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EAST/WEST CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AS WAR BETWEEN THE SEXES

1. The Cruelties of Migration

Mieke KOLK, Sha’za mustafa

“There is a whole tradition in immigrant fiction”, says Kiran Desai, a young Indian female writer whose intriguing novel The Inheritance of Loss won the 2006 Man-Bookerprize, in a recent interview in Dutch Journal NRC. “The structure of the story is more or less fixed. Departure from the homeland, lots of trouble, arrival in America, Europe, and in the end descriptions how it is to be a ‘Western’. But I realized that I could not tell my story without going back and write about the place I left. I experienced this necessity as a writer but for many migrants it is reality. Suddenly they realize themselves or the second or third generation that half of their story happens somewhere else, that half of their emotional life is missing. Not only as part of the past but also of the present”.

The loss of context, the loss of a surrounding where things which you do and say are understood as ‘natural’, work out in series of mostly traumatic experiences where generation, social class and race are determining factors as different forms of imprisonment in a post/colonial past. In this sense her book reflects the model the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih introduced in 1969 with his first Third World novel about migration: Season of Migration to the North.

Of course there are many differences between the two best-selling books but here I would like to concentrate on an interesting change in perspective, that is the function of gender and sexual relations in both novels.

Like those of Tayeb Salih’s, Kiran Desai’s main characters are male but where Salih re/presents the cultural clash between East and West as a gendered clash, where the hero tries to domesticate the foreign culture by dominating the foreign woman, Desai shifts for her love-interest from a male protagonist to a female, from sexuality to a love theme: a young Indian girl becoming obsessed by her first erotic experiences.

This change seems logic, different times, different positions and different home-lands. I would have left it like this, if not one of my Sudanese (female)
friends had brought a whole series of recent Sudanese migration novels to my attention.


What is surprising is that the male authors of the new novels offer the same kind of oppositional model East/West, Male/Female as Tayeb Salih had done, where Western woman ‘insults’ the Eastern man by her free sexual behaviour which he ‘punishes’ by leaving her for the chaste Sudanese woman at home.

I asked Sha’za Mustafa to concentrate her summary of the essay on
1. the male/female identities and relationships and
2. on the endings of the novel. As we know from literary theory, endings offer the author’s ultimate truth and a solution to the ideological clashes that the text must solve.

From East to the West

The four other novels that deal with the cultural differences between East and West within a larger theme of migration are:

1. Camels do not stop for the Red Light, by Tarik Altayeb, 1999
2. People of the Road, Alkhidir Aaron, 2002
3. Circles of Fear, Ahmed Kair, 2005
4. Do not awake the Ants, Ahmed AlRufaee, 2005

People of the Road deals with the hero Mamoun Said who has left his village in Sudan and traveled to Germany where he has to face the seduction by German women. Circles of Fear tells a love story of a Sudanese diplomat and an American woman. The novel of Tarik Altayeb Camels do not stop for the Red Light is about a young Sudanese man and his adventures among Austrian women (with an encouraging introduction by Tayeb Salih). Do not awake the Ants won a prize in the celebration of Tayeb Salih as author in the autumn of 2005 in Sudan. The novel is about a scientist traveling to London, who shows two states of mind. He lives in London with the mentality of the Sudanese village—where he is born, and while living in the village he looks at life with Western eyes—he always makes criticizing comparisons! In the end he decides to stay in Sudan forever.
All the novels reflect a series of themes concerning the many roots of Sudanese culture: Islamic, Arabic, African and the difficulty to get rid of them while facing the many problems for the young men in the West and the obstacles to adapt to the new cultural surroundings.

When we look at the effect of the Islamic upbringing we see many scenes of the religious culture the young hero’s grew up in. Tayeb Salih’s Mustafa Sa’eed remembers for instance the prayers of his father and when he returns in the end to Sudan he becomes a religious man, attending prayers and helping poor people. The African roots are reflected by the fact that most of the main characters are black men. The American heroine Suzanne in Circles of Fear describes her Sudanese lover Khalid as the black guy. Khalid himself writes to his friend in Sudan a long letter in which he connects being black with Slave Trade, Racial Discrimination, Demonstrations for Civil Rights etc.

While in England, Mustafa Sa’eed of Season of Migration tells that his girlfriend Isabella thinks that he is a primitive creature, naked, holding an arrow, catching elephants and lions in the forest. She tells him also that he looks like someone who eats human flesh. Mustafa’s professor in Oxford does not hide his feelings towards him while saying: in spok of all our efforts to civilize you, you still act as if you comes from the forest.

In Germany, Mamoun Saida’s girlfriend in the novel People of the Road sees him as African, dark coloured/burned by the sun. When she is angry she shouts at him: You the black wicked son of the Negro. In Austria hero Tarik is considered mostly as the product of Africa, its forests, its poverty. Girlfriend Gaby cannot hide her surprise that he is also intelligent and able to learning the language very quickly.

What is the answer of the Sudanese towards these cultural prejudices they are faced with, that are concentrating on the colour of their skin and their background ‘in the jungle’?

Some act in the way the other see them, like Mustaf Sa’eed who had sex with four women, and promised to marry them. Three killed themselves and he killed his wife. But in the four other novels the men behave better, maybe as an effect of their Islamic upbringing.

In the USA, hero Khalid has just one woman, Suzanne. When she asks him: Will you leave me, he denies: no other woman will be in my life, you are my only
love, the first and the last love. Khalid prefers talking about politics to having sex. He spends hours talking about Palestine, Iraq, Arab politics and differences between their cultures. Most of the times it is Suzanne who says: Let us go to bed. In Austria, Tarik is too shy to get a girl, and if so, it is mostly the girl who takes the initiative by inviting him to her home for just ‘a cup of coffee’: “I stood up, surprised, amazed, she holds my hand and I was walking with her as a lost boy searching for his parents.” And Mamoun in Germany refuses all attempts of the German women and when he feels desire uprising he asks God’s forgiveness and leaves quickly: “It is great to live as a good strong man, in an angel’s way in the country of Satan”!

In the end

All the novels show Sudanese males who are unable to integrate in Western culture and prefer to go back to their native country.

Khalid in Do not awake us leaves the USA when Suzanne wants to marry him and his sister wants him to marry a friend, saying to him: “the country of the Western people made you a Western man”. Our hero dies in an explosion. The open ending saves him from making the ultimate choice. In the same way Mustafa Sa’eed returns home to a village on the Nile, marries a rural woman but is no longer able to overcome his problems, he disappears while swimming in the Nile.

Mamoun in Camels do not stop… also returns from Germany to his village and marries a woman there. He becomes a businessman traveling up and down and permits himself a love affair in Germany.

Muhammed Ali Salih ends his article with this comment:

In the beginning of the 21st century we might expect new novels from the new generations and a hero who travels to the West, adapts with its culture, and marries one of its women “if they want to do so”. It should be a hero who keeps to his culture, is proud of his Islamic religion, Arabic culture, and the African colour! Maybe one of those novels will carry in the title some reference to “be with them”, according to the American proverb ‘if you cannot beat them, join them!”.