

# Multiculturalism and the Sense of Freedom

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«**Culture**»<sup>1</sup> is one of the most elusive concepts because of its very abstract nature. It is generally thought to consist of different kinds of knowledge that are held to be valid within a certain community in so far as they establish a link with the natural world and make it familiar:

Culture is a man-made environment, brought into existence by the ability to symbol.

Once established, culture has a life of its own, so to speak; that is, it is a continuum of things and events in a cause and effect relationship; it flows down through time from one generation to another... The function of this external, man-made environment is to make life secure and enduring for the society of human beings living within the cultural system<sup>(1)</sup>.

What seems of importance in the passage is the idea of culture as having “a life of its own.” For this means that it transcends the scope of individuals so that instead of its being at their service, they turn into its subjects. This is so probably because the life of a given culture exceeds by far that of the individual and is

1. “Evolution of Culture”, Britannica CD 2000, Deluxe Edition.

therefore transhistorical in the sense that it is very enduring and that even when it changes, it does so through gradual reforms rather than through revolutions.

Although many fields are interested in culture, and many of these claim the label of “cultural studies,” there is, nevertheless, one aspect of culture that is seldom explored by researchers, namely its ability to condition behavior and perception of one’s environment. For, although there is an agreement about culture as being a knowledge about the world with the function of providing security and continuity of life, the concept is seldom, if ever, discussed as a worldview, an ideology which impinges on the mind and deprives it of the freedom that is necessary for intellection, which, in turn, is a precondition of human existence, as opposed to social life. In this sense, culture interposes between the individual and the environment through its mediatory function, thus preventing direct contact with, and experience of the world – things which are a source of genuine knowledge that is founded on individual experience, instead of being a series of truths and truisms that are transmitted from one generation to another. Furthermore, such a coherent body of established truths is not apprehended as a culture, a knowledge which establishes relationships between things, a conceptual environment that is supposed to account for the natural one, but as the “natural” way for things to be and, therefore, as the reality. Absolutism of this kind is a fertile ground for the development of ethnocentric attitudes which encourage, perhaps impose glorification of the native culture because of its ‘infallibility’. This attitude results at best in introversion and uncommunicativeness with other cultures, at worst in condemnation of all that is culturally alien and hence in intolerance. For this reason, existence of a second culture beside the native one is often a redeeming feature inasmuch as it is likely to introduce a tendency to cultural relativism and, hence, a sense of freedom - a state where the human, as opposed to the cultural, identity thrives.

In what follows I wish to argue that communication between different cultures is a phenomenon that shakes the stability of comfortable, ethnocentric attitudes by urging cultural relativism which, in turn, results in acceptance of otherness and difference. However, and this is the concern of this essay, such communication is not effected by those who are fervent supporters of their native culture, but by those who, thanks to their multiculturalism and relativistic attitudes, recognize it for one culture among others, and try to open its shell to the fresh air of cultural difference in order to encourage intellectual existence, which alone guarantees freedom from the “mind-forged manacles” of cultural autocracy. This I will attempt through an examination of Bahaa Trabelsi’s *Une*

Vie à Trois<sup>(2)</sup> as being a novel that encourages cultural communication through a confrontation of different cultures. This examination will first concern the main character in order to show the way this one acts the role of a crucible where different cultures meet, but where no one of them prevails, and second the writer, who, by breaking certain cultural taboos, tries to give an idea about the Moroccan identity, outside the stereotypes that are usually affixed to it, as one where many cultures meet, creating a conflict between cultural backgrounds that are different. The main argument of this essay is, then, that this novel would potentially appeal to readers from distant environments and different cultures, not because it tells about the Moroccan culture, although there is much of it in the novel, but because the existence of different cultures, and the ensuing conflict between them, lead to a sense of freedom that is necessarily of vital interest to human beings in general, being the main dream of the self-conscious, human identity.

In this concern, Adam, the protagonist of the novel, appears to be the most interesting character, who represents not only different cultures, but who shows that such a mixture of dissimilar cultures grants the ability not to be bound by anyone of them and hence his freedom which would explain his appeal to the reader. He is, in fact, a very complex character because of his strange nature that is challenging to the reader.

It is significant that on first returning to Morocco, Adam faces the problem of existing in his native country and talks about the prospect of overcoming the problem as a “crazy hope”, which perhaps hints at the impossibility of the enterprise. That is why he goes to the analyst so as to receive some help. However, he is careful to describe that first contact with a representative of society who has the role of adapting people to their environment by making them accept it. What most annoys him in the analyst’s waiting room is its appearance which reeks of comfort and solace.

When I came back to Morocco with my  
degrees in my pocket, and with the crazy hope that I  
would manage to exist in my country, I wanted to go  
to the analyst.

2. Bahaa Trabelsi, *Une Vie à Trois*, Casablanca : Eddif, 2000. For quotations, I will be using the English translation which, up to the time of writing this article, has not been published yet. Page references, on the other hand, are to the Eddif edition.

I can still see myself. I could not understand what I was doing there, in that waiting room. Hot colours, soft sofa, and filtered lights. It was reeking of comfort and solace (p. 19).

It could be said that those things seem what Adam precisely abhors and that therefore, if he is to exist, it must be on different terms. For comfort and solace would seem euphemisms of attributes that are in a sense shameful for the individual whose task is, above all, existence and self-assertion. They seem to imply that solace is precisely what attests to inability to exist on one's own, the need for outside help and, therefore, the surrendering of oneself to the other. Only in such self-effacement can comfort be attained. Existence of the individual, on the contrary, implies an unceasing struggle for self-assertion, and hence its lack of stability and comfort.

In this first introduction of himself, Adam is presented as a very complex character because of his awareness that is strictly individual and which transcends the bounds of cultural, common sense. In fact, his abhorrence of comfort and solace is an implicit intimation that he despises the mode of life that is highly valued in society and which is promulgated through common sense, through such notions as mutual assistance, tranquility, and stability, among others – values which are supposed to bring about happiness within the community. Such despise is indeed a refusal to live in so debased a way, where one accepts a mode of existence that is common and hence admits one's incapacity to be different. Adam cannot accept the idea of hankering after "happiness", like other people and that is why he abhors that which people like. In so doing, he shows a trait of character that is no common nature, namely his active search of a mode of existence that is beyond the scope of everyday-life concern with simple contentment. One cannot help drawing the parallel, in this respect, with the Swiftian view that happiness "is a perpetual possession of being well deceived". For the view, like Adam's attitude, implies that comfort and happiness are attainable, but only at the expense of oneself, of one's identity – a meaning that contradicts human culture in the sense of implying that human, as opposed to social, existence has no relation to such cheap pursuits. This awareness makes Adam torn between the desire to have a peaceful life and the conviction that deep inside, he cannot give in to such a longing. That is why from the start, he presents himself as a split personality:

I feel like laughing. Hysterical! My reflection  
in the mirror despises me. It does not like me. Sleep!

Forget! Slide my head on the pillow with the view of Absence beside. Moments of empty life. Why this need for the other? A caress, a kiss, something in the gesture, in the voice, and then we think ourselves alive. Slavery must have the same origin, misinterpretation (pp. 17-18).

Adam is here made up of two different selves, one that is in the mirror and which escapes the tyranny of necessity and looks down on the other that is enslaved by it inasmuch as it lives within history. The latter self complains of absence, which at this stage is indefinite. It may refer to Christophe, the lover Adam leaves behind in France when he comes back home, as it may allude to some indefinite longing which, because unintelligible, is misinterpreted as being a need for the other, a misinterpretation which costs one oneself, one's identity. That is why Adam speaks of slavery as originating in misinterpretation. In other words, Adam lives an inner conflict between two different tendencies, and seems to have chosen the easiest by coming back home while his free self, the one which urges him to look for a different mode of existence, still appeals to him, and is perhaps a little too assertive. Because of the elusiveness of such a self, Adam mistakes its appeal for a need for the other, and hence misreads himself. This misreading entails his dependence on the other and hence the notion of slavery, which implies, in this context, that life, within society, is characterized by such slavery inasmuch as people depend on one another, and so lose their true selves. On the basis of this complex view of himself, Adam emerges as a philosopher who looks for a mode of existence that is hardly intelligible to common sense, and implicitly promises that his share of the narrative will be in accordance with his personality.

This complexity is accentuated by another dimension that is even more difficult to grasp than the existential split of the personality. For Adam does not consider himself only within the historical categories of time and space as the character who has just returned to Morocco and who finds it difficult to readapt to it, but also introduces a dimension of his existence which, though straightforward when carefully pondered, is still baffling because of its metaphysical nature. He considers himself within the aesthetic/literary framework as a character whose life depends upon the reader's reaching the end of the story and hopefully understanding it:

The child who was in me had painted the whole in pink. He is dead. In my distress, I sometimes

reclaim him. Image of a nightmare. Child's carrion mutilated by bitterness. In order for him to be born again, one has to read on the screen of my memories: "The End" (p. 17).

Adam is here the character child who can live within the confines of the story only if the reader properly understands it. The allusion is to the status of the character in fiction as being a function of the text which can only be realized through the reading activity. So that the child who paints everything in pink and who has been murdered by the state of split Adam lives, hints at the self-assertive being who exists in his own right, and who shapes his own existence. The moment Adam comes back to Morocco, this self dies because its vehicle faces now the problem of readaptation, and therefore is in quest of an appropriate mode of existence. He is no longer the assertive identity of the child, but the crushed personality of the adult who is aware of the situation that impinges on his consciousness. This is the character who is introduced to the reader and who should serve only as a basis for reconstructing the genuine/original Adam – the assertive self who refuses the common and easy life of cheap pursuits – through the many hints given throughout the narrative. Unless those hints are carefully examined there is no reconstruction of that child. The child can be born again, Adam the function of the text can only be realized once the reader reaches the end without overlooking the challenging image given of Adam. In this sense, Adam's life depends on the reader's willingness to deal with the character as character, not as a replica of a supposedly historical person, in order to recreate the idea of individuality that is the actual target of the character. This is what Rim seems to emphasize in the closing lines of the novel when, as will later appear, she hints at there being a "right tune" of viewing Adam.

Adam is, then, made up of a series of different layers which compose a complex identity. He is the one who comes back to Morocco after spending his university life in France where he is able to express his homosexuality and live it, and, therefore, the country that represents freedom. Once back he realizes that his father expects of him to take charge of his business and to marry, a project which deprives Adam of his freedom in the sense that his identity of the homosexual cannot find free expression because of the taboos that surround it, but also because his life has already been designed for him by his father. Adam is indeed not supposed to exist in his own right, but only to fit in a space that has been prepared for him by someone else. That is to say, Adam's dilemma concerns two different cultures. The French is suited to Adam's aspirations and so it represents for him the notion of freedom, as he acknowledges:

I lived a passion in a world where I felt free. Queer Paris fulfilled my desires. I discovered myself emotionally and sexually, with the feeling of belonging to a community that is endowed with a culture, a system of values that is peculiar to it, beyond frontiers and racial problems, ahead of its time, delinquent, happy. AIDS did not worry me. Christophe and I were faithful to each other, in our own way (p. 21).

Noteworthy in this passage is the way Adam views France. For this one is not only the physical, geographical place one can identify on a map, but rather a moral environment that has very much a symbolical value. In this respect, it is interesting that he talks about it as being the place of his self-realization, the one which is situated “beyond frontiers and racial problems”, and, more important, almost beyond time. The Moroccan culture, however, would stand for confinement, being against aspirations, as Adam has only to play a role that is already defined for him. If he chooses the first, it means that he chooses ease and comfort – things which he naturally abhors, and if he chooses the second, it means that his life will be a constant struggle for self-assertion – which partly explains his second choice.

However, Adam’s existential dilemma, does not arise so much from the existence of the two alternatives in a discrete way, but rather from his complex desire to live both lives at the same time. For when he comes to Morocco he is not actually forced, but rather seduced by the prospects that accompany his return. As he acknowledges, life in Morocco has a specific meaning:

When I came back to Morocco, my father asked me to run his firms.

They are yours, now, said he solemnly to me.

I accepted. That is the reason why I came back. All my childhood was nourished by this dream: to inherit power from my father. He had promised that much to me, and he kept his promise (p. 35).

The desire of self-assertion takes here the form of power. It is strange, however, that in his “youth,” Adam believes that he can inherit it in a peaceful way, without having to sweat for it himself. That suggests that he believes his identity is going to be handed down to him by his father. Nevertheless, he soon

realizes that such a comfortable situation has implications he does not really like, when his father communicates to him his mother's worries:

We had a talk together. She wonders why you don't get married. It makes her miserable. She's not wrong, you know. You're our only son, and we'd like to see your children before we die. Moreover, you're no longer that young. Thirty-five is a good age to settle down. Aren't you even tired of having a good time occasionally? Apparently, you don't even have that, confined as you always are in here. We are Muslims, and a good Muslim has to marry (p. 36).

Only at this stage does Adam realize the full meaning of his situation. His longing for a peaceful power he can inherit from his father has as a price the surrendering of his freedom in order to be enslaved by a duty towards his social environment – a situation which he experiences as a death:

I would have liked to be a little boy with a strong longing to roar with laughter, and to cry like a pampered child. These recent times, I no longer hear myself cry. No regret, no rage, no joy. Cold. The sun's heat has departed in the palm of Christophe's hand (p. 21).

On returning to Morocco, Adam finds himself within a cultural environment which totally excludes the possibility of the free existence he experiences in France. Being caught in a kind of life he has somehow entrapped himself in, he realizes that he has to meet the cultural requirements of his situation and that there is no escaping them:

I know it. I will play their game.

I am a coward (p. 41).

And yet, because of his self-awareness, he determines to appear to live as he is expected to, but to actually live as he wishes, and therefore chooses the mode of simulation and disguise as being the most suitable for his condition:

How good it is to lie! There is something feverish about lying. One recreates oneself (p.21).

In this way, Adam starts to live a double life by fulfilling at once the social/cultural claim, which imposes on him uniformity with his surrounding, and his



longing for an individual mode of existence that answers his particular needs. Thus, Adam forges his difference from his social environment and acquires a dimension of existence where he becomes distinguishable from the rest of people in so far as he is aware that life is no simple business. His intellectual freedom, which is at the root of his dual and complex life, makes him interesting not as a representative of his culture, but rather as incarnating a species which tries to become cultureless, as it were, in order to be human. It is in this perspective that homosexuality acquires a symbolical status as representing a quest for the self which is assertive and which proves one's existence against the role one has to play in society. In other words, homosexuality has amoral, existential implications rather than socio-moral ones. Jamal, the object of Adam's love is, in fact, an alter-ego, and would stand for the self Adam intends to assert. He is the symbol of that beautiful state, "Jamal" being the Arabic word for beauty, in which Adam recovers the lost free self. Such recovery, however, is no easy process, but one where Adam engages in constant disguise and pretence in order to hide his true self which is disturbing and worrying to society. Rim, the Arabic word for hind and therefore symbol of animal beauty, is the wife who provides comfort and solace within society, which Adam abhors because such a marriage reinforces his loss of his free self. That is why Adam juxtaposes his two relationships and states their meanings to him with unwavering and clear definiteness:

Both of them, each in a different way, are to me like Adam's apple. He, the coveted and forbidden fruit, the original sin, the one which will kick me out of the paradise of human beings, and she, that useless cartilage across the throat, the ostentatious and flaunted evidence of my male nature (p. 58).

This passage is pivotal because it succinctly states the complexity of Adam's life and seems to present it as a model, not a mirror, to human life in general. The complexity, as stated above, springs from the conscious desire to have a certain mode of life that goes with the ontological/existential demands of humanness, and the necessity of living like other human beings, and hence of superficial social conformity and uniformity. Furthermore, through the reference to the Biblical Adam, he seems to imply that such a conflict is, in fact, one which ought to characterize human life, because the notion of humanity would seem to be defined by the desire to assert identity in an environment which can only exist through the alienation of this same identity and the substitution for it of a vague, general and uniform one.

As this short examination of the character of Adam shows, the idea of freedom results from the juxtaposition of different cultures which lead to the prosperity of individual identity.

At the thematic level, the writer, too, seems to go through the same process and breaks certain taboos by giving her main characters traits that do not really correspond to the popular image of the Moroccan who is perfectly integrated in society and who lives in harmony with it. By introducing the theme of homosexuality and prostitution, the writer shakes the moral stability which is flaunted as a characteristic of a supposedly serene and homogeneous society. To this image, the writer juxtaposes another one which mingles different environments and cultures to show the fermentation that characterizes social life once its different components are brought into direct contact.

In fact, the novel may be considered a crucible for different cultures. The characters belong to different classes and social categories, and this makes them culturally different. Adam, the central character, is like a crossroads where four different and conflicting cultures meet: two of these are geographically distinct, the Moroccan and the French, while the others are conceptually opposed, the patriarchal and the homosexual. Jamal belongs to the low strata of society and is a homosexual who prostitutes himself for a living. Rim is torn between two different cultures. She is at once the conservative bourgeois who sees in marriage her self-realization, but also the schoolgirl who would rather rebel against all. Amina, her sister, shares with Adam the French culture, but acts as a vigil who sees that things take place exactly as they ought, thus playing the role of a guardian to established social values.

Similarly, at the level of the narrative, the writer confronts these cultures and would seem to gain freedom from such confrontation. The opening chapter "Prologue" introduces a narrator who, from the start, announces that she first meets the characters of her story in a bar, thus asserting a personality that breaks Moroccan taboos by her very presence in a bar. For this is set in a society that is not only a Muslim one, and where bars belong in the "unofficial," marginal side of life, but also where it is totally inconceivable, and next to impossible to find a woman drinking alcohol in such places, unless she is a whore. This suggests that the narrator is no traditional figure and that, therefore, the story is implicitly promised to be unlike other stories. This idea is immediately confirmed, when the narrator confesses that the characters have escaped her in order to narrate their own stories, which gives rise to a multiplicity of narrators besides herself.

In fact, the narrative does not seem to be bound by a “reality” which should be communicated to the reader, but appears rather to be motivated by the desire to make this latter think in order to be free from the tyranny of established truth. That is why the narrator announces from the start a certain strangeness that acts as a warning. For although this one is a third-person narrator, she does not really share much with the traditional third-person realistic figure, as she does not even take charge of the whole story. What is more, the way she announces the presence of other narrators is interesting inasmuch as she destroys the image of the omniscient narrator in the very first page:

I have decided to keep this elusive view of them. I will make of them characters so that they belong to me, recreate them in order to find peace in literary disillusion. Page by page, I have made them talk, love, and pitilessly suffer. I have interrupted them, ridiculed them. They have escaped me, trifled with me, scoffed me, and tamed me to ultimately narrate their own stories (p. 9).

This shift from the narrator who is in complete control of her material to one who is outdone by her characters is very challenging in the sense that it shows the reader, who is usually accustomed to identify the narrator with the writer, that this one is a character like the others and has a determined function to fulfil within the work. The implication of the warning is that the reader loses the comfort and ease of narratorial guidance and so has to rely on individual efforts in order to make sense of the work. For, although the novel seems to be a straightforward “realistic” story, it deals in philosophical issues which only an attentive reader can deal with. That is why the narrator baffles the reader in the last chapter by making Rim transcend her status to become a narrator who is not only capable of thinking, but who also challenges the reader and even tries to force an intellectual effort on his/her part:

But you will still consider me a stupid woman.

I will only ask you to give this reflection careful consideration: I have to find the right tune to think of Adam and Jamal. The passage from beauty to the insipid charm of a thought is hung up by just a thread – that of mediocrity. And is there worse mediocrity than that of taking the posture of a judge? (p. 144).

This intimation seems to be a direct challenge to the reader because it seems to imply that it is so simplistic to stop at the surface of things and dismiss the novel as a simple story about homosexuality. Rim, who is throughout the novel the epitome of the stupid schoolgirl who wants to marry just to make her friends jealous of her, since she considers marriage as a way to adulthood and freedom, turns in this last chapter into the narrator philosopher who directly addresses the reader and urges him to make the distinction between beauty and insipid charm in relation to thinking about Adam and Jamal, thus precluding the comfortable and reassuring attitude of the judge who would simply engage in simplistic value-judgement, without the least effort to understand.

It is in this sense that the narrative is characterized by a certain freedom which gives the reader a hard time attempting to understand the story. In fact, even more than that, the last shaking of the reader, which Rim's ultimate intervention in the narrative constitutes, also reinforces the idea that cultural diversity grants freedom. Rim, who has a very traditionalist view of marriage in the novel, surprises by her acquiring a totally new vision at the end, as she signals her liberation from the conceptual, conservative, and moral framework of her environment. She, in fact, seems to mature by acquiring a new perspective that belongs to her:

I have never felt so small. Not because Adam and Jamal have deceived me, or because they have loved each other, but because I have not been allowed to see things happen. My vulnerability springs from that, and hence, my inability to understand.

As to my pain, you can imagine its extent. But I will not be overshadowed by it. Living with Adam and Jamal has taught me two things: first, never to pigeonhole people as I was taught to do, and second, to endure.

Adam refused to be cooperative during the ceremony of the serwal. I would like to still believe now that it was out of consideration for me. Partly, at least.

Jamal was my friend. He kept me company, and supported me in difficult times. We shared bursts of laughter and the melancholy of some days.

At no time did I feel injured or rejected.

I want to keep up the belief that they have loved me.

To learn to look at the others and draw the true substance of what I see, that is what I want to be made to say (p. 144).

Rim's change is signaled by her movement out of her culture which categorizes and pigeonholes people, instead of trying to understand their differences, and by her turning into a stoic instead of being the victim who would constantly complain. Although she learns that she has been deceived by Adam and Jamal, she refuses to simply judge them. In fact, what she actually objects to is her being prevented from living her life and understanding it herself, her own way, without the interference of her own environment. It is in this endeavour that her character changes from the pampered schoolgirl who is married off by her parents into the human being who accepts cultural difference, as represented by Adam and Jamal, thus showing her emancipation from cultural, traditional beliefs. In so doing she seems to gain an intellectual maturity that is denied to her sister, the intelligent girl who is educated in French universities.

At this stage it would be only be fair to conclude that although *Une Vie à Trois* is certainly and unmistakably a twentieth-century Moroccan novel, which contains many allusions to some cultural practices and customs which may be of interest to some disciplines, its appeal cannot be attributed to such things. It is rather a novel which deals with existential issues that transcend the time and space in which the work is produced in order to be of interest, not to a particular discipline or field of knowledge, but to humanity at large. Its value is imputable to its aesthetic/literary dimension which would recommend it to different cultures. If it appeals to non-Moroccans, it will not be due to its being rooted in the Moroccan culture, but rather to its concerns which transcend its spatiotemporal environment. In this sense, its freedom would account for its success.