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From Post-Western to Transcultural Humanism and Return to Literature

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Abstract The article problematizes the still West-centric approach implied in using *post*-Western when referring to humanism and the humanities, advocating in its place the adoption of *trans*cultural. While rejecting any foundationalist/essentialist view of the human and of humanism, it holds worthwhile reflecting on a) the hermeneutical impossibility of pulling ourselves out of our own Western tradition, b) the latter's actual diversity and complexity, and c) its having no copyright on humanism worldwide. Only a transcultural perspective can fully capture the vital role that humanism can still have today in our globalized world. Here literature – particularly by hyphenated authors – leads the way, transcultural humanism being its 'natural' vocation, as here exemplified by drawing on Sudanese-British Leila Aboulela's fiction.

Keywords Post-Western humanism. Transcultural humanism. Transculturality and literature. Postcolonial studies and humanism. Leila Aboulela.

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1 Introduction

Written from the position of a Western scholar grown up and educated in Italy, what follows engages with the sweeping and West-mirroring assumptions entailed in the use of the term *post-Western* when attached to humanism. While keeping firm the vital need and function of critical humanism and the humanities today, it strongly argues in favour of a *transcultural* version of them, which finds a vocational enactment in literature, as exemplified in the final paragraph focussed on Leila Aboulela's narrative.

2 Problematizing the Qualifier *Post-Western*

The semantic inflection given to the qualifier *post-Western* when referred to the humanities is generally taken to mark the cultural decentring of the West and the parallel emergence of new, anti-hegemonic critical perspectives. Furthermore, the 'post-Western humanities' phrase is usually not meant to imply a demise of humanism *per se*, and this is not something to be taken for granted. In the wake of the crimes committed by the self-appointed beacons of civilization, Europe and the West, with the "strip-tease", in Sartrean terms,[1] of their humanistic values obscenely staged by their colonialisms and imperialisms, and with the Holocaust and their other genocides as a most tragic peak of in-humanity, difficulties in defining the human and proclamations of the expiry of Western humanism have come as no surprise. Not surprisingly, too, in this 'liquidation', the equation between Western humanism and humanism tout court has often been passed off as if no other humanist thought had ever surfaced in world history.

However, as adamantly put by D.A. Alderson and R. Spencer "an ethically and politically grounded humanism is still necessary, for we have to have some sense of what a human being is to know when he or she is being degraded and what human agency", no less than dignity and freedom at that, "are when they are denied" (2017, 2). As a matter of fact, ours is a world of globalized assault on humanity, due to an uncharted civilizational crisis dominated by a new solid complicity between savagely neo-liberal and technocratic monopolies disempowering democracy and distributing inequality at an unprecedented rate, a horrifying extended application worldwide of biopolitical practices to the new wretched of the earth – the subaltern humanity made of migrants, refugees, political prisoners,

1 Cf. Sartre 1967, 21, where the phrase "strip-tease of our humanism" is used with reference to French/Western colonial crimes.

economic/sexual slaves, and so on –, a shameless strengthening of neo-imperial ambitions and of neo-nazi and neo-fascist nostalgias, and a rekindling of religious monotheistic fundamentalisms. This brutal and complex scenario thrives on a parallel epistemological crisis fuelled by fake and virtual 'realities' easily exploitable by those powers who are strategically interested in spreading ignorance and uncritical thought.

Therefore, it is difficult to disagree with K. Plummer when he writes that "we now need the highly charged and contested term 'humanity' (or some equivalent) more than ever before" (2021, 4). Not incidentally, through recapturing and firmly relying on the par-excellence humanistic principle of the dignity of man, defenders of humanism take the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserting equal political, social, and economic rights for all human beings regardless of race, colour, religion, and ethnic provenance to ground the ideal of a renewed universal humanism.

As with the political regime of democracy, many of us believe that no matter how fragile and always provisional for its being open to dispute and contestation, an inclusive and non-foundational idea/ideal of humanism can and has to be cultivated. I mean a post-essentialist ideal, accompanied by a totally anti-sovereigntist view of human subjectivity, as in the revisionist framework discussed by I. Chambers in *Culture After Humanism* (2001). This would be a kind of humanism that

> engages with […] the perpetual narrative reconstructions and conflicts over what it means to be human. Ultimately, it does it with the goal of building on these contested understandings to find pathways into better futures and worlds. (Plummer 2021, 5)

When using the phrase 'critical humanism' the immediate reference is E.W. Said and his seminal reflections in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), a collection of lectures governed by the assumption that "it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism" (2004, 10). My mind also goes to that appeal of his, made urgent by his acute awareness of its scarce glamour in the institutional academy at the time he was writing, according to which "humanism is the only and I would go so far as saying the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history" (2003, 878).

Having said that, once granted that the decentring of the West and the still vital need of humanism *per se* may said to be safely implied in post-Western, still my resistance concerning its use lies in the fact that it continues to evoke the ever-haunting ghost of Western narcissism, a monological discourse from the West to the West, post-Western being a qualifier that has still much to do with us, with the

West, rather than with our Others, the non-West. It may reasonably be taken as still flirting with the European tendency "à saisir l'identité non pas tant en termes d'appartenence mutuelle (co-appartenence) à un même monde, qu'en termes de relation du même au même, […] dans son propre miroir" (Mbembe 2015, 10; to understand identity not really in terms of reciprocally belonging (co-belonging) to one world, but in terms of the same's relationship to the same, […] in its own mirror).[2] The tenor of my discourse, here, is very close to B. Robbins' arguing that "when Eurocentric humanism remains the definitive target, the center around which all critique revolves, the perspective remains imperial" (2000, 563).

Whether one takes post-Western as a periodizing term that follows on from the discourse of Western humanism, or as meaning a new epistemological/gnoseological direction, or both, the use of post-Western entails the still Western hypostasis of a linear and uniform view of history and of cultural development untouched by 'other' influences. And in both cases the evoked image is that of a passing on of the sceptre or, even more radically, of a disposing of Western humanism, which presses for a blunt question: shall we throw away the baby with the bathwater? More decisively, do we really believe that this could be possible, just a matter of choice, or is it not the case that we would find ourselves in Münchausen's predicament without having access to his self-sufficient magic solution? In fact, this appears a historically impossible option, not only for us, the direct inheritors of Western humanism – but also for all those Others who have been involved in (or tainted by) our hegemonic culture. And the reasons of this impossibility are more than one.

Firstly, our own culture is not something superimposed on us, a clothing we can decide to take on and off, or to totally dismiss, all the while maintaining a naked/natural body, a sort of cultural tabula rasa from which to re-start. We have grown into it, into a history of interpretations, from generation to generation. It is our cultural skin, we cannot peel it off. We can, certainly, react to or modify it, but we can never act independently of it. In H.G. Gadamer's hermeneutical terms (2013, Part II, ch. 2) nobody sees from nowhere, we are always and already situated in history and our existential condition is hermeneutic in the sense that it is made of 'prejudices', i.e. pre-judgements that arise first from the intellectual/cultural traditions in which we have been formed and then, from the needs of our current historical situation.

Perhaps, the modifier *post-* might be more profitably replaced by the adverb *beyond*, which can evoke the double action of keeping our

2 The translations from French into English given in the present article are by the Author.

'good' prejudices while being able to enlarge and open them to the influence of others' prejudices. If post- is liable to suggest horizontal uniformity, beyond is able to evoke an un-limited space open to creation/invention. Transposing Levinas' humanistic grammar of the Other, one might replace the "for-himself" Western subject, all absorbed in "persisting in its Being", and not only imagine, but also practice an Other humanism, one beyond the West, in which the Western Ego "goes out to Others in a way that compromises the sovereign identification with itself", in a way that challenges and "empties it of itself" by showing it "ever new resources", by "nourishing it with new hungers" (2006, 29-30).

Secondly: which Western humanism are we talking about? I am asking because, as effectively put by Halliwell and Mousley, "humanism has been tied up, packaged and streamlined by some anti-humanists in such a way as to negate its actual diversity" (2003, 3). More straightforwardly, "[i]ts history has been crassly simplified and its meanings homogenized, by wave upon wave of anti-humanist thinking that has swept the academy since the 1960's" (Wayne, Leslie 2017, VI). In these waves, it must be said, one should also include some post-structuralist modes of postcolonial thinking that, in their "almost complete reliance on the Western tradition of anti-humanist critique of metaphysics" have paradoxically shared in the latter's "obsessively self-centred" questions (Hassan 2002, 51). However, at the beginning of the new millennium Robbins could write that "a universalistic and humanistic impulse […] has gradually emerged within cultural studies generally and postcolonial studies in particular" though "that was slow to be perceived as such because of the prevailing anti-humanism" (2000, 567), and though, according to Spencer's less optimistic view, this partial rehabilitation "has not gone very far at all" (2017, 122). Yet, not only has Western humanism been a crucial weapon in the arsenal of anticolonial thought and movements in the 1950's and 1960's, but paradoxically, this lukewarm, when not repudiating, posture towards it in postcolonial theory and criticism has often been countered by its explicit, creative re-appropriation on the part of postcolonial authors (of Mphahlele, Bessie Head, Soyinka, or Walcott – to name just a few). And while in Europe poststructuralists were decrying the death of the subject and practicing their deconstructive projects, African, Caribbean and, broadly, non-Western intellectuals were fully concerned with "building an epistemology able to create, debate and negotiate subjectivity and humanity" (Marzagora 2016, 170).

So, the contention is that one should be aware of the need to have a pluralized view of the cultural phenomenon historically known as Western humanism, which, from Antiquity to the present age, has allowed for various, sometimes contrasting, traditions in it that, taken together, forbid a monolithic perspective. Renaissance humanism, to

take its most iconic expression, was never a single strand of thought, but from the start was compounded by different, often dissonant languages that have given a dialectical, dramatic imprinting to their co-existence, as unrelentingly discussed by Eugenio Garin. More importantly, of the various streams compounding the tradition of Western humanities, not all of them were essentialist and Eurocentric.

The Enlightenment itself was a much more complex intellectual and political experience with respect to the summary trials it has and still is often undergoing. A profitable reading against the prevalent demonizing views of its project, especially but not exclusively by anti-humanists, is provided by political philosopher Sankar Methu, who, in his remarkable study *Enlightenment Against Empire*, significantly endorsed by T. Todorov, persuasively deals with the historical and philosophical distinctiveness of Enlightenment anti-imperialist political thought thanks to a number of prominent European thinkers that, in the late eighteenth century, "attacked imperialism, not only defending non-European people against the abuses of European imperial rule, as some earlier modern thinkers had done, but also challenging the idea that Europeans had any right to subjugate, colonize, and 'civilize' the rest of the world" in the name of their alleged cultural superiority (2003, 1). Methu devotes persuasively informed pages to demonstrating the analytical and nuanced arguments about human nature, cultural diversity and cross-cultural moral judgements put forth in particular by Diderot, Herder, and Kant.

Admittedly, defences of Empire were prevalent at that time, but this should not prevent us from counter-intuitively reminding ourselves that besides the Gobineaus there were also the Voltaires, from realizing, that is, that the Enlightenment was "unique not because of the absence of imperialist arguments, but rather due to the presence of spirited attacks upon the foundations of empire" (2003, 4), which, as solidly evidenced by Methu's study, will have no equivalent up to the first half of the twentieth century. "It is high time, then", the Indian scholar asserts, "that we pluralize our understanding of the 'Enlightenment' both for reasons of historical accuracy and because, in doing so, otherwise hidden or understudied moments of Enlightenment-era thinking will come to light" (264). Symptomatically, his cautioning against Western anti-humanist theory's sweeping demonization of Enlightenment has been voiced by non-Western postcolonial thinkers such as Aijaz Ahmad, who clearly saw the danger of its "reactionary" use (1996, 279). The same, I contend, should apply to our view of Western humanism, without losing sight, of course, of its false consciousness and of its no longer tenable prejudices. As emphasized by Said, "attacking the abuses of something is not the same thing as dismissing or entirely destroying the thing. […] it has been the abuse of humanism that discredits some

of humanism's practitioners without discrediting humanism itself" (2004, 13).

Paradoxically, but only at first sight, this very objection is lucidly and vigorously levelled by the African philosopher Olúfémi Táíwo at that specific politics of linguistic and cultural decolonization in the global South which is driven by a total, indiscriminate hostility towards everything 'tarred' with colonial auspices. This 'sanitizing' policy, he observes, ends up with rejecting most influential African thinkers and writers as inauthentic, thus losing a crucial component of cultural history and, ironically, denying history and agency to Africa. His focus is on "how indigenous genius has taken hold of and turned to their own purposes various material and ideational artefacts that were parts of their lives before, during and after colonialism" (2022, 8-9), all the while maintaining that not being able to see colonialism as *one*, if prominent and long-lasting, "episode" rather than as *the* totalizing experience of African history is continuing to play the Eurocentric game. More broadly, one may add, when colonialism is assumed as *the* defining experience in the history of non-Western countries, this cannot but qualify the use of *post-colonial* as intrinsically Eurocentric, the term *post-* "reducing the cultures of peoples beyond colonialism to prepositional time […], to a Eurocentered epoch that is over (post-), or not yet (pre-)" (McClintock 1992, 86).

Crucially, Táíwo wonders whether and how it can be possible to define, single out and separate the "conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought" (93). And, commenting on these radical theorists' efforts at "making clear what these African thought systems were like before colonialism superimposed foreign categories on them", he observes how "quite wolly these grand claims […] turn out to be […] once we begin to deconstruct them" (93-4). The fact is that, for African thought, "foreign categories of thought are diverse, multiple and dynamic […]. Additionally, the realities upon which colonialism imposed itself were not uniform" (93).

Táíwo's provocative challenge ("decolonize this!") is particularly effective when he asks where exactly iconic African thinkers or authors like Fanon, for example, the champion of third-world thought who turned to his purposes what was valuable in Western thinkers like Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, Freud, or Sartre, should be put in this "anti-Euro-modernity" battle. Furthermore, he adds, Fanon does not spare serious indictments of endogenous practices.[3] The regressive

3 Which is what, on the contrary, often characterizes the kind of "philanthropic orientation" A.F. Mufti envisions in the post-secularist attitude towards its others of "the postcolonial liberal Western subject", who, when facing most aberrant practices

abyss of nativism, in particular, is something Fanon, as much as Cabral, Senghor or Césaire, were vociferously warning against, and with all of them commitment to a new humanism was unmistakable. They knew that, in Táíwo's own words, "transforming the struggle against colonialism into a call for renouncing any aspect of the cultural, social, political, or scientific life of the colonizer would be to give up on the oneness of humanity", and they knew that "hybridity is the very core of human civilization" (63).

Táíwo also firmly objects to the demonization of universalism, since to abandon any possibility of thinking the universal because of the *false* universalism of European colonialist ideologies, or, as put by Ghanaian political philosopher Ato Sekyi-Otu, "to abjure universalism *tout court* because of imperialism, Eurocentric and discriminatory auspices of certain versions […] is the last word of the imperial act" (2019, 14). Here one might usefully approach this objection by retrieving the internationalistic and universalistic vocation of Fanon's humanism. In fact, as underlined by P.K. Nayar,

> [i]t is significant that Fanon, for all his rootedness in Algeria and Africa, is emphatic about the need to address universals. This universalism stems from a particular humanist component of his thought. Fanon's humanism is the solidarity with the world's suffering, irrespective of race, colour or geography.[4]

In a way, Táíwo and Sekyi-Otu are posing my very objection from a reversed position, with a warning against a dangerous demolishing of universalism tout court. It is the abstract universalism entropically and exclusively defined on the basis of Western paradigms that deserves being rejected and replaced by that kind of concrete universalism feeding on plurality invoked by Mbembe in the wake of Césaire and Senghor:

> Affirmer que le monde ne se réduit pas à l'Europe, c'est réhabiliter la singularité et la différence. En cela, et quoi que l'on ait dit, Césaire est très proche de Senghor. Tous les deux récusent les visions abstraites de l'universel. Ils font valoir que l'universel se décline toujours dans le registre de la singularité. À leurs yeux, l'universel est précisément le lieu d'une multiplicité de singularités

or beliefs from the Western standpoint, "criticiz[es] the latter for failing to understand the apparently aberrant instead on its own, internal terms and for harbouring toward it the imperial intention of annihilation" (2013, 16). I owe this source reference to the useful suggestion of my reviewer.

4 Opportunely, Nayar then connects Fanon's brand of humanist universalism with Gilroy's "strategic universalism", a future-oriented, "planetary" humanism dispensing with the categories of race, sex, class (Gilroy 2000, 327-58).

> dont chacune n'est que ce qu'elle est, c'est-à-dire dans ce qui la relie et la sépare d'autres singularités. (2015, 228)
>
> To say that the world is not reducible to Europe means to rehabilitate singularity and difference. In this, whatever one may say, Césaire was very close to Senghor. Both of them reject the abstract views of the universal. They assert that the universal is always inflected in the modes of singularity. To them, the universal is the very place of a multiplicity of singularities each of which is but what it is, that is in what links it to and separates it from other singularities.

This is certainly not the kind of relativist and tolerant multiculturalism that turns out to be politically easy but too weak for the dire times we are living in: a non-committal posture masking ethical indifference and, sometimes, cultural ignorance. Neither is it the globalized "hyperculture" denounced by B.-C. Han (2023), the exotic spatio-temporal assemblage of disparate cultural forms put together with scarce or inexistent historical awareness and respect for differences – the "supermarket of cultures" for today's curious "hypercultural tourists".

A third reason for resisting the use of post-Western is that one should also be cautiously aware of the fact that the phrase post-Western also subsumes an identitarian purity in the cultural heritage that is being given as overcome which is historically questionable, the West having no copyright on humanism[5] –as well as on barbarity, at that – and having reciprocally drawn from the humanisms of other civilizations. Philological, literary, historical, anthropological researches should have made clear, by now, that "too much is known about other traditions, to believe that even humanism itself is exclusively a Western practice" (Said 2004, 54). To exemplify, Said recalls the achievements of scholars like the Arabist and Islamist G. Makdisi, and of the historian and Greek scholar Martin Bernal in order to underline the important Islamic and African contributions to the composition of Western humanism. Facing the complex interweaving of European and non-European cultures – a fascinating, rich complexity inevitably dispelling any essentialist and identitarian picture of cultures – he comes to this heartfelt reproach:

5 Humanist-like thinking has traditions across continents and cultures for over 2.500 years. For instance, Buddhism and Confucianism have had skeptical currents of their own. Other examples are, in India, the ancient Ajnāna philosophy of radical heterodoxy and the Lakāyata school of philosophical materialism, and, in Africa, the West-African Akan philosophy (dating from the thirteenth century) and the Southern African Ubuntu philosophy.

> When will we stop allowing ourselves to think of humanism as a form of smugness and not as an unsettling adventure in difference, in alternative traditions, in texts that need a new deciphering within a much wider context than has hitherto been given them? (55)

Readers must have certainly recognized the idiolect of Said's "critical humanism", defined not as

> a way of consolidating and affirming what 'we' have always known and felt, but rather as a means of questioning, upsetting and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritical codified certainties, including those contained in the masterpieces herded under the rubric of the 'classics'. (28)

Significantly, it is meant as a *worldly* humanism, plunged in "the real historical world from whose circumstances none of us can in fact ever be separated, not even in theory" (48) – in this globalized world in which "to some extent we are all outsiders and, to a slightly lesser but almost equal extent, insiders simultaneously" (48).

Said's latter paradox means something close to what the Arabic-Islamic philosopher Fathi Triki means when he holds that in order to live within and with cultural diversity it is necessary to be prepared for a "dialogue transculturel" (2010, 20; transcultural dialogue), "prêt à une pensée hétérologique […] prêt à penser à partir de l'autre, à s'engager, à inclure l'altérité à son mode propre de penser, de sentir, et d'agir" (20; prepared for a heterologic thought […] prepared to think starting from the other, to engage in including alterity in one's own way of thinking, feeling, and acting).

3 Towards Transcultural Humanism

My argumentative steps so far were meant to lead to a further, final stage: rather than post-, more than beyond, the prefix that fully catches the sense and function of humanism and the humanities today is *trans-* in the qualifier *transcultural*, as advocated by philosophers of culture such as W. Welsch and M. Epstein. Far from indiscriminately attacking or abandoning our alleged monocultural worlds – starting from the big divides between West and the East/Middle-East, the North and the South, and continuing all through their replicas in minor keys –, the transcultural approach forces their boundaries of various nature, to look for and insist on what can connect them, while accepting that some differences may not be overcome and need to be respected. From a transcultural perspective, different worlds, different

languages are not simply put side by side in a static and unproductive relationship of tolerant co-existence, as multiculturalism would have it, but they are dynamically involved in overcoming their reciprocal borders. New compatibilities, as well as new diversities, emerge from permeation and hybridization, which, as emphasized by Welsh, are certainly preferable to the superficial cultural uniformization produced by globalization or to the particularization of identitarian, sealed policies (2001, 82-3). Transcultural encounters creatively destabilize our received understanding of cultural formations and unsettle easy syncretic tendencies. We are very far from the autistic and celebratory reconfirmation of our culture's 'glorious tradition' that has characterized certain lifeless, monumental defences of Western humanism as vigorously denounced by Nietzsche (1874/1980).

A transcultural approach to the humanities can receive lifeblood from the notion of cultural transfert inaugurated by Michel Espagne, which is focussed on the process of re-interpretation/re-semanticization that any cultural 'object' undergoes in passing from one culture to another, where the fundamental role played by translation in all this should come as no surprise. Cultural 'transference' flows into forms of *métissage* that are resistant to comparison. In comparison, Espagne points out, the observer (usually belonging to one of the two compared cultural objects/texts) tends to oppose in order to find similarities and differences, whereas transference has more to do with complex and multi-polar interactions among cultures whose gnoseological assumptions may be quite diverse. Espagne's theoretical contribution is particularly precious when he remarks how in no way should we consider these different cultures as "'homogeneous and original' in themselves as each one of them in its turn is the result of previous *déplacements*; each one of them has a history made of successive hybridations" (2013, 3). And, of course, these cultural imbrications can never be contained in one-way directions.

Métissage in cultures and their conceptual frameworks is old news, something human history has positively known, as Said, as much as Welsch (2001, 75), are keen on emphasizing. Effective examples of this factual historic transculturality is traced back by Espagne to Antiquity, in the Mediterranean area, in the exchanges between Egypt and Greece, those same exchanges which have led Martin Bernal to hypothesize an archaic African heritage at the heart of European civilization (1987). Literature has always been able to conjure up the "portals of globality" studied by Espagne, and nowadays still continues to do so through deeply transcultural postcolonial works by authors like Gurnah or Ghosh. From this perspective, the notions that most of all become obsolete casualties to be definitely put aside are those of the alleged purity of uncontaminated cultures, as well

as of allegedly sealed cultural hegemonies. More deeply, it is the identitarian myth that turns out to be untenable.

A valuable assist to Espagne's theses may be found in Turkish-American political philosopher Seyla Benhabib's plea for our recognizing "the radical hybridity and polyvocity of *all* cultures" (2002, 45). She, too, criticizes false generalizations concerning the supposed homogeneity of the West's developmental history and identity, not to mention the cohesion of its value systems (44). Such holistic view of cultures and civilizations has contributed to neglecting those elements in them "which may be perfectly compatible with, or which may themselves lie at the root of the West's own discovery of universalism" (44). This leads Benhabib to seriously reassess the hotly-debated question of the ethnocentrism of universalism as it presupposes "that we know who the 'West and its others' are. But who are we? Who are the so-called others? Are they really others?", she asks (45). Benhabib's provocative question, I believe, is to be approached as questioning that form of misguided anti-humanism that puts radical alterity as axiomatic. Yet, as vigorously contested by Robbins, "[i]s radical alterity their [the others'] self-description, or is it on the contrary a category that pre-empts their self-description?" (2000, 563).

Not taking into adequate account the complex global dialogue across cultures and civilizations is something Benhabib is particularly worried about since it encourages the binarisms of 'we' and 'the other(s)' when the last thing we need in our troubled pluriverse are theses of cultural incommensurability and untranslatability.

Not surprisingly, the clash-of-civilizations theory was shared in common by Samuel Huntington and Osama Bin Laden with the tragic consequences we know all-too-well, and has been and continues to be shared by the powerful 'rogues' of the world, by all those "qui ont intérêt à traduire la complexité du monde en termes d'affrontement entre entités simple et homogènes: Occident et Orient, 'monde libre' et Islam" (Todorov 2008, 157; who have a vested interest in translating the complexity of the world into a confrontation between simple and homogeneous entities: the West and the East, the 'free world' and Islam). Yet, as Benhabib hermeneutically objects, "if frameworks, linguistic or conceptual, are so radically incommensurable with each other, then we would not be able to know this" (48). In her political philosophy, considering untenable the view of cultures as sealed and internally self-consistent wholes goes hand in hand with the pragmatic 'moral imperative' to enter into a cross-cultural dialogue, as "we have become moral contemporaries caught in a net of interdependence" (51-2).

Here I like to call into play Epstein's voice, more exactly when he wisely writes that the transcultural experience helps us develop "the most precious freedom", which is freedom from *our own* culture,

the one in which we were born and educated, meaning the freedom not to be overdetermined by it but, more healthily, to be able to enlarge its horizons in unpredictable configurations, "through the risky experience of our own cultural wanderings and transgressions" (2009, 330). Welsch as much as Epstein are careful to point out that this in no way means to forget or to reject the 'prejudices' of our native culture. To retrieve the beginning of this essay, this does not entail an indiscriminate recantation of our Western heritage and modes of inhabiting the world. Still, against any fearful or arrogant identitarian self-confinement, "to be cultural means to rise above one's inborn identity", be it ethnic, religious, political, or of gender, "through the variety of self-destructions, self-transformations, and interferences with other identities" (339).

I would say that this is *practicing* humanism in a transcultural way. And this is what literature, patently so postcolonial literature, which has both challenged Western humanism and shown it the way to inclusive renewal, performs by vocation.

4 An Example of Literature's Transcultural Performance: Leila Aboulela's Case

It can be safely contended that literature, and to a great extent postcolonial literature in any language, especially by hyphenated diasporic authors, is the one better equipped for enacting a fully transcultural humanism capable to listen to, be exposed to, and constructively deal with Otherness.

To bring this essay to a close with an example of this vocation of literature, I will just briefly focus attention on the powerfully transcultural experience offered by the fiction of Sudanese-British Leila Aboulela.[6] Aboulela fully participates in the wave of Arab Anglophone writers who, for four decades, have been engaged in a critical revision of Western 'translations' of Arab alterity, "articulating an alternative episteme derived from Islam but shaped specifically by immigrant perspectives" (Hassan 2008, 299). Her work may represent for us a particularly precious example of transcultural challenge: in fact, as I have pointed out elsewhere (2024), by first placing religious faith as such and then Islam right at the centre of her fiction, she poses a double challenge of Otherness to a largely secularized (when not Islamophobic) Western audience. She wants

6 One of the most prominent African Arab writers in English today, Aboulela is author of six novels and two short-stories collections, as well as of radio plays.

her fiction to translate 'Islamic logic'[7] by showing how it invests the everyday lives of her Muslim characters, often (but not exclusively) Muslim women in Islamophobic Western contexts. In doing this, she pre-empts and dis-orients many Western readers' expectations without even slightly pandering to them. So, for example, her Muslimas are often fulfilled in their religion, they are not victims or escapees of Islam; each of them finds her own, deeply personal path toward God, while, at the same time being able to quietly deconstruct the patriarchal expectations of her own community.

The fact is that in her fiction Islamic faith becomes a vector of transculture that rules out any simply 'voyeuristic', or anthropologic-like multicultural posture on the readers' part and that, exactly by virtue of its resistance to domesticizing Islamic alterity, jolts them away from the self-centred impulse to confirm their own identity and 'prejudices'. One cannot go on reading Aboulela if s/he is not prepared for a sort of temporary 'conversion' translating her/him into her Muslim characters' Other worldview.

The first challenge, that of proposing religious faith as her main theme, compels us to face the inveterate neglect of religious discourse and the sacred by Western criticism, including postcolonial studies. It compels us to rethink the relationship between Western humanism and secularism or, better, to rethink its often inertial identification with a rational(istic) critique of religion, as if whatever is religious should be at risk of irrationalism and fundamentalism, as if the need for spirituality, independently of whether one is a believer or not, could not be integral to being human in the world. As a matter of fact, the process of secularization cannot be said to have entailed the elimination of the religious experience, rather "the power of religion is still growing in many countries around the world", so that "far from the secular world that was once predicted, a post-secular age has arrived" (Plummer 2021, 19). "By showing how the world of her Muslim characters 'transcends' the over-simplified division between Islam and secularity in the continuum of their everyday lives" (Zinato 2024, 6), Aboulela stimulates a revision of Western criticism's traditionally inattentive, often hostile, posture towards religion, spurring a more dialogic relationship.

Here we are approaching her second challenge, Islam. Islam in her novels and short stories is a way of existing in the world, it is emphatically not an a-historical, theological hypostasis. It is a shared

7 "I want to show the psychology, the state of mind and the emotions of a person who has faith. I am interested in going deep, not just looking at 'Muslim' as a cultural or political identity but something close to the centre, something that transcends but doesn't deny gender, nationality, class and race. I write fiction that reflects Islamic logic" (Aboulela 2011, "Author Statement", *British Council*. Cf. `https://www.britishcouncil.org/writer/leila_aboulela`).

point of Aboulela criticism that translation is the philosophical, thematic, and rhetorical framework of her narrative. In her unfailing efforts at translating for us cultural difference through the experience of Islam permeating her characters' everyday life (also in the guise of reactive or renouncing attitudes), in no way does she aim to convince or to convert us (that kind of divine translation only coming from Allah, as repeatedly conveyed by her narrative). Her 'translations' of Islamic culture have nothing exotic in them and may be quite uncomfortable at times. Some opacity, too, is part of this transference, when we experience an 'excess' that resists full translation, "the 'beyond' of interpretation in what may be understood as a sense of cultural 'otherness'" (Ashcroft 2013, 122), which becomes awareness of our own Otherness.

When our own Otherness is made palpable to us, that is the moment in which our ego-logical cultural perspective is shaken and, in Levinasian terms, our being "for the Other" becomes possible. There are several of these moments in Aboulela's narrative. One example that can here be given of her transcultural strategy can be drawn from the short story "The Ostrich", in which we are made to share in the Sudanese Muslima Samra's anguishing disorientation and estrangement when, returning to London and to her Sudanese husband Majdy, she realizes that the two months she has just spent in Khartoum have wiped away the two years of life here, that she is "a stranger once again" (2018, 89). Her husband is doing a PhD and is infatuated with his new Western life, with its modernity, which he expects his wife should embrace in public, not to 'disgrace' him. So, while seeing her out of the airport, the first words he addresses to her are "You look like something from the Third World", referring to her clothes ("crumpled and out of place"), her soaked sandals, her resigned expression. We, Western readers, start feeling as *she* feels – hurt, ashamed. She "lets him put his arm around her by way of greeting", and we suddenly perceive *with* her all the estranging weight of this gesture, so common with us but suddenly not appearing as 'natural' anymore. She "ha[s] to remember to walk next to him and not loiter behind" because "he dislikes if she walks a few steps behind".

> "What would people think", he says, "that we are backward, barbaric." He sneers at the Arab women in black abayas walking behind their men. "Oppressed, that's what people would think of them. Here they respect women, treat them as equal; we *must* be the same," he says. So I *have to* be careful not to fall behind him in step and *must* bear the weight of his arm around my shoulder, another gesture he had decided to imitate to prove that, though we are Arabs and Africans, we can be modern too. (86; italics added))

That Majdy's mimicry of Western 'modernity' is not the result of a real transcultural negotiation but his self-compulsory way to put up with his complex of cultural inferiority, is inferable from the fact that the latter gives in when they are alone. Its double-bind nature is fully evidenced by his slapping her, in private, for her daring to mention polygamy in the presence of their new non-Muslim friends, only to give her "apologetic caresses" afterwords, ashamed of himself.

Majdy forbids her to wear the veil: "If you cover your hair in London they'll think I am forcing you to do that. They won't believe it is what you want". "So – she thinks, and here Aboulela's chiselled prose gets sublime – I must walk *unclothed*, *imagining cotton on my hair, lifting my hand to adjust an imaginary tobe*" (94-5; italics added). These words offer us a deep insight into her way of being in the ('our') world, making palpable our own ignorance of/Otherness to it. The suspended gesture of her hand lifting an imaginary tobe stays in our mind with the force of a still image, it encapsulates our transcultural experience of otherness. To her, not to wear the veil is like walking naked, exposed, and is lived as a privation, a privation she cannot intimately get used to.

The veil, of course, is loaded with contested and contextual meanings, and it obviously can become a token of female autonomous agency only where and when it is not imposed – certainly not in countries like today's Iran. As pointed out by S.T. Al-Karawi and I. Baizura Bahar, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* – but this holds true for her whole narrative – "provides the reader with an opportunity to explore how the veil is a metaphor or trope whose diversity can only be understood by *unpacking the lived experiences* of the Arab Muslim woman in the West" (2014, 255; italics added). Now, the veil is what many, not all, Muslimas in Aboulela's fiction want. Significantly, as in the case of Najwa, the protagonist of *Minaret* (2005), they may decide to become hijabis only when they are in Europe, where they rediscover and reappropriate for themselves what was only inertial or non-existent. In the cultural-transfert dynamic depicted by Aboulela, in the West, where it is no more compulsory and where cases of unveiled Muslim characters are certainly not absent, the veil may certainly become a protection from sexualized gazes, as well as a target for racist abuse, but in both cases it remains a strong token of the post-migrant autonomy enjoyed in being able to choose whether to wear it or not, independently of the white approval. Above all, in the Sudanese author's transcultural narrative of faith, this freedom is embraced by her committed Muslimas with the view to translating it into an enhancement of their loving submission to Allah. The Western reader is obviously not asked to share in this choice but, perhaps, s/he is now able to catch the fulfilling, rather than constraining, meaning the veil has for them.

To Najwa, as much as to Samra, the protagonist of *The Translator* (1999), and to other hijabis in Aboulela's narrative, "the hijab is not only a visual marker of piety […] it is the means by which piety is cultivated" (Canpolat 2016, 217), like praying. As to the interplay between visibility and invisibility entailed in wearing it, I believe the following, insightful, observation by Hassan (2006, 762) concerning Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* may be safely applied to Aboulela's fiction as well:

> In putting into question the intuitive association in Western epistemology of visibility with presence, voice, and subjectivity, the veil here functions as the horizon of translatability. The untranslatable beyond the veil becomes a test of ethics, demanding of the ethical agent an acknowledgement of epistemological limits and a refusal to submit the untranslatable to the forgery of the discourse on otherness.

We might rephrase "horizon of translatability" as horizon of transcultural translatability. Aboulela's fiction succeeds in widening our gnoseological/existential horizons and understanding – not necessarily our sharing – of a different world, yet not so different as to bar attentiveness to what can be connective. To fully experience her art, one has to surrender her/his Ego's boundaries and enter a Levinasian ethical disposition to be for-the-Other. The "faces" of her protagonists jolt us out of our self-affirming existing and impel us to question and interrogate our own moral, ideological, existential certainties (Levinas 2006, 29-36). In this encounter of Othernesses boundaries get infringed, interrogated and negotiated. In this interplay between proximity and distance, some untranslatability, some irreducibility of the Other's Otherness remains vital evidence that our reciprocal recognition has been respectful of differences and has avoided illusory assimilation.

Aboulela's transcultural *Bildung*, to use a term of classic Western humanism, finds its main inspiration in Qur'anic and other forms of Islamic literature (such as Sufi philosophy and poetry, hadiths, and so forth). Her humanistic reading of the Qur'an, which is "effortlessly and inseparably embroidered in her narrative" (Edwin 2013, 70), also reveals her intellectual sharing in Muslim Arab Feminism's questioning of gendered formation of Islamic epistemology (Fatima Mernissi's above all). Her reading background has drawn from Arab writers, but also from Russian classic novelists, and from British, canonic and postcolonial, anglophone literature (privileging J. Rhys and A. Gurnah). Furthermore, she has often mentioned Fanon and Said as her important sources of influence.

From a transcultural perspective we become able to see connections between her Islamic humanism, Gilroy's humanist

appeal for a globalized philosophy of conviviality, and the Arab-Islamic philosopher Triki's "philosophie du vivre-ensemble dans la dignité" (philosophy of living-together in dignity). The latter, in its turn, rests on a strong idea of *reasonableness* (rather than *ratio*) that recaptures and builds on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* put into dialogue with that of *al-ta'aqul* by the philosopher of the Islamic Golden Age Al Farabi and the Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (fourteenth century). Also, by retrieving Kant's ideal of perpetual peace, Triki tries to open new, ethical-political perspectives to an idea of reason (*'aql*) that can be practiced in a world in which violations of human rights and new forms of colonialism and imperialism have become ordinary, global reality (1998, 2006).

A transcultural humanist perspective makes it possible to perceive these common efforts without erasing diversity. In Mbembe's words, "ce que nous devons *imaginer* c'est une politique de l'humaine qui est, fondamentalement, une politique du semblable, mais dans un contexte ou, c'est vrai, ce que nous partageons d'emblée, ce sont les differences. Et ce sont elles qu'il nous faut, paradoxalement, mettre en commun" (2015, 255; what we must *imagine* is a politics of the human that is, fundamentally, a politics of the similar, but in a context where, it is true, what we share straight away are our differences. And it is these differences that, paradoxically, are to be pooled by us). Said was adamant on the fact that it should be the duty of humanists to disturb the world as it is and "provide suitable models of coexistence" (2004, 49-50). And Fanon's lesson in the will to believe that a true, universal humanism is possible has definitely not lost its urgency nowadays. Transcultural humanism appears as the viable path for trying what might appear as utopian. Still, as beautifully put by Bill Ashcroft,

> this is the utopian potential of the trans-cultural […] a space of transformation in which change is conceived. […] The transculturality of literature may not herald an immediate resolution of cultural differences, it may not be the only path to genuine cosmopolitanism, but by crossing borders it shows that a different world is possible; a world that will not come about unless it has first been imagined. (2023, 15)

Rather than remaining in Münchausen's pond, staring on the quicksand of Western humanism's bankruptcy, we had better cherish its strong, critical tradition of self-questioning, and learn from its misfires, along the track shown by Fanon, who, "instead of producing a hegemonic, top-down ideal definition of 'humanness' […] looks into the '*raté*' – the failures, misses, misfires – of human subjectivities and builds, bottom-up, inductively, a notion of humanness from its processes of alienation" (Bessone 2022, 1585).

After all, is not anti-humanism still a creature of true humanism's lucid awareness of vulnerability, fallibility, and provisionality? Let's fail better, then, in the awareness that humanness is not something 'given' or inherited once and for all, that humanity cannot be the exclusive precinct of anybody and of any culture, and that its meaning needs to be constantly interrogated and acted upon.

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