

Writing the Self/ Writing the Other in Thomas Keneally's *The Tyrant's Novel* and Inaam Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter*

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Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 110)

What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own conceptual horizon in someone else's horizon. (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 365)

Writing, as an important cultural tool, can be both a means of domination—of securing the compliance of the subjugated groups—and a means of confrontation—of circulating subversive ideas that can ultimately help to effect change and liberate such groups. Therefore, in times of crisis, committed writers and intellectuals take it upon themselves “not only to define the situation, but also to discern the possibilities for active intervention, whether [they] then perform them [themselves] or acknowledge them in others who have either gone before or are already at work” (Said, “The Public Role” 26). Thus, their texts become “socially symbolic acts” (Jameson 20) that form a discursive intervention aiming at radical social transformations. A wide range of writers adopt humanistic approaches to defend the general human rights and to give voice to the subordinate segments of humanity in distinct geohistorical locations. The renowned Australian writer, Thomas Keneally, and the Iraqi writer and journalist, Inaam Kachachi, exemplify these humanistic efforts. Keneally's humanistic tendencies are clear in his association with PEN, the human and cultural rights advocacy organization that aims to support literature, foster international understanding, and defend freedom of expression. His project is also embodied in fictional works that consistently attempt to give voice to the voiceless. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Schindler's List*, *To Asmara*¹ and other novels demonstrate his sustained efforts to champion the cause of the dispossessed in various parts of the world. Kachachi, a journalist, has always been an advocate of the freedom of expression; her experience with the stifling censorship under Saddam Hussein's regime was her first incentive to leave her country of birth and settle in Paris. Since then she has been preoccupied with giving voice to the Iraqi people in their dilemma both in her fictional and non-fictional works.² These humanistic concerns find expression in Keneally's *The Tyrant's Novel* (2004) and

Kachachi's *The American Granddaughter* (2008). Both novels are inspired by some of the major and most controversial political events in the recent history of the Middle East and of the world at large, namely, the crisis in Iraq which culminated in the 2003 American invasion. Through the tale of the pseudo-named Alan Sheriff, a renowned novelist in an unnamed Middle-Eastern country (presumably Iraq), Keneally manages to "create the record of intolerable times" (Keneally 28), under the stifling weight of UN sanctions, foreign interference, and diminishing wealth on the one hand, as well as repression, censorship and surveillance on the other. Being forced to ghostwrite a novel under the oppressive shadow of Great Uncle (a barely disguised Saddam Hussein) and his overguard, Sheriff lives the moral and political dilemma of his country. Though he manages to flee the horrors of this regime, he is still trapped within a global system that aims at getting rid of the abject refugees and banishes them outside its livable territories into walled and wired prisons and camps. To borrow Keneally's own words, the novel is a "tale of walls and gates" (44), where there seems to be no way out of the inescapable chain of confinement and imprisonment both inside one's home country and on a more planetary scale.

In a similar vein, the Iraqi novelist Inaam Kachachi manages through her novel *The American Granddaughter* (2008) to tell "a story like no other" (Kachachi 3): the story of a young woman, Zeina Benham, who is born in Iraq, grows up in Detroit, then returns to her country of birth as a translator for the American army. The story is mainly about the war in Iraq and its effect, not only on the protagonist, but also on a whole array of characters whose lives are altered forever because of its devastating consequences. However, it is also about the bleak life led by Iraqi and other Arab refugees and exiles in the West: about divided loyalties and shattered lives—the simultaneity of conspicuous togetherness and conspicuous otherness in a predominantly globalized world.

Both texts offer a complex modeling of the world based mainly on an ongoing interaction between cultures, ideologies, texts and contexts. Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical theory offers itself as the most effective tool for reading such texts. For Bakhtin, the novel, as *the* dialogic genre, does not merely represent the world but actually hybridizes and orchestrates "contested, contestable, and contesting" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 332) conceptualizations of that world. Novels are not just stories but rather means of understanding, negotiating, and modifying conflicting representations of the world. Thus, it is through narrative that cross- cultural negotiation of publicly-disseminated representations of self and other(s) is possible in a milieu of unfinalizable dialogicality. Consequently, the very act of creating subject positions is implicated in otherness for, as Bakhtin asserts, "[t]o be means to be for another, and through the other for oneself" (*Problems* 287).

Moreover, the novel as "a genre, understood as way of seeing, is best described neither as a 'form' (in the usual sense) nor as an 'ideology' . . . but as a 'form-shaping ideology'" (Morson & Emerson

282). Thus, in discussing the dialogic nature of representation and the problematics ensuing in its realm, it becomes necessary to question “the adequacy of any storytelling framework in which [the narrative] might be represented” (Jameson 49), and to focus particularly on the formal aspects of the texts under discussion. Those aspects bring to mind Tony Morrison’s famous questions: “How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an . . . other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter?” (Morrison 16). These questions can be applied to imagining the self, as well as the other, in a dialogic forum.

The dialogical element of Keneally’s and Kachachi’s texts is established first through the construction of the leading characters and their occupations in life. Both Keneally’s Alan and Kachachi’s Zeina exist in a world immersed in a multiplicity of narrative voices and texts. As writers and translators, they both experience narrative as an “interillumination of languages” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 362). Living in a heteroglossia³ of voices, they try to express the self, to reach out for the other and to create a more humane way of translating their intercultural world(s). Translation here is the embodiment of dialogue as it simultaneously encompasses the immediate linguistic act and the cultural mediation implicated therein.

Moreover, the prosaic reality of narrative and its potential for complex and multiple dialogue make it more of a “map of contemporary life” (Vitanova 28). Sheriff’s own works as a novelist and a short-story writer have deep dialogic reverberations that map the contemporary life in his country. He tactfully manages to circumvent the centripetal forces represented by state censorship by seemingly keeping in line with state policies. On a deeper level, he tries to give space for the interplay of centrifugal forces that aim at translating both the first Gulf War which he has taken part in and the sanctions’ stifling effect on the people into works of fiction. He aims through his novel to draw attention to “this tale of the tyranny of sanctions, and the cruel jokes of the black market under the broader tyranny of Great Uncle” (Keneally 60). Consequently, his narratives resonate with multiple social and political strata: from the soldiers on the Southern front to the women on Summer Island, to the black marketeers in Eastside market.

This social heteroglossia emanates from the desire to include the voices of subordinate classes—a desire shared by other writers in *The Tyrant’s Novel*. The two writers, a male and a female, who appear in the two parts titled “the visitor’s preface” and the “after-tale”—which comprise the frame narrative—are outspoken in their desire to communicate with the other through narrative. The interview between the anonymous writer and Alan Sheriff gives way to Sheriff’s account of his own life story told retrospectively. The interview, along with its long uninterrupted core narrative, stands witness to the power of narrative to construe and constitute one’s concept of self and other. Shedding light on the story of the other helps the listener/reader ascribe meaning to human suffering and opens the way for an association of meaning that underscores the spots of difference and sameness which constitute what it means to be human. It also co-implicates them in a

translational process that illuminates the cultural life of their respective peoples, while simultaneously reassembling the sense of a shared existence that highlights the global effect of the story where the misfortunes of one people necessarily leave an imprint on all other peoples. The text emphasizes the connection of people's lives on earth where even "the blowing of a referee's whistle [in a football match] in Lyons of itself produced [a] prodigious result in *our* [Arab/Iraqi] hemisphere, in *our* kitchen" (Keneally 53). In such a glocality, literature necessarily becomes a "medium in which men and women fight out their social and political battles at the level of signs, meanings and representations" (Eagleton 11). Hence, Keneally's novel, like that of his protagonist Sheriff, inescapably becomes "overtly political, insofar as all [the] characters [are] aware of being held in a vice of politics" (Keneally 113).

The fact that the interview of the frame story takes place in a prison where asylum seekers are detained is itself significant. It bears witness to the circle of fear that surrounds, not only the asylum seekers facing the unknown, but also the Western people who are entrapped within its vicious circle. In our postcolonial era of "negative globalization" (Bauman 7), things have changed drastically on the economic, social and political levels. It is an era characterized by "a selective globalization of trade and capital, surveillance and information, violence and weapons, crime and terrorism, all unanimous in their disdain of the principle of territorial sovereignty and their lack of respect for any state boundary" (Bauman 7). Thus any violence committed against the other(s) promptly results in a backlash of violence and terrorism aimed at civilians at home. Moreover, the accompanying unsettling of the other's lives results in the arrival of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers who come banging the doors of the rich countries looking for stability and new life-opportunities. However, they find that the immigration process is itself nothing but a "lottery and thus a tyranny of chance to match the tyranny of intent or danger they had run, floated, or flown away from" (Keneally 4).

The part of the novel set in the detention camp was inspired by Keneally's visit to the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre outside Sydney, a prison-like centre used to cater to people deported from or refused entry into Australia. The centre is notorious for its harsh conditions that were reported and condemned by many Human Rights organizations. The visit left Keneally appalled and intent on writing a novel to expose the reality of the conservative governments in Australia, who, like all similar governments, "find it suitable to have an enemy in-the-midst, more imagined than real, whom they can point out to the populace as the threat" (Keneally1). Here Keneally adopts sociological theories that explain how in our era of liquid modernity "the nation-state loses its might, now evaporating into global space, and its political acumen and dexterity, now increasingly relegated to the sphere of individual 'life politics' and 'subsidiarized' to individual men and women" (Bauman 25). Hence, the only way that politicians can retain their power and find for themselves a new role is by making personal safety the main concern of the people and stressing the

insecurities of the new urban life caused by the intruding outsiders. Most of the refugees in such places are thus stigmatized, rejected, and imprisoned just like “a virus too toxic to be released” (Keneally 1). Their status, in camps or prisons, becomes more difficult as they are caught in a “lasting state of temporaryness [sic]” (Bauman 46), not “for six weeks, not merely until it was discovered whether they had dangerous powers or connections; . . . not for six months, to allow the watchers to observe their behavior. But for years” (Keneally 1-2).

Moreover, Keneally is keen on demonstrating that even those refugees who manage to be legally admitted still have to suffer. Beyond “the possible, dangerous exodus and the harshness of processing in some other country lay the destiny of a career as a hotel maid in some New or Old World city; and for [gentlemen] . . . , a future as parking attendant or cabdriver” (Keneally 22). Keneally’s novel becomes an attempt to shed more light on the problems of those refugees that “the government wanted people to see as an inhuman and peevish mass” (8). The anonymous narrator, the mouthpiece of Keneally in this matter, expresses the motives behind his concern saying: “I imagine grandchildren I may never have asking, what did you say when the government locked up the asylum seekers?” (9). Just like Keneally himself, the anonymous writer/narrator chooses to assume his ethical and cultural responsibilities and to undertake his role by giving voice to the refugees.

Kachachi chooses to assume the same kind of responsibility in her novel especially given that more than five million Iraqis were forced to flee their land as a result of the sanctions imposed by the West followed by the American invasion of their country. Unlike Keneally, Kachachi does not concentrate on the difficulties of finding refuge whether in other Arab countries like Jordan, or in the West as exemplified in the novel by the United States. In exile herself in Paris since the 1970s, Kachachi understands the difficulties of moving to another country, and another culture. In her novel, she portrays the nightmarish quality of the American dream where immigrants are ghettoed into slum-like areas with limited chances of upward mobility. Zeina tries to argue with Muhaymen, her Iraqi milk brother⁴, who thinks that “emigration was like captivity: both left you suspended between two lives, with no comfort in moving on or turning back” (Kachachi 130). She tries to argue that “in this day and age, migration was a form of settling, that belonging didn’t necessarily come from staying in one’s birthplace,” that it is more viable to consider “the whole world . . . [as] your homeland” (Kachachi 130).

However, the dialogic element of the novel does not permit things to end there. Everything in her story points to the opposite of her argument about belonging. Zeina and her family live with other immigrants in “the rotting wooden houses of Seven Miles. . . . [where] the impoverished rich . . . gained money only after hard labour took their health. They went home at the end of the night drained and barely able to recognize their families” (Kachachi 133). The only avenue open for them is to grab any opportunity of work no matter how debased. Thus Zeina’s father, the former celebrated TV presenter,

suffers a heart attack resulting from the humiliation he feels when he works at “carrying beer boxes at a storehouse owned by relatives” (Kachachi 142). Her mother, who used to work at the University of Baghdad, works in a hotel, first in the kitchen for three years, then in reception. She “cursed her bad luck every day, until she ran into the former head of the philosophy department at the University of Baghdad arranging vegetables at Farmer’s Jack” (Kachachi 142). In addition, her brother Yazan becomes a drug addict without any prospects of a good future. This kind of fate is shared by most of her friends and neighbours, so when the government announces the need for translators to accompany the army, the promise of financial security and welfare outdoes any fear of injury or death, any question of betrayal or loyalty.

Keneally’s time frame stops at the sanctions before the beginning of the invasion. Kachachi’s text, on the other hand, picks up where Keneally ends and focuses on the war in Iraq. Kachachi is intent on showing that “war was a rotten onion” (129), that “war was no dance and no picnic, that death had a bitter aftertaste” (126). At first, Zeina, like many other Americans, believes in the humanistic claims of the American administration, and that she is on a mission to “bring down Saddam and liberate a nation from its suffering” (Kachachi 10). She believes that the Iraqi people “won’t believe their eyes when they finally open onto freedom. Even old men will become boys again when they sup from the milk of democracy” (Kachachi 10). Real life-experience challenges such claims and makes Zeina suffer under the weight of compassion with and guilt towards “terrified children and innocent civilians dying in Baghdad” (Kachachi 15). She laments that funerals have become “daily routine, no different from going to the cinema in happier lands” (Kachachi 172).

However, this concern for the suffering of the people does not emanate from a narrow nationalism similar to that of “TV politicians and dinosaur nationalists” (Kachachi 27). The kind of nationalism that has its roots in “a kind of blind Bedouin patriotism that celebrated with gunshots when she saw me taking my brother’s side against my cousin, and my cousin’s side against a stranger” (117) is unthinkable in the case of Zeina. Hers is “tainted by a dual nationality” (117) that makes her more like “a dog with two homes but unable to feel at home in either” (147). Unable to decide once and for all “whose side [she] was on” (107), she thinks of herself instead as a “citizen of the world” (130). As such, she becomes the advocate of a kind of positive cosmopolitanism where “the whole world can be your homeland” (130). Such openness for multiplicity and recognition of similarities make Zeina refrain from a univocal monologic understanding of the situation. One strength of the novel is that it manages to portray the tragedy and suffering on both sides. Zeina feels the weight of the loss and the list of the dead which is getting longer: “Talib Shannoun [,] Hassan Abdul-Amir [,] Muzaffar Al-Shatry [,] Qais, Hatif, Raad and Abdul-hussein Al-Nadaf [on the one hand, and] Brian and Jessica and Michael” (Kachachi 167-68) on the other. Beyond any political or military claims or tactics, common human anguish makes the grieving

mothers of American soldiers who had died in Iraq “empathis[e] with the grief of Iraqi mothers that [they] saw on the news wearing black *abayas* and weeping over the children they lost in the streets of Baghdad” (Kachachi 128).

However, despite the significance of the novel’s humanistic concerns, the text seems simultaneously to express the vulnerability of all humanistic and idealistic values under the weight of war and aggression. Unrestrained power poisons any ability to affect any kind of human relation between the invading army and the colonized people. The Iraqis disprove the American propaganda that portrayed them as “people eager for regime change, dreaming of freedom and welcoming the arrival of the US Army” (39). Instead, in any encounter with the invaders, their black eyes overflow with nothing but “rejection” (39). In no time, the American troops have to face incessant attacks by armed groups that are “called . . . insurgents, or rebels, terrorists, criminals, troublemakers—anything to avoid using the word ‘resistance’” (136), the only word that fits the description of groups formed to fight an invader. The result is a vicious circle of mutual violence as “the brutality of [the American] soldiers increased in direct proportion to [their] losses” (139). The circle of violence culminates in Abu Ghraib prison and the atrocities practiced therein. Instead of bringing freedom and democracy the Americans do nothing but “replace torture with torture” (140). In the place of a shared human experience, there is an accelerating sense of polarization that depends on an “us and them” (Kachachi 164) rhetoric that brings about more aggression, more enmity. Thus the main challenge for Kachachi is how to express the enduring humanistic values in the face of such inhumane practices.

Conversely, the main challenge for Keneally is how to maintain the cultural integrity of his humanistic project, and how to write about an-other dialogically without exoticizing, or oversimplifying him or her. There is already a huge library of Western texts, old and new, that claim to represent the oriental other but in so doing, usually resort to orientalist strategies of essentialization and stereotyping. Keneally, in his portrayal of the refugees at the detention centre and of the Iraqi characters in the core story, mostly succeeds in evading such serious blemishes. However, David Rieff of the *Washington Post* actually criticizes the novel for being “too politically correct.” Keneally’s primary aim is to expose the reality of the Western coalition against Saddam and to refute the claims that it is the latter’s tyranny that triggered Western antagonism against him after decades of alliance. Great Uncle stresses this fact as he remarks: “[t]hey were appreciative of us once, the Americans, weren’t they? When we were fighting the Others for them” (Keneally 85). Even when Western countries decide to get rid of him when he becomes a nuisance, they impose their sanctions, punishing the people rather than the tyrant. Keneally points out that the name of the game is oil, the “Satanic honey” (Keneally 232) that makes this part of the world important, and exposes it to incessant waves of colonial and neocolonial conspiracies and schemes.

However, the means the author chooses to express those thematic concerns proves to be anything but easy. Keneally's concern for the dispossessed started early in his career when he wrote *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972), which explores the impact of the encounter between European and indigenous cultures from an Aboriginal point of view. Sue Ryan-Fazilleau summarizes objections raised against this novel despite its importance as a landmark in Australian literature. She remarks: "Keneally's title seems to me to be a misnomer. It implies that the novel is Jimmie Blacksmith's interpretation of the events of 1900-1901, in terms of Aboriginal history. But in fact the novel is an early 1970s white interpretation of an episode in the history of white/Aboriginal relations in Australia" (27). In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, the predominance of the authorial voice limits the dialogicality of the novel and deepens the impression of "a very tightly, very self-consciously, structured novel, deliberately asserting the presence of its author as one who selects, shapes, interprets and judges the historical events he is dealing with" (Sturm 265-66). This narrative strategy results in a distancing attitude and a discomforting reading experience, which eventually makes Keneally more aware of the dangers of speaking for the other, and more eager to explore the possibilities of experimenting with diverse narrative techniques. These experimentations were of prior importance for a novelist of Keneally's wide range of topics, which covered various cultural, historical and geopolitical areas and eras.

Likewise, in *The Tyrant's Novel*, the narrative voice becomes a crucial element in managing the networks of power through which Western forms of representation are circulated. In order to heighten the dialogic effect of the narrative, Keneally has to avoid having the Western writer/narrator tell the story of the refugee other. Hence, the narrative-within-a-narrative technique limits the interference of the authorial voice and allows the refugee to tell his own story in his own words. The device proves to be useful in highlighting the cultural encounter and its ensuing consequences. As it is usual in Keneally's fictional world, the racial encounter results in a cultural misunderstanding of the kind that takes place between Alan and Alice, the journalist who writes an article about the asylum seekers and about Alan himself. In her article, Alice hints that Alan shows some kind of physical attraction to her, adding that "he sometimes took her wrist and absorbed her with his sad, ironic eyes and wistfully considered her breasts" (Keneally 8). This reference is itself a sign of misinterpretation that emanates from the inability of the journalist to fathom the depth of Alan's tragedy or the real meaning of his gestures towards her. In such two completely distinct semiotic spheres, signs take on different significance and interpretation that can easily lead to misunderstanding.

The same kind of misunderstanding is obvious in the anonymous narrator's attempt to translate Alice's motives to Alan. The latter makes a gesture "indicating either that innocence and worldliness were mixed in her, or else that my [the narrator's] idea of both qualities didn't match his" (Keneally 9). Unlike the Western writer/reader,

Alan, like all the other refugees, strives just to stay alive; in such a condition, human intimacy and normal relationships become unimaginable. This discrepancy drives the anonymous narrator to admit this lack of understanding and to declare: “we’re naïve” (235). The confession of his naiveté paradoxically becomes a sign of the fruitfulness of the narrative. It simultaneously acknowledges the positionality and reflexivity of the anonymous narrator. The two men’s distinct cultural backgrounds assign for them distinct identity and power positions, while the reflexivity of the narrator opens the door for a self-conscious, analytical self-scrutiny that makes the encounter and the interview most revealing and informative for the anonymous narrator, and presumably the novel’s readers.

The same kind of misunderstanding and deformation can be found in Kachachi’s novel. Because of their lack of any historical or cultural understanding that could have helped them appreciate the symbolic meaning of the rituals practiced by the Shi’a Muslim on the day of “Ashoura”, the American soldiers end up mocking the rituals in a comic way that exasperates Zeina. The Christian Zeina is aware that “the religion they were mocking wasn’t [her] own . . . [but growing] up to the sounds of its muezzins [she] act[s] like any religious fundamentalist” (Kachachi 106) and severely attacks them. The text is keen on demonstrating that the cultural component that brings together Iraqi Muslims and Christians is stronger than that which bonds Zeina and her American fellow-soldiers. In order to make the “Ashoura” ritual nearer to their minds, she tells them the story of her aunt Jawza who performs the ritual of crawling across the street on all four so that “the Virgin would take pity on her and heal her only son” (106-07). For most of them, her tale is “‘incredible’, ‘fantastic’, as if [she] was telling it for their entertainment” (107). The only one who reacts differently and shows a great deal of understanding and sympathy is Manuel, “the dark-haired soldier of Peruvian origins” (107). With his Roman Catholic background and third-world origin, he is able to spot the resemblance between the “Ashoura” rituals, Aunt Jawza’s ritual, and “the Good Friday procession that took place in the poor neighbourhood where he grew up in Lima” (107). He stands out as different from Shawn, the one who does the mimicry. The latter could not see the analogy between the Ashoura rituals and “the sketch of worshippers by the Wailing Wall” (Kachachi 106). Religion in general, by its very nature, can never be subject to logical analysis. Any disregard for its symbolic nature and culture-specific reincarnations in different societies necessarily involves cultural and religious bias.

On another narrative level, the precarious nature of the cultural encounter finds its locution in the irreducible difficulty of translation expressed by Alan himself as he works on subtitling American movies. The many references to films underscore the heteroglossia of texts that pervades the novel. However, the difficulty that Alan faces emanates from the nature of translation as situated at the intersection between two languages. Consequently it needs “creative people” (Keneally 68) capable of conveying the exigencies of social and cultural situations and participating in an “economy of in-betweenness” (Derrida 179),

that necessarily involves a complicated network of interrelations among diverse semiotic forms and practices. Translation is thus “a *dia*-logic place, for at least two different logics meet in it: those of two different languages” (De Michiel 695). Consequently, Alan draws attention to the usual inaccuracy of the subtitling process, whether because of the translator’s negligence or his/her need to conform to some ideological requirements/restrictions. Commenting on the subtitling of the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Alan remarks: “the skill of the screenplay was continuously betrayed by the banality and literalism of the subtitles. I had become . . . affronted at the damage done not only to the original English but to the translation into my own language” (Keneally 68). Moreover, the fact that the movies are not dubbed but subtitled signifies the prevalence of the English language as a lingua franca that undermines the vernacular. On a more implicit level, it can stand for the lack of synthesis between cultures, for subtitling highlights the genuine diversity of the two cultural and linguistic spheres in as much as dubbing is a kind of forced assimilation, a discordant blend that results in a unified cultural product with dissonant constituents.

The precariousness of translation is also one of the main concerns of *The American Granddaughter*. The novel is living proof of Mona Baker’s premise that “translation and interpreting are part of the institution of war and hence play a major role in management of conflict” (1-2). Only one week after 9/11 “the FBI was already recruiting Arabic translators” (Kachachi 12). Under the influence of American propaganda, but also under the lure of “the one hundred and eighty-six thousand dollars, the price of [her] precious language, the price of [her] blood” (Kachachi 10), Zeina applies for the job. Even before the beginning of her mission as interpreter, Zeina is well aware of the difficulties of cross-cultural translation. In the course of her relationship with her American boyfriend, Calvin, she faces many situations where she finds the task of translating some Arabic word or expression for him problematic. For example, when she tries to translate the “Arabic saying about the monkey being as beautiful as a gazelle in his mother’s eyes, . . . he stared at [her] blankly and said that indeed he considered the monkey more beautiful than the gazelle” (Kachachi 45). Zeina insightfully explains this in the light of cultural difference, of “his freedom from the oriental superstitions . . . and his lack of a sense of humour” (45). Later, when she arrives in Iraq, she finds things even more difficult as the Americans “found a mysterious country that they couldn’t decipher. Their local guides [i.e. interpreters] were even more clueless” (65). The designation of her job is not an “interpreter” but rather

a cultural adviser . . . an interpreter who not only transferred words between languages but also offered the soldiers her sociological expertise. [She] explained to them, for instance, that entering places of worship was not to be done with shoes on. That they have to give women time to cover their heads before breaking into a house.” (83)

At the same time, she “listened [to Iraqi people] and interpreted and filled in forms and gave advice. But [she] didn’t permit [herself] sympathy or displays of emotion” (84). She, along with other interpreters, tries to calm down “the terrified folk and mediat[e] the rising anger” (Kachachi 61). However, the common people couldn’t possibly have appreciated her efforts or understood her dilemma. They only saw the army uniform that “was cutting [her] off from [them]” (Kachachi 7). As far as the people were concerned, they and Zeina “were in fact crouching in opposing trenches” (7). The image that persists in their minds is that she came “riding the occupation tanks. A phrase that . . . had a lighter ring than treason” (Kachachi 65), but couldn’t alter the fact of her allegiance to the enemy. Consequently, “[i]nterpreters and translators were especially vulnerable. They were being hunted down and slaughtered like animals” (Kachachi 112).

Both writers manipulate many narrative and textual tools that prove appropriate for the purpose of each of the two novels. However, in the case of Keneally the final effect is marred by the rather contrived method of giving Western names to all the non-Western characters and places. *The American Granddaughter* similarly represents the tendency of the refugees and the exiles to “Americanise [their] names” (Kachachi 63). Zeina’s brother, for instance, “whose name was now Jason” (Kachachi 9), is originally called Yazan. However, the fact that this tendency is introduced through only one minor character makes the effect not as disconcerting as in the case of *The Tyrant’s Novel*. In the latter, the overt aim behind this replacement is voiced by Alan as he renounces his Arab name and insists on using such an Anglo-Saxon one, asserting that their lives would be much easier “if we all had good Anglo-Saxon names . . . or if we were not, God help us, Said and Osama and Saleh. If we had Mac instead of Ibn” (Keneally 5). Alice, the journalist, also declares it “a brave stratagem designed to demand the sort of regard the minister would no doubt pay to all the suburban Alans who voted for him” (Keneally 8). In addition, this method might be interpreted as a way of making the characters more appealing to the reader who might otherwise take a hostile attitude towards them in the light of the anti-Arab feelings that have dominated the Western scene since 9/11. However, the effect of this displacement is intensified by Keneally’s portrayal of Alan’s character as “Westernized” (Keneally 54), not only by name but also by nature, history, and affiliation. Alan has “Anglophile parents and grandparents . . . [and] the British Mandate period made the . . . well-off city people like [his] father . . . nearly as British as, say, a Canadian, a New Zealander, an Australian, or a member of India’s ruling class” (Keneally 20). Such oversimplification of issues of cultural assimilation and hybridity, as well as this tendency to homogenize the (post)colonial space, is deeply problematic.

Bakhtin asserts that “a definite and concrete locality serves as the starting point for the creative imagination. But this is not an abstract landscape . . . no, this is a piece of human history. . . . Therefore the plot . . . and the characters do not enter it from the outside, are not invented to fit the landscape, but are unfolded in it as though they were

present from the very beginning” (*Speech Genres* 49). The intricate relation between the spatiotemporal elements of the story and its thematic and narrative concerns is what Bakhtin calls the chronotope. The narrative deficiencies in *The Tyrant’s Novel* are largely due to an inability to take such spatiotemporal elements into consideration in the portrayal of characters and events. This pattern again can be traced back to Keneally’s humanistic understanding of culture. According to Frantz Fanon, Western humanism depends on a “proclamation of an essential equality between men” (131). However, the term “human” itself is defined in terms of “Western humanity as incarnated in Western bourgeoisie” (Fanon 131). Bakhtin renounces such predispositions with their “mistaken tendency to reduce everything to a single consciousness, to dissolve in it the other’s consciousness (that one understands)” (qtd in Todorov 108-09). He advises that “in order to better understand a foreign culture one should live in it, and forgetting one’s own, look at the world through the eyes of this culture” (qtd in Todorov 109). Consequently, this incorporation of the other within the spirit and idea of the self becomes a kind of violence against that other; this “alleged integration”—as Emmanuel Levinas warns us—“is cruelty and injustice [for it] ignores the other” (52).

Moreover, even postcolonial writers with such clear Western affiliations (education, residence, and sympathies) are not so utterly divorced from their cultural roots. On the contrary, most of their fame actually rests on their representations of their culture(s) to the Western reader. Alan, on the other hand, confesses a total ignorance of some of the most important issues that form an essential part of the native culture such as the differences between the Sunni and the Shi’a Muslims—the two major religious groups in Iraq. When the anonymous narrator asks Alan about religion as a source of comfort, Alan “grinned in apology. I’m such a weak Mediationist [Sunni]. I asked what that was. Just one of the sects at home, he told me. Scratch a Mediationist, he explained, and you’ll find an agnostic. I didn’t have the expertise to argue this point” (Keneally 4). The important thing here is not that this piece of information is incorrect (which it is), but rather that the narrator confesses his lack of expertise concerning the topic of his narrative. Moreover, on another occasion, Alan resorts to the common wisdom that the strong Iranian resistance to the Iraqi troops is due to the Shi’a desire for martyrdom: “[o]ur army was momentarily glamorous, for unlike the Others, we had no suicide troops and could be imagined as normal frontline soldiers” (Keneally 21). Edward Said once commented on a similar remark in the *New York Times* saying, “[s]uperficially, phrases like that have a certain plausibility, but in fact I think they are used to cover a great deal of what the [writer] knows nothing about” (*Covering Islam* li). Bearing in mind the undeniable differences between journalism and fiction, the fact remains that lack of information on one’s topic is a serious flaw. This is more troubling when it comes from a writer of Keneally’s reputation and in an era that witnesses a proliferation of well-researched novels, including some of Keneally’s own novels such as *To Asmara*. These novels, while seeking their own versions of truth—a

larger truth than that offered by traditional historical accounts—still show their authors' striving for accuracy in relating the historical facts of the periods, characters and events they are dealing with.

On a formal level, "the link to cultural otherness proper appears . . . as an effect of cross-cultural intertextuality, textual hybridity, and the incorporation of foreign languages or mythologies" (Schwab 16), all of which are almost absent in the novel. Though the novel might seem to satisfy the dialogic criteria by the abundance of intertextual references used, most of those references are to European and American texts. Bakhtin affirms that this kind of heteroglossia is not satisfactory as "it remains within the boundaries of a single language system, [it] is not fertilized by a deep-rooted connection with the forces of historical becoming that serve to stratify a language" (*Dialogic Imagination* 325). Keneally seems to adopt again a rather humanistic approach to literature, an approach that stresses the centrality of the canonical literary texts of the West and Europe and pays heed to little else. It also stresses the universality of those texts and their humanistic spirit that transcends any cultural or geopolitical differences. Therefore, everything "in [Anton] Chekov seemed to Sarah and me [Alan] suddenly to relate to *our* community, *our* fraught nation" (Keneally 39, italics in original). Alan's references are mostly to writers of the stature of Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, and Tennessee Williams. When he wants to assess his own work, the point of reference is the great tradition: "De Maupassant, Katherine Mansfield, Alice Munro, Grace Paley" (Keneally 192). It can be argued that some of these writers, such as Grace Paley, belong to ethnic minorities. However, Paley is still regarded as one of America's most revered short-story writers. As a writer, Alan writes in his native language; nevertheless, he has in mind Western critics and Western readership: "when I daydreamed, I daydreamed that my book would remind the *New York Times* of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, or of Steinbeck" (Keneally 51).

The only time the text refers to national literature occurs when Louise James tells Alan that his grief "is precisely from here, from the fourteenth-century love poets" (Keneally 193). It is obvious that even this one reference is made in passing and without alluding to any specific names or works. Moreover, the reference is itself problematic because the fourteenth century was a time of literary decline in the Arab world. The heyday of love poetry in Baghdad was rather during the fourth Hijri century according to the Islamic or Hijri calendar, which corresponds to the tenth century in the Gregorian calendar. On the other hand, the text draws an implicit comparison between Western and postcolonial authors in a way that is rather dismissive and belittling of the latter. When Alan tries to write a novel for Great Uncle, he does this after the death of his wife and in very difficult psychological and emotional conditions. Consequently, the novel is "absolute diarrhea," as Alan describes it (Keneally 158). McBrien, his editor and friend, tells him it is "less social realist than I thought . . . It reads like a fable. The American lefty reviewers will see it in those terms. They mightn't say you're the new Steinbeck, but they'll call you

the new Chinua Achebe” (Keneally 158). McBrien adds that in normal circumstances, Alan’s work would have certainly been different, better: “[i]n the Western manner. But you’ll have leisure to do that. And the critics will be disposed to see any broad strokes, any primitivism, as a post-colonial legacy” (Keneally 158). Though it might be argued that these preferences reflect the assimilated nature of the character of McBrien, the approving silence of Alan himself and the lack of any counter-opinion that might balance this one in the text make it the only alternative offered.

The American Granddaughter is a typical polyphonic novel and the Benham children embody the hybrid nature of exiled families. They speak nothing but Arabic at home but “English remained the language of the street, work and the news” (Kachachi 13). However, even their Arabic is always imbued with English words, transcribed in the novel through Arabic letters. Moreover, Zeina’s upbringing helps strengthen her hold on her mother tongue. As a child, her “favourite game was Poetry Pursuit” (Kachachi 12) where she competed with her father in reciting Arabic poetry. Later on, Arabic “books and novels . . . ordered from a bookshop in Dearborn or from neelwafurat.com online . . . cassette tapes and CDs of Arabic songs by Fairuz, Um Kulthum and Kazim Al-Sahir” help keep the link between Zeina and her mother tongue; between her and her culture of origin. Fifteen years later, when Zeina returns to work in her country of birth, she uses the language with all its idiosyncrasies and local flavour so well that her “grandmother looked impressed that [she] still remembered [even] those figures of speech” (Kachachi 63). She also has a gang of “Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian and Syrian friends . . . [who] met for dinner on the first Saturday of every month at one of the Arabic [sic] restaurants in the city. [They] chatted and laughed, ate *tabouleh*, *mejaddareh* and *Shawermeh*, and danced to the rhythms of *oud* and *tabla*” (14). Those are all well-known strategies used by immigrants to protect themselves from being engulfed by the host culture with all its might and power. Thus, though she does not appreciate the kind of nostalgia other immigrants who “sang for Baghdad with the transcendence of whirling dervishes” (Kachachi 117) express, her hybrid self is too willful to succumb to total assimilation.

As a result of this background, Zeina and her story belong to the “post-colonial legacy” proper. The text is a dialogic amalgamation of diverse cultures, signs patterns, genres, and languages. Zeina tries to make sense of her strange life by representing it in a typical postmodern way. It is in the realm of this syncretic sphere that Zeina tries to negotiate her subjective experience through a chain of metaphoric and metonymic associations that dialogically deliver the encoded meaning of the experience through so many texts and voices. For instance, the novel is crammed with allusions and references to real movies that are summoned to interpret and/or comment on the events, and with imagined ones that would help articulate the new realities of the Iraqi people both at home and in exile. From *King Kong* to *Rambo* and from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* to the Egyptian movie *Nasser 56*, Zeina resorts to the cinematic space to make sense of

the bizarre situation she finds herself in and to equally conquer the madness of war and her own tragic liminal position as inhabiting the circles of both the colonizers and the colonized. Though most references are to American movies, a fact that might suggest the hegemonic nature of an American culture disguised as a globalized universal one, Zeina makes a point of disrupting this scheme of power by making “the gap between its [the West’s] civilized culture and its actual conduct . . . loom embarrassingly large” (Eagelton 74). Zeina engages in a dialogic negotiation of meaning and manages to expose the ideological messages of those movies and the active role of the viewer that generates the meaning by virtue of her subversive cultural stance. After all, the realities of war are not “like . . . the scenes in [her] head from American World War II movies of girls in Paris and Napoli waving to US Army convoys” (Kachachi 6).

However, it is ultimately literature rather than film that supplies the rudimentary dialogic framework through which real cultural and existential negotiations are carried out within a specialized aesthetic sphere. The text contains intertextual references to the Qu’ran and the prophet Muhammad’s Hadith (saying), to the Bible, to Arabic texts and writers as well as Western ones. For example, the epigraph of the novel is an unauthenticated Hadith: “Beware the beautiful woman of dubious descent.”⁵ Moreover, the novel is, among other things, a narration of the protagonist’s experience as an author struggling with her material. It is through this experience that the cultural, psychological and political functions of literature are examined. The text within the text thus shifts the emphasis from literature as cultural product to literature as cultural process. It turns into a site of inner monologue which is actually a polylogue, a site of struggle between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. It is mostly told in the first person with the exception of the times when Zeina is struggling with the inner split between her and the author within her. The author, her “alter ego who’d learned to imitate the pitch of [her] tone” (Kachachi 106), strives for a nationalist novel—one that is significantly described as outmoded “in black and white and sepia, no longer suitable for the age of Photoshop” (27). The author celebrates the Iraqi culture and defends the Iraqi cause. She ultimately tries, like Zeina’s grandmother, “to return [her] to her Iraqi righteous path, not to [her] American one.” (117).

However, Zeina’s other self understands that she cannot shed her American component, that truth is multi-faceted and identity can never be univocal. The confrontation between Zeina and her author-self takes the shape of a mirroring glance that externalizes the character’s struggle for self-definition and self-scrutiny. In a Lacanian⁶ moment, the construction of a holistic image of herself is done through the mirror held up by the writing experience, of trying to form a totality out of the fragmented parts of the self as exposed through her experience in Iraq. The moment of writing is crucial because it is the point of intersection between the aesthetic and the political. Writing is “a noble work . . . But it also ha[s] the power to bend the truth” (Kachachi 91). It is never ideology-free, but layered with political and

social presuppositions and convictions. Therefore, Zeina's text attempts to be as inclusive as possible by representing the richness of the Iraqi culture with all its shades: Muslim as well as Christian, Shi'a as well as Sunni and Chaldean as well as Arab. Through literature, she finally accepts the realities of her multiplicity and is able to see herself for the first time in her "totality" and to "re-cognize" the holistic nature of her different constituents. Though she does not succumb to her grandmother's model represented by her author-self, what she learns from her "complete[s] [her] as a woman, as a human being" (Kachachi 177). She is back in America, but she renounces war and violence. She does not bring souvenirs or gifts back from Iraq as she does "not need reminders" (Kachachi 180). Echoing her father, she ends her novel by the famous Biblical quote: "I'd give my right hand if I should ever forget you, Baghdad" (Kachachi 180)⁷. The subversive nature of her choice is indicated by the substitution of Baghdad for Jerusalem. This alignment to Iraq is reinforced through her choice to write her text in Arabic, not in English. Thus her return to America is not an acceptance of the cultural power of the West but rather a triumph of multiplicity and a subversive activity that helps to re-define what it means to be American. Thus, if the "elementary mechanism of translating is dialogue" (Lotman 143), then Zeina tries to live up to her role as a translator and a mediator, and write a dialogic text that represents the multiplicity not only of the Iraqi culture, but of the American culture as well.

If the "ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power" (Morrison 15), then Kachachi does a better job writing the self and the other. While both Kachachi and Keneally champion the "humanistic ideals of liberty and learning [which] still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation" (Said, *Humanism* 10), the kind of humanism adopted by each of them is different. Kachachi seems more successful in making use of those ideals while evading the typical pitfalls of traditional humanism that sees history as that of the "white, male, European, and American" (Said, *Humanism* 26). Her version of humanism is "cosmopolitan and text-and-language-bound in ways that absorb the great lessons of the past . . . and still remain[s] attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused" (Said, *Humanism* 11). This kind of democratic humanism—or dialogic humanism in more Bakhtinian terminology—helps literature avoid the danger of being a narcissistic monologue that fails to recognize in the mirror of otherness anything but a deformed version of the self. It also opens the door for a more harmonious representation of the self and its other(s) that acknowledges the unity of human origin and rights, in principle, while leaving space for cultural variety and multiplicity, in practice. This is not to depreciate Keneally's efforts for he nevertheless attempts to fulfill the intellectual's role "to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power" (Said, *Humanism* 135). His work, like that of Kachachi, becomes "a kind of counter-memory, with

its own counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep” (Said, *Humanism* 142). Thus, despite their disparate loci of enunciation that play a vital role in the way each chooses to write his/her respective novel and the attitudes adopted therein, both writers manage to draw attention to the dilemma of the referent society of their texts, encumbered as it is with oppression, injustice, war and violence.

Notes

1. *To Asmara* (originally published as *Towards Asmara* 1989) is a novel set in Eritrea, the province within Ethiopia struggling for independence. Through the journey of four Western characters across the war-torn country, Keneally manages to give voice to the subordinated Eritrean people and to trace their valour and forbearance in the face of violence and famine. *Schindler's List* is a Booker Prize-winning novel published in 1982. It relates, through the character of Oskar Schindler, the horrors of the Holocaust and the suffering of Polish Jews in forced labour camps under the Nazi regime. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) is a novel that traces through a third-person omniscient narrator the life of Jimmie Blacksmith, who is discriminated against and subjected to oppression because of his race. It shows how this kind of injustice is apt to lead to the kind of uncontrollable rage and delinquent behaviour represented by Jimmie.

2. Inaam Kachachi is an Iraqi writer living in Paris. She has written *Lorna, Sanawateha maa' Jawad Selim* (*Lorna, her years with Jawad Selim*, 1997), a biography in Arabic of the English painter Lorna Hailes and her Iraqi husband. She has also edited an anthology in French under the title *Iraqis Speak: The Iraqi Drama In Women's Writing* (2003) and produced two novels in Arabic: *Sawaqi al-Quloob* (*Streams of Hearts*, 2005) and *Al-Hafeeda al-Amreekiya* (*The American Granddaughter*, 2008) which was short-listed for the 2009 International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

3. Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (*Dialogic Imagination* 324).

4. In Islamic law babies that are breastfed by the same woman are considered siblings and are therefore forbidden to get married.

5. The translation does not convey the author’s play on the word “khadraa’ Ed-duman” which in addition to the literal meaning used by the translator: “beautiful woman of dubious descent,” also has an underlying reference to the colour green associated with the green zone where the Americans resided in Baghdad.

6. According to Jacques Lacan the age between six and eighteen months marks the shift into the Imaginary. At some point, the child makes the sudden and miraculous recognition of his mirror reflection.

This jubilatory self-recognition marks the emergence of the ego and the formation of narcissism. The immediate realization of the narcissistic model brings about its disruption: my mirror image is me and at the same time the other, and therefore all the more alien. That is why the jubilation of the recognition of one's unified unfragmented self is interrupted by the anxiety of loss, the loss of one's self-being which is split in the very act of its formation.

7. In the Arabic text, there is a clear intertextual resonance with the famous verse from the Bible that says: "If I forget you O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its skill or strength]" (Psalms 137:5). The English translation unfortunately fails to render this intertextuality by its inability to produce the Biblical equivalent in English.

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