

**New Historicism and Postcolonialism in the
Autobiographies of Penelope Lively and Radwa
Ashour: A Comparative Study**

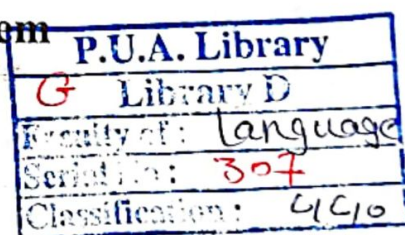
A Thesis Submitted by
Heba Gaber Abd ElAziz
For the Degree of MA



Supervisors

Prof. Amira H. Nowaira

Prof. Heba M. Sharobeem



Department of English Language and Literature

Faculty of Arts

University of Alexandria

2011

Conclusion

The study presents New Historicist and Postcolonial readings of Radwa Ashour's autobiographical fiction, *Atyaf* and Penelope Lively's memoir, *Cleander, Jacaranda*. The research is divided into theoretical and practical parts. The theoretical part focuses on the relationship between New Historicism, Postcolonialism and autobiography. The practical part applies the findings of the theoretical part to the autobiographies at hand.

Chapter One, "New Historicism and Autobiography", thoroughly inspects the theory of New Historicism. Greenblatt's definition of the term as a practice rather than a set of doctrines is highlighted as a basic New Historicist concern. The chapter differentiates between New Historicism and New Criticism to show the differences between the two schools. Based on this New Historicist background, the chapter compares New Historicism to autobiography as they reread events in people's lives.

The chapter has come to the conclusion that there is a clear relation between New Historicism, as a critical school, and autobiography, as a literary genre. The study mentions that the concern with autobiography comes parallel to the rise of New Historicism in the 1960s. As much as New Historicism views history sceptically, autobiography reflects changing understandings of events. New Historicism and autobiography believe that different discourses at work affect and reflect a great deal about the author and the text. In fact, the different discourses at work mix private and public matters, present and past and fact and fiction.

The study concludes that the similarities between New Historicism and autobiography can be summarized in three points. First, New Historicism and

autobiography reread history because historical narrative is subjective. Second, New Historicism and autobiography include the cultural, social and political discourses at work in any given age in the interpretation of historical events. Each discourse represents a text and the various texts are of the same importance. Any text may yield information valuable in understanding a particular milieu. Third, New Historicism and autobiography assert that the different discourses do not form a backdrop because of their diversity but they work at any given time to affect not only the author and his/her text but also the reader because both the reader and the text are inescapably part of the social construct.

Chapter Two, "New Historicism in *Atyaf* and *Oleander, Jacaranda*", traces a rereading of Egypt's history during colonial and postcolonial periods. The chapter explores Ashour and Lively's usage of New Historicist techniques like "subversion" and "containment". Montrose's notions of "historicity of the text" and "textuality of history" are applied to both texts.

The study concludes in the second chapter that both autobiographies lend themselves to the school of New Historicism. While Ashour subverts the theme of Arab subjugation, Lively subverts Eurocentric ideas of superiority and dominance. Ashour's autobiographical work dramatizes the end of history through the "subversion" of the "Arab subjugation theme". The chapter highlights that regimes or governments establish their patterns of dominance, subordination and dependency. Ashour "subverts" the roles of governments in writing history by promoting and enhancing the roles of peoples. The study stresses that Ashour depends on peoples' testimonies rather than official books or certificates to New Historically write about the massacres of Deir Yassin and Sabra and Shatila. It is noticed that Ashour calls for

social and cultural change through presenting the Arab indifference towards the massacres. Thus, the mourning of Arab civilization loss is a way to articulate ideas about change and development.

The chapter observes that Lively presents a counter history to the Eurocentric ideology through her description of the colonial encounter. Lively subverts the Eurocentric historical "truths" about World War II and the imperial context in Egypt through moulding an informal imperial context. The study notes that the choice of a "child" as the mediator of "informality" is of prime significance. The chapter notices that although Lively subverts the idea that the empire aims at sustaining order and civilization in its colonies, she justifies the colonial presence in Egypt by mentioning that the British occupation is the last ring in two thousand years of occupation. This contradiction explains the cultural confusion that Lively experiences due to her early subjugation to two different cultures.

The chapter concludes that Ashour contains the idea of the importance of the female agent in changing social realities and Lively also contains the female as the vehicle of reshaping ideologies and concepts. Ashour gives Shagar a central narrating role. The role of the female autobiographer enables the protagonist to resist the marginalization of voice and space. In this way, Ashour questions the validity of the dominant logic in patriarchal societies where women are defined in terms of lack of rationality and silence. In a similar fashion, Lively subverts male centered traditions of autobiography writing through a subversion of the male obsession with the "self" into an obsession with the world and life. Finally, the chapter observes that Ashour uses oral tradition to recapture neglected histories, whereas Lively uses landscape

history to trace historical changes. The study illuminates that oral tradition and landscape history are used by the writers as New Historicist techniques.

Chapter Three, "Postcolonialism and Autobiography", shows a definition of Postcolonialism as a set of theories developed and studied by émigré intellectuals from the Third World in the more developed world. The research discusses that colonialism uses education, in general, and the study of language, in particular, to promote imperialistic ideologies. The chapter explains Bhabha's notions of cultural hybridity as a source of confusion to the colonizer and colonized. It shows that the desire for self reproduction and investigation does not lead to the exchange of ideas nor cultural integration but rather confusion and tension. This chapter hints upon the Feminist Postcolonial agenda and places emphasis on the works of Spivak. In conclusion, it examines the relation between Postcolonialism and autobiography.

The third chapter has proven that the genre of autobiography and Postcolonialism mix personal and collective identities, link past to present and add fact to fiction. From a Postcolonial view, autobiography can be used as a protest genre as it has attracted many political activists to express their disagreements with systems. The genre has been used by many opposition groups to express their disagreement with different governments and systems. The chapter illustrates that the notion that "autobiography" is a Western invention was refuted by Postcolonial writers who choose this genre to project their ideas to the public. Thus, autobiography constitutes a popular form of imperial literature for two reasons. First, the genre has helped writers to define themselves within or against traditions to shape their cultural identities. Second, autobiography allows them to reassemble their childhood and

adulthood experiences to negotiate their cultural heritage due to the cultural diversity that they have been exposed to.

The last chapter, "Postcolonialism in Lively's *Oleander, Jacaranda* and Ashour's *Atyaf*", stresses that both autobiographies are relevant to Postcolonialism. The idea of national pride is elaborated in both works. Obviously, the idea of cultural confusion rather than hybridity is the result of Lively's early subjection to two different cultures. The chapter agrees that Ashour's identity crisis stems from the tension between traditions and Western ideas of freedom and modernity that she cannot apply in a Third World culture.

The chapter reveals that the idea of national pride is evident in both autobiographies but ironically, the writers' autobiographies reflect a failure to assert their national identities as a result of cultural hybridity that resulted from the colonial encounter. The central target of the study is to show that education is the tool for spreading colonial / postcolonial attitudes and beliefs. Lively's participation in the PUS curriculum away from home and the teachings of her British nanny have shaped her colonial ideas. Likely, Ashour's education in a nun school and a nationalized school has created her postcolonial character. Lively's perception of her occupation, as a writer, enables her to connect identity formation and cultural indoctrination. The memoir is, therefore, the equipment of socialization that determines Lively's perception of events and produces meaning to her life. Likely, Ashour's profession as a writer enables her to question the historical identity of the Arab culture and the issues of Arab subjugation and inferiority. While she celebrates the Western discourse and ideologies of freedom, she negates the Western discourse about Egypt and the Arab World.

On the whole, Atyaf and Oleander, Jacaranda depict the Egyptian milieu from two different perspectives. Ashour's Egypt is anchored in history and Lively's Egypt remains suspended in mythical times. However, both writers express a sense of loss towards their home countries. Ashour refuses the forms of corruption in her country and Lively expresses a sense of inquiry about her homeland. The two works manifest the role of the female writer in changing the social realities of her society. The texts incorporate the personal lives of the heroines as main constituents of history.