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Interrogating Identity in Lahsen Benaziza's *The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller*

Dr. Rachid Toumi

Professor of English, Ibn Zohr University, Morocco

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of identity in Lahsen Benaziza's debut novel, titled The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller. It uses postcolonialism as a reading strategy to focus on the novel's dramatization of the legacy of the colonialist encounter and the impact of discrimination on subjectivity-formation in a historical context still burdened by the colonial past. It explores the compelling ways in which this piece of postcolonial writing reconstructs personal identity and achieves narrative authority in a hybrid text narrated from the point of view of the marginalized Other. In its appreciation of the novel's filtration of cultural narrative through the medium of expatriation, the paper refers to the works of Ernest Hemingway, James Baldwin, and Tayeb Salih to bring into view how Lahsen Benaziza shares with these classic writers the artistic sensibility that uses exilic space as a paradigm for personal experience and as a laboratory for intellectual action.

One of the achievements of Lahsen Benaziza in his *The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller* is his proper and sustained situating of the novel in the context of colonization and imperialism. The artwork of this narrative location is as impressive as any piece of best-known postcolonial creative writing in dramatizing and tracing significant intersections in the lives of marginalized subjects, as these episodes intertwine with the larger recent past; notably, colonialism, the post-war period, decolonization, and the post-colonial era. The novelist's well-wrought embedding of the unique experiences of fully-fledged and memorable fictional protagonists in actual history as well as the centrality of personal experience to his literary imagination are indeed characteristic of classic literature. Mesmerizing, *Splendid* is a novel soaked in blood and tempered with humor and the counterpoint between fact and fiction in a postcolonial drama as disquieting as Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to name only a few.

Benaziza's semi-autobiography follows the tremendous and tumultuous life story of Ayoub Benaissa, a Moroccan ex-professor of English literature. Although infirm, traumatized, and impoverished, Ayoub gets into the habit, and endures the hardship, of going to the airport each Saturday all the way from Benslimane to Casablanca, as "he got into his head the crazy idea of travelling" (316). The reader's expectation is blocked when they learn that the airport is his last destination. Restlessly moving between the departure and the arrival areas and careful not to attract attention to his ghostly presence, this

eccentric character, "a habitué of the airport" (205), scribbles down in his notebook important stations in his life as he 'travels' through memory.

Employing modernist narrative techniques such as flashback and the stream of consciousness to develop plot and probe psychological depth, the novel incrementally pieces together, with a powerful cumulative effect, the shattered pieces of Ayoub's life and his formidable battle to rise above its debris—the legacy of colonization, the exodus from the countryside to the ghetto on the heels of independence, the almost impossible struggle for an education at home and abroad, the desperate search for love, the return of the native, the frustrations with the contradictions of the post-colonial era, the tragic car accident that took the life of his girlfriend, Sheryl, and that took a toll on his health. Ayoub is found dead in the airport, his writing pad stained with his own blood. The legacy of Ayoub is an inscrutable "manuscript" that a fqīh construes as "Demiyatee," an esoteric language of the occult that his 'inheritors' must decode (325). The aesthetics of this narrative scenario share literary modernism's imagination of the dialectics of meaning-making taking place between the writer, the text, and the reader.[1]

The postcolonial contextualization of *Splendid* is immediately established as focus of the novel. It kicks off with Ayoub, through whom the narrative is focalized, and his Canadian girlfriend, Sheryl, engaging in a typical couple's joyful petting. Such intimate moments, however, are short-lived as the question of race and identity pops up and poisons their banter. While Sheryl is characterized as irrevocably entrenched in a type of virulent Eurocentrism disguised as feminism, Ayoub would like to think of himself as a "humanist" who endorses universal human values, universality being something and Westernization being something else. On the other hand, the Oriental man is "crippled" by the colonial past: The inferiority complex instilled in him as the ex-colonized Other has irremediably riddled him with self-doubt (9–11). His attitude toward the West is quite ambivalent: He sees the West as one of the finest civilizations in history as well as one of the nastiest, both enabler and crippler. Benaziza's protagonist is reminiscent of Mustafa Sa'eed, Salih's legendary character in *Season of Migration to the North*, the "noble person whose mind was able to absorb Western civilization but it broke his heart" (33). Yet, unlike Mustafa Sa'eed, the prophet-like Ayoub does not seek revenge in order to heal his wounds. His half-conscious survivalist technique consists primarily of guilt-ridden moments of "dissimulation" as he makes his way along dangerous racial landscapes (217). Ayoub is not a hater; he is a lover and a forgiver who expresses himself through the language of the heart and sees the world through the prism of literature.

The distance and "double perspective" offered by exilic space (Said 60) enable Benaziza to present us in *Splendid* with quite a disinterested postcolonial representation of the West and its Other in a painful self-examination and reconstruction of personal and collective identity.[2] For one thing, the experience of expatriation has increased Ayoub's racial awareness, as he becomes race-conscious following traumatic encounters in a wholly discriminatory social milieu. It was a moment of bewilderment as well as a flash of epiphany for the budding Ayoub when the racist epithet, 'nigger', was hurled at him by a drunken white man in Canada, he who had never thought of himself, not even in the slightest ways, as a black person:

> Once while he was quietly riding a bus […] he suddenly heard a young man hurling racist and xenophobic utterances while fiercely looking at him. It actually took him sometime before he realized that he was the target of the man's racist slurs, for he never thought of himself as a black man, let alone a nigger, a loaded term he abhorred, and that he thought he would encounter only in movies or in African-American Literature or literature in general that deals with racism […] it was like an epiphany:
>
> "That's it, I am Black! Otherwise that fool wouldn't call me a nigger!" (226)

[1]See, Barthes 142–148.

[2]On exile as an "actual" and "metaphorical" condition, see, Said 52.

Tapping the source of culture through such encounters in expatriate space, Ayoub has come to the realization that Whiteness is less a matter of color than an ideological construct rooted in Eurocentric "self-definition" (Morrison 45). In *Splendid*, Benaziza represents Whiteness and Blackness as social constructions tied to innocence and posits identity as a dialectic between self and otherness. In reconstructing his racial identity, Ayoub has come to identify with the Blues tradition and the Slave Sublime (135). Being himself a great "survivor" (133), he has found in the spirit of the Blues the inspiration to counter alienation, a sensibility he shares with Baldwin and Hemingway. In bleeding telling his narrative of healing, he single-handedly makes one last formidable, if not suicidal, attempt to sublimate suffering into art—not unlike Harry in Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" or Sonny in Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues."[3]

In the West's quasi-egalitarian and savagery discourse, Ayoub, once the slaving 'African boy' at home, emerges as the "the equal of a White tramp" abroad (228–229), a complex image that brings into play the trinity of race, class, and sexuality. This sneaky discourse of "Racial progress" (Baldwin, "On Language, Race, and the Black Writer" 143) aims to rationalize the prolongation of the never-ending alleged civilizing mission (Bhabha 82). In America, Ayoub, essentialized in terms of "African depravity" (258), is the intellectual and sexual threat that must be monitored and permanently kept in check in a post-colonial historical context in which paternalism is the order of the day. Being no more than the 'exceptional nigger' in the West's discriminatory representations, he is doomed to bear the brunt of race in a society still rigidly defined by the color line. Ayoub strives to the best of his capacity as a human being and as an intellectual to maintain his integrity in the face of such denigration.

Ayoub is a hybridized intellectual marginality who smoothly and passionately walks a tight rope between indigenous popular culture and European high modernism. Like Professor Mustafa Sa'eed, Salih's "black Englishman" (53), Professor Ayoub Benaissa, Benaziza's "Humphrey Bogart" (137), is gifted with an exceptional creative hybridity. His "radical switch" from *al-aïta* to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is indeed a personal experience his students have no clue to (266–267).[4] For Ayoub, the cultural positionality he occupies depends on preserving critical distance from both Western and native cultures—without being on the wrong side of history. Like the Achebe of *Things Fall Apart*, his examination, while critical of aspects of indigenous culture, is careful not to reproduce colonialist representations that target the underbelly of his society.[5] Similarly, while he cherishes Western literature, he is scathingly critical of the erotica and exotica of writers like Edith Wharton (235–236). Unlike Negritude, Pan-Arabism, and Wahhabism, his representation celebrates aspects of his culture without romanticizing his ancestry.

In Ayoub's subtle and balanced cultural critique, Western society is not always ugly. In his relentless clinical self-examination and cross-cultural speculations, the West's spirit of "tolerance," for instance, is juxtaposed to rigid elements of the East's mores and their consequent duplicity in the management of the social space. To illustrate his social commentary, Ayoub remembers the night he indulged in a drunken revelry with a gorgeous graduate student from the Netherlands at the English Department's lounge in Dalhousie University. Whereas the easy-going *Nasara* witnessed the incident "without making any fuss," some of his people would have made much ado about nothing in a similar situation:

> It would have been severely reprimanded by the university and most likely would have been reported to the authorities […] not to

[3]Holcomb and Scruggs argue that Hemingway's fiction represents for African-American writer, Ralph Ellison, the stoicism needed to confront "existential alienation," an artistic expression the Blues articulates (5).

[4]Baldwin writes that Americans are "children" because they have "no key to the experiences of others" ("The New Lost Generation" 668).

[5]Achebe argues that Armah's *The Beautiful One Are Not Yet Born* is trapped in such a representation ("Africa and Her Writers" 41).

> mention the public scandal, the shame, the finger pointing that would follow such a transgression of morality […] That incident brought to Ayoub's mind a saying, in all likelihood wrongly attributed to *Hadith*, the gist of which is that if your weak nature leads you to sinful acts, at least be discreet by hiding them from others. The saying is probably well-intentioned, but the interpretation given to it in Moroccan society is quite catastrophic. People have come to believe that the virtue lies more in hiding a sin than in not committing it. At least, the equivalent recommendation in European societies not to wash one's dirty linen in public has been questioned and even reviled as a symbol of the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie; whereas, our 'wisdom', as far as Ayoub knew, was not only still given credence by being attributed, and probably wrongly so, to the Prophet, but also by being acted upon with relish and with an astounding hypocrisy in our society. All in all. (247–248)

Ayoub's interrogation of identity through the mediation of expatriation is meant to analyze and "demythologize" cultures by putting them in the context of one another (Miller 124). Like Hemingway, Baldwin, and Salih, Benaziza uses expatriate space—the emotionally-charged and intellectually-stimulating encounters it offers—in a disinterested comparative approach to dramatize transnational cultural dissections through an insider/outsider perspective.[6]

In reconstituting personal identity, Ayoub endeavors to come to terms with himself by transcending the barriers of the colonial legacy. He is trapped in an infernal vision of history seen as "fatality," an existential wound which bedevils his intellectual and cultural project of hybridization and the interrogation of "a new identity" (250–252). The legacy of White Supremacy cuts deep into the psychology of postcolonial relationship, a tenuous dialectic in which the Other, as Frantz Fanon concludes in *Black Skin, White Masks,* maintains a subversive alterity no matter how unspecified its imagination of racial identity is (222). This psychological reaction on the part of the traumatized postcolonial subject is a self-defense mechanism that manifests itself ultimately as a structure of self-preservation. Such an irresolvable psychic conflict, nurtured by persisting exposure to discrimination, has the effect of maintaining the profoundly constitutive moment of alienation that followed the original moment of the traumatic colonialist encounter.

Western culture has become an integral part of Ayoub's being and he drags it behind him across the high seas. He is haunted in the most disquieting ways by Sheryl, the "Canadian apparition," "*poison*" and *poisson* of icy cold North American Arctic Ocean (194). Character as well as symbol, she is the far-off cry that profoundly disturbed the tranquility of his predecessor, Mustafa Sa'eed, in *Season*: The mysterious contagion of "wanderlust" and the insistent 'call' of the country of the West "whose fishes die of the cold" (67; 1). Significantly, the scent of Sheryl's perfume, "*poison*," is evoked in Ayoub's memory in the elegiac imagery of T.S. Eliot, the literati figure whose name is closely associated with European high modernism and with the existential condition of exile, actual and metaphysical. Faced with a growing and gnawing sense of alienation within identity and being tormented by guilt, Ayoub embarks on one last journey to confront the conundrum through the work of memory and through the power of storytelling. For the physically and metaphorically infirm Ayoub, only in writing there is movement, respite, and meaning.[7] Writing becomes then for Benaziza's traumatized protagonist a form of therapy.

Ayoub's work of identity-construction in narrative collapses at a certain point in its progression, perhaps more from physical and emotional exhaustion than from intellectual sophistication. By manipulating narrative details, he 'kills' Sheryl, "his impossible love," in an improbable accident which takes place in a pastoral setting. After all, writing is only writing. His agitated mind evokes the incident in a violent

[6]As Hemingway puts it in his Parisian memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, "Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan (6).

[7]Paul Bowles writes in a 1971 letter: "Only in action is there a possibility of relief, but what action can a writer engage in save writing—that is, what meaningful action? (441).

and fairy tale-like dramatization in what looks like an instinctually-driven attempt at self-exorcism and scriptotherapy. Surely, writing, realistic and fantastic, is Ayoub's last remaining refuge—his Hemingway-like "clean, well-lighted place."[8] He survived the colossal crash by some cosmic miracle; indeed, the man who saved his life is described in terms of a benign divine "angel." A war rages in his bosom between the rational and the emotional, his mind "racing" back and forth reluctantly and ambivalently as he *constructs* this armistice-yearning narrative move (304–307). Ayoub's postcolonial vision posits the intellectualization of the potentiality of the West/East 'wedlock' and its actualization less a *cul-de-sac* than a possibility. "Who knows?" Armed with humanistic knowledge, willpower, and compassion, they might walk hand in hand and rise above their crippling colonial heritage toward a brighter future, Ayoub ruminates at one scene in the airport (250). To Ayoub's dismay, such a longed-for harmonious postcolonial world and new world order is hard to come by both in reality and in fiction.

The elimination of Sheryl from Ayoub's narrative is reminiscent of a similar purgation in Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*. "The prelapsarian state of bliss" in Paradise Valley in *Splendid* (298) and in the Riviera in *Garden* is threatened by difference—racial and sexual. In *Garden*, David takes ultimate refuge in his childhood memories of a bygone Eden-like African world to counter alienation within identity. He replaces his interrupted honeymoon narrative—disrupted by encroaching rampant sexuality—with his African pastoral fiction and its fictionalized masculine identity in which his wife, Catherine, and her world of gendered fluidity have no part to play.[9] Inhabiting that narrative space by David and Ayoub enables them to preserve the semblance of an Eden-like innocence, a mythical sanctuary in which the fragmented self retains its assumed original coherence. Yet, the tragedy of the human condition is that the Fall had already taken place and that the Garden can be remembered only as memory.[10]

In my focus on the metaphorical layering of Ayoub's narrative, I might be reading too much into the accident that took the life of Sheryl—an interpretation the author might not thought of at the time of writing. However, there seems to be no alternative explanation of the scenario of her death within the framework of the postcolonial critical paradigm, the text being primarily a postcolonial novel. The death of Mustafa Sa'eed's mistresses, while narratively plausible, is also metaphorically explained in Salih's postcolonial vision in *Season* in terms of "the germ of a deadly disease that assailed them a thousand years ago" (33). In such an interpretation, the death of Sheryl in Ayoub's narrative account and the murder of Jean Morris by Mustafa Sa'eed in *Season* may metaphorically signify the rift/innocence that divides the West and the East into antagonistic entities. Equally important, at times Ayoub's perception borders on the schizophrenic and the surreal in narrative moments that increasingly blur the fine line between reality and fiction. At one of those episodes, for instance, the real-life Old Veteran is confused with the fictional character, Stetson, in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (176–177). Now, is Sheryl's fate reality or fiction, a calculated narrative move or a memory confusion? This is to say that the author/protagonist narrative positionalities must not be conflated and that the character's needs, motives, and mental capacities may occasionally call into question his reliability—not honesty—as narrator.

By paying homage to literature and by using exilic space as a paradigm for personal experience and for disinterested intellectual action in *The Splendid Life of a Frequent Traveller*, Benaziza places intellectuals and intellectualism in the vanguard in the battle for social and historical change. Ayoub's legacy, an enigmatic literary text dedicated to the wretched souls of the earth, is his last passionate and

[8]In exploring the potential intertextuality between Hemingway's and Toni Morrison's fiction, Holcomb and Scruggs note that in Morrison's *Beloved*, "there is no place of grace, not even Baby Suggs's 'yard,' which Sethe and Baby Suggs both thought was their 'clean, well-lighted Place,' to use Hemingway's well-known term. Like Hemingway, Morrison understood that all forms of refuge are subject to invasion" (17).

[9]See, Toumi, "Locating Innocence in Sexual Difference" 31.

[10]See, Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* 239.

companionate artistic gesture that connects him, in a Blues-like image, to human suffering and the awaited salvation. Such a legacy is meant to empower and set free the Eastern and the Western subjects, both *écorché vifs* (328), by increasing their perception of reality beyond persisting innocence, to use once again a Baldwinian-inspired analysis here. Ayoub's narrative is located in a no-man's-land in the *international* airport where he died—a Hemingway-like removed zone of "separate peace" (*A Farewell to Arms* 217). *Splendid* is a postcolonial novel that restages the initial clash between Europe and its Other and rearticulates the belief that history is not yet ripe for bridging the cultural gap and psychic distance which still exist between the Western and the Eastern worlds. It puts a premium on the role of cross-cultural understanding, communication, and compassion in negotiating difference and interrogating a new postcolonial identity.

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