

The Traumatic Complexities of Alienation, Otherness, and Marginalization in Miral Al-Tahawy's Novel *Brooklyn Heights*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is an attempt to bind the reader to the complexities of otherness and marginalization as trauma experienced by the protagonist and other immigrants in the America depicted in *Brooklyn Heights*¹. In all of their complexities and nuances that this paper seeks to explore and discuss these concepts, otherness, alienation, and marginalization, in light of Homi Bhabha's concept of otherness and Daphne Grace's theorization on the geographical senses of 'belonging' or 'dislocation'. As such, since Al-Tahawy's narrative focuses on spaces of otherness and marginalization, this paper aims to reveal how the novelist tends towards the deeply personal, and creates interesting transnational connections through a wide cast of multi-racial immigrants and refugees. The paper further exposes how Al-Tahawy, through her compelling and masterful style, captures the confusions and conflicts of marginalized immigrants and how otherness and marginalization, as experiences of social and psychological disjunction, lead to cultural alienation in America; how attempts at assimilation in a new host country even further highlight the sense of loss and alienation, especially if the immigration from the original home country takes as a result of a traumatic event; and whether or not assimilation necessarily nullifies one's ethnicity or means total disappearance or "dissolving" into the mainstream.

Keywords: *Al-Tahawy, Brooklyn Heights, Trauma, Otherness, Marginalization, Assimilation, Acculturation.*

Introduction:

The trauma of otherness, alienation, and marginalization and the complexities prevalent in the life of exiled/diasporic persons are universal phenomena that have emerged as major themes in many literary works crossing the barriers of caste, creed and nationality. In recent years, the concepts of otherness, alienation and marginalization have become even more salient, as boundaries become increasingly tested, identities challenged, and

difference ever more powerfully promoted.

In particular, Miral Al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* (2010) is replete with issues such as alienation, loneliness, and the fragmented identity, are not only central themes in the novel, but they are also viewed as a perpetual process that never ends and whose effects are ongoing. Yet, the little critical and detailed observation of Miral Al-Tahawy's *Brooklyn Heights* appears to fall back on narrowly feminist literary expectations that, though valuable,

perform an injustice to the work which contains themes that are demanding and fiercely emotional. The work marks a notable shift in theme and form from the author's other works. It focuses on the lives of marginalized men and women, further reinforcing the continual and the relentless nature of exile; social taboos; memory and tradition; the predicament of minorities; the exilic perspective; identity questions (belonging, assimilation, acculturation); the experiences of displacement and homelessness, the ideologies of 'home' and nation; the racial hierarchies that shape the lives of immigrants and refugees; feminist problems; and the East/West dynamics in Arabic literature.

Discussion:

Brooklyn Heights explores the exilic experience of Hend, a recently-divorced, middle-aged Egyptian woman with Bedouin origins, who immigrates to America with her eight-year-old son and ends up in Brooklyn, New York. Upon relocating to Brooklyn with the visa she inherits from her former husband, Hend finds herself amidst a plethora of displaced, outcast and diverse ethnic communities. Although the novel takes place in the present day, Hend's family life and the influence of Bedouin tribal customs are told

in flashbacks. In prose that verges on the poetic, she juxtaposes personal details of her life in Brooklyn with episodes based on her life in a Bedouin context in Egypt. Throughout, she struggles with loneliness, exhaustion and depression. The story continues for an unspecified period of time as Hend's son grows and acclimates to his new environment and she, conversely, feels increasingly dislocated and alienated from those around her, from men, from her own son who is never named in the text, and even from her own body. The novel ends with Hend's realization that her story is ultimately a sad copy of the stories of other alienated and marginalized characters in both Egypt and America.

The novel, which is described by *The Independent* as "an elegiac study of immigration and the scars it leaves on the soul" (1), chronicles the alienation, loneliness, and isolation that often obfuscate the lives of immigrants who come with big dreams, only to discover that such dreams are "always just out of reach" (87)². On the surface, the novel focuses on Hend's exilic experience in America, but through the portrayals of other immigrants, the intricacies and dynamics of foreignness and dislocation are filtered and revealed. The novel comprises characters who are marginal members of society, and forced to

adapt their lives accordingly. The difficulties they face determine the ‘new’ identities they come to adopt. Al-Tahawy, who assumes that her work “reflects [her] quest to understand the value of paradoxes in life...” (219), delineates her characters’ dilemma, their problems and plights in a fast changing world. She shows the fluid and dynamic nature of the identity of an individual which transcends boundaries of time and space. In so doing, she uses the setting of Brooklyn Heights in New York as an impetus for exploring narratives of exiled persons; longing and nostalgia; shattered dreams; displacement and discovery; and loss and hope. This setting may appear exotic for a writer firmly grounded in her own national culture. This setting, however, is not simply a change of place where events take place, but a change of the perspective from which local and global issues are discussed. This change must have been inspired by the author’s own experience in America. Al-Tahawy tells *The New York Times* that writing her novel in New York gave her “unexpected freedom, unfettered by the societal fears that might ordinarily chain writers in Egypt—even in works of fiction”. That freedom “is part of what the American culture gives, not only to the writer but to the human being”, she adds (3). Arguably,

Al-Tahawy could not have written this narrative that way if she has remained in Egypt. She had to leave to achieve the distance needed for her analysis and to gain what Edward Said calls the “contrapuntal” perspective of exile” (186), looking at things from different perspectives. Furthermore, the distance from the homeland may have offered Al-Tahawy a fresh perspective on old questions that have haunted her and provoked new questions arising from her encounter with the “Other” and with other marginalized groups of minorities and immigrants in New York.

The novel, however, is not driven by plot or action, but by memory and character. Al-Tahawy narrates Hend’s story in a unique style that combines the stream of consciousness technique with the confessional form, but in an autobiographical manner. She once admitted that all the heroines she describes in her novels “spring from the essence of my [her] memories” (215). In this respect, Hanadi Al-Samman assumes that diasporic writers, such as Al-Tahawy, who write down their memoirs are at least partly urged by the wish to assert their position among others, and affirm their own voice amid a multitude of other voices and to assert an existence that would otherwise be forgotten” (62). But this approach, Al-

Samman continues, “seems to be problematic for female writers whose mere societal existence has long been relegated strictly to the private sphere” (63). Therefore, when writers commit their lives to paper, they “go against a culture [i.e., Arab culture] which is based on concealment” (64). In fact, it was this desire to break away from the isolation of the private sphere and the legacy of concealment that motivates Al-Tahawy to expose her inner self. Thus, in writing a novel interconnected with her personal life, she writes herself as a diasporic Egyptian woman who rejects being silenced, made invisible, and framed in a mirror that does not reflect who she is.

At this point, it is worth noting that the novel has strong echoes of the life of the author herself; both she and her protagonist are Egyptians, newly-divorced, have one son, immigrate to America, live in Brooklyn Heights, and with dreams of becoming accomplished writers. In effect, Al-Tahawy does not shy from admitting that *Brooklyn Heights* is, in a way, autobiographical: “I write about heroines who adopt my features, desires and disabled potentials...Every piece I wrote was an autobiography of my soul, and a reflection of the painful dilemmas of millions of women...” (214-215). Besides,

the author’s sense of displacement and alienation contributes to building up her identity as an Egyptian writer in diaspora. ‘Exile’, be it physical or existential, spiritual or intellectual, has been a source of inspiration for Al-Tahawy in writing this narrative. “I spent long periods in the beginning where I did not know how to smile”, she tells *The New York Times* during an interview, reflecting on the loneliness of her new American surroundings. “That is part of the connection with exile”, she adds (1).

This confession lends an authenticity to Hend’s literary character, who is haunted by feelings of alienation that are inextricably bound with a constant sense of exile and displacement both at home and abroad. The author, thus, takes the reader into Hend’s consciousness as she drifts between Egypt and America. Hend feels in a kind of limbo, physically here but mentally there, unable to adapt to the host society but unable to return. Thus, Hend’s, and by extension all immigrants’, sense of living between two worlds, between a lost past and a nonintegrated present is, as Iain Chambers assumes, “the most finite metaphor of this postmodern condition” (27). In Hend’s case, she, following the breakup of her marriage, moves away from her displaced position in her home in Egypt

to a different environment to start a new life, forge new links with different people, and to create a world in which she can experience herself as a whole person, as integrated rather than a fragmented human being. Her arrival in New York suggestively coincides with Obama's election. She notes the billboards with the word "change" that soar high in big and small streets nearby. A word that represents all the forthcoming stages she dreams of: "She pins a button printed with that word on her chest as a token of her own soon-to-be-fulfilled dreams. Her son has the same button pinned to his school bag" (6). They wear them because, like everyone else, they crave change, and its sister declaration: Hope; words that make them feel that they have become a part of this map, a part of its deepest aspirations. Considering Obama's hybridity, all these references may be taken as allusions to the fulfillment of the ultimate 'American Dream'. Since Obama represents "hope" and "change", Hend imagines a New York that would offer her the opportunity to actualize an idealized role that the claustrophobic confines of her patriarchal home never could. She aspires to "chart a map with which to replace the memories she has fled, the memories that have left a blank space in their wake" (5). Yet while "hope" and "change" fill the air

in New York, Hend and her son bypass the residents of Brooklyn Heights, and rather than living the "American Dream", she realizes that the new beginning she hopes for cannot be grasped. Far from the glamour and bright lights she comes to associate with New York, she finds Brooklyn Heights a marginal neighborhood defined by its cultural diversity.

Ultimately, there is no sense in the novel of a new life unfolding in the new land Hend moves to. Rather, she, who dreams of being a writer and of crafting a better life for herself and her son, discovers that American life "is not beautiful" (11), and that it can be difficult to turn dreams into reality. She never quite succeeds in harnessing it to the creative process. Instead, she ends up with a cleaning job at Dunkin' Donuts coffee shop in the oldest neighborhood of Arab-American immigrants. Even the apartment she and her son move into is not sized to fit their dream, as it is "no bigger than a small matchbox" (3). Hend, thus, finds herself fleeing an unfavorable environment to be trapped in another. She, who does not imagine her new life would become "a smoldering fire" and "a long exile" (37), finds herself standing "wretched and alone, in a place where the four winds mightily converge" (11). Eventually, she becomes

convinced that her new world is, like any other world, old or new, a place where dreams are both made and broken.

Here, Al-Tahawy reinforces the profound alienation pervading the immigrant's dream turned nightmare. Its sense of "dislocation", Daphne Grace assumes, "can occur as much as one's country of birth as in a new location reached either through migration or exile". Grace goes on to point out how this experience and its consequent feelings of confusion have been treated by such writers, as V.S. Naipaul, who stresses how migrants experience this sense of alienated identity both within their "home" and host countries, both of which are experienced as illusions" (7-8). Disillusionment, thus, replaces blissful neutrality or infatuation, and the uncertainty about how to deal with the "Other" disappears. Ultimately, Hend, who immigrates to America "shouldering her solitude" (1), becomes a victim of alienation as her conception and perception are at variance with the experiences she gets.

These feelings of estrangement and foreignness, which pervade the narrative, bear witness to the protagonist's loss and disorientation. Her withdrawal and unease reveal the existence of impenetrable boundaries that keep her disconnected from the society in which she lives. Her trauma,

then, occurs on multiple levels, with the nature of her debilitating memories of Egypt being closely intertwined with and simultaneously embedded in her disappointments abroad. Hend's personal trauma extends to the dissolution of her marriage, resulting mainly from her husband's multiple spousal infidelities. Her diasporic identity enables her to strip off the gauze of nostalgia through which exiled persons often view their homelands. When in America, for instance, she is initially elated by her newfound freedom away from what she perceives as her family's stifling Bedouin social environment and the unwavering gazes of Egyptian society, all of which are seen an obstacle to success in Hend's struggle to achieve an autonomous identity. She feels that "she is free now," just as "she had always longed to be" (169). Yet the experience of displacement, with its associated socio-cultural and psychological trauma, is very hard and painful. In America, Hend lives a strange, sad, fragmented life that is nonetheless full of intensity. She begins to suffer from inner thoughts, mostly related to a conviction of isolation, randomness, and meaninglessness in her way of existence. She feels as if she stands on a journey that "took her nowhere" (136). She questions her new spaces, hoping vaguely for better opportunities: "I

came here from Cairo—why, I don't exactly know" (11). Allen Wood argues that human beings at bottom "are all alienated", if we either experience our lives as meaningless or ourselves as worthless, or else are capable of sustaining a sense of meaning and self-worth only with the help of illusions about ourselves or our condition" (cited in Rosemarie Tong, 101). Edmund Fuller suggests how such conditions of "despair" and the conviction of meaninglessness appear to afflict humans more than conditions of war, persecution, famine, and ruin" (3). These problems are really so pervasive because they threaten to corrode every sphere of human life as man fails to perceive the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a changing world.

Al-Tahawy further elaborates on how her protagonist, who leaves Egypt in "a last-ditch attempt to escape everything" that reminds her of her "failure" (130), is unable to adapt herself to the new environment. In this respect, the author touches on how "language" as one of the most significant factors that intensify the feelings of nostalgia, deepens the sense of alienation, and hinders integration in the host country. The author explores the impact of dislocation on the self as it is manifested by the linguistic alienation that Hend

experiences. Therefore, the first barrier erected between Hend and the rest of people around her starts with the language difference and the subsequent inability to communicate. The fact that she lacks in strong communication skills in English, however, makes the informal introduction she has with other immigrants "much simpler". They exchange with her "truncated sentences", as though she is "an outsider, not belonging" (12). Yet when she tries to draw the Arab immigrants into conversations in Arabic, they "never speak to her in Arabic", but "chatter together in bad English and claim that they know next to nothing about each other's countries because the Arab world is so big and wide and very different" (13). Eva Hoffman assumes that language for the exile is similar to culture, which she defines as the matrix that provides coherence to people's lives. The realization of the role culture plays, she argues, comes after the dislocation takes place. Only then does she realize that she and all human beings are "creatures of culture" (49). Like Hoffman, Iain Chambers reveals the strong relationship between language and culture when he asserts that language is not just a means of communication, but it is more importantly a whole set of cultural constructs that shapes one's identity.

Because language never exists in vacuum and is always punctuated by social, intellectual, and cultural contexts, its loss accentuates the feelings of estrangement from which the exile suffers (22-25).

As far as “language” is concerned, one may argue that both Arabic and English in Al-Tahawy’s narrative represent ‘homeland’ and ‘exile’, respectively. To Hend, Arabic, like ‘homeland’, is “an endangered language, a language that is slowly dying out, but she clings to it because unfortunately, she tends to get insanely attached to things” (13). English, on the other hand, reinforces the cultural barrier she feels in New York and reminds her of her poor ability to communicate in any other language. This makes it almost impossible for her to reach the point of thinking of the new country as ‘home’. Instead, she openly declares her embarrassment and sense of guilt for not being able to speak English fluently and confesses her uncanny feelings towards the language: “I really feel shy whenever I have to speak in English...The expression, “Excuse me, what did you say?” which I hear all the time, makes me freeze. I have a serious problem communicating with people...I feel my stupidity and ignorance more than at any other time in my life. I feel that I have to re-think so many things” (12). Thus, Hend’s incapacity to speak English is

utilized as a metaphorical implication of her alienation from people in the streets and from her own son who quickly masters the American accent. Unlike her son, she feels out of place, unable to catch the spoken idiom as her son does. The fact that her son adapts himself to American culture and quickly adopts American accent, adds to Hend’s sense of alienations because she realizes that the older he gets, the more she begins to realize that “they are each moving in opposite directions, and that she will have to let go soon” (17). Hence, her awareness of the need to assimilate replaces a strong feeling of alienation in the American environment. The exile that she regards as a shelter and an opportunity for her psychological healing does not eliminate her trauma, but just covers it up with an illusion of successful acculturation.

Hend’s feeling of alienation is furthered by her fear and anxiety for her eight-year-old son. When she goes to work on early mornings, she agonizes over his wellbeing and vulnerability in this new cultural setting: “She resents the thought of him waking up in an empty apartment, getting dressed by himself, struggling over his shoelaces. She won’t know for sure whether he’s wrapped his scarf tight around his neck against the biting cold or whether he’ll be safe crossing the street alone and

walking to school with no one to watch over him” (85-86). She is constantly preoccupied about how her son would act and feel: “Is he running through the playground now? Will he fall and break something on the slippery ground? Will the other kids make fun of his accent? Has he found someone to talk to, or is he still standing alone with his back to the wall like the other immigrant kids? Do the other kids give him the finger to test his cultural competence?” (87-88). Worst of all, Hend is haunted by fear that her heart might suddenly stop and she might “abandon him suddenly as her own mother abandoned her” (131), when she died of breast cancer. In her melancholic imagination, she envisions her son getting up in the morning, then shaking her cold, rigid body in a growing crescendo of terror. That is why she “has scrawled” the names and numbers of all the people she knows in Brooklyn on the kitchen wall and keeps his passport “visible” on the kitchen table”. In that way, he could easily be found and sent back to Egypt, “leaving her [dead] body to be tossed into any old cemetery” in Brooklyn (69).

As far as the theme of ‘alienation’ is concerned, Al-Tahawy once points out that her work “reveals what she fears; the feelings of sleeplessness, love and

estrangement” (215). It is, thus, ironic to find that the narrative occasionally states that Hend is plagued by oblivion and forgetfulness, despite its notable preoccupation with memory and recollection: “[Hend] now forgets a lot of things. She often leaves the food to burn on the stove and the smoke alarm disturbs her neighbors” (60). At night, she thinks about how she “has begun to forget so many thing”, and worries that her keen memory is “getting moldy” (4). Her belief that she is losing her memory and is slowly turning into an old woman are indicative of her failure of becoming part of her surrounding community. This also bears witness to the psychological pain triggered by exile in the sense that Hend acts like she is making an example of herself and is warning others of being in a situation similar to hers by showing them the damage she sustains.

Apparently, Hend’s sufferings are manifestations of a physical as well as a spiritual crisis. The novel takes us to the lower depths of human sufferings and the inferno of existential agony. It exposes human weaknesses, mostly related to feelings of loneliness, depression, forgetfulness, and senility. The author recounts how her protagonist is always in the habit of wearing a “black”, and “mannish” jacket to “screen off” her fear of

telltale markers of her age, like her “absent-mindedness, her impatience, her constant fatigue, her numerous delusions, and her insatiable need to walk and walk with no particular goal in mind” (115). Hend assumes that this jacket “expresses her fashion sense” (169), and transforms her into “someone else, anyone else” (170), seamlessly “blending into her surroundings” (31). Throughout, she also pictures herself as “nothing” but “an indefinite noun, a pitiful anonymity, a woman solitary and neglected...” (62). She, bewildered by her new world, is weary and in a constant state of existentialist ennui. She believes that she is always “defenseless and exposed”, “pathetic and belligerent” (82). She struggles with feelings of anxiety, and depression; always haunted by feelings of “emptiness and futility” (114); always “lives in a world of her own”; sleeps a lot because she is “always all alone”, and “doesn’t have anything particular to do” (65). Feeling alienated, Hend sees herself in the small “solitary drops” of rain and reflects on how “closely” she fits in “with the wretchedness around her”. She finds herself fits in with the “wretchedness” of the homeless people who sit “alone” and glance “longingly” at strangers with whom they “hope to exchange a smile or a few simple words” (100). She believes that her

road “began and ended in tears” (58), and her life has been “nothing” but “a series of adaptations of old movies” (165). With her superstitious fatalism and borderline hysteria, Hend is an awkward and often an unattractive character. She has never been “sociable, or vivacious and amusing”. Nobody can “penetrate the tough outer skin that she hid beneath” (89-90). Whenever she feels lonely, she bursts into “stinging tears,” raging against her own self. She cries bitter tears, and her heart “shudders as though it is about to grind to a halt” (133). Yet when not in danger of an emotional breakdown, she relishes her own sense of inadequacy and incompetence, in an almost self-exalting manner. With the passage of time, she realizes that she is “incapable for healing [her] wounds” (108). Instead, she looks upon her life as a “string of mistakes repeated with the same obstinate stupidity” (75); and her dreams are always “full of terror and the unknown” (131).

As such, Hend’s sufferings are also manifestations of a physical crisis. When she reflects on her own body, she discovers the awkwardness of her relationship to it across the years: “She did not love her body and she had never thought about it much before” (72). Instead, it has always been “an obscure question mark” (71). In her adolescence, Hend discovers that she is

“the only one” of her classmates who “had not yet been visited by the ‘sculptor of girl’ who ‘chisels out the curves of waists and breasts and bellies and buttocks, adding a touch here and there to the planes of the face, along with a smattering of face” (72). She frets about her body’s “imperfections” which result from pregnancy and childbirth, and the realization that her features are “stripped of all their usual veils,” wrinkled by the months and years, leaving her “with the profound feeling that her life is now all behind her” (75). Ultimately, her dreams of having “a brand new body never materialized” (74). Thus, when she looks at herself in the mirror, she “cannot find the little girl” she used to be. Instead, all she sees “a strange woman who looks like her” (170). Then, she cries and desperately searches in every corner “for that little girl who used to live inside her...” (108). Like her body, Hend’s hair becomes a “reliable barometer of the generally wretched state of her emotional health”. It falls out in clumps and grows thin and frizzy “as a result of her many fits of jealousy and bouts of depression, as though sharing in the wasteland of her loneliness. Ultimately, she cuts it short, then regrets having done so “because now she could no longer recognize the girl looking out at her from the mirror” (168). She wonders how she

turns into a “plump woman with short hair, crushed by fear, seeking out imaginary walls to flatten herself against” (62). When she stands gazing in the mirror at the strands of her hair that fall away when she tugs at them with her hand, she finds them lying “in stray piles on the floor like a hodgepodge of memories waiting to be gathered up and tossed in the waste bin” (169).

Hend’s interior life is rich and full of yearning, fueled variously by escape fantasies borrowed from critical self-reflection and self-loathing. She believes that she is always moving in the wrong direction, always pretending to be strong when in reality she quakes in mortal fear, always wanting things but never reaching out for them, never knowing the difference between truth and illusion. The narrative, however, locates the roots of Hend’s sense of ‘alienation’ in America in her own ‘alienation’ in her homeland, Egypt. As the youngest and only daughter in her family, Hend had a frustrated relationship with her mother, who herself leads a frustrated life she passes on to her daughter. The author points out how Hend’s feeling of “alienation” and low self-esteem is partly caused by this mother who constantly belittles her daughter by telling her that she is not beautiful, definitely not the princess

that she thinks she would grow up to be (159). Hend still remembers the various humiliating nicknames her mother used to address her with: “‘Gap-tooth’, ‘Bucky’, or ‘Thumbs’”. The list also includes other nicknames, such as ‘Little demon’, ‘Loopy’, and ‘Head-in-the-clouds’” (47). Thus, instead of confirming her daughter’s existence, Hend’s mother undermines her daughter’s social existence and detaches herself from her. Hend’s relation with her mother is actually reminiscent of Al-Tahawy’s relation with her own mother. In an interview with Jaya Bhattacharji, the author relates how her relationship with her mother affects her life and how her mother dismissed her as “abnormal” and “untalented”: “It is a very hard relationship with my mother as she cannot make distance between her dream and me. She cannot understand this image about myself. She affects [my] self-confidence” (1). Ann Foreman argues that since a woman’s sense of self is entirely dependent on her families’ appreciation of her, this feeling of ‘alienation’ at home is “profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves not as selves but as “others” (102). Thus, against this suffering from human relationships the individual can keep himself/herself aloof from other people, or withdraw from them, as it is the case with

Hend, who, feeling humiliated and threatened, only feels herself when detached from others, preferring to live in a state of self-ensnarement. Like Foreman, Sidney Finkelstein points out that “this feeling of ‘estrangement’ intensifies when the bonds between one and others become tighter”. In that case, the individual “becomes alienated”, not only from the “others”, “but from himself” (136).

In America, however, the bitterness remains as Hend finds herself aimless, caught in memories of the past, and psychically adrift. She moves through the maze of the past and the present and penetratingly records a grim but productive encounter with life. Apparently, her problem lies in the fact that she cannot steer a course between letting go and holding on. Despite her desperate efforts to keep the unsettling memories of the past at bay, her unassimilated past often breaks through the protective shield of numbing. Thus, in creating a fantasy world and distorting the reality she cannot possibly assimilate into her life, she resumes her life narrative in her own way and manages to maintain some measure of continuity in her life, although it completely isolates her from others and from reality and ultimately leads to her social and psychological alienation. Homi Bhabha assumes how the spheres of

private and public, past and present, the psyche and social develop an interstitial intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often opposed". These spheres of life, Bhahba continues, "are linked through an 'in-between' temporality that takes the measures of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history" (13). In light of Bhahba's view one can assume that the 'home' trope for Hend is not the site of nostalgic longing; rather, it is there to remind her of the maladies that plague the homeland's body. Thus, healing the inherent wounds, reconstructing a healthier homeland is crucial to her mission in Brooklyn Heights. In so doing, there is a past to be learned about, as something that has to be told. It is grasped through memory and reconstruction. This 'troubled' past and Al-Tahawy's participation in its construction has to be questioned, traced through memories, and reconstructed anew. However, the stance of looking back is fraught with conflicting emotions of longing and loss, fear of return to homeland, as well as anxieties generated from recollecting that traumatic past. On the other hand, the 'exile' trope for Hend is no more than a place that "confirms her

solitude and verifies her talent for escaping" (5).

In other words, Hend's presence in America is characterized by a focus on the past evident in her inability to integrate herself into mainstream American life. This is also reminiscent of the author's own experience in America. In her interview with *The New York Times*, the author reveals how she wrote *Brooklyn Heights* while "split" between two worlds: "[T]he world I was coming from and which had become very sharp in my memory, and the place where I am living, with its contradiction and contrast, variations and harmony" (2). Thus, the author employs juxtapositions or parallelisms as she explores places in both Egypt and Brooklyn. These places do not, however, turn out to be so radically different. The world of the margins the novel depicts in Egypt emerges as parallel to that of their likes in America. The reader is at once taken to the bridge, the park, and the avenue, juxtaposed to the Bedouin village and hills where the protagonist lives, and the Cairo her parents used to know. While wandering through Brooklyn, Hend comes across the Mexican neighborhood and watches the "unemployed" day laborers standing in groups on the wide sidewalks. Those "less fortunate" remind her of the

day laborers she used to see scattered in squares and on the narrow sidewalks back home in Cairo, waiting “patiently for small jobs that may or may not materialize” (18). In this context, one may argue that though Al-Tahawy creates a narrative invested in interethnic encounters, she does not present a romanticized ideal of either Egypt or America. Instead, she constantly refers to blemishes in the much-celebrated Western democracy and repeatedly invokes social injustices in her own country. She assumes that each culture creates its own margins, and that is what makes them the same in spite of their differences. The author told *The National* that her protagonist is basically “a mirror to talk about the kind of societies we have in Egypt and America”, and what the narrative ends up saying is that actually “we are pretty similar” (2). In so doing, Al-Tahawy balances out her critique of the Egyptian culture by presenting a similar critique the American culture, a strategy repeatedly used throughout *Brooklyn Heights*. This dual focus allows her to be self-critical while reminding Western readers of similarly problematic areas in their own culture, such as slavery, racism, sexism, imperialism, and prejudice. She further shows how her view of America is not drawn in contrast to her homeland, but is projected as a continuum,

through memories of her homeland. In so doing, she facilitates cultural translations between the “Self” and the “Other” that enlighten her knowledge of each other and of herself.

In her critique of American culture Al-Tahawy first alludes to the “dark-skinned women” Hend meets in the narrow streets of Fort Greene —home to the largest community of African-Americans in Brooklyn— and feels close with because they belong to the same continent that is also hers” (5). In a sense, the allusion to this African-American community and the “dark-skinned women” may be taken as a reference to the history of American slavery of the black people. The fact that these dark-skinned women still “speak at breakneck speed”, and keep many of their cultural characteristics, as represented by “the African caftans, chili and spices, oils and perfumes and colorful jewelry of the hot, brown continent (5) is another allusion to their ongoing “segregation” within the American society. The author further goes on to express her critique of the social injustices that make Brooklyn a city of “contradictions” (157) and turn New York into “a giant meat grinder” that will hail you as long as you are in service. But once your “gears” become “rusted”, you will be “tossed in the garbage” (141). The author

deplores the city which is marked by its “heartlessness and inhumanity”, the number of “vagrants and homeless people” that wander its streets, and the old people in the parks, “neglected by children” who have no time for anything but making money. Now, these “unserviceable” old-aged people spend their times “alone” on empty benches, looking for a spot in the sunshine and trying hard to ignore the pains of their “loneliness and old age” (145). She further wonders how such a “cruel” city could produce “all this human misery”, while people call it the apple of the world! (141). Al-Tahawy contends that Americans are “not as free as they claim”, because they become ‘slaves’ to materialism, consumerism, and “money and survival form the axis on which everything turns”. She wonders about “the kind of life that forces you to bow down to a customer just because he hands you a few pennies...which you might even die before you manage it” (141). She further dismisses the supposedly “free” American media with its “propaganda” and “calculated manipulations of people’s states, thoughts and choices” (41). In doing so, the author hammers home the idea that the America media is not much different from the official state media in Egypt or anywhere

else and the social injustices in Egypt have their counterparts in America.

Besides her critique of these patriarchal structures, Al-Tahawy is also critical of the “fake religiosity” within the Egyptian society, as represented by her father who recites the Qur’an and narrates the stories of the prophets to his children while he consumes alcohol (55). There is also the story of Hend’s art teacher who pretends to be “pious” and “God-fearing”, to an extent that he forbids his students from drawing human beings, or any creature with a soul, but to “draw landscapes that illuminate the Creator’s infinite wisdom” (162), meanwhile he impregnates one of his students and runs away with her (163). Al-Tahawy also exemplifies the manipulation and abuse of religion through the story of the Arabic teacher who spends his time in class “stuffing his cigarettes with hashish” (110), and staring at his pupils’ bodies” (99, 109), and who travels to Yemen without bidding farewell to his mother, but he returns “with a prayer mark on his forehead” and “a pure white jilbab”. Since then, he begins to spend all his time in the mosque, preaching to people and leading them in prayers, becoming famous for his “eloquence and zeal” and the words which bring tears to his audience (111). Meanwhile, he opens a chain of stores,

giving them Islamic names; ‘al-Baraka’, ‘al-Quds’, and ‘al-Furqan’” (111). As is clear, all these characters represent the schizophrenic Arab male who is simultaneously a devout Muslim and an alcoholic, predator, or swindler.

Yet while *Brooklyn Heights* mirrors the unusual trajectory of Hend’s diasporic experience in America, it also addresses the worries immigrants face. Many leave their homeland for serious reasons but all do so with a picture of a new beginning, a bright future where they can grasp whatever they have been dreaming of attaining. The narrative stresses the lament of being ‘displaced’ and the painful alienations and loneliness imposed by exile. As Edward Said puts it, “[e]xile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience”. It is the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted”, he adds (173). Yet Hend, who feels dislocated and ‘out of place’, begins to identify herself with similar female immigrants who share a common bond as exilic subjects. In spite of the wide variety of backgrounds and countries of origin, hope of a new life and loss of a former life form a common thread that connects each character; and yet, ironically, their loneliness and

disappointment also prevent these immigrants from reaching out and forming the bond of companionship that each so dearly crave.

Al-Tahawy introduces the stories of many Arabs and non-Arab immigrants who come to America, either in flight from their former lives or with the hope to re-invent themselves, but are still unable to fulfill the dreams they come for. She first introduces a large number of emigrant female characters representing numerous issues pertaining to women in both East and West. The author portrays deep portraits of these ill-fated women, without undercutting their dignity. She also reflects the social context in which she creates them, providing a glimpse of life in exile. The lives of these immigrants are always a struggle for dreams they might not attain or fulfil. Rather, many of them reach a point of despair as they reflect on the gulf between their new lives and their dreams. We see, for instance, the emigrant female workers who are “in high demand”, because their wages “are generally lower”, and because employers imagine that women of color are better at communicating with customers who look like them...” (85). We also encounter other less fortunate female immigrants and refugees, such as Dawji, the Haitian girl who cleans houses in Hend’s neighborhood

(179); Nazahat, the Bosnian refugee, who used to be a doctor in her country and is an “an expert at diagnosing and treating all kinds of aches and pains” (103), but who ends up doing shopping for the rich Yemeni families and sewing shrouds for the dead (103, 179); the Mexican Jojo who tells fortunes for the passersby; the eighty-year-old Russian Emilia who spends her time rummaging the garbage bins for old shoes so that she can sell on Saturdays flea market (40); or the Somali Fatima who works as a cashier, but has no stable place to sleep in and spends most of her time rubbing her inflamed pimples caused by bedbugs (86-88).

Clearly, Al-Tahawy’s inclusion of these immigrants in her narrative paints a vivid and dynamic picture of their inner world of contradictions ensuing from the gap between their former and new lives, and their hopes for self-fulfillment and despair. These characters also mirror Al-Tahawy’s personal obsession with bearing witness to a cruel world full of miserable women coming from the four corners of the earth. Through an examination of the inner world of Hend and also the lives and minds of the other female immigrants she meets in her long walks across Brooklyn as she attempts to adjust to her new environment, the author also tries to create a metaphorical

unity between the protagonist and the other female émigrés and builds a forlorn yet vibrant portrait of the emigrant community in Brooklyn. In so doing, she creates a kaleidoscope that underscores the way in which one’s life is made up of the myriad experiences he/she has, and achieves a realistic but compelling portrayal of the emotional turbulence and hardships of life.

Notably, Al-Tahawy weaves Hend’s story seamlessly between the lives of fellow immigrants her protagonist meets in Brooklyn Heights and the memories of her own life and the lives of others back in Egypt. Both she and these immigrants have big dreams, yet the freedom they seek is mired in the pasts they are desperate to escape. These pasts invariably include testimonies of emotional abuse and humanitarian asylum, wives beaten and abandoned by husbands, daughters brutalized by parents, brothers and sons turned into fanatics. When she visits the Refugee Assistance Agency to seek handouts and food stamps, she sees women from “Burma and Bosnia”, “Iraqi women in cheerless black robes, fair-skinned Kurdish women, and Afghans with “bright, flushed faces” (103). She feels a strong affinity with the abused Uzbek women seeking asylum: “Their papers are marked ‘physical and emotional abuse...humanitarian

asylum’– phrases that Hend understands too well” (105). She further discovers that each of the women taking classes with her at the dance studio “seems to turn in circles around her own failures”. The music is “always sad”, and the lyrics are about “weeping women” and the men who “abandoned them” (80). Like Hend, these women are still into their thirties, but “little wrinkles had begun to sprout at the edges of their faces”. Like Hend too, most of these women have been “recently divorced”. She can see these women “calmly watching life pass by and aching to become a part of it” (81).

Ironically, then, Hend, who believes that she “resembles no one” (13), and her unfinished collection of poetry is entitled *I am Like No Other* (2), detects parallels between herself and the characters she meets in Brooklyn until she becomes convinced that “[w]e all become sorry copies of each other in the end” (182). The immigrants she meets conjure up parallel memories from her childhood and her small Bedouin village in the Nile Delta. These encounters awaken memories and evoke connections. Hend discovers that everything around her “invites nostalgia” (2), and people seem to “reflect her own image back” in Egypt (2). The people she meets remind her of those she used to

know; places she visits take her back, in her mind, to where she used to be. Besides, she comes to realize that the exilic women around her “look exactly like herself in ways that are painful, frightening, and comforting at the same time” (11). For example, she finds in herself a “carbon copy” of the Russian Emilia; the two women “enjoyed being alone in each other’s company” (42). She also panics at the realization that she is Lilith, the Egyptian aristocrat who loses her memory. When Lilith passes away and her belongings are thrown on sidewalks, Hend accidentally pokes around and rummage in these boxes to panic from the similarities she discovers between herself and Lilith. She realizes that her words and Lilith’s are the same, their photos are the same, their stories are the same, their sons look alike, and their fates are probably similar: “Doesn’t she look a little like me? Isn’t that old scar under her eyebrow like the one I have? Doesn’t this boy look like my son? I know these papers...And I know that I’ve written every word in them myself, she thinks. This is my handwriting, they belong to me...I feel like I’ve lived all this before, that these letters are mine, these words are mine” (181). Strikingly, whenever Hend wanders around Brooklyn, she herself is often mistaken for many ethnic identities.

For example, when she wanders in the Jewish neighborhood, some of the passersby mistake her as an Orthodox or an Oriental Jew. The Latinos also think she is “one of them,” and the Indians mistake her for a “Kashmiri,” while other immigrant communities claim her as “one of their own” (169-170).

Thus, disillusioned by the failure of their aspirations to materialize after immigrating to America and equally dissatisfied with life in diaspora, these immigrants wallow in despair that make their foreignness impotent rather than oppositional. The quest for self-realization and the fulfillment of dreams appear to be within reach, but they remain an illusion. Reality is a painstaking endeavor, though it may be futile. In between reality and illusion lies the vast area of human predicament in exile. It is this area which Al-Tahawy tries to explore. Thereby, the pathos of exile and futility of the fulfillment of dreams remain as irreconcilable existential problems of the modern world. Through this kaleidoscopic spectrum of disadvantaged characters, we encounter unique but familiar life histories in Al-Tahawy’s narrative. The author not only reveals the kind of injustices and abuse faced by immigrants but also their ways in understanding and navigating the struggles they have to intake. In this way,

the novel is laudable, not only for giving voice to marginal, oppressed, sometimes silent characters, but for evoking a vanishing world of those forced to leave their homelands

Conclusion

Miral Al-Tahawy’s *Brooklyn Heights* pertains to racialized formulations of otherness, alienation, and marginalization. It is also quintessentially a poetic novel of alienation and displacement. It is a humanistic work that represents the individual experience as it intersects with the vastness of a labyrinthine world. While the author shares her experience of life in both Egypt and America, she generalizes her experience beyond the bounds of gender or race. The voluntary move away from ‘home’ helps Al-Tahawy gain a broader perspective on history and culture, thus allowing her to act as the agent of social transformation. Through her portrayal of the emotional turbulence and hardships of life, readers obtain an easy yet insightful glimpse into the colorful histories, origins and ongoing stories of the immigrants and residents that Al-Tahawy’s protagonist encounters both in Brooklyn and in her childhood home in Egypt. In a sense, the novel is an authentic study of

human relationship bedeviled by exile and cultural encounters. The novel underscores the interactions of its main character, Hend, a displaced single mother and a Bedouin from Egypt, with similarly struggling Arab and non-Arab immigrants in Brooklyn. The protagonist and other immigrants find themselves questioning the new spaces to which they come, hoping for better opportunities. Moreover, the novel is deeply invested in depicting issues of Arabs or Arab-Americans' assimilation into the American mainstream. It depicts the complex facets of Arab migrant experience in the U.S., especially in contemporary

times. Though these forms of dislocation, namely exile, diaspora, and migration, have been productively and extensively explored in both postcolonial theory and literary texts, what makes *Brooklyn Heights* different is the fact that the narrative is less overtly political, and relatively disengaged from American politics. It is true that the text focuses upon spaces of 'Otherness', but it tends towards the deeply personal, and creates interesting transnational connections through a wide cast of multi-racial immigrants and refugees.

NOTES:

¹**Trauma**, in my analysis, refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. Descriptions of the geographic place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self.

² Miral Al-Tahawy. *Brooklyn Heights*. Translation by Samah Selim. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

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