

Transnationalism and Linguistic Ambivalence in Selected Poetry by Egyptian-American Poets

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“[W]hat is my language, the one that belongs to me, the one that I belong to? I have lost that answer in a multitude of selves, a puzzle of identity” (Ronderos 66).

This study examines selected poetry written by two Egyptian-American poets, namely Maged Zaher and Pauline Kaldas. The research investigates Zaher’s and Kaldas’s use of Arabic language, and/or Egyptian colloquial dialect in some of their poems, together with their techniques of mingling Arabic with the English language, the original language of the poems. The paper argues that such mingling manifests a sense of linguistic ambivalence which the two poets feel towards not only English, but also Arabic. The paper also examines the phenomenon of grafting Arabic into English poems as a sign of connectedness to both Egypt and America, and as an evidence of both cultural hybridity and transnationalism.

The paper starts by a definition of “transnationalism,” a highlight of its major characteristics, and an exploration of the various connectors to homeland, especially “language.” Then, I will attempt to explore the significance of selecting specific language/s in writing through drawing a comparison between the language of the host country and that of homeland; a special attention is paid to the Arabic language. The attempts of the two poets to write in both languages, host and home, underscore the hybridization in general, and the linguistic hybridity in particular. The two terms are closely related to ambivalence and linguistic ambivalence, as will be explained. Finally, I am going to analyze selections of poems by Zaher and Kaldas in relation to the discussed concepts, especially that of “linguistic ambivalence.” I am going to conclude with a discussion of the poets’ techniques in mingling the Arabic and the English

languages, their reasons for doing so, as well as the tangible consequences of their attempts.

Transnationalism: A Plethora of Linkages

Transnationalism has lately grown into an important research concern in social sciences. Katharyne Mitchell introduces the term transnationalism as follows: “[t]he Latin root *trans* means across, and transnationalism literally refers to that which takes place across national boundaries” (“Transnationalism” n. pag). The use of “that” in Mitchell’s description is vague, it could refer to “relations,” I suppose. Yet, the term comes clearer in Nina Schiller Glick and Peggy Levitt’s clarification that transnationalism or transnational processes accentuates the “ongoing interconnection or flow of people, ideas, objects, and capital across the borders of nation-states” (5). Paolo Boccagni traces the term transnational saying: “[i]nterestingly, it has done so less as a noun – as if “transnational” stood for a novel kind of migrant – than as an adjective, pointing to the variable relevance of cross-border connections to migrants’ life trajectories” (“Transnationalism” n. pag.). Within these readings of transnationalism, the study focuses on the poets’ relation to their country of origin as well as to the host country: “[c]entral to the transnational perspective are the connections reproduced between migrants’ home and host societies” (Boccagni, “Transnationalism” n. pag.).

Revealing connections to the land of origin has usually accompanied migrants. Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald maintain that: “[i]nternational migrants usually have good reason to leave home, but once abroad, they are often motivated to sustain a connection to the town, region, or nation left behind” (1192). This means that migrants are commonly connected to their native lands regardless of the reasons that thrust them towards migration. In other words, “[c]onnectivity between source and destination points is an inherent aspect of the migration phenomenon” (1178). Waldinger and Fitzgerald, therefore, perceive the relation between the country of origin and that of destination as essential and innate in the migration experience. They add: “[o]bserving that migration produces a plethora of connections spanning home and host societies,” transnationalism scholars “proclaim the emergence of transnational

communities” (1171). This means that the multiple connections to both countries are the foundation stone on which transnationalists build their views.

Attempts have been made to draw the major characteristics of migrants who are identified as transnational. According to Glick et al., transnational migrants “forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (48). This means that transmigrants are the individuals who are eager to create social links between the host land and the motherland. In a further clarification, they maintain that: “[c]ontemporary immigrants cannot be characterized as the ‘uprooted.’ Many are transmigrants, becoming firmly rooted in their new country but maintaining multiple linkages to their homeland” (48; emphasis in original). A transmigrant is, therefore, a migrant who maintains connections to both lands. Hence, both countries are often treated by transmigrants as homelands: “[t]he individuals involved in the process, or the transnationals, often develop meaningful ties to more than one home country” (Wei and Hua n. pag.).

Connections to the land of origin are wide and variable. Helen Lee clarifies that transnational studies examine the different aspects of the migrants’ lives “including their complex ties with kin; their economic connections to the homeland, particularly remittances; their citizenship; their involvement in political and ethnic organisations; and their ties through religion and ‘cultural’ elements such as music, food and art” (13).¹ Further indirect examples of cultural ties are “exhibiting the national flag, wearing the national football team T-shirt, reproducing the flag’s colours in one’s clothes” (Boccagni, “Private” 198). This means that transmigrants reveal connections to their land of origin through being attached to one or more of the previous ties.

Likewise, Boccagni, being a professor of Sociology, reads homeland ties in relation to the society. He refers to these ties as “motherland references” (“Private” 202). He presents three references: “social ties at distance” that are “structured by its political, economic or other institutions,” and “with one’s family,” in addition to “emotional and affective ties with immigrants’ earlier lives, whose often idealised nostalgic memory contrasts with the exigencies of the immigrants’ hard present life” (202). Hence, both Lee and Boccagni observe the major ties to homeland to be cultural, social, emotional, political, economic, or religious.² In addition, “it is equally important to recognize the capacity of

transnational individuals to mobilize their linguistic resources to (re)construct different relations and meanings within a specific social context and the creative qualities of language mixing, hybridization, and creolization” (Wei and Hua n. pag.). Thao Nguyen argues that: [t]ransnationalism leads to new forms of identity construction, emergent in semiotic practices and marked by in-betweenness and hybridity. Transnational individuals mobilize their linguistic resources to reconstruct different relations and meanings, through language mixing or invention of new forms” (8). Transnationalists, therefore, tend to use language as a thread of connection between both communities.

Encountering Different Languages

Languages are the doors through which the writers meet their audience. Stephen May explicates that immigrants “often adapt the language of the host country in which they reside,” for the sake of “enhancing their integration and social mobility within that country” (141). Yet, they “may retain their original language as an ‘associated’ language – one that group members no longer use, or perhaps even know, but which continues to be a part of their heritage” (141-42). The “associated” language is the “language associated with a particular culture” (138), the native language, to be precise. I read May’s explanation as applicable to transnationalist immigrant authors who usually write in the language of the host country, but sometimes incline towards the native tongue in order to preserve their heritage, despite the fact of its being an abandoned language according to his/her group members.

Writing in a specific language is not done accidentally. According to Khaled Mattawa, “[l]anguages are rationales and when we use them we think along the grooves they make for us by the force of their histories and their intellectual input” (“Four” 271). In the case of transmigrant writers, the “grooves” are both furrows which mark the author and channels which connect him/her to the land of origin. The grooves image is better understood when reading Elie Kedourie’s explanation which perceives language as “the test of nationality” because he considers it as a sign of a group’s “peculiar identity” and an essential means of asserting its “continuity” (49). Mattawa gives special attention to the use of various languages within American poetry. He maintains that:

American poetry is becoming more and more multilingual through the diverse native usages of its bilingual practitioners. This multilingualism is most evident in the writings of minority or immigrant poets. These

bilingual borrowings are not meant to unify a diversified culture but to express the poet's identity and perhaps aid the poet's struggling subculture from being subsumed. (*How Long* 62)

Writing in the Arabic language is observed in the literature by transmigrant writers from Arab origins. Jehan Fouad notes that "Arab-Americans are sometimes nostalgic for Arabic language, the native tongue of their ancestors" (30). This could be related to Norma Alzayed's statement that: "[o]ur native language resides deep within us" (264).³ Through making use of their native language, the poets introduce the audience to their culture and their identity. Jolanda Guardi maintains that: "[b]eing Arab and writing in English means knowing that one is living in a dominant language and a dominant culture" (46). Therefore, American authors of Arab descent insert Arabic words into their writings as an attempt to resist this dominance: "[m]ultilingual writing becomes not only experimental writing, but also a form of resistance against linguistic imperialism" (Guardi 45). To sum up this discussion, Egyptian-American poets often choose to shift to their mother tongue for various reasons: out of nostalgic feelings, in order to assert their belonging to their homeland, to introduce the reader to the distinctive Arabic language, to preserve their individual and communal native culture, or to resist the dominant language and culture.

The blend of English and Arabic in the examined poems could be placed under the umbrella of hybridization.⁴ "[H]ybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms," or, in other words, a "cross cultural 'exchange'" (Ashcroft et al. 118-19). Mitchell assigns the primary feature of hybridity as "the idea of integration and diffusion, of a thing that is derived from heterogeneous sources, and composed of incongruous elements" ("Hybridity" 188). As indicated by Manisha Shah:

Hybridity thus stands in opposition to the myth of purity of racial and cultural authenticity, of fixed and essentialist identity. It embraces blending, combining, syncretism and encourages the composite, the impure, the heterogeneous and the eclectic. It presents itself as an alternative discourse that subverts the very idea of a dominant culture and creates a unique canon inviting a reexamination of power structures. (82)

Hybridization takes various forms "linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc." (Ashcroft et al. 118).

Hybridization in relation to language is defined by Bakhtin as: “a *mixture* of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an *encounter*, within the arena of an utterance, between two different *linguistic consciousnesses*, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (358; emphasis added). The poems under study create a “mixture” between the Arabic and English languages within the same poem or “a single utterance;” so, both “social languages,” since they belong to two different societies, “encounter” each other. Arabic and English, therefore, prove to forge a “linguistic hybrid,” to use Bakhtin’s expression (359). For Bakhtin, “hybridity delineates the way in which language, even within a single sentence, can be double-voiced,” as reasserted by Robert Young (18). Young points out that: “[h]ybridity describes the condition of language’s fundamental ability to be simultaneously the same but different” (19). In the present case, it is the same because it is still utilized, and it is different since it is employed in fusion with another language.

This “linguistic hybrid” within the poems has resulted in the creation of unique poetry utterances. As suggested by Vanessa Guignery: “[t]he *encounters* and *mixtures* triggered off by *hybrid* processes open up new perspectives on the world and result in artistic forms which can combine different styles, languages, modes and genres” (3; emphasis added). In reflecting the influence of hybridity, Guignery asserts the creation of artistic literary works of art that embrace a hybrid style, mode and genre, in addition to, or perhaps by means of, the linguistic hybridity.

Axel Englund and Anders Olsson read the literary writings of immigrants as a “point of intersection between native and acquired language” (1). They add that: “[t]o be an expatriate writer is to be constantly faced with a gap in one’s language and identity, to exist in a state of *in-between*” (1; emphasis added). Nguyen states that: “multilingual talk can be a way in which speakers create a new social *space* for themselves, where they transcend the limits of identification in terms of culture, nationality or speech community” (10; emphasis added). The previous perspectives lead towards Bhabha’s “third space.” Bhabha celebrates an “in-between” or “third space” created by hybridity as it “may open the way to conceptualizing an *international culture*” (*The Location* 38; emphasis in original). For Bhabha, hybrid “is always the split screen of the self and its doubling” (“Signs” 156). This means that hybridity reveals two contradicting

aspects: the divided selves, cultures, and identities within the immigrant, as well as their dual selves, cultures, and identities. Bhabha's words point to ambivalence, I suggest.

Ambivalence is a state of "continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite" (Ashcroft et al. 12). For David Macey, the term describes "the simultaneous existence of contradictory feelings towards a single OBJECT" (11; emphasis in original). *Cambridge Dictionary* defines the term as "the state of having two opposing feelings at the same time, or being uncertain about how you feel." According to Melanie Klein, "ambivalence is present in the earliest OBJECT-RELATIONS established by the child. Love for the object is inseparable from the wish to destroy it" (qtd. in Macey 11-12; emphasis in original). This point of view suggests that ambivalence is innate and natural.

Ambivalence has always accompanied hybridity. Mitchell maintains that: "the hybrid can stand as the perfect conduit" of the advantages of ambivalence (Mitchell, "Hybridity" 188). This view perceives hybridity as a positive consequence of ambivalence. Ashcroft believes that "[c]ultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space" (118). This means that ambivalence evokes the individual's cultural inclinations. The relation between hybridity and ambivalence is also negotiated by Bhabha: "[t]he migrant culture of the 'in-between' . . . moves the question of culture's appropriation . . . towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference" (*The Location* 224). Thus, the presence in a state of an in-between third space alerts the immigrant of his/her ambivalence. Bhabha, in addition, asserts the role of such a contradictory state in awakening a desire of resistance: "[r]esistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture;" resistance is rather "the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourse" ("Signs" 153).

Inspired by Ashcroft's definition of ambivalence, linguistic ambivalence could be described as the continual fluctuation between wanting to write in one language and wanting to write in another. Those two languages are usually the language of the host land and that of the homeland. Linguistic ambivalence appears in literature when the writers, who write in the language of the host country, attempt to introduce their mother tongue, mainly to preserve their culture

and to resist the dominant culture of the new land. Mattawa explains that: “[n]ative languages constitute the most valued possessions immigrant cultures attempt to hold on to;” therefore, “a number of bilingual American poets have displayed ambivalence toward English” (*How Long* 62). While Mitchell elucidates that: “[s]eeking to find a potential space of resistance that would counter the authority of colonial control, Bhabha seized on the potential of hybridity to create that space through linguistic ambivalence” (“Hybridity” 190). Magda Hasabelnaby, as well, elucidates that Bhabha “resorts to the potential of hybridity” in creating “a space of resistance” through “*linguistic ambivalence*” (n. pag.; emphasis added). According to this viewpoint, literary writings of transmigrants which reveal their ambivalence vis-à-vis two languages might be considered as effective tools in resisting the dominant culture of the mainstream.

Interestingly, the immigrant writer Cristina Pinto-Bailey calls the mother tongue the “stepmother tongue.” She believes that the native tongue foreignizes the individual in his/her country of settlement:

The telltale mark of my foreignness is not any outward sign or feature. It is not my skin color, my eyes or nose; it is my language, not my mother tongue but rather a sort of wicked stepmother tongue: it is my accent, my intonation, my word choices, my syntax, and my word plays, which often make sense only within multilingual universe. (98)

The language of origin is perceived as a “wicked stepmother” because it turns the speaker into a foreigner amidst the new community. The native tongue is only useful within a multilingual context but might be harmful and discriminating within the host country. Such confession reflects the speaker’s linguistic ambivalence since we already live in a multilingual universe. Pinto-Bailey’s ambivalence is even more painful when we consider her complaint that: “one language is never sufficient to carry out my voice, to speak for myself, for the person I am. And so code switching has become a natural means of communication” (97).

Linguistic ambivalence clearly shows in Kaldas’s comment on language in the lives of Arab migrants. For Kaldas:

Voices modulate in the comfort of Arabic broken by the higher pitch of English, still accented by those who immigrated even forty years ago, *disrupted* by the practiced tones of my second-generation cousins whose

English flows like a stream until an Arabic word *falls from their mouths* like a pebble. (*Looking* 23; emphasis added)

This perspective reveals the language conflict in various generations of migrants. First generation of migrants, who spent some years in Egypt before migrating, speaks Arabic comfortably mingled with some English, while second generation of migrants, who were born and brought up in the United States, speaks English smoothly interrupted by Arabic words. Hybridity, I assume, occurs in both cases.

Linguistic Ambivalence in the Poetry of Maged Zaher

Maged Zaher (1967-) is a contemporary Egyptian-American poet, translator and software engineer, who was born and raised in Cairo, then moved to the United States to study engineering, and settled down there. Zaher is the author of various poetry collections: *Portrait of The Poet as an Engineer* (2009), *Thank you for the Windows Office* (2012), *The Revolution Happened and You Didn't Call Me* (2012), *If Reality Doesn't Work Out* (2014), *the consequences of my body* (2016), and *The Tahrir of Poems: Seven Contemporary Egyptian Poets* (2014), in which he translates poetry written by Egyptian poets who participated in the revolution of the 25th of January 2011. He is the winner of Genius Award in literature in 2013.

The Arabic language rarely shows itself in Zaher's volumes of poetry. In 2013, he declares "I dream of writing a dual language poem" ("Dream" n. pag.). He attempts to fulfill his dream in 2016 in his book *the consequences of my body*, which incorporates various fragmentations, as Zaher uses the Arabic language in such uncommon way. The poetic pieces of fragments which are all written in the English language are interrupted by a jumbled Arabic poem which reads:

بض غ ل ا ن م ي ف ك ي ا م ب ا ن ي ت ا ي ء ا س م ل ا ا ذ ه
د ئ ا ص ق ل ا ن ا ل
ه د ي ج ا ي ا و ن ل م ح ت م ل
ه ل ل ا ن م ة م ع ن ح ا ب ص ل ا
ة ف ر غ ل ا ر ئ ا ت س ن م و (p. 66)⁵

Contrary to the rules of the Arabic language, Zaher writes Arabic letters from the left-hand side instead of the right-hand one; in addition, the letters appear scattered with extra spaces to separate the words from each other. Writing Arabic from the left-hand side, in addition to typing scattered letters instead of the cursive form of Arabic, looks like an odd mixture between Arabic and English that reflects the poet's ambivalent recreation of his linguistic hybridity. Moreover, the

distinctive style points to Zaher's identity as a software engineer who likes to write in codes so that his readers would exert more effort to decipher his codes, which results in a peculiar piece of art.

When the Arabic reader manages to decode this poem, s/he would stand perplexed. The reader who is capable of decoding the lines has to adjust the poem as follows:

هذا المساء يأتينا بما يكفي من الغضب
لأن القصائد
لم تحمل نوايا جيدة
الصباح نعمة من الله
ومن ستائر الغرفة

On the other hand, the English reader, whose language and culture are often seen as superior, is compelled to be thrust in a sea of Arabic letters and feel perplexed and incapable of following up. The poet completely uses a foreign language and obliges him/her to study the classical Arabic in case s/he wants to read the poem and understands its meaning.⁶ This fragment, therefore, is either to be read in Arabic or to be ignored altogether, which will create a gap in the process of reading Zaher's book of poetry. Through a minimal knowledge of the Arabic letters, the English-speaking audience will notice the Arabic alphabets which are highlighted by being scattered. The reader, therefore, will be able to identify the poet's identity and appreciate his pride in the Arabic language. This poem could be translated as:

This evening brings enough of anger
Because the poems
Have not carried good intentions
Morning is a blessing from Allah
and from the curtains of the room (my translation)

Zaher is well aware of his own linguistic ambivalence. He admits in one of his poems: "I lost fluency in Arabic and didn't acquire it in English . . . I am not a master of any language" (*If Reality* 59), and in another: "Waiting for coffee / In broken English . . ." (*consequences* 25). Zaher's line about his broken English concretizes Aciman's words concerning migrants who "speak English with an accent;" this accent "marks the lag between two cultures, two languages, the space where you let go of one identity, invent another, and end up being more than one person though never quite two" (11).⁷ The lag referred to by Aciman is

mirrored in Zaher's poem that appears as something between Arabic and English and reflects an identity crisis.⁸ Zaher perceives himself as a "hybrid poet," he maintains that: "[t]he rhythm in my body is mostly Arabic language," yet "the words and thoughts are English" ("Maged Zaher: Building Poetry" n. pag.). These words mirror the linguistic ambivalence, which is a sign of Zaher's hybridity.

Zaher's poem reflects ambivalence with regard to both languages, which results in an ambiguous piece of poetry. Writing a whole poem in the standard form of the Arabic language reflects his solid knowledge of Arabic, as he migrated after growing up in Egypt and had his native language skills fully developed.⁹ Yet, using scattered Arabic letters in the opposite direction gives a fake impression of dyslexia towards the Arabic language, which highlights an ambivalence towards it. The poet's proficiency in classical Arabic did not protect him from facing linguistic ambivalence since his daily communication, speaking and writing, are in English. Ambivalence reveals itself when the poet writes Arabic letters in an English form.

Linguistic Ambivalence in the Poetry of Pauline Kaldas

Linguistic hybridity also shows itself in the poetry of Pauline Kaldas. Kaldas (1961-) is an Egyptian-American poet and a professor of English literature. She is the author of the *Egyptian Compass*, a collection of poetry (2006), *Letters from Cairo*, a memoir (2007), *The Time between Places*, a collection of short stories (2010), *Looking Both Ways*, a memoir (2017), besides co-editing *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2009) with Khaled Mattawa. She has obtained the Silver Award from *ForeWord Magazine Book of the Year Awards*. Kaldas was born in Egypt and at the age of eight she migrated to the United States with her parents.¹⁰

In one of her articles, Kaldas discloses the reasons of writing in English and she compares the Arabic language to the English language. She writes in English firstly because "it is the only language I know well enough," and secondly because it is the "language of survival in a new world" ("In Direction" 12).¹¹ Kaldas proceeds: "[b]ut English rises from the front of the throat; it is Arabic that urges from inside the body where sound comes from the center, gathering emotion to articulate the deepest feeling" (12). Kaldas, thus, romanticizes her relationship to the mother tongue; for her, it comes out of the heart while the

language of diaspora is merely a physical motion of the lips.¹² Kaldas's words reveal contradictions in her own perception of language, or, in other words, reflect her ambivalence. Similar to Zaher's words of losing fluency in both languages, Kaldas writes: "I have neither native tongue nor second language" ("In Direction" 11), which equally mirrors a state of ambivalence.

Like Zaher, Kaldas introduces the reader to the Arabic alphabets in her poem entitled "A B C / أ ب ت: for Yasmine and Celine."¹³ However, unlike Zaher, she does not leave the English-speaking reader perplexed with the letters, but she plays the role of the Arabic instructor. The subtitle of the poem addresses the poet's daughters as representatives of the third generation of immigrants who are mostly detached from their native tongue. This is asserted by starting the poem with "child" and by asserting the reader's "brown skin," which characterizes many Arabs in general and most of the Egyptians, in particular. In other words, the poet mainly addresses the young generation: "child," of Arab descent: "brown skin." Kaldas starts her volume of poetry by this poem, so that the reader realizes her Arabic identity from the very beginning.

Arabic letters appear throughout the poem. Kaldas starts "A B C / أ ب ت" saying:

Child, open your dark eyes

follow your brown skin to this sound

خ

deep from your throat

bring it out like phlegm (lines 1-5).

In the previous lines, the speaker guides the audience how to pronounce the Arabic letter "خ" which represents the sound /x/. She presents, as well, the Arabic letter "ث" that resembles the sound /θ/; in order to be able to pronounce the letter, the persona explains: "hold your tongue in your teeth / snatch the air" (21-22). She also describes the sound "ق" /q/ as: "begin to swallow your tongue" (16). It is worth noting that the poem has to be read as an analysis from a poet not a linguist; in other words, the pronouncing tips are neither scientific nor sufficient. Nevertheless, the previous explanations are acceptable when addressed from a poet who aims at simplifying the process of pronouncing a new language for children.

However, some other letters are characterized in a misleading, yet rhetorical technique. This could be detected in the poet's attempts to represent the following sounds respectively: /ʕ/, /ħ/, and /h/ in “ع – in the center below your heart / pull to a tone like a cymbal” (6-7), and “ح – walk in a desert / till your thirst becomes sand” (11-12), and “و – walk longer till the air feels of water” (13-14). The speaker's description of these sounds is ambivalent and ambiguous. It has to be taken into consideration that the speaker is not qualified enough to teach classical Arabic; she admits losing the ability even to understand classical Arabic (“In Direction” 11). So, her efforts to preserve her mother tongue and transfer it to the next generation are to be appreciated, especially that she concentrates on the Arabic letters that do not have equivalents in English alphabets ق, ح, ع, خ. Moreover, she deals with letters (ث – ق) that are seldom pronounced in the vernacular dialect, which she knows well, and are often substituted by other sounds, as if she were teaching herself together with her audience.¹⁴

The speaker laments the detachment of some immigrants from their mother tongue. She personifies the Arabic language as a choked person: “your grandparents choked their last / Arabic signature bought / you a ticket to America” (8-10). Throughout the verb “choked,” the speaker blames the first generation of immigrants and perceives it as responsible for an entire linguistic assimilation of the younger generation. It sounds that the poet regrets the migration experience which detached the immigrants in general, and the new generations of immigrants in particular, from their native tongue.

Throughout the poem, linguistic ambivalence is reflected in three different generations. The grandparents in the poem are Kaldas's parents since she addresses her daughters. Based on one of Kaldas's articles, the Arabic language carries her parents' emotions: “Arabic is the language my mother wails in when she learns that her sister has cancer. It is the language my father cries in when he learns of his mother's death in Egypt” (“In Direction” 12). This indicates a linguistic ambivalence since the parents unconsciously shift from English to Arabic on specific occasions. Linguistic ambivalence is also asserted by the parents' failure to connect their children and their grandchildren to the Arabic language, as declared in the poem, in spite of its emotional significance to them.

Similarly, Kaldas occasionally shifts to Arabic. She believes that “Arabic touches on our irrational;” she sets an example that it is “the spoken words I share

with my uncle when he enters my dreams to say goodbye the night he dies” (“In Direction” 12). This deviation from the English language, and surrealist departure to the Arabic one highlights the linguistic ambivalence. Moreover, Kaldas’s attempts to connect the younger generation to the Arabic language via mixing it with the dominant language, in order to make it comprehensible, further stress her linguistic ambivalence. Both generations, the grandparents and the parents, are transnationalists in so far as they are tied to both languages. The new generation, on the other side of the cliff, appears more detached from the Arabic language. Yet, the attempts of the elder generations to connect the younger ones to Arabic, which are done through a blend between English and Arabic as clear in the poem, are symptomatic of everyone’s linguistic ambivalence.

The Arabic language, the Egyptian dialect in particular, appears several times in Kaldas’s verse. Her poem “Morning” is written in a mixture of the English language and the Egyptian vernacular dialect in transliteration:

Sabah el kheir

Sabah el fol

Morning of luck

Morning of jasmine

Sabah el noor

Sabah el eshta

Morning of light

Morning of cream (6-13; italics in original).

The vividness of the Arabic language is crystalized through the poet’s translation efforts. Such translations are attempts to reflect the aesthetics of the Arabic language. Though Kaldas’s efforts as a mediator between two languages are sincere, she suffers a tension that results in inaccurate translations, for instance, “el kheir” is not “luck” and “el fol” is not identical to “jasmine.” Moreover, “el eshta” is more oriental than the “cream.” Kaldas might be applying such changes to her translation on purpose to domesticate her vocabulary to conform to the American culture. According to Lawrence Venuti, domesticating while translating is “the assimilation of the source text to what is intelligible and interesting to readerships in the receiving culture” (37).¹⁵ However, Kaldas “foreignized” the poem, or “avoided familiar, conversational forms,” to borrow Venuti’s words (129), via surprising the English speaker who never uses these idioms in morning greetings. Keeping in mind that “Arab immigrant literature

oscillates between the two strategies of domesticating and foreignizing” (Hassan 32), Kaldas’s hesitating strategy asserts her ambivalence. This poem corresponds to Wael Hassan’s idea that:

a major language in the hands of a minority writer is defamiliarized through its infusion with words, expressions, rhetorical figures, speech patterns, ideological intentions, and the worldview of the author’s minority group, which differentiate the writer’s language from that of the mainstream culture, producing all sorts of estranging effects. (4-5)

The poet attempts to transfer her culture to the readers. She presents a few of the different versions of optimistic, intimate morning greetings Egyptians use in lieu of the one version of its corresponding English greeting “good morning.” Yet, Kaldas’s attempt emphasizes May’s belief that: “the traditionally associated language reflects and conveys its culture more felicitously and succinctly than other languages, *while that language-in-culture link remains generally intact*” (138; emphasis in original). In other words, Kaldas plays the role of a cultural translator who proves that culture is best expressed in its original language.

Kaldas sounds tied to both languages; a kind of tie that results in a state of linguistic ambivalence. The poet seems proud of her native language, specifically when she starts with the Arabic lines. Similarly, her italicization of the Arabic lines only emphasizes her interest in foregrounding the Arabic language. However, the main language of the poem remains to be the dominant language of her new homeland. The combination between Arabic and English, and the line by line translation endeavors, mirror a similar combination in the poet’s mind. It is essential to note that mingling both languages does not affect the rhyme of the poem. The lines above sound musical, especially through the repetition of “Sabah” and “Morning;” the alliteration in “luck” and “light;” the consonance in “Kheir” and “noor;” and the assonance in “kheir’ and “cream.”

Fouad comments on Kaldas’s language in “Morning,” as well as on the form of the poem. She maintains that:

Kaldas traces one of the major differences between Arabic and English through studying the way the phrase “good morning” is uttered in both languages. She compares the cold, lifeless, standard, American ‘good morning’ which is “mumbled so the ‘good’ disappears / only ‘morning’

left” (20-21), to the intimate, and more vivid, Arabic “*Sabah el Kheir*” with all its variations (30).

Fouad’s words recall those of Hassan when he writes: “literal translation may be used to transfer the cultural-linguistic character of one language-its idiomatic expressions and its sensibility-into English, at the expense of fluency and immediate intelligibility” (33). In addition, Fouad elaborates Kaldas’s preference of the Arabic language to the English one and concludes that the poet sees Arabic as more powerful. Yet, according to her, Kaldas brings both languages “side by side” as a kind of reconciliation or crossing the “linguistic border” whose passing is a challenging mission (31). Fouad adds that: “Kaldas chooses to communicate her idea of the difference between English and Arabic in a simple language using a straightforward translation and transliteration of colloquial Arabic and, more specifically, of Egyptian slang expressions” (31). She adds that the poem “has the pleasures of calmness, compact shape and balance” (31). Fouad points to the poet’s attempts of reconciliation conveyed through such “calmness” and “balance.” In the context of the present research, such “calmness” and “balance” are strategies to help the transmigrant poet to organize the chaos in her psyche, and to handle the linguistic and cultural ambivalence she experiences.

Linguistic ambivalence reveals itself early in the title of Kaldas’s poem “Utterances,” which expresses her bewilderment towards the spoken words. Kaldas introduces the reader to some Arabic words. She introduces various Arabic terms, starting by writing each term in Arabic letters, then she offers a transliteration, and finally she provides a translation of the term into English, followed by an example on each term. This strategy of transliterating may “Arabize” English, as noted by Hassan (33). Kaldas starts her poem as follows:

tell three silent things

اللغة / *el logha* / *language*

thoughts in Arabic

slipped into a school desk

my lips don’t move

to make words in English (1-6).

The persona here conveys the emotions of a migrant child who moved from an Egyptian school to an American one. The linguistic dilemma that occurs for many

migrant children is highlighted. Kaldas elucidates the role of her mother tongue when she recalls herself at class thinking in Arabic and incapable of pronouncing her thoughts in English. The metaphor by which Kaldas describes the abstract (thoughts in Arabic) in terms of concrete objects that move smoothly crystalizes the dominance of Arabic language at that time of her development. The figure of the lips which cannot move or utter words in English reasserts that the mother tongue is more powerful, the use of the verb “make” instead of pronounce or utter expresses the effort needed to forge her thoughts in English. Keeping in mind that the Arabic language is “silent,” as stated in the first line; or in other words, is not articulated in the United States, makes its power more noticeable.

Arabic expressions continue to appear throughout the poem. For example, Kaldas tells about the second item in the “*three silent things*” which is “الـحزن / *el hozn / sadness*” (7) that appeared on her father’s face after receiving “the call from Egypt that his mother died” (11). The third silent thing for Kaldas is “الـنفس / *el nafes / breath*” (12) as when she tried “quieting the air” (15) while hiding under her parents’ bed. The poet’s ambivalence in relation to her mother tongue is crystalized here when she misspells “el nafas,” the Arabic translation of “the breath” and writes “el nafes,” instead, the latter being the Arabic translation of “the self.”

Then Kaldas moves towards describing “*three loud things*” (17): “المهرجان / *el mahragan / festival*,” “الـنرفزة / *eel narvaza / temper*” and “اول يوم / *awel yom / first day*” (18, 23, 28).¹⁶ To be accurate, “temper” is not similar to “الـنرفزة,” temper is used to refer to a state of mind, an attitude or a feeling that could be either anger or calmness, while النرفزة refers to anger only (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Ambivalence shows in the speaker’s inability to adjust the Arabic definite article as it appears either as “el” or “eel,” and which is absent in the English version of the words since they are not preceded with “the.” It is worth noting that “Utterances” is the last poem in Kaldas’s volume, which invites the reader to finish the book with the Arabic words residing in his/her mind and heart.

Both poems, “Morning” and “Utterances” are not only transnational, but they are also translational. Translational literature refers to “texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation” (Hassan 32). Such forms of texts “participate in the construction of cross-cultural identities” (33). This could be related to Bhabha’s indication of the

“transnational and translational sense of the hybridity” (*The Location* 5). Moreover, as Guardi points with reference to Ahdaf Soueif’s novels, “[t]he English reader – thanks to the visual recognition of the original English word and the conceptual explanation embodied in the narrative – is forced to acknowledge that there is a language, i.e. Arabic” (50). This indicates that the presence of the Arabic side by side with the English comes to emphasize the Arabic language and to foreground its presence in the poet’s and the readers’ world.

Conclusion

Language usage in the poems under study is distinct. The poets in this study create a unique mixture of the native language and the language of the new homeland. Zaher and Kaldas prove to be transnationalists; they reveal a connection to their land of origin via expressing themselves in their mother tongue in spite of feeling and being tied to the language of daily communication and survival. The analysis of their poems which embrace the Arabic language suggests a sense of linguistic ambivalence in divergent degrees. Despite their knowledge of the Arabic language, due to the fact of living in Egypt for several years before migrating to the United States, neither of the poets writes Arabic poetry, and both use English as their medium of communication.

Zaher writes one poem in the classical Arabic, yet it is heavily impacted by the imprint of the English language. The poem is nothing but scattered Arabic letters from the left-hand side, and the result is an ambivalent and hybrid poem in need of decoding. Despite his ambivalence, Zaher is brave enough to depend mainly, but not entirely, on his mother tongue to encourage the audience to decipher its signs. By doing this, Zaher drives his English readers to experience their position as non-native speakers of the language and share his own perplexity of lack of comprehension when he first arrived at his new “homeland.” Yet, Zaher is still considered as a poet who seldom expresses himself in his mother tongue.

Kaldas starts and ends her volume entitled *Egyptian Compass* in poems that mingle both languages, in addition to various hybrid poems throughout the volume. She writes in the vernacular Egyptian tongue, usually followed by the English transliteration and translation, and which include inaccurate Arabic descriptions. Kaldas’s linguistic ambivalence is more complex than that of Zaher’s due to various reasons. Kaldas migrated as a child and experienced language conflict at earlier age, and she is a mother who bears the responsibility

of teaching her daughters the Arabic language, in addition to being a professor of English literature who is sensitive towards language. To sum up, Zaher and Kaldas attempt to impose parts of their identity upon their writings and stimulate the English reader to accept such identity. They are representatives of transmigrant poets who create a linguistic hybrid that reflects both: their peculiar culture and their linguistic ambivalence.

Notes

¹ Steven Vertovec states that: “[n]ow many countries are wholly reliant on remittances for a significant share of their national economies” (15). This could be applied to Egypt as the economy relies, to some extent, on remittance.

² Despite relating transnationalism to the ties with the land of origin, some intellectuals go further to regard transnationalism as multidimensional. Nadjie Al-Ali and Khalid Koser, for instance, assign having “*multiple* allegiances to places” as a defining characteristic of transnational migrants (8; emphasis added). The use of “multiple” instead of “double” denotes loyalties to several nations. Michael Bommes maintains that transmigration could not be regarded as “a one-way move from an emigration country to an immigration country” and that transmigrants “are leading not just one- or bi-directional, but multi-directional lives” (109). This implies a call for considering transnationalism as a global relation rather a homeland connection. According to Mitchell “the concept has propelled greater interest in the multidirectional processes that simultaneously embed people, places, and things in two or more societies” (“Transnationalism” n. pag.).

³ Alzayed adds that: “[l]anguage is about more than just words. It is the repository of personal experience” (264). Such “personal experience” constitutes the connection to the land of origin and its culture.

⁴ “The word ‘hybridity’ has its origins in biology and botany where it designates a crossing between two species by cross-pollination that gives birth to a third ‘hybrid’ species” (Guignery 2). Also see “hybridity” in Macey’s *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*.

⁵ Zaher’s poems are cited by the page number rather than the number of the lines since they are published as untitled fragments in his books of poetry.

⁶ The Arabic language has two main forms. The classical, more formal

written version is called Modern Standard Arabic or *fusha*, and this is articulated in the Quran and in the media. The less formal, spoken dialects of Arabic vary greatly from country to country, even within a country, and are used for everyday spoken communication. (Kayyali 1)

⁷ This accent appears in Zaher's speeches and poetry readings on the *YouTube*.

⁸ The language crisis of migrants is expressed by Zaher in:

Oh dead bird

Come live here

Next to the dictionary

We will take walks

By the edges of trauma (*consequences* p. 20)

⁹ Zaher's proficiency in the classical Arabic shows while receiving the Genius Award in America. He starts his speech by reciting a piece of Arabic poetry, followed by thanking his Arabic schoolteacher in Egypt saying: "he turned me to a poet" ("2013" 00:01:15-59).

¹⁰ For further details kindly check Kaldas's official website:

www.paulinekaldas.com/index.htm

and for listening to some of her readings check: hollinsmfa.wordpress.com/readings/

¹¹ The language of survival concept is also adopted by the Chinese-American writer Ha Jin, as well as the linguistic ambivalence issue when he mentions perceiving English as the language of betrayal (35-36).

¹² To comment on Kaldas's shift between Arabic and English languages, Kaldas talks about a friend of hers who noticed: "when I switched from speaking English to speaking Arabic, my entire self transformed-my tone of voice, gestures, body movements-'you become a different person with each language,' he said" (*Looking* 53).

¹³ All Kaldas's poems are from her volume entitled *Egyptian Compass*.

¹⁴ The transliteration of the sounds is done according to the IPA.

¹⁵ "The domesticating method of translation" might result in "diverse forms of cultural and social exclusion" (Venuti 129).

¹⁶ All italics are in original.

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