

Rethinking Identity In The Context And Writing Of Migration

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Summary

This article aims to read Robert Solé's migrant francophone work through the issues of identity, interculturality, and multilingualism; in short, an aesthetic of hybridity is always open to the other, going far beyond the drawing of borders and the confusion of religion-language-identity. Otherness and transculturation animate the Franco-Egyptian author's fictional, autobiographical, and historical narratives, where intergeneracy comes into play through the poetics of migration in a perpetual quest for critical destruction and nostalgic reconstruction.

Any gaze focused on migrant literature is confronted with undoubtedly complex but fascinating realities that never cease to animate specific questions related to the identity, multiple origins, and as many existential experiences (linguistic, spatial, intercultural, geopolitical, etc.) of the authors. As a result, reflections, studies, and critiques have been pouring in since the 1980s in Canada, then in Europe, and all over the world to the point of becoming increasingly sensitive to the acuity and importance of migration phenomena and migratory expressions addressing many questions on influences, crossbreeding, acculturation, cultural contiguities, the in-between, transculturation to situate it, legitimize it and find its place and justification.

Francophone literature from the Arab world, whose writing oscillates between a questioning of identity and an aspiration to the universal through an essential mediation between the East and the West, could not, however, be conceived outside of this problematic of the in-between.

Francophone literature, world literature, literature of exiles, stateless people, that of smugglers-mediators, writers from "beyond France" or from elsewhere and the "periphery," migrant literature... what then is the reality of all this in the era of postmodernism and today? Daughter of a "Cultural Imperialism," the Submissive Oriental or the Feminized Orient, "A Kind of Ghetto"? Or a space for exchange, intercultural dialogue, freedom, or diversity? All these questions are still asked, and although the problem of its definition in terms of identity still exists, the fact remains that migrant fiction has become a high¹ place where these questions are formulated and where a collective awareness of cultural diversity is developed. Consequently, the humanities, as well as

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sociological, historical, and literary studies, are submerged in notions of a remarkable terminological profusion and of defining and operational concepts: ethnic, multi-ethnic, immigrant, migrant, minority, minor, transcultural, mixed literature; writings of cultural communities, that of drifting and of the out-of-place. However, beyond and beyond any attempt at theorization whatsoever, it is the migrant texts with their styles, representations, self-representations, and modalities of enunciation analyzed that could rightly provide keys to possible interpretation.

From both a thematic and poetic point of view, Robert Solé's work is immersed in the intercultural, the in-between, and hybridity, all in all, a singular and relevant form for characterizing otherness and grasping the interactions between cultures that shape the gaze in the postcolonial field through fictions and biographies nourished by fantasies and realities to which is added a robust historiographical tendency that is part of current currents of thought such as post-memory.

Indeed, the work of Robert Solé is entirely in line with this orientation or path in the world being a migrant literature, a literature which still causes much ink to flow, characterized essentially by the experience of exile as is the case for example of Andrée Chédid or Tobie Nathan, but in other registers, another vision and poetics.

Keywords *Egyptian Writers; french Expression; cultural Hybridization; francophone Literature; literary Identity.*

Introduction

Migrant Poetics

Thus, linked to the experience of exile, migrant literature is that of the reconfiguration of space, constantly questioning the here and elsewhere through the prism of the past and the present: diasporic, minority, community writing, that of crossbreeding... so many names and forms of deterritorialization placing it in the category or paradigm of displacement. In this regard, Pierre Nepveu emphasizes that thinking about migrant writing means: "insisting on the movement, the drift, the multiple intersections that the experience of exile arouses."

In addition to the theme of exile and the poetics of migration, the work of Robert Solé is part of this current movement sweeping across the world: post-memory, a path towards the reconciliation of peoples and nations defending the eternal utopia of "living together."

From the outset, Robert Solé's work is situated at the crossroads of several approaches explaining the need to write, the emergence of the event unconscious, notably through memory, dimensions visible in all of his novels, essays, and other works where Egypt dominates, and France inhabits the texts, possessing, enveloping the narrators and fascinating the author.

Nevertheless, in the background, there is also a question of clearly identifiable literary postmodernity illustrated by the work of Robert Solé through characteristics specific to such a movement in writing such as historiographic metafiction, the functionalization of the self, fragmentation, hybridity, pastiche, irony in the discourse of narration often grappling with a memorable past and a memorial present. It is also about non-linearity due to the rhythm of the back-and-forth, the confusion of narrative instances (self-narrative, the intimate, esteem, autofiction) ... in short, a writing, a style and particular stories whose modernist influence is attested, but transcending it by a new aesthetic after the Second World War, a time from which so-called postmodern works (in art, architecture, and literature) want to be different from all that precedes them, standing against the ideas mainly inherited from the Enlightenment as well as modernist approaches to literature, the latter can now be understood in the wake of new trends in critical theory such as deconstructivism, postcolonialism, the reader-response, generic subversion, the open work.

Françoise Bonardel observes that the end of the grand narratives, the initiatory ones, thesis novels, and the apprenticeship novel has indeed opened the era of postmodernism. It is, therefore, this fundamental opposition to the precepts of modernism that participates in some way in a particular denigration aimed at postmodernism, which privileges the artisanal style, "tinkering writers" ignoring the distinction between high and low culture compared to those modernists in terms of literary genre. Added to this is the supremacy of subjectivism and psychologism surpassing the ideas of the stream of consciousness: discontinuity, metafiction, pastiche, and irony abound in postmodern writing. Therefore, These are fundamental components that characterize the whole of Robert Solé's work, doubly approached from the point of view of both form and content to grasp the issues of migrant and postmodern writing.

Historiographic metafiction

Robert Solé's work revisits a History section between the East and the West. From the Crusades, the Mamluks, and the massacres of the Christians of Damascus in 1860 to the Expedition of Napoleon Bonaparte and the British occupation to modern times, from the 70s-80s-90s and 2000s, the departure of Christian families from Egypt to other countries and continents, intolerance and violence, in short, stories that these great moments in the History of the East and the West go through.

At first glance, the past remains a present and very much alive - and these stories are taken up but romanticized through the pen of an atypical writer with multiple origins: Franco-Egyptian, Syrian-Lebanese, and Greek-Catholic. It is in the filial narrative, that of the origins and current events by the *mise en abyme*, that the novels trace the entire History of the Levantines intertwined, pursuing a complex itinerary through the centuries and where the intrigues are tied around the fate of the Christians of the East and the great families whose fate changed a lot under the regime of President Nasser. So many questions preoccupy the characters about themselves, their fate, in Egyptian society, their culture, their culture, or mixed race.

The romance of origins places the identity issue at the center of aesthetic concerns, transforming itself into a crisis whose outcome is none other than a form of hybridity and a mythology of crossbreeding. Otherness is at the heart of certain novels with the appearance of an almost classical realism akin to the naturalist vein with the cycle of genealogies through a fresco with nostalgic accents in the painting of a cosmopolitan and Levantine society by the return of characters evolving in the urban space of Cairo or Alexandria.

These processes include journalistic and historical writing, where the novelistic structure of the cycle draws its unity from the memorialist and documentary work representing socio-political realities through an intensely poetic dimension.

The identity crisis is overcome by the praise of memory with nostalgic accents that are perfectly illustrated by an allusive form with mythical resonances of very evocative titles: *Le Tarbouche*, *La Mamelouka*, *Mazag*, *Le Sémaphore d'Alexandrie*, *Une Soirée au Caire*, *Le Pharaon renversé*, *L'hôtel Mahrajan*, *Les méandres du Nil*.

The composite identity is expressed through a fragmentary, discontinuous narration and apparent hybridity in the genre, transcending the boundaries between historical novels and autofiction through the filiation story and literary journalism. Similarly, the posture of the enunciation plays on the different languages of the text: French, Arabic, Egyptian, Latin, and Greek, and where the text becomes the place allowing the confusion of the referential and the fictional, the real and the mythical and the identity of the narrator and the characters through intercultural mixing. The filiation story allows the writer, through the narrative voices and the characters, to highlight the importance of family

heritage in his construction. The family novel is a pretext for reporting fragments of the History of Egypt, particularly those of the Christian community of Greek Catholics, thus making it possible to pose the identity problem by questioning the past and expressing the singularities of family heritage.

This writing technique, resolutely postmodern, stands out from post-Freudian autobiographies adopting new devices: memories are no longer presented as simple integral and autonomous images of the past since they are worked by a memory that searches for them, reorganizes them, adjusts them, corrects them or revokes them. It is memory at work through autofiction or the functionalization of the self: the narrators, the characters are always the same, the Levantine communities, Melkites, Greek Catholics, Syrian-Lebanese, Jews from the Orient and Franco-Egyptians whose itinerary is similar to that of the author's families and his entourage.

At the same time, each novel is an opportunity for the author to return to a mythical episode and to introduce a figure linked to the History of Egypt whose playful work, allusion, and metaphor allow the establishment of an incessant game of association regarding the symbolism of the stories.

In *Les Méandres du Nil*, *Egyptomania* and *Egyptology* come together to narrate the mythical French passion for Egypt: Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, Champollion's deciphering of hieroglyphics, Saint Simonism; but the epic of the obelisk on the Place de la Concorde (the gift that Mehemet Ali made to France) announces the Ottoman decline and the pillaging of a historic monument belonging to Egyptian civilization.

The historical and social background of *La Mamelouka* serves that of *La Mamelouka* whose social ascension alludes to that of his community, that of the Levantines who held executive positions in the administration, doctors of the sultans, and lawyers. These historical realities (sometimes evoked, sometimes romanticized) trace the history of the Christians of the East, active participation in the *Nahda*, and the problem of their total integration. Their status was the subject of a controversy that would accompany them for centuries, and their identity remains surrounded by geographical, religious, cultural, and social ambiguity beyond the identity background; the historical background is illustrated by *La Mamelouka*, the metaphor of an Egypt subjected to Franco-British rivalries.

From Egypt inhabited by the Mamluks, the author moves to Egypt dressed to tell the story of the *Tarbouche* and its myth: a sacred object, a sign of modernity, progressive ideas, and a national emblem. Suppose the *tarbouche* becomes a national attribute for Gerges Batrakani. In that case, it also reveals another reality, that of his attachment and belonging to Egypt, which has never granted him a clear identity:

We were called Syrians. An ambiguous name that ignored Lebanon led people to believe we belonged to another country. It was as if our families, established in Egypt for ages, had yet to cut ties with Damascus, Aleppo, or Sidon definitively! However, did we not ourselves bring about this ambiguity for the sake of a label and the need for a difference? In Egypt, there were the English, the Greeks, the Italians, the Armenians, the Jews... We were Syrians, failing to be entirely Egyptian or slightly European (p. 11).

The *tarboosh* thus addresses the central issue of identity. Batrakani, this Eastern Christian, Syrian-Lebanese, Greek-Catholic, and *Khawaja* in the eyes of native Egyptians, asserts himself through the *tarboosh* industry to rebuild a lost identity.

Hôtel Mahrajane is the symbol of an Egypt still grappling with a turbulent history where the Mediterranean happily rubs shoulders with the Desert and where Jews,

Christians, and Muslims coexist harmoniously without really living together but as neighbors until the upheavals of the 2000s.

Shocked by certain savage practices still widespread in today's Egypt, scandalized by the state of the prisons and the arbitrary arrests and therefore revolted, Robert Solé published *Le Pharaon renversé* which deals with the political maturity illustrated by the Arab Spring revolution demonstrating a thirst for freedom for a rebirth and construction of democracy.

On the fictionalization of the self

In addition to the memorial investigations and the documentary work in his historical approach, Robert Solé's novels cultivate the expression of the intimate, constantly playing with the boundaries of the biographical genre and where the author merges with his narrators and characters, sometimes splitting himself, multiplying existences.

In origins and identities, Robert Solé perpetuates his cycle of the family saga by transporting his reader to the West, to Paris, where he takes an entire Orient through his *mazag*. It is through the metaphor of the spider's web that he reveals the social rise and professional success of the atypical and phlegmatic character Basile Batrakani, who had no origins other than the *mazag* who, "raised in the garden of approximation, had learned an exact science" (p. 103). This *mazag* designates the personal character of a man who savored each day of his existence; he knew how to take his time in all circumstances without giving the impression of wasting it, a man who "seemed to have eternity before him" (p. 67) as the ancient pharaohs believed. *Mazag* also means mixture: "A subtle mixture, a perfect mixture" (p. 140). This mixture results from a Franco-Egyptian identity through which Basile transports the Egyptian soul to France, making Cairo the Paris of his childhood and youth. This world he never ceases to praise is a part of his identity that he does not want to lose, just as he has already lost his Egypt by opting for the forced departure, leading a life of exile and nostalgia. The other part of his identity is that he has made a place for himself in a Western city "so unforgiving of foreigners with astonished looks and infinite contempt," he says (p. 75). Despite his perfect integration in his adopted country, Basile could not fully get used to this binary France, "desperately symmetrical, in which North and South, left and right, public and private, secular and Catholic were permanently opposed... a society of permanent conflict, of congenital rigidity", he said to himself (p. 143).

Nevertheless, what seems to have helped him integrate into this new world and let himself be carried away by "the noises, perfumes and smells of Paris" (p. 76) was his exceptional flexibility with others that he had inherited from his ancestors. The investigation of the past is the process by which the narrator begins and continues the narrative thread through family photo albums, old letters, testimonies, and the consultation of archives to reconstruct an era. From there, the return to oneself takes place, and the writer recreates the historical and sociological context of the story to question his existence and the links that united him to his family and community.

Suppose it is a question of a family novel; there is no frank autobiography there. In that case, there is instead a writing of a "fictionalized" self, a masked self which eludes, and yet it is pretty comparable to that of the author, by clues constituting the discourse.

Furthermore, the play on the identity of the narrative instances is another fact that determines the hybridity of the genre between fiction and autobiography: the author has precisely specified all this by writing:

I had the irresistible urge to tell, in a novel, our life on the banks of the Nile. Mine. That of my parents. That of my grandparents. Those of the generations that had preceded us... I,

the amnesiac, was rebelling in some way against amnesia. I remember that I said to myself then: it is not expected that people who have lived, loved, cried, and done so many things in Egypt disappear like this without leaving a trace. They deserve at least a footnote in the great book of twentieth-century history. I want to write this note. (Fous d'Egypte: 2005).

Through autofiction, Robert Solé extends his writing of a self that is both fictional and real to blend it into that of the characters to whom he gives voice and existence in turn: names, surnames, and works famous in their time; it is through this process that Robert Solé inserts his imaginary quest into a very real geography of Egypt.

However, the writing of this composed genre, autofiction, calls, through its imagination and fantasies, another aesthetic, that of the hybrid. In its hybridity, the text mixes both a multiple belonging and the cultural and religious specificities of the Christian community, the Egyptian one in full nationalism and also foreign relative to the French and British presence. These belongings appear through the onomastics, the language, and the mode of each Levantine community. This cultural mixing is only a contact zone where both oppositions and assimilations between the different communities of Egypt are played out. This mixing, frequent in the novels of Robert Solé, appears in other places in the text, characterized first by the names of the characters referring to the belongings. The choice of the characters' names first reflects the ethnic dimension where it first fulfills the "classifier of lineage" role, as Claude Lévi-Stauss notes, and refers each character to his ethnicity of origin.

In the gallery of characters, the narrator quickly identifies their religious identity through the family names that allow their confession to be distinguished: the famous Jewish jeweler Jacob, the Copt Makram, and the Muslim Mahmoud.

In its role, onomastics shows the cohabitation of Egyptian and French-speaking cultures in the society of the time, like a "mythology of crossbreeding," to borrow Roger Toumson's title, a euphoric dynamic of mixtures.

The names mix and intersect, creating a hybrid form that is sometimes accompanied by contradictory reactions, as illustrated in the first scene of *Tarbouche*, where the grandfather Georges Batrakani insists on giving the baby a Western or Greek-Catholic first name. At the same time, the parents prefer an Arabic first name, Rafik, in Egypt, where nationalism is at its height. The parents choose this name for a social order based on amalgamation and in-between.

In other situations, the names connect the characters to other identities: for the pharaonic past through the Coptic, Isis, and her pride in having pharaohs as ancestors. For the religious, as attested by the names Batrakani and Boutros, for the social, as shown by the family names which refer to the professions practiced by the ancestors: the Haddad, the Sakakini, the Najjar, the Boulad..., for the cultural, the first name of the aunt Magui is intended to be more Western than Magda and finally for the historical, the Mamelouka.

From there, the narrator paints a colorful, cumbersome and contrasting portrait of the Levantine community composed sometimes of usurer merchants like Ferdinand, Georges' brother, of dragomans in the service of embassies and the West like Georges' uncle Batrakani, sometimes as mediating civil servants like Elias Batrakani, intellectual scholars like the Touta, lawyers who, although anxious to defend the Egyptian people, remain deprived of the title of "true Egyptians" and whatever they do, they remain second-class citizens with an imprecise status.

From this ambiguous status, the characters never cease to expose their position, sometimes embarrassing, of their community as Georges Batrakani explains to the Minister

of France Henri Gaillard: "The problem is that we have kept our traditions, our religion, a character consistent with our education and our history. However, we are going to see the nationality of a race that is not ours imposed on us. Who can assure us that the future Constitution of independent Egypt will fit in with our morals and ideas?" he asks in *Le Tarbouche* (p.101).

The issue lies in the in-between of the Syro-Lebanese, neither Europeans, Egyptians, Orthodox, nor Catholics, but Westernized Orientals, Greek-Catholics, in love with the French language and culture without dominating it and speaking Arabic without possessing it. Thus, The characters live between two cultures, statuses, and languages.

The narrator's nuanced view presents them as accomplices with the Europeans out of concern to preserve their privilege: "Since time immemorial, in our families, Greek Catholics had arranged to offer their services to a foreign state and thus obtain a title, a protected status or a real nationality (*Le Tarbouche*, p.71), observes the narrator, who adds that his maternal great-grandfather Elias Batrakani: "would have been Russophile if the Russians had occupied Egypt and pro-Chinese if China had invaded it, he writes (p.51).

These characters are considered by Coptic and Muslim Egyptians as "exploiters who suck our blood," one of the characters specifies (*Le Tarbouche*, p. 80), "intruders in the pay of the occupier," he says (*La Mamlouka*, p. 187). As for Europeans, they consider them as "indefinable people who were neither European nor truly indigenous" (*La Mamlouka*, p. 123).

Cultural and religious identity, therefore, merges with national identity, and the narrator of *Tarbouche* ends his story with this realization: "Being in-between, we should have served as a link" (p. 421).

The metaphor of the "hyphen" which closes *Le Tarbouche* is part of the poetics of incompleteness on the reality of Eastern Christians and which will be amplified in another novel, *Mazag*, where the narrator confides to his reader, through the character of Basile Batrakani, another image of the in-between.

As for the narrator, in this paper, who plays the intermediary between the author and the character, the author and the reader, it is in writing that he assumes a plural identity, mixed as Basile Batrakani suggests, who "adored Paris and Cairo, and who felt bigamist," (*Mazag*, p.138). He felt bigamist because he married the two cultures, Egyptian and French, Eastern and Western.

Robert Solé's writing is the place of this in-between where superstitions and oriental and Egyptian customs meet the other side of the Mediterranean. In a preface th, the author expresses this relationship that runs through all his novels and that characterizes his characters and narrators:

It is a love story—or rather, a thousand love stories: the meeting, on the banks of the Nile, of future French-language writers with a language that became a companion, if not a homeland. I speak of it with knowledge of the facts, being one of the children of this Egyptian France, remarkably analyzed in the following pages. "Egyptian France" perhaps deserves quotation marks. However, it should be known that the French passion for Egypt is nothing compared to the love that certain Egyptians or "Egyptianized" people felt for France and the language. (*Between Nile and Sand. French-Speaking Egyptian Writers (1920-1960) Foreword*)

The crossbreeding or the in-between is also manifested by the passage from one language to another: French is the language that Michel writes in his journal, which he inserts in *Le Tarbouche*.

It is also Arabic and Egyptian in the characters' speech: "ya ebni, ya habibi, ya comte, mille marks, la molokhia, la kobeiba labaneya, la galley, le suffrage, du kalam...".

The speech is made up of an alternation of French sentences punctuated with Arabic words and pronounced in an oriental manner by rolling the r's and singing the letters, for example: "From where by where? I asked myself in Egyptian slang" (Mazag p.64), a familiar and appropriate use of French: "From where by where ya Micho, the sultan knew La Fontaine?". Alternatively, to say that the molokheya is successful, Maguy Touta addresses her sister, saying: "Darling, your molokheya came out very well," an expression reflecting this mixed universe in the language used.

It is also a question of the passage from one cultural code to another, from traditional and popular dishes such as fowl and taameya to muscadet and Beaujolais during the sacred Sunday meal, registering the customs of the Western table where Eastern gastronomic specialties molokheya, kobeiba, arak, and konafa are superimposed.

Robert Solé's novels depict a vast social circle composed of several communities which, although they are distinct from each other, share familiar places and a mixed identity where Christian families frequent Westerners of different affiliations: like Edouard Dhelemmes, the Popinot and William Elliot, the natives like the Copt Makram, a businessman and Hoda Charaoui, a Muslim feminist. This gallery of characters extends to the Soffragui, daya, or coachmen, mostly Egyptians from the working class or peasants.

The author uses realistic, autofiction, and journalistic processes by resorting to the family novel through an aesthetic of the fragment; in this regard, he explains:

One day, I felt the need to look back. Of course, there are others with this experience. Amnesia and self-mutilation are not necessarily definitive. With age and nostalgia, we often retrace our steps and go over a part of ourselves that had been denied and put into hibernation. That we want to reconcile with ourselves, to pick up the pieces (...) I returned to Egypt. On tiptoe. Walking on eggshells. With much emotion, of course. (...) But what touched me most was the near disappearance of this cosmopolitan environment in which I had grown up; he writes

This extract rightly highlights this fictionalization of oneself and one's family in the novels of Robert Solé, who, after twenty years of exile, reconnects with his country of origin, retracing, not without ambiguities and fantasies, the history of his community. The author plays on the boundaries of the self and fiction by transposing life fragments; the quest for identity also leads him to his country of origin, Egypt. This hybridity is not only thematic; it reflects a past and a present formed from a mosaic of cultures to which another corresponds; this is played out in the different places of the text; it is linguistic, semantic, and, above all, metaphorical.

Robert Solé reinvents the Mamelouka, revisiting a part of Franco-Egyptian history, exhumes from oblivion the Tarbouche, meditating on Egyptian nationalism, reorients a disoriented oriental in the West in Mazag, reconnects with a bygone era in *Une soirée au Caire* to the nostalgic rhythm of the return of the exile, celebrates the gesture of the Arab Spring in *Le Pharaon renversé* and sings the ruins of cosmopolitanism in *Hôtel Mahrajan* and in *Les méandres du Nil* representing his real and fantasized Egypt in the grip of the historical, the political, the socio-cultural, the religious and the symbolic requirements to express multiple, composite and ambiguous identities, that of his Levantine community.

It is in this way and through this writing and poetics of migration that we can situate or replace the work of Robert Solé in the context of a postmodern vision and literature which, without abandoning pre-modernism or repudiating modernism, tends to pave the way for ideas different from those before and varied aesthetic forms in a new era.

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