COSMOPOLITANISM AND NARRATION: THE DIGITAL TALE

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I will focus on a group of Arab female bloggers, questioning the notions of 'exile' and 'cosmopolitanism'. Bilingual, bi-cultural interpreters of their societies, these women are offereing their views on the ongoing Arab revolts to people living away. Thanks to a media environment easy to access and to personalize, they can become active members of a 'community of equals', gaining the space of expression they often lack in their societies.

I. Exile and cosmopolitanism

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said makes a distinction between 'cosmopolitanism' and 'exile', between the "incurable loss of the exile" and cosmopolitan "romanticism" (1984: 175): "Paris may be a capital famous for cosmopolitan exiles, but it is also a city where unknown men and women have spent years of miserable loneliness: [...] the hopelessy large numbers, the compounded misery of 'undocumented' people suddenly lost, without a tellable history"(ibid: 176). At the same time, this distinction can be put in perspective when considering exile in its more private dimension. Speaking of the opposite and interconnected phenomena of exile and nationalism, Said claims that "… both terms include everything from the most collective of collective sentiments to the most private of private emotions, there is hardly language adequate for both. But there is certainly nothing about nationalism's public and all-inclusive ambitions that touches the core of the exile's predicament. Because exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being"(ibid: 177).

Probably, one of the most interesting aspects of Said's perspective on exile is the emphasis on the possibilities provided by this "discontinuous state of being". Even if loss is never underestimated by Said, at the same time he recognizes in exile a possibility for strengthening individual skills, with an emphasis on mobility and the use of technologies of expression that allow both the individual and the community to share and transform memories: "Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity" (ibid: 184). The subjectivity Said speaks about, is especially conscious of the fact that "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions" (ibid:186). This description seem to apply well to the life conditions of some female bloggers, who are constantly translating their personal/collective stories for an audience which is different in culture and language.

In *Strangers to Oneself,* Julia Kristeva argues that "Those who have never lost the slightest root seem to you unable to understand any word liable to temper their point of view […]. The ear is receptive to conflicts only if the body loses its footing" (1994: 17). What Kristeva describes seems to be close to the idea of solidarity, connecting different cosmopolitan communities, depicted by Jacques Derrida in On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness (2003). The communities that Derrida portrays are 'cities of refuge' that offer asylum to exiled writers; this idea is not so far from that of the cyber cosmopolitan communities offering visibility to men and women who are oppressed in their real societies:

"That, in effect, very much resembles a new cosmo-politics. We have undertaken to bring about the proclamation and institution of numerous and, above all, autonomous 'cities of refuge', each as independent from the other and from the state as possible, but, nevertheless, allied to each other according to forms of solidarity yet to be invented. "(Derrida 2003: 4).

Both the 'cities of refuge' and the 'cyber citizens' can be considered as examples of different "imagined communities" - as Benedict Anderson defined the groups of people connected by "invented" forms of solidarity, that were at the basis of the birth of nation-states. These connections can rely on different kinds of media, used independently or simultaneously. Following the works of theorists such as Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Manuel Castells (1996), we can re-consider the condition of exile as a phenomenon that follows the planetary fluxes of images and information produced through the satellite and the web communication systems. On the one hand, we can consider the use of communicative platforms by immigrants and exiled people, that allows the mediated rebuilding of diasporic communities (Aksoy & Robins, 2006); on the other hand, some of these "imagined communities" develop new forms of social grouping and new identities (Giddens 1991), based on unconventional forms of social inclusion and exclusion.

II. Women and blogs in the MENA region

The use of blogs and social networks acquired a particular relevance in the countries undergoing political and social crisis, as for some of the Arab states. Recently, despite the persisting high levels of illiteracy and the difficult social and political position for female citizens in most of the Middle-Eastern/North African region, women seem to have played a central role both in participating to the protests in the streets and in narrating these events. Particularly through their personal blogs, they seem to have gained and managed a "technical and cultural control over external representations" (Brock, Kvasny & Hales, 2010) - representations that, in the specific cases of the region, are constructed by Western mainstream media.

Blogs have been interpreted as privileged spaces for the convergence of the private and the public sphere, "the means by which the 'feminine' voices, previously excluded from public discourse and kept hidden in the 'private' sphere, can now be released" in a public/politic environment (Kambouri & Hatzopoulos, 2007). Similarly, Fatema Mernissi (2005) describes the effects of the digitalization process in the MENA region:

"The key problem giving anxiety to elites and masses, to heads of states and street-vendors, to men and women in the Arab world today is the digital chaos induced by Information Technologies such as the internet and the satellite which has destroyed the *hudud*, the space frontier which divided the universe into a sheltered private arena where women and children were supposed to be protected, and a public one where adult males exercised their presumed problem-solving authority".

III. Blogs and narrations of war

During the past years, an increasingly high number of citizens have taken part in the collective narration of events of social/political relevance through blogs. In the case of the Iraq war, two of the most popular sources were the blogs of Salam Pax and Riverbend, a male and a female Iraqi citizen reporting, in English, the everyday implications of the U.S. invasion. Seven years later, the political revolts spreading from one country to another in the Arab region seem to acknowledge an even bigger role to the blogosphere and social networks, actively used by a huge number of citizens of different ages, gender and social conditions to promote revolutionary contents and to consolidate virtual communities, overcoming their oppressing regimes' control.

In this sense, blogs can be considered as pieces of postcolonial re-writings, that question the cultural and geographical centres, and especially the vertical structure of traditional media, making the hidden archives, that are part of our everyday life, visible.

Being spaces of questioning, these blogs often represent an alterity that cannot usually find place in the outside world; bloggers are often themselves a mixture of cultures and identities, acting as cultural mediators and interpreters – otherwise, as Salam Pax writes in one of his posts, "'Western' readers wouldn't get it, because it would be so out of their cultural sphere" (2003). They try to render the sufferance and anger, the horrible conditions of life of the populations they belong to, comprehensible; to make them emotionally and rationally understandable to people who belong to other cultures, through their mastering of the English language and their cosmopolitan education. Their position is often accompanied by a feeling of being a stranger and a betrayer in both cultures, experiencing the same tension of the 'exiled' person. Later in the same post, Salam Pax confesses:

"I feel like the embodiment of cultural betrayal. The total sell-out – and this is making me contradict myself all the time. [...] This is not the dialogue of equals we used to talk about. I keep making references to their – everything – because I am so swallowed up by it". [December 21, 2002].

Particularly in the case of the Arab female blogs, these digital diaries become the spaces where it is possible to negotiate the author's identity both inside and outside the political and social contexts. This happens thanks to the exchange with the readers - people from all over the world, mainly from Western countries - who become the loyal followers of these chronicles, giving the authors a well-defined role within the cosmopolitan public sphere. In order to allow the readers to identify with the experience of their everyday lives, each blogger choses a different strategy. Riverbend's blog, born in Iraq in 2003, is one of the best examples of a "domestic perspective" on the outside war. Here is one of her chronicles of the post-war period, implicitly underlining the fact that the Iraqi population consists of "normal" people living an absurd and nonsensical situation. provoking a kind of "It could be you" effect.:

"My mother stood anxiously by the open kitchen door, looking out at my father who was standing at the gate. E. and I ran outside to join him and watch the scene unfolding only 3 houses away. [...] I'll never forget that scene. She stood, 22 years old, shivering in the warm, black night. The sleeveless nightgown that hung just below her knees exposed trembling limbs- you got the sense that the troops were holding her by the arms because if they let go for just a moment, she would fall senseless to the ground. [...] It was the first time I had seen her hair… under normal circumstances, she wore a hijab. That moment I wanted to cry… to scream… to throw something at the chaos down the street. I could feel Reem's humiliation as she stood there, head hanging with shame - exposed to the world, in the middle of the night". [September 19, 2003]

For Riverbend, claiming that Iraqi civilians are "common, normal people" also means to defend the conditions that Iraq women apparently used to enjoy before the United States' invasion:

"I am female and Muslim. Before the occupation, I more or less dressed the way I wanted to. I lived in jeans and cotton pants and comfortable shirts. Now, I don't dare leave the house in pants. A long skirt and loose shirt (preferably with long sleeves) has become necessary. A girl wearing jeans risks being attacked, abducted or insulted by fundamentalists who have been… liberated!" [August 23, 2003]

IV. The 2011 Arab revolts seen through female blogs

In the case of female blogs that narrate the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia between January and March 2011, there seems to be a constant attempt to keep national and female issues together, sometimes with uncertain results. On her blog (justurhead.blogspot.com), the Egyptian Eman Hashim writes:

"I chose to look for the bigger picture, just neglecting women role in the constitution reforming committee, which included only men, as to put aside any battles that will distract us from the main bigger goal… The Revolution. But I think now is the time to say it loud: stating a constitutional amendment that will prevent women from the possibility of running for presidential elections is not and will not be accepted". [March 8, 2011]

In other occasions, the revolt seems to be an extraordinary occasion for allowing women to take part into the public life of their country for the first time. Bloggers can be found giving a patriotic nuance to the posts, as with Afrah Nasser, a young Yemenite journalist (afrahnasser.blogspot.com), now exiled in Sweden, who writes:

"Minutes ago, I was at a Men's rally where hundreds of thousands of Yemenis marched through Sana'a's streets. I marched with them. Keep in mind that Yemeni women never march with men for social, cultural and/or religious reasons, but I did it! It was an amazing feeling.. I had nothing but looks of respect and care from the men demonstrators. Long live my beloved people and my country!". [April 13, 2011]

These digital diaries are always made of different media, a personal bricolage of various means of expression - short movies, cartoons, literary pages - that contribute to the construction of another world, and the re-invention of the limited freedom of action that affects their lives. As Amira Al Hussaini summarizes on her blog homepage, provocatively called *Silly Bahraini Girl* (http://sillybahrainigirl.blogspot.com/):

"Silly Bahraini Girl is a blog for all of us - women blessed with a brain which ticks and a heart that throbs. A Bahraini girl is never silly but there are some factions out there who insist that we are not given our place in the society".

Even if most of these women denounce big limitations in female rights in their countries, they are well aware of their universal rights as cosmopolitan citizens. At the same time, their blogs are the platforms where to re-discuss the international representations of Arab societies. As Eman Al Nafjan explains in the "About" section of her blog, "There are so many non Arabs and non Saudis out there giving 'expert'

opinions on life and culture here, hence my blog. Get it straight from the source: Saudi, genetically wahabi and a woman" (http://saudiwoman.wordpress.com). Eman's objective, among many others, is to reach her reader directly, in order to negotiate those individual and collective representations she considers to be inaccurate. Her readers seem to be thankful for this approach, as demonstrated by many comments on her blog:

"It's intriguing to see what life is like in other parts of the world that are so different from mine. In America we have such pre-conceived ideas about other nations and their people that we get from our media. Most people believe it as truth and never take it upon themselves to discover the truth for themselves. Yes, there are differences. But not all differences are bad. We are all people. We all laugh, cry, hope, dream, breathe, love, die. We just do it differently" . [*loisanne67*, February 24, 2010]

In the central days of the revolts, the blog's task was to spread the 'revolutionary' view of the political situation, and to overcome the barriers of language. As it emerges in this exchange of opinions on the blog of the Yemenite Afrah Nasser, when answering one of her readers:

Nadia said...
The world is indeed thirsty to hear from Arab youth because most information available is in Arabic. For example, without blogs like yours how else would they know what's going on in Yemen?

Afrah Nasser said...
Nadia, my dear sis, I agree with what you mentioned. We have to tell our countries' stories in all languages so harmony could exist! [May 19, 2011]

Such a truly, even if simplified, cosmopolitan view of the world politics gives a pivotal role to new media. This role is also of direct witnessing for the ones who are unable to participate to the events. We can see it in the comments to a post of *A Tunisian Girl*, the blog by the political activist Lina Ben Mhenni (atunisiangirl.blogspot.com):

"I'm another Tunisian citizen of the world livin in France. We are so proud of you here and in so many other places... we just have to look at Egypt! But we're also so scared for you too, and so frustrated not to be there with you all right now, in Tunisia! […]You have already proved that we can fight for freedom! And gain it! […] And your precious posts are here to tell! You, our eye-witness, and even ear-witness! I know. You among others. You, a Tunisian girl, among others. You are not alone! [*Anonyme*, January 29, 2011]

There is a final element that unifies the narration of these women, a kind of temporal displacement, the fact they often offer a view of the present from the perspective of the past. The Syrian blogger Mariyah (mariyahsblog.com) on February 2, 2011, comments on the revolts in Egypt with a long quotation from Khalil Gibran, and publishes episodes of a novel based on her parents' story. The Egyptian Zeinobia (egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com) describes herself in the "About" section of her blog with these words: "I am just an Egyptian girl who lives in the present with the glories of the past and hopes in a better future for herself and for her country". The need to connect the present with the past, and the will to regain possession of this past in the contemporary Arab societies, has been stressed by Fatema Mernissi (2005) when she speaks of the state rulers' despotic attitude to the access to museums and to other art institutions. "It is this despotic appropriation of the past and all innovative domains from arts to domestic crafts by the rulers which explains why the issue of museums and time navigation are such sensitive

topics in the Arab media today" (Mernissi 2005, personal website). In the same online article, you can find her intense warning:

"The challenge for the intellectuals is to help rulers to equip the youth to surf responsibly on the internet by inventing futuristic solutions which equip them to navigate not in space only but also in time. Mastering time is the secret of graceful navigation in a globalized planet where meeting strangers daily is the only way to make a living. To travel in the past, that is to navigate in time, is the best way to teach oneself tolerance, and respect for diversity".

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