

# **Two Women Crossing Cultural Borders**

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The idea of a border or a frontier or a boundary that limits a space or a people is much older than colonial and postcolonial theory. Its recent use in the framework of postcolonial thought is what should be remembered. As a key concept in postcolonial studies, the border is defined as a “crucial feature in imagining the imperial self, and in creating and defining (othering) those others by which that ‘self’ could achieve definition and value” (1).

The theoretical discussion of borders owes its debt to Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands / La Frontera that was published in 1987 (2). It is due to the influence of this book that the idea of the border has become prominent in the field of cultural studies, in spite of the fact that Anzaldúa was concerned with the American-Mexican border, where “living on borders and in margins” (3) has become an abode. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all definitions of the ‘border’, since they cover almost every area that requires transgression / crossing: genre, gender, household, values, cultures, land occupation, and, certainly, traveling. In other words, crossing a (any) border is generally regarded as an act of transgression. Therefore, borders are either to stay intact to function professionally, i.e., to keep two entities separate, or they are to be crossed and transgressed. This ‘either/or’ formula resonates the position of modernism and avant-gardism on borders:

For modernism the border is always a limit that sub-tends and controls practice. For the avant-garde, on the other hand, it is a special transgressive space whose traversal (and conflictual) re-articulation guarantees the continuity and seriality of avant-gardist rupture. The discourses of both modernism and the avant-garde are secured by the imagination of border, but they are locked in a double spiral which folds together modernist intensity and avant-garde extension (4).

In this paper, I intend to examine two texts in which two women writers who have crossed and read the border. These texts were written as cultural accounts of travel experience. However, what is foregrounded is the intercultural encounter itself. Cultures usually erect borders to protect themselves from any syncretism only to delineate the false notion that they are static and homogenous. Therefore, these texts set the possibility of delineating an actual heterogeneity and an on-going cultural change and identity reformation.

Travel is, undoubtedly, a form of movement through space and borders. Thus, it triggers “an engagement with the other or others in a liminal space materially, psychologically, or culturally in-between” (5). The encounter in that space of travel brings up an oscillation between sameness and difference, the two faces of the identity coin. This is what Homi Bhabha calls the “hither and thither, back and forth” of the hidden “in-between spaces” which “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (6). Thus, the paper will focus on examining the dialogic, the hither and thither movement, established by the pull between the erection of borders delineating difference and the crossing of these borders through the cultural exchange with the other.

Crossing the borders between cultures is not always a successful story. By definition, travel is about crossing physical borders. The real problem lies in the cultural and psychological borders. So travel can either lead to what Welchman calls the ‘modernist intensity’ or to the ‘avant-garde extension’; it either creates a real contact zone or it reinforces the concept of the homogenous cultural identity. In a nutshell, travel problematizes the concept of ‘home’, of roots, of identity, of position, and most important, of gender.

At this juncture of gender and genre, one has to take a position against the celebratory tone with which women’s travel writings are introduced. In most of the anthologies (7) there is an emphasis on the idea of exercising freedom and challenging the patriarchal norms. As much as this might be applicable to and true of some women’s travel accounts, it also essentializes and homogenizes women’s perspectives. That is why the paper will focus on the way those two women rearticulate their own identity in the contact zone of the intercultural encounter, or in the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha how they travel “trans-culturally while engaging in the local habitus” (8).

The two texts I am examining in this paper are the products of the experience of the West-Eastern Divan based in Berlin. It is a project that aims at promoting and understanding Middle Eastern literatures in Germany and vice versa. ‘At the end of the exchanges, writers will compose essays for publication in two books, one about German writers and one about writers from the Middle East. In other words, there will be an anthology of oriental and occidental prose- or, a West-Eastern Divan’. One of the encounters happened between Marica Bodrozic and Miral Al Tahawi. Marica Bodrozic, the German writer, went to Cairo in March 2003, and Miral Al Tahawi, the Egyptian writer, went to Berlin in July 2003 (9).

The first thing that attracts attention is the title of the project: West-Eastern Divan. The mere reproduction of the West and East as monolithic constructs brings to one's mind the famous verse of Rudyard Kipling, "the East is East, the West is West, and together the twain shall never meet". The responses of both writers, however, defy and challenge the subtle binary thought inherent in the title. They have both crossed the dividing borders, each in a different way, to create a contact zone with the other. The texts have proved borders to be permeable.

a) Miral Al Tahawi:

Al Tahawi crosses the borders immediately by transgressing the division of genres. Her response cannot be categorized as corresponding to a specific genre. It is a mixture of autobiography, fiction, travel account, self-exploration, memory repertoire, (a novella, short story, a report?). The memory of her grandmother as a 'stranger' is intertwined with her self-image on one hand, and she perceives herself as a 'stranger' in Cairo, on the other. The subtitles are significant in that they refer to the 'outside' bluntly, whereas they refer to the self poetically and metaphorically: my grandmother, the guest, contact lenses, the gypsy, Herman Hess, the star, and the sunflower.

Within the framework of these subtitles, the writer moves freely from past to present, from self to other, from here to there, from Cairo to Marrakech, from Cairo to Berlin, from Berlin to Cairo, from her grandmother to her counterpart, from her son to herself, and from her text to that of Herman Hess. In short, the hither/thither movement of Homi Bhabha is ceaseless. This movement also indicates the ebbs and flows of Derridian intertextuality. For Derrida, any approach to a text requires "a bord, an edge," yet there is

A sort of an overrun that spoils all the boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a text into a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces (10).

If crossing the borders of the genre could be easily discerned, it is not the same with the border crosser herself. Al Tahawi's crossing of the border remains ambivalent. This ambivalence is structured by the 'ruptured' text. To explain, the text works both with ancestry and progeny, only to generate a new belonging.

The ancestry is represented in the figure of the grandmother with whom the text opens: “she does not remember how she came to that house”. She is a displaced figure by whom “the young and old servants passed, emitting the smells of the kitchen, and they never called her ‘madame’ or ‘auntie’. They always referred to her as ‘the guest’ or ‘the bringing of our master’”. With this painful process of re-rooting, the grandmother was able to re-route her way into the life of the writer and her son who:

... sleeps hugging a big bear that he named after his grandmother. When her luggage is ready, he wouldn't speak. He would just sit silently in the car seat, wave from behind the window- pane, and ask, ‘are you coming back again?’ She would wave to him while running between airports, departure halls, and take offs and landing schedules. When the teacher asked him about his mother's profession, he drew a butterfly, hugged his bear and sang for it ‘nanu nanu’.

The desire to connect across pushes the crosser forward whereas ‘progeny’ pulls her backward. Thus, she remains at the crossroads causing a rupture into the solid frozen borders.

Ancestry and progeny works on another level as well. Al Tahawi recalls her mother's encounter with a female guest, “my mother called her ‘the guest’, perhaps because her name was not familiar and my mother was unable to welcome her with all the words and rhetoric she knew, ...So my mother would just lay her hand on the guest's back and pat her with love that the guest never knew its source.” The same gush of generosity is to be repeated in the present with the German counterpart of the writer who is also called ‘the guest’, “here in the alleys of Al Hussein and Alexandria, all friends would race to pay the bill. My friends do not have such luxury but they insist on doing it, and they came up with touristic ideas so that the guest can see the allies of Mahfouz, the museum, the pyramids, or even their small houses”. This linking via repetition of certain codes of behaviour enables the writer to cross the border within her and to reach for the other. In addition, she employs her cultural beliefs to bridge differences. The use of the common Arabic saying, “after forty nights the stranger becomes one of us” implies that the other has stopped being othered.

Through employing ancestry and progeny, the ‘to’ and ‘fro’ movement is reinforced and the writer's position remains ambivalent. This

ambivalence in itself is turned into something else, i.e., a new belonging. In Gloria Anzaldua's words:

She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode- nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (11).

Al Tahawi's ambivalence also stems from her writing experience, i.e., the power of imagination, "I have become a woman inhabited by times I never lived".

If crossing the borders was ambivalent in some cases, it was clear-cut in others. The cultural encounter between Al Tahawi and Bodrozic oscillated between sameness and difference, both are embedded in the meaning of identity. In the part entitled "contact lenses" Al Tahawi says "the stranger wants to see me. They told me it is a project that restores the experience of travelers to the East. But she did not cross dress. In her hotel room that overlooks the Nile, she takes off a lens and puts on another". The acute awareness of the history of European women travelers puts Al Tahawi on the guard, hence, the metaphor of replacing the lens. However, in this lens, Al Tahawi sees her own image reflected as "an estranged tiny woman, wandering in large and dry streets". The reference here is to the streets of Cairo that Al Tahawi has struggled to reach by challenging tight nomadic patriarchal norms. Yet, crossing this border was not completely successful since she is still preoccupied with the concept of 'home' that she never found in Cairo. Later, she would find it in other places. Homi Bhabha argues that the border places the polemic of culture in 'the beyond', which is not a new horizon, nor does it pretend to leave out the past. This 'beyond' is a complex construct of identity based on past and present, in and out, inclusion and exclusion (12).

Only with her counterpart, Al Tahawi could identify where her 'home' is, "in her translated stories, I try to see her". Having been able to see the other, Al Tahawi creates a place that relates to roots and to routes. Thus, Al Tahawi crossed the border that separates her from the other by finding a common ground based on agency and subjectivity. S.P. Mohanty asserts "it is important to go beyond a simple recognition of differences across cultures. For 'they' do ultimately what 'we' do, since they share with us a capacity for self-aware historical agency" (13).

Al Tahawi goes as far as to identify with Herman Hesse, to whom she has devoted a whole part of her text. She even quotes him, “the world seems beautiful and exciting when it realizes its human identity beyond the masks of race, gender, history, and beyond the far continents”. Human agency, after all, is capable of discerning the fact that “cultural border zones are always in motion, not frozen for inspection” (14).

Still, one cannot say that borders are completely erased. Heavily policed borders remain a challenge to Al Tahawi. In crossing the geographical borders, Al Tahawi is reduced the other, the stranger, and the intruder: “a window fenced with questions, in front of which, you- or I- stand. So why do you see the street, your home, and all your land as a narrow space, whereas this window, behind which sits a featureless employee, becomes the whole world and the space?” The world, at this point, becomes a “policed room”.

It is a journey against ‘origin’, replete with the risks of being reduced into the other who lacks agency. In this context of ‘policed’ borders, “‘othering’ is a method of preservation, a homogenizing, a freezing for inspection” (15). Othering the other serves to perpetuate the binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that each border crosser is bound to confound and confront.

The same homogenizing happened when Al Tahawi met an audience who had its own ready-made judgments and images of her. She was asked the common stereotypical questions, “how did they allow you to write? You are a Muslim, so why aren’t you veiled? You are an Arab woman, how do you travel alone? As a married woman, do you think that one woman is enough for the Arab man? Do you believe that Arabic literature could be accepted by other cultures?” She did not respond to those questions but kept “answering questions that were never asked”, that is to say, *her-story*. She was motivated to get across set codes, references, and cultural stereotyping, not to mention her intention to deconstruct the image of the “Arab woman”. When stereotypes were about to be subverted, the audience was perplexed, “why don’t you answer the questions? Why do you digress into irrelevant things? Don’t you understand?” Al Tahawi’s response to these aggressive accusations summed up the whole issue: “probably because I am not a clever student, or perhaps I am out of the subject already, probably you cannot understand me either. We need somebody to explain to both of us”. It is obvious that there are two discourses in clash. On one hand, there is the modernist discourse that believes borders function to protect and control, on the other, there is the avant-gardist discourse that places itself ‘outside’, in the margin to carve new contact space, without erasing any historical realities. In Al Tahawi’s interaction with the audience, she based her resistance strategy on

dislocating the language to subvert the rigidity of the modernist discourse,- “the language as we know it has to be dislocated and acted upon- even destroyed- so that it begins to serve our purposes” (16).

b) Marica Bodrozić:

Marica Bodrozić’s text was written before Al Tahawi’s. Similarly, it transgresses the borders of the genre. The text thrusts itself into Al Tahawi’s writings and space through images: “images were foggy, and trees were smaller than they are in reality. Where am I? In which story am I wandering? Amongst which images am I walking? It is as if these images have come out of me into this part of life, in a place that is not mine, a place that is totally different from the one I was in a few days ago.” The initial crossing takes place through images, or rather through the “transgression of text-image boundaries” in T.W.J. Mitchell’s words. The transgression is sudden and abrupt that it does not require rites of passage. Right from the outset, the writer is hammered with images. The feeling was so overwhelming, “on the route of my life, that has become so close to me, images roll to endow me with a writer, a woman, a young mother with large eyes. A person who is strong and delicate at the same time, she is Miral Al Tahawi”. The reservoir of images establishes the contact zone between the two women. Put differently, images are employed for the benefit of the cultural encounter.

The house of Al Tahawi’s grandmother works like a huge image gallery. It fuels Bodrozić’s text on two axes simultaneously: it helps her to read the other while being in Cairo, and to write the other while being in Paris. That is to say, the grandmother has become an image on Bodrozić’s mind, not as an icon but as a signifier. She believes that, “it is not necessary for the gate of the house to be open. Photos could stay hung on the walls for decades. In language, things open up, trees blossom, and the steam of the tea comes out”. The ‘gate’, as another form of borders, does not pose a threat to Bodrozić. Yet, Bodrozić negates its physical locking function to promote the power of the visual.

Physical borders, for which the gate stands, also lose their power, to give space for the poetic. Bodrozić shows her awareness of this power when she wonders “what would be the fate of writing if the garden stops yielding itself, and when it keeps its own stories (when it protects itself)?” The garden as a space was already open to the other who can identify with its inner workings, its true essence. This is how images gain life and become a cultural zone. The highly poetic language of Bodrozić

helps her to dive into the philosophical meaning of cultural borders and to cross them. Welchman believes that:

The poetic is the agency of the border. It names the ineffability of functions that can only take place in transgressive space. It bespeaks the unknowability of the in-between. It marks out the fuzzy limits of the interstice. It translates everything that is becoming (17).

As a transgressive space, the grandmother's house becomes a site of continuity that gives Bodrozic "the feeling of jumping out of the time wheel, a feeling that carries inside a liquid, and talks to me through silence, reserved silence, translated into literature. Translation of the self: crossing over. Readable: concrete". This continuity is a from of routing and rooting at the same time. Put differently, Bodrozic was capable of reconstructing her identity that was ruptured in Germany, "here, I can be a Yugoslav again, I can restore an identity that does not exist anymore in Europe."

Despite her crossing of the cultural borders through images, Bodrozic is aware of the several negative ways images can be used. One of those ways is steal away the history of the images, and to decontextualize them so they become the object of the other's gaze. For the German director who came to film the grandmother's house, the photos were just objects. Bodrozic recalls that "watching him doing that was a nauseating sight...I felt there was a kind of theft, theft of life's ingredients...He was looting the life of the photos". When the director entered the father's wing in the house, both Al Tahawi and Bodrozic were highly offended by this act of violation. Their offence was so deep to the extent that Bodrozic felt that "the grandmother's soul, hovering over the place, will send a bird that will pluck out our eyes and memories because we have betrayed the photos."

Images, for the German director, stand for discontinuity, a feeling that was reinforced by his tendency to homogenize the other. Contrariwise, images for Bodrozic stand for continuity, which is similar to her journey of routing and rooting. Having spotted these images in Al Tahawi's writings, Bodrozic could connect spiritually with the 'dead' grandmother. It is noteworthy that the strong metaphorical presence of the grandmother throughout the text implies re-rooting and displacement at the same time. The re-rooting results from/in connecting, bonding and crossing. The displacement results from the reshaping of the cultural identity against absolute and essentialist belongings. If "imagining the tracks that map

another's world, the transgressions that maintain another's dream, sometimes lay bare one's own true name" (18), then Bodrozic has found her own true name, "I knew once again that it is possible to find several similar selves to mine in this world."

The whole text in itself is like 'crossing in progress'. So far, Bodrozic has managed to heterogenize the other with the result of subjectivity replacing 'othering.' This was not done only through giving life to images and assimilating them, but also through connecting with the collective history of the other, "Shagaret Al Dorr, that proud queen, after which one of Zamalek streets is named, seems so familiar to me as if I had lived in her age." To complete the crossing journey, the writer links to Arabic literature through interferences to Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist, and Ibn Hazm, the Andalusian writer. The text's title, 'this is the habit of God in his creatures and the earth', is borrowed from Ibn Hazm's book The Ring of the dove. To seal the bonding off, Bodrozic ends her text with a reference to Al Tahawi's words, "if we want to negotiate, we have to read each other." 'Reading' in Bodrozic's text has gained several connotations to express the "multilayered and dynamic pattern of syncretism" (19). The text reads space, the other, literature, images, and the beyond.

The text is basically motivated by the desire to answer a crucial question, "similar to the novel of The Tent, I want to know how it is beyond the fence. What is the beyond?" It is a desire that created a space to be fulfilled, a space that allows for a real cultural crossing of the borders.

Both women were able to cross several borders, whether within themselves or between cultures. Transgression takes place on all levels, genre, culture, stereotypes, identity, and even language. Both texts try to locate a route to reformulate the identity via ancestry and progeny (with the grandmother linking both), self and other, continuity and discontinuity, and personal and collective history. Both women have found, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's words: "a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it...displacing and emptying out the establishment of totality" (20).

## Notes

- 1) Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1999 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1989), p. 108
- 2) Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987. This book, cited and commented on extensively, is considered to be an essential reference in border studies. It has also contributed to the analysis of the chicano/a literature.
- 3) Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, p. III
- 4) John C. Welchman, "The Philosophical Brothel", in *Rethinking Borders*, edited by John C. Welchman. London: Macmillan, 1996, p. 160
- 5) Susan Friedman, *Mappings*, p. 143
- 6) Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 1. The introduction explains in detail the meaning of the 'in-between spaces' and the way they carve new spaces of identity.
- 7) See for example:  
Mary Morris, ed. *Maiden Voyages: Writings of Women Travelers*. New York: Vintage, 1993; Karen Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition*. Ithaca, NJ: Cornell UP, 1994; Lisa St Aubin de Teran, *Indiscreet Journeys: Stories of Women on the Road*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990; Dea Birkett and Sara Wheeler, (eds.). *Amazonian: The Penguin Book of New Travel Writing by Women*. London: Penguin, 1998.
- 8) Trinh T. Minh-ha, "An Acoustic Journey", in *Rethinking Borders*, John C. Welchman (ed.), p.12
- 9) The visit of each writer, including her encounter with her counterpart, has resulted in the two texts I am analyzing in this paper. The two texts were published in *Fikrun Wa Fann*, 80, 2004, issued by the Goethe Institute. However, Al Tahawi's text was shortened for editing purposes. This has affected the overall significance of her account of the encounter with Bodrozic, since the parts where she identifies with Bodrozic are all deleted and the subtitles are reordered. By coincidence, on the back cover of this issue there is a painting by the Indonesian artist Dede Eri Supria, and it is entitled "The Crossing".

- 10) Jacques Derrida, "Living On: Border-lines", trans. James Hulbert in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*. New York: Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 81-4
- 11) Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. P. 79
- 12) Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. p. 1
- 13) S.P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism", *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2.2 (1989): p.23
- 14) Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p. 217
- 15) Roger Bromley, "Narratives for a New Belonging- Writing in the Borderlands", in *Cross- Addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*, John C. Hawley (ed.). New York: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 277
- 16) Ibid., p. 281
- 17) John C. Welchman, "The Philosophical Brothel", p. 173
- 18) John C. Hawley, "Introduction", in *Cross- Addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*, John C. Hawley (ed.), p. 9
- 19) Roger Bromley, p. 291
- 20) Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary is/ Not a Name" *October* 52 (spring 1990) p. 96