos in the next room and filled the apartment with clouds of smoke. He didn't offer to help, didn't even glance up as I trailed back and forth with pots and plates, glasses of orange juice I'd hand-squeezed that morning. I would never tolerate this dynamic in New York, but here, somehow, it is harder to speak to. He is punishing me for something, and I am letting him. He is weaponizing all his losses against me, and I am wanting the abuse, or, at the very least, accepting it as mine. After years of claiming Arabness as an excuse for what I am—hairy, hard-boned and dirtskinned, sensual, impulsive, superstitious, nostalgic, full of body-shame and estrangement—I feel I'm earning it at last. The hazing is belated but confusingly sweet. I have a guilt, and the boy from Shobrakheit has an anger. (Naga 2022, 86)

One wonders about the boy's anger. Is it the post-revolution disillusionment or the romantic disillusionment when he perceives their relationship as an anthropological experiment:

> Other times she looks at me with an appetite that is romantic but wrong: Curious, consumptive . . . anthropological? As though she were peering at a moth pinned to a corkboard, shivering, still very much alive. As though she were laying it on her warm tongue, letting it dissolve there. It's her American showing: rolling into my village in a military tank, tossing at my mother's feet three- quarters of an apple she has only peeled with her teeth. (Naga 2022, 72)

Finally believing that "home can't be passed from one body to the next, like a secret whispered in the ear?" She breaks with him and reverts to her Americanness. Starting to date William, who shares her culture and status, where pop culture references are not to the unknown Souad Houseny but to Michael Jackson i.e. where there is a balance of power and understanding:

> I return to English and even my breathing changes, little oh-ohs of ecstasy instead of ah-ahs. For too long I have been that other girl: weak, self-effacing—an obvious American in her fat-tongued, blubbering Arabic, and punished for it. But not anymore. It is in Arabic that lovers murder each other with side tables, and it is in English that they theorize about what it means to be murdered by side table. It is in English that they write about it, grieve and forgive, fuck their equals. (Naga 2022, 119)

However, we know that the boy from Shobrakheit is an Egyptian who cannot Speak English. The shifting power dynamics between the American and the boy from Shobrakheit leads to what Bhambra calls for in Connected Sociologies a “reconstruction of our understanding of social worlds by means of the identification of new connections between events, entities, and people(s)” (2015).

Hotter Than Egypt[3]

Hotter Than Egypt (2022) is a play by Yussef El Guindi about an American couple, Paul and Jean, who go to Egypt for their anniversary only to end up separated after 26 years of marriage. Their Egyptian tour guides, Maha and Seif, who are engaged to be married, become entangled in their marital crisis and simultaneously confront their own relationship challenges. By interweaving the personal and the political, the play offers a unique perspective on the power dynamics not only between the American couple and their Egyptian guides but also between each couple. Set against the backdrop of political and economic turmoil of post Arab Spring Egypt, the play explores several socio-political issues and their cross-cultural implications, touching upon the revolution, colonialism, and cultural patronization.

The play starts off in the middle of an argument pitting Seif and Paul against each other, each embracing a set of cultural values and beliefs that are different from each other. Paul is a great proponent of U.S. values and a stern believer of white supremacy. Not only does he criticize Egyptian politics, but he also criticizes Islam. Seif is convinced that the West and its colonial powers are the source of all evil and embraces an Islamic attitude, making their argument seem like a power duel:

> PAUL: I’m genuinely curious. Has there ever been in history, and maybe there was, any kind of theocracy that worked out well.
> SEIF: But is not your country a great power now?
> PAUL: You mean because of the Puritans?
> SEIF: They started the road for your success, no?

> PAUL: It wasn't the Puritans, it was the revolution of 1776. Throwing the English out and saying "enough", we're not beholden to anybody but ourselves
> SEIF: We share this in common; - this wish.
> PAUL: What wish?
> SEIF: Saying we want to be free. We fight the British too.
> PAUL: But we didn't overthrow one tyranny to bring in another. (El Guindi 2022, 1)

Paul assumes power based on his own perception of western superiority while Seif also has his conception of American imperialism and to be defensive to avoid feeling exposed or vulnerable and feels the need to defend his self-worth and beliefs that are being challenged by Paul. Each of the two characters seems to symbolize a socio-cultural category, whereas Paul symbolizes American imperialism and domination, Seif represents the Islamic resistance to what is referred to as "Western intrusion" that disrupts Islamic society. Saad Eddine Ibrahim notes that "adhering to Islamic teaching sometimes is the only means of resistance" (1988, 655–656). Nonetheless, if the situation is considered from a hierarchical notion of power, where power is understood as the capability of an individual to exert their will over others, Seif's power is downplayed. Not only does Maha continue to shut him down, but she also constantly reminds him that "We don't argue with tourists, we entertain them" (El Guindi 2022, 3).

Paul, the rich American man assumes power over Seif, not just because Seif is working for him, but also because he seems to embrace this sense of entitlement stemming from the mere fact that he represents white supremacy. For Seif the American tourist embodies the American superpower, imperialism, and neo-colonialism that he must overcome to assert his own power. His resentment of them becomes a source of empowerment, fueling his attempts to belittle them. Revealing his stereotypical view of a culture where women must be covered, Paul reprimands Jean for walking in her bikini, disguising his chauvinism as cultural sensitivity:

> PAUL: I'm just trying to be considerate of the customs here.
> JEAN: You act like I've walked in naked.
> PAUL: To the locals this is naked. (El Guindi 2022, 6)

He speaks from a position of power where his opinion on Islam and Egyptian culture, his superficial attempts at respecting the culture serves only to validate his Wester culture imbuing it with superiority and power over the locals. An orientalist attitude, in the sense of "Imagined geographies"[5] where "representations of other places . . . articulate the desires, fantasies" and

become “a tool of power, of a means of controlling and subordinating” giving himself “the right to objectify” the locals (Gregory et al. 2009, 369–370).

> PAUL: I don’t agree with this covering-up sham either; but I do know how they react here. Seeing a woman half naked . . . You just can’t be yourself here” (El Guindi 2022, 6)

Though Paul cannot really be seen as the “ugly American,”[6] yet he defiantly holds the moral geography of the Orient, that is “exotic but inferior” the “other” is weak and fanatical the exact opposite of the West civilized, dynamic and needless to say superior.

Seif, aware of Paul’s Orientalist perception manipulates Paul by striking on his deepest fears, that is, Islam. According to Zareena Grewal, today the Muslim world, which is consistently confused with the Middle East, “figures as a place and an idea that is strategically important to the U.S. despite being, in the eyes of most Americans regressive, dangerous and distant, both geographically and culturally” (2013, 6). It is worthy to note that research on the perception of the West to Muslims and vice versa concluded that “Many in the West see Muslims as fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance. Meanwhile, Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see Westerners as selfish, immoral and greedy – as well as violent and fanatical” (Pew Research Center 2006). Pretending to be religious i.e., confronting Paul with his deepest fears Islam as perceived in the Western imagination, he explains to Maha that he “was making fun of his fears. This panic they have of our religion is too much” (El Guindi 2022, 10). Seif is not the docile native either. He does not conceal his resentment to Western imperialism and continues blaming the Americans as if he is taking all his frustrations on them:

> SEIF: Why not be shown around by someone who shows contempt for you. Who insults you for your country’s imperialism or past colonialism. Hire us and we’ll tell you why you should feel guilty if you don’t already, while exploring Egypt. Some tourists are very politically savvy that way. (El Guindi 2022, 8)

Another major cultural misunderstanding that surfaces in the play is the place of women in Islamic culture. The above-mentioned research has found that “The chasm between Muslims and the West is also seen in judgments about how the other civilization treats women. Western publics, by lopsided margins, do not think of Muslims as “respectful of women.” (Pew Research Center 2006). This attitude is exposed when Paul starts arguing with Seif about Maha. Ignoring the fact that we see Seif as a supportive partner trying to support Maha to peruse her dream, yet Paul, besides his continuous gaslighting

of his wife Jean, sees himself the savior he will save Maha from this backward man:

> PAUL: Mind you I don't blame you. The way women are treated here I'd be worried myself if my wife went out alone every day.
> SEIF: The women in your country don't hear rude things on the street?
> PAUL: They do. But – outsider's opinion, I feel if there weren't so many Egyptian police around, all kinds of pent up stuff would be let loose.
> SEIF: Of course there are rude men here with no morals, but we are not wild people.
> PAUL: I didn't think that at all. Not even close. I'm just a big believer in - a big booster of personal freedoms. Which doesn't seem to be available to everyone here.
> SEIF: If you mean government, yes, we have problems. But even with America, in everyday life, do you not have rules? You are not free to do whatever you want.
> PAUL: I'm butting in, I know, but when I see talent like Maha's go to waste. There are things about my country that bug me too, so no argument about our own crap. Which is why I'm thinking of running for political office, as a matter of fact. I do feel passionate about our American values and women's rights happen to be at the top of my list. That's all. (El Guindi 2022, 16)

This situation reminds us of Lila Abu-Lughod's study that deconstructs the Western concept that Muslim women need saving (2015) and of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's cynical observation of colonialism where white men save brown women from brown men (2002, 1988) the presumptuousness of superiority and an arrogance that needs to be challenged. But "Maha dreams of leaving Egypt" and he, Paul will fulfil this dream by leaving his wife and eloping with her. That is saving her.

Another glaring contrast between the tourists and the Egyptians is their economic power, posing poverty as Seif and Maha's biggest challenge:

> SEIF: Okay, okay. I'm sorry I'm not a millionaire like these Americans. This is the problem with this job: we entertain people who rub our poverty in our faces.
> Paul escalates his behavior, continuing his criticism of Egyptian/Muslim culture. When Paul, the rich American, challenges Seif further, he responds by asserting his stance.
> SEIF: I think "straightforward" is for people who live with a cushion under their bottom. When you have money you say what

> you want. People with less money must listen. Poor people say what they think rich people want to hear, and they bite their tongue. That is how they survive. (El Gunidi 2022, 15)

The dire economic situation slides Seif down the power scale. Maha is leaving him for the rich American and he seems to be trapped in a futile fight against America and American imperialism. Seif too, in spite of his relentless defense of Egypt and its culture aspires for the American Dream of wealth acknowledging the power of Paul over him

> SEIF: I want this superpower. I want to be an older man with mediocre looks and go up to any young woman and say I love you and suddenly she drops everything and goes with me. Not Superman's power, that power. (El Gunidi 2022, 68)

Exposing his defeat he says,

> SEIF: Egypt feels like a collapsing life boat. And here comes someone inviting you on to an ocean liner. It would be stupid to ignore the opportunity. And I don't know if I can give you the life you deserve. I'd try but - could I? I don't know if I have that gene, or whatever it is that makes some people super successful. And I don't know if that's me, or this country? Or it's this country telling me it's me when it's really their mess.

He is reaching complete disillusionment, losing his sense of pride and power that he derives from ancient Egypt:

> SEIF: It's this country that's crazy town. You, you're making a rational decision. I don't know what century this country lost it, it feels like it's been crazy for years. Maybe it started flipping out with the last Cleopatra. Now there's someone who made bad choices with a foreign. (El Guindi 2022, 69)

This ultimate defeat and frustration are expressed in the following lines:

> SEIF: Who isn't? Being fed up is the air we breathe in this country. Even the rats and cockroaches are fed up: "Where is the high-quality garbage we're used to", I'm sure they're saying - among themselves.

The love hate relationship with America is another prominent theme, all the Egyptian characters we see aspire to be American one way or another. Maha is a case in point, at the beginning of the play, Seif tells her that she is too aligned with the government, yet she just wants to leave, dropping all her plans

and love to go to America, to move away from the margins to the center. When Maha explains her reasons for eloping with Paul, it really has nothing to do with Paul, but rather has to do with Egypt, reflecting this aspiration for the American Dream:

> MAHA: You and me, we're – we're like those frogs boiling in water. We really are. Living here, the way it is, the way it's making us a little crazier each day. With everything a monumental pain in the ass and no fun. Where's the fun? The joy in anything? It's like someone took fun and joy and beat them to death. No: it's like someone told fun and joy to go to some government office and get their identity papers in order. And no one's heard from them since. Lost in bureaucracy. And you don't seem bothered.

However, Seif is portrayed as totally bothered. Before this confrontation with the dire reality of his situation he had expressed his frustration with the country and its politics "sometimes this country makes me want to smash something," (El Guindi 2022, 43) yet he continually asserts his distance from the demonstrators and the revolution, calling them "those idiot protesters outside." Losing hope of gaining power and glory from ancient Egypt, for the first time in the play, he sees the value of the protest and the revolution, maybe in an attempt to substitute his source of power or in search for some hope:

> SEIF: Perhaps I should join them instead of flying off to you. I help stage the next revolution, but this time we win long term because I'll really get involved. I'll help put in place new laws that make everything better, which will make you want to come back and start your fashion empire right here. (El Guindi 2022,71)

Finally, Paul, too, is defeated, as Maha refuses to be saved, and Jean discovers her internal strength and defies his judgment, asserting her beauty as she sails on the Nile and identifies with Egypt.

Even though we do not get the idealist picture of Egypt, but are exposed to its realities of political oppression, class system and poverty, the characters are portrayed as real people in a real place. Unlike *If an Egyptian Cannot Speak English*, we really do not get the crowded dirty streets of Cairo. We only get to see the tourist hotel, the felucca on the Nile and the museum, but it is not the postcard-perfect or the Egyptomania image. Although the setting has all the elements of the exotic touristic scenes of Cairo, these scenes are not presented as exotic but rather they played an important role in alienating the foreigners. Furthermore, the focus on the people and their interactions takes away from the mythical image dressing it with reality disrupting the "imagined geography" of the place.

The interactions do not build cultural bridges or avoid miscommunication and misunderstanding. Nonetheless, the interchangeable power relations, though often skewed, create what Bhambra calls 'new understandings' that arise from 'reconsidering what we previously thought we had known.' These interactions connect different sociologies, which 'are themselves located in time and space, including the time and space of colonialism, empire, and (post)colonialism', reflecting the 'lived experience' of socio-political situations shaped by the tensions of colonialism and its aftermath (2015).

Conclusion

If An Egyptian Cannot Speak English and *Hotter Than Egypt* delve into the complexities of relationships and power dynamics, set against the backdrop of post-Arab Spring Egypt. The two texts depict American characters navigating unfamiliar geopolitical spaces where they are exposed to the multiplicity of Cairenes' lives, their experiences, culture, and knowledge which challenge the insularity of historical narratives, whereas Bhambra puts it "while there might be historically interesting societal and cultural variations, there was not anything to be learnt from the rest of the world, at least not contemporaneously" (*Connected Sociologies* 2014, 8).

If the relationships in the two novels are considered through the lens of the Colonial Matrix of Power, the epistemic delinking was key in challenging the presumed power relations which are maintained through the "construction of the (racial) Other" (Stojnić, 2017, 105). While both the tourists and the American embrace the power of the U.S., maintaining the power of economy, control of gender, authority and knowledge all the pillars of the Colonial Matrix of Power,[7] they are "([d]is)placed in a world of global contacts where communities, economies, and subjectivities constantly cross," (Behdad 1994, 1) and are "no longer naturally 'at home' in the West" (Clifford 1989, 179). Their power "has been destabilized by other locations, contested by other trajectories of subjectivity, and displaced by other forms of knowledge" (Behdad, 1994, 1).

In conclusion, I argue that the cultural encounters as perceived in the two texts reconceptualize these cultural interactions and result in new models of understanding. The actual encounter highlights the need to "consider how what we know is itself framed as knowledge through particular systems of representation . . . [and] question the adequacy of those systems not in terms of their supposed fidelity to what is observed" (Said 1978, 272). While the Americans are blinded by the universal model of modernity, they are confronted with recognizing the plurality of possible modernities and the possibilities of pluriverse.

Notes

1. U.S.-Egypt relations have not been smooth and have been characterized by an ambivalent love/hate relationship where US hegemony and cultural imperialism overshadows Egyptian culture and politics. During the Nasser era (1956 - 1970) the U.S. represented the new imperial power, Egypt sought to overcome. Sadat resumed political relations in 1972 and with the open-door policy transformed Egypt, making the U.S. a friend rather than a foe.
2. Shobrakheit, a poor village in the delta, is known as the hub for magic and sorcery.
3. References are made to unpublished script shared by author. However, the play was recently published by Broadway Play Publishing Incorporated end of 2023.
4. Café Riche was established in 1908 and was named after Paris' famous Grand Café Riche which is still operating today.
5. A concept developed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*.
6. Ugly American" is a stereotype depicting American citizens as exhibiting loud, arrogant, self-absorbed, demeaning, thoughtless, ignorant, and ethnocentric behavior mainly abroad.
7. The colonial matrix of power has four interrelated domains: control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education) and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity).

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